

The Wonderful Wizard of Oz



Frank Baum was born in New York, the seventh of nine children. His family was in the oil business. He was a pampered child, due to his family's wealth and his heart condition. Before becoming a children's author, Baum had a number of professions ranging from actor and journalist to chicken breeder. He often went bankrupt in his other professions, but his children's books sold so well that he became a full time writer for children. His first children's books were *Tales from Mother Goose* (1897), *Tales from Father Goose* (1899) and *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900), illustrated by Willian Denslow. This Oz book was such a big success both among critics and the public, that Baum continued to publish one Oz book a year. Baum tried to stop writing Oz books after *The Emerald City of Oz* (1910), but his non-Oz books wouldn't sell, so he continued extending the Oz series.

In his introduction to *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900), Frank Baum wrote that the story was written:

... solely to please the children of today. 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 admired and was aware of the European fairy tale tradition (Perrault, Andersen, Grimm). He actually said that "the winged fairies of Grimm and Andersen have brought more happiness to childish hearts than all other human creations". However, he thought that this tradition was now "historical", and the time had come for "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 by their authors to point a fearsome moral to each tale". So, he aimed at eliminating the crudity of European folklore and the artificiality of its magical creatures. Such artificiality was criticized by Tolkien in his famous essay "On Fairy-Stories" (*Tree and Leaf*, 1965) as that "long line of fluttering sprites with antennae".

The novel is also in the tradition of traveler tales such as a *Gulliver's Travels* and *Robinson Crusoe*. According to Tolkien, these books do not deal with fantastic

places, but with places concealed by distance which are not completely unbelievable. Thus the land of Oz, based on Kansas, conceals places like Lilliput. Its “fairies” are not creatures from the spiritual world that occasionally visit the world of mortals, but inhabitants of the land. The book is for some critics the first fairytale constructed out of American materials.

Baum had his children audience always in mind. He was convinced that children wanted action, “exciting adventures, unexpected difficulties to overcome, and marvelous escapades”. That is why he placed a big emphasis on plot and often introduced strange twists and turns. He wanted to write in a plain style which was easy to children, like that of the brothers Grimm, eliminating lengthy descriptions that bore children (Andersen). He avoids the wordplay, linguistic awareness, or intertextuality of such works as *Alice in Wonderland* or *Peter Pan*. The plainness of his prose style led some teachers to criticize the book for being badly written. His characters are flat, constructed around a single idea or quality.

The book has the circular structure found in many children’s books, as Dorothy leaves the safety of her home in Kansas to go through adventures and finally return home. This structure is also regarded as a ‘quest structure’ or ‘rite of passage’ structure.

Baum tried to eliminate the terrors characteristic of European folklore. His characters do go through some difficult experiences, but these are quite soft. His villains, the Wicked Witch, are soft too. As a critic has said: “the only punishment Dorothy is threatened with is not to dance in a pair of hot iron shoes or to be strangled by an enchanted girdle, but rather merely to do the house cleaning at the castle” (Hearn 63). Surprisingly, he creates a Good Witch, combining the traditional European figure of the witch with American optimism.

Although Baum did not create his tales to convey some fearsome moral, his work is always moral, for in the Oz books Good always triumphs over Evil.

Baum’s protagonist is Dorothy, a contemporary child with whom children could easily identify. His Kansas girl was in part inspired by Lewis Carroll’s Alice, and Baum argued that it was “fair to state that children loved Alice better than any prince or princess that Andersen ever created. The secret of Alice’s success lay in the fact that she was a real child and any normal child could sympathize with her all through her adventures”. Even if Baum admired *Alice in Wonderland* (1865), he found it too difficult in a cognitive sense for children, too ironic, sarcastic and subjective to be understood by them. This can also be said of Barrie’s *Peter Pan* (1904). Many readers have wondered whether protagonists like Wendy or Alice would be able to read the books they are in.

The Oz books are not irony free, however. There are some puns (‘juego de palabras, dobles sentidos’) in *The Wizard of Oz*, although these are not very subtle. He also uses an easy to understand irony called ‘character irony of self-betrayal’: characters

like the Scarecrow, the Cowardly Lion or the Tin Woodman desire to possess qualities they already have, as their behavior in the text shows.

Baum had always dreamed of adapting his tales for film. In 1939, twenty years after his death, the classic film *The Wizard of Oz* was released, starring sixteen-year-old Judy Garland. You may watch some trailers of it in the film's official website at <http://thewizardofoz.warnerbros.com>. Hollywood famously changed Dorothy's silver shoes to Ruby Slippers (on display at the Museum of American History in Washington). The film fills in some blanks in the novel, emphasizing, for instance, the characters of Uncle Henry and Auntie Em, who never really emerge from the background in the novel.

Sources:

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