

# PEARL S BUCK'S PORTRAYAL OF MAN AS VICTIM OF VICISSITUDES IN *THE GOOD EARTH*

by

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## ***Abstract***

*In reading a novel or any kind of literary work, it is very important to make proper observation of the theme of the story that has been presented. Since literary works are but a small-scale representation of life, what is presented in them is often what is seen or heard in everyday life. Only literary writers make it more interesting than it really is in real life through their power of creativity. This paper is a literary*

*appreciation of Pearl S Buck's "The Good Earth", where my personal observations as to the morality of the main characters and the soundness of the author's philosophy are discussed. In the last section "Conclusion", all the insights I have gained through reading the novel have been presented in the form of moral lessons.*

*It is hoped that this paper will also serve as a good guide to students seeking pleasure and edification that literature has to offer.*

## **Introduction**

Poverty and wealth, though as different as chalk and cheese, usually coexist in human society and many of the social problems arise from these two factors. History has clearly witnessed that changes from one social system to another (i.e. from primitive communal system to feudal system) are mostly determined by the vast contrasts in the possession of wealth among men. Though it is not surprising that there are both rich and poor people living in a community, it is interesting to study how wealth or the lack of it affects men.

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“The Good Earth” provides us with a good source to study man from two sides – man in time of poverty and man in time of prosperity, and how he reacts to problems that confront him. Originally a humble Chinese farmer of hand-to-mouth existence, Wang Lung, the main character of the story, experienced a chequered career and finally gloried in the soil he worked and thus became a wealthy landowner. This paper is a literary appreciation of Wang Lung’s life – how he stood against poverty and wealth and to what extent he could adhere to his principles in time of crisis. Consequently, his wife will also be discussed in that light, being an important character in the story.

Through one Chinese peasant and his children, Nobel prize winner Pearl S Buck traces the whole cycle of life, its terror, its passions, its persistent ambitions and its meagre rewards. “The Good Earth” is a universal tale of the destiny of all men.

### **Summary of the Story**

Being too poor, Wang Lung the farmer could not afford a woman of his own choice and had to beg for a slave-girl from a rich man’s house (Great House of Hwang) in town. O-Lan was her name and she was not at all beautiful, though strong and healthy. Despite her taciturn nature, she was a very obedient and dutiful wife. She not only did the housekeeping but also helped her husband on the farm. Even when she became pregnant, she continued working at home and on the farm regularly till minutes before giving birth.

Then, to the delight of Wang Lung, she bore him his first child - a son. That year, the harvests were also good and they were better off. They even bought a piece of land from the great house. The land they bought was very fertile. The weather being favourable throughout the year, the harvests the following years were even better than they expected. To crown it all, Wang Lung was blessed with another son. Now people in their village began to recognize him as a rich man and the head of his village.

But he was not a man without trouble. Together with the rise of prosperity, his uncle had become a millstone round his neck because, according to the rule of the society, his uncle, being the younger brother of his father, could depend on him if he had not enough for himself and his family. Though that idle uncle did not want to earn money for himself by doing labourious work, he felt no qualms about asking hard-earned money from his nephew. Every time he came to him, Wang Lung could not help but give a lump sum of money to his uncle.

Then, there came drought one summer and all the crops under cultivation withered. The only field that bore harvest for Wang Lung that year was the one he had bought from the great house - it being near the moat, with water available. Despite the threatening drought and possibility of starvation, he firmly decided to buy more land from the great house and he really did so. But drought continued and everlasting starvation prevailed and fear of death became everyone’s daily companion. At last, Wang Lung decided to go to the city in the south where food was said to be abundant.

Food was really abundant in that foreign city. Wang Lung earned money by pulling a wagon the whole day and the rest begged for their living. Yet they scarcely had enough to eat. Naturally, the poor, who were leading a hand-to-mouth existence despite their hard work, began to hate the rich, who lived in the lap of luxury by grinding the faces of the poor. The worst was that people had to live in great fear because there was talk of war everywhere. The poor were often arrested by soldiers to use as porters at war and people like Wang Lung lived in constant fear of being caught.

As the tension between the rich and the poor heightened and their relationship strained, there came a day when the poor broke open the locked gates of the rich men's houses by force of number and plundered all the valuable things they could find. Wang Lung, not actually knowing what to do, was also among the mob. By some quirk of fate, he came face to face with a terror-stricken rich man alone in a room, and from whom he managed to get many pieces of gold. With wealth in his possession, he instantly decided to go back to his land.

When they got back to their land, Wang Lung also found that O-Lan too had in her possession a bundle containing many precious jewels which she came by when she happened to be in the rich man's house together with her husband. Wang Lung bought more land with those jewels. There were then many successive years of good harvests and Wang Lung became a wealthy farmer and landowner. But, being aware of his illiteracy and its disadvantages, he decided to educate his sons. Wang Lung now had twins - a boy and a girl, apart

from the two sons and a daughter that he had before they went to the South.

Seven good years passed and there came the floods. All his lands were inundated and he grew more and more impatient as he had no work to do for a long time. He was not at all happy, being confined at home. So he went to the teashop in the town as an escape. A few visits he paid to the shop changed much of Wang Lung - his personality, his attitude towards his land, his family life and the like. That was the place where he came across Lotus, a woman who was later to become his mistress. He was wild with passion at first sight and his intoxication knew no limits when he first had her for money. His lust for her was so great that he wanted more and more of her. He was no longer interested in his work. Instead, he spent his time and money satisfying her needs and making himself look like a rich town-dweller so that he might not hear any complaint from her about his rustic nature. His madness was now far-gone and the farmer in Wang Lung was also gone, at least for a short time.

Then, out of the blue, his long lost uncle and family arrived. His uncle's wife soon sensed that Wang Lung was after a woman. Through her help, he was able to buy Lotus for a very high price. Naturally, women in the house began to hate each other cordially. To make the matter more complicated, Wang Lung's father in his dotage sensed that there was another woman in the house and kept shouting "harlot" all the time. Just as he could not appease his father, neither could he console Lotus. What rankled Wang Lung's mind most was her ruthlessness towards his own children and he gradually began to feel that his

love for Lotus had slackened to some extent.

Now, his eldest son was an educated young man. But the lad turned out to be a moody fellow and Wang Lung interpreted his moodiness as the first sign of manhood. So he arranged an engagement between his son and the daughter of a merchant. Nevertheless, he did not become cheerful and Wang Lung bitterly learnt later that his son had taken to drink and was after immoral women. Although he knew that it was his uncle's son who tempted his own son to do such indecent things, and therefore wanted to drive his uncle's family from his house, prudence prevented him from doing so in the end, because his uncle was a member of a robber gang, and his life might be at stake without his uncle at his home.

All of a sudden, familiarity developed between his eldest son and Lotus and the two were always together whenever Wang Lung was out. He could not help feeling suspicious about their relationship when he one day burst in upon them at an unexpected moment in her room. The sight made him mad with anger, which at last found expression in beating his son to a pulp and, without further examination, he turned his son adrift.

Two years passed and O-Lan's health rapidly declined. Though Wang Lung was willing to spend any amount of money if it were for her recovery, the doctor merely gave up because he could see her days were numbered. At her will, Wang Lung had his eldest son sent for and a marriage had to be promptly arranged between him and the daughter of a merchant, whom O-Lan thought to be clever and capable of becoming a

good wife to her son. She died at last, full of contentment. His old father also died some time later. The two were buried on the same day.

That year, there was a deluge in the region and great famine was the aftermath. Many people died of hunger and disease. Had it not been for his uncle, who was a member of the most feared robber gang, Wang Lung would surely have been robbed of his wealth. Knowing their status in the house as well as Wang Lung's predicament, his uncle's family never seemed satisfied, demanding more and more from him. What was most nauseating was that his uncle's son began to plague the house by leering at his youngest daughter and his daughter-in-law.

Thus, Wang Lung was never at peace. So, at his wit's end, he decided to resort to a ruse which would restore him peace of mind, that is, to make his uncle's family addicted to drugs by giving them as much opium as they would need.

People who had been flooded out had now returned home and needed money for farming again. Wang Lung lent them money at high interest and bought land and slaves cheaply from those who could not afford to buy tools. That year, Wang Lung also rented some chambers from the great house of Hwang at the request of his eldest son, who could no longer stand his cousin's leering at his wife. Everyone in his family moved to the great house except Wang Lung himself, his youngest son and his daughter. Much to Wang Lung's relief, his uncle's son one day told him that he was going to join the war in the north. Overjoyed, he did not mind giving the young man the money he demanded

to buy necessary things. A great change in Wang Lung's life took place when Ching, his loyal and most reliable agent, fell dead one day working on the farm.

Now that Ching was gone, his life as a farmer had almost come to an end because he was too old to plough a lonely furrow. So he rented out all his lands and moved to the great house and scarcely came to the house on his land. Though he could no longer work due to decrepitude, he did not have to worry about money. But his peace of mind was often disrupted by his eldest son, who was wasting prodigious amounts of money to make the house look palatial. Finally, out of his desire to live in peace, he began to take the line of least resistance by giving him any amount of money he wanted. His second son was different in his view regarding money. He did not want his brother's silly spending to affect the amount of the inheritance they would get after the death of their father.

Then the eldest son brought another problem. He suggested that his youngest brother should also be given a chance to study. Wang Lung turned a deaf ear to this suggestion because he had intentionally spared his youngest son to work on the land. When his youngest son told him that it was his own will to learn to read, Wang Lung was totally disappointed and he gave up on everything, letting him do what he intended to do. Since the son whom he had intended to work on the land proved his lack of interest in the farm, he asked his second son to see to the rents and to the silver that came from the land. The two brothers were not on friendly terms anymore and began pouring scorn on each other, their nature being different:

the elder extravagant and the younger thrifty.

Suddenly there was war. A horde of soldiers led by his uncle's son stayed at his house, and the fear of being molested subdued all the women in the house. At last, Wang Lung decided that his cousin should be given a slave so that the other women might be secure from his indecent assault. The first slave chosen for the purpose refused and she kept screaming blue murder out of fright. The pitiful sight of the helpless girl tugged at Wang Lung's heartstrings and so he saved her from her terrible plight, letting another slave take her place. Amid the persistent trouble at home, there arose another problem - a knock-down blow to Wang Lung - when his youngest son came up

with the proposal that he would go to war. He was so enamoured of his own plan that nothing could change his decision.

Just as Wang Lung's peace of mind was troubled by all that was around him, so was his equanimity upset by an unquenchable desire in his heart, that is, he happened to fall in love with the slave-girl (Pear Blossom) whom he had saved from falling into the hands of his uncle's son, risking Lotus's anger. His thirst was satisfied only when he chanced to meet her one night privately and from that moment she was his to command.

But his passion did not last for long. He was still fond of her, but passionless. With the passing of the flame out of him, he suddenly felt older and feebler. Yet he could find no peace of mind at home. The incessant quarrels between his daughters-in-law, his eldest son's seeking immoral pleasure outside, his

youngest son's going away to join the war – all conspired to make the aged man sad and morose.

What never changed was his love for the land. He went there and watched the labourers at work. At last, he decided to spend his remaining days at his old house. He would sit in the sun with a handful of earth in his hand and was content. His sons were dutiful. They came almost everyday bringing delicate food fit for the old man. One day, the two brothers came and after greeting him courteously, they went out. They did not know that they were being followed by their father when they began to discuss the sale of the land. Angry was not the word for the way he felt as their words burnt down into his heart. Seeing their father, the great lover of the land, in such a pitiful plight, they hastily promised that they would never sell the land. Only their cunning smiles betrayed their promise.

### **Man – a victim of vicissitudes**

Of the many characters in the novel, only Wang Lung will be discussed in respect of the way he behaves and reacts to the challenge of life – he being the main character through whom Pearl S Buck has painted a wonderful picture of the frailties of human nature. In describing man as victim of vicissitudes, emphasis will be placed mainly on highlighting the fallible and aberrant behaviour of man under the influence of wealth.

By promoting Wang Lung from a poor farmer to a wealthy landowner through a strange twist of fate, Pearl S Buck has examined the heart of a simple farmer to see to what extent wealth can

change man. She portrays the vicissitudes in Wang Lung's life by dividing his entire life into five stages: his life before marriage, his life after marriage, his life in another town during famine, his life back in his native place and his life after taking another woman.

### **His Life before Marriage**

When the story begins, Wang Lung and his father were so poor that they had to skimp even on water. Indeed, he was not much different from the common run of farmers at that time, except that his love for the land was matchless and his efforts untiring. Like fellow farmers of his time, he was thrifty, naïve, humble and superstitious.

It was quite natural that he was excited on the day of marriage and became dreamy and distracted while doing his routine duties at home. But his true farmer's spirit can be seen in the way he thinks about the rain and the crop even on that day. Amidst the feelings of excitement that a groom might experience on his marriage day, he could still sense the coming of the much-awaited rain just by the soft wind blowing gently from the east, and was thus relieved to know that the wheat under cultivation would not be affected. However neglectful he had been of his appearance in the past, he tried to look as neat and good looking as he could on that day. When the barber suggested that a new fashion should take in the place of his old-fashioned braid, he made his naivety conspicuous by replying to him that he could not do so without asking his father. Despite his best clothes and spruce appearance, he could not help feeling unspeakable humiliation at the splendour of the great house to which he

came for a slave-girl – his wife-to-be. Out of his superstitious nature, he made offering of sticks of incense to the gods of their fields so that they might be blessed with rain needed for fruition of crops on his return home with his wife.

This was how the simple, humble farmer Wang Lung started his married life when the story began.

### **His Life after Marriage**

His early married life was marked with good fortunes. Successful harvests brought him a great deal of money and more land. His fields were full of crops such as wheat, rice, garlic and the like. The birth of his first child - a son - rejoiced his heart. To top it off, he got complete contentment in his life for the first time when their status enabled them to set their foot at the great house as visitors on the second day of the New Year, the day for women to visit each other. Indeed, it was the contentment of a downtrodden person who had his turn to show his worth to those who oppressed him. This incident clearly indicates that man's pride may be absent for some time when he is down, but not forever.

His popularity in his village increased together with his rise to prosperity. But he was true to his type through thick or thin: he always held on to his frugal habit, and land for him was his flesh and blood. He was as superstitious as he used to be. On their return from the great house after their visit, the thought that an evil spirit might see his son scared him stiff. So he opened his coat hastily and thrust the child's head into his bosom and said in a loud voice, "What a pity our child is a

female whom no one would want and covered with small pox as well! Let us pray it may die!"

But his prosperity did not last long. There was extreme drought in the region which was soon followed by great famine. All the food that Wang Lung gathered in his house was stolen. Disappointed, he spat on the face of the god, which he once greatly revered; his faith in the god's power had gone. Out of his ardent desire not to give up and die at the prime of his life, he decided to go to the south where food was abundant.

### **His Life in Another Town during Famine**

His stay in this new town was really a turning point in his life. Naturally, life was hard for a simple farmer like Wang Lung in that new town, where life was characterized by vast differences between the rich who lived on the fat of the land and the poor whose existence hung by a thread at the threat of hunger. As political tension rose between the foreigners and Chinese nationals, the town where Wang Lung lived rapidly developed into a powder keg and fear of death haunted everyone - rich or poor alike. But Wang Lung's misery in this new town came to an abrupt end when he retrieved his fortunes one day by accident. No sooner had he become well off than he gravitated towards his land.

### **His Life back in His Native Place**

Except that his wealth had increased enormously after his return to his native place, Wang Lung did not change much. He still loved his land as much as he had

before and he enjoyed working in the fields as heartily as ever. In spite of his riches, he preferred to hold on to his unpretentious style of living. Though he had once become bitter with the gods and thus lost his faith in their power owing to their inability to bring rain to the region, he now reverted to his original faith and began to offer them candles and incense, though not so willingly and with complete trust as he had before. This stage in Wang Lung's life could be said to be the sunny period of his life, because it was the only time in his life when he experienced unclouded contentment of a true farmer by doing his work in the field, affording him the full savour of the nectar of his success without being disturbed.

It is definitely a blessing to be wealthy. In his village, people began to hold Wang Lung in high esteem. Many made up to him because of his wealth. Whenever there appeared problems in the village, his decision was accepted, whatever it was. Indeed, it was money that made him different from any other man in his village. It seemed that the unexpected acquisition of wealth could not upset the equanimity of this simple farmer. Apparently it really looked so. But a twist of fate made him as defenceless as a spent rabbit which was left to the tender mercies of a pack of wolves. Indeed, wealth had begun to attack him from a different direction.

Naturally a glutton for work, he could not help feeling impatient when there was nothing to do as his lands were being inundated. The water remained stagnant for months and he became more and more frantic with despair. No one's company at home could take his mind off his quandary. Unable to get rid of his boredom, he

went to a teashop to while away the time. It is no wonder that a man of wealth should lay himself open to temptation when he has been deprived of work to steady him. Now Wang Lung was rich and he had nothing to do to occupy his mind. Naturally, he began to think of how to make the most of his wealth so that he might enjoy the days of his manhood to the full when he was out of work. It was the knowledge that he was rich - rich enough to do anything that his heart had set on - that made him lose his moorings.

Besotted with the pride that wealth had given him, he forgot himself and began to think that the teashop that he used to go to was too humble a place for a rich man like him and looked at the people around him with disdain. Besides, he found it hard to condescend to eating or drinking with common people at the same shop. This sudden impulse of pride arose in him led him to a great teashop which was newly open. This teashop being a place where men sought immoral pleasure, the poor farmer out of his elemental nature fell easy victim to irresistible desire at the sight of beautiful girls in dishabille.

Indeed, it was his desire to show off his wealth that now clouded his reasoning. At the new teashop, he met Cuckoo, once the head of slaves at the great house. It touched a raw nerve when she said maliciously that an undignified farmer like him should visit such a grand place and her taunts impelled him to show that he was lordly and rich enough to do as he liked. Then, without realizing that he had been making a fool of himself, he let himself fall prey to his burning passion. Money and silver went streaming out of his hands, just to satisfy



the needs of a particular girl called 'Lotus'.

### **His Life after Taking Another Woman**

His intoxication knew no limits as he visited Lotus more and more. At last, he realized that he would never become a happy man unless he had her for himself. So, he bought her for a king's ransom and brought her home.

In the early days of her arrival, he felt that he was standing at the portals of happiness. It seemed that money really was a passport to one's happiness. But this transient happiness ran off him like water off a duck's back and misery and discontent soon followed. Prior to her arrival, Wang Lung's uncle and family had appeared out of the blue and, finding him rich enough to assume full responsibility for their living costs, decided to stay with him. When Lotus came, she also brought Cuckoo with her to serve her as her mistress. The rot really set in when his house was full of people of different nature and temperament. There was hostility among the women in the house and O-lan and Cuckoo were constantly at loggerheads. Although Wang Lung pulled all the stops out to pour oil on troubled waters, his effort was to no avail.

Finding that sharing of the kitchen was one of the causes of the bad blood between O-lan and Cuckoo, he built a new stove for Cuckoo so that she might cook any time she wanted. But it seemed as if there were no effective remedies to put things to rights after taking Lotus as his mistress. No sooner had Cuckoo got permission from Wang Lung to cook what she liked in the kitchen specially

built for her than she began to buy very expensive foods imported from foreign countries. Though he felt as if she were eating his own flesh, he simply could not prevent her from doing so lest it might offend Lotus. Thus, seeing his money dribbling away day by day and finding no one to complain to about it, Wang Lung had but to accept his fate despite the pangs of anger raging in him.

Indeed, wealth had turned his life into a miserable existence rather than a peaceful one after he was blinded by an unreasoning passion, that is, after taking Lotus for his mistress. It had also forced him into a tight corner, rendering him as powerless as a poor frog in front of a hungry python. He was simmering with anger when he learnt that his uncle's son was tempting his own son to do immoral things. At the end of his tether, he even tried to throw his uncle's family out of the house bag and baggage. But it was his knowledge that he was a man of wealth that made him eat his words. Instead of turning them adrift, his situation compelled him to wait on them hand and foot, because he knew how dangerous his uncle could turn out to be once driven out of his house. Thus, wealth had forced him to live with people he disliked and even to treat them with respect.

Nevertheless, he did not allow himself to be putty in his uncle's hands just because he (his uncle) was a member of a robber gang. He often fell back on his fortune using it as effective defence in dealing with life's tougher confrontation when there was failure or lack of other means. Since his uncle was nothing but a thorn in his flesh, he tried to entice him and his family to take narcotic drugs so that he might live in peace and he went to considerable expense to buy the drugs needed for the

purpose. His wealth had given him courage even to curse Heaven when another great flood seemed imminent for the second time in his life. He consented to his eldest son's proposal to rent the great house at an exorbitant price only because he expected that he would get the greatest satisfaction in his life by being able to live in the house where he had undergone much humiliating experience when he first went there for a slave-girl - O -Lan. Wealth was also a medium of exchange for peace even in his declining years. He sought peace of mind by giving any amount of money that his eldest son asked from him to make the house look grander. He used a great deal of money to appease Lotus's anger when he was deeply involved with Pear Blossom, a young slave-girl. Thus, wealth had stood him in good stead in some of the important cases in his life. But it is wealth itself that had made him an irrecoverable loser in the end by tempting his sons to sell his lands - which to Wang Lung were his life's blood, his pride and joy.

A careful examination of his life will reveal that he was more prone to make mistakes in time of prosperity than that of poverty. Men tend to lose their reason and plunge into mischief when they suddenly rise from poverty to prosperity at an unexpected turn of life. But Wang Lung was not exactly that type because his morality remained unshaken for quite a long time after his acquisition of large fortunes. His wealth is, indeed, just a pawn which he made use of in his struggle against passion. But, paradoxically enough, it is also his wealth which turned him a prisoner of desire in the end.

## **The Morality of the Two Main Characters:**

### **Wang Lung and O-Lan**

In this section, the main character Wang Lung and his wife O - Lan will be examined from a moral standpoint according to their involvement in the story. Though there are other prominent characters in the story such as Lotus, Ching, Wang Lung's father, Cuckoo, Wang Lung's uncle and family, Pear Blossom and their children, they are only agents whom Buck has used to portray the true picture of Wang Lung through all his changing fortunes.

### **Wang Lung**

Pearl S Buck has described Wang Lung, the boy, the man and the farmer, who worked on the farm through poverty to prosperity. True to the old saying "To err is human", his life was not a blameless one. He did both good and bad things in his lifetime. He had all the qualities which were characteristic of an average man - ie, ambition, determination, love, passion, pride, jealousy, greed, anger, fear, and superstition. His most predominant quality was his undying love for his work throughout his life. His philosophy was very down to earth. He saw the earth as a life-giving force to which everything, both animate and inanimate, had to go one day.

Wang Lung's piety towards his father was very remarkable. Neither poverty nor wealth had prevented him from performing his daily filial duty. When the story began, he was very poor. But he attended to all his father's needs with religious care, and dereliction of duty was never known to him. Even

during the great famine, he showed his devotion to his filial duty by giving anything that could be eaten to his father, though he and his children were starving. Despite the hunger clawing at his stomach, he was proud that no one could say that he had forgotten his father when death seemed imminent. When he became rich again, he made his father's life as comfortable as he could, sparing no expense.

Wang Lung was the sort of man who did not dare go against the stream. He lived strictly to the codes of society. According to the rule of their society, a man who was in a position to look after his kindred who belonged to his older generation should not simply stand by and watch when they were in need. The Sacred Edicts also commanded that a man was never to correct an elder. Wang Lung knew that his uncle had never been good to him in his life and that he was a thorn in his side. But he could not turn his uncle down because he was afraid that his society would regard the act as a blot on his character. Besides, he felt that acting in defiance of the Sacred Edicts was a sin. So, finding himself unable to shake his uncle off, he made a virtue of necessity by satisfying all his needs time and again. This is how circumstances had forced him to look after his uncle even before the uncle became a member of the robber gang.

By nature, he was the unpretentious type. Despite the drastic change from the state of poverty to that of prosperity, he held on to his frugal habit. He neither gambled nor bought expensive food, but always spent his time fruitfully at his work.

He was often subject to flattery and powerless against unkind taunts. Even in

his poorest state, he was greatly flattered when a beggar called him "Teacher" to ask for some money, and his complacency impelled him to give two small pieces of cash to the beggar. Once, the new rich Wang Lung was at a loose end when his fields were inundated. In the past, he had immersed himself in work and there was nothing to distract his attention. Only when he was out of work did he become aware of the dividing line that his wealth had drawn between him and ordinary people. Wherever he went, people began to pay a great deal of attention to him and his heart swelled with pride at this attention. Later, he found it repugnant to go to his accustomed teashop and to eat or to drink with the common folk there. This change in his attitude made him defenceless against Cuckoo's taunts at the new teashop and he was easily goaded into a sudden impulse to parade his wealth. Thus, he thrust himself into the noose made by Cuckoo.

Wang Lung was a man who never forgot the good deeds that someone else had done for him. Ching, his neighbour, gave him some food when he did not have a scrap of food during famine. Actually, Ching did so only because he wished the wrong he had done to Wang Lung be pardoned. (Ching had joined the mob when they plundered Wang Lung's house). Wang Lung was so grateful to Ching, who had spared him some food in spite of his own hunger, that he made him his agent when he became rich.

Out of his tender nature, he was sometimes more sentimental than practical. Food was so scarce during the famine that the chances of their surviving through it were very slim. Though his family hinted that their ox

should be killed in order that they might live, he closed his eyes to their suggestion. He simply could not stand the thought that his ox, which had been his companion since it was a calf, should be sacrificed after its years of faithful service. But he could no longer resist their pressing demand and had to acquiesce at last. When his wife was ready to kill the ox, he went into the room where he slept, laid himself upon the bed and wrapped the quilt about his head so that he might not hear the beast's bellowing. Needless to say, he was a man who lacked moral courage to a large degree.

With unrest rampant in the new town, Wang Lung was quite at a loss what to do. Food was no longer abundant. Fear of being caught by the soldiers never put his mind at rest. The worst was that he could not go back to his native place for lack of money. His wife suggested the sale of their daughter so that they might get some money to go back home. He was wounded in his deepest susceptibilities on hearing her suggestion and replied to her that under no circumstances would he do so. This showed how truly he loved his daughter.

Though Lotus became his object of desire after her arrival, it is not that he was unsympathetic toward O-Lan. It is true that O-Lan had been out of his mind for a long time. But he could not help feeling sympathy for O-Lan when he came to know from his daughter that she was not allowed to weep aloud when her mother bound her feet tightly lest he would not allow such painful binding if he heard her weep out of agony. He was deeply affected when he learnt from his daughter that her mother bound her feet more tightly everyday because she was afraid that her daughter would not be

loved by her husband just as Wang Lung did not love her because of her unbound ugly feet. This incident made him think about his wife very tenderly for the first time in his years with her. When her health began to deteriorate, he was ready to go to considerable expense for her recovery. But a rude awakening came when the doctor gave up and from that time he spent most of his time beside her bed, doing everything to make her as comfortable as he could till she breathed her last. On the day of her funeral, he cried real tears for the first time in his life.

Wang Lung could be considered a thoughtful person. This can be seen when he planned to give his daughter poison just before he died. He was never at peace with himself whenever he thought of his eldest daughter who would be left unattended after his death. It was a great relief to him when he got someone (Pear Blossom) to do the job for him after his death because giving poison to one's own child was quite an unenviable job and he dreaded it more than the hour of his own death. Undoubtedly, he seemed cruel in his decision to poison his own daughter. But since she was a mental defective whose existence was no more than a living death, his reasons preponderated over other considerations and he did what he thought best for his daughter. Without doubt, there can be various interpretations regarding this peculiar decision of his. 'Cruel', 'Selfish', and 'Inhuman' will be some of them. But if the cause of his wanting to resort to euthanasia is studied, it is found that his decision sprang from his great affection for his daughter. Though the intention he had in mind was not a faultless one, he could do no better than that since he was sitting on the horns of a dilemma. If the

end were to justify the means in some cases, Wang Lung could be pardoned in this case.

Wang Lung, by nature, was an honest man who wanted to earn money by fair means. Never in his lifetime was he poorer than the time when he and his family were living in the new town. Life was so hard in this town that even men took the line of least resistance by begging for their living. But he earned his money by pulling a wagon laboriously the whole day. He was very annoyed when he learnt that his two sons were growing into petty thieves. He showed his dislike of his sons' misdemeanours by throwing away the meat that his second son had snatched from a shop, though they had not eaten any meat since they killed their own ox.

Wang Lung was also a man of his word. While living in wretched poverty in the new town, he heard people like him say how they would spend the money if they were rich. He heard only of how much they would eat and sleep and what dainties they would eat that they had never yet tasted, and of how they would gamble and of what pretty woman they would buy for their lust, and above all how none would ever work again like the rich men in the city. Hearing their talk, Wang Lung cried out suddenly that if he had the gold and the silver and the jewels, he would buy land with them and bring forth harvests from the land. He did not eat his words when he actually became rich. He believed that land was more valuable than gold and jewels for a farmer. So he bought more lands and finally came to the fore as a rich landowner.

His character, however, was not beyond reproach in spite of his many

virtues. In the first place, he did not acquire his fortunes by fair means. He simply got it by extortion. Yet there are extenuating circumstances in this case. Though he happened to be in the mob plundering the rich man's house, he was quite unaware of the situation and did not know what to do until he came face to face with a terror-stricken rich man alone. It was the rich man who first proposed to give him money on condition that he spared him his life. In his extreme distress, the word 'money' suddenly brought his mind a piercing clarity - that he would be able to go back to his land without selling his daughter for a paltry sum of money. This knowledge changed him into another man alien to his nature and began to squeeze more money out of the helpless rich man.

It is true that his acquisition of wealth did not change his personality and attitude, although the change was very sudden and unexpected. But it was not because he was of stolid type, but because he was too absorbed in his work to yield to any distraction. His weaker self became visible when he was left without occupation for some time. It was the time when he began to notice the difference between his own status and other people around him. From that time on, he became purse-proud and began to treat other people with haughty contempt.

It was very inconsiderate of Wang Lung to demand the two small pearls from his wife just because he wanted to give them to Lotus. Actually, it was not his ill-gotten gains alone that made him a wealthy landowner. It was the jewels that his wife came by which enabled him to buy more land. She made no objection when he decided to sell all her jewels to

buy more land. She only requested him to spare her two small pearls so that she could hold them sometimes in her hand. He was not only inconsiderate but also cruel in demanding the pearls back from his faithful wife who had been with him through fair or foul just because he wanted to satisfy his desire for a prostitute.

It seemed practical that he decided to make his uncle's family less troublesome by giving them a large supply of opium, though it was not a proper thing to do. Speaking from the moral standpoint, it is definitely a derogatory act. But it is also true that he would never be in peace if he did not choose to do so.

There is also a vein of jealousy in his nature. When his eldest son suggested that they should leave their land to live in town, he lost his temper and said that it was the land that had made him (his son) somehow better than a farmer's lad and that it was the land that had given him wealth. Unable to contain his anger anymore, he rose and tramped about loudly in the room and spat upon the floor, because although one side of his heart triumphed in his son's fineness, the other side was robust and scornful of him. His jealousy towards his youngest son was even more obvious. It is true that he had sacrificed his heart-felt desire in order to let his youngest son choose the way of life he preferred. Wang Lung had purposely spared that youngest son to fill his shoes. But when he said he wanted to be a scholar like his brothers, Wang Lung had to give up his wish. He was ready to do anything he could for that son - marriage, scholarship abroad or anything within reason - when he came up with a new proposal that he would go to join

the war. But when he (youngest son) hinted that he was somewhat interested in Pear Blossom, he was smitten with a strange jealousy. He suddenly felt himself older than he was and saw his son a man slim and young. Although he reasoned that it would be a good thing to give the maid to the lad, the mere thought stabbed him like a thrust on the flesh already sore and finally thought better of it.

Speaking from the moral standpoint, Wang Lung's character was not a flawless one. In the course of the story, he did both good and bad things. But, if fallibility of man is to be taken into consideration, his character is not bad enough to be termed as 'dissolute'.

## **O-Lan**

She was a slave at the great house of Hwang since the age of ten. Although she was not good looking, she was a very dutiful and faithful wife to Wang Lung. In the face of life's tougher confrontations, she had been practical, brave and stolid.

It is not to be questioned that O-Lan's practicality and some of her daring acts had often saved Wang Lung a lot of trouble in times of crisis. But it is a matter of opinion to say to what extent she had done things in accordance with moral standards because there are times in life when one has to do certain things which may not be morally acceptable, not because one does not know what one is doing, but because one cannot simply avoid doing them. Supposing a parent - i.e. a mother, encourages her children to steal, or she kills her newborn baby or she tries to sell her daughter to solve her financial problem. Without further thought, anyone would say that she is an inhuman mother. O-Lan had done all

these three things. Undeniably, she did the most cruel thing for a mother to her children and under no circumstances was her behaviour morally acceptable. But when one gets to know her true story, one will find that there are facts to be considered in extenuation of her crime - if what she had done is to be recognized as crime.

What compelled her to kill her own baby? There was great famine in the region. Food was so scarce that people had to eat grass and even the bark of trees. A man might walk for a handful of days and see not an ox nor an ass nor any kind of beast or fowl. Whatever animal came within sight became man's food - even dogs and horses. Some people even forgot their nature and ate human flesh. O-Lan's children were reduced to skeletons after many days without food and they could hardly stand up. It was a moral certainty that they would all die of hunger if they did not go to another far away place where there was no famine. The stumbling block was that O-Lan was pregnant and too near her time. Anyone can imagine what agony this woman had endured, with the starved creature gnawing at her from within, desperate for its own life. But, since the question of whether to remain at home or to go away was a matter of life and death, she and her husband agreed to go to the south after she had given birth. As usual, she gave birth alone without anyone's aid. Though the baby was born alive, it was found dead when the husband came in. Only the two dark bruised spots on its neck were telling its father of its fate.

Without doubt, she committed murder - infanticide. But, practically speaking, she saved six lives including hers by sacrificing the baby's life. Even

if she had not killed the baby, it would surely die some time afterwards due to lack of food. And waiting for the baby to die, they would also die because their strength was draining away by the moment.

Life was hard even when they got to the southern city. They had to struggle the whole day for a scanty meal. With all her husband's manual labour and her begging, they never could gain enough to cook rice daily. Unable to stand their insatiable hunger, the two sons turned to petty thieving. To O-Lan, this was nothing. If the boys could not keep their faces straight while begging, she thought it was better for them to steal to fill their bellies. Once, the younger boy snatched a piece of pork from the shop. Although her husband turned away from it in repugnance, she only quietly said that meat was meat and ate it. Speaking from the moral point of view, it was very irresponsible and short-sighted of her to let her sons go to the extent of stealing, even though it seemed the only resort to the impending famine crisis at that moment.

Suddenly, the town they lived in turned into a hot spot and war was imminent. Her husband had to shun working in the daytime for fear of being arrested. Then they became aware that their lives were at stake if they stayed on. But they could not afford the return journey to their land. Practically, she suggested the sale of their daughter to cover up the expenses. Undoubtedly, few mothers would have the heart to do such a thing to one's own flesh and blood. But she had her reasons to justify her seemingly cruel plan. When her husband turned down her proposal, she said that she had been sold to a great house so that her parents could return to

their home. Her experience had told her that it was what the poor should do when there was no other way. Besides, it was only for her husband who was always longing for his land that she tried to do that unenviable job.

Apart from these three ugly things that she had done in time of extreme poverty, there were no other blots on her character throughout her life. With her practicality of thought, she often rose to the occasion when her husband was at a loss what to do. It was she who suggested at the first onset of hunger how to eke out their livelihood by grinding corn-cobs to eat instead of wasting them in burning. It was she who made her sentimental husband face the facts of the matter when he refused to kill the ox, saying that an ox was an ox, and it was she who did the killing when her husband had not the heart to do so. It was she who spoke courageously to the plundering crowd when they took not only food from her house but also their furniture, making them feel ashamed for their act. When her husband said that they would go to the south, it was her determination and mettle which impelled her to say "One can at least die walking". No woman with less courage would have a ready answer like hers at such a time when lack of food had already drained all her strength away and when she was so near to her term.

On arriving at the new town, her husband was greatly disappointed when he found that he could not build a hut like others using split reeds. But her working knowledge came in handy and she built the hut herself. Besides, begging experience in her childhood stood her in good stead and she earned as much as her husband did. Thus she

had been a good wife to her husband through weal and woe.

It was surprising that she was resigned when her husband took a second wife. What was more surprising was that though she was silent about Lotus, her husband's second wife, her anger would find its vent against Cuckoo. She must have prepared to accept the fact that it was second nature to men to take mistresses in time of prosperity. But it stuck in her throat to have Cuckoo as a member in her house since she had never been good to her while they were together at the great house. Nevertheless, she was the sort of woman who bore her misfortune with equanimity. Since Lotus arrived, she tried to keep herself aloof from others. Though she was overcharged with feeling, she never failed to do things that she used to do for her husband and for her father-in-law and she did them on her own responsibility. Even in her last hours, she was considerate towards her husband. When her husband agreed to pay five hundred pieces of silver to the doctor for her recovery, she did not want her husband to spend that much for her and said that her life was not worth that amount, which was large enough to buy a good piece of land. She did not even want her husband to spend much money in making her more comfortable while she was on her deathbed, though she was secretly very pleased with his kindness. Thus she showed her forbearance towards her husband till her last moment.

O-Lan, however, was not a woman who had never shown her worth in her life. She took pride in her position twice in her life - once in her early married life and the other on her deathbed. Her contentment was consummated for the



first time in her life when she was able to set her foot as a visitor in the great house where she had been a slave. Indeed, she had been awaiting that moment eagerly since she got married. She was at death's door when she showed her worth for the second time. Never once had she spoken to Cuckoo since she came to her house together with Lotus. But she called for her before she breathed her last and said, "Well, and you may have lived in the courts of the Old Lord, and you were accounted beautiful, but I have been a man's wife and I have borne him sons and you are still a slave." Indeed, she had had her last laugh on Cuckoo who used to torture her with rude remarks in her youth at the great house.

If the two main characters, Wang Lung and O-Lan, are to be compared from the moral standpoint, both had shown their pride at a certain stage of their life, though differently. Based on his awareness of his wealth, Wang Lung had shown false pride; based on her knowledge that she had been a dutiful wife who had borne her husband sons, O-Lan had shown proper pride to the great house and to Cuckoo. Both of them had done certain things in their life which were by no manner of means morally acceptable. But O-Lan was unavoidably forced to do them in her great distress in response to the merciless challenge of life whereas Wang Lung did them in time of prosperity when he had everything to make life comfortable. Despite her taciturnity, her unaffected affection for her husband was revealed through her ravings when she breathed her last with such words "How can that one feed him and care for him as I do? Beauty will not bear a man sons!"

## Conclusion

The story is plainly a manifestation of man's weaknesses and his defenseless nature against the onrush of pride, passion and wealth in life. Though such events are commonly found in human society, few bother to get a lesson out of them. No one is to blame for this because people are often too full of their own troubles to care about the difficulties of others in today's competitive society. However commonplace the theme of this story might be, it contains a lot of moral lessons for a receptive mind and should be read both for edification and for pleasure.

In the story, pride is to be found as the mainspring of all the undesirable things. Pride can be of two kinds - one is complimentary and the other derogatory. A feeling of satisfaction, delight and pleasure in what one can do or has done or in someone or something connected with oneself can be called proper pride; having too high an opinion of oneself because of one's rank, wealth and abilities can be called false pride, which is also known as vanity or vainglory. It was the false pride that drove Wang Lung to a temporary insanity, which finally turned his life into a miserable existence. Pride is, without doubt, the parent of all evils. Wang Lung's fate had testified to the truth of the saying "Pride goes before a fall".

In this connection, it is also necessary to find out what made him so proud. The answer is not far to seek - his wealth. But he had been a wealthy man for many years before he became arrogant. So there must be another reason for his becoming proud. A long

period of time out of work is certainly another reason. His weakness for self-illusion came out into the open when he contacted other people in his absence from work. Though he was not quite aware of the power of his wealth when he had drowned himself in work, his free time enabled him to see his economic status in relation to others around him and he was soon inclined to act like a lord. From this it can be noted that work, among its other advantages, is the chief force which usually keeps a tight rein on men so that their mind may not stray. In the story, Wang Lung put his whole self into the job when he was besieged with troubles at home. Work is, therefore, also a great healer in some cases.

The story also reveals passion as the destructive element of mankind. Wang Lung played his faithful wife false largely due to his burning passion for a girl who was a prostitute. True to the proverb "Proverbs are the daughters of daily experience", wise men of olden times have left us some proverbs describing the fallibility of man in the face of passion: "when passion entereth at the fore gate, wisdom goeth out of the Postern" (i.e. Reason cannot co-exist with passion), "The end of passion is the beginning of repentance". Wang Lung did repent at last, especially after his

love for Lotus had been satiated to the top of his bent.

Besides pride and passion, his wealth also contributed much to his undoing. It was his wealth that added fuel to his burning passion. So even wealth can turn out to be an enemy if misused. Because money can have a damaging effect on man, there have been such wise sayings at our disposal as "Money is a good servant, but a bad master", "The love of money is the root of all evil", "Money doesn't always bring happiness", which we can remember in times of trouble.

Through the main figure Wang Lung, Pearl S. Buck has skillfully portrayed the vanity of human wishes. However much he longed for peace of mind throughout his life, however ardent his wish was to make his youngest son his successor in the field, his plans and ideas were never crystallized into reality in his lifetime in spite of his riches. The author has made her description of the vanities of life clear by portraying fame, power, wealth, pleasure, hope and the like as an element without true lasting value. 'The Good Earth', above all, is a novel which not only entertains readers by the fertility of the author's imagination but also gives them 'a slice of life'.

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