**Perseus and Medusa**

Perseus was the son of Jupiter and Danae. His grandfather Acrisius, alarmed by an oracle which had told him that his daughter's child would be the instrument of his death, caused the mother and child to be shut up in a chest and set adrift on the sea. The chest floated towards Seriphus, where it was found by a fisherman who conveyed the mother and infant to Polydectes, the king of the country, by whom they were treated with kindness. When Perseus was grown up Polydectes sent him to attempt the conquest of Medusa, a terrible monster who had laid waste the country. She was once a beautiful maiden whose hair was her chief glory but as she dared to vie in beauty with Minerva, the goddess deprived her of her charms and changed her beautiful ringlets into hissing serpents. She became a cruel monster of so frightful an aspect that no living thing could behold her without being turned into stone. All around the cavern where she dwelt might be seen the stony figures of men and animals which had chanced to catch a glimpse of her and had been petrified with the sight. Perseus, favoured by Minerva and Mercury, the former of whom lent him her shield and the latter his winged shoes, approached Medusa while she slept and taking care not to look directly at her, but guided by her image reflected in the bright shield which he bore, he cut off her head and gave it to Minerva, who fixed it in the middle of her AEgis.

After the slaughter of Medusa, Perseus, bearing with him the head of the Gorgon, flew far and wide, over land and sea. As night came on, he reached the western limit of the earth, where the sun goes down. Here he would gladly have rested till morning. It was the realm of King Atlas, whose bulk surpassed that of all other men. He was rich iii flocks and herds and had no neighbour or rival to dispute his state. But his chief pride was in his gardens whose fruit was of gold, hanging from golden branches, half hid with golden leaves. Perseus said to him, "I come as a guest. If you honour illustrious descent, I claim Jupiter for my father; if mighty deeds, I plead the conquest of the Gorgon. I seek rest and food." But Atlas remembered that an ancient prophecy had warned him that a son of Jove should one day rob him of His golden apples. So he answered, "Begone! or neither your false claims of glory nor parentage shall protect you;" and he attempted to thrust him out. Perseus, finding the giant too strong for him, said, "Since you value my friendship so little, deign to accept a present;" and turning his face away, he held up the Gorgon's head. Atlas, with all his bulk, was changed into stone. His beard and hair became forests, his arms and shoulders cliffs, his head a summit, and his bones rocks. Each part increased in bulk till be became a mountain, and (such was the pleasure of the gods) heaven with all its stars rests upon his shoulders.

Then Perseus returned to Seriphus to King Polydectes and to his mother Danae and the fisherman Dicte. He marched up the tyrant's hall, where Polydectes and his guests were feasting. "Have you the head of Medusa?" exclaimed Polydectes. "Here it is," answered Perseus, and showed it to the king and to his guests.

# Perseus and Medusa Study Questions

Bring on the tough stuff - there’s not just one right answer.

1. Why does Perseus have to go on a quest for Medusa's head?
2. What happens to people unlucky enough to look Medusa in the eyes?
3. Do you feel bad for Medusa? Why or why not?
4. How does Perseus get the Graeae to tell him the location of the Nymphai?
5. What magical artifacts do the Nymphai give to Perseus to help him complete his quest?
6. What are the properties of each artifact?
7. Is it right for Perseus to kill Medusa? Why, or why not?
8. Which of Perseus' qualities are heroic? Does he have any un-heroic qualities?
9. Watch either the 1981 or 2010 version of Clash of the Titans. Compare and contrast the Hollywood films to the original myth.
10. Research the myths surrounding other famous Greek heroes like [Odysseus](http://www.shmoop.com/odyssey/odysseus.html), [Theseus](http://www.shmoop.com/theseus/), or [Heracles](http://www.shmoop.com/heracles-hercules/). Compare and contrast these figures to Perseus.
11. Pick a modern superhero or action star and compare him or her to Perseus. How are our modern heroes similar or different from the ancient Greek ones? What qualities do we admire in heroes? What qualities did the ancients admire?

# Theme of Women and Femininity in Perseus and Medusa

The issue of women and femininity in Perseus' stories are kind of problematic. As we see it, women are either beautiful and helpless damsels in distress (Danae, Andromeda) or ugly monsters (the Gorgons, the Graeae). Perseus saves the damsels and defeats the monsters either through might (Medusa) or clever tricks (other Gorgons, icky sisters). In other words, in this myth, we don't see any strong female characters – at least not any that survive.

## Questions About Women and Femininity

1. Why do you think we don't see any strong female characters in this story? How might this story reflect the role of women in ancient Greek society?
2. Many feminists have taken on Medusa as a symbol. Why do you think that is? What about Medusa is appealing?
3. Does Athena offer a strong female presence in the story, or is she too minor of a character?
4. How did you feel about Perseus' treatment of the female "monsters" in this story?
5. Is it significant that Medusa doesn't get a chance to fight Perseus?

# Perseus and Andromeda

Perseus, continuing his flight, arrived at the country of the AEthiopians, of which Cepheus was king. Cassiopeia, his queen, proud of her beauty, had dared to compare herself to the Sea- Nymphs, which roused their indignation to such a degree that they sent a prodigious sea-monster to ravage the coast. To appease the deities, Cepheus was directed by the oracle to expose his daughter Andromeda to be devoured by the monster. As Perseus looked down from his aerial height he beheld the virgin chained to a rock, and waiting the approach of the serpent. She was so pale and motionless that if it had not been for her flowing tears and her hair that moved in the breeze, he would have taken her for a marble statue. He was so startled at the sight that he almost forgot to wave his wings. As he hovered over her he said, "O virgin, undeserving of those chains, but rather of such as bind fond lovers together, tell me, I beseech you, your name and the name of your country, and why you are thus bound." At first she was silent from modesty, and, if she could, would have hid her face with her hands; but when he repeated his questions, for fear she might be thought guilty of some fault which she dared not tell, she disclosed her name and that of her country, and her mother's pride of beauty. Before she had done speaking, a sound was heard off upon the water, and the sea-monster appeared, with his head raised above the surface, cleaving the waves with his broad breast. The virgin shrieked, the father and mother who had now arrived at the scene, wretched both, but the mother more justly so, stood by, not able to afford protection, but only to pour forth lamentations and to embrace the victim. Then spoke Perseus: "There will be time enough for tears; this hour is all we have for rescue. My rank as the son of Jove and my renown as the slayer of the Gorgon might make me acceptable as a suitor; but I will try to win her by services rendered, if the gods will only be propitious. If she be rescued by my valor, I demand that she be my reward." The parents consent (how could they hesitate?) And promise a royal dowry with her.

And now the monster was within the range of a stone thrown by a skilful slinger, when with a sudden bound the youth soared into the air. As an eagle, when from his lofty flight he sees a serpent basking in the sun, pounces upon him and seizes him by the neck to prevent him from turning his head round and using his fangs, so the youth darted down upon the back of the monster and plunged his sword into its shoulder. Irritated by the wound the monster raised himself into the air, then plunged into the depth; then, like a wild boar surrounded by a pack of barking dogs, turned swiftly from side to side, while the youth eluded its attacks by means of his wings. Wherever he can find a passage for his sword between the scales he makes a wound, piercing now the side, now the flank, as it slopes towards the tail. The brute spouts from his nostrils water mixed with blood. The wings of the hero are wet with it, and he dares no longer trust to them. Alighting on a rock which rose above the waves, and holding on by a projecting fragment, as the monster floated near he gave him a death-stroke. The people who had gathered on the shore shouted so that the hills re-echoed to the sound. The parents, transported with joy, embraced their future son-in-law, calling him their deliverer and the savior of their house, and the virgin, both cause and reward of the contest, descended from the rock.

The joyful parents, with Perseus and Andromeda, repaired to the palace, where a banquet was spread for them, and all was joy and festivity. But suddenly a noise was heard of war-like clamor, and Phineus, the betrothed of the virgin, with a party of his adherents, burst in, demanding the maiden as his own. It was in vain that Cepheus remonstrated, "You should have claimed her when she lay bound to the rock, the monster's victim. The sentence of the gods dooming her to such a fate dissolved all engagements, as death itself would have done." Phineus made no reply, but hurled his javelin at Perseus, but it missed its mark and fell harmless. Perseus would have thrown his in turn, but the cowardly assailant ran and took shelter behind the altar. But his act was a signal for an onset by his band upon the guests of Cepheus. They defended themselves and a general conflict ensued, the old king retreating from the scene after fruitless expostulations, calling the gods to witness that he was guiltless of this outrage on the rights of hospitality.

Perseus and his friends maintained for some time the unequal contest; but the numbers of the assailants were too great for them, and destruction seemed inevitable, when a sudden thought struck Perseus: "I will make my enemy defend me." Then, with a loud voice he exclaimed, :If I have any friend here let him turn away his eyes!" and held aloft the Gorgon's head. "Seek not to frighten us with your jugglery," said Thescelus, and raised his javelin in act to throw, and became stone in the very attitude. Ampyx was about to plunge his sword into the body of a prostrate foe, but his arm stiffened and he could neither thrust forward nor withdraw it. Another, in the midst of a vociferous challenge, stopped, his mouth open, but no sound issuing. One of Perseus's friends, Aconteus, caught sight of the Gorgon and stiffened like the rest. Astyages struck him with his sword, but instead of wounding, it recoiled with a ringing noise.

Phineus beheld this dreadful result of his unjust aggression, and felt confounded. He called aloud to his friends, but got no answer; he touched them and found them stone. Falling on his knees and stretching out his hands to Perseus, but turning his head away, he begged for mercy. "Take all," said he, "give me but my life." "Base coward," said Perseus, "thus much I will grant you; no weapon shall touch you; moreover you shall be preserved in my house as a memorial of these events." So saying, he held the Gorgon's head to the side where Phineus was looking, and in the very form in which he knelt, with his hands outstretched and face averted, he became fixed immovably, a mass of stone!

**Questions to Perseus and Andromeda**

1. What can this story tell us about the role of women in the ancient world?
2. What is created when Medusa's blood touches the seaweed?
3. How does Perseus do away with Phineus, Andromeda's angry uncle/fiancé? Was Perseus being fair?
4. Compare and contrast Andromeda with a modern damsel in distress, like Superman's girl, Lois Lane, and Spiderman's girl, Mary Jane.

# Theme of Love in Perseus and Andromeda

Superman has Lois Lane, Spiderman has Mary Jane, Mario has Princess Peach, and Perseus has Princess Andromeda. Like pretty much every hero ever, Perseus has a ladylove who he's willing to face down any villain for. No adventure story is complete without a little romance thrown in, and the episode of Perseus and Andromeda is one of the most famous love affairs of all time, a classic story of love at first sight. This story also brings in questions of familial love, when King Cepheus decides to sacrifice his daughter in order to save his kingdom.

## Questions About Love

1. What is it about Andromeda that attracts Perseus?
2. Do you believe in love at first sight? Why, or why not?
3. Compare and contrast the tale of Perseus and Andromeda to a "damsel in distress" story from a recent movie.
4. Do we get any hints about whether Andromeda loves Perseus?