

### Riders to the Sea

Drama by J. M. Synge



**READING 2C** Relate the characters, setting, and theme of a literary work to the historical, social, and economic ideas of its time. **4** Evaluate how the structure and elements of drama change in the works of British dramatists across literary periods.

#### DID YOU KNOW?

J. M. Synge . . .

- had an ear for languages and studied Gaelic, Hebrew, French, and Italian.
- revised his plays until the pages were “nearly unreadable.”
- died shortly before his 38th birthday.

#### Meet the Author

### J. M. Synge 1871–1909

The leading playwright of the Irish Literary Renaissance, J. M. Synge was an astute and sometimes critical observer of Irish culture. In the seven plays Synge wrote during his short life, he forged a new style of drama that made use of the lyrical dialects and rich folk traditions of the Irish peasantry.

**Love for the Irish Countryside** Edmund John Millington Synge was born near Dublin into a once-prosperous Anglo-Irish family whose fortunes had begun to wane. While Synge was still an infant, his father died. Synge’s mother came from a devout Protestant family, but Synge never shared her piety, preferring the wild beauty of the Irish countryside to the inside of a church.

**A Scholar and Musician** Synge graduated in 1892 from Trinity College, Dublin, where he won prizes for his academic achievements in Gaelic and Hebrew languages. Most of his energy, however, was put into musical studies. In 1893, he traveled to Germany to study music but eventually abandoned his dream because of an inability to conquer stage fright.

**The Aran Islands** From the mid-1890s to the early 1900s, Synge traveled Europe, often on foot, and began to write poetry and literary criticism. While in Paris, the poet

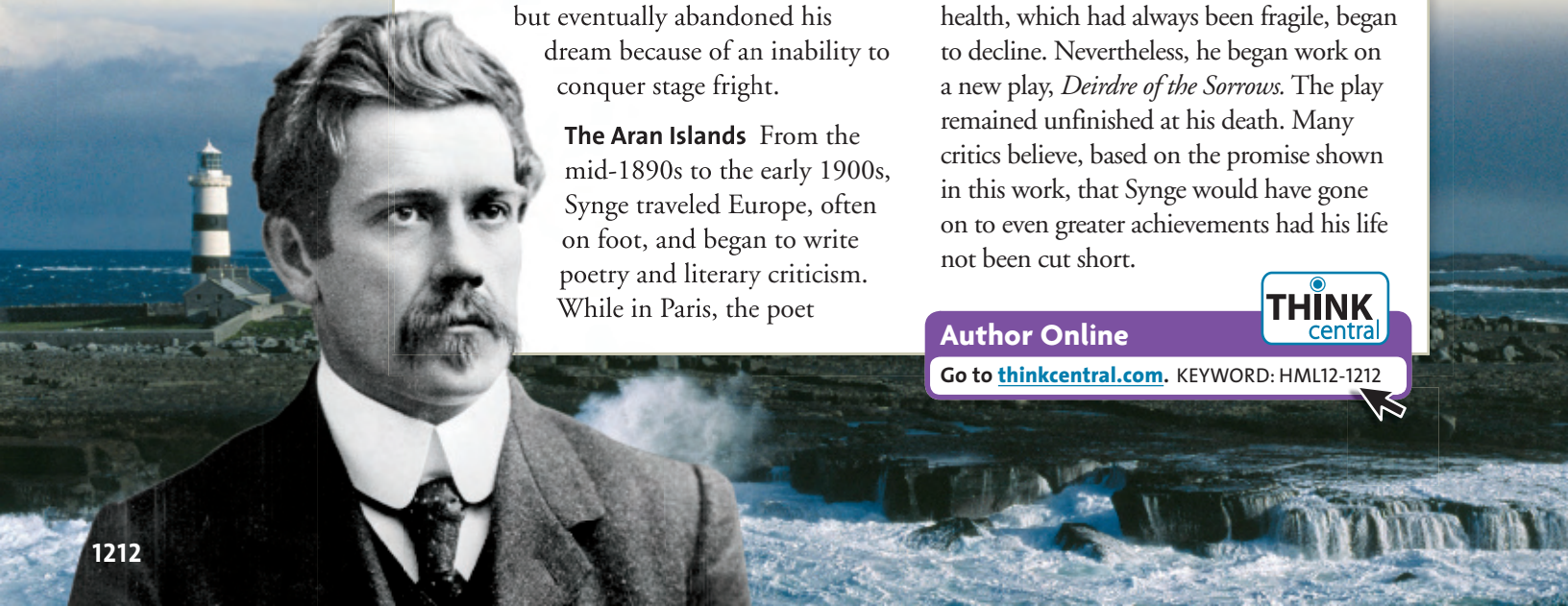
William Butler Yeats urged him to give up Paris literary life and visit the Aran Islands, off the western coast of Ireland. Synge made five trips to the islands between 1898 and 1902. He published his observations of peasant life and culture there in the book *The Aran Islands*, but his visits also deeply influenced most of his plays.

**Scandal and Controversy** In 1902, Synge wrote three plays, including *Riders to the Sea*; he quickly established himself as a promising, albeit provocative, playwright. Five years later, a major controversy erupted with the premiere of his comedy *The Playboy of the Western World*. Riots broke out on opening night, making it nearly impossible for the actors to deliver their lines. Considered scandalous, the play was condemned by many critics. A handful of influential figures including Yeats, however, championed the play. Today, it is generally considered Synge’s masterpiece.

**Unfinished Business** In 1907, Synge’s health, which had always been fragile, began to decline. Nevertheless, he began work on a new play, *Deirdre of the Sorrows*. The play remained unfinished at his death. Many critics believe, based on the promise shown in this work, that Synge would have gone on to even greater achievements had his life not been cut short.

#### Author Online

Go to [thinkcentral.com](http://thinkcentral.com). KEYWORD: HML12-1212



## LITERARY ANALYSIS: DIALOGUE

Like most plays, J. M. Synge's *Riders to the Sea* tells its story almost exclusively through **dialogue**—conversation between two or more characters. In this one-act tragedy, dialogue advances the plot and establishes the overall mood. It also reveals the background and personalities of the play's characters—humble Aran Island fishermen and their families. Synge's dialogue features an unusual **dialect**, a nonstandard vocabulary, syntax, and grammar that reflects the play's remote Irish coastal **setting**. Dialect adds richness and authenticity to Synge's portrayals, as shown in this excerpt:

*It's hard set I am to walk. . . . In the big world the old people do be leaving things after them for their sons and children, but in this place it is the young men do be leaving things behind for them that do be old.*

As you read, note how Synge's dialogue helps to convey not only character but also the historical, social, and economic conditions of a particular time and place.

## READING SKILL: UNDERSTAND CULTURAL CONTEXT

When you analyze the **cultural context** of a literary work, you consider the social or national traditions that influenced its creation. J. M. Synge was an important figure in the Irish Literary Renaissance, a movement that revived ancient Irish folklore and legends in literature. He was particularly inspired by the language and time-honored ways of the Aran Island people, who struggled to survive on isolated islands in the bone-cold Atlantic Ocean. To fully appreciate the cultural context of *Riders to the Sea*, study the background information on page 1214 and the footnotes throughout the play. Then, as you read the play, note statements or references that you are able to clarify with this knowledge of cultural context.

Statement or Reference	Explanation
"[Bartley] won't go this day with the wind rising from the south and west." (lines 63–65)	The conditions of the sea were very important to the people of the Aran Islands. They couldn't travel to the mainland in bad weather.



Complete the activities in your **Reader/Writer Notebook**.

## How much GRIEF can one endure?

For most of us, the death of a loved one is a rare occurrence. After suffering such a loss, we have time to work through feelings of despair and anger and eventually accept the death. J. M. Synge's play *Riders to the Sea*, however, is set in a time and place where catastrophe strikes often and enduring grief is a part of daily life.

**QUICKWRITE** Think of a time in your life when you've felt grief—for example, after the death of a relative or a beloved pet. Write a journal entry to describe the strategies you used to come to terms with your loss.



# RIDERS TO THE SEA

J. M. Synge

**BACKGROUND** *Riders to the Sea* is set in the stark, treeless landscape of the Aran Islands, off the western coast of Ireland. Isolated from the economic and cultural developments that were occurring elsewhere in Ireland and Europe at the turn of the 20th century, most Aran Islanders continued to rely on the sea for their livelihood, constantly subject to the fickle and dangerous weather of Galway Bay. Synge's play was strongly influenced by his visits to the Aran Islands. Details in the play—such as the practice of knitting garments with specific patterns—were drawn directly from the journals he kept while living there.

## PERSONS IN THE PLAY

**Maurya** (mô'r'ə), an old woman

**Bartley**, her son

**Cathleen**, her daughter

**Nora**, a younger daughter

**Men and Women**

## SCENE

An island off the West of Ireland

*Cottage kitchen, with nets, oilskins, spinning-wheel, some new boards standing by the wall, etc. Cathleen, a girl of about twenty, finishes kneading cake,<sup>1</sup> and puts it down in the pot-oven by the fire; then wipes her hands, and begins to spin at the wheel. Nora, a young girl, puts her head in at the door.*

**Nora** (*in a low voice*). Where is she?

**Cathleen**. She's lying down, God help her, and maybe sleeping, if she's able.

10 (*Nora comes in softly, and takes a bundle from under her shawl.*)

**Cathleen** (*spinning the wheel rapidly*). What is it you have?

**Nora**. The young priest is after bringing them. It's a shirt and a plain stocking were got off a drowned man in Donegal.<sup>2</sup>

(*Cathleen stops her wheel with a sudden movement, and leans out to listen.*)

**Nora**. We're to find out if it's Michael's they are, 20 some time herself will be down looking by the sea.

**Cathleen**. How would they be Michael's, Nora? How would he go the length of that way to the far north?

**Nora**. The young priest says he's known the like of it. "If it's Michael's they are," says he, "you can tell herself he's got a clean burial, by the grace of God; and if they're not his, let no one say a word about them, for she'll be getting her death," says he, "with crying and lamenting."

(*The door which Nora half closed is blown open by a 30 gust of wind.*)

**Cathleen** (*looking out anxiously*). Did you ask him would he stop Bartley going this day with the horses to the Galway fair?<sup>3</sup>

1. **cake**: Irish soda bread.

2. **Donegal** (dä'nĩ-gôl'): a seaport on the coast of the northwestern Irish county that is also called Donegal.

3. **the Galway** (gôl'wā') **fair**: the closest market town, across the water on the mainland of County Galway.

*Heathcliff's House* (1950),  
Laurence Stephen Lowry.  
Oil on board, 4" × 7.2".  
Image courtesy of The Lowry,  
Salford Quays, United Kingdom.







**Nora.** “I won’t stop him,” says he; “but let you not be afraid. Herself does be saying prayers half through the night, and the Almighty God won’t leave her destitute,” says he, “with no son living.”

**Cathleen.** Is the sea bad by the white rocks, Nora?

**Nora.** Middling bad, God help us. There’s a great  
40 roaring in the west, and it’s worse it’ll be getting when the tide’s turned to the wind. (*She goes over to the table with the bundle.*) Shall I open it now?

**Cathleen.** Maybe she’d wake up on us, and come in before we’d done (*coming to the table*). It’s a long time we’ll be, and the two of us crying.

**Nora** (*goes to the inner door and listens*). She’s moving about on the bed. She’ll be coming in a minute.

**Cathleen.** Give me the ladder, and I’ll put them up in the turf-loft,<sup>4</sup> the way she won’t know of them at  
50 all, and maybe when the tide turns she’ll be going down to see would he be floating from the east.

(*They put the ladder against the gable of the chimney; Cathleen goes up a few steps and hides the bundle in the turf-loft. Maurya comes from the inner room.*)

**Maurya** (*looking up at Cathleen and speaking querulously*). Isn’t it turf enough you have for this day and evening?

**Cathleen.** There’s a cake baking at the fire for a short space (*throwing down the turf*), and Bartley will want  
60 it when the tide turns if he goes to Connemara.<sup>5</sup> (*Nora picks up the turf and puts it round the pot-oven.*)

**Maurya** (*sitting down on a stool at the fire*). He won’t go this day with the wind rising from the south and west. He won’t go this day, for the young priest will stop him surely.

**Nora.** He’ll not stop him, mother; and I heard Eamon Simon and Stephen Pheety and Colum Shawn saying he would go.

70 **Maurya.** Where is he itself?

**Nora.** He went down to see would there be another boat sailing in the week, and I’m thinking it won’t be long till he’s here now, for the tide’s turning at the green head,<sup>6</sup> and the hooker’s tacking from the east.<sup>7</sup>

**Cathleen.** I hear some one passing the big stones.

**Nora** (*looking out*). He’s coming now, and he in a hurry.

**Bartley** (*Comes in and looks round the room. Speaking sadly and quietly*). Where is the bit of new rope,  
80 Cathleen, was bought in Connemara?

**Cathleen** (*coming down*). Give it to him, Nora; it’s on a nail by the white boards. I hung it up this morning, for the pig with the black feet was eating it.

**Nora** (*giving him a rope*). Is that it, Bartley?

**Maurya.** 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  
90 a deep grave we’ll make him, by the grace of God.

**Bartley** (*beginning to work with the rope*). I’ve no halter<sup>8</sup> the way I can ride down on the mare, and 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.

**Maurya.** 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, and I after giving a big price for the finest white boards you’d find in Connemara.  
100 (*She looks round at the boards.*)

**Bartley.** How would it be washed up, and we after looking each day for nine days, and a strong wind blowing a while back from the west and south?

**Maurya.** If it wasn’t found itself, that wind is raising the sea, and there was a star up against the moon,

4. **turf-loft:** the area for storing peat, partly decayed plant matter used as fuel.

5. **Connemara** (kŏn’ə-mär’ə): the southwestern part of County Galway, to which Bartley will travel by boat with the horses he is bringing to the Galway fair.

6. **green head:** a grassy section of land overlooking the sea.

7. **the hooker’s . . . east:** The hooker—a small sailing ship—is changing course by turning across the wind from the east.

8. **I’ve no halter:** Bartley is commandeering the new rope to use as a halter for tying and leading the horses.

and it rising in the night. 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?

110 **Bartley** (*working at the halter, to Cathleen*). Let you go down each day, and see the sheep aren't jumping in on the rye, and if the jobber<sup>9</sup> comes you can sell the pig with the black feet if there is a good price going.

**Maurya**. How would the like of her get a good price for a pig?

**Bartley** (*to Cathleen*). If the west wind holds with the last bit of the moon let you and Nora get up weed enough for another cock for the kelp.<sup>10</sup> It's  
120 hard set we'll be from this day with no one in it but one man to work.

**Maurya**. It's hard set we'll be surely the day you're drowned with the rest. What way will I live and the girls with me, and I an old woman looking for the grave?

(*Bartley lays down the halter, takes off his old coat, and puts on a newer one of the same flannel.*)

**Bartley** (*to Nora*). Is she<sup>11</sup> coming to the pier?

**Nora** (*looking out*). She's passing the green head and  
130 letting fall her sails.

**Bartley** (*getting his purse and tobacco*). I'll have half an hour to go down, and you'll see me coming again in two days, or in three days, or maybe in four days if the wind is bad.

**Maurya** (*turning round to the fire, and putting her shawl over her head*). Isn't it a hard and cruel man won't hear a word from an old woman, and she holding him from the sea?

**Cathleen**. It's the life of a young man to be going on  
140 the sea, and who would listen to an old woman with one thing and she saying it over?

**Bartley** (*taking the halter*). I must go now quickly. I'll ride down on the red mare, and the gray pony 'ill run behind me. . . . The blessing of God on you.

(*He goes out.*)

**Maurya** (*crying out as he is in the door*). He's gone now, 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.

150 **Cathleen**. Why wouldn't you give him your blessing and he looking round in the door? Isn't it sorrow enough is on every one in this house without your sending him out with an unlucky word behind him, and a hard word in his ear?

(*Maurya takes up the tongs and begins raking the fire aimlessly without looking round.*)

**Nora** (*turning towards her*). You're taking away the turf from the cake.

**Cathleen** (*crying out*). The Son of God forgive us,  
160 Nora, we're after forgetting his bit of bread. (*She comes over to the fire.*)

**Nora**. And it's destroyed he'll be going till dark night, and he after eating nothing since the sun went up.

**Cathleen** (*turning the cake out of the oven*). It's destroyed he'll be, surely. There's no sense left on any person in a house where an old woman will be talking for ever.

(*Maurya sways herself on her stool.*)

**Cathleen** (*cutting off some of the bread and rolling it  
170 in a cloth; to Maurya*). Let you go down now to the spring well and give him this and he passing. You'll see him then and the dark word will be broken, and you can say "God speed you," the way he'll be easy in his mind.

**Maurya** (*taking the bread*). Will I be in it as soon as himself?

**Cathleen**. If you go now quickly.

**Maurya** (*standing up unsteadily*). It's hard set I am to walk.

180 **Cathleen** (*looking at her anxiously*). Give her the stick, Nora, or maybe she'll slip on the big stones.

**Nora**. What stick?

9. **jobber**: a traveling trader who buys goods to sell to others.

10. **cock for the kelp**: conical heaps of dried seaweed used for fertilizer.

11. **she**: Female pronouns are typically used to refer to boats and ships.





*Off the Donegal Coast* (1922), Jack Butler Yeats. Oil on canvas, 60.5 cm × 90.7 cm. © Crawford Municipal Art Gallery, Cork, Ireland/Bridgeman Art Library. © 2007 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/DACS, London.

**Cathleen.** The stick Michael brought from Connemara.

**Maurya** (*taking a stick Nora gives her*). In the big world the old people do be leaving things after them for their sons and children, but in this place it is the young men do be leaving things behind for them that do be old.

190 (*She goes out slowly. Nora goes over to the ladder.*)

**Cathleen.** Wait, Nora, maybe she'd turn back quickly. She's that sorry, God help her, you wouldn't know the thing she'd do.

**Nora.** Is she gone round by the bush?

**Cathleen** (*looking out*). She's gone now. Throw it down quickly, for the Lord knows when she'll be out of it again.

**Nora** (*getting the bundle from the loft*). The young priest said he'd be passing tomorrow, and we might  
200 go down and speak to him below if it's Michael's they are surely.

**Cathleen** (*taking the bundle*). Did he say what way they were found?

**Nora** (*coming down*). "There were two men," says he, "and they rowing round with poteen<sup>12</sup> before the cocks crowed, and the oar of one of them caught the body, and they passing the black cliffs of the north."

**Cathleen** (*trying to open the bundle*). Give me a knife, Nora; the string's perished with the salt water,  
210 and there's a black knot on it you wouldn't loosen in a week.

**Nora** (*giving her a knife*). I've heard tell it was a long way to Donegal.

**Cathleen** (*cutting the string*). It is surely. There was a man in here a while ago—the man sold us that knife—and he said if you set off walking from the rocks beyond, it would be in seven days you'd be in Donegal.

**Nora.** And what time would a man take, and he  
220 floating?

12. **poteen** (pə-tēn'): illegally distilled whiskey; moonshine.

(Cathleen opens the bundle and takes out a bit of a shirt and a stocking. They look at them eagerly.)

**Cathleen** (in a low voice). The Lord spare us, Nora! isn't it a queer hard thing to say if it's his they are surely?

**Nora**. I'll get his shirt off the hook the way we can put the one flannel on the other. (She looks through some clothes hanging in the corner.) It's not with them, Cathleen, and where will it be?

230 **Cathleen**. I'm thinking Bartley put it on him in the morning, for his own shirt was heavy with the salt in it. (pointing to the corner) There's a bit of a sleeve was of the same stuff. Give me that and it will do. (Nora brings it to her and they compare the flannel.)

**Cathleen**. It's the same stuff, Nora; but if it is itself, aren't there great rolls of it in the shops of Galway, and isn't it many another man may have a shirt of it as well as Michael himself?

**Nora** (who has taken up the stocking and counted 240 the stitches, crying out). It's Michael, Cathleen, it's Michael; God spare his soul, and what will herself say when she hears this story, and Bartley on the sea?

**Cathleen** (taking the stocking). It's a plain stocking.

**Nora**. It's the second one of the third pair I knitted, and I put up three-score<sup>13</sup> stitches, and I dropped four of them.

**Cathleen** (counts the stitches). It's that number is in it (crying out). Ah, Nora, isn't it a bitter thing to think of him floating that way to the far north, and 250 no one to keen<sup>14</sup> him but the black hags<sup>15</sup> that do be flying on the sea?

**Nora** (swinging herself round, and throwing out her arms on the clothes). 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?

**Cathleen** (after an instant). Tell me is herself coming, Nora? I hear a little sound on the path.

**Nora** (looking out). She is, Cathleen. She's coming up to the door.

260 **Cathleen**. Put these things away before she'll come in. Maybe it's easier she'll be after giving her blessing to Bartley, and we won't let on we've heard anything the time he's on the sea.

**Nora** (helping Cathleen to close the bundle). We'll put them here in the corner.

(They put them into a hole in the chimney corner. Cathleen goes back to the spinning-wheel.)

**Nora**. Will she see it was crying I was?

**Cathleen**. Keep your back to the door the way the 270 light'll not be on you.

(Nora sits down at the chimney corner, with her back to the door. Maurya comes in very slowly, without looking at the girls, and goes over to her stool at the other side of the fire. The cloth with the bread is still in her hand. The girls look at each other, and Nora points to the bundle of bread.)

**Cathleen** (after spinning for a moment). You didn't give him his bit of bread?

(Maurya begins to keen softly, without turning round.)

280 **Cathleen**. Did you see him riding down?

(Maurya goes on keening.)

**Cathleen** (a little impatiently). God forgive you; isn't it a better thing to raise your voice and tell what you seen, than to be making lamentation for a thing that's done? Did you see Bartley, I'm saying to you?

**Maurya** (with a weak voice). My heart's broken from this day.

**Cathleen** (as before). Did you see Bartley?

**Maurya**. I seen the fearfulest thing.

290 **Cathleen** (leaves her wheel and looks out). God forgive you; he's riding the mare now over the green head, and the gray pony behind him.

**Maurya** (Starts, so that her shawl falls back from her head and shows her white tossed hair. With a frightened voice). The gray pony behind him. . . .

**Cathleen** (coming to the fire). What is it ails you at all?

13. **three-score**: 60. A score is 20.

14. **keen**: to wail over a dead body in mourning—a traditional Irish practice.

15. **black hags**: a literal translation of the Irish word for cormorants, dark sea birds that call out over the water.



**Maurya** (*speaking very slowly*). I've seen the fearfulest thing any person has seen since the day Bride Dara seen the dead man with the child in his arms.<sup>16</sup>

300 **Cathleen and Nora.** Uah.

(*They crouch down in front of the old woman at the fire.*)

**Nora.** Tell us what it is you seen.

**Maurya.** 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 gray pony behind him. (*She puts up her hands, as if to hide something from her eyes.*) The Son of God spare us, Nora!

310 **Cathleen.** What is it you seen?

**Maurya.** I seen Michael himself.

**Cathleen** (*speaking softly*). You did not, mother. It wasn't Michael you seen, for his body is after being found in the far north, and he's got a clean burial, by the grace of God.

**Maurya** (*a little defiantly*). 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 words in my throat.

320 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 gray pony, and there was Michael upon it—with fine clothes on him, and new shoes on his feet.

**Cathleen** (*begins to keen*). It's destroyed we are from this day. It's destroyed, surely.

**Nora.** Didn't the young priest say the Almighty God won't leave her destitute with no son living?

330 **Maurya** (*in a low voice, but clearly*). It's little the like of him knows of the sea. . . . Bartley will be lost now, and let you call in Eamon and make me a good coffin out of the white boards, for I won't live after them. 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 to the world—and some of them were found and some of them were not found, but they're gone now the lot of them. . . . There were Stephen and Shawn were lost in the great  
340 wind, and found after in the Bay of Gregory of the Golden Mouth,<sup>17</sup> and carried up the two of them on one plank, and in by that door.

(*She pauses for a moment, the girls start as if they heard something through the door that is half open behind them.*)

**Nora** (*in a whisper*). Did you hear that, Cathleen? Did you hear a noise in the north-east?

**Cathleen** (*in a whisper*). There's someone after crying out by the seashore.

350 **Maurya** (*continues without hearing anything*). There was Sheamus and his father, and his own father again, were lost in a dark night, and not a stick or sign was seen of them when the sun went up. There was Patch after was drowned out of a curagh<sup>18</sup> 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  
360 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.

(*She pauses again with her hand stretched out towards the door. It opens softly and old women begin to come in, crossing themselves on the threshold, and kneeling down in front of the stage with red petticoats over their heads.*<sup>19</sup>)

**Maurya** (*half in a dream, to Cathleen*). Is it Patch, or Michael, or what is it at all?

370 **Cathleen.** Michael is after being found in the far north, and when he is found there how could he be here in this place?

16. **since the day Bride** (brí' dē) . . . **arms:** since Bride Dara saw a more frightening omen. *Bride*, often spelled *Bridie*, is a nickname for Bridget.

17. **Bay of . . . Mouth:** probably Gregory Sound, which separates the two larger Aran Islands.

18. **curagh** (cŭr'ā): a small rowboat made of hides or canvas stretched over a wicker or wooden frame.

19. **red . . . heads:** Aran Island women traditionally wore red skirts; here, in their haste to reach the shore, the women had grabbed their skirts to use as shawls.

**Maurya.** There does be a power of young men floating round in the sea, and what way would they know if it was Michael they had, or another man like him, for when a man is nine days in the sea, and the wind blowing, it's hard set his own mother would be to say what man was in it.

**Cathleen.** It's Michael, God spare him, for they're  
380 after sending us a bit of his clothes from the far north.

*(She reaches out and hands Maurya the clothes that belonged to Michael. Maurya stands up slowly, and takes them in her hands. Nora looks out.)*

**Nora.** They're carrying a thing among them, and there's water dripping out of it and leaving a track by the big stones.

**Cathleen** *(in a whisper to the women who have come in)*. Is it Bartley it is?

390 **One of the Women.** It is, surely, God rest his soul.  
*(Two younger women come in and pull out the table. Then men carry in the body of Bartley, laid on a plank, with a bit of a sail over it, and lay it on the table.)*

**Cathleen** *(to the women as they are doing so)*. What way was he drowned?

**One of the Women.** The gray pony knocked him over into the sea, and he was washed out where there is a great surf on the white rocks.

400 *(Maurya has gone over and knelt down at the head of the table. The women are keening softly and swaying themselves with a slow movement. Cathleen and Nora kneel at the other end of the table. The men kneel near the door.)*

**Maurya** *(raising her head and speaking as if she did not see the people around her)*. 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  
410 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



*Silent Man* (1995), Andrew Gadd. Oil on canvas. Private collection.  
© Bridgeman Art Library.



now to be going down and getting Holy Water<sup>20</sup> in the dark nights after Samhain,<sup>21</sup> and I won't care what way the sea is when the other women will be keening. (to Nora) Give me the Holy Water, Nora; there's a small sup still on the dresser.

(Nora gives it to her.)

420 **Maurya** (*drops Michael's clothes across Bartley's feet, and sprinkles the Holy Water over him*). It isn't that I haven't prayed for you, Bartley, to the Almighty God. It isn't that I haven't said prayers in the dark night till you wouldn't know what I'd be saying; but it's a great rest I'll have now, and it's time, surely. It's a great rest I'll have now, and great sleeping in the long nights after Samhain, if it's only a bit of wet flour we do have to eat, and maybe a fish that would be stinking.

430 (She kneels down again, crossing herself, and saying prayers under her breath.)

**Cathleen** (to an old man). Maybe yourself and Eamon would make a coffin when the sun rises. We have fine white boards herself bought, God help her, thinking Michael would be found, and I have a new cake you can eat while you'll be working.

**The Old Man** (*looking at the boards*). Are there nails with them?

**Cathleen**. There are not, Colum; we didn't think of the nails.

440 **Another Man**. It's a great wonder she wouldn't think of the nails, and all the coffins she's seen made already.

**Cathleen**. It's getting old she is, and broken.

(Maurya stands up again very slowly and spreads out the pieces of Michael's clothes beside the body, sprinkling them with the last of the Holy Water.)

**Nora** (*in a whisper to Cathleen*). She's quiet now and easy; but the day Michael was drowned you could hear her crying out from this to the spring well. It's fonder she was of Michael, and would any one have thought that?

**Cathleen** (*slowly and clearly*). An old woman will be soon tired with anything she will do, and isn't it nine days herself is after crying and keening, and making great sorrow in the house?

**Maurya** (*puts the empty cup mouth downwards on the table, and lays her hands together on Bartley's feet*). They're all together this time, and the end is come. May the Almighty God have mercy on Bartley's 460 soul, and on Michael's soul, and on the souls of Sheamus and Patch, and Stephen and Shawn (*bending her head*); and may He have mercy on my soul, Nora, and on the soul of every one is left living in the world.

(She pauses, and the keen rises a little more loudly from the women, then sinks away.)

**Maurya** (*continuing*). Michael has a clean burial in the far north, by the grace of the Almighty God. Bartley will have a fine coffin out of the white 470 boards, and a deep grave surely. What more can we want than that? No man at all can be living for ever, and we must be satisfied.

(She kneels down again and the curtain falls slowly.)

20. **Holy Water**: water blessed by a priest and used for religious purposes.

21. **Samhain** (să-văn'): the Irish-language term for All Souls' Day or All Hallows' Day, a Christian holy day celebrated on November 1.

## Comprehension

1. **Recall** What do Nora and Cathleen hope to find out from examining the clothes in the bundle?
2. **Clarify** Why does Maurya want to keep Bartley from going to the fair in Galway?
3. **Summarize** Describe the various mishaps Maurya and her family have experienced.



**READING 2C** Relate the characters, setting, and theme of a literary work to the historical, social, and economic ideas of its time. 4 Evaluate how the structure and elements of drama change in the works of British dramatists across literary periods.

## Literary Analysis

4. **Examine Dialogue** In his one-act play, Synge quickly establishes the main **characters** and the **conflict** they face. Reread the dialogue between Nora and Cathleen in lines 7–51. What important information do you learn about them and their difficulties in this exchange?
5. **Analyze Dialect** Consider how Synge’s use of the Aran Island dialect contributes to his character portrayals. Would you have viewed Maurya and her family differently if they had spoken a more conventional form of English? Explain your answer.
6. **Interpret Mood** Review lines 146–154 and lines 289–324 in *Riders to the Sea*. What overall mood, or atmosphere, does the setting of the play help create?
7. **Understand Cultural Context** Look over the notes you recorded as you read the selection. In what ways was Synge influenced by each of the following aspects of Aran Island culture in his writing of *Riders to the Sea*? Cite details.
  - island setting
  - religion
  - fishing
  - superstition
8. **Evaluate Dramatic Conventions** *Riders to the Sea* is a **tragedy**—a work that presents the downfall of a dignified character. In classical tragedies, the main character, or **hero**, has a **tragic flaw**, a quality that leads to his or her destruction. Often, other characters in the play will warn of the doom to come. To what extent does Synge’s work conform to these conventions of tragedy?
9. **Compare Texts** Compare Synge’s play with “For Men of Seaside Village, Lonely and Unfamiliar Roles” (page 1225). Is grief experienced similarly in the selections? Use details from both texts to support your response.

## Literary Criticism

10. **Social Context** What does Synge convey about the role of women in the society portrayed in *Riders to the Sea*? Provide examples from the play to support your response.

*How much **GRIEF** can one endure?*

People often have different reactions to the loss of a loved one. What are some ways to cope with the devastating loss of a sibling or close friend?



# Conventions in Writing

## GRAMMAR AND STYLE: Use Realistic Dialogue

J. M. Synge strove to portray the characters in his plays as realistically as possible. One way he did this was to listen carefully to the lilting **dialect** of the Irish peasants he knew. He then reproduced their way of speaking in his plays to lend authenticity to the dialogue, as shown in this example:

*Nora. Middling bad, God help us. There's a great roaring in the west, and it's worse it'll be getting when the tide's turned to the wind. (She goes over to the table with the bundle.) Shall I open it now?*

*Cathleen. Maybe she'd wake up on us, and come in before we'd done (coming to the table). It's a long time we'll be, and the two of us crying. (lines 39–45)*

One feature of this particular Irish dialect is **inverted word order**. For example, notice how Nora says “it’s worse it’ll be getting” instead of “it’ll be getting worse.”

**PRACTICE** Review the way in which Synge constructs dialogue in *Riders to the Sea*, noting distinctive vocabulary, contractions, grammatical constructions, and word order that characterize the dialect used in the play. Then write six lines of dialogue that might have taken place between Nora and the young priest as he gave her the bundle of clothes. A sample has been done for you.

### EXAMPLE

*Priest: It's a drowned man in Donegal, the clothes were got off of. Find out if it's Michael's they are.*

*Nora: First, I'll have to see if herself is asleep. She's not slept much, God help her, for nine days.*

## READING-WRITING CONNECTION



Expand your understanding of dialogue by responding to this prompt. Then, use the **revising tips** to improve your dialogue.

### WRITING PROMPT

**WRITE AN ALTERNATIVE ENDING** Suppose that Bartley returns safely home, having gotten a good price for the horses. Write a **one-page dialogue** in which his mother and sisters welcome him home.

### REVISING TIPS

- Be sure to include some of the characteristic dialect used in the play.
- Check to see that you have maintained a consistent tone and point of view.
- Try to have the characters refer to some of the specific events or ideas in the play.



**WRITING 14A** Write an engaging story.

Interactive Revision

Go to [thinkcentral.com](https://www.thinkcentral.com).  
KEYWORD: HML12-1224

**NEWSPAPER ARTICLE** This excerpt from a newspaper article describes the devastating effects of a tsunami that struck an Indonesian fishing village in 2004.

## For Men of Seaside Village, Lonely and Unfamiliar Roles

ELLEN NAKASHIMA

**LAMTEUNGOH, INDONESIA.** Baharuddin, the head of this devastated Sumatran<sup>1</sup> fishing village, gently lifted the limp remains of his 11-year-old daughter, swaddled in a plaid sarong.<sup>2</sup>

"She was my youngest daughter," he said, gazing down mournfully and tenderly at the remains. "She was the most beautiful one."

He placed her in a communal grave not far from the sea, where a wall of black water crashed ashore last month and killed his wife and their five children. Baharuddin and two other villagers laid two other bodies in the grave and shoveled soil on top.

Then he and nine other men crouched under the searing sun, hands outstretched, palms turned up, and prayed.

When the tsunami<sup>3</sup> inundated the northern and western coasts of Indonesia's Aceh province, killing more than 100,000 people, most of the victims in seaside villages like this one were women and children. Three out of four of the survivors in relief camps are men or boys, according to United Nations officials.

Many in these coastal towns were fishermen who survived at sea or farmers in the hills above the high water line. But their wives and children were killed at home not far from the beach when the driving waves turned the village into ruins on December 26.

In Lamteungoh, there are 105 widowers and only 19 widows. These rugged men



Survivors pray for their loved ones.

are now grappling with unfamiliar roles, dependent on one another and uncertain about what comes next. With their families gone, some say their lives have lost purpose. They are caring for children in communal style and tending to the injured. They are struggling to move through their grief and reclaim their future.

"Life today has no meaning at all for me," said Baharuddin, 49, who has thinning hair, a furrowed brow, and a fisherman's lean, wiry body, tanned to a dark chocolate hue. "Now, suppose I find a job and make money. To whom can I distribute it?" he asked rhetorically, seated on a log in the rubble-strewn village and smoking a clove cigarette. "I have no wife anymore. No children anymore." . . .

1. **Sumatran** (sōō-mă'trən): referring to the large Indonesian island of Sumatra.

2. **sarong** (sə-rông'): a long, often brightly colored strip of cloth worn draped over the hips like a skirt.

3. **tsunami** (tsōō-nă'mē): a huge sea wave caused by a great disturbance under the ocean, such as an earthquake; sometimes called a tidal wave.