

# Icarus: entering the world of myth



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# Introduction

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In this free course, *Icarus: entering the world of myth*, you will be working on one short mythical narrative, the death of Icarus. One aim of this course is to introduce you to the Roman poet Ovid, a crucially important figure in the history of classical mythology. Very few Graeco-Roman mythic narratives escaped Ovid's attention, even if some crop up in unexpected places and only feature by brief allusion. Sampling Ovid in this OpenLearn course will involve the exciting activity of probing deeper into his influence on both the matter and the method of myth-telling in the literary and visual arts for centuries after his death.

This 'taster' of a myth from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* will also acclimatise you to reading and responding to a mythical story with an extremely varied afterlife. Here, you will focus on two famous later works which both draw on the Icarus myth: a sixteenth-century Netherlandish painting by Pieter Brueghel the Elder, and a poem written in 1938 by W.H. Auden. You will analyse the ways in which the ancient myth has been transformed in these more recent artworks, and consider what these changes can tell us about the societies in which they were created.

This OpenLearn course is an adapted extract from the Open University course [\*A330 Myth in the Greek and Roman worlds\*](#).



# Learning Outcomes

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After studying this course, you should be able to:

- display knowledge of one well-known classical myth, and understand its relation to a number of other myths and characters
- understand how this myth functions in a range of historical, cultural and artistic contexts
- engage in basic literary and visual analysis of ancient and later sources of myth.

# 1 Ovid as mythographer and myth-maker

Publius Ovidius Naso, to give Ovid his three full names as a Roman citizen, was born in Sulmo (modern Sulmona), Italy, in 43 BCE and died in exile at Tomis on the Black Sea coast (modern Constanța, Romania) in 17 or 18 CE. Ovid was a poet who wrote in a variety of genres, but for present purposes you might start by regarding him as a mythographer or myth collector. The reason for this is his epic poem *Metamorphoses*, written in Latin in Rome around the end of the first century BCE, which has proved to be a treasure house of Greek and Roman myths throughout the centuries.

*Metamorphoses* continues to function as a 'myth-kitty' – a notion coined and dismissed by the poet Philip Larkin (1982, p. 69) – but Ovid was not producing this *magnum opus* to be a mere catalogue for future cultures. There are some parallels between Ovid and the nineteenth-century scholar Sir James Frazer as both authors made connections between themes and characters across different myths. The kind of thematic superstructures Ovid and Frazer created – in their very different ways – have proved enormously influential on ideas about the meaning of myth and its function in society.

As indicated above, Ovid was a receiver and also a refashioner (in his own day) of mythical material. He adapted and combined well-known narratives in ingenious ways but also brought to the fore less familiar, small-scale stories from Greek and Roman legend and put these on the mythic map for future generations. His use of an epic frame for such disparate and narratively fluid material was in itself challenging and innovative. In his prologue to *Metamorphoses* (1.1–4) Ovid claims to weave together stories of transformation in a 'continuous' song.

## 2 Icarus as symbol and signifier

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The myth of Daedalus and Icarus, the father and son who escaped from the island of Crete on wings, is told in Book 8 of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Icarus has become the more familiar of the two characters as the ancient high-flyer who fell from the sky when the wax that secured his wings was melted by the sun.

Icarus' story connects up with a number of narrative passageways centred on the island of Crete (where Daedalus, the legendary artificer and craftsman, constructed a maze, the Labyrinth, to conceal and control the Minotaur). Daedalus was himself effectively imprisoned on the island (the king barred his exit by sea) and so was unable to return with his son, Icarus, to Athens or find sanctuary away from the harsh regime at Crete.

The Cretan labyrinth also featured in the exploits of the Athenian hero, Theseus, who slew the Minotaur, the half-man, half-bull offspring of queen Pasiphaë, with the help of Ariadne, daughter of King Minos. Another connected myth is that of the Cretan princess Phaedra, who later married Theseus (even though he had abandoned her sister, Ariadne, his guide through the Labyrinth), and developed a destructive and tragic passion for her stepson Hippolytus. These strange sexual couplings (or attempts at them – Phaedra is scorned and takes her revenge) stem from a curse on the descendants of the sun god, Helios. Aphrodite punished Helios for his exposure of her affair with Ares by decreeing that the female descendants of the sun would select and pursue inappropriate and disastrous partners.



Figure 1 Henri Matisse, *Icarus*, plate VIII from 'Jazz', 1947, pochoir plate, 42 x 66cm

### Activity 1

Think about any medium (from art, literature, film, television, or even perhaps a scientific article) in which you may have encountered Icarus. It might be the briefest of allusions or simply the use of his name to conjure up the miracle of 'man' or a man in flight. In what way is his myth used? The painting by Matisse reproduced on this webpage is one striking example. You could also look up 'Icarus' using an online search engine.



## Discussion

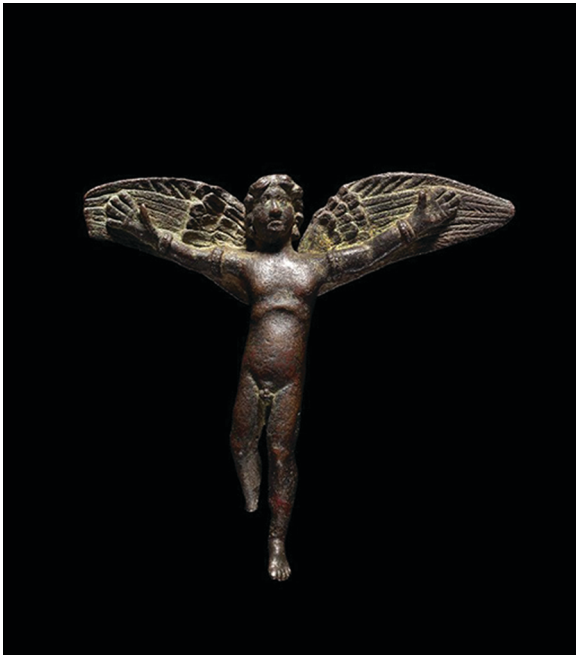


Figure 2 Roman cast bronze figurine of Icarus flying, first to third century CE, height 11.5 cm, found in Crete.

As both character and image, Icarus continues to turn up in unexpected places, from scientific papers to advertising. Icarus has become a symbol for heroic daring (the crew of space shuttles that did not survive) but his flying and falling have been given a psychological timbre as well as a physical expression in all kinds of literature from poems to thrillers. Icarus also regularly represents the alienation of the artist and the consequences of breaking out of boundaries, both cultural and social. If you typed 'Icarus' into an internet search engine, this no doubt yielded a fascinating but random range of Icarus-related themes with plenty of examples from popular culture as well as more traditional 'high' arts. For example, popular contemporary music boasts a long list of Icarus references, from Joni Mitchell's lyrics about airwoman Amelia Earhart ('Amelia', 1976), to Queen's song, 'No One But You (Only the Good Die Young)' (1997). Another song from 2003 by the band Thrice focuses on Daedalus' perspective on the tragedy with a track entitled 'The Melting Point of Wax'. Some of these new versions use the classical myth to communicate the universality of human emotions and suffering; at the same time, they often update the details for a new contemporary audience. For instance, Matisse's painting *Icarus* is widely seen as an evocative image of twentieth-century warfare: the single red dot in the figure's chest has been interpreted as 'a modern pilot who has been shot down, and falls through a sky illuminated with flashes of gunfire' (Kemp, 2002, p. 417).

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## 3 Daedalus and Icarus in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*

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In this section, you will read two passages from Ovid's narrative and explore his portrayal of Icarus and Daedalus.

### Activity 2

Read [Ovid's story of Icarus](#) (Metamorphoses 8.183–235).

How does Ovid portray the characters of Daedalus and Icarus?

How might Ovid be manipulating our emotions?

*Provide your answer...*

### Discussion

You may have been struck by how Daedalus speaks for himself almost immediately in the text, outlining his dilemma succinctly and appraising the reader of his action plan. We might argue that this invites us as readers into Daedalus' mind and sets up a sympathetic resonance, as well as making the manufacture of the wings a tense dramatic moment. Ovid renders Daedalus' dilemma all the more poignant because he is trying to escape with his young son, Icarus. Devising drastic measures to escape, Daedalus knows he is taking a huge risk in attempting flight. He invests all his legendary skills as a craftsman in the design of wings for himself and Icarus.

Icarus is depicted as a boy rather than an adolescent; he gets in his father's way in the workshop and has no real inkling of the danger he is about to face. The first mention of Icarus creates the image of a meddling child, a familiar scene with tragic resonances. Ovid's readers (who would not need reminding about the myth) knew that the successful completion of the wings would mean the fall and death of Icarus. The heedlessness of the boy is a fatal characteristic; he will ignore his father's advice and soar towards the sun.

Before Icarus plummets to his death with his horrified father wailing his name, 'now no longer a father' (Ovid twists the emotional knife deeper here), he and Daedalus have enjoyed a brief but god-like view of the world. Angler, shepherd and ploughman have gazed up in wonder at them, but the glory is short-lived. The name 'Icarus' appears three times in the final lines, uttered by the desperate father as he looks down for his lost son.

The translation you have been reading captures this threefold lament, but not all translators follow the Latin so closely. A.D. Melville, for instance, renders the two lines as: 'His wretched father, now no father, cried/"Oh, Icarus, where are you? Icarus/ Where shall I look, where find you?"' (1986, p. 178). However, he does repeat 'where' three times, so has intentionally retained the emphasis and rhythm of the repetition. In this way Melville keeps the literary artifice intact, but a cultural context has been lost because the repetition of the name in Raeburn's translation evokes features of a formal lament. The custom at Roman funerals was to call upon the corpse thrice by

name (possibly to 'waken' the dead, in case they were actually in a catatonic trance) so the passing over of Icarus is ritually marked by Ovid before the burial even takes place.

### Activity 3

Now read about [Daedalus and Talos](#), who is also known as Perdix (Metamorphoses 8.236–59)

Does this alter our perspective on Daedalus, the grieving father?

Can you suggest why Ovid delays the information about Talos/Perdix?

*Provide your answer...*

### Discussion

The partridge is Perdix, Daedalus' nephew and one-time apprentice. Ovid's educated readership would probably be familiar with the background story but the modern reader may be finding out for the first time that Daedalus was fleeing justice and retribution when he left Athens and took refuge in Crete. Daedalus had tried to murder his nephew, Talos, who had been entrusted to him as a second son to learn the craftsman's trade, but whose remarkable talents inspired jealous rage in his teacher. The goddess Minerva (Greek name, Athena) changed Talos into the partridge (Latin *perdix*) so he was saved from a fatal fall.

Talos becomes Perdix and this provides the actual transformation that justifies the presence of Icarus' story in a text about changes in form, and yet it could be argued that Daedalus and Icarus are imitating birds if not actually physically metamorphosing into something else. The murdered nephew is transformed into the partridge, a bird that has paradoxically (but logically given the manner of the boy's death) a horror of heights and nests close to the ground. The partridge rejoices at Icarus' death and Daedalus' grief.

Ovid closes the narrative with an aetiological myth, explaining why the partridge behaves as it does – possibly Perdix is supposed to be the 'first' partridge. (*Aetia* is the Greek for 'cause', so aetiological myths often explain the origin of a species or something about their attributes.) Does Ovid mean to alter our perspective and undercut the sympathy we feel for Daedalus by this flashback technique?

There are times when even the ancient reader might feel led along by Ovid, even though they were in touch with the 'surround' stories of many major myths and would have this information already. In other words, Ovid's readership would be aware of Daedalus' crime against Perdix and Daedalus' designing of a labyrinth where, every fourteen years, Athenian boys and girls were slaughtered by the Minotaur.

Ovid is a master of allusion, cross-referencing, reprising and prefiguring not just within the confines of his epic, but also shifting the spotlight on to hitherto marginalised figures in the myths. Icarus' fall is a brief episode, and although he was represented in ancient art, the literature of Greece and Rome tended to focus on the character of Daedalus whose remarkable talent formed the fulcrum of several key myths. Ovid's reconstruction of the boy's last moments are so vivid that Icarus became foregrounded, representing a tragic loss not just of life, but of human endeavour and artistic aspiration.

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Overall, many would say that in *Metamorphoses* Ovid perfected the art of theorising myths as he narrated them, suggesting a psychological subtext here, an artistic symbol there, a metaphor on power at one moment, and a crisis of human identity the next. So, the adult reader is unlikely to 'just read' Ovid for the stories but will rapidly become engrossed in interpreting their motifs, themes and mixed messages. This is not to suggest that Ovid is producing a theory or theories of myth but he is clearly manipulating myths to yield their full potential as cultural, social and ideological barometers.



## 4 Brueghel and Auden

This next section will explore how far Ovid's own agenda (artistic, personal and, to some extent, ideological) has shaped two famous representations of Icarus in painting (Brueghel's *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*) and poetry (W.H. Auden's *Musée des Beaux Arts*). These subsequent versions of the myth may on the surface depart from Ovid's narrative, and you should note that the poem is actually reacting to the painting in the first instance, and is, therefore, 'once removed' from Ovid.

If you already have some skills of visual analysis or feel comfortable with literary critiques of twentieth-century poetry, then both the painting and the poem may prompt you to ask questions about their form and composition. If not, then you can follow the guidelines below; these will help you to analyse artistic and literary techniques in the retelling of the myth. In these separate boxes you will find a brief biography of Brueghel and Auden plus a few central characteristics (or 'tools of the trade') of their chosen genres which can be fruitfully applied to their texts.

### Brueghel and his work

Pieter Brueghel the Elder was born around 1520 and died in 1569. He was master of the Antwerp Guild in 1552 and is renowned for his landscape painting (the Alps and Italian scenery inspired his work). But his subsequent reputation fluctuated with positive and negative reactions to a satiric and graphic style of representation, pictures of peasants, life in the raw, allusions to contemporary troubles and so on – he lived and worked in turbulent times with constant political and religious turmoil in the Netherlands.

### What to look for in a painting

The subject matter is an obvious starting point and the title tells the viewer quite a lot. Although a variety of activities may be taking place, the way the figures and objects relate to each other (foreground, background, at the margins of the frame) reveal something of the painter's priorities. Size matters: if you are not viewing the original in an art gallery, you should at least work out the proportions of a picture and its impact (ranging from intimate cameo to larger-than-life and all the gradations in between). This leads into the area of perspective and how the spectator's viewpoint is manipulated – how distant or how close the objects might be and whether we are outside or inside the space the painting occupies.

Is there a focal point that draws us in? Is there an aerial or atmospheric perspective? (Optical effects can be achieved with the creation of dust particles to mute far away objects.) Is there an obvious vanishing point – do apparently parallel lines converge towards a single point on the horizon? How are colour and tone deployed? Are the colours warm, bright or sombre? Is there a light source in the picture and are parts of the picture deliberately obscure or understated? Being observant about just some of a painting's qualities can reveal significant tensions as well as correspondences that might exist between its form and content. For instance, the brushwork, tone, colour, perspective and positioning of figures might reinforce or subvert the subject matter.



Figure 3 Pieter Brueghel the Elder. *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*, 1560, oil on canvas mounted on wood, 74 x 112 cm

## 4.1 Brueghel's *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*

The following activity focuses on Brueghel's *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*, and encourages you to think about how this artistic version of the myth relates to Ovid's narrative.

### Activity 4

Look at Brueghel's *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*.



Figure 3 (repeat) Pieter Brueghel the Elder. *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*, 1560, oil

on canvas mounted on wood, 74 x 112 cm

Does your knowledge of the Ovidian narrative affect your response to the painting?

How would you describe its content if you were not familiar with the myth of Icarus?

Provide your answer...

### Discussion

You may have been struck by the difficulty of finding Icarus in the scene – even if we could stand in front of this large canvas, the white legs disappearing into the water are hardly central. This is a busy but not a bustling landscape and there is a distinct sense of measured movement in the human activities Brueghel portrays. The influence of the bright Mediterranean dawn is very much in evidence in the scene but possibly the ploughman sports the richer hues of the Northern school of painting. You may agree that the viewer is drawn into the picture and invited not only to examine the world beyond this figure in the foreground but also to wonder how each of its parts or vignettes relate to each other. The drowning boy is the only disturbance, a sudden and uncalculated event occurring in an otherwise (at first glance) tranquil setting.

Icarus is so close to the ship (this delicate craft is like almost everything in the picture, animate and inanimate alike, uncaring of the tragic death of the boy in the water) that if the viewer of the painting did not know the myth it would be reasonable to assume that Icarus was a man or sailor overboard. In that case the wonder of a boy falling from the sky has been transformed into a blip or a blot on the landscape.

In Peter Wagner's *Icons, Texts, Iconotexts* there is yet another interpretation of Brueghel's almost mischievous depiction of Icarus. The somersaulting boy could be a swimmer happily disporting himself in contrast to the ploughman who is toiling away – the sort of sardonic comment Brueghel was fully capable of making about contrasts between the labouring peasantry and their wealthy 'betters' (Wagner, 1996, p. 276).

If you look Icarus up online, or in a mythological dictionary, you may find another version of the story, one in which Icarus followed his father from Athens by boat and was shipwrecked off Samos. There was also a tradition that Daedalus and Icarus sailed from Crete. So Brueghel may be following Ovid for the scene but suggesting a less miraculous method of escape for the exiles.

Ovid's tragic tale is very much marginalised (after all, the painting is called *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*). Nor is there any sign of Daedalus. It was long thought that Daedalus had originally been included on the canvas, as it looked as if a high aerial figure had been subsequently painted over or painted out. The amazed spectators of the poem mind their own business in Brueghel.

We might wonder what the point was of including Icarus at all. A simple answer would be that biblical and classical scenes were regarded as worthier subject matter for high art than a mere landscape. In theory the presence of Icarus elevates the genre Brueghel has chosen. In other paintings Brueghel marginalises momentous religious events in a similar way, focusing on environment and setting rather than the alleged subjects, such as the martyrdom of Christ or the journey of the Magi.

However, there is clearly a more complex agenda at work in all Brueghel's paintings and his relationship to Ovid's text is a subtle and subversive one. On closer inspection

the partridge (Perdix) is in the picture (bottom right and on the branch above the angler preoccupied with his fishing) which demonstrates that Brueghel is consciously engaging with Ovid's narrative. The presence of the partridge reminds a viewer familiar with Ovid that Perdix was enjoying his moment of revenge. To complicate matters there is a counter-view that the partridge is not in fact looking towards Icarus but is as detached or unobservant as the other spectators.

In that case you may feel that the painting is pure parody and very far from the poignancy of Ovid's narrative. No one in it is noticeably concerned at the tragedy and the legs are positively comical. Brueghel certainly seems to be altering Ovid in his portrayal of the 'witnesses' to this incredible sight, men flying like gods. Only the shepherd is looking upwards and this is, in any case, a conventional way of portraying shepherds in art. As for the ploughman who clearly supplants Icarus as the painting's protagonist (and it is characteristic of Brueghel to promote everyday rural activities in this way), he bears out the German proverb that 'a farmer does not leave his plough for the sake of a dying man'. And if you look carefully, there is a skull halfway up the trunk of the fruit tree towards which the plough furrows run.

## 4.2 A further angle on the painting

Although all these human figures have been imported from Ovid, according to Christian Vöhringer, Brueghel has produced 'a pictorial cultural composition which comprises Flemish calendar motifs and there could well be a reference to the Athenian farmer Icarios and the spring constellation to which he belonged' (2007, p. 107). Brueghel has painted a young man at the plough who might be described as an incongruity in that he is 'festively' dressed. Vöhringer concludes that 'without the ploughman and his calendar significance the only mythological painting by Brueghel would be alien' (p. 110).

However, Brueghel may not be entirely distancing himself from the tragedy of Icarus. The painter produced several drawings and prints that relate to 'the artist' and he had a complicated relationship with sixteenth-century humanist traditions. He might have been drawn to Icarus as an overweening craftsman with little talent and so deliberately portrayed him in an undignified landing because this would be a just retribution of misplaced pride. But Brueghel did also produce a magnificent sketch of Icarus free falling in clear space which shows him as a muscular and heroic man rather than a weedy and callow youth.

For all these reasons the painter's reference to this particular myth in this particular painting must surely be motivated by more than an attempt to elevate his art in terms of the hierarchy of genres.

## 4.3 Auden's *Musée des Beaux Arts*

The next activity asks you to read the poem *Musée des Beaux Arts* and investigate the way Auden conveys his thoughts and feelings about the Breughel painting.



## Auden and his work

Auden was one of a group of intellectual poets who hoped to prick the public conscience with their poetry. They promoted the cause of anti-fascism in the 1930s and, according to Stephen Spender, 'were the divided generation of Hamlets who found the world out of joint and failed to set it right' (1951, p. 202). Auden was poetically inspired by T.S. Eliot and he followed a similar technique of incorporating short poems into longer works. Eliot advised Auden not to apologise for rather recondite allusions, and Auden seemed to follow Eliot's style of composition as well as his sense of doom and resignation at a culturally impoverished and diminishing civilisation.

## What to look for in a poem

The Auden poem you are about to read is composed in free verse and this can be a challenging form to analyse in purely 'technical' terms, but the following general guidelines should help you work out how the poet conveys his feelings on viewing the Brueghel painting.

A first relatively (or deceptively) straightforward question to ask is 'what is the poem about?' Is it descriptive, reflective, a message of some sort or an outpouring of emotion? Is anyone specifically addressed? Does it work on more than one level of meaning and are we encouraged to read between its lines?

The technical skills employed by a poet are actually his or her artistry (and armoury) of expression. If there is no identifiable rhyme scheme or regular rhythm it could have quite a conversational feel. (This is also enhanced by the sense carrying over from line to line – called enjambment.) What type of language characterises the poem – archaic, specialised or colloquial – and are there any vivid, emotive or surprising choices of words?

If consonants are repeated (alliteration) or vowel sounds are repeated (assonance), and if there is only occasional rhyming or slant rhyme (similar sounding words but not quite a perfect match), what kind of effect does this have?

What about the figurative language of poetry and its impact on the reader? Does the poet use simile (an image in which one thing is likened to another; e.g. 'my love is like a red, red rose') or metaphor (where one thing is actually substituted for another; e.g. 'life is a walking shadow') to expand our visualisation and understanding of a scene or a situation?

### Activity 5

Now read Auden's poem *Musée des Beaux Arts* and answer the questions that follow.

W.H. Auden, *Musée des Beaux Arts*

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About suffering they were never wrong,	1
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;	

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How, when the aged are reverently, passionately waiting	5
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	10
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	15
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,	20
Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.	

W.H. Auden (1966) *Collected Shorter Poems 1927-1957*, London, Faber and Faber

What kind of message do you feel Auden has received from Brueghel's painting?  
Can you detect any vestiges of Ovid in Auden's literary response to *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*?

*Provide your answer...*

### Discussion

'About suffering they were never wrong, / The Old Masters,' is the arresting opening to Auden's poem. It is as if the reader has stumbled upon Auden's train of thought or that he has deliberately stopped us in our tracks with his musings. The poem masquerades as something conversational and so technically it is free verse (although there is a detectable, if lackadaisical, rhythm and rhyme scheme). The form of this poem – the continuous present of the verb in the first stanza (especially line 4); the flow of one line into the next (enjambment) – reflects and simultaneously reinforces the reverie-like state of the poet.

The second stanza constitutes a sonnet-like 'turn' (the *volta* which marks a change in direction, pace or tone) as the poet stands in front of *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*. Auden's commentary on the Brueghel painting has been prefaced then by the common message he has found in a gallery of representations that refuse to foreground suffering and set even significant martyrdoms against scenes of 'life going on'. The movement of the lines keep in step with Auden who seems to be circling around the paintings and then stopping in front of *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*.

Thinking back to Brueghel's technique of promoting surroundings over important historical subjects in other works, you might safely assume that Auden sees the painting as a centrepiece for human suffering that has no universal significance. Auden imports scenes from other Brueghel pictures to stress the general lack of interest from those engrossed in activities of the moment (lines 7–8 and 12–13).

The poet apparently accepts, even approves, the fact that Brueghel and the Flemish school of painters saw suffering as it really was, no great issue in the grand scheme of things. This is a bleak reaction on Auden's part but there might be some hint of comfort about the constancy of elemental things and the fact that the natural world keeps its core aspects unchanged whatever personal tragedies occur within it.

There is an alternative way of dealing with grief: the assumption that the natural world not only suspends all activity but that it might partake in the mourning. The notion that the natural world should grieve over individual bereavement is known as 'the pathetic fallacy' and Auden does seem to be up-ending this romantic view of a universe in tune with personal suffering. For Auden, Brueghel is the sane counterpoint to such a sentimental view of suffering; and yet Auden himself in his apparently heartfelt poem, commonly known as *Stop All the Clocks* demands that the world stop turning because of his personal loss, and that living creatures cease to carry on the daily round and routine.

## 4.4 Auden's *Stop All the Clocks*

In this section you are invited to compare Auden's perspective in *Musée des Beaux Arts* with his depiction of overwhelming grief in this poem.

### Activity 6

W.H. Auden, from *Twelve Songs (Stop All the Clocks)*

Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone, 1

Prevent the dog from barking with a juicy bone,

Silence the pianos and with muffled drum

Bring out the coffin, let the mourners come.

Let aeroplanes circle moaning overhead 5

Scribbling on the sky the message He Is Dead,

Put crepe bows round the white necks of the public doves,

Let the traffic policemen wear black cotton gloves.

He was my North, my South, my East and West,

My working week and my Sunday rest, 10

My noon, my midnight, my talk, my song;  
I thought that love would last for ever: I was wrong.

The stars are not wanted now: put out every one;  
Pack up the moon and dismantle the sun;  
Pour away the ocean and sweep up the wood.                      15  
For nothing now can ever come to any good.

W.H. Auden (1966) *Collected Shorter Poems 1927-1957*, London, Faber and Faber

If you compare Auden's two poems you may be particularly struck by the insistence that in *Stop All the Clocks* the dog should not enjoy his juicy bone (line 2) which is in stark contrast to line 12 of *Musée des Beaux Arts*, where dogs are depicted as going on with their 'doggy life'. In this respect Auden may be moving closer to the world of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in which death or traumatic transformation of one creature can cause emotional and physical tremors across a landscape.

## 4.5 A further angle on the poems

It is worth noting that *Stop All the Clocks* has received its iconic and sentimental status partly because of its appearance in the film *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (directed by Mike Newell, 1994). In the cinematic context it underscored a moving scene with the deceased's lover reciting the poem as a sincere lament (although those less taken with the film's relentless sequence of comic vignettes may have welcomed the moment as 'tragic relief'). But this is the beauty of 'reception', that it reinvents the original meaning and timbre of the text, as *Stop All the Clocks* was most likely intended to be a pastiche of love in grief rather than a genuine outpouring of sorrow. The bereaved lover is demanding against all reason that time is suspended, and that cosmic and conventional activity ceases, but this is part of the helplessness and hopelessness of the human condition.

Although it would seem in *Musée des Beaux Arts* that Auden identifies himself intimately with the painter's view of Icarus, there are moments when Ovid's *Metamorphoses* text reasserts itself. The forsaken cry (line 16) evokes the terror of Icarus and the helpless grief of Daedalus. Ovid's creation of a telescoped time frame, the joyous flight suddenly cut short as the boy plummets towards the water, is reflected in Auden's line.

Michael Riffaterre detects equivocation in Auden towards Brueghel's depiction of Icarus (1986, pp. 1–13). Riffaterre argues that Auden has reinstated Icarus in all his poignancy after buying into Brueghel's comical depiction of his deathly fall. Auden redirects our gaze to Icarus falling out of the sky which has no place in the narrative sequence of the painting. Auden identifies the body of the boy and gives him voice whereas the white legs in Brueghel completely anonymise him. Auden also suggests in this last stanza that the ship must have seen 'something amazing' and the reader is left with the abiding image of the boy falling out of the sky.

Riffaterre believes that 'Pointing to what is hidden in the landscape makes the description of the landscape a pretext to show what it is hiding' and he cites Auden's poetic principles: 'To me Art's subject is the human clay/And landscape but a background to a torso' (p. 9). In that case, there is a double bluff in Auden's focus on Icarus in the second stanza, in that



he paradoxically restores him to centre stage. Riffaterre makes the interesting point that 'Auden's melodramatic focusing on a child's death eliminates the artist's symbolism' (p. 10). I think what Riffaterre is getting at is the choice Auden has made to restore the poignancy of Ovid's portrayal while praising the painter for downsizing the tragedy of an individual. The poet imagines 'the forsaken cry' and the very focus on the 'white legs' has already foregrounded them in our minds even if they are minimalised in the painting.

Riffaterre goes on to complicate the process further in that he believes Brueghel is making a statement about artistic failure; high-flying Icarus ends as a brushstroke in the painting but is still recognisable as an aspiring artist by the critical viewer. Icarus loses his status as a symbol in the Auden poem because he is simply, if unutterably sadly, the silly little boy who flew too close to the sun.

Both artist and poet, separated by centuries and huge cultural distances from Ovid, are still conducting a dialogue with their Roman source and simultaneously 'mything' Icarus for their own particular purposes. Roland Barthes argued that myth cannot really be grasped as an object, a concept or even an idea, but should be seen as a speech act, a message, a very specific sort of communication (1993, p. 93).

## Conclusion

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This free course, *Icarus: entering the world of myth*, has offered you a talk-through of three ways of narrating a myth and the rich interaction of its representations in very different cultural contexts, centuries apart. We hope that this has given you some sense of the complexity of a myth's function and meaning. As many of us will have encountered Greek and Roman myths in our childhood, we may occasionally feel that the complex categorisations and the search for subtle meanings in familiar stories can constitute the death of innocence in the face of theory. However, there is no reason why we should not derive great pleasure from reading from the outset with a critical perspective; Ovid's narratives do not simply invite us, they compel us to do just that.

This OpenLearn course is an adapted extract from the Open University course [A330 Myth in the Greek and Roman worlds](#).

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## Acknowledgements

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Figure 1 Henri Matisse, *Icarus*, plate VIII from 'Jazz', 1947, pochoir plate, 42 x 66cm

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Figure 2 Roman cast bronze figurine of Icarus flying, first to third century CE, height 11.5 cm, found in Crete.

British Museum, London, 1867,0326.1. Photo: © Trustees of the British Museum (! **Warning! Calibri not supported** <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>).

Figure 3 Pieter Brueghel the Elder. *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*, 1560, oil on canvas mounted on wood, 74 x 112 cm

Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts, Brussels. Photo: akg-images

## Text

Activity 5 W.H. Auden (1966) *Musée des Beaux Arts* *Collected Shorter Poems 1927-1957*, London, Faber and Faber

Activity 6 W.H. Auden (1966) *Stop the Clocks* *Collected Shorter Poems 1927-1957*, London, Faber and Faber

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