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Washington Irving used various literary genres in “The Sketch Book”

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Abstract

The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon was the compilation of 34 short stories and essays by Washington Irving. It included some of his most famous stories, such as The Legend of Sleepy Hollow and Rip Van Winkle, and was one of the first works of American fiction to become popular in Britain and Europe. The tone of the stories varied widely, and they were held together by the powerful charm of their narrator, Geoffrey Crayon. In The Sketch-Book (1820-21), Irving explored the uneasy relationship of an American writer to English literary traditions. In two sketches, he experimented with tales transplanted from Europe, thereby having created the first classic American short stories, Rip Van Winkle, and The Legend of Sleepy Hollow. Based on Irving's final revision of his most popular work, this new edition included comprehensive explanatory notes of The Sketch-Book's sources for the modern reader. William Makepeace Thackeray called Irving "the first ambassador whom the New World of Letters sent to the Old," and The Sketch Book had remained as Irving's most recognized and applauded work. Critics had praised Irving's skilful reinterpretation of European legends in "Rip Van Winkle" and "Sleepy Hollow," noted that Rip and Ichabod Crane immediately had become recognized as iconic American literary characters. Irving's use of supernatural elements in The Sketch Book had also been commended, with reviewers lauding the author's ambivalent and realistic approach to fantastic situations. Scholars had also complimented Irving for his astute social commentary in "Van Winkle" and "Sleepy Hollow," argued that Irving used his unusual protagonists to highlight the clash of divergent cultures—Loyalist versus the Revolutionary, Yankee versus the Backwoodsman. Donald R. Anderson had commented on the enduring "American-ness" of "Rip Van Winkle" and "Sleepy Hollow," stated "that Rip Van Winkle had become an almost instant cultural icon for an emerging American nation at the time of his appearance in 1819 was a testimony to what Washington Irving suggested had happened and would continue to happen within his nation's psyche: the creation of anchorages in the past, which, while perceptually at odds with idealized freedom, was an inevitability whose primary danger lies in our protective need to ignore the actualities, the particularizations, of freedom."

Key words: *penned, celebrated, satire and whimsicality*

Author and his works: The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent, commonly referred to as The Sketch Book, is a collection of 34 essays and short stories written by American author Washington Irving. This book was published serially throughout 1819 and 1820. The collection included two of Irving's best-known stories, attributed to the fictional Dutch historian Diedrich Knickerbocker, "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" and "Rip Van Winkle". He penned the *History of New-York from the Beginning of the World to the End of the Dutch Dynasty, by Diedrich Knickerbocker* (1809), a satirical work that earned the writer widespread acclaim. It also marked Irving's first use of the pseudonym "Geoffrey Crayon", which he would continue to employ throughout his literary career. In addition to the stories based on folklore, the collection contained travel sketches, literary essays, and miscellany. *The Sketch Book* was a celebrated event in American literary history. The collection was the first American work to gain international literary success and popularity. Its unprecedented success actually made it possible for Irving to devote himself to writing. Based on European folktales, "Rip Van Winkle" and "Sleepy Hollow" presented stories of men who found their lives transformed by supernatural forces. Both tales had become canonical works of children's literature, inspiring numerous illustrated editions as well as film, stage, and television adaptations.

Background: Washington Irving's *A History of New York . . . by Diedrich Knickerbocker* (1809) was a comic history of the Dutch regime in New York, prefaced by a mock-pedantic account of the world from creation onward. The writing was interrupted in April 1809 by the sudden death of Matilda Hoffman, as grief incapacitated him. He prepared an American edition of Thomas Campbell's poems, edited the *Analectic Magazine*, and acquired a staff colonelcy during the War of 1812. In 1815 he went to Liverpool to look after the interests of his brothers' firm. In London he met Sir Walter Scott, who encouraged him to renewed effort. The result was *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent* (1819–20), a collection of stories and essays that mixed satire and whimsicality with fact and fiction. Most of the book's 30-odd pieces concerned Irving's impressions of England, but six chapters dealt with American subjects. Of these, the tales "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" and "Rip Van Winkle" had been called the first American short stories. They were both Americanized versions of German folktales. The main character of "Rip Van Winkle" was a henpecked husband who slept for 20 years and awoke as an old man to find his wife dead, his daughter happily married, and America now an independent country. The tremendous success of *The Sketch Book* in both England and the United States assured Irving that he could live by his pen. In 1822 he produced *Brace bridge Hall*, a sequel to *The Sketch Book*.

Further reading and thinking, though brought the vague inclination into more reasonable bounds, only served to make it more decided as a writer. It was then the author visited various parts of his own country; and had been merely a lover of fine scenery, he had felt little desire to sought elsewhere its gratification, for on no country had the charms of nature been more prodigally lavished. Her mighty lakes, her oceans of liquid silver; her mountains, with their bright aerial tints; her valleys, teemed with wild fertility; her tremendous cataracts, thundered in their solitudes; her boundless plains, waved with spontaneous verdure; her broad, deep rivers, rolled in solemn silence to the ocean; her trackless forests,

where vegetation put forth all its magnificence; her skies, kindled with the magic of summer clouds and glorious sunshine;— never needed an American look beyond his own country for the sublime and beauty of natural scenery.

But 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. His native country was full of youthful promise; Europe was rich in the accumulated treasures of age. Her very ruins told the history of the times gone by, and every mouldered stone was a chronicle. He 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 had to lose himself among the shadowy grandeurs of the past.

The author had, besides all this, an earnest desire to see the great men of the earth. He had mingled among them in his time, and been almost withered by the shade into which they casted him; for there was nothing as baleful to a small man as the shade of a great one, particularly the great man of a city. But he was anxious to see the great men of Europe; for he had read in the works of various philosophers that all animals degenerated in America, and man among the number. A great man of Europe, thought that he , must therefore 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 he was confirmed by observing the comparative importance and swelling magnitude of many English travellers among us, who, he was assured, were very little people in their own country. The author would visit this land of wonders, he thought, and would see the gigantic race from which he had degenerated.

It had been either his good or evil lot to have his roving passion gratified. The author had wandered through different countries and witnessed many of the shifting scenes of life. He could not say that he had studied them with the eye of a philosopher, but rather with the sauntering gaze with which humble lovers of the picturesque stroll from the window of one print-shop to another; caught sometimes by the delineations of beauty, sometimes by the distortions of caricature, and sometimes by the loveliness of landscape. When, however, the author looked over the hints and memorandums he had taken down for the purpose, his heart almost failed me, at finding how his idle humour had led him astray from the great object studied by every regular traveller who would make a book. The author feared that he should give equal disappointment with an unlucky landscape-painter, who had travelled on the Continent, but following the bent of his vagrant inclination, had sketched in nooks, and corners, and by-places. His sketch-book was accordingly crowded with cottages, and landscapes, and obscure ruins; but he had neglected to paint St. Peter's, or the Coliseum, the cascade of Terni, or the bay of Naples, and had not a single glacier or volcano in his whole collection.

PLOT:

Though *The Sketch Book* consisted of seven "sketches"—ranging from fictional prose to nonfiction criticism—"Rip Van Winkle" and "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" were the collection's two best known works and the only two pieces to receive widespread critical and popular attention. "Rip Van Winkle" was written in the form of a paper composed by "Diedrich Knickerbocker," one of Irving's recurring narrators. Knickerbocker related the plot, claimed that he had heard tales of supernatural events in Dutch settlements in the Catskill Mountains. One of those tales was the story of Rip Van Winkle, a congenial, though notoriously lazy peasant who had lived outside of the Catskills in the 1750s. Tormented by his shrewish wife, Rip neglected his farm and family for the pleasures of alcohol and wandered in the forest, accompanied by his loyal dog, Wolf. One day, Rip and Wolf journeyed high into the Catskills. As evening approached, Rip encountered a little old man, dressed in old-fashioned Dutch garb, who asked for Rip's help in carrying a keg of liquor. They had come upon a party of eccentric elderly men playing ninepins—based on Henry Hudson and his men—and Rip drank heavily from the keg. He fell into a deep sleep and awoke transformed—he appeared to have aged decades overnight. Returning to the inhabited world, Rip discovered that he had, in fact, slept for over twenty years, and the world he once knew had changed greatly. He slept through the American Revolution—a great surprise for the British Loyalist Rip—his wife was now dead and the townspeople barely remembered him. His tale of wonder was met with mixed responses from the community. Did Rip really sleep in the mountains for years, or had he invented this bizarre account merely as a subterfuge for having remained free from responsibility and obligation? "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" was also narrated by Knickerbocker and again utilized a supernatural occurrence as its driving plot device, featured a demonic "Headless Horseman" who preyed on an isolated village. The story revolved around Ichabod Crane, a slight, bookish schoolmaster, who was viewed as an outsider in the community. Ichabod had become enamoured with Katrina Van Tassel, the heiress to a vast, wealthy farm. This enraged Katrina's other suitor, the brutish and masculine Abraham Van Brunt—or "Brom Bones"—who began terrorizing the gullible and nervous Ichabod with tales of the ghostly Horseman. Ichabod, an expert in supernatural lore, left the Van Tassel farm, terrified of encountering the Horseman. As Ichabod made his way home, he sensed a presence following him through the woods. Ichabod fled, believed the Horseman pursued him, and a fantastic chase ensued. Eventually, it was revealed that Brom was playing a prank on Ichabod, used the schoolteacher's sensitivity and imagination to chase him out of town. In an epilogue, the reader learnt that Ichabod had made a success of himself in the city—an environment more suited to his artistic personality. There were several other stories and essays in *The Sketch Book*—including "The Spectre Bridegroom" "The Author's Account of Himself," and "The Voyage," among others—but none of them had been able to rival "Rip Van Winkle" and "Sleepy Hollow" for their continuing impact on popular culture and the American literary tradition.

THEME:

"Rip Van Winkle" was derived from Irving's study of German literature, specifically the German folk tale "Peter Klaus," caused some critics of the era to accuse the author of plagiarism. Irving translated the story to American soil and used it to exemplify the differences between America's agrarian past—before the Revolutionary War—and the new independence of Jeffersonian democracy. Rip appeared content in his carefree lifestyle, but he accomplished nothing and held no influence. The post-Revolution townsfolk had gained their freedom and independence, though to Rip, they appeared chaotic and beleaguered. "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" was also of German origin, but Irving utilized the tale to illustrate the conflict between civilization—or progress—and the idyll of the New Eden in America. Irving pitted the sensitive artist figure against Sleepy Hollow's practical minded, progressive society, embodied the popular motif of the Yankee versus the Backwoodsman. Both stories also subverted the archetype of the traditional heroic protagonist in American literature. Rip was a negligent fool, though Irving made his lack of responsibility and ambitions seem charismatic and appealing. Ichabod embodied none of the characteristics common to literary heroes—strength, confidence, courage, etc.—but the reader found him more sympathetic than the oafish Brom Bones. However, some literary scholars had countered the standard readings of the protagonists in "Van Winkle" and "Sleepy Hollow." For example, Albert J. von Frank had asserted that Ichabod Crane should be viewed as the antagonist of "Sleepy Hollow" because he forced a sense of order and empiricism on the idyllic agrarian community. Irving also used both stories to comment on the power of storytelling—"Van Winkle" and "Sleepy Hollow" were both presented as stories told by Diedrich Knickerbocker. In "Van Winkle," Rip—a notorious liar—awoke to find him in a new world, though many townspeople refused to believe his tale of supernatural slumber. The story concluded with Rip reduced to a local oddity, spun yarns about America's past. Ichabod's steadfast belief in the local legend and myth of the Headless Horseman made him terrified of his surroundings, a fear that Brom exploited to chase the schoolmaster out of town. With "Van Winkle" and "Sleepy Hollow," Irving had created two uniquely American legends, which continued to attract new critical readings and recontextualizations as time progressed.

Critical thinking: On reading the book one would ponder as to how did the social events of the time impact the text of "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow?" Being specific, how did the American Revolution, Expansionism, and Puritanism impact this work? It's important to remember that during this period there really was nothing like American literary tradition. Most of the literature written in America during this time was overly influenced by European, and particularly British, writers of the same period because there was very little sense of an "American culture." On the other hand, the publication of Irving's works signalled the beginning of an American literature. He used American settings and discussed American concerns such as the loss of traditions and the American dream. In the descriptions of his geographical settings of "Rip Van Winkle" and "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" we find it similar. Both were set in small Dutch villages, untouched by the outside

world. In "Rip Van Winkle" Irving emphasized the "antiquity" of the place "founded by . . . Dutch colonists, in the early times of the province", and his physical description of the village included details such as windows, fronts, and imported bricks, giving the impression that the story took place in a transplanted Dutch village. The authenticity of the place would have appealed to Knickerbocker and allowed the reader to believe in a history that was longer than America's relatively brief one. The same sense of history pervaded the setting of "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" and allowed the ghost story to exist. In Knickerbocker/Irving's own words, "Local tales and superstitions thrived best in these long sheltered, long settled retreats . . . for the ghosts in the generality of villages . . . had scarce time to take their first nap, and turn themselves in their graves, before their surviving friends had travelled away from the neighbourhood". It was reflection of a real concern for many citizens faced with the rise of the industrial revolution. In fact; there is much more to the stories than the action because both are character-driven instead of plot-driven. Today, much of our entertainment is plot-driven or action packed. Undoubtedly, Irving had read Franklin's Autobiography and was fully aware of his ideology concerning the accessibility of the "American dream" but instead of espousing those ideas, he created characters that were decidedly shameful but won our hearts. It had been suggested that Rip was a direct reaction to the Franklin ideal of American manhood. Both stories had happy endings in which everyone got what they probably wanted from the beginning. The Van Winkles were happily rid of one another, and Rip was free to live an idle life; Ichabod didn't have to teach anymore, and Katrina and Brom were married. But are we, as modern readers, satisfied with the endings? Did Rip deserved to return after 20 years of rest to find that his friends had all died? Didn't we have a problem with the obvious implication of Rip Junior as an exact replica of his father? or that Rip's daughter was going to take care of him quietly as Dame Van Winkle ever did? Didn't we want Ichabod to return to Sleepy Hollow to face his demons?

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