

The Transformation of Narrative Voice: Female Characterization in Adaptations of Wicked

Zhehao Hu¹, Xinyu Li^{2*}, Yuan Xu³

¹*School of Business Administration, Hunan University of Finance and Economics, Changsha, China*

²*School of Literature and Communication, Hubei Minzu University, Enshi, China*

³*School of Literature, Nanjing Normal University, Nanjing, China*

**Corresponding Author. Email: 202213237@hbmzu.edu.cn*

Abstract. Wicked has undergone a dual adaptation from novel to musical and then from musical to film, vividly demonstrating the influence of the creator's different narrative choices in different media on the shaping of character images and relationships. By studying the differences in narrative perspectives between Maguire's Wicked novel and Zhu Haowei's Wicked film in 2024, one can summarize the differences in the characters of the two female protagonists under different narrative perspectives, as well as the new understanding of female friendship in today's society. The film has adapted the zero-focus narrative of the original novel into an internal-focus narrative with Glinda as the narrator, giving Glinda's "blonde beauty" image a new interpretation space under the authority of the narrator, and also giving Elphaba's revolutionary image more symbolic meaning. Under the new character image, the female friendship between Elphaba and Glinda, which is an "embellishment" of Elphaba's life in the novel, becomes an indispensable soulmate in both of their lives, a hidden thread running through the entire film.

Keywords: Wicked, narrative voice, film adaptation

1. Introduction

Wicked is the first adult novel by children's literature author Gregory Maguire, which came out in 1995. As the subtitle promised, "The Life and Times of The Wicked Witch of the West," the novel is telling the story of the villain "The Wicked Witch of the West" from a classical fairy-tale The Wonderful Wizard of Oz, where Elphaba narrates her entire life journey of being misinterpreted despite all attempts and thus turning into the Wicked Witch of the West.

At home, most current studies of Wicked deal with a limited medium (the musical Wicked) in terms of analysis and understanding. Henan University Yuan Tingting's "On the Image Creation of the Main Characters in the Musical Wicked" and Shanghai Conservatory of Music Zhang Xingyi's "Analysis of the Character Creation of Elphaba, the Heroine in the Musical Wicked" are both discussing the character arcs and the function of music in image-building according to storylines, and no description on the role of narrative voice is mentioned [1,2]. Li Youyuan's article "The Heterotopic Wonders on the Theatrical Stage: A Review of the Image Creation in the Musical

Wicked" (or Luo Li's article "Wicked: A Broadway-style Stage Spectacle", which either supports or undermines the musical's allegorical narrative [3,4].

There are almost no academic reports on the film *Wicked*; the discussion is mostly about the expression art of musical film. In the article 'The music and dance in *Wicked*: A deep explanation of emotion' written by Zhao Yanlong, the movie *Wicked* (based on musical of the same name) is expressed deeply by its "music and dance language to present the inner world of character and emotion conversion by their own methods [5]. Zhu Chenfei's "Wicked: Cross- Border Integration and Artistic Innovation between the Film and the Musical" carries on a comparative study from aspects of visual performance, musical performance and performance art [6]. In the article, the narrative structure difference between the film and the musical was mentioned but it was not discussed in detail.

The novel was subsequently adapted for the stage as a musical in 2003, and this production was also adapted into a movie, which received a number of nomination awards. In general, this study on the narrative voice difference of *Wicked* in novel, musicals and film, in one way or another, has its innovative and experimental significance. During the adaptation process, there must be varying narratives, dialogues and actions because of the genre change, and the adaptation, in turn, leads to different characterization by character type due to narrative difference.

2. Theoretical foundation

This study is primarily grounded in Gérard Genette's narrative theory. As a pivotal French structuralist narratologist, Genette underscores the notion of "narrative voice" in his narratological framework, addressing the dimensions of narrative distance, perspective, and person. He condenses the interrelated concepts of perspective, view, and viewpoint in narration into the core term "focalization," while categorizing narrative voices into three distinct types: zero focalization, internal focalization, and external focalization. Specifically, zero focalization denotes omniscient narration without a fixed perspective, as defined by the assertion that "the narrator knows more than any character"; internal focalization entails the narrator recounting the story solely from the singular perspective of a specific character, i.e., "the narrator only states what a particular character knows"; and external focalization is distinguished by the trait that "the narrator knows less than the characters [7]." Notably, this conceptual framework is also applicable to visual narrative—since visual narratives are predicated on the viewer's observation, the presence of narrative voice therein acquires enhanced purposes and significance.

3. Glinda's image-building change - the narrator with authority

In the novel, Glinda is one of the many supporting roles. But she becomes the narrator of this story in the movie. The novelist emphasized her Naive narcissism, while Screenwriters and directors highlighted her Vanity and hypocrisy.

The different ways of beginning the movie and the novel reflect how the change of narrative perspective affects the difference of Glinda's image.

The novel begins in such a scene: Elphaba eavesdrops Dorothy and her friends talking about The Wicked Witch of the West-- Elphaba herself. Then it shifts to a zero-focalized, god's-eye perspective to narrate the witch's life in chronological order. However, the movie begins with the grand feast to celebrate the death of The Wicked Witch of the West, which was briefly mentioned at the end of the novel. Then, through the little girl's question to Glinda, the narrative shifts to Glinda's perspective. This part of the story is multifunctional. From this plot, audience can learn Glinda's character image

from her complex emotions. More importantly, this plot point marks the film's change from the original zero-focalization narrative of the novel to an internal focalization narrative where Glinda is the narrator. Glinda got the status and authority of a narrator from this change, which is the foundation for the transformation of her character in the film.

In the novel, Glinda's characterization relies on the perspective of the omniscient narrator and protagonist, Elphaba. The author describes Glinda's growth and development, indicates his examination and evaluation through Elphaba and gives the character a narrative arc. In such a narrative mode, Glinda is the object of analysis and depiction, whose character exists only in the appraisals of others. However, in the movie, as the narrator, Glinda is the evaluator and examiner of her own experiences. The naivety and innocence of the "past Glinda," when examined through self-reflection, endow the "present Glinda" with insight and maturity. The recognition of her past shortcomings naturally signifies the achievement of growth and development. In another word, the status as a narrator gives the story dual meaning--describe the character in the story directly and shape the narrator indirectly.

This change of narrative mode can also be defined as a change from Authorial Narrative Voice to Personal Narrative Voice which is put forward by Susan S. Lanser in her book *Fictions of Authority: Women Writers and Narrative Voice* [8]. The key difference is the narrator's location relative to the story. The Authorial voice speaks from a position of public authority about the world of the story, while the personal voice speaks from within that world, offering a character-bound account of it. The novel uses Authorial Narrative Voice. Glinda hides beneath the author's authority, while the authorial voice assumes responsibility and power of narration. This narrative mode was changed into a Personal voice in the musical *Wicked* by the book writer Winnie Holzman, and the film continued this narrative approach. In the Personal voice, the Female Narrator tells her own story. Glinda, the narrator's presence on stage, both bears the risk of readers' skepticism and gains the power of narration, which enables her self-reflection, self-examination, and self-transcendence within the narrative.

The scene at Shiz University's Opening Ceremony also demonstrates the different narrative perspectives employed in the film versus the novel, resulting in distinct character portrayals.

At the beginning of the second chapter, the narrative perspective turns to Glinda. Although it is still written in the third-person point of view, its meticulous psychological depiction and limited narration are essentially similar in expressive effect to an internal focalization on Glinda. However, there are still many differences between the story told by the omniscient narrator and by Glinda. The novel depicts Glinda's vanity and narcissism, and her lies and deception induced by psychology. To conceal her lack of wealth and social status, she claimed that "A traveler's paradise is himself, and the finest accessories he can acquire are the quaint habits and exotic atmospheres of distant places [9]." However, she could not say anything when she met the real exotic atmospheres-- Elphaba and her green skin. Her haughty demeanor and language, juxtaposed with the deep-seated inferiority complex beneath, are repeatedly highlighted in the narrator's descriptions. This is a flaw in Glinda's character that even she herself remains unaware of—one that only the omniscient narrator can reveal and describe through psychological portrayal.

The film also begins with this part of story from Glinda's perspective. But in the movie, Glinda was dazzling, reputable and had a prominent family-- just like her fantasy in the novel. Different from feeling self-conscious around wealthier classmates in the novel, Glinda was the center of attention with so many packages and companions in the film. Different from being speechless with shock after seeing Elphaba, she calmed down and showed her kindness to improve her standing in campus with a speech about her plan to help Elphaba.

It's evident that both the novel and the film highlight Glinda's trait of "vanity," but in the novel, this vanity is portrayed as a naive, girlish narcissism, while the film places greater emphasis on social maneuvering behind it. Notably, Glinda who has a perfect family and confident personality is just the Ideal Self in novel Glinda's imagination, and this image is shaped by the narrator Glinda herself. In another word, this is the self from her subjective recollection, which casts a shadow over the authenticity of this image. All in all, the novel uses a zero-focalization narrative, which allows the narrator to comprehensively reveal all aspects of Glinda's character flaws, with its god's-eye view. While the film's internal focalization narrative looking back with an equal stance, shaping the character's growth and transformation while exposing their weaknesses.

4. Elphaba's character transformation - the revolutionary challenging authority

In the novel, Elphaba is depicted as a calm and rational revolutionary who challenges authority with scientific thinking, her resistance brimming with political metaphors. In contrast, the film portrays her—through Glinda's memories—as a gifted yet reclusive magical prodigy, whose motive for rebellion leans more toward personal experiences. The novel constructs a tragic hero with profound ideas via an omniscient perspective, while the film, opening with Glinda's subjective narration to the public, simplifies her into a dramatic "eccentric genius."

The impact of narrative voice on character portrayal is exemplified in the scene where Elphaba meets the Wizard in *Wicked*.

In the novel, this meeting is situated within a grand political narrative framework. The zero-focalization (omniscient) perspective first creates a symbolic setting: on the empty throne, inlaid emeralds glimmer in candlelight... Above the throne, flickering light forms a skeleton. The Wizard never truly appears; instead, he is represented throughout by a skeleton puppet, foreshadowing the "power" as imperceptible and unattainable. In the film, however, the Wizard soon reveals himself from behind the mask, his incompetence and powerlessness satirizing the emptiness of authority. The most striking difference between the novel and the film lies in Elphaba's personal abilities: the novel presents her as an ordinary human, who fears the "disguised" might of the Wizard yet confronts him for fairness and justice; the film's Elphaba, endowed with extraordinary magical talent, is sought after and deceived by the Wizard, and rises up only after exposing his conspiracy. Both versions embody Elphaba's rebellious spirit, but with a key distinction: the novel positions her as a representative of "rebels," while the film casts her as a symbol of "rebellious spirit" itself. An individual "rebel" may be insignificant, yet the "rebellious spirit" condensed behind them is an unstoppable and formidable force.

Different narrative voices generate distinct cognitive possibilities. The authorial voice is suitable for illustrating structural oppression, whereas the personal voice excels at evoking emotional resonance [8]. Specifically, the complex political metaphors constructed by the novel's omniscient perspective are transformed into more nuanced emotional changes in the film under Glinda's internal focalization. The novel suppresses immense emotions beneath intense conflicts through lengthy dialogues, creating an undercurrent of tension; the film, by contrast, emphasizes Elphaba's facial expressions amid fierce conflicts. Nevertheless, a comparison of Elphaba's portrayals in the two mediums reveals that these two tendencies are assigned to contrasting character images: the "individual" rebel is placed in an almost cold, macro revolutionary narrative with zero-degree narration, while the symbol of "revolutionary spirit" is endowed with abundant and delicate emotional fluctuations.

In the "young lion" scene of *Wicked*, Elphaba's image is uniquely presented through the film's visual language and the novel's textual art. These two mediums exhibit distinct artistic charms in

character portrayal while collectively constructing a three-dimensional and vivid image of a rebel.

The film adopts Glinda's memory perspective and a personal narrative approach, using intuitive visual language to present a vivid Elphaba to the audience. When the focus shifts to her sudden standing up to question the professor, viewers can directly perceive her inner anger and resolve. Close-up shots of her trembling hands and furrowed brows, paired with lines like "Someone has to do something," endow her rebellious spirit with a strong visual impact. Through close-ups of the trembling young lion cub and Elphaba's expressions, the film evokes intense emotional resonance in the audience and shapes Elphaba's dissatisfaction with animals being caged and silenced forever. Such application of audio-visual language renders Elphaba's resistance visually striking.

The novel employs an omniscient perspective and the objective narration of an authorial voice, shaping Elphaba's image through multiple techniques and revealing her richer inner world via detailed textual descriptions. The repeated detail that "her voice was trembling" not only conveys anger but also implies fear, making her character more three-dimensional [9]. Elphaba's repeated question "Where is its mother?" demonstrates not only her persistence but also her rigorous logical thinking process [9]. Additionally, the novel's descriptions of her actions—"sitting awkwardly" yet unable to refrain from speaking again—and the side portrayal of Boq noticing that "she was so angry her face was turning white" collectively construct a contradictory yet authentic image [9]. The unique advantage of textual psychological descriptions allows readers to deeply understand Elphaba's complete mental journey from emotional impulse to rational thinking.

From a feminist narrative perspective, the choice of narrative voice is often intertwined with gender politics. Feminist narratology not only focuses on the relationship between the focalizer's gaze and the characters' gazes in the story but also examines the gender politics embodied in the narrative perspective [10]. In the film, Elphaba is shunned due to her green skin, yet she is portrayed as a determined figure who is unyielding to others' judgments, yet desires recognition. In the film scene, upon witnessing the unfair treatment of animals, Elphaba speaks up and argues that resistance is necessary—only to be met with indifference from her classmates. Overwhelmed by helplessness, she uses her abilities to put everyone to sleep and save the young lion, further embodying her anger and helplessness at having no one to help or speak up for her. In the novel, however, Elphaba is mainly shaped as a rebel who motivates others to take action: she stirs up others' emotions by questioning the professor's behavior and rescues the young lion with the collective effort of the group.

Despite their differing expressive approaches, both mediums successfully shape Elphaba's core identity as a rebel. The film makes her resistance direct and powerful through audio-visual impact, while the novel deepens readers' reflection through the charm of text. Narrative voice interweaves emotional memory with historical time, allowing people and events belonging to the "past" to resonate with the "present" in the moment of storytelling [11]. When film audiences are stirred by Elphaba's courage to stand up in the scene, novel readers are savoring every subtle moment of her ideological transformation between the lines.

5. Elphaba and Glinda character relationship shaping transformation - from adversaries to intimates

The relationship between Elphaba and Glinda is only a small part of the original novel's plot, while in the movie, more attention is paid to describing their friendship. In the original novel Glinda, the self-obsessed, and Elphaba, the aloof, found it difficult to form any sort of deep conflict or close connection. In the movie, their friendship actually propels Glinda to tell the tale. Mutual love and

envying each other make them get to know each other more [12]. They became friends after that. They know each other more, and stand by each other more firmly.

In the novel, their separation following their departure from the Emerald City Palace is framed through an omniscient narrator as a "necessity of fate." Through dialogue, the author depicts Elphaba deciding to drop out of school to dedicate herself to the revolution, while Glinda returns to the university and becomes the "Good Witch". Their choices are explained by their diverging life paths, and the narrative lacks almost any emotional expression—yet this absence lends the conclusion an even more powerful emotional tension. The omniscient perspective reinforces a sense of inevitability here: their friendship ultimately gives way to their respective missions, reduced to a footnote in Elphaba's tragic life, as written at the end of the novel: "They never saw each other again, like two straight lines that intersect and never meet [9]."

The division that Glinda now experiences as personal within the film carries some heavy emotional weight. In her narrative, Glinda remembers many details to play upon: the look passed between the crossroads as they fled, Glinda's decision to fling her cloak to the floor in front of her and say "I hope you may finally find your joy, and not regret what you've done," as she uses a different script from the novel. In contrast, Genette claims that the limitations of internal focalization can intensify emotional tones: 'When Glinda looks at us during her return-to-narrative, the camera continuously zooms in on her teary eyes: we witness both her reluctance to go and her appreciation of the witch's decision' [7]. For them to remain more than physically separate, this form of narration makes it possible for their love for each other to become the Intimate Friendship type of love: 'When our roads diverge / I will try to remember / Just the way you made me smile'. This corresponds to Lanser's theory: a solo narration enables female protagonists to justify each other's decisions based on collective experience [8]. So their companionship actually grows via regard for each other's dignity, rather than being further faded by estrangement—in the book two casual tourists on the same journey, but the intimate friend in the film who know each other the profoundest.

The turning point in Elphaba and Glinda's friendship in the novel takes place in the exact episode "the hat offer" (chapter 14). After a storm strikes and a fierce wind tears the dorm room window from its hinges, two girls make an unexpected encounter after a hat falls: "At this time in the dorm, on this first morning of spring, it is the little round pink hat that attracts her eye. Glinda was looking at her friend and that way it occurred. She pushes Elphaba up, and says with a wobbly but cozy hand: 'Try it on, come on try it on' [9]. Although initially made only for fun, Glinda expects it to be a joke to bring her back into the fray of a social ranking among her classmates. But the novel's telling again shifts the balance: when Elphaba actually slips on the cap, the green complements an odd but compelling relationship between the orange pendant and the pointed yellow veil, giving her an additional peculiar charm. Glinda then changes from mockery to surprise and whispers, "You're beautiful"—a compliment couched in pleasure and perhaps just the vaguest of allusions [9]. Two young women stand in front of the window of the dormitory; looking into the reflection of the window, she stares into the raindrop and the leaves of the maple tree, and the scenery becomes more beautiful. In this, the description of the novel maintains a cool ironic tone: The mood Glinda is restless, shrewd, with the beginning of being condescending to Elphaba. This moment appears to be a warm moment, but in fact, there is an air of ambiguity and irony; it seems more like a rift between them in their relationships than a truly deep emotional synthesis. Very different, in contrast, is how the movie re-contextualizes and lifts off this section by retaining the most important picture, "the hat offer" but giving it a completely different emotional charge [13].

In the film, Glinda presents Elphaba with the hat not for comic relief but for charity. Glinda's gift to Elphaba is metonymical in the triad lighting-shadow-music and exceeds the act of dressing up.

Specifically, this shot (in which Glinda tenderly lowers the hat on Elphaba's head—the later moment when she hangs her cloak on Elphaba's head—) becomes a reference point for the transition from enemy to lover for their relationship. It is in this shot that narration is no longer inflected with the irony and ambivalence of the Novel; it is expressive and sincere, affirmative, and approving. From Glinda's side, the audience would easily observe that she completely lets go of her social rivalry, accepts Elphaba's special charm for the first time, and that very moment establishes her own "Emotional Bond" with Elphaba in the most faithful form. On comparing with the novel, the film's version is more on the sincerity and holiness of the friendship [13].

The novel, of course, contains nothing but fake feelings. Yet, while the novel is marked by indeterminacy and detachment, the movie (purposefully or not) amplifies, as well as deepens, that moment of authenticity. In other words, when wearing the hat is no longer the stuff of ridicule, the hat becomes symbolic of their growing friendship [13]. Thus, the difference in "the hat offer" between the novel and the movie precisely reflects the differences between the two narrative logics: the novel employs irony and ambiguity to create a complex psychological game, while the movie reinforces the sincerity of female friendship through tenderness and kindness. In the movie, Glinda's gaze and memories expand this interaction to express her respect and nostalgia for Elphaba, a key moment for the subsequent development of their friendship. Conversely, viewers and readers can clearly perceive that the movie has transformed the novel's fleeting ironic moment into an intense emotional turning point. In this way, the act of "giving the hat" becomes an important test of the development of friendship toward intimacy.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, adapting *Wicked* from novel to film, has seen the narrative transform from Zero-focused narrative to an Internal-focused narrative. Glinda becomes narrator and, using this narrative point of view, furnishes herself with self-consciousness, in turn undergoing considerable character development by becoming Subjectivity-in-her-own-right rather than always just an object defined primarily by Elphaba in the source novel. On Glinda's side, Elphaba's character is presented in a more flesh-and-bone way, too, and the shifts in her emotional and psychological structure are made perceivable in greater symbolic scenes. Elphaba assumes a more defined form, not just as a symbol of rebellion but also as a stronger symbol for Glinda. The new characterizations involve inevitable changes in the two relationship patterns, and "Female friendship" becomes a necessity in narrating women's lives. No more is Glinda's friendship a side note in Elphaba's life but "they have become confidantes who know each others' true essence indeed" (Elphaba and Glinda). Both transformations are to some extent representative of the updated attitudes of today's screenwriters towards female characters and Female friendships, but in a more substantially reflected dimension of today's upgraded creative concept—it even highlights the right of Female self-narration, makes female relationships the source of narration, and observes narrative diversity. Through this, they have been granted the opportunity to go through a transformation again and take a step forward at the beginning of the 21st century, of classic characters born at the end of the last century, built on a timeless fairy tale.

Authors contribution

All the authors contributed equally and their names were listed in alphabetical order.

References

- [1] Yuan, T.T. (2018) On the Image Creation of the Main Characters in the Musical Wicked. Henan University.
- [2] Zhang, X.Y.(2021) Analysis of the Character Creation of Elphaba, the Heroine in the Musical Wicked. Shanghai Conservatory of Music.
- [3] Li, Y.Y. (2023) The Heterotopic Wonders on the Theatrical Stage: A Review of the Image Creation in the Musical Wicked. China Theatre, (1), 87-88.
- [4] Luo, L. (2017) Wicked: A Broadway-style Stage Spectacle. Contemporary Theatre, (6), 58-59.
- [5] Zhao, Y.L. (2025) The music and dance in Wicked: A deep explanation of emotion. Film Literature, (8), 157-161.
- [6] Zhu, C.F. (2025) Wicked:Cross- Border Integration and Artistic Innovation between the Film and the Musical. Film Literature, (8), 71-75.
- [7] Genette, Gerard. (1990) New Narrative Discourse. Translated by Wang Wenrong. China Social Sciences Press.
- [8] Lanser, S.S. (2002) Fictions of Authority: Women Writers and Narrative Voice. Translated by Huang Bikang. Peking University Press.
- [9] Maguire, G. (2025) Wicked: The Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West. Translated by Wan Jie. China Friendship Publishing Corporation.
- [10] Wang, X. (2015) A Feminist Narratological Analysis of "The Ark". Peony, (18), 21-22.
- [11] Wang, J. (2025) "Voice" Narrative and Historical Expression: A Case Study of Mo Yan's Novels. Journal of Tianjin University (Social Sciences), 27(2), 174-181.
- [12] Li, Z. (2013) A Brief Analysis of "Female Rivalry" in Literary Works. Youth Years, (9), 58-59.
- [13] Zhu, P.Y. (2014) A Comparative Study of Film Language and Literary Language. Youth Literati, (8), 6-7.