

## Art and Its Obligations: Towards a Thematic Understanding of Auden's "Musée des Beaux Arts"

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### Abstract

This study attempts to make a thematic analyse of W.H. Auden's poem "Musée des Beaux Arts", which touches on a number of significant issues, including the human condition and its struggles, the significance of art and culture in society, the contrast between the splendour of art and the ordinary reality of life, the fact that pain and suffering are an essential part of the human experience, the concept of the artist as a witness to the world, and so on. The study emphasises how powerful and thought-provoking Auden's poem is, reflecting on the human condition and the place of art in society. It implies that the poem inspires readers to consider their own tragedies, suffering, and the function of art in the face of such realities. Additionally, it clarifies that the poem is Not only about beauty and historical art, but also about humanity's hardships and the role that art plays in understanding and recognising those challenges.

**Keywords:** Art, Auden, Brueghel, Human suffering, Icarus, "Musée des Beaux Arts"

### Introduction

Wystan Hugh Auden was a well-kNown literary personality who wrote a variety of works that covered a broad range of topics and ideas. Auden, who was born in England in 1907,

started composing poetry at an early age and went on to become one of the 20th century's most important poets.

Auden's flexibility as a writer is shown by the fact that he also produced plays and essays in addition to poetry. Because he often explored the complexity of love, morality, religion, and politics in his writings, he gained recognition as a respected and provocative voice in the literary community.

His 1947 poem, "The Age of Anxiety," which won the Pulitzer Prize, is among Auden's most well-known works. It examines the contemporary human condition while reflecting on the concerns and worries of the post-World War II era. "The Age of Anxiety," is regarded as one of his most influential poems. It is a reflection of the human condition in a world that is becoming more unstable and unpredictable.

Through his writings, which are still read and studied today, Auden's legacy endures. Many poets and authors have found inspiration in his poetry, which is noted for its humour, intellect, and emotional depth.

### **Musée des Beaux Arts**

The poem "Musée des Beaux Arts" by W.H. Auden explores the human experience of tragedy and sorrow, as well as the function of art in the face of these truths. The poem, which was written in 1938, gets its name from the *Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique* (Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium), which the poet visited, and he utilises the paintings there as a springboard for a more in-depth examination of the human condition. Auden mainly focuses on the painting *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* by Pieter Brueghel<sup>1</sup>.

According to Greek mythology, Icarus is the son of Daedalus, a brilliant craftsman renowned for his ability to create exquisite items. The Labyrinth on the island of Crete is

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that many academics have also spelled the name "Brueghel" as "Bruegel". The spelling "Brueghel" is used in this study. In quotations from other scholars, their spelling of the artist's name was unchanged.

created by Daedalus. King MiNos imprisoned Daedalus and Icarus on the island of Crete, but Daedalus built himself and his son a pair of wings each so they could escape. To avoid melting the wax that held the wings together, Daedalus cautioned his son against flying too near to the sun. In spite of his father's warning, Icarus soared too close to the sun, causing the wax to melt and leading him to fall into the water and drown. In the painting of Brueghel, the audience finds Icarus drowning in a corner; only one set of legs can be seen protruding out of the water (Sarot, 2016, pp. 82-83). "Although we can only conjecture as to the genesis of Auden's poem about the suffering of mankind as depicted by the Old Masters, an examination of facts indicates that other Bruegel paintings are probably referred to "(Kinney, 1963, p. 529). As Auden investigates the function of the artist in the face of sorrow and catastrophe, the poem's main idea is progressively explored. According to him, an artist's role includes acknowledging and addressing the darker parts of the human experience in addition to portraying beauty. He praises the old Masters:

"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;"

(lines 1- 4) (Auden, 1977)

The opening line of the poem describes how the people shown in the museum's painting appear to be untouched by the sorrow and tragedy around them. For instance, the youngster falls from the sky, as the ploughman goes about his business, and the ship continues to sail while being unaware of the boy's destiny. The contrast between the beauty and tranquillity of art and the brutal reality of life is the poem's main idea, and this visual sets the scene for it.

The poem "Musée des Beaux Arts" by W.H. Auden touches on a number of significant issues, including but Not limited to the human condition and its suffering, martyrdom, war,

loss, social and moral responsibility, the place of art and culture in society, the idea of beauty and its transient nature, the contrast between the splendour of art and the ordinary reality of life, the fact that pain and suffering are an essential part of the human experience, the idea of the artist as a witness to the world, and the relationship between the artist and the subject of art. These themes and many more related issues can be examined in an elaborate manner.

### **Suffering and the Question of Social and Moral Responsibility**

In this poem, Auden challenges the primacy of the human experience while attempting to make sense of mortality, death, loss, and pain. He also casts doubt on the subjectivity of individual perception and the common practice of putting one's own needs ahead of those of others.

“In Breughel's Icarus, for instance: how everything turns away  
Quite leisurely from the disaster...”

(lines 14-15) (Auden, 1977)

The poem focuses on the pain that victims of war, accidents, or illnesses go through and how they are often forgotten. Many of these people are alluded to by Auden, including Icarus, and he implies that their pain is mostly ignored. Auden even “presents the animals as a mirror of humanity that helps reveal our daily disregard for our fellow man. The animals suggest that humankind can never truly be ignorant of suffering and that failure to respond to suffering is akin to causing it, which is the ultimate message of the poem.” (Joplin, 2015, p. 212)

The poem also has a strong social responsibility message, encouraging readers to see the pain of others and do what they can to alleviate it. Recognising the sufferings of others might help us better comprehend our own. Even though grief is inevitable, Auden contends that shared empathy and understanding may offer comfort to those who are suffering. He

suggests that, despite the beauty of life, we must embrace and appreciate the challenges we face in order to discover purpose and insight.

Pain may be a catalyst for learning and knowledge as well as an inspiration for creativity. He also suggests that the sublime may be attained by using suffering as a source of power.

### **The Human Condition and Its Struggle**

According to Auden, the human condition and its struggles are shared by all humanity at large, and “Musée des Beaux Arts” relates to this universal experience of suffering in the midst of life’s beauty and joy. He talks about the difficulties faced by people throughout history. Dealing with daily challenges may leave one feeling small and helpless and how modern living hasn’t done anything to make these struggles any easier. The poem describes the beauty of existence and the happy times that are finally overwhelmed by the pain of being human. “Though both Auden and Bruegel were exposed to suffering in their life, a fact which manifests critically throughout their oeuvres, neither artist expresses judgment on the disengaged “witnesses” of crime in these works. Instead we’re met with a map to which suffering and humanity are placemarked; “its human position,” as Auden describes” (Goefron & Makowiecka, 2015, p. 8). Thus Auden explores the difficulties that come with being human, such as the struggle for existence, loneliness, and mortality.

### **The Function of Culture and Art in Society**

Auden’s poem “Musée des Beaux Arts” unerringly discusses the function of culture and art in society. Auden suggests that comprehending human sorrow should also come from looking at art and culture, in addition to beauty and appreciation. He also suggests that art should be considered as a reflection of societal concerns and current events rather than just as a kind of enjoyment. “The idea of the poem is to dramatize the anomalous merging of great ‘poetic’ events and mundane, prosaic, daily affairs, the same merging that Brueghel and the

Old Masters verified in their paintings - sufferings, miraculous births, martyrdoms, myths woven through the fabric of ordinary life” (LePage, 1973, p. 254).

Auden demonstrates how art may serve as a social forum for empathy and understanding. He conveys that art is a method of expression that may unite people and help to improve the world. Additionally, he thinks that the ability of art can transcend space and time and enable access to information and understanding from a range of viewpoints.

### **Martyrdom**

The concept of martyrdom is one of the important themes of W.H. Auden’s poem “Musée des Beaux Arts”. In his poem Auden makes the argument that some individuals suffer and pass away as a result of their dedication to a greater purpose or cause:

“...the dreadful martyrdom must run its course

Anyhow in a corner...”

(lines 10-11) (Auden, 1977)

He uses Icarus as an illustration of a person who perished as a result of his flying close to the sun. Auden urges readers to think about the fortitude found in suffering and dying for a good cause by referencing old stories. “He (Auden) presents a panorama of visual images that provide a chronological synopsis of suffering, with examples such as the suffering of Christ and the suffering of Icarus... It is important, in this respect, to remember the place of composition: the Museum of Fine Arts in Brussels, where Auden was able, in spite of the peaceful and quiet environment around him, to find the most indelible scenes of suffering” (Khaleel, 2016, pp. 114-115). In the poem, Auden discusses how the ploughman and the ship in the artwork are seemingly unaffected by Icarus’ anguish and tragedy as they continue their daily activities. This symbolism emphasises the concept of martyrdom by implying that life continues and that the world is generally apathetic to the martyr’s struggle, even in the face of extreme anguish and sorrow.

### **The Idea of the Artist as a World Observer**

Auden discusses how the artist may give the voiceless a voice and play a part in fostering a greater knowledge of human suffering. “The theme of the painting concerned with indifference to suffering would seem able to function as the intertextual model for Auden’s poem because, even if the ploughman is oblivious of Icarus’s fall, the sailing ship must have witnessed it, as the poem states (lines 19-20)”. (Hopkins, 2015, p.1920)

“... and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen  
Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,”

(lines 19-20) (Auden, 1977)

He stresses the significance of identifying pain in order to foster empathy and understanding in both our individual lives and society at large. The poem encourages artists to produce works that will not ignore the suffering of existence. He recommends using art as a tool to investigate and comprehend the common problems of life. Auden considers the artist’s function as a global witness. He makes the argument that art may be used to record and monitor the world, as well as to communicate experiences and ideas that might help to forge a better future.

### **The Connection between the Subject of Art and the Artist**

Auden talks about the connection between the subject of an artist’s art and themselves. In order to produce work which is meaningful and which accurately depicts the human experience, he stresses the significance of knowing and relating it to the subject. He discusses the ability of art to connect people and proposes that in order to make art that is true to life, the artist should be there for the lives of the individuals they are capturing in their works. “Auden generously praises the Old Masters for their insight into a rueful moral truth” (Mason Jr, 1990, p. 284). He contends that art ought to serve as a forum for exploring and challenging the human condition and for illuminating our challenges. The relationship between the artist and the subject of art may be complicated but should never be ignored.

### **The Concept of the “Sublime” in Art and How It Can Transcend the Ordinary**

In his poem “Musée des Beaux Arts”, Auden explores the Notion of the “sublime” in art and how it might rise above the ordinary. He talks about how art can make the ordinary more beautiful and meaningful while also examining even the most unpleasant and difficult aspects of life. The ordinary may become remarkable through the use of art, and that it is sometimes impossible to fully comprehend the human condition through the use of words alone. As Coombes writes, “Auden speaks to us of the Doomed Poet. Brecht speaks to us of an idealized Working Class. Brueghel speaks to us of men and women in struggle, against immediate circumstances- but also against the pervasive power of myth. Perhaps it is the painter, and Not the writers, that we should read ?” (Coombes, 1986, p. 26). In hard times, art may offer comfort and consolation. Auden postulates that despite tragedy and suffering, art may be a source of solace, peace, and hope.

### **The Concept of Time and How It Influences the Way We Understand and Value Art**

Auden discusses how art eVolves through time and how our perception of a work of art may vary greatly depending on the context in which we view it. While we might Not always be able to grasp the underlying significance of a piece of art, considering it from the perspective of time might aid in our ability to see its beauty, significance, and emotional impact. Art should be seen as a mirror of the human experience as well as an expression of truth, and that in order to fully understand the coil of things, one must take time into account. “A figural view of history assumes that all human events are related and continuous, and Auden has recently again expressed his dismay before “the atomization of time — the most terrible thing that is happening in the world today” (in a television broadcast of the programme Open End, WGBH TV, Channel 2, Boston, 4 August 1960)” (Bluestone, 1961, p. 332).

## Conclusion

The central theme of W.H. Auden's poem "Musée des Beaux Arts" focuses on the contemplation of suffering and the human condition. Numerous academic assessments of this poem have focused on its formal composition, its intricate imagery, and its thought-provoking inquiries into the nature of pain. But the poem is Not out of criticism: "Auden's "Musee" is regularly classified as a bitter poem, a reaction to the pretensions of the modernist avant-garde or a resignation that the modern world has become too turbulent for art (Kent, 2010, p. 266)". In spite of this, Auden is successful to weave together allusions from ancient Greek and Roman mythology, the Old and New Testaments, and the themes of war, art and martyrdom to produce a conVoluted story that develops into an unsettling finale. Along with discussing themes of birth, death, destiny, and the ability of art to transcend sorrow, the poem's imagery is also vivid and multilayered.

Auden challenges the reader to reflect on the nature of pain and its role in the human condition by comparing the impacts of human sorrow with the enduring character of art. He investigates how art may convey the feeling of sorrow, bring comfort, and give a glimpse of the possible heavenly satisfaction when we help others in their suffering. Thus, Auden's poem relates to our innate humanity and indirectly but positively encourages us to stand up for the cause of others.

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