**ALISTAIR MACLEOD - THE BOAT**  
*"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."*  
  
**ELEMENTS:**  
  
**Characters:**  
- Son (narrator)  
- Mother; described as "my mother was of the sea" (3); son's first memory of her was of being alone with her while his father was on the boat  
- Father; son's first memory of him was of his big rubber boots, the smell of the sea on him, and that he appeared very powerful  
- Daughters/Sisters  
- Uncle (helps on boat)  
- Tourists who came to town and went on the boat  
  
**Setting:**  
The story takes place in a small fishing town, where the harbour seems to be the heart of the village, as almost all the inhabitants' lives are centered around the fishing season. Much of the story takes place inside the narrator's house, within the house, the setting is primarily the father's bedroom—described as being "disruptive chaos"—and the kitchen—described as "shared by all of us...the buffer zone". The "buffer zone" seems to be neutral territory, which gives the fathers room a certain "man cave" feeling, like he needs his space because he has sacrificed so much time working for his family; "the single room that was my father's" (3); this is a place where he can surround himself with the life he couldn’t have. A large portion of the story also takes place on the boat, which is an important place as it is how the father (and the son, later on) makes the family's living, and how the family is able to carry on their tradition.  
  
**Style/Devices:**  
Foreshadowing: When the father tells the son to remember what he said, after the son promises to fish with him for as long as he lives, this foreshadows the father's death, as the father wants the son to listen to what he really said, with emphasis on the "for as long as he lived" part.  
Allusion: - The tourists compare the father to Ernest Hemingway, who wrote “The Old Man and the Sea”, which is essentially the topic of this story. He is also described as "almost did look like one of those unshaven, taken-in-Cuba pictures of Hemingway" (7), after they sent the father a picture of him  
<http://elorawritersfestival.blogspot.ca/2011/04/earnest-hemingway-in-cuba-circa-1937.html>  
- The uncle is compared to Tashtego, a hunter in Moby Dick. This provides readers with more insight into the character of the uncle, giving him an air of power and strength.  
- The mother is said to remind the narrator if Eustacia Vye, a character in Thomas Hardy's "The Return of the Native" who wanted to escape her life for something else. This causes readers to wonder if the mother wanted to do something different with her life too, and felt bound by tradition as much as her husband felt bound by her.  
  
**Theme:**   
The two main themes of this story seem to be obligation and sacrifice, which do go hand in hand, because often when someone is obligated to do something, they have to sacrifice something that they wanted for themselves. Another theme is tradition.  
Obligation:  
See "conflict"  
- "'I am not telling you to do anything,' he said softly, 'only asking you.'" The father says this to the son in reference to his going back to school; this almost make the decision even harder for the son now that his father had specified that he was asking, not telling. Now the son doesn't have an obligation, but does feel that he has an obligation to make his father happy.  
- The father kept his other clothing—that which wasn't worn for fishing—separate, describing it as uncomfortable, but he doesn't keep his work clothes nicely either. This symbolizes how he doesn’t really love either parts of his life, and is torn between what he wants and what he’s “obligated” to do.  
Sacrifice:  
- It is possible that the father killed himself so that the son’s promise to “fish with him for as long as he lived” wouldn’t hold true anymore; perhaps the father sacrificed his life so that the son could go to university rather than stay with him.   
- The son feels that he has to stay with his family and fish because he’s the last child in their family, the only boy, and all his older siblings have left.  
- The father uses his room to live for a brief time the life he wished he would have had, that he sacrificed to provide for his family through the tradition of fishing.  
- “She had stopped sleeping in it after I was born” (4) while referring to his father's bed insinuates that his mother and father no longer have the desire to be together but perhaps they sacrificed this in order to make their life work for their children  
- His father never tans, he doesn't really seem to be built for the sea, as doesn’t know how to swim, etc., insinuating that he didn't really *want* to do this, but lives this life for his family anyway; this is emphasized by: “And I saw then, that summer, many things that I had seen all my life as if for the first time and I thought that perhaps my father had never been intended for a fisherman physically or mentally. At least not in the manner of my uncles; he had never really loved it.” (10)  
Tradition:  
- The family has been fishing in the village for many generations, and the mother really wants to keep this tradition alive; all the boats are traditionally named after the woman in the family.  
- “He threw the money he had earned on the kitchen table as he did with all his earnings but my mother refused to touch it” (6) gives the idea that the mother does not care about the money, so much as that her husband carries on the tradition of fishing.   
  
**Point of View:**  
The story is told from the son's perspective, written in first person. At the beginning, it is written in the present tense, and the rest of the story occurs in the past tense through the use of a flashback to the narrator's childhood. The benefits of this point of view include the fact that the reader can understand and sympathize with the narrator's confusion between pleasing his mother or his father.  
  
**Conflict:**  
The main conflict presented in this story involves the son being pressured by both his parents; by his father to go to university like he couldn't do himself, and by his mother to continue the family's tradition of fishing. He is obligated to help his family...to a point (his father’s death). This obligation is an excuse so that he doesn’t have to decide what he wants for himself. His obligation becomes a necessity rather than something his own will to do what is right. This happens when his father becomes ill and he is forced to pick up the slack; this problem worsens when the father dies and his uncle leaves their boat too.   
  
**Minor Conflict:**  
A minor conflict involves the father wanting to go to university and the daughters following in his footsteps by reading and getting away from the family's traditions.  
  
**Symbolism:**  
- Books—education and escapism; they allow the father (and the daughters, later on), to escape from the life they live  
- The boat—the traditional Nova Scotia way to live  
- The chain bracelet—the father's tie to the sea  
- Pictures of grandchildren—the mother's escapism  
- The father's singing—this represents how the father actually does know a lot about the sea, and obviously enjoys some aspects of it  
- The sea, the harbour—throughout the story, the sea is used as a comparison to the house, because the house and the sea are very important in their family; “still the room remained, like a rock of opposition in the sparkling waters of a clear deep harbour, opening off the kitchen where we really lived our lives, with its door always open and its contents visible to all” (4). This uses the harbour as a simile to the house, because each was so important in their lives. “As if all my sisters were of identical ages and like so many lemmings going into another sea” (8) provides another mention of the sea—and the creatures in it—being used as a symbol.  
- The father never sleep beneath the covers of the bed, as if he is not willing to commit to sleep; this symbolizes the fact that maybe he never wanted to commit to the sea, to the life that would force him to live  
- "And I stood at the tiller now...in the place and in the manner of my uncle" (11)—this symbolizes the narrator becoming an adult, taking over jobs that he didn't used to do when he was younger, but that are his responsibility now.  
- Clothing—the way the father treats different types of clothing (see theme: obligation). Also, the fact that the mother wouldn't wear the clothing her daughters bought for her, even though she liked it, as if she didn't want to indulge in something petty that wasn't helping the family; this is also how she views reading, as being pointless.  
\*The tides of change is a good metaphor for what happens in this story.  
  
**Important Quotes:**  
The following quotes were ones that seemed to be very important and influential to the story's theme:  
- “I was ashamed yet proud, young yet old and saved yet forever lost” (6). This provides a symbol to the son's constant confusion about what he should do with his life, and who's wants he should serve. This quote gives three examples of a dichotomy, as ashamed/proud, young/old and saved/lost are coupled things which one cannot have both of simultaneously, just like the narrator cannot have both his potential futures, but only one, and can only please one of his parents.  
- “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.” (9) This quote is essentially the thesis of the story; the son does not know whether to follow his father's or his mother's wishes, because he cannot choose both, and so each choice does exclude the other.  
- "One day my mother said to me, 'You have given added years to his life.'" (11). This quote is very important as it shows how the mother is valuing all that the son does for the family, and that the father is benefiting from this too. This is something that shows that in some ways, the son was able to please both his parents, however briefly, and perhaps without his realizing.  
  
**CONNECTIONS:**  
  
**Text to Text:**  
The following poem has a similar theme to "The Boat":  
  
The Road Not Taken  
  
Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,  
And sorry I could not travel both  
And be one traveler, long I stood  
And looked down one as far as I could  
To where it bent in the undergrowth;  
  
Then took the other, as just as fair,  
And having perhaps the better claim  
Because it was grassy and wanted wear,  
Though as for that the passing there  
Had worn them really about the same,  
  
And both that morning equally lay  
In leaves no step had trodden black.  
Oh, I marked the first for another day!  
Yet knowing how way leads on to way  
I doubted if I should ever come back.  
  
I shall be telling this with a sigh  
Somewhere ages and ages hence:  
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I,  
I took the one less traveled by,  
And that has made all the difference.   
Robert Frost  
  
The poem points out that there are choices to be made in life, where there is not necessarily a right or a wrong answer. However, no matter what is chosen, it will have an effect on the person who made the decision.  
What other connections can be made between “The Road Less Travelled” and the story?  
  
**Text to Self:**  
What experiences have you had which have forced you to choose between two things that you enjoy or want equally?  
What was the sum of your choice?  
How did the choice, whether right or wrong in your eyes, affect how your view on similar choices now?  
Do you find that your mother or your father has a more powerful hold on the way you make decisions as far as pleasing one or the other goes?

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