The Boat

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ALISTAIR MACLEOD

Alistair MacLeod was a Canadian writer best known for his short stories, many of which were set in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, where his family had lived since the 1860s. Though he published only one novel and fewer than 20 stories in his lifetime, his work is widely acclaimed, starting with his first story "The Boat," which was published in 1968 and went on to be named one of the best American short stories of the year. Working odd jobs in mining and logging while he completed his education, MacLeod earned a B.A. from St. Francis Xavier University, an M.A. from the University of New Brunswick, and a PhD from the University of Notre Dame, where he began his creative writing career. In 1971, he married Anita MacLellan; they lived together for 43 years and had 7 children. Focusing on 19th century British literature, MacLeod taught English at Indiana University for three years before eventually moving to Windsor University, where he continued to teach for over three decades. In 2014, MacLeod died of a stroke. His funeral was held in a Scottish Catholic church near his home in Cape Breton.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

While MacLeod's biography doesn't line up exactly with the narrator of "The Boat," some events from the story may have been inspired by his life. Like the narrator, MacLeod also grew up in the rugged Cape Breton region of Nova Scotia. Also like the narrator, MacLeod taught for a few years at a university in the American Midwest. Several more distant historical events are referenced in the story. The Highland clearances in Scotland, for example, were a period in the 18th and 19th century when tenant farmers were evicted from the Scottish Highlands by wealthier interests looking to consolidate grazing lands; many of the farmers chose to emigrate from Scotland and some of them ended up in Canada. MacLeod's reference in the story to "Ireland's discontent" refers to ongoing conflicts in the region, both between the Irish and the English and between Irish Catholics and Protestants. It could also refer to the Irish potato famine (1845–1852), which forced many Irish people to leave the country (again, with a number ending up in Canada). Finally, MacLeod references the American Revolutionary War. For the purposes of "The Boat," the most relevant event from that war is that several Loyalists or "Tories" (residents of the U.S. who supported British rule) either chose to leave the U.S. or were expelled, with many of them settling in Nova Scotia, Canada.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Name-checked in "The Boat," and also the subject of MacLeod's doctoral dissertation, the 19th-century British writer Thomas Hardy was a key influence on "The Boat." Known as one of the leading realists of his time, Hardy believed in a universe ruled by chance, where bad things can happen to undeserving people for seemingly no reason. As a result, his work has a reputation for being bleak. As one of the leading Canadian short story writers of his generation, MacLeod was both inspired by and an influence on other 20th-century writers who explore Canadian identity, including Margaret Laurence, Ann-Marie MacDonald, Wayne Johnston, Margaret Atwood, and Alice Munro. As a teacher, MacLeod also worked directly with students, many of whom would also go on to publish their own work.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Boat
- **When Written:** Late 1960s
- **Where Written:** University of Notre Dame
- **When Published:** 1968
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary Canadian literature
- **Genre:** Realism
- **Setting:** A harbor in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia
- **Climax:** The narrator realizes that his father has disappeared from their boat during a severe winter storm at sea
- **Point of View:** First person

EXTRA CREDIT

Writer's Block. MacLeod found his university job so draining that he couldn't do any writing at all during the school year. As a result, he ended up doing most of his writing during summer breaks, at his home in Dunvegan, Cape Breton. Maybe that's why it took him 13 years to write his only novel!

The Magic of Technology. MacLeod wrote his stories by hand, working on a sentence until it was perfect before moving on to the next one. He hated computers because, as he put it, "When I type on the computer and see it on the screen, I think that fairies or leprechauns wrote it."

PLOT SUMMARY

The narrator of the story, a middle-aged professor at a Midwestern university in the United States, recalls how he often wakes up at 4 a.m., afraid that he has overslept and that his father will be waiting for him with a crowd of other men, and

that they will all have to head down to the harbor. After realizing it was only a dream, the narrator then walks in the cold to an all-night restaurant, where he makes small-talk with the regulars and drinks bitter coffee. He knows the memories that wake him up at night are only "echoes and shadows."

Jumping back in time, the narrator recalls his first memories of his family's **boat**, the *Jenny Lynn*. He remembers his father in big rubber boats, taking him out on his first trip on the boat. He also remembers how everyone in his family was always asking questions that ended with the words "the boat," like "Well, how did things go in the boat today?" This is the first question the narrator himself remembers asking. The narrator also recalls his mother, who was a tall, energetic woman and who came from a long line of people who had lived by the sea.

The narrator goes on to recall his old house. Most of it was kept spotless and organized by his mother, but his father's bedroom was a mess, and some of this mess spilled into the kitchen, which everyone used. Out of all the junk the father owns, perhaps most interesting to the narrator is his large collection of paperback **books**, which range from pulp novels to literary classics. When he isn't out fishing, the narrator's father spends most of his time alone in his room, reading books and listening to the radio.

The narrator also has many older sisters who, when they are young, help his mother around the house. But shortly after each one hits puberty, they discover their father's books. This starts a chain of events that leads to them getting jobs in a local restaurant that serves tourists. There they meet young men from out of town, and ultimately, despite their mother's disapproval, they move away to big cities to get married. One time, the father takes some tourists out on a boat ride, then afterwards visits with the tourists at their rented cabins, gets drunk, and sings old sea shanties and cultural songs for them. The narrator has mixed feelings about the way the tourists view his father.

Eventually, all of his sisters move away, and the narrator lives alone in the house with his mother and father. The narrator's sometimes send gifts of books for his father, and pictures of their kids for their mother, which she refuses to look at. When his father begins to get older and lay around in bed all day, the narrator must help to get the boat ready for lobster season. This leads to him deciding to quit school in order to help his family with the fishing business. His father, however, tells him he must go back to school at once. Ultimately, the narrator listens to his father, much to his mother's anger. Shortly afterwards, his father makes a seemingly miraculous recovery and the season goes well.

During the summer, when the narrator is out of school, his maternal uncle (also his father's fishing partner) leaves to work on a big commercial boat as he works to save up for his own boat. The narrator has come to realize that his father never much liked the fishing life, and would have preferred to have gone to college—he respects his father even more for making the sacrifices he has. The narrator steps into his uncle's role, and promises his father he'll stay and help with the fishing business for as long as his father lives. His father replies, "I hope you will remember what you've said."

At first, the fishing is successful, and the narrator's father acts like he's young again. But as the year progresses, the fishing becomes more hazardous. On a particularly stormy November 21st, on what may be the last outing of the fishing season, the narrator loses track of his father during a winter squall. His father has apparently gone overboard, and there's no way to rescue him, particularly because, like many men of his generation on the wharf, he doesn't know how to swim.

Jumping back to the present, the narrator comments that the lobster beds off Cape Breton are still as vibrant as they ever were. He notes however, that big commercial fishing boats have tried but failed to move into the area, because they keep finding "their buoys cut adrift and their gear lost and destroyed." Official investigations into the incidents meet resistance from the locals, and eventually the outsiders go away.

The narrator feels uneasy knowing that his mother lives alone off his father's meager life insurance policy. She's too proud to ask for help and resents the narrator for leaving his home and the traditional lifestyle that goes with it. She remains devoted to the sea, as she always has been.

Finally, the narrator jumps back to November 28th, a week after his father's disappearance, when his father's body was discovered ten miles north of the wharf. The body is badly disfigured, with part of it missing, including his father's rubber boots. Around his father's wrists are brass chains that he wore when he was working in order to prevent his skin from chafing, and his hair is full of seaweed.

CHARACTERS

The narrator – The narrator, who isn't named in the story, is a middle-aged university professor at a Midwestern university. He is frequently haunted by memories of how he grew up, which are very different from his current life, and he temporarily escapes them by going to an all-night restaurant where he meets up with some regulars and a waitress. The narrator recalls living as a child and young man in a close-knit fishing community in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, with his father, mother, and older sisters, as well as his maternal uncle, who works on his family's fishing **boat** with his father. As a boy, he watches what the other members of his family do with fascination. He learns about the importance of "the boat," aka the *Jenny Lynn*, which his father takes out when he goes fishing and which is named after his mother. His parents' interest in the boat leads the narrator himself to take an interest in it.

Meanwhile, the narrator also watches his sisters, who all seem to be traditional, domestic girls until they hit puberty, when they start reading their father's **books**, start working in a seafood restaurant on the wharf that serves tourists, and then ultimately leave the village to marry rich, sophisticated men who live in faraway cities. Once all of his sisters are out of the house and the narrator has grown into a teenager, he begins to play a more active role and must decide between his education, which his father wants him to pursue, and his family's fishing business, which his mother wants him to prioritize. Though he is eager to uphold his family's traditions, he ends up choosing to get an education and move away (even becoming a university professor). This choice is partly a result of his father's urging, but is driven in the end by his father's death during the final fishing run of the lobster season. Without his father alive, the narrator has less obligation to stay in the community and continue working on the boat. The story implies, though it never makes completely clear, that his father may have committed suicide precisely because he knew it would push the narrator to leave the town and pursue his education. As a highly educated character who used to be very devoted to his parents and his community, the narrator is a bridge between old traditions and the next generation. As such, he lives in the broader world of opportunity that his father wanted for him, and yet he also lives with the ghosts of the traditional family and communal life he has lost.

The narrator's father – Like the narrator and most members of his family, the narrator's father isn't named in the story. He comes from a working-class background in Cape Breton and didn't have children until later in life, not getting married to the narrator's mother until after he turned 40. The narrator's father is a fisherman descended from a long line of fisherman, and began introducing his son to the family **boat**, the *Jenny Lynn*, at an early age. When not out working on the boat, the narrator's father spends much of his time alone in his room, which is always a mess. He keeps a radio in the room as well as piles and piles of paperback **books**, which he reads voraciously. Although he is withdrawn at times, he spends hours talking with his daughters (the narrator's sisters) late into the night after they become interested in reading the books he has. Though he is part of a rich local fishing tradition, he (often indirectly) encourages his daughters and son to follow new paths in life, even when it means contradicting their mother who wants the family to focus on their traditional lifestyle. While he is vigorous and capable even at an advanced age, eventually his health starts to decline. The narrator's father rallies, though, when it looks like the narrator will have to quit school to help with the family business. Around this time the narrator comes to realize that his father's body, which chafed under the sun, was never suited for fishing, and that his father had always wanted to go to college but had instead taken up the responsibility of continuing the traditions of his family. The narrator respects his father more for this sacrifice, promises to help his father on the boat for as long as his father needs him, and joins his father on the boat for the lobster season. Though this summer spent with his son on the boat is joyful, eventually the waters become more treacherous. One stormy day, the father disappears from the stern of the boat. While the cause of the father falling from the boat is never made entirely clear, the story implies that he may have committed suicide because he knew his son wouldn't leave town and pursue an education while he himself was still alive. His body is discovered a week later, badly disfigured. He is still wearing chains around his hands that he wore to prevent chafing, suggesting that he was chained to his life on the boat and unable to escape it—even in death—and that, in the end, he made one last sacrifice to ensure his son wouldn't suffer the same fate.

The narrator's mother – Although her maiden name provides the namesake for the titular **boat**, the *Jenny Lynn*, MacLeod never reveals the narrator's mother's current last name. The narrator's mother is a tall, strong woman who comes from a long line of people who lived by and fished the sea. She was beautiful when she was younger, and was many years younger than her husband, the narrator's father, when they married. Together they had several daughters (the narrator's sisters), with the narrator being the youngest child. Her brother (the narrator's uncle) works her husband on the boat. By the time the narrator's memories begin, his mother hasn't slept in the same room as his father for a while. Perhaps more than anything else, the narrator's mother values her family's traditional life and order. She keeps her house neat and organized, with the exception of the one room she can't control: her husband's bedroom (which spills over into the common kitchen area). Initially, her daughters help her keep the house in order, but as they get older, the mother loses them almost as soon as they discover their father's **books**, which sets them on a path to eventually leaving home to marry wealthy men in distant cities. The narrator's mother disdains these men as effete and worthless despite their financial success, and cuts off contact with her daughters. Eventually, when the narrator's sisters all leave home, the narrator's mother pins all her hopes on him to keep alive the family tradition, even pressuring him to quit school in order to help with the boat. (She herself hasn't read a book since high school and finds them a waste of time.) The narrator wants to please her, but ultimately, he ends up leaving the community to get an education, in large part because his father's tragic death at sea leaves him nothing to uphold or continue. The mother, however, never leaves her community, continuing to live in relative poverty and resenting the narrator for leaving all the while. Throughout the story, she never changes, and MacLeod shows through her how her devotion to tradition offers strength and resilience but also a suffocating rigidity that can lead to loneliness and misery in an always changing world.

The narrator's sisters – Always referred to as a group, the

narrator's sisters all follow a remarkably similar life path, and the narrator watches their lives with fascination. Red-haired and beautiful, they help their mother around the house when they're young. After they hit puberty, however, they discover their father's collection of paperback **books** and begin to disdain traditional housework, to the disappointment of their mother. As they read and have long talks with their father about the books, they all decide to work at an American-owned seafood restaurant in town that caters to tourists. During the summers where they work these jobs, they meet young men who are rich and sophisticated in ways that their parents will never be. Eventually, they leave town to marry these men—despite the fact that their mother disapproves of them—and move to distant, cosmopolitan cities like Boston, Montreal, and New York. They continue to send their father gifts of books and their mother pictures of their children, which their mother refuses to look at. The fate of the sisters in the story is a bit of a paradox: they form a new tradition out of breaking old traditions. Ultimately, they represent the inevitability of change, showing how a whole generation can become wealthier and better educated than the one before it, at the cost of losing the old traditions.

Tourists – In addition to being an active fishing village—in fact it is implied *because* it is a picturesque and active fishing village—the Cape Breton community where the narrator grows up is also a tourist definition. The tourists rent cabins that overlook the village from a high hill, and often frequent the American-owned seafood restaurant in the harbor where the narrator's sisters go to work. The tourists are always referred to as a group. One particular group of tourists asks the narrator's father to take them out on a **boat** voyage, which he does. Later, they invite him back to their rented cabins, where he gets drunk and sings old sea shanties and the war songs of his ancestors. The tourists pay him and record his songs (although the narrator's mother won't touch the payment). That winter, they send the narrator's father a postcard where they call him "Our Ernest Hemingway" with "Our" underlined. In their interactions with the village and with the narrator's father the tourists come to represent the complicated relationship between the modern outside world and the traditional world: how the outside world craves the "authenticity" of tradition and seeks to experience it through tourism, but in doing so objectifies, claims ownership over, and condescends to those traditions; how the traditions of the fishing village attract outside attention (and money from tourists), but in doing so lead to change that undermines the tradition, underscored by the fact that the sisters end up marrying some of the tourists.

Commercial fishing interests — Late in the story, the narrator notes that big commercial fishing boats have attempted to come into the traditional fishing waters of the village, but are unable to make inroads because they find their traps lost or destroyed and leave the area. The clear implication is that the residents of the village are sneaking out in boats at night and sabotaging the commercial traps. This back and forth captures another side of the battle between the outside modern world and the local traditions of the village. In this case, the villagers success in rebuffing the outside fishing ships suggests that despite their greater wealth and resources, outsiders to the community will never be able to claim what isn't theirs. But, at the same time, the story of the narrator's family suggests that the fishing village may slowly lose its fisherman, and a temporary setback for the commercial fishing interests doesn't mean that they won't return. Further, the story's reference to the Scottish Highland clearances, which involved wealthier interests evicting tenant farmers in order to consolidate grazing lands, indicate that what is happening follows a longstanding pattern in which the forces of money and change usually, eventually win out.

The narrator's uncle – The brother of the narrator's mother and the fishing partner of his father, the narrator's uncle isn't mentioned until later in the story, even though he has presumably been part of the family fishing business for a long time. He acts as an assistant to the narrator's father until he decides to work on a larger vessel, which will earn him enough money to buy a **boat** for his own family. The departure of the narrator's uncle makes it necessary for the narrator to step into the role of helping his father. The uncle's presence in the story reinforces how close-knit the family fishing operation is, while also showing how things can change with each generation.

Waitress – When, as an adult teaching at a Midwestern university, the narrator goes out to an all-night restaurant, he usually sees the same waitress and has the same conversation. She comments it must be cold out because he has tears in his eyes. The waitress provides an outside perspective, pointing out that the narrator is crying but not realizing that it's because he's getting emotional about his memories. The waitress also echoes his sisters, who worked as waitresses themselves when they were young.

THEMES

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CULTURAL HERITAGE, TRADITION, AND CHANGE

When the narrator wakes up at the beginning of Alistair MacLeod's "The Boat," he is confused and feels as if he is transported to an earlier time, back when he was

young and living in a fishing village on Cape Breton. Sometimes characters fin the story eel the pull of an even more distant past: when the narrator's father sings for tourists, he channels "scattered Highland ancestors he had never seen," bringing the "savage melancholy of three hundred years" down to the harbor. The fishing community where the narrator lives is steeped in tradition. By positioning the narrator as both an insider to this tradition and also as someone who breaks away from it, the story explores tradition and the forces of change, and the enduring tension between the two. The story furthers this exploration through the conflict between the narrator's mother, who is utterly devoted to her cultural traditions, and his father, who has seen his own dreams stifled by these same traditions. "The Boat" captures the tension between tradition and change, the ways that both tradition and change can offer benefits and costs, and how the tension between tradition and change can tear families and communities apart.

The narrator's father and mother share similar traditions that give them purpose and identity as a fisherman and fisherman's wife, but they view the costs and benefits of those traditional in very different ways. The narrator's mother, who is described as "of the sea, as were all her people," is the family member most resistant to change and devoted to her family's traditional way of life. She is devoted to her familial role (the same role her mother presumably held before her), dedicated to teaching her daughter's how to fill that same role, and mistrustful and dismissive of anything that doesn't fit into that scope, including books, education, or the wealthy outsiders who eventually marry her daughters. She cares so completely about maintaining her family traditions that she basically disowns any of her children who leave the community. While the narrator's father is a capable fisherman and a master of old traditional songs, he is more open to the outside world. He reads constantly and listens to the radio, and is willing to sing traditional songs to tourists and perform his heritage for them. Most significantly, he encourages his children to read and go to school, even as he knows this will lead them to leave the community. In fact, as the story progresses and the father, it is implied, commits suicide to ensure his son won't keep working on the boat, it becomes clear that the father acts as he does precisely *because* he desperately wants his children to escape what he sees as the restrictive traditions of the community—a desire borne out of his own experience of the way that his obligation to his family traditions thwarted his dreams of going to a university. Tradition binds the narrator's family together, defining each of their roles in ways that are inherited from previous definitions, but his parents' opposite orientations toward those traditions tear them apart.

The narrator seeks to bridge his parents' different ideas about tradition, but as he grows up it becomes apparent that this isn't possible. The narrator's conflict between choosing tradition or modernity is most prominent when he has to decide between helping with the boat or continuing to go to school. The narrator's mother pushes him to leave school and join his father on the boat. His father, in response, urges the narrator to go back to school. The fact that the school year and lobster season fall at exactly the same time symbolically shows how the narrator can't fulfill both wishes of his parents. He has to choose one, and the story presents the choice between choosing tradition and embracing change as mutually exclusive.

In addition to portraying how individual *characters* view the tensions between tradition and change, the story also explores the interaction between change and tradition more generally. The family's journey, in which the youngest generation moves away from the family tradition due to personal desires for new experiences and opportunities is the most obvious aspect of this exploration. But the story also shows how the town is changing. Through its portrayal of the tourists who vacation in cottages that overlook the town and love it when the narrator's father sings old fishing songs, the story shows how the traditions of the residents of the town are attractive to outsiders, such that the outsiders come to experience them, and in doing so change the town. The story also shows how, as the outside world encroaches, so do outside commercial interests. The narrator mentions at one point that local fishermen have twice fought off large fishing companies' attempts to move into local waters. But the implication is that the big companies can't be held off forever; an implication given more weight by the fact that the narrator's family's ancestors experienced the 18th-century Scotland Highland Clearances, a forced eviction of small farmers by wealthy interests focused on developing large-scale sheep farming. Put another way: the bigger money always comes eventually, and always brings change, often at the expense of those who were there before.

Ultimately, the narrator, his father, and his mother all pay a price for their connection to their heritage and tradition. The mother ends up alone and in poverty, the father ends up dead after sacrificing himself to ensure his son won't end up chained to the family tradition as he himself was, and the narrator ends up fulfilling his father's dream of being a university professor but remains haunted by the memories of what he lost. Still, there is also something noble about the characters' struggle: about the narrator's ability to achieve what wasn't possible for his parents, about the mother's refusal to bend to the forces of familial or societal change, and about the father's self-sacrifice to work vigorously in a life he never wanted in the name of tradition and then his final sacrifice to save his son from the same fate. In "The Boat," MacLeod shows the complexities of tradition in an always changing world, how it both sustains and constricts, how it gives meaning but can also dictate one's lot in life, using the narrator's family as a focal point to explore changes in an entire regional community.

GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES AND INHERITANCES

As a college professor at a Midwestern university in the United States, the narrator of "The Boat" has a very different life than his parents did at his age. While the narrator's mother and father have dissimilar personalities, they share many life experiences because of when and where they were born. They have lived by the sea their whole lives—something none of their children will ever do. The narrator's sisters marry men from outside the tight-knit Cape Breton fishing community and leave to live in big cities around the world. Unlike them, the narrator makes an effort to bridge the gap between generations, attempting to learn the ways of the fishing **boat** that plays such a massive role in his parents' lives. While the narrator is successful in some ways at emulating the older generation and winning their approval, his ultimate choice to leave the community suggests that some changes between generations are inevitable. While the story focuses on one family in a specific community, his story explores broader generational differences, showing what is inherited and lost throughout history and how such generational shifts have always been happening.

"The Boat" is a story about generational differences, and it explores the various ways that members of a family might relate to such change. The narrator's mother fights change tooth and nail. Her meticulously ordered house is her way of preventing change from entering it and affecting her children. The narrator's father actively (if subtly, at first) encourages his children to be different from him. Although he reads the same **books** his children do, they are experiencing them at an earlier age and with his tacit support. This early exposure to culture gives them the impetus to leave the community, through marriage or through education. The narrator's sisters seem to simply melt into the tides of change. By presenting the girls as a group, always referred to simply as the sisters, the story portrays them as having little individual choice—they are portrayed as simply shifting with the times, which take them away from the village where their parents have always lived. The narrator tries to be a bridge. He attempts to quit school and become the kind of fisherman that his father is (and that his mother would approve of). But ultimately, he follows his father's wishes and chooses to get an education and leave his town behind. Still, even as a university professor in a distant city, he remains connected to his parents through memories that haunt him.

Even "The Boat" portrays the massive shifts across a single generation of a family, the story makes a concerted effort to show that much is nonetheless inherited from parents to children, ancestors to descendants. Some of this inheritance is physical. For example, according to the narrator, his sisters resemble their parents: "They were tall and willowy like my mother and had her fine facial features set off by the reddish copper-coloured hair that had apparently once been my father's before it turned to white." Other inheritance involves habits, good and bad. On the positive side, the father passes on to his children a love of books and the worldly curiosity they represent. On the negative side, the father passes on his habit of smoking in bed to his son. That the narrator describes the cigarette butts that remain from this habit as "grey corpses on the overflowing ashtray," suggests that the father may also have passed along his melancholy and tendency toward self-destruction. Finally, there is the inheritance of culture. Though the narrator's father never met his ancestors, he sings Gaelic songs beautifully. The narrator does not sing the songs himself, but they live on prominently in his memory, showing how ancient culture survives but takes on new significance for new generations.

"The Boat" makes clear that, even though it focuses on a very specific community at a moment of significant generational changes, such changes have *always* been happening in history. Though the narrator's Cape Breton community has existed for a long time, it was initially a community of immigrants, driven from their homelands by different generational changes, such as the conflict and famine in Ireland and the Highland clearances in Scotland. In fact, the tight-knit community at Cape Breton was originally made up of people from very different backgrounds. The story notes that some are Catholic and others are Protestant—two groups that have historically been at odds with each other. The unity of the community during the narrator's parents' generation was itself a departure from previous generations, when the inhabitants would have been recent immigrants with their own separate traditions.

The story, then, explores the interplay between what changes and what is preserved across generations, and portrays how these two processes are always happening at the same time. Further, "The Boat" itself can be seen as embodying this same dynamic. The story is most immediately notable for its narrative of a family torn apart by change. At the same time, in telling the story the narrator preserves the lost past, ensuring that it won't be lost. The story itself functions as a document of both change and inheritance.

DUTY AND SACRIFICE

It is a general axiom of society that duty and sacrifice are heroic and necessary. "The Boat," in which the parents in a family conflict about what they feel they do or don't owe to their traditional fishing lifestyle, makes clear that the deeper truth is more complicated. More specifically, the story shows that two people can—for good reason—feel a duty to radically different things. Further, the story captures how seemingly heroic sacrifice can have monstrous consequences—the mother and the father in the story each sacrifice for what they see as the requirements of their family, and those sacrifices end up destroying the family

completely. "The Boat," then, is a story about the *complexity* of duty and sacrifice, about how people are defined and changed by what they feel they owe and what they are willing to sacrifice, and about the complicated legacies of such sacrifices.

When he's younger, the narrator is dutiful and willing to sacrifice himself for the good of his family. But it isn't always clear who or what he should be dutiful towards. The narrator grows up in a house that's literally divided: between the cleanliness of his mother and the mess of his father. As he watches his sisters grow up, he learns that it often isn't possible to be dutiful to both parents. The sisters please their mother when they're younger, only to frustrate her when they're older. Meanwhile, they initially want to clean up their father's mess, only to get caught up in the **books** strewn around his room and, from there, to fulfill his dreams for them to find a way out of the village. Like his sisters, the narrator himself will find himself caught between the expectations of his parents, unable to please them both. He tries to devote himself to the **boat**, which seems to be the one thing that unites both parents, but this starts a chain of events that ultimately leads to his father's death at sea.

Sacrifice changes the characters, in ways big and small, and it defines the Cape Breton fishing community where the narrator grew up. To give just one of many examples, the narrator's father sacrificed his chance at a university education in order to remain a part of the community and support a family. It isn't clear how much choice the narrator's father had about his sacrifice—if a university education was even an option for him. Sacrifice was not just an expectation but a necessity for him. This idea of sacrifice as an obligation rather than a choice is reinforced by the ending of the story, where the narrator's father is discovered dead with the chains that he used to protect his forearms still around his wrists. In a different way, the narrator's mother also sacrifices her life for her community. Even after the death of her husband and the departure of her children, she remains alone in Cape Breton, living in near-poverty. Her sacrifice allows her to hold on to her identity and her love of the sea, but it also almost completely cuts her off from her own children. The fact that she is so involved in the community—and that she still has more distant relatives that continue taking out boats even as the narrator is in middle age—suggests that this sacrifice is a central feature of life in the community.

While duty and sacrifice are often considered positive qualities, the narrator's complicated memories show that in reality, the results of these sacrifices are mixed. In many ways, the narrator's mother and father seem to engage in a kind of war of sacrifice, in which each tries to out-sacrifice the other to achieve what they want. The narrator's mother sacrifices her relationship with her family in order to try to force her children not to leave their village, and then to feel the sadness of having abandoned it after they did leave. The narrator's father, meanwhile, goes even further. After the narrator promises that he will help his father with the boat for as long as his father lives, his father—the story strongly implies—commits suicide by allowing himself to be swept off the boat during a storm. The father sacrifices his life in this way to ensure that his wife will still be supported—barely—by his life insurance policy, while also giving his son no reason to stay in the village. While both the father and mother sacrifice everything for their children, the story does not present these sacrifices as heroic. The mother is left alone, furtively glancing at photos of her grandchildren when no one is looking. And the sorry state of the narrator's father's dead body when it is found undercuts the idea that there was anything noble about his sacrifice of his life. His shredded body, and particularly the chains that remain around his wrists, suggest that he was destroyed by his work and could not escape being "chained" to it, even in death.

Ultimately, the narrator's story is only possible because of his father's sacrifice—if not for his death, the narrator might still be in Cape Breton working on the same boat as his father, instead of teaching at a Midwestern university. But it is unclear if this is a positive outcome: even as a professor, the narrator sleeps fitfully and, lost in memories of his childhood village, finds himself on the verge of tears. "The Boat," beautifully captures how sacrifice can be sustaining and life-defining, while simultaneously showing how it can be useless or even self-destructive.

TIME, LOSS, MEMORY

In "The Boat," a middle-aged college professor tells the story of his childhood and teenage years as the youngest child in a Nova Scotian fishing family. "The Boat" is a frame story, in which the narrator tells the story from two points of view—as the boy and teenager experiencing the events of the story for the first time, and as the older man looking back and commenting on those events and on their repercussions. With such a structure—in which the narrator is both looking forward to his coming life and looking back on past events— "The Boat" naturally takes the passing of time as one of its themes. In addition, the narrator's story describes not just his own transformation over time, but also the slow dissolution of his family's traditional Nova Scotia fishing lifestyle as modern society slowly seeps into the world of his family and community, and the way that time catches up to his fisherman father. The story, then, becomes a meditation on the passing of time, on what is lost, and what endures.

The story's frame structure creates a clear definition between past and present, between the narrator as he was then and is now, but at the same time emphasizes the way that memory connects the grown-up narrator to his past self. The story's first paragraph, where the narrator is half asleep and is momentarily unable to differentiate between his past and his present, establishes the interplay between time and memory in the

story. This interplay continues throughout the narrative, as the narrator occasionally interrupts his story to comment about how his memories distort the actual chronology of events. For example, after describing his family's **boat** in great detail he says, "I say this now as if I knew it all then… I learned it all very slowly and there was not time enough." By telling the story in this way, MacLeod emphasizes not just the passage of time, but how the narrator *experiences* time through memory—the way that the narrator's past informs who he is, but also the way that who he is now impacts his memories of that past.

The passing of time in the story is frequently connected to loss, whether it's the loss of innocence, the loss of a lifestyle, or even the loss of life itself. From the opening scene of the story, the "grey corpses" in the narrator's ashtray indicate that "The Boat" will be a story about death, both literal and metaphorical. Much of the loss in the story has to do with families. The narrator's sisters leave the house and community one by one as they move off into the wider world, in a pattern so regular that it feels inevitable. Sometimes the loss in the story is more metaphorical. For example, the narrator loses some of his innocence when he overhears a heated argument between his parents and begins to see them both in a different light. As the story progresses, the losses become larger, culminating with the death of the narrator's father and the implied eventual death of his fishing community's whole way of life. As the story within the frame passes from the narrator's childhood to his early adulthood, the passing years are threaded through with an increasing sense of loss, emphasizing how loss is inevitable and only increases over time.

All of the losses that the narrator witnesses in the story, however, become memories. What endures over time are memory, culture, and the natural world—things that stretch beyond the lifespan of any one individual. The story ends with an image of physical destruction—the narrator recalls finding his father's body and notes, "There was not much left of my father, physically, as he lay there with the brass chains on his wrists and the seaweed in his hair." This stark image highlights the fragility of the human body, particularly since in the narrator's earlier memories, his father was strong and vigorous. Notably, the father's body is destroyed by waves, cliffs, fish, and gulls, and his hair is being replaced with seaweed. This transformation suggests a truth about the natural world: how death and loss fits into a larger natural cycle of renewal. The story presents a single human life as full of inevitable change leading to death, but the natural world absorbs that death and continues on. Meanwhile, the Cape Breton community where the narrator used to live also experiences significant changes over the course of the story, but some aspects of its culture endure. Though big fishing boats owned by outsiders try to come in and exploit the area, they find "their buoys cut adrift and their gear lost and destroyed." As one visiting official notes: "No one can own the sea." The harbor residents keep some of their culture even as time passes, because it's bigger than any one person and because it's connected to the more enduring natural world.

Ultimately, "The Boat" is clear-eyed that no single human can resist the passage of time. Change and death will eventually come for all. But it does hold out hope for tradition and culture to endure beyond the lifespan of individuals, just as the narrator's own father carried in him the songs and spirit of his Gaelic ancestors whom he had never met. "The Boat" itself plays into this dynamic, as the story the narrator tells keeps alive the memory of his father, of his torn-apart family, of the village he has seemingly forever left behind. The story is itself a kind of boat, preserving the past into the future.

SYMBOLS

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

THE BOAT

As the titular object of the story, **the boat** (aka the *Jenny Lynn*) is key to understanding everything that happens to the narrator and his family. Perhaps above all, the boat represents tradition. On the surface level, the name of the boat is significant because it follows the naming pattern that everyone in this particular fishing village uses (basing the boat's name on that of a female family member), illustrating one of the many ways that the local community is bound together by traditions. The specific name of the narrator's family's boat, *Jenny Lynn*, is also significant: it links the boat specifically to the narrator's mother, who is described as being "of the sea" and is more devoted to the traditions of their tight-knit fishing community than any other character in the story. Because it shares the mother's maiden name, rather than her current one, the boat also evokes the past and ancestors, showing how the weight of the familial line persists into the present day, and in particular how the mother feels that it is her duty to preserve the fishing traditions of her family.

While this connection to the past is important, the boat also plays a central role in the present lives of the narrator and his family: because they depend on their fishing catch for their entire income, The boat is the key to their livelihood. It is the economic anchor of the family—when the narrator's uncle decides to work on a larger vessel in order to make enough money to buy his own boat, the implication is that he is leaving the orbit of the narrator's family in order to start his own family. The boat makes the family. The family, in some sense, is the boat: preserving relationships and tradition through the current of time into the future.

As the story progresses, the boat becomes a source of both of

unity and division in the narrator's family. During the final summer season, when the work is easy and profitable, the narrator becomes closer with his father, to his mother's approving delight. But just a few months earlier, when it was necessary to prepare the boat for the lobster season, the boat led to family conflict: because his father is ill, the narrator chooses to leave school to help with the preparations (pleasing his mother), but his father tells him he must return to school. IN this way the story dramatizes how the boat, and the old traditions it represents, prevents the narrator from achieving his potential at school, where he is exposed to new learning, to new ideas. And the narrator's mother and father's different opinions about the narrator's priorities—whether or not he should leave school to work on the boat—represent their broader feelings about the traditions the boat represents. The narrator's mother thinks they are all that matters, while his father thinks they are restrictive and thwart personal dreams. Ultimately, the boat leads to the death of the narrator's father: while the circumstances are ambiguous, it seems likely that the narrator's father committed suicide so that his son would not be anchored to the boat—to tradition—in the same way that he was.

BOOKS

Practically every object the narrator's father owns carries symbolic significance, from his rubber boots (which represent his hardiness in life and so which are missing in death) to his radio (which connects him to the outside world while at the same time helping him tune out the domestic vision of his wife). The most enduring symbol that he owns, however, is his large collection of **books**. That the father's books are all old paperbacks, many of them pulpy, suggests that he is frugal and unpretentious; yet the fact that his eclectic collection also includes literary classics suggests that he can also be cerebral. MacLeod suggests that enjoyment of "high art" like Dostoyevsky and Faulkner doesn't have to be limited to ivory towers. The father's strong interest in books shows that he is curious and intelligent, and that he had academic potential that he wasn't able to fulfill because he had to take up fishing and preserve his family's traditions. His deep interest in books combined with the narrator's comment that his father had once wished to go to college implies that the father himself recognizes and regrets this thwarted potential.

In the story, there is also a clear cause-and-effect relationship between the narrator's sisters discovering their father's books and them eventually leaving their tight-knit fishing community for cosmopolitan cities around the world. As they reach adolescent, the sisters begin to read their father's books and talk with him about what they read; and at the same time they lose interest in the domestic tasks given to them by the mother. Soon they start working at the restaurant in the village that serves tourists, meet well-off men who are visiting, and move away and marry. The clear implication is that the books are a gateway to an awareness of a bigger world, and as the sisters become aware of that world they step through the gate and don't come back. Eventually, even after they leave the house, their main connection home is the books they send to their father. Notably, once they get older and start their own families, the books they send back begin to be hardcovers instead of paperbacks. This suggests a reversal of roles—now they are the ones providing books for their father, and, unlike their father, they have enough money to buy hardcovers, suggesting that the new generation has been able to achieve a new level of prosperity. The narrator's own relationship with books is less straightforward than his sisters—at one point, he is willing to give up his education to help his family with the **boat**. Ultimately, however, he ends up as a university professor, suggesting that the books his father provided allowed him to achieve what his father always dreamed of doing for himself but couldn't because of his circumstances.

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 Boat Quotes

❝ There are times even now, when I awake at four o'clock in the morning with the terrible fear that I have overslept; when I imagine that my father is waiting for me in the room below the darkened stairs or that the shorebound men are tossing pebbles against my window while blowing their hands and stomping their feet impatiently on the frozen steadfast earth.

Related Characters: The narrator's father, The narrator

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 1

Explanation and Analysis

This opening line of the story blurs the divide between the present and the past. The narrator, currently a middle-aged college professor, wakes up momentarily confused about where and when he is, and recalls a scene from his childhood in a fishing community in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia. Out of context, the quote is disorienting—it's not immediately clear who the other men are or why they are throwing pebbles against the narrator's window. While it's

possible to figure out from context that perhaps they are other fishermen and that they are impatiently trying to wake up the narrator (who overslept), it's only later in the story that the narrator depicts the full scene. Meanwhile, the disorientation of the scene is its point: it captures how the past is both gone and still present, something lost and yet still something that haunts the narrator in the present.

Notably, the narrator's father does not wake his son up—he leaves that to the men outside throwing pebbles. Perhaps this reflects the father's hesitance to indoctrinate his son into the local fishing traditions. It is the community, more than the father himself, that pulls the narrator toward the boat and to his past. As the rest of the story makes clear, the father has mixed feelings about his work; though he dedicates his life to it, it becomes a prison for him. Despite the father's attempts to protect his son from a similar fate, however, the son is still haunted by old traditions, which come back to him as memories.

> When we returned to the house everyone made a great fuss over my precocious excursion and asked, "How did you like the boat?" "Were you afraid in the boat?" "Did you cry in the boat?" They repeated "the boat" at the end of all their questions and I knew it must be very important to everyone.

Related Characters: The narrator's mother, The narrator's father, The narrator

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

This quote, which comes right after the narrator recalls being a boy and getting back from his first excursion on the boat with his father, establishes the boat as the central symbol in the story. The quote repeats the word "boat" several times in order to mimic the way that, in the narrator's memory, everyone in his family was always repeating the word "boat."

The specific questions—"How did you like the boat?", "Were you afraid in the boat?", and "Did you cry in the boat?" cover a wide range of emotions. Although the questions are directed specifically at the narrator, they could also refer to the feelings the boat inspires in the whole family. Over the course of the story, the boat will indeed inspire affection, fear, tears, and more. The narrator understands even at a young age that it will be important for him to take an interest in the boat, and all the traditions and customs that it represents. For better and for worse, the boat—and the work and tradition it embodies—binds the narrator's family together and drives much of the action in the story.

> She was thirty-two feet long and nine wide, and was powered by an engine from a Chevrolet truck. She had a marine clutch and a high-speed reverse gear and was painted light green with the name *Jenny Lynn* stencilled in black letters on her bow and painted on an oblong plate across her stern. Jenny Lynn had been my mother's maiden name and the boat was called after her as another link in the chain of tradition. Most of the boats that berthed at the wharf bore the names of some female member of their owner's household.

Related Characters: The narrator's mother, The narrator

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis

After describing his first trip on the boat, the narrator gives more details about it, like its dimensions—information that he picked up over the course of several years. The use of technical language shows that the narrator is an expert, even after all his years away from Cape Breton. Perhaps the most important detail about the boat is its name, Jenny Lynn, which is also the narrator's mother's maiden name. Throughout the story, the narrator's mother is described as a steady, traditional figure, whose entire family has lived by the sea for generations. The boat's name then, explicitly connects it to the narrator's mother's proud lineage. The convention of naming boats after female members of the household also provides some context about gender relations in the fishing community. While the community seems to be largely patriarchal, with men using the boats to provide for their families, women also play an important role—most immediately by supporting the men in their fishing and performing tasks for the boats, but also by acting as stewards tradition.

The fact that the boat has a Chevy truck engine is both ironic and fitting—while it's ironic that the boat that is so central to Cape Breton culture has an American-made engine (something the narrator's mother would usually

reject), it's also fitting, since a truck is also commonly used for working-class labor, just like a fishing boat.

> Magazines and books covered the bureau and competed with the clothes for domination of the chair. They further overburdened the heroic little table and lay on top of the radio. They filled a baffling and unknowable cave beneath the bed, and in the corner by the bureau they spilled from the walls and grew up from the floor.

Related Characters: The narrator's father

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 7

Explanation and Analysis

As he's describing his family home growing up, the narrator also recalls his father's somewhat unusual room. One of the most notable features of the room are the piles of books and magazines, which dominate the small room. Given that the narrator's father works with his hands as a fisherman, it is meaningful that he is so interested in a cerebral activity like reading. His overflowing collection of books hints at a central aspect of his character and the core difference between him and his wife. While the narrator's mother is a woman of the sea focused only on those traditions, the narrator's father's interest in books indicate his interest in the wider world and suggest he could have been a different kind of person in different circumstances.

The immense volume of books suggests that the father is passionate about his interests, even obsessive. His collection is particularly impressive because he doesn't have much money to spare (hence his preference for ten-cent paperpacks). Eventually, the books become a bridge between the father and his children, but because he does so much reading alone in his room, the books also represent the vast portions of his life that he keeps hidden from the world.

> By about the ninth or tenth grade my sisters one by one discovered my father's bedroom, and then the change would begin. Each would go into the room one morning when he was out. She would go with the ideal hope of imposing order or with the more practical objective of emptying the ashtray, and later she would be found spellbound by the volume in her hand.

Related Characters: The narrator's father, The narrator's sisters

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 9

Explanation and Analysis

While describing his sisters, the narrator notes that their lives all end up following the same pattern. When they're young, they do well in school and excel at helping their mother with housework, but as soon as they discover their father's collection of books, they begin to lose interest in domestic things. This happens around the age when they hit puberty, suggesting that they become different sort of women than the girls they used to be.

The fate of the narrator's sisters is a bit of a contradiction. On the one hand, reading opens up new worlds to them and allows them to do things that their parents were never able to do. On the other hand, however, the sisters all ultimately end up following the same path—and the narrator essentially treats them all as being one collective character. In collectively following this same pattern, the sisters come to seem as if they have little individual agency, and are instead being formed by the changing times. In this way, hey come to embody both what remains from the previous generation (particularly since they inherit the physical characteristics of their parents) and also what inevitably changes over time.

> In the winter they sent him a picture which had been taken on the day of the singing. On the back it said, "To Our Ernest Hemingway" and the "Our" was underlined. There was also an accompanying letter telling how much they had enjoyed themselves, how popular the tape was proving and explaining who Ernest Hemingway was. In a way it almost did look like one of those unshaven, taken-in-Cuba pictures of Hemingway.

Related Characters: Tourists, The narrator's father, The

narrator

Related Themes:

Page Number: 14

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes after the scene in which the narrator can hear his father singing up at the tourists' cabins (after taking them out on a tourist boat ride, at the request of the narrator's sisters). The narrator has mixed feelings about hearing his father sing and knowing that the tourists are recording him. On the one hand, he is proud of his father's connection to his heritage and of his wonderful singing voice, even if the narrator doesn't quite feel the same connection to it. But the narrator is also suspicious of the tourists' attempts to take the Cape Breton culture as their own. Without directly saying it, the narrator implies that the tourists objectify his father and act as if they own him—with the most notable detail being the underlined "Our" in "Our Ernest Hemingway." They also act condescending toward him, explaining who Ernest Hemingway is—in fact, with as many books as the narrator's father reads, it's very likely he would know perfectly well who Hemingway is.

In the singing scene and the follow-up in this passage, the story captures the complicated interplay between the tourist and the authentic fishing village and culture that the tourists come to visit. The tourists come to the village to experience its authenticity, but in briefly experiencing it they come to think of it as theirs, as something they now know and own, despite the fact that they have only scratched its surface and do not truly understand it at all. Nonetheless, the tourists' assertion that they do own it is powerful, and not entirely untrue: they do get the narrator's father to take them out on his boat for a purpose other than what the boat is for, they get him to sing for them, and their money changes the town, such as leading to the establishment of the restaurant at which the narrator's sister's work and eventually meet the men who they will marry and move away with. On the other hand, though, the father in a way is also using the tourists. He seems to recognize that his village won't entirely survive with the changing times, and in sharing his songs he preserves them to a degree—which is better than them disappearing entirely.

> And the spring wore on and the summer came and school ended in the third week of June and the lobster season on July first and I wished that the two things I loved so dearly did not exclude each other in a manner that was so blunt and too clear.

Related Characters: The narrator

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 19

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes after the narrator decides, with the encouragement of his father and against his mother's wishes, to go back to school and miss lobster season. The fact that the timing of the school year and the lobster season lines up almost exactly is meaningful—and the narrator notes how clearly this makes it impossible to do both. It's one or the other.

The choice between school and lobster season is just a small-scale version of the larger choice the narrator faces—whether to join his father and mother in continuing the fishing business or whether to seek out a new way of life like his sisters did. Unlike the sisters, who shift abruptly from wanting to uphold to the traditions to wanting to get out, the narrator tries to act as a bridge between the old traditions and new ways. The narrator genuinely wants to do both, and he seems destined to regret his decision no matter which one he chooses. Ultimately, the narrator's decision to go to school instead of help with the lobster season predicts how the rest of his life will go—despite a few more months working on the boat, the narrator eventually leaves Cape Breton behind to become a university professor.

> "I hope you will remember what you've said."

Related Characters: The narrator's father (speaker), The narrator

Related Themes:

Page Number: 22

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes immediately after the narrator promises

his father that he'll continue to help his father fish for as his father lives. The fact that the narrator quotes his father directly, particularly since the story is light on dialogue, suggests that the wording of his father's reply is particularly important. Initially the narrator seems to believe that his father in this moment is holding the narrator to his promise in a literal way—that he will spend his life helping his father on the boat. But as the story progresses, it becomes clear that while his father *is* holding him to his promise, his emphasis is different from what the narrator initially understands. The father, who does not want his son to spend his life fishing, has seen the loophole in his son's promise—he sees that if he dies, his son will no longer be obliged to stay in Cape Breton and fish with him. This quote, then, strongly implies that the father's eventual death at sea is in fact a suicide.

The father's eventual death, then, is not a tragic accident but a deliberate sacrifice. The father, unhappy with how his life turned out, wants to prevent his son from suffering the same fate, and the only way he can think to do this is by killing himself. In some ways, the father's sacrifice is successful—as a university professor in the Midwest, the narrator does indeed have a very different life than his father. In other ways, however, the sacrifice wasn't worth it. While the narrator's father's death did free his son from the obligations of the local community, the narrator in middle age remains haunted by memories of his past, and he's still a solitary man with an overflowing ashtray, just like his father was. The narrator has been freed from a life of hard fishing labor, but he also lost his connection to his community, and he lost his father—and it's not clear from the story that the loss is worth what was gained.

❝ On November twenty-first the waves of the grey Atlantic are very high and the waters are very cold and there are no sign posts on the surface of the sea. You cannot tell where you have been five minutes before and in the squalls of snow you cannot see. And it takes longer than you would believe to check a boat that has been running before a gale and turn her ever so care fully in a wide and stupid circle, with timbers creaking and straining, back into the face of storm. And you know that it is useless and that your voice does not carry the length of the boat and that even if you knew the original spot, the relentless waves would carry such a burden perhaps a mile or so by the time you could return. And you know also, the final irony, that your father, like your uncles and all the men that form your past, cannot swim a stroke.

Related Characters: The narrator's uncle, The narrator's father, The narrator

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 23

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, the narrator describes the moment when he realized his father has gone overboard from the boat and died. The scene obliquely hints at the father's death, becoming more explicit as the passage goes on. In part, this ambiguity is meant to mirror the narrator's own experience of slowly coming to a dreadful realization. This ambiguity may also be the result of deliberate work by the father—even if the father's death is indeed a suicide (as is heavily implied by a quote earlier in the story), it still can't look like one. The father's goal is to free his son from the obligations that imprisoned him in his life—and one part of this is making sure that his wife (the narrator's mother) is provided for. If the father's death is ruled as an accident rather than a suicide, the narrator's mother will be able to collect on his life insurance policy. On some level, the narrator seems to realize this, based on the details that he mentions. Still, he never says conclusively that his father committed suicide, perhaps reflecting an unwillingness to look at the fact directly.

It's ironic that the narrator's father and uncle aren't able to swim—the sea, which sustained them in life, is also deadly to them. Once again, this reinforces how the father's work, where he seemed so capable and vigorous, was also killing him.

❝ There was not much left of my father, physically, as he lay there with the brass chains on his wrists and the seaweed in his hair.

Related Characters: The narrator's father

Related Themes:

Page Number: 25

Explanation and Analysis

These final lines end "The Boat" on a decidedly bleak note: the narrator remembers seeing the decaying body of his dead father, who disappeared a week prior. The brass chains around the father's wrists are important. He wears them to

protect the skin of his arms from the abrasions and chafing that come from working with the ropes and lines on the boat. The chains protected him, but at the same time chains on wrists are strongly connected to the idea of shackles or restraints, and so the chains also suggest that the father was "chained" to his boat and his career—and more broadly imply that the father was trapped in his current situation. That the chains still cover his wrists in death make clear that he couldn't escape his entrapment even in death—and that in fact that entrapment is what led to his father's sense that his death was the only way out for himself or his son.

Throughout the story, the narrator slowly realizes that, although his father was a capable fisherman, it didn't make him happy. In fact, his father spent most of his working life doing things he didn't want to do; as opposed the reading he did in his free time, which is what he was most interested in. While the narrator admires his father in some ways for making this sacrifice, the consequences of it scare the narrator. The narrator's family devoted their lives to the sea, and now he sees how it repays them: by physically (and also metaphorically) tearing the father apart. The seaweed in the father's hair (i.e., surrounding the brain) could represent the sea's greed—that even after taking the father's life, it still wants more of him, and the part that his father himself most valued.

The gruesomeness of the final paragraph is meant to be compared to the previous paragraph, where the narrator talks about his mother living alone on a meager insurance policy. The narrator feels guilty about this and perhaps has even considered going back to his village to help his mother. But it's the grim memory of his father's body that stops him. Ultimately, the narrator's guilt about his mother is outweighed by his horror over what happened to his father. The narrator's father gave the ultimate sacrifice for his son. After seeing the results, the narrator decides not to do the same, although in many ways he is still unable to escape turning into a man like his father.

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 BOAT

The narrator recalls how he sometimes wakes up at 4 a.m., afraid that he has overslept and that someone is waiting for him: either his father in another room or men standing outside, stomping around in the cold and throwing small rocks against his window. When this happens, the narrator is already getting out of bed and looking for his clothes before he realizes that he's alone, that his father and the men aren't there, and that there isn't any **boat** docked at the pier.

The opening paragraph of the story blurs the lines between past and present: the narrator gets confused and thinks he is an adolescent again. This blurring communicates that even though he is now a middle-aged college professor as he tells this story, he continues to be haunted by his memories of when he was a boy living in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia. The time 4 a.m. is significant because it's when the men of his village used to go out to the boats to prepare to fish—this time will recur throughout the story. These patterns of when to wake up have endured in the narrator, even though he is a long time gone from his former home.

When the narrator wakes up like this, next to his overflowing ashtray, he thinks of death and is afraid, so he splashes his face with water, then walks a mile to a local restaurant that's open all night. In the winter, this walk is so cold that by the time the narrator gets to the restaurant, he has tears in his eyes. The waitress usually comments on the tears, saying it must be extremely cold, and the narrator agrees.

The ashtray is a clear metaphor for death, since it is a graveyard for the "corpses" of old cigarettes. The ashtray also connects the narrator to his father, who also used to smoke, showing a bad habit that was inherited between generations. The bleakness of the scene, including the cold and the tears in the narrator's eyes, foreshadow that the memories he has about his father and his old life will not end happily. The narrator may be depressed—later in the story, the narrator's father will himself have what seems to be a prolonged episode of depression.

The narrator makes small talk with the handful of people who are always in the restaurant until the sun comes up. He drinks bitter coffee, then leaves before the morning crowds get there because he teaches at a university in the Midwest and doesn't want to be late. He knows then that his day will pass as usual and that the memories of the **boat** that wake him up at night are "only shadows and echoes," something from a time long passed.

MacLeod continues to paint a bleak scene, with "bitter" coffee and memories that appear as "shadows and echoes." One of the reasons why the narrator is so disturbed by his memories is that they remind him of his own mortality. The presence of other patrons in the restaurant suggests that the dark feelings the narrator feels are universal, but notably the patrons don't discuss these feelings—they make small talk instead. The story itself seems to be a way to communicate deep feelings that people themselves do not casually share between each other.

The narrator jumps back in time to his very first memories of the **boat**. His first memory as a child is of his father in big rubber boots, with a face full of stubble, smelling and tasting of salt, with wild, white hair. On his first short ride in the boat, at a very young age, the narrator rides on his father's shoulders. After docking, the narrator and his father return home and everyone makes a big deal about the narrator's first trip. They ask lots of questions that end with the words "the boat," so the narrator learns it must be something that's important to all of them

"The Boat" is a frame story, and this is the point where the story transitions from the outside frame which takes places in the Midwest in the present when the narrator is middle-aged, to the middle part of the story, which takes place many years earlier in the Nova Scotia fishing village where the narrator grew up. This scene introduces the most important character in the narrator's recollections—the father—showing him when he was relatively young and in his prime. It also introduces the titular boat, which is central to the narrator's family's way of life.

The narrator jumps to his first memory of his mother. He remembers her as also being obsessed with "the **boat**," doing the tasks necessary to support the narrator's father's work as a fisherman, like making food and fixing clothes. She often asked her husband "Well, how did things go in the boat today?" which is also the first question the narrator himself remembers asking.

The narrator's mother has a strong connection to the boat, which in turn demonstrates her strong commitment to the family's traditional way of life. Her devotion to helping with the boat and the father's work as a fisherman shows her capability and strength of character, but it also hints at her singular focus and stubbornness—she is only *in the boat and this fishing life.*

The narrator describes the boat: it is a "Cape Island boat" (as Nova Scotians call it) and it's made for catching lobsters, mackerel, cod, haddock, and hake, depending on the season. It's named *Jenny Lynn*, after the narrator's mother's maiden name, following a local tradition where boats are named after a female member of the owner's family. The narrator admits that, as a child, he didn't know all the details about the boat, such as its specific dimensions in feet, or the fact that it had an engine from a Chevrolet truck.

The name Jenny Lynn *is significant for several reasons. First, it shows that the narrator's family conforms to what everyone else in the community does, taking a name that follows a local tradition. In particular, the fact that the boat has the mother's maiden name even more strongly ties both the boat and the mother to this way of life. The narrator's mother comes from a long line of people who lived and worked by the sea, and the boat acts as a bridge between this long tradition and the present. The boat is both the source of the family's livelihood and its link to the family's traditions. Meanwhile, the narrator's interposed comment about not knowing details about the boat is a reminder that the story is a frame story, and that the narrator is no longer a part of the tradition that he describes in this scene. Even as it shows the family embedded in its traditions, it also shows that things are going to change.*

The narrator lived in a house that was part of a small community of about 50 houses arranged in a horseshoe shape around the wharf from which the fishing boats set out. The inhabitants of the houses are a mix of Catholics and Protestants, whose ancestors were driven out of their previous homelands by turmoil, such as the religious conflicts in Ireland, the Highland Clearances in Scotland, and the Revolutionary War in the United States.

The fact that the houses are arranged in a horseshoe shape around the wharf emphasizes how central fishing is to the small community's way of life. The references to the ancestors of the wharf's inhabitants once again emphasizes the role of tradition in the community. In some ways, however, it also signifies a break with tradition. Groups from various backgrounds—including some that would have been hostile to each other, like Catholics and Protestants in Ireland—have been forced out of their old traditional homes and come together to form a new community that blends elements of their old communities and has developed its own traditions.

The most important room of the narrator's house is the kitchen, which has an old-fashioned stove that burned wood and coal. The kitchen has a big wooden extendable table that could be made larger or smaller depending on the situation, with five hand-crafted wooden chairs. Across from the stove is an old couch that dips in the middle. At the south end of the room is a window that looks out on the sea, and opposite that are clothes hooks for the family. Beneath the hooks is where the family leaves their shoes, mostly rubber boots. The wall also has a barometer. The kitchen is used by the whole family and is less organized than the other ten rooms of the house but more organized than the narrator's father's room.

The contrast between the cleanliness of the rest of the house and the messiness of the father's room represents the conflict between the narrator's mother and father. The mother's sense of order signifies her devotion to the old traditions—she wants to keep things the same. While the father is also old fashioned in some ways (for example his big rubber boots), his disorder shows that he is not quite as devoted to or content with tradition as the mother. The kitchen window looking out to the sea emphasizes the whole family's connection to the sea, particularly since the kitchen is the one room the whole family shares.

The narrator reveals that it was his mother who kept the rest of the house so organized. The narrator describes her as being a tall woman, "dark and powerfully energetic," like one of the women from a novel by Thomas Hardy. She raised seven children, making all of the meals and most of the clothes, and in addition to that, even maintained elaborate gardens as well as hens and ducks. She is fourteen years younger than the narrator's father, and the narrator describes her as "of the sea, as were all of her people."

Alistair MacLeod, the author of this story, was himself a professor of literature and was very familiar with the writing of Thomas Hardy—he wrote his PhD dissertation on him. Hardy was a realist and naturalist writer, who portrayed characters caught up in forces of both tradition and change that were larger than themselves. Just as the characters in "The Boat" reckon with their traditions and ancestors, MacLeod is also reckoning with his own literary predecessors. Once again, the narrator highlights his mother's connection (as well as her whole family's connection) to the sea.

The narrator moves on to describing his father's bedroom. The door to it is in the kitchen, located between the clothes rack and the barometer. The room always looks like a strong gust of wind had just blown through it. The bed is never made because his father usually sleeps on top of the sheets. Cigarette debris is everywhere, and even the table is full of black cigarette marks, from cigarettes that fell off the ashtray when the narrator's father didn't notice. At the foot of the father's bed is one window that faces out to the sea.

The father's bedroom is one of the most important settings in the story and full of symbolism. The cigarette debris recalls the narrator's ashtray at the beginning of the story, and suggests that the narrator's smoking habits are inherited from his father. The fact that the father's room only has one window, at the foot of his bed, facing out toward the sea, suggests that his whole life is oriented toward the sea—perhaps whether he likes it or not. The room's small size and single window could be taken as suggesting a prison cell, an interpretation that will become more meaningful as the story progresses.

The father has a bureau and a closet in the bedroom. The closet holds a suit, a couple of formal shirts, and black shoes that don't fit him well. His "friendly clothes," some of which were knitted by the narrator's mother, are left sitting on the sole chair in the room. When people visited him, he told them to throw these clothes on the floor so they could use the chair.

The father's discomfort with formal shirts and suits suggests that he is firmly working class. His carelessness with his clothes (many of which were knitted by the narrator's mother) foreshadows some of the discord between the father and mother, by showing that he doesn't always value the same things she does.

Magazines and **books** are scattered all over the room. Most of the magazines are familiar popular ones, but there's a wider variety of books. Some are conventional but many are used paperbacks that used to be sold for ten cents each in special magazine advertisements. Originally, the father purchased these books from the ads himself (which the narrator's mother disapproved of, because of the cost), but eventually the narrator's sisters, who had moved away to cities, sent him paperbacks. Pulp writers like Mickey Spillane and Ernest Haycox are mixed in with literary writers like Dostoyevsky and Faulkner, and one noteworthy package contained both the poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins and a sexual self-help book called *Getting the Most Out of Love*.

The father's large collection of books shows that he is well-read. The fact that the books are ten-cent paperbacks suggests that that father can't afford to buy expensive hard covers, but that he is dedicated enough to read whatever it is that he can afford. The books in the father's collection are eclectic—Spillane and Haycox were popular in the early 20th century but mostly forgotten today. Dostoyevsky, Faulkner, and Hopkins, meanwhile, are considered classic writers. The father's mix of low-brow and high-brow suggests that he's at once unpretentious and cerebral—a trait that indicates the father is self-taught and directed in his reading rather than educated. The eclectic book collection might also be seen as MacLeod suggesting that the divide between high- and low-brow is not as wide as it might seem if you approach books with an open mind.

When the narrator's father wasn't on the **boat**, he would lie in bed to read and smoke while the radio played. The narrator often heard his father awake as late as four a.m., and it seemed to him that his father seemed to never fall completely asleep.

The narrator's father is a creature of habit. The hour of four a.m. appears again, once more creating a link between the narrator and his father. The father seems to never fall fully asleep, suggesting one the one hand that his work is never done and on the other that he so values his free time that he is unwilling to use it to sleep.

The narrator's mother hated the mess in his father's room, and she stopped sleeping in the room shortly after the narrator's birth. In addition to mess, she also disliked reading, having last read *Ivanhoe* in high school and finding it extremely boring. But in spite of the mother's disapproval, the room stayed as it was, with the door open so that everyone in the house could see.

The narrator's mother's hatred of reading sets up yet another contrast between her and the father. That the narrator's mother finds the book boring suggests she sees no value in things that do not pertain to her everyday life, which in turn makes clear her devotion to the everyday traditions of their fishing livelihood. This, in contrast, makes clear that the father has broader interests beyond just being a fisherman. That the mother disapproves of the state of the fathers room but cannot change it makes clear the intractable and enduring nature of the conflict between them.

The narrator's sisters are all tall and beautiful like their mother, and red-haired as their father was before his went white.) All his sisters did well in school and helped their mother around the house. The narrator was the youngest sibling and the only son.

The narrator's sisters have characteristics from both parents, physically showing how things can be passed down from generation to generation. Their work around the house shows how they are being trained by their mother to fulfill roles like hers in the village.

The narrator's father worries when the narrator's sisters play on the wharf with other children, but they do it anyway when their mother sends them on errands. [BF1]Unlike the narrator's father, his mother doesn't care about what the girls do with other children, noting that they could be getting up to much worse.

The conflict between the narrator's mother and the narrator's father becomes more open as they argue over how to parent their daughters. While the narrator's mother generally tends to be the stricter parent, the fact that she lets her girls play on the wharf with the other children suggests that she is willing to make an exception because she values the sea and their community so much. The father's desire to protect the sisters from the wharf suggests he may also have a broader interest in protecting them from exactly the things that the mother values.

As each sister enters ninth or tenth grade, they begin spending time in the father's bedroom. Initially, they go into the room when the father's out, hoping to clean up the mess, but eventually they start reading one of the **books**. The mother disapproves and tells them to stop reading "that trash" and help with work.

The sisters experience major changes at roughly the age they hit puberty, and these changes are defined by their shifting allegiance between the values of their mother and father. They initially enter their father's room out of a sense of duty to their mother's efforts to keep the house clean and orderly, but in short order they become lost in their father's interest in books. Discovering the father's books opens their minds to the outside world and as a result makes them less willing to help their mother out around the house. The way that the sister's all fall into this same pattern suggests larger forces at play in some way, as if the sisters are all caught on the changing tides of time.

Eventually, the mother begins to mount an organized opposition to what the narrator's sisters are doing. While not "overly religious," she begins making religious arguments for why **books** are a waste of time. In particular, she says these things louder when she knows the narrator's father is around to hear them. In response, he usually turns up the volume of his radio.

The narrator's mother believes (correctly) that the father's books are leading her daughters away from her. Though she's not "overly religious," she calls on religion because it is a traditional authority and she respects tradition. The passive aggressive way that the mother tries to make the father hear (and how he turns up his radio in response) show how the two of them can fight without speaking to each other directly. The mother is fighting to keep her daughters focused on the everyday life of being in a fishing family; the father increasing the volume on his radio continues his efforts to bring the outside world into the house.

Each sister begins to lose interest in her household chores after she starts reading the father's **books**. They get summer jobs at a big American-owned seafood restaurant on the wharf that draws in tourists. The mother hates this arrangement because the restaurant owners and patrons aren't "our people." She gets angry at the sisters and claims that they aren't interested in "any of the right things." The worst argument the narrator overhears occurs when his mother tells his father that she hopes he'll be "satisfied when they come home knocked up and you'll have had your way."

The fact that the restaurant is American-owned and that it draws tourists means that it represents the outside world. It's presence in the village (and in the story) shows how that outside world has encroached on the insular community of the fishing village. The mother—who cares solely for the village and its traditions to the extent that she doesn't even like books—does not approve of such encroachment—she interprets it as not only problematic but as immoral, as influencing her children to start caring about the wrong things. When the narrator overhears his parents arguing, it's shocking because he is used to more passive aggressive disagreements between the two of them; this explicit argument is also the first time that it is made totally clear that the father wants *his children to have these experiences that broaden their horizons beyond the village and its traditions*

At the time of the argument, the narrator's father is 65 years old. He looks gray and tired. The narrator wonders what would happen if his father killed his mother, right there, while he's watching. But the narrator's father goes back to his room, and so the narrator comes in, acting as if he hadn't seen anything. He makes a lot of noise so that they'll hear him and asks his father "Well, how did things go in the **boat** today?" His father says not too bad.

The narrator is for the most part a passive observer in his own story—here, he avoids conflict by pretending not to have heard anything. If the father suspects anything, he doesn't let on—he says things went OK in the boat. The father could be lying, or this could also imply that an argument like the narrator just heard isn't unusual for the narrator's father and mother—the only unusual thing was that the narrator was around to hear it. The narrator's recourse to bringing up the boat also indicates the way that tradition can bind people together—it gives a subject to discuss that is ever present and enduring—but can also offer people a way to hide from the changes that are occurring behind the scenes.

The narrator's sisters make decent money as waitresses, so they buy the father a razor and buy the mother the types of clothes that she usually likes, but she puts these clothes away in trunks. One day, the sisters ask the father to take some tourists from their restaurant out on the **boat**, *Jenny Lynn*. The tourists like the narrator's father and, after the boat ride, invite him to their rented cabins that sit up on the hill that overlooks the wharf. While there, his father gets drunk and starts to sing for the tourists. Hearing his father's voice from the cabins stirs conflicted feelings in the narrator, who begins to tremble and cry. The tourists record the father as he first sings old traditional sea songs, and then switches to the Gaelic war songs of his ancestors. The tourists pay him for all his work, but the narrator's mother won't touch the money.

The mother is so stubborn and devoted to her community that she refuses to accept any gifts that can be sourced back to money earned from outside the community. The sisters' request for the father to take the tourists on the boat suggests that they are much more willing than the mother to blend the new with the old. The father does not seek out the tourists as his daughters do, but neither does he refuse the request to take them on a boat and later sing for them. The father's knowledge of old songs displays his connection to ancestors he's never met and shows how the distant past, by being passed down through culture, can still influence the present. The fact that the tourists pay the father and record his songs shows that even those without the same connection to tradition can sense that there is something significant about the wharf—the tourists want to make their own connect to this tradition. Yet the payment also suggests that the tourists see this tradition as a commodity to be bought and sold, not as something that is lived in and passed down through community's and family's. That the father is willing to perform the songs for the tourists, and to accept their money in return, further emphasizes his difference in regard to his position on tradition and change from the mother. The narrator's conflicted feelings place him somewhere between his mother and father—a position he'll occupy through most of the story.

Later, in the winter, the tourists send the narrator's father a picture of him singing with the caption "To Our Ernest Hemingway" with "Our" underlined. The narrator's father looks out of place at the tourists' cabin, but he does look a little like a rugged Hemingway in Cuba.

The highlighting under the "Our" is supposed to suggest that the tourists are possessive and condescending—that they view the father more as a pet or a servant than as an equal. Throughout, the story captures the complicated relationship between tourism and local authenticity. The tourists crave the authenticity, but in experiencing it they commodify and change it. Yet in performing for the tourists the father nonetheless passed on, in some way, his cultural heritage to a broader audience, in a way that is similar to Hemingway through his books. The unanswered question is whether the cost of that sharing is worth the benefit. Hemingway also famously wrote about the sea and is another literary ancestor of MacLeod.

The pattern of each sister starting to read **books** and work in the restaurant continues as the years go by. They face angry questions from the mother and try to avoid her, but they have long conversations with the father, pushing his clothes off the chair so that they'll have a space to sit.

The narrator more or less treats all his older sisters as one composite character. Though they break away from the traditions of their Cape Breton wharf, the fact that they all do the same thing suggests that they may not have as much choice as they think, that they are pulled by a different tide than the narrator's mother—they ride the tide of change, while the mother steadfastly resists it.

The narrator interjects into his narrative to admit that he's compressing time and that things didn't happen as neatly as he describes them. He remembers how his sisters all left for big cities—Boston, Montreal, New York—after marrying men they met while working in the restaurant. The men are rich and handsome, and none of them are fishermen. Despite these men's financial success, the mother resents them, believing them to be "a combination of the lazy, the effeminate, the dishonest and the unknown." They are not "her people" and not from her sea.

The narrator's sisters marry husbands that by many standards are ideal: rich, handsome, and worldly. Still, the mother not only resents these men but actively looks down on them because no amount of money will change the fact that they don't come from her type of people. She criticizes them as "lazy" and "effeminate," suggesting that her ideal image of a man is traditionally patriarchal: a strong breadwinner who will provide for his family through manual labor.

Eventually, the narrator is alone with his mother and father in the house where his sisters had also once lived. When the narrator is fifteen, his father begins to suddenly seem older and sicker. He lies in bed, smoking, reading his **books**, and listening to the radio. When most of the other residents of the wharf begin preparing for lobster season, he still doesn't get out of bed.

A new phase of the story begins when the narrator is alone in the house with his parents because he can no longer just sit by and observe. He now becomes a much more active part of the story, which also fits with the fact that he is growing up. That the father lies in his bed all the time alone is probably meant to suggest that he's not physically ill, but is rather depressed—a signal that not only does he want his children to not fall into the fishing life, but that he himself does not love that life either.

The narrator's maternal uncle is also his father's partner, and while the father stays in bed the uncle helps the mother and the narrator make lobster trapping gear for the **boat**. The season starts May first, but by March they're well behind in preparations. The narrator realizes he must put aside his **books** and school so that he can help his mother and uncle pick up the slack.

The presence of the narrator's uncle as a business partner reinforces how closely family and economy are tied together in the Cape Breton fishing community. The narrator's decision to stop his education to help with the lobster season is symbolic—it shows that he is willing to do something different than his sisters and continue living the traditional lifestyle of his parents.

When the narrator talks to his father for the first time after leaving school, his father tells him that he must go back to school the next day. The narrator protests that he's already made a decision, but his father holds his ground and says that he won't be satisfied unless his son goes back. As he says this, the father is lying on the same bed where he conceived the narrator, at age fifty-six. His father then softens his tone, and says that he isn't telling the narrator what to do, only asking him.

Despite the narrator's willingness to become more like his father—to choose the sea over school—the narrator's father advises him to do the opposite. Since the narrator's father is likely depressed, it's not hard to imagine why the father would want a different life for his son. The father's shift from a stern tone to a softer one suggests that he is more sensitive than his rugged exterior would suggest.

The next morning, the narrator goes back to school. His mother disapproves of this choice. But his father makes a surprising recovery and gets the *Jenny Lynn* ready to go just in time for lobster season. The narrator is at his high school, "discussing the water imagery of Tennyson" when he sees the lobster trappers going out on the wharf, skillfully doing their work. That night, the narrator's mother asks his father "Well, how did things go in the **boat** today?"

The narrator has mixed feelings about going back to school. While he wants to please his father by getting an education, he can't help feeling that he is merely learning about *things by discussing "water imagery" while right down on the wharf he can see men actually* doing *things in the water. At the end, the repetition of the question "Well, how did things go in the boat today?" suggests a return to normalcy, at least for the moment, which coincides with the father's dramatic recovery. That recovery, though, also seems to be a part of the father's private battle with the mother. The father has gotten the narrator to go back to school, when the mother expresses her disapproval, the father cuts the ground out from under her by getting better, such that there is no reason for the narrator to leave school. The implication is that the father is sacrificing once more by rousing himself in order to stop his son from dropping out of school.*

Lobster season ends—the narrator wasn't able to help because it coincides almost exactly with his school term. Meanwhile, the narrator's uncle is offered a position on a bigger **boat**, and everyone knows this means he's leaving the *Jenny Lynn* because he'll make enough money to buy a boat for himself.

The narrator has shown a desire to bridge the gap between his mother and father. But the exact overlap of lobster season with school suggests that this may actually be impossible—he can't dedicate himself both to the boat and to school. Meanwhile, the departure of the uncle suggests a slow unraveling of the fabric holding their family (and its fishing business) together. The opportunity means the uncle will be able to establish his own business and build his own family, though the mention of the bigger boat may also imply slow changes in the way the community functions.

The narrator joins his father for the next season—trawling—and this pleases them both. Men stomp by the narrator's house at 4 a.m., and he and his father join them on the way down to the wharf. When the narrator is not awake on time, they throw pebbles at his window, causing him to panic and rush to get ready. The narrator's father never wakes the narrator himself. Overall, it is a good summer for the family business.

This scene helps explain the somewhat mysterious first paragraph of the story—when the narrator wakes at the beginning of the story, he is picturing these men of the harbor, headed down to the wharf. The narrator's father is reluctant to wake up the narrator, perhaps reflecting his deeper reluctance to pull his son into a fishing lifestyle.

The narrator remembers how his father never tanned because his skin was so ruddy—he just burned again and again. His father wore brass chain bracelets, like many other men in the wharf, in order to protect his skin from chafing. The narrator realizes that summer that maybe his father wasn't built to be a fisherman, either physically or mentally. He remembers how his father mentioned one night that he had always wanted to go to university.

The father's brass chain bracelets are an important symbol—they show how he was literally chained to his job. While earlier in the story, the narrator's father is portrayed as being seemingly destined to be a fisherman (if sometimes an unconventional one), in a key moment the narrator realizes that this wasn't necessarily the case. That the father wanted to go to university and was never actually cut out to be a fisherman provides a key realization—that the father sacrificed (or was forced to sacrifice) his own dreams to devote his life to doing something he didn't want, in order to preserve his own family's fishing tradition. This realization gives a reason to the father's desire to protect his children from having to sacrifice their own dreams Interestingly, the narrator himself ends up as a professor, suggesting that he was able to accomplish what his father dreamed, and then some—though, given that the narrator himself also seems depressed, it's clear that achieving this dream came at its own cost.

The narrator becomes curious about his father's previous life and wonders why he didn't marry until after turning forty. He wonders if it was a shotgun wedding, then feels guilty for thinking this when he sees his oldest sister was born eleven months after the wedding. The narrator begins to love his father for spending his life doing something he didn't like rather than following his dream. The narrator himself feels guilty of being selfish, even over small dreams like his goal to finish high school. The narrator therefore promises his father that he will stay and help with family fishing business for as long as his father lives. The father replies, "I hope you will remember what you've said."

The narrator begins to realize that, even after living with his father for his entire life, he still doesn't know many things about the man. In fact, he didn't even think to wonder about many things. At this point, the narrator sees his father's sacrifice as entirely noble, as something to admire him for. And, so, the narrator makes his own sacrifice and promises to help his father with the fishing business, but he is motivated more by guilt than anything. This suggests that the narrator is in danger of being "chained" to the business just as his father is. The father's choice of words when he replies to the narrator is significant: while at first it seems that the father is merely saying that he hopes the narrator lives by his word, as the story reaches its conclusion it becomes clear that the father is taking the son extremely literally such that his response is the strongest hint in the story that the father's death at the end may be a suicide (in order to free his son from the fishing business.

The narrator's father's room overflows with **books**, which he accumulates and reads even more voraciously than before—some are even hardcovers, sent by the narrator's far-away sisters, who are becoming parents themselves. The narrator continues to fish with his father into September. The narrator's mother says that the narrator has "given added years" to his father's life.

Perhaps aware that his death is on the horizon, the narrator's father pours renewed energy not only into his work, but also into his passions, like reading. The new hardcover books are a reminder that the sisters have achieved greater financial success than the previous generation—the books represent continuity between generations, but the different formats of the books (paperback vs. hard cover) represent change. This movement toward wealth is, in some communities, the goal change across generations, though the mother does not at all appreciate any change that results in her family abandoning its old ways. The mother's words about the son adding years to his father's life turn out to be deeply ironic.

As it becomes October, then November, the fishing gets harder: the narrator and his father aren't able to work at night and lose some of a trawl. It gets colder and they must wear heavier clothes. The narrator stands at the tiller of the **boat**, like his uncle once did. When the water gets choppy, he looks over at his father at the stern to shout over the loud engine. On November 21st, however, on what seemed like the final run of that season, the narrator looks over and sees that his father isn't there. He knows right then that he'll never see his father again.

The darker weather and harder working conditions foreshadow the darker direction that the story will soon take. The narrator takes his uncle's physical place on the boat, suggesting how he could eventually succeed the uncle, fully learn the fishing life, and then take over the boat for his father and continue the family tradition. That this path is just taking shape when the father abruptly disappears from the boat—and the narrator clearly understands that his father is now dead—is a further suggestion that the father committed suicide precisely to make sure that his son did not take this path.

The narrator remembers more about November 21st: the gray waves around the **boat** were high and cold, with low visibility because of the snow. If something fell off the boat, it could be carried in the water a mile before the boat could get to it, if you could even figure out the right direction to go. The narrator notes that his father, like his uncle and like many men of the wharf, can't swim at all.

The low visibility of the weather reflects the ambiguity surrounding the circumstances of the father's death. Though the narrator never calls his father's death a suicide, the timing, the circumstances, and the father's earlier words to his son all make suicide very likely. Because the father's death cannot be verified as a suicide, however, his wife will still entitled to life insurance payouts (as made clear by the end of the story), which is a likely reason for why the father ensures that his suicide could also be interpreted as an accident. The fact that the narrator's father and uncle can't swim is ironic: the very thing that sustains them (the sea) can also kill them. It also further suggests that the father's time on the sea has always been slowly killing, emotionally and physical.

In the present day, the narrator notes that the lobster beds off Cape Breton are still just as vibrant as they used to be, and that their lobsters are shipped off to various cities around the world. But despite the high demand for lobster, the old wharf where the narrator used to live has not been touched for the past ten years. Big commercial **boats** try to come in to fish the waters, but they find "their buoys cut adrift and their gear lost and destroyed." Police have come to investigate the incidents, but they get no answers from the locals and ultimately just go away.

The story switches back to its external frame now that the interior story has explained how the narrator got from his youth to his adulthood. While much of the story deals with the breaking down of old traditions, this section suggests that some traditions do endure, even if it's in a diminished form. The commercial boats recall the tourists from earlier, although this time they are not successful and are driven back by the Cape Breton community. Though the narrator associates many bad memories with where he grew up, he still admires the resiliency of the community. At the same time, it's worth noting that the narrator earlier mentions that his family is descended from people evicted in the Scottish Highland Clearances—which were a historical event in which poorer farmers were evicted by richer interests seeking to combine small tenant farms into larger and more lucrative grazing tracts for livestock. Given such historical resonances, and the way that the story suggests that there are patterns in the changing tides of history, suggests that this momentary success in repelling the outside interests may not be permanent, and that change is likely to come eventually that will significantly change the community.

The narrator feels uneasy knowing that his mother lives alone and doesn't get much from his father's life insurance policy. She's too proud to ask for additional help, though. The narrator notes that it's hard to know that she resents him for leaving her and abandoning their traditional lifestyle. She remains devoted to the sea.

The narrator's mother is so stubborn that even after all her children are gone and her husband is dead, she still clings to the same way of life. As a character, she doesn't change at all in the story—she actively resists change at all times through the story. The narrator's feelings toward her seem to be founded in guilt as much as love, and his feelings toward her also seem to capture his feelings toward his loss of his community as well. The implication is that the narrator has left that community and his mother behind, and he can't go back—and he feels the loss.

But the narrator comments that it is also hard to know that his father's body was found on November 28th, ten miles north of the wharf. The body was badly disfigured, with parts of it missing, and the boots are missing too. Around his wrists he still has the brass chains, and his hair is full of seaweed.

The gruesome image of the narrator's father's body ends the story on a grim note. The disfigurement of the corpse reflects all the ways that the father suffered physically and mentally for his job as a fisherman and for his traditional lifestyle. The fact that he has chains around his wrists suggests that he is still chained to his work—even in death, as the sea begins to claim what remains of his body. The narrator describes knowing about his father's death as "hard." Earlier in the story he viewed his father's sacrifice to work the boat instead of doing as he wanted as a simple good to be admired. The narrator doesn't view his father's sacrifice of his life to free him—the narrator—from the boat as similarly purely noble. The loss of his father is hard, and it's not clear if to the narrator it was worth the cost—though it's also not clear if being sentenced to a life on the boat, as his father was, would have been worth it either. The story ends with a sense of the "rock and a hard place" nature of changing times, and of the tragedy inherent of trying to navigate those powerful historical forces. The story itself, though, functions as a kind of counterweight to the loss the narrator experiences. The story preserves his youth, his community, his mother, and his father in a way that his father's Gaelic songs preserved that long-lost path—the story is itself a kind of boat keeping afloat a lost past on changing tides.

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