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Professor Pittman

American Lit. I

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Washington Irving and the Not-So-American Myth

Washington Irving has often been revered as the father of American literature, and, more specifically, the father of the American myth. He was one of the first American writers to make a real living off his writing, and as such was considered to be America's personal declarer of independence within the literary world. Having been viewed as so undoubtedly *American* in his writings, one might find interest in the fact that Irving drew very heavily on European sources in his inexplicable creation of this nation's fiction, as it appears "he was not all that at 'home' with American life" ("Background: Irving the 'Historian'"). Some of Irving's most famous works, in fact, are near retellings of popular European fairy tales, predominantly of German origin, that are interlaced with several other European influences. "Rip Van Winkle," for instance, finds strong inspirational roots in a German folktale entitled "Peter Klaus the Goatherd," as well as in the German retelling of Sleeping Beauty.¹ Both tales find their origins in even older lore, adding up to create longstanding legends that focus on a central motif. Irving furthered the fantastic legacy of such folklore with his own writing, thereby creating the American myth in the process.

Whether Irving intended to become the great father of American literature he is considered to be today is up to debate. It is certainly true that he sought to entertain his American audience along with his European audience, but it seems that he may have been mocking the newly formed nation rather than venerating it. This idea is especially prevalent in

¹ The original tale of Sleeping Beauty is French, written by Charles Perrault, but because Irving seems to have drawn his inspiration from the German version, this essay will refer to the tale as told by the Brothers Grimm.

“Rip Van Winkle,” his most famous tale, which is interestingly renowned for its status as a wonderfully engaging and entertaining children’s story. The fact that Irving was America’s so-called declarer of literary independence is striking, considering that he seems to have held marginal disdain for budding American society, choosing the Old World over the New, and incorporating blatantly European themes into his writing. In Irving’s eyes, America was only good for its “charms of nature” (Irving, “The Author’s Account of Himself” 27).

Born in New York in 1783, Washington Irving—ironically named after the first president of the United States—did not always stay close to home, nor did he seem to hold his birthplace in very high regard. He even once referred to New York City as “the renowned and ancient city of Gotham” (“It Happened in History”). Upon first glance, this proclamation may not mean much to anyone, that is, until it is taken into account that the original town of Gotham, England was widely renowned for the unrelenting stupidity its residents. Having formed such a low opinion of American society, it seems rather fitting that Irving sought a more so-called *civilized* societal norm. While he did grow up in America and spend a good portion of his adult life there, he seemed to gravitate towards Europe, having spent two years abroad in his early twenties so as to overcome a case of tuberculosis (Reidhead 25). Upon his first return to New York, Irving began work on what he intended to be a parody of Samuel Lathem Mitchell’s *The Picture of New-York*, creating a fictional narrator by the name of Diedrich Knickerbocker and entitling the work *A History of New-York from the Beginning of the World to the End of the Dutch Dynasty* (Reidhead 25). This was the first work that earned widespread literary acclaim for Irving, thereby solidifying his position as a satirical writer while simultaneously earning his spot among other well-known American authors of the time, such as James Fenimore Cooper and Samuel Goodrich. Irving’s Dutch narrator was unique in the fact that he was advertised as being a real

person, when he was in all actuality a fictional being of Irving's own conception, brought to life in order to draw in and entertain readers with thinly veiled satire. Irving often targeted prominent people in his work, even satirizing President Thomas Jefferson as a Dutch governor named William the Testy (Reidhead 25).

It might seem rather peculiar that most of Irving's fictional characters, such as Knickerbocker and Rip Van Winkle, were Dutchmen who had settled in New York but who held onto their Dutch ways of life. His strong incorporation of Dutch culture into his so-called American writing illustrated early on just how interested in European culture he was. Rather than focus on the succinctly American feel of the time, Irving chose instead to write his characters into the predominantly colonial past, bestowing upon them deliberately European personae. As Edwin Bowen described it in *The Sewanee Review*, "Irving did not share the restless energy of the typical American. Unlike most of his countrymen he seems to have found more to interest him in the past than in the present or future" (182). Irving himself even admitted to his obsession with the European tradition in "The Author's Account of Himself," taken from his first installment of *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.*:

... Europe held forth all the charms of storied and poetical association. There were to be seen the masterpieces of art, the refinements of highly cultivated society, the quaint peculiarities of ancient and local custom.... I longed to wander over the scenes of renowned achievement—to tread, as it were, in the footsteps of antiquity—to loiter about the ruined castle—to meditate on the falling tower—to escape, in short, from the commonplace realities of the present, and lose myself among the shadowy grandeurs of the past. (28)

The truth in this statement is undeniable, especially when one takes into consideration the fact

that two of his most famous stories— “Rip Van Winkle” and “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” — are centered around European groups who are adamant about their Old World ways of life. In the opening statements of “Rip Van Winkle,” for example, Irving says this of the tale’s fictional author: “Whenever... he happened upon a genuine Dutch family, snugly shut up in its low-roofed farm house, under a spreading sycamore, he looked upon it as a little clasped volume of black-letter, and studied it with the zeal of a bookworm” (29). It would be apt to view Knickerbocker, being the advertised author of “Rip Van Winkle,” as a direct counterpart to Irving himself. In this way, it is clear that Irving did indeed find great interest in European custom, especially that of the Dutch and German variety.

In addition to his Old World setting, Irving drew inspiration from fairy tales and other types of folklore, some of which were considered antique even in the early nineteenth century. To properly juxtapose the ways in which he borrowed from such tales, however, the focal points of “Rip Van Winkle” must first be acknowledged. Originally published in 1819, this tale is set in the time directly before the Revolutionary War, when the Dutch settlers Irving writes of still paid their respects to England. A somewhat lazy protagonist, Rip Van Winkle spends a great deal of his time hunting in the Catskills with his dog in an attempt to escape the nagging of his shrewish wife. It is during one of these sojourns into the wilderness that a strange thing happens, and Rip does not come home for twenty years. While lazing beneath the quiet canopy, he spots an apparition of sorts, who has Rip assist him with carrying a large keg of liquor up a hill. Eventually, Rip and the strange man come to a hollow, where Rip witnesses an odd group of men—ghosts, in fact—all “playing at nine-pins” (“Rip Van Winkle” 34). As Rip is made to wait on the ghosts, he begins to sneak doses of the liquor he had previously carried up to them. Before he realizes what is happening, “one taste provoke[s] another, and... at length his senses

were overpowered... and he fell into a deep sleep (“Rip Van Winkle” 35). A deep sleep it is, indeed, as Rip does not wake up until twenty years have gone by. When he rises from his slumber and returns to town, he discovers that everything has changed. His nagging wife has died, his home is in ruins, and the country has been through a war for its independence. Rip’s declaration that he is a “loyal subject to the king” (“Rip Van Winkle” 37) is understandably viewed as treason by the those who have witnessed the Revolution and now praise General George Washington. Completely lost, Rip is saved only by the recognition of his now-grown daughter, who kindly takes him in and cares for him. Rip’s journey through time is an eccentric one, underscored by the blatantly European tradition it draws from in its attempt to perceive new America.

Perhaps the most obvious inspiration for Irving’s story is “Peter Klaus the Goatherd,” a German folktale written in 1800 (Reidhead 26). Much like Rip, the story’s namesake is a man content with doing nothing. While Rip prefers to be alone in the mountains, his dog and his gun his only companions, Peter Klaus spends his days in the pastures with no one to keep him company save his flock of sheep. Both characters are led to a hollow by a mysterious personage, Peter being led by a young “boy, who, without saying a word, silently [beckons] him to follow” (“Peter Klaus the Goatherd”), and Rip being led by a “short square built old fellow, with thick bushy hair, and a grizzled beard” (“Rip Van Winkle” 34). Just as Rip does, Peter comes upon a mysterious group of men playing at nine-pins, and he is made to assist them in their game. And, just like Rip, Peter finds himself sneaking drinks from the apparitions’ alcohol supply and falls into a twenty-year coma. Upon waking, Rip and Peter each find that their beards have grown “at least a foot” (“Peter Klaus the Goatherd”) and everything in their hometowns has changed. Peter is graciously taken in by the daughter who thought she had lost him, and he spends the rest of his

days with her and her family, just the same as Rip. Altogether, the similarities between this German legend and Irving's tale are undeniable. The degree with which Irving was inspired by "Peter Klaus" suggests that it was done so with great purpose, as if to say that, although America had gained its independence, it would never truly escape the clutches of Europe, nor would it ever be able to measure up to Europe's standards. Because Irving wrote during a time when there really were no well-known American authors, he perceived that America had no literary value as opposed to Europe, whose history was rich in literature and the arts. Irving certainly viewed Americans, including himself, as being inferior to Europeans:

I had... an earnest desire to see the great men of the earth. We have... our great men in America... But I was anxious to see the great men of Europe; for I had read in the works of various philosophers, that all animals degenerated in America, and man among the number. A great man of Europe, therefore... must be as superior to a great man of America, as a peak of the Alps to a highland of the Hudson; and in this idea I was confirmed, by observing the comparative importance and swelling magnitude of many English travelers among us; who, I was assured, were very little people in their own country. I will visit this land of wonders, therefore... and see the gigantic race from which I am degenerated. (Irving, "The Author's Account of Himself" 28)

Here, Irving politely throws some heavy-handed insults at American society. With one short paragraph, it is made abundantly obvious that he perceives American citizens to be far inferior to those of the European variety. In fact, he views everything in America as being subpar to what lies in Europe, and this feeling is only intensified when he decides to live abroad in Europe for seventeen years, starting in 1815 (Reidhead 26). Irving had an overwhelming desire to ingratiate himself in the so-called superior society Europe had to offer, and his writing reflects that desire

with ease. The time he spent abroad influenced his stories heavily, as is shown with the strong parallels between “Rip Van Winkle” and “Peter Klaus the Goatherd.”

Moreover, “Peter Klaus the Goatherd” is not the only legend Irving drew inspiration from when he penned “Rip Van Winkle.” His story also shares some striking similarities with the German tale of “Little Briar Rose,” better known as “Sleeping Beauty,” written by the Brothers Grimm. In this fairy tale, a king and queen desperately hope for a child, but have none. That is, until one day when a frog mysteriously appears while the queen is bathing and tells her that she will have a daughter “before a year has gone by” (“Sleeping Beauty”). The prophecy comes true and the queen gives birth to a strikingly beautiful baby girl. To celebrate, the king hosts a great feast and invites twelve magical women to the party, leaving a thirteenth without an invitation. The first eleven women bestow great blessings upon the baby, but before the twelfth can give her blessing, the furious thirteenth appears and curses the child to “prick herself with a spindle and... fall down dead” (“Sleeping Beauty”). The king and queen are devastated, but the twelfth woman steps in, and while she cannot completely undo the harm of the thirteenth, she prevents death by stating that “the princess shall not die, but fall into a deep sleep” (“Sleeping Beauty”). Now, the king attempts to rid his daughter even of this fate by burning all the spindles in the kingdom, and he thinks he has succeeded. However, fate has other plans, and in the Grimm version of the fairy tale, the princess meets her fate when she stumbles upon an old woman who has seemingly been locked in one of the castle’s towers with her spindle. She becomes entranced by the spindle, and “taking [it] into her hand she [begins] to spin; but no sooner [has] she touched it than... she [pricks] her finger with it... and lay in a deep sleep” (“Sleeping Beauty”), thereby becoming a true Sleeping Beauty. The princess slept for years on end, until finally she was awakened by the kiss of a prince, who married her and stayed with her

for the rest of her life. While Rip is not, in fact, a fifteen-year-old princess who is cursed to fall into a deep sleep simply by pricking her finger, he *is* led into a seemingly unending slumber by mystical means. In the same way that Sleeping Beauty is entranced by the spindle that ends up putting her in a coma, Rip is entranced by the strange old men and the mysterious keg of liquor he encounters in the mountains, which ultimately lead to his twenty-year sabbatical. The twelve magical women of the story correlate to the supernatural presence of the ghosts playing nine-pins, and the thirteenth could be seen to represent Rip's temptation to drink the mysterious alcohol that belongs to the ghosts. Additionally, the woman whom Sleeping Beauty finds in the tower with the spindle—and even the frog who foretells the princess's birth—juxtaposes nicely to the grizzled man who leads Rip to the hollow. When the princess finally rises from her comatose state, she is brought into the care of the prince who becomes her husband, just as Rip is brought into the care of his beloved daughter.

Clearly, there are quite a few notable similarities between these two texts. However, there is also one key difference: when the princess wakes, everything around her resumes just as it had before she pricked her finger, save that she gains a husband. When Rip awakens, on the other hand, he finds that quite literally everything about his home and country has changed. This was no accident on Irving's part, who was very deliberate in his choice to emphasize the changes that took place over a period of only twenty years. Unlike Rip, Sleeping Beauty's family did not die or even age while she slept. Her kingdom remained exactly as it had been when she fell asleep, and she was thus able to quickly acclimate to her waking life. Rip, however, had no such luck. The family he left behind when he succumbed to the magic of the ghosts and their liquor disappeared, leaving only his grown daughter in its wake. The people with whom Rip had shared a neighborhood were dead and gone, as was the period of English colonization and rule in

America.

It is clear from the uncanny similarities between “Rip Van Winkle” and “Peter Klaus the Goatherd,” as well as the parallels between “Sleeping Beauty” and the former, that Irving wrote from a distinctly European background. He wove new legends from those already in existence, managing to give young America a history of its own in the process. However, in borrowing from European lore, Irving also created an American myth that was highly non-American in influence. His recreation of Old World legends allowed him to give America a history, of sorts, to call its own, both lauding the nation as a true country while simultaneously mocking its need to repress Old World custom and back away from European culture. Signs of Irving’s feelings concerning this matter are riddled throughout “Rip Van Winkle,” as well as many of his other stories. “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow,” for instance, has a strong European background that suggests it “may have been inspired by... German, English, and Scandinavian folktales involving a headless rider chasing hapless travelers” (“Irving’s Legend: The Story Behind the Story”).

Irving’s ability to incorporate satire into his legends in such a way that the story comes across as funny and lighthearted while simultaneously displaying the harsh perception he had concerning America is exhibited gloriously in his writing. In his most famous tale, Irving is not praising the sudden changes that Rip observes upon waking, but rather bemoaning them. To the vast majority of the country, the Revolutionary War represented not only the beginning of the newly formed government, but also the beginning of America’s success story. To Irving, however, the American Revolution marked a shift from Old World paradise to “commercial and political Babel” (“Background: Irving the ‘Historian’”). This notion would certainly explain why Irving seemed so at home in Europe; it served as his Old World sanctuary. In his eyes, the rise of America symbolized the fall of the Old World traditions and customs he had come to

know and love. As a result, Irving wrote “Rip Van Winkle” not to praise the birth of America post-war, but instead to describe in great but vague detail its ascension to democracy more as a fall from grace rather than a rise to power.

Why, then, did the newly independent nation choose to laud someone so stuck in the British past as its greatest writer? It is true that Irving did much to satirize America’s budding government and society, but in doing so he also bestowed upon it a history that no one thought it could possibly have at such an early point. He laid the very foundation for the start of the nation’s literary movement not by writing about the rich history hidden within the new country’s structure, but rather by mocking the nation in such a crafty and entertaining way that it was nearly impossible not to perceive him as the type of author “to be read when one desires [particular] amusement and unfeigned delight” (Bowen 182). Whether Irving anticipated just how loved an author he would be even today is unknown, but he certainly wrote to entertain, otherwise he would not have been able to really make a living off his work. Even if Americans of his time were aware that his satire pointed to the new democracy as a failure and looked to the Old World past with reverence, they found enjoyment in his storytelling anyway. What they saw was not a derogatory commentary on their foolishness for turning away from European tradition, but rather a written proof of the fact that, yes, America was real and, yes, it had an established history that was uniquely its own. Of course, this was only the idealized claim of Americans. In reality, Irving’s writing did not denote a factual history, but rather a fictional one. When he wrote about Rip Van Winkle’s adventure in the mountains, Irving had never even seen the Catskills (Skinner), meaning that he had to fabricate much of the scenery he described in the story. So, despite the fact that Washington Irving lived a life filled with good-natured curiosity and humor, it is more apt to refer to him not as the father of American literature, but rather as the

father of the American myth, for his history was a fabricated one that described the rise of American society through negatively biased tunnel vision. He preferred the antiquated artfulness of European culture to the youthful promise for which America was then known, and he did a fantastic job of exhibiting such a preference in his satirical works.

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