

An analysis on Rip Van Winkle

计 15 张一可 2021010793

Greatly impressed by this short yet entertaining and thought-provoking story, I want to dig into the question of what makes it one of the masterpieces in American literature, and I thought the answer would be a combination of its profound theme, close association with the time, as well as its perfect narrative skills. These features, when put together, make it one of the pioneers in American literature, opening up the brand new phase of Romanticism and influencing many other works of the time.

One thing that makes *Rip Van Winkle* a classic in American literature should be the deep theme and multiple implications embedded in the story. There are multiple interpretations on the theme of this novel, and I agree that it reflects the earthshaking changes American Revolution has brought and its influences on ordinary people's lives and thoughts. When Rip was awoken after 20 years' sleep, he was surprised to find that the tranquil village he was accustomed to was now a bustling town where people are greatly concerned about political issues. He has also changed from a subject of the King to a free citizen of the United States. Through the dramatic contrast, the story vividly depicts the changes the Revolution War has brought, but it wasn't focused on the political meaning of the change. Instead, it is centered on how those changes in the country's political atmosphere influenced ordinary people's lives. Rip, who has slept through the change and missed out on all the important events, stands for unchanged traditional thoughts and values in the country. Opposite to the passionate attitude people now take towards politics, Rip was indifferent about political issues. The freedom of his country meant nothing to him, the only thing he was delighted in was the end of his marriage, which he joked as his "petticoat government". At the same time, the story shows that there are unchanged traditions and values of the past that should be cherished and preserved, such as the good nature of ordinary person like Rip, the innocence of people and the harmony in their relationships, as well as people's unmovable family bounds. Irving shed light on the values of "continuity" in the midst of change, inspiring readers to appreciate the unfading value that tradition bears.

The story also reflects upon how ordinary people are supposed to handle the changes that befall them. By unfolding the story from the view of an ordinary person, it explores the question of self-identification crisis modern man has to face when dramatic changes take place.¹ Provided that such changes in world's political environment is a problem that we now face more widely and frequently, it's also a question of broad and permanent value.

I also notice that there are certain features of the story that got their inspiration from the time and in turn, influenced make other literature works yet to come. One important feature is

¹ Nan-nan LI, Li-mei LI, Rip Van Winkle,an Allegory about Modern Man's Self-identity Crisis[C], Proceedings of 2019 International Conference on Education, Management, Economics and Humanities, 2019:323-327.

Irving's emphasis on nature and glorification of the natural world. Influenced by the Deism and possibly also Daoism (道教 originated from China)² doctrines, Irving placed great importance on the depiction of natural scenery in his story. The soft beautiful curls of Catskill mountains not only served as the background of the story, but also adds to the scents of romanticism and shows the harmonious relationship between human and nature at the time. Different from works that worship God in colonial America and works that focus on heroes in revolutionary period, *Rip Van Winkle* is simply focused on ordinary people and their lives. Our good-tempered protagonist Rip turns out to be an interesting and lovable character that many readers grow to like. He loves nature, is eager to help other people in need, and has an adventurous soul. To sum up, these features of the story, influenced by the time, are naturally knitted into the story. They are reflections of the historical background, and because of their typicality, continue to make influences on other literature works, while helping us learn about American culture and history and the same time.

Another striking characteristic of this story is the huge contrast between its readability and the deep thoughts it tried to convey. Even a young child can read it and find it amusing, but one may have to read it several times to fully grasp the deep meanings hidden in this simple story. Different from political pamphlets and articles in the revolutionary period, Irving didn't express his thoughts in a straightforward way. Instead he carefully buried his thoughts in this delicate and well-designed story. He achieved this effect by making use of metaphors and symbols.³ According to different understandings, our protagonist, Rip Van Winkle, may stand for the backward traditional methods of America, while his wife, Dame Van Winkle, symbolizes Britain and its repression. She can also be regarded as the symbol of heroes inheriting the martial character of ancestors and sacrificing in the war. By posing a conflict between Rip and his wife, the story explores the contradictory relationship between America's past and presence, between its traditional methods and modern values. The use of metaphors and allegory like this gives the story a deeper meaning behind the lines, leaving the space of thought and imagination to readers themselves. Also, there's no need to mention that the novel has all the components of "a good story". It has a special plot design, very lively and distinctive characters, as well as an humorous and vivid way of storytelling. These features make this story enjoyable to read, enabling it to be aesthetic and meaningful at the same time.

According to the analysis above, I believe it's the novel's deep and thought-provoking theme, honest reflection of the time and use of multiple narrative skills that makes it one of the masterpieces in American literature. These features entitled it to enjoy a long-lasting reputation

² Kairui Fang. Deism and Daoism in Washington Irving's "Rip Van Winkle"[J]. Fudan Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences, 2017, 10(1) : 21-36.

³ Mingjing Su. Symbolism in Rip Van Winkle[J]. International Journal of Education and Management, 2018, 3(2)

and to make enduring influences in the literature world.