Landscape with the Fall of Icarus

SUMMARY

Bruegel's painting shows that it was spring when Icarus fell and died. At the time, a farmer was working the fields. All the human activity nearby was frantic and lively, taking place close to the shoreline. People were wrapped up with their own lives, and sweating in the same sun that melted the wax holding together Icarus's wings. An insignificant event occurred off the coast—there was a splash that nobody noticed. This was the sound of Icarus hitting the water and dying.

THEMES

LIFE, SUFFERING, AND PERSPECTIVE

"Landscape with the Fall of Icarus" is a poem written about a 16th-century painting by Pieter Bruegel the Elder, which, as the name suggests, was inspired by the Greek myth of Icarus. The poem makes the point that the significance of suffering and tragedy depends upon perspective. No matter what terrible event might happen to an individual, the poem implies, the rest of the world will keep turning. Basically, life goes on.

In the original myth, Icarus is a young man who escapes captivity by flying with a pair of artificial wings made for him by his father, the great craftsman Daedalus. His father warns him not to fly too close to the sun, but Icarus does so anyway. The wax holding his wings together then melts from the sun's heat, sending Icarus plummeting to his death.

Like most Greek tragedy, the myth seems epic, profound, and, above all, *meaningful*. In other words, it's a story worthy of people's attention, a tragedy with a purpose that contains a lesson about youthful arrogance. But here, in the poem, Icarus's death is "quite unnoticed."

In fact, the majority of this short poem does not discuss Icarus's death at all, focusing instead on nearby activity. A farmer plows his field, for example, getting on with the economic work that life demands of him. There's no mention of whether he even sees Icarus.

Further afield, a whole coastal community bustles with life—what Williams calls "the whole pageantry / of the year." While "pageantry" here doesn't refer to an actual parade or ceremony, it does speak to the way that most people's attention is called *elsewhere*. Icarus may be dead, but his death as depicted here means very little to the rest of this world. Tragedy, then, is basically *swallowed* up by the continuation of everyday life.

Think about how, for example, a funeral procession to a cemetery will probably be followed by a row of cars full of people just trying to go about the business of their day. Similarly, the hustle of real life (as depicted in the poem and the painting) provides little time for dwelling on other people's tragedy. That's why the "pageantry / of the year," by which Williams's means the entirety of humanity's performance, is concerned not with Icarus, but with "itself."

Finally, it's worth noting how the poem is bookended by matter-of-fact reports of what happened. Both the first and last stanza state the entirety of Icarus's story—which, in other versions, is full of drama, emotion, and significance—in as few spare words. The death happens, but barely.

The fall is deliberately presented as a blink-and-you'll miss-it moment, described as a mere "splash." And with that, the poem ends, and the reader's attention—like the attention of the others referenced in the poem—moves on. Like the spring season in which the poem is set, life continues at full speed, barely registering whatever tragedy has recently come to pass.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-21

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-3

According to Brueghel ...
... it was spring

"Landscape with the Fall of Icarus" begins by making it clear that the poem is a work of ekphrasis—a form of literature in which a writer describes and reflects upon a work of visual art. This poem is inspired by (and takes its title from) a painting attributed to the 16th-century Dutch master, Pieter Bruegel the Elder. This poem is part of a sequence of 10 poems all based on Bruegel works. Both the poem'a title and the opening line, then, are part of the poem's overall allusion to the painter of the original work. (As this is an ekphrastic poem, readers should check out the painting it's based on to understand what's happening here!)

The reference to Bruegel is only the first layer in the poem's use of allusion. While the poem overall alludes to the painting, the painting *itself* alludes to the Greek myth of Icarus and Daedalus—and a brief understanding of that myth is necessary before looking at the poem in greater detail.

In the original myth, the young Icarus escapes captivity by flying with a pair of artificial wings made for him by his father,

Daedalus. In spite of his father's warnings, Icarus flies too close to the sun. This melts the wax holding his wings together, and Icarus falls to his death.

The original myth, then, is a kind of fable that warns against excessive hubris (pride and arrogance). Both the painting and the poem play with the idea that, unless people experience something first-hand, they are unlikely to find profound lessons in the suffering of others—they are simply too busy leading their own lives. That's why the poem and painting are title "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus," and not simply "The Fall of Icarus."

The opening stanza establishes the thread between the different allusions, and recognizes the authority of Bruegel, who is generally considered one of the most important painters of his era (the Dutch and Flemish Renaissance). Though the poem is, of course, not *by* Bruegel, the speaker sets out from the start that what happens in the poem is also what happened "according to Bruegel."

The first tercet (three-line stanza) sets the scene, achieved entirely by one seasonal word: "spring." Even with this one word, the poem sets up a kind of tension between life—the renewal and growth of springtime—and death in the figure of Icarus.

The poem is written in free verse, but there is an interesting metrical effect in the opening:

> According to Brueghel
> when Icarus fell

Brueghel is pronounced with stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable. The second line picks up on the sound of the artist's name, rhyming "-ghel" with "fell" (though given that the "-ghel" in "Brueghel" isn't stressed, the rhyme is subtle). Note above, however, how "fell" takes on a heavy stress after the unstressed "-us" in "Icarus," meaning that, even in the seeming simplicity of the opening lines, the poem represents the myth in miniature. The heaviness of that stressed beat on "fell" subtly reflects the way that gravity brings Icarus crashing down to earth. The lack of punctuation and continual enjambment—both characteristic of Williams's poetry—also give visual representation the fall, the poem crashing down the page as each line gives way rapidly to the next.

LINES 4-5

a farmer was ...
... his field

Here the reader starts to learn what was going on nearby at the time of Icarus's deadly fall. The farmer figure is, quite intentionally, nothing out of the ordinary. It's springtime, an important point in the year for agriculture, and accordingly the farmer has plenty of work to do.

The farmer is, in a weird way, present at Icarus's death—this great, momentous event in mythology—but he most likely doesn't notice anything. Already, then, the poem is getting to the heart of its main idea: that what people deem significant depends on perspective.

Icarus's death is undoubtedly tragic, but for the farmer, who is neither literally nor emotionally close to Icarus, it means very little. This seems to both heighten and undermine the tragedy of Icarus's death. There is something desperately sad about the way it goes unnoticed, but the poem also makes the point that, in the grand scheme of things, Icarus's death is no big deal.

Notice how the alliteration between "farmer" and "field" conceptually links the man with his work. He is utterly preoccupied, and with good reason—he doesn't have time to consider the meaning of Icarus's death. The possessive "his" also suggests a sense of ownership, perhaps, even pride, in the farmer's character. Perhaps he doesn't own the field himself, but his work gives him purpose and meaning, and, of course, the means by which to survive.

LINES 6-8

the whole pageantry ...
... awake tingling

Line 6 ("the whole pageantry") begins a new sentence, though there is no punctuation to suggest this. It also marks a shift from language that is literal and down-to-earth to the poem's more figurative, metaphorical section.

It's not yet clear what "the whole pageantry" is, though the bold alliteration between "ploughing" and "pageantry" hints that this "pageantry" is where most of the human attention in the poem is directed—as opposed to towards the fall of Icarus.

Lines 7 to 12 ("of the year was [...] with itself") explain and justify the poem's most unusual word, "pageantry." Pageantry is an elaborate display or ceremony, often in the form of a colorful parade complete with flags, music, and movement. This is a metaphor for the hive of activity that is taking place on the coast near to the site of Icarus's fall.

Icarus dies near to a coastal town, making it all the more interesting that his fall goes unnoticed. Then again, it's not especially remarkable that this happens, given that everyone in that town is busy with their own lives. Spring seems to have given the town a renewed sense of vigor and purpose, and, even though the poem doesn't zoom in on any actual people, it does give the impression that it's a hectic environment.

Everyone is engaged in their own meaning-making—their own life's pageantry—and doesn't have time to notice, let alone reflect upon, Icarus's death. The use of the word "pageantry" also feels a bit critical and dismissive on the speaker's part, suggesting that the townspeople's lives are all mere performances (ones that distract them from the presence of death, no less).

The metaphor—"the whole pageantry of the year"—is also personified by the use of "tingling" in line 8. Think about how the sensation of tingling is so intimately linked to sensory feeling, to being alive. It's not a grandiose, significant sensation, but one that is an unmistakable sign of life. The word is also linked with excitement for the future, as in "tingling with anticipation." In being "awake" and "tingling," the coastal town offers a stark contrast to the lifelessness of Icarus.

LINES 9-12

near ...
... with itself

Lines 9 and 10 ("near [...] sea") make it clear that this is a coastal environment. Grammatically speaking, the subject here is still "the whole pageantry / of the year"—all this human activity is happening "near" the water.

The placement of "near" entirely on its own line signals that it's an important word. The poem, like the painting, clearly implies that the meaning of a particular event depends on an individual's proximity to it—how near or far they, both literally and emotionally.

For Icarus's father, Daedalus, the death of Icarus is one of the most significant events in his life because Icarus his son. But for the others in the town with no connection to Icarus, or even knowledge of his death, it means nothing. Think about the way an accident can occur on a highway yet cars will just keep driving past. "The edge of the sea" has a similar effect. Icarus's death occurs on a kind of border between significance and insignificance, and most people live on the latter side.

Lines 11 and 12 ("concerned / with itself") are a little ambiguous. It's not totally clear whether "concerned with itself" applies still to the "pageantry / of the year" or to "the sea." Most likely, "itself" maintains the same grammatical subject (that is, "pageantry / of the year") because of the mention of "sweating" in the next stanza (which is much more likely to apply to the society on the shore rather than the water in sea).

Either way, these lines signal that neither the people in the town nor the sea itself are "concerned" with Icarus's death. Both the town and the sea represent the harsh truth that life, quite simply, goes on. People in the town go about their daily business, and the sea's waves keep pushing and pulling at the shore.

LINES 13-15

sweating in the ...
... the wings' wax

In the fifth stanza, the poem links what's happening on the shore with what happened to Icarus. Both the people in the coastal town and Icarus himself live (or die) under the same sun. But while that sun makes the town's "pageantry"—the entire sum of human activity—sweat, the consequences for Icarus are much more dire.

"Sweating" echoes the earlier "tingling" in both meaning and tense. Both are past-progressive verbs ("was [...]ing"), indicating continuous action or activity, despite the poem being set in the past tense (which, it's worth noting, makes Icarus's death seem all the more final). Both words relate to sensations of the skin, and sensations of the skin are a very present-tense way of signalling *life*. Think about how people describe having a *dead* arm or *dead* leg. The ability to feel sensations on the skin is part of the minutia of being a living, breathing human being.

Sweating, of course, is mostly caused by heat and/or exertion. The alliteration between "sweating" and "sun," which also chimes with the /s/ in "itself" in the preceding line, gives this section a kind of whispery, slippery feel. Sibilance like this is often associated with water, and its presence here also relates to the watery environment in which the poem is set.

The "sweating" in the town is caused by the sun, the same celestial body that causes Icarus's death. Though warned by his father against doing so, Icarus intentionally flies too close to the sun, which causes the wax in his wings to melt. His wings ruined, he falls to his death. The alliteration of "wings' wax" draws attention to the wings' essential fragility (the combination of wings and wax being unnatural), while also created a rush of air that perhaps evokes Icarus's fall.

Notice how Icarus's death is barely discussed in the poem. This is the point at which the focus on Icarus is strongest, but it's still just a few words. The poem thus mirrors the general insignificance of Icarus's death by treating it as something that barely registers.

LINES 16-21

unsignificantly ...
... Icarus drowning

The last two stanzas ("unsignificantly [...] drowning") home in on the precise moment of Icarus's death, while also stressing its insignificance. All the tragedy—and epic mythology—of the fall of Icarus is reduced to "a splash quite unnoticed," an event that happens "unsignificantly." These two "un" words signal a kind of undoing, both of the grandiose importance of the mythical story *and* of Icarus himself.

The poem contains a kind of logical contradiction that is at its clearest here. If the death of Icarus is so meaningless, the reader is asked to consider why it has generated so many artistic responses—two of which are involved on this page. The poem, like the painting, is interested in how humans create meaning in their lives, and how they sometimes shut out information and events—no matter how tragic—in order to function properly in their daily lives. There is nothing *inherently* significant about Icarus's death, the poem implies. It all depends on who is thinking about it, and what they're thinking. In a word, perspective.

In these lines, the poem continues the sibilance established by "sweating in the sun" in line 13:

> unsignificantly
> off the coast
> there was
> a splash quite unnoticed
> this was
> Icarus drowning

The sibilance here evokes the sound of Icarus's falling body actually hitting the water.

Notice also how the last two lines are closely related to the first two in the poem. "This was / Icarus drowning" is intentionally devoid of any sentimentality or romanticization, and instead states the facts of what happened in as few—and as simple—words as possible. This stresses the event's insignificance, making it seem like a kind of throwaway remark.

The poem intentionally leaves the reader wondering what it is that they have just read. That is, the death of Icarus—the famous story that has survived for millennia—is a blink-and-you'll-miss-it moment. And the onomatopoeia of "splash" is almost embarrassing. It's both quiet and loud, and gives the reader a feel of how most people nearby might actually have experienced Icarus's death. The farmer might have lifted his head on hearing a sound—and then, with a full day's work to do—turned back to his plow.

SYMBOLS

THE FARMER

The farmer of lines 4 and 5 serves as a symbol of the general indifference to Icarus's death, and of the way that human life simply goes on in the face of suffering or tragedy.

Remember that the poem's main idea is that suffering depends on perspective. Most people, most of the time, are too caught up in their own lives to engage fully with—or in this case, even notice—another's tragedy. This isn't presented as some kind of condemnation of humanity, but rather as a cold, hard truth about how things work.

Icarus's death is one of the most famous Greek myths of all, and has a serious lesson about the arrogance of youth at its heart. But in the "real world" of Bruegel's painting and Williams's poem, Icarus's death is a mere "splash." And the farmer, naturally, has work to do. It's spring, an important time in the agricultural calendar, and the farmer has to turn up the earth of his field so that he can plant new crops. Quite literally, he is sowing new life just as another life expires in an almost inaudible splash. The farmer stands in for all the people on the shore, who similarly have their own business to attend to, and for the way that the world keeps turning and turning in the face of suffering.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 4-5:** "a farmer was ploughing / his field"

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Alliteration is an important part of "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus." Overall, alliteration intensifies the poem's images, bringing them to life on the page.

The first two examples of alliteration are in the second stanza:

> a farmer was ploughing
> his field
> the whole pageantry

The poem suggests that tragedy often goes unnoticed, because most people are busy getting on with their own lives and wrapped in their own dramas. The character of the farmer introduces this idea. The alliteration between "farmer" and "field" links the man with his labor, showing how he is too wrapped up in it to notice the "splash" caused by the fall of Icarus. The two alliterative /p/ sounds are also loud and bold, pre-empting the way that the coastal town's attention is anywhere but on Icarus. It's also worth noting that the relatively methodical placement of alliteration in this stanza mimics the deliberate pattern of the farmer's plowing.

The other examples of alliteration occur in the sixth stanza (lines 13-15):

> sweating in the sun
> that melted
> the wings' wax

The /s/ sound plays an important role in this stanza and those nearby. Sibilance is often associated with water, giving the reader a sense of the atmosphere around the coastal town. The slippery /s/, which also occurs as consonance in nearby lines, evokes the wateriness of perspiration, which relates to both the hot hive of activity in the town *and*, perhaps, Icarus's nerve-wracking realization that he is going to fall to his death (which presumably occurs just before the moment in which the poem is set).

The two /w/ sounds in "wings' wax" represent the way in which Icarus's wings are held together—through wax—and how they fail him.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** “farmer,” “ploughing”
- **Line 5:** “field”
- **Line 6:** “pageantry”
- **Line 13:** “sweating,” “sun”
- **Line 15:** “wings' wax”

ALLUSION

As an ekphrastic poem—a literary work that considers a piece of visual art—"Landscape with the Fall of Icarus" is an allusion from start to finish: it references the painting of the same title, as well as the myth of Icarus and Daedalus depicted in that painting.

A basic understanding of this myth is important to making sense of the poem. Icarus, a young man, is imprisoned on Crete with his father, the master craftsman Daedalus. Daedalus concocts a plan for escape, and fashions both himself and his son a pair of wings held together—as line 15 mentions—by wax. Daedalus warns Icarus not to fly too close to the sun. But this warning goes unheeded, and when Icarus flies too high, the sun's heat melts the wax in his wings, sending Icarus plummeting to his death.

This myth is up there with the best-known Greek myths, and is seen as a kind of fable for youthful arrogance and pride. This is an important point: the myth is *meant* to be significant, offering those who hear it a kind of life lesson. But in Bruegel's 16th-century painting, Icarus is reduced to a mere splash on the side of a canvas which, as the title suggests, depicts a landscape. It takes a few moments to even find Icarus on the paintin!

Accordingly, the original painting makes the point that tragedy and significance depend upon perspective—for most people in the coastal town near the site of Icarus's fall, his death means very little. These people are too busy with their own lives—their own hopes, dreams, and dramas—to be concerned with Icarus.

This idea is at the heart of Williams's poem, too. The poem is based on the painting, and, in a way, is a kind of tribute to it. The poem begins by recognizing the authority of Bruegel (or "Brueghel," as it's spelled here), showing respect for the truth that his painting reveals.

Even the poem's form is a kind of allusion to Bruegel, with the actual drowning of Icarus barely registering a "splash" on the page—exactly how it is handled on the canvas. That's why both painting and poem are titled "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus." Icarus's is death is not front and center, but a kind of incidental presence within the landscape.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-21

CONSONANCE

Consonance occurs throughout "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus." Generally speaking, consonance helps bring the poem's images to life for the reader.

The second stanza ("a farmer [...] pageantry") contains strong alliteration, discussed separately in this guide, as well as subtle /l/ consonance in "ploughing," "field," and "whole." This keeps things feeling cohesive and unified. Later, the soft /g/ of "pageantry" reappears in "edge of the sea" (with assonance popping up between "pageantry" and "sea" as well). Though these examples are spaced out on the page, the lines between them are very short, allowing the lines to clearly echo each another. The gentle sense of melody here reflects that idea of "pageantry," or performance, going on in the town while Icarus plummets to his death.

Another important example of consonance runs from line 10 ("the edge of the sea") all the way to the last line of the poem, and is more specifically an example of sibilance. Most of the lines in this section of the poem—which, in such a short poem, represents a significant chunk—contains an /s/ sound. For example: "sea," "itself," "sweating," "sun," "wax," "unsignificantly," "coast," "splash," "unnoticed," and, of course, "Icarus." Sibilance is often associated with water and the sound of the sea (think of the hiss and crash of the waves on the shore), and that idea is definitely in play here. In fact, there is so much /s/ sound that it perhaps represents the way that Icarus's body is swiftly swallowed up by the sea, while everyone else gets on with their lives.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “Brueghel”
- **Line 2:** “fell”
- **Line 4:** “farmer,” “ploughing”
- **Line 5:** “his field”
- **Line 6:** “whole pageantry”
- **Line 10:** “edge,” “sea”
- **Line 11:** “concerned”
- **Line 12:** “itself”
- **Line 13:** “sweating,” “sun”
- **Line 15:** “wings' wax”
- **Line 16:** “unsignificantly”
- **Line 17:** “coast”
- **Line 19:** “splash quite unnoticed”
- **Line 20:** “this”
- **Line 21:** “Icarus”

ENJAMBMENT

Enjambment is a key feature of "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus." In fact, nearly every line is enjambed! This is pretty characteristic of William Carlos Williams's poetic style more generally, which often features short, enjambed lines and a

total lack of guiding punctuation.

The result here is that the poem flows quickly down the page, images and events all blurring into one another—sometimes confusingly, to the point that readers can't be entirely sure what or who the subject of a line is. This blurring effect is important to the poem's thematic point, which is that Icarus's death doesn't stand out for those just going about their own lives nearby.

Also note how enjambment allows the poem's short lines to cascade down the page, falling, in a sense, with unstoppable momentum towards the end. The enjambment thus helps the shape of the poem itself mirror the shape of Icarus's fatal fall.

The enjambment also gives the poem a hurried quality that relates to the "pageantry / of the year" taking place on the shore. This is the speaker's metaphor for the frantic activity taking place in people's lives on the coastal town—their busy, everyday existences that mean that they can't really take notice of what's happening to Icarus. The poem uses enjambment to break the sentences in awkward places, keeping the reader's eye travelling steadily downwards until eventually there is the "splash" Icarus hitting the water. But before the poem can dwell on this, it's over.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "fell / it"
- **Lines 4-5:** "ploughing / his"
- **Lines 6-7:** "pageantry / of"
- **Lines 7-8:** "was / awake"
- **Lines 8-10:** "tingling / near / the"
- **Lines 11-12:** "concerned / with"
- **Lines 12-13:** "itself / sweating"
- **Lines 13-14:** "sun / that"
- **Lines 14-15:** "melted / the"
- **Lines 15-17:** "wax / unsignificantly / off"
- **Lines 17-18:** "coast / there"
- **Lines 18-19:** "was / a"
- **Lines 20-21:** "was / Icarus"

METAPHOR

"Landscape with the Fall of Icarus" is a relatively straightforward poem, featuring short lines, simple vocabulary, and clear images. Accordingly, there aren't a lot of figurative devices. Lines 6-12 ("the whole pageantry [...] with itself") represent the poem's only section where what's happening isn't presented in stripped-down, literal terms.

The metaphor "the whole pageantry / of the year" is the poem's way of describing the sum of human activity taking place in the coastal town while Icarus plummets to his death. Pageantry refers to a kind of parade or performance, often complete with music, dancing, and marching. It is, in other words, quite a high-energy event.

The poem isn't referring to any *actual* pageantry, but to the way that the people in the town have their own lives to lead, going about their own business, playing a role in their own dramas, and focusing on the things that are important to them—which don't include the young man falling from the sky.

The word also implies a kind of falseness to the goings-on in the town, however, as though people are simply performing their roles rather than actually living them. This performance, in turn, blinds them to Icarus's fall and to the message of his story (which is a warning against hubris, or excessive pride). Subtly, perhaps, the poem is critiquing the tendency of people to avoid the reality of things like death. The people are displaying their own hubris, in a way, in performing "pageantry" while Icarus falls.

This pageantry is in turn personified, creating a second metaphorical layer. The pageantry is "awake" and "tingling"—in other words, fully alive. This gesture towards wakefulness and sensory feeling contrasts with the lifelessness of Icarus, while also underscoring the poem's main point that life goes on, no matter what.

Lines 11 and 12 ("concerned / with itself") are most likely part of this metaphor too. That said, they could apply to the sea, rather than to the pageantry—the syntax and grammar are not clear. Line 13's "sweating in the sun" seems to pick up where "tingling" left off, however, again relating the liveliness of the coastal town to skin-based sensations. It seems likely, then, that lines 11 and 12 do apply to the pageantry. That is, this "pageantry" is what is "concered / with itself."

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** "the whole pageantry"
- **Lines 7-12:** "of the year was / awake tingling / near / the edge of the sea / concerned / with itself"
- **Line 13:** "sweating in the sun"

ONOMATOPOEIA

Onomatopoeia occurs just once in "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus." This is found in the last stanza:

> a splash quite unnoticed

It's probably fair to call "splash" the quintessential onomatopoeic word. Onomatopoeic words are those that sound like the thing they are describing, and dictionaries often list the "splash" as an example! Quite simply, then, "splash" creates a sonic effect that mimics the sound of Icarus hitting the water. By placing the word near its end, the poem performs a trick similar to that of the painting itself, keeping Icarus's death nearly out of view, with most of the action taking place elsewhere.

Generally speaking, the poem is quite restrained in terms of its

use of sound-based effects like alliteration, consonance, and so on. "Splash," then, sticks out. This speaks to the main tension in the poem between the supposed meaning (and mythological grandeur) of Icarus's death and the reality that no one really cares.

Where Onomatopoeia appears in the poem:

- **Line 19:** "splash"

VOCABULARY

Brueghel (Line 1) - Bruegel (here spelled Brueghel, which is also correct) was an important painter of the 16th-century Dutch/Flemish Renaissance.

Icarus (Line 2) - Icarus is a famous figure from Greek mythology. In the myth, Icarus's father, the great craftsman Daedalus, fashions himself and his son a pair of artificial wings held together with wax. Daedalus warns Icarus not to fly too close to the sun, but Icarus can't resist. The wax holding the wings together subsequently melts from the sun's heat, sending Icarus plummeting to his death. The story is usually taken as a warning against hubris, or excessive pride.

Ploughing (Line 4) - An alternate spelling of "plowing"; the churning-up of soil in order to then sow new seeds.

Pageantry (Line 6) - An elaborate ceremony, usually a parade, full of music, dancing, and color.

The wings's wax (Line 15) - Icarus's wings are held together by wax, which melts when he flies too close to the sun.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Landscape with the Fall of Icarus" has 21 lines, divided equally into seven three-line stanzas (a.k.a. tercets).

In terms of form, this poem is pretty characteristic of Williams's general style. There is no punctuation, the lines are short, and breaks between phrases are implied by grammar, syntax (the arrangement of words), and enjambment. This general style creates a sense of falling here, in which the lines cascade down the page with unstoppable momentum. Of course, this mimics Icarus's fall itself.

The poem is also in a particular mode of poetry known as ekphrasis. This is writing that takes a piece of visual art as its subject—that art here being a painting of the same title as the poem, by the 16th-century artist Pieter Bruegel (or Brueghel) the Elder.

The poem handles Icarus's death in much the same way as the painting. That is, the point of the poem is not to linger on Icarus's death, but rather to show how it happens "quite unnoticed." Similarly, Bruegel depicts Icarus's "splash" off-center and not as part of the main "landscape."

The poem actually begins by showing its admiration for the original painting, making clear that what follows is "According to Brueghel," who thus become a kind of authority. The opening and the ending of the poem both state the facts of what has happened in a way that is intentionally simple and sparse. Doing so underscores the poem's main thematic idea—that Icarus's death is not some grand, significant event.

METER

This poem reads mostly as free verse—that is, unmetered verse.

The first thing that any reader will notice about the poem is that its lines are very short. This, combined, with the lack of punctuation (and continual enjambment), creates a falling effect, mimicking the fall of Icarus.

Most lines have two stressed syllables—like the opening line—while some have just one (e.g., the self-contained "near" in line 9). Additionally, the first line of each stanza sometimes features a very similar metrical pattern. Lines 1, 4, and 19 all start with an iamb (da-DUM), followed by an anapest (da-da-DUM), followed by a dangling unstressed beat. Line 10 has a very similar form—going iamb-anapest, but lacking that final unstressed beat. Here are lines 1, 4, and 19 to illustrate:

Accord- | ing to Brue- | ghel
a farm- | er was plough- | ing
a splash | quite unnot- | iced

And here is line 10:

the edge | of the sea

This creates some very subtle consistency in the poem. The "splash" of Icarus's fall has the same rhythm as the farmer's work in the fields and of life in general in the town, which reflects the poem's idea that this fall isn't significant—it doesn't represent a major shift in the surrounding world.

Another interesting metrical moment appears in the opening two lines:

According to Brueghel
when Icarus fell

The rhyme between "Brueghel" and "fell" doesn't quite match because the rhyming syllable is unstressed in the first line, and stressed in the second. This creates a strong emphasis on "fell," again evoking the weight of Icarus's suddenly flightless body.

RHYME SCHEME

There is no rhyme scheme in "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus." A neat rhyming pattern would probably feel too ordered for a poem that is on the one hand about a deadly fall, and on the other about the *inattention* of those nearby. That said, the poem does open with a very subtle rhyme:

> According to Brueghel
> when Icarus fell

The unstressed second syllable of "Brueghel" chimes with the stressed "fell." Rhymes featuring unstressed syllables are subtle, and this doesn't have a very important effect on the poem apart from starting it off on a gently melodic note. Lines 3 and 4 also rhyme a stressed syllable with an unstressed one ("spring," "ploughing"). It's not a hugely significant rhyme, but does link "spring" with the act of "ploughing," suggesting the renewal and new life that come with that time of year.

SPEAKER

The speaker does not impose much of a presence on "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus" and is generally taken to be Williams himself. The poem is a work of ekphrasis—writing about a piece of visual art—and seems keen to stay true in words to what happens in paint on the canvas. The poem is even introduced with "According to Brueghel," suggesting a kind of admiration for the painter that sets up as an authority on the poem's themes.

Notably, the speaker avoids what might be considered more "poetic" language. The vocabulary is intentionally simple, and there isn't a huge amount of complicated metaphor. This is in keeping generally with Williams's poetic style and also echoes one of the characteristics of Bruegel's paintings—a willingness to use materials drawn from everyday reality, rather than the sometimes grandiose world of classical mythology.

SETTING

Technically speaking, the poem's setting is Bruegel's painting of the same name. The poem is a work of ekphrasis—writing about a piece of visual art—and talks about Icarus's death with a high degree of loyalty to the original painting.

The poem absorbs the "landscape" setting of the painting, depicting a coastal scene. It's a sunny day in spring, and a farmer is plowing his field while townspeople go about their lives. Though it never zooms in on the town in any detail, the poem refers to the "pageantry" of human activity going on—suggesting that this is a bustling place. No one notices Icarus's death, which is reduced to a mere "splash" at the end of the poem. Life simply goes on, as no one pauses to consider what has just fallen into the sea, let alone what the event means.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"Landscape with the Fall of Icarus" is taken from William Carlos Williams's final book of poetry, *Pictures from Brueghel and Other Poems* (1962), which won the Pulitzer Prize shortly after William's death the following year. The poem is an example of ekphrasis and focuses on a painting by the 16th-century Dutch artist Pieter Bruegel the Elder. The poem shares its title with the painting and is part of a larger cycle of 10 poems all based on works by Bruegel.

The poem is also characteristic of Williams's style: short lines, minimal punctuation, and spare vocabulary. Williams is closely associated with the imagist movement in poetry that prioritized precise, clear imagery over more highbrow tendencies like mythical allusion (though, of course, there is one here!) and complex formal schemes.

In the original myth that both the poem and painting depict, a young man named Icarus escapes captivity by flying with a pair of artificial wings made for him by his father, the craftsman Daedalus. When Icarus flies too close to the sun, the wax holding his wings together melts, sending Icarus to his death. The original myth is a fable that warns against excessive hubris (pride and arrogance), and has inspired many other works of art in the centuries since it first appeared.

W.H. Auden, the prominent 20th-century Anglo-American poet, also wrote about the same subject in "Musée des Beaux Arts." Like Williams, Auden highlights the seeming insignificance of Icarus's death—how everyone turns "leisurely" away from tragedy to get on with their own lives. A less famous poem on the same painting is Michael Hamburger's "Lines on Bruegel's Icarus," which strikes a slightly different tone from the other two poems.

As a work of ekphrasis, "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus" comes from a long and rich line of poetic tradition. Readers might want to check out some other examples of the form, such as John Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn," "On the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci in the Florentine Gallery" by Percy Bysshe Shelley, Thom Gunn's "In Santa Maria del Popolo," "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror" by John Ashbery, and "Deeply Morbid" by Stevie Smith.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

This poem is taken from Williams's final collection, published not long before his death at the age of 79 in 1963. In 1962, John F. Kennedy was President of the United States, and the year is also notable for the Cuban Missile Crisis. That said, the poem is single-mindedly concerned with Bruegel's painting that

it's only through the language and style that the 20th-century shows its face. The context of the subject itself straddles two worlds: Bruegel's 16th-century Europe and, through the myth of Icarus, ancient Greece.

Pieter Bruegel (also spelled Brueghel) is widely acknowledged as one of the most important painters of all time, though in truth little is known about his early years. He was born between 1525 and 1530 to what was most likely a peasant family, placing him at significant disadvantage to other painters from more wealthy backgrounds. He travelled to Italy to explore the Italian Renaissance, but was more impressed by the natural landscapes he saw on his way home—and this influence is certainly at play in the original painting.

Bruegel's paintings were often complex and full of individual figures, though they also placed emphasis on everyday life—particularly peasant life—as a worthy subject. His "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus" represents a meeting point between two different genres of visual art: landscape and history painting. In a way, both poem and painting use Icarus as a way of denying the relevance of mythology in everyday existence—and the art that existence generates.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Painting Analyzed — A short discussion about the original artwork. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_pJoIuCweio)
- More About Bruegel — A short film about the great painter. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c5BOzhwaWeM)
- Williams's Life Story — A valuable resource on Williams's life and work from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/william-carlos-williams)
- The Painting Itself — Check out the famous painting by Pieter Bruegel the Elder that inspired the poem. Can you spot Icarus? (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bruegel,_Pieter_de_Oude_-_De_val_van_icarus_-_hi_res.jpg)
- Auden's Take on the same painting — Check out LitCharts analysis of a different ekphrastic poem that focuses on the same painting— Musée des Beaux Arts time by W.H. Auden. (https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/w-h-auden/musee-des-beaux-arts)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS POEMS

- The Red Wheelbarrow
- This Is Just To Say

HOW TO CITE

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