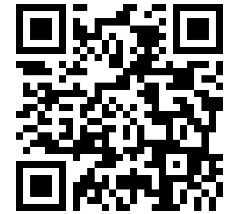


The Influence of Religiosity on Narrative Elements and Character Development in John Millington Synge's *Riders to the Sea*



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ABSTRACT: John Millington Synge's *Riders to the Sea* is an Irish play that explores the profound impact of religious beliefs on its characters' lives. The narrative centers on Maurya, an aging matriarch who endures immense loss as her male descendants are metaphorically consumed by the merciless sea. Unlike traditional tragedies, the calamity in this play does not arise from a disruption of order leading to the hero's downfall. Instead, the characters are portrayed as victims of the unpredictable sea, impervious to religious rituals. Through the integration of this funeral motif, Synge elevates the family tragedy to a universal drama, resonating with themes of fate and human suffering.

KEYWORDS: John Millington Synge, *Riders to the Sea*, religiosity, Aran Islands, thematic universality, local color

Synge offers a unique opportunity to experience a wild, off-grid lifestyle in the Aran Islands. His community is firmly grounded in local traditions and spirituality, while also espousing the ideals of liberty. The playwright strives to establish a context in which the universal human experience can be subjected to examination.

In the collective consciousness of the Western world, religion has traditionally been linked with the land of the sea and seafarers. This association is evident in mythology and literature, where the sea is often depicted as a realm inhabited by deities, characterized by superstition, and imbued with magical properties.

This paper examines *Riders to the Sea*, a one-act masterpiece by John Millington Synge (1871-1909), Ireland's most celebrated playwright alongside William Butler Yeats (1865-1939) and Samuel Beckett (1906-1989).

Subsequent to a period of travel throughout Europe, Synge encountered Yeats in Paris. At the urging of Yeats, Synge relocated to the Aran Islands, situated in the westernmost region of Ireland. In this environment, he was able to identify the essential elements that would form the basis of his work, including the setting, characters, language, themes, motifs, and symbols.

This paper aims to examine Synge's portrayal of the sea from two distinct perspectives: the pagan, superstitious mentality and the Christian vision as it evolved in nineteenth-century Ireland. This intersection is of great significance for an understanding of the playwright's efforts to contextualize events within a primitive framework as a means of reconstructing an order out of chaos.

Riders to the Sea was first published in the September 1903 issue of the periodical *Samhain Magazine* and subsequently premiered in Dublin on February 25, 1904. The objective of this analysis is to examine the ways in which geography shapes cultural norms and how religious beliefs contribute to the formation of social norms. Synge's intellectual development was significantly influenced by the ideas of prominent thinkers such as Charles Darwin, Herbert Spencer, and Charles Arthur Mercier.

Synge was born in 1871, which coincided with the publication of *The Descent of Man*, in which Darwin put forth the argument that humans like all animal species had evolved through natural and sexual selection. The publication served to highlight the notion that a universe governed by chance and struggle existed, given the belief that man had descended from a less systematized form.

In 1895, Synge commenced perusing the sequel to Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*. *The Theory of Evolution* challenged traditional ways of life and had a significant impact on popular thought and lifestyles.

Prior to an examination of Synge's play, it is beneficial to consider the symbolism of the sea through the lenses of several disciplines. From an anthropological perspective, water serves three primary functions: it sustains, it purifies, and it mortifies.

In the earliest historical records, the foodstuffs permitted to humanity following the Deluge included plants and animals. The perils of the sea are elucidated in monotheistic religions, as evidenced by the divine subjugation of antagonistic forces through the figures of Jesus in the New Testament and Solomon in the Qur'an. As cited in Genesis 9:1-2:

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God blessed Noah and his sons, saying to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth. The fear and dread of you will fall upon all the beasts of the earth and all the birds of the air, upon every creature that moves along the ground, and upon all the fish of the sea; they are given into your hands."¹

Given that Christianity originated in the vicinity of Lake Galilee during the time of Jesus's ministry, it is notable that the New Testament contains a greater number of references to fishing than the Old Testament. The first disciples of Jesus were fishermen, and thus fishing is a pervasive theme in the Gospels.

The sea serves as a conduit for intercontinental communication. However, the sea is also associated with cyclical storms and shipwrecks, which can result in fatalities and even be perceived as a curse. In the creation narrative, the Flood episode results in the destruction of nearly all of humanity (Genesis 6:5-7:24). The engulfing waters are associated with dark powers, and the biblical sea is home to monstrous creatures of primordial chaos, such as Leviathan (Job 40:25-41, 26).

In the Bible, the sea is depicted as an inherently dangerous entity, destined to disappear at the end of time. This is evidenced by Revelation 21:1, which states: "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea."²

In *Riders to the Sea*, the ocean is depicted as both a malevolent and a benevolent entity. It serves as a source of sustenance for the islanders, providing them with food. The sailors' belief system is in a state of flux, oscillating between the opposing forces of abjuration and adjuration. The play could be aptly titled *A Plunge into Death or Life*. The perception of the sea as an opening or a closing, an asset or an obstacle, is contingent upon the observer's perspective.

It can be argued that the negative portrayal of the sea in *Riders to the Sea* is offset by the playwright's profound respect for its majesty. Synge's theatrical style emerged not from the halls of academia but from the lived experiences of the Aran Islands and the Anglo-Irish dialect as expressed in the everyday realities of fishermen.

Synge's *Riders to the Sea* is regarded as a seminal work of the Irish Literary Renaissance. This flourishing period sought to instill a sense of national pride in Ireland during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

This one-act play is a modern drama that closely models itself on the conventions of classical tragedy. Synge deftly interweaves conventional and modern elements to create a distinctive style of tragedy, imbued with a sense of religiosity yet transcending it to a more nature-oriented faith where no papal institution stands between God and creation. This nature is elevated above all clergy, a theme that will be further explored.

Tragedy portrays the downfall of a virtuous protagonist through a complex interplay of hubris, predestination, and the influence of the divine. In Aristotle's view, the tragic hero must possess a flaw in character or an error in judgment (hamartia) and may not necessarily perish at the end of the narrative. However, the reversal of fortune (peripeteia) and the moment of recognition (anagnorisis) are essential elements of the tragic hero's journey.

Tragedy, then, is a process of imitating an action which has serious implications, is complete, and possesses magnitude; by means of language which has been made sensuously attractive, with each of its varieties found separately in the parts; enacted by the persons themselves and not presented through narrative; through a course of pity and fear completing the purification (catharsis, sometimes translated "purgation") of such emotions.³

It is incongruous to categorize *Riders to the Sea* as a tragedy in the Aristotelian sense. The characters' downfall is not a consequence of their imperfections; rather, they are victims of the tempestuous ocean that looms over them like the sword of Damocles. The Aristotelian concept of tragedy is defined by the narrative of an extraordinary calamity that results in the downfall of a high-born individual.

The tragic hero is fated to grapple with formidable challenges and to gain wisdom from adversity, thereby attaining a sense of dignity and a profound sense of spirit. In this regard, Maurya, the matriarch of the family, is more akin to a pathetic figure than a classical tragic heroine.

Maurya is an unremarkable peasant woman with no discernible noble origins. Upon realizing her impending demise, she is compelled to acknowledge the inevitability of suffering as an inherent aspect of the human experience. Having lost her loved ones, she is rendered completely defenseless and is forced to confront the reality of their demise with unbearable poignancy. In a poetic evocation, she speaks to no one but herself:

MAURYA

(in a low voice, but clearly) It's little the like of him knows of the sea. . . Bartley will be lost now, and let you call in Eamon and make me a good coffin out of the white boards, for I won't live after them. I've had a husband, and a husband's father, and six

¹ http://web.mit.edu/jywang/www/cef/Bible/NIV/NIV_Bible/GEN+9.html

² http://web.mit.edu/jywang/www/cef/Bible/NIV/NIV_Bible/REV+21.html

³ Aristotle, *Poetics*, translated by T.S. Dorsch, in *Classical Literary Criticism*, London: Penguin, 2000, p. 58. Aristotle presents his definition in the sixth chapter of his *Poetics*.

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sons in this house—six fine men, though it was a hard birth I had with every one of them and they coming to the world—and some of them were found and some of them were not found, but they're gone now the lot of them. . .⁴

SHE CONTINUES

There were Stephen and Shawn were lost in the great wind, and found after in the Bay of Gregory of the Golden Mouth, and carried up to the two of them on one plank, and in by that door (lines 329-342).

The daughters of Maurya, Nora and Cathleen, may be considered to represent the choral voices in the play. This bears resemblance to the conventions of classical Greek tragedy. The two sisters provide commentary on the action in which they are also participants. Cathleen, the eldest daughter, appears to exhibit a greater degree of autonomy, defending Bartley's decision to embark on a voyage of discovery despite her mother's apprehension about the unknown. Synge incorporates female characters into the decision-making process, a role that has historically been associated with men.

From its inception, *Riders to the Sea* evokes an overwhelming sense of doom. The fatalistic outlook of the characters impedes the pace and rhythm of the play, yet this does not diminish its tragic intensity. R. D. Trivedi points out that “*Riders to the Sea* is remarkable for its tragic intensity and homely pathos.”⁵

In terms of dramatic structure, *Riders to the Sea*, like almost all of Synge's plays, adheres to the classic Aristotelian unities: unity of time (a single day), unity of place (the Aran Islands), and unity of action (human frailty in the face of a hostile environment). The primary dramatic action occurs offstage, yet the play evinces a pervasive tragic quality.

Synge's portrayal of the peasantry serves to assert his Irishness. The play *Riders to the Sea* is set in the Aran Islands, where the inhabitants are engaged in a dual economic activity, combining fishing and farming. The use of a rural, insular dialect lends a quality of verisimilitude to the dialogue. The islanders are depicted as adhering to animistic beliefs and practices, reflecting an archaic worldview that encompasses a belief in supernatural powers.

The supernatural element is an integral aspect of classical tragedy, as evidenced by the title of the play, which refers to the two horsemen, Michael and Bartley. Maurya catches sight of her ghostly son, Michael, and interprets this vision as an augury of Bartley's imminent demise (line 289). This ancient belief in the malevolence of phantoms demonstrates the convergence of paganism and Christianity, a phenomenon that is further underscored by Maurya's assertion: “I am under no obligation to obtain holy water on the nocturnal occasions following Samhain” (lines 412-414).

It is worth noting that Samhain is a pagan Celtic festival that commemorates the deceased and signifies the transition from summer to winter. The play *Riders to the Sea* is concerned with the concept of movement. Furthermore, it is about the significant transformation that occurs in the protagonist's psychological state.

The play's narrative revolves around a single family whose male members are consumed by the sea before the curtain rises. The matriarch is left to care for her remaining family members, including her two daughters, Nora and Cathleen, and her last surviving son, Bartley. The Irish family depicted in the play is structured according to a patriarchal model, wherein conventional gender roles are adhered to. This is exemplified by the following dialogue:

BARTLEY

(to CATHLEEN) If the west wind holds with the last bit of the moon let you and Nora get up weed enough for another cock for the kelp. It's hard set we'll be from this day with no one in it but one man to work.

....

CATHLEEN

It's the life of a young man to be going on the sea, and who would listen to an old woman with one thing and she saying it over? (Lines 117-141)

While rural Irish society is ostensibly patriarchal, it is, in fact, a more profoundly matriarchal community. By the conclusion of *Riders to the Sea*, the female characters have demonstrated the capacity to survive in the absence of their male protectors, a point that Maurya had previously highlighted: “It's hard set we'll be from this day with no one in it but one man to work” (lines 120-21).

Maurya's trepidation exemplifies the patriarchal mindset that necessitates women's reliance on male patronage. By demonstrating that Maurya and her two daughters are capable of surviving without the support of men, Synge underscores the fact that women are equally capable of survival in the harsh world outside the domestic sphere. He advocates for the empowerment of rural women by affording them a decisive voice.

⁴ John Millington Synge, *Riders to the Sea*, in Janet Allen, “Unit 6: *Modern and Contemporary Literature*,” Holt McDougal Literature: Texas British Literature. [Evanston, Ill.]: Holt McDougal, a Division of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2010. 1214-1222. Subsequent page numbers in brackets are to the same text.

⁵ R.D. Trivedi, *A Compendious History of English Literature*, Vikas Publishing House Pvt Ltd: New Delhi, 2001, p. 764.

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Given that the majority of men in Maurya's family are effectively rendered invisible, they are predominantly described by their female relatives, existing primarily on the verbal level. In this manner, Synge enables women to challenge traditional structures of social oppression through the agency of language.

While Synge portrays men as vulnerable in the face of the inevitability of death, he depicts women as the guardians of customary codes, perpetuating the sacred ritual of burial. This ritual symbolically conveys that which cannot be captured in words. From that point onward, the wailing of the peasant women became a helpless means of expressing their rage against the sea. This practice represents a pagan remnant of Irish Celtic beliefs that were not altered by the introduction of Christianity.

The setting of *Riders to the Sea* plays a pivotal role in shaping the play's overall atmosphere, evoking a pervasive sense of isolation and desolation. The characters' journey is not only a voyage of initiation but also a Darwinian struggle for life, as they find themselves caught in a life-and-death dilemma within the enclosed island system.

Despite its absence from the immediate foreground, the sea nevertheless exerts a pervasive and unsettling influence. Robin Skelton posits that the sea's overwhelming presence imbues it with a godlike power; he observes that "the dominance of the sea makes the sea itself into a power, a god."⁶ This may explain why Synge juxtaposes the sea and the divine in the following exchange:

Nora: [...] the Almighty God won't leave her destitute [...]

Cathleen: Is the sea bad by the white rocks, Nora?

Nora: Middling bad, God help us (lines 36-37).

In the play, nature is represented by the destructive force of the sea, which serves as the nemesis, or antagonist, against which the characters fight for their dignity. The sea occupies an ambivalent position in the drama, given its relevance to the fundamental human concerns of life and death. The sea is a dualistic entity, simultaneously bestowing and revoking life, offering salvation and inflicting destruction. Moreover, the sea serves as a conduit for spiritual catharsis, as the cleansing properties of water purify the human soul.

Synge's skeptical perspective on religion is conveyed in a nuanced manner in *Riders to the Sea*. Despite the priest's attempts at solace, Maurya's prayers remain unanswered. Synge's portrayal of the priest as a figure of little consequence serves to highlight the profound divide between the Christian clergy and the Irish peasantry.

It is noteworthy that the priest in Synge's *The Tinker's Wedding* (1909) is similarly an outsider among the Wicklow peasantry. The two plays in question do not espouse an overtly anti-religious sentiment; however, they do subtly allude to the intermittent presence of Catholicism in the Irish countryside.

It is evident that the sea is superior to the religious authority embodied by a young priest (lines 14, 23, 65, 198, 327), who remains unnamed, unlisted in the cast, and offstage. The priest's lack of familiarity with the sea and its inhabitants undermines his charismatic appeal, particularly given his continental background. He is unable to prevent Bartley's dangerous voyage through the use of ritual or to avert the looming threat of the vast and relentless sea. It is unlikely that the laws of the universe will be altered by such prayers. The following dialogue provides insight into this matter:

CATHLEEN

(looking out anxiously): Did you ask him would he stop Bartley going this day with the horses to the Galway fair?

NORA

'I won't stop him,' says he; 'but let you not be afraid. Herself does be saying prayers half through the night, and the Almighty God won't leave her destitute,' says he, 'with no son living' (lines 31-39).

If it is indeed the case that the priest has no physical presence on the stage, his dramatic importance remains unquestionable. This is because he serves to maintain a constant tension between paganism and religion, nature and culture, island and continental traditions.

The ocean in *Riders to the Sea* is depicted as a formidable entity, simultaneously imposing, cleansing, and undeniably potent. The sons of Maurya are collectively drawn to the allure of the untamed wilderness, thereby establishing a pervasive sense of tension throughout the entirety of the play. From the outset, the play generates a sense of impending tragedy, culminating in the moment when Michael's body will emerge from the water. The question of whether Bartley will ultimately have the courage to face the storm remains unanswered at the play's conclusion.

Bartley is determined to pursue a career at sea, despite the warnings of a priest and the objections of his mother. Another element of classical tragedy that Synge amplifies in his play is the presence of foreboding. Bartley is not morally blind; rather, he is driven by a survival instinct that cannot be deterred by any force on earth, including maternal instinct. Nora corroborates this

⁶ Robin Skelton, *The Writings of J. M. Synge*, Indianapolis and New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1971, p. 43.

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assertion: "He'll not stop him, mother, and I heard Eamon Simon and Stephen Pheety and Colum Shawn saying he would go" (lines 67-69).

Aware of the inherent cruelty of nature, Bartley endeavors to adapt to his wild surroundings, thereby representing the fundamental dichotomy between Eros and Thanatos, which the sea serves as an ever-present, archetypal symbol.

The play *Riders to the Sea* can be described as a drama of experiential crisis and existential acceptance. Maurya has experienced self-fulfilling prophecies, and rather than cursing the sea, she ultimately comes to terms with her fate. Her tragedy has undergone a profound transformation, establishing the definitive tone of the play: "They're all gone now, and there isn't anything more the sea can do to me" (line 406).

In the conflict between humanity and the sea, the female protagonist is ultimately vanquished, yet she maintains a dignified bearing throughout. It is challenging not to empathize with her unfortunate circumstances. However, her apparent despondency at the sight of Bartley's body seems incongruous with the expected maternal response, leaving the reader/viewer with a sense of longing for a more assertive maternal reaction. Like a deer caught in the headlights, Maurya utters a mumbled response:

They're all together in this time, and the end is come. May the Almighty God have mercy on Bartley's soul, and on Michael's soul, and on the souls of Sheamus and Patch, and Stephen and Shawn (bending here head); and He have mercy on my soul, Nora, and on the soul every one is left living in the world (lines 458-464).

After a slight pause, she adds:

Michael has a clean burial in the far north, by the grace of the Almighty God. Bartley will have a fine coffin out of the white boards, and a deep grave surely. What more can we want than that? No man at all can be living forever, and so we must be satisfied (lines 467-472).

In this concluding statement, "No man at all can be living forever," the playwright humanizes Maurya's experience, thereby shifting her journey from specific realism to universality.

In portraying the dire circumstances of a hapless family confronted with the unruly sea, Synge extols the cosmic might of nature. As Florence Le Doussal puts it, "*Riders to the Sea* est bien cet hymne à la mer, indomptable, indomptée—oriflamme spirituelle et universelle—qui unit, dans la vie ou dans la mort, les marins de toutes les nations."⁷

One might posit that the play is life-affirming; it is through death that Maurya gains an understanding of life. Her acquired sense of enlightenment serves to illustrate Synge's underlying message regarding the capacity of nature to restore the human spirit. In *Riders to the Sea*, Synge dramatizes a domestic drama of human worth, achieving a timeless appeal.

The tragedy depicted in this work is that of the Irish peasantry, but also that of all men and women who are subject to unfathomable cosmic forces. The mother represents not only Aran women but all women globally, thereby achieving a status of universal motherhood. *Riders to the Sea* can be interpreted as a tragedy of both fate and character. Most crucially, it is a tragedy of ordinary humanity confronted with the overwhelming forces of nature, which ultimately hold the final sway and prevail.

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