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978-1-107-05667-1 - Failure and the American Writer: A Literary History

Gavin Jones

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FAILURE AND THE AMERICAN WRITER

If America worships success, then why has the nation's literature dwelled obsessively on failure? This book explores encounters with failure by nineteenth-century writers – ranging from Edgar Allan Poe and Herman Melville to Mark Twain and Sarah Orne Jewett – whose celebrated works more often struck readers as profoundly messy, flawed, and even perverse. Reading textual inconsistency against the backdrop of a turbulent nineteenth century, Gavin Jones describes how the difficulties these writers faced in their faltering search for new styles, coherent characters, and satisfactory endings uncovered experiences of blunder and inadequacy hidden in the culture at large. Through Jones's treatment, these American writers emerge as the great theorists of failure who discovered ways to translate their own social insecurities into complex portrayals of a modern self, founded in moral fallibility, precarious knowledge, and negative feelings.

Gavin Jones is Professor of English at Stanford University, where he currently serves as department chair. A former Junior Fellow in Harvard University's Society of Fellows, Jones is the author of *Strange Talk: The Politics of Dialect Literature in Gilded Age America* (1999) and *American Hungers: The Problem of Poverty in U.S. Literature, 1840–1945* (2007). He has published numerous articles on nineteenth- and twentieth-century American literature in journals such as *American Literary History*, *African American Review*, and *New England Quarterly*.

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*For Hazel and Eli –
Be warned!*

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“A real failure does not need an excuse. It is an end in itself.”
Gertrude Stein

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Contents*

<i>List of Illustrations</i>	<i>page</i> x
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xi
Introduction: Henry Adams and the Catastrophic Century	1
1 Falling for Edgar Allan Poe	17
2 Herman Melville in the Doldrums	35
3 The Disappointments of Henry David Thoreau	60
4 Stephen Crane's Fake War	75
5 The Double Failure of Mark Twain	95
6 Sarah Orne Jewett Falling Short	112
7 The Faltering Style of Henry James	133
Conclusion	153
<i>Notes</i>	163
<i>Index</i>	187

Illustrations

I.1	Portrait of Clarence King (c. 1881).	<i>page</i> 4
I.2	Joseph Jefferson playing Rip Van Winkle, by Napoleon Sarony (1869).	9
1.1	Portrait of Edgar Allan Poe, by W. S. Hartshorn (1848).	19
1.2	“The Times,” by Edward Williams Clay (1837).	25
1.3	Original illustration to Poe’s “Balloon-Hoax” (1844).	27
2.1	Portrait of General Peter Gansevoort, by Gilbert Stuart (c. 1794).	46
2.2	Portrait of Herman Melville, by Rodney Dewey (1861).	53
3.1	Table of accounts, from Henry David Thoreau’s <i>Walden</i> (1854).	69
3.2	“Reduced Plan,” from <i>Walden</i> .	71
4.1	“Incidents of the war. A harvest of death, Gettysburg, July, 1863,” by Timothy H. O’Sullivan.	87
5.1	The Paige compositor (1901).	96
5.2	Marginal illustration to Mark Twain’s <i>Those Extraordinary Twins</i> (1894).	100
6.1	Portrait of Sarah Orne Jewett.	121
6.2	Jewett’s signature.	122
7.1	“London in November, and Mr. Henry James in London,” by Max Beerbohm (1907).	136

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-05667-1 - Failure and the American Writer: A Literary History

Gavin Jones

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-05667-1 - Failure and the American Writer: A Literary History

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xii

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