

Outside Powers, Society, Death and Empowerment in *Riders to the Sea* and *Trifles*

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Abstract

Upon first reading, Susan Glaspell's *Trifles* and John Synge's *Riders to the Sea* might not share a lot. However, the more you read between the lines, the more you come to realize how much in common both plays have. This article discusses the underlying similarities shared by them: 1) outside powers affecting the female protagonists in both plays, 2) society and how it shapes the female protagonists' reaction to the major events of the plays, and how it shapes the reaction of others towards the same events, 3) death; how it is not always a force of destruction, and 4) empowerment of the female characters as events draw out the best in them.

1. Introduction

1.1 John Synge's *Riders to the Sea*

John Synge was a major literary influencer during the Irish Literary Revival (1850-1920) which brought to the front the importance of reclaiming Ireland's native language and rich literature. He strove to present the islands' culture in his work; names of people, places, islands, stories, superstitions, traditions, and even the way people of the islands spoke, (Bruna, 2017). His play *Riders to the Sea* contains interesting samples of what is known as Irish English, a mixture of English vocabulary spoken with Irish Gaelic structures and verb forms. Synge spent time on the Aran Islands, where he came across a heart-breaking story of a young man washing up on the shores of an island, and was later identified through his clothes. This incident inspired *Riders to the sea*, and Synge used his ability to weave a story where people, faith and the sea were in a constant clash.

1.2 Susan Glaspell's *Trifles*

Susan Glaspell drew her inspiration for *Trifles* after covering a hot-media murder case known as the John Hossack Murder in 1900. Hossack was a farmer who was presumably murdered at the hands of his wife, who insisted that she was innocent. She was arrested and charged within four days of her husband's death. Stories of how her husband abused her only surfaced after that, fueling the imagination of people and cementing the opinion that she had in fact had a motive. A year later, Mrs. Hossack was put to trial, facing an all-male jury who, expectedly, found her guilty. A second trial followed as a result of all the attention and media frenzy the case got, with most jurors pronouncing her guilty, again. However, this second trial had a few jurors who strongly believed in Mrs. Hossack's innocence, and no matter how the other jurors tried, they were not able to sway them. Glaspell's *Trifles* saw the light in the time of the American Women's Suffrage Movement, and is, as Jawad (2020) argues, still viewed as taking a stand against the silencing, marginalizing and oppression of women in the American society.

2. Structure

Riders to the Sea can be considered a one-act "classic tragedy"; it has all the elements deemed necessary for a tragedy to be worthy of its name, (Conversi et al, 2021).

The story is about the tragic downfall of its protagonist; Maurya, arriving at the conclusion that faith did in fact let her down and hence it has no place in her life any more (Kitishat, 2019), how such a downfall is brought about by their own tragic flow; letting her last son leave the house without blessing him, and the failure to prevent fate from taking its course in spite of her trying to follow him after being berated by her daughter for bringing bad luck upon them, (Donoghue, 1955).

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Trifles, on the other hand, is a one-act play that is completely free from the tragedy recipe. A main character that never shows up on stage, a climax that is not worded for once, and a resolution reached by a silent exchange of looks, (Medalle, 2018). One might think how can a play that follows a Greek tragedy 'template' have anything in common with a play in which the protagonist does not make an appearance? In order to answer this question one must consider the "little things" that both plays share.

3. Similarities

3.1 Outside Powers

Both female protagonists in these plays have been in constant struggle with powers far stronger than them. Maurya lost all her battles against the sea: she lost a husband, six sons and her father-in-law. Mrs. Wright lost a great deal to her husband: she is no longer "the sweet little thing" she used to be, she no longer sings, and she is not even considered a good housekeeper. Both had been once young, beautiful and spirited, both had been crushed by the sheer brutality of their opponents. Ironically enough, the sea and Mr. Wright provided for these women, yet at the same time they managed to destroy the woman and leave a shell molded in the form that is better suited for barely surviving day to day.

3.2 Society

Thakurdas (2020) and Vural (2017) point out that Maurya fears the sea; she fully understands that the sea can never be tamed or trusted, so it is no wonder for her that it should take away all that she holds dear. Nonetheless, she cannot understand why the men in her life fail to see the sea as a threat, or why they fail to realize how dangerous it is. Society views men risking their lives as heroes who defy outside powers; an act of utter selflessness through which they provide for those in their charge. Never for once does society blame men for their recklessness or approaches them for leaving their loved ones in shock over their death. The fishing community in Inishmaan does not attempt to stop Bartley from leaving although everyone sees a storm brewing in the distant horizon. Bartley is a man doing his best to provide for his family, so none should cross his way. Leder (1991) argues that if Bartley must die to provide for his family, he is then a hero in the eye of the society which at the same time considers his death an episode in the life of his unlucky mother. It is his mother's job to mourn him, then move on. Drawing on this note, Mrs. Wright realizes that once she traded her maiden name, Minnie Foster, with her husband's, she became nothing more than his property. She understood what category her community squeezed her in, and did her best to comply. Yet, what she could not grasp is why should the new Mrs. Wright be completely rinsed clean of any traces of the old Minnie Foster. Jawad (2020) explains that what gradually broke Mrs. Wright is her husband's cruelty and how her community turned a blind eye to what was happening to her. In the eyes of men, Mr. Wright was a 'good man', a man who provides for his family, and what more can you ask of a man? That he was cold and cruel, or the fact that he made sure his wife is kept isolated from their neighbors, is of little consequence. In both plays, community does nothing to stop tragedies from happening.

However, men and women representing community in both plays part ways towards the end. Uddin and Chowdhury (2016) state that gender greatly affects the reaction to the tragedy in the life of the female protagonist. While one man in *Riders to the Sea* agrees to build a coffin for Bartley only after being promised a cake in return, the old women present in the house ask for nothing; they are there to help Maurya prepare her last son for his last journey. They patiently listen to her as she bids him goodbye, and watch her lose her faith, yet never judge her. The men in *Trifles* come into the Wright's house already condemning Mrs. Wright, full of their pre-made ideas about the frailty of women and their senseless actions, and how unimportant their daily chores are, (Saleh, 2010). They come only to "inspect" and find "motives" which will incriminate Mrs. Wright. The women, on the other hand, succeed at freeing themselves from pre-judgment. They go through a self-searching experience in which they step aside from the pre-tailored path and make their own judgment. They decide that they come to help her, not to prove her guilty of a crime that, by the end of the play, they sadly view as a natural result.

3.3 Death

Though seen as the tragic event in both plays, death is in fact the turning point that actually sets both protagonists free. In *Riders to the Sea*, Maurya lived her life in constant fear of what the sea can treacherously take away from her. A long list of losses made her life a continuous journey of misery. Her father-in-law drowned, her husband drowned, four sons drowned, then the last two sons drowned only ten days apart. To lose a loved one to a power you can do nothing against is heartbreaking, to lose six sons and a husband is crushing. Maurya has been dealt blow after blow, yet she kept praying that her last living son may be spared such a fate. A fear of another loss kept her in a mental cage, inside which she believes herself a pious woman who holds fast to Catholicism, while turning a blind eye to the superstitions she strongly believes in or the doubts taking hold of her mind.

She is ever afraid of the storms, always watching the wind, while keeping holy water in her possession lest another beloved drown and none can be found to sprinkle on them. With the death of her last son, Maurya suddenly realizes that she no longer has to fear the storms or the rising winds, she no longer has to fear losing another son, for they are all gone now and "there isn't anything more the sea can do to me". No more fear of another son drowning, no more waiting for bodies to shore up, no more waiting for news, and no more losses. Yumiko (2017) comments that, in a sense, Maurya is finally free.

Mrs. Wright has long been imprisoned in her own house; physically, mentally and emotionally. Ahmed (2018) states that Mrs. Wright has been literally under lock and key; no one and nothing enters the house without Mr. Wright's approval. She gradually began losing bits and pieces of her old self: she stopped singing, she lost her fresh looks and sweet character, her careful housekeeping became sloppy, and even her stitches got uneven and almost unraveled. As an attempt to defy her jailer, Mrs. Wright obtained a bird, and a cage for it. A metaphor so heart-wrenching in its details, for she was once a little bird herself, and now the little bird is living in a cage. She accepted the cage, and tried to live as if it was the normal thing to do. All that came crashing when Mr. Wright killed the poor little bird. It is one thing to let yourself be controlled, hurt and abused, but it is another to see your loved one get the same treatment. Nati (2019) explains that Mr. Wright has unwittingly made the gravest mistake of his life by taking his wife to her breaking point. He thought that killing the bird was nothing, a *trifle*, and would teach her a lesson and made her understand who is the master of the house, but he singlehandedly made her see for the first time that he is not worthy of her time or patience. The cage in which she and the little bird were forced into has finally been broken, and both the little bird and the old Mrs. Wright are both dead, hence Mrs. Wright is finally free of all that held her silent and submissive. She is now free of her husband, his cruelty and the house in which she was no more than a prisoner.

3.4 Empowerment

In spite of the dark, gloomy mood of both plays, one cannot fail to notice how little details empower women. In *Riders to the Sea*, the mere act of the old women staying at home with Maurya while she watches the dead body of her son being laid on the floor for her to sprinkle the holy water on, makes it clear that the solidarity women show in the face of loss and helplessness makes them capable of withstanding losses and heartbreaks. Maurya confesses her understanding of how life goes on, how loss and death are just a natural part of living, "No man at all can be living forever, and we must be satisfied". Only one who has been through so much can see the true value of others being ready to offer what little they have to help.

Manuel (2000) comments that Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters in *Trifles* find themselves in a situation where they should decide for themselves. To hold such a power over your mind is no little feat. For a woman who has always been governed by what her husband and community sees fit and thinks fit, to be able to think for yourself is a power in itself. Upon finding the dead bird, both women come closer, and each one gives the other the chance to see things from a different perspective. They both suddenly recognize their own power against the outside world of men and their views. Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters come to the conclusion that it is now their version of the truth that will be known, and that they both have the power to change the course of events. Holstein (2003) remarks that Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters realize that no matter how men try to belittle them, they can choose to stick by one of their own.

4. Conclusion

Literature is the mirror in which we see our shared humanity. No matter how old or new a story is, you are guaranteed a journey into the hearts and minds of other people who, in spite of living in a totally different place or time, still experience the same emotions everyone of us must have once felt. *Riders to the Sea* and *Trifles* are but one example. Women have been through so much throughout history; they fear for their loved ones, they fight to save their loved ones and they lose their loved ones. Women endure, they stick together in the face of all the challenges and they move on.

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