

Nobel Prize in Literature 1911



Count Maurice (Mooris) Polidore Marie Bernhard Maeterlinck

The Nobel Prize in Literature 1911 was awarded to Maurice Maeterlinck *"in appreciation of his many-sided literary activities, and especially of his dramatic works, which are distinguished by a wealth of imagination and by a poetic fancy, which reveals, sometimes in the guise of a fairy tale, a deep inspiration, while in a mysterious way they appeal to the readers' own feelings and stimulate their imaginations"*.

RESEARCH INFORMATION:

This year highly competent persons have proposed several men of letters as candidates for the Nobel Prize in Literature. Several among them presented such great and unusual qualities that it has been very difficult to weigh their respective merits. In giving this year's award to Maurice Maeterlinck, who has been proposed and seriously considered several times before, the Swedish Academy has been determined first by the profound originality and singularity of his talent as a writer, so different from the usual forms of literature. The idealistic character of this talent is elevated to a rare spirituality and mysteriously causes delicate and secret strings to vibrate in us. He is certainly not of a shallow nature, this unusual man, who has not yet reached the age of fifty and who, as an author, follows his own quite personal voice and possesses the marvellous faculty of being

Call for research and Review articles publication: ijsidonlineinfo@gmail.com

at once mystical, profound, and popular through the charm of his expression. While reading him one sometimes recalls the words of Sophocles, «Man is only a trivial shadow», or the words of Calderon that life is a dream; and yet Maeterlinck knows how to render the fine nuances of our moral life with the force of a visionary. What in ordinary circumstances dwells in us latently and belongs to the secret depths of our being, he calls up with the tap of a wand, and we acknowledge that he has evoked features of our most intimate being, which ordinarily remains hidden in a mysterious twilight. He does it without affectation and mannerisms and mostly with an unflinching sureness and classical refinement, although action and scenery are often vague - like a Chinese shadow show - and in keeping with the great subtlety of his poetry. Legendary and fantastic as the narration may be, the dialogue is pointed. With the sounds of muted music, the poet introduces us to unsuspected regions of our inner being, and we feel with Goethe that «Alles Vergängliche/Ist nur ein Gleichnis». We have the foreboding that our true home is far away, well beyond the limits of our earthly experiences. We hardly ever pass beyond this foreboding with Maeterlinck, although his poetry opens for us glimpses of inaccessible distances.

Maurice Maeterlinck was born in 1862 at Ghent. His family appears to have been well-to-do. He was educated at the Jesuit college of Saint-Barbe. He did not like it, but this conventional school probably influenced his intellectual development very strongly by orienting him toward mysticism. After finishing school and passing the baccalaureate, Maeterlinck followed the wishes of his parents, read law, and established himself in Ghent as a lawyer. But he succeeded, according to his biographer Gerard Harry, only in demonstrating brilliantly his ineptitude for the legal career, having the «happy defects» that render a man absolutely unfit for the pettifogging quarrels and public counsel's speeches in the law court. He was attracted by literature, and this attraction increased during a stay in Paris where he became acquainted with a number of writers, one of whom, Villiers de l'Isle Adam, apparently had a great influence on him. Paris fascinated Maurice Maeterlinck so much that he established himself there in 1896. Nonetheless, the great metropolis did not really suit this solitary contemplative mind as a permanent place to live.

He goes there, from time to time, to deal with his editors, but in the summer he likes to live at Saint-Wandrille, an old Norman abbey which he bought and saved from imminent vandalism. In the winter he seeks refuge in the mild climate of the town of Grasse, known for its flowers.

The first work published by Maurice Maeterlinck was a slim collection of verses entitled *Serres chaudes* (1889) [Ardent Talons]. These poems appear more tormented than one would have expected from his calmly meditative disposition. The same year (1889) he published a dramatic fantasy, *La Princesse Maleine*. It is sombre, terrifying, and deliberately monotonous due to numerous repetitions intended to give an impression of duration; but a delightful fairy-tale charm reigns in this little drama, which is written with a vigour one would not have suspected in the author of the *Serres chaudes*. It is in any case an important work of art. *La Princesse Maleine* was enthusiastically praised by Octave Mirbeau in *Le Figaro*, and from that day on Maurice Maeterlinck was no longer unknown. Later on, Maeterlinck wrote a whole series of dramatic compositions. Most unfold in eras that we could not determine and in places not to be found on any map. The scene is usually a fairy castle with underground passages, a park with lovely shady places, or a lighthouse with the sea in the distance. In these melancholy regions figures often move veiled like the idea itself. In several of his most perfect scenic works, Maurice Maeterlinck is a symbolist and an agnostic; but one should not conclude that he is a materialist. With the instinct and imagination of the poet he feels that man does not belong solely to the tangible world, and he expressly says that poetry does not satisfy if it does not make us perceive a reflection of the more profound and secret reality that is the source of phenomena. Sometimes this background appears to him in an obscure and misty fashion like an ensemble of occult powers of which men are easily the victims, and he then attributes to the occult force a fatal omnipotence that destroys our freedom. But in several dramatic works he has mitigated this conception; he has given more room to hope and to mixed mystic influences, less to reality. The main idea which always dominates, especially in his best works, is that the spiritual, real, intimate, and profound life of man, which is manifested precisely in his most

spontaneous acts, must be sought in the realms beyond thought and discursive reason. It is these acts which Maeterlinck excels in representing with the almost somnambulant imaginative power and dreaming spirit of a visionary but with the precision of a perfect artist. At the same time the expression is stylized; the simplification of the technique is pushed as far as possible without harming the understanding of the drama.

A more pronounced deism would have had a beneficial influence on his dramas because it would have made them less similar to shadow plays; but one should not disparage the creations of his genius. Like Spinoza and Hegel, who were great thinkers though not deists, Maeterlinck is a very great poet although his conception of things and of life is not that of a deist. He does not deny anything: he simply finds the principle of existence hidden in the shadows. Besides, is not agnosticism in some degree excusable, since no human reason could ever formulate an exact notion of the origin of existence which in many aspects is accessible only to intuition and to faith? And if Maurice Maeterlinck's characters are sometimes creatures of dreams, they are still very human, for Shakespeare was not wrong in stating

We are such stuff As dreams are made on, and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep

Besides, Maeterlinck is in no way a polemist; in almost all his works there breathes a sweet, sometimes melancholy soul, so that in poetic beauty he excels many writers whose conception of the world rests perhaps more on the concept of personality. Maurice Maeterlinck is evidently a man who has felt and thought profoundly. Homage must be rendered to his sincere thirst for truth, and it must be remembered that there exist for him a law and an inner right which invariably command and direct man in the midst of a world where so many things seem to encourage injustice. If Maurice Maeterlinck, who has passed through so many stages of inner development, sometimes speaks of «gravitation» as the power that rules the world, and apparently wants to substitute it for religion, one would hardly be wrong (considering his symbolism) in taking the word «gravitation» as a

symbolic expression of that law of religio-ethical gravity to which, if I may say so, all are obedient.

There is no time to list all of Maeterlinck's works; however, it seems right to me on this solemn occasion to recall very briefly the most characteristic ones.

The pitiless, mysterious power of death has rarely been rendered in more poignant fashion than in Maeterlinck's little piece, *L'Intruse* (1890) [*The Intruder*]. Among all those who surround the sick mother and who hope for her recovery, only the old blind grandfather notices furtive and sliding steps in the garden where the cyprus trees are beginning to rustle and where the nightingale is hushed; he feels a cold breeze pass, he hears a scythe being whetted, he reckons that someone invisible to the others has entered to sit in their circle. On the stroke of midnight there is a noise as if someone had suddenly stood up and gone away; at the same instant the sick one dies. The guest no one can escape has passed there. The portent is described with great force and subtlety. The short play *Les Aveugles* (1890) [*The Blind*], which shows the same foreboding of disaster, is perhaps even more melancholy. The sightless have followed their guide, an old sick priest; and there in the middle of the forest they believe they have lost him. In reality he is in the middle of them but he is dead. Little by little they realize his death. How will they now find their refuge?

In *Pelléas et Mélisande* (1892) and *Alladine et Palomides* (1894) we find in different variants the fatal power of love which Maeterlinck describes with a fantastic imagination - that love which, fettered by other bonds or by external circumstances, neither could nor should attain a happy ending, but which is crushed by a fatality against which human strength breaks.

The most inspired of Maeterlinck's dramas is unquestionably his *Aglavaine et Sélysette* (1896), one of the purest jewels in world literature. This play is deeply melancholic but contains poetic treasures. Méléandre, who has married the sweet, timid Sélysette, begins to love the noble Aglavaine, a love Aglavaine returns. Theirs is a pure love which raises them above the common lot. But Sélysette suffers from not possessing

Méléandre's heart alone. The tender creature, full of abnegation, resolves to sacrifice herself for the happiness of her husband and Aglavaine. She leans so far out of the embrasures of an old turret that a crumbling part of the wall collapses and Sélysette falls, not into the sea as she had thought, but onto the sand of the beach. Wounded, she is carried to the house, and even on the verge of death she is unselfish; wishing to spare them remorse, she tries to pretend to Méléandre and Aglavaine that her fall from the tower was accidental. In this drama in which delicately shaded states of soul abound, all the characters are noble and generous. Both Aglavaine and Méléandre feel that a happiness that is purchased at the price of another's suffering is fugitive and vain and, if they do not feel less irresistibly drawn to one another, they do not by any means yield to low desires but to a powerful, spiritualized attraction. They struggle against fate, a struggle all the more painful as they well suspect that fraternal love will ultimately be impossible and that everything will lead them to the complete union which they flee as a sin. These words of Aglavaine are beautiful: «If somebody must suffer, it should be us. There are a thousand duties, but I think one is rarely mistaken in the attempt to relieve a weaker creature by taking its suffering upon oneself» This play has a charm which ranks it among the most beautiful poetic creations of the century.

Aglavaine et Sélysette, Maeterlinck's masterpiece, appeared in 1896. In 1902 the author published the drama of *Monna Vanna*, known and played even here in Sweden. The action takes place against the historical background of the Renaissance in Italy; its composition is very clear-cut and entirely free from that kind of twilight which generally characterizes Maeterlinck's art. The dramatic idea of duty which sustains the action has often been disputed, with very diverse opinions. The play is certainly bold and of great psychological interest, but Maeterlinck is perhaps more himself in the short, delicately symbolic plays in which the great, flooding light of day does not hold sway but which open up marvellous perspectives for the most intimate presentiments of the human heart.

Maurice Maeterlinck, a many-sided writer, has written works of a philosophical nature, if not purely philosophical works. Such, for example, is *Le Trésor des humbles*

(1896) [*The Treasure of the Humble*] which, among other interesting studies, contains inspired pages about the mystic Ruysbrock and about the spiritual life. Maeterlinck's idealism finds a happy expression here in his words on the most exalted poetry, which, he says, aims at keeping open the principal paths which lead from the visible to the invisible world. In many places in this book appears the thought mentioned earlier that there is behind our visible self another self which is our true being. This idea may appear mystical to the empiricists; at bottom it is quite as plausible as Kant's doctrine of intelligibility which, after all, is the source of the empirical character. In *Le Temple enseveli* (1902) [*The Buried Temple*] is found the idea of an invisible personality, the basis of the visible and earthly personality. If, however, Maeterlinck is accused of fatalism, one should remember the glowing optimism of his book *La Sagesse et la destinée* (1893) [*Wisdom and Destiny*], in which man's fate is said to reside in himself and to depend on the way in which he exercises his will. The downfall of great historical personages is represented here as caused by their own faults or originating from the fact that they lost their old confidence in themselves through errors, and indeed through evil actions, and thereby lost the strength to combat perils victoriously.

In 1900 *La Vie des abeilles* [*The Life of the Bee*] appeared. This book had strong repercussions. Although Maurice Maeterlinck is an enthusiastic beekeeper and thoroughly familiar with the life of the bees, he did not intend to write a scientific treatise. His book is not an abstract of natural history but an exuberantly poetic work abounding in reflections, the sum total of which is almost a declaration of incompetence. It is useless, the author seems to say, to inquire if the strange cooperation among the bees, their apportionment of work, and their social life are the product of a reasoning mind. It matters little whether the term «instinct» or the term «intelligence» is used, for they are but ways of revealing our ignorance in the matter. What we call instinct among the bees is perhaps of a cosmic nature, the emanation of a universal soul. One immediately thinks of Virgil's immortal description of the bees in which he says that a thinker attributes to them a share of *divina mens*, the divine thought, the divine spirit.

L'Intelligence des fleurs (1907) [*The Intelligence of Flowers*], another of Maeterlinck's works, is interesting for its bold representation of plants as having wisdom and self-interest. Here one finds the same richness of poetic imagination and, occasionally, profound reflections.

With his creative force, which never runs dry, Maeterlinck composed in 1903 the fascinating dramatic phantasy *Joyzelle*, which shows, through difficult trials and sombre episodes, the triumph of love faithful to its own nature. *Marie Magdeleine* (1909) represents the change in the soul of the repentant sinner and her victory over a temptation that was all the stronger as it touched precisely the noblest side of her nature and urged her to save the Messiah at the sacrifice of herself and of the new moral life which he himself had created in her; that is to say, at the sacrifice of the vital work of the Messiah. Finally, we admire the spectacle *L'Oiseau bleu* (1909) [*The Blue Bird*], a profound fairy tale which sparkles with the poetry of childhood, even if it seems to include too much reflection to have quite enough naive spontaneity. Alas! the blue bird of happiness exists only beyond the limits of this perishable world, but those who have pure hearts will never seek it in vain, for their emotional lives and their imaginations will enrich them and purify them in their journey across the countries of the land of dreams.

And so we return to the place we started from, the land of dreams. Perhaps we would not be wrong in saying that for Maurice Maeterlinck, all reality in time and space, even when it is not a product of the imagination, always carries a veil woven of dreams. Under this veil is hidden the real truth of existence, and when the veil is lifted someday, the essence of things will be discovered.

I have tried to give an account of Maeterlinck's conception of life, using his works as a guide. One cannot doubt the beauty and nobility of this conception; moreover, it is presented in the original form of a poetry that is strange and sometimes bizarre but always inspired.

Maurice Maeterlinck belongs to the chosen ones in the field of poetry. Tastes may change, but the charm of *Aglavaine et Sélysette* will remain. Today Sweden, the land of



sagas and folk songs, offers her world prize to the poet who has made us perceive the tender vibrations of the melody that is hidden in the hearts of men.

For more details please visit:

http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1911/press.html