

**The Allegorical Significance of
The Wizard of Oz**

Richard Bloodworth

Film 370

Georgia State University

Dr. Kay Beck

The motion picture *The Wizard of Oz* is one of the most seen movies in the world. Directed by Victor Fleming, who also directed another great American movie *Gone with the Wind*, the filmed musical odyssey boasts immense popularity as well as surreal, allegorical dream imagery which invites critical analysis and subjective interpretation of its content. Other movies may be grander in scale or more somber in tone but none are more intriguing or wide ranging in philosophic scope. The 1939 MGM movie (there were several stage and film adaptations of the classic written by L. Frank Baum in 1900) should be added to the list of a select few great American movies such as *2001*. The reason for its broad appeal and permanence in the public's collective consciousness range from its value as light entertainment to its depth of disguised philosophical introspection. Meaningful to people of all ages, *The Wizard of Oz* contains, as does any great work of art, many levels of meaning; each viewing provides new insight to the viewer.

As children's entertainment combined with adult social satire, the movie invites comparison to Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, a Blakean song of innocence and experience, not unlike mathematician's Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass* where naivete and worldliness collide. Like John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* and Homer's *The Odyssey*, *The Wizard of Oz* is a journey toward self-realization which is the basis of most religion and, like Voltaire's *Candide*, a journey and conflict between optimism and pessimism. Besides being an entertaining thought trip, the film is technically well-crafted, a unique assemblage of visual and performing talent with plenty of what Susan Sontag would call camp humor – a cult movie for the masses.

The central characters each allegorically embody basic human characteristics, an allegory

being a collection of literary symbols corresponding to real life attributes and characteristics. Dorothy's innocence, the Scarecrow's ignorance desiring knowledge, the Tin Man's romanticism, the lion's timidity desiring self confidence and courage, the good witch's goodness, the Wicked Witch's evilness and jealousy, the Wizard's Machiavellian quest for power through devious means, and the Munchkin's collective subservience all combine to form the story's meaning. The witches' personification of good and evil could correspond to the concept of God and Satan in Judeo Christian ideology. The film seems to be about each person's pursuit of happiness through self- actualization and the obstacles that slow the quest.

After our being introduced to her Kansas farm life and the farm hands, Aunt Em, Uncle Henry, mean Miss Gulch and Professor Marvel, Dorothy is transported with her dog Toto via cyclone to a strange environment for which she had not been prepared. From the somber gray of Kansas to the Technicolor land over the rainbow, Dorothy steps into a world of sterile, plastic perfection, the nonexistent Utopia of Oz. As she surveys the new world, geometry's most perfect shape, the sphere, floats toward her and is transformed into the Good Witch Glinda who explains to Dorothy what has occurred: Dorothy has unknowingly killed the Wicked Witch of the East when her house landed in the land of Oz. The cute and freaky Munchkin's come out of their hiding place and thank Dorothy for saving them from their slavery to the witch. In the midst of the celebration the Wicked Witch of the West appears and vows revenge toward Dorothy for causing her sister's death. Dorothy asks the Good Witch, after the Wicked Witch has exited, how to get back to Kansas and is instructed to follow the yellow brick road to the Emerald City to consult with the all-knowing, omniscient, and powerful Wizard of Oz. On the road Dorothy meets and musically encounters the Scarecrow, the Tin Man, and the Cowardly Lion who are comically conveyed by Ray Bolger, Jack Haley, and Bert Lahr. Since one wants a brain (he

really means a mind and the ability to think), one a heart to be able to experience human emotions like love, and another wants courage; the three allegorical figures roughly correspond to the Greek philosophy of developing the attributes of mind, body, and spirit. The four of them with Toto march onward to meet the Wizard and encounter obstructions to their goal mostly generated by the Wicked Witch of the West. When they finally meet the Wizard they are instructed by him that in order for him to satisfy their requests they must first satisfy one of his which is to bring him the broomstick of the Wicked Witch of the West which essentially meant for them to kill his rival so that he could gain more power. The request is similar to a political figure instructing his subjects to kill for him during times of war. The green-skinned, jealous, and life-taking witch is eventually destroyed accidentally by the life-giving substance water by Dorothy who was kindly trying to help her. Dorothy is subsequently praised as a heroine by the witch's former subjects.

As an analysis of power and the fragility of the human beings who hold those positions of authority the Wizard could represent a mysterious, hidden paranoid capitalist, like Howard Hughes, who behind the scenes controls his subjects' lives. His language is spiced with economic jargon as when he refers to Dorothy liquidating the witch and desiring to return to the land of E Pluribus Unum. By satisfying the Wizard's desire for more power the four characters are superficially rewarded. The Scarecrow is given a false diploma for a mind, the mechanical Tin Man who brings to mind one of T.S. Elliott's Hollow Men receives a mechanical heart as unromantic and unnatural as an implanted artificial heart in humans, and the lion is given a medal for bravery for a deed he did not commit. Dorothy is given a trip back home. In a fairy tale rewards are given without dedication or earning through work as through simply wishing and magical processes but does not nature contain its share of not yet understood "magical"

processes that science can not explain? Also, wishing or dreaming precedes reality; first someone must have a dream or idea and then translate the concept into reality through some form of labor.

Dorothy represents innocence, beauty, and childlike curiosity and is well portrayed by Judy Garland. The sex of the voyager is irrelevant; I personally would have identified with the movie more strongly if the protagonist were male but whether Dorothy or a mischievous Tom Sawyer or Huck Finn is scooting down the yellow brick road is unimportant since the quest for self actualization is universal and transcends sexual roles.

The dream imagery found in the *Wizard of Oz* invites critical analysis. The author, Baum claimed he only wrote to please children but we all have the child we once were within us and some may argue that we are all children at this stage of the evolution of the species. Deceptively simple treatment of a complex idea and the existential quest for self actualization lift the movie above mere entertainment for children. Dream metaphors are used often in art and literature from *A Midsummer's Night Dream* to *The Tempest*. *Macbeth* and *Julius Caesar* involve dream imagery and witchcraft as does Hamlet's "To be or not to be" soliloquy. The land of Oz could correspond to the religious metaphor of Heaven, that unattainable Shangri La beyond the rainbow. One possible explanation is that Dorothy's dream was not a dream at all but a temporary descent into madness since Dorothy believed she actually was in Oz. Psychologists inform us that schizophrenics are unable to dream and, not having that outlet to ventilate irrational thought, are unable to differentiate reality from fantasy. But assuming that the dream actually occurred, the movie could be viewed as everyone's journey into their unconscious and the resolution of personal and social conflict. The idea may have been most succinctly stated in the children's cycle song lyric: Row, row, row your boat, life is but a dream.

Bibliography:

The Wizard of Oz, 1983; Schoccken Books, by L. Frank Baum and critical commentators

The Oz Scrapbook, 1977; Random House, David L. Green and Dick Martin

To Please a Child, 1961; Reilly and Company, Russell P. MacFall