Something Wicked This Way Comes

Author: Ray Bradbury  
Born: August 22, 1920; Waukegan, Illinois  
First Published: 1962  
Type of Work: Novel  
Type of Plot: Adventure tale and fantasy  
Time of Work: The mid-twentieth century  
Locale: A small town in Illinois  
Subjects: Friendship and the supernatural  
Age Level: 13-15

Two boys encounter a sinister carnival capable of granting them their most secret wishes, but they learn that there is a terrible price to pay for succumbing to the carnival's temptations.

Principal Characters  
WILL HALLOWAY, a bright, somewhat naive thirteen-year-old  
JIM NIGHTSHADE, Will's more worldly-wise best friend, who is also thirteen  
CHARLES HALLOWAY, Will's aging father, a library janitor  
G. M. DARK, the coowner and proprietor of the carnival who is covered with tattoos  
J. C. COOGER, the coowner of the carnival who takes on the guise of a twelve-year-old boy in order to infiltrate the town  
MISS FOLEY, the boys' seventh-grade teacher  
THE DUST WITCH, a blind witch, one of the members of the carnival

Form and Content  
Something Wicked This Way Comes is a richly imaginative story of good overcoming
evil. Will Halloway and his next-door neighbor, Jim Nightshade, see themselves almost as twins. Born only minutes apart in the same hospital on Halloween, they have grown up like brothers, but now, at the age of thirteen, personality differences have begun to emerge. Will is naïve and almost reluctant to let go of each moment. Jim, whose father is dead, is much more streetwise and curious; he is anxious to become the man he never knew in his father. Will’s aloof and world-weary father, Charles Halloway, at fifty-four, feels too old to be a suitable father for a teenage boy. He senses that he has failed as a father and fears death and the effects of age.

Late one October night, a mysterious carnival, Cooger and Dark's Pandemonium Shadow Show, sets up on the edge of town. The carnival is peopled by menacing freaks and is run by G. M. Dark, a heavily tattooed ringmaster, and J. C. Cooger, a huge, red-haired man. With a mirror maze, a carousel, and sinister sideshows, the carnival seduces the weak-willed and vain by catering to their human cravings and frailties.

Will and Jim watch secretly as Mr. Cooger rides the carnival carousel backward. With each revolution, Cooger becomes a year younger. When the carousel finally stops, he emerges as a twelve-year-old boy and enters the town, posing as the nephew of Miss Foley, one of the town's teachers. Will and Jim follow the boy. (Later, when Cooger is being transformed by the carousel back into his adult self, they damage the carousel's machinery and make it spin faster and faster, transforming Cooger into an ancient, feeble man on the brink of death.) Jim becomes secretly obsessed with the carousel's ability to add or subtract years, seeing it as a way of instantly making himself the grown man he longs to be.

Mr. Dark begins a methodical search of the town for the two boys. He first sends the Dust Witch, a blind crone who navigates by sense of smell, over the town's rooftops in a balloon. When that plan fails, he begins a physical search of the town, in the guise of a parade, but Will's father intervenes to protect the boys. The boys tell him about their predicament. By searching old newspapers and books in the library, Charles Halloway discovers that the carnival has visited the town many times over the centuries, tempting people with the fulfillment of their most secret wishes and feeding off their corrupted souls. When Mr. Dark confronts Charles in the library, where the boys are hiding, he tempts the older man by promising to make him young if he will only betray the two boys. The boys are abducted by Mr. Dark, but Charles rescues them when he discovers that the evil of the carnival can be overcome when humans find the strength to laugh at what they most fear.

Analysis

*Something Wicked This Way Comes* incorporates many of the themes of Ray Bradbury's earlier work and all of his stylistic strengths and weaknesses. The novel is written in Bradbury's richly figurative language, with countless similes and metaphors, which are at times breathtaking in their originality and at other times simply puzzling. While this sometimes inspired, sometimes contrived style of expression is likely to frustrate the novel's target age-group, the fast-paced plot is visceral and unrelenting.

One of the novel's clear themes concerns the importance and strength of friendship. Throughout the novel Will and Jim are portrayed as twins, yet there are some