

Example of essay on rip van winkle by washington irving

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In the opening paragraphs of the tale of Rip Van Winkle, the author, Washington Irving, describes the main character Rip Van Winkle as “ a simple good-natured man”, “ a kind neighbor” and “ an obedient hen-pecked husband.” He suggests that it is the latter characteristic that makes him so popular with everyone, due to the general view that men who are “ under the thumb” in their homes tend to be “ obsequious and conciliatory” when away from their home.

In other words Rip Van Winkle’s true personality and own identity have been suppressed by his long experience of being verbally harangued by a shrew of a wife. Irving suggests that in some respects the effects of his wife’s general behavior has been positive in teaching him how to be extremely patient and “ long-suffering.”

Perhaps because of that, others in his village all liked him including the other wives, who blamed his wife for everything, and the village children, because he joined in their games and told them thrilling stories, effectively finding himself a position of popularity in his community with everyone (including the village dogs), except for his own wife.

According to Irving, Rip Van Winkle’s main personality defect was his total aversion to any work that would earn him a living. He would gladly help others, but would refuse to work on his own land, which he declared to be not worth the effort, as a consequence losing much of it until he was left with a tiny area and even that was poorly maintained.

It was because of his indolent attitude that his wife berated him constantly, to which he responded in silence and with a shrug of his shoulders, followed – usually – by vacating the house to escape from her wrath. Often though, he

would be reduced to heading off into the woods with his gun and accompanied by Wolf, his dog. Essentially then, his own identity and personality had been suppressed by his shrew of a wife, effectively turning him into Dame Van Winkle's husband rather than being a full individual in his own right. Regularly driven from his own home by his wife, it became his only recourse to "lose himself in his wanderings through the woods, accompanied by his fellow-suffering dog. So not only had his own identity been diminished, but his relationship with his wife was next to non-existent, meaning that their identity as a couple was merely at a nominal level. It could be said that though he had been deprived of his own true identity, he had made himself a new one by creating a full life away from his difficult home environment.

It was during one of his woodland rambles, when in late evening he encountered a strange character high up in the mountains, apparently dressed in the style of early Dutch colonists, who sought and obtained Van Winkle's willing (as was his nature) assistance in carrying what appeared to be a full liquor keg, until they reached a clearing populated by similarly-dressed individuals having a seemingly pleasant time but in total silence. Van Winkle was then motioned to serve the assembled persons with drink from the keg, which he did, though somewhat fearful in this strange and quite unusual environment. Subsequently, tempted to try the beverage himself, he downed several until at length he fell asleep.

When he awoke on what he perceived as the next morning, his companions and his faithful dog Wolf had vanished and his trusty gun seemed to have been replaced by a rusting version with the stock suffering from worm

attack. Scrambling with difficulty to where the gathering had been the night before (his joints seemed to have stiffened up), there was not only no trace of the group but even the topography of the location had changed. Fearful of the reception he might get from his dragon of a wife, he set off for home. As he approached the village he met people dressed “strangely” and who gave him odd looks whilst touching their chins. When Rip involuntarily did the same he found to his amazement he was sporting a very long beard! He recognized nobody and found his house dilapidated and in ruins. He then soon encountered people outside what was once the familiar Inn, but the Inn and the people had changed, and a much busier atmosphere prevailed with discussions about politics, using words and describing events that were alien to Rip Van Winkle. He was then asked whether he was Federal or Democrat – also terms that at the time had no meaning for him.

Following the strange experience in the hills recounted in Irving’s story, and having returned to his home village believing himself to have been absent for just the one night, (but finding that he had been gone for twenty years and that the people he had known had mostly either died or moved away), he then met his own son (who was apparently as idle as himself) and his daughter – now with her own child – and then a former neighbor who recognized him.

Another former neighbour not only vouched for him but recounted to the other villagers the tale that ghosts gathered every twenty years in the spot that Rip Van Winkle had visited. Van Winkle was soon persuaded to live with his daughter and lapsed into his former lazy habits, but now fraternising more with the younger generation. So “overnight”, he had lost his old

identity and although still the same Rip Van Winkle, had found a new place in the community he had previously inhabited.

His relationship with his wife was no more, so he was longer part of a couple, but became now a guest in his married daughter's home - another shift in both his personal and relational identities.

Once he had settled once more into the debating group outside the Inn and had mastered the understanding of the changes, including political ones, that had occurred in his "lost" twenty years, he became aware of the current political scene, but was most of all pleased to be free of the oppression he had suffered for years under the regime of his wife Dame Van Winkle, who had since departed this life. So he had in effect acquired a new identity - that of a "free" man - no longer subject to the tirades from a wife who perhaps with justification had been unforgiving of his indolent ways.

In his former life (before his long sleep), he had been aware that England had ruled his country, though being non-political that had had little influence on his life. That political change meant that he was now a citizen of the United States of America, but that also had little significance for Rip Van Winkle. Being little interested in politics, it had not in his view affected his identity in that regard.

So, in summary, Rip Van Winkle's married life had changed his identity from that of a free-thinking individual into someone permanently in the shadow of a domineering wife. Then, following his 20-year sleep, he had come out from that shadow thanks to the demise of the wife. However, in terms of his relational identity, he had gone from being a farm and house owner to a guest in his own daughter's house. In terms of his political identity, although

those intervening years had brought about drastic changes to the politics of the country he lived in, because Rip Van Winkle was non-political, his identity in that regard would to him at least have seemed unchanged.

Works Cited:

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