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. The sun in the painting continues to shine as it must. The speaker draws attention to its reflection on Icarus's pale legs as they descend into the murky 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 smoothly onward.

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 ignorance and indifference of the scenes' onlookers. The poem suggests that the "position" of suffering in human lives is at the margins—that is, that people would rather not confront, or are outright numb to, the immediate reality of another's pain.

The speaker begins by insisting that the "Old Masters" (acclaimed, pre-19th century European painters) understood suffering like no one else. Suffering, their work implies, is something that's always happening yet doesn't affect anyone who's not in its direct orbit.

Illustrating this idea, the speaker turns to various paintings in which bystanders can be seen going about their lives even as terrible events are taking place. The speaker alludes to *Massacre of the Innocents*, for example, a painting that depicts the biblical story of the slaughter of male children under the age of two by Herod, King of Judea. 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." The speaker juxtaposes these images of suffering and mundanity to emphasize the tendency of life to continue in the face of incredible violence.

The speaker then turns to a scene whose bystanders are well aware of the suffering taking place in front of them and *still* turn a blind eye: *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*. This painting alludes to a Greek myth in which a boy named Icarus is given wings made of feathers and held together with wax. After flying too close to the sun, Icarus's wings melt. He falls to the ocean and drowns.

Despite appearing the title of Brueghel's painting, it's pretty hard to actually spot Icarus in this "landscape"! The drowning boy is relegated to a corner, identifiable only by his legs sticking out of the water. Meanwhile, the sun keeps shining, ships keep sailing, and a ploughman keeps pulling his plow.

The speaker latches onto this sense of cold indifference. The ploughman, the speaker muses, "may / Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry" but decided it wasn't important enough to stop his work; "it was not an important failure" in his mind. The speaker adds that the sun "shone / [a]s it had to"—beating down as though nothing has changed despite *causing* Icarus's death. Finally, the speaker points out a "ship that must have seen" the "amazing" sight of Icarus falling but thought it best to continue on its journey; the ship (and the people on it) had places to be and "sailed calmly on," unperturbed by this tragedy.

Suffering is so common that it can feel utterly ordinary, the poem ultimately suggests, yet there's a human tendency to avoid looking at this mundane reality directly.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-21

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

About suffering they ...
... walking dully along;

The speaker opens the poem by immediately establishing its setting: the poem takes place in the Oldmasters Museum, one of the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium. And right away, the speaker makes a statement about the painters in this museum that will guide the rest of the poem: the Old Masters (that is, highly skilled European artists who produced works before the 19th century) always understood how people respond to suffering (that is, they understood its "position" in people's lives).

The speaker's unconventional syntax (essentially, its arrangement of words) calls readers' attention to the word "suffering," placing it near the beginning of the poem's opening line. The description of the Old Masters as "never wrong," rather than *always right*, also gives the poem a slightly pessimistic bent from the get-go.

The speaker then clarifies the "position" of suffering in human life: "it takes place," the speaker says, while people are simply going about their lives. One person might be in pain while "someone else" is going through the motions of life: "eating or opening a window or just walking dully along."

The polysyndeton of this line (that repeated "or") creates a kind of piling up effect; readers get the sense that the speaker could insert any number of actions into this list because people fill their days with any number of repetitive, mundane, even boring (note the word "dully" above) activities.

LINES 5-8

How, when the ...
... of the wood:

The next four lines might allude to *The Census at Bethlehem*, a painting by Pieter Brueghel the Elder that depicts the arrival of a pregnant Mary and Joseph in Bethlehem. The couple doesn't particularly stand out in the scene, however, which is filled with various people going about their days as well as images of children skating, as the speaker puts it here, "[o]n a pond at the end of the wood."

The speaker latches onto the contrast between this holy event and the seeming indifference of various figures in the painting. This passage specifically juxtaposes the image of elderly, pious people eagerly awaiting Christ's birth with that of children who either have no idea or no interest in what's going on.

Note how the enjambment of line 5 evokes the excitement of "the aged," creating a sense of anticipation as the reader must continue onto the next line to learn the object of these figures' enthusiasm:

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

The speaker then turns towards the "Children who did not specially want it to happen, skating / On a pond at the edge of the wood." It's not that these kids don't want Christ to be born, but rather that it doesn't hold immediate significance for them. They're too busy being kids, playing on a frozen pond.

Lines 5 and 7 are nearly identical in length and linked by the end rhyme between "waiting" and "skating." This rhyme emphasizes the juxtaposition between the old and the young, again suggesting how major events in one person's life or group of people's lives can mean very little, if anything at all, to others. While the "aged" are "waiting," the young enjoy themselves.

As the passage that follows (lines 9-13) reminds readers, Jesus's birth was followed by the massacre of all male children under the age of two. As such, this moment might also be read as a kind of warning: ignorance of others' suffering can lead to ruin.

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).

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"), reminding readers of these painters' power to capture the "position" of "suffering."

While *The Census at Bethlehem* depicts a moment before Christ's birth, this second painting 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, and these massacred children are considered the first Christian martyrs.

The juxtaposition of the chaotic, violent site of this massacre with the "pond at the edge of the wood" from the previous lines perhaps suggests that peaceful, pleasant backdrops always exist within a wider landscape—one that also contains terrible violence. The speaker's decision to call attention to two scenes centered around children also grimly reinforces the cruel disparity between the experiences of those who suffer and

those whose life goes on in the face of such suffering.

The speaker's relaxed, detached tone is particularly pronounced in these lines, which feature two examples of understatement:

- The speaker refers to the massacre as "dreadful martyrdom [that] must run its course" and reduces the site of that massacre to "some untidy spot." The speaker's 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 just becomes "untidy"—slightly disorderly.
- The speaker also states that the violence "must run its course," suggesting that suffering is common and inevitable. The speaker's use of the word "must" suggests confidence in this idea as a universal truth and perhaps also a sense of resignation.

Instead of focusing on the scene's violence, the speaker's gaze lands on the animals at the edge of this painting. While narrating this brutal scene, the speaker's tone is so casual, it verges on being funny; a horse scratches its rear and the dogs are, well, "doggy."

Note that line 12 is considerably lengthier than those that surround it and is also enjambed, appearing to linger out in space:

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

Line 12 also doesn't contain any caesurae. As a result, it seems to ramble on without interruption, reinforcing the speaker's unbothered tone and mirroring the monotony of the animals' actions.

Also notice how the speaker describes the horse as "innocent," seemingly absolving it of any responsibility for the massacre taking place nearby. Perhaps the speaker feels some 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 in its face.

Yet the speaker also specifies that the horse belongs to a soldier, who is called "the torturer." Thus, in one breath, the speaker announces the horse's innocence and calls it into question; perhaps the line between ignorance and complicity is thinner than people would like to believe.

LINES 14-17

In Breughel's Icarus, ...

... an important failure;

The poem's second stanza describes another painting (which was attributed to Breughel the Elder at the time but is most likely an early copy of his original): *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*. The painting and the rest of the poem allude to a famous story from 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, however, and flies close to the sun; wings melted, Icarus plummets into the ocean and drowns.

In Breughel's painting, Icarus is nothing more than a pair of legs sticking out of the water. These legs are in a lower corner of the painting and easily missed; casual onlookers would be forgiven for thinking, at first, that the painting simply depicted a ploughman going about his day.

Notice the reappearance of the word "how" here ("how everything turns away"), reminding readers once again that the speaker is talking about is proof of the Old Masters' mastery of suffering. The speaker also refers to this painting more directly than the others, calling it "Breughel's Icarus." Still, the speaker uses generalized language to describe the specific violence pictured in Breughel's painting, describing 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 another example of understatement.)

Once again, the speaker focuses on a bystander's reaction—or, really, lackthereof—to the scene. It's possible that "the ploughman" the painting depicts "heard the splash, the forsaken cry" of Icarus as he fell to his death. But even if he did directly witness Icarus's death, the speaker says without hesitation that "for him [the ploughman] it was not an important failure." In other words, Icarus's failure—one of the most famous in all of history—doesn't actually matter to this laborer; he's presumably got things to do! This indifferent bystander is alert to the violence unfolding around him and still "turns away."

LINES 17-21

the sun shone ...
... sailed calmly on.

The speaker continues to describe the scene going on around Icarus's death. Just as the ploughman keeps going about his work, "the sun shone / As it had to." The sun, the speaker says, can't simply stop shining because one boy has drowned; life always goes on even as tragedies unfold. The phrase "had to" also implies resignation or a lack of choice—that the sun (and the people it shines on) *must* carry on in the face of suffering (perhaps because suffering is everywhere).

That sun shines directly, albeit passively, on Icarus's "white

legs," illuminating this disaster briefly for anyone else who bothers to look up from their own lives. Quickly, though, those legs are engulfed by "green / Water" as Icarus drowns and disappears for good. This juxtaposition of white legs and green water creates a vivid image; the sight of Icarus's thrashing limbs provides a narrow glimpse of his anguish as he vanishes from view altogether.

The speaker goes on to give an account of an "expensive delicate ship that must have seen" the incredible sight of Icarus "falling out of the sky" and yet "sailed calmly on." The speaker's characterization of the ship is an example of personification; people *on board* the ship—and not the ship itself—witness Icarus's death and do not intervene (this moment thus can also be thought of as metonymy).

The speaker's use of personification reinforces yet another juxtaposition: although the ship is "delicate" it "sails calmly" through the ocean, while Icarus is not so fortunate. In this case, the serene ship is juxtaposed with the drowning Icarus. And in calling Icarus "[s]omething amazing," the speaker drives home the point that even when people witness remarkable suffering they tend not to act. Even "amazing" sights can't shake them out of their own lives and concerns.

POETIC DEVICES

ALLUSION

The speaker alludes to three paintings hanging in the *Musées des Beaux Arts* attributed (at the time) to Pieter Breughel the Elder, one of the foremost figures of the Northern Renaissance. This was an artistic movement that took place in the Netherlands during the 16th century. It 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 the Northern Renaissance were largely 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.

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 and instead focuses 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.

Lines 4-8 specifically 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 Brueghel's painting, a blue-veiled Mary rides a donkey led by Joseph. The speaker does not focus on this image, of course. Instead, they draw attention to kids skating on a nearby pond.

The remainder of the stanza alludes to *The Massacre of the Innocents*, continuing the biblical story:

- Herod, King of Judea, hears that a savior has been born and feels that his power is under threat. 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 rather than the terrible violence of this event.

Finally, the poem's second stanza 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. Daedalus, a skilled inventor, fashions two pairs of wings made of feathers, wax, and string so that they can escape. Icarus flies too close to the sun, however, which melts his wings; Icarus falls down to the ocean and 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 ("white legs disappearing" and "a boy falling out of the sky"), the poem's emphasis remains on the townspeople who witness his death and simply go on with their day.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

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

CAESURA

This poem contains several examples of caesurae, which add to its casual, conversational tone. Frequent pauses in the middle of lines slow the poem down, reflecting, perhaps, the fact that the poem's speaker is leisurely wandering through a museum. This speaker seems to be in no rush.

Caesurae also call attention to important words in the poem. In lines 2 and 3, for example, colons separate "The Old Masters" and "Its human position" from the rest of their lines. The colons' placement adds emphasis to these phrases, helping to establish the poem's subject (that is, the Old Masters' depictions of human attitudes towards 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" grants the poem some structure and links the painters' grasp of human indifference to suffering with specific examples of that suffering in art.

In the poem's final stanza, caesurae separate images of suffering from those of bystanders' disinterest. For example, "the disaster" (i.e., Icarus's death) appears alongside "the ploughman," who turns away:

> Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may

The semicolon divides the line, reflecting the ploughman's disinterest; the line itself turns away from "the disaster." Similarly, a caesura contrasts Icarus's "important failure" and "the sun," which continues to shine on his drowning body:

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

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

Consonance is a very subtle presence in this poem, whose language is, for the most part, quite prose-like. Still, there are some moments of repetitive sound that help to emphasize certain images and shape the poem's mood.

Much of this consonance is more specifically sibilance, the repetition of hushed and hissing /s/ and /sh/ sounds. Listen, for example, to the phrase "Icarus, for instance." There's also some subtle assonance here (that repeated short /ih/ sound); as a result, the phrase sounds almost like a quiet tongue twister.

There's more sibilance in lines 3-4, where it combines with gentle /l/ sounds:

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

The soft sounds here reflect the quiet mundanity of the scene at hand. The roughness of suffering doesn't affect that "someone else," whose life goes on smoothly (and, indeed, "dully").

Listen, too, to the sibilance in the poem's final line as well:

> Water, and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen
> Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,
> Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.

The gentle language here reflects the calmness of that ship (the lilting /l/ sounds of "sailed calmly" add to the effect). Also remember that art museums are typically hushed, serious places; the poem is thus appropriately quiet in its own sounds as a way of evoking this setting.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "takes place"
- **Line 4:** "While," "someone else," "just," "dully along"
- **Line 5:** "reverently, passionately"
- **Line 11:** "some," "spot"
- **Line 14:** "Icarus," "instance"
- **Line 16:** "splash," "forsaken cry"
- **Line 19:** "expensive delicate ship," "must," "seen"
- **Line 20:** "Something," "sky"
- **Line 21:** "somewhere," "sailed calmly"

ENJAMBMENT

This poem contains a great deal of enjambment, as most lines break in the middle of clauses and phrases. These enjambments, like caesurae, control the poem's pace and add to its casual, conversational feel. Readers get the sense that the speaker is relaying their observations off the cuff, as they come to them, rather than trying to cram their thoughts into distinct lines. The enjambment thus adds to the poem's thoughtful, reflective tone.

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:

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

The rapid shift from line to line quickens the poem's pace as well. 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. Take 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 juxtaposes the intense suffering that some people experience with the lack of concern that bystanders display. This juxtaposition is essential to the poem's point: that people are generally ignorant of or indifferent to the suffering of others (which tends to take place at the edges, or on the margins, of life).

The second half of stanza 1, for example, juxtaposes a pond where children play with the "untidy spot" in which babies are "martyred." 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. The speaker also contrasts this violence with the humorous images of dogs going "on with their doggy life" and a horse scratching "its innocent behind on a tree." As the children carry on with their games and animals do what animals always do, 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 suggests 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.

Lines 5-7 take a slightly different approach, contrasting devout, elderly people who are "reverently, passionately waiting" for the birth 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's the older folks' *main* concern and the least of the children's concerns. Juxtaposition suggests 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.

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, Brueghel's 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 (seen, for example, with the townspeople whose natural inclination is to go 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. The poem seems to sardonically suggest that people 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. 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, it seems, 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"

PARALLELISM

The poem uses parallelism to emphasize its point: that human indifference to suffering is essentially universal. By turning to repetitive phrasing and grammatical structures, the poem subtly underlines the monotony of daily life and its tendency to continue interrupted even in the face of human anguish.

Lines 2-5 specifically feature anaphora, as the word "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 *illustrate* this understanding. This anaphora also creates a sense of redundancy; the speaker keeps repeating themselves, elaborating with new evidence but not actually making a new point.

There's also a brief moment of polysyndeton 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. As a result, this line appears exceptionally repetitive and monotonous—much like the day-to-day activities that it describes.

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

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

UNDERSTATEMENT

Understatement adds 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 male babies. Herod, King of Judea, felt threatened by the news that a savior had been born, so he ordered these 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.

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 similar 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; upon flying too close, 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 dies. 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 in myth.

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.

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 from 5 to 22 syllables. Most lines are enjambed, meaning that line breaks occur in the middle of sentences and phrases. All of this adds to the poem's casual, thoughtful, and ultimately detached tone.

The stanza break marks a jump in time and place from ancient Bethlehem to ancient 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.

Note, too, that each stanza is composed of one very long, syntactically complex sentence. As such, 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 polished one). The long length of certain lines also makes them appear to drone on. This is the case with line 4 ("While someone [...] along;") and line 12 ("Where the dogs [...] horse"), for example, which describe life carrying on amid historic suffering. The speaker's unhurried cadence thus mimics the bored demeanor of the figures described.

METER

This poem is written in free verse, meaning it doesn't follow a regular meter. This adds to its thoughtful, conversational tone. Readers get the sense that the speaker is relaying their thoughts in real-time, moving through this museum and noting their observations of certain paintings as they pass by them.

RHYME SCHEME

This poem does not stick to any conventional rhyme scheme. It does use plenty of end rhyme, but these 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 separated by a few lines, end rhymes aren't all the noticeable on a first reading of the poem. In other words, the rhymes appear 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're more noticeable, 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.

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. All readers know is that the speaker is visiting an art museum—specifically 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.

The speaker spends much of the poem pointing out specific

details within the paintings that line the gallery. The speaker's long, complex sentences and conversational rhythms lend the poem a relaxed, informal atmosphere; it feels as though the speaker is perusing the paintings and working out an analysis in real-time. The speaker's tone is also quite detached, suggesting this person's emotional distance from the suffering on display.

In fact, the speaker only obliquely references the episodes of violence that the paintings depict. The mass slaughter of children is called "dreadful martyrdom," for example, and Icarus's death is simply "the disaster." Such a cool, removed tone allows the poem itself to exemplify the indifference to suffering that the speaker articulates.

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 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.

Readers can easily envision the poem's speaker drifting through this setting, stopping to focus on specific paintings and describe them to the reader. And 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 themselves, 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—suggests that human apathy towards the suffering of others is universal, consistent across time and place.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

One of Auden's most famous poems, "Musée des Beaux Arts" first appeared in the magazine *New Writing* in its Spring 1939 issue. It was later collected in Auden's book *Another Time*, published in 1940. Some critics see "Musée des Beaux Arts" as a precursor for Auden's Pulitzer Prize-winning long poem *The Age of Anxiety* (1948); both works explore the ways in which people attempt to diffuse their intense anxieties about the world around them—especially its moral and political challenges.

Auden was a great proponent of old poetic forms, plain and approachable language, and light verse: poetry, he believed, didn't have to be highfalutin to be serious and meaningful. His own poems often deal with death and suffering in a voice that's equal parts crisp, witty, and melancholic. But he also delighted in writing everything from pantoums to villanelles to scandalous limericks. "Musée des Beaux Arts" isn't Auden's only ekphrastic poem (that is, a poem that describes a work of art), either. His poem "The Shield of Achilles," first published in 1952, was inspired by Homer's *Iliad* and is another of his most famous works.

Auden was hardly the only poet to tackle the myth of Icarus; in fact, he wasn't even the only poet to focus specifically on Brueghel's painted depiction of this myth! The modernist William Carlos Williams also 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.

Auden had such a distinctive and unusual poetic voice that many critics see him as a school of his own: he and his contemporaries Cecil Day-Lewis, Stephen Spender, Christopher Isherwood, and Louis MacNeice are sometimes classed together as the "Auden group."

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Auden composed "Musée des Beaux Arts" in December of 1938, less than a year before the start of World War II. 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). Many read this poem as, in part, a reaction to the bloodshed that the young poet witnessed during his travels and which he wrote about extensively.

Austria had been earlier in 1938 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/MglyXpmuNdcLJg?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

- As I Walked Out One Evening
- Funeral Blues (Stop all the clocks)
- Refugee Blues
- September 1, 1939
- The Shield of Achilles
- The Unknown Citizen

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