

Washington Irving and his contribution in American Literary History

Dr. Jayanta Mukherjee

Associate Professor & Head,

Department of English,

Belda College

Belda-721424

West Bengal, India

Mob: 9874206121

jyantamukherjee1975@gmail.com

Abstract

The primary focus of this study is to critically analyse the contribution of Washington Irving in American literary history. **Washington Irving** (April 3, 1783 - November 28, 1859) was an American short story writer, essayist, biographer, historian, and diplomat of the early 19th century. He is best known for his short stories "Rip Van Winkle" (1819) and "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" (1820), both of which appear in his collection *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.* His historical works include biographies of Oliver Goldsmith, Muhammad and George Washington, as well as several histories of 15th-century Spain that deal with subjects such as Alhambra, Christopher Columbus and the Moors. Irving served as ambassador to Spain from 1842 to 1846. He made his literary debut in 1802 with a series of observational letters to the *Morning Chronicle*, written under the pseudonym Jonathan Oldstyle. He moved to England for the family business in 1815 where he achieved fame with the publication of *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.*, serialized from 1819-20. He continued to publish regularly throughout his life, and he completed a five-volume biography of George Washington just eight months before his death at age 76 in Tarrytown, New York. Irving was one of the first American writers to earn acclaim in Europe, and he encouraged other American authors such as Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Herman Melville and Edgar Allan Poe. He was also admired by some British writers, including Lord Byron, Thomas Campbell, Charles Dickens, Francis Jeffrey and Walter Scott. He advocated for writing as a legitimate profession and argued for stronger laws to protect American writers from copyright infringement.

Key Words : American, Folklore, Irving, Independence, Identity, National, Revolution.

Irving Washington (1783-1859) remains one of the most celebrated American Writers in the 19th century. He is remembered for his famed “Rip Van Winkle” and “The Legend of the Sleepy Hollow”. Irving was the last born in a family of eleven. His mother was a staunch Anglican while the father was a Presbyterian. Although he missed out on college education which his strict father offered to his siblings, he continued reading widely mainly focusing on the law and history. According to Apap & Hoffman (2010) Irving Washington has been described in a number of ways with recent studies viewing him as the precursor to radical romanticists such as Edgar Allan Poe. He set the precedence for other American writers in the 19th century. Wyman (2010) noted that some of Irving’s works such as Rip Van Winkle dangerously critiqued the new nation and created a platform where other authors could identify the problems in the young nation and address them through writing. His multi-themed publications make it hard for 21st century scholars to perfectly place his writings into a single line of writing.

Rip Van Winkle is considered to be one of Irving’s most successful works. It was published in *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent* in 1819. The short story is written in form a narrative. The main character in the story is a Dutch American villager named Rip Van Winkle. Van Winkle falls asleep for twenty years and wakes up when the American Revolution has been completed. After missing the American Revolution, Van Winkle has all the reasons to pay allegiance to the King in Britain. The main theme in Rip Van Winkle is national identity. After the American Revolution, the young country was slowly developing and taking baby steps towards asserting itself into the international map. The young nation faced the challenge of building a sound economy after pushing the Britons away, preserving national independence, and also creating a stable political system which would charge the country into the next stage, Irving viewed the idea of national identity as one of the forces which needed to be reinforced to ensure that the country moved together as a unit.

Just 40 years after independence, United States was already witnessing serious inequalities in the society. The spirit of national identity and unity that had guided it during the American Revolution was slowly fading away and in its place paving way for a new group of leaders who were out to enrich themselves and serve the interests of their cronies. Colker (1963) explored the significance of the long sleep in Irving’s story. He established that sleep could have been used as a major theme to develop other themes. Considering that Van Winkle sleeps for twenty years and wakes up without noticing the government has changed, Irving may have been out to state that the old government was similar to the one that took office. The new leaders were still as oppressive and so the concept of independence was slowly losing its value.

The young country was facing the challenge of developing the machinery of government. Irving tried to capture the new position of the emerging generation. On page 23, he stated that “Rip now resumed his old walks and habits; he soon found many of his former cronies, though all rather the worse for the wear and tear of time; and preferred making friends among the rising generation, with whom he soon grew into great favor.” Therefore, even after independence, Van Winkle and his cronies continued leading the same life they led before it.

The idea of a revolution seemed a far-fetched goal. The goals set therein were tough to realize and so it would take the country a longer time to pay the huge debts and start developing its own economy.

The theme of freedom is well presented in the narrative. Van Winkle values his freedom. However, he lacks the guts and will to fight for the freedom. He believes that nature is set in such a manner that man should be suffering. The fact that he still believes King George III is still in control of the US shows the retiring state he had taken. Just like some other citizens in the country, he could not realize any difference between the old government under King George III and the current leadership. Van Winkle silently resists some of the systems. He resists the actions by his wife although he does it passively by throwing hands up and sighing. He is resigned and ready to adjust to any form of suffering that comes his way. After sleeping for twenty years and waking up when everything else has changed, Van Winkle does not feel the national fabric that was supposed to bind the new country together. The ideas presented in Rip Van Winkle would later come to manifest in the struggles that followed in the 19th century. The Civil War came to pass as the issue of slavery was being abolished as well as the First Wave of Feminism as women struggle to find their position in the new country. Van Winkle identified some of the themes that other writers develop and further critiqued the development of the new country. Pollard (2007) analyzed Irving's works through the lens of a 'questioning American'. After the revolution, Americans were being shaped to a new state where they were discouraged from questioning the actions of the government. Irving started to challenge that notion by presenting the state of citizens who were resigned and struggling to link with the national fabric.

The Legend of the Sleepy Hollow explores the activities in a valley called 'Sleepy Hollow'. Just like Rip Van Winkle, The Legend of the Sleepy Hollow is set among the Dutch settlers. The main conflict in the story is the city life versus the rural life. Ichabod Crane, the protagonist in the story is not made for rural life. According to Hoffman (1953) Irving uses American folklore in the story to advance his argument. Greed is a major theme in The Legend of the Sleepy Hollow. Katrina seems happy when men fight for her attention. Her behavior can be viewed as a manifestation of greed where she is happy as they continue fighting for her attention while she is not ready to settle down with any of them. Her greed for power and attention forces her to continue entertaining the men without granting any of them the chance to date her fully. Ichabod is also used to advance the theme of greed. He is a foolish protagonist.

The presence of the supernatural or the adoptions from American folklore manifest strongly in the story. There are several ghosts haunting the Sleepy Hollow town. These ghosts are accompanied by spirits which further hurt the people or threaten their existence. The position of the settlers further supports the assertion that the land was bewitched long time ago by a Native American leader or chief.

The style in the story is different from Irving's other stories. It presents a deep element of imagination. The whole story is moved from the reader since Ichabod is also reading a story.

Therefore, the focus is on Ichabod and his response after reading the story. Ichabod enjoys reading stories about ghosts, witches and demons. In equal measures, Ichabod has a perfect memory and so he pays dearly after listening to the stories or reading the books about ghosts and demons. He is so paranoid and believes that everything is supernatural. As a defense mechanism, Ichabod struggles to force the supernatural become natural. Ichabod imagination alienates him from the realities of the world. For instance, he tries to woo Katrina into a relationship that would lead into marriage. However, he is more of a joker that keeps on dreaming about their marriage life while he has nothing else to offer apart from singing lessons.

The nature of life in a classless society is well presented in the story. The Legend of the Sleepy Hollow presents Katrina as a member of the upper class but she can be accessed by the poor folk. However, when she is choosing a marriage partner, she is forced to choose between two losers. One of them is a homeless teacher whose obsession with ghosts and demons make his life miserable. The other one is an irresponsible young man with no fortune. At the end of the day, the class Katrina represents will be broken as she struggles to chart her way into the future.

The characters of the two rivals, Ichabod and Brom show the beauty of using personal attributes to determine the fate of a given person. They are both poor meaning that they are fighting on a level ground to win Katrina's heart. Irving was condemning the classism that was taking over the young country after the American Revolution. Later in the 19th century, Karl Marx came out strongly to condemn classism and its roots in the American society. The use of characters such as Ichabod makes the whole idea a dream. In fact, the title "The Legend of the Sleepy Hollow" further shows that the town could only exist in one's imagination. In real sense, classism was a major concern with the poor folk having no chance to break the barrier that forced them into poverty. Karl Marx argued that classicism was a product of capitalism. As the young country started shaping itself, a new crop of citizens managed to maneuver their way to the top. They either benefited after serving in the government or after establishing flourishing businesses in the country. Katrina's family is presented as part of the group since they had a successful business that guaranteed them a position at the top of the ladder. The rich did not freely interact with the poor regardless of their profession or other personal attributes unless in very rare cases.

Greven (2004) argued that "I locate Ichabod Crane, the hapless protagonist of Irving's famous story, within an antebellum literary tradition of inviolate men - figures such as James Fenimore Cooper's Natty Bumppo; constructed inviolate selves of Henry David Thoreau and Frederick Douglass; who articulate the intense anxieties that surround the contested site of American manhood". This introduces a new theme in Irving's work, that of Manhood. At the beginning of the 19th century, the role of education was changing. Individuals such as Frederick Douglass rose from the fangs of slavery to advance a serious agenda to abolish slavery in the country. Their ideas could be viewed as mere dreams by the rest of the population. The same could be seen in the character of Ichabod Crane. Although he did not have the hap to advance any serious agenda, he was learned and so he had the potential to

push for a serious agenda in future. Irving therefore explored ideas which ranged from politics to various roles of men and women in the society. He identified any problem that affected the society and developed themes surrounding it.

An analysis of thematic approaches in Irving's work reveals a number of ideas which were used to cement his position in American literature. For instance, Rip Van Winkle presents the loss that came with the new identity that the people had after getting the freedom they had been fighting for. It presented a challenge to the American values. At the end of the narration, Van Winkle pays allegiance to King George III of Britain. This is a major activity in the story which shows the change that had occurred in the country. The citizens could only identify with the foreign leader since their own leaders had failed to live up to the huge promises they had made to the people. Furthermore, the use of sleep to show the time lapse in the story can be viewed symbolically as a period of no development. In fact, very few activities were going on in the country as it struggled to pay the huge debts it had and also develop a system that could sustain its growth. The Sleepy Hollow challenges the contentedness that the people had in the rural areas. Life in the rural areas was slow. There were limited chances and challenges as compared to the city. The story therefore urged the readers to avoid living in a dream. However, Greven (2004) views Ichabod as a hopeful character who would later rise to create a revolution. There was a lot of potential in Ichabod which had not been tapped. R'ister (1945) linked Irving's writing style and themes to his interactions with people in Europe where he lived for seventeen years. He had a view of two countries and regions which gave him a wider view to life as compared to other writers of his time.

Irving passed the bar examination in 1806 and he was prepared to become a lawyer in the young nation. He had read a lot of history which would later help him understand the structure of the society. After doing the bar exam, he collaborated with James Paulding and his brother James to write the Salmagundi. Hedges (2000) argued that Irving started his career in law in a low tone. His brother, Peter, would later introduce him into writing. Peter, a physician by profession was also doing well writing about politics and literature. Peter started a small newspaper, The Morning Chronicle where Irving practiced in his early days in literature. He would use the platform to grow his skills and identify different themes which he could easily focus on in his later career in literature. His collaboration with James Kirke Paulding and his brother William Irving was the nod he needed to fully immerse himself into the murky waters of literature. Irving adopted a less aristocratic politico-economic position than bourgeois. He could easily identify with the low class as compared to the upper class.

After making his debut entry in literature in 1802 while writing articles for his brother's newspaper The Morning Chronicle, Irving was later admitted into the bar in 1806 to practice as a lawyer. He did not invest seriously in the field as he was working on his new career in literature. Irving motivated other writers in his time and set a good precedence that would be used to identify the themes that resonated with the challenges in the society. For instance, in the two stories analyzed in this paper (The Legend of the Sleepy Hollow and Rip Van Winkle) communicate themes such as national identity, the role of citizens in the young country and the failure to achieve the goals which the new government had set. The classes

which were starting to manifest in the society were worrying Irving. Just like Karl Marx, he believed that classicism would introduce inequalities that would increase the gap between the rich and the poor.

Works Cited

1. Apap, C. & Hoffman, T. *Prospects for the study of Washington Irving. Resources for American Literary Study*, 2010, 35, 3-27.
2. Colker, M. L. *A medieval Rip Van Winkle story. The Journal of American Folklore*, 1963, 76(300), 131-133.
3. Greven, D. *Troubling our heads about Ichabod: "The legend of sleepy hollow," Classic American literature, and the sexual politics of homosocial brotherhood. American Quarterly*, 2004, 56(1), 83-110.
4. Hedges, W. L. *Irving Washington. American National Biography*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/anb/97801986Q6697.article.1600829>, 2000.
5. Hoffman, D. G. *Irving's use of American folklore in 'the Legend of Sleepy Hollow'*. *PMLA*, 1953, 68(3), 425-435.
6. Irving, W. *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*. Retrieved from. <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/4j/41-h/41-h.htm> 1820.
7. Irving, W. *Rip Van Winkle*. Retrieved from. [https://www.ibiblio.org/ebooks/Irving,'Winkle/Irvinp Winkle.pdf](https://www.ibiblio.org/ebooks/Irving,'Winkle/Irvinp%20Winkle.pdf) 1819.
8. Pollard, F. *From beyond the grave and across the ocean: Washington Irving and the problem of being a questioning American, 1809-20. American Nineteenth Century History*, 2007, 8(1), 81-101.
9. Rister, C. C. *The western journals of Washington Irving. Journal of American History*, 1945, 32(1), 111-112.
10. Wyman, S. *Washington Irving's Rip Van Winkle: A Dangerous Critique of a nation ANQ: A Quarterly Journal of Short Articles, Notes and Reviews*, 2010, 23(4), 216-222.