



Lesson 10

L. Frank Baum:

A Hero's Journey



I. L. Frank Baum: A Hero's Journey

II. Brief Description of the South Dakota Feature

In literature, the hero's journey is a trek the main character takes in pursuit of some goal, in search of some treasure, or in an attempt to save others. It is one of the main plot lines in all fiction and even a lot of non-fiction. It also provides all of us with a message—that we are all the heroes of our own lives and that, though we may not be out to “save the universe,” looking at our lives through this lens can lead to a happier, more accomplished, and more fulfilling life. L. Frank Baum not only lived out this message, but his main work—one most students will have seen as a movie—made this point abundantly clear.

III. Lesson Plan Steps:

A. Anticipatory Set

Hold up the two images later in this lesson plan.

“Who can tell me what movie these images are from?” (Student easily answers with the name of the movie.) “But actually, only one of these (point to the one from the movie) is actually of ‘The Wizard of Oz.’ The other is of a group of statues of the main characters that can be found in South Dakota. Anybody know where?” (Either confirm they are correct—in Aberdeen—or if nobody answers because they don't want to admit they've been there, then explain that it is in Aberdeen.)

“OK, so we know there is some kind of connection to South Dakota through Aberdeen. Let's go to today's reading to find out more.”

B. Objective and Purpose

Objective: The students will be able to identify L. Frank Baum as the author of the book, “The Wonderful Wizard of Oz,” on which the movie was based.

The students will be able to describe Baum's time and activities in Aberdeen, S.D.

The students will reach the conclusion that the accomplished goals (brain, heart, courage) of the friends of Dorothy in Baum's book (and the movie) were not given by the Wizard but attained by their own efforts.

Purpose: Students will understand that the most important attainments of life must be done by the person him- or herself, and that this makes each person's life a hero's journey.

C. Resources to be Accessed

1. Lesson 10 Reading: "L. Frank Baum: A Hero's Journey" (see below)
2. The book, "The Wonderful Wizard of Oz," and the 1939 movie, "The Wizard of Oz."
3. Aberdeen, S.D., Chamber of Commerce History of Aberdeen:
<https://aberdeensd.com/living-here/history-of-Aberdeen/>

D. Modeling

"Something I notice about good movies and great movies and good books and great books is that the great ones have meanings on different levels. Here's what I mean by that. When I was a small child, I could watch 'The Wizard of Oz' and just enjoy it (or be frightened by it) because of the fun characters and the swirling colors and the fast adventure. Then when I watched it as an adult, I could see the messages it sent about how the group of friends thought they could get these gifts from the Wizard, but actually they earned them themselves. And there are even more levels. The Yellow Brick Road is a reference to the issue of what backed money and that people were arguing for silver backing in addition to gold, in order to loosen up and spur the economy. Now that's a story for a different day (and probably a different teacher), but it is definitely another level of meaning.

And the meaning we can see from it in regards to this lesson is that the most important things in life we have to pursue ourselves. That nobody else can do it for us. To illustrate that, think about the Scarecrow. What was he after?"

Calls on student.

"That's right, a brain. What he means by that is an education. So, think about asking someone to give you an education. How would that even be possible? Oh, someone might give you some tuition money. Or they might hold your feet to the fire to get your homework finished and get good grades. But there is no other way for a person to become educated than by doing the actual studying, by learning for themselves. And doing that hard work is part of 'The Hero's Journey,' the life experiences each of us have that get us where we want to be, attain those things we desire, face down the challenges and obstacles in our lives. If you're waiting to be given anything truly important in life, you'll be waiting a long time. You'll be waiting your entire life."

E. Checking for Understanding/Guided Practice

"OK, your turn. Let's move on to the Cowardly Lion. (By the way, did you know the Cowardly Lion's costume was made of real lion pelts? When it went up for auction recently, it sold for \$3 million!) Though he was a lion—king of the beasts—he lacked courage. Partner up and answer the following questions:

Can someone give you courage? (No.)

Why not?

So, if you wanted to be a braver person, what would that take? (Consider talking about cognitive-behavior principles such as increasing exposure. For instance, if you are afraid of snakes, and someone finds a garter snake in your yard, convince yourself to sit on the front stoop while the snake makes his way across the grass. If you do it for a while, your fears will lesson. Then get close to the snake. Instead of 15

yards away, move to 10. As you increase your exposure with time, your fears will lessen, and you'll grow in courage.

So, just to check, can someone else remove your fears? Not really, it has to be you who takes it on."

F. Independent Practice

"Let's try one more, but this one is just you in your mind. Think of a career you would like to pursue in life. Maybe you like it because it is interesting. Maybe it comes with a high salary. Maybe it is prestigious—people will be impressed if you have this career or job.

Now you already know that no one can land this career for you. You have to do it yourself. What things will you have to do in order to become the person with this job? Just think to yourself."

Wait time....

"Did you think about what education you would need? How will you need to dress? Will you have to move to take a job like this? Will your family be supportive, including a future wife or husband? What will you need to do to convince them?

Ok, all those things you just ran through, add them all up and that is the Hero's Journey. You are the person in charge. You are the hero of your own play, of your own plot, of your own life. You are the difference maker, and no wizard or parent or friend can make it happen. It is all up to you."

G. Student-Led Closure

"All right, now turn to your partner. Exchange answers on the following questions:

- Did it make sense for the Scarecrow, the Tin Man, and the Cowardly Lion to travel to the Wizard to get a brain, heart, or courage? Why not?
- How did L. Frank Baum's time living and working in Aberdeen influence his most famous book, 'The Wonderful Wizard of Oz'?
- What does it mean to say that each of us are the 'hero of our own life'?"

H. Standards Addressed

SD Mindsets & Behaviors for Student Success: K-12 College, Career, and Life-Ready Competencies for Every Student:

- B-LS 1. Critical thinking skills to make informed decisions.
- B-LS 4. Self-motivation and self-direction for learning.
- B-LS 7. Long- and short-term academic, career, and social-emotional goals.
- B-SMS 1. Responsibility for self and actions.
- B-SMS 5. Perseverance to achieve long- and short-term goals.
- B-SS8. Advocacy skills for self and others and ability to assert self, when necessary.

Social Studies:

5.SS.9.H: The student describes the life of pioneers in South Dakota during the 1800s.

8.SS.2.O: The student explains the meaning and historical significance of the following terms and topics: Robber Barons, Captains of Industry, Dawes Act, Ku Klux Klan Acts, and the Free Silver Movement.

English/Language Arts:

4-5.RF.4. Read with sufficient accuracy and fluency to support comprehension.

6-8/9-10.RH.2 Determine the central purpose and understanding of primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of the source distinct from prior knowledge or opinions.







L. Frank Baum:

A Hero's Journey

Do you remember the first time you ever watched the movie, "The Wizard of Oz"? Were you one of the people who couldn't sleep that night out of sheer terror of the Wicked Witch of the West? (She was so scary, they actually made a whole "Sesame Street" episode devoted to explaining to small children why they needn't be afraid of her. She appeared in the episode in full costume!) Or did you get the bejeezus scared out of you by those flying monkeys?

The author of "The Wonderful Wizard of Oz" (that is the title of the book on which the movie was based), L. Frank Baum, would have probably been surprised by those scary elements of the movie, but we'll never know because he died 20 years before Judy Garland became Dorothy Gale. The rest of us can be surprised that a movie made in 1939 is still watched by so many people today. It's not just a classic, it's a classic that people still watch and often with their children.

Baum's connection to South Dakota is just three years long, from 1888 to 1891. He had been writing stories and working in the theater but, even though he himself had been born into a very wealthy family, was having trouble making ends meet. A catastrophic fire in a theater showing one of his plays put a definite end to that endeavor, so he and his new wife, Maud Gage, packed up the truck and moved to Aberdeen, in the Dakota Territory.

Baum tried his hand at retail, opening a store called Baum's Bazaar. It quickly went bankrupt. He tried editing the local newspaper, The Aberdeen Saturday Pioneer. It, too, failed and, bereft, he took a job as a newspaper reporter in Chicago. Baum never returned to South Dakota again.

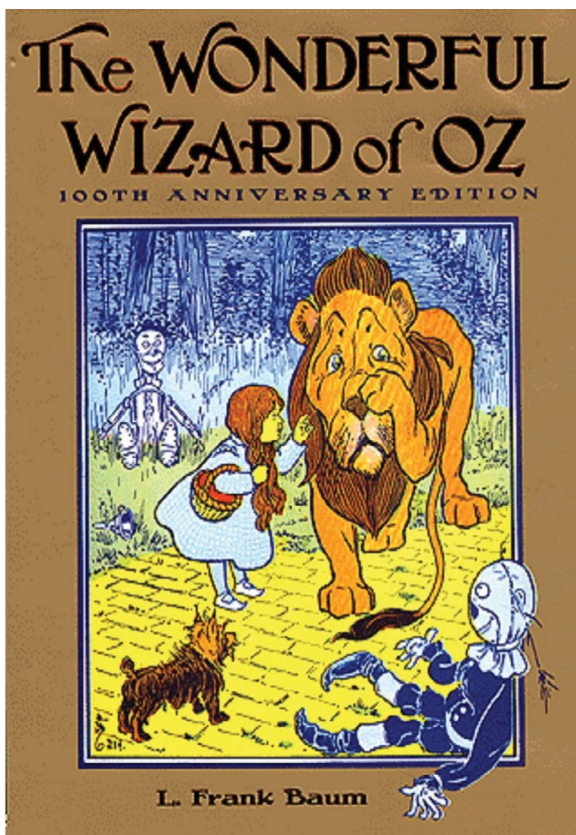


Adobe Stock

But South Dakota (when Baum moved there, it was the Dakota Territory but when he left, it had achieved statehood) left its mark on Baum, and Baum left his mark on the state. Do you remember the opening scenes of the movie, those kind of dismal, kind of blasé black-and-white vistas? The drab countryside, the drab farmyard, the drab people. That was his perception of South Dakota, which, at the time, was suffering through a long, devastating drought. It proved to be the perfect foil to Oz, which was impossibly colorful, outrageously peopled (remember the munchkins?), and magically animated (right down to those apple trees which, come to think of it, were also pretty scary).

But there is more to it than that. Much more. One of the classic themes in books and literature is the hero's journey. That theme basically sets out a person—usually a young person—who will face any number of difficult challenges, triumph over them all, and ultimately win the day. L. Frank Baum's story had a unique twist. He started with a little girl, in fact a little orphaned girl, Dorothy. But her quest is not some noble journey aimed at freeing enslaved people or saving others from starvation and deprivation. It is not even about slaying monsters. All Dorothy Gale wants to do is get home. A Kansas tornado drops her into the most beautiful place outside of the world, people with interesting characteristics who instantly love and protect her, and all she can think about, all

she wants is to get home. Home, to a black-and-white, colorless place of an aunt and uncle and hired hands, who all have far too much to contend with to pay her any mind. Or so it seems.



But her intrepid travel through Oz is not just a hero's journey, it is a heroes' journey. Dorothy is on a quest, but so are the Scarecrow, the Tin Man, and the Cowardly Lion. (No, we aren't forgetting Toto, but he is kind of just along for the ride; his destiny is Dorothy's destiny as well.) And you already know this story. Dorothy is trying to get home. The Scarecrow wants a brain, the Tin Man a heart, and the Cowardly Lion some courage. And so, they set off to find all of these things by traveling to see the Wizard of Oz, the Wonderful Wizard of Oz.

Getting those things means fending off and ultimately destroying the Wicked Witch, battling trees, sneaking into a castle, escaping a field of flowers meant to put you to sleep forever, and sticking together through thick and thin. Oh, and surviving those menacing flying monkeys.

But the real message of the movie doesn't really come to you until you reach the very end. Their first visit to the Wizard sends them off to the witch's castle on a seemingly impossible quest. The second visit leaves the Wizard facing an impossible quest. The Wizard is a fraud. He can no more give the Scarecrow a brain, the Tin Man a heart, or the Lion some courage than you or I could. He's a pretend wizard.

He's also a very lucky wizard. He's lucky because he knows something those three companions of Dorothy don't know. He knows that the only people who can give them what they desire are... themselves. In their hard fighting and hard work and deep friendship with Dorothy, they have

already found what they are looking for, even though they don't know it. When the Scarecrow figured out how to find his way into the witch's castle, face down the monkeys, and hurdle every other barrier, he developed his brain. He gave himself a brain. When the Tin Man risked his life to help Dorothy find the way home and his pals their way back to the City of Oz, he developed his heart, his caring for others. He gave himself a heart. And when the Cowardly Lion overcame his craven nature to enter the castle and defeat the guards, he developed his bravery. He gave himself courage.

The Wizard, that windbag, never did nothing for nobody, nowhere,



US Library of Congress, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

L. Frank Baum

no how. And that is how all of our lives work. There is nothing important in life that anyone else can actually give you. If you want to be intelligent, you have to go to school and study and finish your work. Nobody else can do it for you, not if you want to actually get the education. If you want to be successful in a job or career, there is only one person that can make that happen, you. If you want to have good friends, if you want to meet someone you love and get married, if you want to raise children and delight in their lives, same deal. It's all you.

It is because you are on a journey. And the hero of that journey is you. Who else could it be?

Dorothy found her way home, but only once she had helped all of her friends. L. Frank Baum became a success in life, but only after he had done the hard work of writing many books and found his calling in writing books for children. He couldn't rely on his wealthy parents to make him a success. He couldn't rely on his friends to push him forward and become a literary success. All those people helped him, of course. But Baum, like each of us, had to do the hard work, find his Yellow Brick Road, and start the long journey to success and happiness. A happiness which he provided, not coincidentally, to the whole world.

In fact, Baum even put this message very clearly in his book, out of the very mouth of the Wizard himself: "Oz, left to himself, smiled to think of his success in giving the Scarecrow and the Tin Woodman and the Lion exactly what they thought they wanted. 'How I help being a humbug,' he said, 'when all these people make me do things that everybody knows can't be done. It was easy to make the Scarecrow and the Lion and the Woodman happy, because they imagined I could do anything.'"

What they didn't quite understand was that they were the only ones that could have accomplished those things for themselves. They, not the Wizard, were the heroes of their own lives.

