

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Geraldine McCaughrean was born in England, where she studied theater and began writing her versions of traditional texts such as *The Canterbury Tales* and Shakespeare’s plays. Her goal was to retell these challenging texts in language that young readers could enjoy and understand. She has received numerous awards for her books, and her writing is noted for its strong use of imagery and narrative structure that bring her stories alive for young readers.

Myth

“Daedalus and Icarus”

from *Greek Myths* by Geraldine McCaughrean

The island of Crete was ruled by King Minos, whose reputation for wickedness had spread to every shore. One day he summoned to his country a famous inventor named Daedalus. “Come, Daedalus, and bring your son, Icarus, too. I have a job for you, and I pay well.”

King Minos wanted Daedalus to build him a palace, with soaring towers and a high, curving roof. In the cellars there was to be a maze of many corridors—so twisting and dark that any man who once ventured in there would never find his way out again.

“What is it for?” asked Daedalus. “Is it a treasure vault? Is it a prison to hold criminals?”

But Minos only replied, “Build my labyrinth as I told you. I pay you to build, not to ask questions.”

So Daedalus held his tongue and set to work. When the palace was finished, he looked at it with pride, for there was nowhere in the world so fine. But when he found out the purpose of the maze in the cellar, he shuddered with horror.

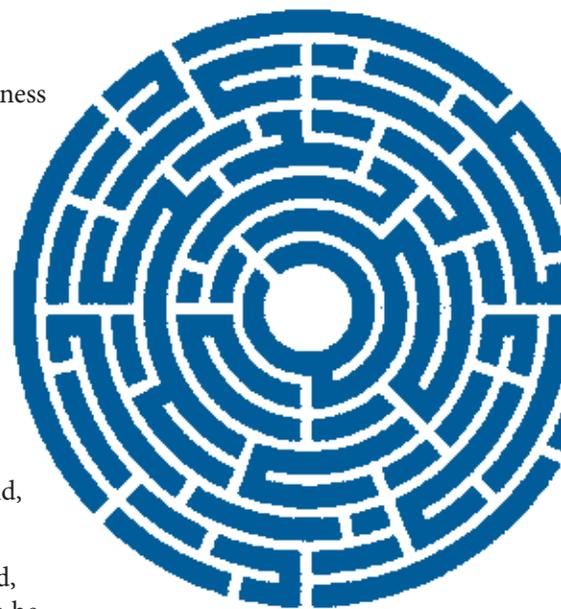
For at the heart of that maze, King Minos put a creature that was half man, half beast—a thing almost too horrible to describe. He called it the Minotaur, and he fed it on men and women!

Then Daedalus wanted to leave Crete at once, and forget both maze and Minotaur. So he went to King Minos to ask for his money.

“I regret,” said King Minos, “I cannot let you leave Crete, Daedalus. You are the only man who knows the secret of the maze and how to escape from it. The secret must never leave this island. So I’m afraid I must keep you and Icarus here a while longer.”

“How much longer?” gasped Daedalus.

My Notes



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Flight to Freedom

My Notes

KEY IDEAS AND DETAILS

Wings and flying are often a metaphor for what?

“Oh—just until you die,” replied Minos cheerfully. “But never mind. I have plenty of work for a man as clever as you.”

Daedalus and Icarus lived in great comfort in King Minos’s palace. But they lived the life of prisoners. Their rooms were in the tallest palace tower, with beautiful views across the island. They ate delectable food and wore expensive clothes. But at night the door of their fine apartment was locked, and a guard stood outside. It was a comfortable prison, but it was a prison, even so. Daedalus was deeply unhappy.

Every day he put seed out on the windowsill, for the birds. He liked to study their brilliant colors, the clever overlapping of their feathers, the way they soared on the sea wind. It comforted him to think that they at least were free to come and go. The birds had only to spread their wings and they could leave Crete behind them, whereas Daedalus and Icarus must stay forever in their luxurious cage.

Young Icarus could not understand his father’s unhappiness. “But I like it here,” he said. “The king gives us gold and this tall tower to live in.”

Daedalus groaned. “But to work for such a wicked man, Icarus! And to be prisoners all our days! . . . We shan’t stay. We shan’t!”

“But we can’t get away, can we?” said Icarus. “How can anybody escape from an island? Fly?” He snorted with laughter.

Daedalus did not answer. He scratched his head and stared out of the window at the birds pecking seed on the sill.

From that day onward, he got up early each morning and stood at the open window. When a bird came for the seed, Daedalus begged it to spare him one feather. Then each night, when everyone else had gone to bed, Daedalus worked by candlelight on his greatest invention of all.

Early mornings. Late nights. A whole year went by. Then one morning Icarus was awakened by his father shaking his shoulder. “Get up, Icarus, and don’t make a sound. We are leaving Crete.”

“But how? It’s impossible!”

Daedalus pulled out a bundle from under his bed. “I’ve been making something, Icarus.” Inside were four great folded fans of feathers. He stretched them out on the bed. They were wings! “I sewed the feathers together with strands of wool from my blanket. Now hold still.”

Daedalus melted down a candle and daubed his son’s shoulders with sticky wax. “Yes, I know it’s hot, but it will soon cool.” While the wax was still soft, he stuck two of the wings to Icarus’s shoulder blades.

“Now you must help me put on my wings, Son. When the wax sets hard, you and I will fly away from here, as free as birds!”

“I’m scared!” whispered Icarus as he stood on the narrow window ledge, his knees knocking and his huge wings drooping down behind. The lawns and courtyards of the palace lay far below. The royal guards looked as small as ants. “This won’t work!”

“Courage, Son!” said Daedalus. “Keep your arms out wide and fly close to me. Above all—are you listening, Icarus?”

“Y-y-yes, Father.”

“Above all, don’t fly too high! Don’t fly too close to the sun!”

“Don’t fly too close to the sun,” Icarus repeated, with his eyes tight shut. Then he gave a cry as his father nudged him off the windowsill. He plunged downward. With a crack, the feathers behind him filled with wind, and Icarus found himself flying. Flying!

“I’m flying!” he crowed.

The guards looked up in astonishment, and wagged their swords, and pointed and shouted, “Tell the king! Daedalus and Icarus are . . . are . . . flying away!”

By dipping first one wing, then the other, Icarus found that he could turn to the left and the right. The wind tugged at his hair. His legs trailed out behind him. He saw the fields and streams as he had never seen them before!

Then they were out over the sea. The sea gulls pecked at him angrily, so Icarus flew higher, where they could not reach him.

He copied their shrill cry and taunted them: “You can’t catch me!”

“Now remember, don’t fly too high!” called Daedalus, but his words were drowned by the screaming of the gulls.

I’m the first boy ever to fly! I’m making history! I shall be famous! thought Icarus, as he flew up and up, higher and higher.

At last Icarus was looking the sun itself in the face. “Think you’re the highest thing in the sky, do you?” he jeered. “I can fly just as high as you! Higher, even!” He did not notice the drops of sweat on his forehead: He was so determined to outfly the sun.

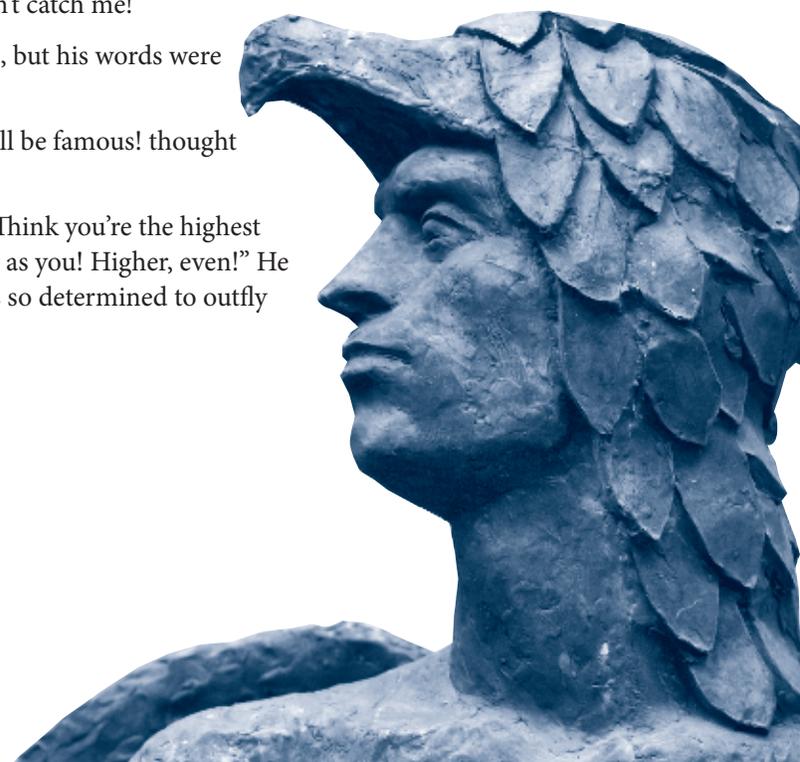
KEY IDEAS AND DETAILS

Can you find the similes used in this selection? What is their effect? Remember that similes are comparisons using “like” or “as.”

KEY IDEAS AND DETAILS

From what point of view is this myth written? How do you know?

My Notes



Flight to Freedom

KEY IDEAS AND DETAILS

Using the context of this passage, what do you think a “plume” is?

My Notes

ACADEMIC VOCABULARY

A **theme** is the central idea, message, or purpose of a literary work.

A **metaphor** is a comparison between two unlike things in which one thing is spoken of as if it were another.

Soon its vast heat beat on his face and on his back and on the great wings stuck on with wax. The wax softened. The wax trickled. The wax dripped. One feather came unstuck. Then a plume of feathers fluttered slowly down.

Icarus stopped flapping his wings. His father’s words came back to him clearly now: “*Don’t fly too close to the sun!*”

With a great sucking noise, the wax on his shoulders came unstuck. Icarus tried to catch hold of the wings, but they just folded up in his hands. He plunged down, his two fists full of feathers — down and down and down.

The clouds did not stop his fall.

The sea gulls did not catch him in their beaks.

His own father could only watch as Icarus hurtled head first into the glittering sea and sank deep down among the sharks and eels and squid. And all that was left of proud Icarus was a litter of waxy feathers floating on the sea.

After Reading

“Daedalus and Icarus,” like most myths, teaches us a lesson. Daedalus tells his son, “Don’t fly too close to the sun.” Since it is not likely that any of us will wear wings made of feathers and wax, the main idea, or **theme**, of this story is not a literal lesson about how high to fly. The story of Icarus can be read as a **metaphor** for other, more realistic situations we might face.

1. Discuss the following ideas in a collaborative group:

- In the story, Icarus thinks to himself, “I’m the first boy ever to fly! I’m making history!” Icarus also says to the sun, “I can fly just as high as you! Higher, even!” What does this dialogue illustrate about the character of Icarus? How could this relate to the story’s theme?
- Daedalus repeatedly warns Icarus not to fly too high, advice that Icarus thoughtlessly ignores. What might this story be saying about relationships between parents and children? What might it be saying about how we learn?
- The expression “flying too close to the sun” has taken on other meanings, namely about the consequences of risk taking. What is this story saying about the benefits and dangers of taking risks?
- Sometimes critics of scientific development and rapid technological change bring up the story of Daedalus and Icarus as a warning about the dangers of reckless science taking humans into areas where they might not belong. Explain how this story might illustrate the idea of the dangers of technology and scientific progress.

WORD CONNECTIONS

Analogies

Think about the relationship (analogy) between feather and wing. Then write a word that has the same relationship with the word *alphabet*.

Feather : wing :: _____ :
alphabet.

