

Nobel Prize in Literature 1917



Karl Adolph Gjellerup



Henrik Pontoppidan

The Nobel Prize in Literature 1917 was divided equally between Karl Adolph Gjellerup "*for his varied and rich poetry, which is inspired by lofty ideals*" and Henrik Pontoppidan "*for his authentic descriptions of present-day life in Denmark*".

RESEARCH INFORMATION:

Karl Gjellerup was born in 1857 and died on October 13, 1919. Like Henrik Pontoppidan, he came from a family of ministers. He chose a career in the clergy although he felt no special calling for it; rather his inclinations drew him strongly toward literature, and alongside his "bread and butter studies" he devoted himself to reading the Greek, English, and especially the German classics. In the course of his theological studies, he came gradually to take a purely negative attitude toward theology and became attracted by the literary radicalism led by Georg Brandes. In 1878 he made his literary début under the pseudonym of "Epigonos" with a short novel entitled *En idealist* [An Idealist]. He published next, in quick succession, a series of tales and poems in which he posed as a fanatic enemy of all theology and as a sworn partisan of Darwin and the doctrine of evolution.

After this first period of anti-theological battles, not marked by a profound originality, Gjellerup undertook a trip abroad during which he collected his thoughts and

found his intellectual equilibrium. At the same time his literary talent took on more distinct outlines: the description of an era, "*Romulus*" (1883); the beautiful short story "*G-Dur*" (1883) [G-Major], a portrait of intimacy; and especially the great drama *Brynhild* (1884), which marks the peak of his talent during this period. The theme of this drama is the episode of the Volsunga Saga in which Sigurd and Brunhilde, finding themselves on the same mountain, are separated by their destiny but dream of and desire one another. This waiting, full of torment, this quiet desire, imbues with sentiment the tragedy which is presented with strength and with great poetic and pictorial richness. The verse, especially in the choruses composed in the ancient fashion, attains great lyric beauty. The scope of the work is due to its depth and form; through its idealism and moral elevation it contrasts absolutely with the other productions of the naturalistic period during which it was written. In spite of his freedom of thought, Gjellerup had at bottom only a few common bonds with the naturalistic school. He had, on the contrary, many more addresses with German classicism, with the literature of antiquity, and with the wealth of sentiments of Wagner, and when he realized this fact, he broke sharply and publicly with the school of Brandes in his travel book, *Vandreaaret* (1885) [Wander Year]. His literary production (plays, lyric poems, stories) was henceforth oriented toward idealism, but at the beginning it only barely succeeded from the artistic point of view, even though the richness of his poetic gifts was always visible in it. The best of the books he published during the last years of this period was the charming novel *Minna* (1889), a truly beautiful love story and a delicate study of feminine psychology which must be classed in the highest rank of Scandinavian novels. Let us cite also that novel with the broadest foundations and a solid construction, *Møllen* (1896) [The Mill], a curious analysis of the state of mind of a murderer who becomes remorseful and denounces himself; it is a work of tragic grandeur. Less remarkable as works of art, but expressive of Gjellerup's high moral ideas about marriage and the relationship between the sexes, are his modern bourgeois dramas *Herman Vandel* (1891) , *Wuthhorn* (1893), and *Hans Excellence* (1895). These dramas are not a plea for marriage. Indeed, the author puts the idea of marriage above banal conventions, and

precisely because he puts it so high, he does not find it realized in ordinary marriages. He proposes as a purer model the free union, even though it would not have the consecration of church or state, provided that this union is the only one in a human life.

These dramas, whose tendency is religious despite their individualistic revolts, form a transition between the first ideas of the author and those which characterize the last and most significant period of his literary life. It was without doubt the enthusiasm for the musical drama of Wagner, to which he devoted a masterly work, which led him to the study of Buddhist wisdom with its annihilation of the personality in the universal world of Nirvana. Among the works written by Gjellerup in the twentieth century, the best ones are inspired precisely by these speculations on India and place on stage Hindu subjects which he has treated so poetically and idealistically that they have aroused general admiration. This period of his work began with a musical play, *Offerildene* (1903) [The Sacrificial Fires], the legend of a young disciple of Brahma who in the simplicity of his pious soul discovers wisdom beneath the literal sense of the law, and who wishes to preserve in the world the three sacrificial fires: the fire of the soul, the flame of love, and the fire of the funeral pyre which consumes the body. Philosophical thought is here allied freely and harmoniously with the creative imagination of a poet. In the great mythic novel, *Pilgrimen Kamanita* (1906), which contains a history of Buddha's, era, Gjellerup has elucidated the essential characteristics of the Buddhist conception of the world, its doctrine of renunciation, its effort toward perfection, and its dreams of paradise, of Nirvana, and of universal destruction. Kamanita is the man in search of earthly satisfactions who, after seeing the fragility of all things, desires instead eternal treasures. We follow him not only during his earthly life but also during the different transformations he undergoes in the "Western Paradise", in which the tropical sumptuousness of India is rediscovered. Those who have destroyed themselves awaken here and leave their lotus buds to participate in the dance of the blessed and to undergo new incarnations, following which their souls begin a new existence in the empire of the Buddha of the hundred thousand cycles. In spite of its uninterrupted speculations on Hindu philosophy, this poem exercises a singular

fascination. Quite intuitively the poet seems to have penetrated into the spiritual life of a far-off people and to have expressed their dreams of it with the visionary's gift. In certain passages of this poem one finds the spirit of the Arabian Nights, and certain parts of the Western Paradise present a penetrating picture of the sumptuous magnificence of the life of the blessed. In the same way the drama *Den fuldendtes hustru* (1907) [The Wife of the Perfect One], which deals with the purifications that Buddha's wife must undergo to attain perfection, is a masterpiece. The author has succeeded in permitting his own nature and genius to shine through these dogmatic and philosophical revelations of a millennial philosophy. Gjellerup's last great work, *Verdens vandrerne* (1910) [World Wanderers], with its half-Oriental, half-western moral, does not attain the same artistic beauty, but it contains beautiful details and holds our interest through a mysticism full of imagination as much as through the development of the action.

Karl Gjellerup was that strange combination, a scholar as well as a poet. His inventive imagination and his gifts of visionary poetry were often difficult to harmonize with his specific knowledge and his lively intelligence. His earlier works are characterized by very broad but sometimes clumsy descriptions, philosophical rather than spontaneous. They occasionally neglect artistic form, but they are always rich in ideas and full of promises of originality. Among them are such remarkable works as *Brynhild* and *Minna*. A poet who gathers all the flowers; a spirit that seeks tirelessly until it reaches its true domain in the world of Hindu mysticism, in which his profound thought and his ideal effort to clarify the enigmas of truth and life are combined with his artistic instinct: such is the Gjellerup of the second period. Thought charged with emotion, a great knowledge of the soul, a great desire for beauty, and a poetic art have given birth to works of enduring value. The author of *Pilgrimen Kamanita* and *Den fuldendtes hustru* has justifiably been called the "classic poet of Buddhism".

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