

Classic Poetry Series

Gabriela Mistral
- poems -

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Gabriela Mistral(7 April 1889 – 10 January 1957)

Gabriela Mistral was the pseudonym of Lucila Godoy Alcayaga, a Chilean poet, educator, diplomat, and feminist who was the first Latin American to win the Nobel Prize in Literature, in 1945. Some central themes in her poems are nature, betrayal, love, a mother's love, sorrow and recovery, travel, and Latin American identity as formed from a mixture of Native American and European influences. Her portrait also appears on the 5,000 Chilean peso bank note. Mistral herself was of Basque and Aymara descent.

Early Life

Mistral was born in Vicuña, Chile, but was raised in the small Andean village of Montegrande, where she attended the Primary school taught by her older sister, Emelina Molina. She respected her sister greatly, despite the many financial problems that Emelina brought her in later years. Her father, Juan Gerónimo Godoy Villanueva, was also a schoolteacher. He abandoned the family before she was three years old, and died, long since estranged from the family, in 1911. Throughout her early years she was never far from poverty. By age fifteen, she was supporting herself and her mother, Petronila Alcayaga, a seamstress, by working as a teacher's aide in the seaside town of Compañía Baja, near La Serena, Chile.

In 1904 Mistral published some early poems, such as *Ensoñaciones* ("Dreams"), *Carta Íntima* ("Intimate Letter") and *Junto al Mar*, in the local newspaper *El Coquimbo: Diario Radical*, and *La Voz de Elqui* using a range of pseudonyms and variations on her civil name.

Probably in about 1906, while working as a teacher, Mistral met Romelio Ureta, a railway worker, who killed himself in 1909. The profound effects of death were already in the poet's work; writing about his suicide led the poet to consider death and life more broadly than previous generations of Latin American poets. While Mistral had passionate friendships with various men and women, and these impacted her writings, she was secretive about her emotional life.

An important moment of formal recognition came on December 22, 1914, when Mistral was awarded first prize in a national literary contest *Juegos Florales* in Santiago, with the work *Sonetos de la Muerte* (Sonnets of Death). She had been using the pen name Gabriela Mistral since June 1908 for much of her writing. After winning the *Juegos Florales* she infrequently used her given name of Lucilla Godoy for her publications. She formed her pseudonym from the two of her

favorite poets, Gabriele D'Annunzio and Frédéric Mistral or, as another story has it, from a composite of the Archangel Gabriel and the Mistral wind of Provence.

Career as an educator

Mistral's meteoric rise in Chile's national school system plays out against the complex politics of Chile in the first two decades of the 20th century. In her adolescence, the need for teachers was so great, and the number of trained teachers was so small, especially in the rural areas, that anyone who was willing could find work as a teacher. Access to good schools was difficult, however, and the young woman lacked the political and social connections necessary to attend the Normal School: She was turned down, without explanation, in 1907. She later identified the obstacle to her entry as the school's chaplain, Father Ignacio Munizaga, who was aware of her publications in the local newspapers, her advocacy of liberalizing education and giving greater access to the schools to all social classes.

Although her formal education had ended by 1900, she was able to get work as a teacher thanks to her older sister, Emelina, who had likewise begun as a teacher's aide and was responsible for much of the poet's early education. The poet was able to rise from one post to another because of her publications in local and national newspapers and magazines. Her willingness to move was also a factor. Between the years 1906 and 1912 she had taught, successively, in three schools near La Serena, then in Barrancas, then Traiguén in 1910, in Antofagasta, Chile in the desert north, in 1911. By 1912 she had moved to work in a liceo, or high school, in Los Andes, where she stayed for six years and often visited Santiago. In 1918 Pedro Aguirre Cerda, then Minister of Education, and a future president of Chile, promoted her appointment to direct a liceo in Punta Arenas. She moved on to Temuco in 1920, then to Santiago, where in 1921, she defeated a candidate connected with the Radical Party, Josefina Dey del Castillo to be named director of Santiago's Liceo #6, the newest and most prestigious girls' school in Chile. Controversies over the nomination of Gabriela Mistral to the highly coveted post in Santiago were among the factors that made her decide to accept an invitation to work in Mexico in 1922, with that country's Minister of Education, José Vasconcelos. He had her join in the nation's plan to reform libraries and schools, to start a national education system. That year she published *Desolación* in New York, which further promoted the international acclaim she had already been receiving thanks to her journalism and public speaking. A year later she published *Lecturas para Mujeres* (Readings for Women), a text in prose and verse that celebrates Latin America from the broad, Americanist perspective developed in the wake of the Mexican Revolution.

Following almost two years in Mexico she traveled from Laredo, Texas to Washington D.C., where she addressed the Pan American Union, went on to New York, then toured Europe: In Madrid she published *Ternura* (Tenderness), a collection of lullabies and rondas written for an audience of children, parents, and other poets. In early 1925 she returned to Chile, where she formally retired from the nation's education system, and received a pension. It wasn't a moment too soon: The legislature had just agreed to the demands of the teachers union, headed by Mistral's lifelong rival, Amanda Labarca Hubertson, that only university-trained teachers should be given posts in the schools. The University of Chile had granted her the academic title of Spanish Professor in 1923, although her formal education ended before she was 12 years old. Her autodidacticism was remarkable, a testimony to the flourishing culture of newspapers, magazines, and books in provincial Chile, as well as to her personal determination and verbal genius.

International work and recognition

Mistral's international stature made it highly unlikely that she would remain in Chile. In mid-1925 she was invited to represent Latin America in the newly formed Institute for Intellectual Cooperation of the League of Nations. With her relocation to France in early 1926 she was effectively an exile for the rest of her life. She made a living, at first, from journalism and then giving lectures in the United States and in Latin America, including Puerto Rico. She variously toured the Caribbean, Brazil, Uruguay, and Argentina, among other places.

Mistral lived primarily in France and Italy between 1926 and 1932. During these years she worked for the League for Intellectual Cooperation of the League of Nations, attending conferences of women and educators throughout Europe and occasionally in the Americas. She held a visiting professorship at Barnard College of Columbia University in 1930–1931, worked briefly at Middlebury College and Vassar College in 1931, and was warmly received at the University of Puerto Rico at Rio Piedras, where she variously gave conferences or wrote, in 1931, 1932, and 1933.

Like many Latin American artists and intellectuals, Mistral served as a consul from 1932 until her death, working in Naples, Madrid, Lisbon, Nice, Petrópolis, Los Angeles, Santa Barbara, Veracruz, Rapallo, and New York. As consul in Madrid, she had occasional professional interactions with another Chilean consul and Nobel Prize winner, Pablo Neruda, and she was among the earlier writers to recognize the importance and originality of his work, which she had known while he was a teenager and she was school director in his hometown of Temuco.

She published hundreds of articles in magazines and newspapers throughout the Spanish-speaking world. Among her confidants were Eduardo Santos, President of Colombia, all of the elected Presidents of Chile from 1922 to her death in 1957, Eduardo Frei Montalva, Chilean elected president in 1964 and Eleanor Roosevelt.

The poet's second major volume of poetry, *Tala*, appeared in 1938, published in Buenos Aires with the help of longtime friend and correspondent Victoria Ocampo. The proceeds for the sale were devoted to children orphaned by the Spanish Civil War. This volume includes many poems celebrating the customs and folklore of Latin America as well as Mediterranean Europe. Mistral uniquely fuses these locales and concerns, a reflection of her identification as "una mestiza de vasco," her European Basque-Indigenous Amerindian background.

On August 14, 1943, Mistral's 17-year-old nephew, Juan Miguel Godoy, killed himself. Mistral considered Juan Miguel as a son. The grief of this death, as well as her responses to tensions of World War II and then the Cold War in Europe and the Americas, are all reflected in the last volume of poetry published in her lifetime, *Lagar*, which appeared in a truncated form in 1954. A final volume of poetry, *Poema de Chile*, was edited posthumously by her friend Doris Dana and published in 1967. *Poema de Chile* describes the poet's return to Chile after death, in the company of an Indian boy from the Atacama desert and an Andean deer, the huemul. This collection of poetry anticipates the interests in objective description and re-vision of the epic tradition just then becoming evident among poets of the Americas, all of whom Mistral read carefully.

Gabriela Mistral Early Childhood Center in Houston

On November 15, 1945, Mistral became the first Latin American, and fifth woman, to receive the Nobel Prize in Literature. She received the award in person from King Gustav of Sweden on December 10, 1945. In 1947 she received a doctor honoris causa from Mills College, Oakland, California. In 1951 she was awarded the National Literature Prize in Chile.

Poor health somewhat slowed Mistral's traveling. During the last years of her life she made her home in the town of Roslyn, New York; in early January 1957 she transferred to Hempstead, New York, where she died from pancreatic cancer on January 10, 1957, aged 67. Her remains were returned to Chile nine days later. The Chilean government declared three days of national mourning, and hundreds of thousands of Chileans came to pay her their respects.

Some of Mistral's 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. She wrote and published some 800 essays in magazines and newspapers; she was also a well-known correspondent and highly-regarded orator both in person and over the radio.

Mistral may be most widely quoted in English for Su Nombre es Hoy (His Name is Today):

“We are guilty of many errors and many faults, but our worst crime is abandoning the children, neglecting the fountain of life. Many of the things we need can wait. The child cannot. Right now is the time his bones are being formed, his blood is being made, and his senses are being developed. To him we cannot answer ‘Tomorrow,’ his name is today.”

Awards and Honors

2009: Popescu Prize, Madwomen

Mistral has a school named after her in San Juan, Puerto Rico.

Anniversary

And we go on and on,
Neither sleeping nor awake,
Towards the meeting, unaware
That we are already there.
That the silence is perfect,
And that the flesh is gone.
The call still is not heard
Nor does the Caller reveal his face.

But perhaps this might be
Oh, my love, the gift
Of the eternal Face without gestures
And of the kingdom without form!

Gabriela Mistral

Creed

I believe in my heart that when
The wounded heart sunk within the depth of God sings
It rises from the pond alive
As if new-born.

I believe in my heart that what I wring from myself
To tinge life's canvas
With red of pallid hue, thus cloaking it
In luminous garb.

Gabriela Mistral

Death Sonnet I

From the icy niche where men placed you
I lower your body to the sunny, poor earth.
They didn't know I too must sleep in it
and dream on the same pillow.

I place you in the sunny ground, with a
mother's sweet care for her napping child,
and the earth will be a soft cradle
when it receives your hurt childlike body.

I scatter bits of earth and rose dust,
and in the moon's airy and blue powder
what is left of you is a prisoner.

I leave singing my lovely revenge.
No hand will reach into the obscure depth
to argue with me over your handful of bones.

Gabriela Mistral

Decalogue Of The Artist

I. You shall love beauty, which is the shadow of God over the Universe.

II. There is no godless art. Although you love not the Creator, you shall bear witness to Him creating His likeness.

III. You shall create beauty not to excite the senses but to give sustenance to the soul.

IV. You shall never use beauty as a pretext for luxury and vanity but as a spiritual devotion.

V. You shall not seek beauty at carnival or fair or offer your work there, for beauty is virginal and is not to be found at carnival or fair.

VI. Beauty shall rise from your heart in song, and you shall be the first to be purified.

VII. The beauty you create shall be known as compassion and shall console the hearts of men.

VIII. You shall bring forth your work as a mother brings forth her child: out of the blood of your heart.

IX. Beauty shall not be an opiate that puts you to sleep but a strong wine that fires you to action, for if you fail to be a true man or a true woman, you will fail to be an artist.

X. Each act of creation shall leave you humble, for it is never as great as your dream and always inferior to that most marvelous dream of God which is Nature.

Gabriela Mistral

Dusk

I feel my heart melting
in the mildness like candles:
my veins are slow oil
and not wine,
and I feel my life fleeing
hushed and gentle like the gazelle.

Gabriela Mistral

I Am Not Alone

The night, it is deserted
from the mountains to the sea.
But I, the one who rocks you,
I am not alone!

The sky, it is deserted
for the moon falls to the sea.
But I, the one who holds you,
I am not alone !

The world, it is deserted.
All flesh is sad you see.
But I, the one who hugs you,
I am not alone!

Gabriela Mistral

Pine Forest

Let us go now into the forest.
Trees will pass by your face,
and I will stop and offer you to them,
but they cannot bend down.
The night watches over its creatures,
except for the pine trees that never change:
the old wounded springs that spring
blessed gum, eternal afternoons.
If they could, the trees would lift you
and carry you from valley to valley,
and you would pass from arm to arm,
a child running
from father to father.

Gabriela Mistral

Rocking

A thousand waves
Divine the sea she rocks
I hear the loving seas
And rock my son, my son

Night fields of wheat
The wandering wind rocks
I hear the loving winds
And rock my son, my son

His thousands worlds
Silent God Father rocks
I feel His hand in shades
And rock my son, my son.

Gabriela Mistral

Song Of Death

Old Woman Census-taker,
Death the Trickster,
when you're going along,
don't you meet my baby.

Sniffing at newborns,
smelling for the milk,
find salt, find cornmeal,
don't find my milk.

Anti-Mother of the world,
People-Collector -
on the beaches and byways,
don't meet that child.

The name he was baptized,
that flower he grows with,
forget it, Rememberer.
Lose it, Death.

Let wind and salt and sand
drive you crazy, mix you up
so you can't tell
East from West,

or mother from child,
like fish in the sea.
And on the day, at the hour,
find only me.

Gabriela Mistral

The Alpaca

She is harnessed for a long journey; on her back she carries an entire store of wool.

She walks without rest, and sees with eyes full of strangeness. The wool merchant has forgotten to come to get her, and she is ready.

In this world, nothing comes better equipped than the alpaca; one is more burdened with rags than the next. Her sky-high softness is such that if a newborn is placed on her back, he will not feel a bone of the animal.

The weather is very hot. Today, large scissors that will cut and cut represent mercy for the alpaca.

When something is lost in the park, to whom do we look but this ever-prepared beast which seems to secretly carry all things?

And when children think about the objects they have lost—dolls, teddy bears, flying rats, trees with seven voices (they can be hidden in only one place)—they remember the alpaca, their infinitely prepared companion.

But look at those eyes, those astonished eyes without knowledge; they only ask why she has been harnessed for such a long trip and why no one comes to relieve her.

The high plateau is to blame for this tragedy—the mother alpaca incessantly stares at it. The mountain was also casting off burdens, and so its summit became clear, and filled the eyes of the mother alpaca.

She was taken down from the plateau and situated near a nonsensical horizon, and when she turns her neck, she continues looking for the older alpaca, for the one who sheds a pack on high, and returns to the sun's radiance.

“What have you and I done to our Andean cordillera?” I ask the alpaca.

Gabriela Mistral

The Lark

You said that you loved the lark more than any other bird because of its straight flight toward the sun. That is how I wanted our flight to be.

Albatrosses fly over the sea, intoxicated by salt and iodine. They are like unfettered waves playing in the air, but they do not lose touch with the other waves.

Storks make long journeys; they cast shadows over the Earth's face. But like albatrosses, they fly horizontally, resting in the hills.

Only the lark leaps out of ruts like a live dart, and rises, swallowed by the heavens. Then the sky feels as though the Earth itself has risen. Heavy jungles below do not answer the lark. Mountains crucified over the flatlands do not answer.

But a winged arrow quickly shoots ahead, and it sings between the sun and the Earth. One does not know if the bird has come down from the sun or risen from the Earth. It exists between the two, like a flame. When it has serenaded the skies with its abundance, the exhausted lark lands in the wheatfield.

You, Francis, wanted us to achieve that vertical flight, without a zigzag, in order to arrive at that haven where we could rest in the light.

You wanted the morning air filled with arrows, with a multitude of carefree larks. Francis, with each morning song, you imagined that a net of golden larks floated between the Earth and the sky.

We are burdened, Francis. We cherish our lukewarm rut: our habits. We exalt ourselves in glory just as the towering grass aspires. The loftiest blade does not reach beyond the high pines.

Only when we die do we achieve that vertical flight! Never again, held back by earthly ruts, will our bodies inhibit our souls.

Gabriela Mistral

The Rose

The treasure at the heart of the rose
is your own heart's treasure.
Scatter it as the rose does:
your pain becomes hers to measure.

Scatter it in a song,
or in one great love's desire.
Do not resist the rose
lest you burn in its fire.

Gabriela Mistral

The Sad Mother

Sleep, sleep, my beloved,
without worry, without fear,
although my soul does not sleep,
although I do not rest.

Sleep, sleep, and in the night
may your whispers be softer
than a leaf of grass,
or the silken fleece of lambs.

May my flesh slumber in you,
my worry, my trembling.
In you, may my eyes close
and my heart sleep.

Gabriela Mistral

The Shining Host

In vain you try
To smother my song:
A million children
In chorus sing it
Beneath the sun!

In vain you try
To break my verse
Of affliction:
The children sing it
Under God!

Gabriela Mistral

The Stranger (La Extranjera)

She speaks in her way of her savage seas
With unknown algae and unknown sands;
She prays to a formless, weightless God,
Aged, as if dying.
In our garden now so strange,
She has planted cactus and alien grass.
The desert zephyr fills her with its breath
And she has loved with a fierce, white passion
She never speaks of, for if she were to tell
It would be like the face of unknown stars.
Among us she may live for eighty years,
Yet always as if newly come,
Speaking a tongue that plants and whines
Only by tiny creatures understood.
And she will die here in our midst
One night of utmost suffering,
With only her fate as a pillow,
And death, silent and strang.

Gabriela Mistral

Those Who Do Not Dance

A crippled child
Said, "How shall I dance?"
Let your heart dance
We said.

Then the invalid said:
"How shall I sing?"
Let your heart sing
We said

Then spoke the poor dead thistle,
But I, how shall I dance?"
Let your heart fly to the wind
We said.

Then God spoke from above
"How shall I descend from the blue?"
Come dance for us here in the light
We said.

All the valley is dancing
Together under the sun,
And the heart of him who joins us not
Is turned to dust, to dust.

Gabriela Mistral

Tiny Feet

A child's tiny feet,
Blue, blue with cold,
How can they see and not protect you?
Oh, my God!

Tiny wounded feet,
Bruised all over by pebbles,
Abused by snow and soil!

Man, being blind, ignores
that where you step, you leave
A blossom of bright light,
that where you have placed
your bleeding little soles
a redolent tuberose grows.

Since, however, you walk
through the streets so straight,
you are courageous, without fault.

Child's tiny feet,
Two suffering little gems,
How can the people pass, unseeing.

Gabriela Mistral

To See Him Again

Never, never again?
Not on nights filled with quivering stars,
or during dawn's maiden brightness
or afternoons of sacrifice?

Or at the edge of a pale path
that encircles the farmlands,
or upon the rim of a trembling fountain,
whitened by a shimmering moon?

Or beneath the forest's
luxuriant, raveled tresses
where, calling his name,
I was overtaken by the night?
Not in the grotto that returns
the echo of my cry?

Oh no. To see him again --
it would not matter where --
in heaven's deadwater
or inside the boiling vortex,
under serene moons or in bloodless fright!

To be with him...
every springtime and winter,
united in one anguished knot
around his bloody neck!

Gabriela Mistral