

Why Wislawa Szymborska?

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Wisława Szymborska (born July 2, 1923) is a Polish poet, essayist and translator. Honored by the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1996 following on from earlier Polish award-holders Henryk Sienkiewicz, Władysław Reymont and Czesław Miłosz and by numerous other awards, she is generally considered the most important living Polish poet.

In Poland, her books reach sales rivaling prominent prose authors — although she once remarked in a poem entitled "Some like poetry" [Niektorzy lubi poezje] that no more than two out of a thousand people care for the art.

Szymborska frequently employs literary devices, such as irony, paradox, contradiction, and understatement, to illuminate underlying philosophical themes and obsessions. Szymborska is a miniaturist, whose compact poems often conjure large existential puzzles. Although most of Szymborska's poems are barely a page in length, they often touch on issues of ethical import, reflecting on the condition of Man both as individual and member of human society. Szymborska's style is marked by intellectual introspection, wit, and a succinct and stylish choice of words.

Szymborska's reputation rests on a relatively small body of work: she has not published more than 250 poems. As a person, she is often described as modest to the point of shyness. Long cherished by her Polish literary contemporaries (including Czesław Miłosz), Szymborska became much better known in international circles after her 1996 Nobel Prize. Szymborska's work has been translated into many European languages, as well as into Arabic, Hebrew, Japanese and Chinese.

In 2001 she became an honorary member of the American Academy of Fine Arts and Literature, the most important American distinction awarded to renowned artists. Her most important collections of poetry are: 'Dlatego żyjemy' (Why we live - 1952), 'Pytania stawiane sobie' (Questions Asked of Oneself - 1954), 'Wolanie do yeti' (Calling to the Yeti - 1957), 'Sto pociech' (A Hundred Joys - 1967), 'Ludzie na moście' (People on the Bridge - 1986), 'Koniec i początek i koniec' (End and Beginning - 1993), 'Lektury nadobowiązkowe' (Optional Readings - 1996), 'Widok z ziarnkiem piasku' (View with a Grain of Sand - 1996), 'Sto wierszy - sto pociech' (A Hundred Poems, a Hundred Joys - 1997), and 'Chwila' (A Moment - 2002).

Read one of her poems and you will understand why Szymborska... and maybe this will follow with more searching and reading...

Kot w pustym mieszkaniu
 Umrzec tego się nie robi kotu.
 Bo co ma poczwać kot
 w pustym mieszkaniu?
 Wdrapywać ściany?
 Ocierać między meblami?
 Nic niby tu nie zmienione,
 a jednak pozamieniane.
 Niby nie przesunięte,
 a jednak porozsuwane.
 I wieczorami lampa już nie świeci.
 Słychać kroki na schodach,
 ale to nie te.
 Reka co kładzie rybę na talerzyk,
 także nie ta, co kładła. Coś się nie zaczyna
 w swojej zwykłej porze.
 Co? się nie odbywa
 jak powinno.
 Ktoś tutaj był i był,
 a potem nagle zniknął
 i uparczywie go nie ma. Do wszystkich szaf się zajrzało.
 Przez polki przebiegło.
 Wcisnęło się pod dywan i sprawdziło.
 Nawet złamało zakaz
 i rozrzuciło papiery.
 Co więcej jest do zrobienia.
 Spać i czekać. Niech no on tylko wróci
 niech no się pokaze.

Juz on sie dowie,
ze tak z kotem nie mozna.
Bo idzie sie w jego strone jakby sie wcale nie chcialo,
pomalutku,
na bardzo obrazonych lapach,
i zadnych skokow piskow na poczatek.

Cat in an empty apartment

Die - you can't do that to a cat.
Since what can a cat do
in an empty apartment?
Climb the walls?
Rub up against the furniture?
Nothing seems different here,
but nothing is the same.
Nothing has been moved,
but there's more space.
And at nighttime no lamps are lit.
Footsteps on the staircase,
but they're new ones.
The hand that puts fish on the saucer
has changed, too. Something doesn't start
at its usual time.
Something doesn't happen
as it should.
Someone was always, always here,
then suddenly disappeared
and stubbornly stays disappeared. Every closet has been examined.
Every shelf has been explored.
Excavations under the carpet turned up nothing.
A commandment was even broken,
papers scattered everywhere.
What remains to be done.
Just sleep and wait. Just wait till he turns up,
just let him show his face.
Will he ever get a lesson
on what not to do to a cat.
Sidle toward him
as if unwilling
and ever so slow
on visibly offended paws,
and no leaps or squeals at least to start. Translated by
Stanislaw Baranczak
& Clare Cavanagh

Dying - you wouldn't do that to a cat.
For what is a cat to do
in an empty apartment?
Climb up the walls?
Brush up against the furniture?
Nothing here seems changed,
and yet something has changed.
Nothing has been moved,
and yet there's more room.
And in the evenings the lamp is not on.
One hears footsteps on the stairs,
but they're not the same.
Neither is the hand
that puts a fish on the plate. Something here isn't starting
at its usual time.
Something here isn't happening

as it should.

Somebody has been here and has been,
and then has suddenly disappeared
and now is stubbornly absent. All the closets have been scanned
and all the shelves run through.

Slipping under the carpet and checking came to nothing.
The rule has even been broken and all the papers scattered.

What else is there to do?

Sleep and wait. Just let him come back,
let him show up.

Then he'll find out
that you don't do that to a cat.

Going toward him
faking reluctance,
slowly,
on very offended paws.

And no jumping, purring at first. Translated by
Joanna Trzeciak

J.Z.

source: www.wikipedia.org and links