CHAPTER III

Riders to the Sea: The Visuals of a Ritualistic Tragedy

Riders to the Sea is the first play written by Synge, even though The Shadow of the Glen is the first of his plays produced. In form and spirit it is different from The Shadow of the Glen. Unlike other plays, Synge set it on Aran. In The Shadow of the Glen, one of the unhappy comedies set on Wicklow, he reveals a sense of cool irony, an inclination for the grotesque and an overwhelming enthusiasm for gaiety which are absent in Riders to the Sea, a solemn tragedy of great sublimity. But the ritualistic atmosphere of the wake, introduced in a mock-style in the play is developed in Riders to the Sea with all its auditory and visual possibilities for an intimate theatre experience to be communicated to the audience.

Riders to the Sea follows strictly a ritualistic pattern from beginning to end. This pattern manifests itself in the moral concept of Maurya's attitude to life changing from one state to another with deep conviction, and each mood is created by a particular mode of thought and feeling with clear aesthetic structure. The tragic pattern itself is woven into the ritualistic structure of the play. These two inextricably form a rhythmic relationship. The structure has a close similarity to the myth and ritual of Greek tragedies, especially those of
Sophocles. "The play's stark austerity has been celebrated as one of its most classical features."¹ It has an archetypal imagist colour also, which has lent the work a rare charm and universality. The play communicates itself to the audience at these levels: myth, ritual, images and symbols. It is an audio-visual method of understanding and representing human experiences "which are prior to the arts and sciences and philosophies of modern times. To understand it (it now appears) we must endeavour to recapture the habit of significant make-believe of the direct perception of action,"² which underlies Synge's theatre.

As a playwright Synge's success lies in recapturing a distinct form of dialogue tinged with the Gaelic beauty of the remote past. The sense of being involved in something of the distant past gives the audience a feeling of reverence. The play actually begins after all the major events have taken place. The mystery is maintained by focusing upon the tragic at a level beneath or prior to any rationalization of human intercourse. This mystery with all its ambivalences and suggestiveness revolves round a vague psychic state of the principal character Maurya with dramatic, sensory and emotional immediacy. The ritualistic movement of the action of the play is discernible


in the eternal movement of the riders to the sea. "Synge captures the timeless rhythm of recurring death. . . . The riders to the sea are the beginning and the ending, the first and the last riders, victims of the relentless repetition of the eternal pattern." The deep structure of this pattern reveals the encounter of man with more than man.

Synge stimulates in the audience an interest in the total scheme of the play through the ritualistic structure. It takes us to the deepest centres of man's individual and collective consciousness. In fact, all art can be traced to the roots of rituals observed in communal participation for which myth may provide the background. Anthropological and sociological studies also have proved that human instinct has a fascination for narrative and impersonation. All this is possible only through an organic linking up with the ritualistic expression and interpretation of the power of natural forces, the cycle of life and death and the life of the past, present and future.

The mythical milieu

Riders to the Sea is placed against a mythical background. Synge has effectively exploited the mythical dimension of Aran life for this play. Man's encounter with the sea is as old as life on this earth. Nowhere can one find success for man in these encounters. In all histories, legends, fictions, parables

and ballads we get exciting events from man's fight with nature. The sea is the embodiment of all the forces, creating and destroying. Man depends on it for his life and he may be drowned in its deep whirlpools. Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*, Melville's *Moby Dick*, etc. describe this type of spiritual and mythical confrontation with an invincible sea which, according to Whitman, is always sounding something deep, dark and mysterious. The woman's sense of loss is equally mythical. She is destined to give birth to the children who are fatally claimed by (evil) forces beyond her understanding. Everywhere in human experience woman is thus subjected to untold miseries caused by the loss of the children and the menfolk of the family. Consequently, this sense of loss has become a part of the human consciousness. Synge has relied on the collective consciousness of man who is represented here by the primitive ways of the Aran folk. Their methods of life reveal themselves to us in terms of the archetypal image of the sea and man's struggle against it. "The recurrent pattern of tragedy is re-enacted with the intense sense of loss met by the sorrowful mood of resignation."^4

In *Riders to the Sea* Synge has dramatically used the mythical background for effective communication in theatre. Here communication is made easy with a statement and declaration of the mythical values of a particular ethnic group. The idea of inevitability pervades its entire life. As Ernest Boyd says:

Synge concentrates the action upon essentials, and by a wonderful employment of the means legitimately at his disposal, he causes Riders to move swiftly to the climax, whose inevitability broods over each scene.  

**Ritualistic design**

As a play *Riders to the Sea* can be appreciated only in the context of its cultural tradition. The atavistic forces rumbling in our consciousness are appropriately visualized. These mythical roots could be visualized only through rituals. The rituals have a strong grip on myths. In the primitive stages and on the threshold of anthropological changes, rituals and myths helped man to understand his total being in relation to the community, nature and creator. Ritual and myth hand in hand widened the wisdom of human understanding and equipped mankind better for mutual communication.

The Aran Islands present themselves as a strange land, where a distinct ethnic group dwells with a ritualistic attitude to life. Synge had the fortune of knowing their life from 1898 onwards at close quarters. He felt that these people preserved a mystical urgency in their relationship between life, religion, ritual and art. Artaud also visited the Aran Islands in search of a primitive theatre which might proclaim to the world that they possess "a culture which was one with life."  


attempt was to transform this ritualistic way of life into theatrical images. It is a metaphysical theatre rooted in reality. Synge noticed with great interest the sacrificial attitude with which the fisherfolk carried out their activities.

**Ritualistic tragedy**

The play when produced can be interpreted on the stage as a ritual enactment even though ritualistic tragedy may lose much of its charm and involvement when taken out of its environmental setting. A twentieth-century urbanized audience can also feel the tragic intensity with a sense of directness and depth. They can be completely under the spell of the make-believe. They can witness the terrible combats of the human protagonist (Maurya) and the superhuman antagonist (sea). The audience might be moved towards different attitudes of mourning, expectation, lamentation and finally resignation. On the stage the central character's fate on certain occasions is felt to be theirs. In ancient Greek tragedies a tragic ritual was performed mostly by a chorus. For instance, the chorus in *Oedipus* is still the element that throws most light on the ritual form of the play as a whole.

The ritualistic scheme gives the play a dimension of audience participation. The audience see an event which might occur in their life also. The whole community becomes a single unit in the concept. The audience have the feeling of committing themselves to a cause higher than any in their ordinary mundane life. Thus the chorus
represent the audience and the citizens in a particular way, not as a mob formed in response to some momentary feeling, but rather as an organ of a highly self-conscious community. Something closer to the conscience of race than to the over-heated affectivity of a mob.7

This type of choric and audience participation is called for by the sacrificial nature of the play. Riders to the Sea represents a great sacrifice in terms of theatre language. The very title implies the inevitable sacrifice of the riders to the sea. It seems that it is a perpetual process, a ritual, an eternal journey and an inescapable sacrifice. The men-folk of the Aran Islands go to sea for feeding their dear and near ones. They have to go, and we find that this is a pilgrimage from which they will never come back. The riders themselves may be aware of the fact that they are on an eternal journey. And those who send them—the mothers, sisters, wives and children—too are quite familiar with the last journey of their men-folk to the sea! Still they cannot bring themselves to prevent them from galloping into the mysteries of wild waves. In Riders to the Sea Maurya tries to stop her youngest son Bartley from going to sea on the ground that his brother's dead body might be recovered and brought home any time and then there must be a man at home to dig a deep grave and observe the funeral rites.

The play moves fast like a ritualistic dance where the dancer may even be in trance. It also provides us with wonderful

moments of trance in which Maurya rakes the turf fire out, forgets her identity as a subject of defeat and reveals herself to be a spirit, challenging the antagonist and placing herself above it. Finally this ritual performance tires the performer who cannot maintain the frenzy and comes down to earth to understand her individual place in the scheme of cosmic existence. This type of ritualistic action moves forward rapidly accompanied by the wild magic of the waves. Maurya seems to be like the sea and her actions like the waves. The association of Maurya's physical and spiritual world with the external and internal nature of the sea cannot be casual. That the pattern of the tragedy has only one rhythm—the action of Maurya and that of the sea combined into one—is clear. This rhythmic pattern and its ritualistic visual elements need to be considered to display Synge's awareness of stagecraft.

Nine phases of the ritualistic development

The rhythmic action of the play can be perceived as nine phases of rising and falling. Each phase ends with a clue for the next to begin. It can also be noted that each phase or unit has the tragic pattern of Greek plays. That is, the action will present the purpose-passion-perception cycle. The motive/movement is deemed to be the purpose which lies in the spiritual psyche of the characters. The motive must bring out, in the second stage, great passion or suffering and agony which is a stage of purifying oneself. The process of purgation or purification helps the character to perceive more clearly the
internal pattern or net-work of life. This understanding of the inner life radically changes character, situation and complete atmosphere operating a peripetia similar to Greek tragedy. *Riders to the Sea* can be seen as moving along this pattern of purpose-passion-perception cycle. Maurya's life has these three crucial stages. The nine points of this emotional development and descent in action are discernible in the play for the sake of better and more effective communication. This division of the play into nine units is justified by and demanded from the inner flow of the action of the plot:

One: Cathleen and Nora. From Nora's entrance from outside with a bundle to Cathleen's going up a few steps on the ladder to hide the bundle.

Two: Cathleen, Nora and Maurya. From Maurya's first entrance to Nora's reference to Bartley, "He's coming now, and he in a hurry." *(Plays, I, p. 7)*

Three: Cathleen, Nora, Maurya and Bartley. From Bartley's first entrance to his exit from the scene after having wished God's blessing on his mother and two sisters.

Four: Cathleen, Nora, and Maurya. From Maurya's "He's gone now, God spare us, and we'll not see him again" *(Plays, I, p. 11)* to her exit with Bartley's bread.
Five: Cathleen and Nora. From Cathleen's "Wait, Nora, maybe she'd turn back quickly" (Plays, I, p. 13) to Cathleen's "Keep your back to the door the way the light'll not be on you" (Plays, I, p. 17) till Maurya's entrance.

Six: Cathleen, Nora, Maurya. From Maurya's entrance to the last sentence of her recollection of the son's death "it was a dry day, Nora--and leaving a track to the door". (Plays, I, p. 21)

Seven: Cathleen, Nora, Maurya, old women and men. From the entrance of the old women to the stage direction, "Cathleen and Nora kneel at the other end of the table. The men kneel near the door." (Plays, I, p. 23)

Eight: Cathleen, Nora, Maurya, women and men and Bartley's body. But in Maurya's world of action, there is only one character, that is herself. From Maurya's "They're all gone now" (Plays, I, p. 23), to the stage direction, "Maurya stands up again very slowly and spreads out the pieces of Michael's clothes beside the body, sprinkling them with the last of the Holy Water." (Plays, I, p. 25)

Nine: Cathleen, Nora, Maurya, Bartley's body, women, men, the dead and living mankind. From Cathleen's "She's quiet now and easy" (Plays, I, p. 25) to the last
stage direction "she kneels down again" (Plays, I, p. 27).

The play opens to reveal a small cottage kitchen, with nets, oil skins, spinning wheel and some new boards standing by the wall. "Cathleen, a girl of about twenty, finishes kneading cake and puts it down in the pot oven by the fire, then wipes her hands and begins to spin at the wheel" (Plays, I, p. 5). Here the audience get two levels of visual images. One is that of a realistic cottage kitchen, quite poor and bare. The other is a suggestion struck by the spinning wheel—the wheel of fate. Nora, Cathleen's younger sister can put her head in at the door only after the meaning of the stage set and its background has been established.

The play begins with only one character on the stage as in The Playboy of the Western World and The Shadow of the Glen. Of course in The Shadow of the Glen Nora Burke is the only living character on the stage with her husband Dan Burke lying "dead" and covered up on the bed. This is a pattern to be specially noticed in Synge's plays. Even though Nora and Cathleen are physically present our attention is drawn to Maurya, the protagonist. Their dialogue exposes Maurya's troubled state of mind, age and exhaustion:

Nora /In a low voice/. Where is she?

Cathleen. She's lying down, God help her, and maybe sleeping, if she's able. (Plays, I, p. 5)
Nora is coming in softly, taking a bundle from under her shawl. We feel that something untoward has happened and they try to hush it up. The reference to "a shirt and a plain stocking were got off a drowned man in Donegal" (Plays, I, p. 5) stops Cathleen working at the wheel with a sudden movement. This is enough to attract the attention of the audience. We are to find out "if it's Michael's they are, sometime herself will be down looking by the sea" (Plays, I, p. 5). Nora says: "She's moving about on the bed. She'll be coming in a minute" (Plays, I, p. 7). Descriptions of Maurya communicate to us, the audience, the figure of an old woman, worn out and broken and, at the same time, forced to perform a ritualistic function.

The first phase in a low key prepares us with the essential details of an unfortunate incident. Maurya and her daughters have to wait for Michael who was drowned in the far north. It becomes more pungent and tragic when it overlaps with Bartley's "going this day with the horses to the Galway fair" (Plays, I, p. 5). Even his fate is predictable as the young priest is reported to have said, "I won't stop him . . ." (Plays, I, p. 5). The ironical effects of these words are carried over to the forbidding fear of the girls. Hence even before the protagonist enters, the style and nature of the action are neatly outlined. Maurya merely physicalizes it.

In the second phase we find Maurya taking stock of the situation. She is the bitter embodiment of loss and waste. It seems that, like a ritual, she has been giving birth to
five young men and quite unwillingly sacrificing them to the wild waves. The last hope is now pinned on Bartley who will surely be stopped by the young priest. The second phase thus ends with Maurya's hope and expectations diminishing. Even though Bartley has not presented himself, we get a very good description of him for whom "there's a cake baking at the fire for a short space and Bartley will want it when that tide turns if he goes to Connemara" (Plays, I, p. 7). When he appears he lives up to the impression already created of strength and impulsiveness.

In the third phase of the development of the ritualistic plot we witness Bartley rushing into the room in a hurry. He is "speaking sadly and quietly" (Plays, I, p. 9). This tone of sadness and quietness suggests an event sadder and graver. He is asking for the new rope which was bought in Connemara. The answer to this enquiry is startling. Cathleen coming down says, "Give it to him, Nora; it's on a nail by the white boards. I hung it up this morning, for the pig with the black feet was eating it" (Plays, I, p. 9). In this reply by Cathleen she has unknowingly shuffled the suggestive symbols of crucifixion, death and destruction. The new rope links all these symbols. Here the rope, white boards, nail and the pig with the black feet are all reminders of death and doom. "According to Irish mythology pigs are sacred both to the moon-goddess of the sea and to the death-goddess. Pigs were sacrificed to Manannan Maclir, the god of the sea, in order to ward off evil, including
death by drowning."\(^8\) Since Maurya has not sacrificed the pig, her family has exposed itself to the danger of drowning. The rope and white boards have been specially kept ready for the burial of Michael’s dead body if and when retrieved from the wild waves. Hanging on a nail in the given circumstances projects the picture of Christ undeservedly nailed on the cross. The pig with the black feet will emphatically accentuate the tragic force latent in the reply. Maurya’s request to Bartley to leave the rope and her explanation of the purpose of these objects kept by her strengthen the tragic irony. Hearing the imperative to leave that rope Bartley takes it, which is an obvious act of disobedience to his mother. At the same time it provides a powerful visual contrast. It also prophetically links Bartley’s life with his elder brothers’ fate who were all lost at sea. Bartley does not appear to be very much concerned with the scolding or complaints of his mother, because he feels

The first unit of the play brings home to our mind the fatalistic view of the ancient Greeks. The dance of death does not spare any of Maurya’s men-folk. In all these points of fatalism, supernatural elements and form of the play, *Riders to the Sea* is very similar to Greek tragedies.\(^9\)

---


\(^9\) Robin Skelton analyses these points in detail, comparing them with the structure of Greek tragedies in *The Writings of J. M. Synge*, p. 49.
The strongest dramatic thrust of the phase is a mother's appeal to her only son who is also on the point of leaving her. To him the most important thing is to secure the best price but "what is the price of a thousand horses against a son where there is one son only?" (Plays, I, p. 9). Bartley is deaf to these arguments and rashly making arrangements to be away from home.

The image of two old mothers--Maurya and the Sea--claiming and struggling and fighting hard for the young man continues in the following sections with an added effect accumulated by the preceding ones. That is the central struggle and the conflict which can be interpreted as the "spine" of the play. The resultant force and energy that rests with the sea proves fiercer and the other mother, Maurya has to succumb to a sense of total loss. Bartley's quick exit with the halter is replete with echoes of a sacrificial journey never to return. The repetitions of his fatalistic statements prepare the audience for the final catastrophe.

Bartley taking the halter says:

I'll ride down on the red mare, and the grey pony will run behind me. . . . The blessing of God on you. (Plays, I, p. 11)

He then rushes out as if he cannot even control himself. This mad rush followed by Maurya's helpless cry "We'll not see him again" (Plays, I, p. 11), creates in the audience a feeling of inevitability.

Maurya's laments start the fourth unit of the ritual.
Very often Maurya like a deified ritualistic performer, sees events which others cannot. She foresees experiences which her kith and kin cannot even dream of. Here is the role of Tiresias in Greek tragedies. The difference between the blind prophet and Maurya is to be seen in their cognitive coherence and the effect of their ironic statements. The blind prophet does not meet with the bitter consequences of his oracular exhortations. But in the case of Maurya her awareness of doom and fall is like flashes of immortality. And these pieces of information and expressions of their indelible impressions ironically befall herself. She becomes a victim of her own visions.

In the fourth unit of the ritualistic play is seen Maurya's mental struggle between the awareness of mortality and an intense desire to mask that awareness. After Bartley has run out recklessly, Maurya is reminded by Cathleen of his bread which she has been preparing. It is a mother's blessing that Bartley required. Cathleen gives us a very good visual picture by referring to her brother's mental attitude, "why wouldn't you give him your blessing and he looking round in the door?" (Plays, I, p. 11). This question forces the audience to think that Bartley, in spite of his panic exit, lingers looking round in the door and expecting his mother to come out and shower her blessings on him. Maurya's mind is now under the grip of a sense of futility which disconnects it from immediate events and from surface consciousness when she
is thus "raking the fire aimlessly without looking round" (Plays, I, p. 11) perfectly absorbed within herself.

The act of Maurya's taking the bread to Bartley is really akin to a solemn mass which is again a communal ritual. Almost like a priest Maurya is moving on a narrow line between two worlds, that of the dead and that of the living. A priest at the altar associates the life of the mortals in this world with the holy spirits of the dead. The piece of bread used in mass is taken for the flesh of Christ that rejuvenates and rekindles new life in those who accept it. Similarly mother Maurya takes the piece of bread almost in a sacrificial attitude to Bartley, her only son. Unfortunately Bartley does not accept it. Hence he is not absolved of his sins and is not saved and brought back to life. Giving Bartley's bread to Maurya, Cathleen suggests: "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" (Plays, I, p. 13). This is a movement of hope of resurrection but it is immediately marred by a reference to death, when Maurya is leaning on "the stick Michael brought from Connemara" (Plays, I, p. 13). Once this reference to death is made then there is a conglomeration of death and its nightmarish visitations. Maurya's mind is full of such impressions of agony lying deep, ready to come out at the slightest provocation. As Synge says:

The maternal feeling is so powerful on these islands that it gives a life of torment to the women. Their sons grow up to be banished as soon as they are of age, or to live here in
continued danger on the sea; their daughters
go away also or are worn out in their youth
with bearing children. . . .

Next is the inspection unit. "At this stage in the play
some change of mood or pace, some variation of tension are
necessary, to give relief for highly charged emotions in both
characters and audience, to forward the action. . . ."11 Now
that Maurya is gone out of the house, Nora and Cathleen take
the bundle out for close examination. To their surprise and
horror Nora, by counting the stitches on the stockings, identifies
the shirt to be Michael's. In this unit of the play, death
appears in a grotesque form to the audience: the figures of
young men floating dead on the waves. There is no one to lament
over them "but the black hags that do be flying on the sea"
(Plays, I, p. 17). The sisters try to hide the death of Michael
from their mother. The images of death are brought to meet one
another with an unprecedented force. It is the irony, that works
at different levels in this context. Maurya anticipates Michael's
death and has gone to the extent of preparing for his burial.
She could see more than her young daughters could imagine. The
audience must also have seen Michael's death and linked it with
Bartley's. Thus these different levels of awareness—discrepant
awareness—are in a way providing the audience with a sense of
superiority so that they can enjoy the tragic depth better.

10 J. M. Synge, The Aran Islands (Dublin: Maunsell, 1911),
p. 111.

And with this understanding, "horror comes from the fact that no one can rest in the dream; it is shattered from time to time by actuality, the sea or death."  

In the sixth unit we find Maurya coming back to the room, "the cloth with the bread is still in her hand" (Plays, I, p. 17). "Maurya begins to keen softly, without turning round" (Plays, I, p. 17). It is sure that she must have seen a deadly vision and says so: "I seen the fearfullest thing" (Plays, I, p. 19). She goes on explaining to Nora:

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 with the grey pony behind him. (Plays, I, p. 19)

She saw Michael himself on the grey pony "with fine clothes on him, and new shoes on his feet" (Plays, I, p. 19). This is the smell of death intensified by Maurya's vision. Death has been pervading the atmosphere and is in charge of the fate of the family. The theatrical quality of the images of clothes referred to by Maurya cannot be overlooked by any audience. "A succession of images are offered--the clothes a man puts on going out to sea, the clothes stripped from a drowned man and the spectral clothes of the returning dead."  

From now onward, Death is appearing in visible forms. Maurya's vision is one of the strongest and "the fearfullest thing any person has seen, since the day Bride Dara seen the


dead man with the child in his arms" (Plays, I, p. 19). The playwright presents this vision in so particular and natural a way that the audience also feel the "felt authority" of it. "Synge wins from his audience the willing suspension of disbelief by the strength and actuality of his dramatic images."^{14}

The sea is identifiable with Maurya herself. They are the same on certain occasions and different at other times. Here Maurya is the loser, and the sea the winner. The play moves forward with the physicalization of Maurya's fears associated with the vision, and the smell of death becomes intense. Maurya refreshes the audience with the minute details of her past experiences with the death of her sons and husband. It is almost like an involved narrator beautifully presenting a pageant of immortal pictures which will be later enacted on the stage:

There was Sheamus and his father, and his own father again, were lost in a dark night, and not a stick or sign was seen of them when the sun went up. There was Patch after was drowned out of a curragh that turned over. I was sitting here with Bartley, and he a baby, lying on my two knees, and I seen two women and three women, and four women coming in, and they crossing themselves, and not saying a word. I looked out then, and there were men coming after them, and they holding a thing in the half of a red sail, and water dripping out of it--it was a dry day, Nora--and leaving a track to the door. (Plays, I, p. 21)

This technique of oral narration of an experience to be realized in action on the stage has been repeatedly used by Synge. As

^{14} Nicholas Grene, Synge: A Critical Study of the Plays, p. 54.
W. B. Yeats says, Maurya in "Riders to the Sea, in mourning for her six fine sons, mourns for the passing of all beauty and strength." \(^{15}\) Then the coming in of old women crossing themselves on the threshold and kneeling down with red petticoats over their heads silently but eloquently announces the advent of death and provides concrete examples of communal participation in the ritual. After this announcement of death through different suggestions and signs, Death itself walks in. Synge's sense of stagecraft assumes dignity in presenting here the tragic visuals of a ritualistic design.

Bartley's dead body is now carried in on a plank with a bit of a sail over it and is laid on the table. One of the women tells Cathleen, "The grey pony knocked him over into the sea, and he was washed out where there is a great surf on the white rocks" (Plays, I, p. 23). This phase of the play reveals Maurya's reaction to the specific situation of death. The bargaining for her sons with the sea is now over and the suppressed agony bursts out into a wild rage. She sees the sea and confronts it. She is not aware of the presence of other people. She raises her head and looks beyond the doors and stares at the waves and cries, "they're all gone now and there is n't anything more the sea can do to me" (Plays, I, p. 23). This is the only moment in the play where Maurya is enraged.

Almost like a ritualistic performer in trance Maurya loses her control over consciousness for a moment and rises

to the height of the waves trying to crush them down. Her appearance itself is close to the white waves rising with foam and froth. When she has tossed off the piece of cloth covering her hair the white dishevelled hair is revealed. The deep anguish of her eyes with many wrinkles on her face projects a picture of the wild sea in feminine physique on the stage. Maurya is once again the mortal mother who has painfully given birth to some mortal fine men who have all ridden to the sea never to return. Eartley only sums up the long procession of the images of death. Michael's clothes are here, which she puts across Bartley's feet. Then she continues her ironic lament, and comments:

It's a great rest I'll have now, and great sleeping in the long nights after Samhain, if it's only a bit of wet flour we do have to eat, and maybe a fish that would be stinking. (Plays, I, p. 25)

The ninth and the last unit of Riders to the Sea is an answer to death and natural calamity. Death has appeared in different forms one after another claiming all the men-folk of Maurya's family. Now she is quiet, sadder and wiser. She has risen to the level of looking at the neighbours and other people of this world with a sense of compassion and consideration. Like the performer in a sacrificial ritual, she blesses the whole of mankind. This great change in her character is a major point of the play. It was "I" or "me" in the beginning as far as her existence and thought were concerned. "In presenting this climax Synge uses the two fundamental
of the dramatist: narration and enactment on the stage, the classical method and the modern."\(^{16}\)

Now Maurya finds a maternal affection for the men outside the arena of her direct experience. She imagines that all the men folk of her family must have now reunited by the grace of God in the other world. From this note of relief comes out the universal prayer:

May the Almighty God have mercy on Bartley's soul, and on Michael's soul, and on the souls of Sheamus and Patch, and Stephen and Shawn (bending her head) . . . and may He have mercy on my soul, Nora, and on the soul of everyone is left living in the world. (Plays, I, p. 27)

By turns Maurya rises high to be one with the whole of humanity and comes down to be confronted by the inevitable sense of loss. She kneels down on the stage before the dead body of Bartley; but in the minds of the audience, she does so before the mystery of the metaphysics that controls human existence. With this the stage dimension of the play rises to a remarkable height. The President of the Mortals, to borrow an expression from Thomas Hardy, must have finished his work with Maurya for the time being.

This textual division of Riders to the Sea into nine phases of movement has revealed the inner pattern of the visual elements characteristic of a ritualistic design in theatre. The physical movements, actions, gestures, stage business, poses, compositions, exits and entrances of the characters

\(^{16}\) Alan Price, Synge and Anglo-Irish Drama, p. 187.
lead us to create an aesthetic structure connecting all of them. The actions and off-stage images of violent death at sea when linked up with this aesthetic structure provide the spectator a wholesome dramatic experience touching upon the eternal and the universal in him. Now we will see how these abstract and poetic suggestions can be instrumental in creating auditory and visual images in theatre.

Maurya's dramatic monologues

In this play Maurya performs a ritual which is based on a shared myth: other characters are only witnesses participating in the ritual. Cathleen and Nora and the women and men who come later are all spiritually involved in it. The stage can be set very clearly and realistically with a suggestion of the elemental forces and a "big world" outside the room. Maurya is almost in a prayerful mood in touch with the inner self. Most of her dialogue is practically monologues—dramatic monologues. She sees in her mental world figures, forces, foes or friends with whom she converses. The spectator cannot see the person Maurya is talking to. But they can imagine Maurya's second person. It can be Cathleen or Nora, any one of her dead sons or husband or his father. It could be the priest, church or God or the wild sea now turbulent. She could also aim at the unseen evil within the very nature of things which has appeared in the form of death. Maurya's monologues accentuate the force of the theatrical quality and its progress.
There are critics who believe that nothing happens in the play, not even a dramatic development in the characters. But really, the play revolves round Maurya whose change is noteworthy. There is no change in Oedipus or Antigone which cannot be compared to those rapid movements and mutations that take place in Maurya. From the beginning to the end Maurya's change is clear and visible. In the beginning Maurya is reported to be swaying with the burning feelings of loss and hope, expectations and frustrations. As time moves she is found speedily moving and changing with all the natural passions and prejudices. Raymond Williams is reluctant to concede the change taking place in the total character of Maurya and in the action of the play:

It is a powerful rhythm, within a deliberately limited action. Its paradox is the depth of its language and the starved, almost passive experience. It is as if the fatalism were determined at one level and the lives of the Islanders at another and then the two are fused, but incompletely, in a dominant single rhythm. As such it is a dramatic fragment for reasons other than its brevity, but what is achieved in this fragment is an indication of that common action which the theory of language might be, at its most serious. What has been achieved, that is to say, is a chorus, but not yet the action on which the chorus depends.17

Here Raymond Williams seems to soothingly rule out the catastrophe and tragic intensity of the play. He approves of the powerful rhythm of the language. But it is "in a dominant

single rhythm." He also approves of the chorus but not the action on which the chorus depends. Taking the first point of passive experiences, it is impossible to have a powerful rhythm and "passive experience" in the enjoyment of drama. Rhythm in drama cannot be confined to the mode of rendering dialogue, its modulations, inflections and the beauty of the language. It must be inextricably inter-linked with the cause, motives and effects of actions developed unit by unit, rising rhythmically to the inevitable denouement. If the rhythm is powerful the action also must be equally powerful, in which case the audience will never feel it as passive. 18

Moreover, Riders to the Sea being a ritualistic tragedy, brings into its powerful rhythmic action the discerning spectators with their imaginative faculties actively involved.

Another point raised against the play is its incomplete fusion of fatalism and the lives of the Islanders. Hence it appears to Williams to be a dramatic fragment. This is contrary to the practical experience on the stage. Analysed closely, the play reveals many dramatic fragments of great perfection, mutually depending upon one another for organic and coherent development. One must understand that almost like a tragedy of Sophocles or an Ibsenite play, Riders to the Sea begins at

18 It seems that Williams may be arguing that Riders to the Sea does not contain certain elements of the traditional tragic form, and therefore remains "a fragment." Maurya's experience is passive, because she does not incur tragic guilt (as Oedipus or Lear do). There is also no peripetia. The tragedy is determined from the start.
the most crucial moment of Maurya's life which is conventionally
the climax. Most of the events have already taken place. They
are all retrospectively referred to, giving a picture of complete
events and actions in Maurya's life relevant to the drama that
is happening in front of us. It is thus a complete play half
of which is caught dynamically behind the stage events thereby
propelling the stage happenings with unprecedented energy and
life and consequently what has been achieved is a great action
working up a greater choric force. The play is very brief
because Synge must have mastered by 1902 the craft of his medium
and consequently had been able to condense the experience of
many lives into powerful auditory and visual images for the stage.

Riders to the Sea achieves great success by the dramatic
fragments within the play, which finally leave a cumulative
impression on the audience, which is total and complete. This
sense of completion is felt through the nine stages of ritual-
istic visual elements analysed above. Dramatic irony enhances
the sharpening quality of the impression left on the audience.
Here the visual and the auditory suggestions on the stage act
upon each other thereby helping the audience to perfect the
ironic impressions already left in their minds. These impressions
will finally take the play forward in terms of time. J.L. Styan's
The Elements of Drama physicalizes this idea of time and
impressions diagramatically as follows:
Here, according to J. L. Styan, the able playwright provides us with shifting impressions, and thus drama moves in time.

The good critic measures and assesses the development between impression 1 and impression 2, a development which is the true source of effect in the play. But the primary activity in the theatre is simply that of the alert playgoer's absorbing meaningful impressions by an accurate scrutiny of idea and feeling, his eyes and ears finally attuned to the actor's suggestions.

Riders to the Sea is an exemplary work for demonstrating shifting impressions and rapid suggestions. As the impressions change in relation to the ideas and feelings, the audience move forward in time; a particular impression is strengthened by retrospective reference to an experience or event which must

19 J. L. Styan, The Elements of Drama, p. 68.

20 Ibid., pp. 68-69.
have taken place years back. Even that long past moment of action is reached or traced by single units. Hence the audience have a feeling of backward and forward movement of action in relation to time. For instance, Maurya's recollections of the painful birth of her sons and their helpless disappearance into the depths of the sea convince us of the intensity of her emotions in this particular moment. It also makes the imminent events credible and acceptable to us. Each suggestion of Maurya anticipates another suggestion. She sometimes describes a dramatic action which happened in her life in the recent past. Something similar or the same in different guise will be enacted next moment. Maurya's narration of the appearance of the mourners while she was sitting with Bartley as a small baby on her knees, is an example. Quoting J. L. Styan again, "Drama is composed of the infinite combinations and permutations of such impressions moving in time." The punctuations will manifest themselves in the silence of the characters on the stage, their strange looking at one another, their turns and positions and finally in their intimacy with their own inner self.

These changing impressions will also effect a shift or change in human relationship. In the beginning Maurya and the daughters establish within their abode a well knit, strongly built association. With the images of the death of Maurya's sons haunting her mind, she is more and more distanced from her.

daughters. As time moves, with more recollections of the past, Maurya tries to be one with all the dead. Finally she comes to understand the human condition trapped in this small existence. She then identifies herself with all the dead and the living on this earth. She prays for them all. This wonderful change that has come over an ordinary fisher-woman in the Islands is dramatically very significant. A play-goer must be able to discern this aspect of action, development and change in human relations in the play.

The production envisaged

In a production the set can be designed to be in harmony with the total meaning and impressions of the play. Synge was very strict about the realistic setting to be used for the play:

a cottage interior with the large open hearth,
a small creel or basket of turf beside a hook in the chimney from which the cast-iron cooking pots are hung; three or four of the "Sugawn" chairs, with twisted hay-rope for seats; a single long kitchen table on which they cook and eat

where the girls examine the drowned man's clothing and on which Bartley's body is laid. It is on this table that the bread has been baked. It must be left to the director of the production to choose the details of stage and hand properties. The essential ones must be used to bring out the meaning of the play. A director has always to be faithful to the internal structure of the play and not to the extrinsic elaborations. In Riders

to the Sea what T. R. Henn suggests is that

there might be a built-in bed with a door to its recess; a short clumsy ladder that leads to the "loft," below the thatch a single door with a half-hatch, a window that looks out on the headland; There must be a dresser, with china on it; beside it, perhaps hanging on the wall, a little shrine with a red oil lamp under it, and a bowl for the holy water. In a corner, the new boards and coil of rope.23

The degree of a director's dependence upon Synge's realistic idea about the authenticity of the props is to be decided by his own creative vision gained from and sustained by the text. Nicholas Grene states that Synge was very particular about the types of clothing and properties to be used in the first production of Riders to the Sea in 1904.24 Synge got the flannel and pampooties from Michael Costello on Inishere and the clothing to be used must be the one that was used on Inishman, the island of Riders to the Sea. In a modern production the cast can be taught the authentic movement of the poor and frightened fisherfolk and the nature of their intimate relationship. The properties can look very natural within Maurya's household. The set should first visually establish the background and the particular dramatic situation. At the same time, since the play is not naturalistic and its strength and eternal quality are innately supplied by the symbolic, suggestive and archetypal images, the set should not be realistically overemphasized.


The design and patterning of the stage set means a lot in this play, and hence certain objects like the spinning-wheel, white boards, bowl for holy water, new rope and the bundle (bits of shirt and stocking) can be highlighted. The spinning-wheel used by Cathleen could also suggest in the arrangement of all the properties a cyclic pattern of life. In the beginning Cathleen is spinning at the wheel. Besides the functional purpose of spinning, Cathleen could go on looking at it, the process of the wheel turning and turning and turning. This instrument gathers a kind of transcendental meaning of time past, present and future—all in a flexible and cyclic movement. Light could focus on it lingeringly. The rope hanging on the nails and the white boards are the objects to be projected with light in succession. Only after that can come the question from Nora outside, "Where's she?" (Plays, I, p. 5). The symbolic significance of the bundle is established by the way it is handled and taken care of. All these properties link up Maurya's little home with life and death outside it. Thus the play is ritually, as T. R. Henn puts it, an "interpretation of the world of the living by the world of the dead."25

The properties of a play have no independent value or existence. They become a part of the whole structure of the visual experience only when they are properly integrated with the action from the beginning to the end of the production.

Thus all these objects contribute a lot to the structural development of the play. The rope, for instance, has been bought and kept by Maurya for the burial of Michael if and when his body is recovered from the sea. But when Bartley comes, he takes it out to make a halter for him to ride on to the fair. In the production the actor doing the role of Bartley can be made to work the rope in so many ways on the stage. One must be again careful of the meaning of his work with the rope. While kept hanging one end of the rope can be presented as if coming from the inner room. If the end is not seen it can be taken as coming from the sea itself. It may be a far-fetched idea. While Bartley is working with it, trying its strength, stretching it to different extremes, making knots and nooses and putting them on his neck or arms or waist, the different levels and suggestive functions of the rope will be clearer to the audience. During this stage business he can converse with his sisters, with Maurya's reflection or narration of her fate. He does not seem to listen to her words, but is busy with the halter. It is very important to note that Bartley does not feel impelled to reply to his mother's agonized murmurings. The bread is also handled by Maurya as an object of ritual. When Bartley goes out, she takes it out for him and is unable to give it to him. When she brings it back we feel that Bartley has not received the "sacramental" bread which is later offered by Cathleen to the old man who will dig a deep grave for Bartley. As Darrell Figgis rightly points out,
turf for the fire in one place, Michael's clothes in another, the ominous white boards and the forgotten cake in Maurya's hand, all keep the movement in flow past awkward places till its course is accomplished. And it is worthy of note that they each and all come to be symbols of doom, being thus not only aids to the movement, but heightening, moreover and intensifying the very cause and tragical colour of its being.26

The holy water is also a linking and suggestive property. Its bowl is completely emptied on Bartley's body and an original actress can sprinkle some drops on Cathleen and Nora, on the men and women around and finally on the audience themselves thereby spiritually uniting the whole of mankind. This is what I made my actress do in my production of the play. The clothes of Michael now spread on Bartley are also a link connecting the dead brothers. Another object unifying the members of the family here is the stick Michael brought from Connemara. It is with the help of the stick that Maurya goes out in search of Bartley. Thus the properties are used by Synge with a definite sense of stagecraft and dramatic action in progress. All these serve the purpose of achieving a clear aesthetic structure with their root firmly placed in the realistic and domestic mould of Maurya's family.

Maurya and the sea

In a serious production of the play the sea has to make its presence felt, though not through its roaring and troubling

sound which will disturb the subtle beauty of the work. At the same time the sea which has claimed six fine young sons of Maurya and her husband and his father cannot be ignored. The sea in the play is a malevolent character with no shape.

Synge makes the old woman, mother of many fishermen, never refer to the sea except as—the sea. Her phrases are: the sea; on the sea; in the sea; by the sea. There is never an adjective; no personification; no synonym. The word ocean does not occur. Yet how terribly aware of the malice of the sea we become.

It can be vast, deep and dark. It can appear smiling also with its over-vaulting waves. It has different moods: quiet, calm and composed with all troubles laid deep in its womb. It can also be angry, violent and shouting or crying aloud. And finally it can be tired and exhausted after all the cries and lamentations are over. Then there may be so many other indistinct and vague moods in between or along with the three different stages noted above. These moods of the sea are in a sense comparable to those of Maurya herself. In the beginning of the play, Maurya is presented as calm and composed with the fire of sorrow burning in her. When Nora goes to the inner door and listens, "She's moving about on the bed," almost like the disturbed ocean. Later till Bartley's body is brought home, Maurya maintains this mood like the sea with slight variations of ups and downs. But when the last of her sons is also brought home dead, she bursts out beyond any limit. She challenges and

questions the ocean and all the wild forces which jointly wrought her doom. She is then like the sea in the grip of violent motion. After all the tears are shed, she has come to terms with Nature itself. Death has to follow birth. This realization resigns her to her present condition which makes her accept the universal fact that "No man at all can be living for ever, and we must be satisfied" (Plays, I, p. 27). She is defeated but she does not accept defeat, which may be a heroic trait in the Irish cultural heritage.

A musical representation of Maurya and the Sea

In my production of the play I tried to give the audience an impression of Maurya and the sea as two sides of the same personality. The sea can be the other self of Maurya and vice versa. This central idea was brought home to the audience with the help of particular music which, when played properly from the beginning till the end of the play, produced a parallel but organically meaningful sound track for the whole performance. The music selected was Debussy's La Mer (The Sea). It is a prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun. This composition is based upon a poem by Mallarme, a text which was called "a famous miracle of unintelligibility." It is about a faun, a simple sensuous, passionate being. Upon awakening in the forest, the faun tries to recall an experience of the previous afternoon. The effort to remember is too difficult for his poor brain and consequently he gives himself once again to sleep. Debussy has created out of this basic outline an exciting,
elusive and exquisite musical tribute to the sea. It has a sub-title *Three Symphonic Sketches*. It was begun in 1903 and completed in 1905.

*La Mer* is in three movements. The first is entitled *from Dawn to Noon* on the sea. It begins in an eerie mood. As the light grows brighter, waves grow fair and the spume they toss into the air glints in the sunshine. In the beginning of the play this part of the music was slowly and repeatedly played which created a poetic and suggestive dimension. The second movement relates to the play of the waves. It is capricious and the waves appear to be coryphees or they "gambol like dolphins." This portion of the music when played added to the vigour and passion and fighting instinct displayed in Maurya's outburst. The final movement concerns the sea more or less settled with its waves silently musing something sensitive and subtle. Thus Debussy's music presents us with a more dramatic vision of the ocean which the whistling and imperious wind lashes into splendour.

**Movements, composition and choreography**

The movement and space relations to be used must be in tune with the tragic and ritualistic approach of the play. Thinking of its ritualistic potentials, Synge himself has suggested slow rhythmic and orchestrated movements which can become quick and rapid sometimes. Rendering of dialogue must also go in harmony with the movement. When Bartley comes in he speaks "sadly and quietly." Maurya's raking the fire with
the tongs aimlessly without looking around and later swaying herself on her stool, "standing up unsteadily, she goes out slowly," Nora's "swinging herself half round, and throwing out her arms on the clothes" etc. point out Synge's idea of movement on stage. Maurya's inability to give Bartley the bread and coming back with it into the room is another qualitative movement suggestive of the sacrificial and sacramental nature of the play. After coming back "Maurya begins to keen softly, without turning round." Some sudden and impulsive movements are also used in order to bring out emotional excitement and downfall. Maurya becomes a little defiant in negating Cathleen's statement, "It wasn't Michael you seen, for his body is after being found in the far north, and he's got a clean burial, by the grace of God" (Plays, I, p. 19). Again Maurya's voice is lowered when she speaks of the young priest's lack of knowledge of the mysterious working of the universe. Her lamentations also fall into a rhythm which accords with the meaning and movement required by the situation.

The stage business with the properties is also patterned in the way suggested by the mythical and ritualistic undertones. Maurya does not use the stick brought by Michael without a reference to the helplessness inflicted upon her in this small world by the world outside taking away all her children. There is a reverential stance to be found in her approach to everything. She stands up to receive from Cathleen Michael's clothes. By that gesture the object and the whole atmosphere assume an
air of devotional respect. When Bartley's body is brought into the room Maurya does not shout aloud in unruly anger. Instead, she goes over and kneels down at the head of the table surrounded by the keening Islanders. As Rudolph Stamm analyses:

What will be her reaction when she sees him dead, too? Synge has solved the difficulty with great success. There is no loud outburst, but what is more terrible: quiet gratitude for being beyond all torturing fears after fate has done its worst. 28

Only after some time of repose and meditation does she come up challenging the sea and the gods behind. The sprinkling of the holy water over Bartley and on all the others and on the pieces of Michael's clothes sums up the sacramental obsequies. In all these Synge reveals himself to be a master craftsman of austerity and meaning of stage images deep-rooted in Irish myths, legends, folklore and belief, both Christian and pagan.

Maurya as Priest in a ritual

Synge is conscious of the correlations of the visual images and the spiritual and dramatic purpose behind them. Riders to the Sea is a perfect example of the type of stage composition and choreography which come close to a primitive congregational sermon. Here the priest is Maurya herself with personal and realistic emotions. Cathleen, Nora and the Aran neighbours can be linked to the faithful coming to receive sacrament and to listen to the sermon of the priest on the

---

pulpit. In the play the neighbours all come with their heads down keening softly as if they are here to participate in a communal ritual. The two elegies that Maurya speaks are as grave and universal as an important sermon of a serious priest. The feeling of Destiny pervading the play brings it closer to an involved audience as in an ancient Greek tragedy. Corkery is of the opinion that "the greatness of Riders to the Sea lies in this: that it is one of the few modern plays written, and successfully written, in the Greek genre." As usual in a sermon from the altar, Maurya's "sermons" also deal with the question of life and death. She has all the human passions provoked by the stinging of the sea. But she controls her personal animosity and sublimes it into a holy feeling for all mankind. The choreographic pattern of the characters (actors) at this moment on the stage will be that of a devotional nature. Maurya can be at the centre of the stage behind the table on which Bartley's body is laid and Cathleen and Nora slightly kneeling down on her two sides. The women three or five or seven or nine can intermittently keen while kneeling down on two ends of the table in a sculptural frame. Two or three men could be on the stage behind the keening women so that all these figures with Bartley dead on a raised table will give the image of a painting of the Middle Ages or that of a composite sculpture by Michael Angelo. The mimetic quality

29 Daniel Corkery, Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature, p.108.
and the repetitive emphasis of the ritualistic elements have always to be borne in mind by a good director.

Synge does not want a director to lose sight of the powerful conflict which has all the dramatic and theatrical qualities. The play is built upon vigour and beauty of speech, "and its subtleties and anything that detracts from these things, by extraneous sight or sound, must be rigorously rejected by the producer."\(^{30}\) This is only to emphasize the dramatic and poetic quality of the play which may be lost in the hands of sentimental and melodramatic enthusiasts.

Even though \textit{Riders to the Sea} was written as early as the summer of 1902 when he wrote \textit{The Shadow of the Glen} also, it indicates all the qualities of a mature drama both as literature and theatre. In making use of the Irish mythical greatness in the structure of a ritualistic tragedy Synge has concretely established the particular and the dramatic out of which he has risen to the universal and the poetic.

What has been explored in the chapter is the theatrical potential of the play to be interpreted in stage language. Thus it is found that \textit{Riders to the Sea} provides much material in terms of abstract and concrete philosophy for the stage. The ritualistic presentation of the play, far from reducing the dramatic and realistic strength, only adds to the total meaning in a stage production.