

Folktales as a reminder of tradition and history

An analysis on the usage of folktales in Washington Irving's *The legend of the sleepy hollow*

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Abstract: Renowned as the father of American literature, Washington Irving included a great number of folktales and stories in his novels. Out of the many intentions Irving utilized these folk stories in his novels, there's one specific point that we shouldn't ignore. The folktales act as historical records of ordinary American residents' lives and beliefs, and at the same time, are used to remind people not to forget their folk traditions and historical heritages. Further on, Irving's stories vividly demonstrate the important values folktales carry, from their aesthetic and literary beauty to their contribution in America forming its own national identity. Combining historical studies on American society and literature works would be meaningful both in understanding society and in interpreting literature works, which is the key methodology used in this study.

Keywords: Washington Irving, The Legend of the Sleepy Hollow, American folklore, American folktales

1. Introduction

Washington Irving, the renowned novelist in the history of American literature, usually set up his stories in the American Dutch colonies. One of the most striking features of Irving's works is that they included a mass of American traditional folktales. From the fortuitous meeting Rip had in the forest with the dwarfs, to the tales of the headless horseman in Sleepy Hollow, these folk stories not only created an extremely charming air of mystery, but also played an important role in promoting the development of the story. At the same time, local American residents in Irving's stories are deeply influenced by these superstitious tales and beliefs. It can be inferred from Irving's stories that folklores took up a significant part of their lives.

This study digs into the question of why Irving included so many folktales in his novels and is based on a texture analysis on one of his most famous works *The Legend of the Sleepy Hollow*. To be specific, the study wants to explore how Irving fulfilled his role of a folklore revivalist by using folktales in his stories. Also, by analyzing the aesthetic and historical values of folktales shown in *The Legend of the Sleepy Hollow*, this study further explains the significance of Irving's folklore revivalism.

2. Literature review

Early study on folktales in Irving's works mostly focused on the original sources of them. For example, *Rip Van Winkle* and *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* are both recognized as "Americanized versions of German folktales".¹ During this time, critics stressed how Irving got inspirations from European cultural traditions to add up to the cultural context of his stories. However, in 1935, Hoffman pointed out that the "comic mythology" Irving used in

¹ Pochmann, Henry A. "Irving's German Tour and Its Influence on His Tales." PMLA: Publications of the Modern Language Association of America, vol. 45, no. 4, 1930, pp. 1150—1187.

his novels was the reflection of local traditions in American colony, shedding light on the folktales' values in the aspect of American folk traditions.²

In 2020, Celestina further explained that Irving included the folktales in his stories as a record of American folk traditions. She proposed that expect from a Romanticism novelist, Irving also possessed the important identity of a "revivalist of American folk traditions". Celestina supported this argument by elaborating on the historical background and personal experiences in which Irving created his works.³ However, Celestina's argument was mostly based on background analysis, which is disconnected from Irving's specific works and texts. By looking into one of Irving's most famous works *The Legend of the Sleepy Hollow* and making texture analysis, we can supplement on her background analysis and back up the idea of Irving's role as a folklore revivalist.

At the same time, scholars have been exploring the values of traditional folktales in American history and society. As a newly emerged nation, it's easy for people to ignore that America does create and possess a history of its own. Bronner analyzed how traditional folklores helped America build up its national figure. Folklores, as he pointed out, are flections of native and indigenous cultures, transplantation and adaption from the old world, forces in the development of city, and also people's processes in their everyday life.⁴ If we could associate folklore study with Irving's literature works, we could find substantial evidence for these arguments and possibly discover other unique values that American folklores have, such as their aesthetic values and their strong power of absorbing people into the imaginative world.

3. Analysis

3.1 Irving as a folklore revivalist

Renowned as "the father of American literature", Irving consciously takes the mission of American folklore revivalist. The numerous folktales in his novels can not only be seen as a history record of American folk traditions, but also a reminder for people not to forget these traditions and to carry them on in the nation's process of development. The following part will analysis these two roles Irving's usage of folktales played based on *The Legend of the Sleepy Hollow*.

3.1.1 Irving's works as a history record

On the one hand, folktales in Irving's works can be seen as a truthful record of American folk history and traditions. Irving took great efforts to describe how local people in American colony were influenced by these folktales. This version of American history, different from the official history of the nation, is the history of local people and their daily lives, which is

² Hoffman, Daniel G. "Irving's Use of American Folklore in "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow"." PMLA : Publications of the Modern Language Association of America 68.3 (1953): 425–35. Web.

³ Celestina Savonius-Wroth. "In the Village Circle." Western Folklore 79.2/3 (2020): 179–214. Web.

⁴ Bronner, Simon. "The Challenge of American Folklore to the Humanities." Humanities (Basel) 7.1 (2018): 17. Web.

seldomly shown in other literature works and records. From Irving's works, even in nowadays, we can easily peek into the lives and beliefs of American people that lived two centuries ago.

For example, we can learn that they are generally superstitious about folktales. Irving described the residents in *Sleepy Hollow* as "given to all kinds of marvelous beliefs; are subject to trances and visions, and frequently see strange sights, and hear music and voices in the air". In Irving's view, believing in superstition is a striking feature of those residents in these long-settled villages. Exchanging folktales is a natural and necessary part of their lives. At the dance party that Ichabod attended at Van Tassel's house, after gossiping over anecdotes and war events, people begin to change "tales of ghosts and apparitions", mostly related to the headless horseman Galloping Hessian. People made up stories of haunted encounters with the horseman and narrated those ghost stories in a horrible atmosphere. Most listeners, including Ichabod, was greatly impressed by them.

From these records, we can see that the belief in folktales was not uncommon among American residents. This piece of information is an important supplement to the history written in historical books, featuring as the fresh and vivid depiction of people's lives. This record is important for us to learn about American history and society from a different angle.

3.1.2 Irving reminding people not to forget the traditions

On the other hand, recording history was not the only purpose of Irving's utilization of folktales, he also used them to remind readers that folk traditions and histories are dispensable components of the country's history. Therefore, they should be passed down from generation to generation, and it would be a huge loss if people gradually lose track of them. This intention of Irving can be seen in the following paragraph quoted from *The Legend of the Sleepy Hollow*.

"Local tales and superstitions thrive best in these sheltered, long settled retreats; but are trampled underfoot by the shifting throng that forms the population of most of our country places. Besides, there is no encouragement for ghosts in most of our villages, for they have scarcely had time to finish their first nap and turn themselves in their graves, before their surviving friends have travelled away from the neighborhood... This is perhaps the reason why we so seldom hear of ghosts except in our long-established Dutch communities."

It could be difficult to guess Irving's intention behind these lines, but if we interpret it from the perspective of American folk traditions, it could be seen as strong evidence of Irving's "folklore revivalism". Firstly, folktales, as Irving put it, "thrive best in the sheltered, long settled retreats", whereas in most of the American villages, "ghost have scarcely had time to turn themselves", which metaphorically means that these villages are not given enough time to develop folk stories of their own. By drawing comparison between the time-honored Dutch colonies that are rich in folktales and the newly formed villages that are otherwise scarce in them, Irving stressed that folktales are the reflection of a region's deep historical and cultural background.

Also, Irving stated that although these "long-settled retreats" possess rich folktales and local superstitions, they are at the same time "trampled underfoot by the shifting throng that forms the population of most of our country place". After the Revolutionary War, earthshaking political and social changes were taking place in every part of American society, even in those tranquil Dutch colonies. There was a "shifting throng" of immigration, and there were also huge changes taking place in people's styles of life. Are the newcomers still

fascinated by the folktales in the antique colonies? Are the folktales recorded and preserved well? Judged from Irving's depiction, the answer to the questions above may not be positive. Concerned by these issues, Irving included the folktales in his novels, appealing for a better preservation of them.

3.2 The everlasting values of folklores

As stated above, the folklores in Irving's novels served both as historical records and reminders for people to preserve folk traditions. But what are the values of those folklores in American society? To solve this question, it's a meaningful attempt to build connection between scholar's study on American folklores and Irving's short stories. Illustrated by Bronner, folklores have played an important role in the formation of American's identity and helped the nation adapt from the old world.⁵ We can also see this historical value of folklores from Irving's novels. At the same time, the aesthetic and literary beauty of folktales is another important value that should be recognized. As a non-written "verbal literature", folktales included plentiful breathtaking and heart-clipping plots and characters, which has the magical power of grabbing people's mind and making them absorbed. The following part will analyze the values of American folktales from these two angles, also based on *The Legend of the Sleepy Hollow*.

3.2.1 The aesthetic and literary value of folktales

The value of folktales first lays in their inborn aesthetic and literary beauty. They are imaginary, but told in a way that is rich in details, having the magical power to bring people in. They serve for the purpose of triggering people's emotions and imaginations, which share great similarity with other literature types. As a kind of "verbal literature" in the general sense, folktales bear incredible aesthetic value. People can be easily infected by the stories as well as the way they are told, opening up marvelous experiences upon hearing them.

The aesthetic value of folktales is side reflected in *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*, most strikingly shown in Ichabod's fascination in folktales and his eventual fooled by them. Ichabod took great joy in reading his "History of New England Witchcraft" and listening to old Dutch wives sharing their marvelous tales. His personality of "small shrewdness and simple credulity" made it easier for him to be infected by the horror tales. As a result, Irving called his taking delight in ghost tales a kind of "fearful pleasure".

From Irving's description, we can easily see how the mechanism of folktales work on people's minds. In the first phase, Ichabod absorbed in the stories while listening to them, consciously or unconsciously bearing them in mind. Listening to ghost stories were also marvelous experiences, as Ichabod "repaid" the tales by connecting it to his reading of witchcrafts or adding other magical events happened in his native states. He also imagined fearful sights seen in his nighty walks around Sleepy Hollow while listening. From these descriptions, we could see that Ichabod is a perfect receiver of folktales — he voluntarily used his imagination to intensify the horrible experience. The environment in which folktales were told also added up to the horror of the process. Such tales were told in "drowsy undertone" with people talking in the dark. As a result of the darkness and Ichabod's own

⁵ Bronner, Simon. "The Challenge of American Folklore to the Humanities." Humanities (Basel) 7.1 (2018): 17. Web.

imagination, the ghost stories “sank deep in his mind”, leaving indelible marks and memories that would automatically come up to his mind later.

Next, as nighttime comes when people’s imaginations are more prone to be triggered, Ichabod would be scared. The ghost stories heard during the day would silently creep up his mind and bother him. At those times, everything in the natural world could flutter his imagination and startle him. That makes his way home from the dance party horrible in the first place. In the silent and dark environment when he rode alone, the horror stories “came crowding upon his recollection”, making the environment more horrific and dismal. Ichabod began to whistle, his teeth chattering and knees saddling. The border between imagination and real world was made unclear, the tremendous power of one or two folktales is demonstrated vividly in this scene.

But are the terrifying effects of ghost tales solely resulted from Ichabod’s sentimental personality? Or is startling by ghost tales a more common and universal experience? Irving also offered us answer in his story. He showed us that folktales possess everlasting effects that could work on large crowds of people and stand the test of time. The far-ranging influence of folktales was shown in travelers who came to this area would also be influenced by the special superstitious beliefs. Irving wrote that the influence of ghost tales “is unconsciously imbibed by everyone who resides there for a time”. Whoever come here are sure to “grow imaginative, to dream dreams, and see apparitions”. Given that folktales told by residents in Sleepy Hollow are so infectious and impressive, this effect would not be hard to explain. Also, as readers two centuries later, we can also be easily infected by Irving’s fabulous narration of Ichabod’s startling encounter, it showed how the everlasting aesthetic value of folktales could endure the test of time.

3.2.2 Folktales as part of the nation’s identity

Folktales also played a critical rule in helping America adapt from the old world and form its national identity.

In *The Legend of the Sleepy Hollow*, Irving left us various hints as to where American cultural traditions were originated from, which was embodied in the sources of folktales. In the beginning, American folktales were mostly originated from European and Indian culture. Legends in Sleepy Hollow either claim the spot to be bewitched by a High German doctor or owe the magical powers here to an old Indian chief.

But just as America developed numerous folk stories out of European and Indian sources, the nation also made a culture of its own out of the cultural influences it received. Folktales on this newborn land was enriched by people adding new stories to it. Those newly developed stories were generally localized, adapting to the geographical and cultural conditions of the nation. For example, local places were involved in these new stories, such as the sequestered church which is a “favorite haunt of troubled spirits” and the adjacent bridge and brook where Ichabod was encountered by the horseman’s spirit. After Ichabod’s encounter, the bridge become “more than ever an object of superstitious awe”, witnessing people’s superstitious beliefs. These tales of haunt spots build connection between people’s real life and the tales borrowed from other cultures.

Also, local characters were the protagonists in these new folk stories, like the story Brom Bones asserted to be encountered by the headless horseman. Although Bones used this story to joke the horseman as “an arrant jockey” and boasted his own boldness, this made-up story

also enriched the folktales in American local culture and contributed to the localization of folktales. Moreover, Ichabod's magical encounter has also become a new source of superstition, become the favorite story that old country wives "talked about the neighborhood around the winter evening fire". As those freshly happened events became the material of folktales, they also became pieces of memory people share with their neighborhood and part of their shared identity.

Why can the localization of folktales help America build its own national identity? The answer would be that it has helped the nation form and share a culture of its own. Shared cultural heritage was a kind of immaterial bond between American residents, connecting their thoughts and uniting their hearts, so that they are no longer immigrants to this newfound land, but creators and witnesses of the country's own culture. This was the reason why folktales were important in the nation's adapting from its past and finding an identity of its own.

4. Conclusion

Most of the studies on Washington Irving's short novels does not pay attention to the rich folktales they included, while studies on American folklores seldomly resort to literature works for resources. But Literature works could offer us views into the society that breeds it, and at the same time, being informed about society backgrounds is also important if we want to interpret literature works successfully. Therefore, it would be a meaningful attempt to build connection between Irving's works and American folk traditions. If we analyze Irving's works from the perspective of folk culture, we can see the everlasting effects of folktales to get people absorbed and their contribution in helping the nation develop its own identity. We can also see Irving's concern about the forgetting of American's folk traditions in the fast-changing world. As a "folklore revivalist", Irving included folktales in his works to record American's folk traditions and to remind the importance of folktales' preservation.

5. Bibliography

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