

The demon in dame van winkle essay sample



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Dame Van Winkle is cast as the ultimate antagonist throughout the story “ Rip Van Winkle.” Though the readers never actually are allowed to “ see” firsthand the endless horrible atrocities and abuse Rip suffers at the hand (and mouth) of Dame Van Winkle, we are reminded of it constantly throughout the story, left wondering what she could possibly be doing that is so awful. Dame Van Winkle’s demonization in this story acts as a kind of allegorical social commentary: if a woman is the sole cause of *all* of a man’s distress, then he himself is not responsible for any of the “ wrongs” he suffers in his life, and thus it is that her removal from his life is directly related to his greater enjoyment of life and a lack of any further stress on him. In this story, a direct correlation is made between Rip Van Winkle’s discontent and Dame Van Winkle’s constant nagging. This point is furthered supported when, after Rip’s supernatural slumber, he learns of his wife’s death and feels nothing but relief, and from that point forward his life is pure bliss. It seems that Irving uses this story of Rip Van Winkle as a form of social commentary—the commentary being the echoing of men’s irrational beliefs that women are a destructive presence in men’s lives, and serve no greater purpose than to make men miserable.

Dame Van Winkle is a fairly easy target. Aside from what we are told from the viewpoint of Rip Van Winkle, we never actually experience this horrid monstrosity for ourselves. Because of this, the readers never actually have the chance to form their own opinions, as opposed to just being *told* what to believe, and the Dame never has the chance to defend herself. This entire tale or terror is completely one-sided and entirely biased, and thus from the very beginning is suspect to scrutiny. If we the readers are to believe in the

indescribable wickedness that is Dame Van Winkle, then we need to see some actual examples of it and be allowed to make our own fair judgments. This opportunity is not afforded to us, however, which throws the entire premise that the Dame is the cause of all the strife in Rip's life into question. A character cannot be demonized in such a way without there being significant evidence that s/he should be (at least., not if the audience is expected to believe it). It is easy to "pick on" a character who isn't present to defend herself; it would surely be much more difficult to prove that she deserved the negative portrayal she received.

According to the narrator of the story (which is told from Rip's point of view), Dame Van Winkle is essentially single-handedly responsible for all of the stress and discontent in Rip's life. There are constant references to her "termagant" (PP #) nature, her "continually dinning" (PP #), how he was a "hen-pecked husband" (PP #), and how "Times grew worse and worse with Rip Van Winkle as years of matrimony rolled on" (PP #). There is a great deal of pity being played up for Rip in this story when his wife is described as such a relentless beast. Yet we also know that Rip was a terrifically lazy man: "The great error in Rip's composition was an insuperable aversion to all kinds of profitable labor" (PP #). And it was not simply a matter of Rip just being *lazy*; he was *so* lazy that their farmland dwindled under his "supervision," and what little of it that was left was the "worst conditioned farm in the neighborhood" (PP #). It can be assumed from here, knowing simply that Rip was a horribly lazy man and that his wife and children depended upon him to provide for them, that he was apparently entirely incapable of doing so. They owned many acres of perfectly good farmland

which he allowed to fall to shambles, with what little ground that could produce anything at all not producing much of anything, much less anything of substance.

The cows they did have had wandered off, because Rip failed to maintain the fence that would have kept them in. All this means that the amount of food they had to eat was severely limited, and anything that they would have produced in order to sell was nonexistent. Rip isn't just simply failing to provide for his family; his family's lack of food and resources is caused directly by Rip and his actions. A wife, who is most likely starving as a result of forgoing her own food to provide for her children, would surely be exasperated by this behavior of her husband's, and would most certainly confront him at every opportunity to show him how he is failing his family and needs to take responsibility and fix the problem. As Rip goes out to gallivant with the townsfolk and their children, day after day, while the Dame remains at home caring for children that are probably hungry, dirty, possibly even sick from malnourishment, it is only *realistic* that she would harbor a resentment against him and unleash it upon his return—this is her family, after all. Given Rip's complete lack of responsibility (and the effect it probably had on his family), it would seem that any amount nagging and hen-pecking done by Dame Van Winkle would be entirely justified, even expected. She is not ruining his life here: he's ruining hers.

Rip finds his escape from Dame Van Winkle in the form of mysterious keg-toting, forest-dwelling explorer ghosts, whose generous libations put him to sleep for 20 years. Upon awaking, Rip (of course) had some serious adjustments to make (like first discovering that he had missed out on the <https://assignbuster.com/the-demon-in-dame-van-winkle-essay-sample/>

last 20 years), but after he is told that Dame Van Winkle had died, “ There was a drop of comfort” (PP #). After the passage of 20 years, Rip was officially an old man, which meant for him that he could continue in all his idle ways without judgment, because at his age it was acceptable to be nonproductive. He was also relieved because he could come and go as he pleased “ without dreading the tyranny or Dame Van Winkle” (PP #).

He lived his life as he always had, but now it was without fear because he was finally free of the Dame: “ Whenever her name was mentioned, however, he shook his head, shrugged his shoulders, cast up his eyes; which might pass either for an expression of resignation to his fate, or joy at his deliverance” (PP #). Rip did not mourn the passing of his wife, but rather acknowledged only the freedom he was gaining away from her. Twenty-year-long naps aside, the real story here is how a man could be so desperate to get away from his “ shrewish” wife that he would be willing to sacrifice 20 years of his own life and outwait her death, just so he could live as he chose. The Dame was not ruining his life, but rather just forcing him to take responsibility for his own carelessness. He, in turn, decided that instead of dealing without his own faults he would rather just avoid them altogether. The forest beer spirits were merely just an allegory for Rip’s own desperate childishness.

When the narrator concludes the story, the final words are: “...it is a common wish of hen-pecked husbands in the neighborhood, when life hangs heavy on their hands, that they might have a quieting draught out of Rip Van Winkle’s flagon” (PP #). Ultimately, the moral of the story has nothing to do with the pseudo-sci-fi elements of the 20-year sleep, nor does it have

anything to do with a man appreciating the things he has and finding contentment in life through acceptance, but rather lauds the avoidance tactic used by Rip and comments on how every man in the neighborhood wishes he could do the same. This is a highly misogynistic thought process (the idea that a woman could make a man so incredibly miserable that as a last resort he escapes her by sleeping for 20 years), and one that ends up upholding the anti-woman sentiment predominant throughout the story.

While it seems very obvious that the story is purposely creating a direct correlation between a man's misery and a woman's nagging, and framing it all in the context of a strange phenomenon, it is unclear whether this is the express intent of the *author* himself, or if Irving's intentions with this story were meant to be a kind of tongue-in-cheek, facetious parody of men's and women's relationships. It really is possible that either situation is the case, because while Irving offers a plentitude of "proof" against Dame Van Winkle, which then relates back to all femalekind, he also offers just as much proof towards the inherent folly of Rip Van Winkle, making him out to be just as much of a buffoon. Therefore, it may be that Irving wrote the story to echo the paranoid anti-female sentiments of the men of his time, but only to make a mockery of them.

In conclusion, the story of "Rip Van Winkle" acts in many ways as an allegory for the relationships between men and women during this time, and moreso of men's negative perception of women as being relentless, unforgiving nags—even when the husband is a relentlessly lazy, slothful overgrown child. Dame Van Winkle here is both a villain and a victim—a villain in her husband's eyes, but a victim of her husband's own desperation

to blame the consequences of his laziness on someone else. She is an easy scapegoat in the story, but the astute reader just isn't buying into it.