

An Ecocritical Interpretation of Rip Van Winkle

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Abstract. In light of the global ecological crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic, there is a pressing need to expand the application of ecocritical theory, which examines the relationship between literature and ecology. This paper employs ecocriticism to provide a comprehensive analysis of Washington Irving's *Rip Van Winkle*. It begins by examining the conflicts between humanity and nature from the perspective of natural ecology, the conflicts between individuals and society from the perspective of social ecology, and the conflicts within the individual from the perspective of spiritual ecology. These conflicts are then interpreted within the context of Irving himself and early American history, shedding light on Irving's ecological consciousness and the ecological concepts prevalent in early American literature.

Keywords: Ecocriticism; Ecocrisis; Rip Van Winkle; Washington Irving.

1. Introduction

1.1 Brief Introduction to Washington Irving

Rip Van Winkle is one of the representatives from Washington Irving's masterpiece, *The Sketch Book*. Born into a wealthy merchant family in New York, Washington Irving had the privilege of extensive travel throughout the United States and Europe. *The Sketch Book* draws upon his rich experiences, employing a novel writing style and vivid descriptions that garnered great acclaim both domestically and internationally. *Rip Van Winkle* and *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* both pioneered the American short story genre, establishing Irving as the first American writer to achieve global recognition, earning him the title of "the father of American literature."

1.2 The Synopsis of Rip Van Winkle

Rip Van Winkle recounts the tale of a man named Rip Van Winkle, who resided in an American village near the Catskill Mountains, alongside the Hudson River, during the Dutch Colonial Period. Rip was a simple and good-nature man, as well as a kind neighbour and an obedient and henpecked husband. He was relatively willing to attend to anything else but his business or profitable labor. On a fine autumn day when he was after his favorite sport of squirrel shooting on the Catskill Mountains, Rip came across a company of odd-looking personages. After tasting their beverage with the favor of excellent Dutch gin, he fell into a deep sleep. Upon awakening, he discovered that twenty years had elapsed since he had last been at home. Everything had changed: he was a free citizen of the United States instead of a subject of George III thanks to a revolutionary war; he was also free from the petticoat government -- the tyranny of Dame Van Winkle because she had passed away.

1.3 Brief Introduction to Ecocriticism

Ecocriticism is a literary theory that explores the relationship between literature and ecology. It not only emphasizes the harmonious coexistence of humans and nature but also advocates for the interpretation of literary works through an ecological lens, urging individuals to adopt ecological perspectives. This theory can be traced back to the era of American Romantic literature, where the central theme was the celebration of nature and the profound emotional connections between individuals. Transcendentalism, the pinnacle of Romanticism, epitomized this sentiment, asserting that only by reconnecting with nature can humans discover the true meaning of life and transcend their limitations. In the 1950s, with the advent of the industrial revolution and advancements in science and technology, humans began to exploit nature for economic gain, disregarding the laws of

natural development. Consequently, numerous environmental issues arose, leading to an increasingly severe ecological crisis. In this context, in William Luckett's *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism* (1978), the term Ecocriticism was formally proposed for the first time in 1978. Since then, many scholars began to pay attention to this theory and it developed rapidly. By the 1990s, ecocriticism has become an important theory in literary research. In 2000, Chinese Professor Lu Shuyuan further categorized ecology into "natural ecology", "social ecology" and "spiritual ecology" in his *Ecological Research in Literature and Art* (2000).

1.4 Significance of This Paper

This paper holds great practical significance in the context of the global ecological crisis and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, as it explores the ecological dimensions of literary works and provides ecological enlightenment. By analyzing the conflicts between humans and nature, individuals and society, and within the individual in Rip Van Winkle, readers are prompted to reflect upon the relationship between humans and nature, fostering a comprehensive ecocritical perspective. Furthermore, Irving, as the first American writer to achieve international acclaim and be hailed as the "father of American literature," warrants an ecocritical interpretation of his works. Such an analysis will enhance our understanding of Irving's ecological concepts and the ecological consciousness prevalent in early American literature.

2. Natural Ecology: the Conflict between Human and Nature

2.1 Nature and Environment 20 Years Ago

Humanity's perception of nature has evolved from awe to conquest and now destruction. In the face of industrial development and the degradation of the natural environment, there is a growing realization of the importance of living in harmony with nature. Washington Irving, through his vivid and detailed descriptions of the natural environment, not only sets the backdrop for the story but also creates an atmosphere of harmony.

At the very beginning of the story, the Catskill Mountains on fair weather days "are clothed in blue and purple, and print their bold outlines on the clear evening sky", and if it is cloudless, the mountains "will gather a hood of gray vapors about their summits, which, in the last rays of the setting sun, will glow and light up like a crown of glory."

Nestled at the foot of these enchanting mountains is a village, "whose shingle roofs gleam among the trees" and there were some houses "with lattice windows, gable fronts surmounted with weathercocks, and built of small yellow bricks."

After his squirrel shooting expedition, Rip Van Winkle saw the lordly Hudson, "moving on its silent but majestic course, the reflection of a purple cloud, or the sail of a lagging bark, here and there sleeping on its glassy bosom, and at last losing itself in the blue highlands."

These vivid descriptions of the splendid natural scenery and environment not only align with the tradition of nature-focused literature in American Romanticism but also reflect Irving's deep affection for the harmonious nature of the United States.

2.2 Nature and Environment 20 Years Later

Rip's slumber lasted nearly two decades, during which America underwent the Revolutionary War and significant transformations occurred. Even the remote mountain village where Rip resided experienced profound changes.

Upon his return to the village, Rip discovered that "it was larger and more populous." Moreover, there were houses "which he had never seen before", and those "which had been his familiar haunts had disappeared".

When he came back to his own house, which Dame Van Winkle had always kept "in neat order," he found it "empty, forlorn, and apparently abandoned."

Then Rip hastened to his old resort, the little village inn, only to find it disappeared. The inn, once full of villagers, had been replaced by “The Union Hotel”, with “a large rickety wooden building stood in its place”, with “great gaping windows”, “some of them broken”, and “mended with old hats and petticoats”. Instead of “the great tree which used to shelter the quiet little Dutch inn of yore”, there now was “reared a tall naked pole”.

2.3 Interpretation of the Changes of Nature and Environment

Confronted with these sudden changes, Rip questioned “whether both he and the world around him were not bewitched”. Twenty years ago, the Catskill Mountains were picturesque, the village was adorned with trees, and the Hudson River exuded majesty. Two decades later, Rip's house lay abandoned, the small crowded inn was replaced by a dilapidated hotel, the big tree in front of the hotel had been cut into “a tall naked pole” with the stars and stripes.

Through the changes of the nature and environment in the village 20 years ago and 20 years later, it is not difficult to see the binary opposition and the conflict between human and nature, as well as Irving's concerns about the relationship between humans and nature in the early development of American society and his nascent ecological consciousness.

Following the Revolutionary War, American industrialization, political and scientific advancements progressed rapidly. However, this period of social and economic prosperity also brought unprecedented harm to the natural environment. Urbanization encroached upon natural lands, political, social, and economic development demanded natural resources, and numerous ecological crises emerged.

Even in a small village, such dramatic changes occurred, underscoring the suffering endured by nature and the ecological environment. These sufferings, however, are merely the beginning. Irving expresses his anxiety about the relationship between humans and nature through Rip's own anxieties and the conflicts between humans and nature depicted in the story.

3. Social Ecology: the Conflict between Individuals and Others

3.1 Interpersonal Relationship 20 Years Ago

In addition to the ecological issues within the natural realm, ecocriticism should also focus on the social ecological problems reflected in literature. In Rip Van Winkle, the social ecological problems manifest primarily in the relationships between individuals and others. Twenty years ago, Rip and the villagers enjoyed a warm and friendly rapport, extending even to the children and dogs.

Rip was always willing to lend a helping hand. He would never “refuse to assist a neighbor in the roughest toil”, and was a foremost man “at all country frolics for husking Indian corn, or building stone fences”. For instance, he helped the women of the village “run their errands”, and “do such little odd jobs as their fewer obliging husbands would not do for them”. In a word, Rip was ready to “attend to anybody's business”.

The women in the village held a deep fondness for Rip. All the good wives, with the amiable sex, “took his part in all family squabbles, and never failed”. The children and dogs adored Rip, joyfully shouting whenever he approached. He engaged in children's sports, “made their playthings, taught them to fly kites and shoot marbles, and told them long stories of ghosts, witches, and Indians”. Each time he strolled about the village, he was surrounded by the children, who would “hang on his skirts, clamber on his back, and play a thousand tricks on him with impunity”. What's more, not a single dog in the neighborhood would bark at him.

3.2 Interpersonal Relationship 20 Years Later

Rip's slumber spanned two decades, a period marked by significant political and economic changes in America. The War of Independence granted political freedom to the 13 colonies in North America, but it also witnessed a deterioration in social ecology and interpersonal relationships.

Back in the village, he found that the children did not recognize and respect him. They just “ran at his heels, hooting after him, and pointing at his gray beard”. The dogs, also unfamiliar with him, barked at him as he passed by. Even his dog had forgotten him.

When someone asked him “whether he was Federal or Democrat”, Rip, unaware that twenty years had passed, still thought he was “a loyal subject of the king”. At that time, the villagers, embroiled in political strife, turned hostile towards him, labeling him “a Tory”, “a spy”, “a refugee” and attempted to drive him away from the hotel. A gentleman even challenged him “whether he meant to breed a riot”, merely because he carried a rusty fowling piece on his shoulder and was accompanied by a group of women and children.

3.3 Interpretation of the Changes of Interpersonal Relationship

The development of politics and the economy not only poses challenges to the natural and ecological environment but also exerts a negative influence on human beings within the social community. Communication and interaction between individuals diminish, leading to alienation and a worsening of interpersonal relationships.

Twenty years ago, the villagers enjoyed friendly interpersonal relationships, and the village exuded a peaceful and harmonious atmosphere. They readily assisted one another. However, twenty years later, political and economic development intensified conflicts of interest, resulting in a deterioration of interpersonal relationships. The villagers became hostile towards one another, engaging in offensive discourse driven by politics and elections. Through the comparison, it is not difficult to see that political and economic development intensifies the conflicts between individuals and others in society, especially the conflicts of interests, thus worsening interpersonal relations.

Even when faced with an elderly man with a long, grizzled beard and a rusty fowling piece, villagers engrossed in political strife accused him of intending to “breed a riot”. Therefore, it can be inferred that conflicts between individuals and others in American society, extending beyond the village, are even more pronounced. Through the comparison of interpersonal relationships in the village before and after twenty years, Irving expresses his contemplation on the relationship between individuals and others and the social ecological crisis amidst rapid political and economic development.

4. Spiritual Ecology: the Conflict of Self-Demands

4.1 Villagers' Self-Demand 20 Years Ago

Twenty years ago, the villagers lived a leisurely and tranquil life. They were of honest and kind character and with simple interests and demands. They do not have many material and spiritual needs. Caring about state affairs and talking about politics was one of their ways to relax or consume the spare time.

There was a kind of perpetual club of the sages, philosophers, and other idle personages of the village in a small inn of the village.

Villagers used to join the club to “talk listlessly over village gossip”, or “tell endless sleepy stories about nothing”. Here they would solemnly “listen to the contents” of newspaper drawled out by Derrick Van Bummel and then sagely “deliberate upon public events some months after they had taken place”. Their “profound discussions” was worth any statesman’s attention.

4.2 Villagers' Self-Demand 20 Years Later

Two decades later, from Rip’s perspective, “the very character of the people seemed changed”. There was “a busy, bustling, disputatious tone” about it, instead of “the accustomed phlegm and drowsy tranquillity”.

Politics consumed the villagers' thoughts and lives, as they incessantly spoke, voted, and shouted in the name of politics. The need to participate in politics became the most important part of their spiritual needs. A orator, with “his pockets full of handbills”, was “haranguing vehemently about

rights of citizens -- election -- members of Congress -- liberty -- Bunker's Hill -- heroes of '76 -- and other words". After his speeches, he immediately inquired his audience "on which side he voted". A busy man always asked others "whether he was Federal or Democrat."

The villagers were no longer as tolerant and kind as they once were, harboring great hostility towards those who held differing political views. When an elderly man, bewildered and dismayed, thought himself as a loyal subject of the king, the villagers would erupt in fury, shouting, "A Tory! a Tory! a spy! a refugee! hustle him! away with him!" A man even charged him with "breeding a riot" simply because he was with "rusty fowling piece" on his shoulder and with "the army of women and children that had gathered at his heels".

4.3 Interpretation of the Changes of Villagers' Self-Demands

Twenty years ago, people of the village lived a life of simplicity, leisure and idyll. The wise and idle gathered together to "talk listlessly over village gossip", or "tell endless sleepy stories about nothing". Their knowledge of the outside limited to the old newspapers they had come across. Twenty years later, villagers' lives are no longer as tranquil as they used to be. They gather all day to argue about elections, freedom and rights.

From the perspective of the development of individual needs, it is the transformation of individuals from paying attention to the basic survival needs to the higher spiritual needs of self-realization. But the process of this transition is delicate. If a certain aspect of self-demand is too intense, it is not only difficult to achieve the demand, but serious adverse consequences may cause. In *Rip Van Winkle* it is easy to see how the intensity of the villagers' need for political participation has changed from 20 years ago to 20 years later. From everyone's crazy participation in politics and villagers' reactions to those who diverge from them in politics 20 years later, it can be seen that the process of changes of villagers' demands may have been a little rapid and premature.

In terms of the development process of human civilization, this is a great progress from ignorance to civilization. Human civilization includes material civilization and spiritual civilization, and the development of the two civilizations always complement each other. Simple and ignorant villagers disappear, replaced by a group of people who work all day for politics. While material civilization and political civilization are flourishing, human beings should also pay attention to the construction of spiritual civilization and the healthy development of their own spiritual ecology and self-demands, so as to achieve a smooth transition to change self-demands. Never merely or excessively focus on one aspect of self-demands at the expense of others.

5. Conclusion

To a certain extent, the changes in the village before and after Rip's slumber represent a significant leap in the evolving demands of humans on nature, from initial satisfaction to insatiable desires. As of now, mankind has not found a satisfactory solution to the conflicts between humans and nature, a contradiction that puzzled Irving even two centuries ago. Rip's 20-year sleep reflects the contradiction between the development of human civilization and nature from his perspective. It also expresses Irving's yearning to escape modern civilization and his admiration for the primitive wilderness. Through Rip's legendary experience, Irving conveys his ecological thoughts and raises profound concerns about the future of human existence. Simultaneously, it serves as a reminder not to overlook the importance of protecting nature while enjoying material comforts. Irving's ecological thoughts, expressed as early as the early 19th century, demonstrate his forward-thinking understanding of the relationship between humans and nature. In this sense, *Rip Van Winkle* serves as a prelude to a future of harmonious coexistence between humans and nature.

Furthermore, in addition to the natural ecological problems, the central topic of ecocriticism, this paper also focuses on the social ecological and spiritual ecological problems reflected in the story. The natural ecological problem is concerned with the relationship between human and nature. The social ecological problem is the problem of interpersonal relationship, and the spiritual ecological

problem emphasizes the relationship between one's own spiritual needs. The rapid development of politics and economy not only brings lots of problems to the nature and ecological environment, but also to the development of people in community and their self-needs. The comparison between the interpersonal relationship and the self-needs of the villagers before and after 20 years expresses Irving's reflection on the relationship between individuals and others, personal development and his pursuit of the unity of natural ecology, social ecology and spiritual ecology amidst the backdrop of material civilization's development.

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