“The Shoe’s on the Other Foot”:

Challenging the Perceived Triviality of the Wicked Witch of the East

By Jordan Pennington

Popular perception of the wonderful world of Oz as envisioned by L. Frank Baum involves two witches—Glinda the Good Witch of the North and the mysterious yet iconic green Wicked Witch of the West. Our understanding of these figures is basic in that the Good Witch aids our heroine in her quests and the Wicked Witch provides hindrance. Yet, in Gregory Maguire’s 1995 reimaginative prequel, *Wicked: The Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West*, readers are reintroduced to a character slighted by original versions—Nessarose Thropp, the Wicked Witch of the East, whose function in previous tales is merely to play victim to falling houses and purloiners of footwear.

Due to its function as a prequel and primary focus on Elphaba, the Witch of the West, Nessarose plays a considerably more significant role in the narrative, though she is still somewhat overshadowed by her sister and Glinda the Good. However, Nessarose embodies contradictions and ambiguities conceptually central to the novel—she represents qualities of both goodness and wickedness in a fashion similar to the other Witches to whom she is very close, serving as a perfect mirror image of her sister especially. Nessarose ultimately becomes a troubled woman who is undeniably a despotic tyrant, a vengeful sorceress, and a religious extremist; however, readers must balance this with the tragic nature of her past, namely, how her disability forced reliance on others and an internal drive for superiority. As much as Elphaba becomes the Wicked Witch of the West as a result of exterior societal expectations, Nessarose becomes the Wicked Witch of the East through internal psychological instability brought on by
her complex relationships with other characters, concepts, and objects. Though parallels can be drawn between her character traits and those of the other Witches of Oz, especially her sister, Nessarose’s unique psychological state and related devotion to the Unnamed God shape a persona with a life and times at least as “wicked” as any Witch of the West.

Common understanding of psychological processes would suggest that Nessarose was on a path toward achieving goodness and the adoration of her parents from the moment of her birth. Not only were her parents relieved that her skin lacked her sister’s verdigris, but she, as the second-born child, was statistically more likely to have a positive relationship with her parents than Elphaba because parents typically become “more relaxed and less demanding” after the first child (Forer 12). Frex, in particular, is taken to Nessarose for her pink skin and piety. While Elphaba was something too bizarre and physically paranormal to be considered a blessing from the Unnamed God, Nessarose was a child that, though not his biologically, was born in Frex’s own image. They found themselves able to connect on not only the physical level of Nessarose’s more apparent “normality”, but on a more abstract spiritual level in the sense that both Frex and Nessarose represent otherwise strong and attractive people whose positions in life have left certain things out of their reach—for Frex, this is in the unfaithfulness of his wife and waywardness of his parishioners, but for Nessarose it manifests more obviously in her lack of arms. That she, too, cannot “reach” the things she desires but maintains a belief in the capacity of the Unnamed God to reach them for her makes Nessarose by far the child for whom his love is most intensely apparent. From one perspective, this intensive parental love seems to support an image of Nessarose as being good, suggesting less internalized bitterness toward authority figures than, for example, Elphaba may possess.
More sinisterly, though, the loving adoration of her parents can be considered a flaw in Nessarose’s childhood, making her too pampered and fragile—as Elphaba tells Glinda during their days at Shiz: “She isn’t good at taking care of other people because she has never learned how to take care of herself” (Maguire 135). Frex’s love for Nessarose has left her vulnerable because she is constantly reliant of the assistance of those around her, having never developed Elphaba’s strict independence brought on by her role as a relative outcast. The implications of such a fact are obviously huge considering Nessarose’s future political career, though it also speaks to the constant presence and severity of her disability.

Throughout her life, or at the very least until the enchantment of the magic shoes, Nessarose is defined by her absence of arms. Though otherwise considered to be supposedly beautiful, being described as “gorgeous, pink, slender as a wheat stalk,” Nessarose is unable to conceal her armlessness no matter how carefully she drapes her academic shawl (Maguire 131). That the shawl is so arranged to lessen the extremity of her appearance suggests, at best, an innocent attempt of Nanny’s to help Nessarose fit in—of possibly greater likelihood is the possibility that Nessarose instructs the grumbling Nanny to arrange the shawl in such a way out of vanity, that at whatever internal level she resents her condition and is silently struggling for some level of power.

According to the theory of twentieth-century psychologist Alfred Adler, Nessarose, as a disabled person, “has a special type of inferiority, ‘organ inferiority’, and thus an enhanced drive to establish [her] superiority” (Thomas 70). This corresponds to Nessarose’s aloof, holier-than-thou nature, a nature that is psychologically justified by this concept of organ inferiority. Nessarose doesn’t necessarily consider herself to be superior to all others, but internally strives
to be—and as Glinda shrewdly predicts during their days at Shiz, Nessarose would “develop a knack for being witheringly superior” (Maguire 143).

This sense of superiority and self-centeredness is achieved largely through the constant relationship Nessarose maintains with her Unionist concept of the Unnamed God—it fuels her ego to be able to have absolute control over this relationship. Maguire provides the key logical reasoning for her religious fanaticism in one of Elphaba’s elixir-induced flashbacks by writing, “Nessa can see but she cannot touch: what a curse for a child! (No wonder she believed in things she couldn’t see—nothing is provable by touch)” (381). This would suggest that her religious zeal stems from her lack of arms; psychoanalysis and theories of organ inferiority serve as an intermediary between the two. Belief with real things, such as human relationships, is a major issue of struggle in Nessarose’s life. Though she seems to interact with the rag-tag group of her peers to some extent—even wishing to go to the Philosophy Club—her disability or the strict opinion of her minders (“Hush Nessa . . . That’s not the place for you”) forces her away from actual social contact and back into her own mind, praying to the Unnamed God (Maguire 163). As such, Nessarose forms very few tangible human connections—as Frex asks Elphaba, “Have you known Nessa to have an adult bond with anyone other than the Unnamed God?” (Maguire 319). For someone constantly relying on and in the presence of other people, Nessarose is very much alone.

Perhaps the strongest bond Nessarose has to another person, aside from perhaps Nanny (and no one seems to mind Nanny), involves the relationship she has with her sister, Elphaba. Though they were in competition for the respect and approval of Frex—something Nessarose always possessed that Elphaba did not—the two spend time together at Shiz without animosity; indeed, with a certain closeness. Elphaba indulges her sister, adjusting their living space at
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University, and initially expecting to care for her in the event of Nanny’s eventual passing. Sometimes referred to even as one unit (“the Thropp females”) their relationship is somewhat remarkable as they possess almost perfectly opposite character attributes, differing in areas such as skin color, voice and manner of speech, style of dress, religious conviction, and degree of independence. Frex calls attention to these differences, to Elphaba’s wildness and Nessarose’s tranquil goodness, saying to Elphaba that Nessarose “tamed” her, that “she was holy and blessed even from the day she was born. Even as an infant, she soothed your wildness with her obvious need” (310).

This uncharacteristic behavior for Elphaba—submissive attentiveness to her sister in opposition to her more typical wildness—represents a phenomenon of character adaptation which psychoanalyst Francis D. Baudry describes as being that a “given character trait often represents the best possible solution in a particular solution” (205). Though it is against her typical behavior patterns, Elphaba submits to Nessarose because she presents a more dominant character force—and being “tamed” and exhibiting a certain, perhaps uncharacteristic softness is the best possible solution Elphaba has for dealing with this presence in her life.

In spite of these differences and singular personal dynamic—or perhaps because of them—Elphaba and Nessarose share similarities and bonds beyond those of any other character-pair. Specifically, they both experience an intense loneliness and almost self-induced isolation—for Elphaba, this is physical in her move to Kiamo Ko—but for Nessarose, this manifests in continued introspection and worship of the Unnamed God. Emotional pain sharpens their forced isolation and steepens the descent into the types of behaviors that merit titles as Wicked Witches. For Elphaba, her major source of emotional pain is her loss of Fiyero; for Nessarose, however, it’s the loss of Elphaba herself—she describes being left at Shiz University with Glinda, then
with Nanny, such that she says “back then I felt horribly alone. Only my faith saw me through” (312). In their final meeting, though this issue of abandonment and the trials of time have left some rift between them, the Thropp sisters have those small details such as school memories or having now “shared” Nanny that serve as a sisterly bond despite their socio-political disparagements.

Nessarose’s relationship with Glinda, too, is of note because it can be inferred that, once Elphaba leaves Shiz, Glinda acts as a sort of surrogate sister to Nessarose before she, too, leaves school. This ultimately culminated in Glinda’s enchantment of the slippers to give Nessarose power, confidence, and poise—an act not entirely delineated in the text. The shoes—the ruby slippers popularly identified with Dorothy—were the possession of Nessarose, a symbol of her superiority over Elphaba in terms of attracting the love of their father. While the reader experiences primarily Elphaba’s perspective of the shoes as a token of love, to Nessarose, they are a means of empowerment, a blessing from the Unnamed God as well as a reminder of Glinda’s supportive presence in the absence of her sister. In other words, although the common reader experience is one of desiring the shoes for Elphaba because her struggles have remained so central to Maguire’s attentions, the same shoes have equal meaning and worth for Nessarose, albeit for different reasons.

With the individualist freedom offered by the ruby slippers, Nessarose is able to lead the seceded Munchkinland due to her inherited post as the Eminent Thropp, now, the Eminence of the East. Though at her most prominent within society, Nessarose is simultaneously at her most withdrawn and introspective—the political hubbub and to-do to her is nothing more than “tiresome events of the distracting world” (Maguire 312). She metes out “justice,” as in the case of Nick Chopper, without blinking an eye, blurring reader perception of her as a character that is
innocently and primarily “good”. That she is now mixing sorcery with her strict religious beliefs is disconcerting considering her previous stance harshly against it; however, she cannot be considered as much a hypocrite as she can a representation of ambiguity in that what Elphaba says must be the working of spells, Nessarose refers to as the ability of a righteous person to “work miracles in the honor of the Unnamed God” (314). This blurring of the lines of polar opposites may be considered merely evidence of Nessarose’s inability to rule effectively, though a psychoanalytic perspective would suggest that the adoption of sorcerous practices is a cry for attention from one of her “sister Witches”—that being socially disconnected from her peers, Nessarose is “acting out” and becoming lost in personal strife.

Practically, Nessarose’s habits of political authoritarianism create a climate that is hazardous to the people of Munchkinland. Even from solely the perspective of her stance on religion, she represents a danger to the civil liberties of Munchkinlanders in that “an individual who believes in the existence of an invisible world also tends to succumb to the incitement of demagogues proposing anti-democratic value systems”—in this case, however, the demagogue in question is Nessarose herself (Pedazhur and Weinberg 41). From this perspective, Nessarose’s attempts to subdue Munchkin unrest through ritual practice and religious chicanery parallels the political style of the Wizard—the only differences being that Nessarose uses a base of religious appeal where the Wizard appeals to social divisions to greater effect. As such, Nessarose has merely substituted the tyranny of the Wizard for something equally wicked, but available at a much more local level. Though they turn to her out of desperation in time of drought, more damage is done in terms of loss of personal freedom, to the point where Boq expresses the voice of the Munchkinlanders in saying “It’s people who claim that they’re good, or anyway better
than the rest of us, that you have to be wary of” to which Milla explicitly responds “like Nessarose” (Maguire 357).

As such, distinction between “goodness” and “wickedness” becomes increasingly difficult to discern in Nessarose’s adult life. Though she strictly adheres to the theoretically benevolent principles of Unionism, she manages still to re-institute those barbaric policies of sacrifice due to her possession of a “population of ill-educated, nervous subjects to pacify” (Maguire 317). Readers are forced to consider whether Nessarose’s implementation of such practices is a vain attempt to placate her subjects and maintain power or a noble attempt to unify her subjects in worship of a deity she believes will ultimately cleanse their souls and grant spiritual fulfillment. The former argument seems supported by the notion that, having been disabled and abandoned, her position as Eminence is one of the few things Nessarose has left, and therefore something that she’d cling to at all costs; the latter, by her consistent and unwavering faith in the capacity of the Unnamed God to positively influence the lives of Its believers. From either perspective, Nessarose’s perception of her own dogma as benevolent is at odds with the opinions of her people.

This capacity to simultaneously exist in states of wickedness and goodness is of particular interest in the character of Nessarose because she, unlike her counterparts of the West and North, is stark and unyielding in her worldview. Though Glinda begins the novel as Galinda, “a vain, silly thing,” she comes to genuine realizations about her superficiality and thoughtfully uses it to her advantage in manipulating the “coven of vipers” that is the Ozian political climate (Maguire 133). Her change is singular and dramatic, from ignorance to deliberate self-awareness—from childishly neither good nor wicked to knowingly both; she serves the interests of the tyrannical Wizard in order to be able to continue to lead a comfortable lifestyle of
performing “good” acts for the Ozian people. Nessarose presents no such change in that her awareness of the Unnamed God is a consistent presence in her life—she opposes the Wizard for the “good” of the people of Munchkinland and sets up a parallel regime of equal “wickedness” because of a consistent personal belief system, not because of any sort of personal change or revelation.

On a similar note, Nessarose’s certainty in her convictions and world-stance present contrast with the uncertainty of her sister, Elphaba. In a key scene of personal despair, Elphaba questions her own sanity and lack of religious convictions, this serving as a microcosm of her constant questioning of her own wickedness throughout the novel that is mirrored in audience experience. Maguire outlines the dilemma by saying:

If you could take the skewers of religion, those that riddle your frame, make you aware every time you move—if you could withdraw the scimitars of religion from your mental and moral systems—could you even stand? . . . Is religion itself—that tired and ironic phrase—the necessary evil? (387)

In doing so, the reader comes to share Elphaba’s envy for how secure Nessarose is in her religious convictions. By removing the uncertainty that plagues Elphaba—a very human sort of uncertainty—through an absolute profession of belief in the Unnamed God, Nessarose has a degree of serenity that is difficult to fathom.

Therefore, in a practical sense, Nessarose’s character becomes integral to the success of the story because she “grounds” her sister. In a literal sense, she “grounds” later sections of the plot by prompting Elphaba’s two significant returns to Munchkinland and thus tethering Elphaba to social and familial obligations instead of allowing her to continue to self-imposed exile. The final section of the novel, “The Murder and Its Afterlife” can refer to the murder of Nessarose by
Dorothy and the aftershock to Elphaba just as easily as it could to the murder of Elphaba by Dorothy and the aftershock to the more general Oz. As such, Nessarose and her unique character not only take on a position of importance within larger thematic discussions of the novel, but one that is arguably equal in terms of magnitude to that of her sister, our supposed protagonist.

This is because of Nessarose’s aforementioned more absolute and rigid world view—in the case of Elphaba, Maguire’s thematic exploration of good and evil ultimately leads to a “Wicked” Witch with good or redeeming qualities because Elphaba is uncertain about her place and purpose in life, agnostic in her religious stance, and psychologically inclined to the position of outcast. Nessarose can be considered an equal exemplification of the human ambiguities of being both “good” and “wicked” because though she is stabilized by the “skewers of religion”, she is remembered as having the same qualities as Elphaba—a “Wicked” Witch with good or redeeming qualities. Though through her treatment of Munchkinlanders her defining characteristic of faith results in resentment and suffering, that same faith elicits the love of her father and allows for great personal strength and a genuine self-perception as a figure of benevolence.

Ultimately, *Wicked* is successful because the Wicked Witch of the East does not stay merely the pair of shriveling legs beneath a house that she may’ve been associated with in earlier texts. Though she easily slips into the background amongst the more dynamically extroverted personalities of those around her and the spectacle and detail of Maguire’s careful reimagining of Oz, Nessarose nonetheless not only forces a closer examination of good and evil as they appear in the context of the novel due to her unique mental state and related religious fanaticism, but achieves a new status of worth as a character that promotes discussion of Maguire’s thematic exploration of the ambiguous confliction and coexistence of the good and the wicked.
Works Cited


