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The Irish Connection In ‘*Riders To The Sea*’ by J.M.Synge

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Abstract

Born in 1871, at Rathfarnham, a Dublin suburb, to a middle-class Protestant family, James Millington Synge grew up in the shadow of his mother, a pious lady whose narrow piety exasperated him. The death of his father in 1872, a year after his birth, left young Synge in the total care of his mother. Growing up to be a young man, Synge, during his stay in Germany and Paris, was fortunate enough to find friends like W.B. Yeats, who wisely advised him not to waste his time on an alien culture, but to return to Ireland, his roots. Following his advice, Synge set himself to stimulating Irish drama and opened the now-famous Abbey Theatre in Dublin. In 1907, ‘The Playboy of the Western World’ was produced. The play, however, did not go down too well with the Irish audience and was shouted down every night of its performance. The audiences who wanted an Irish Theatre that could convey a picture of an Ireland worthy of self-rule were disappointed with Synge’s eccentric, wild and irresponsible characters. They felt let down. However, Synge’s thoughts and plays received recognition after the Abbey Company toured Oxford and London. Synge also wrote some poems as bare in their style as his drama and some essential critical and descriptive prose. Synge’s fame rests on plays like ‘The Playboy of the Western World’ and ‘Riders to the Sea’. His early death, however, was a setback to the world of Literature and, in the words of a critic, “a loss to English Literature.”

Synge’s dedication to Ireland and everything Irish-topography, people, language, culture, and ideology-sums up Synge’s fascination for his roots and his motherland. The paper will review ‘Riders to the Sea,’ focusing on Synge’s idea of Ireland and his feelings for different aspects of Irish culture.

Keywords: Sea, suffering, fate, death, Aran Islands, Irish connection.

The Aran Islands, a background for ‘Riders to the Sea

Synge’s passion for Ireland made him seek stories about his homeland. It was here that he found the raw material for ‘Riders to the Sea’. Having visited the Aran Islands in 1896, W.B. Yeats had persuaded Synge to visit the Islands. He had learned something about the primitive, courageous life of the Gaelic-speaking islanders ‘set apart /In a most desolate stony place.’ The Islands provided Synge with material for various magnificent essays like ‘The Aran Islands’ and ‘In Wicklow, West Kerry and Connemara.’ Interacting with the inhabitants, Synge felt that he was talking to people who lived in a world of grey where there were wild rains and mists every week in the year. The men seemed to him to be ‘under a judgment of death.’

The islanders had indeed to battle for their existence. They had to manure their small fields with seaweed. There was no winter feed for their cattle and ponies. They fed on fish from the sea. Often winter storms could end their struggle with the sea, fought in softwood and canvas rowing boats called ‘curraghs.’

Life on the Aran Islands was dangerous life. The small curraghs and larger sailing vessels called ‘hookers’ were often crewed by men who would lose their battle with the sea and whose bodies were later washed ashore on the rocks. Even the planks used for coffins were hard to come by.

Imbibing fatalistic and Christian ideology at the same time

Synge, however, found valuable lessons through the life of the islanders. There was a particular mixture of bravery and fatalism in them. A blend of paganism and Christianity was evident. With uncertain deaths being witnessed time and again, it was not too difficult to realize that the islanders were preoccupied with fate and the supernatural on one

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hand and death and burial on the other. Their pagan beliefs made them fear Nature and dread the supernatural. The sea was seen as a symbol of destruction. It was seen to be highly potent.

On the one hand, it provided a livelihood to the islanders; on the other, it could take away life. Maurya loses all her sons because of the sea. She sees the sea as a threat to life. When her youngest and only surviving son Bartley, plans to go to the mainland by sea to sell his horses, she is skeptical. She has already lost far too many men from her family. Synge very skillfully entwines pagan beliefs with the Christian faith. This makes suffering, supernatural, and death some of the main themes in the play. The fatalistic idea that human grief and loss are inevitable and cannot be eluded permeates the space.

The play is a reflection of the struggle between man and the sea. While men are seen as passionate about the ocean, women are subjected to passive suffering and loss. Both men and women face an awareness of death's imminence and the mysterious sea's inflexibility. What is interesting is Synge's ability to compress the more significant issues of life into one act, to intensify one certain death into the general human tragedy, and to convey local events as archetypal, thereby possessing lasting significance.

The play abounds in the use of symbols. Synge skillfully uses symbols to indicate a recurring theme or point toward a particular message he wishes to convey to his audience or readers.

The spinning wheel used by the eldest daughter, Catherine, is symbolic of the family's difficulties. The number 9 is used in the novel as a sign of bad luck. The family does not receive any news of Michael for nine days. Maurya weeps for her dead son for nine days, and when Bartley dies in the sea, some nine unknown women come to see Maurya.

The rider is another symbol. The male members of the island are all riders. They ride to the sea to catch fish and earn a livelihood. They make adventurous trips to the sea ' to face death. Their defeat with the sea is the defeat of humans by undefeatable Nature.

Bartley's red mare and Michael's grey pony stand for death. Bartley rides on the red pony but never comes back alive.

The bread symbolizes life. Maurya makes bread for Bartley but cannot deliver it. The result is that Bartley is deprived of life and faces death. Maurya's turning of the empty cup, mouth downwards, is another symbol. The action suggests a failure of Christian comfort at the time of the demise of the male member and is a symbol of infinite suffering and renunciation. This symbol also reinforces the theme of tragedy for old Maurya.

Synge, the Supreme artist

The dramatic skill that has gone into the compression of the play's action is commendable. The texture is closely woven, and the reader can comprehend the significance of symbols used extensively to bring home the play's theme. The repetitive entry of the silent mourners serves as a recollection of past deaths and, in the present, recognition of yet another death for Maurya. Bartley's death makes Maurya cry, which ironically sounds like relief: " I'll have to call now to be up crying and praying when the wind breaks from the south, and you can hear the surf is in the east..."

And above all, the play's intensity comes from the use of language, which in its mixture of Gaelic syntax and English vocabulary, gives the style heroic dignity. The simplicity reduces the action and the commentary made upon it by the characters to fundamental truths about the human condition.

References

J.M. Synge's *Riders to the Sea* (1904)