

Riders To The Sea

By: J.M. Synge

(M.A. Semester II Paper II Drama II)

Created By: Dr. Suchitra Gupta, Professor Govt. V.Y.T.P.G.Autonomous
College, Durg

J.M. Synge as a Dramatist

- J.M. Synge (1871-1909), a leading figure in the Irish literary renaissance, portrayed the harsh rural conditions of the Aran Islands with sophisticated craftsmanship.
- Synge went to the Aran Islands at the behest of W.B. Yeats (Yeats felt Synge could make an original contribution to Anglo-Irish literature if he studied and described them in his writings)
- (Although he came from a middle-class Protestant background) Synge's writings are mainly concerned with the world of the Roman Catholic Peasants of rural Ireland.
- The plays of Synge are unique in that he made a harmonious blend of humour, romanticism, realism, poetry and drama. He understood the importance of instilling poetry into modern drama which realism was threaten ing to make flat. Synge found laughter in the lives of vagrants, tinkers and beggars.
- Synge was a great lover of nature. (In his plays nature is not a mere background to man's moods and actions; it takes an important part in the action and shapes the destiny of human beings)
- Synge did not write his plays to serve any political, social or moral ends. (The Irish land agitation, the rise of Sinn Fein and other social, political issue do not find any place in his dramas) He only dealt with the life of the simple peasants of Western Ireland, their joys and sorrows.

- Synge was an object realist. When drawing his characters he depended on his observations of real life. (His characters are real human beings of flesh and blood)
- Synge did not write his play in verse but his prose has a rhythm and harmony which gives it the effect of poetry. (Synge listened to the peasants and fisher folk in Aran Islands and reproduced this Anglo-Irish dialect in all its richness. He absorbed the local idiom which was full of similies and presented it in all its beauty and harmony)
- In his short span of literary career he wrote various types of plays—tragedy, comedy, farcical comedy and folk comedy.

His major works are:-

1. The Shadow of the Glenn- 1903
2. Riders to the Sea- 1904
3. The Well of the Saints- 1905
4. The Play boy of the Western World- 1907
5. The Tinker's Wedding- 1908

Background of the Play

'Riders to the Sea' is a play written by Irish Literary Renaissance playwright John Millington Synge. A one act tragedy, the play is set in the Aran Islands and like all Synge's plays it is noted for capturing the poetic dialogue of rural Ireland. The plot is based not on the traditional conflict of human wills but on the hopeless struggle of people against the impersonal but relentless cruelty of the sea.

'Riders to the Sea' is written in the Hiberno English dialect of the Aran Islands. Synge's use of the native Irish language is part of the Irish Literary Revival, a period when Irish literature looked to encourage pride and nationalism in Ireland.

Several scenes of the play are inspired from his stay at Aran Islands.

These include the identifying of the drowned man by his clothing and the account of a man's ghost been seen riding a horse.

Important Characters of the Play

- Maurya : Grief-stricken widow and mother of eight children
 - Cathleen : Maurya's elder daughter
 - Nora : Maurya's younger daughter
 - Bartley : Maurya's youngest and only living son
-

Plot Synopsis

The short play 'Riders to the Sea' is about the calamities inflicted by the sea on a family of fisherman on an island to the West of Ireland.

Maurya has lost her father-in-law, her husband and five of her sons to the sea. As the play begins Nora and Cathleen receive word from the priest that a body which may be their brother Michael, has washed up on shore in Donegal. The girls hide this from their mother due to their concern for her safety. They also do not get a chance to tell this news to Bartley. Bartley is planning to sail to Connemara to sell a horse and ignores Maurya's pleas to stay. He leaves gracefully. Maurya predicts that by night fall she will have no living son. In her anxiety Maurya forgets to bless her departing son. Maurya goes after Bartley to bless him. Meanwhile Nora and Cathleen confirm from the clothing that the corpse is of Michael. Maurya returns home claiming to see the ghost of Michael riding behind Bartley and begins lamenting the loss of the men in her family to the sea, after which some men bring the corpse of Bartley. He has fallen of his horse into the sea and drowned.

'Riders to the Sea' as a Tragedy

'Riders to the Sea', a play written by J.M. Synge is a representation of human suffering having great tragic appeal. The tragic theme of *Riders to the Sea* revolves round Maurya. The tragedy of the play, though simple and straight-forward, is sublime and universal having a penetrating appeal. The play brings out the utter tragedy of humanity, pitted against the violent force of a cold, unrelenting, natural element—the sea. The sea assumes here almost the role of fate and becomes instrumental to human suffering and death.

'Riders to the Sea' is indeed a great tragedy in its representation of human suffering and cathartic appeal. There are two views on the tragic vision of life. One – man is the play thing of inscrutable power called fate and another that character is responsible for tragic end. 'Riders to the Sea' is a suitable combination of Greek and Shakespearean tragedies.

The sea is a force of Nature over which nobody has any control. Opposing the sea and opposed by the sea, are the members of the community living on the island which serves as the setting for this play. The human opponents of the sea in the play are Bartley, his sisters, Cathleen and Nora, and his mother Maurya.

'Riders to the Sea' is more a tragedy of fate than a tragedy of character. The characters confront their downfall without any tragic flaw. Fate is the controlling element and one can change either its decree or direction. Hence life means nothing but tragedy and unconditional surrender to the merciless fate.

The inhabitants of Aran islands are dependent totally on the sea in order to support their family. They have been going to the sea from

generation to generation fully aware of the impending danger. The cruel sea has devoured countless lives, but the struggle of the islanders never ceases as there are no other options for earning living. Thus here the sea assumes almost the role of the fate and becomes instrumental to human suffering and death. It is rather the nemesis of human life that comes down to shatter human hopes and happiness.

'Riders to the Sea' is full of grim instances wherein we are informed that Maurya has already lost six loved ones to the ocean, her father-in-law, her husband and four of her sons. Now her only surviving sons are Michael and the youngest Bartley. Unfortunately Michael has been missing for nine days and discovery of his dead body ultimately confirmed his demise. All these loved ones went to the sea being fully aware of the possible danger and faced what the destiny predetermined. They can't be liable for their decision as it was an inevitable part of their living. Eventually, Bartley also walks in the same path and decides to go to the main land in order to sell horses at the cattle fair. He too, was conscious of the dangers but was determined to stick to his decision. In the end Bartley is thrown by his horse and swept out into sea, where he drowns. Thus Bartley falls a victim to fate without having any tragic flaw. Maurya's closing remark confirms that none can fight against fate. So she admits the power of fate and surrenders to fate saying "What more can we want than that? No man at all can be living for ever and we must be satisfied."

To conclude 'Riders to the Sea' is a great tragedy having Greek dramatic qualities. Through the cruelty of fate Synge universalised the theme of human suffering and loss. Synge has effectively employed the method of forewarning the audience of the disaster through hints and forebodings and so it is artistically satisfying that the news of Bartley's

death does not come very abruptly. Thus Synge caters to the traditional precept that the final event in the drama should have a probability and should not come as a sudden shock which would be detrimental to artistic pleasure.

Themes of 'Riders to the Sea'

The Power of the Sea is the central theme of the play. The sea is right outside the cottage door, volatile, unpredictable and implacable. It has taken almost all of Maurya's male family members and is poised to take the last living son Bartley as well. It defies rationality and God; the Holy Water is a pitiful reflection of it.

Different characters relate to the sea in different ways. For Nora and Cathleen, the sea only matters in terms of losing family members; for Maurya, it is the greatest enemy, for the young priest, it is of little importance; for Bartley, it is dangerous but is a way of life. The potency of the sea in this play is Synge's meditation on the power of nature and of suffering.

Catholicism Vs. Paganism: - The play is steeped in traditional Irish Catholicism: there are priests, blessings, Holy Water etc. However, traditional Catholicism rests, somewhat uneasily side-by-side with more pagan religious elements. Maurya doesn't heed the priest's empty, naïve platitudes so much as she looks to the stars and other natural phenomenon for warnings and signs. She knows more about the island than he does; she is skeptical of his outsider status and he is never even seen within the boundaries of the cottage. She heeds the power of Sea much more than she heeds God. It is only at the end of the text when her battle with the sea is over that she can peacefully submerge herself back into the rituals and rites of her catholic faith.

Tradition Vs. Modernity: - Maurya represents tradition, her children and the young priest on the other hand, represent modernity. Maurya knows everything about the island and its particulars; her religion is more Paganistic than Catholic, her views stubbornly held. She does not

embrace new ideas of comforting Catholicism or commerce. She only knows her small life, and when she is wary to even leave her cottage.

Maurya's children, in contrast, deride her "senseless" behaviour and rigid adherence to her beliefs. They look beyond the island to the wider world; the young priest is the connection between these two spaces. The tensions between the two worlds is most evident through the characters of Bartley, who understands that the sea is dangerous but feels its pull because he is a man and must secure a livelihood for his family. At the end of the play, it is clear that modernity will ultimately dominate, but it is also clear that Maurya's world view is still important and has much to teach the younger generation.

Gender Roles: - The characters in the text rigidly adhere to the prescribed gender roles of their time and place. Nora is relatively voiceless, while Cathleen is the keeper of the hearth. Maurya is the quintessential Mother, caring only for her family and the extension of its lineage. She worries, chastises and mourns. Her sons are her main focus. She is not at all comforted by the fact that her daughters remain living: they are essentially useless in terms of what they can bring to the family. As the man of the family at the opening of the play, Bartley's role is clear: to provide for his family. Cathleen articulates that it is the life of a young man to be going on the sea. He is the provider and Maurya's fears that he will die are related to the problems they will face after he is gone.

Human Stoicism: - This theme is brought about by the character of Maurya who despite her intense suffering and desolation accepts her fate stoically and prays not only for her family, but also for the entire

humanity. Human beings have no choice but to accept the will of God, to accept and endure their fate stoically.

Fate:- Everyone in the community, Maurya specially, is powerless to stop death. Maurya has tried everything from catholic devotion to secular superstition, to keep death from claiming her family members, but to no avail. The sea claims all the male members of her family one by one.

To conclude 'Riders to the Sea' is a great tragedy that has taken up many issues besides building a tragic atmosphere. The play has for its theme, The Sea, Catholicism Vs Paganism, Tradition Vs Modernity, Gender Roles and Human Stoicism and the role of Fate.

Supernatural in Riders to the Sea

'Riders to the Sea' though a realistic play has touches of supernatural elements that go to heighten the tragic effect of the play. In the play, natural elements, including the sea, have supernatural qualities. The sea, which has claimed Maurya's husband and five of six sons, has a supernatural force to it. Religion is powerless to defeat it.

At the beginning of the play, Cathleen, one of the daughters, asks if the priest can stop Bartley, the one remaining son, from going to sea to sell his horse. Nora says that priest has refused to do so saying that God won't let Maurya destitute. In other words, the priest is powerless to prevent the deaths of both Michael who dies in the beginning of the play and Bartley, the son who dies at the end of the play. Instead, the sea claims both of them, and Maurya's prayers cannot defeat the power of the seemingly supernatural sea.

At the end of the play, Maurya says, "They are all gone now and there isn't anything sea can do to me." In other words by the end of the play, it is clear that the power of the supernatural that is invested in nature is more powerful than religion. Maurya has no more reason to pray, as it is obvious that the supernatural can defeat the prayers.

In large part, the whole play is about reconciling the relationship of the natural to the supernatural environment of the Aran Islands, where the sea is a constant threat to the fishermen's lives. The inhabitants must reconcile their real world lives with their beliefs in the "supernatural." In the real natural world, a drowned fisherman's body washes up on the shore and is identified by his distinct knitted sweater. In the supernatural world, he is delivered to his family by riding a pale horse, a universal symbol for death. The family, which has already lost

members to the sea, sees this tragedy as inevitable, because life itself on the Aran Islands is a battle with natural elements. The term “reconcile” indicates this acknowledgement and gives the play its poignant note.

We are presented with a world in which both natural and supernatural elements seem to coexist. The isolated island on which Maurya and her family live presents itself a perfect place where superstition and religion have a massive impact on its inhabitants, and this can be seen principally through the characters of Maurya and the way in which she sees a vision that predicts her last son’s death. A harrowing sight is witnessed by Maurya when she goes to bid farewell to her son Bartley who is going to the sea. She sees Michael dressed in new clothes following Bartley on grey pony. This vision makes Maurya certain of not only the death of Michael but also of the impending death of Bartley. This scene has another supernatural incident interwoven in it. The popular Irish folklore of *Bride dara*.

We are plunged into a world where blessings are important to avert evil and where visions are common and talked about as foreshadowing important events. Maurya’s vision of her dead son Michael with Bartley effectively shows how Bartley as well will join his brothers in being lost to the sea that will leave Maurya destitute.

The reference to the Holy Water too has supernatural impact. The Holy Water does not seem to be holy in the sense of having been blessed by a Christian priest; it seems to be a magical liquid.

There is a hint of supernaturalism in the very title of the play. Bartley is the only one to ride. The second rider is Michael’s ghost who is

seen by Maurya riding the grey pony which is running behind the red mare. Moreover the grey colour is associated with death.

To conclude, the play succeeds in arousing in us strong feelings of pity and fear that are intensified by the effective use of supernatural.

Symbolism in *Riders to the Sea*

J.M. Synge's 'Riders to the Sea' is embedded with many symbols highlighting the tragedy of the central character, Maurya. Most of the symbols are classic and typical, suggesting the universal meanings. The careful and effective use of symbolism has made the play the best tragedy by J.M. Synge.

The major symbol of the play is the sea, the source of life and at the same time the destroyer of life. The people of the Island depend upon the sea for their survival by fishing. They collect sea weeds as a source of fuel. They have to cross the sea for the purchase of the goods and also for the selling of their productions. To make coffins they have to go across the sea. The sea stands for the main source of livelihood for the Islanders, but at the same time generous sea turns out to be destroyer and life taking agent. The sea is the natural force which can be violent and fierce at times. It has taken many lives of the islanders including all the male members of Maurya's family. She is left with her two daughters without any strong support for the financial provision. The sea is out of the prediction and even out of the control of God. The islanders believe that the sea tides refers to the birth and the declining sea tides refers to the death.

The Riders are another symbol of this play. The male members of the Island are all riders. They ride to the sea for fishing and support their families in their livelihood. Their defeat with sea is the defeat of human being by the undefeated nature. Their metaphorical journey of life is one long ride to the sea.

The use of the Number Nine is another mythological symbol in the play. The number nine is used as a sign of bad luck in the play. There is

no news of Michael for 9 days. Maurya keeps weeping for her son for nine days and when Bartley dies in the sea some nine unknown women come to Maurya.

The red mare of Bartley and grey pony of Michael both stand for death. Bartley sets off to the sea riding on the red mare and never comes back again. Moreover, there seems to be some connection between the red mare ridden by Bartley and the grey pony ridden by Michael. Red colour stands for life and strength and grey colour is associated with death. The bread Maurya takes for Bartley is a symbol of life, but she cannot deliver it to him as he rides away fast. The result is Bartley is deprived of life and has to face death. The turning of empty cup mouth downwards by Maurya is another important symbol in the play. This action suggests a failure of Christian comfort at the time of the demise of all the male members and shows the theme of infinite suffering and renunciation. This symbol also reinforces the theme of tragedy of old Maurya.

The white boards which remain onscreen for the duration of the play, symbolize the impending death of Bartley. Maurya refers to these boards often which make clear that death weighs constantly on the minds of the characters. Furthermore, the ambiguity of whose body will go in the coffin underscores the notion that death weighs constantly on the minds of characters. Next point, The water on the bodies of Patch and Bartley is a symbol of the way by which Death comes from the sea straight to the house of the family.

Spinning Wheel and Hearth: -

Cathleen is always involved with the spinning wheel and the hearth and they are symbols of women's work and the pervasiveness of

gendered labor. This is notable in a play so concerned with the traditional separation by gender-Bartley is the provider, Cathleen is the baker and so on. Spinning wheel is symbolic of the time period this play is set in and reflects the difficulties of the life this family lived.

The rope symbolises Bartley's imminent death. As he fashions (makes) a halter for the horse, he is actually fashioning a halter for his own neck. That rope was always intended to lower a coffin into the grave, and now that grave will be of Bartley.

The Holy Water symbolises purification, sanctity and traditional Catholicism. It is benevolent water and it stands in contrast to the powerful water of the sea.

To conclude, the use of symbols gives depth to the play, extending it beyond the bounds of the apparent simplicity of the plot.