

The Gothic and the Carnavalesque in American Culture

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The question of what constitutes the American Gothic has been the subject of critical debate since at least the mid-1980s. The difficulty scholars have had in definitively defining this movement, genre in Jones' approach is sometimes too limiting a concept and the discussion crosses over several discreet media, has been the ways in which it is defined. No single lensing or locating of the concepts seems to encompass the form and substance Jones seeks to address here. As he notes, the American Gothic is not historical or chronological in nature but rather is a series of movements marked by the historical, social, and cultural shifts in American culture since the nineteenth century. This poses a fairly sizeable question regarding how to define the American Gothic in context, particularly a context which is frequently ahistorical. Jones notes that:

Often, the Gothic text does not offer a compelling account of the American real, but nevertheless remains a distinct product of American culture. These texts are the product of a historical moment but appear to turn their back on that moment, instead offering readers something else. (1)

It is this ‘something else’ which preoccupies much of the seven chapters of Jones’s examination of the concept, attempting to define the genre through what it does as much as what it is at a given stage of the development of the concept within the culture. The central argument is that the carnivalesque, the shift between the normal world of decorum and ‘common sense’ and the topsy-turvy world of the visceral circus presented in Gothic fiction broadly and the American Gothic most clearly, is the critical feature for defining what the American Gothic is and how it functions in context.

Jones’s approach is deeply indebted to Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of habitus, the habit of mind and acculturation imposed by the larger society, and Walter Benjamin’s concept of aura, the sense of the authentic or the real. These elements inform the ways in which the readers of American Gothic texts are invited to read and participate in the narratives in a uniquely personal way. Jones notes that ‘genres like the Gothic might be understood as practices that inform the action of readers and writers, and generate fields that orient the practice of participants. Readers are able to distinguish between “serious” iterations of the genre and a “carnavalesque” mode’ (4). This has as much to do with the sense of place and proper taste as with content or specific generic concerns as the carnival defines its own aesthetics and the acceptable limits of decorum while suspending the larger sense of the ‘real’, inviting a self-limiting shift away from the mundane and opening a space in which the otherwise outré is considered the norm and the boundaries of ‘good’ taste are not what they seem. The sense of the carnivalesque inviting a temporary suspension of the real, a vicarious enjoyment of the threatening or forbidden, is an interesting approach to the reading of the texts Jones engages as examples of the genre by showing how each generation of readers or viewers seeks slightly different forms of the same carnivalesque experience.

This is visible from the example of Charles G. Finney's 1935 novella *The Circus of Dr. Lao* presented in the introductory 'Ballyhoo'. The mysterious, somewhat satanic carnival that arrives in town demonstrates all of the ways in which the Gothic – particularly the American Gothic in Jones's reading – prepare the reader for the juxtaposition of mirth and horror, a pleasure in digression and the loss of control. Jones states that these kinds of readings and viewings are the inherent carnival of the Gothic, as informed readers know all too well that 'when frightful action is presented, sometimes the audience appears to be scared – gasping, shrieking, quietly tense – but just as often, there is laughter, incredulity and even derision expressed. This is not breaking faith with the spirit of the performance or film: it is instead characteristic of how we engage with horror narrative' (2). It is through this lens of joyful transgression and the inversion of 'good taste' that Jones argues the American Gothic should be understood.

The first full chapter, 'Theory, Practice, and Gothic Carnival', establishes the theoretical limits for the discussion at hand, focusing on a handful of critical theorists in the field including Benjamin, Bordieu, and Bakhtin, in addition to critics of horror and the Gothic – notably Tony Magistrale, Linda Bayer-Berenbaum, and Justin D. Edwards – in order to establish the evolution of the genre and the state of the field. The emphasis here is on what has gone before in terms of the critical discussion and how the limits of the carnival moment in the American Gothic have come to be defined. While this chapter serves as a review of the field in large part, Jones's use of Stephen King's short story 'The Raft' (1982) as a concrete touchstone for the discussion provides a helpful point of reference for the theory and theorists discussed and helps to establish the range and register for the discussion to follow.

“‘The Delight of Its Horror’”: Edgar Alan Poe’s Carnivals and the Nineteenth-Century American Gothic’ begins the chronological exploration of the concept of the carnivalesque as the crucial feature of the American Gothic in earnest. Tracing the evolution and shifts in the concept of the carnivalesque, as Jones has defined it, from Washington Irving’s short fiction, through Hawthorne’s ‘Young Goodman Brown’ (1835) and finally to Poe’s unabashed Gothic fantasies demonstrates the ways in which the subversion of the real and the establishment of the ‘otherwhere’ of the carnival and the surreal has been part of the American Gothic from its beginning. Of interest are the ways in which the suspension of the real in favour of narrative, many of the tales Jones outlines involve metanarratives and storytelling as part of their mechanics, function to show the reader how the tales should be read and responded to. Substance is, in many cases, secondary to the sense of the story and the aesthetic effect it generates. Jones ties this to the continental Gothic but also stresses the ways in which it seems to be deliberately moving away from those models in an attempt to better integrate with the nascent American culture of the period. It is here that Jones also establishes what he sees as the two major branches of the American Gothic, the serious Gothic in a traditionalist mode represented by Hawthorne and the more sensational, carnival strain represented by Poe’s ‘Hop-Frog’ (1849) or ‘Masque of the Red Death’ (1842).

Chapter three, ‘Weird Tales and Pulp Subjunctivity’, moves the discussion into the modern era, discussing not only seminal figures in the pulp era such as H.P. Lovecraft, R.E. Howard, and Robert Bloch, but also lesser known figures of the time in the context of the suspension of the normal and the favouring of sense over simple legibility in form and content. Using the work of Michel Houellebecq as the theoretical touchstone for the chapter, Jones argues that ‘readers assume a particular “disposition” when they approach Lovecraft, and that this

disposition involves a rejection of the everyday, or the historical “real” (75-6). This rejection of the real involves accepting, with a certain sense of detachment and pleasure, the specific rules of the cosmic carnival, the ‘cosmic horror’ and ‘weirdness’, the pulp authors like Lovecraft seek to evoke. While this is closely tied to the reading habits required for the enjoyment of the Gothic broadly, it is also aligned with specific American ideological habits and the broader culture of the period. Jones admits that the nationalized pulp Gothic sensibilities of Lovecraft’s New England or Howard’s weird American West are located geographically and culturally as much as they are self-limiting as carnivalesque spectacles. This is, however, where Jones sees their power as stemming from; the limits these national markers place on the texts inform the ways in which the reader is invited to participate in the narratives and establishes the context for their enjoyment while walking a fine line between the ‘serious’ Gothic of Hawthorne and the openly ‘carnavalesque’ tradition of Poe (80).

The fourth chapter, ‘Ray Bradbury and the October Aura’, is deeply engaged with Benjamin’s sense of aura and the ‘reality’ or ‘realism’ of later American Gothics. Particularly in the discussion of Bradbury’s *Something Wicked This Way Comes* (1962) and *The October Country* (1955), the ways in which the sense and sensibilities of the Gothicized America Bradbury presents invites both a carnival appreciation of the culture and a specific engagement with the historical moment and cultural concerns. This discussion in many ways is continued in the following chapter, “‘Hello again, you little monsters’”: Hosted Horrors of the 1950s and 1960s’, where the discussion shifts to television programs such as *The Twilight Zone* (1959-64), *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* (1955-65), and the EC comics such as *Tales from the Crypt* (1950-5). Where Chapter Four establishes the ‘October aura’, a playful ghoulishness where every day is Halloween and the monsters are real and just as human as anyone else, Chapter Five

demonstrates the ways in which this sensibility permeated American culture in the middle decades of the century. Jones also stresses, in both of these chapters, the crossovers between literature and emerging media as the television programs often used the literature of the earlier iterations of the American Gothic as source material. Similarly, the EC comics often possessed a somewhat literary bent and stole plots and narratives wholesale from the culture around them.

‘Stephen King, Affect and the Real Limits of Gothic Practice’ both agrees with and complicates the playfulness emphasized in the preceding two chapters. Using King’s emergence as one of the most recognizable popular American authors of the late twentieth century as a foundation for the establishment of a long-form American Gothic in the broader culture’s awareness, Jones argues that the novel represents a substantial evolution in the concept of the American Gothic and its acceptance as a broader cultural reading practice. The solidification of culture and habit Jones sees in the popularity of King and his contemporaries is striking, and King himself, particularly in *Danse Macabre* (1981), endorses the idea of horror and the Gothic as visceral and performative, but also mitigates some of the sense of play and freedom from restrictions emphasized in the previous chapters. This is shown in the sometimes blatant Gothicism of more mainstreamed authors such as Joyce Carol Oates and Toni Morrison, whose more ‘serious’ Gothicisms sometimes, in Jones’s view, coincide with the Gothic carnival or redirect the conversation toward the more staid, ‘serious’ American Gothic of Hawthorne. The ‘bleed’ of the American Gothic in all of its forms into other literatures in the period demonstrates both its presence in the broader culture and the possibility of its self-limiting recursivity, possibly becoming self-defeating.

The appropriately titled chapter, ‘Every Day is Halloween – Goth and the Gothic’, seeks to locate ‘the presence of Goth in the American Gothic’ and ‘describes dispositions available to

participants in carnival Gothic texts – temporary, subjunctive accounts of self that readers might assume as they read’ (181). Jones here argues that Goths, as participants in a particularly performative subculture within the broader social fabric, ‘often seem to hold similarities of interest and instinct with carnival Gothic readers, to read their worlds as their readers might read them’ (181). This is grounded, in part, in the realization that the subculture itself is in many ways very literature oriented and is becoming increasingly visible in the literature of the American Gothic itself. The conditional celebration of the ‘Halloween world’ represented by Gothic popular culture is tempered by increasing darkness in the literature and what Jones sees as an almost fatalistic acceptance of outsider status that is to be revelled in for its own sake.

‘Waiting for the Great Pumpkin’ serves as a conclusion to the text and serves primarily as a chronology of the discussion. Some of the points raised here, such as the other potential cultural touchstones for the American Gothic as it is experienced today or the rationale for the deepening resignation within the culture Jones notes in the last few chapters but does not develop, would be worthy of further exploration in the text but are given scant treatment here.

Overall, Jones’s scholarship is solid and well supported throughout. His voice, while not without issues, is generally clear and easy to follow from point to point theoretically and chronologically. The major problems here are largely stylistic, there are a number of internally recursive notes in each chapter that feel more appropriate for a thesis or dissertation than in a mature scholarly work and these self-references sometimes break the flow of the work. Particularly in the second and fourth chapters, the emphasis on literary and cultural theory also seemed a bit heavy-handed for a less theory inclined reader to fully appreciate the nuance of the discussion. While clearly aimed more at a purely scholarly audience in parts, while being surprisingly witty and discursive in others, the whole is enjoyable and demonstrates a new and

clear insight into why the American Gothic is both difficult to define and incredibly present in the popular culture of today.