

**The Man and the Sea: An Ecocritical Study of John Millington Synge's *Riders to the Sea***

**BY**

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**ABSTRACT**

The Irish playwright, poet, writer, collector of folklore, and a key figure in the Irish Literary Revival, John Millington Synge's (16 April 1871 – 24 March 1909) one-act play - *Riders to the Sea* (1904) is about the life in the Aran Islands and the death and destruction of the mass caused by the indomitable nature witnessed by them. Geographically the Aran Islands is situated at the west coast of Ireland, the islanders are depending on the sea to spend their livelihood throughout the whole year. Though the sea couldn't show its dualistic nature in all the times, the sea is presented here the roll-model of their life as well as death to the islanders. The vision of the protagonist of the play, mother Maurya about the deaths of her two sons, Michael and Bartley, upon the sea evidences that devastating power of the water is not only affiliated with its ontological presence, but also its epistemological capacity which is about the narrative ability of matter. Through this paper Synge wanted to show the crucial struggle of human being in a micro-level perspective to establish their existence upon the invincible nature in a new ecocritical platform.

**Keywords:** Human Struggle, Invincible Nature, Eco-criticism and J. M. Synge.

## Full Paper

‘Ecocriticism’ is the study of literature and ecology from an interdisciplinary point of view. The term ‘ecocriticism’ was coined by William Rueckert in his essay “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism” in 1978 to analyze the works of authors, researchers and poets in the context of environmental issues and examine the various ways literature treats the subject of nature, though it was first originated by Joseph Meeker as an idea called “literary ecology” in his “The Comedy of Survival: Studies in Literary Ecology” (1972). It takes an interdisciplinary point of view by some ecocritics brainstorm possible solutions for the correction of the contemporary environmental situation, though not all ecocritics agree on the purpose, methodology, or scope of ecocriticism. In 1899 John Millington Synge was nearly thrown from a small boat into raging swells off the island of Inis Meain. The green waves curled and arched themselves above him; then in an instant he was flung up into the air and could look down on the heads of the rowers, as if they were sitting on a ladder, or out across a forest of white crests to the black cliff of Inishmaan. The danger of the Aran Islands, rough seas would later become a haunting motif in Synge's 1904 *Riders to the Sea*, a tragedy of an Irish mother who loses her last son to the waves. There is a striking duality of landscape in this work; the sea functions as both the provider for the family and as its potential destroyer. This duality is mirrored in Maurya, for she is both the nurturer of her children and the inadvertent destroyer of one. By examining Synge’s use of nature with an ecocritical approach, one can see that it does not conform too many of the traditions of British writers. It is not purely pastoral, Romantic or sublime but is a blend of uniquely Irish ambiguities towards place.

John Millington Synge is considered the greatest playwright of the Irish Literary Revival, a movement in Ireland associated with the poet William Butler Yeats and other Irish writers. This revival took place at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. Irish-born, He traveled to the Continent and lived in Paris, where he taught English and began writing poetry. In Paris, in 1896, Synge met Yeats, a leading writer and one of the founders of the Abbey Theatre in Dublin, a theater dedicated to performing Irish plays. Yeats advised Synge to return to Ireland and take as a model for his writing the people of the Aran Islands off the west coast of Ireland. J. M. Synge’s one-act play *Riders to the Sea* is among the early plays of the national theatre of Ireland, the Abbey Theatre. Founded in 1904 with the aim of representing

Irish characters by the Irish playwrights on stage, the Abbey Theatre hosted works of Irish dramatists who thoroughly returned to the Irish myths, stories and their national troubles as a source of inspiration. Synge, as his contemporaries at the time, centred his play on the life of Irish peasants in the Aran Islands. His work dominated by female figures takes place in a cottage of the Aran Islands, and its plot structure, albeit a simple one is enriched by the playwright's effective use of language and symbols. As the life of those peasants is threatened by certain harsh conditions and death in the sea, the play is enmeshed with a tragic tone. Synge records the desperate situation of the peasants in a land where "one is enforced to believe in a sympathy between man and nature" in that the sea dominates their lives as a powerful force.

Following Yeats' advice, Synge's wrote *The Aran Islands* (1907), a travel memoir recounting island folklore and daily events in the lives of the Aran islanders. From this same things Synge took inspiration and material for his various plays. Writing of actual events, Synge used expressions and speech patterns of the old-fashioned local dialect to give a poetic, particularly Irish quality to his drama. The source and the collected materials of the *The Aran Islands* are also the main inspiration of his *Riders to the Sea*. The details regarding the drownings are realistic and common there, because all the male members went to sea regularly to spend their livelihood, otherwise they would die in starvation. A young woman wonders if a drowned man whose body has been found is her missing brother or close-relative. She puts together information about his clothing or any other materials and an object found on him to confirm that the dead man must be her brother Michael. Synge weaves this and other material into the tragic story of Maurya, her two daughters, and the lost men of the family. In doing so he takes the story beyond the local to a mythic level.

The play *Riders to the Sea* begins in the cottage kitchen with nets, oilskins, spinning wheel and some new boards standing by the wall. After kneading cake Cathleen, a girl about twenty, starts spinning at her spinning wheel. Later, when Cathleen and Nora examine the clothing of the drowned man, trying to determine whether it is Michael's or not, Cathleen cuts the string that holds the bundle. Examining the stocking, Nora speaks of knitting, dropping and picking up stitches. These images of spinning, knitting, and cutting suggest the actions of the Fates, classical goddesses of destiny who determine the length of human life as they spin and cut the thread of life. Maurya's speech of resignation at the end of *Riders to the Sea* has been

compared to the ending of a Greek tragedy, Sophocles' *Oidipous Tyrannos* (c. 429 b.c.e.; *Oedipus Tyrannus*, 1715), in which the chorus says that no mortal is happy until he has passed beyond life's pain. Maurya's vision of the dead Michael riding the gray horse as an omen of doom has a biblical flavor.

“---. He went by quickly; and ‘the blessing of God on you,’ says he, and I could say nothing. I looked 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.”

(*Riders to the Sea* – 70)

It would be a mistake, however, to read Synge's allusions too strictly. Some of these images may have been suggested by other sources. Synge does not force such parallels; rather, he uses them to add color and a mythic scale. Synge also uses images of sacraments. Water, often a sign of baptism and life, here takes away life, but the people have no choice but to turn to it for their living. The bread of life, a cake that is baking on the turf fire, goes uneaten by Bartley as he leaves without his mother's blessing. When she tries to correct this oversight he is already beyond her help.

The humble cottage in which the play is set is like an island itself, small and vulnerable in comparison to the large, dangerous world outside. The beauty of Synge's one-act play, which takes approximately half an hour to perform, is in its language and its simplicity. It presents the clear line of the tragedy itself, seen in its final hours. The players in this drama are not at fault for what happens to them. Instead, this is a tragedy of a fate that cannot be avoided and in the face of which there is no alternative but stoicism and acceptance. *Riders to the Sea* opens with Cathleen and Nora's anxious waiting for the news about their lost brother Michael's fate in the sea upon which Maurya's only living son Bartley decides to go to the sea. After Bartley's leaving his family, the tension of the play rises with Maurya's vision that she claims to have seen upon the sea about the deaths of her two sons. As her vision comes true as reflected, the play ends with her lamentation and submission to the fate. Therefore, the play instantiates, in Synge's own words, “the glory and power of the waves” through creative and destructive dynamics of water. In their search for life in the sea to feed themselves, the islanders are faced with a tragic end. Yet agency of the sea is not only limited with its dualistic nature as a life-giver and life-taker,

but this power can also be extended to its narrative capability as revealed in Maurya's vision. This paper, therefore, aims to pinpoint the sea as an indomitable agency in the analysis of Synge's play with a particular emphasis on its onto-epistemological dimension in the framework of material ecocriticism.

Synge's *Riders to the Sea* illustrated the agentic power of 'a rough and perilous sea', and the playwright makes use of his observations that he specifically refers to his book - *The Aran Islands*. In this book, Synge's observation is that he dwells on the islanders' oneness with nature. Oona Frawley, likewise, states that

"Aran provided first-hand experiences of the sea's ruthlessness and the constant negotiation with weather that curagh-travel demanded. Synge repeatedly notes the threat of drowning in *The Aran Islands*, and variously experiences exhilaration, terror and profound dejection – all aspects of the sublime – in the face of churning sea."

*(The Cambridge Companion to J.M. Synge – 17)*

In other words, Synge's observations about the vigorous sea and the ways it shapes lives of the islanders are mirrored in *Riders to the Sea* as reconciliation between the imaginative character and the real community. The play, therefore, embodies important place of the sea and its agentic force for the islanders.

The islanders' dependence on the sea is initially portrayed through the simple setting of the play: "Cottage kitchen, with nets, oilskins, spinning-wheel, some new boards standing by the wall, etc." (*Riders to the Sea* - 59). These simple objects of the peasant life are actually Synge's "primary means of making at least one aspect of the sea palpable and concrete on the stage – the sea as the source of livelihood for the islanders. The objects symbolically and implicitly stand out to represent peasants' tightly-knitted life with the sea. Yet their connection with the surrounding water does not always help them survive; instead, it brings a tragic end to their lives as in the case of Maurya's family. The play illustrates that this tragedy lies in the death of men by drowning, and women are left behind to suffer and survive alone. As a case in point, when Bartley, Maurya's son, decides to go to the sea, the mother voices her worry, asking: "What way will I and the girls with me, and I an old woman looking for the grave?" (*Riders to the Sea* - 63). However, he does not obey her mother, and his visit to the sea brings

his own death. Losing the last man of her family, Maurya describes the terrible fact of their lives:

“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 every one of them and they coming to the world – and some of them were found and some of them were not found, but they’re gone now the lot of them ....”

(*Riders to the Sea* - 71)

Although they depend on the sea for survival, their attempts in the sea end with death, and male figures appear to sacrifice their lives in this way. Nearly all the male members of this island are riders to the same unappeasable sea and their riding turns into a path to their death. While men die, women endure, Maurya, as the spokeswoman said;

“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, and you can hear the surf is in the east, and the surf is in the west, making a great stir with the two noises,---.”

(*Riders to the Sea* - 73)

More than this, the sea in Synge’s *Riders to the Sea* plays the dualistic nature, functioning as both the provider for the family and as its potential destroyer. In this regard, the presence of the sea in the play corresponds to its symbolic meanings as a symbol of the dynamism of life and an image simultaneously of death and of life. This duality is recognized by Maurya in that she indicates destruction of the sea, saying that “for when a man is nine days in the sea, and the wind blowing, it’s hard set his own mother would be to say what man was it” (*Riders to the Sea* - 72). The powerful sea, not always in positive terms, interacts with human beings in an continuous process. In this instance, the sea emerges as a means of living while unpredictable conditions cost the peasants’ lives. In this context, ontological presence of the sea is at the forefront of the action considering that physical force of the water is deeply felt through Maurya’s sons in the sea.

Interestingly enough, it has to be recognized that the sea-figure cannot be restricted to its physical formations in *Riders to the Sea*. This is to say that the connection between the sea and people can be traced in another way. To specify, it is possible to explore narrative agency of matter through Maurya’s vision on the sea. When Bartley leaves without his mother’s blessing,

the girls, Cathleen and Nora, persuade Maurya to go to the sea and give the bread to Bartley as he forgets to take. When Maurya returns, she appears disturbed and describes her vision to her daughters:

“I went down to the spring well, and I stood there saying a prayer to myself. Then Bartley came along, and he riding on the red mare within the gray pony behind him. [She puts up her hands as if to hide something from her eyes] The Son of God spare us, Nora! [...] 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 bless 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 looked 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.”

(*Riders to the Sea* - 70)

The importance of the sea is repeatedly emphasized through frequent reference to its conditions. Catherine and Nora refer to the turbulence of the sea, being worried about Bartley’s intended journey. Maurya also comments about the tempestuous sea revealing her constant nervousness and tension about the safety of her sons. In fact, sometimes the sea appears to indirectly enter the stage. Gusty sea-breeze blows open the door and later the sea-water comes dripping into the room when Bartley’s body is brought in.

Synge has presented the sea in *Riders to the Sea* as an unscrupulous force that indiscriminately destroys both the good and the bad, and it reverses natural order by taking away the young to leave the older generation to lament. This is evident in Maurya’s comment about Michael’s stick – “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” (*Riders to the Sea* - 65). Yet in their perpetual battle with the sea, the Aran folks acquire a rare moral strength, heroism and stoic endurance. Bartley fully aware of his eminent death does not hesitate to sail to Galway.

The stage-props in *Riders to the Sea* are closely associated with the sea. The nets and the oilskins establish fishing as their occupation’ the white boards, the rope and the nails are meant for burial reminding us of the destructiveness of the sea. The bundle containing Michael’s clothes is soaked in seawater and the cake is made for Bartley to be eaten during the sea journey.

These props attempt to establish a few signs of human identity against the absolute devastation of the sea.

The religious beliefs and customs of this Celtic community are also closely associated with the sea. Though formally the Aran islanders perform Christian rituals, their concept of the universe being a hostile place where man is a victim of the malicious forces of nature, is almost pagan. Like pagans, they are full of superstitions about the 'black hags' and the 'star-crossed'. They also believe in supernatural vision such as Maurya's witnessing of Michael's spectre on the gray horse following Bartley riding the red mare, the reference to the vision of the 'Bride Dara' confirms this view. The spring-well also has supernatural associations. However, the paganism is finally overpowered by Maurya's deep Christian faith at the end of the play. When she invokes his blessings upon the souls of all the living and the dead, she achieves a spiritual triumph over the sea. Aran Islands provided first-hand experience of the sea's ruthlessness and the constant negotiation with weather that Irish travel demanded; Synge repeatedly notes the threat of drowning in The Aran Islands.

In Synge's play, *Riders to the Sea*, the universal drama of life and death has been symbolized by the presence of the sea. It is an elemental power against which the characters of the play struggle and strive. It is a grim force, contradicting which the human characters in the play achieve heroic identity. The sea in this play controls the whole situation, of both nature and human beings, though remaining off stage. The sea's unseen presence fills the mind of both the characters and the audience. As a background, as a living character, as a force of nature, as an agent of destiny, as a villain, the sea plays a great role throughout the whole play.

Here the playwright highlights the tie between human beings and the agentic matter in a way that this vision can be associated with Barad's notion of agential realism with an emphasis on material and discursive competence of matter. This ability of matter enables to produce meanings so matter involves in an onto-epistemological realm. Bearing this in mind, the presence of matter in the context of the play is not restricted to its nature of existence, but the sea also comprises epistemological sphere. This amounts to saying that the narrative ability of the sea is unveiled in Maurya's vision. The agentic power of the sea is epitomized through her vision of death on the sea in which she becomes sure of her loss, justifying that "all forces and flows (materialities) are or can become lively, affective, and signaling" (*A Political Ecology of Things* - 117). From this vantage point, the interaction between the sea and Maurya is revealed



owing to the narrative capability of matter. The sea both illustrates its own story and discloses the actuality of death for the islanders. Thus, Synge's sea appears to be 'a storied matter' which becomes a text itself. In this regard, Maurya reads the text or recounts the story of the sea enmeshed with the story of her sons through her vision.

In conclusion it can be said that, the sea has become a source of inspiration and a dominating element in various types of works of throughout the history. As a case in point, the presence of the sea is of utmost importance in heroic literature of ancient times as observed in Homer's "Odyssey" where the heroic figure goes through a journey in the sea and metamorphoses into an ideal and mature hero in this process. In Old English period, the sea plays a great role in the adventures depicted in Beowulf. In Romantic poetry, for instance, in Samuel Taylor Coleridge's (1772-1834) "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" (1798), the sea is the main setting in the mariner's tragic story where he is able to appreciate the power of nature in time. In another example by Matthew Arnold (1822-1888), the sea suggests the idea of separation and loss of religion and faith in "Dover Beach" (1867). Virginia Woolf's (1882-1941) *The Waves* (1931) is based on a relation between the movements of waves and the stories of different characters in a way that the stream of consciousness technique is embedded in this correlation. By virtue of the analysis of Synge's *Riders to the Sea*, agentic power of the sea alludes to another function as it becomes the focal point of the work since it dominates the life of the Irish peasants in two opposite ways as a source of survival/life and trauma/death. Although the title of the play alludes human endeavour to control the sea, its vigorous power is deeply felt by the islanders considering that their fates are shaped by its powerful presence. The play appears to reveal agentic capacity of matter and adds to its spectrum in its display of narrative ability of the sea. Therefore, the existence of the sea in this work can be highlighted within the arguments of material ecocriticism in that the sea becomes a kind of story-teller in Synge's play and exposes its onto-epistemological dynamics.

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