Rip Van Winkle

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF WASHINGTON IRVING

Washington Irving was a fiction writer, biographer, historian, essayist and US ambassador who worked during the first half of the 19th century. He is most famous for his short stories "Rip Van Winkle" and "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow." Irving was born in New York and was named after General George Washington (who hadn't yet been elected President at the time of Irving's birth, as the Constitution had not been either written or ratified by 1783). Irving studied law before becoming interested in historical writing and short fiction. His writing eventually earned him fame and status, and he was one of the first American authors whose writings received international recognition. He spent 17 years living in Europe (primarily Britain and Spain) and was well regarded abroad. Later in his life he moved back to Tarrytown New York, and lived on an estate he named "Sunnyside." He left this estate to serve as the US ambassador to Spain for four years before returning. He continued writing and keeping up with correspondence until his death in 1859.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The story, technically, is set over the course of 20 years. It's opening occurs around 1769 or 1770, while it's second half after Rip wakes up takes place around 1789. The beginning of the story therefore takes place before the Revolutionary War, when the United States did not exist and the colonies were still colonies of England, and not even contemplating the revolution to come. The second part takes place after the war has ended, the United States has become an independent nation, the period of the Articles of Confederation is over and the Constitution has been ratified, leading to the first presidential election, which will result in George Washington becoming President. In short, the twenty years that Rip sleeps through contain extraordinary change on both a national and local level, with profound effects on how the people of the just-created United States perceived of themselves and behaved.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

"Rip Van Winkle" borrows much of its content from Dutch folklore and other mythologies. The story appeared in a book (called *The Sketchbook of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.*)alongside Irving's other very famous short story, "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," which displays a similar interest in mystical happenings and forces of nature. Though Irving's mythology is borrowed, the work represents a significant departure from its American predecessors by employing less formal and even vernacular language as well as emphasizing nature, magic, and other irrational forces. Much of these techniques are tied into Irving's Romanticist ambitions—he sought to emphasize individuality and nature in a country that was increasingly valuing communality and industry. Irving was writing at a time when America had recently fought once again for its freedom in the War of 1812 and was just starting to become an increasingly industrial and mercantile nation. His decision to set "Rip Van Winkle" before American Revolutionary War (and to imagine a hero who slept through the entire thing, thus serving as a kind of time capsule from the past) likely grew out of his nostalgic longing for a more peaceful past, before America was so determined to represent production and progress, and before the communality of "The American People" was emphasized over the individual. This American Romantic tradition would be carried on by writers like Nathaniel Hawthorne, whose short stories bear many thematic resemblances to Irving's.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** "Rip Van Winkle"
- **When Written:** 1817
- **Where Written:** England
- **When Published:** 1819
- **Literary Period:** American Romanticism
- **Genre:** Short story
- **Setting:** The Catskill Mountains, late 1700's
- **Climax:** Rip Van Winkle is bewitched by strange beings on the mountain and passes into a deep sleep. When he returns home, nothing is the same.
- **Antagonist:** Dame Van Winkle
- **Point of View:** The story has layered narrators; the omniscient voice of the author presents us with the first person account of the fictional historian Diedrich Knickerbocker, who has personally investigated and recorded the events of Rip Van Winkle's story.

EXTRA CREDIT

Just in Time. Washington Irving also wrote a comprehensive biography of his namesake George Washington, which he completed less than a year before he died.

Overnight Success. Irving composed his first draft of "Rip Van Winkle" over the course of just one night in Birmingham, England.

PLOT SUMMARY

Diedrich Knickerbocker, an old New York gentleman with an interest in the histories and stories told by the descendants of Dutch settlers in New York in the early 19th century, narrates the story of a simple, good-natured man named Rip Van Winkle, who lives in a small village in the Catskills. Though Rip comes from a family full of chivalrous and militaristically successful men, he is unconcerned with such things and is chiefly occupied with shirking his duties to his home and family and avoiding his nagging wife, Dame Van Winkle. He spends most of his day out of the house with his dog Wolf, where his wife can't reach him as easily, either talking with townspeople at the **inn**, hunting squirrels, fishing, or helping on farms other than his own.

One day Dame Van Winkle is so persistent in her haranguing pursuit of Rip that he flees to the woods with his gun and dog. He absently follows a squirrel high into the Catskill Mountains and ends up taking a nap. Just as the day's light is fading and Rip is preparing to go back down the mountain, he encounters a stranger. The stranger is holding a stout keg on his back, and Rip, drawn by some mysterious force, helps the stranger carry the keg to the top of the mountain, where he finds strange men wearing antiquated clothing playing ninepins (these men are the spirits of Hendrick Hudson and the crew of the Half Moon, though Rip doesn't know that). Rip is instructed to serve them a **drink** that is so enticing that Rip secretly tastes some himself, and then consumes it immoderately and falls into a deep sleep on the mountain.

When Rip wakes up he assumes he has slept through the night, and worries about the backlash he will face from Dame Van Winkle. But soon it becomes apparent that something strange has happened. The gun by his side is an old and rusty one, and his beard is now a foot long. His joints are stiff, and he finds it difficult to climb the mountain. He tries to locate the peak on which he fell asleep but cannot find it. Wolf is also nowhere to be found, and after searching for him as long as he could, Rip apprehensively descends the mountain with the rusty gun, dreading his reunion with his wife. Though the path is nowhere to be found and the landscape is strange, Rip successfully makes his way back to the village.

On the outskirts of the village a group of children—none of whom are familiar to Rip—chase after him and point at his beard. Rip notices that the village is now larger and more populated. New houses line the roads and unfamiliar faces peer out at him from windows. Perplexed, Rip finds his old house. He expects to hear his wife yelling at him shrilly, but never does. What's more, his house is dilapidated, as though no one has tended to it in a very long time. He sees a dog that resembles Wolf, but the dog is dirty and emaciated, and does not recognize Rip. He goes to the inn to look for his old friends and finds in its place the **Union Hotel**.

Rip introduced himself to the strangers at the hotel as a "loyal subject of the king" but this is met with outrage. He discovers that 20 years have passed since he went up the mountain. The American Revolution has taken place. His friends and neighbors Nicholas Vedder and Brom Ducher are dead, and Derrick Van Bummel is working in the newly established American Congress. His son Rip Van Winkle Jr. has grown up to be just like his father, and his daughter Judith has married and has a child (Rip Van Winkle III). The townspeople come to believe Rip's story on the mountain after his tale is corroborated and explained by the oldest man in town, Peter Vanderdonk, and the townsfolk eventually turn their attention back to the upcoming presidential election. Rip moves in with his daughter and spends the rest of his days living as he did prior to his disappearance, only now he has no need to fear his wife's intrusion and lives freely and peacefully.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Diedrich Knickerbocker – Knickerbocker is the fictional historian who narrates the story of Rip Van Winkle. We learn that Knickerbocker has died shortly after composing this history. Formerly an "old gentleman of New York," Knickerbocker fostered a keen interest in the history of the Dutch settlers of New York, and preferred to do research by obtaining first person accounts as opposed to turning to books. He had the capability and intelligence to concern himself with "weightier labours" but nevertheless focused on enjoyed his hobby thoroughly until his death, and is generally well remembered by common people in his community, if not by critics.

Rip Van Winkle – The protagonist of the story, Rip Van Winkle is a genial, passive man living in a small Dutch province in the Catskills, who spends his time engaging in work that is not useful or profitable, such as hunting squirrels and doing odd jobs in houses and gardens that aren't his own. He is the "henpecked husband" of his constantly nagging wife, Dame Van Winkle, from whom he is often hiding, and who is the cause of most of Rip's unhappiness. Rip ventures up to the top of a mountain one day while squirrel hunting and encounters strange beings who bewitch him with liquor such that he sleeps for 20 years, missing the American Revolution and the dramatic transformation of both his town and the country around it.

Dame Van Winkle – Rip Van Winkle's wife is a sharp-tongued and nagging woman whose only role in the story is to antagonize and hound her lazy husband, who avoids all domestic duties. Though Dame Van Winkle's unceasing harassment of her husband is mentioned frequently, she has no dialogue in the story and remains a kind of comical background force. She dies while Rip is asleep on the mountain, from

"breaking a blood vessel in a fit of passion at a New England Peddler."

Rip Van Winkle, Jr. – The son of protagonist Rip Van Winkle and Dame Van Winkle. Rip Jr. is determined to grow up to be just like his father. The reader sees at the end of the story that he has succeeded in this (which also means that he has avoided succeeding in much of anything else).

Derrick Van Bummel – Derrick Van Bummel is the schoolmaster. He is an educated and articulate man who eagerly participates in earnest discussions of the news contained in old, outdated newspapers with other townspeople at the **inn**. He becomes a great militia general in the war and, after the war, eventually becomes a member of Congress.

Nicholas Vedder – Nicholas Vedder is the landlord of the old inn, who sits all day in the shade of a large tree, who speaks very little, and whose opinions are indicated by the way he smokes his pipe: short puffs when he is displeased, and long tranquil puffs when he is pleased. He is dead by the time Rip wakes up from his long sleep.

Hendrick Hudson / the crew of the Half Moon – Hudson was a 17th century explorer of the New York metropolitan region, most famous for sailing up the Hudson river (which now takes his name). He was lost at sea after mutineers set him and several other members of his crew adrift. In the story, the spirit of he and his crew haunt the highest peaks of the Catskills. They lure Rip Van Winkle to the top of the mountain, where they play ninepins and provide Rip with **a drink** that keeps him asleep for 20 years.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Judith Gardenier – Rip Van Winkle's daughter, and eventual mother of Rip Van Winkle III. Rip moves in with Judith after his return from the mountain.

Rip Van Winkle III – The grandson of Rip Van Winkle, and the infant child of Judith Gardenier and her husband.

Peter Vanderdonk – The "most ancient" inhabitant of Rip Van Winkle's village, Peter Vanderdonk is the one person able to recall Rip Van Winkle after his 20-year absence. He corroborates Rip's story to the townspeople and thereby ends the confusion surrounding Rip's strange return.

Jonathan Doolittle – The owner of the **Union Hotel**, the establishment that has taken the place of Nicholas Vedder's inn after Rip's return.

Brom Dutcher – A neighbor of Rip Van Winkle. He dies in the Revolutionary War.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

TYRANNY VS. FREEDOM

"Rip Van Winkle" examines various kinds of tyrannical power: the tyranny of marriage, the tyranny of day-to-day responsibilities, and the more literal tyranny of King George III of Britain over his American subjects. The story poses various questions about how we can maintain our freedom in face of these tyrannies. By extension, the story also prompts us to wonder what "freedom" from tyranny means, what a "tyrant" really is, and how America and its citizens are especially in need of answers to these questions.

Rip Van Winkle's long nap has the primary effect of freeing him from three major kinds of tyrannies: the tyranny of government, the tyranny of marriage, and the tyranny of societal expectations. Before his sleep, he is a subject of King George III, the henpecked husband of the ever-nagging Dame Van Winkle, and a man in the prime of his life—he is physically able and reasonably expected to work. But he sleeps through the American Revolutionary War. When he wakes from his nap, therefore, he is freed of the King's tyranny. Additionally, during Rip's nap his wife dies after bursting a blood vessel during a tirade she was delivering to a New England merchant. Rip is especially ecstatic about this particular liberation from a tyrannical marriage. Rip no longer has to obey (or, more frequently, hide from) the commands of Dame Van Winkle. And lastly, Rip's nap has aged him to the point when no one expects him to be productive or even busy. He can live unbothered by the King, his wife, or the expectations of his community. But the reader should note that after his nap, Rip goes on living much the same way he did before, suggesting that perhaps he was free even when tyranny abounded. Irving seems to be asking us if tyranny is really an insurmountable restriction upon living freely, or if it is merely an obstacle the free must overcome with persistence and creativity.

It is even suggested that Diedrich Knickerbocker himself (the fictional historian who narrates Rip's tale) is exercising his own freedom by doing so. We are told his time would have been better spent pursuing "weightier matters," but nevertheless Knickerbocker sticks to his hobby even in the face of critical scorn, economic failure, and the societal expectation that he should be doing otherwise. He freely "rides his hobby in his own way." In this sense, "Rip Van Winkle" is not only a story *about* freedom, but also an *example* of freedom. Knickerbocker performs the very freedom about which he writes.

"Rip Van Winkle" was written in 1817, and published in 1819. The United States was still new, and had only recently endured the War of 1812, during which it was reasonable to question

the country's continued freedom from the British. Narratives about freedom would have addressed important questions the United States and its citizens had for their government and themselves. "Rip van Winkle", for instance, seems to suggest that personal freedom is available to the individual regardless of external circumstances. Rip and the author who writes about him can then be seen as free in spite of the various tyrannies that threaten that freedom. This story about the persevering freedom of the individual would have certainly been interesting (and perhaps comforting!) to American readers in a time when the freedom of the collective nation of the United States of America was still perceived as fragile.

ACTIVE VS. PASSIVE RESISTANCE

Though Rip Van Winkle values his own freedom greatly, he cannot be said to actively fight for it. Rip is the perfect example of a passive resistor. He responds to his wife (and eventually to the mention of his late wife) by throwing up his hands, shaking his head, and looking up at the sky. This characteristically resigned gesture neither denies nor accepts. What's more, when Dame Van Winkle was alive, Rip freed himself from her simply by avoiding her. There is never a single moment of confrontation between Rip Van Winkle and Dame Van Winkle, despite the fact that she is Rip's primary antagonist. Rip's passivity in attaining freedom from King George III is even more pronounced: he becomes a free citizen of the United States by napping peacefully through the American Revolution.

Rip's passivity is held up in contrast to various examples of active resistance. One of Rip's friends dies in the War. Another ends up working in the American Congress. Both of these men became integral to the birth of a new nation. The patriot in front of the **Union Hotel**, so focused on the upcoming election, is another figure who is actively maintaining the integrity of the new democratic America. Even the spirit of Hendrick Hudson, who bewitched Rip on the mountain, calls to mind active resistance and revolt: Hudson was a Dutch ship captain who was violently overthrown by mutineers on his boat and set adrift, never to be seen again. He and the other characters tied up in the activity of revolt, revolution, and nation building help to set Rip apart as distinctly *not* active.

This division between passive and active resistance could be seen as a response to the country's violent recent past. Perhaps Irving's suggestion, by making an almost impossibly passive character the protagonist and hero of the story, is that passivity is (or can be) effective. Rip is free, generous, kind, and happy—without fighting, campaigning, or competing. Irving (in line with the American Romanticism his writing exemplified) might be wondering if America's incessant emphasis on industriousness and active patriotism is in fact necessary for the happiness and fulfillment of its citizens.

TRUTH, HISTORY AND STORYTELLING

"Rip Van Winkle" is a framed story, in which a fictional storyteller (historian Diedrich Knickerbocker) is said to have collected it and in so doing establishes the story's status as a credible *historical* account. But we have reason to doubt its status as such. Knickerbocker does not research using historical texts. He instead collects his stories straight from the mouths of Dutch families. His historical "research" consists of oral storytelling. What's more, the story includes obviously mythological and magical figures, the "strange beings" that "haunt" the Catskill Mountains (later revealed to be the spirit of mutinied ship Captain Hendrick Hudson and his remaining loyal crew). The story opens with a poem about truth; but in the first paragraph Knickerbocker notes the "magical" beauty of the Catskills. There is the immediate suggestion that "Truth" is not the same as "historical fact."

We know that Knickerbocker has spoken with Rip Van Winkle, whose own story is (we're told) beyond doubt, but we are also frequently being clued in on details that make the account seem less reliable. For instance, Rip cannot keep his story straight the first few times he tells it, but we are led to believe his eventual consistency is reason enough to believe him. We are repeatedly prompted (paradoxically by Knickerbocker's constant reassurance) to wonder what is real and what isn't—and what "truth" itself consists in. Where does the line between history and fiction occur, and can "truth" still be present where facts are in dispute?

Washington Irving was himself a historical writer and biographer as well as a fiction writer in the tradition of American Romanticism. So, his interest in the relationship between truth and fiction, history and the mystical or irrational, is unsurprising. At the time of "Rip Van Winkle's" publication, America was growing and beginning to construct its national identity. Perhaps the conflation of "history" and "fiction" demonstrated by Diedrich Knickerbocker is meant to suggest that storytelling, art, and culture develop a country's history and identity as much as so-called "factual" events do. Irving's interest is not only in compiling America's historical record, but also in developing (and calling for the further development of) an American mythology, American folk history, and a new and distinct American voice.

LABOR VS. PRODUCTIVITY

"Rip Van Winkle" distinguishes between labor on its own and productive labor, or that which is profitable. Rip is the most obvious example of someone who labors without profit. He is happy to help in gardens and farms that are not his own—while his own land becomes severely run-down. He will hunt squirrels or fish all day, even if he knows he will have very little to show for it.

Though he is busy, he is not productive. Additionally, Derrick Van Bummel, the highly intelligent schoolmaster who has earnest discussions about long out-of-date newspapers with others at the old **inn**, is notably occupying himself with an ultimately irrelevant exercise. (Van Bummel's later work in the American congress suggests he eventually reforms himself into a productive laborer.) Knickerbocker himself, it is suggested, is also guilty of laboring without productivity. He slaves over his historical accounts though they are believed by most to be—however thorough and accurate—basically inconsequential.

In the early 1800's America was an increasingly industrious, mercantile, and profit-driven culture. The cultural emphasis on productivity was ever-present. The idea that Americans—like Knickerbocker or Rip Van Winkle—might labor not out of a desire to advance and be productive, but rather out of generosity, interest, or the simple pursuit of joy was perhaps refreshing to Irving and his readers, who would have felt the increasing pressure of their growth-obsessed culture. This idea, of resisting industrialization and hyper-productivity, is something that would only intensify in certain strains of literature over the course of the century as the Industrial Revolution spread across Europe and the US.

CHANGE VS. STASIS

There is a dynamic tension in "Rip Van Winkle" between change and stasis (and by extension past and future). When Rip wakes up on the mountain he returns to discover that everything has changed. The town is bigger and more populous, his children are grown, his wife is gone, and he now has a grandson. Plus, the Unites States of America is now an independent free nation and Rip is no longer a subject of the King. All of this is true, yet Rip eventually resumes living just as he did before.

Because Rip manages to live through the American Revolution without participating, his perspective is uncontaminated by the tumultuous change that brought the US from the past to the present. As a result, the town comes to regard Rip as a kind of keeper of the past. They gather around him and listen to his stories every day at the Union Hotel. Rip functions as the link between the past before the Revolutionary War and the future after it. Rip's stories are attractive in two ways: one as a connection to a nostalgic past now lost to history given that the world and the country had changed dramatically and profoundly, and yet in many ways Rip is a comforting example of the fact that life goes on as it did before. In addition, the fact that Rip Van Winkle Jr. has grown to be indistinguishable—in both appearance and behavior from his father—suggests even more thoroughly Rip's almost mystical continuity. And, of course, at end of the story we meet the infant Rip Van Winkle III.

It is as though the story wants us to believe that some version of Rip Van Winkle will always live—lazily and happily—in the Catskills, regardless of the rapid change of his environment. This again is a very clearly romantic gesture on Irving's part, indicating a nostalgia for the past and a suspicion of political and technological advances that were rapidly changing the American experience and the American landscape during the time Irving was writing. And it is also an insistence that the past as represented by Rip Van Winkle will live on within that future.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE INN

The inn is where, prior to Rip Van Winkle's long sleep, he and other townspeople spend their days. The inn functions as a locus for unproductive activity, and represents the peace and rest of the past, before America violently revolted against the King of England and began to vigorously build itself as an independent nation. The old innkeeper Nicholas Vedder spends the whole day sitting under the shade of the big tree, moving when the shade moves. His pursuit is of tranquility and nature, rather than productivity and profit. Schoolmaster Derrick Van Bummel wastes his considerable mental faculties debating events in outdated newspapers with others at the inn, and the inn is where Rip avoids his wife and his domestic duties. The inn is a figure for passive resistance and idle amusement. A sign bearing the face of King George III overlooks the activity of the inn. It becomes symbolic and significant especially in its oppositional relationship to the establishment that replaces it, **The Union Hotel**.

THE FLAGON OF DRINK

The drink is a symbolic representation of the passive escapism that Rip Van Winkle (and other henpecked husbands) so desperately long for. It's delicious irresistibility gestures to the seductive power of escape—and the drink does in fact provide escape from responsibilities, duties, toils, and from history itself.

THE UNION HOTEL

The Union hotel represents the inverse of the old inn. It is now occupied by industrious political activists, who, instead of lazily concerning themselves with outdated news, are occupied by the upcoming Presidential election. The tree under which the old innkeeper used to sleep has been replaced by a flagpole flying the stars and stripes of

the union—this is an ominous sign of the new America's increasing interest in industry and patriotism displacing a love of nature. George Washington's face, also, has replaced King George's. Where previously the inn had been a place of idle amusement overseen by a generally absent tyrant, it is now a place of industry, labor, and patriotism.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin Classics edition of *Legend of Sleepy Hollow and Other Stories* published in 1999.

"Rip Van Winkle" Quotes

The old gentleman died shortly after the publication of his work, and now that he is dead and gone it cannot do much harm to his memory to say that his time might have been much better employed in weightier labors. He, however, was apt to ride his hobby in his own way.

Related Characters: Diedrich Knickerbocker

Related Themes:

Page Number: 28

Explanation and Analysis

The short story begins with a "framing device"--we're told that the story we're about to read was compiled by one Diedrich Knickerbocker. By drawing attention to this fictional author, Irving encourages us to question the truth of the story itself, while also giving it the flavor of historical veracity mixed with personal legend and experience.

Furthermore, the avatar of Deidrich Knickerbocker allows Irving to exercise some false modesty about his own writing--he claims that the story is subpar, or perhaps not worth the reader's time ("his time might have been much better employed in weightier labors"), and yet Irving's aside is *also* an early reference to the themes of memory, productivity, and idleness in the story. What is the point of writing, or pursuing one's particular "hobby"? Irving seems to ask us. Perhaps there's no more point to writing than there is to sleeping.

There have been various opinions as to the literary character of his work, and, to tell the truth, it is not a whit better than it should be. Its chief merit is its scrupulous accuracy, which indeed was a little questioned on its first appearance, but has since been completely established; and it is how admitted into all historical collections as a book of unquestionable authority.

Related Characters: Diedrich Knickerbocker

Related Themes:

Page Number: 28

Explanation and Analysis

In the framing device of the short story, Irving playfully insists that the story we're about to read is accurate—and then he deliberately creates confusion about its accuracy. We're told that Knickerbocker was scrupulously accurate in his writing; yet we're also told that there have been serious questions about the contents of his stories.

As we'll come to see, Irving is right: the story is both true and false. On a literal level, there was no Rip Van Winkle. And yet the story uses metaphor and fantasy to convey a deeper, historical truth--the rapid changes that took place in the United States during Irving's lifetime, and during the generations immediately before his own.

The great error in Rip's composition was an insuperable aversion to all kinds of profitable labor. It could not be from the want of assiduity or perseverance; for he would sit on a wet rock, with a rod as long and heavy as a Tartar's lance, and fish all day without a murmur, even though he should not be encouraged by a single nibble…in a word, Rip was ready to attend to anybody's business but his own; but as to doing family duty, and keeping his farm in order, it was impossible.

Related Characters: Diedrich Knickerbocker (speaker), Rip Van Winkle

Related Themes:

Page Number: 30

Explanation and Analysis

Rip Van Winkle, as Washington Irving describes him, is both a quintessentially American archetype and noticeably un-American. Winkle embodies the popular 19th century American brand of Romanticism, embraced by writers like Walt Whitman and Herman Melville. Just as Whitman

celebrated those who "loaf and lounge," Irving affectionately portrays Winkle, a lazy man who seems to be mortally frightened of doing any *useful* work -- he's busy all the time, but never doing the things he seemingly out to be doing. (He's like someone who spends more time and effort figuring out how to cheat than it would take to just study for the test.)

And yet Winkle is also distinctly un-American. His inability to provide for his family and take care of his land puts him at odd with the dominant ethos of the early 19th century. Thomas Jefferson argued that American democracy could only succeed with the ingenuity of the American farmer; a figure who had to be able to own land and take care of it himself. Winkle, of course, can do nothing of the kind.

> His son Rip, an urchin begotten in his own likeness, promised to inherit the habits, with the old clothes of his father.

Related Characters: Diedrich Knickerbocker (speaker), Rip Van Winkle, Rip Van Winkle, Jr.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 31

Explanation and Analysis

In the early pages of his short story, Washington Irving depicts an ironical "lineage" for Rip Van Winkle and his family. Rip is a lazy guy, and his son is destined to be lazy too. While Irving could be said to criticize Rip and his kid for their habits, his tone is remarkably affectionate and easy-going--he seems to admire Rip for his slow pace and calm way of looking at life, in contrast to the increasingly frantic industriousness of the American ethos surrounding him.

There is, in short, a reassuring familiarity in Irving's description of Rip and his son. We *know* that Rip's kid will grow up to be just like his dad--that's the natural order of the universe. But as we'll soon see, the natural order of the universe will disappear in the turbulence of Rip's (sleeping) life and the events of the American Revolution.

> Rip Van Winkle, however, was one of those happy mortals, of foolish, well-oiled dispositions, who take the world easy, eat white bread or brown, whichever can be got with least thought or trouble, and would rather starve on a penny than work for a pound

Related Characters: Diedrich Knickerbocker (speaker), Rip Van Winkle

Related Themes:

Page Number: 31

Explanation and Analysis

Washington Irving conveys the full extent of Rip's pleasant laziness in this passage. Rip, we're told, is almost incapable of doing work. He enjoys his leisure, and avoids doing labor even when doing so would benefit his fortunes greatly.

Rip is, in short, a distinctly American character. He lives in a place where it's still possible to do little work and still live off the "fat of the land." At the time when Irving was writing, however, the world that Rip stood for--the world of free soil and free food--had almost vanished. Thus, there's something deeply nostalgic and sentimental in Irving's portrait of Rip: at a time when human beings were increasingly being measured and judged based on their capacity to do hard work, Rip's idleness is a blessing, not a sin.

> His wife kept continually dinning in his ears about his idleness, his carelessness, and the ruin he was bringing on his family. Morning, noon, and night, her tongue was incessantly going, and everything he said or did was sure to produce a torrent of household eloquence. Rip had but one way of replying to all lectures of the kind, and that, by frequent use, had grown into a habit. He shrugged his shoulders, shook his head, cast up his eyes, but said nothing.

Related Characters: Diedrich Knickerbocker (speaker), Rip Van Winkle, Dame Van Winkle

Related Themes:

Page Number: 31

Explanation and Analysis

The final ingredient in Rip's life is his nagging wife. Rip's wife doesn't share his fondness for idleness and leisure--on the contrary, she wants Rip to work hard to support her and their child. Rip resents his wife's nagging, but not enough to lash out against her. Instead of yelling back, or actually changing his behavior, just Rip shrugs and says nothing.

Rip's actions (or rather, his *lack* of actions) signal to us that he's afraid to "rebel" against his wife's tyranny. Rip could be said to stand for the average American leading up to the

time of the Revolutionary War--dissatisfied with English rule, but reluctant to do anything to upset it.

> How solemnly 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; and how sagely they would deliberate upon public events some months after they had taken place.

Related Characters: Diedrich Knickerbocker (speaker), Derrick Van Bummel

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 32

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, we're introduced to the "wise man" of the community, Derrick Van Bummel. Derrick claims to be an educated man (although Irving never gives us any real evidence that he is), and spends long hours at the Inn talking about the "news" that he finds in old, discarded newspapers.

The passage does a good job of subtly conveying the disjointedness of life in Rip's community. Rip's town as a whole is isolated from the rest of the world--even when the people get their hands on a newspaper, it's hopelessly out of date. It's as if the entire town operates on a different schedule than the rest of the world. In other words, Rip isn't all that different from his town itself. For the time being, Rip lives in a place that enables his lazy, unproductive, but overall pleasant way of life.

> On nearer approach, he was still more surprised at the singularity of the stranger's appearance. He was a short, square-built old fellow, with thick bushy hair, and a grizzled beard. His dress was of the antique Dutch fashion—a cloth jerkin strapped around the waist—several pair of breeches, the outer one of ample volume, decorated with rows of buttons down the sides, and bunches at the knees.

Related Characters: Diedrich Knickerbocker (speaker), Hendrick Hudson / the crew of the Half Moon, Rip Van Winkle

Related Themes:

Page Number: 33

Explanation and Analysis

Here we're introduced to the mysterious figure of a Dutchman (later revealed to be Henry Hudson, the famous explorer). The figure, we later deduce, is a ghost, haunting the wilderness area around Rip's town. Irving conveys the Dutchman's old-fashioned demeanor by describing his clothing and beard.

The Dutch occupy a small but important space in American history. Dutchmen were stationed on the east coast of America for a mere two generations, but during this time, they introduced an incredibly broad range of beloved American foods, activities, and names. New York, waffles, maple syrup, Santa Claus, Wall Street, and ice skating are all 18th century Dutch imports.

In short, the Dutch settlers in the U.S. were ghostly figures, at least from the perspective of their English successors: they were gone almost as soon as they'd arrived, leaving behind a strong yet ethereal legacy. It's entirely appropriate that Irving chooses the Dutch to be the ghosts in his short story--they represent the "vanished past" that Rip will quickly become a part of. (It should be noted that Hudson himself was English, but his explorations were on behalf of the Dutch East India Company.)

> As he approached the village, he met a number of people, but none whom he knew, which somewhat surprised him, for he had thought himself acquainted with every one in the country round. Their dress, too, was of a different fashion from that to which he was accustomed. They all stared at him with equal marks of surprise, and whenever they cast their eyes upon him, invariably stroked their chins. The constant recurrence of this gesture induced Rip, involuntarily, to do the same, when, to his astonishment, he found his beard had grown a foot long!

Related Characters: Diedrich Knickerbocker (speaker), Rip Van Winkle

Related Themes:

Page Number: 36

Explanation and Analysis

Rip Van Winkle, who's just woken up from a decades-long

sleep, returns to what remains of his old town. Rip immediately notices that the townspeople find him odd: he doesn't recognize them, and they look at him for too long, stroking their chins. Rip begins to realize what's happened to him when he discovers that his own beard is a foot long--evidently, he's been asleep for a very long time.

The passage reinforces the differences that have arisen between Rip's culture and the present day. It's not only because of his beard that Rip stands out from the townspeople--his clothing is different, and his easygoing way of life is a thing of the past.

He now hurried forth, and hastened to his old resort, the little village inn—but it too was gone. A large rickety wooden building stood in its place, with great gaping windows, some of them broken, and mended with old hats and petticoats, and over the door was painted, "The Union Hotel, by Jonathan Doolittle." Instead of the great tree which used to shelter the quiet little Dutch inn of yore, there now was reared a tall naked pole, with something on the top that looked like a red nightcap, and from it was fluttering a flag, on which was a singular assemblage of stars and stripes...he recognized on the sign, however, the ruby face of King George...but even this was singularly metamorphosed. The red coat was changed for one of blue and buff, a sword was stuck in the hand instead of a scepter, the head was decorated with a cocked hat, and underneath was painted in large characters, GENERAL WASHINGTON.

Related Characters: Diedrich Knickerbocker (speaker), Rip Van Winkle, Jonathan Doolittle

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 37

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Rip Van Winkle struggles to come to terms with his new reality. He's been asleep for twenty years, meaning that almost everything about his life has disappeared or changed enormously. Rip's favorite places to hang out, such as the local inn, have been torn down and replaced with new structures. Notice that the building standing in place of the inn is larger and less personal than its predecessor--a symbol, perhaps, of the way America has become bigger, more industrial, and altogether less friendly to an easygoing sort like Rip.

Perhaps the biggest change in American society in the twenty years Rip missed is the replacement of George III's monarchy with home-grown American democracy. Rip has missed the Revolutionary War entirely. Irving implies that the subtler cultural changes Rip notices--the new emphasis on industry and productivity, which make his old way of life impossible--are also consequences of the Revolution.

The very character of the people seemed changed. There was a busy, bustling, disputatious tone about it, instead of the accustomed phlegm and drowsy tranquility.

Related Characters: Diedrich Knickerbocker (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 37

Explanation and Analysis

Rip himself becomes aware of the subtle changes in American culture in the last 20 years. Where before the people of his town were more slow-paced, laid back, and friendly, they're now busier, more irritable, and generally not as fun to know. Rip missed out on the crucial years during the Revolutionary War, when America (historians have often argued) became more focused on industry, work, and materialism.

As Rip explores his new town, it becomes clear that he's the last relic of a bygone time--a time when people weren't so concerned with conflict or productivity, but also a time when people submitted to the rule of a distant king. Irving treats Rip as a nostalgic hero, not a lazy fool--Rip might not be good at working, but in a society where work has become the only thing that matters, laziness isn't such a bad thing.

It was determined, however, to take the opinion of old Peter Vanderdonk, who was seen slowly advancing up the road. He was a descendant of the historian of that name, who wrote one of the earliest accounts of the province. Peter was the most ancient inhabitant of the village, and well versed in all the wonderful events and traditions of the neighborhood. He recollected Rip at once, and corroborated his story in the most satisfactory manner. He assured the company that it was a fact, handed down from his ancestor the historian, that the Catskill Mountains had always been haunted by strange beings. That it was affirmed that the great Hendrick Hudson, the first discoverer of the river and country, kept a kind of vigil there every twenty years.

Related Characters: Diedrich Knickerbocker (speaker), Hendrick Hudson / the crew of the Half Moon, Peter Vanderdonk

Related Themes:

Page Number: 40

Explanation and Analysis

In this long expository section, Irving gives us something of an explanation for Rip Van Winkle's misfortune. Peter Vanderdonk explains that Rip was bewitched and tricked by the spirits of departed Dutchmen--it's on account of Hendrick Hudson that Rip has fallen asleep for so long.

It's interesting that Vanderdonk seems to accept Rip's story almost immediately--Vanderdonk has heard a lot of information about Hudson's ghost, and trusts that Rip really has had an experience with the ghostly explorer. Irving isn't (here) concerned with historical plausibility; his goal is to convey the *sense* of the passage of time. Peter Vanderdonk's explanation is a necessary bit of information, but Irving doesn't linger on the details, except to show how blurry the line is between historical scholarship and local legend.

> Rip now resumed his old walks and habits...[he] was reverenced as one of the patriarchs of the village, and a chronicle of the old times "before the war."

Related Characters: Diedrich Knickerbocker (speaker), Rip Van Winkle

Related Themes:

Page Number: 40

Explanation and Analysis

In this amusing conclusion, we learn that Rip Van Winkle basically picks up where he left off. Rip was a lazy young man, and now he's a lazy old man. The difference is that as an old man, Rip is respected and even "reverenced" in his community--there's no wife to nag him or urge him to do work, and he's not young enough to be expected to contribute.

A further implication of the passage is that, following the Revolution, America has become deeply nostalgic for the "old days." Even if nobody seriously wants to go back to a time when George III ruled America, the people of the U.S. are nostalgic for a time when life was more easygoing, and it was possible to be laid back and apolitical. Rip Van Winkle is the very embodiment of his country's nostalgia (both within the story *and* for Washington Irving).

> He used to tell his story to every stranger that arrived at Dr. Doolittle's hotel. He was observed, at first, to vary on some points every time he told it, which was, doubtless, owing to his having so recently awaked. It at last settled down precisely to the tale I have related, and not a man, woman, or child in the neighborhood but knew it by heart. Some always pretended to doubt the reality of it, and insisted that Rip had been out of his head, and this was one point on which he always remained flighty. The old Dutch inhabitants, however, almost universally gave it full credit.

Related Characters: Diedrich Knickerbocker (speaker), Rip Van Winkle, Jonathan Doolittle

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 41

Explanation and Analysis

Here we take our leave of Rip Van Winkle. Rip enjoys spending his time telling people his remarkable story--he sits in the Union Hotel that's replaces his old inn, talking to anyone who'll listen to him. Although Rip has lost some of his old family (his wife), he's gained a new family--the informal "family" of hotel patrons who listen to him every evening, as well as his own grown children and grandchild.

Amusingly, the story ends exactly where it began--by simultaneously affirming and questioning its own veracity. Knickerbocker assures us that Rip has gotten his story straight, but the very fact that it used to "vary" in its details undermines the likely truth of the account. And either way, its now been repeated so many times that some details have surely been erased or exaggerated along the way. Such are the pitfalls of the American folk tradition that Washington Irving lovingly celebrates.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

"RIP VAN WINKLE"

The story opens with a parenthetical note written by an omniscient third person narrator, who tells us that the following tale was written by the late historian Diedrich Knickerbocker. Knickerbocker was keenly interested in a province in New York at the base of the Catskill mountains, and which was founded by Dutch settlers long ago.He researched the history of this province by listening to first person accounts of Dutch families who lived there. Many agree that Knickerbocker's talents would have been better spent on more important subjects. However, even those who doubt the literary merit of his writings must acknowledge his accuracy. Knickerbocker died shortly after composing the history we are about to read, and, though he is not remembered well by critics, commoners in New York remain fond of him. Some bakers have even printed his face on cakes, which the narrator maintains gives Knickerbocker "a chance for immortality almost equal to being stamped on the waterloo medal or a Queen Anne's Farthing." Knickerbocker remained devoted to his hobby until the end, despite the fact that it offered so little prestige.

This opening, despite being bracketed in parentheses, is of crucial importance in framing the story. The strange insistence on Knickerbocker's historical accuracy introduces questions about the difference between history and storytelling or folklore. The author admits that Knickerbocker did not use books or impartial sources, and that critics were at first very skeptical of the truth of Rip Van Winkle's story, and remain skeptical of its literary merit. The comical suggestion that cakes immortalize Knickerbocker reveals that he isn't well-respected, but also suggests that other forms of immortalization – like getting your face on a penny – are also sort of silly and not all that permanent either. That Knickerbocker enjoyed his research mirrors Rip's own philosophy of work: that it's less important for it to be profitable than for it to be done freely and happily.

Knickerbocker's story opens with a poem by Cartwright about truth. He then proceeds to describe the "magical" beauty of the Catskills. He zeroes in on a small village at the foot of these mountains, where a good-natured man named Rip Van Winkle lives. Rip's greatest trouble is his wife, Dame Van Winkle, who is shrewish and constantly nagging Rip about hisbiggest weakness: that he can find no motivation to engage in profitable labor of any kind.Though he is happy to help on properties that are not his own, he avoids work on his own farm and his land is severely run down. His children are unruly, and his son, Rip Van Winkle Jr. is determined to grow up to be just like his father. His wife's lecturing is incessant, but Rip's response is always resigned: he shrugs his shoulders, shakes his head, and looks up to the sky.

The initial juxtaposition of Cartwright's words about truth and Knickerbocker's description of the "magic" of the Catskills again complicates the notion of historical "accuracy." Can "history" incorporate folklore or mythology? What's more, we discover that much like Knickerbocker himself, Rip Van Winkle prefers and enjoys labor that is not profitable or held in high esteem. Though Rip cherishes his freedom, he does not actively rebel against his wife's control. He still lives as he wishes, however, and it is suggested that his habits (along with his name) are being passed down to his son.

The only way Rip can avoid his angry wife is to escape his home. Rip used to enjoy going to the **inn** and participating in idle talk with his neighbors. Much of the conversation is simple town gossip. But the schoolmaster Derrick Van Bummel is said to have facilitated many a meaningful discussion of politics and current events. He is a well-spoken and well-educated man who, when he happens to find an old newspaper, debates earnestly about the eventsdescribed within, months after they've taken place. The landlord of the inn is an old patriarch named Nicholas Vedder, who spends every day pursuing the shade of a large tree outside the inn: when the sun moves enough that the shady spot changes, Vedder moves with it. However, even this pleasant environment fails to protect Rip. Eventually his wife discovers him there and hounds him.

The inn is a hotspot of unproductive labor. Lazy Nicholas Vedder spends his whole day pursuing, rather than profit or personal gain, the shade of the big tree. Even more notable is Derrick Van Bummel, who uses his considerable intelligence to debate about events that happened many months ago. Though the narrator notes how articulately and passionately Derrick spoke about the papers, the reader can understand that the exercise is ultimately useless. The inn is a place to avoid duty and productivity, where labor is enjoyable, not profitable. Dame Van Winkle's discovery of the inn therefore drives Rip to seek escape elsewhere.

Rip must now find a new sanctuary from his wife's berating. He takes to roaming the woods with his gun and his dog, Wolf. One day in autumn, he absently wanders high up in to the mountains while hunting squirrels. He is fatigued from the climb and sits down to rest in a scenic glen. He falls asleep. When he wakes, he seems to hear a voice calling his name and soon perceives a stranger standing on the trail, carrying a stout keg on his back. Rip is compelled to follow this stranger, though he can't say why. He helps the stranger carry the keg up to the top of a peak, where a group of men is playing a ghostly game of ninepins (a game similar to bowling). Rip notices their clothing is antiquated, traditionally Dutch garb, and that they seem to take no enjoyment out of their game. When they see Rip they stop playing, andsilently direct Rip to pour **the drink** from the keg into flagons to serve the men. Rip is scared at first, but eventually calms down and even goes so far as to sneak a sip of the drink. He finds it so irresistible that he consumes a great deal of it and falls asleep.

The introduction of these ghostly figures transforms the story from a supposedly dry historical account to one containing fantastical and mystical elements. The magical appearance of the Catskills mentioned in the first line is revealed as no mere metaphor: there are in fact (at least in Knickerbocker and Rip's mind) magical beings that inhabit the highest peaks of the mountain. Once again it is suggested that historical fact is not the only thing relevant to a country's history. The antiquated dress of the strangers (and Rip's confusion about it) foreshadows Rip's return to town later in the story (when he will appear strangely old-fashioned to the residents there). The magical drink that Rip takes is irresistible, just like the promise of escape and freedom that drew Rip up the mountain in the first place.

When Rip wakes up it is bright and sunny outside. The strangers on the mountain are gone, and there is no sign that they had ever been there. He fears that he has spent the entire night asleep on the mountain and dreads the inevitable fury of his wife. When he looks for his gun, all he can find is a rusty old one, and he believes someone swiped his gun and replaced it. Wolf is nowhere to be found. Strangest of all is that Rip's beard is now a foot long. Rip spends some time searching for his lost dog, but the terrain is strange to him and hunger eventually drives him down the mountain.

Rip's disorientation in this scene begins to build a sense of strangeness and dread that contrasts with the bright and pretty natural surroundings. Rip's worries (about his wife) are quickly made to seem inconsequential in the face of these mysterious circumstances. While Rip is worrying about the same things he has always worried about (evading his wife's anger), the clues in his environment tell us—the readers—that something has changed even if Rip doesn't quite yet realize it.

When Rip reaches his village at the base of the mountain, he notices that it seems more populous and the buildings more numerous. A group of children, none of whom are familiar to him, begin following him and pointing at his beard. He goes to his home, expecting at any moment to hear the shrill reprimand of Dame Van Winkle, but when he arrives, his usually tidy home has fallen into a state of utter disrepair. An old, emaciated dog resembling Wolf lurks around the yard, but does not recognize Rip and growls at him.

The tension continues to climb as Rip slowly begins to register the dramatic changes that have taken place since his time on the mountain. His wife is gone, his dog is old and does not recognize him, and his house and property look as though they've been abandoned. The clash between expectations of sameness and evidence of dramatic change is coming to a head.

Increasingly unsettled, Rip hurries to the old inn, but finds in its place an establishment called **The Union Hotel**. The portrait of King George III on the sign has been changed to a portrait of someone called General George Washington. Rip's panicked demeanor, ratty clothes and unkempt face draw attention from tavern politicians and townsfolk. They inquire about his intentions and wonder if he has come to interrupt the election. Utterly bewildered, Rip introduces himself as a native of the village and a loyal subject of the King. The response is an uproar from the villagers who accuse Rip of being a spy.

The transformation of the inn is even more significant: it has changed from a place of idle unproductivity where lazy men talk over long-past news to a bustling political hub contemplating a coming election. Future elected President George Washington (unknown to Rip) now oversees the industrious activity of free citizens. Before, the face of Tyrant King George presided over the unproductiveactivities of the village men enjoying their leisure. The rage Rip incites when he declares himself a subject of the king definitively confirms his status as a strangeoutsider.

The crowd is finally calmed enough to hear Rip's version of events. He offers to give the names of the neighbors he was searching for, and in doing so hears that Nicholas Vedder has been dead 18 years, that Brom Dutcher has died in the American Revolutionary War, that Derrick Van Bummel is now working in the American congress, and that he, Rip Van Winkle, has been missing for 20 years. His son is now grown, and a perfect likeness of himself. His wife has died after she burst a blood vessel in a fit of rage at a New England peddler. Rip cries in confusion but is comforted when a woman carrying a baby comes forward to get a look at him soon identifies herself as his daughter, Judith Gardenier. She is now grown and has an infant son, Rip Van Winkle III. Rip now accepts that he has been asleep for 20 years, and tells his incredible story to his remaining family and the village.

The implications of Rip's sleep become increasingly clear. He has dozed peacefully through the American Revolution, while all of his friends are either dead or permanently changed by the war (such as Derrick Van Bummel who now works, productively, in Congress. Rip slept while his world utterly changed. Yet the comical death of Rip's wife means that Rip Van Winkle is freed (though through no action of his own) from more than one tyrant. And, even in the face of all this change, certain elements of stasis stand out: Rip's son is identical to his father, and the introduction of a third Rip Van Winkle suggests a kind of comforting indefinite continuity.Thus the hero's ultimate accomplishment is his ability to resist the drive to progress and change.

The villagers wonder at his story, and are unsure whether or not to believe him. Eventually Rip's story is corroborated by the most ancient man in the village, Peter Vanderdonk. Vanderdonk recalls Rip Van Winkle from before his disappearance, and explains that the Catskill Mountains have long been haunted by Hendrick Hudson and the Half Moon crew. (Hudson was a Dutch explorer in the early 17th century who sailed up the river in New York that now bears his name. Later, he was mutinied by his crew and set adrift along with those loyal to him and never seen again.) Having been completely convinced of Rip's story's veracity, the villagers turn their attention back to the more important matter of the first presidential election in the newly minted United States of America.

Once again, the issue of credibility is raised—the villagers question Rip's story in much the same way Knickerbocker's critics did. The corroboration offered by Vanderdonk, while meant to relieve doubts, raises even more questions for the reader, as his story involves the haunting of the Catskill mountains by a mutinied ship captain. (It should be noted that the mutiny of Hudson by his crew echoes the violent overthrow of King George III's rule by his citizens who then created the United States.) That it turns out that the villagers are happy to believe Rip and return to their work on the election, reminds us that this "history" is not merely factual—perhaps a nation's "history" must include more than factual details.

Rip moves in with his daughter and lives out his days in leisure (as he did before, but without his wife's haranguing). Because of his advanced age, no one has any expectation that will perform any duties or chores. He tells his story daily at The Union Hotel, and though he initially varies on some details, he eventually becomes completely consistent. In a final note, Knickerbocker suggests those who doubt Rip's credibility are only pretending to doubt him, and assures the reader that the Dutch inhabitants of the Catskills are almost universally agreed on the story's truth.

In spite of all of the dramatic changes just revealed to us, Rip goes on living in much the same way he did before. He thus becomes a figure who stands for sameness and the past, and links the peaceful and slow time before the Revolutionary war to the bustling time after. There is a wisp of a suggestion here that Rip – with his generous laziness, his meandering pursuit of minor, personal, joyful unproductive labor, and his story of magic and connection to the deep past –offers a kind of necessary balance to this new country built on rational enlightenment thought and a zest for economic growth. The issue of Rip's perfectaccuracy is raised one last time, emphasizing the integral role mythology and folklore has played in this village'shistory (and perhaps suggesting the need for adistinctly American folk history).

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