

## The Challenge of Modernism



**READING 3** Evaluate the changes in sound, form, figurative language, graphics, and dramatic structure in poetry across literary time periods. **RC-12(A)** Reflect on understanding to monitor comprehension.

### Musée des Beaux Arts The Unknown Citizen

Poetry by W. H. Auden

#### Meet the Author

#### W. H. Auden 1907–1973

W. H. Auden brilliantly captured the turbulent climate of his era. In both lyrical and satirical poems, he communicated the anxieties and uncertainties people faced during the 1930s—the time of the Great Depression, the Spanish Civil War, and the outbreak of World War II.

**Early Passions** As a boy growing up in the British industrial city of Birmingham, Wystan Hugh Auden developed an interest in both urban landscapes and in urban social problems. Fascinated by science, he considered becoming a mining engineer. At the age of 15, however, he discovered his talent for writing poetry and grew determined to make writing his career. Nevertheless, his early interest in science didn't entirely leave him; references to scientific phenomena abound in his work.

**Generation Auden** While a student at Oxford University, Auden exerted a significant influence on a group of young, politically active writers who would become the literary leaders of the 1930s. Later known as the Auden Generation, this group included Louis MacNeice, Christopher Isherwood, and C. Day Lewis. Repulsed by the lingering horrors of World War I and by the deplorable living conditions

endured by the growing ranks of England's unemployed, these writers lashed out against social and political injustices in their work.

**New Home** After graduating in 1928, Auden enjoyed the happiest period of his life. Beginning in 1930, he published several volumes of poetry to glowing reviews. In these works, he used a remarkable variety of poetic styles and forms to explore the problems afflicting modern society and the complexities of the human psyche. Seeking fresh inspiration, Auden moved to New York City in 1939. He maintained residence there until 1972, when his college at Oxford offered him a rent-free residence.

**Eccentric Lifestyle** Even after becoming a renowned literary figure who mingled with the rich and famous, Auden lived the life of an eccentric. He resided in messy, rundown apartments in New York's Greenwich Village; he dressed in shabby attire; and he frequently appeared in public wearing jeans and bedroom slippers. Although disorderly in his personal habits, Auden maintained a strict sense of order in his poetry and took delight in the beauty of words. "A poet," Auden explained, "is, before anything else, a person who is passionately in love with language."

#### Author Online

Go to [thinkcentral.com](http://thinkcentral.com). KEYWORD: HML12-1174



#### DID YOU KNOW?

W. H. Auden ...

- was a stretcher-bearer during the Spanish Civil War.
- became a United States citizen in 1946.
- won a Pulitzer Prize for his book *The Age of Anxiety*.

**LITERARY ANALYSIS: IRONY**

W. H. Auden believed that his role as a poet was to present ordinary aspects of human existence, and to do so in a way that readers could understand and relate to their lives. To that end, he strove to write simply and avoid the finery of what he termed “grand poetry.” The two poems you are about to read reveal Auden’s knack for both simplicity of style and biting satire. One important component of Auden’s satire is **irony**. Both “Musée des Beaux Arts” and “The Unknown Citizen” contain ironic elements. As you read, look for examples of the following types of irony:

- **situational irony**, a contrast between what is expected to happen and what actually happens
- **verbal irony**, in which a speaker or writer says one thing but means another

**READING SKILL: INTERPRET IDEAS**

“Musée des Beaux Arts” was inspired by a trip to Brussels, where Auden viewed the paintings in the Royal Museum of Fine Arts, including several by the 16th-century artist Pieter Breughel. In “The Unknown Citizen,” Auden explores the quality of life in the 20th century. As you read these poems, your goal should be to interpret the ideas Auden expresses about the human condition. For each poem, use a chart like the one shown to record specific phrases, images, or lines that convey Auden’s ideas about human nature and life. Note what you think these examples reveal about Auden’s ideas.

Phrases, Images, or Lines	My Interpretation
“... suffering ... takes place/While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along...” (“Musée des Beaux Arts,” lines 1–4)	



Complete the activities in your **Reader/Writer Notebook**.

## What makes you feel INVISIBLE?

In some situations, anonymity can feel good. Blending into a crowd on a bustling city street or losing yourself in a mass of fellow sports fans at a sold-out game can be exhilarating. But there are times when feeling exactly like everyone around you can make you feel invisible—unoriginal and not of much consequence.

**QUICKWRITE** Whether it’s your first day at a new school or a frustrating night when your family seems to look right through you at the dinner table, some situations can cause a disconcerting sense that you’re invisible. With a partner, list four or five such situations. Try to identify aspects of contemporary life that might contribute to this feeling. Then, on your own, choose one of the situations you listed and describe it in a paragraph or two. What emotions might this kind of situation trigger?

### Examples

1. Applying for a summer job
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

# MUSÉE DES BEAUX ARTS

W. H. AUDEN

- 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;  
5 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  
10 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. **A**
- In Breughel's *Icarus*, for instance: how everything turns away  
15 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  
20 Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,  
Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.

**[Title]** *Musée des Beaux Arts*  
(myōō'zā dā bōz ār): French for  
"Museum of Fine Arts." Auden saw  
the painting described in this poem  
in the Musée des Beaux Arts in  
Brussels, Belgium.

**2 Old Masters:** great European  
artists of the 16th–18th centuries.

## **A** INTERPRET IDEAS

Reread lines 1–13. What is Auden  
saying about human suffering  
in these lines? Record your  
interpretation in your chart.

**14 Breughel's *Icarus*** (broi'gəlz  
īk'ər-əs): the painting *Landscape  
with the Fall of Icarus* by Pieter  
Breughel (also spelled *Bruegel* and  
*Brueghel*). In Greek mythology, Icarus  
and his father, Daedalus (dēd'l-əs),  
escape imprisonment on wings  
crafted of wax and feathers. When  
Icarus flies too near the sun, the wax  
melts and he falls into the sea and  
drowns.

## Literary Analysis

- 1. Summarize** What incident in the Icarus legend is depicted in Breughel's painting and **alluded** to by the speaker of the poem?
- 2. Analyze Tone** Describe the tone of this poem. In what way is the tone at odds with the "miraculous" and "dreadful" events the speaker recounts?





*Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*, Pieter Breughel the Elder. Musée d'Art Ancien, Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts, Brussels, Belgium. © Scala/Art Resource, New York.

# THE UNKNOWN CITIZEN

W. H. AUDEN

*(To JS/07/M/378*

*This Marble Monument Is Erected by the State)*

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 saint,  
5 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 scab or odd in his views,  
10 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. **B**  
The Press are convinced that he bought a paper every day  
15 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  
20 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.

## Analyze Visuals ►

What adjective seems most appropriate for describing the image on page 1179?

**9 scab:** a worker who refuses to support a union and crosses a picket line.

## **B IRONY**

Consider what you learn about the poem's subject in lines 1–13. In light of this information, why is the poem's title ironic?

**21 phonograph:** a machine for playing music on vinyl records;  
**frigidaire** (frĭj'ĭ-dâr'): a refrigerator.





*Portrait* (1931–1932), Francis Bacon. © 2008 The Estate of Francis Bacon/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/DACS, London.

- 25 He was married and added five children to the  
population,  
Which our Eugenist 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. **C**

**26 Eugenist** (yōō'jə-nĭst): a scientist who tries to improve the human race by controlling hereditary factors.

**C IRONY**

The speaker asserts in line 20 that the unknown citizen had “everything necessary to the Modern Man,” and, in the poem’s final lines, deems questions about happiness and freedom “absurd.” What point is Auden making with these ironic statements? Explain.

## Comprehension

1. **Recall** List three facts the speaker reveals about the subject in “The Unknown Citizen.”
2. **Clarify** Why does the speaker refer to the unknown citizen as a “saint”? Explain why “no official complaint” could be brought against this citizen.



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## Literary Analysis

3. **Examine Allusions** In “Musée des Beaux Arts,” review the references to Christ’s “miraculous birth” and “dreadful martyrdom,” as well as the allusion to Icarus’s “failure.” Why might Auden have included these particular references, rather than less specific or less well-known images of suffering?
4. **Draw Conclusions** Look again at the reproduction of Breughel’s painting *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* on page 1177. Why do you think Auden chose this particular painting as the focus of “Musée des Beaux Arts”?
5. **Analyze Style** Review “The Unknown Citizen,” noting Auden’s unorthodox capitalization of words such as *Press*, *Union*, and *Public Opinion*. Why do you think Auden capitalizes these words?
6. **Analyze Speaker** In **satiric** poems, the poet often creates a specific “voice” in order to critique certain aspects of society. For “The Unknown Citizen,” Auden created a speaker whose attitudes are quite different from his own. What do you think was Auden’s purpose in speaking through this voice? Explain what using this voice helps him accomplish, citing specific lines from the poem.
7. **Interpret Ideas** Review the chart you filled in as you read. What ideas about the human condition does Auden convey in these poems? Citing evidence, explain how you interpret the poet’s ideas regarding anonymity, history, and conformity.
8. **Evaluate Irony** Re-examine both poems, noting examples of **situational irony** in “Musée des Beaux Arts” and **verbal irony** in “The Unknown Citizen.” In each poem, what ideas does Auden’s use of irony help him convey? How might each have been less effective if Auden had stated his views more directly?

## Literary Criticism

9. **Historical Context** Auden wrote both of these poems around 1940, a time in which the world’s attention was focused on World War II. The United States, Auden’s adopted homeland, was following a policy of isolation, staying out of the war and other world affairs. What conclusions can you draw about how this context might have shaped Auden’s work?

### *What makes you feel* **INVISIBLE?**

What is the difference between being invisible and being ignored? Which gives you more control?

## Conventions in Writing

### ◆ GRAMMAR AND STYLE: Choose Effective Words

Auden, who wanted his poetry to reflect his concern for the common person, writes simply, avoiding flowery or figurative language. His use of plain images and uncomplicated diction makes his poetry widely accessible. For example, in the following description of Breughel’s painting, notice how Auden employs **concrete nouns**, such as *water*, *ship*, and *boy*, and everyday adjectives and verbs:

... 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. (lines 17–21)

**PRACTICE** Rewrite the following stanza to better reflect Auden’s style, replacing flowery language with simple, concrete words and images.

The full moon, lustrous as a beacon, flooded the ocean  
With beams of lemon-colored light,  
Illuminating a diminutive, fragile vessel that bobbed  
On mammoth silver waves like a child’s toy,  
As the despondent crew searched fruitlessly for a cove  
To shelter them in its arms from the tempestuous sea.

### READING-WRITING CONNECTION



Expand your understanding of Auden’s “The Unknown Citizen” by responding to this prompt. Then use the **revising tips** to improve your analytical essay.

#### WRITING PROMPT

**WRITE AN ESSAY** What developments in modern society is Auden warning readers against in “The Unknown Citizen”? In **three to five paragraphs**, analyze the flaws of the society he depicts and identify the changes he seems to be recommending.

#### REVISING TIPS

- Add a description of the poem’s theme to your opening paragraph.
- Make sure you give specific examples of negative social tendencies explored in “The Unknown Citizen.”
- Try to use some of Auden’s concrete nouns.



**WRITING 15A** Write an analytical essay. **ORAL AND WRITTEN CONVENTIONS 17** Understand the function of and use the conventions of academic language.

Interactive  
Revision



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KEYWORD: HML12-1181