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Light and Dark: The Duality of Good and Evil

Kevin Prchal
College of DuPage

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Stories of good versus evil have been written and told for as long as history can remember. David and Goliath, Luke Skywalker and Darth Vader, and, in more recent times, Elphaba and Glinda from the popular novel Wicked. In this novel, author Gregory Maguire takes a revised, imaginative look at the land and characters of Oz from L. Frank Baum’s 1900 classic novel, The Wonderful Wizard of Oz. The main character, Elphaba, whom later receives the unfavorable title of the Wicked Witch of the West, struggles to showcase the goodness in her heart when everyone perceives her to be evil. After many years of bad fortune, she eventually gives in to her reputation as a wicked witch, and shudders away from the world she once tried to change for the better. Stories like this are important because they challenge its readers to redefine what they perceive as evil. For over 100 years, the Wicked Witch of the West has been known as a cruel and vicious character, but this novel, through an elaborate detail of her life, somehow leaves its readers feeling sorry for her. To many people, there are two ways to live in this world; a life of purity and commitment to God, or a life of sin and disobedience to God. But before one points fingers at the wicked, they must first look at themselves. Is humanity really above evil? After all, those who commit acts of evil are not, in the literal sense of the word, monsters. They are not genetically modified animals trained to kill, they are human beings sharing the same fundamental experience as everyone else. Just like light and dark exists in every room, good and evil exists in all human beings.

In the novel Wicked, author Gregory McGuire shows his readers that someone viewed as evil is not in fact a monster, but may in fact be a well-intended, and misunderstood individual. Though no act of violence can be justified, McGuire’s novel offers a glimpse of humanity behind the evil that the world had previously come to accept in the classic character, the Wicked Witch of the West. This challenges its readers to find the humanity, not just in a fictional character, but in real life criminals as well. Daniel Olaska, a seemingly normal man from Naperville, Illinois, is one of those criminals. He woke up every day in the comfort of a good home, a loving family, and a secure job as an aviation safety inspector. The people in his hometown knew him as a kind and well-mannered young man with a high interest in his career and his church community. But on the night of February 4th, 2012, Olaska’s whole life took a dark turn for the worse. Everything his community knew about him, and everything he had worked for, was stripped away in an act of unimaginable violence. What started as a verbal confrontation between Olaska and 23-year-old Willie Hayes ended in the stabbing and death of Hayes’ friend, Shaun Wild (Erbentraut). Not only did this event send chills down the spine of his community, but it challenged all those who knew Olaska to identify, and even sympathize with whatever it was inside him that made him snap. FOX News journalist, Lauren Green has been working in the news for 16 years, and says she has seen one recurring theme: individuals that appear normal, leading seemingly good lives, so often are the ones committing horrible crimes (Green). What led Daniel Olaska, a man with no criminal record, to do something so horrifying as taking the life of another man? Was it stress? Depression? Perhaps the result of a long history of mental illness in his family? Or was it the devil himself, leading Daniel away from a life of kindness and humility to God?

No story of good versus evil can surpass what some believe to be the origins of this ongoing theme in our lives; the story of God and Lucifer. Lucifer was a perfect angel, created by the vision of God. His appearance was radiant and beautiful, and he was crowned the Chief Covering angel in the
kingdom of Heaven. As the Chief Covering angel, Lucifer spent much of his time with God the father and Jesus Christ. However, after some time, Lucifer started to become jealous of God’s relationship with Jesus, and he set out to prove that he was above Jesus. In this campaign, he rallied the support of nearly one third of the angels in heaven, all of whom started to worship Lucifer instead of Jesus. God urged Lucifer and his army to end this behavior, but it only got worse and God was forced to throw Lucifer out of heaven, along with his misguided followers. Some believe that ever since Lucifer was thrown from the gates of heaven, he has been taking shape in many different ways on earth, corrupting the image of life that God intended for us.

Under these theological views, there have been many different examples of Lucifer’s corruption on earth; Hitler and the holocaust, Osama bin-Laden and the attacks on September 11th, and Joseph Kony and his army of child-rebel soldiers who continue to terrorize the people of central Africa. One major spiritually-centered example would be the Salem Witch Trials of 1692. The Salem witch trials were a series of hearings and prosecutions of people accused of witchcraft in colonial Massachusetts, between February 1692 and May 1693. According to Frances Hill, author of the book The Salem Witch Trials Reader, the accused were said to be under a “satanic influence,” and the supernatural powers that they possessed had been corrupting the purity of their community. One of the accused, a child named Dorcas Good, was only four years old. She was imprisoned and spent eight months without any light, unable to run or walk and with nothing to play with but the rags she was wearing. After proving her innocence, she was released under the care of her father, William Good, who forever struggled to mend and financially support the psychological damages this imprisonment had on his daughter. Another one of the accused, Bridget Bishop, was first confronted for wearing the color red. Her attraction to this color, the town people said, was a sure sign of the devil living inside her and she was later tried, accused, and hung to death for practicing witchcraft. She was the first of 20 women executed on these charges. Though the Salem Witch Trials provide tangible examples of evil behavior in a theological sense, acknowledging the spiritual presence of evil still does not provide a scientific explanation for it.

Because evil can only be identified as a theological term, and not a scientific term, it cannot be accepted as a scientific explanation for human cruelty. According to Simon Baron-Cohen, an award-winning psychologist, and author of the book The Science of Evil: On Empathy and the Origins of Cruelty, evil can be explained as essentially a lack of empathy. Humans all have what Cohen refers to as an “empathy circuit” in their brains, and in order to have the capacity to commit harm to another human being, that circuit must be malfunctioned. To live without empathy means one has no awareness of how they come across to others, how to interact with others, or how to anticipate the feelings and reactions of others. They are oblivious to other people’s feelings and thoughts, but also oblivious to the idea that there might even be other points of view. The consequence is that one believes 100 percent in the rightness of their own ideas and beliefs, and judges anyone who does agree with their beliefs as wrong or stupid.

One of Baron-Cohen’s patients, Paul, has been diagnosed a psychopath (Type P Personality Disorder) who withholds zero degrees of empathy towards human life. Paul has recently been detained in a secure prison after having been found guilty in the murder of a man he says gave him a “bad look” from across a bar. When Baron-Cohen asked Paul if he believed that he did anything wrong, he replied, “People have treated me like shit all my life. I’m not taking it from no one no more. If someone shows me disrespect, they deserve what they get” (Baron-Cohen 66). He showed no signs of anxiety or guilt, and clearly, someone who lacks guilt will be capable of doing bad things without worrying about how they themselves or someone else might feel. There are a number of different ways, aside from just being labeled “evil”, that someone could come to withhold zero empathy towards others, but in Paul’s case it was years of parental neglect, abuse and distrust in the people in his life. Diseases such as narcissism, autism, and Asperger Syndrome may also void any feelings of empathy as well, but these diseases do not always lend themselves to violent behavior.
Whatever the reason, history has shown that humans have the full capacity to hurt one another. But one must not forget that they have the full capacity to love one another as well.

Amidst the violence on the streets, the decay of our environment, and the greed-driven stock market, it can be easy to see the bad in this world. But oozing out of the seams of every one thing wrong comes a world of love and empathy. It can be found anywhere one looks, if they have the heart to see it. In the smiles of strangers, in the embrace of friends and family, in the care and protection of one’s community, and in the hearts of the soldiers who fight to defend the freedom of their country. It can be found everywhere. Even in a war, soldiers, who are essentially trained to kill, avoid the actual act of killing. They find no glory or pleasure in the act of killing, and those who are forced to, often times report vomiting at the sight of a dead enemy, and carry on a life of haunting memories for years after. According to the book, The Age of Empathy by Frances De Waal, during the Vietnam War, U.S. soldiers fired more than fifty thousand bullets for every one enemy soldier killed (De Waal 218). Most bullets were fired into the air. Why would this be, if not for empathy with their fellow human beings? Union General William Sherman of the American Civil War wrote: “I am sick and tired of war. Its glory is all moonshine. It is only those who have neither fired a shot nor heard the shrieks and groans of the wounded who cry aloud for blood, for vengeance, for desolation. War is hell.” (De Waal 220). War appears to be more of a system designed around hierarchy and following orders than of aggression and mercilessness.

Not only are humans inherently designed to care for one another, but animals have instinctive empathetic behaviors as well. De Waal did a number of different studies to measure the empathy and body language in animals and found that they are not so far off from human behaviors. (De Waal 129). In one case, there was a wounded Elephant named Eleanor who was found dragging her swollen trunk along the ground. After a few moments, she fell heavily to the ground causing a sorrowful uproar from her fellow elephant friends. One of them, an elephant named Grace, rapidly approached with her tail raised and helped Eleanor back on her feet, but it wasn’t long before she starting shaking and toppled over again. After much effort from both humans and elephants, Eleanor eventually died and Grace began weeping at the top of her voice causing the rest of the herd to respond with similar sounds. (De Waal 132). Recent events such as the attacks on September 11th, and Hurricane Katrina have exposed humanity’s deep empathy for one another. When the World Trade Center towers fell down, it was the most united this country has ever been, and that’s because no one was going through it alone. It was a sorrow shared among millions of people. And when the people of New Orleans were neglected and virtually left-for-dead by their government, their fellow citizens of the world came together to help aid and rescue them in their time of need. This world may be lush with everyday stories of good and evil, however, there is one undeniable fact that cannot be ignored: the citizens of this world have many different definitions of good and evil.

One of the main causes of evil has been human attempts to eradicate evil. When the World Trade Center towers fell on September 11th, most of the world watched in sadness and in pain, but there was a small demographic that simultaneously celebrated the attacks as well. To Osama Bin Laden and his army of al-Qaeda soldiers, the Americans people were the evil ones. George Bush and Osama bin-Laden had opposite views of the world; Bush saw al-Qaeda as an evil threat to the Western world, whereas Bin Laden saw the Western world as a threat to the Islamic way of life. There exists no common ground; one must simply choose sides between the two. In a fascinating article titled The New Holy War vs. Good and Evil written by David. R. Loy for Tikkun magazine, he makes the point that in order for one side to feel secure in their goodness, they must first attack and destroy the evil outside of them. “The interdependence of good and evil implies that we can’t know what is good until we know what is evil, and we don’t feel we are good unless we are fighting against that evil,” Loy explains. “We love this struggle between good (us) and evil (them),” he continues, “because there is something quite satisfying about it.” (Loy 16-18). Stories of good prevailing over are exciting, and one might even find themselves cheering for the good guys to kill

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the bad guys. But it’s these kinds of stories that can have a profound influence on one’s values. What they are telling the world is that it’s okay to hurt someone as long as one has first demonized them and found a way to fit him or her into their good-versus-evil script. School bullies, for example, begin by looking for some minor offense like a perceived insult, or a bad look, and then use that to justify their violence. And on a bigger scale, we see this on the headlines of newspapers during a time of war. The media must first find a way to demonize the enemy in order for one to feel justified in their actions against them. The fundamental issue, however, should not be good fighting against evil, but instead how the world can learn to live amongst one another despite any differences in morality.

In 2001, parents of the victims of Gary Ridgway, “The Green River Killer,” took to the stand in court to express their pain and hatred toward Ridgway. However, one victim’s father expressed forgiveness. “Mr. Ridgway,” he started, “There are people here that hate you. I’m not one of them. You’ve made it difficult to live up to what I believe God says to do, and that’s to forgive. You are forgiven” (Lust4mord). This sent Ridgway to tears, hurting him more than hateful words could have ever done. With a single spark of kindness, a mass-serial killer had finally shown remorse. A light shines within every human being. How bright that light shines, however, can only be determined by the love one gives, and the love one receives. Where was this light when Dan Olaska needed it? Where was it when the accused witches of Salem were strung up by their necks, or when Lucifer was tossed out of the gates of Heaven? Where was this light when Elphaba rose, and fell before the injustice bestowed upon the people of Oz? By labeling someone evil, one is taking sides against them, cutting off any possibility of making a connection. Life should be a shared experience. One in which not only the poor, but the wealthy receive our light. Where the victim and the criminal, the orphan and the son, and the holy and the wicked receive our light. For when that light dies, the distinction between right and wrong becomes distorted, and the capability of committing an act of evil becomes all the more likely.

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Works Cited


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