

The Fall of Icarus

According to Greek mythology, to escape exile in Crete, Daedalus made wax wings for himself and his son Icarus to use to fly away. Daedalus told Icarus he could fly under one condition: he was not to fly too close to the sun, for the heat would melt the wings. But Icarus ignored his father's warning and fell to his death in the ocean. The tale is well remembered today and is often seen not just as a tragedy but as a lesson. Some use it to remind their children to always obey them (like Icarus, we should listen to the warnings of our elders, since the warnings are there for our own security), while others simply use it to remind people to be aware of their own limitations (like Icarus, we too must be careful not to get too close to the sun). The story is also the subject of a well-known painting attributed (possibly erroneously) to Pieter Breughel, the Dutch painter: *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*.



As its title might suggest, the painting is a landscape. It shows a clear sky with a hot sun shining down and reflecting off a clear ocean that contains a large ship in its center. In the foreground is a cliff, with a ploughman performing the routine task of plowing his field. Others in the picture are watching their flock or minding their own fishing. In the lower corner can be seen a pair of legs dangling in the water. These, apparently, are Icarus's, and the viewer's gaze is not directed to them at all. Instead, one only finds them when looking for Icarus, knowing he must be there given the title of the painting. The painting, thus, emphasizes not the tragedy of Icarus but the routineness of life around him. It suggests that each of us is too wrapped up in our own lives to notice or acknowledge another's suffering or tragedy, even one as remarkably odd as Icarus's (how many of us have seen a man fall from the heavens and go kerplunk in the ocean?). The painting argues that we are all, essentially, shallow and self-absorbed, unable to look past the monotony of our own tasks or care about anything that we have not decided is important to us. That must be what you meant, right, Pieter?

This seems to be the conclusion made by most analysts of the work. Two separate poets have written memorable poems about the painting (technically, both are examples of ekphrasis, a literary description of a visual work of art), and both seem to accept that conclusion. In 1938, W.H. Auden wrote "Musée des Beaux Arts," named after the museum in Brussels, Belgium that displays the painting. His free-verse poem is divided into two relatively short sections. The first refers to general human suffering and pain, while the second refers directly to Breughel's wonderful work. Auden remarks how, in the work, "everything turns away/Quite leisurely from the disaster" of Icarus's fall. To Auden, all of us will constantly go on with our lives, even as tragedy falls all around us. Tragedy, Auden writes, "takes place/While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along." This is a sad fact of life, but it is true. We witness a car accident on the highway, we slow down and stare, maybe even call 911 to alert authorities, but we keep on driving on forever to our next meetings, our next work shifts, our next day of school. Even grander tragedies are thought of in terms of the personal. We might remember what we were doing when we found out the Twin Towers had fallen, but most of us eventually go on with the routine that is life.

In 1960, the American poet William Carlos Williams offered his take on the painting, one more personal than that of Auden. Williams' fear in seeing the painting is not the fear of the routine but rather of Icarus himself. To Williams, our flight in life is ever upward, but eventually all of us will die. And who will notice our deaths? Williams' poem is short and moves quickly, lacking much punctuation. It makes the poem itself feel short and brief, just like life I suppose. And he notes that "a

splash quite unnoticed” occurred in the water amidst all the “pageantry/of the year.” Yet Williams ends the poem by stating that the splash “was/Icarus drowning.” Thus, we are forced to acknowledge the almost fully invisible, almost fully unnoticed death of Icarus at last, even while Breughel and Williams himself have obscured it.

Or have they? Both Williams and Breughel use the title “Landscape with the Fall of Icarus.” In doing so, they are placing the landscape in the foreground, but the fall of Icarus is still the last image created. Just as the viewer of the painting is left looking for Icarus and remembering finding him, the reader of Williams’ poem is left knowing that the “unnoticed” splash was caused by Icarus. Thus, was the tragedy actually unnoticed? No. A tragedy will always be noticed and felt; it just might not get the reaction the sufferer of the tragedy himself will have expected or possibly even deserved.

1) According to paragraph 1, one possible lesson of the story of Icarus’s fall is that

- A. We should not trust the warnings of others who cannot be trusted.
- B. We sometimes need to escape from confinement.
- C. We should all be aware of what we are not capable of doing.
- D. We are all selfish and self-centered individuals.
- E. We will all fail to notice tragedies happening all around us.

2) It can be inferred from paragraph 1 that Pieter Breughel

- A. is not a very well-known Dutch artist
- B. may not agree with the standard interpretation of *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*
- C. was mostly active in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries
- D. created *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* because of his fascination with Greek mythology
- E. may not have painted *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*

3) The second paragraph primarily discusses

- A. the author’s interpretation of *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*
- B. the selfishness of Daedalus in *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*
- C. poetic analyses of *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*
- D. what Breughel intended to paint in *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*
- E. the methods Breughel used in painting *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*

4) *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* contains all of the following EXCEPT

- A. Daedalus
- B. a ploughman
- C. a ship
- D. a fisherman
- E. a shepherd

5) *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* is housed in

- A. Holland
- B. Greece
- C. France
- D. Belgium
- E. America

6) As used in paragraph 4, the word **obscured** most nearly means

- A. formed
- B. hidden
- C. destroyed
- D. created
- E. realized

7) Compared to W.H. Auden's "Musée des Beaux Arts," William Carlos Williams' "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus" is

- A. in free verse
- B. shorter
- C. an ekphrasis
- D. less depressing
- E. more intimate

8) The passage uses each of the following literary devices EXCEPT

A. Aphorism, characterized by the use of a concise statement that is made in a matter of fact tone to state a principle or an opinion that is generally understood to be a universal truth. Aphorisms are often adages, wise sayings and maxims aimed at imparting sense and wisdom.

B. Imagery, characterized by using vivid or figurative language to appeal to the reader's senses.

C. Rhetorical question, characterized by a question posed for effect rather than one that expects a reply.

D. Apostrophe, characterized by a sudden turn from addressing the general audience to addressing an absent person, group, or personified abstraction of an idea.

E. Onomatopoeia, characterized by the use of words whose pronunciation is very close to the actual sound or noise they are meant to represent.

9) Based on the information in the passage, summarize the story of Icarus and explain its possible morals or messages.