

Pilot Officer John Gillespie Magee, Jr., (1922-1941)
served with the Royal Canadian Air Force during the Second World War. He was sent to England for combat duty in July 1941. On December 11, 1941 his Spitfire collided with another plane over England and Magee, only 19 years of age, crashed to his death.

John Gillespie Magee

High Flight (1941)

surly *adj* sur
bond *sb* lænke
tumbling *adj* tumlende
mirth *sb* glæde
wheel *vb* kredse
soar *vb* hæve sig
hover *vb* svæve
chase *vb* jage
craft *sb* (flyve)maskine
delirious *adj* vild, ør
lark *sb* lærke
un'trespaced *adj* ubetrådt
sanctity *sb* hellighed

Oh, I have slipped the surly bonds of earth
And danced the skies on laughter-silvered wings;
Sunward I've climbed and joined the tumbling mirth
Of sun-split clouds – and done a hundred things
You have not dreamed of; wheeled and soared and swung 5
High in the sun-lit silence. Hovering there
I've chased the shouting wind along, and flung
My eager craft through footless halls of air;
Up, up the long, delirious, burning blue
I've topped the wind-swept heights with easy grace, 10
Where never lark nor even eagle flew;
And while, with silent lifting mind I've trod
The high untrespaced sanctity of space,
Put out my hand, and touched the face of God.

Pre-reading

Imagine that you are about to board a flight. What are your thoughts, expectations and feelings as you approach the waiting plane?

Using the technique of speed writing, write for five minutes. Share your thoughts with your neighbour.

Analysis and Interpretation

1. The poem is a sonnet. Use the Fact sheet on p. 52 to examine in what way High Flight follows the rules of the sonnet.
2. How does Magee use rhyme and rhythm?
3. Divide the poem into sections and provide each section with a headline.
4. Make a paraphrase of the poem.
5. Describe how flying makes the poet feel.
6. Find examples of similarities between man and bird.
7. Explain and discuss the meaning of the last sentence "touched the face of God".
8. What is the effect of using a traditional poetic form to describe a modern experience like flying?

Post-reading

Look up the Greek mythological character Icaros. Compare the story of Icaros and the fate of the poet himself to the poem.

Fact sheet: The Sonnet

The sonnet was introduced by the Italian Renaissance poet Petrarch (1304-1374); it has fourteen lines. The first 8 lines (the octave) usually introduce the subject of the poem, the sonnet then takes a turn and the final 6 lines (the sestet) form a conclusion or a comment. The sonnet has a strict rhyming scheme: ABBA-ABBA-CDC-CDC and is often divided into stanzas according to the rhyme scheme. The sonnet became very popular in Europe and William Shakespeare also used it, however in a slightly modified version. The Shakespearean sonnet falls in three quatrains (4 lines) which present the subject matter of the poem and a concluding couplet (2 lines) which forms the conclusion or even a punchline to the poem. This version of the sonnet also has a strict rhyming scheme: ABAB-CD-CD-EFEF-GG.

The break-up of the traditional verse form in the twentieth century has also affected the sonnet. It is still a 14-line poem but poets use the form more freely and are often seen to ignore the implicit stanza forms and rhyme schemes. However, the form is still used to express a single thought or emotion.