The Wonderful Wizard of Oz to Wicked: A Timeline of Feminism

By Olivia Fehrenbacher

Writers may consciously or unconsciously develop pieces that reflect current issues in society by allowing these issues to influence the plot and character development of their piece. Cultural criticism can be found in a variety of pieces, but among the most influential are those pieces that have imprinted a nation. The 1900 version The Wonderful Wizard of Oz made its way into the homes of the American citizens at the start of the twentieth century and eventually became a representation of the American society’s views on society. In the contemporary United States, most citizens have been shaped, in some form or another, by the original book, movie adaptation, or Gregory Maguire’s response novel Wicked. The impact that this piece had on the American society in terms of feminism and the suffragist movement raises awareness of the reader’s need for the characters and morals that this story provides. Each piece plays a part in telling the story of American society’s feminist mentality. Further, the mentality of women is represented throughout the collection and provides a timeline representative of the feminist movement.

In order to analyze this collection in terms of feminist criticism, the study of women in the twentieth century must be adequately represented. At the beginning of the twentieth century, women were gaining their independence in terms of government recognition and societal freedoms. It was the turn of the century, and the mentality of United States citizens was beginning to shift in terms of female condition. The development of The Wonderful Wizard of Oz, which was heavily influenced by the women of the twentieth century in terms of female characterization, provided a literary representation of early twentieth century women.
At the beginning of this century, like the suffragist before them, women were striving for their independence and for sexual equality. At this point, women did not have the right to vote and birth control had yet to be ratified; therefore, the women of the early twentieth century, the point in time when *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* was published, did not have rights governmentally and were expected to solely bear children.

The social mentality of the United States’ citizens is adequately represented within the 1900 version of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* as the distinction between men and women was prevalent within the text. Dorothy, for example, is characteristically naïve, a product of both age and gender. The events that happened to Dorothy are circumstantial and are seemingly “out of her control,” which then asks the question of whether she actually had any control of herself or her surroundings in the first place. The women that have gained wisdom through hard work and sacrifice, like Auntie Em and Glinda, are described as being somber and stiff whereas the description of the male appearances are obsolete. “When Aunt Em came there to live she was a young, pretty wife. The sun and wind had changed her, too. They had taken the sparkle from her eyes and left them a sober gray; they had taken the red from her cheeks and lips, and they were gray also. She was thin and gaunt, and never smiled, now.” (Baum, 12) Based on that description, a person could not appear to be more hopeless than Aunt Em. This is not overwhelmingly represented throughout the book; however, it is important to understand that the physical representations are one of the defining characteristics of the women in this story.

As the twentieth century progressed, women eventually gained the right to vote through the nineteenth amendment and the ratification of birth control in the early 1900s. The progress of the century, among other changes, aided in the 1939 film adaptation of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, and the representation of femininity in the late thirties.
The women of the late 1930s, and the progress made both governmentally and socially, are represented in the film adaptation of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. According to Mickey Moron, author of “1930s, America-Feminist Void?” feminism was characterized by the 1920s in terms of female independence; however, the women of the 1930s felt that they were not making any great strides in favor of sexual equality. (Moron 1) With this in mind, *The Wizard of Oz* represents this struggle and the feelings of defeat that the women of the 1930s felt by creating female characters that appeal to the viewer’s reality. The women in this film adaptation occupy the leadership roles of the Land of Oz, and though they seek advice from a higher power, the Wizard, they are guided by the intuition of themselves and of other women. In this way, *The Wizard of Oz* could be viewed as a movie with positive feministic traits as the female characters, themselves, are portrayed as being seemingly independent from men; however, outside of sexual equality and within the realm of female relations, the portrayal of what is “good” and what is “evil” rides, heavily, on the appearance and nature of the woman.

To exemplify this, the Wicked Witch of the West is intended to represent evil; however, the actions that cause her to be evil are not provided. In contrast, Glinda is the representation of good; but, like the Witch, the causes of her goodness is also not provided. What the viewer does see, however, is the appearance and tonality of the characters. The clothing and voices of the Witch and Glinda, for example, are contrasting in a way that exemplifies their differences and expresses their symbolism. In other words, a “good” woman speaks softly and dresses in beautiful clothing and a “wicked” woman speaks with a harsh tone and dresses in dark clothing.

Kathleen Ragan explains in her essay “What Happened to the Heroines in Folktales?” that the Aarne-Thompson index, a classification of folktales, “places both male and female protagonists under male headings, ignores, female activity, focuses on male activity at the
expense of females, portrays females as passive, and uses different standards to evaluate male and female behavior” (Ragan 1) Ragan intends to make a claim of all fairytales; however, this claim does not take the cultural context in which The Wizard of Oz and Wicked had taken place into consideration. This meaning that both the film and response novel were revolutionary for their time in terms of the feminism.

What is unique about the The Wizard of Oz, when viewed in terms of Ragan’s idea of fairytale agenda, are the revolutionary qualities that are being ignored as far as sexual equality. For example, the passiveness and struggles stay, for the most part, within the realm of the women. The Wizard is the leader of Oz; but, the women of the story have gained independence in terms of leadership roles and, in some ways, defy the Wizard. The Witch, for example, does not follow him and, for the most part, completely defies him.

As Ragan states, earlier fairy tales portrayed women as being passive and, essentially, “pleasing” characters. For example, in the film adaptation of Grimm’s Snow White, which came out in the theaters two years before The Wizard of Oz, the women are passive and portrayed in the way that Ragan describes. The Wizard of Oz does contain the qualities that are seemingly revolutionary; however, the foundation of the film’s plot is still solidified in the Wizard’s ruling and advice.

After 1939, the suffragist movement continued to evolve into what is now called the Second Wave Feminism. During the second wave feminism, women began to enter the work force due to the effects of World War II in the 1940’s. This, eventually, perpetuated the movement of equality in the work force as women began to seek wages that were equivalent to men. Rachel R. Richard states in her book, “Riding the Waves: A Trans-Generational Approach
to the Feminist Movement,” women began mobilizing even more in the 1940s, and they never
demobilized afterward. For example, female union membership expanded as more women were
working for wages and a new generation of labor feminists revived socialist feminist goals and
initiated a campaign for ‘equal pay for equal work.” (Richard 27)

Along with changes governmentally, the United States experienced social enhancements,
as well. The children of the 1950s, for example, were delayed socially by the Great Depression
of the 1930s and the World War of the 1940s. As Richard states, these “gave children the
opportunity to delay the burdensome responsibilities of adulthood. This empowered “Baby
Boomer” generation, specifically young U.S. citizens, began to find fault and reject their parents’
world, judging it to be morally deficient.”(Richard, 27) The products of the “Baby Boomer”
generation became the social leaders of the second wave feminist movement and fought in the
liberation of women as well as racial justice. The effects that the second wave generation had on
feminism undoubtedly enabled and effected the third wave generation.

According to Pamela Aronson, author of “Feminists or ‘Postfeminists’?: Young
Women’s Attitudes toward Feminism,” “since the mid-1980s, 30 to 40 percent of women have
called themselves feminists, and by 1990, nearly 80 percent favored efforts to ‘strengthen and
change women’s status in society.’” (Aronson 904) In order to have an adequate understanding
for the feministic criticism within Maguire’s Wicked, the enlightenment of late twentieth century
feminism is required.

At this point in time, the women of the nineties were considered to be postfeminist. As
Aronson describes, the postfeminist women are those who have benefited from the previous
suffragists but are not pushing forward with the movement. More importantly, this generation
represents the “death” of feminism as the movement, according to Aronson, does not make any significant progress. The prevalence, and the questions that arise with the directional progression in which feminism was going, can be more thoroughly understood when paired with the literature of the nineties. *Wicked*, for example, unravels this direction through the development of its characters. (Aronson 904)

The importance of understanding the feminist movement of the nineties aids in the critical analysis of *Wicked’s* female characters. Similar to American society, the women of Oz are mostly apathetic about women’s rights. This is both representative and prophetic of the women’s suffrage movement. *Wicked* is representative of America’s resistance to the feminist movement while at the same time reestablishing a sense of progression in feminism itself. This is seen through the characters and provides a thorough representation of feministic mentality. Maguire does this through the actions and descriptions of Galinda, Madam Morrible, and Elphaba by allowing these three women, among others, to embody the death, the fear, and the internal following of feminism.

At some point, women began to neglect their feminist drive, even fear it. In the book, the representation of this fear is perfectly exemplified through Galinda. As she is first introduced, it is obvious that social hierarchy is important to her, and that she does not celebrate social justice. This is seen at the beginning of the Gillikin chapter when she is discussing travel with Professor Dillamond. “If the Wizard’s Banns went through the Hall of Approval, as they are likely to do, the goat himself would be required by law to give up the privileges he had earned through years of study, training, and saving. ‘Is that right for a creature with a spirit?’ he said. ‘From here to there, there to here, in a pen?’ ‘I quite agree, travel is so broadening,’” said Galinda.” (Maguire 67) She values herself and others against the figurative totem pole of social
rank, and is in complete denial that she will ever reach the top. Galinda’s mentality is representative of the female condition past and present. The idea of women as homemakers and social purists, though it has been challenged, was still prevalent during the nineties.

Galinda not only represents the homemaker and social purist of the early twentieth century but the way in which women seek and maintain power, as well. This meaning that women, unlike men, must portray themselves in a way that is socially appealing. This is seen through Galinda as she gains power socially and governmentally through her appearance. Gaining power through appearance does require an element of independence and Galinda is an intelligent and strong character for gaining power; however, this should not distract from the actualities of the situation and that, though she is successful, her means of success are not favorable in terms of feminism. By creating a character like Galinda, Maguire seems to be clarifying that this is still a common tendency among women, and is calling attention to the fact that equality among men and women in terms of political and social power is still lacking as women are powerless without adequate appearance.

The characterization that Maguire does with Galinda represents the death of feminism. He does this by creating a character that values herself poorly and in a historically pleasing way. This meaning, that the value system that Galinda goes by is not parallel to that of the contemporary nineties or even the later sixties and seventies, but rather the beginning of the Twentieth century. Galinda’s mentality represents the foundation for what feminism deems as being non-feministic. With this in mind, the motives behind this characterization becomes curious to the contemporary reader as Galinda, who is well-respected in the book, is the cliché of anti-feminism in reality. This questions whether feminism is obsolete in the American culture and when and why this movement died.
The fear of feminism, which works hand in hand with its death, is represented through supporting characters like Madam Morrible and Sarima. Both of these characters are seemingly independent of men, however, they are characteristically harsh and unsettling in their independence. Madam Morrible, for example, works directly under the Wizard. In other words, she is the neck that moves the head. The power that Madam Morrible has in the book demonstrates a highly feministic form of independence and work status; however, though she is one of most feminist pleasing characters, Madam Morrible has overwhelming traits of evil.

Similar to Madam Morrible, not in terms of evil necessarily but in terms of characterization, Sarima depicted as a character that is distraught and non-feminine after the death of her husband. It is as if a woman's femininity is measured against her husband, which in Sarima's case, is obsolete. She, like Madam Morrible, is independent, though, her independence does not seem liberated.

Both of these characters represent the fear that twentieth century women feel in terms of the feminist movement. Women of this century seem to have a shared belief that being a feminist means being distraught, disconnected, and alone. This ignorance is represented through characters like Madam Morrible and Sarima, and depicts the life that women of the contemporary society try desperately to avoid.

What is ironic about the belief and action system of late twentieth century feminists is that, by avoiding lifestyles like Madam Morrible, Sarima, and Galinda, they are unknowingly making themselves a part of the feminist movement. They are becoming Elphabas.

Elphaba is contemporary society’s representation of passionate feminism; however, the character herself would never readily admit that she is a part of any group, let alone the feminists. Elphaba's mentality is common among women of the mid-nineties as the media began
to portray feminists in a negative and extremist fashion. Like Elphaba, The third wave feminists are so passionately against labeling that the feminist movement is seemingly "dead," but in actuality, it has never been more alive.

In the book “Catching a Wave: Reclaiming Feminism for the 21st Century” by Roy Cooke Dicker and Alison Piepmeier, the authors dedicate a whole chapter on the misguided idea that feminism is dead. The chapter, “The ‘Big Lie’: False Feminist Death Syndrome, Profit, and the Media,” discusses the way in which the feminist movement is perceived as being dead; but, in actuality, this death is merely conceived by the media. “Such swipes at the sisterhood were sadly typical, with journalists branding women’s rights activists silly nitwits or strident separatists, prudish harpies or promiscuous harlots.”(Dicker, 32) This statement resonates with the characterization and actions of Elphaba, as the idea of harsh and anti-productive labeling is used. Likewise, these portrayals of feminism in reality made women fear the harsh labels that walked hand-in-hand with feminism.

Elphaba becomes the contemporary feminist because she is not pleasing or radical in her independence. Unlike the other women mentioned, Elphaba does not strive for acceptance and allows herself to “be” in a way that is non-aggressive and non-negotiable. This characterization suggests that the third wave feminists are not getting caught up in the definition or label of being a feminist but are actually adopting the lifestyle. Feminism is not a “dead” or a “thing of the past” but something that is alive and thriving through the lifestyles of women deemed as the third wave feminists.

Feminism can be seen in the form of a timeline when paired with The Wonderful Wizard of Oz, The Wizard of Oz, and Wicked as each represents the similarities and differences of women through the twentieth century. Like all social movements, the progress comes in waves
and is influenced by its citizens and culture. Literature and film provide embodied representations for contemporary citizens of where feminism has come, where it is going, and why it is important. Society is in perpetual motion and must be documented, in one form or another, to promote the need and entitlement of these waves.
Works cited


