The Good Earth Study Guide

The Good Earth by Pearl S. Buck

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Pearl Buck was one of the most widely read American novelists of the twentieth century. When she published her most popular and critically acclaimed novel, *The Good Earth*, in 1931, she was living in China as the wife of a Christian missionary. By that time, she had lived in China for about forty years and brought to her portrayal of Chinese rural life a knowledge that few if any Western writers have possessed.

The novel is about a poor farmer named Wang Lung who rises from humble origins to become a rich landowner with a large family. Although Wang Lung is a fundamentally decent man, as he becomes wealthy and acquires a large townhouse he becomes arrogant and loses his moral bearings, but he manages to right himself by returning to the land, which always nourishes his spirit.

The *The Good Earth* contains a wealth of detail about daily life in rural China at the end of the nineteenth century and in the first quarter of the twentieth century; it shows what people ate, what clothes they wore, how they worked, what gods they worshiped, and what their marriage and family customs were. The novel is written in a simple but elevated, almost Biblical style, which lends dignity to the characters and events. It was widely praised for presenting American readers with an accurate picture of a country about which they knew very little in the 1930s. As of 2006, *The Good Earth* had never been out of print and had sold millions of copies in many different languages.

Author Biography

Nationality 1: American

Birthdate: 1892

Deathdate: 1973

One of most popular American authors of the mid-twentieth century, Pearl Buck was born on June 26, 1892, in Hillsboro, West Virginia. Her parents, who were Christian missionaries, took her to China when she was three months old. Spending her childhood in Chinkiang, China, Buck was able to read Chinese as well as English literature when she was only seven years old. When she was eight, her family was endangered by the Boxer Uprising of 1900, which targeted Western missionaries for killing.

After attending a boarding school in Shanghai, Buck returned with her family to the United States, and in 1910, she enrolled at Randolph-Macon Woman's College, in Lynchburg, Virginia.

She graduated in 1914, and she soon returned to China, marrying John Lossing Buck, an American agricultural specialist. The couple lived in a village in North China. In 1924, Buck taught English literature at the University of Nanking. The following year, she returned to the United States and enrolled at Cornell University, from which she received an M.A. in 1926. After returning to China in 1927, Buck and her husband found themselves caught up in revolutionary violence in Nanking. A mob looted their house as they lay in hiding in a tiny room in a nearby house.

During the 1920s, Buck developed her writing craft, publishing stories and essays in magazines. Her first novel, *East Wind, West Wind* was published in 1930. It was followed by *The Good Earth* in 1931, which won the Pulitzer Prize in 1932 and the William Dean Howells Medal in 1935. The novel, which was a runaway bestseller, was made into a Broadway play and a film. Buck was now a prolific writer, and two novels soon followed: *Sons* (1932) and *A House Divided* (1935), which followed the saga of the family of Wang through later generations.

Buck returned permanently to the United States in 1934. She divorced her first husband and married Richard Walsh, the president of a publishing company. The couple lived in Pennsylvania and adopted six children.

In 1938, Buck became the third American and the first American woman to be awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. The award was for Buck's outstanding publications, *The Good Earth*, *The Exile* (1936; a biography of her mother), and *Fighting Angel* (1936; a biography of her father).

Buck continued to publish for the remainder of her life, but her later books were not as highly regarded by critics as her work of the 1930s. However, throughout her writing life, her books remained popular with readers, and at the time of her death, her books had been translated into more languages than those of any other American writer. In all, she published over seventy books, including novels, short stories, biographies, an autobiography, poetry, plays, and children's literature, as well as translations from the Chinese. She was also involved in humanitarian causes and was an outspoken advocate for civil right and women's rights. She sought to promote understanding between Eastern and Western cultures.

Buck died on March 6, 1973, at the age of eighty.

Plot Summary

Chapters 1-3

As *The Good Earth* begins, Wang Lung, a poor farmer in north central China, is preparing to get married. He is looking forward to having a woman to do the household chores since his mother died six years earlier. He lives with his father, an old man who complains a lot.

Early in the morning, Wang Lung puts on his best clothes and walks into the town. He is on his way to the House of Hwang, the wealthiest family in town, where he has been promised a slave girl as a wife. The marriage has been arranged by his father, and he has never met the girl, although he knows she is not pretty.

Arriving in town, he visits the barber and then the butcher, where he buys meat for the evening wedding feast. Outside the House of Hwang, he is at first too frightened to go in, and he goes to a restaurant and buys noodles and tea. When he returns to the House of Hwang at noon, he is taken to the Old Mistress, who summons the female slave, named O-lan. The old mistress says O-lan is a virgin and a good worker, although somewhat slow and stupid. Wang Lung is pleased to have her, and on their way home, he takes her to a temple, where he burns incense to the gods. When they arrive home, O-lan prepares the food, and Wang Lung's neighbors and relatives arrive for the feast.

As the days go by, Wang Lung begins to enjoy married life. O-lan, although she is mostly silent, is a good cook and a competent housekeeper. By summer, she has started to work with him in the fields, too.

Soon O-lan becomes pregnant. Refusing help from anyone, she gives birth to a baby boy, to the delight of Wang Lung and his father.

Chapters 4-6

Following a local custom, Wang Lung buys fifty eggs and dyes them red in honor of the new baby. In a short time, O-lan resumes her work with her husband in the fields. That year, the harvest is a rich one, and the frugal Wang Lung manages his affairs well, in contrast to his lazy uncle and his wife. During the winter, he even manages to save some silver pieces.

For the New Year celebrations, O-lan makes rice cakes, and Wang Lung and she take their son to the House of Hwang. O-lan presents the boy to the Old Mistress and gives the cakes to the ladies in the house. O-lan learns from the cook that the Hwang family has fallen on hard times because of the spendthrift habits of the young men, and the family wishes to sell some land. Wang Lung decides to buy the land and is proud of his new acquisition.

In spring, he and O-lan labor on their new land. In the fall, O-lan gives birth to a second son, and Wang Lung is happy with his good fortune. His plentiful harvests continue, he saves money from the sale of his produce, and he earns a reputation in the village as a man of substance.

Chapters 7-9

Wang Lung is angered by the laziness of his uncle's family. His uncle has a wife and seven children, but none of them works, and the family is always in need. One day Wang Lung's uncle complains of his ill-fortune and asks Wang Lung for money. Reluctantly, Wang Lung gives him nine pieces of silver.

O-lan gives birth to a baby girl. Neither he nor O-lan is pleased by this, since girls are not valued as highly as boys.

There is a summer-long drought, and only one piece of Wang Lung's land bears harvest. But Wang Lung remains well off, and he buys more land from the House of Hwang as that family's fortunes continue to decline.

The drought continues into autumn. Food becomes scarce, and Wang Lung and O-lan are forced to kill and eat their ox in order to survive. Wang Lung gives his uncle some beans, but when the man returns for more, Wang Lung refuses. His uncle turns against him.

In the winter, hungry villagers, encouraged by Wang Lung's uncle, come to Wang Lung's house, intent on stealing food. But they find little food there. The famine gets so bad that people eat grass and the barks of trees, as well as dogs and horses.

O-lan gives birth to another girl, but the infant dies, either strangled or smothered by O-lan. With his family penniless and starving, Wang Lung decides they will travel south to escape the famine. He and O-lan sell their furniture but keep their land.

Chapters 10-13

Wang Lung and his family begin their walk south, then catch a train. When they arrive in the city of Kiangsu (based on Nanking), Wang Lung buys mats and builds a hut that rests against the wall of another house. They get rice from the public kitchens for the poor. The following day, the family begs on the streets, except for Wang Lung, who hires a rickshaw and conveys people around town. But for all his hard work, at the end of the day, he has made almost no profit. Fortunately, however, O-lan and their sons have collected enough money to pay for their rice the following morning.

As Wang Lung pulls the rickshaw each day, he gets to know the city, but he does not feel at home there. He hears young men speaking to crowds at street corners, saying that the Chinese must have a revolution and rise up against the foreigners. Wang Lung

meets a foreigner for the first time when he gives a ride to an American woman in his rickshaw.

In the city, food is plentiful, but Wang Lung and his family cannot escape their poverty. When the younger son steals pork from a butcher, Wang Lung beats him. He decides he must get back to his land as soon as possible. But he has nothing to sell that would finance the move back, and he refuses to entertain his wife's idea that he should sell their daughter into slavery.

Chapters 14-16

When spring comes, Wang Lung still longs to return to his land. He does not understand city life. Sometimes men hand him papers with writing on them, but since he cannot read, he does not understand the message. One such paper has a picture of a man hanging on a cross; another shows a fat man stabbing a man who is already dead. A man tells Wang Lung that this depicts a rich capitalist killing the poor. Wang Lung is mystified; he does not understand this way of seeing the world.

One day Wang Lung sees several men seized by soldiers, and a shopkeeper informs him that there is war somewhere, and the soldiers need people to carry their supplies. Wang Lung narrowly escapes being seized himself. Frightened, he stops going out in the day and takes a night job pulling wagonloads of boxes through the streets.

The city is filled with fear, and there are rumors that the enemy is approaching. Wang Lung loses his job and runs out of money. He is desperate. Then comes the news that the enemy has arrived in the city. In the violence that follows, a mob breaks into the rich house that adjoins Wang Lung's hut. Wang Lung is swept up into the action but, unlike the others, does not steal anything. But then he finds himself alone in an inner room with a man who has been in hiding. The frightened man thinks Wang Lung will kill him and offers him money. Wang Lung takes the man's silver.

The next day Wang Lung and his family return to their land, where he buys seeds, grain, and an ox. He is visited by his neighbor Ching, who fared badly during the famine. Wang Lung gives him seeds and offers to plough his land. Wang Lung is pleased to hear that his uncle has left the village, and no one knows where he is.

Back on his land, Wang Lung is happy again. One night he discovers that O-lan had stolen some jewels from the rich person's house. He insists that he must have all but two pearls so he can buy more land from the House of Hwang.

On visiting the formerly great house, he learns that bandits have stolen all the remaining wealth and that only two people still live there, the Old Lord and a former female slave named Cuckoo. Cuckoo tells him there is land available for sale, and Wang Lung purchases it with the jewels he took from O-lan.

Chapters 17-19

Wang builds additional rooms to his house and buys Ching's land. Ching comes to live with him and helps on the land. Wang Lung hires laborers and builds another room for the house. O-lan gives birth to twins, a boy and a girl, and Wang Lung is happy. The only sad thing in his life is that his first daughter is mentally retarded and never learns to speak.

There are many years of good harvests. Wang Lung hires more laborers and builds another house. He no longer works in the fields but spends his time supervising his workers and marketing his produce. He sends his eldest son to school so the boy can learn to read and write and help him at the grain markets. Wang Lung also sends his younger son to school, and he is proud of them both.

One year there is a flood, and two-fifths of Wang Lung's land is under water. He is not worried, however, because his storerooms are filled. But he is restless. Now he has money, but he is not as happy as he was before. He is aware that he now occupies a higher social status, and he starts to patronize a more sophisticated tea house in town than the one he has been going to for years. In the evening, he hears women's voices coming from the upper floor of the tea house. One night, with the help of Cuckoo, whom he encounters by chance in the tea house, he is shown to the room of one of the women, whose name is Lotus. Captivated by the slender Lotus, Wang Lung visits her every night and does not return home until dawn. He is infatuated with Lotus all summer and buys her expensive gifts. He even takes O-lan's pearls and gives them to Lotus.

Chapters 20-22

Wang Lung's uncle returns. He knows how wealthy his nephew is, so he decides that he and his wife and son will move in with him. Wang Lung is appalled, but tradition demands that he cannot reject his uncle. His uncle's wife soon discovers that Wang Lung has a mistress and informs O-lan. Wang Lung decides to move Lotus into his house, and he builds a new court with three rooms to accommodate her. Lotus agrees to come in exchange for many expensive gifts.

After Lotus arrives, Wang Lung spends his time with Lotus rather than O-lan. While O-lan accepts the presence of Lotus, she does not accept the presence of Cuckoo, because when they were both slaves in the House of Hwang, Cuckoo did not treat her well. Wang Lung builds a new kitchen so the two women can stay apart. But there is little peace for Wang Lung. He tires of Lotus's petulance and the fact that she does not like his children. After Lotus becomes angry with them one day, Wang Lung's love for her cools. In the fall, he turns again to the earth, which has always nourished his life. As he works in the fields, he no longer feels so attached to Lotus.

Wang Lung's eldest son has learned to read and write and helps his father at the grain market. Wang Lung decides he must find a wife for his son, but he has difficulty finding

a suitable match. His son becomes moody and plays truant from school, for which Wang Lung beats him with a stick.

Chapters 23-25

Lotus and Cuckoo tell Wang Lung that a wealthy grain dealer named Liu has a young daughter who would make a suitable wife for his son. Wang Lung hesitates to agree to this idea, but after he finds that his son has been visiting a prostitute in town, he tells Cuckoo to negotiate the match.

Wang Lung confronts his uncle, who has been constantly abusing Wang Lung's hospitality. He tells him that he must leave the house. But his uncle shows him the lining of his coat, in which there is a false beard of red hair and a length of red cloth. Wang Lung then realizes that his uncle is one of the Redbeards, a gang of robbers that has been marauding in the area. He realizes that he cannot throw his uncle out of the house for fear of reprisals.

Wang Lung is upset because Liu refuses to allow his fourteen-year-old daughter to marry for another three years.

Wang Lung's son, now nearly eighteen, says he wants to study in one of the great schools in the south. Wang Lung angrily refuses permission. But after O-lan tells him that his son has been visiting Lotus, Wang Lung goes unexpectedly one night to Lotus's court. Finding the two of them together, he beats his son severely. Lotus claims that she and the young man only talk; he has never been in her bed. But the next day, Wang tells his son to leave for the south. Then he turns his attention to his second and third sons. He apprentices the former in the grain market and decides that the latter will become a farmer. He then thinks of O-lan and notices she is sick. He summons a doctor who says that O-lan will die.

Chapters 26-28

For many months, O-lan lies in bed, slowly dying, and her future daughter-in-law comes to the house to look after her. O-lan says she will not die until she sees her eldest son married. The son returns, and the night of the wedding feast, O-lan finally dies.

After her death, Wang Lung moves into the court where Lotus lives. Within a few days, Wang Lung's father dies, and he and O-lan are buried at the same time.

In the summer, there is a catastrophic flood. Wang Lung's land is under water, but his house, which is on higher ground, survives. There is a severe famine in the village because there are no harvests, and people starve. There is no harvest the following year either, and Wang Lung has to conserve his dwindling resources. To add to his troubles, his uncle and his family are always complaining, demanding money, and reminding Wang Lung that were it not for their protection, his house would long ago have been attacked by the Redbeards. Not only this, his uncle's son lusts after the wife

of Wang Lung's son. Wang Lung decides to ply his uncle and his wife with opium that will dull their minds and make them less troublesome.

After the flood recedes and the villagers return to their homes, Wang Lung lends them money to restore their property. The trouble between Wang Lung's eldest son and his cousin continues, and at his son's suggestion, Wang Lung decides to move his family into the empty inner courts of the House of Hwang.

Chapters 29-31

While the rest of the family moves, for a while Wang Lung remains on his land with his mentally retarded daughter and his youngest son. Wang Lung's uncle's son leaves to join in a war in the north, to Wang Lung's relief. He starts to spend more time at the house in town and is proud when his daughter-in-law gives birth to a son.

Wang Lung's faithful steward, Ching dies, and Wang Lung buries him near the family plot. Lonely without Ching and tired of all his labor, Wang Lung takes his son and daughter and lives permanently in the house in town. Persuaded by his eldest son, Wang Lung buys the outer courts of the house as well. The son ensures that the rents are raised, forcing the tenants out. Wang Lung then spends lavishly, restoring the house to its former splendor. Some time after this, he employs a tutor for his youngest son and puts his second son in charge of managing his land.

Over the next five years, Wang Lung has four grandsons and three grand-daughters. Also, his uncle dies.

One day a horde of soldiers, one of whom is the son of Wang Lung's uncle, descends on the town. They are rough and violent, and some of them take up residence in Wang Lung's courts. The son of Wang Lung's uncle behaves especially badly and comes into conflict once again with Wang Lung's eldest son. Anxious to placate him, Wang Lung gives him a female slave named Pear Blossom.

Chapters 32-34

Wang Lung is nearly sixty-five years old, but he can find no peace. The wife of his eldest son and the wife of his second son quarrel; the eldest and the second son dislike each other; the youngest son says he want to become a soldier, which displeases Wang Lung, and Lotus is angry with Wang Lung when he takes Pear Blossom as a mistress. His passion for Pear Blossom does not last long, however, although he still spends time with her.

Wang Lung now has eleven grandsons and eight granddaughters. He thinks of his life as nearly over, and he decides to return to his land, with Pear Blossom and his daughter, to live out the remainder of his days.

In the fall, he overhears his first two sons discussing a plan to sell the land after his death. He is angry, and they try to reassure him that the land will not be sold, but unseen by him they exchange a knowing smile, indicating they have no intention of keeping this promise.

Characters

Ching

Ching is a farmer and neighbor of Wang Lung. He is a small and quiet man with a face □like an ape's.□ Honest and decent, Ching is ashamed of the fact that during the famine he joined with the mob that went to Wang Lung's house to steal. He took a handful of Wang Lung's beans, but only because his child was starving. A short while later, Ching gives Wang Lung some dried red beans to atone for his actions. During the famine, Ching's wife dies, and he is forced to sell his daughter to a soldier to save her life. When Wang Lung returns from the city, he helps Ching. He later buys Ching's land and employs Ching to help him manage all his land. Ching becomes a loyal employee, and there is mutual respect between the two men. When Ching dies, Wang Lung grieves for him even more than he did for his father.

Cuckoo

Cuckoo is a sharp-voiced, shrewd woman who for much of her life is a slave at the House of Hwang. But after the old mistress dies and the house is sacked by bandits, she becomes the mistress of the Old Master and manages his affairs. She also acts as intermediary for Wang Lung to meet Lotus. When Lotus moves to Wang Lung's house, Cuckoo attends her as a servant. This arrangement causes friction in the house because O-lan dislikes Cuckoo and will not speak to her. As the years go by, Cuckoo and Lotus develop a more equal relationship and become friends. Cuckoo is very skilled at looking after Lotus's interests.

Old Master Hwang

Old Master Hwang, the patriarch of the Hwang family, allows his family to decline into poverty and ruin. He insists on taking in new concubines every year, even when he cannot afford to do so, and he seems to exert little control over his sons.

Old Mistress Hwang

Old Mistress Hwang is the matriarch of the Hwang family. When Wang Lung goes to her house to fetch his bride, Old Mistress is rather stern and haughty. She is addicted to opium. When the family fortunes go into decline, Old Mistress sells much of the family land. She dies of shock when bandits raid the house and tie her to a chair and gag her.

Liu

Liu is a wealthy, good-hearted grain dealer with whom Wang Lung does business. The two men also arrange for their families to be linked through marriage. Liu's daughter marries Wang Lung's eldest son, and Wang Lung's second daughter is promised to Liu's second son. Also, Wang Lung's second son is apprenticed to Liu.

Lotus

Lotus is a courtesan who entertains men on the upper floor of the tea shop that Wang Lung frequents. She is slender and alluring, with tiny hands and feet. When he first meets Lotus, Wang Lung is captivated by her charm and falls under her spell. He does whatever she asks of him, and he also brings her expensive gifts. Eventually, Wang Lung moves Lotus into his own house, so that he does not have to share her with others, and he builds new rooms for her. Wang Lung's uncle's wife comments that Lotus □reeks of perfume and paint□ and is not as young as she looks, but Wang Lung does not seem to care. An idle woman, Lotus lies around on her bed all day, nibbling at food and being bathed and oiled by Cuckoo. In the evenings, she decks herself out in her fine clothes. For Wang Lung, □there was nothing so wonderful for beauty in the world as her pointed little feet and her curling helpless hands.□ Lotus can also be bad-tempered, especially with Wang Lung's children, and eventually Wang Lung's love for her cools.

O-lan

O-lan is Wang Lung's wife. Before she is given to him in marriage, she spent ten years as a slave at the House of Hwang. O-lan is a plain, taciturn woman who accepts her lot in life without complaint. She makes a good wife for Wang Lung, since she is a competent housekeeper, an excellent cook, and a hard worker in the fields. She also has a lot of common sense. When Wang Lung complains about having his uncle's family living with them, she says it cannot be helped, so they must make the best of it. But Wang Lung does not love his wife. He treats her cruelly when he insists on taking the jewels she cherishes and using them to buy land. When Wang Lung becomes wealthy, he becomes dissatisfied with O-lan's appearance. He thinks of her as □a dull and common creature, who plodded in silence without thought of how she appeared to others.□ He starts to criticize her, and she bears his reproaches silently. She knows he does not love her. After Wang Lung acquires Lotus as a mistress, he no longer sleeps with O-lan. O-lan dies after a long illness, the night of her eldest son's wedding feast.

Pear Blossom

Pear Blossom is a young slave. Wang Lung bought her during a famine, when she was half-starved. She is small and delicate and helps Cuckoo and Lotus. Later, even though Wang Lung is old enough to be her grandfather, he takes Pear Blossom as his mistress.

Son of Wang Lung's uncle

The son of Wang Lung's uncle is a worthless young man who is nothing but trouble from the beginning. He is the only son of his father but contributes nothing to the family's welfare. He is a bad influence on Wang Lung's eldest son, who is younger than he, and he takes him into town to visit prostitutes. The two young men later quarrel, and the son of Wang Lung's uncle reveals another of his faults: he is a womanizer who has designs on the wife of Wang Lung's son. Later, he leaves to become a soldier, although he has no intention of ever taking part in a battle. Some years later, he is one of the horde of soldiers that descend on Wang Lung's town and stay in the inner courts of the former House of Hwang. He is hated and feared, and Wang Lung gives him the slave Pear Blossom to satisfy his lusts so that he will not harm the other women.

Wang Lung

When the story begins, Wang Lung is a young farmer eking out a precarious living from his small amount of land. He is a hardworking, dutiful man who looks after his old father. Because Wang Lung is poor, he can only acquire a former slave as a wife. When he goes to the great House of Hwang to claim his bride, he is terrified. A humble man from the fields, he knows nothing of city life. He is accustomed to frugal habits and is shocked at how much everything costs.

After he acquires a wife, Wang Lung begins to prosper. He fathers two sons, his harvests are good, he saves money and buys more land. The only adversity he suffers is from things over which he has no control. When drought leads to famine, he takes his family to a big city in the south, just so they can survive. But Wang Lung is still a man from the country, and he never adjusts to city life. He misses his land. Working on the land gives him peace and contentment, and whenever he is away from it, he suffers.

Wang Lung is an honest man, but he falls prey to temptation when he takes silver from a frightened man as a mob runs through the rich house in the city. The money enables him to return to his land, and once more, he prospers, winning the respect of others in the village; he has become a man of substance. But as he gets more wealthy, he forgets some of the values that enabled him to succeed. He no longer works on the land and is sometimes idle, and he thinks his humble wife is not good enough for a wealthy man such as he. His former humility is replaced by a certain amount of pride at the fact that when he goes into the tea shop, people whisper about him, pointing him out as a rich landowner. He starts to patronize another tea shop which he had formerly despised because there was gambling there as well as □evil women.□ But soon he gets smitten by one of those very □evil women,□ the courtesan Lotus, and for a while he loses his moorings altogether, lavishing gifts on her and becoming vain about his own appearance. He eventually frees himself from this obsession by going back to work on the land. His life is not entirely peaceful, however, since he spends much of his time worrying about his sons and other family matters. When he is very old, he leaves his house in the town and returns to live in the old earthen house on his land.

Wang Lung's father

Wang Lung's father is an old man who lives with his son. Wang Lung looks after him and makes sure he has enough food, even during the famine. He seems to remain cheerful and says he has seen worse days. The old man travels south with the family but refuses to beg on the streets with O-lan and the boys. He just trusts that he will somehow receive enough food.

Wang Lung's first daughter

Wang Lung's first daughter is mentally retarded, perhaps because during her first year of life there was little food for her to eat. She never learns to speak but sits around with a sweet, empty smile on her face. Wang Lung takes good care of her, calling her □my poor little fool.□

Wang Lung's first son

Wang Lung's first son is sent to school at age twelve so he will be able to help his father, who cannot read or write, in his dealings at the grain market. He proves himself to be an able scholar, and later, when he is nearly eighteen, he continues his education at a prestigious school in the south. He returns when his mother dies, and he marries a girl from a wealthy family. As a young man, he is quite different from the way his father was at the same age. He is accustomed not to poverty but to wealth, and he does not have his father's love of the land. He spends money lavishly to renovate the former House of Hwang because he thinks that his family should live in a style commensurate with their wealth.

Wang Lung's second daughter

Wang Lung's second daughter, the twin of his third son, is a pretty child. Wang Lung and O-lan decide to bind her feet so it will be easier for her to find a husband. The girl is later betrothed to the son of Liu. When she is thirteen, to escape the undesirable attentions of the son of Wang Lung's uncle, she is sent to live with Liu.

Wang Lung's second son

Wang Lung's second son is apprenticed to Liu, the grain dealer. Unlike his elder brother, this middle son is a competent, careful businessman, and Wang Lung trusts him with the financial management of his land. But the son turns out to be too parsimonious. He provides the slaves and servants with the least he can give them, causing Cuckoo to sneer at him in protest; he complains to Wang Lung that so much money is being spent on restoring the former House of Hwang that it will eat up his inheritance, and he even complains that his own wedding costs too much.

Wang Lung's third son

Wang Lung's third son is a quiet boy, and Wang Lung does not know much about what interests him. Wang Lung's plan is for the boy to become a farmer, but the boy says he wants to learn to read. Wang Lung thinks this is unnecessary for a future farmer, but he accedes to his son's request and employs a tutor. After the band of unruly soldiers come to the village, the boy listens to their stories and says he wants to be a soldier. The boy is fond of Pear Blossom and disappears from home after his father takes Pear Blossom for himself.

Wang Lung's uncle

Wang Lung's uncle is a lazy good-for-nothing who fails to cultivate his lands and look after his family. Instead, he persuades Wang Lung to give him money. Eventually, when Wang Lung has become wealthy, his uncle insists on moving into his nephew's house, along with his wife and son. Once there, they all make nuisances of themselves and contribute nothing to the household. The uncle takes advantage of Wang Lung's unwillingness to behave harshly to a relative and cements his position at the house by revealing that he is a member of the Redbeards, a gang of robbers, and claiming that it is only his presence in the house that prevents the Redbeards from robbing it. Wang Lung solves the problem presented by his uncle by getting him addicted to opium, after which the old man lies around smoking all day and no longer creates trouble.

Wife of Wang Lung's first son

The wife of Wang Lung's first son is the daughter of Liu. She tends to O-lan in her final illness and then marries the son when she is sixteen. O-lan and Wang Lung think highly of her. However, she is not so popular with Wang Lung's second son and his wife. The two women hate each other, and the second son tells Wang Lung that the wife of the eldest son talks all the time about all the luxury in her father's house and encourages her husband to spend too much money on unnecessary things.

Wife of Wang Lung's second son

The wife of Wang Lung's second son comes from a good family in a nearby village. She quarrels constantly with the wife of Wang Lung's eldest son, who regards her as ill-bred.

Wife of Wang Lung's uncle

The wife of Wang Lung's uncle is a self-pitying, lazy woman who never bothers to clean her house. She has seven children, six of whom are girls. When Wang Lung becomes wealthy, she moves into his house, with her husband and son. She abuses Wang Lung's hospitality, eating the expensive foods that Cuckoo brings for Lotus and

complaining a lot. Like her husband, she eventually becomes addicted to opium, which makes her passive and manageable.

Themes

Love of the Land

Throughout the novel, the land is the □good earth□; it nourishes Wang Lung, physically, emotionally, and spiritually. When he toils in the fields, he is happy; as a farmer, he knows his true place to be on the land, as it has been for many generations of his family before him. When he is forced by famine to go south to the city, he is out of his element, cut off from what sustains his life, and this contrast between country and city occurs repeatedly throughout the novel. When Wang Lung hears that the young lords of the House of Hwang no longer have any direct contact with the land, he immediately decides that he will start his two young sons working in the fields, □where they would early take into their bones and their blood the feel of the soil under their feet, and the feel of the hoe hard in their hands.□ Working on the land restores Wang Lung's spirits at crucial moments in his life. Whenever he is troubled, physical labor on the land restores him. It liberates him from his unhealthy infatuation with Lotus and has the same effect after the plague of locusts has gone: □For seven days he thought of nothing but his land, and he was healed of his troubles and his fears.□ While all else in life may fluctuate, the land alone remains. Even when Wang Lung is old and rich and living in a town house, his link with the land cannot be broken□□his roots were in the land□□and every spring he feels the call to return to it, even though he no longer has the strength to hold a plow. To lose connection to the land is to lose connection to life. This is why he says to his sons, when he hears that they are planning to sell the land, □If you sell the land, it is the end.□

The Corrupting Influence of Wealth

The theme that wealth corrupts occurs repeatedly and is connected to the theme of losing connection to the land. At the beginning of the novel, the House of Hwang is a symbol of great wealth and luxury. When Wang Lung arrives with the meat he has bought for the wedding feast that night, the gateman tells him that in this house, they feed such meat to the dogs. Arriving in the main hall, Wang Lung is so overawed by its size and splendor that he almost falls over. The wealth of the House of Hwang has been built up over the generations simply because of their ownership of land. But over time, they have forgotten the source of their wealth. The young lords of the House go abroad and spend money wastefully; they never go to the land and see it for themselves. Instead, they rely on agents to handle affairs for them, and they simply collect the money. Eventually, the House of Hwang falls. As Cuckoo tells Wang Lung, □And in these generations the strength of the land has gone from them and bit by bit the land has begun to go also.□

Although Wang Lung takes this observation to heart, he also goes through a phase in which wealth makes him forget the principles of thrift and hard work on which his life is based. He also forgets his origins and becomes quite a snob. The old tea shop he has

frequented for years is no longer good enough for him, and neither is his wife, or so he decides. When he meets Lotus, she makes him ashamed of smelling like a country fellow, and he starts to have his clothes specially made in a fashionable cut by a tailor in town. He also wears velvet shoes such as those worn by the Old Master Hwang. In a telling moment, O-lan says that he reminds her of the young lords in the House of Hwang. Wang Lung mistakenly takes this as a compliment. It appears that he is in danger of going down the same path trodden by the young lords. Even after he recovers from his infatuation with Lotus, he still thinks of himself as a cut above the common man. When he goes into one of the poorer areas of town and sees the common people, he despises them as □filthy□ and walks past them □with his nose up and breathing lightly because of the stink they made.□ He forgets that not too long ago he was a common man himself and rarely washed until he met Lotus, thinking □the clean sweat of his labor washing enough for ordinary times.□

The third example of the corruption of wealth is Wang Lung's eldest son. He has never lived as close to the land as his father and has been raised in a wealthy house. He is contemptuous of the common people, and they laugh at him for his snobbish attitude, saying that he has forgotten the smell of manure on his father's farm. He is always spending money lavishly and does not seem aware that all the wealth comes from the land. O-lan remarks, just as she had done to Wang Lung, that the behavior of her eldest son reminds her of the young lords in the House of Hwang. The desire of both the eldest and the second son to sell the land after Wang Lung's death suggests that they may indeed be following in the path of those who so catastrophically mismanaged the House of Hwang.

Inferior Status of Women

In the society depicted in the novel, women occupy an inferior position. O-lan is a slave before she marries and is accustomed to working from dawn until midnight. As a wife to Wang Lung, she becomes almost a domestic slave. She is expected to do all the cooking and housekeeping and to work alongside her husband in the fields as well. She knows her place and accepts the conditions of her life without complaint, even though Wang Lung has little respect for her. Once, early in the marriage, Wang Lung finds himself wondering about her former life as a slave. But then he is ashamed of his own curiosity; □She was, after all, only a woman.□

A revealing moment comes when O-lan gives birth to her first daughter. It is a disappointment to both her and her husband. □It is only a slave this time□not worth mentioning,□ she says, and Wang Lung, preoccupied with dealing with his uncle, does not even look at the newborn. He thinks of the birth almost as a curse (□the birth of daughters had begun for him□). A female child is not even considered part of the family into which she is born, for as soon as she is of child-bearing age she will marry and become part of another family.

The undervaluing of women can also be seen in the fact that during harsh times, the daughters of the poor are often sold into slavery, so that the other members of the

family can survive. When O-lan smothers her second daughter, who is born during the famine, she is merely acting on a culture-wide devaluation of female life. It is more than unlikely that her actions would have been the same had the child been a boy.

Style

The novel is a realistic one but also on occasions employs imagery and symbolism. The traditional Chinese practice of foot-binding, for example, is used as a symbol of Wang Lung's desire to improve the social status of his family. The binding of girls' feet over a period of years resulted in a deformed foot that sometimes was no longer than three inches. Foot-binding was a painful process, but a small foot was considered desirable. Wang Lung finds Lotus alluring because she has tiny feet. Also, if a girl had bound feet it was easier for the family to find her a husband. The practice was not common amongst the poor, however, because poor women had to work; they could not afford to be merely decorative objects. Since O-lan is a kitchen slave, her feet were not bound. However, when Wang Lung acquires wealth and determines that his wife is not good enough for him, what repels him most are her □big feet,□ and he looks at them angrily. To appease him, she offers to bind the feet of their younger daughter. O-lan does this successfully, and the result is that the girl □moved about with small graceful steps.□

Wang Lung's braided hair is also used as a symbol. It represents the traditional way of life. When as a young man Wang Lung visits a barber on his way to collect his bride, the barber wants to cut off the braid to make him look more fashionable, but Wang Lung will not hear of it. He says he would need his father's permission to have it cut□another indication of his adherence to traditional customs. However, when Wang Lung meets Lotus, he forgets all about the values that have sustained his life, and when she mocks him for having what she calls a □monkey's tail,□ he has it cut off straightaway, so he can look fashionable. But when he gets home, O-lan is horrified by what he has done. □You have cut off your life!□ she says, thus establishing a symbolic link between the way a man's hair is worn and the traditional ways of life.

Historical Context

Revolutionary Change in China

During the period covered by the novel, China went through dramatic political change. Although *The Good Earth* focuses mostly on rural existence, which was resistant to change, on two occasions Wang Lung comes into contact with wider social forces. The first occurs when he is in the city of Kiangsu (Nanking), and he hears all the revolutionary talk and sees soldiers in the city, recruiting for a war. Then a revolutionary army arrives, and mob violence breaks out. The atmosphere and events described in these sections of the novel are based on the growing social unrest in China during the first decade of the twentieth century. For decades, the political institutions of Chinese imperial rulers had become increasingly corrupt and incompetent, failing for example to defend China from foreign invasions. The social discontent thus generated culminated in the Revolution of 1911, in which the Ch'ing dynasty collapsed. The trigger for the revolution was an uprising that broke out in October of 1911, between nationalist revolutionaries and the military in the city of Wuhan. For four months, many provinces rose up against imperial rule. There was heavy fighting in Nanking. Buck's parents, the Christian missionaries Absalom and Carie Sydenstricker, were in Nanking at the time and were advised to evacuate, but they refused to do so.

On February 12, 1912, a Chinese Republic was established with revolutionary leader Sun Yat-sen as its first president. He proclaimed the goals of the republic as nationalism, democracy, and socialism. But he soon came under pressure and resigned in favor of Yuan Shi-k'ai, a revolutionary general. Yuan Shi-k'ai declared himself emperor in 1915, but he died the following year before he could advance his imperial ambitions. His death severely weakened the republican government and led to the period known as the Warlord Era (1916-1927), in which provincial armies vied for power, often producing devastating results for local populations. It is this period that is referred to in chapter 31 of *The Good Earth*, when the horde of soldiers descend on Wang Lung's town and tyrannize the local people. This action signifies the widespread chaos in China during this period, which was not finally resolved until the triumph of the communists in 1949.

Foot-binding and the Role of Women in China

In traditional, pre-twentieth century Chinese society, women were assigned a position inferior to that of men. The qualities that were valued in women were obedience and loyalty. As is apparent from *The Good Earth*, the birth of a girl was not greeted by the family with as much pleasure as that of a boy. As Xiongya Gao explains in *Pearl S. Buck's Chinese Women Characters*, if a couple's first child was a girl, this was considered a disappointment; if the second was a girl also, it was cause for grief; and a third girl was considered a tragedy. The wife would be blamed for her failure to produce

a son. It was not unusual for an infant girl in a poor family to be smothered or sold into slavery (as *The Good Earth* demonstrates).

Young girls in traditional Chinese families faced other hazards growing up, including having their feet bound. The practice of binding the feet began among the aristocracy in the tenth century and spread throughout China. Foot-binding was started when a girl was between the age of four and six and would continue for over a decade. The feet would be bound tightly with bandages so that the toes were bent under the sole of the foot and the arch pushed upward. The procedure, which resulted in broken and misshapen bones, was extremely painful and resulted in deformed feet. Such feet were subject to infection and disease; after some years of binding, the foot would be virtually dead and would smell. But the tiny, crippled foot was looked on by Chinese men as a most desirable thing. As Gao puts it, □Such a product of cruelty, of women's tears and suffering, had come to be greatly admired, played with, and worshiped by men. It [the foot] became the most erotic organ of the female body.□ In other words, women were deliberately crippled in the name of beauty and eroticism.

For the cruelty of the practice, one need look no further than the description in *The Good Earth*, when the daughter of Wang Lung tells her father that she weeps □because my mother binds a cloth about my feet more tightly every day and I cannot sleep at night□ The bandages on the foot were usually changed every two days, and rebound more tightly, causing greater pain.

If a girl did not submit to foot-binding the chances of her finding a husband were slim. She was told that she had to have her feet bound in order to be pleasing to men. Part of the attraction for men was that a woman with bound feet was physically weak and could more easily be controlled. Such women were kept secluded in the home. They could not walk far or sometimes at all without leaning on a man. Having a girl with bound feet was a sign of the family's social status. It meant they could afford to have an unproductive female in the house. Big, unbound feet (like O-lan's in the novel) were a sign of poverty and low status.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, however, voices were raised in China against the inferior status of women and the practice of foot-binding. Jonathan Spence, in *The Gate of Heavenly Peace*, quotes from an essay published in 1904 by a young woman named Qiu Jin, who protested about the oppression of women in Chinese culture. Her description of the prevailing attitude toward the birth of a daughter recalls a number of passages in *The Good Earth*. The father will

immediately start spewing out phrases like □Oh what an ill-omened day, here's another useless one. . . . He keeps repeating, □She will be in someone else's family later on,□ and looks at us with cold or disdainful eyes.

Qui Jin also protested against foot-binding:

They take out a pair of snow-white bands and bind them around our feet, tightening them with strips of white cotton; even when we go to bed at night we are not allowed to

loosen them the least bit, with the result that the flesh peels away and the bones buckle under.

Foot-binding was banned by the Chinese government in 1911. During this period, also, as Spence reports, Chinese society was starting to address the issue of the status of women. The number of girls' schools increased, and magazines and newspapers were published that focussed on women's issues. Christian missionaries and Chinese reformists were also influential. In 1919, the first girls were admitted to Peking National University.

Critical Overview

On publication in 1931, *The Good Earth* was a huge critical and popular success. It was chosen for the Book of the Month Club, which in the 1930s was a guaranteed way to generate high sales for a book. In fact, *The Good Earth* was the bestselling book in the United States in 1931 and 1932. It was reviewed in all the major newspapers and magazines and received near universal acclaim. It was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1932. Over the years it was translated into thirty languages.

What reviewers most liked about the novel was that it was the first book to give Western readers insight into what Chinese society was really like. It was not a fanciful portrait of China as seen through the distant gaze of a Westerner, and it did not present the Chinese in terms of the unflattering stereotypes that were common in the West at that time. For example, a reviewer for the *New York Times* comments that the country portrayed in the book is □a China in which, happily, there is no hint of mystery or exoticism. There is very little in [Buck's] book of the quality we are accustomed to label, 'Oriental'□ (quoted in Peter Conn, *Pearl S. Buck: A Cultural Biography*). In *The Nation*, Eda Lou Walton comments that Buck's □complete familiarity with her material allows her to present her characters as very human and very real, as people who engage our sympathies.□ H. C. Harwood, in *Saturday Review*, remarks: □The opening chapters of *The Good Earth* are so lovely that one forgets the Far East, one forgets everything but humanity.□ Harwood also commented on how

[W]ithout effort or anger an alien civilization is quietly presented. It is so easy to be funny about China, and so easy to be funny about the collisions of alien cultures. Mrs. Buck turns away from all that and explains Wang Lung.

The novel was also well reviewed in a number of Chinese journals, although some Chinese intellectuals professed to dislike it. Buck's defenders felt this was because she had revealed a side of Chinese life (poverty, inequality) that the Chinese educated class would sooner not have exposed.

In the early 2000s, there was a revival of interest in *The Good Earth* among contemporary readers because the book was selected for Oprah Winfrey's Book Club.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Aubrey holds a Ph.D. in English and has published many articles on twentieth century literature. In this essay, he discusses the religious beliefs of the society depicted in the novel and how Wang Lung's attitude toward religion gradually changes.

In *The Good Earth*, Buck's saga of rural Chinese life over several generations, the three great religions of China—Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism—make almost no appearance. In Chinese history, there has generally been a distinction between the religious beliefs and practices of the educated classes and those of the peasantry. Over the centuries, the common people have known little of the intellectual or devotional practices of these great faiths. Instead, as Ninian Smart explains in *The Religious Experience of Mankind*, "religion, interwoven with magic, had an immediate practical significance in the struggle for worldly benefits and in the common round of agricultural and family festivals." It is these early religious beliefs and superstitions, which seem to have remained unchanged for many hundreds and perhaps thousands of years, that are presented in *The Good Earth*, against the background of Wang Lung's changing attitude towards them.

The first insight into the religious beliefs and practices that govern life in the small village in which Wang Lung lives comes when, as a young man, he returns from the House of Hwang with his bride, O-lan. The first thing he does is take her to the western field on his property, where a tiny earthen "temple" stands. It was built by Wang Lung's grandfather, and Wang Lung's father tends to it with great care. It is part of their family tradition. Inside stand two earthen figures depicting a male and a female god. They are covered in robes of red and gilt paper which Wang Lung's father makes for them every New Year. Wang Lung burns incense to these gods of the fields, in whom all the townspeople believe, so that they will bless his marriage and make it fruitful. Although at this stage Wang Lung appears to believe in these gods and their power, the author gives a hint that they may not be as all-powerful as he believes. The gods look spruced up in their new robes, but this will not last, because "each year rain and snow beat in and the sun of summer shone in and spoiled their robes." These are gods who are damaged by the very things they supposedly control.

In addition to believing in the power of the gods, Wang Lung also believes in omens and evil spirits. He is relieved to find that the sticks of incense he has brought with him to the temple are not broken, for that would be an evil omen. Then later, when he comes home with O-lan and his baby son from the House of Hwang, he shows his superstitious nature. He boasts about how beautiful the baby is, but then he is fearful because he is walking under an open sky with his baby and any evil spirit could see the child, and, presumably, cause him harm. So Wang Lung covers the child's head and speaks out loud to confuse any lurking evil spirit, saying it is a pity the child is a female and has smallpox and that he and O-lan should pray that it may die. It appears that this is a world in which malicious spirits practice trickery and must be outwitted by human ingenuity.

Such are the basic religious beliefs of this late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century Chinese peasant society. But as the novel continues, it becomes apparent that Wang Lung is not a slave to ancient beliefs about the gods. He is at heart a practical, down-to-earth man who learns to look for comfort, solace, and peace not to the capricious gods but to the earth, the land, the bringer of sustenance and the giver of life. He is quite willing to reject the gods, but he never rejects the land.

It is during the famine that Wang Lung's attitude to the gods starts to undergo a radical change. Like Job in the Bible, when suffering comes Wang Lung expresses his frustration with God. But he goes further even than Job, directly accusing the □Old Man in Heaven□ of being wicked, although he does feel a twinge of fear at doing so. When he goes to the temple, instead of burning incense, he spits on the face of the god. But the god and his consort □sat there unmoved by anything and Wang Lung gnashed his teeth at them.□ Wang Lung repeats these sentiments when the famine is over and he has returned from the city. Peering into the temple, he sees that the statues of the gods have fallen into ruin. No one has been paying them any attention; their faces have been washed away by the rain and their paper clothes are in tatters. These are impotent gods, indeed, and Wang Lung seems to relish the feeling of revenge that the sight of them produces in him: □Thus it is with gods who do evil to men!□ he says.

Wang Lung's religious skepticism sees him through into middle age and beyond. When he is getting on in years and Ching warns him of an approaching flood, he repeats his earlier sentiments with even greater vehemence: □I have never had any good from that old man in heaven yet. Incense or no incense, he is the same in evil.□ He even tells Ching that he thinks God enjoys looking down and seeing men drowning and starving. Not surprisingly, the humble Ching is shocked and asks that his employer not talk in such a way. But Wang Lung just walks off, muttering to himself. It appears that a prosperous, successful man has no need for religion.

But often in crises or moments of emotional intensity, people suddenly return to the beliefs they think they have outgrown. So it is with Wang Lung□although with a twist. Some years after the flood, he is awaiting the birth of his grandson. When he hears from Cuckoo that it will be a long and difficult birth, he gets frightened and feels the need for spiritual support. He buys incense and goes to the temple in the town, □where the goddess of mercy dwells in her gilded alcove.□ He summons a priest to make the offering. But then a thought strikes him: what if the grandchild is a girl not a boy? To offset this possibility, he strikes a more assertive note in his newly recovered piety: □If it is a grandson I will pay for a new red robe for the goddess, but nothing will I do if it is a girl!□ Then he goes to the small temple on his own land, burns incense as an offering and says much the same thing to the two gods there □who watched over fields and land.□ In his old age, then, Wang Lung shows that he has not quite renounced the religious beliefs and customs that are observed as a matter of course in his society. But the years have changed him. As a young man he respected the gods and was submissive to them; as a mature man, he railed against the malevolence and injustice of the gods; now, as an old man, he is willing to take them into partnership, to deal with these vexing gods as an equal, as if they were bargaining partners and he were negotiating the price of purchasing new land or selling his goods. They may be gods,

but he is Wang Lung, man of substance and not to be trifled with. Over the years, he has learned his lessons; that life is hard and unpredictable; that the gods may have little care for human happiness, that he must make his own way and cleave to the land, which he venerates with the kind of fervor that others reserve for those inscrutable gods.

Source: Bryan Aubrey, Critical Essay on *The Good Earth*, in *Novels for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2007.

Adaptations

The Good Earth was filmed by Metro Goldwyn Mayer in 1937, directed by Sidney Rainer. As of 2006, the film was available on video cassette. A play based on the novel was written by Owen Davis and Donald Davis and produced in the Theatre Guild in New York City on October 17, 1932.

Topics for Further Study

Closely examine the brief incident described in chapter 14, in which Wang Lung encounters a Christian missionary. What image does it present of Christianity? Does the passage suggest that Christian missionary work in China is positive or negative? What reasons might Buck have had for presenting Christian missionary work in this light? Write an essay in which you present your analysis.

Obtain a copy of the 1937 movie version of *The Good Earth* and make a class presentation, with video clips if possible, of the main differences between the book and the movie. Take especial note of how O-lan is portrayed. Also consider why all the leading parts were taken by white rather than Chinese actors.

Consider some of the stereotypical ways in which Chinese and other Asian people were viewed by Americans during the twentieth century. Consider films and television programs. Why did the West cultivate such negative views of non-Western cultures? Make a class presentation in which you discuss such stereotypes and show how portrayals of Asians and Asian-Americans in the media today are more positive than in former times.

Team up with another student and make a class presentation in which you compare John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) to *The Good Earth*. What themes do the two books have in common? Does Steinbeck's book suggest a reason why *The Good Earth* was received so enthusiastically by American readers during the 1930s?

Compare and Contrast

1930s: In the Chinese city of Nanking, invading Japanese troops kill an estimated 369,366 Chinese civilians and prisoners of war between December 1937 and March 1938. About 80,000 women and girls are raped; many are then mutilated and murdered.

Today: For decades Japan refused to apologize to China for atrocities committed during World War II. In 2005, Japanese prime minister Junichiro Koizumi apologizes for the fact that Japan caused grief and pain to many people in Asian nations during the war. But he does not mention Nanking by name.

1930s: China is under the rule of the Nationalist Party, led by Chiang Kai-shek. The Chinese Communist Party opposes the nationalists but in the 1930s is on the defensive. In 1934, the communists begin their famous 6,000-mile Long March from Hunan to northwest China, where they establish a base.

Today: China is ruled by the Communist Party, but economic reforms over the past twenty years have introduced many capitalistic practices. The private sector of the economy is growing fast as China develops into a major world power.

1930s: In Shanghai, a Chinese city subject to many international influences, educated, sophisticated women forge new roles for themselves that leave old ideas about appropriate gender roles behind. They regard themselves as free and liberated, but traditionalists see in them the dangers of modernity and foreign influences. The lives of Chinese women in rural areas and less modern cities, however, remain hard, with few recognized rights.

Today: The Chinese government makes great strides in protecting women's rights and advancing women's political and social status. Gains have been made in education, health care and employment, although discrimination still exists in the workplace, and women from poor areas frequently have their rights violated, especially in matters of family and marriage.

What Do I Read Next?

Buck's novel *Sons* (1932) is the second volume in the trilogy that begins with *The Good Earth*. Beginning where the previous volume ends, *Sons* is about the lives of Wang Lung's three sons, the eldest (the landlord), the second (the merchant), and especially the youngest son, who becomes a warlord. None of the sons respects the father's legacy. As literature, *Sons* is not considered the equal of *The Good Earth*; nonetheless, it is a tale well told.

Splendid Slippers: A Thousand Years of an Erotic Tradition (1998), by Beverley Jackson, is an account of the Chinese practice of foot-binding. Jackson describes the history of foot-binding, what the procedure involved, and the erotic fascination associated with bound feet. She also compares foot-binding to other exotic practices supposedly aimed at enhancing female beauty, such as the custom of the women of Burma who appear to stretch their necks by wearing a series of heavy necklaces. (Actually, the collar bone collapses toward the rib cage as x rays have proven.)

John Henry Gray's *China: A History of the Laws, Manners, and Customs of the People*, published by Dover Books on Literature and Drama in 2003, is a reprint of the original book that was published in 1878. Gray was the archdeacon of Hong Kong, and this readable history covers the period when Wang Lung, in *The Good Earth*, was a young man. It covers topics such government, prisons, religion, Confucian philosophy, marriage, servants and slaves, sports, funerals, and commercial activities such as agriculture and tea and silk production. It includes 140 illustrations of scenes from daily life.

The Cambridge Illustrated History of China (1999), by Patricia Buckley Ebrey, is a much praised, scholarly work that covers with pictures and text some four millennia of Chinese history and culture.

Further Study

Doyle, Paul A., *Pearl S. Buck*, revised edition, United States Authors Series, No. 85, Twayne, 1980.

This is a concise and readable introduction to the entire range of Buck's work.

Harris, Theodore F., in consultation with Pearl S. Buck, *Pearl S. Buck: A Biography*, John Day, 1969-1971.

Written by her close friend and collaborator, this two-volume work is, as of 2006, the most comprehensive biography of Buck.

Leong, Karen J., *The China Mystique: Pearl S. Buck, Anna May Wong, Mayling Soong, and the Transformation of American Orientalism*, University of California Press, 2005.

Leong explores American orientalism during the 1930s and 1940s, focusing on three women who were associated with China: Buck, Anna May Wong, and Mayling Soong. Leong shows how these women negotiated the cross-cultural experience of being American, Chinese American, and Chinese against the backdrop of the emergence of the United States as an international power and the growing participation of women in civic and consumer culture.

Liao, Kang, *Pearl S. Buck: A Cultural Bridge across the Pacific*, Greenwood Press, 1997.

Liao analyzes the reasons for the success of Buck's early novels and the critical neglect of her later work. He argues that the social, historical, and cultural values of Buck's work exceed their aesthetic value.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's"For Students" Literature line, NfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on "classic" novels frequently

studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of "classic" novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members—educational professionals— helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in NfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed—for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man–the character is listed as "The Narrator" and alphabetized as "Narrator." If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. • Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name "Jean Louise Finch" would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname "Scout Finch."
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by NfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an “at-a-glance” comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author’s time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

NfS includes “The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,” a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children’s Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Novels for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Novels for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Novels for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from NfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

"Night." Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234–35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from NfS (usually the first piece under the "Criticism" subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on "Winesburg, Ohio." Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335–39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. "Margaret Atwood's "The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition," Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9–16; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133–36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. "Richard Wright: "Wearing the Mask," in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69–83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59–61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Novels for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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