

## Aran Island and Synge's Riders to the Sea

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### Abstract

Synge's play "Riders to the Sea" is based on his direct learning of the Aran Islands. While on the Aran Island of Inishmaan, Synge heard the record of a man from Inishmaan whose body showed up on the shore of an Island province Donegal, which inspired "Riders to the Sea". The play deals with the series of unfortunate incidents that frequent the Maurya family living close to the sea shore of one of the Aran Islands. The members of this family form the microcosm of the whole community of the Island. This paper entitled "**Aran Island and Synge's Riders to the Sea**" looks to investigate the life of Aran islanders as displayed in Synge's "Riders to the Sea".

**KEYWORDS:** Island, incidents, microcosm, life

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Synge's play "Riders to the Sea" is based on his direct learning of the Aran Islands. While in Paris Synge met W.B. Yeats and it was he who advised him to give up Paris and to go to the Aran Islands where he can find a new and fresh creative impulse to fire up his writings. Consequently, he made several visits to the Aran Islands which lie off the west coast of Ireland, spend quality time there, examined the habits, the manners and the method of life of the general population there and subsequently in 1907 published a journal entitled "The Aran Islands". What pulled in Synge to the Aran Islands was a strong desire to be away from the scholarly and the sophisticated towards the basic and the primitive, where traditional folk ways still gave a style and respect to men's lives that was missing in Paris or Dublin. In spite of the fact that Synge's journal, "The Aran Islands", is hued by his very own feelings, he proves himself to be a sharp observer of the life of Aran Islanders. He may have disregarded the religious and otherworldly parts of the general population he expounded on, as a few critics have suggested; however in most other respects he gives us a genuine and clear picture of life on these islands. His journal is likely the best prologue to his dramas. He took some of his plots from the tales he heard in the Aran Islands. For instance while on the Aran Island of Inishmaan, Synge heard the record of a man from Inishmaan whose body showed up on the shore of an Island province Donegal, which inspired "Riders to the Sea". This paper entitled "**Aran Island and Synge's Riders to the Sea**" looks to investigate the life of Aran islanders as displayed in Synge's "Riders to the Sea". A legitimate investigation will demonstrate that in this play, Synge has given a precise image of the propensities and convictions of the poor sea faring individuals in the islands of Ireland.

The play "Riders to the Sea" deals with the series of unfortunate incidents that frequent the Maurya family living close to the sea shore of one of the Aran Islands. The members of this family form the microcosm of the whole community of the Island. These people are fishermen -cum-farmers. From the play it becomes evident that the Aran Islanders

earn their living partly by fishing, partly by agriculture, partly by selling their produce and animals on the mainland for which they will have to face the dangers of the sea .Bartley's directions to his sisters, prior to leaving for the mainland, about the works they should perform in his absence are as follows:

BARTLEY [Working at the halter, to Cathleen.] :Let you go down each day, and see the sheep aren't jumping in on the rye, and if the jobber comes you can sell the pig with the black feet if there is a good price going.

MAURYA: How would the like of her get a good price for a pig?

BARTLEY [To Cathleen]:If the west wind holds with the last bit of the moon let you and Nora get up weed enough for another cock for the kelp. It's hard set we'll be from this day with no one in it but one man to work.

He instructs his sisters to take heed that their sheep don't jump into the field of rye. He tells them to sell the pig with the black feet if they can get a decent cost for it. He also asks them to gather enough Kelp (a kind of sea- weed) from the ocean shore which, when burnt, yields valuable substances like iodine, and which is also utilized as manure in their fields. In Bartley's case, he finds it necessary to visit the mainland to sell the red mare and the grey pony which belongs to his family. There references to the sea make it obvious how inextricably intertwined is an islander's life to the sea. Moreover, Bartley's guidelines shed light on the occupations which the Aran Islanders seek after to acquire their living.

The play also gives the readers some insights into customs and rituals related to death and mourning observed in the Aran Islands. The key word that is linked to death in this play is a ritual called "Keening", i.e., a lamentation for the dead. He gives us a point by point depiction about this custom in his journal "The Aran Islands". Ladies will weep for the dead and will sway their bodies to and fro as if in extreme grief. This happens when Bartley's dead body is brought into the house:

ONE OF THE WOMEN: It is surely, God rest his soul.

[Two younger women come in and pull out the table. Then men carry in the body of Bartley, laid on a plank, with a bit of a sail over it, and lay it on the table.]

CATHLEEN [To the women, as they are doing so.]:What way was he drowned?

ONE OF THE WOMEN: The gray pony knocked him into the sea, and he was washed out where there is a great surf on the white rocks.

[Maurya has gone over and knelt down at the head of the table. **The women are keening softly and swaying themselves with a slow movement.** Cathleen and Nora kneel at the other end of the table. The men kneel near the door.]

Thus "Keening" is a form of ceremonial grieving observed as a custom among Aran Islanders.

Another custom which is connected with death in Aran Islands is the 'making of the coffin'. According to the custom of the island, when someone dies, the male member of the family should make a casket for the dead. In the absence of a surviving male member, the obligation of coffin making is entrusted upon the neighbors. When we read through the play, we learn that Maurya had already obtained new wooden boards for making a coffin in case her son Michael's body washes ashore. But unfortunately that doesn't happen and as if by a cruel twist of fate, the same wooden boards are used for making a coffin for the burial of her other son Bartley. With Bartley's demise Maurya's household was left with no male members and so the neighbors were requested to make a coffin for Bartley's burial:

CATHLEEN [To an old man.]: **Maybe yourself and Eamon would make a coffin when the sun rises.** We have fine white boards herself bought, God help her, thinking Michael would be found, and I have a new cake you can eat while you'll be working.

THE OLD MAN [Looking at the boards.]: Are there nails with them?

CATHLEEN There are not, Colum; we didn't think of the nails.

ANOTHER MAN: It's a great wonder she wouldn't think of the nails, and all the coffins she's seen made already

Yet another reality that we understand from perusing the content is that even though the Aran Islanders are Roman Catholic Christians by religion, they are slanted more towards Pagan convictions than towards Christianity. There is one instance where a young minister guarantees that Maurya need not stress as God will positively hear her out prayers and will protect her only surviving child Bartley, rather than being consoled, Maurya reacts by saying that the priest remains unaware of the doings of the ocean. From this remark, it turns out to be certain that the Christian confidence of these islanders isn't extremely solid. Curiously enough, the youthful cleric in the play is presented as an absentee priest. The superstitions current among the islanders makes it evident that though they are Christian by creed, they are really Pagan by practice. Despite being assured by the priest that God will keep her only surviving son Bartley safe, Maurya was hell bent on stopping Bartley from making a trip to the mainland since she had a premonition that he will perish in the sea. As Bartley goes out, Maurya mourns that by dusk she will have no child left in this world. This is a clear indicator of her fatalistic attitude and the fact that her superstitions have a stronger hold on her than her religion. There is an instance in the play where Maurya reveals to her girls that she had seen Michael riding the grey pony behind Bartley who was riding the red mare suggesting possible doom for Bartley. Her words indicate that she had seen the ghost of Michael. Despite the facts that they belong to a Christian family, her two girls don't question the claims that their mom makes. Rather they trust it blindly, accept it as an awful sign and end up startled. Moreover there is another reference in the play about a prominent

superstition in the island, the one about Bride Dara having seen a dead man holding a child in his arms. Besides, there is a scene where Maurya predicts the following day's climate based on the position of a specific star which shone opposite to the moon. Toward the end of the play, after every male member of her family has perished in the sea, when she communicates her acknowledgment of her pitiful destiny, she doesn't make any reference to the reassurances which Christianity offers like the eternity of the spirit. All she says is that "No man at all can be living for ever, and we must be satisfied." These words resound not with the Christian ideas like the salvation, eternity of the spirit or the promise of afterlife but with stoic acceptance of cruel fate. Every one of these episodes proposes that Maurya and the Aran island community she represents are increasingly Pagan in practice though they are Christians by religion.

Thus we can say that Synge's "Riders to the Sea", with its regional coloring unfurls before the reader the life of the Aran Islanders and offers him a rich and fresh reading experience. A proper reading of this play will familiarize the reader with every aspect of the Aran islanders like their beliefs, habits and manners.

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