

Riders to the Sea (John Millington Synge) Introduction The one-act play by J.M. Synge, "Riders to the Sea", through the depiction of calamities brought upon by the sea on a fisherman's family, offers a glimpse of the Aran islanders, among whom Synge had spent a few days on being urged by his friend, Yeats. First performed at the Molesworth Hall, Dublin, on 25th February 1904, it is greeted as a representative piece of the Irish Literary Renaissance, for having a straightforward plot and for using the unique language of rural Ireland. Summary Maurya, an old peasant woman, is worried about her son Michael. Her husband, her father-in-law, and four of her sons have been drowned in earlier sea accidents, leaving her with two sons, Michael and Bartley, and two daughters, Cathleen and Nora. Now Michael is missing at sea. As Maurya sleeps, Cathleen works at her spinning and makes a cake for Bartley, the younger of her two remaining brothers, to take on a trip. Bartley is planning to go to the horse fair on the mainland. Nora comes into the house with a bundle of clothes a priest has given her. The clothes, a shirt and a stocking, have been taken from the body of an unidentified young man found floating off the coast of Donegal to the north. Hearing their mother stir, Cathleen and Nora decide to hide the clothes. They plan to examine them later to see if they are Michael's before saying anything to Maurya. Cathleen asks Nora if she asked the priest to urge Bartley not to sail in the stormy weather. Nora says that the priest told her to trust God not to leave Maurya without any sons. Cathleen climbs into the loft and hides the clothes. When she hears her mother getting up, she pretends she has been fetching turf for the kitchen fire. Maurya scolds her for wasting turf. Maurya asks where Bartley is, and Nora tells her that he has gone to check on the boat schedule. Moments later, Bartley hurries into the room looking for a piece of rope to make a horse halter. His mother tries various arguments to stop Bartley from going to the horse fair. She tells him that he ought to leave the rope where it is because they might need it to lower Michael's coffin into his grave if he has drowned. When Bartley tells her it is expected to be a good fair, Maurya replies that a thousand horses cannot be worth as much as a son. Bartley continues with his plans anyway, knotting the rope into a horse halter and giving Cathleen last-minute instructions for looking after things during his absence. Bartley and Maurya leave, and Nora decides not to mention anything about the hidden clothing until Bartley returns safely. When Maurya returns after seeing Bartley off, she sits by the fire and begins to moan and cry. Nora and Cathleen demand to know what is wrong, and she tells them that she has seen Bartley riding the red horse, with Michael, in fine clothes and new shoes, riding behind him on the gray pony. When she tried to call her blessing to them, her voice choked in her throat. Shocked by her mother's words, Cathleen gives in and tells her that Michael has drowned. Maurya continues to speak as if to herself, recounting her losses one by one, as other old women come into the house, cross themselves, and kneel to pray. Cathleen hands Maurya the bit of Michael's clothing, and then Maurya knows it is true that he is dead. They hear a sound outside and find that it is men carrying Bartley's wet body. The gray pony had knocked Bartley down in the surf, and he had been swept out with the tide and drowned. Now Maurya realizes the finality of her loss. She will never see Michael again, and Bartley, her last son, is also dead. She says there is nothing left to threaten her now. The men prepare to build a coffin for Bartley from the white boards Maurya had earlier gotten for Michael's burial. Maurya sprinkles the last of the holy water on Michael's clothes in final benediction and asks for God's blessing. She notes that no one can live forever and that one must be

satisfied with a decent grave. Maurya stops complaining and stoically accepts her fate. The play ends on this note of submission before fate and mortality.