

W. H. Auden: Poems Summary and Analysis of "Musée des Beaux Arts"

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.

Analysis

"Musée des Beaux Arts" was composed in 1938, published under the title "Palais des beaux arts" in a newspaper in 1939, and included in the volume *Another Time* in 1940. It was written after Auden had spent time in Brussels, Belgium. The title refers to the museum that the poet visited while he was there, and the painting mentioned in the poem was hanging during the time of his visit. It is often considered a transition poem, as it occupies the space between the poet's early stage of abstruse, complicated poems and his latter, simpler, and more conversational period. The structure of the short poem is relatively simple, and it uses ekphrastic description (verbal description of images).

The museum Auden visited is known for its prominent collection of the Old Masters, particularly painters from the Netherlands. Many critics have discussed the painting mentioned in the poem, "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus" (1558), and others by Pieter Brueghel the Elder, a Renaissance-era painter, that were hanging in the gallery and may have influenced Auden in writing his poem. The identity of painter and painting is in doubt; critic Arthur F. Kinney maintains that while Brueghel painted this very scene, his version included the figure of Daedalus while the painting mentioned by Auden is actually a copy painted by Brueghel's son Pieter the Younger, which is exactly the same but leaves out Daedalus (father of Icarus). The painting depicts the end of the myth of Daedalus and his son Icarus told by Ovid, in which the two fashion wings for themselves to escape imprisonment, but Icarus flies too close to the sun and the wax on the wings melts, causing him to plunge to his death in the sea. This is the "disaster" mentioned in the poem.

Another Brueghel is *The Numbering of Bethlehem*, which depicts Joseph and Mary's arrival in Bethlehem to be counted for taxes, as told in the New Testament. The painting is full of small details, and Auden's lines about people walking "dully" along and the elderly waiting for the miraculous birth and the children skating happily along likely derive from this scene. There is also *The Massacre of the Innocents*, which Auden may have alluded to 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 ABCADEDDBFCFCE) 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 necessary to understand someone else's plight; they just keep "skating." Animals are blithely unaware of human suffering and merely attend to their biological needs.

Meanwhile, many adults remain unaware of or unconcerned by others' suffering. The ploughman "*may*" have noticed "the splash, the forsaken cry" of Icarus, but it was not "an important failure," and the plowing must go on. The ship nearby "*must*" have noticed, but it had "somewhere to get to," so it sailed "sailed calmly on." In the painting, another character, a shepherd is looking up, perhaps at Daedalus, but the poem does not explicitly mention this part of the scene; the poem notes only that "everything turns away / Quite leisurely from the disaster." Brueghel placed the ploughman's head, looking down at the ground, right by the shepherd's head, which emphasizes the contrast and the ploughman's unconcern. (A man on shore, near the legs of Icarus, does seem to be looking at him and even reaching out, but this character also is not mentioned in the poem.)

Auden's tone in the poem is measured, precise, and matter-of-fact. He does not use superfluous words or stick to traditional rhyme or meter. The poem is not didactic; its moralizing is delicate. The diction is certainly proletarian and accessible: "When someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along." The reader senses that this is Auden's quiet contemplation of a painting; one can almost see him standing before it, thinking about the nature of suffering amidst those who do not care. It is important to remember that the poem derives from the time immediately before the Second World War as nations were shoring up their militaries and preparing for conflict, and in this way its theme of unconcern prefigures those who go about their business in New York City in Auden's "September 1, 1939."

W. H. Auden: Poems Summary and Analysis of "The Unknown Citizen"

The poem begins with an ironic epigraph, "To JS/07 M 378 / This Marble Monument / Is Erected by the State."

The Bureau of Statistics and all other reports show that he will complied with his duties to "the Greater Community." He worked in a factory and paid his union dues. He had no odd views. The Social Psychology investigators found him to be normal, as did the Press: he was popular, "liked a drink," bought the daily paper, and had the "normal" reactions to advertisements. He was fully insured. The Health-card report shows he was in the hospital only once, and left cured.

The Producers Research and High-Grade Living investigators also showed he was normal and "had everything necessary to the Modern Man"—radio, car, etcetera. [The Public](#) Opinion researchers found "he held the proper opinions for the time of year," supporting peace in peacetime but serving when there was war. He was married and had the appropriate number of five children, according to the Eugenicist. He never interfered with the public schools.

It is absurd to ask whether he was free or happy, for if anything had been wrong, "we should certainly have heard."

Analysis

"The Unknown Citizen" (1940) is one of Auden's most famous poems. Often anthologized and read by students in high school and college, it is renowned for its wit and irony in complaining about the stultifying and anonymous qualities of bureaucratic, semi-socialist Western societies. Its structure is that of a satiric elegy, as though the boring, unknown

citizen was so utterly unremarkable that the state honored him with a poetic monument about how little trouble he caused for anyone. It resembles the “Unknown Soldier” memorials that nations erect to honor the soldiers who fought and died for their countries and whose names have been lost to posterity; Britain’s is located in Westminster Abbey and the United States’ is located in Arlington, Virginia. This one, in an unnamed location, lists the unknown man as simply “JS/07 M 378.”

The rhyme scheme changes a few times throughout the poem. Most frequently the reader notices rhyming couplets. These sometimes use the same number of syllables, but they are not heroic couplets—no, they are not in iambic pentameter—they are often 11 or 13 syllables long, or of differing lengths. These patterns increase the dry humor of the poem.

Auden’s “Unknown Citizen” is not anonymous like the Unknown Soldier, for the bureaucracy knows a great deal about him. The named agencies give the sense, as early as 1940, that a powerful Big Brother kind of bureaucracy watches over its citizens and collects data on them and keeps it throughout one’s life. This feeling makes the poem eerie and prescient; one often thinks of the dystopian, totalitarian states found in the writings of George Orwell and Aldous Huxley or the data-driven surveillance state of today. In Auden’s context, one might think of the state-focused governments of Hitler, Stalin, and Mussolini.

The Big Brother perspective begins from the very outset of the poem, with its evocation of a Bureau of Statistics. The man has had every aspect of his life catalogued. He served his community, he held a job, he paid union dues, he did not hold radical views, he reacted normally to advertisements, he had insurance, he possessed the right material goods, he had proper opinions about current events, and he married and had the right amount of children. It does not appear on paper that he did anything wrong or out of place. In fact, “he was a saint” from the state’s perspective, having “served the Greater Community.” The words used to describe him—“normal,” “right,” “sensible,” “proper,” “popular”—indicate that he is considered the ideal citizen. He is praised as “unknown” because there was nothing interesting to know. Consider, in comparison, the completely normalized protagonist Emmet in *The Lego Movie*.

At the end of the poem, the closing couplet asks, “Was he free? Was he happy? The question is absurd: / Had anything been wrong, we should certainly have heard.” With these last lines comes the deeper meaning of the poem, the irony that despite all of the bureaucratic data gathering, some aspect of the individual might not have been captured. It becomes clear that the citizen is also “unknown” because in this statistical gathering of data, the man’s individuality and identity are lost. This bureaucratic society, focused on its official view of the common good, assesses a person using external, easily-catalogued characteristics rather than respect for one’s uniqueness, one’s particular thoughts, feelings, hopes, fears, and goals.

Interestingly, and ironically, the speaker himself is also unknown. The professionals in the poem— “his employers,” “our Social Psychology workers,” “our researchers into Public Opinion,” “our Eugenicist”— are just as anonymous and devoid of personality. While a person might be persuaded that he is free or happy, the evidence of his life shows that he is just one more cog in the faceless, nameless bureaucratic machine.

W. H. Auden: Poems Summary and Analysis of "In Memory of W. B. Yeats"

William Butler Yeats died in winter: the brooks were frozen, airports were all but empty, and statues were covered in snow. The thermometer and other instruments told us the day he died “was a dark cold day.”

While nature followed its course elsewhere, mourners kept his poems alive without letting the poet's death interfere. Yet, for Yeats himself, mind and body failed, leaving no one to appreciate his life but his admirers. He lives through his poetry, scattered among cities and unfamiliar readers and critics, who modify his life and poetry through their own understandings. While the rest of civilization moves on, "a few thousand" will remember the day of his death as special.

In the second section of the poem, Yeats is called "silly like us." It was "Mad Ireland" that caused Yeats the suffering he turned into poetry. Poetry survives and gives voice to survival in a space of isolation.

In the third, final section of the poem, the poet asks the Earth to receive Yeats as "an honoured guest." The body, "emptied of its poetry," lies there. Meanwhile, "the dogs of Europe bark" and humans continue their "intellectual disgrace." But the poet is to "follow right / To the bottom of the night," despite the dark side of humanity somehow persuading others to rejoice in existence. Despite "human unsuccess," the poet can sing out through the "curse" and "distress." Thus one's poetry is a "healing fountain" that, although life is a "prison," can "teach the free man how to praise" life anyway.

Analysis

Along with his piece on the death of Sigmund Freud, Auden's tribute to the poet William Butler Yeats is a most memorable elegy on the death of a public figure. Written in 1940, it commemorates the death of the poet in 1939, a critical year for Auden personally as well as for the world at large. This was the year he moved to New York and the year the world catapulted itself into the Second World War.

Yeats was born in Ireland 1856 and embraced poetry very early in his life. He never abandoned the traditional verse format of English poetry but embraced some of the tenets of modernism, especially the modernism practiced by Ezra Pound. He was politically active, mystical, and often deeply pessimistic, but his work also evinces intense lyrical beauty and fervent exaltation in Nature. He is easily considered one of the most important poets of the 20th century, and Auden recognized it at the time.

The poem is organized into three sections and is a commentary on the nature of a great poet's art and its role during a time of great calamity—as well as the ordinary time of life's struggles.

The first, mournful section describes the coldness of death, repeating that "The day of his death was a dark cold day." The environment reflects the coldness of death: rivers are too frozen to run; hardly anyone travels by air; statues of public figures are desecrated by snow. These conditions symbolize the loss of activity and energy in Yeats' death.

At the same time, far away, wolves run and "the peasant river" flows outside of the rest of civilization ("untempted by the fashionable quays"), keeping the poetry alive. The implication is that the poems live even though the man may be dead. The difficulty with this situation, however, is that the man can no longer speak for himself; "he became his admirers." His poems, like ashes, are "scattered" everywhere and are misinterpreted ("unfamiliar affections" are brought into the poems). The ugly fact of bad digestion modifies the poems as "The words of a dead man / Are modified in the guts of the living."

Furthermore, as in “Funeral Blues” and “Musée des Beaux Arts,” the events of the average day go on—a trader yells on the floor, the poor suffer—for most people, the day goes unmarked. It takes a special soul to mark the importance of the day of the death of a great poet, and only “a few thousand” have such a soul. As scholar James Persoon writes, “These two elements—the poet’s death as national and natural crisis and the poet’s death as almost completely insignificant—describe a tension within which Auden explores the life of the work after the death of the author.” Thus, in addition to the thermometer telling us so, the speaker of the poem tells us that it is a “dark cold day” with respect to the popular reception of Yeats’ poetry.

In the second section the speaker briefly reflects on the generative power behind Yeats’ poetry. It was “Mad Ireland” that “hurt” him and inspired his poetry as a form of survival. For Yeats, “silly” like other poets or, more broadly, like other Irishmen or humans, poetry was a “gift” that survived everything other than itself—even Yeats’ own physical degeneration, the misinterpretations of “rich women,” and Yeats’ own failings. Poetry itself, from this perspective, survives in the midst of everything, not causing anything, but flowing out from isolated safety (perhaps the Freudian subconscious) and providing voice (metaphorically a “mouth”) to that deep level of raw and unassailable humanity.

The third and final part brings the reader back into more familiar territory, with six stanzas of AABB verse, every line in seven-syllable trochaic verse (three long-short feet followed by a seventh stressed syllable).

The body of Yeats (“the Irish vessel”) rests in the ground, the warring nations fight (metaphorically, the “dogs of Europe bark”), people misinterpret his work (“intellectual disgraces”), yet somehow, his poetry retains a place somewhere. The true poet, like Yeats himself, will “follow right / To the bottom of the night” (to the primordial humanity expressed in Yeats’ poetry), to that fundamental human freedom where an “unconstraining voice” can “persuade us to rejoice” in our existence.

True enough, the human “curse” (evoking the Fall of Man in *Genesis*) remains; death awaits. This is all too true in a time of war. But the poet can turn the curse into a “vineyard” where sweet poetic drink can form. On the one hand there are “deserts of the heart” and human distress, yet on the other hand, with this wine a “healing fountain” can release a man from “the prison of his [mortal] days.” A poet like Yeats, despite everything, can “teach the free man how to praise” that fundamental spark of existence that survives in one’s poetry.

W. H. Auden: Poems Summary and Analysis of "The Shield of Achilles"

Thetis looks at the images on the shield that Hephaestus has been making for Achilles during the Trojan War. She expected to see olive trees and vines and marble cities and ships on windy seas, but Hephaestus has forged “an artificial wilderness” under a leaden sky. The plain is bare and brown, but a great multitude of boots stand ready for war. A faceless voice dryly explains with statistics why war is required for justice, so they march forth.

Thetis also expected scenes of religious piety, but that is not what Hephaestus has been making. Barbed wire encloses a military camp in “an arbitrary spot,” and civilians observe from a distance while the camp punishes three pale prisoners by binding them to upright posts. No hope comes from outside. The prisoners and the citizens are too “small,” and the prisoners (perhaps also the other characters) “lost their pride / And died as men before their bodies died.”

Thetis has looked a third time over the shoulder of Hephaestus while he works. She looks for athletes and dancers enjoying games and music, but on the shield there was a “weed-choked field” instead of a dancing floor. One poor child wanders about alone, throwing a stone at a bird that flies away to escape. To him rape and murder seem normal. The child has never heard of a place with kept promises or even human sympathy.

Hephaestus limps away, revealing the whole shield to Thetis, who cries out in horror at its imagery. This is what the armorer decided to put on the shield of Achilles, son of Thetis, Achilles the man-slayer doomed to soon die.

Analysis

“The Shield of Achilles” provides a chilling confrontation between love and war. Written in 1952, it was included in his volume of poetry of the same name, which was published in 1955. The volume won the National Book Award in 1956. It is written in alternating seven-line stanzas of rime royal (ABABBCC) and eight-line stanzas in a ballad format (ABCBDEFE).

The contents of the poem derive from Homer’s *Iliad*, an ancient epic poem concerning a key part of the Trojan War. A lot has happened by this point. In book 18, the goddess Thetis, the mother of Achilles, asks the god Hephaestus (Latinized as Hephaestus) to create a shield for son so he can triumph in the war against Troy. Achilles’s earlier shield was taken by Hector after he killed Achilles’ close friend Patroclus, who had taken the armor into battle thinking that seeing this armor would scare the Trojans (Achilles had stayed out of the fight over a dispute with Agamemnon about a woman). Homer goes into great detail describing the shield that Hephaestus makes; it contains a veritable history of the world in its scenes of pastoral calm, marriage, war, the cosmos, art, and nature.

The poem begins Thetis looking over the armorer’s shoulder with disappointment. In each of her three stanzas, employing the repetition “She looked over his shoulder” in the first line, she is hoping to see images of civilization, joy, piety, and peaceful employment of athletic and musical arts. She loves her son and is thinking ahead to what he should be fighting for. But instead she sees images of irrationality, war, wilderness, immorality, injustice, and punishment. The contrast between what Thetis expects and what Hephaestus delivers, what Thetis desires and what the armorer thinks appropriate for Achilles, is stark.

The pattern of hope and disappointment occurs all three times, followed by the concluding stanza wrapping up the point: after all, Achilles is doomed to live a short but heroic warrior’s life. Achilles, like people in general, can try to live average but boring lives instead, but Achilles has chosen heroism, and his mother is dismayed.

Critic Scott Horton argues that the poem has contemporary resonance for Auden and his audience, reflecting a warning about the Cold War and the authoritarian warmongering of the 1950s: “Auden is not portraying the tragedies of the last war as such. He is warning of a world to come in which totalitarian societies dominate and the worth and dignity of the individual human being are lost. He warns those who stand by, decent though they may seemingly be, and say nothing.” This perspective is supported by anachronistic images on the shield. Thetis sees a scene that seems more like one from the Second World War: barbed wire around a military base. Modern war engages “millions” and spreads propaganda through “statistics.”

Another allusion on the military base concerns the three people punished. A crowd watches from a distance as three figures are brought forth and bound to three posts in the ground. This scene alludes to the Crucifixion of Jesus between two others, as though the three posts are crosses, and it makes the horrors of war seem more universal. Horton writes, “the anonymous image also displaces the greater spiritual significance of the Christian sacrifice, suggesting that in the modern world such sacrifice has lost its ultimate meaning and that the victims, Christ in particular, have become nameless and insignificant.” Poet Anthony Hecht has noted that the executed men were not martyrs, just victims. One also might see in this image an allusion to the Jews and others killed in Nazi concentration camps.

When Hephaestus hobbles away (in myth he is lame) without comment, the shield is his only statement. He put a mirror up to reality and reproduced it on the “shining metal.” In contrast, Thetis’ “shining breasts” reflect her motherly love, less with reality than with hope. Auden once said, “A society which was really like a good poem, embodying the virtues of beauty, order, economy, and subordination of detail to the whole, would be a horror.” As much as we might strive for the virtues, reality—whether presented by Hephaestus, Homer, or Auden—shows us a different, more distressing world.

W. H. Auden: Poems Summary and Analysis of "September 1, 1939"

The poet sits in a dive bar on 52nd Street, disappointed in the bad decade of the “low dishonest” 1930s. The decade and recent events have consumed people’s private lives. The odor of death “offends” the night of September 1, 1939.

Future scholars will describe how a cultural problem led from the time of Martin Luther to the time of Hitler’s hometown of Linz, a pattern which has driven the German culture into madness. Meanwhile, schoolchildren and the average person know well enough: “Those to whom evil is done / Do evil in return.”

The ancient Greek historian Thucydides knew about dictators and so-called democracy, their “elderly rubbish” of arguments that enable the dictator to cause pain, mismanagement, and grief while an apathetic population permits it. It is happening again in 1939.

The “neutral” New York skyscrapers demonstrate the power of “Collective Man” to accomplish great things, but America is in a “euphoric dream” of neutrality as war breaks out in Europe. America looks “out of the mirror” and sees the face of imperialism and the “international wrong.”

Normal people continue their average American days, keeping up the music and keeping on the lights. Though we make ourselves seem comfortable and at home, we are actually “lost in a haunted wood,” like children who are afraid of the dark and “have never been happy or good.”

The most pompous pro-war speeches spouted by “Important Persons” are not as base as our own jealous wish “to be loved alone.” This is a normal error and not just what “mad Nijinsky wrote / About Diaghilev” (after Diaghilev left him for Diaghilev’s lover); each person selfishly wants what she or he cannot have.

Commuters come from their “conservative dark” families into “the ethical life” of the public sphere, vowing to improve their lives. Meanwhile, “helpless governors” make their

“compulsory” political moves now that war has broken out. Do they have any choice? They seem deaf to advice and unable to speak for those who have no voice.

Yet, all the poet has is his voice, which can expose the lie of neutrality rhetoric and the romanticism of the “man-in-the-street,” who goes along with the authorities and enjoys his “sensual” pleasures. To the poet, there is no “State,” but we are all interconnected and rely on each other. That is, “We must love one another or die.” (Auden’s later version reads: “We must love one another and die.”)

While the world slumbers, flashes of hope come from “the Just,” exchanging their messages. The poet seeks to be among them, human all the same, troubled by despair but still holding up “an affirming flame.”

Analysis

“September 1, 1939,” one of Auden’s most famous and oft-quoted poems, gained new prominence after the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. Curiously, though, Auden came to dislike this work, finding it “dishonest” and a “forgery.” He had his publisher include a note that the work was “trash he was ashamed to have written”; he also tried to keep it out of later collections of his poems. It is unclear why he felt so embarrassed by the poem. It has remained a staple of Auden’s work as well as an inspiring call to speak out in hope for justice and brotherhood despite times of war or terror.

The poem was written in 1939, just as German troops invaded Poland and began the Second World War. It was published in *The New Republic* that year and included in the collection *Another Time* the following year. Hitler’s invasion of Poland declared his military strength and flouted the agreement of the Munich Conference, shocking the entire world. The United States did not enter the war until 1941.

Auden begins his poem with the speaker sitting in a dive bar in New York City. Hitler’s actions have brought the “low dishonest decade” to a close, bringing “the unmentionable odour of death” to the September evening. He contemplates Hitler’s psychology using a Jungian concept—a “huge imago,” a psychological concept of the idealized self—and he imagines that historians will explain how German culture, perhaps starting with Martin Luther’s Protestant shakeup of Christianity hundreds of years earlier, led Germans to go along with Hitler’s psychopathic evil.

Yet, even the average person perceives the basic human patterns in the story: doing evil to someone leads that person to do evil in return. More than 2,000 years ago, Thucydides saw how dictators abuse an apathetic population to accomplish their ends, even in a democracy like Germany (or the United States). The same pattern keeps occurring. Perhaps this is a reason why Auden’s nine stanzas all have the same pattern of eleven lines that, while they do not rhyme, tend to repeat vowel and consonant sounds at the ends of lines (for example, the last four lines of stanza 1: earth/lives/death/night; stanza 2: know/learn/done/return; stanza 3: away/pain/grief/again). The story told here is not new.

In the fourth stanza the poet focuses on New York City, a paragon of modern capitalism, which has yielded “blind skyscrapers” that “proclaim / the strength of Collective Man” via competition and diversity rather than coordinated socialistic efforts. Yet, one cost of this social blindness is isolationism. People cling to their average lives; they are content to pursue their happy dreams, and they keep the music playing and the lights on so that they never see how morally lost they are. They trust “Authority” (the government or the capitalist telling

them to remain neutral for their own good), which fits their selfish and sensual desires to fulfill their goals regardless of what is happening in Europe.

What is missing is awareness of this basic human jealousy that privileges oneself over others, leading not only to evil but also complacency and apathy when evil is happening elsewhere, as in Europe. Meanwhile, politicians inevitably take advantage of these tendencies as the geopolitical “game” plays out.

In the last two stanzas the poetic voice tries to overcome the problems identified in the previous stanza: “Who can reach the deaf, / Who can speak for the dumb?” Auden scholar James Persoon notes that the speaker only has one voice with which to “undo the folded lie” that humans are too jealous to seek justice.

Yet, the speaker is one of many people who provide “points of light” like this poem. In contrast to the points of light that come from a firing gun, the poem’s rhetorical points “flash out” as a message exchanged with other members of “the Just,” those who seek justice. Although each person writes selfishly and separately, “dotted everywhere,” poems about solidarity and justice create a kind of solidarity. In this way, the network of poems “ironically” emerges spontaneously, mirroring the network of New York skyscrapers which emerge without coordination and make the city.

The poet knows he is just like everyone else, “composed like them / Of Eros [alluding to the god of love, representing the passions] and dust [alluding to Biblical passages about human mortality and returning to the natural dust of the earth upon death].” It is a time of “negation and despair” for anyone who is paying attention to Europe. Nonetheless, the speaker hopes his words can show “an affirming flame” of human connectedness and concern.

If Auden’s speaker is speaking against apathetic neutrality in the face of German aggression, is he calling for the United States to go to war? Or is the role of such a poet to affirm common humanity and justice along with the others who are “Just,” taking a prophetic route while hoping that people will turn from their selfish ways? When Auden changed the key line from the idealistic “We must love one another or die” to “We must love one another and die,” the meaning seems to have changed to express that going to war in the name of love was, in the case of the Second World War, perhaps in hindsight, justified.