

# "the legend of sleepy hollow" and postcolonialism



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Terry W. Thompson's article "'Lively but Complicated: English Hegemony in 'The Legend of Sleepy Hollow'" was published in *Midwest Quarterly* in 2013. In this article, Thompson explores the political climate in Washington Irving's famed short story "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" and evaluates the character Ichabod Crane through a postcolonial lens. Thompson contends that in addition to conventional interpretations of the work, Irving's short story may be read as an expression of the historical "cultural tension" between Dutch and English settlers in early American society (136). While Irving's work is generally read as an exploration of the themes of past versus future or rural versus urban, Thompson argues that there is a larger theme of clashing cultures at the core of these interpretations. In his article, Thompson asserts that Ichabod Crane may be viewed as the embodiment of English colonialism.

In support of his argument, Thompson highlights the various characteristics that make Ichabod stand out as an example of English colonialism. As a man of English heritage from Connecticut, Ichabod is an outsider and minority in the predominantly Dutch area of Sleepy Hollow. Although one might assume that Ichabod's position as an outsider and minority would force him into the Dutch way of life, that is not the case. Thompson, asserting that Ichabod's way of thought perpetuates the English colonial mindset, writes, "When the new schoolteacher [...] ambles into Sleepy Hollow, he immediately—and intentionally—disrupts a Dutch place with his English worldview and thereby becomes a serious threat to two centuries of stability and homogeneity" (137-138). This interpretation of Ichabod is supported by historical evidence; indeed, English colonists forcefully sought new territory during the

colonization of America with a disregard for previous settlements and existing customs. There is a history of " violence" and " hostility" between the Dutch and English settlers as the English forged their way into new territories, bringing their customs with them (136). Another element of Ichabod's character that lends itself to Thompson's interpretation is the fact that Ichabod is a school teacher. Thompson contends that this is an example of the way in which English colonists would forcefully assimilate minority cultures into the English idea of civilized society.

Contrasted against the rural Dutch, Thompson argues that the English Ichabod seems to embody the " expansionist attitude" that was popular among the English colonists (137). Thompson describes the English as being " ruthless purveyors of commerce, industry, development, and growth," and he parallels this presentation of the English with Ichabod's actions and attitudes in the work (137). Despite being an outsider, Ichabod makes himself feel quite at home in Sleepy Hollow. Seeking room and board with various families in town, Ichabod may aptly be labeled as an entitled individual. Thompson, delving further into the notion of Ichabod's sense of entitlement, notes the various ways in which Irving characterizes Ichabod's hunger. In Irving's work, Ichabod's appetite is compared to that of a snake and a locust, and Thompson asserts that this portrayal mimics the insatiable desire that the English colonists possessed regarding expansion. Like a snake that devours its food whole, the English colonists were devouring American land, resources, and minority cultures and customs. Like the locusts that come in swarms, bringing chaos and destruction, the English

colonists arrived in America and forcefully placed their ways of life and thought on other cultures and upturned any existing concepts of normalcy.

Continuing his argument that Ichabod embodies English colonialism, Thompson explores the role of Katrina Van Tassel and Ichabod's attitude toward her in "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow." He proposes that Katrina serves as a "Pocahontas figure" who would permit "[Ichabod's] entry into the local hierarchy of power" (144). It is not necessarily the affection of Katrina that Ichabod desires; rather, when thinking about Katrina, he focuses on her material wealth, what he would do with it, and how he could gain from it. While he is impressed by Katrina's beauty, he is more impressed by her father's land and home. Thompson, explaining the notion of Katrina's position as a Pocahontas figure, writes,

[Ichabod's] covert enterprise is to liquidate Katrina's entire estate and turn the vast acreage that has been Dutch land for almost two centuries into hard cash. [...] Ichabod plans, as another Englishman did many generations before, to remove his chosen Pocahontas from her ancestral lands. [...] In essence, like the teenaged Powhatan girl who was taken away to live in an unfamiliar place far from her own people and culture, Katrina Van Tassel, a Rubenesque avatar of all things Dutch, will be spirited away to a foreign landscape, a lovely trophy taken from an indigenous and therefore inferior race. (145)

The sense of entitlement that Ichabod feels about Katrina, accompanied with his insincere, manipulative, and selfish nature, reflects an English colonial

ideology. Ichabod only wants Katrina's hand in marriage so that he can gain something of monetary or societal value.

If Katrina Van Tassel is the Pocahontas figure, what does that make Brom Van Brunt? How are readers to interpret this character who makes a fool of Ichabod? If, following Thompson's interpretation, Ichabod is the embodiment of English colonialism, why is he defeated? Generally speaking, the English colonists won, and their customs became the dominant customs of wherever they decided to colonize. Therefore, it could be argued that there is a flaw in Thompson's argument. Thompson, however, explains Ichabod's defeat as a representation of the Dutch resistance to cultural assimilation. According to Thompson, Brom epitomizes the Dutch way of life. Because Ichabod is defeated by Brom, Irving's story can be viewed as a criticism of English colonialism. Although Ichabod is the protagonist of the work, Irving merely uses his character to personify and critique colonialism.

The overall argument of Thompson's article deserves notice. Using support from the text and the history of English colonialism, Thompson effectively interprets "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" as an expression of the tense underlying cultural dynamic that pervaded the colonial period of America. Thompson's interpretation of the work serves to add depth to other, more conventional, interpretations of the work. The notion that Irving's short story is an exploration of the themes of past versus future or rural versus urban can be explained more thoroughly through the postcolonial lens. Utilizing the information from Thompson's article, readers may understand that the past and the rural of these interpretations are symbols of minority groups and their assimilation into the English idea of society, and the urban and the

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future of these interpretations are symbols of English colonialism and its tendency to upturn and replace preexisting customs. Thompson adds another layer to the character of Ichabod Crane that aids in understanding why Irving depicts him in the somewhat peculiar manner that he does. Ichabod's physical appearance, attitude of entitlement, and the overall odd outcome for his character in the work can be explained by Thompson's explanation of his character's position as the embodiment of English colonialism.

In conclusion, Thompson's "' Lively but Complicated:' English Hegemony in ' The Legend of Sleepy Hollow'" effectively interprets Irving's short story as a criticism of English colonialism. In recognition of the underlying cultural tension in early American society, Thompson has an argument that is both compelling and credible. The article highlights the various ways in which Irving depicts the social and political atmospheres of the colonial period in America in his work, and in doing so, Thompson allows for a more in-depth evaluation of the short story's meaning and analysis of Ichabod Crane. Though the total villainization of Ichabod may not have been what Irving intended, Thompson's claims shed a useful and informative light on Irving's work.

## **Work Cited**

Thompson, Terry W. "' Lively but Complicated:' English Hegemony in ' The Legend of Sleepy Hollow.'" *Midwest Quarterly*, vol. 54, no. 2, Winter 2013, pp. 136-148. EBSCOhost, dsc. idm. oclc. org/login? url= http://search. ebscohost. com/login. aspx? direct= true&db= lfh&AN= 85110804&site= eds-live&scope= site.  
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