

## Musee des Beaux Arts

### A Poem by: Wystan Hugh Auden

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Wystan Hugh Auden (1907-1973), an Anglo-American poet, was born in the 21<sup>st</sup> of February in York. He was brought up in a scientific family; therefore, he didn't read any poetry until he was sixteen years old. He entered the University of Oxford, and became the center of a group of literary intellectuals.

Auden participated in the Spanish Civil War as an ambulance driver and a stretcher-bearer. In 1938, he moved to the United States and became a naturalized American citizen and taught in some schools and universities, and then he returned to England as "Professor of Poetry at Oxford."

His main poetical works are: *Poems* (1930), *Paid on Both Sides* (1930), *The Orators* (1932), and he wrote three plays in collaboration with Christopher Isherwood: *The Dog Beneath the Skin* (1935); *The Ascent of F6* (1936), and *On the Frontier* (1938). After that he published *Another Time* (1940) ; *New Year Letter* (1941); *For the Time Being* (1945); *The Age of Anxiety* (1948); *Collected Shorter Poems* 1930 – 1944 (1950) ; *Nones* (1952) ; *The Shield of Achilles* (1955)

Since W.H. Auden is a poet of the 1930's , his time was very difficult, which he called "The Age of Anxiety" because of the threat of war on the one hand and the destruction of Industrialization on the

other hand. Auden, as well as the other poets of the 30's, puts imagination aside and makes science and reason as main themes of most of his poetry. It can be characterized as relying on insight, rather than eyesight. His society is always in front of his eyes, as poet :

Auden was one of the most accomplished and significant writers of his time. He created one of the largest, and richest bodies of work of any poet of the twentieth century.

After Auden's graduation in 1928, he became recognized as the most talented of his generation of British Poets, as the voice of a new generation. Auden gave his voice to the deepest themes of his generation's concerns over political and economic crises, suspicion of aestheticism, Marxist and Freudian understandings of self and society, and distrust of established authority, whether in literary, political, religious, or personal life. He believes that the job of the artist is to help pave the way for a revolution that would destroy the old order and would free individuals for rebirth:

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;  
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:  
They never forgot  
That even the dreadful martyrdom must run its course  
Anyhow in a corner, some untidy spot

Where the dogs go on with their doggy life and the torturer's horse  
Scratches its innocent behind on a tree.

In Breughel's Icarus, for instance: how everything turns away  
Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may  
Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,  
But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone  
As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green  
Water, 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.

**Situation:** “Musée des Beaux Arts” is about a painting in Brussels by Brueghel, that Auden viewed in 1938 when he visited the museum. He praises the old masters, the painters whose paintings were in the museum. He says that the classical artists were accurate in picturing human suffering, and they understood this suffering better than modern people.

**Commentary:** He describes how the suffering takes place while others are careless either eating or opening a window or walking or doing something else.

He starts talking about individual paintings in the museum. The first is about the birth of Christ; “miraculous birth” and “the tragedy of a death” may get some hints at religion, mainly at Christianity. He says that old people were respectfully and eagerly waiting for the miraculous birth while children were careless, playing or skating on a pond.

Then he moves to another painting in the corner in which a horse is tied to a tree and scratching its behind on the tree, which is described as a torturer horse.

The poet moves to a painting that talks about the fall of Icarus, the son of Daedalus. Icarus is a Greek mythological figure, who and his father were imprisoned in Crete. Trying to escape from the prison, Daedalus made some wings for both of them and ordered his son not to fly too close to the sun. Icarus didn't listen to what his father says, and then the wax that held his wings to his body melted; he fell into the sea and died.

**Irony:** The title means a "Museum of Fine Arts". Verbal irony can be found in the title, because it suggests that the poem is about beautiful things, while its content talks about people who are suffering and dying.

The whole poem presents a situational irony, because it talks about the carelessness of people to the human pains.

The poem can be considered either as a piece of poetic art-criticism written in a smooth, almost chatty tone or as an example of alienated ironic humor mocking man's actions that are: "in no way correlated in weight and value to the results they produce". It seems that Auden wants to say that the irony of the death of Icarus, has been an emblem for man's upward flight that always ends in tragedy. "The reader is forced to make notice, forced paradoxically not only to see but to feel the painful irony of death in the midst of life". In the three paintings, there are some people suffering, but nobody pays attention to them. In the first painting, may be the children were too young to know the importance of Jesus' birth, so they kept skating on a pond. In the second painting, the animals could do nothing about the dreadful martyrdom. But in the third one, the farmer and people on the ship saw the fall of Icarus and they didn't care for it. In this way the poet uses the situational irony.

**Theme:** One can say that the main theme of this poem is the apathy with which people view individual sufferings. "It is this very contrast between the personal sorrow and the ever – flowing stream of life. The poem hints at Auden's involvement in the conflict between meaningful events and an oblivious world.