

**Follow the Yellow-Brick Road: Katabasis and the Female Hero in *Alice in Wonderland*, *The Wizard of Oz*, and *The Nutcracker***

Catherynne M. Valente  
May, 2005

One thing is for certain, that the white kitten had nothing to do with it—it was the black kitten's fault entirely.

--Lewis Carroll

*Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There*

The Western corpus is replete with narratives that serve to define and illuminate the male experience. From *Gilgamesh* to *Tom Sawyer*, there is no paucity of stories that mirror the trials of young men, which guide a homogenous intended audience through the ordeals of initiation, friendship, the integration of the self, physical and intellectual challenge, and death. This is the primary social function of the hero cycle—to provide an exemplum, a blueprint of correct living.

Yet there are comparatively few such cycles for young women. While the traditional folktale often incorporates a feminine character or two, her journey is usually quite short, that is, from birth to courtship to marriage, and from thence either into childbirth and death or to vanish summarily and inexplicably from the narrative. Yet all her efforts are aimed towards and circumscribed by men. This, of course, served a patriarchal purpose: to encourage young girls to follow this path, and not attempt to deviate from it into the more dynamic cycle of men and heroes. But in the postmodern world, where the experience of women is no longer limited to hearth and childbed, where can they look for their own exempla, for heroines that perform the heroic cycle in their own right? That cycle is not now, if ever it was, the exclusive purview of men: women, too, must thread their path through the archetypes it presents.

The current research will concentrate on three such cycles: *Through the Looking Glass*, *The Wizard of Oz*, and *The Nutcracker*. Each of these is a peculiar combination of specific cultural paradigms, mythological mirroring, and psychological case study which explore a feminine hero on her journey through one of the classic landscapes of legend: the Underworld. Each narrative follows a female child through her katabasis, her descent and return, which functions as a metaphor for entrè into adult sexuality as well as a literal passage through hell. Each of them is also problematic as a feminist text *per se*, and fails at key points to rehabilitate the image of the passive heroine on her marriage-quest, nevertheless, they provide a folkloric model of feminine action which is not present in the works of Grimm, Andersen, or Perrault. All three tales have also transcended their text, becoming truly folkloric, for there is hardly a child who does not know Clara and her brave Nutcracker, though almost none of them know of E.T.A Hoffman. Therefore, this paper will deal with three distinct media into which these women have been incarnated: novel, film, and ballet.

Alice, Dorothy and Clara<sup>1</sup> perform a curious pantomime. All three reflect unerringly the attitudes and assumptions of their own cultures: 19<sup>th</sup> century Britain, early

---

<sup>1</sup> Or Marie, depending on the production. In the original short story by E.T.A. Hoffman, the little girl in question is named Marie Stahlbaum, and certain latter ballet interpretations have returned to this name and a more strict adherence to the original story. However, Clara is still more common, as she is called in the 1844 adaptation by Alexandre Dumas père, upon which the traditional ballet is directly based, rather than the Hoffman.

20<sup>th</sup> century America, and 19<sup>th</sup> century Germany. However, they simultaneously mimic the gestures of much more primal navigators of the Underworld: those of Inanna and Persephone, Sumerian and Greek katabaseis which describe the change of the seasons through the harrowing journey of a single goddess through the kingdom of the dead. Inanna and Persephone are very similar figures—Inanna may even be viewed as a parallel Persephone, despite the drastic difference in agency between the two—so it is useful to view them as a single archetype with key differences, and interpret our more contemporary heroines in the light of their histories. While neither Oz, Wonderland, nor the Kingdom of Sweets is explicitly the land of the dead, as landscapes of threat and morbidity, they are certainly siblings to the territories of Hades and Ereshkigal, and the lost children who wander through them are echoes and shadows of their divine foremothers.

### **Alice Through the Looking Glass**

It is the going underground that preserves the body,  
so though Persephone is ancient  
and Alice long ago became antique  
each could pass for sixteen.

They stand close, arms about each other's waist,  
faces pressed together -- halves of an apple  
cut to show the star of seeds.

They stand on opposite sides of knowing,  
balance each other. What Alice lacks in weight  
she makes up in fear, heavy as the denser metals.

It is the going underground that gives them  
this battered look -- dark crescent moons beneath  
the eyes, lips swollen and split at the corners.  
Dirt in their scalps, at the roots.

--Stephanie Bolster  
*Portrait of Alice with Persephone*

Of the three young women contained in this study, Alice is the figure most divorced from the ambitions of her fairy tale sisters. She does not begin her quest for the purpose of rescuing a male, she has no constant male companions to save her, and she does not end her tale as a wife. It is sheer intellectual curiosity that drives her through the Looking-Glass<sup>2</sup>, convinced that there must be a “room you can see through the glass that’s just the same as our drawing-room, only the things go the other way.”<sup>3</sup> Unlike Dorothy and Clara, she is not taken by force, but enters Wonderland, or the Looking-Glass World, of her own volition, because *she is trying to get there*. This expression of agency trumps even *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, wherein her entrance to the Underworld is more explicit—she literally descends beneath the earth—but essentially accidental. Her truly heroic gesture, unambiguous in its intent, is her penetration of the Victorian mirror.

In this act, Alice is a textbook hero. As Campbell delineates the initial progress of the champion:

---

<sup>2</sup> It is also curiosity—in addition to boredom with traditional education, a typical attitude of the kind of picaresque male hero epitomized by Huck Finn—which drives her down the Rabbit Hole in the first of the Alice books, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865, Macmillan). While this is the first of Alice’s adventures, *Through the Looking Glass* is not so much a sequel, as the later Oz books are, as it is a parallel adventure, which is non-specific as to which journey into Wonderland came first (since in neither book does Alice reference the events of the other). I have chosen to focus on this second, but not secondary book, from whence many of the most famous scenes come, in part due to Disney’s collapsing of the two books into the animated *Alice in Wonderland* (1951).

<sup>3</sup> TTLG, pg. 8. All quotations taken from the Children’s Classics edition, *Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There*, Dilithium Press Ltd. New York, 1990.

The hero goes forward in his adventure until he comes to the “threshold guardian” [the mirror] at the entrance to the zone of magnified power...Beyond them is darkness, the unknown, and danger; just as beyond the parental watch is danger to the infant and beyond the protection of society is danger to the member of the tribe. The usual person is more than content, he is even proud, to remain within the indicated bounds.<sup>4</sup>

She is separated from her ordinary English home and passes through a liminal space, into an Otherworldly landscape which she has no choice but to navigate. In this sense, Bolster’s identification of Alice with Persephone is not the whole story, as Persephone was stolen into Hades and forced to remain, while Alice enters it with wonder and purpose. The more appropriate pairing is with the Sumerian goddess Inanna, who descended in order to confront her sister and shadow-self Ereshkigal, Queen of the Underworld.<sup>5</sup>

There can be no doubt that it *is* the Underworld, albeit a remarkably different one than in classical representations. It is, like Oz and the Kingdom of Sweets, a baroque, surreal, orientalized geography, a feminine space, at least, feminine and oriental according to the sexual and political dualism of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and it is ruled over by the Red Queen, the symbolism of whose coloring hardly needs commentary.

Alice almost immediately encounters the Ereshkigal of Wonderland: the Red Queen. It is this enigmatic woman that Alice pursues across the chessboard with all the fervor of a knight pursuing a maiden. She is the black kitten to Alice’s white kitten, the Jungian shadow-self which must be integrated into the hero in order to create a cohesive whole. No real motivation is given for Alice’s fascination with the Red Queen, for the urgency of her pursuit. None is needed. The hero must seek out his shadow, the life-instinct must seek out the death-instinct, and the self must seek out the other. Gawain is drawn to the Green Knight, Odysseus cannot help but challenge Polyphemus, Arthur must eventually fight Mordred—and Alice must reach the Eighth Square where her Queen waits.

In the grand tradition of medieval ladies, the Red Queen is rather callous and cruel. She is a cold, distant figure, the ideal object of courtly love. The famous line Disney gave to their caricatured Queen of Hearts properly belongs to this Queen: “I don’t

---

<sup>4</sup> Joseph Campbell, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*. Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1949. pp. 77-78.

<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, Inanna departs simultaneously from several different points of origin:

In Uruk she abandoned her temple to descend to the underworld.

In Badtibira she abandoned her temple to descend to the underworld.

In Zabalam she abandoned her temple to descend to the underworld.

In Adab she abandoned her temple to descend to the underworld.

In Nippur she abandoned her temple to descend to the underworld.

In Kish she abandoned her temple to descend to the underworld.

In Akkad she abandoned her temple to descend to the underworld. (Wolkstein-Kramer)

Alice does this as well, descending twice, but seemingly unaware of her other journeys to the same fantastic world. Are there, perhaps, two Alices, just as there are two kittens and two Queens, descending to Wonderland simultaneously from two different points of origin?

know what you mean by *your* way, said the Queen; all the ways about here belong to *me*.”<sup>6</sup> Alice must prove herself in order to enter the Red Queen’s company, and the entirety of the subsequent narrative is taken up with Alice’s striving towards this scarlet woman, accomplishing feats in order to become worthy of her.

The number two plays a great role in *Through the Looking Glass*. In fact, nearly all the main characters occur in pairs, most explicitly doubled. There are two Alices (Alice and her reflection, combined in the book’s first act of penetration and integration, but not its last), two Queens, two kittens, Tweedledum and Tweedledee, and the Lion and the Unicorn. For the most part, it is Alice who is the fluid creature, the one which can integrate and grow, rather than any of the other sets of doubles. However, for all their binaries (weak/strong, emotional/stoic, gentle/implacable), the White and Red Queens are clearly in league. When Alice finally arrives in the Eighth Square, she finds both Queens seated on their thrones: “Everything was happening so oddly that she didn’t feel a bit surprised at finding the Red Queen sitting close to her, one on each side. She would have liked very much to ask them how they came there, but she feared it would not be quite civil.”<sup>7</sup>

Of course, they have always been there. The White Queen, with all her lessons on feminine conduct—she not only instructs Alice to dress her shawl, but tries to hire her as a handmaiden, and orates on the subjects of proper wages, memory, justice, and faith—can be seen as a Neti figure, Ereshkigal’s servant who prepares Inanna for her audience with her own dark sister-Queen. Though Neti is male, the function is the same: to lessen the heroine so that when she will be handicapped when she confronts the adversary/object. Alice is never physically threatened, and she does not, as Inanna does, shed her clothes, but what is stripped away over the course of the narrative is her certainty of her own identity, her confidence in the truth of what she knows, to the point where, when she finally does discover the throne-room, she can hardly recall her own name without prompting. The White Queen is integral in this fracturing of Alice, and introduces the difficult notion of deliberately believing the impossible—something that, on the surface, should be second nature to the ingenuous Alice. However, this seed of relative morality is actually quite pernicious. To believe the impossible is to believe the untrue, is to believe a lie, and thus, the White Queen lays the groundwork for the Red Queen’s later attempt to reconstruct Alice’s personality into a mirror of her own: into Queen Alice.

To go into the Underworld is to die, whether literally or figuratively. Though a magical resurrection will follow, both Inanna and Persephone do—Inanna is murdered by her sister:

Then Ereshkigal fastened on Inanna the eye of death.  
She spoke against her the word of wrath.  
She uttered against her the cry of guilt.  
She struck her.  
Inanna was turned into a corpse,  
A piece of rotting meat,

---

<sup>6</sup> pg. 28 *Through the Looking-Glass*.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* pg. 153-54.

And was hung from a hook on the wall<sup>8</sup>.

Persephone eats the food of the dead, and for all intents and purposes becomes a dead woman, in order to rule the dead.

But real women cannot cheat death. They cannot come back. Alice is not a goddess, and she cannot literally die and still return to her tidy drawing-room. Nevertheless, she both eats forbidden food and confronts the Queen of the Otherworld. She is a Persephone who narrowly escapes: she is tempted, and very nearly turned into one of the macabre revelers at her final feast, but she threads the needle<sup>9</sup>.

It is the Red Queen who first offers Alice food: a biscuit.

“I know what *you’d* like!” the Queen said good-naturedly, taking a little box out of her pocket. “Have a biscuit!” Alice thought it would not be civil to say no, though it wasn’t at all what she wanted. So she took it, and ate it as well as she could; and it was very dry; and she thought she had never been so nearly choked in all her life.”<sup>10</sup>

This is strikingly reminiscent of the description of the food of the dead in later Akkadian version of this Descent, *The Descent of Ishtar*:

To KUR.NU.GI, land of no return,  
Ishtar, daughter of Sîn, turned her attention,  
the daughter of Sîn turned her attention  
to the dark house, the seat of Irkalla,  
to the house whose entrants do not come out again,  
to the road whose way is without return,  
to the house whose entrants are deprived of light,  
where dust is their nourishment and clay their food.  
They do not see light, they dwell in darkness,  
and they are clothed like birds in a garment of wings;  
dust has settled on the door and the bolt..<sup>11</sup>

The biscuit is a cake of dust, it chokes the living Alice. It is the food of the Queen alone: the food of the dead.

At the climactic feast which concludes Alice’s katabasis, food is also a major issue. The litany of courses is truly bizarre, but also strangely evocative of the Babylonian menu:

*Then fill up the glasses as quick as you can,  
And sprinkle the table with buttons and bran:  
Put cats in the coffee, and mice in the tea--  
And welcome Queen Alice with thirty-times-three!*

---

<sup>8</sup> All quotations taken from *Inanna: Queen of Heaven and Earth*. Diane Wolkstein and Noah Kramer. Harper Perennial, New York, 1983.

<sup>9</sup> It is worth noting that the literal descent of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* can be seen as a sort of burial and thus death, but the dominant direction of TTLG is *through*, not down, and her passage across the individual squares—seven of them—much more reminiscent of Inanna’s journey through the seven gates of the Underworld than Persephone’s burial by Hades.

<sup>10</sup> TTLG. pg. 33-34.

<sup>11</sup> *The Descent of Ishtar*, lines 1-11, trans. Sonya Taaffe.

*Then fill up the glasses with treacle and ink,  
Or anything else that is pleasant to drink:  
Mix sand with the cider, and wool with the wine—  
And welcome Queen Alice with ninety-times-nine!*

This is all inedible food, food that will choke Alice, food in which the organic and nourishing is befouled with corpses (cats and mice), earth (sand), and shorn hair (wool). The world of the dead inverts the world of the living; that which was sacred and wholesome becomes poisoned and untouchable. Next, Alice is shown a leg of mutton and a pudding, both of which are subjected to a formal introduction by the Red Queen, and then removed. The pudding actually speaks, and while the food vanishes before it can be consumed, there is a suggestion that Alice is being asked to commit a kind of cannibalism, devouring the flesh of a thinking, speaking being. It is a grotesque, macabre meal, and pointedly, Alice eats none of it.

Yet she has performed the heroic reintegration. She has become Queen Alice, accepted into the community of women, feted and praised. She has accomplished her quest, from pawn to Queen, and absorbed her Other—it is this which gives her the power to end her sojourn in Wonderland as purposefully as she began it:

“And as for *you*,” she went on, turning fiercely upon the Red Queen, whom she considered as the cause of all the mischief—but the Queen was no longer at her side—she had suddenly dwindled down to the size of a little doll, and was now on the table, merrily running round and round after her own shawl, which was trailing behind her.

At any other time, Alice would have felt surprised at this, but she was far too much excited to be surprised at anything *now*. “As for *you*,” she repeated, catching hold of the little creature in the very act of jumping over a bottle which had just lighted upon the table, “I’ll shake you into a kitten that I will!”<sup>12</sup>

Alice here executes a formidable act of magic. She has achieved her object, her Lady, her sister-self, and, the act done, she reduces the woman in question to a homunculus, and then into her familiar cat. Once the grail is achieved, it is no more than a little cup. Once the Lady is conquered by the virile knight, she is lessened in his sight, reduced to a caricature of femininity, forever chasing her shawl.

Indeed, when she returns, or wakes, she is initially quite as imperious as the Red Queen ever was, having absorbed her darker self, her adult persona, her fully realized womanhood. She orders her kittens about with all the authority of Queen Alice.

Of course, in the end it is all a dream, whether Alice is the dreamer or no. In the end, it must be remembered that despite the strength and resonance of the female hero, this is still a narrative constructed by a man, a man who was, to safely understate the matter, over-attached to the real Alice, a child of four. Perhaps it maintains the comfort

---

<sup>12</sup> TTLG, pg. 177



level between the Victorian genders to pull the rug out from beneath this proto-heroine, and allow her agency only as part of a fantasy. The sour note continues as Carroll implies that the dream may not even have originated with Alice, but with the Red King, a figure hardly memorable in the text:

“Now, Kitty, let's consider who it was that dreamed it all. This is a serious question, my dear, and you should *not* go on licking your paw like that--as if Dinah hadn't washed you this morning! You see, Kitty, it *must* have been either me or the Red King. He was part of my dream, of course--but then I was part of his dream, too! *Was* it the Red King, Kitty? You were his wife, my dear, so you ought to know--Oh, Kitty, *do* help to settle it! I'm sure your paw can wait!” But the provoking kitten only began on the other paw, and pretended it hadn't heard the question.

Which do *you* think it was?<sup>13</sup>

And so Alice is robbed even of the dubious honor of having dreamed it all—she is merely a figment, and object herself, a fragment of the male psyche, rather than a fragmented psyche of her own, seeking maturity and integration. At least she is spared the usual metaphor for cohesive maturity: Alice does not emerge from Wonderland with a husband.

Despite this unfortunate conclusion, Alice stands as a truly liminal figure—she is the penetrating hero, usurping all the rights of the masculine, to the point of pursuing a female idol through knightly trials, yet she, as Persephone does, falters and—just once—eats the food of the dead. Thus we know Alice is always bound to return to Wonderland, to stand before the dark Queen, be she a playing card or a chess piece, and perform her unique magic, changing them from animate to inanimate and back again, an act befitting the Queen of Heaven.

The difference has to do with men,  
with Persephone's marriage to Hades.  
Alice had choices—White Knight, Mad Hatter,  
Three of Spades—but pronounced them insubstantial  
as a pack of cards. The difference

has to do with the glint tightened  
around Persephone's finger,  
the magenta of pomegranate  
in the creases of her palm and thighs.  
Alice's thighs are clean. Except for the curve  
of dirt under the nails, her hands are white  
as something dead, or not yet born.

--Stephanie Bolster

---

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, pg. 183-84.

*Portrait of Alice With Persephone*

## The Wizard of Oz

Come along Dorothy. You don't want any of *those* apples.

--The Scarecrow  
*The Wizard of Oz*,  
1939 (MGM)

While Disney's 1951 animated adaptation *Alice in Wonderland* has certainly become iconic, with its blonde Alice and pink striped Cheshire Cat, it has achieved nowhere near the cultural resonance of MGM's 1939 musical, *The Wizard of Oz*. For Americans. Judy Garland is the definitive Dorothy Gale, and continuing sales of L. Frank Baum's books owe a great deal to the extreme nostalgia and admiration with which the film is viewed. In addition, the era in which the film was made adds a dimension to the story that Baum could not have foreseen: composed in 1900, of the grayness of Kansas is merely a function of a coastal author's impressions of the Plains States. Filmed in 1939, it becomes a chilling commentary on the Depression, and the Technicolor pageantry of Oz a truly Californian paradise. For these reasons, I have chosen to focus some attention on the filmed version of Dorothy's journey, as well as the original novel.

It should be noted that neither the film nor the novel are actually named for the main character—in fact, of the 15 Oz novels, only one contains Dorothy's name in the title, despite her central position in the plot. *The Wizard of Oz* shares this with *The Nutcracker*, which is named for an inanimate object rather than a living girl.<sup>14</sup> The charlatan wizard who lends his name to the entire countryside appears only at the end of the film, and is no more present in the novel, where he is even less impressive, giving the Scarecrow, Lion, and Tinman what amounts to junk<sup>15</sup> and telling them it is their hearts' desire. Yet this is the namesake of the novel, not the girl who exposes his fraud. Considering the Progressive movements of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in America, the drive towards Prohibition and women's suffrage (Baum himself was son-in-law to Mathilda Joslyn Gage, a staunch feminist leader, and it was she who encouraged him to write *Oz*), this emphasis on the fraud rather than the earnest American child who reveals it seems somewhat disingenuous.

Dorothy herself is the most passive heroine encompassed by this study. Her Persephonic journey happens *to* her, her exploits are unconscious, accidental: her house is swept up by a tornado, she kills the arch Witch of the East without knowledge or intent, and is thus praised as a great sorceress, a title she has neither earned nor deserves. Like Persephone, Dorothy's descent is almost entirely accidental. Persephone, after all, only picked a crocus, and ate a few seeds. Her fate was decided for her, and her descent involuntary. She does not often "save the day," as her male companions, though each are missing a vital organ of emotional experience, repeatedly solve the problems presented to the group themselves, as in the case of the Witch of the West sending her wolves, crows, and bees after them. The Scarecrow hides them from the bees with his straw, the Tin

---

<sup>14</sup> The Hoffman story takes this one step further, entitled *The Nutcracker and the Mouse King*, construing the tale as one of a battle between two men, as though Marie/Clara were only a spectator.

<sup>15</sup> Pins and bran, a clock, and a bowl of liquid which might as well be snake oil, but is probably water.

Woodsman slaughters the wolves, and again, the Scarecrow first frightens and then kills the crows. Even her murder of the Wicked Witch of the West is accidental:

"You are a wicked creature!" cried Dorothy. "You have no right to take my shoe from me."

"I shall keep it, just the same," said the Witch, laughing at her, "and someday I shall get the other one from you, too."

This made Dorothy so very angry that she picked up the bucket of water that stood near and dashed it over the Witch, wetting her from head to foot.

Instantly the wicked woman gave a loud cry of fear, and then, as Dorothy looked at her in wonder, the Witch began to shrink and fall away.

"See what you have done!" she screamed. "In a minute I shall melt away."

"I'm very sorry, indeed," said Dorothy, who was truly frightened to see the Witch actually melting away like brown sugar before her very eyes.

"Didn't you know water would be the end of me?" asked the Witch, in a wailing, despairing voice.

"Of course not," answered Dorothy. "How should I?"

"Well, in a few minutes I shall be all melted, and you will have the castle to yourself. I have been wicked in my day, but I never thought a little girl like you would ever be able to melt me and end my wicked deeds. Look out--here I go!"<sup>16</sup>

Dorothy is only angry—she has no way of knowing that her actions will kill, and therefore bears no moral responsibility for the act. There is none of the symbolism of the Red Queen and Alice here, there is no doubling. The Witch's presence in the tale is erased by the mid-point of the narrative, and Dorothy's goal is always the Wizard, and through him, Kansas. She is forever in pursuit of this mythical Kansas, which is herself, seeking out not union with the shadow but a return to light. The film re-orientes the action slightly, making the Wicked Witch a constant presence rather than a vague threat, which we will return to in a moment.

But Dorothy does make active choices, and she does, again, almost immediately upon crossing over into Oz, encounter a powerful female figure, in the form of the Witch of the North. This figure is merged with Glinda, the Witch of the South, in the film, and her key gesture excised.

---

<sup>16</sup> *The Wizard of Oz*, pg. 99-100. All quotations taken from *The Wizard of Oz*. Tor Books, New York 1993.

"You must walk [to the Emerald City]. It is a long journey, through a country that is sometimes pleasant and sometimes dark and terrible. However, I will use all the magic arts I know of to keep you from harm."

"Won't you go with me?" pleaded the girl, who had begun to look upon the little old woman as her only friend.

"No, I cannot do that," she replied, "but I will give you my kiss, and no one will dare injure a person who has been kissed by the Witch of the North."

She came close to Dorothy and kissed her gently on the forehead. Where her lips touched the girl they left a round, shining mark, as Dorothy found out soon after.<sup>17</sup>

This mark remains on Dorothy throughout the rest of her journey through Oz, and it protects her from harm from *any* source, even the Witch of the West. It is an inverted mark of Cain, which earns her safe passage through the wilds of Nod—and yet, the erotic content cannot be entirely glossed over. Whatever power the Wizard holds over Oz<sup>18</sup>, Dorothy's is a journey book-ended by the desires of women: the Witch of the South brands Dorothy with an unmistakable symbol of sexuality, and the Witch of the West keeps her as a slave. Just as Persephone's connection to Demeter protects her from being entirely ravished by Hades, Dorothy's strange kiss from a sorceress prevents her from being killed outright. With this seal of loyalty, Dorothy commences her journey into the Underworld, seeking out the trickster-Hades at its center.

And Dorothy does choose to make the journey, just as she chooses to accept the charge to murder the offending Witch. It is her continuing ability to choose, and choose correctly, is what makes Dorothy a hero. She unerringly takes the magical items that will aid her: the Golden Cap which controls the Winged Monkeys and the Silver Shoes. Her obsession with Kansas, with herself, drives her to accept what is a truly alarming sequence of events. She is not seeking out her double, but seeking only her *nostos*, her homecoming, an Odyssean gesture which is not, when viewed in connection with the Greek epics, as stereotypically feminine as it would appear.

While her Underworld is equally baroque and bizarre, its strangeness seems uniquely American, utilizing the tropes of the circus or county fair (dwarves, false psychics and magicians, straw men, and automata) and presenting an environment which, especially in the film's startling use of the new Technicolor process, explicitly links Oz with the fairyland of the San Joaquin Valley and Hollywood, where the vast exodus of farmers and their families from Kansas and her sister states terminated. Dorothy

---

<sup>17</sup> TWOO, pg. 13.

<sup>18</sup> In fact, the four witches are completely subservient to him, despite the fact that they possess real magic and he does not. It is possible to read here some commentary on the suffrage movement as pioneered by the triumvirate of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Baum's mother in Law, Mathilda Gage, wherein women, possessed of intelligence and power, are not allowed voice in the governance of their country, while corrupt men control all.

deliberately rejects the beauty and magic that Oz/California offers her, and reaffirms the message of the virtue of her own farm:

The Scarecrow listened carefully, and said, "I cannot understand why you should wish to leave this beautiful country and go back to the dry, gray place you call Kansas."

"That is because you have no brains" answered the girl. "No matter how dreary and gray our homes are, we people of flesh and blood would rather live there than in any other country, be it ever so beautiful. There is no place like home."<sup>19</sup>

Like Persephone, Dorothy is inextricably tied to the land, even if that land is infertile and spent. She will always return to Kansas, and always return to Oz. She shuttles between the two with all the regularity of the Corn Maiden. Indeed, it is perhaps her attachment to Kansas that marks her out as a hero in the Campbellian sense: "The first problem of the returning hero is to accept as real, after an experience of soul-satisfying vision of fulfillment, the passing joys and sorrows, banalities and noisy obscenities of life. Why re-enter such a world?"<sup>20</sup>

Yet, despite that attachment, and unlike her sister Alice, Dorothy is not at all shy about eating the food of her strange new surroundings, the food, that is to say, of the dead. Once the food from her own house's larder runs out, she happily eats the fruit she finds in roadside orchards—and perhaps this is an underlying cause of Dorothy's continual journeys between the two worlds. By the time she reaches the field of poppies, she is subsisting on nothing but the food of Oz.

The poppies themselves are reminiscent of the threatening flowers Alice first encounters—both heroines tread on the distant cousins of the asphodels of Hades. However, Dorothy's flowers, as the source of opiates, are an even darker menace. The link between the magical sleep they affect and death is made quite clear: if Dorothy does not wake up, she will die. In the film, this is the work of the Witch, but in the novel, the poppies are simply the natural flora of the area around the Emerald City. Dorothy, unlike Alice, does symbolically die, falling under the spell of the scarlet flowers and waking only after she is dragged from the field by the Tin Woodsman and the Scarecrow, as they do not breathe. Interestingly, Dorothy only wakes once the kingdom of the field mice have been assembled to rescue the still-slumbering lion, so that she loses consciousness surrounded by symbolic asphodel, and wakes overcome by mice, the symbol of the sun-god Apollo, brought back into the land of the living by her allegorical half-brother.

Though the Witch of the West is no Ereshkigal in Baum's construction, the film does try to cast her as such. She is present from the first scenes of Oz and the source of all the danger which besets Dorothy, rather than such peril stemming from the nature of Oz as a particularly beautiful incarnation of hell<sup>21</sup>. She is Dorothy's great nemesis, not merely the price of her return to Kansas.

One might, perhaps, wonder at the relative ease with which this adolescent girl agrees to commit murder. It is a disturbing dynamic: the powerful male pits women against each other, asking a child to destroy a woman she does not know in exchange for

---

<sup>19</sup> TWOO, pg. 24.

<sup>20</sup> *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, pg. 218.

<sup>21</sup> Of course this is not meant in the Christian sense, but in the sense of a hazardous Underworld.

a favor he cannot grant. And here a rather Freudian procession occurs: Dorothy, encouraged by the twisted trickster/father-figure of Oz/Hades<sup>22</sup>, goes forth to eradicate her adult self, the archetype of the wicked mother, who forces her to clean and cook, and perform all the menial duties of a daughter like Cinderella or Snow White. And like Snow White's stepmother, the Witch constantly plots to harm Dorothy, and circumvent the charm of the benevolent, good woman's kiss. But Dorothy prevails, not by integrating the adult, sexualized self—in fact, in her obsession with domination, the Witch can be taken to refer to an expression of female sexuality particularly disturbing to the male psyche—but by melting her, by reducing her to the primordial feminine soup which is the source of so much anxiety, the bubbling, churning, swamplike mass of the Witch's very real body. While *Oz* is, as all hero cycles ultimately are, a coming-of-age story, Dorothy embraces not any reflection of her darker nature, but only affirms that such a thing does not exist: Dorothy is the celestial knight, at least in this first novel, clean of all influence but that of her own Kansas (Heaven) presided over by her beloved Auntie Em (Mary). She dreams of Auntie Em with quite the same devotion that Gawain grants to the Mother of Christ on his own Quest to the Green Chapel.

When she does encounter the Hades figure at the center of Oz, Dorothy does not merge with him in any meaningful way. She commits murder for him, and begs for his help, a daughter submitting to her father's wisdom, but in the end, she cannot even climb into the balloon with him, and is left behind by this manic man from Omaha, disappointed, as all children are when paternal omnipotence proves hollow. Once again, Dorothy escapes the fate of the fairy-tale heroine, and does not emerge with a husband, a result we might term the Inanna Outcome, for Inanna emerges of her own volition, only to send her lover back to hell in her place, unconcerned.

Ultimately, Dorothy's presence in Oz is almost catastrophic. Just as the influx of Oklahomans, Texans, and Kansans into California caused a great deal of damage to the economy and environment, and resulted in an intense animosity between Californians and "Okies," Dorothy's pilgrim's progress is anything but benign. She murders two women, and while these women are universally decried as Wicked Witches, a power vacuum is nevertheless created where a full half of the kingdoms of Oz are left without a ruler. She removes Oz himself from the monarchy and crushes large portions of the china village in the South. These vacuums are subsequently filled by Dorothy's friends—each of them becomes the King of some portion of Oz: the Scarecrow over the Emerald City itself, the Lion over the Beasts, and the Tinman over the Winkies, formerly enslaved by the Wicked Witch, wholesome patriarchal rule replacing corrupt feminine power.

Pointedly, Dorothy is not even offered such a position.

Alice passes through Wonderland without leaving much of a mark—she certainly does not kill anyone—but Dorothy cannot do the same. The power structure of the Underworld is permanently changed, and it will require the return of its favorite Persephone a full fourteen more times to maintain itself. Once Dorothy completes her katabasis, hell can no longer survive without her.

In the novel, the reality of Oz is unquestionable. When Dorothy returns to Kansas, a new house has been built and she is greeted by Auntie Em:

---

<sup>22</sup> Hades was Persephone's uncle, but the relationship and vast age difference reflect the unfortunately named Electra complex.

"My darling child!" she cried, folding the little girl in her arms and covering her face with kisses. "Where in the world did you come from?"

"From the Land of Oz," said Dorothy gravely.

Dorothy's repeated journeys to Oz in the later novels bear witness to the solid realism of Oz, which is not divorced from our own world, simply separated from it by a great desert. Yet, in the film, the audience is given an Alice-ending, and Dorothy is shown to have been merely delirious with fever, dreaming. Perhaps Hollywood was not as forward-thinking as Mathilda Gage's son-in-law, and loathes allowing such an outlandish female fantasy to stand as uncontested fact. Perhaps Baum's Dorothy, even with her crippled agency, was too ensconced in the male hero cycle to be allowed to retain her presence of mind. Instead she utters the famous line, protesting that she is not mad, that she knows herself and her experience: "Oh, but it *wasn't* a dream! It was a place! And you - and you - and you - and you were there. But you couldn't have been, could you?"<sup>23</sup> In the end, Dorothy submits to her male relatives' interpretation of events, and denies herself in their favor.

This editorial change is perplexing, and repeated in the transition of *The Nutcracker* from text to stage.

---

<sup>23</sup> *The Wizard of Oz*, MGM 1939.



## The Nutcracker

And Marie is to this day the queen of a realm where all kinds of sparkling Christmas Woods and transparent Marzipan Castles—in short, the most wonderful and beautiful things of every kind—are to be seen.

--E.T.A. Hoffman

*The Nutcracker and the Mouse King*

There are few fairy tales more textually problematic than *The Nutcracker*. Though it is by far and away the most popular ballet ever performed, thanks to ubiquitous Christmas performances, most theatre-goers are not even aware that it is based on a 19<sup>th</sup> century work of Romantic fiction—or that they are watching a Russian interpretation (by Ivan Alexandrovitch Vsevolozhsky and Marius Petipa, with music by Tchaikovsky) of a French adaptation by famed novelist Alexandre Dumas of a German short story by Ernst Theodor Amadeus Hoffman<sup>24</sup>. Indeed, it is hardly common knowledge that there is a textual basis for the ballet at all.

While modern productions have tended to try to restore some of the Hoffman story, the fact remains that it is the adaptations which have shown themselves to possess remarkable cultural resonance and longevity. In truth, the difference between the original story and the ballet are not as vast as critics like Maurice Sendak<sup>25</sup> believe. The ballet excises a long story-within-a-story called *The Story of the Hard Nut*, and shortens the period before the advent of the Kingdom of Sweets. The name of the heroine, Marie Stahlbaum, is changed to Clara, and, perhaps the only truly fundamental change: once again, the psychological arena of the action is shifted from objective reality to the silly dream of an overactive child.

Clara/Marie's quest is a simple one. She is given a doll for Christmas which all the other children think is ugly, but which she loves dearly. Through her love, the doll comes to life, and together they defeat the wicked Mouse King, gaining entrance into the Kingdom of Sweets, where they encounter the Sugar Plum Fairy and all the attendant beauties of the Underworld. And then, depending on the version, she either wakes up or stays to become Queen.

In Hoffman's story, the similarity to Inanna is immediately apparent. Marie is asked to give up seven belongings in order to satiate the Mouse King and heal the Nutcracker, which is to say, in order to enter the Otherworld: two ribbons, a handkerchief, a shoe, her Christmas candy, her sugar-toys, and a magnificent dress of many colors<sup>26</sup>. Were she to hand over all these things, she would be a mirror-image of Inanna:

When she entered the first gate,  
From her head, the *shugurra*, the crown of the steppe,  
was removed...

---

<sup>25</sup> Sendak designed a production for the Pacific Northwest Theatre Company in 1983 wherein he changed the Kingdom of Sweets into an 18<sup>th</sup> century seraglio in order to preserve the spirit of Hoffman. There is, needless to say, no seraglio in the original story.

<sup>26</sup> Finally, she does refuse to give over this dress to the Mouse King, but she does shed it before entering Toyland or the Kingdom of Sweets, and so it is still a sacrifice.

When she entered the second gate,  
From her neck the small lapis beads were removed...  
When she entered the third gate,  
From her breast the double strand of beads was removed..  
When she entered the fourth gate,  
From her chest the breast plate which called  
'Let him come, let him come!' was removed...  
When she entered the fifth gate,  
From her wrist the gold ring was removed...  
When she entered the sixth gate,  
From her hand the lapis measuring rod and line was removed...  
When she entered the seventh gate,  
From her body the royal robe was removed...<sup>27</sup>

Inanna and Marie stand together at the gates of that strange world, one naked, the other in her dressing-gown, both alone, ritually pure, and ready to enter the darkness.

In the ballet, it is not her shoe that the little girl sacrifices, but a candle. Since her name was altered from Marie to Clara, it is interesting that this is the new object which kills the Mouse King. Clara is Latin for *bright* or *shining*, and so in some sense the child sacrifices herself—her light self, her civilized spirit exemplified by fire tamed, and with it destroys the irrational monster, the Mouse that walks like a man. In theatrical productions it is particularly noticeable that the Mouse King represents aggressive male sexuality—he is dressed in tight, dark velvet, in the costume of a 19<sup>th</sup> century rake. With the purity of her light, Clara rejects this destructive sensualist, and wins her Nutcracker's life. The name Marie is also significant: Inanna is the Queen of Heaven in Sumerian mythology, and Mary, the root of Marie, is the Christian Queen of Heaven. That the character's name metamorphoses from a specific source of light and goodness to a general one suggests the lessening of her power which will climax with the skewing of the reality of Toyland.

Marie, in contrast to the later Clara, makes a further gesture of sacrifice:

"I [Marie's mother] don't know whether or not some mouse jumped out and frightened you, though there are no mice around here generally. But you broke a pane of the glass cupboard with your elbow, and cut your arm so badly that Dr. Wendelstern (who has just taken a number of pieces of the glass out of your arm) thinks that if it had been a little higher up you might have lost your arm, or even bled to death."<sup>28</sup>

Marie has shed blood, which can of course be construed as menstrual blood, the loss of which marks her transit from selfish child (as her brother Fritz is) and self-sacrificing womanhood (evinced by her intervention, whether with shoe or candle) in the affair of the Nutcracker and the Mouse King. She has crossed a symbolic boundary from childhood to womanhood which will be further dramatized by the grotesque Candyland of the Nutcracker's Kingdom.

---

<sup>27</sup> *Inanna*, pg. 140-141.

<sup>28</sup> *The Nutcracker and the Mouse King*, pg. 147. All quotations are taken from *The Best Tales of Hoffman*, Dover Publications, New York, 1967.

In Maurice Sendak's comments on his adaptation of *The Nutcracker*, he derides these sequences as childish and silly: "Who in the world needed another Nutcracker? The mandatory Christmas tree and Candyland sequences were enough to sink my spirits completely... I didn't want to be suited to the confectionery goings-on of this, I thought, most bland and banal of ballet productions."<sup>29</sup>

It is shocking that Sendak, himself such a brilliant peddler of the macabre, the dreamlike, and the darkly fantastic, fails to see the depth of symbolism in Hoffman's Toyland, and the ballet's Kingdom of Sweets. His solution of making the implicit eroticism of the animated Nutcracker explicit in the form of an 18<sup>th</sup> century seraglio is a grotesque interpretation that strips Hoffman of all his subtlety. For the "Candyland sequences" are very much present in the original tale, and not, as Sendak claims, merely as "a short, ironical interlude."

For a child, nothing is more tempting, desirable, delightful, forbidden, magical, or frightening as candy. It is the goal of any child's heart at Christmas and Halloween, and yet it can sicken and harm—it is, for the innocent youth, the very apple of Eden. If it were not, it would not be such a favorite building material of witches. Hansel and Gretel's nemesis constructed the perfect lure—is there a child who can resist the Gingerbread House, who can resist Turkish Delight? If fairy tales teach us anything without equivocation, it is that candy is evil. It is a poignant symbol of civilization, of industry: sugar and honey are natural sweets; candy requires factories and workers, artisans and bakers. It is a made thing, it is *techne*. Marie sheds her clothes and enters the Underworld; Clara exchanges the primitive technology of her candle for the sophisticated, decadent, witch-loved technology of "Candyland." There is hardly a more sinister set-dressing of hell imaginable than to drape it in spun sugar and peppermint.

Indeed, the moment she sets foot in this world, toy-prince in hand, witchery abounds. In the story, she crosses three rivers, which correspond roughly to the Styx, the Lethe, and the Acheron: the Orange Brook, the River of Honey, and the River Lemonade. In the ballet, the first creature she meets is a cameo from an entirely different tale-cycle, the Snow Queen. The Snow Queen, slumming in Germany, is a picture-perfect incarnation of Ereshkigal: cold, implacable, beautiful, and ineffably adult set against Clara/Marie's cracking veneer of childhood. Yet, because she *is* little more than a cameo, and because snow and sugar are symbolically so similar, her character can be elided into the true Ereshkigal figure of *The Nutcracker*: The Sugar Plum Fairy.

Fully half of the final act of the Tchaikovsky ballet is consumed with the enchanting, yet mysterious presence of the Sugar Plum Fairy. The most famous dances of the production are given to this enigmatic figure, and she all but steals the Nutcracker from his young mistress. This is immediately evocative of Inanna's unfaithful lover, Dumuzi, who dressed in colorful robes and celebrated when Inanna was killed. The Sugar Plum Fairy, again, the fully sexualized, adult female, perhaps the most innocuous-seeming shadow-self in literature, seduces the hapless Nutcracker into her beautiful dance, and since the ballet ends with Clara awakening beneath the Tree, it is possible to read the narrative so that the Fairy was successful, leaving Clara only with the hollow doll-shell in her lap. This would correspond to the Inanna myth, since Dumuzi is set below to take Inanna's place so that she can return to the world of the living.

---

<sup>29</sup> from the introduction to *Nutcracker*, by E.T.A Hoffman and Maurice Sendak, Three Rivers Press, New York, 1984.

Inanna and Ereshkigal, much as any heroic pairing of protagonist and antagonist, are a binary set: the self and the other, the shadow and the light. It follows, then, that Clara and the Sugar Plum Fairy share the same relationship. Surprisingly, the famous Baryshnikov Nutcracker makes this textual: the roles of the Snow Queen and the Sugar Plum Fairy are cut out entirely, and Clara is given all the dances that previously belonged to the Fairy, even costumed in her trademark sparkling mauve. In the guise of her other self, Clara reaches a kind of erotic maturity in these stolen dances, a completely integrated self.

In Hoffman's tale, there is no such figure<sup>30</sup>. Marie simply tours Toyland, eventually coming to rest in its Metropolis-Capitol and agreeing to marry the Nutcracker. When she awakes, no one will believe what she has seen, but unlike MGM's Dorothy, she does not accept their judgment, and within the hour produces the metamorphosed Nutcracker, to whom she is now betrothed. Marie is the most self-possessed of heroines, and her unerring faith in her own interpretation of events earns her a throne.

Alone of the three girls considered here, Marie chooses to return to the Underworld, eager to become its Queen. She embraces this other universe wholeheartedly, becoming both Inanna and Ereshkigal, Queen of Heaven and Mistress of the Dead. Little is said of the Nutcracker but that he loved his wife, and we are left with the image of a mature Marie, ruling wisely and well. Neither Alice nor Dorothy is allowed to truly grow up, though we are given to understand they have come of age. Marie, ever so subtly, becomes the Sugar Plum Fairy of the later ballet—the Queen of Sugar and Snow. And though Marie, unlike her sisters, and perhaps because her adulthood is encompassed by the narrative, does end her tale with a husband, so too does Persephone, and both are wed to the King of the Underworld.

Yet, once again, the later incarnations rob her of this magical ending. The postmodern world which prides itself on its enlightenment, its political correctness, cannot bear to create versions of Marie and Dorothy as real heroes, only as deluded children. It was safe for the male writers who, it should not be forgotten, created these texts, to fashion a tidy fantasy in which a girl might have her own *aresteia*, her moment of greatness, a heroic journey not less than those of Odysseus, Theseus, Aeneas: the chances that any real little girl would grow up to be other than a wife and mother were terrifically slim. It was safe to call these girls Persephone, the lone Greek goddess who is married, yet childless. It is safe to call them Inanna, and let them hold a vicious shoe, chess piece, or bucket of water. But in this best of all possible worlds, where real women are no longer bound to the hearth, to tell them stories of the astonishing feats of intrepid young girls is to increase the ranks of women in the Underworlds of the office building, Wall Street, and Congress. It is no longer harmless fantasy, it is the seed of actual heroism, actual strength. And so the tales themselves must become harmless fantasy, in order to keep the Kansas homefires safe from those ravaging shadows, those hordes of Witches, Fairies, and Queens.

\* \* \*

—and it really *was* a Kitten, after all.

--Lewis Carroll

---

<sup>30</sup> Perhaps it is too much to speculate that this addition is the source of the greater resonance of the ballet over the written text: the opposing female character provides a mystery and depth—a face to the Kingdom of Sweets—that is absent in the original.

*Through the Looking Glass And What Alice Found There*  
**Works Cited\***

Baum, L. Frank. *The Wizard of Oz*. Tor Books, New York 1993.

Bolster, Stephanie. *White Stone: The Alice Poems*. Signal Editions, Montreal, Canada, 1998. Pages 45-46

Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero With A Thousand Faces* The. Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1949.

Carroll, Lewis. *Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There*, Dilithium Press Ltd. New York, 1990.

Hoffman, E.T.A. *The Nutcracker* in *The Best Tales of Hoffman*, Dover Publications, New York, 1967.  
pp. 130-182.

Sandars, N.K. (trans.) "Inanna's Journey Into Hell," *Poems of Heaven and Hell From Ancient Mesopotamia*. Penguin, New York, 1971. Pg. 130-166.

Sendak, Maurice & E.T.A. Hoffman. *Nutcracker*, Three Rivers Press, New York, 1984.

Wolkstein, Diana/Kramer, Noah. *Inanna: Queen of Heaven and Earth*. Harper Perennial, New York, 1983.

Taaffe, Sonya. (trans.) *The Descent of Ishtar*. 2005.

\*The author wishes to thank Sonya Taaffe and Mariane Desautels for their immeasurable help in fleshing out the ideas presented in this paper.