

Diane Charles
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Paper 1 Analysis

Peddle-Pushing: Interpreting Ms. Gulch's Bicycle in *The Wizard of Oz*

Power is a major theme in *The Wizard of Oz*. Both in Kansas and in Oz itself, all of the characters confront the power others hold over them while they also discover their own power to influence others and define their own destinies. The decidedly theatrical *mise-en-scene* of the film helps the audience understand how such power works in the film. In this analysis, I want to concentrate on the role played by Ms. Gulch's bicycle.

Ms. Gulch enters the film in a shot of her riding the bike. This takes place on the very road where Dorothy first appears. As we see Ms. Gulch's legs pumping furiously, we hear the theme that will define both the Ms. Gulch and the Wicked Witch of the West characters. Where Dorothy was skipping and running with her dog in the opening sequence, Ms. Gulch is powering a machine with her body, multiplying the speed she could reach if she were walking. However, the bicycle represents a specific kind of bodily power. Unlike a car, which depends on fuel and the drive of its engine, Ms. Gulch powers the bicycle herself. Where professor Marvel moves with the aid of a horse, Ms. Gulch doesn't need to depend on the powers of either fossil fuels or the willingness of another animal. The bicycle instead simply multiplies her own capacities—the power she herself already possesses and controls. The prop of the bicycle suggests that she has already learned what Dorothy and the other characters will come to find out: that she herself has great power.

Like many props in the film, the bicycle holds a profound potential for transformation, and this too reveals something about how power works in the film, but it also highlights the importance of visual elements in filmmaking. During the twister sequence, Dorothy gazes out the window of her spinning house. As the house whirls, various characters appear, including an old woman knitting. Then, Ms. Gulch appears on her bike, furiously pushing the pedals through the storm. In a fantastic effect, the bike is superimposed on the image of the broom as Ms. Gulch's costume changes to the flowing black robes of The Wicked Witch of the West. The bicycle is transformed into the broom, and the transformation makes visual sense since the actress Margaret Hamilton keeps virtually the same posture, first straddling the bike and then the broom. The transition is seamless, as the bars of the bike become the pole of the broom.

The presence of the bicycle and its superimposition on the broom seem to suggest much about the Wicked Witch's power. Though the broom helps the witch fly, the broom as a prop is much like the bike. As just a broom, it is nothing magical, and it requires the power of someone willing to use it to make it work. Thus, what seems magical is connected with the bicycle, that most rational and unmagical prop. Like the whole film, the bicycle prop demonstrates that those who seem most fearsome are relying on their own powers as anyone must to use a bike or a broom. This is especially true for Dorothy herself. In the scene of her return to Kansas, she must use the Ruby Slippers to take her home, something that Glenda tells her she could not have done until she believed herself capable of it. Like Ms. Gulch on her bike, Dorothy magics herself back to Kansas only through the consciousness of her own powers and her willingness to use those most ordinary of objects to take her from one place to another place—a pair of shoes.

Works Cited

The Wizard of Oz. Dir. Victor Fleming. Perf. Judy Garland, Frank Morgan, Ray Bolger, Bert Lahr, Jack Haley, Margaret Hamilton. MGM, 1939.