

# Washington Irving (1783-1859)



## Sydney Smith's Taunt (1820)

- In the four quarters of the globe, who reads an American book, or goes to an American play, or looks at an American picture or statue?”
- Until the end of this century, American printers routinely stole the work of English writers.
- Irving's name did not appear on any of his books before he was 50. Why?

## Irving

- America's first international literary celebrity was born in New York City, the eleventh child in a close-knit family. After writing satirical sketches and essays for his brothers' newspapers for some years, Irving captured the nation's attention with the fictitious *A History of New York*, supposedly written by a curious old gentleman named Diedrich Knickerbocker.

## Irving

- However, his *Sketch Book* (1819-20), which included “Rip Van Winkle” and “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow,” remains his most recognized and influential contribution to American literature. Through Irving, American writing as art came into being.

# Irving and His Time

- The 18th century had been one of enlightenment and classical thought throughout Europe. The classical thought failed to provide solutions for the inequalities and rifts in society brought on by industrialization and commercial prosperity.
- The romantic movement was common to all world literatures in the period after 1800.

# American Romanticism (1810-1865)

- Not a revolt against neoclassicism. The American writers wished to establish a national literature on self-reliance and independence with which the colonists had carved civilization out of a virgin wilderness.
- A large part of American romantic writings directed the characteristic romantic surge of powerful emotion toward the expression of individual pride and patriotism, making the

# American Romanticism

- writing national, full of local color and the folkloric elements of the times.
- Instead of attacking social injustices which followed in the wake of industrialization and the rise of factories, American romantic writers attacked a more fundamental human injustice (Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* published in 1852).

# American Romanticism

- With no historical past to idealize, the American romantics turned their attentions to the Indians, the frontiersman, and the wilderness setting.
- The development after 1830 of transcendentalism in New England.
- Many called Irving the first American romantic.



# Narrative Method

- Recast German folk tales or Spanish legends in the Dutch colonial settings
- Picturesque color and human richness
- Polished style, detailed description, satire

## "Rip Van Winkle"

### The Author's Account of Himself

*"I am of this mind with Homer, that as the snail that crept out of her shell was turned eftsone into a toad, and thereby was forced to make as stool to sit on; so the traveller that straggleth from his own country is in a short time transformed into so monstrous a shape, that he is faine to alter his mansion with his manners, and to live where he can, not where he would.*

Lyly's Euphues

I was always fond of visiting new scenes, and observing strange characters and manners. Even when a mere child I began my travels, and made many tours of discovery into foreign parts and unknown regions of my native city, to the frequent alarm of my parents, and the emolument of the town-crier. As I grew into boyhood, I extended the range of my observations. My holiday afternoons were spent in rambles about the surrounding country. I made myself familiar with all its places famous in history or fable. I knew every spot where a murder or robbery had been committed, or a ghost seen. I visited the neighboring villages, and added greatly to my stock of knowledge, by noting their habits and customs, and conversing with their sages and great men. I even journeyed one long summer's day to the summit of the most distant hill, whence I stretched my eye over many a mile of terra incognita, and was astonished to find how vast a globe I inhabited.

This rambling propensity strengthened with my years. Books of voyages and travels became my passion, and in devouring their contents, I neglected the regular exercises of the school. How wistfully would I wander about the pierheads in fine weather, and watch the parting ships, bound to distant climes--with what longing eyes would I gaze after their lessening sails, and waft myself in imagination to the ends of the earth!

Further reading and thinking, though they brought this vague inclination into more reasonable bounds, only served to make it more decided. I visited various parts of my own country; and had I been merely a lover of fine scenery, I should have felt little desire to seek elsewhere its gratification, for on no country have the charms of nature been more prodigally lavished. Her mighty lakes, like oceans of liquid silver; her mountains, with their bright aerial tints; her valleys, teeming with wild fertility; her tremendous cataracts, thundering in their solitudes; her boundless plains, waving with spontaneous verdure; her broad deep rivers, rolling in solemn silence to the ocean; her trackless forests, where vegetation puts forth all its magnificence; her skies, kindling with the magic of summer clouds and glorious sunshine;--no, never need an American look beyond his own country for the sublime and beautiful of natural scenery.

But Europe held forth the charms of storied and poetical association. There were to be seen the masterpiece of art, the refinements of highly-cultivated society, the quaint peculiarities of ancient and local custom. My native country was full of youthful promise: Europe was rich in the accumulated treasures of age. Her very ruins told the history of times gone by, and every mouldering stone was a chronicle. I longed to wander over the scenes of renowned achievement--to tread, as it were, in the footsteps of antiquity--to loiter about the ruined castle--to meditate on the falling tower--to escape, in short, from the common-place realities of the present, and lose myself among the shadowy grandeurs of the past.

I had, beside all this, an earnest desire to see the great men of the earth. We have, it is true, our great men in America: not a city but has an ample share of them. I have mingled among them in my time, and been almost withered by the shade into which they cast me; for there is nothing so baleful to a small man as the shade of a great one, particularly the great man of a city. But I was anxious to see the great men of Europe; for I had read in the works of various philosophers, that all animals degenerated in America, and man among the number. A great man of Europe, thought I, must therefore be as superior to a great man of America, as a peak of the Alps to a highland of the Hudson; and in this idea I was confirmed, by observing the comparative importance and swelling magnitude of many English travellers among us, who, I was assured, were very little people in their own country. I will visit this land of wonders, thought I, and see the gigantic race from which I am degenerated.

It has been either my good or evil lot to have my roving passion gratified. I have wandered through different countries, and witnessed many of the shifting scenes of life. I cannot say that I have studied them with the eye of a philosopher; but rather with the sauntering gaze with which humble lovers of the picturesque stroll from the window of one print-shop to another; caught sometimes by the delineations of beauty, sometimes by the distortions of caricature, and sometimes by the loveliness of landscape. As it is the fashion for modern tourists to travel pencil in hand, and bring home their portfolios filled with sketches, I am disposed to get up a few for the entertainment of my friends.



When, however, I look over the hints and memorandums I have taken down for the purpose, my heart almost fails me at finding how my idle humor has led me aside from the great objects studied by every regular traveller who would make a book. I fear I shall give equal disappointment with an unlucky landscape painter, who had travelled on the continent, but, following the bent of his vagrant inclination, had sketched in nooks, and corners, and by-places. His sketch-book was accordingly crowded with cottages, and landscapes, and obscure ruins; but he had neglected to paint St. Peter's, or the Coliseum; the cascade of Terni, or the bay of Naples; and had not a single glacier or volcano in his whole collection.

## Question

“His sketch-book was accordingly crowded with cottages, and landscapes, and obscure ruins; but he had neglected to paint St. Peter's, or the Coliseum; the cascade of Terni, or the bay of Naples; and had not a single glacier or volcano in his whole collection.” What was the misfortune of being an American writer at Irving's time?

# “The Legend of the Sleepy Hollow”



[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Legend\\_of\\_Sleepy\\_Hollow](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Legend_of_Sleepy_Hollow)

# “Rip Van Winkle”

- [The following Tale was found among the papers of the late Diedrich Knickerbocker, an old gentleman of New York, who was very curious in the Dutch history of the province, and the manners of the descendants from its primitive settlers. His historical researches, however, did not lie so much among books as among men; for the former are lamentably scanty on his favorite topics; whereas he found the old burghers, and still more their wives, rich in that legendary lore, so invaluable to true history. Whenever, therefore, he happened upon a genuine Dutch family, snugly shut up in its low-roofed farmhouse, under a spreading sycamore, he looked upon it as a little clasped volume of black-letter,' and studied it with the zeal of a book-worm.

## “Rip Van Winkle”

- The result of all these researches was a history of the province during the reign of the Dutch governors, which he published some years since. There have been various opinions as to the literary character of his work, and, to tell the truth, it is not a whit better than it should be. Its chief merit is its scrupulous accuracy, which indeed was a little questioned on its first appearance, but has since been completely established; and it is now admitted into all historical collections, as a book of unquestionable authority.

## “Rip Van Winkle”

- The old gentleman died shortly after the publication of his work, and now that he is dead and gone, it cannot do much harm to his memory to say that his time might have been much better employed in weightier labors. He, however, was apt to ride his hobby his own way; and though it did now and then kick up the dust a little in the eyes of his neighbors, and grieve the spirit of some friends, for whom he felt the truest deference and affection; yet his errors and follies are remembered "more in sorrow than in anger," and it begins to be suspected, that he never intended to injure or offend.

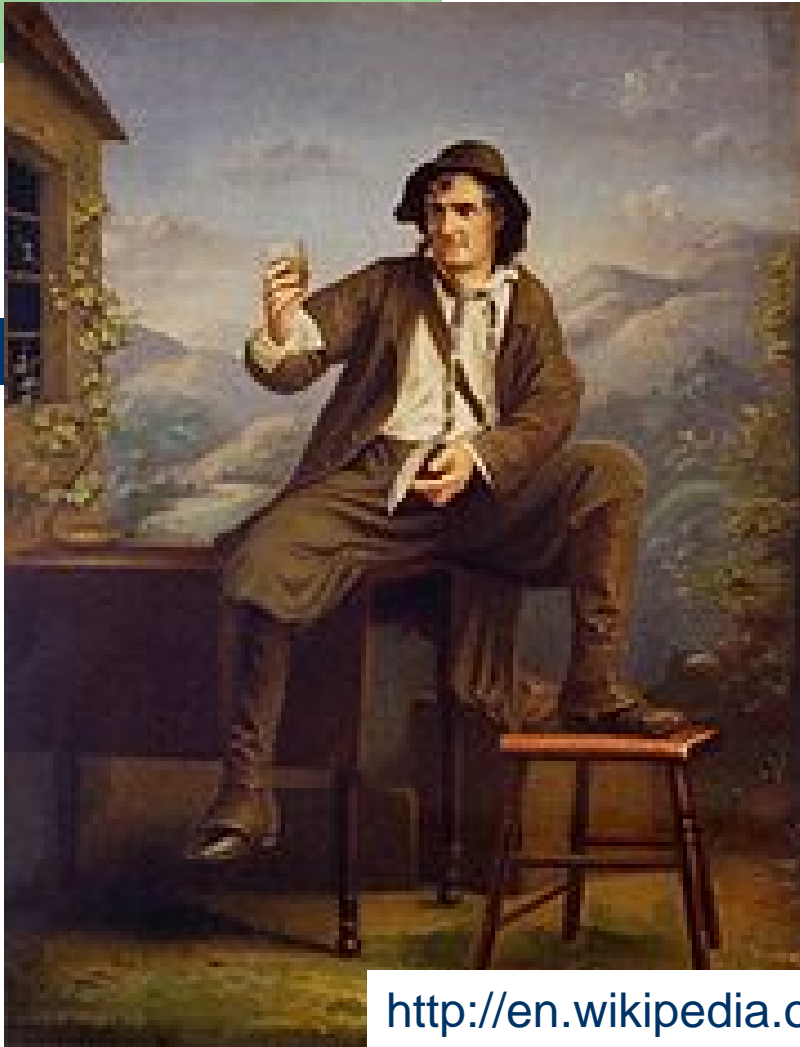
## “Rip Van Winkle”

- But however his memory may be appreciated by critics, it is still held dear by many folk, whose good opinion is well worth having; particularly by certain biscuit-bakers, who have gone so far as to imprint his likeness on their new-year cakes; and have thus given him a chance for immortality, almost equal to the being stamped on a Waterloo Medal, or a Queen Anne's Farthing.]”

## Question

- “Rip Van Winkle” was first told by Rip Van Winkle, passed to Diedrich Knickerbocker who committed it to paper. That writing was subsequently discovered posthumously by Geoffrey Crayon (pseudonym of Irving).
- Why did Irving use all these frames?





[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rip\\_Van\\_Winkle](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rip_Van_Winkle)



# Ninepins



[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Skittles\\_\(sport\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Skittles_(sport))

# Settings

- Whoever has made a voyage up the Hudson must remember the Kaatskill" mountains. They are a dismembered branch of the great Appalachian family, and are seen away to the west of the river, swelling up to a noble height, and lording it over the surrounding country. Every change of season, every change of weather, indeed, every hour of the day, produces some change in the magical hues and shapes of these mountains, and they are regarded by all the good wives, far and near, as perfect barometers. 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.

# Dutch colony

- At the foot of these fairy mountains, the voyager may have descried the 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. It is a little village, of great antiquity, having been founded by some of the Dutch colonists; in the early times of the province, just about the beginning of the government of the good Peter Stuyvesant," (may he rest in peace!) and there were some of the houses of the original settlers standing within a few years, built of small yellow bricks brought from Holland, having latticed windows and gable fronts, surmounted with weather-cocks.

## “Rip Van Winkle”

- In that same village, and in one of these very houses (which, to tell the precise truth, was sadly time-worn and weather-beaten), there lived many years since, while the country was yet a province of Great Britain, a simple good-natured fellow, of the name of Rip Van Winkle. He was a descendant of the Van Winkles who figured so gallantly in the chivalrous days of Peter Stuyvesant, and accompanied him to the siege of Fort Christina." He inherited, however, but little of the martial character of his ancestors. I have observed that **he was a simple good-natured man; he was, moreover, a kind neighbor, and an obedient hen-pecked husband.**

## “Rip Van Winkle”: Satire

- Indeed, to the latter circumstance might be owing that meekness of spirit which gained him such universal popularity; for those men are most apt to be obsequious and conciliating abroad, who are under the discipline of shrews at home. Their tempers, doubtless, are rendered pliant and malleable in the fiery furnace of domestic tribulation; and a certain lecture" is worth all the sermons in the world for teaching the virtues of patience and long-suffering. A termagant wife may, therefore, in some respects, be considered a tolerable blessing; and if so, Rip Van Winkle was thrice blessed.

- Rip's sole domestic adherent was his dog Wolf, who was as much hen-pecked as his master; for Dame Van Winkle regarded them as companions in idleness, and even looked upon Wolf with an evil eye, as the cause of his master's going so often astray. True it is, in all points of spirit befitting an honorable dog, he was as courageous an animal as ever scoured the woods--but what courage can withstand the everduring and all-besetting terrors of a woman's tongue?

# Irving

- The moment Wolf entered the house his crest fell, his tail dropped to the ground, or curled between his legs, he sneaked about with a gallows air, casting many a sidelong glance at Dame Van Winkle, and at the least flourish of a broomstick or ladle, he would run to the door with yelping precipitation.



- Poor Rip was at last reduced almost to despair; and his only alternative, to escape from the labor of the farm and clamor of his wife, was **to take gun in hand and stroll away into the woods**. Here he would sometimes seat himself at the foot of a tree, and share the contents of his wallet with Wolf, with whom he sympathized as a fellow-sufferer in persecution. "Poor Wolf," he would say, "thy mistress leads thee a dog's life of it; but never mind, my lad, whilst I live thou shalt never want a friend to stand by thee!" Wolf would wag his tail, look wistfully in his master's face, and if dogs can feel pity I verily believe he reciprocated the sentiment with all his heart.

- In a long ramble of the kind on a fine autumnal day, Rip had unconsciously scrambled to one of the highest parts of the Kaatskill mountains. He was after his favorite sport of squirrel shooting, and the still solitudes had echoed and reechoed with the reports of his gun. Panting and fatigued, he threw himself, late in the afternoon, on a green knoll, covered with mountain herbage, that crowned the brow of a precipice.

- From an opening between the trees he could overlook all the lower country for many a mile of rich woodland. He saw at a distance the lordly Hudson, far, far below him, moving on its silent but majestic course, with the reflection of a purple cloud, or the sail of a lagging bark, here and there sleeping on its glassy bosom, and at last losing itself in the blue highlands.

- Passing through the ravine, they came to a hollow, like a small amphitheatre, surrounded by perpendicular precipices, over the brinks of which impending trees shot their branches, so that you only caught glimpses of the azure sky and the bright evening cloud. During the whole time Rip and his companion had labored on in silence; for though the former marvelled greatly what could be the object of carrying a keg of liquor up this wild mountain, yet there was something strange and incomprehensible about the unknown, that inspired awe and checked familiarity.

# Nine-pins: Legend

- ... A company of odd-looking personages playing nine-pins. They were dressed in a quaint outlandish fashion; some wore short doublets, others jerkins, with long knives in their belts, and most of them had enormous breeches, of similar style with that of the guide's. Their visages, too, were peculiar: one had a large beard, broad face, and small piggish eyes: the face of another seemed to consist entirely of nose, and was surmounted by a white sugar-loaf hat, set off with a little red cock's tail. They all had beards, of various shapes and colors.

- By degrees Rip's awe and apprehension subsided. He even ventured, when no eye was fixed upon him, to taste the beverage, which he found had much of the flavor of excellent Hollands." He was naturally a thirsty soul, and was soon tempted to repeat the draught. One taste provoked another; and he reiterated his visits to the flagon so often that at length his senses were overpowered, his eyes swam in his head, his head gradually declined, and he fell into a deep sleep.

- **On waking**, he found himself on the green knoll whence he had first seen the old man of the glen. He rubbed his eyes--it was a bright sunny morning. The birds were hopping and twittering among the bushes, and the eagle was wheeling aloft, and breasting the pure mountain breeze. "Surely," thought Rip, "I have not slept here all night." He recalled the occurrences before he fell asleep. The strange man with a keg of liquor--the mountain ravine--the wild retreat among the rocks--the wobegone party at nine-pins--the flagon--"Oh! that flagon! that wicked flagon!" thought Rip--"what excuse shall I make to Dame Van Winkle!"

- The appearance of Rip, with his long grizzled beard, his rusty fowling-piece, his uncouth dress, and an army of women and children at his heels, soon attracted the attention of the tavern politicians. They crowded around him, eyeing him from head to foot with great curiosity. The orator bustled up to him, and, drawing him partly aside, inquired "on which side he voted?" Rip stared in vacant stupidity. Another short but busy little fellow pulled him by the arm, and, rising on tiptoe, inquired in his ear, "Whether he was Federal or Democrat?" Rip was equally at a loss to comprehend the question;



- when a knowing, self-important old gentleman, in a sharp cocked hat, made his way through the crowd, putting them to the right and left with his elbows as he passed, and planting himself before Van Winkle, with one arm akimbo, the other resting on his cane, his keen eyes and sharp hat penetrating, as it were, into his very soul, demanded in an austere tone,

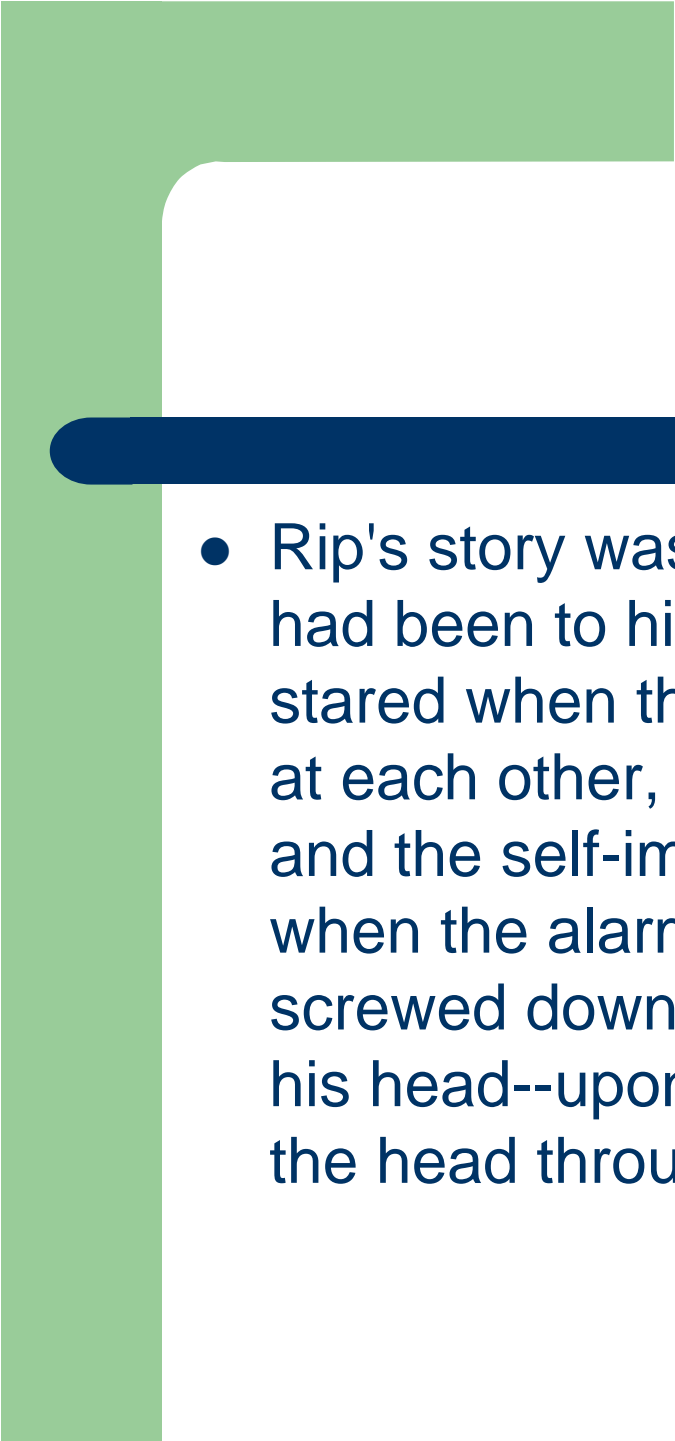

# Anachronism

- "what brought him to the election with a gun on his shoulder, and a mob at his heels, and whether he meant to breed a riot in the village?"--"Alas! gentlemen," cried Rip, somewhat dismayed, **"I am a poor quiet man, a native of the place, and a loyal subject of the king, God bless him!"**

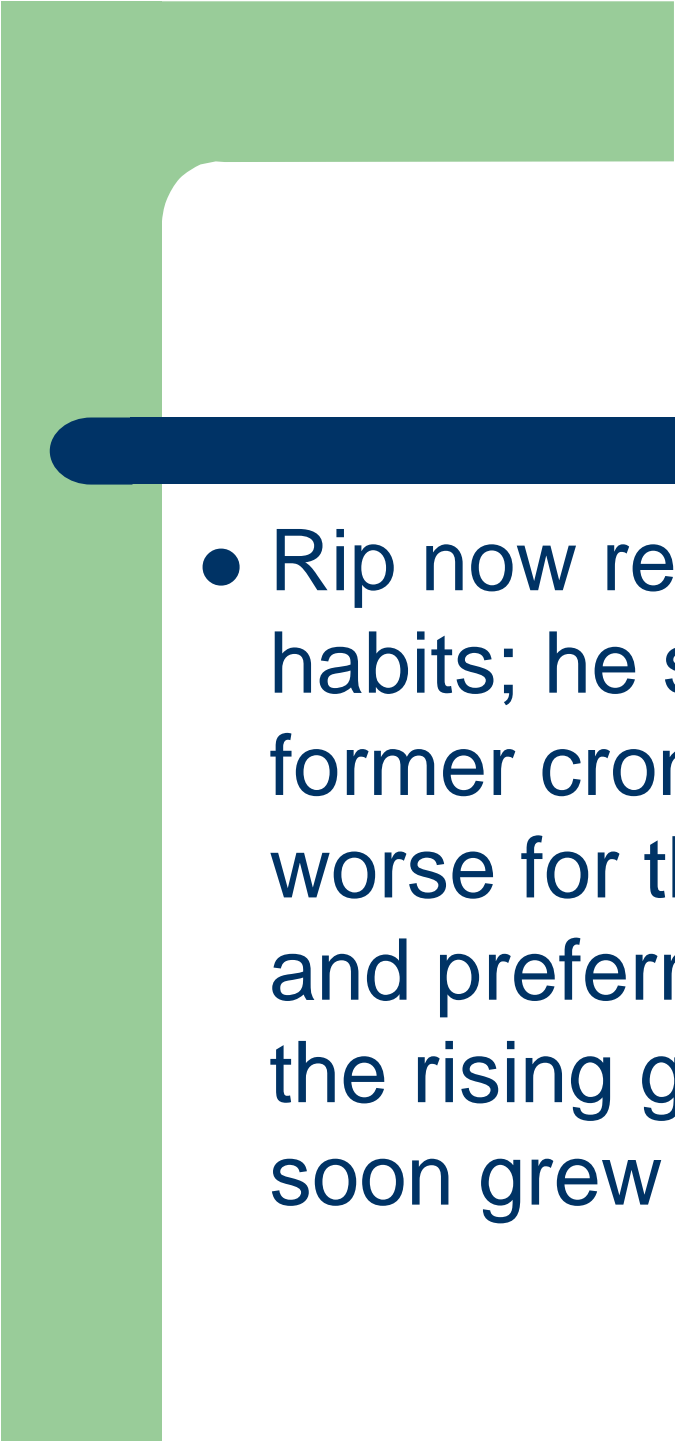

- Rip looked, and beheld a precise counterpart of himself, as he went up to the mountain: apparently as lazy, and certainly as ragged. The poor fellow was now completely confounded. He doubted his own identity, and whether he was himself or another man. In the midst of his bewilderment, the man in the cocked hat demanded who he was, and what was his name?

- "God knows," exclaimed he, at his wit's end; "I'm not myself--I'm somebody else --that's me yonder--no--that's somebody else got into my shoes--I was myself last night, but I fell asleep on the mountain, and they've changed my gun, and every thing's changed, and I'm changed, and I can't tell what's my name, or who I am!"

- "What is your name, my good woman?" asked he.
- "Judith Gardenier."
- "And your father's name?"
- "Ah, poor man, Rip Van Winkle was his name, but it's twenty years since he went away from home with his gun, and never has been heard of since--his dog came home without him; but whether he shot himself, or was carried away by the Indians, nobody can tell. I was then but a little girl."

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- Rip's story was soon told, for the whole twenty years had been to him but as one night. The neighbors stared when they heard it; some were seen to wink at each other, and put their tongues in their cheeks: and the self-important man in the cocked hat, who, when the alarm was over, had returned to the field, screwed down the corners of his mouth, and shook his head--upon which there was a general shaking of the head throughout the assemblage.

- To make a long story short, the company broke up, and returned to the more important concerns of the election. **Rip's daughter** took him home to live with her; she had a snug, well-furnished house, and a stout cheery farmer for a husband, whom Rip recollected for one of the urchins that used to climb upon his back. As to Rip's son and heir, who was the ditto of himself, seen leaning against the tree, he was employed to work on the farm; but evinced an hereditary disposition to attend to my thing else but his business.

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- Rip now resumed his old walks and habits; he soon found many of his former cronies, though all rather the worse for the wear and tear of time; and preferred making friends among the rising generation, with whom he soon grew into great favor



- Happily that was at an end; he had got his neck out of the yoke of matrimony, and could go in and out whenever he pleased, without dreading the tyranny of Dame Van Winkle. Whenever her name was mentioned, however, he 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.

## Rip as the paradigm of the American male

- Americanization of medieval German myth
- Rip: grows old but not up
- Remaining boyish and irresponsible to the end

## Question

- Some readers see “Rip van Winkle” as an allegory about the history of America. Dame van Winkle is a symbol of mother England. She died after the revolution. Rip’s confusion about his own identity reflects the new country’s concern with its own identity. Do you agree with such an interpretation? What might be Irving’s views about the new country? Optimistic? Pessimistic?

## Question

- The main event in “Rip van Winkle” is the American Revolution. What statements about the revolution does the story make? What might be Irving’s views about tradition and change?

## Question

- Some people take Irving to be the Father of American Literature. Can you cite examples from the story to support their claim?

## Question

- What kind of person Rip Van Winkle?  
Discuss his general characteristics, specific situations, and his triumphant postures as the man-boy American who never grows up.

## Question

- We can find in this tale the motif of escape. Trace the development of this motif and discuss the significance of this motif.

## By the way

- At the outset of his story, Washington Irving uses personification to invest the Catskill Mountains with human qualities. Making the mountains come alive enables them to become mysterious and unpredictable.





# Terms

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- American Romanticism