

Riders to the Sea



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF J. M. SYNGE

Synge was the youngest of five children, and his father died of smallpox just a year after he was born. Despite his mother's religious fervor, Synge began moving towards agnosticism after reading Darwin. He attended Trinity College and the Royal Irish Academy of Music, and (despite performing poorly) he cultivated an interest in Irish literature. Synge began writing poetry and spent several years abroad in Germany, Paris, and Italy studying music. In Paris, he was introduced to the renowned writer William Butler Yeats and he was inspired by Yeats' passion for the Irish Literary Renaissance, a literary movement associated with an increased interest in Irish language and culture. Synge would go on to write poetry, plays, and articles that focused on the Irish culture and peasantry, and though he wrote in English, his writing contained the music of Irish speech patterns. Eventually Synge became one of the three directors of the Irish National Theatre Society, along with Yeats and Lady Isabella Gregory. He suffered from cancer of the lymphatic glands beginning in 1897 and would die from the disease in 1909 in Dublin.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Riders to the Sea was written in the middle of the Irish Literary Renaissance, a movement in which Synge, along with William Butler Yeats and Sean O'Casey, was a leading figure. The Renaissance was triggered by a resurgence in Irish pride in their identity and culture, as well as efforts to keep the Gaelic language alive, such as the founding of the Gaelic League in 1893. Writers and scholars developed a particular interest in the histories, legends and folktales of Ireland, and this was entwined with a changing political mood, as there was a desire to "de-Anglicize" Ireland, which was still under British rule. Thus, the Irish Literary Revival stirred nationalist sentiment and spread the desire for Irish independence from Britain in the years leading up to 1919 when the Irish War of Independence against the ruling English officially commenced.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Standish James O'Grady's *History of Ireland: Heroic Period*, published in 1878, was highly influential in spurring interest among scholars in Ireland's heritage and encouraging nationalistic feeling. This helped bring about the Irish Literary Renaissance, a movement of which Synge was a part. William Butler Yeats' *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry*, a collection of stories by various 18th and 19th century writers, was another notable work published when the Renaissance

was in full swing. It shares with *Riders to the Sea* the quest for the resurgence of authentic Irish identity through folklore and history. Sean O'Casey, an Irish playwright, shared Synge's focus on the poorer classes in society. O'Casey was the first significant Irish playwright to write about the slums and working classes of Dublin in such works as *The Shadow of a Gunman* (1923) and *Juno and the Paycock* (1924).

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Riders to the Sea
- **When Written:** 1902
- **Where Written:** While writing the play, Synge's time was divided between Dublin, Paris, and the Aran Islands.
- **When Published:** The first performance was February 25, 1904.
- **Literary Period:** Irish Literary Renaissance
- **Genre:** Drama
- **Setting:** Aran Islands, Ireland
- **Climax:** Bartley's body is brought back to the cottage
- **Antagonist:** The sea

EXTRA CREDIT

Inspiration for Riders to the Sea. William Butler Yeats first encouraged Synge to travel to the Aran Islands and make notes on the people who lived there. Through these visits, Synge gathered the material for *Riders to the Sea*, among other works.

Tradition. Although the English took over the Aran Islands during the reign of Elizabeth I, the isolation of the islands meant that their traditional culture was better preserved than in other regions the English conquered. To this day, Gaelic (not English) is still primarily the first language of the islanders.



PLOT SUMMARY

Riders to the Sea takes place in the kitchen of a cottage located in the Aran Islands to the west of Ireland. As the play opens, Cathleen, a girl of around twenty, is attending to household chores. Her younger sister Nora enters carrying a cloth bundle. Affirming that Maurya, their elderly mother, is in the other room lying down, Nora presents the bundle, which contains clothing that may belong to their brother Michael who has not returned from a voyage on the sea. The two girls worry about the storm brewing outside, since their last surviving brother Bartley intends to go on the sea that day. They decide not to open the bundle in case Maurya comes in, since they are

worried about her reaction to evidence of Michael's death.

Cathleen hides the bundle just before Maurya enters, and Maurya inquires about Bartley's whereabouts. Maurya declares that Bartley will not go to sea today due to the storm, but Bartley soon comes in to prepare for his voyage and his mother's attempts to dissuade him from leaving have no effect. Bartley begins to instruct Cathleen on how to do additional chores, such as taking care of the sheep, now that their brother Michael is gone and Bartley, the only man left, will be out on the sea for several days.

Once Bartley is gone, Maurya cries out that he will die by nightfall. Cathleen chastises Maurya for her pessimism and for not giving Bartley a blessing, but then she realizes that she and Nora forgot to give Bartley his bread. She sends Maurya to catch Bartley before he leaves and give him both the bread and her blessing.

Cathleen and Nora quickly investigate the stocking from the bundle while Maurya is gone. They identify it as Michael's and mourn his lonely death on the sea. A silent, frightened Maurya returns, still holding the bread, and begins to keen, unable to answer Cathleen's questions about Bartley. Finally, Maurya reveals that she has seen a vision of Michael's ghost riding behind Bartley, and Cathleen begins to keen as well, interpreting the vision as an omen that Bartley will die. Maurya then reflects on the deaths of all of the men in her life.

Nora and Cathleen hear a crying out by the sea shore. Old women begin to enter the cottage in mourning. Cathleen wonders if they have found Michael, and she gives Maurya the clothes from the bundle as proof of his death. However, one of the women affirms that it is Bartley who has died—he has been thrown by his **horse** into the sea, and his body is brought in by other townsfolk. In a trance-like state, Maurya sprinkles Holy Water and prays over Bartley's body, implying that she will die soon now that all of the men in her life are dead.

man remaining in the household. He is determined to go out on the sea to provide for his family, despite the grief he feels after the likely death of his brother Michael. Maurya's relentlessly urging him to stay home, and the clear risk to his own life of going out to sea in a storm. He dies when he is thrown from his **horse** into the sea, directly after Maurya sees a vision of Michael's ghost riding behind him.

Cathleen – Cathleen is Maurya's older daughter, about twenty years old. She has stepped up as the most capable woman in the household, since Maurya's age and sorrow have broken much of her mother's spirit. With most of her brothers gone, Cathleen is prepared to take on more responsibility at home, but she still firmly believes in traditional gender roles, such as Bartley's duty as a young man to go on the sea.

Nora – A young girl, Nora assists her sister Cathleen in household tasks. She helps take care of their mother Maurya, even as she copes with all the deaths happening around them. Nora seems to have more confidence in the Catholic priest than Cathleen or Maurya, though her confidence in the priest proves misplaced after Bartley's death.

Townsppeople – Various townspeople—primarily old men and old women—enter the family's cottage at the end of the play as part of the procession bringing Bartley's body back from the shore. The women explain what has happened to Bartley and keen over him, and Cathleen asks one of the old men to help make Bartley's coffin. Most of these townspeople are old, which underscores the fact that it's only young men who seem to be dying, even though the young are usually expected to outlive the old.

The Young Priest – Though the young priest never physically appears in the play, he is often referenced by other characters, particularly in the context of his promise to Maurya that God would not leave her destitute with no son living. This promise turns out to be false, which is no surprise to Maurya—she does not believe that that Catholic Church understands the power of the sea. The priest represents the waning of Maurya's Catholic belief and the powerlessness of God and the Catholic Church to intervene against the sea on behalf of the islanders.

Michael – Michael is Maurya's son who disappeared before the action of the play begins and thus does not appear onstage. Much of the play's opening is devoted to characters discussing whether or not Michael is still alive, which brings a mood of foreboding throughout the play. Maurya has a vision of Michael's ghost riding behind Bartley, which is a sign that Bartley will die next. Indeed, Michael's presence seems to have returned in order to take Bartley, the last remaining man of the household, with him into the next life.



CHARACTERS

Maurya – Maurya, an old woman, is the mother of Bartley, Michael, Cathleen and Nora, and she has weathered the deaths of her husband, her husband's father, and the rest of her sons. At this point in her life, she is beaten down by grief and hardship. Maurya's religious faith is a mixture of Catholicism and pagan beliefs indigenous to the Aran islands where she lives. Her Catholic faith seems to be waning, although she still reflexively prays and invokes God throughout the play, and she simultaneously leans on her pagan beliefs to help understand and predict the will of the sea. By the end of the play (after the deaths of Bartley and Michael, her last two sons), Maurya seems undone, seems to give up her Catholic faith, and believes that she will soon pass away as well.

Bartley – Bartley is Maurya's last surviving son, and the only



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-

coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



SPIRITUALITY AND MOURNING

Riders to the Sea depicts a devout community of Catholics for whom faith is a stabilizing force amid the harsh realities of their lives. Allusions to God are threaded throughout the play as characters bless one another, pray, and plead for mercy. However, Catholicism is not the only spiritual tradition in this community; the characters rely on a blend of Catholicism and pagan beliefs native to the Aran Islands in order to grapple with the relentless hardships of their lives. This blend of paganism and Catholicism, as well as the characters' spiritual doubt and feelings of powerlessness, are shown to be a product of the tremendous fragility of lives lived on a dangerous ocean. The characters are willing to try anything to mitigate their hardships, though they ultimately find themselves powerless before forces that they cannot control.

Throughout the play, the characters invoke the name of God many times, wielding their Catholic faith as a tool for comfort, control, and hope. Oftentimes, though, the characters' references to Catholicism seem reflexive, rather than meaningful. For example, early in the play Cathleen says of Maurya, "she's lying down, God help her, and may be sleeping, if she's able." This invocation of God is not a prayer or even an acknowledgement of God's power—it's a description of a painful and uncertain situation, and the mention of God is more a statement of pity than a nod to spirituality. The characters' speech is peppered with similar phrases throughout the play, such as "God spare us" and "the grace of God."

In several notable instances, however, the characters engage deeply with their Catholic faith, particularly in order to question whether Catholicism is serving them at all. Maurya spends a lot of time earnestly appealing to God to spare her family, but she still has serious doubts when the young priest assures her that God will listen to her fervent prayers and keep Bartley safe on his ocean voyage. Casting doubt on the power of her prayers and the priest's authority, she says, "It's little the like of him knows of the sea." Thus, she seems to put more stock in the power of nature than in the power of God or the wisdom of the priest. The family also engages in a quasi-theological debate over whether to track down Bartley to give him a blessing before he leaves on an ocean voyage. The sisters seem to believe that the blessing will give Bartley God's protection (though they may simply be trying to get Maurya out of the house), while Maurya remains uncertain about whether the blessing will have any effect to counter the dangers of the sea. These instances make clear that, while the family members are earnest in their Catholicism and they take prayer and theology

seriously, their faith is not wholly placed in God.

Instead of having complete faith in God, Maurya and the sisters often look to pagan beliefs that do not fit into the traditional beliefs of Catholicism. The most striking example of paganism comes when Maurya sees Michael's ghost riding behind Bartley on **horseback**, and she is certain that this is a sign that Bartley will die before nightfall. However, the family also looks to subtler omens to predict future events and advise on the family's course of action. For example, Maurya doubts Bartley's assurance that Michael's body won't wash up while Bartley is gone, since she saw "there was a star up against the moon." To her this sign implies that Michael is dead and might soon surface.

Though paganism is associated in the play with the natural world, it is also inextricably blended with Christianity, and the characters' spiritual beliefs are best understood as a mixture of these two traditions. The pagan vision of Michael's ghost has Christian overtones, in that the death Maurya foresees—in which a horse throws Bartley into the ocean—is a direct reference to a passage from The Book of Exodus. The blend of Catholicism and paganism is also evident in Maurya's reference to "getting Holy Water in the dark nights after Samhain" (Samhain being a pagan festival), and in Maurya's mourning Bartley by simultaneously keening over him (a pagan mourning ritual) and saying a Catholic blessing.

At the end of the play, as Maurya takes stock of her profound losses, she reflects on the spiritual forces that shape her life. While anointing Bartley's body with Holy Water, Maurya says, "It isn't that I haven't prayed for you, Bartley, to the Almighty God. It isn't that I haven't said prayers in the dark night till you wouldn't know what I'd be saying." This dismissal of God's power comes alongside Maurya's acknowledgment that it's the sea—not God—that has taken her family: "there isn't anything more the sea can do to me," she says. Confronted with the futility of faith and prayer in the face of the power of nature, however, Maurya continues to sprinkle Holy Water and ask God for mercy. This ending suggests that there is no single spiritual answer—Catholicism, paganism, or even utter spiritual doubt—that will satisfy people in the face of relentless tragedy. The play's tension between different spiritual practices and the feeling of utter powerlessness, then, is shown to be a product of the family's desperation. Living at the mercy of forces beyond their control, the family simultaneously places hope and faith in God, doubts God's power to help them, engages in pagan rituals and beliefs, and attests to their own powerlessness in the face of it all.



FATE AND MORTALITY

In *Riders to the Sea*, the community's fragile existence depends on their young men's ability to make a living from the sea—the very force of nature that often takes their lives. Because of this, *Riders to the Sea* is

centrally concerned with past deaths and the threat of death in the future. Maurya and her family struggle to retain a hold on the lives of the young men that they still have, though they seem to understand that death at the hands of the sea is inevitable.

Throughout the play, Synge presents multiple omens and symbols signifying death, which foreshadow Bartley's fatal accident and remind the rest of the characters of their own mortality. The **white boards** that Maurya bought for Michael's coffin are onstage during the entire play, strongly implying that there will be at least one death. Maurya refers to these boards often, which makes clear that death weighs constantly and heavily on the minds of the characters. Bartley's death is also foreshadowed by the **rope** he uses to make a halter for his **horse**. The rope bears resemblance to a noose, an instrument of execution, and it is also associated with death through Maurya's statement that they might need the rope to lower Michael's body into a grave. Additionally, the belongings of the dead have a strong pull on the living, which is particularly apparent in how Michael's belongings affect Bartley and Maurya. Maurya is holding Michael's walking stick when she sees his ghost riding behind Bartley, and Bartley wears Michael's shirt when he is thrown into the sea. It seems that the dead want the living to join them, and Maurya seems to believe that death will also be her fate, saying that all of her men are together now and that she will soon be with them.

In light of all of these omens, it's not surprising that Maurya predicts Bartley's death. Throughout the play, she believes that it is his fate to die in the sea just as it was the fate of her other sons and her husband. However, she still desires to save him from this fate, even while believing that she is powerless to help him. Maurya attempts to persuade Bartley not to go to the sea by telling him outright that he will die. She says, "It's hard set we'll be surely the day you're drown'd with the rest," and she tries various strategies to keep him home, including telling him not to take the rope that he needs to halter his horse. Despite her efforts to keep him home, she seems to know that his death is inevitable, since she continues to claim that Bartley will die until his body is finally brought into the house.

Bartley's death is shown to be part of a pattern of deaths in Maurya's family. All the men have died in the sea, and thus Bartley's eventual death in the same manner was inevitable. It is the fate of the young men in the community to go on the sea, since they must make a living for their families, despite that their lives are at risk each time they go out. Bartley thus had no choice, despite his mother's pleading; he had to go to sea and eventually die like his fathers and brother in order to keep his family alive. Bartley's death is foreshadowed to such an extent that it is not necessarily a surprise when he dies, but rather the culmination of the pattern of death that has afflicted the family. With Bartley gone, Maurya achieves a weary calm, delivering the last line of the play, "No man at all can be living for ever, and

we must be satisfied." Thus, the play acknowledges that fate cannot be avoided—it is every character's fate to die, not only the men.



AGE AND GENDER

The small fishing community in *Riders to the Sea* is organized based on traditional age and gender roles. Men are the primary providers for their families, while women handle household chores. The old guide and advise the young, who then care for the old in return. However, the relentless and inevitable pattern of death among the young men who are duty-bound to work on the sea causes a dearth of able-bodied providers in the community. Without enough young men on the islands, the traditional norms surrounding gender and age are threatened.

It is immediately clear from the beginning of the play that labor on the island is organized through traditional gender roles. Throughout the play, the women are always seen spinning, mending, cooking, cleaning, etc., while the men are only seen or spoken about in the context of their work outside the home. However, the family is suffering, since they have three women in the home and only one man, Bartley, left to provide for them. When Cathleen realizes that they have forgotten to give Bartley his bread before he leaves, Nora exclaims that he has "eat[en] nothing since the sun went up." Bartley has thus gone without food all day, which might be due to the loss of income after Michael's death. Additionally, Cathleen mentions that she had hung up the **rope** because the pig had been eating it, suggesting that the pig may not have enough to eat, either. Bartley, the only man left in the family, notes the difficulty they face with only himself remaining to work outside of the home: "It's hard set we'll be from this day with no one in it but one man to work." Maurya also remarks on the women's dependence on Bartley, saying, "It's hard set we'll be surely the day you're drown'd with the rest. What way will I live and the girls with me?" It is uncertain how they will fare without a man to do the work expected from his gender.

In addition to gender, the community follows traditional norms regarding age, with the old imparting wisdom and guidance to the young, and the young taking care of the old. This norm is also disrupted by the pattern of deaths among the young men. When Bartley does not listen to her warnings, Maurya exclaims, "Isn't it a hard and cruel man that won't hear a word from an old woman, and she holding him from the sea?" Bartley thus upends the traditional structure of society by not heeding the advice of the older Maurya, even though he is acting out of his own sense of duty to provide for her. Bartley's body is also brought back to the family's home by a procession of mostly older people. The old bringing back the body of a young man speaks to another inversion of age norms: generally, the young expect to outlive the old, but for young men on the Aran Islands the expectation is reversed.

The play implies that the repeated experience of losing her sons has caused Maurya to deteriorate, limiting her ability to run the household as she should. This is clear in her forgetting to buy nails for the coffin, which (as one of the men points out at the end of the play) should have been second nature to someone who has lost so many family members. Grief has undone the basic knowledge that she has gained from her life experiences, which leaves her particularly vulnerable: she is old, her experiences are losing their value, her words do not carry weight with the young, and she has no sons left to care for her. The play's implication is that this state of affairs can only lead to Maurya's own death—she will soon follow after her boys.

Since the deaths of the men in the family have begun to dismantle the gendered and generational structures, the surviving women will have to figure out how to make a living outside of the home in order to survive. The feasibility of this is left in question, however, since the women require guidance to expand into new roles, and there are few men left to guide them. All of the characters are clearly used to their gendered roles. Early in the play as Maurya tries to dissuade Bartley from leaving, Cathleen scolds her: "It's the life of a young man to be going on the sea, and who would listen to an old woman with one thing and she saying it over?" She firmly believes it is Bartley's duty as a man to work on the sea and his alone. In the only scene when Bartley is home, he gives Cathleen advice on how to proceed while he is gone, like caring for the sheep and selling the pig. This is a hint on how gender roles might shift, though the women are so isolated in their roles that they need explicit instruction. Additionally, Maurya immediately puts Cathleen down as Bartley is instructing her, asking, "How would the like of her get a good price for a pig?" Maurya doubts that any shift in gender roles would be successful, even as she wants to save Bartley from his duty to go out on the sea. Finally, Maurya's fixation on and belief in her own coming death makes it doubtful that she will be useful in helping Cathleen and Nora survive with Bartley gone. With Maurya gone, too, a young woman and a girl will be left on their own, without the guidance of the old or the protection of men. Thus, Synge ends the play with the implication that a radical and dangerous shift is coming to the women's lives—one for which they seem deeply unprepared.



THE POWER OF THE SEA

The sea's vast natural power, which takes the lives of all of the family's men, is a constant threat to the play's characters. The dangers of the sea are

unavoidable, however, since the men of the Aran Islands must brave the water in order to trade, fish, and obtain essentials for their families to survive. The sea—a source both of nurture and of anguish—comes to seem more powerful than God in the play. It is the force before which everyone is powerless, whose whims the characters must ultimately accept.

While the power of the sea is most dramatic in its life-and-death stakes, the sea influences even the most quotidian aspects of the characters' lives. In trying to open the bundle which contains Michael's clothes, Cathleen and Nora must use a knife to cut the string which is "perished with the salt water." Bartley also has to wear Michael's old shirt for "his own shirt was heavy with the salt in it." The salt water thus permeates the household, a constant reminder of the sea's power.

Just as the sea damages the clothing and materials of the community, it also destroys the bodies of men. In the search for Michael's body, the women of the family are left with only the scraps of clothing that are found, as his corpse would be unrecognizable after so long in the water. In this sense, the identity and life of the men are erased by the sea. After recognizing Michael's clothing from the bundle, Nora says to Cathleen, "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?" The life and achievements of Michael have thus been taken away from him by the sea, with no physical signifiers of who he was and what he accomplished. Maurya also asks near the end of the play, "What way would they know if it was Michael they had, or another man like him, for when a man is nine days in the sea, and the wind blowing, it's hard set his own mother would be to say what man was it." Even the person who brought him into the world cannot recognize him after the sea has taken him.

In the play, the sea wields its power over all other spiritual forces. Despite the young priest's promise that God will protect Bartley, and despite Maurya's prayers, the sea still takes Bartley's life, proving the impossibility of defying its will. While Maurya tries to use Catholicism to counter the will of the sea, she uses her paganism to try to understand and accept the sea's violence. The most explicit example of this is her vision of Michael's ghost riding behind Bartley, which she interprets as a sign that the sea will take the life of her last son. At the end of the play, Maurya says in reference to the men she has lost, "They're all gone now, and there isn't anything more the sea can do to me.... I'll have no call now to be up and crying and praying when the wind breaks from the south." Despite Maurya's efforts to use faith in God and her pagan beliefs to contend with the sea, the outcome is the same; the sea takes all of the men in her life, and she is forced to accept the sea's power, having nothing left to lose and nothing left to fear.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



BARTLEY'S HORSES

Bartley's horses are a complex symbol of death and fate, as Bartley dies by being thrown into the sea by the gray pony. The Christian overtones of the horses are important to understand, since Bartley's accident is a direct reference to a passage from The Book of Exodus: "I will sing unto the Lord, for He hath triumphed gloriously; The horse and his rider hath He thrown into the sea." In the Biblical context, these lines are a celebration of God's defeat of the Pharaoh, which allowed the Israelites to escape Egypt. However, the parallel between Bartley's horses and the Bible does not cast Bartley's accident as God's will—instead, Synge presents the sea as eclipsing God's power and inevitably taking the lives of young men, despite fervent prayers and the Priest's promises. In other words, Bartley's accident is not the will of God, but the will of the sea. Just as God threw "the horse and his rider" into the sea, the sea wants Bartley (and all other young men) so badly that the gray pony knocks him into the water even before he leaves on his dangerous voyage. Bartley's horses illuminate the title of *Riders to the Sea*, as the riders are Bartley and Michael, both of whom are riding to their deaths.



THE WHITE BOARDS

The white boards that Maurya bought to build Michael's coffin are onstage for the entirety of the play, and their presence is an omen of death that implies that another fatality will occur before the play's close. Maurya refers to these boards often, which makes clear that death weighs constantly on the minds of the characters. Furthermore, the ambiguity of whose body will go in the coffin underscores the notion that death on the Aran islands is common and encroaching. Though the boards are meant for Michael, his body has not yet washed ashore, which means that the coffin can hold someone else. While Maurya suggests that the boards could be for her, since she won't live after all her sons are gone, Bartley's body is the first to be returned to the house. Despite the implication that the coffin is Bartley's, the boards remain onstage, unbuilt, until the close of the play, since Maurya has inexplicably forgotten to buy the nails needed to build the coffin. Thus, even as the curtain drops, the boards still lean ominously against the wall, implying more death to come.



THE ROPE

Like the **white boards**, the rope that Bartley uses to make a halter for his **horse** is yet another symbol of death. The rope resembles a noose, an instrument of execution, and Synge further associates the rope with death through Maurya's statement that they might need the rope to lower Michael's body into a grave. Significantly, Maurya says this in the context of fighting to keep Bartley from going on the

sea where she believes he will die. By telling Bartley not to take the rope in case Michael's body washes up, she is really telling him that he can't halter his horse and therefore can't go to the seashore—Maurya's and Bartley's conflict over the rope, then, is a conflict over his life. When Bartley takes the rope (by then a clear symbol of death), it becomes even more obvious that his fate is sealed. The rope also highlights the difficulty of the family's survival in another context: the pig tries to eat it, which calls attention to the family's hunger. While the rope is associated with Bartley and Michael's deaths on the sea, the rope's association with the pig suggests a different bleak fate for the women, especially since they cannot provide for themselves now that the men are gone.





QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Dover Publications edition of *Riders to the Sea* published in 1993.

Act 1 Quotes

☝ "I won't stop him," says he, "but let you not be afraid. Herself does be saying prayers half through the night, and the Almighty God won't leave her destitute," says he, "with no son living."

Related Characters: Nora (speaker), Bartley, Maurya, The Young Priest

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 62



Explanation and Analysis


In this passage, Nora is quoting the young priest to Cathleen. She explains that when the priest gave her the bundle of clothing that might be evidence of Michael's death, he assured her that God would protect Bartley, the last living brother, because of their mother's faith. This passage illuminates the stakes of the play's central conflict by making clear that Bartley is the last living man in the household, and that he is in grave danger by going out on the sea. This passage also calls attention to the significance of Catholicism in the lives of the family, since it shows that the priest is a significant authority in the community and it reveals how much Maurya prays. Despite that Catholicism is shown here to be a significant presence in the family's life, the priest's words are not particularly comforting to the girls; their anxiety about Bartley's safety is not laid to rest by the priest's assurances. This hints at the challenges to faith that will come, particularly due to the inability of

Catholicism to intervene against the destructive power of the sea, despite the priest's promise.

It's a hard thing they'll be saying below if the body is washed up and there's no man in it to make the coffin, and I after giving a big price for the finest white boards you'd find in Connemara.

Related Characters: Maurya (speaker), Michael

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 63

Explanation and Analysis


Here, Maurya is brooding about the injustice of not having Michael's body to bury, while simultaneously trying to persuade Bartley to stay home from his ocean voyage. Thus, her sentiment here seems both manipulative and genuine. On the one hand, she is genuinely worried that if Bartley is at sea when Michael's body washes up, then no man will be present to build the coffin, which will leave the family helpless in the face of tragedy. On the other hand, Maurya is desperate to keep Bartley from danger and it's not clear that she truly believes Michael's body will wash up—perhaps, then, she is simply saying this to convince Bartley to stay home. Her motivation is likely a combination of these two sentiments, and this statement shows, above all, her desperation.

This passage also makes clear the strict gender boundaries on the island. Even though Maurya has buried her husband and her other sons, she is not capable of building a coffin by herself—she needs a man to do it for her. Her inability even to make a coffin without Bartley hints at the dire predicament the family will face once Bartley, the last remaining son, is gone. It's also significant that Maurya brings up the price she paid for the boards. The family is clearly struggling financially, so the “big price” of the boards adds to the significance of the boards' presence onstage. In other words, Maurya's emphasis on the quality and price of the boards intensifies their potency as an omen of death and adds an absurdity to the situation. Maurya has sacrificed tremendously to buy boards to bury Michael, whose body might never be returned to them, but the family can barely afford to eat and the situation is unlikely to improve. Thus, death is consuming the family literally, financially, and emotionally.

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?

Related Characters: Maurya (speaker), Michael, Bartley

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 63



Explanation and Analysis

This quote follows an exchange between Bartley and Maurya in which Maurya tells Bartley to stay home from a trip on the sea in case she needs his help burying Michael, and Bartley responds that Michael's body won't surface. Here, Maurya pivots from discussing Michael's body to what seems to be her deeper concern: that if Bartley goes out on the sea, he will die, too. Though Bartley believes that it is his duty to support the family by going to the fair where he can buy horses, Maurya tells him here that there's no number of horses that would be worth more than keeping him alive, since he is the last man in the house. This further illuminates the stakes of keeping Bartley alive. The family can barely eat, so they could use the money from the fair; therefore, if Bartley staying alive is worth so much more than the horses, the audience is left to intuit that the consequences of Bartley's death would be dire.

This passage also establishes the connection between Bartley and horses. Bartley, who has come home to halter his horse, is trying to support the family by trading horses. However, instead of bringing prosperity to the family, the horses will bring ruin when Bartley's horse throws him into the sea. In this way, the horses have a role that runs parallel to the role of the sea. Just as the sea is both the village's means of survival and a relentless bringer of death, the horses represent both economic opportunity and a deadly force: the horses at the fair lure Bartley to the sea, and his own pony knocks him into the water to drown. Nature, then—in the form of horses and the sea—seems to be conspiring to ruin the family.

It's the life of a young man to be going on the sea, and who would listen to an old woman with one thing and she saying it over?

Related Characters: Cathleen (speaker), Maurya, Bartley

Related Themes:  

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Explanation and Analysis

Here, Cathleen chastises Maurya for voicing her anxiety over the possibility of Bartley dying on the sea as he prepares for his voyage. Cathleen not only believes that it is unlucky for Maurya to be insinuating that Bartley will die, but she also approves of Bartley's voyage, since she sees it as performing his duty as a young man by going on the sea to earn a living for his family. In this way, Cathleen conforms with the traditional gender norms of the islanders' culture.

However, this passage also confirms the breakdown of traditional norms in regards to age. Instead of respecting her elders, Cathleen rebukes her own mother, implying that she is being foolish and not worth listening to. The old often provide wisdom for the young and are respected in return, and yet Cathleen dismantles this societal structure in seeming retaliation for Maurya encouraging Bartley to break traditional gender norms by staying home from his voyage. Overall, this quote paints a picture of the instability of traditional norms surrounding gender and age on the island.

☞ 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.

Related Characters: Maurya (speaker), Michael

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 65

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Maurya ruminates on the reversal of the natural pace of life, illustrated by the young dying and leaving their belongings behind for the old to use. She is prompted to say this when she is handed her dead son Michael's walking stick to use while walking after Bartley to give him a blessing. Bartley's life could, according to the islanders' superstition, depend on this blessing, and thus Michael's walking stick is a crucial object for Bartley's fate. Though Maurya intends the walking stick to help her save Bartley's life, Bartley's ultimate death suggests that the walking stick and other belongings of the dead (as he was wearing his brother's shirt when thrown into the sea)

actually pull the living towards death. Therefore, the objects that the dead leave behind reinforce the unnatural pattern of the young dying before the old. This passage is also yet another example of how traditional norms concerning age are being disrupted. The old are unable to advise or be protected by the young if the young pass away before them.

☞ 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?

Related Characters: Nora (speaker), Michael

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 66


Explanation and Analysis

This exclamation from Nora follows her identification of the clothing in the bundle as belonging to Michael, which proves that he is dead. Crying out, Nora laments the irony that such an accomplished man as their brother could be reduced to nothing but scraps of his clothes. This demonstrates the destructive and transformative power that the sea has over bodies, memories, and community. The sea eradicates Michael's body and identity, taking away the possibility of recognizing his corpse, and thus turning him into a faded image of what he used to be. His rowing and fishing prowess was nowhere near enough to combat the will of the sea, and this passage makes the sea seem relentless, devastating, and even cruel in that it effaces Michael's identity and refuses to even allow the family to bury his body.

☞ He went by quickly; and "the blessing of God on you," says he, and I could say nothing. 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.

Related Characters: Maurya (speaker), Michael, Bartley

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 68



Explanation and Analysis

In returning to the cottage, a terrified Maurya recounts a vision of Michael's ghost riding on the gray pony behind Bartley. She had gone after Bartley to give him the blessing that she had failed to give him before he left home, but when the time came, the vision prevented her from speaking. The implication here is that the pull that the dead have on Bartley, combined with the destructive will of the sea, overpowers God's protection and makes Maurya mute. Maurya and Cathleen accept without hesitation that this vision is a prophecy of Bartley's death, even though this logic is outside the realm of their Catholic faith. The vision truly is prophetic—the pony that Michael rode is the one that knocks Bartley into the sea, acting as the sea's accomplice and the instigator for his fatal accident.

The fine clothes and new shoes that Michael wears prove that his presence indeed comes from another life, as the family would not have been able to afford such clothing. This also suggests that Michael may now be better off, far away from suffering. Michael could be, in a sense, taking Bartley away from the hardship that a life on the Aran Islands puts one through, including the grief from constant deaths of family and friends and the dangerous labor on the sea.

There does be a power of young men floating round in the sea, and what way would they know if it was Michael they had, or another man like him, for when a man is nine days in the sea, and the wind blowing, it's hard set his own mother would be to say what man was it.

Related Characters: Maurya (speaker), Michael

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 69

Explanation and Analysis

This passage follows the entrance of old women in mourning into the cottage. Nora and Cathleen had heard a cry on the seashore, yet Maurya remained oblivious to her surroundings until the old women entered. She asks Cathleen if it is Michael, and wonders how she would even be able to identify his body if it is indeed his. There are so many young men continuously dying on the sea and being rendered unrecognizable by the salt and the surf that they often cannot be sure of whose body is found. This echoes Nora and Cathleen's previous grief that the sea took Michael and left nothing of him but his shirt and stocking to suggest who he once was. The harsh reality of death by the

sea has nearly desensitized the family, and the islanders, to the destruction of bodies, and it breaks down the physical bond of recognition even between mother and son.

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

Related Characters: Maurya (speaker), Bartley

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 70


Explanation and Analysis

At this point in the play, Bartley's death has finally been revealed and his body has been brought by townspeople into the family's cottage. Maurya utters this quote as she sprinkles Holy Water over Bartley's body and lays Michael's clothes over his feet. Though the young priest assured the family that Maurya's prayers should have been enough to save Bartley, God has failed to protect Bartley and the rest of the men in the family from the sea. Despite this, Maurya still clearly retains some Catholic faith since she uses Holy Water to anoint Bartley's body. Regardless, though, the play gives the sense that she has and will always have more fear and belief in the power of the sea than in God. Maurya finally implies that her own "great rest" is coming, which likely means her own coming death rather than simply peace of mind. In this play, the dead seem to pull the living to join them, and Maurya wishes to join the members of her family who have passed. However, this would leave her daughters Cathleen and Nora with no young men to provide for them and no elder to advise them. Their fate is therefore cast as ominous, since the chances of their survival are weak.

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

Related Characters: Maurya (speaker), Michael, Bartley

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

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Explanation and Analysis

Delivering the very last lines of the play, Maurya finishes performing rites over Bartley's body and accepts the manner of burial that each of her sons will receive: Michael has been given "a clean burial" in the sea and Bartley will have "a fine coffin out of the white boards." This acceptance comes despite the fact that Maurya is only able to give one of her sons the traditional burial, since Michael's burial was

chosen by God and by the sea. In asking, "What more can we want than that?" Maurya illustrates the helplessness of herself and her community. They will always lack control over their lives—it is out of their hands to cultivate prosperity and happiness or avoid grief and suffering. Maurya acknowledges that it is every human being's fate to die and that fighting this truth is futile. Though her reaction may spring from a numbness born of the vast amounts of grief and suffering that she has experienced (rather than true acceptance and wisdom), it's clear that Maurya thinks it wise to surrender to the power of the natural world.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

ACT 1

The play, set on an island west of Ireland, opens on a kitchen inside a cottage filled with nets, oil-skins, and cooking tools. Cathleen, a girl around twenty years old, is kneading dough and spinning thread when Nora, her younger sister, asks the whereabouts of their mother Maurya.

After Cathleen tells her that Maurya is lying down, Nora presents a bundle that the young priest has given her containing a shirt and stocking from a drowned man in Donegal who may be their brother Michael. The wind blows open the door, spurring Cathleen to ask Nora if the young priest would stop Bartley, their last living brother, from going on the sea in such a storm. However, the priest had assured Nora that God would not leave Maurya with no son living after all of her prayers. Cathleen decides that she and Nora will not open the bundle yet in case Maurya walks in.

Hearing Maurya stirring in the other room, Cathleen hides the bundle in the turf-loft and throws turf down to feed the oven, in which bread is baking for Bartley's journey. Upon entering, Maurya declares that Bartley will not go on the sea in such weather and that the young priest will surely stop him. Nora tells her that the priest will not stop him and that Bartley is determined to go.

A sad, quiet Bartley enters and quickly asks for the **rope**, which Cathleen had hung up to prevent the pig from eating it. Maurya attempts to keep Bartley from taking the rope, as they might need it if Michael's body washes up. She then reflects on the injustice of having paid so much for the **white boards** to make Michael's coffin since there's no body to bury yet, and Bartley dismisses the idea that there's still a chance of finding Michael's body.

As Bartley uses the **rope** to make a halter for his **horse**, he instructs Cathleen on taking care of certain chores once he is gone, though Maurya is skeptical that Cathleen could do either. Maurya questions how she and her daughters will live once Bartley is dead and continues to try to prevent Bartley from going out onto the sea. Cathleen firmly tells her, "It's the life of a young man to be going on the sea," and Bartley leaves.

The set indicates that this is a fisherman's cottage and that the division of labor is traditional. The women will use the kitchen equipment, and the men will use the fishing equipment on the sea.



This scene makes clear the danger that nature (and the sea, in particular) presents to the men of the family, and it also shows that the sea is their livelihood. To counter their grief and their fear of the sea, the priest encourages the family to have faith that God will protect Bartley from harm. The care Nora takes to make sure Maurya does not immediately find out about the potential proof of her son's death suggests the toll that losing so many children has taken on her.



As it is clearly Bartley's duty to go on the sea, Cathleen's job is to prepare food for his trip. Maurya echoes Cathleen's prior question about whether the priest could prevent Bartley from leaving, illustrating the family's anxiety over losing another man in the family.



Bartley's death is foreshadowed heavily by the rope, which is associated with Michael's corpse and also resembles a noose. The white boards, which will be used to make a coffin, invoke the idea that the family is waiting for a corpse. The direness of the family's situation is evident in the hungry pig's attempt to eat the rope, as well as Maurya's worry about the expense of the boards.



Maurya's worry about the women's future illustrates the necessity of having a man in the family to do the dangerous work. Though Bartley can instruct Cathleen on how to do certain traditionally male jobs around the cottage, she will not be able to fill his shoes completely, since she cannot go on the sea.



Maurya despairingly cries out that she will have no son left her by nightfall, and Cathleen rebukes her for not giving Bartley a blessing and “sending him out with an unlucky word behind him.” Realizing that they have also forgotten to give Bartley his bread, Cathleen sends Maurya to bring the bread to Bartley before he is gone and, while she’s at it, to give him his blessing. Nora gives her Michael’s old walking stick to steady her, and Maurya sadly reflects on the irony of the young leaving things behind for the old.

With Maurya gone after Bartley, Cathleen and Nora have their chance to look through the bundle. Cutting through the knots, they take out the bit of stocking. After counting the stitches in the stocking, they realize it must indeed be Michael’s, for Nora remembered dropping four stitches when making it. They are overcome with grief at the knowledge that Michael has drowned, lamenting that there is nothing left of his body “but a bit of an old shirt and a plain stocking.”

Cathleen hears Maurya coming back up the path, and decides that they will not tell her about the proof of Michael’s death until Bartley returns from his voyage. The girls busy themselves, and Maurya comes in slowly, still carrying the bread. Cathleen questions Maurya about what has happened as she begins to keen (to wail in grief). Weakly and fearfully, Maurya reveals that she has seen Michael. Cathleen softly contradicts her, telling her that “his body is after being found in the far north, and he’s got a clean burial by the grace of God.”

Maurya tells her daughters that as she tried to say “God speed you” to Bartley, the words choked in her throat. She then saw Michael in fine clothes and shoes riding behind Bartley on a gray **pony**. Cathleen immediately begins to keen, believing that this is an omen of death for Bartley, and Nora clings to the young priest’s promise that God would not leave Maurya destitute.

As Maurya, grief-stricken and oblivious to her surroundings, recounts the ways in which her sons, husband, and father-in-law have died on the sea, Nora and Cathleen hear someone crying out on the seashore. Old women begin to come into the house and kneel down. Maurya asks Cathleen who has died and wonders how they would know if it was Michael after being so long in the sea. Cathleen declares that it is indeed Michael and shows her mother the clothes from the bundle.

However, it is in fact Bartley who has died. More townspeople enter the cottage, and Bartley’s body is carried in on a plank with a bit of sail covering it. One of the women tells Cathleen that Bartley’s **horse** knocked him into the sea.

Cathleen’s insistence on Maurya giving a blessing to Bartley shows that she still does hope for God’s protection against the sea. She scolds her own elderly mother for her pessimism, which shows her superstitious belief that pessimism will give Bartley bad luck. Maurya’s use of the walking stick Michael left behind also demonstrates the irony of the old outliving the young.



Though it was fairly apparent that Michael has died at sea, Cathleen and Nora finally have evidence of his passing. It’s noteworthy how anonymous this evidence is: the only sign that the clothes belong to Michael is actually unrelated to him: it’s Nora’s stitches. There is no body and no direct evidence of him—it’s as though the sea has subsumed his whole being.



Maurya’s fragility is evident in Cathleen’s need to protect Maurya from the certainty of Michael’s death until Bartley comes home safely. Once Maurya reveals her vision, Cathleen frames Michael’s death as delicately and positively as possible, telling her mother that God gave Michael a “clean burial,” rather than emphasizing that the sea has killed yet another of their men.



The family’s pagan beliefs are strong enough that Cathleen and Maurya are both convinced that Maurya’s vision is an omen. Nora hangs on to her Catholic faith and trust in the priest, wanting desperately to choose hope over dismay.



The suffering that Maurya and her family has endured over the years becomes even more heart-wrenchingly clear through Maurya’s list of the dead. The fact that a procession of old women are bringing in the body underscores the unnatural age distribution on the island: the young men are dying, but the old are still alive.



Maurya’s vision of Bartley’s death has come to pass, suggesting that the sea is indeed more powerful than God.



The women who have gathered in the cottage begin to keen. As she anoints Bartley with Holy Water, Maurya speaks aloud to herself of how “there isn’t anything more the sea can do to [her].” Despite her prayers, the sea has taken her last son and she now will have “a great rest.” Cathleen reflects on how “old” and “broken” Maurya has become, and Maurya prays for the souls of her sons and of “every one...left living in the world.” Maurya then declares that it is everyone’s fate to die in the end and that “we must be satisfied.”

Though her Christian faith has, in a sense, failed her, Maurya still anoints Bartley with Holy Water and prays. She implies that it will also be her fate to die soon, since the sea has taken her sons and broken her spirit. Death is inevitable, and the power of the sea simply hastens one’s passing. It is impossible to fight either death or the will of the sea.





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