

# Rip van winkle analysis essay



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Over a century after Washington Irving published his world-renowned short story, Rip Van Winkle, the piece remains one of the most well-known fictional works in history. Irving's descriptive writing style uses words to paint a vivid picture of the characters and setting where this story takes place. Without a critical analysis, Rip Van Winkle can be viewed as simply a pleasant folklore that is enjoyed by all ages. With further consideration of themes woven into the story's symbolism, it's clear there are deeper messages within the slumbering tale of the main character.

I believe Washington Irving's purpose for writing Rip Van Winkle was to express the perseverance of change that is grounded in the foundation of long-standing traditions. Irving skillfully used a personification of the setting, a cast of relatable characters, and the repetition of themes with symbolism to accomplish his purpose in this publication. This story begins a few years prior to the American Revolutionary War and concludes twenty years later when the main character rouses from his lengthy sleep.

The time lapse enveloped within this short story provides a unique glimpse of extensive change in one American town over only a couple of decades. Beginning with a tale of an American town before English rule, the author transitions to a time of colonialism and concludes with the town recovering from the wounds of war. The chronological and political setting of Rip Van Winkle was undoubtedly one of personal relevance for its author.

Washington Irving was one of the first American authors to break through the traditional loyalty of colonists and settlers to read material exclusively from British writers.

Like the changes detailed in Rip Van Winkle, Irving's writing career also experienced periods of adversity and transformation with the turbulent times (Rust, 2002). Basic knowledge of American geography allows readers to identify the setting of this tale in eastern New York, nestled between the Hudson River and the Catskill Mountains. Irving's life-like description of the mountains as "swelling up to a noble height" and "clothed in blue and purple" allow a believable manipulation of reality. Readers are permitted to consider the magical qualities and unpredictability of the landscape.

With the personification of the setting, Irving nearly adds the Catskills to the list of characters in this story. It no longer seems far-fetched that the mountains themselves could be responsible for mysterious trickery. The Catskills mountains are joined by several other characters that Irving uses to fill a number of roles in the town, family, and larger symbol of community. Rip Van Winkle, the main character, is a meek, compliant citizen, husband, and father. He has little motivation to build a life of his own, but is willing to offer the occasional hand to neighbors when the opportunity arises.

Rip's incessantly nagging wife has no real identity of her own. More than an individual, she represents the gnawing need for productivity and drive to survive and thrive. No one, not even Rip's faithful dog, enjoys this unfortunate reality of life. Irving inserts the development of other characters to provide readers an anchor to Van Winkle's past, like Peter Vanderdonk, and vision of the future, like his loyal daughter, Judith Gardenier. The most robust evidence supporting Irving's message of change can be found in the symbolism and themes utilized throughout this short story.

Even those that have never slept for a period of twenty years can relate to the feeling of what was once familiar seeming suddenly foreign. Rip Van Winkle awakens to find his wife dead, house demolished, and entire town unrecognizably different. During his idleness, everything in Rip Van Winkle's world has drastically changed. Once resistant to changing his own avoidance of work or lack of identity, Rip Van Winkle modifies his appreciation of his past as he realizes all that he's lost.

Irving exposes the raw symbolic wounds that can result with the realization of change, especially when one has not participated in transitional periods. Just as Rip Van Winkle reaches the depth of despair, the oldest town's citizen, Peter Vanderdonk, certifies Van Winkle's claims. With confirmation of his outlandish story, Van Winkle is reunited with his grown daughter and we see the literal connection to the past in her newborn son, Rip Van Winkle III. Readers are reminded that no matter how radical the change, continuity with the past always remains.

Washington Irving concludes this tale with further support of the suggested purpose motivating Rip Van Winkle. The main character's preference to passively enjoy the passing of time endures, but he enjoys the company of younger individuals in the town rather than his older peers. Washington seems to want readers to remember that new generations will shoulder the burden to infuse their communities with action and productivity, but the lines of tradition, family bonds, and continuity run too deep to exclude from the story of change.

Deciding whether or not my own worldview aligned with Washington Irving's purpose required a reflection on the entire work without the distraction of details in character development. At first, I opposed Irving's characterization of one of the only females in the story as a faceless nag with no regard for humanity. I found myself frustrated with Van Winkle's lack of motivation to provide even the bare necessities for his family and I began to question whether the story's message was a more basic one, heralding the importance of work.

Upon review of the story's overarching themes and symbolism, however, I related to Irving's gentle method of contrasting the new and old elements of change. My own approach to life agrees soundly with the reminder that even massive changes are rooted in the ties of the past. The long-standing aspects of my identity are just as important as my contemporary growths. I enlist a similar approach when considering the value of any impending change. The words of Rip Van Winkle have endured for hundreds of years. So, too, has the purpose of Washington Irving's story survived the changing of times to agree with the worldviews of today's readers.