

Reflections:

A Student Response Journal for...

The Good Earth

by Pearl Buck

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CHAPTER 1

1. As the novel opens, Wang Lung's sense of gender roles is clear as he prepares for the arrival of his bride. Make a list of household duties that you feel are female responsibilities and those that you consider male responsibilities. Why do you think certain roles are gender-specific?
2. As Wang Lung walks to the House of Hwang, he purchases special foods and visits a barber. He also worries about the appearance of his bride. Imagine you are going to be married. What special preparations and/or purchases would you need to make your wedding day special?
3. O-lan stands submissively as the Ancient Mistress relieves her of her duties and describes her as "a good slave, although somewhat slow and stupid," as well as commenting on her lack of beauty. Imagine you are O-lan. Write a diary entry revealing how you feel about how the Ancient Mistress has described you.
4. Wang Lung's first days with O-lan are characterized by a mixture of pride and awkward silence. Contrast the marriages in the novel with those of today. Which method do you think is more likely to bring happiness? Why?
5. Throughout Chapter One, Wang Lung shows great respect and admiration for his father even though they do not always agree. Describe a conflict you have had with an adult in which you failed to show respect. Do you think a more respectful attitude would have helped in resolving the conflict? Why or why not?

CHAPTERS 2 - 3

6. Wang Lung and O-lan spend many hours working the soil, “this earth which formed their home and fed their bodies and made their gods.” For Wang Lung, the land represents the past, present, and the future. It defines his culture. What is your concept of American culture? What ideals or practices do you think define you as an American?

7. O-lan hopes to dress her firstborn son in fine clothes when she presents him to the Ancient Mistress. Once a slave and now a wife, O-lan takes great pride in planning for the baby. What are some accomplishments that have given you a sense of pride? Make a list of at least six things you are proud of and explain why each one gives you pride.

8. Wang Lung exclaims, “We shall buy a good basketful of eggs and dye them all red for the village. Thus will everyone know I have a son!” What customs are practiced today to announce births? Do they make sense to you?

9. In Chapter Three, O-lan is presented as a woman possessing great inner strength and courage. Write a simile that celebrates someone’s strength of character. You may need to look up “simile” in the dictionary.

CHAPTERS 4-6

10. With a strong wife, a healthy son, and a good crop, Wang Lung worries that his life is too fortunate and says, “The air and the earth were filled with malignant spirits who could not endure the happiness of mortals, especially of such as are poor.” To ward off possible bad luck, Wang Lung burns incense in the little family temple. What are some common superstitions today? What do people do to keep misfortune from coming their way?
11. Wang Lung does not become friendly with his neighbors because he fears they will begin borrowing things from him. Does your family have good relations with your neighbors? Why or why not?
12. As the new year approaches, Wang Lung decorates the house with red paper as a symbol of prosperity and good luck. Write a paragraph about how you feel the perfect New Year should be celebrated.
13. When Wang Lung and O-lan take the baby to meet the Ancient Mistress, it is extremely important to them that they appear prosperous. In other words, “they dress to impress.” Are people judged by the way they dress? Why do you think some clothing styles are more popular than others?
14. Write a letter to your school newspaper explaining your thoughts on the emphasis teenagers place on fashion.
15. Wang Lung states that “Land is one’s flesh and blood.” Clearly, he considers land to be his most prized possession. What is your most prized possession? What would you be willing to sacrifice in order to keep it?

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16. Wang Lung calls his new parcel of land “a sign and a symbol.” What does the purchase of the land symbolize to him? What do you feel about having land to own? Is it important?
17. Wang Lung’s reaction to the news that O-Lan has borne another son is markedly different from that of his firstborn son. Do you find that first-born children today have advantages over their younger siblings? Explain your answer in a note to a child who complains that the first-born has all the advantages.

CHAPTERS 7-9

18. Frustrated, Wang Lung openly criticizes his uncle, for which he is slapped and reminded of the custom against correcting his elders. Do you agree with this custom? Relate an incident when correcting an elder could have proven beneficial, either from real life, a book, or a movie.
19. When Wang Lung's third child, a daughter, is born O-lan says she is "not worth mentioning" and Wang Lung sees the birth as an "evil omen." How do these statements affect you? Why do you think girls carry low social value in China, even today?
20. After a season of drought, Wang Lung secretly purchases more land. Think of a secret you have kept. What were your reasons for doing so? Explain them in a personal diary entry.
21. After being robbed, Wang Lung states, "They cannot take the land away from me...it is mine." This is a moment of strength for Wang Lung in the face of very bad circumstances. Write about a time when you or someone you know remained strong during a time of great misfortune. Make sure you explain whether you agree with that person's decision.
22. When Wang Lung obtains a little food, he feeds his father before he feeds his children. Imagine your family is starving and you do not have enough food to sustain everyone, but you have enough for one person besides yourself. Who would you feed first and why?
23. O-lan kills her fourth child, a girl, moments after she is born. Write a letter to O-lan and give her some advice.