

## **Nobel Prize in Literature 1928**



**Sigrid Undset**

**The Nobel Prize in Literature 1928 was awarded to Sigrid Undset "*principally for her powerful descriptions of Northern life during the Middle Ages*".**

In her first novels or novellas, all of them remarkable works, Sigrid Undset painted the present-day world of young women in the environs of Christiania. It was a restless generation, prompt to make the gravest decisions as soon as its aspirations for happiness were at stake, ready to take the ultimate logical and sentimental consequences of its impulsive nature, and impassioned for truth. This generation had to pay dearly for the sense of reality it acquired. It had to pass through many trials before regaining its inner unity, and some of its representatives succumbed in the struggle. The women of this generation were strangely isolated in this disconcerting world. Far from finding support in a firmly established social rule, they had, in full consciousness, renounced the heritage of the past. Hostile to all established social order, which they considered a useless yoke, they counted only on themselves to create a new society, consistent with a conviction, doubtless sincere at bottom, but easily misled.

With a lively imagination, Sigrid Undset lived the life of these women; she portrayed them sympathetically but with merciless truthfulness. She traced the tragedy of their lives without embellishing or amplifying it; and she conveyed the evolution of their destinies with the most implacable logic, which implied the condemnation of her heroines and of the world in which they were living. The picture is gripping, as far as the scope of the personages permits; it is attractive only in its marvellously fresh and brilliant descriptions of nature. Remaining forever in the reader's memory are the excursions on skis in the Norwegian solitude, the effects of the capricious play of the winter light, the exhilaration of the icy wind during the run, the mad dance of the blood in the veins, the spirit of adventure, the joy, the feeling of life and strength which makes the heart pound. And Sigrid Undset describes with the same mastery the splendours of spring, saturated with light and full of promises. In this domain her art attained greatness quite early.

This greatness began to extend to her entire work as soon as she abandoned the disunified and uprooted beings of the present time who had attracted her attention, in order to dedicate herself to the life of a distant past. She was destined by birth to do pioneer work in this area. Her father was a gifted historian, and from childhood she had lived in an atmosphere of historic legend and folklore. Moreover, she acquired a solid historical knowledge, guided, it would seem, by this premonition of the task her genius had set for her.

There she found the material which truly suited her nature, and her imagination was confronted with a task adequate to its scope. The characters she was going to make appear out of the past would offer a more complete unity and would be of a firmer cast than the contemporary characters. Far from being confined in a sterile isolation, they would participate in the great solidarity of past generations. These great masses would come alive in her work in a more vivid, firmer shape than the amorphous society of our era. Here was a great challenge to a writer who felt capable of carrying a heavy burden.

In their fashion, the generations of the Middle Ages also enjoyed a more varied inner life than the present generation, which Sigrid Undset found obsessed with the pursuit of

sexual happiness, a quest which also determined their concepts of truth. These ancestors were strongly determined by the sentiment of honour and by faith. Here was the rich field for a psychology adequate to them. Moreover, the author's imagination was bound to be attracted by the difficult task of conjuring out of the darkness of a little known past the external life of former generations in all its diversity. Sigrid Undset has done so to an extent that has aroused general admiration. In so far as the inner life is concerned, her work can hardly be criticized. Intimately combined with the

consciousness of the nation, in her depiction, honour retains all the rigour and all the weight that it had for the chevaliers and great landowners of the fourteenth century. The demands of honour are clearly stated, and the conflicts it creates are worked out regardless of their brutal consequences. Religious life is described with startling truth. Under Sigrid Undset's pen it does not become a continuous holiday of the mind, penetrating and dominating human nature; it remains, as in our day, insecure and rebellious, and is often even harsher. Profoundly conscious of the hold of faith on these inexperienced and unpolished souls, the author has given it, in the grave hours of existence, an overwhelming power.

The erotic life, the problem common to the two sexes, which constitutes the centre of Sigrid Undset's psychological interest, is found again, almost without modifications, in her historical novels. In this respect, objections naturally come to mind. In medieval documents, the feminist question is not known; one never finds hints of the inner personal life which later was to raise this question. The historian, demanding proofs, has the right to note this discrepancy. But the historian's claim is not absolute; the poet has at least an equal right to express himself when he relies on a solid and intuitive knowledge of the human soul. The archaeologist must admit that there existed in the past instruments of a nature other than those which have come down to us, not to mention the often fortuitous ways in which the memories of the past have reached us. The poet has the right to suppose that human nature has hardly varied in the course of ages, even if the annals of the past are silent in certain regards.

In spite of the laws imposed by necessity, the common life of man and woman could scarcely have been peaceful and simple. It was no doubt less noisy than in our day, but it was exempt from neither conflicts nor bloody disturbances. To these conflicts and disturbances Sigrid Undset gave a voice, although it sometimes seems that the voice had accents far too modern and that the sentiments were too subtle for an era in which the influence of poetry had not yet manifested itself. The heavier and harsher environment seems also to have been of a nature which hardened the characters more firmly. But it is to this dissemblance, if indeed one can speak of dissemblance, that her poetic work owes its poignant and evocative life. In the inevitable compromise between the present and the past, from which the historical novel cannot escape, Sigrid Undset has chosen a richly rewarding way.

Her narrative is vigorous, sweeping, and at times heavy. It rolls on like a river, ceaselessly receiving new tributaries whose course the author also describes, at the risk of overtaxing the reader's memory. This stems in part from the very nature of the subject. In the series of generations, conflicts and destinies assume a very concentrated form; these are whole masses of clouds which collide when the lightning flashes. However, this heaviness is also a result of the author's ardent and instant imagination, forming a scene and a dialogue of each incident in the narrative without taking the necessary backward look at the general perspective. And the vast river, whose course is difficult to embrace comprehensively, rolls its powerful waves which carry along the reader, plunged into a sort of torpor. But the roaring of its waters has the eternal freshness of nature. In the rapids and in the falls, the reader finds the enchantment which emanates from the power of the elements, as in the vast mirror of the lakes he notices a reflection of immensity, with the vision there of all possible greatness in human nature. Then, when the river reaches the sea, when Kristin Lavransdatter has fought to the end the battle of her life, no one complains of the length of the course which accumulated so overwhelming a depth and profundity in her destiny. In the poetry of all times, there are few scenes of comparable excellence.

Sigrid Undset's last novel, the two-volume story of *Olav Audunssøn* (1925-27), is generally on a level with the preceding novel, although it does not soar to its tragic finale. It attains, however, almost the same height in the scene in which Olav kills the Icelander. This scene constitutes a magnificent tableau, a masterly expression of the inner life, with a loftiness, a justice, an almost superhuman breadth of view rising above all the atrocities. One rediscovers here the same ripening of power as in *Kristin Lavransdatter* (1920-22). As far as the character studies are concerned, it seems impossible to reach higher than the portrayal of Eirik, the principal personage of the last part of the novel. Here is the complete evolution of a human being, from the first manifestations of childhood which are recorded not only with a vigorous strictness but also with a surprising superimposition of new traits, proportionate to the increasing clarity in the character delineation. One sees a human soul freely develop under one's eyes, a true creation of a truly superior art.

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