

## Studying the Character of Medusa

Read each of the four selections on Medusa and answer the questions that follow.

Medusa had been a beautiful maiden, so lovely in fact that suitors had come from all over the Mediterranean area to ask her father for her hand in marriage. Most unforgettable had been her long golden hair, which Medusa had bragged equalled Athena's in beauty. The grey-eyed goddess remembered Medusa's vanity, watched her, and waited. When the Lord of the Sea fell in love with this mortal girl and slept with her in Athena's sacred shrine, the goddess's simmering rage exploded into a holocaust. If Medusa's hair was her best feature, Athena would begin with that!

Medusa awoke with the feeling that hissing, crawling creatures were using her head as a nest. As she reached up to feel the cause of her discomfort, she burned her fingers. Cautiously and with great fear she arose and reached for her hand mirror. For her, the nicest part of each morning was this quiet time when only the servants were awake. Then she could leisurely admire her own beauty as she combed her hair. Today, her mirror confirmed a monstrous transformation. Where her long golden locks had shimmered in the firelight last night, long scaly dragons were exhaling flames into the sunlight. But that was not all. As Medusa noticed, with great relief, that her face, at least, was still untouched, large pointed teeth began to emerge above the sides of her mouth. She stared in silent horror as they gradually extended in front of her face with an upward curve as if she were some hideous wild boar.

Her one thought was to escape before anyone saw what had happened to her famous beauty. As she adjusted the position of her mirror, she noticed another gift: golden wings. At least the deathless gods would permit her to flee.

Medusa uttered a small prayer of thanks for the wings as she climbed upon the window ledge. By this time her hands were becoming stiff and heavy. She dared not think about additional transformations. She thought only about escape. Without a backward look, Medusa stepped off the ledge into the air, forsaking all that she had loved for the unknown. She was certain that only a goddess would have transformed her in this hideous way, and this same goddess would now lead her where she was destined to go.

Medusa was right. A wind propelled her winged body far to the west, over lands and seas, until finally it set her down in a wasteland beyond a towering range of mountains. She continued forward on foot through the rocky forests until she emerged by a seashore. The beach also was a rocky one, with scattered statues upon the coarse sand. Never before had Medusa seen such realistic sculpture. If she had not approached one or two of them and touched them, she would have thought that they were real people.

The thought of people turning into stone sculptures reminded her of a story she had heard long ago. As she remembered it, there were two monstrous immortal women who lived at the western end of the earth, not far from where the Titan Atlas held up the sky. They had snaky locks, boars' tusks, bronze hands . . . Medusa stopped. Her agonizing cry filled the air and echoed from the cliffs. "I have become a Gorgon!" She raged against her fate, futilely beating the air with heavy hands. Medusa wondered if she ever could resign herself to her fate: to her hideous appearance and to her dreadful loneliness.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Donna Rosenberg, and Sorelle Baker, *Mythology and You* (Lincolnwood, Ill., 1984), 201-202