His clothes were dripping as he came in. The water was streaming down his cheeks, a little reddened by the wind and the rain. He shook back his long hair and threw his jacket on the bed post, then abruptly remembering, he looked through the pockets for a box of matches. The house was in partial darkness, for, though the evening was not dark, the daylight was hooded by thick yellow curtains which were drawn across the width of the window. He shivered slightly as he lit the match: it had been a cold, dismal afternoon in the fields. The weather was extraordinarily bad for the time of year and gathering the sheaves into stacks was both monotonous and uncomfortable. He held the match cupped within his hands to warm them and to light his way to the box where he kept the peats. The flickering light showed a handsome face. The

Metaphor: interior or house is dull and dark, like the son’s life

Pathetic fallacy – the setting mirrors the character’s emotions

Suggests unpleasant and repetitive work
The flickering light showed a handsome face. The forehead was smooth and tanned, the nose thin though not incisive, the mouth curved and petulant, and the chin small and round. It was a good-looking face, though it was a face which had something childish about it. The childishness could be seen by a closer look, a look into the wide blue eyes which were rather stolid and netted by little red lines which divided them up like a graph. These eyes were deep and unquestioning as a child’s, but they gave an unaccountable impression that they could be as dangerous and irresponsible as a child’s. As the match flickered and went out with an apologetic cough, he cursed weakly and searched his pockets. Then he remembered he had left the box on the table, reached out for it impatiently, and lit another match. This he carried over to the lamp which lay on the table. The light clung to the wick, and he put the clean globe gently inside the brackets. When the lamp was lit, it showed a moderately sized kitchen, the walls of which were...
Setting: a croft – poor and uncared for

‘Bitter’ is repeated often to describe the mother.

Comparison to ‘insurance man’ is disturbing – there is something false and selfish about the smile

‘witch’ suggests mother is evil and tormented

Contrast: innocent yet dangerous
immediately became still and dangerous again. The clock
struck five wheezingly and, at the first chime, the woman woke
up. She started as she saw the figure crouched over the fire and
then subsided: ‘It’s only you.’ There was relief in the voice, but
there was a curious hint of contempt or acceptance. He still sat
staring into the fire and answered dully: ‘Yes, it’s only me!’ He
couldn’t be said to speak the words: they fell away from him as
sometimes happens when one is in a deep reverie where every
question is met by its answer almost instinctively.

‘Well, what’s the matter with you?’ she snapped pettishly,
‘sitting there moping with the tea to be made. I sometimes
don’t know why we christened you John’ – with a sigh. ‘My
father was never like you. He was a man who knew his business.’

‘All right, all right,’ he said despairingly. ‘Can’t you get a new
record for your gramophone. I’ve heard all that before,’ as if he
were conscious of the inadequacy of this familiar retort – he
added: ‘hundreds of times.’ But she wasn’t to be stopped.
More cruelty: destroying her son’s confidence

Narrator tells us she accepts no responsibility for him

Suggests that even making tea is difficult for him

Makes mother sound like a snake

Imagery connected to arrows – suggests her words cause him pain and literally wound him.
‘Have you stacked all the sheaves now?’ she was asking. He swung round on his eddying island as if he had seen that the seas were relenting, drawing back. At such moments he became deferential.

‘Yes,’ he said joyously. ‘I’ve stacked them all. And I’ve done it all alone too. I did think Roddy Mason would help. But he doesn’t seem to have much use for me now. He’s gone the way the rest of the boys go. They all take a job. Then they get together and laugh at me.’ His weakness was pitiful: his childish blue eyes brimmed with tears. Into the grimace by which he sought to tauten his face, he put a murderous determination. But though the lines of his face were hard, the eyes had no steadiness; the last dominance had long faded and lost itself in the little red lines which crossed and recrossed like a graph.

Comparison suggests sea-sickness and confusion

Still wants to please her

Reinforces idea of him as a child

Reminds us that he is not a child, but a grown man who is being driven into a fury by the mother

Graph image is repeated
‘Of course Roddy doesn’t want to help you. He’s got enough to do as it is. Anyway he’s got his day’s work to do and you haven’t.’

‘It isn’t my fault I haven’t.’ He spoke wearily. The old interminable argument was beginning again: he always made fresh attacks but as often retired defeated. He stood up suddenly and paced about the room as if he wanted to overawe her with his untidy hair, his thick jersey, and long wellingtons.

‘You know well enough,’ he shouted, ‘why I haven’t my day’s work. It’s because you’ve been in bed there for ten years now. Do you want me to take a job? I’ll take a job tomorrow... if you’ll only say!’ He was making the same eternal argument and the same eternal concession: ‘If you’ll only say.’ And all the time he knew she would never say, and she knew that he would never take any action.

Suggests that the same argument is played out every day of their lives

The son finally takes action, but contained within it is the idea that things will never change
Contrast: the son is not strong enough to put up with the mother’s attacks

‘animal’ suggests he lacks understanding / intelligence

Narrator explains son’s inner thoughts

Lengthy comparison of cowardice to a dangerous animal or monster: personification. Contains an idea of the fear of the dark – linked to childhood (son is child-like)
Repeated motif of bitterness

Constant cruel negativity about her son

Everyday thing (fire) linked to idea of damnation: son’s life is a torture

The son looks after his mother attentively, even though she does not admit it
‘Why didn’t you wash this tray? Can’t you see it’s all dirty round the edges?’ He stood there stolidly for a moment, not listening, watching her frail, white-clad body, and her spiteful, bitter face. He ate little but drank three cups of tea. Then he took out a packet of cigarettes and lit one nervously and self-consciously.

‘Cigarettes again? Don’t you know that there’s very little money coming into the house. If it weren’t for your father’s pension where would you be . . . you who’ve never done a day’s work in your life? Answer me!’ she screamed. ‘Why are you sitting there like a dummy, you silly fool!’ He took no notice, but puffed at his cigarette. There was a terrible weariness in his eyes. Nowadays he seldom felt his body tired; it was always his mind. This voice of hers, these pettinesses of hers, were always attacking his mind, burrowing beneath it, till he felt himself in a dark cave from which there was never to be any escape.

Extreme ungratefulness makes reader dislike mother intensely

Repetition of ‘bitter’

Mother insults son – screams at him – dramatic climax

Son does not react. Metaphor of ‘dark cave’ explains his mental state: detached from reality
Sometimes words came to him to silence her, but between the words leaving his mind and leaving his lips they had changed; they had lost their import, their impact, and their usefulness.

His mind now seemed gradually to be clearing up, and he was beginning to judge his own actions and hers. Everything was clearing up: it was one of his moments. He turned round on his chair from a sudden impulse and looked at her intensely. He had done this very often before, had tried to cow her into submission: but she had always laughed at him. Now however he was looking at her as if he had never seen her before. Her mouth was open and there were little crumbs upon her lower lip. Her face had sharpened itself into a birdlike quickness: she seemed to be pecking at the bread with a sharp beak in the same way as she pecked cruelly at his defences. He found himself considering her as if she were some kind of animal. Detachedly he thought: how can this thing make my life a hell for me?

List of three things his words cannot achieve – the son is unable to break out of his situation

Glaring at the mother usually achieves nothing...

... but now his perception of her has changed

Son now sees mother as animal or thing, not person – suggests he will attack her

Repetition of ‘hell’
What is she anyway? She’s been ill for ten years: that doesn’t excuse her. She’s breaking me up so that even if she dies I won’t be any good for anyone. But what if she’s pretending? What if there is nothing wrong with her? At this a rage shook him so great that he flung his half-consumed cigarette in the direction of the fire in an abrupt, savage gesture. Out of the silence he heard a bus roaring past the window, splashing over the puddles. That would be the boys going to the town to enjoy themselves. He shivered inside his loneliness and then rage took hold of him again. How he hated her! This time his gaze concentrated itself on her scraggy neck, rising like a hen’s out of her plain white nightgown. He watched her chin wagging up and down: it was stained with jam and flecked with one or two crumbs. His sense of loneliness closed round him, so that he felt as if he were on a boat on the limitless ocean, just as his house was on a limitless moorland. There was a calm, unspeaking silence, while the rain beat like a benediction on the roof. He walked over to the bed, took the tray from her as she held it out to him. He had gone in answer to words which he hadn’t heard, so hedged was he in his own thoughts.

‘Remember to clean the tray tomorrow,’ she said. He walked back with the tray fighting back the anger that swept over him.

Series of rhetorical questions: indicates son’s internal turmoil.

Action, but not the action we expect – anti-climax?

Animal image combined with fragility of neck (‘scraggy’) – raises tension.

Ugliness of mother.

Mental state will not allow him to act. ‘Ocean’ imagery linked to landscape (‘moorland’) – no one can help him.

Pathetic fallacy.
Dramatic climax: internal. Son does not act – frustrating for reader.

Bitterness: defining characteristic of the Mother and Son’s relationship. Similarity between them (fault of the mother).

Story closes with reference to weather – rain = ambiguous. Sadness? Solace in nature?

The mother does not find out how close she came to death.