

A romantic view of sleepy hollow



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Peter Lerangis' *Sleepy Hollow* is a magnificent example of romantic fiction. It contains and expounds upon all of the vital elements of romanticism.

Lerangis includes an exemplary romantic hero and his quest to find truth in an abstract issue. An enormous fascination with supernatural events and uneasiness towards women accompanies his romantic hero. And, Lerangis juxtaposes the harsh realities of city life to the romantic beauties of nature, defining romanticism in its entirety. The American hero is the most predominantly represented element of romanticism within the novel.

Paralleling a typical romantic hero, Ichabod is full of youth and innocence. This youthful existence is apparent in Ichabod's arachnophobia, through which he resorts back to childish panic rather than facing his fears as a mature adult. During one such instance of panic, he notices a spider in his room and " he scream[s], leaping away, as [a spider] skitter[s] under his bed" (Lerangis 110). Just as a child screams and runs when faced with fear, Ichabod resorts to his immature and primal instincts when faced by this small spider. Ichabod also portrays youth and innocence with his quest for higher truths. For instance, when he begins to contemplate the scars on his hands, he quickly ceases. He does not allow himself to ponder over their origin because " he prefer[s] solvable mysteries, and this one [makes] his brain fold darkly inward like a frightened sowbug" (14). In a matter of seconds, he goes from attempting to attain knowledge about his past to hiding from the idea as if he were a small child. However, aside from these minor flaws in his character, Ichabod is a hero in every sense of the word. When he is confronted by injustices in his society, he rebels against established authority. One such rebellion occurs when the high constable refuses to hear his voice. The high constable orders Ichabod to " stand

down,” and Ichabod quickly responds, “ I stand up, for sense and justice” (11). This opposition to authority demonstrates Ichabod’s heroism and genuine concern for society. Lerangis’ inclusion of the supernatural and uneasiness with women illustrate two additional characteristics that define a romantic work. The supernatural is especially predominant throughout the novel. The first recount of events Ichabod receives from the people of Sleepy Hollow is that the murder victims’ heads were “ taken by the Headless Horseman” (23). This “ Headless Horseman” is the ghost of “ a Hessian mercenary” whom the Americans beheaded during the Revolutionary War (24). The ghost of the Horseman is even gifted with supernatural powers to control the weather. “ The Horseman’s wind” and “ the horseman’s storm” always foreshadow a beheading whenever they present themselves within the novel (136). The supernatural also ties into the romantic’s apprehension towards women and their symbolic need to domesticate. Ichabod incorporates the supernatural and his anxiety around women into one entity when he tells Katrina, “ But perhaps there is a little bit of a witch in you...you have bewitched me” (101). This statement is simply a manifestation of Ichabod’s inability to perform in Katrina’s presence. This failure to function is apparent because “ all words, all paths of thought, [lead] to Katrina;” and whenever Katrina is around, Ichabod is “ speechless. She renders [him] speechless” (33; 31). Both the supernatural and his discomfort around women serve to oppose Ichabod in his quest to attain a higher truth. In addition to youthful heroism, truthful quests, the supernatural, and uneasiness towards women, Lerangis’ distrust of cities and his love of nature truly promote his romantic views. A romantic’s view of New York City is juxtaposed in the inhabitants’ view that “ the world end[s] at Wall Street”

and that its citizens “ seldom venture north into the farmlands and swamps” (3). This idea of being constrained is the main focus of the romantic author. And, this distrust of cities does not end with its containment. New York City is further exemplified as a place where “ distance murders [hold] little shock value” and “ death [is] a daily event” (3). This image of a cruel and inhumane city appeals directly to the sense of pathos, invoking a concern its people and the hope for a solution. This solution is found in nature’s juxtaposition of the city. Nature symbolizes freedom, and a bird serves as the most predominant symbol of this freedom. In the novel, this bird is a cardinal, a bright red bird with the ability to fly, free from constraints and injustices. In the city, Ichabod has a cardinal as a pet, locked away in a cage. However, before leaving for Sleepy Hollow, he releases the bird and “ watch[es] as its fiery red plumage [is] consumed in the rays of the rising sun” (14). This symbolizes both Ichabod’s release from the city’s cage and the beginning of a new chapter in his life. This cardinal appears later in the novel when Katrina tells Ichabod that she “ would love to have a tame one, but wouldn’t have the heart to cage him” (60). This announcement reiterates the idea that nature is free from all constraints and should not be caged for a mere moment’s enjoyment. However, the cardinal’s symbolic freedom is not everlasting. As Ichabod is talking to the “ Witch of the Western Woods,” she opens her fist and “ a dead bird spill[s] out-a cardinal” (31; 73). Ichabod responds to this annihilation of freedom by “ stepp[ing] back in horror” (73). It is this distrust of civilization and love of nature that leads Ichabod to Sleepy Hollow; and in the end, it is nature that triumphs over the evils of the city with its “ snow, falling gently” and “ covering [the city’s] multitude of sins” (149).