History, Literature, Values and the Self

by Margaret Eby

There is never just one influence governing a piece of literature. The author considers how the text itself flows and creates complex meaning based on the interplay of words, annotations and connotations. He also must consider, however, his life experience; the “write what you know” mentality is constantly acknowledged. What may not be immediately apparent if not explicitly stated in the work is the cultural, historical and societal influences that played a role in the writing of the work. Whether intentionally or subconsciously, an author is constantly subjected to the structures and events of society and thus those customs and internalized thoughts of the workings of society will leak into the work. I believe that cultural context and historical influences are the largest factors in the writing of a novel.

When studying the metamorphosis of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, the original chapter book by L. Frank Baum, to *Wicked* by Gregory Maguire, there are three canonical works that stand above all other sequels, prequels, and remakes. The work that started the entire journey, of course, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, released in 1900 is essential. In 1939, the most famous adaptation of the original book was made. The movie *The Wizard of Oz*, starring Judy Garland, Frank Morgan, Ray Bolger, Bert Lahr and Jack Haley, thrust the story into the limelight and made it a true household name. The most radical adaptation is arguably *Wicked*, a novel by Gregory Maguire and released in 1995. This novel turned the archetypal story of Glinda the Good Witch, The Wicked Witch of the West, and a lost gal from Kansas named Dorothy upside down. This prequel has gained much attention for its bold and risque images, along with its edgy
and heady themes. For this reason, it must also be analyzed as a canonical work in the collection.

Based on an analysis of important events and themes in American history during the eras in which the three recognized works were developed, released, and gaining popularity, it’s impossible to ignore the effect that these aforementioned events would have had on the writing of the works. In doing this, readers and scholars beg the question of why this story was retold in the era in which it was? This story was told three major times with the same characters, and, in that, it became a practically flawless lens through which readers and scholars alike can analyze the social values and cultural customs of the era in which the story was told. Because of the very clear structures of good and evil, grateful and selfish, and lost and found, the ability to either adhere to them or completely topple them makes this fairy tale an exemplary one through which to analyze cultures and eras. Each period contained essential turning point in American culture. The turn of the century was a time of wonderment and invention. In 1939, America was just coming out of the Great Depression and trying to pick themselves up to reclaim their image as the “true America” for the world. Changing gender roles, diversity and widespread government skepticism greatly shaped the 1980s and 1990s. Each retelling of this classic tale allows the reader to look through the eyes of the current society and into the world so different from their own. *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, *Wizard of Oz*, and *Wicked* are products of their time and thus naturally contain the social values, political doctrines, and general beliefs of America at that time. The ability to look at history through this case study is a opportunity for young children, their parents, and even scholars to learn while they enjoy.
In 1900, a children’s chapter book was released to a progress-driven American public. L. Frank Baum wrote a story about a lost little girl from Kansas and her dog Toto searching for a way home. Along the way, of course, Dorothy and Toto meet a trio of misfits and, together, the motley crew travel to the beautiful Emerald City in search of The Great and Terrible Oz. This Wizard can allegedly grant the Scarecrow a brain, the Tin Woodsman, a heart and the Cowardly Lion a hefty share of courage. After some bloody run-ins with a pack of wolves, a murder of crows, and a swarm of black bees, the quartet do as the Great Wizard had commanded and kill The Wicked Witch of the West. Though they come to find out that The Great and Terrible Oz is actually a fraud and farce, they are empowered in knowing that the qualities they desired, had been theirs all along. Dorothy is finally granted her wish of returning to Kansas and lives contentedly with her Aunt Em and Uncle Henry.

The turn of the century was a major decade of progression for America. It was a time of wonder, change and invention. Americans were hungry for new and beautiful advances and weren’t being disappointed. To preserve literature’s prevalence in the face of such large-scale scientific and industrial evolution, L. Frank Baum felt that particularly children’s stories needed to make the same strides. Believing such, he set out to create a new fairy tale. He had grown tired of the tales of old and the terrifying lengths they took in order to teach its readers a lesson. He felt “a series of newer ‘wonder tales’ in which the stereotyped genie, dwarf and fairy are eliminated, together with all the horrible and blood curdling incidents devised be their authors to point a fearsome moral to each tale” was simply necessary (Baum xiii).

Not only did he want to modernize children’s literature so it could keep up with the wondrous growth in the country, but he also wanted to capture the spirit of the American public
and the era in which they were living. Baum wanted his “wonder tale” to be pure entertainment, a magical extravaganza that America could fall in love with. “It aspires to being a modernized fairy tale, in which the wonderment and joy are retained and the heartaches and nightmares are left out” (Baum xiii-xiv).

In this time of wonder and innovation for United States, L. Frank Baum lived in one of the most eclectic and thrilling cities. During his formative years of authorship, Baum was living in Chicago. Perhaps the most captivating comparison that L. Frank Baum sneaked into his classic lies within The Wonderful Emerald City of Oz. On May 1, 1893, the Chicago World’s Fair opened for its 179 day run. Because of its wondrous white buildings, it was “more famously known as ‘the White city’...looking to ‘out-Eiffel Eiffel” (Mauro). The comparison is undeniable. The Emerald City is an enchanting and enthralling wonderland, unlike any other place in Oz. “The streets were lines with beautiful houses all built of green marble and studded everywhere with sparkling emeralds. They walked over a pavement of the same green marble and where the blocks were joined together, there were rows of emeralds, set closely, and glittering in the brightness of the sun” (Baum 69). The “White City” of the Chicago World’s Fair is “considered by many historians as the greatest national event in American history through the year 1900” (“1890s-Age of Immigration”). “The entire enterprise served to show the world that beauty could be built upon ashes, in this case those left from Chicago’s Great Fire...” (Mauro). In the same way, the Wonderful Emerald City of Oz is a marvel like Dorothy, Lion, Scarecrow, and Tin Woodsman have never seen, a place where “everyone seemed happy and contented and prosperous” (Baum 70).
Almost forty years later, Victor Fleming and MGM Studios provided the American public with what has now become one of the most quintessential films of all time. The film adaptation of L. Frank Baum’s chapter book was released in 1939 and stayed relatively true to the original story. Though condensing was necessary, it is an accurate account, keeping with the style and spirit of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. The integral questions when considering the making of this movie are, of course, why now? What would make 1939 the appropriate and ideal timeframe for an adaptation of this classic story to be well-received?

In order for a film, book or any other form of entertainment to be successful, it must be relatable. The main character Dorothy was not the typical damsel in distress of the 1940s. She didn’t require a knight in shining armor to take her home to Kansas. She was a hearty farm girl from a region that sent nothing but hardship to its citizens in the 1920s and 1930s. Kansas has long been thought to be Middle America. In the 1930s, the Midwest, or Dustbowl, was being destroyed by dust storms and tornadoes. Uncle Henry’s farm, being in Kansas, was naturally prone to being taken and wrecked by tornadoes. It is not at all far-fetched that Dorothy would be swept away in a massive dust storm. It just so happens, however, that this one led not to devastation and the loss of quality of life, but rather to a fantasy land in which our story takes place, further emphasized by the visual switch from the drab sepia tones of Kansas to the vibrant Technicolor of Oz” (Burger 7).

The 1930s were a time of extreme hardship for American society. After the crash of the stock market in October of 1929, America was in the Great Depression. On November 8, 1932, Franklin Delano Roosevelt was elected president after the inconsequential presidency of Herbert Hoover and began his presidency with the iconic phrase, “We have nothing to fear but fear
itself.” Throughout his first of four terms, his weekly Fireside Chats, the New Deal Act, the creation of the CCC, and various other civic organizations provided the means necessary for America to pull itself out of its depression and get back on its feet. By the end of the 1930s, when this film adaptation came out, America was well on its way, if not almost completely recovered. There were prosperous hopes in the future, despite the looming world war across the ocean. The prosperity of America at this time provided many benefits for the success of *The Wizard of Oz*. Societally, when we are richer, we are able to indulge more in entertainment and various other frivolities. The American population would be more inclined to treat themselves to a movie.

Further, the film itself provides images of prosperity, freedom and the ability to succeed as individuals. The wealth of the Emerald City is gorgeous, opulent and appealing, but the more important concept that Americans could hold onto was the image of empowerment that lies within the main characters and the freedom they then provide to the Winkies after killing The Wicked Witch of the West. Dorothy, with the help of her new friends, the Cowardly Lion, the Scarecrow and the Tin Woodsman, pulls herself out of a predicament and finds her way home. Even more importantly, the end of the film tells each of the main characters that what they desired, they had all along. The Cowardly Lion had great courage; the Scarecrow had a wise and cunning mind; the Tin Woodsman had an immense heart. These images empower the audience to look inside themselves and find that which they are seeking that can help them succeed.

Riding on the high of America’s political and economic recovery, the film *The Wizard of Oz* was an icon for American prosperity and good fortune. As America was struck by and tried to muddle through the social revolution and turmoil of the following decades, however, it
seemed to be an appropriate time to retell the story once more. These experiences called for a much different re-imagining of L. Frank Baum’s classic, and this appeared in Gregory Maguire’s novel *Wicked*, released in 1995. This edgy and somewhat controversial novel is not a remake, but rather a prequel to the story of Dorothy’s plopping in and journey through Oz. He sets out to explain the lives of Glinda the Good Witch from the North and The Wicked Witch of the West. Maguire also gives supporting characters, like The Wicked Witch of the East who gets killed and whose death provides the ruby slippers that propels the original plot, and The Great and Terrible Oz, a closer look. Through his novel, he gave a third dimension and background to the characters that had become America’s two-dimensional archetypes for good and evil. Moreover, Maguire wrote *Wicked* in an attempt to discover and deconstruct the true meaning of the word “wicked.” He wanted to analyze how society views wickedness versus good, free will versus predestination, and the structures of thought in society and in individual readers. Maguire, in doing this, created a world that is surprisingly, both subtly and obviously, very much like our own.

Word War II and the proceeding decades brought significant changes to the role of women in American society. Women on the home-front of the war were required to take the jobs that men could no longer hold. They entered a prominent office in the workplace, empowered by icons like Rosie the Riveter and Eleanor Roosevelt. Not long after, the nuclear, saccharine families of the 1950s were burst apart by the drug, sexual, and feminist revolution of the 1960s supporting bra burnings and free love for any and everyone. This wild counterculture was followed by women’s mass exodus for the workplace in the seventies. Throughout these decades, women were not only gaining physical ground in America’s patriarchal society, but
fashion trends changed severely over these decades as well. No longer were women required to have tiny waists to fit in flowing skirts and feminine blouses. Fashion was becoming more androgynous as women began to wear pants and suits. Archetypal roles of women continued to be broken down as the millennium came to a close in politics, business and even changing fashion trends as women gained a more prominent role in power.

Gregory Magire’s *Wicked*, focuses heavily on women in power and twisting gender’s structural roles. The book follows the life of the Wicked Witch of the West, Elphaba, and her search for identity, acceptance, eventual acknowledgement of her difference, and her rise to power through that. Maguire presents this widely feared character “as a flawed, fascinating woman and adds a texture and sinister undertone to Oz that had to this point remained peripheral at best” (Burger 10). There are many powerful women throughout the book besides Elphaba as well. Galinda, Elphaba’s boarding school roommate and reluctant friend becomes Glinda the Good Witch of the North, a force whose authority we already know because of *The Wizard of Oz*. In the religious and political words, Oz continues to be focused on women. Between the Kumbric Witch, the great Ozma and Lurline, the control always seems to lie in the hands of a woman, until the Great Oz invades. Women of great power in *Wicked*, regardless whether she uses it for “good” or “evil,” seems to profoundly exemplify the advancement of women in American society through the 20th century.

Turning to the book, one of the main issues and plot movers becomes the fact of and fight for Animal rights. In a world where there are animals and there are Animals, there grows a different dynamic of hierarchy. When the Wizard aims for the mockery, dehumanization—or possibly de-Animalization—and elimination of Animals throughout Oz, Elphaba joins the fight to
protect them. This thrusts Elphaba into hiding and shady activity. Elphaba leaps into the throes of the fight for Animal rights, and it leads her through the first in the most mysterious chapters in her life. The question is, however, why would Gregory Maguire choose to make the rights of emotional and psychological creatures such a turning point in the book?

America’s signature reference in the world, besides Superpower, is The Melting Pot. The eighties and nineties saw rapidly growing diversity in race, religion, sexual orientation and socioeconomic status. There was a greater sense of both alienation and acceptance that nurtured generations. In this case study, the growing dynamics of diversity are reflected in the hierarchy of Oz. Not only are there disparities between the different races—Munchkinlanders, Winkies, Quadlings, and Ozians—but there is the larger conflict between people, Animals and animals. There are factions of people that accept Animals and believe in their value as a part of society, but, as stated above, the government thinks very differently. The grand theme of diversity, acceptance and fighting for beliefs on either side evokes images of America’s previous and continuing problems with tolerance between races and other classifications of people, particularly as the 20th century came to a close.

The government’s lack of tolerance and nonchalance when disenfranchising or cutting off certain groups of people wasn’t the only cause of public cynicism. For this and the previous generation, political problems, ‘which are replete with examples of governmental failure or suggestions of governmental ineptitude” (Zukin et. al. 26) have been a source large-scale political distrust. The past 30 years, have seen crucial scandals and crises that have led to the deconstruction of the faith that younger generations have in the political system. Not too far in the past, this country has experienced and dealt with the Cold War, the JFK assassination,
Watergate, the Iran-Contra Affair, the controversial Vietnam war, the rise of the personal scandals of politicians. These political catastrophes “[sent] the message that politics and government meant back-room deals, investigations, and partisan attacks” (Zukin et. al. 28). Though there have been times of success throughout the past few Presidential administrations and Congressional majorities, the broad-ranging sentiment is one of political skepticism. The “youth of the 1980s and 1990s came of age at a time when government was disgraced...were subjected to a political environment that basked the government and politics and a disjointed national agenda that failed to provide a focus” (Zukin et. al. 29).

Gregory Maguire demonstrated the discontent of the American public through the political landscapes of Oz and the characters he highlights within that realm. The Great Wizard’s role turned into a similar mistrusting situation in the land of Oz. It’s wondrous and magical to land in a place by hot air balloon, and to be received as wonderful by the people. He was immediately given power and respect, lauded as a great being. It comes to be known, of course, that he is a fraud that does not legitimately care about the different peoples of Oz. The Wizard makes movements toward war, creates unrest in his land, and tries to create distraction through institutions such as the pleasure faith and Philosophy Club. The political landscape of Oz is one of suspicious activity, constant plight, and political mistrust that brings to mind the beliefs of the generations currently inheriting the political world.

The strength of influence on each of the three most important works in the journey, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900), *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) and *Wicked* (1995) is conclusive and indisputable. History is an unavoidable source of information and influence of thought. The societies in which L. Frank Baum, Victor Fleming and Gregory Maguire lived tremendously
impacted how their individual works were written and adapted, socially and politically. Why? Each man felt they had a duty to retell this story reflecting the time and needs of Americans which they recognized and wanted to fill. The characters could reflect strict structures in gender roles and how we classify good and evil, as *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* and *The Wizard of Oz* film do. It could contradict and deconstruct our society’s long standing structures as Gregory Maguire’s *Wicked* does. Because of the wide variety of ways to approach this story, it is an ideal narrative through which we can look at society.

Throughout the course of the turn of the century, the era of the Great Depression and our recovery, and the late part of the twentieth century, great advancements were made in society. The zeitgeist of each era is contained in each canonical work. Whether considering the social values, the political actions, or the needs of the American public, each retelling illustrates the changing times of the era in which it gained popularity. The readers have the chance to read the same classic story through the lens of a different time, a different society, one with far different values than their own. When analyzing literature whether novel or otherwise, it is impossible to ignore cultural context. *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, *The Wizard of Oz*, and *Wicked* were heavily influenced by the politics and societal advancements of the time. As with any analysis of history, there is not only potential to look at the values and structures of American society in a certain time period. These tales require the reader to analyze the nature of the stories we tell and how their themes shape our culture. They make us draw into ourselves and explore our true identities and roles as individuals in the grand schemes of society.
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