

The libretto in brief

Traduzione di Rodney Stringer

The scene is laid entirely in a nondescript fishing small town on the inhospitable east coast of England.

Prologue

At the Moot Hall an inquest is held into the death at sea, under suspicious circumstances, of an apprentice to the fisherman Peter Grimes. Conducted by the lawyer Swallow, one of the village notables, it concludes with a verdict of acquittal for Grimes on the grounds of insufficient evidence. He is given a warning to behave better in future.

Act I

Scene 1

Peter realises that he cannot work without an apprentice, also because he is anxious to earn a better living in order to re-establish his name in the town. Moreover, he wants to marry the widow Ellen Orford. A new apprentice is procured for him by the chemist, Ned Keene. The kind widow Ellen Orford, who is the Borough schoolmistress, offers to accompany the boy to the village from the orphanage of a town not far away. They travel with the carrier Hobson.

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Scene 2

Unfortunately their journey is made at nightfall, and the spring storms have caused landslides along the coast and roads. The travellers are awaited by the whole community, who have barricaded themselves in “The Boar” pub, run by Auntie, where she exhibits her Nieces. Here are heard the dialogues presenting and defining the various characters. Ellen Orford, Hobson and the apprentice at last arrive, exhausted and shivering with cold. But Peter, heedless of the storm, roughly pushes the boy out and takes him straight to his solitary hut.

Act II

Scene 1

A fine summer Sunday morning. The scene is set outside the Borough church. Ellen Orford is knitting, and trying to talk fondly to the boy about his condition. For she has noticed that he unfortunately already bears the marks of ill-treatment received from the impetuous Peter Grimes. At this point the fisherman strides in and abruptly drags the boy away to go fishing, even though it is Sunday which is supposed to be his day off. The whole scene is distinguished by the solemn sonority of the religious service being sung off-stage, in the church with its doors wide open. The service is attended by all the other inhabitants of the Borough. When the congregation comes out onto the square, the notables decide to send a deputation to Grimes’ hut to ascertain the boy’s living conditions.

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Scene 2

When they get there they find the hut surprisingly tidy, but empty. Just before their arrival in fact, Grimes forces the lad through the back door onto the cliff-top, to go out fishing for what he feels sure is going to be a very big catch. Afterwards, they cannot but make their way back to the Borough.

Act III

Scene 1

A few evenings later. From the Moot Hall come the sounds of a dance, attended by the whole community. On the stage, men are going from the Hall to the pub, chasing after the Nieces. Mrs. Sedley, who has been talking to Ned Keene, voices her suspicions about the fate of Grimes and his apprentice, who have been missing for some days. Captain Balstrode and Ellen Orford come across, lying wet on the beach, the sweater which she had knitted for the boy. Amid general apprehension, an expedition is dispatched to search for the man and the boy.

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Scene 2

Later, in a thick fog, Peter appears, worn out and deranged. Ellen tries in vain to console him. But Balstrode convinces him to take his boat out to sea, where he cannot be seen from the shore, and to sink it. At dawn, with its habitual routine and noises, a new day breaks for the Borough. News comes from the coastguard tower that a boat has been sighted sinking on the horizon. No one can see it from the land and nobody takes any notice as they go about their daily business. The scene closes with a chorus that sings of the incessant ebb and flow of the tide.