

# J.M. Synge's *Riders to the Sea* in performance: from specific realism to universality

MARÍA C. SANZ CASARES

Universidad de Valladolid

## ABSTRACT

The greatness of John Millington Synge's masterpiece *Riders to the Sea* has commonly been attributed to an extraordinary symbiosis of twofold qualities: realism and symbolism. The realistic setting depicts everyday Aran life, but the question of the nature of symbolism, the quality responsible for its universality, is still unsettled. The purpose of this paper is to show how the play is constructed in such a way as to produce a gradual change from the particular tragedy of a family to a drama of universal proportions. This will be done by offering an analysis of stage directions, which will help to reconstruct the performance imaginatively.

The greatness of John Millington Synge's masterpiece *Riders to the Sea* is commonly attributed to an extraordinary symbiosis of twofold qualities: realism and symbolism. *Riders to the Sea* is a play with a degree of pictorial realism about the stage setting and credible behaviour by believable characters, but, at another level, what we see and hear constitute powerful images that suggest more complex statements. The extent and nature of these images are not, however, unanimously appreciated. While N. Grene (1975: 41-59) rejects any symbolic meaning of the play on the basis that it has a wholly realistic component based on the Irish history, legend and folklore, other critics, among them, D. Corkery (1966: 135-47), P.L. Levitt (1971: 84-116) and R. Skelton (1971: 41-52) offer the spectrum of multiple cultural sources for what they consider symbolic aspects of the play: the mythology of the sea, the use of numbers, the old women mourning functioning like a Greek chorus, the dramatic irony similar to the Greek tragedy, etc.. Besides, Skelton (1971: 43) maintains that Synge has organised the imagery in such a way as to refer us, not only to the world of Irish history and folklore, but also to the world of archetype and symbol. This archetypal world, ultimately responsible for the universal meaning of *Riders*, makes symbolism work independently of the audience's or readers' awareness of these varied sources; in other words, either on stage or when reading it, this play surpasses the scope of a specific local story of an Aran fisherman's family to become a tragedy of huge proportions.

My purpose here is to show why this happens, how Synge creates a tragic atmosphere that transcends the realism of the setting and action on the stage. Studying the paragraphs of stage directions we can reconstruct the performance imaginatively and envisage the world of the play. Stage directions are an integral part of the substance and structure of *Riders*. Synge pays special attention to such features as the props and the characters' gestures and movements. They create the mood of the play, which is, in addition, intensified by spoken directions, the many references to storms -the sea offstage.

The material for analysis will be, then, the authorial comments on the characters' physical actions and feelings through the stage directions. The critics cited have already

pointed out the tremendous significance of the props and of some aspects of the characters' facial and vocal expressions and movements as the basic means to establish the duality realism/symbolism in *Riders*. In addition to this, I will examine here all the remaining areas covered by the stage directions in *Riders*.

According to Keir Elam (1990: 28), realism is largely metonymic in mode while symbolism is primarily metaphoric. The question is, then, to find out when the characters, props, setting and technical elements -the theatrical signs- stop functioning as a part of a greater whole or in relation to others to stand for something else. Therefore, it is necessary to establish the basic relationship between the theatrical sign and its signified, and to see which semiotic type or function is predominant in *Riders*: the *indices*, *icons* or *symbols* (Elam 1990: 21-29, Gutiérrez 1992: 26-27, 91). In other words, my aim is to show when the theatrical signs stop functioning as icons or indices of a particular, objective reality to become symbols of universal meaning. The icon represents its object by any form of similarity between the sign and its signified; the indexical signs are causally connected with their objects, often physically or through contiguity (e.g. the door suddenly blowing open points to the presence of a strong wind), while a symbol expresses a relationship between sign and signified conventional and unmotivated.

This analysis is carried out in two interrelated parts. In the first place, I will analyse the stage directions in *Riders* following the sequence in which they appear. And in the second place, I will organise them in codes of semiotic signs following Aston and Savona's classification (see 1994: 82-90), to see which type or function is predominant. I have considered both types of stage directions, the "intra-dialogic" or inserted in the dialogue, and the "extra-dialogic", those set apart and placed between brackets and in italics. But, in this play, there is a redundancy of effect in that extra-dialogic -or written- directions are frequently repeated in an intra-dialogic -or spoken- way. For practical purposes, when repeated, I've only considered those set apart.

*Riders* is a one act play with no scene divisions, but the play progresses in different phases. To follow its progress, I will reproduce the sequence of stage directions in sections, which I have grouped according to the function they have, the atmosphere the play creates or the change of pace or mood it produces (these will be printed in bold type).

1. **Properties:** (*Cottage kitchen with nets, oil skins, spinning-wheel, some new boards standing by the wall*).

The opening paragraph of stage directions establishes a realistic setting by describing a few naturalistic props on stage. They function as icons of the true objects of a poor fishermen's cottage. As N. Grene points out (1975: 48), "it is the very ordinariness of these objects, their unchanging actuality which gives them their strength". But P. Levitt (1971: 86) calls attention to one prop which seems out of place, the new white boards standing by the wall; at the moment we have to wait for its significance.

2. **Opening: ordinary activity:** (*Cathleen, a girl about twenty, finishes kneading a cake, and puts it in the pot-oven by the fire, then wipes her hands, and begins to spin at the wheel*)

These directions initiate the physical action of *Riders* and give detailed instructions to the actress playing Cathleen. This serves to establish her ordinary activity, cooking and spinning, depicting the Aran Islanders' daily life.

3. **Nora's entrance:** *The girls show strain and anxiety: (Nora, a young girl, puts her head in at the door). (In a low voice). (Nora comes in softly, and takes a bundle from under her shawl). (Cathleen spinning the wheel rapidly). (Cathleen stops her wheel with a sudden movement, and leans out to listen).*

Normal activity is abruptly interrupted when Nora makes her entrance cautiously, putting in her head, coming in softly, speaking in a low voice and producing a bundle hidden under her shawl. Her deliberately careful attitude brings all of a sudden apprehensions which are made more explicit and disquieting when she explains that the bundle contains a bit of an old shirt and a plain stocking got off a drowned man found far north, in Donegal. They are to find out whether those clothes belonged to their brother Michael, whose body Maurya is searching for each new tide on the shore. On hearing this news, Cathleen suddenly stops spinning, which implies a spontaneous impression on her. The contents of the bundle become all of a sudden two important props necessary for the development of the action. In addition, they tell us at the very beginning of a play that *Riders to the Sea* is about death. Now, the girls must cope with Michael's death; for this reason their gestures and movements start to show strain and anxiety.

4. **They get anxious about the bad weather:** *(The door, which Nora half closed is blown open by a gust of wind). (Cathleen looking out anxiously).*

The door and the window are means of a necessary remembrance of the life outside the room: the sea. The strong gust of wind signifies an impending storm, a rough sea; it also functions as a reminder of Bartley's intention of going to the sea. Cathleen, consequently, looks *anxiously* out of the window. We begin to understand that going to the sea in bad weather and getting drowned is a common event in the ordinary life in Aran.

5. **Secretism about the bundle** *(She goes to the table with the bundle). (Cathleen goes to the inner door and listens). (They put the ladder against the gable of the chimney). (Cathleen goes up a few steps and hides the bundle in the turf loft).*

Back to their immediate problem: the bundle. Nora and Cathleen fear Maurya should enter and hear about it. They find a hiding place, and the bundle is hidden unopened, thus suspense is maintained on the original question of Michael.

6. **Maurya's entrance uneasy; the girls hide their feelings with domestic activities:** *(Maurya comes from the inner door). (Maurya speaking querulously). (Maurya sitting down on a stool by the fire). (Cathleen throwing down the turf). (Nora picks up the turf and puts it round in the pot-oven).*

Maurya enters with signs of tremendous suffering; she keeps a querulous voice and sits by the fire. The girls try to hide their strain paying attention to domestic duties.

7. **Bartley's entrance; his occupation, anxiety and hurry; confrontation with Maurya:** *(Bartley comes in and looks around the room). (Speaking sadly and quietly). (Nora giving him the rope). (Bartley takes the rope. Beginning to work with the rope). (Maurya looks round at the boards). (Bartley working at the halter).*

Bartley enters in a hurry, because he is determined to go to the sea. While on stage, he is all the time making himself ready to go. He starts by making a halter for the mare out of the new rope Maurya bought to lower Michael's coffin. Maurya tries to keep her son back with the argument that if he goes, who will make a coffin out of the new white boards she

looks at, and without the rope, how will the coffin be lowered in the grave. Her looking at the boards calls attention to them, and from now on, they will be a disturbing reminder of death. The white boards, the rope and the hidden contents of the bundle are no longer mere props or icons of ordinary life. They are physical indices of death.

Bartley seems to pay no heed to Maurya's entreaties. But we are aware that he is also uneasy, for the stage directions tell us that he speaks sadly and quietly, though he makes pretensions of haste. Working with the rope allows Bartley to avoid his mother's looks and appeal, and his haste indicates that he is trying to escape from a terrible emotional scene at home. But Bartley's feeling moves between the anxiousness to avoid Maurya's agony at home and the reluctance of leaving his house to face danger at the sea.

8. **Daughters' and son's activity:** *(to Cathleen). (Bartley lays down the halter, takes off his old coat and puts on a newer one of the same flannel). (Getting his purse and tobacco). (Taking the halter). (Bartley goes out).*

Maurya's tremendous anxiety and weakness *(Maurya crying out as he is in the door).*

Bartley addresses Cathleen -not Maurya- and makes her responsible for the domestic tasks in his absence. This way he is not only eluding his mother, but putting emphasis on Maurya's incapacity to take care of the house in the present circumstances.

Syngé is precise naming the things Bartley takes with him to go off: the halter, a new coat, his purse and tobacco. Bartley forgets his food, though at present the audience is not made aware of it. Maurya's cry at his departure renders it ominous, indicating an impending disaster.

9. **The girls go on with their domestic duties with signs of alarm.** *(Maurya takes up the tongs and begins raking the fire aimlessly without looking round. Maurya sways herself on her stool). (Cathleen crying out).*

The strained atmosphere after Bartley's departure persists as the girls try to resume their home tasks with signs of alarm. Maurya is not to be counted on for help. She has just lost a son on the sea and she believes she is going to lose another. Her swaying on her stool and her aimlessly raking the fire implies that she is only concerned with her tragedy.

The fire makes the girls realise Bartley has gone without his bread. A new charge of tension immediately follows. The bread was to be Bartley's only sustenance while on the sea. The girls have forgotten to give him his only food for their minds are not in the physical activity they have undertaken.

10. **The bread is discovered; Maurya sent away:** *(Cathleen comes over the fire). (Turning the cake out of the oven). (Cathleen cutting off some of the bread and rolling it in a cloth). (Maurya taking the bread). (Maurya standing up unsteadily). (Cathleen looking anxiously at her). (Maurya taking a stick Nora gives her. She goes out slowly).*

In spite of the tremendous pressure on the daughters, they alone handle the situation, and try to go back to normality. They take the bread, wrap it in a cloth and give it to Maurya. They send her off to pursue Bartley and give him his bread.

11. **The girls deal eagerly and anxiously with the bundle:***(Nora goes over to the ladder). (Getting the bundle from the loft). (Taking the bundle). (Cathleen Trying to open the bundle). (Nora giving her a knife. Cathleen cutting the string). (Cathleen opens the bundle and takes out a bit of a shirt and a stocking). (They look at them eagerly. Cathleen in a low voice). (She looks through some*

*clothes hanging in the corner). (Nora brings a bit of flannel and they compare the flannel). (Nora who has taken up the stocking and counted the stitches, crying out). (Cathleen taking the stocking counts the stitches. Crying out). (Nora swinging herself half round, and throwing out her arms on the clothes after an instant. Looking out). (Nora helping Cathleen to close the bundle). (They put them into a hole in the chimney corner).*

Maurya's departure allows the girls to go back to the bundle. The action that follows is carried out in an apprehensive mood until the suspense concerning Michael's death disappears. Tension and suspense are maintained as the girls try to untie the knot and it proves difficult. The young women speak in a low voice, as if to keep their activity secret. They don't need so much secrecy now Maurya is away, but their own fears, their reluctance to know the truth about the clothes compel them to keep a cautious attitude. Once the bundle is opened, they take out the contents and look at them eagerly and speak in a low voice. They know at once they are Michael's but they are still reluctant to see the truth, and start to examine them carefully by comparing the flannel of the bit of the old shirt and counting the stitches on the stocking. They are really Michael's. What remains of Michael's clothes represents the loss of the everyday life of a young and strong fisherman. They both cry.

12. **Recomposing a normal scene:** *(Cathleen goes back to the spinning-wheel). (Nora sits down at the chimney corner, with her back to the door).*

Maurya is heard to be back. The girls don't want Maurya to hear yet about Michael while Bartley is away in bad weather and they hide the bundle again. Thus the initial secrecy is still kept. The girls feign normality by turning to domesticity.

13. **Maurya's return. Signs of alarm:** *(Maurya comes in very slowly, without looking at the girls, and goes over to her stool at the other side of the fire. The cloth with the bread is still in her hands). (The girls look at each other, and Nora points to the bundle of bread). (Cathleen after spinning for a moment). (Maurya begins to keen softly, without turning round). (Goes on keening). (Cathleen a little impatiently).*

At hearing Maurya, her daughters resumed home activity, which is abruptly interrupted when they see that Maurya still has the bread in her hands. There follows the recounting of the vision, illustrated by a conjunction of harmonic stage directions describing the characters' movements, gesticulation and vocal definition and speech. With them the play experiments a change of pace, of movement, of mood, directing our attention towards the climax.

The girls are impressed by Maurya's slow entrance, and the way she sits without a word to them or looking at them. They look at one another in fear and amazement. They point at the bundle. This time they make no obvious signs of alarm when they realise she has not reached Bartley to give him his food, but anxiety is given vent when Cathleen tries aimlessly spinning for a moment. Once again her going back to domestic cares does not help. They suspect something has happened. Their anxiety reaches a climax when Maurya starts keening. To end the suspense that is consuming Cathleen, she asks Maurya what has happened in an impatient tone. Cathleen's vehemence breaks the spell Maurya seems to be plunged into, and she gains some control over herself. In a weak and frightened tone Maurya recounts her vision. She frightens her daughters, who gather and crouch at her feet. The vision is somehow brought on stage by Maurya's putting up her hands, as if to hide something from her eyes. She is still under the influence of the vision.

14. *The vision: (Maurya with a weak voice). (Cathleen leaves her wheel and looks out). (Maurya starts so that her shawl falls back from her head and shows her white tossed hair). (With a frightened voice). (Cathleen coming to the fire). (They crouch down in front of the old woman at the fire). (Maurya puts up her hands, as if to hide something from her eyes). (Cathleen speaking softly). (Maurya a little defiantly). (Cathleen begins to keen). (Maurya in a low voice). (She pauses for a moment as if they heard something through the door that is half open behind him). (Nora in a whisper). (Cathleen in a whisper).*

Maurya has come back in a state of shock for the dreadful vision she has had. She has seen Michael riding after Bartley on the grey pony. After a moment of disbelief, ultimately Nora and Cathleen give credence to it. Considering the realistic setting, this seems to imply that visions are part of the realities of Aran, at least part of the life Sygne is creating as "real". But the mood and atmosphere before the vision have been foreshadowing tragedy, and the vision is its prelude. Under these circumstances, the vision does not dispel the illusion of reality provided we understand that the logic of the world represented on stage that we accept as real is not necessarily the logic of the external world. But we needn't accept the world of *Riders* as a literary parallel to the real one. It can be accepted as a naturalistic or literal copy of the life of the Aran islanders, because everything in the action works within its boundaries.

The question of how the vision conforms to the Aran world is the question of whether it is a piece of superstition or actuality, that is, whether it is Maurya's delusion, due to her terrible suffering, or it has really taken place. We will learn in time that it only exists in Maurya's mind. The common spectator and reader accept visions not as objective occurrences of the real world but as a mirage or hallucination of the mind. In this sense the play does not surpass the logic of the real world. This accounts for the reluctance N. Grene shows to accept any symbolic explanation of the play. He finds that everything in *Riders* has a factual and literal reality "which is intractable to allegorical or symbolic interpretation" (1975: 52). Grene believes that Maurya's vision fits into the realistic atmosphere of *Riders* because Bartley died accidentally. Though the vision suggests that Michael is responsible for his brother's death, the islanders inform that "the grey pony knocked him over into the sea, and he was washed out where there is a great surf on the white rocks" (28).

But the critics have detected some biblical references underlying the vision. P. Levitt (1971: 99) has established the parallelism between the description of Michael's costumes -he is wearing white and clean linen- and two verses of *The Book of Revelation*: one is 19:14: "And the Armies which were in heaven followed (the word of God) upon white horses, clothed in fine linen, white and clean", and the other 19:8: "for the fine linen is the righteousness of saints". Consequently, Michael's spectral clothes indicate that he is dead. On the other hand, the grey pony Michael was riding on recalls the pale horse of Revelation 6:8 "I behold a pale horse: and his name that sat on him was death". We have to infer that, not only is Michael dead, but he is *death itself*; that he has returned from the dead to take his brother with him. Maurya clearly understands that Michael has appeared to her to announce Bartley's death.

It is, however, possible that the spectator or reader misses the biblical allusion. So my concern here is to see the function of the vision on stage independently of its biblical references. As important as the narration of the vision itself is the way it is narrated: convincingly, breathlessly and in a state of shock.

Cathleen's faint doubts expressed in a soft voice are answered by Maurya's little defiance. It is the first time Maurya reacts with a little energy, which proves that she is sure about the vision she has had. The girls surrender, and start to keen also. There are some noises outside that the girls only seem to hear, and they start to whisper, not to disturb Maurya's recount.

Now everything is prepared for Bartley's death, which is dramatised by a procession of mourners and some funeral rites.

15. **The procession of mourners:** *(Maurya continues without hearing anything). (Maurya pauses again with her hand stretched out towards the door). (The door opens softly and old women begin to come in, crossing themselves on the threshold, and kneeling down in front of the stage with their red petticoats over their heads). (Maurya half in a dream). (Cathleen reaches out and hands Maurya the clothes that belonged to Michael). (Maurya takes them in her hands). (Nora looks out). (Cathleen in a whisper to the women who have come in). (Two younger women come in and pull out the table). (Then men carry in the body of Bartley, laid on a plank, with a bit of sail over it, and lay on the table). (The men kneel near the door). (The women swaying themselves with a slow movement).*

The turning point from realism to symbolism is definitely the vision. Before it action concerned daily life; after it, actions become rituals: the rite of carrying Bartley's corpse home, the procession of mourners, the religious ceremony of kneeling and praying, the keening, and Maurya's ritualistic benediction of her son's corpse with Holy Water. And rites are fundamentally symbolic.

Unaware of what is happening outside, Maurya starts a threnody in which she recounts in a sort of litany how the sea has taken the lives of her sons and her husband and her husband's father. This dirge heightens the ritualistic character of the drama. As Price puts it (1961: 187), "past and present merge as in a dream sequence while the mother chants the name of her dead sons". As Maurya explains how her son Patch was brought in when his body was found, she points at the door. It is being emphasised that it is a fateful door, through which her dead sons are brought back dead. Her pointing at the door also announces that Bartley is being brought home.

When attention is called on the door, it is opened softly and the islanders begin to enter in a slow and orderly procession. This indicates that something has happened and in an impulse Nora looks out of the window. She sees the men carrying Bartley's body in the same way as Patch before. This means, according to Price (188), that "Nora is being initiated into this ritual of death. She is in the same position of Maurya, seeing her children brought home in this procession. It is always the same. Men ride down to the sea and are brought home in this way".

Then, the islanders bring in Bartley's corpse. Maurya asks if it is Patch or Michael or what is it at all. She cannot distinguish her sons in death. Cathleen tells her about Michael and gives her the clothes of the bundle.

16. **The blessing ceremony:** *(Maurya has gone over and knelt down at the head of the table). (The women are keening softly, and swaying themselves with a slow movement). (Cathleen and Nora kneel at the other end of the table). (The men kneel near the door). (Maurya raising her head and speaking as if she did not see the people around her). (Maurya saying prayers under her breath).*

Contrary to our expectations, Maurya doesn't fall in agony or cry in desperation, but seems to get some control and comfort, as she starts to perform the ritual of blessing with

the Holy Water: it is a blessing for the dead present on stage and a blessing for the absent dead, which stands for all the dead. She sprinkles the Holy Water till the last drop and she puts the empty cup mouth downwards on the table, to signify that the cycle of her deaths is closed.

The verbal blessing that occurs parallel to that with Holy Water adds emphasis. From a personal lament, Maurya moves towards an acceptance of death itself. Maurya asks a blessing not only for Bartley and Michael, and her other sons, but “for everyone is left living in the world” (30). When calamity has reached its peak, she finds some peace and consolation for the sea can do no more to her: she will not have to suffer any more the anguish of watching the sea and of waiting for the return of the fishermen. Distress is left for the other families who still have fishermen among their members. Maurya understands that our destiny is death; we must accept it and “we must be satisfied”. According to Price (1961: 191), when Maurya has reached this deep knowledge of life and death, she is no longer a specific mother mourning the deaths of her sons. She is a symbolic, universal mother, “an image of humanity facing a hostile universe, and through her” we can see that “life is essentially tragic and the final reality is death”.

It is extraordinary that even in the peak of ritualism, Synge does not exclude realism. Its realistic counterpoint is the brief words whispered by the girls and the islanders. These whispers enhance the tragic atmosphere, while they make us not forget that life must go on: since Maurya is concentrated on the religious observance of death, the others must attend the physical arrangements for the burial, as the making of the coffin out of the white boards bought for Michael.

\* \* \*

After this analysis of the stage directions in their original sequence, we can infer the following conclusions.

The action has two distinct parts; one before the vision and other after it. The action is confined to a single room and the subject matter is, in one sense, domestic. However, in the first part, domesticity is disturbed and the events in that room are related to the outside world. In the second part, the tragedy is made universal.

#### BEFORE THE VISION: CREATING A SPECIFIC REALISM FORESHADOWING DEATH

A) Concerning the first issue, how domesticity is stirred and disordered, it is presented as the result of a recent tragedy, Michael's death, and the way the characters try to accommodate their activity to it. Their efforts to cope with it are suggested both with their physical action and with their mode of speech. These are relevant not only as an extension of the characters' personality, but because they provide the mood of the play. Changes in their actions and voices are key moments which mark a significant change of mood or reveal some fact or attitude. This is clearly shown if we have a simple look at the stage directions of *Riders to the Sea* organised according to the codes of semiotic signs they belong to, and in relation to the characters implied or related to.



## STAGE DIRECTIONS BEFORE THE VISION

## FUNCTION: CHARACTERS' IDENTIFICATION AND PHYSICAL DEFINITION

## – Entrances and exits

CATHLEEN/NORA: (*Nora puts the head in at the door*); (*Nora comes in softly*).

BARTLEY: "*Bartley is coming in a hurry*". (*Bartley comes in*); "*I must go now quickly*"; (*Bartley goes out*);

## – Movements, postures and occupations

NORA/CATHLEEN: (*Cathleen finishes kneading a cake, and puts it in the down in the pot-oven by the fire, then wipes her hands, and begins to spin at the wheel*); (*Cathleen spinning the wheel rapidly*); (*Cathleen after spinning for a moment*); (*Nora sits down at the chimney corner, with her back to the door*); (*Cathleen hides the bundle in the turf loft*); (*Turning the cake out of the oven*); (*Cutting off some of the bread and rolling it in a cloth*); (*Cathleen taking the bundle*); (*Nora getting the bundle from the loft*); (*Cathleen trying to open the bundle*); (*Cathleen opens the bundle and takes out a bit of a shirt and a stocking*); (*Nora cutting the string*). (*Nora who has taken up the stocking and counted the stitches*); (*Nora swinging herself half round, and throwing out her arms on the clothes*); (*They put the ladder against the gable of the chimney*); (*Throwing down the turf*); (*Nora picks up the turf and puts it round the pot oven*); (*Cathleen taking the stocking*); (*Cathleen counts the stitches*); (*Cathleen goes back to the spinning-wheel*);

MAURYA: (*Standing up unsteadily*); "*She is moving about on the bed*"; (*Maurya turning round to the fire*); (*Maurya putting her shawl over the head*); (*Maurya takes up the tongs and begins raking the fire aimlessly without looking round*); (*Maurya taking the bread*); (*Taking a stick Nora gives her*); (*She goes out slowly*);

BARTLEY: (*Bartley takes the rope*); (*beginning to work with the rope*); (*working at the halter*); (*Bartley lays down the halter, takes off his old coat and puts on a newer one of the same flannel*); (*getting his purse and tobacco*); (*taking the halter*).

## – Facial expressions, gestures and reactions

NORA/CATHLEEN: (*Looking out*); (*Looking out*); (*They look at them eagerly*); (*Pointing to the corner*); (*The girls look at each other and Nora points to the bundle of bread*); (*Looking out anxious*); (*Looking at her anxiously*); (*She looks through some clothes hanging in the corner*); (*Looking out*); (*Nora looks out*); (*Cathleen listens*);

MAURYA: "*Crying and lamenting*"; (*Looking up at Cathleen*); (*Looking out*); (*Maurya looks down at the board*);

BARTLEY: (*Bartley looks around the room*).

## FUNCTION: CHARACTERS' VOCAL DEFINITION AND SPEECH FORMAL CONCERNS: Mode of delivering speech

## – Tone, quality of voice, emotion, pace and Volume

MAURYA: (*With a weak voice*); (*With a frightened voice*); (*Speaking querulously*);

CATHLEEN/NORA: (*Speaking softly*); (*A little impatiently*); (*In a low voice*); (*crying out*); (*In a low voice*); (*Crying out*); (*Crying out*);

BARTLEY: (*Bartley speaking sadly and quietly*).

– Addressee to others: (*Bartley to Cathleen*); (*Bartley to Nora*);

Action and language work together in order to dramatise a particular friction between an old woman and her young daughters and son. Maurya struggles to prevent her son from going to the sea, but she does not want to show openly that she is alarmed. She uses indirect

arguments. Maurya's has had a long and tragic experience with the sea, and now she has a foreboding of an immediate new misfortune. The younger generation tries to make Maurya realise that Bartley must go out, that "it is the life of a young man to be going to the sea". They are too young to let life stop its ordinary rhythm. This is the central conflict of the first part of the play: while alive, men in Aran must go the sea, they must fulfil their inescapable destiny. It is what Daniel Corkery has defined as the conflict between Maurya and the sea.

The efforts of Maurya's daughters and son to make her understand that her foreboding is unfounded prove not only useless, but her anxiety makes them become progressively laden with the same fears. Consequently, each character's behaviour is a response to their respective knowledge, apprehension or foreboding of death. And their facial expressions, gestures, reactions, movements, postures, occupations and actions have their distinctive marks.

The character's movements express anxiety. Each person feels strain though they try to hide it from one another. But their gestures and actions betray them. When Maurya is offstage, the young girls endeavour to keep in secret their knowledge of Michael's death and burial in the far north; in Maurya's presence, the girls and Bartley hide their apprehensions occupying themselves with the ordinary house activities. They are all the time dealing with the stage properties. Activity serves, on the one hand, to portray daily life in Aran, but, on the other hand, their movements and gestures are a means of releasing hard tension. Contrariwise, Maurya merely sits by the fire for she has no mind or mood for activity, she is grief-stricken. Her movements are defined as unsteady, slow, aimless. In both cases, activity and inactivity must be undertaken in such a way that they become reactions through which the characters give vent to their uneasy and premonitory feelings.

Of all the gestures, the facial expression of *looking* is by far the most recurrent, whether to look out of the window -i.e. to look at the sea, which brings it on stage-, to look at the few important props -the white boards and the bread-, or to look in a particular way -*eagerly* and *anxiously*. Looking and pointing serve to call attention to the objects they point at. The author makes us see what the characters see and the way they are looking at something/someone. Synge's attention is focused on the rough sea offstage; on the white boards standing on the wall; on the rope intended to bury Michael, out of which Bartley makes a halter; on Michael's remaining clothes wrapped in a bundle; on Bartley's forgotten bread; on Michael's coat that Bartley puts on to go the sea.

Besides, there is a long series of directions defining vocal quality, that is, how characters (actors) have to speak -the mode of delivery, tone, quality of the voice, emotion, pace and volume. They also serve to convey and emphasise their feelings: Maurya's voice is weak, frightened, low and querulous. Her speech and laments consequently have to be rendered in a soft, slow, "half in a dream manner". Cathleen and Nora's diction varies considerably according to the situation. Their rendering alternates between a soft, low voice or a whisper when trying to keep secrecy and the impatient tone with which they attempt to turn Maurya back to normality. Bartley has to speak sadly and quietly. Notwithstanding, in spite of difference in quality, all the characters' vocal definition conveys strain, sadness, anxiousness and apprehensions. Vocal definition is undoubtedly a basic means of achieving a tragic mood throughout the play.

B) The sea offstage. Extending the limits and implications of the play

Concerning the second question I have raised above, regarding how the play extends the limits of the scenery other than to the Aran cottage, which is also undertaken before the vision, this issue is accomplished by a series of climatic and geographical references.

- Offstage geography/points of the compass: "Donegal"; "in the far North"; "Galway fair"; "Connemara"; "the sea"; "Bay of Gregory of the golden mouth"; "the west"
- Weather: "this day with the wind rising"; "There's a great roaring in the west"; "Is the Sea bad by the white rocks?"; the expression "The tide's turning" is repeated.
- Offstage sound: Wind: (The door, which Nora half closed is blown open by a gust of wind).

The geographic references are mainly to the sea, some points of the compass and some places of Irish main land. They indicate their relation with other maritime resorts, that their means of living depends on provisions from the sea and commerce with the main land. Boards for the coffins are brought from Connemara because in Aran there are no woods; Bartley must go to Galway to sell their horses. What is being emphasised is, then, that the play is not really concerned with what is happening on stage, inside the cottage, but outside. What happens to the Aran men, and all the men whose lives depend upon the sea.

The sea is the great protagonist. Throughout the play, whenever the characters look out of the window or speak about the weather or about the sea, they are bringing the sea inside. And it is always with fear and apprehension that they watch or talk about it. The climatic references heighten specially the fierceness of the sea.

Summing up, before the vision, there are two main kinds of theatrical signs. On the one hand, props and stage directions are used as *icons*, to create a realistic setting and an atmosphere of everyday activity as representation of life. Accordingly, the set of design elements together with the characters' identification and physical definition have the primary function of establishing the ordinary reality of Aran life, presided over by a powerful sea. On the other hand, props and stage directions are used as *indexes* of tragedy. Synge has constantly recourse to the index to attract his audience's attention, which must be focused on his characters' anxiety and fears. And these indices altogether help to transform the normal mood of everyday activity that opens the play, creating an atmosphere of apprehension, of tension and suspense.

There is a faint and subtle line of departure from the treatment of the props and characters as *icons* and *indices* of the specific reality of Aran to the regarding of them as *symbols* of universal tragedy. The mood and reactions of the characters, the secrecy about the bundle, the white boards and the rope, the bread Bartley has forgotten, among other signs, are meant to prepare us to consider unconsciously, in Bourgeois's words (1913: 162), that "the homeliest details" "assume a fearsome and premonitory significance. Intimate, familiar things ... are but weird symbols of an overmastering doom.". Darrell Figgis also comments that "each prop becomes a symbol foreshadowing the tragic ending of the play" (Levitt 113).

"As the play unfolds" -E. Benson puts it- (props] become charged with enormous symbolic voltage" (1982: 54). As a preparation for the vision, we have been given a series of insights both into the tragedy of Maurya's family, trying to cope with Michael's death, and into the relation between the two young brothers through the possessions Bartley has inherited from his dead brother. In addition, Bartley is going to the sea in a bad weather and has forgotten his bread -his only food. Bartley is sad and quiet, the girls alarmed, and Maurya

lost in her misery. All this suggests that Bartley is in danger, and all the characters express their fears and anxieties with their voices, gestures and movements. Thus a tragic atmosphere is fully created.

Action moves within the limits of the domesticity of Maurya's environment, but realism is manipulated. Instead of presenting us just with a slice of life on stage, Synge uses imagery of death, allusions to death and foreboding of impending tragedy to express the characters' feeling of being caught up in an inescapable fate. It is because we have been prepared to expect a slice of life, that anything that works against it is so disturbing.

Tragic mood is emphasised when Maurya returns with the bread in her hands. If we examine the stage directions of this second part according to their function, we will see that the mood is created once again by the combination of the characters' tense movements and specific features of vocal definition.

THE VISION AND AFTER: CREATING SYMBOLISM: From index to symbol: Biblical references to extend the implications of the play.

#### STAGE DIRECTIONS AFTER THE VISION

##### FUNCTION: CHARACTERS' IDENTIFICATION AND PHYSICAL DEFINITION

###### 1. Facial expressions, Gestures and Reactions:

NORA/CATHLEEN: (*The girls start as if they heard something through the door that is half open behind them*).

MAURYA: (*Maurya puts up her hands, as if to hide something from her eyes*); (*Maurya bending her head*); (*Maurya looks at them eagerly*); (*Maurya starts, so that her shawl falls back from her head*).

OLD MAN: (*Looking at the boards*).

###### 2. Entrances and Exits

OTHER CHARACTERS: (*The door opens softly and old women begin to come in, crossing themselves on the threshold, kneeling down in front of the stage*); (*Two younger women come in*).

###### 3. Movements, Postures and Occupations

NORA/CATHLEEN: (*She reaches out and hands Maurya the clothes that belonged to Michael*); (*Nora gives the Holy Water to Maurya*). (*Cathleen and Nora kneel at the other end of the table*).

MAURYA: (*Sitting down on a stool at the fire*); (*Maurya sways herself on her stool*); (*Maurya kneels down again*); (*Maurya stands up slowly*); (*Maurya kneels down again, crossing herself*). (*Maurya takes them in her hands*); (*Maurya drops Michael's clothes across Bartley's feet, and sprinkles the Holy Water over him*); (*Maurya stands out again very slowly and spreads out the pieces of Michael's clothes beside the body, sprinkling them with the last of the holy Water*); (*Puts the empty cup mouth downwards on the table, and lays her hands together on Bartley's feet*).

OTHERS: (*Two younger women pull out the table*); (*Then men carry in the body of Bartley, laid on a plank, with a bit of sail over it, and lay on the table. The men kneel near the door*); (*The women swaying themselves with a slow movement*).

FUNCTION: CHARACTERS' VOCAL DEFINITION AND SPEECH FORMAL CONCERNS: Mode of delivering speech

1. **Tone: quality of voice & Emotion. Pace. Volume**

MAURYA: (*Maurya begins to keen softly, without turning round*); (*In a low voice, but clearly*); (*Speaking very slowly*); (*Crying out as he is at the door*); (*A little defiantly*); (*Continuous without hearing anything*); (*Half in a dream, to Cathleen*); (*Raising her head and speaking as if she did not see the people around her*); (*Saying prayers under her breath*).

CATHLEEN/NORA: (*Speaking softly*); (*A little impatiently*); (*In a low voice*); (*Crying out*); (*In a low voice*); (*Crying out*); (*Crying out*); (*Cathleen begins to keen*); (*In a whisper*); (*In a whisper to the women who have come in*); (*In a whisper to Cathleen*); (*Slowly and clearly*).

OTHERS: (*The women are keening softly*).

2. **Silence/pause**

CATHLEEN: (*After an instant*).

MAURYA: (*Maurya pauses for a moment*); (*Maurya pauses again with her hand stretched out towards the door*); (*Maurya pauses and the keen rises a little more loudly from the women, then sinks away*).

Normal life has a sudden end. Domesticity gives way to ritualism, as the girls confer the main role to Maurya during the recounting of the vision. The girls react at Maurya's return with confusion stopping abruptly their activities to listen to her. Then, they respond to the vision with awe. Maurya is spell-bound and only comes to mind when Bartley's body is brought in. Maurya, indifferent to domestic activities, is the protagonist, and Nora and Cathleen's role is reduced to listeners, commentators and attendants in the subsequent rituals of death.

As the end approaches, the number of stage directions increase. There is a direct relation between the number of stage directions and the intensity of the play.

With the vision, the play moves from the worries of the daily, domestic life of a poor family to a tragedy of life and death. This change results from the overlapping of a series of ritualistic sequences, a tragic mood -heightened by low voices, whispers and the many pauses and silences-, and a mixture of small but significant details working altogether to transcend the limits of a particular tragic event in an Aran cottage. The scene in its entirety is an all-embracing funeral rite at home preceding the burial: firstly, there is the enactment of one man's death on stage, which becomes an image of every man's death. Secondly, Maurya enacts a Christian ritual of blessing her last son drowned in the sea, and the remaining clothes of Michael, symbol of his soul. In the third place, the orderly procession of mourners who know exactly what to do means that they are performing a rite which is periodically repeated in all the families. In the fourth place, the islanders function like a chorus, signifying that they all share the same destiny. Their keening and praying are not only for Bartley but for themselves, for their own individual drama. Today they mourn the death of a member of Maurya's family, as they have mourned somebody else's before, and as they will do in the future for others. Death is inescapable.

From this analysis it is inferred that the play explains itself by the way it is constructed. Universality works primarily on a theatrical level. The various sources of symbolism -i.e. the Bible, classical tragedy and mythology, Aran folklore- enrich its meaning, make the play stronger, but the real understanding of *Riders to the Sea* lies in the way realism is manipulated by a skilful authorial control over the performance, by creating a tragic atmosphere, by recurrence, by suggestions and by ritual.

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