

Annie Thrasher

American Literature — Dr. Kane

September 23, 2016

### How America as a Setting Influenced Rip Van Winkle

The setting of Washington Irving's *Rip Van Winkle* plays an integral role in how the story is told, because without it, this story would only be a strange folk tale about a crazy man. The emotional, physical and periodical setting of the story play into Rip's development as a character, as well as rounding out the storyline to ensure the reader's understanding of the tale.

Emotionally, Rip handles his wife, and physically, the setting literally and figuratively changes several times throughout the story. It is important to understand the time period change from Great Britain's America to free America that also represents a literal change in location for Rip after a long twenty years.

The Kaatskill mountains are a beautiful backdrop to the story of *Rip Van Winkle*. They are described as "fairy mountains...[with] light smoke curling up from a village, whose shingle roofs gleam among the trees, just where the blue tints of the upland melt away into the fresh green of the nearer landscape" (Irving, 472). This tranquil setting is what allows Rip to live his carefree, albeit lazy, life hunting and fishing and taking care of everyone's problems except his own. The physical setting changes several times throughout the story as Rip travels from the town to the woods, and then returns to the same, but much different, town.

Aside from the physical setting, we can see an emotional setting in the story outlined by Rip's behavior in reaction to the world around him. This mainly comes from his wife, Dame Van Winkle, who interrupts his tranquility constantly with her nagging. She goes so far as to

interrupt his tavern sanctuary in town, and “...his only alternative to escape from the labor of the farm and the clamor of his wife was to take gun in hand, and stroll away into the woods” (Irving, 474). Perhaps the only respite in this emotionally draining setting for Rip is his dog, Wolf, a companion in his suffering.

In the mountains after Rip follows the man up the ravine, he experiences a literal change in location, which can also be understood as a change in setting. The man leads Rip up the mountain and “...through a ravine [to] a hollow, like a small amphitheater” (Irving, 475). This scene can be interpreted as Rip encountering god-like figures; the men are dressed in strangely historic clothing and “Nothing interrupted the stillness of the scene, but the noise of the balls, which, whenever they were rolled, echoes along the mountains like rumbling peals of thunder” (Irving, 476). This encounter with gods may be a part of the reason that Rip passes twenty years in what feels like one night — perhaps time passes differently in this location.

When Rip Van Winkle returns to the town after twenty years in the mountains, he does not experience a change in location, but the setting of the story has changed dramatically due to time and a regime change. Under Great Britain’s version of America, he had a happy life that was not intruded on by politics very much. He could go to his tavern with his friends and do as he pleased. Rip had never been bothered much by politics, “there was only one species of despotism under which he had long groaned, and that was — petticoat government” (Irving, 481). Thus, the transition into free America as far as politically only affected Rip in the beginning when he claimed to be loyal to the king.

As far as the rest of his life was concerned, Rip was greatly affected by the transition America made into a free country. Rip realizes as he enters the town that he no longer

recognizes the people in the town, and that they are all dressed strangely. The war had taken his friends from him either by death or job opportunity in Congress, so Rip knew almost no one save for his children. The tavern where he had found sanctuary had been remodeled, and everything seemed slightly more rundown and tattered, especially his house, which had “gone to decay — the roof fallen in, the windows shattered, and the doors off the hinges” (Irving, 478). The tree that the owner of the tavern sat behind to avoid the sun while smoking his pipe had been removed to put a flagpole up.

With this figurative change in setting comes a big change in Rip’s emotional setting as well. He moves in with his daughter, who “...had a snug, well-furnished house, and a stout cheery farmer for a husband” (Irving, 481). He also learns that Dame Van Winkle had passed during his time in the mountains, and “Whenever her name was mentioned, however, he just shook his head, shrugged his shoulders, and cast up his eyes; which might pass either for an expression of resignation to his fate, or joy at his deliverance” (Irving, 481).

The setting for Rip Van Winkle influences the titular in his attitude and outlook on life. The physical setting of the story literally leads to Rip’s characterization as a lazy man who runs from his wife anytime there are problems, but it also influences his kindhearted and caring nature to take care of others. Emotionally, the setting of the story is stressful for Rip until he returns to the town to learn of the changes that have since passed, especially his wife’s death. Perhaps the most influential setting change is the time transition between Great Britain’s America and free America, because this change engulfs the physical in a sense as well as the emotional. The story itself would not make sense without the setting, because understanding how Rip’s location changes throughout leads the reader to understand why the changes are significant.

Works Cited

Irving, Washington. "Rip Van Winkle." *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, Shorter Eighth Ed., vol. 1, edited by Nina Baym, W.W. Norton & Company, New York, 2013, 470-482.