

English 521

The Boat (Echoes, pg. 261) Short Story Analysis

Directions: On a separate sheet of looseleaf in your binder or notebook, comment on each of the following elements of short fiction as they pertain to the short story “*The Boat*.”:

Part I: Complete questions #1 and #2 a) found on page 278 in *Echoes 11*.

1. The effect of books: The father loved reading and used books to escape from the dreariness of a life spent at a job he disliked but was shackled to. The daughters followed suit, learning from books about life outside their small village and eventually moving away. Although the narrator loved books and obeyed his father’s request that he continue his education, there is evidence that he loved the sea as well– he is not altogether happy in his life as a university professor, as the opening paragraphs make clear. The mother never reads, distrusting books as “a waste of time.” She resents them for what they eventually do: drawing her children away from her, into worlds that are different and distant.

2. a) The author describes his father as disorderly, unkempt, and distant. He was at times ill-tempered and abrupt with his wife. While the narrator loves the ocean and life on the boat, he knows that it is a harsh life. Competition is growing, making it ever more difficult for the families who are trying to make a living from the ocean. He is also, like his father and sisters, attracted to books and the world beyond the village. While he feels a strong duty to work on the boat with his father, he also wants to continue his education, despite the mother’s disapproval and his feelings of protectiveness toward his father.

A. Narration/ P.O.V:

i) What type of narration is used? It is written in the past or present tense?

First-person; written in past tense. It starts out in the “here and now,” followed by the narrator’s reminiscing about a time gone by.

ii) What role does the narrator play in the story?

The narrator is the youngest child and only son.

B. Setting:

i) It is often easier for Atlantic Canadians to visualize MacLeod’s settings because of the element of familiarity. Describe as many details about the setting as you can.

ii) How is the setting connected to the conflict?

-The setting is a small fishing community on Cape Breton Island- Port Hawkesbury, around the middle of the 20th century (1940s)

-Traditional, rural community. Fishing is the cornerstone of this community, so when it starts to decline, and new generations lack an interest to maintain these traditions for economic and practical reasons, naturally, a conflict is at stake.

A great quote from the story that describes the setting is as follows:

“I learned first about our house, which was one of about fifty that marched around the horseshoe of our harbour and the wharf that was its heart. Some of them were so close to the water that during a storm the sea spray splashed against their windows while others were built farther along the beach, as was the case with ours. The houses and their people, like those of the neighbouring towns and villages, were the result of Ireland's discontent and Scotland's Highland Clearances and America's War of Independence. Impulsive, emotional Catholic Celts who could not bear to live with England and shrewd, determined Protestant Puritans who, in the years after 1776, could not bear to live without.” (263)

C. Conflict/ Resolution:

i) Is the conflict internal or external? What type is it? (ie. Human vs. ?)

ii) Is it resolved? Explain.

It seems that each of the characters faces his/her own conflict. Most notably, perhaps, is the narrator's INTERNAL conflict, human vs, self: he is still torn by a conflict of values- "It is not an easy thing to know that your mother looks upon the sea with love and on you with bitterness because the one is so constant and the other so untrue...but neither is it easy to know that your father was found on November twenty-eight, ten miles to the north and wedged between two boulders at the base of the rock-strewn cliffs where he had been hurled and slammed so many times." (p. 277)

The story ends with discovery of father's body- son had vowed he would fish with him as long as his father lived- father wanted him to have a better life- one that an education would provide- so he took his own life to ensure his son would not endure the hardships he had, and would not be chained to a place and a job he did not love. Resolved?: yes.

D. Characters:

i) In your opinion, who is the protagonist? Describe what we know about him/her.

The central character is the boys father, a fisherman who has never really liked the fishing lifestyle and who clearly would have preferred to get an education. Many times it is pointed out that he values education. For example, his room is described as being full of books. However, he never had the chance to pursue this dream. He would like for his son to get an education and not have to live the dangerous and harsh lifestyle he does- the lifestyle that ends up killing him.

ii) i) In your opinion, who is the antagonist? Describe what we know about him/her.

The mother is arguable the antagonist. She does not share the same feeling about education and escaping from the fishing world that the father does. She is stern and conservative in that she wants everything to remain the same, and therefore struggles to isolate both herself and her family from the 'outside' societies.

The "sea" itself could also be argued as the antagonist. It is, after all, at the root of all the conflicts. In this case, it would be external; human vs. nature.

E. Theme:

i) Create a theme statement for the story.

Traditions can sometimes stand in the way of dreams and aspirations.

F. Style:

i) Comment on the diction/syntax in the story.

Most sentences are average to long and very complex- no short, choppy sentences or dialogue. The writing is very rich in descriptive, sensory detail (imagery) and contains a lot of figurative language:

Personification- cigarettes- "caused the snuffing out of their lives" "The boat in our lives... she was registered..." p.262

Metaphor- the boat, the tourists, the books, etc

Simile- "whiskers had continued to grow in death, like the grass on graves..."

G. _____ Opinion:

i) Which ELEMENT in your opinion had the most impact on the story?

Setting- traditions of the Maritimes

Characters- Parents and narrator

ii) Do you think the narrator is content with his decision to move to the mid-west to pursue a career based on higher education? Provide support for your answer.

No: Narrator feels tremendous guilt- mother disappointed in him because he has not continued the family tradition of fishing- father committed suicide because he did not want his son to do something he believed would not be beneficial to his son- knew it was a hard life and competition is growing, and it is becoming increasingly difficult for families to make a living from the sea.
