

FEMALE FIGURES IN LITERATURE:
Redefining the Myths through Intertextuality
and Carol Ann Duffy's Poetry



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Spring 2018

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Abstract

Our paper “Female Figures in Literature: Redefining the Myths through Intertextuality and Carol Ann Duffy’s Poetry” aims to study how women are perceived and textually presented. For us, the object of consideration stands within the framework of literature and feminism. Therefore, our focus was to examine female figures, taken as representative archetypes of the two available roles for women – the passive or the evil. We attempted to see the evolution of society’s perception of femininity reflected on a tolerant field such as literature. The research was based on the concept of intertextuality formulated by Julia Kristeva and on M. M. Bakhtin’s reflections. In particular, our starting point were figures found both in Ovid’s and Carol Ann Duffy’s works. From this common ground we chose three female figures that were examined in depth - namely: Eurydice, Galatea and Medusa. We realized that through different interpretations of the myths these characters were able to leave behind the burden of their traditional features and embrace more modern ones, while retaining at the same time some of their conventional traits.

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Introduction

In the changing world we live in, we are constantly provided with different images of femininity. As observers we realize that the rules society used to accept are not valid anymore: the spectrum of behaviors is wider, and different types of women are trying to find themselves in these conditions. Despite the progress that have been made and the traditional borders that have been broken, we still feel that the representation of women is restricted. Stereotypes still survive and women are seen within pre-existent roles, like wives, mothers, caretakers etc. The male gaze dominates not only politics or the public domain, but also literature – a place that is considered to be progressive, ready to accept new schemas. We hope to find examples in literary texts that contradict the male dominancy and show the truly tolerant nature of literature. “Men and women alike know that more than half the world is female but men and women alike forget it every day. It takes a poem to jog our memory”¹: in our project we are in search of those poems.

We want to investigate female figures in literature. Our starting point is the poetry of Carol Ann Duffy and notably her collection *The World's Wife* (1999). In that work, Duffy gives a voice to the female party of famous stories. She is trying to express and explain what women thought, felt, did, while the world thought that they were idle, just under the shadow of men. Women were lacking a voice for centuries and were traditionally represented as men believed they were. The collective imaginary had, therefore, created and accepted a dual schema – two available roles that women could take on.

Starting from the ancient times, women's representation in literature has always been confined to these restricted roles; roles that reflected the way men saw their female counterpart. Being the one in power, they put women in fixed categories because it was not acceptable for them to have different characteristics. Women had to accept the roles and follow the imposed rules. So, for centuries both real and fictional women possessed stereotypical features from which they could not detach themselves. The two only available characters for them were on the one side the silent, obedient and passive woman, who could only do, without questioning it, what her husband -or father- wanted her to do; while on the other side there was the wicked and corrupted woman. These corrupted women were the ones who used their femininity and sexuality to deceive men and sometimes even kill them. They have always been considered as threats and were chased as enemies. But, at the same time, they embodied sexual desire and were wanted by men. A good example to visualize this dual schema comes from the *Odyssey*, where the hero can balance between his lover, the witch Circe and his loyal wife, Penelope.

If we look at early literature, we can see that these, at first, were the only types of representation that the female gender had. As A. H. Aghababian states, in ancient literature women were mostly represented as victims of men, as objects to be exploited, but whenever they tried to rebel and to take on a more active role, they were portrayed in a negative light: they were seen as wicked, dangerous, malicious, etc². This categorization has consequences, as pointed out by Mary Ellman: the elements that define women also

¹ Duffy, C. (2015). *The world's wife, poems* (Picador Classics). London: Picador, p.x

² Aghababian, A. H. (2015). "Ancient Greek Women and Warfare: Building a More Accurate Portrait of Ancient Women Through Literature." *Inquiries Journal/Student Pulse*, 7(06), p.2. Retrieved on 26/05/2018 from: <http://www.inquiriesjournal.com/a?id=1049>

reduce their possibility to develop from the character they have been assigned. Women in literature are characterized mainly, she continues, by confinement and compliancy: they are doomed to grow in seclusion, and they bear a sense of submission³.

But during the centuries different types of literature started to explore women's roles in a deeper way, offering more opportunities together with fairer representations, closer to a new reality. Even male writers saw that there are not only these two types of women: so, different images had to be created. This shift was a long one, new texts were produced but also a revisiting of old stories and old characters enabled a deeper exploration of female characters that once had fixed characteristics.

Through time, the spectrum between the available roles seemed to get slowly covered, and women were given the chance to be represented in a more nuanced way through the natural process of intertextuality. One of the things we want to investigate is in which extent that happened – and how important was the role that literature played.

Literature is not only an artistic representation of reality. Obviously, it follows the changes in society by adopting new schemas and styles. But most importantly literature is a tolerant field, a place where one can re-invent oneself and where new versions of identity can exist and thrive. We want to see how mythological figures could be reborn and parallelized with realistic or non-realistic women; how a revisited option of a myth could speak about an average woman, about her passions, her fears, her needs. In this context, the poetry of Carol Ann Duffy is the best choice we could have done. Her collection is attempting to create revisions and give a fresh sight to women that are already connoted.

In the introduction of the collection *The World's Wife*, Jeanette Winterson, the editor, cites Muriel Rukeyser to say, “that the poem is an intervention: ‘the capacity to make change in existing conditions’”⁴. Duffy's poems suggest changes to the existing conditions of perceiving female figures and they also create environments where different types of women can exist and speak. Most of the poems have the form of a monologue, the female figures are the narrators of their own stories and the poems are both lyric and playful. The poet is experimenting with different linguistic devices to create approachable texts, since her intention is to make us deal with “poetry as an everyday event”⁵. In this poetic sphere we can identify ourselves and meet women that take on roles that are clearly found between the two traditionally imposed options of the evil or the silent.

We will examine how stories have been retold and re-elaborated during the centuries: several authors' use of intertextuality and multiple resources enabled female figures to evolve and take on new shades that transformed them and detached them from the cages in which they have always been locked in.

³ Ellmann M. (1968) *Thinking About Women*, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich in Savitt J. *Female Stereotypes in Literature (With a Focus on Latin American Writers)*. Retrieved on 26/05/2018 from: <http://teachersinstitute.yale.edu/curriculum/units/1982/5/82.05.06.x.html>

⁴ Duffy, as above, p.vii

⁵ Duffy, as above, p.vii

Motivation

As we are an international group of students studying in the field of English Studies and composed exclusively of women, we took a starting point in our own literary preferences: books that we have already read or current topics that interest us. After a brief brainstorming, lots of different kinds of books and ideas were on the table. All members of the group agreed that literature has always been a witness of what happened throughout history. Moreover, literature has a privilege, since it can be subjective in the way of reflecting society, and the authors use their imagination to create and interpret. Literature has been able to capture what was happening in the real world either by giving different visions of reality or by proposing alternatives. We concluded that from the very beginning literature has been a space where society has shaped currents, criticism and disappointment, but also expressed hopes and dreams for a different future.

These conclusions were a perfect starting point; a common interest was cultivated, but we still needed to find a narrower area. The solution came as we realized that feminism and women's rights were coming up in our discussion. Feminism is facing a unique moment and as women we want to be part of it. For this reason, we thought to navigate our academic research towards this area.

Even though women have achieved a lot over the last century, it seems that everything has a limit and there are certain sectors in the public and private sphere where women are not welcome. In 2016, we witnessed how a woman almost became President of the United States of America. As she lost, a misogynist, who believes he can treat women as he likes with complete impunity, won the election. The good news is that women do not consent to it anymore, they are determined not to tolerate that situations and to keep their heads up. There are many examples that prove that women are actually fighting to shake the established male rules and start to follow their own. An amazing case was the 2017 Women's March during the first day of the new U.S. president's term. It was a worldwide protest, where women said that: "we were answering a call to show up and be counted as those who believe in a world that is equitable, tolerant, just and safe for all, one in which the human rights and dignity of each person is protected and our planet is safe from destruction"⁶. The march was so successful that it was held again this year.

Also, another event has shaken the foundations of patriarchy. Following accusations made against the producer Harvey Weinstein, a new social movement was born. With the hashtag #MeToo, tired of being silenced, thousands of women who were victims of sexual harassment, assault and sexual violence gained the visibility and credibility they deserved when talking about the incidents they experienced. Famous actresses, singers, writers, journalists and politicians but also waitresses, lawyers, teachers etc. have come together under the umbrella of #MeToo and managed to put the blame on the responsible men and not on them. The ones at fault have been accused in public – so justice has no excuses to avoid prosecutions – so they are finally suffering the consequences of their actions⁷. This

⁶ Unknown Author, The March: Jan 21 2017 [Official Webpage Post]. Retrieved on 26/05/2018 from: <https://www.womensmarch.com/march/>

⁷ Boboltz, S. (2018, May 25). Harvey Weinstein Turns Himself In To Police For Alleged Sex Crimes [Blog Post]. Retrieved on 26/05/2018 from: https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/harvey-weinstein-arrested_us_5a020edee4b04e96foc5f916?guccounter=1

is a great achievement for women's fight but mainly it is just a starting point; there is still a long way to go.

Despite all that has been achieved during the previous years, the discussion about #MeToo showed that women still have only two available roles to take on: the faithful and silent woman or the representation of evil. These “evil” women are those who are believed to have caused the sexual harassment themselves, and the men at fault found in their powerful character an unjustified excuse for their actions. It was usually said that they “deserved” what they experienced. At the same time, also the “silent” role suffered harassment and had not the strength to denounce it. So, we asked ourselves what literature can do. Has it followed the new trend or is it accepting the male order of things? And is it a “safe” place where women had the opportunity to play other roles and represent themselves differently? As we were trying to answer these questions, we realized that we came upon a topic of study that combined our interests in literature and the current situation of women. We hope that the result of our study would allow us to understand in a better way how stereotypes were used to represent women and how female figures have been evolving throughout the history of literature.

Problem Area

Our general problem area is literature and feminism. Within this field we used the theory of intertextuality to conduct a chronological research on how female figures are perceived. What concerns us the most is the perception of women in literature, which was always indicated by the male gaze, as well as the possible ways to break these boundaries and create new roles for heroines.

The term intertextuality was coined by Julia Kristeva in the 1960s and it indicates the interaction between the texts. According to her, a text cannot be an independent entity: it lacks *originality* because it is the result of several different influences and re-elaborations of older texts. This process clearly affects the meaning of the texts: it cannot be drawn directly but it has to be mediated and derived by the texts it refers to. This means that there is not a single meaning, but layers of meaning⁸. With this project, we aim to show that through the process of intertextuality, female figures were given new possibilities of representation.

Research Questions

Our initial statement is that throughout history men have always been – and continue to be – those who possess the power, those who are in control and those who establish the rules. These rules have always included a defined model of behavior and of appearance for women, who were obliged to stick to it in order not to be outcasts. The female representation in literature followed this pattern, depicting women only as “good” or “bad”: on one hand there were those who followed the patriarchal rules and therefore

⁸ Oxford Reference, *Intertextuality* [Definition], Retrieved on 26/05/2018 from The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms (3 ed): <http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199208272.001.0001/acref-9780199208272-e-605>

were obedient and silent. On the other hand, there were those who did not accept this schema and, consequently, were represented as evil – as a threat that had to be eliminated.

Little by little, authors and works changed this dual representation, expanding the spectrum of roles that women could take on. In particular, with this project we want to bring attention to a modern poet, Carol Ann Duffy, who was able to transform characters who have always been associated with one of the two pre-existent roles. She made them appear in front of our eyes as complex figures, each of them with their own personality, which was “suppressed” in the past.

One of Duffy’s most striking and effective characteristics is her great employment of irony. Irony is a device that not only enables the readers to better understand the characters - by creating personal connections -, but that also clearly renders the situation of oppression and confinement that women have always had to bear.

The tales Duffy rewrites are told by voices that have always been in the shadow, because their story could only be told from a male perspective. Now, Duffy shuts up the men and lets the women talk and finally express their point of view and their own perception of themselves. Once the male voice is excluded, we are able to see the range of possibilities that stands for women. As we can understand by reading Duffy’s poems, women have the possibility to auto-determine themselves, to choose which part of the spectrum to occupy between the two given roles.

In this framework we come up with the following research question:

- Is literature a field where female figures take on more than the two traditionally available roles?

This question is followed up by two working questions that narrow down the field and specify our research:

- How does the theory of intertextuality navigate our understanding and how does it allow writers to open up the spectrum of roles for women?
- How does Carol Ann Duffy use poetic devices to revisit myths and impose new roles for female characters?

Limitations and Delimitations

This section includes an overview of the limitations and delimitations that were considered in our research. Firstly, the limitations have been imposed by the field that we are studying. Secondly, we will shortly account for the different delimitations we made to narrow down the project even more.

Limitations

As we are students of the English Studies Department, we knew since the beginning that our major limitation would have been the fact that we had to develop a project inside the framework of the English language. Therefore, we chose the area of literature, which was probably more familiar to us. Instead of seeing this limitation from a negative point of view,

we decided to see it as a way to help us choose a topic within the wide variety of possibilities offered by the field of literature and the vast amount of produced texts.

Furthermore, we considered the short period of time available as another limitation. Although it is true that we are lucky enough to have chosen a field that does not require typical qualitative and quantitative analyses, a project in English literature requires an incredible amount of researching and reading.

Delimitations

Despite the limitations imposed by the framework, we decided to delimit our project even more. The first delimitation was that our project idea was inspired by the work of Carol Ann Duffy and her collection of poems *The World's Wife*. This meant that our starting point was a total of 30 female figures represented in poems of varying length but, in accordance with the time we had to develop the project, it was impossible for us to analyze them all. For this reason, we chose to delimit our study to three female figures (Eurydice, Galatea and Medusa) that would serve as examples of the two available established roles for women in society and literature: the choice between either the patient and silent or the evil.

Even after this delimitation, our field of investigation was too broad, so more delimitations were required. We decided that we wanted to do a symmetrical analysis of the three female figures. The birth and evolution of each myth was different; for example, it is possible to find mentions to the Medusa myth even in African legends. We had no other choice but to select a starting point, which for us was the book *The Metamorphoses* by Ovid. In this way, we would be able to conduct and develop our analysis starting from the antiquity and Ovid's Latin legacy, moving towards modern times and the poetic voice of the feminist Carol Ann Duffy. However, we had not limited our research in time yet: so we decided to investigate the evolution of the figures until now and we found examples that were created after Duffy's collection.

Our last decision was a different kind of delimitation. We decided that we would analyze these three female figures not only in Literature but also in theatrical texts, psychoanalytical theories, feminist texts, the pop culture and even in fashion commercials. Our decision was motivated both by the idea of intertextuality but also by the fact that literature could be found outside the traditional borders of the acknowledged genres. We thought that a textual analysis inspired by different kinds of textual references would enrich our project. As we have already explained, the basic limitation was that we are students of the English Studies Department, so a wide theoretical framework to all the afore mentioned fields would have not be possible for us. We delimited our readings to the theory of intertextuality, which functioned as a basis for our work.

Moreover, we did not restrict ourselves to the English language, but also saw examples written for instance in German. This decision was made because we wanted to investigate the representation of these three female figures in a broader way within the Western culture.

Theoretical Framework

The purpose of this project is to find out if literature and texts in their various forms can offer a spectrum of different roles in the representation of women. Therefore, the theories we are employing to support our project derive from the work of Julia Kristeva and M. M. Bakhtin. We will focus mainly on the notion of intertextuality by the first scholar, and on a more general conception of genres – such as the novel and poetry – by the latter.

Intertextuality is a term coined by Kristeva in the 1960s and it indicates the interrelation that exists among texts. She states that a text cannot exist as an independent entity; this because every text is the result of a re-elaboration of older ones and it is characterized by the sign of several different influences. This process clearly affects the meaning, which cannot be understood directly, without any previous knowledge, but it must be derived by the literary works the text refers to. This interconnection creates layers of meaning, each of them adding something to the previous one.

Through the chronological retracing of the literature that has been written about the three mythical figures we chose, it is clear how each work added an extra piece to the puzzle, creating more complex characters if compared to how they were presented in their common starting point.

Moreover, Kristeva discusses the relationship between intertextuality and genre, the latter being a concept that the author rejects⁹. Genres give specific connotation to a text, restricting its possibilities to evolve. Therefore, Kristeva conceived the notion of intertextuality to defeat the authority of the genre. She wanted to substitute what she calls the “rhetorical division of genres” - epic, poetry, novel - with a new “typology of texts”, which would include all types of texts¹⁰. In claiming so, Kristeva reiterates Bakhtin’s work: he also supported the idea of redefining traditional literary genres and to include in a new classification both literary and non-literary works¹¹. Nevertheless, Kristeva is more radical: she does not aim to create new genres, but to create different types of texts¹². The scholars’ arguments support our choice to take into account in our analysis also non-literary texts, such as fashion commercials and elements of the pop culture.

Kristeva’s intertextuality is characterized by a great inclusiveness: she considers the entire literary history as a text whose parts are in relation to one another¹³. This connection can be seen in our analysis of works that follow each other: there are always elements that recall one another and that add something more to the previous works. The most obvious connection is how the “original” form of the myth - as written by Ovid - offers the framework for new productions. Carol Ann Duffy’s poetry could not be fully understood by someone who has not read the myths before. The figures are connoted by the collective imaginary and the poet uses exactly that connotations to criticize them, to move a step further, to create new versions of the characters and even make fun out of the traditional perspective.

⁹ Duff, D. (2002). Intertextuality versus Genre Theory: Bakhtin, Kristeva and the Question of Genre. *Paragraph*, 25(1), 54-73, p.57. Retrieved on 26/05/2015 from: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43263675>

¹⁰ Duff, as above, p.58

¹¹ Duff, as above, p.58

¹² Duff, as above, p.60

¹³ Duff, as above, p.63

Our readings and schemas imposed by the collective imaginary will always affect the way we understand things. Those motifs are not only textual, but they can also be visual: for instance, if you have even been in the Glyptoteket in Copenhagen and seen Rodin's series of sculptures illustrating the *Metamorphoses*, you will always keep these sensual shapes in your mind. The way the bodies are sculpted is inspired by the Latin text, but at the same time viewing them affects the way we are perceiving the stories, if it happens to read them again. Furthermore, we cannot unread what we have read and even if we dislike it and have rejected it, it will be forever saved in the back of our thoughts. It is the previous knowledge that will be - maybe unconsciously - reflected on any new information we get. Our understanding derives from what we already possess.

Moreover, we considered Bakhtin's theory on poetry, which can be read in connection with and in contrast to the novel. According to the author, poetry and novel represent respectively monologue and dialogue: in poetry, we can read about only one voice, one person expressing a single point of view; while the novel is characterized by a multitude of voices, also because of its connection with different genres¹⁴.

It seems to us particularly important Bakhtin's definition of poetry as a monologue in relation to Carol Ann Duffy's poems: for a long time in poetry we have read only about one point of view – that of the men, defining the state of things through their eyes and representing it as the truth. But Duffy reverses this: since in poems the point of view we can read about is only one, then let it be that of a woman telling her truth. The author shuts up the male counterpart to finally give space to the female one.

Finally, as we have already mentioned, Bakhtin also talks about dialogism in connection with the novel. In general terms, dialogism represents an opposition to the monologue and it indicates the different perspectives, consciousnesses and voices that can be found in texts (in his theory, the novel). According to him, the relation between the different perspectives works to create a new reality, a new way of perceiving the world¹⁵. From this concept Kristeva was able to derive her definition of intertextuality¹⁶.

¹⁴ Bakhtin M. M. (1975), *The Dialogic Imagination*. University of Texas Press Slavic Series. (p. 264)

¹⁵ Bakhtin, as above, p. 298

¹⁶ Duff, as above, p. 55

Analysis

Preface

In our introduction we briefly stated what Carol Ann Duffy is doing in her poetry and why we chose her. Her poems in *The World's Wife* published in 1999 are fresh and humorous: via irony she manages to speak about women in an accurate way. "Duffy is best known for writing love poems that often take the form of monologues"¹⁷: the female figure speaks without being interrupted. The collection that we are examining received enthusiastic feedback:

In what Antioch Review contributor Jane Satterfield called "masterful subversions of myth and history," the poems in this collection are all told from the points of view of the women behind famous male figures, both real and fictional, including the wives and lovers of Aesop, Pontius Pilate, Faust, Tiresius, Herod, Quasimodo, Lazarus, Sisyphus, Freud, Darwin, and even King Kong. Not all the women are wives, however. For example, one poem is told from Medusa's point of view as she expresses her feelings before being slain by Perseus; "Little Red-Cap" takes the story of Little Red Riding Hood to a new level as a teenage girl is seduced by a "wolf-poet." These fresh perspectives allow Duffy to indulge in a great deal of humor and wit as, for example, Mrs. Aesop grows tired of her husband's constant moralizing, Mrs. Freud complains about the great psychologist's obsession with penises, Sisyphus's bride is stuck with a workaholic, and Mrs. Lazarus, after finding a new husband, has her life ruined by the return of her formerly dead husband. There are conflicting emotions as well in such poems as "Mrs. Midas," in which the narrator is disgusted by her husband's greed, but, at the same time, longs for something she can never have: his physical touch. "The World's Wife appeals and astonishes," said Satterfield. "Duffy's mastery of personae allows for seamless movement through the centuries; in this complementary chorus, there's voice and vision for the coming ones." An Economist reviewer felt that the collection "is savage, trenchant, humorous and wonderfully inventive at its best." And Ray Olson, writing in Booklist, concluded that "Duffy's takes on the stuff of legends are... richly rewarding."¹⁸

The collection revisits stories characterized not only by mythological subjects or by Biblical references, but also stories about women that existed next to famous men, who shaped the world we live in today. Jeanette Winterson, the editor of the collection, explains in her introduction that Duffy mainly attempts to create a joke – "a joke on the world's most popular dedication – To My Wife". The women she writes for are standing "behind the scenes, the throne, history"¹⁹.

With this project, we aim to show that through the process of intertextuality, female figures were given new possibilities of representation. We will take as examples three poems: *Eurydice*, *Pygmalion's Bride* and *Medusa*; all three of them are inspired by mythical figures present since the ancient times in Ovid's work. Our choice derives from our wish to investigate how the female representation changed through the years. Especially, these three female figures are represented in their "original" myths and in the collective imaginary following the typical stereotypes that were assigned to women. Eurydice and Galatea are the passive and silent women, what we know of them derives from the male's perspective; they never speak for themselves. While Medusa is the deceitful and evil

¹⁷ Unknown Author (Poetry Foundation), *Carol Ann Duffy* [Blog Post]. Retrieved on 26/05/2018 from: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/carol-ann-duffy>

¹⁸ Poetry Foundation, as above.

¹⁹ Duffy, as above, page ix-x

woman, represented as a monster to be defeated, but whose background is never remembered. Citing again Winterson, “poetry is a conversation across time”²⁰, the best tool to navigate in the past and explore its connections to the present.

The first figure we will present is Eurydice, the wife of the great poet Orpheus, who descended to the Underworld to bring her back, when she abruptly died. Their story was conceived as one of the greatest love stories and was always told from Orpheus’ point of view: Eurydice was his silent muse and source of talent. Using the stimulus given by Duffy, we wanted to contradict this idea, so we investigated the figure firstly in Ovid and then in the poem “Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes” by the famous Austrian poet Rainer Maria Rilke. Together with the interpretation of Duffy’s poem, we worked on another feminist who revisited the myth, Margaret Atwood and her poem “Orpheus” from the *Orpheus and Eurydice Circle*. Finally, we moved to the present and watched a fashion commercial for Gucci directed by Gia Coppola to investigate how the myth still inspires a younger generation of artists.

The second figure that concerned us was Galatea, found in Duffy’s poem as “Pygmalion’s Bride”. Pygmalion created a statue and fell in love with it, so he prayed to the Gods asking to give life to the stone. The poem is the story of that statue-woman, who was traditionally silent. Our investigation is chronological and again starts from Ovid. Then we attempt to see how the figure was perceived later, making a quick reference to Rousseau. We observe Galatea’s evolution in the play *Pygmalion* from Bernard Shaw and in later more feministic texts: Carol Ann Duffy’s poem and the most recent short story written in 2013 by Madeleine Miller.

The last mythical female figure that we wrote about was Medusa. For the collective imaginary, the Gorgon Medusa is well-known for her poisonous snaky hair and her power to petrify everyone who dare to look at her. Medusa is the personification of the wicked and corrupted woman, who dares to defy the established order of powers and therefore deserves to be punished. Our research starts from Ovid and continues to the psychoanalytic theory of Sigmund Freud. During our analysis, we realized that we need to cross the boundaries of literature and to examine some scholars. Except for Freud, we read the feminist philosopher Hélène Cixous and her interpretation of the myth. We also worked on a poem by Sylvia Plath called “Medusa”. We mention the use of the figure in the logo of the fashion house Versace and the modern view of a new Medusa in Duffy’s poem. Finally, in our attempt to approach the present, we found the figure being utilized in politics and particularly in the last USA presidential elections as a negative symbol for powerful women.

Eurydice

In her poem “Eurydice” Carol Ann Duffy obviously deals with the mythical figure of the nymph Eurydice, who was the wife and muse of Orpheus. In her poem Duffy attempts to retell the myth and empower the heroine’s state by giving her voice – a voice much needed to someone who always lacked one. We will return to the poem later and analyze its

²⁰ Duffy, as above, page vii

meaning, but before that, we will attempt a retrospective reading of previous texts, which were written inspired by this story. This historical examination aims to clarify how the female figure is represented and what is her part in the story. As we already mentioned our research started from Ovid and continued with the Austrian poet Rainer Maria Rilke and his lyric version of the myth. Approaching the present, we compared two feminist poems: one by Margaret Atwood and the one by Duffy. Our final destination was a short movie, a fashion commercial inspired by the same myth.

Our starting point is the original myth as it was written by Ovid in *Metamorphoses*. The 10th book starts by reciting the well-known myth²¹. The narrator is omniscient and tells the story following the expected form of a fairytale. We see the hero, the talented bard Orpheus, in Thrace setting for his journey to the Underworld to bring back his young and beautiful bride, who had just passed away bitten by a viper. He is desperate and determined to fulfill his mission (“Inflam'd by love, and urg'd by deep despair”)²². Ovid creates a threatening image of the Underworld to let us understand how resolved the hero is. In the 3rd verse we hear him speaking to the gods asking for his wife (“My wife alone I seek; for her lov'd sake”, “Let me again Eurydice receive”, “Know, I'm determin'd to return no more;/ So both retain, or both to life restore.”). He expresses his request in form of a song, which moves all the creatures of the Underworld (“while the bard melodiously complains,/ And to his lyre accords his vocal strains”). Persephone, the queen of the dead, is herself deeply moved, so the gods agree to give Eurydice back to the bard. She appears there revived, ready to follow her husband back to life. Orpheus will have her on one condition: he is not allowed to turn and look at her until they exit the Underworld:

Now, from a troop of shades that last arriv'd,
Eurydice was call'd, and stood reviv'd:
Slow she advanc'd, and halting seem to feel
The fatal wound, yet painful in her heel.
Thus he obtains the suit so much desir'd,
On strict observance of the terms requir'd:
For if, before he reach the realms of air,
He backward cast his eyes to view the fair,
The forfeit grant, that instant, void is made,
And she for ever left a lifeless shade.

The two of them follow the dark path towards life. Just before reaching the exit, Orpheus cannot resist any longer, since he wants to be sure that she is there, behind him: almost in the margin of light he turns to look at his beloved one:

When he, mistrusting lest her steps might stray,
And gladsome of the glimpse of dawning day,
His longing eyes, impatient, backward cast
To catch a lover's look, but look'd his last;
For, instant dying, she again descends,
While he to empty air his arms extends.

²¹ Ovid, R., Ovid, & Humphries, Rolfe. (1983). *Metamorphoses*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, p.234-237

²² In this section of our analysis, we are referring to Ovid translated by Sir Samuel Garth, John Dryden, et al. We found this translation more poetic and suitable for that specific part. Unknown Author, *Metamorphoses by Ovid. Translated by Sir Samuel Garth, John Dryden, et al. Book X*. Retrieved on 26/05/2018 from: <http://classics.mit.edu/Ovid/metam.10.tenth.html>

Again she dy'd, nor yet her lord reprov'd;
What could she say, but that too well he lov'd?
One last farewell she spoke, which scarce he heard;
So soon she drop'd, so sudden disappear'd.

Eurydice had been transformed from dead to alive and now she is again transformed to a lifeless shadow. Both parties of the couple return where they belong: Eurydice to death and Orpheus to life. According to the myth, Orpheus will never again love a woman until his tragic end (“Since Orpheus fled the face of womankind,/ And all soft union with the sex declin'd.”).

What strikes us as interesting is the fact that this myth still works as a powerful means of inspiration for many artists, who come from different backgrounds or create within a wide artistic range. In our collective cultural memory Orpheus symbolizes the perfect love poet. He is the one capable of singing about love, and Eurydice, the woman that inspired the songs and the talent, is silent, visible only when he decides to create something about her or because of her. As years go by, the figure of Eurydice is more actively present and the recent works care for her equal representation to Orpheus. She is no longer the silent nymph controlled by the talented poet and musician, but his lover able to stand next to him, not behind him. As we said, the story was told many times, but we do not wish to reproduce a whole list of references. A quick search reveals a couple of operas, ballets and plays, numerous paintings and sculptures, like *The Orphic Trilogy*, series of films by Jean Cocteau (1930-1959), the play *Eurydice* by Jean Anouilh (1941) or Jacques Offenbach's operetta *Orpheus in the Underworld* (1858) etc. Traditionally the story was focused on Orpheus and it was always told by his point of view, as if the artist, the viewer or the reader did not care much about Eurydice's feelings and thoughts. If we imagine a historical line, we realize that there was a point where the different versions of the myth started to function more widely and Eurydice became important and possibly even an active element of the story. We chose some examples of the myth's revisions that we are going to examine further. A good start is a poem by the Austrian poet Rainer Maria Rilke written in the beginning of the 20th century, since it is balancing between tradition and modernity. Regarding the representation of the female figure, the poem is a breakthrough. Although it is written from the male point of view, Eurydice is presented to have made choices that affect her life.

Rainer Maria Rilke's poem “Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes” published in 1904 is a narrative poem: the myth is not just retold in modern terms, but it is used to create a metaphor, which is going to express the poet's feelings on alienation and estrangement. A beautiful analysis and reflection on the poem is given to us by Joseph Brodsky, who - a poet himself - enlightens these aspects in his essay *Ninety Years Later*. Brodsky states that “Rilke's poem is not so much a rendition of the myth as its growth” and in the context of this expansion Eurydice could be more active and even have feelings on her own²³. Her feelings are meaningful enough and should be considered.

²³ Brodsky, J. (1996). *On grief and reason, essays* (Penguin modern classics). London: Penguin Books, p.326-372

The poem is set in an Underworld resembling a cave or better an abandoned mine (“That was the strange unfathomed mine of souls”)²⁴. The visual depiction enhances the lyric impact and involves grey colors and gloomy feelings, silver glittery tones for the souls and an intense contrast to the red blood (“like silent veins of silver ore”, “Between roots/welled up the blood that flows on to mankind,/ like blocks of heavy porphyry in the darkness.”, “and that immense, gray unreflecting pool” etc.). The reader gets swallowed into the setting and is forced to follow the path along with Orpheus - that only single path that leads again to the world of the living (“And on the single pathway the approached.”).

The narrative -mainly focused on Orpheus- makes it almost inevitable to avoid an identification of Rilke *the poet* to Orpheus *the poet*. He is illustrated too human (“gazing in dumb impatience straight before him”) and that connects him even to his creator. On the other hand, Eurydice is depicted more divine -dead and untouchable, the estranged lover. According to Brodsky, the poet “presents Eurydice as an utterly autonomous entity”²⁵, her presence is described in a new verse, the poetic means and language change when he speaks about her. We have the feeling of observing her at a distance, the description of her beauty is done as something *former* (“Even now she was no longer that blond woman/ who’d echoed in the poet’s poems,/ no longer the broad couch’s scent and island,/ nor yonder man’s possession any longer.”). She -being no one’s possession any longer- is as dead as can be: a root (“She was already root.”). No human, just a soul *rooted* in the Underworld far from the joy of love, far from her former self and character, far from the husband (“her sex had closed/ like a young flower at the approach of the evening”).

We see Eurydice following Orpheus guided by Hermes and as she does so, she eventually does not even know where she is going and why. The most powerful line of the poem reveals that utter alienation. When Hermes informs her that Orpheus had turned, and that now she is obliged to return to the Underworld, she asks “Who?” -who am I following, what kind of path am I taking.

Joseph Brodsky claims that “[i]n fact, the entire poem could be construed as a metaphor for romantic estrangement between two participants in an affair, with the initiative belonging to the woman and the desire to restore things to normal to the man”²⁶. This argument supports our general claim that literature and revisited myths can cover the spectrum of different attitudes that women (and men) can adopt. Far from a dogmatic feministic approach, Rainer Maria Rilke’s poem gives Eurydice an existence that has nothing to do with a silent wife or a muse with no character and no feelings.

Moving along the timeline, we stop almost 70 years after Rilke’s poem and we meet a new Eurydice: a powerful and determined woman in Margaret Atwood’s poems known as “Orpheus and Eurydice Circle”. Written between 1976-1986 and published in the second volume of her *Selected Poems*, this circle of three poems gives the myth an entirely new

²⁴ We are referring to the English translation of the poem made by J. B. Leishman and published in 1976 in London, which is also found in the essay we are examining: Brodsky, as above, p.332-335. Another English translation is provided in: Rilke, R., Krisak, Len, & Schoolfield, George C. (2015). *New poems* (Studies in German literature, linguistics, and culture). Rochester, New York: Camden House, p.151-156

²⁵ Brodsky, as above, p.360

²⁶ Brodsky, as above, p.368-369

aspect²⁷. At this part we are discussing the first one, which is titled “Orpheus” and it is Eurydice addressing her husband in a rather aggressive way.

Atwood’s poem has a more minimalistic perception. The language is simple and straight forward, the setting is free of connotations and detailed descriptions. There is again a path the heroes are following. The road leads to a flash light, like we are looking at the end of a tunnel, which makes it hard for Eurydice to see clearly:

You walked in front of me,
pulling me back out
to the green light that had once
grown fangs and killed me.²⁸

She is capable of perceiving the figure of her former lover, but just the shape of his body. In front of her eyes there is an outline of him. The poem is not long and the plot is quickly reaching a climax. At that decisive point, Eurydice acts to change her situation: she will never return to the living world. When she must act, she does not hesitate. It is interesting that she is not able to see his expression when he turns:

I could see only the outline
of your head and shoulders,
black against the cave mouth,
and so could not see your face
at all, when you turned

She knows well that for Orpheus her loss is more than the loss of a wife. For him such a turn of the events will be a great failure, that might cause pain at the first place, but also the feeling of vanity. Losing her would evoke a sense of uselessness to someone being so close to something he anticipated that much, but still fails to get it (“Before your eyes you held steady/ the image of what you wanted/ me to become: living again.”). She is determined to cause these feelings (“Though I knew how this failure/ would hurt you, I had to/ fold like a gray moth and let go.”). She wants to evolve from a passive echo to an active voice, from the muse following the selfish guy around to an independent dead woman (“I was your hallucination, listening/ and floral”). And she does so.

The poet creates a powerful image to show the passage from the Underworld to the state of alive mortality. As Eurydice follows Orpheus, the closer she gets to the exit and the tunnel flash light, the more human she gets. She is regaining her flesh, which could be pleasant, but also some other human characteristics that are related to more annoying parts of mortality (“already new skin was forming on me/ within the luminous misty shroud/ of my other body; already/ there was dirt on my hands and I was thirsty.”). Having a flesh also makes her again a sexual being, what a husband wants and it is hard for her to notice that. The reader feels that being dead can be good, interesting and divine, better - for sure- than an unpleasant and humiliating marriage.

²⁷ Goodreads, *Selected Poems II: 1976 – 1986 by Margaret Atwood* [Blog Post]. Retrieved on 26/05/2018 from: https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/17653.Selected_Poems_II

²⁸ We are referring to the poem as found in an educational webpage, access to the book was not possible. Unknown Author, *Margaret Atwood’s Orpheus and Eurydice’s Circle: Orpheus (1)* [Blog Post]. Retrieved on 26/05/2018 from: <https://sites.google.com/site/uteurydice/the-history-of-orpheus-and-eurydice/margaret-atwood-s-orpheus-and-eurydice-cycle>

Moreover, Atwood implies that there are always means which could be used by women to empower their state within a patriarchal system, which takes under no consideration the female desires. Eurydice is alone in a world that does not care about what she wants and who she wants to be. Her husband (who possesses or at least possessed her) makes a deal with the gods (who accept the state of man possessing woman) to take her back. Orpheus is allowed to have his wife back, just because he wants her and deserves her. Eurydice is his reward for being who he is. Eurydice, on the other side, has a totally different conception of the situation, so she uses her voice to make him turn. And obviously she manages to obtain what she was aiming for: he loses her.

The last line of the poem comes as a conclusion and it is mainly the source of information about their former relationship and its unfair power balance. Orpheus cannot handle that Eurydice has a voice which can initiate actions (“You could not believe I was more than your echo.”). For him she is a beautiful creature, just reflecting his own self, she should remain just his echo.

Margaret Atwood creates a poem about female empowerment. We see how differently things are perceived and how strong the female party is at that point. Although her writing is giving a new perspective it is still weak, since unfortunately it is stuck in the dualism of dumb and suppressive men against smart and suppressed women.

Written in 1999, Carol Ann Duffy’s “Eurydice” evolves the ideas first posed by Margaret Atwood in a different poetic environment and offers her audience a more complete view on a new Eurydice. The heroine is again powerful and determined, and the poem is full of irony and humoristic hints. The poet uses stylistic devices to create a text that evokes different feelings and at the same time criticizes how society is built in an unfriendly -to say the least- way against women.

Duffy’s narrative poem retells the myth using a new order in reciting the events. Eurydice is in the center: the poem is not just focused on her feelings, but she is the narrator having as much verses as she needs to make her point of view clear. The poem starts with her addressing to an audience of girls (“Girls, I was dead and down/ in the Underworld, a shade,/ a shadow of my former self”)²⁹. She tells her story returning to the past, explaining what happened and she gives us a description of Orpheus. Being the single first-person narrator, her view is clearly biased. Orpheus appears to be a star poet, he is called the Big O and Eurydice is making fun out of it (“Big O was the boy. Legendary.”). The main event of the myth, his descent to the Underworld and his failure to bring her back, is viewed like a battle between the two of them. Eurydice is the winner of this game and now she enjoys telling her story to the other girls.

The Underworld of Carol Ann Duffy’s poem is not fully described. We find ourselves in a quiet place, but we have no visual stimuli. The Underworld is a place where language stops (“It was a place where language stopped,/ a black full stop, a black hole/ where words had to come to an end.”). This symbolic pause of language affects Orpheus and the turn of the events. Since he is a poet, his main power is the use of language. His language was his power on his wife, his means to seduce her, his magic force. But in a place with no language, he is not important to her anymore. The second stanza of the poem describes

²⁹ We are referring to the poem “Eurydice” found in: Duffy, as above, p.58-62

their relationship which is full of references to speech and poetry. The couple's everyday life is infused by his poetry: Orpheus follows the girl around, he gets inspired by her and calls her his muse. She was flattered, but not any longer. The narrator reflects on their past with coldness; now she is unavailable and happy to have found a place where she is safe and protected. It is obvious that she has no reason to go back, she does not want him to own her again:

So imagine me there,
unavailable,
out of this world,
then picture my face in that place
of Eternal Repose,
in the one place you'd think a girl would be safe
from the kind of a man
who follows her round
writing poems,
hovers about
while she reads them,
calls her His Muse,
and once sulked for a night and a day
because she remarked on his weakness for abstract nouns.
Just picture my face
when I heard -
Ye Gods -
a familiar knock-knock at Death's door.

Full of irony again, Eurydice portrays Orpheus *larger than life*, a hero-poet ("Him./ Big O./ Larger than life."). His status is enough to allow him to have his muse back as a price. Like in Atwood's poem, but even clearer, Eurydice knows that she is seen as an award ("with me as a prize"). In the 4th stanza Orpheus is depicted using typical elements that emanate from the original myth, like his ability to calm wild animals and seduce every creature, even the whole nature. The irony is clear without having reached its highest peak yet. We almost believe in his divine talent:

The blurb on the back of his books claimed
that animals,
aardvark to zebra,
flocked to his side when he sang,
fish leapt in their shoals
at the sound of his voice,
even the mute, sullen stones at his feet
wept wee, silver tears.

However, Eurydice knows how to ruin this image. "Bollocks", said she. She knows his qualities well, since she has done all the typing herself. We are now brought back into reality *-literally*. The environment is not mythical, the story could be set in our present. Orpheus is a poet, Eurydice his muse - a muse that works as a secretary and is obliged to admire him and keep his self-esteem high. Eurydice has the pre-given role of the muse to follow, a role that she did not choose (or even if she had chosen it once, she no longer wants it). She states that she wants to speak for herself, she wants to be presented as she sees her own self and not as the poet wishes to present her:

Bollocks. (I'd done all the typing myself,
I should know.)
And given my time all over again,
rest assured that I'd rather speak for myself
than be Dearest, Beloved, Dark Lady, White Goddess,
etc., etc.

“In fact, girls, I'd rather be dead”: if there is a matter of choice, she chooses to be dead, but no one asks her. The narrator uses a clever metaphor to comment the publishing society: publishers -and gods- are men, so they do not care about women (“But the Gods are like publishers,/ usually male”). The patriarchy does not mind if the muse no longer wants to be a muse. Her role is to serve as his inspiration: visible and important only in his poetry, part of the publishing deal.

Duffy plays with language and the style changes, as if Orpheus' poems are embodied in Eurydice's narration. The rhyming verse which illustrates the power of his poetry, a power strong enough to seduce the cold-blooded creatures of the Underworld, is maybe the greatest demonstration of irony:

Orpheus strutted his stuff.

The bloodless ghosts were in tears.
Sisyphus sat on his rock for the first time in years.
Tantalus was permitted a couple of beers.
The woman in question could scarcely believe her ears.

In the last part of the poem, Eurydice's narration becomes impatient. She makes two attempts to change her destiny and stay in the Underworld. She is really determined to use every means of power that she possesses to be in charge of her future (“Girls, forget what you've read./ It happened like this -/ I did everything in my power/ to make him look back.”). The first failed attempt was gentler; she tried to touch his neck and ask him if she could stay where she was (“I stretched out my hand/ to touch him once/ on the back of the neck./ *Please let me stay.*”). But as they were approaching the light she had to act more decisively, so she uses a weapon that she already knows would be efficient. She knows well that Orpheus' self-image is the most important thing to him and that he would not resist to a compliment. She uses successfully that power to make him turn. So, he turns. And loses her:

I willed him to turn.
I was thinking of filching the poem
out of his cloak,
when inspiration finally struck.
I stopped, thrilled.
He was a yard in front.
My voice shook when I spoke -
Orpheus, your poem's a masterpiece.
I'd love to hear it again...

To Orpheus' major drama, the narrator responds with a trivial everyday life comment; and this is Duffy's talent: making the reader smile, because everything is trivial and could have happened to you as well:

What else?
I noticed he hadn't shaved.
I waved once and was gone.

The last lines wrap up the poem in a circular way. The silent dead are wise and talented (“The dead are so talented”, “the wise, drowned silence of the dead”). In Eurydice’s world Orpheus’ language has no power. She can be herself, free and glad to be dead. In the poems we discussed so far, being dead symbolizes a freedom. Especially in Atwood’s and Duffy’s world, death symbolizes a new state of being without men, in a world free of them and their demands; death is the place where women can develop themselves as they want -being no one’s wife, no poet’s muse.

Within the feminist perspective we can see some differences between Atwood’s and Duffy’s poems. As we claimed before, Margaret Atwood is trapped in the dual schema of offender and victim. On the other hand, Carol Ann Duffy moves outside these strict lines and plays with Eurydice’s character. She is not a victim nor a saint. She is ironic and a bit wicked. The poem makes the reader think that there is no balance of power between the two sexes, both historically or in the present. Relationships are unfair, opportunities are not equally shared and our cultural background is male. The myths should be retold, so that the female point of view could be stated and developed. Duffy’s poem demonstrates that there are lots of ways to do so.

A more recent example of adapting the myth is seen within the world of fashion. To promote the Pre-Fall Collection of 2016, Gucci recruits Gia Coppola to make a short fashion film. Following her family’s tradition of working in the film industry, Coppola is one of the aspiring directors of her generation, making movies and clips that are admired within the indie community. The *Gucci Stories: The myth of Orpheus and Eurydice* was released in June 2016 and is set in New York mansions, clubs, streets and parks³⁰.

The myth of Orpheus and Eurydice is retold by her as a modern fairytale dressed by Gucci. Out of the colors and the patterns, the extravagant clothing and make-up, the love story of the young musician and his muse is presented: Eurydice and Orpheus are equally presented in the film. She is on focus in lots of plans. Moreover, none of them speaks during the whole movie. At the crucial point where Orpheus descends in the Underworld (which has the form of a notorious night club) to bring her back, she remains inactive and seems lost. Orpheus plays his guitar and is allowed to take her back. As they are returning to the daylight there are several plans that show us how they walk. At some parts we see Orpheus in the front and the girl trying to follow him, but there are again plans that are focused on Eurydice. The camera gives as her point of view: we see her or what she sees - Orpheus back (and Gucci backpack). During their walk, they are holding hands until the point when Eurydice stops (or is stopped) and leaves his grip. Now we know the end of the story. It is the same as it was hundreds of years before. Orpheus turns to look if she is still following (or basically why she is not holding his hand any more) and she disappears returning to where she belongs. Eurydice looks at him and a tear drops. What is new in the short film by Coppola is the representation of the couple -their happy and creative moments (their “Bliss” as indicated in the beginning of the second part) and their

³⁰ [GUCCI]. (2016, June 7). *Gucci Stories: The Myth of Orpheus and Eurydice* [Video File]. Retrieved on 24/05/2018 from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V5Mli5mEbx4>

marriage: it is something that both want and clearly enjoy. Also new -and possibly visible because of the previous illustrations of the myth- is the hint that Eurydice may stop intentionally, because she no longer wants to return. And maybe the reason of her denial is the fact that Orpheus could have been the one responsible for her death, as he abruptly leaves her alone when he sees (or just thinks of) his previous lover.

The modern Gucci fairytale is one more proof that such a story can work as a stimulus for young artists and be liked by young people. Furthermore, the radical feminist interpretation is no longer needed for the spectrum to be covered, since both heroes are not depicted within the traditional male and female roles.

In this project we are arguing that literature and art are there to cover the spectrum of possible roles available for women and men, breaking the rules of socially constructed gender roles. We believe that the example of Eurydice is showing that this is possible. The female figure evolves and gains her own voice. We meet her a silent muse standing next to her poet, an alienated ex-lover, a clever but once suppressed wife, sneaky and determined...

Galatea

The second mythical female figure that we want to examine is that of Galatea, found in Carol Ann Duffy's poem "Pygmalion's Bride". She is the statue-girl created by the king Pygmalion, protagonist of one of the myths written by Ovid. This is another character that belongs to the category of the passive and silent women, but during the course of the centuries many authors gave her the possibility to evolve and to take on different roles and nuances. In order to analyze her development, we followed the same chronological pattern we used with Eurydice. We started by commenting Ovid's myth and how unpleasant it may seem to the modern reader. After a brief mention of Rousseau's 1762 play *Pygmalion*, which represented a turning point for the evolution of Galatea, we analyzed George Bernard Shaw's 1912 play, *Pygmalion*, where the myth is transported into more recent times and where Galatea finally has a voice and speaks for herself. Subsequently, we returned to the modern author that connects each figure: Carol Ann Duffy with her poem "Pygmalion's Bride", which represents an entirely revisited version of Ovid's myth, with the female party as the narrator of the events. This poem aims to create a new perspective and to make the reader think, also thanks to a great employment of irony, which enables us to feel closer to the protagonist. Finally, we examined the 2013 short story *Galatea* written by Madeline Miller, whose characters present more modern characteristic and live a life that could be our own. Thanks to this chronological retracing, we were able to follow the changes in the literary representation of the female figure, witnessing her shift from a "lifeless" figure to a character that acts in order to obtain freedom.

Pygmalion is a mythical figure that we encounter in the 10th book of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*: he is the king of Cyprus and also a sculptor. He is characterized by hatred for the female gender, developed after witnessing the behavior of the women of Cyprus, called Propoetides, whose main features are vices, such as lust. Disgusted by them, Pygmalion decides to stay bachelor and to create an ideal woman for himself: he starts to sculpt the

figure of a woman from a block of ivory, and every day he chisels his sculpture in order to create a girl whose beauty has never been seen before (“He made, with marvellous art, an ivory statue/[...] and gave it greater beauty/ that any girl could have.”)³¹. Finally, his creation is so beautiful that he falls in love with it; he touches it, kisses it, speaks to it, imagining that it responds to him (“His kisses/ he fancies, she returns”). Then, he brings it jewels, flowers and finally he puts it in his bed, since what he wants is a wife. One day, during a festival for the celebration of Venus, not daring to pronounce his wish out loud, he prays that his statue can be turned into a living woman who will become his wife. Venus hears his wish and signals him that she will grant it, so Pygmalion rushes home and starts to touch and kiss his creation. She slowly turns from ivory into flesh under his hands. Finally, with Venus’s blessing, the couple gets married and they later have a daughter, Paphos.

One of the main topics of this myth is that of creation: the creation of a woman who is designed to be perfect, to satisfy a man’s standard of perfect beauty, as well as his desires. The way in which Ovid describes how Pygmalion decorates the statue makes us think about the objectifying male gaze upon women. In this case, the sculptor covers his statue with several different gifts that would make it beautiful before his eyes; but, in the end, she is always more beautiful naked:

He pays her compliments, and brings her presents
Such as girls love, smooth pebbles, winding shells,
Little pet birds, flowers with a thousand colours,
Lilies, and painted balls, and lumps of amber.
He decks her limbs with dresses, and her fingers
Wear rings which he puts on, and he brings a necklace,
And earrings, and a ribbon for her bosom,
And all of these become her, but she seems
Even more lovely naked, [...]

The female figure of this story belongs to the category of the silent, obedient and passive woman. As a lifeless statue in the beginning, she does not have the possibility to act; the block of ivory just bears Pygmalion’s chisel until it acquires the shape of a perfect woman. Once the statue is transformed into a human being, the modern reader does not feel like much has changed, since barely any of her actions, let alone her thoughts, are mentioned. Pygmalion himself cannot believe that she is now alive, so he searches for any proofs that can confirm it, continuing to touch her:

[...] And Pygmalion
Wonders, and doubts, is dubious and happy,
Plays lover again, and over and over touches
The body with his hand. It is a body!

As these verses seem to indicate, even when the statue turns to life, Pygmalion keeps seeing her as an object, a body to possess.

The girl is not the focus of the myth: she is not described, she does not have a name (thus an identity), and we do not know anything about what she feels or thinks. Everything is built to draw our attention on Pygmalion, the real protagonist of the story; this is the same

³¹ Ovid et al., as above, p.241

pattern that we encounter in the Orpheus myth: the poet is the core of the story, while Eurydice seems to represent a side character. We can say she differs from Pygmalion's statue only because she has a name; but in all other aspects both women are alike in their anonymity. They are both viewed as "artistic creations" of talented men. These characteristics lead Galatea to take on the traditional role of the subdued woman, whose existence is dedicated to her husband and to the satisfaction of his needs. A sensitive reader could find the Pygmalion myth disturbing; it actually gives the feeling that the girl is forced into her marriage with the sculptor. She does not have a say in this: when she wakes up – or better, when she comes to life – she finds herself in an already determined situation, where she does not have any power or possibility to change. The only thing we know about her from the text is that she "blushes and responds" to Pygmalion's kisses, because of course she cannot do otherwise. Everything else about her is a mystery to us and, as it has been for the following centuries, not interesting. During the centuries, this myth has been revised and re-interpreted in different ways, through different forms and perspectives by many authors. Still, in the following revisiting of the myth the figure of the girl was not considered interesting, and therefore she remained for a long time only the "object" of the relationship.

As Stefanie Eck points out in her work "*Galatea's Emancipation. The transformation of the Pygmalion Myth in Anglo-Saxon Literature since the 20th century*", the first step forward from this perspective was done by Rousseau, with his 1762 play "*Pygmalion*". The focus is still Pygmalion, whose primary feature now is that of being an artist who is not sure about his abilities, but whose confidence is regained when he sees the perfect beauty of his creation³². A change occurs in the girl as well: first, she now has a name, Galatea, which contributes in giving her an identity; secondly, in this play she speaks for the first time. Even though her words are mainly focused on Pygmalion (she acknowledges herself as her creator's mirror image), this aspect represents an important turning point: it is the beginning of a process that will lead Galatea, in subsequent interpretations of the myth, to take a step outside of the category in which she has always been confined.

George Bernard Shaw was the first author to give a feminist interpretation to the Pygmalion myth: he gave a new and modern role to his Galatea, that of the powerful and independent woman. In his 1912 play "*Pygmalion*", the sculptor is represented by Henry Higgins, a phonetician, while the role of Galatea is played by Eliza, a girl who sells flowers in the street as a living³³. She is characterized by a decidedly non-standard use of English language and by lack of manners, traits that Higgins will change in the course of the play. Nonetheless, we are able to notice that, right from the beginning of the play, Eliza is an independent woman: she is able to find a way to survive using her own means, not relying on anyone else. Moreover, she is not silent and obedient as the original Galatea; instead, she speaks for herself and stands up to other people. We can see a great difference in this character,

³² Rousseau J. (1762), *Pygmalion* in Eck, S. (2014). *Galatea's emancipation, the transformation of the Pygmalion myth in Anglo-Saxon literature since the 20th century* (Compact). Hamburg, Germany: Anchor Academic Publishing, p.7-8

³³ Shaw G. B. (1912), *Pygmalion*. Longman Literature

compared to the mythical Galatea. The latter was never independent, literally her life depended on a man; while Eliza is self-supporting at the beginning, and she later becomes dependent on a man.

Subsequently, Higgins makes a bet with a colleague: he will manage to transform Eliza from a flower girl to a duchess, both in her language and in her manners. Only this will make her a worthy human being, at Higgins's eyes. Eliza agrees on her education, because her goal is to become a lady who can open a flower shop. But here her dependence begins.

Her "sculptor" is similar to the original Pygmalion only in his bachelorhood and in his misogyny, as Stefanie Eck points out³⁴. He does not love Eliza as Pygmalion loved his statue, and he also does not care neither about her feelings nor about her future. He is interested only in the result of his experiment, and he does not see that he is hurting Eliza in the process. She has to bear humiliation and insults, and she is taken away from her old life. At the same time, even if at the end she speaks and behaves like a lady, she is still not fit for the aristocratic life. He changed her completely and made her unfit ("You know I can't go back to the gutter, as you call it, and that I have no real friends in the world but you and the Colonel")³⁵.

This is not what she wanted when she asked Higgins to educate her, and we know it from the first act, even before the experiment was set, when Eliza says: "He has no right to take away my character."³⁶ She knows what she wants and that she deserves respect. This is the reason why she rages against Higgins at the end of the process, using the language he taught her. It is her way of rebelling against her creator. She realizes that everything has been done at Higgins's benefit.

At the end of her transformation, the girl also understands that now she is superior to her creator: she does not only possess a proper language, but also proper manners that Higgins lacks. She does not need him anymore: it is him who needs her, now that he has become accustomed to her serving him. So while he tries to convince her to stay with him, because "she will relapse into the gutter in three weeks without me at her elbow"³⁷, Eliza already knows that she can do without him. He is the one that will lose a great deal without her helping him in his everyday life. Moreover, staying with him would mean never to have back the independence she knows she can now regain. She is conscious of the mistake she made when she decided to undertake the experiment: "Why did you take my independence from me? Why did I give it up?"³⁸. Furthermore, she is not afraid of him anymore, now she has the knowledge: she can live without him.

That is why she decides to marry another man, despite of Higgins's desire for her to remain a spinster like he is a bachelor. She will now have an equal relationship and obtain the respect she knows she deserves and that she never had before. Unsurprisingly, Higgins cannot imagine a relationship based on equality. When Eliza announces that she will marry Freddy, his comment is if he can "make anything of [her]"³⁹. But Eliza, who is not willing

³⁴ Eck, as above, p.15

³⁵ Shaw as above, p. 102

³⁶ Shaw, as above, p. 14

³⁷ Shaw, as above, p. 94

³⁸ Shaw, as above, p. 100

³⁹ Shaw, as above, p. 101

to be passed over again, replies that “perhaps I could make something of him.”⁴⁰ And she adds: “But I never thought of us making anything of one another; and you never think of anything else. I only want to be natural.”⁴¹ As underlined by Eck, through Eliza’s character, Shaw expresses a modern view on male-female relationship⁴².

Shaw’s Galatea undergoes a process that makes her understand that she was a worthy human being from the beginning. The only good thing Higgins has done was to make her realize it. She was also driven to develop a self-confidence that enabled her to rebel against her oppressive Pygmalion. This reaction is not to be seen within the standard available roles for women. She was close to the traditional role of a Galatea only when she decided to be educated by Higgins; but neither before nor after the process, she had those characteristics. Shaw depicted a woman who had to understand that she already had the abilities to make herself independent.

In her poem “Pygmalion’s Bride”⁴³, Carol Ann Duffy follows a similar path, depicting a process of transformation that will lead Galatea to her independence. One of the most striking characteristics of her poem is that Galatea is talking in the first person. Revisiting the Pygmalion myth, the author offers us the feminine point of view of the story, enabling us to understand the girl’s feelings and thoughts.

At the beginning, we read about a girl who compares herself to a cold piece of ivory, of marble, or to a stone (“Cold, I was, like snow, like ivory”). This is what she feels towards Pygmalion: she is not interested in him, and she hopes he will not touch her, since she does not want to be touched. But he does it anyway, because he is not able to understand Galatea’s feelings, or he simply does not care (“I thought ‘He will not touch me’/ But he did”). He then starts to kiss her, and to speak to her, telling her things that hurt her (“He spoke - / Blunt endearments, what he’d do/ And how./ His words were terrible”). Through his words, Pygmalion is asserting his domination over her; probably he is also trying to intimidate her, to make her give in to him.

In order to escape from this situation, Galatea first tries to isolate herself, to exclude him from her mind, but then he begins to scream, destroying the girl’s attempts to be left alone. (“My ears were sculpture,/ Stone-deaf shells./ I heard the sea./ I drowned him out./ I heard him shout.”)

In the following stanza, she keeps ignoring him and playing the statue when he brings her gifts. So, he starts touching her more violently to “wake her up”, to make her react (“He let his fingers sink into my flesh,/ He squeezed, he pressed”; and again “His nails were claws.”). She still bears the pain until the point in which she cannot any more.

This is the moment in which Galatea changes her strategy: she knows that in order to get rid of him she must give him what he wants; not passively, because that would mean to surrender to him; she is too clever to do so. She knows she must act in a way that will cause

⁴⁰ Shaw, as above, p. 101

⁴¹ Shaw, as above, p.101

⁴² Eck, as above, p.17

⁴³ We are referring to the poem “Pygmalion’s Bride” found in: Duffy, as above, p.51-52

Pygmalion to be disgusted by her. This is the only way in which she will obtain freedom. So, she deceives him in giving herself to him. She makes him think that she really wants to be with him, that she feels pleasure during their sexual intercourse, while in reality she is making up a farce, performing a passion she does not feel. She is aware of the fact that her manifestation of pleasure will upset Pygmalion:

So I changed tack,
Grew warm, like candle wax,
Kissed back,
Was soft, was pliable,
Began to moan,
Got hot, got wild,
Arched, coiled, writhed,
Begged for his child,
And at the climax
Screamed my head off –
All an act.

Everything goes as Galatea expected: her suddenly active behavior disgusts Pygmalion to the point that he leaves and never comes back again, giving Galatea the freedom she wished for. The final stanza is full of meaning in its irony: “And haven’t seen him since./ Simple as that.” This short statement aims to show that Pygmalion’s only alternative is to run, to leave her, as soon as Galatea does not fit his standard of beauty and behavior anymore. In this case, irony is also used to connect this episode with what happens frequently in relationships nowadays.

Carol Ann Duffy gives Galatea a new role, or better, she changes her role. Galatea has always been included in the category of the silent and obedient woman: the only role that a woman could have, which satisfied men and appeared to them as the most beautiful. She falls in this category because her own existence depends on a man’s wants. When she comes to life in Ovid’s myth, she is forced to marry the sculptor, because that is what he wanted. We do not know anything about what she wanted, if she agreed with marrying him. But she has to accept it passively. The original state of Galatea was that of a sculpture. Her wishes were not to be considered since she had no background or a fully human existence. She was created to serve as an object. Her human consistency was needed for her to participate in the sexual intercourse. Duffy’s poem is introducing her as a woman: she has feelings and a strong will, a body that belongs to her and a future for her own.

Galatea is not willing to bear a condition she hates, so she decides to step outside of the category where she has always been confined, adopting a new role. She leaves behind her passiveness and she takes matters into her own hands, becoming a deceiver and using her intelligence to gain freedom for herself. It seems like this woman does not lack the knowledge or the experience as the previous Galateas, because she knows exactly what to do to get rid of Pygmalion. She knows men’s reaction before a woman’s manifestation of passion, and she knows that it will scare him to the point he will leave her alone. She is cleverer than he is, and she realizes a trick to mislead him, in order to obtain what she wants.

In spite of her deceit, the reader does not perceive her as the evil character, because she was a mistreated and molested woman whose only chance of survival was to use her skills

to protect herself. For this reason, in stepping outside of her traditional category, she does not fall into the other available role: the one of the evil woman. She creates a new role for herself, the role of a woman who will not accept to be harassed anymore, and who will stand for herself and her needs. Moreover, in order to achieve her independence, she uses her femininity, which could be regarded as ironic. These elements of Duffy's perception make the poem playful, as well as the figure more realistic.

The last example that we are going to examine is a short story written by Madeline Miller. *Galatea*⁴⁴, published in 2013, offers a more modern revisiting of the myth, since the mythical characters are transported into our time, depicting a relationship between men and women that is greatly and sadly spread nowadays: an abusive one. As in the myth, Pygmalion is a sculptor who hates the women of his town, so he decided to create one for himself from a block of marble. This modern Pygmalion becomes rich thanks to his Galatea: after seeing her beauty, everyone wanted a statue sculpted by him. But he does not like to give her the credit for his wealth. Galatea is aware of the fact that she was responsible for his success, but Pygmalion is annoyed when she makes it clear ("He is rich because of me, if you want to know, but he doesn't like it when I say that").

In this work, Galatea tells her tale in the first person, starting in medias res: we first meet her in a hospital bed, ill. The nurses around her worry about her condition: she is pale, she should lie back and eat something. But she says that her skin color is normal, since she used to be made of stone. When the doctor comes to visit her and sees that she is standing up, he asks her why she is still standing. The dialogue with the doctor seems to suggest that she is ill because she did something she was not supposed to do: "What are you doing? This is exactly why you are ill".

When she describes her husband, we start to put the pieces together: there are many things that Pygmalion does not want to see in his wife, so she has to control herself and act in a way she knows will please him. Every day, when he visits her in the hospital, they re-enact the moment in which Galatea became human, or as she says, when she was born. They are following a script, and she must act as he wants. Even the posture of her fingers must be perfect: "So I have to concentrate and hold them just the way he likes, or it ruins everything". He checks every detail, and every day, after they finish their play, they have sex according to his will.

The narrative is focused on some days and events of their marriage. On one of those days, the couple has a quarrel about their daughter Paphos: Pygmalion accuses Galatea of loving their daughter more than she loves him, and Galatea apologizes, subdued, and tries to calm him. Pygmalion blames her for their daughter's unhappiness ("How could she be [happy], after what her mother did?", "You should not have run"). The reader can tell that Galatea is in the hospital because she did something her husband did not want her to do, and she was punished. This man is her creator, her husband, her father and her mother, as he says, and he must control everything that regards her, every little detail, even in her physical appearance. He is disturbed when he notices for the first time in ten years some stretch

⁴⁴ Miller, Madeline (2013), *Galatea: A Short Story*. Retrieved on 26/05/2018 from <https://www.amazon.com/Galatea-Kindle-Single-Madeline-Miller-ebook/dp/B00DY4SJKM>

marks on his wife's belly and she tries to explain that they are something natural after a pregnancy. He replies that they are ugly and wished that she was still made of stone for him to be able to fix them ("If you were stone, I would chisel them off").

We start to understand what kind of man Pygmalion is, but everything becomes clearer when we learn that he imprisoned his wife in their house after discovering that other men looked at her, while she was playing outside with their daughter. It is obvious that he is a jealous and violent man: after an argument, he hurts her and hits her, leaving evident bruises on her body. Even if it is not overtly stated, we can hypothesize that his violence is the reason why she has been in the hospital for so long.

When Pygmalion finds out that Galatea is pregnant again, he cannot accept the existence of another being she will love more than him, so he orders that she has an abortion. This is the turning point when the woman decides to act to change her condition. That night, before taking the abortive medicine, Galatea manages to escape from the hospital. She already knows what to do, and she is willing to sacrifice herself in order to save Paphos. She runs home, she wakes up her husband and she makes him run after her, to catch her. They cross the city, arriving at the sea. They dive into the water, where Pygmalion seizes her. But she does not fight: she just holds him tight so that he cannot get free and waits for them to be dragged down. This is the solution Galatea chose because she knew it was the only situation in which she could be stronger than him: her marble is so heavy that even Pygmalion is not able to fight it.

Madeline Miller was able to revisit the original myth, transforming it into a story that represents a reality familiar to the modern reader. Pygmalion is a violent and abusive man, who wants to control everything and suppress the female party, while Galatea is a submissive woman. She does not want to make her husband angry, so she adapts her every move to his desires. He considers her just as an object to be admired for its beauty, and he also expects to be the only person she gives her love to. When things do not go as he wants, he hits her until she must go to the hospital. This is the same life that several women live every day. To escape her situation, Galatea can think of only one way, the most extreme one, out of love for her daughter, who will be free to live without her father's violence. Freedom is to be found in death, the only place where Pygmalion cannot follow her. The schema of finding safety and freedom in death reminds us of the poems we already discussed in the case of the previous figure, Eurydice. The writer plays with the traditional roles once again and moves the figure of Galatea in the spectrum: Miller's Galatea is a new type of woman. From passive and obedient, she acts in the most tragic way possible, the only way she can think of to be finally safe. This short story contains a powerful critique to and representation of today's society, where a lot of women suffer violence.

Galatea, the "Pygmalion's bride", is represented in various ways. We recorded the character's evolution from a nameless statue, made to be the perfect woman to a symbol against violence and suppression. The modern representations of the myth give us options of women that are suffering or not and use their sexuality or desperation to become free and independent.

Medusa

The last poetic stimulus of our analysis is “Medusa”: Carol Ann Duffy’s poem written for the heroine, who is one of the most famous mythical creatures known for her power to petrify everyone who dared to look her in the eyes. Although there are several versions of Medusa’s myth, there are not so many references to her story, before the appearance of Perseus, who killed her by cutting her head off.

As in the previous analyses of Eurydice and Galatea, we are following a chronological pattern to see the development of the figure. One more time, we started by commenting the myth presented by Ovid. This allowed us to add some background data to the story of the ancient Gorgon Medusa. From the 8th century A.C we made a great time leap to the beginning of the 20st century with the famous psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud. In his essay included in the *Collected Papers*, we discovered Medusa as a symbol of castration for the male gender. Back to the field of literature, we thought that it would be interesting to analyze the poem “Medusa” by Sylvia Plath, where the myth is used as a symbol of fear but also as a model of empowerment. Some years later the feminist philosopher Hélène Cixous gives a new interpretation to the myth. Her essay *The Laugh of Medusa* transforms the figure into a tool of active empowerment breaking the typical rules of patriarchy and calling all women to claim their right to write. Again, we found the figure of Medusa readapted, in this case in the fashion industry. Thanks to Versace and his vision of the myth, the Head of Medusa is a symbol of beauty and power. Our next step was the interpretation of Carol Ann Duffy’s poem (her poems were our common ground). In her “Medusa” the mythical figure is the narrator of her own story. This reinterpretation gives us the opportunity to meet a new version of the heroine: she is a woman suffering because of betrayal and lack of confidence but, at the same time, she decides to become strong by utilizing her ability to turn men into stone. Finally, the perception of Medusa’s myth nowadays also concerned us. We wanted to check if it still has a negative connotation. The last presidential elections of the United States of America when Hillary Clinton (Democratic candidate) was represented as Medusa and Donald Trump (Republican candidate) was represented as Perseus confirmed that hypothesis.

In the 4th Book of the *Metamorphoses* by the Roman poet Ovid⁴⁵, Medusa was the mortal of the three Gorgon Sisters. She was considered one of the most beautiful women in Ancient Greece and since she was a priestess in the temple of the goddess Minerva, she was not allowed to get married to any of her male suitors. She had to remain a virgin, like the goddess. Her beauty was so well known that not even the Lord of the Seas, Neptune, could resist her, so he raped her in the temple of Minerva. Then the goddess blamed Medusa for this sacrilegious act and punished her by transforming her in a painful way. Minerva turned her priestess into a monster, making her beautiful hair into poisonous snakes and giving her the destructive power to turn anyone who looked directly at her into stone. Medusa was further cursed to spend the rest of her days in isolation on a remote island, where she would no longer have contact with the outside world. Men no longer

⁴⁵Ovid, et al., as above, p-106-115

sought her out to bask in her beauty, but they pursued her to kill her. One of those men was Perseus.

In the myth, Perseus was the son of Jupiter and the mortal Danae. He lived with his mother under the protection of the King Dictis in Sefiros Island. The king had an evil brother, Polidectes, who fell in love with Danae. In an attempt to keep Perseus away from his mother, Polidectes orders him to bring him the Head of Medusa. After receiving gifts from the Gods (Minerva gives him a shield and Hefesto his powerful sword), Perseus sets out for his destiny. First, he arrives to the cave of the mythical Witches and steals their magical eye - that allows them to see the future - to force them to reveal the whereabouts of Medusa. She lives with her sisters, where Perseus finally finds them sleeping. Following the advice of Minerva, he uses the shield as a mirror in order to see her, but not directly. With a single move of the sword, he cuts her head, which he will use as a weapon in other adventures. The Head of Medusa is then delivered to Minerva so she can put it in her shield to frighten her enemies⁴⁶.

The figure of Medusa in the Greek and Roman Mythology represents the role of the evil woman. Neptune is the one who provoked the sacrilegious act in the temple of Minerva, but it is Medusa - the victim of rape - who received a punishment in the form of a painful transformation and isolation. The punishment was not enough for the goddess, since out of envy, she even helped Perseus to kill her. In the collective imagination, the image of Medusa is the image of a monster. It is curious how people avoid the part of the rape by Neptune and only remember that Medusa was a beautiful woman, maybe too vain, and that she was cursed because for it.

The influence of the myth of Medusa - or rather her figure - extends over the centuries. From the Greeks and Romans there are multiples references to the myth. But it is in the twentieth century, when the figure of Medusa is reanalyzed and it is given new interpretations that we are shifting between either the symbol of evil wickedness or incredible power. We are about to examine the evolution of the figure not only through literature but also taking into consideration other fields like psychology, philosophy, etc. Our research started from Carol Ann Duffy's poem, but the necessity to explore the figure in other dimensions emerged.

To begin with, we will summarize part of the theories of Sigmund Freud. In the case of the psychoanalyst, the myth transcends the frontiers of literature and enters in the field of psychology. In 1922, Freud wrote an essay about Medusa included in his *Collected Papers*. To him, the decapitation of Medusa symbolized castration. The fear that the mythological monster inspires is the fear of the castration complex: "To decapitate: to castrate. The terror of Medusa is thus a terror of castration that is linked to the sight of something. Numerous analyses have made us familiar with the occasion for this: it occurs when a boy, who has hitherto been unwilling to believe in the threat of castration, catches sight of the female genitals, probably those of an adult, surrounded by hair, and essentially those of

⁴⁶ Ovid, et al., as above, p-114

his mother”⁴⁷. Medusa’s transformed to snakes hair are seen by Freud as a representation of phallic symbols. “[...] A multiplication of penis symbols signifies castration”, explains Freud, who created a rule to support his theory⁴⁸. The petrification, which was caused if anyone dared to gaze at Medusa, actually symbolized the erection.

Freud’s interpretation of the mythical figure of Medusa is multiple. On the one hand, the male observer is enthralled by the castration complex, while on the other hand, by his sexual fascination. Medusa represents at the same time repulsion and attraction.

As we already mentioned, the figure of Medusa had mainly negative connotations. It is part of our goals in this project to explore different approaches of the myth and multiple ways in which the symbols could be used. It was obviously not only Carol Ann Duffy who decided to “rescue” the figure of Medusa from the connection with the embodied malice, but also other writers. We are returning to literature and discuss the poem *Medusa* by Sylvia Plath. Especially after mentioning Freud’s relevant theory, the interpretation of the poem appears to be interesting, since it is dedicated to the poet’s mother.

Written in 1964, *Medusa* is a poem that describes the complicated relationship the poet had with her mother Aurelia⁴⁹. The poem is a confession; the author expresses the depression and suffocation that her mother provoked in her. Sylvia Plath uses as a metaphor both medusas, the mythological figure and the genus of jellyfish, to describe how her mother influenced her physically, emotionally and even artistically:

In any case, you are always there,
Tremulous breath at the end of my line,
Curve of water upleaping
To my water rod, dazzling and grateful,
Touching and sucking.
I didn't call you.
I didn't call you at all.
Nevertheless, nevertheless
You steamed to me over the sea,
Fat and red, a placenta

Paralyzing the kicking lovers⁵⁰

In the poem, Sylvia Plath describes her mother as a very oppressive and controlling person, someone who can turn men into stone with a gaze (“Paralyzing the kicking lovers.”). This reference to the paralyzing power is used to identify her mother with a person who was able to draw her (“Squeezing the breath”, “could drawn breath”). The author tries to escape from her mother, but she is always there as imposed by the word “umbilicus”, even

⁴⁷ Albrecht, T. (1999). Apotropaic reading: Freud's "medusa's head". *Literature and Psychology*, 45(4), p.3. Retrieved on 26/05/2018 from: <https://search-proquest.com.ep.fjernadgang.kb.dk/docview/219709411?accountid=13607>

⁴⁸ Albrecht, as above, p.9

⁴⁹ Plath, S. (1960). *Sylvia Plath: Ariel*. New York: HARPER & ROW PUBLISHERS: New York, p. 25-26

⁵⁰ We are referring to the poem as found in: Plath, as above, p.25-26

when there was an Ocean between them (Plath lived in England and her mother in the USA). There is also a contradictory portrayal of Aurelia Plath as Medusa and the Virgin Mary, illustrated in the line “A Communion wafer? Blubbery Mary?” - showing a multiplicity of conflicting but firmly entrenched representations of motherhood.

In this framework, the symbolic use of Medusa by Sylvia Plath offers multiple interpretations. The feelings that the daughter has towards her mother could be both negative and positive. Medusa is a type of woman that causes awe: the typical combination of admiration and fear⁵¹. Centuries after the genesis of the myth, the choice of the monstrous Medusa could be connected with the idea of the sublime. Plath is feeling small under the shadow of the ever present mother. In general lines, the poem expresses the suffocation that is caused by such a powerful woman. However, this monster is also a model of empowerment that could be implicitly admired. Moreover, it is important to point out that, while in the myth the power of Medusa was effective just against men, in the poem the power can affect other women as well. This fact, combined with Freud’s theories about the Electra complex (the daughter’s love for the father and hate for the mother) and the tradition of patriarchy, shows that continuously even in the twentieth century the figure of Medusa still had a mainly negative connotation.

The French philosopher and feminist critic Hélène Cixous writes the essay *The Laugh of the Medusa* in 1975. The choice of the title is not a coincidence: the philosopher intends to make a re-reading of the Freudian theory of the castration complex while eliminating the negative connotation that has always been associated with the figure of Medusa:

Too bad for them if they fall apart upon discovering that women aren't men, or that the mother doesn't have one. But isn't this fear convenient for them? Wouldn't the worst be, isn't the worst, in truth, that women aren't castrated, that they have only to stop listening to the Sirens (for the Sirens were men) for history to change it is meaning? You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she's not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughin.⁵²

This paper combines considerations on poetic prose and post-modern philosophy with activism. According to Cixous, female bodies and sexuality had been discussed more by men than by women: a situation encouraged by the patriarchal system. Throughout the essay, the author addresses women in order to “bring them to writing” – to create a new *écriture féminine*. She states that the main reason why women are afraid of writing is because they have always been told that it is something that they cannot do, something that is far from their abilities and that only men can do because they are men, because they

⁵¹ De Nervaux, L. (2007). *The Freudian Muse: Psychoanalysis and the Problem of Self-Revelation in Sylvia Plath’s “Daddy” and “Medusa”*. Retrieved on 26/05/2018 from: <http://journals.openedition.org/erea/186>

⁵² Cixous, H., Cohen, K., & Cohen, P. (1976). *The Laugh of the Medusa*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, p. 12

have attributes that women do not have; this would trigger women's jealousy. She perfectly explains this theory in the essay when she writes:

The Dark Continent is neither dark nor unexplorable. It is still unexplored only because we've been made to believe that it was too dark to be explorable. And because they want to make us believe that what interests us is the white continent, with its monuments to Lack. And we believed. They riveted us between two horrifying myths: between the Medusa and the abyss. That would be enough to see half the world laughing, except that it's still going on. For the phallogocentric sublimation is with us, and it's militant, regenerating the old patterns, anchored in the dogma of castration. They haven't changed a thing: they've theorized their desire for reality! Let the priests tremble, we're going to show them our sexts!" She is making an appeal: women must write for other women and for themselves. They must write about their experiences, menstruation, lactation, pregnancy, etc. The feminine body "will produce far more radical effects of political and social changes than some might like to think."⁵³

In this occasion, we are witnessing how the re-reading of the myth eliminates the negative connotation associated with the character to give it a new life and turn it into a symbol of women's power.

Once again, an example of reusing the myths is to be seen in the fashion world, an industry which traditionally addresses women. The logo of the brand Versace is the Head of Medusa and it was chosen as a symbol of beauty and power⁵⁴. The brand creates a new connotation: the mythical figure is there having a new role. She represents the qualities that new age women seek, like being independent, strong and unforgettable. In fact, the snakes have been used in fashion to imply power since the ancient times. For instance, in Greek mythology, Minerva, the goddess of war and wisdom is illustrated wearing a dress with a snakes pattern; the aim was to frighten her enemies. The Italian designer Gianni Versace was fascinated by the figure of Medusa. He was very interested in Greek mythology, art and architecture, influences that derive probably from his childhood in a place with close association to Greece⁵⁵. He knew the myth behind the Head of Medusa, her power to make people fall in love with her and to petrify them, and "from the moment he saw her gaze, chose it as the symbol for his legacy of female empowerment, freedom and justice". Thanks to Versace, Medusa acquired a new interpretation and she is also related to something positive and beautiful, like a popular fashion brand.

⁵³ Cixous, as above, p.11

⁵⁴ Unknown Author, *Versace's Medusa Myth - The Medusa Story* [Post from the Online Store EU]. Retrieved on 26/05/2018 from: <https://www.versace.com/eu/en/world-of-versace/brand/the-medusa-story/?selectedSubCategoryId=2351#2351>

⁵⁵ Blyth, J. (2013, September 5). *Closer to God* [Blog Post]. Retrieved on 26/05/2018 from: <http://www.dazeddigital.com/artsandculture/article/17030/1/closer-to-god>

Carol Ann Duffy's poem *Medusa* is a modern revised version of the myth. In fact, the setting is far different from Ovid's or the previous literary texts we examined. Duffy creates a new Medusa and gives her the role of a woman suffering because of her lack of self-confidence and because of male infidelity. It is a poem that deals with love and pain, with the fear of being left alone and with jealousy. Like all the previous poems by Duffy that we examined, it is written as a monologue, where we hear the uninterrupted voice of the heroine. She talks about the power of an angry suffering woman. The role that Medusa undertakes is that of a woman afraid of being cheated on by men. In trying to avoid neglect and in protecting herself, she becomes a beast. Instead of experiencing the pain after being abandoned, she prefers to build a wall that will keep the one she loves far away.

Men can make you suffer and Medusa will not accept that. She wants to be the one that makes others suffer. So, the first stanzas explain how her transformation was not imposed by someone else, but by her own feelings. Suspicion, doubt and jealousy turned her hair into snakes. Her appearance and her thoughts were affected, and her anger made her terrible and ready for revenge:

A suspicion, a doubt, a jealousy
grew in my mind,
which turned the hairs on my head to filthy snakes
as though my thoughts
hissed and spat on my scalp.⁵⁶

The poet creates clever metaphors to show the connection between the new Medusa of the poetic creation and the already connoted mythological figure. In the beginning of the poem, Medusa is transforming into a monster because of her jealousy. She is aware of the power that derives from her monstrous transformation, she knows that "there are bullet tears in [her] eyes". An innocent look of a beautiful woman can turn a man into stone. "Are you terrified?" – she asks, addressing both the man she loves and the reader. This powerful image obviously symbolizes the ability of the mythological Gorgons to petrify just with her gaze, a power which will be used as a revenge tool by the new-age Medusa of the poem.

As she is slowly transforming she becomes aware of her power. The following stanzas convey the reader her ability, which is clearly an ability to petrify; she can turn a living creature into an object. This power is connected to the way men view women: as objects. Objects have no feelings, they never get old and if you find them aesthetically insufficient, you can always find another one closer to your current taste. Medusa is afraid that she will find herself in that position and tells the perfect Greek god, that she loves, that he should better "be terrified":

Be terrified.
It's you I love,
perfect man, Greek God, my own;
but I know you'll go, betray me, stray
from home.
So better by for me if you were stone.

I glanced at a buzzing bee,
a dull grey pebble fell

⁵⁶ We are referring to the poem "Medusa" found in: Duffy, as above, p.40-41

to the ground.
I glanced at a singing bird,
a handful of dusty gravel
spattered down.

I looked at a ginger cat,
a housebrick
shattered a bowl of milk.
I looked at a snuffling pig,
a boulder rolled
in a heap of shit.

Just before the end of the poem and the final meeting of the lovers, Medusa looks at herself in the mirror and witnesses her total transformation. All her love is now turned into anger. The fear of being abandoned, the pain and the jealousy make her powerful and strong, so that she is able to create alone a new self-image. The transformation is double: she is the fearful and disliked Gorgon but also a dragon that can take revenge. The rhyme between the almost identical words *Gorgon* and *dragon* shows that they are just the two aspects of the same thing, two different ways of understanding. The mirror, which symbolizes society and the male gaze, shows a Gorgon, a threat. The heroine, on the other side, perceives herself as a dragon, a positive symbol of power, the opportunity to be in charge of her own life. The dragon opens its mouth that produces fire, a fire exploding from the top of a mountain. The lava symbolizes the expression of her passion. As we previously discussed in the case of Galatea, women that demonstrate passion are considered a threat by men:

I stared in the mirror.
Love gone bad
showed me a Gorgon.
I stared at a dragon.
Fire spewed
from the mouth of a mountain.

When the poem reaches its climax in the last lines, another metaphor connecting the myth with the present is found. There is a reference to the *sword and shield* (the presents of gods): the game of love is parallelized with a battlefield. The lover's heart and tongue are in this environment the weapons that he will utilize to "kill" Medusa. Carol Ann Duffy makes a playful plot twist since her heroine secretly possesses her fatal sight and will use it to win, as soon as her lover glimpses her. The only thing she needs is a motivation to fight, and she finds it. Along with his weapons the man brings images of his "girls", younger women that he loved – an image that provokes Medusa's jealousy and provides her with the needed excuse:

And here you come
with a shield for a heart
and a sword for a tongue
and your girls, your girls.
Wasn't I beautiful
Wasn't I fragrant and young?

Look at me now.

In this project we argue that literature can create new roles for women and can represent more types of realistic female figures to whom real women can identify. Carol Ann Duffy's use of everyday language, irony and self-reflection manages to create a heroine who is breaking the rules. To begin with, this figure clearly stands in the spectrum between the two traditionally available roles for women. Duffy's Medusa is not silent and passive. She is strong enough to cause pain and take revenge. At the same time, she is not a villain nor a whore, since she is not using her sexuality to cause that pain and her motives are understandable. Her lack of confidence is caused by men who like women that are always young and beautiful. She will not accept this situation, which makes her mad. We feel empathy and compassion for her. Moreover, this poetic Medusa is not adopting the characteristics already mentioned in the theories by Freud or Ciroux. Jealousy is one of the elements that sets her actions but not the only one. It is not the kind of jealousy described by the scholars (namely a jealousy that occurs because men have a power that women severely want), but a more personal fear of being insufficient in a society that pays attention to beauty and behavior standards. Medusa's will is to possess a man the way men traditionally possessed women: by treating them as objects. The myth gives the poet the framework to tell a story like this. The ability of the Gorgons to petrify is the ability to turn a man into an object. Since the lover is made of stone, the woman possesses him. He cannot neglect her or fall for another girl. Carol Ann Duffy makes an ironic comment on the need of people to stay together forever.

The United States presidential election of 2016 showed once again that the figure of Medusa still has a negative connotation. The Democratic candidate was Hillary Clinton and the Republican candidate was Donald Trump, current President of the United States. It was the first USA election with a woman as a candidate, with real options to win, so it is not surprising at all that the figure of Medusa cropped up during the campaign, it was too easy to just let it go. It is not the first time that Hillary Clinton has been compared with the mythological snake-haired monster: people are used to it. What is curious is that Donald Trump was represented as the Perseus of the story. This shows how in politics and in other areas where men have held power without any question, they feel threatened by what powerful women represent: they portray the possibility to disrupt the domain of men⁵⁷. They are seen as the "villains", and the only solution men – or the "heroes" – have to keep their status is to cut their heads off, to silence them. This is the main reason why male politicians turn to the myth of Medusa so often. Almost every influential female figure has been photoshopped with snaky hair: Martha Stewart, Condoleezza Rice, Madonna, Nancy Pelosi, Oprah Winfrey, Angela Merkel. Women's appearance is often used as a way to degrade them.

The myth of Medusa is one of the favorite literary sources for the male authority when it feels threatened by a female force. Throughout history there are several examples of it,

⁵⁷Bond, S. (2017, November 23). *Rehabilitating Medusa: Powerful Women, Sexism And Reading Mary Beard's New Book* [Blog Post]. Retrieved on 26/05/2018 from: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/drsarahbond/2017/11/23/rehabilitating-medusa-powerful-women-sexism-and-reading-mary-beards-new-book/#40fd254a4c43>

starting from Machiavelli's description of the State as a woman "without head, without order, beaten, despoiled, torn" in his treaty *The Prince*. Furthermore, during the French Revolution, Medusa became a symbol of a monstrously feminized Republic. This tradition witnessed during the United States presidential elections of 2016 continues until now. In 2017 in her new book *Women & Power: a manifesto*, Mary Beard explores the "radical separation" between women and power. She carries out an analysis of how women from Medusa to Elizabeth Warren have been categorized, marginalized and silenced:

An even more interesting aspect is the cultural connection that becomes evident when a woman defends unpopular, controversial or simply different opinions: in this case they are considered indicative of her stupidity. It's not that you disagree with her, it's just that she's stupid: I'm sorry, honey, but you don't understand⁵⁸.

⁵⁸Beard, M. (2017). *Mujeres y poder: un manifiesto*. Barcelona: Critica, p.29

Discussion

Starting from the theoretical framework that employed the theory of intertextuality, what we wanted to investigate is how through its process different types of women could develop within literary texts and basically in the collective imaginary. We live in a world that is changing – and it was changing every day since the very beginning. These changes are inevitably reflecting on the production of texts and on the use of schemas or images. Literature have been both preserving notions from the past and adopting social breakthroughs. Texts are the laboratory where the old and the new can coexist and suggest a new perspective.

In our project we used Carol Ann Duffy's poetry as a common ground and we found three imaginary women; we decided to shortly examine their textual presence through the years. Accepting that literature can be found even outside the traditional frontiers of the acknowledged genres, we investigated how Eurydice, Galatea and Medusa thrive not only in poetry or novels, but also in political science, commercials etc.

The theoretical tools that intertextuality provided us made us think and understand practically the notion of non-originality. Every single work of art, every short story or novel, poem or song, is the outcome of a mixture of elements and components that pre-existed. Both writers and readers are affected by that procedure. For instance, when a poet creates a poem with a mythical figure as protagonist, they have to accept not only the story written beforehand by someone else, but also the connotations that have been developed around that story and figure. In the case of Carol Ann Duffy, that outcome is obvious in her poetry. The poet worked with female figures that were already present for ages in the collective imaginary and evolved them. She gave these fictional women a fresh perspective by judging playfully patriarchy and its limitations. In the Afterword of the collection *The World's Wife*, she explains herself the ideas that inspired her work:

[...] I'm looking at the story, and I'm thinking the events are the same but I might change the interpretation of the events. And of course the main change is from male to female views of things: that's what you say, but what does she say? And in any situation there'll be a different explanation of events. [...] I wanted to be able to expand the stories and to bring in extra layers of truth. I wanted to add, and not take away from originals⁵⁹.

In order to do so, she used both the narrative (for example the fact that Galatea was a sculpture made by Pygmalion and later on she became his human wife), but also the characteristics that these figures traditionally had (Galatea was young, beautiful, silent and passive). Using these elements, she was able to reverse them and play with what the reader would have expected to read. Fulfilling or not expectations is an important part of a poem written for someone they know. Intertextuality suggests that all poems are written for someone that we know, since we are familiar with one of the layers of the story. Taking again Galatea as a study case, Duffy created a story about a beautiful and silent girl, a woman being created as a sculpture by a man, but finally made her act unexpectedly.

What Duffy tried to do, was to speak about new realistic types of women, that are finding themselves between the spectrum of the two already available roles. For that notion, intertextuality also played a role: "to bring extra layers of truth" is one of the its main ideas. Moreover, Duffy's other readings are an obvious influence. Feminist theory, her beliefs and

⁵⁹ Duffy, as above, p.78

political views, as well as her favorite songs or artists inspired her to write. The results are poems with a dialectic relationship to all the afore mentioned components.

Intertextuality affects the reader in a similar way. In case someone had never read one of the myth's version before, it could be difficult to get a full understanding of the poem written by Duffy. And even if they understood the poem, if the image imposed to them for Galatea was different than the common one, the ironic element of the poem would not be that *ironic*. Furthermore, in a less obvious way, every time that we come across a new text or information, we are doing comparisons to what we already know. We are constantly creating images that combine what we possess – like it or not – to what we perceive. Maybe, if a reader had seen the movie “My Fair Lady” (which was also inspired by Pygmalion's myth) before reading the poem, a positive connection could have been created. The protagonist of the movie, Audrey Hepburn, would also “star” in the poem. Such procedures exist and work unconsciously.

Discussing a bit further the idea of intertextual approaches, we might need to explain how they work on the figure of Medusa. The examples, what we faced, were quite different. Medusa has been negatively connoted from the beginning, while Eurydice and Galatea had more familiar and pleasant characteristics. Medusa was considered a threat, a malicious and evil woman, who needs to be eliminated. A power deriving from a woman and being threatening towards men is a taboo in the Western society and in the collective imaginary. In the case of the powerful Medusa, we saw intertextuality connecting pre-existing literary texts (like Ovid's) with today's politics. The conclusions that were made were that despite the progress in society, powerful women are still not completely accepted.

These thoughts evoked further reflections on how women are in general represented. Obviously different representations coexist: both feminist approaches and traditional role models are trending. At the same time, when the #MeToo movement gains credibility and sexual harassment is being publicly accused, books like *50 Shades of Gray*, which in a sense “justify” violence and sexual oppression against women, became best sellers worldwide.

Mythical female figures will always inspire new writers, and the natural procedure of intertextuality will make these texts strongly connoted. To finish our discussion, we want to analyze briefly a short story that we felt that combines elements from all the figures we examined. This is a way to show in praxis how connections are made. The short story *Cat Person* published in December 2017 in *The New Yorker* came directly to our minds. This short story written by Kristen Roupenian became viral, since it dared to tell a modern love story as it is, focusing on the female figure⁶⁰. The protagonist, Margot, has to balance what society expected from her and what she wanted. The story is a romance between her and an older man, Robert. In the beginning, she is flattered by his interest (like maybe Eurydice, or every woman who had found herself being a “muse”) and starts dating him. During their date, she has mixed feeling. In the begging she has a good time and proposes that they continue at his place. There, she has second thoughts and doubts if she wants to continue. However, she decides to give it a try and have sex with him. She feels trapped, because he was kind and caring to her in the beginning, but as they are having sex, she feels that she is being treated like an object, not participating enough nor enjoying what she is experiencing (like Galatea). The protagonist of the short story was always kind and when

⁶⁰ Roupenian, K. (2017, December 11). *Cat Person* [Short Story]. Retrieved on 26/05/2018 from: <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/12/11/cat-person>

she decides that she is not in the mood to see Robert again, she ends everything politely. But even though, after some messages she does not reply to, the man starts accusing her. Her self-evident right to finish a relationship is misinterpreted and she finds herself being called a bitch. The right to decide and to empower her state “allows” the man to blame her (like Medusa, whose power was hated).

New texts are always produced, and patterns could be recognized. Intertextual approaches make us think of those connections and imagine different ways of representing women. Revisiting older texts can enrich the spectrum of available roles and lead to a fairer representation of those women, who were thought to be outcasts. Literature is a tolerant field, so both writers and readers, feel safe to express and identify themselves.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this research has attempted to show some of the main aspects of how women have been perceived in literature for centuries by exploring the representation of three mythical figures.

Our initial question was how intertextuality opens up the spectrum of available roles for women. After our analysis, we concluded that the interrelation of texts that are probably distant in time enables new roles for women to develop. More types of female representation can exist when different intertextual elements are interacting. Furthermore, we also witnessed how women represent an active part in the revindication of their own new nuances and how they are engaged in battles to bring the chimera of equal rights into reality. However, there is still much work to do. Literature provides a tolerant framework for new interpretations and multiple layers of truth. Carol Ann Duffy’s poetry, which helped us navigate and explore women voices, is an example of such a fairer representation. Her intention, as she explains herself in the Afterword of *The World’s Wife*, was not to present women that are better than men:

I didn’t want every woman in the book to be better than men. That wasn’t my agenda, so I wanted to look at unpleasant aspects of being female as well as look at ways of being male. I wanted to look at ways of being human⁶¹.

Words like these support women to continue their journey towards a fairer position in society and a wider representation of their identity in literature.

⁶¹ Duffy, as above, p.78

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