

## Mary DeShazer: On "Medusa"

Silence also forms the core of "Medusa," a poem in which Bogan directly confronts her own demonic aspect in the guise of the terrifying Gorgon, who according to classical myth turns onlookers into stone. Rather than being a totally debilitating encounter, however, this confrontation enables the poet to assume some of Medusa's frozen, silent power. The poem begins with a description of the awesome meeting, which occurs in a "house, in a cave of trees," under a "sheer sky." As the poet encounters Medusa, a whirlwind carries the reflection of house, trees, and sky into the poet's range of vision. This image of reflection is especially crucial, since according to legend the Gorgon's hideous face must be viewed only indirectly, lest the observer be petrified with fright and cast into stone. Significantly, however, the poet confronts the "bare eyes" and "hissing hair" directly. This act of boldness recalls the male quester of another Bogan poem, "A Tale," who finds endurance only "where something dreadful and another / Look quietly upon each other"; and it also anticipates later poems such as "March Twilight," in which a watcher gazes into "another face," only to see "time's eye"; or "Little Lobelia's Song," whose childlike speaker sees reflected in her own face the image of a potent other. As these other poems suggest, this eye-to-eye encounter between speaker and "shadow," that other self both frightening and recognizable, is crucial to Bogan's poetic imagery and to her perception of the poet-muse relationship. Only by looking squarely at the "beast within," Bogan believes, can the poet come to terms with her own hidden powers.

The last three stanzas of "Medusa" describe a scene transformed, as both time and motion are suspended in the wake of the Gorgon's power: "a dead scene forever now," in which "Nothing will ever stir." Medusa has exercised her powers of transformation by recasting her surroundings into silence and stasis, a state which parallels the perpetual suspension of the scene on Keats's Grecian urn. Surprisingly, however, the poet's resolute voice emerges from this silence. Although Bogan calls this a "dead scene," life flourishes amidst the stasis ("The grass will always be growing for hay / Deep on the ground"), and her description conveys a tentative resolution. As the poet stands "like a shadow / Under the great balanced day," she becomes a new Medusa, a potent and demonic goddess capable of controlling herself and her craft, of "killing" life into art. Medusa's silence provides Bogan a powerful, if static, stance from which to speak. The poet's usurpation of the goddess's strength recalls Yeats's enigmatic question at the end of "Leda and the Swan."

Did she put on his knowledge with his power  
Before the indifferent beak could let  
her drop?

Unlike Leda, who was forced by Zeus into female subservience, the poet confronts her goddess as a same-sex equal, and that makes all the difference. Bogan assumes both the knowledge and the power of Medusa, her demonic muse, and through this power she redefines stony silence as vital creative energy.

From "My Scourge, My Sister?: Louise Bogan's Muse." In *Coming to Light: American*

Women Poets in the Twentieth Century. Ed. Diane Wood Middlebrook and Marilyn Yalom. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press., 1985. Copyright © 1985 by the University of Michigan.

**Publication Status:**

Excerpted Criticism [1]

**Publication:**

- Private group -

**Criticism Target:**

Louise Bogan [2]

**Author:**

Mary DeShazer [3]

**Poem:**

Medusa [4]

---

**Source URL:** <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/criticism/mary-deshazer-medusa>

**Links**

[1] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/category/publication-status/excerpted-criticism>

[2] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/poet/louise-bogan>

[3] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/creator/mary-deshazer>

[4] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/poem/medusa>