

## **“No man at all can be living forever, and we must be satisfied”: A Critique of J.M.Synge’s *Riders to the Sea* as a Greek Tragedy**

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### **Abstract**

Tragedy, as a form of drama, is as old as drama itself, and the ancient Greek tragedies bear an example of this. Even Aristotle, while theorizing about the tragedy in his *Poetics*, frequently mentioned the ancient Greek tragedy; thus, Greek tragedy, in a way, became the role model of the tragedy at that time. Such tragedies always had its association with religion; critics often consider they were a tribute to Dionysus, the Greek God. With its unique structure, familiar stories, and employment of chorus, these tragedies were a treat to watch. Along with entertaining the audience, Greek tragedies always bear profound moral teaching, useful for our day-to-day life. In the hands of the trio of tragedians – Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides – Greek tragedy saw its fullest growth, and they even evolved it from time to time. Naturally, there were attempts to recreate and imitate such extraordinary plays all over the world, including in England. In Ireland, J.M. Synge’s *Riders to the Sea* was such an attempt in the genre of a one-act play in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This paper is a detailed examination of Synge’s play and will be a critique of *Riders to the Sea* as a Greek tragedy.

**Keywords:** Aristotle, Fate, Greek Tragedy, *Poetics*, Symbolism.

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Like all other literary genres, tragedy, too, has always been a product of society and its audience. For example, Shakespeare’s audience used to enjoy an entirely different kind of play than the audience of T.S. Eliot or Harold Pinter. However, with the evolution of time, the concept of tragedy also varied from time to time, from country to country. In England, tragedy

saw the fullest growth during the Elizabethan period, especially in the hands of Kyd, Marlow and Shakespeare. Among them, it was only Shakespeare's tragedies that came closer to the role-model of tragedy, prescribed by Aristotle in his *Poetics*. According to Aristotle, a tragic hero must be a person of high rank so that his fall from that position can be intensified. However, in the early twentieth century, especially in the hands of John Galsworthy, we witnessed a different kind of tragic hero. Galsworthy's hero is an ordinary day-to-day person instead of a person of any high rank; his *Justice* (1910) is a clear example of this. In America, this kind of tragedy dealing with an ordinary person was popularized by Arthur Miller, as evident from his famous 1949 play *Death of a Salesman*.

The Irish playwright J.M. Synge's *Riders to the Sea* (1904) is one of the few plays of the Modern Period which carries almost all the features of a Greek tragedy. The play is primarily based on Synge's own experience in the Aran Islands in western Ireland, where he spent his life from 1898 to 1901. It was actually W.B. Yeats, who suggested Synge to observe the people of the Aran Islands and the latter at once accepted the suggestion. Synge was highly impressed by the unique lifestyle and cultures of the Aran people, about whom he wrote in detail in his four-part essay book *The Aran Islands*, published in 1907. At the same time, he did not fail to notice the hard life and sufferings of the native people in "isolation in the face of a universe that wars on them with winds and sea." (Synge 20). His *Riders to the Sea* is about such kind of sufferings and struggle; even Synge's many other plays are also primarily influenced by the life of such Aran people, including his masterpiece, *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907).

One of the prominent features of Greek tragedy is its unification of plot; that is to say, the main plot of a Greek tragedy is mainly concerned with climax and denouement with very little or no diversion of the plot. Even Aristotle, in his *Poetics*, considered the plot as the soul of a tragedy and was against any kind of diversion in the main action. When we go through *Riders to the Sea*, we at once realize that the play is concerned with a single action. Set on the island of Inishmaan, the play basically presents the story of Maurya and her two daughters Cathleen and Nora. Before the action begins, Maurya has already lost her husband, husband's father and four of her sons in the sea. Michael is her other son, whose death has been confirmed by Cathleen and

Nora by observing his remaining belongings in the course of the play. Maurya's attempt to stop Bartley, her last surviving son, from going to the sea takes a large portion of the play. Once again, Maurya succumbs against the wrath of the sea as Bartley also dies in his journey. Maurya's lament over such loss and her stoic personality has its connection with the main action; even Cathleen and Nora's attempt to hide Micahel's belongings is also no diversion.

This unification of action in the play actually conforms to the Unity of Action – one of the three unities mentioned by Aristotle in his *Poetics*, and strictly maintained by the Greek tragedians. The other two unities – Unity of Time and Unity of Place – have also been strictly followed by the dramatist here. As a one-act play, the whole action of the play takes place within the single revolution of the sun, and the play can be read in a single sitting. Aristotle did not speak much about the Unity of Place in his *Poetics*; nonetheless, Greek tragedy used to follow this unity also. The overall action of *Riders to the Sea* takes place in Maurya's cottage in Inishmaan; even action such as Bartley's death, which takes place outside the cottage, has only been narrated by Maurya instead of taking place on the stage.

Fate always plays a pivotal role in Greek tragedy, especially in the plays of Sophocles and Aeschylus; even fate sometimes plays the role of a character in such tragedies. In *Riders to the Sea*, the role of fate is played by the sea – the giver and taker of life. During his visit to the Aran Islands, Synge closely observed the difficulty people faced therein, leading their life amidst the islands; this play accurately captures such hardships. Maurya has lost his six sons in the sea along with her husband and husband's father; they all had to go to sea as it is their only source of income, the only source of livelihood. Her uttering at the ending part of the play is quite significant: "They're all gone now, and there isn't anything more the sea can do to me...." (Synge 11). With the death of Bartley, the only surviving son, the role of the sea might have ended, but the life of Maurya and her daughters is definitely going to be a worse one.

The motto of Greek tragedy is less character, more action, and all the major plays of Sophocles, Aeschylus or Euripides are examples of this motto. This is mainly because to keep the focus on the main plot and on the protagonist, around whom all the actions take place. Here,

the audience also find there are only three characters who play a significant role – Maurya and her two daughters, Cathleen and Nora. Bartley appears only for a brief moment, and the group of Men and Women only appear at the ending part of the play. The primary action follows Maurya, who mourns the death of all her sons and husband, and at the end of the play is quite content that Bartley will get a proper burial. Throughout the play, Cathleen and Nora are trying to hide the death of Michael by hiding his belongings.

In Greek tragedy, the protagonist is often a person of high rank, such as a king or queen, so that their fall can be intensified. Aristotle, in his *Poetics*, also pointed out that a tragic hero must be better than an average person. In Synge's play, though Maurya is an ordinary person, in her sufferings and stoicism, she becomes one with the all tragic heroes. Readers can at once find a similarity between Maurya and Oedipus in her stoic uttering at the ending part of the play:

“It isn't that I haven't prayed for you, Bartley, to the Almighty God. It isn't that I haven't said prayers in the dark night till you wouldn't know what I'd be saying; but it's a great rest I'll have now, and it's time surely” (10).

The Greek tragedians were against the mixing of comic and tragic elements in their plays to maintain the Unity of Action and to ensure a grave tone throughout the play; Aristotle also hated the idea of mixing comic and tragic elements in tragedy. But such kind of mixing is noticeable in English literature, especially in the prominent tragedies of Shakespeare. His *Hamlet*, *Macbeth* or *King Lear* involve comic characters and situations, famously termed as comic relief. It is noticeable that unlike Aristotle, Dryden in the 17<sup>th</sup> century supported such kind of mixing in his *Essay of Dramatick Poesie* and interpreted such tendency as a part of our human life itself. But Synge's play here strictly follows the Greek concept and maintains a serious tone throughout the play. The play begins with the anticipation of Michael's death and ends with Bartley's death and Maurya's acceptance of her fate. Even in the subplot of Cathleen and Nora, there is no deviation as far as the grave tone is concerned.

Unlike the Elizabethan Revenge tragedy, which used to present every kind of violence and horror on the stage, Greek tragedians were strictly against any kind of presentation of horror

on the stage. Yes, there was violence and horror even in the Greek tragedy, but instead of presentation, they were merely narrated by any other character or Messenger in the play. Thus, the audience witness that an event like Oedipus' blindness in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* is narrated only. Such kind of narration actually provides scope to readers or the audience to associate them mentally and psychologically with the mental sufferings of the protagonist. Though there is very little violence in *Riders to the Sea*, nonetheless, an event like Bartley's death, caused by the knock of a grey pony, has only been informed by one of the Women in the play.

Use of symbol and irony is a part and parcel of Greek tragedy, so also of Synge's *Riders to the Sea*. From the very beginning of the play, numerous ominous symbols have been used to suggest something destructive. For example, the symbols of the black cat, whiteboards and grey pony all predict the ill happenings. "These people make no distinction between natural and supernatural" (Page 86), wrote Synge in his *The Aran Islands*. This is evident from Maurya's hallucination of Michael riding a grey pony, even after his death. However, this hallucination itself symbolizes the doom of Bartley. The play is also full of dramatic and tragic ironies, which bear similarity with that of Sophocles and Euripides.

Chorus is an integral part of a Greek tragedy and often plays a valuable role in the play. It usually consists of a group of characters, who often comments on the action of the play, and even provides much information regarding the characters and action of the play. In the plays of Sophocles or Aeschylus, the chorus often performs some dancing movements on the stage while commenting on the actions of the play. In English tragedy, the use of the typical chorus of Greek tragedy is rare. However, John Milton, in his *Samson Agonistes* (1671) and Shelley in his *Prometheus Unbound* (1820), used such chorus to the fullest, as did T.S. Eliot in his 1935 play *Murder in the Cathedral*. One should not expect a typical chorus in a one-act play like Synge's *Riders to the Sea*, although Maurya herself plays that role quite well. Like the chorus of any Greek tragedy, she comments here on the incidents and happenings of the play from time to time. Thus, we come to know about Michael's riding of grey pony through Maurya's hallucination. At the same time, through her description of such hallucinations, the audience at once anticipates the probable death of Bartley.

In *Poetics*, Aristotle divided the plot of a tragedy into two categories: simple plot and complex plot. Aristotle spoke in favour of a complex plot, which, unlike simple plot, includes dramatic devices like Anagnorisis and Peripeteia. Anagnorisis in tragedy suggests a peculiar moment in the play when the protagonist discovers something of paramount importance. Peripeteia, on the other hand, is connected with Anagnorisis and signifies the reversal of fate of the protagonist. These two devices were frequently used by the Greek tragedians in their plays, mainly by Sophocles. It is J.M. Synge's sheer brilliance that within a one-act play, he employs such devices. The Anagnorisis in *Riders to the Sea* occurs when Maurya saw the ghost of Michael on the grey pony, riding behind Bartley; as Maurya says: "I seen the fearfulest thing" (Synge 7). With this discovery, Maurya is sure that Bartley is going to die, and her fate is also going to change. Bartley was the only surviving son in the family and was also the only earner; with his death, Maurya and her family have to struggle hard to survive amidst such hostile circumstances; thus, Maurya says: "My heart's broken from this day" (8).

Another essential feature of Greek tragedy is high-sounding poetry; they were written in the medium of poetry, rather than prose. Aristotle also described poetry as an essential element of tragedy in his *Poetics*. Synge's play, although written in prose, it bears a certain poetic spirit, found in the ancient Greek tragedies. While going through the speeches of Maurya at the ending part of the play, one will be bewildered by the way the dramatist provides the poetic essence through prose. One is sure to find a poetic tone; a poetic spirit in Maurya's such utterings:

"Michael has a clean burial in the far north... Bartley will have a fine coffin out of the white boards, and a deep grave surely. What more can we want than that? No man at all can be living for ever, and we must be satisfied" (12).

Like all other tragic heroes, Maurya here also evokes the two most desirable emotions of a tragedy – pity and fear. We at once feel pity for her such loss, for her such sufferings and also we fear that such kind of incidents may happen with us. Towards the ending part of the play, Maurya, like all Greek tragic heroes, attains a certain kind of stoicism, and through this, she truly accomplishes the catharsis of pity and fear.

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