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<p><b>‘जिनिअस’</b> या सहामयि प्रसिध्द झालेली मते मुख्य संपादक, संपादक मंडळ व सल्लागार मंडळास मान्य असतीलच असे नाही. या नियतकालिकात प्रसिध्द करण्यात आलेली लेखकाची मते ही त्याची वैयक्तिक मते आहेत. तसेच शोध निबंधाची जबाबदारी स्वतः लेखकावर राहिल.</p> <p>हे नियत कालिक मालक, मुद्रक, प्रकाशक विनय शंकरराव हातोले यांनी अजिंठा कॉम्प्युटर अँड प्रिंटर्स, जयसिंगपूर, विद्यापीठ गेट, औरंगाबाद येथे मुद्रित व प्रकाशित केले.</p>
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## Critical Analysis: “Riders to the Sea” by J.M. Synge

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### Abstract

‘**Riders to the Sea**’, Synge’s first play, is an astonishingly mature work of art whether we regard it as literature or as drama (a distinction Synge liked to make). It is a masterpiece enjoyed equally in the library or in the theatre. Like all great works of art it defies definition, seeming inexhaustible in meaning and complexity. The plot is simplicity itself: Maurya an old woman hopes that the body of her son, Michael, will be washed ashore. He was drowned nine days earlier. Already Maurya has lost her husband, her father-in-law and four other sons to the sea. When the play opens her two daughters have been given clothes from the body of a drowned man. Before they can discover whether the clothes are Michaels’, Bartley, the youngest son enters preparing for a journey by sea to the Galway horse fair. Despite the entreaties of his mother not to go he sets off. The daughters identify the clothes of the drowned man as Michael’s and Bartley is knocked off his horse and drowned in the Sea. Maurya, in the last mourns the death of her family and invokes mercy on all the living and the dead. This paper tries to explain how this play represents the tragedy of living upon the Aran Islands and how a family copes with it in their everyday life.

**Keywords:** One act play- tragedy – Aran Islands- Gaelic culture – Pagan beliefs

### Introduction

Although Synge’s notebooks and letters tell us little about the origin and composition of ‘**Riders to the Sea**’. It was written; along with ‘**The Shadow of the Glen**’ during the summer of 1902. Synge composed first Riders.<sup>01</sup> He mentioned it in his letter written to his friend and stated, “By the way ‘Riders’ was written before ‘**The Shadow of the Glen**’, though ‘**The Shadow of the Glen**’ was the first played.”<sup>02</sup>

The central incident of the play and many of the motifs used in it are drawn from Synge’s experiences on the Aran Islands. So to understand the inwardness of the play, we must try to

reconstruct imaginatively. Something of the life of the Islanders as Synge's knew it at the turn of the century. **The Aran Islands** form a small group of three, Inishmore, Inishmaan, and Inisher, set far out in the Atlantic between the coasts of Galway and Clare. O Flaherty's film, '**Man of Aran**' gave a good picture of the setting and of the life. Such life was taken as the background of the play by Synge.

### **Riders to the Sea**

The story on which the play is based and from which the play derives its title is told in part four of the Aran Islands. Synge secures from his audience a willing suspension of disbelief because he roots his theme of multiple death and terrifying prescience in a meticulous faithfulness to the details of everyday peasant life, while simultaneously investing those details with archetypal associations that have validity for an audience seemingly far removed from any experience of peasant life. An incident recorded in part three of the Aran Islands helped Synge ground his 'ghost story'. 'Now a man has been washed ashore in Donegal with one pompously on him and a striped shirt with a purse in one of the pockets, and a box for tobacco.'<sup>03</sup> This becomes the substance of the sender subplot relating to Michael's death and by investing it with realistic detail, such as the bundle of clothes as Michael's, Synge masks the difficulties inherent in dramatizing the supernatural. In his handling of this subplot, and in having Nora and Cathleen voice their doubts (and ours) about the reality of Maurya's vision, Synge skillfully presents an appearance of objectivity and reasonableness that always our tendency to disbelieve.

Maurya : I seen Michael himself.

Cathleen : (speaking Softly) you did not mother ....

This art by which Synge makes Nora and Cathleen surrender ultimately to Maurya's vision reveals how Synge moves between the literal reality of Aran life and a more elevated and richer reality of archetype and symbol. The island surrounded by the implacable death dealing sea is also the arena of man's struggle in a hostile and meaningless universe.

This simultaneity of Synge's art in this respect is clearly suggested by the props which dominate the set: nets, a spinning – wheel, new boards, a halter hanging on the wall. These are everyday Aran household items which persuade us that the action is naturalistic, but as the play unfolds, they become charged with enormous Symbolic Voltage. Synge's demand and care for the right properties reveals a great deal about the interaction of the principles in the early years of the Irish theater, as they collaborated, they maintained to add dignity to Ireland.<sup>04</sup>

When the play opens Cathleen finishes kneading bread and begins to spin. The stage directions reinforce unobtrusively that extraordinary sense of inevitability in the play on which nearly all critics comment.<sup>05</sup>

The abrupt stopping of the wheel intimates clearly that the clothes belong to Michael and that he is dead. The rope that the pig with the black feet was eating is used to lead a horse, but a halter or rope is also associated with death by hanging. The mood of the play which is suggested by the props and the opening stage directions is intensified also by the many references to storm, which intimate crisis and disorder. The play is dominated by the sound of the sea and allusions to the elements and the points of the compass. The two women discuss the impending storm as they prepare to identify the clothes of the drowned man. The coming of the old woman, Maurya force the two women to postpone identifying the clothes. It increases our desire to be convinced of what we are already believed. The action now centers on Maurya's to dissuade Bartley from going to the Galway fair. Maurya believes that young priest will stop him surely, but Nora informs that the priest will not stop Bartley because he is convinced God will not take her last son. The dramatic irony here adumbrates a dominant and recurring theme in Synge's work – the opposition of Christian belief and older, pagan beliefs. It is clearly intimated that the young priest is powerless in the face of the eternal and malignant sea. The drowning of the last surviving son is bitter testimony to the immeasurable cruelty of the God of the Aran islanders.

The tragic inevitability which marks the opening of the play extends to the scene between Maurya and Bartley. Bartley acts like a man driven to carry out a predestined task and Maurya's arguments seems curiously inadequate, even obtuse. She asks him not to take the rope which will be needed for Michael's funeral and she points out that it is needed for the task of burying his brother. Her concern seems primarily directed at observing the properties due to the dead. Only in her third speech to Bartley she speaks of his possible death and not of Michael's actual death.

'If it was a hundred horses, or a thousand horses you had it, what is the price of a thousand horses against a son where there is one son only?'

Her speech shows the insecurity of his life as well as their life as a whole. Michael's death is in her mind, but she can also see the next death in home that is Bartley's death in near future. So, she wants to stop him at any cost.

The inability of mother and son to communicate – their enmity even – is further emphasized by the fact that Maurya refuses to give Bartley her blessings even though she knows he is going to his death. Similarly, it is suggested that she, the mother, withholds from Bartley

the bread that might have sustained him. Nora reproaches Maurya by saying that ‘you’re taking away the turf from the cake’, and sends her off to give Bartley the blessings she has withheld. Is it possible for any mother to withhold her blessings? Here, Maurya does and naturally it is against her inner will. Does Synge want to show that we human beings are mere toys in the hands of Nature? Can’t we change the destiny?

The daughters now identify the clothes as belonging to the dead Michael because of the four dropped stitches. In this scene Synge works skillfully on two levels. Although the primary interest in the play is directed to Bartley and his fate. Michael dominates the play, and the various clues that lead to the establishment of his death help to establish Bartley’s death. Maurya enters keening because she claims to have seen ‘the fear fullest thing’- her son Michael riding the grey horse. The peripeteia or reversal which Synge has managed here in apparent contradiction to the literal truth- is linked to a stunning recognition (anagnorisis) which is that Bartley will die. The effect Synge achieves here in relating peripeteia and recognition is among the most theatrical of his entire work.

The sequence leading up to Bartley’s death contains many clues about the meaning of the play. Maurya, carrying Michael’s stick, sets out for the spring to meet Bartley. And Bartley wearing Michael’s clothes blesses his mother, but she is unable to offer him the life- sustaining bread or return his blessing. She is able to say only, ‘I could say nothing’. It is then that she sees Michael arrayed in new clothes riding the grey pony and she recognizes that her last son must die. She makes herself sure that, ‘Bartley will be lost now’, Cathleen, when hears Michael’s ghostly apparition, immediately accepts the truth of Maurya’s vision. The grey pony seems an analogue of the allegorical ‘Pale horse’ of the Apocalypse.<sup>06</sup> It is to the non-literal reality of the grey pony that the three women respond and we can be sure that this was the effect Synge intended. For example, the ship which comes to bear Bartley away is a very real ship which is mentioned three times and always with reference to ‘the green head’. But the fact that Synge is very specific about the ship’s location does not preclude suggestions that this is a death ship come for Bartley. The Aran Islands tells of two fairy ships one of which sought to lure a man to his death at a ‘green point’ and one which is associated with ‘a great flock of birds on the water and they all black.’<sup>07</sup> Synge has woven a complex nexus of images like nets, halter, wheel, boards, and ships, horses that suggest entrapment, futility and death.

In the Aran Islands most of the many stories about horses appeal to the supernatural. Even the horses of ‘**The Riders to the Sea**’ suggest at once scenes from the actual life of the

Aran people while intimating through myth and symbol more universal dimensions. The spectral and apocalyptic rider on the grey pony that Maurya saw has associations with the ghostly riders in the folk stories recounted in the Aran Islands. And especially on the pale horse, on the literal and mythic levels, represents death. So that Maurya cried out in fear when she saw him Michael is one of the company of the dead who comes seeking out his brother to join the fairy company just as the fairies stole the young women in the story in the Aran Islands. We might go further and argue that for some mysterious reason Michael murders his brother. It is the ghostly Michael who is the killer of his younger brother – for reasons that lie deep in the Iris psychology.<sup>08</sup> This fratricide is the first of those complex psychological and familial conflicts that Synge explored in his plays. So, the **‘Riders of the Sea’** is dominated by a corpse.

### Conclusion

In the ‘Poetics’ Aristotle states that the terrible and pitiful incidents proper to tragedy arise when suffering is caused by people whose relationship implies affection, as when a brother kills a brother, a son his mother. In **‘Riders to the Sea’**, Michael – a brother and Maurya a mother both are involved knowingly or unknowingly in the death of Bartley. The remainder of the play, following Maurya’s account of her meeting with Bartley and Michael, is an extended threnody or dirge in which Synge heightens the ritualistic character of the drama and combines narration with enactment that is the procession of mourners with the corpse of Bartley. Past and present merge as in a dream- sequence while the mother chants the name of her dead ‘men children’ (Bourgeois’s phrase)<sup>09</sup> The enactment of one man’s death becomes an image of every man’s death.

It is one of the finest speeches in the play, Maurya, mater dolorosa, remembers Bartley as a baby, while the man Bartley now reduced to ‘a thing’ is borne in. Like a malevolent animal, the sea tracks its victim even into the heart of the family past, present and the future coalesce to give a quality of timelessness and dream which is intensified by the sense of ordered ritual that prevails. The Keening women take their prescribed place in a frieze of ceremonial grief, the daughters kneel at one end of the table on which the corpse is laid. The mother at the head of the table, is like a priestess about to celebrate the last rites as she begins her last great speech, ‘They’re all gone now and there isn’t anything more the sea can do to me.....’

Since the meaning of Maurya’s final speeches is central to an understanding of **‘Riders to the Sea’**, it is helpful, if we follow more clearly the genera of the play. **‘Riders to the Sea’** is unique in dramatic history for it is the only one act play that can be described as tragedy in the fullest sense. At first sight the plot would seem to be too simple, the characterization too faintly sketched, to enable the playwright to build up and communicate the typical momentum, the high

seriousness, proper the form. From the outset the protagonists seem to be enclosed in an inflexible circle of destiny, in which the prayers and consolations of Christianity are powerless; the resolution of the play rests upon a resignation that is more stoic than Christian, a sense of relief that no further loss is possible, when humanity confronts the ultimate of death:

‘No man at all can be living for ever, and we must be satisfied.’<sup>10</sup>

The ‘good’ in **‘Riders to the Sea’** is death itself. The play expresses fear and apprehension about living and dying, but never about a death which is attended by proper observance. Maurya’s last speeches confirm this notion of death as good. Michael, angel of death wears ‘fine’ clothes and ‘new shoes’ the coffin for Bartley will be ‘a good coffin out of the white boards’. The substance of those speeches should also be taken at face value; they speak of something won; rather than something lost; they are not speeches of despair or acceptance or resignation, but speeches of acquiescence even justification. Birth is hard, life trial to be endured, death deliverance.

No doubt, it is a tragedy. Suffering in human life and in literature is due to several reasons. A person may be himself responsible for his misfortunes on account of some flaw in his own character. Another person may have to undergo suffering on account of the social conditions which prevail around him and of which he becomes the victim. Another man suffers for no apparent reason, and in such a case we attribute his suffering to a mysterious power to which we give the name fate or destiny. **‘Riders to the Sea’** is such an example of a tragedy in which surrounding and fate play very important role. Maurya, her only death husband and sons, her only one alive son Bartley her daughters Cathleen and Nora all are the Victims of their surrounding that is sea.

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