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Up-Hill

BY CHRISTINA ROSSETTI

Does the road wind up-hill all the way?

Yes, to the very end.

Will the day's journey take the whole long day?

From morn to night, my friend.

But is there for the night a resting-place?

A roof for when the slow dark hours begin.

May not the darkness hide it from my face?

You cannot miss that inn.

Shall I meet other wayfarers at night?

Those who have gone before.

Then must I knock, or call when just in sight?

They will not keep you standing at that door.

Shall I find comfort, travel-sore and weak?

Of labour you shall find the sum.

Will there be beds for me and all who seek?

Yea, beds for all who come.

Poems that depict struggle are, generally speaking, poems that are universal. Everyone struggles in some capacity or the other, and this is hardly something that the average person needs a particular art form to tell them. Christina Rossetti was no stranger to struggle in life, and her poem, *Up-hill*, seems to call up her perspective on the concept. It imagines a conversation told in such a way that the reader can easily hear one side or the other coming out of their own thought process, and relating to it one way or the other. “An uphill battle” is a common expression that likely informed the title of Rossetti’s work, so it is no surprise that both the expression and the poem are still very relevant today.

Up-hill is written in a common style for poetry; it consists of four verses with four lines each. Notably, *Up-hill* is written from the perspective of two distinct narrators, one who asks questions, and one who provides answers. These narrators are kept easily separate from one another by the simple rhyming pattern of the piece. It is rhymed in an ABAB style, where every “A” (which is to say the first and third line of each verse) rhyme is spoken by one narrator, and every “B” line the other. To further simplify this, the lines also alternate between asking questions and giving answers. In this way, Rossetti is able to craft a poetic conversation between two people without complicating her work in any way — normally a fairly difficult thing to do. Between the rhyming and the narration pattern, this is an easy poem to read and follow, and flows nicely, despite the somewhat erratic syllable count for each verse.

In the first verse, the author seems to be drawing on the common “uphill battle” metaphor to inform the title of the poem. The first speaker asks about “the road,” and whether or not it is uphill for its entire length, as well as whether or not the time it will take to walk the road will mean the entire day. The description of the “whole long day” is an unusual choice — especially since without the word “long,” this line would match the first one for syllables. Its addition is meaningful in showing the reader that the speaking asking questions is tired. Their uphill journey has clearly taken some time up to this point, and they are anxious for its conclusion. It is also possible that the “long day,” in contrast to simply “the day” refers to a twenty-four hour period. This seems likely based on the answer they receive — that their journey will not be over before

sundown. The second narrator's lines are much shorter than the first one's; they are succinct. The only aspect of their character of particular note is that they refer to the other speaker as their friend.

The questions and answers continue with the second verse, where an atmosphere begins to become noticeable. The two characters portrayed here are clearly very different in their perspectives on the uphill journey. The first speaker is unsure and lacks confidence; here they ask if there is a place they can stay for the night, since their journey will take so long. As soon as they are told that such a place exists, they worry that they'll miss seeing it. The second speaker, by contrast, is certain not only that there is an inn for shelter against the dark, but that they will undoubtedly find it before it is too dark to see. It is an odd experience as a reader to alternate between fear and confidence on every line of the work; Rossetti has chosen to portray one journey through two opposite viewpoints, and yet it remains easy to follow and understand.

In the third (and second-to-last) verse, the questioning narrator wonders about the inn they are to find, and whether or not they will be welcome there. This is a strange line of thought — the idea of an inn, after all, is for anyone to find shelter, and an inn is constructed with nomads in mind. And yet, the speaker here is concerned that they will be unwelcome, despite assurances from their companion that they will be welcomed by the "other wayfarers." The first speaker hopes to find friends in their same predicament, and are told that they will. The anxieties of the initial speaker and the confidence of the second one continue to be the prominent theme of the work, though the identities of both remain concealed.

The idea of two friends walking up a hill for a full day is a rather unlikely scenario in the literal sense. The expression from which this poem likely was inspired refers to situations and scenarios that require harder work than usual to overcome — walking down a pathway versus walking up a hill. In a figurative sense, the speaker asking questions in this work is attempting to overcome an obstacle, and liken it to trying to walk uphill for a full day. The second speaker could be a friend encouraging them along the way, or it could be another aspect of their own personality, their sense of optimism or determination to finish what they have started.

The idea of an inn along the way, in which lies comfort equal to the work put in (“Of labour you shall find the sum”), as well as other people climbing the same hill, is a likely metaphor for friends and family. It is difficult — to put it lightly — to attempt to cross over any kind of obstacle without some kind of support. If it was easy to do, after all, it wouldn’t be much of an obstacle. So the speaker draws on their own sense of self and imagines that at the end of the day, there will be a roof over their head. Perhaps they are going home to their family, or perhaps the inn is a bar where they can meet up with friends and forget about the hardships of the day.

The amazing thing about *Up-hill* is that any of the above interpretations are plausible when the entire poem is read in a metaphorical context. At its core, the poem is about two voices, one struggling and seeking rest, and another encouraging them and telling them they will find it. Nearly everyone should be able to relate to this in some way, because the poem is intentionally written to stand on the fine line between vague and relatable. What exactly the speakers are doing in trying to ascend this climb is unspecified, because it doesn’t matter. What does matter is that second voice that encourages them, assures them, and helps them to find rest. A friend, a family member, or an internal voice — to every reader, it will be someone different. The important thing, however, is that it will be someone.

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