

Gabriela Mistral



(1889-1957)

Gabriela Mistral was the first female Latin American poet to receive the [Nobel Prize for Literature](#). She received it in 1945. The Nobel citation read:

"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."

Gabriela Mistral was the pseudonym for Lucila Godoy y Alcayaga. Her personal life was marked with tragedy. She was born in Vicuna, Chile in 1889 but her father left the family at the age of 3. By the age of 16 she was supporting her mother by working as a teacher's aide.

In 1906 she met Romeo Ureta, who became the great love of her life.

Unfortunately he killed himself in 1909 and this left a profound impact upon her life. Even more tragically, Gabriela was also later to see her nephew (whom she looked upon as a son) commit suicide at the age of 17. However despite personal setbacks Gabriela was able to pursue a very successful career in education. This was partly because she became a successful writer. She had many works published, dealing with many issues related to education and poetry.

Many of the poems in *Ternura* deal with themes from childhood. However her poems also express much deeper ideas as well. Mistral wrote frequently of images such as love (especially motherly love). Mistral's poems were influenced by her Christian faith - she was a lay member of the Franciscan order. A recurrent theme in some of her poetry is the concept of "rebirth" after death - a liberation from the world. In the 1930s Francisco Donoso, a Chilean author and priest, wrote that "almost all of Gabriela Mistral's poems have the accent of a prayer".

This is an example of her poetry in Spanish language, which expresses her awareness of the delicacy of nature.

*"No maguellers a la tierra / no aprietas a la olorosa,
/ Por el amor de ella abájate, / huéla y dale la boca."*

(Do not trample the earth, do not crush the sweet-smelling fruit. For love of it, bend down, smell it and give it your mouth.)

Mistral passed away in 1957, on her tomb were inscribed her own words:

"What the soul is to the body, so is the artist to his people,"

Margot Arce de Vazquez says of Gabriela Mistral:

"Gabriela was to Spanish - America what Unamuno was to modern Spain. She represented the basic and typical essence of our race as Unamuno represented that which was typically Spanish. She carried within her a fusion of Basque and Indian heritage: Spanish in her rebellious, individualistic spirit; very Indian in her long, deep silences and in that priestly aura of stone idol. To this representative cultural value must be added the great value of her literary work, an incomparable document for what it reveals of her person and for its unique American accent."

Some of her best known poems include: Piececitos de Niño, Balada, Todas Íbamos a ser Reinas, La Oración de la Maestra, El Ángel Guardián, Decálogo del Artista and La Flor del Aire.

As well as being a poet Gabriela played an important role in the educational systems of Mexico and Chile, was active in cultural committees of the League of Nations, and was Chilean consul in Naples, Madrid, and Lisbon. She held honorary degrees from the Universities of Florence and Guatemala and was an honorary member of various cultural societies in Chile as well as in the United States, Spain, and Cuba. She taught Spanish literature in the United States at Columbia University, Middlebury College, Vassar College, and at the University of Puerto Rico.

Poetry of Gabriela Mistrale

Gabriela's Acceptance Speech December 10, 1945

Today Sweden turns toward a distant Latin American country to honour it in the person of one of the many exponents of its culture. It would have pleased the cosmopolitan spirit of Alfred Nobel to extend the scope of his protectorate of civilization by including within its radius the southern hemisphere of the American continent. As a daughter of Chilean democracy, I am moved to have before me a representative of the Swedish democratic tradition, a tradition whose originality consists in perpetually renewing itself within the framework of the most valuable creations of society. The admirable work of freeing a tradition from deadwood while conserving intact the core of the old virtues, the acceptance of the present and the anticipation of the future, these are what we call Sweden, and these achievements are an honour to Europe and an inspiring example for the American continent.

The daughter of a new people, I salute the spiritual pioneers of Sweden, by whom I have been helped more than once. I recall its men of science who have enriched its national body and mind. I remember the legion of professors and teachers who show the foreigner unquestionably exemplary schools, and I look with trusting love to those other members of the Swedish people: farmers, craftsmen, and workers.

At this moment, by an undeserved stroke of fortune, I am the direct voice of the poets of my race and the indirect voice for the noble Spanish and Portuguese tongues. Both rejoice to

have been invited to this festival of Nordic life with its tradition of centuries of folklore and poetry.

May God preserve this exemplary nation, its heritage and its creations, its efforts to conserve the imponderables of the past and to cross the present with the confidence of maritime people who overcome every challenge.

My homeland, represented here today by our learned Minister Gajardo, respects and loves Sweden, and it has sent me here to accept the special honour you have awarded to it. Chile will treasure your generosity among her purest memories.

Prior to the speech, Professor A.H.T. Theorell of the Department of Biochemistry, Nobel Institute of Medicine, addressed the Chilean poet: To you, Gabriela Mistral, I wish to convey our admiring homage. From a distant continent, where the summer sun now shines, you have ventured the long journey to Gösta Berling's land, when the darkness of winter broods at its deepest. A worthier voice than mine has praised your poetry earlier today. May I nevertheless be permitted to say that we all share in the gladness that the Nobel Prize has this time been awarded to a poetess who combines magnificent art with the deepest and noblest aims.