Necessarily Evil: Defining "Wicked" in the Face of Amoral Authority

by Brandi Bramlett

"It is dangerous to be right in matters on which the established authorities are wrong.[1]" Established authorities have the power of the people. Challenging authority quickly garners negative labels. However, only from the perspective of authority is this person in the wrong. It can be of no fault to the critic of authority's wrong that authority labels him/her "evil," "wicked," "threat," or "dangerous." Established authority regulates society's definition of "evil." This creates the common dichotomy of good versus evil. Frequently, this also creates the "us" versus "them" dichotomy, which distracts from what is "right" or "wrong" which is all a matter of perspective (Edwards and Klosa 35). Without a broader perspective, society's focus is never on the individuals goals. When a narrative is established which details the individual's struggle against authority, power, and social disparity, it becomes clear that not all that is wicked is necessarily evil, bad, or wrong.

Within the narrative of Gregory Maguire's novel, *Wicked: The Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West*, Maguire uses the main character, Elphaba (the future Wicked Witch of the West) and her strength of character to define "wicked." This is no easy feat and proves near impossible when analyzing the characters actions and motives throughout the novel. "Wicked" is indefinable in any singular respect due to the complexities of character and obscurity between choice and fate. For the driving conflict, however, Maguire pulls straight from the pages of L. Frank Baum's original work, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*.

[1] Voltaire (1694-1778) was a writer, historian, and philosopher of the Enlightenment period in France.

Who is the Wicked Witch of the West? She is the source of evil and discontent defined by the Wizard and his society. Maguire recreates the world of Oz where the Wizard is the established authority—in all its patriarchal, autocratic, and deeply flawed glory—who ultimately fears Elphaba's autonomy as a threat. She is a threat to the Wizard who in turn defines her as a threat to established order in Oz and the society he has created (Roman 212). The fact is that evil is not innate, and it is the "prerogative of those in power to define evil for their citizens" (215). Exploring the moral qualities described within the narrative which lead to the central conflict between Elphaba and the Wizard will prove how this is possible and why it is important to identify the definer.

Elphaba at the height of her intellectual development is deeply philosophical and full of youthful exuberance. Her vision of life is largely untainted by society's aversion to her strangeness because she grew up in a section of Oz where her "otherness" was largely overlooked by comparison. Elphaba spent the majority of her childhood in Quadling Country where the citizens were decimated by the Wizard's army coming in and stripping the land of rubies, and she helped take care of her sister who was entirely helpless due to an unfortunate deformity. Her focus then was not on her identity, but the disadvantages others faced under the scrutiny of authority and a life that requires constant care and attention (Maguire 135). Because of this, Elphaba develops a sense of moral responsibility towards the downtrodden, disadvantaged others in society. She also never has to focus on her own strangeness, which is an advantage because she does not pity herself for physical characteristics that are beyond her power to control. Instead, she focuses on changes she wishes to make in society. The culmination of this dream comes just when she sings for her friends and conjures up an imagery

of "a land where injustice and common cruelty and despotic rule and the beggaring fist of drought didn't work together to hold everyone by the neck" (Maguire 151). Based on the character development thus far, Elphaba has been described as a selfless, concerned individual who only wants to save her country—her society—from pain and suffering.

When Elphaba comes to Shiz University for an education, she finds that so close to the intellectual height of society there is a lack of concern for the actions of the government in marginalizing and maltreatment of Animals. Animals are sentient beings, and by comparison are *not* animal beasts. Animal Banns are proclaimed which force Animals to stop their upward mobility in society. Animals are no longer afforded the same rights as people—the chance to better themselves or their families by studying, working in professional capacities, or even travelling throughout the country (Maguire 88). Elphaba becomes personally involved in the struggle against this ideology because it deeply affects one of her professors. Dr. Dillamond is a Goat who specializes in Life Sciences (Elphaba's interest) and who seeks to prove that there is no biological difference between Animals and humans. Elphaba believes that through scientific research, if Dr. Dillamond can prove such a thing, politically she can prove that the Animal Banns are immoral based on indistinguishable biological differences between Animals and humans (Maguire 110).

This aligns with the development of her morals immensely, and every action she performs after is to this end (Haybron 133-4). First, it exemplifies her concern for the disadvantaged members of society who, otherwise, have had their voice removed from the concerns of policy and equality in Oz. Second, she becomes so impassioned for Animals that she

furthers her quest for social justice by questioning those in authority closest to her like her other professors and headmistress.

After the suspicious death of Dr. Dillamond, who had been on the verge of a breakthrough, Elphaba pulls her moral differences closer to herself and shuts out her friends to spare them any backlash from the research she means to continue. This is noble because she is trying to protect her friends who "have too much to lose" and she does not want to put them at risk (Maguire 140). While she recognizes the immediate danger of going against the government, her morals demand no less of her than to see to it that things are set to right—Animals are un-Banned and Dr. Dillamond's death was not in vain. Becoming secretive is her defense against persecution.

The final straw that breaks Elphaba's tolerance of the ignorance at Shiz University regarding the Banns is when a professor introduces a lion cub to his lecture. The lion cub is obviously scared and motherless, defenseless to the core, and about to be subjected to a demonstration that he obviously wants no part of but has been taken into unwillingly. This perversion of science (trying to prove that Animals and animals are the same by subjecting the young to tests against their will) infuriates Elphaba. The lion cub is the ultimate symbol of a helpless creature. She voices her displeasure by standing up and arguing with the professor until the lion cub is rescued. Her friends during this exchange try to shush her because Elphaba "was getting a terrible reputation as a loudmouth" (Maguire 145-6). Elphaba has no concern for herself; her only motivation is saving another.

Soon after, implications are made that Madame Morrible, headmistress at Crage Hall of Shiz University, is responsible for Dr. Dillamond's death. Elphaba already knows it is useless to confront the authority present at the University, and she must hide her knowledge from Madame Morrible when she, her sister, and her best friend are called in for a private meeting with the headmistress herself. While she is successful in maintaining the secret passion she has been harboring since Dr. Dillamond's death, she cannot escape notice for her stubborn tenacity and growing personal power. Madame Morrible recognizes and even appeals to the girls' vanity by praising them in order to establish them as important secret agents of the government. While Elphaba initially recognizes the praise as confirmation of her resolve, she is deeply offended by Madame Morrible's involvement in perpetuating the injustices distributed by the government and her acceptance of such fate (Maguire 156-60).

Her conflict with Madame Morrible is Elphaba's first conflict with authority. Yet, Madame Morrible is no substitute for the conflict between Elphaba and the Wizard. So far, the Wizard has only been present in name and is only a figurehead in the mind of Elphaba. However, Madame Morrible serves as a proxy for the Wizard and is the first proving ground Elphaba must face in order to test her will and resolve. Instead, she retreats—which is to her favor and yet is a major disadvantage. She leaves in order to spare her sister and her best friend the fallout caused by challenging authority. However, had she stood up to Madame Morrible she might have recognized sooner the faults in her moral arguments and spared herself a much larger enemy down the road.

So far, Elphaba has proven herself a deeply moral character who, under different circumstances, in the end may in fact be a valued member of society. Of course, changing the story is not the intent of Maguire because the end of Elphaba's story was already written by L. Frank Baum in 1900 and transitioned into the American culture dramatically in a film adaptation in 1939. It might be of interest then to pinpoint exactly at what point Elphaba turns "wicked"—not just in name but actively and morally by definition of the established authority. Even halfway through the narrative, Elphaba protects her friends and other loved ones from threats, and disregards her own welfare in order to advocate for Animal rights, social justice, and equality. This does not sound like any other wicked or evil character ever created before.

Driven by the corruption apparent in the upper echelons at Shiz University, Elphaba dashes of to see the Wizard. Surely, the Wizard after hearing of the oppression of important research shall do something about the corruption and injustices surrounding her life. Elphaba firmly believes in the benevolence of the Wizard she has never met and only supposes his ignorance is due to the suppression of information by other leaders like Madame Morrible. This will be fixed when she tells him all that happened, or so she believes.

When she makes such a case to the Wizard, though, he expresses that he knows all about Madame Morrible, Dr. Dillamond, and his research. When her pleas to reason don't work, Elphaba exposes her carefully worded emotional outrage at this affront to *her* sense of what is morally wrong, which is everything the Wizard is disregarding in their argument. When he ends up disregarding her morals, she has to assume he is at the very least amoral if not immoral, and questions what he would use to describe the *wrong* that is going on (Haybron, 135). The Wizard

uses this opening to reassert his authority and tell Elphaba that "it is not for a girl, or a student, or a citizen to assess what is wrong. It is the job of leaders, and why [leaders] exist" (Maguire 175).

In two sentences, the Wizard summarizes their conflict. She is not to tell him what to do. He is the definer. He defines the world for society by differentiating between good and right from what is evil and wrong. It is his purpose. In contrast, he defines Elphaba in terms she should be thinking about instead of "leader" which challenges his authority. Unfortunately, Elphaba does not think of herself as a girl, a student, or a citizen. She hardly defines herself at all except by her morals; especially when she responds, "But then nothing would keep me from assassinating you, did I not know what wrong was" (Maguire 175). This is a direct foreshadowing to what Elphaba's cause becomes, but the Wizard interprets it as a direct threat. By threatening the Wizard, even if Elphaba is right, she has ensured that the Wizard's personal definition of her as a threat would define her as against not just the Wizard, but completely against his expectations of societal norms which have already established themselves in the minds of the collective conscience.

So far, the topics discussed have highlighted Elphaba's development as a highly morally conscientious person and not as how she is viewed by society both before and during the Wizard's reign because she has not defined herself. She defies all references to her skin color, dresses in drab clothes, is outspoken, and uses subversive political tactics; and these are the exact things that the Wizard and society use to define her.

Since birth, Elphaba's strongest characteristic has defined who she is to society. She is green. Such is the strangeness of her appearance that even the women who took pity on her

mother as she was giving birth to save them both, immediately started making plans to kill Elphaba before she even had a name (Carreto-Gonzalez and Rodriguez-Martin 202-3). “Why don’t we kill it? You know what people will say” (Maguire 20). Her color makes her stand out in a society where people are defined by the characteristics of their homeland. When she cannot be placed in any nationality based on her looks, society just lumps her with the “other” anomalies that are left disregarded at the bottom of the social scale.

Her gender is another difference that she disregards. She dresses down instead of flamboyantly, walks around un-chaperoned, speaks out in class, and challenges the political doctrines of her education, which are phrased in the language of “lessons.” When the Wizard uses girl-student-citizen to describe his opposite, he is not using them as separate identifiers, but as one. Girl-student-citizen Elphaba is not conforming to the Wizard’s “dichotomy that aligns good girls with selflessness and bad ones with ambition and desire” (Burger 126). Elphaba, instead of phrasing her argument solely in concern for the citizen, uses her outspokenness to challenge the Wizard and express her desires. By defying the Wizard’s expectations, she has inadvertently labeled herself on the wrong side of the dichotomy—bad, evil, wicked.

He says she is wicked, she says he is wicked. The Wizard is already an established authority in Oz. The people listen to him and believe him. His power and authority are indicative of the male stereotype. Such is the problem then, that though they may be equally evil, “it is the wicked woman who is condemned by society,” whereas her male counterpart gets redemption through authority (Carreto-Gonzalez and Rodriguez-Martin 206).

Finally, there is the act of her political defiance. Above all, this is what labels her poorly in the eyes of the Wizard's society in Oz. She recognizes that the Wizard is the controlling figure and it is impossible to sway him. By becoming "other," Elphaba is marginalized and fully realizes the extent of her other-ness. Her empathy for the oppressed is compounded by a dislike of the human after her interaction with the Wizard (Roman 218). She tells Fiyero, her lover, "I never use the word humanist or humanitarian, as it seems to me that to be human is to be capable of the most heinous crimes in nature" (Maguire 187). She is forced to hide her true nature and even her name from society, lest she be found and targeted. She can no longer be who she was because she has to hide and be secretive. Elphaba has marginalized herself in this respect both in due to her original lack of self-identity and the Wizard's self-imposed definitions.

The final crux in Elphaba's wickedness happens after the death of her lover. When the government goes too far, suppressing her independence and individuality, then killing the only piece of her identity she had left that had lived on through her lover's attentions and affections, Elphaba is crushed by the weight of all the expectations she failed to fulfill. Therefore, it is not the reader, the citizens of Oz, or Elphaba herself who define Elphaba as "wicked." In order to comprehend Elphaba's supposed wickedness, it is important to understand that it is the Wizard sets the standards of good versus evil. By using his comparative dichotomy, we understand that Elphaba's transformation into the Wicked Witch of the West is not a reflection of her identity, but an impression left by the norms the Wizard's society has constructed and the Wizard's need to define those who do not conform.

Works Cited

Buger, Allisa. "Wicked and Wonderful Witches: Narrative and Gender Negotiations from The Wizard of Oz and Wicked." *Beyond Adaptation: Essays on Radical Transformations of Original Works*. Ed. Phyllis Frus and Christy Williams. Jefferson, NC: McFarland &, 2010. 123-32. Print.

Carretero-González, Margarita, and Ma Elena Rodríguez-Martín. "Wicked Women: The Menace Lurking Behind Female Independence." *Something Wicked This Way Comes: Essays on Evil and Human Wickedness*. 199-209. Amsterdam, Netherlands: Rodopi, 2009. Print.

Edwards, Jason and Brian Klosa. "The Complexity of Evil in Modern Mythology: The Evolution of the Wicked Witch of the West." *Millennial Mythmaking: Essays on the Power of Science Fiction and Fantasy Literature, Films and Games*. Ed. John Perlich and David Whitt. Jefferson, N.C: McFarland &, 2010. 32-50. Print.

Haybron, Daniel M. "Evil Characters." American Philosophical Quarterly 36.2 (1999): 131. JSTOR. Web. 15 Nov. 2011.

Maguire, Gregory. *Wicked: The Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West*. New York: Regan, 1995. Print.

Roman, Christopher. "The Wicked Witch of the West: Terrorist? Rewriting Evil in Gregory Maguire's Wicked." *Fairy Tales Reimagined: Essays on New Retellings*. Ed. Susan Redington Bobby. Jefferson, NC: McFarland &, 2009. 210-20. Print.