

1939 Film Version of *The Wizard of Oz*: A Girl's Initiation Trip

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Introduction

The Wonderful Wizard of Oz (*The Wizard of Oz*)(1900) by American writer L. Frank Baum has been enchanting people throughout the world for decades.¹ It is also frequently abridged and adapted to other media: films, stages, cartoons, comics, and picture books. Before and after Baum's death, about forty film versions appeared. Among them, the MGM film *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), starring the iconic Judy Garland with her dazzling performance, has been especially popular.² Directed by American filmmaker Victor Fleming, it is said to be the most beloved American children's film ever made.

In this paper, I deal with the 1939 film version of *The Wizard of Oz*, especially focusing on Dorothy Gale, the protagonist of the story, and her spiritual growth, comparing the film with the original story, referring to the American era Baum had lived.

In the Land of Oz

The opening scenes are depicted in black and white. Dorothy, who lives in poverty with her Aunt Em and Uncle Henry on a farm on the bleak Kansas prairie, happens to be taken through the air by a cyclone with her house and her dog Toto to a fantasy world.

After Dorothy's house lands in the Land of Oz, a colorful fantasy world appears before her. Is this real or not? Dorothy seems to wonder, but is not so surprised. The Land of Oz is quite different from Kansas. Dorothy discovers that her house has

¹ Baum did not imagine that this book would lead to a series before publishing his first Oz book, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. Because of the book's popularity, Baum wrote thirteen more Oz books before his death in 1919. Moreover, the series has continued with different authors: Philip José Farmer's *A Barnstormer in Oz* (1982), Geoff Ryman's *Was* (1992), and Gregory Maguire's *Wicked* (1995), among others. The recent hit musical play *Wicked* is based on Maguire's novel.

² The official website is: <<http://thewizardofoz.warnerbros.com/>>.

landed right on the Wicked Witch of the East, killing her. After this incident, the diminutive Munchkins rejoice at the death of the Witch and thank Dorothy because they had been enslaved by the Witch for a long time. Glinda, the Good Witch of the North, welcomes Dorothy as well.³ At Glinda's behest, Dorothy puts on red shoes that the Wicked Witch of the East wore.⁴ In the story, Glinda is a fairy godmother, a kind of a guardian, for Dorothy.

This place is where Dorothy dreamt about: "Somewhere Over the Rainbow." This is where Dorothy wished to come, but we are shown that now her only concern is to return to Kansas, and the entire story describes her quest to return home to her Aunt Em, Uncle Henry and friends. Glinda advises Dorothy to follow the Yellow Brick Road to the Emerald City to ask the Wizard of Oz to make her wish come true. Dorothy is told that he is the most powerful wizard in the Land of Oz, and he will help her return to Kansas.

Following the Yellow Brick Road, she encounters three companions, each of whom laments some perceived deficiency in their own characters. The first is a Scarecrow, whose wish is to have a brain – he wants to be smarter. The second is a Tin Woodman, whose wish is to have a heart – he wishes to have feelings. The third is the Cowardly Lion, whose wish is to have courage – he wants to be an admired lion. Dorothy tells them that the Wizard of Oz will be able to fulfill their dreams, so these three decide also to go to the Emerald City to have the Wizard bestow them their essential feature: a brain, a heart, and courage. On the road, her three companions help her and share her adventures.

In the Emerald City, the Wizard of Oz is obliged to welcome the four. Actually he is not the Wizard, but pretends to be one using mechanical devices and illusions. Listening to the four's wishes, the Wizard promises to grant their requests only if they will take away the broom of the Wicked Witch of the West in Winkie Country, where the Winkies are ruled by the Witch. The Wizard thinks they cannot do it. The four have no choice but to head for the Country to steal the broom from the Witch. In finding it, fortunately Dorothy splashes water on the Witch, which causes the Witch to melt entirely away.

After taking the broom, the four go back to the Emerald City, but they discover that the Wizard of Oz is not a real wizard but a con man from Omaha, Nebraska. Everybody in the Land of Oz believes that he is a great and powerful wizard.

³ In the original novel, Glinda is the Witch of the South.

⁴ In the original novel, the color of the shoes is silver.

Actually his power is illusory. This time he cannot use his magic tricks and cannot make their dreams come true. However, he is thanked by the three (except Dorothy) because he let them believe that their wishes had already been fulfilled. By the end of their trip to the Emerald City, the four have grown spiritually: The Scarecrow has used his brain for the other three; the Tin Woodman has used his heart for them; and the Cowardly Lion has used his courage to help them. Through their trip and their friendship, they learn that they have attained their wishes.

To help Dorothy, the Wizard suggests that he take her home himself in his balloon. In spite of her joy, she cannot go with the Wizard because her dog Toto jumps out from the balloon on takeoff. The Wizard goes to Omaha alone, leaving Dorothy behind. But with instructions from Glinda, Dorothy clicks her shoes together three times so that she can transport herself back to Kansas. Dorothy has attained the power to transform her own condition at the end of the story, not depending on others.

A World Filled with Vivid Colors

The film enlarges the world of the original story because it uses picturing strategies of vivid colors on the screen. The film begins with the gray world of the prairies in Kansas. After Dorothy's arrival in the Land of Oz, a vividly colorful world appears in front of her. The film contrasts gray with color.

In *The Wizard of Oz*, colors are important. Each color has its own image. The Yellow Brick Road, which leads to the Emerald City, is yellow. The Munchkins who live in the East prefer blue. The color green is especially important; it is a recurring image. In the Emerald City, which is the center of the Land of Oz, everything is green. The City is controlled by the Wizard of Oz, who behaves like a wizard but is actually an ordinary American person like Dorothy. In the original book, Emerald City citizens are required to wear green-colored glasses in order that they can see everything in green by the Wizard. That is why everything appears a resplendent green. This decree shows Oz's duplicity. On the other hand, the color of the face of the Wicked Witch of the West is also green. Green also symbolizes wickedness. Poppies are red in this story. Since ancient times, it is believed that poppies put you to sleep. Dorothy's shoes are also red in the film.

The Colors of the Rainbow

In the first black-and-white scene in Kansas, Dorothy sings the song "Somewhere

Over the Rainbow.”

Somewhere over the rainbow
Way up high
There’s a land that I heard of
Once in a lullaby

Somewhere over the rainbow
Skies are blue
And the dreams that you dare to dream
Really do come true

Some day I’ll wish upon a star
And wake up where the clouds are far behind me
Where troubles melt like lemondrops
Away above the chimney tops
That’s where you’ll find me

Somewhere over the rainbow
Bluebirds fly
Birds fly over the rainbow
Why then, oh why can’t I? ⁵

Why does Dorothy want to go over the rainbow and visit the land beyond? The rainbow has seven colors. In the gray world in Kansas, she adores colors with a utopian longing. The song reveals her wish to escape from there. She is not satisfied with the world she lives in. However, even if one attempts to go over the rainbow, it cannot be realized. Actually the closer you get to the rainbow, the fainter it gets. Using the image of the rainbow, we see the futility of Dorothy’s dream.

In the Land of Oz, we can say that Dorothy’s dream has come true. But even the Land of Oz is not an ideal world. In the Land of Oz, she is given trials and obstacles to overcome.

⁵ From the script of *The Wizard of Oz*.

Kansas, the Gray World

The place in Kansas where Dorothy lives is a dry, flat and featureless prairie. We can see its gray world from the following parts in the original story.

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 a flat country that reached to 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 everywhere. 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.⁶

Even human beings are gray:

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 her eyes and left them a sober gray; they had 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.⁷

We see that everything is gray from the description. The color gray reflects the wasteland where it is hard to live. Baum's novel was influenced by the poor economic and agricultural conditions of Kansas in the late 1880s and early 1890s.

Baum's Background and America in His Era

L. Frank Baum had a dramatic side in his life. He was born in New York. Like

⁶ L. Frank Baum, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, pp. 1-2.

⁷ L. Frank Baum, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, p. 2.

many Americans at this time, Baum turned to the West. After his marriage he moved to Aberdeen, South Dakota, and kept a store, which failed in 1890 because he was too generous with the poor people there, especially children. After that, he became a journalist. As an editor of *The Aberdeen Saturday Pioneer*, he wrote on politics and current events in the late 1880s and early 1890s. Baum was disturbed by the Gilded Age, which glossed over the desperate economic plight of farmers and workers, especially in the Midwest.

Then he moved to Chicago and founded the trade journal *The Show Window*. At the same time, Baum was encouraged by his mother-in-law to write children's books. In writing, he felt happiness.

It seems that Baum was not satisfied with the place where he lived. Like other Americans, he was driven from the East to West Coasts in search of a better American life. That is why his last destination was Hollywood, California in 1909. It was his final frontier. For Baum, Hollywood seems to have the utopian features of Oz. It was supposed to be his ideal place. He thought that the technology of films was like magic. Inspired by the novel film industry, Baum and his friends started their own studio to film Baum's stories. In the beginning, filmmaking for him was a fantastic project. The company created three of his tales: *The Patchwork Girl of Oz*, *The Magic Cloak of Oz*, and *His Majesty, the Scarecrow of Oz*. But despite his passion for films, his company failed financially. The world of films is just a place where one can superficially forget one's own plight. He realized the harshness of the real world. Though Baum was as interested in films as he was in new inventions and ideas, in the end he became disappointed with them as well.

Motifs from Fairy Tales and Juvenile Literature

To enlarge the world of fantasy, Baum utilizes a number of motifs from fairy tales and children's books: the motifs of the Brothers Grimm's fairy tales, Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, among others. Baum admired *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, saying that "the secret of Alice's success lay in the fact that she was a real child, and any normal child could sympathize with her throughout her adventures."⁸ In these fairy tales and books, the prepubescent heroines overcome many difficulties and trials and grow into womanhood. Watching the 1939 film, one is reminded of the description in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* when Dorothy

⁸ Michael Patrick Hearn, ed., *The Annotated Wizard of Oz*, p. 38.

wears a blue-and-white dress similar to Alice's. Unlike in Baum's book, in the movie version's last scene Dorothy awakens like Alice, signifying that the Land of Oz has been her dream. According to Jack Zipes, "Many literary fairy tales are already adaptations because they are translations that comprise some kind of adaptation in language and references to different cultural contexts."⁹

Dorothy's Fantasy World

Dorothy encounters the fantasy world. Without realizing it, she uses the fantasy world as a means of withdrawing from the wilderness of her real, ordinary life in Kansas. In a sense, Dorothy retreats into her subconscious. Her imagination is stimulated by her escape from the poverty and boredom before her, but in addition to that Dorothy's prepubescent psychic state is reflected in the world she creates.

By contrasting the fantastic and real worlds, Baum depicts a girl's inner growth. The story of Dorothy's death/rebirth and her initiation process is described. Even in the fantasy world, the child has to overcome obstacles to personal development.

Labyrinth

The cyclone which brings Dorothy to the fantasy world of Oz is a kind of labyrinth. It reminds us of one of the Greek myths in which the Athenian hero Theseus kills the Minotaur, a mythical creature that is half-man and half-bull. He is helped by Ariadne, who gives him a skein of thread, which he binds to the entrance to the labyrinth. This helps him to escape from the labyrinth after killing the Minotaur. For Dorothy, Glinda is her Ariadne and the Wicked Witch of the West her Minotaur.

In the first scene of *The Wizard of Oz*, Dorothy is taken through the air by a labyrinthal cyclone to a fantasy world and in its last scene, she is involved in a labyrinthal strong wind and reaches her home in Kansas.

It has been believed that one who enters a labyrinth traces it all the way to the center. In its center, one can find one's new self. According to Miranda Bruce-Mitford, "Labyrinth is compared to the complicated life. Entering a labyrinth means to die, and getting out from it means rebirth."¹⁰ Reaching the center of a labyrinth, one symbolically dies and is reborn as a new self, and returning to the entrance again is to accomplish one's rebirth. For Dorothy, the labyrinth is a path for the Land of Oz.

⁹ Jack Zipes, *The Enchanted Screen: The Unknown History of Fairy-Tale Films*, p.8.

¹⁰ Miranda Bruce-Mitford, *The Illustrated Book of Signs and Symbols*, p. 34.

In the story, we can find mazes as well. What is the difference between a labyrinth and a maze? In the case of a labyrinth, one can reach the center and get out from it. The entrance and the exit are the same. Originally, a labyrinth is a one-way path. In the case of a maze, once inside, one finds it difficult to reach the center and get out from it. In the Land of Oz, Dorothy is in mazes. The path to the Emerald City, the Yellow Brick Road, is a maze because it forks off in several directions. Which path should she take? She is required to choose. In another maze which is the Land of the Wicked Witch of the West, Dorothy has to accomplish a task assigned by the Wizard: She must take the broom of the Witch. Summoning up her courage, she proceeds along the corridor, and in the room she finds a broom. But on her way back to the entrance, she happens to be found by the witch. But the Witch dies because Dorothy pours water to douse the Scarecrow's flames and splashes the Witch. The Witch melts because of the water. Dorothy finds that water is the Witch's weakness. Thus Dorothy can clear the hurdle imposed by the Wizard.

The structure of the labyrinth is like a vortex. Anyone who reaches the center of the labyrinth needs to turn back to the entrance. Dorothy gets into the labyrinth through the cyclone, and its center is the Land of Oz. After attaining autonomy, she can turn back to the entrance: her home in Kansas. In sum, being able to get out from the labyrinth means rebirth to another, higher phase: growing into adulthood. The child in her self dies and is reborn as an adult.

A Girl's Initiation

In the Brothers Grimm's *Snow White*, Snow White's death occurs because she has eaten a poisoned red apple given by her stepmother, and the seven dwarfs cannot revive her. They lay her in a transparent coffin made of glass, which is accidentally found by the Prince. Attracted by her beauty, the Prince decides to bring her back to his castle. But one of the Prince's angry attendants happens to drag Snow White from the case and strikes her, and at that moment, the poisoned piece of the apple is dislodged from her throat, and Snow White recovers. In the end, she gets married to the Prince. Bruno Bettelheim points out that "As she eats of the red part of the apple, the child in Snow White dies..."¹¹ It is important to notice that the child in Snow White dies symbolically. The apple's red color symbolizes her menarche. Through her rebirth, she becomes a woman.

¹¹ Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, p. 213.

In *Sleeping Beauty* by the Brothers Grimm, the Princess ascends a labyrinthal circular staircase and enters a small room where an old woman is spinning. The Princess touches a needle, pricks her finger, and as it bleeds falls into a sleep. The bleeding symbolizes her menarche. After hundred years, she is awakened by a Prince, gets married to him and enters adulthood.

Little Red Riding Hood is swallowed by the wolf, dies symbolically, is cut out of the wolf's belly by the hunter and is reborn. Even though it is a wolf, she symbolically returns to the womb and is reborn into another phase. This shows her symbolic death and rebirth. As some critics have pointed out, the red color of Little Red Riding Hood symbolizes her menarche. According to the interpretation by Bettelheim, "Little Red Riding Hood's childish innocence dies as the wolf reveals itself as such and swallows her. When she is cut out of the wolf's belly, she is reborn on a higher plane of existence; relating positively to both her parents, no longer a child, she returns to life a young maiden."¹²

In Dorothy's case as well, we can understand that the child in Dorothy dies through her trip to Oz. It is symbolized by her sleep in the red Poppy Field. From ancient times, red poppies have symbolized sleep, death and rebirth. Dorothy is rescued by the Scarecrow and the Tin Woodman in the Poppy Field scene. Otherwise she would sleep forever.

Dorothy wears red shoes. Do Dorothy's red shoes symbolize her menarche? By experiencing menarche, a girl steps toward womanhood. Does it symbolize her changing process from a girl to a woman? In the last scene, she does not wear red shoes. Her shoes fall off in the desert and are "lost forever."¹³ A woman who can accept the reality of the world of Kansas no longer needs red shoes.

After repeating the words, "There's no place like home,"¹⁴ Dorothy falls unconscious. This represents Dorothy's symbolic death. After that Dorothy is reborn and surrounded by her family and friends at home. Dorothy has reached the center of the labyrinth and accomplished her rebirth. She returns from the center, which means that she is becoming a spiritually grown-up woman.

In the Land of Oz, Dorothy encounters three peers, each of whom wishes for a brain, a heart, and courage. We can say that these three are Dorothy's doubles. On the way to the Emerald City, the Scarecrow makes good suggestions and proposes

¹¹ Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, p. 213.

¹² Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, p.183.

¹³ L. Frank Baum, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, p. 83.

¹⁴ From the script of *The Wizard of Oz*.

thoughtful ideas. The Tin Woodman shows caring emotions to Dorothy. He always encourages her. In the Poppy Field, he weeps openly, realizing he cannot do anything for the sleeping Dorothy. We can say that he becomes a compassionate man. The Cowardly Lion can do anything for Dorothy. He gets into the castle of the terrible Witch of the West to help Dorothy. Through their trip, they attain what they wish to have. If they are her doubles, it means she also attains these qualities.

The opening and closing scenes take place in the gray world of Kansas. However, there is a difference between the two. In the last scene we find that home is the best place for Dorothy, and she accepts her life with Aunt Em, Uncle Henry and friends even if it is harsh. Through her trip to Oz, she can understand and change conditions in Kansas, and she comes to sympathize with the people there. Jack Zipes writes about Dorothy's difficulties and growth through her trip in Oz:

Dorothy is “wizened” by her trip through Oz, and Baum knows that she is stronger and can face the drabness of Kansas. This is why he closes the book in America: Dorothy has a utopian spark in her which should keep her alive in gray surroundings.¹⁵

The Land of Oz is the world in which Dorothy can fulfill her dream, i.e., she can go “Somewhere over the Rainbow.” However, she finds that even in the fantasy world there is plenty of adversity to overcome. She loses the chance to get in the Wizard's balloon, but she discovers that she can get back home by herself. At the end of the story, we find that she goes back home not because she is homesick, but because she accepts Kansas and is determined to live there. She realizes how happy she would be with Em and Henry although they are not her real parents.

Even in a fantasy world, you have to get what you want yourself. At first the Scarecrow, Tin Woodman, Cowardly Lion, and Dorothy want somebody to fulfill their dreams for them. But if you yourself try to fulfill them, you find that you can. In the course of their journey, they grow spiritually and understand that they can grow through their own acts. *The Wizard of Oz* is not a Cinderella story. The prince never appears to help you. Even if you are a little girl, you need to help yourself.

¹⁵ Jack Zipes, *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion*, pp. 127-128.

Conclusion

For Dorothy, the cyclone is connected to the World of Oz where she can find a new, vividly colorful world. In this world, she gets the chance to grow spiritually with the help of her peers – the Scarecrow, Tin Woodman, and the Cowardly Lion. These three symbolize intelligence, compassion, and bravery. Dorothy's peers attain these qualities in the process of their trip to the Emerald City. It means that Dorothy attains the qualities of intelligence, compassion, and bravery as well.

We notice that the closing scene is as gray as the opening scene. But for Dorothy this is not the same gray world she left. Despite her longing to go to the place “over the rainbow,” after landing Dorothy is obsessed with returning to Kansas. It is like homesickness. But near the end of the story, she wholeheartedly wishes to return to Kansas. For the spiritually grown-up Dorothy, the gray Kansas has a different meaning. She will no longer escape from the real, ordinary world. We can say that she has become old enough to accept living in poverty with Aunt Em and Uncle Henry in gray Kansas.

As we have seen, the Land of Oz is an Americanized fantasy world. It, however, is not necessarily a comfortable world. Not all the people in Oz are good people who help her. The obstacles she has encountered there symbolize her inner dilemma, and she has had to overcome them to pass into adulthood.

In this way, the film depicts the process of Dorothy's initiation trip, in which a girl becomes a woman and achieves autonomy. Dorothy symbolically dies in the red Poppy Field, goes to the Emerald City, and after being unconscious returns to the real world as a reborn Dorothy. This means her growth from prepuberty, and her red shoes symbolize her menarche. She realizes the importance of cooperation with friends and understands that she can overcome difficulties using her brain, her heart, and her courage. After experiencing the fantasy world, Dorothy understands that she has to accept the real world—her harsh home background. Paradoxically the real world is a more precious place than the fantasy world. Thus we can find a girl's initiation and growth in *The Wizard of Oz*.

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Filmography

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