

The 100th Anniversary of Władysław Reymont's Nobel Prize for „The Peasants”



The 1905 portrait of Władysław Reymont by Jacek Malczewski is available on the digital collection of the National Museum in Warsaw at cyfrowe.mnw.art.pl

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Joanna Sokołowska-Gwizdka

On November 13, 1924, Władysław Reymont was awarded the Nobel Prize in

Literature for his monumental novel „The Peasants.” This four-volume epic, which Reymont wrote between 1901 and 1908, was published in installments in „Tygodnik Illustrowany” from 1904 to 1909. The novel’s action spans ten months—from September to July at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries—and is set in the small village of Lipce. It is divided into four parts, each reflecting the cycle of nature: „Autumn,” „Winter,” „Spring,” and „Summer.” The renowned literary critic Kazimierz Wyka emphasized that Reymont created a unique work in Polish literature, one that not only tells the story of the peasants’ lives but also faithfully captures their mentality, customs, and worldview. In his analysis, Wyka noted how the author constructs the depicted world through the rhythms of nature, cyclical agricultural work, the changing seasons, and festivals that dictate the rhythm of the characters’ lives. „The Peasants” is also a study of universal human emotions and conflicts—love, jealousy, greed, and the struggle for power—giving the novel a timeless and universal character.



Władysław Reymont, circa 1897, photo available at the Polona Digital Library

Władysław Reymont, born on May 7, 1867, as Władysław Stanisław Rejment in Kobile Wielkie, within the Russian Partition, spent his youth during a time when Poland was divided among three empires. Artistically connected with the Young Poland movement, he drew inspiration from the lives of ordinary people and the Polish countryside. In his works, such as *The Promised Land* and *The Comedienne*, he portrayed not only the beauty but also the hardships and injustices that were the daily realities of his characters. Before becoming a writer, Reymont worked as a railway laborer and an actor in a traveling theater, experiences that later inspired his literary work.

The Nobel Prize in Literature, awarded for „the most outstanding work of an idealistic tendency,” recognized Reymont’s epic narrative and his realistic and poetic depiction of rural Polish life. However, the Nobel Committee’s decision in

1924 was unexpected. Although Reymont was respected in Poland, his fame did not match that of other candidates, such as the German writer Thomas Mann, the Russian playwright Maxim Gorky, or the 1915 French Nobel laureate Romain Rolland. In addition to honoring the literary value of *The Peasants*, the prize for the Polish author also had a political dimension—it highlighted international recognition of Poland, which regained its independence in 1918 after 123 years of partition.

Reymont, who had long struggled with health issues, including a heart attack, did not receive the news of the award with excessive enthusiasm, aware that it might be his last great achievement. He passed away a year later, on December 5, 1925, at the age of only 58. In letters to friends, he wrote about the “irony of life”—on one hand, worldwide fame and recognition, and on the other, the battle with illness that prevented him from fully enjoying his success. Due to health reasons, he was unable to personally accept the award in Stockholm; instead, it was received on his behalf on December 10, 1924, by Alfred Wysocki, the then-Polish diplomatic representative in Sweden. The monetary prize, amounting to 116,000 Swedish crowns, helped the writer with medical treatments and provided financial security for his family.



On August 15, 1925, Władysław Reymont visited the small village of Wierzchosławice near Tarnów at the invitation of Wincenty Witos. In honor of the writer, a grand harvest festival, known as the „Reymont Harvest Festival,” was organized. In the photo, Władysław Reymont (center) is pictured with his wife on the honorary platform

Reymont’s success was a source of immense national pride for Poles, especially in the context of rebuilding the state after regaining independence. Newspapers such as *Kurier Warszawski* and *Rzeczpospolita* published enthusiastic articles, praising the writer’s talent and the significance of his work for Polish national identity. Reactions abroad varied—some critics expressed surprise that the prize was awarded to a lesser-known author. German newspapers, such as the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, emphasized that Thomas Mann, the author of *Buddenbrooks*, was more deserving of the distinction. The Swedes, however, believed that Reymont brought freshness and authenticity to European literature, fully justifying their choice.

On November 22, 1924, Warsaw's *Tygodnik Ilustrowany* published an article titled „The European Press on Reymont.” The article revealed how deeply Europeans were engaged with literature at the time and how moved they were by the news of the award. There were extensive articles about the author (some newspapers dedicated entire issues to Reymont) as well as critical essays on *The Peasants* and brief informational notes. *Tygodnik Ilustrowany* also published a letter from Romain Rolland:

Thank you very much for sending me the French translations of your two books. As for The Peasants (Autumn), I hold it in the highest regard. What a fertile and rich land. (...)

Happy is the one who, like you, is not merely a laborer of books (as Goethe said, the more one writes or reads such books, the more one becomes a book himself!)—but is instead the land itself—his own land, in the full cycle of the four seasons!

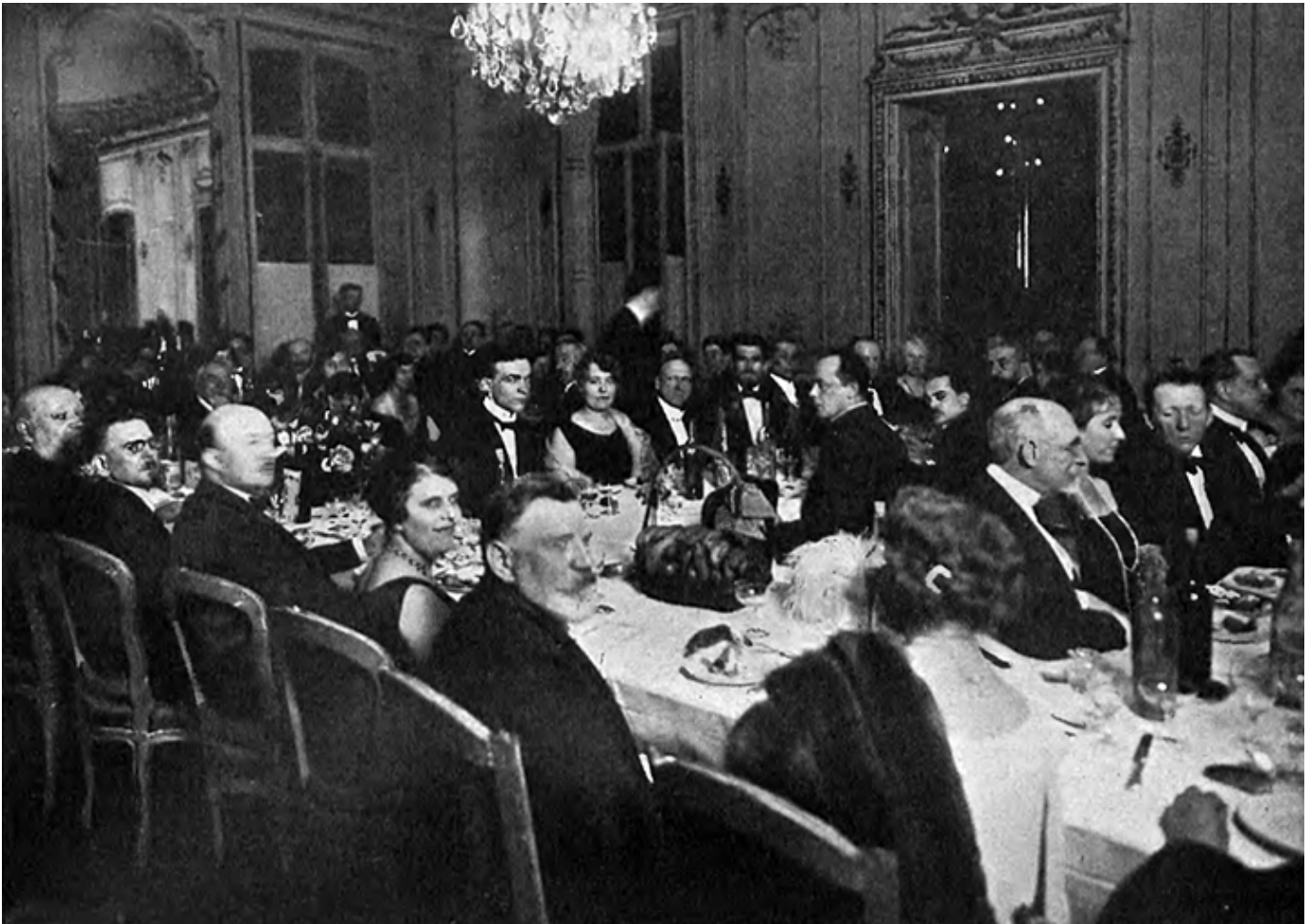
I congratulate you, I congratulate not just you but your entire nation through you. I rejoice that Poland has you, and I thank you for allowing me the privilege of knowing you.

Believe me, dear Mr. Władysław Reymont, that I am fully devoted to you with all my admiration.

Romain Rolland

The widespread popularity of Reymont's epic led to numerous translations and publications of *The Peasants* worldwide. Reymont himself was invited to attend meetings at literary societies across Europe. On June 6, 1925, *Tygodnik Ilustrowany* published an article titled „The Worldwide Fame of Reymont,” in which the author discussed the many invitations the writer accepted during the spring of 1925. Although Reymont had been unable to accept the Nobel Prize in person, these later travels benefited him. The color returned to his cheeks, and a smile reappeared on his face, along with his former energy. During this period, he frequently heard that the literature he created had become a part of the world's cultural heritage.

American newspapers expressed gratitude that the Nobel Committee had recognized this previously lesser-known yet truly brilliant author.

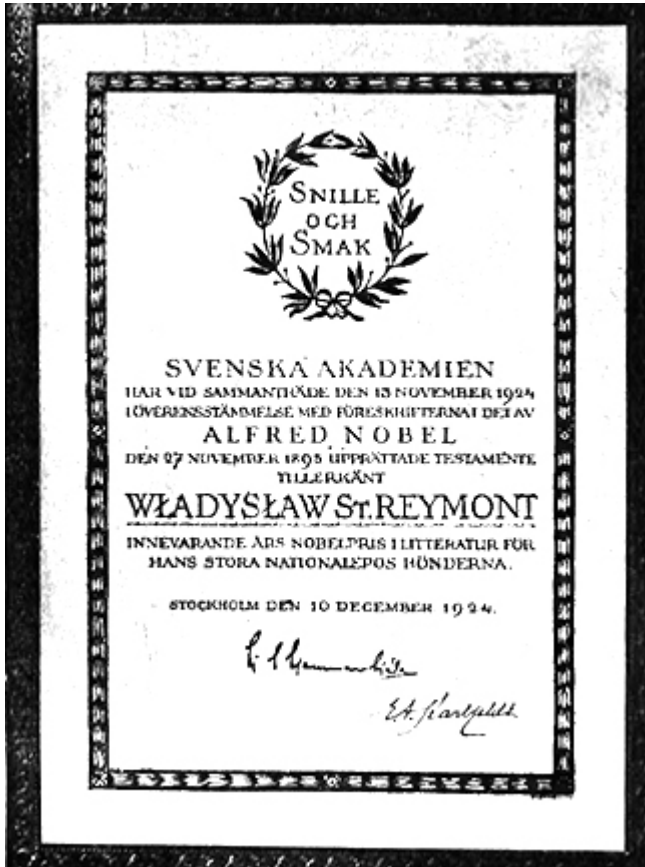


A banquet was held on May 15, 1925, by the France-Poland Society and the Société des Gens de Lettres in Paris in honor of Władysław Reymont (second from the left). To the writer's right sits the French government representative, Minister de Monzie, and to his left, the president of the French Society of Writers, Legolfic. Photo published in Tygodnik Ilustrowany, June 6, 1925

A hundred years after being awarded the Nobel Prize, *The Peasants* remains one of the most significant works of Polish literature. The novel has inspired numerous film, theater, and television adaptations, including the latest animated painting version, which has received acclaim both in Poland and abroad. *The Peasants* continues to be studied by literary critics and scholars who analyze its social layers as well as the symbolism of nature and the life cycle.

In the context of global climate change, Reymont's message about the harmony between humans and nature takes on new relevance. The themes of returning to

tradition, defending local cultures, and preserving agriculture in the face of globalization are presented in *The Peasants* in a way that remains both timely and thought-provoking.



"Tygodnik Ilustrowany", June 6, 1925

Polish Nobel Prize Laureates in Literature:

- Henryk Sienkiewicz - 1905
- Władysław Reymont - 1924
- Czesław Miłosz - 1980
- Wisława Szymborska - 1996
- Olga Tokarczuk - 2018

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Sources: Wikipedia, TVP, Culture.pl, NobelPrize.org, *Tygodnik Ilustrowany*, collections of the University Library in Łódź.

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GALLERY



Photo by J. Sokołowska-Gwizdka



Between 1888 and 1893, Władysław Reymont worked as a railway guard for the Warsaw-Vienna Railway and lived, among other places, in Lipce in this house located by the railway crossing. Photo by J. Sokołowska-Gwizdka



*The house of Władysław Reymont in Lipce Reymontowskie. It was here that the writer set the action of *The Peasants*. Lipce (now Lipce Reymontowskie) served as inspiration but are not depicted exactly as they appear in the novel. Photo by J. Sokołowska-Gwizdka*



Lipce Reymontowskie, a historic peasant cottage located within the Władysław Reymont Museum, photo by Joanna Sokołowska-Gwizdka



The Władysław Reymont Museum in Lipce Reymontowskie, photo by J. Sokołowska-Gwizdka



The Władysław Reymont Museum in Lipce Reymontowskie, photo by J. Sokołowska-Gwizdka



The symbolic grave of Maciej Boryna at the cemetery in Lipce Reymontowskie, photo by A. Sokołowski



The symbolic grave of Maciej Boryna at the cemetery in Lipce Reymontowskie, photo by J. Sokolowska-Gwizdka

Painterly Vision of Władysław Reymont's „The Peasants”

An Interview with Dorota Kobiela Welchman - Co-director and Creator of the Visual Concept of the Film, on the Adaptation of the Nobel-Winning Novel.

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Kamila Urzędowska as Jagna and Cezary Łukaszewicz as the Blacksmith Michał in the film „The Peasants”, photo by Małgorzata Kuźnik, Courtesy of Sony Pictures Classics

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Joanna Sokołowska-Gwizdka:

What motivated you to bring Władysław Reymont’s novel to the screen?

Dorota Kobiela Welchman:

First and foremost, a deep admiration for the literature. Reymont’s *The Peasants* is an outstanding work of prose that won the Nobel Prize, surpassing works such as Thomas Mann’s *Buddenbrooks*. Reymont himself did not believe he stood a chance for such a prestigious award.

The novel is set in the late 19th century in the small village of Lipce, which symbolizes a typical Polish countryside. The social portrait depicted in *The Peasants* appeared exotic to the Nobel committee, while also vividly reflecting the human experience, with its passions, love, anger, and jealousy. You have managed to bring out and highlight all these values, making the scene from over a hundred years ago contemporary and universal.

It was this universality of the literary image that captivated us. There are so many modern themes one can find in this novel. It was very important to me to address issues in the film that are relevant in today's world. This wasn't just an adaptation treated like a homework assignment.



Kamila Urzędowska as Jagna and Robert Gulaczyk as Antek in the film „The Peasants”, photo courtesy of press materials, www.chlopifilm.pl

Joanna Sokołowska-Gwizdka:

For us, *The Peasants* was a school reading; everyone who finished school in Poland knows it. But how did your husband, an Englishman who wasn't raised on Polish literature, perceive the novel?

Dorota Kobiela Welchman:

My husband, Hugh, read the book from a different perspective. I was curious how he would receive it. But he said it was one of the best universal novels about humanity and emotions he had ever read, and it describes a social group that is rarely featured in books and often underappreciated—peasants.

Typically, peasants are depicted in a stereotypical way: the poor farmer exploited by the cruel landowner, without character or personality. In the book, we see the

individuality of each member of this community and the motivations behind their actions.

In the film, we wanted to preserve this literary value; here, the peasant is also vivid, colorful, and interesting. The excellent supporting cast helps shape a distinct collective protagonist, which adds depth and authenticity to the entire portrayal.

In the adaptation, the central character is Jagna; the events unfold around her, and she is the one who evokes emotions and arouses passions. In the book, this character is left open-ended and ambiguous.

The ambiguous way Reymont presented Jagna gave us immense opportunities in creating the script. We looked for ways to best portray her sensitivity. We decided that her artistic talents—her paper cutouts—would be an excellent symbol of her inner experiences.

Women in such communities did not know what individuality was; they conformed to the norms and customs widely accepted. Being different was not acceptable.

The theme of otherness and Jagna's situation as a young woman, contrasted with the dominant voice of the majority, is, in my opinion, very relevant today. Jagna primarily wanted to live her life her own way. From the beginning, when she refused to cut her braids during the wedding ceremony, she was rebellious. Her defiance of the general rules aroused growing fear in the community, and fear breeds aggression.

Joanna Sokołowska-Gwizdka:

Why did you decide on painterly animation, similar to *Loving Vincent*?

Dorota Kobiela Welchman:

When I was listening to the audiobook of *The Peasants* while driving, I discovered that Reymont's language is very rich but also incredibly visual. So the decision to use a painterly technique seemed natural.



Kamila Urzędowska as Jagna in the film „The Peasants”, ©Kateryna Ocheredko, Courtesy of Sony Pictures Classics

Joanna Sokołowska-Gwizdka:

You once mentioned in an interview that a painting is static for you, and that’s where the idea for painted films came from. Do you still think that way?

Dorota Kobiela Welchman:

I believe so. While working on *Loving Vincent*, I was always tempted to go „behind the scenes” of the paintings featured in the film. My painting professor used to say to look at still lifes as if they were actors, and that approach has stayed with me.

The scale was immense, with a dynamic camera and numerous group scenes. Unlike *Vincent*, here the story was already established, and we sought the visual layer to match it.

Joanna Sokołowska-Gwizdka:

The Peasants is a grand spectacle full of painterly details. What challenges did this production present?

Was every element of the film created first and then painted? Wouldn't it be easier to simply paint a complex piece of costume or decoration?

Dorota Kobiela Welchman:

Sometimes on set, we joked that if someone lost, for example, an earring, the painter would just paint it in. But everything had to be prepared in advance. For instance, the wedding crown for Jagna was designed by artist and graphic designer Professor Katarzyna Stanny. The work took days and nights. First, an embroidered headdress was created, and then the second, final part was made, consisting of a golden mesh onto which various decorative elements were applied. It became a true work of art.

Joanna Sokołowska-Gwizdka:

The film heavily relies on the aesthetics of the Young Poland movement; the referenced works of Józef Chełmoński and Ferdynand Ruszczyc perfectly complement the narrative of the novel. However, the music doesn't originate from Reymont's time, yet it feels as though it not only belongs to the era but also carries the spirit of a broader Slavic identity.

Dorota Kobiela Welchman:

The music was composed by Łukasz Rostkowski, who previously was a rapper under the stage name L.U.C. He approached us with the idea of writing music for the film, and although he had never done it before, we decided to take a chance. As we started working together, it quickly became clear that his talent harmonized perfectly with our vision.



Kamila Urzędowska as Jagna in the film „The Peasants”, Courtesy of Sony Pictures Classics

Joanna Sokołowska-Gwizdka:

In November, we will be showing *The Peasants* at the Austin Polish Film Festival in Texas. What do you think an American viewer will notice?

Dorota Kobiela Welchman:

I think viewers worldwide will notice the universal story that resonates with contemporary issues, such as double standards or patriarchy. These are themes that can be understood in any part of the world. The issues shown in the film are not exclusive to the Slavic world but are also indicative of our times and the modern human experience.

Joanna Sokołowska-Gwizdka:

What does this film mean to you personally?

Dorota Kobiela Welchman:

That's a very emotional question. For me, it is an intimate story about my

experiences, feelings, and my relationship with the character of Jagna. Besides that, this film is the result of four years of work by a large artistic team, their dedication, and the energy they gave us.

The film inspires thought and encourages the reevaluation of stereotypes. It is also a beautiful piece with high aesthetic values. You have created a great work that, regardless of time, opinions, or judgments, is timeless and will go down in history.

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Dorota Kobiela Welchman, photo by PORTRAIT STUDIO Norman Wong

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We invite you to the film screening during the Gala of the 19th Austin Polish Film Festival, on November 8, at 6:30 pm. More information on the website:

<https://www.austinpolfilm.com/>

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