The Alchemical Wizard of Oz

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L. Frank Baum's classic fairytale, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, written in 1900, may be one of the most beloved children's stories of the modern era. It may also, in fact, be an allegory of the mystic's journey, using classic alchemical symbols and operations as Dorothy sojourns along the golden path toward reintegration and the discovery of the Philosopher's Stone. The Emerald City at the center of Oz, for example, is a likely allusion to the Emerald Tablet of Hermes Trismegistus. But either by extreme coincidence or hidden intent, Oz closely parallels the seven operations of Azoth alchemy, which Baum would have been familiar with as a Theosophist and student of occultist Madame Blavatsky. This article offers both the student of alchemy and general Oz enthusiast an entirely new way to read *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*.

The cover of the first edition of The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, 1900.*

The Wizard of Oz is one of the most-watched movies of all time.[1] But before the 1939 MGM classic turned Judy Garland into a household name, the book that the film was based on—L. Frank Baum's illustrated picture book, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*—was a smashing success in its own right. Published in 1900 and considered the first truly American fairy tale,[2] Oz was a bit of a sensation even before Hollywood got ahold of it, selling 90,000 copies in the first two years and quickly selling out each of its first four printings.[3] Another three million copies were sold over the next few decades, and it turned Baum into a celebrity who went on to write several *Oz* sequels. One hundred twenty years later, the Land of Oz still continues to capture our imagination in pop culture references, and even as a hit Broadway musical-turned-movie, *Wicked*.

One popular interpretation of *Oz* is that it's a story about the plight of the Midwest farmer, William Jennings Bryan, and the gold standard. This was a hypothesis put forward by a high school history teacher named Henry Littlefield, who, in the 1960s, argued that *The Wizard of Oz* was really an allegory for the nineteenth-century American populist movement.[4] Littlefield's hypothesis, however, has been hotly debated by scholars,[5] and even Littlefield later acknowledged in a letter to *The New York Times* that "there is no basis in fact to consider Baum a supporter of turn-of-the-century Populist ideology."[6] While it is likely Baum could not resist a few jabs at the establishment here and there, I do not believe he intended the story to be political satire.

Was *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, then, just a fantastical story, as Baum implores us to believe in his prologue, "written solely to please children of today?"[7] Or is something else going on below the surface of Dorothy's jaunt along the yellow brick road? While we can't be certain Baum intended the story to be more than a simple fable, there is sufficient evidence to suggest

L. Frank Baum with a group of children, ca. 1914.

that, by design or inspiration, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* is a story about the mystic's path, from birth to rebirth, using well-worn alchemical symbols to show the way toward reintegration and the discovery of the *Occultum Lapidem*, or Philosopher's Stone.

A Modern Myth

Some of the most popular stories, even among adults, are those with adolescent heroes who must learn their place in the world. *Harry Potter*, *The Hunger Games*, *Star Wars*, and the entire Disney canon are but a few recent examples of how much the "Hero's Journey"[8] resonates with audiences of all ages. One could argue that as older religious myths lose their cultural foothold, they are being replaced with modern myths, sometimes in the form of young adult fiction.[9] Where adult stories focus on the physical and tangible struggles of life, children's stories can be a nonthreatening way to dive deeper, to go to that wellspring in the abstract, using symbols and allegory to explore the essence of who we are and of our purpose. Old religions may disappear, for good or ill, but the desire to understand our sublime nature endures. Thus, even in a predominantly agnostic and science-focused age, stories and myths remain a popular medium to help us grasp the unfathomable.

L. Frank Baum probably understood this when he wrote *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, creating a new guidebook for a young country in 1900 on the precipice of modernization. As he states in his prologue to *Oz*, the fairytales of Grimm and Anderson are historical, and "the time has come for a series of newer wonder tales."

Before turning to the exegesis to see where Baum might be leaning on alchemical symbols, a few biographical notes will support this hypothesis. L. Frank Baum was married to Maude Gage, who was the daughter of one of the most important feminists and suffragettes in American history, Matilda Joslyn Gage. Historians have largely overlooked her importance in the suffrage movement, but it was Matilda Gage, not the more famous Susan B. Anthony or Elizabeth Stanton, who chiefly penned *History of Woman Suffrage*[10] and who did as much or more to advance the rights

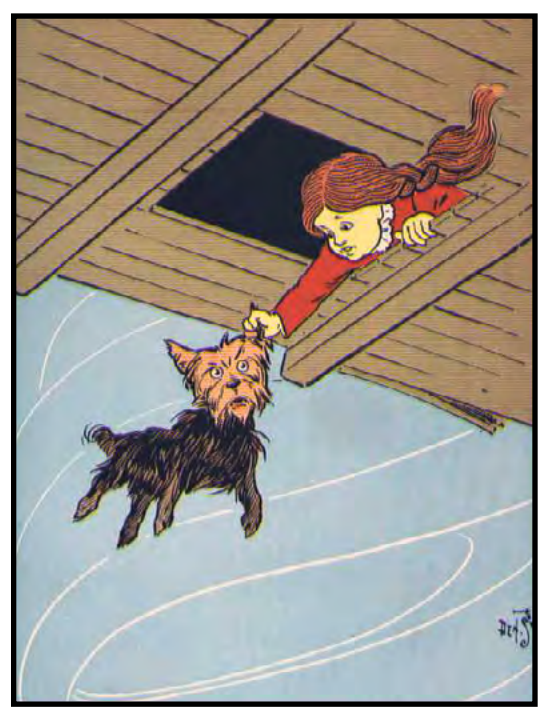
of women in nineteenth-century America as any other, according to Baum biographer Evan Schwartz.[11] Truly an avatar ahead of her time, Matilda Gage was a women's suffragist, a Native American rights activist, an abolitionist, a freethinker, and a prolific author, who was "born with a hatred of oppression."[12] It was also Matilda Gage who introduced her daughter and son-in-law to the ideas of the newly formed Theosophical Society, of which she was a member.

Founded in 1875 by famed occultist Madame Blavatsky, Henry Olcott, and William Quan Judge, the Theosophical Society had three objectives: (1) to form a nucleus of the universal brotherhood of humanity without distinction of race, creed, sex, caste, or color; (2) to encourage the study of comparative religion, philosophy, and science; and (3) to investigate the unexplained laws of nature and the powers latent in humankind.[13] Records show that Frank and Maude Baum were officially admitted into the Theosophical Society on September 4, 1892, which would have required them to study and become proficient in the Society's teachings and win the respect of a mentor who would recommend their admittance.[14]

That L. Frank Baum was a student of Blavatsky's and keenly familiar with esoteric teachings in the years prior to writing *Oz*, having likely read both *The Secret Doctrine* and *Isis Unveiled*, is worth considerable attention. It is also worth pointing out that Baum believed such teachings could be successfully transmitted through works of literature. In a newspaper column he wrote in 1890 for the *Aberdeen Saturday Pioneer*, he argued:

> There is a strong tendency in modern novelists towards introducing some vein of mysticism or occultism into their writings. Books of this character are eagerly bought and read by the people, both in Europe and America. It shows the innate longing in our natures to unravel the mysterious: to seek some explanation, however fictitious, of the unexplainable in nature and in our daily existence. For, as we advance in education, our desire for knowledge increases, and we are less satisfied to remain in ignorance of that mysterious fountain-head from which emanates all that is sublime and grand and incomprehensible in nature.[15]

Did Baum ladle hidden, mystical lessons he had learned the previous decade into his own writings? In 1996, University of Georgia professor and Theosophist John Algeo argued as much when he wrote a short piece for the Theosophical Society postulating that *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* is filled with theosophical teachings, including astral projection, which he argued is what Dorothy experiences when she is lifted from Kansas by a cyclone and placed in the curious land of Oz.[16]



Dorothy catches Toto by the ear as their house is caught up in a cyclone. First edition illustration by W. W. Denslow.

Others have argued that the yellow brick road is an allusion to the Golden Path in Buddhism and represents the soul's path to illumination.[17]

But a more thorough examination on the origins of Oz is offered in *Finding Oz: How L. Frank Baum Discovered the Great American Story*. Biographer Schwartz draws connections between real events in Baum's life and those that take place in his stories, and agrees that Theosophy and other esoteric teachings probably influenced Baum's creative output.[18]

Taking that idea a step further, there is convincing evidence that Baum intended his story to be a more specific allegory; in fact, one that directly follows the seven stages of Azoth alchemy. To examine this hypothesis more closely, let's turn to the text to see what alchemical symbolism may be identified in *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*.

Kansas—The *Prima Materia*

Before beginning the magnum opus, the alchemist starts with *prima materia*, or first matter—that ubiquitous but subtle substance that will be transformed into the Philosopher's Stone and life elixir. Dorothy's journey begins on a colorless, drab Kansas farm, and to drive the point home, Baum uses the word *gray* ten times in the opening pages of his magnum opus:

> Dorothy stood in the doorway and looked around, she could see nothing but the great gray prairie on every side. . . . The sun had baked the plowed land into a gray mass, with little cracks running through it. Even the grass was not green, for the sun had burned the tops of the long blades until they were the same gray color to be seen everywhere. Once the house had been painted, but the sun blistered the paint and the rains washed it away, and

A still from an early scene in the 1939 movie The Wizard of Oz. *Taking its lead from the book, the movie remained colorless until Dorothy lands in Oz.*

In this scene in the 1939 movie, Dorothy lands in Oz and sees the yellow brick road for the first time. It is also the first time the movie bursts with bright color, which startled audiences on its release.

> now the house was as dull and gray as everything else. (p. 12)

In the first operation of alchemy, the beginning substance is reduced to ashes using fire and intense heat, and since ashes are gray, it is possible Baum is hinting at the first stage, here. But more than likely, he is using Kansas as a metaphor for the actual prima materia. On the outside, it may appear to have little life in it, but there is latent power hidden within that gray, Kansas soil. It is in Kansas where Dorothy's story begins, and where it ends. Indeed, her story is the prototypical hero's journey—an orphan who must leave her flawed and colorless home, face many difficult trials, find the treasure she seeks, and return home, transformed.[19] That's the alchemist's journey, also.

In the Merry Old Land of Oz

After Dorothy and Toto are swept up by a cyclone, they land in Oz, in the east. East is the cardinal direction most often symbolic of birth and rebirth, since this is where the sun is "reborn" each morning. In the original book version, Dorothy is given magic silver slippers (not ruby as in the movie version) for killing the Wicked Witch of the East. Baum biographer Schwartz, believed that the silver slippers have a significant esoteric meaning: "In Theosophy, one's physical body and one's Astral body are connected through a 'silver cord,' a mythical link inspired by a passage in the Old Testament that speaks of a return from a spiritual quest. 'Or ever the silver cord be loosed,' says the book of Ecclesiastes. 'Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God [the Divine] who gave it.'"[20]

As noted earlier, the yellow brick road might represent the golden path in Buddhism that spirals outward, symbolic of the spiritual journey on which Dorothy is about to embark. Once on the yellow brick road, her alchemical work is underway and we start to see a pattern that follows the seven operations of alchemy.

First Alchemical Operation: Calcination (*Visita*)

Using Dennis William Hauck's scholarship on Azoth Alchemy as a guide[21] —a system used by noted alchemists such as Basil Valentine, Paracelsus, and Isaac Newton—there are seven operations to be undertaken to produce the Philosopher's Stone. The word "Azoth" is derived from the first and last letter of the alphabet, A–Z, symbolizing totality and completeness (note the similarity to O–Z). The first of the seven operations is called "Calcination," a laboratory process that uses fire to reduce the prima materia to ash. The symbols most often associated with Calcination are the metal lead, a skull, death, blackness, and crows or ravens. Perhaps not coincidentally, the first thing Dorothy encounters on the yellow brick road is the Scarecrow, signaling that we may be in the realm of Calcination. It is also significant that the Scarecrow seeks a brain. Before beginning the alchemical work, the philosopher's first task is to study and learn. So, likewise, the first thing Dorothy must acquire before she gets to the Emerald City is "right thinking." Of

course, throughout the story we see that the Scarecrow really does, in fact, have a brain and uses it more than his companions. It turns out he has everything he needs and just doesn't realize it yet. That is true of the alchemist, also, who already possesses all he or she needs and has on only to put in the work to discover and refine it.

Baum throws in another hint that we are in the Calcination stage when the Scarecrow remarks to Dorothy that he isn't afraid of anything, except "a lighted match" (p. 40). Thus, as will be repeated throughout the story, the Scarecrow is closely tied to the fire of Calcination.

Second Operation: Dissolution (*Interiora*)

The second stage of alchemy is Dissolution, where water is added to dilute the ashen matter from Calcination. Where lead is the metal of Calcination, tin is the metal most often associated with Dissolution, and so Dorothy's second encounter on the yellow brick road is the Tin Woodman. Transitioning from fire (Calcination) to water (Dissolution), Dorothy discovers the Tin Woodman's joints are rusted shut, for he got stuck in a rainstorm. And just like the Scarecrow, who is afraid of fire, the Tin Woodman must be mindful of water. "And as [the Tin Woodman] walked along he wept several tears of sorrow and regret. These tears ran slowly down his face and over the hinges of his jaw, and there they rusted" (p. 71).

The Tin Woodman serves another purpose, also, in that his search for a heart represents feelings. Dorothy, having already acquired right thinking, must also have right feeling. It takes compassion to be a true philosopher, which the Tin Woodman represents.

Third Operation: Separation (*Terra*)

The third stage of alchemy is Separation, which requires the alchemist to keep the usable parts while removing the rest. As the Emerald Tablet instructs, "Separate the earth from the fire, the subtile from the gross." This third stage is often represented by the planet Mars and the metal iron and frequently with illustrations of two white birds picking at the material to take its most useful parts.[22] This is the stage that takes a great amount of effort, according to noted alchemy historian Dennis William Hauck: "At this stage, the saved elements are pure but opposite and were often seen at war or struggling with each other. It can be a tortuous time that demands will and determination."[23] In other words, it takes courage. The third companion Dorothy meets is the Lion, in need of some will and determination of his own. The alchemist may have intellect and compassion, but she or he will also need courage to act. In addition to right thinking and right feeling, Dorothy will need right action, and this may be what the Lion represents.

Dorothy meeting the Cowardly Lion. First edition illustration by W. W. Denslow.

A still from the 1939 Oz *film. From left to right: the Tin Man, Dorothy, the Scarecrow, and the Cowardly Lion.*

There is another, different, interpretation worth exploring, which is that Scarecrow, Tin Woodman, and Lion represent salt, mercury, and sulfur. In his monumental work, *The Secret Teachings of All Ages*, Manly P. Hall explained:

> In alchemy there are three symbolic substances: mercury, sulphur, and salt. To these was added a fourth mysterious life principle called Azoth. . . . Salt, sulphur, and mercury each has a triune nature, for each of these substances contains, in reality, also the other two substances, according to the secret arcanum of the wise. . . . These nine divisions—3 times 3, plus Azoth (the mysterious universal life force)—equals 10, the sacred decad of Pythagoras.[24]

World of	*Father*	*Child*	*Mother*
Humans	Spirit	Soul	Body
Elements	Air	Water	Earth
Chemicals	Sulphur	Mercury	Salt

This triune nature, according to Paracelsus, can be seen in the chart below.[25]

It is possible that Baum used Dorothy's companions as a metaphor for these three elements where Scarecrow is fiery sulfur, Tin Woodman is volatile mercury, and Lion is salt of the Earth. There is an argument to be made, as well, that spirit, soul, and body closely follow intellect, heart, and courage. On the other hand, in alchemical symbolism, lions are more often associated with fire and sulfur than with salt.

In any case, Dorothy at this stage is now armed with intellect, purity, and courage, and ready to pass the initiatory stages, the "lower work." Madame Blavatsky famously penned: "There is no danger that dauntless courage cannot conquer; there is no trial that spotless purity cannot pass through; there is no difficulty that strong intellect cannot surmount. For those who win onwards there is a reward past all telling – the power to bless and save humanity; for those who fail, there are other lives in which success may come."[26]

Fourth Operation: Conjunction (*Rectificondo*)

Conjunction, the recombination of the saved elements from Separation into

a new substance, is the midway point of the seven alchemical operations. It is associated with the metal copper and the planet Venus, or sometimes gold and the Sun. So important was this stage, alchemists regarded Conjunction as the invisible eighth operation, as Hauck wrote:

> In the horizontal orientation of left and right, the Conjunction is an attempt to balance the masculine consciousness of the King with the feminine consciousness of the Queen. . . . Conjunction marks [a] balancing point between the forces of the Anima (Soul) on the alchemist's right side to the forces of the Spiritus (Spirit) on the alchemist's left side. In fact, it is the alchemical crucifixion at the center of the vertical and horizontal realities that makes Conjunction the most significant operation in alchemy.[27]

Dorothy's next stop along the yellow brick road is the Emerald City. In the topography of Oz, the Emerald City is located directly in the center of the map, at the midway point between East–West (the horizontal and physical plane of the two wicked witches) and North–South (the vertical and spiritual plane of the two good witches). The Emerald City, like the fourth operation of alchemy, is the symbolic rose at the center of the cross. L. Frank Baum would have been familiar with the Emerald Tablet, a translation of which was given by Madame Blavatsky in *Isis Unveiled*:

> What is below is like that which is above, and what is above is similar to that which is below to accomplish the wonders of one thing. As all things were produced by the mediation of one being, so all things were produced from this one by adaptation. Its father is the sun, its mother is the moon. It is the cause of all perfection throughout the whole earth. Its power is perfect if it is changed into earth. Separate the earth from the fire, the subtile from the gross, acting prudently and with judgment. Ascend with the greatest sagacity from the earth to heaven, and then descend again to earth, and unite together the power of things inferior and superior; thus you will possess the light of the whole world, and all obscurity will fly away from you. This thing has more fortitude than fortitude itself, because it will overcome every

The Emerald City. First edition illustration by W. W. Denslow.

subtile thing and penetrate every solid thing. By it the world was formed.[28]

As mentioned before, the Emerald City could certainly be a nod to the Emerald Tablet. In any case, it is important enough for Baum to have placed it at the very center, or heart, of Oz.

An interesting scene in the book that was excluded in the film version is the four manifestations of the Wizard. In the book, Dorothy, Scarecrow, Tin Woodman, and Lion each visit the Wizard individually, on successive days, to make their requests for a brain, heart, and courage. To Dorothy, the Wizard appears on a green throne as a giant, hairless male head. Seeing that Dorothy has both the silver slippers and the mark of the Good Witch of the North on her head, the Wizard instructs her that before he can grant her wish to return home she must first kill the Witch of the West (her journey to transcend the physical, horizontal plane is only half complete, having only killed the Witch of the East).

The following day, the Scarecrow visits the Throne Room to ask for a brain. This time, the Wizard is a woman in a flowing green dress (mother-in-law Matilda Gage would have approved and one can only speculate why MGM took this part out). To the Tin Woodman, the Wizard appears as a terrible beast with "five eyes in its face . . . five long arms . . . and five long, slim legs," (p. 132), perhaps alluding to the five-pointed crown and quintessence (fifth element) commonly associated with this Conjunction stage. To the Lion, the Wizard appears as a giant ball of fire. In the Wizard, these four manifestations represent two dual natures—the king and queen of opposite polarities, and also as body and spirit (beast and fire). Hauck wrote: "The alchemists often referred to the Conjunction as the 'Marriage of the Sun and Moon,' which symbolized the two opposing ways of knowing or experiencing the world."[29]

Dorothy meeting the Wizard. First edition illustration by W. W. Denslow.

Another aspect of the Wizard, which is not revealed until later in the story, is that the Wizard is nothing but a "humbug," a fraud, or even a trickster. Imagery from the Conjunction stage often shows Hermes with a wry smile. Hauck wrote: "Conjunction is really a good-natured ruse by the notorious trickster, who knows that both the King and Queen must die or sacrifice their identities in the marriage to produce the Child of the Philosophers, which is all Hermes really cares about."[30] After Dorothy ventures west and kills the wicked witch, she will come back to the Emerald City and discover the Wizard is just a humbug. More importantly, she'll discover her latent power already within.

Fifth Operation: Fermentation (*Invenies*)

Where the first three operations of the Emerald Tablet focused on "what is below is like that which is above," in the fifth

operation the alchemist is now channeling "what is above is similar to that which is below." This is the beginning of the "higher work." At this stage, Hauck wrote that a milky substance that can be described as yellow or golden in color emerges from the material: "Finally, out of the utter blackness of Putrefaction comes the yellow Ferment, which appears like a golden wax flowing out of the foul matter. Chinese alchemists called this substance the Golden Pill, which marked their intermediary Yellow Phase, an alchemical transition also recognized by Alexandrian alchemists."[31]

Coincidentally, at this stage Dorothy and her friends travel to the "Yellow Land of the West," where they meet the yellow Winkies, who live in the Yellow Castle surrounded by "buttercups and yellow daisies." As he did in making sure the reader knows Kansas is gray, Baum goes to great lengths to show that yellow is the domain of the Wicked Witch of the West. Gold also features prominently here as Dorothy takes possession of a Golden Cap that belongs to the witch. Later in the story, this Golden Cap will help Dorothy summon the winged monkeys who will carry her back to the Emerald City. Likewise, Scarecrow, Tin Woodman, and Lion are all given gifts of gold: "The Winkies gave Toto and the Lion each a golden collar . . . to the Scarecrow they gave a gold-headed walking stick, to keep him from stumbling; and to the Tin Woodman they offered a silver oil-can, inlaid with gold and set with precious jewels" (p. 162).

Dorothy and the Wizard of Oz prepare to take off in his hot air balloon, in a still from the 1939 film.

It is in the West that Dorothy finally overcomes the physical, horizontal plane, melting the Wicked Witch of the West with a bucket of water and returning to Oz to claim her treasure.

Sixth Operation: Distillation (*Occultum*)

After returning to Oz, Dorothy learns the Wizard is really just a humbug, unable to help her get back home. This is an important lesson, as Algeo explained, "Reliance on a teacher, on a guru, must inevitably end in disappointment. All teachers are humbugs, save one—the Teacher Within."[32] Dorothy must find the hidden stone within, which is the final goal of the alchemist. The Wizard devises a plan to take Dorothy back to Kansas in a hot air balloon, but she misses the ride because her dog, Toto, runs away. Toto is also the reason Dorothy gets swept up in a cyclone in the first place and lands in Oz. Some have speculated that Toto represents Dorothy's inner voice, according to the Vigilant Citizen website: "The balloon ride is representative of traditional religion, with a skinny-legged wizard promising a trip to the Divine. Toto was right to force Dorothy out of the balloon, otherwise she might never have found her magic. This is a call for us to listen to our intuition, our gut feelings, those momentary bits of imagination that appear seemingly out of nowhere."[33]

Schwartz speculated that the unusual name "Toto" may have come from an important aspect of Theosophical teaching[34] regarding The Secret Doctrine. As Madam

The good witch Glinda, in a still from the 1939 film.

Blavatsky explained, "The Eternity of the Universe *in toto* as a boundless plane . . . is like a wink of the eye of Self-Existence."[35] Including characters with the names "Toto" and "Winkies" may have been Baum's wink to the initiated reader.

"Ascend with the greatest sagacity from the earth to heaven," the Emerald Tablet says of the Distillation stage. Alchemical images of this operation include bulbous-like vessels such as the alembic, which is a distillation tool that collects condensation, as well as images of flying objects rising into the air. The hot-air balloon could therefore be symbolic of this stage. Psychologically, Dorothy has passed the threshold, having seen the Wizard for what he is. She must now turn inside to find her way home.

Seventh Operation: Coagulation (*Lapidem*)

The seventh operation of alchemy is Coagulation, which fuses the fermented and distilled material of the previous operations, incarnating and releasing "the *Ultima Materia* of the soul," more commonly known as the Philosopher's Stone. Hauck wrote: "Using this magical Stone, the alchemists believed they could exist on all levels of reality. In society, it is the living wisdom in which everyone exists within the same light of evolved consciousness and knowledge of Truth."

Dorothy's final journey before returning to Kansas is to travel south, to the domain of the good witch Glinda, "a beautiful woman, who knows how to keep young in spite of the many years she has lived" (p. 215). In addition to the ability to transform base metals into gold, alchemists are known for creating the elixir of life, a veritable fountain of youth, of which Glinda appears to be in possession. The color that dominates the South is red, which is also said to be the color of the Philosopher's Stone. "Glinda sat upon a throne of rubies . . . and her hair was a rich red in color" (p. 253). These are all probable clues to let us know we are in the final stage of the Great Work.

Alchemy is fundamentally about transformation: the transformation of the physical, the psychological, and the spiritual, which in Oz is accomplished with three clicks of the heels. Says the Good Witch of the South, "The Silver Shoes . . . have wonderful powers. And one of the most curious things about them is that they can carry you to any place in the world in three steps, and each step will be made in the wink of an eye" (p. 257). Again, Baum appears to

be borrowing directly from Blavatsky here ("the Universe *in toto* . . . is like the wink of an eye in Self-Existence").

What *Oz* Teaches Us

After her journey through Oz, Dorothy is finally able to return home. Kansas is still gray, but she now sees it through a different set of eyes.

> "My darling child!" [Aunt Em] cried, folding the little girl in her arms and covering her face with kisses. "Where in the world did you come from?"
>
> "From the Land of Oz," said Dorothy gravely. "And here is Toto, too. And oh, Aunt Em! I'm so glad to be at home again!" (p. 261)

Alchemy's ultimate aim is not riches or longevity or escape, but rather a return to the Garden of Eden (Kansas), only this time transformed, on a higher level and more in tune with the Divine. One of the more vexing aspects of our existence is that we must experience pain, and struggle, and separation from the Divine. No one can hand us the Philosopher's Stone; there is no treasure map that will take us to its location, nor can we steal it from anyone else. It requires a great deal of individual effort and, sometimes, pain, but experience on the physical plane is necessary for growth and understanding. I believe this is what Louis-Claude de Saint-Martin, the eighteenth-century French philosopher, meant when he wrote, "The ordeals and oppositions which we undergo become our crosses when we remain beneath them, but they become ladders of ascent when we rise above them." We endure a cycle of birth, struggle, and rebirth, but toward a higher end, and it is possible that this is what Baum was ultimately trying to convey. In a brief exchange at the end of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, he gave us a final clue, with a bit of blunt force:

> "Your Silver Shoes will carry you over the desert," replied Glinda. "If you had known their power you could have gone back to your Aunt Em the very first day you came to this country."
>
> "But then I should not have had my wonderful brains!" cried the Scarecrow.
>
> "And I should not have had my lovely heart," said the Tin Woodman.
>
> "And I should have lived a coward forever," declared the Lion.
>
> "This is all true," said Dorothy, "and I am glad I was of use to these good friends. But now that each of them has had what he most desired . . . I think I should like to go back to Kansas." (p. 257)

In the 1939 film, Dorothy's slippers are ruby red instead of silver like in the book.

Dorothy wakes up in Kansas, in a still from the end of the 1939 film.

Dorothy's journey ends where it started, but everything is different because of her knowledge and experience and great effort to return home. If the return to the source is not the ultimate aim of the alchemist, what is?

The Master Behind the Great Work

When asked how he came up with the story of Oz, L. Frank Baum admitted, "It came to me right out of the blue. I think that sometimes the Great Author has a message to get across, and He [It] has to use the instrument at hand. I happened to be the medium, and I believe the magic key was given to me to open the doors to sympathy and understanding, joy, peace, and happiness." But it was the great suffragette and Theosophist Matilda Joslyn Gage who convinced Frank Baum to start writing stories in the first place. She had seen an ad in the newspaper calling for children's stories, for which the publisher would pay up to $500, and had recalled the delightful tales Baum made up for his children after a long day at work.[38] Gage wrote to her son-in-law, urging him to reply to the ad. "If you could get up a series of adventures or a Dakota blizzard adventure where a heroic teacher saves children's lives," she wrote, "[or] bring in a cyclone . . . from North Dakota." In the same letter, Gage urged Baum to write stories "which comes with a moral, without however any attempt to sermonize."[39]

A few months after writing her letter, Matilda Gage went through transition. It was then that the idea for the Wizard of Oz came to L. Frank Baum in a flash. In his biography, Schwartz observes: "While the spirit of Matilda Joslyn Gage was ascending to a different realm, Frank experienced a singular moment unlike any other in his life. 'Suddenly,' [Frank later told his publisher] 'this one [story] moved right in and took possession.'"[40]

It's impossible to know if the many references to alchemy and theosophy were intentional, inspired, or just some happy coincidence. Baum certainly intended *Oz* to be both entertaining and commercially successful, but it appears he also used it as a tool to convey a great metaphysical lesson. In this context, then, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, may be one of the most important works of early American literature, and perhaps one of the great esoteric texts of our modern age.

Endnotes

[1] "AFI's 100 Greatest American Movies of All Time," American Film Institute, Accessed June 20, 2017, https://www.afi.com/afis-100-years-100-movies/.

[2] Meghan O' Rourke, "The Man Who Made Oz: L. Frank Baum and the First American Fairy Tale," *Slate*, Accessed September 21, 2009, https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2009/09/dissecting-the-real-wizard-of-oz.html.

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Chapter XXIV.
Home Again.

AUNT EM HAD JUST COME out of the house to water the cabbages when she looked up and saw Dorothy running toward her.

"My darling child!" she cried, folding the little girl in her arms and covering her face with kisses; "where in the world did you come from?"

"From the Land of Oz," said Dorothy, gravely. "And here is Toto, too. And oh, Aunt Em! I'm so glad to be at home again!"

The last page of the first edition of The Wizard of Oz, *1900.*