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When in Doubt: An Exploration of the Role of the Oracle in the Harry Potter Series

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J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series has become a world-wide phenomenon and inspired eight movies, two theme parks, three supplemental books, and a comprehensive fan website. The series follows Harry Potter's time at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry where he encounters a cast of extraordinary characters, none more so than the professor of Divination, Sibyll Trelawney. Rowling does not seem to account for it without Trelawney and her power as an oracle Harry's story would never happen. Trelawney's role as an oracle is at the very heart of *the Harry Potter series*.

For the ancient Greeks, oracles were the mouthpieces of gods and seldom questioned. Cassandra, one of the most notable literary oracles, was cursed to never be believed despite speaking the truth. Many aspects of the oracle are reimagined in J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series through the character of Professor Sibyll Trelawney. These are paralleled in both Cassandra and the oracles of antiquity. The importance of Trelawney to the *Harry Potter* franchise is often overlooked because of the belief that she is a fraudulent Seer with a penchant for predicting death and calamity that never seems to occur. She echoes the struggle of Cassandra in *Agamemnon* and the actions of the oracles in Greece. The role of the oracle in this series adds layers of depth that cannot be fully appreciated until the reader rereads the Series.

Oracles have been around for centuries and were once an important part of culture and were powerful diviners. One of the most famous oracles was the Oracle at Delphi, who would prophesize while sitting on a bronze tripod, and gave prophecies that were notoriously vague and could be interpreted many way (Kronzek and Kronzek, "Prophecy" 225) s. Oracles would go into trances so they could "speak" with their chosen god. An important aspect of augur is that many oracles believed it to be a gift rather than a procedure one could perform for an outcome (Kronzek and Kronzek, "Prophecy" 220). Many of the oracles had a habit of prophesizing a

future filled with suffering and injustice followed by peace and harmony (Kronzek and Kronzek, “Prophecy” 221). Prophecy, unlike the uncertain art of divination, remains a much more terrifying force.

Sibyls, “mysterious women known for their ability to foresee the future while in a trance,” were contacted to predict the rise and fall of rulers and empires (Kronzek and Kronzek, “Prophecy” 222). Sibyls were often portrayed as cave-dwelling, divinely inspired mad women; historians agree that sibyls were all women (Kronzek and Kronzek, “Prophecy” 222). Sibyls differed from oracles in one major aspect: while an oracle would speak when they were spoken to, a sibyl only spoke when they were divinely inspired to speak (Kronzek and Kronzek, “Prophecy” 224). It is no wonder that J. K. Rowling chose the name Sibyll for Hogwarts’ Divination professor.

Trelawney in Context

Possibly the most famous Oracle in the Western literary tradition is Cassandra who appears in both Homer’s and Aeschylus’s writings. Cassandra predicts death and destruction and for her predictions, she is portrayed as a mad woman, not unlike the sibyls (Bogan). Cassandra was a priestess of Apollo and was cursed by him for refusing his advances. Her curse forces her to speak her prophecies, but never be believed; her most famous prophecy is the fall of Troy in Homer’s *The Iliad* which leaves her outcast by the Trojans. Cassandra becomes a spoil of war for Agamemnon and later is murdered by Agamemnon’s wife, Clytemnestra. Cassandra’s tale is full of tragedy and death, as are her prophecies.

The power of the oracle has been seen in literature throughout history, most recently with Sibyll Trelawney, Professor of Divination at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Her

Hogwarts colleagues question her abilities calling her a fraud for her often obscure predictions. But what if she constantly reads and perceives details that no one else can? Trelawney has the potential to be a True Seer. This is not unlike the role of Cassandra in *Agamemnon*; who predicts her own death among other future happenings and no one believes her prediction. Most notably Trelawney predicts Harry Potter's imminent demise (frequently throughout the series). This is not the only death Trelawney predicts; in *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, Trelawney walks through the halls carrying a deck of tarot cards and pulls the Tower card saying, "If Dumbledore chooses to ignore the warnings the cards show—Again and again, no matter how I lay them out—the lightning struck tower, ... Calamity." (Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* 543). What Trelawney foreshadows is Dumbledore's death later that night; Dumbledore falls from the top of the tallest tower at Hogwarts. So why do people question Trelawney's predictions?

To understand why people doubt Trelawney we must look at her methods and the reason why people doubted Cassandra. Trelawney teaches Divination an imprecise art to begin with that seems to align more with the traditional idea of fortune-telling rather than some of the other "magics." Trelawney teaches her students to read tea leaves, gaze at star charts, peer into crystal balls, and read tarot cards among other divining practices. She seems to delight in predictions of peril and misery, but what if that is all she can see in her visions? Just like Cassandra, whose only vision in *Agamemnon* is of hers and King Agamemnon's deaths, the oracles and sibyls of the past were known for their dire predictions. Professor Minerva McGonagall says of Trelawney to the students after their first Divination class in *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, "[...] Sibyll Trelawney has predicted the death of one student a year since she arrived at this school. None of them has died yet." (109). Professor McGonagall goes on to say, "Divination is

one of the most imprecise branches of magic. I shall not conceal from you that I have very little patience with it. True Seers are very rare, and Professor Trelawney..." (Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* 109). Professor McGonagall implies that Trelawney is not a True Seer, but if they are as rare as she implies then how would she determine whether Trelawney is a True Seer. McGonagall's use of the word "yet" in referring to Trelawney's predictions of death implies that McGonagall holds a dim view divination and Trelawney. Trelawney's status as a Seer is important because of her similarities to Cassandra.

In every version of her story, Cassandra is locked away by King Priam; eerily similar to the life that Trelawney lives at Hogwarts. After receiving their class schedules in The Great Hall and looking at where the classes will be held, Ron says to Harry and Hermione, "Divination's at the top of the North Tower. It'll take us ten minutes to get there" when Harry, Ron, and Hermione arrive the only way into the North Tower is a ladder dropped from the trapdoor in the ceiling (Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* 99 & 101). Both Cassandra and Trelawney are locked away and perceived by others to be insane for their predictions of death and sorrow; unlike Cassandra who is forced into isolation, Trelawney's isolated existence is a choice.

The Trance

Trelawney's two major "Seeings" occur when she goes into a trance state. She cannot remember them afterwards and both times she prophesizes about Voldemort, the first his death and the second his return to power. The trance like state is a common theme in the writings of sibyls and oracles; there is a common belief that a trance-like state is necessary for prophecy and divination (Kronzek and Kronzek, "Crystal Ball" 45-46). What engages readers in these

moments remains the description of the trance: “Professor Trelawney had gone rigid in her armchair; her eyes were unfocused and her mouth sagging. [...] Her eyes started to roll. Harry sat there in a panic. She looked as though she was about to have some sort of seizure. [...] –and then Professor Trelawney spoke again, in the same harsh voice, quite unlike her own” (Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* 324). This description is very compelling given the descriptions of other oracles in trances, “the Sibyls were divinely inspired prophetesses who spoke discursive utterances, usually forecasts, in spontaneous ecstasy.” (Parker 159). Sir James Frazer in his landmark tome *The Golden Bough* (1922) says of the trance,

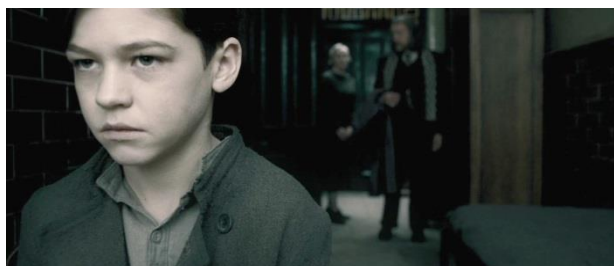
Certain persons are supposed to be possessed from time to time by a spirit or deity; while the possession lasts, their own personality lies in abeyance, the presence of the spirit is revealed by convulsive shiverings and shakings of the man’s whole body, by wild gestures and excited looks, all of which are referred, not to the man himself, but to the spirit which has entered him; and in this abnormal state all his utterances are accepted as the voice of the god or spirit dwelling in him and speaking through him. (Frazer 62).

These two very different descriptions of oracles in the midst of prophesizing line up with Rowling’s own description of Trelawney’s trance from shaking to being unaware that something has overtaken her body for a short amount of time. These parallels give rise to the importance of Trelawney and her role as an oracle.

Trelawney in Literature

While Trelawney’s trances occur under very specific circumstances: one alone in a room with Harry, the other alone in a room with Albus Dumbledore, the rest of Trelawney’s predictions occur when she seems in control of her own body. This distinguishes Trelawney

from an oracle, when she prophesizes she goes into a trance, but when she makes predictions in her Divination class, she is very aware of herself and what she says. This awareness is so acute that it leads to one of the most peculiar predictions to appear in the *Harry Potter* series, Trelawney is explaining the importance of the placement of the stars and planets on the day of a person's birth to her students when she says to Harry Potter, "I was saying that Saturn was surely in a position of power in the heavens at the moment of your birth....Your dark hair...your mean stature...tragic losses so young in life...I think I am right in saying, my dear, that you were born in midwinter?" (Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* 201). Now most people who read the books are aware that Harry Potter was born at midnight on July 31, so Trelawney is seen as a fraud, except that she reads a part of Harry that no one is aware of, she reads the sliver of Lord Voldemort's soul that resides in Harry. Lord Voldemort, born Tom Marvolo Riddle, was born in midwinter, had dark hair, and lost his mother while he was young.



(Image of a Young Tom Riddle)

When Trelawney makes this and other comments she is seen as crazy and dismissed by others, not unlike the way Cassandra is dismissed in *Agamemnon*, "Knowing thy doom, why walkest thou with clear eyes,/ Like some god-blinded beast, to sacrifice?" (Aeschylus). Cassandra is questioned for her knowledge, but ultimately dismissed as being crazy; this is her curse. Cassandra was gifted by Apollo the gift of foresight, but also plagued to always speak her prophecies and never be believed. It is unclear as to why Cassandra was cursed by Apollo, some

myths say she agreed to have a physical relationship with him and then denied him her body when the time came, others say Apollo fell in love with her and she did not return his affections (Bogan). No matter the reason, it is clear that the curse of never being believed has fallen upon Trelawney, as well.

Trelawney is a part of a unique literary tradition tracing back to the ancient Greeks that continues into contemporary literature. Trelawney is often questioned, but this is not true for all oracles in literature; King Arthur does not question or scorn his oracle, Merlin, he instead tries to keep the prophecy from coming to fruition setting him on the course of his destiny; and recently in Rick Riordan's *Percy Jackson* series (a series of books centering on the children of Greek gods) the Oracle of Delphi is never questioned, despite her vague prophecies, but she must be met with before a hero sets out on a quest. The most famous prophets who predicted the future, which are still studied today in our churches are those that appear in the Bible; Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Daniel to name a few.

Many aspects of Trelawney mirror those of Cassandra; one of the more striking is their marriage status. In *Agamemnon* Cassandra is brought home as a spoil of the Trojan War, she is unmarried at the time. Professor Sibyll Trelawney remains unmarried throughout the *Harry Potter* Series. Both women are virgins, under an archaic definition of the word literally meaning "unwed female" (Virgin). This important distinction is a binding one giving rise to the question of purity and prophecy. It was believed at one point that the people who could divine the future best were children who would not have been married. The Romani people of Eastern Europe also put great stock in chastity before marriage and most especially when a young girl would travel out to tell fortunes (Thompson 331-332). Since these women are in a state of exile from society, could this lend to the strength of their prophecies and their predictions?

Trelawney's Methods

Trelawney's methods of divination are reminiscent of those used by people throughout history; tea leaves, tarot cards, crystal balls, and so on. Her appearance in both the book and movies are even more suggestive of what you would see on a fortune teller.

Harry's immediate impression was of a large, glittering insect. Professor Trelawney moved into the firelight, and they saw that she was very thin; her large glasses magnified her eyes to several times their natural size, and she was draped in a gauzy spangles shawl. Innumerable chains and beads hung around her spindly neck, and her arms and hands were encrusted with bangles and rings. (Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* 102)



(Image of Trelawney)

The Romani peoples have historically been marginalized and ostracized by society, not unlike the marginalization of oracles. They are also seen as a superstitious group a trait Trelawney also seems to share. In a particular scene in *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* Trelawney happens upon an intimate Holiday Feast comprised of twelve Hogwarts residents her reaction is, "I dare not, Headmaster [Dumbledore]! If I join the table, we shall be thirteen! Nothing could be more unlucky! Never forget that when thirteen dine together, the first to rise

will be the first to die!” (Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* 228). This might seem like a silly superstition, but in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, this superstition returns to predict the death of Alastor “Mad-Eye” Moody, a member of the Order of the Phoenix.

Trelawney’s methods of divination trace back to the ancient times. Methods like crystallomancy, tasseomancy (tea-leaf reading), astrology, and tarot reading have long histories and have repeatedly been called into question often for their lack of scientific grounding. This is why divination is referred to as an imprecise art. Divination is “the art of foretelling the future” and has been found in every culture in written history (Kronzek and Kronzek, “Divination” 60). In ancient Greece and Rome, professional diviners would work for the government and watch birds as a form of divination: “Of all earth’s creatures, birds were the closest to the heavens, so it’s understandable that they were regarded as good indicators of what might or might not please the gods” (Kronzek and Kronzek, “Divination” 61-62). Trelawney’s divination uses practices that have been studied for centuries and while imprecise still serve a purpose.

The Crystal Ball

The crystal ball, a tool used for a technique called “scrying,” has become a metonym for oracles and is often seen in conjunction with Trelawney. It is a crystal ball Harry returns to Trelawney in the movie and a crystal ball he is meant to be peering into in *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*. Literal crystal balls are also shown to hold prophecies in the Hall of Mysteries at the Ministry of Magic in *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*. This is a strong image, a hall of crystal balls that hold prophecies made about witches and wizards, given the relationship between crystal balls and telling fortunes. Ron helpfully informs Harry and Hermione one night that the witches and wizards who work in the Hall of Mysteries are referred

to as “Unspeakables,” because “no one really seems to know what they do in there” (Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* 539). This suggests that maybe divination is not quite the junk magic people believe; in this representation, the crystal balls literally hold a person’s future within themselves and that the prophecies are somethings that need to be kept secret and away from the public.

Trelawney’s “Sight”

Trelawney tells her students at the beginning of the term, “So you have chosen to study Divination, the most difficult of all magical arts. I must warn you at the outset that if you do not have the Sight, there is very little I will be able to teach you” (Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* 103). This idea of divination as an art rather than an exacting practice is a common belief. In fact, many people throughout history who were said to have “The Sight” would go to great lengths for their perceived power. “The Sight” is the term generally used to describe a person’s ability to look into the future. Oracles needed to be pure in thought and body, at one point in history children were thought to be best at divining given their openness to imagination (Kronzek and Kronzek, “Crystal Ball” 46). Even Trelawney tells her students that she keeps away from the general public because “I find that descending too often into the hustle and bustle of the main school clouds my Inner Eye” (Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* 103). Given that Trelawney has two confirmed prophecies, three if you count the prediction of Harry’s death, her Inner Eye seems rather clear.

Trelawney frequently makes comments or predictions that like her infamous death predictions cause others to dismiss her. Given her perceived love of the dark and depressing, one could wonder if she misreads signs or reads too far into the signs. Early on in the third Harry

Potter book, Trelawney sees a symbol called “The Grim” in Harry’s future, a symbol of death. Later on in the novel Harry’s godfather Sirius Black, an unregistered Animagus in the shape of a big black dog, returns to seek his revenge on the man he believes killed James and Lily Potter (Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*). Trelawney sees a dog in Harry’s future and immediately sees a death omen, but what if all she saw was the return of Sirius Black. The dual meaning here provides Trelawney some validity, not only is she predicting Harry’s future death, but also the return of his godfather. Trelawney’s immediate prediction of death at seeing The Grim presents the possibility of duality in her predictions; The Grim represents death, but it is also a physical representation of Sirius Black’s Animagus shape. This prediction is twice proven correct, no matter how a person reads it; whether as a physical or a metaphorical symbol.

Trelawney in Film

It is saddening that such a dynamic and ultimately important character is almost completely written out of the *Harry Potter* movies. Trelawney’s only appearances occur in *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, and *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, Part 2*. Her role in these films is small and easily overlooked. Her main appearances are her prediction scenes in *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* and when Dolores Umbridge tries to remove her from Hogwarts castle in *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*. In fact, her major accomplishment in the novels (the Prophecy) is almost completely removed from the fifth movie: a disembodied voice speaks from a crystal ball while Harry holds the crystal ball in his hands; the movie is unclear to viewers if this is meant to be Trelawney or not as no clear picture is seen in the swirling smoke. (Radcliffe, Grint and Watson, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*). The viewer has no idea if Trelawney speaks the Prophecy. In the eighth and final *Harry Potter* movie, the viewer sees Trelawney at

Hogwarts drawing a sheet over the body of a fallen soldier and comforting a female student. Trelawney no longer appears as an outcast or an oracle she is merely a soldier in a battle, relegated to covering the dead (Radcliffe, Grint and Watson, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, Part 2*). These small snippets of Trelawney express how little stock people put in her. Trelawney becomes essentially erased from Harry Potter's journey towards his final battle and is used to express how evil Dolores Umbridge, a Ministry of Magic employee, can truly be.

There is a small scene before Umbridge tries to remove Trelawney that, while trivial considering the rest of the story, exemplifies her connection to the sibyls of old. Umbridge demands Trelawney give her a prediction, Trelawney cannot and so she falls back on her habit of predicting doom (Radcliffe, Grint and Watson, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*). Trelawney can only prophesy when she is in a trance state, not unlike the sibyls. When she is not in a trance, she falls onto her vague, doom and gloom predictions the same as an oracle who predicts despair followed by joy. Trelawney is an outcast from society, a character caught between the role of an oracle and a sibyl.

The Prophecy

The Prophecy that has been mentioned repeatedly and determines Harry Potter's Hogwarts experience is Trelawney's crowning achievement as a Seer:

The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord [Voldemort] approaches....Born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies...and the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not...and either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives....The one with the power to vanquish

the Dark Lord will be born as the seventh month dies... (Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* 841)

Quite a few parts make up the prophecy and direct the reader to Harry's role in the Prophecy. First is the obvious beginning which speaks of a child being born who can defeat Voldemort. "Born to those who have thrice defied him" refers to Lily and James Potter, Harry's parents, who were a part of a rebel group working against Voldemort and as told by the Prophecy defied Voldemort three times (Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* 841). Harry was born on the last day of July, the seventh month of the year. When Voldemort killed Harry's parents, a sliver of Voldemort's soul attached itself to Harry and marked Harry as Voldemort's equal in power, but as Dumbledore explains to Harry; Voldemort knows nothing of love and is incapable of love, and love that protects Harry throughout his life. The penultimate line of the Prophecy explains that only Harry can kill Voldemort and only Voldemort can kill Harry, but one of them must die. The final line circles back to the beginning of the Prophecy and reiterates that the child will be born at the end of July. The Prophecy has many components to it and many specific indicators of whom it is designating as the savior of the Wizarding World.

This prophecy has spawned much conversation given that according to Trelawney's prophecy Lord Voldemort will choose the person who will kill him. It is ultimately Voldemort who sets himself and Harry on their path, not Trelawney's prophecy, but Voldemort's fear of death spurs him onward to his death. The Prophecy did not necessarily have to come true, but from the moment Voldemort heard the prophecy he began to set it in motion. So did Trelawney really predict the future or did she somehow influence the future with her prophecy. The power Harry has that Voldemort knows not, it is the ability to love and to be loved. Dumbledore put it best when he said, "That which Voldemort does not value, he takes no trouble to comprehend.

Of house-elves and children's tales, of love, of loyalty, and innocence, Voldemort knows and understands nothing." (Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* 709).

Trelawney's prophecies and predictions create a unique bond between herself and the rest of the world. Few of her students worship her and many laugh believing her a fraud, but it is only Harry who seems to truly understand the magnitude of Trelawney's power. Even J. K. Rowling does not seem to understand the character she created. Scholar Jeremy Peirce mentions an interview with Rowling in his essay "Destiny in the Wizarding World" where she says that Trelawney reflects Rowling's views that there's no such thing as destiny (43). This comment seems to contrary to everything Rowling creates with the character of Trelawney. Trelawney and the Hall of Mysteries are proof that destiny does exist in the Wizarding world, and whether they are aware of it or not it is a powerful force. Despite what Rowling intended with Trelawney, she created a powerful oracle whose prophecy sets the entire series into action. If Trelawney had not predicted Voldemort's demise, he would have never killed Harry's parents and there would be no story. Without the Prophecy Voldemort would never have chosen Harry, ergo Harry would not have been The Chosen One, and who knows what would have happened. Harry is the only person who sees the power in Trelawney and while he might not believe every prediction she makes he knows that she has a true gift.

Other Oracles

Professor Trelawney is not the only character who has a true gift; Ron Weasley has a sixth sense when it comes to prediction and sometimes past events. In *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* Ron, Hermione, and Harry are looking at Tom Riddle's Diary trying to guess why Riddle would have been given an award for services to Hogwarts and Ron says,

“Maybe he murdered [Moaning] Myrtle; that would have done everyone a favor...” (Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* 232). What we learn later is that Tom Riddle is Lord Voldemort and did in fact kill Myrtle to create his first Horcrux, an item or creature that carries a part of someone’s soul and is created through the darkest of magic, his Diary. In *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* Ron predicts Harry will experience, “A windfall, unexpected gold” in *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* Harry wins The Triwizard Tournament and wins one thousand Galleons, a form of wizarding money (Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* 106). Ron’s comments while vague and sardonic show an aptitude for prediction. Ron even quotes Trelawney when Hermione calls Divination “woolly”, saying “Professor Trelawney said you didn’t have the right aura! You just don’t like being bad at something for a change!” (Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* 111). Ron is not wrong in this accusation; Hermione excels at every other subject at Hogwarts every subject except Divination, which she quits before the school year is ended causing one of Trelawney’s predictions to come true. Ron jokingly predicts in their fourth year that Harry will “get stabbed in the back by someone you thought was a friend” and that Ron will “come off worse in a fight” both of these come to fruition when later in the book the boys get into a huge fight that makes Ron look like a spoiled child (Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* 222). Ron’s predictions while often made jokingly come true or are eerily accurate leading the reader to question his ability as a Seer.

Another character who makes predictions and gives warnings is the Sorting Hat. The Sorting Hat is largely overlooked by the movies, but in the books, it foreshadows the events in the seventh book. The Sorting Hat is used to sort students into their respective houses (Slytherin, Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, or Ravenclaw) by reading each student’s mind using Legilimency, a magic akin to mind-reading. The Hat’s first song tells the readers that it used to belong to Godric

Gryffindor, one of the original Hogwarts founders, and was created by the Four Founders (Salazar Slytherin, Rowena Ravenclaw, Godric Gryffindor, and Helga Hufflepuff) (Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* 177). In *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* the Sorting Hat issues its warning during his opening song starting by telling the students about how close the founders were, “For were there such friends anywhere/ As Slytherin and Gryffindor?/ Unless it was the second pair/ Of Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw?” (Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* 204). The Sorting Hat’s final lines are most worrisome:

I sort you into Houses
 Because that is what I’m for,
 But this year I’ll go further,
 Listen closely to my song:
 Though condemned I am to split you
 Still I worry that it’s wrong,
 Though I must fulfill my duty
 And must quarter every year
 Still I wonder whether sorting
 May not bring the end I fear.
 Oh, know the perils, read the signs,
 The warning history shows,
 For our Hogwarts is in danger
 From external, deadly foes
 And we must unite inside her
 Or we’ll crumble from within
 I have told you, I have warned you....
 Let the Sorting now begin.

Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* 206-207

This warning comes after Voldemort is returning to power and regained a corporeal form. The Sorting Hat stays in Dumbledore’s office except for when Fawkes, Dumbledore’s pet Phoenix, carries it to the Chamber of Secrets at the end of *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* and outside to Neville Longbottom at the very end of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* and obviously the Beginning of the Year Feast and Sorting. How is it that the Sorting

Hat knows Hogwarts is in trouble? Is he overhearing Dumbledore talking to other witches and wizards? Or is The Sorting Hat basing his warning on what he witnessed more than a thousand years ago? The Sorting Hat's prediction resurfaces in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* when Hogwarts is threatened students from Hufflepuff, Gryffindor, and Ravenclaw unite to fight for Hogwarts and all it stands for. The Sorting Hat is a powerful magical object that not only reads the students' deepest selves and placing them in the House they will flourish in, it also foreshadows the Battle for Hogwarts.

In *Harry Potter and the Order and the Phoenix*, when the Sorting Hat forewarns the students of the danger in the world, it is also predicting the formation of Dumbledore's Army in the line, "And we must unite inside her" (Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* 207). Dumbledore's Army is a group of like-minded Hogwarts students who desire to learn Defense of the Dark Arts in a more practical way than what Umbridge was allowing. This organization unites students from Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, and Ravenclaw houses creating bonds that draw them into the Battle for Hogwarts. Even though the Battle at Hogwarts highlights the problems with sorting the students into houses, at the very end of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* the reader learns that Hogwarts is still sorting students into the four Houses. While the Sorting Hat serves his purpose no matter what and issues warnings in times of need, I feel that Dumbledore said it best when he commented, "You know, I sometimes think we Sort too soon" implying that people often change from who they were at age eleven (when the students are Sorted), because anyone can be clever, ambitious, brave, and loyal (Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* 680). The Sorting Hat is a powerful magical object that reads a person's deepest thoughts and tries to protect its home by warning students in times of need.

Choices and Mandates

Dumbledore tells Harry towards the end of *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, “you are free to choose your way, quite free to turn your back on the prophecy” (Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* 512). Not only is this in direct opposition to what he told Harry at the end of *The Order of the Phoenix*, it is also curious. If prophecies can be ignored and need not be followed then why does the Ministry of Magic keep the crystal balls containing the prophecies in a locked room that is referred to as the Hall of Prophecy and hidden away from the wizarding population? The Ministry hides the prophecies away, if they hold no power over the person then why don't they let every witch or wizard hear their prophecy? Voldemort hears only part of his prophecy and sets it on course by attacking the Potters and choosing Harry as his adversary. In *The Order of the Phoenix*, the Hall of Prophecy is destroyed during a battle between the Death Eaters and Dumbledore's Army. This destruction may release every witch and wizard from their destiny since they will never hear their prophecies, but Harry is still trapped in his destiny because Voldemort has locked them into their roles.

Trelawney often gives her students homework involving recreating star charts from certain nights in the student's life. These star charts would be similar to creating a monthly horoscope, the students are asked to predict their own future by looking at the placement of stars and planets. People today can put too much stock in horoscopes, but they are printed in newspapers every day and people regularly check them. Ron and Harry eventually begin to make false predictions and fake star charts that still manage to impress Trelawney. Trelawney's assignments align with faux sciences such as astrology, and even in the magical world of Harry Potter, it would be an imprecise magic, but these century old practices remain today for a reason.

Trelawney's End

Trelawney's final appearance in *the Harry Potter series* is a powerful scene that speaks to the heart of her character and to her future in divination. "Then, with a bright white flash and a crack, a crystal ball fell on top of [the werewolf's] head, and he crumpled to the ground and did not move.... And with a movement like a tennis serve, she heaved another enormous crystal sphere from her bag" Trelawney has turned her tool into a weapon to defend not only her home, but also her world (Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* 646). Her actions invoke the enchanter Prospero's lines in William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, "I'll break my staff, / Bury it certain fathoms in the earth, / And deeper than did ever plummet sound / I'll drown my book" (Shakespeare, V.i.54-57). Trelawney no longer needs to look into the future because the future is here and now she must step outside of her tower and defend her world from the evil she predicted. Every crystal ball Trelawney throws, every life she saves, is a mark against her predictions of death; she is no longer a watcher she has taken action to protect her home and taken action to stop the death and destruction she's seen. Trelawney in this moment has transcended from her role as a Sybil, an Oracle, and a Fortune-Teller, she is a soldier fighting for a better future.

The Future

Trelawney's story ended at the Battle for Hogwarts, even if she managed to survive the battle, she is no longer needed as a sibyl or oracle. Trelawney's end opens up a view of the oracle that proves while the future may not be clear it has a power all its own. Trelawney is more than an oracle she is the future, something terrifying and often cloudy with no clearly set path.

Even though she makes an accurate prophecy, it is still vague and full of loopholes and surprises no one could have seen. Trelawney shows the oracle taking an important role that while marginalized is necessary to the very fabric of the story. Trelawney has shown that an oracle is only an oracle so long as he or she is needed.

Sibyll Trelawney is a complicated character in a complicated story with threads that interconnect and cross in ways that only she seems capable of seeing. For this, she is ostracized and overlooked, treated like a pariah and almost evicted from her only home. She mirrors the mythical Cassandra, cursed by the gods and killed by Clytemnestra and the Romani people who for centuries have been segregated from society. Trelawney represents so much more than an oracle she is the voice who speaks to deaf ears of a terrifying future that no one wants to hear. She is an oracle in every right and by every appearance.

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