



# ST. LAWRENCE HIGH SCHOOL

A JESUIT CHRISTIAN MINORITY INSTITUTION



## STUDY MATERIAL 3

Sub: ENGLISH 'B'

Class: XII

Topic : THE EYES HAVE IT

Date: 13.05.2020

**About The Author:** Who isn't familiar with Ruskin Bond? We have all read him at some point in our lives. Born in 1934 at Kasauli in Himachal Pradesh, he is an Indian writer of British descent. He is a prolific writer and till date, he has written over 500 short stories, essays, novels and more than forty books for children. The setting of most of his stories is Dehradun, just as Malgudi is for R.K. Narayan. He has received many awards, including the Sahitya Academy Award in 1992, the Padma Shri in 1999, a Lifetime Achievement award in 2012 and the Padma Bhushan in 2014. Bond now lives in Mussoorie and will celebrate his 86th birthday on 18th May this year.

**Synopsis of the Chapter:** The tale is about a meeting between strangers on a train. The journey brings together two people (who are blind) into close proximity and a casual conversation ensues. They both try to pretend that they are sighted unaware of each other's disability. At the beginning of the story, a man is alone in a train compartment simply waiting for the journey to begin. The man is blind and can only differentiate between light and darkness. Soon, he is joined by a young girl who is originally accompanied by her parents. They seem extra anxious about her well-being in that they tell her exactly where to put her luggage, not to lean out of the window, and not to speak with strangers. Soon, the girl's parents leave and the man and the girl are alone in the train compartment as the journey begins. Most of the story involves the conversation between the two characters: the man and the girl. When the man asks the girl if her destination is the same as his own, she is startled, but is happy to strike up a conversation. The girl says that she will be met by her aunt in Saharanpur in order to be taken home. When the girl learns the man is headed to Mussoorie, she sounds envious. The hills are beautiful at this time of the year. Before the girl gets off at her destination, the man tells her that she has "an interesting face," which the girl likes because she is usually told she has a "pretty" one. At the end, however, she leaves and another man enters. Through the comments from this new passenger, the man learns that the girl, too, was blind.

### Character Analysis:

1. The narrator – The narrator in this short story can be observed from different perspectives. He is very conscious about concealing his identity as a blind man. He is a lonely person yet he tries to avoid the unwanted and unnecessary sympathy of others. He prefers to be independent and is full of life. He doesn't detach himself from society nor is he depressed by brooding on his handicap. Instead, he boldly and confidently talks to others as is quite evident in his conversation with the girl and the man. Being able to converse skilfully with others without them noticing even once that he is blind takes a lot of courage and that is exactly what the blind narrator comes across as – a confident individual. He loves to play the game of guessing what goes on around him and thereby, tricking others into believing that he can see. In this game of pretence, he invariably wins against his opponent. Ruskin Bond has created the blind protagonist of his story as a man who, despite his physical handicap, is nevertheless, a person worthy of our admiration. He serves as an inspiration to all those who are handicapped. It is as if through the blind narrator, Bond seems to be telling other handicapped people like him to be bold and confidently take on the world and the challenges that life throws at him. The narrator is nostalgic about his earlier days and romantic about the beauty of nature. He is frank and gallant in his praise of the young girl. He is fascinated by the girl's voice, the sound of her slippers and the smell of her perfumed hair. The very thought of

laughter makes him troubled and lonely, which explains why he seeks human company and is happy conversing with complete strangers.

2. The girl – The girl who joined the narrator in the story is an interesting girl. Like the narrator, she too is blind and tries to conceal her blindness from the narrator. Though she was advised by her parents not to talk to any unknown passengers, she however, manages to keep up an interesting conversation with the narrator. She is frank and honest which is clear from the way she expresses her love for the hills. Her love for Mussoorie establishes her as an admirer of nature. She has a clear ringing laugh, a beautiful voice like a sparkling mountain stream and sweet perfumed hair that tantalizes and mesmerises the poet. It is these aspects of her nature that the narrator says will stay with him for a little while longer after she disembarks from the train. Furthermore, the girl is modest and polite. She is cordial in her conversation with the narrator and politely replies to all of his questions and remarks directed at her. She too, like the narrator, seems to claim no sympathy for being blind. On the contrary, she is cheerful and plays along with the narrator in his game of pretence and make-believe. The author presents her as a normal person who can see but it is only at the end of the story that the narrator and the readers realise that she was blind as well.

**Theme of the Story:** There are multiple themes explored in this wonderful short story by Ruskin Bond, the first being that of kindness. Throughout the story the narrator shows kindness to the young woman in the compartment. He compliments her when he can which is somewhat ironic considering that he cannot see her. The fact that he considers that the woman has an interesting face may also be important as it suggests that the narrator is attempting to appeal to the woman's intellect rather than to her vanity as most men would do.

The second theme that the story explores is the theme of determination and independence. This is clearly seen in the narrator's engagement with the young woman. He may be blind but the narrator does not consider this to be an obstacle. While others might admit defeat and rely on others, the narrator doesn't. He maintains his independence and is not shy to interact with the girl and answer her questions confidently. It is also interesting to note that the same level of confidence is seen in the young woman. When the narrator asks her to describe the landscape to him, rather than admitting she is blind she tells the narrator to look for himself. The determination that the narrator shows in the story is mirrored by the young woman.

Another theme that comes through after reading the story is that of self-consciousness. It becomes clear very early on in the story that the narrator is somewhat conscious of himself when he is in the compartment. He does not wish to let the young woman know that he is blind possibly out of the fear that she may judge him negatively if she comes to know that he cannot see. It is also possible that the narrator is working from memory when he talks to the young woman about the landscape as he is looking out the compartment window. If this is the case then it would further emphasise the fact that the narrator wishes to hide the fact that he is blind. In reality, the narrator is aware of how those who are blind are treated by others.

Yet another theme is the theme of perception. Bond uses the narrator's other senses in the story, particularly that of sound and smell. The first favourable impression the narrator forms of the girl is the sound associated with her. He likes the way her slippers slap against her heels. He also has a strong desire to touch the young woman's hair. He would like to know whether she kept her hair long or short and whether it was loose or tied up in a bun. Such is the favourable perception he has of the young woman that he attempts to paint a picture of the young woman for himself based on what she says to him and what he can smell and hear of her. This is very important as the narrator appears to be compensating for his inability to see and seems to be doing so successfully.

**Use of Irony** – Ruskin Bond's short story is ironical right from the beginning. In fact, the very title of the story is ironical since whatever happens in the story is described through the eyes of the narrator who is blind. When the girl gets on to the train, her parents advised her not to talk to strangers yet ironically, the rest of the story is a conversation between the narrator and the girl who have each other for company. Another instance of irony in the story is when the blind narrator gives a detailed description of the hills in October. It is indeed ironical for it comes from a blind man! The end of the story is also interesting as Bond appears to be introducing further irony into the story. It is only after the young woman has left that the narrator discovers that she too was blind. Every effort that the narrator made to hide his own blindness from her has been in vain. We realise that the young

woman would have never known he was blind regardless of the narrator's actions. Again, the narrator makes a safe comment when he remarks that the girl has an interesting face. It is only at the end we come to know the truth of this remark when the other male passenger confirms this fact. She did indeed possess beautiful eyes but ironically they were of no use to her as she was blind. And how ironical it is for the narrator to be absolutely correct in his assessment of the girl despite the fact that he was unable to see the young woman's face!

**Significance of the Title:** The title "The Eyes Have It" is quite striking. In some editions, we even find an alternative title "The Eyes Are Not Here". The title highlights the fact that eyes, or in its absence, the mind's eye, have a prominent role to play in this story. Both the protagonists of the story, the narrator and his female co-passenger, are blind. In fact, the narrator very early on in the story says that being blind, his eyes are sensitive only to light and darkness. He even says that people who cannot see or see very little have to take in only the essentials, whatever registers most tellingly on their remaining senses. This sentence is significant because it tells us that in the absence of sight, the other sensory organs of sound, smell and touch are heightened. This explains why the very first quality about the girl that attracts the narrator's attention is the sound of her slippers slapping against her heels. Later, he admits liking the sound of her voice that reminds him of a sparkling mountain stream. Further, it is her sweet-scented hair that he wishes to touch. It is by relying on such sensory perceptions that the narrator is able to draw up a picture of the girl in his mind's eye. As for the girl, the sound of the engine's whistle and carriage wheels are her cue that she has reached her destination. This brings us to the next point that the eyes in the title of this story don't just literally refer to our organ of sight – the eyes. Bond is here playing on the word 'eyes'. What he actually wants to refer to is the importance of the inner eye or what we call imagination or intuition. As we read on, the eyes in the title assume a deeper significance. It does not merely indicate the organs of sight but the sense of perception activated by the mind. In fact, most of the conversation that takes place between the two strangers on the train is based on the inner eye of the narrator. So when the girl asks the narrator if he can see any animals outside, he tells her confidently that there are no animals left in Dehra. He is speaking intuitively here for he knows instinctively that there are actually no animals left in Dehra. Again, he brings his mind's eye into play when he describes the scenic beauty of the hills in October. Furthermore, his intuition tells him that his female co-passenger has an interesting face. Up till this point, the narrator feels he has got it all figured out in his mind about the girl. It takes another male passenger to reveal to the narrator the shocking truth about the girl – that she too was blind like him. His mind's eye could capture every other detail about the girl except the fact that she too didn't have eyes like him to see the world.

**Moral of the Story:** Through his story 'The Eyes Have It' the author, Ruskin Bond, wants to draw attention to the plight of the blind and sightless. He sympathizes with the blind and calls on us to reconsider our treatment towards them. The blind are very often misunderstood and underestimated in society. But we are wrong in our judgement because like the two blind protagonists in the story show us, blind people are strong and confident. They move about on their own without the help of others. They live in a world devoid of colours and rely on their other sensory perceptions to understand their surroundings. The sense organs, which we take for granted and are a luxury for us, is for them a necessity as their survival depends on it. What they need from us, therefore, is not our pity but our compassion. We need to become more sensitive to their needs. Another lesson that we learn from this story is the importance of the journey of life. Note how the entire story is set on a train. Well, the train is simply a metaphor for the journey of life, a spiritual journey from unseeing to seeing, from the world of darkness to the world of light, from concealment to revelation because throughout the story what the narrator kept doing was pretending he could see. He kept up the lively conversation with the girl the whole time only to conceal his blindness from her. But at the end, the truth that she too was blind is finally revealed to him. Thus, the story moves from deception to discovery, from lies to truth.

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