

Washington Irving's "Rip Van Winkle" and "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" as American Folklore: A Representation of Headway

A Linda Primlyn

Folk literature accounts for only a small slice of folklore, which includes, among other things, rhymes, jokes, stories, superstitions, traditions, sayings and customs and writes to preserve and honour the primitives and natives of the Dutch ancestry. Through publication in written form by retellers, folk stories complete the metamorphosis from folklore to folk literature. Folk tales are simple in their subjects and assertions while containing a moral. The information and experience found within folktales are simple because they are intended to be pertinent and helpful to everyday people. The morals within are intended for the same audience and strive to inform listeners of important life lessons and ways to behave.

Washington Irving, the first professional writer in the United States, observes people and customs. The two best-known of Irving's stories selected for discussion, "Rip Van Winkle" and "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," appear originally in *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent* (1819-1820), a collection of tales and familiar essays. Both stories were adopted by Irving from German folklore that the author learned about through a lifetime of reading and years of travel. "Rip Van Winkle" and "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" have very similar geographical settings from small Dutch villages, untouched by the outside world. Young says, "Folk literature contains references to a society's values: what the people value; what they laugh at; what they scorn, fear, or desire; and how they see themselves" ("From Anansi to Zomo" 259). Rudolfo Anaya affirms, "Stories help us understand and appreciate other people and place and they hold many valuable lessons" (16). In "Rip Van Winkle" Irving emphasizes the "antiquity" of the place "founded by some of the Dutch colonists in the early times of the province" (Irving 3), and his physical description of the village includes details such as windows, fronts, and imported bricks, giving the impression that the story takes place in a transplanted Dutch village. Irving employs the fictional folklorist Diedrich Knickerbocker as an external narrator looking back on old tales. Knickerbocker asserts that his stories are all true, claiming to have met Rip Van Winkle himself and assuring the reader that "authentic historians of those parts, who have been careful in collecting and collating the floating facts concerning this spectre" (33). He tells the audience a bit about Knickerbocker's scholarly interests that he was very curious in the Dutch history of the province and the manners of the descendants from its primitive settlers as well as his preference to study the people as a type of cultural history rather than gathering information from books. The authenticity of the place would have appealed to Knickerbocker, with questionable mental health. He died, leaving behind various writings which were subsequently sold off to pay Knickerbocker's outstanding debts.

Here the reader is allowed to believe in a history that is longer than America's relatively brief one. The same sense of history pervades the setting of "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" which allows a ghost story to exist. Irving says "Local tales and superstitions thrive best in these sheltered long-settled retreats, . . . for ghosts in most

of our villages, for they have scarcely had time to finish their first nap and turn themselves in their graves before their surviving friends have travelled away from the neighbourhood" (62) which can corroborate the existence of a headless horseman. One might shiver a little and think of the infamous spectre, "the apparition of a figure on horseback without a head . . . whose head had been carried away by a cannon ball, . . . and who is ever and anon seen by the country folk, . . . and the spectre is known, at all the country firesides, by the name of the Headless Horseman of Sleepy Hollow" (32, 33). Ichabod Crane the protagonist of the story after leaving his lover Katrina's house, is confronted by the headless horseman who follows Ichabod at an unthreatening pace until his horse, Gunpowder, begins to run on the haunted bridge. Ichabod loses his saddle but manages to stay on his horse until the horseman throws his head at Ichabod, knocking him from his horse. This incident comments on the transient nature of American communities in the early 1800s and is a reflection of a very real concern for many citizens faced with the rise of the Industrial Revolution.

It is important to remember that during this period there really was no such thing as an American literary tradition. Most of the literature written in America during this time was overly influenced by European, and particularly British writers of the same period because there was very little sense of an "American culture." The publication of these selected stories signalled the beginning of an American literature. American settings, American concerns such as the loss of traditions and the American dream are appealed to a vast (un-American) audience who were suddenly faced with the idea that American writers might have something to offer. The setting of these stories begin with the Dutch history of the area, and Irving goes on to describe the town as "one of the quietest places in the whole world," with a tranquil brook running through it and the sweet sounds of chirping birds all around. Irving delves into the town's history, citing Indian legends which say that the town is "bewitched," and that those who live there often have their eyes and ears playing tricks on them. His focus in the description of the two settings is to give the history of a little sleepy town, using an element of romanticism as well as the beautiful picture of the image of the "Kaatskill Mountains" and the village at its foot, to choose his peaceful, remote setting, and paying special attention to nature and native legends.

Several dichotomies and similitude are established in both the stories and are presented in an ironical way. For instance, Ichabod the protagonist of "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," an educated man, is in contrast with the peculiar character of its inhabitants, who are the descendants from the original Dutch settlers and "its rustic lads are called Sleepy Hollow Boys throughout all the neighbouring country. A drowsy, dreamy influence seems to hang over the land, and to pervade the very atmosphere" (31). Irving scorns the male pursuits of the local men of Dutch heritage and spends his time working his way into the hearts of the society. Likewise, in "Rip Van Winkle" Rip though not an educated man like Ichabod feels himself and coexists with the learned men in the town. Also to escape the constant harassment of his wife, he heads to the town square to join others on a bench in front of the small inn where there is "a kind of perpetual club of the sages, philosophers, and other idle personages of the village" (8). They used to sit in the shade through a long, lazy summer's day, talking listlessly over village gossip or telling endless sleepy stories about nothing. Sometimes by chance

they get an old newspaper from some passing traveller and "... they would listen to the contents, as drawled out by Derrick Van Bummel, the schoolmaster, a dapper, learned little man who was not to be daunted by the most gigantic word in the dictionary" (8). Jeffrey Insko points out that Irving's "body of work includes 'serious' histories and fictional sketches – among them 'Rip Van Winkle' and 'The Legend of Sleepy Hollow' – that are themselves deeply concerned with matters historiographical" (609).

The reader finds ironical elements in "Rip Van Winkle," as well as in "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow." Throughout the stories, observations are made by the reader about the characters Ichabod Crane, Katrina Van Tassel, Brom Bones, the headless horseman, Rip, Dame, Judith who are ironic in one or in another way. The irony lies in the fact that the protagonist Rip Van Winkle flees to the woods from his insulting wife, shirking his responsibilities as a husband and father. He confronts a short old man with bushy hair and a grizzled beard, wearing old Dutch clothing and carrying a keg. He helps the man with a keg, sees several oddly dressed men playing nine-pins silently, and drinks from a flagon and sleeps for twenty years in the mountains. He awakens, thinking of how angry his wife will be because he slept. Similarly, the irony in "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" is that the enterprising young man Ichabod, at the invitation to attend merrymaking in Van Tassel's house, thinks that he might make his appearance before his mistress in the true style of a cavalier. So he borrows a horse from a farmer, a broken-down plough horse, and he gallantly mounts like a knight-errant in quest of adventures. He tries to compete his rival Brom Bones's favourite steed Daredevil which is "full of mettle and mischief, and which no one but himself could manage" (Irving 58). His bare unwanted pride makes him to be vanquished by the spectral figure on a dark autumn night. Every time he is mentioned in terms of heroic possibilities, he is immediately made to look ridiculous. However, to a careful reader, the story is more than that.

The reader points out the evil temper of women and tells how the author makes sweeping generalizations about women and marriage in a ridiculous tone. Comments such as "a tart temper never mellows with age, and a shad tongue is the only edged tool that grows keener with constant use" (8) illustrate a typical male attitude toward women who speak their minds rather than playing the silent and submissive role designed for them. In "Rip Van Winkle," Irving paints a henpecked husband, a man who is constantly being nagged by his wife. His lack of industry has left him with "a mere patch of Indian corn and potatoes, yet it was the worst-conditioned farm in the neighbourhood" (6). It is the duty and responsibility of a male to work through a conflict whether it is with the weeds over his fields, or help his kids to wear out their clothes, or to help the wife in her daily chores. Ignoring such a fact the author comments that only because of the woman (Dame) the male (Rip) wanders up in the woods for twenty years. Here it is time to brood over the fact that a wife will not entertain a lazy husband to sit and enjoy his life while she is doing her household means.

Whereas in "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" Irving creates a young woman with an agenda, willing to use whatever weapons at her disposal whether it may be her beauty or her physic. Ichabod's lover Katrina Van Tassel who plays a major role in the inward life of Ichabod is depicted in a contradictory, ironical way. She is fully aware of her

beauty and her power, and is a contrast to her lover in such characteristics. Here the reader finds that the woman is considered as an "admirable" mystery and the male is described as that he does not conform to one of a strong favourite, but to that of an underdog: "He was tall, but exceedingly lank, with narrow shoulders, long arms and legs, hands that dangled a mile out of his sleeves, feet that might have served for shovels, and his whole frame most loosely hung together" (34). Also he is a ravenous eater and his appetite exposes his avariciousness and greed. The author equals the protagonist's love towards his lover Katrina to that of the food, considering her a tempting "morsel . . . plump as a partridge, "ripe and melting and rosy-cheeked as one of her father's peaches" (42). Terence Martin comments "Ichabod can swallow and digest anything; therefore he is always and increasingly gullible" (143). Although Katrina is not an irritable woman like Dame Van Winkle, her character type is one to be if not feared, at least watched as potentially dangerous.

Collections of folk literature are often compiled around a single theme or cultural origin. Irving is fully aware of his ideology concerning the accessibility of the "American dream" but instead of espousing those ideas, he creates characters that are decidedly ignoble but win anyway. Possessed by personal desire, Ichabod is so confident that he will one day acquire the beautiful daughter and the land of her father Baltus Van Tassel the wealthy Dutch farmer. His interest in Katrina has very little to do with any kind of romantic attraction to her but he has much more to do with her father's material possessions and – more to the point – the food her father can provide, such as land and the many animals that provide his sumptuous meals: "His heart yearned after the damsel who was to inherit these domains, and his imagination expanded with the idea, how they might be readily turned into cash" (Irving 45). This kind of personal desire is demonstrated by the American states, as their motives for Manifest Destiny transformed from those of exploration and expansion to dominance and control over the native people and their land. Lloyd Daigrepoint states "Ichabod [also] represents the modern debasement of imagination by materialism, a pious utilitarianism, and the idea of progress, particularly as these were supported in early 19th-century America" (72) and goes so far as to call Ichabod himself "a representative of progress" (73).

Ichabod's gluttony and greed over possessions may have reference to the growth of America. Just as the colonists of this new nation hungered for a better life, Ichabod hungers at the Van Tassel lands, "he pictured . . . the pigeons were snugly put to bed in a comfortable pie, . . . the geese were swimming in their own gravy; and the ducks pairing cozily in dishes, like snug married couples" (44). The endless description of food through the eyes of Ichabod is reminiscent of arming details. He cannot be an ideal knight as he lacks courage, chivalry, and finally he is not a warrior but a scholar. Hence it is clearly understood that Ichabod is the representation of the new budding nation. Youthful and inexperienced as it was, it is necessary to work its way up in the world. This adolescent America had proved its ambition to be free, but now hoped to gain the respect of the world, power in the world order, pride in itself, and a sense of nationalism to infuse its people. The rivalry between the two nations Europe and America proves the rivalry between Ichabod Crane and Brom Bones.

Terrell shows that “Old stories are like large snowballs rolling down a hill. They grow, gathering details with each telling. Sometimes they break apart into two or three stories; sometimes they hold together and become a cycle of related tales, or even an epic” (782). As it is pointed out by Terrell, the stories, after many rise and fall, finally seem to have happy endings, in that each character gets annoyed with each other. Both the stories are open ended: Rip’s return after 20 years of rest to find his friends have all died, to have a life without his wife though she is “a constant harassment” and also without his friends. Rip’s daughter though she takes care of Rip immediately, how long it will continue is not known. Modern readers are not satisfied completely with the endings. Ichabod too does not have to teach anymore while his lover Katrina and Brom are left to be married and expected to have a happy life. Modern readers are left to brood over the matters which are laid in front of them.

Irving, as a man of many talents, uses many stylistic ideas to create a fantastically detailed and descriptive romantic folk tale. It is through these stylistic devices he weaves the characteristics of a folk tale such as humour, hearsay, and local colour together to create a deliciously romantic story of nature, love, and supernatural events. Legendary phantom grants Irving’s tale the label as folk tale. These tales are over flown with opposing forces such as good vs. evil, known vs. unknown, supernatural vs. reality. These forces are presented as the victim and the victor, the underdog and the front-runner in order to understand the major significance of Irving’s tales. As a tale of opposing forces, the legend explicates rivalry, a rivalry between the characters Ichabod Crane and Brom Van Brunt, Rip Van Winkle and his wife Dame Van Winkle. These opposing forces face oppositions till the end. The rivalry in “The Legend of Sleepy of Hollow” is not only between the opposing forces of two characters, Ichabod and Brom but also between the slightly awkward underdog Ichabod and the powerful bully and a respected rival of Ichabod. Just as Great Britain used its power and strength to worry the colonies and then later the young American states, Brom uses his to harass Crane.

Cultures passed their values through the sharing of folk tales and brief narratives are handed down orally. Irving meant his tale to convey a warning to the budding nation of its vulnerability, its problems, and the obstacles and hardships that stand in the way of its success. While Irving and the other members of “the American literary nationalism of the 1820s. . . ultimately raised tough questions about the nation’s future, about its strengths and vulnerabilities, and about its character and potential as a democratic republic” (Levine and Krupat 934), these questions and criticisms, along with “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow,” are not without a sense of hope or optimism. Readers should remember that “Ichabod is not ultimately the loser in this legend. All he has lost is a farm girl’s love and a measure of self-respect; the former was no real passion, the latter can be repaired” (Hoffman 433–34). The American nation, like Ichabod, has the potential to grow up, to learn from mistakes, and then to thrive against all odds.

Works Cited

- Anaya, R. *My Land Sings: Stories from the Rio Grande*. New York: Morrow. 1999. Print.
 Blair, Walter. *Native American Humor*. New York: Norton, 1937. Print.

Washington Irving's "Rip Van Winkle" and "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" ... 51

- Daigrepont, Lloyd. "Ichabod Crane: Inglorious Man of Letters." *Early American Literature* 19.1 (1984): 68-81. JSTOR. Web. 15 Nov. 2010.
- Hoffman, Daniel. "Irving's Use of American Folklore in 'The Legend of Sleepy Hollow.'" *PMLA* 68.3 (1953): 425-35. JSTOR. Web. 9 Dec. 2010.
- Insko, Jeffrey. "Diedrich Knickerbocker, Regular Bred Historian Early American." *Literature* 43.3 (2008): 605-41. Project MUSE. Web. 11 Dec. 2010.
- Irving, Washington. *Rip Van Winkle and Other Stories*. England: Penguin Books. Print.
- Levine, Robert, and Arnold Krupat, eds. *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. 7th ed., Vol. B. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2007. Print.
- Martin, Terence. "Rip, Ichabod, and the American Imagination." *American Literature* 31.2 (1959): 137-49. JSTOR. Web. 15 Nov. 2010.
- Young, T.A., & Ferguson, P.M. "From Anansi to Zomo: Trickster Tales in the Classroom." Ed.M. Opitz. *Literacy Instruction for Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students: A Collection of Articles and Commentaries*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association. 258-74. 1998. Print.
- Young, Terrell A. & et al. *Folk Literature: Preserving the Storytellers Magic. Children's Books*. International Reading Association. 782-92. 2004. Print.