

# Wing's Chips

✧ Mavis Gallant

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## Learning Goals

- understand the historical context of a story
  - analyze a narrator's bias and perspective
  - examine irony and use of contrast
  - write an essay and present a dramatic monologue
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Often, since I grew up, I have tried to remember the name of the French-Canadian town where I lived for a summer with my father when I was a little girl of seven or eight. Sometimes, passing through a town, I have thought I recognized it, but some detail is always wrong, or at least fails to fit the picture in my memory. It was a town like many others in the St. Lawrence Valley—old, but with a curious atmosphere of harshness, as if the whole area were still frontier and had not been settled and cultivated for three hundred years. There were rows of temporary-looking frame and stucco houses, a post office in somebody's living room, a Chinese fish-and-chip store, and, on the lawn of the imposing Catholic church, a statue of Jesus, arms extended, crowned with a wreath of electric lights. Running straight through the centre of the town was a narrow river; a few leaky rowboats were tied up along its banks, and on Sunday afternoons hot, church-dressed young men would go to work on them with rusty bailing tins. The girls who clustered giggling on shore and watched them wore pastel stockings, lacy summer hats, and voile dresses that dipped down in back and were decorated low on one hip with sprays of artificial lilac. For additional Sunday divertissement, there was the cinema, in an old barn near the railway station. They had no sound track; airs from "My Maryland" and "The Student Prince" were played on a piano and there was the occasional toot of the suburban train from Montreal while on the screen ladies with untidy hair and men in riding boots engaged in agitated, soundless conversation, opening and closing their mouths like fish.

Though I have forgotten the name of this town, I do remember with remarkable clarity the house my father took for that summer. It was white clapboard, and surrounded by shade trees and an untended garden, in which only sunflowers and a few perennials survived. It had been rented furnished and bore the imprint of Quebec rural taste, running largely to ball fringes and sea-shell-encrusted religious art. My father, who was a painter, used one room as a studio—or, rather, storage place, since he worked mostly out-of-doors—slept in another, and ignored the remaining

seven, which was probably just as well, though order of a sort was kept by a fierce-looking local girl called Pauline, who had a pronounced moustache and was so ill-tempered that her nickname was *P'tit-Loup*—Little Wolf.

Pauline cooked abominably, cleaned according to her mood, and asked me questions. My father had told her that my mother was in a nursing home in Montreal, but Pauline wanted to know more. How ill was my mother? Very ill? Dying? Was it true that my parents were separated? Was my father *really* my father? "*Drôle de père,*" said Pauline. She was perplexed by his painting, his animals (that summer his menagerie included two German shepherds, a parrot, and a marmoset, which later bit the finger of a man teasing it and had to be given away to Montreal's ratty little zoo, where it moped itself to death), and his total indifference to the way the house was run. Why didn't he work, like other men, said Pauline.

I could understand her bewilderment, for the question of my father's working was beginning to worry me for the first time. All of the French-Canadian fathers in the town worked. They delivered milk, they farmed, they owned rival hardware stores, they drew up one another's wills. Nor were they the only busy ones. Across the river, in a faithful reproduction of a suburb of Glasgow or Manchester, lived a small colony of English-speaking summer residents from Montreal. Their children were called Al, Lily, Winnie, or Mac, and they were distinguished by their popping blue eyes, their excessive devotion to the Royal Family, and their contempt for anything even vaguely Gallic. Like the French-Canadians, the fathers of Lily and Winnie and the others worked. Every one of them had a job. When they were not taking the train to Montreal to attend to their jobs, they were crouched in their gardens, caps on their heads, tying up tomato plants or painting stones to make multicoloured borders for the nasturtium beds. Saturday night, they trooped into the town bar-and-grill and drank as much Molson's ale as could be poured into the stomach before closing time. Then, awash with ale and nostalgia, they sang about the maid in the clogs and shawl, and something else that went, "Let's all go down to the Strand, and 'ave a ba-na-ar-na!"

My father, I believe, was wrong in not establishing some immediate liaison with this group. Like them, he was English—a real cabbage, said Pauline when she learned that he had been in Canada only eight or nine years. Indeed, one of his very few topics of conversation with me was the

England of his boyhood, before the First World War. It sounded green, sunny, and silent—a sort of vast lawn rising and falling beside the sea; the sun was smaller and higher than the sun in Canada, looking something like a coin; the trees were leafy and round, and looked like cushions. This was probably not at all what he said, but it was the image I retained—a landscape flickering and flooded with light, like the old silents at the cinema. The parents of Lily and Winnie had, presumably, also come out of this landscape, yet it was a bond my father appeared to ignore. It seemed to me that he was unaware of how much we had lost caste, and what grievous social errors we had committed, by being too much identified with the French. He had chosen a house on the wrong side of the river. Instead of avoiding the French language, or noisily making fun of it, he spoke it whenever he was dealing with anyone who could not understand English. He did not attend the English church, and he looked just as sloppy on Sundays as he did the rest of the week.

“You people Carthlic?” one of the fathers from over the river asked me once, as if that would explain a lot.

Mercifully, I was able to say no. I knew we were not Catholic because at the Pensionnat Saint-Louis de Gonzague, in Montreal, which I attended, I had passed the age at which children usually took the First Communion. For a year and more, my classmates had been attending morning chapel in white veils, while I still wore a plain, stiff, pre-Communion black veil that smelled of convent parlours, and marked me as one outside the limits of grace.

“Then why’s your dad always around the frogs?” asked the English father.

*Drôle de père* indeed. I had to agree with Pauline. He was not like any father I had met or read about. He was not Elsie’s Mr. Dinsmore, stern but swayed by tears. Nor did he in the least resemble Mr. Bobbsey, of the Bobbsey Twins books, or Mr. Bunker, of the Six Little Bunkers. I was never scolded, or rebuked, or reminded to brush my teeth or say my prayers. My father was perfectly content to live his own summer and let me live mine, which did not please me in the least. If, at meals, I failed to drink my milk, it was I who had to mention this omission. When I came home from swimming with my hair wet, it was I who had to remind him that, because of some ear trouble that was a hangover of scarlet fever, I was

supposed to wear a bathing cap. When Lon Chaney in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* finally arrived at the cinema, he did not say a word about my not going, even though Lily and Winnie and many of the French-Canadian children were not allowed to attend, and boasted about the restriction.

Oddly, he did have one or two notions about the correct upbringing of children, which were, to me, just as exasperating as his omissions. Somewhere in the back of his mind lingered a recollection that all little girls were taught French and music. I don't know where the little girls of the English of his childhood were sent to learn their French—presumably to France—but I was placed, one month after my fourth birthday, in the Pensionnat, where for two years I had the petted privilege of being the youngest boarder in the history of the school. My piano lessons had also begun at four, but lasted only a short time, for, as the nun in charge of music explained, I could not remember or sit still, and my hand was too small to span an octave. Music had then been dropped as one of my accomplishments until that summer, when, persuaded by someone who obviously had my welfare at heart, my father dispatched me twice a week to study piano with a Madame Tessier, the convent-educated wife of a farmer, whose parlour was furnished entirely with wicker and over whose household hung a faint smell of dung, owing to the proximity of the out-buildings and the intense humidity of summer weather in the St. Lawrence Valley. Together, Madame Tessier and I sweated it out, plodding away against my lack of talent, my absence of interest, and my strong but unspoken desire to be somewhere else.

*"Cette enfant ne fera jamais rien,"* I once heard her say in despair.

We had been at it four or five weeks before she discovered at least part of the trouble; it was simply that there was no piano at home, so I never practised. After every lesson, she had marked with care the scales I was to master, yet, week after week, I produced only those jerky, hesitant sounds that are such agony for music teachers and the people in the next room.

"You might as well tell your father there's no use carrying on unless you have a piano," she said.

I was only too happy, and told him that afternoon, at lunch.

"You mean you want me to get you a *piano*?" he said, looking around the dining room as if I had insisted it be installed, then and there, between the window and the mirrored china cabinet. How unreasonable I was!

"But you make me take the lessons," I said. How unreasonable *he* was!

A friend of my father's said to me, years later, "He never had the faintest idea what to do with you." But it was equally true that I never had the faintest idea what to do with him. We did not, of course, get a piano, and Madame Tessier's view was that because my father had no employment to speak of (she called him a *flâneur*), we simply couldn't afford one—the depth of shame in a town where even the milkman's daughters could play duets.

No one took my father's painting seriously as a daily round of work, least of all I. At one point during that summer, my father agreed to do a pastel portrait of the daughter of a Madame Gravelle, who lived in Montreal. (This was in the late twenties, when pastel drawings of children hung in every other sitting room.) The daughter, Liliane, who was my age or younger, was to be shown in her First Communion dress and veil. Madame Gravelle and Liliane drove out from Montreal, and while Liliane posed with docility, her mother hung about helpfully commenting. Here my father was neglecting to show in detail the pattern of the lace veil; there he had a wrong shade of blue for Liliane's eyes; again, it was the matter of Liliane's diamond cross. The cross, which hung from her neck, contained four diamonds on the horizontal segment and six on the vertical, and this treasure he had reduced to two unimpressive strokes.

My father suggested that Madame Gravelle might be just as happy with a tinted photograph. No, said Madame Gravelle, she would not. Well, then, he suggested, how about a miniature? He knew of a miniaturist who worked from photographs, eliminating sittings, and whose fee was about four times his own. Madame Gravelle bore Liliane, her cross, and her veil back to Montreal, and my father went back to painting around the countryside and going out with his dogs.

His failure weighed heavily on me, particularly after someone, possibly Pauline, told me that he was forever painting people who didn't pay him a cent for doing it. He painted Pauline, moustache and all; he painted some of the French-Canadian children who came to play in our garden, and from whom I was learning a savory French vocabulary not taught at Pensionnat Saint-Louis de Gonzague; he very often sketched the little Wing children, whose family owned the village fish-and-chip store.

The Wing children were solemn little Chinese, close in age and so tangled in lineage that it was impossible to sort them out as sisters, brothers, and cousins. Some of the adult Wings—brothers, and cousins—ran the fish-and-chip shop, and were said to own many similar establishments throughout Quebec and to be (although no one would have guessed it to see them) by far the richest people in the area. The interior of their store smelled wonderfully of frying grease and vinegar, and the walls were a mosaic of brightly painted tin signs advertising Player's Mild, Orange Crush, Sweet Marie chocolate bars, and ginger ale. The small Wings, in the winter months, attended Anglican boarding schools in the west, at a discreet distance from the source of income. Their English was excellent and their French-Canadian idiom without flaw. Those nearest my age were Florence, Marjorie, Ronald, and Hugh. The older set of brothers and cousins—those of my father's generation—had abrupt, utilitarian names: Tommy, Jimmy, George. The still older people—most of whom seldom came out from the rooms behind the shop—used their Chinese names. There was even a great-grandmother, who sat, shrunken and silent, by the great iron range where the chips swam in a bath of boiling fat.

As the Wings had no garden, and were not permitted to play by the river, lest they fall in and drown, it was most often at my house that we played. If my father was out, we would stand at the door of his studio and peer in at the fascinating disorder.

"What does he do?" Florence or Marjorie would say. "What does your father do?"

"He paints!" Pauline would cry from the kitchen. She might, herself, consider him loony, but the privilege was hers. She worked there.

It was late in the summer, in August, when, one afternoon, Florence and Marjorie and Ronald and Hugh came up from the gate escorting, like a convoy, one of the older Wings. They looked anxious and important. "Is your father here?" said the grown-up Wing.

I ran to fetch my father, who had just started out for a walk. When we returned, Pauline and the older Wing, who turned out to be Jimmy, were arguing in French, she at the top of her voice, he almost inaudibly.

"The kids talk about you a lot," said Jimmy Wing to my father. "They said you were a painter. We're enlarging the store, and we want a new sign."

“A sign?”

“I told you!” shrieked Pauline from the dining-room door, to which she had retreated. “*Ce n’est pas un peintre comme ça.*”

“Un peintre, c’est un peintre,” said Jimmy Wing, impeturbable.

My father looked at the little Wings, who were all looking up at him, and said, “Exactly. *Un peintre, c’est un peintre.* What sort of sign would you like?”

The Wings didn’t know; they all began to talk at once. Something artistic, said Jimmy Wing, with the lettering fat and thin, imitation Chinese. Did my father know what he meant? Oh, yes. My father knew exactly.”

“Just ‘Wing’s Chips?’” my father asked. “Or would you like it in French—‘*Les Chips de Wing?*’”

“Oh, *English,*” said all the Wings, almost together. My father said later that the Chinese were terrible snobs.

He painted the sign the next Sunday afternoon, not in the studio but out in the back garden, sitting on the wide kitchen steps. He lacquered it black, and painted—in red-and-gold characters, fat and thin—“Wing’s Chips,” and under this he put the name of the town and two curly little letters, “P.Q.,” for “Province of Quebec.”

Tommy and Jimmy Wing and all the little ones came to fetch the sign the next day. The two men looked at it for a long time, while the little ones looked anxiously at them to see if they liked it. Finally, Jimmy Wing said, “It’s the most beautiful thing I ever saw.”

The two men bore it away, the little Wings trailing behind, and hung it on a horizontal pole over the street in front of their shop, where it rocked in the hot, damp breeze from the river. I was hysterically proud of the sign and, for quite the first time, of my father. Everyone stopped before the shop and examined it. The French-Canadians admitted that it was *pas mal, pas mal du tout*, while the English adults said approvingly that he must have been paid a fine penny for it. I could not bring down our new stature by admitting that he had painted it as a favour, and that it was only after Jimmy and Tommy had insisted that he had said they could, if they liked, pay for the gold paint, since he had had to go to Montreal for it. Nor did I tell anyone how the Wings, burdened with gratitude, kept bringing us chips and ice cream.

"Oh, yes, he was paid an awful lot," I assured them all.

Every day, I went to look at the sign, and I hung around the shop in case anyone wanted to ask me questions about it. There it was, "Wing's Chips," proof that my father was an ordinary workingman just like anybody else, and I pointed it out to as many people as I could, both English and French, until the summer ended and we went away.

- ¶ Along with Alice Munro, Mavis Gallant is considered one of Canada's premier writers of short fiction. Many of her stories deal with the difficulty of fitting into different cultures. They also display a fine eye for detail and involve the interplay of varying points of view. Gallant left Canada for Europe in 1950, and while living in Paris, published many short stories with *The New Yorker* magazine. She has published two novels and one of her many short-story collections, *Home Truths: Selected Canadian Short Stories* (1981), won the Governor General's Award. She was made a Companion of the Order of Canada in 1993. "Wing's Chips" is from *The Other Paris: Stories* (1986). (Born Montreal, Quebec 1922)

## RESPONDING

### Meaning

1. a) In small groups, discuss why the narrator's father agreed to paint the sign for the Wing family.
  - b) What is the significance of the sign in the story? Why did Mavis Gallant choose to make it the title of the story? Share your interpretations with other groups.
2. a) This story is told primarily from the perspective of the narrator as a young child. Develop a profile of the narrator. How does she view her father and the world around her? What biases does she have and what might account for these biases? Support the character traits you identify with specific evidence from the text.
  - b) Looking back as an adult, how might the narrator reassess her father's attitudes and behaviour?

### Form and Style

3. At one point in the story, the narrator's father is asked to paint the portrait of a young woman, the daughter of Madame Gravelle, from Montreal. Madame Gravelle was not happy with the portrait. The narrator sees this as a failure on her father's part. Explain the *irony* in the narrator's attitude.
4. Mavis Gallant creates irony through her use of contrasting images. For example, the "leaky rowboats" and "rusty bailing tins" contrast with the description of the delicate clothing worn by the girls on the shore. Find two other examples of this type of ironic contrast and explain how they add to the meaning of the story.