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Exploration of Theme



"Alchemy 2" by Linda Woods; www.moonbirdhill.exposuremanager.com

In this section, we aim to explore themes in popular literature, poetry, plays, art and music. In doing so, we gain new understandings and learn more through the words of the greats and the potent images of our collective histories. Write in, tell us your interpretations of your favorite works, and feel free to suggest the next piece of culture we research to divine its theme! Contact us! themes@thewriteplaceatthewritetime.org

In this issue, we draw back the curtain to reveal the hidden secrets of the land of Oz. Although it was billed as a children's fantasy tale, the story about *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* by L. M. Baum is speculated by some to be a symbolic satirical commentary on the Populist movement of the 1890s. It wasn't until 1964 when Henry M. Littlefield brought this theory about the agrarian movement and the Mid-west to light in the pages of the *American Quarterly* that such a correlation was drawn.

Baum had been a former political journalist with a rumored sympathy to the Populist movement. It seemed obvious to Littlefield that Baum had found a way to immortalize his perspectives on the time period through the allegory present in the fictional story. Amongst the hard critics of this theory was Baum's great-grandson and Baum scholars who maintained that he did not possess any sympathetic leanings toward Populism. Yet still, it became a widely held urban legend that still shows many parallels to the early twentieth century political sentiments. Skeptics admit to it working very well as an allegory of the time, especially having been written by Baum whose personality allowed for satirical interpretations all taken "with a grain of salt".

Key symbols included Dorothy's slippers; most recall the ruby slippers of the iconic film but the original slippers of the book were silver. The yellow brick road was gold. This seems to indicate the call for "free and unlimited coinage of silver and gold" at a fixed ratio which would allow farmers and small business owners to pay off their debts. Dorothy herself is said to be the ideal American—guileless and kind. Kansas is portrayed in black and white with the dreary landscape coinciding with what had happened to the West during that time—countless infestations of grasshoppers, droughts and severe winters that had destroyed the plains. One of the most vocal proponents of the Populists was nick-named "The Kansas Cyclone" and Dorothy was given the last name of "Gale" in the play version by Baum which both contribute to the tornado image. The fall of the house upon the Wicked Witch of the East, much to the munchkins' delight, supposedly shows the wicked control of industry enslaving "the little people", meaning small business owners and the middle to lower income groups. The Wicked Witch of the West is the result of the natural disasters as well as the wealthy who sought to buy out farmers and oppose movements which could have proved beneficial to the West. Glenda the Good Witch of the South understands and sympathizes with their plight as the South

did in the "Gilded Age" as well as the teetotalers who, in this case, were represented by Toto.

The scarecrow was tied to the ridicule of the Mid-western farmers who were perceived to be less educated and gullible. His character however, is resourceful, resilient and clever. The tin man was the industrial laborer during the Depression- his rusty state symbolized the need to "pump the system" and rather than oil, this meant monetary value. The cowardly lion was a rhyme for 'Bryan', as in William Jennings Bryan who was seen as cowardly by critics but who truly championed the Populist cause (he was often portrayed as a lion satirically). The Emerald City was in a larger sense America, in a smaller sense Washington D.C. The yellow brick road was a tie-in to the "streets paved with gold" reference to America. The Wizard of Oz, was the archetype of the sort of politician who did not fulfill promises, sympathize nor give without greatly receiving something in return. Dorothy, Toto and her three companions realize that they had what they needed within them all along.

The story does not necessarily show a lasting victory or clear moral, however. This may further prove that the story is an allegory because rather than defying critics who maintain that Baum was not a supporter of the Populist movement, it might actually indicate that he was not- thus possibly reinforcing the theory of allegory regardless of political association. The story neither supports nor opposes the movement so much as it merely presents the prevalent politics of the Gilded Age. In the ability to create this illusive mystery through imagination and fantasy, Baum himself acts as the man-behind-the-curtain with smoke and mirrors to wittily keep the audience guessing at whatever deeper truths/interpretations we might take away from the story ourselves.

Write in with your views/favorite adaptations of *The Wizard of Oz!*
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Further Information and Recommended Reading:

"Money and Politics in the Land of Oz" by Quentin P. Taylor, 2005
(<http://www.usagold.com/gildedopinion/oz.html>)
(<http://www.independent.org/publications/tir/article.asp?issueID=40&articleID=504>)

"The Wizard of Oz: Parable of Populism" by Henry Littlefield, 1964 *American Quarterly*

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