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Reimagining Feminine Archetypes: Symbolism and Resistance in Carol Ann Duffy's Medusa

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Abstract: Carol Ann Duffy's poem "Medusa" from her collection The World's Wife (1999), reinterprets the classical Greek myth of Medusa by presenting the traditionally feared female monster through a deeply personal and psychological perspective. Conventionally portrayed as a symbol of female monstrosity and destructive power, Medusa is reimagined by Duffy as a woman shaped by emotional insecurity, betrayal, jealousy, and the experience of marginalisation. This paper examines how Duffy challenges established feminine archetypes through the symbolic representation of transformation, anger, and female identity. Drawing upon feminist literary criticism, particularly the perspectives of Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Butler, the study explores how the poet questions the patriarchal construction of femininity and the cultural tendency to associate female anger with monstrosity.

The poem's recurring images of snakes, stone, and the destructive gaze function as symbolic expressions of psychological alienation and the loss of emotional security. By giving Medusa a first-person voice, Duffy shifts the narrative perspective from the traditional male-centred myth to the woman's subjective experience. This transformation enables the figure of Medusa to emerge not merely as a threatening mythological creature but as a complex representation of female vulnerability, suppressed emotions, and resistance to conventional gender expectations. The paper argues that Duffy's revision of the Medusa archetype exposes the ways in which female identity is constructed, judged, and distorted within patriarchal narratives, ultimately transforming the image of the monstrous woman into a powerful symbol of female agency and resistance.

Keywords: *Feminine Archetypes - Feminist Revisionism – Symbolism - Female Identity -Patriarchal Representation - Resistance.*

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Introduction

The representation of women in literature has often been shaped by patriarchal traditions that associate femininity with beauty, obedience, purity, and emotional restraint. Women who challenge these expectations are frequently portrayed as dangerous, irrational, or monstrous. Classical mythology, in particular, has contributed to such representations by presenting female characters through predominantly male-centred narratives. Contemporary feminist writers revisit these traditional portrayals to question gender stereotypes and reclaim women's voices. In this context, Carol Ann Duffy's poetry offers a significant exploration of female identity, power, and resistance.

In her collection *The World's Wife* (1999), Duffy reinterprets familiar mythological and historical figures from women's perspectives. Her poem "Medusa" revisits the Greek myth of the monstrous woman and presents her as a psychologically complex individual experiencing insecurity, jealousy, betrayal, and emotional isolation. Through the first-person narrative, Duffy shifts attention from Medusa's terrifying appearance to her inner emotional struggles.

The poem employs powerful symbols such as snakes, stone, and the destructive gaze to represent psychological transformation, emotional suffering, and alienation. These images challenge the conventional association of female anger with monstrosity and invite readers to reconsider the cultural construction of feminine identity. Drawing upon feminist perspectives, particularly Simone de Beauvoir's understanding of socially constructed femininity and Judith Butler's exploration of gender identity, this study examines how Duffy reconstructs the Medusa archetype.

The paper argues that Duffy transforms Medusa from a traditionally demonised mythological figure into a representation of female vulnerability and resistance. Through symbolic imagery and the reclamation of narrative voice, the poem challenges patriarchal representations of women and questions the boundaries between femininity, power, and monstrosity.

The Construction of the Monstrous Feminine

The figure of Medusa occupies an important position in classical Greek mythology. Traditionally represented as a terrifying woman with snakes for hair and a gaze capable of turning people into stone, she becomes an embodiment of danger and destruction. Her appearance distinguishes her from conventional representations of ideal femininity, which frequently emphasise beauty, innocence, and submission. The myth therefore establishes a contrast between the acceptable feminine image and the woman perceived as threatening.

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Duffy challenges this conventional representation by giving Medusa an individual voice and emotional history. Rather than introducing her merely as a supernatural creature, the poet presents her as a woman whose transformation is connected to emotional insecurity and the fear of betrayal. Her identity is not restricted to her monstrous appearance; it emerges through her thoughts, memories, suspicions, and relationships.

This reconstruction can be examined through Simone de Beauvoir's feminist perspective in *The Second Sex*. Beauvoir argues that womanhood is shaped by social and cultural conditions rather than determined entirely by biological identity. Her understanding of woman as the socially constructed "Other" provides a useful framework for examining Medusa's position. Medusa becomes an outsider because her appearance and behaviour violate established expectations of femininity. Her monstrous identity can therefore be interpreted as a cultural label imposed upon a woman who no longer conforms to the idealised feminine image.

Duffy's representation encourages readers to look beyond the conventional classification of Medusa as a monster. By presenting her emotional experiences, the poet questions the assumptions through which women are judged and marginalised.

The Social Construction of Womanhood

Simone de Beauvoir argues that femininity is not simply a natural condition but is shaped by social expectations and cultural structures. Her famous statement, “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman,” suggests that society constructs ideas about what a woman should be.

In “Medusa”, Duffy’s poem reflects this idea through Medusa’s transformation from a beautiful woman into a monstrous figure. Medusa remembers her former identity through the questions:

“Wasn’t I beautiful? Wasn’t I fragrant and young?”. These questions reveal that Medusa measures her lost identity through conventional standards of feminine beauty and desirability. Her earlier value appears to be associated with youth, attractiveness, and fragrance. However, after experiencing jealousy and the fear of betrayal, she becomes associated with ugliness, foulness, and destruction.

The lines, “I’m foul mouthed now, foul tongued, yellow fanged.” show the transformation of her identity. She is no longer represented through the qualities traditionally associated with ideal femininity. Instead, she becomes a threatening figure. Through Beauvoir’s perspective, Medusa’s transformation can be understood as a rejection of the idealised feminine image. Society often expects women to remain beautiful, gentle, desirable, and emotionally controlled. When Medusa moves outside these expectations, she is represented as monstrous.

The final question, “Wasn’t I beautiful?”, becomes especially significant because it reveals her awareness of the difference between her former socially valued identity and her present rejected identity. Duffy questions a culture in which feminine worth is closely connected to physical beauty and male approval. Medusa’s tragedy is not simply that she loses her beauty; it is that her identity becomes defined by the loss of the qualities through which she was once valued.

Symbolism and the Psychological Transformation of Medusa

Symbolism is central to Duffy's reconstruction of the Medusa archetype. The poem's recurring images of snakes, stone, and the gaze represent the gradual transformation of emotional suffering into psychological alienation and hostility.

The Symbolism of Snakes

The snakes associated with Medusa's head are among the most recognisable features of the classical myth. Traditionally, they signify danger, supernatural power, and monstrosity. In Duffy's poem, however, they also reflect the speaker's disturbed emotional condition. The transformation of her hair into snakes suggests that her inner turmoil has become visible through her physical appearance.

The snakes can be interpreted as symbolic expressions of suspicion, jealousy, and emotional disturbance. Their presence connects Medusa's psychological condition with the external image of the monstrous feminine. Instead of treating monstrosity as an inherent characteristic, Duffy presents it as an identity that develops alongside emotional suffering. The symbolism therefore challenges the assumption that a woman who expresses anger or insecurity is naturally destructive.

The Symbolism of Stone

Stone represents another significant dimension of Medusa's transformation. Her ability to turn living beings into stone is traditionally understood as a supernatural power associated with destruction. However, the image also suggests emotional rigidity, isolation, and the inability to maintain meaningful human relationships.

The transformation of living forms into lifeless objects reflects the destructive consequences of fear and mistrust. Medusa's power, which initially appears extraordinary, gradually becomes a source of separation. She is unable to establish emotional closeness because her gaze creates distance between herself and others.

Stone therefore operates on both physical and psychological levels. It represents the loss of emotional connection and the gradual isolation of an individual consumed by suspicion. Duffy uses this symbolism to demonstrate how emotional suffering can transform personal relationships into spaces of alienation.

The Symbolism of the Gaze

The gaze is particularly important in understanding the relationship between power and identity in the poem. Medusa's gaze traditionally represents the power to destroy those who encounter it. In Duffy's reinterpretation, however, it also becomes an expression of suspicion and the desire to discover the truth about her relationship.

The gaze can be understood as a symbol of emotional insecurity. Medusa's suspicion influences how she perceives the world around her, making ordinary experiences appear threatening. Her ability to transform others into stone consequently becomes a metaphor for the destructive consequences of mistrust.

The gaze also reverses the conventional relationship between the observer and the observed. Medusa is no longer simply an object of male description or fear; she becomes the speaking subject who interprets her own experiences. This narrative shift is significant because it gives the traditionally

marginalised female character control over the presentation of her identity.

Female Identity, Anger and Patriarchal Expectations

One of the central concerns of "Medusa" is the representation of female anger. Literary and cultural traditions have frequently associated feminine virtue with patience, gentleness, emotional control, and submissiveness. Women who express jealousy, dissatisfaction, or anger are often described through negative stereotypes.

Duffy questions this expectation by presenting Medusa's emotional condition as an important part of her identity. Her jealousy and suspicion are not ignored or idealised; instead, they reveal the complexity of human relationships. The poem explores how the fear of betrayal can influence an individual's understanding of love, trust, and personal security.

Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity in Gender Trouble provides another useful perspective. Butler examines how gender identities are maintained through repeated social expectations and performances. From this perspective, femininity is not simply a natural or fixed category but is continually shaped by cultural norms.

Medusa's transformation can be interpreted as a disruption of these norms. She no longer represents the conventional ideal of feminine beauty and emotional restraint. Her monstrous appearance places her outside socially accepted definitions of womanhood. Duffy uses this transformation to question why women who depart from established expectations are frequently represented as threatening.

Nevertheless, Medusa's resistance remains complicated. Although she possesses extraordinary power, that power does not provide emotional freedom or fulfilment. Her transformation produces isolation rather than liberation. This contradiction makes the character particularly significant: Duffy does not present female empowerment as a simple rejection of traditional femininity but explores the psychological difficulties associated with identity, insecurity, and social judgement.

Gender Performativity and the Disruption of Femininity

Judith Butler argues that gender is not a fixed or natural identity. It is produced and maintained through repeated social behaviours, expectations, and representations. These repeated performances create the impression that particular forms of femininity and masculinity are natural.

In “Medusa” The poem presents two contrasting versions of feminine identity. The first is the beautiful woman who is young, fragrant, and desirable. The second is the transformed woman who is foul-mouthed, frightening, and destructive.

The contrast is visible in the lines:

“My bride’s breath soured, stank in the grey bags of my lungs.”

and:

“I’m foul mouthed now, foul tongued, yellow fanged.”

The transformation challenges the conventional image of femininity. Medusa no longer conforms to the expectations of beauty, softness, and emotional restraint. Her appearance and language become threatening rather than pleasing.

The repeated question, “Are you terrified?” followed by the command, “Be terrified.” is particularly important. Medusa is no longer merely an object to be looked at or judged. She directly addresses the person who fears her. Her voice becomes assertive, confrontational, and powerful.

The line, “So better by far for me if you were stone.” also reveals a reversal of traditional gender relations. Medusa's gaze gives her the power to transform the male figure into stone. Symbolically, she gains control over the person whose betrayal she fears. Through Butler’s theory, this transformation can be interpreted as a disruption of established gender expectations. Medusa's monstrous appearance and assertive speech challenge the idea that women must always perform acceptable femininity.

Duffy presents Medusa as a figure who disrupts conventional femininity. However, her transformation is not complete liberation. Her power emerges from jealousy, insecurity, and fear of abandonment. Therefore, the poem presents resistance as psychologically complicated rather than entirely empowering.

The Abject and the Monstrous Feminine

Kristeva introduces the concept of abjection to explain the feelings of disgust, fear, and rejection produced by things that disturb established boundaries of identity, order, and social acceptability. The abject is associated with what a culture attempts to exclude because it threatens its sense of order and stability. In “Medusa” Medusa’s physical transformation strongly reflects Kristeva’s concept of abjection. Her body becomes associated with unpleasant and disturbing images -“which turned the hairs on my head to filthy snakes” and “I’m foul mouthed now, foul tongued, yellow fanged.”. The imagery of snakes, foulness, and bodily transformation makes Medusa appear frightening and socially unacceptable. She becomes a figure who disturbs the boundary between human and monstrous identity. The animal imagery further develops this transformation. When Medusa looks at ordinary creatures, they turn into lifeless objects:

The buzzing bee becomes a grey pebble.

The singing bird becomes dusty gravel.

The ginger cat becomes a housebrick.

The snuffling pig becomes a boulder.

These transformations demonstrate how her gaze destroys life and changes the natural world into lifeless matter. Her monstrous power is therefore connected to her emotional condition.

Another important moment occurs when she looks at herself, “I stared in the mirror. Love gone bad showed me a Gorgon.”. The mirror becomes a symbol of self-recognition. Medusa sees herself through the image of the monster. Her identity is no longer separated from the frightening figure she has become.

The line “Love gone bad” is particularly significant because it connects monstrosity with emotional suffering. Her transformation is presented as the consequence of a damaged relationship and the fear of betrayal.

Through Kristeva’s theory, Medusa can be understood as an abject figure because her body and identity disturb conventional ideas of beauty, femininity, and human order. Duffy uses the monstrous female body to question the cultural tendency to reject women who do not conform to acceptable standards. Medusa

becomes frightening not only because of her supernatural power but also because she represents emotions and identities that society finds difficult to accept.

Reclaiming the Female Voice through Mythological Revision

An important feature of Duffy's poetry is her use of dramatic monologue to provide alternative perspectives on familiar characters. In "Medusa," the first-person voice shifts the narrative focus from the traditional mythological representation to the woman's personal experience.

In conventional accounts, Medusa is primarily remembered through the fear she creates in others. Her identity is defined by her appearance and supernatural abilities. Duffy changes this perspective by allowing Medusa to speak about her emotional experiences. The reader encounters not merely the legendary monster but an individual who struggles with suspicion, vulnerability, and the fear of losing affection. This technique can be understood as feminist revisionism. Instead of accepting inherited narratives as complete and unquestionable, Duffy revisits them to uncover the experiences and perspectives that have been overlooked. The poem demonstrates how storytelling can influence the construction of female identity.

The reclamation of Medusa's voice also challenges the relationship between representation and power. When women are represented exclusively through external descriptions, their experiences and interpretations remain marginalised. By allowing Medusa to narrate her own story, Duffy creates an alternative literary space in which the female character becomes the centre of interpretation. The reclaimed voice does not eliminate Medusa's emotional conflict. Her narrative reveals both her desire for emotional security and the destructive consequences of her insecurity. This complexity prevents the poem from becoming a simplistic celebration of female power. Instead, it presents female identity as a continuous negotiation between vulnerability, agency, and social expectations.

The Monstrous Feminine as a Symbol of Resistance

The concept of the monstrous feminine is significant in understanding Duffy's reinterpretation of Medusa. Women who possess power outside conventional social structures have often been represented as frightening or unnatural. Their difference becomes a reason for exclusion, and their independence is frequently associated with danger.

Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection, discussed in *Powers of Horror*, offers a supplementary perspective on the cultural construction of the monstrous. Abjection concerns what unsettles established boundaries and challenges familiar distinctions between acceptable and unacceptable identities. Medusa's physical transformation disrupts conventional definitions of beauty and femininity, making her a figure of cultural discomfort.

Through this framework, Medusa's monstrous appearance can be understood as a challenge to the boundaries of idealised womanhood. Her snakes, destructive gaze, and altered physical identity distinguish her from the socially accepted feminine image. She becomes an embodiment of everything that conventional representations of femininity attempt to exclude.

Yet Duffy's representation also reveals the limitations of this resistance. Medusa's power does not free her from emotional suffering. Her transformation makes her increasingly isolated and unable to sustain intimate relationships. The poem therefore explores the paradox of female power: the ability to challenge conventional expectations does not necessarily guarantee personal freedom or emotional fulfilment.

By presenting both the strength and vulnerability of Medusa, Duffy develops a more complex understanding of resistance. The monstrous woman becomes not simply a symbol of destruction but a figure through whom the limitations of patriarchal definitions of femininity can be questioned.

Conclusion

Carol Ann Duffy's "Medusa" offers a significant reinterpretation of the traditional feminine archetype by transforming the classical mythological monster into a psychologically complex female character. Through symbolic images of snakes, stone, and the gaze, the poem explores the relationship between emotional insecurity, identity, and alienation. Duffy's use of the dramatic monologue gives Medusa a voice that challenges the male-centred narratives through which her identity has traditionally been constructed.

Viewed through feminist literary perspectives, the poem questions the cultural expectations that associate femininity with beauty, obedience, and emotional restraint. It also exposes the tendency to classify women who deviate from these expectations as threatening or monstrous. However, Duffy does not portray Medusa's transformation as an uncomplicated form of empowerment. Her extraordinary power exists alongside vulnerability, suspicion, and isolation.

"Medusa" transforms the image of the monstrous woman into a means of examining the complex relationship between gender, representation, and power. By revisiting a familiar myth from a female perspective, Duffy challenges inherited stereotypes and demonstrates how poetry can reclaim marginalised voices. The poem thus presents feminine identity as neither fixed nor singular but as a complex experience shaped by emotion, cultural expectations, and the struggle for self-definition.

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