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**Subject: Medusa: the Myth in Modern Women's Poetry**

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## Medusa: the Myth in Modern Women's Poetry

### Introduction

Feminist scholars have been fighting to revise the negative image of women in myths and fairy tales. They endeavour to deconstruct these icons of the female-as-monster and the female-as-angel, prevalent in patriarchal writings. These passive portraits of women are, according to feminists, part of an agenda to confine women within the social norms in these male-dominated societies. Unlike fairy tales in which the beautiful is always the good-hearted woman, classical and other ancient myths portray women in monstrous forms.

Their beauty becomes a source of destruction, not only for them but for other men as well. Lilith, Medusa, and the Sirens were all part of these stereotypical images of the female-as-monster. Medusa and her two sisters, Stheno and Euryale, were daughters of Phorcys and Ceto, two pagan deities from the ancient mythic world.

Before her transformation into a snake-haired monster, Medusa was a beautiful maiden. When she was sexually assaulted by Poseidon, the god of the sea, Athena turned her into a female monster, or a Gorgon with fatal gaze and a serpentine crown, having the ability to turn any onlooker into a stone.

Instead of being patronised and supported for her rape and subsequent punishment, she is defeated and beheaded by the mythical hero, Perseus.

Perseus was assisted by the classic deities, who offered him a mirrored shield, golden winged sandals, and a sword, with which he was able to kill Medusa.

Perseus, then, gave her head to Athena to be placed on her shield to terrify her enemies in wartimes.

In addition, after she is slaughtered, her blood was taken by Asclepius, the god of healing, to be used for killing, curing, and resurrecting people.

There is a belief that Medusa was punished, not only because of Athena's unjustified belief that Medusa's rape desecrated her temple, but also because Athena was jealous of Medusa's irresistible beauty.

She has never been viewed as a victim. Historically, she is often portrayed as a female monster who has the power to seduce and kill.

Her hair, which was once the symbol of her beauty, now snaky, becomes the source of destruction and monstrosity.

Medusa was sometimes incarnated in beautiful images in ancient pieces of sculpture and paintings.

Yet beneath her luring figure, there lurks a threatening power to petrify men who approach her. This is because of her innate hatred of mortal men.

In western culture, Medusa remains a threatening image for male authority with her monstrous head and alluring nature.

In his "Medusa's Head" (1940), Sigmund Freud interpreted the myth as being a reference to a child's early knowledge of female sexuality, viewing Medusa and her hideous head as an embodiment of the mother's sexual objects.

Freud's reading of the myth contributes to solidify the passive image of Medusa as a defiant female, mainly because of his assumption that

Medusa is associated with men's fears of being castrated and disempowered.

In spite of her status as a victim of rape, punishment, and murder, Medusa is often depicted as a monster. Besides, her murderer, Perseus, has been praised and celebrated as a hero.

In modern culture, any woman who poses a threat to patriarchal authority is demonised in the image of Medusa, who even after her death, maintains the same power of turning men into stone with her fearful snake-haired, severed head.

For men, Medusa represents the threat of losing power and authority. For those living in the modern age, the age of the New Woman, Medusa's image retains its threatening power as a symbol of castration and monstrosity, who has a desire, not only to petrify, but also to conquer and possess.

Women in power have been compared to Medusa throughout history. Notable examples are Marie Antoinette , Queen Elizabeth II, and most recently Angela Merkel and Hillary Clinton.

This patriarchal anxiety of politically independent women, embodied in some photoshopped images online, reveals the fears of the man-centered world of females' politics and growing power.

In male, misogynistic art and culture, Medusa is often portrayed as a subversive force, who retains her traditional role as an alluring seductress.

She became the archetypal femme fatale, characterised by irrepressible erotic desire, violence, and death.

Feminist scholars encourage women writers to deconstruct this false stereotype by forcing men to see Medusa's reality, not as a nasty woman, but as a human being who has the power to control her body and to assert her identity.

For feminists, therefore, Medusa is always a symbol of female inspiration, power, anger, and revolt.

These writers use Medusa as a means via which to encounter misogyny and oppression in a male-dominated society.

Helene Cixous, a French feminist theorist, in her seminal treatise, "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1975), protests the inferior view the man-dominated world adopts in its treatment of women.

Cixous believes that Perseus killed Medusa because of his fears of being disempowered and killed by her. He has to kill her and to make use of her severed snaky-haired head to defeat his enemies.

Though her fatality and fearful ophidian head are symbols of power and authority, away from being signs of monstrosity, she is also deprived of this power, which is usurped and exploited first by Perseus and then by Athena.

Cixous employs this image as an epitome of power in feminist writings. She believes that not all women's writings are feminine.

She intends to use such cultural figures as Medusa as a symbol of femininity and creativity to confront the monstrous images in patriarchal discourse or sexist male-authored texts.

Cixous's new reading of this mythic figure helps deconstructing Freud's negative image of the dangerous castrating woman.

She also objects to the degrading passive image that some ambivalent female voices present in subversive female-authored-texts.

For instance, American poet Louise Bogan (1897-1970), in her 1921 poem “Medusa,” deviated from the dominant trend in feminist writing which glorifies Medusa as an empowering figure and a source of inspiration.

Bogan’s Medusa is a figure that is associated with despair. Her biographers attributed this negative image to Bogan’s suffering and her difficulties after she and her little daughter were abandoned by her husband.

In the poem, Medusa’s ability to petrify differs from her traditional image as an uncanny female who has the ability to turn her male onlookers into stones.

It is the speaker’s/poet’s life that is rendered static and stone-like after she is deserted by her husband:

When the bare eyes were before me  
And the hissing hair,  
Held up at a window, seen through a door.  
The stiff bald eyes, the serpents  
on the forehead  
Formed in the air.  
This is a dead scene forever now.  
Nothing will ever stir.  
The end will never brighten it  
more than this,  
Nor the rain blur.

There is a shift in perspective in the representation of Medusa, however. Through her laughing face, one can see an image completely different from that of the negative monstrous woman.

Medusa's laughter does not only shatter her negative image, but it also brings women a hope of a better life.

In some feminist revisions of the myth, Athena's punishment of Medusa is seen as an act of solidarity and protection.

Female writers believe that Athena transformed Medusa into a Gorgon to protect her from rape, which is a constant threat to women in patriarchal cultures.

They relied on the meaning of the name "Medusa" in Greek, which is "to guard and protect", to support their assumption that Athena's intention was to protect the beautiful Medusa from men's sexual advances.

However, their view misses the main point of the myth which is the fact that Athena assisted Perseus to kill Medusa by providing him with a mirrored armour to avoid her petrifying gaze. It also overlooks the fact that Athena used Medusa's head later on as a weapon to defeat her enemies.

In Edith Sitwell's "Medusa Love Song," Medusa is presented as a rape victim, who though warn by her sister of her subsequent rape, remains faithful to her romantic feelings.

Sitwell is one of few poets who depict Medusa as a victim rather than an alluring monstrous female.

In the poem, Medusa's excessive innocence and her inability to see the danger that she and her female sisters are liable to in the patriarchal world made her an easy prey to men's cruelty.

In "The Muse as Medusa" (1971), May Sarton (1912-1995) imagines Medusa as an empowering muse. To her, Medusa is not a petrifying monster, but an inspiring force and a source of creativity:

I saw you once, Medusa; we were alone.  
I looked you straight in the cold eye, cold.  
I was not punished, was not turned to stone.  
How to believe the legends I am told?

I came as naked as any little fish,  
Prepared to be hooked, gutted, caught.  
And I saw you, Medusa, made my wish,  
And when I left you I was clothed in thought.

Sarton is so identified with Medusa to the extent that she can see the world through Medusa's eyes. She even views her face to be Medusa's face:

I turn your face around! It is my face.  
That frozen rage is what I must explore.  
Oh secret, self-enclosed, and ravaged place!  
This is the gift I thank Medusa for.

Ann Stanford's (1916-1987) poem "Medusa" (1977) shows the poet's identification with the title character as a victim of rape.

Stanford allows Medusa to speak for herself and to express her anger over her rape and her desire to revenge:



For me it was anger-no consent on my part,  
no wooing, all harsh rough as a field hand.

I didn't like it. My hair coiled in fury;  
my mind held hate alone.

I thought of revenge, began to live on it.

My hair turned to serpents,  
my eyes saw the world in stone.

Published in her collection of poems *The World's Wife* (1999), Carol Ann Duffy's (1955-) "Medusa" approaches the Medusa myth from a new perspective.

Duffy's female speaker identifies herself as Medusa because of her jealousy. She suspects her husband and believes that he betrays her and has affairs with other women:

A suspicion, a doubt, a jealousy  
grew in my mind,  
which turned the hairs on my head  
to filthy snakes  
as though my thoughts  
hissed and spat on my scalp.

The speaker threatens to turn her husband into a stone for his infidelity to her:

Be terrified.  
It's you I love,  
perfect man, Greek God, my own;

but I know you'll go, betray me, stray from home.

So better by for me if you were stone.

Overwhelmed by her jealousy, the speaker views her reflection in the mirror as being a reflection of the image of Medusa:

I stared in the mirror.

Love gone bad  
showed me a Gorgon.

I stared at a dragon.

She even contemplates her desire to turn her Perseus-like husband into a stone just to keep him for herself:

And here you come  
with a shield for a heart  
and a sword for a tongue  
and your girls, your girls.

Wasn't I beautiful  
Wasn't I fragrant and young?

Look at me now.

Modern writers respond differently to the Medusa myth as they incorporated her in their writings. While the male writers continue to depict her in sexual overtones, the female writers portray her as a symbol of power and creativity. Medusa has become a source of empowerment and serves as a muse for modern female poets. Their identification with her and her suffering is also clear in some of their writings which present Medusa as a victim of rape and murder.