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Cavalier Treatment: We're Off To See The Analyst

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Cavalier Treatment: We're Off To See The Analyst

CAVALIER TREATMENT

WE'RE OFF TO SEE THE ANALYST

LEE SPETH

Things have changed since my youth when psychology tended to disparage fantasy literature, especially for the young. The psychologist no longer anathematizes, which is good, but today's pontifical sobriety is not necessarily better than the old days when the fantasy reader was viewed as a raucous outlaw. There's a limit to how respectable one wishes to be, and when, at last, a serious attempt is made at co-option, the warm-blooded book-lover must raise a protest.

Dorothy and the Lizard of Oz is a pedantic little desecration newly available from Creative Therapeutics, Inc. in Cresskill, N. J., a tightly-bound hardcover, aggressively suitable for libraries. The author, Richard A. Gardner, M. D., is a practicing child psychologist who has also given us Dr. Gardner's Modern Fairy Tales and Dr. Gardner's Fairy Tales for Today's Children, along with more clinical works like The Child's Book about Brain Injury. In the preface he allows that renovating an established classic like The Wizard of Oz may smack of impropriety, but his motives, predictably, are of the loftiest:

"I have tried to retain what is healthy in the Baum and MGM versions and to omit what I consider to be unhealthy and contributory to inappropriate and maladaptive ways of looking at and dealing with life." He has been moved to revision because "There are the magic solutions that instantaneously solve the most complex problems

".... Although Dorothy does finally return to Kansas, the problem with Miss Gulch is not dealt with at the end of the story. Dorothy fled Kansas and then flees Oz. The problem that originally caused her flight from Kansas is not resolved."

But this won't do, for the original book and the movie differ. It is unjust to arraign the author, L. Frank Baum, for the misdemeanors of MGM. True, at the end of the movie Dorothy has not resolved her problem with Miss Gulch; the audience has merely forgotten it. But this is no fault of Dorothy's creator, for in the book Miss Gulch did not exist. The original Dorothy's only problem is to return to her home - a home she never willingly fled - and since the entire book is taken up with her efforts toward this return, at frequent peril of life and limb, her success cannot fairly be called "simple", nor can the book be denounced for offering "easy answers". Magical, yes, but not easy.

It may of course be objected that lots more contemporary children have seen the movie than have read the book - which is probably true - and that Dr. Gardner may justly seek to compensate for harm he feels the movie is doing. Even so, I would hold, he owes Baum the courtesy of a distinction he does not make. And this excuse will not cover his handling of Dorothy's three companions:

"The attraction of the Straw Man, the Tin Woodman, and the Cowardly Lion is that they provide children (and, to a lesser extent, adults) with vicarious gratification of needs that are central." But the Wizard, by his symbolic gifts, makes it all too easy: "The Strawman earns his degree in less than a minute This capacity to love and be loved is suddenly acquired, merely by wearing a little ticking clock The cowardice problem is instantly cured"

Now the most addling cliché one can fall into about fantasy is that asserted by Dr. Gardner in his preface: "There is the stereotyped world in which all people and things are immediately recognized as either good or bad, right or wrong. And all consistently remain in the assigned role throughout the story." Adherence to this cliché can only obscure The Wizard of Oz. For the book does pivot about the figure of the humbug - "a good man but a bad wizard" - who certainly does not "remain consistently in an assigned role throughout the story". In both book and movie the Wizard is exposed by the heroes and we have a satire upon pretension. But then things move a step further: Dorothy's friends accept gifts and reassurances from the Wizard, knowing him to be a fraud. This touch is unusual in a children's book, it doubles irony and it has a wry human truth in it. It is not a morally simple moment and the child reader or viewer is not carried along to renewed belief in the Wizard. Dorothy is the "identity figure" of the story and the Wizard cannot baffle her as to whether she is in Kansas. That children are also fond of the Scarecrow, the Tin Woodman and the Lion does not prevent recognition of their fallibility. Even a child knows that they really have the qualities for which they so pathetically seek emblems, and we laugh fondly at them as Baum takes us into the workshop of the Great Oz and shows us exactly what the humbug's doing.

The plot of Dorothy and the Lizard of Oz may be briefly summarized. Chapter One introduces the true Wizard of Oz, a philanthropic wise man whose refusal to give "easy answers" to life's problems irritates a large segment of the Emerald City's population. They employ a witch to transform the sage into a lizard (drawn to resemble an alligator) and he is driven to the swamps beyond the town walls. Chapter Two brings in the humbug, who becomes the hidden but grandiose Wizard of Oz, offering quick fixes and placebos. Chapters Three to Five briefly recapitulate the story of The Wizard of Oz in the MGM version, with one important exception - the humbug is not exposed and Dorothy goes home with her dog in the balloon. In the next chapters each of Dorothy's companions finds that the gifts bestowed by the Wizard are meaningless, one by one they are directed to the exiled Lizard, and that worthy counsels each on how to develop the real gifts latent within his nature.

Finding Toto still threatened by Miss Gulch, Dorothy balloons back to Oz (her skill in handling the balloon is never made plausible) and likewise reaches the Lizard. He urges her to reason with the sheriff back home and helps her to discover a basis for compromise with Miss Gulch, which done Dorothy and her companions argue on the Lizard's behalf before the Town Council. Glinda restores the sage to his right shape and he resumes residence in the city; the humbug is scornfully left in peace since the simple-minded want him.

Baum's story is not so much retold as hijacked. The single moral about avoiding "easy solutions" pounds upon the reader with the monotony of engine knock; there is no wit, no adventure, no danger after the witch melts. Characters are flat. For a sample of the prose, here is the first appearance of the Winged Monkeys, an opportunity for sound and excitement:

MATTERS OF GRAVE IMPORT

GRACIA FAY ELLWOOD

ANDERSEN: JOY, SORROW AND THE JOKE PROPER

"Just then they noticed some strange looking things in the sky. At first they looked like little black dots. Then they noticed that the black things were coming toward them. As the things flew closer they could not recognize what they were. They were weird looking creatures, and they had never seen anything like them before. Then, when they got very close, they saw that they looked like monkeys."

The true hero is the Wizard-Lizard who, oddly, displays no magical powers at all. The illustrator shows a bespectacled classical philosopher and by the text he is clearly an analyst, leading his clients with gentle Socratic questions. "He never gave simple solutions." It seems an odd taboo; we cry like the crew of the *Pinafore*. "What, never?" After all, some backaches are cured by just changing shoes.

There is no real chance that Gardner will delight or thrill the young as Baum has; there is a real danger of his misleading them. It is not just that his Analyst-Wizard-Lizard is never wrong; a man will boost his own profession. But there lies at the heart of this didactic little book a singularly lethal untruth, that has, in my experience, brought pain and frustration to my fellow creatures.

"The best thing for you," the Lizard counsels Dorothy, "is to talk to the sheriff yourself and see if you can convince him to change his order" (that given to Miss Gulch for the confiscation of Toto). It works.

"You're right," the sheriff said. "I really didn't hear your side of the story and I should have before giving her that order. I'm sorry."

Of course children should be taught to be reasonable. But to teach them that they can count on the world to respond reasonably is abominably wicked. They can count on no such thing.

In a passage that occupies four pages, Dr. Gardner's Dorothy is led through a verse by verse recantation of the lyrics of "Over the Rainbow". But then he replaces the lemon-drop MGM never-land with the rationalist Utopia of the Enlightenment, a Utopia no less unreal for being deadly earnest in conception.

"She never had any more trouble with Miss Gulch. She and Toto stayed away from her high fence and so never gave her a reason to complain." Lord above, has Dr. Gardner really never met Miss Gulch? The Miss Gulches of the world require no reasons to complain.

Dr. Gardner is invited to attend an Oz convention. I've been to three and find the people generally cheerful, well-adjusted, not much wracked by divorce, drugs, drink or break-downs, economically functional, perhaps somewhat gentler than the norm. I contrast the unhappiness I have known among people who grew up expecting life to be fair. There is much to be said for books that tell children, "Life is unexpected".

But the issue here is larger than a slur upon Oz fandom. The psychologist has a legitimate interest in fantasy, as in anything else that enters the mind. But that interest should be expressed in ways that do not demean both the psychologist and the materials. I dare say a psychologist might write good fantasy - no examples spring to mind - but he will do so by disciplining the didactic temptation and by subordinating himself to his language and to his tale. As for *The Wizard of Oz*, why fix what isn't broken?

Recently the Mydgard branch discussed Hans Christian Andersen's two novellas *The Snow Queen* and *The Marsh King's Daughter*. The sense of the meeting was that here are treasures that need to be dusted off and cherished anew. This column will therefore be a branch discussion report, so to speak. As it were.

Most of us had not read *The Snow Queen* for years, and had not heard of the other story at all before this; we were surprised by the density of the material. One luminous image after another appeared, more or less integrated in the story, exemplifying many basic motifs of Romance. Paradisal childhood innocence, capture-and-rescue, snow and ice as symbols of dehumanization, talking flowers and animals, the Wise Old Woman in her womblike hovel, the talisman, the warm, life-renewing tear, the ailing king and his languishing land, the Quest for the Grail-like marvelous object, the shapeshifting protagonist, the seizure of the maiden by the King of the Underworld, the dual-natured child of light and darkness, the life-giving sacrifice of the innocent, the return of the dead, the miraculous recovery of the king, the moment in paradise that takes up many decades on earth.

Another feature of Andersen that we had largely forgotten was his humor. Having long associated him with the sufferings of the ugly duckling, the little match girl, the little mermaid and others, we were surprised that these matters of grave import were often so cavalierly treated. *The Marsh King's Daughter* is told largely from the point of view of a pair of married storks, who discuss the ordeals and joys of the human protagonists amidst petty domestic carping and appreciative comments about mouth-watering Nile frogs.

One element in *The Snow Queen* that is bound to interest Lewis enthusiasts is of course its influence on the Narnian tales. The snow queen found her way nearly intact into *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, even to the sleigh, the reindeer, and the seduction and imprisonment of the foolish little boy. The submerged sexual motif is more noticeable in Andersen's story, where Kay is kissed by the Snow Queen, and although he is described as a child, he is confused not long afterwards with the young man who courts (and presumably marries) the clever Princess.

Andersen's icy queen differs from Lewis' in that the former is identified with rationality. As Kay is carried off in her sleigh he tries to pray, but finds that all he can remember is the multiplication tables. Later, in her arctic palace, she sets him to working out a cerebral puzzle. She is almost impersonal--she destroys by virtue of what she is, in contrast to Jadis, who is gratuitously cruel and a betrayer. And correspondingly, she is not destroyed at the climax; she is simply absent when Gerda comes for Kay. Rationality cannot be slain.

Lewis uses the image of cold and snow again in *The Silver Chair*, a quest to the North, and a sinister female figure who abducts a young man. He is saved by a young heroine, though the tone is rather different in that Jill shares the honors with Eustace and Puddleglum.

(Continued on page 42)

