





*Limitations of Human empathy in Auden's  
Musée des Beaux Arts*

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حدود التعاطف الإنساني في قصيدة أودن "متحف الفنون الجميلة"

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## **Abstract:**

*"Musée des Beaux Arts" is a powerful meditation on the limitations of human empathy and the ways in which art can help us overcome them. Through its vivid imagery and thoughtful observations, the poem encourages us to look beyond the surface of our everyday lives and connect more deeply with the experiences of others. This research examines how Auden's works have a power in limitation and meditation inside human soul. It puts human in a comparison with a chaotic world, human suffers with less abilities to face this world by meditation. The type of power, which Auden intends, is the power of art to pass limitations like using imagery and allusion.*

**Keywords:** Auden, arts, limitation, meditation, imagery, Musee

## **المخلص:**

قصيدة "متحف الفنون الجميلة" هي تأمل قوي عن القيود المفروضة على التعاطف الإنساني. من خلالها نجد أن الفن يمكن ان يساعدنا في التغلب على هذه القيود. فمن خلال صورها الحية وملاحظاتها المدروسة، تشجعنا القصيدة على النظر إلى ما هو أبعد من سطح حياتنا اليومية والتواصل بشكل أعمق مع تجارب الآخرين. يبحث هذا البحث في مدى قوة أعمال أودن في الحد والتأمل داخل النفس البشرية. حيث إنه يضع الإنسان في مقارنة مع عالم فوضوي يعاني منه الإنسان بقدرة أقل على مواجهة هذا العالم بالتأمل. نوع القوة، الذي يقصده أودن، هو قوة الفن لتجاوز القيود مثل استخدام الصور والإشارة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: أودن، الفنون، الحدود، التأمل، الصور. متحف

## **Introduction**

In W.H. Auden's poem "Musée des Beaux Arts," the speaker portrays on the nature of suffering and the bonds and limitations of human empathy. The poem discusses the idea that human beings often fail to fully comprehend the depth of another's pain or misfortune, and may even become desensitized to the suffering of others. One of the ways that Auden portrays this theme is by contrasting the mundane activities of daily life with the extraordinary events that occur around us. For example, he describes how "the dogs go on with their doggy life" while "Icarus [falls] into the sea." This juxtaposition suggests that even when something dramatic and tragic is happening right in front of us, we may be too focused on our own immediate concerns to fully grasp the gravity of the situation(Bloom 67).

However, the poem also suggests that there is a way to go beyond our human limitations and truly empathize with others. The final lines of the poem suggest that we can learn from the examples of great artists who have depicted suffering in their work. By looking at portrays including Brueghel's "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus,"(Auden). we can begin to understand the full impact of tragedy and feel a deeper sense of compassion for those who have experienced it.

## Methodology

The methodology about W.H. Auden's poem "Musée des Beaux Arts" involves the use of several literary techniques to convey its central themes of human limitation and the power of art to overcome them. One of the most striking aspects of the poem's methodology is its use of imagery. Auden employs vivid and specific descriptions to evoke a sense of the ordinary world alongside the extraordinary events happening within it. For example, he describes "the sun shone / as it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green / water," (Auden), while "some disaster" is happening "out at sea." This contrast helps to emphasize the idea that we often fail to see or comprehend the full impact of suffering, even when it is happening right in front of us.

Another important aspect of the poem's methodology is its use of allusion. Auden references several works of art throughout the poem, including the paintings of Brueghel and the myth of Icarus. These allusions serve to deepen the poem's themes by drawing on a rich cultural history of depictions of human suffering and tragedy. Additionally, they help to convey the idea that art has the power to communicate complex emotions and experiences that might otherwise be difficult to fully express.

The poem's structure is also an important part of its methodology. Auden uses a loose form of free verse, with irregular stanzas and no set rhyme scheme. This structure reflects the idea

that the world is often chaotic and unpredictable, and that human beings are limited in their ability to control or understand it. Overall, the methodology of "Musée des Beaux Arts" is characterized by its use of vivid imagery, allusion, and a loose free verse structure. Through these techniques, Auden is able to explore complex themes in a way that is both emotionally resonant and intellectually engaging.

### **Limitation in "Musée des Beaux Arts"**

W.H. Auden's poem "Musée des Beaux Arts" is a powerful meditation on the limitations of human existence as well as the ways in which we are often unable to fully comprehend or engage with the world around us. Throughout the poem, Auden explores the idea that our physical and emotional limitations prevent us from truly understanding and engaging with the suffering of others, and that these limitations ultimately contribute to our own feelings of isolation and despair (Fyre 235).

One of the key themes of "Musée des Beaux Arts" is the inevitability of suffering and tragedy in the world. Auden draws heavily on the story of Icarus, the mythological one who flew away close to the sun and fell to his death, as a metaphor for the human experience. In the poem, Auden describes how Icarus falls "unsignificantly into the sea," a phrase that highlights the idea that even the most significant and dramatic events can ultimately be reduced to insignificance in the grand scheme of things. This sense

of futility and insignificance is echoed throughout the poem, as Auden describes the ploughman who continues to work even as Icarus falls to his death behind him (Krisch 81).

While Auden's poem is certainly a meditation on the limitations of human existence, it also suggests that there may be ways to transcend these limitations and link with others on a deeper level. One of the most powerful images in the poem is the description of the "miraculous birth" of the ship, which seems to emerge fully formed from the sea. This image suggests that there may be moments of transcendence in which we are able to break free from our limitations and connect with something larger and more meaningful than ourselves (Ibid).

At the same time, however, the poem also suggests that such moments of transcendence are fleeting and rare. Auden's poem is filled with images of isolation and separation, from the "old masters" who painted the scenes of suffering depicted in the poem to the ploughman who remains oblivious to the tragedy unfolding behind him. Ultimately, the poem suggests that our limitations as human beings are not easily overcome, and that we must learn to live with the inevitable suffering and tragedy of the world around us (Lerner 115).

Despite its bleak and despairing tone, "Musée des Beaux Arts" is ultimately a poem that offers a powerful and poignant commentary on the human condition. By exploring the limitations of human existence in such an evocative and thought-provoking way, Auden invites readers to reflect on their own experiences of suffering and isolation, and to consider the ways in which we might be able to connect with others and transcend our limitations. While the poem may not offer easy answers or solutions, it is a testament to the power of poetry to help us grapple with the most profound and difficult questions of the human experience (Mendelson 271).

In W.H. Auden's poem "Musée des Beaux Arts," the speaker observes the painting "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus" by Pieter Brueghel and reflects on the human tendency to ignore or remain indifferent to the suffering of others. The painting portrays the myth of Icarus, who tried to fly too close to the sun with wings made of feathers and wax, and fell into the sea when his wings melted. However, in the painting, Icarus is merely a small figure in the corner of the composition, while the rest of the world carries on with its daily activities (Ibid).

The poem contemplates the idea of human limitations and the consequences of attempting to go beyond them. The speaker notes that;

"the sun shone

As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green  
Water" (ll,10-12),

It is implying that the world continues on regardless of Icarus's demise. The poem suggests that humans are limited in their ability to control or alter the natural order of things, and that attempts to do so can lead to tragic consequences. In the poem, the speaker seems to suggest that human beings should acknowledge their limitations and focus on the things they can control, rather than attempting to exceed their capabilities. This theme is reflected in the lines;

"About suffering they were never wrong,

The old Masters: how well they understood

Its human position" (ll, 15-17).

The "old Masters" understood the limitations of humanity and the inevitability of suffering, and their art reflects this understanding. The poem can be interpreted as a commentary on the dangers of ambition and the pursuit of power, as well as a warning against ignoring the suffering of others. The image of Icarus falling into the sea serves as a metaphor for the consequences of overreaching and the importance of recognizing our own limitations (Miller 165).



Auden's "Musée des Beaux Arts" reflects on the idea of human limitations and the consequences of attempting to exceed them. The poem suggests that humans should acknowledge their limitations and focus on the things they can control, rather than attempting to alter or control the natural order of things. The painting "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus" serves as a powerful metaphor for the dangers of ambition and the importance of recognizing our own limitations.

As the speaker notes;

"In Brueghel's Icarus, for instance: how everything turns away

Quite leisurely from the disaster" (ll, 6-7).

This suggests that the world can be indifferent to human suffering, and that we must be careful not to ignore the consequences of our actions. The poem reminds us that while we may be capable of great things, we must also recognize our own limitations and the importance of empathy and compassion towards others.

One of the central themes of the poem is the idea that human beings are often unable or unwilling to fully comprehend the depth of another's pain or misfortune. This is evident in the poem's opening lines, which describe how "About suffering they were never wrong, The Old Masters." The implication here is that artists throughout history have recognized the universality of human suffering, but that the rest of us are often too caught up in our own

concerns to truly empathize with those who are suffering (Peter321).

Auden explores this theme further through his use of imagery. Throughout the poem, he contrasts the mundane activities of daily life with the extraordinary events that occur around us. For example, he describes how;

"the ploughman may

Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,

But for him it was not an important failure."(ll,19-21).

This juxtaposition suggests that even when something dramatic and tragic is happening right in front of us, we may be too focused on our own immediate concerns to fully grasp the gravity of the situation. However, the poem also suggests that there is a way to go beyond our human limitations and truly empathize with others. The final lines of the poem suggest that we can learn from the examples of great artists who have depicted suffering in their work. By looking at paintings such as Brueghel's "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus," we can begin to understand the full impact of tragedy and feel a deeper sense of compassion for those who have experienced it(Vendeler 69).

Auden's use of literary techniques also contributes to the poem's overall impact. For example, he employs allusion to reference several works of art throughout the poem, including the paintings of Brueghel and the myth of Icarus. These allusions

serve to deepen the poem's themes by drawing on a rich cultural history of depictions of human suffering and tragedy. Additionally, they help to convey the idea that art has the power to communicate complex emotions and experiences that might otherwise be difficult to fully express.

The poem's structure is also an important part of its methodology. Auden uses a loose form of free verse, with irregular stanzas and no set rhyme scheme. This structure reflects the idea that the world is often chaotic and unpredictable, and that human beings are limited in their ability to control or understand it. "Musée des Beaux Arts" is a powerful and thought-provoking poem that invites us to reflect on the limitations of our empathy and the ways in which art can help us overcome them. Through its vivid imagery, subtle literary techniques, and thoughtful observations, the poem encourages us to look beyond the surface of our everyday lives and connect more deeply with the experiences of others (Spender 181).

## **Conclusion**

In "Musée des Beaux Arts," W.H. Auden presents a profound exploration of the human condition, highlighting our limitations in understanding the depth of others' pain and suffering. Through vivid imagery, subtle literary techniques, and references to art, Auden urges us to move beyond our self-centeredness and connect with the experiences of others. He suggests that art can serve as a vehicle for empathy and understanding, providing a way for us to bridge the gap between ourselves and those who are suffering. Overall, Auden's poem invites us to reflect on the importance of empathy, the power of art, and the need to transcend our limitations in order to connect more deeply with the world around us.

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