United States History II

The Wizard of Oz

BACKGROUND:

1) The Wizard of Oz is one of the most popular films ever produced in Hollywood. It has made many generations both happy and scared through the actions of a wide variety of characters. The purpose of this assignment is to examine the historical facts and themes prevalent in this allegorical tale.

2) The author, L. Frank Baum, was a former newspaperman who was writing about the tumultuous times that the United States experience in the last 30 years of the 1800’s. The monetary standard was not stable enough to keep the currency from fluctuating wildly. It caused many families to lose their possessions (farms to be exact).

3) The last 30 years of the 1800’s were characterized by prolonged deflation. It hit the agricultural sector of the economy particularly hard due to extremely low prices in the market. Desperate for help, the farmers turned to the Populist Party who had started gaining momentum with its roots based in the Mid-West. One of their basic points was to push the idea that we could and should have both gold and silver backing up our currency (bi-metallic standard). This would offer more potential stability and keep the price swings from being so extreme.

4) The banker bosses of the east like Jim Fisk and Jay Gould depended on gold to back the currency. They felt that they controlled not only the economy but also the political agenda. The railroad barons were attempting to control westward expansion and also felt that the gold standard was the tried and true monetary standard. The owners of the industries in the east and those moving to the west had a “subjugated” workforce in place and were making a lot of money. When the bimetallic standard issue was first raised, they did all they could to squash it. The Populists endorsed the silver issue and fell in behind a politician named William Jennings Bryan. While running for office, he gave his famous, “Cross of Gold” speech. In it he said, “You come to us and tell us that the great cities are in favor of the gold standard. We reply that the great cities rest upon our broad and fertile prairies. Burn down your cities and leave our farms, and your great cities will spring up again as if by magic. But destroy our farms and grass will grow in the streets of every city in the country.”

5) Bryan lost the race, but he had made a very important point. The money issue was a politically charged topic so when the book *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* was written, it was an immediate success. By using fictional characters, the author was able to portray the issues of the day without coming right out and slapping the real characters in the face. Thus, as the good guys walked, skipped, and stumbled down the yellow brick road, they symbolized not only what was good about our country but also how the people were inherently naïve. Enjoy the trip and see how good literature can illustrate and symbolize issues that we all have to deal with. Through his words, Baum showed how a ragtag bunch of characters could overcome many obstacles and solve their own problems together, even if they did not think they could.

6) Your assignment is to enjoy the movie and then pull all of the elements together to form the “Allegory of Oz”.
CHARACTERS AND SYMBOLISM:

* Please identify the symbolism and related rationale for 15 of the following 21 characters/items from the movie.

1)  *Dorothy* –

2)  *Auntie Em and Uncle Henry* –

3)  *Scarecrow* –

4)  *Tin Man* –

5)  *Cowardly Lion* –

6)  *Wicked Witch of the East* –

7)  *The Munchkins* –

8)  *Wicked Witch of the West* –

9)  *Glenda, The Good Witch of the North* –

10)  *Wizard of Oz* –

11)  *Emerald City* –
12) The Yellow Brick Road –

13) Ruby (Silver) Slippers –

14) The word Oz –

15) The poppy field –

16) The Greeter of Emerald City –

17) The Flying Monkeys –

18) The Winkies –

19) The clock heart –

20) The diploma –

21) Medal of Valor –

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

* Please answer the following question related to the excerpt from *The Wizard of Oz: Parable on Populism* by Henry M. Littlefield:

-- List and explain 8 specific ways in which the movie differs from Frank Baum’s book.
* Please answer 10 of the following questions.

1) How is life portrayed on the farm in the beginning of the movie? How is Dorothy portrayed? Where is the farm located?
2) When the house landed on the Wicked Witch of the East, why does her sister want the slippers so badly? Why would that enhance their powers over Oz?
3) How is the Wizard of Oz portrayed by the Munchkins before Dorothy leaves for Emerald City?
4) What do the yellow brick road and slippers have in common? Why?
5) Why did the yellow brick road look so smooth in the beginning and become so rough toward the end of the journey? Also explain all of the crossroads they encountered on the trip.
6) Explain what the scarecrow meant when he said, “people do an awful lot of talking and they don’t have brains.”
7) Tie in the Tin Man’s lack of a heart with the emotional state of the people he symbolized.
8) How is the lion an accurate portrayal of its character? Why is his song “the King of the Forest” an accurate portrayal of his character?
9) When the foursome emerged from the forest, they ran into a poppy field. Who put it there and why? Why were poppies used as a symbol?
10) After they wake up from their slumber, how did Emerald City look to them? What does the comment mean regarding how beautiful the city looked and that wonderful and powerful leaders must live in a place like that? What is the illusion created and how does that tie in with the popular illusions people held in the late 1800’s?
11) How does the scene of Glenda bringing snow to cover the poppies support her symbolism?
12) There was a song in the movie as they were leaving the poppy field that said to “come out of the dark and into the light.” What did that mean, especially since they had just seen Emerald City?
13) When the doorkeeper was asked if he had ever seen the Wizard, he said, “Nobody’s ever seen the wizard”. When he was asked, “how do you know he exists?” he didn’t have an answer. How does that relate to the average citizen’s perception of the president in the late 1800’s?
14) When they got into the city, everything looked green. In the book they had to put on green-tinted glasses while in reality the city was colorless. What does this mean?
15) While they were going to meet the wizard, the citizens of Emerald City sang a song that went something like this; “Buzz, buzz, buzz, chirp, chirp, chirp and a couple of la de dahs, – and we wake up at 12 and start to work at 1, we take an hour for lunch and then our work is done, jolly good fun”. What does that relate to Emerald City’s comparison to our capital?
16) What do the words the workers were singing mean when the foursome went into the building to get freshened up?
17) When the “Keeper of the Palace” told the characters they could not see the wizard, that nobody has ever seen the wizard, and not even he had seen him, what was being portrayed through the lives of Americans in the late 1800’s?
18) When they finally entered to palace, each saw the wizard in a different way. The movie showed different colored smoke, while the book they each saw different characters. How does that relate to America in the 1890’s?
19) The soldiers of the witch were called the Winkies. What words were they chanting and how do they tie in with the symbolism in the movie?
20) What did the witch melting away have to do with the whole controversy over the gold and silver standard? What comment did the Wizard make to the foursome with regards to the melting of the witch?
21) Explain the symbolism of each of the things the Wizard gave to the characters. How does that relate to their weaknesses and also to the power of the Wizard? Relate that to the relationship the leaders had with the actual general population of the 1890’s.

22) When the wizard tried to take Dorothy back home, what happened? Who had he left in charge until his return? Why him? What areas did the rest of the characters control?

23) What was the symbolic way Dorothy could have gone home at any time? Tie this into the symbolism of the gold-silver standard.

24) Who was responsible for the lion finding his courage? Why was it that person?

25) Why did Dorothy keep making the comment that she was sure that she had known all of the others but just couldn’t remember? Why were the characters from such different realms of the country able to get along and become stronger when they had been so divided before?