

Reading between the Lines

**Integrated language and
literature activities**

**John McRae and
Roy Boardman**

Peking University Press

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JM
RB

To the student

This book does exactly what its title and sub-title suggest: it helps you to see below the surface (between the lines) of what you read in English, and to improve your own ability in the language (in particular, your fluency) by offering many wide-ranging opportunities to practise. To this end, it introduces you to English literature, to what writers have told us about their experience of life, their feelings and opinions, in ages as far apart as William Shakespeare's and Samuel Beckett's. You will find that the literary texts deepen and enrich your thinking and feeling and result in more effective personal expression.

At the same time, you will begin to read English poetry and prose with pleasure and understanding. The book does all it can to bring literature not only within your grasp, but also into direct relation with the things you most care about.

Books are good enough in their own way, but they are a mighty bloodless substitute for life.

Robert Louis Stevenson, *Virginibus Puerisque*

1 Family

We're a family, aren't we?

1.1 Theme

Listen to the song and decide who you more easily identify with, the father or the son.

Father

It's not time to make a change
Just relax, take it easy
You're still young, that's your fault
There's so much you have to know
Find a girl, settle down
If you want you can marry
Look at me, I am old
But I'm happy

I was once like you are now
And I know that it's not easy
To be calm when you've found
Something going on
But take your time, think a lot
Why think of everything you've got
For you will still be here tomorrow
But your dreams may not



Son



How can I try to explain
When I do he turns away again
It's always been the same
Same old story
From the moment I could talk
I was ordered to listen
Now there's a way and I know
That I have to go away
I know I have to go

Family

It's not time to make a change
Just sit down and take it slowly,
You're still young, that's your fault
There's so much you have to go
 through
Find a girl, settle down
If you want you can marry
Look at me, I am old
But I'm happy

Away, away,
 away
I know
 I have to make this decision
Alone –
 no

Stay, stay,
 stay
Why must
 you go and make this
 decision
Alone?

All the times that I've cried
Keeping all the things I knew inside
It's hard, but it's harder
To ignore it
If they were right I'd agree
But it's them they know not me
Now there's a way and I know
That I have to go away
I know I have to go

Cat Stevens, 'Father and Son'

Discuss these points with a partner.

- a) The father's attitude to his son, and the son's attitude to his father. Which do you more easily identify with?
- b) Have you ever experienced this kind of relationship with a parent or a child?
- c) Is the son right to leave home? What circumstances would justify doing so? Are there any circumstances which would make leaving home impossible to justify?

1.2 Discuss your thoughts, conclusions and experiences with the class as a whole. Can you think of other problems that families often have? Do they differ at all from country to country? Or from one part of your country to another? Make a list and a few notes on how common you think each problem is.

2.1 Text A

As you read, look for the answers to the following questions:

- Why is the father an outsider in the home?
- How old is Paul?
- What does Paul dislike most about his father?
- Can we ever see a positive side to the father's nature?

'Wha's it matter to yo' what time I come whoam?' he shouted.

And everybody in the house was still, because he was dangerous. He ate his food in the most brutal manner possible and, when he had done, pushed all the pots in a heap away from him, to lay his arms on the table. Then he went to sleep. 5

Paul hated his father so. The collier's small, mean head, with its black hair slightly soiled with grey, lay on the bare arms, and the face, dirty and inflamed, with a fleshy nose and thin, paltry brows, was turned sideways, asleep with beer and weariness and nasty temper. If anyone entered suddenly, or a noise were made, the man looked up and shouted: 10

'I'll lay my fist about thy y'ead, I'm tellin' thee, if tha doesna stop that clatter! Dost hear?'

And the two last words, shouted in a bullying fashion, usually at Annie, made the family writhe with hate of the man. 15

He was shut out from all family affairs. No one told him anything. The children, alone with their mother, told her all about the day's happenings, everything. Nothing had really taken place in them until it was told to their mother. But as soon as the father came in, everything stopped. He was like the scotch in the smooth, happy machinery of the home. And he was always aware of this fall of silence on his entry, the shutting off of life, the unwelcome. But now it was gone too far to alter. 20

He would dearly have liked the children to talk to him, but they could not. Sometimes Mrs Morel would say: 25

'You ought to tell your father.'

Paul won a prize in a competition in a child's paper. Everybody was highly jubilant.

'Now you'd better tell your father when he comes in,' said Mrs Morel. 'You know how he carries on and says he's never told anything.' 30

'All right,' said Paul. But he would almost rather have forfeited the prize than have to tell his father.

'I've won a prize in a competition, dad,' he said. 35

Morel turned round to him.

Family

'Have you, my boy? What sort of a competition?'

'Oh, nothing – about famous women.'

'And how much is the prize, then, as you've got?'

'It's a book.'

40

'Oh, indeed!'

'About birds.'

'Hm – hm!'

And that was all. Conversation was impossible between the father and any other member of the family. He was an outsider. He had denied the God in him.

45

The only times when he entered again into the life of his own people was when he worked, and was happy at work. Sometimes, in the evening, he cobbled the boots or mended the kettle or his pit-bottle. Then he always wanted several attendants, and the children enjoyed it. They united with him in the work, in the actual doing of something, when he was his real self again.

50

He was a good workman, dexterous, and one who, when he was in a good humour, always sang. He had whole periods, months, almost years, of friction and nasty temper. Then sometimes he was jolly again. It was nice to see him run with a piece of red-hot iron into the scullery, crying:

55

'Out of my road – out of my road!'

Then he hammered the soft, red-glowing stuff on his iron goose, and made the shape he wanted. Or he sat absorbed for a moment, soldering. Then the children watched with joy as the metal sank suddenly molten, and was shoved about against the nose of the soldering-iron, while the room was full of a scent of burnt resin and hot tin, and Morel was silent and intent for a minute. He always sang when he mended boots because of the jolly sound of hammering. And he was rather happy when he sat putting great patches on his moleskin pit trousers, which he would often do, considering them too dirty, and the stuff too hard, for his wife to mend

60

70

D.H. Lawrence, *Sons and Lovers*

Discuss the answers you have found to the questions, before going on, and, if you wish, relate each one to your personal experience of family life by talking about the following points with a partner. The letters (a) to (d) relate the points to the questions you have answered.

- a) Think of an outsider in your own family, or in a family you know well. What is his/her influence on family life?

- b) Is it common at Paul's age for young people to feel they hate their fathers and mothers, or conversely have a very strong attachment to them?
- c) Have *you* ever felt strong dislike for a parent's behaviour or attitudes? What attitudes does the son dislike in Cat Stevens's song?
- d) What are the positive sides of *your own* nature, do you think, from the point of view of other members of your family?

2.2 Discuss the following in groups of three or four and make notes on your conclusions. Then compare ideas.

- a) The father is presented very unfavourably. Do we have any sympathy for him? When, and how is it brought out?
- b) The first reference in the passage to Mr Morel is to 'his father'. What other words are used to refer to him? Why does Lawrence keep changing?
- c) Why do you think the father acts as he does? Do you feel he realises what the others think of him?
- d) What do you imagine the relationship between Paul's mother and father is like?
- e) Do you find the passage realistic, or exaggerated?
- f) There are several possible 'gaps' in communication in this family scene, any of which might help to explain how the situation arose. Which of the following do you think the most significant in the context?
 - the generation gap
 - inability to communicate because of different social backgrounds and working environments
 - unwillingness to communicate
 - shyness
 - insecurityDiscuss the relevance of each of these possibilities and any others you think are important.

2.3 Look carefully at the way Lawrence constructs his paragraphs in relation to each other, and discuss their effectiveness in relation to the theme. In particular, notice that:

- Three paragraphs begin with 'And', one with 'Then'.
- Several paragraphs begin with the names of the characters or with a personal pronoun.
- All the paragraphs in the conversation between Paul and his father (Morel) are one-line, single-sentence paragraphs.
- The final paragraph of the extract is longer than all the others.

- 2.4** Basically, the past tense used in the extract has two meanings. One meaning is that of 'used to do', the other refers to events that occurred only once.
- Find out where these different meanings occur and comment on the contrast between them.
 - What is the effect of the phrase: 'Sometimes Mrs Morel *would say...*'?
- 2.5**
- The vocabulary that Lawrence chooses is strong, simple, direct. Find those words that you think are most effective, and try to say why you find them so.
 - Compare Lawrence's style in describing Mr Morel to Charles Dickens's style in describing Mr Gradgrind.

Mr Morel

The collier's small, mean head, with its black hair slightly soiled with grey, lay on the bare arms, and the face, dirty and inflamed, with a fleshy nose and thin, paltry brows, was turned sideways, asleep with beer and weariness and nasty temper.

Mr Gradgrind

The emphasis was helped by the speaker's square wall of a forehead, which had his eyebrows for its base, while his eyes found commodious cellarage in two dark caves, overshadowed by the wall. The emphasis was helped by the speaker's mouth, which was wide, thin, and hard set. The emphasis was helped by the speaker's voice, which was inflexible, dry, and dictatorial. The emphasis was helped by the speaker's hair, which bristled on the skirts of his bald head, a plantation of firs to keep the wind from its shining surface, all covered with knobs, like the crust of a plum pie, as if the head had scarcely warehouse-room for the hard facts stored inside.

Charles Dickens, *Hard Times*

One of the differences is the absence of simile and metaphor in Lawrence's description, and their frequent occurrence in the Dickens piece. Can you suggest reasons why the authors might have made such different choices?

3.1 Text B

As you read and listen to this scene, try to work out the relationship between the characters.

HARRY [*he is hurt and throws a hand at her in disgust*]: Ach! you make me sick.

SARAH [*mocking*]: Ach, you make me sick. I make him sick. Him, my fine man! You're the reason why she thinks like this, you know that?

HARRY: Yes, me.

SARAH: Well, of course you. Who else?

RONNIE [*collecting dishes and escaping to the kitchen*]: I'll wash up.

HARRY: I didn't bring her up – she's all your work.

SARAH: That's just it! You didn't bring her up. You weren't concerned, were you? You left it all to me while you went to your mother's or to the pictures or out with your friends.

HARRY: Yes. I went out with my friends. Sure!

SARAH: Well, didn't you? May I have so many pennies for the times you went up West to pictures.

HARRY: Oh, leave off, Sarah.

SARAH: Leave off! That's all he can say – leave off, leave me alone. That was it. I did leave you alone. That's why I had all the trouble.

ADA I'm going home, Mummy.

SARAH [*caressingly and apologetically*]: Oh no, Ada, stay, it's early yet. Stay. We'll play solo.

ADA. I'm feeling tired and I must write to Dave.

SARAH. Well, stay here and write to Dave. We'll all be quiet. Ronnie's going out Daddy'll go to bed and I've got some washing to do. Stay, Ada, stay. What do you want to rush home for? A cold, miserable, two-roomed flat, all on your own. Stay. We're a family aren't we?

ADA [*putting on her coat*]: I've also got washing to do, I must go –

SARAH: I'll do it for you. What's a mother for? Straight from work I'll go to your place and bring it back with me. Stay. You've got company here – perhaps Uncle Hymie and Auntie Lottie'll come up. What do you want to be on your own for, tell me?

ADA: I'm not afraid of being on my own – I must go.

SARAH [*wearily*]. Go then! Will we see you tomorrow?

ADA: Yes, I'll come for supper tomorrow night. Good night. [*Calling*] Good night, Ronnie.

RONNIE [*appearing from kitchen*]: 'Night, Addy.

SARAH: You washing up, Ronnie?

RONNIE: I'm washing up

SARAH: You I don't have to worry about – but your sister runs



Family

away. At the first sight of a little bother she runs away. Why does she run away, Ronnie? Before she used to sit and discuss things, now she runs to her home – such a home to run to – two rooms and a shadow!

RONNIE: But, Ma, she's a married woman herself. You think she hasn't her own worries wondering what it'll be like to see Dave after all these years?

SARAH: But you never run away from a discussion. At least I've got you around to help me solve problems.

RONNIE: Mother, my one virtue – if I got any at all – is that I always imagine you can solve things by talking about them – ask my form master! [*Returns to kitchen.*]

SARAH [*wearily to Harry*]: You see what you do? That's your daughter. Not a word from her father to ask her to stay. The family doesn't matter to you. All your life you've let the family fall around you, but it doesn't matter to you.

HARRY: I didn't drive her away.

SARAH [*bitterly*]: No – you didn't drive her away. How could you? You were the good, considerate father.

[*HARRY turns away and hunches himself up miserably*]

Look at you! Did you shave this morning? Look at the cigarette ash on the floor. Your shirt! When did you last change your shirt? He sits. Nothing moves him, nothing worries him. He sits! A father! A husband!

HARRY [*taking out a cigarette to light*]: Leave me alone, please leave me alone, Sarah. You started the row, not me, you!

SARAH [*taking cigarette from his hand*]: Why must you always smoke? – talk with me. Talk, talk, Harry.

HARRY: Sarah! [*He stops, chokes, and then stares wildly around him*] Mamma. Mamma. [*He is having his first stroke*]

Arnold Wesker. *Chicken Soup with Barley*

- a) How old do you think Ada and Ronnie are?
- b) Where do Ada and Ronnie live?
- c) Why does Ada leave?
- d) Who do you think Dave might be?
- e) What difference in behaviour do you notice between Ada and Ronnie? Why do they react so differently?
- f) Why does Sarah use the third person so much ('Him', 'my fine man', etc.)?
- g) How would you describe the relationship between Harry and Sarah? Who seems the stronger?
- h) Do you think Harry was 'the good, considerate father'?

3.2 Discuss the following points in class.

- a) Do you agree with Ronnie that 'you can solve things by talking about them'? Or do you prefer Harry's reaction, 'Leave me alone'? In what ways is your opinion influenced by your own experience of family relationships?
- b) 'What's a mother for?' asks Sarah. How has she interpreted her role, and why? What do *you* think a mother's for?

4.1 Text C 

The next passage also centres on a mother's role. As you read and listen to the scene, look for the similarities and differences between Sarah and Albert's mother.

ALBERT: Mr. Ryan's leaving. You know Ryan. He's leaving the firm. He's been there years. So Mr. King's giving a sort of party for him at his house . . . well, not exactly a party, not a party, just a few . . . you know . . . anyway, we're all invited. I've got to go. Everyone else is going. I've got to go. I don't want to go, but I've got to.

MOTHER [*bewildered, sitting*]: Well, I don't know . . .

ALBERT [*with his arm round her*]: I won't be late. I don't want to go. I'd much rather stay with you.

MOTHER: Would you?

ALBERT: You know I would. Who wants to go to Mr. King's party?

MOTHER: We were going to have our game of cards.

ALBERT: Well, we can't have our game of cards.

[*Pause.*]

MOTHER: Put the bulb in Grandma's room, Albert.

ALBERT: I've told you I'm not going down to the cellar in my white shirt. There's no light in the cellar either. I'll be pitch black in five minutes, looking for those bulbs.

MOTHER: I told you to put a light in the cellar. I told you yesterday.

ALBERT: Well, I can't do it now.

MOTHER: If we had a light in the cellar you'd be able to see where those bulbs were. You don't expect me to go down to the cellar?

ALBERT: I don't know why we keep bulbs in the cellar!

[*Pause.*]

MOTHER: Your father would turn in his grave if he heard you raise your voice to me. You're all I've got, Albert. I want you to remember that. I haven't got anyone else. I want you . . . I want you to bear that in mind.



Family

ALBERT: I'm sorry . . . I raised my voice.

He goes to the door.

[*Mumbling.*] I've got to go.

MOTHER [*following*]: Albert!

ALBERT: What?

MOTHER: I want to ask you a question.

ALBERT: What?

MOTHER: Are you leading a clean life?

ALBERT: A clean life?

MOTHER: You're not leading an unclean life, are you?

ALBERT: What are you talking about?

MOTHER: You're not messing about with girls, are you?

You're not going to go messing about with girls tonight?

ALBERT: Don't be so ridiculous.

MOTHER: Answer me, Albert. I'm your mother.

ALBERT: I don't know any girls.

MOTHER: If you're going to the firm's party, there'll be girls there, won't there? Girls from the office?

ALBERT: I don't like them, any of them.

MOTHER: You promise?

ALBERT: Promise what?

MOTHER: That . . . that you won't upset your father.

ALBERT: My father? How can I upset my father? You're always talking about upsetting people who are dead!

MOTHER: Oh, Albert, you don't know how you hurt me, you don't know the hurtful way you've got, speaking of your poor father like that.

ALBERT: But he is dead.

MOTHER: He's not! He's living! [*Touching her breast.*] In here! And this is his house!

[*Pause.*]

ALBERT: Look, Mum, I won't be late . . . and I won't . . .

MOTHER: But what about your dinner? It's nearly ready.

ALBERT: Seeley and Kedge are waiting for me. I told you not to cook dinner this morning. [*He goes to the stairs.*] Just because you never listen . . .

He runs up the stairs and disappears.

Harold Pinter, *A Night Out*

- a) How old do you think Albert is?
- b) What kind of job does he have?
- c) Who are Seeley and Kedge?

- d) Does Albert often go out in the evenings?
- e) Is the situation a familiar one for Albert?
- f) Do you think Albert would 'rather stay with' his mother? If not, why does he say it?
- g) Albert's mother uses different stages of emotional blackmail to try to make Albert stay at home – 'our game of cards' is the first. Can you trace the others? What is the climax of this?
- h) Why is Albert's mother so possessive?

4.2 Stage directions

- a) In the Pinter passage, why is the stage direction '*Pause*' important, especially the third time it occurs? Why do you think Albert's mother pauses at the lines 'I want you...I want you to bear that in mind', and 'That...that you won't upset your father'? Do you think she does so deliberately, or is she at a loss for words?
- b) Look more carefully at the stage directions in the extracts from Wesker's *Chicken Soup with Barley* and Pinter's *A Night Out*. The directions have various functions; for example, they:
 - describe tones of voice;
 - suggest gesture to accompany or substitute dialogue;
 - indicate movement from one part of the stage to another.
 - i) Put the various stage directions from both passages into these three categories.
 - ii) Are there any other categories?
 - iii) Does either of the two playwrights use any one of the categories to particular effect?
 - iv) What is different about the stage direction '*He is having his first stroke*' at the end of the Wesker passage?

4.3 Discuss the following in groups of three or four.

- a) Would you react like any of the younger characters in the passages (Paul, Ada, Ronnie, Albert) if your family situation were similar?
- b) What do you think they can do about their family lives? Should or could they simply leave home?
- c) Is family life necessarily as troubled as those we have read about?