

EDITH HAMILTON

Students who enjoy reading Greek and Roman mythology as part of their English classes have Edith Hamilton to thank. At the age of sixty-three, Hamilton began a second career retelling the ancient myths of Greece and Rome. Hamilton's scholarly work single-handedly renewed an interesting the classical world in American schools.

Edith Hamilton was born in 1867 in Dresden, Germany. Her father, Montgomery Hamilton, was the son of a prominent Fort Wayne, Indiana, family, and her mother, Gertrude Pond Hamilton, was the daughter of a Confederate sympathizer who moved to Europe during the Civil War. Montgomery and Gertrude eventually moved their family back to Fort Wayne, where Edith and her three sisters grew up.

Hamilton studied Greek and Latin languages and literature when she entered Bryn Mawr College in 1891. In 1896, she became head of the first private school, Bryn Mawr School for young women, to focus on college preparation. Hamilton's theories of education were based on the Greek ideals of individualism, academic freedom, and intellectual exploration. She encouraged students to develop their own individual talents. She served as headmistress at Bryn Mawr School for twenty-six years.

After her retirement, Hamilton turned to writing about her favorite subject: the Greek and Roman classics. In 1930 she published her first book, *The Greek Way*. Several other book followed including her most famous work, *Mythology* (1942).

In her books, Hamilton made ancient cultures accessible to a wide range of readers. She also idealized Greek culture over all others. In *Mythology* she wrote, "In Greece man first realized what mankind was." She believed that the Greeks maintained a balance of mind, body, and spirit superior to other cultures.

LITERARY ELEMENTS

As you read, write down the name of stories you are familiar with that share similarities with the story of Perseus. Be sure to list the similarities.

Archetype: an image or symbol used repeatedly in art or literature.

Plot Pattern Archetype: a sequence of events that is familiar because it appears repeatedly in stories told across cultures, all over the world. One plot pattern archetype,

for example, involves a hero guided by magical beings or gods. As you read, see how many different plot pattern archetypes you can identify in this story.

Stock Character: a character in literature, theater, or film of a type quickly recognized and accepted by the reader or viewer and requiring no development by the writer. Stock characters do not have the same universal quality as archetypes and are usually limited to a specific culture or time period. i.e. tough-guy detective, faithful friend to the hero, damsel in distress whom the hero rescues.

Symbol: an object, person, place, or event that is literal but also represents something other than itself. Writers often use symbols to make abstract ideas or concepts concrete.

Myth: the word *myth* comes from the Greek word *mythos*, meaning “word” or “story.” A myth is a traditional story that deals with goddesses, gods, heroes, and supernatural forces. A myth may explain a belief, a custom, or a force of nature.

Characteristics of most myths:

- Sought to explain things people could not otherwise understand.
- Served to bind a group of people together.
- Were used to set examples for both virtuous behavior and flawed behavior.
- Contain supernatural elements.

BIG IDEA

Courage and Cleverness. As you read this myth, look for examples of Perseus’s bravery and intelligence. Make note of these instances.

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Think about what you already know, personal experiences, and experiences of others and try to connect them to the story. Include beliefs, traditions, practices, and customs of your culture and others both past and present.

IDENTIFYING GENRE

GENRE refers to a category of literature. Each genre has its own conventions, or standards, that give readers certain expectations. When reading a story categorized as a mystery, for example, the reader expects a mysterious event to occur. The reader also expects a suspenseful tone, twists and turns in the plot, and a final resolution in which the mystery is solved. “Perseus” is a myth. As you read, try to identify the characteristics of the myth genre.

***Perseus* by Edith Hamilton**

King Acrisius of Argos¹ had only one child, a daughter, Danaë. She was beautiful above all the other women of the land, but this was small comfort to

the King for not having a son. He journeyed to Delphi² to ask the god if there was any hope that some day he would be the father of a boy. The priestess told him no, and added what was far worse: that his daughter would have a son who would kill him.

The only sure way to escape that **fate** was for the King to have Danaë instantly put to death—taking no chances, but seeing to it himself. This Acrisius would not do. His fatherly affection was not strong, as events proved, but his fear of the gods was. They visited with terrible punishment those who shed the blood of **kindred**. Acrisius did not dare slay his daughter. Instead, he had a house built all of bronze and sunk underground, but with part of the roof open to the sky so that light and air could come through. **Here he shut her up and guarded her.**³

So Danaë endured, the beautiful,
To change the glad daylight for brass-bound walls,
And in that chamber secret as a grave
She lived a prisoner. Yet to her came
Zeus in the golden rain.

As she sat there through the long days and hours with nothing to do, nothing to see except the clouds moving by overhead, a mysterious thing happened, a shower of gold fell from the sky and filled her chamber. How it was revealed to her that it was Zeus who had visited her in this shape we are not told, but she knew that the child she bore was his son.

For a time she kept his birth secret from her father, but it became increasingly difficult to do so in the narrow limits of that bronze house and

finally one day the little boy—his name was Perseus—was discovered by his grandfather. “Your child!” Acrisius cried in great anger. “Who is his father?” But when Danaë answered proudly, “Zeus,” he would not believe her. One thing only he was sure of, that the boy’s life was a terrible danger to his own. He was afraid to kill him for the same reason that had kept him from killing her, fear of Zeus and the Furies⁴ who pursue such murderers. But if he could not kill them outright, he could put them in the way of tolerably certain death.⁵ He had a great chest made, and the two placed in it. Then it was taken out to sea and cast into the water.

In that strange boat Danaë sat with her little son. The daylight faded and she was alone on the sea.

When in the carven chest the winds and waves
Struck fear into her heart she put her arms,
Not without tears, round Perseus tenderly
She said, “O son, what grief is mine.
But you sleep softly, little child,
Sunk deep in rest within your cheerless home,
Only a box, brass-bound. The night, this darkness visible
The scudding⁶ waves so ear to your soft curls,
The **shrill** voice of the wind, you do not heed,
Nestled in your red cloak, fair little face.”

Through the night in the tossing chest she listened to the waters that seemed always about to wash over them. The dawn came, but with no comfort to her for she could not see it. Neither could she see that around them there

were islands rising high above the sea, many islands. All she knew was that presently a wave seemed to lift them and carry them swiftly on and then, retreating, leave them on something solid and motionless. They had made land; they were safe from the sea, but they were still in the chest with no way to get out.

Fate willed it – or perhaps Zeus, who up to now had done little for his love and his child – that they should be discovered by a good man, a fisherman named Dictys. He came upon the great box and broke it open and took the pitiful cargo home to his wife who was as kind as he. They had no children and they cared for Danaë and Perseus as if they were their own. They too lived there many years, Danaë content to let her son follow the fisherman's humble trade, out of harm's way. But in the end more trouble came. Polydectes, the ruler of the little island, was the brother of Dictys, but he was a cruel and ruthless man. He seems to have taken no notice of the mother and son for a long time, but at last Danaë attracted his attention. She was still radiantly beautiful even though Perseus by now was full grown, and Polydectes fell in love with her. He wanted her, but he did not want her son, and he set himself to think out a way of getting rid of him.

There were some **fearsome** monsters called Gorgons who lived on an island and were known far and wide because of their deadly power. Polydectes evidently talked to Perseus about them; he probably told him that he would rather have the head of one of them than anything else in the world. This seems practically certain from the plan he devised for killing Perseus. He announced that he was about to be married and he called his friends together for a celebration, including Perseus in the invitation. Each guest, as was customary, brought a gift for the bride-to-be, except Perseus alone. He had

nothing he could give. He was young and proud and keenly mortified. He stood up before them all and did exactly what the King had hoped he would do, declared that he would give him a present better than any there. He would go off and kill Medusa and bring back her head as his gift. Nothing could have suited the King better. No one in his senses would have made such a proposal. Medusa was one of the Gorgons,

And they are three, the Gorgons, each with wings
And snaky hair, most horrible to mortals.
Whom no man shall behold and draw again
The breath of life,

for the reason that whoever looked at them was turned instantly into stone. It seemed that Perseus had been led by his angry pride into making an empty boast.⁷ No man unaided could kill Medusa.

But Perseus was saved from his folly. Two great gods were watching over him. He took ship as soon as he left the King's hall, not daring to see his mother first and tell her what he intended, and he sailed to Greece to learn where the three monsters were to be found.⁸ He went to Delphi, but all the priestess would say was to bid him seek the land where men eat not Demeter's golden grain⁹, but only acorns. So he went to Dodona¹⁰, in the land of oak trees, the talking oaks were which declared Zeus's will and where the Selli¹¹ lived who made their bread from acorns. They could tell him, however, no more than this, that he was under the protection of the gods. They did not know where the Gorgons lived.

When and how Hermes and Athena came to his help is not told in any story but he must have known despair before they did so. At last, however, as he wandered on, he met a strange and beautiful person. We know what he looked like from many a poem, a young man with the fire down upon his cheek when youth is loveliest, carrying, as no other young man ever did, a wand of gold with wings at one end, wearing a winged hat, too, and winged sandals, At sight of him hope must have entered Perseus' heart, for he would know that this could be none other than Hermes, the guide and the giver of good.

This radiant personage¹² told him that before he attacked Medusa he must first be properly equipped,¹³ and that what he needed was in the possession of the nymphs¹⁴ of the North. To find the nymphs' abode¹⁵, they must go to the Gray Women who alone could tell them the way. These women dwelt in a land where all was dim and shrouded in twilight. No ray of sun looked ever on that country, nor the moon by night. In that gray place the three women lived, all gray themselves and **withered** as in extreme old age. They were strange creatures, indeed, most of all because they had but one eye for the three, which it was their custom to take turns with, each removing it from her forehead when she had had it for a time and handing it to another.

All this Hermes told Perseus and then he unfolded his plan. He would himself guide Perseus to them. Once there Perseus must keep hidden until he saw one of them take the eye out of her forehead to pass it on. At that moment, when none of the three could see, he must rush forward and seize the eye and refuse to give it back until they told him how to reach the nymphs of the North.

He himself, Hermes said, would give him a sword to attack Medusa with – which could not be bent or broken by the Gorgon's scales,¹⁶ no matter how

hard they were. This was a wonderful gift, no doubt, and yet of what use was a sword when the creature to be struck by it could turn the swordsman into stone before he was within striking distance? But another great deity¹⁷ was at hand to help. Pallas¹⁸ Athena stood beside Perseus. She took off the shield of polished bronze which covered her breast and held it out to him. “Look into this when you attack the Gorgon,” she said. “You will be able to see her in it as in a mirror, and so avoid her deadly power.”

Now, indeed, Perseus had good reason to hope The journey to the twilight land was long, over the stream of Ocean and on to the very border of the black country where the Cimmerians¹⁹ dwell, but Hermes as his guide and he could not go astray They found the Gray Women at last, looking in the wavering light like gray birds, for they had the shape of swans. But their heads were human and beneath their wings they had arms and hands.

Perseus did just as Hermes had said, he held back until he saw one of them take the eye out of her forehead. Then before she could give it to her sister, he snatched it out of her hand. It was a moment or two before the three realized they had lost it. Each thought one of the others had it. But Perseus spoke out and told them he had taken it and that it would be theirs again only when they showed him how to find the nymphs of the North. They gave him full directions at once; they would have done anything to get their eye back. He returned it to them and went on the way they had pointed out to him. He was bound, although he did not know it, to the blessed country of the Hyperboreans²⁰, at the back of the North Wind, of which is said: “Neither by ship nor yet by land shall one find the wondrous road to the gathering place of the Hyperboreans.” But Perseus had Hermes with him, so the road lay open to him, and he reached that host of happy people who are always banqueting and

holding joyful revelry.²¹ They showed him great kindness: they welcomed him to their feast, and the maidens dancing to the sound of flute and lyre²² paused to get for him the gifts he sought. These were three: winged sandals, a magic wallet²³ which would always become the right size for whatever was to be carried in it, **and, most important of all, a cap which made the wearer invisible.**²⁴ With these and Athena's shield and Hermes' sword Perseus was ready for the Gorgons. Hermes knew where they lived, and leaving the happy land the two flew back across Ocean and over the sea to the Terrible Sisters' island.

By great good fortune they were all asleep when Perseus found them. In the mirror of the bright shield he could see them clearly, creatures with great wings and bodies covered with golden scales and hair a mass of twisting snakes. Athena was beside him now as well as Hermes. They told him which one was Medusa and that was important, for she alone of the three could be killed; the other two were immortal. Perseus on his winged sandals hovered above them, looking, however, only at the shield. Then he aimed a stroke down at Medusa's throat and Athena guided his hand. With a single seep of his sword he cut through her neck and, **his eyes still fixed on the shield with never a glance at her, he swooped low enough to seize the head.**²⁵ He dropped it into the wallet which closed around it. He had nothing to fear from it now. But the two other Gorgons had awakened and, horrified at the sight of their sister slain, tried to pursue the slayer.

Perseus was safe; he had on the cap of darkness and they could not find him.

So over the sea rich-haired Danaë's son,

Perseus, on his winged sandals sped,
Flying swift as thought.
In a wallet of silver,
A wonder to behold,
He bore the head of the monster,
While Hermes, the son of Mais,
The messenger of Zeus,
Kept ever at his side.

On his way back he came to Ethiopia²⁶ and alighted there. By this time Hermes had left him. Perseus found, as Hercules was later to find, that a lovely maiden had been given up to be devoured by a horrible sea serpent. Her name was Andromeda and she was the daughter of a silly vain woman,

That starred Ethiop queen who strove
To set her beauty's praise above
The sea-nymphs, and their power offended.

She had boasted that she was more beautiful than the daughters of Nereus, the Sea-god. An absolutely certain way in those days to draw down on one a wretched fate was to claim superiority in anything over any deity; nevertheless people were perpetually doing so. In this case the punishment for the arrogance the gods detested fell not on Queen Cassiopeia, Andromeda's mother, but on her daughter. The Ethiopians were being devoured in numbers by the serpent; and, learning from the oracle that they could be freed from the pest only if Andromeda were offered up to it, they forced Cepheus, her father,

to consent. When Perseus arrived the maiden was on a rocky ledge by the sea, chained there to wait for the coming of the monster. Perseus saw her and on the instant loved her. He waited beside her until the great snake came for its prey; then he cut its head off just as he had the Gorgon's. The headless body dropped back into the water; Perseus took Andromeda to her parents and asked for her hand, which they gladly gave him.

With her he sailed back to the island and his mother, but in the house where he had lived so long he found no one. The fisherman Dictys' wife was long since dead, and the two others, Danaë and the man who had been like a father to Perseus, had had to fly and hide themselves from Polydectes, who was furious at Danaë's refusal to marry him. They had taken **refuge** in a temple, Perseus was told. He learned also that the King was holding a banquet in the palace and all the men who favored him were gathered there. Perseus instantly saw his opportunity. He went straight to the palace and entered the hall. As he stood at the entrance, Athena's shining buckler²⁷ on his breast, the silver wallet at his side, he drew the eyes of every man there. Then before any could look away he held up the Gorgon's head; and at the sight one and all, the cruel King and his servile courtiers²⁸, were turned into stone. There they sat, a row of statues, each, as it were, frozen stiff in the attitude he had struck when he first saw Perseus.

When the islanders knew themselves freed from the tyrant it was easy for Perseus to find Danaë and Dictys. He made Dictys king of the island, but he and his mother decided that they would go back with Andromeda to Greece and try to be reconciled to Acrisius, to see if the many years that had passed since he had put them in the chest had not softened him so that he would be glad to receive his daughter and grandson. When they reached Argos,

however, they found that Acrisisus had been driven away from the city, and where he was no one could say. It happened soon after their arrival Perseus heard that the King of Larissa,²⁹ in the North, was holding a great athletic contest, and he journeyed there to take part. In the discus-throwing³⁰ when his turn came and he hurled the heavy missile, it swerved and fell among the spectators. Acrisius was there on a visit to the King, and the discus struck him.

The blow was fatal and he died at once.³¹

So Apollo's³² oracle was again proved true. If Perseus felt any grief, at least he knew that his grandfather had done his best to kill him and his mother. With his death their troubles came to an end. Perseus and Andromeda lived happily ever after. Their son, Electryon, was the grandfather of Hercules.³³

Medusa's head was given to Athena, who bore it always upon the aegis, Zeus's shield, which she carried for him.

¹ *Argos* was a powerful city in southeastern Greece during the seventh century b.c.

² *Delphi* was an ancient Greek town to the south of Mount Parnassus. It was the site of an oracle, or shrine, where a priestess supposedly channeled predictions of the god Apollo.

³ **Plot Pattern Archetype:** *What other stories, fairy tales, or myths do you know that include a woman shut up alone?*

⁴ The *Furies* were female snake-haired goddesses who carried out revenge on humans for their wrongdoings.

⁵ **Plot Pattern Archetype:** *Does this turn of events seem familiar or surprising to you? Explain.*

⁶ *Scudding* means "moving along at a fast pace."

⁷ **Making Connections:** *What figure of speech or phrase can be associated with Perseus and his pride?*

⁸ **Big Idea: Courage & Cleverness:** *Does Perseus show courage here? Why or why not?*

⁹ *Demeter's golden grain* refers to Demeter, the Greek goddess of agriculture.

¹⁰ *Dodona*, in northwestern Greece, was the site of an oracle dedicated to Zeus.

¹¹ The *Selli* were a tribe of people who lived in the northwestern part of ancient Greece

¹² *Personage* means "an important person."

13 Identifying Genre: Why do you think the Greeks created this and other stories about humans aided by gods?

¹⁴ *Nymphs* are female nature spirits in Greek mythology.

¹⁵ An *abode* is a home or a place of residence.

16 Identifying Genre: How does the description of this sword fit the characteristics of a myth?

¹⁷ A *deity* is a god or goddess.

¹⁸ *Pallas* is another name for Athena and is sometimes used as part of her regular name. One myth claims Pallas was a friend of Athena's whom she killed accidentally. She added his name to her own so that he would not be forgotten.

¹⁹ *Cimmerians* were a race of people living in what is now Russia and Ukraine.

²⁰ *Hyperboreans* were a mythical group of people living in the northern parts of Asia and Europe. Their land was supposed to be perfect.

²¹ *Revelry* means "loud, boisterous celebrating."

²² A *lyre* is a stringed instrument similar to a harp.

²³ Here, *wallet* is used in its Middle English sense and means "knapsack."

24 Identifying Genre: Would these three items be found in a realistic story set in the present? Explain.

25 Big Idea: Courage & Cleverness: What is clever about Perseus's method of killing Medusa?

²⁶ *Ethiopia* is a coastal country in northeastern Africa.

²⁷ A *buckler* is a type of shield.

²⁸ The term *servile courtiers* refers to the submissive people who advised the king.

²⁹ *Larissa* is a city in eastern Greece.

³⁰ A *discus* is a heavy round disk that is thrown in track and field competitions.

31 Plot Pattern Archetype: How does this event complete one archetypal pattern in the story?

³² *Apollo* is a Greek god known for healing, prophecy, and music.

³³ *Hercules* is the Roman name for the Greek hero Heracles, who was the son of Zeus and a human woman named Alcmene. Hercules successfully completed twelve tasks in order to become a god.