

# **WICKED**

## **ACTIVE LEARNING**



## **Teacher Introduction to Wicked: synopsis, characters, themes**

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# About Wicked

**“Gregory Maguire’s shrewdly imagined and beautifully written novel not only revives the Wicked Witch of the West but re-envisions and redeems her for our times.”**

Newsday

Author Gregory Maguire’s 1995 novel ‘Wicked: The Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West’, from which the musical **Wicked** was adapted by the writer Winnie Holzman, takes readers on an extraordinary new journey through L. Frank Baum’s magical world of Oz, cunningly implying that we’ve not previously been told the whole story.

Baum’s “**classic of children’s literature**” (BBC Bitesize), *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, was first published in 1900 and continues to thrill and fascinate the public more than 120 years after its publication. A publishing phenomenon, it was to be the first in an eventual series of 14 Oz-based books and has provided the inspiration for innumerable subsequent books, plays, musicals, games and films (most famously the 1939 musical film *The Wizard of Oz*, starring Judy Garland).

**Wicked** imagines a beguiling backstory and future possibilities to the lives of Baum’s beloved characters, revealing the decisions and events that shape the destinies of two unlikely university friends on their journey to becoming Glinda The Good and the Wicked Witch of the West. Their ‘origin story’ poses the question: was the Wicked Witch of the West really wicked or the innocent victim of a corrupt regime?

The themes of a political leader - in this case The Wizard - ruling through propaganda and ‘fake news’ remain highly relevant. Because Elphaba is perceptively different, the Citizens of Oz are quick to believe the news that she’s apparently a “Wicked Witch”, providing a clever distraction from the corruption at the core of the Wizard’s regime.

**Wicked** is frequently described as a ‘prequel’ or ‘back story’, although its story takes place variously before, simultaneously and after the familiar Oz tale. The modern phenomenon of the ‘prequel’ (perhaps most notably the Star Wars franchise), strongly intrigues and engages learners.

## Themes

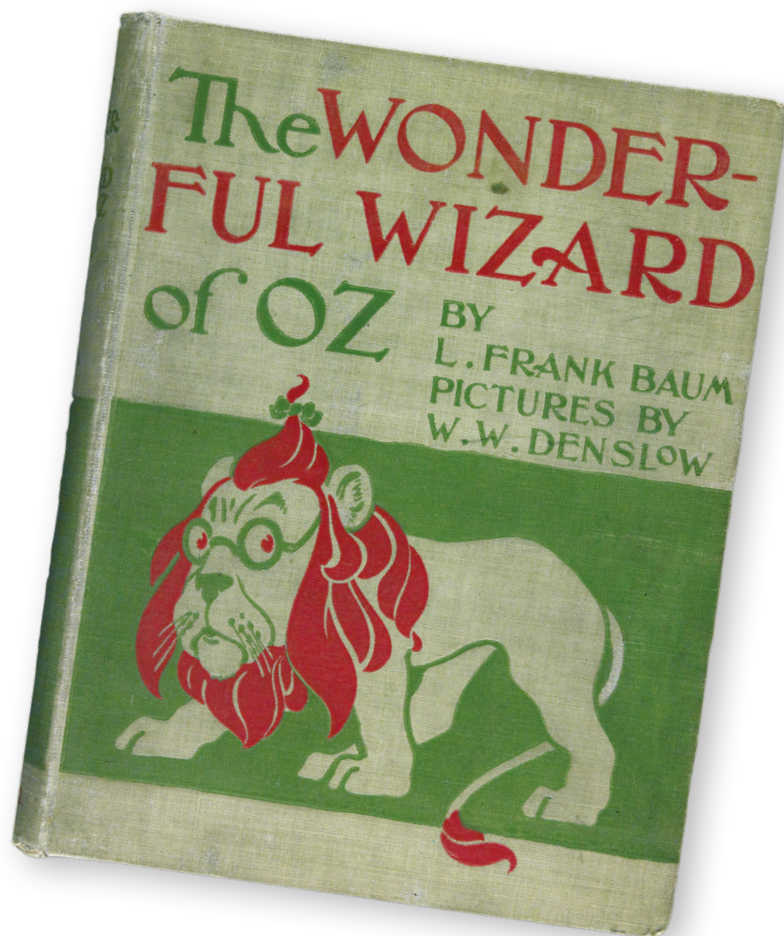
**Wicked** explores themes of self-esteem, identity, prejudice, victimisation, propaganda and fake news, peer pressure, ambition, and friendship.

L. Frank Baum’s ‘The Wonderful Wizard of Oz’ is now more frequently published as ‘The Wizard of Oz’.  
‘Wicked: The Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West’ by Gregory Maguire is recommended for readers aged 16+

# Synopsis: The Wonderful Wizard of Oz

Whisked away from Kansas by a swirling tornado, Dorothy's house crushes the Wicked Witch of the East when it lands in the dazzling world of Oz. Glinda The Good Witch gives Dorothy the dead witch's jewelled slippers and sends her off along the yellow brick road which leads to the Wizard's Kingdom. Along the way she is joined by a scarecrow with no brain, a tin man without a heart and a lion that lacks courage, each of them believing that the Wizard can give them what they want most in life.

When they reach the Emerald City, the Wizard explains they must kill the Wicked Witch of the West before he will grant their wishes. They overcome many dangerous challenges and dispose of the witch (although quite by accident), and return only to find that the Wizard has no real powers. Disappointed, they set off again, this time to find the Good Witch who helps Dorothy return home, thanks to something she had all along.



# Synopsis: Wicked

## Act 1

The musical begins as the citizens of Oz celebrate the death of the Wicked Witch of the West. Glinda The Good says that she knew the Witch herself, as they were at university together.

We snap back in time to see Elphaba, a powerful witch, and Glinda The Good meeting for the first time at Shiz University. Elphaba has been sent to Shiz to take care of her younger sister, Nessarose, was born prematurely. Her father presents Nessarose a going-away present - a pair of jewelled shoes. Madame Morrible, Shiz's headmistress, makes Elphaba and Glinda roommates, despite their protests.

Glinda and Elphaba attend a class taught by Doctor Dillamond, Shiz's only Animal professor. In the middle of class, Dillamond discovers a message written on his blackboard: "Animals should be seen and not heard." Dismissing the class, he confides in Elphaba that there is a force in Oz causing the Animals to lose their powers of speech.

Fiyero arrives at Shiz, and it's clear from the beginning that he and Glinda are attracted to each other. Glinda has another admirer – Boq – a munchkin. Glinda convinces Boq to take Nessarose to the upcoming Ozdust Ball, prompting Elphaba to thank Glinda for her kindness. But Glinda decides to play a trick on Elphaba and give her a pointed black hat to wear, convincing her it is fashionable.

At the Ozdust Ball, Glinda finds out that Elphaba has convinced Madame Morrible to let her join the sorcery seminar, which is what she has really wanted. Glinda regrets her prank, and when Elphaba arrives in the black hat and is immediately ridiculed, Glinda joins her, followed by Fiyero and then the other students. The girls' friendship begins.

The next day, Doctor Dillamond is arrested under new Animal laws and dragged away. His replacement arrives with a terrified lion cub as the subject of an experiment, kept in a cage that causes Animals to lose their power of speech. Outraged, Elphaba loses control of her powers, freezing the entire class except for Fiyero. They rescue the cub and set him free. Elphaba realises she is developing feelings for Fiyero despite his relationship with Glinda. Madame Morrible finds Elphaba, announcing that she has been granted an audience with the Wizard in the Emerald City. Elphaba invites Glinda along with her to see the Wizard.



When they meet the Wizard, hidden behind a big mechanical head, he presents Elphaba with an ancient spell-book, the Grimmerie. Elphaba understands the lost language in the book, and gives Chistery, the Wizard's monkey, wings. Elphaba tries to reverse the spell, but cannot, and the Wizard reveals a whole cage full of winged monkeys, transformed by Elphaba. Elphaba realises with horror that it was the Wizard who robbed the Animals of their speech and realising his plans for her, runs away, clutching the ancient Grimmerie.

The Wizard sends Madame Morrible and his guards after Elphaba. Hiding in an attic of the palace, Elphaba and Glinda hear that Elphaba is falsely proclaimed as a dangerous and wicked Witch. Elphaba decides to use her powers to stand against the Wizard and do what she believes is right, while Glinda chooses to stay in Oz. Elphaba uses the Grimmerie to place a levitation spell on a broom and flies away from the palace guards. This public act of defiance convinces the Ozians that she is truly wicked, and they flee from her in terror as she rises victoriously into the western sky.



## Act 2

Glinda has become Glinda The Good, and Fiyero is appointed Captain of the Guard in the Wizard's Palace.

Elphaba arrives at her old home, where Nessarose is now the Governor of Munchkinland. Elphaba enchants Nessarose's shoes, turning them into ruby slippers and enabling her to stand on her own. Nessarose attempts to cast a spell from the Grimmerie to make Boq, now her servant, fall in love with her. However, the spell backfires, causing Boq to literally lose his heart. Elphaba saves him, but can only do so by turning his body into tin.

Elphaba returns to the Palace to try to free the monkeys but is captured by the Guards. However Fiyero frees her, and leaves Glinda to follow her. Glinda, hurt and alone, suggests to the Wizard that they can trick Elphaba into coming to them by spreading a rumour that Nessarose is in danger. Madame Morrible decides to take this a step further, creating a tornado that brings Dorothy's house to Oz and crushes Nessarose to death.





Elphaba senses that her sister is in danger. She flies to Nessarose, but is too late.

After giving Dorothy Nessarose's shoes and directing her down the yellow brick road, Glinda takes a private moment to grieve and is confronted by Elphaba. They are interrupted by the Wizard's guards, who capture Elphaba. Fiyero intervenes and takes Glinda hostage, allowing Elphaba to escape before surrendering himself. At the castle, Elphaba tries to cast any spell she can to prevent Fiyero from being killed.

Glinda has realised Madame Morrible is responsible for Nessarose's death, but when she confronts her, Madame Morrible tells her that there is blood on her hands as well, and advises her to smile and wave. Glinda travels to Elphaba's castle, where Elphaba has captured Dorothy to force her to return Nessarose's jewelled shoes. Elphaba and Glinda forgive each other for all grievances. To help her in her future, Elphaba gives the Grimmerie to Glinda. Elphaba forces Glinda to hide, and she watches from the shadows as Dorothy throws a bucket of water on Elphaba, who appears to melt away to nothing.

Fiyero comes to the spot where Elphaba was melted. Making sure that no one is watching, he knocks on the floor and out from a trap door steps Elphaba – it was all a trick to ensure their safety. Before leaving, Elphaba regrets that she'll never see Glinda again. Simultaneously, Glinda reports to the people of Oz that the Wicked Witch of the West has been killed and promises to properly earn her title as Glinda The Good. As the people celebrate and Glinda mourns, Elphaba and Fiyero leave Oz behind.

# Character profiles



## Elphaba

The first thing you notice about Elphaba is her skin colour – an unconventional shade of green. Somewhat stubborn, she is a strong character of high moral standing and is not afraid to stand up for what she believes is right and rise above any taunts she may receive. Elphaba is a naturally good judge of character and has a caring nature revealed through her love of animals and the support she gives to her sister, Nessarose. She is a brilliant student with a rather exceptional gift for magic that she tries to hide.



## Glinda (aka Galinda)

Beautiful, popular and privileged. She's a bit of a snob and used to getting everything she wants. Not always as sugary sweet as her appearance would suggest - she leads the class in making rude remarks about Elphaba and is not afraid to use others to her advantage. She ignores her conscience and is swayed by temptation to join the Wizard's administration and elevate her position in Oz. But as Glinda and Elphaba become friends, Glinda learns from Elphaba and becomes truly good.





## Fiyero

A handsome prince without a care in the world, except for himself and having fun. He's had it easy in life, usually gets what he wants and can get away with anything. On the surface he's very shallow but Elphaba reveals a much deeper, thoughtful side, allowing him to realise what he truly wants in life.



## The Wizard

Elevated with little qualification or experience to the revered position of 'The Wonderful Wizard of Oz', the Wizard craves admiration and glory. Calculating and manipulative, his politics might be more accurately described as 'smoke and mirrors'. He stirs up fear amongst the citizens of Oz, who look to him for security and hold him in higher regard than he deserves.



## Madame Morrible

Eccentric Headmistress at Shiz University, her sorcery skills include the ability to manipulate the weather. She makes a startling career move when she becomes the Wizard's Press Secretary. She amasses great power, which she abuses mightily. Part of Madame Morrible's propaganda includes labelling Elphaba 'wicked'.



## Nessarose

Elphaba's younger sister was born prematurely. Very beautiful, Nessa is the favourite daughter of the Governor of Munchkinland. When she arrives at Shiz University, she receives a parting gift from her father of jewelled shoes which she wears every day. Unlucky in love, Nessa becomes the cruel and reclusive Governor of Munchkinland in later life.





## Dr Dillamond

A goat. A respected historian at Shiz University and a passionate civil rights defender, Dr Dillamond falls before the repressive policies of the Wizard, who has convinced the people of Oz that allowing animals to talk and enjoy social equality is a national danger.



## Boq

A munchkin at Shiz Univeresity, he falls in love with Glinda at first sight. Desperate for her approval he agrees to take Nessarose to the Ozdust Ball, where she in turn falls in love with Boq. He is then forced to work for Nessarose when she becomes Governor of Munchkinland.



# Themes and discussion points

## The Wonderful Wizard of Oz

A useful starting point is to clarify pupil knowledge of the original story (either L. Frank Baum's book or the MGM film musical The Wizard of Oz) so that they can draw parallels and fully engage with the moral context of the **Wicked** story as it explores the differences between right and wrong and how there can be different sides to every story.

## Prejudice

The musical looks at preconceptions and how someone can be very different from the way they are perceived. We see this with Elphaba, whom we discover is not the Wicked Witch we think she is in the Wizard of Oz. We also see this in the treatment of the animals in the story.

- What is prejudice? How would it make you feel if someone was prejudiced against you?
- In groups, think about examples of prejudice or preconceptions. These might be from books or films, from the media or from the pupils' own experiences. Discuss these. How and why did people judge this person wrongly?

## Friendship

**Wicked** is about a strong friendship between Glinda and Elphaba.

- What makes a good friend? Discuss in groups what qualities make a good friend and share back your list of qualities with the class.

## Bullying

Elphaba is bullied when she first arrives at Shiz University, as people don't understand why she is green, and they don't like her because she is different. In groups discuss the following questions:

- Why do people become bullies?
- How does it feel to be bullied?
- What would you do if you knew someone was being bullied?

Share back your responses with the class.

## Ambition

Both our main characters, Elphaba and Glinda, have very strong ambitions.

- In groups, discuss what your ambitions are. What would you like to achieve when you are older?
- Now think about what might stop you from being able to achieve that ambition, and how you might overcome those obstacles. Glinda and Elphaba both find that they have to make sacrifices in order to realise their ambitions.

## Fake News and propaganda

Elphaba falls victim to fake news being spread about her once she stands up to the Wizard and flees Oz. Glinda attempts to defend her, but public opinion against Elphaba has already been established.

- How does fake news start and how can it spread so quickly?
- Can you control fake news?
- What is propaganda and what are some examples in recent history?

# Identity

Both Glinda and Elphaba's personal identities are very strong, and very different. They have come from different backgrounds and have very different views on life and other people around them.

- What makes us who we are? Is it physical characteristics, hobbies, etc?
- Do other people always see you as you see yourself?
- Have you tried to change any aspects of your identity? If so, what?

# Self-esteem

Elphaba is bullied and constantly made aware that she is different because of her skin-colour. Her self-esteem and confidence are very low but she doesn't always show this.

- How do people act when they have low-confidence? Are there any ways that this shows?
- How can you help someone who has low self-esteem feel better about themselves?
- Is there one thing they could do each day to make them feel more positive?