

Nobel Prize in Literature 1986



Wole Soyinka

The Nobel Prize in Literature 1986 was awarded to Wole Soyinka "who in a wide cultural perspective and with poetic overtones fashions the drama of existence".

This year's Nobel Prize in literature goes to an African writer, Wole Soyinka from Nigeria. Now in his early fifties, he has a large and richly varied literary production behind him and is in his prime as an author.

His background, upbringing and education have given him unusual conditions for a literary career. He has his roots in the Yoruba people's myths, rites and cultural patterns, which in their turn have historical links to the Mediterranean region. Through his education in his native land and in Europe he has also acquired deep familiarity with western culture. His collection of essays *Myth, Literature and the African World* make for clarifying and enriching reading.

The learning that the professor of literary science bears with him is in no way an encumbrance to his literary works. They are vivid, often harrowing, but are also marked by an evocative, poetically intensified diction. Soyinka has been characterized as one of the finest poetical playwrights that have written in English.

Among his plays special mention can be made of *A Dance of the Forests* and *Death and the King's Horseman*. The former is a kind of African *Midsummer Night's Dream* with spirits, ghosts and gods. There is a distinct link here to the indigenous ritual drama and to

the Elizabethan drama. A key figure in Soyinka, the god Ogun, also appears in the play. He is both creator and destroyer and as Soyinka sees him has traits that lead one's thoughts to the Dionysian, the Apollonian and the Promethean in European tradition.

Death and the King's Horseman is in the nature of an antique tragedy with the cultic sacrificial death as theme. The relationship between the unborn, the living and the dead, to which Soyinka reverts several times in his works, is fashioned here with very strong effect. Soyinka confirms his position as a centre of force in drama.

In a play such as *A Play of Giants* we find another side to Soyinka. It is a dark farce, an aggressive writer's thrust in the service of common sense. The introductory piece of prose is a caustic summing up of Africa's agony.

It has already been mentioned that Soyinka's plays have strong poetical elements. In several collections of poems he has also appeared as a poet of great distinction. One of the highlights is *Idanre, and Other Poems*, in which a central theme is the very thing that Ogun represents: the conflict, perhaps the union, between destruction and creation.

The collection of poems *A Shuttle in the Crypt* shows real moral stature. The poems were written during the writer's two years in prison, to which he was sent because of his attitude in his country's civil war. They are poems about mental survival, human contact, anger and forgiveness. The same experiences lie behind his prose work *The Man Died: Prison Notes*, which in itself is a literary work of the first rank.

Linguistically too Soyinka stands out as excellent. He possesses a prolific store of words and expressions which he exploits to the full in witty dialogue, in satire and grotesquery, in quiet poetry and essays of sparkling vitality.

Wole Soyinka's writing is full of life and urgency. For all its complexity it is at the same time energetically coherent.

For more details please visit:

http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1986/press.html