

Baum's land of oz: a reflection of a corrupt america



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Though regarded by many as a harmless children's tale, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* was crafted by L. Frank Baum to convey an allegory of the Populist Party during the 1890s and to illustrate his concerns about the American government. Baum pinpointed the apparently negative direction of the country through the characterization of Oz and the symbolism of the cyclone, the green spectacles, the Tin Man, the Cowardly Lion, and the Scarecrow. The three companions of Dorothy are included in the story not only to provide assistance along the way of her journey, but also to present subtle hints to readers of their resemblance to characters of the Populist Party, further extending the allegory that Baum had devised.

The characterization of Oz supports Baum's distaste of the American government because of his inability to properly rule over his people. Oz is depicted as a selfish and greedy ruler. His main priority is not what it should be, his people. When Oz is revealed, he says, "I have fooled everyone so long that I thought I should never be found out. It was a great mistake my ever letting you into the Throne Room. Usually I will not see even my subjects, and so they believe I am something terrible." (82). Oz is cowardly and ashamed of his humbuggery, so he hides behind the screen and admits to doing this because he is worried about what his people think of him. This reflects the actions of American leaders because both are unable to understand the priorities of their leadership, instead they are over consumed in their sham of a government. Although Oz shows characteristics of a poor leader, he proves his intelligence by demonstrating an act of imperialism over the Wicked Witch of the West. In Tuerk's article, "Oz in Perspective: Magic and Myth in the L. Frank Baum Books," it is explained that Oz "at first

guessed that the wicked Witch of the West was as big a humbug as he was and consequently thought, like a good American imperialist, that he could extend his reign into her country” (Tuerk 39). He is crafty with his actions and demonstrates qualities of a smart leader by taking advantage of the Wicked Witch of the West. American leaders, like Oz, were crafty with their manipulation of the government and the corruption of the Populist Party. Baum mirrors the actions of Oz to parallel the sly actions of America. Dorothy can see through Oz's humbuggery and makes him feel ashamed. She tells him that he is “ a very bad man” (81). By Dorothy being brutally honest to Oz, he is able to know that he is in trouble and that his sham of being a Wizard is going to be ruined. She represents the American people during the 1890s and she is frustrated with the leadership of her country. By portraying Oz as a cowardly humbug, Baum is able to make it evident to the reader that he is unhappy with America's leadership.

Moreover, the symbolism of the cyclone as a rebirth of America and the green spectacles as a shield of protection to Americans is related to the ideas of populism and the government during the 1890s. The occurrence of the cyclone represents the abundance of change that America (Dorothy) undergoes. Kansas is described during the cyclone as “ very dark, and the wind howled horribly around her ... but Dorothy sat quite still on the floor and waited to see what would happen” (7). Because of the cyclone, Dorothy faces a drastic change and anticipates what will occur, similar to what the American people experienced during the 1890s. The government fooled people into thinking that the system was working, similar to what Oz does to his people. Oz explains what the green spectacles are and says, “ But my

people have worn green glasses on their eyes so long that most of them think it really is an Emerald City, and it certainly is a beautiful place, abounding in jewels and precious metals, and every good thing that is needed to make one happy." (Baum 81). Oz admits to brainwashing his people into thinking that their city was the best and efficiently thriving, when really it was not. Like Oz, America recognizes the mistakes made with the concept of free silver and how much of a failure the Populist Party was for the country. The cyclone and green spectacles further mirror Oz after Populist America during the 1890s.

Dorothy's companions throughout her journey are seen to represent various members of the populist movement. The cowardly lion represents William Jennings Bryan. When Dorothy first meets the lion, she tells him that he is "nothing but a big coward" (30). This mirrors Bryan because he was depicted as being somewhat cowardly for opposing war against Spain. The tin man is seen to portray industrial workers, specifically those who work with steel. When Dorothy rescues him, he is moaning in pain- "I have been groaning for more than a year, and no one has ever heard me before or come to help me" (24). His state of pain reflects the industrial workers state of pain during the depression of the 1890s. The brainless Scarecrow represents the midwestern farmers, whose years of pain and hardship created a sense of self-doubt. When Dorothy first meets the scarecrow, he explains his appearance- "You see, I am stuffed, so I have no brains at all" (18). The scarecrow is seen as brainless, like how the farmers felt because of the pain they were forced to endure due to the negativity brought about by populism. These three characters are helpful to Dorothy and also to Baum because they represent

key people of the Populist party that make clear connections between the book and the 1890s.

Baum includes certain symbols and characters in order to illustrate an allegory of the 1890s. Thus, he conveys his concerns with how the government is running and with the corruption of populism to America. Oz and Dorothy are depicted to represent America and its leadership, and their characterization reveals the severity of populism's adverse effects. Such an allegory is presented in a creative and subtle way so that it is not painfully obvious, but the connections are still clear to a discerning reader.

Works Cited

Baum, L. Frank. *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. N. p.: Peoria and Chambers, 2015. Print.

Tuerk, Richard Carl. *Oz in Perspective: Magic and Myth in the L. Frank Baum Books*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2007. Print.