

World Literature Club (10-14): Myths of the Ancient World



Perseus and Medusa

Περσεύς

- One of the greatest of the Greek heroes.
- Son of Zeus and the mortal Danaë, as well as the half-brother and great-grandfather of Heracles.
- Perseus might be from the Greek verb **πέρθειν** (*pérthein*, "to waste, ravage, sack, destroy")
- Slayer of the Gorgon Medusa

As an infant he was thrown into the sea in a chest with his mother Danaë by Acrisius (his grandfather). After Perseus had grown up on the island of Seriphus, where the chest had landed, King Polydectes of Seriphus, who fell in love with Danaë, tricked Perseus into promising to obtain the head of Medusa, the only mortal among the Gorgons. Aided by Hermes and Athena, Perseus pressed the Graiae, sisters of the Gorgons, into helping him by seizing the one eye and one tooth that the sisters shared and not returning them until they provided him with winged sandals (which enabled him to fly), the cap of Hades (which conferred invisibility), a curved sword, or sickle, to decapitate Medusa, and a bag in which to conceal the head. Because the gaze of Medusa turned all who looked at her to stone, Perseus guided himself by her reflection in a shield given him by Athena and beheaded Medusa as she slept. He then returned to Seriphus and rescued his mother by turning Polydectes and his supporters to stone at the sight of Medusa's head.



Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief (Rick Riordan, 2005) Extract 1



"Are you two crazy?" Grover said. "This place is weird." We ignored him. The front lot was a forest of statues: cement animals, cement children, even a cement satyr playing the pipes, which gave Grover the creeps. "Don't knock," Grover pleaded. "I smell monsters."

Then the door creaked open, and standing in front of us was a tall Middle Eastern woman—at least, I assumed she was Middle Eastern, because she wore a long black gown that covered everything but her hands, and her head was completely veiled. Her eyes glinted behind a curtain of black gauze, but that was about all I could make out. Her coffee-coloured hands looked old, but well-manicured and elegant, so I imagined she was a grandmother who had once been a beautiful lady. "Oh, my dears," the woman said. "You must come in, poor children. I am Aunty Em. Go straight through to the back of the warehouse, please. There is a dining area."

The warehouse was filled with more statues—people in all different poses, wearing all different outfits and with different expressions on their faces. I was thinking you'd have to have a pretty huge garden to fit even one of these statues, because they were all life-size. But mostly, I was thinking about food. Our hostess disappeared behind the snack counter and started cooking. Before we knew it, she'd brought us plastic trays heaped with double cheeseburgers, vanilla shakes, and XXL servings of French fries. Grover picked at the fries, and eyed the tray's waxed paper liner as if he might go for that, but he still looked too nervous to eat. "What's that hissing noise?" he asked.

Aunty Em ate nothing. She hadn't taken off her headdress, even to cook, and now she sat forward and interlaced her fingers and watched us eat. "You make these statues yourself?" I asked. "Oh, yes. Once upon a time, I had two sisters to help me in the business, but they have passed on, and Aunty Em is alone." Annabeth had stopped eating. She sat forward and said, "Two sisters?"

"It's a terrible story," Aunty Em said. "Not one for children, really. You see, Annabeth, a bad woman was jealous of me, long ago, when I was young. I had a... a boyfriend, you know, and this bad woman was determined to break us apart. She caused a terrible accident. My sisters stayed by me. They shared my bad fortune as long as they could, but eventually they passed on. They faded away. I alone have survived, but at a price. Such a price."

"Percy?" Annabeth was shaking me to get my attention. "Maybe we should go." "Please, dears," Aunty Em pleaded. "I so rarely get to be with children. Before you go, won't you at least sit for a pose?"

Annabeth shifted her weight from foot to foot. "I don't think we can, ma'am. Come on, Percy—"

Aunty Em directed us to a park bench next to the stone satyr. "Now," she said, "I'll just position you correctly. The young girl in the middle, I think, and the two young gentlemen on either side."

"Where's your camera?" Grover asked.

Aunty Em stepped back, as if to admire the shot. "Now, the face is the most difficult. Can you smile for me please, everyone? I will just be a moment," Aunty Em said. "You know, I can't see you very well in this cursed veil...."

"Look away from her!" Annabeth shouted. She whipped her Yankees cap onto her head and vanished. Her invisible hands pushed Grover and me both off the bench. Then I heard a strange, rasping sound above me. My eyes rose to Aunty Em's hands, which had turned gnarled and warty, with sharp bronze talons for fingernails. I almost looked higher, but somewhere off to my left Annabeth screamed, "No! Don't!" More rasping—the sound of tiny snakes, right above me, from ... from about where Aunty Em's head would be. I couldn't move. I stared at Aunty Em's gnarled claws, and tried to fight the groggy trance the old woman had put me in. Instead I looked to one side and saw one of those glass spheres people put in gardens— a gazing ball. I could see Aunty Em's dark reflection in the orange glass; her headdress was gone, revealing her face as a shimmering pale circle. Her hair was moving, writhing like serpents.

Aunty Em. Aunty "M." How could I have been so stupid? Think, I told myself. How did Medusa die in the myth? But I couldn't think. Something told me that in the myth Medusa had been asleep when she was attacked by my namesake, Perseus. She wasn't anywhere near asleep now. If she wanted, she could take those talons right now and rake open my face.

Her voice invited me to look up, to sympathize with a poor old grandmother. "Annabeth's mother, the cursed Athena, turned me from a beautiful woman into this." "Don't listen to her!" Annabeth's voice shouted, somewhere in the statuary. "You have to cut her head off." Annabeth grabbed a green gazing ball from a nearby pedestal. "A polished shield would be better." She tossed me the glass ball. "Just look at her in the glass. Never look at her directly."

I took out my pen and uncapped it. The bronze blade of Riptide elongated in my hand. I followed the hissing and spitting sounds of Medusa's hair. I kept my eyes locked on the gazing ball so I would only glimpse Medusa's reflection, not the real thing. Then, in the green tinted glass, I saw her. Medusa was about to lunge at Grover when I yelled, "Hey!"

I advanced on her, which wasn't easy, holding a sword and a glass ball. If she charged, I'd have a hard time defending myself. But she let me approach—twenty feet, ten feet. I could see the reflection of her face now. Surely it wasn't really that ugly. The green swirls of the gazing ball must be distorting it, making it look worse.

"You wouldn't harm an old woman, Percy," she crooned. "I know you wouldn't."

I hesitated, fascinated by the face I saw reflected in the glass—the eyes that seemed to burn straight through the green tint, making my arms go weak. From the cement grizzly, Grover moaned, "Percy, don't listen to her!" Medusa cackled. "Too late." She lunged at me with her talons. I slashed up with my sword, heard a sickening shlock!, then a hiss like wind rushing out of a cavern—the sound of a monster disintegrating. Something fell to the ground next to

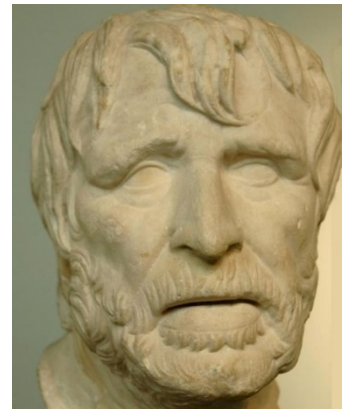
my foot. It took all my willpower not to look. I could feel warm ooze soaking into my sock, little dying snake heads tugging at my shoelaces.

"Oh, yuck," Grover said. His eyes were still tightly closed, but I guess he could hear the thing gurgling and steaming. "Mega-yuck." Annabeth came up next to me, her eyes fixed on the sky. She was holding Medusa's black veil. She said, "Don't move." Very, very carefully, without looking down, she knelt and draped the monster's head in black cloth, then picked it up. It was still dripping green juice. We found some old plastic grocery bags behind the snack counter and double-wrapped Medusa's head. We plopped it on the table where we'd eaten dinner and sat around it, too exhausted to speak.

Finally I said, "So we have Athena to thank for this monster?" Annabeth flashed me an irritated look. "Your dad, actually. Don't you remember? Medusa was Poseidon's girlfriend. They decided to meet in my mother's temple. That's why Athena turned her into a monster. Medusa and her two sisters who had helped her get into the temple, they became the three gorgons. That's why Medusa wanted to slice me up, but she wanted to preserve you as a nice statue. She's still sweet on your dad. You probably reminded her of him." My face was burning. "Oh, so now it's my fault we met Medusa."

Hesiod 700 BC (around the same time as Homer)

....Medusa who suffered a woeful fate: she was mortal, but the two were undying and grew not old. With her lay Poseidon in a soft meadow amid spring flowers. And when Perseus cut off her head, there sprang forth great Chrysaor and the horse Pegasus who is so called because he was born near the springs of Ocean; and that other, because he held a golden blade in his hands....



Ovid 43 BC -17 AD

"Now, valiant Perseus, pray
tell the story of the deed, that all may know,
and what the arts and power prevailed, when you
struck off the serpent-covered head."

"There are" continued Perseus "two sisters, born
of Phorcys. These were wont to share in turn
a single eye between them: this by craft
I got possession of, when one tried
to hand it to the other.—I put forth
my hand and took it as it passed between:
then, far through rocky pathless crags,
over wild hills that bristled with great woods,
I went till I arrived to where the Gorgon dwelt.



Along the way, in fields and by the roads,
I saw on all sides men and animals—
like statues—turned to dark stone at sight
of Medusa's terrible gaze. Nevertheless
reflected on the brazen shield, I bore
upon my left, I saw her horrid face.

When she was helpless in the power of sleep
and even her serpent-hair was slumber-bound,
I struck, and took her head sheer from the neck.—
To winged Pegasus the blood gave birth,
his brother also, twins of rapid wing.'

So did he speak, and truly told besides
the perils of his journey, arduous
and long—He told of seas and lands that far
beneath him he had seen, and of the stars
that he had touched while on his waving wings.

And yet, before they were aware, the tale
was ended; he was silent. Then rejoined
a noble with enquiry why alone
of those three sisters, snakes were interspersed
in dread Medusa's locks. And he replied:—

"Because, O Stranger, it is your desire
to learn what worthy is for me to tell,
hear ye the cause: Beyond all others she
was famed for beauty, and the envious hope
of many suitors. Words would fail to tell
the glory of her hair, most wonderful
of all her charms—A friend declared to me
he saw its lovely splendour. Fame declares
the Sovereign of the Sea attained her love
in chaste Minerva's temple. While enraged
she turned her head away and held her shield
before her eyes. To punish that great crime
Minerva changed the Gorgon's splendid hair
to serpents horrible. And now to strike
her foes with fear, she wears upon her breast
those awful vipers—creatures of her rage.

Myths in the Modern World

Companies

- **Amazon:** The online retail store is named after the group of strong women warriors who were trained in combat and archery and known as the Amazons.
- **Pandora:** The jewellery brand took its name from the first mortal woman in Greek mythology, her name meant all-gifted.
- **Hermès:** He was the messenger of the Greek Gods, but today you will see this name for the company that specialises in luxury goods, lifestyle accessories and perfumes.
- **Dove:** The dove was a symbol of Aphrodite, the Goddess of beauty. Unilever owns a personal care brand by the same name.
- **Apollo:** The US Apollo Space Program to take astronauts to the moon was named after Apollo, based the God's ability as an archer to hit his target.
- **Nike:** The US sports apparel company is named after the Greek Goddess of victory.
- **Cerberus:** The Australian Royal Navy has a training facility in Victoria named HMAS Cerberus, after the multi-headed dog that guarded the gates of the Underworld.
- **Cereal:** the generic name for our breakfast meal is named after Ceres, the God of grain.

Names

Jason: from the Greek hero Jason who led the Argonauts.

Troy: from the Greek city of Troy.

Helen: from Helen of Troy, who was the daughter of Zeus.

Penelope: in *The Odyssey*, Penelope is the wife of Odysseus.

Phoebe: was a Titan associated with the moon.

Astronomy

The names of the Zodiac, which is your star sign from your birth date, all have their beginnings from Greek Mythology.

Is Latin a dead language?

Ad hoc/Alibi/Bonus/Carpe Diem/E.g/Extra/Multi

The Amazon logo, featuring the word "amazon" in a bold, lowercase, sans-serif font. A curved orange arrow is positioned below the letters "a" and "z", pointing from the "a" to the "z".

LOGOS VS MYTHOS: CORONAVIRUS



Myths were created by early civilisations to make sense of things happening in the natural world around them. They might explain the history of a people or explain a natural or social huge event. Your turn...write a story using mythology, but related to a current event!

Further Resources

Books

The Roman Mysteries by Caroline Lawrence

Percy Jackson and the Olympians by Rick Riordan

The Heroes of Olympus by Rick Riordan

Films and TV

Percy Jackson & the Olympians: The Lightning Thief

Percy Jackson: Sea of Monsters (2013)

Roman Mysteries TV series CBBC

Hercules (1997 animation)

Music

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Isic2Z2e2xs> Gustav Holst, the Planets Suite – The Planets are named after the Roman Gods. Holst uses this to guide to tone of his music.