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Author/s: DADHI RAM PANTHI

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Panofskian Interpretation of Pieter Bruegel's *The Fall of Icarus*

DADHI RAM PANTHI

Department of English

Pashupati Multiple Campus, Tribhuvan University, Nepal

Abstract: This article is an exploration of the painting *The Fall of Icarus* by Pieter Bruegel through Panofskian meanings of visual art: pre-iconographical description, iconographical analysis and iconological interpretation. Erwin Panofsky used the terms Pre-iconography, Iconography and Iconology to interpret any piece of visual art. The paper aims to explore the three different meanings of the painting as objectively as possible. His idea can be very clearly explored to analyze the piece of the painting as it depicts the multiplicity of meaning. It gives sensory details, allegorical associations and ideological interpretation. The piece of painting is such a piece of art that fulfills the passion of the onlookers, tells the myth on it, and also expresses the ideology of the painter.

Keywords: visual art, pre-iconography, iconography, iconology, myth, multiplicity, allegorical, ideological.

Introduction

The Fall of Icarus is a painting painted by the painter Pieter Bruegel which is preserved in the Royal Museum of Fine Arts in Brussels, Belgium that gives three different meanings according to Erwin

Panofsky. In this paper, I have attempted to present its pre-iconographical description, iconographical analysis and iconological interpretation as expressed by Erwin Panofsky in his essay “Iconography and Iconology: An Introduction to the Study of Renaissance Art.” First, the visual features or sensory description and practical experience of the onlookers and their referring meanings give the idea of pre-iconographical meaning. The pre-iconographical meaning can be derived in this painting by elaborating the things that can be observed through our senses and such meaning is possible by merging the images of the delicate ship, ploughman and his duty, the sheep grazing in the field, the number of boats on the sea, the shining sun, trees and small plants, a horse busy in his duty and a man drowning into the sea. Secondly, iconographical meaning, according to Panofsky is derived by analyzing its allegory or myth. *The Fall of Icarus* is painted relating to the Greek myth. Thirdly, the painting gives ideological meaning which is derived through synthesis, intuition, cultural symptoms, and tendency of human mind and by the practice of ideology.



Fig.1. *The Fall of Icarus*, by Pieter Bruegel (1525-1569), The Royal Museum of Fine Art, Brussels, Belgium.

Pre-Iconographical Analysis of *The Fall of Icarus*

Erwin Panofsky, the critic of visual culture, argues that visual description consists of three parts: pre-iconographical description, iconographical description and iconological description. Pre-iconographical meaning can be derived on the basis of primary or natural subject matter. Such description is factual and expressional. Panofsky argues that pre-iconographical description is the description of "Pure forms that is: certain configurations of line and colour representation of natural objects such as human beings, animals, plants, houses, tools and so forth – artistic motifs. An enumeration of these motifs would be pre-iconographical descriptions of the work of art" (221). Pre-iconographical meaning is derived through our practical experience and it is what we see. In this way, pre-iconographical description is done through our senses. Panofsky further argues "Everybody can recognize the shape and behaviour of human beings; animals and plants and everybody can tell an angry face from a jovial one"(224). By making a close observation of the visual images in *The Fall of Icarus* one can certainly derive a primary meaning of any visual images which is termed as "pre-iconographical interpretation." The images of the delicate ship, ploughman and his duty, grazing sheep in the field, the number of boats on the sea, the shining sun, trees and small plants, a busy horse in his duty, a drowning man into the deep and dark sea, and more pertinently; his impending death certainly give the message to the onlookers that all living and non-living beings are in their own course or duty. The things are happening in such a way that they are indifferent in the problems of others. So, the painting vividly elaborates the essence of the complexity of modern life. People are so busy in the modern world that they have no time to stand, stare and listen to the traumas of others. A modern man suffers alone and dies alone. Chris Jenks argues, "Seeing comes before words... a picture is a fact"(1). He means to say that eye becomes the centre in pre-iconographical description of visual culture. Obviously, *The Fall of Icarus* seems to be the painting of common event but it has vividly painted the picture of modern life. Anyone can derive the theme of human indifference through this painting.

Iconographical Meaning of *The Fall of Icarus*

The second meaning of visual images according to Panofsky is iconographical analysis. It not only denotes a particular person, place or thing but also ideas and concept about it. Panofsky writes it as “secondary or conventional” subject matter” (221). Jiblal Sapkota writes that, “in the iconographical analysis the analyst has to connect artistic motifs and their combination with themes or concepts” (127). It clearly shows iconographical analysis presupposes a correct identification of the artistic motifs. In iconographical analysis, one tries to find the images, mythologies, stories, or allegories to know the meaning of any piece of visual art. In that sense, to find the iconographical meaning of *The Fall of Icarus*, Greek myth is to be analyzed. Scott Foresman writes on Brueghel’s Icarus:

The painting *The Fall of Icarus* by Pieter Brueghel was inspired by the Greek myth that relates how Daedalus made wings of feathers and wax for his son Icarus and himself in order to escape imprisonment. Despite his father’s warnings, Icarus flew too near the Sun; the wax holding together the feathers of his wings melted, and he fell into the sea and drowned. (808)

According to the myth, Daedalus was a famous inventor who served King Minos of Crete. Daedalus made the maze for the King. Daedalus served both King Minos and his wife, Pasiphae. She asked Daedalus to make a fake cow, The Minotaur, half man and half bull. When Daedalus is angry, the King traps Daedalus and his son Icarus in the maze. Daedalus makes wings by sticking together with wax to escape from the imprisonment for him and his son Icarus. Daedalus warns Icarus not to fly too high as the heat of the sun will cause the glue to melt and the wings will fall apart and also not to fly too close to the water as the wings will fall apart from the moisture. Disregarding his father's warning, Icarus flies towards the heat of the sun and the wings start to fall apart from his body and he also falls into the sea and dies. The dead body of Icarus is found by Heracles who buries it there and renames the island Icaria in his honor. In *Rhetoric of the Image*, Roland Barthes argues “Cultural meaning is ruled-governed transpositions”

(43). In this way, Panofsky's iconographical meaning and Roland Barthes' coded iconic message are interconnected. For Panofsky iconographical meaning is cultural meaning or contextual meaning. He argues "Iconographical analysis dealing with images, stories and allegories instead of with motifs, presupposes, of course, much more than that familiarity with objects and events which we acquire by practical experience" (225). Cultural meaning can be derived through practical experience, images, stories and allegories. We need to be familiarized with other cultures to know cultural meaning. Iconographical meaning is not surface meaning. Its meaning is culture-based meaning. It differs from one culture to another culture. Iconographical meaning is not universal meaning, rather it is contextual.

Iconological Interpretation of *The Fall of Icarus*

According to Panofsky, the third meaning of visual image is iconological interpretation. He observes iconological meaning as "intrinsic meaning or content" (222). Sapkota also writes, "iconological interpretation arises from synthesis rather than analysis" (128). In simple words, the analysis of images, stories and allegories is the correct iconological interpretation of visual images. W.H. Auden argues "Its human position; how it takes place while someone else is eating or opening a window or walking daily along" (Longman 2790). It shows W.H. Auden has really understood the inevitable aspect of death. Death comes at any time and takes us away. This is the position of human life which is well understood by W.H. Auden and Pieter Bruegel both. Human indifference is the theme of both Auden's poem "*Musee Des Beaux Art*" and Bruegel's *The Fall of Icarus*. Arthur F. Kinney argues, "The theme of Bruegel and Auden is the same: suffering does not affect us directly, it often passes by us unawares" (531). Here, the main point is that suffering is beyond the control of human consciousness. Our awareness cannot protect us from impending tragedy. *The Fall of Icarus* is the fall of human beings from the grace. It symbolizes the vanity and futility of human life which is quite short and momentary. We human beings are nothing in front of the vastness of nature. Nature is so great and vast that cannot be explained in certain words. The fall and drowning of Icarus is the destruction of human beings by the power of

nature. The ploughman and the shepherd are quite devoted in their duty and responsibilities. It shows success lies in struggle and hard labour. The shepherd is carrying stick in his hand that symbolizes the need of security and devotion for the job. It also symbolizes that animals are under the control of human beings. Here, the grazing sheep are under the control of the shepherd. It also shows the exercise of power which is practiced by the shepherd and the ploughman that they are practicing over animals. It shows where there is knowledge there is power exercise. Michel Foucault (1977) says power is everywhere. Foucault believes in the “automatic functioning of power” (207). He further argues “Power has its principle not so much in a person but in a certain concerted distribution of bodies, Surfaces, lights, gazes...” (202). The ploughman, the shepherd, the sun, the sea, the ship, human beings and nature all are exercising power. But the power of nature is greater than the power of any other things. Nature is source of beauty, creativity, life and death. We struggle and enjoy in it and our life ends in it. The painter is using dim light in the water where Icarus is falling. That indicates death but Icarus's leg can still be seen out of water in which the painter is focusing light. It shows Icarus is still alive but he is going to die soon. The delicate ship is carrying its passengers and going in its own journey. It shows where there is movement there is life. The ploughman is ploughing the field using horse to carry the plough. It is the violence of animal rights. Human beings use animals to fulfill their needs. It shows human beings are selfish but nature does not discriminate anyone. All the human beings and animals are equal in front of the power of nature. Human life is quite short and momentary. Every day we are busy we have to be busy for survival so the painter has shown the struggle of human life in this painting. The sea is dark and deep and it shows the vastness as well as the cruel aspect of nature. The Sky is clear. The painter is capturing the time of shining sun in this painting. It clearly shows the painter's intention is to paint the movement of world activities. The passengers in the ship are busy. The shepherd is busy. The ploughman is busy. The sea is busy. The city is busy. Time is busy and even the drowning Icarus is busy in the process of drowning. It shows modern life is so complex that there is no time to stand, stare and care about others. Grazing sheep on the meadow symbolizes the struggle for survival. Stick in the hand of the shepherd is

the symbol of power exercise and security. The farmer who is ploughing the field is sweating that is the symbol of struggle. The dog accompanying the shepherd symbolizes that dogs are also the friends of human beings. They help human beings in danger. The shepherd might have taken the dog to protect his sheep from the attack of wild animals. There are trees and small plants full of leaves in the painting. They are not cut down. Everyone can enjoy in the greenery scene of the trees and plants. The interesting issue of the painting is that the painter has shown even the issue of death of human being just like other common daily duties and activities. In this sense even death is shown as a normal everyday duty of human being. The painting is great in the sense that whole human position from birth to death is depicted in this painting. Iconological description of Panofsky is symbolic and ideological interpretation. Roland Barthes calls it non-coded iconic message which is quite symbolic. The iconological interpretation of *The Fall of Icarus* is high level interpretation and Panofsky argues, "Iconological interpretation ... requires something more than a familiarity with specific themes... it is interpretation of images, stories and allegories" (227). The third message for Roland Barthes is symbolic message, it is connotational. It is non-coded iconic message. He expresses:

It depends on the different kinds of knowledge, practical, national, cultural, aesthetic ... A portion of the symbolic plane (of language) which corresponds to a body of attitudes-tourism, home keeping, knowledge of art ... There is a plurality and co-existence of lexicons in one or the same person, the number and identity of these lexicons forming in some sort of a person's idiolect. (46)

In this sense, iconological meaning cannot be derived without broader study. One should have the knowledge of his/her practical life events, knowledge of national issues, knowledge of cultural practices and knowledge of aestheticism. Symbolic meaning can be derived by merging the knowledge/ideas of different fields. W. J. T. Mitchell argues:

Images are not just a particular kind of sign, but something like an actor on the historical stage, a presence or

character endowed with legendary status, a history that parallels and participates in the stories we tell ourselves about our own evolution from creatures... of a creator, to creatures who makes themselves and their world in their own image. (9)

He means to say that image carries power. Image is not just a mere picture but it has historical events, legends, actors, evolution of creatures and history of the creators. In this connection *The Fall of Icarus* is not just the image of landscape, falling Icarus but it has some connection with history. The critic of visual culture Jean Baudrillard exposes “The simulacrum is never that which conceals the truth. It is the truth which conceals that there is none. The simulacrum is true” (166). Here, he might be indicating that even simulacrum does not conceal the truth in visual culture. Every visual creation is also truth. *The Fall of Icarus* is creation through human mind so it is truth. It may not be exactly the same that we directly see the objects in the lap of nature but still this painting is a creation, created by Pieter Bruegel and it is truth. He further argues “It is no longer a question of imitation, nor of reduplication nor even of parody. It is rather a question of substituting signs of the real for the real itself” (167). It clearly shows simulacrum is not merely the photocopy but is substitution of signs from the real. So Pieter Bruegel is not just imitating the things from the nature but it is the substitution of signs to create new form of truth. Baudrillard also justifies that simulacrum is not illusion but truth as he expresses “Illusion is no longer possible, because the real is no longer possible...” (177). He might be focusing the power of 'Eye' in visual culture. What we see is the real. Illusion is created through our ideology and politics but 'eye' does not discriminate. Susan Sontag even blames the western philosophers from Plato as they misinterpreted the world. For Plato the world of idea was the real world but the world of images was just illusion. Sontag says, “Reality has always been interpreted through the reports given by images; and philosophers since Plato have tried to loosen our dependence on images by evoking the standard of an image free way of apprehending of real” (119). Her interpretation explores that without image apprehension of real is not possible. We cannot deny the images while interpreting the visual culture. Pieter Bruegel understood this fact and created the painting entitled *The Fall*

of *Icarus*. Sontag's field of interest is the interest of photography. She writes “A photograph is not only an image but an interpretation of the real; it is also a trace” (120). For her, image is better and more powerful because it does not emerge out of nothing but it emerges out of the interpretation of the real. Sontag is quite fascinated with image world as she further argues “Knowing a great deal about what is in the world (art, catastrophe, the beauties of nature) through photographic images, people are frequently disappointed, surprised unmoved when they see real thing” (131). She means to say that image world help people know a lot and people are really moved in the world of image. They are never disappointed and surprised but the real world is bitter and it disappoints us and betrays us every time. Pieter Bruegel knew this fact and created *The Fall of Icarus* to prove that image world is more powerful than real world. Susan also says “Even capitalist society cannot function denying the images” (140). Images are fundamental to interpret the world. She says “cameras define reality in the two ways-as a spectacle (for masses) and as an object of surveillance (for rulers)” (140). It shows images are for all from high to low. Her interpretation of image is “de-platonized” because Plato blamed the images just the “transitory shadows”. Susan concludes “Images are more real than anyone could have supposed” (141). Pieter Bruegel captures similar notion in *The Fall of Icarus*.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Panofskian notion of the meaning of visual art is vividly depicted in *The Fall of Icarus* by Pieter Bruegel who seems keen observer of the ordinary life events. The painting is worth having as it gives three- tiered meanings of Panofsky i.e. pre-iconographical interpretation, iconographical analysis and iconoloical meaning. He is able to look at the tragedy of the death of Icarus. The main theme of the painting is that life goes on while disaster occurs. The painting reflects on human nature in the context of apathy amidst tragedy. The ploughman and sailors are concerned only with their own affairs, and unaware or uninterested in the tragedy of Icarus. People suffer not always directly but also indirectly. Human awareness cannot always function as suffering occurs in human life. People struggle hard in their life and they are finally forced to be involved in a tragedy. They try to survive but fail and the cycle of apathy continues. The ship sails on.

The ploughman ploughs and the fisherman baits his hook. Human beings are blind to what is right before their eyes, and that is a self-inflicted blindness that they often choose. By juxtaposing the ordinary and extraordinary, the painter Pieter Bruegel has been able to reflect on the rawest of human tendencies and their inherent apathy even in the face of tragedy. Anthropocentric world view is nothing in front of the vastness of nature. Human life is just like the morning's dew. Human beings are present as well as absent in the lap of nature. Nature not only brings happiness in human life; it also brings tragedy in no time. This is the position and fate of human beings depicted in *The Fall of Icarus*.

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