Icarus

SUMMARY

Some feathers and a hat floating in the water were the only evidence of Icarus's remarkable flight, fall, and presumable drowning in the sea. The police didn't bother to investigate the more bizarre details of what happened, and the people who witnessed the event quickly dispersed to watch (or join) a war between rival gangs. The police report, which was quickly forgotten, said that Icarus had drowned, but this wasn't true: in fact, Icarus swam away from the scene until he finally reached the city. There, he rented a house and worked in his garden.

His neighbors thought that Icarus, who now went by the name Mr. Hicks, was just a nice, regular guy. They couldn't possibly imagine that the same man dressed in drab, ordinary business clothes had once maneuvered a pair of enormous wings. They couldn't imagine that Icarus's unhappy, hopeless eyes had once set themselves on the sun. Even if Icarus had told his neighbors about his past, they wouldn't have understood. His wild tale would have messed up the tidy yards in front of their homes (i.e., it would have sewn chaos in their neat, orderly lives). And yet, everything Icarus read told him that what he'd done was all wrong: that Icarus had no business growing old in a suburb. He wondered if it was possible for the exceptional talent of a hero to be reduced to the merely average skill level of a regular person.

Now, every night, Icarus digs into the pain his failure had caused. Every day, he closes the curtains in his workshop, builds a small pair of wings, and then attempts to fly up to the ceiling lamp. He never succeeds, and he is disgusted with himself for attempting this flight in the first place. There was a time when he thought of himself as a heroic figure undertaking grand, noble deeds. He dreamed about his fall from the sky, which he viewed as a deeply tragic and noble act. Nowadays, he just commutes to work on the train.

He does his part by joining various groups devoted to specific tasks. All the while, he thinks it would have been preferable to have died in the water.

THEMES

THE LOSS OF YOUTHFUL AMBITION

Edward Field's "Icarus" contrasts the hopes and dreams of youth with the compromises and disappointments of adulthood. The poem continues the Greek myth of Icarus, a boy who escaped from imprisonment by flying on makeshift wings held together by wax. In the myth, Icarus flies too close to the sun; the wax melts and Icarus drowns in the sea. But in Field's poem, Icarus swims away and assumes a new life in suburbia under the name Mr. Hicks. No longer young and recklessly heroic, Icarus now plods through a dull, ordinary life, wishing all the while that "he had drowned." The poem suggests that, while the compromises of adulthood might feel safe and practical, they're also rather tragic: grand youthful ambition, once lost, is hard to reclaim.

The Icarus of this poem is a far cry from the reckless boy who dared soar close to the sun and "thought himself a hero." The poem even implies that Icarus never actually *meant* to survive his flight—that, as a young man, he had dreamed of making a name for himself and of burning out "heroically."

But by swimming away from the scene of his failure, Icarus essentially allows his former self to die in the water. His choice to take on a new identity suggests that he's embarrassed by his youthful arrogance and downfall. His crash changes him from a rash kid to a responsible, yet decidedly less remarkable, adult.

Now Icarus is unrecognizable (and miserable) as Mr. Hicks, who rides a commuter train to work while wearing his "gray, respectable suit." His "sad, defeated eyes" hide his former glory, making it impossible for those around him to imagine him doing anything other than behaving responsibly. And, in comparison to the wild endeavors of Icarus's youth, the "neat front yards" and "various committees" of adulthood are safe yet boring and predictable.

Realizing his unhappiness, Icarus attempts to recreate his glorious moment of soaring on wings, but it's a rather pathetic attempt—one that suggests he's trapped in and unwilling to escape from his comfy suburban prison. Every day, Icarus "Constructs small wings and tries to fly / To the lighting fixture on the ceiling." This "lighting fixture" is hardly the lofty sun he once aimed his sights on, and he "Fails every time." He also "hates himself for trying," perhaps because doing so reminds him of everything he's given up by accepting an average existence.

His whole life seems like "a horrible mistake," in fact, and he feels it would have been better to drown in the sea than survive only to be faced with unending boredom and failure. In this way, the poem offers a tragic glimpse of a middle-aged man who has lost touch with his youthful fire and perhaps encourages readers not to abandon their own youthful aspirations.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-3
- Lines 7-31

PRIDE, MEDIOCRITY, AND FEAR OF FAILURE

"Icarus" illustrates how pride and fear of failure can prevent people from reaching their full potential. Icarus's father in the original myth is the brilliant craftsman Daedalus, who builds the wings they use to make their escape using feathers and wax. Icarus fails to heed his father's warning and flies too close to the sun, which melts his wings. The myth is commonly understood as a warning against hubris, which Field's poem further links with shame and cowardice: instead of swallowing his wounded pride and trying again, *this* Icarus abandons his former identity altogether and hides out in the suburbs. Icarus clearly resents his average existence, and in this way the poem suggests that a life free from public risks is no life at all.

Icarus doesn't confront the police or "witnesses" after his "tragic fall." Instead, perhaps embarrassed by his big mistake, he takes their disinterest as an opportunity to slip away unnoticed and don a new suburban identity, one that no one will suspect is tied to the boy who flew too close to the sun.

On the surface, the new Icarus is a normal, "respectable" member of his suburban community. Yet Icarus is clearly miserable, still dreaming "of his fall, the tragic fall of a hero." And this dissatisfaction stems, at least in part, from his pride: Icarus sees himself as someone who should be above "the middling stature of the merely talented" and laments how someone with his pedigree could be "aging in a suburb." All the "books" he reads tell him he should be doing more—that choosing this safe, mediocre life has been "a horrible mistake."

But the same pride that makes him think he's better than the life he leads prevents him from doing anything about it. Indeed, the contrast between Icarus's private and public lives suggests that he's so scarred by his early failure that he will never risk failing in front of others again.

Having gotten a taste of greatness, Icarus longs to recreate his dramatic flight, but his small-scale reconstruction is pathetic. His daily attempt to fly only within his small workshop suggests that he's stuck in a pattern of mediocrity that he will never break free from—no big wings, no daring attempt in the ceiling-free sky, because that would require the potential of a second failing for all to see.

As sad as his private attempts are, Icarus's public life is even sadder. The suit, the commuter train, the committee work—those might be the building blocks of some people's dreams, but they construct misery for Icarus, who cannot enjoy his current life because he never allowed himself to find out if he really could achieve greatness through persistence and daring. His refusal to act boldly—to be courageous and humble enough to accept the risk of failure—ensures that he will stay among the average.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-3
- Lines 7-31

THE CONFORMITY AND ALIENATION OF MODERN LIFE

Icarus's loss of ambition results not just from his own fear of failure, the poem implies, but also from societal pressure to conform. He goes through the motions of living a normal life, renting a house with a garden and riding the train to a steady job in his "gray, respectable suit." Yet despite his efforts to be like everybody else, it's clear that no one around Icarus actually cares about him—nor, it seems, do they really care about much of anything at all! Modern life is marked by apathy and conformity, the poem suggests—features that stifle individuality, passion, and empathy.

The world of the poem doesn't seem like a particularly compassionate or curious one. The police "ignore / [t]he confusing aspects of" Icarus's fall, for example, preferring to file an inaccurate report than actually *investigate* what happened to the boy. Other "witnesses," meanwhile, can't be bothered to stick around; the speaker says that they "ran off to a gang war"—another dystopian detail that the poem lists off with clear nonchalance, as though such violence is a simply an expected part of life in the modern world.

Meanwhile, the neighborhood Icarus settles down in is filled with "neat front yards" that he doesn't dare "disturb," a sign of society's desire to maintain the appearance of order and normalcy (even in the face of apparently common "gang" violence). And as the poem goes on, readers might get the sense that Icarus has done *too good a job* of fitting in. His neighbors can't fathom that there could be anything special about "That nice Mr. Hicks," and, even if he were to tell them about his remarkable past, he knows they'd just look at him with "a shocked, / uncomprehending stare." In other words, they wouldn't be able to even understand what he's talking about, so far removed would it be from their own mundane experiences.

Cookie-cutter suburban life, the poem suggests, can be shallow, hollow, and, above all, intensely isolating.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 3-21
- Lines 27-31

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-5

Only the feathers ...
... a gang war.

The poem's opening lines allude to the traditional ending of the story of Icarus, a famous figure from Greek mythology. Icarus was a young man who, along with his father Daedalus, tried to escape from imprisonment by flying away on wings made of feathers and wax. Icarus flew too close to the sun, resulting in the wax in his wings melting; he plummeted to his death in front of his father's eyes.

This poem picks up where the myth left off, transporting Icarus to the modern day and imagining what the scene looked like after he crashed into the water:

> Only the feathers floating around the hat
> Showed that anything more spectacular had occurred
> Than the usual drowning. [...]

In other words, there's no evidence that something amazing (a boy flying and falling from the sky) just happened.

The fact that a "drowning" is considered "usual" suggests that this modern world is a violent, disturbing one; apparently, people drown all the time, and no one really cares. Indeed, the police, whose job it is to set the record straight, don't feel like grappling with the "confusing aspects of the case," while the "witnesses" who actually saw Icarus's fall "ran off to a gang war." The speaker mentions all of this casually; gang wars, drownings, apathetic police—it all comes across as par for the course in this world.

The poem's use of conversational free verse and plenty of enjambment adds to its nonchalant tone. There's no strict meter regulating the poem's rhythm, and the speaker doesn't contort phrases to make them fit on a single line. Instead, the poem reads almost like prose, its long sentences sprawling unconstrained down the page.

That said, there are some devices here that keep the poem feeling musical. For example, alliteration ("**f**eathers **f**loating," "**p**olice **p**referred") adds some moments of emphasis and keeps the poem sounding *poetic*.

LINES 6-9

So the report filed ...
... tended the garden.

Thanks to the apathy of both the "witnesses" to Icarus's fall and the "police" who investigated it, Icarus was declared dead by drowning.

The "report" of his death was "filed and forgotten in the archives," again suggesting how routine death is in the world of the poem. The /f/ alliteration in "**f**iled and **f**orgotten" calls readers' attention to the fact that Icarus's death, in this poem, is nothing special; it becomes just another piece of paper stuffed away in a filing cabinet. Rather than becoming the stuff of myth, *this* Icarus has already been forgotten.

The poem then introduces a major twist on the original myth: Icarus didn't actually drown, the speaker says, but, in this alternate version of the story, he swam from the scene of his fall unnoticed. Eventually, he made it "to the city / Where he rented a house and tended the garden."

On one level, compared to drowning in the sea, washing up in the city and living a quiet little life sounds pretty great! Readers perhaps imagine that Icarus is simply happy to be alive after his reckless brush with death. By ending the first stanza with this simple and seemingly desirable outcome, the poet allows the reader to imagine, for a moment, Icarus living happily ever after.

At the same time, however, the image of the bold, free-spirited Icarus now anonymously tinkering in his garden seems rather sad. It's a striking contrast to his epically tragic fate in the original myth. Sure, he's safe—but he's also not the ambitious young man he used to be.

LINES 10-12

"That nice Mr. ...
... controlled huge wings

The speaker says that the "neighbors" know Icarus as "That nice Mr. Hicks," indicating that Icarus has assumed a new identity. Rather than being the stuff of legend, this new identity gives Icarus a generic-sounding name and casts him as merely "nice," a bland, ordinary adjective.

The speaker goes on to say that these "neighbors" would never have imagined "that the gray, respectable suit / Concealed arms that had controlled huge wings." In other words, Icarus didn't just change his name; he's adopted the *lifestyle* of the neighborhood in which he now lives. The "gray, respectable suit" suggests that he works a white-collar job in the city (calling this suit "gray" also subtly nods to the dullness of Icarus's new life). Apparently, Icarus blends into this new environment so well that no one would ever suspect him of the recklessness and daring he displayed in his youth.

Notice the use of alliteration and consonance in these lines:

> "That **n**ice Mr. Hicks," the **n**eighbors called,
> **N**ever dreaming that the gray, respectable suit
> **Con**cealed arms that had **con**trolled huge wings

Muted, nasally /n/ alliteration in lines 10-11 emphasizes the quiet "respectab[ility]" of Icarus's new environment, where peoples' true selves are hidden beneath colorless "suit[s]" and

polite smiles. The strong /con/ consonance/assonance in line 12 then highlights the contrast between Icarus's current situation—his "arms" hidden beneath the sleeves of a suit—with how powerful he had once felt "controll[ing] huge wings" as he flew from captivity toward the sun.

This contrast suggests that Icarus has flown from one form of captivity to another; perhaps his spectacular fall in between was the only time he felt truly alive, powerful, and free.

LINES 13-17

Nor that those ...
... neat front yards;

The speaker continues to describe the way Icarus appears to his "neighbors," saying that these people would have no reason to believe that his "sad, defeated eyes had once / Compelled the sun." In other words, the boy who had once defied his father's warnings and flown dangerously close to the sun is nowhere to be seen. This adult, responsible version of Icarus is a mere shadow of the reckless yet courageous boy he used to be.

The firm, full-stop caesura in line 14 emphasizes this break with the past:

> Compelled the sun. And had he told them

Even if Icarus were to tell his neighbors about his real identity and past, these neighbors "would have answered with a shocked, / uncomprehending stare." That is, they wouldn't have understood; they wouldn't have been able to reconcile the "nice Mr. Hicks" in front of them with the boy who had risked everything for the thrill of flying higher and higher in the sky.

Indeed, Icarus assures himself that "he could not disturb their neat front yards." This line speaks to the conformity of the neighborhood he lives in, and of the modern world itself. He feels he can't be honest about who he is because it would ruffle feathers in a world that prizes orderliness and compliance.

The fact that Icarus is unwilling or unable to "disturb" the status quo further suggests that he himself is also beginning to conform to societal expectations. This is not the rebellious and ambitious Icarus of myth, but rather a modern man who is afraid to stand out in a world that values fitting in.

LINES 18-21

Yet all his ...
... the merely talented?

Although Icarus conceals his true self from his neighbors and leads a normal, respectable life, "all his books insisted that this was a horrible mistake." Basically, Icarus knows he's not living the life he was meant to live, the life he dreamed of when he flew away from Crete on wings of wax and feather. This unexceptional life is surely not the one he imagined he was escaping to as he soared above the ocean.

He then poses two rhetorical questions in a row that convey his deep dissatisfaction with his life and his disappointment in himself:

> What was he doing aging in a suburb?
> Can the genius of the hero fall
> To the middling stature of the merely talented?

The first question implies that Icarus, of all people, is not meant to be fading away into mediocrity. Not only is he the son of a famous craftsman (Daedalus), but he himself once had the courage to attempt something extraordinary: he flew across the sky on enormous wings and confronted the blazing sun. *Surely*, he asks here, *there must be more in store for him than this?*

The second question then implies that Icarus feels self-doubt and loathing creeping in. The "genius of the hero" might refer to his father Daedalus's famous brilliance. Perhaps Icarus is wondering whether it's possible that his father's genius manifested in his son as just some unremarkable talent. That is, perhaps he feels he's failed to live up to the legacy his father gave him.

Readers might also take that "hero" as Icarus describing his former self, whose *literal* fall from the sky has landed him in this deeply average existence.

All in all, the conclusion of the second stanza implies that Icarus is supremely unhappy with his new lot in life. His wasted potential suggests the dangers of trying to fit in out of fear and pride, while also suggesting that the modern world is designed for this kind of conformity.

LINES 22-26

And nightly Icarus ...
... himself for trying.

Each night, the speaker says, "Icarus probes his wound." This "wound" perhaps refers to his pride, bruised along with his body in his very public failure, and also to his deep dissatisfaction and disappointment with how his life has turned out. He "probes," or explores his own pain, unable to let go of his past.

Note how the poem switches to the present tense here, making the poem feel more immediate and tragic; there won't be any grand return to his former glory at the poem's end, because Icarus is still stuck in this blank suburban existence.

He hasn't *entirely* given up on his dreams, however. During the day, he "Constructs small wings and tries to fly / to the lighting fixture on the ceiling" of his "workshop." A ceiling light is a major step down from the sun; Icarus's ambitions are much smaller than they once were.

The fact that he only attempts this feat with "curtains carefully drawn" further indicates that he's frightened of any of his

neighbors seeing what he's doing. He'd feel silly and foolish were they to know what he does in his workshop, the poem implies, and he doesn't want to risk public humiliation again.

What's worse, every time Icarus "Fails" to make it to the "lighting fixture," he "hates himself" for ever having tried. He's stuck in a horrible loop: not only is he afraid of being judged by others, but he's now judging *himself*. He believes he's destined for more than a mediocre life in the suburbs, but every time he tries to realize this destiny, he feels farther and farther away from the bravery and daring of his youth. His dreams are slowly suffocating.

Notice the use of anaphora (the repetition of "And") in lines 22-23. Even though the repetition only occurs once, it is enough to suggest the monotonous nature of Icarus's life in the suburbs, which is punctuated only by his attempts to again fly. The /c/ alliteration in lines 23-24 ("curtains carefully drawn, / Constructs") adds intensity to Icarus's private attempts to regain his former glory, suggesting how important these moments are to him in the course of his otherwise un-noteworthy life.

LINES 27-31

He had thought ...
... he had drowned.

Notice the use of repetition in lines 27-28, which adds intensity to Icarus's devastating realization that his life hasn't turned out the way he'd thought it would:

> He had thought himself a **hero**, had acted **heroically**.
> And dreamt of his **fall**, the tragic **fall** of the **hero**;

Polyptoton ("hero"/"heroism") and diacope (the repetition of "fall" and "hero") emphasize Icarus's former vision of himself as a great, noble figure. He once believed that he was doing something grand and epic and that his fall was something immensely "tragic."

The poem then concludes with a striking juxtaposition, as the speaker contrasts this glorious vision of Icarus's past with his monotonous, decidedly normal present. Now, instead of flying and falling, he "rides commuter trains" to work and "Serves on various committees." The poem doesn't even mention what committees these are, emphasizing how even trying to do some good in this world is merely a social obligation, a thing people just *do* because it's what "respectable" people do.

Notice how the poem's final sentence begins at the end of the third stanza and then carries over into the fourth to end the poem. By allowing these last two lines to occupy their *own* stanza, the poet emphasizes the immensely unfulfilling nature of Icarus's safe, normal life: even as Icarus is doing what everyone else does, participating in the society in which he lives, ostensibly trying to improve it, he secretly wishes he had died when he fell from the sky.

Had he drowned then, as a young person aspiring to greatness, he would have died "a hero." His life would have meant something. Instead, he's become complacent, given into the pressure to fit in, and given up on his dreams. In this way, the poem suggests that the conformity of the modern world is suffocating, and that the loss of youthful dreams and ambitions is its own kind of horrible death.

SYMBOLS

WINGS

The "huge wings" that Icarus once "controlled" symbolize his youthful dreams and ambitions, which he left behind when he swam away from his public fall and moved to the city. These wings had once hoisted him up above "the middling stature of the merely talented," bringing him closer and closer to the "sun," suggesting the heights to which he aspired. But when the sun melted his wings and he went crashing into the sea, he lost his nerve: he didn't want to fail that publicly ever again.

Since then, Icarus still feels the old urge to fly—but his attempts are constrained by pride and fear. He "Constructs" only "small wings," and he aims only as high as "the lighting fixture on the ceiling." In other words, his dreams are minuscule compared to what they once were.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 11-12:** "Never dreaming that the gray, respectable suit / Concealed arms that had controlled huge wings"
- **Lines 23-25:** "And daily in his workshop, curtains carefully drawn, / Constructs small wings and tries to fly / To the lighting fixture on the ceiling:"

POETIC DEVICES

ALLUSION

"Icarus," of course, alludes to the Greek myth of Icarus.

Icarus was the son of Daedalus, a famous craftsman who incurred the wrath of King Minos of Crete. Minos imprisoned Daedalus and Icarus in a labyrinth (one Daedalus had actually built for Minos, but that's another story!). In order to escape, the clever Daedalus built huge wings of feathers and wax. He instructed Icarus not to fly too close to the water, for if the wings got wet, they would become too heavy and stop working. Likewise, he told Icarus not to fly too close to the sun, as the heat would melt the wax in the wings. Once they took off, however, Icarus was so filled with the exhilarating power of

flight that he ignored his father's warning and flew higher and higher, "Compell[ing]" the sun to melt his wings. He fell from the sky into the sea and drowned.

The poem alludes to pieces of this myth throughout. Through these allusions, the poem juxtaposes the thrilling glory of Icarus's youth with his boring, normal life in the suburbs.

For example, the speaker notes how his "gray, respectable suit / Conceal[s] arms that had controlled huge wings," and that his "sad, defeated eyes had once / Compelled the sun." His earlier "genius" is now "the middling stature of the merely talented," and he leaps for "lighting fixture on the ceiling" rather than the sun in the sky. Allusions to Icarus's epic backstory make these details feel all the more dismal.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-3
- Lines 6-8
- Lines 11-14
- Lines 20-21
- Lines 22-25
- Lines 27-28

RHETORICAL QUESTION

The poem uses two back-to-back rhetorical questions in lines 19-21 to give some insight into Icarus's state of mind as he settles for a life of mediocrity and conformity:

> What was he doing aging in a suburb?
> Can the genius of the hero fall
> To the middling stature of the merely talented?

These questions aren't really meant to be answered. The first question implies what the previous line explicitly stated: that his life in the "suburb" was "a horrible mistake." In other words, Icarus knows this isn't the life he was meant for. He also knows the reason he's here is, in part, because he was too afraid to confront the "witnesses" to his fall; he was too prideful to admit his failure and swam away from the scene.

Likewise, he already knows the answer to the second question—if the "genius of the hero" can "fall / to the middling" (or average) "stature of the merely talented." Stated simply: Can someone as brilliant as he is become mediocre, just a vaguely talented person living amongst other vaguely talented people? (Icarus might also be implying that he did not inherit the genius of his father, Daedalus.)

The question implies its own answer: yes. Icarus has already proved it to be so as he wastes his "heroic[]" potential on making "small wings" and trying to fly to the "ceiling" behind closed "curtains," where no one can see him, where he doesn't have to risk *real* failure. By again and again choosing to avoid real risk, *public* risk, Icarus ensures he will never again rise above the "middling stature" of cookie-cutter suburbia.

Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:

- **Lines 19-21:** "What was he doing aging in a suburb? / Can the genius of the hero fall / To the middling stature of the merely talented?"

ALLITERATION

Alliteration adds some moments of music and emphasis to an otherwise very prose-like poem. In the very first line, for example, /f/ alliteration draws attention to the imagery of "feathers floating" on the water, which alludes to the myth of Icarus falling into the sea and drowning. Similarly, the alliterative phrase "filed and forgotten" rings out clearly and calls readers' attention to the fact that, in this poem, Icarus doesn't go down as a tragic here; instead, his epic fall is treated like a "usual drowning," stuffed away in a filing cabinet and never thought of again.

Later, in lines 10-11, nasally /n/ alliteration ("nice," "neighbors," "Never") evokes the bland monotony of the suburban world Icarus has stepped into. In contrast, the strong /con/ and /com/ sounds in "Concealed," "controlled," and "Compelled" in lines 12-14 suggest the power Icarus had once felt as he flew above the ordinary world on wings his father had constructed. And in line 21, muted /m/ alliteration ("middling" and "merely") emphasizes the drab life awaiting those who give up on their dreams.

A striking string of alliteration occurs in 26-27:

> Fails every time and hates himself for trying.
> He had thought himself a hero, had acted heroically,

Insistent /h/ sounds (and insistent repetition) add intensity to these lines, in which the speaker juxtaposes Icarus's current self-loathing against his former vision of himself as a heroic, tragic figure.

Finally, note the /comm/ alliteration/consonance/assonance in "commuter" and "committees" in the poem's final moments. These words sound extremely similar; given that they each relate to a main activity in Icarus's new life, the shared sounds suggest the monotony of Icarus's modern existence.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "feathers," "floating"
- **Line 3:** "police," "preferred"
- **Line 4:** "confusing," "case"
- **Line 6:** "filed," "forgotten"
- **Line 10:** "nice," "neighbors"
- **Line 11:** "Never"
- **Line 12:** "Concealed," "controlled"

- **Line 14:** "Compelled"
- **Line 21:** "middling," "merely"
- **Line 23:** "curtains," "carefully"
- **Line 24:** "Constructs," "fly"
- **Line 25:** "fixture"
- **Line 26:** "Fails," "hates," "himself"
- **Line 27:** "He," "had," "himself," "hero," "had," "heroically"
- **Line 28:** "fall," "fall"
- **Line 29:** "commuter"
- **Line 30:** "committees"

REPETITION

The third stanza of the poem uses several different kinds of repetition (and general parallelism) to build momentum and intensity as the speaker nears the conclusion of Icarus's tale.

For example, there's anaphora in lines 22-23:

> **And** nightly Icarus probes his wound
> **And** daily in his workshop, curtains carefully drawn

The parallel phrasing of "And Nightly" and "And daily" suggests a similarity between these "nightly" and "daily" activities." During both, Icarus is unhappy and failing to capture the glory of his past. Icarus's attempts to "fly / To the lighting fixture on the ceiling" isn't really about any present-day ambition so much as it is a way of "prob[ing] his wound." In other words, he's torturing himself with this idea that he could and should have been more, that his life since the fall has been nothing but disappointment after disappointment.

Lines 27-28 then contain both polyptoton and diacope:

> He had thought himself a **hero**, had acted **heroically**,
> And dreamt of his **fall**, the tragic **fall** of the **hero**;

Polyptoton (the repetition of the root word "hero") emphasizes Icarus's youthful perception of himself. He once believed himself noble, epic, *heroic*, the kind of person who undertook grand deeds. That he keeps returning to this word suggests, perhaps, that he's desperately trying to remind himself of who he once was, or that he's struggling to reconcile this heroic person with his current self.

The diacope of fall, meanwhile, gives him a chance to essentially revise his "fall." It wasn't just a big mistake, but rather something "tragic"—the noble ending of a "hero."

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 22:** "And"
- **Line 23:** "And"
- **Line 27:** "hero," "heroically"
- **Line 28:** "fall," "fall," "hero"

VOCABULARY

Spectacular (Line 2) - Sensational, amazing.

Aspects (Line 4) - Features, specific parts.

Compelled (Lines 13-14) - To make or coerce someone or something into doing something (i.e., by flying too close to the sun, Icarus "Compelled" it to melt his wings).

Merely (Line 21) - Just. The speaker is saying that Icarus is *just* "talented," nothing more.

Middling stature (Line 21) - Of average rank or importance.

Probes (Line 22) - Examines, pokes at, explores.

Commuter (Line 29) - Someone who travels (usually from the suburbs into the city) on a daily basis for work.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Icarus" consists of 31 lines of free verse broken up into four stanzas. The poem's first three stanzas are much longer than its fourth: the stanzas contain nine, twelve, eight, and just two lines, respectively. This dramatic contrast in stanza lengths evokes the way Icarus's dreams, and indeed the scope of his entire life, shrink after he swims away from the site of his fall.

METER

"Icarus" is written in free verse, so it doesn't use any sort of regular meter. Instead, the poem's language feels casual and conversational. This makes sense, given that this is a *modern* Icarus who has survived his fall into the sea and ended up in the city. The *lack* of meter in the poem reflects the fact that it's updating the myth of Icarus for a contemporary audience.

RHYME SCHEME

As a free verse poem, "Icarus" doesn't use a rhyme scheme. As with the poem's lack of meter, the lack of rhyme scheme keeps things feeling more relaxed and conversational. The language flows naturally, evoking everyday speech. One might also argue that the plain, unadorned language and absence of more overt musicality echo the "sad, defeated [hero]" who has stepped out of Greek myth into the "neat[ness]" and conformity of a modern world.

SPEAKER

The speaker of the poem isn't a part of the story they're telling; they don't participate in any of the events, and they don't refer to themselves at all. They know every part of the story (i.e., they're omniscient): what really happened to Icarus, how his neighbors think of him, and the questions that trouble him

when he's alone. The speaker also presents Icarus neutrally—that is, they aren't passing judgment on Icarus's actions or failures. Instead, they focus on how *Icarus* feels about these things.

SETTING

The poem is clearly set in the modern world. The poem references "police" and "gang war[s]," drawing attention to the violent aspects of modern society. Icarus ends up "rent[ing] a house" in the city, where he's surrounded by neighbors who can't see past his "gray, respectable suit" or "sad, defeated eyes." Likewise, Icarus is surrounded by "neat front yards" that are not to be "disturb[ed]." The world he lives in now is one of conformity and polite appearances.

Only in his "workshop" with the "curtains carefully drawn" is Icarus able to entertain his old ambition, though the "wings" he makes now are "small" and he reaches only as high as the ceiling light. Ultimately, he has settled for a life of "commuter trains" and "committees." His life may be respectable, but there's nothing daring, adventurous, or exciting about it. In short, it couldn't be further from the epic, passionate world of the original myth.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Although Edward Field began writing poetry during his time serving as a pilot in World War II, he didn't publish his first book, *Stand Up, Friend, With Me*, until 1963. Since then, he has published a variety of poetry, fiction, and non-fiction books and also edited multiple poetry anthologies.

Field is sometimes associated with the New York School of Poets, in large part because of his romantic relationship with Frank O'Hara. The New York School wasn't an actual institution; it was a group of experimental artists and poets who shared an interest in ordinary, everyday occurrences, and who wished to portray life in a way that felt true to how it happened. They tended toward spontaneity and humor and were influenced by both surrealism and expressionism.

Many other contemporary poets have found inspiration in the myth of Icarus. Two of the most famous works are W. H. Auden's "Musée de Beaux Arts" and William Carlos Williams's "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus." Both of these poems, like Field's, focus on the way that the rest of the world ignores Icarus's "spectacular" fall, swiftly moving on with their humdrum lives in the face of something incredible.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Edward Field was born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1924, to Jewish immigrants from eastern Europe. Field's experience as a pilot in the U.S. Air Force during World War II had a major impact on his life. During a bombing of Berlin, Field's plane was shot down; the pilot managed to direct the plane into the North Sea, thereby saving most of the men on board, including Field. The poet would likely have died of hypothermia had it not been for one of the other men, who gave up his seat on the life raft to Field and subsequently died trying to swim to a second raft. It's possible that his experience as a pilot (and the heroism of these men) informed "Icarus" on some level.

The end of WWII also saw enormous growth of American suburbs. Thousands of returning veterans wanted to settle down and start families, taking advantage of low-interest government loans to buy homes and do so. Throughout the 1940s and '50s, the U.S. also saw a return to traditional, conservative values, and there was a great deal of pressure to conform to a certain way of life. As a gay man from a poor, immigrant, Jewish family, it isn't difficult to imagine why Field might have felt called to criticize the stifling homogeneity of suburban life.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- A Look at the Poet's Career — A brief introduction to the poet's work, plus additional poems, from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/edward-field)
- The Poem Out Loud — Listen to a reading of the poem set to music. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m5wuqohSfUs)
- An Explanation of the Myth of Icarus — An animated video that portrays the events of the original Greek myth of Icarus and Daedalus. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3s2QPQnuaGk)
- How Field's Experiences Shaped His Poetry — An interview in which Field discusses his upbringing, his heritage, his time serving as a pilot in WWII, and his experiences as a gay man in New York City after the war. (http://lastbohemians.blogspot.com/2020/02/th-epic-interview-with-poet-edward.html)
- Field Discusses the Birth of the Gay Literary Scene in New York — An NPR interview with Field regarding the publication of his memoir, The Man Who Would Marry Susan Sontag, in which he discusses what it was like living in Greenwich Village in the 1960s. (https://www.npr.org/2006/06/04/5449777/poet-edward-field-reflects-on-the-bohemian-life)

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Mottram, Darla. "*Icarus*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 21 Dec 2021. Web. 14 Apr 2022.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Mottram, Darla. "*Icarus*." LitCharts LLC, December 21, 2021. Retrieved April 14, 2022. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/edward-field/icarus.