GORGON'S HEAD

The King of Argos was warned by an oracle that his grandson would kill him, so he made up his mind never to have a grandson. He locked up his daughter, Danae, in a bronze room with only a small barred opening for light and air so that no man could come near her.

But that could not keep out Zeus. The god turned himself into a shower of gold and poured into the stronghold. Nine months later Danae gave birth to a son, whom she named Perseus.

When her father realized what had happened, he shut up Danae and her son in a chest and threw it into the sea. The chest was washed up on the island of Seriphos and found by a man named Dictys, the brother of the King of Seriphos.

Dictys took care of Danae and Perseus, and they lived in his house for many years until Perseus had grown to be a young man. Throughout these years the King of Seriphos, Polydectes, pursued Danae. Although she refused, saying she could never love him, he continued to pester and waylay her. Only the watchfulness of Perseus prevented him from achieving his aim. The two men grew to hate each other, and Polydectes
longed to be rid of Perseus. But since the youth was under his brother’s protection there seemed to be nothing he could do.

Then came a day when Polydectes held a great feast and invited all the nobles and warriors of Seriphos. While the wine was flowing he asked his guests to say what would be the best gift for a king.

“A horse!” cried one, and all agreed except Perseus. The youth, made reckless by wine, called out mockingly, “The head of a Gorgon!”

Everyone laughed, for no man could kill a Gorgon. The Gorgons were three sisters, monsters with bronze claws and wings and the tusks of beasts; anyone who met their pitiless gaze would be turned to stone.

The next day each of the nobles brought to the palace a horse as a gift for the king. Polydectes watched with pride and pleasure the procession of fine animals with their enameled and jeweled bridles, saddles of the best workmanship, and ribbons of gold and purple braided into their manes and tails.

Then he turned to Perseus—for he saw that his opportunity had come at last. “You have brought me no gift, Perseus. Yet you suggested one, I remember. I command you to bring me the head of a Gorgon!”

Danae gasped and looked at her son in terror.

But Perseus, although he was afraid and regretted his rash words at the feast, said, “I will bring it.”
That evening he prayed to Hermes and to Athena, and both gods appeared to him. They told him what he must do to succeed in his quest. First he must go to the cave where the Graiai lived. These were three withered women, gray-haired sisters of the Gorgons, who shared one tooth and one eye between them.

"They pass the eye and the tooth from one to another," said Athena. "You must steal the eye and keep it until they reveal to you the way to the Gorgons' country."


"Their names are Euryale, Stheno, and Medusa," said Athena. "All are monsters but Euryale and Stheno are immortal and cannot die. Medusa is the one you must kill."

"Medusa. Forgive me, great goddess, how shall I know which is Medusa?"

"You will know her by her hair, which is not hair at all but a mass of writhing snakes that hiss and bite. Do not look any of the Gorgons directly in the eye or you will be turned to stone. I will lend you my bronze shield. Use it to reflect their images, and when you see Medusa, strike."

Hermes gave Perseus a curved knife of adamant and a pouch for the Gorgon's head. He lent the youth his own golden winged boots, which enabled him to speed through the heavens, and his wide-brimmed cap that made the wearer invisible.
Perseus fell to his knees in gratitude and thanked the gods as they left him with these gifts.

The next morning he said good-bye to his mother and warned her to be wary of Polydectes. He strapped Hermes’ boots onto his feet and put on the cap of invisibility. Then he flew, swift as the wind, to the cavern where the Graiai lived.

This cavern was in a cold, gray country, and he found the three withered women sitting around the embers of a fire. As soon as Perseus entered the cave they heard him.

"Someone is here!" cried one of the sisters. "Give me the eye! Give it!"

"Who’s that? Who’s there?" cried another.

Even the one with the eye could not see Perseus because he wore Hermes’ cap. "Who has the eye?" the other two cried, stretching out scrawny arms.

"Deino has it. It’s here."

And Perseus saw the hands, blindly reaching, and one that held the eye. He stepped closer and took it.

The sisters began to quarrel.
"Where is it?"

"I gave it to you!"

"You dropped it!"

"No! You took it from me!"

Perseus stood clear of them and spoke. "I have the eye."

They gasped and turned toward his voice. "Who are you? Give it back!"

"I have the eye," repeated Perseus, "and I will return it to you when you tell me how to find your sisters, the Gorgons."
The Graiai muttered together. They were the guardians of the way to the Gorgons' country; it was their duty to keep out strangers. But what could they do without their eye?

"Listen," said the oldest of them. And she explained to Perseus how to reach the Gorgons. Then she stretched out a bony hand. "The eye!"

"The eye!" cried the other two.

Perseus returned it and flew away, leaving them passing the precious item to and fro.

He knew he was in the land of the Gorgons as soon as he crossed its borders. It was rocky, parched, and desolate, as the Graiai had described, and all around, on roads and plains, were still figures: people and animals turned to stone by the cold stare of a Gorgon.

Perseus felt afraid. There was no sign of life, only the statues, frozen in movement and with a look of terror on their faces. But as he flew onward he saw before him a cliff top, and on it perched what appeared to be three great birds with brazen wings. He held up Athena's shield and flew lower, tilting the shield to view them.

He saw that these were not birds, but female monsters. Their great gleaming wings enfolded them like cloaks as they perched, asleep, on a crag on the cliff top. Their bronze hands ended in sharp curving claws that gripped the rock. Their faces were turned away from him, half-hidden by their wings, but at any moment one might wake and look around. He only dared view their reflections in the shield.
He moved it to study each one in turn. The middle one was Medusa — she of the snaky hair. He heard its faint hissing and saw the snakes’ tongues flicker in and out. Their many eyes gleamed. They were not asleep. What if they woke Medusa? He knew he must act at once.

He crept closer, keeping Medusa’s reflection in the shield. The snakes
became agitated. Close behind the monster Perseus stopped and drew Hermes’s knife from its scabbard.

The scrape of metal alerted Medusa. She turned; he saw in the shield her terrible stare. Then he struck and sliced off her head.

Blood spouted from the neck. Medusa’s sisters woke and shrieked and rose on clattering wings as Perseus seized the head and stowed it in his pouch. They saw it disappear and, although he was invisible, they lunged, screaming in fury, their claws swiping the air around him. With the shield held up to protect himself, Perseus sped away. But the

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Gorgons heard him go. They flew after him, beating the air around him with their great wings. He watched them, reflected in Athena’s shield, and quailed at the sight of their fierce teeth and claws. If they caught him, they would tear him to pieces.

But Hermes’ winged boots took him high and fast into the heavens, and soon he was clear of the Gorgons’ land and flying above the head and shoulders of Atlas. Atlas was the Titan who, for untold ages, had held up the heavens and all the stars. The weight of this burden crushed even his giant frame, and he longed to be free of it, but he was immortal and would never die. When he heard Perseus approach he cried out, “Who’s there?” and Perseus took off the cap of invisibility and told him about the Gorgon’s head.

Then Atlas saw a way out of his plight. “Take pity on me,” he said. “Let me look at the face of Medusa.”

Perseus was reluctant, appalled, yet curious too, for he had never seen the transformation to stone take place.

He reached into the pouch and pulled out the head, being careful to hold it facing away from him.

Atlas stared at the dead face, and Perseus saw a grayness come over the Titan’s features, and then cracks appeared; his shoulders sagged and settled, and his face changed and became craggy. His eyebrows were
lines of trees, and his eyes—were those eyes or dark cave openings? Where his hair and beard had been was dense forest. Atlas the Titan was gone. He had become the range of mountains that bears his name to this day.

Perseus flew on toward Ethiopia, and now, as he flew across the sea, he saw far below him a young woman chained to a rock below a headland. Waves were breaking at her feet. He flew lower, and the girl looked up and cried out to him for help.

"Who are you? Why are you here?" asked Perseus.

"I am Andromeda, the king’s daughter. My mother, Kassiopeia, boasted that she was more beautiful than the nymphs of the sea, and as a punishment the nymphs sent a sea monster to ravage the coast. My father sought help from an oracle, which told him that if he sacrificed me to the sea monster it would go and leave our people in peace."

As she stopped speaking, a look of terror appeared on the girl’s face. She pointed out to sea. "It is coming for me!"

Perseus saw a ripple under the surface of the water. A long, dark shape moved rapidly nearer. Andromeda screamed as the monster’s head burst from the water, streaming weed and foam. It turned toward the sound, and its jaws gaped wide.

Perseus lunged downward with Hermes’s knife and struck the monster a deep blow in the shoulder. No ordinary blade could have pierced that
scaly skin, but the god's knife was so sharp it could cut through stone. The creature howled and turned its jaws on Perseus, who flew upward, out of its reach.

He struck again, darting down to stab, and then upward to escape the monster's snapping teeth. Blood stained the sea, and the monster grew more ferocious. As Perseus flew down to strike again, it whirled around and lashed with its tail, so close it grazed his golden boot. Wounded but still dangerous, it turned its attention once more to the chained girl. Andromeda screamed.

"Look away!" Perseus warned her. "Close your eyes!"

And from his pouch he drew the Gorgon's head. He raced toward Andromeda and held the trophy up above the monster's snapping jaws. The monster turned to see what Perseus held—and its jaws turned to stone. Perseus hid away the head, and when he looked again he saw that where the serpent had been was nothing but a ridge of rock breaking the surface of the sea.

The girl still stood with her head averted and eyes shut, shaking with fear. Perseus alighted beside her and said, "Princess, you are free."
With Hermes's knife he struck through the chains that bound her and led her up the cliff to safety. Her parents were overjoyed to see her safe and asked Perseus how they could reward him.

"If the maiden is willing, I choose Andromeda as my bride," said Perseus.

The girl and her parents agreed. Then, on the shore, Perseus built three turf altars to Hermes, Zeus, and Athena and made sacrifices to them in gratitude before walking with Andromeda to the wedding feast in her father's hall.

But Andromeda's father had not told Perseus that his daughter had formerly been promised to another suitor, her uncle Phineus. This man, who had not troubled to try and save her from the sea monster, came now with warriors to take her away by force. A great battle ensued, and many of Andromeda's family took the part of Phineus because he was a kinsman. Those who supported Perseus were outnumbered, and although the youth fought bravely, he found himself surrounded by enemies. Phineus moved in, his sword at the ready.

Perseus shouted a warning to his friends to look away. Once again he brought out the Gorgon's head and held it up. Phineus was stopped midstride, his sword arm upraised, a triumphant smile frozen forever on his face. Behind him, several of his followers suffered the same fate; the others fled in terror.

And so, at last, the interrupted wedding feast took place. When it
was over, Perseus and Andromeda traveled to Seriphos, where Perseus heard that his old enemy, Polydectes, had abducted his mother and imprisoned his own brother, Dictys, who had tried to protect her.

Perseus strode into the king’s hall, unwashed and bloody from his adventures, and faced Polydectes in front of his assembled warriors.

Polydectes gave a great laugh. “Well, if it’s not young Perseus, back from his travels and looking the worse for wear! So, boy, have you brought me the Gorgon’s head?” And he looked around at his followers, who all laughed with him.

In response Perseus reached into Hermes’s pouch and seized Medusa’s head by its snaky curls. He pulled it out, still dripping blood, and before
Polydectes knew what was happening he had stared full into Medusa’s terrible eyes. In an instant he and all his nobles were turned to stone.

Then Perseus freed Dictys, who became King of Seriphos and married Perseus’ mother, Danae, whom he had long loved.

Perseus returned the winged boots, cap, pouch, and knife to Hermes, and the bronze shield to Athena. He made a gift of Medusa’s head to Athena, and the goddess set it in the center of her shield.

Then Perseus and Andromeda went to his birthplace, Argos, to make peace with his grandfather; but the old man, hearing that Perseus was on his way, and remembering the words of the oracle, feared that his grandson had come to kill him. He fled to the land of the Pelasgians. Perseus became king of Argos in his stead and ruled it wisely for many years.

But what the Fates have decreed can never be averted. Perseus traveled one spring to a far country to take part in their public games. There he threw a discus, which struck and accidentally killed his grandfather, who by chance was among the spectators. And so, at last, the prophecy was fulfilled.
In the ancient and mysterious past, when the gods of Greece walked the same ground as mortal men, there lived in the muddy depths of the ocean a sea witch. She was one part poisonous eel, one part giant water snake, and a third part woman—in such a hideous combination that all creatures who looked at her froze in terror and could barely swim away. The only thing more frightening than this sea witch were her many children. They clung to her with their long, scaly bodies, bent fins, and gaping teeth.
Now, all with the sea witch and her brood remained constant, until a very strange thing happened. The sea witch produced one more child, a girl, and she looked nothing like her sisters or brothers. She was beautiful. The sea witch named her Medusa, and as swift as an undersea storm, news spread of the girl's amazing beauty. Even Poseidon, the King of the Oceans, was entranced. He sent Medusa a betrothal gift, a necklace all of sea gold and pearls of every color.
One sunlit day Medusa sat upon a crag, admiring how the necklace looked against her fair skin.

"I am just like a goddess!" exclaimed Medusa. "I am even more beautiful than Athena herself. And when I marry Poseidon, I will be Queen of all the Oceans."

Medusa did not know that Athena was nearby and heard everything she said. In a jealous fury, the goddess rose in a whirlwind beside the girl.

"You are no goddess," Athena announced, "but the bragging daughter of a mud toad! You came from the sea and to the sea you will return. But only after you live out your days in such ugliness that anyone who looks at you will turn to stone. Hide yourself if you can! One day a boy from the sea will come to kill you. This is my curse!"
Medusa felt a burning, twisting pain in her head. She edged over the crag and stared hard into the mirror of the sea. Her once lustrous hair was a mass of living snakes! She was no longer a beauty, but a horrible monster—a gorgon!

“Athena! I spit on you!” snarled Medusa. And all the snakes on her head hissed and spat. Still too proud to join her ugly sisters and brothers, Medusa fled over land looking for a cave to hide in. And true to Athena’s curse, anyone who looked upon her was instantly turned to stone, like one of the statues in the temple of Zeus.
Now, while Medusa hid herself far away on a distant shore, Athena's curse was taking shape. It so happened that an old fisherman saw a wooden chest thrown from a giant wave onto the sandy beach. The salty bindings suddenly burst, and out sprang a woman and a boy, almost more dead than alive.

"Praise Athena, we are free!" said the woman. "I am Danae and this is my son, Perseus. My father was told by a priestess that if I ever had a child, the child would kill him. So my father put me in an underground chamber, hoping no man would ever see me. But Zeus, the King of the Gods himself, saw me through my open sky window. He visited me disguised as a shower of gold and gave me this child. When my father saw my son, he put us in that chest and tossed it far out to sea."
The old fisherman felt sorry for the woman and the child. He took them home and gave them food and drink, and bid them stay.

“You will be safe with me as long as you never venture beyond this cove,” said the fisherman. “My evil brother rules the other side of our island, and if he ever sees you, you both may come to harm.”

And so, Danae and Perseus lived in great peace and happiness with the old fisherman. But one day, Danae walked, daydreaming, along the inland road. Before she realized where she was, it was too late. She was seized by soldiers and taken away. Perseus saw them and followed close behind, only to be taken prisoner himself.
Danae and Perseus were taken to a huge marble hall. On the throne at one end was Polydectes, the tyrant brother of the old fisherman.

"I have never seen you before on my island," said Polydectes. "Where are you from?"

"We came from the sea," replied Danae.

"Like a gift," laughed Polydectes, who looked longingly at the beautiful woman. What a bride she would make, what a queen! But as for the boy, Polydectes did not want someone else's son. And as he tried to think of ways to get rid of Perseus, an invisible Athena whispered an idea into his ear:

"Danae!" Polydectes announced. "I have decided to make you my queen. And your son, Perseus, will bring us a wedding gift—the head of Medusa!"

"Marry you?" gasped Danae. "How could I ever marry the tyrant who sent my son to certain death?"

"Mark well my words," commanded Polydectes. "You will marry me at nightfall tomorrow. If you defy me, and if Perseus fails to return with Medusa's head, then it will be death for you both!"
Guards took Danae away, weeping, to her new bedchamber. Perseus was shoved out onto a rocky path by the sea.

“If only I had the wisdom of Athena and the speed of Hermes,” Perseus said aloud, “I could find Medusa and save my mother!”

Athena had been waiting for this moment. Even she could not have asked for a better messenger, for Perseus was no mere mortal, but the son of Zeus. Athena smiled, knowing Medusa would soon meet her end.

In a brilliant golden light, Athena appeared with Hermes at her side. Perseus gasped in amazement and stood back.

“We have heard your words and will help you,” said Athena. “Come with us to the Gray Sisters. They alone can tell you the way to the gorgon Medusa.”
Athena and Hermes gently took hold of Perseus’ arm and flew on an airy path until they came to a small, desolate island. Perseus saw three wrinkled masses—graying creatures with drooping wings and horrid, sagging faces. In the middle of each one’s forehead was a sunken hole where an eye should have been.

“Between them they share one eye,” said Athena. “Take it from them and do not give it back until they answer you.”

“Who speaks?” asked the first Gray Sister. She pushed the eye into the hole in her forehead and let out a terrible screech.
“What is it?” asked the second Gray Sister. “Give me the eye. I want to see.”

The minute the first sister removed the eye from her forehead and held it out for the second sister, Perseus rushed up and grabbed it.

“I’ve got your eye and will not give it back until you tell me the way to the cave of the gorgon Medusa.” said Perseus.

The Gray Sisters howled and wailed and gnashed their teeth. Their scraggly arms flailed out, trying to find the thief. But Perseus held on to the eye.

“All right,” snarled the third sister. “You must first go beyond the grass-green sea to the isle of the North. There the nymphs of the winds will give you what you need to find Medusa’s cave. Now give us our eye!”
As soon as Perseus dropped the eye into the clutching hands of the Gray Sisters, Athena and Hermes whisked him high above the sea. Soon they stopped on a beautiful windswept island. All of a sudden Perseus heard three sweet-toned voices, softer than a songbird’s, and he felt nimble fingers like gentle gusts of wind encircling him. He watched as invisible hands strapped winged golden sandals to his feet, placed a leather pouch on his arm, and pressed a Cap of Darkness into his hands.

“Quickly,” whispered the nymphs, “go to the Isle of the Hyperboreans. There you will find the gorgon’s cave.” Airy fingertips pointed past the horizon, and the voices faded into the evening mists.
Once more Perseus flew with the gods to the Isle of the Hyperboreans, but now it was his own golden sandals that carried him. He stood with Athena and Hermes on a rocky cliff rising beneath the mouth of a dark cave.

"Remember," Athena warned, "never look upon Medusa's face, lest your eyes meet and you turn into stone! Gaze instead at her reflection in this." And she pushed her own shield onto Perseus' arm.

"And take my sword," said Hermes. "It will fly at your command. Now go!"

Perseus put the Cap of Darkness on his head and became invisible. Slowly he entered the cave. The air was full of whispers and the smell of death. Perseus raised the shield and held it at an angle. There was Medusa, sleeping. For an instant her face seemed beautiful to Perseus. But the snakes on her head twisted hideously around each other, their sharp, black tongues darting in and out of the slits of their mouths.
As Perseus raised his sword, Medusa awoke. Her eyes opened wide. Every snake on her head coiled back, ready to strike. Perseus’ hand began to shake as he stared at Medusa’s reflection. Never had he seen such a horror: all scales and veins, covered with slime from the floor of the cave. Suddenly, the Cap of Darkness slipped from his head. He was in full view!

Medusa’s face darkened with anger. Her eyelids flushed crimson. Her tongue licked at the rancid air as she rose up in front of the shield.

“Athena!” Medusa hissed. “I see your messenger hiding behind your shield. Kill me if you can!” And she lunged forward.

“Sword of Hermes!” shouted Perseus. “For my mother’s life and mine, help me now!” Instantly, the sword came down. Like a silver beam, it sliced the air, and when its tip hit the ground, Medusa’s head lay at Perseus’ feet.
With Medusa's head safely tucked into the leather pouch, Perseus flew toward the palace of Polydectes. The sun was rising, and Perseus feared he was too late. But as he alighted, he saw Danae kneeling at Polydectes' feet, shielding her face. The tyrant clutched a dagger over her head.

"Stop!" Perseus yelled. "I have the gift you sent me for!"

Polydectes stopped and frowned. "I am not such a fool to believe that you have the gorgon's head. No one has ever seen Medusa and survived. Show me what you hide in that pouch. For all I know it is nothing more than a giant snake!"

"You have asked for it, and have it you will," cried Perseus. "Mother! Cover your eyes!"

Perseus opened the pouch and pulled out the head of Medusa. Polydectes and his soldiers shrank back in horror. But it was too late. Even in death, Medusa's gaze turned them into stone. Perseus quickly thrust the head back into the pouch and tied it up.

Perseus embraced his mother, and together they wept for joy.
Since that day, the old and wise fisherman ruled the island, where Danae lived a long and happy life. Perseus, a hero, traveled the world in search of adventure. And Athena, her anger spent, took the pouch and threw it into the ocean. When Medusa’s head fell onto the bottom of the sea, her blood streamed out across the salty depths, and wherever it trickled, the blood turned to bright-red coral, from sea to sea and ocean to ocean. And, from that day to this, the red coral glimmers in the darkest, most frightening parts of the underwater world—all that is left of the blood of Medusa.
A popular story told by ancient Greeks and Romans was about a monster named Medusa (mih-DOO-suh). Medusa lived in faraway Okeanos. She was very ugly and had snakes for hair. Medusa also had a terrible power. Anyone who looked at her turned to stone.

Ancient Greeks and Romans believed that gods controlled their lives. Many stories said the gods punished people who made them angry. Medusa had not always been a monster. She once was a beautiful woman, but then she angered the goddess Athena (uh-THEE-nuh). Athena turned Medusa into a monster.

In stories, the gods helped heroes kill monsters. The Greek hero Perseus (PUR-see-uhss) was sent on a quest to kill Medusa. The gods Athena and Hermes (HUR-meez) gave Perseus gifts to help him. But Perseus still needed to find a way to kill Medusa without being turned to stone.
The monsters Keto (KEE-toh) and Phorcys (FOR-siss) were Medusa’s parents. Medusa had monstrous sisters named Stheno (STHEE-noh) and Euryale (yoo-RYE-uh-lee). Stheno and Euryale could not be killed. They were immortal. Medusa was mortal, unlike her sisters. She could die. Medusa and her sisters were known as the Gorgons.

Medusa was very beautiful. Many men wanted to marry her. One day, the sea god Poseidon (poh-SYE-don) saw Medusa and fell in love with her. Medusa met Poseidon in one of Athena’s temples. Medusa became pregnant with Poseidon’s children.

Athena was angry that Poseidon and Medusa had met in her temple. Athena could not harm Poseidon. He was too strong. Instead, she punished Medusa. Athena changed Medusa into a monster. Medusa grew big tusks like a boar. Scales covered her skin. Medusa’s hair changed into snakes. Medusa became so ugly that anyone who looked at her turned to stone.
The gods Athena and Hermes gave Perseus items to help him kill Medusa. Hermes gave Perseus a strong sword. Athena gave him a bronze shield. Athena also told Perseus not to look directly at Medusa. If he did, he would be turned to stone.

Using the winged sandals, Perseus flew to Okeanos. There, he found the three Gorgons sleeping. Perseus quietly sneaked up on Medusa. He used his shield like a mirror to see where she was. He could look at Medusa’s reflection in the shield without being turned to stone. Then with one swipe of his sword, Perseus cut off Medusa’s head.

Medusa’s sisters heard Perseus and woke up. Perseus put Medusa’s head in the magic bag. He used the winged sandals to fly away.

Many strange things happened after Medusa died. At the time of her death, Medusa was pregnant with Poseidon’s children. When Perseus cut Medusa’s head off, her full-grown children leaped from her body. Chrysaor (KRIS-ay-or) was a powerful giant. Pegasus (PEG-uh-suhss) was a winged horse.

On his way home, Perseus flew over the deserts of northern Africa. Drops of blood fell from Medusa’s head. The blood mixed with sand and turned into different kinds of snakes. Ancient Greeks used this story to explain why Africa’s deserts are filled with snakes.

For ancient Greeks and Romans, the image of Medusa was a symbol of protection. People placed her image on armor and shields. They believed that it would scare away enemies and protect them in battle.

People still use Medusa’s name and image. Scientists named a type of jellyfish after her. The medusa jellyfish is round with large tentacles sticking out from its body. People think the jellyfish looks like Medusa’s head floating in the water.

One of the first floorless roller coasters is named Medusa. Riders travel through many twists and turns at about 60 miles (100 kilometers) an hour. The roller coaster is named Medusa because it scares almost everyone who rides it.

Today, people no longer believe that Greek and Roman myths are true. But people still enjoy them. Myths are exciting stories about heroes and monsters. Myths also teach people about the beliefs of ancient cultures.
A Monster Too Ugly to Look At

Being female and having a woman's face, the Sphinx had something in common with another mythical monster—Medusa. According to Greek legend, Medusa was one of three sisters called the Gorgons. They were the daughters of two sea creatures, Phorcys and Ceto, who themselves had been conceived by Gaea, the primitive spirit inhabiting Earth. The other two Gorgons were Stheno and Euryale.

A number of ancient accounts said that Medusa was originally a beautiful young woman. That beauty attracted the attention of Poseidon, god of the seas. One day the two made love in one of the temples dedicated to the goddess of wisdom, Athena. She caught them in the act and was enraged. To punish Medusa, the goddess turned her into a gross, misshapen being with a mass of squirming snakes in place of her hair. Moreover, if a person looked directly at the Gorgon's face, he or she turned to stone in mere seconds.

In a sense, therefore, Medusa became a monster too ugly to look at.

Eventually Medusa came to live, along with her sisters—who were unaffected by gazing at her—on a remote island. Over the years travelers landed on the island by accident or to search for food. All of them made the mistake of looking at the snake-haired creature that dwelled there. So they became statuelike pillars frozen forever in various poses.
The Invisible Intruder

The day finally came, however, when a man landed on the Gorgons' island and managed to survive. Named Perseus, he had been sent by Polydeuces, king of the Aegean island of Seriphos, to kill Medusa. The young man had several advantages during his quest. First, Hermes, the messenger god, guided him to the island. According to the ancient Roman poet and storyteller Ovid, Perseus traveled through thick-bearded forests, and tearing rocks and stones, until he found the Gorgons' home. And as he looked about from left to right, no matter where he turned, he saw both man and beast turned into stone, all creatures who had seen Medusa's face.

Perseus' second advantage was a highly polished metal shield given to him by Athena, goddess of war. Other gifts he'd recently received included a pair of winged sandals that enabled him to fly and a cap that made anyone who wore it invisible. With these objects, Perseus set out to confront Medusa.

Soon the young man found his prey sleeping on a big rock. Careful not to look directly at Medusa's face, he gazed at her reflection in the mirrorlike shield. Suddenly the hideous monster woke up. She could sense that an intruder was near, but could not see Perseus thanks to his cap of invisibility. His winged sandals allowed him to circle the Gorgon from above. Tightly gripping his sharpened sword, he dived at her at just the right moment. A swift slash of the sword severed the snake-haired head from Medusa's body. While her body spurted blood and collapsed in a heap, Perseus swooped sideways and caught her head in a sack.

Birth of Pegasus

Having successfully completed his mission, Perseus flew away, making sure not to peek at the sack's deadly contents. At the last moment, though, he looked back at the blood-soaked body on the rock. To the young man's astonishment, something was flying its way out of the corpse. While Perseus watched in awe, a magnificent winged horse rose. It glanced around to get its first glimpse of the world. Then the stunning creature, which would come to be known as Pegasus, briefly tested its wings and gracefully fluttered away. As Perseus departed in the other direction, he was struck by an important realization. Even a being as monstrous and lethal as Medusa could harbor deep inside it an element of wondrous beauty.
THE GORGONS

Monstrous sisters with wings, claws, and serpent hair, the most famous being Medusa.

Of these monstrous sisters, Euryale (Wide-roaming) and Stheno (Strong) were immortal, but Medusa (Ruler) was mortal. All three were so hideous that a mere glance at one of them could turn a person into stone.

It is in the story of Perseus that Medusa reared her ugly head. This son of Danae and Zeus had been adopted by King Polydectes after the boy and his mother were washed onto his island. Now, the king had designs to marry Danae against her will. Perseus offered to win whatever gift the bridegroom desired, even the head of Medusa if he so wished, as long as Polydectes married Hippodameia, his official bride, and not Danae. Polydectes accepted this rash gesture, and asked Perseus to bring back Medusa's head—a seemingly impossible task.

The goddess Athena overheard the conversation and, as an enemy of the Gorgons, she offered to help Perseus in his mission. She took him to the island of Samos where all three Gorgons could be seen in pictorial form, so that he could tell Medusa apart from her immortal sisters. Athena warned Perseus not to set eyes directly on Medusa or he would be turned to stone. To aid him in his mission, she gave him a highly polished shield.

The winged god Hermes, patron of travelers, lent Perseus a sickle with which to cut off the Gorgon's head. Well-prepared for the task, he set off for the western land of the Hyperboreans where the Gorgons dwelt. Perseus approached stealthily as the monstrous sisters slept among their victims—men and beasts who had been petrified. Looking only at the image of Medusa reflected in his shield, Perseus raised his sickle and with one blow sliced off her head. As her sisters stirred, Perseus quickly hid the head with its serpent hair in a wallet and took flight with the aid of winged sandals lent to him by nymphs. The speed and nimbleness of the sandals enabled Perseus to outstrip the enraged pursuing Gorgons. As Perseus flew over the desert, some drops of Medusa's blood fell onto the sand, and swarms of poisonous snakes emerged.

MEDUSA SLAIN
The head of Medusa, with snakes for hair.