



Icarus and Daedalus

The name Daedalus (ded' 'l əs) means "artful craftsman" in Greek, and Daedalus deserved his name. According to legend, he learned his craftsmanship from the gods themselves. Not only did he design buildings, machines, and weapons for various Greek kings, but he also made wonderful toys for their children. His son, Icarus (ik' ə rəs), is remembered for the fateful flight recounted in this myth.

Josephine Preston Peabody (1874–1922), who wrote this version of the myth, was best known for her poetry and plays.

Characters in Myth

Like people in real life or characters in fiction, the gods and heroes in myths have different ways of thinking and acting. Prometheus, for instance, is concerned about the results of his deeds, while Zeus is more stubborn and emotional. Hades is dark and forbidding, like his underworld kingdom, but Apollo loves the light.

You can understand the characters in myths by paying attention to what the storyteller says about them. You can also learn about them by observing what they say and do themselves. In "Icarus and Daedalus," you will meet a father and son who are quite different from each other.

Look For

In this myth, Daedalus invents wings that enable him and Icarus to fly. Look for the differences in the ways that these two characters respond to the experience of flight. What does this difference tell you about each character?

Writing

Have you ever wanted to fly—not in an airplane, but as a human being with wings? Imagine that you could drift in an updraft of air like a hawk or fly for great distances like a migrating bird. Describe the sensation of flying as you imagine it. For instance, what would you see and hear, and what would the wind feel like against your body?

Vocabulary

Knowing the following words will help you as you read "Icarus and Daedalus."

cunning (kun' iŋ) *adj.*: Skillful; clever (p. 581)

veered (vird) *v.*: Changed directions (p. 581)

fledgling (flej' liŋ) *n.*: Young bird (p. 581)

rash (rash) *adj.*: Reckless (p. 581)

vacancy (vā' kən sē) *n.*: Emptiness (p. 581)

sustained (sə stānd') *v.*: Supported (p. 582)

Icarus and Daedalus

Josephine Preston Peabody

Among all those mortals who grew so wise that they learned the secrets of the gods, none was more cunning than Daedalus.

He once built, for King Minos of Crete,¹ a wonderful Labyrinth² of winding ways so cunningly tangled up and twisted around that, once inside, you could never find your way out again without a magic clue. But the king's favor veered with the wind, and one day he had his master architect imprisoned in a tower. Daedalus managed to escape from his cell; but it seemed impossible to leave the island, since every ship that came or went was well guarded by order of the king.

At length, watching the sea-gulls in the air—the only creatures that were sure of liberty—he thought of a plan for himself and his young son Icarus, who was captive with him.

Little by little, he gathered a store of feathers great and small. He fastened these together with thread, moulded them in with wax, and so fashioned two great wings like those of a bird. When they were done, Daedalus fitted them to his own shoulders, and after one or two efforts, he found that by waving his arms he could winnow³ the air

and cleave it, as a swimmer does the sea. He held himself aloft, wavered this way and that with the wind, and at last, like a great fledgling, he learned to fly.

Without delay, he fell to work on a pair of wings for the boy Icarus, and taught him carefully how to use them, bidding him beware of rash adventures among the stars. "Remember," said the father, "never to fly very low or very high, for the fogs about the earth would weigh you down, but the blaze of the sun will surely melt your feathers apart if you go too near."

For Icarus, these cautions went in at one ear and out by the other. Who could remember to be careful when he was to fly for the first time? Are birds careful? Not they! And not an idea remained in the boy's head but the one joy of escape.

The day came, and the fair wind that was to set them free. The father bird put on his wings, and, while the light urged them to be gone, he waited to see that all was well with Icarus, for the two could not fly hand in hand. Up they rose, the boy after his father. The hateful ground of Crete sank beneath them; and the country folk, who caught a glimpse of them when they were high above the treetops, took it for a vision of the gods—Apollo, perhaps, with Cupid after him.

At first there was a terror in the joy. The wide vacancy of the air dazed them—a glance downward made their brains reel. But when a great wind filled their wings, and Icarus

1. King Minos (mī' nəs) **of Crete:** King Minos was a son of the god Zeus. Crete is a Greek island in the eastern Mediterranean sea, southeast of Greece.

2. Labyrinth (lab' ə rinth')

3. winnow (win' ō) *v.*: Beat as with wings.



LANDSCAPE WITH THE FALL OF ICARUS (detail)
 Pieter Breughel
 Scala/Art Resource

felt himself sustained, like a halcyon bird⁴ in the hollow of a wave, like a child uplifted by his mother, he forgot everything in the world but joy. He forgot Crete and the other islands that he had passed over: he saw but vaguely that winged thing in the distance before him that was his father Daedalus. He longed for one draft of flight to quench the thirst of his captivity: he stretched out his arms to the sky and made towards the highest heavens.

Alas for him! Warmer and warmer grew the air. Those arms, that had seemed to uphold him, relaxed. His wings wavered,

drooped. He fluttered his young hands vainly—he was falling—and in that terror he remembered. The heat of the sun had melted the wax from his wings; the feathers were falling, one by one, like snowflakes; and there was none to help.

He fell like a leaf tossed down the wind, down, down, with one cry that overtook Daedalus far away. When he returned, and sought high and low for his poor boy, he saw nothing but the birdlike feathers afloat on the water, and he knew that Icarus was drowned.

The nearest island he named Icaria, in memory of the child; but he, in heavy grief, went to the temple of Apollo in Sicily, and there hung up his wings as an offering. Never again did he attempt to fly.

4. **halcyon** (hal' sē ən) **bird** *n.*: A legendary bird, identified with the kingfisher, which could calm the sea by resting on it.

THINKING ABOUT THE SELECTION

Recalling

1. Why does Daedalus want to leave Crete?
2. How does Daedalus plan to escape?
3. Paraphrase the warning he gives to Icarus.
4. Why does Icarus fall from the sky?

Interpreting

5. Do you think that Daedalus was punished by the gods for daring an unusual deed? Explain.
6. Do you think Icarus was punished for disobeying his father? Explain.
7. What lesson does this myth teach?

Applying

8. Why do you think humans have always wanted to fly like birds?

ANALYZING CHARACTER

Understanding Characters in Myth

Like novels and short stories, myths present a variety of characters. In "Icarus and Daedalus," you learn about a famous father and son through what the storyteller says about them and what they do themselves.

1. Where does the storyteller inform you that Daedalus is "cunning"? In what ways does Daedalus display his cunning?
2. What does Daedalus reveal about himself in his words to his son?
3. At what point in the story does the storyteller hint that Icarus will disobey his father?
4. What does the boy's flying too close to the sun tell you about him?
5. Do you think Icarus's behavior is typical of that of most young people? Why or why not?

CRITICAL THINKING AND READING

Comparing and Contrasting Characters

Comparing means finding similarities. **Contrasting** means showing differences. By compar-

ing and contrasting Icarus and Daedalus, you can learn even more about them.

1. Find evidence to show that the father and son both are eager to escape the island.
2. How are the two similar in their first reaction to the experience of flying?
3. How are they different in the ways they adapt to this new experience?
4. Explain whether the contrast between them results more from the difference in their ages or from their differing personalities.

SPEAKING AND LISTENING

Creating a Dramatic Monologue

A **dramatic monologue** is a poem in which a fictional character expresses his or her thoughts and feelings to an imaginary listener. Write a dramatic monologue in which Icarus tells about the escape. Include his thoughts and feelings about each important event. For instance, how did he feel as he saw his father making the wings, or what did he think when his father warned him about flight? The poem does not have to rhyme. After you have finished your poem, share it with classmates. Ask them to help you think about ways to revise your monologue so that it sounds like Icarus talking.

THINKING AND WRITING

Writing About Characters in Myth

Imagine that you are a reporter for an Athenian newspaper. You suddenly hear that an old man who just died on one of the Greek islands was Icarus. It turns out that he survived his fall into the sea and lived for many years, hiding his identity. Write a story for your newspaper with the following headline: The Secret Life of Icarus. In the story, tell what happened to Icarus after his fall. Explain such matters as how he survived the accident, whether he felt sorry for what he did, why he never contacted his father, and whether he married. As you revise your account, make sure it will be interesting enough to sell newspapers.