THE GOOD EARTH
PEARL S. BUCK

Includes detailed explanatory notes, an overview of key themes, and more

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CONCEPT ANALYSIS

ORGANIZATIONAL PATTERNS:
- The text is divided into thirty-one chapters, none of which are given names. This is not surprising as even the main character’s children in the book are not given names until they are much older and educated. The novel is not separated into individual books, but subtly feels as if it is as it tracks, chronologically, the different phases of Wang Lung’s life and in turn, his family’s life. The first period of the book begins with Wang Lung as a young farmer, poor but self-sufficient, on the day he is taking a wife. He and O-lan become profitable, bear children, but are eventually forced off their land into Southern China to escape famine. Their time in the large city marks the second period of the book. Here Wang Lung and O-lan are exposed to the growing influence of western cultures as well as to the economic poverty that forces the lower-class to violently steal from the rich. The third period the book involves Wang Lung’s return to his land, his prosperity that is equal to the House of Hwang, and his taking of a concubine. This section foreshadows Wang Lung’s downfall just as the House of Hwang fell. The final period of the book shows Wang Lung’s sons, who have no pride for the land, planning to sell it and move into the newly renovated House of Wang.
- The Pocket Book’s Enriched Classic version of the novel also includes detail explanatory notes to help the reader understand words or phrases that are indigenous to the Chinese culture, an overview of key themes found in the text, discussion questions and suggested readings for the interested reader.

ISSUES RELATED TO THE STUDY OF THE LITERATURE:
- Social Change in Rural China
  “Though Wang Lung often seems impervious to the outside world, The Good Earth explores the way peasants were and were not touched by the changing economy, western technology, and new social and religious movements sweeping across China. At first Wang Lung’s family is confined to poverty, work, and land. Then the arrival of famine forces them into a new world. The railway, a symbol of western technology, saves them from starvation. Once they reach the Great City, their survival hinges upon what they can earn each day. For both Wang Lung and O-lan, westerners are a blessing because they are relatively generous, but only by stealing from wealthy [Chinese] can they afford to return to farming” (401). Though many see influences of Communism and Christianity in the novel, neither plays a major role in Wang Lung’s life. His life is molded by westerners and the new technology they bring to his country, but in the end, Wang Lung’s relationship with capital is only so he can return to his old way of life (402).
- Women’s Unassuming Power.
O-lan represents the loyal, hardworking wife who is obedient to the gender rules of her society. She is characterized by "modesty, industry, practicality, and self-sacrifice" (402). "She is the kind of woman who gives birth, alone and without the assistance of other women, and then returns to the fields to help her husband harvest crops. When her husband tires of her after she has [borne] six children, she quietly accepts the arrival of his concubine-a second wife-in the household" (402). While the novel does show moments where women are the oppressed victim, it is also depicts women as complex, those who are capable to saving their family from starvation as O-lan does. Women are also shown as having the sensitivity and love for their husbands seen in O-lan's love for the pearls Wang Lung gives her.

- The Cyclical Nature of Life
  The characters in the novel are like the land, that follows a cyclical pattern. "The Great House of Hwang declines while the fortunes of Wang Lung and his family rise" (403). But Wang Lung and his family are destined to share a similar fate. "Wang Lung becomes distracted by women. His sons do not inherit his appreciation of the land, and they become increasingly estranged from the rich earth that gave rise to their wealth" (403). At the end of the novel, Wang Lung returns to his old house and sits in the same spot his father once did, resting in the sunshine. He has worked the land and will be buried in the land. His sons however move into the Great House of Hwang, taking the novel full-circle.

SETTING:

- The majority of the novel takes place in a rural, Northern Chinese village that is subservient to what they can grow, sell, and eat from their own lands. There is no electricity or plumbing, but a train does run on the outskirts of the city showing the effects of western technology. The novel does have one small portion that takes place in a Southern Chinese city, referred to as the Great City, where Wang Lung and his family go to escape the famine. This city is crowded, dirty, and is economically stratified. This excerpt gives the reader a taste of what is going on around the whole of China, while the bulk of the novel takes place on Wang Lung's land.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND:

- 1892: Pearl S. Buck moves back to China as a little child, having been born in West Virginia.
- 1898: The Boxers, a group who opposes western presence in China, is founded.
- 1900: The Boxers kill many foreigners who come to China and in response, the United States sends troops to combat the rioters.
This tension can be seen throughout Wang Lung’s stay in the Great City, where groups are forming to bring down the great houses and an army is being formed. Pearl S. Buck herself also had to flee to Shanghai during the Boxer Uprising for safety.

- 1914: Beginning of WWI and the rise of the Chinese Nationalist Party.
- 1920: Pearl S. Buck gives birth to a daughter, Carol, who is later diagnosed as being mentally retarded. This may or may not have affected her giving Wang Lung’s oldest daughter a mental disability.
- 1929: United States experiences the Great Depression, affecting other economies worldwide.
- 1931: *The Good Earth* is published.
- 1938: Pearl S. Buck receives the Nobel Prize for Literature.
- 1939: WWII begins.

**POINT OF VIEW:**
- The novel is written in third-person omniscient. This is key to the novel. As the reader is able to follow the thoughts of Wang Lung as he goes from being a humble farmer, to a starving man, to a prosperous land-owner, to an idle and distracted middle-aged man, to an old man who is much like his father before him. The reader can see the changes in Wang Lung as he is affected by wealth. And while the reader cannot read the thoughts of O-lan or other characters in the novel, Wang Lung’s perception of them paints an excellent picture.

**IRONY:**
- The irony of the novel is that Wang Lung, who buys land from the House of Hwang who has spent themselves into debt, becomes like the house in the end of the novel. His wife, who was a slave in the House of Hwang, essentially becomes a slave in the House of Wang Lung, bearing silently the concubines and indolent spending. Also, by sending his sons away to become educated, Wang Lung isolates them from the land. They want only the land for the capital they can make for selling it. In the end, Wang Lung becomes just like father, a man who irritated him throughout his life.

**TONE:**
- The tone of the novel is much like the characters themselves: relatively simple and not overly detailed. The sentence structure, though grammatically perfect, feels a little unfamiliar at times and gives the reader the feeling that they are reading about a foreign place, time, and people. It also distances the reader slightly from the characters so that they can see more clearly what is happening to them because of their choices.
VOCABULARY:
- The author does not use complicated words in the book primarily because her characters are all simple farmers, those without education. Wang Lung, the main protagonist, cannot even write his own and thus sends his sons to be schooled so that they may be able to read and write. Some of the more complex words are: erect, earthen, bickered, loathed, shrillness, moat, coquetry and indulgent.
- But while the language is not difficult, the syntax is not always simple. For example: “Yet he was afraid in his heart of what he had done, and yet so he would have cut off his life if the girl had desired it” (196). The words in this sentence are not hard to understand, but the way they are put together may confuse some students.

IMPLICATIONS FOR STUDENT DIVERSITY:
- This novel is excellent at showing the differences between people. First, students who have ever moved to a different place, especially a different culture, will be able to relate well when Wang Lung takes his family to the Great City. Students who have moved from a rural area to an urban area would understand well what it is like to meet people whose traditions are different from your own. In the Great City, Wang Lung meets people who have never owned or farmed land, those who do not want to work to support their family. He also meets westerners there, people with light skin, hair, and eyes. Students who live in diverse ethnic places would relate well to living with people who do not share their same physical characteristics.
- Another diversity in the novel is the character’s differences in wealth. Wang Lung himself goes from being extremely poor to wealthy, just as the House of Hwang goes from being from prosperous to destitute in the end. Students who come from areas with great economic diversity may understand the strain of being around people whose family has more or less money than they do.

AFFECTED ISSUES RELATED TO THE WORK:
- While the novel takes place in China in the late nineteenth century, there are still many parts of the book that students could connect with. Sadly, too many students know what it feels like to be hungry, to not have enough to eat. Northern China undergoes a great drought, leaving the land dry and infertile. Wang Lung and his family are forced to eat what they can find on the land, and even have to sacrifice their beloved cow to eat. Wang Lung tries hard to provide for his family, as many fathers and mothers do, but it still unable to keep his children from being hungry. Students with parents that are unemployed may relate well to Wang Lung’s fear and disappointment in himself as he cannot feed his family.
• Students who must work to help sustain their families will also relate to the novel. Wang Lung must work with his own hands to feed his children, with his wife working along side of him, and even his sons for a time. If they do not work, they do not eat. Many students hold jobs that help support their families.
• Those who have had to move to a new city would understand the estrangement Wang Lung felt when he moved to the Great City. He didn’t understand the dialect they spoke or the way they earned their money. He also didn’t recognize many of the foreigners who came in and out of the city. Many times when people move even within their own country, they feel that have moved somewhere foreign. The students would relate to Wang Lung’s anxiety in a new place.
• As uncomfortable as it is, students may also understand what it feels like to have a parent who is not loyal to their other parent. While it is not against custom for Chinese men to take second wives or concubines, the reader can tell from O-lan’s heartache when Wang Lung brings Lotus into the house that this still caused great pain, as it does in our own culture.

INFORMATIONAL AND FUNCTIONAL TEXTS:
• Functional texts on farming techniques.
• Informational texts on Chinese religion, eating customs, forms of worship, education, rural living styles, prostitution, war, and famine.

RESEARCH/PROJECT IDEAS:
• As a writing exercise, students must pretend that they are a character in the novel other than the main protagonist, Wang Lung. Choosing an experience that they personally related to or that they thought was exciting in the novel, students would write their own experience in being a part of experience. This will teach students to look through another person’s perspective.
• Students must research something historical in the novel and give a short classroom presentation on their findings. They can choose to research communism, Chinese religion, famines, Chinese cities and social stratification, farming techniques for Wang Lung’s time period, etc. This presentations can be going on while the class is reading the novel to help students understand the background of the text.
• Choose one character in the novel and write a character progression paper. Students are to think about what the character was like at the beginning of the story and then write about how the character has changed by the end of the story. What events led up to the changes of the character?
• Create a painting, drawing, mosaic, or collage from a scene of the story that was of importance to the student. Explain the significance. Teachers can bolster the student’s confidence by displaying these projects around the classroom.
• Make a bookmark illustrating the story. On the back of the bookmark, write at least 5 words you would use to describe the book.
• Make a poster that has a collage of words that the students feel relate to the novel or to how they responded to the novel. These words can be cut from magazines, newspapers articles, Internet images, etc. This will help the students personalize the novel.