



A Thematic Study Of J.M.Synge's Riders To The Sea

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Abstract:

Many scholars like Barrett H. Clark (The British and American Drama of Today) believe that **Riders to the sea** is not a tragedy in its real sense and it is only a picture of the Irish peasantry. Their conclusion is based on their comparison of this one—act play with those of Shakespeare's full—length tragedies, which is, in our opinion, an unjust comparison. Our study of the play below amply demonstrates that **Riders to the sea** is one of the greatest Irish tragedies. In spite of its topical theme the play has universal tragic appeal. From very beginning to the end we find tragic elements in this play. The characters in this play are poor peasants living on Aran islands, who are cut off from the modern society of Ireland. But their sufferings are of not lesser intensity than those of Shakespearean tragic characters who are men and women of very high position. The central character, Maurya's sufferings and her struggle with the sea to save male members of her family arouse pity in our hearts. The death of her husband, father—in—law, and six sons is tragic and has a universal appeal. In this paper we propose to trace human struggle for survival and the hopeless submission to the uncontrollable natural forces, the sea and her various moods, indicating the tragic elements in the play.

Keywords: tragedy, universal, conflict, struggle.

Introduction:

John Millington Synge(16 April, 1871—24 March, 1909) was one of the greatest playwrights, poets and prose writers of Ireland. After completing his college education from Trinity college, Dublin Synge wanted to become a musician but due to his shy nature to perform on the stage, he gave up the idea and started pursuing writing. In 1894 he went to Paris to study literature and language at the Sorbonne. It was in Paris in where W.B Yeats, a famous poet and the founder member of the Irish Literary Society, discovered him, recognized his talent and advised him to return to Dublin to devote himself to write about the lives of the Irish peasants and about their culture and heritage. In 1898 Synge went to the Aran Islands and live there for five years, collecting Irish stories and folklores (Alice B. Fort & Herbert S. Kates in Minute History of the Drama). His famous one—act play, Riders to the sea was written when Synge was living in Aran Islands and closely observing the lives of the fisher men on the islands.

The play, Riders to the sea deals with the helplessness of an old mother, Maurya who is in constant struggle with her powerful enemy, the sea which has already swallowed her husband, father—in—law and her five sons. She is hopelessly struggling to save her last living son, Bartley, but she fails in her attempt and, in the end, silently surrenders to her fate and to the sea by keeping herself busy in the preparation of the funeral of her last son:

MAURYA:(in a low voice, but clearly)...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 sons in this house—six fine men, though it was a hard birth I had with everyone and some of them were not found, but they're gone now....(Riders to the sea)

She finds solace in the thought that from now onwards the sea can not do any harm to her because now she has nothing to lose and thus she gets rids of the fear:

MAURA:(raising her head and speaking as if she did not see the people around her) They're all gone now, and there isn't anything more the sea can do to me....I'll have no call now to be up crying and praying when the wind breaks from the south,I'll have no call now to be going down and getting Holy Water in the dark nights after Samhain, and I won't Care what way the sea is when the other women will be keening.(To NORA) Give me the Holy Water, Nora, there's a small sup still on the dresser.(Riders to the sea).

This speech of Maurya before the dead bodies of her two sons is the climax of the grief which touches our hearts. Here Maurya's lamentation is not only hers but covers the whole community living in the Aran islands in particular and the all the women of the world in general and so has universal appeal.

The story of the play is simple and brief. Maurya, the central character in the play is an old poor woman. The male members of her family are engaged in fishing in the sea. Due to high waves and storms Maurya's husband, father-in-law, and five sons have already become the victims of the sea. Her son, Michael, is missing for nine days. Out of severe grief she has lost her senses. Michael's death is confirmed when he is identified by his sisters, Cathleen and Nora by his clothes which were sent to them by the priest for the identification. The last remaining son, Bartley, is going to Connemarra to sell his horse. Due to storm and high sea, Maurya tries to stop him but he ignores his mother's pleas to stay. He goes on a voyage and falls off his horse into the sea and is drowned. His dead body is brought by some villagers. Maurya is now totally broken. She has endured so much grief that she has become insensitive to any pain and so she is behaving as if nothing miserable has happened and the death of son is a normal thing. In the end she find solace only in that

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.(Riders to the sea).

The play ends with a note of universal fact when Maurya laments that"**...No man at all can be living for ever, and we must be satisfied.**"

The play is set in the Aran Island which is in the west of Ireland. When the play opens we find Cathleen working in the kitchen. The props in the kitchen, "**nets**", "**oilskin**", "**spinning-wheel**", "**some new boards**", etc. show the poverty of the inhabitants. Nora brings clothes of a drowned man for identification given by the priest. Due to Maurya's pitiable condition they don't want to tell her about Michael's death. So they hide the bundle of clothes when they saw Maurya coming to them. Thus the elements of suspense is brought in the play. The identification of Michael's clothes is delayed only to be confirmed later on but his death has been hinted at in the very opening of the play which is an indication of the conflict between the sea and the human beings which is also the main theme of the play. The sea has already defeated Maurya by drowning one of her sons when the play opens.

The conversation between Cathleen and Nora in the beginning of the play set the tragic mood of the play. Their conversation about Michael's missing for nine days, Maurya's pitiable condition and

Her fear for losing her last living son, Bartley's sailing on a voyage to sell his horse and the young priest's failure in stopping him from the voyage etc., creates the tragic atmosphere of the play from the very opening of the play.

Before the death of Bartley all the characters in the play except Maurya, are hopeful that he will not become a victim of the sea. Even the young priest has hope that God will not do wrong with Maurya. So he consoles them by saying, "**...and the Almighty God won't leave her destitute...with no son living.**" But his forecast proves to be wrong when we hear the death of Bartley. This wrong forecast is ironical and enhances the intensity of Maurya's grief as well as shows the cruelty of the sea, a symbol of destroyer, by showing how Maurya is left "**with no son living.**" The wrong forecast of the young priest and its acceptance by Cathleen and Nora shows their ignorance of the power of sea. It is only Maurya who knows and understand well the real power of the sea. Bartley's death gives a lesson to the islanders that if they want to live in harmony and

peace with the sea, they should be aware of the various moods of the sea. If the sea is calm she plays the role of giver so the fisher men should seek their livelihood in the sea at this time. If the sea is not calm and the weather is not good, they should not go into the sea because this time the sea is in the role of a taker. Any conflict with the sea will prove fatal for human beings. The main cause of the tragedy in this play is the ignorance of the various moods of the sea by the islanders due to which a conflict between men and the sea occurs. Bartley's excitement to go on a voyage in spite of high sea and storm shows his readiness to indulge in a conflict with the uncontrollable power of the Nature which results into his death. It also symbolizes that the sea is drawing him towards death. The "roaming" of the sea symbolizes the anger, fury and the cruelty of the sea. Maurya's struggle against the sea is in fact a struggle against the Nature's cruelty and fury which shows that Nature is always hostile to human beings. Thus the story of the play shows the struggle between life and death in which, finally, death wins because Bartley goes out without the cover of his mother's blessing.

Before her actual appearance on the stage, Maurya has been introduced to us and we become aware of the painful and tormenting situation which she is passing through. We also come to know about her pitiable mental condition due to the apprehensive death of her last living son. In Michael's death she sees a vision of Bartley's death. Out of fear she utters words which contain the universal feelings of a mother for her sons, **"...what is the price of a thousand horses against a son where there is one son only."**

Throughout the play we find the expression of the grief and Maurya's pleas, her last remaining son goes out, she is unable to bear her grief and hysterically cries out, **"...He's gone now, God spare us, and we'll not see him again. He's gone now, and when the black night is falling I'll have no son left me in the world"**. Here the fear and sorrows of Maurya are universal and concern all the mothers of the world.

Riders to the sea is a representative tragic play which depicts the cultures, traditions, beliefs and habits of the Aran islanders. When Bartley goes out, ignoring Maurya's pleas, his mother does not bless him out of anger. Cathleen

and Nora considers it a bad omen which shows their superstitious belief. Cathleen scolds her mother for not giving her blessing to Bartley:

CATHLEEN: Why wouldn't you give him your blessing and he looking round in the door? Isn't it sorrow enough is on everyone in this house without your sending him out with an unlucky word behind him, and a hard word in his ear.

They also believe that only Maura's blessing can save Bartley. So, they compel their mother, Maurya to go to the sea shore and bless him so that the bad omen may break and Bartley may come back safely:

CATHLEEN:(cutting off some of the bread and rolling it in a cloth, to MAURYA) Let you go down now to the spring well and give him this and he passing. You'll see him then and the darkword will be broken, and you can say, "God speed you," the way he'll be easy in his mind.(Riders to the sea).

Realizing her mistake, Maurya goes out hurriedly to bless Bartley for his good voyage but she does not meet him and thus she is unable to bless him. If Maurya would have blessed Bartley, he Would not have died and the tragedy would not have taken place.

When Maurya is going to meet and bless Bartley, Cathleen gives her the sticks which Michael had brought from Connemara. The stick will help her from slipping from the big stones. The stick symbolically reminds Maurya of her dead son, Michael which fills her heart with sorrows which she expresses helplessly:

MAURYA:(taking a stick NORA gives her) In the big world the old people do be leaving things after them for their sons and children, but in this place it is the young men do be leaving things behind for them that do be old.

This speech of Maurya has a universal tragic appeal. The stick here symbolizes the son who is supposed to be the helper of the parents in their old age. This

also shows that she has accepted Bartley's death and her helpless surrender to her powerful enemy, the sea.

The death of Bartley has repeatedly been hinted at from the beginning of the play in the form of the vision of Bartley, "riding on the red mare and the gray pony behind him." The gray pony behind him symbolizes the death which is continuously following Bartley. Michael's ghost is riding on the gray pony who pushes Bartley into the sea and ultimately kills him. Maurya describes this fearful vision which she saw on the beach to her daughters:

MAURYA:(a little defiantly) I'm after seeing him this day, and he riding and galloping. Bartley came first on the red mare; and I tried to say "God speed you," but something choked the words in my throat. He went by quickly; and, "The blessing of God on you," says he, and I could say nothing. I look up then, and I crying, at the gray pony, and there was Michael upon it—with fine clothes on him, and new shoes on his feet.

Maurya's vision of Michael riding on the horse behind Bartley is a hint of Bartley's death. Maurya is now sure that Bartley will die. So, when her daughters tell her about Michael's death, her only response is that the boards she bought for Michael's coffin, will serve for Bartley instead.

Role of the sea:

The sea, in the play, has been presented as both kind as well as cruel. It is kind because it provides livelihood to the inhabitants of the island. They earn their livelihood by catching fish and collecting sea weeds from the sea. It is cruel because it also takes the lives of the people. The people die in it. Thus we see that the sea in this play is giver as well as taker. The sea, in this play, represents a powerful force of Nature over which nobody has any control. If someone opposes the power of the sea, he will be loser. Maurya's sons are drowned because they have gone against the rule of the sea, i.e, they have sailed during the high winds and high sea. They have broken the law of the sea and so the sea has punished them. The people, living on the sea coast must obey the law of the Nature. They must be aware of the sea and its various moods.

Maurya's male members are not aware of this. So, they are drowned. It seems, as we have discussed above, Maurya is aware of the kindness, cruelty and various moods of the sea. So, she is anxious about the safety of her males and struggles with the sea but is defeated surrenders herself to the sea, the uncontrollable power of the sea.

Conclusion:

Our above discussion amply demonstrates that **Riders to the sea** is a representative tragic play of J.M.Synge which depicts lives, tradition, culture, sufferings and habits of the people living on the Aran Islands. It also depicts a constant struggle between human beings and the sea which symbolizes the uncontrollable power of the Nature. The struggle between the human beings and the sea proves to be hopeless and fruitless on the part of human beings. Human beings are defeated and the sea, their relentless enemy, emerges victorious in the end of the play. Maurya's suffering represents the suffering of the whole humanity and her defeat represents the defeat of the whole community of among us. It is a kind of catharsis for us. Her lamentation is not only for the male members of her family but of the whole world. She is a great loser in the battle but she is not a single woman to bear the brunt of the sea. She represents the whole community of the world. In conclusion we can say that, in spite of its brevity, simplicity, and straight forwardness, the theme of the play is sublime and has a universal appeal.

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