

W. H. AUDEN

“MUSÉE DES BEAUX ARTS”

“IN MEMORY OF W. B. YEATS”

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I. INTRODUCTION

1. W. H. Auden (1907-1973) was the major poet writing in English during the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s. It was Auden who gave the name for the period after the development of atomic and nuclear weapons: “The Age of Anxiety.”

2. Born in England, he became an American citizen in 1946.

3. His poetry shows the influence of three other major twentieth century figures:

a. Sigmund Freud, the renowned Austrian psychologist, influenced two major themes in Auden’s poetry: rebellion against conformity and exploration of emotional repression.

b. T. S. Eliot, one of the two greatest English poets of the twentieth century, influenced Auden’s treatment of cultural decay and dehumanization in the modern world.

c. W. B. Yeats, the second greatest poet writing in English during the twentieth century, influenced Auden’s reflective poems in which the personal and the public interact.

4. Stylistic aspects of Auden’s poetry include (1) much use of irony and understatement, (2) a vocabulary which mixed colloquial and academic language and abstract words with concrete ones; and (3) use of both traditional verse form (rhyme, rhythm, stanzaic divisions, etc.) with free verse (the absence of fixed patterns in each of these poetic areas).

II. “MUSÉE DES BEAUX ARTS”

Note on pronunciation: The title, which translated as “Museum of Fine Arts,” is pronounced myoo zay day bo zar. There is a stress on the second syllable of “*musée*” (that is, the “zay”) and on “*arts*” pronounced as “zar,” or as a rhyme for the English word “car,” since z, the final consonant of “*Beaux*,” is carried over to the first syllable of “*Arts*.”

The first syllable of “Musée” is pronounced as the first syllable of the English word “music”; it is not stressed. “*Beaux*,” pronounced as “bo,” or as a rhyme for “no,” is not stressed. Nor is “*des*,” pronounced as the English word “day.”

A. The major themes of “Musée des Beaux Arts” are (1) the indifference of human beings to the suffering of other human beings and (2) the continuance of life despite horrible individual suffering.

B. Structure: The poem has a three-part structure.

C. Lines 1-4:

1. These lines present the thesis that the great painters—“Old _____” (2)—truly understood the nature of human suffering.

2. These great painters understood how people, caught up in their own problems, typically ignore (or try to ignore) the suffering of other people:

3. “About _____, they [the great painters] were never _____” (1).

4. Ironically, this last word is a moralistic term which is used to describe an immoral situation, the _____ of people to the suffering of others.

5. To prove this thesis about suffering, the speaker structures his discourse around three great paintings by Pieter Brueghel, a 16th-century Flemish (Belgian) artist.

6. A characteristic of Brueghel is to place the central event of a painting in an inconspicuous position.

D. Lines 5-9:

1. This brief section concentrates on Brueghel’s painting The Numbering at Bethlehem.

2. Here _____ (riding on an ass) and Joseph are lost in the crowd, tucked away in the lower part of the canvas. Except for his saw (_____)

was a carpenter), the couple would be indistinguishable from the other minor figures in the painting.

3. However, one point stands out: Nobody cares about the physical _____ of this pregnant woman or the psychological suffering of her worried _____, who is trying to find a place for his pregnant wife to stay.

4. Instead, the painting focuses on a tax collector, who is surrounded by people presumably haggling to lower their _____.

5. In the background sits the local inn, which is obviously full, thereby necessitating that Joseph and Mary would have to sleep in a barn.

6. Receiving even more space than Mary and Joseph are some children skating and throwing snowballs on a frozen pond.

7. The awaited “miraculous _____” (6) of Christ is lost in the hubbub of materialism and hedonism, of those “who did not specially _____ it [the coming of the Saviour] to _____” (7).

E. Lines 10-14:

1. Again a brief section which is devoted to a second painting by Brueghel, The Massacre of the Innocents.

2. Here the soldiers of Herod are shown brutally cutting the throats of the first-born Israelite children, hoping thereby to kill the Messiah who, Herod had learned, has been born.

3. Most of the painting’s canvas, however, is given over to a horse scratching its behind on a tree and some romping dogs.

4. In the words of the speaker, the painting contrasts the “dreadful _____” (11) of the slaughtered innocents with the dogs getting on with “their _____ life” (13) and the horse of one of Herod’s soldiers scratching “its _____ [notice the irony of this word] behind on a _____” (14).

5. The painter and the speaker of the poem convey the idea that most people are animalistic and have more concern for their own comfort—scratching an itch—than the horrible slaughter—the suffering of others—which is taking place nearby.

F. Lines 15-22:

1. This long section is based on a third painting by Brueghel, Landscape with the Fall of Icarus.

2. The Icarus story occurs in Greek mythology: Daedalus, a Greek artist and builder, had crafted a pair of wings of feathers and wax. With Daedalus's permission, Icarus, his son, strapped the wings on for a flight. Although his father had cautioned Icarus not to fly too near the sun, which could melt the wax, Icarus recklessly disobeyed. The sun melted the wax, and Icarus fell into the sea.

3. In Brueghel's painting, as in his two others discussed above, the main subject, Icarus, is almost _____ from the canvas.

4. It is only after a person looks at the picture for several moments, reminding himself/herself that Icarus must be there somewhere because the painting is _____ for him, that one notices two naked _____ protruding from the ocean in the lower right-hand corner, those of the unfortunate Icarus.

5. In the center foreground of the painting, there is a pleasant scene of country life: a "_____" (16), who is the largest object in the painting, his nearby sitting dog, and behind him a shepherd tending seventeen sheep.

6. Also given prominence in the painting is an "expensive delicate [merchant] _____" (20).

7. The farmer and the people on the ship must have seen "Something _____, a boy _____ out of the sky" (21), but since this suffering does not directly affect them, they turn away "Quite _____ from the _____" (16), which was not "an important _____" (18) to them, and "calmly" (22) went on with their lives.

8. Thus the three examples have proven the thesis that as long as one is not among the suffering, each person is callously _____ to the suffering of others.

9. The prosaic conversational tone of the poem makes its rhyme go almost unnoticed, just as the _____ go unnoticed in the paintings.

G. TITLE OF THE POEM

1. The title of the poem comes from the French name of the Museum of Fine Arts in Brussels, Belgium, which houses Brueghel's paintings on Icarus and the Numbering.

2. Note: The Massacre painting is in a Vienna, Austria, museum.

III. “IN MEMORY OF W. B. YEATS”

A. THEME: The death of a great poet signals, even symbolizes, the death of Western _____, which is poised on the brink of a world war.

B. GENRE: An _____ (a poem on the death of a great person).

C. STRUCTURE: The poem has three sections, each very different in stanza, line, and meter.

D. SECTION I (1-31)

1. It consists of _____ unrhymed stanzas: Four stanzas have six lines; one has five lines, and the last has only two lines.

2. Lines 5-6—“What _____ we have agree / The day of his death was a _____ day”—are repeated in lines 30-31.

3. Stanza 1 (1-6): The winter, when vegetation dies, is associated with the death of the poet. The d sound is prominently alliterated. Give examples.

_____ disappeared, _____, deserted, _____, dying
_____, day, _____, _____, day.

4. What personification is used in line 4? “_____” of a day.

5. Stanza 2 (7-11): It states that during this last “_____” (7), Yeats was far from his native Ireland.

6. His impending personal death will not mean the death of his poetry: “The death of the poet was kept from his _____” (11). Yeats’s poetry will survive his death, the speaker asserts.

7. Stanza 3 (12-17): It describes the moment of the death of Yeats. What city-planning or architectural metaphors are used to describe this physical breakdown of his body and mind? “_____ of his body”; the “_____ of his mind”; the “_____” presumably of his “feeling[s].”

8. This physical disintegration of Yeats’s body is meant to parallel the later developed theme of the breakdown of European nations, which were drifting toward _____.

9. Stanza 4 (18-23): It states that once Yeats is dead, interpretations of his poetry becomes “scattered” (18) and “punished” (21): “The words of a _____ man / Are modified in the _____ of the living” (22-23).

10. Stanza 5 (24-29): The speaker concedes that quickly most of the world will forget the death of Yeats.

11. Many will return to their materialism, as represented by the beast-like “[stock] _____” (25). Others will stay mired in their poverty: “And the poor have the sufferings to which they are _____ accustomed” (26). All of these will become mastered by their egotism: “And each in the _____ of himself is almost convinced of his freedom” (27).

12. However, some few will remember the cold January day of Yeats’s death as the day a literary giant passed away, an event which might even herald the beginning of the death throes of Western _____.

13. Stanza 6 (30-31): This repetition of lines 5-6 brings a changed meaning: The word “instruments” (30) now means people as well as _____. “Dark” and “cold” (31) now refer to _____ as well as the weather.

E. SECTION II (32-41)

1. It consists of one stanza of ten lines. All are rhymed, but eight employ SLANT RHYME, that is, imperfect or inexact rhyme.

Slant rhyme is produced in several ways:

- (a) It does not exactly repeat the rhymed vowel sound (“all / _____” of lines 32 and 35).
- (b) It approximates the final vowel sound (“decay / _____” as in lines 33 and 34).
- (c) It does not rhyme on a stressed syllable (“survives / _____” of 36 and 37).
- (d) It employs a final rhymed consonant which is merely similar (“_____ / survives” of 39 and 40)
- (e) It makes use of a variant of Slant Rhyme, called IDENTICAL RHYME or SAME RHYME, in which the rhymed word is repeated (“survives / _____” of 36 and 40).

Only lines 38 and 41 are perfectly rhymed: “south / _____.”

2. The section begins with a humanizing of Yeats, the literary giant, but quickly goes to an admiration for his poetic gift that transcended all the human weakness he revealed in his life: “You were _____ like us; your gift _____ it all” (32).

3. The speaker notes that even the great “poetry” which Yeats, full of pain and “hurt,” wrote about “_____ [revolutionary] Ireland” (34), when all is said and done, really did not change Ireland a whit. “For _____ makes nothing happen: it _____” (36).

4. How does poetry survive, that is, help humanity? Poetry survives as a source of insight and wisdom, not as a means of changing or causing events.

F. SECTION III (42-77)

1. It consists of nine _____, perfectly rhymed aabb. The perfect rhyme suggests that the speaker is coming to a _____ about the importance of poetry.

2. Note: In late editions of his poems, Auden deleted the second, third, and four stanzas of this section (46-57), which basically contend that over “Time” (46) a reader usually “forgives” (50) the foolish political views of poets, such as Yeats and Kipling (55), because of their genius “for writing well” (57).

Auden probably omitted these lines because he came to see them as a digression from the great theme of the poem’s last five stanzas, which spell out how poetry can be of service to humankind.

3. Lines 58-61 explicitly state the political theme: The nations of Europe, consumed with hatred for each other, are on the brink of a war which can destroy civilization:

In the _____ of the dark

All the _____ of Europe bark,

And the living nations wait,

Each _____ in its _____.

4. Poetry cannot change this political situation, but after the horror of the war, poetry can help the survivors pick up the pieces and begin again.

5. By exposing “the _____ of the night” (67), the poet can “Still persuade us to _____” (69).

6. The poet can turn the “curse” (71), the “deserts of the _____” (74), and “the _____ of his days” (76) into “the _____ fountain” (75) which will help to “free” (78) people from hatred and the desire for war.