

ENGLISH 1102

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Landscape With the Fall of Icarus Musee des Beaux Arts

The Greek mythological figure Icarus is best known for his tragic and life-ending plunge into the Aegean Sea (*Oxford English Dictionary*: “Icarus”). Icarus’s refusal to heed his father’s advice led to his demise. The infamous myth symbolizes “ambitious or presumptuous acts which end in failure or ruin” (OED: “Icarian”). Pieter Brueghel the Elder’s four hundred and forty-seven year old painting, “Landscape With the Fall of Icarus,” immortalizes this historically infamous expiration. “Landscape With the Fall of Icarus” also inspired “Musee des Beaux Arts”: a poem by W. H. Auden that elaborates on Icarus’s death. Auden’s poem is split into two distinct sections: the first is a description of Brueghel’s wisdom, and the second is a description of Brueghel’s painting. Yet, a pervading theme of tragedy and disaster infiltrates both sections of Auden’s works. Throughout both the painting and the poem, a constant juxtaposition and reflection of life and death is observed. The intersection of “Landscape With the Fall of Icarus” and “Musee des Beaux Arts” illustrates the fact that death is an unavoidable facet of life and that repose is no more significant than vitality.

In Pieter Brueghel the Elder’s “Landscape With the Fall of Icarus,” the contrast that is drawn between the painting’s title and focal image illustrates the intertwined nature of life and death. The title of the painting leads the audience to believe that the landscape will contain a prominent illustration of the death of Icarus in the Aegean Sea. Instead, the large canvas that is filled with a beautiful seascape and common people performing common tasks shows the title character as a single, minute leg that is tucked away in the bottom right corner of the painting. In contrast, Brueghel uses a garish hue to designate a ploughman and his horse as the focal point of the painting. The dull orange color of the ploughman’s undershirt, the only non-muted color in the painting, creates a jarring contrast against the cool and muted blues and greens. After examining the ploughman, the viewer’s gaze is left to wander from shepherd to ship and from horse to city. Upon viewing the entire canvas, the only representation of the fallen Icarus is the subtle, thrashing leg. A sharp contrast is drawn between Icarus, representing death, and the focal point of the vivacious orange, representing life. Neither element is dominant, and, in turn, Brueghel’s work does not favor life over death or the inverse. Instead, this contrast of death and life is deftly utilized by Brueghel to emphasize the fact that one does not exist without the other.

The symbiotic relationship of life and death is emphasized by the tones and colors used in Brueghel’s masterpiece. Color selection is a very effective means by which artists are able to convey tone and emotion. Primary colors are most often used to convey powerful emotions; blues representing melancholy and pensiveness, reds representing rage and anger, and yellows representing cheerfulness and levity. “Landscape With the Fall of Icarus” is painted in muted blues, greens, and taupes and is devoid of any primary colors. In this illustration of the death of a young child, the only semblance of an emotional color is the orange shirt of the ploughman that effectively draws attention from the tragedy and towards life and daily tasks. Even the setting sun that is descending into the sea lacks the vivid reds and purples that are often associated with

sunsets. Instead, this sun barely reflects its dull orangish-yellow glow onto the greenish-blue sea. The bland sunset, symbolically representative of death or an ending, removes the tragic emotions from Icarus's demise by placidly illuminating his death in indifferent and emotionless tones. Brueghel's emotionless illustration of living and dying glorifies neither life nor death, but rather further established the two as equal inverses through his deliberate use of color.

Brueghel's usage of color is mentioned only twice in Auden's literary work. Auden notes Brueghel's brushwork of the "green/water" and Icarus's "white legs" (19-20, 19). In describing muted colors instead of the ploughman's orange shirt, Auden focuses the audience's attention of the lack of emotional undertones in the painting. The colors that Auden draws attention to, green waters and Icarus's white legs, carry an important symbolic value. Green and white, which represent inexperience and innocence respectively, illustrate Icarus's innocent life and death. This description works in direct conjunction with the mention of the "torturer's horse" and its "innocent behind" (13, 14). Both these innocent creatures - Icarus and the torturer's horse - are exposed to tragedy and death: Icarus's death resulting from his own inexperience and the horse's exposure to tragedy resulting from his owner's actions. By illustrating the fact that even the most innocent creatures are plagued by death and tragedy, Auden illuminates the fact that death is unavoidable for every living creature; thereby, revealing the inseparable nature of life and death.

Auden's vocabulary and descriptions further emphasize the equivalent weight that life and death possess. Throughout the poem, Auden describes Icarus's death through emotionless and detached words. Icarus's fall, as seen through the eyes of the ploughman, is described as "not an important failure" (18). The ship that is sailing away from Icarus sees the same event as "something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky" (21). Descriptions of the other characters' actions parallel the dispassionate description of Icarus's passing. The activities of the living are portrayed as lax and leisurely: "walking / dully," "reverently, passionately waiting," "skating / On a pond," and "Scratch[ing] its innocent behind" (4-5, 6, 8-9, 14). By portraying both the actions of the living and dying in the same detached light, Auden is able to reveal the fact that life holds no greater significance than death and vice versa.

To thoroughly emphasize the inextricable essence of life and death, both Auden and Brueghel surround death with life. In Brueghel's "Landscape With the Fall of Icarus," the dying Icarus is engulfed by life. A ploughman, a shepherd, a fisherman, a hawk, a horse, a city, foliage, six ships, and nineteen sheep engulf life, and are ignorant of a dying Icarus. The ships, which are made of wood and steel, seem to be more alive than Icarus due to their engorged sails. This same encircling theme is mimicked by Auden in "Musee des Beaux Arts." Auden opens his poem with the theme of constant suffering. He then quickly encircles life of every sort around the everlasting nature of suffering:

While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking / dully along; /
How when the aged are reverently, passionately waiting / For the miraculous
birth, there always must be / Children who did not specially want it to happen,
skating / On a pond at the edge of the wood/ (4-9).

This pattern is continued into the description of Brueghel's painting. In the second section of his poem, Auden begins by mentioning "the disaster" of Icarus's demise (16). Icarus is quickly surrounded by a disinterested ploughman, a sun that "shone / As it had to on the white legs," and an "expensive[ly] delicate" ship that "had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on" (18-19, 18, 22). Though life and death are often thought to be antitheses of each other, the strategic

placement of vitality next to tragedy in both “Landscape With the Fall of Icarus” and “Muse des Beaux Arts” reveals their intertwined nature.

The intersection of “Landscape With the Fall of Icarus” and “Muse des Beaux Arts” reveals the equivalent and inseparable nature of life and tragedy. Brueghel was able to convey this message through the contrast of title character and focal point, his color choice, and the juxtaposition of lively and tragic images in his painting. Auden reinforced the same message through highlighting Brueghel’s wisdom and significant areas of the painting in his poem. By studying these two pieces, one is able to realize that death and life are infinitely intertwined and are equally significant. In realizing this dualistic nature of life and death, one is able to truly enjoy life by not fearing death.

Works Cited

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