

The Good Earth



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF PEARL BUCK

Pearl S. Buck was born in Hillsboro, West Virginia, but moved to China with her parents when she was only five months old. Her parents worked as Presbyterian missionaries. During the Boxer Rebellion—an uprising against foreign and Christian forces—Buck’s family lost most of their Chinese friends, but Buck’s father refused to believe the Chinese would actually harm him. Buck attended a Western school in Shanghai, where her classmates’ racist views of Chinese people contrasted with her parents’ beliefs in racial equality. Buck herself spoke both English and Chinese. In 1911, she returned to the United States to attend Randolph-Macon Woman’s College, in Virginia. After her graduation, she received news that her mother was ill, so she applied to become a missionary and returned to China, where she worked for eighteen years. She married another missionary, John Buck, in 1917, and they lived in Anhui Province, where much of *The Good Earth* takes place. In 1920 the couple moved to Nanjing, where Buck taught English literature at a university. The Bucks returned the U.S. for a year in the mid-1920s, during which time Buck went to graduate school at Cornell. Soon after they returned to China, an anti-Western uprising forced Buck’s family to hide in a poor Chinese family’s hut. They spent a year in Japan until it was safe to return to China. In the early 1930s, Buck gave a speech in New York arguing against the need for foreign missionaries in China. She was forced to resign as a missionary and returned to the U.S. In 1935 she divorced her husband and married Richard Walsh, her publisher. She received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1938. She spoke out on a variety of social issues, even starting the first international, interracial adoption agency. After the Communist Revolution in 1949, the new Chinese government forbade Buck from entering China. She died of lung cancer in 1973.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Beginning in the late eighteenth century, Western powers tried to open China for trade, and when China resisted, the West forced the country into treaties giving foreigners power within the country. This led to the weakening of the central government and its inability to provide for its people. It is possible that the uprising in the southern city in *The Good Earth* is based on the Xinhai Revolution in 1911. The Qing dynasty’s inability to deal effectively with increasing Western influence resulted in much discord. Eventually, revolutionaries raised rebellions all over the country, eventually overthrowing the Qing dynasty and setting up a republican government with Sun

Yat-sen at the head. Additionally, in the early 1900s, before the revolution, the empress tried to implement reforms including the outlawing of slavery, foot-binding, and opium. As seen in the novel, however, the reforms were not well enforced, and many of these practices continued.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Buck wrote two further books focusing on Wang Lung’s children and grandchildren. These novels are titled *Sons* and *A House Divided*, and together the three books form the House of Earth trilogy. *Sons* tells the story of Wang Lung’s youngest son leading an army against warlords, while *A House Divided* deals with the youngest son’s son, Wang Yuan, joining an activist group and studying in America.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Good Earth
- **When Written:** 1929
- **Where Written:** Nanjing, China
- **When Published:** 1931
- **Literary Period:** Modernism
- **Genre:** Historical fiction
- **Setting:** Early nineteenth century China (Anhwei and Kiangsu)
- **Climax:** Wang Lung sitting in the Old Mistress’s chair and deciding to rent the House of Hwang
- **Antagonist:** Wang Lung’s uncle’s family, nature
- **Point of View:** Third person limited

EXTRA CREDIT

Divorced for a day. Buck married her second husband, Richard Walsh, on the very same day that she divorced her first, John Buck.

A connection transcending life. Buck designed her own gravestone, which sits in Pennsylvania and displays her name in Chinese characters.



PLOT SUMMARY

The novel opens on the wedding day of Wang Lung, a simple Chinese farmer. He has never met his bride-to-be, and on this morning he goes to the nearby town to fetch her from the wealthy house where she works as a slave. After much nervousness, he finally appears before the Old Mistress of **the**

House of Hwang, who presents him with his wife, O-lan. They return to Wang Lung's house, stopping on the way to burn incense in a temple to the gods of the earth. Wang Lung has a wedding feast that night, and then he sleeps with O-lan.

Over the next few months, O-lan works hard in the house, and when she runs out of tasks, she come to help Wang Lung with his work in the fields. Wang Lung is very happy with her. Before long, she becomes pregnant and gives birth to a healthy son, bringing joy to the house. They have a large harvest that winter, and Wang Lung guards it carefully, saving the money he makes.

When New Year's arrives, O-lan bakes beautiful cakes to bring to the Old Mistress. She dresses her son in fine clothes and Wang Lung accompanies them to the great house, proud of his prosperity. O-lan learns that the House of Hwang is suffering from a lack of money and hoping to sell some **land**. Wang Lung triumphantly buys it. In the spring, O-lan gives birth to another son. His harvests continue to be large, and he begins to become an important man in his village.

Wang Lung worries that his lazy uncle will ruin his family's reputation, so he admonishes his uncle's wife for letting her daughters talk to men. The next day, his uncle comes to demand money for his eldest daughter's dowry. Wang Lung grudgingly gives it to him. At the same time, O-lan gives birth to a girl, which Wang Lung sees as bad luck.

Soon after, a drought comes. Wang Lung buys more land from the House of Hwang, though he doesn't have much money. As the drought worsens, Wang Lung's family becomes more and more desperate for food. His uncle, however, spreads rumors that he's hoarding food and refuses to share, so men from the village tear apart his house trying to find it.

As the family starves, O-lan gives birth to another girl, whom she kills immediately. One day, men from town come to buy Wang Lung's land, but he refuses. Instead, O-lan sells them all the furniture in the house. With the money they've made, the family sets out for the south, hoping to find food. They end up on a train, where the other passengers tell Wang Lung how to survive by begging in the southern city.

When they arrive in the city, they build a mat hut against a wall and get rice from public kitchens. O-lan and the children beg on the streets, while Wang Lung pulls a ricksha (rickshaw) around the city. They make just enough money to eat consistently, but Wang Lung feels like a foreigner in the city. He constantly dreams of going home to his land. O-lan suggests that they could sell their eldest daughter to raise the money they need, but Wang Lung is too attached to her.

Wang Lung hears men blaming their poverty on the wealthy, but he isn't convinced by their arguments. One day he sees soldiers snatch men off the street to force them into slavery, so he begins to hide in his hut during the day and work at night. The city becomes unsettled, but he doesn't know exactly why. Just as he decides he must sell his daughter to return to his

land, a mob forces its way into the wealthy house behind the wall. Wang Lung gets caught up in it and forces a fat man to give him large amounts of gold.

The family returns home and uses the gold to reestablish their farm's old success. One night, Wang Lung discovers that O-lan has been guarding a handful of jewels that she stole from the wealthy house in the city. Wang Lung takes them to the House of Hwang to buy more land and finds that the House was robbed during the famine. Only the Old Lord and a female slave named Cuckoo remain. Much to Wang Lung's dissatisfaction, he has to do business with Cuckoo.

Wang Lung expands his house and hires men to work his lands, putting his neighbor Ching in charge of them. He sends his sons to school so that they can learn to read and write, which he can't do.

After seven good years, the region floods. Many people starve, but Wang Lung has enough set by to live comfortably. However, he has no work to do while his fields are underwater, and he grows restless and grumpy. He suddenly realizes how ugly O-lan is, and tells her so. He begins to go to a fancy tea shop, where he finds Cuckoo in charge of a number of prostitutes. She convinces him to hire one, and he's astonished by the beauty of the girl, whose name is Lotus. Wang Lung returns to her night after night, but his passion is never entirely fulfilled. He starts spending exorbitant amounts of money on gifts for Lotus and on finery for himself.

One day, Wang Lung's uncle brings his family to live with Wang Lung, and Wang Lung can't turn them out because they're family. He decides to buy Lotus and bring her to live in his house. Cuckoo comes as her servant, and O-lan lashes out at her while pretending Lotus doesn't exist. There are constantly conflicts between Wang Lung's family and Lotus. Finally Lotus insults his children, and Wang Lung's passion for her cools. He returns to his fields.

Wang Lung decides he should find his eldest son a wife, but before he can do so, his son becomes moody and refuses to go to school. One morning, the son comes home drunk, and Wang Lung discovers that he's gone to a prostitute, Yang, with Wang Lung's uncle's son. Wang Lung visits the prostitute and convinces her to turn his son away if he returns. Wang Lung tries to throw his uncle's family out, but his uncle reveals that he's part of a robber band that will destroy Wang Lung if he's cruel to his uncle. Wang Lung finally engages his son to the daughter of a grain merchant named Liu.

An infestation of locusts arrive, killing many crops but leaving most of Wang Lung's intact. Soon after, the eldest son announces that he wants to go to school in the city to the south, but Wang Lung refuses to let him go. Then O-lan tells him that the son goes to Lotus's rooms when Wang Lung is gone. The next day, Wang Lung surprises his son in Lotus's court and, furious, tells him to go to the city.

Wang Lung apprentices his second son to Liu and engages his second daughter to Liu's son. Wang Lung begins to think about O-lan more often, and he realizes she's in pain. He brings a doctor, who says that she's dying. Wang Lung is distraught. He spends the winter at O-lan's bedside. Just before the New Year, O-lan says she wants to see her son married before she dies, so Wang Lung brings him back from the city and makes the wedding arrangements. O-lan is happy during the wedding, but dies soon after. Not much later, Wang Lung's father dies as well. He makes a burial plot on his land and buries them both in it with a grand funeral.

Another massive flood comes, and Wang Lung rations his food and money, but he has to give his uncle's family privileges to protect his house from the robbers. They become increasingly demanding. When the eldest son learns of the situation, he suggests that Wang Lung get them addicted to **opium** so they won't cause trouble. Wang Lung only agrees after his uncle's son tries to molest his second daughter.

When the flood recedes, Wang Lung's eldest son can no longer stand living alongside his cousin, and he suggests that they move into the House of Hwang, now abandoned by the old family. Wang Lung visits the house and likes the feeling of power it gives him, so he decides to rent it. His eldest son's family moves there, but Wang Lung stays behind in his old house.

Ching arranges a marriage for Wang Lung's second son, and Wang Lung's nephew leaves to fight in a war. Wang Lung eventually moves to the house in town, where he relaxes in luxury. However, there always seem to be problems in his household. His eldest son spends lots of money to decorate the house lavishly and become well respected in the town, but the second son doesn't want him to waste so much money. The youngest son wants to go to school instead of working the land, which Wang Lung grudgingly allows, putting the second son in charge of the land.

There are rumors of an approaching war, and one day soldiers fill the town and garrison themselves in all the houses. Wang Lung's uncle's son brings many soldiers to Wang Lung's house, and he has to let them live in the outer courts, though they destroy them. The uncle's son lusts after the women in Wang Lung's household, so he gives him a slave woman to keep him busy.

Finally, the soldiers leave for the war. Wang Lung marries off the slave he had given to his uncle's son, sitting where the Old Mistress did when she gave O-lan to him. Wang Lung's youngest son decides he wants to become a soldier, but Wang Lung refuses to let him go. Meanwhile, Wang Lung begins to lust after a young slave named Pear Blossom. He makes her his concubine, and when the youngest son finds out, he runs away to the army.

As the years pass, Wang Lung sits in the sun and relaxes like his

father did, focusing only on his physical comfort and paying little attention to the goings-on around him. He still goes out to his land in the spring, and he has his eldest son buy him a coffin. Eventually he moves back to his house on his land to live out his last days. One day he hears his sons discussing how they'll sell the land. In the face of his distress they promise not to sell it, but their smiles tell a different tale.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Wang Lung – Wang Lung is the main character of *The Good Earth*. He's a hardworking, honest man who hates conflict and aspires to better himself and his family. He starts out as a simple farmer, but through wise management of his **land** and a refusal to ever give up, he manages over the course of the novel to become quite wealthy and move into the great **House of Hwang**. Though he's virtuous, he also has his faults—he angers easily and hurts his wife, O-lan, by ignoring her for his concubine Lotus once he becomes wealthy. While Wang Lung does in some ways fall prey to the degeneration that wealth causes, his dedication to his land prevents him from ever becoming as dissipated as the Old Lord. Wang Lung believes that his land is his most important possession and the foundation of his family, and he does all he can to protect it. Additionally, he cares deeply about what other people think of him, and he strives to act in whatever way is most fitting to his station.

O-lan – O-lan is Wang Lung's wife. She's a quiet, hardworking woman who has suffered much even before she comes to Wang Lung's house. Her father sold her as a slave in a year of famine, and she works in **the House of Hwang** until she marries Wang Lung. She's not physically attractive, which Wang Lung comes to fault her for. However, she's quite clever and resourceful and often saves Wang Lung in difficult situations by revealing talents he doesn't know she has. She's also brutally realistic; she kills a daughter that she births during the famine, knowing that they can't feed her, and she suggests that Wang Lung sell their eldest daughter so that they can return to their **land** from the city. O-lan's willingness to subject her daughter to the horrors of slavery that she herself knows intimately shows both her internalized misogyny and her complete loyalty to Wang Lung. Furthermore, she takes great pleasure in overcoming her past, taking personal victory from any opportunity to show that she has risen above the station of slave in the House of Hwang. She eventually dies of organ failure.

Wang Lung's father – Wang Lung's father is quite old. He trusts Wang Lung to take care of him, and Wang Lung feels a strong familial duty to do so. He generally does little more than sit in the sun and nap, but he always maintains a very optimistic view of life, and is known to bring laughter to some of the grimmest

situations. Symbolically, he acts as an advocate for the old way of life, before Wang Lung became wealthy, disapproving of anything he perceives as luxurious and scolding his son for purchasing a second woman, Lotus. He eventually dies, and Wang Lung buries him along with O-lan in the first graves in the family burial plot.

The eldest son (Nung En) – Wang Lung intends for his eldest son to become a scholar and help him when he signs contracts to sell his harvests. He doesn't expect his son to become moody and lustful—like a young lord in **the House of Hwang**, O-lan says, which makes Wang Lung proud even as he's exasperated, since it proves that he's advancing his family. The eldest son comes to care even more than Wang Lung does about the appearance of his family, and he wants to be respected by the important men in town. As a result, he spends excessive amounts of money on decorating the house in town, leading to conflicts with his brother, the second son.

The second son (Nung Wen) – The second son is crafty and thrifty. He goes to school along with the eldest son, and then Wang Lung apprentices him to Liu to learn to be a merchant. Wang Lung only begins to understand his son's character when he requests that his father find him a wife who will work hard and not ask him to spend money. The second son argues with his brother, the eldest son, about the excessive use of money in the house in town. Eventually Wang Lung makes him steward over **the land**, putting him in charge of the money.

The youngest son – Wang Lung intends for his youngest son to work on **the land** after him. As this son remains quiet and sullen, Wang Lung doesn't notice for a long time that he doesn't actually want to work on the land. Instead, the youngest son wants to go to school as his older brothers did. Wang Lung eventually allows him this. Later, however, the son announces his intentions to become a soldier, and Wang Lung puts his foot down, forcing the youngest son to run away to the army. This son is handsome but intense, and he refuses to be distracted by women.

The daughter / the eldest daughter (the poor fool) – The eldest daughter is born during the famine, and Wang Lung takes her birth as a bad sign because she's his first female child. She proves to be mentally disabled (perhaps as a result of her malnourished upbringing), and she never learns to talk or to take care of herself, instead sitting in the sun and smiling and laughing at Wang Lung. She twice comes close to awful tragedy, first in being born during the famine and second in almost being sold as a slave. Ironically, she ends up being the happiest character in the novel simply because she's seemingly unaware of what goes on around her. Wang Lung wishes he himself had this ability to ignore everything bad, and so he dotes on his eldest daughter, and she in turn makes him happy.

The second daughter – Wang Lung's second daughter, the youngest son's twin, is a pretty girl whom he marries to Liu's

son. She cares a lot about her appearance and carefully keeps her feet bound, because O-lan tells her that Wang Lung doesn't care for her as his wife due to her ugliness. The second daughter mentions this to Wang Lung, and it makes him feel terribly guilty and pay more attention to O-lan. Wang Lung's uncle's son tries to molest the second daughter, leading Wang Lung to send her to Liu's house until her marriage.

Wang Lung's uncle – Wang Lung's uncle is his father's brother. He's a lazy, immoral man who's always looking to live off of Wang Lung's charity. His perpetually loose, untidy clothes signify his generally careless way of living. Wang Lung despises his uncle for letting his wife laze about and his daughters run wild. When the famine comes, it's suggested that he and his family might be eating human flesh, which foreshadows his later "consumption" of Wang Lung. When Wang Lung becomes wealthy, his uncle installs his family in Wang Lung's house, expecting to be fed and clothed. Wang Lung is first bound to help his uncle by the obligations of family ties, but when Wang Lung gets fed up with his demands, his uncle reveals that he's part of the Redbeards, a band of robbers. Thus, his presence in Wang Lung's house protects the house from the robbers, but also forces Wang Lung to be courteous to his uncle's family for fear of them. Eventually, Wang Lung strips his uncle of his power by getting him addicted to **opium**, which keeps him pacified and physically weak.

Wang Lung's uncle's wife – Wang Lung generally despises his uncle's wife. She's almost as lazy and immoral as her husband, always demanding luxuries they can't afford. Early on, Wang Lung tells her off for letting her daughters talk to men in the village, and she blames her husband's chronic bad luck for their lack of dowry funds, rather than his laziness. When Wang Lung's uncle's family moves into his house, the uncle's wife immediately sees that Wang Lung is in love with a woman besides his wife, and tells O-lan. She also gives Wang Lung the idea to buy Lotus, and he has her make the arrangements. However, he never really trusts her, and tries to keep Lotus from talking to her. The uncle's wife urges her husband to blackmail Wang Lung for money, and Wang Lung eventually gets her addicted to **opium** to keep her from causing trouble and draining his coffers.

Wang Lung's uncle's son – Wang Lung's nephew takes after his parents—he's just as lazy and cruel as they are. He becomes a bad influence in Wang Lung's house, leading Wang Lung's eldest son to Yang, the whore in the great house, and getting him drunk. In part due to this experience, the eldest son comes to hate and deeply distrust his cousin. The uncle's son lusts after the women in Wang Lung's house and tries to molest Wang Lung's second daughter. The eldest son can't stand having his wife in the same house with his cousin, and he urges Wang Lung to move to town. Finally, the uncle's son decides he wants to see a war, so he goes north, much to Wang Lung's relief.

Ching – Ching starts out as a fellow farmer and Wang Lung's neighbor. When a mob comes to Wang Lung's house to steal food during the famine, Ching takes a handful of beans. He feels terribly guilty about it and later gives Wang Lung some beans to help his family move south. When Wang Lung returns to his **land** after the famine, he hires Ching as his steward over the land, and the two become fast friends. Ching is an honest, hardworking man who represents the best of those connected to the land. Wang Lung is distraught when Ching dies and buries him at the entrance to the family burial plot.

The Old Mistress – The Old Mistress is the female head of **the House of Hwang**. Wang Lung meets her only once, when he goes to fetch O-lan from the great house for their marriage, but the meeting leaves a deep impression on him. Along with her husband, the Old Lord, the Old Mistress represents wealth and social superiority to Wang Lung. He becomes ashamed of the fear he felt in her presence, but he also wants to have the power that he felt emanate from her. However, the Old Mistress also smokes vast amounts of **opium**, which not only leave her weak and helpless, but also help bankrupt her family. During the year of famine that drives Wang Lung's family south to the city, robbers attack the House of Hwang, and the Old Mistress dies of fright. In sum, she symbolizes both the power of the rich and the dangers of decadence that come with wealth.

The Old Lord – The Old Lord is the male head of **the House of Hwang**. Like his wife, the Old Mistress, he represents the wealth and power that first frightens Wang Lung, and then becomes his goal. The Old Lord's money comes from his family, so he's never known life without endless supplies of it, and he spends it without a thought. This practice eventually contributes to his family's ruin. Wang Lung meets him only once, when he goes to the great house to buy **land** with the jewels that O-lan stole. By this time, the Old Lord and Cuckoo are the only people left in the house, and the Old Lord himself opens the gate that the gateman used to tend, showing how far he has fallen from his previous position. Furthermore, he's completely controlled by Cuckoo and comes across as a pitiful, despicable character who proves that wealth is not necessarily permanent.

Lotus – Lotus starts out as a prostitute in one of the tea shops in town, with Cuckoo as her madam. Wang Lung falls in love with her there, and his love consumes his life, ruining his relationship with O-lan and making him spend excessive money on gifts for Lotus and fancy clothes for himself to impress her. She acts as a symbol of the degeneracy that wealth can cause, and she herself indulges in all the luxuries that Wang Lung can give her, spending all her time eating and being groomed. Wang Lung brings Lotus to his house as his concubine, and his passion for her eventually cools, though he's happy to have her in his house for the rest of his life.

Pear Blossom – Wang Lung buys Pear Blossom as a young

slave in a year of famine. His uncle's son takes a liking to her when he comes to Wang Lung's house with the soldiers, but Wang Lung protects her from him. Soon after, Wang Lung takes her into his rooms as a concubine, even though he feels he's much too old for her. She insists that she likes old men. However, she also tells him that she hates men in general. The reason for this hatred remains unclear, but its vagueness allows her declaration to condemn all the actions of men towards women in this book, many of which are despicable. Pear Blossom acts as the comfort of Wang Lung's old age and agrees to take care of the eldest daughter after his death.

The gateman – The gateman controls the gate at **the House of Hwang**. When Wang Lung first visits the house to fetch O-lan for their marriage, the gateman intimidates him and laughs at him for his farmer's ignorance. When Wang Lung returns with O-lan so that she can show their baby to the Old Mistress, their clothes make the gateman show Wang Lung more respect. The gateman's reactions to Wang Lung show how the general public regards him as his wealth and social status grows.

The gateman's wife – The gateman's wife gives Wang Lung tea while he waits for O-lan to show their baby to the Old Mistress. By this point, Wang Lung feels secure enough in his social status to shun the tea as not good enough for him. Later, once the Hwang family has left the house and it's been overrun by commoners, Wang Lung finds the gateman's wife guarding the gate to the inner courts that he decides to rent. Her presence accentuates the difference between his status when he first entered the gates and when he comes to rent the courts.

The Old Lord's agent – The agent deals with all of the Old Lord's business transactions, always taking a cut for himself. When Wang Lung first buys **land** from the Old Lord, he does it through the agent. Later, Cuckoo speculates that the agent played a role in the ransacking of the House of Hwang during the famine, showing that even those the wealthy trust can turn against them.

Liu – Liu owns the grain market where Wang Lung sells his harvests. He goes to the tea shop where Lotus is a prostitute and treats the women very fairly. Thus, when Lotus hears that Wang Lung wants to find a wife for his eldest son, she suggests Liu's daughter. Wang Lung finds Liu to be a respectable businessman, and they get along well. Liu's son also becomes engaged to Wang Lung's second daughter, who later goes to live in Liu's house to escape the lusts of Wang Lung's uncle's son.

Yang – Wang Lung discovers that his eldest son has been visiting this prostitute along with his uncle's son. She's known for being cheap and serving the common people of the town, so Wang Lung particularly doesn't want his son going to her. Wang Lung visits Yang where she lives in the deserted **House of Hwang** to ask her to turn his son away. Her presence there shows how far the Hwangs' fortunes have fallen.

The doctor – Wang Lung brings a doctor to examine O-lan once he realizes she's ill. The doctor tries to sell Wang Lung medicine for her, but keeps raising the price each time Wang Lung offers to pay because he can't ensure her recovery. Wang Lung eventually realizes that this means O-lan will die no matter how much money he can offer.

Cuckoo A woman who worked as a slave in the House of Hwang at the same time as O-lan. Old Lord took her as a concubine. Later, Cuckoo came to run the tea-shop where Lotus was a prostitute. When Wang Lung fell in love with Lotus and brought her to live with him, Cuckoo, always on the lookout for wealth to exploit, came too. O-lan never accepted Cuckoo into her home, and the two lived as bitter enemies.

MINOR CHARACTERS

The eldest son's wife – The eldest son marries Liu's daughter, who reminds Liu of Lotus. Like Lotus, she has a taste for luxury, and thinks herself superior to those lower in birth than she, such as the second son's wife.

The second son's wife – The second son's wife comes from one of the villages, and she's a robust country girl. She works hard and doesn't aspire above her station, just as her husband wanted. However, she does get into conflicts with the eldest son's wife.

The teacher – Wang Lung sends his eldest son and second son to a teacher who beats his students with a fan. During the summers, the teacher falls asleep in class.

difficulties lead directly to Wang Lung's rise, since he's able to buy their land from them, which in turn gives them less revenue from crops, causing an almost inevitable reversal of the families' class statuses.

As Wang Lung becomes more similar to the Hwangs in his wealth and his way of life, he also begins to encounter problems similar to those that caused their demise, implying that these problems are inherently connected to an excess of money. As his leisure time increases, he finds himself drawn to selfish pastimes that drain his money, such as loitering at the tea house and hiring the prostitute Lotus. Lotus eventually disrupts his life even further when he feels that he must have her live in his house, meaning he has to pay for her luxuries and deal with his wife O-lan's displeasure. Similarly, the Old Lord of the Hwangs kept many concubines and indulged in every luxury. Furthermore, Wang Lung's eldest son becomes more interested in women and pleasure than in responsibility, just as the Old Lord's sons wasted all his money in their pursuit of the same ends. Even **opium** connects the two families—the Old Mistress nursed an expensive addiction to opium, and Wang Lung ends up buying large amounts of the drug to keep his uncle's family sedated.

The novel doesn't just portray Wang Lung's rise from poor to rich in isolation, though. Set in the early 1900s, it also portrays the kind of class struggle that would soon come to the forefront in China with the rise of the Chinese Communist Party beginning in 1921. In the city to the south of Wang Lung's home, he becomes aware of the wealth and decadence of the rich in comparison to the destitution of the poor, who are starving and living in huts built against the outside wall of a rich family's house. Though rich and poor are thus in extremely close proximity, their standards of living are as different as possible. Wang Lung also sees the impoverished people around him gaining a consciousness of their class and revolting against the unfairness of their situation by raiding the houses of the rich, effectively leveling the difference in wealth by force.

As a landowner, Wang Lung never sees himself as part of the lower class and never gains much of a political outlook. Rather, he always sees wealth as a worthy goal that he pursues without question. But the novel takes a wider view, and through the fall of the Hwangs, the issues that beset Wang Lung himself as he gains wealth, and the ransacking of the wealthy houses in the southern city, the novel offers a more nuanced view of wealth. While every single character in the novel would rather be wealthy than poor, the novel shows, first, how the attainment of wealth can lead to personal and familial moral decline. Second, it shows a changing world that's beginning to question whether the wealthy actually deserve their wealth because of some sort of natural supremacy, and one in which class difference is thus likely to erupt in political violence.



THEMES

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RICH VS. POOR

The overall arc of the story shows Wang Lung's journey from a poor farmer to a rich landowner.

This change is seen most clearly through his relationship with the Hwang family. At the beginning, Wang Lung goes to the **House of Hwang** as a poor man buying a wife, and he's terrified of the wealthy and powerful Hwangs. Throughout the course of the story, however, he manages to buy up the Hwangs' **land** as their fortunes fall and their family degenerates. By the end, Wang Lung has essentially become the Old Lord of the Hwangs, living in their house and farming or renting out their lands. In fact, Wang Lung's family effectively changes places with the Hwang family. As Wang Lung becomes more prosperous, the Hwangs begin to struggle. The Hwangs'



FAMILY

Chinese society in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, as depicted in *The Good Earth*, revolves entirely around family structures, and so

the course of the novel can be traced according to the development of Wang Lung's family.

The book begins with Wang Lung becoming the head of his family—in some sense creating a family—by marrying O-lan, which enables him to have children and thus a line of descendants. Family line in this society depends on male children, as girls are either married off into other families or sold as slaves. Much of the rest of the novel, then, involves Wang Lung's efforts to build and protect his family. Initially, Wang Lung's life consists of working in the fields so that he can feed himself and his family and take care of his elderly father. He feels responsible for the well-being of those connected to him, and when times get bad, he even thinks of them as mouths to feed and bellies to fill. Wang Lung also sees his family as offering a kind of legacy, as providing a means of preserving his own accomplishments and values down through history.

Yet the novel also never shirks from showing just how much trouble a family – and the social expectations around family – can be. For example, Wang Lung's uncle and his uncle's wife and uncle's son are lazy and often take advantage of Wang Lung for their own benefit. By the bonds of family, Wang Lung does owe them assistance in hard times, and he worries that others will think ill of him if he doesn't give in to his uncle's demands for food, money, and shelter, even when his own immediate family is struggling during the famine. Eventually, Wang Lung figures out a way to navigate the tricky obligations of family regarding his uncle. He gets the uncle's family addicted to **opium** so that they become lethargic and stop causing him trouble as long as he supports their habit. This solution allows Wang Lung to maintain his honor, as he isn't outwardly denying his family assistance, but he essentially decides to put the needs of his immediate family above those of his extended family.

But Wang Lung's own family also thwarts his hopes and ambitions for both himself and his family legacy. Only his mentally disabled eldest daughter, the "poor fool," who does nothing but sit in the sun and sometimes laugh, allows Wang Lung the power over her that he wishes he could have over his entire family, and thus he treasures her in a way he doesn't his other children. His other children all have independent desires of their own. The novel ends as his sons, who have grown up wealthy and decadent, lie to Wang Lung as they promise never to sell the family **land**, and it is clear that Wang Lung's sons will squander the family fortune just as the Hwang sons did when Wang Lung was young.

The irony of family in the novel, then, is that Wang Lung devotes himself to it almost entirely – seeing his own values and success as bound up in the success of his descendants –

but even as he works for the benefit of those descendants, the individual members of his family destroy what he has built for them to satisfy their own independent desires. And because this same fate befell the **House of Hwang**, the novel makes clear that this is no aberration – that families rise and fall, and always will.



THE OPPRESSION OF WOMEN

In *The Good Earth*, Buck portrays an extremely patriarchal society in which men hold almost complete power over women. The male characters see women within a dichotomy, meaning that there are only two options for their perception of women—as silent, obedient, honorable women, or as "whores" —and very little wiggle room exists between these roles. In either case, men consider women to essentially be their slaves, either as their unfailingly willing helpers or as providers of sexual satisfaction.

This society's oppression of women is most obviously evident in the fact that it refers to newborn babies as "men" or "slaves" rather than "boys" or "girls." These names aren't just names, either. Families strongly value male children over female children. And when daughters are born, families often see them as burdens and sometimes kill them or sell them as slaves when they need money in hard times, just as Wang Lung himself considers selling his eldest daughter, the "poor fool," as a slave when his family is living in the city.

Through the character of O-lan, the novel shows how even when women perfectly play the role of silent, obedient wife it still does them little good. O-lan acts as a savior to Wang Lung multiple times, such as when she convinces a group of starving men not to steal their furniture and when she obtains the jewels that provide the foundation for Wang Lung's agricultural expansion. Yet he rarely recognizes her role in his survival and rise to prominence. The implication is that, because O-lan must be obedient to Wang Lung as a wife, any help she provides is something she already owes to him, something he deserves and essentially accomplished himself.

Furthermore, as often happens in patriarchal societies, O-lan's appearance counts for far more with Wang Lung than her intelligence or abilities do. Ultimately, as Wang Lung becomes wealthier he grows discontented with O-lan's plain appearance and large feet (small feet, often made so by breaking and binding them, are considered beautiful), and he turns to other women for sexual satisfaction, eventually taking on Lotus as a concubine. Not until O-lan is dying does Wang Lung come to recognize some of what she has done for him.

Furthermore, because the female characters have always lived in a society that devalues them, they entirely subscribe to its rules for them, a state of mind called "internalized misogyny." As much as O-lan has been hurt by society's treatment of women, she herself doesn't hesitate to practice the same injuries upon

her daughters. In fact, she is the first to suggest that Wang Lung sell their daughter, even though she herself was sold in a similar situation, when her parents badly needed money, and she admits that as a slave, she was beaten every day with a leather harness. She shows such complete dedication to her husband's welfare and such contempt for her own life and that of her daughter that she's willing to sell her into assured misery. To O-lan, this is simply how women's lives go, and she doesn't even seem to consider seeking an alternative.

Lotus is certainly a less selfless character than O-lan, as in her greed she constantly manipulates Wang Lung into buying her new luxuries. Yet her greed and manipulation still exist entirely within the larger patriarchal structure in which her beauty and sexual availability makes her valuable to Wang Lung. She never even considers – seems incapable even of imagining – any other way of life.

Buck was a supporter of women's rights, and *The Good Earth* took an important step simply by portraying the oppression of women in Chinese society. However, telling the story from a man's point of view prevents the novel from offering any glimpses into how the female characters might have far richer lives than Wang Lung perceives, or from suggesting ways in which women might take power over their own lives. Even so, Buck does demonstrate that Chinese women are valuable members of society, and Buck's beliefs are evident in Wang Lung's occasional and brief recognitions of this value, as when he realizes some of what O-lan has done for him as she is near death, and when he can't bear to sell the "poor fool" and his fortunes shift for the better before he can change his mind.



CONNECTION TO THE EARTH

The novel's title – *The Good Earth* – makes reference to its portrayal of the importance of the **land**. Wang Lung starts out as a simple farmer,

entirely dependent on the land, and he makes his fortune mostly by means of the land, first by farming it and eventually by renting it to others. The land acts as a life-giving force, seen most literally when in the famine, Wang Lung and his family resort to eating the dirt itself. For a long time, even his house is made out of earth. Without the earth, Wang Lung has nothing. The gods to whom Wang Lung pays the most respect are associated with the earth, showing that he essentially worships the land. This makes sense, since his survival depends on its fertility, and the land and the weather determine his fortunes.

When Wang Lung has to leave his land and go to the city, he constantly misses it and sees his return to it as a return to happiness and prosperity. Even when he's living in a shack made out of mats, it comforts him to know that he owns land and will someday go back to it. He feels a deep connection to his land, as it represents all he has in the world. Everything he does, he connects in some way to the earth.

Although political events go on around him and cause upheaval in the greater nation of China, Wang Lung remains uninterested in their progress and more or less unaware of being part of a greater country. For him, the idea of "the land" suggests not a vast country, but only his own plot of earth, and his own plot of earth is all that matters. To Wang Lung, his land represents a form of wealth that no one can take from him. This perspective might help explain his disinterest in the political unrest of the poor people in the city, since no matter how destitute he becomes, he still knows that he has his land, and so he never feels the complete desperation that leads the people to revolt against the wealthy.

At certain points of the novel, however, Wang Lung strays from his devotion to the land. Most significantly, when he begins to prosper, he no longer has to spend so much time working in the fields himself, which gives him the freedom to spend time at the tea house and fall in love with the prostitute Lotus. Finally, when Lotus lashes out against Wang Lung's eldest daughter, Wang Lung's love for Lotus wanes and he becomes more himself again, and less under her influence. His return to a more fundamental form of himself is marked by his return to the land as he joyously goes out to plant seed. The land acts as a moral remedy against the kind of decadence that destroys the Hwang family and threatens to destroy Wang Lung's family, too. When Wang Lung falls into this self-indulgence with Lotus, the land helps cure him of it. Furthermore, he blames his eldest son's moodiness and lustfulness on the fact that he hasn't worked on the land and gained the discipline and dedication it requires.

When Wang Lung becomes even wealthier, he moves to the city, away from his land, which seems almost like a betrayal of the very entity that gave him his wealth. However, he maintains his devotion to the land: he still goes out to the land every spring, connecting him to the cycles of the seasons and of fertility. He takes comfort in the fact that he will be buried in the ground on his land, thus becoming even more entirely a part of it.

The final image of the book is of Wang Lung holding a handful of earth as his sons lie to him, saying they'll never sell the land. This ending implies that the younger generation, having grown up in greater prosperity, doesn't feel the same connection to the earth that Wang Lung does. The novel provides a sense of a changing world, in which revolution pits poor against rich and people seek wealth from sources other than the earth. Wang Lung's devotion to his land seems to belong to a bygone, less modern, era.

The sons' decision to sell the land also acts ironically as a marker of Wang Lung's success—he has followed closely in the footsteps of the Old Lord of the **House of Hwang**, whose own sons' failings originally allowed Wang Lung to acquire much of his land. But against this backdrop, the earth is ages old and will endure beyond the lives of the characters. No matter what

mistakes humans make, Wang Lung takes comfort in the fact that the land will always exist and always provide goodness.



SOCIAL STATUS

No matter Wang Lung's class status at any point, he's always very conscious of acting in a way proper to his position so that others will respect him,

either as a poor farmer or as a rich landowner with an extensive house.

When Wang Lung initially visits **the House of Hwang** to retrieve O-lan, he acts extremely deferentially towards the Old Mistress, making it clear that he presents no challenge to her supremacy. In contrast, when he becomes wealthy he later sits just where the Old Mistress sat and presides with great dignity over pairing off a slave and a poor farmer. He changes the way he acts to fit his change in social status.

Wang Lung also wants to ensure that his family members act in ways that will bring only honor to their name. He resents the way his uncle and his family act, because he believes it reflects badly upon Wang Lung himself. Wang Lung even tries to make his uncle rein in his daughter, because he thinks that she's acting overly bold around men and will be labeled a whore.

Buck portrays many points of Chinese etiquette that American readers may find strange, but are integral to the characters' way of interacting with the world around them. For example, when O-lan visits her old mistress to show off her first son, Wang Lung doesn't go into the house with her, because the day is one on which women visit each other. Instead, he waits in the gateman's house, where he sits in a certain chair accepted as a place of honor. Even as he follows these conventions, he also knows how to forgo politeness for conscious ends. When the gatekeeper's wife gives him tea, he purposely doesn't drink it in order to give the impression that he's on his way up in the world, and the tea is no longer good enough for him. Wang Lung often manipulates social etiquette like this to send a certain message.

Sometimes, Wang Lung struggles to change his way of acting in accordance with his rising social position. When he begins going to Cuckoo's tea room, for example, she scorns him because he doesn't know the procedure for hiring a prostitute. To Cuckoo, this inexperience shows that Wang Lung is still an ignorant farmer despite his increase in wealth. Thus, in order to truly improve his social position, he must not only become wealthy, but also change his way of acting in order to live according to the same social conventions that other wealthy men follow.

Essentially, Wang Lung cares deeply about what other people think of him. He pursues wealth not only for his own comfort, but also because it makes people admire him, and he relishes the respect that they pay him as a result. And his experience shows that one's social class depends not only on money, but

also on *behavior*: wealth grants access to a social class, but the proper behavior grants acceptance within it.

Yet even as the novel portrays Wang Lung subscribing entirely to the established system of social respect in his society, it also depicts how some of those around him refuse to do the same. In fact, the political unrest that Wang Lung largely ignores is based on challenging the old order in China. The contrast between Wang Lung's personal life and his goals of social advancement with the outside political environment of growing despair and rebellion accentuates the feeling that Wang Lung is a relic in a changing world, and highlights how social rules can both completely guide a life and, even at the same time, be entirely overthrown.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



THE HOUSE OF HWANG

The House of Hwang represents the wealth and respect to which Wang Lung aspires, but also the danger of excess and degeneracy that goes along with it. Wang Lung is first entirely intimidated by the house and doesn't know how to act within its bounds, as it represents a world far beyond that which he's used to. Over the course of the book, the state of the house and those who live within it deteriorates while Wang Lung's fortunes rise, though he never ceases to see the house as a marker of wealth due to its earlier greatness. When Wang Lung's eldest son suggests that he rent the inner courts of the house, Wang Lung does so for the feeling of power that it gives him as he symbolically replaces the Hwang family whom he always regarded as far superior to him. Taking over the house marks the pinnacle of Wang Lung's rise.

However, the house also embodies the cyclical nature of the story. The Hwangs had to leave their house because they frittered away all their money on luxuries and then were robbed by a band that included their own starving servants. When Wang Lung moves into the house, he and his family also fall into luxurious habits, and the uncle's wife's addiction to **opium** even mirrors the Old Mistress's. The common people grumble of revolting against the rich when the eldest son drives them out of the outer courts. Finally, at the end of the book Wang Lung's sons plan to sell his land, just as the Hwang family sold theirs before their downfall. Thus, Wang Lung's move into the House of Hwang seems to set him in the footsteps of the Hwang family, not only in their prosperity, but also in their decline.



THE LAND

This novel centers around the land more than anything, as indicated by the title. Wang Lung feels deeply connected to the earth, and it symbolizes life in all its forms as Wang Lung's life literally depends on it. He builds his house out of earth, grows his food in it, and even eats the dirt itself when his family is starving. He feels that the earth is part of him and he a part of it, and when his family members die, he's comforted by the fact that they can lie in the earth. Even when he's at his most desperate, Wang Lung feels that he can go on as long as he knows he has his land waiting for him, a promise of better times to come.

Not only does Wang Lung depend on the land for food and income, but he also needs it for his own mental well-being. While he's in the city to the south, he realizes he can't be happy when he's away from his land. Later, when he becomes too wrapped up in the luxuries and attendant problems that go along with wealth—such as falling in love with Lotus—only the land and his hard work there can heal him. The land acts as an antithesis, or an opposing force, to the detrimental effects of wealth. Only poorer people work on the land, and it's seen as improper for Wang Lung's family to do so once they've become wealthy. Thus, whenever Wang Lung returns to his fields and feels his old connection to them, he shows that he can never become so entirely decadent as the Old Lord. However, his sons' decision to sell the land at the end of the book indicates that they are in danger of this degenerate life, since they never worked the land and felt its necessity to life.



OPIUM

Opium represents the destruction of the wealthy by their own excessive wealth. When Wang Lung meets the Old Mistress at the beginning of the book, he sees that her opium use makes her weak and forgetful. Later, he hears that her need for the drug is draining the family coffers, and eventually it weakens her so much that she dies of fright when the robbers come to [the House of Hwang](#). Opium is quite expensive, so only the rich can afford to become addicted to it in the first place, and then it destroys them.

Later Wang Lung purposely gives opium to his uncle and his uncle's wife in order to keep them from causing him trouble. Their complete loss of will shows the power of money to wipe out awareness of the world outside of a wealthy person's house or mind. When Wang Lung moves his uncle's wife to the house in town, she seems to take the place of the Old Mistress, who was similarly addicted, and thus to foreshadow that Wang Lung's family will follow the same path of degeneration as the Hwang family.



THE PEARLS

When Wang Lung discovers the handful of jewels that O-lan has stolen from the great house in the city, she asks to keep two pearls, and he lets her. However, he later takes them from her and has them made into earrings for Lotus. Though O-lan has few aspirations to greatness, the fact that she treasures the pearls so much shows that she has plenty of thoughts and feelings that Wang Lung doesn't perceive. He thinks of her as a very simple, hard-working woman, and he never considers that she might want a better life than she has. Furthermore, her desire for the pearls shows that she appreciates beauty, even though Wang Lung thinks she's ugly and sometimes wishes she would try to make herself more beautiful. Later, the pearls act as an agent of Wang Lung's casual cruelty, as he takes this treasured possession from his wife and gives them to Lotus, who represents his desertion of his wife.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Washington Square Press edition of *The Good Earth* published in 2004.

Chapter 1 Quotes

““Raise him,” said the old lady gravely to the gateman, “these obeisances are not necessary. Has he come for the woman?””

“Yes, Ancient One,” replied the gateman.

“Why does he not speak for himself?” asked the old lady.

“Because he is a fool, Ancient One,” said the gateman...

This roused Wang Lung and he looked with indignation at the gateman.

“I am only a coarse person, Great and Ancient Lady,” he said. “I do not know what words to use in such a presence.”

Related Characters: The gateman, Wang Lung, The Old Mistress (speaker), O-lan

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 16

Explanation and Analysis

Wang Lung goes to the House of Hwang to fetch his new wife, O-lan, who works as a slave there. The gateman shows him into a great hall, where the Old Mistress is to present Wang Lung with O-lan, and Wang Lung falls onto his knees before her to show his respect.

This is Wang Lung's first of many visits to the House of Hwang, and this first visit leaves a great impression on him, effectively setting the standard against which he will measure all future visits as he rises in status and receives greater respect in the house. On this visit, even the gateman, a servant himself, feels that Wang Lung is so far beneath him that he can insult Wang Lung even in front of the Old Mistress. Wang Lung himself admits that he's completely in awe of the great house and its mistress, and that his much lower social status means he doesn't know how to act here. This scene makes it clear that social status doesn't depend only on wealth, but also on one's way of bearing oneself. Wang Lung is not insulted directly for his poverty, but instead for the social acts that mark him out as ignorant.

Much later, Wang Lung will buy the house and sit where the old lady sits, quite aware of the symbolism in the act that shows how his fortunes have risen.

After Wang Lung and O-lan have been married for a few months, O-lan runs out of tasks to do in the house and comes to help Wang Lung in the fields. Though marriage in this culture is a distinctly unequal institution, in that men have almost complete power over their wives, this scene is one of equal partnership. Wang Lung and O-lan rarely talk to each other, and they don't talk in this scene, either, but their work shows a unity of mind and purpose that results from a natural affinity for each other rather than from long discussion and forced intimacy.

Significantly, this almost spiritual union between husband and wife comes from their work on the land. O-lan is really the only character who values the land as deeply as Wang Lung does, and in this scene they are joined by their care for the earth that gives them life. Buck emphasizes the cycle of life and death, writing of the generations of farmers that have come before this one, all of them dependent on the earth for life and eventually returning to it in death. Wang Lung and O-lan are part of this cycle, and they, too, will die one day; but their labor is given an elegant significance by the fact that they're part of this traditional partnership with the earth. Furthermore, the earth deserves respect because of its constancy—no matter how the human world has changed or will change around it, the land remains more or less as it is, providing life for those who tend to it.

Chapter 2 Quotes

☝☝ Moving together in a perfect rhythm, without a word, hour after hour, he fell into a union with her which took the pain from his labor. He had no articulate thought of anything; there was only this perfect sympathy of movement, of turning this earth of theirs over and over to the sun, this earth which formed their home and fed their bodies and made their gods. The earth lay rich and dark, and fell apart lightly under the points of their hoes.... Some time, in some age, bodies of men and women had been buried there, houses had stood there, had fallen, and gone back into the earth. So would also their house, some time, return into the earth, their bodies also. Each had his turn at this earth. They worked on, moving together—*together*—producing the fruit of this earth—speechless in their movement together.

Related Characters: O-lan, Wang Lung

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 29-30

Explanation and Analysis

Chapter 3 Quotes

☝☝ Wang Lung sat smoking, thinking of the silver as it had lain upon the table. It had come out of the earth, this silver, out of his earth that he ploughed and turned and spent himself upon. He took his life from this earth; drop by drop by his sweat he wrung food from it and from the food, silver. Each time before this that he had taken the silver out to give to anyone, it had been like taking a piece of his life and giving it to someone carelessly. But now... he saw the silver transmuted into something worth even more than itself—clothes upon the body of his son. And this strange woman of his, who worked about, saying nothing, seeming to see nothing, she had first seen the child thus clothed!

Related Characters: The Old Mistress, O-lan, Wang Lung

Related Themes:     

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 35

Explanation and Analysis

Before O-lan gives birth to her first child, she tells Wang Lung that she plans to take the child (whom she assumes will be a son) to the House of Hwang to show him to the Old Mistress. She wants to clothe him well and present him triumphantly as a sign of her social ascendancy, as she used to be a slave in the house. Wang Lung thinks this is a wonderful idea, and he gives her the money for the clothes.

This passage essentially acts as Wang Lung's meditation upon the land, money, family, and social status. He recognizes the life-giving quality of the earth, but he also sees how the earth produces money, and money produces objects that can both take care of his family and increase his importance in the eyes of others. Now that he has a family of his own, he feels that his work produces rewards that it never did before because he can see his family prosper directly because of his work. However, the fact that this passage comes directly after O-lan's plan to impress the Old Mistress implies that Wang Lung also sees his son's clothes as a mark of his status, which increases along with his wealth. He, too, was humiliated in front of the Old Mistress (though certainly to a lesser degree), and he would like to see his money go to salve that humiliation.

Finally, Wang Lung expresses amazement at O-lan's inner life. O-lan is consistently a more complicated character than Wang Lung understands. It seems that because she's a nearly silent woman, he thinks there's nothing more to her than what he sees. However, he here realizes that she has dreams just like he does, even if she doesn't always tell him about them.

Chapter 4 Quotes

☝ There was more than enough [milk] for the child, greedy though he was, life enough for many children, and she let it flow out carelessly, conscious of her abundance. There was always more and more. Sometimes she lifted her breast and let it flow out upon the ground to save her clothing, and it sank into the earth and made a soft, dark, rich spot in the field. The child was fat and good-natured and ate of the inexhaustible life his mother gave him.

Related Characters: The eldest son (Nung En), O-lan

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 41

Explanation and Analysis

Not long after O-lan gives birth, she begins to work in the fields with Wang Lung again, now with their son lying on the ground nearby. She stops periodically to nurse him.

This passage connects O-lan's fertility to that of the earth. At this point, Wang Lung's crops are producing large harvests, and O-lan is filled with a similar overabundance of life. As she lets her milk flow into the ground, it's as though she offers back to the earth the life that the family has received from it. Her milk nourishes the land, which will in turn continue to nourish the family. The passage offers images of a sweet prosperity, simpler than Wang Lung's later financial prosperity. Their current prosperity is based on hard work, love, and vitality, and carries with it none of the bitter complications that financial prosperity does. The family's life is simple, pure, and happy.

Chapter 5 Quotes

☝ I had but a moment for private talk with the cook under whom I worked before... but she said, 'This house cannot stand forever with all the young lords, five of them, spending money like waste water in foreign parts and sending home woman after woman as they weary of them, and the Old Lord living at home adding a concubine or two each year, and the Old Mistress eating enough opium every day to fill two shoes with gold.'

Related Characters: O-lan (speaker), Wang Lung, The Old Mistress, The Old Lord

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 51

Explanation and Analysis

After O-lan visits the House of Hwang with her son, she tells Wang Lung as they walk home that the family is experiencing financial difficulties. The Hwangs are so used to having endless amounts of money at their disposal that they have neither the ability nor the desire to limit their pleasures. The description of the Hwang family in this passage shows that wealth has led them into constant decadent indulgence, and throughout the book, wealth will be associated with this same sense of excess.

Furthermore, as Wang Lung later begins to grow prosperous, he will imitate the Hwang family in many aspects of his life, as he continues to admire their wealth and superiority in the town. However, he will fail to fully

consider the mistakes they made in order to avoid making them himself. O-lan's account of the Hwangs' mistakes in this passage actually foreshadows the later progression of Wang Lung's family. His eldest son will pursue women he shouldn't and spend excessive amounts of money; Wang Lung himself will buy concubines; and he will have to constantly supply his uncle and his wife with opium. O-lan is the only one who never gives in to the temptation of debauchery, perhaps because she sees clearly the fall of the Hwangs as she relates it in this passage.

Chapter 7 Quotes

☞ The voice of his wife answered from the bed more feebly than he had ever heard her speak,

"It is over once more. It is only a slave this time—not worth mentioning."

Wang Lung stood still. A sense of evil struck him. A girl! A girl was causing all this trouble in his uncle's house. Now a girl had been born into his house as well.

Related Characters: O-lan (speaker), Wang Lung's uncle, The daughter / the eldest daughter (the poor fool), Wang Lung

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 65

Explanation and Analysis

Wang Lung's uncle comes to him to ask for money so that he can marry off his daughter, who's been associating with men in a way that's deemed inappropriate. Wang Lung doesn't want to give him the money because he knows his uncle will waste it, but when he's forced into it, he goes to fetch the money and finds that O-lan has just given birth.

The fact that the characters call girls "slaves" from the very moment of their births shows, perhaps more than anything else, the misogyny of this society. Even if they're not literally sold into slavery, girls are destined to work their whole lives for their husbands. Furthermore, O-lan seems to despise herself for giving birth to a girl, and to despise the baby for *being* a girl. She hardly thinks Wang Lung even needs to know about the child. Her attitude shows that misogyny is so deep-seated in her culture that women often participate in their own oppression just as much as men oppress them.

Wang Lung, for his part, literally sees the girl as a sign of evil, though she's only just been born and is hardly even aware of

the world around her. This is quite a lot of baggage for a baby to carry from the moment of birth, simply because of her gender. Buck also fails to push back against this interpretation of the baby as a sign of evil, since the famine begins just after her birth, seeming to confirm Wang Lung's prediction.

Chapter 8 Quotes

☞ They cannot take the land from me. The labor of my body and the fruit of the fields I have put into that which cannot be taken away. If I had the silver, they would have taken it. If I had bought with the silver to store it, they would have taken it all. I have the land still, and it is mine.

Related Characters: Wang Lung (speaker), Wang Lung's uncle

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 75

Explanation and Analysis

During the famine, the villagers believe, at the uncle's urging, that Wang Lung has excess food that he's storing for his family. They come and ransack his house to find it, but in fact there's very little food. They leave Wang Lung feeling terribly distressed at the possibility of his family's starvation, but he takes comfort in the fact that no one can steal his land.

This passage explains one of the reasons that Wang Lung always feels so intimately connected to his land: it's more fully his than anything else, because he owns the land without question and it's seemingly impossible for anyone to force it out of his possession. Thus, the land will always be there for him and will always provide the possibility of food and money.

After his last harvest, Wang Lung bought more land from the House of Hwang, which seemed potentially foolish since food was already scarce. However, he now feels confident that he made the right decision, even though his family is starving. The villagers could have stolen his money or food, but the land endures as his no matter what humans do. This lesson also shows why land is so important to wealth, and why the Hwangs begin to decline in earnest once they begin getting rid of their land.

Chapter 12 Quotes

☞ ...[O]nce when Wang Lung heard a young man... [say] that China must have a revolution and must rise against the hated foreigners, Wang Lung was alarmed and slunk away, feeling that he was the foreigner against whom the young man spoke with such passion. And when on another day he heard another young man speaking... and he said... that the people of China must unite and must educate themselves in these times, it did not occur to Wang Lung that anyone was speaking to him.

Related Characters: Wang Lung

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 107

Explanation and Analysis

When the family flees to the city to escape the famine, Wang Lung feels very different from the city people because he's a country farmer and doesn't know all the social rules of the city. He comes into contact with some of the political movements of the time, though he's not educated or aware enough to understand them as such.

In this passage, Wang Lung encounters men speaking about one of the most important Chinese political debates of the nineteenth and early twentieth century: to what extent Europeans should be allowed influence in the country. However, his isolation in the countryside means that he doesn't understand what the men are really talking about.

Wang Lung's sense that he himself is a foreigner, rather than realizing the men are speaking against Europeans, gestures to a weakness within the Chinese nationalist political movement. How is China to unite as a culturally independent country against Western influence if rural peasants such as Wang Lung hardly even recognize themselves as Chinese? In other words, the cultural and economic divides within China work against the unification of its people against an outside threat.

Chapter 13 Quotes

☞ Day by day beneath the opulence of this city Wang Lung lived in the foundations of poverty upon which it was laid. With the food spilling out of the markets, with the streets of the silk shops flying brilliant banners of black and red and orange silk to announce their wares, with rich men clothed in satin and in velvet, soft-fleshed rich men with their skin covered with garments of silk and their hands like flowers for softness and perfume and the beauty of idleness, with all of these for the regal beauty of the city, in that part where Wang Lung lived there was not food enough to feed savage hunger and not clothes enough to cover bones.

Related Characters: Wang Lung

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 113

Explanation and Analysis

As Wang Lung's family and other families like theirs struggle for basic survival, begging or working physically exhausting jobs for barely any money, the city is filled with rich people enjoying all the luxuries it has to offer. This passage displays the yawning chasm between rich and poor, with few people in between and no way for the poor to work their way up in the world.

At Wang Lung's home in the countryside, the poor farmers come into contact less often with the sort of wealth that Wang Lung sees every day in the streets of the city. In fact, in the countryside this kind of wealth seems to exist almost exclusively within the bounds of the House of Hwang. Thus, the farmers are less inclined to feel the unfairness of their poverty in comparison to others' wealth, since almost everyone around them lives similarly to themselves.

In the city, on the other hand, the poor are faced every day with rich men enjoying themselves at the cost of the poor. Thus, it makes sense that movements such as Marxism, which encourages poor laborers to rise against the rich, are active in the city but not in the country. Buck's description of social inequality in this passage seems to support such movements to redistribute wealth.

Chapter 14 Quotes

☞☞ “The dead man is yourselves,” proclaimed the young teacher, “and the murderous one who stabs you when you are dead and do not know it are the rich and the capitalists, who would stab you even after you are dead. You are poor and downtrodden and it is because the rich seize everything.”

...[Wang Lung] listened in interest to hear further what the rich men had to do with this thing, that heaven would not rain in its season. And at last... Wang Lung grew bold and asked,

“Sir, is there any way whereby the rich who oppress us can make it rain so that I can work on the land?”

Related Characters: Wang Lung (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 125

Explanation and Analysis

In the city, men on the streets sometimes give Wang Lung pamphlets and speak to crowds about various issues. One day, a man gives him a paper with a picture of a fat man stabbing a poor man. The speaker seems to be a Marxist, as he’s essentially discussing the oppression of the poor by the rich. Calling the rich “capitalists” also indicates that he’s suggesting an alternative to capitalism, which Marxism does.

Wang Lung has rarely thought of the rich as his enemy, instead living in awe of them and desiring to be more like them. Furthermore, he can’t understand the man’s speech the way the city laborers around him can, because he sees land as the way to acquire money. Marxism focuses on the proletariat, meaning people who work for a wage, rather than on farmers, whose prosperity depends greatly on the whims of nature. Buck thus seems to criticize Marxism here for ignoring a large portion of the population, or for rejecting those with the more “wholesome” lifestyle of depending on nature.

When the people finally do rise against the rich, they are probably inspired in part by men such as this one, who help root the idea in their minds. Wang Lung, however, can’t relate to the way he describes the world, so he’ll only get dragged along in the revolt rather than fully participating in it.

Chapter 16 Quotes

☞☞ “If I could have two,” she went on humbly, “only two small ones—two small white pearls even...”

“Pearls!” he repeated, agape... Then Wang Lung... looked for an instant into the heart of this dull and faithful creature, who had labored all her life at some task at which she won no reward and who in the great house had seen others wearing jewels which she never even felt in her hand once.

Related Characters: Wang Lung, O-lan (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 146

Explanation and Analysis

Once the family returns to their land, Wang Lung discovers that O-lan has been hiding a packet of jewels that she stole from the great house in the city when the mob broke in. Wang Lung insists they must sell the jewels, but O-lan asks if she might keep two pearls.

This passage shows how rarely Wang Lung truly sees O-lan as a person, simply because she’s a woman, and a silent, uncomplaining one at that. O-lan has had very little happiness in her life, having been sold as a slave at an early age, treated badly in the House of Hwang, and then living as Wang Lung’s servant as much as his wife. However, this doesn’t mean that she doesn’t appreciate beauty just as much as anyone else, or have her own inner mysteries and desires. This moment makes Wang Lung see that O-lan is more complicated than he thought, and when he allows her to keep the pearls (that really belong to her anyway, since she obtained them) it bonds them together in their quest for a better life.

☞☞ But all this was not a sudden thing. All during the lifetime of the Old Lord and of his father the fall of this house has been coming. In the last generation the lords ceased to see the land and took the moneys the agents gave them and spent it carelessly as water. And in these generations the strength of the land has gone from them and bit by bit the land has begun to go also.

Related Characters: Cuckoo (speaker), The Old Lord, Wang Lung

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 151-52

Explanation and Analysis

When Wang Lung brings the jewels to the House of Hwang to buy land, he finds that only the Old Lord and the servant Cuckoo remain. The Old Mistress is dead, the house is falling to pieces, and the rest of the family has scattered. Cuckoo explains that mismanagement of the family's wealth allowed this ultimate destruction.

Cuckoo's interpretation of the family's loss of wealth both supports Wang Lung's ideas about the land and acts as a warning to Wang Lung as his family grows in prosperity and begins to follow in the footsteps of the Hwang family. Cuckoo points out that as the Hwangs lost their connection with the land and let other people manage it for them, they lost all appreciation for the value of money and the work that it took to earn it.

Furthermore, Cuckoo seems to associate their distance from the land with a weakening of body and character. If the land—and working on it—gives life, then ignoring the land makes life drain from the family. Finally, the Hwangs began to sell their land, meaning they got rid of the very source of their wealth. This is the fate that the end of the book will imply for Wang Lung's own family.

Chapter 18 Quotes

☝️ ...[N]ow, instead of [his money] passing from him like life blood draining from a wound, it lay in his girdle burning his fingers when he felt of it, and eager to be spent on this or that, and he began to be careless of it and to think what he could do to enjoy the days of his manhood.

Everything seemed not so good to him as it was before. The tea shop which he used to enter timidly, feeling himself but a common country fellow, now seemed dingy and mean to him.

Related Characters: Wang Lung

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 170

Explanation and Analysis

After many prosperous years, Wang Lung's land floods and he finds himself with excess time on his hands. He becomes

unhappy with O-lan and decides that he deserves to have a good time now that he's made his fortune.

In this passage, the reader sees Wang Lung struggling with how to change his life to fit with his wealth. Until now, he's always been constantly working to tend the land and make money. But now that he's more or less achieved his goal, he feels lost. The idea of wealth is wonderful, but now that he has it he doesn't know what to do with it.

Wang Lung's sense of loss proves that wealth doesn't necessarily lead to happiness. When he was poor, he was thrilled with simple pleasures like O-lan's cakes or a set of new clothes. Now, he's dissatisfied with everything around him, expecting greater things from his wealth, and his search for satisfaction will only lead him into decadence and familial discord.

Chapter 19 Quotes

☝️ His good brown body that he washed but rarely, deeming the clean sweat of his labor washing enough for ordinary times, his body he now began to examine as if it were another man's, and he washed himself every day...

He bought sweet-smelling soap in the shop, a piece of red scented stuff from foreign parts, and he rubbed it on his flesh, and not for any price would he have eaten a stalk of garlic, although it was a thing he had loved before, lest he stink before [Lotus].

Related Characters: Lotus, Wang Lung

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 183

Explanation and Analysis

As Wang Lung labors under his great passion for Lotus, he becomes a changed man, to the point that his family doesn't understand what's happened to him. The actions detailed in this passage indicate that Wang Lung is trying to become someone different than who he has been, someone who he thinks will satisfy Lotus, and in the process he must deny the person he has been his entire life.

In washing every day, Wang Lung seems to be trying to wash away his former self. His farming life, as represented by his sweat, is no longer satisfactory to him, because he doesn't think it's satisfactory to Lotus. Similarly, though he's hardly even acknowledged the existence of the world outside of where he himself lives, he suddenly buys soap from somewhere far away, which seems like a symbolic

severing of his formerly deep-rooted connection with his home. Finally, he stops eating garlic. Garlic is a traditional food of the farming class, so in denying himself garlic, he attempts to act as someone of higher social status, rather than as who he really is.

Wang Lung makes all of these changes to himself in an attempt to seem more refined and act in a way that he thinks denotes a superior social standing, hoping to impress Lotus and make her desire him. In fact, this essentially marks the beginning of his dissatisfaction with the simple fact of his wealth, and his enduring need to act in a way fitting to someone wealthy. However, denying his roots only ever causes problems for Wang Lung, and the wealthy don't necessarily act in beneficial ways.

Chapter 20 Quotes

☞ And Wang Lung... felt his mouth suddenly dry and parched and his voice came from him in a whisper,

"Silver, then! Silver and gold! Anything to the very price of my land!"

Related Characters: Wang Lung (speaker), Cuckoo, Wang Lung's uncle, Lotus

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 192

Explanation and Analysis

When his uncle forces his family on Wang Lung, he overhears his uncle's wife telling O-lan that Wang Lung is going to buy another woman. Wang Lung hadn't actually thought of this before, but now he's set on buying Lotus. The uncle's wife says that Cuckoo will certainly sell Lotus if he offers enough money.

This passage shows how desperate Wang Lung's lust for Lotus has made him, and how different he's become from the man he was before he fell in love. He used to be somewhat thrifty with his money, since he worked so hard to earn it, and he certainly never considered letting his land go. Even when his family was on the brink of death from starvation, Wang Lung refused to sell his land to buy them food.

Now, Wang Lung seems earnestly ready to sell his land in order to buy Lotus. This change signifies a greater change that wealth brings upon him—a surrender to his desire for

luxury and satisfaction in all aspects of life, and a drawing away from the land that he used to treasure above all else. This moment is only one extreme of a broader severing of his ties to the land as he becomes wealthy enough to hire others to work it for him.

Chapter 22 Quotes

☞ As he had been healed of his sickness of heart when he came from the southern city and comforted by the bitterness he had endured there, so now again Wang Lung was healed of his sickness of love by the good dark earth of his fields and he felt the moist soil on his feet and he smelled the earthy fragrance rising up out of the furrows he turned for the wheat.

Related Characters: Lotus, Wang Lung

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 212

Explanation and Analysis

After Wang Lung sees Lotus lash out at his children, his passion for her finally cools. When the floods recede from his land, goes out to the fields and begins to work as he hasn't in a long time.

As always, the land heals Wang Lung of whatever trouble he's having. In this case, his corrupting love for Lotus has gotten in the way of his loyalty to the land and caused him to stray from the principles that he was raised with as a farmer, instead leading him into the unhealthy excesses of the wealthy.

The land acts as an antidote to the sins that money invites, as it's a life-giving force that continues to exist no matter what, for all people. Thus, it's always there for Wang Lung to return to once he comes to his senses, and now he returns to it with his whole body, seeing its color, feeling it on his bare feet, and smelling its healthy scent. As he helps the earth create life in his crops, the earth gives him life in turn.

Chapter 24 Quotes

☞☞ But [O-lan] rose at dawn and she did her work and Wang Lung saw her only as he saw the table or his chair or a tree in the court, never even so keenly as he might see one of the oxen drooping its head or a pig that would not eat.... And she said nothing but she worked at her cooking and at the washing at the pool even in the winter when the water was stiff with ice to be broken. But Wang Lung never thought to say,

“Well, and why do you not with the silver I have to spare, hire a servant or buy a slave?”

Related Characters: Wang Lung, O-lan

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 239

Explanation and Analysis

Wang Lung deals with problems within his family and in his fields, and through it all O-lan remains constant, performing the work that Wang Lung expects of her. However, she also becomes ill without Wang Lung realizing it. In fact, this passage shows that Wang Lung hardly notices her at all.

Wang Lung's society expects women to perform their duties quietly and without complaint, and it also expects wives to do whatever is needed to keep their household running smoothly. Yet O-lan receives no praise or reward when she conforms to these expectations as perfectly as she does. Instead, her silence makes her fade into the background. Of course, this is mostly Wang Lung's fault, as he's abandoned her for Lotus and dismissed her value entirely when he began to see her as ugly. He fails to appreciate her and won't realize how essential her work is until she grows ill in earnest and can no longer do it.

Furthermore, this passage demonstrates that the practice of calling all girls “slaves” from the moment of birth is really an accurate custom. Even though O-lan is no longer technically a slave, she still must work as though she is, receiving no compensation or even appreciation. Wang Lung never thinks to use his wealth to ease her burden because he essentially thinks of her as a slave, part of the landscape that he doesn't need to think about rather than as a member of his family. Essentially, this passage is emblematic of the broader treatment of women throughout the book.

Chapter 25 Quotes

☞☞ ...[M]y mother said I was not to weep aloud because you are too kind and weak for pain and you might say to leave me as I am, and then my husband would not love me even as you do not love her.

Related Characters: The second daughter (speaker), O-lan, Wang Lung

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 249

Explanation and Analysis

Wang Lung visits Liu and engages his second daughter to Liu's son. When he returns home, he notices that his daughter has been crying, and she tells him that it's because her bound feet hurt.

Foot binding was practiced in parts of China for centuries. Because small, dainty feet were considered beautiful, girls' feet would be broken and bound tightly with cloth so that they could never grow large. O-lan's feet were not bound, and when Wang Lung grows wealthy and thus picky, he criticizes her feet in particular. O-lan then binds her daughter's feet in hopes that her daughter's husband will love her more than she thinks Wang Lung loves her.

In this scene, his daughter's uncomprehending honesty makes Wang Lung finally begin to realize the betrayal that he has practiced on O-lan. He has rejected her for her appearance rather than valuing her for her wisdom and faithfulness, and she's so obedient that she doesn't even try to make him see his wrongdoing. Instead, she puts her daughter through physical pain in the hopes that she can avoid the emotional pain that O-lan herself experiences.

Even as O-lan acts in reaction to Wang Lung's cruelty, she still sees him as “kind and weak,” expecting him to stop the foot binding if he realizes how painful it is. Thus, she seems to blame herself for her ugliness, rather than blaming Wang Lung for his superficial judgment of her. O-lan experiences her society's misogyny in all the worst ways, and yet she never seems to fight the wrongs done to her.

Chapter 28 Quotes

☞☞ Then Wang Lung's uncle took it greedily, for it was sweet to smell and a thing that only rich men used, and he took it and bought a pipe and he smoked the opium, lying all day upon his bed to do it. Then Wang Lung saw to it that there were pipes bought and left here and there... and the silver for this Wang Lung did not begrudge because it bought him peace.

Related Characters: Wang Lung's uncle, Wang Lung

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 281-82

Explanation and Analysis

Wang Lung's uncle's family becomes so troublesome, with the uncle threatening to set his robber band on the house and the uncle's son molesting Wang Lung's daughter, that Wang Lung decides his only choice is to get the uncle's family addicted to opium. Opium acts as a narcotic, subduing the user's energy and causing strange dreams.

However, opium is also regarded as a luxury. The uncle is eager to accept the opium partly for this reason, since he sees it as a toy of the wealthy and he wants to live in the comfort of the wealthy. Though it's very expensive, Wang Lung would rather spend the money on keeping his uncle's family quiet than spend it on giving them everything they ask for.

Additionally, opium is associated with the House of Hwang, as the Old Mistress smoked copious amounts of it. In fact, her constant desire for opium contributed to the family's loss of their fortune. Thus, Wang Lung should perhaps be more cautious about bringing opium into his household, since it adds to the ways in which his family imitates the Hwangs, who ended in ruin.

☞ Now Wang Lung in the old days when the great family were there would have felt himself one of these common people and against the great and half hating, half fearful of them. But now that he had land and that he had silver and gold hidden safely away, he despised these people who swarmed everywhere, and he said to himself that they were filthy and he picked his way among them with his nose up and breathing lightly because of the stink they made. And he despised them and was against them as though he himself belonged to the great house.

Related Characters: Wang Lung

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 291-92

Explanation and Analysis

Wang Lung's eldest son wants his father to rent the House of Hwang so the family can move there. Wang Lung goes to inspect the house and has to walk through the commoners living in the outer courts to reach the inner courts, where he could live.

Wang Lung's response to the commoners shows that he has to some extent forgotten his roots and become just as proud and arrogant as the Old Mistress and the gateman were on his first visit to the House of Hwang. The passage suggests that there's no fundamental difference between Wang Lung and the commoners whom he disdains. In fact, they're just the same, since he used to be one of them. Only his money makes him think that he's better than they are.

Wang Lung's whole life story serves to show that the rich aren't divinely chosen; the rich are normal people who in some cases are particularly hard workers, but in general just get lucky.

☞ There before him was the great carved dais where the old lady had sat, her fragile, tended body wrapped in silvery satin.

And moved by some strange impulse he went forward and he sat down where she had sat and he put his hand on the table and from the eminence it gave him he looked down on the bleary face of the old hag who blinked at him... Then some satisfaction he had longed for all his days without knowing it swelled up in his heart and he smote the table with his hand and he said suddenly,

"This house I will have!"

Related Characters: Wang Lung (speaker), The Old Mistress, The gateman's wife

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 293

Explanation and Analysis

Wang Lung has been considering renting the House of Hwang, and he comes upon the gateman's wife, who shows him into the inner courts and the great hall where Wang Lung met the Old Mistress the first time he came to the house. On Wang Lung's first visit here, he was humiliated by his poverty and his ignorance of how to act around such

social superiors. Even the gateman, a servant himself, acted as though he were far better than Wang Lung.

This experience has stuck with Wang Lung his entire life, and now he's finally able to retrospectively take control of the situation. As he sits in the Old Mistress's chair, he symbolically becomes the social equal to the Old Mistress. Furthermore, he's clearly a social superior to the gateman's wife. Though this may seem like a very small triumph, the fact that the gateman so humiliated Wang Lung on his first visit gives it significance as well.

Although Wang Lung hasn't quite realized it, it seems that he's been working his entire life towards this moment, towards being able to take this seat that he's always thought of as the ultimate place of power. As it represents the pinnacle of his achievement and occurs before his family begins to more earnestly follow the Hwangs' path to self-destruction, this moment can be seen as the climax of the novel. However, in the fact that Wang Lung symbolically becomes the Old Mistress just before her family's decline, this passage also marks the moment that his family slips into her family's dangerously luxurious shoes.

role in this event, but he lets his son do as he wants and never protests.

The eldest son's actions are despicable in any circumstances, but particularly in light of the fact that his own family—and he himself—used to be in the position of the commoners. In the city, Wang Lung's family lived in poverty up against the wall of a wealthy house, just as these commoners do. But neither Wang Lung nor his son pays any heed to this past of theirs, preferring to dwell on their current prosperity instead.

Furthermore, Wang Lung doesn't seem to have learned anything from his experience as a commoner. In the city, the people struggling around him used the very same phrase that's used in this passage, "when the rich are too rich," to justify their revolt against the wealthy and their ransacking of the great house. This book works in cycles, and this phrase represents the cycle of poverty and revolt against it. And with the Marxist ideas that Wang Lung heard in the city floating around, revolt against his own family might come sooner rather than later.

Chapter 30 Quotes

☞ ...[T]hese common people found that the rent for the rooms and the courts where they lived had been greatly raised... and they had to move away. Then they knew it was Wang Lung's eldest son who had done this...

The common people had to move, then, and they moved complaining and cursing because a rich man could do as he would and they... went away swelling with anger and muttering that one day they would come back even as the poor do come back when the rich are too rich.

Related Characters: Wang Lung, The eldest son (Nung En)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 308

Explanation and Analysis

Wang Lung's eldest son wants the family to take over the outer courts of the house, rather than staying confined to the inner courts. He thinks it isn't socially respectable for them to be living in such close quarters with commoners. Thus he offers a higher rent to the Hwangs so that they'll evict the commoners. Wang Lung doesn't explicitly play a

Chapter 33 Quotes

☞ ...[H]e had been of half a mind to walk out on his land and feel the good earth under his feet and take off his shoes and stockings and feel it on his skin.

This he would have done but he was ashamed lest men see him, who was no longer held a farmer within the gates of the town, but a landowner and a rich man.

Related Characters: Wang Lung

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 339

Explanation and Analysis

When Wang Lung is lusting after Pear Blossom, he becomes restless with desire and considers going out to his land from his house in the town. However, he now feels that his social status doesn't accommodate visits to his land; the land is for the poor farmers and laborers, and people might lose their respect for him if they saw him going into the territory of these lower-class people.

Wang Lung's hesitancy to go to his land indicates perhaps the most dangerous stage of his symbolic replacement of the Hwang family. Throughout the book, the land has acted

as a healing force and as the source of wealth and life. Characters have repeatedly warned that when a family grows disconnected from their land, their fortunes fall rapidly. This is exactly what happened to the Hwangs, as Wang Lung well knows, considering that he benefited from their sale of their land.

Essentially, Wang Lung's concern for social propriety is taking precedence over his connection to his beloved land. If he doesn't go out to the land, it can't heal him of his attachment to the vices of wealth as it has in the past.

Chapter 34 Quotes

☞ Every man I hate except you—I have hated every man, even my father who sold me. I have heard only evil of them and I hate them all.... I am filled with loathing and I hate them all. I hate all young men.

Related Characters: Pear Blossom (speaker), Wang Lung

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 350

Explanation and Analysis

Pear Blossom becomes Wang Lung's concubine and then more of a simple companion. One day he asks her why she's so afraid of men, and she answers that she hates them all. She gives no particular reason for her hatred, but all of the misogyny portrayed throughout the story provides a pretty good idea of why a woman would hate men.

Ironically, Pear Blossom says that she hates "even [her] father who sold [her]," as though this hatred seems particularly odd. However, it makes perfect sense that she would hate a father who showed that he loved her so little that he could say goodbye to her forever and leave her in slavery. In fact, this early experience provides a concrete reason for her hatred of men, as it probably showed her how little they value and respect women.

But Pear Blossom's attitude is almost more powerful in its vagueness. As she doesn't point to any particular explanation for her hatred, it allows her emotion to apply to all of the men in the book and all of their awful acts against women, even the ones for which she wasn't present. In a book whose female characters generally accept and perpetuate their own oppression, Pear Blossom stands out as a woman who recognizes, on some level, that she deserves better from men.

☞ "Now, evil, idle sons—sell the land!" He choked and would have fallen, and they caught him and held him up, and he began to weep.... "It is the end of a family—when they begin to sell the land," he said brokenly. "Out of the land we came and into it we must go—and if you will hold your land you can live—no one can rob you of land—"

...And he stooped and took up a handful of the soil and he held it and he muttered,

"If you sell the land, it is the end."

...And they soothed him and they said over and over, the elder son and the second son,

"Rest assured, our father, rest assured. The land is not to be sold."

But over the old man's head they looked at each other and smiled.

Related Characters: Wang Lung (speaker), The second son (Nung Wen), The eldest son (Nung En)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 357

Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs at the very end of the book, when Wang Lung follows his sons out onto the land and overhears them discussing how best to sell the land and divide the money.

All of Wang Lung's life experience has taught him that land is the most important possession. The land is to be worshiped and loved, and in return it will take care of a family. The land gives life and heals, and when a family turns away from it, as the Hwangs did, the family won't last long. Furthermore, Wang Lung knows that the land in itself is immovable wealth, and it also produces wealth—including all of the wealth that Wang Lung has acquired, and that now puts his sons in the position of considering selling the land.

Furthermore, Wang Lung now finds his sons, his own flesh and blood, betraying his sincerest wish. He's struggled with his family plenty in the past, and even experienced his uncle's family's extreme betrayals of him, but he's always had control of the land, his most important possession. Now, with death approaching, he knows that he will soon be powerless to prevent his sons from making what he sees as the worst possible mistake.

On a more symbolic level, the very title of the book is *The Good Earth*, gesturing to the land. Thus, if the land is sold, the family is stripped of its story and becomes immediately nonexistent, no longer connected to the one constant element of the world—the earth.

However, another possible interpretation of this ending exists. Wang Lung has always ignored the goings-on of the world around him, preferring to remain as unmoved as the

land itself. As a result, he's very traditional in a rapidly changing world. His sons, on the other hand, are more attuned to progress and political events. The world does change, and it's possible that the sons know that the economy is changing, too, and farming may no longer be the most practical way to make money. In this interpretation, Wang Lung clings foolishly to the past as he goes to his grave and the world sweeps on without him.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

Wang Lung awakens on his wedding day. He usually waits to hear his father coughing and opening his door, but today Wang Lung gets up immediately and looks out the window. Since it's spring, he tears away a piece of paper that had been covering the window. He wants the house to look nice for this day. There's a breeze that will bring rain soon that will make the wheat grow well. He takes it as a good omen.

The novel begins with Wang Lung preparing to start his family by getting married. Wang Lung lives his life in harmony with the land, and now as spring comes and the land is reborn, a new era of his life is born as well.



Wang Lung goes into the kitchen in a shed connected to the house, where there is an ox. The kitchen and the house are both made of earthen bricks and are thatched with straw. Even the oven was made with earth from Wang Lung's family's land. Wang Lung decides to use all the water in a jar to bathe himself, even though he's usually careful with the water. He wants to be clean for his new wife.

The description of Wang Lung's house stresses his connection to the land, as the earth shelters and nourishes him in the walls, roof, and oven. The details that the ox lives in the kitchen and Wang Lung is usually frugal with the water indicate how poor he is.



Wang Lung sets a fire in the stove as he has done ever since his mother died. For six years, he's brought his father hot water to help with his cough, but Wang Lung will be able to rest now, he thinks, since his wife will do these tasks. He imagines the children they'll have. He and his father have often had to prevent relatives from trying to move into their house, since they have plenty of room. But soon, there will be children to take up all the empty space.

Wang Lung looks forward unabashedly to the work his wife will take off his own shoulders. In fact, a major reason for him to get married is so that someone else can take on the burden of the housework. The mention of Wang Lung's pushy relatives foreshadows the difficulties he'll later have with his uncle.



Wang Lung's father comes to the door of the kitchen, coughing and asking for his water. Wang Lung puts some tea leaves in the water, and his father protests that tea is too expensive for this use. Wang Lung tells him that it's a special day, and finally the old man drinks the tea. When he sees Wang Lung pouring the rest of the water into a tub, he protests at the amount of water he's using. Wang Lung doesn't want to admit that he wants to be clean for a woman's eyes. He brings the tub to his room, and his father exclaims that they shouldn't give the woman the wrong impression of their way of life with such decadence.

Wang Lung's father's protests at the use of tea leaves and bath water reinforce the portrayal of their poverty, particularly since a wedding is normally seen as a special occasion on which a man might indulge himself a little. However, Wang Lung's embarrassment at wanting to impress his wife indicates how little his culture respects women. Women are expected to change themselves to suit their husbands' needs, but their husbands shouldn't even feel the need to clean themselves for their wives.



Wang Lung washes himself with a towel and puts on clean clothing instead of his dirty, torn winter clothes. He also puts on a long robe that he only wears for celebrations. He combs his long hair. His father returns to ask for food. Wang Lung takes the robe off and pours the water from the tub into the ground outside the door. He feels angry at his father's demands, but he knows he won't have to make food after this. He prepares some corn meal gruel and brings it to his father, saying that they'll have rice that night, though not as much as at the spring festival.

Wang Lung returns to his room and considers whether he should get a shave before he goes to the woman's house. He counts his money to see whether he can afford it. He has invited friends and relatives to dinner and plans to buy food in town. Finally he decides he will get his head shaved, after all.

Wang Lung leaves the house and stops to look at the buds of his crops. They need the rain that he expects will come. Since it's a special day, he'll buy incense for the temple to the earth god. He heads towards the city wall, imagining **the House of Hwang**, where the woman he's going to marry has been a slave. His father said Wang Lung could only afford to take a slave as his wife, so his father had gone to the House of Hwang and asked for a slave who wasn't pretty. Wang Lung wanted a pretty wife, but his father insisted that the woman needed to work in the house and the fields. Besides, he said, the young lords in the House of Hwang would have already taken the virginity of a pretty slave. Wang Lung and his father brought jewelry to the woman's owner to make the engagement official.

Wang Lung enters the city gate, passing a man selling peaches. He decides he'll buy his wife some on the way out. He then heads toward the barber's, passing farmers who came early to sell their goods. He sits in a barber's stall, and the man teases him about his reluctance to spend money, making Wang Lung feel inferior to those who live in town. The barber suggests that Wang Lung should cut off his braid, as it's the new fashion, but Wang Lung protests. He hates spending so much money.

Wang Lung buys food and incense and then goes to **the House of Hwang**. But once he gets there, he's too shy and nervous to go in. He's never been in a wealthy house before. He decides to eat something first, so he goes to a restaurant and eats noodles. Compared to the poverty of the other customers, he looks almost well-off. A beggar asks him for money, and he feels proud and gives a bit of money. Wang Lung sits a long time, and finally the waiter gets impatient, so he buys some tea, though he doesn't like paying for it. When he sees a neighbor enter, he leaves quickly.

No matter how his father treats the occasion, Wang Lung feels that a wedding is significant, and he'll treat it as such. His preparations for celebration are small gestures, but meaningful to him. In pouring his bath water into the ground, Wang Lung seems to feed the earth just as it feeds him. Wang Lung feels irritated at the household tasks he has to do, but he never considers that his wife might also find them irritating.



The fact that throughout his wedding day Wang Lung constantly counts his money foreshadows that he will continue to focus intensely on his wealth for his whole life. His way of making decisions demonstrates his frugality.



Even on this special day, Wang Lung is thinking about his crops. The buds symbolize a beginning just as the spring does—he's about to begin a new way of living, one that similarly involves young life, as he'll have children (hopefully). Wang Lung's father is constantly practical, wanting Wang Lung's wife to act as a worker on the farm more than as someone to make Wang Lung happy. Though Wang Lung will for a long time accept having a wife who isn't pretty, the fact that he originally wants a pretty wife foreshadows his later dissatisfaction with O-lan's appearance.



The scene at the barber's demonstrates the differences between town and country. Wang Lung feels separate from those who live in the town, both due to his poverty and his slightly different social norms. Wang Lung often struggles with ambivalence between wanting to move up in life, but feeling reluctant to leave behind the morals and traditions he was raised with.



Wang Lung grapples here with his poverty in comparison to the Hwang family, which makes him frightened to go into their house. However, when the beggar makes him feel comparatively rich, he's proud of his status. These incidents show how much money and status matter to him. He also cares greatly about what other people think of him, as proven by his reaction when he thinks his neighbor might perceive his nervousness at the prospect of marriage.



Wang Lung returns to **the House of Hwang**, and now the gates are open. The gateman challenges him impolitely, and Wang Lung nervously struggles to explain his purpose in coming. Finally the gateman understands, but doesn't consent to lead him inside until Wang Lung gives him some money. The man announces Wang Lung's arrival and leads him through a series of courtyards. Finally they come to the Old Mistress's rooms, but the gateman protests that Wang Lung can't go in carrying his basket of food. Wang Lung fears that something will be stolen if he leaves it outside, but the gateman says that no one in this house would want food of such poor quality.

The gateman leads Wang Lung into a huge room, and Wang Lung almost trips as he gapes up at the ceiling. The Old Mistress sits on a dais (raised platform), holding an **opium** pipe. Wang Lung kneels before her, and when the gateman calls him a fool who can't speak for himself, he explains that he doesn't know how to speak to someone so superior to himself. The Old Mistress sucks on her pipe and immediately forgets why Wang Lung is there. Wang Lung explains that he's come for a woman, and the Old Mistress recalls that the slave O-lan is to be married to him. She orders O-lan brought in.

Wang Lung can hardly look at O-lan, he's so nervous. He's satisfied with her voice, but disappointed that her feet aren't bound. The Old Mistress has Wang Lung stand next to O-lan, and she tells him that she bought O-lan from her parents when there was a famine. She says that O-lan is neither smart nor beautiful, but she'll work hard. She's probably a virgin, since there have been prettier slaves around to tempt the men of the house. The Old Mistress tells O-lan to bring her first child to the house for her to see. Wang Lung doesn't know what to do next, but the Old Mistress orders them out.

The gateman drops O-lan's box of possessions by Wang Lung's basket of food and disappears. Wang Lung now finally looks at O-lan. Her face seems silent and isn't beautiful, but she's wearing the jewelry he sent for her, and he's elated. He indicates that she should carry the box and the basket, but when she struggles with them, he takes the box himself. She leads them out a side gate into the street.

At the city gate, Wang Lung buys peaches and gives them to O-lan to eat. She walks behind him, and he sees her nibbling the peaches, but she stops when he looks at her. They reach the temple to the earth, which Wang Lung's grandfather built. There used to be paintings on the walls, but rain has almost entirely washed them away. Inside sit the figures of the god and his wife. Wang Lung's father clothes them yearly with sheets of paper.

Wang Lung's first visit to the House of Hwang is characterized by a sense of social alienation between Wang Lung, the poor country farmer, and everyone associated with the Hwang family, who are rich and respected in town. Even the gateman, a servant, makes fun of Wang Lung and takes advantage of him. Furthermore, he disdains the food that Wang Lung has just bought with care and pride for his celebration, highlighting the gap between rich and poor in this society.



Wang Lung will long remember his humiliation before the Old Mistress, and one of his more unconscious goals in working towards wealth is to reverse their positions and prove himself just as good as the Old Mistress. His lack of social skills in this situation further highlight their difference in status. However, the Old Mistress's appearance with the opium pipe also presents the first hint of the destructive power of wealth.



For many years, Wang Lung will forget his initial disappointment with O-lan's feet. However, it foreshadows his later dissatisfaction with her appearance, particularly her unbound feet. The Old Mistress's account of O-lan's history paints a tragic picture that shadows her through her silent, uncomplaining years with Wang Lung. This scene presents O-lan as a product whom the Old Mistress has bought and used and is now selling to Wang Lung, listing her merits and failings.



Wang Lung treats his new wife as his servant from the very outset, expecting her to carry what he's bought. However, he does show some humanity by taking pity on her when it's too much, and the fact that he carries her box while she carries his basket symbolizes their support of each other.



By buying O-lan peaches, Wang Lung shows his desire—which he hesitates to admit—to please her. She walks behind him as a properly modest woman must. The fact that Wang Lung's family takes care of the temple to the earth gods demonstrates their dependence nature to send them good fortune in their crops.



Wang Lung lights incense in front of the figures, and he and O-lan stand before them. O-lan brushes ash away from the incense, and then is fearful she has done wrong, but Wang Lung feels that it makes the incense belong to both of them, a married couple. When the incense burns down, they go home.

This is the closest that Wang Lung and O-lan come to a wedding ceremony, as they pay homage to the earth together in a holy space. Thus, the earth binds them from the beginning. Perhaps because of her past experiences, O-lan is clearly fearful of strange men, including her new husband.



Wang Lung's father stands in the doorway, but it's beneath him to acknowledge O-lan. Instead, he predicts that it will rain soon, and tells Wang Lung off for spending money in town. Wang Lung tells him that guests are coming. The old man is secretly glad, but doesn't let it show so that O-lan won't expect luxury in this house. Unpacking the food, Wang Lung asks O-lan if she can cook, and she answers that she has worked in the kitchen for many years.

Women's extremely inferior position to men in this society becomes apparent in the fact that Wang Lung's father can't even acknowledge the existence of someone who will be living in his house for the rest of his life. However, his prediction of rain suggests fertility for the new couple, as for the land. He also shows his dedication to a simple life.



That evening, guests arrive, relatives and other farmers. They sit in the middle room. O-lan doesn't want the men to see her, which makes Wang Lung proud that he gets to see her. He brings the food she's prepared into the middle room and tells his guests that they can't see his bride yet, since they haven't consummated the marriage. O-lan has cooked delicious food, and Wang Lung is glad of her talent.

Again, O-lan is seen as a product that Wang Lung must fully take possession of before anyone else can be allowed to see her. O-lan's modesty acts to her credit with Wang Lung, and this will later set her apart from women who are seen as promiscuous. Her good cooking also marks her early on as a good wife.



When the guests finally leave, Wang Lung finds O-lan asleep by the ox in the kitchen. When he wakes her, she instinctively raises her arm as though to protect herself. He brings her into his room and lights a candle, feeling suddenly shy near her. He undresses and gets into bed, telling her to blow out the candle when she's ready. He pretends to be asleep, but when the candle finally goes out and O-lan gets into bed, he joyfully grabs her.

Curled up with the ox while Wang Lung's guests enjoy themselves, O-lan seems valued just as much (or as little) as the animal is, even on her own wedding night. Her instinct to expect danger suggests cruelty in her past. Wang Lung makes no romantic gestures; the purpose of this marriage is his own pleasure and reproduction.



CHAPTER 2

The next morning, Wang Lung feels luxurious as he watches O-lan get dressed. He's surprised that her face looks the same as it did before, since he feels like their wedding night has changed him. He tells her to bring his father hot water, and she asks whether to put tea leaves in it. He wants to say yes, because he doesn't want her to see the extreme difference in prosperity between his home and **the House of Hwang**, but instead he lies that tea leaves make his father's cough worse. He stays in bed, but long habit of getting up early prevents him from sleeping more.

Even though traditionally, sex is supposed to transform a virgin woman into a whore (if unmarried) or a wife, Wang Lung is the one who feels changed, while O-lan seems just the same, countering this cultural narrative. Wang Lung has already begun comparing himself to the House of Hwang, something that will drive his ambition for years. He also shows his eagerness to appear better than his station.



Lying in bed, Wang Lung finds himself wondering whether O-lan likes him and enjoyed their night. He's very happy with her body and is ashamed to discover that he wants her to like him. She brings him tea but is afraid she shouldn't have used the tea leaves. Wang Lung is glad she's afraid of him and approves of the tea leaves, and he decides that O-lan does like him.

In his current simplicity, Wang Lung can find beauty in O-lan's body though she isn't conventionally beautiful. Furthermore, his desire for her approval implies that he doesn't feel as naturally superior to her as he's supposed to. This is an oddly romantic scene, as opposed to the lust of the previous night.



Over the next few months, Wang Lung works hard in his fields, but he always watches O-lan, and he takes great pleasure in going home to a clean house and food already prepared. In the mornings, O-lan gathers fuel for the stove from the countryside, so they never have to buy any. In the afternoons, she gathers animal manure for fertilizer. She works hard without being told to do anything, mending clothes and cleaning bedding. However, she rarely speaks, and though Wang Lung wonders about her life before she came to him, it isn't fitting for him to be interested in a woman's life.

Though O-lan has worked in a rich house, she immediately adapts to Wang Lung's way of life, doing everything she can to support his frugality. She acts as an ideal wife: silent, undemanding, and dutiful. Again, Wang Lung can't manage to see himself as so superior to his wife that he can quell his curiosity about her. Despite the demands of his society, his instincts want him to recognize her as a whole person with a story of her own.



Since she's used to working in a busy house, O-lan quickly runs out of tasks, so one day she comes out to Wang Lung in the fields and begins hoeing alongside him. As hours pass and it becomes hot, the two fall into a peaceful union with each other and the earth. People have lived here and been buried here for ages, and they are part of this cycle of the **land**. When the sun sets, Wang Lung looks at O-lan, who is dirty and sweaty. She says nonchalantly that she's pregnant. Wang Lung feels joyful and tells her to stop working.

As with the scene in the temple, this is another scene of the earth joining Wang Lung and O-lan together in partnership. In this moment, they seem like equals. Buck stresses the constancy of the land as the human world changes around it, and immediately Wang Lung and O-lan become part of this cycle of birth and death when O-lan announces her pregnancy.



They go home, where Wang Lung's father is impatient for his dinner. Wang Lung tells him that O-lan is pregnant, trying not to show his excitement. The old man is happy at the news, but quickly forgets it in his hunger. Wang Lung sits on a bench and marvels at the fact that he has created life.

Wang Lung's father expects total care as an elder (an important aspect of his culture) and focuses primarily on his own bodily needs, while Wang Lung represents a younger, more vivacious stage of life, and his thoughts turn to the very beginning of a human life.



CHAPTER 3

As the pregnancy progresses, Wang Lung suggests one night after dinner that they should find a woman to help with the birth, but O-lan shakes her head. Wang Lung has gotten used to O-lan's silence. He insists that there must be another slave from **the House of Hwang** who could come help. He has never mentioned O-lan's past life before, and she suddenly becomes angry, saying that she won't have anyone from that house. Wang Lung persists in his line of argument.

O-lan demonstrates extreme self-sufficiency and resourcefulness in her ability to give birth on her own. Giving birth has traditionally been one of the situations in which women support each other, and in this book with almost no positive female companionship, O-lan refuses even this most necessary form of it. Her hatred for her past life first becomes evident here.



O-lan says that when she goes back to **the House of Hwang**, she will bring her son. Both will be clad in new clothes, and she'll present herself to the Old Mistress. Wang Lung realizes that O-lan has been planning this for a long time, even though it seemed like she wasn't even thinking about the child. He gives her as much money as she needs for the clothes, plus a little more that he'd been considering using to gamble. He's always too afraid of losing money to gamble. O-lan takes the money, saying it's the first silver she's ever had. Wang Lung thinks of how the silver came from the **earth** he works. For the first time, he sees spending money not as a waste, but as creating something wonderful—clothes for his child.

O-lan doesn't want anyone with her when she gives birth. Her time comes one evening when she's working in the field with Wang Lung, harvesting the rice. Wang Lung has been getting impatient with her slow work, but when he turns to look at her, he notices that she's in pain. She returns to the house, telling him not to come into the room where she lies. He is only to bring her a sharpened reed to cut the umbilical cord. When he returns home with the reed, he's amazed to find that O-lan has prepared dinner. She comes panting to the door of her room to fetch the reed from him.

Wang Lung's father tells him not to worry yet and recalls his many children who died. Wang Lung stands at the door of the room, listening to O-lan pant and smelling a frightening smell of blood. Finally, he hears a baby cry and asks whether it's a "man." O-lan confirms that it is. Wang Lung jubilantly awakens his father to tell him the news, who laughs with happiness at being a grandfather. Finally, Wang Lung eats his dinner, listening to the sounds from the bedroom.

Wang Lung goes back to the room, and O-lan allows him to enter. It smells like blood, but the only blood he can see is in a tub that O-lan has pushed under the bed to conceal it. She's lying in bed with the baby beside her, wrapped in Wang Lung's old trousers, as is the custom. Wang Lung looks at the baby, unable to speak because of his emotions. O-lan appears worn out from the birth, and Wang Lung feels very tenderly towards her. He says that the next day, he'll buy red sugar and stir it into hot water for her to drink. In fact, he'll even buy eggs and dye them red so that everyone will know he has a son.

O-lan wants nothing more than to overcome the cruelty she experienced at the House of Hwang and to prove that she's no longer a slave. Thus, she hopes to symbolically throw off the Hwangs' power over her before Wang Lung even thinks to work towards the same end. O-lan and Wang Lung both treasure money for having very little of it, while it will be seen that the Hwangs waste theirs since they have so much. Wang Lung recognizes that his life proceeds from the earth, this time in the form of money that will set his child apart and mark his upward mobility.



O-lan exhibits incredible strength and stamina, doing physical work up until when she goes into labor and even fulfilling her housewife's duty to feed her family while in labor. No one can reproach her for laziness or shirking her responsibilities as a wife. Her request to be alone while giving birth makes the process into something mysterious and frightening.



Wang Lung's father's memories of his dead children demonstrate the dangers of life in this time, particularly as a poor family. The fact that Wang Lung calls a newborn boy a "man" indicates that he already pins on it all his hopes for a son who will bring him pride and eventually take over care of the land. Even at birth, the boy has a whole host of social expectations on him.



O-lan hides all signs of the trial she has just endured, perhaps because to perfectly fulfill the role of wife, she must never complain or draw attention to herself. Wrapping the baby in Wang Lung's trousers indicates that he is expected to grow up in his father's image and someday take over Wang Lung's responsibilities. Wang Lung fully feels the importance and miracle of this first birth as he won't with the later births.



CHAPTER 4

The day after the birth, O-lan makes food as usual but doesn't go to work in the fields. That afternoon, Wang Lung goes to town to buy fifty eggs and red paper to dye them red. He also buys red sugar, telling the merchant proudly of his son. The man wishes him good fortune as he does to many customers, but it makes Wang Lung feel particularly lucky. However, he soon becomes worried that if he's too fortunate, evil spirits will come to ruin his happiness. He buys incense and burns it in the temple where he and O-lan went before. Wang Lung feels sure that the gods in the temple will protect his family.

Before long, O-lan begins working in the fields with Wang Lung again. They thresh and winnow the harvested wheat, and then plant another crop for winter. While O-lan works, the baby lies on a quilt on the ground. Sometimes O-lan stops to nurse him, both of them looking brown from the dirt as though they were made out of **earth**. O-lan produces more milk than the baby can drink, and it gushes into the ground. The baby is healthy, taking life from his mother's milk.

When winter comes, the family is well prepared. The harvests have been bountiful, and the house is full of onions, garlic, wheat, and rice. Because Wang Lung is careful with his money, he can afford to wait until food is scarce to sell his grain, so that he'll get a better price for it. His uncle, on the other hand, always has to sell his grain far too early. Wang Lung's uncle's wife is lazy and always wants luxuries, unlike O-lan. Wang Lung even has a leg of pork that he bought from his neighbor Ching when his pig began to sicken and had to be killed.

The family sits with their wealth while the winter becomes bitterly cold. When the baby turns one month old, Wang Lung invites guests over and gives them the eggs that he's dyed red. Everyone admires his healthy son. Meanwhile, the wind tears leaves from all the trees except the bamboos and prevents the wheat seed from sprouting. Finally, the wind stops and it rains, and the baby tries to catch the water as it drips off the roof. Wang Lung's father boasts of his grandson's intelligence. The wheat sprouts.

Red is the color of joy and good fortune in Chinese culture. Wang Lung feels very lucky and proud to have a son, but his fear of evil spirits in the face of his happiness gestures to the inevitable rise and fall of fortunes throughout life. Everyone experiences good luck and bad luck, and if Wang Lung has just had excellent luck, it seems likely that there's bad luck to come. However, imagining bad luck as evil spirits means that he can act preemptively to fight it off.



Buck again stresses the family's connection to the land. O-lan and the baby seem to be made out of the earth, and in fact all the nourishment they've ever received has originally come from it. In return, O-lan gives her milk to the earth, almost as a sort of offering. The image is one of great fertility; O-lan's fertility produces milk that nurtures not only her son, but also the fertile land.



Wang Lung's luck has stayed excellent, and the land has been just as fertile as O-lan. However, even in the midst of Wang Lung's hard-won prosperity, the reader learns of his uncle's family's woes, foreshadowing the uncle's family's later attempts to drain Wang Lung of his fortune. Wang Lung's financial wisdom is contrasted with his uncle's blunders.



This is one of the few truly content times for Wang Lung's family. They can share their good fortune with their relatives and neighbors, and though nature temporarily creates a setback for the crops, it passes quickly enough. The baby's growth parallels that of the wheat; as he becomes aware of the world around him, the wheat begins to grow, too.



The farmers feel that the **earth** is doing their work for them by watering the crops, so they have time to visit each other and socialize while their wives work at home. Wang Lung, however, worries that others will want to borrow from his plentiful stores of food if he becomes too friendly with them, so he avoids visiting. He stays home and mends tools while O-lan mends clothes and earthenware. They feel happy at each other's work and approval, though they say little. Wang Lung has a bit of extra money from the harvest, so together they hide it in a hole in the wall behind their bed. It gives them a sense of wealth and comfort.

Wang Lung may be well-off at the moment, but he doesn't feel secure in his wealth. Though he always cares what others think of him, right now he's more worried about being able to take care of his family than about showing off. In this phase of modest wealth, Wang Lung and O-lan can mutually appreciate each other and exist in perfect harmony. Hiding the money together is an act of unity and trust that makes them seem almost equal.



CHAPTER 5

As the New Year approaches, Wang Lung makes preparations, gluing red paper with symbols for happiness and riches onto his farm tools and symbols for good luck on the doors. His father makes new dresses for the temple figures out of more red paper, and Wang Lung burns incense in the temple. He also buys candles to burn under the picture of a god in his house.

The New Year is an important festival in which the Chinese honor their gods and ancestors and look forward to good fortune in the coming year. Wang Lung's preparations center around the earth, as he decorates his farm tools and makes offerings to the earth gods. His fortune comes from the land.



O-lan bakes fancy moon cakes like those eaten in **the House of Hwang**. When Wang Lung sees how beautiful they are, he's very proud. His father wants Wang Lung's uncle to see them, but Wang Lung thinks the uncle's family would want to eat them. O-lan says that she's going to bring the cakes to the Old Mistress when she visits with the baby after the New Year. Wang Lung is very pleased with the idea, and can think only of this upcoming visit. On the first day of the new year, his uncle and his neighbors come to the house to celebrate, and Wang Lung makes sure that the best of the cakes are hidden.

Wang Lung loves the idea of showing off his good fortune to the Old Mistress, particularly after he felt so ashamed in front of her. Similarly, O-lan is eager to prove to her former mistress that she has value in the world, particularly as it becomes increasingly apparent that she wasn't treated well at all at the House of Hwang. The moon cakes symbolize the first step in Wang Lung's journey to replacing the Hwangs.



On the second day of the New Year, women visit each other. O-lan dresses the baby in his fancy new clothes, and she and Wang Lung also dress well. They go to **the House of Hwang**. Wang Lung is gratified by the gateman's amazement at the sight of his family. The gateman can tell that Wang Lung has done well in the past year, and he invites Wang Lung to wait for O-lan in his own house. Wang Lung proudly watches his wife and son go into the great house, then enters the gateman's house. He takes the honorable seat offered by the gateman's wife, but he declines to drink the tea she gives him, as though it's not good enough for him.

The first time the gateman met Wang Lung, he treated the farmer with disdain. The change in his attitude shows how Wang Lung's social status has increased as his wealth increased—the presence of his son, along with his family's good clothing, make the man treat Wang Lung with respect. Wang Lung feels his respect acutely and will seek out this sort of respect in the future. He even tries to flip the tables socially by disdaining the gateman's wife's tea, which seems rather arrogant.



When the gateman brings O-lan back, Wang Lung examines her face and can tell that all has gone well. As they leave the house, he takes the baby and eagerly asks how the visit went. O-lan whispers in shock that it seems **the House of Hwang** is lacking in money. The Old Mistress and the slaves were all wearing the same coats as the previous year. The clothes of O-lan and the child were better than those she saw in the house.

Wang Lung exults at this news, but fears that evil spirits will want to spoil his happiness. He hides the child and says aloud that it is a sickly female. O-lan agrees. He asks what has caused this change in the fortunes of the great house, and O-lan tells him that the young lords spend too much money, the Old Lord has many concubines, and the Old Mistress never stops eating **opium**. A daughter about to get married has a huge dowry and demands all the best clothes.

The Old Mistress told O-lan that the family is looking to sell **land** just outside the city wall. This entirely convinces Wang Lung of the family's fallen fortunes, since land is the most important thing. Suddenly he decides with triumph that he'll buy the land. O-lan argues that it's too far from their house, and he should instead buy land closer to them. Wang Lung says that the closer land has bad soil. He imagines going to the Old Lord as an equal and buying the land with his own money, and he thinks that O-lan, who used to be a slave in **the House of Hwang**, will instead be the wife of a man who owns the Hwangs' land. O-lan realizes this, too, and agrees that he should buy the land.

CHAPTER 6

The new piece of **land** changes Wang Lung's life. When he first buys it, he almost regrets his purchase, wishing he could have his money back. The land will take more work, and buying it wasn't so wonderful as he'd imagined. When he got to the great house, the Old Lord was still asleep, and the gateman refused to wake him, because he was with a new concubine. Wang Lung had to deal instead with the Old Lord's agent, who's untrustworthy.

One day Wang Lung goes to look at his new **land**. He paces out how large it is and decides that he'll replace the stones at the corners set with the seal of **the House of Hwang** with his own name. But he doesn't yet want other people to know that he's rich enough to buy this land. He thinks how little this land means to those in the great house, and hates that it means so much to him. He realizes how much of a difference there still is between himself and the House of Hwang. He decides that he'll buy so much land from them that this plot will seem insignificant.

Just as Wang Lung first begins to show off his increasing wealth, he finds out that the House of Hwang is decreasing in wealth, beginning a symbolic switch in their places that will take the entire book to complete. In this initial stage, Wang Lung and O-lan regard the Hwangs' misfortune as almost unthinkable.



Wang Lung again feels the oncoming doom that good luck spells in a world where fortune changes quickly. He and O-lan try to fool luck (in the form of evil spirits) by pretending their luck is bad. The House of Hwang is consumed by what their wealth has given them; they are sinking in luxury. They use their wealth for vice, and it will destroy them.



Wang Lung values his land so highly that he absolutely can't imagine wanting to sell land for any reason other than desperation. The life-giving symbolism of land in this book means that in buying the Hwangs' land, Wang Lung also buys their life, meaning this is another step in his path to making his family into the "new" Hwangs. Though he wants the land for itself, he more strongly wants it for the triumph he will feel at buying the land of the people who have oppressed him and his wife.



Wang Lung's initial regret of his purchase proves that he bought the land just as much for the triumph of buying land from the Old Lord as an equal, but his failure to meet the Old Lord shows that simply having enough money to buy land doesn't make Wang Lung an equal with the Hwangs. The Old Lord lives decadently, sleeping in with a concubine.



By replacing the seal of the House of Hwang with his own name, Wang Lung will take another symbolic step towards replacing the Hwang family itself. However, Wang Lung still hesitates to act as though he's rich, afraid that others will take advantage of him if he does. For the first time, he gives voice to ambition, acknowledging his desire to become as rich as the Hwangs.



Wang Lung works hard throughout the spring. His father takes care of the baby so that O-lan can work in the fields. When Wang Lung notices that O-lan is pregnant again, he's irritated that she won't be able to help with the harvest, but she says that only the first pregnancy is difficult. Neither mentions the pregnancy again until that fall, when O-lan goes back to the house from working in the fields one day. It looks like it's going to rain, and Wang Lung has to gather the ripe rice. Later in the day, O-lan returns to the fields, having given birth. Wang Lung wants to tell her to rest, but his own fatigue keeps him from doing so. He only asks whether the baby is a boy or a girl, and she tells him it's a boy. He's glad, and they work into the night.

After dinner, Wang Lung goes to look at his new son and is pleased. He imagines that he'll have another every year, and feels that O-lan brings him good luck. He tells his father that the eldest son will have to sleep with him now, and the old man is delighted, as he has long wanted the older son to warm him at night. When the older son sees the new baby, he understands that he can no longer sleep with his mother, and goes to his grandfather's bed without protest.

Wang Lung has good harvests again and hides more money in the wall. The **land** he's bought gives him even better harvests than his old land. Everyone comes to know that he owns the land, and people talk of making him the head of the village.

CHAPTER 7

Wang Lung has often thought his uncle might cause trouble, and now he begins to do so. Because of their family ties, Wang Lung has to support him if the uncle needs help. The uncle works enough to feed his family, but no more. The uncle's wife doesn't keep their house clean, and their daughters run around the village and talk to men. This disgrace makes Wang Lung so angry that he tells his uncle's wife that no one will marry a girl who's so bold with men.

The uncle's wife tells Wang Lung that they can't pay for their daughters to marry since they don't have the sort of money he does. She says it isn't her husband's fault that he has bad luck no matter how hard he works. Tearing at her hair and weeping, she laments her family's "evil destiny." Her neighbors come to watch, but Wang Lung insists that the eldest daughter must be married while she's still a virgin, and then he goes home. He dreams of becoming richer and doesn't want his uncle's family to ruin his rise in status.

Wang Lung was thrilled with O-lan's first pregnancy, but his excitement has quickly turned to irritation. Even though a wife's duty is to bear children, Wang Lung rarely remains satisfied with O-lan for long in whatever capacity she serves him, and now he values her work in the fields above her childbearing ability, thus giving her no support as she carries and births his child. O-lan, however, remains uncomplaining, showing incredible stamina as she returns to work immediately after giving birth. Wang Lung doesn't appreciate her.



Once Wang Lung no longer has to think about his crops, he does find satisfaction in his new son. Even now, however, he doesn't appreciate O-lan's hard work, but instead thinks only that she brings luck, something she can't really control. The family is growing, and even the eldest son has a duty to the family at his young age—he will keep his grandfather warm.



Wang Lung begins to make a name for himself as his success grows—money equals respect. The one piece of the Hwangs' land affects his meager fortunes in a way it never could affect the Hwang's great ones.



Wang Lung's uncle's family exists in opposition to Wang Lung's own. While Wang Lung and O-lan constantly work to try to better their place in life, Wang Lung's uncle and his wife are lazy and careless. But Wang Lung's responsible personality—and rigid social rules—won't let him watch his own relatives struggle if he has the power to help them.



The uncle's wife insists that her family's poverty isn't her husband's fault, even though Wang Lung knows it is. This makes the family even more unlikeable, since they won't take responsibility for their own failings. Wang Lung shows his overpowering care for his social status here, as he doesn't want his relative's bad reputation to set him back as he becomes an important man.



The next day, Wang Lung's uncle comes to the field where he's working. O-lan isn't working with him, because she's pregnant again, and not as strong as before. Wang Lung's uncle's clothes fit him badly. He comes to stand silently where Wang Lung is hoeing. Finally, Wang Lung says sarcastically that he must be a slower worker than his uncle, if his uncle is already done cultivating his beans. His uncle replies that bad luck has made his beans fail to grow. Wang Lung knows his uncle has come to ask a favor.

Wang Lung's uncle agrees that his daughter should be married, and he's worried that she'll get pregnant and shame their family. Wang Lung wants to tell him to force her act respectably, but he can't say this to someone older than him. His uncle laments that his wife is lazy and only births girls. If he were as rich as Wang Lung, he says, he would share his wealth with his nephew.

Wang Lung replies that he isn't rich, and has many mouths to feed. His uncle says that his purchase of **land** from the Hwangs shows his wealth. Wang Lung gets angry, telling his uncle that he and O-lan work hard, unlike his uncle and his uncle's wife. His uncle slaps him for speaking disrespectfully to an elder. Wang Lung knows he has done wrong, but remains angry. His uncle threatens to tell the whole village of Wang Lung's disrespect.

Finally, Wang Lung asks what his uncle wants of him. His uncle calms down and asks for money to marry off his oldest daughter. Wang Lung takes him to the house for the silver, resentful because he knows his savings are going to be wasted on his uncle's gambling. At the house, his uncle gives Wang Lung's children coins and admires them while Wang Lung goes to his room for the money.

In the room, Wang Lung finds that O-lan has birthed a girl, which she calls a "slave." Wang Lung feels that the birth signifies bad luck. When he takes the silver out of the wall, O-lan asks what he's doing, and he says he must lend it to his uncle. O-lan points out that it won't be a loan, but a gift. Wang Lung is aware of this. He gives his uncle the money and goes back to the field, where he falls to work with a passion, thinking of his money wasted.

O-lan's constant work and childbearing seems to be wearing on her, though Wang Lung doesn't give it a second thought. He knows his uncle doesn't take good care of his crops, but his uncle refuses to take responsibility for his crops' poor quality or to ever look critically at his own life choices. His ill-fitting clothes symbolize his generally careless state.



Wang Lung knows that he's wiser and more responsible than his uncle, but he's too polite to transgress traditions of respect for family and for elders. His uncle blames his misfortune not only on luck, but also on his wife, refusing to take any blame himself. He tries to guilt-trip Wang Lung.



Wang Lung initially kept his land purchase a secret so that others wouldn't try to take advantage of him, and now his uncle is doing just that. Although Wang Lung's arguments are accurate, his transgression of social rules puts him in the wrong, which could hurt him in his quest to rise socially.



Wang Lung's uncle essentially blackmails him into giving him money, foreshadowing later similar acts. The uncle acts kindly to the children despite his despicable demands, which proves his untrustworthiness—he can appear innocent while really hurting his own relatives.



The fact that girls are called "slaves" from birth indicates their complete disempowerment in every phase of life. Girls are valued far less than boys, and Wang Lung even sees the birth of a girl as an evil omen. Against this backdrop, O-lan demonstrates her financial awareness and practicality.



By evening, Wang Lung's anger wanes and he remembers that he now has another mouth to feed. He anticipates more daughters to come, who are raised for the good of other families. He hasn't even looked at his daughter's face yet. Leaning on his hoe, he grieves that now he won't be able to buy more **land** until the next year. He sees a flock of crows land in the trees near his house, and he chases them away. It's a bad omen.

Daughters are valued little partly because they will marry into other families, rather than bringing wealth or glory to their own family. Wang Lung initially seems to dislike this daughter, though she will become his most treasured child. Just as Wang Lung senses, this day acts as a turning point in his fortunes.



CHAPTER 8

Now that the gods have turned against Wang Lung, nothing goes well. The sky is always clear, and no rain comes. Despite Wang Lung's work, the fields become dry, and the wheat dies. He constantly brings the rice buckets of water, but finally the pond goes dry and O-lan says the well water must be used for drinking. Wang Lung replies that if the plants die, they'll all starve. Their lives depend on the **land**.

As a farmer, Wang Lung's livelihood depends on the whims of nature even more than on his own hard work. Wang Lung is very aware of how closely his family depends on nature's favor and on the land. They might as well be the plants, dying as the land dries up.



The **land** Wang Lung bought from **the House of Hwang** is the only field that bears crops, because it's near the moat. Wang Lung sells the grain as soon as he harvests it, and he decides to buy more land as he had planned, despite everything. He's heard that the House of Hwang is struggling more than ever, and the Old Mistress wants the agent to sell land so she can have **opium**. The Old Lord has taken another concubine, as he desires younger women the older he gets. He can't understand the idea of not having enough money. The young lords follow their parents' example, blaming the agent for the lack of money, and he's become quite distressed.

Wang Lung makes a risky decision by buying land when he has cash rather than storing up food. This decision demonstrates the strength of his desire to own more land and build up his wealth. If land represents life in this novel, he decides land will give life more than food will. The Hwangs understand neither the value of land nor of money, so they're willing to give up anything to satisfy their desires, showing that wealth becomes dangerous when a person no longer works hard for it.



The fields of **the House of Hwang** haven't borne harvests either, so the agent is desperately in need of Wang Lung's silver. They make the deal quickly. Wang Lung feels satisfied to have this fertile **land**, particularly since it belonged to a great house. He doesn't even tell O-lan that he bought it.

Wang Lung values the land more because of the social climbing that it represents—owning the land of a great house means he's closer to being the head of a great family. However, his secrecy about the purchase shows that he knows it may have been unwise at this time.



Months pass without rain. Men stand around in the village discussing whether the clouds might hold rain, but the wind always blows the clouds away. Wang Lung harvests small amounts of beans and corn, making sure nothing is wasted. O-lan tells him to save the corn cobs, because when she was a child they ate them in years of famine. Everyone falls silent with fear when she says this. Only the girl is unafraid, because she drinks from her mother's breast. O-lan tells her to eat while she can. Then O-lan becomes pregnant again, her milk dries up, and the baby constantly cries with hunger.

Though O-lan never really illuminates her past, she does make offhand comments that suggest suffering and tragedy in her life before her marriage to Wang Lung. However, her previous experience of famine also helps her family, as she has a certain expertise. While O-lan's milk earlier flowed in such abundance that she could feed not only her son, but also the land, now she dries up along with the land.



Throughout that fall, no one asks anyone else how they find food, but only thinks of themselves. Wang Lung has taken care of his ox as long as possible, letting it graze with the oldest son on its back to keep it from being stolen until he felt even this precaution might not protect it from the village men. When the food runs very low, Wang Lung's father says they must eat the ox. Wang Lung protests, because he feels deeply connected to this beast that helps him in the fields. His father insists that they'll die if the ox doesn't. Wang Lung puts it off as long as possible, but the children are hungry, and finally he consents to the ox's death, but he can't kill it himself.

Wang Lung lies in bed with a quilt around his head so he can't hear O-lan kill the ox. He finally comes out when she's cooked the meat, but he can't eat it. O-lan tells him that the ox was old, and they'll get a better one. Finally he eats. Before long they've eaten every part of the ox, and only the skin is left, stretched to dry.

The villagers think that Wang Lung is hiding money and food. His uncle comes asking for help, and Wang Lung has to give him a small amount of beans and corn. When the uncle returns for more, Wang Lung sends him away, and the uncle spreads rumors that Wang Lung has plenty to eat but won't give him anything. The villagers become more and more desperate as the winter gets colder, and finally the uncle's words cause a group of men to come to Wang Lung's house.

The men throw Wang Lung's family out of the house and tear everything up to find his food. They're disappointed when they only find a tiny amount, so they begin to take his furniture. O-lan speaks to them, saying that her family has no more than theirs. They're all starving, and they'll all have to eat grass and bark. She points out that she's pregnant, and the men leave, ashamed. One man, a neighbor named Ching, wants to apologize, but he can't bear to return the beans he's stolen, so he just leaves.

Wang Lung stands outside and feels frightened that he has nothing with which to feed his family. But then he's calmed by the thought that no matter what, no one can take his **land** away. The men would have stolen silver, but he still has his land.

Wang Lung's ox feels almost like family to him, as it is part of his connection to the land. Without it, he can't work effectively in the fields, and he knows that eventually he'll be able to grow crops again, and he'll need the ox in order to make his livelihood. The fact that both man and beast labor on the land creates a certain intimacy in Wang Lung's mind. However, he's finally forced to see that he has to choose between the ox and his children.



Wang Lung demonstrates his compassionate character as he struggles so much to let go of the ox. Even his extreme hunger doesn't compromise his emotion. O-lan, on the other hand, proves her practical, unsentimental nature. Their reactions counter conventional gender expectations.



Wang Lung's early caution about letting people know of his good fortune seems more and more prudent as time goes on. Now that people know he was relatively wealthy before the famine, they think he must still be. His uncle further proves his cruelty as he uses his position as family to take advantage of Wang Lung even as Wang Lung's family starves.



The men turn into a mob due to their overpowering hunger. O-lan shows herself to have a cool head in an emergency, and she acts bravely and wisely, though Wang Lung doesn't acknowledge it. Her words indicate again that she knows from experience how the famine will progress, but she faces the future without visible fear. Ching's guiltiness about his theft will later serve to the family's advantage.



For Wang Lung, the thought of his land always acts as a comfort. In this situation, he feels that his land is a more secure form of wealth than money or even food.



CHAPTER 9

Wang Lung feels that he has to do something to prevent his family from dying. He's angry at the gods, and shakes his fists at the sky. One day he goes to the temple of the **earth** and spits on the figure of the god. The temple is unkempt now, but the figures show no emotion.

The family rarely gets up, sleeping to forget their hunger. People are eating bark and grass, and there are no animals to be found. The children's stomachs are bloated with hunger. The daughter hasn't learned to sit up, and she never cries, but only stares out of a hollow face. In normal circumstances, Wang Lung would have ignored her, but now he dotes on her, calling her a "poor fool." When she smiles at him, he cries, and sometimes he sits at the door holding her. His father gets food even before the children, because Wang Lung knows it's his responsibility to take care of him. Wang Lung's father remains cheerful, saying that in worse times, he saw people eating children. Wang Lung is horrified.

One day, Wang Lung's neighbor Ching comes to the house and wonders what's left to eat now that all the animals, the grass, and the bark have been eaten. Wang Lung looks at his daughter and sees a faint smile that breaks his heart. Ching says that the villagers, including Wang Lung's uncle and his uncle's wife, are eating human flesh. Wang Lung becomes afraid and says that his family will go south. Ching says he doesn't mind dying, but Wang Lung has to take care of his family. Wang Lung joyfully tells O-lan that they'll leave, and she approves, saying that she'll give birth soon, and they can leave the next day. Wang Lung pities her, for she looks awful.

Wang Lung begs Ching to give him any food he has left, and he'll forgive Ching for stealing from him. Ching is ashamed, and says that it was all Wang Lung's uncle's fault. He only has a handful of beans, but he'll give some to Wang Lung. He brings back some moldy beans, which Wang Lung gives to O-lan, who knows she'll die giving birth if she doesn't eat. Wang Lung chews a few of the beans and feeds them to his daughter, which satisfies his own hunger.

That night, Wang Lung sits in the main room while O-lan gives birth alone, as she wishes. He doesn't care whether it's a boy or a girl, since he only thinks of the baby as another mouth to feed. Just as he hopes the baby will be born dead, he hears it cry, but only once. He goes to the door and asks whether O-lan is all right. She tells him to come in, and he finds the baby dead on the floor. It was a girl. O-lan looks awful, and Wang Lung pities her for having to starve not only for herself, but also for this child.

In Wang Lung's culture, the gods often act as manifestations of nature. Just as the sky remains unresponsively dry, so the figures of the gods have deserted Wang Lung in his hour of need.



The land is in the throes of a severe famine, and people must resort to desperate measures. Whereas Wang Lung would normally care little for a female child, his pity for her, her inability to understand their situation, and her smiles in the face of his desperation bond him to her. Characteristically, however, he feels more sentiment for this helpless girl than for his brave, resourceful wife. Wang Lung's duty to protect his father wins out over his duty to protect his children, showing the strength of respect for elders.



Wang Lung's daughter consistently smiles and laughs in even the most desperate moments, simply because she's unaware of everything around her, suggesting that this might be a more peaceful state of being. Wang Lung's uncle and his wife prove themselves to be about as barbaric as possible; furthermore, their consumption of human flesh foreshadows their later consumption of Wang Lung's wealth—they essentially take for themselves whatever they can get their hands on.



Ching demonstrates the essential goodness that Wang Lung will come to highly value in him. This goodness also speaks to the evil influence of the uncle, if the uncle can turn bad even someone as good as Ching. Wang Lung loves his daughter so much that he feels almost as though her body is his—feeding her makes him feel as though he's eaten.



The famine has changed Wang Lung's priorities. He no longer cares about wealth or social status, but only about his family's survival. At this point, children are almost a curse, whereas Wang Lung used to dream of a house full of children. As always, O-lan struggles alone, perhaps a metaphor for her entire life and marriage.



Wang Lung brings the child out and wraps it in a mat. Its head flops around and he sees two bruises on its neck. He brings it to an old cemetery and lays it against a grave. A starving dog immediately appears, and though Wang Lung hits it with a rock, the dog won't budge. Wang Lung leaves in complete despair.

It becomes clear that O-lan killed her own child, which is probably most merciful, though she likely wouldn't have done this if it were a boy. Wang Lung's tragedy reaches a new low, as he can't even protect his dead child.



The next morning, Wang Lung realizes that his family is far too weak to travel. Besides, they might not find any food in the south. It's better to die in their own home. He stares out over the dry, barren fields. Even if he had money, there would be no food to purchase. He can't even get angry at the rumor that rich men are hoarding food. He no longer feels hungry. He has been feeding his children soil from the fields mixed in water, which has a little nutrition and slightly satisfies their hunger. He's glad to hear O-lan slowly eating the few beans left.

Wang Lung feels desperately helpless, hardly fighting for life anymore, but only for a good death. No matter how desperate he gets, however, he rarely feels anger against the rich, perhaps because his aspiration to be one of them blinds him to their faults. Though the land always gives the family life, it does so most literally here, as they eat the dirt itself, not even what grows in the dirt.



As Wang Lung thinks of death, he sees men, including his uncle, coming towards the house. His uncle remarks that Wang Lung's family is doing well. Wang Lung becomes angry when he sees that his uncle isn't starving. His uncle retorts that his own wife is nothing but bones and three of their children have died. He insists that he has only thought of Wang Lung and his father. He's borrowed food from the men who are with him with a promise to help them buy **land**. The men have come to buy Wang Lung's land.

Wang Lung's uncle tries to create a different reality, saying that Wang Lung's family is well when they're starving and making his own family pitiable when he himself looks fine. The uncle always uses Wang Lung's responsibility to his family against him, but the uncle hurts his relatives for personal gain—now he's feeding himself by trying to strip Wang Lung of his very life, the land.



Wang Lung doesn't acknowledge the men, but sees that they're men from town who look well fed. He hates them for eating when his own children are starving. He refuses to sell his **land**. His second son crawls to the door, too weak to walk. Wang Lung's uncle asks if that's the same fat boy he saw in the summer, and Wang Lung begins to weep.

Wang Lung finally feels righteous anger against those who thrive while his family withers. His pride won't let him sell his most prized possession at all, much less to people as awful as these. The appearance of his son creates a powerful contrast with the well-fed men.



Finally Wang Lung asks how much the men will give him, thinking he must feed his children. A one-eyed man says they'll give him a great price, a hundred pence per acre. Wang Lung says this is one-twentieth of what it's worth, but another man points out that he's starving. Wang Lung sees that the men are sure he'll sell to save his family, and he becomes terribly angry. He screams that he'll never sell the **land**. Instead he'll feed the earth to the children and bury them in it. Then his anger leaves, and he stands weeping. The men only smile.

The men try to force Wang Lung to choose between his land and his family, the two things that he values above all else. This is practically an impossible choice, particularly since he has nowhere to live and no way to make a living without his land. He chooses the land, seeming to think that it will protect his family both in life and death. His love for his land and his love for his family are really inseparable.



O-lan comes to the door. She says calmly that they won't sell the **land**, because they'll need it when they get home from the south, but they'll sell everything in the house besides the farm tools. The one-eyed man says they'll give two pieces of silver for all of it. It's a bad price, but O-lan accepts, and he gives her the silver. The men take everything from the house. When they go to take the bed from under Wang Lung's father, the uncle stands outside to avoid seeing his brother. When they leave, O-lan says they must leave while they have the money, and Wang Lung agrees. He takes comfort in the fact that he still has his land.

O-lan again demonstrates her bravery and composure under pressure, even when Wang Lung is on the brink of completely falling apart. Her calmness is more convincing than Wang Lung's hysteria, and the men believe that she means what she says as they didn't with Wang Lung. On some level, the uncle knows that what he's done is despicable, but that doesn't make him change his ways.



CHAPTER 10

The next day, the family closes the door behind them, the boys carrying bowls and chopsticks, and they leave. Wang Lung carries the girl until he has to give her to O-lan so that he can carry his father on his back. They pass the temple with its oblivious gods. The wind is frigid, and Wang Lung encourages his sons with talk of food in the south. They reach the gate to the city, where deep mud hinders them. Wang Lung has to carry his father and his children through, and he's left almost without strength.

This scene presents the ultimate picture of familial unity. The boys carry the bowls that symbolize their hope for food in the near future, while Wang Lung and O-lan use what little strength they have left to help their daughter and Wang Lung's father. It's so difficult for them just to reach the town that it seems they have little hope of going farther.



They pass the gate to **the House of Hwang**. It's locked, and a few people lie outside. Wang Lung hears one say that the rich are eating while they starve, and another says he wants to burn the house down. Wang Lung says nothing.

Though all the evidence points to the cruelty of the rich, Wang Lung doesn't seem to hate them the way the other starving people do, perhaps because he already envisions himself as a rich man.



The family emerges on the other side of the town as it gets dark, and they find a crowd of people moving south. Wang Lung asks where everyone is going, and someone tells him they're going to ride the "firewagon" south. Wang Lung has heard of this machine that expels fire and water, and has often intended to go see it, but never has. He asks O-lan if she thinks they should go on the firewagon. While they stop to wonder, Wang Lung's father and sons sink to the ground. His daughter looks almost dead, and O-lan says they're all likely to die that night.

The popular name for the train shows that it's still a rather new addition to the countryside. In fact, it's just one of the changes that often go on around Wang Lung almost without him noticing. In this case, the train results from the Industrial Revolution and foreign influence in China. Wang Lung is almost as unchangeable as the land, which remains for eons no matter what goes on in the human world.



Wang Lung realizes that they can't survive another day of walking, so he says they'll take the firewagon. That very moment a huge noise and fiery eyes come out of the darkness. The family is pushed forward in the ensuing terror of the crowd, but they manage to stick together and end up in a compartment. The firewagon takes them away.

The frightening, modern machine that takes the family away from their land foreshadows the unfamiliar institutions that they'll encounter in the city, where everything is more closely connected to broader movements of modernity in the country and the world.



CHAPTER 11

Wang Lung pays the family's fare and buys some bread and rice. They've eaten so little lately that they have trouble eating now. Wang Lung's father cheerfully forces the bread down, making the people around him laugh with his determination to live.

Wang Lung saves the rest of the money. He listens to the wisdom of other people in the firewagon who have gone south in other years. One man tells him he must buy mats and not let the merchant charge him extra because he's from the country. He must make the mats into a hut, cover himself in dirt, and beg on the street. Wang Lung doesn't like the idea of begging. The man says that every morning one can get rice cheaply in a public kitchen. Wang Lung secretly counts his money and finds he has enough for the mats and the rice, with a little extra. But he still doesn't want to beg. He asks the man if there's work he can do. The man says angrily that he can pull a rickshaw, but it's bad work, and better to beg.

When they get off the firewagon, Wang Lung has a plan. He leaves the family with O-lan and goes to buy mats. He can hardly understand the southerners' accents, and they have quick tempers when he asks them directions. Finally he returns with the mats. He sees that the boys are frightened, but his father is amazed at the southerners' health. Caravans pass carrying bricks and grain, and the drivers give Wang Lung scornful looks, cracking their whips just to see the family jump.

Wang Lung sees that there are huts built against the wall behind them, but no one knows what's on the other side of the wall. Wang Lung struggles to put a hut together until O-lan says she knows how to do it from her childhood. Before long she makes a round roof and secures the edges with bricks. They all sit inside, amazed that just the day before they were a hundred miles away.

The family feels hopeful, and they go to find the public kitchens. They soon join many people carrying bowls and heading for the kitchens. Inside they find giant cauldrons containing white rice. The people crowd forward towards the good smell of the steam, jostling dangerously though there's plenty for all. Wang Lung can only cling to his family, and he manages to get the rice before the crowd pushes him away.

Things immediately begin to look up as the family gets food. Wang Lung's father has never despaired, perhaps because he had no responsibility to take care of the others and has already lived a full life.



On the train, Wang Lung already begins to hear of the differences between the country people and the city people that he will feel more sharply later on. Wang Lung has worked hard his whole life, and begging seems almost like what his uncle does. He has too much honor to be able to respect himself if he doesn't work for his food. The man's comments about work in the city foreshadow the awful working conditions in the city, as opposed to on the land.



Wang Lung immediately begins to feel the difference between the people in his part of the country and those in this southern city. Even though nobody seems to want his family there, the health of the city people is promising, as it indicates that there's plenty of food to go around.



O-lan's knowledge of how to build a mat hut suggests, as other clues have, that she experienced great hardship before she married Wang Lung. The family feels the change in the pace of life that the Industrial Revolution has caused, as the train makes it possible to travel quickly.



On one hand, the city offers a sort of welfare system that allows its poor people to eat. On the other hand, the method of distributing that food almost dehumanizes the crowds of people, as they push and shove like anonymous beasts to feed themselves, giving no thought for the hungry people around them.



They go outside and eat their rice, and Wang Lung thinks he'll save some for later, but a guard tells him he can't take any rice away. Wang Lung doesn't understand, and the guard explains that some people will buy the cheap rice and give it to their pigs. Wang Lung can't believe people would be so cruel. He asks who provides the rice, and the guard says the rich people do so in order to gain credit in heaven or the approval of other men. Wang Lung insists that some people must do it simply because they are good, but the guard doesn't answer.

The family returns to their hut and sleeps soundly. The next morning, they need more money, but Wang Lung no longer despairs, because there's so much food in the city. O-lan says she, the children, and the old man can beg. She shows the boys how to hold their bowls and cry out for change. Wang Lung is amazed, and she tells him that she begged like this as a child and was sold as a slave in a similarly difficult year. They all go out to beg, O-lan carrying the girl and telling passersby she'll die without charity. The boys don't take begging seriously, so O-lan scolds and slaps them until they cry, telling them they can starve.

Wang Lung rents a ricksha (rickshaw). He struggles to pull it, so he goes up and down a quiet street to practice. He's about to give up when a man asks for a ride. Wang Lung wants to turn him down, but the man is deaf, so Wang Lung has to let him get in. The man wants to go to the Confucian temple. Wang Lung doesn't know where it is, but he asks people as he goes through the crowded streets. At the temple, the man gives Wang Lung a silver coin, telling him not to ask for more.

Wang Lung doesn't even know how much the coin is worth, so he has it changed into pence. He's happy with the amount, but another ricksha puller tells him he was cheated. The man learns that Wang Lung didn't argue about the fare before the trip, and he exclaims at Wang Lung's countrified ignorance. He tells him that he has to argue about the fare with anyone except white foreigners, who always pay too much. The people around laugh at Wang Lung. He leaves, remembering that he still has to pay back the cost of renting the ricksha.

Wang Lung has three more passengers that day, but he only has a penny left after he's paid for the ricksha. He's disappointed, but he feels better when he thinks about his **land** waiting for him at home. He returns to the hut, and O-lan and the boys have begged enough money to pay for their rice the next morning. The second son won't let go of the money he begged. Wang Lung's father didn't get any money, but he says that he has worked all his life, so now he expects his son to take care of him.

In accepting the help of the rich, who don't truly care about the poor, Wang Lung loses some of his free will, as he's not even allowed to decide what to do with the rice that he has purchased (albeit at a lowered price). Even in the midst of his relief at being able to eat, Wang Lung must deal with the cruelty of humans, who buy and even give the rice for purely selfish reasons. In comparison, Wang Lung seems exceedingly moral.



It becomes increasingly evident that O-lan is reliving traumatic experiences from her childhood, though she uses them productively to better equip her family to deal with their present challenges. She never expresses any distress about her past, though it seems to have been extremely painful. While Wang Lung cares too much about his honor to beg, O-lan does whatever she needs to in order to feed her family. This might also be a difference in gender expectations.



Wang Lung gets pulled into the life of the city almost against his will, though the experience also shows that there's plenty of ready money around. The practice of riding in rickshaws highlights the divide between rich and poor, as poor men must physically exert themselves like cart animals to transport rich men, who sit leisurely in the rickshaw.



The difference in currency highlights the difference in culture that a hundred miles makes at this time. Furthermore, Wang Lung is now in a city instead of the country; he doesn't even know how to properly enact his role as a poor rickshaw puller, causing him social shame. This is the first time that white foreigners are mentioned, gesturing to the existence of a wider world that Wang Lung has never even considered.



The thought of his land often acts as a comfort to Wang Lung in the city, as though he feels that his real life is back home with the earth. The second son's possessiveness of his money perhaps foreshadows his business acumen and thriftiness later in life. Wang Lung's father depends fully on his son's familial duty for his survival and feels no guilt, because his culture works that way.



CHAPTER 12

As Wang Lung begins to feel secure in his family's survival, he starts getting to know the city and the routines of the people in it. He often brings people to either the Western school or the Chinese school, but he doesn't know anything about them. He brings men to houses of pleasure, but he experiences no pleasures himself.

Even though Wang Lung's family looks like the city people, they are like foreigners there. Life is slower in the country than in the city, and at home people eat simply, whereas here they want delicacies. The smell of the garlic they eat marks out country people from the city people. One day Wang Lung hears a man giving a speech about China's need to revolt against foreigners, and he feels that the man is talking about rising against *him*. When he hears another man saying that Chinese people need to unite and educate themselves, he doesn't imagine himself as part of this group.

Finally, Wang Lung learns that he is not a true foreigner. One day when he's looking for passengers, someone hails him who looks entirely strange, and Wang Lung can't even figure out whether they're male or female. As he gives the person a ride, he asks another ricksha puller what the person is, and learns that she is an American woman. Wang Lung is frightened of her, but she gives him twice the usual fare. When Wang Lung tells O-lan, she says that the foreigners always give her more money when she begs, but they don't think this is because the foreigners are good people. This experience teaches him that people with light hair and eyes are more foreign than those with black hair and eyes, and Wang Lung truly belongs to his race.

It seems like there is food everywhere in the city. The markets are filled to bursting with all varieties of fish, grains, meats, vegetables, and sweets. It doesn't seem possible that anyone could starve here, but Wang Lung and his family still join the large group of people who buy cheap rice from the public kitchens. They never manage to make enough money to buy their own rice to cook, though sometimes they get cabbage. In this case, the boys have to steal fuel from farmers carrying it into the city, and sometimes the farmers hit them.

Wang Lung exists in the city, but he doesn't understand it or really become part of it. According to historical context, great upheaval is going on regarding Western influence in China, but Wang Lung takes part in this debate only on the extreme periphery.



Though Wang Lung's family is Chinese and the city is also Chinese, it becomes clear that Chinese culture is not uniform across all regions, nor between the city and the country. Wang Lung feels completely like an outsider, and senses hostility against him as a result. Buck exposes a weakness of the political movements of this time, suggesting that they catered only to a certain urban population and failed to understand the perspective of more rural people.



This scene shows how isolated life in rural China could be at this time. Considering that Buck herself was an American woman, she demonstrates an ability to see herself from a point of view in which she hardly even exists. Furthermore, she expresses no sympathy for foreigners in this book, instead criticizing her own kind for their inability or refusal to assimilate to Chinese culture and their false goodwill towards Chinese people. Wang Lung only truly realizes he's Chinese when he meets someone totally foreign to whom he can compare himself.



The irony caused by Wang Lung's poverty in a land of plenty highlights the inequality in his society. While the wealthy can have everything they want, the poor suffer just to survive. No matter how hard Wang Lung works, it seems that his family will never be able to escape from poverty, as they never have enough money to set anything aside.



The second son begins to get good at stealing. Though this doesn't bother O-lan, Wang Lung hates seeing his sons steal. One night when there's pork in the stew they're cooking, the younger son admits to having stolen it. Wang Lung refuses to eat it and throws it on the ground. O-lan, however, washes it and puts it back in the pot. Wang Lung watches silently as the family eats the pork, but later he beats his son for stealing. This incident strengthens his conviction that they need to return to their **land**.

Just as Wang Lung couldn't stand to beg, his honor won't let him put up with thievery in his family. He sees the land as a place of salvation, where he can teach his sons the value of work and even of basic morality. O-lan, on the other hand, cares more about her family's survival than about any sense of righteousness, perhaps because of her childhood struggle to survive a famine and because she has been ill-treated all her life.



CHAPTER 13

Though the city is filled with luxury, Wang Lung's family has barely enough to survive. The working people of the city have no chance to enjoy themselves, but instead spend all their time creating the luxury in which the rich live. The older poor people remain silent, putting all of their energy into their work. Even in rest, their faces are twisted from the strain of their constant labor. They have no understanding of themselves; one man sees himself in a mirror and calls his reflection ugly without realizing it's really himself.

Again Buck emphasizes the inequality of Chinese society, in which the rich live in excessive luxury and the poor have no chance to escape poverty. There's no suggestion that a middle class exists. The story of the man looking in the mirror acts as a metaphor for many of the people's nonexistent political consciousness; they are only aware of themselves as machines that do work.



The poor women make do with others' leavings and stolen bits of cloth or food. They're endlessly having children, who are only more mouths to feed. Wang Lung and his family become part of this class of people that permeates the city and surrounding countryside. When the boys of this class grow into adolescence, they become unhappy with their lot in life. When they start families, their anger becomes despair. From men in this state, Wang Lung finally learns what's on the other side of the wall where his family lives.

The poor families generally seem to have no consideration of birth control, so their constantly enlarging numbers only keep them more entrenched in poverty. Buck describes the lower class as an entity unto itself, even if its members don't recognize themselves as part of this group. Even before Buck reveals what's on the other side of the wall, she implies that it may be the source of the lower class's anger.



The first hints of spring are arriving, and Wang Lung can't sleep, so he stands on the edge of the street where his father squats. The old man is holding onto a loop of cloth within which Wang Lung's daughter is staggering around. Wang Lung watches and longs for his **land**. His father says he understands, having had to leave the fields four times in his life and know that they weren't planted. Wang Lung points out that he always returned to the land, and he promises himself that they'll go back this time, too.

Wang Lung seems to connect his sense of family with his land, which has come down to him through his family and has always nourished them. No matter how many times they've had to leave, they've always returned to the source of their life. Wang Lung's father surely has expertise on how to survive a famine, having done it four times, yet his sense that he deserves to be taken care of means he never offers this wisdom.



Wang Lung returns to the hut and tells O-lan that if he had anything to sell, they would go back to the **land**. He wishes they could walk back, but knows they wouldn't survive. O-lan says that he could sell their daughter. Wang Lung protests, but O-lan says that she herself was sold so that her parents could go home. If she could do as she liked, she would kill the girl before she'd sell her, but she's willing to sell her for Wang Lung's sake. Wang Lung says he'd never sell the girl. But now that she's suggested it, the idea tempts him. The girl has grown, but doesn't speak. She still smiles at Wang Lung, and this keeps him from being able to sell her.

Wang Lung cries out in despair that he can never earn enough to save any money. A man who lives in a neighboring hut appears and says that thousands of people in the city feel the same way. Wang Lung rarely sees this man, as he works at night pulling wagons. Sometimes they pass each other at dawn. Now the man says that the current state won't last forever. He has sold two daughters, but remarks that some people prefer to kill daughters when they're born. He predicts change coming, since the rich have become too rich. He says that behind the wall lies a wealthy house where even the slaves live in luxury.

That night, Wang Lung can't sleep because he's thinking so much about the difference between his life on this side of the wall and the decadent life he imagines on the other side. He again considers selling his daughter, since she'd probably have a better life in a rich house. However, he realizes that she wouldn't fetch a high enough price to buy supplies once they reached home. He doesn't think anything of the man's prediction that something always happens when the rich become too rich.

CHAPTER 14

With the arrival of spring, the beggars go out to the countryside to forage for food, and O-lan and the boys go with them. Wang Lung continues to work. The warm weather makes everyone less satisfied with their meager lot in life, and the men begin to talk in the evenings. O-lan knows things about these men, but she remains silent.

Wang Lung feels separate from the other men because he owns **land** and plans to return to it, while the others think only of day-to-day satisfaction. Wang Lung feels he doesn't belong here, but to the land, and he needs to get back to it. The men talk only of money and of how lazy and luxurious their lives would be if they were rich. Finally, he tells them that if he had money, he would buy land. They ridicule him for not knowing how to spend money, but he is unmoved.

O-lan displays her internalized misogyny here, meaning that she accepts her society's awful treatment of women. Even her first-hand knowledge of the miserable life of a slave doesn't prevent her from being willing to give her daughter the same fate. In fact, she seems to think death would be a better fate than slavery, but her sense of duty to her husband and her male children overrides her compassion for her daughter. Rather than rebelling against her own abuse, she accepts it as a matter of course.



This man offers a sort of Marxist political consciousness, essentially suggesting that the working-class is a group united in their problems, and that their misery is the fault of the rich. He even foresees a revolt against the rich. The homes on either side of the wall, one extremely opulent, the others simple mat huts, present in one location the broader problems of inequality that trouble the city.



Characteristically, Wang Lung focuses on his own desire to become wealthy, rather than on his neighbor's prediction of class revolution. His desire to not be poor seems to constantly prevent him from developing a political consciousness as a working-class man. He even thinks that his daughter's life would be better if she could live among luxuries, not considering how she'd be treated as a slave.



The spring is a time for rebirth and growth, but Wang Lung is stuck in the city, far from his land. As a woman, O-lan is in a position to learn information that Wang Lung can't. However, also as a woman, she understands that her knowledge is not valued.



Wang Lung knows that he has wealth in his land; he has learned that land is a more secure form of wealth than money. This makes him feel different than the city people, as he knows he has a chance to actually make good money again. He wants to buy more land in part to increase his profits, but also because land gives him a sense of fulfillment.



Wang Lung can think only of his **land**, and so he hardly pays attention to the goings-on of the city. Twice, men give him papers with something written on them, but he can't read. First a foreigner gives him a paper, and the man's appearance frightens Wang Lung. The paper shows a picture of a white man hanging on a cross. He brings it home and shows it to his family, and his father suggests that the man on the cross must have been evil. Wang Lung thinks perhaps a relative of the foreigner was killed this way and the man wants revenge. Eventually O-lan sews the paper into the sole of a shoe.

Later a Chinese man gives another paper to Wang Lung. This one has a picture of a poor Chinese man being stabbed to death by a fat man. Wang Lung listens to the man telling a crowd that the dead man represents them, and the murderer represents rich capitalists. He blames their poverty on the wealthy. Wang Lung has only ever blamed his poverty on bad weather that ruined the crops. Eventually he asks whether the rich can make it rain, and the man calls him ignorant, saying that if the rich would share their wealth, no one would need it to rain. Wang Lung isn't convinced, but he takes the papers that the man gives so that O-lan can use them for shoes.

The men who live in the huts welcome the man's message, and they begin to think of knocking down the wall that separates them from the wealthy house. They feel discontented and unfairly treated. Wang Lung still only wants his **land** back.

One day, while pulling his ricksha down the street, Wang Lung sees a number of common men captured by a band of soldiers. He realizes that the men don't know why they're being captured, so he hides in the doorway of a shop. When the soldiers are gone, he asks the owner of the shop what just happened. The man says there must be a war somewhere, and the soldiers need servants to carry their supplies. They won't pay the captives anything, and they don't care about the men's abandoned families. The shop owner is quite accustomed to this. He warns Wang Lung when the soldiers are coming back, and when they've passed Wang Lung runs home.

Wang Lung tells O-lan what has happened and feels terrified that he'll be forced to die on a battlefield and his family will starve without him. He wonders if he should sell their daughter so that they can go home. O-lan tells him to wait, for she has heard people saying strange things.

Buck and her family were all foreign Christian missionaries, and yet this scene shows some disdain for the job. She did, in fact, come to believe that missionary work was unnecessary and badly conducted. Wang Lung learns nothing about Jesus from the pamphlet, ironically considering explanations quite counter to Christian teachings. Though the missionary undoubtedly wants Jesus to be revered, his image will instead be tread on daily.



This man seems to be a follower of Marxist thought, pitting poor against rich. Notably, Wang Lung is far more willing to listen to a man of his own nationality than he was willing to listen to the foreign missionary. However, Buck points out one of the weaknesses of Marxism: it focuses on the proletariat, those who work for wages, and it dismisses the revolutionary power of the agricultural class to which Wang Lung belongs. Thus, Wang Lung doesn't feel that this ideology applies to his problems.



The Marxist man has succeeded in stirring up revolutionary thoughts among the laborers, but as long as Wang Lung knows his land waits for him, he can't be entirely in sympathy with them. (This might also be Buck trying to show Marxism as in opposition with a more "wholesome" trust in the earth.)



This practice of forced conscription into the military shows how little value poor people have as independent beings with free will. Instead, their own countrymen can essentially force them into slavery at any moment. Wang Lung is faced with the prospect of slavery for himself, even as he has considered selling his daughter into it. This scene also demonstrates how isolated Wang Lung is, unaware of any political or military events outside of his immediate surroundings.



Even as Wang Lung considers what it would like to be a slave and fears for his family, he fails to consider his daughter as a valuable enough person that she should be spared the fate he himself fears. O-lan again shows her quiet awareness of the world.



Wang Lung only goes out at night now, and he pulls huge wagonloads of goods for very little money. The work is exhausting, but he sleeps during the day, hidden in the hut. As the spring goes on, the city becomes unsettled, and the wealthy people ship their possessions away. The boys come home with news of having seen rich men, and a man told them that one day the riches would belong to the poor. The elder son wants money so that he can try a cake, and Wang Lung thinks longingly of the cakes O-lan made when they were prospering. Suddenly he can no longer stand their life here, and he weeps for the **land**. O-lan tells him to be patient, for everyone is talking of something.

From the hut, Wang Lung hears soldiers marching constantly to battle. Everyone in the city is afraid, and no one talks to each other. The markets are empty and the shops closed. There are rumors that the enemy is approaching, but the poor people aren't afraid, since they have nothing to lose. Finally Wang Lung loses his work, since no one is buying anything. Before long, the family runs out of money, and the public kitchens close.

Wang Lung holds his daughter and asks her if she'd like to go to a great house, and, not understanding, she smiles, which pains him. Wang Lung asks O-lan whether she was beaten as a slave, and she says she was beaten every day with a piece of leather. He asks whether the pretty slaves were beaten too, and she replies without emotion that they were either beaten or fought over by the men who would sleep with them. Wang Lung pities his daughter, but feels that he might have no choice but to sell her.

Suddenly there's a deafening noise, and the family cowers to the ground. When it stops, O-lan says that the enemy has broken into the city. Then they hear the sound of a crowd. They're terrified. Finally they hear a large door opening, and one of their neighbors comes to tell them that the gates of the wealthy house have opened. O-lan leaves immediately, and Wang Lung follows in a daze.

Wang Lung finds a mob forcing its way into the house. He gets caught up in the crowd, and it pushes him through the gates. Those who have lived there are nowhere to be seen, but there's still food on the tables and fires in the kitchens. The mob goes into the inner courts where the rich people lived and begins ransacking the treasures there. Wang Lung doesn't take anything. When he finally comes to his senses, he makes his way to the edge of the crowd and sees the back gate that is meant to allow the residents to escape.

Wang Lung remains so focused on the thought of his land that even his sons are more aware of the social upheaval brewing around them. Even as revolt against the rich seems imminent, he thinks only of his own former and potential prosperity, rather than growing angry against the rich as the other laborers do. O-lan seems to know what's going on, but Wang Lung never presses her for more information, perhaps because he still doesn't believe that a woman could (or should) know anything of value.



The coming of war changes everything. A country is obviously best prepared for war if its people are unified against the enemy, but China hasn't taken care of its working class well enough to make them care whether its current rulers stay in power or not. Historically, Buck may be referencing the Xinhai Revolution of 1911.



O-lan's abusive past becomes increasingly clear, along with the degree to which she subscribes to society's devaluation of women, since she's still willing to sell her daughter despite the horrors she experienced as a slave. Wang Lung, too, is not entirely turned off by O-lan's description of abuse. In fact, he seems about to decide to sell his daughter.



Again, O-lan seems to understand what's going on better than Wang Lung does. Though they don't even know who the enemy is, any army seems likely to kill them without asking questions. However, the discontent that's been growing among the poor seems to finally have reached the crisis O-lan has expected.



Even now that the revolt has come, Wang Lung only takes part because the crowd drags him on, not because of any actual desire to do so. Furthermore, his sense of honor that made him hate the idea of his sons stealing keeps him from doing so as well, even when everyone around him is stealing. The existence of an escape gate suggests that similar invasions have happened in the past, and there's a cycle of discontent with inequality of wealth.



Wang Lung comes upon a fat man who hasn't escaped. He's terrified of Wang Lung and begs him not to kill him, saying he'll pay him well. Wang Lung finally realizes that this man's money can let him get back to the **land** without selling his daughter. In an uncharacteristically cruel voice, Wang Lung tells the fat man to give him the money, and he takes handfuls of gold coins from him. The fat man weeps and Wang Lung despises him, telling him to leave or he'll kill him, though Wang Lung couldn't even kill an ox. The man runs away. Wang Lung carries the gold back to his hut, determined to return to the land the very next day.

The man's fatness both suggests a life of luxury in contrast to the starving people of the city and recalls the pamphlet the Marxist gave Wang Lung, on which a fat man stabbed a poor man. Perhaps both of these reasons influence Wang Lung's sudden change of heart, though the thought of his land is undoubtedly first and foremost. His extremely uncharacteristic harshness in this situation opens the door for all of his future wealth, until he'll one day essentially become the fat man.



CHAPTER 15

Now back at home from the city, Wang Lung feels like he never left. He uses the gold to buy seeds and an ox. Before they even reach home, he notices a strong-looking ox plowing a field and asks to buy it. Its owner refuses, but Wang Lung feels that he must have it, so he eventually convinces the farmer to sell the ox for far more than it's worth. He leads it home with them.

As Wang Lung had to let his ox be killed during the famine, buying a new ox acts as a symbol of the family's recovery. Wang Lung wants to put their struggles behind them and get his crops growing again, for which he needs an ox to plow the land.



The door, roof thatch, and farm tools have been stolen from their house. Wang Lung buys new tools and mats to cover the roof, and in the evening he looks out over his **land**, ready for planting. For a while he doesn't want to interact with other people, and when the villagers come to visit, he accuses them of stealing from his house while he was gone. They say that it was either his uncle or bandits.

After feeling out of place in the city for months, Wang Lung wants nothing more than to devote his entire self to his land, which is his home. Essentially, everything has been taken from the house except for the walls, which are made of earth. Thus, everything he has is the earth—which can't be taken.



Finally Wang Lung's neighbor, Ching, tells him that robbers lived in his empty house and attacked the surrounding area. There are rumors that Wang Lung's uncle was involved. Ching looks awful, and Wang Lung asks what he's eaten to survive. Ching says he has eaten garbage and unidentified meat. His wife died, and he gave his daughter to a soldier. Now he doesn't have any seed to plant. Wang Lung gives him seed and offers to plow his **land** for him. Ching weeps, but Wang Lung reminds him of the beans Ching gave him before he left.

Though Wang Lung has always felt a responsibility towards his uncle, his uncle seems to have no problem blatantly stealing from his own relatives, indicating a moral baseness. Though Ching once stole from Wang Lung, the two now begin to form a fast friendship based upon providing each other with the very means of survival at crucial moments. This will bind them to each other for life.



Wang Lung is glad to discover that no one knows where his uncle has gone, though he's angry at the news that his uncle sold all his daughters. Wang Lung spends all his time in the fields, even napping in the dirt. O-lan repairs the house, and one day she and Wang Lung buy new furniture and set up a shrine to a god of wealth. Wang Lung notices that no one has taken care of the gods in the temple, and he feels that the gods deserve this for the famine they sent. Before long the house is put together again, O-lan is pregnant, and the crops are sprouting. Wang Lung begins to fear his own happiness, and he thinks he'd better give the gods some incense, since they control the **land**.

Perhaps out of a sense of guilt, Wang Lung seems quick to judge his uncle for selling his daughters when he himself considered doing the same not long before. Reunited with his land, Wang Lung can hardly bear to leave it, as though it's a lover. However, after this point, Wang Lung's success makes him turn his eye away from the land and towards the luxuries of wealth. This change is foreshadowed by his disregard for the gods of the earth, and his establishment of a shrine to a god of wealth instead.



CHAPTER 16

One night in bed, Wang Lung feels a bundle hanging around O-lan's neck. At first she doesn't want to show it to him, but then she yields. He discovers a handful of jewels and is dumbfounded, knowing that they're extremely valuable. She tells him that she found them in the wealthy house in the city, hidden behind a brick. He's impressed, and she explains that rich people are always afraid and hide their treasures, so she knew what to expect when she saw the loose brick.

Wang Lung says that they must trade the jewels for **land**, which can't be stolen. As he's putting them into his coat, he notices that O-lan seems to want something. She asks whether she might keep two white **pearls**, not to wear, but just to hold sometimes. He's astonished, and she doesn't seem to expect him to allow this. Wang Lung realizes that O-lan has worked all her life and never had anything nice. He gives her back the jewels, and she finds two pearls, which she wraps in fabric and hides between her breasts. For days after, Wang Lung sometimes thinks of those pearls, but he never sees her look at them.

Wang Lung decides to use the other jewels to buy more **land** from **the House of Hwang**. When he goes to the house, he pounds on the gates, but no gateman comes. Eventually he hears someone slowly approaching, and a voice asks him to identify himself. When he gives his name and the voice curses him, he realizes it's the Old Lord. Wang Lung says he wants to talk to the agent, but the Old Lord says the agent has gone. Wang Lung can't make deals with the Old Lord himself, but he wants to get rid of the jewels, so he says he came about money. The Old Lord thinks he's come to collect a debt, and reveals that he can't pay anything.

When Wang Lung says he's come to buy from the house, a woman (Cuckoo) suddenly opens the gates and lets him in. The Old Lord's formerly fine clothes are dirty, and Wang Lung can hardly believe that this person he has feared is now so weak and pitiful. The woman looks better, but her accent marks her as a slave. There's no one else around. The woman sees that Wang Lung isn't comfortable talking business around the Old Lord, so she sends him away. Wang Lung can hardly believe how quiet, empty, and messy the house is.

O-lan has more or less made a study of rich people's weaknesses, and though it serves her well for now, it will also make her see more clearly the vices into which her own household will soon fall. O-lan might hide the jewels simply because she likes their beauty, but perhaps she already fears the influence that undue wealth will have on Wang Lung.



Wang Lung's experiences during the famine have made him more desperate than ever to put all his wealth into land. Meanwhile, he seems to think that since O-lan isn't very attractive herself, she doesn't want or appreciate beauty—he hasn't even fully considered her as an individual with her own interests and desires. In this rather tragic moment, Wang Lung finally manages to briefly empathize with his wife and give her a small token in return for everything she's done for him. As Wang Lung rises to greatness, O-lan will simply cling to these two pearls.



Since the gateman formerly acted as a judge of Wang Lung's status through the eyes of the great house, keeping Wang Lung in his proper place, his absence now indicates that the House of Hwang no longer has the power to pass social judgments. The fact that the Old Lord himself has taken the gateman's place confirms the complete collapse of the social system within the house. Everything depends on money: When he's run out of it, even the Old Lord must do a servant's task.



The Old Lord and the House of Hwang have completely fallen from their former greatness, proving that the wealthy and respected are not divinely chosen to be so, but instead rely on economics and luck just like everyone else. The fact that Cuckoo seems to be in better shape than the Old Lord suggests that she's taking advantage of him, marking her out as someone to beware of.



Cuckoo harshly tries to initiate business discussions, but Wang Lung protests that he can't do business with a woman. Cuckoo shouts that no one else is here. Wang Lung can hardly believe it. Cuckoo says that bandits stole the slaves and the goods, and the Old Mistress died of fright. Most of the servants left even before this, when the food and money ran out. Some of them, including the gateman, were among the robbers. She admits that the wealth has been poorly managed for generations. Wang Lung still can't believe his ears.

Cuckoo explains that one of the young lords tried to get his father to leave the house, but she convinced him to stay so she wouldn't be alone. Wang Lung realizes that she's taking advantage of the Old Lord. Wang Lung says he can't do business with a slave, but Cuckoo says that the Old Lord will do whatever she says. Finally Wang Lung asks how much **land** is left, and Cuckoo says there's quite a bit, and it can all be sold. Wang Lung points out that the young lords would have to agree, but she says that they already have. She tells him he can pay the Old Lord directly, but Wang Lung knows that Cuckoo would get some of the money, and so he leaves.

Wang Lung needs to think about what he's learned, so he goes to a tea shop. It seems awful that this great family has fallen apart, and he concludes that it's because they abandoned their **land**. He decides to immediately start his sons working in the fields. In the meantime, he still needs to get rid of the jewels before anyone finds out he has them.

Wang Lung buys tea for the shopkeeper in exchange for the news that he's missed. The man tells him about **the House of Hwang** being robbed, and that only the Old Lord and the slave Cuckoo remain. For now, Cuckoo can control everything, but when the young lords return, she'll be thrown out. Wang Lung asks whether the **land** is for sale. The shopkeeper isn't interested in the subject, but says he's heard it is.

Wang Lung returns to the great house and speaks to Cuckoo at the gate. Once she assures him that the Old Lord will put his own seal on the deeds of sale, Wang Lung asks whether she wants gold, silver, or jewels, and she eagerly chooses the jewels.

CHAPTER 17

After the purchase, Wang Lung has more **land** and harvest than he can handle, so he adds a room to his house, buys a donkey, and asks Ching to move in and help him out. The rains come at the right time and in the right amount, so they have a harvest so great that Wang Lung has to hire two more men to bring it in.

For the first time in this book, a woman has some measure of power. However, Wang Lung struggles to accept it, and Cuckoo is portrayed as a scheming, greedy character. The Hwangs' destruction worked from within until even the gateman turned against the house, proving that the Hwangs had no love to keep their servants loyal once the money ran out. To Wang Lung, the Hwangs have been such an unshakable institution that he can't understand their fall.



Cuckoo has essentially become the head of the House of Hwang, which is completely an affront to the societal system in which she, as a female slave, should be at the very bottom of the social pyramid. Her ascendancy suggests that the power structure is not as unassailable as it seems, just as the revolt in the city did. Wang Lung doesn't adjust well to change, and he can't immediately accept this collapse of his world.



Even after experiencing the class-based unrest in the city, Wang Lung still mourns the destruction of the wealthy family. He wants to instill his sons with the reverence of the land that he feels, so that his family can never follow in the Hwang's footsteps.



Wang Lung doesn't trust Cuckoo, in part because she's a woman taking control in what's considered an improper way. The shopkeeper essentially repeats what Cuckoo told him, but this time Wang Lung believes it. The shopkeeper doesn't share Wang Lung's almost rabid need for land.



Cuckoo's desire for jewels speaks to her enjoyment of luxury and flashy wealth. It also makes it seem that the sale was destined to be made in this way, since Wang Lung has jewels at the moment.



The jewels, along with nature's goodwill, really put Wang Lung over the edge of survival and into prosperity. Thus, though he does work hard, his success comes in great part from his good luck.



Wang Lung makes his sons work in the fields with him to get them used to the labor. However, he no longer allows O-lan to work in the fields, since he can hire workers now. He builds another room to hold the harvests and buys more animals. O-lan makes new clothes and bedding until she gives birth to another child. She still wants to be alone when she gives birth. When Wang Lung gets home that night, he discovers that she's had twins, a boy and a girl. He's joyful and jokes that this was why she kept the two **pearls**.

Wang Lung has no troubles at this time besides the fact that his eldest daughter never speaks, perhaps because she starved for her first year, and only smiles when she sees him. Wang Lung calls her his "poor little fool." He's glad he didn't sell her, because her owners would have killed her. Sometimes he takes her into the fields with him.

There are usually famines every five or ten years in this region due to flooding or drought. Wang Lung decides to become wealthy enough that he'll be able to weather these hard years and not have to leave his **land** again. He has good harvests for seven years, eventually paying six laborers who live in a house behind his own. He expands his own house to form a courtyard. Ching acts as his steward, organizing the farm work. Ching remains very thin and quiet, but Wang Lung knows he can trust him to weed out dishonest or lazy workers. The two men become like brothers.

Wang Lung eventually comes to work on the business end of the farm, rather than in the fields. However, he struggles because he can't read, and he always has to have someone else read him the contracts when he sells his harvests. He's ashamed that he doesn't even know how to sign his own name, and the clerks laugh at him. He decides to send his eldest son to school so that he can deal with the contracts for his father. When Wang Lung announces his decision to his son, the boy is overjoyed. The second son doesn't think it's fair that his brother gets to go to school, so Wang Lung lets him go as well.

Wang Lung and O-lan outfit the boys with clothes and writing supplies. They are to attend a school run by an old teacher who beats his students with a fan. In warm weather, he falls asleep after lunch, and the students get into mischief. When he suddenly awakens, he beats the students with the fan, and the neighbors hear and say that he's a good teacher. Wang Lung walks them to school on the first day and gives the teacher a bundle of eggs. He tells the man to beat them as much as necessary to make them learn.

Wang Lung hopes to avoid the Hwangs' downfall by training his sons up to be farmers, but he doesn't take into account that they need to love the land as much as he does in order to be truly dedicated to it. He feels that his social status is changing, and to fit with his new prosperity, he can't have his wife working in the fields. However, he still struggles to believe that she might want the pearls just for their beauty.



On one hand, Wang Lung shows compassion in his love for his daughter. On the other, he seems to love her particularly because she's silent and doesn't seem to think, which could make her the ideal woman in this patriarchal culture.



For the first time, Wang Lung makes wealth his explicit goal, though even now, he justifies it with his love of the land. By establishing a system of laborers with a steward over them, Wang Lung becomes no longer the simple farmer he once was, but instead puts himself on the path to becoming something of a businessman. Ching is the only man outside Wang Lung's family whom he ever becomes particularly close to.



Wang Lung's increasing prosperity pulls him away from the land, which is another step towards his imitation of the Hwangs, who would never consider working on the land themselves. Even so, Wang Lung's ignorance of book learning acts as a constant reminder of his humble origins. Sending his sons to school puts his family on even more of an upward trajectory, as education can dramatically increase their social status.



Ironically, the teacher's worth is judged by the degree to which he disciplines his students, rather than by how well he actually teaches. However, this suggests that school is meant to teach students a way of acting and a sense of respect just as much as it's meant to teach actual academic subjects.



On his way home, Wang Lung is filled with pride in his sons. When he passes a neighbor, he tells him his sons are going to school to learn to read. The teacher names the boys Nung En and Nung Wen in accordance with their father's profession, as "Nung" means a person who makes their living from the **land**.

Wang Lung knows that his sons' attendance at school signifies his family's progress in the world. At the same time, the teacher's names for the boys gesture to their permanent connection to the land, even if they don't care much about it.



CHAPTER 18

After seven years of good harvests, the river floods almost half of Wang Lung's **land**. Many houses in the region are destroyed, but Wang Lung's house is on a hill. People use boats to get around, and many starve. Wang Lung feels secure in his wealth, but he has nothing to do while his land is flooded. He has his workers make repairs to the house and take care of the animals, so he's left idle. He can only sleep so much.

After the famine, Wang Lung swore to himself that he would never have to leave the land again. Because of his hard work and prosperous years, he now knows that he can wait out the flood without worrying that his family will starve again. However, he makes no effort to help those who are starving, despite his past experience.



Wang Lung gets impatient with his father, who still thinks tea is too luxurious and doesn't realize how wealthy Wang Lung is. The old man has grown deaf and forgetful. The eldest daughter sits by him, twisting a piece of cloth, and though Wang Lung takes care of both of them, he can't really interact with them. His daughter makes him sad, and he instead watches the twins running about.

Wang Lung's father's apparent ignorance of how well he's done seems to minimize Wang Lung's accomplishments, to his frustration. The old man and the eldest daughter together represent the mindlessly continuing existence of humanity in the face of temporary success and tragedy.



Wang Lung looks at O-lan but never sees anything new. He suddenly sees that she's ugly and unaware of her own appearance. He tells her she doesn't look like the wife of someone as wealthy as he is. She's sewing a shoe sole, and she stops and blushes. She says that she's been ill ever since her last pregnancy. He asks her to try to make herself look nicer, but she only looks at him and hides her feet. Wang Lung is ashamed of himself and remembers how hard she's worked for him, but he goes on. He mentions her feet, which he thinks are too big. O-lan says she'll bind the younger daughter's feet. Wang Lung is angry that she's frightened, and he decides to go to the tea shop.

Now that Wang Lung has succeeded in his initial goals, he can afford to be dissatisfied in new ways and seek out new goals. Furthermore, he becomes pickier, as he's well off now and feels he should have more refined tastes. But in his desire for increased status, he fails to remember all that he owes O-lan; in fact, without her, he would never be as prosperous as he is now (or even alive, probably), with the leisure to criticize her. Feet are an important indicator of beauty in his culture, and they become a symbol of his dissatisfaction.



Wang Lung gets grumpier as he remembers that he owes his **land** to O-lan's theft of the jewels. He tells himself that she only took them because they were pretty and would have kept them for herself. He wonders if she still has the **pearls** between her breasts, but he doesn't like to think of it, because her breasts are ugly now. None of this might have mattered if Wang Lung was still poor, but now he has so much money that he begins to want to enjoy himself.

Wang Lung's grumpiness shows that he knows he's in the wrong, but he can't seem to help his dissatisfaction with O-lan's plainness, so he tries instead to convince himself that O-lan is just a vain, stupid woman who likes shiny trinkets. Wang Lung's wealth makes him think that he deserves better than O-lan, since he thinks of women only as objects to satisfy men.



Wang Lung doesn't enjoy anything as much as he used to. The tea shop he's always gone to seems below him, and when he comes in, people talk of his wealth. He's usually proud to hear it, but today it doesn't cheer him. He realizes he doesn't need to come here anymore, so he wanders the streets of the town. He goes to a story-teller's booth, but can't get into the story.

Wang Lung goes to a fancier tea shop that he's always considered a bad place where people indulge in gambling and prostitutes. He wants to experience something new. As he enters, he tries to be bold, though he knows that he was poor only a few years ago. He drinks his tea silently and looks around at the elaborate decorations, including paintings of beautiful women.

Wang Lung goes back to the tea shop every day and stares at the paintings. He might never have done more, but one day someone comes down the stairs from the upper floor. Hardly any buildings in the town have more than one floor, and at night the sound of music and singing comes from the upper floor. Wang Lung is listening to the men playing dice, so he isn't aware of the woman until she touches him on the shoulder. He recognizes Cuckoo, who laughs to see him here.

Wang Lung feels he must prove he's not just a country farmer. Cuckoo already knows he's wealthy, and she suggests he buy some wine, which he admits he hasn't done yet. He's embarrassed when she mentions prostitutes, and confesses that he hasn't considered them. Cuckoo tells him that the paintings are of the women they have to offer, and that he should choose one. Wang Lung can hardly believe they're real. He imagines whom he would pick if he were someone less responsible. After much thought, he chooses a dainty woman holding a lotus. Suddenly he realizes how enthralled he is with the picture, and hurriedly goes home.

CHAPTER 19

If Wang Lung had to plant his fields or if some crisis had occurred in the family, he might have forgotten the painting of the woman. But nothing happens, so he remains restless, avoiding O-lan's stare. One evening he puts on his nicest coat and goes to the tea shop, which is busy and joyful. He hesitates at the door and might not have gone in, but then Cuckoo emerges from the shadows.

Now that Wang Lung has become wealthy like he always dreamed, he finds that it isn't as wonderful as he imagined. He expects everything to be automatically better, and when it isn't, he's disappointed. He feels that he should frequent places more in keeping with his higher status.



The fact that the fancier tea shop is associated with sinful indulgence suggests that wealth leads naturally to sin. Despite his wealth, Wang Lung feels out of place, knowing that he's socially a newcomer rather than a member of an old, established family like the Hwangs.



The fact that most of the buildings in the area have only one story invests the tea shop with a special sense of wealth and mystery. It seems logical that this rare second floor is a place of mysterious pleasure. Cuckoo is positioned as a temptress, particularly as it's stated that Wang Lung might never have indulged himself if she hadn't turned up.



Despite his wealth, Wang Lung still acts like a farmer, and he fears indulging in the luxuries of the rich even as he wants nothing more than to do so. At this point, he still has enough distance from the rich to be able to criticize their pastimes; specifically, he still tells himself that it's irresponsible to hire prostitutes and prevents himself from doing so. However, his idleness means he has the time and energy to obsess over pretty women, and it's only a matter of time until he gives in to his desires.



Wang Lung's failure of will is blamed directly on his idleness; meaning, in other words, that he gives in to the temptation of sinful luxury only because he's wealthy enough to not be worrying about more urgent matters. Cuckoo, as temptress, encounters him just at the crucial moment when he hesitates.



When Cuckoo recognizes Wang Lung, she dismisses him as just a farmer, which angers him. He wants to show that he's wealthy enough to do whatever he wants, so he shows her a handful of silver and she asks which woman he wants. He requests the woman holding the lotus. Cuckoo leads him through the tea shop and up the stairs. He's never climbed stairs in a house before. They walk down a hall, and Cuckoo calls out to the girls, then tells them that he only wants Lotus. One girl says Wang Lung smells like **land** and garlic, and he's humiliated. Finally Cuckoo leads him into a room where a girl sits on a bed.

If anyone had told Wang Lung that such small, dainty hands and feet existed, he wouldn't have believed them. He sits awkwardly staring at the girl, who looks exactly like the picture, and he hardly believes she's real. She touches his arm softly, and his arm seems to burn. He only trembles. Lotus laughs gently and calls him ignorant. Wang Lung takes her hand, asking her to teach him, and she does.

Though Wang Lung has suffered much in his life, he suffers more than ever due to Lotus. He goes to her every night, always beginning as a shy, ignorant farmer and then letting his passion overtake him. But he can never have her fully, which keeps him always wanting her. It's not a healthy love as his desire for O-lan was; when Lotus forces him to leave each night, he never feels satisfied, and only wants her more. He hardly listens to what she says, but only watches her.

Wang Lung begins to sleep outside rather than in his own bed. He snaps at anyone who speaks to him and ignores his family, living only for the nights. When Lotus laughs at his long hair, he cuts it off. O-lan is terrified by this, but he says Wang Lung doesn't want to look old-fashioned. He would do anything for Lotus. In the past he rarely bathed, but now he bathes every day, worrying O-lan. He tries to smell nice, and never eats garlic.

Wang Lung's family doesn't understand the change in him. He no longer lets O-lan make his clothes, but goes to a tailor, and he buys shoes like those the Old Lord wore. He keeps the clothes at the tea shop, because he's embarrassed for his family to see them. He even buys a ring for himself. O-lan is bewildered and tells Wang Lung he reminds her of a lord from the great house. This makes him happy, and he's kinder to her.

Wang Lung feels the need to prove himself wealthy not only in fact, but also in deed—he wants to act as the wealthy do. This means going against his own moral code, or perhaps changing his moral code to that of the wealthy. As he climbs the stairs, he metaphorically walks out of his old life and into a strange new one in which he holds himself above other people, on a higher floor of society.



Wang Lung particularly notices Lotus's feet since these are the feature of O-lan that most bothers him. He feels more than ever like an ignorant farmer, and his relationship with Lotus begins based on this power difference. In an almost fetishistic way, he pretends to surrender his power as a wealthy male to put her in charge of their sexual relations.



Buck distinguishes between the unthinking lust that Wang Lung used to feel for O-lan, which "properly" resulted in many children, and his obsessive passion for Lotus, which is labeled as unnatural and never produces children. His dissatisfaction stands for the insatiable desires of the rich, whom the novel sees as destined to destroy themselves.



Wang Lung's love for Lotus becomes dangerous, in that he can't think rationally when it comes to her requests and desires. He would go willingly to his own destruction for her. He entirely abandons everything that used to make him who he was in an attempt to conform to social norms of a higher class, hoping to impress her.



Wang Lung continues his transformation into one of the Hwangs, walking both literally and metaphorically in the shoes of the Old Lord. Though he's satisfied with O-lan's assessment of him, it must be noted that she had neither liking nor respect for the lords to whom she was a slave. Wang Lung treats her little better.



Wang Lung spends vast amounts of money not only to be with Lotus, but to buy her gifts. Whenever she expresses a desire for anything, he must buy it for her. O-lan sees him taking silver out of their hole in the wall but remains silent. She knows that he has some life separate from her, but not what it is. She's feared him ever since he insulted her appearance. He's always angry with her these days.

One day, Wang Lung finds O-lan washing his clothes and asks her what she's done with the **pearls** she kept. He's ashamed of himself but won't admit it. She says she still has the pearls, and she hoped to make them into earrings for their younger daughter. Wang Lung replies that the girl's skin isn't light enough for pearls. He demands that she give him the pearls, and she does. He laughs when he sees them. O-lan continues washing his clothes, crying.

CHAPTER 20

Wang Lung might have spent all his money if his uncle didn't suddenly turn up at his door as the family eats breakfast one day. Wang Lung is astonished, having practically forgotten his uncle was still alive. He invites his uncle to eat with them, and he eats a large quantity of food. Then he announces that he needs to sleep, and Wang Lung has to put him in his father's bed. His uncle looks at the furniture and remarks on Wang Lung's wealth. He acts as though everything belongs to him, and he goes to sleep.

Wang Lung realizes that his uncle will never leave, since he now knows that Wang Lung can take care of him. When his uncle wakes up, he says he's going to get his wife and son, since Wang Lung can feed and clothe them all easily. Wang Lung can't do anything about it, since he knows he'll be shamed in the village if he drives out his own family. He makes room for them, and they move in. Wang Lung is very angry but has to pretend to welcome them. After a few days of anger, O-lan tells him they have to bear the situation.

Wang Lung feels that since he can have no comfort in his own house, he has to find it with Lotus. His uncle's wife immediately sees that he's in love with another woman, and she tells O-lan. Wang Lung overhears. His uncle's wife says that she knows the signs of a man in love, and one woman can never be enough for a man, especially if the woman is as hard-working as O-lan. O-lan needs to accept that Wang Lung is going to buy another woman.

The Old Lord squandered his fortune on concubines, and Wang Lung already seems to be pouring his wealth in the same direction, blinded by his passion. O-lan's silence is almost more painful than her anger would be, as even in her pain, she continues to act as the perfect wife according to society's demands.



Wang Lung's theft of the pearls feels like his worst and cruelest betrayal of O-lan, as he takes her only luxury from her to feed his own overflowing appetite for luxury. Furthermore, he denies her the right to beauty because he judges that she has no beauty herself. He shirks his duty to his broader family, such as his daughter, in favor of a manufactured connection to Lotus.



Wang Lung's uncle is always looking for ways to be comfortable without having to work for it, and the responsibility required by family ties is one of his favorite ways to take advantage. He interprets this responsibility as meaning that everything that belongs to Wang Lung belongs to him also, even though he has done nothing to deserve it.



Unlike the last time his uncle came demanding aid, Wang Lung now really does have the resources to support his uncle. However, this doesn't mean that it won't tighten his finances. He cares so much about his social standing, though, that he can't transgress the rules around family responsibility for fear of losing the status he's gained by becoming wealthy.



The uncle's wife's perception of Wang Lung's love implies that she's more closely acquainted with vice than O-lan. Ironically, men say they want hard-working wives, but the uncle's wife implies that working hard actually makes women less attractive to their husbands. Women really can't win either way in this book.



Wang Lung suddenly realizes he must satisfy his desire for Lotus by buying her and bringing her to live with him. He speaks to his uncle's wife privately, seeking her approval of his plan, which she gives eagerly. She tells him she can make the arrangements for him. He tells her Lotus's name, though it seems to him that everyone must know who she is, and he tells her where Lotus lives and that Cuckoo is in charge of the house. The uncle's wife sees that her task will be easy, since Cuckoo will do anything for money. Wang Lung says he would give even his **land** for Lotus.

Wang Lung is afraid to go to the tea house until Lotus is his. He thinks he'll kill himself if he can't have her. His uncle's wife grows impatient with his worrying. Wang Lung forces O-lan to constantly clean the house, and she becomes terrified, knowing what's happening. Wang Lung can't stand sleeping with her. He has his men build another court of rooms, though they don't understand why. He decorates the rooms lavishly, and his uncle's wife helps him. He doesn't speak of it to O-lan or Ching.

Wang Lung waits impatiently for Lotus, so he has a man build a goldfish pool for the center of the court. Then he's impatient again. He's always harsh to his family now, and one day O-lan begins weeping more passionately than he's ever seen. She can only repeat that she has given him sons. Wang Lung feels bad, knowing he has no good reason to be angry with her. Finally, his uncle's wife announces the price that Cuckoo and Lotus demand. Wang Lung is overjoyed and gives her the money, rewarding her with some for herself as well. He buys delicacies and waits.

Eventually Lotus arrives, carried in a sedan chair across the fields and followed by Cuckoo. Wang Lung is suddenly afraid and hides in his room until his uncle's wife calls to him. He comes out ashamedly, and Cuckoo greets him. She tells Lotus to come out of the covered chair. Wang Lung can't stand the laughing faces of the common men from town who carried the chair, but then he sees Lotus and forgets everything else. Lotus steps out of the chair, not speaking to him but only asking Cuckoo where her rooms are. Cuckoo and the uncle's wife lead her to them. Wang Lung has sent everyone else away from the house.

When Wang Lung's uncle's wife emerges, she tells him that Lotus isn't as young as she appears, and if she were younger, she probably wouldn't have come to live with him. Seeing Wang Lung's anger, she adds that Lotus is very beautiful and will make him happy. After a while, Wang Lung works up the courage to go to Lotus, and he stays there all day.

Wang Lung doesn't care in the least that his betrayal has been revealed to O-lan and is probably causing her great pain. Instead, he thinks only that he's found a way to have Lotus all the time, thus betraying O-lan even further. His uncle's wife expresses no sympathy for O-lan either, but in fact works against her, exposing a lack of female solidarity. Wang Lung's willingness to lose his land shows the depth of his abandonment of his former self.



Wang Lung becomes even crueler to O-lan, making her clean in preparation for the coming of the woman who has replaced her in his heart. His secrecy around the preparations, particularly from Ching, whom he respects, shows that some part of him is embarrassed. Instead he associates with the uncle's wife, whom he hates under normal circumstances.



Wang Lung is almost going crazy out of desire for Lotus. O-lan has borne so much suffering—as in the famine—without any indication of discouragement, but this situation drives her to wild tears. She feels that she has held up her end of the marriage by birthing sons, and so Wang Lung has no right to turn against her. Wang Lung has always been careful with money, but he spends with abandon now.



Wang Lung does realize, on some level, that his actions are worthy of shame, but his pride and desire overpowers everything else. Ironically, he fears the judgment of the lower-class men, perhaps because he knows he used to be one of them, and the reminder makes him remember that in his past life, he would have laughed at his current actions, too. The fact that he's sent his household away also proves that he's embarrassed of what he's doing.



The uncle's wife provides the impartial perspective on Lotus that the reader has not yet received, as the narration only gives Wang Lung's perspective. The truth adds to the sense that Wang Lung is acting foolishly, blinded by his carnal desire.



O-lan finally returns at night with the children and goes through her normal routine without Wang Lung. He now spends all of his time with Lotus. Lotus has commanded that Cuckoo stay on as her servant and take care of her, and Cuckoo lives in the court with her. Lotus lies in bed all day eating delicacies. In the evening she sends Wang Lung away and Cuckoo bathes and dresses her. Then she walks into the court and looks at the goldfish pond. Wang Lung most admires her tiny feet. His desire is finally satisfied.

CHAPTER 21

Wang Lung refuses to believe that bringing Lotus and Cuckoo into his house will cause conflict, even though O-lan and Cuckoo's attitudes show that it does. As time passes and Lotus remains, his hunger for her decreases somewhat and he becomes more clear-sighted. He expected O-lan to hate Lotus, but instead he notices discord between O-lan and Cuckoo. Lotus begged Wang Lung to let her keep Cuckoo with her, as she's all alone, and he could never have refused her this. Besides, O-lan is expected to ignore Lotus's existence, and he doesn't want his uncle's wife to be her only company.

O-lan becomes unnaturally angry with Cuckoo. Cuckoo is willing to be friendly, but never forgets that O-lan was only a kitchen slave when they both worked in **the House of Hwang**. She points out how their positions have reversed from that time. O-lan asks Wang Lung what Cuckoo is doing there. He feels a mixture of shame and anger and can't answer. When O-lan persists, he asks why she cares. She says that when they worked in the great house, Cuckoo always ordered her around and insulted her. When Wang Lung can find nothing to say, O-lan begins to cry. He remains silent, and she can only look at him and creep away. Wang Lung tells himself that other men are worse to their wives than he is.

In the morning, O-lan refuses to leave hot water for Cuckoo or let her use the cauldron to boil her own. When Cuckoo complains, O-lan ignores her. Cuckoo goes to Wang Lung, who scolds O-lan. O-lan says she won't be a slave to slaves. When he angers and shakes her, she accuses him of giving Lotus her **pearls**. This makes him ashamed, and he tells Cuckoo that he'll build another kitchen for her to use. This satisfies Cuckoo, and Wang Lung feels that he can enjoy Lotus without worrying about this conflict.

Wang Lung has split his family in order to satisfy himself. O-lan and the children go about their life as usual, but Wang Lung no longer wants to be part of it. He essentially begins a second household adjacent to his original family. Cuckoo has always been a sinister influence, so her intimacy with Lotus bodes ill. Lotus indulges in the luxury that only wealth can bring without a second thought.



Wang Lung seems to be willfully blind, or simply doesn't want to acknowledge that women have feelings and O-lan has reason to be angry. Even though Wang Lung is really to blame for betraying O-lan, O-lan directs her anger at Cuckoo instead. Now that he has what he wants, Wang Lung reverts to his dislike of his uncle's wife, thinking her a bad influence on Lotus, though Cuckoo doesn't seem like a much better influence.



O-lan's past again rears its head. She has always expressed a need to triumph over her oppressors in the House of Hwang, and until now she has succeeded. But now, Cuckoo won't let her forget that she was once a slave. By bringing Cuckoo into the household, Wang Lung essentially asks O-lan to be respectful towards someone who has abused her. He places his own needs far above hers and manages to rationalize his cruelty because he doesn't want to acknowledge his faults.



O-lan finally takes a stand for herself. If Wang Lung is ascending to prosperity and the luxurious living that goes with it, why should she be forced to revert to her miserable life before her marriage? Giving her pearls to Lotus seems like the ultimate denial of O-lan's bond with her husband, as they were part of the jewels that made him rich—that O-lan herself gave him.



However, Cuckoo begins going to town every day to buy expensive foods to cook in the kitchen. Wang Lung doesn't like her spending so much money, but doesn't want to tell her this or dissatisfy Lotus. His worry makes him love Lotus a little less fiercely. Furthermore, his uncle's wife begins to eat with Lotus and Cuckoo, and Wang Lung doesn't like that Lotus is friends with this woman he doesn't much like. When he tries to discourage Lotus from the friendship, she only complains about the hostility she faces in his house. She keeps him from her room and says he doesn't want her to be happy, so he has to give in.

Wang Lung becomes afraid to tell Lotus what to do, so she's constantly talking to his uncle's wife and makes him wait to see her, which makes him angry. He's also angry that his uncle's wife eats Lotus's fine foods and gets fat, but she acts very courteously to him. His love for Lotus becomes shot through with irritation, and he can't even talk to O-lan about it.

One day Wang Lung's father, who's usually oblivious to the world around him, discovers the doorway through which Lotus lives. Wang Lung hasn't told him about her, since he's almost deaf. He sees Wang Lung walking with Lotus in the court and cries out that she's a harlot. Wang Lung leads him away and explains that she belongs to him, but his father keeps shouting that she's a harlot, and that he and his father each only had one woman. He hates Lotus and periodically shouts or spits into her court. Wang Lung doesn't want to scold him, but he also doesn't want Lotus to be angry.

One day Wang Lung hears Lotus scream and finds that the twins have brought his eldest daughter into her court. The younger children are always curious about Lotus, and she complains that they bother her, but he refuses to lock them out of her court and they go in when he's not watching. This time, they've decided that their sister should see Lotus. When she sees Lotus's bright clothes, she reaches for them and laughs, frightening Lotus. When Wang Lung comes, Lotus is angry and says that she'll leave the house if she has to deal with children and an idiot.

Wang Lung loves his children, and he gets angry. He says that if Lotus doesn't love them, she doesn't love him. He's most angry that Lotus cursed his favored eldest daughter, and he stays away from Lotus for two days, instead playing with his children. When he goes back to her, she's particularly kind to him. But even so, he never loves her as much as he did before. At the end of the summer, he looks out over his fields, which are no longer flooded, and he feels drawn to the **land**. He tears off his fancy clothes and calls for his farm tools, and he goes out to his fields.

The conflicts within his household, which will plague Wang Lung until his death, begin to bring his passion down to earth. Having worked in the House of Hwang, Cuckoo is used to the wealthy spending their money with complete abandon. Though Wang Lung is not usually inclined to do this, Cuckoo's presence tips his household a little more towards following in the footsteps of the House of Hwang. Meanwhile, Lotus proves herself manipulative and self-centered.



Wang Lung begins to lose his power over his household. In fact, he seems rather pitiful—as he suddenly wants to be able to talk to O-lan, but he's already burned all his bridges with her. Having Lotus in his house isn't as dreamy as he imagined.



Wang Lung's father represents his old, humble life as a farmer. He even references family tradition to justify his indignation at the presence of Lotus. His father's reaction emphasizes Lotus's status as a symbol of Wang Lung's new wealth and the way it can lead to harmful decadence. Ironically, Wang Lung's father insults Lotus for her perceived promiscuity but doesn't directly blame Wang Lung for her presence, though it is his fault.



Lotus and the eldest daughter make a pretty contrast, Lotus being very stormy in her moods and the eldest daughter being forever content with what goes on around her. Moreover, women are supposed to be mothers in this culture, so Lotus's hatred of children is probably meant to seem unnatural, an indication that she's not a "proper" woman, but instead an instrument of luxury.



Dedication to family finally wins out over Wang Lung's destructive lust for Lotus. To his credit, he displays great loyalty to the daughter whom he once considered selling into slavery. His love for her in her simplicity seems to consistently help him find what really matters in life. Wang Lung's return to the land marks a return to the essence of himself and an end to the blindness caused by his decadent passion.



CHAPTER 22

Wang Lung's **land** heals the damage his love has done to him. He directs his men and plows and hoes the earth, and when he tires he sleeps on the ground. At night he returns to Lotus's court, and she's disgusted by the dirt covering him. He tells her she's a farmer's wife, and she denies it. He only laughs. When he finally bathes before bed, he doesn't do it for her, and he feels free.

Wang Lung realizes he has much to do, and he works hard in the fields, his body hardening again. When he comes home for meals he eats O-lan's simple food and breathes the smell of garlic onto Lotus, though she hates it. He's no longer obsessed with her. Lotus gives him pleasure while O-lan keeps his house.

Wang Lung is proud of other men's jealousy of Lotus, because this shows his wealth. His uncle often brags about Wang Lung's prosperity, and the village men respect him as a superior. They come to him for loans and advice.

Wang Lung has a good harvest that year, and he takes it to market with his eldest son. He's proud to see his son reading and writing in front of the clerks, who admire his skill. He's particularly happy when his son notices a mistake in a contract and can change it to be correct.

When they're walking home, Wang Lung decides that he must find his eldest son a wife so he doesn't have to marry a slave as Wang Lung himself did. He discusses his son's marriage with Ching, though he doesn't expect him to be much help. Ching wishes he could offer his own daughter to the boy, but he doesn't know where she is. Wang Lung thinks that he wants someone far superior to Ching's daughter. Around town, Wang Lung listens to men talking about potential brides, but doesn't say anything about it to anyone, particularly not his uncle's wife, whom he doesn't trust to find someone fitting.

Once again, Wang Lung's land acts as a life-giving force. As he sleeps on the ground and gets dirt on his skin, he becomes a part of the land as he was before his wealth. Lotus takes the dirt as a sign of low status, but Wang Lung now finds himself able to embrace his true self no matter what social implications it has.



Liberated from his all-consuming passion, Wang Lung finds balance in his life. He lives simply as a farmer (consumption of garlic is a mark of the lower class) but also takes pleasure from the woman that his wealth has bought him.



Despite embracing the land again, Wang Lung still enjoys the social respect that goes along with his wealth. He becomes an important figure among the villagers.



Wang Lung is proud to be able to give his son an education. His family begins to move up in the social world not only through wealth, but also through learning, a luxury that only the wealthy can afford.



Wang Lung wants to keep his family climbing the social ladder by making an advantageous marriage for his son. In the process, however, he slights the two people he should respect most in the world—O-lan, who was a slave when he married her; and Ching, who used to be his equal in poverty. Thus, Wang Lung's desire for the respect of the wealthy makes him forget the noble qualities of his roots.



At New Year's, men come to visit Wang Lung and say he can have no greater fortune than what he already has. Wang Lung knows this is true, but as spring comes, he still can't find a proper wife for his eldest son. As the trees sprout leaves, his son becomes moody, worrying Wang Lung. No matter what he tells him to do, the boy won't obey, and he refuses to tell his father what's the matter. Furthermore, he stops going to school unless Wang Lung yells at him or hits him, and sometimes even then he wanders the town instead of going to school. When Wang Lung finds out, he beats the boy until O-lan intervenes, but the boy endures it without a sound.

One evening after Wang Lung beats his eldest son, O-lan tells him that the beatings will do no good. She's seen the young lords in **the House of Hwang** act the same way, and when the Old Lord found women for them, their moodiness passed. Wang Lung protests that he didn't have this problem himself, but O-lan points out that he was a farmer, and their son has no work. Wang Lung sees that he had no time to be moody when he was young. He's proud that his son is more like a young lord, and he says he'll marry him off soon.

CHAPTER 23

Lotus pouts at the fact that Wang Lung pays attention to anything other than her. He laughs and tells her that he's thinking about how to find a respectable wife for his son. Lotus likes the eldest son now, and she tells Wang Lung about a man who used to come to her at the tea house and speak of his daughter, who reminded him of her. He was polite and fair with his money.

Lotus calls Cuckoo in to ask what the man's profession was, and Cuckoo identifies him as Liu, a grain dealer. When she tells Wang Lung where Liu's market is, he realizes he sells his own grain there, and he thinks he might actually be able to marry his son to Liu's daughter. Lotus urges him to send Cuckoo to make the arrangements, and Cuckoo says she'll go immediately. However, Wang Lung wants to think about it for a while yet, and he makes them wait.

One morning, the eldest son comes home drunk and sick. Wang Lung discovers him, and O-lan washes him and puts him to bed. Wang Lung questions the younger son as to where the older one was, but the boy doesn't want to tell him, because his brother has threatened him. In the face of Wang Lung's rage, however, the boy finally admits that his brother has gone out for three nights with Wang Lung's uncle's son, but he doesn't know where.

The eldest son becomes the next difficulty in Wang Lung's household that prevents him from enjoying his wealth as he wants to. Wang Lung sent his son to school as a privilege, but never having had to struggle as Wang Lung did, the boy more easily grows dissatisfied with his comfortable life. Wang Lung responds to his son's bad attitude in a stereotypically masculine way, using violence rather than trying to gain the boy's confidence to figure out what's really going on.



Ironically, Wang Lung is glad that his son acts like a young lord even when it means that he acts in a way that Wang Lung doesn't approve of, showing Wang Lung's irrationality when it comes to advancing his social status. The family takes another step towards imitating the House of Hwang, as O-lan perceives. Significantly, the young lords' constant lusts contributed to the Hwangs' fall from wealth.



Lotus's need for attention contrasts highly with O-lan's silence that endures even when she gives birth. The fact that the girl Lotus recommends for the eldest son has been likened to Lotus herself might not bode well for the marriage. Though Lotus provides pleasure, she's not the hardworking wife type.



Wang Lung likes the idea of joining his son to someone who's connected to his own wealth. He used to make snap decisions, such as when he bought land from the Hwangs, but now that he's more secure in his way of life he never seems to do anything without thinking it over thoroughly.



The eldest son finally seems to be giving in to the debauchery that wealth allows. In contrast, Wang Lung wouldn't even try the wine at the fancy tea shop until Cuckoo urged him into it. The uncle's family seems to be again causing trouble in Wang Lung's household.



Wang Lung finds his uncle's son in his uncle's rooms, also drunk. He questions the young man, who at first refuses to give a straight answer, but is finally frightened by Wang Lung's anger and admits that they went to a prostitute (Yang) who lives in the remains of the great house (the **House of Hwang**). Wang Lung knows that only poor men go to this woman. He immediately heads for the great house, hardly seeing his fields as he walks.

The gates of the house are never closed now, and families of common people rent the rooms. It's all dirty. Wang Lung asks the way to the whore named Yang, but when he knocks on her door she says she's not working now. He keeps knocking, and finally a woman wearing makeup opens the door. She tells him to come back later, but Wang Lung says he's come about his eldest son. He describes him to her, and she remembers the boy and his cousin. Wang Lung tells him that he'll pay her double if she'll refuse his son the next time he comes to her. She agrees to the deal, and Wang Lung leaves quickly, sickened by her.

The very same day, Wang Lung tells Cuckoo to go to Liu and arrange his son's marriage. He watches over his sleeping son, thinking with disgust of the whore. O-lan comes in and wipes away the boy's sweat. Then Wang Lung goes to his uncle's room and lashes out at him. When he tells his uncle what's happened, the man laughs and says it's only natural. Wang Lung suddenly remembers all of his grievances against his uncle and says he and his family must leave. When his uncle doesn't move, Wang Lung goes to hit him. His uncle opens his coat and reveals a false red beard and a piece of red cloth. Wang Lung is frightened, because these signify a robber band that has destroyed many people's lives. He leaves without a word.

Wang Lung finds himself in a more uncomfortable situation than ever. His uncle acts just as he always has, and Wang Lung has to be nice to him for fear of what he might do otherwise. Even when Wang Lung has had plenty of wealth while other people starved, bandits have never attacked his house, though he's always been afraid that they would. He'd begun to think the gods were protecting him, but now he knows the real reason why he's been fortunate. He doesn't tell anyone what his uncle showed him.

Wang Lung is bothered, somewhat hypocritically, by the idea of his son going to a prostitute. However, he's most disturbed by the fact that association with this particular prostitute is below his son's class status. Ironically, the prostitute lives in the House of Hwang, showing how far the great house has fallen.



Whereas the gates of the House of Hwang used to expressly keep out the commoners, including Wang Lung himself, they are now open to any who wish to enter, symbolizing the Hwangs' fall from the exclusivity of greatness. This is the first time Wang Lung enters the house and knows he's socially superior to everyone in it. Wang Lung finds Yang disgusting simply because of her base surroundings, even though she does essentially the same job that Lotus did.



Wang Lung feels that marrying his son off will allow him to act out his lusts in a healthier, more socially acceptable way. His uncle, however, still has no moral compass and sees no problem with the son going to a prostitute. Finally, familial duty is no longer enough to make Wang Lung put up with having to support his uncle's family. The uncle now tries to blackmail him in another way—by implying that he'll set the robber band of which he's a part onto Wang Lung's house if he throws him out.



Wang Lung is stuck between a rock and a hard place. If he throws his uncle out, he'll have to fear the robbers, but if he allows his uncle to stay, he'll never have peace in his house. Furthermore, Wang Lung realizes he's in debt to this uncle whom he hates, and if his uncle's connection to the robber band became known, he could be socially disgraced.



Wang Lung tries to be particularly courteous to his uncle's family, even giving them extra money. He keeps his eldest son inside in the evenings, which makes the boy irritable. Wang Lung considers moving into the town, where the walls protect against robbers, but he realizes he'd still have to come out to work in the fields. He could turn his uncle in to the law, but he would probably not be believed, and could even be punished for being cruel to his family. Besides, the robbers might kill him.

Wang Lung gives in to the blackmailing for the moment, as he sees no other option. Duty to family runs so deep in the culture that it seems even the law enforces it, giving Wang Lung no way to escape from his uncle's evil influence.



Liu agrees to the marriage of his daughter to Wang Lung's eldest son, but wants to wait another three years, which worries Wang Lung. He tells O-lan they must betroth their other children as soon as possible to avoid this same trouble. The next morning, he goes out to his fields, and when he passes his eldest daughter, he thinks that she causes him the least trouble out of any of his children. Wang Lung works in the fields for many days, and the **land** heals him.

Wang Lung fears that his son will get into more trouble if he can't have a wife for three more years. Though he once considered selling his eldest daughter, he's now fonder of her than of any of his children, essentially because she has no will or agency of her own, and only brings him pleasure instead of trouble or complication like his other children. Once again, the land acts as a force of life, bringing Wang Lung back to himself.



One day, a small cloud appears in the south, slowly spreading upward but not moving like a normal cloud. The village men discuss it, worried that it's made of locusts. Eventually the wind blows a dead locust to the ground. Wang Lung forgets about his family troubles and urges the villagers to fight the locusts. Some say that their fate is to starve, and it will happen no matter what. They go to worship in the temples.

The villagers seem to believe the locusts are a sign of the divine, just as they are in the Bible. But as a rich man, Wang Lung feels that he no longer has to bow to divine will, so he fights it instead.



Wang Lung summons his workers and some of the other villagers, and they burn some of the crops and dig moats to hinder the locusts. They don't even stop to sleep. Eventually the locusts arrive, leaving some fields untouched and eating others. Wang Lung and his men kill as many as they can. Wang Lung's best fields are left intact and he still has a harvest. Many people eat the dead insects, but Wang Lung refuses to. The locusts distract him for a week, and then he feels that he can live with his uncle until the man dies. He harvests his wheat and plants rice.

If the locusts really are sent by the gods, Wang Lung seems to triumph over them, or to be favored by them. The rich were sometimes thought to be divinely chosen, like royalty, and the survival of Wang Lung's fields suggests that the gods approve of his increasing wealth. Again, his work in the fields acts as a remedy to his mental disturbances, and he becomes reconciled to the idea of his uncle's blackmail.



CHAPTER 24

One day Wang Lung's eldest son tells him that his teacher has no more to teach him, and he wants to go to the city to the south to attend a more advanced school. Wang Lung is tired from the fields and refuses to allow him to go, but his son insists that he'll go. Wang Lung compares his son's refined appearance to his own rough one, and thinks he looks like his son's servant, which angers him. He tells his son to go work in the fields for once. He forgets all his pride in his son's learning.

At this stage of his life, Wang Lung goes back and forth between being proud of his family's ascent of the social ladder and clinging to the honor of hard work on the land that brought him all his success. While he's proud of his son's education and refinement, he also doesn't like the idea of his son being better than he is.



That night, when Wang Lung visits Lotus, she says that his eldest son wants to leave and go south. He snaps that his son shouldn't have been speaking to her, but she says that Cuckoo told her. Wang Lung still refuses to let his son go. For days afterwards, the boy doesn't complain, but won't go to school. Wang Lung lets him stay home and read in his room, thinking that his son didn't really mean what he said, and he'll be married soon enough.

Wang Lung soon forgets about his son's problems as he gains back through work the money he spent on Lotus. He's still happy to own her, even though she's not terribly young and she never gets pregnant. She becomes more beautiful as she gets plumper.

Wang Lung is almost entirely content, but one night O-lan comes to him. She's become thinner and says her organs are burning. She's looked pregnant for three years, but never given birth. She does her work quietly and Wang Lung hardly notices her. She avoids Lotus entirely. Wang Lung never thinks to hire help for her, even though he hires plenty of labor to help him in the fields. This evening, O-lan announces that she has something to say. Wang Lung thinks of how ugly she is.

O-lan tells Wang Lung that their eldest son goes into Lotus's court when he's not there. Wang Lung hardly believes her, so she tells him to come home when their son doesn't expect him. He thinks that she's jealous of Lotus, and he doesn't worry about what she's said. But that night, Lotus doesn't want him to lie with her, and he realizes that she's acted in a similar way for a while. He thinks of what O-lan has told him and leaves in a huff. He tries to sleep on two chairs but ends up taking a walk outside. He begins to suspect that his son has been spending time with Lotus, after all.

When dawn comes, Wang Lung eats and then goes into the fields. After a while he shouts that he's going to his **land** by the moat and will be gone a long time. However, he stops at the temple and realizes that now that he's prosperous, he pays the gods no attention. He can't decide whether to go home, but he thinks of Lotus refusing to sleep with him and resents her ungrateful attitude. He sneaks back to his house and hears his son's voice in Lotus's court.

Wang Lung jealously guards Lotus from interaction with any men other than himself. He also never takes the time to really try to understand his children, instead imposing his own desires on them. The boy becomes idle, which always seems to cause trouble in this book that values hard work.



Even now that Wang Lung is no longer obsessed with Lotus, she still brings him pleasure. In this society, fatness is a symbol of wealth, as only the wealthy have enough food and idle time to gain weight.



While Lotus has grown plump from rich food, O-lan has grown plump out of illness, which is representative of their places in Wang Lung's heart. Wang Lung still never considers that O-lan might want a better life, perhaps because he only sees her as an ugly workhorse. Lotus gets all the benefits of his wealth, while O-lan gets none.



Wang Lung is very insecure in his relationships with his family members, as all the tensions among them make them likely to act out against each other. O-lan has never lied to him, so it seems ridiculous that he doubts her. However, he also thinks he's so entitled to Lotus's bed that he interprets any unwillingness on her part to sleep with him as a personal affront that must have something sinister behind it.



Wang Lung wants to fool his son into thinking that he won't be home for a while. When he was poorer, he would give offerings to the gods when he was well off and curse them when he suffered. Now, however, he feels that he's the master of his own destiny, which can be a dangerous way of thinking.



Wang Lung grows more angry and jealous than he's ever been in his life. He strips a piece of bamboo and bursts into the court. Lotus and the eldest son don't see him at first, and he watches them talking and laughing. Cuckoo sees him and shrieks, and he begins to beat his son viciously with the bamboo. Lotus tries to stop him, so he beats her too. He suddenly becomes weak and sends his son to his room.

Once Wang Lung's anger cools, he goes into Lotus's room, where she lies crying. He accuses her of trying to seduce his eldest son, but she says he only came because he was lonely, and they never slept together. She tries to make him feel bad for whipping her, saying he's the only man who matters to her. Wang Lung can't help loving her, and he realizes he doesn't want to know what happened between her and his son. He tells his son to leave for the south the next day. Wang Lung passes O-lan, but she says nothing. Then he returns to his fields, weary.

CHAPTER 25

Wang Lung is relieved when his eldest son has gone. He feels that he can now take better care of his other children. He decides to make his second son an apprentice before he grows difficult like the older one. The second son is very different from his brother, small and cunning. Wang Lung decides to apprentice him to a grain market, where he can be of use to his father. He has Cuckoo set up a meeting for him with Liu, the grain merchant.

Wang Lung goes that very day to visit Liu. He has to ask a passerby to identify Liu's house, since he can't read the name on the gate. A servant shows him in. He's pleased with the quality of the furnishings, which are nice but don't denote excessive wealth. He doesn't want his son's wife to be too spoiled.

Liu enters the room and they secretly examine each other and like what they see. They drink and make small talk, until Wang Lung finally proposes that his second son might go to work for Liu. Liu says he'd be glad of the help, as long as the boy can read and write, which Wang Lung affirms he can. Liu sets out his wages, and Wang Lung is satisfied. He asks happily whether Liu might have a son to marry his second daughter, and Liu says he does. The children are the same age, and the men both hope to marry them.

O-lan is proved right once again, though Wang Lung never acknowledges it. He infers quite a bit from simply hearing his son talking to Lotus—from the extent of his anger, he seems to think that his son has been sleeping with her. His extreme jealousy shows how unsure he is of Lotus's love.



It's impossible to know whether Lotus tells the truth about her relations with Wang Lung's son. Wang Lung's passion for Lotus makes him softer with her than he is with O-lan, who may be less beautiful, but who better deserves his kindness. To get his son away from Lotus, Wang Lung gives him what he asked for all along rather than actually punishing him, which is a sort of reconciliation.



Wang Lung never thinks to ask his children what they want, but instead decides what they should do based on what will be most useful to him and their broader family. This gestures to what seems to be a broader cultural sense (in the book at least) that people are not so much individuals but components of families.



Wang Lung's inability to read still chains him to his lower-class upbringing. He wants a daughter-in-law who will work hard like O-lan does, but who will also bring status to his family.



Liu is the only man in the book, besides Ching, with whom Wang Lung forms a friendship. They mutually respect each other as hard workers and honorable people, seeing these qualities in each other just from this one conversation and immediately deciding to link their families together through their children. Essentially, Wang Lung makes an advantageous ally in his quest to better his family.



When Wang Lung returns home, he sees that his second daughter is pretty and has nicely bound feet. But he notices that she's been crying, and he asks her why. She admits it's because her bound feet hurt and keep her from sleeping. She's kept quiet because O-lan told her his pity for her might make him unbind her feet, in which case her husband wouldn't love her, just as Wang Lung doesn't love O-lan. Wang Lung is hurt, and tells the girl that he might have found her a husband.

That night, Wang Lung can't sleep for thinking about O-lan's faithfulness and how she has accurately read his character. In the following days, he sends his second son to his apprenticeship and makes the betrothal of the younger daughter official. He feels that he's taken care of his children, and he's proud of them.

It seems like this is the first occasion Wang Lung has had time to think about O-lan, and now he can't stop thinking about her. He hasn't let her work in the fields for many years, since he thought it shameful once he became rich. He hasn't considered why she began to move more slowly or to groan in the mornings. He suddenly feels guilty, though he tells himself he's been good to her. He can't forget what his second daughter said her mother had told her.

Wang Lung watches O-lan as she goes about her work, and one day he sees that she's in pain. He asks what's wrong and she says it's the same pain she's had for a while. He tells her to lie down. She does so, moaning, and he goes to town for a doctor. Wang Lung describes O-lan's symptoms and brings him to the house. O-lan has fallen asleep. After the doctor takes her pulse, he says that many of her internal organs are not working properly.

Wang Lung is terrified and shouts at the doctor to give her medicine. O-lan awakens. The doctor offers one medicine that won't ensure recovery and another, at an exorbitant price, that will. O-lan says she's not worth the price of the expensive medicine, which alone could buy a piece of **land**. Wang Lung insists he can pay it. The doctor wants the money, but he knows he'll be punished if the medicine doesn't work, so he says he's realized he needs ten times the original price if he's to ensure O-lan's recovery. Wang Lung realizes the doctor is saying O-lan will die. He shows him out and then weeps in O-lan's kitchen, where she's always worked.

Bound feet are supposed to be more beautiful because of their small size. However, the practice is extremely painful and keeps women from walking correctly. The girl reveals the depth of pain that Wang Lung has caused O-lan. O-lan knows that Wang Lung abandoned her for Lotus in part because of her large feet, and she doesn't want her daughter to suffer rejection as she has.



Wang Lung rightly feels guilty about his treatment of O-lan. She has seen through him, recognizing his valuing of superficial beauty over strength of character in women, yet she also seems to partly blame herself for his actions.



It's not so much that Wang Lung has never had time to think about O-lan—he's apparently had plenty of time to think about how ugly she is—but more that his daughter's words have finally forced him to face his own treatment of his wife. Even so, he can't fully admit that he's treated her badly.



O-lan has been in pain for years, but she's tried so hard to be the perfect, uncomplaining wife that she's never mentioned it—and if she has, Wang Lung hasn't listened to her long enough to really understand. It's almost as though her insides have deformed in response to the self-loathing that Wang Lung has caused her.



Now that Wang Lung is faced with losing O-lan, he begins to realize how much he really values her. Even now, O-lan acts modestly and even self-deprecatingly, saying her life isn't worth much. She directly compares her life to the land, a reminder that she's been one of the few people who treasure the land as much as Wang Lung does. But no matter how wealthy Wang Lung has become, money can't save O-lan, suggesting that money isn't powerful in the ways that really matter.



CHAPTER 26

O-lan lies dying all through the winter, and Wang Lung's family finally realizes how much she had done for them. Nobody else seems to know how to cook and clean properly. Wang Lung's father can't understand why O-lan no longer helps him until Wang Lung brings him into her room and he sees that she's ill. Wang Lung's eldest daughter is the only one who keeps smiling, oblivious. The family has to remember to take care of her, and sometimes they forget. Once they leave her outside all night, and Wang Lung is angry until he realizes he needs to take care of her himself.

Wang Lung pays no attention to the **land** while O-lan is dying. Ching takes care of everything, coming twice a day to ask after O-lan, but Wang Lung never has good news, so he tells Ching to stop asking. He usually sits by O-lan's bed, burning charcoal to keep her warm. She always says it's too expensive, and eventually he tells her he would sell all his land if it would heal her. She protests that she'll die sooner or later, and the land will live on.

Wang Lung refuses to talk about O-lan's death, but one day he goes to buy a coffin for her. The carpenter gives him a deal if he buys two, so he buys a second for his father. He tells O-lan what he's done, and she's glad.

Wang Lung sits by O-lan in silence, though sometimes she talks as though remembering her childhood, speaking to someone who abuses her as a slave. Wang Lung can't stand her distress and holds her hand. He's ashamed because even then, he doesn't feel the same love for her that he does for Lotus, and he still finds her ugly. As a result, he's particularly kind to her. He can't feel happy with Lotus because of his worry for O-lan.

Sometimes O-lan becomes fully conscious, and one day she summons Cuckoo. She tells her that despite Cuckoo's superiority in **the House of Hwang**, O-lan herself has been married and had sons, while Cuckoo remains a slave. Cuckoo is angry, but Wang Lung leads her away. O-lan forbids Cuckoo or Lotus from touching her possessions after she dies.

Finally, when it's too late, Wang Lung and his family begin to appreciate the so-called women's work that O-lan has always done without thanks. Though these aren't considered skilled jobs, the family realizes that they aren't as easy as they seemed. Meanwhile, the eldest daughter continues to smile in the face of tragedy, a reminder that life goes on no matter what horrors occur. She also exposes her family members' self-centeredness.



If the land is associated with life, Wang Lung becomes detached from the land as death approaches. He first offered to sell all his land to buy Lotus, so his willingness to do the same to save O-lan seems a sort of reconciliation with her. O-lan understands that her family's enduring place on the land is the most important thing, even as the human world changes around them.



In Wang Lung's culture, people are comforted by seeing the coffin in which they'll lie when they die. Even so, it might seem slightly callous to buy his father's coffin just for a good deal.



In her delirium, it becomes clear that O-lan's past still haunts her, but Wang Lung has never found out the details of her life before she married him. Wang Lung feels the irrationality of love; though he knows rationally that he should love O-lan, his attraction to Lotus still wins out.



O-lan has cared just as much about overcoming her low origins as Wang Lung has. She feels that she has triumphed over her oppressors by succeeding in family life, which is seen as the pinnacle of female achievement. She stands up for her supremacy in Wang Lung's house.



Just before the New Year, O-lan seems better. She has Wang Lung send for the girl who is engaged to their eldest son so that she can make the food for the festival. Liu agrees to let his daughter go since O-lan is dying, and she arrives at the house with a servant. Wang Lung gives her a room and is satisfied with her looks and behavior. She helps take care of O-lan.

After a few days, O-lan says she wants to see her eldest son marry before she dies. Wang Lung doesn't like to hear her talk about dying, but she sounds stronger in speaking her desire. He tells her he'll send someone south to find their son and bring him home. He still hopes she'll get better. He sends a man to tell his son that he must be married in three days. Wang Lung has Cuckoo arrange the wedding feast, telling her to make it as luxurious as in **the House of Hwang**. He invites everyone he knows and tells his uncle to invite anyone he wants, since he's treated his uncle courteously ever since he found out he was part of the robber band.

The night before the wedding, the eldest son comes home, looking like a man and wearing fine clothes. Wang Lung is proud of him and brings him to see O-lan. The son is sad at her state, but pretends to be cheerful. Lotus, Cuckoo, and Wang Lung's uncle's wife prepare the bride for her wedding day, performing rituals, doing her makeup, and dressing her.

When the bride comes before the guests, Wang Lung is glad to see her modesty. His sons enter, and he's very proud of them. His father hasn't understood what's going on, but when he finally does, he laughs joyfully, making everyone else laugh too. Wang Lung watches his eldest son carefully and sees that he likes his bride, and Wang Lung is glad to have chosen well. The eldest son and his bride bow to Wang Lung and his father and go into O-lan's room to bow to her. Her cheeks are red and Wang Lung takes this as a sign of health. She has them sit by her bed while they ritually drink wine and eat rice together, which officially marries them.

There is much feasting. People have come from far away, and Cuckoo has hired town cooks to prepare the food. Everyone has a wonderful time. O-lan has the doors left open so that she can hear and smell the feast, and Wang Lung repeatedly assures her that everything has been done properly. When the guests leave, she becomes tired.

Even when she's too ill to do the preparations herself, O-lan still wants to see that her household properly celebrates the New Year. Significantly, it was at the New Year that she once brought her son to the Old Mistress to show off her ascendancy from her former slave position.



Again, O-lan sees her children as her greatest achievement in life, and she wants to see her family continuing its line before she dies. Perhaps because she's so selfless, she's very aware of the world moving on inevitably into the future, even when she's gone. Meanwhile, Wang Lung takes the wedding as a chance to show off his wealth, demonstrating his desire to replace the Hwang family with his request to essentially reproduce a Hwang wedding.



Wang Lung has entirely forgiven—or forgotten—his jealousy over his son's association with Lotus. None of the women who prepare the bride for her wedding are the type of hardworking woman whom Wang Lung wants his son's wife to be, perhaps boding ill for the marriage.



The bride isn't supposed to enjoy her wedding day, but instead to show she's a respectable type of woman who takes no liberties. This is a scene that marks the continuation of the family, as Wang Lung's father rejoices to see his grandson married and the new couple pays respect to the generation above them. As O-lan dies—her red cheeks are not actually a sign of health—the couple prepares to carry on her line.



O-lan cares deeply that the wedding should be conducted in a manner that fully honors the importance of the occasion and that makes the guests admire her family. The presence of cooks from town brings the family closer to reenacting a Hwang wedding.



O-lan tells her eldest son and his wife to take care of her family, and tells the woman that she owes nothing to Lotus. She falls asleep, and when she speaks again she's not aware of those around her. She says that no matter how ugly she is, she did have a son. She worries that Lotus won't take care of Wang Lung. Wang Lung sends everyone else out and sits by O-lan, despising himself for noticing her ugliness even now. She stares at him but doesn't recognize him, and then she dies.

Wang Lung doesn't want to be near O-lan's dead body, so he has his relatives prepare the body and put it in the coffin. He goes to a geomancer, someone who reads luck in the dirt, to decide on the best day for a burial, which ends up being three months away. He rents a space for the coffin in the temple in town until then. He wants to do everything properly, so he has mourning clothes made for his family. He can't bear to sleep in the room where O-lan died, so he moves into Lotus's court and gives the room to his eldest son and his wife.

Before long, Wang Lung's father dies in his sleep. The second daughter finds him in the morning and brings Wang Lung. Wang Lung prepares the body and puts it in the coffin himself. He decides to make a burial plot on his **land** and bury O-lan and his father there. Wang Lung, too, will be buried there in time. His father's coffin sits in the middle room until the burial, and Wang Lung grieves but knows his father had a long life.

Before the day of the burial, priests come from the Taoist and Buddhist temples and chant all night. If they stop, Wang Lung pays them more. Ching has arranged the burial plot with plenty of room for future family burials. It shows that the family is established on this **land**, and will stay here in life and death. Wang Lung dresses the whole family in white robes and hires chairs to carry them to the burial, including Lotus and his uncle's family. The eldest daughter laughs because she doesn't understand what's happening.

At the graves, Wang Lung does not cry, because he feels that nothing could have been done to prevent the deaths. After the burial, he walks home alone, wishing he had let O-lan keep her **pearls**, and he decides never to allow Lotus to wear them again. He feels that the first half of his life has been buried, and he cries a bit.

O-lan passes on her position in the household to her son's wife. Her last words seem to get to the core of what consumes her most: that Wang Lung can't stand her appearance, but she loves him anyway. Yet even at the very end, Wang Lung can't appreciate her fully because he's so obsessed with her outward appearance simply because she's a woman.



Once O-lan is dead, the parts of her that Wang Lung did love are gone, and only her body, which he was never able to love, remains. As a result, he doesn't want to deal with her body. He's very concerned with burying O-lan in a socially proper and auspicious way that's fitting to his status. Ironically, O-lan's death only draws Wang Lung closer to Lotus, though O-lan would not like this result.



The death of Wang Lung's father marks another shift in the generations and the coming of the future, as the past is buried (literally). As the land provides life, so it now accepts the bodies of those it has nourished and gives them a final place of peace in the earth that they have loved.



The funeral marks the opening of a burial plot that gives the family social status and connects them to their beloved land forever, no matter how the world might change around them. Wang Lung uses his wealth to provide plenty of pomp and circumstance, and everyone wears the proper color of mourning. The eldest daughter has perhaps the most appropriate response, as death and tragedy are not really comprehensible.



Wang Lung finally recognizes that he should have made more of an effort to provide O-lan with happiness and beauty as he himself sought personal pleasure. Confiscating the pearls from Lotus is an act of loyalty to O-lan, though it comes too late.



CHAPTER 27

Wang Lung has hardly thought about his crops, but after the burial Ching tells him that a terrible flood is coming. Wang Lung replies that the gods never do him good, no matter whether he gives them incense or not. Ching doesn't fight the gods like Wang Lung does, but accepts what comes. Wang Lung examines his **land** and sees it has become wet and the waterways have risen. He and Ching decide where to try growing rice, and he says angrily that the gods will enjoy seeing people suffer. Ching doesn't like him to talk that way, but Wang Lung's wealth makes him careless.

Before long, the river bursts its dykes, and everyone contributes money to mend them. But they entrust the money to a new magistrate, who uses it for his own ends. When the river floods further, the people go to his house in a mob, and the magistrate kills himself. The river keeps bursting dykes until it covers all the fields. The water ruins people's houses and they have to save what they can on rafts. Then it begins to rain.

Wang Lung watches the water, which stays below his house on a hill and doesn't quite reach the new graves. No one can harvest anything, and people starve again. Some join the robber bands, which attack the town. Others go south, and others die. The water prevents anyone from planting the winter wheat, so there will be no harvest the next year either. Wang Lung argues with Cuckoo to keep her from spending so much money on food, and he's glad when the flood prevents her from getting to town. He carefully rations the food and eventually sends his laborers south.

Wang Lung has secretly hidden stashes of money and grain, so he knows his family won't starve. But he knows that the starving people hate him because he's still able to eat, so he guards his house carefully. He knows that his uncle's presence protects him from being robbed, so he gives his uncle's family privileges in the house. They can tell he's afraid of them, so they begin to demand more and more. Wang Lung overhears his uncle's wife and son urging the uncle to blackmail him for money, which angers Wang Lung, but he can't think of what to do.

The next day, Wang Lung's uncle asks for money, and Wang Lung has to give it to him, though he hates doing so. Before long the uncle comes back for more, and when Wang Lung says his demands will make them starve, the uncle says he's lucky he's not dead in a burnt house. Wang Lung has to give him the money again.

Now that he's rich, Wang Lung seems to take credit for anything good that happens to him, and to blame the gods for anything bad. However, his constant fighting of what others, like Ching, accept as fate, also contributes to his successes. Ching's worry at Wang Lung's carelessness about the gods foreshadows that Wang Lung's wealth might not always be able to protect him, and he should be more respectful of luck, which is important in farming.



The people only ever seem to exercise power when they join together in mobs, as in the one Wang Lung took part in at the great house in the city. Furthermore, these mobs are invariably made up of the poor gathered against the rich, suggesting that Wang Lung should be wary of them.



Ironically, the last famine occurred due to a want of water, and now an excess of it has the same effect. The cycle of famines in this region gestures to the many cycles in this book: the seasons, life and death, poverty and wealth. Through all of these cycles, only the existence of the land remains constant, which is perhaps why Wang Lung finds so much comfort in it. Now, even Wang Lung knows he needs to watch his spending.



In the last famine, Wang Lung was one of the starving people who envied the rich who continued living comfortably and refused to share their food, but now he acts just as selfishly as if he didn't know the other side of the situation. In this difficult time, angering the uncle's family would have severer consequences than ever, and they never pass up an opportunity to take advantage of Wang Lung.



Wang Lung has no choice but to continue giving his uncle what he wants, since his uncle has the power to kill Wang Lung's entire family. However, they might end up equally dead of starvation if the uncle takes all of their money.



Wang Lung's eldest son keeps his wife shut up in their room away from his cousin, the uncle's son, whom he doesn't trust. When he notices Wang Lung favoring the uncle's family, the eldest son accuses his father of caring more for them than for his own family. Wang Lung admits that he hates them, but has to keep them happy for fear of the robbers.

The eldest son is amazed and suggests that they push the uncle's family into the water and drown them. Wang Lung can't bear to kill, and he says if the uncle is gone, they'll be in danger of the robbers. He wants to find a way to keep them in the house, but take away their power. The eldest son has the idea to buy the uncle's family as much **opium** as they want. Wang Lung is doubtful, saying opium is expensive, and he needs to think about it.

Before long, Wang Lung's uncle's son begins to look at Wang Lung's second daughter, who is very pretty. One night he grabs her and touches her breast, and when she screams, Wang Lung runs out and pulls her away from him. His nephew shows no remorse. Wang Lung tells his eldest son what happened, and the son says they should send the second daughter to the house of her betrothed. The next day Wang Lung goes to Liu's house to propose that the marriage happen soon, but Liu doesn't have the money for it yet. Wang Lung says only that he can't watch over her, and wants Liu to keep her virginity safe in his house. Liu agrees to the arrangement. On his way home, Wang Lung buys some **opium**.

CHAPTER 28

After Wang Lung sends his second daughter away, he offers his uncle the **opium**, pretending he'd bought it to help his father sleep. The uncle is happy about it and smokes the opium. Wang Lung buys pipes to leave around the house and pretends to smoke himself. He only lets his uncle's family smoke the opium, and his house becomes more peaceful.

One day the eldest son announces that his wife is pregnant. Wang Lung is joyful and has Ching buy good food for the pregnant woman to eat. The thought of the birth comforts him throughout the spring.

As summer approaches, people return from the south and come to borrow money from Wang Lung to reestablish their farms. He also buys **land** from them. Others sell their daughters instead, and he buys five slaves to wait on the family. Later, a man brings a thin young girl (Pear Blossom) to sell, and Lotus wants her, so Wang Lung buys her partly to satisfy Lotus and partly to feed the child into health.

The uncle's son once drew the eldest son into drinking and visiting a prostitute, so the son knows the evil influence that he can have. In fact, the uncle's family turns family against family in a way that's unnatural in a culture that places so much value on blood relations.



The eldest son exhibits a willingness to take drastic action, while Wang Lung shows his soft heart again—remember, he couldn't even kill his ox. Opium seems like a wise idea to neutralize the threat of the uncle's family, but it's also a distinctive marker of the rich. The Old Mistress, notably, was addicted to opium.



The uncle's son proves himself a despicable character, as he molests his own cousin and doesn't even think he's done wrong. With such a skewed sense of morality, there's no telling what else he might do. Wang Lung, however, seems to mostly care about protecting his daughter's virginity until she's married, rather than for her general safety and well-being around her cousin. This incident finally puts Wang Lung over the edge, and he decides to try subduing his uncle's family by addicting them to opium.



Wang Lung wants his uncle to think of the opium as a gift, another sign of his subservience to his uncle. Opium acts as a sedative, sending the user off into strange dreams while the user lies in bed, the drug slowly weakening the body.



This pregnancy signals the beginning of the next generation of Wang Lung's family and can be seen as a sign of Wang Lung's success.



Having weathered the famine without much trouble, Wang Lung now benefits from poorer people's struggles as they come to him in need of money. In buying slaves, he again grows more similar to the Hwangs. It's possible that the young Pear Blossom reminds him of how close he came to selling his eldest daughter.



Wang Lung goes across his **land** with Ching, discussing the soil, and brings his youngest son to teach him about farming. He never notices that the boy seems unhappy. Wang Lung wants peace in his house, but his eldest son still hates the uncle's son. The son watches his cousin constantly and suspects him of mischief with the slaves and Lotus, though Lotus only cares about her food these days.

When Wang Lung returns from the fields, his eldest son says he can't bear to have his cousin in the house anymore. He doesn't bring up Lotus, because he's embarrassed that he once lusted after her. Wang Lung doesn't want this trouble, so he tells his son he cares too much about his wife. The young man hates to be accused of anything improper to his station. Wang Lung gets angry because he doesn't want to deal with his sons' lusts for women.

The eldest son suggests that they might move to town and leave the uncle's family in the country. Wang Lung refuses to consider the suggestion, saying that the **land** has given them all they have. He makes a point of behaving like a rough farmer, though he's secretly proud that his son isn't one. His son says they could move into the inner courts of **the House of Hwang**, crying and saying he asks little of his father. Wang Lung is still ashamed by his first, timid visit to the House of Hwang, and his eldest son's idea makes him imagine sitting in the Old Mistress's place and acting as she did. He smokes and fantasizes about this.

Wang Lung makes no decision yet, but he does notice the despicable actions of his uncle's son. His uncle and his uncle's wife have been weakened by the **opium** and no longer make trouble, but their son doesn't give in to it. He refuses to work and spends less time with the robber band, instead hanging around the house.

One day Wang Lung visits his second son at the grain market and asks what he thinks of the family moving to town. The second son approves, saying he could move there with a wife. Wang Lung feels ashamed that hasn't made any plans for this son's marriage, but he says he will.

The second son requests not to marry a woman from town like his brother's wife, who will make him spend money. Wang Lung is surprised at this characterization of his eldest son's wife, but he's happy to find that this son he's almost ignored has a good head for money. Wang Lung asks what kind of woman his son would like, and he says he wants a hardworking, thrifty woman from a good family in the village. Wang Lung admires his son and agrees to look for this sort of woman.

Once again, Wang Lung dictates what his children will do in accordance to what will benefit him and the family rather than asking what they actually want. Wang Lung must deal with an endless number of conflicts in his ever-growing household, and he hates this burden.



The cousin hasn't submitted to the opium the way his parents have, so Wang Lung's trouble with his uncle's family isn't completely solved. Furthermore, Wang Lung isn't particularly good at dealing with family conflicts, as he often gets angry himself. The eldest son, growing up as Wang Lung made his fortune, cares particularly about acting in a socially correct way.



Wang Lung finds himself torn between his love for the land and his roots and his constant desire to better himself in the world. He still isn't ready to completely abandon his identity as a farmer, even though he no longer fully embraces it, either. But the idea of living in the House of Hwang takes hold of him because of the symbolism of it; he could at last completely overcome the humiliation that he experienced on his first visit to the great house.



Though it might seem like a relief that the uncle's son spends less time with the robber band, it also means that he has more time to cause trouble in Wang Lung's household.



Wang Lung again acts rather clumsily with his children's lives. Notably, his children can't acceptably make many decisions for themselves; instead, they must wait for their father to make plans.



A contrast between the first and second son begins to emerge: The first likes to live luxuriously, while the second is a spendthrift. Either Wang Lung has failed to accurately observe his eldest son's wife in his own house, or his second son is even more tight-fisted than Wang Lung himself, and thus judges his brother's wife more harshly.



Wang Lung goes to **the House of Hwang**. There are common people everywhere in the courts, and an old man lives where the prostitute used to live. Years before, Wang Lung would have counted himself among the people in the courts, hating and fearing the rich. Now, however, he looks down on the common people and doesn't like them. Going further into the courts, he comes upon the gateman's wife, who has grown old. He realizes how long it's been since he first came here, and he feels old himself.

Wang Lung asks the gateman's wife to let him into the gate she's guarding. She says she can only let in someone who's interested in renting the inner courts, and he says he is. He doesn't identify himself, but follows her to the great hall where he first came before the Old Mistress. Wang Lung sits where she sat and looks down at the gateman's wife. He feels satisfied and pronounces that he'll take the house.

CHAPTER 29

Wang Lung tells his eldest son to arrange to rent the house, and the family prepares to move. When they're ready to leave, Wang Lung finds he can't leave his **land**, so he tells his sons that he'll come to the great house a day before his grandson is born. He says he must bring his eldest daughter with him, since no one else will take care of her, and his eldest son is ashamed because his wife refuses to have the eldest daughter around her.

The uncle's family moves into what were Lotus's courts, but Wang Lung can tell that his uncle will die soon, and then he can throw out his uncle's son. Wang Lung's house is peaceful and he rests. Eventually he asks Ching to find a wife for his second son. Ching goes to various villages to look at the women, and he returns with news of a fitting maiden. Wang Lung is satisfied, and lets Ching set up the marriage. He's glad that he only has one son left to marry off. He sleeps in the sun like his father did.

Wang Lung decides that he should decrease the work necessary to run his lands by renting some of them out. Men from the villages become his tenants and give him half their harvests. Sometimes Wang Lung sleeps in his house in town, but he always comes back to his **land** at dawn.

The reversal of Wang Lung and the Hwang family continues. Whereas he once came here as a poor man when the house was rich, now he comes to a house of poverty as a rich man. He's very aware of his initial visit to the house, but it doesn't give him any sympathy with the commoners now, though he used to be one of them.



On his first visit, even the gateman looked down on Wang Lung. In another reversal, he now treats the gateman's wife with disdain. Wang Lung then symbolically and climactically completes his rise to wealth as he's always seen it, taking the place of the Old Mistress perched (literally) at the top of the social pyramid.



For the moment, Wang Lung's deep-rooted love for the land—emblematic of his original status as a simple farmer—wins out over his sense of triumph at living where the Hwang family lived. Even at this momentous occasion in his life, he remains loyal to his favored daughter, who depends on him completely for survival.



Wang Lung is hopeful that the trouble with his uncle's family that he has long endured will soon be entirely over. As Wang Lung makes further arrangements for the continuation of his family line, he becomes more like his father, the old patriarch figure who thought himself worthy of continual rest until his death. Thus the cycle of life marches on.



Wang Lung begins to cut some of his connections with the land, as he no longer directly controls the work on it, but only receives the money and food that others produce. He also begins to move physically away from the land.



Wang Lung's uncle's son grows restless, and when he hears about a war in the north, he asks Wang Lung for money so he can go join the fighting. Wang Lung hides his pleasure at this idea and gives him the money, hoping he might die in the war. He comforts his uncle's wife at her son's leaving, and his house is peaceful.

Wang Lung thinks he's finally finished dealing with the trouble that his uncle's family has caused. The mention of a war reminds the reader that events of the broader world still go on throughout the time of the story, despite Wang Lung's ignorance of them.



As his grandson's birth approaches, Wang Lung spends more time at the house in town, amazed to think that he's living where the Hwang family used to live. He buys beautiful fabric to decorate the house and clothe the slaves. He even begins to eat delicacies. Cuckoo laughs to see how similar the situation is to when she used to live here, and Wang Lung is pleased to hear her compare him to the Old Lord.

As Wang Lung cuts more of his ties with the land, he becomes increasingly like the Hwangs. He's conscious of the similarities, but he takes them entirely as positive changes in his life, forgetting that he's only living in the House of Hwang because the Hwangs destroyed their fortune by indulging themselves too much.



One morning Wang Lung hears his eldest son's wife in labor. He's frightened of her screams, so he brings incense to a temple in town, though a woman should rightfully do it on this occasion. He begins to worry that the baby might be a girl, and says he'll buy a robe for the temple figure if it's a boy, but not if it's a girl. He buys more incense and brings it to the temple in the country, asking the gods for a grandson. When he returns home, everyone ignores him in their flurry of action.

Since Wang Lung is powerless to fight his daughter-in-law's pain the way he's fought misfortune like the locusts, he finally has to turn to the gods once again. Even so, he bargains with them like the rich man he is rather than showing them the pure respect he might have once. His prayers demonstrate once again how highly boys are valued above girls.



Finally, Lotus comes to tell him that he has a grandson. Wang Lung is joyful and laughs at his anxiety. He sits remembering O-lan giving birth to all of his children silently and alone, in contrast to his eldest son's wife, who shrieked and caused panic. Wang Lung remembers O-lan nursing her son in the field. His eldest son comes to tell him they need to find a woman to nurse his son as all the important town women do. Wang Lung sadly agrees.

In this house of excessive luxury, Wang Lung remembers the contrast of his early years, which were difficult but abundant in their own way. O-lan now seems particularly strong and admirable in comparison to the woman who's married his son. The son wants to make sure the house is run in a way that fits the family's social status.



Wang Lung's eldest son throws a great feast to celebrate the birth of his son. Afterwards, he tells Wang Lung they should make tablets of ancestors like great families have. Wang Lung likes the idea and has it done. Then he buys the robe he promised the goddess before his grandson's birth. On his way home, he receives word that Ching is dying. Wang Lung blames the earth gods' jealousy of the robe, and he rushes to Ching's bedside.

Some traditional Chinese religion includes worship of ancestors, so the eldest son wants to participate more properly in this veneration of the family by setting up an official presence of the ancestors in the house. It also makes the family seem more established and important. If the earth gods jealously caused Ching's death, it's probably because Wang Lung no longer tends to his own lands.



Wang Lung demands to know what happened to Ching, and the laborers tell him that Ching, now an old man, was showing a new laborer how to use a tool correctly and overexerted himself. Wang Lung has the new laborer brought before him and beats him. When Ching moans, Wang Lung goes to sit by him and holds his hand. He tells Ching he'll buy him a beautiful coffin. When Ching dies, Wang Lung weeps and arranges a funeral and mourning fitting for one better than a servant. He wants to bury Ching in the family plot, but his sons say the family shouldn't be buried with a servant. Instead, Wang Lung buries Ching at the entrance to the plot.

Wang Lung stops going to his **land** so often, and he rents it all out but refuses to sell any of it. He sets a laborer's family to take care of his uncle and uncle's wife. He brings his youngest son and eldest daughter to live in the town and rarely returns to his house in the country.

CHAPTER 30

Wang Lung thinks he has everything he could want and can live in peace. But his eldest son always comes to ask him to buy things to make the family great and plan for the second son's wedding. He wants Wang Lung to take over the outer courts of the house, where the common people have been living. He gets upset because Wang Lung raised him for social superiority, but Wang Lung won't give him the resources for it. Finally Wang Lung tells his son to do what he wants, but not bother him about it.

The eldest son buys beautiful furniture and decorations for the house. Whenever he goes through the outer courts, he disdains the common people, who privately make fun of him but show him respect in public. When their rents are raised and they have to move out, they know it's the eldest son's fault. They leave angrily, saying they'll get their revenge on the rich soon.

Wang Lung knows nothing of what goes on, as he stays in the inner courts, sleeping and eating. His eldest son has the outer courts rebuilt and made beautiful with his wife's advice. The townspeople hear about this and begin calling Wang Lung an important man. Wang Lung gives his son whatever money he asks for without counting it.

Wang Lung's depth of emotion at Ching's death shows how close he has grown to Ching and how much he values his friendship. In this situation, Wang Lung feels that social rules are constricting, as he wants to pay Ching the respect that he thinks he deserves, but he's supposed to treat his friend as nothing more than a servant. In fact, Wang Lung feels that Ching is more like family—certainly more like family than Wang Lung's uncle, who does receive burial in the family plot.



Ching was acting as Wang Lung's link to his land. Now that Ching is gone, Wang Lung drifts even farther from the land that's given him his fortune, and he becomes more and more like the Hwangs.



Wang Lung just wants to follow in his father's footsteps, spending his days in relaxation with other people taking care of the business of living. However, he still controls the family resources, which causes issues. The eldest son's plans for the house would make it even more like the old House of Hwang, where commoners were firmly stuck outside the gates.



The eldest son did experience poverty during the famine, but he was either too young to remember it or he simply refuses to acknowledge that he was once in the place of the commoners who live in the outer courts. Just as the poor people of the city rose against the rich, the eldest son unwisely induces rage that could cause the same outcome.



Wang Lung wants to enjoy his wealth rather than worrying about its potential negative consequences. Meanwhile, the eldest son spends excessive amounts of money in a concerted effort to raise the family's social standing.



One day Wang Lung's second son comes to him and says that they're spending too much money on needless luxuries. Wang Lung blames it all on the son's wedding, but the second son says it's really to satisfy the elder son's pride. Wang Lung agrees to stop giving his elder son so much money. The second son wants to show him a list of expenses, but Wang Lung doesn't want to be bothered.

Wang Lung tells his eldest son they've made enough improvements to the house, but his son insists they need to live somewhere fitting to their high status, and that people are calling them a great family. Wang Lung hasn't heard this, but it pleases him. He says that even great families come from the **land**, but his son says they don't stay there. Wang Lung insists he must stop spending so much. He wants to be left in peace.

The eldest son persists, saying that Wang Lung's youngest son should be sent to school. Wang Lung had planned for him to farm the **land** and doesn't see the need for his education. The eldest son says his brother doesn't want to farm, which Wang Lung has never even considered. He says one of his sons must farm the land, but the eldest son says people will speak ill of him if someone as wealthy as he makes his sons farm. He suggests Wang Lung let his youngest son go to a school in the south.

Wang Lung sends for his youngest son. He sees that the boy is beautiful, but frowns frequently. His son confirms that he wants to go to school, and Wang Lung is bitter that this means none of his sons would work his **land**. The boy is silent, but when Wang Lung becomes angry, he confirms that he doesn't want to work the land. Wang Lung feels that his sons are causing him too much trouble, and he sends the boy away. He thinks how much easier his daughters are. When he calms down, however, he tells his elder son to arrange for the youngest son's education.

Wang Lung appoints his second son as steward over the **land**, which pleases him, as it will give him control over the money. The second son is very thrifty, even rationing out the food on his wedding day and giving the slaves the least pay he can. Cuckoo says a truly great family would be more generous, so the eldest son gives her more money to keep her quiet. He only invites a few friends to the second brother's wedding because he's ashamed of his brother and his lower-class bride.

Wang Lung's second son acts as a necessary balance against the eldest, though their different approaches to wealth also cause conflicts between them. Wang Lung hardly takes anything seriously. He seems to think his wealth bottomless enough that he doesn't need to worry about it running out.



Wang Lung and his eldest son are similar in their desire for social superiority and the approval of others. However, as the one who actually worked to make the family's wealth, Wang Lung better understands what's required to keep it. He still retains his reverence for the land as the source of his money, but his son brushes it off.



Wang Lung still doesn't think like the head of a family that has long been wealthy would think. He feels that his sons must directly farm the land, even though he himself doesn't anymore. As the eldest son points out, rich people don't farm, they pay other people to farm for them. However, this disconnection from the source of wealth does make the wealthy more likely to squander their money.



Wang Lung has never paid any attention to his youngest son, but he's always assumed that the boy will do whatever he tells him. Now he finds that the boy has ambitions of his own. Ironically, Wang Lung once thought the birth of daughters an evil omen, but now he's glad of them simply because their culture teaches them never to question what a man tells them to do. As usual, Wang Lung eventually gives in to what his family asks of him.



Wang Lung makes a wise choice in giving his second son control of the land and money, since he's less likely to throw it all away as the elder son might do. However, the second son also might go too far—if a wealthy family isn't somewhat generous, people will begin to resent them, as the commoners already do. The eldest son again shows how much he cares about his social status.



None of the family seems quite at peace in the house. Sometimes Wang Lung wishes he were back in his plain house on his fields. The eldest son and the second son always argue about spending money and their social status. Wang Lung's grandson is the only happy one, as he knows nothing of wealth and greatness. Wang Lung enjoys playing with him. The eldest son's wife continues to have children, and Wang Lung is glad there's plenty of food to feed them all. The second son's wife gives birth to a daughter.

After five years, Wang Lung's uncle dies during a very cold winter. Wang Lung's uncle and the uncle's wife have long lain in bed smoking **opium**, which has left them weak and ill. Wang Lung brings two coffins to their room so that his uncle can be comforted by seeing where his body will rest. His uncle says Wang Lung is like a son to him, and his wife makes Wang Lung promise to find their son a wife if he comes home.

When Wang Lung's uncle dies, he buries him in the family burial plot and the family wears mourning clothes because it's proper. Wang Lung gives his uncle's wife a room in the house in town, and she smokes **opium** next to her coffin. Wang Lung can't believe he used to fear this woman who now looks as weak as the Old Mistress used to look when **the House of Hwang** collapsed.

CHAPTER 31

Wang Lung has often heard of war, but the closest he came to it was in the southern city. He's heard men say they'll go to war, but war never seemed real. One day his second son tells him that the price of grain has gone up because a war is approaching. Wang Lung looks forward to seeing it. He's not afraid because he's old and rich. He goes about his life as usual.

One day ranks of men in uniforms march through the streets holding weapons. Their fierce expressions frighten Wang Lung, but just as he's about to lock the gate his uncle's son marches by and catches sight of him. He tells the other soldiers that Wang Lung will take care of them, so they quickly take over the house. Wang Lung is powerless. He desperately tells his eldest son what's happened. The eldest son decides he has to be courteous because the soldiers are all armed, so he welcomes his cousin and offers the soldiers a meal before they leave. The cousin says they'll stay for a long time, until they go to the war. Wang Lung and his son have to pretend to be glad.

Wang Lung begins to realize that instead of bringing happiness, wealth causes almost as many troubles as poverty does, albeit of a less fatal sort. He grows tired of worrying about being rich and prefers the company of one who doesn't care about social superiority. True to his origins, Wang Lung still thinks about whether his entire family can eat, while his sons think about how others perceive them.



Wang Lung's culture displays a comfort with death, as coffins act as a reassurance of a final resting place rather than as a gruesome reminder of mortality. Since opium is so expensive, it's an upper-class cause of death. Wang Lung's uncle exposes his own hypocrisy once more, calling Wang Lung his son after threatening to kill him years earlier.



Though the family actually has no respect for the uncle, they have to pay him the respect of ceremony anyway. The uncle's wife plays the role of the Old Mistress as Wang Lung's family unconsciously reenacts the House of Hwang. The presence of her coffin next to her bed emphasizes the degree of her addiction, as she can't deny the opium is killing her.



Wang Lung has never been aware of the greater political events going on around him, even when he was in closer proximity to them in the city. In a way, he's like the land, remaining aloof and only aware of his immediate surroundings. Foolishly, he thinks his wealth will protect him.



Perhaps Wang Lung's wealth can protect him from some catastrophes, but he still hasn't shed the problem of his uncle's son, which originated with family responsibility and has now morphed into a fear for his own life. Wang Lung discovers that world events do actually affect him, even if he has no desire to get involved in them. Though wealth is power, it's not necessarily more powerful than governments and human violence.



Dismayed, Wang Lung and his eldest son bar the door of the inner court. The second son rushes in with news that the soldiers have taken over all the houses in town, and one of the clerks where he works was killed when he protested their presence in his house. He says they must give the soldiers whatever they want. They decide to hide their women in the innermost court to protect them. They guard the gate night and day.

They have to allow the uncle's son into the inner courts because he's family, however. He comes and admires the sons' wives, flirting with the second son's wife and insulting the elder son's wife. Then he goes to Lotus and calls her "Old Mistress," saying he can tell Wang Lung is rich by how fat she is. Lotus is flattered and gives him a flirtatious look.

Finally Wang Lung shows the uncle's son to his mother's room. He wakes the uncle's wife by banging his gun on the floor. She's amazed to see him, and can only think to offer him her **opium** pipe, but he refuses. Wang Lung is worried he'll be angry for what Wang Lung has done to his mother, so he pretends to begrudge the money the opium costs him. When she falls back asleep, her son leaves.

The soldiers destroy the outer courtyards, but the family is most afraid of the uncle's son, for he comes into the courts and looks lustfully at the slaves. Cuckoo says they need to give him a slave for himself, and Wang Lung approves. He sends Cuckoo to the cousin, who tells her he wants a slave named Pear Blossom, whom Wang Lung bought in a year of famine to serve Lotus. When Pear Blossom hears, she drops a teapot and cries in fear of the cousin. Lotus commands her to go to him anyway, though she begs not to. Wang Lung's family can't speak against Lotus, and Wang Lung doesn't want to anger her.

Pear Blossom can tell that Wang Lung pities her, so she weeps at his feet. He tells Cuckoo he doesn't want to force Pear Blossom, but Lotus calls her foolish for resisting. Wang Lung says he'll buy Lotus something to pacify her, and he sends Cuckoo to tell the uncle's son that Pear Blossom has a terrible disease. One of the other slaves offers herself to him, and Cuckoo takes her to him. Wang Lung examines Pear Blossom kindly and tells her to avoid Lotus and the cousin.

The uncle's son gets his slave pregnant before the troops are called away to the war. When he leaves, he boasts that he's leaving a son behind, and says soldiers are lucky because they can make others take care of their children when they go on their way.

Just as the House of Hwang was robbed by a mob, Wang Lung's family now finds themselves beset by a mob of another sort. The situation also demonstrates that the government at this time is not working effectively for its people, as the soldiers are destroying citizens' lives instead of protecting them.



Familial obligations to the cousin continue to undermine the safety of Wang Lung's family. The cousin is even bolder in his troublemaking than he was before. Even he sees the family's similarities to the House of Hwang, as he calls Lotus "Old Mistress."



The cousin doesn't exactly express affection for his mother, instead treating her with characteristic roughness. In contrast, she's lost all of her bite and struggles to perceive any world beyond her opium-induced dreams. Luckily, her son doesn't guess that her addiction is all Wang Lung's doing.



Wang Lung hopes that if he gives his nephew one slave woman, he'll be able to satisfy his lusts. Pear Blossom was the young girl whom Wang Lung bought almost out of pity, because she was so thin. Now, Lotus displays the misogyny of her society as she sees no problem with forcing Pear Blossom to sleep with a man when she begs not to. It's clear that Lotus has gained plenty of power in the household.



Wang Lung can be particularly softhearted in the right situation. In contrast, Lotus seems to think that because she was willing to offer up her body to any man, Pear Blossom should be, too. This recalls O-lan's willingness to sell her daughter even though she herself was a slave. Women continue to practice their own oppression on other women.



The uncle's son exhibits extreme irresponsibility for his own actions. In fact, he doesn't even think he's shirking responsibility; he thinks he has no responsibility to help take care of his own child.



CHAPTER 32

Wang Lung and his sons hire carpenters and masons to repair the courts where the soldiers were staying. Wang Lung assigns the slave who's pregnant with the uncle's son's child to serve his uncle's wife, and the slave gives birth to a girl. He promises the slave the uncle's wife's room once she dies. He tries to give her silver, but she asks him to use it as a dowry and marry her off. He promises to do so, thinking that whatever poor man he finds to marry her will be like he was, coming to **the House of Hwang** to marry a slave. He hasn't thought of O-lan in years, and now he thinks of her sadly.

Before long, the uncle's wife dies. Wang Lung sends for the farm laborer who accidentally caused Ching's death. Wang Lung sits on the dais where the Old Mistress used to sit and presents the laborer with the slave as his wife, feeling how strange his position is. When it's done, Wang Lung feels like he's achieved everything he meant to, and he can have peace as soon as he weds his youngest son.

However, his sons' wives begin to quarrel with each other and scold each other's children. They never forget the uncle's son's appraisals of them, and they always use his words to insult each other. The sons also clash because the eldest son worries about his social status, and the second son worries about his brother's waste of money. The elder son doesn't like it that his brother controls the money. Wang Lung has no peace.

Ever since Wang Lung protected Pear Blossom from his uncle's son, Lotus has disliked her and accuses Wang Lung of lusting after her. Wang Lung thinks of Pear Blossom only as a child until Lotus says this, but then he realizes that she's very pretty after all. Lotus considers selling Pear Blossom but needs the girl to wait on her, which makes Lotus bad-tempered. Wang Lung stays away from her and thinks about Pear Blossom.

Wang Lung's youngest son has long been absorbed with his books, but when the soldiers were in the house, he listened to their stories of war with fascination. Finally he tells Wang Lung that he wants to become a soldier. Wang Lung argues with him, saying he's too good a man to become a soldier, but the boy has made up his mind. Wang Lung offers to send him to any school he wants and says it's disgraceful for a wealthy man's son to become a soldier. The boy says that there's a revolution coming that will free the country. Wang Lung doesn't understand how the country could be freer than it is.

In his position as a family relation to the uncle's son, Wang Lung takes on the responsibility that he has shirked to take care of the woman he impregnated. This slave woman represents the passage of time and generations: She'll replace her partner's mother in the house as her baby carries on the uncle's line, and her marriage will complete the cycle of Wang Lung's ascendancy in the House of Hwang.



Though Wang Lung once beat this laborer, he seems to see something of himself in him. In this odd reenactment of his first visit to the House of Hwang, the laborer takes Wang Lung's place while Wang Lung plays the part of the Old Mistress. Even Wang Lung recognizes that his life has come full circle.



Even when the last of the uncle's family has gone, their influence in the house continues to plague Wang Lung. Furthermore, the very presence of money causes problems that never existed when Wang Lung was poor. He just wants to relax and enjoy the fruits of his labor, but his family causes constant trouble.



The women in this book are often jealous of each other, which prevents them from ever finding common ground in their mistreatment by men. Ironically, Lotus has no reason to be jealous of Pear Blossom until she voices her jealousy. Once again, Wang Lung's idleness leads him into lust.



Wang Lung still doesn't like his children to have minds and desires of their own. He feels that the military is socially beneath someone of his family's standing, and having worked so hard to get here, he doesn't want to see his son fall down the social ladder again. Furthermore, his son exhibits a political consciousness and a vision for change completely beyond Wang Lung's understanding of the world.



Wang Lung thinks that he has given his youngest son everything he could desire, but he decides he must need a wife or a slave. The boy says he'll run away, since he doesn't want a woman. He wants glory, and he points out that the slaves in the house are all ugly besides Pear Blossom. Wang Lung suddenly feels jealous and tells his son to keep away from the slaves, though he just offered his son one. Wang Lung can't understand his own anger.

CHAPTER 33

Wang Lung begins to think only of Pear Blossom. One day he feels particularly lustful, and he considers walking out to his **land**, but is ashamed to let other people see him there. Instead he wanders around the courts, avoiding Lotus. He realizes that his youngest son and Pear Blossom are about the same age, whereas he's almost seventy. He tells himself he should give Pear Blossom to his son, but can't bear to do it. At night, he sits in his court in the dark.

Pear Blossom passes the gate to Wang Lung's court, and he calls her in. He holds on to her coat, thinking that he's far too old for her. She senses his lust and kneels at his feet. She says she likes old men's kindness, and when he says she should have a young man, she replies that they're too fierce. He brings her into his room, though he's content with only watching and touching her.

Eventually Cuckoo realizes that Pear Blossom has become Wang Lung's concubine, and she's reminded of the Old Lord. Wang Lung tells her he's not sure how it happened, and she says someone must tell Lotus. Wang Lung is afraid to do so and asks Cuckoo to tell her. Lotus is angry, but Cuckoo tells her that Wang Lung will buy her whatever she wants, and she orders Pear Blossom and Wang Lung to keep away from her. Wang Lung is happy with this arrangement.

Wang Lung is ashamed to tell his sons about Pear Blossom. The second son comes to talk about the harvest, though Wang Lung no longer worries about the weather and the harvests, since he has plenty of money. He calls Pear Blossom out, and the second son looks as though he's heard rumors about her relationship with his father, but didn't believe them until now. He says nothing about it, and they continue with their normal conversation.

Wang Lung tries to use the same remedy on his youngest son that worked on his elder son and his uncle's son. He has trouble understanding that the youngest son is a different person, with different desires. Wang Lung's incomprehensible anger shows that he's not acknowledging his own feelings for Pear Blossom.



Wang Lung knows that his land could help cure him of his lust and bring him back to himself as it has in the past, but now that he's become so socially superior, he doesn't think it's fitting for him to go to the land. This attitude is exactly what caused the downfall of the Hwangs, as they became disconnected from their land.



Though Wang Lung's desire for such a young girl might be seen as inappropriate, this is actually the first time that he approaches a woman in a situation in which she can refuse his sexual advances. He believed he had a right to his wife's body, and Lotus was a prostitute, so he thought his money gave him a right to her.



The Old Lord's excessive number of concubines contributed to the fall of his family's fortunes, and now Wang Lung is imitating the Hwangs in this respect as well. Lotus sees Wang Lung's love of Pear Blossom as a betrayal, just as O-lan saw his love of Lotus as one. However, Lotus is more easily bought off.



Wang Lung now feels some sort of responsibility to live up to his sons' social expectations of him. Even though it's acceptable for rich men to have concubines, there also seems to be some sense of slight impropriety around it. In this situation, Wang Lung is also embarrassed because of the age difference between himself and Pear Blossom.



Later that day, the eldest son comes to Wang Lung's court. Wang Lung is afraid for him to find out about Pear Blossom, but then he realizes that his son is afraid of many foolish things, and he calls Pear Blossom out to pour their tea. The eldest son looks like he secretly envies his father, and he says his father can do what he wants. Wang Lung can tell that before long, his eldest son will look for a concubine himself.

The youngest son comes that evening when Pear Blossom is sitting with Wang Lung in the court. The youngest son appears suddenly, like a panther, looking fierce. He says that he's going to become a soldier. Wang Lung is speechless. When the boy looks at Pear Blossom, she hides her face. The youngest son leaps out of the court. Wang Lung tells Pear Blossom he's too old for her, but she cries that she likes old men. The next morning, the youngest son has disappeared.

CHAPTER 34

Before long, Wang Lung's passion for Pear Blossom passes, but he's still fond of her and glad to have her around. She's kind to his eldest daughter. Wang Lung worries what will happen to the poor fool when he dies, so he's bought poison that he intends to give her when he's about to die, though he dreads this. He tells Pear Blossom that since no one will take care of his daughter after his death, she must feed her the poison when he dies. Pear Blossom doesn't want to kill her, and she offers to take care of the poor fool in return for Wang Lung's kindness to her. He's very glad, but makes Pear Blossom accept the poison anyway, in case she dies before his daughter.

Wang Lung is usually alone except for Pear Blossom and his eldest daughter. He worries about Pear Blossom, but she insists she's happy. Once he asks her why she's so afraid of men, and she says she hates every man except for him. However, she won't tell him whether Lotus and Cuckoo have frightened her with stories or if something bad happened to her.

As the years pass, Wang Lung sits in the sun like his father did. Sometimes he visits Lotus, who sits talking and eating with Cuckoo as a friend. When Wang Lung goes to his sons' courts, he asks how many grandchildren he has and examines them when they gather around him, seeing likenesses of himself, his father, and Liu. He asks them what they study in school and finds that it has changed since the Revolution. He knows nothing about this Revolution, as he's always been too busy to bother with it.

Wang Lung finally realizes that he shouldn't be controlled by fear of his sons' approval. His eldest son has always been lustful, and now that he sees his father pursuing concubines, he begins to see this as an option for himself, too. However, concubines cost money, so an abundance of them might be unwise.



Coming after the other two sons' acceptance of Pear Blossom's new position, the youngest son's reaction seems even more unexpected. However, he did express attraction to the girl, and it's bitter for one's father to steal one's love interest. The youngest son displays a strength of will that no one else in the family has, and it makes Wang Lung doubt himself.



Pear Blossom becomes more like a companion than a concubine, particularly when compared to Lotus, who's a true concubine. Though this society so values familial responsibility, no one besides Wang Lung seems to think this applies to his eldest daughter, probably because she's disabled and a woman. It seems rather unfair of Wang Lung to place the burden of killing his daughter onto Pear Blossom, suggesting that (just as he did with O-lan) he doesn't really think she has her own feelings and desires.



Pear Blossom's hatred of men is one of the only examples of a female character actually acknowledging the despicable way in which most of the male characters treat women. Since her background remains shadowy, her hatred can expand to all of the misogynistic acts that occur throughout the book.



Finally, Wang Lung has the peace in his house that he's desired for years, a reward for a life full of hard work. He's assured that his family line will continue on after his death, and even those he knew are being reproduced in miniature, gesturing to the cyclic nature of this story. The fact that Wang Lung doesn't know about great government changes proves that he's like the land, remaining unaffected by outside forces.



Wang Lung asks Cuckoo about his sons' wives, and she tells him that his eldest son seems to be thinking of taking a concubine, and often visits the tea shops. She also tells him that she's heard his youngest son is a military official in the Revolution, but she doesn't know what it is. Wang Lung finds he can't focus on these things, as his mind wanders. He thinks only about keeping his body warm and fed.

As Wang Lung grows old, he keeps his love of the **land**, and he goes out to it every spring. Sometimes he sleeps in his old house. One day he wanders to the burial plot and remembers those who he buried there, clearly recalling all of them and his second daughter whom he married away. He looks at the spot where he will be buried and decides he needs to get a coffin.

Wang Lung returns to town and sends for his eldest son, but when he arrives Wang Lung can't remember what he wanted to say. He asks Pear Blossom to help him, and she asks him where he was on his **land**, which makes him remember. Wang Lung tells his son where he wants to lie and that he needs a coffin. His son buys him a wooden coffin that will last forever, and Wang Lung keeps it in his room. It comforts him. Soon he moves back to his house on the land with Pear Blossom and his eldest daughter.

Wang Lung lives peacefully, thinking often about his **land**, but not worrying about planting or harvests. He thinks gladly of his coffin and his place in the earth. His sons come to visit him often, and if they don't he complains to Pear Blossom. She says they're busy, as the eldest son holds a position in the town and the younger son has his own grain market. Wang Lung doesn't really understand.

One day Wang Lung follows his sons out onto the **land**. He comes up to them silently and hears them discussing how to sell the land and share the money. Wang Lung cries out and weeps. They assure him they won't sell it, and he says families fall apart when they sell their land. He holds a handful of dirt. They say over and over that they won't sell the land, but they smile at each other over his head.

Wang Lung has retreated from his family to the extent that he has to ask Cuckoo for the latest gossip about them. The eldest son follows in his father's footsteps, but without Wang Lung's tendency to return to hard work. Wang Lung is done worrying about complicated issues and wants only simple comfort in his old age.



Wang Lung remains loyal to the land, even if his sons don't. His return to his old house and his fond recollection of the past suggests that his life of pleasure in the House of Hwang might not have been as wonderful as he hoped, and he finds comfort in simplicity.



Wang Lung seems to live in the past more than in the present, as he can remember the past clearly, but immediately forgets what happens in the present. The fact that he initiates the buying of his coffin and it gives him comfort suggests that he feels ready for death and satisfied with his life. He now returns to the land, aware that it's his true home.



At the end of his life Wang Lung finds particular comfort in the land that has always been there for him. He will soon return permanently to the earth that has given him life and wealth, and in death he will become a part of the earth's constancy. Though his sons have achieved the social success he worked for, it no longer seems important now.



This ending signals the final tragedy of the book, which is the undoing of all Wang Lung's hard work. Though nothing is certain, these final lines imply that the sons will betray Wang Lung and sell his precious land, and if the Hwangs are any indication, the family will then go on to lose the fortune that Wang Lung created. However, it's also possible that the world is changing, and land will no longer be as important as it was—perhaps also a tragedy.





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