Perseus

This story incorporates many elements of mythology that have been taught in previous lessons. It draws upon knowledge of the gods and goddesses and mythological creatures, as well as the epic hero motif found in other myths like those of Heracles and Orpheus. In addition, it also introduces the concept of fate, a common theme in Greek mythology.

Objectives
- To learn the story of Perseus.
- To understand how mythology was used as entertainment.

Materials
- copies of Medusa picture
- markers, pens, or pencils
- blank paper
- scissors
- tape (or glue)
- “The Story of Perseus” handout
- aluminum foil
- cardboard or posterboard
- permanent markers
- mirror

Preparation
1. Using the cardboard or poster board, cut out a few circles (about 10” in diameter) for the students to use as templates.

Procedure
1. Pass out “The story of Perseus” handout and have the students read it aloud.
2. Discuss with the students why this myth would be entertaining to an ancient audience. The students should begin to recognize that they and ancient children were interested by many of the same things. Point out the roles of the gods and other mythological creatures in the story. For example, Perseus had to kill a Gorgon; Athena and Hermes both provided Perseus with tools to kill Medusa. Also point out that the ancients believed oracles would always reveal the truth about the future.
3. Explain to the students that they will now make their own shields like the one that Perseus had in the story. Instruct them to cut out circles of cardboard (or posterboard) using your circle templates as stencils. They should then use the aluminum foil to cover one side of the circle, fold the foil over the edges, and tape it on the other side to secure it.
4. Have the students put aside their shields for a moment. Pass out copies of the Medusa picture to the students to color and cut out or allow students to draw their own version of Medusa’s head. Then tell the students to tape it (or glue it) to the shiny side of the shield. Allow the students to decorate the foil-side of the shield further with permanent markers.
5. Lastly, have the students cut out a small strip of posterboard and tape it to the backside of the shield so that they have a handle to hold the shield. Explain that the shield with the head of Medusa mounted on it is a symbol of Athena, called the aegis.
6. After you clean up from the craft, have the students help you rearrange the room so that there is a small obstacle course. For safety reasons, use desks or other large objects that will be difficult to trip over.
7. Gather the students at one side of the room. Point out an object on the other side of the room that will be their “goal.” Then instruct them that they will have to reach the goal by walking backwards and using a mirror to look behind them as they move across the room, much like how Perseus in the story
had to reach his goal (Medusa) without looking directly at her. Stress the importance of walking very slowly so that they do not trip over the desks. Compare this to the story, explaining that Perseus did not want Medusa to know that he was coming towards her.

8. Allow one student through the obstacle course at a time, while everyone watches. Encourage students on the sidelines to whisper hints to the brave hero (or heroine) moving across the room!

**Discussion**

- Why was King Acrisius afraid of Perseus? Was his fear justified?
- What gods or goddesses appear in the Perseus myth? What do they do in the story?
The Story of Perseus

Long ago, King Acrisius of Argos learned from an oracle that he would one day be killed by his grandson. Fearing that, he hid his daughter Danae in a chamber underground. But Zeus came down from Mt. Olympus in the form of a stream of gold, which poured through the roof of the chamber, and soon Danae had a baby named Perseus. When Acrisius learned of this, he put her with the child in a trunk and cast it into the sea. The chest washed ashore on the island of Seriphus, where a kind fisherman opened it and gave shelter to the mother and child.

The king of the island, Polydectes, was the fisherman’s brother. As Perseus grew up, King Polydectes fell in love with Danae. He wanted to get rid of Perseus before he married Danae, so he asked Perseus to slay the Gorgon Medusa and bring back her head as a trophy. This would be quite a challenge, since anyone who looked into her eyes was instantly turned into stone. After months of searching for the Gorgons, Perseus received help from Athena and Hermes. They led him to the lair of the Graeae, who knew where the Gorgons were to be found.

The Graeae were three old witches who shared a single eye and tooth: Perseus stole these from them, and refused to give them back until they told him where the Gorgons lived. As soon as he learned this and returned the eye and tooth, he received gifts from his divine guardians: Hermes gave him winged sandals, a cap of invisibility, and a magical bag that would grow to any size, and a sword that could cut through anything, and Athena gave him a shiny bronze shield.

From there, he flew to the island where the Gorgons lived. He held out the shield in which he saw only the reflection of Medusa, which could not turn him to stone. Perseus chopped off Medusa’s head with Hermes’ magical sword and put it in the magical bag. It is said that Pegasus, the magical flying horse, was born when blood dripped from Medusa’s head into the ocean. The remaining two Gorgons tried to pursue Perseus, but his helmet made him invisible.

On his way back to Polydectes, Perseus found the princess of Ethiopia, Andromeda, chained to a cliff as a sacrifice to a sea monster so that it would no longer terrorize the country. When Perseus saw this girl in such distress, he promised the king that he would kill the monster if he could marry Andromeda. The king agreed and Perseus slew the monster with his magic weapons and released Andromeda. They were married soon after that.

Perseus came back to Seriphus only to discover that Polydectes had become a cruel ruler. And once again, remembering his weapons, he entered the palace and showed the evil king and his friends the head of Medusa, and all who saw it were instantly turned into stone. After this he gave Medusa’s head to Athena, who placed it on her shield, which she then called the aegis.

Later, when Perseus was competing in an athletic event, he accidentally killed his grandfather Acrisius with the throw of a discus. Acrisius had happened to be visiting the king who was hosting the event, and the discus happened to swerve towards the audience away from the target. Thus the oracle from many years prior, before Perseus’ birth, came true. Perseus, Danae, and Andromeda lived the rest of their lives in happiness.