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Baum & Fleming: The Wizards of Symbols

Symbolism in the film *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) has often been speculated. Many say that the primary symbolic theme is sexuality. Some argue for symbolism demonstrating religion while their antagonists assert the film entails atheistic beliefs. To me, the metaphors that appear to be the most prominent are those implying historic and economic relations. Henry Littlefield, a teacher in the 1960s, derives his theory of the symbolism in the book The Wonderful Wizard of Oz on those same bases. Though I agree with many of his theories, I have a few disagreements and unique theories pertaining more to the film than to the book. The novel was written by L. Frank Baum in 1900 (published year) when America was slow to come out of a recession and frictions were tense between lower-to-middle-class people and upper-class people. The film on the other hand, had to slightly alter diminutive details to adapt to a transformed America.

Conflicts of Class

Rural Kansas, I believe, depicts the difficult countryside life. Two caring, benign elderly people still work beyond the common retirement age just to get by. Because of the Industrial revolution, farmers often struggled. They live in a very small house with no worries beyond their farm until their niece's dog, Toto, bites Elmira Gulch. Gulch appears to be upper class with too much time on her hands. Toto, meaning *all* in Latin, may insinuate the general middle-class population. Lower-to-middle-class people make up most of the population, so 'all' could hint at the perception of relatively all American people. So, when Toto attacks Gulch, this could indicate the lower-to-middle-class

people attacking the upper-class people representing the conflicts of class in American Society.

The Cyclone : The Industrial Revolution

The cyclone came through and destroyed rural homes and farmlands and ruined many farmers' lives. The industrial revolution drew attention from the farmlands to metropolitan cities. Many farmer's had no other choice, but to abandon their rural hard work and labor for...well, urban hard work and labor. This 'cyclone' took them to a new, mysterious world where they faced fierce challenges.

Black & White (More of a Sepia) To Color : Ordinary to Extraordinary

The first couple of scenes appear in a then commonly seen colorless environment. This colorless environment is Dorothy's home. Familiar to her and familiar to the audience. Director of the film, Victor Fleming, and MGM knew the impact color had on an audience due to Disney's huge hit *Snow White* (1937). MGM was given the opportunity to use the new technology of Technicolor. They took advantage of the opportunity and used it to not only awe the audience through ecstasy of color, but to pull Dorothy and the audience from the ordinary everyday to an extraordinary, mysterious place "over the rainbow" where anything can happen. The array of color, little people, interesting structures, out-of-this-world plants, took us and Dorothy far, far away. We felt vulnerable, oblivious. Rural farmers too felt this way when the industrial revolution took place. They were in a new America where they became vulnerable and challenged.

Oz : Ounces

Theorized by Littlefield, 'oz.' is the abbreviation for the unit of weight, ounce. Gold and silver are commonly weighed in ounces. The populists supported a bi-metallic monetary system which is simply ran on gold and silver. I think Oz is really just a clever name. It sounds bizarre and mysterious. And it could be a play on the word 'awes.' The land of awes sounds like an imaginative fantasy land. Oz is just that.

Wicked Witch of The East : Factory Wardens — Munchkins : Lower-Class People

The Wicked Witch of The East renders the factory wardens strapping down its underpaid workers, the Munchkins. Leading up to the Haymarket Affair of 1896, factory wardens neglected safety of their employees. Employees went on strike and violent conflicts erupted. The factory wardens were finally defeated after the Triangle Shirtwaist fire of 1911 where 146 workers were trapped within a fifteen story building engulfed in flames. Bureaus were formed to regulate safety in the working environment. The Wicked Witch of the East was defeated freeing the Munchkins or the "little people."

Dorothy : American Woman

In the film, Dorothy could exemplify the American woman—although, I'm not sure she did in the novel due to the neglect of woman values in the 19th century. She's a courageous suffragette who is determined to solve a problem. And she follows the path to power by making friends with male characters. Women's suffrage was largely credited to males possessing power, particularly Theodore Roosevelt. Roosevelt, throughout his political career, became more and more progressive. He hired many women to positions of power within the progressive party in the early 1900s. Perhaps the name Dorothy is a play on Theodore's name...Dor-o-thy : The-o-dore...perhaps.

Ruby Slippers : Suffrage

I can't quite finger the refashioning of the silver slippers from the novel to the ruby slippers in the film, but one could interpret that red represents blood, passion, and sexuality which are feminine elements (blood : menstruation, passion/sexuality : the woman's "job" as a wife in those times wasn't much more than keeping their husband happy). The silver slipper, Littlefield suggests personifies "the monetary political issues" (Chelsi, "Lions and Tigers and Political Symbols - Oh My", Associated Content; Sept. 26, 2007) perhaps implying the free-silver platform on which the populists stood in the late 1890s. I speculate that they could insinuate women's suffrage. She was given the right to vote and with it she would follow the path (yellow-brick road) to power (Emerald City/Wizard) and stand up for what she believed in.

The Wicked Witch of the West.

The Wicked Witch of the West, according to Littlefield, is "malign nature" (Dex, "Why does water make the Wicked Witch of the West melt?", Straight Dope; January 1, 2002). She is the instrument of force against rural farmland. Rural farmland is endangered by drought. And when there is a sufficient amount of water, farmers are able to overcome this "malign nature." So, when the Wicked Witch of the West is drenched in a sufficient amount of water she is triumphed. Going beyond Littlefield's theory, I think there has to be more to the Wicked Witch. Why would the witch desire the slippers so persistently? I ponder that she may portray African Americans. When Dorothy was given the slippers, I suggested American women had been enfranchised. African Americans saw this as an opportunity to earn their enfranchisement. She's also

trying to stop industrial business (Tin Man) and the populists (Cowardly Lion). Could she be communism, or merely anti-American in general?

The Cowardly Lion : Populists

Henry Littlefield's theory of the Cowardly Lion depicts him as William Jennings Bryan, the presidential candidate for the Populist party in 1896. The Populist party was depicted as a lion in the newspaper comics—like the Democratic party as a donkey. But I think the Cowardly Lion is more of a portrayal of the entire Populist party who didn't quite have what it took to cut it with the other parties. The Cowardly Lion didn't quite have what it took to cut it with the other lions.

The Tin Woodsman : Industrial Business

The Tin Woodsman depicts the industrial business. He's a man of tin representing the impact of steel on the Industrial Revolution. The industry wardens allowed their employees to work harsh conditions which led to many deaths of men, women, and children on the job. The industry wardens didn't have the "heart" to care about their employees' lives because of the cost. Runners of industry were the wealthiest of those days and undoubtedly the greediest.

The Scarecrow : Rural Farmer

The Scarecrow illustrates the rural farmers. The Scarecrow is filled with hay and doesn't have a brain. The farmers didn't have the brains to run industry. Most farmers basically knew just farming. They grew up on a farm and never went to school. When the industrial age came about, the farmers were unequipped with the knowledge to compete with the industry. When farmers moved into the urban cities to get new jobs, they weren't even equipped with the knowledge to compete for jobs in factories.

The Yellow Brick Road : Follow The Money Trail

If you draw a single yellow brick and presented it to any American and asked them what you had drawn an image of, they would respond, “a brick of gold.” If you draw many yellow bricks as a pathway, they would respond, “the yellow brick road.” My interpretation of the yellow brick road is that it could be regarded as the money trail to the Emerald City. There’s an old saying “follow the money trail” that suggests if you follow the money, it will lead you to the beholder of power. I think the old saying pertains to the yellow brick road leading to the Wizard and the Emerald City to where all citizens of Oz look for answers.

Emerald City : Washington D.C. — The Wizard : President of the United States

The Emerald City represents government power or Washington D.C., more particularly, where the Wizard is the beholder of power, the president. The Emerald City is made up of skeptical, candy-assed people who know there are problems among the regular people throughout Oz outside Emerald city. They simply grin through their teeth pretending everything is just dandy. Then someone expresses an issue and wishes to speak with the Wizard and they are shoed away. In 1894, Jacob Coxey marched on Washington manifesting reform and he was arrested along with dozens of his marchers who followed his leadership. When Dorothy and gang are allowed in to see the Wizard they see the Wizard as this intimidating powerful being. Toto, the American people, reveals his true identity as a real man. He’s merely human. This sketches out that people may need to believe the president is this powerful intimidating force, but deep down he’s just another person living among us.