House of Earth Short Guide

House of Earth by Pearl S. Buck

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Characters

The Good Earth, Wang Lung is a Insimple peasant who makes good by hard work and incredibly good luck.

As the book opens, he is about to take a wife, a plain woman with big feet whom he purchased from the great House of Hwang. O-lan is a good wife, laconic almost to a fault, fertile, and a willing worker beside him in the fields.

She bears him first a son, then another son, then a daughter, next a daughter who dies at birth, and finally twins, a son and a daughter. A drought and crop failure forces the family to seek refuge in a city, where Wang Lung pulls a rickshaw. One day, as if by magic, Wang Lung is swept along by a street gang of looters until he stands alone before a terrified fat man who offers to give him gold in exchange for his life. With the gold, the family is able to return home. Wang Lung buys more land. But as he becomes richer, he comes to spurn O-lan for a prettier concubine. He feels anger at his own behavior but cannot help himself.

O-lan dies prematurely and eventually he occupies the deserted House of Hwang with his concubine. His youngest son, who the father hoped would continue farming the land, runs away from home to become a soldier. As Wang Lung lies upon his deathbed, his two elder sons savor the thought of their generous inheritance.

It is the youngest son, Wang the Tiger, whose military and paramilitary career is followed in the sequel Sons.

Wang the Elder, a pleasure-seeking landlord, and Wang the Second, a conniving merchant, are stereotypes and remain in the background.

Through his own efforts and with the money that he inherits from his father, Wang the Tiger becomes powerful enough to assume the leadership of an independent band of soldiers. But he is too tender-hearted to be a successful brigand, and he takes refuge from his work in supervising the education of his son Yuan. But Yuan has no interest in military matters and is instead fascinated by the things of nature and the growing of the crops. This conflict between father and son mirrors the conflict between father and son a generation before. Wang the Tiger has all the problems of a tragic hero, but lamentably he does not come alive enough to be a tragic hero.

A House Divided begins just after Yuan's quarrel with his father as he seeks sanctuary in his grandfather's old earthen house, still standing on the edge of a hamlet and surrounded on three sides by quiet fields. Yet this is not a good place to hide, for the money-grubbing ways of his uncles have not made the family popular in the vicinity. So Yuan leaves for Shanghai, where he seeks out the family of Wang the Elder. One of his cousins, Meng, has become a revolutionary and Yuan follows suit. He is jailed, then ransomed, and then smuggled out of the country to America, where as a student he becomes a chauvinistic Chinese in exile. Later when he returns to his homeland, he

realizes how misguided was his idealism and he ends up confused, torn between his grandfather's earth-loving idyll and the fashionable world of his uncle's home. But Yuan is also a confusing character; his values are contradictory and his character remains unresolved at the end of the novel. Paul Doyle suggests that he may be a casualty of Buck's simple storytelling technique, so much more effective in analyzing external than internal reality.

Social Concerns

Buck always sought to promote understanding of the world's peoples by stressing similarities rather than differences. Nowhere in House of Earth are Eastern or Chinese ethical values so different from those of the West that the reader feels alienated. Buck deliberately avoids an exploration of the Taoist, Buddhist, or Confucian perspective for this would maximize the foreign aspect of her Chinese characters for an American audience. Her commitment to the promotion of understanding in combination with her lively egalitarianism, so much in accord with Alfred Nobel's requirement that his prize go to "the best works of an idealistic nature," is essentially what won for her the Nobel Prize of 1938.

In this trilogy, which includes The Good Earth (1931), Sons (1932), and A House Divided (1935), the beleaguered Chinese peasant, perennially abused by overlords, warlords, landlords and government officials, wins her sympathy. This concern would remain central to her thought and writing for the rest of her life.

Techniques

The author justifies her extreme detachment from her narrative by choosing for The Good Earth an epigraph from Proust about the musician Vinteuil's refusing to violate the integrity of his music by mixing his emotion with it. Similarly Buck refuses to interrupt her work to announce that she as author does not personally approve of what is happening. So devoid of subjectivity is her story that she sometimes takes her American audience by surprise when she describes events without passing judgment (e.g., when O-lan strangles her newborn daughter in a time of famine). Still what she achieves is a kind of exotic remoteness and this often adds just a trace of romanticism to her realism.

Buck's text is not marked with italics; she seldom uses a Chinese word or explains a Chinese concept. Exoticsounding translations do occur (as when the procuress tempts Wang Lung with "tiger bone wine and dawn wine and wine of fragrant rice") and occasionally she translates the significance of certain proper names. She does use proverbs (e.g., "The melon must always be split wide open before you can see the seeds").

Her vocabulary and syntax tend to be archaic (e.g., "lest he stink," "like a cur," and past tense verbs such as "digged" and "builded") and such archaisms are effective in suggesting the timelessness of Wang Lung's world.

Generally, sentences are short and simple. Naive language is naturally used to match the simplicity of Wang Lung's thoughts, and simple metaphors are used liberally. This simplicity derives both from the "no-nonsense" narration of the old Chinese sagas and from the King James Version of the Bible which Buck so often read and studied during her childhood.

On the other hand, what have been affirmatively labeled as "Biblical" or "folk poetic" rhythms in Buck's style are, according to W. J. Stuckey, a kind of smoke screen to allow mere statement to camouflage huge teleological gaps that a more probing author would undertake to explore. This observation explains a great deal about why Buck holds so little interest for academic literary critics; her work contains little more than mere narrative.

One may also find fault with Buck's heavy reliance upon coincidence and improbable circumstances in resolving plot entanglements. In Sons, which is more limited in appeal because of its central theme of brigandage, characterization is deficient. In fact, the last two books of the trilogy are progressively less interesting, and the style, imitating the cadence but not the imagination of Biblical narrative, is increasingly inappropriate for portraying modern Chinese life. A House Divided is the least successful novel in the trilogy, primarily because Yuan, Wang Lung's grandson, does not achieve a believable individuality. This was actually reflected in readership. While The Good Earth led the best-seller lists for 1931 and 1932 and Sons competed with its predecessor during 1932, A House Divided did not appear among the "top ten" of 1935.

Themes

One theme of the trilogy is certainly the universality of an individual's experience. The unknowable and alien Chinese peasant is transformed here into an unfeared and universal "everyman." Less consciously expressed is the theme of the salutary effect of hard work close to the earth, and the corrupting nature of sloth and luxury. But the most obvious theme is surely the continuity of life itself, the sweeping inevitable cyclical nature of life, where death is counterbalanced by birth, sadness by joy. This cycle is also evident when, after Wang the Tiger has abjured the ideals of his father for a military career, his son Yuan rejects his father to embrace again the land. As opposed to some of her later more propagandistic novels, the message of House of Earth is primarily nothing more sophisticated than the universal ebb and flow of life; life as it simply is, people as they simply are.

But the theme of hard work as panacea was emotionally charged for many Depression-ridden American readers of the early 1930s, for as W. J. Stuckey points out, the economic misery of the 1930s was a result of the extravagant 1920s when Americans abandoned their time-honored virtues of hard work, thrift and sobriety. In this way Buck provided, probably unintentionally, the ready public with a deeply satisfying solution — "Go back to the earth" — to a complex problem. This, plus the sheer escapism of reading about problems somewhere else, probably accounts for much of the popularity associated with The Good Earth and its sequels.

Adaptations

The Good Earth was adapted for the stage by Owen Davis and Donald Davis and produced on Broadway in 1932 starring Alla Nazimova as O-lan. The film (1937), which took four years to make and was shot with authentic Chinese backdrops and a Chinese landscape recreated forty miles from Hollywood, starred Paul Muni and Luise Rainer. The movie cost $2.8 million to produce and lost almost a half million dollars despite its huge popularity.

Still considered one of Hollywood's finest films, it won two academy awards: Luise Rainer for Best Actress and Karl Freund for Cinematography.

Literary Precedents

House of Earth belongs to the tradition of the roman-fleuve. Sagas written in English were made especially popular during Buck's early years by John Galsworthy in The Forsyte Saga (19061922). Oscar Cargill detected a similarity between House of Earth and Emile Zola's Rougon-Macquart family saga (1873-1891), and Buck did in fact acknowledge being influenced by the naturalism of Zola: by his commitment to detached narration, by his interest in the poor, by his emphasis on heredity and environment, and by his appreciation of setting and detail. Paul Doyle points out that although Buck liked to use the word naturalism about her own work, she is more often optimistic in a way that Zola was not, which puts her instead in a category with such life-affirming authors as Charles Dickens, Honore de Balzac, and Moliere. In fact Dickens was her favorite author while she was growing up. She was also influenced by Marcel Proust, from whose Swarm's Way she chose her epigraph for The Good Earth.

Of course, in discussing the precedents of The Good Earth, it is important to seek roots in the Chinese literary tradition as well (especially in the old Chinese narrative sagas), since Chinese and English were both native languages for Buck. Some of the trouble that Buck had with cliches stems from the tradition that a Chinese writer seeks to employ the time-honored phrases that have been sanctified to literature by his predecessors. The folk tradition of the Chinese novel also served to impress upon Buck the value of natural uninterrupted flow in narrative and the precept that character must be shown and not explained.

During some of the same time that she was writing The Good Earth, Buck was actually working on a translation of one of the greatest of Chinese novels, Shui hu chuan, published as All Men Are Brothers (1933).

Tracing the vogue of American interest in the Orient leads to an original international high priest of exoticism, Lafcadio Hearn (1850-1904), one of the first writers to adapt Chinese and Japanese legends for American readers.

Shortly thereafter David Belasco and John Luther Long created the phenomenally popular Madame Butterfly (1900).

Two decades later Alice Tisdale Hobart wrote her Manchurian travel book, Pioneering Where the World Is Old (1917), followed by River Supreme (first published as Pidgin Cargo in 1929). The tremendous popularity of The Good Earth in turn made it easier for authors such as Lin Yutang (With Love and Irony, 1934) and Frederic Prokosch (The Seven Who Fled, 1937) to make use of Chinese and Far Eastern material.

Related Titles

Buck's other books on Chinese life are The Patriot (1939), which is about the revolutionary movement in Shanghai in the late 1920s; Pavilion of Women (1946), which is about a strong-willed Madame Wu who at forty provides a concubine for her still sexually active husband; Peony (1948), which is about a Chinese Jew; Kinfolk (1949), which is about the dilemma of cultural dichotomy affecting native-Chinese Dr.

Liang, who teaches Chinese philosophy at a New York college; Imperial Woman (1956), which is an historical novel about Tzu Hsi (1834-1908) the last ruling Empress of China; and The Three Daughters of Madame Liang (1969), which chronicles the return of three young women to Communist China after being educated in the United States.

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