John Millington Synge’s
Riders to the sea is comparable to Greek Tragedy
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Abstract:

Greek Tragedies of Aeschylus or Sophocles present spectacles of human suffering in the backdrop of the huge machinery of inscrutable Fate. A Greek tragedy shows the essential predomination of the human situation on earth where men, in spite of their bravery and nobility are doomed to suffer for no fault of their own. In the 20th Century, the Greek concept of tragedy lost favour with many of the tragic dramatists like O’Neill or Arthur Miller. But at least one modern dramatist pre-occupied himself with the theme of predestined fatalism and the hostility of elemental Nature. Synge’s Riders of the sea is clearly modelled upon the Greek tragedy of the Aeschylean type, both in structure and theme.

Key words: human sufferings, Fate, Greek Tragedy, fatalism, hostility, Sophocles

Introduction:

Greek tragedies are remarkable so far as, the structure is concerned, for their observance of the three classical unities - unity of place, of time and of action. For Synge the form One-Act-play yielded fantastic opportunities for portraying the tragedy of a fishing community on the remote island of Aran in Ireland. The one Act Play is remarkable for tenseness rather than largeness. Though a One-Act Play isolates and focuses only a fragment of life, the vision it conjures up enchants us by its concreteness and intensity. This form is a modern invention, but it comes very close structurally to the compactness and breath taking speed of a Greek tragedy. We can compare the plot of Oedipus Rex which is concerned with the last day of Oedipus’s life, with the tragic happenings of one day in the life of Maurya, the bereaved mother.
Discussion:
Synge’s strict maintenance of the unities lends the play the high intensity and concentration, found in a Greek tragedy. The unchanging locate of the action is Maurya’s remarkable cottage which stands high on a rocky plane exposed to the howling gales and resonant with the thundering sound of the vexed sea. The desolation of the surroundings certainly sets the tragic tone.

Like the tragedies of Sophocles and Euripides, Synge created a powerful tragic atmosphere by the premonitions of the future and dramatic ironies. The symbols of black cat, while boards, baked bread and the new rope have tragic associations. The symbols of grey pony, red-mare and the resurrection image of dead Michael create the powerful feeling of inescapable fate for the Riders to the Sea. The climax of the play reached when Maurya sees Michael passing before her riding on the grey pony. She has the hallucination of dead Michael and borne down by the sense of impending calamity. The protagonist of the play, Maurya stands not as more peasant mother has lost her all at the hands of stern sea-monster. In her courage, endurance and stoical clam with all passions spent she becomes a grand tragic figure like Sophocles’s Oedipus or Shakespeare’s Desdemona. She consoles herself by saying “No man at all can be living for ever and we must be satisfied”. This stoic resignation to fate combines the play with Greek tragic pattern.

In the Greek tragedies the vast pitiless power is called by the name of Fate and Nemesis. The Greeks believes in the will of Gods who are hostile to man or in Fate that follows inevitably human vice and virtue. Against this power man fight and goes down. In modern tragedies, this power manifests itself in various shapes like chance accidents or supernatural signs. In Hardly and Synge this Fate is synonymous with Nature that is hostile to man and takes a heavy toll of human lives. Synge represents this malignant aspect of Nature by sea. It is Fate appearing as a roaring, howling and hungry sheet of water, But the sea is not visible for a single moment, it is the off stage protagonist of the play.

The dramatic irony in the play is also similar to that found in Greek tragedy. Maurya is waiting for the dead body of Michal and she has bought all the necessary things for the burial. But it is the cruel irony of fate that those are used to Bartley. At the beginning the two girls were trying to identify their brother’s body and the reality is that, the body
carried is at the door is not Micheal’s but Bartley’s. The use of irony here can be compared with Sophoclean irony in Oedipus Rex. Maury’s long monody calls up the past of the family and links it up with the present and future. One cannot expect a chorus in a One Act play like Riders to the sea, but yet Maurya herself performs the role usually taken by a chorus in a Greek tragedy. We can think of the Chorus in Aeschylus’s Agamemnon who recounts the ill of the past and expresses the forebodings about the future, Maurya the central character has the additional function of presenting the tragic doom of the whole family pitted against the cruelty of the sea which has snatched away her everything.

Conclusion:

Riders to the Sea can be compared with the great Greek tragedies in its symbolic nature, its universalization of the theme of human suffering and loss. Maurya with her placid surrender to her fate attains a king of noble grandeur which could be attained only by the heroes of Sophocles.
References


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to the sea