

## ANALYSIS

“The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” (1819)

Washington Irving

(1783-1859)

The legend has a pastoral setting “in the bosom” (heart) of the countryside, in a “sequestered glen”—“a little valley or rather lap of land among high hills, which is one of the quietest places in the whole world.” Likewise, the place names Tarry Town and Sleepy Hollow are pastoral, the diction and imagery evoking “repose” and “tranquillity,” “listless repose,” a “drowsy, dreamy” atmosphere, a place where people “walk in a continual reverie”—a sanctuary for Romantics like Irving.

The harmony and peace of this utopian Garden (except for spirited but harmless frolics and brawls by the gang of Brom Bones) is disturbed by an alien spirit of competition, by acquisitive ambition, and by the aristocratic pretense to superiority of an intruder from the City. The cartoonish Ichabod Crane is both the encroaching “machine” and the snake in the Garden: though lank, he had “the dilating powers of an anaconda.” He was a “perfect master of Cotton Mather’s *History of New England Witchcraft*, in which, by the way, he most firmly and potently believed.” The witchcraft trials of 1692 initiated by Cotton Mather and others had been discredited by 1819. Irving identifies Ichabod with what his audience would have considered a terrifying popular madness that resulted in the executions of innocent people. Hence this schoolmaster is dangerous to children.

Ichabod is “a native of Connecticut, a State which supplies the Union with pioneers for the mind as well as for the forest, and sends forth yearly its legions of frontier woodsmen and country schoolmasters.” He is a New Yorker’s satirical embodiment of New England culture, a representative schoolmaster whose head is dissociated from his heart, from reality and from Nature. Ichabod is pretentious, effete, feminized and so far out of touch with the real world he is a buffoon: “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. His head was small and flat at top, with huge ears, large green glassy eyes, and a long snipe nose, so that it looked like a weathercock perched upon his spindle neck to tell which way the wind blew.”

The people in Sleepy Hollow--the heart of Irving--are descendants of Crèvecoeur’s idealized American Farmer (1782). Brom Bones in his fox-tail cap (1819) is the brother of Cooper’s Natty Bumppo in his coonskin cap (1823-41). Bones and Bumppo are idealized New Yorkers portrayed as more in touch with Nature, reality and truth than New Englanders, who are ridiculed and sometimes portrayed as crazy. When he thinks he is in greatest peril, Ichabod “broke forth with involuntary fervor into a psalm tune.” Likewise in Cooper, ministers from New England who burst into song when under attack are thought by Indians to be insane. Irving and Cooper criticized the dominant New England culture in particular for its residual Calvinism, while affirming their own agrarian culture in the tradition of Thomas Jefferson. The tension in the early 19th century between New England and New York is comparable to the conflict between the industrial North and the agrarian South that contributed to the Civil War. Continued resistance by literary southern agrarians was declared in the manifesto *I’ll Take My Stand* (1930).

Though he expresses a lot of sentiment, the pastoralism of Irving is not “sentimental” in the sense of naive. The sign of evil in the story is a horseman with no head, supposed to be the spirit of a German mercenary decapitated during the American Revolution. Brom Bones is a prototype of the down-to-earth, all-American regular guy as hero, a man of action rather than words, boorish and uncouth, but gallant and courageous--so natural he is compared to a bear. His nickname Bones suggests that he represents what is most basic. He is the one best suited to figuratively inherit America. Though he *appears* to be “headless,” he has more sense than Ichabod, whose ideological New England education has made him “headless” in the sense of dissociating him from reality. Hawthorne later makes the same criticisms of Calvinism in stories such as “Young Goodman Brown” and “The Minister’s Black Veil.” Ichabod (icky bod) is no match for

Bones or Katrina and he has such a “soft and foolish heart toward the [fair] sex” that he is easily used by Katrina “to secure her conquest of his rival.”

In the Postscript, a “dry-looking old gentleman, with beetling eyebrows,” demands to be told “what was the moral of the story, and what it went to prove.” This critic is a Puritan like the one in Hawthorne’s “Main Street” (1849), who lacks imagination, is narrow, reductive, simplistic, moralistic and didactic, with no sense of humor. He lacks faith--the ability, in the phrase of Coleridge, to “suspend disbelief.” In contrast, Diedrich Knickerbocker, the teller of Irving’s legend, has “Faith, sir”--though he is also realistic and does not take his story as all literally true. In jesting response to the obtuse Puritan critic, he concocts morals so obvious it is clear they should not be necessary.

Ichabod the schoolmaster is like the Puritan critic--authoritative and stern and never sparing the rod. But Ichabod has imagination, and he is so timid that he gets scared away by a pumpkin: “The hair of the affrighted pedagogue rose upon his head with terror.” This story has been cited by defensive critics as an example of “anti-intellectualism.” But Ichabod is a pretender, not a true intellectual: “He had read several books quite through.” His head “was small.” He is a cartoon of typical pseudo-intellectuals in the grip of ideology and nonsense. Like liberal professors today. Ichabod is also related to Dr. Battius in Cooper’s *The Prairie* (1827), an academic fool who cannot even find his own ass in the dark.

Michael Hollister (2015)