

Core 311 :History of English Literature 1890-1939

UNIT 02 Poems

03. Musee Des Beaux Arts

- by *W. H. Auden*

(1) About the Poet:

Δ ***Born: 21 February 1907,*** York, United Kingdom

Δ ***Died: 29 September 1973,*** Vienna, Austria

Δ Wystan Hugh Auden (/ˈwɪstən ˈhjuː ˈɔːdən/; 21 February 1907 – 29 September 1973) was a British-American poet.

Δ Auden's poetry was noted for its stylistic and technical achievement, its engagement with politics, morals, love, and religion, and its variety in tone, form, and content.

Δ He was born in York and grew up in and near Birmingham in a professional middle-class family. He attended various English independent (or public) schools and studied English at Christ Church, Oxford.

Δ After a few months in Berlin in 1928–29, he spent five years (1930–35) teaching in British private preparatory schools, then travelled to Iceland and China to write books about his journeys.

Δ In 1939 he moved to the United States and became an American citizen in 1946, retaining his British citizenship.

Δ He taught from 1941 to 1945 in American universities, followed by occasional visiting professorships in the 1950s.

Δ His Notable Works:

- Auden wrote three major volumes:
- A City Without Walls, and Many Other Poems,
- Epistle to a Godson, and Other Poems,
- and the posthumously published Thank You,
- Fog: Last Poems.

Δ His Awards:

- Pulitzer Prize for Poetry 1948
- National Book Award for Poetry 1956
- American Academy of Arts and Letters Gold Medal for Poetry 1968
- St. Louis Literary Award 1970, etc.

(2) About the Poem:

Δ The Musée des Beaux-Arts houses one of the most outstanding public collections in France.

Δ It features paintings, sculptures, drawings and objets d'art from every school, ranging from the 15th century to the present day.

Δ "Musée de Beaux Arts" was published in 1940.

Δ The title translates to "Museum of Fine Arts."

Δ It is based on a visit to Auden made to the Museum of Fine Arts in Brussels, Belgium, in 1938.

Δ While there, he was inspired by the paintings he saw.

Δ Auden's subject is a painting by Pieter Bruegel the Elder: "Landscape With the Fall of Icarus."

Δ The "miraculous birth" of Christ is the dominant event associated with the first instances of suffering.

03. Theme:

The major theme, or general message, of this poem is ****about the nature of human suffering.****

04. Setting:

The poem takes place in ****the Old Masters Museum, housed in the main building of the Musées Royaux des Beaux Arts de Belgique in Brussels, Belgium.****

05. Rhyme Scheme:

There is ***an end-rhyme scheme, however there is no set rhyme pattern based on lines.*** For example: ***wrong and along*** (lines one and four); ***be and tree*** (lines six and thirteen); ***forgot and spot*** (lines nine and eleven). ***The two most important literary devices are imagery and allegory.***

****06. Critical Appreciation:****

The old painters and tragic dramatists were never wrong about suffering. They very well understood the nature of suffering and also humanity's indifference to it. While some people in the world are suffering, the others are busy doing their work. Someone is suffering while other is busy in eating or in opening the window of his drawing room or in walking.

Some religious minded people may care for Christ. They may eagerly wait for Christ to be reborn as has been foretold in the Christian scriptures; on the other hand, the children do not care much for religion and Christ, and so are indifferent to the possibility of his rebirth. They go on with their games such as skating on the frozen surface of a lake, and are not at all keen about the birth of Christ. The great and old painters never forgot to give expression of that great disaster in their paintings. Crucifixion of Christ is taken as an ordinary matter or a routine hanging of a criminal which does not move them or cause them much concern. This general indifference is clearly brought out by two paintings of Brueghels, one depicting the birth of Christ and other his crucifixion. In the latter painting as Christ is crucified, the crucifier's horse goes on rubbing his behind against a tree, totally unconcerned with the great tragedy.

A third picture of Brueghel entitled Icarus brings out this indifference of humanity clearly. It shows Icarus' falling from the sky into the sea. When he falls into the sea, everything looks at him and turns its face away and remains busy in its work without any worry of his disaster. A farmer who was at work in the fields nearby the sea heard the sound of Icarus falling into the sea. But he did not attach much importance to the failure and downfall of Icarus. Icarus fell headlong. His head disappeared first in the greenish water of the sea. Some farmer must have observed merely two white legs rising out of the sea. The crew of the ship must have been surprised to see a boy falling down from the sky into the sea, but it made no efforts to rescue him. It sailed on undisturbed.

07. Conclusion:

The message of “Musée des Beaux Arts” is that ****all humans suffer and need help at some point.**** However, when one might need help, there may be no one who can provide it because they are too absorbed in their own life/work/suffering.

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