

Imagine the setting when the play begins—what we see when the curtain rises—the cottage kitchen with hearth, spinning wheel, table, chairs, ladder to the peat loft, hooks for clothing, rope, white boards for a coffin, other items. Then imagine how it changes before the end—what we see when the curtain falls.

How does Synge establish a conspiracy between Cathleen and Nora? What are their ages? What does Cathleen already understand that Nora learns in the play? How do they regard their mother, Maurya? Their brothers, Michael and Bartley? The young priest? What does Maurya see in their futures?

When Nora enters, what does she bring, and why must she hide her parcel? When, finally, do the sisters open the parcel? Why is it so hard to open? What do they find inside?

Where is Maurya when the action begins? For the past nine days, what has worn her out?

How do the actions of the women in this play resemble those of the Moirai—the fates who spin, measure, and cut the thread of life? Notice, too, how the name *Maurya* resembles *Moirai*?

What causes Maurya and Bartley to disagree? While they speak, what is he doing? What is she doing? What is the symbolic significance of the piece of rope? What would it be used for if not a halter for the gray pony? What does Bartley wear when he departs for the steamer with the horses?

What does Bartley instruct Cathleen to do during his absence? Why symbolically significant? When does he expect to return?

From the beginning, trace the symbolic use of color: Synge uses four colors for death—black, white, gray, and red. Where do you see them?

When the play opens, Maurya has already lost father-in-law, husband, and four sons to the sea. In the action, she learns she has lost Michael to the far north and Bartley in Galway Bay. For what two purposes does Maurya walk down to the spring well? Did she achieve either purpose? Why or why not?

What vision does she see—or Bartley and Michael? Be specific? Why significant? How do Cathleen and Nora react when Maurya returns to the cottage?

In Maurya's absence, the daughters have identified Michael's clothing—how precisely?

Sometimes Maurya seems to think she dreams rather than lives what happens. For her, the best of all dreams is that men risk their lives and yet escape the sea. Yet all these young, beautiful, strong men, these great rowers and fishermen, die. What does the sea give to the community before exacting this price? To the women who love them? How does Synge depict in the action, the constant alternation between hope (that the sea will spare a beloved husband or son) and despair (that the sea takes all)?

How does Synge introduce and develop the importance of community? What responsibilities do the men bear? What about the women? Why do they wear red petticoats and pull them over their heads?

How does Synge develop the principal conflict—between humanity and sea?

How does Maurya act, simultaneously, as bereaved mother and high priestess? Why does Synge place her at one end of the table and the daughters at the other? What is the symbolic importance of the "small sup of holy water"? What does Maurya do with the cup when emptied—and why?

How do we know Maurya has reached the peace such women long for? What will she do no longer? Note the quiet that comes after tragedy.

Structure: four movements

Exposition: mood--near normal, subdued, apprehensive; method--naturalistic, focus on particular

Development: mood--more elevated, antiphony of B and M; method--mainly symbolic suggesting universal through particular

Variation: mood--domestic pathos; method--naturalistic with particular rising toward climax

Climax and Resolution: mood—elegiac, tragic, M's lament and benediction; method--universal emerges through particular.

How does Synge emphasize the pagan fatalism and pagan ritual at the cost of Roman Catholicism (which came to Inishmaan latest among the islands)?

*(For instance, the vision of Michael, the rituals of the thuds of hammer and of the red petticoats and of the women's keening derive from the time of the Fir Bolg, the fourth of the tribes to settle Ireland, fire worshippers—they eventually moved to Greece, worked as slaves there for hundreds of years, escaped from Greece about the same time the Hebrews left Egypt, returned to Ireland and resettled, established the High Kingship at Tara, but after 37 years fell to the Tuatha de Danaan, and, oh, is there more and more.)*

The catharsis (remember Aristotle) comes in realizing, as Maurya does, our tenuous existence in the cosmos. How does Synge represent the stages of this realization? When does she first seem weakened, start keening? When does her resolution commence? How strong is she when we reach the late speeches, the benediction?

Here are a few crucial lines:

If it wasn't found itself, that wind is raising the sea, and there was a star up against the moon, and it rising in the night. 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? (Maurya, p. 86)

In the big world the old people do be leaving things after them for their sons and children, but in this place it is the young men do be leaving things behind for them that do be old. (Maurya, p. 89)

I'm thinking Bartley put it on him in the morning, for his own shirt was heavy with the salt in it. (Cathleen, p. 90)

You didn't give him his bit of bread? (Cathleen, p. 91)

Didn't the young priest say the Almighty God wouldn't leave her destitute with no son living? (Nora, p. 93)

*(Half in a dream)* Is it Patch, or Michael, or what is it at all? (Maurya, p. 94)

Michael has a clean burial in the far north, by the grace of the Almighty God. Barley will have a fine coffin out of the white boards, and a deep grave surely. What more can we want than that? No man at all can be living for ever, and we must be satisfied. (Maurya, p. 97)