

## Conference Paper

# Universal Concept in Literary Work through J.M. Synge's *Riders to the Sea*

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## Abstract

The research, based on a one-act play *Riders to the Sea* by Synge, is to find out the universal concept having a focus on suffering, supernaturalism and death as the representative of universality in any literary work. The story is centered on the protagonist, an old woman, Maurya, who has lost all her male family members, all drowned at sea. The sea becomes a hidden enemy never giving a chance for her to live a life of peace. The sense of universality in literature is inclined to the relationships among human spirit, emotion and social beings. Literature goes beyond national boundaries, time barriers, gender difference and even historical grounds. Literature is not bound to *tempora spatio*, that is without being restricted by time and space. As a reflection of human life, literature touches all the aspects of human life, tending to create universal appeal. Ashcroft in Waseem (2013) states that universalism offers a hegemonic view of existence by which the experiences, values and expectations of a dominant culture are held to be true for all humanity and this could be traced to all literary works. The study was conducted by means of descriptive qualitative method proposed by Cresswell (2013) indicating that such a method makes a focus on description analysis and interpretation of a given phenomenon. The result showed that the three points of discussion: suffering, supernaturalism and death are clearly exposed in the play, inclining to prove the universal concepts in literature.

**Keywords:** suffering, supernaturalism, death

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## 1. Introduction

The sense of universality in literature tends to be related to the link among human spirit, emotion, and social beings. Literature transcends national boundaries, time constraints, gender differences and even historical basis. Literature is not tied to *tempora spatio*, being limited by space and time. As a reflection of human life, literature touches all aspects of human life, tending to create universal appeal.

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The concept of universal values in literary works is a truth on the basis that the scheme of a literary work is a manifestation of the world of life. Literary works bring the reader to the phenomena of society over the world of life that is understood by an author as one of the educational agents. Literary works is a medium containing educational value and also motivation, so it cannot be denied that a literary work is a humanist teacher.

Simply presented, a universal concept is one for all. Thus the universal understanding in a literary work is that the literary work can reach the mind of everyone, not only to be enjoyed by a particular group, but as a whole.

Literature and life both talk about people and society. For literature, society is the most important factor; while society is a vital object for social science. All these things affect each other's attitude and movement. When literature has put forth something right in its creation, it will in turn affect social attitudes as sociality grows. There is nothing that stands out the most between literature and social change. The two things are mutually supportive. Literature can arise because of social change and it could also be a social change that is the result of the creation of a literary work.

Sumardjo & Saini (1997) states that literature is a personal expression of man in the form of experience, thought, feeling, idea, spirit, belief in a form of concrete images that evoke charm with the language tool. This is reinforced by the opinion of Saryono (2009: 18) that literature also has the ability to record all experiences of natural-empirical and non-empirical-supernatural experiences, in other words literature can be a witness and commentary of human life.

## 2. Literature Review

Schopenhauer in Chakraberty (2013) states that every man being no matter what he is can absolutely never do anything else than just what at that moment he does do. Accordingly, the whole course of a man's life, in all its incidents great and small, is as necessarily predetermined as the course of a clock.

This is then supported by Ashcroft, et.al in Waseem (2013) stating that universalism offers a hegemonic view of existence by which the experiences, values and expectations of a dominant culture are held to be true for all humanity.

Three subject matters in this study, namely: suffering, supernaturalism, and death, are the representative of the universality of literary works.

Suffering is defined as distress resulting from threat or damage to one's body or self-identity or probably from any form of inconveniences in the environment [1]. Suffering

exposed in the play is closely tied with supernaturalism and death. Supernaturalism is phenomena that goes beyond the logical intellect. The supernatural remained on the subconscious level. Presence of phenomena that cannot be explained by science confirms that belief in the supernatural is not strictly atavistic remnants of the human psychology of past historical eras, but has certain empirical foundations. This shows that supernaturalism is anything that cannot be reached but keeps on existing [12].

Then Gazalba (1984) states that death is definite and everyone can accept it; thus making death a universal event. This view is supported by Chakraborty (2013) stating that there are some events in human life that are inevitable and universal.

### 3. Research Method

Descriptive qualitative method is applied in this study on consideration that this method could be appropriately used for collecting information to show social phenomena, and often done before an experiment to know what specific things to manipulate and include in an experiment.

The study was conducted by means of descriptive qualitative method proposed by Cresswell (2013) indicating that such a method makes a focus on description analysis and interpretation of a given phenomenon. This concept is then supported by Moleong (2014) stating that qualitative research is a scientific research, which aims to understand a phenomenon in a natural social context by emphasizing the process of deep communication interaction between researchers with the phenomena studied.

### 4. Discussion

This is a story of an old woman from *Aran* Islands, having lost all her male family members, drowned at sea. When this story begins, her five children including her husband and father-in-law have died and those remaining with her now are the youngest son, Bartley, and two daughters Cathleen and Nora. Michael, has also been drifted and died and the story begins with the mourning of Maurya over the death of Michael. Starting from this she begins to think that the sea is not only a danger that is always threatening her but also a hidden enemy and does not provide an opportunity for her to be able to live properly as a mother and a wife and to get peace and happiness.

The tragedy in the play is not just about a woman who lives her whole life in Aran Islands but is a tragedy of humanity that has universal appeal. Here the sea serves as a symbol of destiny, hostile to humans. Maurya becomes a prey in the hands of destiny.

Pertaining to this, *Riders to the Sea* reminds everyone that fate is the main hindrance of man that cannot be avoided.

Suffering, supernaturalism, and death are the subjects not only in the play but also in the concern and discussion of all people on a larger scale. From the beginning of the story to the end, it is clear that Maurya is a distressed person. She has to endure the mental and physical suffering of all the problems around her, especially with regard to the deaths of her male family members. She must be able to let all her male family members go forever without any ability to prevent it. The most severe suffering is when one has to look directly at a problem without any ability to prevent it. Death is a thing that always accompanies her in the face of life. She cannot live in peace. These concerns increase with the existence of supernatural phenomena closely related to the death of all members of his male family.

#### 4.1. Suffering

Suffering is something universal which means suffering can be found in every community as well as individual. As long as there is life, especially human life, suffering will persist. Suffering is like a shadow that always follows a person's standing. Wherever the person walks, his shadow will always follow him, as well as the suffering that always follows every step taken by a human being.

Cassel, Chapman and Volinn in Anderson (2013), define suffering as perceived threat or damage to a sense of self; here suffering is defined as distress resulting from threat or damage to one's body or self-identity. Suffering can vary in intensity, duration, awareness and source. Physical suffering is the subset of distress resulting from threat or damage to one's physical being, whereas mental suffering is distress perceived as originating in one's cognitive or affective self-identity.

Suffering has become integral part of Maurya who has again lost a son, Michael at the sea. His last surviving son, Bartley, is getting ready to travel to the mainland. Maurya does her best to prevent him from going because she is worried that Bartley might also get lost. But fate has decided that Maurya should have no more son left, and she cannot escape her fate. While his fate is touching everyone, her case is not unique. Women around the world are suffering the same kind of agony. Feelings of loss for a mother and grieving sorrows are everywhere. Maurya is a universal mother, whining and lamenting for the brave sons who go to war against the world, never to return.

The sufferings experienced by Maurya keep on going and this can be seen from the following quotes:

CATHLEEN: She's lying down, God help her, and maybe sleeping, if she's able [15].

This is said by Cathleen, Maurya's daughter, who feels deeply moved by the anguish of her mother. Maurya cannot sleep well; she is always nervous and when Cathleen sees her mother lying down, Cathleen hopes and also prays that her mother could have a good rest. Maurya has actually been very depressed. A person with a healthy mind can use his or her potential to maximally face life challenges and establish positive relationships with others. Conversely, people who are mentally disturbed will experience mood disorders, thinking skills, and emotional control that can ultimately lead to anxiety behavior and cannot calm the heart so that it can lead to sleep problems. This is what Maurya experiences now.

The most severe suffering felt by Maurya is when Bartley goes out to the horse bazaar.

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 [15].

Maurya cries and screams hysterically at the door when Bartley leaves. She has tried to persuade Bartley not to go to *Connemara*. She even asks a priest to persuade Bartley not to leave. But all her efforts do not work because Bartley insists on going to the horse bazaar. Basically Bartley does not mean to argue with his mother, but their needs exceeds his obedience to his mother. He must go to sell horses to meet their needs. Maurya, on the other hand, fears of losing his only surviving son. She does not want to lose Bartley. And this is the culmination of Maurya's suffering. She feels that she is driving Bartley to death.

## 4.2. Supernaturalism

The "supernatural" is defined as "all that is not natural, that which is regarded as extraordinary, not of the ordinary world, mysterious or unexplainable in ordinary terms" (Norbeck in [10]). Further Norbec in Petrus and Bogopa (2007) states that, it must be pointed out at the outset that indigenous communities may not categorize their worlds in terms of a distinction between the supernatural and natural, but may view these "worlds" as inextricably linked.

*Riders to the Sea* by Synge contains various supernatural elements exposed in the daily life of *Aran* people. Supernatural nuances are significant in this play and this can be seen from the following quotations.

MAURYA: (*speaking very slowly*) I've seen the fearfulest thing any person has seen, since, the day Bride Dara seen 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... and there was Michael upon it-with fine clothes on him, and new shoes on his feet [15].

When Maurya wishes to give some food to Bartley for his trip, she sees Bride Dara and at that time she stands stunned and unable to do anything because she knows for sure that the appearance of Bride Dara according to the beliefs of the people of Aran Islands is related to death or scary things. Furthermore, when Maurya prays near the spring well, in her supernatural sight she sees Bartley riding a horse and behind him she sees Michael. Both of these views convince her that Bartley would never come back. Then Cathleen tries to argue with her mother by saying that what her mother sees is only an illusion because Michael has been buried well and would not have gone along with Bartley. But that is the view experienced by Maurya, a supernatural phenomenon.

Then Nora, Maurya's daughter, also conveys news containing supernatural elements.

NORA: (*coming down*) "There were two men," says he, "and they rowing round with poteen before the cocks crowed, and the oar of one of them caught the body, and they passing the black cliffs of the north." [15]

There are two people rowing in the middle of the night before the rooster crows and as they pass the black cliffs, one of their canoe paddles touches something and it is a body, later known as Michael's body. Rooster crowing is always associated by the local people with a supernatural phenomena because according to the beliefs of the Aran Island people, the spirits will return to the grave before the rooster crows and that is why they usually do activities after the rooster crows around dawn. Furthermore, the black cliff is always assumed as the journey of the spirit to another world and the spirit will cross the black cliff.

Supernatural event is a strange and unusual phenomenon beyond the limits of human comprehension. Actually every human is equipped with this ability with various level of capability and Maurya has this capability.

### 4.3. Death

In *Riders to the Sea* death becomes a significant phenomenon. Maurya during her life is always associated with death. Beginning with Maurya’s assumption that the cause of death is sea, a frightening enemy that always gives dark shades to her, until finally she no longer has male family members.

MAURYA: Michael has a clean burial in the far north, by the grace of the Almighty God. Bartley 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. [15]

Maurya now feels free from the shackles of the worries she has endured for so long. She calmly prays for all the male members of her family; from her father to her children. Calmly and confidently Maurya tells her daughter, Nora, to pray not only for her family members but also for those who have preceded them. She also says that with the permission and grace of God, Michael has also been buried well by using white coffin. Now Maurya understands and realizes that death is a universal event and everyone will surely die; for that the death of a person is not a catastrophe to those left behind. No one can live forever and everyone should be able to accept this.

The findings indicate that Synge’s *Riders to the Sea* (2016), as the representative of literary works, contains points of discussion always existing in society. Suffering, supernaturalism and death are inseparable from the life of society, giving at the same time an illustration that literary work is universal or nuances of universality are always there in literature. This is supported by the data validation [13] as presented below:

TABLE 1: Universal Concept.

No.	Research Component	Documentation	Interview → Informan (I)										
			I1	I2	I3	I4	I5	I6	I7	I8	I9	I10	
1.	Universal Concept Existence in literary work	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	X
2.	Suffering, Supernaturalism and Death Existence in literary work	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
3.	Suffering, supernaturalism and Death as Universal Concept	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
4.	Suffering, supernaturalism and Death as representative of universal concept	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	X	√	X	√	√

Remarks: I1, I2.....so forth = Informant 1, Informant 2...so forth.

TABLE 2: Interview Result.

No.	Question Indicator	Answer		
		Answer Result	Number of Respondent	Percentage
1	Universal Concept Existence	Yes	10	100%
		No	0	0%
2	Suffering, supernaturalism, and Death Existence	Yes	10	100%
		No	0	0%
3	Suffering, supernaturalism, and Death as Representative universal of concept	Yes	8	80%
		No	2	20%

There are three indicators used in this research, and 10 respondents are included in the study. From the table above, the interview shows that all respondents agree that the universal concept is always present in a literary work. This is proved from the total number of respondents' answer reaching 100%. Similarly, the second indicator of the existence of universal concepts in literature encompasses three aspects of suffering, supernaturalism and death which are also presented in a literary work. This is evidenced by the answers of respondents also reaching 100% stating that the three aspects are universal concepts existing in a literary work. Furthermore, as many as 8 respondents from 10 respondents or as many as 80% of respondents agree that suffering, supernaturalism and death are representative of the universal concept in a literary work, and only 20% of respondents disagree with this. From the results of all the above interviews, it can be concluded that the universal concepts that include suffering, supernaturalism and death are always found in literary works and these three concepts are the representative of the universal concept.

## 5. Conclusions

*Riders to the Sea* is one of the many works of literature giving illustration that literary work is universal. The elements of universality always arise from literary works. Through the play of *Riders to the Sea*, the readers are brought to think and reflect on the events of social life.

The surface layer of the play tells about the local problems faced by a group of people and is specifically faced by individuals; but Synge with his ability to describe the situation, can represent the local problem into something universal. Synge is giving attention to the aspects of Aran Island people's lifestyle which in a broader sight becomes a universal appeal.



Suffering, supernaturalism, and death are the subject matters not only in the play but also in the concern and discussion of all people on a larger scale. From the beginning of the story to the end, it is clear that Maurya is a very distressed person. She has to endure mental and physical suffering of all the problems around her, especially with regard to the deaths of his male family members. She must be able to let all her male family members depart for good and she could do nothing. Thus it is clearly illustrated that the work of literature is universal and the elements of universality always appears in a literary work to give nuance of reflection and ideology for the readers.

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