

### The Sea as Fate in John Millington Synge's *Riders to the Sea*

The sea in *Riders to the Sea*, is not only to the giver but also the destroyer, it has the power of determining which will it be, therefore the tragedy of the play is caused by the sea playing the role of fate. The people in the play live in a remote island, their life depends on the sea. Their males need to go to the mainland to support their families and the only way to go there is through the sea. The tragedy of the play starts with the family loss of all of their males to the sea and the sea acts like fate taking whatever it wants.

The sea has powers of giving life and taking life. The play starts within a midst of crisis and it is related to the sea as Nora answers her sister's question about what is it she has, "The young priest is after bringing them. It's a shirt and a plain stocking were got off a drowned man in Donegal." (1084) The drowned man's clothing makes the crisis because they try to understand if it belongs to their lost brother Michael or not. The sea is given as a hostile figure even in the beginning but it is also the only way of survival. It could be interpreted as that the sea is killing men because they try to expend the traditions of survival by going away from their little islands to the outer world/the big island. The changing of customs by Bartley could be a reason for his death, as his mother said "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..." (Synge 1085) As he needs to make a coffin for his brother in case he is found but he does not stay and neglects his duty. He feels the need of going, as no man can be the provider of his family while doing nothing because of his fear of fate. Leder asserts about Bartley that "He chooses the logical, the practical, the modern route, thereby ignoring both custom and subtleties of island talk." (210) His meets his inevitable death by the sea caused by his choice of modern route and doing whatever he needs to do provide his family.

There is a duality parallelism between the sea and Maurya and the men of the island. Taking the role of fate, the sea is both the giver and the taker, and Maurya is both the giver and taker of life because she gives birth to mortal things, and the men of islands are both the providers and the reasons of sorrow for their family. The men help their family to survive but they also die while helping their family and it leads to the metaphorical death of the family members as they suffer the loss of too many. In the play *Riders to the Sea*, the sea also causes

the metaphorical death of the mother figure Maurya. She says "...for I won't live after them." (Synge 1090) as she has suffered so much for so long and because of it, she feels that she is going to die soon but she is already dead inside. She neglects things as a mother, she has forgotten to buy nails for her son's coffin, and she forgets to give the bread and the blessing. Hull explains "'Riders' may be a static tragedy in which humanity has no role but to suffer and acquiesce to supernatural power, but the play also supports the idea that Maurya takes an active part in determining Bartley's fate." (248) because of her negligence to bless him, he dies. But also there is another way of interpreting the incident, she could not bless him because he was doomed to die because the sea takes what it wants and the blessing would only be a misuse of the word.

The foreshadowing of the death of Bartley can be understood as the sea's determination of getting back what belongs to it. Throughout the play, Bartley's death is foreshadowed, first by the rising of sea and roaring of the wind and second as Kennedy asserts, "Bartley's death is also foreshadowed by his taking Michael's flannel shirt. Irish lore includes suggestions that the dead still own the property they once possessed, and may return to claim it (Plumka 134)." (25) It means that Michael is trying to get his shirt back and the sea's determination to have its possession back is the reason of the absurd way of dying of Bartley's. According to Maurya's vision Bartley rides the red mare and Michael rides the grey one, the grey is the colour of death and it causes Bartley to die. There are two riders to the sea, one is already doomed and the other one is to be doomed at the end of the play.

The sea's indifference to people makes Maurya afraid of the power of the sea. Unlike the priest, she knows the sea and its indifference to her family. The priest on the other hand, believes that "...'the Almighty God won't leave her destitute,' says he, 'with no son living.' " (Synge 1084) because she prays all the time and she has lost nearly all of her male family members, the sea will not take Bartley and she will not be indigent. The sea has got no feelings for Maurya and her family members, playing the role of fate; it just takes what it needs to take. For Maurya's male family members are getting killed by the sea, she becomes terrified of the dominance of the sea and hopelessly tries to find a way to save her last remaining son Bartley. Nevertheless, she cannot make him stay and the last remaining son ends up dying drowned as well and literary, the breath-taking power of the sea both as an attraction and a destroyer is made apparent.

Works Cited:

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