

Riders to the Sea (1904)

From *The Aran Islands* (section III):

Now a man has been washed ashore in Donegal with one pampooty on him, and a striped shirt with a purse in one of the pockets, and a box for tobacco.

For three days the people here have been trying to fix his identity. Some think it is the man from this island, others think that the man from the south answers the description more exactly. Tonight as we were returning from the slip we met the mother of the man who was drowned from this island, still weeping and looking out over the sea. She stopped the people who had come over from the south island to ask them with a terrified whisper what is thought over there.

Later in the evening, when I was sitting in one of the cottages, the sister of the dead man came in through the rain with her infant, and there was a long talk about the rumours about his clothes, and what his purse was like, and where he had got it, and the same of his tobacco box, and his stockings. In the end there seemed little doubt that it was her brother.

“Ah!” she said, “it’s Mike sure enough, and please God they’ll give him a decent burial.”

Then she began to keen slowly to herself. She had loose yellow hair plastered round her head with the rain, and as she sat by the door suckling her infant, she seemed like a type of the women’s life upon the islands,

The loss of one man seems a slight catastrophe to all except the immediate relatives. Often when an accident happens a father is lost with his two eldest sons, or in some other way all the active men of a household die together.

From *The Aran Islands* (section IV):

I asked if any one had seen [a recently drowned islander] on the island since he was dead.

“They have not,” he said, “but there were queer things in it. Before he went out on the sea that day his dog came up and sat beside him on the rocks, and began crying. When the horses were coming down to the slip [to be shipped for sale on the mainland] an old woman saw her son, that was drowned a while ago, riding on one of them. She didn’t say what he was after seeing, and this man caught the horse, he caught his own horse first, and then he caught this one, and after that he went out and was drowned. Two days after I dreamed they found him on the Ceann gaine (the Sandy Head) and carried him up to the house on the plain, and took his pampooties off him and hung them up on a nail to dry. It was there they found him afterwards as you’ll have heard them say.”

“Are you always afraid when you hear a dog crying?” I said.

“We don’t like it,” he answered; “you will often see them on the top of the rocks looking up into the heavens, and they crying. . . .”

Riders to the Sea was written in Synge’s family’s summer cottage in Wicklow in 1902, along with *The Shadow of the Glen* and *The Tinker’s Wedding*. Since 1898 Synge had already spent four summers in the Aran Islands, and would return for a fifth visit in fall 1902. His visits had turned him into a writer, furnishing him with his characteristic

themes and style. The single best background source for *Riders* is Synge's *The Aran Islands*, published in 1907. Out of it, Synge distills everything he's learned of the islanders' experience to create this extraordinarily concentrated tragic vision of life. Of the cycle of plays, *Riders* is the only one set on the Aran Islands. The inhospitable climate and immense hardships endured on the island served to set in relief the momentary beauties achieved in the lives of its people. Such oppositions make up the sum of human existence, no matter what the setting, and Synge would insist on both the darkness and the light in the worlds of all his plays.

Back in Paris in 1903, Synge discussed the play with Yeats and Lady Gregory, who were enthusiastic. James Joyce, however, called it a "dwarf drama." Despite his criticism, Joyce had already memorized Maurya's final speech, and he would produce the play in Zurich in 1918 with the English Players, casting his wife, the Galway-born Nora Barnacle, as Cathleen.

As the National Theatre Society prepared for the first production, the actresses sought out an old peasant woman in the Dublin tenements to coach them in authentic keening, and one actor played dead to inspire the rehearsals. The actress playing Cathleen learned to spin on a spinning wheel brought in from the west of Ireland, and Synge insisted on authentic Aran pampooties, hand-made cowhide moccasins designed for clambering over rocky shores.

The story is simply told. An old woman, Maurya, has over the years lost her husband, her father-in-law and four sons to the sea. For nine days now she's anxiously watched the surf for the body of her son Michael, lost at sea. Her last son, Bartley, prepares to travel by sea to the Galway horse fair; Maurya's asked the local priest to stop him, but the priest has assured her that the Almighty God won't leave her destitute without a son. Resisting his mother's pleas not to go, Bartley leaves without her blessing. Heading up the path to give him her blessing and bread for the journey, she watches him go by astride his red mare, leading a gray pony. Her blessing sticks in her throat as she has a vision of her son Michael in new clothes, riding the grey pony behind. Hope and dread meet in this revelation born of her experience of the worst. Returning to tell her fearful story to her two daughters, she learns that they've just identified Michael's body by remnants of clothing retrieved from a body washed ashore off Donegal. Reversal and recognition occur simultaneously. "No sooner do Cathleen and Nora establish Michael's death than Maurya enters keening because she claims to have seen 'the fearfulest thing'—her son Michael riding the grey pony. The reversal that Synge has managed here—in apparent contradiction to the literal truth—is linked to a stunning recognition, which is that Bartley will die," as Eugene Benson says. Her lament for Michael is barely broken by the sounds of keening outside, when Bartley's body is brought in wrapped in a bit of sail—the grey pony knocked him into the sea. The boys will have clean burials by the grace of the Almighty God, who did nothing to prevent the sea from taking all her sons. Maurya sprinkles Michael's clothes with the last of the Holy Water and puts the empty cup downwards on the table, no longer needed. With relief she lays her hands together on Bartley's feet and blesses the dead and the living. "No man at all can be living forever, and we must be satisfied."

Reflecting the comfort he drew personally from the islanders' ability to blend Christian with pagan beliefs, Synge draws his symbols from Christian, folklore and pagan sources. Revelation 6:1-8: "And I looked and beheld a pale horse, and his name that sat upon him was Death. Exodus 15:1: "The horse and his rider hath he thrown into the sea." Aran Island folk wisdom advises you never to mention a priest while fishing, never to return for a forgotten item after having left for a trip, never to omit a blessing in farewell. Aran fishermen don't learn to swim, because once the sea's got you, you can't be reclaimed. A similar bit of Celtic superstition identifies a spring well with death. Bartley's putting on Michael's shirt suggests a justifiable fratricide, Michael having returned to claim what is his and to have company in the netherworld.

Material objects take on a "shining specificity" [the phrase is Erich Auerbach's in *Mimesis*] in the world of the play. As Synge described it, "Every article on these islands has an almost personal character, which gives this simple life, where all art is unknown, something of the artistic beauty of medieval life. The curaghs and spinning-wheels, . . . the home-made cradles, churns, and baskets, are all full of individuality, and being made from materials that are common here . . . they seem to exist as a natural link between the people and the world that is about them." Defining gestures are always concrete; props have both use value and symbolic value. Cathleen's opening pantomime, as she prepares the soda-bread for Bartley's journey and then sits down at the wheel to spin out yarn for knitting the family's socks, directly foreshadows the dramatic role the props of bread and sock will play in the tragedy. The evidence of Bartley's shirt is inconclusive, because it's made of the typical flannel woven throughout the islands. Almost anyone could be wearing the same flannel. But Nora immediately recognizes the knitted sock as her own handiwork, for its four dropped stitches. In his ill-omened departure, Bartley's forgotten to ask for the bread for his voyage. Taking it to him on the path by the spring well, Maurya is thwarted by the terrible vision of Michael's ghost riding the grey pony, in new clothes that suggest the resurrection of the glorified body promised with the Last Judgment. The bread will feed the neighbors who will have to fashion the coffin to bury Bartley.

The stage dressing includes oil skins and nets, signs that the household makes its living by the sea. Incongruously, there are clean white (newly planed) coffin boards and a length of new rope, both purchased on the mainland for the proper burial of Michael's body should it be recovered. There are no trees on Aran to supply coffins, and the new rope is for lowering the coffin into the grave. Bartley fashions the new rope into a makeshift halter for the grey pony, which later knocks him into the sea. Taken together the props convey the islanders' ambivalent relation to the sea, both source of life and most frequent cause of death. Those who make their living by the sea will die at sea.

KEENING (from *The Aran Islands*)

While the grave was being opened the women sat down among the flat tombstones . . . and began the wild keen, or crying for the dead. Each old woman, as she took her turn in the leading recitative, seemed possessed for the moment with a profound ecstasy of grief, swaying to and fro, and bending her forehead to

the stone before her, while she called out to the dead with a perpetually recurring chant of sobs.

All around the graveyard other wrinkled women, looking out from under the deep red petticoats that cloaked them, rocked themselves with the same rhythm, and intoned the inarticulate chant that is sustained by all as an accompaniment.

The morning has been beautifully fine, but as they lowered the coffin into the grave, thunder rumbled overhead and hailstones hissed among the bracken.

In Inishmaan one is forced to believe in a sympathy between man and nature, and at this moment when the thunder sounded a death-peal of extraordinary grandeur above the voices of the women, I could see the faces near me stiff and drawn with emotion.

When the coffin was in the grave, and the thunder had rolled away across the hills of Clare, the keen broke out again more passionately than before.

This grief of the keen is no personal complaint for the death of one woman over eighty years, but seems to contain the whole passionate rage that lurks somewhere in every native of the island. In this cry of pain the inner consciousness of the people seems to lay itself bare for an instant, and to reveal the mood of beings who feel their isolation in the face of a universe that wars on them with winds and seas. They are usually silent, but in the presence of death all outward show of indifference or patience is forgotten, and they shriek with pitiable despair before the horror of the fate to which they all are doomed.