

Riders to the Sea is a Classical Tragedy**Dr. Sushil Kumar Mishra***Associate Professor and Former Head, Department of English, SRM University, Sonapat, (Haryana) India***Abstract**

RIDERS TO THE SEA is one of the few successful one act tragedies in English literature. It is a remarkable achievement of Synge that he obtains sufficient tragic momentum within a single act. He achieves this by simplifying the conflict of man versus the sea. The setting of the play is realistic and highly poetic. Against the setting of Aran cottage the tragic theme of man's conflict with the sea is presented with a pattern of classical simplicity. It possesses the pattern of classical unities of time, place and action. Against the background of Aran Cottage the tragic theme of old woman Maurya's suffering is unfolded with the fatalistic pattern of the Greek tragedy. It is with a sense of Greek inevitability that the story of old Maurya losing her husband, husband's father and all the four male Sons is unfolded. The tragic theme of inevitable sufferings in conflict with sea which becomes the symbol of fate.

Key Words: Conflict of man versus sea, mysticism, modernism, metaphors, symbols, subjectivity and realism

Introduction:

One of the main themes in the story is that of the sea. Because her sons are always leaving her to be killed by the sea along with her husband, Maurya has become terrified of its power and wants desperately to find a way to save her two remaining sons from its power. In the end, however, she cannot do so and the final two end up drowning and the incredible power of the sea both as an attraction and a destroyer is made evident.

Another theme is that of loss and the inevitability of it. Of course her sons and her father did not have to go to sea and not everyone who goes to sea drowns, but Maurya finds a sort of fate in the power of the sea over her family and her dreams and her waking life are haunted with the power of the sea to reach out and take away her most precious possessions.

The main theme concerns the power of the sea. As an island, Ireland has a very powerful connection to the sea. In many ways, the sea is both saver and destroyer. It can be as much of a boon as a hindrance. The only connection that the inhabitants have to the mainland is through the sea, and in that way it provides life, but the sea also has the power to take life as well. Although set in contemporary Ireland, the tragedy gives a glimpse into the connection that generations of Irish have had to sea and the power it had over their daily lives.

Maurya has to suffer a lot. This extreme emotional pain is also the central theme of Synge's Riders to the Sea. The setting here is wild and rural and at first glance, appears to be a million miles away from the urban Dublin of Juno and the Paycock. The main character is Maurya, an old

woman who has lost her husband and many of her sons to the violence of the sea. She lives with her two daughters, Nora and Cathleen and her two remaining sons, Bartley and Michael. However, the play begins with the news that Michael's body may have been found washed up near Donegal and as a consequence, the two daughters have been given a bundle of clothes salvaged from the corpse. They try to hide the bundle away from their mother for fear that another tragedy might just completely break her. At the same time, Bartley intends to sail over the sea in order to sell a horse. Unlike Juno, Maurya seems to have completely resigned herself to suffering and is fatalistic in her manner and speech. She is engaged in what appears to be a personal feud with the elements where she states, 'They're all gone now, and there isn't anything more that the sea can do to me' (Synge 1995, p.91). Unlike in Juno and the Paycock the male characters are active in the world in that they are battling the landscape in order to survive, in order to make a living. Such a struggle seems futile though in that the sea is always triumphant, claiming fathers and sons, whilst the female characters are left to mourn. More tragedy is to come for both Maurya and her daughters when Bartley is drowned too and the bundle of clothes is finally confirmed as belonging to Michael. Maurya even has a premonition earlier in the play that by the end of the day she will have no sons left and tries to dissuade Bartley from his venture before he leaves with the words, 'what is the price of a thousand horses against a son where there is one son only' (Synge 1999 p. 83). This is not just a statement of her near endless grief, but also a practical statement of survival,

further echoed by Bartley himself where he says to Cathleen, 'It's hard set we'll be from this day with no one in it but one man to work' (Synge 1999 p.85).

Maurya herself is not so much the centre of the play, like Juno, but a presence that pervades the unfolding tragedy. Cathleen and Nora try to hide Michael's clothes from Maurya in order to protect her from more pain, whereas Juno's husband and children run to her when their various modes of escapism fail to work. The practical condition of Juno can be contrasted with Maurya's tendency toward the visionary outlook as her pain over the years has taken on an almost mythical quality. At the closing stages of the play, when Bartley's corpse is brought into the house it is the daughters, Nora and Cathleen that try to organise the practicalities of the funeral. They leave their mother to her all-encompassing grief. Maurya's fatalism and sense of resignation is captured in the last sentence uttered in the play when she states, 'No man at all can be living forever and we must be satisfied' (Synge 1999 p.93).

The theme of gender, particularly of female stoicism in the face of adversity is the key element that unites both Juno and the Paycock and Riders to the Sea. It is the central women in both plays that provide the focus for the political, social and environmental aspects that emerge throughout. It is Juno that holds her family together every time it threatens to disintegrate. When it finally does, it is the female characters that are left, with a pregnant daughter dependent on her mother's strength and resourcefulness. One son is dead and a husband is finally abandoned as the deadweight he really is.

Maurya too is the force that binds her family together, but she is less corporeal than Juno. She is almost more of a spirit than an active force in the world, but nevertheless is the locus of all the pain and suffering that transpires in *Riders to the Sea*. Juno and Maurya are contrasted through the fact that the former is solid and active whilst the latter is almost ghostly and passive. Maurya's struggle is interior and with nature itself whilst Juno is in constant battle with the ideals, whims and predilections of her own family. However, despite their differences, both plays contain two matriarchs whose experience of pain is finally representative of the torment and suffering of Ireland itself during some of the most tumultuous years of its history.

Riders to the Sea is a drama that concerns suffering on many levels. A mother faces the loss of six sons to the sea; the two daughters must bear their mother's pain of loss as well as their own; the last surviving brother knows that he risks death because, out of extreme necessity, he works against an angry sea; and the islanders suffer because they share the hardships imposed on them by the changing economic conditions that have affected the Aran Islands.

The play has several layers of meaning beyond its literal statement. The title itself comes from the Bible, especially the Book of Exodus (15:1), "The horse and his rider hath he thrown into the sea." The Book of Revelation (6:1-8) also sheds light on the central incident in the play: "And I looked and beheld a pale horse: and his name that sat on it was Death."

Besides the Old Testament allusions, certain actions in the play correspond to

events mentioned in the New Testament. When Maurya, in the presence of Cathleen and Nora, sprinkles holy water on Michael's clothes, one thinks of Easter morning, when three women came to anoint the body of Jesus. In this sense the scene becomes symbolic of the Resurrection. Cathleen reinforces this notion of resurrection when she refers to "when the sun rises," voicing John Millington Synge's intended pun on "resurrection of the son."

The play presents a curious blend of Christian beliefs and pagan superstitions. The islanders, simple fisher folk, would have no problem reconciling the two. When Maurya mentions sprinkling "holy water in the dark nights after Samhain," the pagan feast (on November 11) simply becomes a way of marking time, while holy water is a religious symbol of purification.

Certain superstitions appear in the play. Some peasants believed that the dead could control the lives of the living—for example, to assuage its loneliness; a ghost could cause the death of a loved one. It was also believed that the dead minded other people wearing their clothes or using their possessions. Bartley, then, who wore Michael's shirt, could have been selected for death on two counts: Michael's spirit could have wanted company in the world beyond, and he could have been annoyed that Bartley appropriated Michael's shirt for his own use. Then there is the instance of Maurya using Michael's walking stick—and not being able to give a blessing while using it. At many other points in the play Synge shows folkloric influences blended with Christian beliefs. (In *J.M. Synge Literary Companion*, 1988,

Edward A. Kopper explores this aspect of Synge's writing.)

Another theme emerging from the play concerns the struggle of the individual against society. The islanders were originally the self-subsisting people: They farmed, fished, and wove and knitted their own clothes. The Industrial Revolution changed all that, so that people could not make a living in the old way. Commercial farming, fishing, and textile making proved too strong a competition. Those who tried to keep to the simple ways found themselves fighting against insuperable odds.

Bartley must choose between following the old way, which would entail staying with his family to face an impoverished future, and becoming a part of the newly commercialized society by selling the

family's last animals and risking death. The individual is pitted against society and the conflict results in his death.

Conclusion:

Riders to the Sea is a play written by Irish Literary Renaissance playwright John Millington Synge. It was first performed on 25 February 1904 at Dublin, by the Irish National Theatre Society. A one-act tragedy, the play is set in the Aran Island, and like all of 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 a person against the impersonal but relentless cruelty of the sea.

The ending provides release of tension reminiscent of the great Greek drama or the best of the Elizabethan tragic play

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