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2014

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Alycen Aigner

Trinity College, alycen.aigner@trincoll.edu

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Recommended Citation

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The Wonderful World of Oz: The Assimilation between Imaginary Literature and Society, State & Power

Alycen Aigner

One hundred years after its publication, *The Wizard of Oz* remains the most significant children's book in American history: No other fantasy is more beloved, hated, cited, imitated, interpreted, adapted or marketed.

("The Wonderful Wizard of Oz")

The Wizard of Oz was envisioned by Frank L. Baum to be a contemporary American children's tale. Although Baum took cues from traditional European tales, such as the inclusion of wicked characters, quests with nearly impossible odds, and a strikingly simple morale at the story's end, he also added various other elements to make it uniquely American. His introduction of a female protagonist was one of those unique elements rarely seen as a part of classic European tales; the story's American midlands setting was also unusual. Baum remarked upon social, political and economic policies of importance at the time. The story reflected influences of Baum's strong religious faith, his affinity towards mythology and his opposition to the changes brought about by the industrial revolution. The casual, uncomplicated language, and the telling of the tale through the eyes of a child, combined to result in a powerful piece of work that would continue to enthrall children and adults alike for well over a century after its publication.

Neither Frank Baum nor its early readers ever imagined the significance a story of a young girl in a land named Oz could have throughout society and culture, in America and the world for generations. Published in 1900, *Oz* was heavily influenced by the rising realistic period of art and literature. Though Frank Baum is not generally considered a Lost Generation writer, his work showed a similar disdain for the innovative change and "fascination with technology" occurring in America throughout the late 18th century that was reflected in the work of this school of writers. These include such elements as the Land of Oz's utopian features, and lack of cars, complex industry and disaffected workers. Notable also is the depiction of Oz as a "multi-ethnic" and "essentially democratic" society free from the class, status, even inter-species distinctions ever present in most children's literature.

Similar examples of well-loved stories that reinforce the stereotypes of society include *Alice in Wonderland*, *Oliver*, *Annie*, *The Little Princess*, *Mary Poppins*, and *Pollyanna* (Rahn, p 31). This does not mean that Baum dispensed with narrative structure. Oz had an inner structure that worked for its continued success. Indeed, its commitment to preceding generations of writers and extension of the genre universally reflect a solid literary genealogy. However, at the beginning of the new century, Baum was writing at “the perfect time for innovative twists on existing genres. *The Wonderful World of Oz* reflects this openness to change in its new interpretation of the traditional fairy tale” (“The Wonderful Wizard”).

In trying to create a story that is uniquely American, Baum was careful in choosing specific nationalistic details. His characters were iconic and metaphorical: although unique in a folktale (Rahn, p64), the scarecrow was ubiquitous on crop farms of the day. As rendered into character, the Scarecrow's lack of “brain” and repeated quick thinking reflects Baum's admiration for native intelligence. The Tin Woodman, and his often-inconvenient need for maintenance, is representative of the uneasy tension between industry and civilization within the Gilded Age (Baum, 88). His lack of a “heart” is contradicted by his loyalty throughout the adventure, suggesting that the virtue of industry depends on who mans the controls. The Cowardly Lion is the third of the friends to be introduced to Dorothy along her quest, and is a character steeped in cultural and literary reference. His inner contradiction—no “courage”—seems to turn the traditional ancient and medieval depictions of lions on their heads. The Sphinx, for instance, is perhaps the most well known of the leonine creatures. It is found in both ancient Greek and Egyptian mythology and appears in many stories, one of the most famous being Oedipus Rex. “A combination of a lion's body and the head of a man, it symbolizes abundance, power, wisdom, riddles, truth and secrets” (“Everything2”). In C.S. Lewis's book (1954), *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, Aslan (a lion) is the god-like figure watching over the kingdom of Narnia with unmatched power, limitless morality and goodness. Baum's depiction of the lion as cowardly plays with Aesop's fable that “barking dogs seldom bite.” This is explained when Dorothy first meets the lion; she states, “Out West in Kansas, where I live, they always say that the cowboy that roars the loudest and claims he's the baddest man, is sure to be the biggest coward of all” (Baum, 110). Nonetheless, the characteristic he seems to lack is the one he has in most abundance, a reminder that courage is not the lack of fear but rather the ability to act in the face of it. As with Dorothy's other two companions, the pursuit of virtue is something only the virtuous would undertake.

Dorothy herself is a capable, strong-willed child, determined to return home no matter how wonderful Oz may be. Unlike such other female protagonists as Mary from *The Secret Garden*, Anne from *Anne of Green*

Gables, *Heidi*, or the Little Princess, characters who are meek, powerless, or in need of change or self-realization, Dorothy's story is more of a "coming of age," that is, a realization of the strength, determination, and courage to achieve her goal. The qualities her companions seek are indeed ones she already has in abundance and so, far from being weak, she is the one who takes charge and saves herself and her friends from disaster. Perhaps this is why Professor and author Suzanne Rahn writes, "Dorothy is one of the few female characters whom boys have never hesitated to adopt as their protagonist. Her resolute spirit, her intelligence, her kindness and courtesy, her loyalty to family and friends—all make her a worthy yet never too obvious role model for boys and girls alike" (129).

Baum also uses word play when he takes "common descriptive word[s], name[s], or phrase[s] and looks at it through a child's eyes as if for the first time, transforming it literally into some unlikely creature. By doing so, he widens the vocabulary" (Baum, 339). An example of this is in Chapter 22, "The Country of the Quadlings," wherein the motley group of characters comes face-to-face with a treacherous hill covered in rocks, and, as they are wondering how they might climb it, the rocks come alive. Baum has Dorothy refer to them as "Hammer-Heads," which is slang for someone who is neither intelligent nor refined, and even abrasive. Baum's choice of words to depict the creature amongst the rocks allows child readers not only to learn new vocabulary but also to use it in new and different ways and in so doing broaden their imaginative universe (Baum, 338-339).

Another of Baum's concepts in making such a story uniquely American is in removing the horrible and terrifying elements of traditional children's tales. Unlike the Grimm brothers' fairytales or the stories of Hans Christian Anderson and others, which are abundant with ugliness, there is little violence in Baum's stories. Chapter 12 is indeed frightening: Dorothy's little group is faced with the possibility that the Witch will succeed in doing away with them before they can reach to stop her. The Witch has wolves that the Tin Man beheads with his axe, black crows that the Scarecrow is able to scare away, and the Winkies who were over-powered by the ferociousness of the Lion. It is the hideous Winged Monkeys who eventually take them hostage but even they cannot harm them as Dorothy has the kiss of the Good Witch on her forehead, which acts as an amulet against evil. Even so, when Baum adds frightening elements, they are free from agony and bloodshed and "no Baum story ever sent a child to bed to troubled dreams" (Baum, 149).

The Wizard of Oz is free from lengthy descriptive passages. Though they are filled with immense detail that pulls the reader into the narrative, the descriptions are neither excessive nor tedious. The Poppy Fields are written with such clarity that the reader can feel their hypnotic essence:

(Dorothy and her friends) walked along listening to the singing of the bright colored birds and looking at the lovely flowers which now became so thick that the ground was carpeted with them. There were big yellow and white and blue and purple blossoms, besides great clusters of scarlet poppies, which were so brilliant in color they almost dazzled Dorothy's eyes (Baum, 140).

It is of note that Baum's lavish use of color within the story was remarkable: there were 24 different colors, by far exceeding the norms then in practice (Baum, 64). Having evoked the reader's sense of sight and hearing, Baum continues on to engage another of the senses—smell—by describing the flowers as “spicy” (140).

Baum also chooses decisively to eliminate the love element from his “modern” stories. He felt “love, as depicted in literature, is threadbare and unsatisfactory topic which children can comprehend neither in its esoteric nor exoteric meaning. Therefore it has no place in their storybooks” (Baum, 96).

The prominent author Alison Lurie, writes in her book, *Don't Tell the Grown-Ups*,

Most of the great works of juvenile literature, are subversive in one way or another: they express ideas and emotions not generally approved of or even recognized at the time; they make fun of honored figures and piously held beliefs, and they view social pretenses with clear-eyed directness.”

Children's books are intriguing for their simple narratives of good versus evil, the quest for riches or to find a place in the world, to avenge wrong, to prove oneself, or simply to escape danger. They may be read at a child's level with complete satisfaction. However, they often contain powerful messages of politics, moral and social questions, of such issues as race and class distinctions. Stories such as *Mary Poppins*, *Oliver*, *Winnie the Pooh*, *The Little Princess*, and *Annie* reinforce social hierarchy and norms. At the same time, they help to teach children morals, values, and a sense of right and wrong within a safe and entertaining environment. A child's first storyteller, usually the mother, is thus also the first teacher, reinforcing the limits of the safe world. Baum's depiction of Oz within his stories teach of a “multi-ethnic” and “essentially democratic” society free from the hierarchy of class and status distinctions ever-present in much of children's literature (Rahn, 31). Baum successfully accomplished satisfying the reader both at the adult and the adolescent level: providing a “grown up” tale with the familiar echoes of a childhood narrative.

The quest of Dorothy and her friends is a tale as old as time. It is a hodgepodge of characters with different ideals and backgrounds all in the pursuit of a major overall goal, but all with individualistic quests, that lay at the heart of why they are truly present. In pursuit of their quests the characters must overcome obstacles, learn lessons and prove themselves. “Dorothy's quest

demonstrates (as in many folktales) that persistence through all obstacles and dangers enables us to attain our goals, while the quest of her three companions suggests that the inner qualities we most desire—courage, intelligence, and a loving heart—can be found within ourselves” (Rahn, 26). Dorothy’s quest is not unlike Voltaire’s *Candide* in which the title character searches for meaning and purpose to life. In *Oz*, the three characters joining Dorothy have no purpose until they join forces with a girl trying to return home; all of them find what she knew all along, that the most important things—courage, compassion and wisdom—reside within. Thus, the Cowardly Lion bravely pulls his friends out of the river to safety, the Tin Man shows his heart when he laments that the wildcat should try to kill a “pretty, harmless” field mouse, and the Scarecrow saves his friends from the black crows that have been sent by the Wicked Witch (Baum, 208-209). For both *Candide* and Dorothy, the task is to transcend limitations and perplexities. *Candide* must rise above Pangloss’s empty pronouncements about life to see both the good and the bad; he matures with recognition that a meaningful life would be found in a simpler form of existence, represented by the self-sufficiency of a family farm. Similarly, Dorothy found that happiness had always been right at hand. The apex of this return to a simpler time occurred in the writing of Henry David Thoreau forty years before Baum’s book and with Ralph Waldo Emerson’s a mere twenty earlier. Their influence is felt in the implicit critique of industrialization and the alienation of the worker. Interestingly, however, Baum’s story has the elements of a “grail” quest about it: without the trials and tribulations of their journey, neither *Candide* nor Dorothy would have had the wisdom to appreciate what they had. In Arthurian tales, it is often too late for this realization—the knight dies or is defeated—but in Dorothy’s case, her life is just beginning when she arrives at this truth (Dr. Schafer).

Baum’s own quest was for an American children’s story, unique in its characters and substance, which nonetheless drew on existing literary genres. His satirical depictions of government are not unlike the politically charged work of Voltaire (in France) and Swift (in Ireland) whose use of satire is intended not so much to tear down the status quo as to create awareness that would lead to change. Baum does something similar with the Winged Monkeys, unwilling minions of the Witch of the West, who are controlled by a magical cap. These creatures represent the Plains Indians, perhaps, but certainly man in his natural state. As the Monkeys’ leader relates, “we were a free people, living happily in the great forest flying from tree to tree, eating nuts and fruit, and doing just as we pleased without calling anybody master” (Taylor). The Monkey King admits to having engaged in a degree of “mischief,” but nothing to justify the harsh treatment the Monkeys received when “Oz came out of the clouds to rule over this land” (Taylor). The Monkeys were initially sequestered, a reference to the government’s reservation policy, and “civilization’s” tendency to quarantine the alien other. “Later, they

are forced to do the bidding of the Western Witch who commands them with the golden cap. [The]... Monkeys are not inherently bad; they have become so only through the unnatural and evil force" which is tyrannical power. "Under Dorothy's benevolent influence," the Monkeys are restored to their previous state and become "kind and helpful" once again (Taylor). The power reigned over the monkeys is comparable with that of other stories in literature that depict a hat to be an amulet of power, as in the Disney classic *Fantasia*.

Within the world of European and American fantasy and folklore, we regularly see the intertwining of reality with the imaginary. Baum wanted to suggest the permeability of the boundary between the two realms but always anchoring his story back into "reality." "The intermediate, liminal area is almost invariably represented by a journey" (Dr. Schafer), for which "[T]he liminal state [would be] characterized by ambiguity, openness, and indeterminacy. One's sense of identity dissolves to some extent, bringing about disorientation. Liminality is a period of transition where normal limits to thought, self-understanding, and behavior are relaxed—a situation which can lead to new perspectives" (Wikipedia). The anonymous Old English poem, "The Wanderer," brackets memories of happiness with the misery of the present; Oz achieves the reverse: happiness is here and now not in the longing for the past or future. Similarly, C.S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* and today's *Harry Potter* provide examples of humans transitioning from reality into the world of fantasy and back, with the fantastic representing the arena in which some truth or lesson is learned. *The Wizard of Oz* brings a touch of reality into the fantasy world. Late in the story, the reader is treated to an abundance of details involved in creating the hot air balloon that would take Dorothy and the Wizard back to Kansas. There are no magical elements, apart from the notion of flying from fantasy back to reality, and the details are pain-stakingly non-industrial: Dorothy sews the silk by hand; the Wizard paints it, and uses the humble laundry basket to carry them. No steam or fuel is needed—only the wind. These elements ground the reader in a very specific albeit utopian reality that is squarely located between the magic of the past and the harsh industrialization of the present.

Baum also blurs the distinction between reality and fantasy by selectively attributing speech to typically non-speaking beings. As in Aesop's fables, the animals do speak and often they speak great truths; however, Toto does not. He is the reader's anchor to reality. Magic within literature is just that and has no place in the present reality for, as Joseph Campbell writes, "at the return threshold, the transcendental powers must remain behind" (Baum, p 355). Baum adheres to this in the end when Dorothy is whirl-winded home: her magic slippers and the clothes she had been wearing are gone and she is back in what she had originally worn. Although it has been suggested that she lost them in her travels (*The Wonderful Wizard*), in reading Baum's philosophy

behind *Oz*, it was actually magic that could not enter into the real world. One of the differences between Baum's story and others, such as Lewis Carroll or C.S. Lewis, is that in these other tales, it is as if no time had passed when the character returns. Upon Dorothy's return, by contrast, time has passed and her aunt and uncle have had time to rebuild a whole new farmhouse. The Land of Oz seems to truly exist as an unknown land every bit as real as the one from which she has come.

The Emerald City is similar to Eldorado in the story of *Candide* in the sense that both authors are depicting an ideal land, a utopia set apart from the general society where everyone is equal and there is very little interaction with the outside world, so no strife can develop and everyone can live harmoniously together. The Land of Oz is one that has not been colonized by outside forces, though we see in later novels the breakdown of Oz as a result of outside influences, very much like our own history.

In the story, Dorothy encounters three characters along her path to the Emerald City, each metaphorical of something bigger. Each joins her to assist and protect her along the way but also selfishly to ascertain and fulfill their own yearnings. One theory is such that the three are sent by supernatural powers, similar to Monkey where each of the three disciples placed in the path of Tripitaka are there as a result of the Bodhisattva. Monkey, Sandy and Pigsy are on the quest not only to complete Tripitaka's goal of seeking Scripture but also for their own self-fulfillment. The three characters, the Scarecrow, the Tin Man and the Lion, are representational of "supernatural helpers overtly or secretly sent by the patron god or goddess... [Meant for protection, they are the] future kings of Oz, but first they must prove themselves" (*The Wonderful Wizard*). Just as for Monkey, the other disciples must prove themselves for their past transgressions.

The presence of three as well as the recurrent association with God and spiritual themes are common within literature and society as a whole, and feature largely in children's literature of fairy tales with their common focus on good versus evil. The recurrent theme in history of the number three has come to be profoundly symbolic within many cultures, not just in Christianity. Prof. Allan Dundes, a scholar in the study of three throughout mythology, points out that "in Ancient Babylonia the three primary gods were Anu, Bel, and Ea, representing Heaven, Earth, and the Abyss" (Dundes). In Egypt, there are three primary features to the Sun God and in the Hindu faith there are the three aspects of the deity, Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. The presence of three is also observable in literature and art. Tolstoy's *Three Deaths* reflects and analyzes the experience of death by three very different people; there are the three little pigs, the three sisters in Cinderella, the three bears in Goldilocks, and Picasso's three dancers. We see its use in Shakespeare with the presence of three witches and again in Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*, where Scrooge is visited three times by the Ghosts of Christmases Past, Present

and Future. The use of three has come to be symbolic of faith, luck, magic, hope, and more throughout mythology, folklore and fairytales. It is done for rhythm, for geometrical balance, for structure: there are the three orders of society (those who fight, those who work and those who pray), the three graces (faith, hope and charity), and the three aspects of man (body, soul and spirit) (Dundes). The list is endless.

Baum's description of Oz as being all-encompassing is not unlike the common image of God. His use of religious innuendo is ever-present throughout the story. For instance, when Dorothy is faced with the opportunity to confront the Wizard, she is asked, "Are you really going to look upon the face of Oz the Terrible"? (Baum, 184) Baum seems to be suggesting that Oz is a God-like presence, stating that the "Wizard wishes his people to think of him as a god. They believe he changes form at will, and he is in general a mystery to them. One must be worthy to have an audience with him, but few are chosen. If Dorothy had not acquired the Silver Shoes and the Good Witch's kiss, she might never have been admitted" (184). His description here is an association with such stories from the Bible, as when Moses is too afraid to look upon Jehovah in the burning bush in the Book of Exodus (184).

Baum's fairly liberal use of religious references stems from his own strong faith in Christianity. He commented once that as society was changing and progressing, people seemed to be moving away from the church in the common feeling that society had changed but the church had not. The consensus was that it was still teaching "the same old superstitions, the same blind faith in the traditional bible, the same precepts of salvation and damnation." Though he believed there was a way to save "the beautiful religion of Christ," and this very well may be why in his writing there are so many religious references, he is trying to find innovative ways to teach a new generation about faith (Baum, p 34). The whole of Chapter Eight is metaphorical references to faith. His use of the beautifully scented but deadly poppy plants is akin to the "Enchanted Ground that Christians must pass through to get to the Land of Beulah and the Celestial City in *Pilgrim's Progress*" by John Bunyan, a story of how a good Christian makes his way out from the sinful life to heaven (141). Baum is far from the only author who has referenced Bunyan's work; indeed, it can be seen in the work of C.S. Lewis, Charlotte Bronte, Louisa May Alcott, Mark Twain, Alan Moore, and many others ("The Pilgrim's"). The use of this particular flower "has traditionally been associated with sleep and death since ancient times. Because of their color, scarlet poppies were said to grow from the blood of the slain, for they were often seen on battlefields. When Demeter (Cere) sought her daughter Proserpine (Persephone) in the underworld, the gods gave her a poppy to smell to let her sleep, and these flowers sprung from her footsteps" (Baum, p 141). Poppy flowers have also been considered to be the manifestation of the blood of Christ (141).

Baum is not the only author to draw parallels between ancient myths and Christianity. Both C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien have defended Christianity in their literature. Baum's interest in mythology is evident in Chapter Ten, when the Cowardly Lion's recognition that little creatures such as mice could save his life is a reference to Aesop's Fable, *The Lion and the Mouse*, and the self-evident truth that salvation often comes in unexpected ways, indeed, that "the least may help the greatest" (Baum, 161). Alison Lurie writes,

The great subversive works of children's literature suggest that there are other views of human life besides those of the shopping mall and corporations. They mock current assumptions and express the imagination, unconventional, noncommercial view of the world in its simplest and purest form. They appeal to the imaginative, questioning, rebellious child within all of us, renew our instinctive energy, and act as a force for change (Lurie).

Baum's stories are rife with representations: for example, the iconic red shoes that we all associate with Dorothy were silver in Baum's book and are said to be a reference from the story *Pilgrim's Progress*: "[One] must also own religion in his rags, as well as when in his silver slippers" (Baum 38-39). Another interpretation is that the silver slippers and the yellow brick road were representative of the debate over the gold standard. Perhaps Dorothy's shoes represented the Populist Party and Dorothy was the mediator symbolic of "applying silver to gold" (*The Wonderful Wizard*). The same theory continues that the house that fell and killed the Wicked Witch of the East was symbolic of the eventual demise of Easterners at the hands of rural farmers (*The Wonderful Wizard*). "Baum's disillusionment with American politics and presidents" is represented by his portrayal of the wizard's uselessness and how the American government hides behind smoke and mirrors (Rahn, 41).

Dorothy's shoes are representative of evil, which in the hands of the virtuous, can lead to remarkable things. Such symbols of simultaneous good and evil are represented in stories such as Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, where the power of the ring can bring great evil; but alternately, with proper usage, it can be extremely beneficial in the protagonist's journey. Good versus evil is a recurrent theme throughout, beginning with Dorothy's inadvertent crushing of the Witch with her house. The death is a good thing, as it turns out, since she represents the power of evil. The kiss by the Good Witch protects Dorothy and acts as an effective amulet against evil. Several of the characters remark on the benevolent kiss, though the winged monkeys observe that "we dare not harm this little girl... for she is protected by the power of Good, and that is greater than the Power of Evil" (Rahn, p 90). Mythically, Dorothy's innocence is preserved because her act goes beyond the nature of good and evil, for what she is killing are symbols, not human beings.

Baum's consideration of good versus evil, as with his treatment of reality versus fantasy, demonstrates that all is not black and white. When the Wizard

is discovered by Dorothy and she exclaims that he is a terrible person, he states, "Oh, no, my dear; I'm really a very good man; but I'm a very bad wizard, I must admit" (Baum, p 270). In that passage Baum tries to introduce children to the possibility that both good and evil can exist in all of us throughout any society. He is also demonstrating for his adult readers that under certain circumstances, particularly when workers are removed from their natural environments (the farm, for instance), they are detached from their essential selves. Though there are clear references to Marxist theory, this portrayal is also reminiscent of the optimism of *Candide*, in spite of the continuing presence of evil in his life. Dorothy, too, maintains her innocence throughout adversity, ultimately triumphing over darkness and returning home. In all of this, Baum avoids shallow moralizing and superficial allusions, and the story continues to hold the attention of children and adults throughout succeeding generations.

Many elements influenced Baum in writing *The Wizard of Oz* other than literary works. His own personal experiences and value structure, coupled with the cultural and historical aspects of the time period, informed his final masterpiece. Just as other elements have influenced Baum, his work has influenced literary cultures throughout the world. The story of *The Wizard of Oz* has been translated into almost every language including Chinese, Japanese, Portuguese, Romanian, Polish, Turkish, Russian, Czech, Hungarian, Hebrew, and Bengali amongst others. With so many reading this tale, it is hard for it not to have a pervasive impact on the whole world (Rahn, 9).

The images and phrases of the Wizard of Oz have taken on a cultural prominence of their own: they are quoted, mocked, praised, criticized, parodied, reproduced, capitalized on and immortalized within cultures around the world more than any other American story. The quintessential lines of the story, which are forever immortalized in the movie with Judy Garland, have become staples of the American language, "Toto, I've got a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore", "Follow the yellow brick road", and "Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain" are a few of the references quoted within our culture, through literature, movies, and music. Both Elton John and Ozzie Osbourne have written songs in homage to Oz, and many movies such as "E.T.," "Star Wars," "The Gremlins," "Good Morning Vietnam" have references to Baum's work. There are also direct adaptations such as *The Wiz*, an Australian movie called "Oz," a Turkish version produced in 1971, and many others. Several books have also been written dissecting its philosophical elements or, like Gregory McGuire's book, a spin on the original theme that starts before the Oz books do and tells the story before the story. The quote, "The man behind the curtain" has been used "in reference to conspiracy theories and political scandals, including the Kennedy assassinations, Watergate, Iran-Contra, and suspicions of voter fraud in the 2000 U.S. presidential election" ("Wizard of Oz" & "The Wizard of Oz Opens"). The rainbow of which Dorothy sings

has become the symbol of gay pride and mundane items of everyday life such as Dunkin Donuts Munchkins, which pay homage to the literary text (*The Wizard of Oz Opens*). All of these associations point to the power of literature and literary innuendos to impact, form and change culture within society.

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