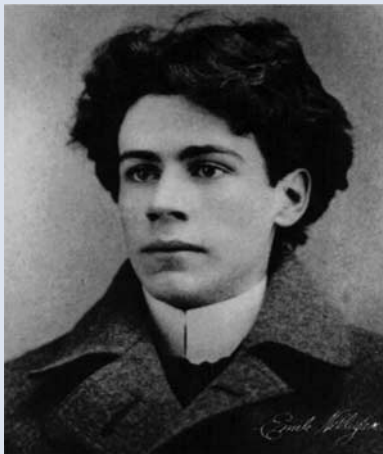


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fallen stars



Emile Nelligan

Raymond Cavanaugh Jr.

Emile Nelligan was born in Montreal on Christmas Eve 1879, entering a family with a French-Canadian mother and Dublin-native father, who emphatically prohibited the use of French inside his home.

As an adolescent, Nelligan found himself gravitating towards his mother, a passionate, open-minded woman, who encouraged her son's interest in French verse and poetic composition. Nelligan senior was a stern and diligent individual, who fancied his son a triumphant businessman. He was to be resoundingly disappointed, as commerce proved far too practical a vocation for one of young Nelligan's bohemian ilk.

By the age of 15, Nelligan was devoting himself exclusively to the study and writing of verse. More of a creator than a scholar, he led a lacklustre academic career at the College Sainte-Marie, where he was fortunate enough to encounter an erudite and discerning priest, who saw in Nelligan a talent he encouraged the young man to pursue.

The mediocre student's first published works offered a bewitching musicality with striking images. After landing poems in several local newspapers, Nelligan made the usually injudicious decision to leave school. This gutsy act eventually paid off, however, as several poetic gems came to fruition from his ardent and single-minded literary quest.

The blossoming drop-out's best-known piece was *The Romance of Wine*, intended as a celebration of the creative temperament, though many incorrectly construed the poem as an ode to alcoholic consumption.

Nelligan's auspicious full-length debut catapulted him into status as one of Quebec's foremost literary figures. With dramatic good looks and an enigmatic gaze, he certainly appeared the part of a young romantic genius. He was a spellbinding performer, who was even carried away by a rapturous crowd following an especially engaging poetry recital.

Soon following this jovial triumph, the eminently promising 19-year-old was stricken by an abrupt psychotic breakdown. There would be no return, and the in-patient eked out a ghostly life sentence at two Montreal asylums.

During the incipient stage of hospitalisation, Nelligan penned a few couplets, though he endeavoured in vain to produce work of merit. With the poet having been dragged past the turbid gates of madness, his muse had stayed behind. So the patient's condition gradually deteriorated for several decades until his death at the age of 61.

Fine poetic composition is an especially formidable talent, and in the literary tradition Nelligan is one of a miraculous few who, as a juvenile, managed to produce verse of canonical calibre.

Among the poets who are known for being a tragic lot, Nelligan carries the grim distinction of being one of the cursed species' most extreme cases. His hauntingly brief and youthful corpus of verse bears testament to a genius in whom madness claimed the upper hand.

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