“People who claim they're evil are usually no worse than the rest of us. It's people who claim that they're good, or any way better than the rest of us, that you have to be wary of.” In this very quote, Gregory Maguire toys with the idea and presentation of evil. That very presentation can easily be misleading. This is particularly seen in Elphaba Thropp, the Wicked Witch of the West. Gregory Maguire’s 1995 novel *Wicked: The Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West* is a responsive and creative look at the story behind all the components of Oz from L. Frank Baum’s novel *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. This novel leaves the reader with the question of what it takes to be “Wicked” and what the true definition of “Wicked” truly is. Therefore, Elphaba Thropp is affected by the social stigmas placed upon her and subsequently responds psychologically through her actions.

Before looking at Elphaba, it is necessary to further look into the preconceived notions we as readers have about who the Wicked Witch of the West was before readings of *Wicked*. Most of us remember the Wicked Witch of the West as an evil witch with evil intentions to conquer the Land of Oz. She was clearly the villain, as she is seen as nasty, threatening, and plotting. She was often seen with her winged monkeys that obeyed her every order. She was green, ugly, and had long black hair hidden underneath a stereotypical witch’s hat. She always carried her broom with her, or as seen in the novel, an umbrella (Roman). She also, made a point to avoid contact with water. Growing up, I never truly wondered what made her so evil. I never pictured her as an infant or a teen with problems that most of us face daily; that is, until I read *The Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West* and realized that not only did the Wicked Witch of the West have a name, but she also had a story.
Elphaba’s birth is the beginning of the misconceptions placed upon her. Melena, gives birth to Elphaba inside the Clock of the Time Dragon. Elphaba is born green, with razor-sharp teeth. She is deemed evil from the very beginning. According to motivation and personality psychologist Abraham H. Maslow, it is quite impossible to find or see anything in an infant that could be described or done as evil, malice, or pleasure in hurting. Babies are without visible and internal evil, hatred, or malice in the first year or two of their lives (Maslow p. 122). Shortly after being born, Elphaba bites one of the women who helped Melena throughout delivery and draws blood. Throughout her childhood, Elphaba was feared by her mother, as seen on page 22 of Wicked, “For days Melena couldn’t bear to look at the thing. She held it, as a mother must. She waited for the groundwater of maternal affection to rise and overwhelm her. She did not weep. She chewed pinlobble leave to float away from the disaster.” (Maguire p. ) She was also abandoned by her illegitimate father, Frex. She is only accepted, at first, by Nanny and Turtleheart. The first years of our lives are extremely critical. There is an extreme need for love, affection, and attention. Everything with a child is merely reactive. For instance, Elphaba was practically and basically shunned by both her mother and father, due to this, as a child; she is quiet, and often withdrawn (Maslow). That is, until she murmurs her first word, “horrors”. Growing up, Elphaba had to compete with her sister, Nessarose, who was also born with a disability. No, she was not born green, and she defiantly did not resemble a dragon, but she did have the disadvantage of being born without any arms. This may have been due to the drugs Nanny provided Melena with to prevent having another green baby. Due to her disability, she required constant attention. Even Frex, whom had been off on various trips for the majority of Elphie’s childhood; took to Nessarose and often favored her as a daughter (Maguire). Sibling
rivalry is also significant in Elphaba’s development (Tyson). If a child, Elphaba for instance, grows up being treated one way, then sees a sibling, Nessarose, treated a different way, this causes tension, jealousy, hostility, and an unhealthy rivalry.

As Elphaba developed as a person, she became more self-reserved. While attending Shiz University, she found comfort in the knowledge of the world, and the books that presented her with that knowledge. She explored her thoughts of religion, practices, civil rights, animal rights, politics, and nature. She stayed in most of the nights, wrapped in a blanket, with her nose literally in her books. While at Shiz University, she is treated as an outsider even to the headmistress. Galinda, her roommate and eventual friend says Elphaba "looked like something between an animal and an Animal, like something more than life but not quite life" after catching a glimpse of her (Maguire p.78-79). These treatments she feels are just like the treatment she received at home. This treatment she receives alters her behavior. She becomes insecure. It is obvious that she feels the need for security, love, belongingness, and comfort. Because of this, her self-esteem is altered entirely. This is particularly seen when she is puzzled by a boy, Boq, first tried talking to her. She turns defensive when Boq tries explaining how he knows her. She snaps back at him with, “Oh well, I have no childhood, so you can say what you like. I grew up in Quadling Country with the marsh people. I squelch when I walk. You don’t want to talk to me. Talk to Miss Galinda, she’s much better in parlors than I am. I have to go now.” (Maguire p.87) Elphaba also eventually becomes friends with Galinda, her roommate, and Boq, a boy she grew up playing with. She became an Animal rights activist defending such professors, such as Doctor Dillamond. This was especially apparent after hearing Madame Morrible’s poetic slash
on the fine line between Animals and animals. This is also when Elphaba first felt some hatred towards Madame Morrible.

Throughout her whole experience at Shiz University, Elphaba finds herself empty. She often feels as if she is missing something. It is obvious to both the reader, and Elphaba’s companions and acquaintances that Elphaba struggles with self-esteem issues. Many of these self esteem issues develop from her constant reminder of her so-called deformity. No one is truly able to understand much about her. It is hard to understand her skin, her baby teeth, and her fear/sensitivity to water. She also has these self-discovered, uncontrollable, emotion-based powers. This is particularly seen when she is able to save Chistery from drowning in the lake, by turning it to ice. From the very beginning Elphaba was placed with the social stigma that she was different in a bad way. Not only did her appearance and her mishaps at birth feed into these stigmas, her actions contributed as well. The harsh words, rumors, and misconceptions are almost tacked onto Elphaba and in turn, this affects her own perspective of herself. Her life is indeed run by gossip and the misunderstandings of outsiders. Along with self-esteem issues comes her crisis with her own identity. Identity is a matter of the mind. We call to our own identity through our own consciousness and do the reciprocal to recognize it in others. In general, this is how, we as people see ourselves (Beswick). Elphaba more or less sees herself as an outsider whom is not accepted by society due to the social stigmas place upon her. Although this may be her identity, she fights it constantly.

Within her identity crisis she also is faced with her psychological history that has developed since her childhood. All those fears, desires, needs, and conflicts are stored in her unconscious. As Lois Tyson states in Critical Theory Today, “It is our not knowing about a problem –or, if we do know we have a problem, not realizing when it is influencing our behavior-that gives it so
much control over us…The unconscious is the storehouse of those painful experiences and emotions, those wounds, fears, guilty desires, and unresolved conflicts we do not want to know about because we feel we will be overwhelmed by them. The unconscious comes into being when we are very young through the repression, the expunging from consciousness, of these unhappy psychological events.” (Tyson p. 12) In Elphaba’s case everything is completely relatable to her situation. Elphaba has some sort of notion that she is different from the rest, but I do not think it reaches deep enough for her to consider herself a problem.

Along with the constant reminders and preconceived-notions about Elphaba, she also is faced with constant failure at every attempt she has at attempting to make good. Her first failure that she is experienced with is her failure at her Animal rights campaign. Subsequently, she also subconsciously feels somewhat responsible and guilty about the death of Doctor Dillamond. She also fails as an underground revolutionary. In turn, she also falls short at saving the one man whom truly loved her for her, Fiyero. While falling in love with Fiyero, she in turn hurts Sarima, Fiyero’s wife. She sadly, cannot save Sarima or her family from the political terrorism, the Gale Force, either. This constant failure is a constant reminder and question of whether Elphaba is meant to be a good person. If you constantly fail at trying to be good, is that society’s way of telling you it is not meant to be. Although she acknowledges her failures, she never truly identifies the true causes of her repressed wounds and failures. Just as Tyson says, “Until we find a way to know and acknowledge to ourselves the true cause(s) of our repressed wounds, fears, guilty desires, and unresolved conflicts, we hang onto them in disguised, distorted, and self – defeating ways.” (Tyson p 13)
In Wicked, Elphaba is not some crazy monster with preordered evil intentions. In my eyes, that is always how the Wicked Witch of the West was made out to be. Elphaba is completely different in that sense. She does not mediate on evil; she is motivated by the mere thought of doing good deeds and standing up for what she thinks is right. This is seen throughout the middle and later half of the novel. She is even motivated to over throw a corrupt government to help those minorities, who she relates to, like her. Evil exists in everyone and sadly, this is the side that readers respond to from Elphaba. Society places the evil stigma upon her from the very beginning, and when Elphaba finally does crack, starting with pushing Nanny down the stairs, she merely proves society’s point. To answer the question of is Elphaba evil, turns out to be more complicated than imagined. Evil is not innate with Elphaba. Christopher Roman says it best when he states, “The novel sets up a definition of evil that is not inherent to the individual; rather it is inherent to oppression and its effects.” What he is truly saying, is that it is not the Elphaba is evil, her situation that lead to her actions and the effects they have are the ones evil. She is even quoted saying when speaking of monsters and the evil within them, “I saw in a book once a drawing of a lake monster, or a sea monster if you believe in oceans, I may not be sure if monster exist, but I’d rather live my life in doubt than be persuaded by a real experience of one.” Other the other hand Nessarose replies with, “A souled is too valuable to ignore, Elphie.” To much surprise Elphaba snips back with, “Well, isn’t it good I don’t have one then, so there’s no muss, no fuss.” (Maguire p. 323) Elphaba recognizes herself, just as people have seen her, throughout her whole life. She knows she is living a life of sadness, and when Nessarose tries pointing it out to her, she replies with. “Well that I’m already familiar with, so at least there’s nothing to jump out and surprise me. (Maguire p. 324)
In my eyes, Elphaba is faced with things that children these days are often faced with everyday. She grows constantly tired of the stigmas placed upon her. If you are constantly told you are not good enough for society, for your family, for your school, or for the cause you are fighting for, you are left with two choices. The first choice is to constantly fight that stigma placed upon you and the negativity day in and day out. It is hard to imagine fighting for over 20 plus years just to prove you are not different beyond appearances. Yes, Elphaba found her comfort with Animals and the comfort and familiarity of the hybrid they represented and the hybrid she saw in herself. Once she failed at the protests and fight against the corruption the Wizard of Oz was placing upon Animals is truly when Elphaba threw in the towel. We, as humans, whether we would like to admit it or not treat people with deformities or differences not quite as extreme as Elphaba, but to a certain extent differently. We shy away from what does not fit exactly into the norms of society. This is seen in grade schools and high school when kids are bullied for the way they dress or merely because they are not like the so-called popular kids. To a larger extent, this negative stigma is placed on lesbians and bi-sexuals when it comes to marriage and acceptance into society. Often they are treated differently and negatively for being a certain way that some people dislike. To think back to slavery, negative social stigmas were place upon African Americans merely because the color of their skin, sound familiar?

All in all, our psychological outlook and well-beings are affected from the moment we are born. We as people have the basic need for wanting and needing safety, belongingness, love, social approval and self approval, and self actualization. Without these, negative behavior can arise, along with self-esteem issues, jealousy, hatred, aggressions, and often destructiveness. Everything is reactive (Maslow). Core issues define us in fundamental ways. When we are faced with issues, we put up defenses to keep the issues in our unconscious. This is a way of avoiding
the problem. When our defenses momentarily break down, anxiety kicks in and we eventually hit a breaking point. This is due to core issues pilling in on top of each other. This is exactly what happened with Elphaba. She is neither wicked nor evil, but the actions and social stigmas placed upon her throughout her life time causes her to hit a breaking point and eventually act psychologically out in an evil manner.
Works Cited


