Synge’s *Riders to the Sea*: Island as Cultural Battleground

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John Millington Synge had a tendency to romanticize Irish peasant life: in *The Aran Islands*, for example, Synge presented the islanders as naive and charming primitives whose lives, while not Edenic, were largely and happily unspoiled by contact with the modern world. Most critical opinion of the last eighty-five years has at least tacitly accepted this image of Synge’s peasants.\(^1\) A criticism informed by contemporary anthropological insights suggests, however, that Rousseauan assessments sell short the plays of Synge and miss much of their richness. If we read the plays admitting the possibility that Synge’s characters are neither naive nor uncomplicated, we see that his dramatic presentation of the peasants differs remarkably from his primitivist notions about them. Synge never allowed his “theories” to dominate his creative vision. As a result, he gave us not romanticized peasants untouched by modernity, but rather individuals fractured by modernity, peasants caught up in the major cultural transition of the modern age: the transition from a folk to an urban consciousness.

What are the marks of that transition? Anthropologists tell us that groups in transition inevitably experience shifts in philosophy, custom, and physical orientation. Transitional communities are not homogeneous; rather, their members are found at every point along the cultural continuum.\(^2\) The traditional members manifest certainty about their own worldview, a reverence for custom, and an awareness of the radical limitations of the material world. The modern members of the group are philosophically relativistic, are willing to alter the old ways, and think of themselves as part of the world rather than part of an island in the world. Those caught in the middle, the “transitionals,” are
almost schizophrenic: drawn in opposite directions by forces of great power, they are culturally double-bound. In Riders to the Sea, Synge presents us with what is virtually a textbook case of a folk culture in transition, for the play deals not only with Maurya’s grief about the loss of her sons but also with the conflict between two worldviews—hers and that of the “big world”—a conflict that Yeats, in a different context, said would lead to the “passing of all beauty and strength.”

At the folk end of the cultural continuum in Riders is Maurya, a traditional island woman with rural interests and convictions; the conflict between her and all the other characters in the play is pervasive and constant. She differs from them first in the limits of her physical world. Maurya’s focus is on “this place,” the island. She knows it intimately—its winds, its graves, its portents. She knows the amount of turf necessary to keep a fire alive, and the way a drowned son will look when he has been floating on the sea for nine days; she knows the long history of her own family—mostly a litany of death. Her knowledge is deep, but sharply limited to the island. In fact, during the course of the play, Maurya’s world becomes progressively more constricted. Early in the dialogue, Cathleen alludes to the fact that her mother keeps vigil for Michael, the missing son, by going down to the shore when the tide is out. By the midpoint of the play, however, just after Bartley has left, age and fragility seem to catch up with Maurya, for, when Cathleen suggests that Maurya make the short walk to the stone well, the old woman comments, “It’s hard set I am to walk.” Her world, already limited to the island, is narrowing to the cottage. From the perspective of this narrow world, the mainland is a hostile place.

Like her physical orientation, Maurya’s attitude toward the customs of the island is also traditional. She seems acutely aware that the order of island life is being irrevocably altered; much of what she says reflects her concern about the erosion of custom and tradition on the island. She sees a son willing to leave the cottage before he has done the proper honor to his brother: “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” (p. 9). She is frustrated by the circumstances that force women to take on the tasks of men: “How would the like of [Cathleen] get a good price for a pig?” (p. 9). She hints, moreover, that there is an erosion of the most basic tradition of the island: the valuing of person over profit. Bartley’s willingness to risk his life for a small gain gives evidence that his presuppositions about the right way to act are quite different from Maurya’s.

Conrad Arensberg and Solon Kimball, in their seminal study of the

208
folk society of Ireland, talk at some length about the respect that traditional Irish society gives the elderly. Initially, it appears that this custom is honored in *Riders*, for Maurya’s children protect her, fear her authority and anger, and worry about her response to the news of Michael's death. Thus, Maurya seems a power in her own house: Demeter-like, she weeps for her dead children and dominates her living ones. But the picture is not entirely traditional. The customary reverence owed to the rural matriarch is being undermined. Although her children are generally polite to her, and see her as one in whom tradition and precedent are preserved, their modern attitudes offer a challenge to her position. Cathleen, the older daughter, who is as quick-tempered and sharp-tongued as her mother, often contradicts the old woman, while Nora and Bartley, seemingly more deferential, covertly resist her. Bartley simply refuses to deal with his mother’s comments or requests, sidestepping questions that make him uneasy, and Nora avoids even the most elementary conversation with her mother.

Despite this resistance, Maurya persists in her beliefs. She has the traditional propensity to extrapolate from an apparently simple event to a philosophical principle. In this way, she is quite different from her daughters; the following interchange illustrates the difference quite clearly:

**MAURYA:** It's hard set I am to walk.
**CATHLEEN:** Give her the stick *(looking at her anxiously)* Nora, or maybe she'll slip on the big stones.
**NORA:** What stick?
**CATHLEEN:** The stick Michael brought from Connemara.
**MAURYA:** *(Taking the stick Nora gives her)* In the big world the old people do be leaving things after them for their sons and young children, but in this place it is the young men do be leaving things for them that do be old. *(p. 13)*

Always practical, Cathleen wants everything to go smoothly and sensibly. Although she is worried about her mother, she knows just how to deal with the old woman’s frailty. Quick-witted and well able to suit solution to immediate need, Cathleen is mistress of the house. A natural storyteller, she provides local detail about this particular stick in this particular cottage. Nora, however, neither sees her mother’s need nor is able to make clear sense of the things in the cottage. For Nora, the stick is simply part of the cottage paraphernalia, an unspecified object that she cannot even locate on her own. Maurya’s perception differs markedly from that of both her daughters. Like Cathleen, Maurya
knows the history of the things in the cottage—the stick, the new rope, the turf, the black pig, and the white boards. But Maurya does not have Cathleen’s mundane view of ordinary things. For Maurya, the traditional woman, things point beyond themselves and are invested with ultimate meaning. The stick is not simply the one Michael brought from Connemara; it is a sign that the order of reality on the island is topsy-turvy. Something is disordered; the proper structure of society has been frustrated. Because the young people of the island have begun to follow the ways of the “big world” (ways that are not suited to the island), the old inherit from the young. Maurya’s attempt to convince Bartley to stay on the island is couched in traditional language and predicated on traditional beliefs. No sooner has Bartley come into the cottage than Maurya says:

“You’d do right to leave that rope, Bartley, hanging by the boards (Bartley takes the rope). It will be wanting in this place, I’m telling you, if Michael is washed up tomorrow morning or the next morning or any morning in the week, for it’s a deep grave we’ll make him by the grace of God. (p. 9)

This is Maurya’s first sally in what she knows to be a duel to save Bartley’s life. Maurya believes that it is not fitting for Bartley to leave the island. Her appeal is to custom, which demands both that Bartley wait until his brother’s body is washed ashore and that he dig a deep grave for the dead man. But Bartley is not interested in custom. Practicality and logic, rather than custom, are the bases for his decision: he says, “I must go now quickly. This is the one boat going for two weeks or beyond it, and the fair will be a good fair for horses, I heard them saying below” (p. 9).

Since Maurya’s appeal to custom fails, she tries a slightly different approach: “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” (p. 9). She does not contradict Bartley or argue with his account of the talk “below,” she simply points out that he may have missed what the villagers implied. If he takes their advice but, as a result, fails to perform his duty to bury his brother, the islanders will not congratulate but rebuke him. Bartley, however, is inured to this argument as well. He chooses the logical, the practical, the modern route, thereby ignoring both custom and the subtleties of island talk. After nine days’ wait, Bartley judges it is unlikely that Michael’s body will be washed ashore. He is convinced that it is pointless to wait any longer: “How would [Michael’s body] be washed up, and we after looking each day for nine days and a strong wind blowing a while back from the west and the south?” (p. 9).
Maurya’s response to this is the central point of her argument. Although she is willing to give a little on the matter of traditional responsibility and custom, she presents two imperative reasons for Bartley to stay on the island. First, he should not go against the signs: “If [the body] isn’t found itself, that wind is raising the sea, and there was a star up against the moon, and it rising at night” (p. 9). The star-dogged moon, called “hurlbassy” by Irish and English sailors, portended tempests. As a man of the island, Bartley should know the weight of such a sign, and he should never ignore it. A more compelling reason, however, is a philosophical one—Bartley should hold life dearer than profit, or risk, or adventure, or action: “If it was a hundred horses or a thousand horses you had itself, what is the price of a thousand horses against a son where there is one son only” (p. 9). Maurya appeals to Bartley to put patience in the place of action, faith in the place of logic, and intuition in the place of reason; she is asking Bartley to think like a traditional man. But Bartley is not a traditional man; though he pauses at the door for Maurya’s blessing, he is firm enough of purpose to depart without it.

Throughout this battle for Bartley’s life, Maurya employs rhetoric characteristic of the oral tradition—a tradition that had lived much longer among the Celts than among other European populations. Maurya, heir to this tradition, wields words in a way no “modern” woman can. Her language is not easily dismissed. It has shape and surface; it is “hard” and “dark” and, as Maurya hints, should have the power to “hold.” Although Bartley manages to resist the holding power of his mother’s words, their energy disturbs the cottage, threatening sanity and order to such a degree that there is “no sense left on any person in the house” (p. 13).

As we might expect, Maurya’s blessing is regarded with some ambivalence by her children, who have been exposed to literacy and its attendant change in consciousness. They grant that the blessing is powerful; all three make it clear that they want Maurya to give Bartley the traditional benediction—no one else’s blessing will do. But even as they seek the blessing, they manage in varying degrees to discredit its power. Bartley wants a hopeful word. He ignores the “hard word” of the woman who is “holding him from the sea,” and he waits expectantly for a hope-filled word. Cathleen, too, wants words of hope, even if they do not correspond to reality. She calls her mother’s ominous prediction about Bartley’s death an “unlucky word,” and she suggests that her mother go to the stone well and say something that will make Bartley’s
mind “easy.” Thus, Maurya’s children are still compelled to ask for a blessing in which they no longer believe.

The benediction is a problem not only for Bartley and Cathleen, but also for critics, who have found it difficult to explain why Maurya steadfastly refuses to bless her son. The old woman’s account of what happened at the spring well adds to the confusion:

I’m after seeing [Michael] this day and he riding and galloping. Bartley came first on the red mare; and I tried to say “God speed you,” but something choked the words in my throat. He went by quickly and “The blessing of God on you,” says he and I could say nothing. I looked up then, and I crying, at the grey pony and there was Michael upon it—with fine clothes upon him and new shoes. (p. 19)

Based on this passage, critics ordinarily claim that Maurya fails to give Bartley her blessing because of her vision of the riders to the sea. Maurice Bourgeois says that the vision “prevented” Maurya from bestowing her blessing on Bartley.8 Robin Skelton comments that Maurya is so “astonished by the specter of Michael that she cannot give Bartley her protective blessing.”9 Errol Durbach asserts that “the prophetic vision of death upon the pale horse renders Maurya incapable of giving her blessing.”10

Such readings, however, overlook an ambiguity in the passage. Maurya’s phrase “Bartley came first” can mean either that the young man was the first of two riders or that Bartley passed Maurya before anyone else. Standard critical assessments of the play read first-in-place: that is, Bartley and Michael come at the same time but Bartley is on the first horse. The alternative reading, that “first” means first-in-time (that Maurya sees Bartley alone and then sees Michael), forces us to see five separate actions in the passage:

1. Maurya goes out to the well intending to give Bartley both the bread and the blessing;
2. Bartley rides toward her and, although she wants to bless him, “something choke[s] the words in [her] throat” (p. 19);
3. Bartley rides by and blesses her, but again she can “say nothing”;
4. She glances down and begins to cry;
5. When she looks up, she sees Michael on the gray pony.

This reading—that Maurya refuses to give her blessing to Bartley before she has seen the phantom Michael—not only takes into account all of Maurya’s words, but also complements an earlier scene in the play. Just as Bartley is about to leave the cottage, he turns around at the door and
waits. Nothing is said, but anyone knowing the Irish custom of blessing a child when he leaves on a journey would hear the silence, would notice the absence of the blessing. For those playgoers who do not know enough to miss the blessing, Synge draws attention to its absence, for he has Cathleen turn and scold her mother with the words: “Why wouldn’t you give [Bartley] your blessing and he looking round at the door? Isn’t it sorrow enough is on everyone in this house with you sending him out with an unlucky word behind him and a hard word in his ear?” (p. 11).

Taking these passages together, we see that Maurya actually fails to give her blessing to Bartley not once but three times—and all three times occur before she sees the vision of Michael. Certainly, Maurya is shocked by the vision of the phantom rider; when she returns to the cottage, she, the old woman who would be “talking forever,” is utterly inarticulate. But the terrible vision is not the reason she fails to give her blessing. A more satisfying interpretation of the vision is suggested by Maurya herself: just after Bartley leaves the cottage, Maurya says, “He’s gone now, God spare us, and we’ll not see him again. He gone now and when the black night is falling, I’ll have no son left me in the world” (p. 11).

Maurya, then, has absolute certainty that Bartley will die. Given her traditional orientation and her peasant's reverence for the power of words, pronouncing any blessing in the face of her certainty about Bartley’s death would be a sacrilege, a misuse of power, a lie. And the lie chokes in her throat. Thus Maurya’s need to withhold her blessing is best explained as an expression of her traditional attitude toward the significance of the word.

Nicholas Grene comments that Maurya’s disagreement with Cathleen about what constitutes the “life of a young man” illustrates that the old woman’s attitude belongs to “a different order of truth.” The same might be said of all that Maurya sees, and wants, and thinks. She truly lives in a world apart—and although she struggles valiantly, she is unsuccessful against encroaching modern values which are causing the island to lose its beauty and truth.

The young priest, Maurya’s opponent in the cultural conflict of Riders, is, like Michael, a phantom. Although he never appears onstage, he is often quoted by the garrulous Nora; thus, we have “lines” for a character who is not listed in the cast. Despite his shadowy nature, the young priest is Maurya's chief foil and adversary. He is her opposite on almost every level: he is young, she is old; he is father, she is mother; he is an outlander, she is a woman of the island; she is very much present...
onstage, he speaks but does not appear, and acts but never comes onstage. Even as Maurya is the traditional woman (who, by orientation, custom, and worldview, guards the ways of the island), the young priest is the “modern” man, whose interests are extra-insular, whose ways are alien, and whose worldview is nontraditional.

On the island, the priest speaks with the voice of the modern urban world. Unlike Maurya’s mistrust of, or her children’s enraptured curiosity about, the ways of the mainland, the priest has a comfortably confident attitude toward that world. As a result, he becomes the mediator between the island and the mainland. Thus, the authorities on the mainland give the priest “the shirt and plain stocking were got off [the] drowned man in Donegal” (p. 5). It is the priest’s task to tell the islanders the news from the big world, and his to determine what information will be given and what withheld. Recognizing the priest as their mediator, the villagers show a remarkable deference to his word. Only Maurya offers any real resistance to his authority. She alone refuses to accept his judgment, saying “It’s little the likes of him knows of the sea” (p. 21). The isolation of the islanders may explain their acceptance of the priest as mediator, since he has behind him the authority of the church and of society; nevertheless, their choice is a destructive one, for, by accepting his authority, they fracture their own tradition. The priest, an outlander who has neither age nor experience, tragically ignores the cumulative wisdom of the island.

Everyone on the island is troubled about the dangerous weather and about Bartley’s decision to go to Galway. Among the villagers, it is a topic of general conversation. Cathleen is uneasy about her brother’s departure, and Bartley himself would rather wait than go, for if there were another boat sailing during the week, he says he would take it. Even Nora voices some cause for alarm: she has heard a “great roaring in the west and it’s worse it’ll be getting when the tide’s turned to the wind” (p. 7). Only the priest is unconcerned, and his confidence reflects his modernity. His is not a world filled with inevitabilities. For him—as for us—there are not only multiple courses of action but also multiple ways of thinking about the world (in which multiple possibilities exist as a matter of course). Because of who and what he is, the priest must bring into question what on the island has always been seen as inevitable. A significant difference between folk and urban consciousness is the folk population’s helplessness in the face of reality. Maurya knows that the sea will take her last son as it has taken all her other sons and the father of her sons. How can she think otherwise? The priest,
with his confidence and his worlds of possibilities, however, also cannot think otherwise than he does.

In this sense, the priest is clearly a philosophical intruder. He is often presented as a religious interloper, a missionary attempting to impose Christian beliefs on the essentially “pagan” islanders; however, too much may have been made of the deep pagan roots of the Aran Islanders. Many of the customs cited as examples of paganism are hardly more than examples of the syncretism that prevails in most religions. It is unconvincing to suggest that the traditional keen (caoine in Irish) reflects a persisting belief in druidical death ceremonies, or that mention of Samhain (the Celtic name of the harvest month) changes the holy water used at the end of the play into the “magical” water of an earlier era, just as it is unconvincing to say that the practice of decorating a tree at Christmas indicates that contemporary Americans believe in Woden.

In short, I do not believe that the priest interferes with the religious practices of the islanders; however, I do think that his Victorian version of Catholicism undermines their traditional philosophy. For example, his notion that God will not leave Maurya destitute is more an expression of Victorian overconfidence than it is an expression of complex biblical faith. This priest, who believes that God permits good things only, may have missed his seminary lessons on the book of Job.

Folk culture is based on the law of limited good: the land is finite, the one son only will die, the sea will be hostile. Insofar as he preaches the message of unlimited good, the priest’s ideas are foreign to and destructive of the rural culture of the island. When the priest, the representative of progress and the “new” life, holds out the promise of a world without limitation, he fractures the folk vision of the world. Any time a real alternative is introduced into a closed system, the system changes—whether the adherents of the system adopt the change or not. The prophet of unlimited good, a prophet who will return to the mainland, believes (reasonably enough) in progress; however, islanders (whose lives are radically limited) will almost inevitably find the message of such a prophet philosophically and empirically inappropriate.14

Each of Maurya’s children shares a part of Maurya’s worldview and a part of the young priest’s. But it is Nora who has been most completely drawn into the cleric’s world. Nora, Maurya’s daughter, not only speaks for the priest, but she is also remarkably like him: she is a shadowy character who has little interest in the ways of the island and who is unsympathetic to its philosophy. Our picture of Nora is fuzzy
because she functions primarily as echo and expositor. Her comments are free of personal content; a good part of what the girl says is simple repetition of the priest’s words. Even when Nora is not quoting the priest directly, she rarely editorializes, offering neither reflection nor comment on what she repeats. So, even as she reveals the young priest, Nora hides herself.

Our sense of Nora’s character is also blunted by her reportorial mode. Often we find her making flat descriptive statements about people and things: when she hears the “great roaring in the west,” it means to her that the weather will get worse—we must infer her concern about Bartley’s safety. As a rule, Nora simply states something and leaves it to Maurya or Cathleen to provide depth and significance. Much of Nora’s dialogue, moreover, is composed of questions which have self-evident answers: “Where is she?” “Is that it, Bartley?” “What stick?” “Is she gone round by the bush?” When she is asked a question, Nora’s answers are generally noncommittal and impersonal, or are quotes from other characters.

Even though Synge made Nora an attendant lady who does little more than swell a scene, she has the marks of a peasant-in-transition. Nora shares with the priest a modern orientation. Her experience is limited, but her interests lie in a world beyond the cottage walls. She comes onstage from outside the cottage, and tells us what the other islanders, Eamon Simon, Stephen Pheety, and Colum Shawn, have been saying. Not only is she always “looking out,” away from the cottage, but she also exhibits little awareness of the ordinary and immediate details of the cottage kitchen, with its “nets, oilskins, spinning wheel, and . . . new boards standing by the wall” (p. 5). She rarely shows the sort of knowledge we might expect of a young woman who lives in the cottage. Her constant fumbling and confusion evidence both her basic insecurity and her genuine lack of interest in the island. She is not certain about the stick that Michael brought from Connemara. She has trouble with the new rope: “Where is the bit of new rope?” Bartley asks Cathleen—and it is well that he asks her, for even after Cathleen identifies the rope specifically and has told Nora precisely where it can be found (“Give it to him, Nora, it’s on a nail by the white boards” [p. 9]), the younger girl still must get Bartley’s confirmation as she hands it to him: “Is that it, Bartley?” she asks. On the one occasion when Nora does know where to find something—“I’ll get Michael’s shirt off the hook the way we can put one flannel on the other” (p. 15)—she is stymied when she does not find the shirt where
she expects to: “It’s not with [the other shirts], Cathleen, and where will it be?” (p. 15).

Similarly, Nora’s attitude toward island customs is closer to the young priest’s urban, nontraditional ways than to Maurya’s folkways. Nora’s ignorance about the details of island life hints strongly at her impatience with that life. It is tempting to agree with Alan Price’s claim that Nora is “hardly aware that [a battle] is happening.” However, given her place in the family (younger daughter) and the likelihood that she will be trapped on the island for a celibate life, Price’s assessment may well be wrong. Nora, in fact, may be one of the loci of anger and passion in the play. Unlike Cathleen and Bartley, who are willing to contradict their mother, Nora remains aggressively withdrawn from the old woman. She answers Maurya’s questions precisely but without embellishment; she seems, in short, to try to separate herself from both her mother and her mother’s world. She is a portrait of an alienated youth.

Maurya, obviously sensitive to Nora’s aloofness, makes several attempts to penetrate the girl’s silence. Although Maurya is harsh with Bartley and Cathleen, she is gentle with her youngest child, never once finding fault with her. In a play that does not often employ direct address, Maurya speaks directly to Nora on four occasions. After Maurya returns from her encounter with the riders to the sea, Cathleen asks her: “Did you see Bartley?” and “What is it you seen?” (p. 19). But Maurya does not respond until Nora asks for information. Then the old woman says, “I went down to the spring well, and I stood there saying a prayer to myself. Then Bartley came along and he riding on the red mare with the grey pony behind him. The Son of God spare us, Nora” (p. 19). Ironically, Nora, who has been called to pray with her mother and invited to share in the dreadful experience, does not even answer. As usual, it is Cathleen, ever curious and ready to listen, who presses for more information.

A few lines later, Maurya recounts (again for Nora) her memory of the day Patch’s body was washed up by the sea:

There was Patch after was drowned out of a curragh that turned over. I was sitting here with Bartley, and he a baby lying on my two knees, and I seen two women, and three women and four women coming in, and they crossing themselves and not saying a word. I looked out then, and there were men coming after them and they holding a thing in the half of a red sail and water dripping out of it—it was a dry day, Nora—and leaving a track to the door. (p. 21)
This is a direct appeal for Nora’s understanding, an expression of the older woman’s desire to share not only the tragedy of the past but also the implications of that tragedy with her younger daughter. But Nora does not respond for several minutes. Her next line offers a chilling contrast to Maurya’s vital, tragic vision of the voracious sea: “They’re carrying a thing among them, and there’s water dripping out of it and leaving a track by the big stones” (p. 23). The difference between the two descriptions is remarkable. Maurya has a vivid and precise mastery of the past; Nora’s present experience is dull, emotionless, stripped of all but the barest detail.

Maurya has invited Nora to understand, to dream dreams, and to see visions of the old world and the old ways; but the girl, whose interests lie outside the island, remains distant. At the end of the play, despite Maurya’s efforts to reclaim her daughter for the traditional world, Nora remains a child of the modern world. She does not rally to Maurya’s side or comprehend the traditional vision; she misses the tragedy and, at the end, sees only an old and broken woman whose tears signify nothing more than her partiality for one son—“It’s fonder she was of Michael and would anyone have thought that” (p. 25).

Bartley, the “one son only,” is the play’s exemplary peasant-in-transition. He, more than any other character, is compelled to deal directly with both the traditional culture and the modern world. Though an islander by birth and training, he must, by virtue of economic necessity, be a part-time mainlander. Although Nora may dream of the big world, and although her mother has the freedom to reject that world, Bartley can do neither. He must balance the old and the new, must find some way to reconcile his mother’s plea that he live within the limits of the traditional life and the priest’s invitation to make the world his island.

It is not surprising that Bartley has difficulty managing his reconciliation. Anthropologist Felix Keesing points out that an individual faced with dual codes of conduct is forced into being “delinquent [with respect to] indigenous rules . . . if he obeys those imposed by the outside authority.”17 Conflicting cultural messages can, ultimately, cause loss of identity. Inevitably, they cause the individual in transition to suffer “dysnomia” or poor integration in both cultures.

On the one hand, Bartley seems comfortable with the ways and customs of the village and the cottage. He knows how to deal with the problems of day-to-day life. He can turn the new rope into a halter for the mare, and he knows when the jobber is coming for the pig with the
black feet. He knows, too, just how long it will take the girls to “get up weed enough for another cock for the kelp” (p. 9). On the other hand, it is obvious that Bartley’s basic attitude toward life has already been profoundly influenced by the “outside authority,” the big world. Each of Bartley’s island concerns is counterpointed by modern interests. He is as aware of the things that will lead him away from the cottage as he is of those things which make the cottage his haven. Bartley has only eight lines in the play; in four of them he speaks of “going.” His vision, then, has a double focus.

In other ways, too, Bartley seems something of a misfit in island society. Although he lives on an island where a clock is an oddity, he is fixated on time and numbers; he is preternaturally alert to the passage of hours and days. From him we learn that it has been nine days since Michael was lost at sea, and that the cutter sitting in the harbor is the last for two weeks or more. He assures his mother and sisters that they will see him “coming again in two days or three days or maybe four days” (p. 11). Bartley seems caught between a timeless and a time-bound society.

Bartley is also trapped between disparate philosophical positions: one is his mother’s fatalistic conviction that if he goes to Galway, he will most certainly die; the other is the young priest’s easy confidence that God will keep him safe. Despite the fact that Bartley throws in his lot with the priest, the youth is far from comfortable with his own choice. Bartley may act like a modern man, but he speaks like a man of the island. As he leaves the cottage on the way down to the cutter, he says to his mother “The blessing of God on you” (p. 11). A short time later, when he passes his mother at the spring well, he utters the same words again. There is more than formula in Bartley’s words. In speaking his farewell, he not only blesses but also attempts to compel Maurya to return the blessing. Bartley’s uneasy wait at the cottage door for his mother’s benediction indicates that he does not leave the island with an easy mind. He longs to have his tradition-bound mother legitimize his decision, to have her utter words that will make his rejection of her beliefs acceptable. He wants, in short, what all those confronted by opposing cultural demands want: the marriage of the conflicting systems that face them.

Of Maurya’s children, it is Cathleen who initially seems the least traditional and more resistant to the old ways and beliefs. Not only does she sympathize with the priest and justify Bartley’s decision to go to Galway, but she also bickers with her mother. The conflict between the
two women is constant. Although Maurya initiates the edgy interchanges with Cathleen when she faults the girl for bringing more turf down to the fire, Cathleen is quick to respond in kind, arguing, “There’s a cake baking at the fire for a short space and Bartley will want it when the tide turns” (p. 7). Later, Cathleen takes her mother to task for being stubborn, complains about her insensitivity toward Bartley, and asserts that the atmosphere of anxiety in the house is Maurya’s fault: “There’s no sense left on any person in a house where an old woman would be talking forever” (p. 13). But, while Cathleen’s contentiousness is certainly a sign of some degree of hostility toward her mother’s values, a close look at the girl’s actions and words shows that she has a traditional outlook. In some respects, Cathleen is the image of a younger Maurya, and it is she who gives promise that traditional notions will persist on the island for a while longer.

Like Maurya, Cathleen is island-centered. She is the keeper of the hearth. As Price says, we see Cathleen “keeping the home together, now that her mother is beyond [doing] it.” When the play opens, it is Cathleen who is tending the fire: Nora has been out to the shore, Bartley has gone to the boat to make plans for his journey, and Maurya has withdrawn for a rest. Both daughters are onstage throughout the play, but Nora is always looking out the window, drawn to the edges of island society, while Cathleen rarely moves away from the hearth. She remains at the center of the little cottage both physically and psychologically: “Hers are the labors of necessity: Cathleen . . . deftly kneads the cake, puts it into the oven and at once begins to spin at the wheel.” But Cathleen does more than that which is necessary—she is sensitive to the smallest detail of cottage life. She knows where Michael’s shirt is, where the new bit of rope is, where the walking stick is. She is a woman for whom the cottage is the world.

The older girl shares not only Maurya’s island-centeredness but also something of her mother’s way with words. We have seen that Maurya is an epic maker; Cathleen is a tale shaper, compelled to give each aspect of her world detail and specificity. For Cathleen, Bartley’s new bit of rope is “the one on the nail by the white boards” (p. 9), which was hung up only that morning because “the pig with the black feet was eating it” (p. 9). Nora hears a “noise” in the northeast, but it is more than a noise for Cathleen, it is the “sound of someone crying out by the seashore” (p. 21). For her, things are not rootless, as they seem to be for Nora; rather, each has a particular history and each triggers a story. Cathleen consistently moves from the factual into the narrative. While she does not have Maurya’s propensity to universalize, she is, like her
mother, concerned with shaping the bits of “insignificant” life into a rounded whole. On different planes of sophistication, both women use words to fit events into a traditional paradigm.

Like her siblings, however, Cathleen exhibits a certain ambivalence about the traditional worldview. She questions the power of her mother’s blessing, challenges her authority, supports Bartley’s right to pursue his decision to go to Galway, and is generally frustrated by the traditional wisdom that brings anxiety into the cottage. But there are subtle ways in which Cathleen’s outlook is still genuinely traditional. Her language suggests that Cathleen longs to fix her place in the world and to stabilize a life that is being uprooted. Maurya simply rejects the modern culture, Nora has capitulated, and Bartley is close to repudiating the island ways. Cathleen is torn; she questions almost everything.

Ultimately, however, it is Cathleen’s response to her mother’s vision which is the best indicator of the girl’s folk orientation. Her response to the vision is critical, for, as Grene correctly points out, the vision is the “center of the plan.” For Maurya, as I have demonstrated above, the vision is the ghostly incarnation of a certainty she has had all along. The riders to the sea confirm her conviction about the doom she knows Bartley faces. To her, the vision offers nothing new at all; nevertheless, it presents a new sort of “evidence” to those who, throughout the play, have ignored her “dark word.” Grene’s claim, however, that “no one in the play questions [the] reality [of the vision]” is not entirely true. Perhaps we can presume that the villagers, who apparently believe in the vision that Bride Dara had, will believe in Maurya’s vision also. But it is unlikely that the young priest will grant credence to Maurya’s account. Besides, the response of both the villagers and the priest is moot, since during the course of the play they do not hear about the vision. Maurya tells only Nora and Cathleen. And contrary to what Grene says, Nora does question the account, though in an indirect way. She says, “Didn’t the young priest say Almighty God would not leave her destitute with no son living?” (p. 19). How, she implies, can this vision be believed, given that the young priest has promised that God will keep Bartley safe? Nora’s apparent reliance on the promise of the young priest is yet another example of her passive resistance to her mother.

In the final analysis, then, Cathleen alone does not question her mother’s vision. And Cathleen believes in it with the same unquestioning certainty that has been Maurya’s all along. The fossilized image Nora used early in the play about the cake in the fire—“And it’s destroyed
[Bartley]'ll be going till dark night, and he after eating nothing since the sun went up” (p. 13, emphasis added)—is given its full literal weight when Cathleen cries out: “It’s destroyed we are from this day. It’s destroyed, surely” (p. 19, emphasis added).

We have seen that Maurya makes a special effort to engage Nora’s interest and support. That Maurya does not make a similar effort with Cathleen suggests that she is more sure of Cathleen. The older girl does not need to be invited to participate in the traditional vision or accept the traditional ways. In the end, Cathleen believes even as Maurya believes.

*Riders to the Sea*, then, is much more than a naive tale about a group of noble primitives. It is an account of a cultural battle, a battle whose tragic outcome is as predictable as is the death of Bartley. Viewing the play as a psychologically accurate representation of turn-of-the-century Irish peasants, rather than as an idyllic, romanticized picture of them, expands our understanding of the characters, offers new and revelatory insight into the interaction among them, and provides a fresh explanation for Maurya’s way of dealing with Bartley. It is to Synge’s credit that he so honestly and accurately portrayed conflicts that he consciously denied. It is, I believe, that shattering accuracy which gives to the play “the depth and resonance of a major work of art.”

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2 See Marion Levy, *Modernization and the Structure of Modern Societies* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1966), pp. 128 ff. Peter Berger, Brigitte Berger, and Hansfried Kelner explain in this way the changes in consciousness that modernization triggers: “The institutional pluralization of modernity had to carry in its wake a fragmentation and ipso facto weakening of every conceivable belief and value dependent on social support. The typical situation in which the individual finds himself in traditional society is one where there are highly reliable plausibility structures (i.e., social confirmation of beliefs about reality). Conversely, modern societies are characterized by unstable, incohesive, unreliable plausibility structures.” See *The Homeless Mind: Modernization and Consciousness* (New York: Random House, 1973), p. 19. The conflict of the two sets of structures is unavoidable. Thus, even if an individual does not accept the alternative worldview, his stable world has been brought into question by the existence of an alternative.
SYNGE’S RIDERS TO THE SEA


6 Fletcher Stewart Basset, Legends and Superstitions of the Sea (Chicago: Bedford, Clarke, 1885), p. 225.


8 Bourgeois asserts: “When Maurya hastens away to bestow her blessing on Bartley [she] is prevented from doing so by her otherworld, ‘spaewife’-like, vision of dead Michael” (John Millington Synge, p. 161).


12 Grene comments, “To Maurya [the priest] is no more than an ignorant young man speaking empty words of comfort” (ibid., p. 55).


14 On the notion of radical limitation, George M. Foster has this to say: “Peasant economy is essentially non-productive; peasants ordinarily are very poor people. Their resources, particularly land, usually are absolutely limited, and there is not enough to go around. Productive techniques, based on human and animal power and the simple tools first used before the time of Christ, are essentially static. Consequently, production is constant . . . the total ‘productive pie’ of the village does not greatly change, and . . . there is no way to increase it however hard the individual works unless new land and improved techniques become available.” Traditional Cultures and the Impact of Technological Change (New York: Harper, 1962), pp. 52–53.


16 For this insight into Nora’s character, I must thank Professor Michael Kane, Department of Theatre and Dance, California State University, Fullerton. Private communication, September 1989.

TWENTIETH CENTURY LITERATURE

20 Grene, *Synge*, p. 46.