

# Oz as Allegory: A Treatise on Frank L. Baum's Populist Masterpiece *The Wizard of Oz*<sup>1</sup>

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**Dorothy**, the protagonist of the story, represents an individualized ideal of the American people. She is each of us at our best: kind but self-respecting, guileless but levelheaded, wholesome but plucky. She is akin to Everyman, or, in modern parlance, "the girl next door." Dorothy lives in Kansas, where virtually everything—the treeless prairie, the sun-beaten grass, the paint-stripped house -- even Aunt Em and Uncle Henry -- is a dull, drab, lifeless gray. This grim depiction reflects the forlorn condition of Kansas in the late 1880s and early 1890s, when a combination of scorching droughts, severe winters, and an invasion of grasshoppers reduced the prairie to an uninhabitable wasteland. The result for farmers and all who depended on agriculture for their livelihood was devastating. Many ascribed their misfortune to the natural elements, called it quits, and moved on. Others blamed the hard times on bankers, the railroads, and various middlemen who seemed to profit at the farmers' expense. Angry

victims of the Kansas calamity also took aim at both Democratic and Republican politicians, who often appeared indifferent to their plight. Around these economic and political grievances, the Populist movement coalesced.

**The Tornado.** In the late 1880s and early 1890s, Populism spread rapidly throughout the Midwest and into the South, but Kansas was always the site of its most popular and radical elements. In 1890, Populist candidates began winning seats in state legislatures and Congress, and two years later Populists in Kansas gained control of the lower house of the state assembly, elected a Populist governor, and sent a Populist to the U.S. Senate. The twister that carries Dorothy to *Oz* symbolizes the Populist cyclone that swept across Kansas in the early 1890s. Baum was not the first to use the metaphor. Mary Elizabeth Lease, a fire-breathing Populist orator, was often referred to as the "Kansas Cyclone," and the free-silver movement was often likened to a political whirlwind that had taken the nation by storm. Although Dorothy does not stand for Lease, Baum did give her (in the stage version) the last name "Gale"—a further reference to the cyclone metaphor.

**Toto.** The name of Dorothy's canine companion, Toto, is also a pun, a play on *teetotaler*. Temperance reformers were among the Populists' most faithful allies, and the Populist hope William Jennings Bryan was himself a "dry." As Dorothy embarks on the Yellow Brick Road, Toto trots "soberly" behind her, just as the Prohibitionists soberly followed the Populists.

**The Baum Witch Project.** When Dorothy's twister-tossed house comes to rest in *Oz*, it lands squarely on the wicked Witch of the East, killing her instantly. The startled girl emerges from the abode to find herself in a strange land of remarkable beauty, whose inhabitants, the diminutive Munchkins, rejoice at the death of the Witch. The Witch represents eastern financial-industrial interests (aka Robber Barons) and their gold-standard



<sup>1</sup> Although this work is based upon research obtained from numerous academic studies, it derives its primary basis from the work of **Henry Littelfield's** "The Wizard of Oz: Parable on Populism". *American Quarterly* 16 (1): 47–58 (1964); **Bradley A. Hansen's**, "The Allegory: The Wizard of Oz in Economics". *Journal of Economic Education* 33 (3) (2002); **Todd Gardner's** "Responses to Littlefield—The Wizard of Oz" (2004); and **Ranjit S. Dighet's** (ed.) *The Historian's Wizard of Oz: Reading L. Frank Baum's Classic as a Political and Monetary Allegory*. (2002). The value of other, unnamed sources is not diminished due to their omission; they are simply too numerous to be listed here.

Stalwart Republican political allies, the main targets of Populist venom. Midwestern farmers often blamed their woes on the nefarious practices of Wall Street bankers and the captains of industry, whom they believed were engaged in a conspiracy to "enslave" the "little people," just as the Witch of the East had enslaved the Munchkins. Populists viewed establishment politicians, including presidents, as either helpless pawns or willing accomplices. After all, had not William McKinley (prompted by JP Morgan) made the gold standard the centerpiece of his 1896 campaign against Bryan and free silver?

It is apt, then, that Dorothy acquires the Witch of the East's silver shoes at the behest of the good Witch of the North, who stands for the electorate of the upper Midwest, where Populism gained considerable support. (Later in the story, good witches are identified with the color white; silver is known as "the white metal.") Still, for all her goodness, the Witch of the North, like the voters of the upper Midwest, is no match for the evil forces of the East, her tender "kiss" on Dorothy's forehead (electoral support) notwithstanding. The death of the wicked Witch, however, is cause for rejoicing-the "little people" (owing to the destruction of eastern power) are now free. All along, the Munchkins were vaguely aware that their bondage was somehow linked to the silver shoes, but the shoes' precise power was never known. Similarly, although Wall Street and the eastern establishment understood silver's power, common farmers knew little of monetary matters, and bimetallism failed to resonate with eastern workers, who voted against Bryan in droves.

After Dorothy and her companions reach Emerald City, the Wizard sends them to kill the wicked Witch of the West. This Witch is also a cruel enslaver, and she represents a composite of the destructive forces of nature that plagued farmers in the Midwest and the evil power brokers of that region. The former menace is mirrored in the Witch's dominion, which recalls the parched plains of western Kansas, and by the ferocious wolves, ravenous crows, and venomous bees that she sends to destroy Dorothy and her friends. When the Witch's minions are destroyed, she utilizes a golden cap to call out the Winged Monkeys to further torment western farmers. The Monkeys represent the dwindling numbers of Native Americans, many of whom were fighting desperately and viciously to retain their land from white intrusion. However, in summoning the Monkeys, the Witch exhausts the cap's magical charm and the flying simians are liberated, an allusion to the reform Dawes Severalty Act. Thus the power of gold proves finite and illusory, and it requires the coexistence of silver (bimetallism) to sustain its power. No wonder the wicked Witch is so keen to possess Dorothy's silver shoes.

The manipulation of gold and silver by the wicked Witch represents the other half of the western menace: the self-interested juggling of metal currency by politicians. McKinley of Ohio, for example, supported the Sherman Silver Purchase Act of 1890, voted for its repeal in 1893, and made the gold standard the cornerstone of his 1896 presidential bid. Senator Mark Hanna, also of Ohio, served as McKinley's campaign manager and close advisor, and he was widely viewed as the Richelieu behind the throne. (Vilified by the Populists, Hanna had William Allen White's scathing attack on the Populists-"What's the Matter with Kansas?"-circulated throughout the country during the campaign.) Not surprisingly, the Wizard requires the death of the wicked Witch of the West before he will grant Dorothy's "party" its wishes. The Witch's demise by water (which also cures the curse of drought via rain) ends her evil reign, liberates her slaves, and restores the silver shoes she had stolen from Dorothy. In one swoop, the parched lands are watered, the farmers are freed, and silver is returned to its rightful owner, the people.

The fourth witch, Glinda of the South, is a good witch who, unlike her northern counterpart, understands the power of Dorothy's silver shoes. In 1896, Bryan's Democratic-Populist ticket carried the South, and some of the strongest silverites in Congress were from the South, whereas northern support for Bryan and free silver was more moderate. In *Oz*, the denizens of the South, the Quadlings, are described as an odd race who never travel to Emerald City and disliked strangers traveling across their land. Not since the 1860s had a southerner served as president, and immigrants and northerners were generally unwelcome in the South. Moreover, the road to the land of the Quadlings is perilous and rife with dangers. For those who were "different" (including resident blacks), the South could be a dangerous place indeed.



**The Scarecrow**. In the hope that the Wizard will help her return to Kansas, Dorothy embarks on the Yellow Brick Road to Emerald City. After traveling several miles, she encounters the Scarecrow, who does not "know anything" because he has "no brains at all." The brainless Scarecrow represents the Midwestern farmers, whose years of hardship and subjection to ridicule had created a sense of inferiority and self-doubt. Populist leaders such as "Sockless" Jerry Simpson were often portrayed as deluded simpletons who failed to understand the true causes of their economic plight. The Populists' "stupidity" was also attested to by their apocalyptic rhetoric, conspiracy theories, and radical agenda, which included nationalization of the railroads, a graduated income tax, and the unlimited coinage of silver. Critics scoffed at their overblown rants, mocked their paranoid style, and dismissed their simplistic nostrums as the distempered ravings of "socialist hayseeds."

The picture of the Scarecrow is not so one-sided. His conduct on the journey through Oz is marked by common sense, resilience, and rectitude. He is not so dumb after all. As we learn near the end of the story, the Scarecrow/farmer had brains all along—perhaps brains enough to grasp the true causes of his misery and the basics of monetary policy. He was only brainless because that was what he had been told about himself.

On the trek through the forest, where the road is in disrepair, the Scarecrow stumbles and falls on the "hard [yellow] bricks," a reference to the Populist claim that the gold standard had a damaging impact on farmers and the people at large. Still, the Scarecrow is "never hurt" by his falls, which suggests that the yellow metal, while a significant barrier, was not the only culprit of the farmer's woes.

**Tin Woodsman**. Proceeding down the road, the duo encounters the Tin Woodman. Once healthy and productive, the Woodman was cursed by the wicked Witch of the East, lost his dexterity, and accidentally hacked off his limbs. Each lost appendage was replaced with tin until the Woodman was made entirely of metal. In essence, the Witch of the East (big business) reduced the Woodman to a machine, a dehumanized worker who no longer feels, who has no heart. As such, the Tin Man represents the nation's workers, in particular the industrial workers with whom the Populists hoped to make common cause. His rusted condition parallels the prostrated condition of labor during the Depression of 1893; like many workers of that period, the Tin Man is unemployed. Yet, with a few drops of oil, he is able to resume his customary labors—a remedy akin to the "pump-priming" measures that Populists advocated.



**Cowardly Lion**. Having liberated the Tin Man, the trio proceeds through the forest, only to be accosted by a roaring lion. He is none other than **William Jennings Bryan**, the Nebraska representative in Congress and later the Populist/Democratic presidential candidate in 1896 and 1900. Bryan (which rhymes with "lion,") was known for his "roaring" rhetoric and was occasionally

portrayed in the press as a lion, as was the Populist Party itself. Bryan adopted the free-silver/16:1 ratio mantra and won the Populists' support in his first race against McKinley. Like the Lion of Oz, Bryan was the last to "join" the party. His defeat in the general election was largely owing to his failure to win the support of eastern workers, just as the Lion's claws "could make no impression" on the Tin Man.

Although Bryan's supporters considered him courageous, his critics thought him "cowardly" for opposing war with Spain in 1898, the subsequent annexation of the Philippines, and criticism that he was prone to back down from a political fight. Yet, for anti-imperialists, who counted many Populists among their ranks, Bryan's unpopular stand was courageous indeed. Less courageous, however, were his final decision to vote for annexation (albeit as a tactical move) and his failure to fight vigorously for free silver in the election of 1900, both of which disappointed Populists.

## **Of Mice and Monkeys**

Another scrape with a menacing beast recapitulates the metaphor. When a "great yellow Wildcat" lights upon the Queen of the Field Mice, the Tin Man decapitates the feral feline with a single swing of his ax. For delivering the Queen from her "enemy," the mice pledge obedience to the Tin Man. Their first act of service is to rescue the Lion from the "deadly poppy fields," where the powerful scent of the flowers has felled the king of beasts.

The diminutive rodents represent the common people, and the "yellow" cat is yet another reference to the evil power of gold. By killing the Wildcat, the Tin Man symbolically slays a chief "enemy" of the people. The timely support of the mice parallels the importance of the common folk in Bryan's bid for the presidency.

**The Winged Monkeys.** The unwilling minions of the Witch of the West add a further dimension to the *Oz* allegory. These creatures represent the Plains Indians. As the Monkeys' leader relates, "we were a free people, living happily in the great forest flying from tree to tree, eating nuts and fruit, and doing just as we pleased without calling anybody master." The Monkey King admits to having engaged in a degree of "mischief," but nothing to justify the harsh treatment the Monkeys received when "Oz came out of the clouds to rule over this land." The Monkeys were initially sequestered, a reference to the government's reservation policy. Later, they are forced to do the bidding of the Western Witch, who commands them with the golden cap. Yet the Monkeys are not inherently bad; they have become so only through an unnatural and evil force. This scenario parallels the view of reformers who blamed the Indians' condition on the whites' inhumane practices. Under Dorothy's benevolent influence, the Monkeys learn to be kind and helpful . . . in other words, "assimilated."

**Chinatown and the Yellow Winkies.** On the journey to find Glinda, the good Witch of the South, Dorothy and company pass through Dainty China Country, which they enter by climbing over a high white wall. China and its Great Wall are the obvious references. But what does China have to do with Gilded Age politics? First, China was in the process of being divided by the great powers (including the United States) into "spheres of influence" for the purpose of commercial exploitation. In 1899 and 1900, Secretary of State John Hay issued the famous "Open Door" notes in an effort to prevent rival nations from gaining "unfair" economic advantages in China. Second, China (also known as the Celestial Kingdom) was the only major nation still on the silver standard. It is apt, then, that Dainty China Country's wall and floor are white, the color of silver bullion. Third, the Lion's careless destruction of the china church echoes the territorial "breakup" of China by foreign intruders and the active proselytizing by Christian missionaries. Finally, the china Princess, who rejects Dorothy's invitation to visit Kansas, resembles China's dowager empress, who strongly opposed the foreign presence in China. The last two parallels recall the anti-imperialism that Bryan and others championed.

Another anti-imperialist theme appears in the form of the Winkies, called "yellow" because they reside in the Land of the West. The Winkies, who are forced to work for the Witch of the West, represent the "yellow man" of Asia, especially the Chinese immigrants and native Filipinos. For decades, the Chinese had immigrated to the Far West to labor in various capacities. Given their "exotic" appearance, clannish habits, and willingness to work for low wages, they were often the targets of abuse, discrimination, and even murder. Under pressure from

the authorities in California, Congress passed the **Chinese Exclusion Act (1882)**, which banned Chinese immigration.

The Winkies also resemble the Filipinos, who, after their country's annexation by the United States, found themselves (once more) subjected to a Western power. Demands for independence were denied on the grounds that the Filipino people were "unfit" for self-government. The assumption that the United States knew what was best for the natives was satirized in Baum's original script of the stage version of *Oz*, where the Scarecrow remarks, "It isn't the people who live in a country who know the most about it. . . . Look at the Filipinos. Everybody knows more about their country than they do" (qtd. in Dighe 2002, 93).

**Oz, Emerald City, and the Wacky Wizard.** The Land of Oz, with its varied landscape and diverse inhabitants, is a microcosm of America, and Emerald City, its center and seat of government, represents Washington, D.C. In an effort to be made whole, Dorothy and her band travel to the capital to see the Wizard, who presumably has the power to grant them their wishes. The journey to Emerald City corresponds to the Populist effort to acquire power in Washington, and the travelers recall the "industrial armies" who marched on the capital during the depression of 1893-97. The most famous of these, "Coxey's Army," was led by a successful businessman who urged the government to fund public-works programs (most notably a "good roads bill") by creating government jobs which would alleviate unemployment. Coxey, who hoped to meet with President Cleveland, was arrested for trespassing, and his proposals were ignored. Dorothy and company also face hazards on the road to Emerald City and are turned away by the Wizard, who shows little sympathy for their plight.

The Wizard, who "can take on any form he wishes," represents the protean politicians of the era, especially the presidents of the Gilded Age. Given the even division of Democrats and factional nature of Republicans, along with the razor-thin majorities of most presidential elections, candidates rarely took clear stands on the issues by virtue of having to compromise for support. As a result, voters often had difficulty in determining what the candidates stood for. The Wizard fits this description, for "who the real Oz is," Dorothy is informed, "no living person can tell." Indeed, when the foursome enter the throne room, the Wizard appears to each in a different form. Like many politicians, he is unwillingly to help them without a quid pro quo: "I never grant favors without some return," a reference to the congressional practice of logrolling.



Politicians are also infamous for failing to keep promises, and the great Oz is no different. When Dorothy's party returns after killing the Witch of the West, the Wizard keeps them waiting, then puts them off. By accident, the all-powerful Wizard is exposed and his true identity revealed. Far from a mighty magician, "Oz, the Terrible" is merely a "humbug," a wizened old man whose "power" is achieved through elaborate acts of deception. The Wizard is simply a manipulative politician who appears to the people in one form, but works behind the scenes to achieve his true ends. Such figures are terrified at being exposed; the Wizard

cautions Dorothy to lower her voice lest he be discovered and "ruined." As it turns out, the Wizard hails from Omaha, where he became a talented ventriloquist and later a circus balloonist. Bryan was from Nebraska, was famous for his "hot-air" oratory, and in the minds of his critics was something like a circus ringmaster. Nebraska was also a bastion of Populism, and Omaha the site of the 1892 Populist National Convention, where the party adopted the "Omaha platform," the movement's leading manifesto. Following the party's convention of the previous year, *Judge*, a popular magazine, parodied the Populists on its cover, which depicted a hot air balloon made of patches that bear the names of the groups and parties that had rallied to the Populist standard: Knights of Labor, Greenback Party, Socialists, Farmers Alliance, and so forth. In the balloon's basket are caricatures of Populist leaders, preaching the "Platform of Lunacy."

Identification of the Wizard with Bryan would seem to raise an obvious problem. Is he represented by the Lion *and* the Wizard? Bryan was never president, but he was a masterful politician and an aspirant to the White House. In conjunction with references to Omaha, ventriloquism, and the balloon, the link between Bryan and the Wizard is a reasonable inference. Just as some of Baum's metaphors serve as a composite, the Lion and the Wizard represent different aspects of Bryan.

**The Colors of Money.** The Land of Oz is colorful, to say the least, and *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* is replete with references to gold, silver, and green. A number of these references have been noted already, but the story makes several others. The references to gold and silver echo the prominence of monetary politics in the 1890s, especially the bimetallic crusade led by Bryan and the Populists. Moreover, gold and silver are often portrayed as working in combination. Of course, there is Dorothy on her sojourn through Oz, "her silver shoes tinkling merrily on the hard, yellow, roadbed." The word *oz* itself is the abbreviation for an ounce of gold or silver. There are additional references to gold and silver, but the ones given here amply illustrate Baum's use of the monetary metaphor.

Green, often in combination with gold, is also a recurrent image. Then as now, green was the color of paper money. The Greenback Party, a precursor of the Populists, advocated the expansion of the money supply via the increased circulation of "greenbacks." Jacob Coxey was a greenbacker, as was James B. Weaver, the Populist presidential nominee in 1892. Most of the green imagery in Oz is general in nature and does not appear to indicate specific parallels. Toto wears a green collar that fades to white (silver), and later he receives a gold collar, as does the Lion. In Emerald City, everyone is required to wear green glasses with golden bands, so that nearly everything appears in a resplendent green. The Lion's liquid "courage" is poured from a green bottle into a gold-green dish, and the Wizard's balloon is patched with green silk of various shades. As the spectacles create an illusion, the liquid courage is only a placebo, and the balloon is a mere patchwork, so the demand for paper money is exposed as a panacea for the farmers' woes which really solved nothing.



At the end of the story, the Scarecrow supplants the Wizard as the ruler of Emerald City, the Tin Woodman is made master of the West, and the Lion is placed over the animals of the forest. Dorothy transports herself back to Kansas by clicking her silver shoes together three times. All this is achieved with the help of Glinda, the good Witch of the South. The message? Populism is triumphant, the goal of gaining political power is achieved. Or is it? Neither the Scarecrow nor the Tin Man nor the Lion truly lacked what each believed he was missing; the great Wizard's powers proved illusory; and Dorothy had the power to transform her condition all along. These

features of the story point to a more ambivalent result. Indeed, Populism's outright failure is suggested when Dorothy's silver shoes fall off in the desert and are "lost forever." After Bryan's defeat in 1896, the free-silver movement went into rapid decline. McKinley's reelection and the statutory adoption of the gold standard in 1900 spelled political oblivion for the Populists.