

John Millington Synge's Riders to the Sea:

Death Versus Life

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المخلص

مسرحية (الراكبون الى البحر) من أفضل مسرحيات الكاتب الأيرلندي (سنك) من الناحية النقدية. لقد ساهمت في صنع إسم سنك لأنه نجح بتصوير حياة كاملة في بضع صفحات. تظهر المسرحية حياة سكان جزيرة آران ببساطة ودقة. لقد وضع سنك أحداث المسرحية في جزيرة أيرلندية بعيدة مركزا على المصاعب التي تعاني منها عائلة إبتليت بمخاطر البحر. يتمثل الإنسان في المسرحية بالشخصية الرئيسية (موريا) وهي أم كبيرة في السن فقدت العديد من الأبناء في البحر. يظهر هذا البحث كيف أن سنك قد لخص بشكل مثير للإعجاب الوجود الإنساني بأسره في هذا الكون وكيف أن الإنسان لا يمتلك بديلا إلا قبول مصير المحتوم.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الموت، الحياة، القدر، البحر

Abstract

Riders to the Sea is one of the most critically acclaimed plays written by Synge. It contributes to make Synge's name because he has succeeded in capturing a whole way of life in several pages. The play shows the Aran islanders' life with simplicity and sincerity. Synge set his play on a remote Irish island, focusing on the hardships of a family plagued by the sea's dangers. Man is represented in the play by the main character Maurya; an elderly mother who has lost several sons to the sea. This paper shows how Synge's, impressively, summarizes the whole existence of man on this universe and how man has no alternative but to accept his inevitable fate.

Key word: death, life, fate, sea>

Death Versus Life

Riders to the Sea is the only play by Synge which was presented during his life time (1904) and did not arouse riots from the audience in Ireland. This is because it is devoid of society-directed satire so it runs in a safe way and comes to be, as Yeats states, a comfort to those who denounce Synge's other plays because they misunderstand the real intentions of this man.¹ It does not tackle social issues but goes deeper than "The surface concerns of life to engage its characters in the most elemental kind of struggle –that for existence".² Similarly, Thomas Whitaker argues that the tragic atmosphere is not created because of a particular sin which the main character tries to atone for but due to the original sin that is man's existence.³

Synge's main concern is to depict a realistic episode in the life of the Aran people and how it is overwhelmed by death. Its reality is enriched by using dialogues "derived from the dialect of the Aran Islanders, among whom [Synge] lived for a time".⁴ For instance, the famous last sentence of the play uttered by Maurya, "No man at all can be living for ever, and we must be satisfied"⁵, is taken from a letter sent by an islander, Martin McDonough to Synge. This man describes the sad story of his brother's wife but he adds, "At the same time we have to be satisfied because a person cannot live always".⁶

Thus, all the events and the rituals of the funeral are real and have been witnessed by Synge during his residence in that island. He narrates the story of the drowned islander and how his sister comes with an infant on her lap exactly as Bartley when the body of Patch has been brought. Synge goes on describing his feeling when he has met those islanders:

As they talked to me and gave me a little
poteen and a little bread when they thought I
was hungry, I could not help feeling that I
was talking with men who were under a
judgement of death. I knew that everyone of

them would be drowned in the sea in a few years and battered naked on the rocks ...⁷

The theme of the play, as Nicholas Grene affirms, is “life against death, or rather death against life”.⁸ Life is delineated as a continuous struggle of the islanders against a superpower represented by the sea. The islanders are obliged to go across the sea so that they can reach the mainland and purchase the essential requirements for their life. This is due to the fact that the island’s soil is poor and stony so they have no provision to live on.⁹ In their attempt to cross the sea and because of their poor equipment for sailing, they often become victims to the devouring sea. This is represented by Maurya’s family that is annihilated by the merciless sea. Thus, it is noticeable that all the characters of the play are occupied with the idea of death through their references to the sea and its fatal power. Contrastingly, the everyday activities of life occupy a narrow space in the play to emphasize the fact that their life is completely overwhelmed by death. Therefore, their life is in ever-lasting tension because they have to confront the sea if they want their families to keep on living. Mothers, like Maurya, can do no more than praying and weeping at home until all their male members are lost. Ultimately these mothers become exhausted because of the continuous weeping so they are obliged to submit to their fate.¹⁰ They realize that life has to go on so they accept the smallest thing they can get like “a bit of wet flour” or “a fish that would be stinking”(p. 13).

But this unequal fight between man and the sea goes on because it is inevitable. The sea is the giver and the taker of their lives. The sea is the source of food to the family of Maurya but it has also annihilated all the men of the family. Paradoxically both life and death are brought by the same source that is the sea. They have no other way for living because they are isolated by the sea from the outside world. What increases the islanders’ tragedy is that the victims are the young men who are the breadwinners for their families. This is because they are

physically stronger than the elder ones to face the challenge. But they would soon be drowned in the sea leaving their families without supporters.

T.R. Henn comments on the setting of the play saying that “the impetus is given by the setting of the Aran cottage ... [and] the interpenetration of the world of the living by the world of the dead”.¹¹ The setting helps in creating the atmosphere of the play because each object in the cottage has its dramatic function in the play. The play begins in the kitchen of a small cottage which is very close to the sea. The cottage reflects the simple social and economic status of the inhabitants because it is the usual place of a poor family. Thus, trivial tools are expected to be seen inside this cottage. The fishing-net is an indicator of these islanders' mode of life. They catch fish which is their main food.

From the very beginning, the audience is introduced to the type of conflict because such a kind of living is not only difficult but also risky. Besides, the word “island” is important because it is a sign of geographical isolation so these people are obliged to accept this way of living and submit to their fate. The spinning-wheel is an indicator that these islanders weave their own clothes so all their requirements are self-made. Moreover, there are some new white boards put against the wall. Because the island is devoid of trees these people have surely purchased the boards from the mainland. Anyone familiar with the way these people live will guess that someone has recently died and a coffin is to be made for his burial out of these white boards.

The opening scene begins to intensify the gloomy atmosphere of the play. As the curtain rises, the audience sees Cathleen, a girl of about twenty, kneading flour and putting the dough in the oven by the fire. When she begins her work with the spinning-wheel her younger sister, Nora, appears at the door. She has got a small bundle of clothes which she hides under her shawl. Now an element of suspense is created by the following questions raised by the two sisters as they talk to each other. The stage direction says that “in a low voice” (p.3), Nora asks her sister

where their mother is. Cathleen replies that their mother is trying to get some sleep in the other room but she is unable to get any. Such a reply increases the suspense because it means that there is a big problem which troubles the mother and forbids her to get some sleep. Nora enters the kitchen and tells her sister that the young priest has given her this bundle. It contains a shirt and a plain stocking which have been taken from the body of a drowned man who has been washed ashore in Donegal.¹²

With the proceeding of the events the audience knows that the drowned man is their brother Michael. Besides, the audience comes to realize the type of conflict this family has to undergo. Now and then, one of the male members of the family is drowned because he has to cross the sea to support his family. Thus, all the life of this family is under the shadow of death.

Death has ironical standards. These standards are conveyed by the playwright through the ironical language of the characters. The ironies have been employed to intensify the contrast in the theme of the play. For instance, Maurya describes her ironical world as she takes Michael's stick, "In the big world the old people do be leaving things after them for the sons and children, but in this place it is the young men do be leaving things behind them for them that do be old." (p.7). She remarks that in the outside world the young are usually the heirs of the old but the matter goes perversely in her rough world. This is because in Maurya's unusual world the young die before the old. In the same way, Maurya says that she is old and will die soon so Bartley should be responsible for the two girls. But ironically and contrastingly, he dies leaving the girls to her. Another ironical situation is created when Nora recognizes Michael's clothes by the number of the stitches. The irony is that she knows the fate of her brother as an important entity depending on a trivial thing. Later on Nora, referring to Bartley, says, "He's coming now, and he in a hurry." (p.4). The phrase "in a hurry" is ironic because it refers to Bartley's death. Man usually clings to life but Bartley goes quickly to his catastrophic end.

More ironies can be traced to show the contrasting standards of life and death. This life is usually led by influential and strong people but death annihilates all people regardless of their rank and status. In this respect, Nora describes the strength of her brother Michael, “And isn’t it a pitiful thing when there is nothing left of a man who was a great rower and fisher but a bit of an old shirt and a plain stocking?” (p. 9). This is a clever hint that death shows no respect to strength because it “reduces even a strong and powerful man to nothingness”.¹³ The same idea is reflected by Maurya when she describes the body of Patch that has been brought dead, “I looked out then, and there were men coming after them, and they holding a thing in the half of a red sail...” (p. 11). Once Patch dies, he becomes just “a thing” and this is the horrible truth of death that converts man who is the most precious power in the universe to a trivial thing. Moreover, Maurya goes on describing her suffering with the delivery of each of her six sons and how she has brought them up with difficulty and patience. But now they are captured by the hand of the merciless death. She says, “though it was a hard birth I had with every one of them and they coming to the world... but they’re gone now the lot of them.” (p. 11), Thus, men are difficult to come to this world but easy to go.

Another ironical situation is created when Maurya declares after her great loss, “They’re all gone now, and there isn’t anything more the sea can do to me ...” (p. 12). The irony is that the sea cannot defeat Maurya simply because she has nothing to lose. This leads Maurya to add, “but it’s a great rest I’ll have now...” (p. 13). In fact, “This is the understandable response of one who has suffered the worst and therefore has no further reason to hope or fear”.¹⁴ The tragic irony is that she becomes “quiet now and easy” only when she has lost everything. This is due to the fact that death is the utmost loss so nothing worse can happen.

Furthermore, to indicate the ironies of life and death Synge has employed so many symbols in his play. The play opens with Cathleen at the spinning-wheel which may suggest that the pattern of fate has been spun and woven. This means

that man's destiny is predetermined. Besides, the spinning-wheel is an indicator of futility because the clothes Cathleen has already spun are returned to her. The white boards are another reference to the islanders' futile land because they have to import them from the mainland. This means that their futile life will be overshadowed by death. The nets being put along the walls of the cottage are to represent an inescapable trap by which all the islanders are caught.¹⁵

Even the stage direction is sometimes symbolic. For instance, "the door which Nora half closed is blown open by a gust of wind" suggests the frequent intrusion of a natural force upon the life of those islanders.¹⁶ Michael's shirt is another symbol of death when worn by Bartley as he rides to his death because he finds his own shirt "heavy with the salt in it" (p. 8). This salt is to indicate that the man will be drowned in the salty water of the sea. At the same time, Bartley does not take the cake when he goes to his inevitable end because the journey to death does not need any food or provision. This cake will nourish the men while making his coffins. The rope which Bartley wants to make a halter for the mare is eaten by the pig with the black feet. This ominous sign is to refer to his black destiny. Moreover, the black knot on the bundle of Michael's clothes is another reference to evil and death. In the same way, Cathleen says that there will be no one to lament Michael but "the black hags that do be flying on the sea" (p. 9).

Perversely, water which is the usual symbol of life has been converted, in the course of the play, into a symbol of death. For instance, Maurya fails to give her son Bartley blessing and bread although she follows him to the "spring well" which is supposed to be a source of life. Thus, this spring of water has become a bad omen of Bartley's end. Similarly, Donna Gerstenberger affirms that "the drops of holy water within the context Synge has set for his play, become ironic reminders of man's frail hopes".¹⁷ Moreover, as Maurya turns the empty cup at the end of the play she gives the impression that she has lost everything.

According to some critics even the name Maurya is symbolic and meant to be identified with the Moira or Fate of the classical Greek mythology.¹⁸ This is meant to indicate the fatalistic cycle of life and death that goes on. This on-going cycle is clearly referred to in the play as Maurya recalls the death of Patch because all the actions she describes are exactly repeated with the death of Bartley. Thus, there is an overlap between the past (Patch) and the present (Bartley) which is to refer to the ever-lasting cycle. This fact is more emphasized when Nora describes Bartley's dead body exactly as Maurya has described that of Patch. This echo between the daughter and the mother is to indicate that Nora will undergo the same experience of seeing her sons carried in dead after their drowning. Therefore, this cycle of doom goes on ceaselessly.

Moreover, the title itself is symbolic enough to be referred to. It is to indicate the main theme that is death in opposition to life. These riders are living human beings who are responsible for their families and are obliged to undergo fatal experiences to earn their living from the mainland. This leads us to speak about the major symbol in the play that is the sea. It is the invisible force which shapes the destinies of all the characters. Throughout the play the audience feels that the sea roars around waiting for more victims. It is true that the sea is a vast amount of water but in the play it has been rendered to a symbol of death that is relentless. Because their life and death are determined by the sea all the characters refer repeatedly to the weather and the tide of the sea. Ironically, this tide becomes the carrier of life and death; the giver and the taker. Some critics go further and say that the sea is the only real character that crashes off-stage and all the other characters are employed by Synge to talk about it.¹⁹

It is worth mentioning that there is no contrast between the characters because all of them belong to the same league that stands in opposition to death. But death has certain influences on the modes of these islanders' life. Because their life is threatened and overwhelmed by horrible and fatal circumstances they are made

superstitious so they resort “to various rituals in order to ward off their evil destiny”.²⁰ Maurya, like all the islanders, believes in omens and portents. For instance, When she sees an ominous sign like the closeness of the star to the moon she anticipates a disaster to follow. Cathleen is no different from her mother. When Bartley leaves, Cathleen remembers that her mother has forgotten to bless him; instead she has said very unlucky words. Moreover, when Maurya describes her terrible vision of Michael’s riding behind his brother Bartley, Cathleen becomes terribly frightened and begins “to keen” saying, “It’s destroyed we are from this day. It’s destroyed surely” (p. 10). According to the islanders’ belief, the dead soul of Michael has come to take Bartley to the other world.²¹ In fact, Synge tries to depict a faithful picture for the superstitions the islanders believe in.²²

The other impact of the islanders’ fatal circumstances is that they show fortitude and courage because they see no way out. They come to realize that their life has a certain pattern which should be accepted. For instance, Bartley has seen the horrible destiny of his brother and neighbours and how they have been drowned but this does not prevent him from going across the sea. He is a courageous and dutiful young man. Bartley knows that with the death of his brother Michael the whole responsibility of supporting the family becomes his. He knows that he must cross the sea to the mainland to purchase the articles needed for the family. Bartley does not listen to his mother who asks him not to go to the sea because he knows that if he fears the sea he cannot perform his duties. Thus, when Maurya talks to him he turns to Cathleen lest becomes influenced by his mother’s sentiment.²³ In fact, if he had not gone that day he would have been obliged to go some other day and meet the same fate. Contrarily this young islander shows an admirable courage which reflects the powerful spirit of man.

Michael is no different from his brother Bartley. Although he does not appear on the stage he is described by Nora to be strong and bold. This is not unexpected

because he has responded to the call of duty and has been victimized like all his predecessors.

The female characters, however, do not show less courage. To begin with Cathleen, this young girl is dutiful and thoughtful. The play opens with Cathleen kneading some flour to bake a bread for Bartley. Then she starts working on the spinning-wheel. She appears to be a hard-working girl. When Bartley is about to leave he depends on her in performing some work in his absence.²⁴ When Maurya tries to prevent Bartley from going to the gallery, "her plea is brushed aside ... and it is answered indirectly by Cathleen"²⁵ who looks very practical when she says, "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?" (p. 6). She knows well that Bartley must go because he is the only breadwinner of the family; hence she sides with her brother and blames her mother. Her thoughtfulness is revealed when she tells Nora to sit with her back to the door so that their mother cannot see Nora crying. In a crisis Cathleen does not break down but tries to control herself and think of the proper thing to do. She does not collapse when she sees Bartley's body being brought to the house; contrarily, she requests some men to come the next day and make a coffin for her brother out of the white boards.²⁶

Concerning Nora, this girl has been very young when the earlier tragedies have happened so she seems less fortified by the harsh circumstances than her elder sister. Nora is surprised to see her mother calm and quiet after Bartley's death while she has wept loudly when Michael has been absent. Innocently, she wonders whether Maurya loves Michael more than Bartley. Thoughtfully, Cathleen replies that the reason is that the old woman has been crying for nine days and that makes her emotionally exhausted.²⁷

As far as Maurya is concerned, this woman is described by Synge as the "strong central life".²⁸ She is indeed the embodiment of fortitude. Her courage lives up to the level of the conflict she is undergoing. Her antagonist is not a usual enemy

but a huge merciless sea. Although the priest has assured Nora that Bartley would survive Maurya is quite certain of his inevitable end. She says, referring to the young priest, that he is less experienced than her of the sea's merciless power. At the end she realizes that life has to go on because weeping is of no avail. Bradbrook affirms that Maurya "has crossed a boundary and entered a new state of being"²⁹ because she becomes able to adapt the new situation. She consoles herself with the fact that death is the inevitable end of every human being so she should be satisfied. Ultimately she prays for the souls of her sons, past and present, and for the souls of the human beings all over the world. By doing so, this fisher wife has risen, as J. L. Styan comments, above her state to acquire "the solemnity and grandeur of a queen".³⁰

Conclusion

It is worth mentioning that *Riders to the Sea* transcends its regional aspect and acquires a universal appeal because its theme, death versus life, is a universal issue. This universality is easily felt to the end of the play when Maurya becomes the voice of all human beings throughout the world because man and nature begin the conflict but cannot put an end to it. In fact, this conflict goes on immortally and endlessly. To emphasize this universality, there is a stylistic hint by the playwright when Maurya shifts to the plural pronoun (we) instead of (I) in the last speech of the play.

Another factor that contributes to the universality of the play is that the characters are the representatives of the human beings in this universe who must suffer and pay in order to go on. Besides, the events, in the general sense, can occur anytime and anywhere on this planet. It is usual that old people, like Maurya, try their best to keep their sons from going to the dangerous places. But the young sons have bold spirit so they ignore the advice and go on to achieve their aim. It is natural

as well that sisters, like Cathleen, tend to side with their brothers so they do not like the excessive talk of the old people and their timid nature.³¹

Thus, *Riders to the Sea* reflects Synge's ability to compress the great issues of life and death into one act. In this respect, the French critic Maurice Bourgeois maintains that the play "strikingly exemplifies Synge's unique and felicitous blending of cosmopolitan literature and Irish social experience".³²

NOTES

١. Cited in Katharine Worth, *The Irish Drama of Europe from Yeats to Beckett*, (London: The Athlone Press, 2008), p. 136.
٢. Donna Gerstenberger, *John Millington Synge*, (New York: Twayne Publisher, Inc., 1964), p. 45.
٣. Thomas R. Whitaker, *Swan and Shadow*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1964), p. 147.
٤. John Gassner, *Form and Idea in Modern Theatre*, (New York: The Dryden Press, 2016), p. 100.
٥. J. M. Synge, *Plays* ed. Ann Saddlemyer, (London: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 14. Henceforth, all subsequent quotations are taken from this edition and the pages will be parenthetically cited in the text.
٦. S. S. Mathur, *Riders to the Sea*, (Agra: Lakshmi Narain Agarwal, 1969), p. 41.
٧. Cited in T. R. Henn ed., *The Plays and Poems of J. M. Synge*, (London: Methuen and Co Ltd, 1963), p. 34.
٨. Nicholas Grene, *Synge: A Critical Study of the Plays*, (New York: The Macmillan Press Ltd, 1975), p. 57.
٩. For more details about the island, see Henn, p. 33.
١٠. Shatha Amanallah Aziez, "The Major Plays of John Millington Synge: A Critical Assessment", (M.A. diss., University of Mosul, 1990), pp. 21-22. T. R. Henn, *The Harvest of Tragedy*, (London: University Paperbacks, 1966) - 1967.
١١. Mathur, p. 98.
١٢. Ibid., p. 123.

١٣. Russell E. Davis, "Riders to the Sea" and "The Playboy of the Western World": A Critical Commentary, (New York: American R.D.M Corporation, 1966), p. 42.

١٤. Aziez, p. 32.

١٥. Sylvan Barnet et al., eds., An Introduction to Literature, (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 2020), p. 548.

١٦. Gerstenberger, p. 48.

١٧. Robert W. Corrigan, The World of the Theatre, (London: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1979), p. 113.

The Moirae or Fates are three sisters in the Greek methology who preside over man's life from the moment of his birth till his death when the eldest sister cuts the thread of human life with her shears. Dorothy Eagle, The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Literature, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), p. 437.

١٨. Davis, p. 46.

١٩. Mathur, p. 41.

٢٠. Ibid., p. 106.

٢١. T. R. Henn comments on the superstitions of these people saying that they do not learn swimming because since the sea inevitably devours them, swimming would only prolong their suffering. T. R. Henn, The Plays and Poems of J. M. Synge, p. 34.

٢٢. Mathur, p. 113.

٢٣. Ibid., p. 108.

٢٤. Grene, p. 50.

٢٥. Mathur, p. 110.

٢٦. Ibid., p. 111.

٢٧. Maurice Bougeois, John Millington Synge and the Irish Theatre, (New York: Haskell House, 1966), p. 167.

٢٨. M. C. Bradbrook, English Dramatic Form: A History of its Development, (London: Chatto and Windus, 1965), p. 128.

٢٩. J. L. Styan, The Dark Comedy, (Cambridge: The University Press, 1968), p. 33.

٣٠. Mathur, p. 52.

٣١. Bourgeois, p. 171.

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