

Tragedy, from a distance: portraying artistic detachment in "musee des beaux arts..."



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In 'Museum des Beaux Arts', W. H. Auden explores human responses towards tragedy across the cultures through the setting details of paintings within the 'Museum des Beaux Arts'. Whilst the poem might be read as an ode to human resilience in the face of tragedy, the consistent fluctuating description between the tragic event and commonplace activities suggests that humans can never truly detach themselves from disaster. Furthermore, the dissonance between the theme of high culture and the simplistic format of the poem is created by Auden to criticise the tendency of the 'old' artistic 'Masters' to disassociate emotionally from the tragic events they paint.

Auden, throughout the verse, uses frequent allusions to the external world of the 'Museum', to present both humanity and natural forces as able to overpower the suffering caused by tragic events, yet, nonetheless, neither are shown to be utterly separable from tragedy. There is a semantic field of everyday activity throughout the poem, including and most notably the described actions of people during a tragic event, albeit that be 'eating or opening a window or just walking dully along'. Here, the catalogue of present participles paired with the form of list is indicative of the ability of human beings to continue with commonplace activities amidst ongoing tragedy, and the later declarative stating that 'there always must be/ Children who did not specially want it to happen' further celebrates the human ability to remain unfazed by 'suffering', with the deliberate allusion to youth through collective noun 'children' reinforcing the impressive ability of both young and old to carry on with their daily lives after a traumatic event.

Nonetheless, just as a painting cannot exist without a frame, through similarly 'framing' the poem in reference to suffering suggests that neither

humans nor the natural world can be utterly detached from the trauma of tragic events, and that it is these experiences which in fact give shape to their existence. An example is the phrase 'the sun shone/ As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green/ Water': to position the moment of suffering between allusions to the natural world further gives the suffering human a significant role in moving the water, which is presented as passive as opposed to active, and the enjambment furthers a sense of movement and activity created by the moment of tragedy, and enjambment is again used for similar effect in the declarative ' the torturer's horse/ Scratches its innocent behind on a tree' in which the horse is defined in terms of an orchestrator of tragedy to suggest that even those that perceive themselves as uninvolved in tragedy cannot escape the effects. Through positioning this phrase in emphatic position of the first stanza's final line, Auden underpins claims of human detachment from tragedy, through foregrounding the poem's overall message that the impact of tragedy is always experienced on an unconscious or conscious level, by everyone and everything. The series of references to different cultures, from the untranslated French title (' Musée des Beaux Arts'), to the greek myth of ' Icarus', to the english language of the poem, further amplifies the ability of tragedy to span across cultures and continue to effect lives even in the present day.

Through extended use of ekphrasis, the poet criticises the artist's ability to detach themselves from the emotional significance of their artwork whilst creating it. The first stanza, despite foretelling a scene of tragedy, does not allude to a specific moment of suffering despite surplus comments on human responses to the apparent event, which could be seen as a veiled critique, by

the poet, on the artists' ability to paint a picture documenting tragedy without actually addressing the catastrophic consequences of the event at hand, and the lack of emotive language within the stanza is further evidence for the detachment between the event and the artist, who is characterised as distracted by less important interactions and objects, such as the 'expensive delicate ship that must have seen/ Something amazing' noted in 'Breughel's Icarus'. The dual adjectives juxtapose the sparse language used to address other features of the painting, which is suggestive of the huge amount of detail used to illustrate the ship in comparison with the actual tragedy, and the diction choice 'delicate' is used perhaps to portray this detail in a mocking tone through presenting the ship as something fragile and insignificant in comparison with the tragic event of Icarus' fate, ignored by the artist, who, like 'everything' in his artwork, 'turns away/ Quite leisurely from the disaster'. The non-standard syntax here draws attention to the artist's indifference in the face of immense danger, which is mocked by the poet immediately in the opening lines, which state 'About suffering they were never wrong,/ The old Masters:'. This phrase mocks the artist's overconfidence in his work through pejorative superlative 'never', and capitalisation of noun 'Masters' used to portray the egoism of the artist whose ideals are in fact outdated and 'old', shown through the fact that the suffering is referred to as 'it' throughout the stanza rather than addressed directly: indeed, the dual split stanzas further suggest a division between the artist's depiction of tragedy and tragedy in itself, with the argumentative tone employed by the poet through frequent caesuras contrasting the folly and intellectual discrepancy of the artists in relation to the topic of suffering.

Auden in ' Musee des Beaux Arts', meditates on the relationship between humanity and tragedy. He immerses readers in the artistic past, yet also offers a lesson for the present. Altogether, his composition warns against foolish attempts to sever humans from catastrophic events, as everyone and everything is proven to be subject to the emotional impact brought on by human suffering.