

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

The Good Earth

by Pearl Buck

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The Good Earth

Background Lecture

Note to the Teacher: In the novel, Buck addresses the issues of prostitution and rape. These issues are culturally relevant and are significant to themes in the novel.

The Good Earth, published in 1931, was instrumental in changing Western attitudes toward the people of China. In telling the story of ordinary believable Chinese people, Buck shattered the Western stereotype of the Chinese as being cruel, backward, opium addicts.

Buck, who grew up in China with her missionary parents, based the novel on her experiences there. With an evident sense of admiration and concern for the Chinese peasants, *The Good Earth* chronicles the life and struggles of the farmer Wang Lung and his family. The circumstances of Wang Lung's life reflect Buck's knowledge of the suffering of the Chinese people at the hands of abusive governments, bandits, landlords, floods, and famine. In addition to historical events in China, the reader learns of Chinese customs pertaining to religion, marriage, death, male and female roles, birth, and family relations. However, the author also creates vivid scenes of what is universal in the human experience: marriage, child rearing, poverty, sickness, family quarreling, a father's pride, and catastrophes of nature.

The following terms have been used to describe *The Good Earth*.

- *Realism* – a literary movement that has at its core the depiction of life as it really is, with no attempt to hide or gloss over the problems, hardships, or ugliness of life. **Example:** *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.
- *Naturalism* – a literary movement that began in the late nineteenth century, which emphasized that man was as much a prisoner of instinct, environment, and heredity as animals; man has no free will in the theory of naturalism. **Examples:** *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*; *The Call of the Wild*.

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Objectives

By the end of this Unit, students will be able to:

1. point out and discuss the realistic and naturalistic elements found in *The Good Earth*.
2. discuss the extent to which this novel is deterministic. Consider the degree of individual initiative and possible free will for characters.
3. point out and discuss the Chinese customs and history presented in the novel.
4. point out incidents and comments that demonstrate Buck's realistic portrayal of both the comic and tragic aspects of life.
5. respond to experiences, characters, and events in the novel.
6. identify examples of characterization, figurative language, imagery, point of view, foreshadowing, contrast. Point out how these features further develop meaning in the novel.
7. define the term *objectivity* and point out how the term relates to this novel.
8. discuss the universality of the human struggle presented in this novel.
9. point out and discuss the significance of the novel's title and its relationship to the major themes.
10. to cite specific incidents and/or comments in the novel to support the following themes found in the novel:
 - Both physical and emotional sustenance exists in having one's own land.
 - There are natural cycles of life evident in birth and death, growth and decay, etc.
 - There is a constant struggle between the wealthy and the poor in society.
 - Humans struggle to survive in the midst of harsh environments.
 - There is a value to hard work that goes beyond the immediate rewards.
 - Wealth and pride may corrupt one's values.
 - In Chinese society prior to the revolution, the position of a woman was one of subservience.
 - There are obligations that exist in relationships between family and community members.

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Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. Compare and contrast the Chinese customs that are present in the novel to American customs. Some topics include: obligations to family, the position of women, foot binding, wedding and burial ceremonies, child rearing, and marriage.
2. Discuss the relationship of Wang Lung and O-lan. Compare and contrast the relationship he has with his wife to the relationships he has with Lotus and Pear Blossom.
3. Tell the story of one day in Wang Lung's life. Consider what he does first, where he goes and what the place looks like, and how he deals with people.
4. Why can Wang Lung not take part in the city life? Compare and contrast the ways of city life to Wang Lung's.
5. How does Wang Lung feel about his life? How do these opinions change throughout the story? Discuss the relationships he has with his wife and family members, farming conditions, and his financial situation.
6. Make a list of at least four reasons for the fall of the House of Hwang.
7. What universal experiences do the characters in the novel go through? How can you relate to their experiences and circumstances?
8. Describe the personality traits, attitudes, and values of two characters.
9. In what ways does Wang Lung demonstrate his pride?

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Chapters 1 – 2

Vocabulary

articulate – to express with words
cauldron – vessel used for boiling water
contrived – obviously planned
demurring – voicing objection
fruition – accomplishment; bearing fruit
gruel – thin, watery porridge
guffaw – burst of laughter
impudence – offensive, bold behavior
obeisances – body movements or gestures
stolid – impassive
thatched – roofing made of plant material
volubly – fluently
zenith – summit; upper region in the sky

1. What is the setting for the novel? Describe the images you have of Wang Lung's farm, his house, the city, and the House of Hwang.

2. What is the point of view in the novel? What effect does knowing these thoughts have on the reader?

3. Characterize Wang Lung by his personality traits, his attitude and his values. How do you feel about Wang Lung?

- 4. Read again the section that tells of the birth, death, and burial of the fourth child. The focus of the narration is Wang Lung's thoughts and feelings about what is happening. What effect does this focus have on you?

- 5. What details indicate that O-lan killed the fourth child? What details indicate that the uncle has eaten his own children? Do you find these actions to be realistic?

- 6. What image do you have of the fire wagon?

Chapters 21 – 22

Vocabulary

betrothed – engaged
harlot – female prostitute
melancholy – gloomy
petulant – peevish
sundered – broken into parts

1. Point out the reason for O-lan's anger and how she deals with her problem. Why is O-lan's method effective?

2. Give several of the reasons that Wang Lung's love for Lotus cools.

3. What do you find comical in these chapters?
