Meet the Poet – W.H. Auden (1907 – 1973)

“Poetry makes nothing happen. It survives in the valley of its saying.” – W.H. Auden

For much of the middle part of the twentieth century, Wystan Hugh Auden was hailed as the greatest poet of his generation—the successor to T.S. Eliot and William Butler Yeats. His poetry was brilliant and political. Auden often used tradition formal techniques to explore modern social and spiritual concerns. His prolific output and versatile abilities helped clear the way for a new poetic style in the post-World War II period.

Born in York, England, the son of a distinguished doctor, the young Auden had no particular literary ambitions; he had originally planned to become a mining engineer. His absorbing interest during childhood and adolescence was science, primarily biology. However, by 1922 he discovered a knack for poetry—publishing his first poem two years later, at the age of seventeen. After entering Oxford University in 1925, Auden famously declared to his English tutor that he planned to become “a great poet.”

While at Oxford, Auden became friends with a group of some of the brightest young poets in England, including Stephen Spender, Cecil Day-Lewis, and Louis MacNeice. Auden’s influence in this illustrious group was so great that it was know as the “Auden Group,” and later dubbed by journalists and critics as the Auden Generation. After college, Auden began teaching in Scotland and England. A somewhat eccentric teacher, he was nonetheless liked by his students. Soon after Auden began teaching, his first book of verse was published. By the age of twenty-five, with the publication of a second volume, Auden had made a mark on the literary landscape. At the time, his poems were characterized, in part, by his belief that poetry could act as a kind of therapy, performing a function similar to psychoanalysis.

Although his writing was primarily psychological, Auden, like many of his contemporaries, was active in the politics of his day. “I am not one of those who believe that poetry need or even should be directly political,” he wrote, “but in a critical period such as ours, I do believe that the poet must have direct knowledge of the major political events.” He went to Spain in 1937 during
the Spanish Civil War, hoping to aid the Loyalists in their fight against fascism. This visit inspired the poem “Spain,” one of Auden’s most famous works. In 1938, just before the start of World War II, Auden moved to the United States. “The attractiveness of America to a writer is its openness,” he said. Auden became a U.S. citizen in 1946. The next year he won the Pulitzer Prize for The Age of Anxiety.

In the late 1940s, Auden divided his time between Europe and the United States. From 1956 to 1961, he was professor of poetry at Oxford University. Throughout the rest of his life he continued to write, creating a diverse body of work that includes not only poetry but also drama, criticism, blues music, musical librettos, and nonsense verse.

**QUESTION #1:** Read the above biography of W.H. Auden and discuss THREE similarities between Auden and Aldous Huxley, author of Brave New World. Consider what we’ve learned about Huxley during our study of Brave New World. If you need a refresher on Huxley’s biography, you can check out [THIS source](http://www.egs.edu/library/aldous-huxley/biography/)

**IRONY** – Irony is a discrepancy between appearance and reality.

**Verbal Irony**—Verbal irony exists in poetry when the speaker says one thing, but the poet clearly means something else.

**Dramatic Irony**—Dramatic irony occurs when the audience or reader knows something that the speaker of the poem or one of its characters does not know.

*Continue on to Part I.*
Part I – Poem – “The Unknown Citizen” By W.H. Auden
Poster - Motor Manufacturing—Empire buying Makes Busy Factories (1928)

Directions: View the poster – Motor Manufacturing—Empire buying Makes Busy Factories. Poster art in the 1920s shared many characteristics with fine art—bold, strong shapes, bright colors, and a focus on progress and technology.

Motor Manufacturing—Empire buying Makes Busy Factories (1928)
by Clive Gardiner (Poster. Victoria and Albert Museum—London)

http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O76313/empire-buying-makes-busy-factories-poster-gardiner-clive/

QUESTION #2: What do you infer about the people shown in this image? Please reference specific details from the poster in your response. How might this poster relate to the title of Auden’s poem “The Unknown Citizen?”

Directions: Read Auden’s poem “The Unknown Citizen.” Answer the questions that follow the poem.

“The Unknown Citizen” (1939)
(To JS/07/M/378 This Marble Monument Is Erected by the State)¹
by W. H. Auden

He was found by the Bureau of Statistics to be
One against whom there was no official complaint,
And all the reports on his conduct agree
That, in the modern sense of an old-fashioned word, he was a sainť,
For in everything he did he served the Greater Community.
Except for the War till the day he retired
He worked in a factory and never got fired,
But satisfied his employers, Fudge Motors Inc.
Yet he wasn't a scab² or odd in his views,
For his Union reports that he paid his dues,
(Our report on his Union shows it was sound)
And our Social Psychology workers found
That he was popular with his mates and liked a drink.

¹ A quotation or short inscription at the beginning of a poem is called an epigraph.
² A scab is slang for someone who does not want to join a union.
The Press are convinced that he bought a paper every day
And that his reactions to advertisements were normal in every way.
Policies taken out in his name prove that he was fully insured,
And his Health-card shows he was once in hospital but left it cured.
Both Producers Research and High-Grade Living declare
He was fully sensible to the advantages of the Installment Plan
And had everything necessary to the Modern Man,
A phonograph, a radio, a car and a frigidaire.
Our researchers into Public Opinion are content
That he held the proper opinions for the time of year;
When there was peace, he was for peace: when there was war, he went.
He was married and added five children to the population,
Which our Eugenist\(^3\) says was the right number for a parent of his generation.
And our teachers report that he never interfered with their education.
Was he free? Was he happy? The question is absurd:
Had anything been wrong, we should certainly have heard.

**QUESTION #3**: In “The Unknown Citizen,” how is the citizen described? Quote specific words or phrases from the poem in your response.

**QUESTION #4**: Cite two examples of verbal irony in “The Unknown Citizen” and explain how they help to convey the poem’s message. (Be sure to clearly state what you believe the poem’s message to be!)

If you are not familiar with the myth of Icarus, check out [this link](http://www.pantheon.org/articles/i/icarus.html) to refresh your memory on that particular Greek myth.

The Myth of Icarus

[http://www.pantheon.org/articles/i/icarus.html](http://www.pantheon.org/articles/i/icarus.html)

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\(^3\) A Eugenist is someone who studies or supports the hereditary enhancement of the human race by controlled breeding.
Part II – Poem – “Musee des Beaux Arts” By W.H. Auden

Poster - *The Fall of Icarus* (1558-1566) by Pieter Brueghel the Elder

**Build Background:** The title of the poem “Musee des Beaux Arts” refers to the Royal Museum of Fine Arts in Brussels, Belgium. This museum owns the painting The Fall of Icarus, to which Auden refers in his poem. This painting, by Pieter Brueghel the Elder, depicts the Greek myth of Icarus. In this myth, Icarus and his father, Daedalus, escape from prison by making artificial wings of feathers and wax. Daedalus warns Icarus not to fly too close to the sun because it could melt the wax, but Icarus ignores his father’s warning and falls to his death. In Brueghel’s rendition, Icarus’s legs can be seen disappearing into the sea in a corner of the painting, while everything else appears normal.

**Directions:** View the painting by Brueghel entitled *The Fall of Icarus* at this link. This painting is the topic of Auden’s poem “Musee des Beaux Arts.”

*The Fall of Icarus* (1558-1566) by Pieter Brueghel the Elder


**Directions:** Read the poem “Musee des Beaux Arts” by W.H. Auden and answer the questions that follow.

“Musee des Beaux Arts” by W.H. Auden (1938)

About suffering they were never wrong,
The Old Masters⁴; how well, they understood
Its human position; how it takes place
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:
They never forgot
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 on a tree.
In Breughel’s Icarus, for instance: how everything turns away
Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may
Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,
But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone

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⁴ The Old Masters refers to great European artists of the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries.
As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green Water; and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky, had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.

**QUESTION #5:** According to the speaker in “Musee des Beaux Arts,” what did the “Old Masters understand about suffering? What do the dogs do and how does “the torturer’s horse” behave? What does this suggest about nature’s reaction to suffering?

**QUESTION #6:** What “disaster” occurs in the second stanza? According to the speaker of the poem, how does “everything” in Brueghel’s painting react to this disaster?

**QUESTION #7:** Find 2 examples of dramatic irony in “Musee des Beaux Arts” and explain how they support the poem’s theme. (Be sure to clearly state what you believe the theme of this poem to be!)

**QUESTION #8:** What is your opinion of Auden’s portrayal of humanity in both of these poems? Cite one example from each poem in your answer.

**QUESTION #9:** In what ways do these poems suggest the disillusionment of British writers during this time period?

**QUESTION #10:** In what ways are people today disconnected from the world around us? Is culture still preoccupied with statistics instead of emotion. Explain.