

## THE WIZARD OF OZ

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### Politics and *The Wizard of Oz*

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There are many variant readings of *The Wizard of Oz*. I see it as an election story, and read it against the amazingly intense elections of 1896 and 1900 when Democrat William Jennings Bryan ran against Republican William McKinley. At that time there was a profound hope by the pro-Bryan forces (silverites) that they could create a political revolution to overthrow the evils of the reactionary industrial order -- but what would the revolution be like? 1896 was a time of severe depression -- much like 1932. Making silver money at the ratio of 16 ounces of silver to 1 ounce of gold was their formula. In a vastly popular pamphlet *Coin's Financial School* the teenage fictional hero "Coin" argued there was lots of silver out West, but the world's small stock of gold was controlled by wicked bankers in New York and London.

Author Frank Baum was for a while a silverite newspaper editor in South Dakota where he watched the mounting excitement. He wrote *Wizard* during the rematch election of 1900, and it immediately became popular. After the *Wizard* book Baum moved to Los Angeles and churned out a whole series of Oz books, none of which are political. He also wrote a non-Oz novel that was a parable of the progressive era. Did people at the time see the novel as political? Yes: on October 6, 1906 the cover of *Harper's Weekly* magazine featured William Randolph Hearst ("Citizen Kane"), the newspaper editor who was running for governor. It depicted him as the scarecrow and the title was "The Wizard of Ooze."

The tale opens in the present in grey, deadening, drought-stricken Kansas. A sudden cyclone (silverite triumph at the polls) carries Dorothy (every-woman) into a flawed utopia -- a land overflowing with milk and honey yet controlled by cruel witches.

The cyclone lands Dorothy's house atop the Wicked Witch of the East, killing her and releasing The Munchkins from serfdom. (The money trust is deposed by Bryan's election, freeing the common people from bondage.)

However, the Wicked Witch of the West remains loose. The Good Witch of the North tells Dorothy that the Wizard of Oz may help her return to Kansas (to normality).

To reach the Emerald City she must follow the Yellow Brick Road, which can be safely traversed only with the magical silver slippers (gold and silver must be in proper parity). Dorothy is protected by an indelible kiss from the Good Witch of the North (an electoral mandate.)

On the yellow brick road, surely one of the most dangerous routes in American literature, Dorothy encounters the silverite constituents. First, the ridiculous

stuffed Scarecrow (the farmer), who cannot scare anyone and who fears he has no brains. Actually his behaviour shows him to be highly imaginative and responsible (so much for the ridicule of the hayseed in big-city newspapers).

The travelers then encounter a vivid symbol of the oppressed industrial worker, the Tin Woodsman. The Wicked Witch of the East had cast a spell so that every time he swung his axe he chopped off part of his body. He is entirely tin now, a purely mechanical being who fears he has lost the power to love. Alone he's helpless -- he can't oil his joints -- but in teamwork he proves effective and compassionate. (The industrial workers, dehumanized by industrialization, need to become aware of their latent compassion, and co-operate in a farmer-labour coalition.)

Finally they encounter the Cowardly Lion, who does frighten people but who says he lacks the courage to do his duty. Working together the coalition fights its way to the citadel of power, the Emerald City. The Wizard, of course, is a charlatan who tricks people into believing he wields immense power; even his Emerald City is only an optical illusion. (emerald-green paper money is likewise a delusion.)

To achieve true freedom for herself and her allies Dorothy must destroy the Wicked Witch of the West -- who enslaves the girl before being dissolved by a bucket of water. (The western elite, especially land barons and mortgage holders, are the remaining obstacle; rain relieves the drought and permits the farmer to assert his superior power.)

The story ends as the Good Witch of the South tells Dorothy that her silver slippers are so powerful that they can fulfill her every wish, and they carry her directly back home, quite without help from the fumbling Wizard. Alas the magic silver slippers are lost in flight when Dorothy returns to Kansas. Utopia thus is possible, with the proper coalition, with the mandate of the North and South, with the silverite panacea -- in the process the forces of evil will be vanquished.

With so much election literature featuring the ratio of 16 oz of silver to 1 oz of gold, the colourful utopia just had to be called Oz.

## References

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