

The Poppy's Spell: Addiction, Colonialism, and Altered Consciousness in L Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*

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Abstract

L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900) presents a fantastical landscape interwoven with complex cultural and historical themes. Among the novel's many allegorical elements, the poppy field episode stands out as a rich site of analysis, particularly in relation to addiction, colonialism, and altered consciousness. This article examines the representation of the opium poppy within the text, situating it within 19th-century anxieties about narcotic influence and Western perceptions of the East. The poppy field's intoxicating effects, rendering Dorothy and the Lion unconscious, reflect broader literary traditions that associate opium with the erosion of agency and moral decline. This portrayal aligns with historical discourses surrounding the Opium Wars, where Western narratives positioned opium both as a commodity of economic control and as a substance that incapacitated individuals and entire societies. Through a critical lens informed by Edward Said's *Orientalism* and historical analyses of opium's role in colonial power structures, this study explores how Baum's text participates in and complicates these discourses. While the poppy field initially functions as an instrument of entrapment, the eventual rescue of Dorothy and the Lion—facilitated by artificial beings and natural forces—suggests a nuanced approach to agency and resistance. The interplay between organic intoxication and mechanical intervention highlights tensions between nature and artifice, reinforcing a broader critique of colonial ideologies that framed the East as passive and the West as active. By contextualizing Baum's depiction of the poppy within these historical and literary frameworks, this article demonstrates that *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* extends beyond the realm of children's literature, offering a sophisticated engagement with issues of power, addiction, and human autonomy.

Keywords: Opium, Colonialism, Addiction, Orientalism, Altered Consciousness

L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900) has long been celebrated as a seminal work in American children's literature, renowned for its imaginative narrative and rich symbolism. While scholars have extensively analyzed its political, economic, and feminist dimensions, the depiction of the poppy field—a scene where Dorothy and her companions succumb to an enchanted sleep—has not received adequate critical attention. This episode, often dismissed as a mere plot device, warrants a deeper examination to uncover its nuanced commentary on themes of addiction, colonialism, and altered consciousness. The poppy's significance within the text can be traced to the broader cultural context of 19th-century America, where the opium trade and its associated anxieties loomed large.

The poppy, as a symbol laden with cultural and historical significance, calls for a reading that considers its literary and social resonances. In the 19th century, opium and its derivatives were the subject of intense fascination and moralizing discourse in the West, with opium dens and addicts becoming stock figures in popular fiction. The poppy field in Baum's text can be interpreted as participating in this broader literary tradition, where the narcotic qualities of the flower are employed to reflect anxieties about the erosion of individual agency and the perceived moral decline of those under its influence (Lovell). Moreover, the poppy field episode can be productively situated within the historical context of the Opium Wars, a series of conflicts between Britain and China in the 19th century over the lucrative opium trade.

However, a deeper analysis reveals that Baum's portrayal of the poppy field is not a simple reiteration of dominant narratives surrounding opium and its effects. Rather, the text's engagement with the poppy field suggests a more nuanced understanding of the dynamics of power, resistance, and the human condition. The poppy field's intoxicating effects, rendering Dorothy and the Lion unconscious, align with historical discourses that positioned opium as a tool of colonial subjugation.

The late 19th and early 20th centuries witnessed heightened global tensions surrounding opium, particularly in the context of the Opium Wars and the subsequent socio-political ramifications. Poppies, the source of opium, have historically symbolized both sleep and death, as well as the exotic allure and peril of the East—a concept central to Edward Said's theory of Orientalism (Said 59). In Baum's narrative, the poppy field can be interpreted as an allegorical space that reflects contemporary anxieties about opium addiction and the cultural implications of colonialism. However, the subsequent rescue of Dorothy and the Lion, facilitated by the intervention of artificial beings such as the Tin Woodman and natural forces like the snowfall, complicates this interpretation. Rather than reinforcing a simplistic binary between the passive East and the active West, the interplay between organic intoxication and mechanical intervention suggests a more nuanced understanding of agency and resistance, where the boundaries between nature and artifice, and the East and the West, are blurred and subverted.

This article seeks to explore how the poppy field episode in *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* serves as a complex symbol intertwining themes of addiction and colonialism. By situating Baum's work within its historical context and employing a multidisciplinary analytical framework, this study aims to fill a critical gap in Oz scholarship, offering a nuanced understanding of the narrative's engagement with issues of power, agency, and cultural hegemony.

Scholarly interpretations of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* have predominantly concentrated on its political allegories, feminist themes, and psychological dimensions. Henry M. Littlefield's seminal essay posits the narrative as a parable on Populism, suggesting that characters and events symbolize late 19th-century American political figures and debates (Littlefield 50). Feminist readings have highlighted Dorothy's journey as emblematic of female empowerment and self-discovery, emphasizing her role as a proactive protagonist in a patriarchal society (Ziaukas 215). Psychological analyses, drawing on Freudian and Jungian frameworks, have examined the characters as representations of the human psyche, with Dorothy's companions embodying facets of her unconscious mind (Karp 112). Despite these extensive analyses, the depiction of the poppy field—a scene where Dorothy and her companions succumb to an enchanted sleep—has not received adequate critical attention. This episode, often dismissed as a mere plot device, warrants a deeper examination to uncover its nuanced commentary on themes of addiction, colonialism, and altered consciousness.

The 19th century witnessed a complex relationship with opium, both as a medicinal substance and a recreational drug. Literary works of the period often grappled with the dual nature of opium, portraying it as both a source of creative inspiration and a cause of moral and physical decline. Thomas De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* delves into the author's own opium addiction, highlighting the allure and subsequent torment associated with the drug (De Quincey 35). Similarly, Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone* incorporates opium use as a central plot element, reflecting societal anxieties about addiction and its consequences (Collins 78). In the context of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, the poppy field episode can be interpreted as an allegorical representation of these contemporary concerns. The potent scent of the poppies induces a deep, lethargic sleep in Dorothy and the Lion, symbolizing the seductive and perilous nature of opium. This portrayal aligns with 19th-century literary depictions of opium as a substance that offers escape and euphoria but ultimately leads to entrapment and loss of agency (Dent 102).

Furthermore, the association of poppies with the exotic and the East ties into broader themes of Orientalism and colonialism. Edward Said's concept of Orientalism discusses how Western literature often depicts Eastern elements as alluring yet dangerous, reinforcing colonialist ideologies (Said 87). The poppy field in Baum's narrative can thus be seen as reflecting Western anxieties about Eastern influences, particularly in the context of the opium trade and its socio-political implications. Despite these potential interpretations, there remains a notable gap in scholarly discourse concerning the poppy field's symbolic significance in Baum's work.

“On and on they walked, and it seemed that the great carpet of deadly flowers that surrounded them would never end. They followed the bend of the river, and at last came upon their friend the Lion, lying fast asleep among the poppies. The flowers had been too strong for the huge beast, and he had given up at last, and fallen only a short distance from the end of the poppy bed, where the sweet grass spread in beautiful green fields before them (Baum 84).”

While existing literature has explored various facets of the novel, the intersection of addiction, colonialism, and altered consciousness as represented by the poppy field has not been thoroughly examined. This study aims to address this gap by providing a comprehensive analysis of the poppy field episode, situating it within its historical and cultural context, and exploring its implications within the narrative.

The present study employs an interdisciplinary theoretical framework to analyze the representation of the poppy field in *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* through the lenses of Orientalism, addiction studies, and literary symbolism. This approach facilitates an in-depth exploration of how Baum's depiction of the poppy field engages with historical and socio-political discourses surrounding opium, colonial anxieties, and the interplay between agency and entrapment.

Theoretical Framework

A primary theoretical lens utilized in this study is Edward Said's concept of Orientalism, which examines how Western literature often constructs the East as an exotic and dangerous "Other" (Said 87). The poppy field, as a representation of opium, aligns with such depictions, reinforcing the West's historical perception of Eastern commodities as simultaneously alluring and corrupting. Said's theory elucidates how the portrayal of the poppy field may

reflect the anxieties of early 20th-century America regarding the perceived threats of Eastern influences.

In addition to Orientalism, the study engages with addiction studies, particularly examining how 19th-century literary narratives constructed opium use as both intoxicating and destructive. Thomas De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* illustrates this duality, portraying opium as an agent of both visionary experiences and debilitating addiction (De Quincey 35). Similarly, Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone* links opium to mystery and moral corruption (Collins 78). Baum's depiction of the poppy field operates within this tradition, offering a potent symbol of addiction's seductive yet incapacitating effects.

Furthermore, literary symbolism plays a crucial role in interpreting the scene's broader significance. The poppy, historically associated with sleep, death, and forgetfulness, carries rich symbolic weight in Western literature (Dent 102). In Baum's narrative, the poppy field functions as a liminal space, temporarily stripping Dorothy and the Lion of their autonomy and underscoring the novel's exploration of power, agency, and resistance.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, text-based methodology grounded in close reading, historical contextualization, and comparative literary analysis.

Close Reading: A detailed textual analysis of the poppy field episode will be conducted, examining Baum's language, imagery, and narrative structure. Attention will be given to how the scene constructs meaning through description, character interactions, and resolution.

Historical Contextualisation: The study situates the text within its historical moment, considering the socio-political climate of the early 20th century, particularly regarding opium trade policies and cultural perceptions of addiction. Archival materials, including contemporary writings on opium, will supplement this analysis.

Comparative Literary analysis: The poppy field's depiction will be examined alongside other literary portrayals of opium, such as those found in *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* and *The Moonstone*, to highlight recurring motifs and divergences in thematic treatment. The study will also explore intertextual connections between Baum's work and broader literary traditions of the period. By integrating these methodological approaches, this research aims to offer a comprehensive reevaluation of the poppy field scene, illuminating its layered meanings and addressing a critical gap in existing Oz scholarship.

The Poppy Field and the Loss of Agency

The depiction of the poppy field in *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* serves as a critical moment in the narrative, symbolizing the intersection of addiction, colonial anxieties, and the fragility of agency. As Dorothy and her companions traverse this seemingly beautiful landscape, they succumb to a forced lethargy, unable to resist the narcotic influence of the flowers. This episode underscores the thematic tension between free will and external control, situating the poppy field as an allegorical space where agency is compromised by seductive yet perilous forces.

Baum's description of the poppy field emphasizes both its visual allure and its insidious effects. The flowers, depicted as "gorgeous red" and "enormous in size" (Baum 107), evoke both fascination and danger. Their sheer beauty lulls Dorothy and the Lion into a trance-like state, rendering them physically incapacitated. This portrayal aligns with 19th-century literary and cultural discourses surrounding opium, particularly its representation as an intoxicant that

first entices before ensnaring. Thomas De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* similarly details the seductive appeal of opium, describing its euphoric effects as "delicious beyond description" before chronicling its eventual dominion over the user's consciousness (De Quincey 35). In both texts, the act of succumbing to an opiate-induced state is depicted as involuntary, illustrating how addiction erodes personal agency.

Beyond addiction, the poppy field also functions as a metaphor for the broader colonial fears associated with the opium trade. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, opium was not only a medicinal substance but also a tool of economic and political subjugation. The British East India Company's role in the Opium Wars exemplifies how narcotics were weaponized to exert control over populations, reinforcing imperial dominance (Brook 58). Baum's poppy field, while not explicitly linked to historical events, resonates with these anxieties, depicting an environment where natural beauty masks an underlying mechanism of control. The forced sleep of Dorothy and the Lion can thus be read as an allegory for colonial subjects rendered powerless by external influences, reinforcing Said's assertion that Orientalist narratives often depict Eastern elements as both enchanting and threatening (Said 89).

Crucially, the means of escape from the poppy field further reinforces the episode's thematic implications. While Dorothy and the Lion remain vulnerable to its effects, the Scarecrow and the Tin Woodman—figures that lack organic, human susceptibility—retain their agency. Their immunity suggests a dichotomy between corporeality and control, wherein those with human bodies are susceptible to external influences, while artificial beings remain unaffected. This distinction underscores the novel's engagement with the idea that biological existence is inherently fraught with vulnerabilities, particularly in environments shaped by forces beyond individual control.

Baum's construction of the poppy field as a liminal space—simultaneously inviting and incapacitating—reflects broader literary traditions in which altered consciousness serves as a mechanism for exploring power dynamics. The scene does not merely function as an obstacle within the plot but instead operates as a microcosm of addiction narratives, colonial tensions, and the precarious nature of autonomy (Cares). By situating this episode within historical and literary contexts, it becomes evident that the loss of agency in the poppy field extends beyond mere fantasy, offering a nuanced commentary on the socio-political concerns of Baum's era.

Orientalism and the Exoticization of Opium Poppy

The representation of the poppy field in *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* resonates with the broader Orientalist tradition of exoticizing opium and the East as sites of both enchantment and peril. Within the novel, the lush, mesmerizing poppy field is presented as a space of intoxicating beauty that seduces and entraps Dorothy and her companions. This duality—wherein Eastern symbols are simultaneously alluring and dangerous—aligns with the ideological framework outlined by Edward Said, who argues that Western literary and cultural narratives often construct the East as an object of fascination while reinforcing its association with moral corruption and passivity (Said 92). Baum's portrayal of the poppy field reflects these Orientalist tropes, positioning opium poppies as an emblem of both seduction and incapacitation.

Baum's imagery of the poppy field evokes the longstanding Western fascination with opium as an exotic commodity. The flowers are described in terms of their sensory appeal—vivid red hues, vast expanses stretching endlessly, and an intoxicating fragrance (Baum 107). This depiction mirrors 19th-century travelogues and literary works that sensationalized opium as a marker of the mystique of the East. Thomas De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium-*

Eater famously indulges in such representations, describing opium dens as spaces of “profound repose” yet suffused with an aura of moral decay (De Quincey 56). Similarly, Wilkie Collins’s *The Moonstone* uses opium as a symbol of foreign intrigue, linking it to India’s colonial history and the destabilization of Western order (Collins 85). In *Oz*, Baum’s use of the poppy field as a liminal space—simultaneously enticing and incapacitating—perpetuates this tradition of rendering opium as a substance that embodies both Eastern allure and latent peril.

The association of the poppy field with sleep and unconsciousness further reinforces Orientalist notions of the East as a space of inertia and passivity. Throughout colonial discourse, opium was often used as a metaphor for the supposed weakness of non-Western societies, particularly in British representations of China during and after the Opium Wars (Brook 77). The portrayal of entire populations as enfeebled by opium reinforced imperial justifications for intervention, depicting Western nations as active agents in contrast to an East rendered docile under the influence of narcotics. Baum’s depiction of Dorothy and the Lion succumbing to the poppies echoes this trope, as they fall into an unnatural, imposed sleep, deprived of agency and movement. “They carried the sleeping girl to a pretty spot beside the river, far enough from the poppy field to prevent her breathing any more of the poison of the flowers, and here they laid her gently on the soft grass and waited for the fresh breeze to waken her (Baum 85)” Their unconsciousness within the field reflects the broader Western literary tradition of linking opium to a loss of autonomy, further entrenching the binary opposition between the active, rational West and the passive, enervated East (Said 98).

However, the novel also subtly complicates these Orientalist associations. The resolution of the poppy field episode—wherein the Scarecrow and Tin Woodman, figures unaffected by the narcotic influence, ultimately save Dorothy and the Lion—suggests a critique of human susceptibility rather than an outright condemnation of the poppy itself. Unlike 19th-century imperial narratives that position opium as an unequivocal symbol of Eastern decadence, Baum’s portrayal leaves room for alternative interpretations, wherein the poppy field represents not simply the dangers of Eastern influence but the broader theme of human frailty when faced with temptation.

In situating Baum’s depiction of the poppy field within the context of Orientalist discourse, it becomes evident that the scene operates as more than a mere obstacle in Dorothy’s journey. The episode reflects deep-seated Western anxieties regarding opium, addiction, and the East, while also participating in a broader literary tradition that exoticizes the poppy as both a source of fascination and a vehicle for loss of control. By framing the poppy field within this ideological context, Baum’s novel engages with the Orientalist imagination in ways that illuminate its cultural and historical underpinnings, making *Oz* a text that is not merely a children’s fantasy but also a reflection of Western literary and colonial anxieties.

Escaping the Poppy’s Spell: The Role of Nature and Agency

The resolution of the poppy field episode in *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* serves as a crucial narrative moment, illustrating the complex interplay between nature, agency, and resistance to external control. While Dorothy and the Lion succumb to the intoxicating effects of the poppies, their eventual rescue by the Scarecrow and the Tin Woodman underscores the novel’s thematic engagement with the distinctions between organic life and artificiality, as well as the means by which agency can be restored in the face of seemingly insurmountable influence (Rockoff). “Nothing that I know of,” answered the Woodman; but the Scarecrow, who had been trying to think, but could not because his head was stuffed with straw, said,

quickly, "Oh, yes; you can save our friend, the Cowardly Lion, who is asleep in the poppy bed (Baum 89)." This episode not only reinforces the dangers posed by the poppy field but also presents nature as both an oppressive force and a potential source of salvation.

Baum's depiction of the poppy field initially positions nature as an antagonistic entity. The flowers, described as "large and beautiful" with a "delicious perfume" that "was so powerful that anyone who breathed it long enough was sure to fall asleep" (Baum 108), are presented as an unavoidable environmental force, imposing their narcotic effects upon those who enter their domain. This aligns with Western literary traditions in which natural elements often serve as both wondrous and perilous. The poppy's effect, particularly its ability to induce unconsciousness, echoes narratives of addiction found in 19th-century literature, where nature—particularly in the form of opium—becomes an agent of both pleasure and destruction. As Timothy Brook notes, the perception of opium as a natural but inherently corrupting force was a central concern in the British imagination during and after the Opium Wars (Brook 82). Baum's poppy field functions similarly, operating as a space where natural beauty masks an underlying mechanism of control.

However, unlike traditional addiction narratives in which the victim's fate is sealed by their exposure to opium, Baum provides an alternative resolution in which agency is restored through ingenuity and external intervention. The Scarecrow and the Tin Woodman, who are immune to the effects of the poppies due to their inorganic nature, become the primary agents of rescue. The Scarecrow devises a plan to carry Dorothy out of the field, while the Tin Woodman constructs a path of escape (Baum 110). Their ability to act contrasts sharply with Dorothy and the Lion's forced passivity, reinforcing a dichotomy between organic vulnerability and artificial resilience. This moment suggests that while natural forces may exert control over human subjects, agency can still be reclaimed through strategic intervention and cooperation.

Further emphasizing this theme, Baum introduces a second element of nature—the winter frost—as the ultimate antidote to the poppy's narcotic grip. When the Queen of the Field Mice suggests that the Lion be placed on a sled and carried out of the field, the narrative shifts toward a redemptive view of nature's role (Baum 112). The cold temperature counteracts the poppy's influence, symbolizing the restoration of balance through environmental forces. This resolution suggests that nature, while capable of imposing limitations, also contains the means for liberation, a perspective that aligns with Romantic literary traditions in which nature is depicted as both a source of destruction and renewal.

Thematically, the escape from the poppy field also reinforces the broader political and colonial implications of the scene. As noted by Edward Said, colonial discourse often constructs the East as a space of passive submission, contrasting it with the West's active agency (Said 97). In this context, Dorothy and the Lion's incapacitation may be read as a metaphor for the perceived loss of control associated with opium addiction, while the Scarecrow and the Tin Woodman's actions align with the Western narrative of rational intervention. However, Baum's resolution complicates this binary by allowing nature itself—rather than solely human ingenuity—to serve as the final means of escape. This suggests a more nuanced view of agency, one that acknowledges both human effort and the restorative potential of the natural world.

Ultimately, the escape from the poppy field represents a pivotal moment in *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, reinforcing the novel's engagement with themes of control, addiction, and resistance (Culver). While the poppies initially function as a force of entrapment, their

influence is countered by both mechanical intervention and natural remediation, illustrating that agency is not entirely lost, even in the face of overwhelming external pressures. By framing the poppy field's resolution within these literary, historical, and philosophical contexts, Baum presents a complex meditation on the nature of control and the possibility of reclaiming autonomy, making this episode a key site of meaning within the text.

Conclusion

The poppy field episode in *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* serves as a compelling site for analyzing the intersection of nature, agency, and the socio-historical discourse surrounding opium. L. Frank Baum's portrayal of the poppies as both mesmerizing and dangerous reflects the broader literary and cultural anxieties surrounding opium's role in Western society. Through the intoxicating allure of the flowers, Baum engages with the trope of the opium-induced loss of agency, a recurring theme in 19th-century literature that problematizes human autonomy in the face of narcotic influence. This motif aligns with the moral panic surrounding opium consumption, particularly in colonial contexts where it was framed as a symbol of both Eastern temptation and Western vulnerability (Brook 79).

Baum's use of the poppy field also participates in Orientalist discourse by exoticizing opium in a way that reinforces the constructed dichotomy between an active, rational West and a passive, enervated East. As Edward Said argues, Western literary traditions have long depicted the East as a space of sensory excess and moral decay, often through the lens of intoxicants like opium (Said 92). The novel's depiction of the field as a place where individuals are rendered powerless by an environmental force mirrors the ways in which colonial narratives framed opium as both an economic commodity and a tool of subjugation. However, Baum's resolution of this episode—through the intervention of artificial beings and the restorative forces of nature—complicates this reading, suggesting an alternative view in which agency is not permanently lost but rather reasserted through strategic action and environmental equilibrium.

The episode also invites a broader discussion about the relationship between nature and human agency. While the poppies initially function as an oppressive force, their effects are ultimately counteracted by the mechanical ingenuity of the Scarecrow and Tin Woodman, as well as the environmental intervention of winter frost. This dual resolution positions nature as both an agent of control and liberation, challenging deterministic narratives that view narcotic influence as absolute. Baum thus presents a nuanced meditation on the capacity for resistance, suggesting that even when faced with external forces that threaten autonomy, agency can be reclaimed through ingenuity, cooperation, and environmental balance.

In light of these readings, Baum's poppy field emerges as more than a mere obstacle in Dorothy's journey; it is a rich literary construct that reflects contemporary anxieties about addiction, imperial power, and the limits of human autonomy. By situating the episode within the broader tradition of Western literary depictions of opium, it becomes evident that *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* is engaged in a complex dialogue with historical and cultural discourses that extend far beyond the realm of children's literature. This analysis not only underscores the enduring relevance of Baum's work but also highlights the ways in which seemingly fantastical elements can serve as allegorical commentaries on real-world socio-political concerns.

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