

# Pablo Neruda (1904-1973)

## Gale Database: Contemporary Literary Criticism Select

### Introduction

Widely regarded as the most important contemporary Latin American poet of the twentieth century, Neruda was noted for his innovative techniques and influential contributions to major developments in modern poetry, both in his native Chile and abroad. Due to the difficulty of accurately translating his works, only a small body of his poems have been rendered into English and often in multiple forms that prompt critical debate regarding their relative quality or accuracy. Although translations of his works have existed since the 1940s, Neruda remained relatively unknown to English-speaking readers prior to the appearance of several of his works in the early 1960s and his being honored with the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1971. Most critics arrange his *oeuvre* into different periods of development-- ranging from the early, traditional works, to the spontaneous surrealist poetry of the 1930s, to the direct political poetry of his later years. Geoffrey Barraclough called Neruda "a one-man Renaissance ... who has modified the outlook of three generations of Latin Americans. His roots are firmly planted in Chile ...; his appeal is to the whole continent."



### Biographical Information

Born in the agricultural region of Parral, Neruda moved with his family at a young age to Temuco, a rainy region of Chile that later figured in his poetry. Neruda commented: "Nature there went to my head like strong whiskey. I was barely ten at the time, but already a poet." He started publishing poetry at the age of fifteen under the pseudonym Pablo Neruda, and at the age of sixteen entered Chile's Instituto Pedagógico, where he majored in French. In 1921, Neruda entered a poetry competition at the annual Spring Festival in Santiago for which he received first prize. The poems in his first collection, *La canción de la fiesta*, which was published by the Students' Federation that had sponsored the competition, reflected the influence of symbolist poets, Walt Whitman, and Ruben Dario. In a traditional style, the poems in this collection address such topics as love and death. A similar blend of romantic and symbolist influences characterize *Crepúsculario*, a second volume that Neruda later dismissed as unsophisticated but which is often considered a classic of Chilean poetry.

## Major Works

At the age of twenty, Neruda began studying poetry in Santiago at the University of Chile; that same year, he established a promising reputation with *Veinte poemas de amor y una canción desesperada* (*Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair*). A highly popular best-seller, this work is considered to mark his transition from symbolist to surrealist poetry. Apparently chaotic and arbitrary in its enumeration of material objects and complex evocation of thought and sensation, the book features poems that convey personal emotion in mystical terms. Although these verses initially shocked critics with their colloquial language and lyrical yet explicit treatment of the joys and failures of love and sex, Neruda later asserted in his famous essay, "Sobre una poesía sin pureza" ("On a Poetry without Purity"), that poetry should be "corroded as if by an acid, by the toil of the hand, impregnated with sweat and smoke, smelling of urine and lilies." Since their initial appearance, Neruda's love poems have been variously faulted and commended for their dualistic celebration of woman as both the seductress of man and his vital link to mother earth and nature. *Veinte poemas* is widely regarded as a masterpiece of Hispanic erotic poetry, and the book's success inspired several later volumes of love poetry, including *Los versos del capitán* (*The Captain's Verses*) and *Cien sonetos de amor*.

Neruda broke further with conventionalism in *Tentativa del hombre infinito*, an experimental work that marks his first use of interior monologue and abandonment of traditional structure, rhyme, syntax, and punctuation. While contemporary scholars concur that reviewers have often misinterpreted this work's illogical surrealist images, resulting in critical neglect, the collection is now regarded as one of Neruda's major works. During the mid-1920s, Neruda further experimented with new constructions in *Prosas de Pablo Neruda*, a collection of prose, and *El habitante y su esperanza*, a volume of short fiction. In honor of his achievement, Neruda was appointed to the diplomatic service in 1927 as the Chilean consul in Burma, and later served in Ceylon and the Dutch East Indies. Neruda began writing the poems in *Residencia en la tierra* (*Residence on Earth and Other Poems*), the first volume in a continuing cycle that established him as a leading figure in Spanish-language literature. Complex in structure and meaning, this work makes use of dense, hermetic language and introspective interior monologue to express a complex metaphysical vision of the earth in which existence is viewed as a continuous process of decay and despair.

Neruda returned to Chile from the Far East in 1933 and was reassigned to Buenos Aires, where he became friends with Spanish poet Federico Garcia Lorca and others associated with the Generation of 1927. The second volume of *Residencia en la tierra*, written after his appointment as Chilean consul in Barcelona in 1934, features a lighter, declamatory style and a more direct approach to communication with his reader. In this work, Neruda reveals a more pragmatic view of world problems and expresses less anguish over his inability to resolve human contradictions. *Tercera Residencia, 1935-1945*, a third installment in the *Residencia* cycle written over ten years later, is less highly regarded than its predecessors due to its didactic espousal of ideological concerns. Following the onset of the Spanish Civil War, Neruda's life and poetry took an abrupt political turn. In *Espana en el corazon* (*Spain in My Heart*), an impassioned tribute in verse dedicated to the cause of the Spanish Loyalists, Neruda's poetry became less personal and began to depict political concerns from a socialist perspective. In "Las furias y las penas," a later poem that was revised and incorporated into *Tercera residencia* following its original publication as a single work in 1939, Neruda stated that his poetry had changed to reflect the transformation of his life and the world following global conflict and economic depression. While serving as secretary to the Chilean embassy in Mexico City from 1939 to 1941, and as a consul from 1941 to 1943, he became increasingly involved in leftist causes. *Nuevo canto de amor a Stalingrado*, a poem in which he praises the defenders of Stalingrad in Russia, led to his dismissal from his diplomatic post in 1943.

Although recalled to his country, Neruda instead traveled to France in 1943 to arrange for the passage of refugees of the Spanish Civil War to Chile. The same year he published his acclaimed poem *Alturas de Macchu Picchu* (*The Heights of Macchu Picchu*), a work inspired by his 1943 visit to the Incan ruins of the title. This piece was later integrated into his epic work *Canto general de Chile*, a collection extensively revised between its original appearance in 1943 and its final version in 1950 that features 340 poems on Chile's natural, cultural, and political history. With this volume, Neruda renounced his work written prior to 1937 and proclaimed himself a populist poet. Writing in a direct, documentary style, Neruda treats each canto as an individual chapter, skirting the boundaries between political reportage, propaganda, and art to enlist reader support for his socialist values. While most critics have agreed that his Marxist view of Chile's history of poverty and tyranny results in a work of uneven quality, *Canto general* is often regarded as one of Neruda's major achievements.

Neruda returned to Chile in 1944 and was elected to the Senate in 1946. There he denounced the prevailing anti-communist stance of his government. In 1947, Neruda published letters in the Mexican and Venezuelan press charging Chile's president, Gabriel Gonzalez Videla, with violating his country's constitution by betraying the national interest in collusion with the United States government. Indicted for treason, Neruda fled his homeland in political exile in 1949. In the next few years he traveled extensively, finished his revised *Canto general*, and completed an expose. *González Videla, el Lavel de la América Latina*. During the early 1950s, Neruda received the Stalin Prize for literature as well as the Lenin Peace Prize and was permitted to return to Chile in 1953. In such works of political verse as *Poesía política* and *Las uvas y el viento*, Neruda employs a new, simpler style to communicate more directly with the common people, a goal that had eluded him despite his popular and political earlier poetry. His next major work, *Odas elementales* (*Elementary Odes*) is a cycle of poems free of political intent that humorously exalt banal objects and the mundane occurrences of everyday life. These short-lined poems, written in free verse and displaying such titles as "Ode to the Tomato" and "The Dance of the Artichoke," elevate fruits and vegetables to poetic stature while mocking the traditional ode. Fernando Alegria called Neruda's *Odas elementales* "a song to matter, to its dynamism and to the life and death cycles which perpetuate it. His concept of universality does not always refer to a philosophic order." Neruda later completed several additional volumes of odes, including *Nuevas odas elementales*, *Tercer libro de las odas*, and *Odas: al libro, a las Américas, a la luz*.

Most critics agree that *Estravagario* (*Extravagaria*) signals the last major development in Neruda's poetry. Like the *Odas elementales*, the poems in this volume are characterized by a flippant, self-indulgent tone and lucid style. Returning to the egocentrism of his earliest verse, Neruda employs self-parody to gently satirize his previous works and persona, particularly mocking his early stance of the poet as hero. His later poetry includes didactic political poetry, light, frivolous verse, and serious, prophetic works, often combining elements from all three styles. A member of the Chilean Communist Party since 1945, Neruda became a nominee for the presidency of Chile in 1970, but his name was withdrawn from consideration when the five parties that made up Chile's political left decided to endorse Salvador Allende. Under Allende's government, Neruda served as Ambassador to France prior to his death. In addition to his many works of poetry and prose, Neruda also completed *Fulgor y muerte de Joaquín Murieta* (*Splendor and Death of Joaquín Murieta*), a stridently anti-American play about a Californian bandit and hero; *Memorial de Isla Negra* (*Isla Negra: A Notebook*), a five volume autobiography in verse expressing reflections on his life and work; and *Confieso que he vivido: Memorias* (*Memoirs*), a posthumous volume of reminiscences written in prose.

## Critical Reception

Widely regarded as the most important contemporary Latin American poet of the twentieth century, Neruda is noted for his innovative techniques and influential contributions to major developments in modern poetry. Rather than classifying Neruda's work according to a single movement or style, most critics arrange his oeuvre into several periods of development-- ranging from the early, traditional works, to the spontaneous surrealist poetry of the 1930s, to the simple, direct and political poetry of his later years. Geoffrey Barraclough called Neruda "a one-man Renaissance . . . who has modified the outlook of three generations of Latin Americans. His roots are firmly planted in Chile; . . . his appeal is to the whole continent." During his lifetime, Neruda was often disparaged for his affiliation with communism and for treating political concerns in his poetry. Since his death, however, critics have endorsed Neruda as a major figure in world literature.