

## **Nobel Prize in Literature 1968**



**Yasunari Kawabata**

**The Nobel Prize in Literature 1968 was awarded to Yasunari Kawabata *"for his narrative mastery, which with great sensibility expresses the essence of the Japanese mind"*.**

The recipient of this year's Nobel Prize for Literature, the Japanese Yasunari Kawabata, was born in 1899 in the big industrial town of Osaka, where his father was a highly-cultured doctor with literary interests. At an early age, however, he was deprived of this favourable growing-up environment on the sudden death of his parents, and, as an only child, was sent to his blind and ailing grandfather in a remote part of the country. These tragic losses, doubly significant in view of the Japanese people's intense feeling for blood ties, have undoubtedly affected Kawabata's whole outlook on life and has been one of the reasons for his later study of Buddhist philosophy.

As a student at the imperial university in Tokyo, he decided early on a writing career, and he is an example of the kind of restless absorption that is always a condition of the literary calling. In a youthful short story, which first drew attention to him at the age of twenty-seven, he tells of a student who, during lonely autumn walks on the peninsula of

Izu, comes across a poor, despised dancing girl, with whom he has a touching love affair; she opens her pure heart and shows the young man a way to deep and genuine feeling. Like a sad refrain in a folksong the theme recurs with many variations in his following works; he presents his own scale of values, and with the years, he has won renown far beyond the borders of Japan. True, of his production only three novels and a few short stories have so far been translated into different languages, evidently because translation in this case offers especially great difficulties and is apt to be far too coarse a filter, in which many finer shades of meaning in his richly expressive language must be lost. But the translated works do give us a sufficiently representative picture of his personality.

In common with his older countryman, Tanizaki, now deceased, he has admittedly been influenced by modern western realism, but, at the same time, he has, with greater fidelity, retained his footing in Japan's classical literature and therefore represents a clear tendency to cherish and preserve a genuinely national tradition of style. In Kawabata's narrative art it is still possible to find a sensitively shaded situation poetry which traces its origin back to Murasaki's vast canvas of life and manners in Japan about the year 1000.

Kawabata has been especially praised as a subtle psychologist of women. He has shown his mastery as such in the two short novels, "The Snow Kingdom" and "A Thousand Cranes", to use the Swedish titles. In these we see a brilliant capacity to illuminate the erotic episode, an exquisite keenness of observation, a whole network of small, mysterious values, which often put the European narrative technique in the shade. Kawabata's writing is reminiscent of Japanese painting; he is a worshipper of the fragile beauty and melancholy picture language of existence in the life of nature and in man's destiny. If the transience of all outward action can be likened to drifting tufts of grass on the surface of the water, then it is the genuinely Japanese miniature art of haiku poetry which is reflected in Kawabata's prose style.

Even if we feel excluded, as it were, from his writing by a root system, more or less foreign to us, of ancient Japanese ideas and instincts, we may find it tempting in Kawabata to notice certain similarities of temperament with European writers from our own time.

Turgenev is the first to spring to mind, he, too, is a deeply sensitive storyteller and a broadminded painter of the social scene, with pessimistically coloured sympathies within a time of transition between old and new.

Kawabata's most recent work is also his most outstanding, the novel, "The Old Capital", completed six years ago, and now available in Swedish translation. The story is about the young girl, Chiëko, a foundling exposed by her poverty-stricken parents and adopted into the house of the merchant Takichiro, where she is brought up according to old Japanese principles. She is a sensitive, loyal being, who, only in secret, broods on the riddle of her origin. Popular Japanese belief has it that an exposed child is afflicted with a lifelong curse, in addition to which the condition of being a twin, according to the strange Japanese viewpoint, bears the stigma of shame. One day it happens that she meets a pretty young working girl from a cedar forest near the city and finds that she is her twin sister. They are intimately united beyond the social pale of class - the robust, work-hardened Naëko, and the delicate, anxiously guarded Chiëko, but their bewildering likeness soon gives rise to complications and confusion. The whole story is set against the background of the religious festival year in Kyoto from the cherry-blossom spring to the snow-glittering winter.

The city itself is really the leading character, the capital of the old kingdom, once the seat of the mikado and his court, still a romantic sanctuary after a thousand years, the home of the fine arts and elegant handicraft, nowadays exploited by tourism but still a loved place of pilgrimage. With its Shinto and Buddha temples, its old artisan quarters and botanical gardens, the place possesses a poetry which Kawabata expresses in a tender, courteous manner, with no sentimental overtones, but, naturally, as a moving appeal. He has experienced his country's crushing defeat and no doubt realizes what the future demands in the way of industrial go-ahead spirit, tempo and vitality. But in the postwar wave of violent Americanization, his novel is a gentle reminder of the necessity of trying to save something of the old Japan's beauty and individuality for the new. He describes the religious ceremonies in Kyoto with the same meticulous care as he does the textile trade's choice of patterns in the traditional sashes belonging to the women's dresses. These

aspects of the novel may have their documentary worth, but the reader prefers to dwell on such a deeply characteristic passage as when the party of middle-class people from the city visits the botanical garden - which has been closed for a long time because the American occupation troops have had their barracks there - in order to see whether the lovely avenue of camphor trees is still intact and able to delight the connoisseur's eye.

With Kawabata, Japan enters the circle of literary Nobel Prize-winners for the first time. Essential to the forming of the decision is the fact that, as a writer, he imparts a moral-esthetic cultural awareness with unique artistry, thereby, in his way, contributing to the spiritual bridge-building between East and West.

***For more details please visit:***

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