

MEET GABRIELA MISTRAL

For most people, losing a loved one is devastating. For Gabriela Mistral, it was an event that transformed a schoolteacher from a small rural village into a poet of emotional power. Through her haunting verses, Mistral expressed the pain of personal loss, but also spurred her readers to care about the oppressed and downtrodden.

As the first Latin American woman to win a Nobel Prize, Mistral earned a reputation as the literary heroine in her native Chile. As an educator, diplomat, and humanitarian, she was an advocate for oppressed people all over the world.

Humble Beginnings Mistral was born Lucila Godoy y Alcayaga, and grew up in a small village in northern Chile, perched high in the beautiful Andes Mountains. Her father, a poet and schoolteacher, deserted the family when his daughter was 3 years old. She started school at age 9, but only attended for a few years. She studied at home with the help of her sister, and eventually became a schoolteacher at age 15.

Poetry from Tragedy At age 20, the young teacher experienced a personal tragedy that would change her life. She fell deeply in love with a railroad employee, and their affair ended when he committed suicide. Distraught over the loss, Lucila poured her emotion into three poems she called “Sonetos de la muerte,” or “Sonnets of Death.” She signed the poems Gabriela Mistral, a name she coined from her two favorite poets, Gabriele D’Annunzio and Frédéric Mistral.

The “Sonetos de la muerte” won Chile’s national poetry contest, Juegos Florales, in 1914. In 1922, Mistral published her first collection of poems, *Desolación (Despair)*. It included “Dolor,” a poem about the aftermath of a lover’s death by suicide.

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A child's tiny feet,
Blue, blue with cold,
How can they see and not protect you?
—Gabriela Mistral

Mother and Teacher Many of Mistral’s later poems dealt with the theme of children and maternity. In 1924, she published *Tenura* (“Tenderness”), a collection of poems about childhood. *Tala* (“Ravage”), published in 1938, was written to benefit the child victims of the Spanish Civil War.

Mistral’s interest in children was also expressed in her career as an educator. In 1922, she was asked to develop an education program in Mexico. The following year, the Chilean government named her “Teacher of the Nation.” She would later serve as a professor at several colleges in the United States.

Serving the World Community As Mistral’s fame grew, she received more opportunities to expand her mission to speak for children and oppressed people all over the world. As a diplomat, she represented Chile at the League of Nations and the United Nations. She has been called the spiritual godmother of UNICEF. She also worked at the Institute of International Cooperation (a precursor

of UNESCO) and on the Commission on Human Rights.

In 1945, her efforts as a poet and humanitarian were recognized with a Nobel Prize. The presentation speech praised her as “the spiritual queen of Latin America.”

Gabriela Mistral was born in 1889 and died in 1957.