

Elegy and Mourning in Alistair MacLeod's "The Boat"

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Readers of Alistair MacLeod have identified "an abiding sense of loss and regret. . . . [and] a pervasive sense of sadness" (Nicholson 98) in the writing, as well as the "proximity of most characters to . . . the final elemental darkness threatening to reduce all hopes to one uniform and meaningless conclusion" (Berces 116). MacLeod's short stories are pervasively somber in that they depict a culture that is in a gradual loss or erosion of value. Colin Nicholson considers MacLeod to be "involved in a kind of historical elegizing, playing a pibroch in his own behalf" (99). The "Scottish-Canadian genealogical explorations" (Gittings 93) that largely comprise MacLeod's short stories, as both laments of a lost past and as fictional chronicles of that past, have the function of memorializing the personal—and familial—as well as social history of the narrators and their ancestors. Many of MacLeod's narrators can be considered to be mourning, and the stories that they tell are an activity of that process; that is, telling stories has the function of helping a narrator memorialize the dead and thus partially work through feelings of grief. MacLeod's stories, however, have not received sustained analysis in terms of mourning, or in terms of their elegiac elements, beyond initial thematic identification. In this paper I will explore the narrator's engagement in "The Boat" from the collection *The Lost Salt Gift of Blood* with this memorializing by delineating the structural elements that allow this story to be identified as a work of mourning, and by exploring the narrator's engagement with processes of mourning—processes that force him to examine his fundamental sense of self.

In a useful conception, Freud defines mourning as work—both in the sense of an action and as an object—a dual connotation that the German word for mourning, *Trauerarbeit*, supports even more forcefully than the English term does. Thus, mourning is considered as work that needs completing and, in some cases, mourning work can be the result of the action, such as, for example, a literary representation. The textual form that is most readily identified as a "work" of mourning is the elegy. The notion that

mourning itself is work implies active involvement by the individual in the processes of grief. While elegy is most commonly associated with poetic forms, it is, as one theorist points out, "a literary genre that has become increasingly marked by blurred boundaries" (Smythe 4); and fiction that incorporates elements of elegy is termed fiction-elegy. Formally, fiction-elegy is "fundamentally trans-generic in that it brackets other genres in their modal form while retaining elegy as the generic 'dominant'" (6). The dominant genre, then, elegy "is a verbal presentation or staging of emotion wherein the detached speaker engages the audience with the intent of achieving some form of cathartic consolation." In tragedy, for example, where mourning is central, "it is the structure of the text that makes catharsis possible" (3). As a "staged performance of grief-work structure is [also] partially functional" (3) in forms that incorporate elegy. Peter Sacks points out that "the objective of an elegy is . . . to displace the urgent psychological currents of its work of mourning into the apparently more placid, authentically organized currents of language" (14). Forms that incorporate elements of elegy channel the emotional responses to death into a structure (the creative work) that can more effectively deal with the loss, and that offers a means for working through the loss. Thus, the work of mourning involves the active ordering and structuring of information into a narrative construction that will enable—or, at least attempt—consolation.

As a work of mourning, "The Boat" is structured around the narrator's grief for the loss of his father. The narrator's means of coping with his emotional state is by telling a story that explores his relationship with his father, mother and ancestral tradition; these relationships are fraught with conflict and ambivalence, for the narrator documents a period in his life where he must choose between upholding old beliefs and forging his own path in life. In this sense, the story he tells is effectively a coming of age tale—stories that document a period frequently associated with troubled identity and competing life choices. His story, however, is additionally complicated by grief, as the narrator's coming of age experience is fundamentally altered by the death of the father. In the present of the text the narrator has made clear career and lifestyle choices (far away from the traditional world of his youth), but he has not come to terms with the significance of his father's passing, and he still feels a fundamental unease with his life.

The narrator's situation parallels definitions of mourning where mourning is described as an action where the individual, in response to a death or serious loss, "calls into question the meaningfulness and reality of the social frameworks in which they participate" (Mellor 13). The result of the serious loss is "the shattering of a sense of ontological security." Ontological security, according to Anthony Giddens, refers to an individual's "sense of order and continuity in relation to events in which they participate

in their day-to-day lives" (cited by Mellor 12). The opening of the story chronicles the contemporary life of the narrator, establishes the fundamental unease that he feels in his daily life, and comments on his continual questioning of his chosen career and lifestyle. "The Boat" begins with the moment of "terrible fear" (105) that awakens the narrator, and the confusion he feels as he comes to an awareness of his surroundings. The link between the narrator's feelings of being "foolishly alone" and the absence of his father is underscored here. The narrator describes his frequent early morning awakenings where he faces "the terrible fear that I have overslept . . . [and] that my father is waiting for me" (105) in a manner that suggests an action that has become reflexive after years and years of constant early mornings to go fishing with his father and the other men: "There are times when I am half out of bed and fumbling for socks and mumbling for words before I realize that I am foolishly alone, that no one waits at the base of the stairs and no boat rides restlessly in the waters of the pier" (105).

In the second paragraph of the story the narrator comments on the preoccupation with death that accompanies these moments, further keying the importance of his father's death to the storytelling. As he states, "I am afraid to be alone with death" which necessitates his rising from bed and departure for an all-night restaurant in search of company. The narrator uses images that are laden with connotations of death to depict his predicament, mirroring his emotional state: "At such times only the gray corpses on the overflowing ashtray beside my bed bear witness to the extinction of the latest spark and silently await the crushing out of the most recent of their fellows" (105). As the narrator moves into the story of his past, he juxtaposes his current unease with the elements of his past that trouble him. As the day dawns, he focuses on "the countless things one must worry about when he teaches at a great Midwestern university" (106), contextualizing his occupation and geographical location—both far removed from the world of his childhood and adolescence. With daylight comes the certainty that the past is far removed from the present, that it is "only shadows and echoes . . . the cuttings from an old movie made in the black and white of long ago," and with daylight comes "all kinds of comforting reality to prove" that the past is long gone. Despite being figments of his imagination, however, the "call and the voices and the shapes and the boat" had the semblance of reality for the narrator during those early morning hours. Thus, the narrator's assertion that the "day will go by as have all the days of the past ten years" (106) is in part an empty conclusion, offering no resolution to his malaise, for the narrator implies that there have been many similar days, and no consolation or resolution has been attained—therefore, more days like this one can be expected. The role of the storytelling is to fill in the "shadows and echoes" that haunt him, to revisit the old movie in an attempt to come to grips with it.

The opening and closing paragraphs of "The Boat" frame the narrator's story. While the narrator's story literally takes up the most space in the text, the frame emphasizes the thematic ordering of the story and provides context. The beginning of "The Boat" emphasizes the continuing presence of the father's influence on the narrator, while he is forever physically absent, and the ending of the story contextualizes the absence by figuring the father's corpse. The figuration of the corpse—by being written—is an attempt at bringing presence to the father; although in the attempt the paradoxical nature of the signifying process is highlighted, for the body can never literally be recovered. It can, however, be figured textually which results in narrative signification. The feelings of emotional instability caused by grief at the beginning of the story, and the figuration of the corpse at the end serve as focalizers for the storytelling. The images of the discovery of his father's corpse are harrowing in their graphic description:

[It is not] easy to know that your father was found on November twenty-eighth, 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. His hands were shredded as were his feet which had lost their boots to the suction of the sea, like the grass on graves, upon the purple, bloated mass that was his face. There was not much left of my father, physically, as he lay there with the brass chains on his wrists and the seaweed on his hair. (125)

The images of the father provide insight into the significance of the narrator's fear and emotion in the opening lines, for the story ends with the graphic description of the discovery of the father's corpse. And it is this image that informs and frames the emotional unease that the narrator is feeling at the opening, for the description of the corpse points to several key thematics of the story, and of the narrator's life: the father's feelings of otherness with the sea, and the narrator's conflicted feelings about tradition. The images reflect the ravages of the sea on bodies, what here literally is a body mutilated by sea, but also function metaphorically to describe the effects that sea, boat, and father, have had on the narrator's conflicted identity—what could be termed a mutilated identity.

Read retrospectively, the images from the closing of the story combine with the opening unease to focalize the narrative and provide context for the narrator's storytelling. The father's mutilated body signifies the narrator's own sense of mutilation in respect to his past and his sense of self.

His father, in death, represents the narrator's epiphanic realization earlier in the summer that his father's occupation was foreign to him, and that he would have chosen otherwise if possible. The father's alienation from his livelihood is complete—both physical and emotional:

My father did not tan—he never tanned—because of his reddish complexion, and the salt water irritated his skin as it had for sixty years. He burned and reburned over and over again and his lips cracked so that they bled when he smiled, and his arms, especially the left, still broke out into oozing salt-water boils. . . . The chafe-preventing bracelets of brass linked chain that all men wore about their wrists in early spring were his the full season and he shaved but painfully once a week. (121)

The bodily rejection of the occupation is manifested as fear in the son for he realizes that this may be his fate as well.

In the present the narrator is feeling conflicted about his dereliction of the family tradition, on his mother's side, of fishing and working on the ocean. This has led to his estrangement from his mother. The exploration of his father's death, and the son's involvement in that summer's activities, becomes an exploration of the narrator's conflicted identity in relation to the roles that he performs in life. As David Stevens notes, "his insistence on reinvoking the past and its implicit sense of guilt suggests that he has left behind only the physical aspects . . . not the psychological ones" (267). He "teaches at a great Midwestern university"—as far away from the ocean as one can get on this continent, and figuratively, in a profession that prioritizes mental activity over physical work. He in effect rejects all that his mother understands and respects in life: a sense of nicely ordered history and tradition embodied in honest hard work on the sea. The mother is comfortable in the "immaculate order" of the house, but does not understand "the disruptive chaos of the single room that was my father's" (108), for the father's room represents a link to the world outside the traditional life that gives meaning to the mother: "My mother despised the room and all it stood for and she had stopped sleeping in it after I was born. She despised disorder in rooms and in houses and in hours and in lives, and she had not read a book since high school" (111). She loses each of her daughters to this link with the outside world, and, eventually, her son: "One by one they went. My mother had each of her daughters for fifteen years, then lost them for two and finally forever. None married a fisherman" (117). And so, the narrator's exploration of his father's death necessarily involves an examination of his mother's feelings of rejection towards him, and of all that she stands for. It is an explicit rejection of tradition and the limiting force that tradition can have on a society and culture, but it is also a lament for the (inevitable) loss of tradition in the face of modernization and change.

While the mother holds out hope that her son may yet return to fish on "the grounds to which the *Jenny Lynn* once went" (124); and the community, still strong in its conservative belief in tradition, upholds that sense of hope, for the grounds "remain untouched and unfished as they have for the last ten years" (124). For indeed, the grounds represent a long line of

family tradition: "For if there are no signposts on the sea in storm there are certain ones in calm and the lobster bottoms were distributed in calm before any of us can remember and the grounds my father fished were those his father fished before him and there were others before and before and before" (124). These grounds, by the mother and community, "are held to be sacred," further underscoring the sense that the narrator is rejecting not only tradition, but the notion of a natural symbiotic relationship between sea and humans.

The opening of the story focuses on the reflexive awakening of the narrator and his temporal confusion. Near the end of the story, however, this scene is deconstructed by the narrator and the effect of that awakening is shifted. The scene is narrated as one of a number of fleeting moments in the son's short fishing career—a point that is clearly elided early in the story. The narrator, in this section of the story, "joined my father then for the trawling season" (120) part of the way through the summer, as he had to finish school first. The description of the early mornings in the narrator's story itself belies the scene as he describes it in the opening paragraph, for in the opening he thinks of his father waiting for him while the narrator oversleeps. But in the description in the textual past, his father does not wait for him; rather, it is the fishermen from the community who provide the impetus for the narrator's work:

The men would come tramping by our house at 4:00 a.m. and we would join them and walk with them to the wharf and be on our way before the sun rose out of the ocean where it seemed to spend the night. If I was not up they would toss pebbles to my window and I would be embarrassed and tumble downstairs to where my father lay fully clothed atop his bed. . . . He would make no attempt to wake me himself. (120)

The narrator remembers that his father had little interest or passion for the work he performed. One of the key memories he has of his father is of his epiphanic awareness that his father is not doing what he would like in life: "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 either physically or mentally" (121). Caught between this realization, and his mother's approbation of his choice to quit school to fish, the narrator romanticizes the father's life—projecting his own sentiments onto his father's situation: "I thought it was very much braver to spend a life doing what you really do not want rather than selfishly following forever your own dreams and inclinations" (122). With this realization he decides to give up his "silly shallow selfish dream" of completing high school to enter into tradition and fish. With the death of his father, however, he abandons fishing for a life of education and books. As the narrator's story attests, the conflict

between his mother's desires, and his father's wishes, as well as his own uncertainty, has remained for many years after this period of his life. The continuing grief that the narrator feels in relation to the loss of his father is in large part due to these unresolved conflicts.

The early morning awakening of the narrator is paralleled a second time in the story by the description of the mother, who also awakens when the fishing day begins—but for other reasons: "She lies awake in the early morning's darkness when the rubber boots of the men scrunch upon the gravel as they pass beside her house on their way down to the wharf" (19). The narrator's story, ostensibly, came out of the mourning for his father, but the description of his mother lying awake in the mornings underscores the importance of the sense of loss that the narrator feels at having given up his traditional role. For indeed, it is the mother—even in the present—who lies awake at the bottom of the stairs waiting for the son to get up to fish. And part of the narrator's sense of loss comes from his mother's rejection of him: "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 has been so constant and the other so untrue" (19).

The narrator of "The Boat" engages in memorializing his personal and familial ancestry out of a need to work through deep feelings of loss that haunt his emotions years after their occurrence. The processes of memorializing, however, are fraught with complexity, for the narrator shows ambivalence in his relation to the cultural and social traditions that he is attempting to memorialize; in effect, the narrator is involved in an elemental crisis of his ontological status—a crisis that he realizes is not necessarily consolable for he finds no resolution to his conflicted identity. John J. Clayton argues that "all expressive art is an attempt to end discords in its creator, to feed some hunger or cope with an experience that feels overwhelming, feels intensely dissonant—to express that experience and so gain control. . . . [Art] is the act of coping" (3). MacLeod's narrator, however, seems more concomitant in his uneasy relationship with his past to what George Steiner has called the "failure of consolation" (Schleifer 2), what he terms the "crises of word and meaning" (cited by Schleifer 1) that "have disrupted traditional Western apprehensions of the possibilities of transcendental significance in experience" (Schleifer 2). The narrator, responding to feelings of grief, attempts to articulate loss through narrative with the hope that the process will prove fruitful. At the heart of this story lies the narrator's attempts at ordering his past into a text that will provide needed consolation; but his failure to do so comments on his unease at marking a past that will unalteringly signify his present and future. In effect, he presents a fear of closure—the final word on his ontological status—but he still is compelled to, in fact must, respond to the emotions that overcome him. The elusiveness of consolation in recent narratives of mourning is

expressed by Smythe: for these writers "consolation," if it can be called that, is acquired in the reader's recognition of form, and in the apprehension of the meaning of loss in its relationship to presence" (10). And thus, the narrator's mourning is enacted not as a process requiring, or even offering the possibility of, closure or resolution, but as a process that enables the exploration of loss, the past, and identity.

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