

Synge's Fashioning of Aran Culture in the *Riders to the Sea*: A New Historicist Reading of Language, Gender, and Religion

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Abstract: Critically, New Historicism locates power dynamics in society and traces 'text within context' to explain how literary and other texts produce context. John Millington Synge was 'an ardent Home Ruler and Nationalist', actively endorsing the Irish Literary Revival movement, and resolutely exhibited a propensity to eulogise Irish primitivism in many of his literary works. Synge's play *Riders to the Sea* engendered a vocabulary that facilitated the circulation of Irish identity and nationalism. Synge's depiction of traditional Ireland and portrayal of the lives of the islanders can be traced as politically motivated and, therefore, to some extent, a distortion of the cultural reality of the time. Synge's play is apparently shallow. He sometimes neglects or exaggerates certain aspects of Aran culture. Synge's modified use of the Hiberno-English language was a purposeful attempt to satisfy the Irish Literary Revival. His gender representation is also influenced by nationalist awareness and attempts to contest the colonial claim of the weak Irish female and bolsters the likelihood of Irish Home Rule. In *Riders to the Sea*, he dealt with the paganism of the primitive people and took a sceptic attitude towards Roman Catholicism, aligning with his personal beliefs. Thus, this paper proposes a New Historicist reading in order to analyse such intricate negotiations and how Synge has fashioned contemporary Irish cultural practices, language, gender roles, and religious faith, reflecting and shaping the discourse of Irish identity, cultural revival, and nationalist aspirations during a transformative period in Ireland's history.

Keywords: self-fashioning, Aran culture, text and context, cultural reality, Irish literary revival.

Introduction

It was the poet W. B. Yeats who suggested J. M. Synge to visit Aran islands. Yeats advised his acquaintance to venture towards the Aran Islands, with the intention of discovering a way of existence that has yet to be articulated within the realm of literature, as illustrated in Synge's work, *The Aran Islands*. He visited and lived there during the summers from 1898 to 1901 (ibid.). Synge based *Riders to the Sea*, a play in one act, on his short-lived experience on the island, which many ethnohistorians find a 'prominent distortion of cultural reality' (Messenger 42). *Riders to the Sea* was written in the midst of the Irish literary revival, a period characterised by the resurgence of Irish cultural and literary traditions that subsequently elicited nationalist emotions and nurtured hopes for self-governance in Ireland. The nativist movement encompassed a deliberate endeavour by notable literary luminaries such as W. B. Yeats and Sean O'Casey to foster a revival of Irish nationalistic sentiment, emphasising the conservancy of Irish identity, culture, and the Gaelic language. Synge had a fervent commitment to the Home Rule cause and Irish nationalism, consistently expressing admiration for Irish primitivism in his literary compositions. This sentiment of profound nationalism permeated the era, as evinced by W. B. Yeats' recollection in a memoir, *J M Synge and the Ireland of his Time*. Jack B. Yeats, a contemporary of Synge and brother to W. B. Yeats, who shared explorations of Connemara with him, echoed Synge's resolute declaration, "I swore I'd be a nationalist. I swore by heaven, and I swore by hell and all the rivers that run through them" (J. Yeats 33). Yeats' affirmation of Synge's nationalistic pledge serves as a testament to the prevailing zeitgeist, shedding light on the intricate interplay between artistic expression and political fervour. Consequently, Synge's portrayal of the islanders' existence, intricately woven into *Riders to the Sea*, emerges as an embodiment of his nationalist convictions and an exploration of the delicate boundary between art and political agenda, thereby adding a layer of complexity to the authenticity of its cultural representation.

Theoretical Framework

The concept of New Historicism was introduced by Stephen Greenblatt, an American academic, in his work *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (1980). Greenblatt proposed examining literary texts as a reflection of the contemporary social, political, and cultural contexts in which they were created and interpreted. The term 'self-fashioning' was employed by Greenblatt to elucidate the process by which individuals shape their identity and public image in accordance with prevailing societal norms and expectations.

In another of his works, “Towards a Poetics of Culture,” he presented a very significant theoretical assertion regarding New Historicism, whereby he posited that his approach should be seen as a ‘practice’ rather than a ‘doctrine’ (Felluga). New Historicism, as a critical framework, examines the distribution of power within society and explores the interplay between texts and their surrounding context, highlighting how literary and other forms of texts contribute to the construction of that setting. This methodical approach involves the careful analysis of written texts, spoken speech, tangible actions, and the comprehensive examination of cultural phenomena, as described by Clifford Geertz as a ‘thick description’. The modus operandi of interest lies in the comprehensive discourse that is contributed by diverse texts. In his seminal work, *Archaeology of Knowledge*, published in 1969, Michel Foucault provided a definition of the term ‘discourse’ as it pertains to the processes through which ‘knowledge’ is constructed. New Historicism espouses a perspective on history that posits the accessibility of all historical events solely through textual representations. Louis Montrose, in his work “Professing the Renaissance: The Poetics and Politics of Culture”, refers to the phenomenon as the ‘textuality of history,’ which plays a crucial role in shaping the characteristics of narratives. This approach aligns with Derrida’s concept that reality is constructed through textualization. Similarly, Greenblatt posited that the concept of identity is inherently fictitious. He also introduced the term ‘improvisation’ to describe the manner in which individuals or collectives endeavour to navigate power dynamics. Here, he emphasises the significance of culture to the New Historicist methodology. His concept of ‘cultural poetics,’ explores the reciprocal relationship between cultural practises and the collective experience, whereby cultural practises both shape and are shaped by this collective experience (Nayar).

In light of the above discussion, it can easily be traced how the representation of culture plays a pivotal role in producing narratives of a particular period. A New Historicist reading of Synge’s *Riders to the Sea* would likely introduce new insights into how the political vibe of contemporary Ireland has influenced the production of the text and how a conscious attempt was made for the improvisation of an ideology persistent among nativists. The play created a discourse through which the manifestations of Irish identity and nationalism circulated. Synge creatively incorporated elements of modern Irish cultural practices, language, gender roles, and religious faith in a manner that effectively conveyed the social and political aspirations of the nationalist and nativist literary movement.

Aran Culture

Synge's play is apparently shallow. Occasionally, Synge demonstrates a tendency to overlook or overemphasise specific facets of Aran culture. The author's depiction of island existence is influenced by his personal tragic worldview. The playwright consistently emphasises the perils associated with the ocean and the significant loss of life experienced by fishermen, highlighting the psychological distress that this situation imposes on individuals (Messenger). In the play *Riders to the Sea*, numerous cultural features and rites are mentioned that were not there during Synge's journey to the Aran. Synge has referred to the *Caoineadh*, also known as Keening, a traditional type of vocal lamentation closely associated with sorrow in ancient Ireland. In *Riders to the Sea*, the women characters, especially Maurya and Cathleen, frequently perform keening. In an episode, they keen when Maurya returns and talks about her dream of 'Michael at the grey pony riding behind Bartley'. On many other occasions in the play, women are seen keening. When Bartley's body is brought in, "the women are keening softly and swaying themselves with a slow movement" (p. 42). The playwright tried to revive the primitive cultural consciousness, ignoring the cultural reality. As Christopher Collins, in his essay "'The Cries of Pagan Desperation': Synge, *Riders to the Sea* and the Discontents of Historical Time," observed:

Caoineadh holds its provenance within the *nosad* (funeral rites) of the *Teamhur Feis* (Rites of Tara). The *nosad* of the *Teamhur Feis* were conducted by the Arch Druid of Ireland at the burial of the deceased High King of Ireland. St. Patrick usurped the *Teamhur Feis* in 433 A.D., which precipitated pre-Christian culture into a decline from a culture of dominance to a culture of residue (10).

Collins reflects that Synge's staging of the *caoine* (keen) in *Riders to the Sea* is "an aesthetic and unethical fetishisation of pre-Christian cultural residue predicated on class insecurity" (ibid. 7). Synge has also referred to several additional rudimentary constituents in a like fashion. For instance, Maurya once alludes to *Bride Dara*, an Irish folklore character in the play: "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." (p. 36). On the other hand, *Samhain*, an important seasonal festival observed by the Celtic population, is widely recognised as Halloween in contemporary society. This serves as an illustrative instance of such a cultural allusion. In a deliberate manner, Synge sought to evoke these aspects to purposefully revive a sense of Irish pride within the populace, bolstering the potency of the political assertion for independence.

Language

Language has been at the centre of discussion by many post-structuralist critical and cultural theorists like Foucault and Derrida etc. In their view, language is a discourse through which ‘power’ and ‘knowledge’ are disseminated. New Historicism places equal emphasis on the politics of language. The establishment of the Gaelic League in the year 1893 served as a catalyst for the nativist movement in Ireland. The primary aims of the League were to save the Irish language and promote its widespread usage as the vernacular, advance the exploration of both mediaeval and modern Gaelic literature, and foster the development of contemporary literary works in Irish (Messenger 44). The deliberate adaptation of the Hiberno-English language by Synge was a conscious endeavour to align with the political imperative within Irish literature. In *J M Synge and the Ireland of his Time*, Synge’s acquaintance W. B. Yeats expresses admiration for the linguistic experimentation employed by Synge. Yeats asserts that Synge’s utilisation of the Irish dialect for a noble objective has significantly contributed to the enhancement of national dignity (XIII).

John Messenger, an ethnohistorian, undertook an ethnographic investigation to assess the extent of distortion within linguistic and cultural reality. He expressed surprise at the prevailing idea that the residents of Aran possess limited or no proficiency in the English language, although their Gaelic language is considered the most authentic in Ireland. He observes:

The English speech of the islanders, as is common throughout rural Ireland, represents a syncretism of Irish and English forms; that is, English vocabulary is merged with Irish grammar and Irish phonemic patterns and speech rhythms influence English pronunciation.... English words form an important part of the vocabulary of the people when they employ the vernacular. (49)

He further writes in his essay, “Literary vs. Scientific Interpretations of Cultural Reality in the Aran Islands of Eire”:

Nativists are extremely critical of English vocabulary borrowings, a point of view not shared by the islanders; the latter are equally critical of the creation of new Irish terms by nativists for cultural innovations. The island folk, among themselves, are also critical of the language revival movement, since most of their number must eventually emigrate

to English-speaking areas where lack of mastery of the tongue places them at a competitive disadvantage. (49)

The linguistic elements included in *Riders to the Sea* serve as a noteworthy aspect that mirrors Synge's fascination with the Irish nationalist ethos. He employed an exaggerated form of the Aran dialect. A significant aspect of the impact can be attributed to the manner in which Gaelic is rendered into English, wherein certain elements of the original grammar are preserved. Synge, in his capacity as a dramatist, has demonstrated the ability to engage in simultaneous composition in two distinct languages. Tim Robinson, in his introduction to *The Aran Islands*, remarked, "the elegiac rhythms of Synge's dialogue are those inherent in the English of native Irish speakers, an English the grammar of which has been metamorphosed by the pressure of Irish, and the works of which have therefore been galvanised into new life by syntactic shock" (27). One illustrative instance is the absence of a lexical equivalent for the affirmative response "yes" in the Irish language. When one repeats the verb of a question, for example, "Is it Bartley that is there? It is." (p. 41) This intricately woven linguistic tapestry exemplifies Synge's ability to harmonise language with the cultural and political aspirations of the time, encapsulating the essence of Irish nationalism within his works.

Gender

Ancient Ireland was characterised by a matriarchal social structure and the veneration of a triple goddess, frequently symbolised by a triple spiral in ancient sculptures (Goode et al.). By the time Synge was writing, a significant transformation had occurred in power dynamics, establishing a male-centric hegemonic framework. Synge portrays a patriarchal social order in *Riders to the Sea* in contexts where masculine characters wield more decision-making authority. For instance, in the play, Bartley exhibits a clear inclination to disregard his mother's remarks and appeals. The female characters in the narrative also embraced the concept of masculine dominance. The following are a few examples from the text:

MAURYA: 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? (p. 24)

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? (p. 25)

CATHLEEN: It's the life of a young man to be going on the sea. (p. 26)

Nevertheless, this depiction is apparent; Synge ultimately sets his play with a deeper insight. The playwright selected the character of Maurya as the central figure in the play. The author skilfully crafted the narrative so that, at its conclusion, all male characters meet their demise, elevating the prominence of the female characters. Furthermore, the author portrays Maurya as a symbol of universal motherhood, imbuing her character with admirable qualities despite the tragic loss of her husband and sons. Maurya manifests a sturdy view of life: “No man at all can be living for ever, and we must be satisfied.” (p. 45). The playwright’s portrayal of gender can be interpreted as being influenced by a conscious sense of nationalism. He may have attempted to challenge the colonial perception of Irish femininity and bolster the potential for Irish Home Rule. His work employed a technique of representing Irish women, with a special focus on those from the Aran Islands, by employing a portraiture style that depicted Aran women as resilient and self-reliant individuals, thereby positioning them within the prevailing power dynamics. As C. Ann Lambert, in her dissertation, “Feminine and the Primitive: J. M. Synge’s Treatment of Aran Women in *The Aran Island*,” observed:

Synge’s portrayal of the primitive is gendered and serves mainly as an exploration of femininity. Additionally, Synge does not provide a picture of a weak society that desperately needs representation by and help from more civilized interpreters, and he instead depicts the island people as very powerful, namely through his descriptions of the island women. In so doing, Synge reshapes Ernest Renan and Matthew Arnold’s “Celtic feminine,” establishing the image of an impressive and able iconic Irishwoman.

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Religion

The portrayal of religious faith in *Riders to the Sea* exhibits a discernible alignment with Synge’s personal belief system. He does not explicitly adhere to any particular religious practice. *The Aran Island* parades Synge’s conviction that beneath the Catholicism practised by the islanders; there exists an underlying layer of the pagan beliefs held by their forebears. In *Riders to the Sea*, Synge explores the pagan beliefs of the indigenous population and adopts a sceptical stance towards Roman Catholicism. This stance contradicts the nativist agenda, as they want to promote the perpetuation of religious beliefs, specifically within Catholicism. Due to this rationale, *Riders to the Sea* faced significant criticism from nationalists, who expressed disapproval of the play due to the author’s treatment of God and religion. Conservative

Catholics like Pearse and Arthur Griffith argued that Synge had done damage to Irish nationalism by failing to idealise his characters (Smith xiii). Within the context of the play, Synge has imbued the figure of the Priest with a subversive disposition, presenting a portrayal that challenges the prevailing norms of Catholicism. In the end, Bartley's death proves his statement false: "...the Almighty God won't leave her destitute", says he, "with no son living." (p. 19). Moreover, the depiction of primordial belief in the supernatural, as exemplified by the scene in which Michael's spirit follows Bartley on the grey pony, elicits disapproval. Synge's use of non-Christian supernatural beliefs in the play drew significant criticism, as it neglects to acknowledge the significance of Catholicism. This portrayal was also culturally insensitive because English people have embraced Protestantism while the Irish, particularly the Islanders, have been primarily Catholic since the fifth century. In this context, Messenger has noted, "The basic differences in religion became fused with other national animosities, mainly economic and political in origin, and Catholicism came to be one of the significant symbols of Irish uniqueness and superiority in the acculturative process." (44).

Conclusion

In conclusion, a comprehensive analysis underscores that Synge's construction of *Riders to the Sea* is intricately intertwined with political motivations and aligns seamlessly with the dominant nativist ideals of his time, coupled with his own deeply ingrained convictions. This play transcends a mere portrayal of ancestral figures of primitive origins, emerging as a multifaceted narrative of heightened complexity. Synge's deliberate engagement with primitivism within the contours of modern literary discourse is a conscious endeavour to rejuvenate nationalist fervour. Through a strategic recalibration of cultural paradigms, linguistic nuances, gender dynamics, and religious undercurrents, he effectively challenges the yoke of colonial authority while asserting an authentic indigenous identity. However, in this process, Synge often overlooks the intricate cultural context that existed during that historical juncture.

The author's depiction of culture within the play is notably marked by a certain superficiality, amplifying specific facets of Aran tradition while leaving other dimensions unexplored. His deliberate manipulation of a modified version of Hiberno-English resonates with the aspirations of the Gaelic League and the broader Irish literary revival. Similarly, his portrayal of primordial culture is discernibly gendered, effectively subverting the colonial notion of the

‘Celtic-feminine’ archetype. Nevertheless, his representation of paganism diverges from the overarching Catholic agenda of the nativist movement, thus veering from a true reflection of the lived experiences of the Irish islanders. Synge’s strategic composition of various elements of Irish culture emerges as a tactical manoeuvre to engage with the intricate power dynamics of his era. Consequently, while his literary rendition of history through prose offers a general account of Aran culture, it must be recognised that this interpretation often deviates from the precise and nuanced tapestry of authentic events.

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