

## **Rip Van Winkle: Analysis**

### **I- Plot Summary**

Rip Van Winkle, a kind but lazy and henpecked husband, lives in a small village in pre-Revolutionary America. He is beloved by the townspeople and children but neglects his own farm while helping others. One day, he escapes to the mountains with his dog, Wolf, and meets mysterious Dutch men who offer him a drink. After consuming it, he falls into a deep sleep and wakes up twenty years later, unaware of how much time has passed.

Upon returning to his village, he finds everything changed: his wife has died, his friends are gone, and America has gained independence from Britain. He eventually resumes his idle lifestyle, becoming a local legend.

### **II- Character Analysis**

#### **1. Rip Van Winkle**

Rip is a passive and good-natured man who avoids responsibility. His unchanged state after twenty years highlights his resistance to progress and personal growth. He serves as both a comic figure and a critique of those who fail to adapt.

#### **2. Dame Van Winkle**

Rip's wife represents the burdens of domestic life and authority. She is portrayed as a nagging figure, pushing Rip into his escapist tendencies. Her death signifies the end of the old order, allowing Rip to live more freely, though unchanged.

#### **3. The Mysterious Dutchmen**

These supernatural figures symbolize the lingering presence of old-world influences in the new world. Their role in Rip's sleep suggests a link between the past and the present, showing that history continues to shape the future.

### **I- Writing Style and Narrative Technique**

Irving uses a blend of humor, irony, and descriptive language to create a timeless folk tale. The story's frame narrative—presenting it as a discovered manuscript—adds to its mythical quality. Irving's detailed descriptions of the village and mountains help establish a strong sense of place, making the transformation after Rip's sleep more striking.

### **IV- Main Themes:**

#### **1- Tyranny can be overcome in different ways.**

One of the main preoccupations of the story is the act of overcoming tyrants, both real and perceived. Whether the person in question is a king, an overbearing ship's captain, or a wife, the characters in the story are trying to remove themselves from what they believe to be that person's tyranny. For instance, Rip Van Winkle is working to overcome his wife's many demands and the tyranny the narrator believes she imposes. Rip does not fight back when his wife yells at him, but he also does not do what she asks. He simply disappears and either wanders away or helps others. The work gets done or it does not. Rip gets what he wants, which is to be left alone.

Furthermore, the citizens of the town have, in Rip's absence, fought a revolutionary war against the king of England. They have overthrown a government that they felt did not have their best interests at heart and have begun, as the narrative points out, holding elections for local office. They have chosen to make their own destiny, to succeed or fail on their own terms, and it all began with ousting a man they viewed as a tyrant.

Though the strange men in the woods are also involved with a tyrant, their situation differs from those of Rip and the villagers, as the strange men remained loyal to their tyrant and were themselves overcome.

Historical record suggests that when Henry Hudson attempted to extend his exploration of the area by sailing further west, there was a mutiny involving most of his crew. Those who sided with Hudson were abandoned in the Catskills, doomed to joylessly reappear every twenty years as spirits. It is these unfortunate loyalists to Hudson that Rip encounters in the forest. Tyranny, within the story, is never rewarded.

## **2- Work is not a man's worth.**

Throughout the story, Rip Van Winkle is not a man who considers his responsibilities important, but the story does not consider this a blemish on Rip's character. Instead of tending his farm or helping with chores, he would rather wander or fish or help others. In a place and time where effort is directly related to food and shelter, Rip seems dangerously derelict in his duties as a husband and father. In the modern view, Rip seems to be a person who has always wanted to be retired, even as a young man. He does not want to have to bother with conforming to society's expectations, nor does he want to have to do what he doesn't want to. His long nap, then, enables him to skip twenty years of adulthood and its responsibilities.

By sleeping through this period in his life, he arrives back in the village as an elder, someone from whom nothing is expected. He is no longer shirking his duties, as those duties have fallen to the next generation. He is able to assume the rewards of a long life without having lived one. He can tell stories and play with the town's children, which is what he has always been best equipped to do. Rather than being a useless husband and father, it is clear that Rip has always been suited to be a town elder, everyone's friendly uncle who can laugh and joke and tell stories while sitting in the sun with a pipe in his mouth while everyone else takes care of business. The narrator considers this to be a reasonable situation for Rip, and refuses to hold the idleness of his younger self against him.

## **3- History doesn't necessarily reflect what happened.**

Rip's story is so fantastical and unlikely that it might be easily dismissed as preposterous, not just by the villagers who clamor to hear his tale throughout the years but by the reader as well. That being said, the question of whether Rip's story is true or not is immaterial. Rip claims it happened, and whether others believe it or not, by telling his story over and over again, by incorporating it into the story of the town and its inhabitants, it becomes part of the area's history. "Rip Van Winkle," then, is a narrative about how stories and history aren't necessarily one and the same but can ultimately blend to the point where it's hard to differentiate one from the other.

The narrator insists on the truth of Rip's story by claiming to be relating it faithfully. In the postscript to the story, however, it is revealed that the narrator knows Rip personally, which might serve to reinforce its authenticity but might also force the reader to reconsider how much the narrator can be trusted. Nevertheless, by repeating the story, by insisting on its truth, eventually the story stands on its own as part of the accepted version of events, regardless of whether or not it actually happened.

## **4- Nature versus Civilization**

Rip Van Winkle is a character who straddles the border between nature and civilization. Rip lives in a village surrounded by nature. Rip's actions in the story suggest that he prefers nature over performing his expected duties in town. Rip is more aligned with his dog than any human, and most of his focus and energy is on hunting and fishing. The story suggests that Rip is more like an animal than a human being. Other humans, most strongly demonstrated by Dame Van Winkle, are concerned with community, farming, and politics. But Rip is content to wander in the forest.

Where Rip manages to straddle the two worlds most impressively is through storytelling. He is a man given to wandering, undertaking actions that serve him on a basic level. He seems to have very little investment in the trappings of civilization, except for his love of storytelling. He can wander far afield, but he is deeply excited about telling the story of his strange encounter in the woods "to every stranger" he encounters. Humans pass important information by telling stories through language and imagery, something that animals can't do. So while Rip may not have much use for civilization as a whole, he is able to tap a deeply human wellspring of connection by retelling his tale over and over.

## 5- Male Idleness versus Female Work

One of the important distinctions drawn in the story is that between the work done by women and the idleness of men in the Van Winkles' village. The narrator seems to take the side of the men in the village, who are portrayed as lazy or perhaps neglectful, but not as evil or malicious. While Rip is the most egregious example of a man who can't be bothered to attend to his family and community, the men who gather at the inn are depicted as no more attentive to their respective responsibilities. Their gathering is a languorous excuse to disappear from the expectations of their community, not an intellectual exercise. The narrator withholds judgment on this group of men.

The story does, however, repeatedly criticize the expectations of Dame Van Winkle. She is presented as unreasonable, constantly nagging her husband. A modern consideration of this story might have greater sympathy for Dame Van Winkle than the narrator does, given the amount of work it must have taken to run a homestead and raise a family. For the narrator, all of Rip's idleness is forgiven because he tells a great tale. Dame Van Winkle is killed off-stage, in a fit of pique, and her death is met with only relief by Rip. It is an important example of the divergent expectations throughout history for men and women.

## 6. Change vs. Stability

Rip's long sleep serves as a metaphor for how societies evolve over time. When he falls asleep, America is still a British colony. Upon waking, he finds an independent nation where the people's attitudes and priorities have changed. The transformation of the village represents historical shifts, while Rip, unchanged, symbolizes nostalgia for the past.

## 7- Time and its Effects

The passage of time is central to the story. While Rip remains the same, everything around him changes. This highlights the inevitability of progress and the idea that those who refuse to adapt will be left behind.

## V- Significant Allusions

**1- Allusions to Colonial History:** The short story "Rip Van Winkle" is set in New York in the mid-to-late 1700s. Irving alludes to the colonial history of this region—such as the Dutch colony of New Netherland, English control over the region, and the American Revolution—to emphasize the historical "reality" of the story. For example, "Hendrick Hudson" and his "crew of the Half-moon" are supernatural characters based on actual figures in history:

- **Henry Hudson** (1565–1611) was an English explorer for the Dutch East India Company who, with his ship *Half Moon*, explored the Hudson River in 1609.
- The Hudson River was the site of the Dutch colony of **New Netherland** for the majority of the 1600s before being ceded to England in 1674.
- "Rip Van Winkle" includes several references to **Dutch culture and influence**, including the "old Flemish painting" that Hudson and his men resemble, the old Dutch clothing that Hudson and his men wear, and the flavor of the alcohol that Rip drinks.

**2- Allusions to the American Revolution:** "Rip Van Winkle" takes place over a twenty-year period that encompasses the American Revolution. Irving describes the village both before Rip's long sleep and after, showing how the national identity of the town has changed over time:

- Before the revolution, Rip's village is small. The village inn displays a painting of **King George III**, who ruled England from 1760 to 1820.
- When Rip returns to the village, many things have changed. There are more people, the town is bustling, and the painting above the inn has been modified and relabeled to "**General Washington.**"
- Rip, who is unaware of the revolution, claims his allegiance to King George III. The villagers call him a "**tory,**" a word for colonists who sided with the British during the revolution.
- Rip overhears his fellow villagers making other references to the revolution. "Heroes of seventy-six" likely refers to the members of the **Continental Congress**, who declared a plan for American

independence in 1776. “**Bunker’s Hill**” was a famous battle of the revolution, fought in 1775. “**The Storming of Stony Point**” refers to another battle of the revolution, which took place in 1779.

An important element of these allusions is how casually they are combined. The villagers’ lumping together of political topics indicates their lack of understanding and discernment. The village, although more crowded and bustling, is still isolated from the nation’s political centers and, for the most part, the consequences of political change.

3- **Literary Allusions:** Irving uses literary allusions to cue readers as to the unreliability of his story’s narrators.

- “Rip Van Winkle” begins with an epigraph from a **1634 play titled *The Ordinary***. The lines in question represent an oath of honesty in the name of Odin (Woden), a Germanic god. The author of *The Ordinary*, William Cartwright, modeled the phrasing of this oath after one in Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, specifically “The Canon’s Yeoman’s Prologue.” By including an epigraph, specifically an oath in elevated diction, the fictional Geoffrey Crayon contextualizes the story that is to follow as important and believable. However, neither Cartwright’s nor Chaucer’s character says these words intending to keep his promise. Thus, the epigraph nods to Crayon’s and Knickerbocker’s assurances of truth, subtly indicating their falsehood without discrediting them.
- The presence of **Diedrich Knickerbocker** stands as an allusion to Irving’s own work. Knickerbocker is a creation of Irving’s, first appearing as the fictional author of Irving’s *A History of New York from the Beginning of the World to the End of the Dutch Dynasty* in 1809. Knickerbocker’s *History* is a satirical work, and so his inclusion as the recorder of “Rip Van Winkle” implies that the facts of its narrative are not to be trusted.

## VI- Romanticism in Washington Irving’s “Rip Van Winkle”

In “Rip Van Winkle,” Washington Irving tells readers the fascinating and curious story of Rip, an idle but loved neighbour of a village among the Kaatskill mountains, in New York. In this text, considered as the first American short story, Irving reflects some of the Romantic features explained above. For instance, Romantic writers love exoticism and, therefore, they are interested in ancient ages

and cultures such as the medieval times and Greek traditions. Thus, the settings for their works are often remote and mysterious locations where characters have peculiar experiences. Likewise, “Rip Van Winkle” is set in a remote old village which was founded by the Dutch. It is an area which is lost between mountains and a river, the Hudson. Irving has opted for a very rural setting far from

the city life. Furthermore, one of the most characteristic features of Romanticism is the return to nature. In their works, Romantic authors usually describe landscapes, mountains, forests, and other natural spots of great beauty as they praise the Earth. Indeed, the Romantics are in great awe of the sublime power of nature because, to them, it is beautifully wild and dangerous. In “Rip Van Win-

kle,” the narrator praises the breath-taking views which the main character contemplates among the mountains, and he describes nature as being unruly and wild too; for example, when Rip is wandering around the highest parts of the **Kaatskill mountains:**

On the other side he looked down into a deep mountain glen, wild, lonely, and shagged, the bottom filled with fragments from the impending cliffs, and scarcely lighted by the reflected rays of the setting sun. For some time Rip lay musing on this scene.

As stated before, Romanticism emerged as a reaction against rationalism, and, therefore, another remarkable characteristic of this movement is an emphasis on imagination and strong emotions over reality and reason. In Irving’s story, Rip meets some magic creatures who play ninepins among the Kaatskill mountains and, from that moment on, he starts to experience very strange situations which do not reflect a real or objective universe at all. After meeting these beings, Rip falls asleep and he awakes 20 years later in a completely different world. Apart from Rip’s fantastic adventure, Irving’s word choice also shows that he encourages

readers to let their imagination run wild when using adjectives such as “fairy” and “magical” . Furthermore, Rip portrays extreme emotions like awe, horror, and confusion, and the narrator explains how he is even unconscious, incapable of being rational, when he is with Henry Hudson and his crew of the Half-moon: By degrees Rip’s awe and apprehension subsided. He even ventured, when no eye was fixed upon him, to taste the beverage [...] and he reiterated his visits to the flagon so often that at length his senses were overpowered, his eyes swam in his head, his head gradually declined, and he fell into a deep sleep. Romanticism emerged at a time of political upheaval, characterized by revolutions and wars of independence taking place both in Europe and America. Thus, it comes as no surprise that Romantic writers are concerned with national-ism and movements of political independence. In this case, “Rip Van Winkle” can also be regarded as a Romantic literary work because not only does Washington Irving depict the American Revolution but he also questions its value when the country itself is still coming to terms with the new situation.

When Rip heads to the mountains, the United States is a dependent country ruled by Great Britain. However, when he returns from his vigil, he finds an independent nation. An illustration of this change is, for instance, the picture of George Washington in the tavern where he used to meet with his friends. Moreover, in this story, such interest in nationalism is linked to the Romantics’ longing for an idealized past. When Rip returns to the village, he is desperate because he knows nobody, he hardly recognizes the town, and he does not know what to do to find his wife and his dog. The narrator tells readers that he is desolate when he discovers what has happened:

Rip’s heart died away at hearing of these sad changes in his home and friends, and finding himself thus alone in the world. Every answer puzzled him too, by treating of such enormous lapses of time, and of matters which he could not understand [...]. He had no courage to ask after any more friends, but cried out in despair, ‘Does nobody here know Rip Van Winkle?’.

Lost in a new world as he wanders between the past and the present, Rip wants to go back to the past and recover his life. In such a way, Washington Irving shows through the main character of the story that, as opposed to the past, the future America is stressful, unforeseeable, and chaotic.