

## ANALYSIS

### “Rip Van Winkle” (1819)



Washington Irving

(1783-1859)

“Rip Van Winkle” became one of the most reprinted stories in history and was included in McGuffey’s readers, the popular textbooks used in American schools for almost a century (1836-1920), where it was introduced with headnotes that reduced it to a temperance tract--a warning that if you drink you might suffer the fate of Rip, pass out for who knows how long and waste your life. In the 19th century, drunken husbands were a major preoccupation of wives like Dame Van Winkle. Rip fulfills the common romantic desire to run away from problems or simply to wake up and find that the problems have disappeared. Irving recast the German folktale as a regional local color tale set in the Hudson River Valley, retaining the archetypal elements that give it more depth and mythic resonance than anything else he wrote.

In the opening, the Kaatskills are “fairy mountains” lording it over the surrounding country, giving dominance to wild Nature, a Romantic priority. Before the American Revolution the country is subordinate to Great Britain, just as Rip Van Winkle is “an obedient henpecked husband” subordinate to his wife, “for those men are apt to be obsequious and conciliating abroad, who are under the discipline of shrews at home.” The tale becomes allegorical: “There was one species of despotism under which he had long groaned, and that was--petticoat government.” With comic overstatement British tyranny is paralleled to “the tyranny of Dame Van Winkle.”

Irving is careful to indicate that Dame Van Winkle is an exception among women. Catering to his women readers, he compliments and assures them Rip “was a great favorite among all the good wives of the village, who, as usual with the amiable sex, took his part in all family squabbles, and...lay all the blame on Dame Van Winkle.” Rip is so generous “He would never refuse to assist a neighbor even in the roughest toil.” He runs errands for the other wives and does odd jobs for them while neglecting his work at home. Nevertheless, radical Feminists have gone so far as to censor the story because they dislike what they consider the stereotype of Dame Van Winkle. They give Irving no credit for reversing traditional gender roles, making the woman dominant. The amiable Irving is a Victorian in viewing “the amiable sex” as superior to men. In this story, however, he is egalitarian. Each of the Van Winkles fears the other for

equally good reasons. Rip is an archetype/stereotype of the irresponsible husband and father; and his wife embodies what men are most inclined to fear in their wives. Finally “reduced almost to despair,” he escapes her by going hunting in the mountains with his dog.

His journey with Wolf up into “one of the highest parts” of the forested mountains brings him through Wilderness and close to the Sky, corresponding to the archetypal individuation process: “There was something strange and incomprehensible about the unknown, that inspired awe.” However, Rip has this transcendental feeling while carrying a keg of liquor. He is less afraid of the dark wilderness than of “encountering the terrors of Dame Van Winkle.” As a result, his experience in the wilderness is pastoral. The stranger he encounters is short and bearing booze. The thunder is not even a storm, but a bunch of munchkins bowling, harmless figures out of a painting belonging to a parson. Apparently he is dreaming. His wilderness is tame. He is no hero of myth. By implication he gets drunk and passes out. Rip has no transforming experience, he does not enlarge himself and attain wholeness. When he comes to he is the same old Rip, though Irving may have intended otherwise, since he emphasizes that the dry gully Rip used as a route upward is now a leaping mountain stream. This is Romanticism. Individuation is a difficult lifelong process and you cannot evolve by running away or taking drugs. Nevertheless, Rip is so laid back and entertaining that once again he “grew into great favor.”

Rip is a dropout like Huck Finn, except that he is a grown man and a parent. A prototype of a hippie, he is a “simple, good-natured man” who plays with children and tells them stories, a pastoral fellow. His fault is “aversion to all kinds of profitable labor.” His estate dwindles away under his management and his children are “ragged and wild.” Usually a partisan Victorian feminist, Washington Irving finally rebels. He might claim to be paying his women readers a compliment, implying that “amiable” wives such as they are do not drive their husbands away. But he ends on behalf of “all the henpecked husbands in the neighborhood.” This tale is Romantic and male in wholeheartedly taking the side of Rip, the escapist. Poor unpopular Dame Van Winkle with her puritan virtues is forgotten, left to raise their children and manage their farm by herself while Rip rests in peace. R. I. P. What it comes down to is this: The man got ripped and abandoned his family. He resurrects himself after many winks--after all the work is done, the children are grown, his poor wife is dead from a broken blood vessel, the danger is over and the Revolution is won. No wonder Rip Van Winkle has a twinkle.

Michael Hollister (2015)