

Blinded by Nature: Wordsworth and Auden on Human Suffering and Apathy

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Though composed over a hundred years apart, William Wordsworth's "The world is too much with us" and W. H. Auden's "Musee Des Beaux Arts" keenly explore the human condition as it relates to suffering. The authors highlight society's shortcomings with respect to being socially aware. In "The world is too much with us," Wordsworth presents a speaker who is angry about how overwhelming the world has become as people become enamoured with materialism and lose sight of the joys that the natural world brings to humankind. He longs for the days when mankind communed with nature. On the other hand, W. H. Auden's poem comments on how materialism has rendered society blind to the suffering of others as we become tunnel-visioned on the labours that will be fruitful only for ourselves and dare not turn to acknowledge the plights of others. His allusion to the artwork "The Fall of Icarus" is a perfect image to pair with his commentary as it illustrates Icarus' demise as just another thing that must happen while the world keeps spinning. In both poems, the personas are critical of our social behaviours and evoke a blended sense of sympathy and pity in the reader. Wordsworth and Auden comment on mankind's ignorance of suffering, whether it be their own or others, through various literary characteristics, including structure, form, tone, and poetic devices.

Wordsworth and Auden first establish their commentary through the structural characteristics of their poems. Wordsworth's poem is a Petrarchan sonnet written in iambic pentameter: the poem features fourteen lines separated into an octet and a sestet that follows a strict rhyme scheme of ABBAABBA CDCDCD. The octet traditionally depicts a problem followed by a response in the sestet. In "The world is too much with us," the speaker presents the problem: people are too preoccupied with the "getting and spending" and "lay[ing] waste to our powers" (Wordsworth 2). Throughout the octet, the speaker is critical of society as a whole (himself included) and uses first-person plural pronouns such as "us," "our," and "we." As the

poem extends into the sestet, the speaker expresses his personal solution to this problem: he wishes he was a pagan, so he could see ancient gods that exemplify oneness with nature.

In addition, such a fixed structure forces the author to choose his words especially carefully, which helps to clearly and concisely express the speaker's strong emotions toward the subject. For example, the speaker describes mankind's obsession with consumerism/materialism as a "sordid boon" (Wordsworth 4). A "boon" (Wordsworth 4) is a beneficial thing, but when preceded by the adjective "sordid" (Wordsworth 4), which describes an ignoble action, the author creates an oxymoron that emphasizes the imbalance between this gift-exchange of nature for industrialism. The speaker believes that the pure goodness of nature could never be equated to the superficial benefits of materialism. Another instance of precise word choice is seen in line twelve, where the speaker expresses that even a glimpse of ancient gods of the seas would soothe his loneliness (Wordsworth 12-14). By choosing the word "glimpse," the author highlights just how sad the speaker feels such that even a tiny spectacle would mean the world to him.

Similarly, the structure and form of W. H. Auden's "Musee Des Beaux Arts" helps to convey the idea of social awareness, particularly the lack thereof. Although "Musee des Beaux Arts" is not a poem of fourteen lines written in iambic pentameter, like Wordsworth's piece, the free form poem resembles a sonnet. The first stanza has thirteen lines that present a specific observation just as the octave in a sonnet would. He posits that the Old Masters "were never wrong" in their understanding of human suffering (Auden 1-3). The second stanza has eight lines, wherein the speaker refers to Bruegel's painting in response to how commonplace suffering is in life. In addition, Auden uses a subtle form of rhyme throughout the poem. Instead of an obvious and strict rhyme scheme, as in Wordsworth's poem, Auden uses end-rhymes in pairs that are unevenly distributed throughout the poem, creating a very discreet scheme (Sarot). For example, in the first stanza, line two ends with the phrase "how well they understood" (Auden 2); the line containing the corresponding end rhyme does not appear until line eight which ends with the word "wood."

Auden's poem also utilizes enjambment: many of the poem's lines end mid-clause, and the thought is continued in the following line. This reduces the stress on the rhyming words as the reader spends only a brief moment before continuing to the next line (Sarot). The use of enjambment is also reflective of the idea that people rarely pause their daily lives to

acknowledge the suffering of those around them. Coupled with the loose rhyme scheme and free verse form, the use of enjambment in Auden's "Musée Des Beaux Arts" creates a structure that mirrors the indifference to human suffering that the poem's speaker refers to.

Next, the authors engage the speakers' tones as a means to further elaborate on the problem of social unawareness. The speaker in Wordsworth's poem transitions through a myriad of emotions as the poem progresses, which can be noted through tone. In the beginning, the speaker expresses an exacting analysis of post-industrial urban life: "The world is too much with us; late and soon, Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers" (Wordsworth 2). This sets the tone for the first half of the poem. Such an emphatic position signals a bold distaste for humans' preoccupation with material things. The speaker's tone goes from critical to frustrated throughout these first few lines. We see frustration through the lack of complete sentences: he says, "late and soon, getting and spending" (Wordsworth 2). These short phrases suggest that the speaker is annoyed or irritated by the actions described. The speaker's tone then transitions into disappointment as he mentions the impure gift of consumerism that we have accepted in exchange for the pure goodness of being one with nature. This disappointment slowly bubbles into anger as the speaker notes all the natural beauty around us, to which we have become oblivious (Wordsworth 5-8). The peak of this anger is evident in line 9 with the exclamation "Great God!". This apostrophe acts as a turning point for the tone of the poem. It is as though the speaker becomes exhausted by his anger and frustration with the happenings of the world such that the subsequent lines take on an almost wishful tone. The speaker is so desperate for a restored connection with nature that he is willing to be a "Pagan suckled in a creed outworn" (Wordsworth 10) renouncing Christian faith in favour of ancient mythologies that are more in tune with nature. This line also highlights the speaker's desperation in that the speaker's description of paganism as "outworn" is an admission of the futility of the wish. It can only be a mere thought because it is impossible to attain (Callan). The word "suckled," which refers to being nurtured by breast milk, presents the speaker as a powerless infant, further illuminating his distress and desperation.

Unlike in Wordsworth's poem, the speaker in "Musée des Beaux Arts" is neither angry nor desperate. Instead, the poem takes on a conversational tone, and the speaker is quite nonchalant and distanced from the things that he is describing. The author uses inverted syntax in the first two lines of the poem, "About suffering they were never wrong, The Old Masters." This

gives the impression that the speaker is sharing his thoughts out loud as he is slowly formulating his opinion about what he sees, like a connoisseur of arts ruminating on a painting (Benz). This conversational approach lightens the mood given the serious issue being discussed. Additionally, the nonchalance mimics the social behaviours of those whom he is describing. Just as suffering takes place along with the humdrum of “eating or opening a window” (Auden 4), so does the speaker casually present his observations in a prosaic manner despite the seriousness of it all. Auden’s word choices and their placements also influence the distanced, conversational tone of the poem: he uses words that make long sounds and juxtaposes significant events with trivial ones. For example, the speaker mentions “the dreadful martyrdom” —a reference to the crucifixion of Christ—then contrasts it with the mundane acts of “dogs go[ing] on with their doggy life and the torturers’ horse scratch[ing] its innocent behind ” (Auden 10-13). Long-sounding words like ‘dreadful’ and ‘torturers’ also slow the reader's pace and support the leisurely tone. Likewise, in the second stanza, Auden euphemizes the dramatic fall of Icarus to merely “a boy falling out of the sky.” This oversimplification tucked between the other drudgeries of daily life effectively highlights the grave issue of universal apathy (Kellman).

Finally, the authors employed a variety of poetic devices to aid in their commentary of human ignorance to suffering. In “The world is too much with us,” Wordsworth uses caesuras and end-stops all throughout. The caesuras are reflective of both humankind’s obsession with fast-paced urban life as well as the speaker’s state of mind. Commas and semicolons in the midst of several lines suggest that the speaker is rushing to get these thoughts out such that they cannot be formulated into proper sentences. We see this in the first two lines of the poem: “The world is too much with us; late and soon, /Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers” (Wordsworth 1-2). After making the opening statement, the speaker jumps straight into his criticisms, which also supports the idea that the speaker is so overwhelmed that his thoughts are somewhat disorganized. The use of end-stops, however, produces some sense of organization to the speaker's critique. It is as though the entire octet is a list of key points definitively supporting his claim that the world is indeed too much for us, and he will not entertain any rebuttals. Other uses of poetic devices include personification and metaphors. The speaker gives human-like qualities to nature throughout the octet. He says that the sea “bares her bosom,” the wind howls, and the flowers sleep (Wordsworth 5-7). These personifications support the idea that though the world has lost touch with nature, the speaker’s ability to acknowledge these simplicities is proof that he

still possesses even the slightest communion with nature. The metaphor used in line 8 of the poem further illustrates the effects of our disconnection with nature. Wordsworth likens humankind to musical instruments that are “out of tune” and cannot be moved by nature, the musician.

Similar to Wordsworth’s work, in Auden’s “Musee des Beaux Arts,” caesura is a notable poetic device used to describe human apathy in the poem. Similar to the aforementioned use of enjambment, the merging of fragments into long, complex sentences using commas and semicolons allows for a conversational tone and a rhythm that flows, mimicking the continuity of life despite the suffering of others. Also, many of the breaks are followed by the word “how.” For example, the speaker mentions, “The Old Masters: how well they understood,” in line 2, and when referencing Bruegel’s painting, at the beginning of stanza two, says, “for instance: how everything turns away Quite leisurely from the disaster.” Repetition of the word “how” is the speaker’s way of providing specific examples of human indifference to suffering, in a conversational yet matter-of-factly way (Soa). Another key poetic device used in Auden’s poem is allusion. In addition to the obvious allusion to Pieter Bruegel’s painting in the second stanza, Auden alludes to significant events in Christianity - the virgin birth and the crucifixion. These allusions to events of great joy and suffering being juxtaposed by frivolous activities perfectly demonstrate the cynicism of mankind.

In summary, both William Wordsworth and W. H. Auden wrote poems that explored the unfortunate cynicism and apathy that often accompanies the human experience. Though the authors are from different eras, and their poetry falls in different genres, they both captured the theme well. Wordsworth’s emotional and critical assessment of the ill-effects of consumerism on the human experience and how our relationship with nature suffers was typical of his romantic writing style. Similarly, Auden’s conversational yet distanced approach to the way we often become blind to others’ suffering provided an almost philosophical discussion between speaker and reader on an age-old penchant of humankind.

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