Rip Van Winkle Study Guide

Rip Van Winkle by Washington Irving

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Washington Irving's "Rip Van Winkle" is one of the best-known short stories in American literature. That is to say, the character of Rip Van Winkle, the man who sleeps for twenty years and awakens to a greatly changed world and a long beard, is one of the best-known characters in American popular culture, widely recognized through his many appearances and references in books, movies, cartoons, and advertisements. The story was first published in 1819 in a collection called *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent*. The book was issued in installments in the United States and was so successful that Irving arranged for a British edition. This became the first book by an American writer to achieve international success. While many pieces from the collection have been forgotten, "Rip Van Winkle" has never gone out of print and is widely available in textbooks and anthologies, including the multi-volume set *The Complete Works of Washington Irving* published by Twayne.

"Rip Van Winkle" is based on German folk tales that Irving learned about through a lifetime of reading and years of travel in Europe. One of his goals was to give the United States, a new country, some of the same feeling of tradition that older nations had because of their traditional lore. For several of his stories Irving borrowed European plots, but transported them into American settings. In a humorous context, "Rip Van Winkle" deals with issues of politics, as he shows how the American Revolution changed one small village, and gender issues, as he shows the comical relationship between a lazy husband and a bad-tempered wife.

Author Biography

Washington Irving was born in New York City on April 3, 1783, the year the American Revolution formally ended. Irving's parents named the youngest of their eleven children "Washington" after a prominent military figure from the war, General George Washington. Irving's family was wealthy, his father a successful merchant, so after a relatively lackluster performance as a student and as a law apprentice, Irving was able to devote himself to a youth of reading and writing and wandering without worrying about having to earn a living.

When he was nineteen and still a law clerk, Irving published his first pieces of writing, a series of satirical letters to the *Morning Chronicle*, a newspaper owned by one of his brothers. These letters, published under the pen name "Jonathan Oldstyle, Gent.," became very popular. Irving also used a pseudonym for his first book, *Salmagundi: or, The Whim-Whams and Opinions of Launcelot Langstaff, Esq., & Others*, which he co-authored in 1807 and 1808 with another brother and a friend. Again, he achieved success with his humor, poking fun at the politics and society of New York City.

Irving published one more important book in this period, the humorous and inaccurate *A History of New York, from the Beginning of the World to the End of the Dutch Dynasty* (1809). This book was said to have been written by Diedrich Knickerbocker, the same fictional historian in whose papers the manuscript of "Rip Van Winkle" was supposedly found.

In 1815, Irving traveled to England to help shore up a failing family business. When the company folded three years later, Irving turned to writing full-time. He published about thirty stories, sketches and essays as *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.* in 1819-1820. This book was a tremendous success both in Europe and in the United States, making it the first work by an American writer to achieve international fame. For the first time, American literature was recognized as distinct and significant. It was in *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.* that "Rip Van Winkle" was published.

Over the next forty years, Irving published more than a dozen books, none achieving the fame or the quality of *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.* He traveled in Europe for another decade, finally returning home a literary celebrity in 1832. He became well respected beyond his literary accomplishments, served as an advisor to President Martin Van Buren and to President John Tyler, and refused a nomination to run for mayor of New York. He settled on a small farm along the Hudson River and never married, having suffered the death of his beloved fiancée in 1809. His last project was a five-volume biography of his namesake, George Washington, which he completed just a few months before his death on November 23, 1859.

Plot Summary

"Rip Van Winkle" is framed with commentary from an unnamed writer. Before the story itself begins, three paragraphs in brackets explain the story's origin: The tale "was found among the papers of the late Diedrich Knickerbocker," a man who dedicated much of his life to studying and recording the history of the Dutch inhabitants of upstate New York. Knickerbocker's published history, the narrator claims, is known for its "scrupulous accuracy," and the tale of "Rip Van Winkle," therefore, should be accepted as truth.

The tale itself opens with a description of the Kaatskill (now called Catskill) Mountains, beautiful and mysterious, at the foot of which is the village where the central character lives. The time is the late 1760s or the early 1770s, while the area is still a colony of Great Britain under the rule of King George III. Rip Van Winkle is a "simple, good-natured fellow" with a faithful dog, a son, a daughter, and a domineering wife. Rip is a favorite of the women and children of the village, and a popular member of the crowd of men who gather outside the local tavern to argue about politics, but he is not as welcome in his own family. As willing as he is to play with the neighborhood children or to help his neighbors with chores, he is lazy and unproductive at home. His farm, which is the family's source of food and income, is falling to ruin. Rip has gradually sold off most of it piece by piece, and what little land remains is rocky and infertile. Truth be told, he does not spend much time working on the farm, preferring to be out in the village visiting or in the mountains hunting and fishing. In short, he is "ready to attend to anybody's business but his own." His wife never lets him forget his responsibilities to the family, or the many ways he fails to fulfill them.

One autumn day, Rip feels so oppressed by the haranguing of his wife that he takes his gun and sets out with his dog, Wolf, to find some peace and quiet. Late afternoon finds him sitting in a high spot in the mountains, admiring the view of the Hudson River far below. Realizing that night is approaching, that he will not be able to get home before dark, and that he will face a scolding for coming home so late, he gets up with a heavy heart to set out for home. Just as he begins to climb down, he hears a voice calling his name.

The voice belongs to a stranger, a "short, square-built old fellow" dressed in old-fashioned Dutch clothing and carrying a keg of liquor up the rocks of a dry stream bed. Without speaking, he indicates that Rip should help him carry his burden up the mountain and into a hollow. There Rip sees a group of bearded men playing ninepins, a form of bowling, in the same old-fashioned Dutch clothing. Although they are playing the game, they do not speak or smile; the only sound is the thunderous rolling of the balls. Rip understands by their gestures that he is to serve the men the liquor from the keg. He does so, and when the men are not looking he also steals a few sips for himself. Gradually, the drink overtakes him and he falls asleep.

When Rip awakens, he is back in the spot where he was sitting when he first saw the stranger. It is a sunny morning and he worries that his wife will be angry with him for spending the entire night away from home. Reaching for his gun, which he has always

taken good care of, he finds instead a rusty old gun. Surely, he thinks, the strangers have drugged him, and stolen his gun. His dog, Wolf, is also missing. Determined to confront the men, he gets up and tries to locate the hollow but he can find no trace of it. In fact, the dry stream bed is now filled with rushing water. With nothing else to do, he heads for home.

Arriving in the village, Rip sees other strange things. He does not recognize any of the villagers he passes and they do not seem to recognize him. There are buildings he has never seen before and everyone is dressed in a new style of clothing. Stroking his chin, Rip discovers that his beard has grown a foot long while he slept. When he finally reaches his own house, he sees that it has fallen to ruin. And at the village inn, where he has spent so many hours, the picture of King George III of England has been replaced by an image of General Washington.

As Rip wanders through the town looking confused, a crowd gathers around him. As he asks for his old friends, he learns that they have died, or gone away. Finally, he meets a kindly young woman who has the same name as his daughter. She tells him that her father, Rip Van Winkle, went into the mountains and disappeared twenty years before. Rip tells his story of the strange men and the keg, and an old villager remembers the historical "fact" that the explorer Hendrick Hudson haunts the mountains and appears every twenty years. Rip's daughter takes him home to live with her. His wife has died and he is now free to spend as much time as he likes sitting at the inn, telling and retelling his story, without fear of scolding.

The tale ends with a narrator returning to center stage, vouching again for the accuracy of the story. One might think, he says, that the story seems oddly similar to old German folk tales, but a note from Diedrich Knickerbocker, which he quotes, proves the story's authenticity. In a postscript, the narrator shares some scraps from Knickerbocker's notebook, describing Indian legends about the Catskill Mountains. These traditional stories reinforce the idea that the mountains "have always been a region full of fable."

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

Rip Van Winkle lived in a small Dutch village in the Catskill Mountains, near the Hudson River. Most of the houses in the village were clean and the gardens and fields were well tended, except for Rip Van Winkle's; his home was a mess. Rip Van Winkle was lazy and did as little work as possible.

Instead, Rip liked to wander through town with his dog, Wolf, and tell stories to the neighborhood children. Most of the town did not mind Rip's laziness. However, his wife minded it very much and nagged him about it all the time. She yelled at him loudly enough to be heard across town and often threw pots and other household items at Rip and Wolf. Dame Van Winkle would criticize Rip and nag at him no matter where he went to get away.

He often went to the inn to relax and swap stories with his friends, until Dame Van Winkle showed up and nagged at his friends and called them names too. Rip Van Winkle always had excuses for not doing various chores.

The only place that Rip was safe from his wife's criticism and nagging was in the woods with his hunting rifle and Wolf. Dame Van Winkle had too much work to do to chase him up the mountain to scold him.

One autumn day, Rip and Wolf went into the hills to escape Dame Van Winkle's yelling and fussing. They spent the day on the mountainside, hunting squirrels, though they did not catch anything. When it was time to return home, they heard a voice calling Rip. They thought it was Dame Van Winkle until they saw a small man in old-fashioned clothes. The little man was carrying a heavy keg. Because Rip was so glad to see that it was not Dame Van Winkle, he hurried to help the little man carry the keg.

Rip Van Winkle heard thunder in the distance. After walking for quite a while, they came to an open field, where Rip saw many little, bearded men bowling ninepins. The noise he had thought was thunder was actually the sound of their bowling echoing through the mountains.

The keg that Rip had helped to carry was filled with a tasty drink, which the small men shared with Rip. After drinking three full glasses, he began to get sleepy. The sun was gone and the noise of the bowling continued as Rip fell asleep in the moonlight.

Rip Van Winkle woke up the next morning in the same place he had sat down to rest the day before, prior to meeting the little, bearded man. His dog was gone, his clothes were tattered and torn, his gun had rusted, and his beard had grown a foot in length. He headed for the clearing where the little men had been bowling, but could not find it. Rip Van Winkle decided to go home, though he knew he would get a horrible scolding.

When Rip came in view of the village, he stopped in disbelief. There were many new buildings. When he entered the village the children gathered behind him whispering, but he did not recognize any of them. He went to his own house, but it was empty and collapsing, showing no sign of life. He called to his children, but they were nowhere around.

Very confused, Rip walked through town to the inn. However, the inn was no longer there. It had been replaced with the Union Hotel. The big tree had been cut down and in its place was a flagpole flying the American flag. Rip had never seen a flag like that one. Outside the inn, people were gathered around, talking about an election.

A young man noticed Rip's rusty hunting rifle and questioned him as to why he brought a gun to the election, as they did not want any trouble. Rip explained that it was just a hunting rifle, and began asking about his friends to help establish his identity. He was told that the innkeeper had been dead for eighteen years and that the schoolmaster he knew had gone to the war and was now in Congress.

Finally, Rip asked if anyone knew Rip Van Winkle. A young woman holding a baby stepped forward, saying that Rip had been her father, and that he'd gone out hunting twenty years earlier and had never returned. He recognized the young woman as his daughter, Judith, now grown. He told her he was her father, and then told everyone the story of where he had been for twenty years.

No one could make any sense of Rip's story. Finally, they called Peter Vanderdonk who knew all of the history of that area. Peter listened as Rip told his story again. He claimed that Rip had met the ghosts of Hendrick Hudson and his crew, the men who had discovered the Hudson River. According to Vanderdonk, Hudson and his men returned every twenty years just to check on things.

Some of the villagers thought Rip Van Winkle was crazy and had made up the whole thing. Some villagers believed him because they occasionally heard the thunder in the mountains. During his twenty-year sleep, Rip had missed the whole American Revolution.

Rip Van Winkle's daughter invited him to live with her family. She did not nag as her mother had. Rip's life was quite peaceful without his wife, Dame Van Winkle to nag at him. He resumed telling stories to the neighborhood children, telling his own story most frequently, as he had always liked ghost stories the best. Occasionally, he would hear thunder in the mountains, but he never went looking for the ghosts because he did not want to lose another twenty years.

Analysis

The story of Rip Van Winkle can be read on many different levels, each with its own theme. At its simplest, the story fulfills the primary function of all storytelling: to entertain. This story is entertaining in and of itself without looking for any deeper meaning. The characters are engaging, and the plot, though unlikely, follows the rules of traditional

folk tales. Rip Van Winkle diverges from the traditional folk tale in one respect, however, because it does not contain daring acts or great adventure. Rip's greatest accomplishment is sleeping for twenty years.

The setting of this story, a Dutch village close to the Catskill Mountains and the Hudson River, is a realistic setting that would be recognized by the story's earliest readers at the time of publication. The setting helps to ground the unlikely events that occur, making them more believable to early audiences. The story is a blend of reality and fantasy, combining a realistic setting with fantastic characters, such as ghosts and dwarves.

Early in the story, the apparent theme is that laziness is inherently evil and will be punished. Because of his laziness, Rip is criticized and nagged all the time and lives in a messy home with a messy garden. He and his friends live in constant fear of his wife's punishing tongue. When he finally does escape from his wife, he is bewitched and loses twenty years of his life. His friends die and his children grow up in his absence, so he has lost that time with his loved ones for good.

However, another possible theme is just as valid. It is because of his laziness that Rip ultimately gets away from him unpleasant, nagging wife forever. When he sleeps off the laziness, he is returned to a life without his biggest fear and discomfort and left instead with a loving daughter, grandchildren, and freedom to continue telling the stories he has always loved. For Rip Van Winkle, laziness pays off in a renewed, comfortable life.

At a much deeper level, Dame Van Winkle can be said to symbolize the expectations of society for our lives. Individuals are expected to contribute in life by keeping up their homes, cleaning up after themselves, providing for themselves and their family. When people follow the rules of society, they get what they need, as Dame Van Winkle did. However, those expectations and achievements do not necessarily ensure happiness, as we also see through Dame Van Winkle's example.

Rip, on the other hand, allowed himself the freedom of creative endeavors in the form of his storytelling and daydreaming. Ultimately, he outlived Dame Van Winkle and was much happier in the process.

Rip Van Winkle's daughter, Judith, seems to have blended both her mother's conscientious work ethic and her father's easy-going, creative nature. The story tells us that Judith does not nag her father as her mother had, but there is no indication that she is a slovenly housekeeper or that she shirks her chores as her father had always done. Well-balanced between work and leisure, she lives a happy, full life with her family and friends.

Rip Van Winkle is a traditional, American folk tale peopled with vibrant memorable characters. Rip has been the subject of many spin-off stories, plays, and cartoons, and he has been used in numerous advertising campaigns. In many ways, he has become not just a folk hero, but also an American icon.

Characters

The Commander

When Rip and the stranger step into the hollow, Rip notices that one of the oddly dressed men appears to be "the commander." He is "a stout old gentleman, with a weather-beaten countenance," and his clothing is a more grand than the other characters. Like the other strangers, he does not speak to Rip or take any particular notice of him. When Rip returns to the village after his long absence, he hears the legend of the explorer Hendrick Hudson. It is said that every twenty years Hudson haunts the county and the river that bear his name.

Judith Gardenier

Judith Gardenier is Rip's daughter. As a young girl, she and her brother are "as ragged and wild as if they belonged to nobody." Twenty years later, apparently married to a man named Gardenier, she is a "fresh comely woman" with a child. She speaks kindly to Rip and takes him home to live with her family.

Diedrich Knickerbocker

Within the confines of "Rip Van Winkle," Diedrich Knickerbocker is simply the man whose papers, found after his death, supposedly contained the story of Rip and his strange encounter. The narrator tells of finding the story and vouches for its accuracy and authenticity based on Knickerbocker's reputation. While the reader of only "Rip Van Winkle" may suspect that the narrator is speaking tongue in cheek, the reader of Irving's earlier works is sure of it. In 1809 Irving published *A History of New York from the Beginning of the World to the End of the Dutch Dynasty*, with Knickerbocker named as the author. This work is blatantly satirical, and presents Knickerbocker as humorously illogical, even foolish.

The Stranger

As Rip is about to descend from his perch high on the mountain in the early part of the story, he hears a voice in the distance calling his name. Looking toward the voice, he sees "a strange figure" climbing up a dry creek bed, weighted down with a large keg of liquor. He is "a short square-built old fellow, with thick bushy hair, and a grizzled beard," and he is dressed in old-fashioned clothing that reminds Rip of the clothing in a seventeenth-century Dutch painting. Without speaking, the stranger indicates that Rip should help him carry his burden, and leads the way through a ravine into a hollow, where other men of the same sort are bowling. The stranger pours the liquor into large flagons, or bottles, and, still without speaking, urges Rip to serve the men.

Derrick Van Bummel

Derrick Van Bummel is the village schoolmaster, and one of the group of men who hangs out on the bench outside the inn.

Peter Vanderdonk

Peter Vanderdonk is "the most ancient inhabitant of the village" and the most knowledgeable in local history. He supplies the information that Hendrick Hudson haunts the mountains above the river named for him, and appears there with his crew every twenty years.

Dame Van Winkle

Dame Van Winkle is Rip's wife. "Dame" is not her first name, but her title, the word used by the Dutch inhabitants in place of "Mrs." In the eyes of Rip and his sympathetic neighbors, Dame Van Winkle is stern and unreasonable. The narrator calls Rip "an obedient hen-pecked husband," and places his wife in the category of "shrews," calling her a "termagant," or overbearing, wife. Apparently, she finds fault with Rip because he does no profitable work, does not help around the house, and shows no interest in the well being of his children or his wife. How readers are to see Dame Van Winkle's character is a central question in the story: Is she a shrew, or is her anger at her husband understandable? For Rip the answer is clear. When he returns to the village to find that his wife has died, he feels the news as "a drop of comfort." Now he is free to live just as he did before, doing no work, being accountable to no one, but without his wife's complaining.

Rip Van Winkle

Rip Van Winkle is a "simple good-natured fellow" living in a small village in upper New York during the time that New York is a colony of Great Britain. To the neighbors he is known as a kind and helpful man, always eager to play with children or help with a chore. To his wife, however, he is known as a lazy and useless man, who neglects his own children and leaves his own fields untended and his fences broken. She scolds him and he avoids her, spending hours at a time sitting on a bench outside the local inn talking over the events of the day with other men, or fishing or hunting with little success. Rip is off in the mountains one day, sitting and looking at the scenery, when he encounters a stranger and follows him into a hollow. He finds a group of silent men in old-fashioned clothing and, sneaking some of their liquor, falls fast asleep. When he awakens twenty years later, it is into a different world. Gradually, he learns that his wife and dog have died, his children have grown up, and the colony of New York is now part of the United States of America. He goes home to live with his daughter and spends the rest of his days telling stories on the bench by the inn, "having nothing to do at home."

Rip Van Winkle, Jr.

The title character's son is also named Rip. As a young boy, he is an "urchin," "ragged and wild" and dressed in his father's cast-off clothing that is much too big for him. Rip the younger looks like his father, and acts like him. When Rip Van Winkle returns from his twenty-year absence, he sees his son leaning against a tree, "a precise counterpart of himself . . . apparently as lazy and certainly as ragged." The younger Rip shows no curiosity about the strange man who is his father and when he is later hired to work on his sister's farm, he shows Rip's old resistance to productive labor.

Nicholas Vedder

Nicholas Vedder, landlord of the inn where Rip spends time talking about politics, is recognized as the leader of the village. He sits all day long in the doorway of his establishment, listening to the other men comment on the news of the day and indicating his own opinions by the energy with which he smokes his pipe.

Themes

American Revolution

Rip Van Winkle journeys into the mountains and falls asleep during the time when "the country was yet a province of Great Britain." The local inn where Rip spends much of his time has a sign outside with a portrait of "His Majesty George the Third," who ruled Great Britain from 1760 to his death in 1820. Other than the portrait, there is no indication in the early part of the story that Rip and his friends are aware of politics, or concerned about it in any way. Various critics have used clues in the story and their knowledge of history to place the beginning anywhere from 1769 to 1774. Although in other parts of the colonies taxpayers are already angry by this time about taxation without representation and other affronts, the men of this village talk endlessly about nothing.

When Rip returns, sometime between 1789 and 1794, significant changes have occurred. The American Revolution has come and gone, the former colonies are an independent nation, and George Washington is the first president of the United States. What changes have independence made in a small village? It is larger, of course, with more people, and the new people do not know Rip. Beyond these superficial changes, Rip notices something else: "The very character of the people seemed changed." There is still a crowd gathered around the local inn, but now their conversation carries "a busy, bustling, disputatious tone about it, instead of the accustomed phlegm and drowsy tranquillity." One man stands among from the crowd "haranguing vehemently" about politics. In this new independent world, it appears, men must take notice of politics, if not by serving in the new government then by being informed and carrying on debate. Some of Rip's old cronies from the inn have answered the call: one was lost in battle during the war, and another became a general and then a congressman.

On the other hand, much is unchanged. Rip is initially startled to see that his beloved inn has a different, shabbier appearance and a new owner. But outside, over the bench, is the same sign that used to bear the portrait of King George. Rip notices that the face on the portrait is the same, although "the red coat was changed for one of blue and buff, a sword was held in the hand instead of a sceptre, the head was decorated with a cocked hat," and the sign now reads "General Washington." With the exception of one tense moment when he declares his loyalty to the King, Rip soon returns to his old life, no different than he lived it the day he went up the mountain. He resumes his spot in front of the tavern and establishes himself as one of the new crowd. Gradually he learns to understand their political talk, but he prefers to tell stories of the old times "before the war." Indeed, although he is no longer a subject but a free man, "the changes of states and empires made but little impression on him."

Critics have argued over Irving's point since the story first appeared, and in his own lifetime Irving faced charges that he was unpatriotic because he lived abroad for so long. Is he implying in "Rip Van Winkle" that the difference between King George and

General Washington is simply a matter of the same face in different clothing? Is he using Rip's lack of interest in independence to further develop his laziness and indifference? Is he calling for more involvement in politics, or less? Like all good literature, this story raises more questions than it answers, but several of the questions clearly have to do with the significance of the American Revolution.

Marital Conflict

If Rip's life has not been much changed by the American Revolution and the coming of independence, it is greatly changed by waking up to find that his wife has died. From his point of view (and from the view of the narrator), his life before he falls asleep is one of constant torment at the hands of an unreasonable wife. He is a "simple good-natured man," an "obedient hen-pecked husband" who has learned "the virtues of patience and long-suffering" through the constant scolding of his wife. She, on the other hand, is one of those "shrews at home" who creates a "fiery furnace of domestic tribulation."

This is the version of the Van Winkle marriage that the story presents, but it is not difficult to peer behind the curtain of irony in the narrator's voice and see things in another light. The fact is, although she has become an incurable nag, Dame Van Winkle has reason to be angry. If Rip is always willing to "assist a neighbor even in the roughest toil," including "building stone-fences," why are his own fences "continually falling to pieces?" If he has found time to be the man who played with the neighborhood children, "made their playthings, taught them to fly kites and shoot marbles, and told them long stories," why are his own children "as ragged and wild as if they belonged to nobody?" It is true that "everything he said or did was sure to produce a torrent of household eloquence" from Dame Van Winkle, but it is hard to see what Rip might be doing to earn praise from her.

Rip has a moment, upon first returning to his decaying house after his long sleep, when he is appreciative of his wife's contributions. He acknowledges to himself that she had always kept the house "in neat order," and that without her presence the house seems "empty, forlorn." But the moment passes quickly and when he finally learns that she has died (bursting a blood vessel while yelling at a peddler) he experiences the news as "a drop of comfort." Settling in with his daughter's family, he is relieved to be out from "the yoke of matrimony." The reader is left to wonder how relieved Dame Van Winkle was on the day she realized that something had happened to her husband up in the mountains and he was not coming back.

Style

Frame Structure

Although the part of the story that carries the plot is relatively straightforward and chronological, this main section of "Rip Van Winkle" is preceded and followed by other material that does not directly advance the plot. This kind of structure is sometimes called a frame structure, because the beginning and ending material can be said to frame the main section. "Rip Van Winkle" has two pieces of writing before the actual tale begins (a quotation in verse, and a note explaining where the story came from) and in most editions one piece afterward (a note from the narrator attesting to the truth of the story, and quoting a letter from Knickerbocker affirming that the story is "beyond the possibility of doubt"). A postscript containing bits of lore from the Native Americans who inhabited the Catskill region was added by Irving in 1848, but most modern editions of the story do not include this section.

With the frame, Irving emphasizes the truth of the tale and at the same time distances himself from accountability for that truth. In other words, he protests too much. He does not expect the reader to take the tale seriously, and every time he insists on its accuracy he puts that accuracy further into doubt.

The only one who knows what Rip saw on that mountain is Rip himself. He has told the story frequently, but he is not the narrator of "Rip Van Winkle." In the note at the end of the story, Knickerbocker claims to have heard the story from Rip's own mouth and Knickerbocker gives it his "full belief." But it is not Knickerbocker, either, who tells the story, but a different narrator. Readers of the entire *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.* know that the narrator is Geoffrey Crayon, Gent. (for "gentleman"), the purported author of the book. Crayon claims to have found the manuscript of "Rip Van Winkle" among papers left behind by Knickerbocker after his death, and Crayon appears to revere Knickerbocker for his "unquestionable authority." The frame creates, then, several layers of doubt. Crayon, of questionable judgment, has the story from the unreliable Knickerbocker (if he is telling the truth about the manuscript), who has it from Rip, who in the beginning used to "vary on some points every time he told it." To read the story and ignore the frame is to miss Irving's insistence that the story is fiction.

Mock-Heroic

A frequent device used by comic writers is the mock-heroic, or the borrowing of elements from epic literature and using them to tell a trivial or ridiculous tale. The quotation that opens "Rip Van Winkle," from the playwright William Cartwright, is an example of the mock-heroic. It is a simple passage, an unnamed speaker swearing by the god Woden to be always truthful. True epics, which the mock-heroic imitates, often begin with an invocation, or an application to a deity to guide the writing to follow. The quotation from Cartwright, which has nothing to do with the story and has apparently

been supplied by the narrator himself, reinforces the claim of truthfulness, and uses dramatic language to make the claim seem more solemn. This is Irving's method throughout the frame: he keeps a solemn face while he claims to be telling the truth, but gives away just enough to demonstrate that he is not.

Typically, the epic begins with the hero being forced to leave his home and setting off into the wilderness where he meets new and threatening people and engages in battles or contests with them. Rip is forced from his home by his wife's temper, and when he sets off into the woods with his gun he soon meets the group of strangely-dressed men bowling. The structure is the same at its core, but the individual elements in "Rip Van Winkle" are silly, presented in a serious tone.

Romanticism

Romanticism is a literary movement that swept through Europe and then the United States in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It affected literature and the other arts, as well as philosophy and politics, and it can be described as a breaking away from formal, classical structures and embracing imagination and spirit over intellect. In literature, several characteristics came to typify romanticism, and many of these are found in "Rip Van Winkle."

A central theme of romantic literature is a reverence for nature. The fact that Rip leaves the city and ventures forth into the rugged mountains, where he undergoes a life-changing experience, is a common romantic plot element. When Rip is especially troubled by the stresses of civilized, city life (that is, by his wife), he has no choice but to "stroll away into the woods." In the story, nature is described with as much attention to imagination as to accurate detail: the "fairy mountains" surrounding Rip's village reach a "noble height" with their "magical hues and shapes." The opening in the cliffs opens and closes with "no traces." The druginduced sleep, the mysterious strangers, and the idea that they might be ghosts from the past, are also found frequently in romantic literature.

Critics often describe the romantic period in American literature as beginning around 1830, ten years after the publication of "Rip Van Winkle," but romanticism flourished in Great Britain from about 1798. An avid reader and traveler, Irving was adept at borrowing from the literatures of other cultures and transporting themes and techniques to his new American literature.

Historical Context

Becoming a Nation

Washington Irving was born in 1783, the year that the American Revolution was formally ended by the Treaty of Paris. His parents had been born in England but Irving was among the first generation of people to know from birth that they were not British subjects, but Americans. The nation was still new, and in many ways unformed. It was not yet clear what the Revolution meant and how the new country would be different from the old colonies. Irving wrestled with this question in "Rip Van Winkle," by having his characters hotly debate political change on election day.

Before the turn of the century, men and women of society wore elaborate powdered wigs and fussy clothing reminiscent of that seen in the French court. Now the common man was the ideal, and the idea that the nation would be ruled by a wealthy aristocratic class was giving way to a more egalitarian sense of rule "by the people," or rule by all of the white men, regardless of social class. Two political parties, Federalist and Democratic-Republican, were formed in 1792, and scenes like the one Rip finds when he returns to his village, of a "crowd of folk" arguing and ready to riot on election day, became common throughout the land. The transition to egalitarian rule was a bumpy one. Issues like the "rights of citizens," including property rights, were hot topics, and debate was often characterized by ignorance and anger.

One question that was little addressed when "Rip Van Winkle" was published in 1819 was the matter of where the Native Americans should live. Native Americans had been routinely removed from their lands as the new nation pushed westward, and in 1830 an act of Congress established the Oklahoma Indian Territory, to which thousands were forcibly moved. The proper role for Native Americans in the new America became increasingly a subject for debate. In 1848, Irving added a "postscript" to the end of "Rip Van Winkle," after the "Note." The added section, which is omitted from many editions of the story today, describes several Native American traditional stories about ghosts and spirits in the Catskill region, a reinforcement of the sense of ancient mystery that Irving tried to capture in the story.

The New American Literature

"Rip Van Winkle" was created during a period when America demanded a new type of literature to represent its vision of itself. At the end of the eighteenth century, the writing coming out of the colonies and the new nation tended toward schoolbooks and sermons and historical essays, developing ideas that had come out of Europe. There was little to distinguish American writing from British. A small collection of plays—most of them bad, and none of them still performed—had featured American characters, but readers who wanted fiction had to import novels from England. Now the new nation wanted to look

forward, to create American ideas and American models for future generations to look to.

One of the most striking things about *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.* for readers today is how European it is. Most of the thirty or so sketches and stories are about English characters in English settings. Some of the plots, including the plot of "Rip Van Winkle," are borrowed from German folk tales. But readers of *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.* in the 1820s marveled at two things: a few of the stories, including "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," were set in the United States; and the writing itself was stronger and more interesting than anything else available at the time. The stories set in America were filled with romantic descriptions of beautiful and powerful American landscapes, and celebrated the desire to escape from society and return to the wilderness that soon became a characteristic American theme.

Irving became a model for writers on both sides of the Atlantic for the next fifty years. One group of satirists in New York during the first half of the nineteenth century called themselves the "Knickerbocker Group" in tribute to Irving. They are almost forgotten today, but Irving's humor and his writing style also influenced generations of major writers including Edgar Allan Poe, Herman Melville, and Mark Twain. But in trying to use European material and transplant it to American settings, Irving had no models himself.

Critical Overview

"Rip Van Winkle" was part of the first installment of *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.* to be released in the United States. It was an immediate success, selling enough copies to encourage Irving to publish future installments (each containing three or four pieces of writing), and to begin a two-volume British publication. The British publication was also a tremendous success, and Irving began work on a German edition. *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.* sold enough copies that Irving was able to devote himself to writing full time for the rest of his life. British critics, especially, were surprised as well as delighted to see that an American writer was capable of creating good prose. In an 1820 review for the *Edinburgh Review*, Francis Jeffrey praised the book's "great purity and Beauty of diction," and called the book "the first American work . . . to which we could give this praise." With *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.*, Irving became the first American writer to achieve international acclaim.

Although "Rip Van Winkle" was not singled out for criticism in the early reviews, it became popular immediately and soon there were plays, poems, cartoons, and songs based (often rather loosely) on the story. The character of Rip Van Winkle entered the national consciousness (along with the incorrect notion, found in several standard reference works, that Rip meets a gang of dwarfs on the mountain).

In the twentieth century, the gaze of serious criticism was turned on "Rip Van Winkle." Much of the criticism has focused on interpreting Irving's political stance. In a 1959 article for *American Literature*, Terence Martin describes the tension between Rip and the townspeople he returns to. A new country, Martin concludes, can ill accommodate imagination and idleness. Steven Blakemore, in a 2000 article in *Early American Literature*, picks up on earlier work on Irving's hostility toward the Puritans, and reveals a complex intermingling of Irving's political and personal ambivalence.

The state of the Van Winkle marriage has also come under scrutiny. In an article published in *ESQ*, William P. Dawson uncovers Irving's "bawdy satire" as he reveals sexual puns scattered throughout the story. He demonstrates that "in images and puns Irving perhaps implies that [Rip] is anything but faithful," and suggests that Rip simply tries to cover up "twenty years of promiscuity" with a tall tale. Jennifer S. Banks, in an essay titled "Washington Irving, the Nineteenth-Century American Bachelor," sees in the story the "theme of growing up and accepting adult responsibility," with Dame Van Winkle representing "the voice of duty and obligation." The reason Rip responds so negatively to his wife, Banks posits, is due to Irving's own "lifelong ambivalence toward women." More common, however, is the viewpoint expressed by James W. Tuttleton, who accepts at face value the narrator's "delight" in seeing Rip "delivered from that body of affliction called Dame Van Winkle."

Another body of criticism has attempted to delineate Irving's sources so that judgments might be made based on what Irving changed and retained in the original source material. One of the earliest of these analyses was Henry A. Pochmann's 1930 article

for *Studies in Philology*, "Irving's German Sources in *The Sketch Book*, which gave later critics essential information for further interpretation. A more recent and wider ranging study is by Philip Young, who not only traces but also interprets the German sources and Irving's adaptations of them, to uncover "immemorial ritual significance [and] an extraordinary picture of the self arrested in a timeless infancy." Deanna C. Turner breaks new ground in a 2000 article in *Symbiosis*, in which she traces Irving's imagery in his descriptions of the mountain to Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poem "Kubla Khan."

Criticism

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Critical Essay #1

Bily teaches writing and literature at Adrian College. In this essay, Bily examines Irving's manipulation of the hero archetype in his story.

Although Washington Irving's "Rip Van Winkle" offers one of the most widely recognized characters in all of American literature, and was a part of the first book by an American to win international acclaim, it is in many ways not an American story at all. Irving was not shy about admitting, and scholars have since verified, that the basic elements of his plot were borrowed from German folk tales that he learned about through a life of reading and traveling.

Beneath that level of influence, however, lie deeper levels. The Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung (1875-1961) theorized that behind each individual's unconscious lies the human "collective unconscious," the memories of our existence before history, or even before we became human. As we struggle to regain our memory, he argued, we form stories around a small group of images called "archetypes." Because we are all human and share the same archetypal memories, each culture around the world tends to create the same stories.

One story that is repeated in many similar forms in cultures throughout the world, or one archetype, is the archetype of the hero. This story has been studied and explained by a great number of scholars, but the clearest and most thorough book on the subject is *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* by Joseph Campbell, originally published in 1949. Campbell studied myths, epics, legends, dreams, and rituals from around the world, and synthesized them into a basic framework for the story of the hero. His framework outlines the adventures of Ulysses, Jesus Christ, the Buddha, Luke Skywalker, and Frodo Baggins. Another hero whose quest follows this pattern is Rip Van Winkle.

According to Campbell, the story of the hero takes place in three stages: separation, initiation and return. To put it more clearly,

A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.

This pattern will sound familiar to anyone who has read much or seen many movies: the hero leaves home, has adventures, and returns home a better man (and it is usually a man). But a closer reading of "Rip Van Winkle" side-by-side with Campbell will demonstrate that Irving was well aware of the pattern, and that he followed it and veered from it intentionally for his own purposes.

As Campbell explains it, the hero's story starts with a call to adventure. The hero does not necessarily want to become a hero, or to venture out on a quest that will separate him from the world he knows and change his life forever. Instead, some outside force

compels him to leave home. Frodo Baggins must leave home because his Uncle Bilbo has left him the One Ring, and he must get it out of the Shire before it is found. In Rip's case, the force that drives him away from home is his wife's bad temper. She scolds him to such an extent that he is "at last reduced almost to despair," and finally "his only alternative" is to take up his gun and "stroll away into the woods." Campbell writes that "the dark forest" is "typical of the circumstances of the call," and it is not until late evening, too late for him to reach home before dark, that Rip begins to leave for home and hears a voice calling his name.

The next step in the hero's progress, says Campbell, is an encounter with one of the "ageless guardians," supernatural figures who guide him through his initiation, his first tests. "Not infrequently," Campbell continues, "the supernatural helper is masculine in form. In fairy lore it may be some little fellow of the wood, some wizard, hermit, shepherd, or smith, who appears, to supply the amulets and advice that the hero will require." Rip does meet a stranger, a "short square-built old fellow" who may not be ageless, but the style of his clothing is almost two hundred years old. This guide does not offer advice; in fact, he never speaks at all. Rip does not speak, either, for there is "something strange and incomprehensible about the unknown, that inspired awe." The only version of an amulet the stranger carries is "a stout keg, that seemed full of liquor"—hardly a magic sword or ring, but the liquor does prove to be the means of Rip's being transported out of this world.

The stranger guides Rip along a "rugged path," apparently a dry streambed, toward the sound of rolling thunder. Rip can hear but cannot see their destination. He follows his guide until they come to what Campbell refers to as "the crossing of the first threshold." Here the hero crosses over into a different realm, a womb-like place often described as a cave, or the belly of a beast. Rip's threshold is a "deep ravine, or rather cleft, between lofty rocks," leading to a hollow. Irving describes the hollow in the dramatic language we would expect from an adventure tale: it is a "small amphitheatre, surrounded by perpendicular precipices, over the brinks of which impending trees shot their branches, so that you only caught glimpses of the azure sky and the bright evening cloud." Later, Rip will not be able to find the opening without his guide. He will retrace his steps "to where the ravine had opened through the cliffs," but there will be no sign of an opening. Instead of a dry streambed he will find a "torrent" of water ending in a black pool.

Once he crosses the threshold, several things might happen to the hero. He will certainly be compelled to complete tests or labors. The Roman hero Hercules completes twelve seemingly impossible labors. Rip's labors are much more trivial: the strangers indicate that he should "wait upon the company," and he does so "with fear and trembling." Another ordeal that the hero might go through at this stage is an encounter with his father, or someone representing the father. This is not a joyous reunion. In some stories, the son must fight and defeat the father. Luke Skywalker, for example, must battle Darth Vader before he can become a Jedi knight. Rip meets "the commander," Hendrick (Henry) Hudson, a British explorer who, because he was in the employ of the Dutch East India Company and established the Dutch claims to upper New York State, can be thought of as the symbolic ancestor of Rip and his neighbors.

Rip does not battle Hudson, but the stares of the men terrify him. In fact, Rip does not engage the men at all. He does not ask them any questions or join in their contest.

Gradually, he gains courage, and dares to sample the liquor. This carries him to the next important stage of the hero's progress: death, or near-death, or oblivion. This is the hero's forsaking or losing his connection to the world, so that when he returns to the world it will be as a new man. Often the hero fights to the brink of death against a nearly overwhelming foe. Rip's battle is with the overwhelming urge to drink: "his senses were overpowered, his eyes swam in his head, his head gradually declined, and he fell into a deep sleep."

Now the hero must return home. He has seen things and learned things that he must take back to his people. Sometimes the hero refuses to go back or hesitates. Rip thinks three times in four paragraphs that Dame Van Winkle will be furious with him for sleeping all night in the mountains, but he is more hungry than he is afraid of his wife, so "with a heart full of trouble and anxiety" he descends the mountain. As a hero, he is ordained to bring new wisdom to the world. But what wisdom does he have?

Campbell points to "Rip Van Winkle" as a "delicate case." The fact is, he writes, "Rip moved into the adventurous realm unconsciously, as we all do every night when we go to sleep." He returns from that realm "with nothing to show for the experience" but his "whiskers." Rip has lost his gun, his dog, his wife, his home, and his friends. What has he gained? Campbell writes, "Rip Van Winkle never knew what he had experienced; his return was a joke."

Rip's return to the village is not the triumph that Odysseus has when he returns to his wife Penelope, defeats her suitors, and restores order to his homeland. Rip returns to a homeland that is in the first stages of becoming an independent, "busy, bustling, disputatious" nation. Once the novelty of talking to the wild man with a long beard wears off, the crowd in the street breaks up and returns "to the more important concerns of the election." Rip resumes "his old walks and habits," makes new friends among the younger folk, and settles into a life as "one of the patriarchs of the village."

Could Irving have known about the archetype? He was unaware of Jung and Campbell of course, and would not have known the terms "archetype" and "collective unconscious," but he evidently read many of the myths and legends from which Jung and Campbell drew their conclusions. Irving devoted much of his life to reading the great works of English, German, and Italian literature (often in the original), and he was well versed in Latin, Greek, and Scandinavian literatures, as well.

As has been well established by critics who have traced Irving's source materials, Irving's claim to have based the plot of "Rip Van Winkle" on German folk tales is accurate. Further, scholars have detected influence from the epic in the other work attributed to Diedrich Knickerbocker, *A History of New York, from the Beginning of the World to the End of the Dutch Dynasty.* Mary Weatherspoon Bowden, for example, the author of the Twayne volume *Washington Irving*, finds that Knickerbocker's account of Peter Stuyvesant's battle at Fort Christina is "truly an epic one." Irving disregards

historical fact to create "a fine example of the mock epic, the literary highlight of Knickerbocker's *A History of New York, from the Beginning of the World to the End of the Dutch Dynasty.*" If Knickerbocker adapted the epic form to tell the story of the heroic deeds of Peter Stuyvesant, it seems quite possible that he did the same to record the deeds of Rip Van Winkle, whose ancestors "figured so gallantly in the chivalrous days" of Stuyvesant and fought with him at Fort Christina.

Irving takes Rip through the hero's stages of separation and initiation, but does not let him return as a hero. Why? Perhaps he wishes to demonstrate that Rip is not up to the task, that the "accustomed phlegm and drowsy tranquillity" are not what the new United States demands. Perhaps he believes that this new kind of country will mature without reliance on heroes of the old order, but will muddle its own way through on the energy from the "crowd of folk about the door." While his friends have been off fighting in the Revolution and serving in Congress, Rip has been asleep, and even now "the changes of states and empires made but little impression on him." We are not meant to admire Rip. He is not the man who will lead the nation into the future. He is a missed opportunity, a failed hero.

Source: Cynthia Bily, Critical Essay on "Rip Van Winkle," in *Short Stories for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #2

Ozersky is a critic and essayist. In this essay, Ozersky puts the theme of Irving's story in its historical context, seeing in the famous sleeper a symbol of a vanishing culture.

The story of Rip Van Winkle is known to almost everybody. Even more than Washington Irving's other American fable, "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," "Rip Van Winkle" is one of the few literary creations to have achieved truly mythic status. Natty Bumpo, Ichabod Crane, and even Tom Sawyer are well on the way to the glass museum case, there to rest alongside Peregrine Pickle, Uncle Remus, and the Five Chinese Brothers. But even a casual Nexis search reveals "Rip Van Winkle" alive and well, still being used in the most casual conversations on non-literary topics. Rip went to sleep for twenty years, and when he woke up, the world had changed; aside from being easy to remember, the myth has stood well in a country whose greatest constant has been traumatic, continual change.

Rip Van Winkle is immortal, in other words, not because of the story's literary brilliance, or because the main character is so deathlessly individuated. Van Winkle is no Sherlock Holmes; there really is not that much to know about his character, other than a few very important characteristics. But those characteristics are so essential to America, and are presented by Irving in such a powerfully allegorical way, that every American, however illiterate, grows up knowing the myth of Rip Van Winkle.

What does this myth consist of? Obviously, the part that captures the imagination is Rip's long nap. The other parts of the story—Rip's shrewish wife, the supernatural game of ninepins, and the heady elixir drunk there, for instance—tend to be less well-remembered. But in fact, it is the background to the nap that gives the story all its lasting power. "Rip Van Winkle" might be shorthand for time travel, the colonial counterpart to the myth of the Einsteinian space-traveler who comes home after a short trip to find all his friends old and gray. But "Rip Van Winkle" only survived long enough to become a time-travel trope because of the specifics of Irving's story.

The most overlooked of these is Mrs. Van Winkle. Van Winkle clearly has no problems in his life other than his hen-pecking wife. Though "his patrimonial estate had dwindled away under his management, acre by acre," and his children "are as ragged and wild as if they belonged to nobody," there are no ill-effects from this neglect, other than the ill-will emanating from Dame Van Winkle. Rip's life in the idyllic Catskill village is a slow and happy one, a pastoral idyll of fishing, squirrelhunting, odd jobs, and "country frolics." Rip's attitude toward his wife is one of saintly suffering. He shrugs his shoulders, shakes his head, and casts up his eyes—the classic posture of the martyr.

Mrs. Van Winkle, we can assume, wants Rip to "improve himself," to make a profit from his farm, to raise her and the children's standard of living, as we might call it today. We might profitably ask why. Rip is happy; his children are happy as far as we can tell. "Rip Van Winkle," Irving tells us, "was one of those happy mortals, of foolish, welloiled dispositions, who take the world easy, eat white bread or brown, whichever can be got

with least thought or trouble, and would rather starve on a penny than work for a pound. If left to himself, he would have whistled life away in perfect contentment; but his wife kept continually dinning in his ears about his idleness, his carelessness, and the ruin he was bringing on his family." But we know that his family is not being ruined; they just lack the material finery and status of a more ambitious man's family. That they look as if they "belong to nobody" suggests a kind of rough-hewn independence. Mrs. Van Winkle is caught up in the cash nexus, where a comfortable life is no longer an end in itself; she is the first of a long line of menacing "civilizers" in American literature, the most famous of whom is of course Tom Sawyer's Aunt Sally. To escape her, Rip has to return to nature, to go up to the mountain and stay there for twenty years.

The conflict between nature and the "civilized" world of the marketplace is at the heart of Rip Van Winkle. And it is at the heart of "Rip Van Winkle" because it was at the heart of the development of America in Irving's time. The earliest settlers of the American interior, because of their distance from the market, tended to be subsistence farmers. The abundant game of the virgin land supplied them with their needs; livestock were generally left to feed themselves in the abundant forests and greens; and only as much agriculture as sufficed to feed the family was practiced. Cash was a specialized commodity only needed for infrequent transactions with the market world—paying taxes, or buying snuff or guns.

The coastal colonies, on the other hand, were deeply committed to commerce from their founding. This tension was to inform the entire early history of America. Jefferson's yeoman farmers and Hamilton's manufacturers, Democratic Republicans and Federalists, country and city. Everywhere market culture encountered subsistence culture, it derided it as lazy, backward, idle. A brisk program for improvement, for education, for legal contracts and mortgages inevitably made mountain folk such as Van Winkle bristle. Why couldn't they just be left alone? Why were people becoming so obsessed with property and politics? Life was easy enough.

By the time "Rip Van Winkle" was written, subsistence culture was on the run; it would finally be eradicated when cheap transport, in the form of canals and railroads, opened up the interior to the marketplace. But in Irving's vision, the good people of the village have little use for these "civilized" values. Just as the people of Sleepy Hollow distrust the Yankee schoolmaster Ichabod Crane, everyone sides with Rip Van Winkle against his wife. Irving makes a point of showing us that Van Winkle is not lazy; at organic subsistence pursuits like hunting, fishing, or helping his neighbors—he's a model of hard work. It is only at the new American quest for self-improvement that Van Winkle fails; and he does not consider it a failure.

Rip, like many other heroes of American literature, is a gentle soul, a child of nature who only wants to be left in peace. Irving, himself a sophisticated urban citizen, naturally tends to idealize such a figure. The settler in the interior, for men like Irving, James Fenimore Cooper, and so many others, was the repository of the American imagination. The cities might be filled with violence, debt, labor strife, and political tumult; but out west there was freedom, natural nobility, and the "virgin land." Rip instinctively yearns for release from civilizing; his last action before coming across the ghosts of Henry

Hudson is to stare at the vast west. After looking at the magnificent river Hudson discovered, Rip turns around:

On the other side he looked down into a deep mountain glen, wild, lonely, and shagged, the bottom filled with fragments from the impending cliffs, and scarcely lighted by the reflected rays of the setting sun. For some time Rip lay musing on this scene.

When he wakes up, his world has changed. Many of his friends are dead. The image of King George III over the tavern has been replaced by one of General Washington. Rip has missed out on the entire era of the American Revolution. Some critics have pointed to this as evidence that Rip Van Winkle is a symbol of America, baffled by rapid political change, but freed at last from tyranny. Irving is explicit on this point, though, telling us that "Rip, in fact, was no politician; the changes of states and empires made but little impression on him; but there was one species of despotism under which he had long groaned, and that was petticoat government."

On the other hand, Rip had the luxury, in former days, of living in a place that was largely outside of the public sector. His friends were the "sages, philosophers, and idle personages of the village" who only knew of the outside world what they learned from an occasional out-of-date newspaper. Public commentary was generally limited to Nicholas Vedder's pipe smoke. When Rip Van Winkle wakes up, he is accused of being a Tory, that is, an English loyalist; but soon enough he is cleared of the accusation. Once cleared he ceases to ever think about politics again.

Rip Van Winkle is, after all, profoundly easy to please because he has no investment in society. He is not weighed down by property, or status, or any other kind of responsibility. His life is the dream of every man who has to pay a mortgage, make peace with his wife, and worry about the price of his crops. Like the mythic "noble savage" of Rousseau, or the heroes of westerns, Van Winkle is an Edenic figure, a man unfettered by society. That, above all else, is the source of his enduring appeal.

The larger meanings of Irving's story are open to question. Some interpretations see him as representing America before the revolution; others, such as this one, might see him as representing subsistence culture. Still others have made potent arguments for seeing him as a boy, longing for an allmale preserve where he could shoot, fish, and relax without being bothered by women. (The last two interpretations can easily coexist, given the way women tended to symbolize civilization and its discontents in Irving's time.) All the critics agree, however, that he is above all an escapist, a man who flees from tyranny, whether it be called England, civilization, womankind, or merely Mrs. Van Winkle. "Happily," Irving tells us, "that was at an end; he had got his neck out of the yoke of matrimony, and could go in and out whenever he pleased, without dreading the tyranny of Dame Van Winkle." But freedom for all Americans has never been that easy.

Source: Josh Ozersky, Critical Essay on "Rip Van Winkle," in *Short Stories for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay excerpt, Martin explores the symbolism of the transformation of the village from a place of dreamy fantasy to one of stark reality.

The work of Washington Irving reflects significantly the quality of this tension between imaginative endeavor and cultural tendency. In *Bracebridge Hall* (1822), Irving tells us that he had experienced England with "the delightful freshness of a child," but that he was "a grown-up child." He admits in *The Sketch-Book* (1819-1820) that the scenic splendor of America has failed to stimulate him imaginatively; in Europe are "all the charms of storied and poetical association." America is filled with youthful promise, but Europe is rich "in the accumulated treasure of age." He longs for a meditative antiquity, for the "shadowy grandeurs of the past," in place of the "commonplace realities of the present." Irving's most profoundly felt imaginative need was to escape from such "commonplace realities," from—in Hawthorne's phrase—the American insistence on actualities. In *Bracebridge Hall* he lamented that America "unfortunately cannot boast of a single ruin." Yet in Europe he failed to get in touch with the essentials of any older culture and remained, as Stanley Williams terms him, "a young man with slender knowledge of the past," one who loved "scraps of culture." The very vagueness of Irving's conception of the past served his artistic temperament; he required for imaginative creation, not the actuality but the "shadowy grandeurs" of the past.

Although (and because) they are known to all, "Rip Van Winkle" and "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" will repay a close analysis and reveal Irving's mode of literary creation in such a culture. Early in his tale of Rip, Irving speaks of the "magical hues and shapes" of the Kaatskill mountains; next he calls them "fairy mountains." The terms "magical" and "fairy," apparently incidental, adjectively subordinate, invite the reader away from the "commonplace realities of the present" to a region of greater imaginative latitude. In beginning his account of Rip's famous adventure, Irving constructs his scene so as literally to remove it from "broad and simple daylight." Rip gazes into a wild and lonely mountain glen which is "scarcely lighted by the reflected rays of the setting sun." Out of this shadowy glen, the American equivalent for the "shadowy grandeurs" of the past, Rip hears a voice calling his name and meets a "strange" figure in antique Dutch dress. In silence and wonder Rip helps the man carry a keg of liquor up a wild mountain: "there was something strange and incomprehensible about the unknown, that inspired awe and checked familiarity." The reader is now, with Rip, in a realm of the strange and unknown that inspires awe and checks familiarity. Only after such careful preparation, after guiding us away from the commonplace practicality of everyday life, does Irving introduce, in four brief paragraphs, the purely marvelous element of the story—the company playing ninepins. At the end of these paragraphs Rip falls into a sleep; when he awakens—on a "bright sunny morning," with the "birds hopping and twittering among the bushes"—we are back in the world of actuality. Rip returns to the village to find not only the people but "the very character of the people" changed.

Irving has taken Rip out of the context of everyday reality, but then has deliberately put him back in it. The tale, in its beginning and end, has historical location. And when Rip

returns at the end of the tale he finds a metamorphosed community, no longer even the same country. The image of George Washington—the father of a new country— has replaced that George III on the sign at the inn, and Rip had no way of orienting himself in terms of this new father image. Irving has had Rip sleep through the American Revolution, through what we might call the birth pangs of our country, and return to a "busy, bustling, disputatious," selfconsciously adult United States of America. There his uncompetitive spirit, his predisposition to idleness, his inclination to imaginative indulgence are badly out of place; he is no more at home than he was with Dame Van Winkle, who prefigures the bustling, disputatious tone of this new world, though she at least knew him. Irving does not exact the full penalty from Rip; he allows him to settle in a corner of this world, but with a function extremely limited and marginal. Nonetheless, the tale dramatizes Rip's loss of identity, and, by inference, the loss of identity of the imaginative function. Rip's miraculous sleep has left him ignorant of the American Revolution—the magical, the marvelous, the imaginative, and the indolent have had no place in the founding of the new republic. And when these qualities return in the person of an antique but childlike man, there arises a sense of embarrassment overcome only when he is known to be harmless, one who will not interfere.

In "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" Irving goes to even greater lengths in creating a nevernever land to contain his tale: "a drowsy, dreamy influence" hangs over the land and pervades the atmosphere; the people have trances and visions and entertain marvelous beliefs. Haunted spots and "twilight superstitions" abound in the neighborhood. All of this of course prepares for the bold reference to the Headless Horseman. And, as if to urge a spirit of enchantment upon his readers, Irving states that even visitors to Sleepy Hollow become bewitched: inhaling the "witching influence" of the air, they begin to "grow imaginative, to dream dreams, and see apparitions." The quotation holds the key to Irving's method of literary creation: the wide-awake reader, dwelling in the "broad and simple daylight" of the actual world, is invited to enter Irving's sleepy region (Gray's "region of fiction"), to dream there under the bewitching influence of fictional apparitions.

Irving's introduction of Ichabod Crane defines a particular problem of the early American writer. "In this by-place of nature," he writes, "there abode, in a remote period of American history, that is to say, some thirty years since, a worthy wight of the name of Ichabod Crane." This archaic substantive *wight* serves to emphasize the incongruity of the introduction; only in the America of the time could a remote period of history be defined as thirty years. That Irving could speak ironically about the poverty of the past in America did not make it less a fact for him to deal with. Without a large, commonly shared, and hence more than personal past to work with and out of, the writer himself had to contain and be the measure of antiquity.

Ichabod Crane personifies the protagonist as comic figure. "His appetite for the marvelous, and his powers of digesting it, were . . . extraordinary; and both had been increased by his residence in this spellbound region. No tale was too gross or monstrous for his capacious swallow." Throughout the tale Irving plays on the idea of Ichabod's tremendous appetite and his "capacious swallow." But not only does this appetite pertain to the marvelous: Ichabod is a "huge feeder"; he contemplates with

longing the largesse of the Van Tassel farm; the very prospect of winning the hand of Katrina comes to him in terms of a superabundance of food. In a manifold sense he yearns to swallow the world and thereby realize an oral heaven. By fitting the notion of gullibility into the dominant metaphor of Ichabod's oral preoccupation, Irving emphasizes the childlike quality of his protagonist. Ichabod can swallow and digest anything; therefore he is always and increasingly gullible. But growing up involves learning what not to swallow, in every sense of the word. Ichabod has failed utterly to learn this first lesson in the practical knowledge of survival precisely because of his extreme addiction to the imagination. Irving couples the oral stage and imaginative indulgence; both signify childhood. There is, moreover, a price to be paid for continuing in childhood. In our natural laughter at the story, we often forget that Ichabod goes down to defeat because he is overimaginative. For he loses all chance for the double prize of Katrina and the wealth of the Van Tassel farm when, terrified by his excessive imagination, he is literally run out of the region by Brom Bones impersonating the Headless Horseman. Brom Bones—the scoffer at superstition, who boasts that he has ridden a winning race against the Headless Horseman—triumphs, marries Katrina, and is the victor of the tale. It is a victory for common sense and hard-headed practicality over imaginative indulgence.

In each of these tales Irving has created his setting as a writer of romance; he overcomes the difficulty of creating imaginatively in the "broad and simple daylight" of his America by positing shadow, mystery, superstition. He writes, in short, as if his settings had antiquity, as if America had a past. Into each tale, however, he introduces a childlike protagonist, whom we may recognize as primitive if we allow for the fact that Irving would share the disbelief in contemporary primitivism and would create such a character out of that disbelief. Rip Van Winkle, with his "insuperable aversion to all kinds of profitable labor," delights in playing with children, and they in turn love him; he is a favorite among the village wives; not a dog in the neighborhood will bark at him. Ichabod Crane spends much time telling ghost stories with the old Dutch wives of Sleepy Hollow; he is the "playmate" of his larger students. In bringing each of these protagonists to a kind of defeat, Irving is echoing James Gray's pronouncement that America must be mature, must call for "substantial food." Rip and Ichabod lose out because they fail to see the necessity of demanding "fact and doctrine," which are at once the prerequisite for and the evidence of personal and cultural maturity. They are would-be heroes, but would-be heroes of the imagination, who cannot withstand or successfully come to terms with the terror that the lot of such a hero, the terror implicit in Rip's loss of identity, explicit in Ichabod's flight. They defeat themselves. It would appear that for Irving there is no place, or a very limited place, for the hero of the imagination in the culture of early America. A nation of Rips and Ichabods, Americans might reason, would soon be no nation at all.

Not even the settings can endure in these tales. It is as if Irving must admit that this is not a real past, that he will not persist in playing with the imagination. In "Rip Van Winkle" the village is transformed from "drowsy tranquility" to a bustling disputatiousness. There are no more shadows in Rip's world. In Sleepy Hollow, to be sure, the people remain unchanged. But we have shown who is the master there: it is Brom Bones (whose true name, Brom Van Brunt, also suggests the kind of strength

Irving wants him to have), perhaps the first American bully, who can play upon fear and superstition to get what he wants. His apparent audacity in impersonating a ghost shows how fully in control Brom Bones is. For this impersonation is audacious only if we see it from the point of view of the villagers of Sleepy Hollow. To Brom Bones, to the only authentic American in the tale, it must literally be child's play. Irving has thus shown his American readers images of themselves in the changed village of "Rip Van Winkle" and in the character of Brom Bones. The manner of each tale suggests that Irving did not find these images entirely flattering, albeit necessary, and, indeed, readers have never found them attractive. Instinctively we sympathize with Rip and Ichabod; we laugh at them and in doing so at what there is of them in us; at the same time, we regret their failure. But what we regret is only what we had to give up to become what we are.

Source: Terrence Martin, "Rip, Ichabod, and the American Imagination," in *Washington Irving: The Critical Reaction*, edited by James W. Tuttleton, AMS Press, Inc., 1993, pp. 56-66.

Critical Essay #4

In the following essay excerpt, Young looks to mythological influences on "Rip Van Winkle" and the impact that they could have on interpretations of the story.

Nearly a century and a half have elapsed, and the name of Rip Van Winkle, one of the oldest in our fiction, is as alive as ever. The subject of innumerable representations—among them some of the country's finest paintings—America's archetypal sleeper is almost equally well known abroad. Nor is his fame simply popular, or commercial. The most complex of poets, as well as the least sophisticated of children, are attracted to him.

But there is something ironic here, for at its center Rip's story is every bit as enigmatic as it is renowned, and the usual understanding of Rip himself, spread so wide, is shallow. Very few of the millions of people who have enjoyed his tale would be comfortable for long if pressed to say exactly what "happened" to him, or if asked to explain what there is about the "poor, simple fellow" that has exerted so general and deep a fascination. Thanks to Irving, the thunder Rip heard is still rolling out of the Catskills. And it is pregnant thunder, charged with meaning. Perhaps it is time someone tried to make out what it has to say. . . .

To be sure this story, though a fine one, is not perfect. For one thing, although Irving's Federalism enables him to jab in mildly amusing fashion at the shabby and pretentious republicanism of Rip's new village, such pleasantries come at the expense of our being wholly convinced of what he is trying to tell us—that Rip at the end is in clover. But the village is no longer entirely the place for him, and the fine old inn where he sits is just not there any more.

That this is, however, the rare sort of story that both satisfies and stimulates is shown by the fact that it has been so often retold, chiefly for the stage. There have been at least five plays—beginning with John Kerr's which first appeared in Washington in 1829—and three operas, and several children's versions. But none has added anything important to our understanding of the story. Joseph Jefferson, who played the role of Rip for forty-five years in his own extraordinarily popular interpretation, had a few sensible ideas about the material, but he also failed to throw out much of the nineteenth-century baggage handed down from Kerr.

Though Joyce and Dylan Thomas have punned elaborately on Rip's name, most of the poets who have invoked him have done nothing much either to interpret the story or the character, and only Hart Crane has given him serious and extended attention. *The Bridge* (1930) has a section called "Van Winkle," whom Crane thought of as "the muse of memory"—or, as he put it to his sponsor, Otto Kahn, "the guardian angel of the trip to the past." Here Rip is a figure evoked from recollection of the poet's childhood and the nation's; since this is to introduce Rip in a thoughtful and promising way, it is too bad that very little is really done with him in the poem.

This is unfortunate partly for the reason that Rip is, potentially, a truly mythic figure. He is conceivably more: ur-mythic. At any rate a primal, primeval myth has been postulated (by Joseph Campbell in his *Hero with a Thousand Faces*), and has been described—as a "separation from the world, a penetration to some source of power, and a lifeenhancing return." And this is a most excellent description of what happens in "Rip Van Winkle." But no one has elevated the story to this status. As Constance Rourke wrote of it twenty-five years ago, the tale "has never been finished, and still awaits a final imaginative re-creation." If, then, we are to be helped to understand the story more deeply by considering what has been done with it, we had better consider what had been done with it before Irving wrote it.

Critical Essay #5

In 1912 an eminent Dutch historian, Tieman De Vries by name, published under the title of *Dutch History, Art and Literature for Americans* a series of lectures he had delivered at The University of Chicago. A large part of this book is devoted to a monumentally inept attack on Washington Irving for having, in "Rip Van Winkle," characterized the Dutch people as stupid, lazy, and credulous. For his overwhelming blow the author, protesting great reluctance and sadness, brings forth the revelation that "Rip" is not the "original" story that Irving is "generally given credit for," anyway. The bitter truth, he discloses, is that the tale had been told before: its embryo is a myth about an ancient Greek named Epimenides, and this germ was "fully developed" by Erasmus (a citizen of Rotterdam) in 1496. In the myth Epimenides was sent to look for a sheep, lay down in a cave, slept for fifty-seven years and waked to find everything changed and himself unrecognized until a brother identified him. Erasmus used this story, then, to attack the Scotist theologians of his day (whom he thought asleep) as Irving used it on the Dutch. The fact that Irving never admitted knowing Erasmus's story, says De Vries, "touches too much the character of our beloved young author to be decided in a few words," and thus, having written the words, he drops the subject.

Quite aside from the foolishness about the Dutch, who are fondly treated in the story, there are two real blunders here. First, Irving's indebtedness was so widely recognized when the story first appeared as to be a subject for newspaper comment and, second, his source was not Erasmus, whose tale is in no sense "fully developed," but an old German tale published by Otmar, the Grimm of his period, in his *Volke-Sagen* of 1800. Actually Irving was on this occasion very noisily accused of plagiarism. At the end of his story he had appended a note in which he hinted that Rip's origin was "a little German superstition about Frederick *der Rothbart* and the Kypphauser mountain," but this has always been regarded as a red herring—so freely had he borrowed from another, and adjacent, story in Otmar: the folk tale of Peter Klaus. About the only thing Irving could do when this was pointed out he did: threw up his hands and said that of course he knew the tale of Peter Klaus; he had seen it in three collections of German legends.

There were probably still other sources for "Rip Van Winkle." We know, for instance, that in 1817 Sir Walter Scott told Irving the story of Thomas of Erceldoune ("Thomas the Rhymer"), who was bewitched by the Queen of the Fairies for seven years. "Doldrum"—a farce about a man's surprise at the changes he found after waking from a seven-year slumber—was played in New York when Irving was fourteen. It is almost certain, moreover, that Irving knew at least a couple of the other versions of the old tradition.

The idea of persons sleeping for long periods is, of course, very common in myth, legend, and folklore. So sleep Arthur and Merlin and John the Divine, and Charlemagne and Frederick Barbarossa (or Rothbart, or Redbeard) and Wilhelm Tell, and Odin (or Woden), the Norse (or Teutonic) god, and Endymion the shepherd, and Siegfried and Oisin and several dozen other heroes of many lands, as well as Sleeping Beauty and Bruennhilde and other mythical ladies—and also the protagonists of many novels, who wake to their author's vision of utopia, or hell. And thee are several myths and legends

about these sleepers which come pretty close to the story Irving told. Probably the best known of these concerns the Seven Sleepers. These men, natives of Ephesus, were early Christians persecuted by the Emperor Decius. They hid in a mountain and fell asleep. On waking they assumed that a night had passed, and one of them slipped into town to buy bread. When he got there he was stunned to see a cross over the gate, and then to hear the Lord's name spoken freely. When he paid for the bread his coins, now archaic, gave him away, and he discovered he had slept for 360 years.

This myth has spread widely, and found its way into books so different as the Koran, where Mohammed adapted it and introduced a dog who sleeps with the seven men, and Mark Twain's *Innocents Abroad*, where Twain tells the story at considerable length (and says he knows it to be a true story, as he personally has visited the cave). Somewhat similar myths are also known in the religious literature of the Jews. In a section on fasting in the Babylonian Talmud, to choose a single instance, appears one of several stories about Honi the Circle Drawer, lately thrust into prominence as a candidate for identification with the Teacher of Righteousness of the Dead Sea Scrolls. One day Honi sat down to eat, the story goes, and sleep came; a rocky formation enclosed him, and he slept for seventy years. When he went home nobody would believe he was Honi; greatly hurt, he prayed for death and died.

The thing that is really vital to "Rip Van Winkle," but missing from all these other stories, is a revelation—some kind of mysterious activity witnessed by the sleeper. But such tales also exist—for instance, the Chinese story of Wang Chih, who comes upon some aged men playing chess in a mountain grotto, is given a date-stone to put in his mouth, and sleeps for centuries, finally waking to return home to practice Taoist rites and attain immortality.

More akin to Rip's is the misadventure of Herla, King of the Britons. He is approached by an ugly dwarf, somewhat resembling Pan, who tells him that he will grace Herla's wedding to the daughter of the King of France, and that Herla will in turn attend the wedding of the dwarf-king. At the Briton's marriage ceremony, the dwarf-guests serve food and drink from precious vessels. A year later, at the wedding of the dwarf-king in a mountain cavern, Herla takes a bloodhound in his arms, and he and his men are enjoined not to dismount until the bloodhound jumps. Some who try are turned to dust, but the hound never jumps and Herla thus wanders hopelessly and "maketh mad marches" with his army for the space of two hundred years. At last he reaches the sunlight and meets a shepherd who can scarcely understand the language the king speaks.

Closer still, in one way, is the story of a blacksmith recorded in the Grimms' *Teutonic Mythology*. While trying to find wood to make a handle for his hammer, he gets lost; there are the familiar rift in the mountains, some mysterious bowlers, and a magic gift—this time a bowling ball that turns to gold. (Others who have entered this cliff have seen an old man with a long white beard holding a goblet.)

The most detailed precedent for Irving, however, and beyond a doubt his principal source, is the tale of Peter Klaus, which appeared in Otmar's collection. This is a story

of a goatherd from Sittendorf who used to pasture his sheep on the Kyfhauser mountain in Thuringia. One day he discovered that a goat had disappeared into a crack in a cliff and, following her, he came to a cave where he found her eating oats that fell from a ceiling which shook with the stamping of horses. While Peter stood there in astonishment a groom appeared and beckoned him to follow; soon they came to a hollow, surrounded by high walls into which, through the thick overhanging branches, a dim light fell. Here there was a rich, well-graded lawn, where twelve serious knights were bowling. None of them said a word. Peter was put to work setting pins.

At first his knees shook as he stole glimpses of the silent, long-bearded knights, but gradually his fear left him, and finally he took a drink from a tankard. This was rejuvenating, and as often as he felt tired he drank from the vessel, which never emptied. This gave him strength, but sleep overcame him nonetheless, and when he woke he was back at the green spot where he grazed his goats. The goats, however, were gone, and so was his dog. There were trees and bushes he couldn't remember, and in bewilderment he went into Sittendorf, below him, to ask about his herd.

Outside the village the people were unfamiliar, differently dressed and strange-spoken. They stared at him and stroked their chins as he asked for his sheep; when involuntarily he stroked his own chin he found that his beard had grown a foot long. He went to his house, which was in decay, and there he saw an emaciated dog which snarled at him. He staggered off, calling vainly for his wife and children. The villagers crowded around him, demanding to know what he was looking for, and when he asked about old friends he learned that they were dead. Then he saw a pretty young woman, who exactly resembled his wife, and when he asked her father's name she answered, "Peter Klaus, God rest his soul. It is more than twenty years since . . . his sheep came back without him." Then he shouted, "I am Peter Klaus, and no other," and was warmly welcomed home.

Since this elaborate parallel with Irving epitomizes the process whereby a national literature adapted foreign materials and began to function, it is somewhat appropriate that our first short story should owe so large a debt to a European source. But it is not at all clear why this *particular* story should have come down to us across a span of some twenty-five centuries—from the time, say, of Epimenides. Some of its charm is obvious; the idea of falling clean out of time, for instance, must be universally fascinating. But the very heart of "Rip Van Winkle," and of "Peter Klaus"—the strange pageant in the mountain—is still, from whatever version of it may be the earliest on down to the present time, enigmatic.

In the scene with the "dwarfs"—to focus again on Irving—it is not even clear what is going on. When the silent men of outlandish appearance and their leader go through their motions, the feeling is very strong that their actions are intended to convey something. But what? They are bowling, of course, and producing the sound of thunder, but why are they doing this? Why are they so sad and silent as they do it? Why so odd-looking? And why does Rip's participation cost him a generation of his life? The action is fairly pulsing with overtones: the men are speaking in signs; their motions cry out for translation as vigorously as if this were, as it seems, some strangely solemn charade.

The question, which seems never even to have been asked, is what are we to make of this thundering pantomime? What have the gods to impart?

The notion that somewhere in the story lurks a secondary, or symbolic, meaning is by no means new. Walter Map, for instance, intended the latter part of his story about Herla to be a satire on the court of King Henry II, which he thought unstable. Erasmus, as already noted, attacked the Scotists through his; and the Talmud draws a moral from Honi's lonely end: "Either companionship or death." More interesting, however, is Arnold Toynbee's interpretation of "Rip Van Winkle" in the third volume of his *Study of History*. There is likely to be, he feels, something "old-fashioned" about any given colonial ethos, and his theory comes to a generalization: "Geographical expansion [of a civilization] produces social retardation." Toynbee thinks Rip an expression of his principle, the long sleep symbolizing the slumber of social progress in a newly settled place. Irving "was really expressing in mythological imagery the essence of the overseas experience. . . . "

The trouble with the interpretations of Map, Erasmus, and the Talmud is that they are forced and arbitrary, and the trouble with Toynbee's is that the story doesn't fit the theory it is supposed to express. If we ever had a period during which social progress was not retarded then it was exactly the period Rip slept through. In that generation we were transformed from a group of loosely bound and often provincial colonies into a cocky and independent republic with a new kind of government and—as the story itself makes clear enough—a whole new and new-fashioned spirit. In order to fit the thesis Irving must have had Rip return to a village where nothing much had happened or changed, and thus he must have written a different story. But he chose instead to write a story on the order of the myth about Honi the Circle Drawer who, according to one tradition, slept through the destruction of the First Temple and the building of the second, or like the one about the Seven Sleepers, who slept through the Christian revolution. In all these tales the startling developments that have taken place during the sleep are a large part of the "point." And even if to Toynbee nationalism is—and was even in eighteenth-century America—a thoroughly deplorable thing, it was not a sign of social retardation.

Since such explanations as these will not help much more than the poets and playwrights have done to show us what is going on in "Rip Van Winkle," and since there is nowhere else to look, we are forced at long last to squint for ourselves through that crevice in the mountain. There, in the shadows, lurk figures and images which take us back, along a chronological line, to a time before the beginnings of recorded history. And if we could identity and understand these figures and images we should have, finally, the answers to most of our questions.

Many editions of Irving's story carry as an epigraph some lines he took from the seventeenthcentury poet William Cartwright:

By Woden, God of Saxons,
From whence comes Wensday, that is Wodensday,
Truth is a thing that ever I will keep
Until thylke day in which I creep in
My sepulchre—.

The most plausible reading of these lines is: "By God it's a true story I'm telling." But this makes Irving's two notes—in which he calls this a true tale—redundant. Less simply read, it might be the story itself saying, "By God, I'll keep to myself the truth about this thing as long as I live." At any rate, it is either a curious coincidence or an obscure clue that, in swearing by Woden, Irving has pointed to the remotest origins of his story that can be uncovered. To bare these origins would be to force the story, at last, to give up its secrets.

Here is a grab bag of traditional elements— folk, legendary, and mythic. The green knoll on which Rip sits when he hears his name has behind it the Green Mounds of Irish fairy tales—often prehistoric burial mounds. It is an appropriate spot for his bewitching and approximate to the "buried men" he is about to visit. Magic potions and sacred drinks are so standard in mythology, folklore, and religion as to suggest parallels automatically as Rip plays Ganymede, wine-pourer to the gods. A less familiar little tradition lies behind those dogs, which Rip and Peter find barely and implausibly alive after so many year—this takes us all the way back to Odysseus, returning after a generation's absence to find his dog Argos in Ithaca, still half-alive and lying on a heap of dung.

But the most important recognition in Irving's story concerns the identity of the men Rip meets in the mountain, and of their leader. These are "Hendrik Hudson" and his crew. The blacksmith and Peter Klaus never identify their strange mountain men, and the unnamed leaders never appear. Nevertheless, it is not hard to guess with considerable assurance of being right both who they are and by whom they are led. It was the Odensberg that the blacksmith entered, and the Kyfhauser that Peter wormed his way into; it is in the Odensberg, according to legend, that Charlemagne and his knights are sleeping, and the Kyfhauser where sleep Frederick Barbarossa and his. Hudson, then, is playing the role of the great kings of European countries, as Arthur plays it in England, and is a survival of this tradition. This recognition opens the door.

Part of the Barbarossa legend, which is better known and more detailed than the one of Charlemagne, concerns the conditions under which he can return to active life. Around the Kyfhauser a flock of ravens is said to fly, and each time the king wakes he asks if they are still there (they are, and this means the time has not come). Another important detail of the story is his beard: it is extraordinarily long already, and when it has grown three times around the table where he sits, his time will have come. It is very likely, then, that the black wings hovering over Rip just before he enters the mountain, and just after he emerges into consciousness, are the ravens of Barbarossa—just as the beards which are prominent in his story and Peter's (although the natural enough consequences of not shaving for twenty years) come down to us from this legend.

But the most important detail of all is a game, common to so many of these stories—the Chinese and Japanese versions, and Peter Klaus and the blacksmith and Rip. And the fact that the game in the stories that primarily concern us here is always bowling, which makes the sound of thunder, gives the whole show away: we are dealing, ultimately, with the gods, and in the farthest recess of this cave the figure with the red beard (to represent lightning), that helped to identify him with Frederick the Redbeard, is the god of thunder—Thor, God of Saxons, whence comes Thorsday, that is, Thursday.

More clearly the prototype of all these sleeping heroes, however, is the magnificently whitebearded Woden, or Odin, the god of the dead whom Cartwright swore by. In the legend about Charlemagne, the people who saw the king described him as a man with a white beard, and the name of the mountain Charlemagne inhabits, the Odensberg, suggests all by itself his ancestor. But the fact that the blacksmith on the Odensberg is in search of wood for a handle to an instrument of power which was the very emblem of the god of thunder, a hammer, suggests Thor just as strongly. So thoroughly have the two gods been confused in these myths that the king who is buried in Odin's mountain has in some stories the red coloring and the red horse that are really appropriate to Thor. On this horse the god issues from the mountain with his men, every-so-many years, and in this activity he is again Odin, the leader of the Wild Hunt.

These confusions between Thor and Odin are not surprising, since the two figures are confused in Norse mythology itself. Although Thor was the son of Odin, he was also sometimes an older god than Odin; often he was a god superior to Odin, and sometimes they were thought of as exactly the same god. The direct ancestor of the Hudson Rip saw, then, was a Thor who has many of the attributes of Odin, and recognizing this takes us to the source of the traditions out of which Irving's scene is principally compounded. Recognizing these traditions, in turn, enables us to understand the subliminal richness of its materials, buried under the detritus of centuries.

The ravens which fly about the Kyfhauser, and the crows and eagle of the Catskills, are lineal descendants of the ravens Thought and Memory who sat on Odin's shoulder and kept him informed, or of the eagle that hovered over Odin's own retreat, or of the flight of ravens, "Odin's messengers" (without whose message Frederick cannot emerge)—or of all three. The dogs in the stories, mixing Greek myth with Teutonic, are progeny of the wolves Geri and Freki who sat at Odin's feet, or of the totem wolf which hung over the west door of his residence—in honor of which ancestry Rip's dog gets his name Wolf. The drink which both invigorated and overpowered Rip is the same drink Barbarossa's knights gave Peter; it belongs also in the goblet Charlemagne was seen holding, and, despite all the magic drinks of folklore and myth, it is ultimately "Odin's mead," from which Odin got wisdom, and inspired poets; it was a magic draft related to the drink always available in the Abode of the Blest, the drink that rejuvenates, and obliterates all sorrow.

In a like manner, the odd appearance of Hudson's crew, those ugly, drab, short and curious creatures (one fellow's face is comprised entirely of his nose) are echoes of the dwarfs Herla met— although those dwarfs also looked like Pan, mixing Greek and Teutonic (and probably Welsh) mythology again. But Hudson's men get their appearance from the Night-Elves who made Thor's hammer— those ugly little long-nosed people, dirty brown in color, who lived in caves and clefts. Beneath this effective disguise the crewmen of the *Half-Moon* are really the knights of Barbarossa and Charlemagne, who are the brave dead warriors brought back from the battlefields by the Valkyries to Odin's hall of the dead: Rip has really been in Valhalla and seen the slain collected around their god, who by the old confusion is now Thor, whose men they have become. The reason for the oddness of their behavior— their melancholy and their lacklustre stares—has become completely obvious, if indeed it was not before: they are

dead. And one of Odin's chief characteristics, his extreme aloofness, accounts for the fact that Rip got but a glimpse of their leader, while neither Peter nor the blacksmith ever saw him at all.

Why such pagan gods should have been imagined as sleeping in mountains can be plausibly explained. When converted to Christianity, the people who had worshipped these figures could not quickly and completely reject the faith of their fathers. To them the outmoded gods lingered on, wandering, sleeping, and appearing infrequently. Later, vanished but actual heroes like Charlemagne, Frederick, Sir Francis Drake, Prince Sebastian of Portugal, and Arthur, were given attributes of the earlier gods. It was most common as well to place them in a mountain, where they were in earth, like the dead, but not under it—not under level ground, that is—like the really dead. Here they are sequestered in their slumbers, but the gods can be thought of as not entirely departed, and the heroes as in a position to return.

Occasionally mortals get to visit the legendary heroes who have taken over the attributes of vanished gods. When this happens, the visitor suffers a magic sleep and a long lacuna in his life: he has lapsed into a pagan world, got himself bewitched, and trafficked with a forbidden god. The punishment is severe. Thus Herla lost everything and Peter lost his flock, wife, home, and twenty years of life— though Rip, to be sure, in Irving's half-convincing happy ending, doesn't suffer so badly. The reason for the punishment is nevertheless clear: it is Christianity's dire objection to traffic with such cults as attached to those gods, as with any intercourse with fairies. This centuries-old element of the story is an historical, symbolic, and didactic expression of the church's long struggle with paganism—and has nothing to do with any social retardation of progress in colonies. Look what happened to Herla and Peter, Christian instruction could say. They were kind and ingenuous men. What then could happen to you? And then because the story is compelling in its own right it survives past the need for it, even after the knowledge of its purpose is centuries forgotten.

Is there any other connection between the visit and the great changes that follow in the life of the man who made it? And what are these visitors doing where they are not supposed to be? The sleeping gods and heroes could be described, and have been, without any mortal to intrude on them, and it doesn't look as though the mortals had just happened in: most of them appear to have been approached and led. And Rip was called by name.

Almost all of the protagonists of these stories, if they witnessed anything within the mountain, saw some kind of game. The fact that the origins of many games fade into ritual and ritual dance suggests that the games in these legends and myths might have their origin in some rite. And some authorities (Jane Harrison and Lord Raglan are notable examples) believe that all myths have their origin in ritual— that a myth is never a folk-explanation of natural phenomena, or anything of the sort, but a narrative that was once linked with a ritual—is the story, in other words, which has outlived the ritual, that the ritual once enacted. Frazer had a more moderate view, and felt that there is a *class* of myths which have been dramatized in ritual, and that these myths were enacted as magical ceremonies in order to produce the natural effects which they describe in

figurative language. This hypothesis has it further that the core of such a myth traces back, finally, to the divinity who is imagined to have founded the rite. The actors are simply impersonating an activity of the originator and worshipping him in this way, his acts being the prototype of the rite. Gradually, then, the rite may be performed more out of piety than from any belief in its efficacy, and finally may be forgotten while the myth endures.

Whatever the merits of this theory one thing seems fairly sure: if it explains the origins of any myths, Rip descends from one of them. The bowlers of the Catskills are impersonating a disguised Thor, in a figurative or symbolic way, in his principal role as God of Thunder, and the actions of these resurrected men are the means of their worship. The solemnity Rip and Peter felt, in the presence of a mystery, is entirely appropriate to so sacred and secret an occasion. "Rip Van Winkle," then, is our version of a myth that survives as a description of a nearly forgotten ceremony in the worship of Thor for the production of rain. It proceeds by a symbolic imitation of how rain is made. The ritual is of the magical sort, and is intended to influence nature through the physical sympathy, or resemblance, between the ceremony and the effect it is supposed to produce. Indeed the story is an example of what Robert Graves has called "true myth": it is an instance of "the reduction to narrative shorthand of ritual mime."

Exactly *why* Rip was allowed to witness this mystery is a secret which, since he was ignorant of the reason himself, he has been able to keep for many generations. So, in all likelihood, was Irving unaware of the original reason for the outsider's presence at the ceremony: even by Peter Klaus's time the myth had so badly deteriorated into folklore that only the fragments we are deciphering remained. But the secret is out by now: Rip and Peter were initiates. Rip goes right through the steps. While he sits dreamily and alone on the green knoll the period of preliminary isolation passes; then he is summoned by name. Helping to carry the heavy keg up the side of the ravine, which he may have had to volunteer to do, is a sort of test. There followed a kind of procession, and something like a vigil, and finally the experience of communication with the divinity and his disciples. Rip is even given a magic drink, which as a novice he is first required to serve, and after this he is plunged into the magic sleep. When he wakes he is in a new phase of life, and on this level the great changes he finds about him are symbols of the changes in him, and of the differences in his situation, now that he is initiate.

Rip has also been reborn in another, reinforcing way, for the imagery of his emergence into a new life inevitably and unavoidably suggests an issue "from the womb." This concept, which is often thrown about gratuitously, really urges itself here, for Irving's description of the entrance to the mountain, taken from "Peter Klaus," is extremely arresting—almost as pointed, say, as accounts anthropologists have given of pits dug in the ground by primitive tribesmen, and trimmed about the edges with overhanging shrubbery (which ditches the men dance about in the spring, while brandishing their spears and chanting that these are no ditches, but what they were built to represent). The imagery is the same when Rip is led eerily through the ravine till he comes to the bottom of a hollow, surrounded by perpendicular precipices, over the brinks of which hang the branches of trees.

From this setting he is delivered into his old age. Ripe for escape before, he has experienced an escape only one step short of death. Apparently well into middle age, and saddled with a wife who had completely lost her desirability, he laid down his gun and entered the mountain. Here he witnessed some symbolical activity—which, in the severely censored form of the pins and bowling balls, has overtones of human, as well as vegetable, fertility— and he saw it all as joyless and melancholy. Magically confirmed in his own feeling about the matter, he drank, slept like a baby, and was released into the world he had longed for—into an all-male society, the perpetual men's club that used to meet at the inn, which his wife can no longer violate, as, unforgivably, she had done before. His gun is ruined and useless, and his wife is gone. But it makes no difference now; he has slept painlessly through his "change of life."

The trouble with this story as some kind of "male-menopause myth" is that the reading is partly based on a misinterpretation attributed, perhaps unfairly, to Rip. Lacking the information we have, he made a mistake: the men were lifeless and unhappy at their bowling because they were dead. More than that, they were still the followers of Thor, whose sign was lightning and whose emblem was a hammer. Thor was god of power, and of human as well as vegetable fertility. He was god of the vital moistures in general, an ithyphallic, not a detumescent, god. Even dead, his worshippers made a great deal of noise in his service. In short, the bowling which sends thunder across the Catskills is violently masculine symbolic activity in a very feminine mountain. And in this last vague but massive symbol is a final irony, for the mystery revealed to Rip had thus two aspects, animal or human, and vegetable—one for each of Thor's two fertility powers.

Of what pertinence were all these revelations to Rip? What does it mean to him that the strange men he saw have come down to us from the men of Thor, or that he was initiated into an ancient mystery and shown the sacred secrets of all life? No relevance at all to him and no meaning whatever. And that is the ironical point. Befuddled, unwitting, and likable old Rip: no man in the valley, luxuriantly green already, thought less or as little about the crops, and no man he knew could have been chosen to witness the secrets of human fertility.

Critical Essay #6

What would have interested him, and what did he want? Concentrating somewhat anthropologically on the story's central scene in an attempt to get at the bottom of it, we have not got to the bottom of the character. But if for a moment we will think more as psychologists, and consider the story as a sort of dream—as a product of the unconscious, itself a kind of anthropologist—we open a whole new and remarkable area of meaning. Suddenly everything seems illusive, unreal; time goes into abeyance and the sense of history is lost; the very identity of the central figure is shaken, and reason dissolves.

The easiest entry to the dream level of "Rip Van Winkle" passes through that inn where Rip once sat with his friends—the inn which was "gone," and replaced by a hotel straight out of nightmare: "a large rickety wooden building. . . , with great gaping windows . . . mended with old hats and petticoats" —and in front a sign with a familiar face all out of place in its setting. Soon, however, "idle with impunity" and "reverenced as one of the patriarchs of the village," Rip "took his place once more on the bench at the inn door." A conflict in Irving explains the confusion. He wanted to show the great changes a revolution had brought, but wished more deeply to feel, and wanted us to feel, that aside from the happy loss of his wife nothing had really happened to Rip. Toynbee, responding fully to this absense of time and change, made what amounts to the same mistake. But it is a meaningful slip, and on one level they are both right. For Rip, time and history *have* ceased operation. Nothing has happened, and the inn is there to signal the fact.

What, then, are we to think when we come to the start of the very next paragraph and are told (in a kind of preliminary postscript at the end of the tale proper) that Rip is now telling his story "to every stranger that arrived at Mr. Doolittle's hotel?" The inn is there, is gone and replaced, is there again, is gone again. Reality is slithering away; and so it must eventually do, for this is not ultimately its world. Nor is this truly the world of fiction, unless of Kafka's. It is the world of the unconscious, where time and history are not suspended, exactly, but do not exist—where everything exists at once. It is the region where people and things are always appearing in unreasonable places, and everything is passing strange: but distorted toward some hard-torecognize truth. The recurring transformation of Irving's hostelry belongs in this night world. It represents a "willfull accident," and as such makes its own kind of sense. Irving was groping very darkly in a world of symbol, myth, and dream for meanings beyond awareness.

In this strange new world Rip's identity is harder to establish than the identity of that shifting meeting place. Removed as he is from time, the confusion of generations is appalling, and he is hard pressed to know in which of at least three generations he really "belongs." It will be next to impossible to know for sure, for the truth is he had almost as little part in his own generation as the one he slept through. This was entirely clear, had we the wit to see it, when we first met him. He was not an adult, but a child playing with children, a kid with a dog. He lived with his wife, to be sure, but only in a manner of speaking, for he accepted instead his "only alternative"; "to take gun in hand

and stroll away into the wood." Or, more striking, he would escape her by sitting on a wet rock with a rod in his hand "as long and heavy as a Tartar's lance, and fish all day . . . even though he should not be encouraged by a single nibble." "A great favorite among all the good wives of the village," he ran their errands and did "such little jobs as their less obliging husbands would not do for them"—not, by pointed implication, what their husbands would do: "As to doing family duty . . . he found it impossible."

At the inn with the menfolk, Rip shows that he wants to be a father. But at home he is a son, and not up to it: he is the son who wants to be the father but his mother won't let him. He represents, to be technical for a moment, the ego arrested at the infantile level in an Oedipal situation; under pressure he reverts all the way back to the sleep of the womb.

The scene in the mountain now takes on a new and different suggestiveness. It is at once the dream of a child and an adult dream reflecting Rip's own predicament. The great noses of the mountain men give the next phallic clue, as they must likewise have done in the ancient Teutonic mythology. (The psychoanalytic and the anthropological mix well: they are both—the first personally, the second culturally— "regressive." From this viewpoint the dwarfs are really disguised little boys with pins and balls practicing, in highly activated silence, a forbidden rite; Rip is not invited to play, too, and they make him work, so he sneaks their drink and goes off to sleep. On the other hand the dwarfs are also so many mirrors to the "adult" Rip, held up as revelations which his consciousness is not likely to read: they are aged little men playing games, who have grown old but not up. Our protagonist, then, is both gerontion and child—or is neither, precisely. He has nor youth nor age, but as it were an after-dinner's sleep, dreaming on both.

On his return to the village, the sense of the decomposition of his "self" becomes even more awesome. His wife-mother is gone, but he is still a child as much as he is anything, and as such he must find his role in a relationship to someone else. But now it is completely bewildering. He is soon confronted with the very "ditto of himself," a negligent loafer named Rip—actually his son. Worse, he faces a woman who seems both strange and, as his poor mind struggles into recollection, hauntingly familiar. She had, she says, a father named Rip, and she carries in her arms a child of that name. Who, then, is our protagonist? His own unaccepted and "impossible" self, or the son of his wife that he used to be and emotionally remains? Or his own son, the loafer leaning there against the tree and, after the ravages of twenty years that passed as a night, looking more like the man Rip impersonated than he suddenly does himself? Or perhaps another Rip, the child of his daughter, now surrogate for his departed wife, and the sign of his true emotional state? Or even, conceivably, the husband of this replacement wife-mother, and the father of this son—or of that one, or of himself? The sense of generation is shattered; his daughter's house, in which he lives, is a whole house of mirrors, and everywhere he looks he sees a different distortion. He has one moment of panicked insight: "God knows . . . I'm not myself—I'm somebody else—that's me yonder—no—that's somebody else got into my shoes. . . ." Small wonder he takes his leave of all these people for the security of the role he can play at Mr. Doolittle's.

It is clear now that Rip escaped no change of life, but his very manhood—went from childhood to second childhood with next to nothing in between. It is not just his wife he had dodged, either, but all the obligations of maturity: occupation, domestic and financial responsibility, a political position, duty to society in a time of war. His relation to history is so ambiguous that—ridiculous suspicion—he is thought a spy. Charming and infantile, he narcissistically prefers himself; he will tell his tale of twenty years' sleep at Mr. Doolittle's, where Irving leaves him for the last time. It has become a symbol for the sleep that has been his life.

Considering the universality of his fame, it is a wonder that no European, say, has pointed gleefully to this figure as a symbol of America, for he presents a near-perfect image of the way a large part of the world looks at us: likable enough, up to a point and at times, but essentially immature, self-centered, careless, and above all—and perhaps dangerously— innocent. Even more pointedly, Rip is a stereotype of the American male as seen from abroad, or in some jaundiced quarters at home: he is perfectly the jolly overgrown child, abysmally ignorant of his own wife and the whole world of adult men—perpetually "one of the boys," hanging around what they are pleased to think of as a "perpetual men's club"; a disguised Rotarian who simply will not and cannot grow up. In moments of candor we will probably admit that a stereotype with no germ of truth in it could not exist: some such mythic America, some such mythic American, exist both actually and in the consciousness of the world. Rip will do very well as their prototype.

"Rip Van Winkle" is then, and finally, a wonderfully rich tale—the richest in our literature— and an astonishingly complex experience arising from a struggle among many kinds of meaning. On the "prehistoric" level we are dimly aware of immemorial ritual significance, on the psychological of an extraordinary picture of the self arrested in a timeless infancy—rich appeals, both, to the child and primitive in everyone that never grow up and never die in anyone. These awarenesses conflict in the story, as they do in life, with the adult and rational perception that we do indeed grow old, that time and history never stop. In much the same way, our affection for Rip himself must oppose our reluctant discovery that as a man we cannot fully respect him.

But in addition to all his other sides, this remarkable Van Winkle also, of course, projects and personifies our sense of the flight and more: the ravages—of time. And this is what wins us ultimately to his side. We know perfectly well that as an adult this darling of generations of Americans will not entirely do. But if he does seem, finally, meek, blessed, pure in heart, and if we mock him for what he has missed we do it tenderly—partly because it is something hidden in ourselves we mock. And this is not just our own hidden childishness. It is all our own lost lives and roles, the lives and roles that once seemed possible and are possible no more. In twenty years all springs are over; without mockery it might be too sad to bear. Today would grieve, and tomorrow would grieve; best cover it over lightly.

And so here is Rip at the end: Lazarus come from the dead, come back to tell us all. He will tell us all, and badgering any who will listen, he tries: Well now—have you heard what happened to *me*? But it won't do; he doesn't know. And that is a pity, truly. Here is a man in whom rest complexities and deficiencies a lifetime might contemplate, as the

world has done; a man who has peered toward the dawn of civilization, witnessed ancient mysteries, and stared at his essential nature; a man who now in town is looking at the future and realizing a dream of the ages. And he cannot communicate his visions.

But supposing that he could, that he could tell us all: would it have been worthwhile? Visions, revelations like these are private. To translate what the thunder meant, to confront the meaning of life and the future of all our childish selves, we all have to go up into our own mountains.

Source: Philip Young, "Fallen from Time: The Mythic 'Rip Van Winkle,'" in *Washington Irving: The Critical Reaction*, edited by James W. Tuttleton, AMS Press, Inc., 1993, pp. 67-84.

Adaptations

Three excellent unabridged readings of "Rip Van Winkle" are available on audiocassette or compact disc. In each case, "Rip Van Winkle" is paired with "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow." A reading by Jim Beach was recorded in 1990 by Blackstone Books. James Hamilton reads the two stories on the 1993 Recorded Books, LLC, recording. And a reading by George Vafiadis was recorded in 2000 by Sound Room Publishers.

Tales of Washington Irving (1987) is a videocassette release of animated films made in 1970. Distributed by MGM/UA Home Video, the 48-minute tape includes "Rip Van Winkle" and "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," and features the voices of Mel Blanc and other familiar stars.

A children's video version, based on Irving's story, *Rip Van Winkle*, was produced in 1997 by Rabbit Ears Productions. It is narrated by Angelica Huston and features original music by Jay Ungar and Molly Mason.

Topics for Further Study

Many critics have studied Irving's familiarity with seventeenth-century Dutch or Flemish painting, and Rip himself thinks of an "old Flemish painting" when he sees the bowling men in their unusual clothing. Find copies of paintings of country life by Adriaen Brouwer, Willem Buytewech, Jan Steen, Adriaen van Ostade, Esaias van de Velde, or others of the so-called Dutch genre painters. Is Rip's perception that the strangers make up a "melancholy party of pleasure" echoed in the scenes depicted in the paintings?

Make a list of important published writings by Americans in the first quarter of the nineteenth century. In what ways are Irving's stories unusual? What do they share with other writings?

When Rip Van Winkle sleeps for twenty years, he sleeps through the American Revolution and awakens into an independent nation. Examine life in Rip's village before and after his long sleep, and in colonies like New York just before and just after the Revolution. How much effect on daily life did this large political upheaval have?

Trace the travels of Henry Hudson through North America. Where did he go, and when?

Find a collection of Native American folk tales, preferably tales that come from the Native peoples of upper New York. How do these tales compare with folk tales from other parts of the world? What are the values held in common by the different cultures? Which values are different?

Compare and Contrast

Late 1700s: Husbands and wives divide up labor according to a strict system. Men are responsible for farm work and handling money and business; women run the house, the children, and the garden.

Today: Husbands and wives are more likely to divide up responsibilities according to the talents of each person, although women are still primarily responsible for house cleaning and child care.

Late 1700s: Laws would make it difficult, if not impossible, for Dame Van Winkle to divorce her husband and remarry, even after being abandoned for twenty years.

Today: A woman in Dame Van Winkle's position would be able to divorce her husband after being abandoned and would be able to find a new partner to help her maintain the farm.

Late 1770s: Irving's hometown, New York City, is a major metropolitan center with a population of 80,000. The population of the United States is under 7 million.

Today: The population of New York City alone is over 7 million.

What Do I Read Next?

"The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," also from Irving's *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.*, is the second of the two Irving stories that have remained popular since their publication in 1819-1820. In the upstate New York town of Sleepy Hollow, pompous schoolteacher Ichabod Crane gives up courting the village's most beautiful and wealthy young woman when he is frightened by a Headless Horseman.

The Leatherstocking Tales, by James Fenimore Cooper, is a series of five novels set in upper New York State and featuring the character of Natty Bumppo, a traditional American hero of the wilderness. In *The Pioneers*, published in 1823, Natty Bumppo grows disgusted with civilization and heads for the West.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poem "Kubla Khan," written in 1797, is said to have been composed during an opium-induced sleep. Critic Deanna C. Turner believes that Irving drew heavily on imagery from the poem when he composed the descriptive passages in "Rip Van Winkle."

In Catskill Country: Collected Stories of Mountain History, Life and Lore (1995), by Alf Evers, is a collection of essays about the region where Rip Van Winkle lives. Among the mysteries explored is the legend of Kaaterskill Falls, mentioned at the end of "Rip Van Winkle."

In *Charting the Sea of Darkness: The Four Voyages of Henry Hudson* (1995), author Donald S. Johnson draws on Hudson's original logs to create a narrative of his explorations.

Further Study

Bowden, Edwin T., *Washington Irving: Bibliography, Boston:* Twayne, 1989.

Volume 30 in *The Complete Works of Washington Irving*, this is the most complete and up-to-date bibliography available.

Hedges, William L., *Washington Irving: An American Study, 1802-1832*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1965.

Hedges emphasizes Irving's early work, including "Rip Van Winkle," which he reads as a tragi-comic story about the fear of marriage. Ironically, Hedges argues that Irving's most significant works are these pieces written while he was living in Europe.

Wagenknecht, Edward, *Washington Irving: Moderation Displayed*, Oxford University Press, 1962.

This is a brief and easy-to-read biography and analysis of the major works and is an important tool for understanding Irving's importance during his own lifetime.

Wells, Robert V., "While Rip Napped: Social Change in Late Eighteenth-Century New York," in *New York History*, Vol. 70, January 1990, pp. 5-23.

Wells, a literary historian, describes the demographic, family, and social changes that took place in New York during the time that Rip is asleep, and he concludes that Irving fully understood those changes.

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Tuttleton, James W., "Style and Fame: The Sketch Book," in *Washington Irving: The Critical Reaction*, edited by James W. Tuttleton, AMS Press, 1993, p. 52.

Young, Philip, "Fallen from Time: The Mythic 'Rip Van Winkle,'" in *Washington Irving: The Critical Reaction*, edited by James W. Tuttleton, AMS Press, 1993, p. 84.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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