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LIT 2000
T S Eliot
Eyes that I Last Saw in Tears
Betty Gilson
<http://www.artisttrue.com>

1. What do “eyes” and “tears” signify as a synecdoche and as a metonymy?

The eyes, as a synecdoche, represent the person that the poet talks about in this poem, while the tears represent a person who was hurt in the past because of his decision to separate.

As a metonymy, the eyes represent his perception and memories about the person that he talks about in the poem, while the tears represent the pain and suffering that he had caused to that person.

2. What is the cause of the tears (line 2)? What is meant by the eyes outlasting the tears (lines 13, 14)? Why should the eyes “hold us in derision”? In line 9 the eyes are “of decision.” What does this synecdoche mean?

The tears are caused by the teller’s unilateral decision to separate. The person who’s crying is obviously taken by surprise by this decision and hurts because the other person deliberately decides to break their relationship.

The “eyes outlasting the tears” refers to the fact that, in time, people find closure to their problems, and they don’t hurt as much as they used to in the past. The pain is just a bad memory, and when looking back in time, everything seems unreal and doesn’t represent a precious (golden) vision anymore. Those feeling experienced in the past seem quite ridiculous, and that’s why the “eyes hold us in derision” (786).

As a synecdoche, the “eyes of decision” represent the person who made the decision to separate—the decision-maker.

3. Explain the paradox of the speaker’s declaration in line 5 that he sees the eyes but not the tears. Why does he say that this is his affliction?

The paradox of the speaker is caused by the fact that his feelings and memories don’t seem to add up anymore. Everything that had happened and affected him and the other person in the past seems so unimportant now. He seems puzzled by the fact that he used to place such an importance (golden vision) on things that now don’t seem important at all. His priorities—as well as the other’s person’s priorities, who obviously found closure to the hurt feelings (“I see the eyes but not the tears”)—have changed so much since then; and “this is [his] affliction” (786).

4. Why might the entire poem be considered a paradox? What happened in life?

What does the speaker look forward to in death?

The poem can be considered a paradox, because—although during his lifetime, the main character seems to have caused a lot of suffering to some people, due to his tough and deliberate decisions—in the next life, he hopes to do exactly the opposite. As he grows older, he realizes how wrong, foolish, and radical some of his decisions were, and therefore he hopes to mend all the bridges that he had burnt in the past.

5. What is the distinction in the poem between “death’s dream kingdom” and “death’s other kingdom”?

“Death’s dream kingdom” represents an “out-of-body” experience, a vision, or a revelation that the poet has about the real “death’s other kingdom” or the so-called “after-life.” While in “death’s dream kingdom,” the person who experiences death is still very much alive and has strong ties with his/her body, in the after-life, all ties with the living world are cut.

Works Cited

Eliot, T S. "Eyes that Last I Saw in Tears." *Literature: An Introduction to Writing*. Roberts, Edgar V. and Jacobs, Henry E. New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2001. 786.