

## **Nobel Prize in Literature 1905**



**Henryk Sienkiewicz**

The Nobel Prize in Literature 1905 was awarded to Henryk Sienkiewicz "*because of his outstanding merits as an epic writer*".

### ***RESEARCH INFORMATION:***

Wherever the literature of a people is rich and inexhaustible, the existence of that people is assured, for the flower of civilization cannot grow on barren soil. But in every nation there are some rare geniuses who concentrate in themselves the spirit of the nation; they represent the national character to the world. Although they cherish the memories of the past of that people, they do so only to strengthen its hope for the future. Their inspiration is deeply rooted in the past, like the oaktree of Baublis in the desert of Lithuania, but the branches are swayed by the winds of the day. Such a representative of the literature and intellectual culture of a whole people is the man to whom the Swedish Academy has this year awarded the Nobel Prize. He is here and his name is Henryk Sienkiewicz.

He was born in 1846. His youthful work *Szkice węglem* (1877) [Charcoal Sketches] breathes deep and tender sympathy for the oppressed and disinherited of society. Of his other early works one remembers especially the moving story of *Janko muzykant* (1879)

[*Janko the Musician*] and the brilliant portrait of the *Lighthouse Keeper* (*Latarnik*, 1882). The novella *Niewola tatarska* (1880) [Tartar Prison] gave a foretaste of Henryk Sienkiewicz's future performance in the historical novel, in which he did not show his full ability until the appearance of his famous trilogy. Of the three volumes *Ogniem i mieczem* [*With Fire and Sword*] appeared in 1884, *Potop* [*The Deluge*] in 1886-87, and finally *Pan Wolodyjowski* [*Pan Michael*] in 1888-89. The first volume describes the revolt of the Cossacks supported by the Tartars in 1648-49; the second deals with the Polish war against Charles Gustave; and the third with the war against the Turks, during which the fortress of Kamieniec was taken after a heroic defence. The climax of *Ogniem i mieczem* is the description of the siege of Sbaraz and of the internal struggle of the inflexible Jeremi Wisniowiecki, debating within himself whether his being indubitably the most resourceful general gives him the right to usurp supreme command. The struggle of conscience ends in the hero's victory over his ambition. Let us mention in passing that in his trilogy the author has described three sieges, that of Sbaraz, that of Czestochowa, and finally that of Kamieniec, without ever repeating himself in his treatment of the theme. *Potop* contains many excellent tableaux that remain in the reader's memory. There is Kamicia, at the beginning of the novel hardly more than an outlaw induced to fight against his king, who under the influence of his love for a noble woman regains the esteem that he had lost and accomplishes a series of brilliant exploits in the service of the legal order. Olenka, one of Sienkiewicz' many beautiful female characters, is ravishing in her religious faith, her incorruptible rigour, and her devout patriotism. Even the villains in this story are interesting. There is the sombre and masterly portrait of Prince Janusz Radziwill, who took up arms against his country, and the description of the banquet at which he tried to inveigle his officers into betraying Poland. Even the traitor has his beauty, and an English critic has drawn attention to the psychological refinement with which Henryk Sienkiewicz shows us the prince debating with his conscience and wilfully deluding himself into believing that his rebellion would serve the cause of Poland. Incapable of persisting for long in this voluntary blindness, the prince dies of remorse vainly repressed. Even in the

unreliable and libertine Prince Boguslaw there are certain attractive traits of personal courage, of courtly grace and cheerful insouciance. Henryk Sienkiewicz knows people too well to present them uniformly white or black. Another distinctive trait is Sienkiewicz' habit of never shutting his eyes to the faults of his compatriots; rather he exposes them mercilessly, while he renders justice to the abilities and courage of the enemies of Poland. Like the old prophets of Israel he often tells his people strong truths. Thus in his historical tableaux he blames the excessive Polish desire for individual liberty, which frequently led to a dissipation of energy and made impossible the sacrifice of private interests to the public good. He upbraids the lords for their quarrels and their unwillingness to adapt themselves to the justifiable needs of the state. But Sienkiewicz is always a patriot who certainly puts the brave chivalry of the Polish people in its proper light and who emphasizes the great role effectively played by Poland, formerly the bulwark of Christendom against the Turks and the Tartars. This high objectivity is above all proof of the wisdom of Sienkiewicz' mind and his conception of history. As a good Pole he must disapprove the attack of Charles Gustave against Poland, but nonetheless he gives brilliant portraits of the personal courage of the king and of the excellent discipline and cohesion of the Swedish troops.

It has often been said that *Pan Wolodyjowski* is the weakest part of the trilogy. We find it hard to subscribe to that opinion. One need only remember the moving account of how the wife of Wolodyjowski escapes from the wily Tartar Azya who combines the qualities of serpent and lion, or the admirable portrait of Basia herself, that beautiful and dauntless soldier wife who combines sweetness with gaiety and courage. The last part of the trilogy is especially rich in gentle and purely human features, as in the beautiful and sublime scene of farewell between Basia and Wolodyjowski, who is about to let himself be blown up with his fort. While the victorious Turks surround the fortress of Kamieniec, when all means of rescue have been exhausted and disaster is imminent, husband and wife are united during an August night in a sort of niche formed by a walled-up gate. He comforts her and reminds her how much happiness they had been granted together and

that death is merely a transition. The first to begin the journey to the beyond would only prepare for the coming of the other. The episode is marvellous and enchanting. Although it is not sentimental, it contains such a wealth of pure and true feeling that it is difficult to read it without emotion. The description of Wolodyjowski's burial is equally grandiose, though in a different manner. At the foot of the coffin Basia, stretched out on the tiles of the church, is overcome by grief. The chaplain beats the tambourine as if he were giving a signal of alarm and exhorts the dead hero to rise from the catafalque and combat the enemy as before. Then, mastering this outburst of grief, he praises the manly courage and virtues of the dead and prays to God that in this time of extreme danger for the country He may give rise to a liberator. At this moment Sobieski enters the church. All eyes' turn toward him. Seized by prophetic enthusiasm, the priest exclaims «Salvator» and Sobieski falls to his knees at the side of Wolodyjowski's bier.

All of these descriptions are distinguished by great historical truthfulness. Because of Sienkiewicz' extensive researches and his sense of history, his characters speak and act in the style of the period. It is significant that among the many persons who suggested Henryk Sienkiewicz for the Nobel Prize there were eminent historians.

The trilogy abounds in descriptions of nature admirable in their freshness. Where would one find the equivalent of the very short but unforgettable description in *Ogniem i mieczem* of the steppe as it awakens in the spring, when flowers rise from the soil, insects buzz, wild geese pass over, birds sing, and wild horses with floating manes and dilated nostrils rush away like a whirlwind at the sight of a troop of soldiers?

Another remarkable trait of this grandiose trilogy is its humour. The little knight Wolodyjowski is certainly admirably drawn, but the portrait of the jovial nobleman Zagloba imprints itself perhaps even more firmly in our memory. His vainglory, his girth, and his taste for wine recall Falstaff, but these are their only common traits. Whereas Falstaff is of a dissipated and questionable character, Zagloba has a heart of gold; he is faithful to his friends in times of danger. Zagloba himself pretends to be a sober man, made to be a good priest, but in truth he is much addicted to the pleasures of the table. He loves wine and

declares that only traitors renounce it because they are afraid to give away their secrets when drunk; what makes him especially abhor the Turks is the fact that they do not drink wine. Zagloba is a terrible gossip - a quality that he considers necessary in winter because otherwise the tongue might freeze and become numb. He flaunts military decorations and boasts of military exploits in which he never took part. In reality his courage - for he has courage - is of another kind. He trembles before every encounter like a coward, but once the battle has begun he is seized by rage against the enemy who will not let him live in peace and he becomes capable of true feats of courage, as when he defeats the terrible Cossack Burlaj. Moreover, he is wily and resourceful like Odysseus and often finds a way out when the others have come to the end of their tether. He is basically a debonair and emotional man, who sheds tears when some great mishap befalls his friends. He is a good patriot and unlike so many others he does not desert his king. It has been said that the character of Zagloba lacks consistency because in the last volume of the trilogy the grotesque gossip becomes more serious and acquires more social consideration. This opinion is inconsiderate. Sienkiewicz wanted to show us precisely how Zagloba develops and becomes somewhat ennobled while at the same time retaining his old faults. Such a relative improvement is all the more natural as Zagloba despite all his bizarre faults is basically as good as a child. Such as he is, Zagloba belongs forever to the gallery of immortal comic characters of world literature, and he is thoroughly original.

The diversity of Henryk Sienkiewicz' talent became apparent when in 1890 he passed from the warrior portraits of his trilogy to a modern psychological novel and published *Bez dogmatu* [*Without Dogma*], which is considered by many critics his main work. The novel is in the form of a journal, but unlike so many other journals, it is never tiresome. With an art hardly surpassed elsewhere it presents to us the type of a wordly man, a religious and moral sceptic, who becomes unproductive because of his morbid need for self-analysis. Through his perpetual indecision, he prevents his own happiness, sacrifices that of others, and finally succumbs. Ploszowski is a highly gifted man, but he lacks moral bones, so to speak: he is without dogma. He is hyper-aesthetic and extremely

sophisticated, but the sophistication cannot replace his lack of faith and spontaneity. There is the figure of Anielka, delightful in her sad melancholy, who watches the best hopes of her life pass away through the egotism of Ploszowski, yet until the end remains faithful to the laws of duty. The author shows us with insight how in a soul that has once been Christian, like that of Ploszowski, the cult of beauty is insufficient to fill the void left by the loss of religious sentiment. Sienkiewicz has portrayed a type which exists in all countries, a brilliant figure marred by intellectual neurasthenia. *Bez dogmatu* is a profoundly serious book that invites reflection, but at the same time it is an exquisite work of art, delicately chiselled. The inspired account vibrates with controlled melancholy, and if the book appears at times cold, it is the cold of a work of sculpture inherent in many beautiful and noble works of art. We find this frequently, for instance, in the works of Goethe.

*Bez dogmatu* was followed in 1894 by *Rodzina Polanieckich* [*Children of the Soil*], a work less inspired than *Bez dogmatu* but characterized by great depth in its description of the contrast of a useful country life and hollow cosmopolitanism. Here again we find the figure of a superb woman, the candid, devoted, and tender Marynia. Critics have raised objections to a detail; that is, the sin of passion which Polanieckich commits. Far from defending him, the author has illustrated how a man whose life is neither abnormal nor excessive, let alone perverted, is nonetheless capable of committing a fault, but soon comes to his senses and repents it without soft complacency. The ties between Polanieckich and his wife are re-established even more firmly at the end of the book, and the novel is really a glorification of domestic virtues and of sane and salutary social activity. There is much charm in the delicately drawn portrait of the sick child Litka, who sacrifices her child's love for Polanieckich in order to reconcile him with Marynia. The episode is sublime and rich in purity and moving poetry.

The same critics who blamed his trilogy for being too long have cavilled at the rapid pace of the short tale *Pojdźmy za nim* (1892) [*Let Us Follow Him*], a simple sketch that paints with great poetic beauty how the countess Antea, ill and suffering from painful and dangerous hallucinations, is cured by the dying and resurrected Saviour. In each case the

criticism is irrelevant, for the different subjects demand a different treatment. *Pojdźmy za nim* is admittedly a sketch, but it is a story of deep and moving sensibility. Thus a master's casual chalk sketch because of its intimate characters is often almost equal in value to his more elaborate works. *Pojdźmy za nim* is written with noble piety; it is a modest flower growing at the foot of the cross and enclosing in its blossom a drop of the blood of the Saviour.

Religious subjects soon led Sienkiewicz to a vast work that has become universally famous. In 1895-96 he wrote *Quo Vadis*. This history of the persecutions under Nero had an extraordinary success. The English translation sold 800,000 copies in England and America in one year. Professor Brückner, the historian of Polish literature in Berlin, estimated in 1901 that about two million copies had been sold in these two countries alone.

*Quo Vadis* has been translated into more than thirty languages. Although one should not overestimate the importance of such a success - bad books also spread easily provided they are seductive - it still points clearly to the value of a work that never addresses itself to the lower instincts of man but treats an elevated subject in an elevated manner. *Quo Vadis* excellently describes the contrast between the sophisticated but gangrened paganism with its pride, and humble and confident Christianity, between egotism and love, between the insolent luxury of the imperial palace and the silent concentration of the catacombs. The descriptions of the fire at Rome and the bloody scenes in the amphitheatre are without equal. Henryk Sienkiewicz discreetly avoids making Nero a major character, but in a few strokes he has portrayed to us the dilettante crowned with all his vanity and the folly of his grandeur, all his false exaltation, all his cult of superficial art void of moral sense, and all his capricious cruelty. The portrait of Petronius, drawn in greater detail, is even better. The author was able to rely on the inspired sketch in the two short chapters of the sixteenth book of Tacitus' *Annals*. Starting from these very brief hints Sienkiewicz has constructed a psychological picture that gives a strong appearance of truthfulness and is extremely penetrating. Petronius, the man of sophisticated culture, *arbiter elegantiae*, is a bundle of contradictions. Epicurean and above all sceptic, he considers life a deceptive mirage.

Pleasures have made him effeminate, but he still has the courage of a man. While free of prejudices, he is at times superstitious. His sense of good and evil is not strongly developed, but his sense of the beautiful is all the more marked. He is a man of the world and in delicate situations he is capable of acquitting himself with skill and sang-froid without compromising his dignity. The sceptic Pyrrhon and the poet of pleasure Anacreon please him more than the uncouth moralists of the Stoa. He despises the Christians, whom he knows little. It seems to him pointless and unworthy of a man to render good for bad according to Christian doctrine. To hope for a life after death, as the Christians do, seems to him as strange as if one were to announce that a new day begins at night. Ruined by the favourite Tigellinus, Petronius dies with the serenity of a death that he had sought himself. The entire description is perfect in its genre. But *Quo Vadis* contains many other admirable things. Especially beautiful is the episode, lit by the setting sun, in which the apostle Paul goes to his martyrdom repeating to himself the words that he had once written: «I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith» (2 Tim., 4: 7).

After this major work Henryk Sienkiewicz returned to the national Polish novel and in 1901 wrote *Krzyzacy* [*The Knights of the Cross*]. The task was this time less easy than in the case of the trilogy because there were fewer sources. But Sienkiewicz overcame the difficulties and gave to his version a strong medieval colour. The subject of the novel is the fight of the Polish and Lithuanian nations against the Teutonic Knights who, having long ago finished their original mission, had become an oppressive institution more occupied with power and terrestrial gains than with the cross whose insignia the members of the order bore on their coats. It was the Archduke Jagiello, later King of Poland under the name of Wladislaw II, who broke the dominance of the order. He plays a role in the novel, although he is only sketchily drawn according to Sienkiewicz' custom of not giving too much prominence to historical characters. The many characters which are entirely the product of the author's rich fancy attract our attention more strongly and furnish excellent examples of medieval civilization. It was a superstitious epoch and, although the country had been Christianized for a long time, people still put food out at night for vampires and



revenants. Each saint had his articular function. Apollonia was invoked for toothaches, Liberius for stones. It is true that God the Father rules the universe, but this very fact proves that he has no time to look after human affairs of minor importance; consequently he has delegated certain functions to saints. That epoch was indeed superstitious, but it was also full of energy. Huge and solid, the castle of the order stands at Marienburg. The Polish and Lithuanian opponents of the monastic knights do not lack force, either. There is Macko, crude, greedy, bent on the interests of his family, but brave. There is the noble Zbyszko, his mind full of chivalrous adventures. Surpassing all the others, colossal, as if cut in granite, there is the redoubtable Jurand, cruel in his hatred of the Teutonic Order and finally the victim of its terrible revenge. In the hour of his humiliation he is more sublime than ever because of his self-victory and the power of his forgiveness. He is one of the most grandiose of Sienkiewicz' warrior characters. Tableaux of gentleness alternate with those of force. Queen Jadwiga is gentle, but her appearance is elusive. The description of the funeral for the poor, sorely tested Danusia is delicately beautiful like a softly chanted passion service. On the other hand, the fresh and springlike picture of Jagienka is radiant with exuberant health and liveliness. All these creations have their individual life. Among the outstanding minor characters are the irascible and bellicose Abbé, unable to brook any contradiction, and Sanders, the seller of indulgences, who sells a hoof of the donkey on which the flight to Egypt took place, a piece of the ladder of Jacob, the tears of the Egyptian Mary, and a little rust from the keys of St. Peter. The closing episode, the battle of Tannenberg in 1410 in which the squadrons of the Teutonic Order were crushed after a heroic battle, is like the finale of a splendid musical drama.

Henryk Sienkiewicz is certainly the first to recognize his debt to old Polish literature. That literature is indeed rich. Adam Mickiewicz is its true Adam, its ancestor by virtue of the full nature of the poetry that distinguishes his great epic. Brilliant as the stars in the sky of Polish literature are the names of Slowacki, a man of fertile imagination, and of the philosopher Krasinski. The epic art has been successfully practised by men like

Korzeniowski, Kraszewski, and Rzewuski. But with Henryk Sienkiewicz that art has reached its full bloom and presents itself in its highest degree of objectivity.

If one surveys Sienkiewicz' achievement it appears gigantic and vast, and at every point noble and controlled. As for his epic style, it is of absolute artistic perfection. That epic style with its powerful over-all effect and the relative independence of episodes is distinguished by naive and striking metaphors. In this respect, as Geijer has remarked, Homer is the master because he perceives grandeur in simplicity as, for example, when he compares the warriors to flies that swarm around a pail of milk, or when Patroklos, who all in tears asks Achilles to let him fight against the enemies, is compared to a little girl who weeping clings to the dress of her mother and wants to be taken in her arms. A Swedish critic has noticed in Sienkiewicz some similes that have the clarity of Homeric images. Thus the retreat of an army is compared to a retreating wave that leaves mussels and shells on the beach, or the beginning of gunfire is compared to the barking of a village dog who is soon joined in chorus by all the other dogs. The examples could be multiplied. The attack on the front and rear of an army surrounded and subject to fire from both sides is compared to a field that is reaped by two groups of mowers who begin their work at opposite sides of the field with the purpose of meeting in the middle. In *Krzyzacy* the Samogites rising from furrows attack the German knights like a swarm of wasps whose nest has been damaged by a careless wanderer. In *Pan Wolodyjowski* we also find admirable images; in order to judge them we should remember that, as often in Homer, the two terms of the comparison converge only in one point, while the rest remains vague. Wolodyjowski with his unique sword kills human lives around him as rapidly as a choir boy after the mass snuffs the candles on the altar one after the other with his long extinguisher. Hussein Pasha, the commander of the Turkish army who vainly tries to leave by the gate that leads to Jassy, returns to the camp to try another exit, just as a poacher who has been tracked in a park tries to escape now on one side and now on the other. The Christian martyrs of *Quo Vadis* who are prepared for death are already as removed from earthly places as mariners who have pushed off and left the quay. Many more situations equally



Homeric and yet equally natural and spontaneous could be cited; thus in *Krzyzacy* Jagienka at the unexpected sight of Zbyszko, who resembles a young prince, stops short at the gate and nearly drops the jug of wine.

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