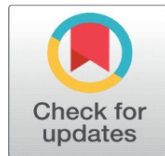
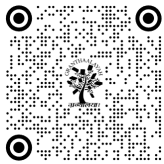


CURRENTS OF CULTURE: RIDERS TO THE SEA AS A BLUE HUMANITIES TEXT

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DOI

[10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i2.2024.2365](https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i2.2024.2365)

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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ABSTRACT

This article reinterprets J.M. Synge's *Riders to the Sea* through the framework of Blue Humanities, focusing on portraying the sea as a force central to modern tragedy. The play depicts the sea as a natural element and an overwhelming, indifferent power, shaping the tragic fate of coastal lives. The sea narrative is explored in its dual role as a sustaining and threatening force, reflecting the deep cultural ties between the islanders and the ocean. Finally, the analysis turns to the theme of the blue economy, examining how the characters' dependence on the sea for survival intertwines with their profound losses. By situating *Riders to the Sea* within these contexts, the article underscores the timeless significance of maritime themes in understanding human suffering and resilience.

Keywords: Modern Tragedy, Sea Narratives, Blue Economy, *Riders to the Sea*, Blue Humanities, Maritime Culture, Coastal Communities

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the works of J.M. Synge, celebrated for his portrayals of rural Irish life, in the field of Blue Humanities. The aim is to demonstrate how the introduction of contemporary theoretical perspectives can enrich our understanding of Synge's traditional narratives. Our focus is on harmonizing the enduring appeal of Synge's depictions of rural Ireland with the innovative lens of Blue Humanities. This multidisciplinary field scrutinizes the maritime facets of our oceans. The paper tries to initiate a scholarly dialogue that brings together the established narratives of a bygone era with the emerging concepts of the Blue Humanities. This academic undertaking aspires to uncover connections that can deepen our appreciation of both Synge's literary works and the evolving paradigms of the Blue Humanities.

Blue Humanities is an emerging interdisciplinary field that explores the relationship between the human experience and the world's oceans, seas, and other water bodies. It is concerned with the cultural, historical, environmental, and social aspects of our interaction with the "blue" parts of our planet. In the context of literature and cultural studies, Blue Humanities might involve the study of maritime literature, examining how authors have depicted the sea and seafaring in their works. This can also extend to analyzing the impact of oceanic environments on different cultures, societies, and their narratives. Since it's an interdisciplinary area, one can find connections to digital humanities as well, especially when it comes to documenting and archiving marine-related data and cultural artifacts.

As an interdisciplinary field at the intersection of the humanities and maritime studies, it has gained momentum in recent years. Its origins can be traced to the broader environmental and cultural turns in academia, reflecting a growing awareness of the importance of understanding our complex relationship with the oceans and seas. This trend has been driven by multiple factors, including the increasing urgency of addressing environmental issues, the recognition of the cultural and historical significance of maritime regions, and the acknowledgment of the role of oceans in global processes. Blue Humanities integrates various disciplines, such as literature, history, anthropology, and environmental studies, to explore the multifaceted connections between humans and the sea.

In recent years, there has been a surge in research related to marine literature, maritime history, and the cultural significance of coastal communities. Scholars are interested in the representation of the sea in literature and art, analyzing how maritime narratives shape our understanding of the environment and cultural identities. Furthermore, the field has expanded to include studies of indigenous knowledge systems, which emphasize the importance of local perspectives and sustainable practices. In this article, we are looking at how the theoretical perspectives of Blue Humanities can shed light on older works of literature that dealt with the themes of seas and other water bodies and their complex interaction with the human world.

John Millington Synge, commonly known as J.M. Synge was a pivotal figure in the Irish Literary Renaissance, also known as the Irish Literary Revival, at the turn of the 20th century. Born on April 16, 1871, in Dublin, Ireland, Synge's contributions to Irish literature and the broader cultural movement were profound. He is best known for his plays, which brought a unique perspective on rural Irish life to the forefront of the literary world. His works are celebrated for their rich portrayal of Irish rural culture, dialect, and folklore.

Synge's significance to Irish literature lies in his ability to capture the essence of Irish life, particularly in the west of Ireland, and present it in a way that both celebrated and critiqued the cultural and social norms of the time. His most famous works include *The Playboy of the Western World* and *Riders to the Sea*. These plays, although initially met with controversy and public outrage, became iconic in Irish literature for their vivid characters and exploration of Irish identity. Synge was closely associated with the Irish Literary Theatre, which would later become the Abbey Theatre in Dublin. The establishment of the Abbey Theatre, in which Synge played a pivotal role, marked a turning point in the cultural revival of Ireland. It provided a platform for Irish playwrights, including Synge himself, to showcase their works, thereby fostering a renewed sense of Irish identity and cultural pride. His contributions extended beyond his writing. Synge's ethnographic research into the Aran Islands and his deep engagement with Irish folklore and customs were integral in preserving and celebrating Ireland's cultural heritage. He combined these elements with modernist theatrical techniques, making his work both deeply rooted in tradition and groundbreaking in its artistic approach. J.M. Synge's legacy in Irish literature is multifaceted. He not only provided a distinctive voice for the Irish experience but also played a crucial role in shaping the Irish Literary Renaissance and the development of modern Irish drama. His works remain an enduring testament to the richness of Irish culture and continue to be celebrated as essential components of Ireland's literary heritage. In this essay, one of his most popular plays, *Riders to the Sea* is taken up for analysis through the lens of Blue Humanities.

Riders to the Sea is a one-act play written by Irish playwright John Millington Synge, first performed in 1904 at the Molesworth Hall in Dublin. Set in the Aran Islands off the western coast of Ireland, the play focuses on the lives of a family of fishermen and the hardships they face living by the sea. The story centers on Maurya, an elderly woman who has lost her husband and five of her sons to the sea. The play chronicles her struggle with the impending loss of her last surviving son, Bartley, as he prepares to make a dangerous journey across the sea. Throughout the play, Synge explores themes of fate, loss, and the relentless power of nature. The dialogue is written in a stylized form of Hiberno-English, capturing the unique cadence and vocabulary of the Aran Islands' inhabitants. *Riders to the Sea* is notable for its stark realism and its portrayal of the harsh realities faced by coastal communities in early 20th-century Ireland.

2. A MODERN TRAGEDY

Riders to the Sea can be viewed as a modern tragedy, and it exhibits several elements characteristic of the tragic genre. The characters in the play are imbued with tragic qualities. Maurya, in particular, embodies the archetype of a tragic figure. She has experienced the profound loss of her husband and five sons to the sea, which evokes a sense of pity and fear in the audience, a fundamental aspect of tragic characters. While the traditional Greek tragedies often involve hubris (excessive pride), modern tragedies like *Riders to the Sea* tend to focus more on hamartia, the tragic flaw or error

in judgment. In this case, the characters' hamartia could be seen as their unwavering economic dependence on the sea, which leads them to make choices that ultimately result in tragedy. Modern tragedies often explore the idea of inevitability and fate. In *Riders to the Sea*, the characters seem trapped in a cycle of loss and sorrow. Despite their best efforts, they cannot escape the tragic pattern of death at the hands of the sea. This sense of inexorable fate is a hallmark of tragedy.

Tragedy aims to evoke catharsis, or emotional cleansing, in the audience. *Riders to the Sea* elicits a powerful emotional response by portraying the characters' suffering and the audience's empathy for their plight. The play's ending, with its culmination of losses, is emotionally charged and thought-provoking. Tragedy often delves into the depths of human suffering, and *Riders to the Sea* is no exception. It explores themes of grief, loss, and the human struggle in the face of adversity. The sea, as a relentless force, represents the larger forces of nature that can lead to human suffering. Modern tragedies frequently lack the moral resolutions typical of classical tragedies. In *Riders to the Sea*, there is no redemption or moral lesson at the end. The play ends on a note of resignation, emphasizing the cyclical nature of life and death. *Riders to the Sea* encapsulates the essence of modern tragedy by depicting characters who face overwhelming forces beyond their control, experience profound suffering, and confront the inevitability of their tragic circumstances. The play's somber tone, emotional depth, and exploration of human resilience in the face of tragedy align it with the genre of modern tragedy.

3. A SEA NARRATIVE

A sea narrative, also known as maritime literature or nautical fiction, is a genre of storytelling that focuses on human experiences and adventures related to the sea. These narratives can take various forms, including novels, short stories, poems, and non-fiction accounts. In the context of Blue Humanities, sea narratives are studied not only for their literary value but also for their cultural significance. They provide insights into how different societies have perceived and interacted with the ocean throughout history, and how these perceptions have shaped our understanding of marine environments and our place within them.

The sea in *Riders to the Sea* serves as a powerful symbol that encapsulates a myriad of themes and emotions, transcending its mere physical presence. The sea embodies a dichotomy of life and death. It is the source of life for the islanders, providing fish for sustenance. It represents their connection to nature and their dependence on it for survival. At the same time, the sea is a harbinger of death. Throughout the play, it takes away loved ones, exemplified by the tragic losses experienced by Maurya and her family. This dual symbolism of life-giver and life-taker underscores the sea's complex role in the characters' lives. The sea's cyclical nature mirrors the cyclical nature of life and death. Just as the sea ebbs and flows, the characters in the play experience cycles of hope and despair. They repeatedly send their men to the sea, hoping for a bountiful catch, but often face the despair of loss. This cyclic pattern reflects the cyclical nature of life itself, where birth and death are recurring themes. The sea symbolizes tragedy and a sense of fatalism that pervades the characters' lives. Maurya's visions of death associated with certain articles of clothing foreshadow the tragic outcomes. The sea, in this context, becomes a manifestation of an inevitable fate that cannot be escaped. It emphasizes the characters' powerlessness in the face of the sea's relentless force.

The sea is also symbolic of the isolation of the Aran Islands and the strong sense of community among the islanders. The sea acts as a boundary, physically isolating them from the mainland. However, it also unites them in their shared dependence on it. The sea shapes their collective identity and shared experiences, further underscoring its symbolic significance. The sea represents the harsh and unforgiving environment of the islands. It is a force of nature that the characters must contend with daily. This aspect of the sea symbolizes the challenging conditions of their lives and the rugged, elemental nature of their existence. The sea is a multi-dimensional symbol that encapsulates the core themes of the play, including the precarious balance between life and death, the cyclical nature of existence, the inexorable tragedy that hangs over the characters, the isolation of their community, and the formidable environmental challenges they face. Its symbolic richness contributes to the depth and complexity of the narrative, making it a central and potent element in the play.

The setting of *Riders to the Sea* is the remote Aran Islands, a group of islands off the western coast of Ireland, and it plays a pivotal role in the narrative. The isolation of these islands is a defining aspect of the characters' lives and the story's atmosphere. The Aran Islands are situated in the Atlantic Ocean, far from the Irish mainland. This physical isolation is a key element of the setting, and it is consistently emphasized throughout the play. The characters are cut off

from the outside world, and their lives are tightly bound to the islands and the sea that surrounds them. In a memorable line of the play, we learn about the remote location of the islands as Maurya's daughters gather around the spinning wheel, and Maurya speaks of her loss, saying, "There isn't anything more the sea can do to me." (Synge) The isolation is not just physical but cultural as well.

The islanders have their unique way of life and traditions, which are different from the mainland. This cultural isolation is reinforced by their dependence on the sea, which shapes their customs and daily routines. The characters' belief in superstitions and Maurya's visions of death are part of their cultural beliefs, illustrating the distinct culture of the Aran Islands. The isolation is intricately tied to the sea. The islanders' livelihoods depend on fishing, and their daily existence is intimately connected to the sea. This dependence on the sea accentuates their isolation, as it dictates their economic well-being and survival.

Bartley's voyage to Connemara to sell the horses is a crucial aspect of the plot. His departure illustrates how the sea is both a source of livelihood and a potential source of tragedy, highlighting the inescapable link between the characters and their environment. The islanders' homes are enclosed and insular, reflecting their physical isolation. These enclosed spaces often serve as stages for the unfolding drama and the characters' interactions. The family home is a microcosm of their isolated world. The interior scenes of the play, where Maurya and her daughters gather, reveal the enclosed nature of their lives. These scenes contrast with the vast expanse of the sea that surrounds them, emphasizing the confinement of their existence. The setting of the islands creates an atmosphere of desolation and bleakness. The vast, stormy sea that encircles them and the barren landscapes contribute to a sense of melancholy and despair. The relentless sea, storms, and the recurring theme of death serve to create an oppressive atmosphere that is intertwined with the characters' isolation, underscoring their struggles.

4. BLUE ECONOMY

The blue economy is a concept that recognizes the importance of the oceans and coastal areas as drivers of economic growth and development, while also emphasizing the need for sustainable use and conservation of marine resources. It encompasses a wide range of economic activities related to oceans, seas, and coastal areas. The blue economy aims to balance economic benefits with environmental sustainability and social equity. It recognizes that healthy oceans are crucial for economic prosperity, particularly for coastal and island nations. However, the concept also faces challenges, such as ensuring equitable access to marine resources, addressing pollution and overfishing, and managing the impacts of climate change on marine ecosystems. Written at a time and set at a place where sustainable practices were unheard of, Synge's play, however, does talk about the challenges faced by people whose lives depend on the sea.

The economic dependence on the sea is a pervasive theme in the play that defines the characters' lives. Their reliance on fishing as the primary source of income is evident throughout the play. It's not just a matter of making a living; it's the foundation of their daily existence. The characters' conversations often revolve around their economic situation, highlighting the ever-present concern. They discuss the sea's mood, the weather conditions, and the potential catch with an acute awareness of how these factors impact their livelihoods. Their economic struggles are tangible and deeply connected to the sea's unpredictability. The loss of family members to the sea represents both personal tragedy and a significant economic blow. Maurya's mourning for her husband and sons is not only about the emotional loss but also the economic hardship it entails.

Each loss means one less person to contribute to the family's income, making their economic future even more uncertain. This economic dependence also creates a sense of inevitability in the characters' actions. They often have to make choices that prioritize economic survival over personal safety. Bartley's perilous journey to Connemara to sell the horses exemplifies this. While Maurya fears for his life, the economic necessity compels him to undertake the risky voyage. The economic dependence on the sea in *Riders to the Sea* thus permeates every aspect of the characters' lives. It's not a detached or passive backdrop; it's an ever-present, demanding force that shapes their choices, decisions, and their outlook on the future. It's a poignant portrayal of the fragile balance between economic necessity and personal safety in their isolated, sea-dependent world.

The economic dependence on the sea in *Riders to the Sea* introduces a complex interplay between economic imperatives and personal safety, shedding light on the characters' difficult choices and dilemmas. This theme of economic necessity versus personal safety is a recurrent motif in the play, illustrating the characters' precarious situation. They are often compelled to prioritize economic survival over the well-being and safety of their loved ones. When Bartley

decides on his perilous journey to Connemara to sell the horses, Maurya, his mother, is deeply worried about his safety and pleads with him not to go. She fears that the sea will claim him as it has her husband and other sons. However, Bartley's decision is driven by economic necessity. He is aware that selling the horses is essential for the family's financial stability. This conflict between economic imperative and personal safety is further underscored by Maurya's poignant lament. She expresses the futility of trying to prevent her sons from going to the sea by saying, "No man at all can be living forever, and we must be satisfied." (Synge)

This sentiment highlights the characters' acceptance of the inevitability of death and the harsh choices they must make. They are caught in a perpetual cycle where economic dependence on the sea often compels them to take risks, despite their fears and the likelihood of tragedy. The play thus portrays a deeply human struggle where economic necessity forces the characters to confront the sea's perils and risks, even when their hearts are heavy with concern. It highlights the intricate web of choices they face, where the sea's economic significance often takes precedence over personal safety, making it a heart-wrenching and poignant aspect of their lives. The sea's economic significance pushes them to make choices that imperil their loved ones, reflecting the profound impact of economic dependence on their lives and the complex moral and emotional dilemmas it creates. The sea remains a central and demanding force, not merely a passive backdrop in their economic struggles.

The prospects of Blue Humanities are a promising one. The urgency of addressing climate change and the sustainable use of marine resources makes it a vital area of study. It is likely to continue evolving as scholars incorporate insights from environmental ethics, policy studies, and digital technologies. Furthermore, the field is expected to engage with pressing issues like ocean conservation, the impact of climate change on coastal communities, and the ethical dimensions of our interactions with marine ecosystems.

As Blue Humanities matures, it may also foster more collaboration between academic researchers and marine-related industries, contributing to a better understanding of the challenges and opportunities in marine resource management and maritime heritage preservation. This interdisciplinary approach can make the field more relevant and impactful in addressing contemporary global challenges, ultimately enhancing our understanding of the world's oceans and their significance for humanity.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None .

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

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