

“THE FLIGHT OF ICARUS”

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Musicians use a variety of methods to suggest meaning in their songs. In the song, "Flight of Icarus", by the band Iron Maiden, one can find examples of irony and symbolism. These two ideas combined relate to the theme of the song, or "its controlling idea or its central insight" (Arp, Perrine 102). The unifying concept of the song is to be well informed about the individuals in whom one instills one's trust. If misled, one could be faced with the point of human reach exceeding its grasp.

The "Flight of Icarus" is actually the title of an ancient Greek myth. Icarus was "the son of an Athenian craftsman" (Coolidge 88) and both were "exiled in Crete after Daedalus murdered his apprentice whose skill was greater than his master's" (Coolidge 88). When the father and son were imprisoned by the king of Crete, the inventor made "wings from feathers and wax" (Coolidge 88) so that he and his son could escape by flying away to the nearest land, Naples. After several hours of successful flight, Icarus was exhilarated by the flight and attracted by the golden light of the sun, and soared upward like an eagle, "despite his father's warnings" (Coolidge 89). The wax in his wings melted and he perished while his father flew to safety. Daedalus, heartbroken, "flew on to Naples and vowed never to fly again" (Coolidge 89).

In the Iron Maiden song, "The Flight of Icarus", Daedalus is portrayed in a very different light. The song illustrates the father as being not only a skilled craftsman and architect, but also a skilled deceiver. The song depicts Daedalus's jealousy of the success of others, and his inability to deal with rivals, as being unlimited and applicable to all, including his son. Daedalus considered his son a rival flying alongside him and a threat of competition. "He knew that if both of them completed the flight, he would have to share the glory with his son" (Wall 210). The father did not want to do this, so he had to ensure that his son did not make it to Naples. As Daedalus prepares to make the great journey, his evil intentions are shown through his eyes, which are "ablaze" (Smith, Dickinson), and one can "see the madman in his gaze" (Smith, Dickinson 7).

Irony "is contrast in which one term of the contrast in some ways mocks the other term" (Arp, Perrine 187). In the mythological story of the "Flight of Icarus," Icarus's father told his son to keep his flying at "a moderate height," (Coolidge 88) and warned him that if he flew too high, the heat would "melt

the wax that holds the wings together” (Coolidge 88). Thus Daedalus is portrayed as being a loving father who really cared for his son, saying to him, “Keep near me and you will be safe” (Coolidge 89).

The Iron Maiden song is essentially mocking the original myth of Icarus... Knowing that the wax from which the wings were constructed would surely melt from the intense heat of the sun, the father encourages his son to fly on his way, “like an eagle, fly as high as the sun” (Smith, Dickinson 7). The irony here is that in the Greek myth, it is the boy who is intent on flying to the sun, while in the song, the father is the one encouraging his son to fly to the sun.

Symbolism is an “item that has a literal meaning in the story but suggests other meanings as well” (Arp, Perrine 182). In the song, “the sun breaks, above the ground” (Smith, Dickinson 7), is a line that symbolizes the sun’s sudden, violent power, a higher authority among all that thrives on the ground, or the solid surface of the earth. By taking a look at every aspect of our universe, one can see that the fate of every object and being is under the control of another. In our solar system, the major celestial objects consist of planets and stars, the sun being the closest and most prominent star to the eight planets. The sun’s power is displayed by the thriving of life on earth, and its *higher* authority is stressed in the song by its presence *above* the ground. Since the rays of light from the sun provide the possibility for life to function on earth, it is therefore above, or dominant over, the ground. Since the earth essentially belongs to the sun, the star holds the ultimate destiny of those that belong to the earth. In essence, Icarus is a product of the earth, and his inferiority in relation to the sun is displayed when his “wings turn to ashes” (Smith, Dickinson 7) as a result of the immense heat.

In the same vein, as the old man, Daedalus, “stands on the hill” (Smith, Dickinson 7), he is remaining motionless on his feet, waiting in anticipation for the sun to rise. The hill symbolizes a higher authority of those natural features that reside on the ground, such as plants. Daedalus standing on the hill symbolizes his connection with a higher authority, as not only is the hill above the solid surface of the earth, but it also provides exposure to “the first rays of light” (Smith, Dickinson 7) from the sun. Just like the sun determines what happens on the planet earth, the parent holds the upper hand over the actions of his offspring. A child naïve to the trials of life trusts in his parents for guidance and support. Unable to discern his own fate and lacking the ability to reason, Icarus’s destiny lay in the hands of his father, which emphasizes the authority of the parent. Icarus comes to realize that he has become a victim of the power of

authority when his “wings turn to ashes” (Smith, Dickinson 7) during his flight, after he had trusted his father. Icarus now realizes “that his father betrayed” (Smith, Dickinson 7) him, and had planned for his wings to fail.

On occasion, the songs of some musicians reflect on their personal lives. Some similarities can be noted between Bruce Dickinson’s childhood and the life of the young boy, Icarus. Bruce’s parents “were still in their teens when baby Bruce was born” (Wall 213) and, unprepared to handle the demands of raising a child, Bruce was left to be “brought up by his maternal grandparents” (Wall 213). Like Icarus, Bruce was betrayed by his parents very early in life. They had detached all of their emotions from their son by abandoning him at birth. Daedalus had also lost all feeling of emotional connection with his son when he encouraged him to “fly as high as the sun” (Smith, Dickinson 7), knowing that the wings would not be able to withstand the heat, and ultimately result in disintegration.

Bruce considered himself “very much an accident” (Wall 214), and that’s partly why he “grew up feeling like such an outsider” (Wall 214), living an “unconventional childhood” (Wall 214). Bruce felt like an outsider towards both society and his parents, as he did not grow up in the same environment as most of his peers. Icarus can also be described as an outsider to both his father and the people on the island, or his society. As the boy was making his way to begin his flight off of the island, the “crowd broke” (Smith, Dickinson 7) and Icarus “appeared” (Smith, Dickinson 7). The Iron Maiden version of “The Flight of Icarus” suggests that Icarus was isolated from the people on Crete, as the crowd’s sudden and violent dispersion upon his coming into sight suggests that he was somewhat unfamiliar to the people on the island.

“Sent away to boarding school from an early age, the young Bruce grew up very independent and self-sufficient” (Wall 214). Likewise, Icarus was very much on his own. With no guidance on his journey, the young boy “flies on the wings of a dream” (Smith, Dickinson 7). In Icarus’s flight, he is essentially left to fend for himself, with the exception of a chant from his father to “fly like an eagle” (Smith, Dickinson 7). Both the childhoods of Bruce Dickinson and the young Icarus can be described as being isolated, with survival left up to the child. Even though Icarus still had connections with his father during his childhood, the relationship was devoid of emotion, and it was as if he had not known whom his father really was. As Icarus looked the “old man in the eye” (Smith, Dickinson 7), he was not looking at his father, but rather someone who was just considered to be an old man to him. Icarus was searching for a final sense of truth

or comprehension of his father through his eyes. It was a last attempt to get to really know who his father was before he made his flight.

Just after Icarus looks his father in the eye, he “spreads his wings and shouts at the crowd, ‘In the name of God my father I fly’” (Smith, Dickinson 7). This is a symbol of the distrust and lack of support that Icarus felt at the time toward his biological father in regards to his flight. First, Icarus announced to the crowd, and not his father, the beginning of his flight. Even though an announcement is made to the crowd, Icarus is not referring to any individuals in the crowd. Secondly at this point, Icarus realizes his isolation from both the crowd and his father, and with no one left to provide security or support for his journey, the boy shouts “‘In the name of God my father I fly’” (Smith, Dickinson 7). Realizing everyone has betrayed him in his surroundings, Icarus therefore instills his trust in God as his father to guide him through his flight.

The father speaks ironically when he says “fly as high as the sun” (Smith, Dickinson 7), because he is really telling the boy to fly as high as the sun as to melt his wings and actually hinder his flight. The boy, Icarus, realizes his father’s true intentions as his “wings turn to ashes” (Smith, Dickinson 7) mid-flight. Even after his son’s wings turn to ashes, “to ashes his grave” (Smith, Dickinson 7), the chorus continues with “Fly on your way, like an eagle” (Smith, Dickinson 7). This re-instates the father’s original intentions of encouraging his son to fly to his death. Even after his son plunges to his death in the sea, Daedalus cheers him on to fly as high as the sun, mocking his flight.

“Flight of Icarus” was written in 1983 in Britain. Iron Maiden had a significant involvement in the New Wave of British Heavy Metal (NWOBHM) scene of the late 1970’s/early 1980’s. This new wave included “groups that were faster, tougher, harder, and louder than their predecessors and set the tone for all metal bands that followed” (Wall 95), from thrash to death metal. “Iron Maiden, along with a handful of other bands including Saxon, Raven, and Def Leppard, ended up achieving commercial success from this movement” (Wall 96). There were literally hundreds of grassroots-level metal bands from 1979-1981, but only a few became leaders of the movement. The influence of all of these bands, however, would be felt in every corner of the world where rock music is played.

Musically speaking, “Flight of Icarus” with its pounding riffs, is no exception to the fast and epic style characterized by the early metal movement. The varied use of guitars, bass, and drums all contribute

to the mood and feeling of the song. To create a sense of energy in the chorus the tempo is increased, both guitars are used for the rhythm, and multiple vocals chant the lyrics. The drumbeat fluctuates from a slow, soft, simple beat in the beginning, to a louder, faster, more complicated beat towards the middle and end of the song as the story progresses. As Icarus falls to his death in the sea, a lead guitar solo can be heard, exemplifying a sense of excitement and action. As one can see, the use of different instruments and the variation in the way they are played has a great effect on the way the message of the song is perceived.

Iron Maiden's "Flight of Icarus," demonstrates that the incorporation of theme, symbolism, irony, and a connection between the writer's personal life and the character, all make up the unity of a song. The variations in the way the music is played also has a great effect on how the message of the song is discerned. The listener realizes that betrayal comes in many forms, and that the ones who seem the most trustworthy and reliable can hurt a person the most... And if one cannot rely on the person who he or she is supposed to trust the most, do not fly too high too soon.

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