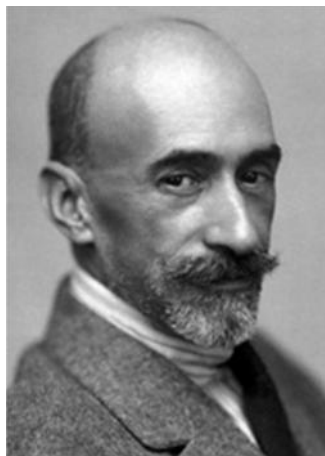


Nobel Prize in Literature 1922



Jacinto Benavente

The Nobel Prize in Literature 1922 was awarded to Jacinto Benavente *"for the happy manner in which he has continued the illustrious traditions of the Spanish drama"*.

Jacinto Benavente has devoted his imaginative gifts mainly to the theatre, and it seems as if he has systematically guided the course of his development in this direction through many varieties of experience. But with this imaginative artist, system seems to be a free and direct expression of his whole being. It appears that no one could have reached his goal with less effort and brooding in comparison with the value of the achievement.

The feeling which has carried him on has also been of an unusually complete and harmonious nature: it is not only the dramatic art and the atmosphere of the theatre that he has loved; he has cherished an equally warm affection for life outside, for the world of realities which it was his task to bring to the stage. It is not a matter of mere uncritical and superficial worship of life. He has observed his world with extremely clear and keen eyes, and what he has seen he has measured and weighed with an alert and flexible intelligence. He has not allowed himself to be duped either by men or by ideas, not even by his own

ideas or his own pathos. Nevertheless, he does not strike one as being in the least bitter, or even blasé.

His writing has thus obtained its most distinctive quality - grace. This is such a rare value, especially in our own times, that there is little demand for it on the market and it is not recognized by most people. Grace, however, is as precious as it is uncommon. It is the token of the balance of powers, of the self-discipline and assurance of art, especially when it is not an end in itself and a mere frivolity, but when, without apparent effort, it stamps its mark on the entire form-giving process. It does not, then, merely play on the surface, affecting the style; it also determines each proportion in the treatment of the subject and every line in its depiction.

This is precisely the case with Benavente. The effect he attains may vary greatly in strength, but it is based on unflinching tact and strict loyalty to the subject. He gives what the subject is able to give without effort and without bombast. The fare he provides may be more or less rich and interesting, but it is always unadulterated. This is a classic feature in Benavente.

Nevertheless, his bent is above all realistic, if we eliminate from that label all the customary flavour of social tendency, commonplace philosophy, or gross striving for effect. To reproduce the wealth and mobility of life, the play of characters, and the struggle between wills, in a way that comes as near truth as possible - that is his chief aim. When he aims at something beyond this - to stimulate thought, to solve problems, to demolish prejudices, to enlarge human sympathy - he does so with the most scrupulous care not to tamper with the objective accuracy of the literary description. He exercises this unusual discipline even when he is faced with the strongest temptation for a dramatist - dramatic and scenic effect. However easily a scene could be made more telling by increasing the tension of the conflict and plot, by putting on more flaring colours, by flogging up the emotions to their highest pitch, Benavente never does this at the expense of truth: he permits no blurring of the tone. He is a rare example of a born dramatist, one whose

imagination, by itself, creates in accordance with the laws of the stage, but yet avoids anything theatrical as fully as all other false conventions.

His activity lies especially in comedy, but that term in Spanish is more inclusive than with us; it comprises what we may in general call middleclass plays without tragic conclusions. If there is such a conclusion, the pieces are called dramas, and Benavente has also written such plays, including the remarkable and moving play, *La Malquerida* (1913) [The Wrongly Loved]. He has also composed many romantic and fantastic pieces, among which are exquisite achievements of poetic art, especially on a small scale.

But his central significance lies in his comedies, which, as we have seen, may well be as serious as they are gay; and in the short forms of comedy, which in Spanish literature have been developed into special species with old and glorious traditions. In the latter Benavente is an enchanting master because of his unlaboured wit and comic verve, his radiant good nature, and his grace, which combines all these qualities. I have time for only a few names: *De pequeñas causas* (1908) [For Small Reasons]; *El amor asusta* (1907) [Love Frightens]; *No fumadores* (1904) [Smoking Prohibited]. But there are many others, an entire treasury of merry jest, where the battle is waged so lightly and so elegantly that it is always good-tempered, however sharp the weapon itself may be.

In the larger works we encounter an amazing range of spheres of life and subject matter. They are taken from peasant life, from all circles of society in the town, from the artist's world down to the travelling circus people whom the poet embraces with a strong human sympathy and whom he values more highly than many other classes.

But it is mainly the life of the upper classes that he has treated in its two characteristic centres, Madrid and Moraleda, the latter a place not found on the map, but which in its sunny and alluring variety comprises the typical features of a provincial town in Castile. In *La farándula* (1897) [The Company of Comedians] the ambitious politician goes to this town in order to rally and to gain the support of the uncorrupted energies of the people for a somewhat vaguely defined ideal; in the play *La Gobernadora* (1901) [The Governor's Wife], conceited ambition dreams of a larger stage for its greater talents.

Moraleda is really a planetary world, which is attracted and illuminated by Madrid and does not reveal the full force of its comedy except in comparison with Madrid.

The capital and its spiritual content are made understandable much more fully through personal vicissitudes of fortune which are determined, as are its fashions and its culture, by the strata of its society. We see a distinct development in the art of Benavente. He begins by stressing the description of environment, with an abundant wealth of colour and life and features that reveal character. The dramatic element proper - unsought, like all the rest of the apparatus - exists for the most part merely to keep the action going. Its function is to arrange the whirl of life in a picture, composed in groups, with strong individual scenes. He has taken pains to create a faithful and artistic mirror of reality, which is then left to speak for itself.

Later his composition becomes more rigid. Although it is arranged firmly around a stronger, deeper, and more spiritual dramatic conflict, it is, nevertheless, almost as simple as when Benavente was merely writing episodes describing society. There is nothing artificial, nothing abstract and isolated, in the human fates which are represented. As before, they are still connected with the world around them, but the light is strictly limited, revealing only what is central from a dramatic point of view. The sharp characterization is carried just far enough to make the action clear; the psychology is merely a means, not an end. Nothing is laboriously prepared beforehand; nothing strikes one really as being prepared at all: every feature in the action comes, as it were, with the improvisation of life and may take one by surprise until one has reflected for a moment, just as happens in life itself. The technique, too, is purely realistic and has not searched for models in ancient tragedy. Summing up the past is not the main function of this kind of drama, nor is the dialogue a kind of cross-examination to discover the past. The required discoveries are made by life itself by means of the unforced course of the action.

Broadly speaking, Benavente does not seek to harrow the spectator; his object is a solution of conflicts that is harmonious even in melancholy and sorrow. This harmony is usually gained by resignation, not weary or aloof or pathetic, and without great gestures.

The characters suffer, tear at their bonds, are attracted by fortune (the way to which is to pass over others' fortune), wrestle in conflicts, measure their world and themselves, and gain a clearer and wider vision through their constraint. That which has the last word is not passion, in fact not the ego at all, but the spiritual value that proves so great that, were it lost, the ego would be poor and fortune empty. The decision is made without capitulation, merely through the fact that the personality is face to face with the consequences of its choice of fate and chooses freely, on the basis of instinctive feeling rather than in accordance with theories.

I have time for only one or two titles of his strange, simple, and quiet dramas: *Alma triunfante* (1902) [Conquering Soul], *La propia estimacion* (1915) [Self-respect], and *Campo de armiño* (1916) [The White Scutcheon]. There are many others of equal value which are more or less like these. The distinctive mark of them all is a peculiarly pure humanity, which at first glance is surprising in the keen and flashing satirist, while the moderation and the freedom from all sentimentality in the mode of expression are in complete accordance with his schooling. As a matter of fact his qualities go well together: as his grace of form is a classic feature, so are his feeling and his insight classic, strictly schooled, well balanced, farsighted, and clear. His simplicity of expression and hushed tone come from the same source.

Nevertheless, Teutonic readers are often reminded, even when it comes to an art as good as this, that it has sprung from a national temperament other than ours and from other poetic traditions. The kind of lyric we desire, at least in the atmosphere of the world of drama, is on the whole probably unknown to the Romance nations. Half-light, both in nature and in the human soul, is lacking in them: all that human beings contain is expressed, or it seems that it *can* be expressed. Their thoughts may have brilliance, rapidity, and, of course, clarity; but they strike us as lacking in power, as belonging to a somewhat more vacant atmosphere, and as having less life in their inner being. What southerners say of our art may reveal equally great defects; but we must mutually



accustom ourselves to admire what we understand and to leave outside our aesthetic judgments things which, for the reasons mentioned, fail to satisfy us.

For more details please visit:

http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1922/press.html