

The Wizard of Oz (1939, 101 min / USA:112 min (uncut pre-release version))

screenplay by Noel Langley, Florence Ryerson, Edgar Allan Woolf, from the novel by L. Frank Baum. directed by Victor Fleming, King Vidor (uncredited), Richard Thorpe (uncredited)

Imagining the Spiritual Journey

“You’ve always had the power to go back to Kansas.”

The Wizard of OZ, released in 1939 by MGM, is one of the world’s most beloved family films. First shown on national television by CBS in November 1956, the movie became a recurring prime time event during the Thanksgiving, Christmas and Easter holiday seasons.

Given its wide television exposure, at a time when video cassettes were still unavailable, The Wizard of OZ may have been seen by more people over multiple decades than any other film. Its repeated family viewing became a cherished rite of passage for generations of Americans. Why does this film speak so powerfully to so many viewers?

A Sacred Story for a Secular Society

The Wizard of OZ is a classic example of one of the Nine Story Types, each of which follows a specific mythic storytelling pattern. These Nine Story Types form the basis of my teaching about screenwriting at the UCLA Film School.



This particular film is propelled forward by the “Power of Imagination” storytelling pattern. This mythic pattern has four main elements:

- The protagonist hears, sees or experiences something beyond the realm of normal every-day life.
- The protagonist unifies others as part of that vision or “other-worldly” experience.
- The unified group journeys together toward some far-off destination or goal.
- In the end, however, the protagonist must step out from the crowd, individually, and perform a heroic deed him or herself.

As pointed out by Joseph Campbell, this storytelling pattern occurs in every society and in every culture. It can be viewed as a secular parable about how God or the spirit calls us, how we are expected to respond to that call, the importance of community, the necessity to stand up against evil as an individual and the power of faith.

All such stories are remarkably similar in their construction. The Wizard of OZ holds very true to the classic elements of this pattern. Let’s look at the plot and protagonist in detail to see how this story mirrors one kind of spiritual journey.

The Wizard of OZ – Plot Summary

In *The Wizard of OZ*, a young Kansas farm girl, Dorothy Gale (Judy Garland), runs away to save her dog Toto from the malicious Mrs. Gulch (Margaret Hamilton). Dorothy feels misunderstood and unappreciated at home and daydreams of escaping “Somewhere Over the Rainbow.”

As she escapes from home she is caught in a tornado. Dorothy manages to return to the farmhouse but is struck on the head. She is transported to a rainbow colored world very different than her drab Kansas home. One of the most famous lines in the film is, “Toto, I’ve got a feeling we’re not in Kansas anymore.”

Dorothy quickly attracts a band of magical fellow travelers as she journeys along the Yellow Brick Road to the Land of OZ. In OZ she asks the Wonderful Wizard’s help in returning home. Each of her companions has a longed-for request as well—the Scarecrow (Ray Bolger) wants brains, the Tin Man (Jack Haley) wants a heart and the Cowardly Lion (Bret Lahr) wants courage.

The great and powerful Wizard (Frank Morgan) agrees to grant the group’s requests if they bring back the Wicked Witch of the West’s broomstick. On this quest the companions have a series of adventures, which bring out the very qualities each of the characters seeks. Dorothy confronts and kills the Wicked Witch. She and her friends then return to OZ with the prized broomstick.



The Wizard acknowledges each character’s deepest desire with a declaration of achievement. The Wizard (who is actually a Kansas hot air balloon operator) offers to take Dorothy home himself but ends up drifting off without her by mistake. Dorothy, like her companions, finds she has the power to achieve her heart’s desire within her self. After she realizes and truly believes, “There’s no place like home,” she magically returns to Kansas.

The Unlikely Hero

Mythic tales propelled by the Power of Imagination often feature children (or the very young) as protagonists. They, after all, are the most easily overlooked, insignificant, and seemingly powerless members of society. These smallest and most vulnerable beings are the least likely candidates to be heroes.

Dorothy is a young farm girl who is no match for the high and mighty Miss Gulch (the Wicked Witch). Dorothy’s unlikely heroism tells us that anyone can be called to greatness. *The Wizard of OZ* reminds us that God calls the ordinary person, the person who seems the least likely to succeed, to do His work.

Being defenseless, inept and inconsequential are often exactly the qualifications God seeks in a hero. These stories remind us that God raises up and empowers anyone He fills with His Spirit. Anyone and everyone can be called—no matter how small or ordinary.

The Call is Terrifying

God's call is not something this unlikely hero wants. Being called to greatness is a terrifying thing. It propels the character into dangerous situations. Although the protagonist may dream of greener pastures, he or she doesn't initiate the action that sets the story in motion. The call to greatness is thrust upon the character—unexpectedly and without warning. Dorothy's house is suddenly blown off its foundation.

Dorothy finds herself slammed into the middle of a strange territory where nothing and no one reacts as expected. She is physically threatened, emotionally intimidated and repeatedly harassed. She is constantly fearful of what lies ahead. Nevertheless she continues to press onward despite, "Lions and tigers and bears. Oh my!"

This story element reminds us that God's call abruptly sweeps us out of our ordinary existence and mundane concerns. We feel unready and unequal to the task as we are propelled into very scary territory indeed. The "lions and tiger and bears" that await—our worst possible antagonists—are our own fears.



Somehow we must find the faith to press onward. Faith is the best (and often the only) antidote to our fear of what lies ahead. Buoyed by faith and filled with hope we look for others to offer aid and comfort along the way. Instinctively, we know the journey must be completed in community with others.

The Importance of Community

One of the most important things the unlikely hero does is inspire other unlikely individuals to share in the vision and join in the journey. This hearty (but equally inept) band is composed of people or creatures that have nothing in common. The protagonist serves as the unifying bond that keeps everyone moving in the same direction.

Dorothy forges her team out of a little dog, a scarecrow, a tin man and a cowardly lion. Each team member fulfills a vital function and is absolutely essential to the story. The Scarecrow, the Tin Man and the Cowardly Lion each learn an important personal lesson along the way. The Scarecrow learns he is clever and smart (and demonstrates that quality in getting the apple trees to throw their apples when Dorothy is hungry). The Tin Man learns he has a heart (because it breaks at the thought of never seeing Dorothy again). The Cowardly Lion learns it isn't cowardice to be afraid—real courage is being afraid and doing a necessary task anyway.

Regardless of their various desires and individual objectives or problems, these team members forget their differences and personal concerns over the course of the journey. They are united in their willingness to sacrifice themselves for Dorothy and the greater good. This story element reminds us of the importance of community.

Despite superficial differences and petty quarrels we need each other. Like it or not, we all are in this together. In the struggle to complete the spiritual journey we are more alike than we are different. We are reminded that God's call makes us part of a whole much greater than our own individual concerns and problems. A sense of community is a potent impetus in continuing to move forward on the journey.

Taking Personal Responsibility

Like Dorothy, unlikely heroes don't strive for personal gain or individual glory. They simply want to enlist others and get through the ordeal in one piece. In the end however, these protagonists must step out from the crowd, tap hidden reserves of inner strength, exhibit great personal courage and emerge as a true leader. The hero must make his or her own individual stand.

At some point, the unlikely hero must personally face down the power of the antagonist and do the deed, whatever it is, alone. He or she must emerge from the safety of the crowd and take a personal position in the opposition to evil. In *The Wizard of Oz*, it is Dorothy who ultimately must step out from the group and face the Wicked Witch armed only with the bucket of water.

Real Power Is an Inner Force

Perhaps the most significant element of Power of Imagination stories is the role of magical objects. These items are endowed with great power. Initially the character thinks that his or her salvation is dependent on this very special article. The character cannot control the object and doesn't really know what to do with it. Only after the character has grown as an individual is the object's power revealed for what it is—the power of a mature personal belief.

Although Dorothy doesn't understand the magic of the Ruby Slippers she knows they must be very powerful indeed for the Wicked Witch of the West to want them so badly. It is only when she learns the lessons of her adventure does she understand how to summon the power of "home" within herself. Dorothy comes to understand how this power works in the following exchange with Glinda the Good Witch.

Dorothy [to Glinda]: Oh, will you help me? Can you help me?

Glinda: You don't need to be helped any longer. You've always had the power to go back to Kansas.

Dorothy: I have?

Scarecrow: Then why didn't you tell her before?

Glinda: Because she wouldn't have believed me. She had to learn it for herself.

As they gain confidence and maturity, these protagonists learn to believe in their personal ability to tap into a much larger force. This story element reminds us that what we believe is what gives us our power. True power is an internal force that requires a deep faith and trust in something bigger than ourselves. We can tap into that force at any time. It, like God's grace, is something that is and always has been within us.

Conclusion

Storytelling has always passed down shared values, defining moral choices and a sense of who we are as a society. It is the way human beings organize a sense of self and the whole nature and scope of human reality. The stories we tell define who we are and what we believe.

The Wizard of Oz is a very particular kind of mythic storytelling pattern propelled by the Power of Imagination, one of Nine Story Types. In a Power of Imagination type of story the protagonist hears, sees or experiences something beyond the realm of normal every-day life. This character unifies others as part of that larger vision or journey. But in the end, the protagonist must step out from the crowd and perform a heroic deed him or herself.

This kind of story is a timeless reminder of the amazing power of the ordinary person called to greatness, the importance of the community, the need to stand up against evil as a committed individual, and the unquenchable power of faith. On a sacred level it is very much a story of how God's call comes into our lives and how we are expected to respond.

These stories tell us that true power is an inner force for good that acts as a beacon guiding us 'home' to God's grace and love whenever we wish. But first we must learn that God is always present within us, even in times of trouble or tragedy. The Wizard of Oz and other Power of Imagination stories inspire us to greatness in our ordinary lives and they tell us that God's power is always available within us—if only we have the courage and wisdom to believe.

Essay © Laurie H. Hutzler. Laurie Hutzler is a media consultant whose interactive problem-solving sessions focus on the power of a story and clarify a character's emotional truth. Laurie has consulted with leading TV networks and production companies including: Disney (USA), BBC (UK), MMG (Belgium), Rubicon (Norway) and Equinoxe (France). She teaches at the UCLA Film School in the graduate and professional programs.