

# Stylistic innovations in rip van winkle by washington irving

Literature



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### ‘ Rip Van Winkle’

Washington Irving in ‘ Rip Van Winkle’ uses several stylistic innovations to recount the fabular story of the man who went to sleep for twenty years. This paper will explore how these devices work to emphasize the message of the story, which is about the fundamental immutability of history and life in general.

In ‘ Rip Van Winkle’, the narrative is told at many removes. There is a frame narrator, Irving himself presumably, who that he is merely reworking a story originally written by an ‘ old gentleman of New York’, ‘ Diedrich Knickerbocker’, who in turn claims to have only put to paper a pre-existing story of Dutch history. This retelling and reworking of the story serves the function of placing it in a tradition of story-telling or history. Coupled with the emphasis on the ‘ scrupulous accuracy’ and ‘ unquestionable authority’ of the story, this contextualizing of the tale gives it a sense of credibility. Since the story deals indirectly with the changes that the liberation of the United States from its imperial ruler brings, this element of historicity is important. Also, the message of the story, as previously mentioned, is in the nature of a truth. It is a comment on life itself and hence, if its illustration is backed by historical proof or at least a semblance of realism, it is made that much stronger.

Irving also employs a rather ironic and humorous tone in his writing. Dame Van Winkle’s description, Rip himself being described as having an ‘ inuperable aversion to all kinds of profitable labor’, the mob near the end of the story who fall on Rip calling him a spy and a Tory are instances of this ironic humor. His observations of situations and characters are tinged with

mild satire. This serves to sustain the interest of the reader, which a more moralistic and preachy tone might have dampened, and lends the story a certain charm. Any fable with a moral must be able to impact its readers and Irving's humorous touch makes the message even clearer and its communication more effective.

Another stylistic element of 'Rip Van Winkle' is the rich imagery used. The story opens with a beautiful description of the Catskill mountains:

When the weather is fair and settled, they are clothed in blue and purple, and print their bold outlines on the clear evening sky; but sometimes, when the rest of the landscape is cloudless, they will gather a hood of gray vapors about their summits, which, in the last rays of the setting sun, will glow and light up like a crown of glory.

And later in the story, when Rip awakens from his long slumber, the writer again brings up the Hudson and the mountains which help Rip recognize that he is home. This emphasis on the mountains and the river as unchanging and constantly present reiterates the story's message in a subtle way. Just as Rip's long sleep symbolizes how the common person was in many ways unaffected by the revolution, the unchanging landscape also brings out the permanent nature of life.

Irving therefore, employs rich imagery, a humorous and playful tone, and also emphasized the historicity of the story – both in the opening note as well as in the postscript – to make his message of the story even stronger. The theme and content of the tale, in this case, is bolstered by the choice of form as well.

Work Cited:

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