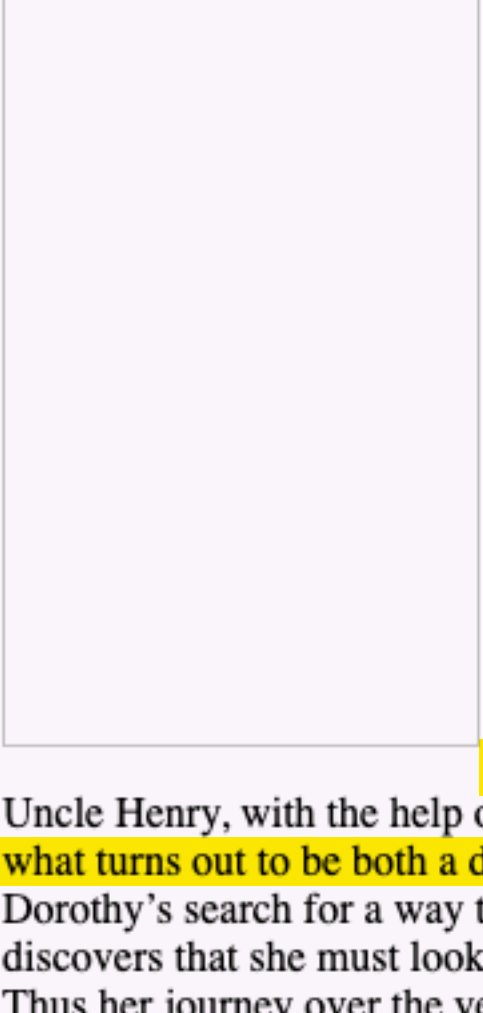


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Mysticism in the Wizard of Oz

by Lindsay Eyler
Grade 11
Oregon Episcopal School
Portland, Oregon

"How can I get there?" asked Dorothy.
'You must walk. It is a long journey, through
a country that is sometimes pleasant
and sometimes dark and terrible." (1)

In L. Frank Baum's classic, The Wizard of Oz, a young girl, Dorothy Gale of Kansas, finds herself and her house lifted off the ground in a great cyclone, and deposited again in the bright and wondrous Land of Oz. Desperate to find her way back home to her Aunt Em and Uncle Henry, with the help of a good witch and a few curious friends she meets along the way, Dorothy sets off on what turns out to be both a delightful and dangerous journey along the road of yellow bricks. This begins as a tale of Dorothy's search for a way to physically get herself back to Kansas. By the end of the story, however, Dorothy discovers that she must look inside herself to find a way home, and that the ability to do so has been with her all along. Thus her journey over the yellow brick road is more spiritual than physical. It is also a journey that in many ways appears to be mystical, containing many elements of mysticism: Dorothy is on a spiritual journey in search of Ultimate Truth. She further achieves many aspects of the classical (and required) stages of the Mystic Way: Purgation, Illumination and Unity, as well some of Evelyn Underhill's additional stages of Awakening and Dark Night of the Soul. Finally, many additional truths and recurring mystical themes feature prominently. However, Dorothy's actions at several stages along the path, most notably that of Purgation, lack the intent and correspondence in purpose to her ultimate goal needed to make her journey a true example of mysticism.

If Mysticism is the practice of a series of spiritual stages with the design of achieving the desired goal of unity with the Absolute, then the realization that there is an Absolute, and that unity with it, whatever it may be, is desired, must take place first. Awakening has been described as the moment the soul "awakes to new needs,"(2) and it is also noted that "the first beginning of all things is a craving."(3) Dorothy's craving and new need is for a return to her home in Kansas. Awakening, however, can take place in infinitely many ways,(4) and the self can be "either suddenly or gradually inclined to 'true wisdom' ."(5) For Dorothy, awakening takes place in a series of several revelations, beginning with her discovery of the existence of the Land of Oz and culminating in the realization that her best hope of getting back to Kansas lies in making a journey to the all-powerful Wizard, the one man she believes can enlighten her to Ultimate Truth, and thus help her find her way home. Since there are no specific criteria for awakening, this looks to be sufficient as the beginning of a mystical journey for Dorothy, however, as Robert Elwood notes, "the awakened mystic... knows that a larger universe of reality and experience exists than ever before. But he or she must deepen and stabilize the relationship with it; otherwise the seeker might... continue on an immature level of religion virtually as inadequate as none."(6) Dorothy's awakening is only one of the pieces required of a mystical journey.

While the way in which a mystic is awakened, and even the course of the path they follow on the way to unity may be very different for each person, all mystics must undergo purgation. As stated by Robert Elwood, "all outlines [of mysticism] include an insistence that a serious spiritual endeavor must embrace preparation of an individual's morals and life-style."(7) Evelyn Underhill's assessment of this is corroborative with Elwood's: "Mortification is an integral part of the 'purgative way' . Unless the self's 'inclination to true wisdom' is strong enough to inspire these costing and heroic efforts, its spiritual cravings do not deserve the name of mysticism," where she defines mortification as "the killing out of all those impulses which deflect the soul from the straight path to God."(8) In other words, to be a mystic, a soul must undergo some sort of purification, usually through prayer, as well as some self-sacrifice of those things which bind it to the material world. It is Dorothy's failure to exhibit any of these practices which make it doubtful that her journey is actually mystical. She does do good deeds for others, such as freeing the scarecrow from his perch in a farmer's field,(9) and saving the tin woodsman from his rusty fate in the forest,(10) but these are just the acts of a kind girl, and there exists no evidence that she does them as any sort of spiritual self-improvement/redemption, or that they have any connection to her mission of reaching Oz. Furthermore, besides solely being centered "on a self-giving and disinterested love", Purgation must also include "the complete abolition of egoism."(11) The mystic must rid the soul of desires for worldly things- all desires of the Self... yet Dorothy's journey is based solely on her desire to get home, and she seeks out her Ultimate Truth for the sole purpose of achieving that desire.

While it could be said that Dorothy's journey is not Mysticism based on the fact that she never undergoes Purgation, it is worthwhile to examine her journey for other elements of the Mystic Way, as her journey is remarkably close to mysticism. There is also, however, little evidence of the next stage, Illumination, in Dorothy's quest. Illumination signifies that the mystic is on the right path, and is in fact getting closer to the divine he or she seeks. According to William James' tenets of Illumination, an illuminative experience must be: ineffable, noetic, transient, and passive, meaning, respectively, that it must be an experience so powerful it cannot be described by words, which defies logic but can be accounted for by the mystic, as well as being impermanent and not brought on as the result of any direct actions of the mystic. Dorothy never experiences Illumination as defined by the William James' tenets, (at least not one that is known to the reader), however she does have at least one experience that encourages her to keep going along her path.

This initial illuminative phase is begun with a dream: One night while sleeping in the forest, "Dorothy dreamed of the Emerald City, and of the good Wizard of Oz, who would send her back to her home again."(12) There is very little description here, however Dorothy does dream of that with which her journey will unite her, and it encourages her to keep going. Teresa of Avila discusses dreams from God in her analysis of Mysticism. During the 'Prayer of Quiet' the soul may receive 'locations' from God in the form of dreams.(13) These dreams are part of illumination, and "come laden with love and fortitude, by the help of which a soul can progress with less labor and grow continually in good works and virtues."(14) In other words, the illuminative gifts (condolences), in the form of dreams, which Teresa speaks of, can serve to show the Mystic they are on the right path, and be encouraged to continue. Dreams are also an important/necessary religious tool for Sufis (Muslim mystics). Also, because Dorothy's quest is not in search of a God, persay, she could not expect to have the kind of supernatural illuminative experiences that would be given only by a God, as described by St. Teresa and William James.

Evelyn Underhill's fourth stage of the Mystic Way is often considered optional, however Dorothy exhibits it quite well. Dark Night of the Soul represents a time when the mystic, "requires a second purgation, deeper and more delicate than the preliminary abstinences and observances."(15) Dorothy has two experiences than can be classified as Dark Night of the Soul. The most significant comes after she has been to see the Wizard, and asked for help returning home. Oz tells her, "you must do something for me in return... kill the Wicked Witch of the West."(16) This is part of purgation for Dorothy, because she must undertake this task with the intent of its completion bringing her closer to her desired end. This instance exhibits the intent that her previous works lacked.

Dorothy's second period of Dark Night comes after she has succeeded in killing the witch, and Oz's plan to return her to Kansas by way of hot air balloon has failed. She receives the advice that her only hope for getting home is to make another journey, this time to Glinda, the Good Witch of the North, who might possibly be able to help her.(17) But Glinda lives on the other side of a treacherous forest,(18) a strange land made entirely of china,(19) and the territory of a mean and dangerous people called the Quadlings.(20) Dorothy must undergo these trials to succeed in her quest, and reassure herself that she is indeed on the right path to Unity.

Thus Dark Night of the Soul is also described as a time when "one is left to wander as on a desert at midnight without a compass."(21) It is a time of despair, when the mystic feels as if he or she is lost, and is not on the right path to Unity. Dorothy feels this despair both times she believes she is about to reach her answer, only to find that she has more obstacles to face before she can achieve her goal. These instances of Dark Night, however, can't take the place of the purgation that Dorothy should have originally exhibited, because she never attempts to undergo the self-purification portion of Purgation: to detach herself from all earthly things. What is interesting about Dorothy's Dark Night of the Soul is that she begins to have sequences of Illumination and Purgation, the latter in the form of Dark Night, for the duration of the book. Each time Dorothy almost reaches her end her plans are foiled and she is pulled back on the path once again. It is unusual for a mystic to experience repeated alternations of these two states, however in Dorothy's instance, this appears to be what is happening.

Finally Dorothy reaches the last phase of her journey, which most nearly resembles the mystical stage of Unity. Dorothy's entire quest has been for the purpose of finding the power that will allow her to return home, (her Ultimate Truth). In the end she finds this power when Glinda reveals to her that the way back to Kansas is to use the charm of her silver shoes, which will carry her over the vast desert that stands in her way.(22) Technically, Dorothy has reached Union.

However, there is something about Dorothy's state of Union that differs very much from traditional Mysticism. Margaret Smith describes the state of Unity as the moment when "the soul seems to be God rather than itself, and indeed is God by participation."(23) St. Teresa describes Unity as the "spiritual marriage" of the soul and the divine. God now acts through the soul, and the mystic does His good works. Dorothy, however, only wishes to achieve Unity for the purpose of returning herself to Kansas. Once she has found the Ultimate Truth which allows her to do that, she returns home, forsaking all the powers she has just found she had, and thereby immediately breaking her newly achieved state of Union.(24) The very nature of Dorothy's purpose, in fact, contradicts common definitions of Mysticism, in which the purpose of a mystic's journey is the union with the divine, and all other desires/strives must be forgotten to properly achieve it.

Besides conforming to the stages of the Mystic Way, (albeit in rather unconventional ways), Dorothy's journey contains other elements associated with Mysticism. Arguably, the theme most strongly stressed throughout the book is that Dorothy has had the power to return herself to Kansas all along, (ever since she acquired the silver shoes), she just doesn't know it. This is true also of the Scarecrow, who frequently exhibits his brainpower by thinking up ways to rescue his friends,(25) the tin woodsman, who has the heart to take care not to harm any being,(26) and the lion, who has always found the courage to do the things that frighten him.(27) The concept follows very closely Margaret Smith's tenet of Mysticism that "the soul has a spark of the divine," and the end of the Mystic Way is the uniting of that spark with its whole.

This is also the prevailing theme in Farid Ud-din Attar's The Conference of the Birds. The birds of the world decide they must journey to find the King Bird, known as the Simorgh. When they finally reach the end of their path "they find that the Simorgh they have sought is none other than themselves. Only 30 (si) birds (morgh) are left at the end of the Way, and the si morph meet the Simorgh, the goal of their quest."(28) This story, as well as The Wizard of Oz, are both examples of an immanent God.

Another theme that holds mystical importance also plays a role in The Wizard of Oz. This is the significance of light. As the soul travels through the seven mansions in Teresa of Avila's Interior Castle, the rooms get lighter and lighter. God radiates brightness. On Dorothy's journey she first passes through the "dark forest", and into a "sunny country that seemed to beckon them on to the Emerald City."(29) When they finally do near the Emerald City it is surrounded by a green glowing aura which, "as they walked on... became brighter and brighter, and it seemed at last they were nearing the end of their travels."(30) Finally, once inside the city, Dorothy and her friends are told they must wear sunglasses, for otherwise "the brightness and glory of the Emerald City would blind [them]." (31) Dorothy is searching for the Ultimate Truth: how to get home. She believes the Wizard can enlighten her with that truth. As she nears the dwelling place of the Wizard her path gets brighter and brighter, until it is blinding light in the center, as in Teresa's mansions.

The Wicked Witch of the West also plays an important mystical role in Dorothy's journey. The Wicked Witch is Dorothy's arch nemesis in her quest to find a way back to Kansas. The Witch wants revenge because when Dorothy's house landed in Oz it crushed her sister, the Wicked Witch of the East. If we view Dorothy's quest as mystical, the Witch serves to impede Dorothy's attainment of Unity through attempts to trick or harm her. St. Teresa often mentions that the Devil works in the mansions to lead the soul astray, and prevent it from reaching Union. Thus the Witch represents the Devil by common purpose, and, interestingly enough, goes about trying to prevent Dorothy's Union in much the same way the Devil in Teresa's mansions does: by sending their creatures or minions to do the job.

In Teresa's mansion "the devil's intentions are very bad, [and] he has many legions of evil spirits [creatures] in each room to prevent souls from passing from one to another."(32) Evil spirits work the most in the dark places: the places are dark because of the Devil's influence.(33) Along Dorothy's path she also faces hellish creatures in the dark places. First in the forest there are the Kalidas, "monstrous beasts with bodies like bears and heads like tigers."(34) Dorothy and her friends barely escape the Kalidas by building a bridge across a great ravine, and destroying it behind them before the Kalidas can cross.(35)

Another encounter with creatures that Dorothy must face is that with the trees that attack her as she travels from the Emerald City to see Glinda in the South. The lion declares that "the trees seem to have made up their minds to fight us, and stop our journey."(36) This seems to be true. The battle with eventual escape from the trees makes Dorothy stronger than before.

Thus The Wizard of Oz is also a story about the triumph of good over evil.(37) The Wicked Witch is unable to stop Dorothy because Dorothy "is protected by the Power of Good, and that is greater than the Power of Evil." The Mystic Way is also about the triumph of good over evil: within the soul of the mystic as well as on the journey itself. Mystics with pure souls and the determination of love will reach God unharmed by the Devil.

In order for Dorothy's journey to be a truly mystical journey, it must be a spiritual journey including Purgation and Illumination. Purgation must include purification of the soul as well as good works and the successful completion of the trials which stand in a mystic's way. Purgation must be completed with the intent of using it as a tool for arriving at the mystic goal of Ultimate Truth. That goal of Unity must also be achieved for the purpose of achieving it alone, and not for ulterior motives. Despite all the remarkable similarities between Dorothy's journey and Mysticism, her lack of purification and intent during Purgation, as well as her self-interested motives for undertaking the journey prevent it from being true Mysticism.

Notes:

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2. Underhill, Evelyn. Mysticism. New York: E.P. Dutton Company, 1961. (p. 33)
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6. Elwood, Robert. The Mystic Path.. (p. 174) *Class Handout.
7. Elwood, Robert. The Mystic Path.. (p. 174) *Class Handout..
8. Underhill, Evelyn. Mysticism. New York: E.P. Dutton Company, 1961. (p. 35-6)
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11. Underhill, Evelyn. Mysticism. New York: E.P. Dutton Company, 1961. (p. 34)
12. Baum, L. Frank. The Wizard of Oz. New York: Scholastic, 1958. (p. 45)
13. Avila, Teresa of. Interior Castle. Trans. E. Allison Peers. New York: Doubleday, 1989. (p. 143-4)
14. Avila, Teresa of. Interior Castle. Trans. E. Allison Peers. New York: Doubleday, 1989. (p. 68)
15. Elwood, Robert. The Mystic Path.. (p. 178) *Class Handout.
16. Baum, L. Frank. The Wizard of Oz. New York: Scholastic, 1958. (p. 72)
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18. Baum, L. Frank. The Wizard of Oz. New York: Scholastic, 1958. (p. 130)
19. Baum, L. Frank. The Wizard of Oz. New York: Scholastic, 1958. (p. 135)
20. Baum, L. Frank. The Wizard of Oz. New York: Scholastic, 1958. (p. 145)
21. Elwood, Robert. The Mystic Path. (p. 178) *Class Handout.
22. Baum, L. Frank. The Wizard of Oz. New York: Scholastic, 1958. (p. 135)
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25. Baum, L. Frank. The Wizard of Oz. New York: Scholastic, 1958. (p. 42)
26. Baum, L. Frank. The Wizard of Oz. New York: Scholastic, 1958. (p. 38)
27. Baum, L. Frank. The Wizard of Oz. New York: Scholastic, 1958. (p. 114)
28. Attar, Farid Ud-din. The Conference of the Birds. Trans. Afkham Darbandi and Dick Davis. New York: Penguin Books, 1984. (p. 16)
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30. Baum, L. Frank. The Wizard of Oz. New York: Scholastic, 1958. (p. 62)
31. Baum, L. Frank. The Wizard of Oz. New York: Scholastic, 1958. (p. 64)
32. Avila, Teresa of. Interior Castle. Trans. E. Allison Peers. New York: Doubleday, 1989. (p. 40)
33. Avila, Teresa of. Interior Castle. Trans. E. Allison Peers. New York: Doubleday, 1989. (p. 40-1)
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36. Baum, L. Frank. The Wizard of Oz. New York: Scholastic, 1958. (p. 133)
37. Baum, L. Frank. The Wizard of Oz. New York: Scholastic, 1958. (p. 86)