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# The Image of Apocalypse: Death and Metaphor in J. M. Synge's *Riders to the Sea*

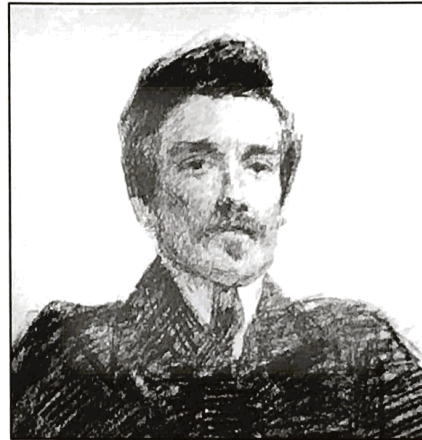
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## Abstract

Critics of J. M. Synge's one-act play *Riders to the Sea* have placed it within a tradition of topographic literature and the Irish literary renaissance. I argue that Synge's play is relevant to a canon of world literature because it depicts an apocalypse, which I use to examine competing notions of apocalypse.

## Revelation or Armageddon?

A definition of the word yields this etymology: *apocalypse*, from the Greek *apokalypsis*, from *apokalyptein* to uncover. Apocalypse is a revelation, an unveiling of hidden knowledge. Synge's play from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century resembles ancient Greek tragedy, which exhibits a perfect synthesis of elements that signify illusion and reality, the collective and the individual. Nietzsche explains the phenomenon of tragedy as the *agon* of the gods Apollo and Dionysos. This cult of theatre is a human event that subverts distinctions between the objective and the subjective.



J. M. Synge, Irish playwright

## Summary

Maurya, an aging widow, bewails the death of her son Michael, drowned at sea. She tries to prohibit her last son Bartley from taking the ferry to sell horses in Connemara. He departs, and she races to the ferry to give her blessing. Returning to the cottage, she anxiously relates a vision she has seen of Bartley riding to the ferry followed by Michael on a grey horse. A chorus of villagers recover Bartley's corpse. Maurya declares the completion of her anxiety because her suffering has reached its limit. She decides to be satisfied in the cycle of life, death and the grace of the Almighty God.



*Four Horsemen of Apocalypse*, by Viktor Vasnetsov. 1887.

## Conclusion

A proper apocalypse is not a Doomsday fire-and-brimstone scenario, nor is it a private sorrow. An apocalypse is the synthesis of both. *Riders to the Sea* and ancient tragedy show the misfortune of a protagonist; the effect of the story on an audience is a track from point A) anxiety to point B) affirmation. Apocalypse is the total sum of both points, a perspective of human existential problems that crosses into mysticism. The story *reveals* purpose and meaning to the individual subject. J. M. Synge's play is a prime example of 20<sup>th</sup> century existential theatre, and the result is an awesome unveiling of human drama.

## Objective Apocalypse

### Collective agony

Elimination of suffering

Symbolic and prophetic

Historical

*Revelation of John* "And I looked, and behold a pale horse: and his name that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed with him." (6:8 KJV)

## Subjective Apocalypse

### Individual agony

Threshold of suffering

Psychological

Non-historical

*Ecclesiastes* "He hath made every thing beautiful in his time: also he hath set the world in their heart, so that no man can find out the work that God maketh from the beginning to the end." (3:11 KJV)

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