

An Analysis of Pearl S. Buck's Writing Style and Themes in Her Works

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Abstract

Pearl S. Buck, an eminent American author and Nobel laureate, is celebrated for her insightful portrayals of life in China and the universal themes of humanity. This paper examines Buck's distinctive writing style and recurrent themes, focusing on her most notable works, including *The Good Earth*. Through a detailed analysis of her narrative techniques, character development, and thematic concerns, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of Buck's literary contributions and their relevance in contemporary literature.

Keywords: Writing style, Themes, Imagery, Chinese culture, Identity, Tradition, Modernity, Social justice

Introduction

Pearl S. Buck (1892-1973) was an influential figure in American literature, known for her deep engagement with Chinese culture and her advocacy for social justice. Buck's works reflect her experiences living in China as the daughter of missionaries, which informed her understanding of East-West cultural dynamics. She received the Pulitzer Prize in 1932 for *The Good Earth*, a novel that explores the lives of Chinese peasants and their connection to the land. This paper seeks to analyze Buck's writing style and the recurring themes in her works, highlighting how her unique voice and perspective contribute to the literary canon.

Pearl S. Buck's narrative style is characterized by its simplicity and clarity, allowing readers to engage deeply with her characters and settings. Her use of straightforward prose is deliberate, as it mirrors the life experiences of her characters, often rural peasants struggling with hardship. For instance, in *The Good Earth*, the language is accessible yet evocative, creating vivid imagery of the Chinese landscape and its agrarian society.

Pearl S. Buck employs a third-person omniscient narrative, which grants her the ability to delve into the thoughts and emotions of multiple characters. This technique enhances the reader's understanding of the complexities of human relationships and societal structures. In *The Good Earth*, this omniscience allows Buck to explore the internal struggles of Wang Lung, revealing his motivations and fears while also situating him within the broader context of Chinese society.

One of Pearl S. Buck's most significant contributions to literature is her exploration of East-West cultural dynamics. Having spent much of her early life in China, Buck possessed a unique perspective that allowed her to bridge cultural divides. Her works often highlight the misunderstandings and conflicts that arise from differing cultural values in her very first novel *The East Wind: West Wind*.

In *The Good Earth*, Buck contrasts traditional Chinese values with Western notions of individualism and materialism. Wang Lung's connection to the land and his communal relationships are juxtaposed against the encroaching influence of Western capitalism. Through this lens, Buck critiques both Eastern and Western societies, advocating for a deeper understanding and appreciation of cultural differences.

Another recurring theme in Buck's works is the struggle for identity, particularly in the context of cultural dislocation. Characters often grapple with their sense of self amidst societal expectations and personal aspirations. This theme is evident in *The Good Earth*, where Wang Lung's identity evolves with his changing social status. As he becomes wealthier, he faces an internal conflict between his humble beginnings and the demands of his new life.

Buck's exploration of identity extends to her portrayal of women. In novels such as *Sons* and *The Mother*, she examines the challenges faced by women in patriarchal societies. These characters often seek to assert their identities and agency, challenging traditional roles while navigating societal constraints.

Pearl S. Buck was a passionate advocate for social justice and human rights, and these themes permeate her works. Her writing reflects her commitment to addressing issues of poverty, inequality, and discrimination. In *The Good Earth*, the stark realities of rural poverty are portrayed with compassion, urging readers to consider the plight of the marginalized.

The novel Son (1932), the sequel novel to *The Good Earth*, explores the legacy of Wang Lung through his three sons following his death. The novel opens with Wang Lung on his deathbed, aware that his sons are eager for his passing. The eldest son has become a wealthy landlord, the second a successful merchant, while the youngest son, Wang the Tiger, is a military officer who arrives too late.

After Wang Lung's death, the family's property is divided. Wang the Tiger is primarily interested in wealth, rejecting his family's land and legacy. The story centers on him, contrasting his ambition with the more conventional paths of his older brothers, who symbolize the moral decline of the family..

House Divided, the final volume of the *House of Earth* trilogy, continues the saga of the Wang family after Yuan's conflict with his father, Wang the Tiger. At 19, Yuan feels disconnected from both his family and his peers, eventually seeking refuge in his grandfather's old earthen house. His father pressures him to marry according to tradition, which frustrates Yuan, leading him to Shanghai where he lives with his half-sister Ai-Lan and her mother.

As revolution erupts in Shanghai, Yuan and his friend Sheng flee to America, where Yuan forms a deep bond with Dr. Wilson, a college professor, and his daughter. Upon returning to China, he discovers a transformed political landscape shaped by a new revolution. He witnesses his father's decline and death, and reconnects with his cousin Meng, now a military captain in the new regime.

Yuan grapples with his identity, torn between the traditional values of his grandfather's home and the modern influences of his uncle and half-sister. Ultimately, he learns to embrace both his heritage and the evolving landscape of China, recognizing the tension between the past and the future. The novel concludes with Yuan poised to adopt a more balanced perspective on his country's transformation.

Published in 1934, *The Mother* is a pivotal work in the author's oeuvre. It offers a poignant exploration of loneliness, sexual frustration, and despair, while capturing the cyclical nature of life and motherhood. The novel glorifies the complex emotions inherent in a mother's journey, presenting a timeless portrayal of maternal experience with universal implications.

In *The Mother*, the author explores the emotional turmoil of a woman abandoned by her husband over a trivial dispute. She grapples with a deep sense of shame as her neighbors incessantly question her about

his absence. At night, consumed by loneliness, she weeps in silence, overwhelmed by her isolation. As she suppresses her desires for adornments—once a source of joy in her husband's admiration—she endures physical and emotional deprivation. Her unfulfilled longing leads her to a breaking point, making her vulnerable to the advances of a landlord's agent.

Pearl S. Buck skillfully illustrates how circumstance can drive a woman into compromising situations, eliciting sympathy rather than judgment from the reader. This moment before her fateful decision is portrayed with poignant clarity. The author vividly describes the atmosphere as dark clouds gather, creating a heavy, oppressive environment that mirrors the woman's internal struggle. Through these concrete details, Buck captures the profound conflict within a woman yearning for a normal, fulfilling life, highlighting her desperation and vulnerability.

This Proud Heart, published in 1938, stands as the first all-American novel by Pearl S. Buck. It centers on the character of Susan, a vibrant and courageous woman who embodies the struggle between two cultures. Buck chose the pseudonym "John Sedges"—a simple, masculine name—reflecting the societal advantages men enjoy over women in writing and other professions. Despite this, she expresses a deep affection for China and its people. Another notable work from this period is *Pavilion of Women*, which explores Chinese life and showcases her literary prowess.

In *This Proud Heart*, Buck examines the fate of talented women through Susan, a genius capable of excelling in multiple domains while navigating her desires for love and family. Peter Conn describes her as "less a fictional character than an allegorical emblem," representing the opportunities and limitations faced by women in 1930s America. At one point, Susan considers sacrificing her artistic ambitions to preserve her marriage, but ultimately rejects this notion, asserting her independence and refusing to be confined by domestic roles. By the end of the novel, she realizes that true fulfillment lies in her art, prompting her to separate from her husband to pursue her passions wholeheartedly.

Buck's works often illustrate the meeting of Eastern and Western cultures, yet they end on an ambiguous note without fully merging. She poignantly addresses the tensions between tradition and modernity amid industrialization, urbanization, scientific advancement, migration, and environmental degradation. Her exploration of social injustice highlights the stark divide between rich and poor, a theme she fervently opposes. Raised in a strong religious environment, Buck maintains a mature perspective free from institutional constraints, effectively portraying the conflict between faith and reason in her narratives.

Dragon Seed, published in 1942, is one of Pearl S. Buck's most acclaimed novels, sharing thematic parallels with her earlier work, *The Good Earth*. Both novels reflect a profound appreciation for the value of the land, characterized by a quiet tone and a chronological narrative that focuses on the lives of two generations. While *The Good Earth* features multiple climactic moments, *Dragon Seed* maintains a consistent level of interest through its sustained stylistic excellence. The two works are closely intertwined, with *Dragon Seed* often seen as a continuation of the themes explored in *The Good Earth*.

Following *Dragon Seed*, Buck released *The Promise* in 1943, which serves as a sequel and centers on the Chinese campaign in Burma. The story follows Ling Tang and his family as they navigate life under enemy occupation, awaiting the fulfillment of promises for support from England and the United States.

Another significant work by Buck is *Imperial Woman*, a fictional biography of the Chinese Empress Dowager, who began as the concubine of the Xianfeng Emperor. In this novel, Buck examines the complexities of female power from a historical perspective. She poses critical questions about what it takes for a woman to hold power: How does she navigate the court of mandarins? What roles does she assume as a wife, mother, sister, lover, and supreme ruler? Drawing on her personal experiences,

imaginative insights, and a postcolonial historical vision, Buck crafts an idealized portrayal of a woman in power, blending romance and realism in her depiction.

Imperial Woman is a historical romance that serves as a novelized biography of Tz'u-his, the Empress Dowager who governed what the West called China, the "Middle Kingdom." Her story is particularly striking because she began her life as a commoner, not a queen. Beautiful and ambitious, she became the favored concubine of Emperor Hsien-feng, residing in the Forbidden City and giving birth to his son. Her remarkable strength of character allowed her to ascend to a position of power, where she ruled for nearly four decades. Despite the controversies surrounding her reign, the Chinese people admired her and largely forgave her transgressions in her later years.

In contrast, Elizabeth, the character from *Letter from Peking*, embodies a rare loyalty to her husband in a society where divorce and remarriage are common. Her acceptance of Ching's customs and people reflects a mindset distinct from the cynical attitudes often found in the West, showcasing a profound understanding of her husband's culture.

Buck's autobiography, *My Several Worlds*, published in 1954—just two years before *Imperial Woman*—serves as a personal memoir that explores her life in China and her return to America. Janie Wang observes that Buck's writing "self-consciously revises Chinese stories into an American landscape," bridging the cultural divide between the two countries. Throughout the memoir, Buck emphasizes her American roots while detailing her experiences in China and her engagement in various egalitarian efforts. More than a reflection on her personal life, this work offers a rich exploration of Chinese culture, customs, and society, providing insights that surpass those found in her novels.

In *My Several Worlds*, Pearl S. Buck beautifully chronicles her journey from childhood in China to her emergence as a compelling woman in the United States. Her writing, marked by an enchanting quietude and depth of spirit, has garnered significant acclaim, including the Pulitzer Prize and the Nobel Prize for Literature. Buck possesses a unique ability to evoke vivid imagery and convey the essence of womanhood, often infused with humor. This talent shines particularly in *My Several Worlds*, where she brings to life the cultures of China, India, Japan, and beyond, capturing their richness in ways few contemporary authors have achieved. In contrast, her depictions of American life, while familiar, may lack the same depth.

Buck's Chinese experience represents just one facet of her multifaceted existence. She is also a writer, teacher, farmer, and a devoted mother to her own child with disabilities, as well as to five adopted children. Her life is filled with endeavors to support parents of children with special needs and to find homes for abandoned infants, highlighting her commitment to compassion and community.

Among her many works, Buck's biographies stand out, particularly *The Exile* and *The Fighting Angel*. Her most popular biographies detail the lives of her parents under the collective title *The Spirit and The Flesh*. *The Exile* focuses on her mother, Caroline, a tribute that emerged from Buck's desire to keep her memory alive for her children who never met her. Upon returning to Nanking, Buck felt a profound urge to preserve her mother's legacy, stating, "I was filled with the need to keep my mother alive, and so began to write about her" (*My Several Worlds*, 183). This heartfelt memoir received widespread recognition and praise, reflecting the impact of her personal history on her literary journey.

The Exile is a heartfelt biography of Pearl S. Buck's mother, marked by a flowery and sentimental style. Buck's deep attachment to her mother infuses the narrative with tenderness and emotion. However, the writing sometimes digresses and becomes repetitive, which may serve as a deliberate technique to authentically convey her feelings. Overall, it is a beautifully crafted biography that creates a vivid

portrait of a woman described as "septic essentially, yet spiritualist as well, an admirer of excellence and visionary of the obscure" (*The Exile*, 206).

Published in 1967, *The Time is Noon* is considered Buck's most personal and autobiographical novel. It tells the story of Joan, a young woman from the small town of Middle Hope, as she experiences New York City for the first time. The fast-moving trains, bustling subway crowds, and swiftly passing faces create a whirlwind around her. Buck adeptly portrays Joan's struggle for self-discovery amid this vibrant chaos. Similarly, in *All Under Heaven* (1973), Malcolm's Russian wife is captivated by the city's towering skyscrapers, while Malcolm himself admires the controlled chaos of cabs and cars, likening them to tamed beasts. Through these characters, Buck captures America's essence of speed and control, defining modernity.

Beyond her literary accomplishments, Buck was also an active humanitarian, advocating for the rights of Asian Americans and promoting racial equality. Her belief in humanity's interconnectedness is evident throughout her works, where she underscores the importance of empathy and understanding for social progress.

This theme of interconnectedness extends to the concept of legacy. Buck often examines how individual actions affect future generations, emphasizing stewardship and responsibility. Her characters frequently face choices with lasting consequences, illustrating the intricate connections among human lives across time.

In conclusion, Pearl S. Buck's writing is characterized by vivid imagery, emotional depth, and a profound understanding of Chinese culture, all masterfully woven into her narratives. Her straightforward prose enhances the accessibility of her themes, making complex issues relatable to a wide audience. Central to her works are themes of identity, the tension between tradition and modernity, and a lasting connection to the land. Buck's exploration of familial ties, social justice, and cultural conflict reflects her commitment to illuminating the human experience in its many forms. Through her rich characterizations and immersive storytelling, she engages readers and encourages reflection on the universal struggles of humanity. Her legacy stands as a testament to the power of literature to bridge cultural divides and foster empathy across generations.

As a writer, Buck not only captured the essence of Chinese culture but also contributed significantly to American literature by challenging societal norms and advocating for a more compassionate world. Her legacy endures, inspiring new generations of readers and writers to explore the complexities of human existence and the importance of empathy in bridging cultural divides

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