

# Riders to the Sea by J.M. Synge



Characters: Maurya (an old woman)  
Bartley (her son)  
Cathleen (her daughter, about 20 years old)  
Nora (a younger daughter)  
Men and Women

First produced at Molesworth Hall, Dublin, February 25, 1904.

## Plot Summary

*The play takes place on an island west of Ireland.*

After nine days of constant grieving for her missing son, Michael, old Maurya is fallen into a restless sleep. Her daughter, Cathleen, is busy with household tasks, when another daughter, Nora, slips quietly into the kitchen with a bundle given her by the young priest. It contains part of the clothes taken from the body of a drowned man far in the north. They have been sent to the family for identification, since the clothes may belong to her missing brother.

The girls go to open the package but then decide to hide it in case their mother, who is waking up, should come in and see them crying. Maurya enters. After the sea had claimed the lives of her husband and four eldest sons, Maurya tries to discourage Bartley, her last living son, from going to Connemara to sell a horse, which was the trip Michael took when he died. But Bartley insists that he will cross the mainland in spite of winds and high seas.

Mad and aggravated at Bartley for not listening to her pleas, Maurya allows him to go, however, without her blessing. Cathleen and Nora persuade their mother to chase Bartley with the food they forgot to give him and to give him her blessing regardless of her fears. While she is gone the girls open the package. Nora recognizes her own stitching in one of the socks, and immediately knows that the owner of the clothes was indeed her brother, Michael. Their only comfort is the hope that his body has been given a good Christian burial where it was washed up.

Maurya returns horrified with a vision she has seen of Michael riding on the horse behind Bartley. She claims that the vision proves that her fear of Bartley's death is being realized. When her daughters show Maurya the clothes her only response is that the boards she bought for Michael's coffin will serve for Bartley instead.

As Maurya speaks the neighboring women enter keening. The men follow shortly, carrying the body of Bartley who has been knocked off a cliff into the waves by the horse he was intending to sell. The play closes on the note of Maurya's accepting surrender to the sea, and to the course of life: "They're all gone now and there isn't anything mire the sea can do to me... No man at all can be living forever and we must be satisfied."

## Biography



John Millington Synge was born on April 16, 1871 to a middle class Protestant family. He was educated at private schools in Dublin and studied piano, flute, violin, music theory and counterpoint at the Royal Irish Academy of Music. He was a talented student and attended Trinity College where he studied Irish and Hebrew. During this time Synge encountered the writings of Darwin and developed an interest in the Aran Islands. Reading Darwin

coincided with a crisis of faith and Synge abandoned the Protestant religion of his upbringing.

Post college he went to Germany to pursue a career in music but found that he was too shy to perform so he quit and began pursuing writing. In 1894 Synge moved back to Ireland for a short time and then to Paris to study literature and language at the Sorbonne. In 1896, Synge visited Italy to study language before returning to Paris. Later that year he met William Butler Yeats who recognized his talent and encouraged him to live in the Aran Islands for a while and then return to Dublin to devote himself to creative work. Beginning in 1898, Synge spent five consecutive summers on the islands collecting stories and folklore. It was this same year that he wrote his first play *When the Moon Hat Set*. Two years later, in 1900 he sent his play to the Irish Literature Theatre but it was rejected. He was though, published in the *New Ireland Review* with an account of his life on the islands. 1901 saw the construction of his second two plays, *Riders to the Sea* and *Shadow of the Glen*. The latter of which was his first play to be performed on stage in Dublin.

In 1904, Yeats and Lady Gregory found the Abbey Theatre and produce *Riders to the Sea*. Synge was appointed Literary Advisor to the theatre and became one of the directors of the company. In 1907 Synge's book length journal *The Aran Islands* was published. It is a slow paced reflection of life on the islands and reflects Synge's belief that beneath the Catholicism of the islanders there were older pagan beliefs of the people's ancestors. In the same year, *Playboy of the Western World*, perhaps Synge's most well known play was produced at the Abbey and was met with an uproar from Irish Nationalists.

March 24, 1909, at age 38, Synge died of Hodgkin's disease leaving behind an important legacy as a key figure in the Irish Literary Revival.

### Other Works

*The Well of the Saints* (1905), *The Tinker's Wedding* (1908), *Poems and Translations* (1909), *Deirdre of the Sorrows* (completed by W.B. Yeats and Molly Allgood in 1910), *In Wicklow and West Kerry* (completed in 1912)

### Cinema

At least two motion picture versions of the play have been made:

- 1935 – a 40-minute black & white movie, directed by Bryan Desmond Hunt, with screenplay adaptation by Patrick Kirwan with Sara Allgood.
- 1987 – a 47-minute color movie directed and adapted by Ronan O'Leary with Geraldine Page.

### Opera

The composer Ralph Vaughan Williams made an almost verbatim setting of the play as an opera, using the same title.