

ANALYSIS

The Wonderful Wizard of Oz (1900)



Lyman Frank Baum

(1856-1919)

As T. S. Eliot avers in “The Waste Land,” the spiritual paralysis induced by the “Unreal City” of dissociated vertical consciousness may be overcome, the wasteland of the soul restored to life and holistic consciousness attained through a quest in the Wilderness. Such inner revolution is exemplified in a simplistic manner in the movement from Garden to City to Wilderness in *The Wizard of Oz*. The heart and the head are personified as the scarecrow and the tin man, one a pastoral fellow of the heartland/Garden who wants a brain or head, the other a mechanical man of the City who cuts down trees and needs to have a heart. The taming of the Wilderness is represented by a cowardly lion. Accompanied by these three personifications of her psyche, Dorothy skips along the yellow brick road to the Emerald City.

In *Oz* the images of Garden/City/Wilderness reflect the cultural mythology of western tradition: the yellow brick road of progress and success leads to the City, idealized as a secular equivalent of Christianity’s Celestial City, with its towers echoing cathedrals and castles of the Middle Ages. Wilderness is perceived from the traditional perspective of Puritans and pioneers, as the dark and dangerous abode of evil to be overcome. Yet Dorothy’s dream vision is also revolutionary in exposing the limited authority of dominant rational consciousness, the fraudulent wizard whose big head proves to be inflated out of all proportion, and in depicting her City as green, suggesting a synthesis of civilization with Nature, centered in a pastoral meadow in the Wilderness of the world.

She learns to rely on herself more completely and moves beyond the vertical City. To get where she wants to go, she must become whole, as must the scarecrow after he is fragmented and scattered all around by the forces of the evil witch. As it turns out, Dorothy has all the head, the heart and the animal courage she needs to overcome evil in the dark depths of the Wilderness, liberating the forces there and turning them to good.

The Wizard of Oz, a fantasy written for the entertainment of children, is also an archetypal allegory that appeals to adults, expressing both the individuation process defined by Carl Jung and the monomyth of the

hero defined by Joseph Campbell. An argument has been made that *Oz* also contains a political allegory, with transitory historical meanings secondary to the universality of the literary allegory.

Michael Hollister (2012)

from "The Wizard of Oz: Parable on Populism" (1968)

The American Culture (Houghton 1968), ed. Hennig Cohen

Henry M. Littlefield

"Ever since its publication in 1900 Lyman Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* has been immensely popular, providing the basis for a profitable musical comedy, three movies and a number of plays. It is an indigenous creation, curiously warm and touching, although no one really knows why.... The second book in the series, *The Marvelous Land of Oz*, is a blatant satire on feminism and the suffragette movement. In it Baum attempted to duplicate the format used so successfully in *The Wizard*, yet no one has noted a similar play on contemporary movements...

Baum's immortal American fantasy encompasses more than heretofore believed. For Baum created a children's story with a symbolic allegory implicit within its story line and characterizations. The allegory always remains in a minor key, subordinated to the major theme and readily abandoned whenever it threatens to distort the appeal of the fantasy.... Baum certainly saw the results of the frightful depression which had closed down upon the nation in 1893.... He took part in the pivotal election of 1896, marching in 'torch-light parades for William Jennings Bryan. [He]...consistently voted as a democrat...and his sympathies seem always to have been on the side of the laboring classes'... Bryan's platform rested mainly on the issue of adding silver to the nation's gold standard.... Baum's allegiance to the cause of Democratic Populism must be balanced against the fact that he was not a political activist....

The Tin Woodman's situation has an obvious parallel in the condition of many Eastern workers after the depression of 1893.... Eastern witchcraft dehumanized a simple laborer so that the faster and better he worked the more quickly he became a kind of machine. Here is a Populist view of evil Eastern influences on honest labor... Dorothy is Baum's Miss Everyman.... Dorothy sets out on the Yellow Brick Road wearing the Witch of the East's magic Silver Shoes [changed to red slippers in the movie]. Silver shoes walking on a golden road; henceforth Dorothy becomes the innocent agent of Baum's ironic view of the Silver issue.... Not understanding the magic of the Silver Shoes, Dorothy walks the mundane--and dangerous--Yellow Brick Road....

The scarecrow [Kansas farmers] soon emerges as innately a very shrewd and very capable individual... The Lion represents Bryan himself... The King of Beasts is not after all very cowardly, and Bryan, although a pacifist and an anti-imperialist in a time of national expansion, is not either.... All together now the small party moves toward the Emerald City. Coxey's Army of tramps and indigents, marching to ask President Cleveland for work in 1894, appears no more naively innocent than this group of four characters going to see a humbug Wizard, to request favors that only the little girl among them deserves....

The Emerald City represents the national Capitol. The Wizard, a little bumbling old man, hiding behind a facade of paper mâché and noise, might be any President from Grant to McKinley. He comes straight from the fairgrounds in Omaha, Nebraska [a center of Populist agitation], and he symbolizes the American criterion for leadership--he is able to be everything to everybody. As each of our heroes enters the throne room to ask a favor the Wizard assumes different shapes, representing different views toward national leadership. To Dorothy, he appears as an enormous head, 'bigger than the head of the biggest giant.' An apt image for a naive and innocent little citizen. To the Scarecrow he appears to be a lovely, gossamer fairy, a most appropriate form for an idealistic Kansas farmer. The Woodman sees a horrible beast, as would any exploited Eastern laborer after the trouble of the 1890s. But the Cowardly Lion, like W.J. Bryan, sees a 'Ball of Fire, so fierce and glowing he could scarcely bear to gaze upon it'....

The Wizard has asked them all to kill the Witch of the West. The golden road does not go in that direction and so they must follow the sun, as have many pioneers in the past. The land they now pass through is 'rougher and hillier, for there were no farms nor houses in the country of the West and the ground was untilled.' The Witch of the West uses natural forces to achieve her ends; she is Baum's version of sentient and malign nature.... Baum makes these Winged Monkeys into an Oz substitute for the plains Indians. Their leader says, 'Once...we were a free people, living happily in the great forest...'

The Witch [of the West]...through natural malevolence, manipulates the people and holds them prisoner by cynically taking advantage of their innate innocence.... If the Witch of the West is a diabolical force of Darwinian or Spencerian nature, then another contravening force may be counted upon to dispose of her. Dorothy destroys the evil Witch by angrily dousing her with a bucket of water.... Plain water brings an end to malign nature in the West.... Led by naive innocence and protected by good will, the farmer, the laborer and the politician approach the mystic holder of national power to ask for personal fulfillment. Their desires, as well as the Wizard's cleverness in answering them, are all self-delusion. Each of these characters carries within him the solution to his own problem, were he only to view himself objectively. The fearsome Wizard turns out to be nothing more than a common man, capable of shrewd but mundane answers to these self-induced needs. Like any good politician he gives the people what they want.

Thus the Wizard cannot help Dorothy, for of all the characters only she has a wish that is selfless, and only she has a direct connection to honest, hopeless human beings. Dorothy supplies real fulfillment when she returns to her aunt and uncle, using the Silver Shoes, and cures some of their misery and heartache. In this way Baum tells us that the Silver crusade at least brought back Dorothy's lovely spirit to the disconsolate plains farmer. Noteworthy too is Baum's prophetic placement of leadership in Oz after Dorothy's departure. The Scarecrow reigns over the Emerald City, the Tin Woodman rules in the West and the Lion protects smaller beasts in 'a grand old forest.' Thereby farm interests achieve national importance, industrialism moves West and Bryan commands only a forest full of lesser politicians....

Baum declares, 'The story of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* was written solely to pleasure children of today'.... *The Wizard* has become a genuine piece of American folklore because, knowing his audience, Baum never allowed the consistency of the allegory to take precedence over the theme of youthful entertainment.'