

Nobel Prize in Literature 1939



Frans Eemil Sillanpää

The Nobel Prize in Literature 1939 was awarded to Frans Eemil Sillanpää *"for his deep understanding of his country's peasantry and the exquisite art with which he has portrayed their way of life and their relationship with Nature"*.

Frans Eemil Sillanpää took the motifs for his novels and novellas, which are almost exclusively about his native land (a small region of Finnish peasants), from the scanty, limited circumstances in which he grew up. From the very beginning of his work, he aspired to represent the reality of what he had seen around him, in the most truthful and complete fashion, in the most minute detail, without avoiding the common or even the ugly that might strike his eyes. His work consists of purely naturalistic description, with a large amount of psychoanalytical interpretation, of the actions and feelings of his figures

He satisfied aesthetic demands by his singular stylistic qualities. His style is artistically formed, terse and simple, facile and lucid, personal and highly expressive. Even in translation one can glimpse the mastery which his compatriots have recognized in him, mastery in a language of rather limited literary background. His stylistic qualities are most fascinating in his descriptions of nature, for there the artist's joy truly finds its broadest

domain. In the human destinies he described, there was no great room for joy. The pictures are most often in very sombre colours, but his artistic power never fails

The novel which gave rise to his reputation was perhaps his *tour de force* as an intrepid and bitter painter of life. It dates from the disastrous year 1918 and was written under the pressure of the events which the author had witnessed in the civil war between the Nationalists and the Communists. Sillanpää left it to others to describe the heroic corollary of the civil war, the liberation from Russian domination, for he mistrusted grand postures. Devoting himself to social struggles, he applied himself solely to his self-appointed task of explaining the reasons and aggravations that had led to the catastrophe. He had lived for a long time with these ideas, and he was never to abandon them, wherever they led him

He named his book *Hurskas kurjuus* (1919) [*Meek Heritage*] in memory of the extremely poor conditions in which a large part of the Finnish people lived, the class in which he grew up and to which he felt closest. These peasants farmed insufficient parcels of land which belonged to the landowners whose half-servants they were, without the protection of a mutual contract. Their fate depended entirely on the good will of their little despots. He called their heritage meek because it was accepted with apathetic resignation tinged with religion, like an ineluctable destiny

The principal personage Sillanpää chose for his novel, Jussi Toivola, can hardly be called his hero. With his predilection for all that is very simple, all that pertains to the dullness of daily life, with his aversion to all that is purely aesthetic and his rectitude in describing characters, he made him an extremely primitive and weak person. Jussi was from the very beginning only a vulgar instrument, the laughing-stock of his community, scorned and ill-treated by all. It is questionable whether, in some other social condition, he might have been able to become something truly different. In addition there was his marriage with a woman quite as benighted as he. She began by duping him, making him accept another man's child. In her housework she was as incapable as he was in his trade. There was never any intelligence or foresight on their small farm, which they had obtained

on very bad terms. They had many children, and, with them, greater and greater worries and needs Jussi was attracted by the revolutionary peasant movement which, merging with other rebellions against the social order, led at the end to anarchy and terror. A certain development of his personality followed from it - the only progress that life had to offer him

He began to reflect on his capacities and, as much as he was able to do so, took an active part in this movement. In the meetings in which there was a matter for all to speak about, Jussi also spoke and discovered that he could do it and that his words were heard. He derived a joy from it that he had never found before and he felt like a man. With his native naiveté and without knowing where the current would carry him, he followed the flood with ardour and played his small part. He carried arms he never used but of which he was very proud. He could thus serve as a sentinel around the houses of the landowners. One day, one of them was killed without his participating in the murder. Soon after the country was reconquered by the Nationalists in the fight against the Communists and the Russians, Jussi was one of those condemned to death for murder

The description of the death of this blind victim of this era's events is the crucial episode of the novel. It is the expression of a painful tragedy, as much as this term can be applied to so forlorn and drifting a destiny, with details of a grotesque comedy, making a whole, however, of a very moving unity

One of the earlier parts of this book - the story of Jussi Toivola's half-grown daughter, the daughter who, to his inexpressible joy, had the honour of being promoted to servant in a fashionable home - was taken out by the author to become a short novel in itself, *Hiltu ja Ragnar* (1923) [Hiltu and Ragnar]. It was written with even greater bitterness, if that is possible

This child of nature, whose ignorance and innocence were prodigious, was seduced by the son of the house. When the consequences began to appear, she did not understand them and believed herself the victim of an illness. She was driven to suicide by the despair

and terror that she felt before an existence which must be her fate. This innocent figure was in a way made poetic by the author's sober and profound sense of pity

This poetry became truly poignant in a later novel, treating a feminine destiny of the same kind, *Nuorena nukkunut* (1931) [*The Maid Silja*], that work of Sillanpää's which was admired most. Silja, like Hiltu, came from a family inevitably condemned to ruin, but she grew up in less severe poverty and, actually, without ugliness. She is presented in a quite different manner. Not deformed by the unhappy destiny of her kindred, she had preserved her personality, imbued with instinctive purity and delicacy. This child had sprung up like a flower in the transient magnificence of full summer, with all the beauty and frailty of the season, in perpetual light, on the shore of the dazzling blue lakes. She appeared as the symbol of that short and ravishing summer, without seeming strange to the poor peasants' world in which she worked to earn her bread

Silja's story is quite simple but very significant. After the ruin of her home she goes into domestic service, but none of the brutality and ugliness of her new surroundings can tarnish her inner feelings. She goes through the worst without being touched by it

She can at last live her love story, but it is almost as short and as ethereal as that of a butterfly. The student who had been her unworthy lover had abandoned her almost immediately, but he kept the most delightful memories of the affair and bore her loneliness without the least complaint

In the war year of 1918 she proved her determination and courage in danger. She performed a fine act but she scarcely noticed it, silent and discreet as she always was. When her congenital tuberculosis began to make its effects felt, she felt no terror. Grateful for the one unforgettable hour that life had given her, she now awaited the end with a sweet and silent dignity. To prevent transmitting her disease to others, she took her few possessions and made herself a tranquil asylum in the wash-house, protected on the land of her masters. From that time on she no longer had any cares

There she was more alone than ever, with nothing to look forward to except the end which she knew was near, but she felt happy and free. She prepared herself to meet the

great adventure by dreaming of all that she had found of beauty, all so simple in itself but resplendent in the light of the love she had really lived. Sometimes she floated in her dreams in the eternal happiness of the beyond.

In this episode, the bitter realist took pleasure in finding the beauty of human nature and, freed from all psychoanalytic doctrine, he remained quite simply the poet and was able to create pure poetry with a flash of grandeur. Outside of that, only in his description of the countryside did Sillanpää's artistic mastery flourish so richly, and then only when he chose motifs as simple as possible while avoiding all that could give immediate delight to the eye, without letting himself be seduced by the colours of a traditional beauty. With the delicacy of a painter, he wished quite simply to render the beauty of what the ordinary observer would have overlooked. In his last important novel, *Ihmiset suviyössä* (1934) [*People in the Summer Night*], he dropped these restrictions and allowed the nature of his homeland to lend all it could. There are large vistas of sweet, fresh verdure, with lakes meandering and glistening with azure brilliance and, above all, the magic of the light of days and nights caught in all its shifting moments. Space gives depth and expanse to his pictures

Human life in this setting has diverse destinies, some menacing and sombre, others in perfect harmony with the happiness which, devoid of cares, is proper to this summer season. One finds here a view of life not influenced by a purely literary taste - a striving for free, rich, and complete beauty. Everything is in tune with the infinite and the calm of space

The pattern of the human figures does not always reach great profundity, but in their quickness and their lightness they are in harmony with the flight of the clouds and the play of lights at dusk or at the dawn of a new day. In the subtle art of this stylist, the verbal pictures take on sonority and their music is that of a violin made of rays and colours

Considered from the purely artistic point of view, this book is perhaps stronger than any of those preceding, even if *Silja*, in its final episode, has a more profoundly human poetry and is thus more moving.

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