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The Duality of Symbols in MacLeod's *The Boat*:

A Symbolic Analysis of Boat, Book, and Sea

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Abstract: Alistair MacLeod's *The Boat* employs a rich symbolic framework to explore the profound tension between tradition and change. This paper analyzes the inherent duality within the story's three central symbols: the boat, the book, and the sea. First, the boat functions both as a supportive foundation for the family's livelihood and cultural continuity, and as a perpetual constraint that entraps individuals in a predetermined fate. Second, the book acts as a symbol with two potentialities for escape: one representing idealized intellectual freedom and broader horizons, and the other constituting an illusory escapism that breeds dissatisfaction with one's reality. Finally, the sea serves as both a daily nurturer that provides identity and sustenance to the community, and an ultimate destroyer. Through this symbolic analysis, the paper concludes that it is the inherent contradiction and complexity of these symbols that collectively forge the core tragedy of the story, illuminating the irreconcilable conflicts between obligation, freedom, and memory.

Keywords: Alistair MacLeod; *The Boat*; Duality; Symbols

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题目：麦克劳德《船》中象征作用的二元性：船、书与海的象征性分析

摘要：阿利斯泰尔·麦克劳德的短篇小说《船》通过丰富的象征体系，深刻探讨了传统与变革之间的张力。本文分析了故事中三个核心象征物：船、书与海与其内在的二元性。首先，船既是维系家庭生计与文化遗产的根基，亦是个体命运中无法挣脱的永恒枷锁，束缚着人对生活的自主选择。其次，书象征着两种逃离的可能：一方面，它代表理想化的智性自由与更广阔的世界；另一方面，它也构成一种虚幻的逃避，滋生人与现实之间的疏离与不满。最后，海既是日常的养育者，为沿海社群提供身份认同与生存资料，又是最终的毁灭性力量，吞噬希望与生命。通过这一象征性解读，本文指出，正是这些象征本身内在的矛盾性与复杂性，共同铸就了故事的核心悲剧，揭示了义务、自由与记忆之间难以调和的冲突。

关键词：阿利斯泰尔·麦克劳德；《船》；二元性；象征

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Introduction

Alistair MacLeod (1936-2014) is a preeminent Canadian author, renowned for his meticulously crafted and critically acclaimed body of work, which is predominantly set in his family home of Cape Breton, Nova Scotia. Despite a relatively small literary output, comprising one novel, *No Great Mischief* (1999), and two short story collections, MacLeod secures a lasting legacy in Canadian literature. In 2000, MacLeod was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada. In 2001, his novel *No Great Mischief* was named the greatest Canadian book of all time and won the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award. To date, MacLeod's works have been translated into seventeen languages and attracted wide attention from scholars and critics. MacLeod is born in Canada, his emotional heartland is Cape Breton, his cultural heritage is Scottish, and his works belong to the world.

Alistair MacLeod's "The Boat" is a foundational masterpiece in Canadian literature, a haunting elegy that navigates the irreconcilable tension between heritage and self-invention. Told through the reflective and guilt-tinged memory of a university professor, the story centers on the profound schism within his Nova Scotian fishing family. This domestic conflict is personified by his mother, an unwavering guardian of their rugged maritime tradition, and his father, a fisherman whose soul yearns for the intellectual liberation found in the world of books,

which is a dream he sacrifices for duty but which he bequeaths upon his son.

Despite MacLeod's sparse literary output, this work remains a towering critical achievement, renowned for its psychological depth and resonant symbolism. The boat itself is a potent emblem of both sustenance and entrapment, while the relentless Atlantic Ocean represents a force of both identity and economic necessity. Through his lyrical, rhythmic prose, MacLeod transforms a specific regional story into a universal and timeless exploration of the inescapable bonds of memory, the guilt of departure, and the profound costs buried beneath the choices that define their lives.

In China, the earliest Chinese rendering of MacLeod's fiction appeared in *World Literature* (2001), where Beijia Lin published three stories: "Vision" (1976), "Autumn" (1976) and "The Tuning of Perfection" (1986). In 2008, Youping Yan translated "As Birds Bring Forth the Sun" (1986) and, in an accompanying note, drew attention to the author's powerful nostalgia. Zhi Zhang added three more tales: "The Island" (1976), "The Lost Salt Gift of Blood" (1976) and "Return" (2000) in 2013. Gradually, story by story, a corpus of MacLeod's short stories was constituted, providing a sustained conduit for his entry into the Chinese literary field. MacLeod, however, still failed to step into the popular spotlight and remained a marginal name. Not until 2015, when *The Lost Salt Gift of Blood* was issued as part of a short classic series, did his Cape Breton gradually become familiar to Chinese readers.

International scholarship shows that critics of MacLeod's short fiction follow the two paths used in novel studies. Some zoom in on a single story and mine it for overlooked details. Others range across several tales from one or more collections in order to trace connections and offer broader readings. Beyond these approaches, commentary on MacLeod can be grouped into three broad strands. First come theoretically oriented close readings that examine the stories' rich meanings, such as MacLeod's sustained attention to the harsh realities of Cape Breton. As Nicholson (1986, p.197) observes that this is an entrusted landscape and its inhabitants are merely its inheritors and caretakers. Second come critics who situate MacLeod within the context of maritime and regional literature and who explore his engagement with cultural identity. Creelman (1999, p.89), for example, argues that the story's use of "blood" reveals an author willing to risk himself in order to consolidate that identity. Finally, a third group of scholars, uninterested in placing MacLeod in any cultural pigeonhole, focus on narrative technique, examining genre, narration, imagery, or temporality, as Christian Riegel (1998) does in his formal analyses.

This paper is structured to systematically analyze the complex symbolism in *The Boat*, arguing that the central images of the boat, the book, and the sea are fundamentally dualistic, embodying both sustainable and destructive forces that reflect the core tensions between tradition and transformation. The analysis will first explore the boat itself, examining its dual role as both a supportive foundation for the family's livelihood and identity, and as a vessel of

perpetual constraint that dictates a life of inescapable duty and ultimate sacrifice. The second section will then deconstruct the symbol of the boat, investigating its dual potential to represent both an idealized form of intellectual freedom and a potentially illusory escapism that fosters dissatisfaction with one's prescribed reality. Finally, the paper will delve into the profound duality of the sea, portraying it as a daily nurturer that provides purpose and sustenance, while simultaneously underscoring its role as an ultimate destroyer of life and dreams. The conclusion will synthesize these analyses, positing that it is through the intricate and often contradictory interplay of these symbols that MacLeod most powerfully articulates the tragic complexities of filial duty, the cost of escape, and the enduring power of memory.

1. Boat: Dual Aspects of Tradition

In *The Boat*, the boat is far more than a simple tool of livelihood; it is a complex and contradictory symbol, embodying the weight of family history tradition as well as the individual's relationship with a seemingly predetermined fate. It functions simultaneously as a supportive foundation that underpins existence and a perpetual constraint that confines lives.

As the titular object of the story, the boat is key to understanding everything that happens to the narrator and his family. Above all, the boat functions as the foundational structure upon which both the family and the broader community's existence is built. It is not merely a vessel for fishing, but the primary source of economic sustenance and a powerful symbol of identity and continuity. The narrator's father depends on it daily, as the boat enables the seasonal cycle of labor, such as spring lobsters, summer mackerel, later cod and haddock. This economic reliance is not presented abstractly but deeply embedded in the physical and emotional rhythms of family life. The boat's absence or delay would disrupt not only the flow of income but the very structure of daily existence. Therefore, the boat operates as the lifeblood of the household, sustaining not just the body but the social fabric of the family unit.

Moreover, the boat is deeply embedded in the family's lineage and cultural heritage. It is registered under the name "Jenny Lynn" (MacLeod, 1991, p. 696), the mother's maiden name, which is a detail that the narrator regards as part of a broader tradition: "most of the boats that berthed at the wharf bore the names of some female member of their owner's household" (MacLeod, 1991, p. 696). This naming practice transforms the boat into a living heirloom, which is a symbolic extension of the maternal line that links the family's past, present, and future. The narrator reflects that the boat is another link or connection in the inheritance of family tradition, suggesting that it is not merely a possession but a vessel of memory, identity, and inter-generational continuity. In this way, the boat becomes a floating monument to the family's matriarchal roots, reinforcing the role of women as both literal and symbolic anchors in a male-dominated seafaring culture.

Furthermore, the boat structures not only the family's economic and symbolic life but also

its daily rhythms, sensory experiences, and linguistic practices. The narrator's earliest memories are saturated with the physical presence of the boat and its associated imagery: the sight of his father's gigantic rubber boots, the taste of salt on his father's cheek, and the persistent scent of the salt that permeates the boat. These sensory impressions form the basis of the narrator's childhood consciousness, illustrating how the boat mediates his understanding of home, family, and self. The mother's life is similarly oriented around the boat: she is constantly repairing clothes that are torn in the boat, preparing food to be eaten in the boat or looking for the boat through kitchen window. After the narrator's first trip on the boat, the family's questions about the boat repeatedly invoke the vessel as the focal point of concern and identity. This repetitive linguistic pattern underscores the boat's centrality in the family's shared vocabulary and emotional life. Ultimately, the boat is not just an object of labor or a symbol of heritage, but the organizing principle of the family's world, the axis around which their lives revolve.

Paradoxically, while the boat serves as the material and symbolic foundation of the family's survival, it also functions as a predetermined and inescapable life path, one that demands physical sacrifice and severely limits individual freedom. For the father, the boat represents a fate that he may never have truly desired but been nonetheless compelled to accept. The narrator, reflecting on the time he spends working with his father, comes to the realization that perhaps his father has never intended to become a fisherman neither physically nor psychologically or to spend his whole life in the boat. Moreover, the boat "emphasizes the continuing presence of the father's influence on the narrator, while he is forever physically absent" (Riegel, 1998, p. 236). Later, the father's retreat into the chaotic and book-filled bedroom stands in stark contrast to the disciplined hardship of life on the boat, suggesting an inner life at odds with the physical demands of his profession. The books, scattered and ash-stained, represent a world of intellectual possibility that remains forever out of reach, highlighting the unbridgeable gap between his lived reality and his unfulfilled aspirations.

For the daughters, the boat and the traditional world which the boat represents become the exact catalyst for their escape. The mother, attempting to confine them to conventional female roles centered on domestic labor, forbids them from playing near the wharf. However, their exposure to the books in their father's room introduces them to alternative ways of life beyond the confines of the household. As a result, they gradually become increasingly restless and discontented, finding themselves slowly losing patience and genuine enthusiasm for the quiet, repetitive domestic tasks such as darning old socks and baking bread day after day, eventually leaving home to work as summer waitresses and marrying young men they meet in the process. For them, the boat symbolizes the restricted, repetitive life they must reject in order to claim autonomy and pursue broader horizons.

For the narrator, however, the boat becomes an inherited destiny. Confronted with the situation of people's "social activities are increasingly detached from their immediate locale"

(Yang, 2025, p. 336), refusal of inheritance is sometimes a choice. As the only son, he is expected to continue the family's maritime tradition. His agonizing decision between continuing his education and remaining on the boat culminates in the emotional promise to his father: to stay with him as long as he lives and to fish the sea together. This vow, though rooted in love and duty, ultimately binds him to a life he might otherwise have chosen to leave. Specifically, this short story focuses on how the modern world threatens individual identity and explores the relationship between the self and the larger world amid recurring predicaments. The boat, in this context, becomes a generational yoke, a symbol of continuity that demands personal sacrifice. It is not merely a vessel for labor, but a powerful force that shapes identity, constrains choice, and enforces the cyclical nature of family fate.

2. Book: Dual Potentials of Escape

In *The Boat*, the book symbolizes a dimension starkly opposed to the traditional world represented by the sea and the fishing vessel. It serves simultaneously as a tool of enlightenment, offering a path to a wider world and intellectual freedom for those constrained by tradition, and as a potential agent of alienation, fostering an illusory escape that can lead to a profound rupture from one's family and community.

Practically, every object the narrator's father owns carries symbolic weight: his rubber boots show his endurance, and his radio links him to the wider world while letting him shut out his wife's domestic voice. Yet the most lasting symbol is his big collection of books. Actually, the existence of the book and the lack of education "are paramount factors in determining not so much the characters' choices but rather working as antagonists in the shaping of their lives" (Paci, 2016, p. 33). At the same time, the shelf holds literary classics, revealing a thoughtful, cerebral side. More importantly, books function as epistemic bridges that transport the marginalized subject beyond the spatial and symbolic confines of the fishing village. For the father, the printed page operates as a heterotopic refuge: the bedroom, "now so filled with books as to be almost Dickensian" (Macleod, 1991, p. 705), is the only site in the house where disorder is tolerated because it signifies an alternative order of knowledge. Here, stretched on the unmade bed, he reads by a goose-necked lamp while cigarettes smolder and the radio offer its steady murmur. The scene condenses into a single image in which there is a kind of tension between manual labor and mental longing.

The father's strong interest in books proves that he is intelligent and curious, as well as that he has academic potential that he is not capable of fulfilling because he has to take up fishing and inherit his family's tradition. His deep interest in books combined with the narrator's comment that his father has once wished to go to college implies that the father himself recognizes and regrets this thwarted potential.

The narrator's sisters are treated as one unit, and he follows their mirror-image lives with

curiosity. All red-haired and pretty, they first help their mother at home. Once they reach their early teens they find their father's paperbacks, lose interest in housework, and upset their mother. Reading and chatting with their father lead them to summer jobs at a tourist restaurant in town, where they meet well-off, city-smart young men, one after another, marry and move away. For the sisters, reading is a catalytic event that converts domestic immobility into geographic mobility. As time goes by, the sisters begin to feel a growing sense of unease and dissatisfaction, eventually letting go of her former interest in the ordinary household tasks of darning socks and baking bread, the two activities their mother repeatedly invokes as synecdoche for feminine duty. Literacy thus mediates a double estrangement: from the gendered labor of reproduction and from the coastal enclave itself. Their eventual migration to Boston, to Montreal, and to New York with the young men they meet in the summer, is not merely an escape but a translation of textual cosmopolitanism into literal cosmopolitan mobility, confirming that books provide the initial map of elsewhere.

The fate of the sisters in the story is a bit of a paradox: they form a new tradition by 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 tradition. "Those living in Canada share cultural traits, but they also share a history of displacement, of migrancy" (Jody, 2013, p. 165). What is more, 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 provides allow him to achieve what his father always dreams of doing for himself but could not because of his circumstances.

The liberty that books appear to offer enters the household as a slow chemical agent, dissolving the adhesive of communal obligation. The mother perceives this corrosive capacity from the outset. Having closed her own engagement with print at the high-school door, she treats every reopened volume as a breach in the domestic dike. Her question of the role of father's books, functions less as curiosity than as moral indictment: reading hours that should be allocated to mending nets or kneading bread, and reading returns no tangible product that can be weighed, cooked, or bartered. When she discovers a daughter interested in the book and the outside world, her response is immediate and corporeal. The slap that sends the paperback to the floor is an attempt to restore the household equation in which time equals measurable output, and in which bodies, rather than books, guarantee economic survival. Years later, when the son prepares to leave for university, she repeats the same zero-sum logic, lamenting that he prefers the useless books to his parents that give him life, thereby forcing a choice between textual and biological ancestry.

Yet the most insidious cost of the book is its capacity to translate private reverie into public absence. The sisters' return visits materialize as a sequence of consumer offerings whose

semiotic charge immediately distinguishes them from the household's subsistence economy. An electric razor, glossy periodicals, and dresses manufactured for urban dining venues where lobster appears as curated cuisine rather than daily sustenance all function as souvenirs of a wage regime grounded in tourist expenditure. The mother, however, intercepts these artifacts at the threshold. By folding the garments into trunks and declining to wear them, she performs a silent act of symbolic refusal: cloth purchased through service-sector remuneration shall not contact skin still permeated by the salt of family-based labor. The gesture operates at two levels. First, it maintains a moral boundary between money earned from seasonal visitors and income generated by the extraction of marine resources, thereby preserving the household's definition of legitimate value. Second, it prevents the commodified exterior from acquiring an intimate place within domestic space, guarding the weave of local identity against threads spun in metropolitan markets. In this way an apparently sartorial decision becomes a cultural strategy, asserting continuity with inherited practices while repudiating the consumption logic that literacy has unleashed.

The deepest wound left by the book is measured in people, not pages. Because none of the girls marries a fisherman, the family line anchored to the sea stops at their generation. Each daughter instead joins households that face city streets, not tides, so future grandchildren will learn from picture books about fire trucks rather than from the storm almanac once kept by the kitchen window. The mother suffers a double absence: her grown daughters no longer sit at the table, and their children will grow up without the taste of salt in their stories. Books begin as harmless paper but end by breaking the chain that once links work, name, and place. What remains is the lasting ache of losing them forever, which does not oppose the migration of Breton Islanders to big cities, but reminds the scattered descendants not to let Breton Island be left with nothing but the piercing sea wind. Once the freedom of the page is tasted, it cannot be returned, and it keeps redirecting lives away from the cove, leaving the mother's tongue and the mother's sea as distant anecdotes told at city dinners.

The narrator stands as both witness and residue of book's double ledger. While his sisters translate borrowed plots into permanent absence, he returns in memory to the kitchen where salt still clings to the walls and the almanac still records storms no one else will name. The books that once offer him escape but now compel him to speak for the continuity that his siblings abandon. His adult voice, shaped by lecture halls far from the cove, becomes a fragile bridge between the mother's evaporating world and the book that cannot be shut. He is aware that every syllable both preserves and distances the life that the books first teach him to imagine leaving.

3. Sea: Dual Sides of Fate

In *The Boat*, the sea is the omnipresent force that governs the existence of the characters, embodying a profound and inescapable duality. It is not merely a setting but an active agent that

both sustains and threatens, acting as both the daily nurturer and the ultimate destroyer. This dual nature encapsulates the central conflict of the story, representing the very essence of the family's fate: a life that is simultaneously provided for and imperiled by the same source.

Primarily, the sea is portrayed as the fundamental provider, the undeniable economic and biological lifeline for the family and the entire coastal community. It functions as the ultimate "breadwinner", dictating the daily routine, shaping identity, and ensuring continuity across generations. The narrator's childhood memories are deeply saturated with the tangible gifts of the sea, which form the unshakable basis of their survival. This sensory link, smelling the air and the nets just as his father does, powerfully connects the sea to heritage and cyclical renewal. The scent is not one of danger but of work, sustenance, and tradition stretching back generations.

One obvious example is that "the lobster beds off the Cape Breton coast are still very rich and now, from May to July, their offerings are packed in crates of ice, and thundered by the gigantic transport trucks, day and night, through New Glasgow, Amherst, Saint John and Bangor and Portland and into Boston where they are tossed still living into boiling pots of water, their final home" (MacLeod, 1991, p. 707). It presents the sea as a daily nurturer through both diction and syntactic movement. The phrase "their offerings" personifies the ocean floor as a generous altar which voluntarily presents its creatures, while the adverbial "still very rich" assures the reader that this fertility is continuous, not accidental. By specifying the calendar rhythm of "from May to July", MacLeod converts the maritime harvest into a predictable seasonal pulse, underscoring the sea's reliability as a maternal source. The subsequent catalog of inland cities: New Glasgow, Amherst, Saint John, Bangor, Boston, maps the terrestrial route that the ocean's gift travels, thereby extending the nurturant function from local wharf to regional economy. Therefore, the passage dramatizes the sea's daily provision: it nourishes the family's table, finances their boat, and structures communal time, all while maintaining an inexhaustible richness that earns the text's quietly reverent label "offerings".

In this role, the sea embodies a familiar and nurturing force. It offers its resources generously, defining a way of life that, while demanding, is fundamentally sustaining. The rhythm of the seasons: like the spring lobsters, the summer mackerel, and later the cod and haddock, is dictated by the sea's provisions, structuring time itself around its abundance. This cyclical harvest makes the sea the giver of purpose and the anchor of a communal identity built upon the shared labor of harvesting its depth. Moreover, the narrator's mother, who is profound of the sea, further personifies this deep, unwavering connection, her life and energy entirely oriented around its demands and gifts. Therefore, the sea is not merely a background element but the active, nurturing nucleus of their world.

Conversely, and with equal power, the sea is depicted as an agent of erosion, loss, and death. Most of MacLeod's characters' lives are "critically vulnerable to if not determined by environmental conditions such as climate, the sea, the region's depleting coal resources" (Berces,

1991, p. 115). For this reason, its nurturing nature is inextricably linked to its capacity for violence, operating as a fundamental force that does not merely give but also takes away. This destructive aspect operates on both a physical and a psychological level, defining the tragic dimensions of the characters' lives. Physically, the sea is the ultimate arbiter of mortality. It claims lives, as seen in the fate of the father, whose body is ultimately consumed by the very element that has sustained him for so long. The narrator's recollection of his father's corpse is brutally matter-of-fact, highlighting the sea's indifference. "His hands were shredded ribbons as were his feet which had lost their boots to the suction of the sea" (MacLeod, 1991, p. 708). This visceral imagery reinforces that the sea's destructive power is not a distant threat but a constant, grim reality that completes its cycle from provider to reclaimer. The father's death at sea underscores the precariousness of an existence tied to its whims. Psychologically, the sea acts as a slow, grinding force that erodes the human spirit. The narrator observes the sea's relentless impact on his father, noting how it ages and weathers him. This simile powerfully conveys how the sea does not just kill. It performs a gradual consumption, draining vitality and individuality from those who depend on it, leaving them worn down by its demands. Furthermore, the mother's entire worldview is shaped by her knowledge of the sea's treachery. Her fear of its destructive potential translates into a rigid insistence on tradition and a fierce opposition to any form of escape, making her a force of entrapment within the home, mirroring the sea's confines. Her life, dedicated to mending clothes torn by the boat and preparing food for it, is a testament to a defensive stance against the sea's ever-present threat.

Ultimately, the sea is the story's final and indifferent arbitrator of fate. It is the dark and unpredictable force that enforces the story's tragic conclusion, demonstrating that the same waters that offer life can, without warning or malice, become a vast and indifferent grave. This profound duality makes the narrator's escape not just a matter of leaving a profession, but a profound confrontation with a fundamental and powerful element of his own destiny and heritage. His physical departure is an attempt to sever ties with a force whose destructive capacity is as immense as its capacity to sustain.

Conclusion

In *The Boat*, Alistair MacLeod constructs an inescapable existential dilemma through three core symbols: the boat, the book, and the sea. The narrator's seemingly autonomous choice is predetermined by these intertwined symbolic forces. Choosing the book entails bearing the guilt of abandoning tradition, while remaining with the boat demands profound self-sacrifice. Ultimately, all is engulfed by the sea, which is a force that both nurtures and destroys. Through this precise symbolic architecture, MacLeod transcends regional narrative to unveil the profound tragedy inherent in the individual's pursuit of freedom against the overpowering currents of cultural tradition and historical fate. Macleod exposes freedom itself as a cultural product whose

parameters are set by the very traditions it seeks to outgrow. The sea's final engulfment is therefore not mere natural disaster; it is the symbolic confirmation that every human path, whether anchored to the wharf or directed toward the campus quadrangle, must sooner or later reckon with the same engulfing vastness. In revealing this inevitability, *The Boat* becomes an elegy not only for a maritime way of life but for the modern conviction that individual choice can break the historical continuum. The short story closes on the sober recognition that while books and boats propose different directions, they share a common horizon where personal desire and collective destiny collapse into the same relentless tide.

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