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**Anglo-Irish dialect in John Millington Synge's**  
*Riders to the Sea*

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## **1. Introduction**

Among the many famous Irish writers of the late 19th and the beginning 20th century, such as W.B. Yeats, John Millington Synge is probably one of the most controversial persons: He was highly educated, he spent time abroad ( he studied at the Sorbonne in Paris), he was one of the few Irishman who actually learned to speak Irish fluently during his stays on the Irish Aran Islands in the West, he wrote prose and plays that are renowned today.

But in his time, he was very unpopular, his plays were not seen as literary masterpieces, but rather as the decadent and unpatriotic writings of a more European than Irish writer. In the following chapter, this misconception will briefly be explained, and the conditions that influenced his writing (but failed to impress him and failed to influence his style ) will be laid out in short, too.

The main topic of this paper will be an analysis of the Anglo-Irish dialect that Synge wrote his plays in, a dialect which he is now famous for. The space of this paper is, unfortunately, too confined to provide an in-depth analysis of his Anglo-Irish in general, and the analysis will, therefore, be confined to the language of Synge's masterpiece as a playwright: *Riders to the Sea*, written in 1902, published in 1903. In this paper, the major features of Synge's dialect in that play, a tragedy with an "austere atmosphere", will be dealt with, it will be shown how they are employed in *Riders to the Sea*, what effect they are to cause.

Furthermore, this paper will try to give some short answers to questions like "is this dialect authentic or an artificial, literary device; what purpose does it serve; what reasons might have made Synge choose to write in this rather unusual dialect".

## **2. John M. Synge and the Irish Revival**

From 1893 on, Synge spent several years abroad, mostly in Paris, but during this

time he did not manage to write something publishable; his famous plays were not written until after his visits to the Aran Islands.

Synge faced a problem that all his contemporary Irish writers had to face: the linguistic disorder that was caused by the transition from Irish to English, resulting in an inability to speak proper Irish as well as in an inability to speak perfect English; in fact, even members of the Gaelic League (founded in 1893), who proposed the reestablishment of Irish as the language of their literature and as the language of daily life, did not command a proper Irish, they rather spoke “gibberish” (cf. *Kiberd*, p.223).

Authors like Yeats chose to write in English instead, and Synge, who “was the only playwright who possessed ... a knowledge of Irish” (*Kiberd*, p.197), chose to do so, too. In English, he could write better and his plays could reach an international audience (cf. *Kiberd*, p.198); but in order to preserve the Gaelic literary tradition, he chose to write “in an English as Irish as possible” (*Kiberd*, p.199), that is in the Anglo-Irish dialect of the Irish peasants.

Although he opposed the Gaelic League in their attempt to revive Irish as Ireland’s main tongue, he nonetheless supported their efforts to preserve the Gaeltacht. While he criticised their actual policy in his writings for national papers, he emphasised the importance of their cause in his articles for foreign papers; he agreed to their major political aims, but he remained critical as to the actual policy to bring about these aims, he refused to be an instrument of their propaganda; Synge was, therefore, often at odds with nationalist hardliners in the League (cf. *Kiberd*, p.221 ff., p.226 f.).

Synge became even more unpopular, though not by his own fault, when he joined the Irish Literary Theatre, founded in 1899 by Yeats, and worked at Abbey Theatre, Dublin, first as a playwright and later as a director: this theatre was the ground where the demands of nationalists’ propaganda and aesthetic, artistic aims clashed, and Synge soon became the scapegoat in the struggles going on around him, which is all the more sad as he actually tried to preserve the theatre’s national character (cf. *Kiberd*, p.243). His plays were most unpopular, many Leaguers saw them as the works of a decadent Parisian playwright” (*Kiberd*, p.233).

Thus, it seems as if Synge, “a man inspired by Ireland” (*Kiberd*, p.244), became a victim of misunderstandings: his efforts and beliefs, which were actually close to those of the League, were generally unknown to the public, instead he was condemned because of his supposed close affiliation to Yeats, although he did not share Yeats’ aristocratic attitudes (cf. *Kiberd*, p.238), and because his plays were most unpopular: “the antagonism of nationalists increased with every passing year” (*Kiberd*, p. 243).

### 3. Anglo-Irish dialect in “Riders to the Sea”

#### 3.1 The nominal group

The *nominal group* can appear in several versions: it can replace “like” with “the like(s) of”, it can replace the conjunction “so that” in a clause of purpose with “the way ...”, and in a question the nominal group phrase “what way ?” can replace “how ?”.

In *Riders to the Sea*, the nominal group can be found 12 times, and all the different versions mentioned above appear:

“Maurya: How would *the like of her* get a good price for a pig ?” (*Plays*, p. 9 )

“Cathleen: ..., and I’ll put them up in the turf loft, *the way* she won’t know ...” (*Plays*, p. 7 )

“Maurya: *What way* will I live and the girls with me, ... “ (*Plays*, p. 11 )

#### 3.2 Pronouns: The suppressed relative pronoun and the use of reflexive pronouns

In *Riders to the Sea*, many sentences lack a relative pronoun which Standard English would require.

This tendency seems to be a direct influence of the Irish language, “in which there is no true relative pronoun capable of inflection” (*Greene*, p. 65).

Indeed, in *Riders to the Sea* there are 17 instances where a relative pronoun (which would have to be used in Standard English) is omitted altogether, whereas there are, in contrast, merely 3 properly used relative pronouns:

“Cathleen: ... hags *that* do be flying...” (*Plays*, p. 17 )

“Nora: ... a man *who* was a great rower...” (*Plays*, p. 17 )

“Maurya: ...a fish *that* would be stinking.” (*Plays*, p. 25 )

The following example from *Riders to the Sea* will show how the relative pronoun may be suppressed: “Nora: It’s a shirt and plain stocking [which] were got off ... .” (*Plays*, p. 5 )

In *Riders to the Sea*, Synge often replaces the Standard English personal pronoun with a reflexive pronoun, or he adds the ‘third person neuter reflexive pronoun’ to a sentence to emphasize what is said.

“Nora: ..., you can tell *herself* ... ” (*Plays*, p. 5 )

“Nora: *Herself* does be saying prayers ... “ (*Plays*, p. 5 )

“Maurya: Where is he *itself*? “ (*Plays*, p. 7 )

“Maurya: If it isn’t found *itself*, ... or a thousand horses you had *itself*, ... “  
(*Plays*, p. 9)

### 3.3 Progressive forms

Greene points out that “ in Anglo-Irish the progressive form of the verb ... is used much more often than in Standard English” (*Greene*, p.66), and this is especially true as to *Riders to the Sea*: there are more than 50 progressive forms in this relatively short play, and this impression of a vast amount of progressive forms is further enhanced by the use of the present participle in the ‘and’ and ‘after’ constructions (see chapters 3.4 and 3.5).

Synge always uses progressive forms whenever one of the play’s characters expresses his opinion or his feelings.

“Nora: ..., and *I’m thinking* it won’t be long ... “ (*Plays*, p. 7 )

“Maurya: ..., *I’m telling* you, ... “ (*Plays*, p. 9 )

“Cathleen: Did you see Bartley, *I’m saying* to you ? “ (*Plays*, p. 17 )

### 3.4 The ‘and’ construction

According to Greene, “ this construction ... is taken over directly from Irish, where a subordinate clause may be loosely related to the main clause by ‘agus’ - and - followed by a noun or participle.” (*Greene*, p.66)

In the same way that Synge prefers the use of progressive forms, he also prefers in almost all cases to connect subordinate clauses to their main clause by the ‘and’ construction; it appears more than 30 times in *Riders to the Sea*, and is often linked to an ‘after’ construction (see chapter 3.5) .

This construction can express various types of subordination, but it most commonly replaces temporal clauses ( which would, in Standard English, have to be preceded by conjunctions like ‘when’ or ‘while’):

“Cathleen: Why wouldn’t you give him your blessing *and he looking* ... ?”  
(*Plays*, p. 11 )

“Cathleen: ... give him this *and he passing*. “ (*Plays*, p. 13 )

An example of an ‘and’ construction replacing a clause of reason would be the following:

“Another Man: ... of the nails, *and all the coffins* she’s seen made ... “ (*Plays*, p. 25 )

(In Standard English, this sentence might look like this: “It’s a great wonder she wouldn’t think of the nails, *because* she has seen so many coffins made already.” )

### 3.5 The ‘after’ construction

This construction is “ again a translation of an Irish construction - ‘after’ + gerund - and in Anglo-Irish it often replaces the Standard English Perfect ... most commonly the English Perfect with just“ (*Greene*, p.68).

In *Riders to the Sea*, Synge uses the ‘after’ construction as often as he uses Standard English Perfect (12 times to 11 times), and he also replaces Standard English Perfect with a past participle without any auxiliary verb (this occurs 8 times, e.g. “Maurya: ... since the day Bride Dara [has] *seen* the dead man ... ” (*Plays*, p. 19 ) ).

As was said before, Synge often uses the ‘after’ construction in connection with the ‘and’ construction, thus enhancing the effect which both constructions have when they are used individually.

“Nora: The young priest is *after bringing* [has just brought] them.” (*Plays*, p. 5 )

“Maurya: ..., *and I after giving* a big price for the finest white boards ...

Bartley: How would it be found, *and we after looking* each day ... “ (*Plays*, p. 9 )

### 3.6 The copula

This construction is, again, an adaptation of an Irish construction: “In Irish there



are two forms of 'to be', the substantive verb 'tá' and the copula 'is'. This copula is used when some part of the predicate requires emphasis", then the verb "can be preceded by the copula" (*Greene*, p.67).

Greene explains that "the phonetic similarity between 'it's' and 'is' must have lightened the task of the early bilingual speaker when he instinctively sought to reproduce the Irish construction in English" (*Greene*, p.67).

Synge makes extensive use of the copula in *Riders to the Sea*, there are almost 40 copula constructions in the play. It is commonly used to let one speaker pick up a word or phrase of the speaker preceding him, and this practice is common in Anglo-Irish because it closely follows Irish in almost always answering with a responsive sentence instead of a simple 'yes' or 'no'.

"Bartley: *It's* hard set we'll be from this day with no one in it but one man ... "

Maurya: *It's* hard set we'll be surely ... " (*Plays*, p. 9-11 )

"Nora: *It's* destroyed he'll be going till dark night ...

Cathleen: *It's* destroyed he'll be surely ... " (*Plays*, p. 11-13 )

### 3.7 Reported speech

Whenever one of the characters in *Riders to the Sea* repeats what another person said, Synge avoids the use of reported speech, he rather let's the characters repeat the direct speech:

"Nora: ... 'If it's Michael's they are', says he, 'you can tell herself he's got a clean burial ..., ... for she'll be getting her death', says he, 'with crying ... " (*Plays*, p. 5 )

In Standard English, reported questions are preceded either by a question word or by 'if'/'whether', and the word order is identical with statements. In Irish, and in Anglo-Irish dialect, too, no such distinction between direct and indirect questions is made, "... the reported question is given as though in direct speech" (*Greene*, p.67). Synge uses both the the Anglo-Irish form and the English form in *Riders to the Sea*.

"Cathleen: Did you ask him would he stop Bartley ...? " (*Plays*, p. 5 )

[ Did you ask him *if he would stop* ... ]

“Nora: He went down to see would there be another boat ... “ (*Plays*, p. 7 )

[ He went down to see *if there would be* ... ]

“Nora: We’re to find out *if it’s Michael’s* they are, ... “ (*Plays*, p. 5 )

#### **4. Conclusion**

As Grene claims, “what is immediately striking about ... Synge’s language is its consistency” (*Grene*, p.69) .

In *Riders to the Sea*, Synge clearly repeats several distinct constructions over and over again, and though this may give the impression of a restricted and artificial type of language (which, in a way, it is), it also has certain advantages: one major advantage is that the limited nature of this language is itself the very reason that it is easily comprehensible to audiences not familiar with Irish - all these features of ‘Irishness’ do not make the language seem obscure. Synge establishes a certain rhythm in his dialogues and builds up “structural patterns and key-notes” (*Grene*, p.69) which serve as a kind of guiding line for the understanding and interpretation of the play.

*Riders to the Sea* is a good example for the kind of effect Synge wants to achieve, in Grene’s words, which perfectly express this effect, : “... a free-flowing, full-winded speech with the lightest possible grammatical punctuation” (*Grene*, p.70); dialogues that are, at the same time, poetical and primitive - primitive as to grammatical refinement, but poetical and dramatic in what is expressed - just like the characters who are portrayed.

It seems that critics who accuse Synge of being “a faker of peasant speech” (*Kiberd*, p.204) are right, because Synge obviously made his plays’ dialect fit his needs - that it was “exploited ... for poetic and dramatic purposes” (*Grene*, p.60) - he shaped it in the way that he needed it to be.

At the same time, those who hail Synge for writing “plays about characters whose originals in life talked poetically” (*Grene*, p.60) are right, too, as Synge’s dialect really is based on the language of Irish peasants. His shaping of the language, that some critics accuse him of, actually refines the dialect to a synthetic, ‘general Irish’, unrestricted by regional characteristics, a dialect which did not simply reproduce but, as Grene says, “gave direction and form to the peasant speech ... “ (*Grene*, p.62).

Synge’s achievement certainly is the following, too: he managed to integrate the poetic qualities of Irish and of the Gaelic tradition into English, into Anglo-Irish, which could provide Anglo-Irish, and, of course, Synge as a

playwright, with a world-wide audience, and English was, in turn, revived as a literary language of importance (cf. *Greene*, p.200).

This achievement is perfectly expressed by the following sentence by Kilberd: “Strategically poised between two literary languages, this dialect could exploit the poetry of both traditions, ... “ (*Kilberd*, p.202).

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