

Ekphrastic Musings: Theme of Indifference in “Musée des Beaux Arts” and “Not my Best Side”

Neethu P. Antony & Lata Marina Varghese

Abstract

W.H. Auden’s “Musée des Beaux Arts” and U.A Fanthropé’s “Not My Best Side” are two noteworthy poems in twentieth-century English literature. W.H. Auden rose to prominence as an Anglo- American poet, dramatist, and literary critic. Through his works, he addressed morality, religion, love, and socio-political aspects. After spending a vacation in Brussels, Belgium, he wrote the poem “Musée des Beaux Arts”, published in 1939. U.A Fanthropé was an English poet who wrote her poems focusing primarily on modernity and social themes. The majority of her works reflect the true essence of English life. Her most famous poem, “Not My Best Side,” was published in 1978. The most striking resemblance between these two poems is that they are both ekphrastic poems that discuss the theme of indifference. Visual and literary art have had a harmonious relationship through the ages, and ‘Ekphrastic’ refers to the act of deriving inspiration for poetry from any literary manifestation of art. As the name implies, ekphrastic poetry describes a particular scene or, more specifically, a piece of art. A poet can augment and deepen the significance of a painting or sculpture through his creative and narrative capabilities by addressing the “action” within it. This article aims to compare and contrast these two poems by focusing attention on the theme of indifference as depicted in them.

Keywords : Ekphrastic; Indifference; Legends and Myths; Modern life.

Introduction

Indifference is a pervasive trait that is regarded as a serious human flaw. This apathetic attitude, which is present everywhere and at all times, is

an intrinsic part of human experience, and in modern times, it is aggravated by a hermeneutical culture that dominates the world. In his poem "The Hollow Men," modern poet and critic T.S. Eliot address the flaws of indifference. It is a condition of being in which we do not care about what is going on around us and do nothing about it. Indifference may isolate and desensitize us from others and their sorrows, and this attitude may be detrimental to both the individual and society. (Eliot 49-51). However, on the other hand, the issues and concerns in the world may appear so enormous that we feel helpless to address them. This implies that even when we are aware of what is going on around us, we may feel powerless to act. Therefore, we simply adopt a cold-eyed attitude and move on. Indifference is immobile and lifeless as there is no passion in it. These days, indifference is spreading like an epidemic as people become more egotistical and self-centred. They are concerned only with their own well-being. In his speech "The Perils of Indifference," Holocaust survivor, writer, and Nobel Prize recipient Elie Wiesel makes a powerful point that: *"Of course, indifference can be tempting-more than that, seductive. It is so much easier to look away from victims... Their hidden or even visible anguish is of no interest."* (Wiesel, 1999).

In the modern world, individuals are so preoccupied with their own concerns that they pay scant attention to the pains and agonies of others. This inherent selfishness forces them to stay unconcerned about others. After the devastating effects of World War II, contemporary literature emphasised more about man's indifference to human suffering as well as the selfishness of modern man. Through different literary forms, famous literary luminaries used their skills and imagination to express their views about modern life and the growing indifference of humans. W.H. Auden and U.A. Fanthrope, having faced the toxic and deleterious effects of modern life, set out to reinterpret ancient popular paintings and create ekphrastic poems that portray the existential angst, disinterest, and apathy of modern man.

Ekphrastic Reconstructions

The term "Ekphrastic" refers to a rhetorical and poetic figure of speech or poetic style that primarily signifies a literary depiction of art. A vivid description of a scene or, more typically, a visual entity, most probably an artwork, is the subject of ekphrastic poetry. The poet may augment and deepen the meaning of a painting or sculpture by imaginatively describing or commenting on its "action". Ekphrasis, like other types of imagery, uses words to create a picture.

W.H. Auden (1907–1973) was one of the most influential figures in 20th-century literature. He experimented not just with poetry but also with drama, criticism, and travel memoirs. His works discussed various themes, including religion, morality, and politics. He was an advocate of the modernist movement, and his poems examined the relationship between religious and secular ideas. Even though he discussed modern politics and psychology, he admired classical works and was enamoured with them. His poems maintained the highest artistic quality, even when he strayed from traditional poetic conventions. The poem “Musée des Beaux Arts”, published in 1939, is an ekphrastic poem written by him after spending a vacation in Brussels, Belgium. The title of the poem refers to a collection of paintings by ancient Dutch artists known as “Old Masters” that can be found in the Belgian gallery of the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Brussels in Belgium. Auden mentions three paintings, “The Census at Bethlehem” (1566), “The Massacre of Innocents” (1567), and “Landscape with the Fall of Icarus” (1558) by the Renaissance painter Pieter Bruegel the Elder. The painting, “The Census at Bethlehem” portrays Mary and Joseph in Bethlehem. “The Massacre of Innocents” illustrates the group massacre of innocent children as per the direction of Herod, the King of Judea, in order to get rid of the new born infant, Jesus Christ. “Landscape with the Fall of Icarus” depicts the Greek mythical story of Icarus, the son of Daedalus, who, despite his father’s warnings, flies perilously close to the sun with the waxwings that his father gifted him. Sadly, the wax melted, and Icarus plummeted and drowned in the water.

Auden was so captivated and bewitched by the paintings that he wrote the poem “Musée des Beaux Arts”, depicting the same incidents but from a different perspective. The poem, which appeared in the collection *Another Time*, is a reflection on ancient paintings that vividly represent the truth of life. Crises, catastrophes, and miseries are a part of life, and they may happen to anybody at any time. In this two-stanza poem, Auden uses famous artworks to illustrate the nature of human suffering. He highlights the fact that humans are generally indifferent to the plight of others as their suffering or tragedy does not directly affect them.



Fig 1: Pieter Bruegel the Elder's "The Census at Bethlehem"



Fig 2: Pieter Bruegel the Elder's "The Massacre of Innocents"



Fig 3: Pieter Bruegel the Elder's "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus"

The first stanza of the poem establishes the theme and begins, "About suffering they were never wrong, / The Old Masters;: how well they understood Its human position: how it takes place" (Auden 79). Auden recognises that the 'Old Masters', the Renaissance and Early Modern painters in Europe, recognised the pattern of suffering and its 'human position'. They believed that all people have unpleasant and traumatic encounters that may alter the direction of their lives, while the rest of the world remains apathetic and goes about their daily routines completely ignoring the misfortunes of others. Auden is enthralled by how these painters represent the human predisposition to be concerned with the minor and major happenings that are going on around them. He is astonished by the painter's innovative and artistic abilities in depicting the actions of people and animals around the edges of the primary theme of the paintings. To create links between his poetry stanzas, Auden made use of several allusions. In "The Census at Bethlehem", the people around Mary and Joseph, who arrived in Bethlehem tired and exhausted after a long journey, appear unsympathetic and indifferent. As he quotes, "While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along" (79). During Christ's miraculous birth, young children went ice skating on a nearby frozen pond, while the older generation fervently awaited the holy birth. "The Massacre of Innocents" portrays the gruesome act of Herod's men. The poet observes that tragedy is often overlooked, and that, "dreadful

martyrdom must run its course," no matter how horrible. He remarks that while some 'dreadful martyrdom' was happening, and many future saints were being tormented in a wood, the animals like dogs and horses were oblivious to the misfortunes of others since they were occupied with their own activities, "Where the dogs go on with their doggy life and the torturer's horse Scratches its innocent behind on a tree" (79). The children, dogs, and horses are the observers and bystanders who get the greatest attention in the opening verse. They are often unaware of human misery as they cannot comprehend it.

In the second stanza, Auden examined the painting "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus" by Pieter Brueghel the Elder, which depicts the plight of the Greek mythological character Icarus, plummeting into the ocean in the lower right corner. The poet reinforces the idea of indifference and apathy through the ploughman, who obviously recognizes the fall of Icarus but is unconcerned about his suffering. Neither the passengers on the ship, the shepherd, nor the man on the shore are looking at Icarus or worried about his predicament. Auden portrays the adult world while concentrating on the demise of Icarus. It illustrates several perspectives that might go much further. Icarus is just a kid here, 'a boy falling out of the sky', while the people in the surrounds are no longer kids, but adults who must have witnessed what has happened. And even if they recognize something odd, they are too preoccupied, unmotivated, and uninterested in taking the necessary rescue steps. These people show no emotion or response to the catastrophic fall of Icarus, as they turn away from the tragedy. Auden affirms that they all may have heard the "splash" or the "forsaken cry", and that even the ship passing close to him continues on its way. All of them are "calmly" focused on their own tasks and are unconcerned about Icarus or his fate. They chose to stay indifferent to his plight. The poem affirms that 'suffering' is portrayed in the arts as a universal feeling. The fate of Icarus and his suffering is revered as a symbol of human suffering and tragedy that goes unnoticed by an apathetic world.

Ursula A. Fanthrope (1929 – 2009) was a prominent English poet of the 20th century. As a talented poet, she believed that poetry could connect with a wide range of emotions and feelings. Through her poems, she used to address the social issues of her time. "Not My Best Side", published in 1978, is an ekphrastic poem based on Paulo Uccello's iconic painting "St George and the Dragon", which alludes to the fabled narrative of St. George, the knight. However, the poem deviates from its conventional meaning when Fanthrope offers a different perspective on the three characters depicted in the painting. She challenged the traditional conventions and examined

the entire narrative of the legend from a modern perspective. The painting portrays three characters: St. George the Knight, a maiden, and a dragon. The poem is divided into three sections, and each stanza is a monologue narrated in the voices of the three characters.



Fig 4: Paulo Uccello's "St George and the Dragon"

The poem begins from the perspective of the dragon. Fanthrope claims that, unlike the popular legend, the dragon in Uccello's painting is deformed and ugly rather than ferocious and monstrous. The dragon spends most of his monologue complaining about how he is depicted in the artwork. He is uninterested in the damsel he has caught, and he thinks she is rather unattractive. He harshly criticizes the painter and expresses his contempt and dissatisfaction for the painter, Uccello, for not allowing him to pose properly, saying, "Not my best side, I'm afraid. The artist didn't give me a chance to pose properly, and as you can see" (Fanthrope 28), which makes clear his vanity towards physical beauty. This "bad publicity" for his reputation bothers and concerns him. The dragon also expresses his disappointment with the knight and the maiden, as both of them failed to meet his expectations. The knight is "beardless" and rides a 'strange' horse with a "deformed neck". When it comes to the maiden, he wonders "Why should my victim be so Unattractive as to be inedible?" (28). The phrases used by the dragon portray how the poem is the inverse of the painting itself. The dragon in the poem is, in reality, an antithesis to

the terrifying fire-breathing dragon.

Reversing the stereotypes, the maiden in the painting, who was supposed to be an innocent virgin lady as in the fable, is presented in the poem as an imprudent woman who lacks both intelligence and ladylike virtues. When she remarks, "It's hard for a girl to be sure if She wants to be rescued." (28), she makes it clear that she is not a usual, damsel-in-distress. She has no desire to be saved by the Knight, whom she regards as a 'boy', thereby defying masculine stereotypes. She admits, "to be honest, I didn't much fancy him" (28). She has her own perceptions and her monologue is filled with blatant sexual insinuation. Rather than admiring the knight, she is charmed by the dragon's look and wants to be devoured by him. Expressing her attraction to the dragon, she sexualises him and displays her lustful feelings for the dragon using statements like "nicely physical, with his claws" and "lovely green skin, and that sexy tail" (28). The dragon, however, does not find her appealing and does not reciprocate her sexual desires, as she hoped. The maiden in the poem defies the established legend and societal expectations by passionately wishing to remain with the dragon. She is described as self-centred and is more of an incarnation of a modern woman than a biblical one. She is unconcerned about societal standards and, like the dragon, is more concerned with her bodily looks than anything else.

The Knight is presented as a selfish individual who only cares about himself. Beyond all appearances as a truthful, valiant warrior and the slayer of cunning dragons, the legendary St. George in the poem seems more pre-occupied with the latest machinery and techniques. He claims himself to be an expert in "Dragon Management and Virgin Reclamation". He boasts that his horse, custom-made spear, and prototype armour are exceptional and rare. Obviously, he is not one of the legendary chivalrous knights. He is arrogantly aggressive, obnoxious, and extremely self-centred when he exclaims, "You can't Do better than me at the moment" (Fanthrope 29). He is oblivious to the dragon and maiden's mocking of his masculinity. Believing himself as unbeatable, he confronts both the dragon and the maiden asking "Don't you want to be killed and/or rescued In the most contemporary way?" (29). He even proves himself to be a chauvinist by making sexist remarks to the maiden, such as, "You want to carry out the roles That sociology and myth have designed for you" (29). He is more concerned with his reputation as a knight than with rescuing the maiden. His chauvinist indifference is exposed when he says, "What, in any case, does it matter what You want?" (29). All three characters are portrayed as narcissists and self-centred. They are clearly indifferent and apathetic

and spare no time for others. The poem's persistent topics are vanity and obsession with physical beauty. No one of the three characters displayed their "best side". The poem brilliantly juxtaposes the past with the present. Using a mixture of humour and satire, Fanthrope deconstructs the narrative of a heroic knight who defeats a dragon and saves a princess. Fanthrope cleverly showed current society's self-centred consumerism by giving contemporary voices to the three primary characters.

Conclusion

The most striking resemblance between the two poems is that they are ekphrastic poems written in free verse based on paintings illustrating old legends, myths, and biblical events. Both Auden and Fanthrope paid great attention to the paintings, imbuing them with new meanings. They evaluated each individual through a contemporary lens and aimed to reveal the true aspects of modern life. Alluding to the painting of Icarus and his subsequent fall, Auden described the avarice of modern man. He also highlighted the indifference and selfishness of modern man towards the sufferings of others by interpreting the paintings "The Census at Bethlehem" and "The Massacre of Innocents".

In Fanthrope's poem "Not My Best Side", the perspectives of the dragon, the maiden, and the knight are compared and contrasted to reveal the vanity, self-centeredness, and indifference of modern society. People's obsession with their physical appearance is hinted at in the poem's title. Defying gender preconceptions, narcissism is shown in the dragon rather than the maiden. Fanthrope wanted to depict the materialistic desires of modern people who are selfish, immoral, and whose actual self is veiled beneath their outward looks. All three characters are completely self-obsessed and indifferent to others.

"Musée des Beaux-Arts" and "Not My Best Side" are two exceptional ekphrastic poems that deconstruct the established mythical or biblical stories as portrayed in paintings of the past from a modern perspective that singularly mirrors the thought process of contemporary society.

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