

## An Ecocritical Study of J.M. Synge's *Riders to the Sea* and *The Shadow of the Glen*

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### Abstract

*The purpose of this paper is to present “the wilderness” of nature and how it affects the culture in J.M. Synge's *Riders to the Sea* and *The Shadow of the Glen*. The idea of wilderness, signifying nature in a state uncontaminated by civilization is the most potent construction of nature available to New World environmentalism. Wilderness has an almost sacramental value; it holds out the promise of a renewed, authentic relation of humanity and the earth.*

*This is an attempt to show that individuals' attitudes in certain contexts are conditioned by the forces of the environment they inhabit. Both these plays selected in this paper reveal that Synge recreates and records the contemporary life of the island less in the journalistic and objective frame. While *Riders to the Sea* presents a tragic vision of life, *The Shadow of the Glen* perfectly blends the tragic with comic. Here the sordidness of the situations lightens the comic effect. The journey of life in the island presented in *Riders of the Sea* results in death and loss and *The Shadow of the Glen* is coloured by disappointment and dissolution.*

*Key Words: Ecocriticism, World Environmentalism, The wilderness (deserts, oceans, uninhabited continents), The Scenic Sublime (forests, lakes, mountains), The Countryside (hills, fields, woods), The Domestic Picturesque (parks, gardens)*

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Ecocriticism is a branch of literary criticism that deals with literature and physical environment. Ecocriticism is one of the youngest movements that have swept the humanities over the past few decades. The term is also known as ‘green studies’. The study of ecocriticism began in the United States in the late 1980s and in the UK in the early 1990s. Ecocriticism is a fairly new term and one that like any other “ism” is constantly being defined and redefined. Most simply it may be said that it is an environmental approach to the text. On the other hand, ecocriticism may be just another way of looking at a text – it brings us close to nature. It reveals how the human relates to the non-human world. An ecocritical reading of the literary text is simply one which in some way incorporates a consideration of the kind of issues and concerns the nature and culture. Literary criticism in general examines the relation between writers, texts and “the world”. In most literary theories, “the world” is synonymous with society. Ecocriticism expands the notion of “the world” to include the entire ecosphere. Ecocriticism takes an earth-centred approach to literary criticism. The naturalists are concerned with the question if nature is being represented in a piece of literature or if the physical setting has a role in the plot or if the values expressed in the works are consistent with the ecological wisdom or if in addition to race, class and gender, place should become a new critical category and in what ways and to what effect the environment crisis is seeping into contemporary literature.

John Millington Synge is one of the greatest Irish dramatists whose work captures the contemporary life of Ireland. His *Riders to the Sea*, written in 1902, first produced at Molesworth Hall, Dublin, on 25<sup>th</sup> February and later produced some year in the Abbey Theatre, is a one-act play which presents a tragic vision of life. *The Shadow of the Glen* was first performed in Molesworth the same year in its publication in October 1903. *Riders to the Sea* is set on an island west of Ireland:

....Where countries of isolation have produced a unique and rugged culture dependant on wresting a livelihood from the sea. The sea pervades the lives of the islanders and the prevailing atmosphere is that of despair. The details of the play are utterly naturalistic (Ingy Aboelazm, 2011:295-296).

The picture of the place and life of the people dwelling in the island reveals the harshness of their realities. The play details the struggles of the dwellers of the island against the forces of nature, which are beyond their control. The people cannot live without the sea, even though the sea holds a disaster for them. The paradox is that the sea is their major means of survival and, at the same time, their death trap. Maurya, an old woman, loses her father-in-law, husband, all her sons to the sea, and the wind and the dark night. She loses two of her six sons, Stephen and Shawn, to the great wind; they are later found in the “Bay of Gregory of the Golden Mouth”. Her husband lost his life in a dark night and his corpse was never recovered. Her fourth son Patch drowned in the sea. Michael, her fifth son, also drowned and no one found his corpse. A young priest later presents Nora a bundle containing a shirt and a plain stocking believed to be Michael’s. His death is such an inglorious one after his entire struggle for survival in the harsh environment, he dies with no one to lament his demise. Bartley, Maurya’s youngest son, insists on going to Connemara to sell their horses in order to eke out a living. He is so serious and confident about his duties that he failed to realize the devastating power of wild nature, especially the vast sea.

At a primary level, the conflict in the *Riders to the Sea* is physical, for it involves a direct conclusion between humanity and its surrounding environment between men and nature, between the islanders and the sea. Man has to venture out into the sea in order to procure food, something necessary for his physical existence. The sea often retaliates by taking away the physical existence of man. But at a deeper level, the war rages within the soul of the man. The struggle of the family against the sea signifies the struggle of the peasants against their harsh environment when Nora asks, “Didn’t the young priest say the Almighty God won’t leave her destitute with no son living?” (*Riders*, 11).

Maurya responds that “It’s little the like of him knows of the sea ...” (*Riders*, 11). This shows that the peasants are the only ones vulnerable to disaster. Maurya heart-wrenchingly comments, when the corpse of her youngest son is brought on a plank, “There are all gone now, and there isn’t anything more the sea can do to me..... They are all together in this, and the end is come.”(*Riders*) 13).

There is a blend of desperation and audacity in Maurya’s comment. It implies that her sorrows have reached their zenith where all fears and anxieties and the efforts to avert them are over. The play ends with total submission to fate. The two most potent and natural symbols are enshrined in the title itself: the “sea” and the “rider”. The sea plays an important role in Irish folklore and the rider is an archetypal symbol, for many riders ride to their death in warfare.

“Ecocriticism” gives a lot of importance to the landscape. The occupation of the islanders is closely associated with the sea and that is found in *Riders of the Sea*. The keening of the woman in the funeral

is a practice unique to the people of Aran Island. The fear of old age and loneliness is also a common trait seen among the people of Aran Island and this sentiment is echoed by Nora in *Shadow of the Glen*. In this play, the characters Nora Burke and Tramp play an important role. In the beginning of the play Nora leads a very secluded life as she is scared of nature. She is apprehensive that she will not be able to survive alone in the outside world. Later, Tramp makes Nora realize that there is a life waiting beyond the sad and desolate glen.

The landscape of the glen in *The Shadow of the Glen* is also a main character which is responsible for the development of the protagonist. We find that nature does not harm human beings who have misunderstood nature. Here Nora, the main character, who first leads a very secluded life later, realizes nature's worth and tries to lead a full life after she starts trusting nature. Nora chooses to go with the tramp at the end when he promises to give her a cosy and secure life in a fantastic landscape.

In the two plays — *Riders to the Sea* and *The Shadow of the Glen* — Synge presents the relationship between the nature and the human beings of Aran Island. The humans impact nature and are also affected by it. In *Riders to the Sea*, Maurya advises her son not to go in the sea as she is sure it will lead to his death and she will be left with only two daughters and no son in the world. On the other hand, in *The Shadow of the Glen*, Synge again portrays the marginalization of the woman in the different way. Whereas in his first play he focuses on the importance of woman in absence of their male protectors, the second play delineates a self-autonomous woman of intelligence. Nora is married to Dan Burke, a farmer, not out of love, but practical considerations. They live in a cottage in County Wicklow. The boring life in the glen can by no means satisfy Nora. Nora Burke in this play is more aware of her identity and more daring to pursue what she wants, which is evident in the way she deals with men and the landscape. Actually, Nora Burke is no ordinary woman willing to sacrifice herself for the sake of family, nation and the nature. The pretence of death by Dan Burke throughout most part of the play may well signify the symbolic death of her husband, for the home is virtually supported by Nora alone. In *Riders to The Sea*, Maurya is forced to reconcile with what fate has to offer her, yet Nora Burke here exhibits her independence as to which way to go and what life to live in the future. Nora's self-assertiveness as a woman is significantly shown at the end of the play when she reprimands her husband and then accepts the Tramp's proposal.

Ecocriticism is an approach which has been there for a very long time but its importance has been realized only recently. In this age of global warming and the rapid depletion of natural resources it is only natural that people turn to the concept of 'back to Nature'. William Cronon has identified the 'otherness' as part of 'the trouble with wildness'. Promoting a more sceptical, less pious ecocritical perspective, Cronon argues that wilderness "quietly expresses and reproduces the very values its devotees seek to reject. The flight from history that is very nearly the core of wilderness represents the false hope of an escape from responsibility, the illusion that we can somehow wipe clean the slate of our past and return to the tabula rasa that supposedly existed before we began to leave our marks on the world." (1996:80). Ecocriticism not only lays emphasis on the 'harmony' of humanity and nature but also tells about the destruction of nature which takes place in the modern world for most of which man is directly responsible. The Aran Island forms the major locale for most J.M. Synge's plays, and Synge speaks of several incidents in the book which have contributed to the main theme of his plays. He focuses on the central conflict of man in community against the forces of nature.

The conflict between staying and leaving in Synge's plays has so far attracted a great deal of critical notice. It has become commonplace that his main characters face a crucial choice: either to stay within the boundaries of a certain community or to abandon it for wandering or for death. At the same time, the fear of loneliness and transience of love have repeatedly been connected to this choice. In this *Shadow of the Glen*, Synge presents the conflict between staying and leaving. Considered one of the greatest one-act plays of modern theatre, *Riders to the Sea* combines rural Irish life with the pathos of Greek tragedies.

It may be concluded that J.M. Synge brings before everyone the limitation of human beings and highlights the view that if nature thinks of revenge for the correction of human beings towards it, the whole humanity, which boasts so much of their brain, will be washed away from the face of the world. Nature can exist without man but man cannot exist without nature. So human beings must cultivate a relationship with the environment through work in order to live a complete life. Synge in his plays has magnificently portrayed the ever-present tension between human beings and the natural elements.

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