

"Musée des Beaux Arts" by W. H. Auden

"Musée des Beaux Arts," which is French for "museum of fine arts," is a poem about the universal indifference to human misfortune. Following a series of reflections on how inattentive most people are to the sufferings of others, the poet focuses on a particular rendition of his theme: a sixteenth century painting by the Flemish master Pieter Bruegel, the Elder, called *The Fall of Icarus*.

W. H. Auden spent the winter of 1938 in Brussels, where he visited the Bruegel alcove of the city's Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts. "Musée des Beaux Arts" was inspired by the poet's fascination with the Icarus painting, as well as by two other canvases by Bruegel: *The Numbering at Bethlehem* and *The Massacre of the Innocents*. It was written in 1939, when Auden was distressed over the defeat of the Loyalists in the Spanish Civil War and the acquiescence of Europeans to the ascendancy of Fascism.

The poem consists of two sections, the first a series of general statements and the second a specific application of those generalizations. Like the great Flemish Renaissance artists, the poet observes how very marginal is individual calamity to the rest of the world. Most others continue with their mundane activities without paying any attention to the kinds of extraordinary events that poets and painters usually dramatize. In particular, instead of highlighting the magnitude of that mythical catastrophe, Bruegel depicts the bizarre disaster of Icarus falling from the sky as if it were peripheral and utterly inconsequential to anything else. Oblivious to what is happening to hapless Icarus, no one and nothing—neither a farmer nor the sun nor a ship—are distracted from proceeding with business as usual.

The second section of "Musée des Beaux Arts" is an abbreviated analysis of the Bruegel work, in which the poet emphasizes how the painter composes his pastoral scene in such a way as to minimize the significance of a boy's suddenly plopping into the sea. Except for the obscure background detail of individual death, the landscape might seem idyllic. Auden's point is a simple one, and, by expressing it simply, succinctly, and nonchalantly, he intensifies the horror of universal apathy.

Lines 1-2

About suffering they were never wrong,

The Old Masters;

Check out the strange syntax of this first phrase. It's everything that your high school English teacher told you *not* to do. The subject? Right at the end of the second line. The phrasing? Repetitive. And even after the speaker's done speaking, we still don't really know what he's talking about.

For example, who are the "Old Masters?" Well, the title of the poem tips us off here: since the speaker is hanging out in an art museum ("beaux arts" are, well, artworks), we're guessing that he's referring to the Grand Masters of the art world.

There's just one other little bit of information that's missing here: what sort of suffering is going on? Well, that's a good question. And our speaker doesn't seem to be offering many answers.

Not yet, at any rate. That's how he hooks us. It's just like listening to a commercial for the nightly news. You know, the ones where the announcers start off by saying things like, "Natural Disasters! Tragedy at Home! The One Health Care Tip You Can't Afford to Miss! ...all that and more when we get back from commercial break." With a lead like that, you've just *got* to keep watching. Or reading.

Lines 2-3

how well, they understood

Its human position;

So we're not really much clearer about what's going on now than we were two lines ago. Sure, people are suffering. And the painters seem to have that covered. But what exactly is this suffering? And who's doing it?

Well, for now we'll just have to be content with the fact that our speaker's something of a tease. See, he knows that his subject matter is sensational enough that he can string us along for a few more lines at least – and that's just what he's planning to do.

Right now, in fact, he sounds a little bit like a philosopher.

Isn't that sort of what happens when you go to an art museum? You sit down in front of a painting that catches your eye, and all of a sudden you're thinking Big Thoughts. You know, the kind that could change the world if you could just remember them long enough to write them down. But by the time you actually *do* get to a pen and paper, well...it's hard to remember just what that epiphany actually was.

You might think that the messiness of these lines mimics that sense of epiphany. Notice how we seem to be building a pattern here?

Lines spill over into other lines, and phrases stop right smack in the middle of new lines. Sloppy? Well, yes. Yes it is. But we're guessing that that's sort of what Auden's intending to do. After all, he's emphasizing the human (read: "imperfect") nature of most things in life. Especially the bad stuff.

Notice how bad things never come in nice little packages? You stub your toe, you lose your bus pass, and your cat eats your biology homework. Don't laugh. It's happened to us. And all of that – ALL of it – happens at the same time. There's no organizing life.

And that's what Auden's form is here to remind us. It's insistently unorganized. Or perfectly imperfect. Either way, it's human. Just like his subject matter.

Lines 3-4

how it takes place

While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along;

Ah, now we're getting somewhere. Imagine this as a painting. (since our speaker's supposedly in a museum)

We may not know who's taking center stage in this little tableaux, but some of the background is beginning to fill in. It's a crowd scene – or at the very least, an afternoon in the park. The point is, no matter what it is that you (or, um, our absent star) is doing, there are lots of other people living lives that are just as busy and important as yours.

Could Auden have picked images that are any more prosaic? Eating? We do that every day. Opening a window? That doesn't exactly stop traffic.

But that's precisely the point. When you're doing the most ordinary things in the world, the people who live across the street from you might just be winning the lottery. Or mourning the loss of a loved one. You just never know.

Lines 5-8

*How, when the aged are reverently, passionately waiting
For the miraculous birth, there always must be
Children who did not specially want it to happen, skating
On a pond at the edge of the wood:*

All of a sudden, our poem's full of people. You can just imagine the crowds of people in a neighbor's house, waiting to hear that a new baby has arrived.

More importantly, you can probably remember just how unexcited you were when your little brother or sister was born. Sure, it seemed cool when your parents told you that you'd get to be a big sister or brother.

Auden's a master at evoking a scene. All of a sudden, we can see (and feel) both what the old and the young are doing and thinking.

These lines may seem pretty unimportant, but they're actually a microcosm of the poem as a whole: our speaker draws us into the emotional world of the poem before he locates us in its physical world. We know just what the children are feeling before we can place them "on a pond on the edge of the wood."

Lines 8-10

They never forgot

*That even the dreadful martyrdom must run its course
Anyhow in a corner,*

We're guessing that our speaker's back to talking about the Old Masters by now. (After all, children don't tend to do much philosophizing. Not when there's good ice to be skated upon.)

If our speaker's right, however, it means that he (and the Old Masters) think about martyrdom just a little bit differently than most of our Lifetime evening specials do. After

all, aren't martyrs the folks that get loads and loads of attention? Doesn't their suffering get remembered and written about forever and ever? Does the name Joan of Arc ring any bells?

Apparently not. See, as our speaker sees it, most suffering just gets swallowed up into the everyday hustle and bustle of life. Even martyrs aren't really thought of as martyrs until after they're dead.

Our speaker emphasizes the tangential nature of most suffering – we see that it's happening, but it's happening somewhere else. At the very least, it's not happening to us.

Looking at paintings of suffering only emphasizes how detached the speaker is from what's actually going on. After all, he can *see* it. But he sure isn't *feeling* it.

And if he's at a huge remove from the action, where does that put us?

Lines 10-12

some untidy spot

Where the dogs go on with their doggy life and the torturer's horse

Scratches its innocent behind on a tree.

OK, we've got to admit: we love this bit of the poem. Just like those earlier lines about the little kids on the pond, these images are all about the details.

Sure, someone's getting tortured. Sure, bad things are happening. But there are also animals (and, we're guessing, people) that are completely oblivious to what's going on. There's something so reassuring about dogs and horses doing the things that dogs and horses do – no matter what's going on behind the scenes.

Notice how, once again, the images that Auden uses are deliberately prosaic. No fancy-schmancy images or unnecessary adjectives to clutter up the scene. What kind of life does a dog have? A doggy one. Obviously.

Then again, there's also something deliberately ominous growing in the background. No matter how happy these dogs and horses seem to be, we know that something bad is happening just outside of our vision. And our speaker's making us cringe with all the anticipation of just what that "something" might be.

Lines 13-14

In Breughel's Icarus, for instance: how everything turns away

Quite leisurely from the disaster;

Now we're moving onto solid ground. Our speaker's not wandering in front of random pictures anymore. He's given us a point of reference: Pieter Breughel's "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus."

We'll get into the painting a bit more in our "Setting" section, but for now let's just point out that it's an old painting (done in about 1558, to be precise). That's why our speaker refers to Brueghel as an "Old" master. He meant the "old" part.

Our speaker doesn't refer to the painting by its full title, of course – sort of like how you might talk about a painting that you just saw...or a painting that you know so well you feel like you can give it a nickname.

We think that the discrepancy between Brueghel's name and our speaker's reference is actually pretty interesting. It shows that, despite all evidence to the contrary, our speaker actually *is* interested in the story that's happening in the background.

Lines 14-16

the ploughman may

Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,

But for him it was not an important failure;

There's something devastating in the understatement of these lines. Sure, spring planting is an important time. Ask any farmer – they'll tell you that there's about eighteen hours of work to do in about eleven hours of daylight. Maybe our ploughman is just too busy to pay attention to noises off in the water. But from what we can tell, it sounds like someone's drowning. There are *legs* out there in that water! Something is not right.

Maybe the farmer's just got too much to do to head off and play lifeguard for silly people who shouldn't be swimming in the ocean. Maybe he's just not concerned about random sounds. Maybe people drown in that water every day. Whatever the reason, this particular fall is not important enough to merit his attention.

Then again, what *does* constitute an "important" failure? Something so dreadful that it affects 10 people? 100? 100,000? When does something become "big" enough to care about?

Sure, that's not what our speaker's actually saying. But he sure as heck is insinuating it. After all, a "forsaken" cry is one that people have deliberately ignored. And it's that indifference which really drives our speaker to generate this poem.

Lines 16-18

the sun shone

As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green

Water;

Once again, there's a certain inevitability in these lines. The natural world goes on, no matter what happens. Dogs do what dogs do. The sun does what it always does: it shines.

Notice how Auden manages to make this both a story and a description? Here's what we mean by that: he's allowing the speaker to narrate Brueghel's painting – and in so doing, he makes all the action happen in real time. We are *there* as the sun is shining and Icarus is drowning. Does that make his version more real or more alive than Brueghel's? Not necessarily. But it does make us pay attention to the temporality of Icarus's fall. It's no longer static. It happens across time – the time that it takes us to read the last few lines, as a matter of fact. And that drawn-out falling makes the tragedy of Icarus' death all the more excruciating to witness.

Then again, our speaker could just be describing what he sees in the painting. Brueghel manages to make the light strike Icarus's legs. That's how we know that he's actually in the water. That and the fact that Brueghel tossed his name into the painting's title, of course.

Lines 18-20

and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen

Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,

had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.

All of the peace and tranquility in this poem (and, well, in the painting to which it refers) gets exposed as something that looks a lot like hypocrisy. Sure, everything is

expensive and beautiful and perfect. But that's only a thin veneer over what's actually the action in this scene – a terrible, terrifying drowning.

Like Brueghel, Auden is emphasizing Icarus's surroundings. In so doing, he transforms the myth; it's no longer about a boy who dreamed too big and couldn't figure out how to fly. It's about all the simple, ordinary people who wouldn't go out of their way to pull a drowning boy out of the water. Sure, the ordinary stuff might not be quite as exciting as the myth. Heck, it's not even what art is *supposed* to be about, is it? We're supposed to be reading about heroes and dragons and martyrs and all the flashy stuff, right?

Maybe not. Maybe Auden's point is that even the heroes need ordinary people to do extraordinary things sometimes. Or even just behave like sympathetic human beings.

Auden's poem doesn't emphasize the extraordinary – just like the rest of the lines, these lines are simple. No tricky words. No fancy rhymes. In so doing, he could just be normalizing the sorts of indifference he describes. Several critics have said just that.

We wonder, though, if he's not exposing that indifference for what it is: an unwillingness to recognize amazing things or out of the ordinary things or even just awful things. In other words, this poem is asking us to open our eyes. You just never know what you're going to see once you do.