

The awakening of the
american spirit in rip
van winkle by
washington irving



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It is no small fact that after the American Revolution everything had changed in American society. It is one of the single most important historical events that shaped our country into what it is today and produced a lot of important American literature that we have today. Rip Van Winkle, I would argue is one of those works of literature and isn't just a fun short story to read to children, but an accurate depiction of how America was able to step up from British rule and become the amazing country that we have today. Washington Irving understood what the American people were experiencing at that time and wrote Rip Van Winkle with a way for American citizens to cope and form their own identity. Even though it was a great thing for America to be totally separated from England, it was also an adjustment and could be seen as like a divorce or a separation of a family. Irving lets his main character take on that role in his story so that it might be easier for the American people to understand. "The opening paragraph of RVW establishes the theme of the national "British" family breakup "while the country was yet a province of Great Britain": the Kaatskill Mountains "are a dismembered branch of the great Appalachian family". The imagery suggests a family that is split off and broken, and Irving employs the "branch" metaphor for families in other essays in *The Sketch Book*. In a story dealing with a change from British to American rule, Irving allusively evokes the commonplace family metaphor used before, during, and after the Revolution: England was the "mother" or "parent" country, and the American colonists were her children. But there is another pertinent cultural metaphor, for Rip is a henpecked husband, badgered by his demanding wife, and soon finds himself separated from his family". When separation of families occur it can be quite traumatic for everyone involved, and I think Irving was trying to help the cause.

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Irving does a great job of using metaphors in “ Rip Van Winkle” to talk about America before it was influenced by England, during the time of English influence, and post American Revolution. Rip Van Winkle is about a man who lives in a tight-knit community along the Hudson Valley. Van Winkle is a man that is highly admired by his whole community because everyone feels like they can depend on him to help them when they are in need. It is ironic, however, that Van Winkle’s wife, Dame Van Winkle, can hardly stand her husband. “ Morning, noon and night, her tongue was incessantly going, and everything he said or did was sure to produce a torrent of household eloquence”. His wife might be justified for always getting annoyed with her husband, because of his lack to help around their own house. Her constant nagging might be the reason that he decides to avoid her as much as possible, so she could be her own enemy because of the instigations she has against her husband. Irving uses Dame Van Winkle as a metaphor for England and its constant need to tell America what to do and how to do it. America, of course is represented as Rip Van Winkle, so we can see that a constant nagging wife (England) telling her husband (America) what to do is what really made Rip Van Winkle want to escape.

As the story goes on that is in fact what Rip Van Winkle wants to do. He decides the only way to escape his wife and farm and finally be happy is to leave and go squirrel hunting with his dog and gun. This metaphor can be seen that Rip Van Winkle’s taking up arms and leaving is symbolic to America deciding to take up arms and leave the controlling motherland as well. Some might argue that Winkle trying to run away is cowardly and he should confront his problems head on but Wang says this of the subject, “ I

would argue that Wolf, as a metaphorical substitute, explicates this artistic creation. Rip, in pursuing his own freedom, is criticized as foolish and useless by society; however, upon his retreat from the village into the woods, the “hen-pecked husband” has regained “the martial character of his ancestors,” and become a gallant hunter. So Winkle seems to transform from a husband who is constantly nagged, into a heroic hunter with a weapon. Winkle tries hunting for squirrels for the majority of the day, but he doesn’t find any. He notices that the sun is setting and should probably return to his house. Along the way back he hears his name from a dwarf-like person. Winkle decides to help this man carry a keg of liquor down the hill, and then drinks a little bit with this dwarf man. Winkle seems to have a bit of drinking problem because he drinks too much and falls asleep.

When Winkle finally wakes up he doesn’t realize that he’s been asleep for twenty years and that the world he knew was completely different now. He heads into town and finds that the image of King George III is replaced with one of George Washington. He finds that that people in his community are very different as well, and that is what Irving was trying to get across. The revolution sparked something within the American people and they became extremely enthusiastic about a new government separated from England. During the twenty years that Winkle was asleep, the American people found their own identity away from England and they were empowered by it.

Winkle is naturally confused by the all of a sudden change to his life and understand who he might be now. It is only when he finds his daughter who tells him everything that has happened including that his wife has passed away, that Winkle is able to find his own identity and one that brings him <https://assignbuster.com/the-awakening-of-the-american-spirit-in-rip-van-winkle-by-washington-irving/>

happiness, despite how sad that sounds. The metaphors that Irving uses in his book are very indicative to how society was during the time that England ruled over the colonies and after. It was very important at this time for Americans to find an identity away from that of being under British rule. Just like Rip Van Winkle's experience when he finds himself extremely happy at hearing of the death of his wife, Dame Van Winkle. There would have been no other way for America to thrive and become the Country of innovation and prosperity that it is today.

Works like Rip Van Winkle are interesting because even though it is a simple tale and a humorous one at that, it teaches a very important time in history for the United States of America. The awakening of the American Spirit was almost recorded in this short story and will forever be remembered as one of early America's finest piece of literature.