

Eng 2600

Daniel Ames

For this essay, I have chosen to write a reader response to “High Flight” by John Gillespie Magee. I read this poem, probably 20 years ago. I believe it was in a WWII novel I was reading at the time. It was actually one of the first poems I read that made me feel as though poetry was accessible to me. John Gillespie Magee was a fighter pilot in the Royal Canadian Air Force during WWII. He started writing this poem while flying a Spitfire plane and finished it shortly after landing. The poem is a description of what he felt while flying. Technically “High Flight” is a sonnet, having 14 lines and is divided into eight lines for the first section and six for the second. Some of the elements of this poem that stood out to me were the positive tone, imagery and metaphors Magee used to describe his experience. The overwhelming feeling of joy and wonder were quite powerful and evident to me. I will try to touch on why these things seemed so apparent in Magee’s work.

Magee’s poem is brimming with light-hearted positivity. I believe it’s the descriptive words in the poem that convey this feeling. In the first line of the poem we read “Oh! I have slipped the surly bonds of Earth” (Howe 205). This gives the impression that being above the Earth, in the sky, is a place of great happiness for him. The rest of the poem reinforces this idea with all the descriptive words used to indicate gaining elevation. He also shows being in the air is more desirable in the first line of the second section when he says “Up, up, the long, delirious burning blue” (Howe 205). It seems apparent the author feels the most joy when in the sky and

this poem is completely dedicated to that feeling. A lot of the verbiage in the poem is joyful in its tone and usage. Throughout the poem we see words like “danced... laughter... eager... delirious...” (Howe 205). The majority of the words in the poem are a celebration of flight and the euphoria it brings. The delight he takes in flying is infectious and awe inspiring.

Another prevalent element of the poem is metaphor. I find it amazing that the author wrote a poem about flying in an airplane and yet we never see the words fly, flying or flight. Through the use of synonyms and metaphor, the author perfectly describes his world of wind and clouds. The impression of flight is given through creative alternatives to flight, such as “climbed... tumbling... wheeled... soared... swung... hov’ring... flung” (Howe 205). I love the author’s achievement of describing flying as anything but. Throughout the poem the reader is aware they are reading about flying a plane, but there is never any mention of an airplane of any sort. The only actual reference to a plane is the author referring to his “craft”. I like the metaphors used to describe the sky throughout the poem. In the eighth line he describes it as “footless halls of air” (Howe 205). Another metaphor used to describe the sky is “... the long, delirious, burning blue” (Howe 205).

One last thing that stood out to me in this poem was the breathtaking imagery of the poem as a whole. From beginning to end, the imagery he uses to describe his plane and the sky is at once unreal, yet familiar at the same time. When he describes his flight, he says he “danced the skies on laughter-silvered wings” (Howe 205). While part of me realizes that I have never done such a thing, it is almost instantly understood what the author means. The imagery for the sky is one thing that really stood out to me. He describes it as “sun-split clouds...

tumbling mirth... sunlit silence... shouting wind... footless halls of air... delirious burning blue... wind-swept heights... high, untrespassed sanctity of space" (Howe 205). There seems to be great beauty and joy in the sky for the author. He describes it in words most people wouldn't think to use for the sky. There also seems to be a sense of reverence associated with being high up in the sky. To really solidify this idea, the author says in the last line that he has "put out my hand and touched the face of God" (Howe 205). The act of flying was obviously a spiritual experience for the author and he does a magnificent job of describing the import of it.

Like I said in the beginning, I read this poem in my youth. The eloquent, graceful description of something I hadn't done yet was so poignant that I felt like I had. At the very least I felt as though I knew what it would be like to someday fly. Magee's tone throughout the poem is light-hearted and joyful. His genius use of synonyms and metaphors are extraordinary and insightful. The imagery used throughout is breathtaking and surreal. I think the real beauty of this poem is the overall effect it has on the reader. I really felt as though I could hear the wind and feel the sun while I read this poem. I had the sensation of flight, of weightlessness. I said before that flying was obviously a spiritual experience for the author. The peace and contentment he felt while flying was akin to touching God. I can honestly say if Magee were a missionary and flying was his religion, he would have a convert in me.

Works Cited

Howe, Elisabeth. *Close Reading An Introduction to Literature*. 1st edition. 1. United States: Pearson Education, 2010. 205.

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