

John Millington Synge. (1871 – 1909). *Riders to the Sea.* (1904).

Summary

Persons

MAURYA: an old frail woman. Querulous because desperate. Lost her husband and five sons at sea.

BARTLEY: her last living son and the family provider.

MICHAEL: her last son to have disappeared at sea.

CATHLEEN: her daughter, about twenty. A strong woman, practical and sensible.

NORA: her younger daughter. Obedient and helpful.

All of the characters are simple peasants.

Setting

The play is set on an island off the West of Ireland. All of the action takes place in a simple cottage kitchen.

Summary

A Bundle of Clothes: Cathleen finishes kneading a cake, puts it in the oven and sits down to a spinning wheel. Nora stealthily enters the kitchen, making sure that the mother is not in. She brings a bundle with a shirt and a plain stocking which were got off an unknown drowned man in Donegal, a place far north. They are to find out whether or not these clothes belong to their brother Michael who was lost at sea nine days before. They hear the mother moving about in the inner room and quickly hide the bundle in the turf-loft because they do not want to upset her. Maurya has been going to the sea the last nine days in case Michael's body was washed up and she is nearly 'getting her death... with crying and lamenting'.

Bartley's Departure: Maurya hopes that Bartley will be prevented from going with the horses to the Galway fair today. The weather is threatening and Maurya fears for him. The young priest fails to stop him but he believes that 'the Almighty God won't leave her destitute... with no son living'. Bartley hurriedly enters the kitchen to get ready for the trip. He gives Cathleen instructions as to what to do during his absence. Meanwhile his mother goes on talking, trying to persuade him not to go. Bartley must go the fair to sell the horses, but Maurya laments: '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?' Nobody seems to pay any attention to Maurya's desperate pleads:

MAURYA: 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 the sea, and who would listen to an old woman with one thing and she saying it over?

Bartley leaves, blessing the family, but Maurya fails to return the blessing.

Maurya's Foreboding: Maurya declares that this was the last time that they saw Bartley alive. Cathleen does not heed Maurya's superstitious prediction and reproaches the mother for letting Bartley go without his blessing. Cathleen realizes that they forgot to give Bartley his bread. She cuts it, rolls it in a cloth and sends Maurya with the bread after him so that she could say 'God speed you' and break the unlucky word. Maurya obeys but complains: '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.'

Michael's Stocking: Cathleen and Nora wait a while until Maurya disappears from view. Then they quickly open the bundle with the clothes and examine it. They cannot tell at first whether or not they are Michael's, but then Nora counts the stitches of the stocking and recognizes her own pattern. Michael has got 'a clean burial by the grace of God'. Maurya can be heard coming. The girls hide the bundle because they do not want to add to Maurya's misery as long as Bartley is on the sea.

Maurya's Vision: Maurya enters the kitchen, still holding the bundle with the bread. She does not look at the girls, neither does she say anything. She sits down on her stool at the fireplace and starts keening softly. She does not answer the impatient questions of the girls, she only says that she saw a most fearful thing. Talking slowly, as a broken woman, she finally reveals that she saw Bartley riding the red mare, the grey pony behind him, and that she saw Michael himself in fine clothes on the pony. Bartley said 'the blessing of God on you', and she tried to return the blessing, but the words got choked in her throat, and she remained silent. Cathleen explains to Maurya that she could not have seen Michael because his body has been found in the far north. Maurya insists on what she saw.

Drowned Sons: Maurya declares that Bartley will be lost and demands that Eamon be called in to make her a coffin out of the white boards because she will not outlive Bartley. She counts out the losses that she suffered at the sea. She lost her sons Stephen and Shawn in a great wind, their bodies were found and carried to the house on one plank. She lost her son Sheamus, her husband and her father-in-law in a dark night, their bodies were never found. She lost her son Patch who drowned when his curagh turned over, his body was carried to the house wrapped in a red sail from which water was dripping and leaving a track to the door. The men with the body were preceded by several women who came in, crossed themselves and did not say a word.

Bartley's Body: Nora and Cathleen hear someone crying out by the seashore. Maurya continues her soliloquy without hearing anything. Several old women come in, cross themselves and kneel down without saying a word. Half in a dream, Maurya wonders whose body is going to follow, Patch's or Michael's? Cathleen says that it cannot be Michael's and hands Maurya the bundle with Michael's clothes. Several men come in, carrying Bartley's body laid on a plank and covered with a piece of sail. The grey pony knocked him into the sea, and his body was washed out. The men kneel down, and so does Maurya and her daughters.

Fulfilment: The women keen softly in the background. Maurya takes the Holy Water, drops Michael's clothes across Bartley's feet and starts sprinkling the water over the body. She speaks 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'. She says that she certainly did pray for all her loved ones but admits that she welcomes the 'great rest' she will have now. Nora wonders how calmly the mother receives the death of her last son, but Cathleen explains: '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, resigned, prays for the deceased and the living ones and concludes:

MAURYA: '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 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'.

Analysis

Language: The language of the play is remarkable not only for the use of some regional lexical items (e.g. 'poteen' = illegal potato liquor; 'curagh' = a small rounded boat) but also and especially for the highly marked syntax. In general, sentence condensers are preferred to dependent clauses and verbs with *-ing* endings are exploited in contexts where these forms would not come in question in standard English: 'I'm thinking it won't be long...' [= I think it won't be long.]. Abundance of cleft structures is normally used: '*It's a long time we'll be...*' [= We'll be a long time.]. Also, reflexive pronouns are commonly used in a non-reflexive function: '...some time *herself* will be down looking by the sea' [= some time she will be down looking] or even 'Where is *he itself*?' [= Where is he?]. Another peculiarity is the occasional periphrastic form with *after* used in the function of present perfect: 'The young priest is *after* bringing them' [= The young priest has just brought them.].

Visions & Reality: The tragedy derives much of its emotional impact from the way in which it foreshadows its outcome. Maurya's foreboding of Bartley's impending death may at first seem but a product of the mother's fears, and neither the characters nor the audience may initially attribute much importance to Maurya's lamentations. Starting with the impressively rendered vision of Bartley and Michael riding together to the sea, Maurya's predictions start being gradually fulfilled. When Maurya recalls the way in which Patch's body was brought to the house, her mental vision is literary acted out as Bartley's body is just being carried to the house in the same fashion as Patch's was.

Women Characters: The play is remarkable for its well-developed female characters; the males are allowed a very limited space only and are not developed in any depth or detail. There is a stark contrast between Maurya, the desperate mother on the verge of a break-down, and Cathleen, the pragmatical and reasonable daughter who attends the necessary tasks to keep the household running while the mother is very much paralysed by her forebodings. At the beginning, Maurya has still one son left and some hope, so she concentrates all her feeble efforts on preserving Bartley. When Bartley is lost, Maurya is broken and resigned. Without a man in the house, the family is ruined, and the mother has nothing more to hope for. At the same time, Maurya has found her peace, she has nothing more to fear or to worry about, she has nothing more to lose. At the end, Maurya seems to accept the inevitability of fate and the fact that the sea not only sustains them, but also demands something in return.