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REVISITING *RIDERS TO THE SEA*: POTENTIALITY OF PREMONITIONS, SUGGESTIONS  
AND SYMBOLS

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ABSTRACT

*Riders to the Sea* appeals to the audience with its unique and concentrated action where everything contributes to the tragic vision of the play. From the beginning to the end, the play is replete with signs, symbols, and premonitions and foreshadowing. Instead of being explicit, Synge rather suggests the layers of meanings that are latent within the otherwise ordinary objects and common dialogue. This paper attempts to explore the potentiality of premonitions, symbols, signs and images and how the playwright weaves the tragic vision through pattering them. The play was an integral part of the Irish Literary Revival and was born of Synge's actual experiences in the Aran Islands. The aim of the paper is also to show the pattern of poetry that is subtly created through the use of these techniques and other folk elements and beliefs of the poor islanders. The universality and the intensity of this otherwise domestic/regional tragedy comes out of the language and structure that mainly rely on ominous symbols and suggestions. Through textual analysis, the paper intends to highlight the underlying significance of the potential symbols scattered throughout the play, and on which depend the essential poetic nature of the tragedy.

**Key-words:** Premonitions, symbols, tragic vision, foreshadowing, poetry, universality.

John Millington Synge's *Riders to the Sea* is a One-act play that has been fascinating the audience and readers throughout the world since its first production on 5<sup>th</sup> February, 1904 by the Irish National Theatre Society at Molesworth Hall. The tragic essence that emerges out of this compact tragedy has its own universal appeal which crosses the boundary of time and space and reaches the heart of everyone. The conflict between Maurya, the old mother and the powerful Sea does not remain confined ultimately within the Aran Islands but becomes almost symbolic of essential human conflict with Nature. Maurya loses all the male members of her family in the play and remains painfully alive with her two daughters, Cathleen and Nora. In the end she remains alive with nothing more to lose. And being defeated she emerges to be victorious. She does not remain ultimately a bereaved mother of six dead sons, comes out to be a symbol of universal motherhood, true to everywhere. But the way Synge has presented the action of the tragedy shows his unequal craftsmanship at selection and organization of the events. In fact, he has built the structure in such a condensed manner that things are suggested or hinted at rather than being obviously described. And all-through the playwright has structured a pattern of premonitions, suggestions, signs, symbols, imagery etc.

which apart from contributing to the poetic nature of the play, has gifted it with a rare sort of universal appeal scarcely found in literature.

It would be very important as well as interesting to note that *Riders to the Sea* was intimately connected to the well-known Irish Literary Renaissance in general and the Irish Dramatic Revival in particular. This movement in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries saw a renewed interest in aspects of Irish culture and stimulated a new appreciation of traditional Irish literature and language. This movement was also associated with the growth of Irish nationalism. As Ashok Sengupta says, "It was opposed to the linguistic and cultural domination of Ireland by Britain, and as integral part of this opposition, it believed in a revival of the Irish language and, along with it, the ancient Celtic myths and folktales" (Sengupta, xiii). Synge, along with W. B. Yeats, Lady Gregory and others felt the necessity for a revival of the Irish theatre and was concerned with the materials and language to be used in the plays. The simplicity and exact living conditions of the rural people were reproduced in the plays and their performance involved an implicit emphasis on realism and naturalism which contributed immensely to the poetic appeal of the plays. As Lady Gregory observed, "What we wanted was to create for Ireland a theatre with a base of realism and an apex of beauty" (Harmon, 169).

The action of *Riders to the Sea* is based on the Aran Islands – a group of three islands (Inishmore, Inishmaan and Inisheer) located at the mouth of Galway Bay, on the west coast of Ireland. In 1896, Synge met W. B. Yeats it was Yeats who first encouraged him to live for a while in the Aran Islands, and then to return to Dublin and to devote himself to creative work. After his illness in 1897, Synge spent the summers from 1898 to 1903 in the Aran Islands, collecting stories, myths and folklores, and perfecting his Irish, while continuing to live in Paris for the rest of each year. His first account of life in the Aran Islands was published in the *New Ireland Review* in 1898, and his book, *The Aran Islands*, based largely on journals, was completed in 1901 and published in 1907 with illustrations by Jack Butler Yeats. And *Riders to the Sea* is also based on Synge's first-hand knowledge and experience in the Aran Islands – the customs, beliefs, faiths, struggle and livelihood of the ordinary people there.

Apparently, the play is a fragment, moving on the limited plane of the conflict between Man and Nature. But it has a "powerful rhythm within a deliberately limited action...its paradox is the depth of its language and the starved, almost passive, experience" (Williams, 143-44). Within the formal limits of a One-act play and a bare minimal setting and action the tragedy acquires numerous meanings. The action of the drama is essentially minimum and simple. It based on a central symbol – the universal conflict between human beings and Nature. Here, the Sea represents the Nature, the inscrutable and inexorable Fate, the destroyer and preserver on whom these Aran Islanders are totally dependent. This thematic simplicity and the symbolic significance of the struggle provide the universal appeal to this otherwise domestic/regional tragedy. The way the conflict is presented throughout the tragedy reminds us of the unequal conflict between man and Destiny in Classical tragedy. The ubiquitous absent presence of the Sea on the stage, the helplessness of the people, their simple yet hard life and living, their Christian faith as well as Pagan belief, the poetic nature of their speech – all this mark the tragedy with simplicity which has its own beauty. But Synge does not always explain everything in an obvious way. Rather he takes recourse to imagery, symbols, premonitions or mere suggestions which also contribute to the essential charm and beauty of this play. The whole play is replete with signs and symbols that are so skilfully woven into the texture of the tragedy that layers of meanings can be unfolded through these.

The very title *Riders to the Sea* has both literal and metaphorical connotations. Apparently, it refers to the two riders in the play – the living Bartley riding the red mare and the spectre of his dead brother Michael following him on the grey pony. But on a more general note, the whole community of Aran Islanders are riders to the sea they are forced to ride the sea by necessity for their livelihood, they have no choice. The poor rural islanders are simply the fishermen who are totally dependent for their livelihood on the extremely rough and tough sea. As Synge writes in *The Aran Islands*, sailing on frail currachs of these fishermen was similar to riding the waves (Sengupta, 18). Sooner or later, most of them were drowned. Consequently, the sea appears to be a powerful symbol – the giver and the taker, the destroyer and the preserver. And thus, the title acquires symbolic significance. Riding and depending on the sea the islanders metaphorically become journeymen

through life. However, as Prof. Sengupta points out, “the fact that the sea is linked to the image of the horses has its origins in Greek and Irish myth” (Sengupta, 18). The title may allude to Poseidon, the Greek sea god riding the waves on his horse. As Poseidon created the horse, all horse-farmers are supposed to be his servants. Apart from this, Maurya, the old grieving mother, is often looked upon as Demeter, the Greek moon goddess, to whom horses were sacred. In Celtic mythology also, the god Manannan Mac Lir is associated with the sea, who represents, like Poseidon, both the ocean and the horse riding the waves. The title may also indicate the ironical reversals that Bartley is actually killed not on the waves but by the grey pony which accidentally pushes him to drown in the sea. So, it may refer to the imagery in the Book of Revelation in the *Bible* (vi: 2) and the horses of Zecharia (1:8, vi-2 and x:5) which prophesies that “the riders of horses shall be confounded” (Sengupta, 18-19). Thus, the title can be interpreted from various angles – literal, symbolical, mythological, religious etc.

The brief yet significant details that Synge provides at the beginning of the play give the play its realistic, almost naturalistic aspect. Through brief references to some objects in the kitchen he has subtly brought out the essential life and livelihood of the Aran Islanders. The ordinary objects there, through suggestions, make the sea palpable and concrete as a source of livelihood for the people. Nets, oil-skins, spinning wheel, kneading cake indicate the hardships of life that are part and parcel of these seafaring fishermen. These objects are symbolical of life of the islanders. But there are also the new boards standing by the wall which introduce the very presence of death in the very opening of the play. Thus, these few apparently insignificant objects suggest the duality of the sea as both preserver and destroyer. T. R. Henn describes Synge’s “poetry of the theatre as a method, in which dramatic objects and symbols dissolve, coalesce, and combine in tension or opposition, to give death or contrapuntal irony” (Sengupta, 20). Synge consciously attempts in opening as well as throughout the whole play to render a kind of structural poetic unity to this play use of imagery, symbolism and sign. Every object is, therefore, symbolic here, sometimes in more than one way. Thus, nets which are symbol of livelihood, may also “suggest a sense of entrapment in which the women, in particular, are victims – a theme which recurs in Synge’s other plays, especially, *The Shadow of the Glen* and *The Playboy of the Western World*” (Sengupta, 20).

The references to the kneading cake, fire and spinning wheel are also symbolic. The baking of the cake like the spinning at the spinning wheel is almost ritualistic in this play. Food is the symbol of life and to forget it simply foreshadows death as will see in case of Bartley. The spinning wheel suggests the conflict between life and death as it is associated with the inexorable wheel of fortune. It also alludes to the three Fates of Greek mythology. Clotho the Spinner holds the distaff, Lachesis the Dispenser weaves the thread and Atropos cuts the thread, thereby fixing the moment of death. Fire may be looked upon as symbol of both life and death. These significant allusions, images, premonitions and symbols before the actual beginning of dialogues prepare us for a rich network of these devices through which Synge weaves the poetic pattern of a moving tragedy.

Before Bartley departs for Connemara fair to sell his two horses, a number of premonitions are there which are ominous enough to suggest that Bartley is going to die. The new rope Bartley needs as a halter for the red mare is full of ominous implications. The position of the rope on the nail right beside the white boards is ominously symbolic. The nail here, as also the forgetting of it towards the end of the play, is itself an image of pain, which is linked to Christ’s crucifixion and death. The nails, therefore, symbolically imply death, which is further confirmed by the fact that the rope is hung on a nail beside the white boards meant for the coffin. Bartley needs the rope to make the halter and ensure his safety, but ironically, he is making his own fateful noose and hurrying to be doomed. Again, the pig with the black feet is another ominous symbol, because, in Irish mythology, pig belongs to the the other world. Moreover, the black colour of the pig’s feet also suggests death. And blackness is repeated along with the figure ‘nine’ (a superstitious number to those people) throughout the play. The image of the “star up against the moon” (5) is an ominous sign of impending disaster in old Irish legend. The stage direction which shows Bartley “takes off his old coat, and puts on a newer one” (5) significantly implies the disaster. This type of image-cluster underlies and foreshadows what is going to happen. Through these modes which are akin to poetry, Synge underscores the tragic action of the drama.

Bartley, the young man, now in charge of the family, gives blessing and leaves for Connemara. He expects her mother's blessing. But, Maurya, in her intense anxiety, forgets to bless him. Not only this, they also forget 'his bit of bread', the necessary nourishment, which suggest that Bartley is going to die. And Maurya goes immediately to the spring well to give Bartley the forgetting blessing and the bread. But she fails as she sees "the fearfulest thing...since the day Bride Dara seen the dead man with the child in his arm" (Synge, *Riders to the Sea*, 11). She could not pronounce the blessing as something choked the words in her throat. What Maurya sees at the spring well is one of the most powerful premonitions in the play. Bartley was on the red mare while on the grey pony there was the spectre of Michael, "with fine cloths on him, and new shoes on his feet" (Synge, *Riders to the Sea*, 11). This is the 'peripeteia' (reversal) which suggests that the ghost of Michael has come from the other world to claim the living Bartley there. This scene at the spring well is "the centre of the play; it is at once climax and catastrophe. Everything that has gone before has prepared for it, everything that comes after is foreseen in it" (Price, 36).

Now Maurya, as well as Cathleen and Nora are sure that definitely Bartley is going to be lost. Maurya, as in a dream, revisits the particular incident of death associated with each male member of her family. The dead body of Bartley is carried in and it is informed that 'the grey pony knocked him over into the sea' (Synge, *Riders to the Sea*, 13). Maurya is relatively calm now and performs the last rituals. She seems to suggest her own imminent death in mentioning 'great rest', 'great sleeping' etc. Again, the juxtaposition of two opposing symbols of the coffin and the cake suggest "a syncretic vision of both life and death" (Sengupta, 42). The sprinkling of the last small sup of holy water on Bartley's dead body and placing the empty cup mouth downwards on the table suggests that Maurya's long struggle is finally coming to its end. Being totally defeated and through her calm acceptance of death, Maurya actually reasserts the triumph of life and emerges as the eternal mother figure.

Within the rich pattern of imagery and symbol is also presented the mysterious character of the young priest who never appears in the action of the play and his words are reported. He is unable to understand the workings of the sea, the ubiquitous symbol of inscrutable Fate in this tragedy. The priest allows Bartley to go to the Galway fair saying, "I won't stop him...but let you not be afraid. Herself does be saying prayers half through the night, and the Almighty God won't leave her destitute...with no son living" (Synge, *Riders to the Sea*, 2). This reported speech of the young priest is usually given as a proof of Synge's own distrust of Christian faith. Maurya also shows her distrust in the priest: "It's little the like of him knows of the sea" (Synge, *Riders to the Sea*, 12). The words of the priest are thus suggestive and ironical. "The sea is indeed the 'Almighty God' of the play, an older and more formidable spiritual power than that represented by the priest who, it is emphasized, is 'young'. The priest never enters the action of the play. He is, spiritually, a stranger to her world. His reported words are all comforting, but they do not comfort" (Skelton, 39-40).

Music had a major influence in shaping Synge's writings. He believed that "Every life is a symphony and the translation of this life into music, and from music back to literature or sculpture or painting is the real effort of the artist" (Kopper, 3-4). And the essential music of the simple life of the Aran Islanders comes out through the subtle pattern of imagery, symbol, premonition etc. which give the tragedy a poetic quality. The language used to depict the ordinary life of the islanders reaches the level of poetic intensity through the elements of foreshadowing, suggestions and signs. Thus, the universal music of tragic suffering rings throughout the tragedy and culminates in Maurya's last universally true utterance: "No man at all can be living for ever, and we must be satisfied" (Synge, *Riders to the Sea*, 15).

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