

**Title:** When the Farmer Didn't Look Up... The First Forrest Gump

**Synopsis:**

This blog post explores Pieter Bruegel's famous (and sneaky) painting Landscape with the Fall of Icarus—and how it slyly redefines who the story is really about. Icarus is falling from the sky, and no one notices. Not the farmer, not the fisherman, not the sheepdog. The blog draws a line from this artistic choice to storytelling, asking writers: What if your protagonist is oblivious to the actual drama? What if the most mythic moments are just quiet background noise in your character's little bubble?

In short: your character doesn't need to be the hero of the world. Sometimes they're just trying to cook dinner while the gods are flailing overhead.

The Snark's Blog: [here](#)

**Discussion Questions**

*Use these questions to spark conversation and reflection in the classroom:*

- What emotions do you feel when you finally find Icarus in the painting? Surprise? Humor? Sadness?
- Why might Bruegel (or the mystery artist) have placed Icarus so far into the background?
- How does this idea challenge our assumptions about “main characters” in stories?
- Can you think of a book, film, or show where the protagonist misses something massive happening around them? Was that frustrating—or brilliant?
- How can this kind of subtlety add emotional or thematic depth to your own writing?

**Writer's Prompts**

*Creative exercises to help students apply the themes of the topic:*

- **Prompt 1:** The Icarus Challenge. Look at Landscape with the Fall of Icarus. Now write a short scene from the point of view of the farmer, fisherman, or sheep. They notice something odd—maybe—but mostly they're just vibing. Make it beautiful, make it mundane.
- **Prompt 2:** Background World-Building. Write a story where something enormous is happening offscreen (a war, a revolution, a global summit), but your characters are arguing about who left the toaster plugged in. Let the world leak in through overheard conversations or the background hum of the news.
- **Prompt 3:** The Oblivious Protagonist. Write a scene where your main character believes they are in a love story—but the reader can tell it's a tragedy. Bonus points if the character is charmingly unaware.

- **Prompt 4: Off-Stage Apocalypse.** Create a dialogue between two characters at brunch while something catastrophic is happening outside the window. They may or may not notice.
- **Prompt 5: Hidden in Plain Sight.** Write a moment where the emotional climax of the story isn't obvious at first—but becomes clear on a second read. Think: a breakup that happens in a single line. A death foreshadowed by a missed phone call.
- **Prompt 6: Side Character's Secret.** Introduce a secondary character who seems unimportant—but you (the writer) know they're the key to everything. Write their first appearance and leave a breadcrumb trail of clues.
- **Prompt 7: Lost and Found.** Write about a minor object your character loses—a spoon, a sock, a letter. As the story progresses, the loss begins to echo something much bigger they're trying not to face.

### **Class Activities**

*These activities will help expand on the themes of the topic:*

- **Group Discussion:** Gallery Talk – Visual Close Reading. Display Landscape with the Fall of Icarus (on a screen or handouts). Have students try to locate Icarus and describe what everyone else is doing. Group discussion: Who's really the main character?
- **Background Event Debate.** Split into teams. Team A argues that characters should be aware of major events. Team B argues that characters can live richly oblivious lives while history unfolds offstage.
- **Write & Swap.** Students write two versions of a 300-word scene: one where the protagonist is the center of the drama, and one where the drama unfolds without them noticing. Swap and compare in groups.
- **Collaborative Alien Story-Building.** Each student invents a character on an alien planet. A massive event (e.g., asteroid strike, royal scandal, wormhole discovery) is about to happen. As a class, layer in hints across individual stories without anyone writing the main event directly. See what emerges.
- **Design Challenge.** Reimagine a famous myth or historical event from the POV of someone who didn't care at the time. Create a concept sketch or a few descriptive lines to explain it (e.g., "Marie Antoinette's hairstylist during the French Revolution").

### **Closing note from the blog's writer, The Snark**

*Let's be honest: most of us are the farmer. We're down here tending our turnips, while Icarus is plunging into the sea like a damp dramatic metaphor. That's not failure—that's the human condition.*

*As a writer, don't always chase the epic. The quiet. The background. The overlooked. That's where your brilliance might live. Because sometimes the best way to tell a story is to not look up. Just let the reader spot the splash.*

*And remember: if your protagonist misses the fall of Icarus but remembers the way the soup boiled over... they're probably more real than most of us.*

*Happy scribbling.*