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Back to index

The Fork in the Yellow Brick Road

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"Persons attempting to find a motive in this narrative will be prosecuted; persons attempting to find a moral in it will be banished; persons attempting to find a plot in it will be shot. --By Order of the Author." So wrote Mark Twain in the prefatory remarks to The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. Twain's warning has gone largely unheeded--as has a similar note in the Introduction to The Wonderful Wizard of Oz, where L. Frank Baum warned that his book "was written solely to please children of today." Scholars, refusing to take Baum at his word, have looked for all sorts of hidden meanings in The Wonderful Wizard of Oz, examining it from feminist, Marxist, sociopolitical, psychoanalytical, mythical, philosophical, and spiritual perspectives.

The most interesting of these interpretations are those that put The Wonderful Wizard of Oz into its historical context, showing how it reflects the issues and concerns of its day--the United States at the end of the nineteenth century. Baum's classic was first published in 1900, a time when the United States was in a tremendous state of flux, its rural, agrarian society steadily giving way to cities and factories. Some Americans championed the new urban/industrial order, while others mourned the loss of a more traditional life and the values and virtues that had accompanied it. Where did Baum fit into this debate? For scholars, the Yellow Brick Road forks at this point; some see The Wonderful Wizard of Oz as supporting the old against the new, while others see just the opposite.

For most Americans, "The Wizard of Oz" is the 1939 MGM movie, not Baum's book. Even those of us who prefer the literary original must admit the strong impact of the movie. But we also know that the two versions of the story were quite different. Take the very beginning of the movie: a happy rural scene, Aunt Em and Uncle Henry in their comfortable home, hired help to do the chores, and so on. Compare that nice pastoral image with the way Frank Baum opened the story:

> Dorothy lived in the midst of the great Kansas prairies, with Uncle Henry, who was a farmer, and Aunt Em, who was the farmer's wife. Their house was small, for the lumber to build it had to be carried by wagon many miles. There were four walls, a floor and a roof, which made one room; and this room contained a rusty looking cooking stove, a cupboard for the dishes, a table, three or four chairs, and the beds. Uncle Henry and Aunt Em had a big bed in one corner, and Dorothy a little bed in another corner....
> When Dorothy stood in the doorway and looked around, she could see nothing but the great gray prairie on every side. Not a tree nor a house broke the broad sweep of flat country that reached the edge of the sky in all directions. The sun had baked the plowed land into a gray mass, with little cracks running through it. Even the grass was not green, for the sun had burned the tops of the long blades until they were the same gray color to be seen elsewhere. Once the house had been painted but the sun blistered the

> paint and the rains washed it away, and now the house was as dull and gray as everything else.
> When Aunt Em came there to live she was a young, pretty wife. The sun and wind had changed her, too. They had taken the sparkle from here eyes and left them a sober gray; they had also taken the red from her cheeks and lips, and they were gray also. She was thin and gaunt, and never smiled now.
> When Dorothy, who was an orphan, first came to her, Aunt Em had been so startled by the child's laughter that she would scream and press her hand upon her heart whenever Dorothy's merry voice reached her ears; and she still looked at the little girl with wonder that she could find anything to laugh at.
> Uncle Henry never laughed. He worked hard from morning till night and did not know what joy was. He was gray also, from his long beard to his rough boots, and he looked stern and solemn, and rarely spoke.

This is very different from the movie. After this brief opening passage, we know something about life on the Kansas prairie, something of what can happen to the human spirit in the midst of that gray existence. The passage is also some of the book's strongest writing. We get the idea that Baum knew Kansas and what life on the Plains could do to people.

Baum did know. In 1888, when his family's business (Baum's Castorine, an axle grease) fell apart, Baum took his growing family to Aberdeen, a pioneer town in the Dakota Territory (South Dakota did not enter the Union until 1889). The passage above is reminiscent of the writings of others who lived on the prairie in the late nineteenth century. Luna Kellie, a young woman who with her family--husband, daughter, and infant son--went to Nebraska where she wrote of drought, locusts, the death of her baby boy, and in general the same sense of "grayness" that Baum described so well. "The sun was very hot and bright. The prairie had all been burnt and grass just starting [and] not one spear seemed to dare to grow an inch higher than another. Not even a shrub or even a gooseberry bush was to be seen all the way and not many houses and most of them sod. The first one I saw I said 'But it is most black.' Pa said 'What color did you think a sod house would be?'"

Kellie and her husband joined the Nebraska Farmers' Alliance, a forerunner of the Populist party, as did thousands of other Midwesterners in the depression decade of the 1890s. (In fact Kellie was an official in the state organization.) Some people think The Wonderful Wizard of Oz reflects Baum's empathy for the prairie farmers, even seeing in his story an allegory of the Populist movement. One of the pioneers in this interpretation was Henry Littlefield. In 1964, Littlefield, a high school history teacher in New York, was trying to figure out a way to get his summer school students to understand the political and economic issues of late nineteenth-century America. His moment of epiphany came one night as he was reading the opening chapters of The Wonderful Wizard of Oz to his children after trying that day to teach the issues of the Gilded Age to his class. Suddenly he realized that the two meshed in ways he'd never imagined, and over the next few days his students helped him find other connections.

The wicked Witch of the East, who "held all the Munchkins in bondage for many years, making them slave for her night and day," represented the eastern industrialists and bankers who controlled the common people--the "little" people, the Munchkins--who were powerless to resist.

The scarecrow stood for the midwestern farmer, wise but naive, who for years had put up with ridicule from people like journalist William Allen White (whose 1896 essay, "What's the Matter with Kansas?" derided Populists as a group better at whining and complaining than at finding solutions for their problems).

The Tin Woodman was the industrial worker, dehumanized, made heartless, by the toils of industry. Gilded Age workers were often portrayed as mechanical; labor leader Samuel Gompers once told members of the American Federation of Labor, "So, there you are, wageworkers in general, mere machines...."

Littlefield found all sorts of hidden meanings and allusions to Gilded Age society in Baum's classic story: the Cowardly Lion was William Jennings Bryan, Democratic/Populist presidential candidate in 1896 (although he roared for the common people, Bryan was afraid to endorse most of the Populist platform); the Yellow Brick Road, with all its dangers, was the gold standard that bankers and businessmen supported as means to maintain their economic power; Dorothy's silver slippers (in the movie, Judy Garland's were ruby red, but Baum originally made them silver) represented the Populists' solution to the nation's economic woes ("the free and unlimited coinage of silver," an inflationary measure that would help debt-ridden farmers); Emerald City was Washington, D.C.; and the Wizard, "a little bumbling old man, hiding behind a facade of paper mache and noise, . . . able to be everything to everybody," was any of the Gilded Age presidents.

The Wonderful Wizard of Oz was no longer an innocent fairy tale. According to Littlefield, Baum wrote the book as a parable of the Populists, an allegory of their failed efforts to reform the nation in 1896. It was an interesting notion, one scholars could not leave alone, and they soon began to find additional analogies between Populism and The Wonderful Wizard of Oz. Political historian Richard Jensen added two new points, finding correspondences for Toto and Oz itself: Dorothy's faithful dog represented the teetotaling Prohibitionists, an important part of the silverite coalition, and anyone familiar with the silverites' slogan "16 to 1"--that is, the ratio of sixteen ounces of silver to one ounce of gold--would have instantly recognized "Oz" as the abbreviation for "ounce." Brian Attebery, a literary scholar, suggested an analogy of his own: "Dorothy, bold, resourceful, leading the men around her toward success, is a juvenile Mary Lease, the Kansas firebrand who told her neighbors to raise less corn and more hell." Gretchen Ritter claimed that the book is "filled with metaphors generated in the money debate of the late nineteenth century."

Perhaps the most extensive treatment of the Littlefield thesis was an article by economic historian Hugh Rockoff, who saw in The Wonderful Wizard of Oz "a sophisticated commentary on the political and economic debates of the Populist Era." Rockoff discovered a surprising number of new analogies. The Deadly Poppy Field, where the Cowardly Lion fell asleep and could not move forward, was the anti-imperialism that threatened to make Bryan forget the main issue of silver (note the Oriental connotation of poppies and opium). Once in the Emerald Palace, Dorothy had to pass through seven halls and climb three flights of stairs; seven and three make seventy-three, which stands for the "Crime of '73," the congressional act that eliminated the coinage of silver and that proved to all Populists the collusion between congress and bankers. The enslavement of the yellow Winkies was "a not very well disguised reference to McKinley's decision to deny immediate independence to the Philippines" after the Spanish-American War.

As scholars extended and modified Littlefield's interpretation--one would be hard pressed to find any character, setting, or event in The Wonderful Wizard of Oz that does not have a "Populist parable" analogy--laymen discovered it as well. Michael A. Genovese, in a widely-reprinted essay first published in the Los Angeles Times in 1988, described The Wonderful Wizard of Oz as "the story of the sad collapse of Populism and the issues upon which the movement was based." Genovese's brief analysis was pure Littlefield. But there was one notable (and somewhat disturbing) aspect of Genovese's piece: Littlefield's name was never mentioned. The phrase "according to one scholar" never appeared. By the 1980s, Littlefield's interpretation had entered the public domain.

Whether or not Littlefield got the credit, his interpretation of The Wonderful Wizard of Oz became the standard line, so widely accepted that everyone knew that the Cowardly Lion was really William Jennings Bryan, that Dorothy's silver slippers represented the silver movement, and so on. People in post-Watergate, post-Vietnam America were fascinated to learn that their favorite children's story was something of a subversive document, an anti-establishment fairy tale.

Supporting Littlefield's thesis is the fact that Baum endorsed the presidential candidacy of pro-silver William Jennings Bryan in 1896. At least that's the traditional story. But Baum's support for Bryan and the silver issue seems to be one of those traditional stories with little basis in fact.

In January 1890, a year and a half after moving his family to Aberdeen and trying his hand as a dry goods merchant, Baum bought a local newspaper, renaming it the Aberdeen Saturday Pioneer. The Pioneer was obviously a Republican paper. During the municipal elections that spring, Baum editorialized in support of the Republican candidates; after they won, he wrote that "Aberdeen has redeemed herself . . . after suffering for nearly a year from the incompetence of a democratic administration." Later that year, Baum urged unity against the growing Independent movement: "We are all members of one great family, the family which saved the Union, the family which stands together as the emblem of prosperity among the nations--Republicanism!" (Not only did Baum speak for the Republican party; he spoke against the movement that would soon evolve into the Populists.)

It must be noted that the Pioneer had been a Republican paper before Baum bought it, and perhaps he had to maintain its partisan identification in order to maintain its circulation. After all, he had a family to feed, and he would be neither the first not the last to espouse a particular political position for economic gain. Furthermore, the Pioneer, while clearly Republican, was quite progressive: Baum wrote in support of women's suffrage, alternative religions, occultism, toleration, and so on. So perhaps Baum was a closet Democrat in Aberdeen, forced to hide his true political feelings.

On the other hand, in the summer of 1896, the year of the election that would mark what has been called "The Climax of Populism" (and five years after he sold the Pioneer and moved to Chicago), Baum published a poem in a Chicago newspaper that began with this verse:

> When McKinley gets the chair, boys,
> There'll be a jollification
> Throughout our happy nation
> And contentment everywhere!
> Great will be our satisfaction

> When the "honest money" faction
> Seats McKinley in the chair!

Hardly Populist rhetoric! Michael Patrick Hearn, the leading scholar on L. Frank Baum, quoted this poem as evidence that Littlefield's argument "has no basis in fact." This illustrates the big problem with this sort of literary interpretation: How can we be sure just what the author meant? The "When McKinley get the chair, boys" poem seems to prove, once and for all, without doubt, that Baum was a Republican, not a Populist sympathizer, in 1896. But is it possible that Baum was joking, getting in a gentle jab at the gold-bugs who were so opposed to economic reform? (Why else use the word "jollification"?)

In the last decade, the tide has turned against the Littlefield thesis. In 1996, the Smithsonian Institution, to celebrate its 150th anniversary, sponsored a traveling exhibit that showed, among other things, a pair of ruby red slippers Judy Garland wore in the movie. An audio tape provided by the Smithsonian to guide people through the exhibit noted that MGM had changed the color of the shoes for cinematic reasons silver shoes apparently did not film well) and explained that L. Frank Baum had originally made the shoes silver as part of an allegory of the Populist movement. A number of angry and vocal Oz fans objected, pointing out that the Littlefield thesis had been discredited, and before you can say "There's no place like home" three times, the audio guide had been changed.

The Littlefield thesis seemed perfect for the 1960s and 1970s, years that began in protest and a new (or renewed) sense of social awareness. But by the 1980s, one of Littlefield's basic assertions--that The Wonderful Wizard of Oz was, like the Populist movement itself, a criticism of American industrial capitalism--was being challenged by scholars who argued that the book actually celebrated the urban consumer culture of the turn of the century. Among the earliest of these revisionist readings was by Stuart Culver, who argued that "Baum was particularly interested in the vagaries of consumer desire." Culver noted that Baum published another book in 1900: The Art of Decorating Dry Goods Windows, one of the first comprehensive guides to window dressing. The book had all sorts of wonderful ideas, from mechanical Easter eggs and Christmas trees to store floats in holiday parades.

The best spokesman of this revisionist view is William Leach. Baum's masterpiece was popular, Leach explained, "because it met--almost perfectly--the particular ethical and emotional needs of people living in a new urban, industrial society." Leach pointed out that the book exalted the opulence and magic of the metropolis. The Emerald City, with its prosperous homes and luxurious stores, resembled nothing so much as it did the "White City" of Chicago's Columbian Exposition of 1893, which Baum visited several times. (He had moved to Chicago about the same time construction began at the Exposition.) "Even with her eyes protected by the green spectacles," wrote Baum,

> Dorothy and her friends were at first dazzled by the brilliance of the wonderful city. The streets were lined with beautiful houses, all built of green marble and studded everywhere with sparkling emeralds. They walked over a pavement of the same green marble, and where the blocks were joined together were rows of emeralds, set closely, and glittering in the brightness of the sun. The windowpanes were of green glass; even the sky above the City had a green tint, and the rays of the sun were green. Many shops stood in the street, and Dorothy saw that everything in them was green. Green candy and green popcorn were offered for sale, as well as green shoes,

> green hats and green clothes of all sorts. At one place a man was selling green lemonade, and when the children bought it Dorothy could see that they paid for it with green pennies. Everyone seemed happy and contented and prosperous.

The book began on the prairie, with everything gray, so gray and desolate one wonders why Dorothy would ever want to return; the Emerald City is bright, beautiful, the color of money and prosperity.

Furthermore, The Wonderful Wizard of Oz reflected Baum's belief in theosophy, an occultist quasi-religious movement that was popular in the late nineteenth century. Specifically, the book emphasized an aspect of theosophy that Norman Vincent Peale would later call "the power of positive thinking": theosophy led, Leach said, to "a new upbeat and positive psychology" that "opposed all kinds of negative thinking--especially fear, worry, and anxiety." It was through this positive thinking, and not through any magic of the Wizard, that Dorothy and her companions (as well as everyone else in Oz) got what they wanted. "The Wonderful Wizard of Oz was an optimistic secular therapeutic text," wrote Leach. "It helped make people feel at home in America's new industrial economy, and it helped them appreciate and enjoy, without guilt, the new consumer abundance." Leach concluded that "the book both reflected and helped create a new cultural consciousness--a new way of seeing and being in harmony with the new industrial order."

Historian Gene Clanton, in a recent study of Populism in Congress, suggested that The Wonderful Wizard of Oz is indeed about the money question, as Littlefield said, but rather than supporting silver as an inflationary reform measure, the book actually stood solidly in the opposite camp, arguing for maintenance of the gold standard. The way to prosperity was, after all, down the yellow brick road, and the silver slippers, for all the hoopla over them, actually did little to help Dorothy. The Wicked Witch of the West, who craved the silver slippers, "most likely was modeled after the specter created in the minds of conservatives like Baum by Populism itself." Clanton did not specifically address many of the issues Leach and others have raised, but his discussion implicitly supports the revisionist interpretation (and it explicitly denies Littlefield's pro-silver reading).

So where are we, a century after the book was published, concerning the fork in the Yellow Brick Road? Was Baum supporting silver and agrarianism? Or was he championing the new industrial order? Or should we throw up our hands in frustration and admit that sometimes a yellow brick road is just a yellow brick road?

Perhaps the best we can say is this: Thirty-six years ago, Henry M. Littlefield looked at The Wonderful Wizard of Oz and saw things no one had seen there before. The Littlefield interpretation remains a useful pedagogical device; Baum gave us a delightful and unforgettable way of illustrating a number of Gilded Age issues, from Populism and the silver movement to the Gilded Age presidency, from the problems of labor to the insurrection in the Philippines. More recently, William Leach and others have shown us a different new way of looking at the book, a way that emphasizes another side of the Gilded Age--the fascination with the city and urban abundance, the rise of a new industrial ethic, and so on. Leach's argument is just as compelling as Littlefield's. "Factual" or not, both are impressive achievements.

But even more impressive is the achievement of L. Frank Baum himself. In the preface to The Wonderful Wizard of Oz, Baum stated that he wanted to write a new sort of

children's story: a modernized, American story, shorn of all the Old World images and motifs. He was tremendously successful in this, producing not only the first real American fairy tale, but one that showed American society and culture in all its wonderful diversity and contradictions, a story so rich it can be, like the book's title character, anything we want it to be--including a parable on Populism or a celebration of America's consumer culture.

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