

UNIVERSIDADE FEDERAL DO RIO DE JANEIRO
FACULDADE DE LETRAS

LETÍCIA FERNANDES PIMENTA

**“ARE PEOPLE BORN WICKED?”: THE (RE)INVENTION OF ELPHABA IN
THE *WICKED* MUSICAL**

Rio de Janeiro

2026

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requisito parcial para obtenção do título de
Licenciatura em Letras na habilitação
Português/Inglês.

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RESUMO

Esta pesquisa analisa a (re)invenção da personagem Elphaba no musical *Wicked: The Untold Story of the Witches of Oz* (2003), a partir de uma comparação com a representação da Bruxa Má do Oeste em *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900), de L. Frank Baum. O objetivo é investigar como uma personagem originalmente construída como antagonista é ressignificada em uma adaptação contemporânea, assumindo novas funções narrativas e simbólicas. Para isso, o estudo fundamenta-se na Teoria da Adaptação, proposta por Linda Hutcheon, na Morfologia do Conto Maravilhoso, de Vladimir Propp, em discussões sobre identidade e discurso desenvolvidas por Stuart Hall, e nos estudos sobre o feminino monstruoso de Barbara Creed. A metodologia consiste em uma análise comparativa das obras, considerando aspectos como função narrativa, caracterização, representação corporal, construção discursiva e significado simbólico da personagem. Os resultados demonstram que a adaptação musical promove uma profunda reconfiguração estrutural e ideológica da Bruxa Má do Oeste, deslocando-a da posição de vilã para a de protagonista. Além disso, a pesquisa evidencia que as categorias de “bondade” e “maldade” são construções discursivas influenciadas por relações de poder, processos de marginalização e perspectivas narrativas. Conclui-se que Elphaba emerge como uma figura complexa, cuja identidade é continuamente negociada por meio de representações sociais, políticas e culturais, revelando o potencial das adaptações para revisitar personagens canônicos e produzir novos significados.

Palavras-chave: Wicked; Elphaba; adaptação; caracterização de personagens; análise comparativa.

ABSTRACT

This study examines the (re)invention of Elphaba in the musical *Wicked: The Untold Story of the Witches of Oz* (2003) through a comparative analysis with the Wicked Witch of the West as portrayed in L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900). Its main objective is to investigate how a character originally constructed as an antagonist is re-signified in a contemporary adaptation, acquiring new narrative and symbolic functions. The research is grounded in Linda Hutcheon's Adaptation Theory, Vladimir Propp's Morphology of the Folktale, Stuart Hall's discussions on identity and discourse, and Barbara Creed's concept of the monstrous-feminine. The methodology consists of a comparative analysis of the selected works, focusing on narrative function, characterization, bodily representation, discourse, and symbolic meaning. The findings demonstrate that the musical adaptation promotes a profound structural and ideological reconfiguration of the Wicked Witch of the West, shifting her from the role of villain to that of protagonist. Furthermore, the study reveals that categories such as "goodness" and "wickedness" are discursively constructed through relations of power, processes of marginalization, and narrative perspective. It concludes that Elphaba emerges as a complex figure whose identity is continuously negotiated through social, political, and cultural representations, highlighting the potential of adaptations to revisit canonical characters and generate new meanings.

Keywords: Wicked; Elphaba; adaptation; characterization; comparative analysis.

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1

Wicked Origins: How the Witch was made in Oz

The Wicked Witch of the West was never only wicked, and never only a witch. Instead, she represents a complex character whose construction draws on cultural notions of witchcraft and villainy. The multiplicity of meanings attached to the character across different narratives and adaptations motivated the development of this study, which originated from both a personal and academic interest in character construction within narrative texts, particularly in musical theatre.

As an admirer of musicals, my engagement with *Wicked* intensified in November 2024, when the release of the film adaptation was announced. As an autistic person, this moment triggered a period of intense focus on the musical, especially on its songs, lyrics, and on the character of Elphaba. During this time, I began informally analyzing the musical numbers and their lyrical content, recording reflections and interpretations in a personal journal. I redirected my focus toward *Wicked* because I have always felt a deep personal connection to Elphaba, which motivated my interest in analyzing her characterization. This study is divided into four chapters, “Wicked Origins: How the Witch was made in Oz”, “Reframing the Wicked Witch: Adaptation, Narrative Function, and Characterization”, “Resonance of the Witch: Elphaba beyond the canon”, “Defying Gravity: A Witch who still has more to say”¹.

This introductory chapter, which is named “Wicked Origins: How the Witch was made in Oz”, will establish the groundwork for a more focused and reflective analysis in the other chapters, tracing what is a witch in the western culture, the original work where the first Wicked Witch of the West appears and its adaptations.

The second chapter, called “Reframing the Wicked Witch: Adaptation, Narrative Function, and Characterization”, develops by examining the relationship between Baum’s original narrative and its musical adaptation. Although the two works belong to different media and therefore present distinct narrative structures and levels of characterization, their

¹ The choice to title the chapters in this manner is both stylistic and closely connected to the construction of the character. Through these titles, it is possible to trace Elphaba’s development throughout the work: her origin is established in the first chapter, followed by a process of reframing that invites readers to perceive her from a different perspective. Subsequently, the resonance of the texts and adaptations that have transformed her representation beyond the original canon is examined. Finally, Defying Gravity (the title of the song in which Elphaba articulates her rejection of the limitations imposed upon her and embraces her own agency) serves as a synthesis of the character’s journey of self-definition and resistance.

stories intersect at several key moments. Consequently, the focus of this chapter is to analyze how these shared narrative elements are reinterpreted and transformed within the musical adaptation.

The third chapter, “Resonance of the Witch: Elphaba beyond the canon”, develops a comparative analysis of both representations, examining how two versions of what is apparently the same character diverge significantly in terms of narrative function, symbolic meaning, and characterization according to the distinct aesthetic and ideological proposals of each work.

Finally, the concluding chapter, “Defying Gravity: A Witch who still has more to say”, will gather the reflections developed throughout this study, not only synthesizing its main arguments, but also acknowledging how engaging with these narratives has reshaped my own understanding of the character and can open possibilities for future continuations of this work.

In order to examine how this transformation takes place, the present study draws on Adaptation Theory (Hutcheon, 2006), Discourse Analysis (Ribeiro, 2004; Wodak & Reisigl, 2001) and Feminism (Creed, 1993), focusing on a detailed examination of the villain from *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* and the central character Elphaba from *Wicked: The Untold Story of the Witches of Oz*. Although these figures are often perceived as iterations of the same character, their portrayals diverge significantly across different media, revealing substantial differences in adaptation, narrative function, symbolic meaning, and characterization.

1.1. The definition of a witch

To understand how this complexity emerges, it is necessary to first examine the meaning of the figure of the “witch” and then trace the transformations of the Wicked Witch of the West across different works: from her initial construction in *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, to her reinterpretation in *Wicked: The Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West*, and her subsequent adaptation in *Wicked: The Untold Story of the Witches of Oz*. In doing so, it is also important to consider how each author’s creative choices and interpretative frameworks contribute to reshaping the character across these narratives.

Witches have long been widely recognized figures in western society, sometimes regarded as fictional, sometimes as real beings. For centuries, the image of the witch as a lascivious, dangerous, and enchanting woman has developed and persisted, finding expression in both written and oral traditions. If you ask a child to draw a witch, the result will likely be an old woman with a pointy hat, a long nose, a broomstick for flying, or a cauldron for stirring potions. But where did these familiar images originate? According to Haesler (2021,

p. 1), “there are elements in the archetype of a witch that have stayed throughout every literature period”. As the author explains, this persistence is rooted in a long cultural history, from Greek mythology to Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, and from the Brothers Grimm’s *Hansel and Gretel* to the four witches of L. Frank Baum’s *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. However, what is the definition of a witch, after all? According to Hutton (2005, p. 126), popular experience and belief have generally recognized three categories of magical practitioners: witches in the abstract; individuals reputed to deal in magic but who consistently denied doing so; and those who claimed themselves to work in a branch of magic.

The witches in the abstract are “[...] a group of beings who existed in the same theoretical sphere as fairies, pixies, and gnomes, even though belief in their existence could be firm and demonstrably ‘real’ occurrences were attributed to them” (HUTTON, 2025, p. 126). This category positions the witch as a mythical being, part of the supernatural folklore that shaped collective imagination. In the second category, there were the “[...] individuals who were reputed to deal in magic but always firmly denied that they did so” (HUTTON, 2025, p. 126). These figures were often members of a community who, whether through rumor, suspicion, or misunderstanding, became associated with magical practices despite their own denials. Frequently, such individuals were healers, midwives, or people with specialized knowledge of herbs and medicines, whose skills could easily be interpreted as supernatural by those around them. And the last category “[...] contains all those who claimed themselves to work in a branch of magic” (HUTTON, 2025, p. 126). Unlike the purely abstract witch or the suspected practitioner who denied involvement with magic, these individuals actively embodied the role that society attributed to them. They were often connected to the occult or claimed to possess arcane powers; some genuinely practiced magical arts, while others cultivated a reputation for such abilities as a means of influence or social distinction. This category demonstrates that the figure of the witch could emerge not only from myth or suspicion, but also through self-assertion and social performance. In doing so, it enhanced social hierarchies, reinforced cultural anxieties about the boundaries between the natural and the supernatural, and created a lasting interplay of reputation, fear, and fascination that gave the witch much of her enduring cultural power.

Hutton’s three categories are important to understand that the figure of the witch is never singular, but a dynamic cultural construct shaped by myth, suspicion, and social reputation. Myth does not immobilize the witch into a timeless essence; rather, it offers a repertoire of symbolic possibilities through which societies repeatedly negotiate fear, deviance, and power. The apparent fixity of the figure conceals an ongoing process of

ideological re-signification, whereby the witch is continually reconstructed in response to historical tensions. This perspective is particularly relevant to the characterization developed in the texts analyzed in this research, since both narratives reinterpret the figure of the Wicked Witch according to distinct cultural, political, and narrative contexts.

1.2. *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz (1900)*

The Wonderful Wizard of Oz (1900), written by L. Frank Baum, narrates the journey of Dorothy, a young girl from Kansas who is transported by a cyclone to the fantastical land of Oz. In her attempt to return home, Dorothy embarks on a quest to seek the assistance of the Wizard of Oz, whom she believes possesses the power to grant her wish. Along the way, she is joined by three companions—the Scarecrow, the Tin Woodman, and the Cowardly Lion—each of whom seeks a quality they believe they lack: intelligence, a heart, and courage, respectively. Together, they traverse a series of challenges that test their abilities and reinforce their interdependence.

The narrative is structured around a linear progression of obstacles and resolutions, culminating in Dorothy's confrontation with the Wicked Witch of the West, whose defeat marks a turning point in the story. After Dorothy and her companions reach the Emerald City, where the Wizard is exposed as an ordinary man instead of the powerful, magical figure constructed by Ozian society. Despite this, he provides symbolic solutions to the companions' desires, demonstrating that the qualities they sought were already inherent within them. Dorothy's eventual return to Kansas is made possible through the magical agency of her silver shoes, underscoring the theme that the means to achieve one's goal may reside within the self.

Within this narrative progression, certain characters emerge as central to the development of the story's conflicts and resolutions. The Wicked Witch of the West is one of them and plays an important role in the construction of the history of Oz. She is one of the four cardinal witches who rule Oz, along with the Wicked Witch of the East², the Good Witch of the North³ and the Good Witch of the South, also known as Glinda, The Good⁴.

“But I thought all witches were wicked.” said the girl, who was half frightened at facing a real witch.

“Oh no; that is a great mistake. There were only four witches in all the Land of Oz, and two of them, those who live in the North and the South, are good witches. I

² Dead in this first book by Dorothy's house that fell into her, also described in the book as a woman that “held all the Munchkins in bondage for many years, making them slave for her night and day” (BAUM, 1900, p. 53).

³ This witch doesn't have a name in this first book, and she presents herself to Dorothy in the second chapter of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (BAUM, 1900, p. 53-54).

⁴ Described as “the most powerful of all the Witches, [...] and she is kind to everyone. [...] Glinda is a beautiful woman, who knows how to keep young in spite of the many years she has lived” (BAUM, 1900, p. 187).

know this is true, for I am one of them myself, and cannot be mistaken. Those who dwelt in the East and the West were, indeed, wicked witches; but now that you have killed one of them, there is but one wicked Witch in all the Land of Oz — The one who lives in the West.” (BAUM, 1900, p. 54)

In this book, the Wicked Witch of the West is not assigned a personal name and is primarily portrayed as a tyrannical ruler over the Winkie Country. This lack of individual name may be interpreted as a reflection of her functional role within the narrative, since her characterization remains largely confined to the execution of the antagonist’s function and does not extend to the development of a distinct personal identity. In contrast, some characters, such as Glinda, are explicitly named and more fully individualized, suggesting a hierarchy of narrative importance. From a structural perspective, the Witch’s lack of a personal name reinforces her function as a symbolic narrative obstacle. However, subsequent reinterpretations and fan engagements have challenged this limited characterization, reimagining the figure of the Wicked Witch as a complex subject and thereby expanding her significance beyond the constraints of the original text, as it’s going to be discussed later on.

The character in the book is also aquaphobic, which explains her reliance on an umbrella rather than the more familiar broomstick that’s shown in the media. This umbrella is not only a tool of authority but also a practical means of shielding herself from potential water attacks, whereas the broomstick represents a later cultural convention attached to the figure of the witch. Physically, she is described as having only one eye that could see from afar, and it was as strong and powerful as a telescope, which adds to her distinctive and unsettling appearance.

Now this same morning the Wicked Witch came to the door of her castle and looked out with her one eye that could see afar off. She saw all her wolves lying dead, and the strangers still travelling through her country. This made her angrier than before, and she blew her whistle twice. Straightway a great flock of wild crows came flying toward her, enough to darken the sky. (BAUM, 1900, p. 138)

In Baum’s *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900), the Wicked Witch condenses centuries of cultural fears and imaginative projections into a figure who is at once tyrannical, grotesque, and vulnerable. Though unnamed and sparsely described, she embodies the anxieties that surround female power and otherness, while also inaugurating a legacy of reinterpretations that would outlive Baum himself. She stands not only as a villain to be defeated but also as a cultural mirror through which one can glimpse the shifting visions of the witch across time.

Although originating in Baum’s novel, the narrative of the Wicked Witch of the West continues to evolve through multiple reinterpretations and derivative works. Among these,

Gregory Maguire's *Wicked* (1995) represents a pivotal reimagining, transforming the figure of the Witch and expanding the narrative possibilities of the Oz universe.

1.3. *Wicked: The Life and Time of the Wicked Witch of the West* (1995)

Wicked: The Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West (1995), by Gregory Maguire, offers a dissident retelling of the Oz narrative by reimagining the Wicked Witch of the West as Elphaba, a complex and morally ambiguous protagonist. The novel traces Elphaba's life from childhood to adulthood, situating her within a socio-political landscape marked by systemic inequality, ideological conflict, and the consolidation of authoritarian power under the Wizard's regime. Rather than presenting Oz as a neutral or purely fantastical setting, Maguire constructs it as a politically charged environment in which issues such as discrimination, propaganda, and the control of knowledge play a central role. Elphaba's marginalization, due to her physical difference and her refusal to conform, positions her as both an outsider and a critical observer of these structures, leading her to challenge dominant narratives and institutional authority.

Within this framework, the novel fundamentally destabilizes the traditional dichotomy between good and evil established in earlier representations of the Oz universe. Characters are no longer defined by fixed moral categories; instead, their actions are shaped by personal, social, and political circumstances. Figures associated with goodness, such as Glinda, are depicted as accomplice in maintaining existing power structures, while Elphaba, labeled as wicked, is portrayed as ethically driven, particularly in her defense of oppressed groups such as the sentient animals. This inversion highlights the extent to which moral labels are socially constructed through discourse and perspective instead of being rooted in inherent qualities. As a result, *Wicked* reframes villainy as a product of misrepresentation and ideological conflict, inviting readers to reconsider the stability of moral binaries and to recognize the role of power in defining what is perceived as "good" or "evil".

While the novel constitutes an important intermediary in the transformation of the character, this study will not explore it in depth, prioritizing instead the comparative analysis between Baum's original narrative and the musical *Wicked* (2003).

1.4. *Wicked: The Untold Story of the Witches of Oz* (2003)

Wicked: The Untold Story of the Witches of Oz (2003)⁵, with music and lyrics by Stephen Schwartz and a book by Winnie Holzman, is a stage musical that reimagines the narrative of the Land of Oz by foregrounding the life and perspective of Elphaba, later known as the Wicked Witch of the West. Structured as a retrospective narrative, the musical opens after Elphaba's presumed death and reconstructs her story through a series of flashbacks, reframing key events familiar from earlier versions of the Oz canon. By shifting the focalization from Dorothy to Elphaba, the musical challenges the moral and narrative assumptions established in *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, presenting a more complex and ambiguous account of the origins of "wickedness". The musical also introduces an important tension regarding narrative voice. While it seeks to humanize Elphaba and challenge the traditional image of the Wicked Witch, her story is primarily presented through Glinda's recollections. As a result, Elphaba gains greater narrative depth but does not fully control the telling of her own story. Unlike Maguire's novel, which places her perspective at the center of the narrative, the musical continues to mediate her characterization through the viewpoint of a socially accepted figure.

The plot traces Elphaba's trajectory from childhood to adulthood, emphasizing her experiences of marginalization due to her green skin and her developing awareness of social and political injustices within Oz. Her time at Shiz University marks a central stage in this development, particularly through her evolving relationship with Glinda, who initially embodies social conformity and privilege. As the narrative progresses, Elphaba becomes increasingly critical of the Wizard's regime, especially in relation to the systematic oppression of sentient Animals, whose loss of voice and autonomy becomes a key political issue within the musical. Her refusal to support the Wizard's authoritarian project leads to her transformation into a political dissident, whose actions are subsequently reframed by those in power as evidence of her "wickedness."

In contrast to Maguire's novel, the musical adopts a more accessible narrative structure, balancing its political themes with emotional and relational dynamics, particularly the friendship between Elphaba and Glinda. Musical numbers such as "Defying Gravity" function as pivotal moments of self-definition and resistance, in which Elphaba asserts her

⁵ *Wicked* (2003) is structured in two acts, comprising seventeen scenes in Act I and fourteen scenes in Act II. Act I functions primarily as an expository and developmental section, introducing the political and social context of Oz while tracing the formation of the relationship between Elphaba and Glinda. Dramatically, it culminates in Elphaba's rejection of the Wizard's authority and her transformation into a political dissident, marked by the Act I finale, "Defying Gravity". Act II serves as the consequential and resolution-oriented section of the narrative. It explores the repercussions of Elphaba's rebellion, the consolidation of her public image as the "Wicked Witch", and the increasing divergence between public myth and private reality. The act ultimately resolves the central conflicts while reframing the events of *The Wizard of Oz* from an alternative perspective.

autonomy and rejects the ideological constraints imposed upon her. Furthermore, the musical simplifies and reorganizes several narrative elements, reducing the novel's intricate political discourse in favor of a clearer narrative arc and a more pronounced focus on identity, belonging, and resistance. As a result, while the musical retains the core premise of reinterpreting the Wicked Witch, it reconfigures Maguire's darker and more complex vision into a narrative that balances political critique with emotional accessibility and performative expression.

1.5. The authors and the adaptations

The gaps in Elphaba's characterization and the ambiguities surrounding her figure opened the way for lots of reinterpretations across literature, theater, film, and popular culture. What was once a nameless witch would later become Elphaba, a complex protagonist whose supposed wickedness could be questioned, reimagined, and even redeemed. In these adaptations⁶, the witch shifts from villain to victim, from symbol of fear to emblem of resistance, revealing how cultural narratives continually reshape her meaning.

Consequently, this transformation extends beyond a simple narrative shift, emerging instead as the result of deliberate artistic choices shaped by the sociocultural contexts surrounding each work. Thus, the meaning of the character is not fixed, but continually reshaped according to the interpretative frameworks and historical moments that inform each adaptation, as the "adaptation is repetition, but repetition without replication" (Hutcheon, 2006, p. 42).

In this sense, it is essential to consider the role of the artists responsible for reimagining these stories. Gregory, the author of the novel *Wicked: The Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West* (1995), explains in an interview for Tufts University that lots of events that happened in England society in the 90s had inspired him to write the book, but the most sensible to him was the James Bulger murder by two boys of 11 and 14 years old (TuftsAlumni, 2015). This case led him to think about the wickedness of people:

What is the nature of evil? What do we think about it now in 2015? And I had to ask myself the question in 1992, 1993, what really do I mean when I say somebody is bad, somebody is wicked? I wasn't really sure. Was I talking about a biological construct or a psychological aberration? Was I talking about the presence of Satan in a post-deitistical world? What did I mean? I didn't know. So I thought, well, I'm pretty stupid, but I'm a good writer, so I'll have to write a story about evil in order to find out what I think about it now that I'm halfway through my life. That was the origin of *Wicked* (TuftsAlumni, 2015, 02min 49s).

⁶ *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900) and *Wicked: The Untold Story of the Witches of Oz* (2003)

Maguire also notes that “the fact that it was about the Wizard of Oz was just sort of happenstance” (TuftsAlumni, 2015, 03:29), a statement that reflects his academic background in children’s literature and his longstanding interest in writing for younger audiences. This perspective is further clarified by Maguire himself, who reflects on the origins of his work:

And I thought, I have always cared about writing for children, and I've been a writer for children. Are there any evils, evil characters in children's books? And immediately, a vision of Margaret Hamilton arose up in front of me, saying, I'll get you and your little dog. And I thought, Jesus, Mary and Joseph, I've just had a vision, and it isn't the Virgin Mary coming down out of the clouds. It's Margaret Hamilton, and she has something to say to me, and I better pick up my pen and write it down. That's how I was inspired to write *Wicked* (TuftsAlumni, 2015, 03min 53s).

This reference is particularly revealing, as it points not to Baum’s original text, but to the visual legacy of *The Wizard of Oz* (1939). It is in this film that the Wicked Witch of the West, portrayed by Margaret Hamilton, is visually codified with green skin, an element absent from Baum’s original text. This detail demonstrates how the character’s visual identity is not fixed within the literary canon, but constructed and consolidated through adaptation and popular culture, and as “art is derived from other art; stories are born of other stories” (Hutcheon, 2006, p. 36), and this change in the character’s physical characteristic draw a whole new path for the history of the Wicked Witch. Consequently, Maguire’s inspiration reveals the extent to which his reinterpretation of the Witch is shaped not only by the novel, but also by the cultural memory of the film, which established the now-iconic image of the green witch.

Winnie Holzman and Stephen Schwartz are the duo behind the Broadway musical *Wicked: The Untold Story of the Witches of Oz*, and their collaboration brings together complementary artistic approaches that shape the adaptation’s distinctive voice. Holzman, responsible for the book, translated Gregory Maguire’s dense and politically layered narrative into a coherent dramatic structure suited to the stage, emphasizing character development and interpersonal dynamics, focusing on the relationship between Elphaba and Glinda. Schwartz, as composer and lyricist, reinforces these narrative choices through the songs that articulate interiority and emotional transformation, with key numbers functioning as moments of self-definition and ideological positioning.

The authors do not merely extend the story created by Gregory Maguire; they also reorganize its narrative logic by centering Elphaba and reinterpreting previously established events through an alternative perspective. In doing so, the musical fills narrative gaps left in

the original text (the book *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*), especially those related to the origins of the Wicked Witch of the West, and reinterprets the causes behind conclusions that were previously presented as evident, such as her defamation and her final fate. This process transforms the Witch from a fixed antagonist into a historically and socially situated subject, whose actions are shaped by political conflict, marginalization, and ideological resistance.

As Holzman notes, “I mean, yes, Gregory Maguire had written it, but we were jumping off from that. We were going to do our version of Gregory Maguire's book. And it wasn't going to be a book. It was going to be on stage” (Wicked Musical, 2013, 4min 59s), emphasizing the adaptive process as one of reinterpretation.

These two women, their friendship is center stage. Women, we have friendships that are very big in our lives. Our friendships are very intense, and I think to see it portrayed on stage, it kind of blew people away. When we started to understand that their friendship was going to be front and center. [...] Glinda and Elphaba, their friendship and what they mean to each other is the heart of our show. And it's a lot of our plot. (Wicked Musical, 2013, 2min 31s)

Central to this reinterpretation is the duality established in the relationship between Elphaba and Glinda, which structures the emotional and ideological core of the narrative. The relationship between them transcends a simplistic opposition between good and evil, as both characters represent contrasting yet interdependent ways of navigating social and political reality. Elphaba becomes associated with resistance, ethical conviction, and marginalization, while Glinda initially embodies conformity, social acceptance, and complicity with dominant structures. Their evolving relationship complicates the moral framework of the narrative, revealing that “goodness” and “wickedness” are not inherent qualities but socially constructed identities shaped by perspective and power. This duality not only humanizes both characters but also reinforces the musical’s broader project of destabilizing binary oppositions, replacing them with a more fluid and relational understanding of identity, morality, and narrative truth.

2

Reframing the Wicked Witch: Adaptation, Narrative Function, and Characterization

If Baum's Wicked Witch of the West was "a familiar female monster [...] [and] invariably represented as an old, ugly crone who is capable of monstrous acts" (Creed, 1993, p. 17), Elphaba, her reincarnation in Gregory Maguire's novel and in the adapted musical *Wicked*, emerges as a character whose perspective invites a reassessment of the assumptions surrounding villainy, identity, and power.

The main shift between *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* and *Wicked: The Untold Story of the Witches of Oz* can be understood through the different adaptive frameworks in which both works are positioned. Although Baum's novel is often treated as the canonical source text, adaptation theory challenges the assumption of inherent superiority of the original. As Hutcheon (2006, p. 38) argues, "literature will always have axiomatic superiority over any adaptation of it because of its seniority as an art form", since adaptations operate as autonomous creative works and not as secondary reproductions.

When a literary work is adapted into theatre, it operates within the constraints of live performance, which fundamentally reshapes its representational logic. The stage does not aim for realistic reproduction, but it relies on suggestion, symbolism, and condensation of meaning through performance, spoken language, embodied action, and limited scenographic resources. As a result, theatrical adaptation depends more heavily on verbal expression and shared symbolic conventions between performers and audience. In addition, its live and collective nature intensifies the immediacy of reception, reinforcing the emotional and interpretative relationship between spectator and performance.

Within this context, Linda Hutcheon (2006, p. 42-43) conceptualizes adaptation through three interconnected perspectives: as a formal entity or product, often presented as an extension or reinterpretation of an existing work; as a process of creation, involving transformation, reinterpretation, and recontextualization of narratives for new audiences; and as a process of reception, in which adaptations are experienced intertextually, as palimpsests shaped by memory, repetition, and variation across texts. In her terms, "we experience adaptations (*as adaptations*) as palimpsests through our memory of other works that resonate through repetition with variation" (Hutcheon, 2006, p. 44).

Applied to *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* and *Wicked*, these three dimensions help to

clarify how the musical does not simply replicate Baum's narrative, but actively reconfigures it. As a product, *Wicked* presents itself as a prequel and reimagining of the Oz universe, expanding the canonical framework rather than replacing it. As a creative process, it reframes the Wicked Witch as Elphaba, shifting her from a narrative function of antagonism to a subject of political, emotional, and deeper ideological complexity. Finally, as a process of reception, *Wicked* relies on the audience's prior knowledge of Baum's story, generating meaning through intertextual tension between familiarity and revision. In this sense, the musical functions as a palimpsest of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, where it rewrites its moral and narrative assumptions while remaining visibly in dialogue with them.

2. 1. Narrative function and symbolic meaning

When considered in terms of narrative function, characters are defined primarily by the actions they perform and by the effects these actions produce within the progression of the story. This perspective aligns with Vladimir Propp's argument in the opening chapter of *Morphology of the Folktale* (1968, p. 3), in which he emphasizes that characters are better understood through their functional roles in the narrative structure than through their individual traits⁷. In the book, Propp proposes a structural analysis of Russian wonder tales based on their narrative composition. Through the examination of a large corpus of folktales, the author identifies a limited number of recurring narrative functions, defined as actions significant to the progression of the plot, which appear in a consistent sequence regardless of the characters who perform them.

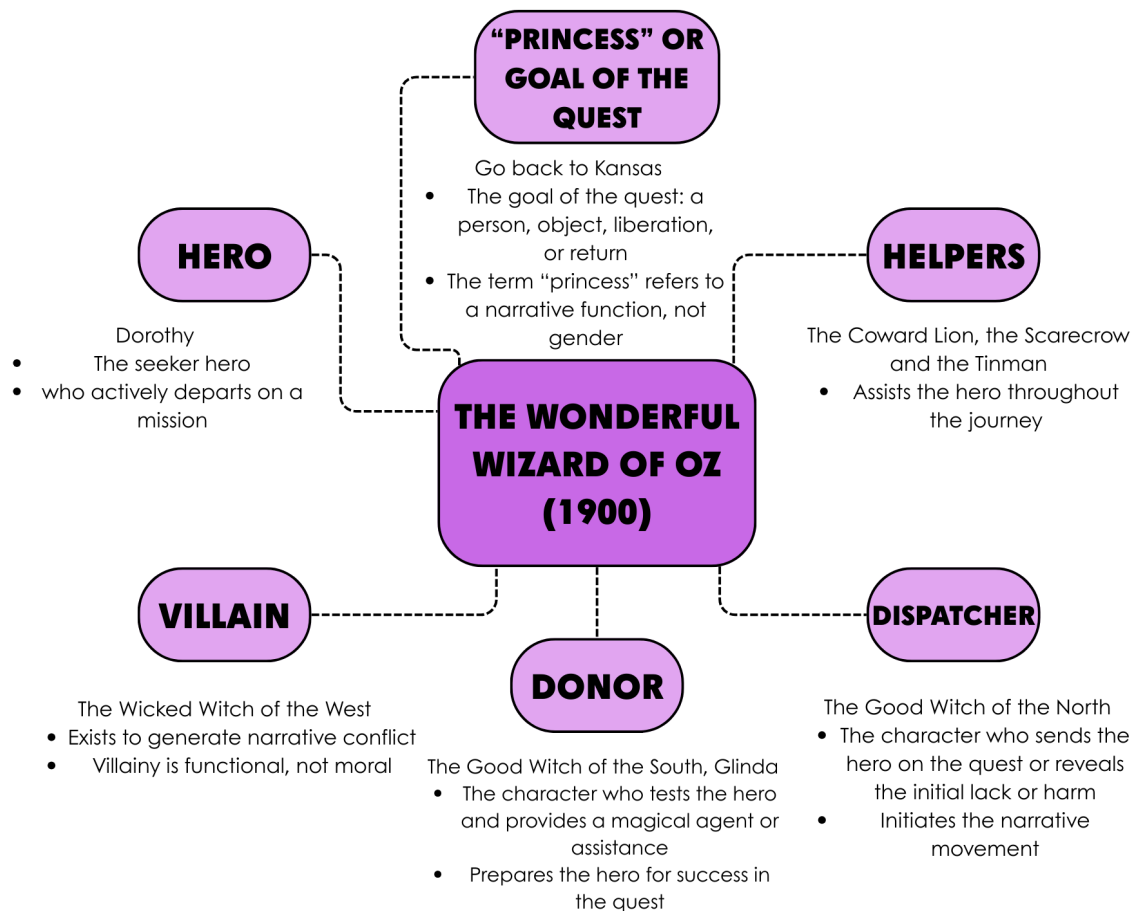
Although Vladimir Propp's structural model was developed through the analysis of Russian wonder tales, its principles remain applicable to other narratives that rely on clearly defined functional roles and linear plot progression, such as *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, which is examined in this study.

In Baum's novel, characters are primarily defined by the actions they perform in advancing the narrative and not by internal perspective. Dorothy occupies the position of the hero as the subject of the quest, while figures such as the Wicked Witch of the West function as antagonistic forces that obstruct this journey. Looking closely at the function of the characters, we can affirm that they can not be interchangeable; otherwise, the model of the story would not be the same as it was in the beginning: we can change names and physical descriptions, but not the functions of each character in the story.

⁷ It refers to a character's inner life such as thoughts, emotions, motivations, and depth; elements that are secondary, or even irrelevant, in a strictly structural analysis.

The following structure of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* shows the function of the characters in the story:

Figure 1 — Analysis of the characters from *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900)



Font: The author

From a Proppian perspective, these characters can be understood as fulfilling stable narrative functions within the plot structure, reinforcing the moral and structural clarity typical of wonder-tale narratives. This functional organization allows the story to prioritize action, movement, and resolution over interiority.

Within this framework, the Wicked Witch of the West in *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* occupies the sphere of action of the villain: she is the agent of harm, the obstacle that must be overcome for the hero's quest to reach resolution (Propp, 1968, p. 27). Her symbolic meaning, therefore, is structural, she embodies narrative opposition: chaos against order, threat against progress, and her defeat restores equilibrium. In Proppian terms, her significance lies less in what she "represents" morally and more in how she activates and sustains the hero's journey.

By contrast, Elphaba in *Wicked: The untold story of the witches of Oz*, destabilizes this

fixed symbolic function. While she is positioned intertextually as the future Wicked Witch, the musical reassigns her Proppian role: instead of functioning primarily as villain, she gradually assumes the sphere of action of the hero, specifically the seeker hero who confronts injustice and undergoes trials (1968, p. 36). This structural shift transforms her symbolic meaning. Elphaba comes to symbolize resistance, marginalization, and moral dissent instead of merely embodying narrative obstruction. From a Proppian perspective, this change demonstrates how symbolic value is contingent upon narrative position: when the same figure is relocated from the villain's function to the hero's, her ideological resonance shifts accordingly.

Thus, this comparison reveals that the symbolic divergence between the Wicked Witch and Elphaba is not merely thematic but structural. In Baum's narrative, the Witch exists primarily in relation to Dorothy's quest, serving as the obstacle that must be overcome. In *Wicked*, however, Elphaba is reframed as the protagonist of an adjacent narrative, transforming her from a supporting figure in Dorothy's story into the central subject of her own quest. Using Propp's model clarifies that the apparent transformation in character psychology can be more precisely understood as a reallocation of narrative functions, in which the character's role within the structure of the story changes, even when their surface-level actions or motivations appear to suggest psychological development.

3

Resonance of the Witch: Elphaba beyond the canon

The Wicked Witch of the West is portrayed in significantly different ways across the works in which she appears, revealing distinct authorial intentions behind each adaptation. In L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, the character is constructed primarily through external descriptions and narrative function, as was already explained.

A first look at the novel *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (2005) shows that the title “Wicked Witch of the West” is mentioned directly fifteen (15) times throughout the text⁸, alongside several additional indirect references. Notably, every direct mention of the character reinforces her association with evil, as Baum consistently employs the complete title “Wicked Witch of the West” rather than simply “the Witch of the West”. This repeated designation does more than emphasize her wickedness; it transforms it into her defining characteristic. By referring to the character exclusively through a title, the narrative reduces her to the social and narrative roles she fulfills, limiting her individuality and distancing her from the reader. As a result, the Wicked Witch is constructed as a symbolic entity associated with danger, fear, and opposition. She is described as someone who enslaves foreigners who enter her territory (Baum, 2005, p. 57, 101), and her presence is frequently connected to the semantic frame of death (2005, p. 128–131). The narrative also emphasizes her social rejection and isolation, portraying her as a feared and despised figure (2005, p. 134).

Physically, the Witch is depicted as grotesque and uncanny, particularly through the description of her single eye “as powerful as a telescope”, which allows her to constantly observe her domain and monitor intruders (2005, p. 137). In Baum's novel, there is no detailed physical description of the Wicked Witch, nor a sustained focus on how other characters visually perceive her. However, her characterization is nonetheless shaped through the effects she produces within the narrative, particularly through fear, authority, and violence, as argued by Creed (1993, p. 275), “whether used for good or evil purposes, [the witch] inspired the deepest dread amongst the members of the community”. In this sense, her “monstrosity” is not constructed through explicit physical attributes, but through her actions and the responses she elicits from others.

⁸ Data collected by the author through the search tool (Ctrl+F) in the Barnes & Noble edition of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (2005) identified seventeen (17) occurrences of the expression “Wicked Witch of the West.” It is important to note, however, that the first two occurrences appear in the introductory commentary by J. T. Barbarese rather than in Baum's narrative and, therefore, were not included in the textual analysis.

This absence of descriptive emphasis paradoxically contributes to a form of symbolic monstrosity that is deeply gendered. The Wicked Witch is constructed as a threatening feminine figure whose power is associated with domination, control, and punitive authority, so, “the witch is defined as an abject figure⁹ in that she is represented within patriarchal discourses as an implacable enemy of the symbolic order. She is thought to be dangerous and wily, capable of drawing on her evil powers to wreak destruction on the community” (Creed, 1993, p. 283).

Within this framework, her “monstrous” quality emerges from appearance, behavior that transgresses expected norms of femininity, particularly passivity, emotional restraint, and social submissiveness. As a result, her characterization aligns with broader cultural patterns in which female authority and autonomy are frequently coded as excessive, dangerous, or unnatural.

Another relevant aspect of the Wicked Witch is her mode of action. In Baum’s novel, she is portrayed more straightforwardly as a malicious person who enslaves others and seeks to maintain strict control over her territory, resisting any form of intrusion. Her hostility toward Dorothy emerges primarily when the latter enters her domain, prompting a series of increasingly drastic and punitive decisions.

as she sat in the door of her castle, she happened to look around and saw Dorothy lying asleep, with her friends all about her. They were a long distance off, but the Wicked Witch was angry to find them in her country; so she blew upon a silver whistle that hung around her neck. At once there came running to her from all directions a pack of great wolves. They had long legs and fierce eyes and sharp teeth. “Go to those people,” said the Witch, “and tear them to pieces” (Baum, 2005, p. 137)

This passage reinforces this construction. Her anger is triggered not by a direct attack, but simply by Dorothy’s presence within “her country,” suggesting that intrusion itself is framed as a threat to her sovereignty. Moreover, the Witch does not carry out the violence herself; instead, she commands the pack of wolves to act on her behalf. The description of the wolves through violent physical imagery, such as “fierce eyes” and “sharp teeth,” extends the atmosphere of threat surrounding the character and contributes to her association with monstrosity and fear. The passage offers little emotional or narrative complexity, constructing

⁹ Although not explored in depth in this study, Julia Kristeva’s concept of abjection offers a useful framework for understanding the witch’s construction as a threatening figure. For Kristeva (1982), the abject occupies a liminal position that destabilizes established boundaries and social categories, provoking both fascination and repulsion. In the case of the Wicked Witch, her characterization as a powerful and transgressive feminine presence aligns with this notion of abjection, as she is symbolically positioned outside the norms that sustain patriarchal and social order.

the Witch primarily through her punitive actions rather than through an exploration of her subjectivity.

The Wicked Witch was so angry when she saw her black bees in little heaps like fine coal that she stamped her foot and tore her hair and gnashed her teeth. And then she called a dozen of her slaves, who were the Winkies, and gave them sharp spears, telling them to go to the strangers and destroy them. (Baum, 2005, p. 139)

The passage further reinforces the Wicked Witch's characterization through exaggerated physical expressions of rage and her reliance on systems of domination. Her reaction is intensely corporealized through actions such as "stamped her foot", "tore her hair", and "gnashed her teeth", transforming anger into a visible and almost monstrous spectacle. These gestures construct the character as emotionally excessive and unstable, reinforcing the association between villainy and lack of self-control.

Throughout the narrative, she rarely attacks her enemies directly; instead, she repeatedly relies on intermediaries and external agents to carry out violence on her behalf. Wolves, black bees, flying monkeys, and enslaved Winkies are all mobilized as instruments of her authority, revealing a mode of action grounded in strategy, manipulation, and hierarchical control.

This pattern reinforces the image of the Witch as a figure whose power operates through domination over others. Her authority depends on the ability to command subordinated bodies and transform them into extensions of her will. In this sense, violence becomes institutional, since it is exercised through systems of obedience and coercion. Together, these elements consolidate her role as a figure associated with domination, violence, and punitive authority, leaving little room for emotional complexity or moral ambiguity. At the same time, this characterization contributes to the gradual construction of narrative tension, as the Witch's power is repeatedly emphasized long before Dorothy confronts her directly. By presenting her as a distant and seemingly invulnerable threat, the narrative encourages readers to perceive her as a force far more powerful than the protagonists, thereby heightening anticipation for the eventual confrontation and reinforcing the dramatic significance of the story's climax.

The little girl, seeing she had lost one of her pretty shoes, grew angry, and said to the Witch, "Give me back my shoe!"
 "I will not", retorted the Witch, "for it is now my shoe, and not yours".
 "You are a wicked creature!" cried Dorothy. "You have no right to take my shoe from me."
 "I shall keep it, just the same," said the Witch, laughing at her, "and some day I shall get the other one from you, too."

This made Dorothy so very angry that she picked up the bucket of water that stood near and dashed it over the Witch, wetting her from head to foot. Instantly the wicked woman gave a loud cry of fear; and then, as Dorothy looked at her in wonder, the Witch began to shrink and fall away.

"See what you have done!" she screamed. "In a minute I shall melt away."

"I'm very sorry, indeed," said Dorothy, who was truly frightened to see the Witch actually melting away like brown sugar before her very eyes.

"Didn't you know water would be the end of me?" asked the Witch, in a wailing, despairing voice.

"Of course not," answered Dorothy; "how should I?"

"Well, in a few minutes I shall be all melted, and you will have the castle to yourself. I have been wicked in my day, but I never thought a little girl like you would ever be able to melt me and end my wicked deeds. Look out—here I go!" With these words the Witch fell down in a brown, melted, shapeless mass and began to spread over the clean boards of the kitchen floor. (Baum, 2005, p. 146, 147)

The culmination of the Wicked Witch's characterization occurs in her death scene, in which she melts after coming into contact with water, the very substance she fears most. Symbolically, this ending destabilizes the image of power and terror that had previously surrounded the character, revealing a profound fragility concealed beneath her authoritarian presence. The scene transforms her body into something unstable and vulnerable, suggesting that her monstrosity is ultimately incapable of sustaining itself within the moral universe of the narrative.

Moreover, the use of water as the agent of destruction carries important symbolic implications. Frequently considered essential for life and associated with purification, cleansing, and renewal, water functions here as a force that restores moral order by eliminating the figure positioned as evil within the story. In this sense, the Witch's death is not portrayed as tragic or morally ambiguous, but as a necessary narrative resolution through which the text reaffirms a binary opposition between good and evil.

At the same time, the simplicity of her death contrasts sharply with the magnitude of the fear she inspires throughout the narrative. A character constructed as powerful and threatening is ultimately defeated through an almost accidental act, which reduces the complexity of her villainy and narrative function to that of an obstacle that must be removed. Unlike later reinterpretations, Baum's novel offers little space for empathy or psychological depth at the moment of her death, reinforcing her role primarily as a symbolic embodiment of evil.

In the *Wicked: The Complete Book and Lyrics of the Broadway Musical* (2010) libretto, written by Stephen Schwartz and Winnie Holzman (2010), the first reference to the Wicked Witch of the West — later revealed as Elphaba — is introduced through her death, an event that occurs within the same narrative moment as Chapter XII, "The Search for the Wicked Witch," in Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (2005). However, unlike Baum's

narrative, the musical immediately frames this event through collective social reaction. From the very beginning, Elphaba is presented not only as a feared political figure, but also as a visibly marginalized subject whose body itself becomes associated with social abnormality and wickedness.

Figure 2 — Idina Menzel as Elphaba in *Wicked*



Font: Playbill, 2026.

Elphaba's marginalization is not constructed solely through the events that occur throughout the musical, but also through the visual perception of her body. Her green skin (as in figure 1), typically connected to the monstrous and gross, positions her immediately as physically different from the social norms established within Ozian society, transforming her appearance into a visible marker of otherness. Before Elphaba is able to define herself through language or action, her body is already interpreted as abnormal, undesirable, and threatening. In this sense, her physical appearance becomes intrinsically connected to the social construction of her supposed wickedness.

The contrast between Glinda and Elphaba is also communicated visually through color. Whereas Glinda is surrounded by bright colors that reinforce her social acceptance and alignment with dominant expectations of femininity, Elphaba consistently gravitates toward black clothing. This aesthetic choice further separates her from the colorful visual landscape of Oz, emphasizing even more her position as the "other". However, the musical resists reducing this difference to a simple visual marker of evil. Although black is traditionally

associated with villainy and negativity, Elphaba's wardrobe gradually comes to symbolize independence, authenticity, and fidelity to her own principles, transforming what initially appears as a sign of exclusion into an expression of self-definition.

Figure 3 — Alyssa Fox and Carrie St. Louis as Elphaba and Glinda in *Wicked*.



Font: Heloisa Tolipan, 2015.

This dynamic also establishes a contrast between socially accepted femininity and monstrous femininity within the narrative. While Glinda embodies beauty, delicacy, charisma, and social acceptance (see in figure 2) — characteristics traditionally associated with normative femininity — Elphaba occupies the opposite position. Her unconventional appearance, emotional intensity, political resistance, and refusal to conform distance her from the idealized image of the “good woman” constructed within Ozian society. Consequently, Elphaba's body becomes associated not only with difference but with danger and social disruption.

As discussed by Creed (2007), female monstrosity is frequently constructed through bodies that challenge patriarchal and social expectations surrounding femininity and control, and “there is one incontestably monstrous role [...] that belongs to woman - that of the witch” (2007, p. 272). Elphaba's characterization reflects this process, as her body and behavior are continuously interpreted through fear, rejection, and moral suspicion.

The opposition constructed between Glinda and Elphaba throughout the musical transcends a simple moral dichotomy and becomes deeply rooted in the visual and social

expectations associated with femininity. While Glinda is publicly recognized as “good” partly because she embodies socially accepted forms of beauty and behavior, Elphaba is progressively associated with monstrosity precisely because her body and actions resist those same normative structures.

In Act I, Scene 1, during the opening musical number “No One Mourns the Wicked” (2010, p. 3), the citizens of Oz celebrate the Witch’s death while Glinda (in this adaptation, The Good Witch of the North) brings the news of Elphaba’s death and attempts to explain the existence of wickedness itself. Throughout the song, Elphaba is associated with evil, danger, and social rejection, particularly in lines such as “GOODNESS KNOWS THE WICKED’S LIVES ARE LONELY” (p. 4) and “GOODNESS COULD SUBDUE THE WICKED WORKINGS OF YOU KNOW WHO” (p. 3)¹⁰, which suggests that even mentioning her name carries a negative and almost cursed connotation to the Ozians.

At the same time, however, the musical introduces a significant narrative complexity absent from Baum’s original work. Although the Ozians believe that Elphaba consciously rejected goodness, expressed in the lyric “WOE TO THOSE WHO SPURN WHAT GOODNESSES THEY ARE SHOWN” (p. 6), Glinda’s narration subtly complicates this interpretation by showing that the Witch’s life was shaped by suffering and misunderstanding, not through evil. This ambiguity becomes central to the structure of the musical and culminates at the end of Act I and beginning of the Act 2, when it is revealed to the audience that Elphaba’s public image as the “Wicked Witch” was partially constructed through political manipulation by Madame Morrible and the Wizard of Oz. By transforming Elphaba into a public enemy, the authorities redirect social attention away from the persecution of the Animals and the growing political instability in Oz, utilizing her as a scapegoat.

Comparing both works, the construction of the character initially follows a remarkably similar pattern. In both Baum’s *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (2005) and the musical *Wicked: The Complete Book and Lyrics of the Broadway Musical* (2010), the Wicked Witch of the West is first presented through the perspective of others. Even before the audience fully understands who Elphaba is, the musical encourages the assumption that she is inherently evil. As Stuart Hall argues in *Identity and Diaspora* (2019, p. 69), identities are never fully completed or fixed; on the contrary, they are constantly in process, continuously formed and

¹⁰ The lyrics of the songs cited in this work have been retained as they appear in the official Wicked Libretto, including the use of capital letters. This choice aims to preserve the formatting used in the primary source, a common convention in musical theater materials and production scripts.

reformed. The author explains that identity operates through the ambiguity between what one is and what one becomes, since the self is always in movement.

Similarly, as Elphaba becomes stigmatized as the “Wicked Witch”, her identity remains in constant formation, shaped through the gaze of others and by her own judgment. Elphaba’s ambivalent representation, which oscillates between who she truly is and what is imposed upon her, reveals that wickedness is not her essence, but the result of a political and discursive process that displaces the self into the position of the “Other” within the society.

Drawing on Roland Barthes’ reflections on language, discourse, and power, themselves influenced by Marxist theories of ideology, Ribeiro (2004) argues that “power was understood as the ability of the dominant class to impose its particular representations as though they were universal truths [...] the ideas of the dominant class are, in every historical period, the dominant ideas” (p. 84, our translation)¹¹. This concept becomes particularly evident in Oz, where the Wizard and, later, Madame Morrible function as central political authorities who control dominant discourse and shape how Ozian society perceives Elphaba.

The Wizard’s control over discourse also contributes to the rationalization of discrimination within the civilization depicted. As discussed by Ruth Wodak and Martin Reisigl (2015, p. 556) in their studies on discourse and racism, discourse plays a central role in the production and legitimization of discriminatory ideologies, shaping social perceptions and reinforcing practices of exclusion against marginalized groups. This dynamic becomes evident in the treatment of Animals throughout the musical, as they are progressively silenced, excluded, and deprived of social legitimacy. By naturalizing these discriminatory structures, Ozian society transforms prejudice into an accepted social norm, creating the conditions through which Elphaba herself begins to recognize the mechanisms of exclusion operating around her.

Elphaba is deeply connected to the Animals in Oz, largely due to her own experiences of marginalization and social exclusion. Having been raised during part of her childhood by Animals in her father’s house¹², Elphaba develops an early emotional connection, perceiving them not as inferior beings, but as individuals capable of affection, intelligence, and care. Unlike Ozian society, which frequently judges and rejects her because of her green skin and

¹¹ “o poder era pensado como a capacidade da classe dominante de tornar suas representações particulares aceitas por todos como se fossem universais [...] as ideias da classe dominante são, em cada época, as ideias dominantes.”

¹² Although this aspect is not explicitly addressed within the musical narrative, fan interpretations commonly regard it as canon that Elphaba was partially raised by the bear midwife who assisted her mother during labor. The film adaptations *Wicked* and *Wicked: For Good* reinforce this interpretation through the inclusion of Dulcibear, whose presence adds further emotional and moral depth to Elphaba’s characterization, particularly in relation to her empathy toward marginalized communities and oppressed groups.

unconventional appearance, the Animals do not see Elphaba as fundamentally different or threatening. As a result, she finds among them a sense of acceptance that she rarely experiences within human society. This emotional proximity gradually shapes her political consciousness, leading Elphaba to become increasingly sympathetic toward oppressed groups and, eventually, an active defender of the Animals' rights¹³. Consequently, her resistance against the Wizard's regime extends beyond personal rebellion and becomes closely tied to broader questions of discrimination, exclusion, and the marginalization of minority groups.

Taking a closer look at the song "The Wizard & I" in Act I, Scene 3, Elphaba expresses her desire to meet the Wizard while simultaneously revealing both her personal aspirations and the collective perception Ozian society has constructed around him:

WHEN I MEET THE WIZARD,
ONCE I PROVE MY WORTH,
AND THEN I MEET THE WIZARD,
WHAT I'VE WAITED FOR SINCE
SINCE BIRTH!
(Schwartz and Holzman, 2010, p. 10)

This passage presents the Wizard of Oz as a figure associated with recognition, legitimacy, and social acceptance. To Elphaba, meeting the Wizard represents the possibility of finally being acknowledged and valued within a society that consistently marginalizes her. At the same time, the lyrics reveal how Ozian society perceives the Wizard as an almost mythical authority capable of granting wishes, transforming lives, and defining individual worth. Part of this expectation is grounded in her perception that the Wizard, like herself, also embodies a form of "difference". However, unlike her own socially stigmatized difference, this is associated with legitimacy, authority, and acceptance within the dominant order. This perceived similarity leads Elphaba to believe that he might be sympathetic to her condition and capable of recognizing her beyond the social label imposed upon her.

Elphaba's desire for recognition is also tied to a deeper aspiration: the possibility of becoming "normal" through the intervention of political power. Rather than rejecting the social structures that marginalize her, she initially internalizes the idea that acceptance must come through alignment with authority. The Wizard thus represents, at this stage, not only

¹³ This dynamic becomes particularly evident in Scene 5, when Elphaba attends Dr. Dillamond's class. During the scene, the professor is repeatedly mocked by students, especially by Galinda, while the phrase "ANIMALS SHOULD BE SEEN AND NOT HEARD", written on the board, exposes the prejudiced ideology embedded within Ozian society (Schwartz and Holzman, 2010, p. 15-18). The statement reduces Animals to passive and inferior beings, denying them voice, agency, and intellectual legitimacy. Elphaba's reaction contrasts with the behavior of the other students, as she openly sympathizes with Dr. Dillamond and attempts to defend him. Her response reinforces not only her emotional proximity to marginalized groups, but also her gradual political awareness regarding the mechanisms of exclusion and social oppression operating in Oz.

political power, but also the imagined possibility of transformation into a socially acceptable subject.

HE'LL SAY TO ME "I SEE WHO YOU TRULY ARE,
A GIRL ON WHOM I CAN RELY"
AND THAT'S HOW WE'LL BEGIN,
THE WIZARD AND I
[...]
'CUZ ONCE YOU'RE WITH THE WIZARD
NO ONE THINKS YOU'RE STRANGE
NO FATHER IS NOT PROUD OF YOU
NO SISTER ACTS ASHAMED
AND ALL OF OZ HAS TO LOVE YOU
WHEN BY THE WIZARD YOU'RE ACLAIMED
(Schwartz and Holzman, 2010, p. 11)

However, this idealized perception of the Wizard is ultimately revealed to be founded upon illusion and political performance. Both in Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (2005) and in the musical adaptation, the Wizard is exposed as an ordinary man who maintains his authority through spectacle, manipulation, and carefully constructed public discourse. The image of the Wizard as an omnipotent and benevolent figure is therefore not sustained by actual power, but by society's collective belief in the narrative he creates around himself. For Elphaba, this revelation represents a significant rupture between expectation and reality. Throughout "The Wizard and I", she imagines the Wizard as someone capable of recognizing her worth and freeing her from social marginalization; however, upon finally meeting him, she discovers that the figure she admired is deeply implicated in the very structures responsible for her exclusion.

The culmination of this meeting occurs in Scene 15, when Elphaba realizes that Madame Morrible and the Wizard intend to exploit her magical abilities through the Grimmerie. Their initial objective is to use her powers to create a group of flying monkeys capable of surveilling Animal activity across Oz:

Elphaba: You planned all this?
Morrible: Well, you benefit too, dearie!
[...]
Morrible: Won't they make perfect spies?
Elphaba: Spies?!
Wizard: You're right, that's a harsh word... how about scouts? That's what they'll be really. They'll fly around Oz! Report any subversive Animal activity.
(Schwartz and Holzman, 2010, p. 37-39)

As Elphaba casts the spell, however, she becomes increasingly aware of the ethical implications of what she is being manipulated into doing. The scene exposes the authoritarian logic underlying the Wizard's regime, revealing how political power operates through

surveillance and social control. Drawing upon Teun A. van Dijk's studies, Ruth Wodak and Martin Reisigl examine the categories employed to rationalize prejudice against minority groups, commonly described as the "7 Ds of Discrimination." According to the authors, "these strategies serve in various ways to legitimize and enact the distinction of 'the other' – for example, by dominating minority groups, by excluding them from social activities, and even by destroying and murdering them" (2015, p. 580). This concept can be directly connected to the treatment of Animals in Oz, since the Wizard's government progressively constructs them as socially undesirable subjects whose exclusion and silencing become politically justified. In this context, the flying monkeys symbolize not only physical surveillance, but also the institutionalization of control over marginalized groups, reinforcing the oppressive structures that Elphaba gradually begins to recognize and reject.

Elphaba's understanding of this dynamic becomes even more evident in "No Good Deed," from Act II, Scene 10, as the song reveals her growing awareness that moral value within Oz is shaped by the social narratives imposed upon the individual performing and not by ethical actions.

AH! WHAT GOOD IS THIS CHANTING?
 I DON'T EVEN KNOW WHAT I'M READING
 I DON'T EVEN KNOW WHAT TRICK I OUGHT TO TRY!
 [...]
ONE MORE DISASTER I CAN ADD TO MY GENEROUS SUPPLY!
 NO GOOD DEED GOES UNPUNISHED
 NO ACT OF CHARITY GOES UNRESENTED
 [...]
THAT'S MY NEW CREED
MY ROAD OF GOOD INTENTIONS
LED WHERE SUCH ROADS ALWAYS LEAD
 (Schwartz and Holzman, 2010, p. 56, emphasis by the author)

In this excerpt, the character articulates a bitter awareness of her own trajectory, in which good intentions do not necessarily translate into recognition or moral validation. There is a perception that ethical action, in itself, does not guarantee control over its social effects, since the meaning attributed to her actions escapes individual agency. What emerges here is a fracture between intention and social interpretation: what she does is continuously re-read through an external gaze that reorganizes her actions within a pre-established framework of meaning.

In this sense, the emphasis does not point to a simple acceptance of the identity of the "Wicked Witch of the West", but rather to a more complex process of discursive sedimentation of that identity. The character comes to recognize that her presence in the world is mediated by narratives that precede and exceed her, so that even her attempts at goodness

are absorbed into a logic of suspicion and reinterpretation. The effect of this is a sense of symbolic entrapment: it is not only about who she is, but about how she is allowed to be read. Thus, the social construction surrounding her does not merely describe her; it actively produces her as a narrative figure. What is imposed is not a fixed essence, but a repetition of readings that gradually consolidate a discursive position for the character, reducing the possibility of alternative meanings for her actions.

From this perspective, it can be concluded that the adaptation of the character into the musical significantly deepens her narrative arc by foregrounding dimensions that are only marginally or never addressed in Baum's original novel. By doing so, the musical expands the audience's interpretative horizon, drawing attention to more complex and socially charged issues that were not explicitly developed in the initial portrayal of Elphaba. Themes such as political and ideological discourse, racism, prejudice, and identity are brought to the center of the narrative, allowing for a more critical and emotionally layered engagement with the character.

4

Defying Gravity: A Witch who still has more to say

This comparative analysis of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* and *Wicked* demonstrates that the transformation of the Wicked Witch of the West into Elphaba constitutes a profound structural and ideological reconfiguration of the character. Drawing on Propp's morphological framework, it becomes evident that this shift extends beyond psychological expansion or narrative enrichment, operating instead as a reallocation of narrative functions. The character's movement from the sphere of the villain to that of the seeking hero fundamentally alters her position within the narrative economy, reconfiguring her from an obstacle to the central agent through which meaning, conflict, and development are articulated.

Furthermore, this transformation exposes the extent to which moral categories such as "good" and "wicked" are not stable or essential attributes, but discursively constructed positions shaped by perspective, power relations, and social interpretation. The adaptation thereby reframes Elphaba not as a fixed reimagining of a literary figure, but as a locus of ideological tension in which issues of marginalization, legitimacy, and political authority are continually negotiated. In this sense, both works cease to operate within a binary moral logic and instead offer a relational understanding of identity, in which subjectivity is produced through discourse and representation rather than determined by inherent essence.

The characterization analysis developed in this research was based on a comparative reading of the selected works, focusing on how the Wicked Witch of the West/Elphaba is constructed through narrative function, physical description, dialogue, social perception, and ideological framing. Rather than examining the character solely through isolated personality traits, the analysis considered how each adaptation reconfigures her role within the narrative according to distinct artistic, cultural, and political contexts.

Particular attention was given to the ways in which discourse, bodily representation, marginalization, and perspective contribute to the construction of villainy throughout the adaptations. Consequently, the comparative analysis sought not only to identify differences between the texts, but also to examine how these reinterpretations transform the characters' symbolic and narrative significance. Elphaba was primarily understood as a character defined by her desire to protect animals and by her status as a misunderstood figure within the society of Oz. However, this research has revealed that her construction as a "wicked" figure extends

beyond this simplified interpretation. Her positioning as a villain is not solely the result of misunderstanding, but it is also produced by a complex interplay of visual, narrative, discursive, and political constructions. These elements work together to shape how her identity is perceived and legitimized within different adaptations. In this sense, Elphaba's characterization emerges not as a fixed moral category but as a product of representational strategies that continuously negotiate meaning, power, and social interpretation.

This study may be extended in multiple directions and through different analytical approaches, as its primary focus has been the simultaneous examination of character construction. By narrowing the analytical lens to each of the characterization categories proposed in the methodology, further research could yield more specific and in-depth insights into the construction of Elphaba as well as other characters within the Oz universe.

Such an approach would not only deepen the understanding of individual representational strategies, but also open space for broader comparative studies that explore how different adaptations reorganize narrative, visual, and discursive elements to produce shifting meanings across time and media. In this sense, the present research functions as a foundation for future investigations into the complex dynamics of characterization, adaptation, and ideological construction within the Oz canon.

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