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ENGL 3103

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America's New Manhood

When one looks back through history, it would seem that ideals of American manhood have changed since America was founded. Competing ideas of what a man should be abound in literature, causing an obvious question to arise: what does American literature say the ideal man should be? I've found that the codes of conduct for men in the earliest works of American literature, such as John Winthrop's sermon "A Model of Christian Charity" and John Smith's *A Letter to New England* are not represented in the conduct of men in later works of American literature. The writings of Washington Irving provide us with a picture of a transitional state in the American ideals of manhood. Analysis of Irving's "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" and "Rip Van Winkle" shows that America's independence from Britain also precipitated a shift in literary ideals of manhood.

For the purposes of this essay, I will evaluate what has long been held as American literary canon. Many would think (and rightly so) that only considering the works of white men in American literature is restrictive. My reason for analyzing these works is that I want to narrow my focus to the earliest recorded ideals of manhood in American literature—the writings of men such as John Smith and John Winthrop—and compare these works to those of similar men much later in American literature. The themes I will be studying will not necessarily reflect the ideals of manhood in other American cultures, such as African American culture, Asian American

culture, female American culture, and so forth. I am examining the literature of white American men so that I can compare apples to apples.

For early New Englanders—that is, those among the first community of individuals established in an embryonic America—the role of the man as head of the household was a key component in the essence of a man (Rotundo 9-11). The culture of England in the years prior to the emigration of colonizers in the 1600s was very community-centered. Many of the settlers that moved to America—specifically those that emigrated with John Winthrop in 1630—decided to leave their home country because Charles I attempted to centralize government power through the implementation of many new policies that forced English citizens into conformity to the Anglican church, as well as imposing new taxes (Breen 70-71; 79). Perhaps for some of the men, the loss of power in the community was considered a threat to their manhood. By moving more power to the monarch, Charles I would be taking power away from the patriarchs of the family units that dominated the manorial system of government of English society at the time.

While many aboard the *Arabella* with Winthrop were women and children, Winthrop's sermon "A Model of Christian Charity" was undoubtedly targeted toward the men on the boat—that is, the individuals who would be acting in the community according to the rules of their society. We can surmise, then, that any codes of conduct that Winthrop outlined are for men—specifically, in this case, white, property-owning men. His words are not to be taken necessarily as universal absolutes for all individuals.

Winthrop places much emphasis on the importance of providing for one's family. He asserts that "he is worse than an infidel who through his own sloth and voluptuousness shall neglect to provide for his family" (Winthrop 168). For Winthrop—and presumably for all of English society—laziness and neglect of one's manly duty is worse than renouncing one's

religion. John Smith also derides negligent behavior in men in *A Description of New England*, calling out fathers who are “foolishly fond,” “willfully ignorant,” and “negligently careless” (94). It is bad for a man to “toil out [his] heart, soul, and time, basely, by shifts, tricks, cards, and dice” (Smith 94); it is good for a man to “leave himself and his family under probable means of comfortable subsistence” (Smith 168). The writings of these early American men are very clear in averring that it is a man’s duty to provide for his family.

There were several reasons (none of which are particularly correct in their logic) that the men of the time used to justify being the only ones who could be the head of the household. One reason for this can be traced back to Puritan doctrine, which held that God had appointed Adam as Eve’s superior at the time of creation, and therefore man should be above woman in society. Many of the other arguments for the man being the only one qualified to lead the household were particularly derogatory toward women, citing the superiority of men’s physical and mental capacities as reason for their unquestionable right to leadership (Rotundo 10-11).

This aspect of manhood is closely linked to another ideal: the manly desire to “embrace employment” (Smith 94) and avoid idleness. One’s line of work was important not only for its quality of giving a man a means to provide for his family; it also was a measure for how much he could contribute to society. It was a common belief before 1800 that there was a link between manhood and social usefulness. Winthrop stresses the importance of a man’s contribution to society, specifically for those that have abundant financial means. He commands his listeners, “if thy brother be in want and thou canst help him, thou needst not make doubt, what thou shouldst do, if thou lovest God thou must help him” (Winthrop 169). It is their duty to provide to the community when someone in the community has a need.

A man is defined, then, chiefly by his relation to the community, which hinges upon the man's familial dominance and his career. These aspects are stacked together precariously to form an uneasy structure on which early American men build their identity. What happens, then, when one or more of these pillars, outlined in early American literature and long valued in white American culture, is compromised or removed? Washington Irving, an early 19th century writer, provides us with a picture of a new type of man that can thrive without relying solely on Winthrop's ideals.

My reason for jumping almost 200 years forward in the timeline of American literature to examine "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" (published in 1820) and "Rip Van Winkle" (published in 1819) is so that I can bring to light what is certainly a major transitional moment in American literature and society. While there were likely societal shifts during this period similar to the one I will be describing, there were none that reflect the formation of the identity of the new American male as Irving's works do. I have chosen to hone in on Irving's "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" and "Rip Van Winkle" because I believe that they provide a means for understanding the mutable mindset of American society.

The narrator of "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" describes Ichabod Crane as "a worthy wight" (Irving 43) and a man who was "esteemed by the women as a man of great erudition" (Irving 45). He is not, however, the typical man that would have been seen in an early American community. Rather than establishing himself and maintaining a family and a home, Crane chooses to live like a nomad, moving among the various farming homes in the town of Sleepy Hollow from week to week.

Conflict arises when Crane attempts to join the community through the courtship of Katrina Van Tassel, the "daughter and only child of a substantial Dutch farmers" (Irving 47). He

is met with much resistance by Brom Bones, “there hero of the country round” (Irving 49). Bones is renowned for his “great knowledge and skill in horsemanship,” his “feats of strength and hardihood,” and his “Herculean frame” (Irving 43). Irving intentionally sets up Bones as a gallant man on horseback so as to bring to mind the traditional hero of literature—that is, one similar to Hercules or a knight on horseback. By doing so, Irving provides readers with a more traditionally-recognizable manly man to balance the atypical Ichabod Crane. The competition between the two over the affections of the much sought after Katrina Van Tassel illustrates something of a conflict between two differing types of manhood. It is a struggle for social dominance between the old ideal of manliness, personified in Brom Bones, and a new ideal, personified by Ichabod Crane.

After much competition between the two men, Crane is expelled from the community “partly through fear of the goblin” (Irving 60) and “partly in mortification at having been suddenly dismissed by the heiress” (Irving 61) who would later marry Brom Bones. Van Tassel’s decision reflects the old American ideals of manhood in a town in which “populations, manners, and customs, remain fixed” (Irving 43). The narrator even wonders “whether [he] should not still find the same trees and the same families vegetating in its sheltered bosom” (Irving 43). Despite the changes brought on by immigration all around it, Sleepy Hollow still upholds traditional community values, so much so that the men of the town, who are chiefly “rough country swains” (Irving 45), did not understand the intellectual labor of a teacher and thought Crane to have “a wonderful easy life” (Irving 45).

It is only when Crane leaves this slow-moving town that he is able to profit—still as an unmarried, scholarly man—by studying law and becoming a politician. It appears that Irving exchanges the old ideals of manhood—those of a patriarch and a gallant, broad-shouldered hero

on horseback—with a new ideal of American manhood: an unmarried man of letters. This is significant for two reasons. Firstly, it marks the creation of a new literary male archetype, quite different from those of early English writers. Ichabod Crane is quite different than, say, Othello, Macbeth, or Titus Andronicus—men who were esteemed and respected because of their war campaigns. These men fought for their dominant roles in society with swords, while Crane earns his dominant role in society through erudition. The second reason that Crane is significant is that he embodies the societal move toward an independent, ambitious, unrestrained man. Crane does not have a family to support. He does not hail from a rich, prominent family. He does not settle in one place. Rather, Crane remains mobile and climbs into social standing through hard work. He was not bowing to the needs of a family or community. Through hard work, he carves his own path into prominent social standing, which was an approach that would become more appealing to early American men as the eighteenth century came to a close.

This movement to a new cultural ideal of manhood in America is seen again in the narrative of Rip Van Winkle. Rip is doubtless represented by Irving as an irresponsible, unmanly man. The narrator reveals that Rip was “a simple, good natured man” and that he was “a kind neighbor, and an obedient, henpecked husband” (Irving 30). He obviously does not fit the archetypal, hardworking family man that Winthrop and Smith presented as the ideal man—he didn’t keep his family’s farm in order at all, and his children were “as ragged and wild as if they belonged to nobody” (Irving 31); however, despite having “an insuperable aversion to all kinds of profitable labour” (Irving 31), Rip is loved by everyone in the community—even the dogs didn’t bark at him.

The only person who didn’t like Rip was his wife. Knickerbocker describes Dame Van Winkle as a “termagant wife” (Irving 33) who would often berate Rip for his idleness, and his

friends for encouraging this behavior quite unbecoming of a man. Rip had two places of solace from this woman. One was the “perpetual club of the sages, philosophers, and other idle personages of the village” (Irving 32). This group included the learned schoolmaster of the village, Derrick Van Bummel, and Nicholas Vedder, a patriarch of the village and the landlord of the inn that the men met in front of. Rip’s second place of solace was the nearby Kaatskill Mountains, which would play a pivotal role in his narrative.

The important thing to note about this group of philosophers is how their behaviors and professions differ from the ideals of American manhood that we have already identified as key to early American society. Van Bummel, although very learned, is not at all the Brom Bones type. Vedder, an established man of the village, does nothing but sit in front of his inn all day. He would only move from this spot to reposition his seat in the shade as the sun moved across the sky.

This group of men seem to represent a new type of man quite different from the laboring farmer that was key to early American society. The labor of Van Bummel may not seem like labor at all to the Brom Bones man. Vedder’s behavior seems downright lazy to any type of man. They are a different type of man—a type of man which Rip, who was constantly avoiding his manly labors at home, could relate to. The men who met here would commonly “talk listlessly over village gossips, or tell endless sleepy stories about nothing” (Irving 32)”; however, there would be times when profound discussions broke out amid their idle ramble. The addition of this detail emphasizes that the way they spend their time is not completely wasteful—although it is quite atypical of a hardworking family man.

Sadly, Rip loses this solace in the company of like-minded men at the hands of Dame Van Winkle, and is therefore forced to seek solace from “the labour of the farm and the clamour

of his wife” (Irving 33) by going far into the Kaatskill mountains with Wolf, Rip’s dog and “sole domestic adherent” (Irving 32). Rip spends much time away from his home village—twenty years, in fact. When he awakes from his mystical sleep, he comes back home to his village to find things in a quite different state than he had left them. Although his home is now in the independent America and not under the reign of King George, what matters most to Rip—and to us—is that Rip is no longer under the tyranny of Dame Van Winkle.

Dame Van Winkle represented the pressures of old manhood: the responsibility of the home and the family, the demand for labor. What we’ve already seen of Ichabod Crane, and how his fear of Brom Bones and scorn by Von Tassel caused him to escape the old-fashioned, unchanging village of Sleepy Hollow, reinforces perfectly my claim that Irving—and other white American male authors—were scared of manhood and the responsibilities that it entailed. What they sought, and what Crane and Rip found, was a new type of manhood, one free from the patriarchal responsibilities that came with being head of the household. The characters of Irving, who would become one of the contributors to the American literary canon, were turning—more precisely, fleeing—from the foundations of manhood laid out by Winthrop at the beginning of American society.

I hold that the reason for Irving’s decision to craft his male characters in such a way was to show how the formation of an independent American identity was bringing about a change in the way society would function. Male identity was moving away from submission to the needs of the community—both the domestic community of his home and the larger community—to independent self-assertion. This shift in male identity mirrors the American community’s shift in identity from a colony of England to its own independent country. Rotundo notes that in the late eighteenth century, Americans were “throwing off their belief in the virtue of submission” and

“[preparing] themselves for revolution” (15). If one sees “Rip Van Winkle” and “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” as societal critiques, then the picture becomes clear: the shifting communal ideals of American society surrounding the Revolution brought about a shift in ideals of American manhood, which is reflected in Irving’s works. The new white American male of the independent America was ambitious, self-driven, and free from the shackles of communal duty.

This new American man, which we see glimpses of in Irving’s works, was beginning to “[reject] the idea that [he] had a fixed place in any hierarchy, be it cosmic or social” (Rotundo 19). Although the political changes of America’s independence had no direct impact on Rip, the biggest shift in hierarchy in his life was that his desires were no longer subordinate to the domestic responsibilities of fatherhood. Similarly, Crane was no longer bound by the social pressure to settle down in his own home, marry, and pursue more socially acceptable labors for a man in the country. Instead, he had the freedom to find his own place in a new American community that did not require him to put aside his own ambition and desires for the needs of the community.

Winthrop’s early American man was a pillar in the foundation of a new society, but what close examination of the progress of American history and literature reveals is that once the society that emphasized primarily the needs of the community had been firmly established, it would be free to shift to the idea that “the individual, not the community, was the fundamental unity of society” (Rotundo 19). This attitude, which surfaced at the turn of the nineteenth century, is clearly illustrated in the character development of Rip and Crane. Irving’s works provide a look at the entire transformation of the American community—and, consequently, the white American male. Irving’s literature shows the change surrounding the turn of the nineteenth century to a new America that values the self more than the community, and would uphold for

centuries to come the ideal that “a man could now advance as far as his own work and talents would take him” (Rotundo 19).

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