

# The Lost Salt Gift of Blood



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ALISTAIR MACLEOD

Although born in Saskatchewan, Alistair MacLeod was raised from the age of 10 in his parents' native home of Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, where his family had lived since the 1860s. After his graduation from high school in 1954, he worked a series of odd jobs in Nova Scotia and Canada, including delivering milk, teaching school, mining, and logging, while earning a B.A. at St. Francis Xavier University. He went on to complete a Master's degree at the University of New Brunswick and a Ph.D. at the University of Notre Dame, where he began writing fiction and, in the year of his graduation, published "The Boat," which was named one of the best American short stories of 1969.

Following his graduation, he became an English professor at the University of Windsor and continued writing during summer vacations, which he spent in his hometown of Cape Breton. In 1971, he married Anita MacLellan, with whom he would have 7 children over the course of a 43-year marriage. He published only five books: *The Lost Salt Gift of Blood*, his first short story collection, in 1976; *As Birds Bring Forth the Sun* in 1986; the novel *No Great Mischiefs* in 1999; *Island*, a compilation of his short stories, in 2000; and the novella *To Everything There Is A Season* in 2004. In total, he wrote fewer than 20 short stories and only one novel during his lifetime. He died at the age of 77 in April of 2014.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

MacLeod depicts three main aspects of life in Nova Scotia and Newfoundland during the 1960s and 70s in "The Lost Salt Gift of Blood"—the state of traditional industries, the emergence of a national identity, and the fracturing of family groups due to emigration out of the provinces. Canada's Maritime provinces (Nova Scotia, Newfoundland and Labrador, and Prince Edward Island) have struggled since approximately the mid-1950s with the failure of industries that have historically been prominent sources of income, like coal mining, steel making, and fishing. In Newfoundland, the collapses of northern codfish populations circa 1977 and 1993 devastated fishermen and fish plant workers and reshaped the structure of local life. However, immediately prior to that—at the time *The Lost Salt Gift of Blood* was published—the fishing industry in the Maritimes was largely very successful, a fact reflected in "The Lost Salt Gift of Blood" by the idealization of fishing as a community tradition and a way of life. In addition, the quotation of local folk songs, and the incorporation of those songs into the story's narrative, mimics the wider cultural revival that took place in Newfoundland in the 1970s, founded on the development of a

cohesive Newfoundland identity and a nostalgia for the pre-mechanized past and traditional industries. As in "The Lost Salt Gift of Blood," the art, literature, and song of the Newfoundland cultural revival were based on elements of local heritage, like the Gaelic language and the generational connection to Ireland, as well as a sense of loss—in the story the family's grief for Jennifer, and in reality the changing landscape of Newfoundland life. Finally, between the 1950s and the 1970s, massive emigration of young people, like Jennifer and the couple's other daughters, began to cause serious difficulties in the Maritime provinces. Between 1951 and 1966, Prince Edward Island lost about 16 percent of the population to emigration, and New Brunswick lost 17 percent between 1951 and 1971. Those most likely to leave the provinces were between 20 and 24 years old, resulting in the isolation of older and younger family members in exactly the manner "The Lost Salt Gift of Blood" portrays.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Although MacLeod declared in an interview with the Guardian, "I don't think you can write like anybody else," his work has been influenced by, and in its turn influenced, a wide range of writers. He identified a group of 19th-century British authors discussed in his doctoral dissertation—namely Thomas Hardy, D.H. Lawrence, and Emily Brontë—as having a powerful impact on his work. In particular, he said that their use of setting as a character and a presence that permeates the narrative helped to inspire his own vivid depictions of Canada, Nova Scotia, and Newfoundland; like [Wuthering Heights](#), the stories of *The Lost Salt Gift of Blood* "couldn't come from anywhere else in the country." His style also shares attributes with a number of other important Canadian writers, such as Margaret Atwood, whose clear and lucid prose style and attention to detail echo MacLeod's fiction. As with MacLeod, Atwood's published work has contributed to the relatively newfound literary success and popularity of Canadian literature in the 20th and 21st centuries, and both of them have become emblems of Canadian art and culture. Finally, in many of his stories, MacLeod references or quotes folk songs, typically Gaelic songs that have migrated with their singers to Nova Scotia and Newfoundland, reinterpreting them or using them as key thematic elements. Ballads, particularly ballads of the British Isles, became a popular source of inspiration for unusual or niche literary fiction in the twentieth century, including Pamela Dean's *Tam Lin*, Dorothy Sayers' *Strong Poison*, and Shirley Jackson's "The Daemon Lover."

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Lost Salt Gift of Blood
- **When Written:** between 1969 and 1976
- **Where Written:** Cape Breton, Nova Scotia
- **When Published:** 1976
- **Literary Period:** Canadian regionalism, Canadian nationalism
- **Genre:** realism, regionalism, short fiction
- **Setting:** a fishing village about an hour outside of St. John, Newfoundland and Labrador
- **Climax:** the narrator's realization that he is ignorant of his son's life and world and that John is better off with the adopted family who love him
- **Antagonist:** isolation and alienation, self-interest, inability to communicate
- **Point of View:** 1st person

## EXTRA CREDIT

**MacLeod's Ancestry.** Alistair MacLeod's ancestors first arrived in the Maritime provinces of Canada in the 1790s, when they traveled from the Isle of Eigg in the Inner Hebrides to Cumberland County, Nova Scotia. They lived in the Bay of Bundy until 1808, when the family—the parents, seven daughters, and two sons—walked almost four hundred kilometers to Inverness County, Cape Breton, where MacLeod was born more than a hundred years later. MacLeod himself described the journey in an article for the *Toronto Star*, adding that there were so few roads at the time that they had to find the way by walking along the shoreline. Like many Maritimers, MacLeod's roots in the British Isles are an integral part of his identity as well as his fiction.

**MacLeod's Dissertation.** MacLeod completed a doctoral dissertation at the University of Notre Dame on the topic of 19th-century British novelists, focusing primarily on Thomas Hardy, whose work bears striking similarities to MacLeod's fiction—which MacLeod was just beginning to write at the time. MacLeod has said, for instance, that he enjoyed Hardy's novels because they were “about people who lived outdoors and were greatly affected by the forces of nature,” as is the case in “The Lost Salt Gift of Blood,” where the life of the villagers is dependent on the vagaries of weather and ocean.



## PLOT SUMMARY

The narrator arrives at a fishing village and describes in detail what he sees, including the house that is his final destination. After several small squalls, the sun is bathing the rocks and plants in light, making the rainwater left on them shine. On the ocean, the narrator can see more rainclouds and imagines he can make out the faraway coast of Ireland. **Gulls** fly overhead,

swim in the harbor, and gather in groups on the rocks above it. The harbor itself is small and connected to the ocean by a narrow channel. Around its edges are the few colorful houses that make up the village, and in it some small boys are fishing for trout.

The narrator is standing at the end of a road, which he has traveled 2,500 miles to reach. He has stopped in front of the shanty he is visiting, and, looking at it, almost turns around and leaves, but does not do so. Instead, he walks down to the harbor, joins the young boys who are fishing there, including a boy, John, whose name he knows, and watches as they attempt to reel in trout, although when he attempts to cast a line he is unable to do so successfully. While they fish, he talks with the boys about the Midwest, their schools, and whether they like their teachers. Walking back up from the harbor with the boys, he hears from one of them about a tame seagull his family kept, which died the previous week. When they reach the top of the path, they encounter John's grandfather and his dog, who have just come out of the house. The grandfather seems to know the narrator and invites him to stay for supper.

Inside the house, John's grandmother greets them, looking at the narrator with “mild surprise” that turns to “open hostility” and then “self-control.” They eat dinner, at which the adults are silent, “reserved and shy,” and John talks about school, fishing, and a brief sojourn in Toronto. After dinner, the grandparents and John gather together and sing folk songs, including a mournful song about a woman named “Jenny.” While they sing, the narrator feels “alien,” out of place, not knowing the music or the family's routines.

When the singing is over, John starts his homework and the old woman knits. The narrator and the old man go into the parlor, where the narrator notes decorations including photographs of the old couple and their five daughters, who he knows have red hair despite the black-and-white of the photographs. The grandfather and the narrator play checkers and drink rum together. The grandfather tells the narrator about John, his visit to his mother, Jennifer, and her husband in Toronto, and the couple's deep love for John. He shows the narrator a newspaper clipping describing Jennifer and her husband's deaths in a car crash.

Following the revelation of Jennifer's death, the narrator goes to bed, where he wanders down the hall to the door of John's room. There he remembers Jennifer and his relationship with her, imagines taking John away with him to the Midwest, and ultimately decides that he cannot understand John or his experiences as well as John's adoptive family can. John is finally identified as the narrator's son, the product of his relationship with Jennifer 11 years ago, when he was a graduate student studying local folklore.

In the morning, the narrator explains to the grandparents that he will be leaving that day, emphasizing the fact that he will not be taking John with him. John offers him a beautiful stone,

which the narrator accepts before bidding the grandparents goodbye and leaving. On an airplane back to the Midwest, he is seated next to a heavy-equipment salesman working in Newfoundland, who, when they land, is greeted by his wife and two children. The narrator watches as the children, running to their father, demand, “Daddy, Daddy, what did you bring me?”



## CHARACTERS

**The Narrator** – The narrator is a middle-aged man living in the American Midwest, who fathered John eleven years ago while in Newfoundland as a graduate student, collecting local folklore. He is successful, intelligent, and well-educated, versed in authors like Yeats and Emily Brontë, but seems to have no family or loved ones other than John and John's maternal grandparents, whom the narrator has not visited in many years. At the beginning of the story, he is intensely hesitant about the prospect of seeing John again and feels discomforted and out of place, all the more so as he realizes the extent to which John, unlike him, is a true Newfoundlander. Although he had originally intended to bring John back with him to the Midwest, after he learns from the old man that John's mother Jennifer has died in Toronto, a newfound awareness of his own ignorance about John's life leads him to relinquish his son permanently to his grandparents and Newfoundland. The story ends with him returning to the Midwest, back where he began, his rift from his son and remaining family complete.

**John** – John is the narrator's eleven-year-old son, who has spent almost all of his life in rural Newfoundland with his maternal grandparents. He is a cheerful, well-adjusted boy, enthusiastic about fishing—catching trout with his friends, building his own lobster traps—and generally unaware of the tension between the adults in the story. He is not close to either of his biological parents, despite having lived briefly with his mother in Toronto before her death, but he seems to feel a deep kinship with his grandparents, treating them with respect, regarding them as surrogate parents, and participating in their heritage. Throughout the story he fails to grasp the meaning of the narrator's arrival or the problem of his presence, which is demonstrated when he talks casually about livestock breeds at dinner as the adults are silent. However, at the end, he gives the narrator **a stone** he has found in one of the story's most poignant, solemn moments, in which father and son achieve a short-lived connection.

**The Grandfather (Ira)** – Ira, referred to as “the old man” and “the grandfather” throughout the story, is the father of the narrator's old lover Jennifer and John's grandfather. He supports his wife and John by fishing, and is teaching John to fish so that he will be able to carry on the family occupation as an adult. He is cordial to the narrator, treating him as a guest and, later, even a friend, and seems to approach his life calmly and philosophically, although he struggles at times in the story

to express deep feelings like love or grief. He is almost impersonal when speaking about his daughter Jennifer's death, capable of verbalizing his grief for her only through music, and shows no particular tenderness either toward John or toward his wife. Yet his love for John, which he describes in one of the story's most moving passages, is the catalyst that leads the narrator to decide to leave John with his family in Newfoundland.

**The Grandmother** – John's unnamed grandmother, Ira's wife and Jennifer's mother, speaks very little in the story, but plays an important role in the contrast drawn between John's relationship with his biological parents and with his adoptive family, as well as in the development of the narrator's history with the couple. When she first sees the narrator again, she responds with “open hostility”—the first suggestion that the narrator's relationship with this couple is more complex than a simple friendship. In addition, she is essential to family routines like singing together or going up to bed at a certain time and by a certain route, which contribute to the narrator's decision to leave John with his family by demonstrating to him how integrated John is into this household and culture. Another less obvious function of her character is to shed light on the relevance of gender in “The Lost Salt Gift of Blood”—as the only living woman who is meaningfully depicted in the story, the fact that she hardly speaks and adds little to the story's emotional core emphasizes the resonance of fatherhood and masculine closeness.

**Jennifer** – Jennifer Farrell, John's mother and the old couple's youngest daughter, dies before the events of the story, but is nonetheless crucial to its impact and to the relationships of her living family. The main characters grieve her in their own ways throughout the story, whether in the form of the grandfather describing her loss to the narrator, the grandparents and John singing a mournful song addressed to “Jenny,” or the narrator thinking about her absence from the house late at night. Her memory makes possible some of the most profound moments of emotion and connection in the story. However, like the narrator, hers is a narrative of emotional alienation; the reader learns that she attempted to bring John with her to Toronto, much as the narrator imagines bringing him to the Midwest, but that both of them were so unhappy she sent him back to Newfoundland and his “real” family.

**John's Friends** – When the narrator first meets John, he is fishing with a group of other boys in the harbor, all of whom live in the village and attend two local schools. The narrator attempts to explain his life in the Midwest to them, but is met with as much confusion as he himself feels in the same scene while struggling to cast a fishing line. Their camaraderie and encouragement of one another, as well as their immersion in the culture of Newfoundland to the point that they cannot understand a life elsewhere in North America, demonstrate by contrast the narrator's alienation and loneliness in a world with

which he is unfamiliar.

**The Salesman** – At the end of the story, the narrator encounters a heavy-equipment salesman on his flight from Newfoundland back to “the heartland.” When the flight lands, the narrator watches as the salesman is happily reunited with his wife and his two children, demanding, “What did you bring me?” Though the salesman features only briefly, his family life, which appears joyful and fulfilling, underscores the abject loss that the narrator has experienced—he has found out his lover is dead, determined that he will be unable to remain in contact with her family in Newfoundland, and once and for all relinquished any claim to fatherhood.



## THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



### DISTANCE AND ALIENATION

Geographical and personal distance are key to Alistair MacLeod's “The Lost Salt Gift of Blood,” in which the narrator journeys 2,500 miles to

Newfoundland to see his son John. The narrator fathered John while visiting the village as a graduate student, but hasn't seen him since. As he awkwardly attempts to reconnect with John, MacLeod illustrates that emotional alienation cannot be resolved by closing a geographical gap. In charting the narrator's failure to meaningfully connect with his son, MacLeod demonstrates how emotional distance and cultural difference can alienate people from one another—sometimes irreparably.

In “The Lost Salt Gift of Blood,” MacLeod shows that even when people reunite with one another geographically, the emotional distance between them persists. At the beginning of the story, for example, the landscape draws attention to geographical distance. The harbor rocks “loom yearningly out towards Europe,” and the harbor is “like a tiny, peaceful womb nurturing the life that now lies within it,” connecting physical closeness to intimacy and peace. However, some distances are still too far to be crossed: “beyond Cape Spear lies Dublin and the Irish coast [...] seeming almost hazily visible now in imagination's mist.” In actuality, Ireland is nearly 2,000 miles away. The description of “imagination's mist” disguising the distance foreshadows the distance between the narrator and John. Although the narrator imagines their alienation can be overcome, this dream hides a distance that is, in reality, impassable. When he finally realizes that geographical closeness cannot heal the rift between them, he considers telling his son, “come away from the lonely gulls

and the silver trout and I will take you to the land of the Taste Freeze”—from Newfoundland and a relationship with his grandparents to the Midwest and a relationship with his father. However, he concludes, “I do not know enough of the fog on Toronto's Queen St. West [...] and of lost and misplaced love.” In other words, he realizes that geographical closeness doesn't affirm emotional closeness—and that after 11 years apart, the emotional distance that hovers between them may linger for life.

MacLeod outlines this alienation and emotional distance in terms of both geographical and cultural distance. The narrator's geographical closeness actually emphasizes his ignorance of his son's world. His alienation from Newfoundland culture is first clear when he watches a group of local boys fishing. When the boys are shouting encouragement, the narrator “[wishes] also to shout some enthusiastic advice but [...] [does] not know what to say.” He sums up his experience with “my feet are wet and chilled within my shoes. No place to be unless barefooted or in rubber boots. Perhaps for me no place at all.” He has come to be with his son, but the only home his son knows is “no place at all” for him. In addition, while the grandparents and John are playing music, he feels like an “alien of [his] middle generation” and “tap[s] [his] leather foot self-consciously” while “the three of them [...] sing, spanning easily the half-century that touches their extremes.” The two grandparents and the child share a culture the narrator lacks. The songs also suggest interpersonal alienation (“*all he'd ask I would deny*”) as well as isolation (“*all alone as I strayed by the banks of the river*”) and geographical separation (“*wide is the gulf, love, between you and I*”). Finally, the narrator's alienation from the setting parallels the reader's own alienation from the story's universe. MacLeod is sparing with information, leaving the revelation that John is the narrator's son to very late and never giving the details of the narrator's relationship with John's mother Jennifer. Like the narrator, the reader enters an unfamiliar world without understanding its foundations.

Lastly, although the narrator experiences a brief emotional connection with the grandfather, the ending affirms that the narrator's alienation from his son, the town and its people are irreparable. Although short-lived, the narrator's time with the grandfather is marked by a sense of community. The narrator refers to them as “we”—“we are warm within the dark”—suggesting intimacy rather than alienation. When the grandfather offers the narrator a drink, “before tasting it, [he knows] the rum to be strong and overproof,” demonstrating comfort with local customs. For a moment, it seems he may be able to overcome his emotional distance. However, later, he decides he has been “too much at home with [...] this man's house and all the feelings of his love.” His failure to connect with the old man contributes to his decision to leave John behind, believing “[he has] collected many things [he] did not understand” and “[he does] not know enough of the fog on

Toronto's Queen St. West and [...] of lost and misplaced love." His choice to separate himself from his son—possibly for good—is founded on his ignorance and alienation. MacLeod reaffirms this when, preparing to leave, the narrator says, "I think I will go back today' [...] I try to emphasize the 'I.'" Though his emphasis affirms he is not taking John away, it also reinforces his isolation, an "I" rather than a "we." His efforts at connection in this scene are also marred by alienation. When he "[turns his] head to the others" while accepting **a beautiful stone** from John, "they are both looking out through the window." Similarly, though the narrator responds to the woman's "I don't know if you know what I mean, but thank you" with "I think I do," suggesting tacit intimacy and knowledge, he and the couple also refute any possibility of further connection—at least in the near future—by agreeing they have no way to keep in touch.

The story ends in insurmountable alienation between the narrator and his family. MacLeod contrasts this with a salesman on the narrator's flight home, who reunites with his children as the narrator continues on without his son. Although both fathers have given their children the "gift of blood"—the gift of life and of family—the story affirms that forming a genuine and lasting bond requires far more than that.



### CULTURAL HERITAGE AND IDENTITY

Though cultural differences can be alienating, "The Lost Salt Gift of Blood" suggests heritage can also be a positive force that unites people. For instance, the relationship between John and his grandparents is founded partly on their intergenerational heritage, and they process the loss of John's mother Jennifer through references to local folklore and song. In this story, heritage and tradition have the ability to unite people with a common history and to help people make sense of the world around them.

First, heritage solidifies the bond between John and his grandparents, who are raising him as a member of their particular culture as rural Newfoundlanders. Genetic heritage, for instance, makes their closeness visual. John's appearance is similar to his Newfoundland family: "his hair is red and curly and his face is splashed with freckles and his eyes are clear and blue." The grandparents had five daughters with red hair, including Jennifer. Since red hair is recessive, both grandparents presumably had red hair as well, and the grandfather's eyes are blue. Blue and "an equally eye-catching red" are also the colors of the checkers the grandfather taught John to make; here, John's literal heritage enters into his cultural heritage. John's grandfather has also passed on to him the cultural tradition of fishing. John first appears fishing in the harbor, and when the grandfather first appears, he wears a fisherman's jersey and a belt buckle "shaped like a dory with a fisherman standing in the bow," and announces that the weather "will be good for the fishing." Later on, the grandfather

says that "John here has the makings of a good fisherman," indicating John's assimilation into Newfoundland culture and intention to follow in his family's footsteps. The heritage John and his grandparents share is perhaps most apparent when they sing together. Instead of suggesting singing, John "appears with his mouth organ," and the grandfather "notices him, nods," and wordlessly fetches his accordion. The grandmother also joins them without ever speaking, implying that this tradition is so established in their family that they do not need to discuss it. The narrator also observes that when the grandparents sing, "they take on the essence of the once-young people" in a photograph of the couple on the wall, and that the three of them "[span] easily the half-century that touches their extremes." The heritage they share blurs any age distinction, rendering them, like their traditions, ageless.

Furthermore, since Jennifer—the grandparents' youngest daughter and the narrator's lover—is dead, MacLeod depicts her presence through heritage like traditional songs. With this, cultural heritage becomes a tool for the characters to communicate and make sense of their world. Although the grandfather struggles to discuss his feelings about Jennifer, he and his wife use their cultural heritage to express their grief. The songs they sing, with lyrics like "*on this earth in grief and sorrow / I am bound until I die*" and "*as the foaming dark waters flow silently past him / Onward they flow over young Jenny's grave*," bear too much relevance to their situation not to be read as a way of verbalizing their grief. Later on, the grandfather tells the narrator that on the night of Jennifer's death, "the signs [were] all bad; the grandmother knocked off the lampshade and it broke in a hunderd pieces – the sign of death; and the window blind fell [...] And the dog runned around like he was crazy, moanen and cryen [...] and the next mornen, first thing I drops me knife," and finishes brusquely, "That night [Jennifer and her husband] be killed." He naturally connects Jennifer's death with traditional Newfoundland belief, emphasized by his description of Jennifer's husband James ("from Heartsick Bay he was") and the reference to the couple being "originally from Newfoundland" in their obituary. Even the narrator expresses his memories of Jennifer in terms of his relationship to Newfoundland belief. While he is imagining looking in on John during the night, he states that "[there] is no boiled egg or shaker of salt or glass of water waiting on the chair." He goes on to describe "a belief held in the outports" about how a girl might use a boiled egg, salt, and water to invoke a vision of her "true lover." The absence of these things, and therefore of the girl looking for her lover, references Jennifer's absence and its impact on him, having returned to the place where he knew her.

"The Lost Salt Gift of Blood" represents cultural heritage as an overwhelmingly positive force that creates comfort and connection. Even the narrator, not a part of Newfoundland culture, is able to find some common ground with John and his family through local belief and tradition. Likewise, the family

mourn the loss of their daughter Jennifer and make sense of her death by framing it as an almost folkloric event, reliant on traditional belief.



## THE PASSAGE OF TIME

In “The Lost Salt Gift of Blood,” journeys are almost always futile and doomed to failure, whether in the case of **a local dog** being unable to find a stick or the narrator being unable to connect with his son after traveling 2,500 miles to see him. MacLeod focuses particularly on the inevitable journey through time, passing from youth to age. Although the story suggests that growing older leads to loss and sorrow, it ultimately affirms that, in the possibility for healing, peace, and the nurturing of the next generation, it is not without its rewards.

MacLeod initially depicts the journey through time—aging, becoming more fragile, and losing one’s children as they become adults—as profoundly sad and burdensome. Rather than satisfaction or self-confidence, aging instills embarrassment, loneliness, and regret. For example, while the narrator and the local boys are walking from the harbor, the narrator is “wheezing and badly out of breath. So badly out of shape for a man of thirty-three [...] The boys walk easily, laughing and talking beside me.” The boys’ youth reminds the narrator of the impact that passing time has had on him, embarrassing him. In addition, MacLeod describes one picture of the grandparents as “a rather jaunty young couple taken many years ago,” as well as a group “of the couple in the other picture; and one of them with their five daughters; and one of the five daughters by themselves [...] roughly between the ages of ten and eighteen.” One of the things marking the photograph as old seems to be the contrast between the couple’s “rather jaunty” cheerfulness then and their attitudes now. The grandfather emphasizes this by saying “‘We be all alone [...] All our other daughters married and far away,’” indicating that passing time has contributed to the couple’s isolation from their loved ones. Finally, the songs the grandparents and John sing tie the passage of time irrevocably to loss and sorrow, as in “*They’re like the stars on a summer’s morning / First they’ll appear and then they’re gone.*” One song concludes by summarizing this theme: “*And on this earth in grief and sorrow / I am bound until I die.*” The passage of time is a pointless journey and a tragedy, one that cannot be escaped.

Yet MacLeod doesn’t leave the reader without hope. Instead, he demonstrates that the passage of time can, under some circumstances, be valuable, healing, and gladdening. His description of the setting affirms the positive aspects of passing time. The harbor is “like a tiny, peaceful womb nurturing [...] life,” suggesting the beauty of a new generation following the old. Also, survival and permanence, elsewhere reasons for grief, become emblems of hope and courage. The houses, “frame and flat-roofed [...] cling to the rocks [...] their bright colours [...]

buoyantly brave in the shadows,” and even nails are “defiantly optimistic” and “buoyantly yet firmly permanent.” Later on, the grandfather observes that “John here has the makings of a good fisherman [...] He and the dog are already out along the shore and back before I’ve made tea,” soon after the reader learns that the grandfather has helped John repair his own lobster traps. Here, generational change becomes productive, both in economic terms and in terms of emotional connection. Fishing also comes into play in another positive depiction of the passage of time, when the narrator comments that “it will indeed be a good day for the fishing and this wind eventually will calm.” MacLeod suggests that, though the journey through time can lead to pain and loneliness, it will also always lead to eventual peace. Lastly, an event that bookends the beginning and end of the story demonstrates the capacity of time and progress forward to heal, rather than harm. At the beginning, the narrator learns that “one of [the boys] used to have **a tame seagull** at his house, had it for seven years [...] It died last week,” and, as he is leaving the village at the conclusion of the story, he sees that the boys “are carrying something that looks like **a crippled gull**. Perhaps they will make it well.” Although one seagull has reached the end of its life, another has appeared, and will begin a new life in good hands.

MacLeod ends the story as the narrator is preparing to board another flight “even farther into the heartland.” He is returning to where he began, without his son, yet the ending is not wholly tragic. Like the passage of time, his journey home is both melancholy, faced with the happiness of another man and his family, and offering the potential for comfort and healing. The airport terminal is “strangely familiar,” and the “heartland” is, clearly, a place that he loves.



## SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



## FOG

Throughout “The Lost Salt Gift of Blood,” MacLeod uses fog to symbolize the difficulty of genuine connection and understanding between people and the ways in which the reality of one’s circumstances can be obscured. While describing the setting at the beginning of the story, he observes how “somewhere beyond Cape Spear lies Dublin and the Irish coast; far away but still the nearest land [...] seeming almost hazily visible now in imagination’s mist.” In this way, MacLeod identifies mist and fog with imagination, something that hides the reality of the situation. This is fitting because it is not immediately clear why the narrator is in Newfoundland—only as the story goes on does the reader develop an understanding of the connection between the

narrator and his son, John. Similarly, when John is singing with his grandmother and grandfather, the narrator reflects that “the words sweep up and swirl about my head. Fog does not touch like snow yet it is more heavy and more dense.” He perceives the distance, the “stranding,” between himself and his son’s family as fog swirling around him. MacLeod represents the narrator’s inability to understand the family’s culture or their love for one another as a literal inability to see them clearly. Fog appears again when the grandfather is describing John’s arrival back in Newfoundland and the day of Jennifer’s death: “It be foggy all the day [...] And I says, small to myself, now here in the fog be the bad luck and the death but then there the plane be [...] soon he comen through the fog [...] That night they be killed.” Fog symbolizes distance and the inability to form connections, and it functions doubly as a symbol here, showing the recovery of the bond between John and the grandfather (John coming “through the fog”) and the distance between Jennifer and both her son and her parents becoming irreparable. Reading about her death in a car crash, the narrator learns that “bad visibility caused by a heavy fog may have contributed to the accident,” connecting the circumstances of Jennifer’s death to a symbol of her emotional and geographical separation from her family. Finally, when the narrator realizes that he is completely unable to bridge the gap between himself and John, he describes his own ignorance and self-deception in terms of fog, saying, “I would like to see my way more clearly. I, who have never understood the mystery of fog,” and, later, “I do not know enough of the fog on Toronto’s Queen St. West [...] and of lost and misplaced love.” Knowing nothing about John’s life, heritage, and experience, he can understand him only partly and confusedly, as though through an obscuring fog.



## GULLS

MacLeod depicts the seagulls living in the harbor of the village as a symbol of the complex types of alienation that characterize the lives of the narrator, John, and Jennifer. At the beginning, the narrator describes them in as much detail as though he has never seen gulls before, and, with similes like “flapping their wings pompously [...] like overconditioned he-men who have successfully passed their body-building courses” and phrasing like “murmuring softly to themselves,” creates the image of a strange hybrid of human and gull. MacLeod renders the gulls, through the narrator’s eyes, as an alien novelty, indicating how unfamiliar and even threatening the narrator finds his son’s world. The gulls also serve as a symbol of the narrator’s alienation from Newfoundland when he considers taking John “away from the lonely gulls and the silver trout” to the Midwest, framing the gulls, and by extension the place where they live, in opposition to himself and his world. Though the narrator’s alienation from Newfoundland leads him to view the gulls as strange and even

threatening, John, who has a deep connection to Newfoundland and its culture, finds happiness and reassurance in them. When he travels to Toronto to be with his mother, feeling “wonderful sad” and out of place, he is comforted by the presence of gulls over Toronto’s harbor, indicating that although he is geographically distant from Newfoundland, he is not yet wholly alienated from it. Finally, the two injured seagulls that bookend the story seem to symbolize elements of John’s struggle with alienation as well.

The tame seagull named “Joey” evokes Jennifer herself, who is “tamed” in her move to Toronto, a major metropolis without the wildness of Newfoundland, though simultaneously injured (like the wounded gull) by the loss of her son, and dies in her new environment. John’s friends’ ability to talk cheerfully and casually about its death parallels John’s lack of knowledge, and perhaps lack of interest, about Jennifer’s death, due to his profound emotional disconnect from her; the boys’ search for a new gull reflects the arrival of the narrator, the suggestion that a new parent and a new bond may come into John’s life. At the end of the story, on the other hand, the crippled gull the boys discover—about which the narrator thinks, “Perhaps they will make it well”—signifies that although the narrator’s bond with John is permanently “crippled,” John’s bond with his family, friends, and culture has been strengthened and “healed” by the narrator’s decision not to take him away.




## QUOTES


Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the W. W. Norton & Company edition of *Island: The Complete Stories* published in 2011.

### The Lost Salt Gift of Blood Quotes

●● Even farther out, somewhere beyond Cape Spear lies Dublin and the Irish coast; far away but still the nearest land, and closer now than is Toronto or Detroit, to say nothing of North America’s more western cities; seeming almost hazily visible now in imagination’s mist.

**Related Characters:** The Narrator (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 118-119



#### Explanation and Analysis


This quotation, which comes at the very beginning of the story, introduces the reader to the relationship between

geographical and emotional distance that is key to the narrative of “The Last Salt Gift of Blood.” Although the Irish coast is far away, it is closer to Newfoundland than any major city in North America; the fact that Newfoundland’s cultural heritage is primarily Irish creates a parallel between the geographical closeness of Ireland and the narrator’s hope to connect with his son’s Newfoundland culture. Though too far away to be seen with the naked eye, Ireland seems “almost hazily visible” in the narrator’s imagination, emphasizing the strength of his desire to be close to his son and his belief that such closeness is within reach. His failure to acknowledge the reality of geography—that he cannot see Ireland from Newfoundland—demonstrates his failure to recognize the reality of his circumstances, that he will never successfully be an active father figure in John’s life.

“One of them used to have a tame seagull at his house, had it for seven years. His older brother found it on the rocks and brought it home. His grandfather called it Joey. [...] It died last week and they held a funeral about a mile away from the shore where there was enough soil to dig a grave. Along the shore itself it is almost solid rock [...] It’s the same with people, they say. All week they have been hopefully looking [...] for another seagull but have not found one.”

**Related Characters:** The Narrator (speaker), John’s Friends, John

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 123-124

### Explanation and Analysis

The narrator has just arrived in Newfoundland and in this passage is talking to John and some of the local boys. This quotation first establishes the local seagulls as a symbol of the role of emotional and geographical alienation in the lives of eleven-year-old John and his family. The tame seagull that has recently died, the reader will learn, represents John’s mother, Jennifer, “tamed” by a move to a major city (Toronto) away from rural Newfoundland, and then killed, along with her husband, in a car accident. The burial of the seagull away from the shore where it lived, “where there was enough soil,” mirrors Jennifer’s death away from her home and family, a parallel emphasized by the boy’s remark that “it’s the same with people.” The boys have begun looking for a new seagull just as the narrator arrives in the


village, juxtaposing the potential appearance of a new bird to replace the old with the potential appearance of a new parental figure to replace John’s mother.

“John here has the makings of a good fisherman,” says the old man. “He’s up at five most every morning when I am putting on the fire. He and the dog are already out along the shore and back before I’ve made tea.”

“When I was in Toronto,” says John, “no one was ever up before seven. I would make my own tea and wait. It was wonderful sad. There were gulls there though, flying over Toronto harbour. We went to see them on two Sundays.”

**Related Characters:** John, The Grandfather (Ira) (speaker), Jennifer, The Narrator

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 128-129

### Explanation and Analysis


Here, the narrator listens to John’s grandfather—Jennifer’s father—talk about the boy. This quotation underlines not only the importance of cultural heritage in John’s life and bond with his family, but also the symbolic resonance of gulls in John’s relationship with his mother. The old man’s observation that “John has the makings of a good fisherman” indicates that he intends John to carry on the family business of fishing once he has died or is no longer able to fish, integrating him more fully into the culture and tradition of Newfoundland and the village. In addition, it suggests the emotional significance of fishing as a method by which the two of them are able to bond with one another. John’s response indicates the dramatic difference between his relationship with his mother in Toronto and his grandparents in Newfoundland—he could not comprehend his mother’s lifestyle and found it “wonderful sad” and unfulfilling. His only solace was the presence of gulls in Toronto harbor, which reminded him of his emotional connection to Newfoundland and made it possible for him to find some intimacy with his mother.



☞ All three of them begin to sing, spanning easily the half-century that touches their extremes. The old and the young singing now their songs of loss in different comprehensions. Stranded here, alien of my middle generation, I tap my leather foot self-consciously [...] The words sweep up and swirl about my head. Fog does not touch like snow yet it is more heavy and more dense. Oh moisture comes in many forms!

**Related Characters:** The Narrator (speaker), The Grandmother, The Grandfather (Ira), John

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 130


### Explanation and Analysis

Here, the narrator looks on while John and his grandparents sing folk songs together after dinner. This quotation demonstrates the depth of the narrator's isolation and the "stranding" he experiences, on the other side of the emotional gap between himself, his son, and his remaining family. John is deeply integrated into this family and their culture—he knows the songs his grandparents sing and their routine of making music after dinner—but the narrator is "alien," unable to play an instrument or sing, unfamiliar with the songs, completely cut off from his son's world. Their singing "spans easily the half-century" that separates them, as though they are one generation, cutting the narrator out of the equation entirely. Furthermore, this quotation reintroduces fog as a symbol, rendering the words of the folk songs as a swirling fog that obscures the scene from the narrator's sight and makes literal his inability to know clearly, and thus connect with, his family.

☞ "When she married in Toronto [...] we figured that maybe John should be with her and with her husband. [...] Well, what was wrong was that we missed him wonderful awful. [...] Like us had no moorings, lost in the fog or the ice-floes in a snow squall. Nigh sick unto our hearts we was."

**Related Characters:** The Grandfather (Ira) (speaker), Jennifer, The Narrator, The Grandmother, John

**Related Themes:** 

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 134


### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the grandfather explains how much he and his wife missed John during his brief stint living with his mother, Jennifer, in Toronto. This passage reflects the complexity of the family's relationships and, once again, fog appears as a representative of distance, both physical and emotional. Until this point, the grandparents' conversation with the narrator has been brusque and unemotional, and this is the first suggestion of intimacy between the narrator and the old man, when they are able to overcome the gulf between them and discuss their feelings honestly—or, at the very least, the old man is able to do so. He acknowledges openly his love for John and how deeply he and his wife felt his absence, "like us had no moorings, lost in the fog." Here, fog acts once more as a symbol of separation and alienation, the grandparents cut off from contact with the adopted son whom they love.

☞ "Well, it was all wrong the night before the going. The signs all bad [...] But still I feels I has to go. It be foggy all the day [...] And I says, small to myself, now here in the fog be the bad luck and the death but then there the plane be [...] soon he comen through the fog [...] Powerful strange how things will take one. That night they be killed."

**Related Characters:** The Grandfather (Ira) (speaker), Jennifer, The Grandmother, John

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 134

### Explanation and Analysis


This quotation—which is also from the grandfather's description of John's visit to Toronto, his return to Newfoundland, and Jennifer's subsequent death—uses the symbol of fog to render the restoration of John and his grandparents' relationship, as well as the permanent severing of John's relationship with his mother. The grandfather says to himself that "here in the fog be the bad luck and the death," suggesting the serious and painful harm that distance and alienation can cause, and thinks that John may not be on the plane, implying a fear that he will not be able to reconnect with John after their separation. However, John comes to him "through the fog,"

representing an ability to bypass the effect of their separation and reaffirm his emotional connection with his grandfather. However, the same night, Jennifer and her husband are killed in a car crash, permanently ending the possibility of any connection between her and John.

“Jennifer Farrell of Roncesvalles Avenue was instantly killed early this morning and her husband James died later [...] The accident occurred about 2 A.M. when the pickup truck in which they were travelling went out of control on Queen St. W. [...] It is thought that bad visibility caused by a heavy fog may have contributed to the accident. The Farrells were originally from Newfoundland.”

**Related Characters:** Jennifer, The Narrator, The Grandfather (Ira)

**Related Themes:** 

**Related Symbols:** 



**Page Number:** 136

### Explanation and Analysis

This quotation is an excerpt from the newspaper clipping the narrator reads about Jennifer’s death, describing how she died and the heavy fog that caused the accident. This is the point at which the narrator first learns about Jennifer’s death, the loss of his original connection to the family and to Newfoundland. Both Jennifer’s death and the fact that the narrator has only now learned about it reaffirm his distance from the family, an alienation symbolized, like John’s, by the “heavy fog” on Queen St. West. Jennifer’s death has irreparably distanced John from his parents, and it has also distanced the narrator from both Jennifer and the family who, under different circumstances, might have welcomed him more warmly.

I stand and bend my ear to hear the even sound of my one son’s sleeping. [...] I hesitate to touch the latch for fear that I may waken him and disturb his dreams. And if I did, what would I say? Yet I would like to see him in his sleep this once and see the room with the quiet bed once more [...]

**Related Characters:** Jennifer, John, The Narrator

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 137

### Explanation and Analysis

In this quotation, the narrator approaches his son’s bedroom door after going upstairs to bed, remembering that it used to be the bedroom of his ex-lover, Jennifer. Here, the reader first learns that John is, in fact, the narrator’s son, which has been implied but never explicitly stated before. Only at this point, when the narrator must make a final decision as to whether or not he will attempt to take John back to the Midwest with him, does the reader discover the reality of how John is related to the narrator. As the narrator is distanced from the only family that remains to him by ignorance of their lives and culture, the reader, too, is distanced from the world of the story by MacLeod’s strategic withholding of information, revealing not until the climax of the story the crucial information that has been missing.

Once, though, there was a belief held in the outports, that if a girl would see her own true lover she should boil an egg and scoop out half the shell and fill it with salt. [...] In the night her future husband or a vision of him would appear [...] But she must only do it once.

It is the type of belief that bright young graduate students were collecting eleven years ago for the theses and archives of North America and also, they hoped, for their own fame.

**Related Characters:** Jennifer, The Narrator

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 138


### Explanation and Analysis



In the middle of the night, hovering outside of John’s bedroom, the narrator thinks about an old folk belief. This quotation reveals, obliquely, the circumstances of the narrator and Jennifer’s relationship, as the narrator is remembering the time he spent in this house 11 years ago. At that time he was a “bright young graduate student” spending time in Newfoundland to study local folklore and ballads, and became Jennifer’s lover, implied by the reference to the belief allowing a girl to see her “future husband.” The indirectness of the narrator’s admission, his only acknowledgment of what took place in this house 11 years ago, also stresses his distance from the family as well as the long-gone time when he felt, through Jennifer, a

connection to them. He refers to graduate *students*, in the plural, and describes his and Jennifer's relationship in terms of a traditional belief, rather than recalling any more intimate specifics or even indicating explicitly that he is discussing himself and his own life.

☛ And perhaps now I should go and say, oh son of my *summa cum laude* loins, come away from the lonely gulls and the silver trout and I will take you to the land of the Tastee Freeze [...] Again I collect dreams. For I do not know enough of the fog on Toronto's Queen St. West and the grinding crash of the pickup, and of lost and misplaced love.

**Related Characters:** Jennifer, John, The Narrator

**Related Themes:** 

**Related Symbols:**  

**Page Number:** 139

### Explanation and Analysis

In this quotation, the narrator concludes that the right decision is to leave John with his grandparents, friends, and community in Newfoundland, rather than take him away to the Midwest—"the land of the Tastee Freeze"—and attempt to resolve the alienation between them. He invokes the gulls as a symbol again, describing them as "lonely" and thereby suggesting his own alienation; John, earlier, found comfort and community in the gulls, and their dissimilar reactions indicate their diverging relationships with Newfoundland, its nature, and its culture. This distance, leaving them incapable of truly understanding each other, is what the narrator acknowledges in saying, "Again I collect dreams"—though he may imagine a genuine connection with his son, he knows that in reality, the alienation between them can never be bridged. He knows nothing of the circumstances of John's life, like Jennifer's death, or his feelings about them, and his ignorance has become insurmountable.

☛ He opens his hand to reveal a smooth round stone. [...] Suddenly he looks up to my eyes and thrusts the stone toward me. "Here," he says, "would you like to have it?"

Even as I reach out my hand I turn my head to the others in the room. They are both looking out through the window to the sea.

**Related Characters:** John (speaker), The Grandmother, The Grandfather (Ira), The Narrator

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 140

### Explanation and Analysis

This quotation, which takes place at the end of the story as the narrator is about to leave, is a rare moment of meaningful connection between the narrator and John, one of two—the other being John teaching him to fish—that bookend the story. Both seem to be efforts on John's part to draw his estranged father into his culture and his world through activities that are important to him, whether fishing or collecting, but both are marred by the alienation between them and the narrator's discomfort with Newfoundland and its people. He cannot cast correctly when John attempts to show him how to fish, and when he accepts the stone, he finds that the grandparents are ignoring what is taking place. Even as John tries to make a gesture of connection and friendship to the narrator, the rest of his family wordlessly reject it.

☛ The salesman's wife stands waiting along with two small children who are the first to see him. They race toward him with their arms outstretched. "Daddy, Daddy," they cry, "what did you bring me? What did you bring me?"

**Related Characters:** John, The Salesman, The Narrator

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 142

### Explanation and Analysis

As the narrator completes the first leg of his trip back to the Midwest, he watches a family happily reunite. This quotation, the final line of the story, acts almost as a call-and-response with the title, "The Lost Salt Gift of Blood." Both of the fathers in the story—the narrator who is leaving his son behind and the salesman who is returning to his children—have given those children the same gift, the gift of "blood," which can mean both life and family. However, the salesman's children clearly expect more than that from him—they expect a hug, a present, the affection of a father who loves them. Their delight at seeing him and the family's happy reunion stands in sharp contrast to the narrator, who has just left his son behind, having given him nothing and been wholly unable to connect with him. Although he gave

his son the gift of blood 11 years ago, more than that is necessary to create a bond of love and trust between

parent and child, and the narrator has been unable to offer anything to John to establish that bond.



## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

## THE LOST SALT GIFT OF BLOOD

In a seaside harbor, the sun is beginning to set on the rocks and plants. A recent rain has left the area “briefly and thoroughly drenched,” and more rainclouds “seem to be forming” over the ocean. The narrator feels that Ireland, “the nearest land” to where he is, seems “almost hazily visible” through the clouds.

*The narrator’s reflection that Ireland seems almost visible, despite how far away it is in reality, foreshadows the problem of his relationship with his son. He imagines it’s possible for them to become close, but in reality, the distance between them is impassable.*



A colony of **gulls** in the harbor are “[wheeling] and [crying],” “squawking and garbling,” and “[gathering] in lazy groups on the rocks.” It is high tide, and the sea is coming into the harbor through a narrow channel, moving toward the high-water marks. Near the harbor are a few colorful houses. There are young boys fishing for sea trout nearby, shouting support to each other.

*The narrator describes the gulls like a naturalist, as if he has never seen them before, using similes that make a common bird seem strange and unusual. His unfamiliarity with the gulls indicates his ignorance of, and alienation from, this region, later revealed as the Canadian island of Newfoundland.*



The narrator is seeing this scene at the end of the road into the village, where he has stopped in front of a shanty he is going to visit. It is “grey and weatherbeaten” with “a heavy rusted padlock.” He considers turning around and leaving “before anything might begin,” but decides not to.

*The narrator thinks of the home as a “shanty,” suggesting a tiny, run-down building. Here, his own financial success distances him subtly from the local people, who live in a poor rural area. His brief longing to turn and leave before anything has happened foreshadows a minor theme of the story, journeys that end, futilely, where they began.*



The narrator walks down the path leading to the harbor. Stones leave his shoes “nicked and scratched.” At the end of the path are four boys fishing, one of whom has just hooked a trout. The other boys, including six or seven on the other side of the harbor, are “shouting encouragement” to him.

*The narrator’s first encounter with the people of this fishing village, a group of cheerful young boys, evokes an image of the village as a friendly, tight-knit community, loving and productive. Alone and seemingly without family, the narrator has no such place of his own.*



John, the red-haired boy who has caught the trout, struggles to reel in the fish, slips on the rock, and accidentally lets the trout go. Wet and bleeding, he tries not to cry. The narrator “[reaches] down to retrieve the rod and return it to him.”

*Here the reader sees for a second time how journeys or quests, in the story’s world, inevitably end without having achieved their end goal. For all he has accomplished, John might as well not have tried to catch the fish at all—much as, at the end of the story, the narrator might as well not have come to Newfoundland. Another notable part of this passage is the narrator’s unemotional awkwardness. Rather than soothe the child or help with his injury, as some adults might have done, the narrator only picks up his fishing rod for him.*



A “shout rises from the opposite shore”—another boy has landed a trout. The boys shout to him as well, and the narrator wants to shout with them but does not know what to say. The boys on the other side of the harbor run over to look at the trout and “exclaim about its size.”

The boys ask the narrator where he lives and what it’s like, but he struggles to explain the American Midwest to them. He asks them about their schools and they tell him which schools they attend—the local Catholic and public schools—and that they are in grades four and five.

The boys also say that they fish almost every day and show the narrator their fishing equipment. There is a “silver spike knotted into the leader” on the end of each fishing line, which some boys say is to attract the fish and some say is a weight.

John offers his fishing rod to the narrator and encourages him to try to cast, but the narrator is unable to cast successfully and gives him back the rod after “three or four more casts.”

The boys’ mothers call them in for supper, and the narrator climbs back up the path with them. He realizes that the evening is cold and his feet are wet in his shoes, and thinks that the harbor is “no place to be unless barefooted or in rubber boots. Perhaps for me no place at all.”

*The sense of camaraderie and community between the boys fishing stands in sharp contrast to the narrator’s solitude and discomfort. The passage of time is subtly emphasized here—he cannot be one of them not only because he is not from Newfoundland, but also because he is an adult, another way in which he is not of their world.*



*As with the narrator’s other attempts at human connection in the story, his effort to explain his own life to the boys is an awkward, ineffective struggle. He simply does not understand Newfoundland and its people, especially its children, well enough to explain the Midwest in terms the boys will understand.*



*Cultural heritage is deeply important to the people of the fishing village, and the spike is one of the traditions that binds them together. Though they don’t know exactly what it’s for, they don’t question its necessity—like all traditions, it’s one of many things that create a community.*



*The alienation between the narrator and John is painfully evident in this attempt at a moment of connection. John tries to share the activity he loves most with the narrator, but the narrator, uncomfortable and out of place, has no success and quickly rejects it.*



*Having failed even to cast a fishing line, the narrator feels his alienation and loneliness deeply. He might once have been familiar with this place, familiar enough that he knows he should be “barefooted or in rubber boots,” but now, as a middle-aged Midwesterner, it seems forbidding and remote to him, “no place at all.” Even though he is with the group of boys, he remains isolated and out of place.*



While they walk up the path the boys talk about a tame **seagull** one of them had that died the previous week, which they buried “where there was enough soil to dig a grave.” By the time they are at the top, the narrator is “wheezing and badly out of breath,” but the boys “walk easily, laughing and talking.” The narrator considers again turning around and leaving, but does not.

A small black-and-white dog and a short, elderly man appear on the road. The man is wearing fisherman’s clothing and has blue eyes and “heavy, gnarled and misshapen” hands. The narrator cannot tell how old he is. The man says that the weather is good and “it will be good for the fishing.”

The old man throws a stick into the harbor for the dog, and the boys shout encouragement to the dog as he swims. He “cannot see the stick he swims to find,” and the boys throw stones to show him where it is. The old man asks the narrator how he has been and suggests that he stay for supper.

The narrator, the old man, and the dog walk along the road toward the houses, accompanied by the boys. The three of them, with John, turn off at the third gate, which leads to the same shanty in front of which the narrator stopped earlier. Inside the gate is a garden with a path lined with stones and flower beds built inside tires. The house is “square [and] green [...] with white borders and shutters” and a porch, and around it are “a variety of sou’westers and rubber boots and mitts and caps.”

The four of them enter the kitchen, where “the woman is at work.” The dog goes to sleep underneath the table. The small kitchen has “an iron cookstove, a table against one wall and three or four handmade chairs.” It also has a rocking chair, a washstand and washbasin, a medicine cabinet, a cupboard, and a couch. On the walls are a barometer and two pictures, one of a “rather jaunty young couple taken many years ago,” and one of the Christ Child.

*The tame seagull’s story parallels, later in “The Lost Salt Gift,” the story of John’s mother, Jennifer, who was “tamed” by her move to a major city from the wilderness of Newfoundland, died in a car accident, and was buried far away from Newfoundland, as the seagull is from the shore where it lived. The passage of time is also invoked here, as the narrator mourns the physical harm that his age has done to him, and linked to the theme of futile journeys by the narrator considering, once again, leaving before he can meet anyone else.*



*This is the introduction of John’s grandfather, whose name, the reader will learn, is Ira. His dedication to fishing is emphasized as it is when John is first introduced, indicating their similarities and their deep bond, founded partly on the tradition of fishing. The narrator’s inability to judge Ira’s age seems to suggest that the passage of time, and the harm it does, no longer affect him, perhaps that he has made peace with it.*



*The dog and the narrator are associated with one another—both on journeys that will prove so pointless as to seem almost comical, the dog unable to retrieve the stick, the narrator choosing to leave Newfoundland soon after arriving, having little to show for his trip.*



*Though the narrator’s initial description of the house as a “shanty” suggested a tumbledown shack, the family’s house seems to be a pleasant cottage with “white shutters” and homemade flowerbeds, littered with cold-weather clothes. Though minor, this is one of the first instances where it becomes clear that the narrator isn’t telling the reader everything, or perhaps that his perception cannot be trusted.*



*Some of the furniture in the kitchen is handmade and most of it is old fashioned, suggesting the theme of cultural heritage in both the skill necessary to make furniture and the handing down of the old furniture itself. The picture of the young couple evokes the theme of passing time—they were young once, but the picture was taken “many years ago.”*



The woman at the stove, who is “tall and fine-featured” with grey hair and eyes, is cooking fish. She looks at the narrator with “mild surprise,” which then turns “with recognition” to “open hostility” and in turn to “self-control.”

While they eat, the narrator and the older couple are “reserved and shy [...] groping for and protecting [...] the only awful dignity we possess.” John talks about what he is learning in school and his lobster traps, which the old man helped him fix. The old man comments that “John here has the makings of a good fisherman” and wakes up earlier than he does. John says, “When I was in Toronto no one was ever up before seven [...] There were **gulls** there though, flying over Toronto harbour. We went to see them on two Sundays.”

After supper, the old man turns on the radio, tuning first to the weather forecast and then to a frequency that lets him listen to local fishing boats. John brings out his harmonica, and the old man “notices him, nods, and shuts off the radio,” going upstairs and fetching an “old and battered accordion.” His wife joins him, and the two of them sing a mournful folk song while John plays the harmonica.

The old man suggests that John sing with them, and he does. As he taps his foot awkwardly to the rhythm, the narrator reflects that he is “stranded here, alien of my middle generation,” and feels separated from the three of them as if by **fog**. The three of them sing another folk song about the death of a woman named Jenny.

*The woman’s reaction to the narrator is another indication that all is not as it seems between him and the family he has come to visit. Whatever his connection to them is, it seems not to be a positive one. However, like the narrator himself, this woman he has wronged in some way has too much self-control to react openly.*



*The narrator and the couple are intensely uncomfortable in each other’s presence, confirming that something is amiss between the adults that makes it difficult for them to interact. Also, the emotional resonance of fishing for John and the old man (later revealed as his grandfather) is spelled out here—the grandfather is teaching John to be a good fisherman, integrating him into his own culture. John, reflecting on a visit to Toronto, juxtaposes for the reader his happiness and ease in Newfoundland and his discomfort with life in Toronto. The only thing that brought him comfort in Toronto were the gulls, a symbol of his life in Newfoundland, whereas for the narrator, the gulls of the fishing village were as alien as Newfoundland itself.*



*The family’s routine is so well established that John, the grandfather, and the grandmother do not have to speak to start making music together, not even to decide what songs they will sing. This demonstrates the extent to which John belongs here, where he has been integrated into family life and into cultural heritage—he knows the songs they sing as well as the grandparents do.*



*The narrator’s experience is the exact opposite of John’s: he feels “stranded,” isolated and unable to fit into the family life of John and his grandparents. The folk song about the death of “Jenny” foreshadows the death that the grandfather will later tell the narrator about, the loss of his daughter, Jennifer, and suggests that the family have been mourning and healing from that loss through music and, more generally, their cultural heritage.*





After singing, the four of them “sit rather uncomfortably for a moment,” before John begins his schoolwork and the woman begins to knit. The old man and the narrator go into the parlor, which has a wood-burning heater and an “old-fashioned mantelpiece [...] covered with odd shapes of driftwood [...] and a variety of exotically shaped bottles.” On the mantelpiece there are also pictures of the couple in the previous picture and their five red-haired daughters.

The old man takes out a collapsible card table, a battered checkerboard, and homemade checkers, bright blue and red, in a matchbox. He tells the narrator that John made the checkers and “gave it a good try.” They play checkers while the old man smokes, and “neither of [them] loses all of the time.”

The old woman and John both bid them goodnight and go up to bed by “the same route.” The old man and the narrator continue playing checkers. Soon the old man fetches the “ostensible vinegar jug” from outdoors and makes a hot rum drink with sugar on the woodstove. Before taking a sip, the narrator “[knows] the rum,” which comes from the islands of St. Pierre and Miquelon, “to be strong and overproof.” The two of them drink the sweet rum together, “warm within the dark and still within the wind.”

The narrator thinks that “it is difficult to talk at times [...] difficult to achieve the actual act of saying.” Eventually the old man begins to tell the narrator about John’s trip to Toronto after John’s mother’s marriage. He explains that he and his wife thought John would “[have] more of a chance” in Toronto, but once they sent him away, they realized that they missed him “wonderful awful” and were “sick unto [their] hearts,” “even the grandmother.”

*This passage introduces again the theme of cultural and personal heritage that the narrator is excluded from. The family have been collecting “odd driftwood” and “exotically shaped bottles,” but whereas the collections seem to be something for John and his grandparents to bond over, the narrator knows nothing about them, the circumstances in which they were found, or what they mean to the family. The pictures of the couple and their five daughters foreshadow what the reader will later learn—that the narrator is connected to the family through the daughters, one of whom was his lover many years ago.*



*John is described at the beginning of the story as being blue-eyed and red-haired; similarly, the old man has blue eyes, and the fact that all five daughters have red hair (a recessive gene) indicates that both their parents must have as well. The colors that mark John’s genetic heritage from his Newfoundland family are here reflected in his cultural heritage—that is, his learning to make his own checkers.*



*As the narrator and the old man become closer, one of the rare moments of connection the narrator experiences in the story, his relationship to Newfoundland and its culture temporarily changes. Even before he has tasted the rum, he knows where it comes from and that it will be “strong and overproof”—rather than being clumsy and discomfited, as with the fishing line, he is comfortable and familiar with this particular local tradition. His moment of friendship and intimacy with the old man seems to have made possible a larger intimacy with the old man’s world.*



*Until this point, the old man, like the narrator, has been reticent and unemotional, but as he begins to tell the narrator about John’s visit to his mother in Toronto, the reader sees how deeply and selflessly he and his wife love John and want the best for him. The old man, able to express his feelings, is able to show John love and care, while the narrator, seemingly unable to verbalize his emotions, is unable to form any kind of connection with the family.*



The old man goes upstairs and brings back an envelope. He shows the narrator a picture of “two young people [...] before a half-ton pickup” with the name “Jim Farrell” lettered on it, and adds that Farrell was “a nice enough fellow, from Heartsick Bay.”

The old man continues telling the narrator about John’s time in Toronto, saying that “they”—the Farrells—“could have no more peace with John than [the grandparents] could without him.” The Farrells decided to send John back to Newfoundland by plane, but “it was all wrong the night before the going. The signs all bad,” and the grandparents and their neighbors were “wonderful scared and not know what to do.” The day of John’s arrival was **foggy**, and the old man thought that “in the fog be the bad luck and the death,” but went to meet him at the airport regardless. He describes poignantly how he saw John come through the fog and start to run, “closer and closer till I can feel him in me arms,” and concludes bluntly, “That night they be killed.”

The old man shows the narrator a newspaper clipping describing the deaths of the Farrells, Jennifer and James, in a car accident on Queen St. West in Toronto. According to the clipping, “bad visibility caused by a **heavy fog** may have contributed to the accident.” The old man then says that he and his wife are “all alone”; their “other daughters” having traveled away, and that they have only John to keep them company. The narrator’s “head begins to reel,” and he thinks that he is “making [himself] too much at home with [...] this man’s house and all the feelings of his love.”

The narrator and the old man urinate outside, where the wind is blowing violently. The narrator observes that “it will indeed be a good day for the fishing and this wind eventually will calm.” They go upstairs and bid each other goodnight.

*In hindsight, it’s unclear whether or not the narrator knows already that Jennifer is married, or whether he is learning it for the first time. The very fact that he has no evident reaction emphasizes his emotional stagnation—even learning or remembering this woman, who is soon to be revealed as his ex-lover, has married someone else, he makes almost no response to it.*



*Here, the fog is invoked again as a symbol of geographical and emotional alienation and its defeat by trust and love. Jennifer and her husband, unable to connect with John, send him back to the family he is close to, and the day he is scheduled to return is foggy, suggesting his complete alienation from Jennifer and her husband as well as potential alienation from the family which he has been separated. “In the fog be the bad luck and the death,” the old man thinks, evoking the serious harm that alienation can cause, but pushes on through the fog to meet John. He thinks briefly that John won’t be on the plane, picturing an outcome in which their alienation is insurmountable, but instead John runs through the fog and hugs him. They have been physically separated, but have succeeded in overcoming that alienation and reaffirming their emotional bond.*



*The old man was right, after all, in thinking that “here in the fog be the bad luck and the death”—it is a heavy fog that causes the accident that kills Jennifer and her husband in Toronto. The association of fog with alienation underlines the emotional impact Jennifer’s death will have, making the “heavy fog” a symbol of the alienation between her, John, and her parents that is now permanent. The narrator experiences a resurgence of his own feelings of alienation, provoked, seemingly, by the news of Jennifer’s death and the loss of his closest connection to the family, and withdraws from the intimacy he and the old man have established.*



*The narrator’s observation that “this wind eventually will calm” suggests both the theme of the passage of time and the recurrence of his own coldness and lack of emotion. Even in mourning for Jennifer, he is able to evaluate the weather, and to recognize that, just like the wind, whatever he feels now will pass.*



The narrator notices that the room where he will be sleeping “has changed very little.” “Like a foolish Lockwood,” he goes to look out the window before undressing himself. Instead of going to bed, however, he goes back to the door and out into the hall, where he “[finds] the door quite easily [...] But no one waits on the other side.” He listens to John, “his one son,” sleeping inside the other room, but does not touch the door “for fear that I may waken him and disturb his dreams. And if I did, what would I say?” He reflects that he would like to see John sleeping and “see the room with the quiet bed once more,” but that “there is no boiled egg or shaker of salt or glass of water waiting.”

The narrator remembers “a belief held in the outports” by which a girl could summon a vision of her future husband by eating a boiled egg half filled with salt and leaving a glass of water by her bedside, “but she must only do it once.” It is the type of belief he would have collected as a “bright young graduate student [...] eleven years ago,” “all about the wild, wide sea and the flashing silver dagger and the lost and faithless lover.”

For a moment, the narrator listens to the old couple sleeping, but soon goes back to his own room, where he lies sleepless in bed. He thinks that he would “like to see my way more clearly” and that “I have collected many things I did not understand.” He considers going into John’s room and speaking to him—asking him to come to the Midwest with him, “away from the lonely **gulls** and the silver trout,” and offering him money. He asks rhetorically, “shall I wait to meet you in some known or unknown bitterness?” However, he finally concludes that any attempt he makes to be a father to John will be misguided, thinking, “Again I collect dreams. For I do not know enough of the **fog** on Toronto’s Queen St. West [...] and of lost and misplaced love.”

The next morning, the narrator gets up early as John is hurrying outside with the dog. The old man is smoking a pipe and boiling water, which he gives to the narrator to shave with. The old woman comes downstairs.

*In this passage, the narrator states explicitly for the first time that John is his son, as he lingers outside John’s door and considers speaking to him. The reader also learns, though the narrator reveals it obliquely, that he was Jennifer’s lover; it is she who should be “waiting on the other side” and who previously slept in “the room with the quiet bed.” His reference to Emily Brontë’s [Wuthering Heights](#), invoking the ghost of a woman calling for her lover, confirms that it is Jennifer and their relationship he is remembering.*



*Here, the reader finally learns the exact circumstances of the narrator’s relationship with Jennifer and presence in Newfoundland: he was a young graduate student 11 years ago, collecting local folklore, when he and Jennifer had their affair. Presumably, he left her after she became pregnant with John, as is suggested by the reference to “the lost and faithless lover.” Notably, like the grandfather discussing “the signs,” the narrator interprets his memories of Jennifer in terms of a local belief, using cultural heritage to mediate his grief.*



*At this crucial moment, the narrator decides once and for all that he will leave John behind for good and not attempt to take him away to the Midwest or sever him from his adoptive family. He understands completely the depth of his alienation and ignorance, wishing he could “see his way more clearly” but unable to do so, and realizing that nothing he can offer John will be as fulfilling to him as “the lonely gulls and the silver trout” of the place he calls home. He recognizes that his hopes of being a father to his son were “dreams,” and that he will never be able to comprehend John’s experiences or know and love him as deeply as his grandparents do.*



*The ordinariness of the family’s morning routine is the first indication that, despite the events of the previous night, nothing substantial has changed, and the narrator’s intimacy with the old man has had no lasting effect.*



The narrator tells the couple that he intends to fly back to the Midwest that day, trying to “emphasize the ‘I.’” Neither of them respond. John and the dog return, and the old man asks John what he has found. John shows them a “smooth round stone,” “of the deepest green, inlaid with veins of darkest ebony,” which “glows with the lustre of near perfection.”

The narrator says that “it is very beautiful.” John explains that he likes to collect them, and then offers it to the narrator as a gift. When the narrator looks at the old couple to gauge their reaction, they are both looking away out the window. He accepts the stone, thanking John profusely, and puts it in his pocket.

After breakfast the narrator prepares to leave. He shakes the old man’s hand, and the old woman thanks him, saying, “I don’t know if you know what I mean but thank you.” The narrator says, “I think I do,” and adds that he would like to keep in touch, “but...” before the old man ends the sentence for him by reminding him that “there is no phone [...] and both of us can hardly write. Perhaps that’s why we never told you.” He does add, however, that “John is getting to be a pretty good hand at it.”

The sun is “shining clearly” outside. The narrator drives away from the house, waving to the old couple, and sees the young boys again at a distance. They are carrying something “that looks like a crippled **gull**. Perhaps they will make it well.”

*Though the narrator’s previous isolation had been forced on him, as in the scene with the boys fishing at the beginning of the story, here he deliberately asserts his isolation, “emphasiz[ing] the ‘I’” and separating himself from the family. He has come to terms with the fact that he will never be able to bridge the gap between them and become one of their tight-knit unit.*



*This short-lived effort at emotional connection between John and the narrator is one of two that bookend the story, the other being John’s attempt to teach him to fish. However, both of John’s gestures of friendship fail—the first because the narrator is unable to learn, and the second because the narrator’s alienation from John’s family, demonstrated by their looking away, makes it impossible for the narrator to connect with John more meaningfully.*



*Following John’s gift of the stone, the narrator experiences another moment in which the possibility of emotional intimacy is presented, but just as quickly taken away. When he responds to the old woman’s thanks with “I think I do,” he is suggesting a wordless intimacy between them, almost as if he is able to read her thoughts. It seems that in this moment she is thanking the narrator for bringing John into their lives. However, whatever connection this creates is immediately broken by his and the couple’s agreement that there is no way for them to communicate in the future, as well as the old man’s reminder (“Perhaps that’s why we never told you”) of Jennifer’s death and the narrator’s ignorance. On the other hand, the old man’s mention that John is learning to write leaves room for connection in the future.*



*The boys have finally succeeded in finding another injured seagull to replace the one that died prior to the beginning of the story. That seagull represented Jennifer, and the “death” of John’s connection with her as his mother. Though the search for a new seagull suggested the appearance of John’s new potential parent, this crippled seagull, which the boys will “make well,” represents not the narrator but John’s community of family and friends, “crippled,” perhaps, by the absence of parents, but able to be healed and whole on its own.*



At the airport, the airport terminal is “strangely familiar [...] glisteningly permanent.” It does not take very long for the narrator to buy a ticket and board the plane. In the air, he learns that the man sitting next to him is a “heavy-equipment salesman” who has “been away a week and is returning to his wife and children.”

When they land in the Midwest, to the narrator, “the distance we have come seems eerily unreal.” He goes down the stairs from the plane with the equipment salesman, and they enter the terminal together. The salesman’s wife and children are waiting to meet him. The salesman’s children run toward him excitedly, asking, “Daddy, what did you bring me?”

*The “strange familiarity” and “glistening permanence” of the airport terminal evoke the theme of the futile journey, underscoring that the narrator has been through here before and that nothing, least of all the airport terminal, has changed since he passed through the airport last.*



*The end of the salesman’s journey and his reunion with his wife and children stand in sharp contrast to the narrator’s loneliness, having cut short his reunion with his own family. What the salesman’s children expect from their own father—a gift, a hug, closeness and affection—is exactly what the narrator was unable to give John, and his failure to supply those things (compared with the grandparents’ success) is why he leaves John behind.*





## HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

### MLA

Pyne-Jaeger, Kit. "The Lost Salt Gift of Blood." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 20 Aug 2019. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

### CHICAGO MANUAL

Pyne-Jaeger, Kit. "The Lost Salt Gift of Blood." LitCharts LLC, August 20, 2019. Retrieved April 21, 2020.  
<https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-lost-salt-gift-of-blood>.

To cite any of the quotes from *The Lost Salt Gift of Blood* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

### MLA

MacLeod, Alistair. *The Lost Salt Gift of Blood*. W. W. Norton & Company. 2011.

### CHICAGO MANUAL

MacLeod, Alistair. *The Lost Salt Gift of Blood*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company. 2011.