

# THE GORGON SISTERS

A MYTHICAL DRAMEDY IN ONE ACT BY  
*Laramie Dean*



**CLASSROOM STUDY GUIDE**

## Introduction

*The Gorgon Sisters* is a theatrical exploration of Ancient Greek Characters, specifically the Gorgons after Medusa is beheaded by Perseus.

## Background

This play, as *Once Upon a Time in Ancient Greece*, was commissioned by the Montana Repertory Theatre at the University of Montana in Missoula and toured the state during the fall of 2014. The play was revised and retitled *The Gorgon Sisters* for the cast and crew of Hellgate's Troupe 3961 to perform at the 2018 Montana State Thespian Convention.

## Playwright Bio

Laramie Dean is a Montana native, born and raised on a ranch in northeastern Montana. His move to the "big city" of Missoula in high school allowed him to take drama classes at Hellgate High School, opening up a world of theatrical possibilities. Laramie earned his BFA in acting at the University of Montana before moving across the country to work on his PhD in playwriting at Southern Illinois University in Carbondale. Since then he has performed, written, and directed numerous plays, including *Othernatural*, a one-man show, which was performed at Stage Left's Left Out Festival in New York City and again at Missoula's own Crystal Theatre. Laramie is currently enjoying his dream job as the theatre director right back at Hellgate High School, where he has recently written and directed adaptations of *The Wizard of Oz*, *Dracula*, and *Frankenstein*. For the past several years he has been commissioned by the Montana Repertory Theatre to compose plays for their Educational Tour: *The Gorgon Sisters* in 2014, *Bronte to the Future* in 2016, and *Morgan and Merlin* in 2018. He was also recently commissioned by Storytree Theatre to write *Ladies Among Lions*, a play about the heroines of Shakespeare.

## Synopsis

Stheno loves telling stories. The story is everything. She starts by sharing the story of the Ancient Greek gods, and how she and her sisters Eurydale and Medusa ended up as gorgons, monsters with snakes for hair. They were turned into gorgons by Athena as punishment for Poseidon flirting with Stheno. Stheno tells the story of what happened to her sister, Medusa, who was killed by Perseus. This story is difficult for Stheno and she decides to go on a quest to bring Medusa back to life. She tries to strike a “I’ll help you, you help me” deal with Heracles, rejects Orpheus’ advice to give up the quest, challenges Athena, freezes the Minotaur, and finally fights Hades. But Medusa is dead and nothing will bring her back to life. Stheno has been acting in guilt because it’s her fault that she and her sisters were turned into monsters and Medusa was killed. Stheno must face the fact that living in the past doesn’t fix relationships in the present. Stheno has a living sister, who she has ignored. She tries to rectify that situation with a story, just for Eurydale.

## Characters

**STHENO:** Female. Pronounced “THEE-no.” A Gorgon on a mission.

**MEDUSA :** Female. Stheno’s baby sister. Dead. Appears in flashbacks as a little girl.

**EURYALE:** Female. Pronounced “Yuh-RY-uh-lay.” Stheno’s sister. Also a Gorgon.

**HERACLES:** Male. A hero. Big and strong. Talks like a surfer dude.

**ORPHEUS:** Male. A washed up musician.

**EURYDICE:** Female. Pronounced “Yuh-RID-uh-see. Orpheus’ dead girlfriend.

**THE HARPIES:** Female. Women with the bodies of birds.

**ATHENA:** Female. The goddess of wisdom.

**THE MINOTAUR:** Any Gender. A creature with the head of a bull.

**HADES:** Male. Lord of the dead and the Underworld.

**APOLLO:** Male. God of light.

**DEMETER:** Female. Goddess of the harvest.

**ARTEMIS:** Female. Goddess of the hunt. Carries a bow and arrows.

**ARES:** Male. God of war.

**POSEIDON:** Male. God of the sea. He carries a trident.

**ZEUS:** Male. Ruler of all the gods. Carries a lightning bolt.

**HERA:** Female. Queen of the gods.

**PERSEUS:** Male. A hero. Handsome and dashing. He carries a sword and a shield.

**CREATURES OF THE UNDERWORLD:** Various spirits, monsters, and devils that inhabit the Underworld and do Hades' bidding.

## Themes

Death, family, relationships, hero journey, memory

## Pre-Read Questions

- ★ What does family mean to you?
- ★ If you have siblings, what is your relationship with them like?
- ★ What does it mean to be a hero? What's your definition?
- ★ What does it mean to take on a quest? What's your definition?
- ★ Who do you consider a hero?
- ★ What's an example of a modern quest?
- ★ Have you ever done anything out of guilt?

# Pre-Read Activities

## Research Project

- ★ In small groups students will research the Gorgons. Who were they? What did they represent in Ancient Greece? What are their stories?
- ★ After completing their research, students will create a presentation in which everyone in the group must take part. It can be:
  - » A live oral presentation with a visual component such as a slide deck
  - » An original scene theatricalizing their findings
  - » A recorded presentation (filmed scene, or oral presentation with visual component)

## Myth Adaptation Exercise

- ★ Divide students into groups. Give each group a version of the Medusa myth.
- ★ Discuss the definition of adaptation, and adaptations that students may know.
  - » Adaptation definition: to make something suitable for a new purpose, to modify, to alter
- ★ The goal of the exercise is to have students adapt the myth into a scene. They don't have to tell the whole myth. Perhaps they pick what they consider to be the most important moment. They don't have to specifically use the words of the story, but the scene must be connected to the myth.
- ★ Remind students that they are making something suitable for a new purpose. That means the scene must have characters and a conflict, and take place in a specific location.
  - » Who are the characters?
  - » What is the conflict?
  - » What location can the scene take place in, as indicated by the myth?

- ★ The scene should be approximately one minute. No longer. The point is for students to work quickly. Again, students do not have to stage the whole myth.
- ★ Give groups time to discuss, create, rehearse, and present.
- ★ Afterward, discuss the similarities and differences of the scenes. Hopefully there will be differences! This will show students that there is not just one way to adapt material.
- ★ Also, discuss the process. What were the challenges? How did they modify and alter for a new purpose?

### **Medusa Tableaux Series**

- ★ In groups, students will research and do a tableaux series on the Medusa myth. What three moments would you choose to visualize the story?
- ★ In groups, students will identify and discuss the three moments that best represent the Medusa story. How will they visualize each moment?
- ★ Groups will then create a tableau for each moment.
  - » Emphasize to students any principles of tableau that you use in your class. Do they need to incorporate levels? Connection between individuals?
- ★ Lastly, groups will create transitions between each tableau to form a series.
- ★ Groups will present their series to the class. Those watching should try to identify the moments each group chooses to visualize.
- ★ Discuss afterward. What are the similarities and differences of the moments that the groups chose?

### **Hero Original Scene**

- ★ Discuss the definition of a hero. What is the personality of a hero? What are their characteristics? What do heroes do? How do they act? Who are modern heroes?
- ★ Based on the discussion, divide students into groups. Each group will create a one-minute scene that includes a hero.

- ★ Give students time to rehearse and then present.
- ★ Discuss the scenes afterward. What are the similarities and differences?

### **Compare and Contrast Discussion**

- ★ Share with students characteristics of the Ancient Greek hero. Who are examples of the Ancient Greek hero?
- ★ Discuss with students, what are the similarities and differences between Ancient Greek Heroes and modern heroes?

### **Medusa Character Profile**

- ★ Divide students into groups. Each group will create a character profile for Medusa. Do some research on the character and then create the following details for the character:
  - » Three physical traits
  - » Three personality traits
  - » A favourite outfit, which includes their favourite colour
  - » Favourite/least favourite food, movie, music
  - » Pet peeve
  - » Secret
  - » Motto
  - » Living environment
  - » Significant relationship or object

## Greek God Character Profile

- ★ Divide students into groups. Each group will create a character profile of one of the following Greek gods: Poseidon, Hades, Athena. Do some research and then create the following details for the character:
  - » Three physical traits
  - » Three personality traits
  - » A favourite outfit, which includes their favourite colour
  - » Favourite/least favourite food, movie, music
  - » Pet peeve
  - » Secret
  - » Motto
  - » Living environment
  - » Significant relationship or object.

## **Close Reading Analysis Questions**

Close reading is an analysis tool. Students read a text multiple times for in-depth comprehension, striving to understand not only **what** is being said but **how** it's being said and **why**. Close reading takes a student from story and character to drawing conclusions on author intention. Close reading prompts students to flex their thinking skills by:

- ★ Teaching students to engage with a text.
- ★ Teaching students to be selective. We can't highlight everything in the text, only the most important elements.
- ★ Teaching students to make educated decisions. All conclusions and opinions must be backed up with a text example.



Have students analyze *The Gorgon Sisters* individually or in groups, using the following text-dependent questions:

**Read One: What is happening?**

1. What is your first impression of the play?
2. Who are Stheno's sisters?
3. Who is the god of war?
4. Who punished Stheno and her sisters by turning their hair into snakes?
5. True or False? Medusa is immortal.
6. Who is Heracles more commonly known as?
7. What favour does Stheno want from Heracles?
8. What advice does Orpheus give to Stheno?
9. Who helps Stheno get to the temple of Athena?
10. How does Stheno stop the Minotaur?
11. Does Hades think Stheno is a hero?
12. Is Stheno able to defeat Hades?
13. What is the key idea of the play?

**Read Two: How does it happen?**

1. What does Stheno mean in Greek? How does this definition connect to her personality?
2. Given what you know about the Medusa story, in your opinion, why has the playwright chosen to portray the Gorgon sisters with human rather than monstrous characteristics?

3. In the original production, all the characters were only played by three actors, one to play Stheno, and two to play all the other characters. In your opinion, how would that impact the staging?
4. In the first high school production, the set was only three cubes. If you were going to stage this play, what would your set look like?
5. Based on Stheno's language, behaviour, and personality, how would you costume this character?
6. Based on Hades' language, behaviour, and personality, how would you costume this character?
7. What is the significance of the line, "Undertaking a heroic quest does not automatically make one a hero"?
8. What is the significance of the line, "Euryale doesn't need me. Medusa does"?
9. What is the significance of the line, "Lots of ways to destroy a person, Stheno, without killing them"?
10. What is the main conflict in the play?

### **Read Three: Why does it happen?**

1. In your opinion, why is the play called *The Gorgon Sisters*?
2. What is the playwright trying to say about heroes? Cite the text to support your answer.
3. What is the playwright trying to say about guilt? Cite the text to support your answer.
4. In your opinion, what is going to happen with the relationship between Stheno and Eurydale?
5. How does the playwright want you to respond to this play?

## Post-Read Questions

- ★ What is one question that you still have about the play?
- ★ Which character resonated with you the most and why?
- ★ Do you recognize yourself in any of the characters?
- ★ How have the characters changed by the end of the play?

## Post-Read Activities

### Character Costume Design

- ★ Choose a character and design their costume.
- ★ Based on their personality, what would they wear? What pieces of clothing define them? What colours and textures would they choose?
- ★ Draw a colour costume rendering.

### Set Design

- ★ Students, individually or in groups, will discuss and decide how they would design the set for this play. Based on the themes in the play, what colours and textures would they choose?
- ★ Draw a colour set rendering or write a two-paragraph description of the set.

### Staged Scenes

- ★ Divide students into small groups and assign each group a scene from the play, or a short moment within a scene.
- ★ Give students time to rehearse.
- ★ Each group will present their moment.
- ★ Discuss the scenes afterward.

- » How did seeing the scenes acted out differ from reading them?
- » Why is it important to act a scene as well as read it?
- » Did any of the presentations offer a different interpretation of the characters than yours?

## **Rewrite Adaptation**

- ★ Now that students know the story, have them rewrite it. All the gods are modern characters, the situations are modern, and the locations are modern.
- ★ Divide students into groups and emphasize that they must adhere to the definition of adaptation: to make something suitable for a new purpose, to modify, to alter.
- ★ Groups will rehearse and present their new version of the story.

## **Playwright Process**

*Playwright Laramie Dean talks about his process writing and adapting The Gorgon Sisters. Have students read and then discuss/reflect on how their perception of the writing process compares to the playwright's.*

### 1. Why did you choose to adapt this story?

I was commissioned by the Montana Repertory Theatre to write a one-act play for their educational touring show, which travels around the state of Montana and performs in schools, libraries, and other, less conventionally theatrical locations. They wanted to use mythology as a seed, and I've always been a fan of Greek myths, so I pitched something involving the Gorgons. When I was younger I was fascinated with the story of Medusa (Ray Harryhausen's special, snakey effects for the original *Clash of the Titans* scared the ever living heck out of me), and I wondered what happened to her sisters she left behind when Perseus decapitated her in the name of love. I began to research the lives of Stheno and Euryale and started thinking about heroic quests, Joseph Campbell's theories on the hero's journey, and dealing with grief. I'm a sucker

for a strong female protagonist — Buffy from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* was definitely an influence — and Stheno certainly kicks butt and takes names.

2. Is there anything you cut that you wished could have stayed in the play?

Actually, the opposite! The original draft was written for three performers and could only be 45 minutes long. The scene between Stheno and Poseidon that takes place outside of Athena's temple originally ended up on the cutting room floor. When my own students decided to perform an expanded version of the play for a full cast, I added that scene back in, and actually ended up writing additional material for the gods, goddesses, and monsters I included.

3. What challenges did you encounter during the writing process?

For the original production, trying to make sure that three people could perform as the characters and run the tech in a variety of venues which could end up being vastly different. Heidi Mudd played Stheno, and Jamie Parnell played all the male characters, while Paige O'Neill ran lights and sound and played the rest of the female characters. In one moment Stheno faces off against Athena and her minotaur, so all three members of the company were on stage at one time, and I had this moment of thinking, *who's going to do the lights???*

4. What changes, if any, were made during rehearsals?

After we performed it for the Thespian convention a few years ago, I went back and added extra scenes for a larger company that included all of the monsters and gods and goddesses Stheno references when telling her story, as well as characters like Eurydice who were only mentioned before.

5. What was it like to see the play performed?

It's my favorite part of being a playwright. I originally trained as an actor, but my heart has never really lain in the realm of performing. I much prefer to see the characters from my brain get up and walk and talk, and hear the choices the actors who play them decide to make. My brother passed away a few years ago, and it was actually a very cathartic experience to watch Stheno go through a journey I was concurrently undergoing.