

Nobel Prize in Literature 1945



Gabriela Mistral

The Nobel Prize in Literature 1945 was awarded to Gabriela Mistral "*for her lyric poetry which, inspired by powerful emotions, has made her name a symbol of the idealistic aspirations of the entire Latin American world*"

One day a mother's tears caused a whole language, disdained at that time in good society, to rediscover its nobility and gain glory through the power of its poetry. It is said that when [\[Frédéric\] Mistral](#), the first of the two poets bearing the name of the Mediterranean wind, had written his first verses in French as a young student, his mother began to shed inexhaustible tears. An ignorant country woman from Languedoc, she did not understand this distinguished language. Mistral then wrote *Mirèio*, recounting the love of the pretty little peasant for the poor artisan, an epic that exudes the perfume of the flowering land and ends in cruel death. Thus the old language of the troubadours became again the language of poetry. The Nobel Prize of 1904 drew the world's attention to this event. Ten years later the poet of *Mirèio* died.

In that same year, 1914, the year in which the First World War broke out, a new Mistral appeared at the other end of the world. At the Floral Games of Santiago de Chile, Gabriela Mistral obtained the prize with some poems dedicated to a dead man.

Her story is so well known to the people of South America that, passed on from country to country, it has become almost a legend. And now that she as at last come to us, over the crests of the Cordilleran Andes and across the immensities of the Atlantic, we may retell it once again.

In a small village in the Elquis valley, several decades ago, was born a future schoolteacher named Lucila Godoy y Alcayaga. Godoy was her father's name, Alcayaga her mother's; both were of Basque origin. Her father, who had been a schoolteacher, improvised verses with ease. His talent seems to have been mixed with the anxiety and the instability common to poets. He left his family when his daughter, for whom he had made a small garden, was still a child. Her beautiful mother, who was to live a long time, has said that sometimes she discovered her lonely little daughter engaged in intimate conversations with the birds and the flowers of the garden. According to one version of the legend, she was expelled from school. Apparently she was considered too stupid for teaching hours to be wasted on her. Yet she taught herself by her own methods, educating herself to the extent that she became a teacher in the small village school of Cantera. There her destiny was fulfilled at the age of twenty, when a passionate love arose between her and a railroad employee.

We know little of their story. We know only that he betrayed her. One day in November, 1909, he fatally shot himself in the head. The young girl was seized with boundless despair. Like Job, she lifted her cry to the Heaven that had allowed this. From the lost valley in the barren, scorched mountains of Chile a voice arose, and far around men heard it. A banal tragedy of everyday life lost its private character and entered into universal literature. Lucila Godoy y Alcayaga became Gabriela Mistral. The little provincial schoolteacher, the young colleague of [Selma Lagerlöf](#) of Mårbacka, was to become the spiritual queen of Latin America.

When the poems written in memory of the dead man had made known the name of the new poet, the sombre and passionate poems of Gabriela Mistral began to spread over all South America. It was not until 1922, however, that she had her large collection of poems, *Desolación* (Despair), printed in New York. A mother's tears burst forth in the middle of the book, in the fifteenth poem, tears shed for the son of the dead man, a son who would never be born...

Gabriela Mistral transferred her natural love to the children she taught. For them she wrote the collections of simple songs and rounds, collected in Madrid in 1924 under the title *Ternura* (Tenderness). In her honour, four thousand Mexican children at one time sang these rounds. Gabriela Mistral became the poet of motherhood by adoption.

In 1938 her third large collection, *Tala* (a title which can be translated as «ravage» but which is also the name of a children's game), appeared in Buenos Aires for the benefit of the infant victims of the Spanish Civil War. Contrasting with the pathos of *Desolación*, *Tala* expresses the cosmic calm which envelopes the South American land whose fragrance comes all the way to us. We are again in the garden of her childhood; I listen again to the intimate dialogues with nature and common things. There is a curious mixture of sacred hymn and naive song for children; the poems on bread and wine, salt, corn, and water - water that can be offered to thirsty men - celebrate the primordial foods of human life!...

From her maternal hand this poet gives us a drink which tastes of the earth and which appease the thirst of the heart. It is drawn from the spring which ran for Sappho on a Greek island and for Gabriela Mistral in the valley Elquis, the spring of poetry that will never dry up.

For more details please visit:

http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1945/press.html