

L.I. I understand the importance of Perseus and Medusa.

Lesson 13: Perseus and Medusa

Of all the monsters and beasts in Ancient Greece, the Gorgons were perhaps the most **gruesome**. Men were **petrified** by them. The three Gorgons had once been very beautiful girls. Then Medusa had fallen in love with Poseidon, the god of _____, and had seduced him in the temple of Athena, the goddess of _____. This had been most unwise. To punish Medusa for behaving improperly in her temple, Athena turned her - and her sisters - into the Gorgons. And that was how they became so ugly. Instead of teeth, they had sharp tusks like wild boars. Their hands were made of bronze and they had wings on their shoulders. But what was most remarkable about these horrors were their hair. Their hair was made of living snakes, slimy green and silver snakes with hissing tongues and gleaming eyes. There were dozens of them, sprouting out of the Gorgons' skulls, writhing over their foreheads, curling round their necks and twisting over their shoulders. Everyone who saw the face of a Gorgon turned to stone.



Back at the banquet, Perseus rushed out of the palace amid the loud laughter and jeers of Polydectes and his friends, and sat beside the quiet sea, thinking about what to do. While he sat there, deep in thought, two Immortals came to him: Athena, tall and stately in her shining helmet, with her polished shield upon her arm; and Hermes with kindly laughter in his eyes, slim and quick of limb, with the winged sandals on his feet.

"Do not grieve, Perseus," said Hermes, "for, by the will of Zeus, we are come to help you. See, here I lend you the sharpest weapon in the world, that very sickle with which Cronos wounded the Sky, and which Zeus used in his battle with Typhon. No lesser blade will smite the head from Medusa the Gorgon."

"And I," said Athena in her calm, sweet voice, "will lend you my shield

with which I dazzle the eyes of erring mortals who do battle against my wisdom. Any mortal who looks upon the face of Medusa is turned to stone immediately by the terror of it: but if you look only on her reflection in the shield, all will be well."

Perseus travelled far and searched for a long time but he found no trace of Medusa and her sisters. He wondered if he had been a **bit hasty** in agreeing to the king's request. At that moment, a figure suddenly appeared, stepping out of the flames of his bonfire. It was a woman, tall and beautiful and with bright eyes. On her head she wore a helmet, and she carried a spear. It was Athena, goddess of wisdom. 'I know who you're looking for. The only way to find Medusa is to ask the Grey Ones.'

So Perseus hastened away, his heart beating with excitement at the thought of the high adventure which was his, and the great honour which the Immortals had done him. Perseus knew he had first to find the three Grey Sisters. They alone knew where the gruesome Gorgon Medusa had her lair. These three revolting old women lived on a rocky cliff top, and kept watch for passers-by to cook in their iron **cauldron**. They could not all keep watch at once, though. Between the three of them, they had only one grey eye.

As he got closer, he could hear the grisly sisters quarrelling about their supper. They could not decide whose turn it was to eat. Between the three of them, they only had one rotten tooth.





Perseus crept up behind them as they argued and before they could stop him, snatched away the eye.

"I've got your eye," Perseus said, "and I won't give it back until you tell me where I can find Medusa."

The Grey Ones stamped their feet and shouted: 'Who is it?'

"Can't see him."

"Bite him!"

"If you don't tell me," Perseus continued, "I'll throw your eye away and you'll never see anyone again."

"All right," the Grey Ones ground their tooth. "There's a big cave in the valley down there."

"And make sure you get a good look at Medusa."

"Look her straight in the eye. You'll never forget your first sight of Medusa!"

Perseus gave them back their eye and left, their laughter cackling in his ears.

Athena had not only told Perseus how to kill Medusa, she had given him the means. He now carried her brightly polished shield in one hand and his sword in the other. He knew that he must be getting close to Medusa's cave. The valley in which he stood was filled with stone people, some trapped as they turned to run, others frozen in horror, their mouths open, the screams still on their lips.

Activity A: How is Perseus going to use Athena's shield to defeat Medusa? In the space below, write an explanation, using the words 'reflect', 'petrify' and 'cunning'.

Now Perseus saw the mouth of a large cave, yawning darkly at him. Holding the shield more tightly than ever, he climbed up the gentle slope and, taking a deep breath, entered the gloom.

"Medusa!" he called out. His voice sounded lost in the shadows. Something moved at the back of the cave. "Medusa!" he repeated. Now he could hear hissing. "I am Perseus!"

"Perseus!" came a deep, throaty voice from the back of the cave. "Have you come to see me?"

The Gorgon stepped forward into the light. For a dreadful moment, Perseus was tempted to look up at her, to meet her eyes. But with all his strength he kept his head turned away and instead of looking at Medusa, he looked at her reflection in the shield. Now he could see her green skin, her poisonous red eyes and her yellow teeth, all reflected in the polished bronze. He lifted the sword.

"Look at me! Look at me!" the Gorgon cried. Still he kept his eyes on the shield. Now the reflection was huge, the teeth snarling at him out of the shield. The snakes writhed furiously, hissing with the sound of red-hot needles being plunged into water.

"Look at me! Look at me!" How could he find her when all he could see was the reflection? Surely it would be easier to kill her if he took just one quick look at her, just to make sure he didn't miss...

"Yes. That's right. Look at me!"

"No!" With a despairing cry, Perseus swung wildly with his sword. He felt the sharp steel bite into flesh and bone. The Gorgon screamed. The snakes exploded around her head as the whole thing flew from her shoulders, bounced against the cave wall and rolled to the ground. A fountain of blood

spouted out of her neck and her body crumpled. Then at last it was over. Still not looking at it, Perseus picked up the grim trophy of his victory and dropped it into a heavy sack.



By the time his search for the Gorgon was over, a whole year had passed. When he returned, the first person he saw was a fisherman. The man burst into tears, "Oh, master Perseus! It was your mother the wicked king wished to marry. Once you were gone he tried to force her and when she refused, he made her the palace washer-woman. For a whole year she has been scrubbing floors. It's terrible."

"We'll soon see about that," said Perseus through gritted teeth. And he strode into the palace, where King Polydectes was sitting on this throne.

"Greetings, sire!" he called out to the astonished monarch. "It is I, Perseus, returned after twelve long months. I bring with me a present that you asked for."

"A Gorgon's head?" Polydectes sneered. "A likely story!"

"Don't you believe me, sire?" Perseus asked.

"Certainly not," the king said.

"Would you believe your own eyes?"

"Have you got it there?" the king pointed at the sack.

"See for yourself."

And with that, Perseus lifted the Gorgon's head out of the sack and held it up for the king to see.

"That's not the ..." King Polydectes got no further than that. The next moment there was a stone statue leaning out of the throne, a stone sneer on its stone face. After that, Perseus became king of the island. As for Polydectes, he was put in the palace garden, and is probably still there to this day.

Activity B: Read the events below. Write a number next to each event to put it into the correct order.

1. Perseus presents Polydectes with Medusa's head.
2. Perseus attends Polydectes' banquet without a gift.
3. Perseus slays Medusa.
4. Perseus announces he will bring back a gorgon's head.
5. Athena gifts Perseus her shield and Hermes gifts him Cronos' sickle.
6. The Grey Ones advise Perseus on where to find Medusa.