A constant trouble-maker in ancient Athens was the craftsman Daedalus. Though his talent raised him far above the ranks of the ordinary citizens—indeed, he had been taught metalwork by Athene herself—he was jealous of anyone whom he suspected might some day rival him.

He had taken as his apprentice his nephew, Talus, and taught him so well that there came a time when Talus seemed to challenge his uncle's reputation as the master-craftsman of Athens. Daedalus was unable to control his jealousy. Forgetting in his rage the loyalty the young man had shown him, forgetting even that he was his own kinsman, Daedalus lured Talus to the highest point of the city walls, and pushed him over the edge.

Murder of a kinsman was considered the most heinous crime of all, and Daedalus fled across the sea—where no one would know of his crime. His pride prevented him, however, from concealing his identity, and he found that although his crime was unknown in Crete, his reputation as a brilliant craftsman was well-established. Minos himself, king of Crete, received him with delight, for he had been looking for some outstanding craftsman to build a huge maze to house the Minotaur.

This monster, half bull and half man, devoured a tribute of seven Athenian youths and seven maidens every nine years. The oppressed Athenians finally gained release from the tribute through the heroism of Theseus, who entered the maze, or labyrinth, killed the Minotaur, then found his way out again. When Minos heard of the incredible deed, he blamed Daedalus, for he was convinced that no one could have found his way through the labyrinth's complex of tunnels without the assistance of its designer. The king's anger grew, until the life of Daedalus was in grave danger.
Although all escape routes from Crete were closed to him, Daedalus' craftmanship proved stronger than the king's power. He built two pairs of wings, one for himself and one for his son Icarus, bigger and stronger than the wings of any bird. They were made of feathers which in some places were sewn together, and in others, joined by wax. With the wonderful inventions securely strapped to their bodies, Daedalus and Icarus prepared to take to the air.

Before they flew off, Daedalus had one warning for his son, for he well knew Icarus' foolhardy nature.

"Be sure to follow me closely, my son," he cautioned. "We must not stray from our course, for it will be easy to get lost. Above all, we must not fly too high. Do not mount above me, but stay on the level where I fly."

Icarus nodded in understanding, and father and son leaped into the air and soared away from Crete.

For a time all was well. Then Daedalus looked over his shoulder for his son, and found no Icarus following. Desperately he scanned the skies, and perceived, far above him, a tiny speck moving further and further away, climbing higher and higher. Daedalus knew that Icarus had forgotten his warning, and had become intoxicated by the sensation of flying, but he was helpless. Unable to save his son, Daedalus could only watch while Icarus climbed and climbed, until at last the sun melted the wax of his wings, and he plummeted into the sea. The place where he drowned has become known, after him, as the Icarian Sea.

ECHOES IN LITERATURE

The modern novelist James Joyce gave the aspiring artist who is the hero of his Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man the name of Stephen Dedalus. Icarus has become a more popular literary symbol than his father. Sometimes he symbolizes reckless bravery, sometimes dreams that are doomed to be dashed to earth.