

Nobel Prize in Literature 1938



Pearl Buck

The Nobel Prize in Literature 1938 was awarded to Pearl Buck *"for her rich and truly epic descriptions of peasant life in China and for her biographical masterpieces"*.

Pearl Buck once told how she had found her mission as interpreter to the West of the nature and being of China. She did not turn to it as a literary speciality at all; it came to her naturally.

It is people that have always afforded me my greatest pleasure and interest», she said, «and as I live among the Chinese, it has been the Chinese people. When I am asked what sort of people they are, I cannot answer. They are not this or that, they are just people. I can no more define them than I can define my own relatives and kinsmen. I am too near to them and I have lived too intimately with them for that.»

She has been among the people of China in all their vicissitudes, in good years and in famine years, in the bloody tumults of revolutions and in the delirium of Utopias. She has associated with the educated classes and with primordially primitive peasants, who had hardly seen a Western face before they saw hers. Often she has been in deadly peril, a stranger who never thought of herself as a stranger; on the whole, her outlook retained its

profound and warm humanity. With pure objectivity she has breathed life into her knowledge and given us the peasant epic which has made her world-famous, *The Good Earth* (1931).

As her hero she took a man who led the same existence as his forefathers had during countless centuries, and who possessed the same primitive soul. His virtues spring from one single root: affinity with the earth, which yields its crops in return for a man's labours.

Wang Lung is created from the same stuff as the yellow-brown earth in the fields, and with a kind of pious joy he bestows upon it every ounce of his energy. The two belong to each other in origin, and they will become one again with the death he will meet with tranquility. His work is also a duty done, and thus his conscience is at rest. Since dishonesty avails nothing in his pursuits, he has become honest. This is the sum total of his moral conceptions, and equally few are his religious ones, which are almost entirely comprehended in the cult of ancestor-worship.

He knows that man's life is a gleam of light between two darkneses; from the one behind him runs the chain of forefathers from father to son, and the chain must not be broken by him, if he is not to lose his dim hope of survival in a surmised, unknown region. For then would expire a spark of the life-fire of the race, which each individual man has to care for.

And thus the story begins with Wang Lung's marriage and his dreams of sons in the house. Of his wife, O'Lan, he does not dream, for - as is proper and fitting - he has never seen her. She is a slave at the great house in the neighbouring town and cheap to buy, since she is said to be ugly. For that reason she has probably been left alone by the young sons of the house, and to this the bridegroom attaches great value.

Their life together is happy, for the wife proves to be an excellent helpmate, and the children soon make their appearance. She satisfies all the demands laid upon her, and she has no claims of her own. Behind her mute eyes is hidden a mute soul. She is all submission, but wise and prompt in action; a wife also in her paucity of words, springing from a philosophy of life learned in a hard school.

Success attends the two. They are able to set aside a little money, and Wang Lung's great passion, next to parenthood, his longing for more ground to cultivate, may now venture forth from subconsciousness. He is able to buy more fields, and everything promises happiness and increase.

Then comes a blow from the hand of fate; a drought descends upon the district. The good earth is changed into yellow, whirling dust. By selling land they could avert starvation, but that would be to bolt and lock the door to the future. Neither of them wishes to do that, so they set forth in company with the growing army of beggars to a city in the south, to live on the crumbs from the rich man's table.

O'Lan had made the journey once before in her childhood, when the end of it was that she was sold to save her parents and brothers.

Thanks to her experience, they accommodate themselves to the new life. Wang Lung toils as a beast of burden and the others beg with an acquired aptitude. Autumn and winter pass. With the spring, their yearning for their own land and its tilling becomes unendurable, but they have no money for the journey.

Then again fate intervenes - as natural a fate in China as drought and plague and flood. War, which is ever present somewhere in that great country, and the ways of which are as inscrutable as those of the powers of the air, stalks across the city and makes chaos of law and order. The poor plunder the homes of the rich.

Wang Lung goes with the mob without any definite motives, for his peasant soul revolts at deeds of violence, but by pure chance a handful of gold coins is almost forced into his hand. Now he can go home and begin the spring work on his rain-soaked soil. More than that, he can buy new fields; he is rich and happy.

He becomes still richer, though ultimately not happier, through the plunder acquired by O'Lan. From her days of slavery she knows something about hiding places in palaces, and she discovers a handful of precious stones. She takes them nearly as unpremeditatedly as a magpie steals glittering things, and hides them as instinctively. When her husband discovers them in her bosom, his whole world is transformed. He buys

farm after farm. He becomes the leading man in the district, no longer peasant but lord, and his character changes colour. Simplicity and harmony with the earth vanish. In their place comes, slowly but surely, a curse for the desertion.

Wang Lung no longer has any real peace in his lordly leisure, with a young concubine in the house and O'Lan pushed into a dark corner, to die there when she has worn herself out.

The sons are not attractive figures. The eldest devotes himself to an empty life of indulgence, the second is swallowed up by greed for gold as a merchant and usurer. The youngest becomes one of the «war lords» who drain the unhappy country. Around them the Middle Empire is torn asunder in the tumult of new creation, which has become so agonizing in our days.

The trilogy does not carry us so far, however; it concludes with a sort of reconciliation between the third generation and the good earth. One of Wang Lung's grandsons, a man educated in the West, returns to the family estate and applies the knowledge he has acquired to the improvement of the conditions of work and life among the peasants.

The rest of the family live without roots in that conflict between old and new which Pearl Buck has described in other works - mostly in the tone of tragedy.

Of the many problems in this novel, the most serious and sombre one is the position of the Chinese woman. From the very beginning it is on this point that the writer's pathos emerges most strongly, and amid the calm of the epic work it constantly makes itself felt. An early episode in the work gives the most poignant expression of what a Chinese woman has been worth since time immemorial. It is given with impressive emphasis, and also with a touch of humour which is naturally rare in this book. In a moment of happiness, with his little first-born son dressed in fine clothes on his arm, and seeing the future bright before him, Wang Lung is on the point of breaking into boastful words but restrains himself in sudden terror. There, under the open sky, he had almost challenged the invisible spirits and drawn their evil glances upon himself. He tries to avert the menace by hiding his son under

his coat and saying in a loud voice, «What a pity that our child is a girl, which no one wants, and is pitted with smallpox into the bargain! Let us pray that it may die!» And O'Lan joins in the comedy and acquiesces - probably without thinking at all.

In reality the spirits need not waste their glances on a girl child. Its lot is hard enough in any case. It is Pearl Buck's female characters which make the strongest impression. There is O'Lan with her scanty words, which carry all the more weight. Her whole life is portrayed in equally scanty but telling lines.

Quite a different figure is the chief character in the novel *The Mother* (1934). She is not referred to by any other designation, as if to indicate that her whole destiny is expressed in that word. She is, however, vividly individualized, a brave, energetic, strong character, of a more modern type than O'Lan's, perhaps, and without her slave temperament. The husband soon deserts his home, but she keeps it together for her children. The whole story ends in sorrow, but not in defeat. The mother cannot be crushed, not even when her younger son is beheaded as a revolutionary, and she has to seek a stranger's grave to weep by, for he has none. Just then a grandson is born, and she again has someone to love and sacrifice herself for.

The mother is the most finished of Pearl Buck's Chinese female figures, and the book is one of her best. But in character descriptions and the storyteller's art she is at her best in the two biographies of her parents, *The Exile* (1936) and *Fighting Angel* (1936). These should be called classics in the fullest sense of the word; they will endure, for they are full of life. In this respect the models from which the portraits are drawn are of great significance.

One seldom feels any great sense of gratitude for the company proffered in contemporary novels, and it is gladly forgotten. The characters have no great wealth of qualities, and the writer puts forth all his powers to lessen them, often by a persistent analysis with foregone results.

Here, however, one encounters two consummate characters, living unselfish lives of action, free from brooding and vacillation. They are profoundly unlike each other, and the

fact that they are thrown together in a common struggle in a hard and strange world often leads to great tragedy-but not to defeat: they stand erect even to the very last. There is a spirit of heroism in both stories.

The mother, Carie, is richly gifted, brave and warm, of a genuine nature, harmonious amid ever-straining forces. She is tested to the utmost in sorrows and dangers; she loses many children because of the harshness of the conditions of life, and at times a terrible death threatens her in those troubled times. It is almost as hard for her to witness the never-ending suffering around her. She does what she can to mitigate it, and that is not a little, but no power is sufficient for such a task.

Even inwardly she passes through a hard and unceasing struggle. In her calling, and with her nature, she needs more than the conviction of faith. It is not enough for her that she has dedicated herself to God; she must also feel that the sacrifice has been accepted. But the sign of this, for which she begs and prays, never comes. She is compelled to persist in an untiring endeavour to find God and to content herself with trying to be good without divine help.

However, she preserves her spiritual health, her love for the life which has shown her so much that is terrible, and her eye for the beauty the world has to offer; she even retains her happiness and her humour. She resembles a fresh fountain springing from the heart of life.

The daughter tells her story with rare and lively perspicuity. The biography is precise in regard to the course of events, but creative imagination plays its part in the various episodes and in the description of the inner life of the character. Nothing is falsified, for this imagination is intuitive and true.

The language has vivid spontaneity; it is clear and suffused with a tender and soulful humour. There is, however, a flaw in the story. The daughter's devotion to her mother makes it impossible for her to do justice to her father. In his family life his limitations were obvious, limitations sharp and at times painful. As a preacher and soldier of Christ he was without blemish, in many respects even a great character; but he ought to have lived his life



alone, free of the familial duties he hardly found time to notice, duties which in any case weighed lightly with him against his all-absorbing calling. Thus he was of little help to his wife, and in her biography he could not be fully understood.

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