

## **Nobel Prize in Literature 1909**



**Selma Ottilia Lovisa Lagerlöf**

The Nobel Prize in Literature 1909 was awarded to Selma Lagerlöf *"in appreciation of the lofty idealism, vivid imagination and spiritual perception that characterize her writings"*.

### **RESEARCH INFORMATION:**

History tells us that there was a time when Sweden fought for a world prize on the field of martial honour. The time of arms has passed, but in the international competition for peaceful prizes our people have for a long time held a position of esteem, and now the hour has finally come when Sweden can enter into literary competition with the great nations. The realm of the mind is determined by living powers that are not measured by population or golden millions but by the idealistic and ethical demands which they satisfy.

Geijer, Tegnér, or Runeberg, to mention only them, could justly have laid claim to the Nobel Prize, and the development which these great men have started has grown to fuller bloom. But among the writers of the younger generation who have contributed so much to our literature, there is one name that enjoys the special splendour of a star of the first magnitude. In the works of Selma Lagerlöf we seem to recognize the purest and best features of our Great Swedish Mother. Five years ago the Swedish Academy recognized the importance and strength of her achievement for Swedish poetry by awarding her the Gold

Medal «because of the imaginative wealth, idealism, and narrative talent that are evidenced in her works, which are beloved inside and outside the borders of Sweden». This homage was strongly appreciated by all classes in our nation. Surely the same nation will be proud to hear today that the Swedish Academy has found Selma Lagerlöf's literary achievement so important that her works should be counted among those considered the property of all mankind and that they are full of the idealism which Nobel required for the award of the Nobel Prize. It should not be thought that this decision was inspired by excessive national self-esteem, especially since many important foreign opinions have supported her candidacy. Nor would anybody consider it a lack of modesty if the Nobel Prize, which is now being awarded for the ninth time, remains in the country of its founder; on the contrary, such modesty could be interpreted as a lack of national self-confidence.

Few first novels have attracted so much attention as *Gösta Berlings Saga* (1891). The work was significant not only because it broke decisively with the unhealthy and false realism of the times, but also because of its own original character. Yet the work was not unanimously praised; if most people admired it greatly, some criticized it severely. There could be no better proof of its extraordinary character. One could not help admiring an imagination that had not had its peer since Almqvist's days. However peculiar the characters and situations created by this imagination might be, they were covered by the marvellous bloom of artistic genius, and the presentation at times exhibited rapturous beauty. The reader was particularly moved by the profound feeling that in this work he was encountering a forgotten piece of what had once been Swedish country life; his heart was captured, just as the curious, radiant surface of the picture enchanted his senses. This first novel did have its weaknesses; how could it be otherwise! Where is gold found pure; when does a genius enter the world completely mature? But one thing was abundantly clear: a new genius of genuine Swedish nature was trying its wings.

Soon she was to enter the realm of her true heritage, the mystical world of fairy tales and legends. Only a soul that had fed on legends since the days of childhood, and that added love to a rich imagination, could dare to interpret the secrets of the invisible world that the

visionary always sees beside or rather beneath the visible world. The visionary quality that is so characteristic in Lagerlöf's writings has been stronger in her than in anyone since the days of St. Birgitta. Just as refractions in the hot air of the desert create a vivid fata morgana for the wanderer, so her warm and colourful imagination possesses a wonderful power of giving to her visions the force of living reality, which is instinctively recalled by whoever listens to her poetry. This is particularly true of her description of nature. For her, everything, even what is called inanimate nature, has its own, invisible, but real life; and therefore her artist's hand is not content with representing the outward beauty of nature. Her loving eye follows the inner life whose silent language has been caught by her fine ear. That is why she has succeeded in eliciting beautiful secrets from fairy tales, living folk legends, and saints' stories; secrets that had been hidden from the wordly-wise but which true simplicity perceives because, as the poet has the old grandmother say, it «has eyes to see the secrets of God».

As a painter of peasant life she is completely original and can compete with the best of other countries. *Tösen från Stormyrtorpet* (1908) [*The Girl from the Marsh Croft*] is inimitable in its realistic and faithful descriptions, and it contains a new and deeper beauty in the irresistible power of unselfish love which underlies the whole work. And there are many other pieces of equal beauty. But Selma Lagerlöf's talent comes out most clearly in the proud achievement that bears the name *Jerusalem* (1901-02) [*The Holy City*]. The deep spiritual movements that have from time to time aroused the peasant population of our country have rarely been traced so clearly as in this description of the pilgrimage of the people of Dalekarlia to the Holy Land. The reader sees things as dearly as if he himself were experiencing how this strong breed with its serious and introspective character goes its way, brooding heavily over the riddles of life. And it is not surprising if these people, torn between belief and superstition, in the painful struggle between their love of the inherited soil and their fear that they may not walk with God, finally abandon home, since they believe that the bells on high admonish them to march toward the holy city. But it is no less natural if these children of voluntary exile, in the midst of their delight at having seen the

earth that had been touched by the foot of the Saviour, are deep in their hearts consumed by the desire for the simple green soil far north in old Dalarna. The sound of rivers and forests is always in their ears. With loving perception the poet has sounded the secret depth of their souls and a bloom of purest poetry transforms the realistic and faithful description of their touching and simple lives. The introduction to *Jerusalem*, entitled «Ingemarssönerna» [Ingemar's Sons], movingly intimates that the lives and deeds of the fathers work like a force of destiny on later generations.

Selma Lagerlöf's style deserves our full appreciation. Like a loyal daughter, she has administered the rich heritage of her mother tongue; from this source come the purity of diction, the clarity of expression, and the musical beauty that are characteristic of all her works.

Purity and simplicity of diction, beauty of style, and power of imagination, however, are accompanied by ethical strength and deep religious feeling. And indeed it could not be otherwise in someone to whom the life of man is a «thread on God's great loom». In poetry of such elevation the air is always pure; more than one of her beautiful legends reflect the simplicity and loftiness of Scripture. But what makes Selma Lagerlöf's writings so lovable is that we always seem to hear in them an echo of the most peculiar, the strongest, and the best things that have ever moved the soul of the Swedish people. Few have comprehended the innermost nature of this people with a comparable love. It is her own heart that speaks when in *Tösen från Stormyrtorpet* the strict judge, whose severe features have increasingly brightened at the sight of the sacrificial love of the young girl, finally says with deep emotion to himself: «That is my people. I shall not be angry with them since there is so much love and fear of God in one of their humblest creatures.» Such an intimate and profound view is possible only for one whose soul is deeply rooted in the Swedish earth and who has sucked nourishment from its myths, history, folklore, and nature. It is easy to understand why the mystical, nostalgic, and miraculous dusk that is peculiar to the Nordic nature is reflected in all her works. The greatness of her art consists precisely in her ability

to use her heart as well as her genius to give to the original peculiar character and attitudes of the people a shape in which we recognize ourselves.

We are acting according to the will of the founder if we honour those who have had such success in appealing to the best sides of the human heart, and whose name and achievement have penetrated far beyond the borders of Sweden. Nor should anyone who bears a famous literary name, whether inside or outside the country, be envious if the Swedish Academy today pronounces that it has awarded this year's Nobel Prize in Literature to Sweden's distinguished daughter, Selma Lagerlöf

**For more details please visit:**

[http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/1909/press.html](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1909/press.html)