

Riders to the Sea Study Guide

Riders to the Sea by John Millington Synge

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Plot Summary

Riders to the Sea is extolled to have been John Millington Synge's greatest play, and is likely based on the second visit he made to the Aran Islands. Set in a cottage on Inishmaan which is the central island of the Aran group, the story follows Maurya and her daughters as they discover that the sea has taken even more from them.

Having already lost four sons, one husband, and a father-in-law to the perils of the sea, Maurya is understandably bereft when the son considered her favorite, Michael, seems to be lost at sea. For nine days she mourns, searching the sea for his body, but by the time Bartley is taken by the sea as well, Maurya is all but numb to the sorrow of loss she has had to bear, and continues to bear.

Bartley is lost when the pony he is leading to Galway fair knocks him into the rough sea, he having decided to go despite Maurya's assertions that she will be left without so much as a single son to be the man of the house. Maurya accepts the final loss gracefully, observing that finally the sea can take no more from her. She sprinkles holy water on Bartley's body and Michael's clothing, which are all that she has from him and then acknowledges the truth that no man can live forever, and in the end we have no choice but to be satisfied.



A Play In One Act: Scene: Pages 7 - 8

Summary

This brief scene surrounds events that took place in the early 1900's on an island called Inishmaan located west of Ireland. A young woman returns to the cottage where her sister has just finished preparing a cake and putting it in the pot-oven by the fire. Cathleen has just sat down at the spinning wheel when her younger sister Nora enters and asks where their mother is. Cathleen tells her their mother is lying down, and hopefully sleeping. Nora takes a parcel out from under her shawl. The young priest had gotten them from a man who drowned near Donegal and sent them along to see if they belonged to their brother Michael.

Cathleen wonders if the young priest will prevent their sole surviving brother Bartley from taking the horses to Galway fair, but Nora tells her that he'd assured her that God would never leave her mother destitute and without a single living son. As such, he wouldn't interfere in Bartley's plans and talk from other locals confirm that Bartley does intend to go and has already gone down to see if another boat would be sailing during the week. The sea is bad, and likely to be worse when the tide turns. Nora asks if she should open the bundle, but fearing their mother will waken before they finish, Cathleen hides the bundle in the turf-loft for now.

Maurya comes down just then, berating Cathleen for using too much turf, and then sits at the fire, commenting that Bartley surely won't go in this weather - that the priest will stop him. Nora tells her that he won't stop Bartley and that she'd heard others saying he would be going. She adds that she is sure that her brother will return home shortly, as she can see the hooker tacking to the west.

Bartley arrives then, asking after the piece of new rope they'd purchased in Connemara, and Nora gives it to him. As he sits making a halter for the red mare, he explains that this is the only boat going for two weeks and the fair is rumored to be good for horses this year.

Maurya berates him for wanting to go, bemoaning the cost of white boards they'd purchased for a coffin for Michael, and no man to make it. Bartley reminds her that they'd been searching nine days already, but Maurya insists that even a hundred or a thousand horses wouldn't be enough to compensate her for her only remaining son.

Analysis

The initial and ongoing theme in this segment and throughout the remainder of the play is the sea and its deathly cost to one family. Maurya raised six sons and laments the most recent disappearance and likely death of her son Michael - the fifth son to be taken by the sea though not yet returned.



Struggle and poverty is also a strong theme as the first character introduced, Cathleen, works to finish kneading cake to put on the hearth and spinning at the wheel. It is clear that this family survives by their willingness to work hard. Cathleen's character is structured to reveal her position as the oldest girl in the family, and her responsibility to maintain their lives while their mother grieves yet again. Her character is strong and capable.

Nora is introduced as another sibling, younger than Cathleen. The author uses her introduction to reveal the dependence and level of faith the family has in God. The priest gives Nora a shirt and stocking that may or may not belong to her brother Michael, in the hopes that they can identify them, building suspense as to whether or not Michael lives.

Cathleen's insistence that they hide the bundle lest their mother see it foreshadows Maurya's introduction as a grief-stricken old woman who is at the brink of collapse from sorrow and leaving the reader hanging as to whether the items are Michael's or not.

Bartley is introduced and revealed as the sole remaining son alive, foreshadowing his demise when he announces his intentions to go to the Galway fair regardless of the risk of bad weather. Maurya is convinced that his death will soon follow, and that she'll have lost all of the men in her life. Her character is weak and anxious while Bartley is determined and fearless. The author uses Maurya's reservations as a means of building the suspense regarding Bartley's trip.

Discussion Question 1

What chores are being done by Cathleen and how do they reveal the period of time in which this scene was written?

Discussion Question 2

What do Nora and Cathleen hide from Maurya and why?

Discussion Question 3

Where is Bartley going, and why is Maurya so determined to keep him home?

Vocabulary

lamenting, anxiously, turf, gable, querulously, tacking, halter



Riders to the Sea: Scene: Pages 9 - 10

Summary

Bartley ignores her lamenting, instead giving instructions to Cathleen regarding the sheep, and the sale of the pig with the black feet if the jobber comes by. Keeping an eye on the ship coming in, he grabs his tobacco and purse, and tells the family he'll return in two, three or perhaps even four days if the wind provides problems.

Maurya turns away, covering her head with her shawl and bemoaning the fact that Bartley refuses to hear her or accept that she is trying to keep him from the sea. Cathleen chastises her gently as Bartley heads out quickly, intending to ride the red mare and lead the gray pony behind him to the pier.

As Bartley leaves, Maurya cries out, bemoaning his loss already, convinced that by nightfall she will have lost him as well. Cathleen asks why she wouldn't give her blessing at least, there having been enough sorrow without her sending him away with a harsh or unlucky word as the last he hears from her.

Maurya pokes at the fire absently, mistakenly moving the warm turf away and Cathleen steps in to replace it. She realizes then that they've forgotten to give Bartley bread for the journey, and Cathleen tells Maurya that she can probably catch him at the spring well and send him on his way with 'God speed you' so that his mind will be easy.

Maurya takes the walking stick Michael brought back from Connemara earlier, and heads out to intercept Bartley while Nora heads to the ladder to retrieve the bundle from the young priest. When the girls are sure she is gone, Cathleen questions Nora about where the body was found, and asks her for a knife to cut through the rope, already perished with salt water.

Analysis

The author again reveals the time period in which this scene takes place by way of the instructions Bartley leaves for Cathleen while he is away. Maurya shows her lack of faith in her daughters when she insists Cathleen wouldn't likely get a good price for the pig. Without a son, and just the girls at home, Maurya is convinced they'll never survive again foreshadowing a time in which they likely will have to.

The theme of water and its perils continues as Maurya insists her last remaining son will be dead when night falls and begins to mourn his passing before he is even near the pier.

Cathleen shows the family to be superstitious when she berates her mother for sending Bartley out without so much as God speed in his ear, and sends her to meet up with him



at the spring well to correct the departure and to give him the bread that had been forgotten for his journey.

Maurya continues to be described as an 'old woman', feeble and unsteady on her feet, ready for the grave. The author uses her diminished capacity as both a means of setting the stage for further sorrow, and to build the strength of Cathleen who inadvertently must act as the matriarch for the remaining family members.

Maurya makes an observation that in most of the world, the elderly leave things behind for their children when they pass, but in her world, the young men die first and leave their things behind for the elderly.

The sea is again shown as relentless and deadly as the priest described to Nora how the body was found and the string perished with salt water reaffirms the difficulties identifying someone who has been in the water for days.

Discussion Question 1

When does Bartley intend to return, and what tasks does he ask Cathleen to take care of while he is away?

Discussion Question 2

What do they forget to give Bartley and what opportunity does that give both Maurya and her daughters?

Discussion Question 3

Where did the priest tell Nora that the bundle of clothing came from and how was it found?

Vocabulary

jobber, kelp, tongs, poteen, crowed, perished



Riders to the Sea: Scene: Page 11 - 13

Summary

Nora and Cathleen open the bundle from the priest to find a shirt and a stocking. They try to match the shirt comparing the flannel, and though it seems to be the same, it is also one of the popular rolls from the shop in Galway and could likely have belonged to someone else as well.

Nora picks up the stocking, and after counting the stitches she remembers having dropped four stitches when she made the second of three pairs for him, and the count matches that mistaken pair. She holds onto the cloth, sad at how pitiful it is that there is nothing but this bit left of the man who was a great fisher and rower.

Maurya comes in, the cloth wrapped bread still in her hand. Cathleen asks her why she didn't give it to Bartley. Maurya keens, saying she's had a fearful vision of Michael riding the gray pony behind Bartley, but Cathleen tells her that is impossible as Michael had been found and had had a clean burial by God in the north.

Maurya insists she saw him however, and was so stunned that she was unable to say a thing to Bartley. Convinced that Bartley is now dead too, she insists that Eamon be called to make a coffin as she is sure she won't live long now that they are all gone. She lists the sons, husband and father-in-law she'd lost to the sea while Nora and Cathleen hear noises that sound like crying near the seashore. Maurya's litany of losses continue as the door opens and women enter. Maurya wonders if they are bringing Michael or Bartley, convinced that there is a power in the sea that can so destroy a body in nine days that even a mother wouldn't recognize him.

Analysis

The ongoing theme of loss and death are strong in this segment as Nora and Cathleen identify the clothing the priest gave Nora as Michael's. It continues as Bartley's body is brought back to the house.

Maurya's character is revealed to have second sight when she sees Michael on the gray pony behind Bartley foreshadowing his death and confirming Michael's death. A strong indicator of the superstitious, and religious undercurrents in this family is shown as even Cathleen and Nora take her vision seriously, already mourning a new loss although it hasn't as yet occurred while foreshadowing that it will occur.

Cathleen's character continues to act as the matriarch in the family, falling into the role as Maurya's grief consumes her. Maurya's grief is an ongoing theme as she is overwhelmed by the ongoing losses of the men in her life.



The cycle of life is also a theme as Maurya goes from matriarch to an almost child like behavior as she resigns herself to having lost all of the menfolk in her family and her eldest takes her place running the household and managing the remaining family.

Maurya alludes to the 'power of young men floating round in the sea', attributing an almost malevolent entity to the souls of those taken by the sea.

This segment reveals how little value women have on their own as Maurya is convinced that her life is over since her sons, husband, and father-in-law were taken by the sea. She doesn't consider the value of her daughters, or even contemplate the idea that they might take over the work there are no longer any men left to do.

Discussion Question 1

How do Nora and Cathleen reach a conclusion about the articles of clothing the young priest sent home with Nora, and what is that conclusion?

Discussion Question 2

Why doesn't Maurya give Bartley the bread she took down to the spring well with her and what conclusions does she draw from this experience?

Discussion Question 3

Who has Maurya lost to the sea by the end of this section, and in which ways were they lost?

Vocabulary

pitiful, rower, keening, impatiently, lamentation, destitute, threshold



Riders to the Sea: Scene: Pages 14 - 15

Summary

Cathleen tells Maurya that they've received bits of clothing that belonged to Michael from the north. Nora watches as men approach carrying something that drips water between them. One of the women who approached first confirms Cathleen's suspicions that Bartley's body is coming and asks how he drowned. The gray pony had knocked him off his horse and into the white surf of the sea.

Maurya goes to Bartley's body, kneeling by the head of the table while the girls gather around the other end. Maurya speaks aloud softly, saying the sea will no longer have a hold on her; or have her going to get Holy Water after Samhain. Now, she'll no longer care which way the winds run. She sprinkles holy water on Bartley and on Michael's clothing, telling Bartley that she'd prayed for him. Now, she can rest, she tells them.

Cathleen asks Eamon and Colum to make a coffin, saying she has a cake ready for them while they work. Colum realizes there are no nails which is surprising given how many coffins Maurya had seen made. Cathleen reminds the men that she is old and broken.

Nora reminds Cathleen of how much more Maurya had cried on the day that Michael drowned and that Michael had always been a favorite of hers. Cathleen believes Maurya is simply cried out, and has no sorrow left in her to share.

Maurya sets a cup upside down on the table and announces that they are all together now and prays for mercy on their souls. She adds that Bartley will have a fine coffin and a deep grave while Michael's burial at sea was clean and what more can they ask for than that. No one lives forever, she adds and when life ends they must be satisfied.

Analysis

Grief and death continue to be a major theme in this section as Cathleen informs Maurya that Michael's clothing was sent to them from the far north, having died at sea as Nora watches while yet another body is brought up the walk to the house.

The author continues to use water as symbolism for death and loss, describing the track left by water dripping from the body as it is brought to them at the house and Maurya's immediate assumption that Bartley had drowned rather than perished in another manner. Maurya puts her empty cup upside down on the table, another symbol for a life that is finished, empty, and without chance of refill.

Religion is also an ongoing theme as men and women alike go to their knees while Maurya talks about how much the sea has taken from her. She speaks to Bartley as though he hears her still. The use of Holy Water sprinkled on the body and on Michael's



clothing are further indications of their religious beliefs as well as Maurya's comments that she will have no more reason to go down to get Holy Water after Samhain. Gathering strength from their beliefs, Maurya observes that they are all together now, and it is clear that she is eager to join them.

The sea is given attributes of malevolence by Maurya who describes it as having no more power over her now that her final son is dead. Her daughters aren't mentioned, and this furthers the impression that women have less value than the menfolk in this time and place.

Cathleen is once again shown as taking the responsibility of matriarch on, organizing for Bartley's coffin to be built, and excusing her mother's lapse when they realize no nails were purchased, despite the number of coffins she'd seen built for her family.

The final portion of this scene reveals the strength and resilience of the people who lived in this time and place as Maurya gracefully accepts the recent deaths of her last two sons, reminding the others that in life we cannot want for more than a good death and a clean burial. No man lives forever, she reminds them and the reader.

Discussion Question 1

How did Bartley lose his life and how does that compare with Maurya's earlier vision?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Nora believe that Michael was her mother's favorite son, and does Cathleen agree with her or not based on her response?

Discussion Question 3

What does Maurya take comfort in after she learns that both Bartley and Michael have died?

Vocabulary

fonder, keening, grace, satisfied



Characters

Maurya

Maurya is an old woman who learns that she has lost her son Michael to the ocean. She has white, tossed hair and wears a shawl.

Maurya has lost six sons - Shawn and Stephen, lost in the great wind, and discovered in the Bay of Gregory of the Golden Mouth; Sheamus, lost in a dark night without a trace; Patch, who drowned when a curagh turned over; Bartley, who is brought to her after the gray pony knocks him off and into the great surf of the sea; and Michael, whose clothing is given back as a way of identifying his remains.

Her grief is so all-consuming that she announces she won't live through it. After sprinkling holy water, Maurya says no man can live forever, and they must be satisfied.

Bartley

Bartley is one of Maurya's six sons.

He takes a length of rope and makes a halter for the mare so that he can ride down to the only boat headed to Connemara for the next two weeks or more. Bartley is trying to get to the Galway fair where rumor has it that good horses will be available.

As he works, he gives instructions to Cathleen while Maurya bemoans how difficult life will be if he is taken by the sea as well.

He is heading to Connemara when the gray pony he is leading to the bay knocks him into the violent surf and he drowns.

Cathleen

Cathleen is Maurya's oldest daughter and does her best to look after the home they live in. Although her mother, Maurya, still lives with them, Cathleen manages the household, kneading cake and spinning as well.

Cathleen and her sister Nora are all that remain of the eight siblings in their family, losing their sole remaining brother to a mishap by the sea during this scene, making for a total of six brothers lost as well as their father and grandfather.

Cathleen stands up to her mother, chastising her for not having given Bartley her blessing before he left, sending him with a hard word in his ear instead.



Nora

Nora is the youngest of Maurya's two daughters. She is the one that the young priest tasked with identifying the articles of clothing taken from a man who drowned in Donegal, on the off chance that they belong to her brother Michael.

Nora confides in Cathleen, and they both agree to keep the bundle from their mother until the clothing is verified to be Michael's for sure. When they forget to give Bartley bread for the trip to Connemara, Cathleen suggests Maurya catch up with him, and while she is gone, they examine the clothing articles.

Nora quickly identifies the stockings as the ones that she knitted for him - the second of three pair by the stitches she dropped between starting and finishing.

Young Priest

The young priest gives Nora a bundle containing articles of clothing and asking her if they belong to Michael. Despite his brief role in this scene, he is an important character as he sets the stage for the discovery of Michael's death, and also reassures the family that after losing so many of the men in their family to the sea, God certainly wouldn't take Maurya's one remaining son - Bartley.

Unfortunately, the young priests' faith in God is misplaced this time as Bartley meets his end in the sea just as surely as Michael had.

Stephen and Shawn

Stephen and Shawn are two of Maurya's six sons who were lost in a great wind, and their bodies found later in the Bay of Gregory of the Golden Mouth.

Sheamus

Sheamus is another of Maurya's sons who went out with his father and grandfather, and all were lost on a dark night with no trace of them ever found.

Patch

Patch is another one of Maurya's sons who drowns when his curagh turns over, his body brought back in half of a red sail.



Michael

Michael is another of the six sons Maurya brought into the world. He is found in the far north, the current having taken him for nine days before his body is found. He is identified by a stocking knitted by Nora and four stitches smaller at the top.

Eamon

Eamon is one of the men that Cathleen asks to make a coffin for Bartley's body with the fine white boards Maurya had bought in Cannemara.



Symbols and Symbolism

Spinning Wheel

A spinning wheel is a device used to spin flax and wool into thread. Used in this story by the eldest daughter Cathleen, it is symbolic of the time period this play is set in and reflects the difficulties of the life this family lived.

String

String is used to secure the parcel of clothing sent for identification to the family, and is so perished with salt water that the knot is black and the package must be cut open.

The perished string is symbolic of the lives lost to the sea.

Flannel

Flannel is the kind of material used to make clothing, and is the material used in the shirt that was recovered for identification by the family.

The material is symbolic of the cold climate that is frequent on the island.

White Boards

White boards are used in this story for the construction of coffins, and has to be purchased in Connemara.

The boards are symbolic of how convinced Maurya is that Michael is dead, having purchased the boards for his coffin even before learning of his fate.

Black Night

A black night refers to a night without a moon and in this story is symbolic of death. Maurya is convinced that if Bartley leaves as intended to go to the fair in Connemara, he will be dead by the black night like all of her other sons.

Turf

Turf is used in place of wood in the fire to cook with, symbolic of how difficult life is on the island where natural resources are often unavailable.



Turf is used as an insulating factor as well, stored in the loft to be used throughout the winters.

Dark Word

A dark word is the term Cathleen uses to describe the comments made by Maurya as her last living son leaves the house, intending to travel to the fair in Connemara.

Cathleen is so disturbed by Maurya's final comments to Bartley that she sends her after him with a hunk of bread rolled in cloth and instructions to break the 'dark word' by telling him 'God speed you' before he leaves.

This is symbolic of the superstition that often guided the lives of those in this time period.

Stocking

A shirt and stockings were found and sent to the family as a means of identification of Michael. The identification is confirmed by Nora who admits to having dropped four stitches on the second of three pairs she knitted.

The knitted stockings are another symbol of the hardships of life on the island for this family.

Black Hags

Black hags are the name given to the sea birds that are the only things that will 'keen' for Michael, lost at sea.

Symbolic of death, the black hags are scavengers of the sea, and harbingers of the end of a life.

Blessings of God or God Speed

The Blessing of God on you is the farewell one gave a family member or loved one who was leaving and to not do so was to send an unlucky or hard word in their ear instead. According to this scene, the unlucky or hard word can be reversed if the person leaving can be caught up with and the proper phrase spoken.

Symbolic of good fortune, people wished each other the God Speed or the Blessings of God which implied good outcomes to their endeavors and quite the reverse if the words were withheld.



Settings

Cottage Kitchen

A cottage kitchen is a term that applies to a small kitchen located on the ground floor of a cottage which is a term given to a small house that has a ground floor with bedrooms constructed in the roofspace.

Inishmaan

Inishmaan is the middle island of the Aran grouping and considered to be the most interesting of the islands west of Ireland.

Donegal

Donegal is the island on which a man's body washed up while Synge was staying on Inishmaan, and because of his clothing was suspected to have come from Inishmaan.

The Pier

The pier is where Bartley must ride in order to catch a boat if he wants to go to the fair on Connemara. It is significant because Maurya is convinced that if she keeps Bartley from the pier and the boat that is there, he will be safe, but Bartley dies in the sea anyway, thrown from the pony off the rocks into the turbulent water.

Connemara

Connemara is the place where the fair is being held and where Bartley hopes to catch a passing ship to.

Galway Fair

The Galway Fair is held on Connemara and Bartley is eager to go, having heard that this would be a good fair for horses



Themes and Motifs

Second Sight

In *Riders to the Sea*, the matriarch of the family, Maurya, is gifted with second sight - a gift commonly known throughout Celtic regions. Second sight is a natural occurrence and few doubt the visions seen by those who have the gift, as is the case with Maurya when she comes home to describe the vision she's had.

Maurya had gone down to the spring well to wait for Bartley to pass so that she could wish him God speed and give him a chunk of bread wrapped in cloth, but when he rides past on the red mare, she is unable to speak a word. The gray pony follows him, ridden by Michael - a son she is convinced is already dead. She saw him wearing new shoes and fine looking clothes and in that moment knows that she will lose Bartley as well.

Isolation

John Synge based this particular scene on an island that provides just enough isolation from the mainland that it remains separate and self sustaining. Its residents must eke out an existence from the land and from the waters that surround them.

Life on an island is different from life on the mainland in many ways. To begin with, there is no convenient supermarket to run to when something is required, and even simple things like rope or white boards must be purchased elsewhere and then brought in by boat.

This kind of isolation, along with the time period in which this scene takes place make for a lifestyle that forces all its residents to be more resourceful and more self sustaining. As such, Cathleen makes cake by hand and uses turf to keep the heat around the cook pot used, and then sits at the spinning wheel to spin. These tasks were commonplace.

Tragedy and Loss

Riders to the Sea is a play in one act that reveals the depth of one woman's tragedy and loss. Maurya is a mother who raised six sons and two daughters on an island west of Ireland. The lifestyle is one of hardship, taken from a time in the early 1900's and the scene describes the finality of loss as Maurya learns that both her sons Michael and Bartley have given their lives to the unforgiving sea.

Maurya has already lost her sons Stephen, Shawn, Sheamus, and Patch and suspects that Michael has also been taken from her when Bartley announces his intentions to go to the Galway Fair on Connemara. She begs him not to go, but Bartley is insistent citing the rumors that the fair will be good for horses. Maurya however considers the cost and



understands that since she has just the one son remaining, there are not enough horses available to make the journey worth the potential loss.

Maurya is so distraught that she can hardly wish him a good journey, and forgets to give him the bread for his trip. She hurries down to meet him, but is stunned silent when she sees Michael riding the gray pony behind him. Bartley continues to the pier, but before he can reach it, the gray pony knocks him off his horse and into the seething waters where he drowns.

Maurya is given Michael's clothing just before Bartley's body is brought up to the house, and Maurya realizes that the sea can no longer harm her. She will no longer have to pray for good winds or fetch holy water, knowing now that she can finally rest as her sons, her husband and his father are together and at peace. Her last thoughts are that no man can live forever, and beyond a fine coffin or a clean burial, what more can be asked?

Water

The scene John Millington Synge writes of is centered on an island off the west coast of Ireland and takes place in the early 1900's. As such, the water surrounding the island was a source of both good and bad for it's residents who depended on water for their survival, but also lost many of their own to the perils of such activity.

Maurya has lost four sons, a husband and a father in law when this scene opens, and during this scene, she loses her last two sons to the ocean as well. Despite her previous losses, and one son currently missing at sea and presumed drowned, her last remaining son is determined to take two of their ponies to the Galway fair. Bartley ignores her pleas, and heads down to the pier. Before he can arrive however, the pony he is leading manages to knock him off and into the ocean where he drowns.

Maurya is not surprised, and mourns the loss of her final two sons, acknowledging that the sea has now taken everything from her,



Styles

Point of View

Riders to the Sea by John Millington Synge is a play in one act that was originally performed in Dublin in 1904. The single scene is performed by four main characters, and a small group of men and women who act as mourners and plank bearers when Bartley's body is returned.

The scene is told from a third person, omniscient point of view, in which the narration is done by an entity that knows the actions and thoughts of all characters. This is evident as there are no first person addresses used and the characters are all intimately known by the author. The perspective in this scene is fixed, and doesn't change with subject matter or character introduction.

The scene is clear and focused, with no questions about who is telling the story or the order of events as they occur.

Language and Meaning

Language and meaning play a substantial part in this scene. The time in which this scene takes place is the early 1900's on an island off the coast of Ireland. As such, the language spoken is an older form of English, and their way of life is tied to the sea. The women still use spinning wheels, and make cakes in a pot oven using turf to keep the heat in. The sentence structure and speech patterns reflect an earlier time when phrases such as 'Herself does be saying prayers...' or asking 'Where is he itself'.

The structure of speech used is typical of the region in which they are located; including descriptive additions such as 'It's hard set we'll be...' in front of an action or task that is difficult, or reversing phrases such as is the case in the following sentence. 'We're to find out if it's Michael's they are, some time herself will be down looking by the sea' as opposed to a more current English phrasing which might be more like 'We're to find out if they are Michael's at a time when she is looking down by the sea'. This lends a credibility to the scene and a sense of realism to the events as they are described.

Structure

Riders to the Sea by John Millington Synge is a play that consists of only one scene presented together in one segment. The entire scene is only eight pages in length, and is set up with four main characters, and a few extras that make up the men and women who bring Bartley back up to the house after the gray horse knocks him into the turbulent water of the sea.



The entire scene revolves around the death of Maurya's last two of six sons, she having lost her husband and father in law previously as well. The scene reflects the hardships of life in that time period and the value of men over women. The play is brief but adequately reveals the depth of Maurya's loss and the peace she feels in believing that she will soon join them.



Quotes

If it's Michael's they are, you can tell herself he's got a clean burial by the grace of God, and if they're not his, let no one say a word about them, for she'll be getting her death, with crying and lamenting.

-- Nora (chapter 1 paragraph 8)

Importance: Nora reveals that this is what the young priest told her when he gave her the articles of clothing that he hoped she could identify. The quote is significant as it reveals the depth of pain that Maurya already suffers having lost so many of her menfolk to the sea already. The young priest has no desire to make her unhappiness any greater than need be.

Herself be saying prayers half through the night, and the Almighty God won't leave her destitute, with no son living.

-- Nora (chapter 1 paragraph 9)

Importance: Nora reveals this as information the young priest had given her, assuring her that Bartley will be safe on his journey to the Galway fair as the Almighty God wouldn't leave her with no living sons. The comment reveals the depth of their faith in God despite overwhelming losses already.

It'll be wanting (the rope) in this place, I'm telling you, if Michael is washed up to-morrow morning or the next morning, or the next morning, or any morning in the week, for it's a deep grave we'll make him by the grace of God.

-- Maurya (chapter 1 paragraph 26)

Importance: Maurya tells Bartley that he should leave the rope behind, sure that they will need it to bury Michael when his body is eventually found.

If it was a hundred horses, or a thousand horses you had itself, what is the price of a thousand horses against a son where there is one son only?

-- Maurya (chapter 1 paragraph 32)

Importance: Maurya tries to talk Bartley out of going to the Galway fair, regardless of how good the rumors had been that it would be for horses. Maurya is more interested in retaining her single remaining son than in selling the horses.

It's hard set we'll be surely the day you're drownd'd with the rest.

-- Maurya (chapter 1 paragraph 37)

Importance: This comment is made right after Bartley gives Cathleen and Nora instructions to follow while he is gone, telling them that it will be difficult for the two girl to manage. Maurya points out that it will be a great deal worse if he is gone as well.



I'll have half an hour to go down, and you'll see me coming again in two days, or in three days, or maybe in four days if the wind is bad."

-- Bartley (chapter 1 paragraph 41)

Importance: Bartley reveals just how much the sea affects his plans to travel and return, unaware that he won't return during his life again.

He's gone now, God spare us, and when the black night is falling I'll have no son left me in the world.

-- Maurya (chapter 1 paragraph 48)

Importance: Maurya has the gift of second sight, but her family takes that gift with a grain of salt as Maurya begs Bartley not to go. She is convinced that her son will die if he does, leaving her without a man in the house, and she is correct.

You'll see him then and the dark word will be broken, and you can say 'God speed you' the way he'll be easy in his mind.

-- Cathleen (chapter 1 paragraph 57)

Importance: Cathleen is disturbed by the way her mother said goodbye to her brother, sending him away with a harsh word and remorse. She encourages her mother to take a bit of bread to the spring well and correct the issue, superstitious and religious enough to believe that by doing so, Bartley will be safe.

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.

-- Maurya (chapter 1 paragraph 67)

Importance: Maurya observes how difficult it is to be left behind by her children, believing that parents should not outlive their children who are supposed to look after them in their golden years.

The young priest said he'd be passing tomorrow, and we might go down and speak to him below if it's Michael's they are surely.

-- Nora (chapter 1 paragraph 71)

Importance: Nora relays the message from the priest who gave her a bundle of clothing hoping that she would be able to identify who owned them, although they hope the clothing does not belong to Michael.

And isn't it a pitiful thing when there is nothing left of a man who was a great rower and fisher, but a bit of an old shirt and a plain stocking?

-- Nora (chapter 1 paragraph 90)

Importance: Nora laments the loss of Michael, his death now confirmed by the bits of clothing the priest gave her.



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.

-- Maurya (chapter 1 paragraph 110)

Importance: Maurya reveals the vision she had when she goes down to meet Bartley and give him his bread and a good word to speed his journey.