

Tracing Out the Background of Names Used in *Harry Potter*

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ABSTRACT: J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* is a treasure of myths and legends. She has invented names for her characters from history and each name reveals something about the personality of the character. For instance, Sphinx in the maze asks Harry a riddle, just as the Sphinx of Thebes asked riddles to the travelers. Series is filled with number of veils which must be unveiled to fully enjoy such a masterpiece.

KEYWORDS: *Animagus, Gryffindor, Hogwarts, Oracle, Sphinx.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Rowling has skillfully chosen names of her characters and major events, each is loaded with history and meaning. Origins of few lie in myths while others in legends. The novel is an entertaining compendium of enchanted world. One of the four houses of Hogwarts is Gryffindor; Harry Potter belongs to this house. Its traits are chivalry, strong-will, and bravery which we come to know from The Sorting Hat's song in *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*

"You might belong in Gryffindor,
Where dwell the brave at heart,
Their daring, nerve and chivalry
Set Gryffindors apart."(93)

Gryffindor in French means 'golden griffin' where 'or' means gold. All the major characters of the novel, Hermione, Ronald, Dumbledore, and McGonagall belonged to this house and they all symbolize goodness and kindheartedness. Rowling always made them win the final battle every year. Malfoy's have always been the opponents of Potter's and Wesley's. Malfoy comes from a Latin word *maleficus* which means 'evil doer'. In ancient times, this word was used to describe witches and their acts were called as *maleficia*. Rosemary Ellen Guiley in *The Encyclopedia of Witches, Witchcraft and Wicca* writes:

"Maleficia included damage to crops and illness or death to animals, as well as anything with a negative impact upon a person: loss of love, storms, insanity, disease, bad luck, financial problems, lice infestations, even death. Witch-hunters encouraged the blame of accidents and natural disasters upon witchcraft because it enabled them to round up suspects and get convictions. If a villager muttered a threat or a wish for calamity upon someone and misfortune of any sort occurred to the victim—maleficia."(222)

Besides this '*mal foi*' in French means bad faith. Name of Draco means 'dragon' or 'snake', which is quite appropriate as he belongs to the House Slytherian. Draco is a rival of Harry and also becomes a tool at hands of Voldemort for killing Prof. Dumbledore. Draco's father is Lucius Malfoy. Lucius derives his name from Lucifer, which stands for Satan. Draco's mother Narcissus Malfoy shares the name of young man from Greek mythology who fell in love with his reflection. Rowling brought up the name of Draco's friend Gregory Goyle from *Gargouille*, a serpent like dragon from France who as per myths flooded the country side. Harry Potter's godfather Sirius Black, a fugitive, whose name refers to a Dog Star known as Great Dog. He can take the form of a black dog. In Greek, *seirios* means burning. Sirius has a great significance in Egyptian mythology where this Dog Star was used to make calendars. New Year eve began when it rise just before the sun. His arrival in the novel gives Harry Potter a hope that he might get rid of his wicked aunt. Before the first appearance of Sirius Black in the novel, Professor Sibyll Trelawney prophesizes his arrival. Prof. Trelawney's subject is to give prophecy by the interpretation of actions and signs. Sibyl, in Greek mythology, were oracular women who possessed prophetic powers under divine influence. Prof. Trelawney when uttered prophetic words she seem to be under some influence because afterwards she does not remember a word of what was being said. In this novel not all her prophecies go fulfilled as Prof. McGonagall in *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* says,

“Then you should know, Potter, that Sibyll Trelawney has predicted the death of one student a year since she arrived at this school. None of them has died yet. Seeing death omens is her favorite way of greeting a new class. If it were not for the fact that I never speak ill of my colleagues --” (87).

Fluffy is “a monstrous dog, a dog that filled the whole space between ceiling and floor. It had three heads. Three pairs of rolling, mad eyes; three noses, twitching and quivering in their direction; three drooling mouths, saliva hanging in slippery ropes from yellowish fangs” (128). It is also a mythical character from Greek mythology known as Cerberus, who guarded Hades. Orpheus played lyre to tame Cerberus and rescued his beloved, Eurydice from Hades. Fluffy is also tamed by music played on lyre when he was guarding the sorcerer’s stone by Prof. Quirrell and also we are told by Hagrid that he bought it from a ‘Greek chapie’ whom he met in a pub.

Albus Dumbledore is the white wizard who is the head master of Hogwarts. His eloquent speech is remarkable because of which he can be called as silver-tongue. His first name means white in Latin that befits him as he is the epitome of goodness and also bears a long white beard as a Merlin. His opponent Voldemort is called as the Dark Lord. Dumbledore is early modern English for ‘bumblebee’. In the novel, Dumbledore loves music and is found “humming to himself a lot.”

Rowling has used *animagus* in her novel, the word is the combination of two words, first is ‘ani’ which stands for animal and the other is ‘magus’, which is a Latin word for wizard. So the word *animagus* means a wizard who can transform into an animal. In Celtic mythology, people could take the form of ravens, eagles etc and in Greek mythology, Proteus, servant of Poseidon, could change into a protean. In *Harry Potter*, *animagus* are Prof. McGonagall, who can take the form of a cat. Sirius Black can change himself into a black dog. Rita Skeeter transformed into a beetle. Peter Pettigrew into a rat and James Potter into a stag.

Rowling has skillfully created names which reveal something about character’s personality. Almost every name has a hidden meaning. Many have been discussed above; few others are Salazar Slytherin, who is the founder of Slytherin House of Hogwarts, shares his name with dictator of Portugal, Antonia Salazar. Sphinx in the maze asks Harry a riddle, just as the Sphinx of Thebes asked riddles to the travelers. Percy Weasley’s owl has a name Hermes, which was the name of messenger of Greek gods. Rowling has every quality of a genius and she has marvelously filled her book with references from the history, myths, legends and literature.

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