

The Secret That Lies Within *The Wizard of Oz*

The Wizard of Oz is one of the most well known American movies even today. The film was released in 1939 and stars Judy Garland as Dorothy, a girl who leaves the world of black and white and enters into the mysterious colorful world of Oz. She must search, with the help of her new friends, for the Wizard of Oz, who will help her get back home to Kansas. The movie was based on the book called *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, by L. Frank. Baum, which was published in 1900. What most people do not know about the book is that, it is thought, Mr. Baum turned his children's story into a book that was based on the Populist Movement in the United States and the Election of 1896. The book and the film are allegories, which is "a representation of an abstract or spiritual meaning through concrete or material forms; figurative treatment of one subject under the guise of another; a symbolical narrative." The movie, *The Wizard of Oz* is an excellent representation of an allegory because of the various symbols, characters, and scenes that are associated directly with the economic and political problems of the Populist Movement and the Election of 1896. In the big picture, the Populist Party was not very successful, but they were able to be heard and they began what would later be known as the progressive period "which greatly changed American society and the role of government."

In the late 1800's in the United States, the Industrial Revolution was booming in the East and many immigrants were being pulled to America because of jobs opportunities and development and there were many big businesses, factories, and banks that were producing a lot of goods. Life seemed all good and well on the eastern part of the United States, but was this the case in the Mid-West?

Times were hard and tough for the average farmer who was working on the farm. They had to deal with problems on the farm such as: not having enough building materials to build houses; plowing the farm lands was difficult due to the thick roots in the ground; lack of water; and the difficulty of heating homes in the winters. All of these problems were simple were solved by using sod to build houses, using the John Deere Steel Tip Plow to plow the fields, constructing windmills to pump water, and burning buffalo "chips" (manure).

These problems were small and simple problems and the farmers found ways to deal with them, but these problems would not add up to the problems that were ahead of them.

There were four main problems in the United States for the farmers: falling prices of farm goods; high grain elevator prices; high railroad rates; high interest rate from banks. Because of technology, farmers could grow and harvest more products. The prices of these products, such as corn, wheat, and cotton, dropped because there was more of each product. This was good for the average American consumer because prices were low, and they were able to get more of each item, but this was very harmful to the farmers because the money that comes from the crops was the farmer's main form of income. The second problem was high elevator grain prices. After the products have been harvested, the farmers had to store them in grain elevators until they were ready to be transported by railroad to other towns and cities. The grain elevators usually had a monopoly because in most cases there was only one grain elevator in each town. The railroads, which the grain elevators were owned by, had no competition and raised the prices as they pleased. This was the same case for the railroads: there was monopoly. Railroads were the fastest and most efficient way of transportation in the late 1800's, and charged their costumers high rates.

When a farmer started a farm, he had to borrow from the bank and he did so throughout the year until the harvest season, where the farmer would get most of his income for the year. When the farmers saw that their prices of crops were falling, they got scared because their interest rates for their loans fixed, meaning that the amount of the loan always stayed the same. This made it even harder for the farmer to pay back the loan and they would be stuck in a circle of debt.

To try to solve this problem of falling into debt, the farmers formed the Farmer's Alliance or cooperatives, to work together to get their resources in large quantities, to get lower prices (ex. Buy fertilizer in large quantities and then split the fertilizer up between the farmers). The idea of forming a cooperative was a very good idea, but it did not work as much as the farmers would want it to. Businesses would often not agree to sell their products at a discounted rate, even though one farmer would want to buy the product in a large quantity. Even the fed up farmers had countless attempts to get their word out about their debt problem to

Washington D.C. to be heard, but were only brought down by the politicians, who were supported by many big businesses and banks and did not care about the farmers. The Farmer's Alliance decided that if they could not get their word out by talking to politicians, then they would become politicians. The Farmer's Alliance ran their own political campaign, the Populist Party or also known as the People's Party.

The Populist Party had four main goals in their campaign: Government control of Telegraph Service; Government Control of Railroads; the Eight (8) Hour Work Day; and the Free Coinage of Silver. The farmers felt that an average person should have the opportunity of using a telegraph and communicating with the world and if the government owned the telegraphs, then the cost of the usage of the telegraph would decline. The farmer's wanted the government to own the railroads because then they would be able to pay a fair amount of money, since there was usually a monopoly. If the government would own the railroads, then the price of the rates for the grain elevators would also drop because the grain elevators were owned by the railroads. In order to have enough voters to win the election, the Populist Party decided that they would throw in the Eight Hour Work Day goal in their campaign to appeal the thousands of industrial workers and get more votes! The most important issue of the Populist Movement and the farmer's biggest goal was the Free Coinage of Silver. As farmers were facing a drop in product cost, they were going into debt. If silver was counted into the country's currency, then the money supply in the United States would go through the roof and inflation would happen, meaning that the prices of the products would skyrocket, making it easier for the farmers to pay back their money to the banks, and thus placing the farmers out of debt.

To fully understand and comprehend the economic and political problems of the farmers, you must understand the basic terminology of economics. As was stated before, farmers were producing more crops due to technological advancement, thus making the price of goods go down because there was more of each product. This made it extremely difficult for the farmers to pay back the fixed loans from the bank. This was the era of deflation. Deflation means that there is "a general decrease in the price of goods and services in the economy" and that the dollar is worth more, because one dollar can buy more goods. The borrowers (the farmers) lose the most during a period of deflation because they have to pay back the bank in more valuable dollars that

they could buy more than in what they borrowed. Inflation is the opposite. Inflation means that there is “a general rise in prices within the economy” and the dollar will lose value since one dollar can buy fewer goods. The lenders (banks) lose the most in a period of inflation because they loan dollars that are worth more and that are more valuable, and get paid back in dollars that have less value. The farmers would rather have inflation because they could pay back to the bank in cheaper dollars. The banks would rather have deflation because that would receive more valuable dollars than they lent out.

The amount of money in circulation is one of the biggest things that interfere with inflation and deflation, but there are many more factors that contribute. Inflation is caused if there is more money in circulation. There are higher prices and people have more money to spend. In deflation, there is less money in circulation, which brings down prices because there are fewer dollars in the economy to spend. Deflation was bad for the farmers since they were getting less profit for their crops and were struggling to pay back their fixed loans to the bank. The Old American System of money was called the Gold Standard. The currency of the Country was in gold and every dollar produced had to be backed up by gold and the economy in America was experiencing deflation because of the Gold Standard. Gold was now getting very scarce and rare, meaning that the circulation of money was low because there was not a lot of gold to back up the money. The low amount of money in circulation caused prices to go down, which was bad for the farmers because they owned a lot of money to the bank. To correct the deflation problem, the money in circulation had to be increased. If the country used silver and gold to back up their currency, there would be more money in circulation. The answer was using bimetallism- silver AND gold. There was a lot of silver mining in the country and there was a lot of it. This would make prices go up and cause inflation. The idea of using the silver and gold as the United States currency was called Free Silver and this was one of the main issues of the Populist Party, but there was a long fight between the farmers and the banks. Banks and big businesses wanted to stay with the Gold Standard because it would keep prices somewhat low and they would earn more money. The farmers wanted to use the Free Silver policy because there would be more money in circulation, which would cause inflation and make it a lot easier to pay back the money that they had loaned to the banks.

The main battle of the election of 1896 was the debate between that gold/silver currency. The candidate for the Democrats was William Jennings Bryan and the Republican candidate was William McKinley. It took a lot of money to run a campaign and to be elected as president in the 1800's and the Populist Party joined forces with the Democratic Party, William Jennings Bryan, to run their campaign. Every idea that the Populist Party had on their agenda went on Bryan's list of things that he would do if he was elected president, including Free Silver. The big businesses and banks did not like the idea of using silver and gold as the nation's currency because they would lose money. They did not support Bryan, but supported McKinley because of his strong Gold Standard stand. The big businesses and banks gave him lots of money to run McKinley's campaign so he was sure that he would win. The banks could not let their money be jeopardized or have any thought that Bryan could win.

The outcomes of the presidential elections of 1896 were very close. Republican McKinley received 7,104,779 popular votes (51%) and Democrat Bryan, with the Populist Party right behind his back, received 6,502,925 popular votes (47%). Bryan was hoping that he would get a lot of votes from the industrial workers because of the Eight (8) Hour Work Day idea. It is shown on election maps that Bryan got his votes from the South East, South, Mid West, and some parts of the North West. In the South and the West there are many farmers and the majority of them would vote for Bryan because if Bryan won then the United States would use Free Silver. In those states that voted for Bryan, there are fewer people, meaning that there are going to be fewer electoral votes as oppose to states in the northeast which have a lot of electoral votes. It is implied that the industrial workers did not vote for Bryan since many of the industrial states voted for McKinley. This is possible because some of the worker were told by their employers that they will be fired if they would vote for Bryan. People can say this because the majority of people who voted for William McKinley were in the North East because there are a lot of big businesses and banks that would want to stay with the Gold Standard.

There were many immigrants in America during this time period, and most of their votes went to McKinley. Many of the immigrants lived in the East and worked in factories. There were also political machines that would work for a particular candidate by doing "favors" for the immigrants. Then, these people would then guide and persuade the person that they were helping, to vote for the particular candidate.

McKinley, who had a lot of campaign money, because of his attitude towards the country's currency, was able to do these favors, unlike Bryan, who did not have a lot of money going towards his campaign.

Though the Populist Party were able to merge and work with the democrats and have William Jennings Bryan to act as their voice in the 1896 elections, they did not win the election. William McKinley won the Gold Standard prevailed. The Populist Party soon faded, but their ideas were kept alive. Before this election, it was seen as almost impossible for the Populist Party to even be considered elected for president or even get their people in the governmental areas. The party elected only eleven governors and forty-five members from congress between the active years of the Populist Party (1891-1902). In the big picture, the Populist Party was not very successful, but they were able to be heard and they began what would later be known as the progressive period “which greatly changed American society and the role of government.”

The story of *The Wizard of Oz* is an allegory, meaning that the movie represents something- the Populist Movement and the Election of 1896. It is hard to believe that someone can decipher symbols, characters, and scenes from a children's movie and tell the story of a very important era in American history. An important thing to remember is that “the film represents what could have happened if all of the pieces fell in place for the farmers”, but we know that is not what happened in reality.

Symbols can have many values and can mean many different things, especially in the *Wizard of Oz*. The little munchkins told Dorothy in a sweet and cheery voice, “*Follow the yellow brick road! Follow the yellow brick road!*” What does this mean? The Yellow Brick Road, which was to be the only way to get to Emerald City, stands for the Gold Standard. Emerald City stands for Washington D.C. and the Yellow Brick Road is the only way to get there because the city was a place of big businesses that supported the Gold Standard. Yellow can be used as another name for gold and gold was stored in bricks or blocks. In the original book version of *The Wizard of Oz*, Dorothy and her new friends go on going on the Yellow Brick Road that has holes in it. The fact that the Yellow Brick Road has holes in it represents the problems of the gold standard that the farmers in the West were facing. The road was dangerous and unsafe and was filled with hazards, such as the agricultural problems and deflation. The Yellow Brick Road was a dangerous, just like the Gold Standard was for the farmers. With the Gold Standard running, farmers had a higher risk of losing their land and profits because they

were having a harder time paying back the banks. There was gold that was missing from the road, and in reality, in order for more money to be produced, there had to be more gold to back up the money, which was not happening on the Yellow Brick Road. This is what got the farmers thinking to form cooperatives and eventually got them the courage to go to Washington D.C. and have William Jennings Bryan speak for the Populist Party to change the course of the currency in the United States so the farmers could have a better life. With all of the growing problems growing around the farmers (The Yellow Brick Road), they had to come to a conclusion that if they did not fix the holes in the Yellow Brick Road (The Gold Standard), then they would grow farther and farther into debt.

The farmers in the late 1800's disapproved of the Gold Standard because they wanted inflation. The Gold Standard would not allow that to happen because Gold was scarce and rare and could not fill in the holes. The prices of the farmer's products were decreasing and they were having a hard time to pay back the banks the money that they owed because of deflation. To fix the problem, another metal had to be placed in the holes that there were in the Yellow Brick Road. The Ruby Shoes are a symbol in the movie that has a very significant meaning to the Populist Movement because they are the missing piece in the puzzle that could have helped the farmers significantly in the long run. In the book, the shoes are silver, not a sparkling ruby color as they are in the film. The silver slippers represent using silver as a part of the nation's currency. Dorothy, who was the unifying force and represents the Populist Party, skips down the yellow brick road with her silver slippers and shoes that represent Free Silver. Dorothy (the Populist Party) brings the silver to be used to fill up the missing parts of gold in the road. Free Silver was the usage of both gold AND silver as the nation's currency. Free Silver would allow inflation to occur, prices would go up, and the farmers would have an easier time paying off their loaned money to the banks, but there were some people who were not happy with the farmer's proposition.

The Wicked Witch of the West represents the big banks and businesses. She is green and ugly and stands for money. During the whole movie, she is after Dorothy's silver slippers, which represent Free Silver. The banks and big businesses did not even want to hear the idea of Free Silver and they did not want to let William Jennings Bryan to win the election of 1896 - the Free Silver would be in works and the banks would lose lots of valuable money. In the scene in the castle, where Dorothy is rescued by her friends, the Witch taps

them all inside the castle, making it almost impossible to escape. For the second time, the Wicked Witch of the West tries to kill the scarecrow by burning him with fire. Dorothy quickly reacts to this by spilling a bucket of water, saving the scarecrow, but also splashing the Witch with water and making her melt to her death. “*You cursed brat! Look what you've done! I'm melting! melting! Oh, what a world! What a world! Who would have thought a good little girl like you could destroy my beautiful wickedness? Ooooooh, look out! I'm going! Ooooooh! Ooooooh!*” were the Wicked Witch of the West’s final words as Dorothy watched her melt to the ground. This may be an only a famous quote from the movie, but it means a lot more. Since the story is based on what would have happened if the Election of 1896 had fallen in favor of the farmers, the quote in that scene has a meaning: No one thought that the Populist Party would win the election because they had very little supporters. They had very little money to run their political campaign since they were not supported by the big businesses and banks. Everyone thought that the farmers were weak and have little or no chance to survive and flourish their ideas and propositions. The Populist Party (“*a good little girl*”) would have destroyed the banks style of living with the Gold Standard (“*beautiful wickedness*”).

By Dorothy, saving the scarecrow, who represents the farmer, and killing the Witch, who represents the banks, it shows very important scene that relates to what the farmer’s would wanted to happen in the Election of 1896 . The farmers, who wanted Free Silver won and the use of the Gold Standard died out. Inflation would now be possible and the farmers would be happy.

The Wizard of Oz later refers to the phase that Dorothy “liquidated” the Witch of the West. This can be deciphered into two very different interpretations. When banks or big businesses go out of business, the term “liquidation” is used say that the banks are “melting and their power is being taken away from them”. William McKinley was greatly funded by these banks to run and persuaded the people of the United States to vote for him for president and to continue the practice of the Gold Standard. With the banks being “liquidated” and being no longer able to support him, McKinley would have lost the presidency to William Jennings Bryan and he would fulfill the dreams of the Populist Party with the start of the Silver Standard. In addition, McKinley had no money from the banks then he would not be able to pay the political machines to do favors for the industrial workers/immigrants. There would be very few people who would vote for him since the majority of the

population was made up from industrial workers. This is if the Wicked Witch of the West is considered to be the big mean banks and businesses. The other interpretation of this scene is that if the Witch is categorized as the “difficult environment of the West”. In the late 1890’s there was a drought in the West that caused many farmers to be driven out of business because they could not pay back the banks all of the money that they owed. That was due to the fact that the farmers were not able to produce no or very profit because of the it was extremely difficult to grow crops. When Dorothy kills the Wicked Witch by throwing a bucket of water on her, this resembles the “liquidizing” of the banks or rainfall on the farmlands and end of the drought and signifying the start of the irrigation movement. In that same scene, after the Wicked Witch is killed, the guards of the Witch are happy at Dorothy for killing the Witch. These soldiers represent the farmers that were owned by the banks because they could not pay back their loans. We know this because the guards sing in the movie “All we own, we owe.” When the Witch was killed the farmers were freed from the banks, making it now easier and possible to pay back their debt to the bank because prices of their products went up, and the dollar had a lesser value than before.

The poor Tin Man was rusted up and needed oil, but what he said that he really needed was a heart. He had no emotions and was not caring. The tin man represents all of the "dehumanized" industrial workers who worked in the factories on the eastern part of the United States. Many industrial workers in the late 1890's were immigrants who has just come to the United States and where given favors and controlled by the political machines of McKinley. Their employers and the Political Machines forced the industrial workers vote to for McKinley. Knowing of needing more votes to win, the Populist Party decided that they would include an Eight (8) Work Day to lure the workers into voting for Bryan. As we know this did not work in the farmers favor, but the movie shows what would have happened if everything fell in place for the farmers. In the scene were the Tin Man crowns the “Courageous Lion, who represents William Jennings Bryan and is singing about being the king of the forest, with a SILVER crown. The silver crown signifies what would could of happened if the industrial workers had voted for Bryan. Bryan would become president of the United States with the help of the industrial workers and would enforce the Silver Standard and the banks would "melt". The banks would no longer be able to support candidate for their "favors" because the banks would lose money due to inflation. The

industrial workers would now not be forced to vote for a particular candidate. The industrial workers would “receive” a heart in the sense that they would be free and be able to have their conscience tell them how to vote for. This is why the Wizard of Oz could not give the Tin Man his wish until the he and his friends killed the Wicked Witch of the West and got her broom. They had to destroy her (the banks) evilness (political machines). In the film, after the Witch, who represents the banks and big businesses is "liquidized", the Tin Man receives a heart is able to care for other people, and feel affection, rather than just caring for himself and whining that he has no oil.

The Tin Man, along with the scarecrow, who represents the farmers, is given a very important job by the Wizard of Oz. The Tin Man is told that he would rule in the West and the scarecrow would rule in the East. The symbolism of this act incorporates the equality that the farmers would have wanted. They wanted the average American citizen to be able to use the telegraphs and other devices at a reasonable price and this is what the Tin Man (industrial worker) would bring from the East to the West. The farmers would bring the Free Silver practice to the East from the West and both sides would trade their “traits” that they had.

From analyzing *The Wizard of Oz*, I was able to learn many different things. The most interesting thing that I learned from watching *The Wizard of Oz* is that there are many things in movies that are allegories- everything is not as it seems. (Ex. The word “Oz”, from the title of *The Wizard of Oz*, comes from the abbreviation “oz.” meaning ounce. It is referring to the ounce of gold and silver and the wizard is the President of the East. There are so many things that one can learn about history.

I really liked learning about the Farmer’s problems and the Populist Movement. Even though the movie did not show what happened in reality, the story of *The Most Wonderful Wizard of Oz* did a good job representing what would of happen if everything fell in place for the farmers I thought that this was a very interesting chapter and use the information that I learned in the classroom about real life situations, to a children’s movie that was made over seventy years ago. I really enjoy learning about history and how one thing can change everything else and I find it fascinating. In history it is not always about the dates and places of people, but rather learning the reasons behind the actions and reactions of the people in different events in time.