

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

The Good Earth

by

Pearl S. Buck

Book Information

Pearl S. Buck, The Good Earth
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Flood, drought, pestilence, and revolution are interwoven into a universal story of man's destiny.

Award: Pulitzer Prize

Topics: Places, Farms; Popular Groupings, College Bound; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 9-12; Recommended Reading, Oprah's Book Club

Main Characters

Ching a farmer and neighbor who both steals from Wang Lung and then returns what he has stolen, and later becomes Wang Lung's trusted friend and farm overseer

Cuckoo a resourceful slave and mistress to the rich old Lord, who later manages a tea house brothel in which she introduces Wang Lung to his second wife, and later becomes the second wife's slave, wielding great influence

eldest son the son who becomes a scholar and is conscious of social status

Lotus a pretty woman from the tea house who becomes Wang Lung's second wife, but assumes no household duties except to provide pleasure for Wang Lung

O-lan the hardworking, efficient slave who becomes Wang Lung's first wife, bears his sons, works his fields, and tends his house

Pear Blossom a pretty young slave purchased to serve Lotus, who becomes third woman in Wang Lung's life and cares for him in his old age

second son the son who becomes a grain merchant, with attention to practical frugality

third son the son who leaves home to become a soldier

Wang Lung the main character; a farmer and a farmer's son, who recognizes that land is the only lasting asset

Vocabulary

geomancer fortune teller who uses geometric figures and lines or geographic features to identify good days for certain events, such as burials, marriages, etc.

hind farmhand or servant

opium addictive narcotic drug derived from the dried juice of opium poppies

slave a person who can be bought or sold, including (in this story) daughters of poor families who are considered "property," as are all females

Synopsis

The Good Earth by Pearl S. Buck is set in the early part of the twentieth century and tells the story of Wang Lung, a Chinese farmer. His prosperity begins when his father procures O-lan, a slave, to be Wang Lung's wife. Good harvests follow, and he is able to purchase land from the great House of Hwang, in which his wife had served. It is clear to Wang Lung that land is the key to security and prosperity.

In the seventh year a drought came, and even though Wang Lung has a poor harvest, he spends much of the harvest money on more land, as he feels that land is better than money. Starvation prevails in the area, and Wang Lung and his family suffer as well. Village people, thinking that Wang Lung has stored food and money, raid his home and take everything except his furniture. Wang Lung is glad he has land instead of money.

With his starving family, Wang Lung moves to a city in the south, where he works and the children and O-lan beg. They are only able to survive until "...the rich get too rich" and the peasant workers revolt. While watching the looting of the rich man's house, he encounters one of the rich relatives, who gives him silver to spare his life. The silver allows Wang Lung and his family to return to the land and begin again.

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With the help of O-lan and his neighbor Ching, Wang Lung becomes very wealthy, buying more land and hiring workers. During an extended flood, he becomes frustrated and bored. He falls in love with a prostitute/slave (Lotus) at the town tea house and brings her home as his second wife. His two elder sons become educated, and one becomes a scholar and the other a merchant. They move into the great house from which O-lan came and away from the land.

When O-lan dies, Wang Lung recognizes his great debt to her and is ashamed that he never learned to love her. His father and close friend Ching both die shortly thereafter. Wang Lung takes his remaining family to town to live in the great house. He turns the business management of farm rent and production over to the merchant son and attempts to deal with domestic conflict. Finally, in his seventies, he takes a third woman into his court. Pear Blossom is a very young and beautiful slave who cares for him and his retarded daughter in his old age.

The story ends with the sons discussing sale of the land, with protests from a nearly senile Wang Lung. To his dismay, they fail to realize that the land is what brought prosperity to their family.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

Why are all of Wang Lung's sons unwilling to be directly responsible for farming the land?

They had spent most of their lives in the town and view farming as work for the poor.

Literary Analysis

A person's character can be revealed by the way he or she treats other people. Identify one instance in which Wang Lung is kind and another in which he is cruel.

He is kind to Ching when he returns from the south by giving him seeds and helping him plant. He is cruel to O-lan when he takes the pearls to give to Lotus.

Inferential Comprehension

Why does it take Wang Lung so long to recognize O-lan's contribution to the household?

She knows her obligations and duties and performs them without instruction or complaint until she is unable. Only after she stops is Wang Lung able to see what she had been contributing so quietly.

Constructing Meaning

How does O-lan express her anger and hatred toward Cuckoo?

She makes it very difficult for Cuckoo to use the kitchen. She tells Wang Lung she will not be a slave to a slave in her house. She explains that she has been a man's wife and borne him sons while Cuckoo was still a slave.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Characterization Early in the story, Wang Lung's father explains why he does not choose a pretty woman to be Wang Lung's wife. Have the students examine this statement with reference to Wang Lung's three women. Have them also discuss the current influence of physical appearance in today's society.

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors As Wang Lung's sons are born, he is overjoyed, and his primary expectation is that he will be cared for in his old age. How is it that he is unable for the most part to compel any of his sons to follow the family tradition and become farmers, even in a society where the patriarch has the last word? Have the students discuss their own experiences

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with parental expectations and their willingness to comply.

Describing Actions or Events Uncontrollable events, such as droughts and attacks by locusts, cause Wang Lung to take action. Others, like his neighbor Ching, respond by resigning themselves to their fate. At other times, such as when his cousin brings soldiers into the great house, Wang Lung also chooses to be patient. Have the students identify other events in the story in which Wang Lung is active or passive and to what degree his response affects the eventual outcome. Are we masters of our own fate? To what extent does this story support your conclusion?

Responding to Literature Have the students examine the family and interpersonal relationships described in this story. In what ways are relationships in today's families influenced by similar factors, such as gender, birth order, physical attractiveness, economic factors, and social status?