

Some of you might recall the old time radio broadcaster named Paul Harvey who used to tell stories containing little known facts on a variety of subjects but what he was most famous for was the ending line in his story, “and now you know the rest of the story.”

Well, I'd like to share with you the extraordinary story behind America's first fairy tale—The Wonderful Wizard of Oz. The children's novel was written by Frank Baum in 1900 and became a movie in 1939 but it wasn't until 1956 it was re-released on television in Technicolor that The Wizard of Oz finally captured its place as a permanent part of American popular culture

And even though The Wizard of Oz was published over 115 years ago there are many underlying themes in the story that we can relate to today. On the Surface The Wizard of Oz appears to be a simple children's fantasy story but there is much more to the story than meets the eye

Many scholars and literary sleuths believe Baum's story is actually a clever allegory, which simply means that it is a story that can be interpreted to reveal a hidden meaning, typically a moral or political one. So to help find some of the hidden themes in The Wizard of Oz lets travel back in time to the late 1800's and examine the economic and political climate of America at that time

Frank Baum was born in upper state New York and grew up with a certain degree of privilege but in his mid-30's, which was considered middle aged back then, he experienced –“go west fever” and left his comfortable lifestyle. He moved with his wife to Aberdeen, South Dakota where he started a couple of businesses that all failed miserably

But Baum's business failings were not entirely his fault because times were really tough in the 1890's due to a prolonged depression. Many businesses had gone bankrupt, a terrible drought in the Midwest had decimated many farms, a large number of factories had closed and unemployment was rampant.

And from these tough economic times sprung a new political party called the Populist Party and even though the political party is not around today the term populism still is. In the 1890's populists thought of themselves as an anti-elitist group opposed to the established mainstream parties of the day and some of their main ideas were:

- Populists strongly believed in monetary reform and they wanted money to be based on silver because then the money supply could not be manipulated by private banking entities like what we now call today the Federal Reserve. Which by the way is as federal as federal express but that is another topic for another day.
- Populists tended to be strong supporters of the women's suffrage movement. In fact, Frank Baum's mother-in-law, Matilda Gage, was one the founding leaders of a Woman's right to vote and in The Wizard of Oz all the strongest figures in the story are women.
- Populists also had a strong following in the teetotaler or anti-alcohol movement.

- And Populists believed that establishment politicians were either helpless pawns or willing accomplices to the banking and industrial powers.

So now we have a little background about America in the 1890's so let's examine The Wizard of Oz story to see if we can discover any populist themes

In the very beginning of the movie a tornado picks up Dorothy's house with her in it and sweeps it from her bleak farm in Kansas. The tornado is thought to symbolize the populist cyclone that was sweeping across the farm belt during the 1890's. Dorothy represents the individualized ideal of the American people and she is the epitome of the girl next door. Dorothy is everything that is good about America

The tornado slams Dorothy's house on top of the wicked Witch of the East killing her which leads to a joyous celebration by the Munchkins because they have finally been set free from the witch who had enslaved them.

The Munchkins are the little folks. They are you and me, and the wicked Witch of the East symbolized the Wall Street bankers who many people in the populist movement believed were engaged in a conspiracy to make the little people nothing more than wage and debt slaves.

After a few adventures Dorothy embarks on a journey down the yellow brick road to Emerald City hoping to find the Wizard in hopes that he can help her return back home. After traveling a few miles she meets the brainless Scarecrow who symbolizes the honest but naïve Midwest farmers who do not have the wit to understand how they continue to lose their farms to the banks, even though they work day and night growing food to feed a hungry nation.

Next Dorothy encounters the Tin Man who is an unemployed woodchopper and has no heart. He represents the industrial workers and the Tin Man's entire body has been replaced with metal parts, thus the Tin Man is dehumanized by machinery (he is robot-like with no heart). He is also in constant need of oil in order to just function and the oil symbolizes liquidity or money which is very similar to the modern day notion of living paycheck to paycheck

Even though Baum wrote the Wizard of Oz before the federal income tax law I think it is an interesting coincidence that T—I—N from the Tin Man is also the acronym for—Taxpayer Identification Number. Everyone has a T I N, which forces us by law to pay our hard earned money to a wasteful, and in my humble opinion, utterly corrupt government. But I digress—

As the journey continues Dorothy's party picks up the Cowardly Lion who represents the politicians who have the power of congress and the constitution to confront the witches—or the banking and industrial complex—and change America into a better place. But as any sixth grader with a little common sense knows, the politician's lack the courage to do so.

Finally, Dorothy and her party arrive at the Emerald City which symbolizes the populist's desire to march to Washington, DC and seize power. Once in Emerald City they encounter the omnipotent and powerful Wizard. Initially, the Wizard of Oz is quite majestic and awesome but later he turns out to be nothing more than a fraud.

The Wizard is not a wizard, rather he tricks people into thinking he is powerful when in fact he is nothing more than a little man without the power people assume he possesses. The Wizard represents the presidents of the era with the idea being that they appear to the American people in one form but work behind the scenes to achieve their true ends.

Since the Wizard of Oz was published over 115 years ago America has changed drastically but as much as it has changed the more it has stayed the same in terms of its political and monetary systems.

So ends the behind the scene story of this famous American fairy-tale. Its true message might have been lost to the mists of time, but its message is no less pertinent now than when it was originally written. In my opinion the Oz tale is best viewed as a satirical representation of the populist movement and a condemnation of a corrupt, possibly psychopathic entity, called Washington, DC.

For those less cynical than me, The Wizard of Oz certainly can be viewed as a wonderfully wholesome and entertaining American story

Either way as Paul Harvey used to say, "Now you know the rest of the story."