

Course: English Literature (First Year)

Lesson Five: “Rip Van Winkle” (1819) by Washington Irving

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Historical Background:

- The story is set over the course of 20 years. Its opening occurs around 1769 while its 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. The second part takes place after the war has ended, the United States has become an independent nation, leading to the first presidential election, which will result in George Washington becoming President

Story Analysis:

- 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.
- Rip is a passive man who refuses to do any profitable work. He spends most of his day out of the house with his dog Wolf, where his wife cannot reach him as easily, either talking with townspeople at the **inn**, hunting squirrels, fishing, or helping on farms other than his own. Rip’s unproductivity is symbolic of the colonies that refuse to bring profit to the British Empire.
- He is often hiding from his constantly nagging wife “Dame Van Winkle”. His angry wife” represents the tyranny of the British Empire over her colonies.

- The only way Rip can avoid his angry wife is to escape his home. Rip used to enjoy going to the **inn**. The inn is a place of unproductive labor. Lazy Nicholas Vedder, the landlord of the inn, spends his whole day pursuing, rather than profit or personal gain, the shade of the big tree. Hence, it can be said that the inn symbolizes passive resistance.
- 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.
- The liquor he drank is described as irresistible that he consumes a great deal of it and falls asleep. 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. In other words, the magical and irresistible drink symbolizes the irresistible desire for freedom and escape.
- When Rip wakes up and finds that the strangers on the mountain are gone. He fears that he has spent the entire night asleep on the mountain and dreads the inevitable fury of his wife.
- When he reaches his village, he notices that it has changed as it has become more populous and the buildings are numerous. This is an indication of the change that took place in his village while he was asleep.
- He goes to his house and finds that it has become decayed and totally deserted with no trace of his wife or children.
- He goes to the inn and finds it is now replaced by the Union Hotel and the portrait of king George III is replaced by the portrait of president General George Washington. 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 an active political place contemplating a coming election.
- He learns from the crowd that is gathering around the Union Hotel that his friend Nicholas Vedder has been dead for 18 years, another friend of his died in the civil war and another

one is now working in the American Congress. This means that while his friends became active resisters to the British Empire in the way that one of them died in the war and the other one is involved in politics, Rip Van Winkle showed passivity that is symbolized in his 20 years of sleep.

- He meets his daughter in the crowd and moves to live with her. So, despite the dramatic change that took place while he was asleep, Rip Van Winkle continues his life of unproductivity and passivity. He becomes a figure who stands for the past, the pre-revolutionary period.
- He learns from his daughter that his wife died and the death of his wife becomes symbolic of the vanishing of the British Empire. This means that as Rip becomes free of his tyrannical wife, the colonies became united and free from the tyranny of king George III.

Themes of the story:

Tyranny Vs Freedom “Rip Van Winkle” opens with a clear examination of the tyranny of marriage exercised by Dame Van Winkle against her husband Rip Van Winkle. This Tyrannical marriage symbolizes the tyranny of King George III over his colonies. Through his 20 years of sleep, Rip becomes freed from the tyranny of his wife and king George III.

Tradition VS Modernity Another theme that can be present is tradition vs modernity. Rip represents the tradition of the colonial past; this becomes evident in the way that he continues his life of unproductivity and passivity after his return despite the dramatic political change that was taking place in his new village.