

## The Political Aesthetics of John M. Synge's *Riders to the Sea*

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**Kang, Meeyoung.** "The Political Aesthetics of John M. Synge's *Riders to the Sea*." *Studies in English Language & Literature* 45.4 (2019): 1-16. John M. Synge's *Riders to the Sea* is a tragedy about Maurya, who loses her male family members—including her father-in-law, husband, and sons—in the sea. Contrary to many critics' views that this is naturalistic literature that emphasizes the power of destiny and circumstance over human lives, this paper aims to demonstrate Synge's affirmation of Maurya's transcendent human power through the lens of aesthetics. To accomplish this, I define this play as a tragedy which enacts the sublime aesthetics. Notably, both the play and the sublime aesthetics have a dual structure, pain and pleasure, which ultimately emphasizes human reason. By virtue of this aesthetic approach, the protagonist, Maurya, appears as a rational woman transcending the most tragic situation. And given that Maurya is a woman who stands for Ireland itself, this approach leads to a new political interpretation, to wit: this play engages in postcolonial strategies by appropriating the gendered bias of tragedy and the sublime, which were hostile to women. As an appropriated form of the sublime, this play represents the type of Irish nationalism Synge had in mind both aesthetically and politically. (Sookmyung Women's University)

**Key Words:** John Synge, *Riders to the Sea*, Sublime aesthetics, Post-colonial appropriation, Irish nationalism.

### I. Introduction

John Millington Synge (1891-1909), an Irish playwright, incorporated his

private interests, such as traveling to various places and experiencing their different cultures, in his six plays.<sup>1</sup> The play *Riders to the Sea* is also based upon his travel to the Aran Islands from 1898 to 1902. *Riders to the Sea* embodies the inspiration and imagination he received from witnessing the lives of the people of the Aran Islands. Synge said after he visited the Aran Islands, “I could not help feeling that I was talking with men who were under a judgment of death. I knew that every one of them would be drowned in the sea in a few years and battered naked on the rocks” (CW 162). Synge’s rather exaggerated and indifferent description reflects the harsh reality of the islands, which is brought out in the serial deaths of men in *Riders to the Sea*. Set in the Aran Islands and premiering in 1904, *Riders to the Sea* deals with the deaths of male characters and the anxiety of the bereaved, Maurya and her daughters. The family had no choice but to live by the sea, despite the great risk of death. Beginning with the departure of the last surviving son, Bartley, the play raises acute tensions that precipitate Maurya’s premonition of Bartley’s death. Although she predicts that she will lose the last of her six sons soon, she cannot stop him from leaving; ultimately, she faces his death.

Because of the great natural forces portrayed as being at work in human lives, scholars generally have categorized this play as naturalistic literature. Philip Beitchman, in *The Theatre of Naturalism: Disappearing Act*, contends that “the Naturalism is well in evidence” (56) in that it shows us “the total victory of the cosmos over man’s puny inventions and ambitions” (51). Similarly, Keith N. Hull emphasizes that “the audience never witnesses any event that truly transcends natural order; there are naturalistic explanations for everything that happens in the play”

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<sup>1</sup> Right after he was graduated from Trinity College in 1892, Synge started travelling about the Continent. He went first to Germany for his musical studies. Next year, he went to Paris pursuing literary criticism. After that, he took a trip to the Aran Islands, Wicklow, Kerry and Connemara, which provided him with an inspiration with which to write his six plays; His first play, *In the Shadow of the Glen* (1903), is set in an isolated cottage in County Wicklow during the early 1900s and *Riders to the Sea* (1904) is set in the Aran Islands. Similarly, the other four of his six plays *The Well of the Saints* (1905), *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907), *The Tinker’s Wedding* (1908) and *Deirdre of the Sorrows* (1910) are set in rural area of Ireland, in which he got an inspiration during his trip.

(247). Likewise, and in a Darwinistic vein, Joy Kennedy contends that this play shows “there is little room for adaptation for Maurya’s family” (27) in this world. Naturalism emphasizes the overwhelming power of the environment over human lives, and is based upon pessimism and determinism, but the dominant naturalistic interpretation of this play reveals that most critics have overlooked Maurya’s inherently transcendent power and its political implications.

Standing against the critics’ views that *Riders to the Sea* is a naturalistic work that emphasizes the power of destiny over human lives, this essay will demonstrate that Synge’s work affirms Maurya’s transcendent human power that makes her a political entity. To achieve this, I will show that this play embodies the sublime aesthetics in terms of dual structure and ultimately reveals the power of human spirit and Synge’s nationalism. As the play progresses the tension is escalating to a higher level with fears that Maurya would lose her last son, Bartley, soon. However, as his drowned body is discovered, this play evokes the cathartic pleasure which derives from a release of emotion that was condensed by the tension. In what follows, I will assert that the dual structure of this tragedy is similar to that of the sublime aesthetic in that both this tragedy and the sublime aesthetic consist of pain and pleasure, enabling Maurya to be a rational being who transcends a tragic situation. The transcendent trait of the sublime aesthetics and its seemingly oxymoronic relationship with the postcolonial resistance embodied by the aesthetics eventually become integrated in terms of Synge’s political aesthetics.

*Riders to the Sea* opens with Cathleen alone on stage, baking bread by an open fire and working at a spinning-wheel. Next, Nora carries in a bundle and tells Cathleen that it contains “a shirt and a plain stocking were got off a drowned man in Donegal” (58).<sup>2</sup> They look to see whether the shirt and stocking can be identified with the clothing of their lost brother Michael, who has gone missing at sea. They become obsessed with anxiety for Bartley, who is their last surviving brother. The

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<sup>2</sup> John M. Synge, ed. John Harrington (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2009). All subsequent references to the play are from this edition.

sisters want the local priest to “stop Bartley going this day with the horses to the Galway fair” (59). As Maurya comes in, Cathleen hides the bundle of clothing and asks Maurya, her mother, if Bartley will go to Connemara. When Bartley himself enters, he looks for “the bit of new rope” which he needs to make a halter for the mare, to ride down to the pier. Maurya, mentioning the death of Micheal, tries to dissuade Bartley and says, “if Bartley is away, who will make the coffin from the white boards, and without the rope how will he be lowered into his grave” (60)? However, despite Maurya’s dissuasion, Bartley leaves. Cathleen reproaches Maurya for sending Bartley off “with an unlucky word behind him, and a hard word in his ear,” but Maurya is lost in her anxiety. After a moment, Maurya leaves her house to find Bartley and give him the bread that has been baking. Returning to the clothing, Cathleen and Nora confirm “a bit of a sleeve was of the same stuff” as Michael’s, and Nora identifies the stocking, which she had knitted for him, as Michael’s. As Maurya enters again, she says of Bartley that “he’s riding the mare now over the green head, and the grey pony behind him” (62). Now that Maurya associates the vision with Michael’s phantom, riding on the red mare with the grey pony behind him, it becomes obvious to them all that both Michael and Bartley have died. When Bartley eventually turns out to be dead as his body is brought in the half of red sail by some women with red petticoats over their heads, Maurya cries.

As shown above, the great tension is generated as the women’s anxiety is precipitated by death-related imagery. The net and oil skins in the first scene are associated with an atmosphere of entrapment. The shirt and stocking of the drowned man, brought home by Nora, also contribute to an atmosphere of death. Besides, the color of red in Bartley’s red mare, red sail, and Maurya’s red petticoat imply death as “red is the color of blood, the color of sacrifice; here, the color of grief” (Gerstenberger 48). When Bartley takes the rope that the pig was eating, an image of death is evoked because, according to Robin Skelton, the pig is considered “an animal in the Other World in Ireland” (30). Most of all, the phantom of Michael

makes Maurya shudder with anxiety. That she sees her two sons in the fantasy, according to Nicholas Grene, implies that “both of them died” (52) and makes Maurya accept their deaths as a fact. Eventually, Maurya must deal with the death of Bartley as “men carry in the body of Bartley, lain on a plank, with a bit of a sail over it, and lay it on the table” (65). As such, the tension develops into a climax stage through a variety of death-related imagery.

## II. Maurya as a Sublime Existence

Contrary to expectations, however, she is not buried in her sadness. Instead, she faces the tragic situation squarely. What she feels is not a frustration but a great rest:

MAURYA It isn't that. I haven't prayed for you, Bartley, to the Almighty God. . .  
. . . ; but it's a great rest I'll have now, and it's time surely. It's a great rest I'll  
have now, and great sleeping in the long nights after Samhain, if it's only a bit  
of wet flour we do have to eat, and maybe a fish that would be stinking. (66)

Maurya is in a state of equilibrium as Nora says, “She's quiet now and easy.” This is, according to Nicholas Grene, no more than “an emotional exhaustion” (56), which is a feeling of emancipation that derives from a release of previously repressed emotion. Feeling pleasure through catharsis, Maurya says “no man at all can be living for ever, and we must be satisfied” (67). Contrary to the extreme tension with which Maurya says before Bartley is found dead, “make me a good coffin out of the white boards, for I won't live after them” (64), her calm attitude seems to be peaceful to the extent that not only she but also spectators feel pleasure. This calmness is antithetical to the great pain and anxiety that suffuse this play.

The two opposing emotions create the gap between Maurya's situation and

spectator's emotion, where the sublime aesthetics is embodied. The dual structure of pain and pleasure makes up the basic framework for sublime aesthetics. Although sublime aesthetics was first coined by Friedrich Longinus and developed by Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Schiller, and Edmund Burke, they had sustained the dual structure. Longinus means by the sublime that there exists an art work which creates awe and pleasure at the same time. He explains sublimity as an alienation leading to identification with the creative process of the artist and a deep emotion mixed in pleasure and exaltation.<sup>3</sup> Afterwards Kant suggests that the sublime involves conflict related with disparity between agent and circumstance resulting pain and pleasure.<sup>4</sup> Distinguishing the sublime from the beautiful, he asserts that feelings of the beautiful is a pleasant sensation while feelings of the sublime arouse "enjoyment but with horror." It is Schiller who develops a Kantian sublime into the aesthetic response to the tragic situation where the conflict of the dual instincts of man is shown. For Schiller, "tragedy should represent both the unconquerable forces and a moral autonomy untouched by the forces, as well as the possibility of the moral freedom to which such autonomy gives rise" (29). Also for Burke, the sublime is the dual emotion of fear and delight which results from the removal of the fear derived from the sublime object.<sup>5</sup> Given the dual emotions, the sublime aesthetics explains the gap between the cathartic pleasure.

What is at stake here is that Maurya becomes not a victim of but a victor over the powers of nature in terms of the transcendent power of human reason that is magnified by the sublime aesthetics. Sublime aesthetics is a filter through which we can evaluate various human and natural phenomena: a novel, a play, a sculpture, a

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<sup>3</sup> For more reference, see Longinus, *On the Sublime*, Trans. W. Rhys Roberts (London: Cambridge University Press, 1899).

<sup>4</sup> See Immanuel Kant, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*. Trans. John T. Goldthwait. (University of California Press, 2003).

<sup>5</sup> See Edmund Burke. "A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful." In *Aesthetics: The Big Questions*. Ed. Carolyn Korsmeyer. (Malden: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 1998)

tall mountain, a hurricane, etc. In contrast with normal aesthetics, sublime aesthetics offers a unique perspective because it indicates not a sublime object but transcendental human reason, which can grasp the sublime object or nature, creating psychological distance. When the overwhelming power of an object evokes awe along with terror, reason makes one to judge the power of both the sublime object and of human feeling detached from the terror. This process enables the human mind to have a view that human reason can transcend the overwhelming natural power by taking an implicitly superior position of power and intellectual control. Accordingly, what is sublime in the sublime aesthetics is not an object but a function of human reason, which generates pleasure.

Indeed, what many aestheticians, such as Kant, Schiller, and Burke, show through sublime aesthetics is the transcendent power of human reason in the dual structure of human emotion when facing inexplicably immense natural power. For Burke, the pleasure of the sublime is a delight, which results in the removal of the pain derived from the sublime object. Through this delight, Burke emphasizes the greatness of human mind:

It gives me (Burke) pleasure to see nature in those great tho' terrible Scenes, it fill the mind with grand idea, and turns the Soul in upon herself. This together with the sedentary Life I lead forc'd some reflections on me which would not otherwise have occurred. I consider'd how little man is yet in his own mind how great! (qtd. in Gibbons 3)

Kant also explains the experience of the sublime as a double emotion that arises from an overwhelming natural phenomenon and reveals the independent human mind untouched by natural power:

Since in contrast to this standard everything in nature is small, we found in our mind a superiority over nature itself in its immensity. In the same way, though the irresistibility of nature's might makes us, considered as natural beings, recognize our physical impotence, it reveals in us at the same time an ability to judge ourselves

independent of nature, and reveals in us a superiority over nature. (271)

It is interesting that the dual structure of the sublime aesthetic leads to emphasizing the power of human reason, given the overwhelmingly deconstructive power of nature. When the sublime generates two contradicting feeling, the terror and an awe, the feeling of terror is caused by the fact that human reason cannot grasp the innate order or system of the object while pleasure is evoked by an uplifted state of mind that defines the object as the sublime, mastering the ineffable. In this process, what becomes sublime is not the object but human reason as the feeling of the sublime renders intuitable the supremacy of our faculties on the rational side of the greatest faculty of sensibility. As such, sublime aesthetics reflects innate human transcendental desire (Gasche 50). In light of the aesthetic interpretation, it turns out to be true that the dual structure of this tragedy necessarily supports Maurya's transcendental power of reason. As Christopher Murray asserts, Maurya "finds voice and gesture to revolt against oppressive circumstances. This voice may appear to be mere resignation to a higher order but in fact it is ... a declaration of independence" (64). Now that Maurya gains her independence, she gets freed from the fears of threatening natural circumstances. "Raising her head and speaking as if she did not see the people around her" (65), Maurya says:

MAURYA They've all gone now, and there isn't anything more the sea can do to me. ... I'll have no call now to be up crying and praying when the wind breaks from the south, and you can hear the surf is in the east, and the surf is in the west, making a great stir with the two noises, and they hitting one on the other. I'll have no call now to be going down and getting Holy Water in the dark nights after Samhain, and I won't care what way the sea is when the other women will be keening. (66)

This independence first means independence from natural power, and, in what follows, it becomes evident that the independence is that from colonial oppression, ultimately aestheticizing Maurya as a postcolonial existence.



### III. Aestheticization of the Postcolonial Existence

Maurya is a woman, and this fact provides a counterpoint to gender-related bias in both tragedy and aesthetics. First, it goes without saying that in traditional male-centered tragedies women were not featured as subjects. Since Aristotle said, in *Poetics*, that women or slaves could not be protagonists in tragedies because “a woman is perhaps an inferior thing while a slave is wholly inconsequential” (29). Even when it comes to the sublime aesthetic, women could not be an aesthetic subject, as Kant thinks that a woman cannot be an agent of aesthetic experiences. His statement reflects the gender bias that transcendent reason belongs to men only. Therefore, the sublime aesthetic has been criticized for its male-centeredness by many feminist philosophers. Christine Battersby shows that “the sublime was often explicitly, and nearly always implicitly, gendered as male” (91). Similarly, Timothy Gould contends that “accounts of the sublime became entangled with masculinist ideology and sensibility” (70) because of a theoretical emphasis on the power of the sublime. All this considered, now is the right moment to ask what makes Synge stand against the ideology of tragedy and the sublime. The proper answer to this question should be sought in the fact that Maurya embodies Ireland.

As Maurya is not only a woman but also Ireland, this play ultimately forms a counter-discourse to the notions of tragedy and Ireland by appropriating the authoritarian assumptions thereon. Considering that the setting of this play, the Aran Islands, provides a pre-colonial Irish setting—as it had not been touched by other cultures due to its isolated geographical position—this setting represents a pre-colonial, authentic Irish culture. More importantly, the fact that the language of this play, as Synge himself says in his journal *The Aran Islands*, is the traditional one of Irish peasantry has a political significance. And his configuration of Celtic folklore in the oppositional position to the foreign culture, especially English, makes his depiction of Maurya more Irish. To illustrate: such tropes as the mention of Samhain, Celtic customs, and the use of imagery such as a gray horse and

rope-eating pigs abound in this play. Moreover, Maurya, sprinkling the holy water on Bartley, plays the role of priest, showing spiritual leadership in the community. This is, according to Nelson Ritschel, to show Maurya's shift from Christianity to Irish paganism, and another clue to show that Maurya represents Ireland. In this way, Maurya stands for Ireland in terms of frequent use of Irish folklore and language. Moreover, for a scholar such as C.L. Innes, Synge is an "anti-colonial" writer addressing the situation of a colonized Ireland seeking to free itself from physical and cultural domination by England (118). As such, Maurya is an objective correlative of Ireland, symbolizing the Irish culture and emotion. What is at stake is that Maurya's cathartic transformation into a powerful entity in terms of the sublime aesthetics renders Ireland independent and strong accordingly.

Such transformation gives rise to a postcolonial strategy by appropriating the imperialist gendered discourse and making an antithesis thereto. Due to nineteenth-century imperialism, the imperialist discourse of masculine Saxon and feminine Celtic became widespread not only in England but also in Ireland. According to Joseph Valente, "the sexual image was in constant use in nineteenth and early twentieth-century England to express the dominator's concept of the relationship between the two islands" (190). Interconnected with the fact that Maurya represents Ireland, the aesthetic depiction of independent Maurya serves as momentum to form a counter-narrative to Anglocentric imperialist discourse. That Synge tries to implant his own thought in the colonizer's linguistic framework in this way, instead of blindly accepting that framework, is no more than a postcolonial strategy, appropriation. This effort to reject some typical aspects of imperialist conscience is a practice of postcolonialism which "wants to disrupt, dissemble or deconstruct the kind of logic, ideologies"(Ashcroft et al. 27) of the colonizer. Likewise, Synge's depiction of Maurya makes her not a woman who is weak or meek but one who is rational and resolute in the framework of the sublime aesthetics, detached from the imperialist gendered discourse.

In this context, Maurya becomes not a submissive colonized woman but a

supernatural Irish national goddess by embracing the Irish literary tradition which has been bound with symbols of Ireland-as-woman. Since the nationalist literary movement in which writers like Yeats, Sean O'Casey, and Lady Gregory shaped a nationalist consciousness based upon a mythology, the image of Ireland as woman has become more and more prevalent in Irish culture. The most popular one was Cathleen Ni-Houlihan, who was often depicted as an old woman in the nationalist literary works and became one of many popular nationalist representations of Ireland as a woman in the nineteenth century. Another popular personification of Ireland was Erin, who was most often the image of Ireland in political cartoons and posters which depicted Erin in a variety of roles, from "frail and maidenly" to "strong and defiant" (Curtis 15). As Elizabeth Butler Cullingford has shown, Celtic fertility goddesses provided the foundation for "nationalist tropes like the Shan Van Vocht (poor old woman), Erin, or the Speirbhean-figures through whom Ireland was represented as a woman menaced by a foreign oppressor" (qtd. in Harris 105). While Yeats and Gregory's version of Cathleen adopted the convention from Celtic mythology of a crone who is transformed into a beautiful maiden when Irish men volunteer to fight for their nation's independence, other renderings of a feminized Ireland took the form of a wholesome maiden such as Erin or Dark Rosaleen or a suffering old woman such as the Shan Van Vocht (literally, poor old woman). Belonging to the latter, the suffering old woman, Maurya, overlaps with an Irish nationalist spirit through the traditional symbol of an old woman. Given that this symbol had been often personified as Ireland in nationalist rhetoric of Irish literary works based upon their anti-English nationalism, the depiction of the poor old woman, Maurya, evokes a motherhood<sup>6</sup> that was stoic and patient to the level of a national mother of Ireland and therefore should be considered as integral to Synge's aesthetics and nationalism.

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<sup>6</sup> Errol Durbach in "Synge's Tragic Vision of the Old Mother and the Sea" asserts that Maurya is associated with an image of a mother and the sea in *Riders to the Sea*. Focusing on the change that Maurya shows after "her shawl falls back from her head and she shows her white tossed hair," which calls attention to visual similarity to the sea of white waves, he contends that Maurya stops her mourning and her keening from that time on and, like the sea, becomes "the womb of life like natural power" (370).

#### **IV. An Embodiment of Nationalism through the Sublime Aesthetics**

Synge has remained a nonpolitical writer not only to conservative nationalists contending “Synge was anything but a nationalist playwright” (Ritschel xiii) but also to many scholars and readers for a long time. Even Yeats said, “Synge seemed by nature unfitted to think a political thought” (11). Synge’s work, according to T.R. Henn, is “non-political, detached, ironic; concerned with this excited yet dispassionate exploration of the world of the western peasantry” (6). This kind of apolitical interpretation for Synge and his plays is mainly the result of his ambivalent attitude, which is derived from his personal life. Born and raised in Ireland, but having spent most of his life in England, Synge long had to contend with his double identity. Moreover, as the Synoges were a Protestant family, he also had to struggle with religious conflicts between Protestantism and Catholicism of Ireland. All these facts considered, we can see his play as a way to resolve the fundamental contradiction of existence that arose from his dual Anglo-Irish identity. This is often represented in Synge’s plays in terms of conflicting powers. As Oona Frawley says, “Synge’s skill as a playwright means that dichotomies – nature-culture; woman-man; displacement-belonging – are continuously explored and interrogated, in turn challenging some of the most stalwart ideologies of both colonial and nationalist mindsets of Synge’s time” (26). What he chose, however, was not the negation of nationalism but an aesthetic expression thereof. As Ritschel says, “Synge was well aware that there was more than one type of Irish nationalist” (xiv). He chose neither Patrick Pearse’s military nationalism<sup>7</sup> nor Yeat’s idealized

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<sup>7</sup> Being an Irish teacher, writer, nationalist and political activist, Patrick Henry Pearse (1879-1916), was one of the leaders of the Easter Rising in 1916. Pearse tried to use his education to defeat the English and insisted on the use of the Irish language. After he realized that it would take more than education to break with English, he turned to be a militant nationalist. As Some historians have seen him as dangerous, fanatical, and violent. In July 1914, Pearse was made a member of the Supreme Council of the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB), a militant group that believed in using force to throw the British out of Ireland.

nationalism<sup>8</sup> because he wished “to work in my (his) own way for the cause of Ireland,” and he knew that he would never be able to do so were he to “get mixed up with a revolutionary and semi-military movement” (Greene 63). In his autobiographical note, Synge says,

Soon after I had relinquished the Kingdom of God, I began to take a real interest in Kingdom of Ireland. My politics went round from a vigorous and unreasoning loyalty to a temperate Nationalism, everything Irish became sacred. (qtd. Skelton 20)

Synge wanted to be on the side of Ireland, depicting Irishness as it is. Although his characters look blunt or tragic, they can be victors, in a way that Synge depicts a poor, old, suffering woman as an independently powerful entity. This is also Synge's way of resolving the contradicting emotions in his mind. Synge struggled with his dual identities, as an Englishman and an Irishman respectively; as writers and nationalists. He was born and raised in Ireland and attended Trinity College, but had to live in England for a long time. However, Synge unifies seemingly conflicting elements—English and Irish, military nationalism and idealistic nationalism—through the sublime aesthetic. Accordingly, the aesthetic approach to *Riders to the Sea* enables us to retrieve the politics of Synge's play and to understand his literary world, one that describes Maurya and Ireland as transcendent entities.

## V. Conclusion

An exploration to the political aesthetics of Synge's *Riders to the Sea* necessarily begins by reconsidering Maurya's position. By virtue of an aesthetic approach,

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<sup>8</sup> Yeats was an Irish Nationalist at heart. Yeats was also a member of IRA, desperate to return to an independent Irish state. As his life progressed, however, he distanced himself from the intense political landscape until 1922, when he was appointed Senator for the Irish Free State. He was generally considered a symbolist writer, using Irish myth and folklore.

Maurya transforms into a transcendent rational being rather than a victim of circumstances despite her loss of family members in the sea. Contrary to the great tension and pain the play arouses, both Maurya and spectators become peaceful to the extent that they feel even pleasure at the end. The two opposing emotions create the Syngean gap between the protagonist's expression and spectator's emotion, where the sublime aesthetics is embodied.

Due to the double structure which is analogous to the sublime aesthetics, Maurya becomes an aesthetic subject who embodies political implications which are derived from the fact that she represents colonized Ireland through the symbol of Irish suffering old woman, appropriating the imperialist and androcentric discourse. As Maurya overcomes the overwhelming situation with human reason that renders human mind superior to overwhelming force of nature by making a psychological distance, Synge's nationalist perspective toward Ireland is revealed. In other words, Synge's irreconcilable conflicts between -English and Irish, military nationalism and idealistic nationalism—is unified through the sublime aesthetic. All in all, as a counter-discourse against gendered bias of aesthetics and literary tradition, *Riders to the Sea* embodies the political aesthetics Synge had in mind by integrating his dual identities, English writer and Irish nationalist.

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