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STRUCTURAL DYNAMICS IN RIDERS TO THE SEA

By William J. Free

R. W. Heilman criticizes Synge’s Riders to the Sea for offering too narrow and limited a view of human experience. Describing the action of the play as “a climactic series of calamities...” involving “grief, the sense of desolation, ... [and] a bowing to destiny...,” Heilman warns against mistaking pathos for tragedy and classifies Riders among those melodramas in which the characters are victims of nature.¹

Heilman’s view implies a sense of inevitable doom which hangs over the characters and makes their fate hopeless and unremitting. Maura, who functions as representative of the whole of the Aran Island community, submits helplessly to the two overpowering forces of nature, age and the sea. Such a view makes the play seem static, or, to use Heilman’s term, “elegiac.” The play celebrates the last moments of a process of entropy within which life returns to death and the play’s structure moves to an ultimate resignation in the tableau of keening at the end.

Undoubtedly Heilman’s description aptly states the dominant image of the play. A slight realignment of emphasis, however, reveals a much richer play than can the elegiac model alone. Riders is not an elegy, it is drama; and its conflict involves not just that of man against nature (or man as the victim of nature) but also the conflict within the family and the community of man between life and death. Attention to such purely dramatic elements as the visual meanings of the actors’ movements on stage and the dynamics of the creation of character reveals that Riders to the Sea offers us not just an image of entropy but a counterimage of expanding youthful vitality.

The term “entropy” describes the decrease of energy and the corresponding movement toward a state of equilibrium in a

physical system. I have borrowed it from Rudolf Arnheim’s *Art and Visual Perception* both because it accurately describes Maura’s movement toward complete resignation in the face of death and because, as Arnheim uses it, it implies the opposing force of vitality. Arnheim, after warning against seeing balance and order as the end-all of art, says: “Just as the emphasis of living is on directed activity and not on empty repose, so the emphasis of the work of art is not on balance, harmony, unity, but on a pattern of directed forces that are being balanced, ordered, unified.”

That so many critics have called *Riders to the Sea* a static play is perhaps because of the relatively low degree of intensity which the force of vitality exercises; but to characterize it, as does Thomas Van Lean, for example, by Maura’s helpless submission to her antagonist alone is to ignore the other force in the play and to misplace the coloring which it gives to the main action. For *Riders* also presents a dramatic image of striving against the inevitability of fate and does so in two senses: in the active intentions of the younger characters and in the physical contrast on stage between their expression of those intentions and Maura’s more passive reaction to the forces threatening to overwhelm her.

Structurally the play contains five basic motive forces: the investigation of the identity of the bundle of clothes which Nora gets from the young priest; the desire to prevent Bartley’s going to the Connamara fair; Bartley’s intention to assume the dominant role in the household, an intention expressed by his resolution to go to the fair; the active antagonism of nature to human life; and the mourning for the dead. The dramatic interweaving of these forces resolves itself into a major theme, the return of life to death, and a minor theme, the resistance of life against death.

Cailteen is the primary resistance to death. (Nora, although also an active character, functions almost as Cailteen’s double.

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3 “Form as Agent in Synge’s *Riders to the Sea,*” *Drama Survey III*: 3 (February 1964), pp. 352-366.
Synge describes her only as a younger girl. At no point in the play does she actively oppose or contrast to Cailteen; therefore, in my discussion I will use Cailteen for convenience sake to represent their dual identity.) Cailteen is the most active character in the play in terms of pursuing and completing specific actions, and at three points she dominates the play.

From the beginning to the point at which Bartley enters, she pursues two actions: the identification of the bundle of clothes and the desire to prevent Bartley's going to the fair. Neither is strongly opposed. Opposition to identifying the clothes comes only from the threat of Maura's appearance and Cailteen's desire not to upset her mother needlessly. Opposition to her desire to prevent Bartley's going to the fair comes, at this point in the play, only from the young priest's assurance, which Nora repeats, that "'the Almighty God won't leave her destitute... with no son living.'" Later, Cailteen and Nora become easily reconciled to Bartley's determination to go to the fair, leaving only Maura as a rather impotent opponent. This reconciliation joins together the representatives of vitality in the play; it comes so easily because Cailteen's impulses are active from the beginning. Faced with Bartley's determination to act, she naturally switches her motive from negative opposition to positive support of his determination to go.

At a second point, after Bartley's exit, Cailteen again dominates the play, first by chiding her mother for sending Bartley off without her blessing and secondly by resuming and completing the investigation of the bundle of clothes. Here the only opposition comes from the passive, defeated reluctance of Maura to act at all and from the resistance of the clothes to yield to identification. Both oppositions Cailteen easily overcomes, the first by badgering her mother into submission, the

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second by the recognition device of having Nora count the stitches on the socks she knitted for their brother.

Finally, at the end of the play, Cailteen assumes the dominant role in the family, a role now vacated by the deaths of her last two brothers, and negotiates with the old man for the building of the coffin. Here is neither opposition nor resolution, but an equilibrium of forces—one, the power of death which the keening women and Maura represent; the other, the continuance of life which Cailteen’s activity represents. The two images stretch into the future and implant themselves into our imaginations as the play closes.

In each of her actions Cailteen is a dramatically powerful figure. She moves directly and decisively toward her desired goals and accomplishes them almost without opposition. The minor impression she gives in the play happens partly because of the ease with which she acts. But had she been more powerfully opposed, she would have emerged as the central character in the play, which Synge obviously did not want. Rather he skillfully holds her vitality to a minor emphasis by having her act so easily that we hardly notice the degree to which she does provide most of the motive for action in the play.

During these scenes Cailteen expresses the life force which moves her by being physically active in visual contrast to the relative inactivity of both Bartley and Maura. At the beginning of the play we see her domestically busy—preparing the cake, working at the spinning wheel. Synge emphasizes the crispness and energy of her movements with the stage directions: “(spinning the wheel rapidly)....”; “Cailteen stops her wheel with a sudden movement...” (p. 39). In the scene in which she and Nora identify the clothes, both bustle about the stage, handling the bundle, hiding it in the turf-loft, counting the stitches. Coming as it does after the intense but still scene in which Bartley prepares to go to the fair, the energy of this scene seems even more emphatic. Then at the end of the play the director’s blocking should have Cailteen rise from her kneeling position.
beside the table and cross to the men to inquire about the coffin. Her movement acquires strong emphasis through its contrast to the repetitious motions of the keening women, the stillness of the old men standing by the door, and the kneeling positions of Maura and Nora at the table. Our eyes follow Cailteen as she moves across the stage and give us a kinesthetic sense of the energy expressed within her motions.

Cailteen’s motions are particularly emphatic because they occur in contexts in which the other characters on stage are relatively still. During most of the play, for example, Maura sits on her stool near the fireplace. Even when she takes the scene, as in her relating the vision of the gray pony or in her reciting the story of the string of deaths that have plagued her, she does so by the force of her words and by the stillness of the other people on stage. Her words at the end of the play also acquire force by the counterpoint of the keening women, whose red petticoats, swaying motion, and high pitched wail provide a ritualistic context in which Maura recites her homage to death. But as the play ends, Maura resumes her still position beside the body and Cailteen rises to continue life by arranging to bury her dead.

Underlying the contrast of activity and stillness are two themes which support it both visually and intellectually. First is the contrast of youth and age. The visual grouping is obvious—Cailteen, Nora, and Bartley contrasted with Maura, the keening women, and the old men. The dialogue emphasizes the theme at several points, particularly as Maura submits to her fate as the end of the play nears. The speeches are Cailteen’s and they emphasize Maura’s progressive decline into passive acceptance. Of Maura’s warnings of the impending disaster if Bartley leaves the house, Cailteen says, “an who would listen to an old woman with one thing and she saying it over . . .” (p. 42)? After Bartley leaves, Cailteen counters her mother’s fears by saying, “There’s no sense left on any person in a house where an old woman will be talking forever. . . .” (p. 44). But
in the last scene, after Bartley's death, Cailteen's descriptions of her mother indicate that even the verbal opposition to fate has disappeared and that Maura has fallen into a despairing acceptance: "Isn't it getting old she is, and broken?" Cailteen asks (p. 53); and a few moments later she comments on the total collapse of Maura's energy with the words "An old woman will be soon tired with anything she will do..." (p. 54). The contexts of these statements emphasize the necessity of Cailteen's assuming the adult role in the household as one generation passes and another rises to take its place.

The second theme is the presence of nature brooding over the characters. The blowing open of the door, although a somewhat melodramatic punctuation of Cailteen's lines about crying and lamenting, emphasizes the power of nature which resides Out There. Maura's memory of her past exists primarily in images of dripping corpses and the raging sea. The dialogue serves as a constant reminder of the pressure of the weather surrounding the stage space and creating through its pressure an intensity of feeling.

And yet youth counters nature. Bartley's role as man of the house overrides the danger of going to the fair. The need for life to continue in spite of nature is a strong theme in the middle of the play. Bartley leaves, and Cailteen sends Maura out to reconcile herself with him and to take him his cake. Although she returns with only a vision of his death and her mission unachieved, her going reminds us of the force of life against death, of man against nature.

This energetic thrust strengthens the impact of the image of entropy in the play and makes it a more profound comment than the merely "elegiac." Surely the force of nature does threaten man: Bartley goes to his death as have his father and brothers before him, and the words of the young Priest seem naive at best in light of the facts of human experience. Maura herself says, "It's little the like of him knows of the sea..." (p. 49). Only the old know the full meaning of the sea: all
things return to death and all energies dissipate into mourning for the passing of life. But the young, although somewhat blinded by their energy and their hope, keep moving optimistically into life.

Thus the play presents an unresolved dynamic, unresolved because it continues cyclically as long as life itself survives. The play reaches a formal dramatic climax in Maura’s resignation to death—“What more can we want than that? No man at all can be living for ever, and we must be satisfied...” (p. 54). But set as a minor key against this elegy for human destiny is Cailteen’s preceding speech: “Cailteen (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 sorrow in the house” (p. 54)? To Cailteen, mourning is an interlude in life, not the end.

*Riders to the Sea* celebrates this interlude of grief with power and dignity. To that extent it is “elegiac.” But it also shows us the image of an equally strong and dignified life force working against desolation and resisting “bowing to destiny.” To that extent it transcends the merely elegiac. Whether or not we consider it tragic, the play is not narrow and limited in its view of human experience, for its dynamics outline for us one of the most fundamental rhythms of that experience.

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