

## **Nobel Prize in Literature 1929**



**Thomas Mann**

**The Nobel Prize in Literature 1929 was awarded to Thomas Mann "*principally for his great novel, Buddenbrooks, which has won steadily increased recognition as one of the classic works of contemporary literature*".**

If one asks which innovation the nineteenth century made in the field of literature, which new form it created in addition to the old forms of epic, drama, and lyric, whose roots are in Greece, the answer must be: the realistic novel. By setting forth the innermost, secret experiences of the human soul against the background of contemporary social conditions, and by stressing the interdependence of the general and the particular, it has been able to portray reality with a faithful accuracy and a completeness that have no parallels in older literature.

The realistic novel - one could call it a modern prose epic influenced by historicism and science - has by and large been the creation of the English, the French, and the Russians; it is associated with the names of Dickens and Thackeray, Balzac and Flaubert, Gogol and Tolstoy. There was no comparable contribution from Germany for a long time; poetic creativity there chose other outlets. The nineteenth century had come to its end

when a young writer, the twenty-seven-year-old son of a merchant from the old Hanse city of Lübeck, published his novel *Buddenbrooks* (1901). Twenty-seven years have passed since then, and it has become clear to all that *Buddenbrooks* is the masterpiece that fills the gap. Here is the first and as yet unsurpassed German realistic novel in the grand style which takes its undisputed and equal place in the European concert.

*Buddenbrooks* is a bourgeois novel, for the century it portrays was above all a bourgeois era. It depicts a society neither so great as to bewilder the observer, nor so small and narrow as to stifle him. This middle level favours an intelligent, thoughtful, and subtle analysis, and the creative power itself, the pleasure of epic narration, is shaped by calm, mature, and sophisticated reflection. We see a bourgeois civilization in all its nuances, we see the historical horizons, the changes of time, the changes of generations, the gradual transition from self-contained, powerful, and un-self-conscious characters to reflective types of a refined and weak sensibility. The presentation is lucid yet penetrates beneath the surface to hidden processes of life; it is powerful but never brutal, and touches lightly on delicate things; it is sad and serious but never depressing because it is permeated by a quiet, deep sense of humour that is iridescently reflected in the prism of ironic intelligence.

As a portrayal of a society, a concrete and objective representation of reality, *Buddenbrooks* hardly has its equal in German literature. Beyond the limits of its genre, however, the novel betrays its common features with the German mind, with metaphysical and musical transcendentalism. The young writer who had mastered the techniques of literary realism so perfectly was at heart a convert to Schopenhauer's pessimism and Nietzsche's criticism of civilization, and the main characters of the novel reveal their ultimate secrets in music.

Basically *Buddenbrooks* is a philosophical novel. The decline of a family is portrayed from the point of view that a profound insight into the essence and conditions of life is irreconcilable with naive *joie de vivre* and active energy. Reflection, self-observation, psychological refinement, philosophical profundity, and aesthetic sensibility appear to the young Thomas Mann destructive and disintegrating forces; in one of his most exquisite

stories, *Tonio Kröger* (1903), he has found moving words for his love of human life in all its simplicity. Because he stood outside the bourgeois world that he portrayed, his vision was free, but he had a nostalgic feeling for the loss of naiveté, a feeling which gives him understanding, sympathy, and respect.

The painful experience of Mann's youth that gave its profound tone to *Buddenbrooks* includes a problem that he has treated and tried to solve in different ways throughout his career as a writer. Within himself he has felt the tension between the aesthetic-philosophical and the pragmatic-bourgeois outlooks, and he has tried to resolve it in harmony on a higher level. In the short stories *Tonio Kröger* and *Tristan* (1903) the exiles from life, the devotees of art, knowledge, and death, confess their desire for a simple and healthy existence, for «life in its seductive banality». It is Mann's own paradoxical love for simple and happy natures that speaks through them.

In the novel *Königliche Hoheit* (1909) [*Royal Highness*], whose realistic form disguises a symbolic story, he reconciled the life of the artist with that of the man of action, and he gave a motto to that human ideal: «highness and love - an austere happiness». But the synthesis is neither as convincing nor as deeply felt as the antithesis in *Buddenbrooks* and the short stories. In the drama *Fiorenza* (1906), in which the moralist Savonarola and the aestheticist Lorenzo di Medici appear as irreconcilable enemies, the gap is opened anew. In *Der Tod in Venedig* (1913) [*Death in Venice*] it reaches tragic significance. It was during this period, in the years that preceded the World War, that he became interested in the personality of Frederick the Great. He felt that that ruler presented a historically valid solution of the problem, for Frederick's genius had, with unbroken vitality, combined action, contemplation, and a penetrating clarity free from illusions. In the ingenious essay *Friedrich und die grosse Koalition* (1915) [*Frederick the Great and the Grand Coalition*] he showed the possibility and reality of the solution, but the problematic writer of *Buddenbrooks* did not succeed in representing this ideal in the plastic and vital form of literature.

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