Revisioning Oz: A Depth Psychology Approach to Myth in *Wicked*

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Wolfram von Eschenbach’s masterpiece *Parzival* begins with a call to acknowledge that each human being is “ black-and-white mixed like the magpie’s plumage” (Sussman 14). The hero can only re-enter the Grail Castle and heal the kingdom after embracing his Moorish half-brother, Feirefiz, whose skin itself is mottled black and white. This theme- so beautifully expressive of the Depth Psychology precept that our true power emerges only after we have embraced our Shadow- finds vibrant contemporary expression in the Broadway musical *Wicked* , adapted by Winnie Holzman from Gregory McGuire’s novel, with music and lyrics by Stephen Schwartz.

*Wicked* is a revisioning of the Wizard of Oz myth[[1]](#footnote-1). We encounter many of the same characters and places (the “Good” Witch, the “Bad” Witch, flying monkeys, a Cowardly Lion, a talking Scarecrow and Tinman, a Wizard, the Emerald City), but experience them in a radically new way, from “the Wrong Side” as the therapist and writer Adolph Guggenbuhl-Craig would say. While Dorothy is peripheral (an unseen figure whose blundering into the land of Oz is used as a tool for political propaganda), the other characters from the old myth are given greater depth and complexity by exploring their origin and evolution.

The heart of the story centers on the relationship between Elphaba and Glinda. Elphaba is scholarly, bookish, socially awkward and environmentally conscious. She is also born green- a condition resulting from conditions surrounding her conception from the affair her mother has with a mysterious man in emerald attire. Neglected and despised by her parents and peers, she has thrown her passions into learning and social causes. An activist for animal rights, she is an Introverted

Thinking and Intuitive type, prone to creating unintentional magic when emotionally provoked. Glinda is Elphaba’s opposite in every way. Pretty, vain and popular, Glinda seems like an intellectual bubble head but has social and emotional skills which ensure her power and prestige. In Jungian typology, she is an Extroverted Sensation and Feeling type. The reaction of the two girls when they meet and are forced to become roommates at Shiz University is a classic case of encountering the Shadow: both of them are horrified and repelled with a depth of intensity neither had ever experienced before. In their witty duet, they ask:

What is this feeling so sudden and new?

I felt the moment I laid eyes on you

My pulse is rushing, my head is reeling

My face is flushing. What is this feeling ?

Fervid as a flame, does it have a name?

Yes! Loathing- unadulterated loathing!

Glinda attempts to increase Elphaba’s social humiliation by giving a hideous, grandmotherly black hat to her roommate to wear for a school dance. However, when Elphaba misinterprets Glinda’s cruel practical joke as a sincere gesture of friendship and responds generously with a gift of a magic wand, it becomes a moment of *felix beati*- and the opposites join on the dance floor in a potent image of connection, mirroring and comical communion. The two girls become unexpected and unlikely friends, with Elphaba awakening the dormant intellectual and moral capacity inside the party girl, and Glinda coaching Elphaba in the rules of social life, initiating her into the sensate world in her song “Popular”

I’ll teach you the proper ploys

When you talk to boys

Little ways to flirt and flounce

I’ll show you what shoes to wear

How to fix your hair.

All the things that really count

While their relationship deepens, it also shows tensions of rivalry: they vie for the chance to learn magic with the headmistress, and they both fall in love with the same man, Fiyero. When Elphaba’s gifts of sorcery come to the attention of the politically powerful, she is invited to the Emerald City . In a fever of girlish excitement, she journeys to the site of her fantasy land of hope and fulfillment. Elphaba’s dreams of wholeness and acceptance are brutally destroyed when the Wizard uses her special spell casting abilities against the animals, the very creatures she has been fighting to protect and has sworn to defend. It is at this moment that the girls’ paths diverge: when they are offered power in a corrupt government, Glinda accepts. Elphaba refuses, however, and becomes scapegoated and demonized by the community.

The moral complexities of life reveal themselves in a series of painful episodes, as Elphaba’s every attempt to heal and protect leads to unforeseen disasters for those she loves (depicted in the song “No Good Deed Goes Unpunished”). This is a reflection of the long and painful process of individuation as the ego struggles to integrate the Shadow. As C.G. Jung wrote in “ The Phenomenology of the Spirit in Fairytales":

The grand plan on which the unconscious life of the psyche is constructed is so inaccessible to our understanding that we can never know what evil may not be necessary in order to produce good by enantiodromia, and what good may very possibly lead to evil. (Jung, *CW 9*: 397)

The *collective* propensity to enantiodromia is vividly present in the plot as well: when the politicians’ propaganda supports the one sided view of Elphaba as “The Wicked Witch of the West”, it psychically constellates the necessity of rising adulation for Glinda as “the Good” . The truth is that each woman is passionate, fallible, complicated and heartbroken- but in the eyes of the masses, wholeness is sacrificed and the archetype of the feminine is split. The women, however, come to a deep sense of understanding and acceptance of their black-and white magpie nature, and

go their separate ways after expressing gratitude for what each has brought the other. Elphaba turns to a life of love, while Glinda takes up the mantle of political leadership and reform, vowing to bring integrity and healing to the community. The symbols that are the source of Elphaba’s identity

(her broomstick and her hat, as well as her lover, Fiyero) all originally belonged to Glinda. The source of Glinda’s greatest power--her wand and book of incantations, and even her changed name- in fact comes from her perceived ‘enemy”. At the conclusion of the musical, there is a stirring rapprochement between these two characters as they acknowledge their mutual debt to one another.

GLINDA  
I've heard it said   
That people come into our lives for a reason  
Bringing something we must learn  
And we are led  
To those who help us most to grow   
If we let them  
And we help them in return  
Well, I don't know if I believe that's true  
But I know I'm who I am today  
Because I knew you:  
  
Like a comet pulled from orbit  
As it passes a sun  
Like a stream that meets a boulder  
Halfway through the wood  
Who can say if I've been changed for the better?  
But because I knew you  
I have been changed for good  
  
ELPHABA  
It well may be  
That we will never meet again  
In this lifetime  
So let me say before we part  
So much of me  
Is made of what I learned from you  
You'll be with me  
Like a handprint on my heart

And now whatever way our stories end  
I know you have re-written mine  
By being my friend:

Like a ship blown from its mooring

By a wind off the sea  
Like a seed dropped by a skybird  
In a distant wood  
Who can say if I've been changed for the better?  
But because I knew you:  
  
GLINDA  
Because I knew you:  
  
BOTH

I have been changed for good

The 1939 film of the *Wizard of Oz*  portrayed one part of the journey towards individuation, as each character on the Yellow Brick Road struggled to find their fourth function (the Scarecrow, his Feeling; the Tinman, his Thinking, the Cowardly Lion, his Sensate courage ). In the musical *Wicked,* this journey to the Self is taken up in a far more deeper and nuanced level as Elphaba and Glinda face the challenge to incorporate within themselves the repressed, discarded, neglected and rejected aspects of the psyche, and find in their Shadow sides the source of power, wholeness and potential healing for both themselves and the community.

Works Cited

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Sussman, Linda. *Speech of the Grail: A Journey Toward Speaking That Heals and Transforms*. New York: Lindisfarne Books, 1995.

1. Using the 1939 movie as its source of inspiration rather than the book by L.Frank Baum. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)