

Without happenings
of the painting "the
fall of



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Without suffering there could be no joy. In the Musee des Beaux Arts this appears to be the theme. In his poem, W.

H Auden puts a voice to the happenings of the painting “ The Fall of Icarus”. The narrator that Auden creates is one that delves into the realm of human suffering, wasted lives, and the plights presented in the painting. Auden’s narrative walks us through the events in the painting, one by one highlighting who is suffering and who is not. The ordinary everyday people going about their daily lives appearing oblivious to what is going on around them. It is accentuated with this line “ While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along;” Auden 4. The ordinary people are completely oblivious to what is happening around them, are distracted, or too busy to stop to help. At the time of W. H Auden writing the poem, he was in Germany visiting a friend.

This was during World War II and he witnessed human suffering up close and personal as a uniformed soldier. His friend spoke that with reporters that W. H Auden rarely spoke of what he had seen. Charles Miller reported that when W.

H Auden spoke of the war he did so “ briefly and with bitterness” Pearsall 4, 4 Which leads one to believe that the painting Musee des Beaux Arts made him think of the war. The pain inflicted on the people and the higher born or government simply ignoring the plight of the civilians. W. H Auden’s narrator speaks of how the old Masters knew suffering. One comes to the conclusion that W. H Auden had seen his share of suffering during his time in the war.

This can be seen in the odd way that the poem is assembled going from dark aspects into light as they weave a tapestry of the human fabric. In the poem, the narrator speaks of one person suffering and in another breath speaks of someone else attending to work or some other mundane chore. The narrator goes on to speak of children skating on a pond oblivious to the birth of a child. The children did not care or want the birth of a child to happen, but they are not going to stop skating to discover more about it. The narrator is always putting an emphasis on how the young deal with events and how the old deal with events.

As if the old know what is happening and are not and the young do not know what is happening, but still care nothing about it. The narrator speaks about the martyrdom and no matter how horrific and horrible it “ must” happen. Although, in the next breath the narrator tells us that it will happen in some place far away and unclear. We can draw parallels between the way the narrator speaks about the painting and television reporters. Images that are just as disturbing and hard to watch that are happening in some place far removed from our own continent and world. “ in a corner, some untidy spot” Auden, 11 In a way we ignore these happenings in the same way that the people in the painting are ignoring the hardships befalling others. The phrase out of sight, out of mind has never been truer.

The second part of the poem shows the way people are separate. Children are playing, others are working, some are suffering, and life goes on. Is there something more sinister at work here? Are the players in this poem avoiding one another so that they do not have to directly involve themselves in someone else’s troubles? The very odd part of the poem is when Icarus falls

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from the sky and not one person reacts. It is much as if this is an everyday occurrence. As if every day an adolescent falls from the sky. The ploughman does nothing at all, not even looking up from his work. The ship and the entire crew did not even bother to look or even stop. Life went on as the adolescent drowns as referenced with “As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green” Auden, 18 The idea of allowing someone to drown in front of us may seem absurd.

Although, it has happened before and has a name. It is called the Bystander Effect where we believe someone else will help so that we do not have to. This is most likely what the narrator is referencing to us. In World War II murders increased to an unheard of degree and not much was done about it. The poem *Museum des Beaux Arts* being narrated through W. H. Auden's eyes as he looked at the painting *The Fall of Icarus* speaks volumes of the author's thoughts. He lays bare that humans can work, play, or complete mundane tasks all while someone else is suffering or even dying. As humans, we have to carry on with what we are doing.

We are afraid of being pulled into the unknown. What we do know is that there will always be suffering and there is not much that we can do about it.