Cultural Reflections of Medusa

This project studies the patterns in which the Medusa myth shapes, constructs, and transforms new meanings of women today, correlating portrayals in ancient Greek myth, nineteenth-century Symbolist painting, and new, controversial, visions of women in contemporary art.

The myth of the Medusa has long been the ultimate symbol of woman as monster. With her roots in classical mythology, Medusa has appeared time and again throughout history and culture. Hedgecock presents an interdisciplinary and broad historical “cultural reflections” of the modern Medusa, including the work of Maria Callas, Nan Goldin, the Symbolist painters and twentieth-century poets.

This timely and necessary work will be key reading for students and researchers specializing in mythology or gender studies across a variety of fields, touching on interdisciplinary research in feminist theory, art history and theory, cultural studies, and psychology.

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Cultural Reflections of Medusa
The Shadow in the Glass
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Cultural Reflections of Medusa
The Shadow in the Glass

Jennifer Hedgecock
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Introduction

The shadow in the glass

Medusa of the Snakes
They used your name
to frighten us,
But you
don’t frighten me …
No more this lie
No more this fear.
You belong to us again.
We call your name
to aid us.
and you
Greet us anew.
Medusa! Medusa! Medusa!
(Forfreedom 72)

When I started writing the first draft of my book about Medusa, my friend, Kim, asked me about the subject. After I explained that it was a study of cultural and artistic representations of Medusa, I was not surprised that her immediate reaction was one of fear and repulsion, invoking stereotypes of the serpent-haired woman. Following that conversation a week later, my friend confided that she had nightmares about Medusa, of a snake escaping from the Gorgon’s hissing hair and making its way to her pillow. When I explained to my friend that Poseidon, the sea god, rapes Medusa followed by Athena’s curse that transforms Medusa’s beautiful hair into serpents and makes her face so frightening that men turn to stone by looking at her, my friend showed more sympathy than fright toward the Gorgon woman typecast as the mythical monster. By that time I was working on a more contemporary interpretation of the Medusean myth influenced by some of the major social movements reported in the news over the past few years, starting with sexual assault charges against Harvey Weinstein, sexual harassment accusations against a plethora of iconic men, the viral MeToo Movement, and later formal allegations of sexual assault and sexual harassment made by former doctoral student Nimrod Reitman against his advisor, feminist scholar Avital Ronell. Though I struggled with popular,
conventionalized yet inaccurate notions about the Gorgon woman expressed earlier by my friend, these twenty-first century upheavals concerning the abuse of corporate and academic power leading to the sexual exploitation of women and men helped form a new perspective of Medusa. In our current cultural climate where men and women are unabashedly speaking out on a global level against sexual harassment, I believe that revisiting the Medusa myth leads contemporary society out of these personifications representing the Gorgon as a victim of womanhood or as a predatory monster. Instead she symbolizes victims of abuse seeking justice and protecting themselves. In fact, the role Medusa plays today largely surpasses this view of the silent victim reimagined into a predatory stereotype. Medusa still transfixes our attention, haunts the imagination, but she represents to us something far different compared to other historical interpretations. Though that very image of the terrifying Gorgon has sustained itself throughout history and contemporary culture, for many other women she evolves into a symbol of strength, and for me, a woman encouraging independence among other repressed women. In this progression of women speaking up in public and telling the truth in courtrooms and televised press interviews, it is figuratively Medusa coaxing men and women of sexual assault to be freed from the trappings of the silent victim, by whispering, “don’t be afraid.”

When I consider contemporary ways in which women have attempted to gain power, share power, or at least refuse to be a victim to it, I am reminded of the story told by Emily Erwin Culpepper, Professor of religion. While writing her dissertation at night, Culpepper answered the door to a man who she believed was the friend of her neighbor. However, the stranger standing outside forced himself into her home with the intention of sexually assaulting her. Immediately, Culpepper’s reaction turned into physical rage, so intense that it scared off her assailant. When she caught a glimpse of her contorted face in the mirror, she did not recognize herself, thus naming her reflection as that “Gorgon spirit.” It was her Medusa face that scared away a dangerous threat and saved her in an emergency. Culpepper recognizes the “Gorgon / Medusa image” as “one face of [women’s] rage,” an expression that all women are capable of demonstrating (qtd. in Garber and Vickers 239). When I read her story, Culpepper’s words invigorated me, viscerally leaving me with the feeling that I was right there with her, fighting off a stranger who dared to trespass, to violate, and to demoralize. But what disturbed me was how Culpepper felt after her attacker was gone. It is an emotion familiar to many women in spite of saying no, standing up for themselves, or fighting back, and that is the feeling of guilt and shame.

According to a study conducted by Caroline Kelleher and Sinead McGilloway, researchers in the Department of Psychology at the National University of Ireland Maynooth, the feeling of guilt comes from a high degree of self-blame among victims of sexual violence. In The Politics of Rape, feminist sociologist Diana E. H. Russell studied the reaction among a number of rape victims who overall expressed guilt and responsibility rather than seeking revenge (265). In other words, these victims believe that the crime committed against them is
something that they could have prevented. Because the assault did happen, the victim believes it is his or her fault. In some cases the victim even tries to justify why this act of violence was carried out against them. Typically, victims also feel like they are not entitled to support or special services but instead should suffer alone and hide their secret. Being secretive is often caused by the stigma that goes along with rape since society often blames female victims. Such condemnation leads a rape victim into a cycle of guilt from which there is little escape when she believes that she has done something wrong. The victim even assumes that she has some kind of control over her situation. Shame leads to guilt, caused by a victim’s belief about the way in which society perceives her. Physical and sexual violence cause a woman to feel defenseless, and when she cannot fight back, she turns to self-hatred.

Culpepper admitted that she blamed herself for letting the man into her home. For other women who do report sexual assault, they often hold themselves responsible for being attacked. Though the attacker ran away before physically harming Culpepper, that feeling of guilt at the hint or aggression of physical violence is inevitable, left with the question: What could I have done differently? Even women who escape such an attack accuse themselves of “not thinking” or putting themselves in a dangerous situation. Having had a family member who was 14 years old when she was raped, I have observed that the cycle of shame runs so deep, that it can self-destruct into drugs and alcohol, a remedy powerful enough to end a person’s life. But I hate using words like “victim” or “rape casualty” to describe women who suffer these outcomes. I especially dislike the idea of identifying my family member as a victim, another casualty of rape, a statistic. Instead, her story is one that echoes and melds together with the voices of other ghosts, women who quietly suffer a similar fate, of women who may have gone on with their lives as if it were a dream, or a nightmare from which they awaken, and start the new day ahead. There might be a much better word in place of “casualty” or “victim” to define a woman or man defenseless against sexual assault or harassment. These terms are redundant and allude to the powerlessness of someone who has endured physical violence. The meaning of these words repeat the violent act committed against them. Such terminology also threatens a person’s identity, even destroying it. But then again destruction brings attention to the weaknesses of old identities, and this recognition can lead to something positive, forcing one to make a clean break from the old self that can no longer function or work productively. The old path heading towards a dead end must welcome something life-affirming. This requires creating a new identity that more readily can adjust to changes that we experience and to a future that will be different from the one we expected. Women who have experienced trauma cannot help themselves within the tight restrictions of an old selfhood. The attempt to do so ignores the reality of their situation. A more evolved selfhood relies on new resources and skills that are not restricted to surviving a traumatic experience, but rather strive for self-acceptance. To transform and to adapt are the new demands that one must face. It also means that a new, emerging identity will be less conformist to the rules of convention.
A genuinely changing selfhood is at odds with patriarchal stereotypes. Women in this case must cross that threshold out of the darkness of silence and into the light of speech. A woman cannot be defined by the crime committed against her. This action shatters the simple worldview of a “victim” or “casualty” of sexual violence when a woman uses her voice, her own Medusa face, by conjuring up her Gorgon spirit. Though Medusa’s anger has often been interpreted as destructive—namely by her deadly gaze—this is a narrow perspective. Her name has an alternative meaning that translates into fertility and renewal, an emblematic figure of mother earth.

Reading about Culpepper’s experience caused me to wonder about women and their face that they use in certain situations. Here’s the problem that I see: today it is very common that women take self-defense classes, they run marathons, they hike, they race down rough terrain on mountain bikes, they snowboard, and they surf. They compete in Iron Man events, participate in triathlons. For months I took kickboxing, not only to gain upper body strength, but to feel good, to experience relief from the rest of the world, to yell, kick, and punch. But those athletic lifestyle activities pursued by women do not change the world in which we live. Women are still taught, encouraged, and rewarded for being submissive and accommodating. This training in obedience is a lifelong conditioning where women are expected to put their guard down, or to just put up with it all; it ultimately keeps women from learning how to defend themselves against physical attacks, or reprimands, denunciations meant to limit women’s power. On the contrary, that raw edge, that self-assertiveness, the yell, the ferocity of a woman’s spirit can be identified with that snake-haired Gorgon woman, that other Self that is in fact staring back at women as an ally looking after them.

Our culture has often defined women as being secretive and manipulative when they are confronted with danger, their face and body easily objectified. But contemporary cultural feminists observe that society has forced women into this situation. Over time, what I observe is that women are responding by finding constructive means to overcome repression and even abuse, by building a strong female community. That sense of female community has become more important than ever. In her lecture dating back to 1970, feminist activist, Ann Herschfang (a.k.a. Ann Forfreedom), declares that “women as a group have never made it, but individual women have seemed to make it, especially in the United States, the richest country in the world” (“Making It and Not Making It,” Episode 3). In a lecture on June 14, 1970, Forfreedom proposed that marriage is one of the means by which a woman can make it, but from a postmodern perspective, this example of achieving power is too conventionalized, an outdated belief where power and identity can only be achieved by a woman’s dependence on another man. An alternative to marriage, according to Forfreedom, is women “making it” as a mistress, instead of a wife, but still relying on a man of power or wealth to achieve this position. Then there are women of power who teach other women how to be exploited by men. While Forfreedom discussed these issues at least four decades ago, a lot
has changed for women. But it has only been in the past few years that sexual harassment occurring in industries where such scandals are usually kept quiet, forced exploited women in powerful positions to start organizing themselves in a global effort to stop sexual violence. Women are coming together as a unified front which seems to be a possibility affecting the way women respond in relation to their own power. But I am skeptical that it will last, and I certainly do not believe that this unified voice speaks for lower income or minority women otherwise marginalized from white, middle-class, college-educated women. This recent effort is not to deny recognition of women from the past who have made the same sacrifices to generate better rights for women. It has certainly led to lawmaking changes such as the 2018–2019 ban on nondisclosure agreements in Washington, Massachusetts, Tennessee, Maryland, and Vermont. Senator Diana DiZoglio who proposed the amendment in Massachusetts, stated that banning nondisclosure agreements “sends a clear message to our communities that we are not nor will we be in the business of silencing victims or covering up misdeeds under any circumstance using public funds.”

Primarily in the workforce, sexual harassment is still secretive, and shameful behavior among sexual predators is oftentimes silenced in the form of money or some other enticement such as job promotions. Given the status of new non-disclosure laws, this appears to be changing. While, previously, women facing challenging situations felt pressured to give in to sexual advances, or try to ignore them, they are now confronting the situation by seeking justice, emerging from the rubble of the past. The #MeToo movement does prove that women must learn to rely on each other and fight on each other’s behalf. The Medusa figure manifests as this unified symbol of strength, a revisionist image signifying this shift that shouts out loud rather than turning against one’s self, paralyzed in silence. Here I want to clarify how I am using the term “revision,” which is not to revise her story or change what she is. When I think of Medusa, I consider how much the ideas attached to her have evolved. These ideas have largely been expressed in art and poetry over the centuries from the time Homer writes about “the terrible monstrous, Gorgon head, a thing of awe and terror” in *The Iliad* (113), compared to May Sarton who identifies with Medusa: “I turn your face around! It is my face” (line 25). My use of the term “revise” is not to amend, to correct, or to alter the Gorgon woman. Instead it is to show how the story develops over the centuries, to reexamine Medusa, to rethink. In *Nan Goldin The Mirror Medusa*, Martine Delvaux confirms that Medusa is “reborn” into a Lilith, Eve, and Salome (13). She is creative, independent, free spirited, and dangerous. She is a goddess, a queen, a fearsome warrior. As we progress further into the twenty-first century, the Gorgon spirit is crucial to this new perspective of female autonomy, a thriving force of possibility for women as they continue moving forward in the twenty-first century.

Though today women still experience the indignation of patriarchal oppression on a socio-economic level, they also continue to be confronted with physical violence. Yet the mythical visage of Medusa is emblematic of women summoning their Gorgon spirit against a dangerous threat. Instead of being put
in such a position, exhaustively staving off a threat, women have more time for their own quiet contemplation and applying themselves to their own work. This was the central issue addressed by Culpepper, that her work on her doctoral dissertation is violently and dismissively interrupted by her attacker. One’s private domain is especially meant to be used for contemplative work. Pursuing academic work has previously been regarded as entering into male-dominated territory, by carving out time and seeking out undisturbed property, a room of one’s own, to think and to write. For decades now women are declaring the right to their own private room to do exactly the same. Culpepper’s attack while working suggests that women still do not have a right to their own property where serious, thoughtful work can be carried out. In *A Room of One’s Own*, Virginia Woolf implicitly demonstrates that achieving personal space constitutes a woman, in this case, as a political subject. For Woolf, private property gives women the right to wield their own power. This claim resonates with all women focusing on serious work that leads to a passage into previously male-controlled disciplines. Among women, private property is a celebrated space where a woman can concentrate and become lost in her own creative energy, to enjoy her freedom and to think without interruption.

I argue that the Gorgon spirit is defined by an attitude of independence, self-assertion and empowerment. Given Culpepper’s example, a woman does not have to be a victim, but can retaliate by the strength of her own fury. Men may be repelled by Medusa, but women are not frightened by her. They can look at Medusa without turning to stone because she guards a woman’s power and encourages them to have no fear of their own power. Today, that Gorgon spirit represents women seeking a new vision of themselves while meeting social and economic demands in the twenty-first century that require them to earn an education, compete in the workforce, or raise children in single-parent homes.

In “Rage Begins at Home,” literary scholar Mary Ann Caws explains that there is a difference between rage and anger among women: “Rage is general, as I see it, and is in that way quite unlike anger—specific or motivated by something—which can, upon occasion, be calmed by some specific solution, beyond what one can state or feel or see” (65). Rage, in other words, has more to do with the oppressive circumstances in which women have had to live, and therefore base their reaction to it. Women may not be able to change the boundaries that cause oppression. But if they work together as a female community, perceptions of women’s actions within the narrow parameters of public and private space can change the way powerful women are socially judged. For example, in contemporary culture we do not perceive Medusa similarly to the way in which Sir John Harrington of the late sixteenth century allegorically portrays the Gorgon as “sinne and vice, a thing base and earthly” (67). From the very beginning, Medusa is judged as demonic and evil because she does not want to marry. Renaissance mythographer Natale Conti names Medusa as a warning against pleasure, that her beauty is a “damnable thing” and that she is “dedicated to pleasure” and therefore “useless in all honorable things” (62).
In comparison to this sixteenth-century evaluation of Medusa, today women have a right to choose not to marry, and it is inhumane to ostracize a woman for being raped.

Yet there is a double standard that exists within our culture upon closer examination of these two issues of women choosing not to marry and of women who are sexually assaulted. In the twenty-first century, women are assured that they have liberties similar to men and a voice to express these rights to independence and self-protection. But this freedom comes with limitations. In other words, it forces us to reexamine these very judgments of women that derive from ancient Greece and the Renaissance, and identify how they figuratively operate as a stigma against women even today. For example, women who choose not to marry are judged, and a woman risks feeling marginalized from her own community of family and friends if she has been raped. Unmarried and childless women indirectly destabilize cherished traditions that define women in association with motherhood. Typically in a pitying tone, married women with children will ask older single women about their choices, an inquiry that figuratively questions their womanhood. I assert that our culture still fears women who do not fit into a proper feminine stereotype as wife and mother. These stereotypes persist even though their specific origin might be archaic, dating back centuries ago. Marriage is still an expectation that our culture has of women and can be overbearing. Mixed reactions to rape victims are most obviously oppressive. But both these situations lead to women’s internalized mood of alienation. Oppressive circumstances from the ancient past may have evolved over time, but remain tacitly in place by rewarding women who conform to the proper, socially acceptable feminine image. To be more specific, women can have power as long as they disguise it or perform public roles identified as a benefactress that appropriately alludes to a mother figure.

Women attempting to break from this stereotype are just now determining a positive way in which they can create new identities for themselves. Younger women are more determined to pursue an education and a career before considering marriage and children. I do not want this to be confused with undermining motherhood or married life. This is not the intention of my point. But not all women choose this more traditional path, and yet they seemed to be lambasted for it. Here it is necessary to explain the difference between a woman’s anger and rage. Though rage is internalized, it can be used by women toward constructive measures. Caws suggests that in our culture there is a belief that one can get in touch with her anger, alluding to the possibility of controlling it or manipulating it. But rage, separate from anger, is something that demands it cannot be controlled; it lives inside a person and can be cathartically released in creative, expressive ways, whether that it is in art or writing or the introspective pursuit of a woman’s personal ambitions, which reminded me of Virginia Woolf. But according to Woolf, in modern, capitalist Western societies, women require the means of money and private property to embark upon these pursuits, which allows some women this privilege, but not all women. The twenty-first century still demands that we look at ways in which women
of different social classes and educational backgrounds can liberate themselves from repressive forces.

Anger can ironically liberate women from social restrictions, but only when anger serves some psychological relief that does not cause them to isolate in self-victimization, stunted by wounds from the past. French feminist Hélène Cixous suggests that women must find creative expression that develops into a community of female writers and artists. Caws further makes a distinction between rage and anger. Wounds that fester have no emotional release. Women must engage in some form of artistic expression, personal and private contemplation, or community work to direct their anger. The Medusian myth, as it is applied to women in this case, provides a creative resource that can be realized within a female community. Anger can be the very thing that clears the path for something new, a new beginning. A new cultural and revisionist myth of Medusa, the invocation of the Gorgon spirit by writers and artists, insists upon force and fury to lead women out of conventional definitions within oppressive parameters of public and private space. Rage can be applied as an objective and productive method by which an injury or injustice is set right. But this relies on more than one individual. It must be a response that involves other women. When the border finally collapses between the “inside” and “outside,” such as private and public realms, necessary change is called for, which occurs by exposing the conventionally defined feminine as inaccurately characterizing women, that they are more than just mothers and wives, but can aspire to be many things. The work achieved within that private realm among women can transition into public space.

My friends’ original belief about the petrifying Medusa, along with the attitudes of men and women familiar with the Gorgon, is primarily rooted in patriarchal convention because Medusa is understood only in context with the hero Perseus who is victorious over the Gorgon. Over time in Western culture, a woman’s power is often in relation to the power of men, or as Forfreedom explains, a woman’s power is the result of her dependence on influential and wealthy men. While over recent years women have succeeded in achieving their own source of economic and social power without depending on men, a woman of position and of power is negated, stereotyped as terrifying, threatening, or in short, labeled “the bitch.” Though men and women still shirk from thinking about Medusa, the passé image is relied upon to undermine powerful women who refuse to honor the sharp boundaries between private and public life. Married women that Forfreedom discusses in her lecture from the 1970s operate from a more ambiguous position within the power structure, within the safe, prescribed borders of the home. Powerful women today have left the private world of silence and entered the public world of speech. By asserting themselves and transgressing this periphery between private and public space, our culture claims that such women are aggressive or mannish, which is meant to negate their femininity. Women who undermine the model between these two separate worlds are castigated by unflattering words and descriptions of their actions that are difficult, if not impossible, to escape. This reproach is meant to cause women to be afraid of their own power.
In Greek myth, Medusa does not exactly seek a public role before Athena curses her, but she certainly does not want the same prescribed, conventional life as other Greek women, and instead desires independence, a privilege allowed only to men of wealth and social position. The curse indirectly warns other young women of that time, and the oppressive patriarchal centuries that followed, against desiring the same independence as men. Freedom of movement from one sphere to the other is only allowed to men, and moving from home into the temple for worship is to move freely within these realms. Easily it can be argued that rape in Athena's temple is not the only reason why Medusa is cursed, but it is moreover for her rebellion against these cherished Greek traditions that force men and women into their proper place within the power structure. To develop this argument about Medusa as a representation of women in the twenty-first century, this project studies various interpretations of Medusa namely in Symbolist art at the end of the nineteenth century and photography and art by Nan Goldin and Liz Craft in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries where Medusa is the central protagonist. Chapter 1 introduces Vincenzo Bellini's Druid priestess, Norma, whose leadership, sacrifices, and personal conflicts exemplify characteristics that relate to the mythical Medusa. This chapter further explains the inspiration for this project and summarizes the historical and cultural transitions of Medusa, from ancient myth to contemporary culture.

Chapter 2 of this project goes into the chronological timeline of Greek myth about Medusa by Homer, Hesiod, Pindar, and Ovid to identify the subtle developments that are made throughout the storytelling of the Gorgon archetype from one generation to the next. In addition, this chapter studies the origins of Medusa in the eighth to seventh century BCE as a talismanic mask produced by hand-crafted carvings or drawings on vases, shields, and plates, even on the front doors of homes. In these examples, Medusa is a symbol used to ward off evil. Her sexual identity is ambiguous, and there is no narrative attached to this image, based only on rituals. British anthropologist, Jane Ellen Harrison, explains in *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* that the talismanic mask in early ancient Greece is based on rituals, but the myths first introduced by Homer in *The Iliad* provide an explanation of these rituals, hence Perseus slaying the Gorgon and therefore giving an explanation of the threat she poses and of her demise. While the sexually ambiguous Medusa head is still produced throughout early ancient Greece at this time, a body is now attached to the head, transforming the cultural representation of Medusa, from frightening monster to a beautiful woman cursed by Athena. The first myth of Medusa depicted by Homer is followed by Greek poets Hesiod and Pindar, and Roman poet Ovid. In paintings, sculpture and poetry where Medusa is a central figure, we see how culture has continued to be obsessed with her.

Chapter 3 concentrates on Romantic philosophy and Symbolist art from the mid- to late nineteenth century. Symbolist paintings portray Medusa as a femme fatale, a seductive and sexually charged woman. This image is ubiquitous and many poets such as Percy Shelley and Charles Baudelaire, and painters Delville, von Stuck, Böcklin, and Munch seem to be obsessed with the Gorgon monster, projecting a tender or sometimes disdainful fascination for Medusa. In
Romantic poetry by Shelley and Baudelaire, these poets present a new aesthetic where corrupted beauty is idealized. But it is time to introduce a more contemporary understanding and realization of Medusa, whose rage women artists not only identify with, but use to reinvent her myth in poetry and art, thus reinventing themselves. Medusa is a symbol from which women can discover their own source of power, their own true self.

Chapters 4 through 6 focus on the artistic interpretations of Symbolist painters Jean Delville, Franz von Stuck, and Edvard Munch. In order to more clearly understand how Medusa evolves in art as both a literary and artistic muse, it is necessary to provide the background and philosophical influences of artists who paint her image and repeat certain tropes that represent the fin de siècle. She is the sad, exiled woman, dark and threatening. Beginning with Homer in the eighth century BCE, Medusa transforms from “a grotesquely unfeminine beast, complete with bulging eyes, protruding tongue, and even the odd beard” (Currie 170) into a beautiful woman. These physical manifestations of the Gorgon are slowly introduced and depicted by 450 BCE in paintings on vases, plates, and other sculptures in ancient Greece; she transforms from a hideous head described by Homer into a beguiling gorgonian when Pindar writes about her. Obviously this is too limited a characterization of Medusa, especially in artistic interpretations. Writing a revisionist myth of Medusa begins with interpretations throughout myth, poetry, literature, philosophy, and art. By the nineteenth century, Symbolist painters Arnold Böcklin, Franz von Stuck, Jean Delville, and Edvard Munch feature her as a central figure throughout their work. The Medusean woman characterizes the spirit and social changes of that period.

Chapter 4 provides a detailed study of the sketching by Jean Delville, The Idol of Perversity, which is also named The Bride of Satan, or Parsifal. While the image in the portrait bears a significant resemblance to Medusa, it also conjures up several myths about the femme fatale, a motif that I argue is somewhat mistakenly attached to Medusa. Primarily, this chapter defines the femme fatale as a female agent who initiates a novice, usually male, to transgress morally prescribed boundaries. She often distracts him from his intended path. The term “initiator” alludes to the role performed by the femme fatale, usually portrayed as destructive. She is a conduit in between that liminal space of experience and innocence, good and evil. I argue in this chapter that such an initiation from neophyte to expert, perfection to fallibility, good and bad is absolutely necessary to truly test the initiate. The initiator is a combination of light and dark signifying the various boundaries that the hero must face in order to be tested, to demonstrate his strength, and to gain knowledge. But to argue that Medusa is relegated to the initiator role would be flawed. She is both the initiate and the initiator of worldly experience where one triumphs and fails, pursues the dark path, and, by the end, ascends to a spiritual realm. She is inexperienced when she serves as a temple maiden, worshipping Athena, and though she is victimized by Poseidon and doubly by Athena, she prevails by creating a secret life for herself in exile.

To make this argument, I explain Schopenhauer’s theory on human suffering and happiness in “The Road to Salvation.” This philosophy explains how the
initiate can be sidetracked by pleasure and happiness, which is all an illusion since the expectation of joy is far greater than its reality. Pleasure disguises itself in the promise of something else. But is always temporal. The initiator only gains wisdom about the world through the tribulations that he or she must face, and the suffering that often goes along with it. But the sacrifice is necessary in order to discover deeper meaning in life, to be purified once again, and to be “led back from the path of error of the will-to-live” (Schopenhauer 636).

In Chapter 5, Medusean images in paintings by Franz von Stuck, a careful analysis of the biblical Eve in Sin, constructs strong similarities to the modern interpretation of Medusa. This chapter also questions the degree to which the spectator can experience liberation from conscious reality when he enters into the symbolic realm of art. Snakes and women come to take on a number of different meanings, which are common motifs in Stuck’s art. In Chapter 6, I move from a thematic perspective on the snake and female image to a study of the personal relationships that the artist has with women. While Munch may have fallen in love a number of times in the early part of his career, his romantic life led to unfortunate disappointment and suffering. Metaphorically, the effect that women have on Munch’s life emerge into feminine archetypes in his art, often where he characterizes women as Medusean tropes. It is important to understand the historical context of his romantic affairs in order to comprehend this new meaning and interpretation of Medusa into art based on human relationships between men and women. This study transitions into Chapter 7 and Chapter 8, an analysis of photography by Nan Goldin and art by Liz Craft where Medusa features as the main protagonist to understand the way women transform Medusa into a new feminist myth. This shift between male artists and their projection of Medusa during the fin de siècle compared to twentieth-century art by women shows how the trope of Medusa culturally transforms and echoes the spirit of the age in which she resurfaces into the faces and stories of the modern woman. Through the work of female artists, such as Goldin and Craft, contemporary women identify more with Medusa’s rage which is deeply internalized but can be used within a number of positive connotations beginning with women creating their own communities and producing their own art where their voices are finally heard. The snake-haired woman is emblematic of this shift to understand how women’s rage serves as a creative and cathartic feature that leads to independent lives by turning the rage outward to more productive pursuits rather than turning it inward against one’s self. Women’s new vision of themselves through the trope of the culturally redefined Gorgon spirit shapes itself into the very translation of Medusa’s name: protector against one’s enemies. That enemy can mean a number of different things, even a woman who perceives herself as a threat; the image eradicates self-blame and self-hatred. This study of Greek and Roman myth, of nineteenth-century male artists’ paintings compared to female artists’ work of the twentieth- and twenty-first-century, produces a new cultural lens of Medusa, leading women to seek an authentic life that allows them to reinvent themselves.
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References


Chapter 4


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Chapter 5


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