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| **The White Boards Symbol in *Riders to the Sea*** |

The white boards that Maurya bought to build Michael’s coffin are onstage for the entirety of the play, and their presence is an omen of death that implies that another fatality will occur before the play’s close. Maurya refers to these boards often, which makes clear that death weighs constantly on the minds of the characters. Furthermore, the ambiguity of whose body will go in the coffin underscores the notion that death on the Aran islands is common and encroaching. Though the boards are meant for Michael, his body has not yet washed ashore, which means that the coffin can hold someone else. While Maurya suggests that the boards could be for her, since she won’t live after all her sons are gone, [Bartley’s](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/riders-to-the-sea/characters/bartley) body is the first to be returned to the house. Despite the implication that the coffin is Bartley’s, the boards remain onstage, unbuilt, until the close of the play, since Maurya has inexplicably forgotten to buy the nails needed to build the coffin. Thus, even as the curtain drops, the boards still lean ominously against the wall, implying more death to come.

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| **The Rope Symbol** |

The Rope Symbol IconLike the [white boards](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/riders-to-the-sea/symbols/the-white-boards), the rope that [Bartley](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/riders-to-the-sea/characters/bartley) uses to make a halter for his [horse](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/riders-to-the-sea/symbols/bartley-s-horses) is yet another symbol of death. The rope resembles a noose, an instrument of execution, and Synge further associates the rope with death through Maurya’s statement that they might need the rope to lower Michael’s body into a grave. Significantly, Maurya says this in the context of fighting to keep Bartley from going on the sea where she believes he will die. By telling Bartley not to take the rope in case Michael’s body washes up, she is really telling him that he can’t halter his horse and therefore can’t go to the seashore—Maurya’s and Bartley’s conflict over the rope, then, is a conflict over his life. When Bartley takes the rope (by then a clear symbol of death), it becomes even more obvious that his fate is sealed. The rope also highlights the difficulty of the family’s survival in another context: the pig tries to eat it, which calls attention to the family’s hunger. While the rope is associated with Bartley and Michael’s deaths on the sea, the rope’s association with the pig suggests a different bleak fate for the women, especially since they cannot provide for themselves now that the men are gone.

Fate and Mortality Theme Icon

The Power of the Sea Theme Icon

Age and Gender Theme Icon