

Greek Mythology In W.H. Auden's " Musée des Beaux Arts"

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Abstract

The serious figures of modernism in English poetry have reliably expressed a significant concentration for using the mythic world, a world that is profoundly genuine and distinctive to them. Myths and fantasy deem a cradle of inspiration for numerous writers, particularly to the ones of the school of modernism and T. S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats and W.H. Auden are no exception. The modernists have lost the feeling of possession. They have lost all the meaning throughout everyday life. Vanity, emptiness and nothingness can best portray their poetical world.

The purpose of the study is to demonstrate W. H. Auden's treatment of classical myths in "*Musée des Beaux Arts*" and investigate the way Auden conveys his thoughts and feelings about the Breughel painting. This study will explore the elements of Auden's use of Greek myths to show current topics or issues like the feeling of thwarted desires, the impartial side of modern art, the tension of time between past and present, as well as the critical need of a profound and good life for modernists.

The study puts focus on the culture and tradition make human life worth living and myth is one of the prevailing signs of culture. It presents a historical background about mythology and its role in shaping the meaning of the poetry. Then, it exhibits Auden's employment of Greek myths in his most anthologized poem "*Musée des Beaux Arts*". The

conclusion of this study inspects how the modernist poet W. H. Auden uses Greek myths as the simulacrum of the modern world reality.

I: Introduction

Since the beginning of history, different mythologies in various places of the globe raised inside societies because of a few factors that fulfill the essential part in people's life . The term mythology showed up at the beginning of the 15th Century and mentions to the writings of myths. It is rooted to the middle French "mythologie" which is originated from Late Latin "mythologia" and from Greek "mythologia" legendary lore, a telling of mythical legends, a legend, story and tale. (Douglas Harper,2015). The term myth is rooted to the Greek "mythos"(Mark P.O Morford, 1999,p.1) and signifies a word, speech, tale or story and logy refers to the investigation area. (" Mythology", 2015)

Myths are generally formed stories that talk about God, rulers and heroes; the stories connect the globe creation and its upcoming demolition. Myths uncover how humankind was formed by gods; portray the connections of particular gods with other gods and people also. They demonstrate to live by giving moral regulation, additionally shows heroes' lives considered as model for a society. So their wide concern is the vital being's attributes of human kind and mythical heroes.

The simplest and most direct way to approach mythology is to look at its subject matter. In the broadest terms myths are traditional stories about gods, kings and heroes. Myths relate the creation of the world and sometimes its future destruction as well. They tell how gods created men. They depict the relationships between various gods and men. They provide a moral code by which to live. And myths treat the lives of heroes who represent the ideals of a society. In short, myths largely deal with the significant aspects of human and superhuman existence. (James Weigel, 1973, p.9)

The dominant part of legends creators are ambiguous since various stories are attached to the pre-writing . However, some are of known sources (Janet Parker, 2006, p.11). Homer is an outstanding example who demonstrates a known person who altered myths. The Greek mythology was reported, firstly by him in his *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. In these artistic works he portrayed various myths stories from the classical mythology:

"Our first witness to Greek mythology is Homer. In the Iliad and the Odyssey we encounter, for the first time in the history of Greek literature, the gods and heroes that constituted myth as the Greeks themselves knew it, and as we know it now. Since Homer's day, Achilles and Hector, Paris and Helen, Zeus, Hera, Poseidon, and Athena, the Cyclopes and the Giants, the Centaurs and the Sirens ..." (Fritz Graft, 1996,p.57)

Mythology typifies particular mythological convictions and stories as well as delineates various subjects. The mythical stories were passed on from one age to the others, and were imported, made, and experienced in an unexpected way. Further, the greater part of myths creators are unknown. Those stories are depicted through numerous ways and a mythology can encapsulate a few mythologies. The Greek mythology developed thousands years back most likely from the antiquated Religions of Crete and had not a settled shape but rather created by places and conditions. Next, this antique myth is depicted through an arrangement of stories, legends and mythical stories. Additionally, the Greek people were the first who made gods taking after to people and furthermore other mythical figures. This old fashioned mythology conveys different subjects and numerous legendary creatures ("A History of Ancient Greece, Mythology", 2015).

The antique Greek mythology has been gone down through different ways and has a critical importance played through every century. The fanciful stories inside this old mythology have influenced individuals from all ages and foundation. The Greek fantasies portray distinctive Greek considerations and thoughts which empower them to get centrality in the modern society. Along these lines, those Greek convictions and stories are found in different

fields in the modern world, from workmanship to writing and from media to film and promoting, their quality is everywhere.

Greek mythology has inspired almost every person who has come into contact with its countless delights and bewitching magic. Because these ancient stories are so exciting and present interpretations of some natural phenomena, they are constantly cropping up in various forms today. We see them in modern plays, novels, television programs, movies and even in advertisements. (Bernard Evslin, 1995, p.112)

Antique mythical story inside English writing in the twentieth century isn't only as to speak about England's writings. It moreover concerns the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and the areas in Africa where English is spoken, the Caribbean, and the Pacific. Antique mythical story has in flawed way began its quality inside the American writings by the translation of *Metamorphoses* as colonial official by George Sandy in the seventeenth century Virginia. All things considered, in the nineteenth century this part was used by second rate and routine versifiers (Geoffrey Miles, 1999, p.17). And in the twentieth century the old records showed up once more. (Ibid, p.17). Some American journalists and writers for instance, Ashbery, Duncan, Jarrell, Jeffers, Levertov, Lowell, MacLeish, O'Neill, Rexroth, Rich, Rukeyser, Tennessee Williams, considered the classical world's mythology a strong tide to use in points, for the contemporary times. When the twentieth century started, antique mythology was still present (Ibid, p.17).

The most important forms of literature that impacts the modern Western society are the literary works made for youthful readers. Those works have a huge effect over youthful people and variation in organization. Each organization contrasts from the others and, presents the Greek mythological world .

The formats of children's books on ancient Greek and Roman mythology vary as much as the methods of composition. They include autobiographies, biographies, comic books, coffee-table books (picture books), and coloring books, dictionaries (encyclopedias) of mythology, dramas, novelettes, and elementary-school readers. (Antoinette Brazouski, 1994, p. 18)

Similarly, there was a concentration on the superheroes of the comic books which are distributed in type of series and the Greek mythical heroes gives a literary genre that can allow traditional philosophers to see the manner which contemporary authors decipher again the old Greek mythical texts (Andrew S. Latham, 2012, p. iii). From 2008–2010, for instance, Marvel comics distributed arrangement named "*The Incredible Hercules*" concentrating on a fresh method for delineating the mythical Hercules. Comic books are influenced by various sources yet the most observed is the Greek mythology, particularly in Western societies like the United States which gains a connection made by history with the Greek civilization (Ibid, p.1).

II: W. H. Auden's "Musée des Beaux Arts": Mystification of Greek Myths

In "*Musée des Beaux Arts*", Auden draws the semantics of the human state of suffering through the archetypal dramatic scene of the fall of Icarus. The Greek mythological figure Icarus is best known for his unfortunate and life-ending drown into the Aegean Sea (Oxford English Dictionary: "Icarus"). Icarus' refusal to notice his father's counsel prompted his destruction. The myth symbolizes "ambitious or presumptuous acts which end in failure or ruin" (OED: "Icarian"). To outline the story quickly, Daedalus and his son Icarus escape the island of Crete to keep away from the fury of King Minos. Daedalus makes wings from flying creatures' feathers for both of them, utilizing wax as glue. Icarus must not fly too low, since then his wings will get wet and he will crash, yet not very high either, in light of the fact that then the wax will dissolve, the clouds will wind up unstuck and he will crash as well. Icarus is presumptuous and flies too high; thus, he tumbles from the sky and suffocates, and his dad

lands in Sicily alone. The story expresses itself splendidly for dramatically interpretation (B. Pavlock, 1998, Pp.140–57). According to Plato, poetry is an imitation of an imitation of an imitation, thrice removed from reality (Plato, 1999:p. 382). In this context, the story of Daedalus and his son Icarus from the eighth book of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, for instance, can be regarded as the first imitation Brueghel's *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* as the second, and Auden's "Musée des Beaux Arts" as the third. In Pieter Brueghel the Elder's "Scene with the Fall of Icarus" the many-sided feature that is drawn between the work's title and focal image expresses the tangled idea of life and death. The title of the picture drives the viewers to assume that the scene will contain an obvious portrayal of the death of Icarus in the Aegean Sea. (R. Barthes, 1993, p.110) "Landscape with the fall of Icarus" influenced "Musée des Beaux Arts" a poem by W. H. Auden that explains Icarus' death. Auden's poem is part into two specific areas: the first is a depiction of Brueghel's wisdom, and the second is a delineation of Brueghel's work of art. Though, a tormenting idea of tragedy and disaster enters the two areas of Auden's works. The study will indicate how Auden expresses his social and political perspectives using myths exhibited by the imagery of Icarus.

Auden was one of a group of intellectual poets who hoped to prick the public conscience with their poetry. They promoted the cause of anti-fascism in the 1930s and, Auden was viewed that he, "were the divided generation of Hamlets who found the world out of joint and failed to set it right" (Stephen Spender 1951, p. 202). Auden was poetically inspired by T.S. Eliot and he followed a similar technique of incorporating short poems into longer works. Eliot advised Auden to not apologies for rather recondite allusions, and Auden seemed to follow Eliot's style of composition as well as his sense of doom and resignation at a culturally impoverished and diminishing civilization (Ibid.)

Wystan Hugh Auden (1907–1973) is one of the essential writers in the twentieth century .He was the third child born on the 21st February, 1907, in York, the north of England. His father was a doctor and his mom a medical assistant. Both of them were High Church Anglicans, which greatly affected Auden's convictions in his later years. One might say that Auden was more like his father in his early times, while he turned out to be like his mother

permanently. Affected and supported by his parents, Auden started his perusing, which further upgraded his enthusiasm for music – music with words. He favored science to poetry in his childhood. However, when entering Oxford, he became eager with the Anglo–Saxon poetry, and medieval poetry, so he felt that he ought to dedicate himself to poetry creation. After graduation he went to Berlin to ponder the German poetry.

Back to Britain in 1930, he became an instructor at a middle school for five years. In spite of the fact that he was occupied with political and social activities in the later 1930s, poetic creation never makes a far away from him. In 1937, he went to Spain to support the antifascists where he composed his well– known poem "*Spain*". Amid, 1938 he went in China with Christopher Isherwood and saw the brutality of the war, which asked him to make a sonnet sequence "*In Time of War*". They returned to United States where Auden decided to settle in after this experience. In 1939, he moved to the United States. In 1940, he reconverted to Christianity and joined the Anglican Fellowship. He turned into a naturalized American in 1946. During his stay in America, he had taught in numerous colleges and was even chosen Professor of poetry at Oxford for five years (1956–1960). He passed away in Vienna on September 29th, 1973 and buried in the churchyard in Kirchstetten, a little town in Austria. There was a plaque in the Poet's side of Westminster Abbey which likewise honored his life.

As a major Anglo–American writer, Auden has a high notoriety and awesome impact on English poetry. Auden was depicted as "the most inclusive poet of the twentieth century, its most technically skilled, and its most truthful" (Edward Mendelson 1981:p. xxiii). Along with his glorious poetic creation, Auden lastly turns himself as another amazing artist following the age of W. B. Yeats and T. S. Eliot. He is a productive author who distributes in succession more than ten volumes during his lifetime, which incorporates twelve collections of short poems, ballads and songs, and six of long poems. His works include numerous subjects such as popular culture, current occasion and vernacular speeches. Plus, he was additionally an incredible dramatist, librettist, editorial manager, translator and essayist. *The Times* proclaimed in 1973:

W. H. Auden, for long the enfant terrible of English poetry ... emerges finally as its undisputed master. .. it was Auden above all who showed how the full range of traditional forms could be received in the service of the kind of moral and social realism that a world in crisis demanded, in this way he was in the vanguard of a versatile and publicly accessible art. (Humphrey Carpenter, 1981: 454).

In John Lehmann's words, what characterizes him, as "the spiritual physician of his generation"(John Lehmann: p.31) was his viable commitment as a writer and scholarly. Without him the social scene of the 1930s would apparently have been both stylishly bland and ambiguous. While Samuel Hynes has portrayed the 1930s as "the Auden Generation", Ian Sansom, in his reference to Auden's impact in its more extensive degree that included British and American writers, has called it "the Auden Generations" (Ian Sansom, 2004:p.226-39) . Auden's poetry can be funny, light, and sweet, but many of his greatest works deal with the suffering that comes from being human. He writes of the rise and rule of the dictators and the deadening bureaucratic state; the extinguishing of the light of great men who have been valuable to the world; the attrition of love through unfaithfulness, sickness, time, and death; the crippling nature of pride and greed; religious doubt; warfare; and the complacency and apathy evinced by others when we are undergoing this suffering. Sometimes people suffer at others' hands, and sometimes people bring it upon themselves. Human suffering has always been a common theme found in almost all of Auden's poems. There may not be a single work of Auden that does not highlight the various forms of suffering that man is subjected to. In "**As I Walked Out One Evening**", though the underlying theme is that of love, it is also the futility of life, of the uncertainties of life and the misery that is a part of life especially in the post-war period, when a radical change came to be visible in the social order in general and more particularly in the lifestyle. Above all, the poem is a reminder of the passage of time and what changes occur in life, causing suffering, as time goes by:

But all the clocks in the city
Began to whirr and chime:

'O let not Time deceive you,
You cannot conquer Time.

In a decade as anxious with crises as the 1930s, it is very conceivable to find an increasing feeling of submission towards the ensuing with monstrosities. people had not yet recuperated emotionally from the damage of World War I and presently couldn't seem to bear extra burdens of torment; the 1930s was every time of hardships, beginning with the Great Depression and rising unemployment and ending with World War II. Auden's voice during these troublesome conditions was one of numerous voices that showed up separately to invalidate the control of mistreatment before the foundation of human rights in it's after war appearance. Artists were among the first and best journalists who characterized a dream of human rights. Paul G. Lauren portrays them as:

The courageous men and women who refused to accept the prevailing cultures of impunity of their time, who envisioned a world in which all people enjoyed certain basic rights, who believed that they had a responsibility to others, and who refused to be silent in the face of abuse. (Paul Gordon Lauren,2008:p,93)

Auden was represented by as an intellectual "who knew about being clever and about popular attitudes to it."(Stefan Collini, 2006: p.35) Unlike most intellectuals, he was not bond to his own responsibilities to analytical reasoning (Ibid.) His self-awareness was with the end goal that he didn't consider himself as profoundly important or as a prophet-poet figure. He kept an equal separation and detachment from his own feelings and his political loyalties. Indeed, even his enthusiasm for Marx, as Auden was indicated that he, "was more psychological than political [...] as a technique of unmasking middle class ideologies." (Monroe Kirklyndorf Spears, 1963: p, 86) Because of the way that the events of the 1930s were inter-related, one can't approach them independently without connections and the impact of past, encircling and following events. This also applies to Auden's poetry, which is an impression of an entire generation. The critical analysis of the poem, in this respect, will think about the encircling conditions and events whereupon they were motivated. The major topic that characterizes "*Musée des Beaux Arts*" rotates around the suffering of the individual. The

poem reflects what kind of writer that its author is. He concerned of human suffering, as indicated by "*Amnesty International*", are those who move according to their own initiative on behalf of others to promote and protect human rights. They are defined by action rather than profession; they could be musicians, engineers, lawyers and poets"(Amnesty International, 2012). Auden was among the writers who utilized their poetry as an apparatus to fortify values and save a commitment to them before the whole society. Auden's urge, however, demonstrates that he knew about the writer's powerlessness to make an interpretation of his words into activities or of the poem's failure to implement activity: "For poetry makes nothing happen"(W. H. Auden, 1977:p. 241). This clearly "anti-poetic" line brings up the issue of the advantage of poetry, which Auden himself replies in a similar poem. He expresses that the writer's "unconstraining voice" in harsh times can at any rate "Still persuade us to rejoice"(W. H. Auden, 1977:p.241). He additionally addresses this inquiry in his essay on Yeats: "poets, i.e. persons with poetic talent, stop writing good poetry when they stop reacting to the world they live in"(Ibid.p.389). The finish of this argument on the role of poetry in life closes with the statement that verse, as words facilitating enduring or giving direction in troublesome occasions, is to be sure worthwhile (Justin Replogle1969:p.93). The moral inquiry in this argument proposes that poetry can't basically add to facilitating suffering. This inquiry, raised by the anti-poet, is immediately answered by the poet: "it survives, / A way of happening, a mouth"(Ibid, p.241). Thus, it isn't words that are to blame for not getting anything happened, rather, the mouth (the poet). S/he picks the words that reflect whether s/he is responding to the world around her/him or not. The elegy for Yeats closes with a substantial point on the worthiness of poetry, which gives literature the pass to human suffering: poetry teaches "the free man how to praise"(Ibid).

Auden couldn't consider myth without also serious query of Justice. When he started writing in the late 1920's, he was an heir to the great pioneers like Picasso , Stravinsky, Eliot, Yeats all of them were interested with myth, the primitive , that which is basic and covered up inside individuals . Auden thought of these consequences uniquely in contrast to the first era. From the beginning, he was interested with the possibility of myth as a manner for identifying what was wide-ranging among individual to dodging the injustice of division such as ethnic, sexual, racial, and subject. He believed that by determination the myth, by identifying that

unique elements in people, it is likely to pinpoint the sort of justice which appeared to have dodged the societies around him. The kind of mythical and profound characteristic of people that fascinated him at the time were the Freudian unconscious and the Marxist belief of history as a master to people, a boot transmission people with it toward a solitary goal (Edward Mendelson,1981:p, xxiii).

Though Icarus is a mythical figure belonging to the Greek mythology, Auden exploits him for his own poetic purpose of delineating a fractured modern world. In the original mythology in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Icarus the myth of Daedalus and Icarus, the father and son who escaped from the island of Crete on wings, is told in Book 8 of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Icarus has become the more familiar of the two characters as the ancient high-flyer who fell from the sky when the wax that secured his wings was melted by the sun. Auden has transformed Icarus into a different figure that symbolizes the modern conscience raising its voice against Man's suffering resulted from wars and blood shedding. Here, Icarus has become a figure for human tribulation. His suffering and death gives overtone for Auden's strong stance against all the violence on humanity.

"*Musee des Beaux Arts*" is a poem that spotlights on human suffering, catastrophe and agony by differentiating the lives of the individuals who endure and the individuals who don't. The vehicle by which this is accomplished is the world of painting, specifically crafted by the old masters. Auden is philosophical and conversational, joining close perception with indifferent thoughts. Written in 1938, just before the beginning of WW2, it flagged a critical change in Auden's lifestyle and expression. He deserted his political persona and started to create one that was more profound in nature. In the same time, he immigrated to the USA, deserting England and Europe. The poem is built on a striking mythical character that who lived in a repulsive and abhorrent world. If Auden described a modern world straightforwardly in exclusion of a mythic world, the picture of that world would not seem that much realistic and effective as it is now. Auden, however, has depicted the modern world on the backdrop of a classical world. In the original Icarus that it was found in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, as both character and image, Icarus continues to turn up in unexpected places, from scientific papers to advertising. Icarus has become a symbol for heroic brave but his flying and falling have been given a psychological timbre as well as a physical expression in all kinds of literature

from poems to thrillers. Icarus also regularly represents the alienation of the artist and the consequences of breaking out of boundaries, both cultural and social. Auden's use of that world as a backdrop of the modern world even renders the latter more precarious and threatening to the individual human beings. Defiantly, Auden appreciated the ancient classical world. (Alexander Nemerov, 2005:pp.780-810)

In Auden's version of the story of Icarus, the mighty Greek world is hopelessly absent being replaced by a reverse of that world– a world that is stripped of all the magnificence and grandeur. "*Musee des Beaux Arts*" is an informal analysis on the strange human circumstances that emerge in certain older paintings, quite one, "*The Fall of Icarus*," which is currently in the Musees Royaux des Beaux Arts in Brussels. Auden makes a speaker who is, to all goals and purposes, conveying a sentiment on different paintings that deal with human suffering. The speaker appears to be knowledgeable and uninterruptedly reaches a series of conclusions with respect to the situation of the individuals who endure and the individuals who don't. Those who don't are regularly viewers, ordinary individuals from the public approaching their day by day business oblivious in regards to what's happening in secret or simply out of earshot. What's more, if they notice something bizarre, they're excessively busy or confused making it impossible to make a move.(Ibid.) There's a heap of references in "*Musée des Beaux Arts*" to heroes who think big but they end badly, like Icarus. Auden's use of the imagery is also important that contributes to show the violence towards people. Some instances of Auden's images for the modern world are:

In Brueghel's Icarus, for instance: how everything
turns away a farmer was ploughing
Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may his field
Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,

The use of mythological personae is central in Auden's poem. Auden, the modernist poet and a pivotal figure of "Auden Generation", exploits the mythic figures to serve his own purpose of depicting a debased modern world. However, one must addresses the most

important developments throughout Auden's life: his seeing of the Second Sino-Japanese War in the first part of 1938, and his relationship to Christianity. Auden has been brought up the significance of Auden's visit to China. Auden composed a book about this visit, in which he consolidates poetry and journalism (Auden 1939). Auden has been convincingly opposed on various parallels that the American painter John Singer Sargent (1856-1925) displayed his 1918 painting "*Crashed Aeroplane*" , which delineates a plane shot out of the sky during the First World War, on Bruegel's work of art (A. Nemerov 2005:p, 708-710). Critics have shown the relationship between Bruegel's artistic painting and aerial fight originated before Auden's work. That Auden was interested by airborne fights is obvious from his depictions and photographs in "*Journey to a War*". In China, Auden really observed young men floating from the sky after their planes had been shot down; fortunately, their fall was broken by their parachute. Critics have proposed that these encounters may well have attracted Auden's thoughtfulness regarding Bruegel's Icarus and made him catch the concealed show of this picture in words (Ibid.)

Icarus, in this respect, embodies the spirit that we see in the members of the "Auden Generation" a generation that emerged in the 1930s and gave voice to the ethical and spiritual issues of the times in their writings. Auden's poetry at this point of time had deeply moral and ethical tone. He was seriously concerned with the political and social conditions of the contemporary times. That is why, a number of poems of this times(written around 1940s and 1950s) are labeled as anti-war poems; likewise, Auden got the title "anti-war poet".

In the poem "*Musee de Beaux Arts*," W.H. Auden uses ekphrasis to influence the idea of human suffering. The poem focuses on how evil corrupts human nature, as an antagonist that opposes love. In the poem, Auden criticizes passivity in human nature but focuses in its collective form. He talks in detail about refraining from doing well as a negative individual behavior (the ploughman, the shepherd and the ship crew) but within community, in order to show how the latter legitimizes and naturalizes the dominance of evil. In the first stanza the speaker mentions notes from different works of other paintings by a same artist, Brueghel .These references feature the bizarre, differentiating human encounters that are a part of life, one individual suffers frightfully, another carries on in any case with mundane activity. The philosophical inquiry that no one can ignore: why is it that some can purposely

disregard the cries for help from those encountering torment and agony? This is halfway replied in the poem, for example, in the first stanza there are children who did not want a miraculous birth to happen, despite an older generation passionately waiting for a miracle birth. They continue skating on ice, oblivious to the one-off happening. The speaker states with a cool detachment how there always must be such a gap between the young and the old. And a little further on the philosophical, fateful speaker asserts in a quiet fashion how martyrdom must run its course, no matter how dreadful, in some remote place, away from the tumult of the crowd.

About suffering they were never wrong,
The Old Masters: how well they understood
Its human position; how it takes place
While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along;
Who, when the aged are reverently, passionately waiting
For the miraculous birth, there always must be
Children who did not specially want it to happen, skating
On a pond at the edge of the wood:

They never forgot
That even the dreadful martyrdom must run its course
Anyhow in a corner, some untidy spot
Where the dogs go on with their doggy life and the torturer's horse
Scratches its innocent behind on a tree."

The second stanza reinforces the idea of separateness, of people at work, at play, whilst the disaster, the suffering, goes on elsewhere. Is it apathy that takes over? Are people consciously looking the other way to avoid involvement? There is an irony in this and the speaker captures it in a subtle, matter of fact fashion. As Icarus dramatically falls into the sea the event for one man was not an important failure; it made no impression on a passing ship with somewhere to get to; there is no reaction.

In Brueghel's Icarus, for instance: how everything turns away
Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may
Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry, the whole pageantry
But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone
As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green
Water; and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen
Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,
Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on."

Auden's poem, through the eyes of an observer of old paintings, explores the idea that, as humans, we knowingly carry on with our familiar and mundane duties as long as we can, even if we know someone may be suffering. We need routine, we fear distraction. Suffering will always happen and there's not much the ordinary person can do about it. The old Masters were never wrong about human suffering and its position in context with the rest of human society. While someone is suffering, others are going about their regular business. The elderly live in desperate hope for a miracle, but children are not particularly concerned. Even a martyr dies on the margins of society. For example, in the painter Brueghel's depiction of Icarus falling from the sky, "everything turns away" uncaringly from his disaster. The ploughman might have heard Icarus splash into the water, but it mattered little to him. The sun glimmers on white legs disappearing below the water. On the nearby ship, people must have seen the amazing sight of a boy falling from the sky, but they have somewhere to go, so they sail away. Also, in the lines, "They never forget / 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 against a tree." The dogs and horses are present in that painting, and no doubt inspired the lines. These examples in the poem's first stanza (with the interlocking rhyme scheme ABCAEDDBFCFCE) provide the context for the extended description of the Icarus painting in the second stanza (with a tighter rhyme scheme AABCDDBC). In each case, people go about their business or their play without comprehending, caring much about, or even knowing about another person's experience of suffering or hope or disaster. Children and animals do not have the elevated

sympathy which is necessary to understand someone else's plight; they just keep "skating." Animals are carelessly unaware of human suffering and merely attend to their biological needs.

So Icarus in the poem might function as a mouthpiece of the poet himself. The poet criticizes the modern world through the use of Icarus's figure. In "*Musée des Beaux Arts*" the beginning of the poem echoes great admiration for the Old Masters' understanding of suffering. Auden tended to follow a medical method of analysis in his poems. As the son of a doctor, Austin Warren argues, he "readily used the words diagnostician, disease, and symptom." (Austin Warren, 1979: p.229) He manifested in his writings the way others were going to think and write, and followed this strategy in his poetry and prose by depending on the diagnosis and treatment of following situation. His verses reflect the complexities and contradictions with which the 1930s were troubled. He was concerned, as Frederick Buell points out, that "with creating a new, more effectively public voice for his poetry." (Frederick Henderson Buell, 1973: p.118) The tool of diagnosis and treatment he used in the "hour of crisis and dismay" was his "strict and adult pen" that "can warn us from colors and the consolations, / the Shadowy arid works, reveal." (Hynes, p.12) This works about human suffering and pain. However, suffering is generally understood as pain, but as we shall see in "*Musée des Beaux Arts*", the reaction towards suffering might differ not only across cultures but even across time and circumstances within the same culture. Poetry here captures these differences in a manner that triggers our awareness of suffering, in addition to providing a minute description of the understanding of suffering on the level of the man in the street whose actions are purely instinctive. It is a reaction on suffering by the poet as a defender of human civil rights. The popular reading of the poem assures that Auden's ethical issues, especially his concern for humanity, occupy the prime place. Even in the midst of relishing at myths and rituals, he never forgets the cry of humanity. As Edward Mendelson puts the issue in his "The European Auden":

As Auden withdrew into the timeless world of ritual and myth, his ethical and political vision was undimmed: while celebrating rituals, he remembers that

‘some are abominable’, that ‘the Crucified has no wish for ‘butchery to appease Him.’

Another aspect linked with the poet’s treatment of myth is the adding of the sense of inevitability: what is to happen, will happen; none or nothing can prevent it from happening. Maybe, Auden has drawn upon Greek concept of fatalism. In the characterization of the *dramatis personae*, we have the manifestation of this theme. Auden’s criticism of Brueghel in "*Musée des Beaux Arts*" is based upon the idea mentioned above: why does everything turn away from the disaster? This question echoes the second line in the poem in which Auden wonders how the Old Masters understood suffering and its human position. In order to gain a better understanding of the poem, however, we should ask an artistic question: why did Auden not react aesthetically towards Brueghel’s portrait? Auden wrote from Brussels, on 31 August 1938, that he was taken by the vitality of the paintings around him,(John Fuller, 1998:p. 266) but that he was looking for a painting that would tell a parable. Finally, he found in Brueghel’s "*Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*", something important to write about.(Ibid) Since poetry and painting have long been considered sister arts, it would not be difficult for a poet to find something interesting to write about in an art gallery. Yet, Auden was more alarmed than amused while studying the paintings; his mind was preoccupied with memories and ideas that did not suit those of a tourist. The ghost of a horrible war hung over him and scenes of death and havoc, which he had witnessed in Spain and China, helped him imagine how terrible the world would be in the near future. Alexander Nemerov argues that Auden transformed Brueghel’s painting into "a surrealist diagram concerning the place of the intellectual in violent times. What do artists and poets and critics do in the face of catastrophe?"(Alexander Nemerov, 2005: p. 780 –810). A few months earlier, Auden had written about suffering as if he was its victim, as in poem 14 from "*In Time of War*" (W. H. Auden, 256) .Further on in the same poem, Auden extends to explain who those "we" were: "All women, Jews, the Rich, the Human Race."(Ibid.) He imagined what would happen from a battle scene he witnessed in China. First, he gave priority to those who would suffer in the beginning: women for their sex, the Jews for their ethnicity and the rich for their wealth; all of them are civilians. The whole of humanity should suffer eventually; even

poets and artists, as he realized later in 1939, were among the victims. This characteristic apathy and passivity can also be traced in other modernist poets, especially in Yeats and Eliot. In T. S. Eliot's "*Wasteland*" and "*The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*", the individual characters are bewildered and hapless in a changed social and cultural milieu. Eliot's protagonist, Prufrock is in a dire need of a love relationship. Instead of dynamic actions we see him hesitate, pause, and linger, eventually never reaching up to the proposal to a lady. His romantic as well as sensual journey ends up with his fantasizing of the mermaids (mythic creatures), singing and dancing in the bottom of the ocean. Many of W.B. Yeats's poems deal with myths and the sense of fatalism is also present here; for example, his "*The Second Coming*" depicts a world- though horrifying is still bound to come. By using his concept of history, Yeats makes prediction about the birth of a monster and the advent of a dark era. In the created myth, Yeats attributes an aura of doom: nothing can stand in the way of the monster. So one thing is clear: in handling myths and legends, the modernist poets create a milieu of doom and predestination.

III: Conclusion

In fine, Auden's commingling of myths with the epochal dimension of human sufferings serves a good number of functions. "*Musée des Beaux Art*" displays multiple thematic issues of modernism through the effective treatment of myths. It has eventually become a classic example of "ekphrasis" poem in modernism. Auden's poems of 1938 focus on how evil corrupts human nature, as an antagonist that opposes love. In "*Musée des Beaux Arts*," he criticizes passivity in human nature but focuses on its collective form. He talks in detail about refraining from doing well as a negative individual behavior (the ploughman, the shepherd and the ship crew) but within its community, in order to show how the latter legitimizes and naturalizes the dominance of evil.

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