

**Tikrit University**

**College of Education**

**English Department**

**M.A English Literature**



**Modern World Drama**

**Reading *Riders to the Sea* through Naturalistic Perspectives**



## **Naturalism: An Overview**

Naturalism is a philosophical and literary movement that emerged in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century in response to growing influence of scientific discoveries and development in biology, psychology, and sociology. Naturalism emphasizes the deterministic nature of existence and human experience. In literary criticism it is used to describe works of literature which use realistic methods and subjects to convey a belief that everything that exists is part of nature and can be explained by natural and material causes, leaving little room for free will.

In literature naturalism developed out of realism. The father of naturalism in literature is Emile Zola. His naturalistic method was pessimistic. The pessimistic perspective stems from the notion that there exists no higher authority that has superiority over humanity, and that the occurrences in the universe are not attributable to a spiritual will, but rather are an inherent requirement of the natural world. According to Zola, man is not directed by a force from above, but is a product of his heredity and his environment. His Naturalism replaced the spiritual, sentimental, or metaphysical man with a physiological man, obedient to the physico-chemical laws and influenced by his environment. According to this, the main features of naturalism in literature are:

- 1- **Determinism:** it indicates that fate, nature, and law of heredity explain why characters' journey unfolds the way it does.
- 2- **Objectivity:** authors of naturalist literature detach themselves from the emotional components of the story. They focus instead on emotions of survival in a hostile world.
- 3- **Pessimism:** Naturalist literature presents a pessimistic perspective of life.

According to the above features, naturalist literature places great emphasis upon setting, natural place in particular, in which characters have no power to stand against its circumstances.

The three primary principles of naturalism in theatre are first, that the play should be realistic, and the result of a careful study of human behavior and psychology. The characters should be flesh and blood; their motivations and actions should be grounded in their heredity and environment. The presentation of a naturalistic play, in terms of the setting and performances, should be realistic and not flamboyant or theatrical. Second, the conflicts in the play should be issues of meaningful, life-altering significance — not small or petty. Third, the play should be simple — not cluttered with complicated sub-plots or lengthy expositions. The influence of Darwinism is evident in naturalistic plays, particularly in the portrayal of the environment's impact on character development and its function as a motivating factor for action. Naturalism favors the use of ordinary speech patterns, the use of believable writing without the involvement of ghosts, spirits, or gods, the selection of contemporary and reasonable subjects, and the avoidance of exotic, otherworldly, or fantastical settings, as well as historical or mythic time periods. It also aims to depict a wide range of social characters, including not only the aristocrats of classical drama but also bourgeois and working-class protagonists, and explore social conflicts. Additionally, Naturalism emphasizes a style of acting that strives to accurately depict reality.

## **Synge and the Irish Drama**

John Millington Synge is one of the greatest Irish dramatists, whose work captures the contemporary life of Ireland. Synge belongs to the Abbey Theatre, which he co-founded with Lady Gregory, William Butler Yeats, and others to revive the Irish identity through an Irish national theater. Synge's fascination with the



objective details of the life of the peasants in the Aran Island shapes the direction of his plays. The Aran Island provides the raw materials that feed Synge's dramatic imagination. This is related to his experiences in Aran Island, where he visited and stayed with the people and got obsessed with their ways to life.

Synge's plays are *In the Shadow of the Glen*, *Riders to the Sea*, *The Tinker's Wedding*, *The Well of the Saints*, *The Playboy of the Western World*. In all these plays, Synge displays his commitment to describing and recording the lives of the Irish peasantry in significant details, adopting journalistic, objective and scientific realistic mode. Synge's *Riders to the Sea* produced in the Abbey Theatre, is a one act play, which presents a tragic vision of life.

### ***Riders to the Sea* as a Naturalist Drama**

The play portrays the challenges faced by the inhabitants of the island as they confront the uncontrollable forces of nature. Despite the possibility of tragedy, the sea remains an essential component of human existence. The contradiction lies in the fact that the sea serves as their primary source of survival while at the same time acting as the cause of their tragedy. The play is patterned in the tradition of the Aristotelian unities of time, place and action. The play takes place in a single location (the island), starts and ends the same day, and the action revolves around the tragic fate of Maurya's family, which is of universal significance.

Maurya, an old lady, experiences the tragic loss of her father-in-law, husband, and sons due to the forces of the sea, wind, and darkness. Maurya strongly describes the anguish that shapes her perceptions in a surrealistic manner: **I've had a husband, and a husband's father and six sons in this house - six fine men, though it was a hard birth I had with every one of them and they coming into the world - and some of them were found and some of them were not found, but they're gone now the lot of them"** The body of her fifth son, Michael, has been missing for days. A young priest gives Nora, Maurya's younger daughter, a package with a shirt and stocking, perhaps belonging to Michael. Cathleen and Nora conceal the bundle from Maurya, who has trouble sleeping due of her son's disappearance. The clothes are confirmed to be Michael's after matching them to his home clothes. Cathleen expresses her distress and astonishment by remarking, **"isn't it a bitter thing to think of him [Michael] floating that way to the far north, and no one to keen him but the black bags that do be flying on the sea?"** This question exposes the inherent futility of human life, since death is an ultimate and undeniable truth. Nora's response enhances the futility of human struggle and existence: **"And isn't it a pitiful thing when there is nothing left of a man who was a great rower and fisher but a bit of an old shirt and a plain stocking?"**

Bartley, the last son of Maurya, is determined to go to Connemara with the purpose of selling their horses in order to sustain their livelihood. However, Maurya prevents Bartely from undertaking this journey due to the fact that it would result in Michael's death. A key motif in the play is the journey. Maurya's sons and her late husband set out on a quest for survival, which ultimately led them to their end. Life is a journey, and its ultimate destination is death, as the journey motif shows. Maurya notes that **"No man at all can be living for ever, and we must be satisfied"**

Bartley disobeys his mother, who dissuades him from going on the sea and refuses to give him her blessing but accompanies him with "dark word": **"He's gone now, and God spare us, and we'll not see him again. He's gone now, and when the black night is falling I'll have no son left me in the world"**. Naturally serving as a prophetic function, this term brings with it an element of pessimism. Because of their severe financial situation, Bartley is determined to go on a risky sea journey to Connemara in the hopes of selling their horses and thus obtaining much-needed funds. In contrast, Maurya's horror and hopelessness stem from her traumatic encounters with the water, which color her gloomy and sad outlook on life and shape

her resistance. Maurya experiences acute psychological trauma, which makes her see life in its negativity and dark, tragic and painful realities. The psychological trauma engenders her tragic dream:

**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...I'm after seeing him 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 word 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 on him, and new shoes on his feet**

The vision is symbolic and prophetic in its function. It foreshadows the death of Bartley and symbolizes the inseparability of the living and the dead.

It is important to note that the sea is a symbol of life and its ordeals. The sea symbolically represents the evils of life that surround the island dwellers. The sea is the enemy, the destructive principle, and destroyer of human and family continuity. Paradoxically, the sea is also the route to the people's survival even though it holds the people's death. The sea is the giver and taker of life. Moreover, the new white boards standing by the wall are symbols of the presence of death. The boards which are intended for Michael's coffin are used for Bartley instead, when his corpse is brought dripping water.

The play ends with total submission to fate. The characters could not achieve happiness and fulfilled life. Maurya painfully comments, when the corpse of the last of her son is brought on a plank: **"They're all gone now, and there isn't anything more the sea can do to me... They are all together this, and the end is come"**. Maurya kneels at the head of the table, where Bartley's body is laid. The kneeling is a symbolic act of submission to fate; it is an act that she performs three times during the religious rites she does for her dead son.

## **Implicit Allusions in the Play**

**Religious Allusion:** The title of the play, *Riders to the Sea*, is an allusion to a well-known Biblical story when the sea parted for the Israelites to walk on dried land but came back again when Moses stretched his staff again to the sea, causing the death of Pharaoh and all his horse riders. Water The holy water which Maurya sprinkles over Bartley's dead body and over Michael's clothes invokes Christian **symbolism** placed in an ironic **context**. Water becomes, in the course of the play, perversely identified with death and not life or regeneration

**Mythical Allusion:** Maurya, Cathleen, and Nora allude to the three sisters of fate. This allusion is ironic because of their inability to control destiny. . The Fates — Clotho, Lachesis, and Atropos — were divinities in Greek mythology who presided over human life. Together, the Fates represented the inescapable destiny of humanity.