Trouble is brewing in the land of Oz . . . though no one seems to be aware of it. In *Wicked: The Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West*, Gregory Maguire introduces the bleak and troubled world of Oz. The country has been in a downward spiral politically ever since the “peaceful takeover” of the land by the “Wonderful” Wizard. Currently, certain citizens of the land of Oz, known as Animals, are being categorized as second-class citizens, thereby losing their basic rights of citizenship; Quaddling Country is being stripped bare of its forestry to secure the jewels it harbors; and steps are being taken in order to secure a rebellion-free kingdom for the Wizard. However, while Maguire describes these plagues on the lives of the Ozians, the reader is bombarded by other things to worry about. The political issues of the land are put to the wayside by a majority of the masses in favor of religious debates and escapades into Pleasure Faith activities. In place of awareness, there are a multitude of stories of both religious and political origins that occupy the minds of the Ozians. Their lives are made up of stories; these tales even shape their existence in many aspects.

As Maguire's novel reveals, all of the stories that humans create for themselves, the stories that society as a whole creates for humans, and the stories that “higher powers”—including government and religious figures—create for the society as a whole do nothing except blind the people to the true issues of the world, and give them a superficial sense of comfort from the horrors of life. The ramifications of these justifying stories stem from the fact that, without the knowledge that something is inherently wrong with a social construct, nothing will be done to catalyze a change in that social construct. The social structure of Oz, which is brought to the public's attention by Maguire's efforts, can be analyzed through this lens.

The ability of government to persuade is actually quite amazing when fully conceptualized. Government officials have the power to pass life-altering laws, send a country to war, and control their
masses with empowered and compelling speeches. In a way, the government is one of the most influential creators of narratives. They tell the people what they should be scared of, what they should be happy for, and, in many ways, what they should think and do to make the world a better place.

Politicians are experts in the concept of *panem et circensis*, which translates to bread and circuses. The idea behind this political strategy is that government officials can earn their peoples' respect, not by being fair and trustworthy, but by giving them what they want. It is used as a distraction for dirty or unfavorable politics. For example, the politicians in ancient Rome were famous for this concept, due to the gladiators who fought in the Coliseum. As long as the public was enjoying its bloodbath entertainment, governmental policies were none of their concern.

The government implements this concept in a variety of ways in the modern world, but three stand out specifically in relation to the land of Oz: utilizing pleasurable activities; blaming another race for unpleasant occurrences; and, at times, creating a social pariah that society will fear. By using these tools, the government can carry on with the political rampage they may be disguising, with no one being the wiser.

One of the biggest changes brought on by the implementation of the Wizard's rule was the creation of the “Pleasure Faith.” The Pleasure Faith is founded on the concept that life should be pleasurable; therefore, people who practice this faith actively are enveloped by a whirlwind of sex, raucous behavior, and mindless abandon. In many ways, the Pleasure Faith is the reaction to the deepest, hidden, forbidden desires in a person's mind. One may receive the ability to revert to the most carnal, basic instincts of the id, and be rewarded for it. The Pleasure Faith's primary function is to distract. If society is focused on happy, pleasant things, it will not notice the unpleasant actions that the government employs. All the government had to do was rely a story—this one specifically about the Kumbric Witch—and give them a reason to want to believe, and the Pleasure Faith was created. The outcome of its creation was a major loss for other religions. Unionism, which is practiced by Elphaba's
family, is abandoned by most followers after the appearance of the Time Dragon, and Lurlinism is being out and out suppressed by the Wizard's reign. The major problem here, however, is the inability of the main characters to notice the strange happenings of the world around them.

With the Pleasure Faith, arose the institution of the Philosophy Club, which happened to become a large part of the Elphaba and Glinda's problems at Shiz. One of the most pivotal moments in association with the Philosophy Club is, while the main characters were still young students at Shiz, they are coerced to join their friends in a visit to the Philosophy Club. This is only after Elphaba, Glinda, and Nessarose are asked to assume a place of power under the Wizard at the behest of Madame Morrible. The three women are placed under a binding spell after their initial refusal. This spell forbade them to discuss their recruitment, but their obligation to adopt their new roles remains. It is only through Elphaba's resistance to the binding spell that she is able to remember what her true mission is—challenging the Wizard. So, in refusing the Pleasure Faith, she is able to challenge the government. As Laurie Penny says in her article in the New Statesman, “. . . when democracy is subsumed within the simulacra of choice – when voting only gives power to a government that U-turns on all of its significant promises and implements an austerity programme for which it has no mandate – the time has come to challenge the iconography of obedience” (Penny 12); therefore, only by seeing through the ruse that the government puts on, can real action take place.

Dr. Dillamond is a character that takes this idea and runs with it. Dillamond is observing what is happening to the Animals of Oz—he sees his mother confined to a pen on the train to Shiz, a professor being stripped of his title and principles, and whole families being beaten, mistreated, and discriminated against. Dr. Dillamond, seeing these awful things and demanding action, starts digging into the religious creations stories—more specifically the differences between the Animals and the animals. He hoped that by knowing the origins and differences genetically between the two species, Animals could be shown as much more similar to humans, thus proving the Animals' “humanity”. All
this digging eventually causes his death at the command, it is expected, of the government. It is suggested that Dillamond had made a wonderful discovery right before his demise. It was a discovery that would change the way people thought about Animals, and that is why he had to be silenced. The uninformed war between the citizens of Oz and the Animals continues to rage on in his absence, with very few still questioning its validity.

In fact, the Wizard is slowly but surely slicing at the rights of the human-like Animals in Oz throughout the novel. At the beginning of the novel, a law is being passed to restrict Animals to traveling in special cars with pens for them to stand in. By the end, animals are being essentially locked away and hated because of the Wizard's laws. For all intents and purposes, Animals think and act just as humans do, so why are they being ostracized? Once again, their potential banishment can be seen as an underhanded political strategy. After all, if the whole world is convinced that a certain group of people is bad, then they are more inclined to blame that group of people for their problems instead of the government that may have in fact caused them. The same is true considering topics such as immigration in the United States. Because of the stories transmitted to thousands of people from the TV screen including concerning decreasing jobs, overcrowding in schools, and increased taxes, the immigrants from many countries who are hoping to coincide within the United States are largely misunderstood and stereotyped. However, unlike in the past, the prejudice seen against the Animals is especially horrific because the Animals start out with rights and equality and are now being dehumanized down to animal standards.

The battle, under these circumstances, becomes more about Animals vs. humans, than government vs. Animals, or really anything else. The problem with this, of course, (and what makes it advantageous to governmental officials) is that if the two bodies of people that are capable of bringing down an oppressive or ineffectual government are split in half and fighting against each other, they do not have the numbers or convictions needed to rise up to fight the government. In an essential scene,
Fiyero finds himself in a dystopia of sorts—the Emerald City. He is sitting in a bar and sees, through the window, a group of people of various races and an Animal family locked behind a wire fence in a schoolyard. The Bears are ordered to be taken away by a single “Gale Forcer” and were savagely beaten. As Fiyero watches this horrific scene, he urges them to fight. “Work as a team—there are twelve of you and only one of him. Is it your differences from one another that keep you docile,” he asks himself (Maguire 203). On a smaller scale, this scenario is exactly what is currently happening in Oz's government. All the races are pitted against each other to the point that they do not recognize humanity anymore. Even after being captured, either to be unjustly imprisoned or executed, they still do not have the idea to stand up together and fight for the good of every race.

An even worse situation presents itself when the people blame, not a group of people, but a single person for all of their problems; the creation of a social pariah for the people to fear. In Wicked, Elphaba becomes the social pariah. After changing her image several times from the beginning of the novel, Elphaba becomes the Wicked Witch of the West. She accepts this role, almost as a duty and almost as a final piece of rebellion against the Wizard. In doing this, she subjects herself to public rumor and becomes a legend for everything that she is not. Her gender is called into question, as is her family, her love life, and her sanity. In the prologue, for instance, multiple versions of her story are told, and all of them seem to be equally believed. In the span of two pages, she becomes “a despot”, “hermaphroditic”, “a married man”, “a spurned lover”, “psychologically warped”, “possessed by demons”, “an abused child”, and “addicted to medicine for her skin condition”. In response to one comment the Tin Woodman replies “I'm just repeating what folks say” (Maguire 1-2) This is just another way to distract from government happenings, just another story that can be told; because, much like the Animals, if Elphaba is made a target, all focus will be on her. Gregory Maguire stated that one thing that he was sure of after completed Wicked is that “The truth is there is a lot of evil perpetrated by institutions in which no single individual ever takes responsibility, and the evil an institution can do is
mammoth” (de Giere 2011). The evil that the government inflicts on the citizens of Oz is immense and crippling—all through the use of stories. The Wizard uses these stories to make Elphaba look wicked, and finally has the young Dorthy venture off to the kill the “Wicked Witch” in order to get her out of the way and retrieve a book of great importance to his power—the Grimerie. In order to gain this prize, and therefore, the gift of even more power, the Wizard is willing to go through extraordinary lengths, even tricking an entire country into believing stories that are not true.

It is apparent from all of these circumstances that narratives have power in politics, and serve very well to distract the public from the issues that are imperative to understand, but there is another major theme present in the book in which distraction from daily problems is key to its success—religion. Religion is full of stories. There is a story for any question, for any situation, for any personal issue. That is one of the wonderful aspects of religion, but also one of the most crippling. Religion, as Marx once said, can be an “opiate of the masses,” meaning that it is a way to keep everyone happy, and nothing really any deeper. It is something to satisfy the crowd, much as the bread and circuses concept does. Religion often struggles to create an ideal society, such as the “house on a hill” philosophy, but if they succeeded, the world would become unreal. As Marxism describes it, everyone in that world would have a sense of “false consciousness” that would blind them to the real world and what is really taking place.

In Wicked we get a glimpse of several types of religion that are present in Oz, all with its own narratives and practices. These narratives are important to understand because they are used by some as an instruction booklet on how to live. Persons who follow religious may use it to justify their actions and decide what would be appropriate to reach for next. For some, a life without a religious purpose has no purpose. Because of religions’ influential stories, it can also be seen as a public distraction on a more personal level than government.

One of the religious aspects of the book that can be very striking to readers is that there are
many, many different theories of how the world of Oz was created. Creation stories are essential to life because of human's natural inclination to know *everything*. If a human-being is curious about an unanswerable question, he or she will naturally discover a way to explain it, even if it is only a story to tell him or herself. It becomes something to appease and satiate, instead of a quest for the truth. Religion can also justify or empower people with a sense of purpose. Religion is very much utilized in this fashion in *Wicked*. For example, Nessarose is a devout Unionist, the daughter of a minister, and she continuously uses religious justification for her actions, thoughts, and treatment. She falls back on religion to hide the scars of her deformity, and, in doing so, alienates many people with her religious criticisms. Elphaba, although she does not really follow a specific religion, is also very much affected by it. As the book progresses, she becomes more and more interested in the idea of a soul. To have a soul, in a religious sense, is to be human and good, which is something that subconsciously drives Elphaba throughout the novel. These two instances show the overwhelming pull that religion can have on people. Many of the characters in *Wicked*, including Elphaba, Nessarose, Frex, etc. are majorly influenced by stories of religion.

The most obvious example of religious distraction is one that was already mentioned, the Pleasure Faith. This religion is the epitome of an opiate for the masses. The Pleasure Faith came about around the same time as the Wizard, if not a little before. Its ability to make the masses forget may have influenced the Wizard to foster the religion, keeping it alive for the masses he controls. Although this is the most obvious example, the religious aspects of the Pleasure Faith are, at its core, the same as the other Ozian religions. For example the creation story that this faith utilizes, in which the Kumbric Witch creates the world, is, according to Dr. Dillamond's research, very similar to the creation stories of the other Ozian religions. In fact, many aspects are similar. Does that connote that the religions' purposes are also the same? If religion is simply something to make the people who believe happily unconscious, then what is to stop a government using religion for its own means? In the world of Oz,
that idea is very relevant.

In *Wicked*, Gregory Maguire used the concept of stories as a manipulative force. This force is used by the government and religions of Oz as a tool of distraction. In this way, narratives are one of the most powerful forces in the world. One must keep in mind, however, that the medium in which Maguire uses this concept is, in itself, a narrative. How does one make sense of a retelling of a story, in order to produce a story about stories? What is the purpose? Maguire is attempting to illustrate the overwhelming capabilities of narratives to translate an idea or multiple ideas into something that speaks to the reader in a significant way. While reading *Wicked*, Maguire almost has the reader on a string, but is spreading the idea of the controlling power of stories. He is really toying with the concept of this undeniable power by showing the reader first-hand how it works. By trying to show the reader first-hand how life-altering on story can be, Maguire is also waking up the public to the daily distractions they are subjected to.

For example, in Oz, as far as the reader knows, despite all of Elphaba's efforts, the Wizard prevails. Elphaba is destroyed by Dorthy, however accidentally, and the only hope the reader is given comes from a bedtime story. The narratives utilized by the Wizard transformed her battle from Elphaba against the Wizard to Elphaba against the world, quite literally. The Wizard, in the end got his way. Because of the Pleasure Faith, the prejudices that were bred against the Animals, and the overwhelming misdirected anger for the Wicked Witch by the end of the novel, the world of Oz was unable to see the deforestation of Quadling Country, the suppressed rebellion of Munchkinland, and the inhuman treatment of other races within Oz. Because of the stories they were told, and their desire to be happy and indifferent, people were killed and dehumanized and land was desecrated. In the “real world”, people would like to believe that horrific events such as these do not occur. But, just because there is no mention of them on the six o'clock news, does that mean they did not happen? Does that make the events they *do* mention completely true? Through this parallel of the world of Oz and the world of
Earth, many aspects of life are revealed, however unpleasant they may be.

Life is full of stories. Stories are inherently powerful because humans inherently believe them. The desire of human beings to sugar-coat everything that is unpleasant or difficult to understand has an enormous effect on society. Without the knowledge that pain exists, pain will continue to exist in larger quantities until the entire world suffers. That is what stories do; they make life less painful for the moment. Stories can make life look easier and more straightforward. They can offer a perfect black and white world with no gray areas. Stories can make a person very happy. However, stories that only serve to disguise something bad, and put to ease those who would see it and worry can only lead to a world that is fake and deluded. That is why it is important to see Oz and worry. Their lives are not so different from our own.
Works Cited
