

STUDY GUIDE

THE HUMMINGBIRD THAT LIVED THROUGH THE WINTER (1941)



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The Hummingbird that Lived through The Winter

Appearing first in the June, 1941 issue of *Harper's Bazaar*, "The Hummingbird that Lived Through the Winter" is one of William Saroyan's most-often reprinted stories. In it, Saroyan tells the story of an unnamed narrator and old Dikran, a man of more than eighty years. Dikran finds a hummingbird, sick and perhaps dying, and the pair work to bring the hummingbird back to health.

The Story



The story of "The Hummingbird that Lived Through Winter" is very simple – one day in the dead of winter, old Dikran finds a hummingbird and, with the assistance of his young neighbor, gives it honey and warmth. Hummingbirds require a warm environment, particularly one where an abundance of food is available in the form of nectar. The narrator notices old Dikran holding the bird and assists him in feeding it, which appears to revive the bird. The narrator opens the window and the hummingbird flies out. Later, the narrator asks Dikran if the hummingbird survived. Dikran points out all the hummingbirds that have gathered in the Spring and says, "each of them is our bird."

The main characters, Dikran and his young neighbor, are opposed not by an individual but by a force – winter. They must fight against nature itself to save the bird. This story has high stakes because we understand that nature, and especially the change of season, is impossible to fight. The hummingbird is an

unwitting victim of either its choice or inability to fly away to warmer areas as the rest of the hummingbirds did.

Setting

The story is set in Fresno, California. Fresno is situated in the central valley of California, a primarily agricultural area. In the first few decades of the 20th century, thousands of Armenians fled their home country and settled in Fresno, mostly in neighborhoods of Armenian immigrants.

The year the story takes place is not stated, but there are clues. The early paragraphs indicate that the narrator, like William Saroyan himself, was born in 1908, as he states that he was 14 in 1922. It appears that this story takes place at some point near or prior to then, as it is pointed out that he's a still a boy.

Themes

William Saroyan is playing with several of his favorite themes in this piece. For such a short story, Saroyan has packed in much of the intellectual content that he traditionally explores in his longer pieces.

MORTALITY

Arguably Saroyan's most frequent theme, the life and/or death of the titular hummingbird is the central concern of the narrator. When old Dikran finds the bird, it is barely alive, but the attention paid by Dikran and the narrator allows for the bird to again take flight and leave when Dikran tells the narrator to open a window.

There are many parallels between saving the life of that hummingbird and saving the life of a human being. First and foremost is the idea of letting go. When a life is saved, whether through direct action or through continuous assistance, the path of healing can be slow, or as shown here, abrupt. Once the patient is healed, they must prove they can make it on their own. That is often a difficult point, and sometimes the recovery is so fast, it seems as if the problem never occurred in the first place. Other times, of course, there is slow recovery over the course of months or years. When Dikran tells the narrator to open the window, he's not only allowing the hummingbird to leave the house, but he's also allowing the bird to prove that he's done his duty; a healer has only done their work if the patient can make it on their own after treatment is withdrawn.

The open-ended question of whether or not the specific hummingbird has survived is also important. The narrator wants to know if that bird itself beat the odds and has survived into the Spring. Dikran, on the other hand, has noticed that the hummingbirds are still there, and that whether or not the specific hummingbird has survived, the hummingbirds have continued, and will continue, into the future. It's possible to read this story as an expression of the idea of species continuance in the face of individual mortality: it is less important to see a single individual survive than the continued survival of the species. This idea can be applied broadly, including as a reflection of Armenians in diaspora. That an individual is not within their homeland is far less important than the continued existence of the homeland and the culture it has fostered.

INTERDEPENDENCE

One major theme is that all things are dependent on one another, and some are more directly dependent. Clearly, the hummingbird will die if not cared for by Dikran and the narrator. The pair of them take on the role of caretakers, though they do not have to do so. They find it their duty to save the life of the hummingbird not for themselves, but for the continuance of all hummingbirds.

Old Dikran is blind, but he is still vital, and he is the source of healing for the hummingbird. He cannot see the hummingbird himself, and he must rely on the vision of the narrator to tell him what it is he has in his hands. It is made more difficult as the narrator does not know the word for hummingbird in Armenian, possibly because hummingbirds do not live in Armenia and there is likely not a word for it. The pair communicate half in English and half in Armenian, a common way for first and second generation members of diasporic communities to communicate. They have different experiences of the world that they are in, and while the narrator has experienced much more of his life in America, and thus in English, to be able to reach Dikran he must reach into his Armenianness to exchange ideas and give direction. To enable Dikran to save the hummingbird, the narrator must provide an aspect of the world to him verbally. He is acting as a translator, as well as a force for providing the assistance required to save the bird.

EARTH STEWARDSHIP

One theme that can be read here is the role of human stewardship over the Earth around them. Dikran has a beautiful garden, which stands out in the poor neighborhood where they live. He has nurtured the ground and grown beautiful plants. Though he is almost completely blind, he continues to build and nurture the land, providing a small patch of comfort and beauty to their Armenian community in Fresno.

The hummingbird is clearly dying. This fact is what sets the story into action, but it is dying likely through no fault of its own. It is up to a pair of humans to care for and nurse the animal back to health, and they do so through the use of natural (honey), personal (the warmth of Dikran's hands), and technological (the warming of the honey on the stove) methods to ensure the survival of the

bird, at least briefly.

When the narrator discusses the survival of the hummingbird with Dikran later, he says that each hummingbird is their hummingbird, that the survival of the whole is greater than any individual, and that each one they help enables the flock to continue. This is an element of environmental conservation, that individual work is part of a bigger picture.

Style

This story can be seen as separated into two different streams, which gives us our primary clue as to who the narrator actually is. The first four paragraphs deal not with the story of the hummingbird, but with the very idea of hummingbirds, and about the narrator's experience and appreciation of them. This portion is written with an informal, almost conversational style, as if the writer is speaking directly to the reader. This ties the story to the voice, and thus the character, of author William Saroyan. The style in the later paragraphs is more traditional, and is dialogue and story driven, as opposed to the looser style of the opening.

Saroyan's writing tends to be evocative, but unadorned. His language focuses on clarity and certainty. He does not waste words, and if he provides a description, it is because it is vital to the narrative. He was also known for prose that provided a positive view of the world, even when presenting a story that does not exactly end well for the characters. This sensation of hopefulness and a general lack of the cynicism that permeated modernist writing at the time has come to be called "Saroyanesque," and is the lasting marker of the great man of Fresno.

Questions

- Do you think the narrator was supposed to be William Saroyan himself? What clues does he provide in the story?
 - Do you think the hummingbird survived the winter? Does that matter?
 - Why do you think Dikran's garden is so important to the narrator?
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Further Reading

Hummingbird Facts - <https://www.hummingworlds.com/>

Fresno County Historical Museum - <https://www.valleyhistory.org/>

Reading of "The Hummingbird That Lived Through the Winter" -

<https://youtu.be/gW58xcfuHmU>

“Study Guide: The Hummingbird that Lived through the Winter”

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