Supernatural Phenomena in Synge’s *Riders to the Sea*

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Abstract

The focus of the study is to analyze the supernatural phenomena experienced by a family on Aran Island located on the west coast of Ireland. The person directly involved with the supernatural phenomena is Maurya, the protagonist of the drama, having lost all of her male family members. By the time this story begins, the second last son, is declared lost and finally found dead on the sea. After that her youngest son goes to the bazaar in the Mainland to sell horses but he never returns. These supernatural phenomena with various forms emerge from the span of these two events. There is a strong belief in supernaturalism among the people of Aran Island and this makes supernaturalism a significant aspect of the whole storyline. The research method used is Descriptive Qualitative with a focus on library research with the ground that descriptive qualitative is appropriately used to study the social phenomena where people make various senses of their life experiences. The result shows that the supernatural phenomena appear in varied forms: Mystery behind the death of Michael, Supernatural vision of Maurya, Foresight of Maurya and Supernatural nuance in the title.

Keywords: supernaturalism, mystery, vision.

Introduction

Synge (2008), an Irish writer, with a full name John Millington Synge, having a great interest in the Aran Islands, situated at the west coast of Ireland, wrote a one-act play, *Riders to the Sea* in 1990. The play is focused on a family of fisherman mostly dependent their living on the sea. Synge has visited the Aran Islands for several times making a study on the manners and life style of the local inhabitants and he is much impressed by their preservations of their traditional folk ways and arts giving a certain dignity to human life. Synge, in *Riders to the Sea*, also inserts schemes of the peasant life, close to myth and supernaturalism, creating something new in his closely-knitted play.

From the beginning to the end, the play is serious and the seriousness goes on mounting till it reaches its climax towards the end of the play and this is intensely horrible and tragic. The elements of the plot are closely and neatly packed and appeared to be dense. This is the distinctive quality of Synge as a playwright in writing this play as within a short course of the story, everything about the characters could be
revealed. Synge does not use a sub-plot of any kind, which at times could a story go beyond control. He simply relates how the various members of a fisherman family die on the sea.

The story of the play is centered on Maurya, the old mother, whose husband and five sons have been taken by the sea. And now he has two daughters, Cathleen and Nora and her youngest son, Bartley. Now she is trying to stop Bartley from going to the mainland to sell horses; however Bartley has to go to the fair on the mainland for this is concerned with their living. But unfortunately, while trying to get all the horses on to the boat, Bartley is drowned. By the death of Bartley, Maurya has no more sons and she now feels relieved as she is not terrorized anymore by the sea. She has finished all her sufferings and she says that the sea cannot frighten her anymore. She feels as if she were a winner in a deadly contest. Her suffering is absolutely complete now. Her last son has also gone forever.

No man at all can be living forever and we must be satisfied. (Synge, 2008, p. 45)

This is her last words showing that she could now accept that all the things in the world are to be changed; man changes as the time changes too. No one could stand against what is already written in fate. This is what popularly said as destiny is character. Throughout a certain even, one could realize the real sense of life and one would realize that human life in mortal. When such a paradigm has come to everyone’s mind, then no one would ever complain of something bad or unexpected. The only thing that man could do is to try but still with limited capacity.

**Literature Review**

Supernaturalism is a concept of beings, forces and phenomena going beyond the logical description. By ‘supernaturalism’ people mean to include all that is not natural, that which is regarded as extraordinary, not of the ordinary world, mysterious and unexplained or in ordinary terms (Pandian, 2002, p. 21). Another concept of the supernatural is also given by David Armstrong in Clarke (2009, p. 130) defining naturalism in a way that incorporates a clear definition of the natural, picturing the doctrine that reality consists of nothing but a single all-embracing spatio-temporal system. If people understand the natural this way then they can have a reasonably clear sense of the supernatural; namely, anything that might exist that is outside the single all-embracing spatio-temporal system. Other definitions of the natural will lead to somewhat different understandings of the natural-supernatural distinction. From this it is inferred that anything beyond the human logical understanding could be categorized into supernaturalism.

**Research Method**

The method used in this study is descriptive qualitative having a focus on library research proposed by Haughman (2009, p. 32). The data used are words, clauses, sentences and paragraphs presented in the play containing the supernatural phenomena. The sources of data in this study consist of primary and secondary data sources. The primary data source is the play written by Synge; and the secondary data sources are related references discussing supernaturalism. Data collection procedure is conducted by means of note-taking technique where writer stands as the key instrument. Then the data validity is supported by triangulation data proposed by Moleong (2010). The data analysis procedures are done through categorization, tabulation, and inference.
Results and Discussion
The story is about the tragic life of a family; however as the story goes by, some elements of supernaturalism are also exposed, and this makes the play thrilled. In time of writing this play, Synge sees that there is a strong belief in the existence of the supernatural among the inhabitants of the Aran Islands. By this it is seen that the supernatural is a significant aspect of Synge’s play Riders to the Sea and becomes an integral part of the whole play. The supernatural gives a certain type of chemistry for all the things exposed. The supernatural appears in varied forms: Mystery behind the death of Michael, Supernatural vision of Maurya, Foresight of Maurya and Supernatural nuance in the title. Characteristics for the phenomena claimed as supernatural are anomaly, uniqueness and uncontrollability, thus lacking reproducibility required for scientific examination.

By this it is clear that supernaturalism is a quality of being supernatural in which there is a force that cannot be analyzed based on logic and believed to originate by divine power and this power can subsequently influence the real object. Although the supernatural is beyond the reach of logical thinking but it can be perceived by the five senses. Every person has supernatural powers but not everyone can feel and direct the potential so that things related to the supernatural are always considered rare or unusual.

Mystery behind the death of Michael
There are many kinds of mysteries, but all of them involve some element of an unknown phenomenon. A mystery is equivalent to a secret, where there is an explanation between why something happened, but it is not revealed to everyone. An event could be a mystery to one person, but not to another, as they may have different sets of knowledge.

Mystery is something hidden and cannot be elaborated or described objectively. An interpretation of a mystery is usually conducted based on subjectivity. Mystery is also associated with supernatural phenomena; though in reality that not all mysteries are of supernatural basis. By this it is stated that a mystery could be analogized as a question without an answer. This is linked with the mysterious death of Michael.

Michael is the second last son who is firstly declared missing and considered dead in the sea but after some time it is revealed that Michael has died dragged by the sea waves. This can be seen at the beginning of the story. There are some things that are supposedly linked to the supernatural behind Michael's death so it can be said that Michael's death has a mystery.

NORA: (coming down) "There were two men," says he, "and they rowing round with potent before the cocks crowed, and the oar of one of them caught the body, and they passing the black cliffs of the north." (Synge, 2008, p. 30)

Nora, the younger daughter, is told by the priest that there are two men carrying the boat and one of them feels that the oar touches something and it is a dead body. This happens before the cock crows and at that time they are passing the black cliff of the north.

For the inhabitants of Aran Islands, the cock’s crow is always associated with the spirit of the dead returning to the grave and the spirit must arrive at the grave before or
along with the time of the cock’s crow. So in order not to be disturbed by the spirit or
ghost, the inhabitants start their activities after the cock’s crow that is at dawn.
Furthermore, the black cliffs are also associated with the journey of the spirit toward
the underworld. The spirit must pass through the black cliff before it reaches the
underworld. By this, Michael’s death based on the beliefs of the local inhabitants is
closely tied with the mystery with the supernatural.

**Supernatural vision of Maurya**

Maurya has a supernatural vision based on her intuition as a mother. According to
Vallotton (2009) vision is what people see, but it is also the way in which they see.
Vision is the lens that interprets the events of life, the way people view people and their
concept of God. Their minds receive images from their eyes but their heart interprets
these images. If their hearts become bitter, jealous, hurt or in some way infected, the
lens of the heart is distorted. What people perceive is happening and what are really
going on could be two completely different things.

> MAURYA: *(speaking very slowly)* I've seen the fearfulest thing any person has seen,
since the day Bride Dara seen the dead man with the child in his arms.
> MAURYA: I went down to the spring-well, and I stood there saying a prayer to
> myself. Then Bartley came along, and he riding on the red mare with the gray pony
> behind him. *(She puts up her hands, as if to hide something from her eyes.)* The
> Son of God spare us, Nora!
> MAURYA: I seen Michael himself.
> MAURYA: *(a little defiantly)* I’m after seeing him this day, and he riding and
galloping. Bartley came first on the red mare; and I tried to say "God speed you,"
but something choked the words in my throat. He went by quickly; and, "The
blessing of God on you," says he, and I could say nothing. I looked up then, and I
crying, at the gray pony, and there was Michael upon it—with fine clothes on him,
and new shoes on his feet. *(Synge, 2008, p. 36)*

This is a picture that Maurya has a supernatural vision. At that time Maurya intends to
deliver bread to Bartley who is going to the mainland; but when she gets to Spring
Well, she sees Bride Dara, who is always associated with death or an omen that make
her unable to do anything; she cannot even speak. She just stands still staring at
Bartley riding a red horse and behind him is Michael riding a gray horse following
Bartley. It is clear that Maurya has seen Michael’s ghost and it is a bad sign because of
the belief that such event indicates that Michael wants to take Bartley.

**Foresight of Maurya**

Maurya also seems to have the ability to predict something, although this ability is not
realized by her or such event only happens by chance. Vallotton (2009) states that
foresight is like looking at life through a telescope. This outlook allows people to know
what is ahead as it connects them to the future. Foresight is the element of vision that
helps life make sense and gives the motivation that they described earlier.

> MAURYA: *(crying out as he is in the door)* He's gone now, God spare us, and we'll
> not see him again. He's gone now, and when the black night is falling I'll have no
> son left me in the world. *(Synge, 2008, p. 26)*

The data shows that Maurya feels angry, sad and also frightened of Bartley's going to
the bazaar to sell horses in the mainland. She disagrees to Bartley’s departure; but
Bartley insists that he has to leave because they need money. Spontaneously Maurya says that with the leaving of Bartley for the mainland then when night falls, Maurya will no longer have a son and Maurya will become a mother without a son. Maurya’s words then turn out to be true as that night Bartley is dragged by the waves and he dies. This is also an ironic supernatural phenomenon.

**Supernatural nuance in the title**

From the outset till the end of the story *Riders to the Sea* has a supernatural nuance, including the title given by Synge. Uddin (2016) emphasizes this by stating that *Riders to the Sea* is the outcome of his actual experience during his staying of five summers in the Aran Island. It is the culture, traditions and superstitions of that land which he wants to present as it is.

The title of this play is *Riders to the Sea*, and the word *riders* are plural; while from the existing storyline, only Bartley rides a horse. So the word *riders* is made plural to show that the spirit of Michael is the second rider. The title of this play has shown that this play is full of supernatural elements.

**Conclusions**

The overall exposures above have provided an illustration as well as proof that the play *Riders to the Sea* has supernatural phenomena. The supernatural phenomena are the reflection of the traditions and lifestyles of the inhabitants of Aran Islands that have been observed by Synge. Some of the most significant supernatural phenomena in the play are the mystery of Michael's death, Maurya's ability as a protagonist to see things related to the supernatural, Maurya's intuition to predict, and the title given by Synge. The uses of supernatural phenomena are common in literary works to give sensation to the audience or readers.

**References**


