REWRITING AND REPURPOSING MYTH: WASHINGTON IRVING'S "RIP VAN WINKLE"

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Abstract: *Rewriting myths enables authors to connect new, contemporary significations to existing mythical frameworks. Washington Irving built one of the first American myths in narrative form, Rip van Winkle, on an older German folktale, which turns out to be just one of the many iterations of the myth of the Sleeper. By constellating the myth of the birth of their national identity to a mythical system, Irving legitimizes the transition from the colonial era to the post-revolutionary one as a natural stage in history, the result of historical confluences being a new, improved consciousness, the American. Through subtle dynamic characterization, Rip, the national (anti-)hero, becomes the protype for Self-Reliance, decades before it was theorized by Emerson, as well as that of American Exceptionalism, while also subverting hegemonic interpretations of the American Dream.*

Keywords: *Myth; Rewriting; Washington Irving; Rip van Winkle; American Literature.*

INTRODUCTION: CONTEXTUALIZING MYTHS

The classical perception of myth is that of a fantastical tale, especially one regarding deities. In fact, a common delimitation between myth and legend is that myths are about gods, whereas legends are about human heroes (as per the Merriam-Webster definition of *myth*). However, this understanding of the term is limiting and insufficient in scope and coverage. Should such a definition stand, only cosmogonical and other such tales similar in scope would fit the parameters, whereas modern criticism talks about a multitude of coexisting worldviews which are in a constant flux. In fact, structuralist Roland Barthes goes as far as saying "myth is a type of speech chosen by history" (108), and as such subject to the rules and interpretations of semiology.

Far from going in a linguistic direction, the perspective adopted in this paper is a more anthropological one. Thus, the view is that "myths present a model or charter for human behaviour and that the world of myth provides guidance for crucial elements in human existence—war and peace, life and death, truth and falsehood, good and evil" (Bolle et al.). Consequently, this perspective is more fruitful in the enterprise of examining a culture through its literature, as the scope of what a myth can be is widened and encompasses the full array of human perception, behavior and values. "Myth is above all a social phenomenon, embedded in society and requiring explanation with reference to social structures and social functions" (Bolle et al.).

Going further still, German historian Hans Blumenberg postulates that the quintessential function of myths is to aid humanity in overcoming "the inexorability of given reality," (quoted in Abrams 171) a need which is not yet outmoded by the advances of science, nor rationality. He proposes a protean perspective on myths, constantly adapting and changing in accordance with the social realities of a given time. This is further supported by Barthes in saying that "mythical speech" is a mode of historical manifestation, as opposed to the natural world, to which it cannot be attributed (Barthes 108).

Psychoanalytically speaking, "myth is a particular kind of communal experience. It is a special form of shared fantasy, and it serves to bring the individual into relationship with members of his cultural group on the basis of certain common needs" (Jacob Arlow quoted in Segal 112). This further roots myth, or at the very least its function, in synchronic intersubjectivity. This definition of myth, though, is not necessarily suited for the "artificial myth" Barthes talks about (134). Myth as Barthian discourse is fabricated, intentional, inlaid

with ideology. Perhaps still ideological, "natural" myth is supposedly the crystallization of human shared experiences – especially suppressed ones, according to Freud. "For Jung and Campbell, myth originates and functions not, as for Freud and Rank, to satisfy neurotic urges that cannot be manifested openly but to express normal sides of the personality that have just not had a chance at realization" (Segal 120). Jung's view, however, is that myths are crystallizations of the collective unconscious meant to aid in the process of individuation. Can, then, a story with an author be a myth?

To Barthes, literature itself is a mythical system (133), while Mircea Eliade's perspective is that the function of literature, "like that of myth, is to tell the story of something significant that happened in the world" (cited in Bădulescu 18). Barthes sees myth as "stolen language" (131), where a form's meaning is replaced (mostly) by richer signification, rooted in complex "history". Furthermore, there is also the idea that the author is just a *scriptor,* channeling the totality of influences exerted upon him. It is not nearly a stretch, then, to expect an "authored" myth ("artificial"), especially one that could concisely be described as a repurposed retelling, to be as much the crystallization of the collective unconscious as a folktale or a classical myth. Ultimately, a "natural" myth can be likened to a rough crystal issued by the collective unconscious, then polished through the voices and additions of many individuals, "authors" and retellers. "The fundamental character of the mythical concept is to be appropriated" (Barthes 118), and "there is no fixity in mythical concepts: they can come into being, alter, disintegrate, disappear completely" (Barthes 119). Therefore, a myth such as the one proposed by Washington Irving by building on the frameworks of earlier legends and folktales is as valid as any; it is yet another iteration of an already mythical form, but with new significations. The meanings of the form are repurposed for a new topology and reflect a new consciousness.

REPURPOSING MYTHS IN RIP VAN WINKLE

Washington Irving (1783-1859) is the creator of many firsts in American literature. The first writer to earn a living solely by writing, the founder of the tradition of the American short story, the first American author to penetrate international markets (Gray 48). Perhaps his biggest accomplishment is being the creator of the first two most poignant American legends (or even myths), which still dominate American imagery, especially come Halloween: *The Legend of the Sleepy Hollow* (1820) and *Rip van Winkle* (1819); "they exploit their specifically American settings and create American myths: they explore the social and cultural transformations occurring in America at the time in terms that are at once gently whimsical and perfectly serious" (Gray 48).

While the consummate romantic of the American Literature is none other than Poe, Irving is perhaps the first big American romantic writer, alongside such names as James Fenimore Cooper, the writer of the American myth of the *frontier*. Irving's romanticism is undisputed, and perhaps all the more reinforced by his famous relationship with Sir Walter Scott, who encouraged Irving to draw inspiration from German folktales (Levine 996). "Myths—both the stories from Greek and Roman antiquity and contemporary folktales—were regarded by the Romantics as repositories of experience far more vital and powerful than those obtainable from what was felt to be the artificial art and poetry of the aristocratic civilization of contemporary Europe" (Bolle et. al).

Irving took the advice to heart, and, consequently, his stories are heavily influenced by many myths, legends, fairytales and folktales, especially of German origin. In fact, entire chunks of *Rip van Winkle* are simply translated as such from its German counterpart, *Peter Klaus* (Young 549, also Plung 65-66). Due to this, many have accused Irving of plagiarism, including Dickens (Levine 996), and tried dismissing him. But efforts by such scholars as Daniel Plung and Philip Young demystify such accusations by proving the repurposing and

reframing of borrowed content to the point of creating new myths. “Critics should have been studying Irving's emendations to the Peter Klaus legend; when the readers recognize he was not plagiarizing, but was building upon a solid foundation, then they can begin to understand what gives ‘Rip Van Winkle’ its truly autochthonous character” (Plung 68). By looking at the differences between the form of the two myths, scholars were able to move past the idea of plagiarism and see the mythical significations of the German story in the American landscape, with American characters. Irving was clearly trying to tap into to vitality and power of existing myths in order to fill in the topology of the newly created American consciousness – and the fact that he chose to do it with Old Continent forms, instead of using the Natives’ mythologies is telling in itself.

Philip Young, in his 1960 essay *Fallen from time: The Mythic Rip Van Winkle* takes inventory of the fundamental myth of Rip van Winkle – the Sleeper – and enumerates an astounding number of legends and myths that are essentially the same: somebody goes to sleep in mystical or fantastic circumstances and wakes up transposed in time and occasionally transformed physically. Young inventories them geographically from Ireland to the Far East, and chronologically from hundreds of years BC, either in China or in Greece’s myth of Epimenides to 1819 AD *Rip van Winkle*. Each of them had their own religious or social meaning as they were created and repurposed in different socio-temporal contexts to fill a mythic need, and so does Irving with his iteration of the myth of the Sleeper. This beautifully illustrates the protean quality of myths, their malleability doubled by their structural integrity. In Straussean terms, mythemes are kept intact as they are re-organized and reframed to result in new significations (Segal 116).

In an almost deconstructivist enterprise, Young further breaks down and cross-references the various myths of the sleeper and uses as key the dedication to Woden at beginning of the story to recalibrate his perspective, reaching the conclusion that these instances of the myth of the sleeper (Rip & Peter) are inheritors of Norse myths. Specifically, the “king under the mountain” myth (Arthur, Barbarosssa, Charlemagne, Hudson) are echoes of Norse myth and symbolic elements (the ravens/eagles, the dogs, the elves/dwarves, the drinking) that are ultimately seeped in ritual and symbolism of death and rebirth. Rip goes on the mountain with his dog, and is called by name, made to carry the keg (which ultimately is the cause of his “sleep” – symbolic Death, recalling the myths of Thanatos and Hypnos), goes into the womb-like hollow where a ritual-like bowling game takes place (the elves/dwarves are not happy, this is obviously not a game of pleasure). Rip drinks and falls asleep. When he wakes up, time has passed, and he is older. The fact that Rip effectively skips over the entire American Revolution is in no way coincidental to this situation, nor are the changes in Rip’s personal life. “In many societies, ritual change involves a transition period in which boundaries are broken and chaos rules, only to be overcome as order is restored” (Bolle). Rip effectively skips over troubled times in his life and in American history and goes directly to the position he had always desired – that of a respected village elder, able to while away his days doing what he most desires, telling stories and debating events, without the pressure and guilt a middle-aged man would be forced to feel.

In fact, Joyce calls Rip “a lazy Odysseus” (quoted in Staley 90), the hero-storyteller, with good reason. Rip goes on his own “odyssey,” up the mountain however, encountering his own “pirates” and “Circe” combined, returning decades after he had gone missing. His dog, similar to that of Odysseus, is still alive, but Rip’s doesn’t recognize him anymore. Upon awakening and return to society, Rip tells and retells his story, performing the dual role of hero and storyteller, perhaps even using his tales as a way to escape (as Odysseus does multiple times), in his case from the responsibility and guilt of the missed years. The parallel with Odysseus is not coincidental, as Irving’s short story collection makes a reference to Homer, and the narrator often mimics his epics’ language and style.

However, this restructuring of Rip's identity following his sleep – no longer the henpecked husband, no longer the subject of King George (despite his claims), no longer the provider, but the respectable elder like those he had looked up to (the schoolmaster), the free American, the storytelling "retired" geriatric – is exactly what indicates that Irving moved from simple repurposing of myths into creation of new ones, uniquely American. The myth of the sleeper has always been about metamorphosis, but "Irving addressed darker and more complex themes of historical transformation and personal dislocation" (Levine 996).

THE CREATION OF AMERICAN MYTHS

Perhaps the shallowest level of interpretation is that of the Melting Pot. Irving mixes in myths, symbols, names and imageries from different nations of the old world (German, Dutch, Greek, British) and relocated them in the new world. A German folktale becomes American, just as the Dutch settlers became free Americans in the story. It is important, however, that Irving decided to pour the signification of the new American identity in older, specifically Old World, forms. Why not chose native legends and myths? There is a mention of the "Manitou Spirit," but everything, from the name of the mountains to the borrowed legend, are of Old World origins – specifically Germanic (Dutch, German, Norse). Irving is necessarily tying the American consciousness to the Old World. The break is clear and clean in the almost magical transition between the two stages – colonial and post-revolutionary; Rip goes to sleep a subject of the King and wakes up a free man. Rip's innocent perspective glosses over the complexities of political change; the revolution almost came as a natural and benevolent shift, rather than a contested and violent upheaval. Of course, there is a certain identity crisis as, unlike the shepherd in the German folktale, Rip's reintegration is not smooth: it takes him a while to reintegrate his past identity with his new, temporally displaced one. He does manage, however, and takes his rightful place as village elder, both storyteller and judge, assuming the roles of both of the elders he had admired before his timeslip. The post-revolutionary Rip is far superior to both his past self, as well as to the past iterations of elders. The new American consciousness, as the heir of the Old World one, is superior; it is the perfected form of the influences from the West. The Melting Pot is as much diversity, as it is American Exceptionalism.

The second level of interpretation is that of the Frontier. "Simply by putting a gun in the man's hands and a dog by his side, Irving could create the picture of the frontiersman. On the surface, Rip would appear to be a pioneer, a man anxious to blaze new trails" (Plung 71). After all, the story begins with the "unforgettable" Kaatskill mountains, "welling up to a noble height" over the Hudson, displaying "magical hues and shapes," "clothed in blue and purple" (Irving). These "fairy mountains" seem to be outright mythical, the Olympus of the Appalachians. As far as an idyllic wilderness goes, they are prototypical and seem to be beckoning all that see them. In fact, they seemed much more appealing to Rip than his own duties, responsibilities and his "nagging" wife, all of which he ultimately abandons by going into the mountains. The call of the wilderness is strong in the consciousness of an industrializing America, with authors such as Fenimore Cooper writing at the same time as Irving about the beauty of nature and the virtues of the frontiersman. Much like how the British King was shackling Americans through taxes and labour, Rip's individuality was being restrained by his responsibilities in the village. Rip's escape to the *terra incognita* of the Kaatskills is a poor parallel to the Americans' war for independence, but it could very well be argued that Rip is very much an anti-hero – *a lazy Odysseus*; his escape is very much in line with his personality. It might however easily be a parallel to the post-war nostalgic opinions, as he escapes encroaching modernity, inherently alienating, to an idyllic Eden, a mythologized pastoral past for 19th-century readers. The tone changes fast, however. Gone are the picturesque vistas, the mountain was now "wild, lonely, and shagged." In fact, the

daring frontiersman climbing the mountain finally descends and "with him he will bring hunger, a rusted rifle, and a case of rheumatism" (Plung 73). To Irving, the Frontier is only useful as myth; the place of the American is in the town. Rip achieves individuation only when he ascends to his place as village elder and storyteller, none of which he could do in the solitude of the mountain.

In Rip van Winkle, Irving further interacts with other American myths as well – individualism, Self-Reliance, American Exceptionalism, the American Dream. Daniel Plung makes a great case for Rip van Winkle as the prototypical American individualist (80). After all, Rip returned from the solitude of the mountain, among civilization, but not interacting with it in the same way. He has his space, the seat outside the hotel, and interacts only with whoever he wishes. This had been his quest beforehand as well – he wasn't lazy, he worked, but only on what he wanted, not on what he had to. He wasn't solitary, but he interacted and sought after his own version of "elite" company – and his wife was not on the list. Ultimately, he runs to the mountains not because he wanted to be apart from society, but because he was not in a position where he could choose which *part* of society he interacted with. Rip skips over the decades of his life in which his responsibilities would not have allowed him total control, returning in the form of an aged person, which enables him to take the place in society he desired. Basically, Rip's "odyssey" is about achieving self-reliance, as Emerson would define it a few decades later: "he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude" (quoted in Plung 79). That the author was able to portray a fundamental "virtue" of the American consciousness, which was only theorized two decades after (Plung 79), is a strong case for his "artificial" myth being the crystallization of the American collective unconscious through the *scriptor* Irving. Alternatively, the myth of *Rip van Winkle* might have aided in the forming of this element of the American consciousness, as numerous Americans were accompanied in their process of individuation by this narrative.

However, while his escape is seen as negative, generating compassion towards his wife and children in the reader, his return is more positively framed. Self-reliance is achieved in community; it is marked as self-assurance and maintaining a certain level of individualism even as intersubjectivity is embraced. Irving indicates "that Rip's life in the city is more suitable for civilized man than the time he spends on the mountain" (Plung 72). In Staley's Odyssean parallel, Rip's return and his stepping up as the village elder is the achievement of the "*nostros*" (99), of the return *home.* Moreover, "for Jung, the hero's failure to return to the everyday world would spell failure to resist the allure of the unconscious" (Segal 121), thus, failure to achieve individuation. If Rip is problematic in the first part of the story, immature, perhaps even pathological in his avoidance of responsibilities, his return and subsequent period of acclimatization to the new status quo mark his metamorphosis into an adult archetype, and even from anti-hero into an American hero.

The reverse of the coin is Rip's subtle subversion of the American Dream. Contrary to the faith that working hard will fulfill the American's dreams of independence through financial and interpersonal affluence, Rip seems content with an unambitious life; the movement is horizontal rather than the vertical, upward mobility of the American Dream. Moreover, contrary to the expected dogmatic teachings against "laziness" or passiveness, Irving just gives Rip everything on a silver platter, undeserving. Following the time slip, Rip receives and becomes everything he had wished for – being a respectable village elder, a storyteller, having self-determination. Not only was he freed from his "nagging wife," but he was a free man in a free country. However, his rejection and subsequent reward might be an emphasis on the idea that happiness should not be tied to the materiality of the world or to one's social accomplishments. Rip's happiness, his American dream, comes from his self-reliance.

Another aspect of *Rip van Winkle* is the already mentioned displacement and identity confusion. Rip goes through stages of temporal and identity displacement: he misses decades in a magical sleep, his physical appearance is changed, he is confronted by his identity crisis when his own dog snarls at him, not recognizing Rip, he is shocked by the change in "loyalties" ("I'm a subject of King George!"), he is no longer married, his wife dead, therefore no longer "henpecked," and he is now a respectable village elder. This is perhaps symptomatic of the fast changes in American history at that point. The myth of the Sleeper, however, invariably references metamorphoses. At the personal level, Rip transitions from immature to mature, from shackled to free and self-reliant. At a societal level, the U.S. is born, a transition from the colonial era to the post-revolutionary one. However, the violence of the revolution is completely skipped, and the reader is only presented with Rip's sleep (and slip) in the mountains. Rip's identity displacement is confusing, but not fought for, not violent, not bloody. For him the transition had already happened, as if by magic. The myth therefore contributes to the idea of a natural historical break: a new national identity was seamlessly reshaped. Especially in the view of the Europeans, America was not yet seen as a mature nation at the time of Irving's travels (Saley 102). While the colonies had liberated themselves, they had yet to create an identity for themselves, especially abroad. Within and without, the identity of the Americans was still tied to their origins, the Old Continent, and the revolution as the foundation of a new country might have seemed artificial. However, in his depiction of history as happening around and without Rip, Irving encourages a narrative of natural transition and metamorphosis. Much like how the German myth became American through topological displacement, so was the American Revolution a transformation that came naturally in the flow of history, and just as naturally resulted in the birth of the American Identity. It originated in the history of the Old Continent, but, through a westward topological displacement, the nation represented the next, natural stage in history; the improved one. Rip's character represents a freedom that was not steeped in war and politics; it was a natural freedom, come about as the result of destiny, however peculiar and fantastical.

Lastly, the awakening of the American identity brought with it a literary awakening as well. Just as Rip awakens as a storyteller (Saley 102), American literature awakened with him, bringing attention and recognition as a contender in World Literature. A uniquely American literature had started being written, within a couple decades even better defined by such authors as Poe, Emerson, Hawthorne, Melville, and *Rip van Winkle* had heralded it. Despite cries of plagiarism, Irving had managed to reframe and repurpose myths and so create new ones. Making the myths American, he created American heroes, situations and still-vivid American imagery. And with Irving and Rip, American authors got a goal and a standard.

CONCLUSIONS

The rewriting of myths enables authors to connect to existing mythic frameworks (or forms) a new signification, a new history, most often insightful for contemporary realities. Written in the early 19th century, Washington Irving's *Rip Van Winkle* is the prime example of how a founding national myth took an older legend, built upon it and expanded its signification to the point of encompassing a national identity. While the legend was originally German and mostly unknown to American audiences, readers could relate to the story's themes of change and dislocation; the mythic structure was able to provide a comforting and recognizable foundation – not of the German one itself, but of all the other iterations of the myth of the *Sleeper*, shaping how the American public understood complex cultural shifts. The assimilation of the birth of the American nation to a complex mythical constellation eased the process of the nation's individuation and acceptance of its own identity, by using a

tried-and-tested narrative to digest and integrate symbols and values. Americans could thus interpret their nations' transformation as a stage in a broader, natural narrative, yet another result of the Manifest Destiny.

At the same time, authors can endow myths with subtle critiques through rewriting. By reworking the implicit hegemonic values and assumptions of myths, they can subvert them and at the same time provide critiques of their contemporary society, avoiding direct confrontation. The idea of heroic revolutionary is turned on its head by Rip, a passive observer who sleeps (and slips) his way through the Revolution. In Irving's time, the Revolution was already a historical event; society needed to move past it and embrace its new identity, relegating history to storytelling. Furthermore, by tapping into the universal themes of personal freedom, self-determination, transformation, alienation, Irving ensured his story would be relatable to both his contemporaries, as well as to future generations.

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