



# ISLAND: COLLECTED STORIES

## ALISTAIR MACLEOD

### *Exploring Your Understanding of Island*



## STUDY TASKS

The following tasks are designed to assist in your preparation for both the **SAC (creative response)** and the **work requirement (analytical response)**. You will need to read and re-read selected stories to deepen your knowledge and understanding of the narratives. **\*\* All tasks should be completed in your workbook or on your device.**

### Characters

- Respond to the following by selecting one protagonist from a story in Island:
  - Personal details** – their full name (and how to spell it), their age and where they live.
  - Character and personality** – their strengths, weaknesses and significant values
  - Background** – their families; their social and cultural context.
  - Motivations** – why do they act in certain ways and make the choices they do?
  - Relationships** – with other characters and with their surroundings.
  - Changes** – in their character, relationships, circumstances or point of view
- Word bank for characters** – to add interest and precision to your writing on texts, try describing characters using some of the words in the columns on the right. Fill in the blank spaces with words of your own:

Common word	More specific words with similar meanings...					
strong	powerful					
weak	subservient					
good	honourable					
bad	immoral					
kind	compassionate					
nasty	malicious					
quiet	reticent					
loud	boisterous					
true	honest					
false	manipulative					
loyal	committed					
disloyal	treacherous					
happy	positive					
sad	negative					
greedy	avaricious					
nice	magnanimous					
smart	perceptive					
silly	unwise					
rash	reckless					
careful	cautious					
brave	courageous					
fearful	cowardly					
thoughtful	reflective					
practical	pragmatic					
racist	bigoted					

## Narrative point of view

**First person** – narrator of the story using 'I'

**Third person** – a 'voice' that narrates the story using 'he/she/they' – does not use 'I'

### First person narration

Select one of the stories in Island written in the first person to answer the following questions:

1. Analyse the advantages and disadvantages of first person narration by filling in the PMI chart –

Plus	Minus	Interesting
+ gives an 'inside account of events	- limits the reader's knowledge of characters to what the narrator knows or thinks of them	! places the reader in the position of an involved participant
+		!
+	-	!
+	-	

2. How reliable is the narrator? Do we believe everything this character tells us about themselves and the world around them? Why or why not? Do they omit any important information?
3. How might the writer's view differ from the narrator's? What makes you think this?
4. Complete the following paragraph about the narrator of your text

\_\_\_\_\_ (name of text) is narrated by \_\_\_\_\_. He/she is a/an reliable/unreliable narrator, demonstrated by \_\_\_\_\_ (evidence from the text). \_\_\_\_\_ (name of the narrator) is \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ (two qualities exhibited by the narrator), as show by \_\_\_\_\_ (evidence from the text: behaviour or action of the narrator, another character's description of them, a quotation from the text etc.)

### Third-person narration

A text written in the third person **tells the story from an outside, more detached point of view**. We use the term **omniscient narrator** to describe this 'all-knowing' perspective. **Third person also allows for a range of viewpoints to be presented**. This is done with a shift from the 'angle' or perspective of one character to that of another and usually invites our sympathy for several characters because we can understand how they think and feel.

Select one of the stories in Island written in the first person to answer the following questions:

1. Analyse the advantages and disadvantages of first person narration by filling in the PMI chart –

Plus	Minus	Interesting
+ can be omniscient (all-knowing) and therefore able to communicate various characters' thoughts and feelings to the reader	- puts the reader in the position of being an observer rather than a participant	! can convey multiple points of view on events and characters in the text
+	-	!
+	-	!

2. Choose a short story from Island. Is the chapter written from a completely objective perspective? How do you know?

## Orientation, setting and context

Orientation usually refers to the particular moment of entry into the narrative.

Setting refers to the places and times in which the action of the narrative occurs. A setting may be a natural or built environment. It may be vast or intimate, realistic or fanciful; it may be in the past, present or future.

Context is a broader term than setting. It encompasses real events and circumstances outside the world of the text. Three main contexts to consider are: historical, social and cultural.

Complete the following questions on setting and context:

1. What is the main setting of your text?
2. How is the setting described or depicted? Look for appeals to the five senses: sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch. Is the environment depicted as generally positive or negative?

3. Find one quote from the text that describes and 'sums up' the setting.
4. Write down three words of your own to describe the setting:
5. What is the connection between the setting and the personalities of any of the characters in the text?
6. What is the historical setting of the text?
7. What historical references are made or alluded to in the text?
8. Does the social context restrict or enhance the opportunities of the characters? If so, how?
9. How is the author's background relevant to the text?

### Structure – key points in narrative structure

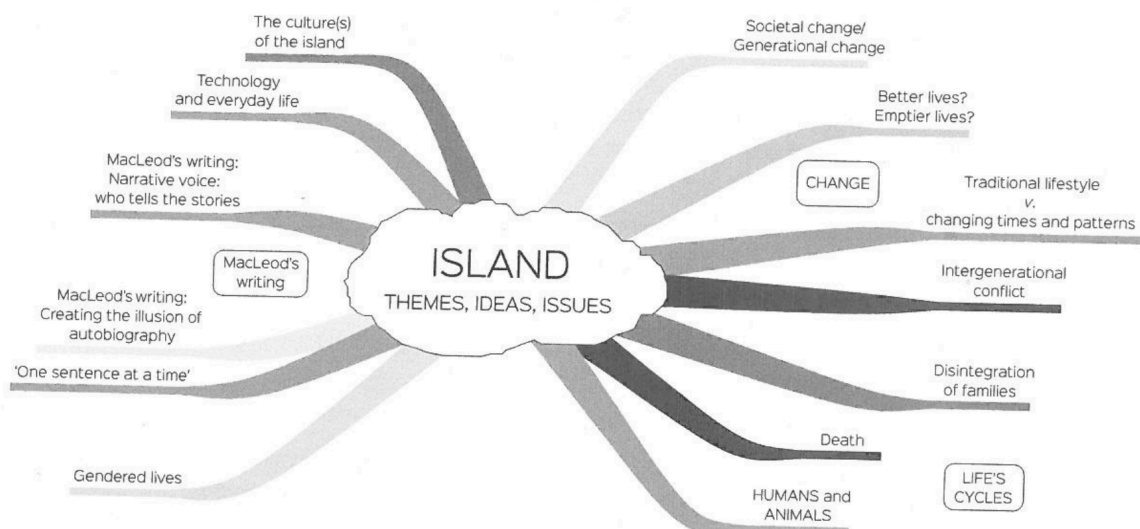
It is important to understand the structure of each narrative in *Island* for analysis, however this awareness will also help you to shape your own creative writing.

All narratives include key points or scenes that create rising and falling tension. Become familiar with and practise using metalanguage in the following table. In the right-hand column use each word in a sentence about your own text.

Word (metalanguage)	Definition	Your example (sentence)
<b>Exposition</b>	The introduction of the main characters and situation; the scene is set for some kind of conflict.	
<b>Crisis point</b>	A character is presented with a problem or challenge that tests their values and beliefs	
<b>Turning point</b>	A decisive change in the course of events; a character realises they cannot return to past circumstances; this can coincide with, or be the outcome of, a crisis point.	
<b>Climax</b>	The point at which the tension rises to a peak; the main conflict between characters and/or ideas comes to a head and must be resolved.	
<b>Denouement</b>	The 'unknotting' or unraveling of narrative threads; when questions are finally answered.	
<b>Resolution</b>	Where the tension relaxes – conflicts are resolved, issues and relationships are sorted out.	

### Themes

Take a close look at the map of possible themes in *Island* below. Practise writing about theme by creating a simple statement using the template as a guide.



Events and Experiences	What do I learn about the character?	What important themes emerge?
<b>Example – Event/Story</b> Calum in The Road to Rankin's Point. Returns to his grandmother		
<b>Event/Story 1:</b>		
<b>Event/Story 2:</b>		
<b>Event/Story 3:</b>		

### 1. Writing about theme

A major theme of *Island* is \_\_\_\_\_. MacLeod suggests that \_\_\_\_\_ (author's point of view on the theme). He suggests this by \_\_\_\_\_ (one piece of evidence from a character). It is also suggested by \_\_\_\_\_ (one piece of evidence from a plot) and by \_\_\_\_\_ (character's name)'s words, '\_\_\_\_\_' (key quotation about the theme).

### 2. Choose three significant events from three separate stories in *Island* and complete the table below to show the links between characters and themes.

## Values

Characters embody values through their thoughts, feelings, attitudes, relationships, beliefs, statements and actions. We respond to characters largely by responding to the values they hold – or to the fact that they appear to have no values.

Culture can also play a role: different cultures can place more or less emphasis on different values; this is often shown through the characters.

### 1. Consider the values in the table below and complete the table with definitions and examples of characters who demonstrate these values in *Island*.

Key value (e.g. doing what is right)	Definition	Characters who demonstrate this value, and how
loyalty		
working hard		
taking responsibility		
Opposite of key value (e.g. doing what is wrong)	Definition	Characters who demonstrate the opposite of the key value, and how
disloyal		
laziness		
not taking responsibility		

### 2. Writing about values

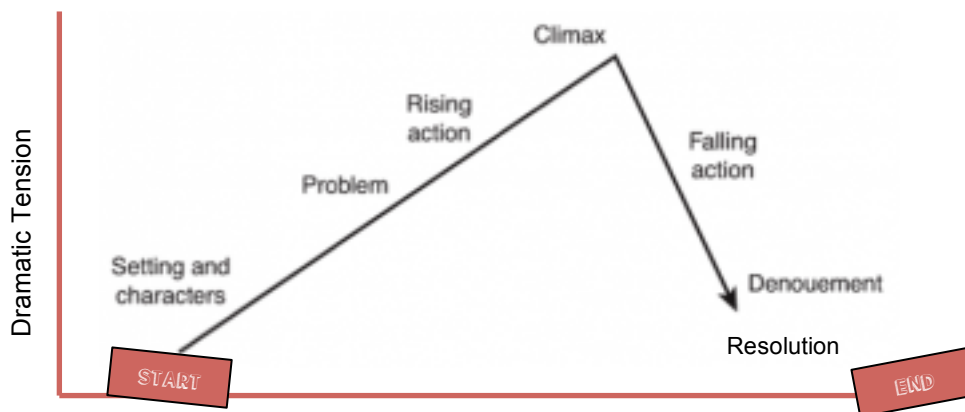
Fill in the gaps in the sentences below, using evidence from one of the stories in *Island* to support your view. Look at how the characters think, the views they express and the decision they make. Consider also the consequences of the characters' behaviour – this can show the writer's approval or disapproval of their values or the values of their society.

- i) The key qualities associated with the protagonist in \_\_\_\_\_ (name of story) are \_\_\_\_\_.
- ii) He/she believes in \_\_\_\_\_.
- iii) We know this because \_\_\_\_\_.
- iv) The protagonist's value reflect/challenge the society's values because \_\_\_\_\_.
- v) One character who supports the protagonist's position is \_\_\_\_\_.
- vi) The writer endorses/criticises \_\_\_\_\_'s values by \_\_\_\_\_.
- The resolution of the story suggests that \_\_\_\_\_.

## Special features of short stories

### Concentrated story structure

In a novel, narrative tension may rise and fall a number of times before the climax is reached and conflict is resolved. In a short story (like those in *Island*), you are more likely to find a pattern similar to that shown in the diagram below.



### Links between stories

In studying *Island*, you need to develop an in-depth understanding of individual stories *and* explore connections or ideas that link the stories together.

- Explore how the **stories explore various aspects of a theme**
- Explore how the **stories are linked by recurring elements**, e.g. character types, similar settings, repeated stylistic features (such as juxtaposition)
- Explore how **a linking idea may be explored from different perspectives in different stories** e.g. male/female viewpoints, father/son perspectives.

### How to write about short stories in a collection

Keep the following points in mind when writing a text response on *Island* (this will also assist you when planning for your creative response so you see the 'big picture' of the collection).

- **Refer only to three or four stories in a text response essay** – any more than this becomes difficult to manage
- **Give the complete names** of the characters (if they are available) the first time you reference them, and mention the titles of the stories they appear in
- **Place quotation marks around the title of each story** you refer to, and underline the title of the collection (this helps to distinguish what you are referring to – a story or a collection)
- **Draw on evidence from the stories** in the same way you would draw on evidence for any other novel, play etc.
- **Try not to jump from one story to another in the same paragraph.** Rather, work from a general topic sentence to focusing on a particular story in order to highlight an aspect of your argument.

## Exploring themes and issues in the collection

Select three or four stories from *Island* you think best demonstrate a particular theme and make notes on the characters, plot or other elements that the writer uses to present this theme. Choose a key quote that relates to the theme from each story, then make notes on how the evidence you have selected relates to the theme.

Key theme:			
Story title	Evidence (characters, plot etc)	Key quotation	Link to theme

## Exploring links between stories in *Island*

Answer the following questions to explore possible links between stories and identify common concerns running through the collection as a whole:

- (1) Write down any associations or ideas that the title of the collection makes you think of (e.g. isolation)
- (2) What are the main settings of each story? (be more specific than Cape Breton)
- (3) What recurring settings are present?
- (4) Identify recurring character types (fathers, sons etc)
- (5) In one paragraph, discuss links that you have identified and how they relate to the main concerns of the collection as a whole. Here's a sample answer:

Many of the short stories in Alistair MacLeod's *Island* have coastal settings and feature characters who are experiencing, or are reflecting on, periods of transition in their lives. The coast is in between land and water, and is constantly changing; it thus mirrors the state of uncertainty flux described by several main characters and narrators. In 'The Boat', the narrator describes the year in which he helped his father on the boat, caught between his love of books and his love of the sea. In 'Island', the main character is the first person to be born on the island, where she later becomes the last lighthouse keeper, marking another kind of transition. The stories thus explore the many facets of change, particularly the loss of traditions and of connections to place.

*"Don't forget - no one else see  
the world the way you do, so  
no one else can tell the stories  
that you have to tell."  
Charles de Lint*

There is nothing  
to writing. All  
you do is sit  
down at a  
typewriter  
and bleed.  
-Ernest  
Hemingway

**GOOD LUCK!**