

Ichabod crane: a farcical character, and a political allegory



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Washington Irving's "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" is a story beloved by many, and Ichabod Crane is a highly debated character. Some believe he is merely a man that helped to tell the tale of the legendary Headless Horseman, and others see him as an antihero that represents the human nature. This strange character is both those things, but one thing stands above the rest when analyzing such a remarkable schoolteacher. Ichabod Crane is a farce character that loosely mimics the British rule over America and its ultimate demise. He is an embodiment of the way Americans viewed the British after the Revolution with his lofty character, insatiable appetite, and severe cowardice. He may seem the hero, but, in reality, he is simply a mockery.

Ichabod Crane is a strange name in and of itself, but Ichabod's appearance and personality help form the character that fits the name. He does not look like a normal hero; he looks famished, and utterly ugly, a prime example of a farce character. He is described as having a lanky body, small head, and big ears and feet. Irving also states that "one might have mistaken him for... some scarecrow eloped from a cornfield" (758). When Ichabod is riding the horse, Gunpowder, the narrator cannot help but mention the hilarity of viewing this scene. "...His sharp elbows stuck out like grasshoppers... the motion of his arms was not unlike the flapping of a pair of wings..." (767). As for Ichabod's personality, he is ludicrous and a mockery of what is real in his bravado and charm. He woos many women, charming them with his intelligence and professed talents such as singing and dancing, though he appears to be overexaggerated at both. Irving says that he is "a man of some importance in the female circles... a kind of idle gentlemanlike

personage, of vastly superior taste and accomplishments..." (760). However, his love for himself shines above the favor the ladies take in him. When the narrator describes Ichabod's singing voice, he does not fail to include that "It was a matter of no little vanity to him... to take his station in front of the church gallery...where, in his own mind, he completely carried away the palm from the parson" (759). Yet, his singing is a "nasal melody" to the country folk and, after Ichabod leaves Sleepy Hollow, "peculiar quavers [can] still... be heard... which are said to be legitimately descended from the nose of Ichabod Crane." (760). As for his dancing, "Not a limb, not a fibre about him was idle, and to have seen his loosely hung frame in full motion, clattering about the room, you would have thought St. Vitus himself, that blessed patron of the dance, was figuring before you in person" (769). St. Vitus' dance is not a pretty one, and for Ichabod to be compared to the saint shows how his dancing was more humorous than beautiful.

Ichabod is not only a strange character, but he also has a strange appetite to match. He seems to wish to devour the entire countryside, and this may be an allusion to the way the British overruled America before the Revolution. Ichabod begins by simply enjoying the delicious food he is given by the country folk he stays with. "...On holiday afternoons [he] would convoy some of the smaller ones home, who happened to have pretty sisters, or good housewives for mothers, noted for the comforts of the cupboard" (759). Then his appetite begins to turn to a ravenous allusion. "He was a huge feeder, and though lank, had the dilating powers of an anaconda." (759). Soon, his desire to devour turns to a woman and her inheritance. When he looks upon Katrina, the narrator states, "...it is not to be wondered at, that so tempting

a morsel soon found favor in his eyes" (761). Ichabod sees her more as a sweet cake rather than a human, and his desire grows when he sees the wealth flowing from the place she lives. "The pedagogue's mouth watered, as he looked upon this sumptuous promise of luxurious winter fare." The narrator then details the way Ichabod sees every animal as some form of holiday dish. His mind doesn't stop at the animals, but he continues, observing the house and land itself. "...his imagination expanded with the idea, how [the land] might be readily turned into cash, and the money invested in immense tracts..." (762). His idea of a good life is to marry Katrina and sell everything she owns to move out West. He hungers for more and more, his insatiable desire a comical comparison to the way the British tried to keep America under their rule. Yet, his appetite is somewhat overwhelming, proving how the Americans felt under the rule of Great Britain.

Finally, Ichabod is a coward that runs away from his home in Sleepy Hollow back to Connecticut where he grew up. He runs away due to the fright he receives from the Headless Horseman, but he also runs due to the unspoken conversation he had with Katrina on the night of the party. Irving states, "Something, however... must have gone wrong, for he certainly sallied forth, after no very great interval, with an air quite desolate and chop-fallen" (771). On his trek homeward, he is dejected, and possibly thinking about heading back to Connecticut before the Headless Horseman shows up. Ichabod is also hilariously superstitious, and he "was a perfect master of Cotton Mather's history of New England Witchcraft, in which, by the way, he most firmly and potently believed" (760). He revels in the tales of witchcraft and horror. He

finds something intoxicating in stories of the unknown world, yet he is appalled when he walks home alone at night, startled by his own footsteps. Irving says that “ his appetite for the marvelous, and his powers of digesting it, were equally extraordinary” (760) and that “ no tale was too gross or monstrous for his capacious swallow” (760) yet, when he was out and about at night and saw fireflies and other nocturnal creatures, “ The poor varlet was ready to give up the ghost with the idea that he was struck with a witch’s token” (760). Because Ichabod is a known superstitious coward, it is inferred that Brom, Ichabod’s rival, poses as the Headless Horseman. Ichabod could have rationalized that this was true, but, instead, he runs and gets knocked off his horse with a flying pumpkin. The rider is described as “ gigantic in height and muffled in a cloak” (773) and Ichabod could have easily seen that this was a trick. This can be compared to the Siege of Yorktown where the British were tricked into thinning their troops and were captured, forced into a surrender to end the Revolutionary War. Ichabod runs back to his home like the British retreat to Great Britain, and Brom is safe to marry Katrina like the Americans were safe to form their own government and be a free country.

Once observed in a way that reflects the British, Ichabod Crane has comical similarities that help to open the story up to a broader perspective. Irving may or may not have based this character loosely off the British rule and fall in America, but Ichabod produces a hilarious likeness to how the Americans saw the British during the time the story was published. His character in general shows an antihero likeness, and his desire to devour everything in sight produces a mockery of how the British monarchy hungered for the

American people and countryside. His cowardice, also, represented a jesting form of how the British finally retreated and gave up, going back to where they belonged.