

**Lesson  
Twelve**

# *The Snake-stone,* Act 1, scenes 15-28

**Aims**

By the end of this lesson you should know more about:

- participles
- how young Elizabeth bonds with her baby
- why James feels he must find his natural mother on his own
- how the play uses timeframes

**Context**

This lesson focuses on the second part of Act 1 of *The Snake-stone*. The starter activity has connections with the starter activities on other parts of speech, in Lessons 1, 2 and 10.



Oxford Home Schooling

## Lesson starter: participles

### What are they?

Participles are verb endings. There are two – past and present.

### Present participle

The present participle is formed by adding *-ing* to the root verb. It is used in three ways:

1. To show that an action is ongoing or continuous:  
*I'm **dreaming**, aren't I?*
2. To show a present intention to do something in the future:  
*We're **flying** to Turkey next week.*
3. As an adjective:  
*I heard a **crying** baby*

### Past participle

This is usually formed by adding *-ed* to the root verb. It has three main uses:

1. To show something was done in the past:  
*James **dived** like a goldfish in a trance.*
2. As an adjective:  
*There was a **stuffed** badger in a glass case.*
3. To show a verb is **passive**:  
*The ambulance was **called** by Darren*

#### Activity One

Pick out the participles in the following. Identify past and present, and how they are being used (verb, adjective, etc.)

1. I heard a crowing cockerel.
2. Dad's mending the shed next week.
3. A falling leaf caught my eye.
4. Laughing party-goers spilled onto the street.
5. Were they singing a song?
6. Driving back, I ran out of petrol.
7. Elizabeth is sobbing and shivering.

## Act 1, scenes 15–18

In scene 15, Elizabeth is still very afraid but is steeling herself to be brave. She intends to take her baby well away from her home, across the mountain. We can tell that she is a country girl by her fear that, up there, ‘boggarts climb out of the peat to lure you into the marshes’. Notice how she calls her baby ‘the skinny thing’.

In the same scene, James as Narrator expresses a growing need to contact his ‘real mother’. In scene 16, however, James has to tell his adoptive mother what happened at the swimming pool. He is in no doubt that the accident was ‘Dad’s fault’. When his father comes in, he accuses him. His father only partly takes the blame:

Maybe I shouldn’t. Maybe he shouldn’t have been messing about like that.

Is this fair? Was Matt ‘messing about’?

Mum tells James that his father made him do the last dive because otherwise he would never have found the nerve to dive from that board again. Do you think this is why his father made him do it?

James realises that his torn envelope has a bit of an address – so he can find his natural mother.

By scene 17, Elizabeth is saying to her baby, ‘Don’t want you to die, little thing. Please don’t die.’ Notice the change in her attitude.

In scene 18, Dad tells James that he thinks he shouldn’t coach him any more. Mum says suggests that James could go for a week’s special coaching in London. This is James’s big opportunity – but not the one his mother thinks.

### Activity Two

You are a shepherd on the mountain. Very early in the morning, through a gap in a hedge, you see young Elizabeth with her bundle and hear her talk to it. Write about what you see and hear. Comment on the things below.

1. The time of day and the weather.
2. How the girl is dressed and how she looks – happy, sad, anxious ...?
3. What you hear, including her tone of voice.
4. Who or what you think she is speaking to.

## Act 1, scenes 19–23

In scene 19 Elizabeth comes to a bridge, and considers dropping the baby in the river. She recalls coming there with ‘the wild boy’, and showing off her diving skills. What is the significance of this to the story?

Scene 20 shows James back at school. Why do you think, when Mr Griffiths says the note is about James’s friend Matthew, James says, ‘He wasn’t really my friend. I didn’t know him very well’? Could the teacher’s recollection of killing a cat be an echo of Elizabeth’s thoughts about her baby, in scenes 19 and 21?

Scene 22 has elements of a detective story, as Mr Griffiths helps James work out the address on his scrap of paper. There is also a hint of trouble to come when Digger and Pieface start to make trouble for James. James sticks up for himself (compare him with Stanley in *Holes*, who is similarly taunted by Derrick Dunne), but Pieface manages to get hold of the ammonite. It is only Mr Griffiths’ return that makes him return it.

In scene 23 we get a proper look at ‘the wild boy’. His ‘people’, gypsies, camped on a field belonging to Elizabeth’s Uncle Staff. Her father and uncle tried to drive them off, but they stayed. What impressed Elizabeth was that ‘They were happy.’ Perhaps there was not much happiness in her own home. She is attracted to this ‘wild boy’, Sam, who says her name ‘nicely’ and offers her his hand.

### Activity Three

There are now four separate time frames in the play. There is the present, represented by the narrators for James and Elizabeth. The others are shown below. Draw pictures or make keyword notes to indicate major events in the other three time frames.

James's recent past – the main storyline being narrated

Elizabeth and her baby

Elizabeth and the 'wild boy'

## Act 1, scenes 24–8

Scene 24 is another important one. It begins with James's diving log, but his log rapidly turns to thoughts of his real mother. He's doing really well until he starts to notice a woman looking at him and gets nervous because he imagines that she is his real mother. It turns out that she was someone looking for a boy to do a swimming costume advert. If James had known this, he might have dived better!

What do you think of James's father's attitude? He tells James, loudly, with people listening, 'I've seen a stuffed salmon do a better dive than that last one. You really let me down.' Is he wrong to say this, humiliating James? What do you suppose he thinks when James says he was thinking about his 'mum'?

In scene 25 Elizabeth seems in danger of bonding with her baby too much to let go of it. She registers that it is a boy, and has black hair like its father – the wild boy.

Scene 26 is short, but reveals that James has found the place in the address on the envelope: Hollygate. He has also decided that he must find it without telling his parents. He explains that 'it's a secret, private thing'. Can you understand this?

Scene 27 is even shorter, but shows that Elizabeth has already started to love her baby boy.

James is a little sneaky, in scene 28, getting his parents to give him cash so that he can buy a train ticket to Chapelfield instead of London. It is a tense moment while James struggles to work out where he needs to go, and a man in the queue behind him gets impatient. He also has to persuade his parents to let him phone them, so that they won't phone and find he's not in London. What do you think of his lying to his parents? Is it justified?

**Activity  
Four**

As James sits on the train, he says to himself, 'I'm going to find my mother.' Write his thoughts about how he got to this point, and what his hopes and fears are now. Think about the points below.

- He's 'not used to telling lies'.
- He's never been to Chapelfield and has no idea of where he'll stay.
- He's supposed to be in London. Ken Eldred will be expecting him.
- He hopes to find his mother. Is *she* hoping to find *him*?

**Self-  
assessment  
test**

This test is on participles, and on *The Snake-stone*, Act 1, scenes 15–28.

1. What is a participle?
2. Which word in this sentence is hiding a participle?
3. Who worries about 'boggarts' and what does this show?
4. How does James's mother explain his father making him dive after Matt's accident?
5. What talent might James have inherited from his natural mother?
6. Which two boys cause trouble for James?
7. What is the first thing Sam (the gypsy boy) says to Elizabeth?
8. How many good dives does James do before diving 'like a goldfish in a trance'?
9. How does James's father almost prevent James from buying a ticket to Chapelfield?
10. How does James's mother make it possible?

