

Society, poverty, and history in the good earth and the grapes of wrath



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While *The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck and *The Good Earth* by Pearl Buck vary greatly in basic subject matter, their thematic content and general intent are strikingly similar. Both award-winning literary works in their own right, together they provide a unique insight into the United States in the 1930s, when the glitz and glamour of the Roaring Twenties had worn off into the decade(s) of economic downturn and national suffering termed the Great Depression. *The Grapes of Wrath*, published in 1939, when the horrible reality of the situation began to hit many Americans, does so in a direct way, giving the reader a firsthand look into the lives of the Joads, a family of Dust Bowl migrants from Oklahoma. Chapters detailing the family's not inconsiderable trials and difficulties alternate with more symbolic ones, "offer[ing] thematic...counterpoints to the Joads' story" (Henry). *The Good Earth*, on the other hand, follows the life of Wang Lung, a poor farmer in early 1900s China, as he builds a family and becomes a wealthy landowner. It too was written during the Depression, by an American author and humanitarian who sought to provide the comfort "of a rags-to-riches tale" in unstable and uncertain times (Thompson). Its focus on the importance of land and family, as well as immense struggles to be overcome, makes its relevance to the Depression clear, and suggests some sort of allegorical purpose for the tale.

Neither Steinbeck nor Buck wrote their books simply to entertain—they used the personal relationships between their characters and the actions taken because of these relationships to illustrate larger concepts of social responsibility and awareness. In the Depression, a time of "poverty and uncertainty," they provided a social commentary and insight into the

physical and emotional realities experienced by many, in particular by the farmers and tenant workers who lost their homes and jobs when the Midwest was struck by the Dust Bowl (Thompson). Using individual families as the focal points of their stories, Steinbeck and Buck provide complementary explorations of the predominant attitudes of the time, attitudes capable of shaping lives almost as much as circumstance.

The Grapes of Wrath addresses the Depression idea of personal responsibility as an important aspect of community membership, as well as a sign of evolution in “the basic unit of social structure in the United States” (Henry). Surrounded by contractors and police officers eager to prey on the vulnerable migrant workers, the Joads recognize the power provided by a community of like-minded individuals, as well as the strength that can be drawn from such a community. While The Grapes of Wrath does feature an emphasis on the community’s value to the individual, it shows the community as an entity composed of people who contribute to it in return. This idea of paying it forward is deemed morally correct by Steinbeck and exemplified by Muley Graves, when faced with sharing his meager jackrabbit dinner with Casy and Tom Joad:

“I ain’t got no choice in the matter...That ain’t like I meant it...what I mean, if a fella’s got somepin to eat an’ another fella’s hungry—why, the first fella ain’t got no choice. I mean, s’pose I pick up my rabbits an’ go off somewheres an’ eat ‘em. See?” (Steinbeck 49).

Muley understands and demonstrates this duty to his fellow man. He helps Casy and Tom survive, just as thousands of Americans, migrant workers and

otherwise, relied upon acts of goodwill to carry on. Tom later expounds on the reasoning behind this, quoting Casy as he describes how the former preacher “ foun’ he didn’ have no soul that was hisn’”, but instead discovered “ he jus’ got a little piece of a great big soul”, a piece that “ wasn’t no good ‘ less it was with the rest” (418). This theory is certainly not a traditional one, but the concept of a person as a fragment of a larger whole was certainly appealing in such times, when self-interest was the prevalent, easy choice to make.

In *The Good Earth*, similar ideas of responsibility and duty to others are present, but with an emphasis on liability. Whenever problems arise for Wang Lung, Buck traces them directly back to acts of “ moral flabbiness” on his part, just as “ the poverty and suffering of the 1930s” might be attributed to be “ a result of the extravagance of the 1920s” (Stuckey). While the Great Depression was certainly not caused by any moral shortcoming on the part of the American people, that did not change said people’s belief that it was their fault, and should be borne as such. Wang Lung’s experiences echo that idea. As Wang Lung grows wealthier and wealthier, he grows bored, and eventually brings a concubine named Lotus Flower into his home, “ painted and cool as a lily” in comparison to his wife O-lan, who is “ earth-stained and dark with weariness” (Buck 196, 198). The sharp contrast in the description of the two women makes it clear which is more visually appealing, but Buck rejects the notion of placing value on physical appearance, instead placing more value on O-lan for her acceptance of hard work and toil, “ the rocky path along which Americans had traditionally traveled” and which had served them well throughout the years (Stuckey). Wang Lung’s rejection of

O-Lan, and by extension these principles deemed essential by Buck, causes him suffering. In this case, that suffering is caused by the death of O-Lan, who, despite his previous unconcern, he realizes he cares for, if only because she “[bore] him sons” (258). The “hard and dry” grief he feels upon her loss is tinged with guilt and regret, suggesting perhaps a sense of culpability present in the minds of Americans throughout the Depression, as if their economic struggles were no one’s fault but their own.

In reality, though, the characters in *The Good Earth* and *The Grapes of Wrath* are not powerful enough to really be responsible for their misfortune. This blame is instead placed on those in power. In the case of *The Good Earth*, this concept remains somewhat abstract, as several individuals serve as allegories for various aspects of the Depression experience. Buck focuses on the big picture, making suggestions about culpability for the Depression on a large scale.

Throughout his life, Wang Lung holds the rich and powerful in great awe. When he goes to “the great gates” to collect O-lan on their wedding day, his meeting with Old Mistress brings him “to his knees...knock[ing] his head on the tiled floor” (15). Given this dramatic response, it is no wonder that Wang Lung jumps at the chance to buy land from the House of Hwang when given the opportunity. He feels “more than equal to these people in the foolish, great, wasteful house,” and dedicates his life to this sentiment (52). This idolization and imitation of the rich occurred in the United States as well, during the 1920s, as the wealthy invested heavily, and the less affluent followed their example to a fault. When the stock market crashed in 1929, everyone was affected, but the poor most of all. Because of this, Buck seems <https://assignbuster.com/society-poverty-and-history-in-the-good-earth-and-the-grapes-of-wrath/>

to imply a sort of responsibility on the part of the rich to set a positive example, and drives this point home at the very end of the book, when Wang Lung essentially becomes another iteration of the Old Lord. She does not condemn her narrator's success, but points out the detrimental impacts of him distancing himself from the sources of his good fortune and of the precedent the Old Lord set.

Steinbeck draws such a connection as well, emphasizing the shift in farming that occurred when "it came about that owners no longer worked on their farms, " but instead " became...storekeeper[s]," many of whom " had never seen the farms they owned" (Steinbeck 232-233). He blames this change for the plight of so many tenant farmers, and understandably so, yet he fails to acknowledge the large-scale economic developments that made the industrialization of farming necessary.

In general, Steinbeck's scope within *The Grapes of Wrath* is limited. Despite the fact that not every chapter is about the Joads, the book keeps its focus on migrant workers, a relatively small subgroup within the thousands impacted by the Depression. His approach towards addressing the authority figures of the time is very direct, without any attempt at symbolism. Instead, Steinbeck openly identifies those he considers to blame for both the Joads' problems as well as the problems of migrant workers collectively by setting the Joads up to face them. From their eviction by the bank early on to police mistreatment throughout, the family carries on; but Ma's abrupt welcome into California stands out as an example of the prejudice Steinbeck wanted to call attention to.

Her conversation with a bigoted police officer, in which he informs her that “we don’t want you goddamn Okies settlin’ down [here]”, serves to emphasize the astounding hypocrisy of discriminating against migrants in a country made up of immigrants (214).

It is no wonder, then that Tom is enamored of the government-run Weedpatch camp, where “folks...elect their own cops” and have a say in how things are run (286). This simple desire for a sense of democracy, by people who “ain’t been treated decent for a long time,” underscores the vast inadequacy of the available aid, and questions how individuals and groups are valued differently because of their circumstances (288). The backdrop of the Great Depression makes this inequity pronounced, as indigence became the reality for many.

The name “The Great Depression” is for many synonymous with poverty and suffering. It calls to mind images of destitution like Dorothea Lange’s ubiquitous Migrant Mother. Neither *The Good Earth* nor *The Grapes of Wrath* attempts to counter this notion; indeed, *The Grapes of Wrath* furthers it as Steinbeck delves into the appalling conditions and treatment that the Joads endure.

While the first camp the Joads stay in comes as a shock to them, with its half-dollar fee and “sullen” proprietor, it is not until they stay in a Hooverville that the Joads must truly face destitution, both physically and psychologically (187). In the Hooverville, there is “no order,” and an air of “slovenly despair” (241). The gloomy atmosphere is further heightened as the contents of the scattered campsite are listed, from “the grimy tents [and]

the junk equipment” to “ the lumpy mattresses out in the sun...[and] the blackened cans on fire-blackened holes” (244). This dismal description of the camp serves as a concrete manifestation of the internal disarray the Joads face as they become cognizant of the reality of migrant life in California. Instead of being the imagined “ lan’ of milk an’ honey,” the state is full of “ cops out tryin’ to scare [the migrants] back” (251).

The Joads’ disappointment is palpable as they experience this loss of their greatest hope. Steinbeck seems to place value in their never-ending endeavor, though, imbuing their suffering with a sense of nobility. However, during the Depression, it is unlikely that those in the Joads’ position would be concerned with a higher purpose for their pains. Steinbeck’s discussion of community support in times of hardship is much more realistic, as well as much more hopeful.

The Wilsons, a couple whom the Joads encounter early on in their journey, demonstrate the kind of unselfish, neighborly behavior that Steinbeck esteems so highly. When Grampa is dying, they offer up their tent so that he can be more comfortable, insisting “ there’s no beholden in a time of dying” (139). In return, the Joads promise to “ see [the Wilsons] get through,” because they “ can’t let help go unwanted” (149). The two families have a sense of obligation to each other of the best possible sort. They are tied together by their mutual kindness, a kindness that provides them with the elusive sense of security that they long for throughout the book.

In *The Good Earth*, Wang Lung and his family also experience extreme poverty as “ the rains...withheld themselves” and the crop fails (Buck 67).

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Unlike Steinbeck's characters, who seek refuge in the community, Wang Lung isolates himself and his family in order to avoid "hostility in the village" and his less-than-honest uncle (73). His desire to make his own way remains strong even when they travel south to the city, as he rejects the notion of begging. Despite the fact that "he had three pence left," Wang Lung remains constant in his "dislike [of the] notion of begging of strange people" (94-95).

While O-lan and the children do end up begging, Wang Lung eschews this humbling activity in favor of pulling a rickshaw, "work for a man's hands" (95). Although this could be interpreted as the imposition of traditional gender roles, it seems more likely that it is instead a valuation of Wang Lung's decision to pursue honest manual labor. Buck elevates Wang Lung for making this choice, and suggests "that individualism leads to...safety and security" (Stuckey). The stereotypically American devotion to hard work exemplified here is certainly one present during the Depression, but perhaps one that didn't need to be emphasized. Thousands of men (and women) sought work that simply didn't exist. The root of the problem lay not in personal ethics but large-scale economic issues. Buck's principles place responsibility to self and family above all else, a rational idea held by many struggling Americans during the time, but one with limited practical import.

During troubling times, many turn to religion as a source of comfort and support. Given the uncertainty of the 1930s, it is surprising that Buck, the daughter of missionaries and a missionary herself, would not attempt to use *The Good Earth* as a vehicle with which to promote Christianity. Instead, she uses the "vivid world of Chinese custom," with its various belief systems and <https://assignbuster.com/society-poverty-and-history-in-the-good-earth-and-the-grapes-of-wrath/>

corresponding practices, to create universal characters and “ demonstrate similarity in order to promote understanding” (Thompson).

Wang Lung’s religious practices, conducted more out of superstition than out of deeply-rooted belief, start a conversation about the value of tradition.

Buck does not overly concern herself with the details of his religious expression, but instead uses them “ to show there [is] no human gap [of understanding], only a factitious cultural one” (Thompson). To achieve this end, she avoids any specific spiritual focus, and includes only one reference to the Confucian edicts regarding filial piety, when Wang Lung violates them by “ correct[ing] an elder” (63). Buck also allows Wang Lung to show reverence to the “ two small, solemn figures” of “ the god...and his lady”, dressed in “ robes of red and gilt paper” (20). These two instances of religious practice actually highlight the universality Buck was attempting to achieve, though, as the central theme of respect becomes apparent.

While Steinbeck too places great importance on respect, he does not attempt to achieve understanding on an international level, but rather a personal one. He does this by addressing the concept of faith as decided by the individual, rather than by society. Given this, *The Grapes of Wrath*’s heavy Christian influences seem ironic at first. However, despite copious Biblical allusions, Steinbeck best uses them to address the concept of doubt, exemplified in the character of Jim Casy.

Casy is Steinbeck’s ultimate paradox: a preacher who is a skeptic. Casy no longer “ know[s] what to pray for or who to pray to,” and spends the novel puzzling through his questions of belief, dispensing remarkable wisdom and

insight throughout, often unintentionally (Steinbeck 137). In addition, Henry suggests that Casy's character is intended to " evoke Jesus Christ's teachings and his sacrifice." Like Christ, Casy gives his life for the many, and while he has no physical resurrection, his death does prompt the awakening of Tom Joad's social consciousness. Tom plans to do " what Casy done," a statement that implies his continued presence amongst the migrant workers, at least on a spiritual level (419).

The role that Casy, and later Tom, seem to fill is that of a savior. Steinbeck draws attention to this both to acknowledge a need for change and to provide reassurance to those victimized by the conflicts described in his book. He and Buck recognize that faith is hard to maintain in times of hardship, and stress the importance of tolerance and respect at a time when the weak were alienated to bolster the self-confidence of those in power. The migrant workers' desire for a deliverer is unsurprising, considering the inhumane treatment they face at the hands of those employed to serve the public.

Despite their desire for liberation, the characters in *The Grapes of Wrath* willingly bind themselves to the land. They feel connected to " the dust-blanketed" earth— after all, they " measured it and broke it up. [They] were born on it, and...got killed on it" (4, 33). The land is an inextricable part of the farmers Steinbeck depicts, and the Joads are no different. While most of the family understands that they legally must leave, Grampa vehemently states:

“ This here’s my country. I b’long here. An’ I don’t give a goddamn if they’s oranges an’ grapes crowdin’ a fella outa bed even. I ain’t a-goin’. This country ain’t no good, but it’s my country. No, you all go ahead. I’ll jus’ stay right here where I b’long” (111).

The Joads don’t let him stay behind, of course, but not soon after they leave he becomes “ sicker’n hell ” and succumbs to a stroke (135). Although such an occurrence was not unlikely considering his age and generally poor health, Casy believes that “ Grampa didn’ die [that night]”, but actually “ the moment [he was taken] off the place” (146). In a way, dying was his way of “ stayin’ with the lan’” he loved so much (146).

In an extreme way, Grampa symbolizes the Joads’ unpreparedness. They are unequipped to handle the changes occurring in society and in agriculture, as the economy began to industrialize and shift away from manual labor.

Wang Lung too clings to the land, although he does not face the same economic barriers as the Joads. However, when he and his family leave during the famine, he remains preternaturally occupied with “ get[ting] back to the land” (Buck 112). “ The thought of [the land] lying there...fill[s] him with desire,” so much desire that he considers selling his oldest daughter for the money necessary to return to it (116).

While Wang Lung is eventually able to go back to his farm, the lengths to which he was willing to go to do so are startling, and foreshadow the ultimate futility of his single-minded dedication to his land.

By the end of *The Good Earth*, one is well enough acquainted with the character of Wang Lung's sons to know that they will disregard his wishes and sell the land their father has dedicated his life to, despite promising him on his deathbed that "the land is not to be sold" (Buck 357). The purpose of acknowledging this is not to condemn their intent, but to remark upon the seeming undoing of Wang Lung's life's work. To Wang Lung, "land [was his] flesh and blood," making the loss of it (had he been alive) a mortal wound from which he would never recover (Buck 52). He measured his success by the possession and development of land, and his sons took that standard away altogether, rendering his daily struggle worthless.

One might argue that this is simply an example of the stereotypical filial betrayal—a dramatic change of heart after a parent's death—but even during Wang Lung's life, his children made no pretense of love for the land their father placed such importance in. Instead, this serves to emphasize the concept of futility pervasive in the Depression. Work for the sake of work, "dogged thrift and industry" with the corresponding deserved reward, was no longer a realistic expectation (Thompson). The Depression became the era of zero payoff, in which getting by equated success. Dave Smith's poem "Ear Ache" also speaks to this attitude:

The Great Depression sat on my grandfather

like Dante's Ugolino eating the malignancy

that betrayed him to insatiable hunger.

Left a lifelong fulminator at destiny,

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he knew nothing he made or said would last.

Like Wang Lung, Smith's grandfather is destined to have his life rendered essentially pointless, a seemingly harsh assessment made all the worse by his own knowledge of this occurrence. Wang Lung is fortunate enough to be unaware of his sons' plans, as are the Joads, who remain ignorant of how hopeless their plight truly is.

Despite their unceasing determination and desire to survive and succeed, "their indomitable will" proves insufficient (Henry). Chapter Three's description of an indefatigable turtle traversing "a concrete wall" and a "cement plain" merely to continue plodding through the dust provides an easily understood analogy for the travels of the Joads (Steinbeck 15). Just like the turtle, they scale one hurdle only to face another, without any true perception of the extent of their journey.

If they were able to comprehend what their journey to California and life there would entail, they would perhaps have been like Muley Graves, unwilling to leave because of some preternatural understanding that the situation in California was such that it wouldn't leave them at all better off than they were before. Steinbeck deprives the Joads of this insight for storytelling purposes—he needs them to travel to California, where "the spring is beautiful" and "the fruit grows heavy" so he can rip that image away for both the Joads and his readers (Steinbeck 346). He exposes the dehumanization brought on by conditions in government work camps and uncaring guards and police officers, but in the process removes "some of

[the Joads'] human appeal" as he employs them for " little more than an allegorical or symbolic function" (Henry).

Symbolic function or not, the Joads are easy to envision as a family with real relationships and real problems. Steinbeck certainly relies upon the impact that their story, however fictional it might be, can provide. While Steinbeck intended *The Grapes of Wrath* as a report on poor treatment of migrant workers in California, the personal twist gives it a national relevance and impact. However, in attempting to balance the large and small scale, something is lost from each. Steinbeck's exploration of conditions in California is held back by the necessities of characterization, and likewise character development and plot are hampered by the big-picture concerns the author tries to address simultaneously.

Buck's attempts at social commentary remain completely allegorical, but her idealized message about the power of work is clear and straightforward. Her stolid, undeniably static characters help with the dissemination of this message, but they lack the multi-faceted humanity necessary to seem real.

Both Buck and Steinbeck also denied their readers the satisfaction of a truly happy ending, or really any significant hope for the future. While Rose of Sharon's nursing of the starving man is poignantly beautiful and ungrudgingly giving, it only serves as a momentary distraction from the wretched reality of their predicament. In the long term, it will have little impact, and the Joads and their acquaintances will continue their perpetually wandering, subsistence-based lifestyle. Buck ends *The Good Earth* on a

similar note, with Wang Lung's death and the sale of the land bringing into question the value of work.

While Steinbeck and Buck certainly draw attention to many aspects of Depression-era society that had previously gone unnoticed, they do so without providing any likely solutions. This limits the power of their arguments tremendously, and suggests deficiencies in the authors' plot, character, and argumentative development. When analyzed in conjunction, though, *The Grapes of Wrath* and *The Good Earth* overcome the potentially reductionist styles in which they were written to attain historical relevance and importance. Together, the two works provide constructive, complementary insights into American attitudes during the Great Depression.

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