

A Psychoanalysis Exploration of Character's Internal Conflict and Childhood Trauma in Jessi Burton's *Medusa*

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Abstract

Many people who have experienced childhood trauma generally experience conditions such as depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder that can cause internal conflict. This study aims to show the internal conflict in *Medusa* by Jessi Burton. This study uses a qualitative descriptive method and a psychoanalytic approach. The results of this study show that the traumatic incidents that happened to young *Medusa* made her feel helpless and ashamed, and she lost her self-confidence, which influenced her way of thinking that everyone who came would immediately leave her and even felt like she would be betrayed again. The traumatic incidents that *Medusa* experienced continue to haunt her through dreams. Her actions were caused by the internal conflict wherein her Ego attempts to mediate the demands of the impulsive Id and the moralistic Superego. The cause of internal conflict emerged because the dream kept repeating the incident where she was raped and punished by Athena, the Goddess that she served, which made her feel ashamed. Those incidents were why she hid when talking to Perseus and made a fake identity because she was embarrassed by her terrible appearance. The internal conflict in *Medusa* also influenced how she decides to react to someone who wants to kill her, Perseus. Her hatred for Perseus can be controlled by finally choosing what the superego wants: to forgive Perseus.

INTRODUCTION

Humans have experienced many events during their lives; these experiences can be good or bad. Humans have every bad experience with a meaning always emphasized by the subconscious. Trauma can destroy trust, and for those who experience it, they will consider something valuable to be destroyed in an instant. This trauma can be felt by adults and children alike (Freud, 1917). Based on Freud, childhood trauma is trauma that occurs in a child's life as a result of war, train accidents, and other frightening things that endanger life. A study is underway to see whether childhood trauma is a risk factor for mental health problems. In real life, many people who have experienced childhood trauma generally experience conditions such as depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder.

Medusa by Jessi Burton is one of the novels that depicts childhood trauma. *Medusa* is a villain in the original story, Greek mythology. In this mythology, *Medusa* is described as a beautiful young girl whom the Goddess Athena cursed for violating the sacred place. While in Burton's novel, it tells the perspective of *Medusa* as a victim of sexual harassment. *Medusa*'s story focuses on the issue of young women who are

victims of abuse, humiliated, and ignored when the perpetrator does not get any punishment. This issue is very related to real-life cases today. This story is an example of how past trauma can affect the emotions and mindset of its victims. The different perspective of Medusa made Burton's work successfully enter the first Locus award nomination (2022). Not only that, her work 'Medusa' has also been listed for two Yoto Carnegie Medals in the writing and illustration categories.

The aim of this research is to show the childhood trauma that can cause the internal conflict of Medusa's character. The childhood trauma can influence the development of Medusa's character in the literary work. The disorder experienced by Medusa, who was a victim of abuse and violence, can be analyzed from how she lived her life after the tragedy occurred, the anxiety that occurred during the trauma due to remembering the incident to nightmares. It will show how the effects of childhood trauma can affect the survival of post-traumatic life by showing the internal conflict and the decisions that the character makes.

There are several articles discussing 'Medusa' by Jessie Burton. A thesis written by Franziska Frohlich (2024), *Medusa: How the Mythological Monster Became a Feminist Icon*, the study explains how Medusa became an icon for feminist empowerment in literature, and the author also mentions Jessi Burton's work *Medusa*, which retells the mythology from the perspective of how Medusa did not get justice as a woman who was a victim which ended up making her a feminist icon. Then, an article written by Lauren (2023), a book blogger, Burton's *Medusa* retells how young women endure trauma and become victims who are blamed, not 'Medusa' as a Gorgon (monster) who will be killed like the original story. Another article from EICicco reviews how Burton reflects feminism by retelling Medusa from the original story, focusing on self-discovery and overcoming trauma. The review of the article also praised Burton for opposing the original story, which tells not Medusa as a monster but as a victim of male injustice.

Not only articles for media but also articles for journals studied this story. One of them is *Choosing a Frame: How Medusa Tells the Story of Trauma and Their Life After Trauma*, written by Yurman (2023). Her journal discusses how Medusa is retold as a strong and resilient victim of victimization. This study also used psychoanalysis but did not focus on the internal conflict that happened to Medusa. Not only articles, a thesis entitled *Medusa: The Face of Ambiguity And Resilience* by Natalie Martinez (2018) states that it is Medusa's beauty that leads to destruction. The difference between Martinez's article and this article is that Martinez's article discusses the original story of Medusa and also becomes a feminist symbol because of the patriarchal narrative that evolved from the image of Medusa itself. Then, the thesis also discusses Medusa, who became an icon of the famous brand Versace as a form of feminist sign. Meanwhile, this study analyzes the story of Medusa by Burton, which discusses the perspective of Medusa, who was a victim of violence to the trauma she experienced when she was 14 years old.

Then, this article explores how trauma can affect Medusa's change in attitude and how she deals with the trauma. There is an article that can help this study to understand more about applying the theory to this novel. Maghira and Pandin's article (2022), *A Psychoanalytic Approach Behaviour as The Impact of Childhood Trauma in Yejide Kilanko's Daughters Who Walk This Path* explains that Freud's original theory explains that the sexual experiences that someone feels in their childhood will make them feel the traumatic incident, from Sigmund Freud's book with the title *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis* (1917).

THEORY AND METHOD

This study used a qualitative method of psychoanalysis by analyzing the flow through the narrative to find out how trauma can affect Medusa's character in the story. For Parker (2005), the use of psychoanalysis in qualitative research focuses on psychoanalysis itself, which is understood as an interesting narrative that is culturally specific and functional. The psychoanalytic concept needs primary and secondary data as a helpful reference point (Holt, 2008). In other words, the data needed to conduct this research is the *Medusa* book as primary data and Articles, books, and journals as secondary data to help develop this research.

There are some steps in analyzing the object in this study. The first step is organizing data, which begins by identifying data types. Second, sorting data into relevant topical categories. This step develops topics based on research objectives and reads the data carefully. Third, identifying topics that will be discussed so that they can be developed into findings. The last step is to apply theory and explain findings; at this stage, researchers create and apply points obtained in line with existing literature and theoretical frameworks.

This study uses Sigmund Freud's Psychoanalysis theory to analyze Jessi Burton's literary work, *Medusa*. The theory used focuses on finding how trauma can manifest due to past memories to the pressure that appears in dreams. Freud's approach (1923) proposed three parts of human personality: Id, Ego, and Superego. These three parts of the mind that work together until the end of human life (Freud & Psychoanalysis, 2001). According to Freud, the Id is an instinct that drives desire and aggression, which, in essence, this instinct seeks satisfaction without thinking about the consequences (Instincts), Superego is a positive instinct that functions as a conscience (morality), and Ego mediates or balances the two parts between the desires of Id and Superego and rational and logical (Reality). These three parts often conflict, especially between the Id and Superego, where the Id's desires conflict with the Superego, thus influencing character behavior. The core of this study is to explore how the three parts form a character's personality in a literary work. According to Wali, this process is called Psychoanalytic Criticism (2010).

Psychoanalysis theory assumes that there is an internal unconscious state that influences external behavior (Sollod, Monte, & Wilson, 2008). According to Freud, the unconscious is a memory that is temporarily forgotten and emphasized. Human behavior is caused by past experiences, especially from childhood. The trauma experienced by Medusa due to childhood experiences causes changes in her behavior and attitudes. Freud's book entitled 'Moses and Monotheism' (1939) states that trauma contains negative effects in the form of traumatic experiences where trauma can reoccur due to remembering forgotten experiences. Medusa is a subject who is struggling to overcome trauma.

By examining the background of the cause of trauma, such as past or childhood experiences, that can leave marks on the character. Freud's theory analyzes how trauma can reappear through dreams, which can be seen from Medusa's actions or attitudes. With paying attention to the flashback flow in the novel that tells the beginning of the traumatic tragedy that befell the main character until the experience returns in the form of a dream due to Medusa's refusal to accept her fate after being cursed and the trauma that is still unresolved. The use of trauma that continues to repeat itself will be able to show how trauma continues to haunt the character.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The story of Medusa by Jessi Burton is a reflection of how violence prevents victims from getting justice or even being tried so that it can have an impact not only physically but also psychologically on the victim. As a result, the victim experiences pressure within herself, feeling dirty, unloved, weak, and worthless. Those who experience this incident, especially in childhood, will leave an unforgettable mark, which young Medusa experienced.

Exploring the Causes of Childhood Trauma in the Past

Trauma will not occur without cause; that is what Medusa experienced in her childhood. Childhood trauma is a trauma that occurs in children's lives as a result of war, train accidents, and other scary things that endanger life (Freud, 1917). A beautiful young girl who had to be a victim of early rape and suffered injustice until the incident was still etched in her mind. The beginning of this trauma was when Poseidon, the god of the sea, targeted young Medusa. Poseidon was attracted to Medusa and kept trying to get her attention.

"He threatened to kill me with a storm he made until I was forced to make a promise to him to save my life and Argostus. After that day, he continued to follow me every time I fished, and I tried to ignore him."(Burton, 2023) .

Not only in Burton's work, the original story tells how Medusa was treated unfairly as a victim of

abuse. Poseidon, who is a God, did something inappropriate to Medusa and destroyed Athena's temple. Then, the Goddess Athena, who was very famous as a figure of female purity, 'Virginity' (Sissa, Greek Virginity), who was supposed to be fair and maintain the sanctity of her temple where Poseidon took Medusa's chastity, instead ignored all of this and punished the victim, Medusa. Athena was the Goddess whom Medusa and her sisters asked for protection to protect Medusa from Poseidon's targets. However, she punished her by turning her and her two sisters into a Gorgon (monster and immortal).

All the events that happened to Medusa at that time occurred when she was still 14 years old. The punishment she received did not stop there. Medusa, her two sisters, and her dog, Argentus, had to be exiled from their hometown and lived on the uninhabited Rocky Island (Burton, 2023). Her life was also targeted by Perseus. It can be seen how Medusa does not get justice at all from society, even the Gods and Goddesses.

As explained in Freud's (1917) theory, the sexual experiences a person experiences in childhood will make them feel traumatic events. The traumatic incidents that befell young Medusa made her feel helpless and ashamed, and she lost her self-confidence, which influenced her way of thinking that everyone who came would immediately leave her, and even felt like she would be betrayed again. Her habit of hiding behind rocks was also a reflection of her trauma when she was transformed into a Gorgon by Athena.

Identify Id, Ego, and Superego

After reading the entire story of Medusa in Burton's version, it was discovered how the Superego dominates Medusa. According to Freud (1920), there are three models of how the mind works until the end of human life. In his theory, three parts of the mind are id, Ego, and Superego. The Id is pain, revenge, hatred, and anger due to the childhood trauma she received. Medusa's anger was caused by the injustice she experienced as a victim of rape. The Id can be seen in the narrative of how Medusa's anger is shown from the treatment of her snakes when Poseidon's name is pronounced. Medusa hated Athena so much, and she said, "Athena is a bitch" (Burton, 2023). She said Athena was a bitch because she was very upset with Athena. Medusa thought that Athena was the one who had spread the story about her being a monster to the people. News that she was a monster had spread in Oceanus and even reached the city of Seriphos, where Perseus came from. Even though she was very annoyed with Athena, Medusa did nothing to Athena except say annoyance because she was a Goddess.

What balances the id and Superego also determines the decisions Medusa makes is the Ego. Ego can be felt by the reader by seeing how Medusa tries to accept herself and not get lost in her hatred. She slowly accepts herself from being a beautiful girl who turns into a terrifying gorgon and is even exiled to an uninhabited island. Her beautiful hair turns into a nest of serpents with various colors, names, and personalities. At first, she did not accept her transformation, but slowly, she accepted herself because the serpents on her head made her comfortable and understood her. Ego can also be seen even though she has had a traumatic experience with men; she still wants to interact with Perseus, and they can even be close and fall in love even though they do not look at each other. Her efforts to continue interacting with Perseus even to the point of disguising her true identity and becoming Merina so that she can continue to talk to Perseus.

"Who was I? Who could I be to this boy, that he wouldn't want to run a mile? Something in my blood told me to keep my name to myself. I plucked another out of the air and pinned it to myself like a painful brooch. 'My name is Merina,' I said." (Burton, 2023).

In the end, the Ego allows the Superego's desire to be honest with Perseus about her true identity, that she is the Medusa that he has been looking for, not Merina (Burton, 2023). The strong desire of the Superego not to lie about her identity to someone she loves drives Medusa to be honest with Perseus because she does not want to deceive Perseus. That is why the Ego fulfills the Superego's desire.

The Superego in the story of Medusa is at the end of the story when she is betrayed by Perseus, who turns out to have been her secret mission all this time, his mission to come to the rocky island to kill Medusa, whom she considers a terrifying monster. Even though Perseus has said, "The Medusa is a monster. She's hideous. Her skin's filthy. She eats lizards for breakfast" (Burton, 2023). She tried to

persuade Perseus to talk to her and listen to her explanation because she had lied about herself as Merina or Medusa. Even though Perseus betrayed her, Medusa still forgave him and had no intention of taking revenge on Perseus, following the norms applied by society about continuing to forgive someone even though they have hurt her because no religion teaches to take revenge on someone. Finally, Perseus died from accidentally looking into Medusa's eyes.

“As best I could, I twined the stems into a wreath, and when it was finished, I placed it on Perseus's head as if it were a crown” (Burton, 2023)

When Medusa paid her last respects to Perseus, she wrapped flowers like a crown around Perseus' stone as a sign of forgiveness from Perseus. If it is not, Perseus, who turned into stone, could have been left alone by Medusa, who was a victim of Perseus' betrayal. She even tried to touch Perseus, hoping he would come back to life, “I held him, I shook him, I touched him everywhere, trying to bring life back to his limbs, but there was nothing” (Burton, 2023). Medusa's actions show that even though her body is Gorgon (Monster), but her heart still feels compassion.

Even after knowing that she was betrayed and targeted to be killed by Perseus, she still paid her last respects to Perseus. In the end, Medusa's Superego won; it could be that the Id, which contained her hatred due to her rejection of herself and the betrayal she received controlled her when she knew that Perseus wanted to kill her. The Id controlled her by retaliating by wanting to kill Perseus back, but the Ego chose to follow what the Superego wanted; her Superego completely controlled Medusa at that time; she even paid her respects to Perseus' death which was an accident due to looking into Medusa's eyes.

Dream as the Impact of Trauma that Haunts the Character

The deep trauma resulting from rape by Poseidon and Punishment from Athena left young Medusa psychologically scarred. Based on psychoanalytic theory, how the subconscious can influence external behavior. The internal conflict that Medusa experiences due to deep childhood trauma due to rape and the injustice she experiences has an impact on the way she accepts herself and behaves. Freud also argued that the unconscious is memories that are temporarily forgotten and repressed. The traumatic incidents that Medusa experienced continue to haunt her through dreams because of the words of one of the causes of her trauma, Athena, who warned her, “Woe to any man foolish enough to look at you now” (Burton, 2023). No matter how difficult it is to forget the incident, the traumatic event continues to appear in her dreams and haunts her every night.

Because of her internal conflict, Medusa was initially suspicious of Perseus' arrival on Rocky Island and thought that Perseus would only stay there for a short time. However, Medusa started to feel insecure about herself after they got close. She thought Perseus would never want to be with her if he knew about her past and looks. The insecurity caused internal conflict in Medusa. The cause of internal conflict emerged because the dream kept repeating the incident where she was raped and punished by Athena, which made her feel ashamed. That is why she hid when talking to Perseus and made a fake identity because she was embarrassed by her terrible appearance now.

“Another bad dream? You didn't stop tossing and turning.”

“But why is he in your head again in the first place? You know it's never just a dream. It means something” (Burton,2023).

Medusa thinks that her current form could prevent her from being able to communicate with Perseus. That is one of the impacts of Medusa's childhood trauma, namely the loss of self-confidence due to the tragedy that befell her, causing her to lie to Perseus about her true identity. She felt unworthy of love and respect due to a curse from the Goddess Athena. According to the article journal *Unveiling the pernicious consequences of trauma in Childhood: A Study on the Relationships between adverse childhood experiences and Children's Well-being and attachment styles in young adults* written by Arora and Soni (2024), childhood trauma can have a major impact on how people live their lives, children who experience violence will have difficulty trusting others as they grow older. The trauma they experience causes them to feel worthless, humiliated, and blame themselves.

CONCLUSION

This research analyzes the story of Medusa by Jessi Burton, which retells the story of Medusa from the perspective of her as a victim of abuse whom a God abused. As a victim, there are some impacts that happened to Medusa, especially to her psychology. She also got hunted by people because of this incident. Since this incident happened when she was a 14-year-old girl, the childhood trauma appears to distract her life. Medusa always feels the internal conflict that affects her actions and decisions.

By using a psychoanalytic approach and Sigmund Freud's theory to explore how the childhood trauma experienced by Medusa affected her psychology. The results of this research begin by exploring the background of the childhood trauma that Medusa experienced due to the rape committed by Poseidon, then the injustice of Medusa as a victim receiving punishment from the Goddess Athena, who is a figure of purity. Then, see how the three personality structures (Id, Ego, Superego) that Medusa has controlled her, even though revenge and hatred for Poseidon and Athena continue to haunt her through dreams about this traumatic incident, but Superego can defeat Id by paying her last respects to Perseus even though she has betrayed by Perseus. Because of the childhood trauma, the incidents following the trauma made her experience nightmares. She was haunted by shame about her current appearance by continuing to hide and thinking that. Apparently, this was preventing her from being able to like someone.

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