Societal Influence: Nature vs. Nurture

By Nicole Suedbeck

Elphaba was born green, with sharp teeth, into a religious family. With her father being a preacher, there were many expectations that were going to be expected of her; these expectations all changed when she was born. When society started talking and spreading rumors about her being ‘wicked’ or a ‘witch’, that was all she knew to be; wicked. Or was it? Did this ‘wickedness’ come from her exterior looks, or was it because that’s what she was told to be? I will explore the different areas of Elphaba’s life in which I will point out the reasons that nurture was the reason that Elphaba turned out to be ‘wicked.’ Of course, there are reasons of nature that were involved, but the nature aspects of Elphaba’s life actually turn out to feed the nurturing during her lifetime.

Let’s take a look at Elphaba’s life, before she was born. With her father being a minister, there were expectations upon expectations that were to be expected of her once she arrived. Even though her mother was pretty much a stay at home mom and her father traveled a lot due to work, the expectations were still present. The expectations consisted both of those of religion, education, and societal communication/relationships. The expectations that she was going to be born a wonderful, beautiful boy all came crashing down the night that Elphaba (a girl) arrived into the world. As her mother lay, lifeless due to the drugs that she was given for pain, the midwives explain the sight they were seeing. “I think it’s rotten,’ said the fishwife, and checked for the root of a trail, counted fingers and toes. “It smells like dung’” (Maguire 27). When Elphie was born, it was obviously quite a surprise; she was green and had sharp teeth and fingernails. The expectations that her parents had for her, flew out the window. Frex and Melena held high expectations for their child before she was even born. This is because, especially now, with the social environment being how we are, expectations need to be set in
order for a child to ‘turn out okay’ in life. This shows that nurture plays a part in people’s lives before they are even born.

Although predestination vs. free will is considered one of the ‘big themes’ of *Wicked* by Gregory Maguire, nature vs. nurture is almost more interesting to look at. With nature vs. nurture, it’s (more or less) focused on the ways and values of what you were born into and born with versus family and beliefs (actions, statements, thought, practices (religious, life), etc.); heredity vs. environment essentially, which will also be looked at as a separate entity. The role of nature, however, doesn’t come much into context through this book; not with what I looked into anyways. I believe that, through Wicked, Elphaba faces more of the nurturing pressures more or less than the nature pressures or concerns; although nature isn’t completely out. Elphie, as we already know, was born green with large, sharp teeth. She was born with all four limbs, all ten fingers and toes, no deformities; healthy, essentially, minus the physical appearance. So the argue of nature vs. heredity may come into play more here. Was it Frex and Melana’s fault somewhere down the line through heredity? Was it possible that some kind of mixture of genes could have caused her to be green? Or was it nature’s way of telling them that they didn’t do something right along the way. Because in the majority of religions, they believe that a “higher power” controls what/who they become, before they themselves even know. At a stretch, was it something that the above power thought they might be able to handle? That it was a plan from the beginning? These are questions that both Frex and Melena, I’m sure, asked themselves when Elphie was born. As said by Farrelly in *Predestination, Grace, and Free Will* “while predestination and the grace that is its effect are antecedent to man’s saving acts and cause all that is good in these acts, as antecedent they can be frustrated by the resistance of
man’s will” (Farrelly 152). This almost proves the fact that it could have, most likely was, something that the above power thought that they could handle.

While some of the expectations of Elphie were those that couldn’t be accepted when she was born, she was still their daughter. Expectations are a huge part of nurture. The way that parents love and care for their child is a huge part of how a child will respond to the world. “Environment is hugely important to human development..” (Plomin & Asbury 89). With Melana and Elphaba’s relationship, you don’t really see a whole lot of that, because of how different Elphaba is; her own mother can’t even love her. Her mother can’t fathom the fact that her daughter is this ‘green monster.’ She can’t quite move past that to show her the love and care that she needs. Elphaba spends most of her time as a child sitting alone, staring at the fire place or playing by herself; she isn’t shown compassion or love. The nature of nurture is also something that does not happen in this book. With Elphaba’s parents, and nanny during the earlier years, don’t show her the love and affection that she needs, it’s because they don’t know how to put the fact that she’s different behind them; they can’t see past the differences.

Throughout part I of the book, Nanny tries to push to both Frex, when he’s around, and Melena that Elphaba needs to get out and be around other children. Seeing as she was two years old and not talking yet, Nanny knew she needed other children to get her to start talking. “‘Nanny is not giving up,’ said Nanny, just as fiercely, ‘I have a long-range view of your happiness as well as hers, and believe me, if you don’t give her the weapons and armor with which she can defend herself against scorn, she’ll make your life miserable as hers will be miserable’” (Maguire 62). Melena didn’t want anything to do with taking her child in public,
because she was afraid of what people were going to say. Little did she know that what people
were going to be saying about her daughter would change her (Elphaba's) life in the end. While
playing with the other children went neither good nor bad, Elphie obviously started learning to
act like a ‘normal’ child. During dinner one night, Melena, Nanny, Frex, and Turtle Heart were
talking of Turtle Hearts’ past. While talking, the word horrors was mentioned a couple of times.
When Elphaba repeated this word, it was a shock because this was her first word. I believe that
this was foreshadowing to what was going to happen at the end of the book when Elphie starts
acting ‘Wicked.’

Even on arrival to Shiz, Elphaba is not treated ‘normally’. There are expectations, as
well, when you go to a college or university. These expectations are set by society and by the
attendees of the college/university. These expectations are that people are going to be
accepting and caring; and the people in colleges and universities are there because all they
want is a higher education, nothing more. So when Elphaba was placed with her roommate,
Galinda, Galinda wasn’t very happy. Galinda had an Ama, and her Ama was one of the only
people to not treat Elphie different because of her skin color; even Galinda was a little
skeptical. “‘Ama, are you blind? That Muchkinlander girl is green’” (Maguire 92). Even going
through school at Shiz, people would point out the fact that she was green; as if she didn’t
already know. The society around her was talking about her and pointing out all of her flaws.
People would make their own assumptions as to why she was green, or why, being a
Munckinlander, she was taller and not “tiny.” “‘Looks are only looks,’ said Elphaba” (Maguire,
93). Elphaba knows, obviously, that she is different. She tries to look past it, and she doesn’t
understand why other people can’t look past the outside, and see that what is on the inside
isn’t the mean, monster-ish girl that everyone else sees. Galinda, when her and Elphie were alone, were fine; but when they were in public, Elphaba usually never addressed Galinda or vice versa. On the day that Elphie did, Galinda was so shocked that she almost couldn’t answer the question.

While at Shiz, Nanny is assigned to come be Glinda and Elphie’s chaperone. While Nanny accepts, Nassarose comes with to start her college career early. Seeing as Nessie was born without arms, Nanny is needed to follow her around and keep an eye on her; as is Elphie. The way that Nessie looks at Elphie is this: she sees her sister as someone who is not religious, who needs lots of prayers. Nessarose is constantly talking about how she is going to get Elphie to convert and join their religion, but Elphaba denies. Nessie tries to tell her that it something good will come out of it, and that she needs to convert. I believe that when Nessie is saying that something good will happen, that she is saying that the ‘evil/wickedness’ will be taken from her; because Nessie also sees her sister as everyone else, but she has, obviously ‘put up with it.’ However, when Elphie leaves Shiz out of the blue, Nessarose is not very happy and holds a pretty strong grudge.

While Elphaba had left Shiz, she took up residency in Emerald City. While there, she met up with (and fell in love with) Fiyero. They had an affair, and even though Elphie wouldn’t let him touch her below the waist, he happened to catch glimpse of a scar. He thought back to rumors that he had heard, and wondered if they were true; that Elphaba was a boy. This goes back to the topic of societal rumors. Some of the things that the midwives said when she was born, were things that would soon be spread as rumors around Quadling Country, they first
thought that she was a boy. These rumors were not only around Munchkinkland or Quadling Country, but they had traveled with her to Shiz; she can’t escape them. The rumors that were spread from the second she was born, are rumors that are going to be spread and talked about until the day that she dies.

These rumors are not only rumors to Elphie; they are her life. These rumors are ideas and ways that are put into her head of what other people see her as. She sees that people see her as a monster and something that no one wants to be around, or talk to, or touch, so she, herself, starts believing that. She doesn’t know how to feel any other way, because she hasn’t heard anything different than that of the ‘talk of the town.’ When all you hear are the negatives, and don’t really know what love feels like growing up, it’s hard to do anything but agree with what you hear. As Holling and Chambers discuss in Resource Science: The Nurture of an Infant, “[The community] has developed an internal resilience to absorb punishment, and it is this resilience that has absorbed the consequences of man’s intrusions” (Maguire 13). With this, this means that the community, or the people in the society, almost own the thoughts of those they talk about. They can control the outcome of one’s life, just by either spreading rumors or making them believe that the person they think they are, isn’t who they really are. “Community wisdom to the contrary,” (Holling & Chambers 13). This proves that the ‘communities know best’ or ‘communities know all,’ in which is not normally the case.

When Elphie realizes that Fiyero is dead, she goes into a coma and carries a little boy to full term. Although she is never sure that he is her son because she has no recollection of anything that happened in that year, it is later said that he is the son of Elphaba. Looking back
through the book, you get glimpses of the Wizard of Oz, and how he is said to be Elphaba’s father. He was said to have engaged in activities with Melena while she was under the influence of a drug called the Miracle Elixir. I think that it is the mix of the two ‘races’ and the fact that Melena was under the influence that that is what turned Elphie’s skin green. The beginning of this book plays so much into the end. In the beginning, you have Melena, who was an unfaithful woman (we didn’t know this at the time), who gives birth to a child who ends up being green and different. And when Elphaba grows up, she ends have having relations with someone who is unfaithful, and having a child that she doesn’t even know was hers. I believe there is a definite play with that. “Both genetics and environment, and the interplay between them, contribute importantly to the development of individual differences” (Plomin & Asbury 86). I think that Maguire was trying to show that, even like in today’s society, no matter how much effect the community or society actually has on someone, that there are still family attributes and behaviors that will be repeated.

As stated in the article *Nature and Nurture: Genetic and Environmental Influences on Behavior*, Plomin and Asbury talk a lot about how the environment plays a role in behavior. They state that “.measures of behaviorally relevant environments such as parenting, stress, or social support..” (90). Throughout the book *Wicked*, Elphaba is living a life. The life that she is living, however, is not one that she has control over; whether she thinks she does or not, her life was controlled by the words of others. As Elphaba, herself, describes:

“I see myself there: the girl witness, wide-eyed as Dorothy. Staring at a world too horrible to comprehend, believing – by dint of ignorance and innocence – that beneath
this unbreakable contract of guilt and blame there is always an older contract that may bind and release in a more salutary way. A more ancient precedent of ransom, that we may not always be tormented by our shame” (Maguire 489).

She sees herself, trapped, like Dorothy is trapped in Emerald City. Elphaba felt trapped in her own body, and that all started with the beginning relationships with her mother and father, not being nurtured and getting the love that she needed as a young child. And that spread through her relationships outside in the community. Everyone would talk bad about her and tell her she was ‘wicked’ and ‘evil.’ She even said herself that she was in a contract; that contract was one with the thought of being wicked. She never wanted to believe it, until the death of her sister set her off. When her sister died and the ruby slippers were given to Dorothy, it seemed as though a switch flipped in her head; she decided it was her time to be ‘the wicked witch.’ Elphie wanted to be able to control her own life, but the comments of all those around her got to her, and she couldn’t be her own person; she had to be what everyone else saw in her. Those in our society who do not tend to fit the ‘norm of every day society’ tend to get shunned, or they are considered unloved. Seeing as they are so much different from everyone, they either have to change to fit the norm, or they are shunned and ignored; their choice. “People always did like to talk, didn’t they? That’s why I call myself a witch now: the Wicked Witch of the West, if you want the full glory of it. As long as people are going to call me a lunatic anyway, why not get the benefit of it? It liberates you from convention” (Maguire 457). Elphie had the same choices; she chose to give in and just go along with what society was telling her to do. She proved to be the wicked witch in the end.
**Bibliography**


