Dramatic Devices

Cottage. Island home within sight of the sea that is the home of the play’s main characters. The play’s entire action takes place in a single room that serves as a kitchen, workroom, and storage area. The room is sparsely furnished; its most essential features are its fireplace, a spinning wheel, and its front door. The fireplace provides immediate evidence of the simplicity of the family’s existence; it serves both as a cooking oven and as the cottage’s sole source of heat. The fireplace’s fuel is turf, which is stored in a loft beside the fireplace. The primitiveness of these arrangements is crude, even by the standards of the late nineteenth century, when turf-burning ovens were found only in places of extreme isolation and poverty.

The room’s spinning wheel is clearly not decorative since Cathleen begins working at it immediately. The fact that some pieces of clothing are handmade is important in the identification of Michael’s belongings. John Millington Synge makes strong use of the door, through which each drowned member of the house has come, with seawater dripping a trail to the door.

**\*Aran Islands**

\*Aran Islands. Group of small islands off the west coast of Ireland, near the entrance to Galway Bay, on one of whose islands the cottage stands. Exposed to the full fury of the open North Atlantic Ocean, the waters around these islands are extremely dangerous, and the constantly changing weather is unpredictable. The play emphasizes the danger of life on the sea with references to the numbers of men who have drowned in it—including five members of the family. However, sea travel is also essential to the family’s survival—a fact made clear by repeated references to Galway and Connemara on the mainland. Aside from items brought by traveling salesmen, everything the family cannot make must come across the sea.