

## Human Indifference to Suffering in W. H. Auden's *Musée des Beaux Arts*

W. H. Auden's poem *Musée des Beaux Arts* explores the theme of human indifference to suffering by reflecting on how tragedy often goes unnoticed by those not directly affected by it. Inspired by his visit to the *Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts* in Brussels, the poem particularly engages with Pieter Bruegel the Elder's painting *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*. In this work, Icarus, the tragic figure from Greek mythology who falls into the sea after flying too close to the sun, is depicted as a barely noticeable figure in the background, while the world around him continues unaffected. Auden's poem uses this image to highlight a universal truth: human suffering, no matter how profound, often occurs alongside mundane daily life, where it is overlooked or ignored. Through vivid imagery and a detached, observational tone, the poem critiques the persistent reality of human indifference to suffering.

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### The Old Masters' Understanding of Suffering

The poem begins with a broad observation about how great artists of the past—the “Old Masters”—understood suffering. Auden writes:

➤ “About suffering they were never wrong,

The Old Masters: how well they understood

Its human position: how it takes place

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

These lines establish the central idea that suffering is rarely the focal point of collective attention. The “Old Masters” recognize that suffering does not occur in isolation but within a world where ordinary activities continue unaffected. The juxtaposition of

suffering with mundane actions—eating, opening a window, or walking—illustrates how tragedy is often met with indifference, as life goes on uninterrupted for those not directly involved.

This notion is reinforced in the next lines:

- “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.”

Here, Auden contrasts significant events, such as the anticipation of a miraculous birth (perhaps referencing the nativity of Christ), with the obliviousness of children playing nearby. This contrast emphasizes that even in the presence of momentous occurrences, the rest of the world often remains indifferent, absorbed in its own activities.

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### The Fall of Icarus: A Study in Indifference

The second stanza of the poem shifts focus to Bruegel’s *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*, using the painting as a case study of human indifference. Auden describes how, in the artwork:

- “In Bruegel’s *Icarus*, for instance: how everything turns away

Quite leisurely from the disaster.”

The phrase “turns away” suggests not just physical turning but also emotional detachment. The word “leisurely” emphasizes that this indifference is not born of urgency or fear but rather a lack of concern. Despite the mythological gravity of Icarus’s fall, the world around him remains unaffected.

Auden then describes the figures in the painting, particularly the ploughman:

➤ “The ploughman may

Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,

But for him it was not an important failure.”

The ploughman is too absorbed in his work to pay much attention to Icarus’s fate. Even if he notices the splash or cry, it does not hold enough significance for him to pause. Auden’s choice of the phrase “not an important failure” is particularly striking—it suggests that while Icarus’s fall may be catastrophic for him, it does not register as significant to the ploughman, whose life continues unaffected.

Similarly, the ship sailing nearby is described as follows:

➤ “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.”

The ship's reaction is even more striking than the ploughman's—it must have seen Icarus fall, yet it continues its journey unbothered. The ship, described as “expensive” and “delicate,” is preoccupied with its own concerns, much like people in the real world who prioritize their personal or material interests over the suffering of others. The phrase “sailed calmly on” reinforces the idea that life continues despite individual tragedy.

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### Suffering in a World That Moves On

Auden's depiction of suffering in *Musée des Beaux Arts* aligns with a broader philosophical perspective on human nature and society. The poem suggests that suffering is an inevitable part of life but that people are often too absorbed in their own routines to acknowledge it fully. The ploughman and the ship do not act out of malice; they are simply indifferent, as their own lives continue without interruption.

This indifference is not unique to the world of the painting. In real life, human tragedies—whether personal misfortunes or large-scale crises—often go unnoticed or are acknowledged only briefly before attention shifts elsewhere. The poem reflects how, despite the magnitude of suffering, the world remains largely indifferent.

Auden does not explicitly condemn this indifference, but the observational tone of the poem subtly critiques it. By placing suffering alongside daily life, he forces the reader to recognize how easily tragedy can be ignored. This message remains relevant in modern times, where global and individual suffering often occurs in the background of everyday life, as people remain preoccupied with their own concerns.

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### Conclusion: The Power of Indifference

Musée des Beaux Arts is a powerful meditation on human indifference to suffering. Through his engagement with Bruegel's Landscape with the Fall of Icarus, Auden highlights how suffering is often overlooked or dismissed by those not directly affected. By contrasting moments of great personal tragedy with the ordinary routines of others, he emphasizes the universal nature of human detachment from suffering.

The poem's closing image of the ship that "sailed calmly on" serves as a haunting reminder that no matter how great the disaster, life continues. Whether intentional or not, people often fail to acknowledge the pain of others, focusing instead on their own lives. This message, delivered through vivid imagery and an observational tone, makes Musée des Beaux Arts a timeless reflection on the human condition.