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Oz: A Reflection of America

L. Frank Baum said that his book *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* is meant to be a “modernized fairy tale” (3), or, in other words, an American fairy tale, the first of its kind, and he certainly did succeed. *The Wizard of Oz* has found its way into the homes of every American from the actual book to the movie to Oz episodes and arcs on TV. Dorothy is one of the most, if not the most, recognizable American figures. Henry Littlefield once said that *The Wizard of Oz* has “unsuspected depth” and that “Baum’s immortal American fantasy encompasses more than heretofore believed” (50). Littlefield is talking about how he believes Baum wrote *The Wizard of Oz* to be a “parable on populism” (47), but that allegory has no place in modern society. As Gretchen Ritter puts so elegantly, “Americans today dimly recollect the Populists as farmers in search of better prices for their crops” (174), most Americans do not have this problem today and will, most likely, never have this problem again. Therefore, Littlefield’s “parable on populism” (47), while an interesting read, is no longer that applicable. Instead, one should focus on the total “American-ness” of the first American fairy tale.

Other fairy tales can reflect what their home country was like and this one does as well. Jerry Griswold states “what can’t be ignored is how much the Land of Oz is a reflection of actual circumstances [in America] at the turn of the century” (463). These circumstances presented real change to America and Baum, himself, and they weren’t necessarily changes he liked. In fact, it could be said that Baum was “driven from the East Coast to the West Coast in search of a better America” all the while not finding it and knowing “that it would never come” in his lifetime (Zipes 131). As he continued to look for it in his real life, he was determined to show children

what America could be like using his Oz books. This could also apply to other countries, but as he was writing the first American fairy tale, only its applications towards America will be discussed. Many critics have noticed this tie to America, but none seem to focus on the different versions of America that Baum presents. Therefore, in *The Wizard of Oz*, Baum brings together two conflicting ideas of what he thought America was becoming—the Emerald City—and what he thought America should be like—the rest of Oz, specifically the Munchkin lands and the South. He also brings in an interesting view of, quite possibly, what America was—Kansas—to compare and critique the different forms of America and show which one he thought would be best.

The center of the Land of Oz is the Emerald City, which is also the center for culture and economy in the Land of Oz, thus representing Washington, DC and other urban areas, in other words, what America was becoming (Ritter 194). Every creature in Oz knows about the Emerald City and has heard tales of its wonderment. This is also true, in America, of Washington, DC and other urban areas, while most, at Baum's time, probably had not been to the capital and would have lived in more rural areas, they would have heard about Washington, DC and the other large cities and know that there are many amazing sights and things to see there. Besides knowing about the urban areas many people were moving into those areas. In as early as the "1880's as much as 40 percent of the rural townships seemed to disappear" to the urban areas, this number would probably only have grown in the 1890's into 1900, when the book was published (Trachtenberg 114). One can also assume that like American urban areas, the Emerald City in Oz was where most of the people were, as it had 57,318 citizens in it (Hearn 201).

Interestingly, Baum would have known about this migration to urban areas, to what he saw America becoming, but in his portrayal of what America was he chose to have Dorothy's

home be in Kansas rather than in a more urbanized area. It is possible that he chose Kansas because he thought it would paint the bleakest picture of America at the time. Baum illustrated this bleakness with his use of color and wealth. Gray is the only color that describes all of Kansas and anyone who lives there, besides Toto and Dorothy. In fact, “the word ‘gray’ appears nine times in... four paragraphs” (Hearn 92). Besides the fact that their surroundings are gray, Aunt Em and Uncle Henry are living “in abject, not genteel, poverty,” like many other farmers would have been at this time period (Culver 99). All of this is quite bleak, but another reason why Baum may have chosen Kansas to be the portrayal of what America was around the turn of the century is because Kansas was considered “the geographical heartland of” America (Ritter 177). Yet, even the heartland was being struck by problems from every side. Baum states that the grass in front of Dorothy’s home had been burned gray by the sun, and the weather is also part of what robbed Aunt Em of her happiness (14). Thus Kansas is a very stark difference to the Land of Oz, it could even be argued that both choices—the Emerald City or the rest of Oz—for what America was becoming and what it could become were better choices than what America was. Interestingly, Dorothy does not seem to notice this as she makes her way through Oz.

Once Dorothy does make it to the Emerald City she notices that all the people “buy and sell incessantly” (Culver 102). Just like in America, capitalism is the preferred method for gaining items and making money. This is seen when Baum says, about the citizens of the Emerald City, “Everyone seemed happy and contented and prosperous” (104). Dorothy, the only actual American in the book, is so accepting “of the exchange of goods or services as the only reasonable economy” that she, herself, when making a deal with the Wizard, symbolizes capitalism and does not even question the fact that he, taking advantage of her naïveté, wants her to kill the Wicked Witch of the West for information on how to go home (Barrett 168).

Because of their capitalistic ways, the citizens of the Emerald City focus on buying very unique items, just like Americans. Instead of buying foodstuff or useful items the citizens use their “green pennies” (Baum 104) to buy “superficial” and “absolutely fictitious” items whose only value is in the fact that they are green. In other words, the items are really only valuable because they are “invested with the magical value of greenness” (Culver 102). Some Americans will also do this, and buy their own form of greenness: new-ness. Some need to have the newest iPhone or the newest car just like the citizens of the Emerald City need to have green popcorn or green shoes (Baum 103). It is interesting to note that while in Baum’s native country there is “the magical value of” new-ness (Culver 102), he instead decided to put that magical value into items that are green. The symbolism behind this is that green is traditionally “associated with money,” and money is traditionally associated with greed (Color Meaning). Therefore, while the citizens of the Emerald City do buy and sell a lot of different things, the citizens can never be fully satisfied with what they have bought, requiring them to buy more and more items, therefore the citizens are buying greed. This paints a rather unflattering view of the citizens of the Emerald City as well as Americans in general.

Outside of the Emerald City the economic situation is very different, instead of capitalism, the areas outside of the Emerald City are more socialist than anything else. So much so that Oz has been called a “socialist utopia” (Zipes 134). In fact, “currency... is only known in the earliest of Baum’s Oz stories” and only found in the Emerald City (Hearn 202). Instead of money, the folks living outside of the Emerald City would probably rely on a bartering system or work together to help each other out instead of making people pay for what they needed. Baum, himself, seemed to live this socialist Ozite life even though he was a “self-proclaimed ‘nonpolitical’” and therefore not actually a socialist (Zipes 128). For example, while living in

South Dakota Baum opened a store, but his “generous extensions [of credit] to the drought-plagued ranchers and farmers forced [the store] out of business” (Baum v). He tried to live the way the rest of Oz lives, but, unfortunately, he was not in Oz. Another point in this view of Baum’s idealized America is that most are shown to have a directly useful job such as being a farmer or a tinsmith. The Munchkins are farmers, the Winkies are tinsmiths, and most of people in the South, besides Glinda, are also farmers.

Kansas, being in the flat midlands of America, is a land of farmers like the Munchkin lands—part of Baum’s idealized America—yet the whole attitude is different. Unlike the Munchkins, Aunt Em and Uncle Henry, the only two characters besides Dorothy and Toto in Kansas, are not happy farmers. Baum makes a point to say that Aunt Em “never smiled” and that Uncle Henry “never laughed” (14). Culver notes that they seem more like “gray automata than human companions” (100). The two seem to mimic Baum’s idea of what the typical American was, he thought that they “worked hard morning to night and did not know what joy was” (Baum 14). Thus Baum’s farmers did not enjoy living in their land.

Farming leads to another interesting comparison, which is that most of Oz, the Emerald City, and those in Baum’s Kansas eat very different things. The only food mentioned, while Dorothy is in the Emerald City is “green candy and green pop-corn” (Baum 104). Whereas, outside of the Emerald City, the Munchkins eat “delicious fruits and nuts, pies and cakes, and many other good thing” (33). And the only food from Kansas is bread (31). Culver explains the importance behind these food items by likening “them to mules who, after eating corn exclusively, have become ‘hay-hungry.’ These animals need to ingest some ‘filler’” food “of no particular nutritional value” (102). In the Emerald City—Baum’s example of an America he did not want—the citizens are only known to eat candies. Therefore, they are only eating the filler

food, which, while delicious, has no nutritional value. In contrast, Dorothy's bread from Kansas is probably very nutritional therefore Kansas—how America was—is shown to have no filler food. On the other hand, the Munchkins—Baum's ideal Americans—eat nutritional food, the fruits and nuts, as well as the filler food, cakes and pies, thus representing well-balanced individuals.

For these individuals, the governing power in Oz is specific to each quadrant in the Land of Oz, the Emerald City has the Wizard, the South has Glinda, and the East and West had the Wicked Witches; but the “political center” rests in the Emerald City with the Wizard (Ritter 194). Yet it could be argued that there are two leaders, two “political center[s]” in Oz (194). This would be the Wizard for those in the Emerald City, and the good witches for the rest of Oz, after Dorothy defeated the Wicked Witches. The Wizard is a powerful figure in Oz, and even the Wicked Witches were afraid of him. He “might be any President” and “is able to be everything to everybody” (Littlefield 54). As seen when he appears as a giant head to Dorothy, a lady to the Scarecrow, a beast for the Tin Woodman, and a ball of fire for the Lion (Baum 106-12). Since the Wizard represents the president this is a very good quality to have. Adaptability allows him to deal with any situation and any problem that is faced. This adaptability is even seen when he had Dorothy take care of his problem, the Wicked Witch of the West, because, he, himself, did not have the power to destroy the witch so he got rid of her in a different manner.

This seems to be the first positive thing that Baum has to say about the way he sees America headed, yet the Wizard turns out to be nothing more than a “humbug” (150). The Wizard is “an excellent manipulator” (Barrett 168), tricking all of his citizens, as well as the whole Land of Oz, into thinking that he is all powerful. This is something that can be seen with American presidents. They, like the Wizard, are supposed to have all the answers, all the

solutions to the problems at hand. Yet, sometimes, they have no idea what would be needed or, simply, what to do, so they give fancy speeches and almost try to trick American citizens into thinking that they've got it all under control and that it will all work out in the end. In other words, "the Wizard may not have an answer... but he is nonetheless a master at promoting" his ideas and himself, like American presidents and "satisfying" his citizens' desire "after a fashion" (Culver 103). And to retain his role as the leader, he must become, and "is more than willing to become[,] whatever" the citizens of Oz—or, in the case of the president, American citizens—"take him to be" (Culver 104). In other words the Wizard must present an illusion towards his citizens.

Like the Wizard is the key figure of what America was becoming, Glinda and the Witch of the North are the key figures in Baum's idealized version of America. Both of these witches are, in fact, witches. Unlike the Wizard, who has no magic, these two have no need for illusions because they are exactly what they say they are. The Witch of the North offers Dorothy protection on her journey with a kiss saying, "no one will dare injure a person who has been kissed by the Witch of the North" (Baum 27). Here Baum is saying that the ideal leader offers her citizens protection. Unlike what the Wizard's version of protection would be, the Witch of the North offers real protection as seen when the Wicked Witch of the West does not "dare hurt [Dorothy] in any way" (Baum 125). The Witch of the North is also a kind leader towards her own people as well as towards the Munchkins. This is a trait that Glinda shares. Glinda is also very intelligent, she is one of the only ones in all of Oz who knows what the magic in Dorothy's silver shoes is, and how Dorothy goes about using that magic.

However, there is one similarity between Glinda, a leader of the rest of Oz, and the Wizard, the leader of the Emerald City, namely she also asks for something in return for helping

Dorothy. When Dorothy asks Glinda if she will help her, Glinda agrees then says, “But, if I do, you must give me the Golden Cap” (Baum 208). The difference between Glinda’s request and the Wizard’s request is that giving Glinda the Golden Cap is not a very difficult thing, nor is it rather unlikely that Dorothy would fail in this endeavor, whereas with the Wizard’s request, she was not expected to return at all. Another difference between the two requests is that Glinda uses the wishes in the Golden Cap to help Dorothy’s friends. Therefore, Baum is saying that a good leader gives back to his or her citizens using the things they have already given to him or her. For example, in his ideal America, the government would use the taxes, represented by the Golden Cap in Oz, to directly benefit the citizens.

Probably the most interesting thing about Glinda, Baum’s idealized leader, is how she is described. Ritter notes, “she is described in the colors of the national flag” referencing Baum’s description of her “with ‘rich red’ hair, a dress of ‘pure white,’ and blue eyes” (183). In Baum’s ideal America, it appears that he believes that patriotism is a better leader than any other, and that it can be used to unite all citizens of the country. Patriotism, he seems to say, does this by breaking apart all the differing opinions and unites its citizens into one inclusive group with only one idea needed to join, which is that their country is great and is more than an illusion.

Baum’s idealized America is just that, more than an illusion, it is real, but what Baum thought America was becoming is not—it is an illusion. “Indeed,” Barrett notes, “Baum was convinced that America was founded on illusion” and he was not pleased with that. Just like what Baum believed about the up and coming America, the Emerald City was also “founded on illusion” (169). Everyone had to wear green glasses to “maintain the myth of the metropolis” (157). These glasses are a key part of the story and seem to say: sometimes all is not what it seems in America and in the Emerald City. Yet, the leaders continue to have their citizens wear

green glasses. Even after the Wizard is discovered to be a fraud hiding behind “a façade of papier mâché and noise” (Littlefield 54), and when the Scarecrow begins to rule the Emerald City the citizens still wear the glasses. The glasses’ “power is perfected and not compromised by the scene of exposure and enlightenment” (Culver 104). Thus suggesting that the citizens of the Emerald City and the United States “like to be deceived” (Barrett 169). Whereas, in the rest of Oz, the folks enjoy a world that is real and not filled with illusions of any kind.

Kansas, what America was, is also a land not filled with any illusions, in fact Baum’s Kansas is shown to be too real. While in the Munchkin lands and the South the fact that the lands are real leads to prosperity and joy, in Kansas it leads to poverty and depression. Even when Dorothy is in Oz, Dorothy’s Kansas “reality is never far from [her] consciousness” (Littlefield 57). This can be seen in her reason to return home, she explains, “Aunt Em will surely think something dreadful has happened to me, and that will make her put on mourning... I am sure Uncle Henry cannot afford it” (Baum 208). Death almost always adds an element of reality to any situation, and living in bleak Kansas, this contributes to it being even more real than it was before. Not only the supposed reality of Dorothy’s death would plague Aunt Em and Uncle Henry, but “even the rites of death are a luxury in Kansas” one Dorothy knows they would not be able to afford (Ritter 177). The fact that Kansas is too real is also seen by the lack of happiness in the characters there. This reality robbed Aunt Em of “the sparkle” in her eyes and “the red from her cheeks” as well as her youth. It changed Aunt Em so much that when she hears Dorothy laugh she wonders how Dorothy could have anything to laugh at (Baum 14). This reality makes it seem as if Aunt Em has no stories or any jokes that she could find fun and amusing. Dorothy, would also be joyless, like her aunt and uncle, if Toto wasn’t there to add a whimsical element to her reality that was lacking in Aunt Em’s (Baum 14). Therefore, Baum

thought that how America was, was a place that was too real, too poor in spirit, and needed to change.

Baum's assessment of how America was and what America was becoming—and it could be argued became—was quite critical, on the other hand, his idealized America was just that: idealized. It is quite clear that Baum saw the need for change in America but he did not want the Emerald-City-like America. He probably also noted how “the end of the nineteenth century saw a shift in American political” and everyday “culture from a[n]... ethos of equality” to an “ethos of management and governance” (Ritter 196). In other words, a change from the ethos of Baum's ideal America to the ethos of his Emerald-City-like America. This change can be seen as Dorothy goes from the Munchkin lands to the Emerald City. Yet it would appear that Baum is arguing for a return to the Munchkin lands as he has Dorothy go to the South, which is a lot like the Munchkin lands. The South values the things the Munchkins value and the only real difference lies in the fact that while Glinda's domain is also mostly farmers, things seem to be more organized and urbanized than the Munchkin lands. Therefore Baum wanted a return to the time when everyone was doing a hands-on job and when good values and reality—not illusions—were the main ethos for the country. He wants to leave the Emerald City and make it to the Land of the South—a better America. While America hasn't made its way to the Land of the South yet, Baum did “install hope in millions... who are led to believe that the experience of a trip to Oz may help them transform conditions at home” (Zipes 127). As each person comes in contact with *The Wizard of Oz* they are able to try and change America to be a better country and one day, with the help of everyone, America will make its way into the Land of the South, just like Dorothy.

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