

Nobel Prize in Literature 1920



Knut Pedersen Hamsun

The Nobel Prize in Literature 1920 was awarded to Knut Hamsun "for his monumental work, *Growth of the Soil*".

It would be superfluous to give a detailed account of a book that in a short time has spread everywhere in its original form or in translation. Through the originality of its plot and style, it has aroused the liveliest interest in many countries and has found favourable reception with the most diverse groups of readers. Only recently a leading and distinctly conservative English reviewer wrote that this book, which had appeared in England only this year, was universally acclaimed as a masterpiece. The reasons for this incontestable success will no doubt hold the attention of literary critics for a long time, but even now, under the impact of first impressions, they deserve to be pointed out at least in their broad features.

In spite of current opinions of our time, those who want to find in literature above all a faithful reproduction of reality, will recognize in *Markens Grøde* the representation of a life that forms the basis of existence and of the development of societies wherever men live and build. These descriptions are not distorted by any memories of a long, highly civilized

past; their immediate effect is due to the evocation of the harsh struggle all active men must in the beginning endure (in varying external conditions, of course) against an indomitable and rebellious nature. It would be difficult to conceive of a more striking contrast with works usually called «classic.

Nonetheless, this work may rightly be called classic, but in a deeper and more profound sense than usual if this epithet is to express something other and more than vague praise. The classic, in the culture we have inherited from antiquity, is less the perfect which calls for imitation than the significant which is taken directly from life and which is rendered in a form of enduring value even for future ages. The insignificant, that which in itself is of no consequence, cannot be comprehended in this notion any more than that which is formally provisional or defective. But apart from that, whatever is precious in human life, although it may appear common, can be placed in the same category as the extraordinary and the brilliant, with a significance and a form of equal value, once it is presented for the first time in its proper light. In this sense it is no exaggeration to maintain that in *Markens Grøde* Hamsun has given to our times a classic that can be measured against the best we already have. Antiquity does not possess in this respect a monopoly inaccessible to future generations; for life is always new and inexhaustible and as such can always be presented in new forms created by new geniuses.

Hamsun's work is an epic of labour to which the author has given monumental lines. It is not a question of disparate labour which divides men within and among themselves; it is a question of the concentrated toil which in its purest form shapes men entirely, which mollifies and brings together divided spirits, which protects and increases their fruits with a regular and uninterrupted progress. The labour of the pioneer and the first farmer with all its difficulties, under the poet's pen, thus takes on the character of a heroic struggle that yields nothing to the grandeur of the manly sacrifice for one's country and companions in arms. Just as the peasant poet Hesiod described the labours of the field, so Hamsun has put in the foreground of his work the ideal labourer who dedicates his whole life and all his powers to clearing the land and to triumphing over the obstacles with which men and the

forces of nature confront him. If Hamsun has cast behind him all the weighty memories of civilization, he has by his own work contributed to a precise understanding of the new culture that our era expects to arise from the progress of physical labour as a continuation of ancient civilization.

Hamsun does not present so-called types on his stage. His heroes and heroines are all very much alive, all in quite modest circumstances. Certain among them, and the best, are unimaginative in their goals and thoughts, the principal example being the tireless and silent farmer himself. Others are drifting, troubled, and often even bewildered by egoistic aspirations and follies. They all carry the mark of their Norwegian origin; they are all conditioned in some manner by «the fruits of the earth». It is one of the characteristics of our sister languages that often the same words express very different nuances of meaning by the images they evoke. When we Swedes speak of the «fruits of the earth», we think immediately of something fertile, abundant, succulent, preferably in an agricultural region that has been cultivated for a long time. The thought of Hamsun's book is not oriented in this direction. «The earth» here is the rugged and forbidding fallow soil. Its fruits do not fall from a cornucopia of abundance; they comprise all that can germinate and grow in this ungrateful soil, the good and the bad, the beautiful and the ugly, among men and animals as well as in the forest and the fields. Such are the kinds of fruits Hamsun's work offers for our harvest.

However, we Swedes, or at least many Swedes, do not feel strange in the regions and circumstances described to us here. We rediscover the atmosphere of the North with all that is a part of its natural and social milieu, and with many parallels on both sides of the frontier. Moreover, Hamsun also presents Swedish characters who are drawn to the newly cultivated land, most of them no doubt attracted by the mirage of brilliant economic success, as the cities on the Norwegian coasts appear on the horizon like snares of the great worldly life enticing defenceless hearts from the heavy toil of the land.

These and other quite human projections, far from weakening, reinforce the impression produced by the classic content of the story. They dissipate the apprehension

one could feel in seeing the light of the ideal at the expense of truth; they guarantee the sincerity of the design, the truth of the images and the characters. Their common humanity escapes no one. The proof is in the welcome this work has found among peoples of different mentalities, languages, and customs. Furthermore, through the light touch of smiling humour with which the author treats even the saddest things he relates, he has proved his own compassion for human destiny and human nature. But in the story, he never departs from the most complete artistic serenity. The style, stripped of vain ornaments, renders the reality of things with certainty and clarity, and one rediscovers in it, under a personal and powerful form, all the richness of nuance of the writer's mother tongue.

Mr. Knut Hamsun - In facing the rigours of the season as well as the fatigues of a long trip particularly arduous at this time in order to come to receive the Prize awarded you, you have given great joy to the Swedish Academy, which will certainly be shared by all the persons present at this ceremony. In the name of the Academy, I have tried as well as possible in the short time accorded me to express at least some of the major reasons for which we appreciate so highly your work which has just been crowned. Thus, in addressing myself now to you personally, I do not wish to repeat what I have said. It remains for me only to congratulate you in the name of the Academy and to express the hope that the memories you will keep of your visit with us will be ties that will link you to us also in the future.

For more details please visit:

http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1920/press.html