

# The temptations of adulthood



“ And that was the October Week when they grew up overnight, and were never so young anymore...”

So begins Ray Bradbury’s dark carnival fantasy, *Something Wicked This Way Comes*. Age and the loss of innocence are strong themes in this story: the boys are barreling forward into adulthood while the adults are looking back, yearning for their lost childhood. By comparing and contrasting the circumstances and desires of children and adults, Ray Bradbury creates an in-depth exploration of childhood and the aging process that positions his work as far more than a typical coming-of-age story.

*Something Wicked This Way Comes* and *Dandelion Wine*, two of Ray Bradbury’s most acclaimed novels, are both set in the small, picturesque hamlet of Green Town, Illinois. This town is in many ways similar to Bradbury’s own hometown of Waukegan, Illinois (Johnson 89). These stories thus belong to a rarely-seen genre, that of the autobiographical fantasy (Mogen 112). The events from Bradbury’s childhood in Waukegan and his experiences as an adult are such clear influences in these writings that “ it almost seems as if he has forgotten nothing: no incident from his past escapes his artistic vision and revision” (McNelly). Bradbury conceptualized these tales as depictions of the two sides of adolescence, symbols of summer and autumn (Mogen 113). This notion of the progression of adolescence has deep roots in the author’s own history. During Bradbury’s childhood, a common occurrence in Waukegan was for a circus train to stop in the town. As a child of four, Bradbury went on a carousel for the first time, and the experience terrified him – a terror that is clearly present in *Something Wicked This Way Comes* (Mogen 125). Also located in Waukegan

is an old library identical to the one featured in this story (Johnson 90). This infusion of the real into the fantastical generates a sense of realism that makes the Green Town stories so unique in the literary canon.

It is only natural that since Bradbury put so much of himself into *Something Wicked This Way Comes*, the story contains both deep symbolism and an outline of his own views on many aspects of life – and especially that of adolescence, which is a central theme in the book. Bradbury “enlarges and distorts the symbols that stand for the preoccupations of adults” (Diskin 148). The carnival, the carousel, and the mirror maze are all manifestations of the themes of frivolity and superficiality. Those townspeople who are tempted by superficial desires are also tempted by the evils of the carnival. Will and Jim, still being children, have not yet succumbed to sin, and as such are able to resist the temptations of the carnival (Diskin 148).

In *Something Wicked This Way Comes*, Bradbury offers an unwavering opinion on the many differences between adults and children. It is almost as if the children and the adults in the book belong to entirely different species (Diskin 128). Indeed, they are such polar opposites that they are unable to achieve any semblance of a peaceful coexistence. The adults of the story yearn to recapture their youth, feeling as if they are aging far too quickly. Charles Halloway repeatedly speaks of wanting to be young again. It is not until Charles Halloway bridges the gap between himself and his son, thus embracing the part of himself that is still a child, that he is able to work alongside the boys to destroy the carnival and evade the dangers that it poses (Diskin 149).

The theme of the sadness of aging is also symbolized by the carousel. It lures unsuspecting victims with images of youthful joy, yet the funeral march that plays during the ride reminds the riders that each year of life only brings them closer to their own funerals. Those vain souls who are lured onto the ride are obsessed with frivolity and live lives rife with sin (Diskin 148). Ms. Foley becomes so obsessed with the carousel and her desire to become young again that she fails to notice that “the nephew” is not her own nephew, and even gives the names of her students to the devil himself, Mr. Dark.

The aging of the boys, however, is depicted in a positive light. Will’s ascension to the role of leader after Jim loses his sense of self to the carnival’s power is portrayed as a positive development. Will’s superior skill at staying calm and level-headed in the face of danger is first demonstrated during chapter 30, when Will takes the lead and defeats the Dust Witch. Will’s transformation paves the way for the “desperate antics of he and his father when Jim’s life is at stake” (Diskin 149). Charles’s “desperate antics” also reveal Bradbury’s belief that it is better for an individual to age naturally while embracing all aspects of his or her character. The victory over the carnival that Charles and the boys share suggests that one should disregard the temptations of eternal youth and be thankful for the unique joys offered by each stage in life.

In *Something Wicked This Way Comes*, Bradbury hopes to impress upon readers his belief that it is not the process of aging that is evil, but rather the temptations and desires that often go hand-in-hand with adulthood. Also, he seems to believe that the manipulation of the aging process is an evil

practice, as shown by the agony suffered by those who fall into the trap of the carnival. The tale is a complex exploration of aging and the perils of adulthood, and a hybrid of fiction, fantasy, and reality. Bradbury's portrayal of adults and children as inherently different reveals the profound changes that human beings undergo over a lifetime, and provides a new perspective on the typical coming-of-age story.

### **Works Cited**

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