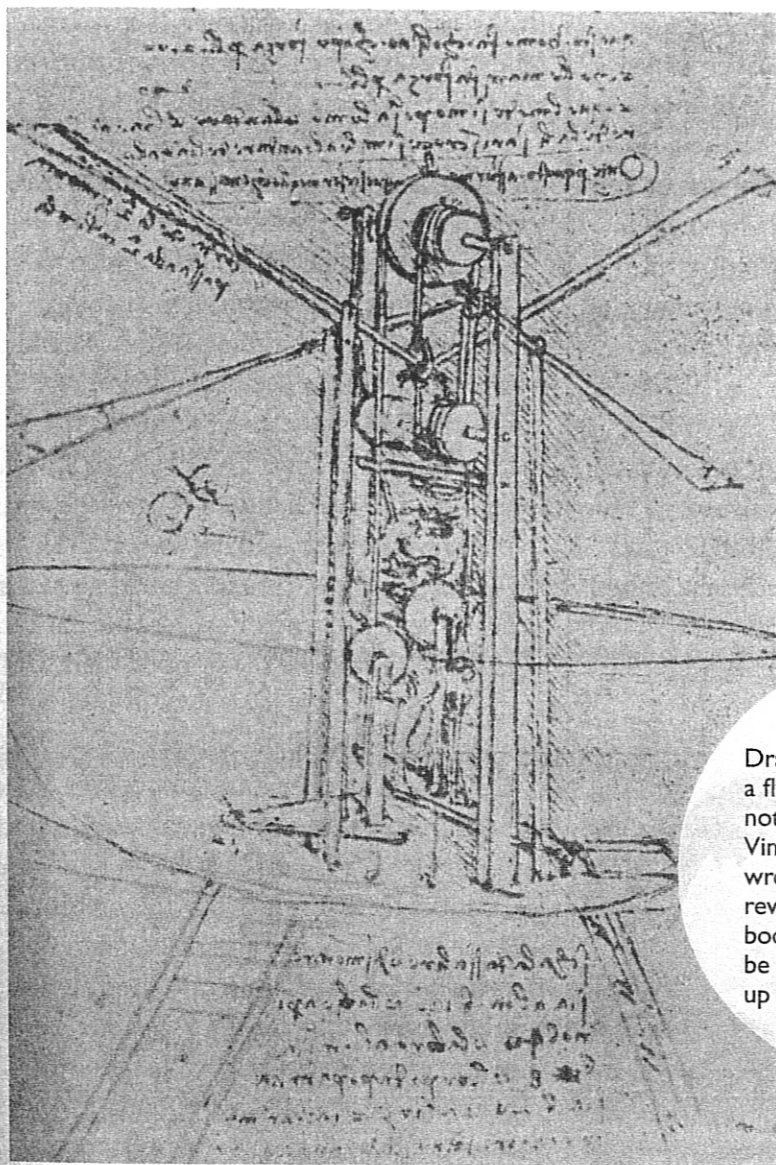


"The Flight of Icarus"



Institute de France, Paris.

Drawing of a man operating a flying machine, from a notebook of Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519). Da Vinci wrote backward and in reverse to keep his notebooks secret; his words can be read by holding the page up to a mirror.

When Theseus escaped from the labyrinth, King Minos flew into a rage with its builder, Daedalus, and ordered him shut up in a high tower that faced the lonely sea. In time, with the help of his young son, Icarus, Daedalus managed to escape from the tower, only to find himself a prisoner on the island. Several times he tried by bribery to stow away on one of the vessels sailing from Crete, but King Minos kept strict watch over

them, and no ships were allowed to sail without being carefully searched.

Daedalus was an ingenious artist and was not discouraged by his failures. "Minos may control the land and sea," he said, "but he does not control the air. I will try that way."

He called his son, Icarus, to him and told the boy to gather up all the feathers he could find on the rocky shore. As thousands of gulls soared over the island, Icarus soon collected a

huge pile of feathers. Daedalus then melted some wax and made a skeleton in the shape of a bird's wing. The smallest feathers he pressed into the soft wax and the large ones he tied on with thread. Icarus played about on the beach happily while his father worked, chasing the feathers that blew away in the strong wind that swept the island and sometimes taking bits of the wax and working it into strange shapes with his fingers.

It was fun making the wings. The sun shone on the bright feathers; the breezes ruffled them. When they were finished, Daedalus fastened them to his shoulders and found himself lifted upwards, where he hung poised in the air. Filled with excitement, he made another pair for his son. They were smaller than his own, but strong and beautiful.

Finally, one clear, wind-swept morning, the wings were finished, and Daedalus fastened them to Icarus's shoulders and taught him how to fly. He bade him watch the movements of the birds, how they soared and glided overhead. He pointed out the slow, graceful sweep of their wings as they beat the air steadily, without fluttering. Soon Icarus was sure that he, too, could fly and, raising his arms up and down, skirted over the white sand and even out over the waves, letting his feet touch the snowy foam as the water thundered and broke over the sharp rocks. Daedalus watched him proudly but with misgivings. He called Icarus to his side and, putting his arm round the boy's shoulders, said, "Icarus, my son, we are about to make our flight. No human being has ever traveled through the air before, and I want you to listen carefully to my instructions. Keep at a moderate height, for if you fly too low, the fog and spray will clog your wings, and if you

fly too high, the heat will melt the wax that holds them together. Keep near me and you will be safe."

He kissed Icarus and fastened the wings more securely to his son's shoulders. Icarus, standing in the bright sun, the shining wings drooping gracefully from his shoulders, his golden hair wet with spray, and his eyes bright and dark with excitement, looked like a lovely bird. Daedalus's eyes filled with tears, and turning away, he soared into the sky, calling to Icarus to follow. From time to time, he looked back to see that the boy was safe and to note how he managed his wings in his flight. As they flew across the land to test their prowess before setting out across the dark wild sea, plowmen below stopped their work and shepherds gazed in wonder, thinking Daedalus and Icarus were gods.

Father and son flew over Samos and Delos, which lay on their left, and Lebinthus,^o which lay on their right. Icarus, beating his wings in joy, felt the thrill of the cool wind on his face and the clear air above and below him. He flew higher and higher up into the blue sky until he reached the clouds. His father saw him and called out in alarm. He tried to follow him, but he was heavier and his wings would not carry him. Up and up Icarus soared, through the soft, moist clouds and out again toward the glorious sun. He was bewitched by a sense of freedom and beat his wings frantically so that they would carry him higher and higher to heaven itself. The blazing sun beat down on the wings and softened the wax. Small feathers fell from the wings and floated softly down, warning Icarus to stay his flight and glide to earth. But the enchanted boy did not notice them until

^o **Samos** (sā'mäs), **Delos** (dē'läs), and **Lebinthus** (lə·bin'thəs): Greek islands in the Aegean Sea.

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the sun became so hot that the largest feathers dropped off and he began to sink. Frantically he fluttered his arms, but no feathers remained to hold the air. He cried out to his father, but his voice was submerged in the blue waters of the sea, which has forever after been called by his name.

Daedalus, crazed by anxiety, called back to him, "Icarus! Icarus, my son, where are you?" At last he saw the feathers floating from the sky, and soon his son plunged through the clouds into the sea. Daedalus hurried to save him, but it was too late. He gathered the boy in his arms and flew to land, the tips of his wings dragging in the

water from the double burden they bore. Weeping bitterly, he buried his small son and called the land Icaria in his memory.

Then, with a flutter of wings, he once more took to the air, but the joy of his flight was gone and his victory over the air was bitter to him. He arrived safely in Sicily, where he built a temple to Apollo and hung up his wings as an offering to the god, and in the wings he pressed a few bright feathers he had found floating on the water where Icarus fell. And he mourned for the birdlike son who had thrown caution to the winds in the exaltation of his freedom from the earth.

Meet the Writer

Sally Benson

Stories That Have Rounded Ends

Sally Benson (1900–1972) never studied writing. She didn't have to: It came naturally. After high school she skipped college and went directly to work, first for a bank and then for newspapers. In 1930, she was reviewing thirty-two movies a month for a daily paper when she got an idea for a short story. She sat down, typed it out, and sold it to *The New Yorker*. Dazed by her good fortune, she stopped writing for nine months. But when her money ran out, she wrote another story and sold that one, too. From then on she poured stories out. Benson published one book



of Greek and Roman myths, but most of her stories tell the amusing adventures of a thirteen-year-old girl named Judy Graves.

“I like stories that have rounded ends and don't rise to climaxes; that aren't all wrapped up in a package with plot. I like them, that's why I write them.”

COMPARING SELECTIONS

Icarus and Daedalus and PROMETHEUS

COMPARE MYTHS

"Icarus and Daedalus" and "Prometheus" are Greek myths that portray characters attempting to use intelligence to outwit their fates. The themes of knowledge and freedom play an important role in both these myths.

1. How does Daedalus use his intelligence? Does he succeed in reaching his goal? Why or why not?
2. How does Prometheus use his intelligence? Does he succeed in reaching his goal? Why or why not?
3. How are these myths alike? How are they different?
4. Which myth do you prefer? Why?



Icarus, 1947 (detail).

COMPARE IDEAS

What is the meaning of the word *hero*? Are any of the characters in these two myths heroes?

- In small groups, talk about the kinds of personal characteristics, qualities, and actions that define a hero. Make a list of the characteristics of a hero. List some fictional as well as real-life examples.
- Look at each of the main characters in the two myths, and talk about whether or not each character's actions and personal qualities were heroic.
- Share your ideas and definitions in a discussion with your classmates.

COMPARE ENDINGS

Compare the endings of these myths. How are they alike? How are they different? How else might each of these selections have ended?

- What else might have happened to Icarus and Daedalus? Perhaps they stayed on the island of Crete or they escaped by boat. What about Prometheus? What else might have happened to him?
- Use your imagination to write an alternate ending to either myth. Feel free to use Zeus or any other Greek god or goddess in your ending, and make up any new details you wish.

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ELEMENTS

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message, or genre; life, expressed in culture. A piece of literature has a **stated theme**, presented directly, or an **implied theme**, which is revealed through the thoughts and actions of the characters. A **single theme** or several **themes** are common to a piece of writing.

What is the **main theme** of "Icarus and Daedalus"? Support your answer with examples and quotes from the myth.

Discuss the **main theme** of the other selection with your partner.

Key Terms
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ture

Write one or two paragraphs about the origins of the myth.