Medusa petrifies (petrificare<petra=rock). Her face turned the ancients to stone. For Dante she was the erotic power that could destroy men. Freud saw in her hair a nest of terrifying penises signaling castration. For Perseus and his patriarchal culture she was a dangerous female monster to be destroyed. So he cut her head off. Yet in our time Medusa has recouped some of her power. Feminists see her as a noble victim of the patriarchy. The designer Versace celebrates the lure of her mysterious face in a logo which stares at us from his ads for men’s underwear, haute couture and exotic dinner ware. She is even on the menu of a Disney resort as a Medusa sushi roll. In our mercantile culture she is once again a power player demanding to be recognized. Medusa still transfixes us. She is an icon.

THE MYTH

This is the Greek myth told in various parts by Homer, Hesiod, Appollodorus, Ovid, and others:

[OUTLINE]

King Akrisios in Argos —oracle—child born of Daughter Danae will kill him.
Akrisios locks up Danae—Zeus intrudes in shower of gold>Perseus—son of God
Akrisios abandons mother and child in ark.
Ark floats to Seriphos—rescue by fisherman Diktys—child raised by Diktys’ brother Ploydektes. Perseus grows up.
Perseus and Polydektes become enemies when Polydektes tries to marry Perseus’s reluctant mother, Danae. He Pretends to be marrying another--followers promise horses as gifts—Perseus in defiance out of the blue promises Medusa’s head.
Everyone knew about Medusa—one of Gorgons—face>people turn to stone
Grand daughter of Gaia—member of OLD royal family of Gods
Hated by Athene—why?—she slept with Poseidon in Athene’s temple—according to Ovid actually raped by Poseidon.
Also hated because of Medusa’s boast of superior beauty.
Athena’s first revenge—changes Medusa’s looks>monster—DESCRIBE
Second revenge—aids Perseus in killing of M.
Athena and Hermes tell Perseus he needs kibisis, hat of Hades, winged sandals from Stygian nymphs.
BUT Only Graiae know where they are—DESCRIBE Graiae—sisters of Gorgons—eye and tooth.
Perseus steals eye>Graiae tell him where nymphs are—Perseus gets the three objects
The decapitation of Medusa with Athene’s help.
Returns home via island of Andromeda and Seriphos—rescues Mother, marries Andromeda, turns evil ones into stone with Medusa’s head.
Kills grandfather in Argos by mistake thus fulfilling oracle’s prophecy.
This story is obviously what we would call a myth.

**WHAT IS A MYTH?**

In common usage it is false belief or tradition. We might say, for instance, that it is probably a myth that George Washington never told a lie or that all women are intuitive while all men are not.

More important, a myth is a traditional story of one culture that other cultures consider to be untrue or mere fantasy. In short, stories we call myths describe events that are outside of human experience and therefore untrue, even though they are accepted by the cultures that developed them as in some sense true. For example:

**THE PERSEPHONE STORY**

But even if we think such stories are literally untrue we are fascinated by them and suspect that there must be some truth somewhere in them. So we see the Persephone myth as on one level a metaphor to illustrate the change in seasons, and on a deeper level as a still truer metaphor about the relationship between mothers and daughters and the trauma that results from a combination of the loss of innocence and the diminishing of a mother’s role by the demands and attractions of erotic attachments.

Myths, then are narratives that various cultures use to try to express our relationship with the world around us and beyond our understanding. Humans have to tell stories, even outlandish ones like myths—it’s what distinguishes us from other species. You might say we tell stories to make creation conscious of itself.

Myths are our most basic stories. They are part of our belief systems. Myths as opposed to other kinds of stories are like dreams. Strange things happen in them for no apparent reason; the boundaries of reality are ignored. Just as we dream, cultures dream. Myths are cultural dreams.

Cultural dreams like individual dreams call for interpretation and analysis—even psychological interpretation.

Many would say that when we interpret myths or dreams two levels of approach emerge. If a psychoanalyst interprets your dreams she will very possibly look at the dreams both as a reflection of personal situations and as a reflection of larger human situations. The same is true of the interpretation of myths. We see myths as a reflection of particular cultural experiences and understandings and as a reflection of the more universal human experience.

So for example, the Persephone myth reflects the role of women in patriarchal Greece but it also reflects the human experience of mother-daughter relationships, the loss of innocence, and the sense of loss that can occur when a daughter leaves home for another kind of relationship.
We begin with a cultural interpretation. How is the myth a reflection of Greek culture from the archaic through the classical period. This was a period in which the warrior culture of the patriarchy achieved dominance over the old agriculturally-centered culture where women were more important. Note that Medusa is female and is a member of the old divine family that preceded the Olympians in Greek mythology. The old family was founded by the great mother goddess Gaia, Medusa’s grandmother. The new family is headed by Zeus, Perseus’s father. The old family was matriarchal and earth-centered. The new family is patriarchal and sky-centered. The rape of Medusa, by Poseidon, her being turned into a monster by Athene, and her being killed by Perseus—reflects the overpowering of the old culture by patriarchal values and force and a diminishing of female power in the culture. True, Athene guides Perseus and is, of course, female, but she is a virgin-warrior goddess born from Zeus’s head, personifying wisdom—Zeus’s wisdom. Perseus is the patriarchal hero committing an act in the interest of the patriarchal culture. The same kind of conflict had already taken place in Mesopotamia, where the new Babylonian patriarchal hero Marduk defeated the old female monster Tiamat, who had once been a creator of the old goddess dominated divine family of Sumer.

We can turn now to the more universal meaning of the Medusa myth. The myth finally centers more on Perseus than on Medusa—Perseus is a patriarchal hero and is, as such, a member of a large universal family of heroes. His life is a series of events that identify him as an almost ritual hero living a proscribed life. Like so many others--Jesus, Buddha, King Arthur, Quetzalcoatl—he is miraculously conceived. After he is born his life is threatened by wicked kings representing resistance to his role as a world-changing hero. In the same way Herod threatens the baby Jesus, Set in Egypt threatens the baby Horus, the son of Isis and Osiris.). Like Jesus, Horus, Siegfried, Moses and so many others, Perseus—is hidden. The next and most important stage in the hero’s life is his quest. The goal of the hero quest can be any number of things—the Golden Fleece, the Holy Grail, the gold at the end of the rainbow. Medusa’s head is Perseus’s goal. To attain his goal Perseus, like so many others—Odysseus, Herakles, Jesus, Osiris, Inanna—must descend to a dark world of monsters and death where he must struggle with his nemesis--the Devil, death itself, in this case Medusa). With the help of divine power, the hero overcomes his enemy. Perseus decapitates Medusa and returns newly invested with the power of his achieved goal—in this case the head of Medusa. Upon his return to his own world he can use that power for good. Perseus uses it to defeat the wicked kings, the old status quo.

The approach to Medusa begins to change in Medieval period in Europe. First of all, she begins to become beautiful again—she becomes dangerously beautiful. She becomes a universal figure who attempts to dissuade the manly hero from his assigned task. She becomes the femme fatale, the woman as dangerous temptress—a new kind of monster to threaten manliness. For the Italian poet Petrarca—Petrarch—Medusa becomes a symbol of the power the beauty of his beloved Laura has over him.

For Dante Medusa represents erotic power.
Cesare Ripa the Perseus vs Medusa struggle represents the power of reason over the power of the senses.

In all of these interpretations the male Perseus represents reason being threatened by but ultimately defeating the power of female eroticism represented by Medusa the femme fatale who can otherwise immobilize men, metaphorically turning them into stone.

The femme fatale figure speaks, of course, to the all too universal desire of men to subjugate women.

IN THE ROMANTIC AGE

The beautiful Medusa still a femme fatale but also the romantic victim. Goethe’s Faust associates her with his beloved Gretchen. In Leonardo’s painting of Medusa the poet Shelley sees “the tempestuous loveliness of terror.”

In the AGE OF REALISM we see a further change in our Medusa icon. Marx borrows from the old vision of Medusa, seeing in her head the social evils that lie within the capitalist system—a femme fatale who threatens the worker. Philosophical Nietzsche –“sees Medusa’s head as symbol of the Apollonian guard against Dionysian excesses.

Jungian psychology saw Medusa as the “Terrible Mother” the dark side of the Great Mother, that side having necessary and positive powers, the power of death, for instance, that is necessary for the continuance of life, aspects represented in India, for example by the terrifying aspects of the great goddess known as Kali and Durga.

THE MODERN MEDUSA

In our era feminist theory has discovered Medusa. Hélène Cixous in “The Laugh of the Medusa”, for example sees in Medusa not the femme fatale or the romantic victim, but a prideful feminine laughter at men’s foolish demonization or subjective vision of women. For the feminist, Medusa is the symbol of the female fighting back, the beautiful and powerful woman who overcomes what Cixous calls the prevailing “phalologocentrism.”

Finally, there is the Medusa of the ad men - the powerful and beautiful Medusa who lures us into Versace’s dinner plates the way beautiful women in negligees entice us on television to by certain cars.

WHO IS MEDUSA? A PASYCHOLOGICAL VIEW —she attracts us because she is the goal of our psychological journey—our journey is Perseus’s and any hero’s journey. We are all miracles at birth and growing up requires avoiding the threats of those—represented by the wicked kings of the hero myth-- who would stunt our growth. A significant part of the hero’s and our life is to go on a quest—to confront the demons within. Hopefully, with the help of wisdom we descend into the depths of our unconscious to confront those demons—our Medusas. But there we don’t just kill the demon, we bring its power back into the world to serve us creatively. This is the role of Medusa’s head.
The decapitated but harnessed demon can become the source of our creativity and wholeness.