

ISLAND: COLLECTED STORIES – CREATIVE RESPONSE

THE VASTNESS OF THE DARK

Write a scene or two in which the reader comes to a greater understanding about what a character is like through the actions the character does.

Relishing the familiar smell of leather and soap, a sudden barking cough leaves me breathless as I unbutton my coat and place it over the arm of a lone chair. The tough yet delicate roses, red like my grandfather's diseased and dying blood, disperse their fragile petals showcasing their natural beauty freely in a vase half full of water. Beside on the table lies 'Great Expectations', which my father would have left behind in his last visit, strewn open with the gentle breeze of the cheap heater allowing its pages to flick over to a new chapter. Over one year ago I left behind this grimy Cape Breton coal-mining town who prisoner I had been all my life; Stockholm Syndrome brings me home.

My grandfather's pale and fragile body lies still in his assigned bed. There is tenseness to him, making him more like a mannequin on his soft mattress rather than a man of flesh and bone. Walking over to him, I offer my hand only to find it almost crushed in the crooked broken force of his. There is a type of awful power in his oddly misshapen fingers, his flattened too-broad thumb, the ridges of his toughened scars and the abnormally large knobs that are his twisted misplaced knuckles; a true reflection of the darkness that eventually envelops most of the mine workers in one way or another.

His eyes begin to slowly blink, pupils dilating at my sight as he adjusts to the morning light and undertone of bleach in the air. A soft curve forms to his mouth allowing me to relax my furrowed eyebrows. "Ah," he exhales, speaking omnisciently, "and as he journeys in different cars, first from Cape Breton, and then further away, he feels as if he is becoming reinvented, but at the same time, he is becoming aware of just how much he is a product of place..." His voice seems to echo and bounce off the walls of this room to escape out into the mines, where it belongs. He is glad to see me, speaking in a superior yet comforting and familiar drunken way he always has where his elderly age grants him the freedom of speech.

I had somehow thought that "going away" was but a physical thing and would allow me to feel free to assume my own identity. Yet, this unknown half empty longingness and almost betrayal overcame me leaving when the Island didn't extend monstrous hands like my grandfathers to seize and hold me back. Because my father told me I was "free" I had so recklessly and incorrectly felt that it was really so. Wrong and dishonest with my grandparents and self, I have tried too hard to be someone else without realising at first what I presently am and where I belong, here, home.

In a sense, mother nature swept me up in the arms of her breeze, her words calling and echoing in every shell of every American shore to yield me home. I have missed the unrelenting relentlessness of the water that forever laps ferociously on the boulders that enclose our secluded Island life, welcoming me to once again work with the grain. The rawness of humanity, panting of stray dogs with tails erect like a lighthouse, and the distant bellowing of sheep where their docile nature makes them an emblem of peaceful co-existence and gentle affection comprises my ideal home. Here, the wind refreshingly strings sharply, where there is a sense of pleasure when the difference between freezing and burning cold cannot be known, and when night time falls like a curtain bringing forth spies from the shadows that shun the sunlight hours, and no matter the velvet quality of the thickened blackness and vastness of the dark, you know in Cape Breton the sun will always rise to bring upon another day.

My grandfather's bitter words escape my lips, "Once you start, it takes a hold of you, once you drink underground water you always come back to drink some more. It's in the blood." For now I am certain, perhaps it is better to belong in a place you hate than to have no place at all.

For my piece, I have chosen to write an additional scene, set one year later after James' lack of success on his journey of self-discovery, where the reader is able to come to a greater understanding of one of MacLeod's most prominent reoccurring ideas that you can't wash away your background and where you've come from. Through first person narration, I open my writing with symbolism. The vase half full represents his new optimistic approach with his return, as well as 'Great Expectations' turning to a new page from the draught to symbolise the beginning of a new chapter. Additionally, I have included the metaphor of Stockholm Syndrome to encapsulate and extend MacLeod's idea that you can hate and love a place and find comfort within it at the same time, which is what James' actions of returning to the Island imply. This idea is furthered with the incongruous beauty of the landscape, which I have made sure to include along with the animals, to detail how hostility is balanced with beauty. Finally, James' grandfather's dialogue purposely reinforces the idea that Cape Breton is where he belongs and MacLeod's grand idea that it is not so easy to change something that is a part of you.