Musée des Beaux Arts

SUMMARY

While perusing a gallery filled with works by celebrated pre-19th-century painters, the speaker notes that these artists accurately portray suffering—especially humankind's attitude towards the suffering of others. The speaker expands on this idea by alluding to *The Census at Bethlehem*, a painting by Flemish Renaissance artist Pieter Breughel the Elder, and remarking that suffering occurs while people go about their everyday lives. Indeed, the speaker calls attention to people eating, someone opening a window, and others simply walking about—all while a pregnant Mary and Joseph arrive to register in the census. The speaker notes that, while older individuals eagerly anticipate the birth of Christ, there will always be other, younger people who are not particularly awaiting such an event—like the children in the painting, who play games and skate on a pond by a wooded area. According to the speaker, the artists are mindful that violence is carried out in some secluded, chaotic area as life goes on around it. Here, the speaker references *The Massacre of the Innocents*, which pictures the killing of the first Christian martyrs. In this painting, animals indifferently carry on as the killing happens—dogs doing doglike things, and the horse of one slaughterer innocently scratching its rear on a tree.

As a specific example of this phenomenon, the speaker points out yet another Breughel painting, *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*, noting that everything in the picture seems to disregard Icarus's violent death. The farmer who drives a plow in the painting's foreground might have heard Icarus plunge into the water and cry out, according to the speaker, but the event is unimportant to him. As suns must do, the sun in the painting continues to shine. The speaker draws attention to its reflection on Icarus's pale legs as they descend into green water. The speaker concludes the poem with the image of a luxurious ship, which must have witnessed Icarus falling from the sky, but had a journey to make and therefore sailed onward placidly.

THEMES

HUMAN INDIFFERENCE TO SUFFERING

The speaker of "Musée des Beaux Arts" walks around a gallery, contemplating works of art by some of the greatest painters of generations past, namely Pieter Breughel the Elder and Breughel the Younger. The speaker retells two iconic stories that the paintings depict—the birth of Christ and the fall of Icarus—calling attention to the unawareness and indifference of the scenes' onlookers. What's more, the speaker also exhibits indifference to the tragedies described, suggesting that the ordinariness of human suffering dulls *every* individual's sensitivity to it.

While examining the Breughels' paintings, the speaker describes bystanders going about their lives as anguish unfolds around them. The speaker first references Brueghel's *The Census at Bethlehem*, which depicts Mary and Joseph after they've completed the long journey to Bethlehem. The speaker describes some of the day-to-day behavior represented in the painting, the backdrop for Christ's birth: "someone … eating or opening a window or just walking dully along." The speaker points out onlookers' mundane, inconsequential actions, the word "dully" even suggesting that these people are bored.

The speaker also points out that though there may be older folks piously awaiting Jesus's arrival, "there always must be / Children" who are more interested in playing and skating. Thus, the speaker indicates that the consequences of this historical moment and the tragedy to come are not felt by the people actually experiencing that moment.

The speaker turns to Breughel the Younger's *Massacre of the Innocents*, in which the first Christian martyrs—Bethlehem's boys under the age of two—are slaughtered because the aging Herod, King of Judea, saw Jesus's birth as a threat to his power. The speaker points out the dogs that "go on with their doggy life" and the horse of one of Herod's men that "Scratches its innocent behind on a tree." Again, the speaker juxtaposes these images of suffering and mundanity to foreground the tendency of life to go on, even in the face of incredible violence.

While the witnesses to the fraught birth of Christ seem ignorant of its significance, the speaker goes on to describe *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*, a scene whose bystanders are aware of the suffering taking place in front of them and still turn a blind eye. This painting depicts the outcome of an ancient Greek myth in which a boy named Icarus is given wings made of feathers, held together with wax, so that he can make an escape. Icarus ignores his father's warnings and flies too close to the sun, drowning after his wings melt.

The speaker first describes a farmer who "may / Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry" but decided it was unimportant and went on plowing his field. The speaker then references the sun that continues to shine "as it had to" after causing Icarus's death. Similarly, the speaker points out a "ship that must have seen" Icarus fall, but thought it best to continue on its journey. The speaker's use of terms like "may," "must," and "had to" reflect the inevitability of someone witnessing Icarus's death and choosing to disregard it. Terms like "leisurely" and "calmly" give the tragic scene a tranquil tone, as the onlookers appear

unbothered.

Finally, the speaker displays a cool detachment from the suffering depicted, proving that human indifference to the trauma of others is universal across time and place. The speaker describes the Massacre of the Innocents, which is typically mourned and lionized, as "the dreadful martyrdom [that] must run its course" and reduces Bethlehem to "a corner, some untidy spot." Similarly, the speaker refers to Icarus's death as "the disaster," "not an important failure," and "something amazing." In doing so, the speaker presents famed instances of human suffering as if they are commonplace—begging the question, "What *would* cause someone to take notice?"

Furthermore, the speaker fails to describe actual violence, "[turning] away / Quite leisurely" from the anguish, as all other passersby do. As the individual most aware of the violence in front of them, the speaker's reaction is telling. More specifically, the speaker proves that even those who recognize human indifference to suffering cannot escape that indifference.

The speaker thus implies that apathy towards the anguish of others is consistent across demographics, periods, and locations—from adults to children; animals to inanimate objects; ancient Greece and Bethlehem to Breughel's Germany, Auden's Belgium, and today. Indeed, in the present day there has been a mass proliferation of images of violence, as new technologies allow people to document and distribute these images with ease. As a result, it is impossible to intervene or even fully acknowledge each example of human suffering that people are confronted by.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-21

ART AND TRUTH

The speaker plays up the poem's gallery setting as the cause for philosophical reflection, and celebrates the ability of specific paintings to illuminate an essential truth about humanity—a truth that the speaker then tries to communicate through poetry. Therefore, using the gallery setting, specific paintings, and poetic techniques, "Musée des Beaux Arts" demonstrates that art has the power to illuminate universal, enduring truths that otherwise go unacknowledged.

The poem's museum setting is prominent, highlighting art's role as the motivating force behind the speaker's analysis of human suffering. The poem is loosely named after the museum that the speaker is walking through. Condensing the museum's name to exclude the descriptors "royaux" (royal) and "de Belgique" (of Belgium) places additional emphasis on "des Beaux Arts" (of Fine Arts) signaling that the presence of art is the most crucial aspect of the museum.

The decision to reflect the poem's setting in its title suggests that the speaker's environment is central to understanding the poem. Further, even before gaining access to the speaker's thoughts, the reader is aware of the setting that provokes these thoughts. In the poem's second line, the speaker subtly calls attention back to the setting by naming "the Old Masters," which is also the name of the specific collection that the speaker visits—the Oldmasters Museum. Moreover, the speaker's references to individual paintings are consistent with what was on view in the gallery at the time, jogging the memory of familiar readers and further defining the museum setting.

The speaker spends much of the poem admiring specific works' ability to convey human indifference to suffering. To make this point, the speaker describes minute details represented in the paintings, underscoring how the artworks themselves reveal this universal truth. For example, the speaker points to someone who is "opening a window" in Breughel the Elder's *The Census at Bethlehem*. The speaker then guides the reader across the picture to "children … skating / On a pond at the edge of the wood." The speaker turns to *The Massacre of the Innocents* by Breughel the Younger, drawing the reader's attention to dogs, who "go on with their doggy life" and a "torturer's horse," who "scratches its innocent behind on a tree."

Finally, the speaker names Breughel the Elder's *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* and in particular points out "the ploughman," "the sun," "and the expensive delicate ship." By repeatedly calling the reader's attention to the indifferent bystanders that the paintings depict, the speaker highlights the ability of artworks to reflect the world as it really is—so full of pain that humans become indifferent to the suffering of others, even in moments of historical importance.

Furthermore, the poem itself exemplifies art's ability to reflect this oft-overlooked truth. On a basic level, poetry allows the speaker to draw attention to specific images within the paintings that evoke a certain narrative. Additionally, like the onlookers described, the speaker never explicitly acknowledges the horrible violence that the paintings reference. Instead, the speaker downplays the shocking cruelty—referring, for instance, to the mass slaughter of infants as "dreadful martyrdom." Similarly, a boy suddenly plummeting to his death following a valiant escape is called "something amazing" and "the disaster." In this way, the speaker's tone captures the poem's message as well.

The speaker describes the bystanders' lack of concern using phrases like: "there always must be / Children who did not specially want it to happen," "dreadful martyrdom must run its course / Anyhow in a corner," and "the sun shone / As it had to." Therefore, rather than challenge this apathy towards these tragedies, the speaker discusses it as a banal inevitability. As such, the internal monologue that constitutes the poem is itself evidence of human indifference to suffering—the very truth that it sees illustrated in other works of art.

In this way, "Musée des Beaux Arts" provides a more truthful alternative to conventional representations of tragic events throughout history—one that acknowledges the tendency of bystanders to disengage. By providing specific examples of paintings in the museum, the poem emphasizes how art can capture this reality. Additionally, the poem embodies this truth itself. Thus, the poem can be seen as a multi-pronged testament to art's ability to communicate essential realities that are otherwise overlooked.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-21

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-3

About suffering they ...
... Its human position:

The speaker opens the poem by immediately establishing its subject and locale. The poem takes placed in the Oldmasters Museum, one of the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium. Immediately, the speaker makes a statement about the painters in this museum that will guide the rest of the poem: the Old Masters always understood how humans respond to suffering.

The meter of these first lines places additional emphasis on important words:

> About suffering they were never wrong,
> The Old Masters: how well they understood
> Its human position ...

The phrase, "About suffering" is particularly pronounced, as it begins the poem and receives two stresses in a row.

Additionally, the speaker uses unconventional syntax to ensure that the poem's subject ("suffering") is unmistakable, appearing at the very beginning. The complex sentence structure also gives the speaker an intellectual tone and suggests the flowery language traditionally associated with poetry, which the speaker will both embrace and reject. Further, the statement that the Old Masters are "never wrong," rather than *always right*, gives the poem a slight pessimistic bent from the get-go. It also suggests that others *have* gotten it wrong, that people have misrepresented the true human attitude towards suffering. Moreover, this initial line is concise, free of caesurae, and is end-stopped, grounding the reader and giving the speaker an air of authority.

Stresses also land on the phrases "Old Masters," "never wrong," "well they understood," and "human position," subtly calling attention to the speaker's main concerns. The poem is not simply "about suffering," but deals with art's ability to articulate human attitudes towards suffering. In general, the poem's first three lines contain a much higher concentration of stresses than the rest of the poem does, creating a powerful opening. These lines also have a greater sense of metrical regularity—with 10 syllables and five stresses a line, they are in a rough pentameter.

In lines 1-2, the consonant and assonant /er/ sound creates a growling effect:

> About suffering they were never wrong,
> The Old Masters: how well they understood

As a result, the poem's atmosphere is slightly aggressive—a sign of the brutality to come.

"Old Masters" are highly acclaimed artists who produced works before the 19th century. A few different poetic techniques highlight this phrase, which centers art as the reference point for the speaker's analysis. It is positioned at the beginning of the poem's second line and followed by a caesura, which requires the reader to pause. Additionally, it receives two stresses in a row: "Old Masters." "Old Masters" also refers to the speaker's locale—the Oldmasters Museum within the *Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique* in Brussels. Thus, for those in the know, it clarifies the poem's setting.

LINES 3-4

how it takes ...
... walking dully along;

This passage establishes two key features of the poem. First, it establishes the speaker's allusion to specific paintings, the details of which serve as examples of "how well [the Old Masters] understood" the human attitude towards suffering. And second, it establishes the speaker's cool, detached tone, which is itself indicative of that attitude.

But before any of that, the speaker emphasizes that the coming analysis is concerned with the *context* of suffering—"how it takes place." Enjambment highlights this idea, as line 3 breaks after "takes place" and has no end punctuation. Furthermore, the phrase receives two metrical stresses ("how it takes place"), and is exaggerated by assonant long /ay/ sounds: "takes place."

Line 4 kicks off the speaker's allusion to *The Census at Bethlehem*, a painting by Northern Renaissance artist Pieter Breughel the Elder. The painting depicts everyday life carrying on as the Virgin Mary, pregnant with the son of God, and her husband, Joseph, arrive in a crowded Bethlehem, where Jesus will be born. For those familiar with the painting, the allusion creates a cultural bond between the reader and the speaker. Furthermore, this moment establishes that the poem will be employing ekphrasis—a type of writing that describes a work of art. Throughout the poem, different paintings will help the speaker think through human attitudes towards suffering.

Here, skipping over Mary and Joseph, the speaker instead points to other vignettes within the painting, which show figures partaking in ordinary activities. These minute details, distinguishable only after prolonged consideration, function as evidence that people tend to go on with their lives even in moments of supposed importance. The repetition of "how," emphasized by caesurae, supports this idea—it links the speaker's narration with "how well [the Masters] understood" suffering's "human position." Similarly, line 4 ends on "along," which rhymes with "they were never wrong" from line 2. Both these moments link the poem's imagery with the Old Masters' understanding.

Line 4 is also much longer than the three proceeding lines, each of which contain 10 syllables, while line 4 contains 22. Additionally, unlike the preceding lines, it contains no spondees (stressed-stressed):

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

Here, unlike lines 1-3, at least one unstressed syllable separates each stress, resulting in a cadence that rises and falls repeatedly. Thus, this line's monotonous rhythm, paired with its length, makes it seem to drone on, matching the humdrum activity it describes. Moreover, the speaker's detailed account of the painting features polysyndeton. The abundance of conjunctions (specifically, "or") expands the line further and contributes to its repetitiveness.

The speaker's casual, detached attitude begins to take shape in this passage, as reflected in the nonchalant cadence of the painting's description. To this point, the speaker states that suffering "takes place / While someone else is eating or…" The phrase "someone else" implies that there is another figure who is in pain, but fails to acknowledge that person directly. By speaking in this way, the speaker overlooks human suffering, much like the townspeople described.

Finally, unlike much of the poem, lines 3-4 create a melodic atmosphere. In addition to the assonant long /ay/ sounds mentioned above, notice the soft sibilance and soothing consonant /l/ sounds:

> … how it takes place
> While someone else is eating or opening a window or
> just walking dully along;

The repeating, gentle sounds soften the atmosphere as the speaker describes humdrum daily life. This laid-back mood is consistent with the townspeople's attitude, which is in turn reflected in the speaker's unbothered tone.

LINES 5-8

How, when the …

… of the wood:

The next four lines continue the allusion to *The Census at Bethlehem* as the speaker selectively describes its landscape. In particular, this passage juxtaposes an image of older, pious individuals, who eagerly await Christ's birth, with an image of children who are completely disinterested in the subject.

The speaker begins by describing the "the aged" using uncharacteristically vibrant language, including "reverently, passionately" and "miraculous birth." A caesura calls attention to this latter phrase. Such unexpectedly spirited terminology introduces drama into the poem's relaxed atmosphere. Additionally, after its first two feet, line 5 contains a repeating metrical pattern of trochees (stressed-unstressed):

> How, when the | aged are | rever- | ently, | passion- |
> ately | waiting

The strong and regular rhythm of this line suggests both the faith and passion of the "aged," who await Christ's birth. Further, line 5 breaks on "passionately waiting," its enjambment creating anticipation as the audience must read on to learn the object of these figures' enthusiasm.

Several brief examples of assonance also occur in lines 5-6, particularly among short /e/, short /a/, and long /a/ sounds:

> How, when the aged are reverently, passionately
> waiting
> For the miraculous birth …

As elsewhere in the stanza, consonant /r/ and /n/ sounds are also present, but the condensed cluster of various assonant sounds is unique to this passage. These overlapping chains of sounds encourage a smooth flow from one phrase into the next, heightening the momentum.

However, all of that intensity dissipates when the speaker turns towards the "Children who did not specially want it to happen, skating / On a pond at the edge of the wood." The absolute ordinariness of the scene and carefree disposition of the children subvert the dramatic atmosphere, which dissipates just as quickly as it came together. Indeed, the speaker appears to assume juvenile language, dropping the initial "e" in "especially." Meanwhile, as a result of juxtaposition, the children come across as exceedingly disinterested.

The description of the children contains a brief metrical regularity in the form of anapests (unstressed-unstressed-stressed):

> On a pond | at the edge | of the wood:

In effect, the meter actually creates a repetitive rising and falling rhythm that is quite monotonous. Similarly, the

assonance of long, soft /ah/ sounds within "On a pond," is quite gentle and calming.

As lines 5 and 7 are nearly identical in length and only separated by one line, the end rhyme between "waiting" and "skating" is very clear, creating one of the most obvious examples within the poem. By linking these two words, this rhyme encourages comparison between old and young, reinforcing the poem's juxtaposition. The speaker's references to age and youth play up the children's obliviousness and the believers' longstanding commitment.

As the passage that follows (lines 9-13) reminds readers, Jesus's birth was followed by the massacre of all male children under two. So, this moment could also be interpreted as an omen that those who might be attentive to imminent suffering will pass on before it arrives, leaving behind ignorant generations.

The juxtaposition that pervades this passage drives home the speaker's point that, even when there is a group that is attentive to (impending) suffering, "there always must be" another, which could not care less. In other words, juxtaposition strengthens the speaker's claim that indifference to suffering is universal. To this end, "how" is again repeated in line 5, as it is in lines 2 ("how well they understood") and 3 ("how it takes place"), as a form of anaphora. Similarly, the word that concludes this passage, "wood," rhymes with "understood" in line 2. Thus, anaphora and rhyme tie the speaker's analysis together by providing two specific examples of the Masters' keen understanding of the human attitude towards suffering.

LINES 9-13

They never forgot ...
... on a tree.

Beginning in line 9, the speaker's gaze shifts to a different Breughel painting, *The Massacre of the Innocents* (the version at the Oldmasters Museum is actually a copy by Breughel's son, Pieter Breughel the Younger). While *The Census at Bethlehem* depicts the village before Christ's birth, here, the speaker alludes to a painting that reveals its aftermath. According to the Bible's New Testament, Herod the Great, then King of Judea, received news that a savior was born and felt that his power was under threat. He sent soldiers to Bethlehem and its neighboring villages to execute all boys under the age of two. The children massacred are therefore considered the first Christian martyrs.

The speaker uses a few stylistic techniques to subtly signal that these lines refer to a new painting. First, with the exception of lines 6 and 13, the stanza's end rhymes are contained within two separate networks, which correspond with the paintings: lines 1-8 rhyme ABCADEDB, and lines 9-13 rhyme FGFGE.

Furthermore, at 5 syllables, line 9 is by far the shortest of the stanza, providing a visual demarcation of the poem's shift. The speaker also begins this passage with a reference back to the Old Masters ("They never forgot"), indicating that, no matter his subject, Breughel was always sure to depict nearby violence. Furthermore, these lines see a reemergence of consonant /r/ sounds:

> They never forgot
> That even the dreadful martyrdom must run its course

This consonance creates a harsh growling effect and contributes to the shift in mood.

The juxtaposition of the chaotic, violent site of the massacre with the "pond at the edge of the wood" demonstrates that peaceful, pleasant backdrops always exist within a wider landscape—one that also contains horrific violence. The end rhyme between "they never forgot" and "some untidy spot" reinforces the Old Masters' expertise in the illumination of this reality. Furthermore, the speaker's decision to call attention to two scenes centered around children grimly reinforces the disparity between the experiences of those who suffer and those whose life goes on. It also suggests that individuals fall into one camp or the other arbitrarily.

The speaker's relaxed, detached tone is particularly pronounced in these lines, which feature two examples of understatement—the massacre is referred to as "dreadful martyrdom [that] must run its course," and the site of that massacre is reduced to "some untidy spot." The speaker's incredibly oblique description of the mass execution of young children greatly downplays the violence that the painting depicts. Likewise, the speaker skims over images of caretakers clutching their babies, townspeople begging for mercy, and soldiers ransacking the town. The backdrop thus becomes "untidy"—slightly disorderly.

The speaker's gaze lands instead on the animals at the image's perimeter. While narrating this brutal scene, the speaker's tone is so casual, it verges on the humorous—a horse scratches its derrière and the dogs are, well, "doggy." By focusing on these images rather than people, the speaker suggests that humans' attitude towards observed suffering is akin to the attitude of animals. Furthermore, the speaker states that the violence "must run its course," suggesting that anguish is commonplace and will inevitably unfold regardless of how peaceful a place used to be. The speaker's use of the word "must" suggests confidence in this as a universal truth, and perhaps also a sense of resignation.

Line 12 is considerably lengthier than those that surround it and is also enjambed, appearing to linger out in space. Further, it contains no caesurae and thus seems to ramble on without interruption. Its meter alternates between 1 stressed syllable and 1-2 unstressed syllables:

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

The rhythm therefore rises and falls repeatedly, reinforcing the speaker's unbothered tone and mirroring the monotony of the animals' actions.

The speaker describes the horse as "innocent," which seemingly absolves it of any responsibility. This would suggest that all who observe violence but do not actively partake—or intervene—are "innocent." In this way, the speaker exhibits sympathy for the bystanders described throughout the poem, implying that suffering is so commonplace that no one should be indicted for carrying on with their life.

Still, the speaker specifies that the horse belongs to a soldier, who is called "the torturer," briefly acknowledging the brutality that transpires. Thus, in one breath, the speaker announces the horse's innocence and calls it into question. Further, "horse" rhymes with "must run its course," while "tree" (the horse's preferred scratching implement) rhymes with "there always must be." So, through rhyme, the speaker links the horse with inescapable suffering. At the same time, though, the speaker absolves that horse of responsibility.

As the stanza ends, the reader suddenly realizes that the whole stanza has been one extended sentence. So, the speaker terminates both the poem's first stanza and its first sentence with this image. As such, the audience is left wondering to what degree the horse—and by extension, all bystanders—are innocent.

LINES 14-17

> *In Breughel's Icarus, ...*
> *... an important failure;*

The poem's second and final stanza describes yet another painting (which was attributed to Breughel the Elder at the time but is most likely an early copy of his original), namely *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*. The speaker's narration of the image alludes to a famous story from classical Greek mythology: a boy named Icarus is trapped in a tower on the island of Crete with his father, Daedalus, who is a skilled inventor. Daedalus fashions two pairs of wings out of feathers, wax, and thread so that the two can escape captivity. Icarus fails to heed his father's warnings and flies close to the sun, which melts his wings. Icarus plummets into the ocean and drowns.

The speaker refers to this painting much more directly than the others, calling it "Breughel's Icarus." The description of this painting is also contained within its own stanza, which suggests that this work is particularly pertinent to the speaker's analysis. The stanza break also helps signal that this story is distinct from the biblical narrative that precedes it. Furthermore, the speaker's references to figures in the painting are readily apparent, while the vignettes picked out earlier take some time to identify and, even then, it is impossible to identify the exact individuals that the speaker points to.

Still, the speaker uses highly generalized language to describe the violence pictured in Breughel's painting. The speaker describes how "everything turns away / Quite leisurely from the disaster." The dryness of tone here, and the oblique way that the speaker refers to Icarus's death, is an example of understatement.

The speaker draws the reader into the stanza with /r/ consonance that also appears in the opening of stanza 1:

> In Breughel's Icarus, for instance: how everything turns away
> Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may
> Have heard the splash

Consonant /r/ sounds create a growling effect, resulting in a slightly harsh, aggressive atmosphere.

The reappearance of the word "how," which strings together many earlier descriptions of indifference, indicates that the speaker continues down the same line of thinking. Working in tandem with enjambment and caesura, the repetition of "how" also highlights the speaker's statement that "everything turns away / Quite leisurely from the disaster"—a sweeping generalization that succinctly encapsulates the speaker's argument. The enjambed line break following "turns away" literally causes an immediate turn from the end of one line to the beginning of the next. Fittingly, line 15 introduces "the ploughman," who cultivates land by turning it over, in addition to turning the plow around at either end of the plot to create new furrows, as pictured in the painting's foreground.

The speaker posits that "the ploughman may / Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry" of the fallen Icarus. So, although the speaker describes a painting, this account of Icarus's death centers around sound rather than sight, emphasized by the onomatopoeic "splash." Thus, once again, the speaker fails to directly address the violence the paintings portray, much like the figures pictured. Icarus's cry probably escaped him before he hit the water, but it is placed after the "splash." The two noises—"splash" and "cry"—which really reference the same image, are made interchangeable via asyndeton, placing them side-by-side without a conjunction.

Although the speaker says that "the ploughman may / Have" witnessed Icarus's death, the speaker says without hesitation that "for him it was not an important failure." Thus, the speaker suggests that the ploughman's awareness of suffering does not impact his behavior. Consonant /n/ and hard /t/ sounds call attention to the phrase "not an important," which comes across as harsh. This indifferent bystander is alert to the violence unfolding around him and still "turns away."

LINES 17-21

> *the sun shone ...*

... sailed calmly on.

As the poem draws to a close, the speaker draws the reader's attention to additional images within *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*, beginning with the sun, which shines down on the drowning Icarus. The speaker specifies that the sun "had to" do so, indicating that life always goes on as tragedies unfold. Two stresses land on "had to" calling attention to this inevitability, which also implies resignation and a lack of choice—people *have to* carry on with their lives in the face of human suffering, because it is omnipresent.

In general, this image receives a great deal of metrical stress, especially because it features spondees (stressed-stressed), which were formerly confined to the poem's first three lines:

> ... the sun shone
> As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green
> Water ...

The meter highlights Icarus's "white legs," which are engulfed by "green / Water." This juxtaposition of white legs and green water creates a vivid image, which serves as the speaker's only true description of the violence pictured in the painting. The sight of Icarus's thrashing limbs provides a narrow glimpse of his anguish as he vanishes from view altogether.

Further, while the sun illuminates Icarus's suffering, it does so passively and only at a point in which his death is inevitable, having been disregarded by the episode's bystanders. The enjambment that occurs in this passage, coupled with line 18's the lack of caesurae, yields a long, uninterrupted illustration that sprawls out over three lines. As a result, the sun seems to shine continually, simply carrying out its routine duty.

The speaker goes on to give an account of an "expensive delicate ship that must have seen" Icarus die, and yet "sailed calmly on." The speaker's characterization of the ship is an example of personification. Readers certainly understand that people *on board* the ship—and not the ship itself—witness his death and do not intervene (this moment thus can also be thought of as metonymy). But by identifying the ship as the actant, the speaker evokes the stoicism associated with grand vessels, which are built to glide effortlessly through rough waters.

These connotations function as a point of comparison between the image of the ship and that of Icarus's thrashing body—although the ship is "delicate" it "sails calmly" through the ocean, while Icarus is not so fortunate. Thus, personification reinforces yet another juxtaposition. In this case, the serene ship is juxtaposed with the drowning Icarus, which the speaker calls "Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky." This comparison drives home the speaker's point that even when people witness suffering—and remarkable suffering, at that—they tend not to act.

This moment marks an escalation from figures who are unaware of the human anguish taking place around them, to one who might be aware, and then to one who is definitely aware. Even so, all of the bystanders respond in the same manner, continuing about their daily lives. Furthermore, with the addition of the sun and the ship, the speaker has now spotlighted humans, animals, the natural world, and inanimate objects as equally dismissive of human suffering.

Like earlier examples of understatement, the speaker's description of Icarus's downfall as "something amazing" avoids direct acknowledgment of its violence, maintaining the speaker's cool detachment. It also downplays the significance of this episode, which is usually highly dramatized.

Finally, the poem's last several words receive metrical stress, giving them rhythmic force: "sailed calmly on." Thus, the reader is left with a strong image of the apathy towards human suffering that the poem communicates.

POETIC DEVICES

ALLUSION

The speaker makes three allusions over the course of the poem, each of which corresponds with a painting hanging in the *Musées des Beaux Arts*. After stating that the Old Masters have a keen understanding of humans' attitude towards the pain of others, the speaker begins to describe details of these paintings, citing them as evidence. The speaker points to various bystanders of well-known episodes of suffering—namely the birth of Christ and the fall of Icarus. Rather than play up these paintings' historical and cultural importance or the violent nature of the suffering that takes place, the speaker adopts a cool tone, surveying the paintings and identifying individual vignettes of everyday life.

The allusions reference paintings attributed (at the time) to Pieter Breughel the Elder, one of the foremost figures of the Northern Renaissance—an artistic movement that took place in the Netherlands during the 16th century. The movement took inspiration from the Italian Renaissance, particularly its interest in antiquity and natural landscapes, as well as its use of perspective and realism, all of which figure into the paintings described.

However, due to the Protestant Reformation, artists of Northern Renaissance were disillusioned with the highly idealized imagery associated with the Catholic Church. Images of the Northern Renaissance are therefore more representative of daily life and resist classical Greek and Roman motifs, in favor of existing gothic styles (which are more bleakly realistic than beautifully idealized). Furthermore, with the explosion of printmaking, images were newly available to

the lower classes, and the paintings themselves followed suit—representative of and accessible to the masses.

Thus, it's easy to see how this movement—which champions realistic depictions of everyday life and resists the idealization of antiquity—is consistent with the speaker's message. Breughel the Elder himself is most known for his banal treatment of mythology, which downplays the heroes of popular narratives, instead focusing on the everyday life unfolding around them. He also pioneered sprawling landscapes that feature masses of people, clustered into smaller vignettes that are set side-by-side. Scanning Breughel's paintings, the speaker identifies these vignettes, placing them next to one another on the page as a means of comparison. In this way, the speaker draws heavily from Breughel's work and the themes of the Northern Renaissance more broadly.

More specifically, lines 4-8 describe *The Census at Bethlehem*, which depicts a scene from the Bible's New Testament. As the nativity story goes, a virgin named Mary is pregnant with the son of God, conceived through his Holy Spirit. She and her husband, Joseph, travel to his hometown of Bethlehem, as they are required to do because a census has been ordered. The town is therefore very crowded, so the family stays in a humble manger, where Jesus Christ is born. In the center of the painting, Mary rides a donkey and wears a blue veil, with Joseph leading, but the speaker does not focus on this image. Instead, attention is drawn to individual figures, who, if one looks closely, can be spotted opening windows, huddling in a tavern-like structure, skating on a pond, and so on.

The remainder of the stanza alludes to *The Massacre of the Innocents*, continuing the story—Herod, King of Judea, hears that a savior has been born and feels that his power is under threat. Thus, he orders his soldiers to slaughter all boys under two in Bethlehem's vicinity. Again, the speaker downplays the significance of this moment, calling attention to the oblivious animals pictured.

Finally, the poem's second stanza directly refers to Breughel's painting *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*, in turn alluding to the Greek myth of Icarus. The myth tells of a boy named Icarus, trapped in a tower with his father, Daedalus, who fashions two pairs of wings made of feathers, wax, and string so that they can escape. Icarus disregards his father's warnings and flies too close to the sun, which melts his wings, and Icarus drowns. The speaker refers to this incident as "the disaster" and mentions "the splash, the forsaken cry" that must have resulted from his fall. While the speaker does introduce mild images of Icarus's suffering—see "white legs disappearing" and "a boy falling out of the sky"—emphasis remains on the townspeople who witness his death and simply go on with their day.

On its most basic level, allusion in the poem functions as a tool for pinpointing specific, concrete images that illustrate the speaker's point. As such, it also treats art as the stimulus for the speaker's analysis, which explores the relationship between art and reality. For those familiar with the *Musées* or the paintings, these allusions build out the poem's museum setting, especially as the three paintings mentioned really did hang together in the same gallery.

In this way, allusion builds a sense of kinship between the speaker and the reader because both are clued-in to these oblique cultural references. Even for those *not* familiar with the paintings, the first two allusions allow the speaker to discuss the Old Masters more generally. As the speaker moves from the general to the specific, it becomes clear that human indifference to suffering is a *universal* truth—consistent across time and place.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- Lines 4-8
- Lines 10-13
- Lines 14-21

ASSONANCE

Assonance appears very briefly in several places throughout the poem, often in conjunction with consonance. In general, the echoing vowel sounds shape the poem's mood and call attention to keywords. In the poem's first lines, assonant /e/ sounds appear alongside consonant /r/ sounds, exaggerating their growling effect:

> About suffering they were never wrong,
> The Old Masters: how well they understood

The resulting /er/ pair that pervades the poem's opening gives it an intense, aggressive quality, foretelling its dark subject matter. The sonic effect also slows readers down, drawing them in.

Assonance appears again at the end of line 3, which reads, "how it takes place." Here, assonant /a/ sounds occur on syllables that receive stress, and they therefore exaggerate the meter. By placing additional force behind the phrase "takes place," assonance clarifies that the speaker is concerned with the *context* in which suffering occurs.

There is a great deal of assonance in lines 5-6, particularly among long /ay/, short /e/, and short /a/ sounds, as well /er/ sounds (which combine assonance and consonance):

> How, when the aged are reverently, passionately
> waiting
> For the miraculous birth, there always must be

These fleeting moments of assonance give the lines a musical quality, creating a heartening, hopeful mood as the speaker describes a group of pious believers patiently awaiting their

savior. This image is juxtaposed with that of carefree children who are unmoved by Christ's birth and the resulting suffering. As such, assonance heightens the contrast between the two images, playing up the claim that "there always must be" bystanders who are indifferent to the anguish unfolding around them.

Line 13 contains short /i/ sound and a type of short /e/ sound called a schwa (/ə/), the two of which are almost indistinguishable:

> Scratches its innocent behind on a tree.

Line 19 features these sounds as well, plus the regular short /e/ sound, within the noun phrase, "expensive delicate ship." Both lines describe what are supposed to be innocuous, even pleasant images—the horse is "innocent," and the ship is "delicate." However, the short vowel sounds are abrupt and unpleasant to the ear, lending a disagreeable, percussive quality to the phrases in which they appear. As a result, the assonance subtly signals that the images are not as they seem. Indeed, both represent figures that are unbothered by the violence they witness.

Typically, assonance creates smooth, melodious choruses of sound, and that is the case in a few places—see "As it had" in line 18 and "calmly on" in line 21. However, most examples of assonance within this poem actually exaggerate the bleakness of its content. As such, the poem both embraces and resists musicality—one of the many ways in which the speaker blends poetic and everyday language and explores the relationship between art and life.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "About," "suffering," "were," "never"
- **Line 2:** "Masters," "how," "understood"
- **Line 3:** "Its," "position," "it," "takes," "place"
- **Line 4:** "eating," "opening," "window," "just," "walking," "dully," "along"
- **Line 5:** "when," "aged," "reverently," "passionately," "waiting"
- **Line 6:** "miraculous," "birth," "there," "always"
- **Line 7:** "Children," "did," "not," "want," "it"
- **Line 8:** "On," "pond," "edge"
- **Line 9:** "never," "forgot"
- **Line 10:** "martyrdom," "must," "run," "course"
- **Line 11:** "Anyhow," "corner," "some," "untidy," "spot"
- **Line 12:** "Where," "dogs," "on," "their," "doggy," "torturer's," "horse"
- **Line 13:** "Scratches," "its," "innocent," "behind"
- **Line 14:** "In," "Icarus," "instance," "everything"
- **Line 15:** "leisurely," "disaster," "may"
- **Line 16:** "Have," "splash," "forsaken"
- **Line 17:** "for," "him," "it," "important," "failure"
- **Line 18:** "As," "had," "disappearing," "green"
- **Line 19:** "expensive," "delicate," "ship," "that," "have," "seen"
- **Line 20:** "Something," "amazing," "falling"
- **Line 21:** "Had," "somewhere," "to," "to," "and," "calmly," "on"

CAESURA

This poem contains several examples of caesurae, which merge clauses and fragments into long, complex sentences. The caesurae work with enjambment to control the poem's rhythm, allowing phrases to flow across line breaks, at which point they are met with carefully placed pauses. The internal punctuation is free of full stops, so the commas, colons, and semi-colons temper the poem's quick pace without breaking it completely. This results in a conversational cadence, as if the text is a record of the speaker's ideas as they come together in real time.

Caesurae also call attention to keywords. In lines 2 and 3, colons separate "The Old Masters" and "Its human position" from the rest of their lines. Thus, the colons' placement increases emphasis on these phrases, helping to establish the poem's subject—that is, the Old Masters' depictions of human attitudes towards observed suffering. These caesurae also highlight the repeated word "how," which appears after each colon, as well as in line 5, where it is followed by yet another caesura. The repeating "how" gives the poem structure and links the painters' grasp of human indifference to suffering with specific examples of its depiction.

In line 11, a comma appears after "Anyhow in a corner," dividing the line. By visually fencing the phrase into a "corner" of the page, the caesura cleverly reflects the text's meaning. And in the poem's final stanza, caesurae place images of suffering side-by-side with those of bystanders' disinterest. "The disaster," i.e. Icarus's death, appears alongside "the ploughman," who turns away. Similarly, a caesura contrasts Icarus's "important failure" and "the sun," which continues to shine on his drowning body.

Because most of this poem's lines contain caesura, those that don't appear increasingly long. Here is a look at lines 9-11:

> They never forgot
> That even the dreadful martyrdom must run its course
> Anyhow in a corner …

Paired with enjambment, the lack of caesurae results in a lengthy clause that spans three lines, uninterrupted by punctuation. It thus sprawls out leisurely, "running its course" like the massacre described.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "Masters: how"

- **Line 3:** "position: how"
- **Line 5:** "reverently, passionately"
- **Line 6:** "birth, there"
- **Line 7:** "happen, skating"
- **Line 11:** "corner, some"
- **Line 14:** "Icarus, for instance: how"
- **Line 15:** "disaster; the"
- **Line 16:** "splash, the"
- **Line 17:** "failure; the"
- **Line 19:** "Water, and"
- **Line 20:** "amazing, a"

CONSONANCE

Although relatively subtle, consonance permeates each line of this poem, shaping its mood. The most prevalent consonant sounds are /r/ and /s/, the harsh growl of the former often clashing with the soft hiss of the latter.

For instance, here's a closer look at lines 14-15:

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

The contrast between sibilance and /r/ sounds reflects the underlying tension between images of violent suffering and those of townspeople going about their day.

A similar effect occurs in lines 1-3, where sibilance takes a backseat, and /n/ and /ng/ sounds are prominent:

> About suffering they were never wrong,
> The Old Masters: how well they understood
> Its human position ...

The pervading growl of /r/ sounds lends the poem's opening an aggressive atmosphere. Meanwhile, consonant /n/ sounds bleed into the next several lines, creating sonic cohesion that eases readers into the poem—both drawing their attention and guiding them smoothly from one line into the next.

Further, as /r/ sounds fade, soft /l/ and /s/ sounds take their place in line 3:

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

These euphonic sounds flow easily, creating a lyrical, serene mood to match the relaxed scene described. Repeating assonant vowel sounds in "walking ... along" and "someone," "just," and "dully" contribute to the melodic effect. As such, consonance reflects the speaker's claim that average people go about their days untroubled by the suffering of others.

Consonance has the opposite effect in line 17, in which /n/ sounds reappear alongside hard /t/ sounds:

> But for him it was not an important failure; the sun
> shone

Both sounds coalesce in "not" and "important," both of which receive one metrical stress. Consonance draws attention to these words and places additional rhythmic force behind them. As a result, the plowman's evaluation that Icarus's death is "not ... important" comes across as exceedingly harsh. In this way, consonance manipulates the poem's mood to match the speaker's observation that people tend to turn away from the suffering of others.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- Line 1
- Line 2
- Line 3
- Line 4
- Line 5
- Line 6
- Line 7
- Line 8
- Line 9
- Line 10
- Line 11
- Line 12
- Line 13
- Line 14
- Line 15
- Line 16
- Line 17
- Line 18
- Line 19
- Line 20
- Line 21

ENJAMBMENT

This poem contains a great deal of enjambment, as most lines break in the middle of clauses and phrases. As such, enjambment allows the speaker to create subtle end rhymes, as they tend to fall on words which are not followed by a natural pause, and which are not necessarily the most interesting words in the line.

Lines 5-7 serve as a good example:

> How, when the aged are reverently, passionately
> waiting
> For the miraculous birth, there always must be
> Children ...

The end words "waiting" and "be" are much less descriptive than terms like "passionately" and "miraculous birth," so they draw less attention. Plus, because there is no end punctuation, the speaker quickly moves past these words and into the next line.

Such subtle end rhymes give a nod to formal verse but prevent the poem from assuming an overtly musical quality, which would detract from the somber mood. The poem takes on a modest, everyday quality that fits with the speaker's interest in the lives of ordinary people.

Because enjambment causes one line to run into the next, it also creates a turning effect as the speaker's attention shifts from the end of one line to the beginning of another. This repeated turning mirrors the townspeople and other figures described, who turn away from the violence unfolding around them. Indeed, line 14 ends, "everything turns away," and the enjambment allows the text to match its meaning.

Moreover, the rapid shift from line to line quickens the poem's pace. In many cases, it creates a burst of anticipation, which encourages the audience to read on. Here is a look at lines 2-4:

> The Old Masters: how well they understood
> Its human position: how it takes place
> While someone else is eating ...

In line 2, the reader learns that the Old Masters are keenly aware of some aspect of human suffering, which remains undisclosed, leaving the reader hanging. Similarly, line 3 reveals that where suffering "takes place" is of great importance, but one must read on to learn exactly where that is.

Line 5 cleverly plays with this sense of anticipation, breaking on "waiting":

> How, when the aged are reverently, passionately
> waiting

Like the pious individuals described, the reader must wait for the arrival of "the miraculous birth."

Finally, enjambment gives many lines the appearance of drifting off, so that the clauses that span them come off as exceedingly lengthy, as in lines 10-13:

> 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.

Enjambment allows this description of suffering to unfold over the course of several lines, "running its course."

The enjambment that characterizes lines 17-20 has a similar effect:

> ... 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 ...

Again, the speaker's narration of this tragic episode sprawls across several lines, going on and on, like the disinterested onlookers that carry on "leisurely" with their daily lives.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "understood / Its"
- **Lines 3-4:** "place / While"
- **Lines 5-6:** "waiting / For"
- **Lines 6-7:** "be / Children"
- **Lines 7-8:** "skating / On"
- **Lines 9-10:** "forgot / That"
- **Lines 10-11:** "course / Anyhow"
- **Lines 11-12:** "spot / Where"
- **Lines 12-13:** "horse / Scratches"
- **Lines 14-15:** "away / Quite"
- **Lines 15-16:** "may / Have"
- **Lines 17-18:** "shone / As"
- **Lines 18-19:** "green / Water"
- **Lines 19-20:** "seen / Something"

JUXTAPOSITION

The speaker employs juxtaposition primarily to contrast the intense suffering that some people experience with the lack of concern that bystanders display.

The second half of stanza 1, for example, juxtaposes a pond where children play and the "untidy spot" in which infants are murdered. By quickly shifting the setting from a quaint, familiar scene to the site of a massacre, juxtaposition emphasizes the disparity between the experiences of the two groups of children. As a result, the infants' deaths appear all the more unjust, while the carefree, playful attitude of the other children takes a sinister turn. Moreover, the murder site is referred to as "a corner" where "dreadful martyrdom must run its course / Anyhow," suggesting that the two scenes are near one another. As the children carry on with their games, this juxtaposition highlights that tragedies take place in the context of daily life.

Similarly, lines 20-21 describe "a boy falling out of the sky" and a ship that "sailed calmly on" even though it "must have seen" the boy drown. This snapshot stresses that even when people are aware of suffering, they tend to ignore it. The speaker's use of juxtaposition plays up the cruelty of this tendency by placing the two images side-by-side, which serves as an impactful

conclusion to the poem.

Lines 5-7 take a slightly different approach, contrasting devout, older people who are "reverently, passionately waiting" for the coming of Christ with "children who did not specially want it to happen." The speaker's description calls particular attention to the groups' age difference, as well as the disparity between their attitudes towards Christ's birth—it is the older folks' main concern and the least of the children's concerns. Thus, juxtaposition emphasizes the speaker's point that, even when there *are* people who are tuned-in to historic episodes of suffering, "there must always be" another group that couldn't care less. The age difference may also signal that the older folks will pass on, leaving behind an uninformed, inattentive generation.

Finally, the speaker uses juxtaposition when describing Icarus's drowning body:

> … the sun shone
> As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green
> Water …

These lines mark the poem's only direct description of the violence depicted in the paintings. It gives the reader a narrow glimpse into Icarus's tribulations, focused around the fact that he is "disappearing"—as the murky water obscures his pale body, his suffering becomes invisible. The contrast between Icarus's "white legs" and "the green water" thus creates a vivid, tragic image as the poem draws to a close.

Moreover, the juxtaposition between Icarus's death and the ship's indifference, as with all the poem's juxtapositions, has a feeling of insensitivity to it—a feeling that lingers at the poem's conclusion. This feeling contributes to the overall coolness of the speaker's subdued tone, a kind of indifference that mimics what the speaker has been trying to describe.

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- Lines 3-4
- Lines 5-8
- Lines 10-13
- Lines 15-17
- Lines 17-19
- Lines 19-21

PERSONIFICATION

This poem contains one example of personification, which occurs in its final lines:

> … 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.

The reader understands that the vessels itself cannot "see," nor can it feel concern about punctuality. Rather, it is the ship captain and crew that witness Icarus's fall and decide to carry on with their voyage. In this way, this is also an instance of metonymy, in which an object (here, a ship) is used to refer to things that are associated with it (the captain and crew).

The speaker's decision to identify the ship rather than its passengers has several possible implications. First, the painting does depict boats but not their passengers, so the speaker is staying true to the picture. Second, there is a longstanding tradition of personifying ships. Captains refer to their ships as "she" and "her," and good ships are known for being stoic—formidable vessels that are untroubled by rough seas. The fact that ships are built to cruise smoothly through turbulent waters can be seen as a reflection of the attitude represented throughout the poem, such as the townspeople whose natural inclination is to continue going about their daily lives in the face of human anguish.

Additionally, the ship is described as "expensive" and "delicate," perhaps signaling that it is not made for search and rescue. Correspondingly, the poem seems to sardonically suggest that humans who do not intervene in the suffering of others are perhaps too "delicate"—as if those with money and power don't want to sully themselves by interfering in others' suffering.

Finally, by calling out the indifference of the ship itself, the speaker places the apathetic figures described earlier on the same level as an inanimate object. Indeed, the speaker describes humans (e.g. "children"), animals (e.g. "the dogs"), and the natural world ("the sun") as unmoved by human suffering. Thus, by personifying the ship, the speaker leaves the reader with the suggestion that all of these entities show the same level of concern for suffering. Indifference is universal

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 19-21:** "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"

REPETITION

The speaker employs repetition sparingly, mostly to organize the text.

There is one example of polysyndeton, which occurs in line 4:

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

The repetition of "or" expands the sentence so that it appears to ramble on, an effect that is aided by a lack of caesurae. Furthermore, while the poem's first three lines contain

spondees (stressed-stressed), each stressed syllable in line 4 is separated by at least one unstressed syllable, yielding a rhythm that rises and falls. As a result, this line appears exceptionally repetitive and monotonous, like the day-to-day activities that it describes.

Lines 2-5 feature anaphora, as "how" begins three successive clauses:

> … 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

Anaphora draws a comparison between the phrases that follow each instance of "how." As such, repetition clearly links the Old Masters' keen understanding of humans' attitude towards suffering with two details from Breughel's paintings that demonstrate this understanding.

Furthermore, line 11 begins with "Anyhow in a corner," while line 14 ends in, "how everything turns away." Both of these lines describe episodes of suffering, towards which their onlookers show no concern. Thus, the repetition of "how" creates a string of evidence that supports the speaker's analysis.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "how"
- **Line 3:** "how"
- **Line 4:** "or," "or"
- **Line 5:** "How"
- **Line 11:** "Anyhow"
- **Line 14:** "how"

UNDERSTATEMENT

Understatement is one of the main contributors to the speaker's nonchalant tone, which mirrors the townspeople's attitude towards the suffering they observe.

While the speaker's language throughout the poem downplays the episodes of violence it references, in part by playing up the onlookers' indifference, the first true understatement appears in line 10:

> That even the dreadful martyrdom must run its course

This line alludes to Breughel's *Massacre of the Innocents*, which depicts soldiers ransacking a village with the goal of slaughtering all of its infant boys. Herod, King of Judea, felt threatened by the news that a savior had been born, so he ordered the killings to be carried out in Jesus's place of birth. The young boys who perished are widely understood to be the first Christian martyrs and as a result, they are typically lionized.

The speaker's description of this event as "the dreadful martyrdom [that] must run its course / Anyhow" characterizes it as inevitable and commonplace. Similarly, while the painting is full of chaos and discord—soldiers climbing into the windows of people's homes, mothers clutching their babies, and peasants begging for mercy—the speaker describes it as simply "untidy."

The speaker makes comparable understatements when detailing *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*, which depicts another iconic story from antiquity. The famous Greek myth tells of a boy named Icarus, whose father crafts two sets of wings out of feathers, string, and wax so that they can escape the tower in which they are trapped. Icarus doesn't heed his father's warning to keep a safe distance from the sun. So, upon flying too close to the sun, his wings melt and Icarus drowns.

The painting pictures townspeople and animals that "turn[] away/ quite leisurely" from the last trace of Icarus—his limbs, which thrash in the water as he expires. The speaker refers to his death as "the disaster" and later "something amazing." While these phrases acknowledge Icarus's suffering, there's a dryness to the speaker's tone, as if "the disaster" is nothing more than an embarrassing accident—it's "not an important failure." This understatement diminishes both Icarus's suffering and the importance of the episode.

Especially in combination with the casual language that pervades the poem, these understatements suggest that the speaker's attitude towards iconic tragedies is similar to that of the apathetic bystanders. The townspeople downplay the significance of human suffering so that they can continue on with their lives, and the speaker mimics this viewpoint—or, at the very least, displays a kind of resigned acceptance. As a result, this attitude provides further evidence that human indifference towards the suffering of others is universal and inescapable. Even the speaker, who meticulously details this phenomenon, is not immune from it.

Where Understatement appears in the poem:

- **Lines 10-11:** "the dreadful martyrdom must run its course / Anyhow in a corner, some untidy spot"
- **Line 15:** "the disaster"
- **Line 17:** "not an important failure"
- **Line 20:** "Something amazing"

VOCABULARY

Musée des Beaux Arts () - A shortened version of *Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique* or the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, a network of art museums in Brussels. The

particular museum referenced in this poem is known as the Oldmasters Museum, founded by Napolean Bonaparte in 1801.

The Old Masters (Line 2) - Celebrated European painters, who produced works before the onset of the 19th century. The speaker of this poem explores a gallery within the Oldmasters Museum, an art museum in Brussels, Belgium whose collection heavily features paintings by Belgian, Netherlandish, and Flemish artists who worked from the 15th to 18th centuries.

Position (Line 3) - Someone's attitude towards something—in this case, suffering.

Dully (Line 4) - In a bored or uninterested manner. "Dully" is an adverb form of the word "dull," meaning unexciting.

Reverently (Line 5) - In a devoted and profoundly respectful manner.

Miraculous Birth (Line 6) - The birth of Jesus Christ. In the Christian tradition, the birth of Jesus is understood as a miracle because his mother, Mary, was a virgin. Jesus is said to be the son of God, conceived through His Holy Spirit. Not unique to Christianity, miraculous births are a feature of several ancient religions.

Specially (Line 7) - For a specific, unique purpose. It is possible that the speaker is taking on the language of the children described, who might say "specially" to mean "especially," or greatly.

Wood (Line 8) - An area that is wooded, or full of trees, but smaller than a forest.

Martyrdom (Line 10) - The suffering of a person or group on the basis of their beliefs—typically religious beliefs, as this poem implies through references to Jesus's "miraculous birth." More specifically, here it refers to the massacre of male children under two, who became the first Christian martyrs.

Breughel's Icarus (Line 14) - *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*, a painting housed in the Oldmasters Museum, and which was formerly attributed to Pieter Brueghel the Elder, the foremost painter of the Flemish and Netherlandish Renaissance. The painting, likely an early copy of Brueghel's original, imagines the aftermath of a Greek myth in which a boy named Icarus plummets to his death after flying too close to the sun, melting his wax wings.

Leisurely (Line 15) - In a relaxed manner, taking one's time. The speaker uses this term to indicate that the bystanders pictured appear unbothered by Icarus's fall.

Ploughman (Line 15) - Someone who drives a plow, an agricultural device that cultivates land so that it can be planted.

Forsaken (Line 16) - Abandoned. The speaker uses this term to indicate that Icarus's cry goes unnoticed or is disregarded by the scene's onlookers.

Shone (Line 17) - Beamed down upon. "Shone" is the past tense of the verb "shine," meaning to give off light.

Amazing (Line 20) - Extremely surprising or awe-inspiring. The speaker calls Icarus's fall "something amazing" to downplay the historical significance and tragedy of the scene, matching the bystanders' attitude.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

This free verse poem is divided into two stanzas—a 13-line stanza followed by an 8-line stanza, or octave. The lines vary greatly in length, containing anywhere between 5 and 22 syllables. Furthermore, most lines are enjambed, meaning that line breaks occur in the middle of sentences and phrases. As a result, the line breaks appear arbitrary, only functioning to create end rhymes—at least at first glance. While it is true that the line breaks result in a complex web of rhymes, they also subtly give the poem additional structure and contribute to the speaker's detached, observational tone.

The stanza break marks a jump in time and place from ancient Bethlehem to Greece, going back at least a few hundred years. As a result, the break also marks a shift to a new iconography and set of references—from the biblical to the classical. This structure calls particular attention to *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*, which is also the only painting that Auden identifies by name.

Changes in line lengths reflect the speaker's shifting attention. For instance, line 4 is unusually long at 22 syllables. This line lands on the speaker's first description of a painting—townspeople going about their daily activities in *The Census at Bethlehem*. Meanwhile, line 9 introduces the speaker's description of *The Massacre of the Innocents*—"They never forgot / That even the dreadful martyrdom must run its course." The dramatic shifts in line length subtly signal that the speaker's attention is shifting to a new painting, providing a loose organizational structure.

Furthermore, each stanza is composed of one very long, syntactically complex sentence. Consequently, the poem comes across as an internal monologue prompted by the paintings—as if it's written in a stream of consciousness style, albeit a pretty organized and polished one. Plus, the long length of lines such as 4 ("While someone ... along;") and 12 ("Where the dogs ... horse"), which describe life carrying on amid historic suffering, makes them appear to drone on. Thus, the speaker's cadence mimics the bored demeanor of the figures described.

Finally, the poem's structure plays with the relationship between art and life. The poem employs the traditional devices of poetry, while at the same time it tries to disguise those devices, pretending that it's just a piece of everyday language. For instance, because of the variation in length, lines seem to

break arbitrarily, as if the poem is a hastily jotted note. However, the line breaks create end rhymes, and the beginning of each line is capitalized, bringing the reader back into the world of familiar verse form. Relatedly, the stanzas' proportions recall a sonnet—yet one that has gone significantly awry. So, the poem's form suggests how the poem is always on the verge of becoming mundane, of ceasing to be a carefully made work of art and instead becoming a part of daily life.

METER

This poem does not follow an overarching pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables, or meter. Instead, it is written in free verse. Even so, the poem uses small moments of meter to call attention to important ideas and shape the speaker's tone. In some cases, stressed syllables call attention to other sonic effects—most commonly assonance.

Here's a look at the meter that kicks off the poem's second stanza (line 14):

> In Breughel's Icarus for instance

The stresses that land on "Icarus" and "instance" emphasize their alliteration, causing the reader to slow down and take notice of the important shift in time, place, and imagery that occurs at this point in the poem. Similarly, line 3 ends with a double stress on two assonant syllables—"takes place"—signaling that the speaker will focus on the *context* of the suffering to come. Furthermore, almost every line ends in a stress, reinforcing end rhymes.

Interestingly, the poem's only spondees (stressed-stressed) appear in its first three and last five lines, establishing the speaker's authority and slowing the poem's pace to create a strong opening and closing. In the poem's first lines, the stresses establish its subject—the poem is "about suffering" (line 1) and where it "takes place," (line 3) as communicated by the "Old Masters" (line 2)

Unlike the first three lines, line 4 contains no spondees and therefore alternates between 1 stressed syllable and a varying number of unstressed syllables:

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

This line is also considerably longer than those that surround it, so the repetitive rises and falls create a droning cadence that emulates the monotony described. This is just one example of the meter's ability to match the speaker's tone with the unbothered demeanor of the figures depicted.

Further, lines 6 falls into a trochaic pattern (stressed-unstressed), after its first two feet:

> How, when the | aged are | rever- | ently, | passion- |
> ately | waiting

This stress pattern gives the impression of repetitive, ongoing action, captures the faithfulness of the patient believers the line describes.

There is a very high concentration of stresses in the poem's second and final stanza, including a reappearance of spondees, which primarily call attention to the image of the sun illuminating the drowning Icarus:

> ... the sun shone
> As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the
> green
> Water ...

These stresses slow the reader down and place rhythmic force behind the image. Thus, the meter calls attention to the small glimmer of violence that the painting depicts—and the fact that the sun illuminates this death only because it "had to." Another spondee lands on the poem's final words, giving them force so that the reader is left with the strong, lasting image of the ship that "sailed calmly on."

While many rhythms come and go throughout the poem, it is overall highly anapestic (unstressed-unstressed-stressed). The resulting high concentration of unstressed syllables, paired with the poem's metrical inconsistency, yields a natural, conversational cadence, with a relatively quick pace to match. So, despite the poem being in free verse, there are many brief moments of metrical regularity scattered throughout the poem. As such, its rhythms give a nod to traditional poetic forms but resist falling into them.

RHYME SCHEME

This poem does not adhere to any established, conventional rhyme scheme. Instead, end rhymes appear in a seemingly random, unexpected pattern.

The first stanza's rhyme scheme is:

> ABCADEDBFGFGE

And the second stanza's rhyme scheme is:

> AABCDDBC

Because most lines break in the middle of sentences and phrases, where there is no natural pause, and because the rhymes are often far apart, end rhymes attract minor attention on a first reading. They are often seen rather than heard, or only noticed after the fact.

So, the rhymes occur erratically and arbitrarily and fail to attract considerable attention at the time of their arrival—much like the historic episodes of suffering that the poem describes. That said, the rhyming pairs are generally closer to one another in the second stanza than they are in the first. As a result, they are more apparent, drawing notice and slowing the reader

down as the poem draws to a close. They also lend the final lines a sense of completion, as if the stanza has been neatly wrapped up.

Within the poem, there are three smaller networks of rhymes that correspond with the speaker's contemplation of three separate paintings. More specifically, lines 1-8 introduce the poem and describe *The Census at Bethlehem*, while lines 9-13 deal with *The Massacre of the Innocents*, and lines 14-21 deal with *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*. Excepting line 13, each rhyming pair occurs within the same "unit," providing structure and subtly shifting the reader's attention from one painting to the next.

Throughout the poem, rhyming pairs link the speaker's analysis with pertinent details from the paintings. For instance, the Old Masters are "never **wrong**" about human attitudes towards suffering, in that they picture someone "just walking dully **along**" as it takes place. Similarly, as an example of "how well they **understood**" this concept, one painting shows children playing "On a pond at the edge of the **wood**." Further, the speaker purports that "everything turns **away**" from suffering and indeed, "the ploughman **may**" have witnessed a death but decides to pay it no mind.

Other rhyming pairs strengthen the speaker's analysis by equalizing everyday events and episodes of immense anguish—such as "the aged … reverently, passionately waiting" the coming of Christ and "Children who did not specially want it to happen, skating." Moreover, rhyme connects the mass slaughter of infants, i.e. "the dreadful martyrdom [that] must run its course," with "the torturer's horse" scratching his rear. Overall, the rhymes help draw connections across time and space, showing the Old Masters' grasp of human indifference to suffering, as well showing the speaker's thought process.

Line 3, which reads "Its human position: how it takes place," is the only line without a rhyming pair. This makes it stand apart, encouraging further consideration. Indeed, this statement epitomizes the speaker's concern—that is, the wider context in which suffering takes place, including individuals' reactions.

SPEAKER

Very little information is revealed about the speaker over the course of the poem. Biographical details such as the speaker's age, gender, and occupation are unknown. However, the reader learns that the speaker visits an art museum, particularly the Oldmasters Museum, part of the *Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique* in Brussels, Belgium. This fact is the only thread that directly ties the speaker to the poet, as Auden traveled to Brussels and visited the museum shortly before writing this poem.

While the poem may at first read like an essay or some other explanatory piece of writing, its long, complex sentences and conversational rhythms yield a more relaxed, informal atmosphere—as if the speaker is perusing the paintings and working out an analysis in real-time. The speaker spends much of the poem pointing out specific details within the paintings that line the gallery, and the narration is therefore highly observational. The speaker's tone is also quite detached, displaying emotional distance from the suffering pictured.

In fact, the speaker only obliquely references the episodes of violence that the paintings depict. Jesus Christ's birth, for example, is called "the miraculous birth," while the mass slaughter of children is called "dreadful martyrdom" and Icarus's death is "the disaster." Such a cool, removed tone allows the poem to serve as an example of the indifference to suffering that the speaker articulates. In this way, the speaker's perspective serves as an alternative, perhaps more realistic account of historic tragedies—one that acknowledges human apathy towards those events, rather than suggesting that they have always been noticed and lionized.

SETTING

The poem takes place in the Oldmasters Museum, housed in the main building of the *Musées Royaux des Beaux Arts de Belgique* in Brussels, Belgium. The poem's title is an abridged form of the museum's name, emphasizing the poem's main focus, the "Beaux Arts," or Fine Arts. The speaker clarifies the setting by mentioning the Old Masters in line 2 and referencing specific paintings housed in the museum. The Oldmasters Museum was founded at the outset of the 19th century, but the speaker is using modern language, so it's fair to assume that the poem is set in the 20th century.

A great deal of emphasis is placed on the poem's museum setting, particularly through the title. Plus, the poem appears within the "People and Places" section of Auden's *Another Time* (1940), the poetry collection in which it appears, again drawing attention to the poem's location. By picking out details within specific paintings, the speaker constantly reminds the reader that the poem takes place in a gallery. Thus, it becomes clear that art is the driving force behind the speaker's meditations, supporting the poem's message that art reveals essential truths about the world.

By considering the vignettes highlighted throughout the poem, both the speaker and the reader become onlookers to historic events. The reader is transported into the painted landscapes, gaining insight into what it might've been like to have been a bystander during one of the incidents represented. The reader thus has firsthand encounters with indifferent spectators—both the speaker and the townspeople. Moreover, the diversity of settings—ancient Bethlehem and Jerusalem, classical Greece, and 20th century Belgium—indicates that human apathy towards the suffering of others is a universal

phenomena, consistent across time and place.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

One of Auden's most famous poems, "Musée des Beaux Arts" first appeared in modernist magazine *New Writing* in its Spring 1939 issue, and was later collected in Auden's book *Another Time*, published in 1940. It might be seen as a precursor for his Pulitzer Prize-winning long poem *The Age of Anxiety* (1948); both works are concerned with the ways in which people attempt to diffuse their intense anxieties about the world around them—especially its moral and political challenges. Like "Musée des Beaux Arts," *The Age of Anxiety* takes a satirical tone towards this subject.

There is a tendency amongst critics to see Auden's work in two halves—those works composed before he emigrated to the United States, and those composed after. While Auden's oeuvre as a whole is highly concerned with morality, his earlier work generally places such issues in political and psychological contexts, while his later work focuses on religion and philosophy. This puts "Musée des Beaux Arts" in a slippery position, as it was composed in the weeks leading up to his move to America. The poem might thus be described as a mark of Auden's gradual transition. Its moral concerns are prominently social and political in nature, though religious imagery is present, if also downplayed.

Auden's influence and place in English poetry can be hard to pin down, as he was renowned for his ability to compose poems in an incredibly broad variety forms—long and short, traditional and radical, obscure and popular. Still, his work can be seen as a reaction against Romanticism, and "Musée des Beaux Arts" is an apt example. Auden prized logical analyses and believed there are universal patterns that govern the world—truths that are intelligible, commonplace, and worthy of exploration.

"Musée des Beaux Arts" isn't Auden's only ekphrastic poem—that is, a poem that describes a work of art. His "Shield of Achilles," first published in 1952, is inspired by Homer's *Iliad* and is another of his most famous works. Relatedly, the modernist William Carlos Williams ("The Red Wheelbarrow") published a poem called "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus" about two decades after Auden's poem on the subject. Its speaker takes a similar perspective to that of Auden's, using a starkly different style.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Auden composed "Musée des Beaux Arts" in December of 1938, less than a year before World War II would begin. During this time, geopolitical tensions mounted as various conflicts broke out around the world, illuminating divisions amongst the political ideologies of different world powers.

Auden had witnessed two such conflicts shortly before writing this poem. He had recently spent six months in China during the Second Sino-Japanese War, a brutal conflict that has been cited as a key instigator of World War II. Like many other young leftists, Auden also traveled to Spain during the Spanish Civil War to support the Republic (see "Spain," one of his most celebrated poems).

Earlier in 1938, Austria was annexed by Nazi Germany, which was becoming increasingly militarized. As global frictions intensified, the outbreak of a major conflict seemed inevitable to Auden. In fact, he immigrated to the United States partly for this reason in the month after "Musée des Beaux Arts" was written.

Auden's firsthand experience as a witness to historic episodes of violence is felt in this poem, as are his anxieties about war and its moral implications. Indeed, upon observing immense suffering, the poem's speaker fixates on "its human position"—the tendency of people to turn away and life to carry on.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Brueghel and Auden — A blog post from Harper's Magazine provides a more detailed look at the paintings described, in the context of Auden's poem. (https://harpers.org/blog/2008/11/audens-musee-des-beaux-arts/)
- Biography of Auden — A detailed account of Auden's life and work from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/w-h-auden)
- Analysis of "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus" — A close, multi-media analysis of Brueghel's famous painting from Google Arts and Culture. (https://artsandculture.google.com/exhibit/landscape-with-the-fall-of-icarus-%C2%A0-royal-museums-of-fine-arts-of-belgium/MgIyXpmuNdcLJg?hl=en)
- Archival Auden Material — Scans of primary sources related to Auden's work, including letters, photographs, and books that are relevant to the poem. (https://www.bl.uk/collection-items?related_to=c56690a6-a16d-4ff7-96c1-351350ad9c3c)
- The Story of Icarus — A retelling of the famous Greek myth from TED-Ed. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3s2QPQnuaGk)
- Pieter Breughel the Elder — A broad overview of the painter's works, including a discussion of Landscape with the Fall of Icarus. (https://www.theartstory.org/artist/bruegel-the-elder-pieter/)

- Auden Reads "Musée des Beaux Arts" — Listen to a recording of the author reading the poem. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G4wq7Wswlq4)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER W. H. AUDEN POEMS

- Funeral Blues (Stop all the clocks)
- Refugee Blues

HOW TO CITE

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