

Fall of Icarus

Directions:

1. Begin by projecting the slide on the Powerpoint file featuring Breughel's *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*. Have students silently observe the painting for about a minute or so and then ask a volunteer to explain how the painting connects to your recent reading of the Greek myth of Daedalus and Icarus. You don't want to discuss too many elements of the painting yet; you just want to make sure that everyone can see Icarus' legs flailing in the water in the bottom right-hand-corner of the painting. (about 3-5 minutes)

2. Hand out the half-sheet questions that go along with the painting. You can have students work solo, but I've had more success by having students work in teams of two as they discuss the questions and then each record his/her own answers. (12-15 minutes)

3. After the students have answered all of the questions on the handout, lead a discussion and have students contribute their own analysis. You might want to use the answer key included in this file to guide the discussion. (about 10 minutes)

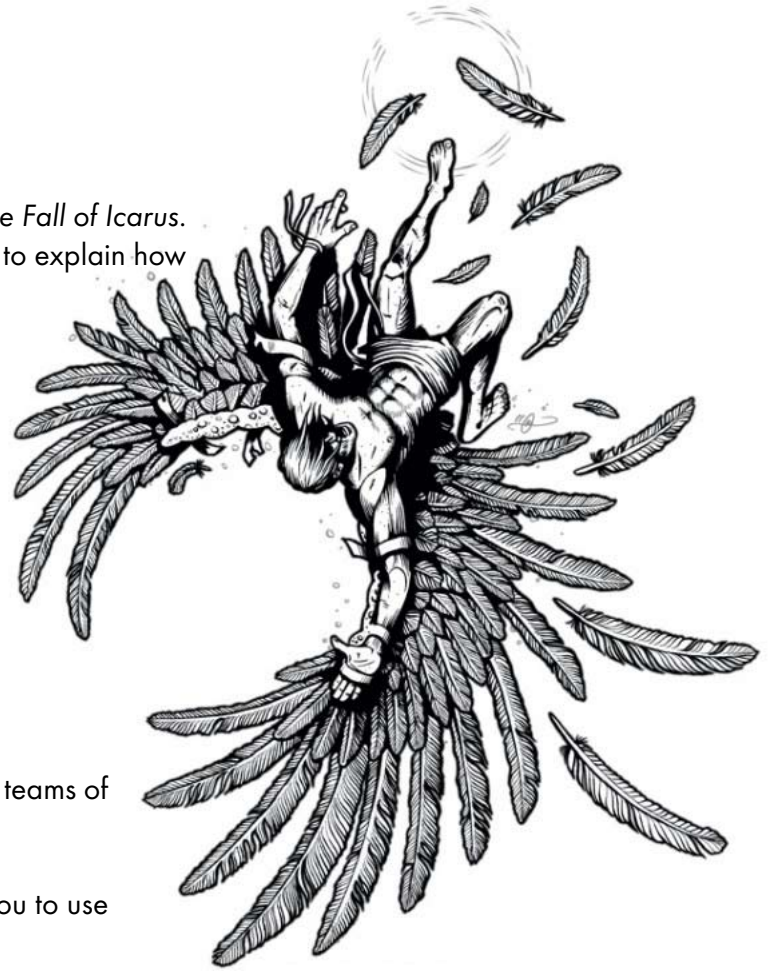
4. Next, hand out copies of the Auden poem. Again, have students work independently or in teams of two as they work through the questions included on the poem sheet. (12-15 minutes)

5. Follow-up on the Auden poem with a discussion of the answers. There is another key for you to use to help guide this discussion, as well. (about 10 minutes)

6. Finally, I've included the lyrics of "Ob-La-Di, Ob-La-Da," an upbeat song by The Beatles on a similar theme as the painting and poem. Hand out the half-sheet of lyrics so students can follow along as you play the mp4 file on your computer. You will need speakers, obviously, that are loud enough for your class to enjoy the song. You also can access the song on Youtube, if that's easier for you, by going here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5g7uldG2gos>

If this address doesn't work, just search Youtube for "Ob la di ob la da Beatles" and you'll find plenty of copies that will work fine for your needs. There's not a lot to analyze in the song (it's pretty straight-forward), but it has the same overall message of people needing to go about their daily business since, well, life goes on. There's less tragedy, more joy here. (The song is just over 3 minutes long and your class may/may not wish to discuss/analyze the song lyrics.)



Landscape with the Fall of Icarus, Breughel



Answer these questions on a separate sheet of paper. Be sure to use complete sentences as you answer every part of the following:

1. When you first looked at the painting, what was the first thing you noticed? How long did it take for you to notice Icarus' legs in the bottom right-hand corner?
2. How would you describe the tone of the painting? Give two examples from the scene that support your conclusion.
3. What viewpoint did Breughel give to the painting? By this, I mean, where does the artist have us "standing" as we look at the scene? What's interesting about this choice? Who are we actually supposed to be in the scene?
4. How do the artist's color and lighting choices impact the message the viewer takes away from the painting?
5. Although the death of Icarus is the critical piece of this narrative scene, this is not a painting about death. What is Breughel's message to the viewer?

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Musee des Beaux Arts (Museum of Fine Arts)

About suffering they were never wrong,
The old Masters: 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
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.

- W. H. Auden, 1940

Answer these questions on a separate sheet of paper. Be sure to use complete sentences as you answer every part of the following:

1. Auden opens the poem with an inversion. Instead of saying, "The old Masters were never wrong about suffering," he says, "About suffering they were never wrong, the old Masters..." What is significant about this launch to the poem? How does the inversion change the line's impact?
2. This poem is free verse, meaning it does not use consistent meter patterns, rhyme, or any other noticeable formula. Auden does, though, occasionally rhyme some of his lines. Identify at least three of Auden's rhyming pairs of words and explain why you think he chose to join those specific lines.
3. In the last stanza, Auden specifically refers to the Breughel painting. He says that "everything turns away" from the disaster. List three people/things in the painting that have turned their backs on the drowning teenager.
4. What is the theme of the poem?
5. Do you think the people in the scene heard/noticed Icarus falling from the sky or do you think they were all so absorbed in their own busy lives that they didn't notice at all? Does one way or the other change Auden's theme?
6. Both Breughel and Auden seem to be suggesting that people notice, but are indifferent to the suffering of others. Do you agree with this idea or not? Give two concrete examples from your life or studies to support your stance.

Ob-La-Di, Ob-La-Da – The Beatles

Desmond has his barrow in the market place...
Molly is the singer in a band...
Desmond says to Molly, "Girl, I like your face"
And Molly says this as she takes him by the hand...
Ob-la-di, ob-la-da, life goes on, brah!...
Lala how the life goes on...
Ob-la-di, ob-la-da, life goes on, brah!...
Lala how the life goes on.

Desmond takes a trolley to the jewelry store...
Buys a twenty carat golden ring... (ring!)
Takes it back to Molly waiting at the door...
And as he gives it to her, she begins to sing...(sing!)
Ob-la-di, ob-la-da, life goes on, brah!...
Lala how the life goes on...
Ob-la-di, ob-la-da, life goes on, brah!...
Lala how the life goes on.

In a couple of years, they have built a home sweet home,
With a couple of kids running in the yard,
Of Desmond and Molly Jones... (Ha ha ha ha ha)

Happy ever after in the market place...
Desmond lets the children lend a hand...
Molly stays at home and does her pretty face...
And in the evening she still sings it with the band...
Ob-la-di, ob-la-da, life goes on, brah!...
Lala how the life goes on...
Ob-la-di, ob-la-da, life goes on, brah!...
Lala how the life goes on.

In a couple of years, they have built a home sweet home,
With a couple of kids running in the yard,
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Happy ever after in the market place...
Molly lets the children lend a hand...
Desmond stays at home and does his pretty face...
And in the evening, she's a singer with the band...
Ob-la-di, ob-la-da, life goes on, brah!...
Lala how the life goes on...
Ob-la-di, ob-la-da, life goes on, brah!...
Lala how the life goes on.

And if you want some fun,
Sing Ob-la-di-bla-da.



Ob-La-Di, Ob-La-Da – The Beatles

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Molly is the singer in a band...
Desmond says to Molly, "Girl, I like your face"
And Molly says this as she takes him by the hand...
Ob-la-di, ob-la-da, life goes on, brah!...
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Desmond takes a trolley to the jewelry store...
Buys a twenty carat golden ring... (ring!)
Takes it back to Molly waiting at the door...
And as he gives it to her, she begins to sing...(sing!)
Ob-la-di, ob-la-da, life goes on, brah!...
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In a couple of years, they have built a home sweet home,
With a couple of kids running in the yard,
Of Desmond and Molly Jones... (Ha ha ha ha ha)

Happy ever after in the market place...
Desmond lets the children lend a hand...
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And in the evening she still sings it with the band...
Ob-la-di, ob-la-da, life goes on, brah!...
Lala how the life goes on...
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In a couple of years, they have built a home sweet home,
With a couple of kids running in the yard,
Of Desmond and Molly Jones...

Happy ever after in the market place...
Molly lets the children lend a hand...
Desmond stays at home and does his pretty face...
And in the evening, she's a singer with the band...
Ob-la-di, ob-la-da, life goes on, brah!...
Lala how the life goes on...
Ob-la-di, ob-la-da, life goes on, brah!...
Lala how the life goes on.

And if you want some fun,
Sing Ob-la-di-bla-da.



Landscape with the Fall of Icarus, Breughel – Answer Key/Discussion Starters

1. When you first looked at the painting, what was the first thing you noticed? How long did it take for you to notice Icarus' legs in the bottom right-hand corner?

Answers will vary, but few students actually notice Icarus right away. Instead, most will notice the dominant plowman carving out his rows and/or the shepherd with his flock. This is intentional on the part of Breughel. Icarus is added to the scene almost as an after-thought. He is a small element and it likely took your class a little while to spot him in the lower right-hand corner.

2. How would you describe the tone of the painting? Give two examples from the scene that support your conclusion.

The tone is warm and comfortable. The scenes of working-class people going about their business make the reader feel a comfort in the tranquility of everyday life. Expect various examples, but the prime ones are any of the working men or the ship leaving the port to go about the business of the day. This tranquility is ironic, of course, because this world is unconcerned or indifferent about the tragedy that's unfolding for Icarus. This contrast will be important when discussing answers to #5 below.

3. What viewpoint did Breughel give to the painting? By this, I mean, where does the artist have us "standing" as we look at the scene? What's interesting about this choice? Who are we actually supposed to be in the scene?

We have a "birds-eye" view; we're literally above the action in the scene. This is interesting because it's the same view that Daedalus, Icarus' father, would have as he trails behind his son. It's not much of a stretch to assume that Breughel wants us to be Daedalus, horrified on several levels. First, he's watching his son die. Second, no one seems particularly bothered by the boy's demise.

4. How do the artist's color and lighting choices impact the message the viewer takes away from the painting?

The color palette is rich/warm and the softness of the blue water isn't threatening even though it is presently killing a teenage boy. Light plays an important role, as it illuminates the horizon (symbolic of hope or the continual passage of time?) and bounces off the foreground. The colors and use of light contribute to the warm, tranquil feeling discussed above.

5. Although the death of Icarus is the critical piece of this narrative scene, this is not a painting about death. What is Breughel's message to the viewer?

Breughel's focus in this painting is on the common man and the business of daily life. Students' answers will vary, but a reasonable conclusion is that Breughel is commenting on our detachment from the tragedy of others. When someone removed from us dies, we feel sad for a brief moment but then move on to the things we have to get done that day. We don't dwell on or really feel the grief of the victim/victim's loved ones.

Think about your own life. How many of us have watched the evening news while eating dinner? Maybe there's a story about a train wreck or a shooting. We feel bad, but we continue eating and channel surf away from the carnage. Breughel is commenting about humanity's indifference to suffering. Clearly, the business of daily life continues even in the midst of tragedy. Life goes on...

Musee des Beaux Arts (Museum of Fine Arts), Auden – Answer Key/Discussion Starters

Answer these questions on a separate sheet of paper. Be sure to use complete sentences as you answer every part of the following:

1. Auden opens the poem with an inversion. Instead of saying, “The old Masters were never wrong about suffering,” he says, “About suffering they were never wrong, the old Masters...” What is significant about this launch to the poem? How does the inversion change the line’s impact?

The reverse order of words takes the emphasis away from the old Masters, the wise and classically trained men, and places it on the tragedy of Icarus’ death. This is a poem with something to say about human suffering. Auden tells us so right in the very first two words of the poem.

2. This poem is free verse, meaning it does not use consistent meter patterns, rhyme, or any other noticable formula. Auden does, though, occasionally rhyme some of his lines. Identify at least three of Auden’s rhyming pairs of words and explain why you think he chose to join those specific lines.

Students will likely notice “wrong/along,” “waiting/skating,” “course/horse,” “away/may,” “cry/sky,” or “green/seen.” At times, the rhyme pairings seem random, but then others direct us to connect to the tragedy. For instance, is it “wrong” to move “along” in the business of our day? “Cry” and “sky” are also interesting because no one in the scene seems particularly upset by the events, which were likely loud and rather noticable as the screaming teen fell from the sky. Students’ answers will vary on this question and will likely be pretty interesting.

3. In the last stanza, Auden specifically refers to the Breughel painting. He says that “everything turns away” from the disaster. List three people/things in the painting that have turned their backs on the drowning teenager.

The ploughman, the shepherd, the sheep, the horse, and even the ship have all turned away from the tragedy. Only one man and one sheep face Icarus, and they are powerless to help.

4. What is the theme of the poem?

Answers will vary, but Auden’s theme is pretty much the same as Beughler’s. Both men are commenting upon humanity’s tendency to move on with life even in the face of horrific events. We do this all the time, as other people’s tragedies are not our own tragedies. I remember feeling this way the week my mother died. I was mired in grief and funeral planning when I noticed a school bus on my mother’s street, picking up children for their ride to school. Life must go on. If we stop for every tragedy, we might never move forward. Still, it is gut-wrenching and seems almost cruel to those who are grieving, like Daedalus. We expect the world to stop for us, but it doesn’t. It can’t.

5. Do you think the people in the scene heard/noticed Icarus falling from the sky or do you think they were all so absorbed in their own busy lives that they didn’t notice at all? Does one way or the other change Auden’s theme?

Answers will vary. Having the people in the painting intentionally ignore Icarus does increase the cruelty in the analysis of human indifference.

6. Both Breughel and Auden seem to be suggesting that people notice, but are indifferent to the suffering of others. Do you agree with this idea or not? Give two concrete examples from your life or studies to support your stance.

Answers will vary. If students agree, they’ll likely talk about seeing news reports of crimes or natural disasters but not having such news change their lives. If they disagree, they’ll likely talk about feeling true and deep grief for a friend who’s suffered a loss or working to improve a social blight they’ve witnessed. The question always leads to a rich class discussion.