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Analysis of “ Riders to the Sea”

The poetic drama *Riders to the Sea*, written by John Synge, is a wonderfully lyrical and haunting drama about an Irish family and the relationship it has to the sea. Maurya, the matriarch of the family, loses the vast majority of her family to the sea, leaving her clinging to whatever hopes might be available to her that any of her family might still be alive. By making this play so poetic in tone, the presentationalism of *Riders to the Sea* draws the reader into the plight of the characters. Synge's low-key requiem shows the hardship of the Irish family through its form, language and content, literary elements used in such innovative ways that I responded quite immediately to them.

The narrative form used within this work is the one-act play; instead of being a straight poem, Synge uses narrative and structural elements of the theatrical drama to make us invest ourselves in the plight of the characters. Stage directions are given just as poetically as their dialogue, and lines are not given in strict meter or rhyme. Instead, there is just a mild lyricism to the dialogue that heightens the emotions and authenticity of the rural Irish setting. The form of the poem resonated with me, as it provided a fascinating middle ground between a poem and a realistic play, turning it into a heightened drama that made me focus on the poem as a story as opposed to work of art.

As previously mentioned, the language of *Riders to the Sea* is a lyrical, heightened naturalism that conveys successfully the emotions of the characters while also having a beauty to the lines themselves that are wonderful to behold. Maurya gives a speech in the play's final scene that is

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wonderfully evocative of this mournful, poetic language:

“ 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 crying and praying when the wind breaks from
the south, and you can hear the surf is in the east, and the surf is in the
west, making a great stir with the two noises, and they hitting one on the
other. I'll have no call now to be going down and getting Holy Water in the
dark nights after Samhain, and I won't care what way the sea is when the
other women will be keening” (Synge).

I responded to this element more than most, as it is the language that carries the themes of death, mourning, and religion (Singh, 2013). Maurya's resigned, beautiful speech and that of others drew me to her plight and helped me relate to her.

The content of the poem is another element that brings out the quality of the poem; the poem addresses the hardships and difficulties that come with life in rural Ireland, as well as the fear of losing one's family. The clear narrative of the poem, including the reveal of the dead body of Bartley, provides distinct dramatic moments that shock and sadden you, placing you firmly in the perspective of the grieving mother Maurya. The sea seems representative of the outside world, and of death; this further cements the heart of the play as the family's island home of Ireland (Schilling, 2011). This helped bring me into the poem as well, as I was following the plot events as if it were a narrative play, focusing less on the lyricism and more on what was happening.

Riders to the Sea is a wonderful poetic drama that blends elements of narrative drama and poetry to create a heightened story that draws you into

the tale of Maurya and her family. The structural form is fantastic, the poetic language gives these simple people a sense of grandeur, and the content makes you feel each and every one of Maurya's losses. All in all, a wonderfully funereal poem to make you examine the importance of family in the face of death.

References

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