

## **Nobel Prize in Literature 1924**



**Wladyslaw Stanislaw Reymont**

**The Nobel Prize in Literature 1924 was awarded to Wladyslaw Reymont "for his great national epic, *The Peasants*".**

This Polish work of imagination has its starting point in the naturalistic novel, especially in the form which that genre received from Zola in France. Reymont has acknowledged that the idea of his book was evoked by *La Terre*, not through his admiration of it, but through the indignation and opposition it provoked. He found in it a conventionalized, distorted, and coarse characterization of the class of society in which he had grown up and which he loved with all the warmth that had been cherished by his childhood memories. He knew this class of society from abundant experience, from within, and with full understanding - not, like Zola, merely through hasty journalistic studies made in accordance with a program mapped out beforehand with preconceived results; and he wished to describe it in its reality, without any distortion through theories. But Zola had a decisive influence on the work in a quite different and more positive fashion. *Chłopi* (1904-09) [*The Peasants*], in the final form in which we have it, would hardly be conceivable without the lessons that Reymont learned from Zola's work as a whole - its searching

description of the environment, its orchestral mass effects, its uncompromising verism, and the harmonious working together of external nature and human life. Nevertheless *Chlopi*, rather than turning out to be a naturalistic novel, has taken on epic proportions - certainly naturalistic in method but epic in scope.

For us moderns that which most profoundly marks a narrative poem as an epic, is a certain completeness and harmony, a general impression of rest, however the various episodes may be charged with suffering and struggle. It is not easy to express this effect in a conceptual form, for it is our feelings that perceive it. It achieves its results mainly from the fact that all the elements of strife and unrest are gradually smoothed out before us, like waves that wrestle with one another; the circles never reach as far as the tranquil horizon that bounds the poem; the unrest puts no question and sends no lament beyond that limit. The world that we have before our eyes is a definite one and is unshakable in its foundations; but it is not a world of compulsion and imprisonment. It is wide enough for human beings to express themselves in action according to the measure of their powers. Hence the harmony of the poem. Whatever happiness is recorded, the most irremediable suffering - the disparity between given reality and ideal requirements - is not to be found there, or at least it does not reach consciousness. The most permanently bitter tragedy, that which from within shatters a being to fragments, has not yet been created; the figures we see are entire and simple and move in *one* piece. Whether the figures be large or small, whether their features be fair or foul, they assume a kind of plastic beauty and monumentality.

It is this that the Polish writer has attained in *Chlopi*; and that he achieved it, in spite of a quite modern training which scarcely promised to lead to such a goal, is surely due to the fact that his chosen subject moved of itself toward this happy form. He probably did not seek the form himself - that is evidenced by the rest of his very different production; but when it offered itself to him in the course of his work, he understood it and followed its laws. This is surely merit enough and worthy of great honour.

His Polish peasants possess in their primitive conditions, and perhaps only in consequence thereof, the simple nature, the archaism in their contours, demanded by epic art - a great aesthetic value, which, however, has been obtained at the expense of being defective in other ways. This throng of figures has extremely little of what ordinarily is called character. Among the men only few have even the raw material of character in mental energy and firmness; and their working up of this material inspires but little respect. The manliness which consists in self-discipline, a sense of responsibility, and a personal grasp of the idea of right, has barely attained any development beyond collective and vague mass feeling. What we see of the life of conscience is the common ground of the village, not the guarded estate of the individual. Consequently one must not expect more from the women: hence it is much that in one figure, the sorely tried Hanus, the pliant forces of her nature become welded together into a stubborn sense of duty.

There is really hardly any moral backbone to be found in this low-lying tract round the sluggishly flowing river. Passion bounces in men's wills like a storm in the reeds, and they bend before every breath of wind, and a spark sets everything ablaze. The sense of honesty is uncertain, perhaps chiefly because it has not had free air to grow in. From time immemorial this people has had to protect itself against oppression by those who owned the soil - all they had to subsist on. And when the soil at last became theirs, the gift came from foreign masters, who grudged them a soul of their own. The passivity, fatalism, and naive good humour, which under similar circumstances were developed in their Slavonic brethren to the east, held no power in the Polish temperament. Here we meet instead a peculiar nervousness which is not elsewhere a characteristic of the peasant, and which readily expresses itself in anger and violent deeds. All their ill-treatment has not sufficed to crush their pride, but that pride is abundantly mixed with vanity; it is touchy, lacking in balance, and gives no trustworthy support to human dignity. Their virtues have as little root as those of children. They consist in directness, in easily stirred susceptibility, in inflexible and lively spirits: they point to a superfluity of unexhausted gifts; and over the whole there extends a never-failing charm, a certain glamour of nobility. But above all,

these people appeal to us through their strong imaginative life. In their poverty and frailty they have windows opened to the world of dreams; and all that is tender and good and beautiful in them flourishes there.

The Church has preserved for them this city of refuge, and to her they are attached with a deep love, piety, and reverence; through her, they expect some day atonement and transfiguration; and in a poetical sense they are already partaking of these good things. By constantly returning to this feature Reymont has contrived to keep the air of beauty over his epic.

Without effort, he has found the gleam of heroism which an epic needs, although his subject matter did not provide him with heroic figures. Heroism was to be found only in their primitively strong, deep attachment to the soil, which gives and takes their lives and lends to their struggle and their love something of the greatness of the forces of nature. Epic breadth and greatness have been attained, too, through the simple touch of genius in the composition of the work, which has been cast in the form of a cycle of the seasons. Autumn, winter, spring, and summer, in symphonically balanced parts, give their contrasts and their harmony in a mighty hymn to life; and when the year has swung full circle in the vicissitudes of human fate, it continues in our imagination in constant novelty and constant recurrence. The episodes in the richly developed action do not occur once only: they have a typical validity. Whether they are idyllic or passionate, tragically wild or merrily diverting, they have all been turned to a rhythm of «Works and Days» in a kind of Hesiodic peasant-world: they have in them a dash of the eternal youth of the earth.

The monotony tending to threaten the peasant novel through its diffuseness of detail, has here generally been avoided by the range and the mobility of the material. Unity of style has been combined with an uncommon power and delight in colour in the painting of the several parts; and the characterization of the figures, in their dramatic working, has received due attention within the given frame. Everything gives the impression of a reality faithfully described - possibly with one exception, the chief female character Jagna, who is quite as much a symbol as a type. But the symbol is poetically justified. In fact, it is the

poetry of the Polish soil and the Polish peasant woman, all the natural magic, the blind working of natural impulses, the pliancy and imaginativeness, the hunger for beauty, and the absence of responsibility, which flourish and intoxicate and are smirched and trampled in times of trouble and guilt. She is the embodiment of all the flaws that Reymont has revealed in his people, despite his love for them; yet she also represents all those qualities which are rich and splendid in human nature. He has made her the tragic heroine of his work; and if, there as elsewhere (and perhaps in consequence of a weakness he shares with the circles he describes), he has passed no clear judgment, he has not allowed any lessening of the tragic tension.

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