



**TEACHER GUIDE**

**GRADES 9-12**

COMPREHENSIVE CURRICULUM BASED LESSON PLANS

# The Good Earth

Pearl S. Buck

**READ, WRITE, THINK, DISCUSS AND CONNECT**

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Pearl S. Buck

## TEACHER GUIDE

**NOTE:**

The trade book edition of the novel used to prepare this guide is found in the Novel Units catalog and on the Novel Units website. Using other editions may have varied page references.

Please note: We have assigned Interest Levels based on our knowledge of the themes and ideas of the books included in the Novel Units sets, however, please assess the appropriateness of this novel or trade book for the age level and maturity of your students prior to reading with them. You know your students best!

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## Skills and Strategies

### Thinking

Research, compare/contrast,  
evaluating, analysis,  
brainstorming

### Writing

Short sequels, poetry,  
collaborative

### Listening/Speaking

Discussion, drama,  
interviewing, presenting

### Comprehension

Cause/effect, predictions,  
summarization

### Vocabulary

Target words, definitions,  
application

### Literary Elements

Characterization, symbolism,  
universality, simile,  
metaphor, personification,  
plot development, irony,  
antagonist/protagonist

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## Background Information

**Genre:** realistic fiction

**Setting:** Anhwei province, China; beginning of the twentieth century

**Point of View:** third-person omniscient

**Themes:** the life-sustaining earth, subjugation of women, family structure, survival

**Conflict:** man against nature, man against self; father against son; woman against social structure

**Style:** informal, chronological narrative

**Publication date:** 1931; had its beginnings in a short story, "The Revolutionist," published in 1928

### Summary

*The Good Earth* traces the life of Wang Lung, a peasant farmer, as he rises from poverty to riches, from obscurity to distinction. He and his wife, O-lan, a former slave in a wealthy household, struggle together to buy land, overcome the ravages of nature, and build a family dynasty. As Wang Lung rises to prominence, however, O-lan slips more and more into the background of his life. He assumes many characteristics of a wealthy landowner. The narrative is primarily the story of the earth that sustains Wang Lung and his love for the land.

**Note:** The novel divides easily into two parts. Chapters 1-14 center around Wang Lung's commitment to the land, with the climactic acquisition of money that will allow him to return to the land. Chapters 15-34 tell of Wang Lung's rise to wealth and distinction in the province and its effect on the family.

### Honors

Pulitzer Prize for fiction, 1932; the William Dean Howells medal by the American Academy of the Arts and Letters, for the finest work of American fiction for the years 1930-34. *The Good Earth*, in conjunction with other works, earned Ms. Buck the Nobel Prize in 1938. She held membership in The National Institute of Arts and Letters.

### Additional Information

The novel was on the best-seller list for 21 months and was converted into a Broadway play and a motion picture. The movie is directed by Sidney Franklin, stars Paul Muni and Louise Rainer, and runs 138 minutes. Rainer won an Oscar for her role as O-lan. It is periodically aired on classic TV channels and can be rented from video chains.

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## Attribute Web

The attribute web below will help you gather clues the author provides about a character in the novel. Fill in the blanks with words and phrases which tell how the character acts and looks, as well as what the character says and what others say about him or her.

**Acts**

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_

**Feels**

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_

**Character**

**Looks**

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_

**Says**

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_

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**Note:** The novel is replete with similes and metaphors. Many of these and some examples of personification are included in the supplementary activities of the chapters, and the student packet has a simile/metaphor/personification worksheet. Point out the use of the color red as students read the novel. In the Chinese culture, red means good luck while white means death or mourning.

## Chapter 1, pp. 1-24

This chapter introduces Wang Lung, a poor peasant farmer, and O-lan, the slave girl who becomes his wife.

### Vocabulary

fruition (1)	cauldron (2)	mutinous (8)	impudence (12)
obeisances (16)	exultation (19)	omen (21)	consummated (23)

### Discussion Questions

1. Discuss how Wang Lung acquires a wife, his wedding day, and the role his wife will fill in his home. (*pp. 1-24, The marriage is arranged by his father who purchases O-lan from the House of Hwang. Wang Lung goes to the great house to get his wife, and they burn incense before the earthen gods to seal the marriage. She will take over all household duties, including the care of Wang Lung's father.*)
2. Analyze references to Wang Lung's aged father, what this reveals about the Chinese family structure, and evidences of their poverty. (*pp. 1-24, He does everything for his father, he can't cut his hair without his father's permission, and his father arranges the marriage. Family is important and elder family members are highly honored. Evidences of poverty: can only afford a slave for a wife, food and tea are scarce, Wang Lung eats in the place for poor men, has only six silver dollars and a few copper coins, and has simple food for the wedding meal.*)

### Supplementary Activities

1. Research and discuss Confucist, Taoist, and Buddhist marriage ceremonies. Compare with the wedding of Wang Lung and O-lan.
2. Ask students to respond to references to women's subjugation: "Take her and use her well," "Obey him...bear him sons" (p. 18). O-lan will not appear before other men because the marriage has not been consummated.
3. Begin a list of references to the earth. Note importance of salvaging all water for the earth (pp. 5-6).

## Chapters 2 & 3, pp. 25-38

Wang Lung is pleased with his wife O-lan. She takes care of the household needs and works side by side with him in the fields. She gives birth to their first son.

### Vocabulary

querulously (25)	zenith (27)	stolid (28)	consternation (32)
importunately (37)			

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## Discussion Questions

1. Discuss how Wang-Lung and O-lan begin to build their life and what forms a bond of "togetherness." (pp. 1-24, 29-30, *He relinquishes all household duties, including the care of his father, to O-lan. She cooks, cleans, and mends, then works with in the fields with him. She announces her pregnancy.*)
2. Discuss O-lan's impending delivery, Wang Lung's concerns, and the birth of the child. Compare with pregnancy and delivery today. (pp. 33-38, *Wang Lung wants to get someone from the great house to help with childbirth, but O-lan reacts angrily that she will have no one from there. She works in the field all day, prepares their food, bears her son alone, and cleans up the blood to protect Wang Lung from any discomfort. His primary concern after the birth is, "Is it a man?"*)

## Supplementary Activities

1. Add to the list about the earth: Earth formed their homes and fed their bodies and made their gods (p. 29); He took his life from the earth (p. 35).
2. Read "A Psalm of Life" by Henry W. Longfellow and/or Genesis 3:19 and compare with Wang Lung's statement, "So would also their house, some time, return into the earth, their bodies also" (p. 30).
3. **Similes:** she was as brown as the soil (p. 30); panting became like whispered screams (p. 37).

## Chapters 4 & 5, pp. 39-53

Wang Lung and O-lan work together to produce a bountiful harvest. O-lan returns to the great house to show her new son with pride. Wang Lung decides to buy land from the House of Hwang.

## Vocabulary

malignant (40)

deprecation (44)

impassive (50)

## Discussion Questions

1. Discuss the mixture of superstition and religion. (pp. 40, 50-51, *Wang Lung fears evil spirits will attack if he has too much good fortune and offers incense before earthen gods to counteract the evil. He fears that walking in the open with a beautiful man child might arouse wrath of evil spirits; he covers his son's head and announces loudly what a misfortune it is to have a sickly girl child.*)
2. Discuss Wang Lung's prosperity and contrast this with his uncle. (pp. 41-47, *He continues to be frugal and cautious. He uses wisdom in harvesting and selling his grain. His uncle sells before grain is even ripe, spends unwisely, and never has anything.*)
3. Note the foreshadowing of problems in the House of Hwang. (pp. 51-52, *Young lords spend money lavishly and are consumed with women. Old Lord adds concubines each year, and Old Mistress consumes copious amounts of opium. They want to sell some land to support their lifestyle.*)