

# Comparison of wizard of oz and hairspray gender issues

Literature



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Gender roles are central issues within the musicals *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming, 1939) and *Hairspray* (Adam Shankman, 2007). The differences between the representation of males and females may, in part, be as a result of the shifting ideologies in the USA in two different historical periods.

In the *Wizard of Oz*, the central protagonist (Dorothy Gale) is a female. At the start of the film, Dorothy is shown to be “in the way” of the male farm workers. This could suggest that the female realm within the film is confined to the domestic sphere of the house. This is further supported by Dorothy being trapped by the tornado but possibly more significantly in her farm house. It is possible to argue that the context of the film - pre- second World War and the civil/equal rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s, both of which arguably changed the ideology of female roles - is reflected by Dorothy’s role in the narrative. In other words, her journey to Oz in the family home could reflect a dominant American ideology about women in the 1930s; a ‘good’ girl will become a housewife and homemaker.

Dorothy’s journey through Oz however could be seen to challenge this ideology as she breaks free of the ‘grey’ world of Kansas, literally steps out of the home and embarks on a ‘Technicolor’ journey through Oz. Her vocalised desire to ‘fly...over the rainbow’ could therefore be an allegory for the frustrations of young females who believed that their destinies were mapped out for them by the expectations that they would become wives and mothers, ultimately confined to the domestic sphere. Ultimately, however, the resolution of the film delivers a crushing blow to the notion that Dorothy may well be something other than a housewife as she accepts “There’s no place like home”. It could therefore be argued that, just as Dorothy learns this

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lesson in the course of the narrative, the film encourages viewers to accept the ideology that a woman's place is in the home; which could be problematic for an emancipated female audience in 2010.

In contrast, the protagonist (Tracy Turnblad) in *Hairspray* may be a more palatable representation of a female for a modern audience. At the start of the film, like Dorothy, Tracy dreams of a better life. However her opening song is 'Baltimore'; a song which is addressed to, rather than in the case of *The Wizard of Oz*, rebuking her home. Perhaps Tracy's acceptance of her ability to become a star within her hometown reflects a wider message that many women have choices in 2007 and they do not need to find a 'rainbow' to change their lives. Equally, unlike Dorothy, Tracy not only achieves her dream by the resolution of the film but is able to counteract different challenges to a liberated female.

In a narrative which is essentially centred around marginalised characters trying to gain acceptance, Tracy offers not only a representation of a strong and ambitious female, but also challenges expectations about ideologies concerning the female physical form and the nature of female beauty. The latter issue, it could be argued, is a more relevant topic for an audience in 2010 than the issue of equal rights for females as the 'size zero' debate dominated American journalism in 2007. The historical setting of the film in 1960s America could therefore be a way of showing the audience how far female liberation has come, but suggesting that women are still face (but ultimately, in Tracy's case, can overcome) limits, put forward by the television and film industry, in relation to physicality.