The Good Earth by Pearl S. Buck tells the story of a poor farmer, Wang Lung, and the development of his life. We are first introduced to Wang Lung as he awaits his bride O-Lan. The rest of the novel is focused on their time together having children, facing poverty, and achieving wealth and prosperity. By the end of the novel, Wang Lung is an old man reflecting on his family in a way that is similar to the beginning of the story. Throughout the novel, Buck weaves in a variety of themes and motifs with the three most prevalent being gender, class, and nation. I believe the most fitting theme of the novel is gender followed by class and then nation because of the role that O-Lan, Lotus, and Wang Lung’s daughters play in the novel.

I believe gender is the strongest theme that characterizes the novel because it places a limit on what a woman is capable of. In the opening chapter, Wang Lung prepares to marry a slave woman from the house of Hwang. His wife O-Lan is quiet, obedient, and does everything she is told. In the early stages of the novel, she takes care of his father, helps Wang Lung in the field, and gives birth to multiple children, all while maintaining complete obedience and failing to challenge her husband. By the time she passes away, she is still merely a wife and nothing more. Wang Lung barely appreciated her in life and mourns her in death, however because of gender roles, O-Lan was never more than just a way for Wang Lung to advance his life. The second example in which gender plays a significant role is the birth of his daughter. On page 65, Wang Lung exclaims, “A girl! A girl was causing all this trouble in his uncle’s house” (Buck
65). The moment she was born, the destiny of Wang Lung’s daughter was already set, reiterating Buck’s fixed portrayal of women and gender in the novel. Furthermore, when the family runs out of money, Wang considers selling his daughter into slavery, showing that women at the time were viewed as material objects to be used rather than people to be loved and appreciated. Additionally, when Wang discovers the prostitute Lotus, he completely forgets about O-Lan and everything she has done for him. Gender plays the biggest role in the novel because of the static situation women faced. Even though women played an instrumental role in the novel, whether it was birthing children, helping tend the land, or other duties, they were all unable to realize any significant gain due to their gender.

The second-best characterization of the novel is class. In my opinion, it is not the best characterization due to generally only showing two classes, the very rich and the very poor; however, the differing experience that comes with class is an important theme in the novel. First the wealthy class is portrayed by Buck as lazy and unconnected to the land. Wang Lung starts out tending his own land while wealthy families like the Hwangs have slaves to tend to it. This disconnection to the land because of class is also seen when Wang Lung becomes wealthy and in turn loses his lasting personal and emotional ties with the earth. Second, class is important in the novel because it shaped the experience the characters experienced in their day-to-day lives. Wang Lung was able to purchase a concubine, more land, and opium for his uncle which I believe Buck wants the reader to perceive as a series of overindulgent acts.

The third theme that is portrayed in the novel is nation and I believe this is the least important due to a few factors. First, because of class, the idea of nation was different for each person. During their time in the Great City, Wang Lung in addition to other poor men were
conscripted to fight in a war they did not know about. Second, the group identity of the Chinese people was split distinctly into class. The rich did not mingle with the poor and vice versa. There is no sympathy for the poor as the Hwang’s “are still making wine, while we starve” (Buck 90). This leads to the poor ransacking rich houses and clearing them of things of value. I believe the group identity in this novel is very loose. While many farmers and people experienced the famine and drought, they are no more connected than before. Wang Lung’s uncle still relies on filial piety to coax him, poor peasants ransack Wang’s house, and Wang Lung loses his connection to the past when he gains wealth. For these three reasons, I do not believe nation played the largest role in this novel relative to other important themes.

I believe that Buck characterized The Good Earth by gender to not only highlight the traditional Chinese view on gender but also the importance of family in Chinese culture. Even though women were more or less viewed as disposable objects they still contributed to the overall welfare of the house. If the family was not together than the nuclear unit as a whole did not function. I believe she was trying to send the message of sticking together and staying close to your roots. This message would have been an effective approach in the 1930’s because of the Great Depression. People looked to anything for support and putting emphasis on getting back to basics and focusing on core values is important. She may have seen the roaring 20’s as the overindulgence of the rich like with the Hwang family and the Great Depression as a sign of moving back to the earth. Overall, I believe gender was the largest theme in this novel followed by class and nation, however all were important in creating this beautiful story.
Works Cited