

Wicked: The Importance of Upholding Your Morals

It is often said that there are two sides to every story. In the musical *Wicked*, this is portrayed through the tale of the witches found in the *The Wizard of Oz*. It is told from the witches' side instead of Dorothy's, and it paints a very different picture than the one we got in their original story. I had the opportunity to personally see this show last year and identified one theme that shone through brighter than the rest. While some may disagree, I think the most important message of *Wicked* is to always stand up for what you believe in.

Wicked is a musical based off of a book of the same name by Gregory Maguire. In it, we see our two main characters, Elphaba and Glinda meet at Shiz University. They are assigned as roommates and immediately detest one another due to their very obvious differences. While their rocky relationship progresses, Elphaba starts to uncover an evil plot in the land of Oz. She discovers that many of the creatures are losing their ability to speak and are being imprisoned for nothing more than the fact that they are animals. One day, a lion cub is brought to the school in a cage and Elphaba, along with the help of her magic and another student named Fiyero, rescues the lion cub and releases it back into the wild. This spurs Elphaba to want to speak to the Wizard of Oz, whom she believes can help all of the creatures that are being detained. She begins her journey to the Emerald City with Galinda, now known as Glinda, by her side as her new best friend. However, while at the Emerald City, Elphaba uncovers that the Wizard is responsible for all of the prejudice and abuse against the animals. The Wizard offers to help grant Elphaba's desires if she joins him, but she refuses because she wants to free the animals. Elphaba runs away from the Wizard and is going to flee the city to avoid capture when she gets into an argument with Glinda. Glinda thinks Elphaba is making a mistake and chooses to stay in the city because she values being popular and having her wishes come true over the needs of others.

While Elphaba begins liberating the animals across the country, Glinda has been given the title of “Glinda the Good” and, along with the Wizard’s workers, has helped spread rumors about how evil Elphaba is. Fiyero comes from Shiz University to stay at the Emerald City and becomes captain of the guard. He leads the search for Elphaba because he doesn’t believe the rumors about her and wants to make sure she is safe. Glinda realizes that she has made a mistake and is only bringing more pain to those around her. When Elphaba decides to leave Oz for her own safety, she and Fiyero fake their deaths and leave Glinda a book of spells for her to use to protect Oz. Glinda banishes the Wizard and begins a more just rule in his place.

I’m not the only one who found many great themes throughout this musical. There are many different interpretations, some that agreed and some that didn’t. Some people found similar messages to what I did. In a review, Laura Pokedoff says, “This is truly what *Wicked* the musical is about: friendship, identity, and standing up for one’s beliefs, even when it seems like the rest of the world doesn’t agree with them.” (Pokedoff) I concur with the conclusions that Pokedoff came to here. I believe this shows that Pokedoff is able to see that Elphaba standing up for what she believed in was tied into the plot and character development in the show. This included Elphaba standing up to one of the only friends she’s ever had and deciding to not discount her own identity or turn away from others who needed her help even though she was now in a position where she was no longer scorned. I think this emphasized how major this theme is in the show.

Other audience members felt that there were different, more important messages in the performance. Matthew J. Palm, a critic for Orlando Sentinel Theater, argues that “the point of the musical is how citizens can be duped when their rulers feed them misinformation.” (Palm) While I feel that *Wicked* does illustrate the dangers of media manipulation, I believe that message to

take a backburner to the strong themes of defending your beliefs. Even at the very beginning of the musical, Elphaba is willing to stand up to authority figures in an attempt to help those she cares about. The theme of disinformation in the news is not even very noticeable until part of the way through the performance. Therefore, I believe that this is not the main theme found in *Wicked*.

And, of course, some found very different main messages in *Wicked*. Steve Charing, another reviewer, wrote: “Friendship and trust are the underlying themes as well as prejudice and tolerance. Government corruption also plays a role in the story. And what may appear wicked or good to some may actually be the reverse. As the saying goes, never judge a book by its cover.” (Charing) *Wicked* is in fact, intended to be *The Wizard of Oz* but from the perspective of the witches of Oz and illustrates that there are two sides of the story and unfair assumptions can leave you to believe untrue information. I believe these to be good general life advice but struggle to see many of these being the main themes to take away from this play. There are few characters who show good friendship or trust, the play ends with almost all the characters with just as much prejudice as they started with and, in my opinion, doesn’t show those in a way that many viewers learn from.

Another reviewer, Stanford Friedman, argues that the main takeaway is about living with consequences of our actions: “Life moves forward, and *Wicked* reveals itself to be, more than anything else, a cautionary tale about learning to live with one’s choices.” (Friedman) I don’t find this thought to be accurate because so much of *Wicked* is focused on change. No one in the show makes a mistake that they can’t come back from. Glinda takes over Oz and begins using her power for good, Fiyero learns that he was focused on the wrong things in life, so he changes

and becomes better. I would argue that it isn't about learning to live with your choices as much as it is about living to learn *from* your choices.

There are even some who believe that there is no main moral to be taken away from this show. Joseph Szekeres, a Canadian theater critic, argues that *Wicked* is merely meant as a distraction from the turmoil of the world around us. He writes that he originally saw the show as little more than a rite of passage story for pre-teen and teenaged girls but in the end decided it was intended as a distraction where you could be transported to a world with magic. (Szekeres) I disagree with this thought. While *Wicked* puts on a beautiful and entertaining show, it has many comparisons and lessons that apply to real life. For example, you could take away the lesson of standing up for what you believe or maybe a lesson to not seek only after fame and popularity as Glinda learned the hard way. I believe that there is nothing in this show that indicates that it is solely for distraction and entertainment purposes. There are beautiful insights to be learned if you are willing and able to look closely.

I would argue that the main message of *Wicked* is to always stand up for what you believe in. We are able to see this theme many times throughout the musical in multiple characters. First and most prominently, we see it in Elphaba. In the first act, we see her fight to protect anyone who she feels can't protect themselves. The first time we ever see her perform magic is when she is worried about her sister, Nessa Rose. She also risks getting in trouble to release an imprisoned lion cub because she believes that the animals shouldn't be mistreated. This shows her determination and how important it is to Elphaba to be a champion for those around her that need it. Later in the show, she sings a song called "Defying Gravity" with the lyrics: "I'm through accepting limits 'cause someone says they're so, some things I cannot change but 'til I try, I'll never know!" I feel this illustrates how she realizes that she is having to go

against everyone and everything she's been taught for what she believes in. It also shows that she realizes she may not succeed but is willing to risk it all to change the world for the better. As this is major character development and a turning point for our main character, I think that *Wicked* makes it clear that this is the message we should take away.

Elphaba isn't the only one that demonstrates this lesson throughout the performance. For example, we also get to see Fiyero adopt this moral. In the beginning, we understand him to be rather hedonistic. However, he joins Elphaba in freeing the lion cub and from there on, we see him begin to uphold those newly found morals. When Elphaba goes into hiding to begin fighting animal imprisonment, Fiyero stands up to Glinda and anyone else who doesn't believe that Elphaba is doing the right thing. This comes to a climax when Glinda and Elphaba get into a heated conflict that puts Elphaba in danger. He puts his position as head guard and his entire life at risk to help defend Elphaba so she can continue fighting for the rights of others.

Near the end of the musical, we even get to see this lesson from Glinda. After Elphaba fakes her own death, Glinda confronts the Wizard. She realizes that he had been lying and that he shouldn't rule over the people of Oz. Until this point in the play, Glinda has seemed to care more about herself than anyone else. She has seen the effects of what the Wizard has done and chooses to pretend everything is fine in order to be popular with those around her. This is really the first time we have seen her stand up for someone else. She kicks the Wizard out and puts his accomplice in jail. This shows that even the character who ends up playing a villain for most of the play is able to realize that she needs to stand up for what she believes in and stand up for those around her.

So why does it matter? Why should anyone care about the life lessons from this musical or which one should be the main theme? I believe we should care because art is all around us.

We can learn from the experiences of others through any type of art and it can teach us how avoid the same mistakes. Many of the literary “classics” of our time are focused on what we can do to better our lives or to become greater people. I believe that this is what makes them high art. An article by Jordan Fisher highlights the difference between low art and high art and why we should care about it. In this article, Fisher joins a much larger debate that seems prominent in much of life. He compiles what others have decided is the difference between high art and low art and we learn that there are many different definitions for what high art should be. One of these definitions speaks of high art as being true to reality, emotional, genuine, and morally serious. (Fisher 476) Personally, I would consider *Wicked* high art based on this definition.

That being said, I don't truly feel that I can presume to call anything “high art” without implying that some other art is “low art”. I disapprove of this distinction because I believe that all art brings some sort of value, even if it is just for the artist. I'm not the only one who dislikes this hierarchy of art. Brenda Jo Wright, an author who has studied art for years, has written about this topic. She says, “These conventional distinctions, in the name of universal ‘humanistic’ standards, perpetuate limited definitions of high art and provide the grounds for discounting and disregarding other art forms.” (Bright 2) Like Bright, I also think that when we define art by our own standards, we can close our eyes to some genres of art. Personally I believe that doing so is a mistake, as we can learn lessons or find many different uses for all kinds of art and we lose the opportunity to do so if we judge it ahead of time.

In my own life, this message of standing up my beliefs is close to my heart. I am currently working towards a degree in social work for this very reason. I want to work with children in the foster care system because I want to be able to protect the children that can't necessarily stand up for themselves. I have had many people in my life try to warn me that this is

an incredibly hard profession, that the foster care system is very flawed, or about how there will always be extra challenges with fostering or adopting children. I have been told numerous times that it might not be a good idea to pursue this job- these comments have only made me want to pursue this career even more. If there are so many people in need of an advocate and some help, how can I just give up because it might be difficult? When I begin to doubt that I could succeed in this job, I see Elphaba as one of many examples of giving a voice to those that don't have one.

I also think that this can be seen in everyone's lives. For example, this year there have been many protests by those who are standing up for what they believe in. These protests were often dangerous situations for those protesting. However, many were aware of the risks and still chose to attend and support the movement because they believed that having their voice be heard was more important. I believe this shows that the main theme from *Wicked* is relevant in our lives today.

In conclusion, there is much speculation about the main theme of *Wicked*, but for me, it is to always stand up for what you believe in. From learning to be a good friend, to the dangers of propaganda in the news, to never judging a book by its cover, there are many lessons that could be found within *Wicked*. Nevertheless, the theme of upholding our morals is seen quite prominently in many of the main characters and throughout the whole plot. We can see how this could be applied in our own lives as well. There are a plethora of examples in the world of defending your beliefs at all times, regardless of whether it is the popular thing to do. I hope that we may have the bravery and strength to stand up for our beliefs, our loved ones, and especially for those who are unable to stand up for themselves.

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