

THE EARTH

H. E. Bates

*H.E. BATES (1905- 1974), born at Northampton in central England, was well acquainted with the English countryside, especially the peasants who lived there. A well known short story writer, he worked for some time as a journalist. His first novel was published when he was only 21 years old. He wrote many short stories about airmen and their adventures based on his experiences in the Royal Air Force. His important works include **Fair Stood the Wind for France** (1944), **The Purple Plain** (1947), **The Jacaranda Tree** (1949), **The Scarlet Sword** (1951 and, **The Darling Buds of May** (1958,). The present short story 'The Earth', set in the English countryside, is about a farmer Johnson and his son Benjy who appears to be a simple minded person. The story very well depicts the laziness of the parents and the growing selfishness and cunningness of their simple-minded son who finally drives them away from their home.*



A. Work in small groups and discuss the following:

- 1. How is your family important to you?**
- 2. What are the responsibilities of the parents towards their children?**
- 3. What are the responsibilities of the children towards their parents?**

THE EARTH

- 1. All that the Johnsons had was the earth. Very often it seemed as if it were all they had ever had.**
- 2. It was true that they also had possessions – a plough, a two-wheeled cart, tools, a bony brown mare which slowly dragged the plough and the cart about their rough four-acre plot – but without the earth these things were useless. It was true that they also had a son.**

3. The Johnsons' son was named Benjy, and it was more than thirty years since they had surrendered to the idea that he was not right in his head. It was not that he was insane or **imbecile** or even that he could not read and write and count figures, but only that he was simple, not quite like other people. And because he was their only son, the Johnsons had spent many years being a little too kind, too anxious and too sacrificial towards him, so that he had grown up to seem worse, in their eyes, than he really was. Benjy had the large loose limbs that often belong to the simple-minded, and thick soft fair hair on his face. He had the look of being a simple-hearted man as well as a simple-minded man. His eyes were blue, and all day long he had a simple smile on his face. But somewhere behind the blue eyes, the simple smile, and the soft childish hair, his simplicity seemed gradually to have become a kind of cunning.
4. It was more than thirty years since the Johnsons, realising that he was not quite like others, had taken Benjy to a doctor. This doctor had **persuaded** them that he needed interests that would strengthen his mind. It would be good if they gave him something to do, some occupation, which would help his development. It would help a great deal if they gave him a special interest, to feed his sense of responsibility. 'You are people on the land,' the doctor said, 'let him keep hens.'
5. So for many years Benjy had kept hens, and what the earth was to his mother and father the hens were to Benjy: they were almost all he had. When he came from school, cut off by his simplicity from other children, Benjy went straight home to his hens, which he kept in a **wire coop** that his father had made at the back of the house. At first he kept ten or a dozen hens, all colours and breeds, brown and **speckled** and black and white, and the coop was small. He fed the hens simply, on **scraps** from the table, **seeded cabbages** strung from the wire, a little maize, and on corn-ears which he **gleaned** in the late summer from his father's acre of **stubble**. It is possible that a hen, being a simple creature, **thrives** best on simple treatment. Benjy understood the first and last thing about a hen: that it exists for the purpose of laying eggs. In those days this simple process had not become scientific; nor had it become highly complicated and **commercialized**. Eggs were cheap; hens mysteriously **pecked nourishment** off the bare earth. They sat in a home-made **nesting-box**, on straw, and laid the eggs expected of them.
6. Benjy understood another thing about the business of hens, and that was that eggs could be sold to callers at the back door of their house, in scores and half-scores and fivers, and the money from these eggs was put carefully, almost religiously, into a large white **basin** that stood on the top shelf of the kitchen cupboard. The basin was beyond Benjy's reach. 'But one day,' his mother would tell him, 'the money will be yours. You understand? Your father and me are going to save the money. When there's enough

we shall put it in the bank. The bank will give interest on it and then one day, when you're twenty-one, it will be yours by rights. It'll all be yours and you can do what you like with it. Do you understand?' And Benjy would simply smile at his mother and say yes, he understood.

B.1.1. Complete the following sentences on the basis of the unit you have just studied:

- a) A simple minded person is _____, _____ and _____
- b) Johnson was more interested in _____
- c) Johnson's possession included _____
- d) Benjy's simplicity seemed gradually to have become _____

B.1.2. Read the following sentences and write 'T' for true and 'F' for false statements:

- i. Johnson was a hard-working man.
- ii. Johnson was interested in preaching.
- iii. Johnson had an insane son.
- iv. Benjy hated his hens.

B.1. 3. Answer the following questions briefly :

- 1) Who is a tenant farmer?
- 2) What did the doctor advise Benjy's parents to ensure his mental growth?
- 3) What did Benjy understand about a hen?
- 4) What did Benjy understand about the business of hens?

7. As time went on Benjy began to keep many more hens. Soon there were more eggs than could be sold at the back door, and by the time Benjy had left school at fourteen he had forty or fifty hens and about as many **laying pullets**, and these were producing an average of two hundred eggs a week. Soon he would set off three times a week with a large basket of eggs on a wheel-truck, and **hawk** them in Castor, the nearest town. By this time the money no longer went into the basin, but straight into the bank. Benjy could read and a year or two afterwards he read in a paper that it was better to **segregate** breeds of hens, keeping **White Leghorns** separate from **Rhode Islands**, and young from old. This meant new coops, and at the same time Benjy read that hens needed air and exercise and dry hygienic places to sleep. Benjy was very strong and understood a simple thing like nailing wire-netting to wood and began himself to build new houses and coops for the new, segregated breeds of hens. For all

this he needed space, and so his father and mother gave him a strip of land running from the back of the house half-way across the field. In this way they gave him something more precious than they had ever given before. For the first time, without fully realising it, they gave him a piece of the earth.

8. All this time they themselves had struggled hard and almost vainly with the earth. At the back of their minds lay a precious belief that Benjy would one day grow out of his simplicity. In the same way they cherished a silent belief that the earth would one day outgrow its poverty. The earth had yielded **stubbornly** for them, and the reason, like Benjy, was simple. The reason was not in the earth, but in themselves. For most of their lives they had put rather more value on faith than sweat.
9. For many years Benjy's father had been a local preacher, a man with quite a gift of talking. He liked not only to talk on Sundays, to village **congregations** in small still chapels far out in the countryside, but he liked to talk at the back-door, over the field gate, in the road outside the house. He talked so much that he must have had an idea that the earth, designed created, and nourished by God, would take care of itself. While he talked, thistles seeded and choked his wheat, rabbits broke in and **gnawed** his cabbages, storms smashed his standing corn. He struggled on like a man chained by bad luck, and while he knew that his land was poor and that Benjy was a simple man, no one had ever had the need or courage to tell him that he himself was a lazy man with too large a trust in Providence.
10. And while his father talked Benjy went on steadfastly with the simple business of making hens lay eggs. Part of the field at the back of his father's house began to resemble a quivering **chequer-board** of black and brown and white feathers. For a long time now the eggs had been too many for the wheel-truck, and Benjy at regular intervals borrowed his father's horse and cart, taking the eggs not only down into the town but also into market. All the time Benjy wore the simple smile of a simple-hearted man on his face, and all the time the money went religiously into the bank in his name.
11. When Benjy was twenty-one his mother and father planned and carried out a little ceremony. They got his passbook from the bank, and at supper his father made a sort of speech, almost in the tone of a public address, in which he talked as if he had been a **diligent** man all his life, setting an example of thrift and industry, and that this, the passbook, was Benjy's natural reward for following it. He talked as if he were talking to a child who still does not know one from two, and at last he gave Benjy the passbook. This is your money, Benjy,' he said. 'Now you're twenty-one, this is your money. Do you understand?'

12. 'Yes,' Benjy said, and he took the passbook. He opened it and looked at it, and saw in it an amount of more than two hundred and thirty pounds. Then he shut up the passbook and put it into his pocket.
13. Benjy's mother and father did not speak. A strange tremor of a peculiar emotion went through them both: a mixture of disappointment, fear, pride, and pain. The amount in Benjy's passbook was more than they themselves had ever amassed from the earth in their lives. They did not hope and did not mean that Benjy should give it back to them, but there was something about the silent, simple finality of his putting the passbook into his pocket that struck them like a blow in the face. They had expected something else: a word of thanks, perhaps a concession, a willingness that they should share the money they had helped to save. It hurt them momentarily that Benjy should appear so completely indifferent to them and to all they felt. Then they remembered why it was. It was because Benjy was still simple. There were shades of feeling and conduct that were beyond his understanding. They were touched with pity for him, and understood.
14. 'What are you going to do with the money?' they said.
15. 'I'm going to buy a piece of land,' Benjy said.
16. 'Lands?' they said. 'What land? Where?'
17. 'Mr Whitmore wants to sell the four acres next to us,' Benjy said.
18. 'But, Benjy,' they said. 'How did you know? How did you find out?'
19. Benjy had a very simple answer.
20. 'I asked Mr Whitmore,' he said.
21. 'Well,' they said, 'that is a very good idea. A wonderful good idea. You couldn't do anything better.'
22. As time went on, and Benjy acquired the land, his father and mother not only felt that it was a good idea but they felt very proud of him. They had that kind of pride in him that parents have in a child that says its first word or takes its first step. Benjy, a simple-minded man, had taken his first step in normal, adult things. It was wonderful, too, that he had taken the step without help, without force or prompting. All his life they had treated him as a child that will not grow up and now, suddenly, he had grown up. Though they could scarcely realize it. Benjy was a man of property.
23. For the next four or five years Benjy went on creating more houses for more hens, and then selling more eggs and making more money. He was still a simple man. He could not have made a pair of boots; he knew nothing about the **stock-markets**. But he knew everything about a hen. His hens were still to him what the earth was to his parents: all he had, and all he understood.

B.2.1. Complete the following sentences on the basis of the unit you have just studied:

- a) Benjy left school at the age of _____
- b) By then Benjy had _____ hens.
- c) Benjy knew about segregating breeds of hens through _____
- d) Johnson believed that the earth designed and created by God would _____
- e) When Benjy was 21, his father handed him _____

B.2. 2. Answer the following questions briefly

- 1) What silent belief did Benjy's parents cherish about their land?
- 2) Why had their land not yielded much?
- 3) How did Benjy's parents feel when he silently put the passbooks in his pocket?
- 4) What had Benjy's parents expected when they handed him the passbook?
- 5) What did Benjy want to do with money?

24. There was only one difference between Benjy's hens and his parents' land. The hens belonged to Benjy. The land had never belonged to his parents, who had rented it now for forty years, on a yearly tenancy, from a man named Sanders. They had often spoken of buying the land, but somehow the scheme never came to anything. It was easier for Benjy's father to stand at the door and talk, or to talk in the **pulpit** and trust in God, than to make a business proposition. And now, at sixty-five, they were too old to think of buying land, even if there had been any money for buying land.
25. And suddenly the land was for sale: their land, their earth, which was all they had. The town was spreading, the man named Sanders said, and everywhere people wanted land for building. Either he must sell the land for building, or he must sell the land to them.
26. They felt lost and **distracted**. They had lived a vague, trusting life without system, with a simple-minded son to rear, with an infinite faith in God but with little or no faith in fertilizers. As a result they had nothing. Even the earth, which they had regarded as **inviolable**, was not theirs, and was about to be taken away from them.
27. Deeply and painfully upset, they went to the man named Sanders, and told him how it was.
28. 'I don't see no way of getting the money,' Benjy's father said. 'So we must get out at Michaelmas. That's all.'
29. 'Don't you worry,' Sanders said. 'Don't surprise me you can't see your way to do it. But I can tell you this, if you can't buy it, somebody not far away will.'

30. 'Who'll buy it?' they said.
31. 'Benjy,' he said.
32. They went home feeling that this was the supremely important moment of their lives. It seemed like the moment of reward. If their faith had been shaken, it was now completely whole again. They saw that there could be joy and satisfaction and ultimate good, even in the raising of a simple-minded son.
33. 'We never knew, Benjy. We never even suspected,' they said. 'What made you do it? What are you going to do?'
34. 'I'm going to put up more incubator houses,' Benjy said.
35. Again, as when they had given Benjy the passbook, they did not speak. They had expected something else, without quite knowing what: a word, a small concession perhaps, an assurance that things would go on as before. But there was nothing, only the same simple finality as when Benjy had taken possession of the passbook. They were momentarily pained. Then they knew, again, why it was. There are some things which are forgivable to a simple-minded man. The simple-minded, as they knew quite well, do not always understand.
36. By this time Benjy was almost forty, and it was only to them that he remained a simple-minded man. As his new hygienic chicken houses began to cover first one strip of his father's former land and then another, with the grey patches of hen-dung eating their way into the brown tilled earth, he began to be the largest poultry farmer on that side of the town. In appearance he had changed too. Always big-limbed, he had now become rather fat. His eyes were still a simple blue, and soft fair hair still grew thickly on his face, but now, set in fat flesh, the eyes seemed much smaller. They were no longer the eyes of a simple-minded man. They were the eyes of a man who, in a simple way, is quite cunning.
37. No one but Benjy, at this time, knew how many hens and chickens he possessed. No one knew how many eggs the collective-system lorries fetched from him every week; no one knew the amount of his passbook. It was possible to gauge his progress only by the new chicken houses covering his father's former land, and by the fact that he now employed people to help him.
38. One of these people was a girl named Florence. She had thick heavy legs and loose lips and unreflective grey eyes that matched Benny's in their apparent simplicity. When Florence bent down to clean the chicken houses, which were raised up off the ground, Benjy could see a gap of bare flesh above her grey stockings or the shadows of deep breasts beneath her smock. In a little while Benjy was catching Florence about the waist in the warm dark incubator houses, and for the first time in his life he had some other interest besides hens.

39. It became clear to him that his father and mother did not like Florence, this simple, undistinguished girl with ugly legs and a mouth that would not keep shut. But Benjy did not need a distinguished, intelligent girl, even if one would have looked at him. He needed a woman to help with the hens, and soon he was saying that he and Florence would be married.

B.3.1. Complete the following sentences on the basis of the unit you have just studied:

- a) The only difference between Benjy's hens and his parents' land was that _____
- b) Benjy wanted to buy his parents' land to _____
- c) It was possible to gauge Benjy's progress by _____
- d) Benjy's parents did not like Florence because _____

B.3.2. Answer the following questions briefly :

- 1) Who had Johnson rented their land from?
- 2) What information did Sanders give them that made them happy?
- 3) Who was Florence?
- 4) Why did Benjy want to marry Florence?

40. As with the passbook and the lad, his father and mother were not prepared for that.
41. 'Married? Aren't you all right as you are? Don't you want time to consider it? Where are you going to live?'
42. 'Here,' Benjy said.
43. And that autumn, at the end of his fortieth year, Benjy moved into the house with Florence as his wife.
44. 'We'll want the front bedroom,' Benjy said.
45. All their lives his father and mother had slept in the front bedroom. Now they vacated it and moved into the back. This removal hurt them deeply. But because it was now Benjy's house, because Benjy asked it, they moved without protest, adding a little more to the long **chronicle** of sacrifice, forgiving Benjy because the simple-minded cannot be expected to understand.
46. But the problem of the girl was different. It seemed to them that the girl was about to take Benjy away from them. The air in the house became charged deeply with **antagonism**, the house itself invisibly but clearly divided. And then presently it became divided in actuality. Up to that time the four people had eaten together. Suddenly Benjy's mother did not like the way Florence **scoured** the saucepans. 'I always scour them with soda. Soda's always been good enough for me and always will.'

47. When Benjy heard of the quarrel he had a very simple solution. 'That settles it,' he said. 'Now you eat in the kitchen, and we'll eat in the other room.'
48. And throughout that winter Benjy and his wife lived in one part of the house, and his father and mother in the other. To the old people the days began now to seem very long, and as they looked out on the land they could see the reason. Where there had once been brown bare earth, rows of winter beans, patches of wheat, there were now only Benjy's chicken houses. The earth was still there, but the purpose of it no longer concerned them. The plough, the mare, the cart, and their few tools stood about in the yard, but now it was truer than ever that without the earth they were useless.
49. As the winter went on, and the four people were more and more confined indoors, the division in the house became an enormous gap. The two women passed each other on the stairs with glances of antagonism, nor speaking. When Benjy's father walked out to preach on Sundays he walked slowly and brokenly, with the steps of an old man. Only Benjy appeared not to be upset. Preoccupied with his hens, it was as if the emotions of normal people never penetrated beyond his plump hairy face and the eyes that looked so harmless and simple still.
50. But in the end it was Benjy who made the decision.
51. 'Mum and Dad,' he said, 'it would be lot better if you went somewhere else to live.'
52. 'Benjy,' they said.
53. 'A lot better,' he said. 'This is our house now. We want it. I bought the house, and I want it now.'
54. 'Benjy.'
55. 'I bought it and I want it,' Benjy said again. 'I want you to go.'
56. 'Benjy, we can't go,' his mother said. 'We got nowhere to go. We got nowhere.'
57. 'You've got to get out!' Benjy shouted.
58. As he shouted they realised, more fully than at any time in their lives, that Benjy was really not right in his head. His simple blue eyes were shot suddenly with a wild expression of insane anger. They not only knew that Benjy was a simple-minded man who was not fully responsible for his actions, but for the first time, struck by this wild-eyed burst of anger, they were frightened of Benjy too.
59. 'All right,' they said, 'we'll find some way to go.'
60. It was little more than a week later when Benjy drove his mother and father down into the town. He now had a small Ford van, and as he drove the van, with his mother and father on the driving seat, he showed no sign of normal emotion. It was clear that he did not understand the meaning of affection, of bewilderment, or of despair. He felt and spoke and thought only in the simplest terms, with the cruel simplicity of a child.

61. 'You'll be better by yourselves in lodgings,' he said. 'You'll be better by yourselves.'
62. They did not answer. They sat with faces made completely **immobile** by a kind of **stupefied** resignation very near to grief. They listened silently and, because for forty years they had believed Benjy to be not right in his head, they made allowances for the last time.
63. Down in the town the car stopped in a street filled entirely with houses. Benjy did not get out of the van, his father's and mother's belongings had already gone on and now they alighted empty-handed. As they stood on the pavement Benjy spoke a few words to them, looked at them with unmoved simple eyes, and then drove away.
64. When the van had gone they stood alone on the pavement, looking at the ground. They stood as if they had alighted in a strange place, were not sure of themselves, and did not know what to do.
65. Once they had had the earth. Now it was not possible to tell, from their downcast and silent faces, whether they altogether realised that it, too, had gone.

B.4.1. Complete the following sentences on the basis of the unit you have just studied:

- a) When Benjy asked his parents to vacate the front bed room, they _____
- b) Benjy asked parents to go somewhere else because he _____
- c) Benjy's parents did not speak when their son drove them down into the town because _____

B.4.2. Read the following sentences and write 'T' for true and 'F' for false statements:

- i. With the arrival of Florence as Benjy's wife, the house was filled with happiness.
- ii. Benjy and his wife lived in one part of the house and his parents in the other.
- iii. Benjy paid utmost attention to his ageing parents.

GLOSSARY AND NOTES

acre (n): a piece of land measuring 4840 sq yards

imbecile (adj): weak in mind, stupid

persuaded (v): convinced

wire coop (n): an enclosed place shut in with wire netting

speckled (adj): spotted

scraps (n): food left in plates

seeded cabbages (n.phr): cabbages which had been left in the ground too long and had flowered and produced seeds

gleaned (v): collected, gathered, picked up

stubble (n): a stalk of grain

thrives (v): prospers, flourishes

commercialized (pp/adj): made commercial, run on strict business lines so as to make as much money as possible

pecked nourishment (v phr): picked up food

nesting-box (n.phr): nest made of box or box like nest

basin (n): bowl

laying pullets (n): young hens that have begun laying eggs

hawk (v): unload

segregate (v): separate

white leghorns; Rhode island: two famous breeds of hen

stubbornly (adv): obstinately

congregations (n): assembly (of worshipers)

gnawed (v): nibbled, sank teeth into

chequer-board (n): a square board divided into a number of small black and white square patches for playing certain games. The rectangular hen coops, each containing a different colour of hen, made part of the filed resemble a chequer board

diligent (adj): hard-working, industrious

tremor (adv): quiver, shudder

stock-markets (n.): a building where people buy and sell shares in commercial firms

pulpit (n.): podium, dais

distracted (adj.): sidetracked

inviolate (adj.): not open to any threat or attack

chronicle (n.): account, record

antagonism (n.): ill feeling

scoured (v.): rubbed, cleaned

immobile (adj.): motionless

stupefied (adj.): bewildered, stunned

immobile (adj.): motionless

C. 1. Long Answer Questions

1. Did Benjy treat his parents justly? What would you do if you were Benjy?
2. On how many occasions were Benjy's parents disappointed with Benjy's behaviour? Describe each occasion briefly in your own words.
3. 'Looks are deceptive.' How does this apply to Benjy?

4. What is the role of Florence in this story? How did she affect Benjy's life?
5. Johnson himself was responsible for his tragedy or troubles. Do you agree with this? Give reasons.
6. How is a simple minded man defined in the story? Do you agree with this definition?
7. Sketch the character of Johnson.
8. Sketch the character of Benjy

C. 2. GROUP DISCUSSION

Discuss the following in **groups** or **pairs**:

1. Your expectations from your parents /guardians
2. Causes and effects of communication gap

C. 3. COMPOSITION

1. Write a short essay in about 150 words on 'an ideal family'
2. Write a paragraph in about 100 words on 'duties of children towards their parents'

D. WORD STUDY

D.1. Dictionary Use

Ex. 1. Correct the spelling of the following words:

tremore	disapointment	bussiness	cobsession
inormos	precupied	imobile	cronicle

Ex. 2. Look up a dictionary and write two meanings of the following words – the one in which it is used in the lesson and the other which is more common

anxious	insane	concession
cunning	simple	interest

D.2. Word-formation

Read the following sentence carefully:

*It was true that they also had **possession***

*His **simple** blue eyes were shot suddenly with a wild **expression**.....*

Here, '**possession**', a noun, is formed by adding suffix '-ion' to 'possess' which is a verb. Similarly, '**expression**', a noun, is formed by adding suffix '-ion' to 'express' which is a verb. Make nouns from the following verbs:

suggest	relate	confess	narrate	create
irrigate	humiliate	frustrate	cultivate	violate

D.3. Word-meaning

Ex 1. Find from the lesson words the meanings of which have been given in **Column A**. The last part of each word is given in **Column B**:

Column A

- weak in mind
- a stalk of grain
- stunned
- to separate
- obstinate

Column B

-ible
-ble
-ent
-ate
-orn

D. 4. Phrases

Ex.1. Read the lesson carefully and find out the sentences in which the following phrases have been used. Then use these phrases in sentences of your own:

- | | | | |
|--------------|--------------|---------------|-------------|
| grow up | come from | cut off | by the time |
| all the time | take care of | for long time | look at |

E. GRAMMAR

Ex.1. Read the following sentences, taken from the lesson, carefully:

- a) *Very often it seemed **as if** it were all they had ever had.*
- b) *He had the look of being a simple-hearted man **as well as** a simple-minded man.*
- c) *By this time the money no longer went into the basin, **but** straight in to the bank.*

In the sentence given above '**as if**', '**as well as**' and '**but**' join words, phrases and clauses. Such words are called conjunctions.

Find at least ten conjunctions which have been used in the story and use them in sentences of your own.

F. ACTIVITY

Ex. 1. Collect information or get the idea of the work and functions at the poultry farm.

Ex. 2. Find out various kinds of hens as found at the poultry farm.

