Rip Van Winkle, an Allegory about Modern Man’s Self-identity Crisis

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Abstract. This paper is to analyze how Washington Irving creates an allegory with the help of rhetorical devices to add profound symbolic meanings to a superficially simple story. The main focus of the paper is placed upon the writer’s skillful use of various different symbols to demonstrate the significant and intricate theme: self-identification crisis the modern man has to face.

Introduction
Washington Irving enjoys many honors of being the great first in American literature history, such as the first successful short story writer, the first distinguished American man of letters. A careful reading of The Rip Van Winkle will make people believe that Washington Irving is also the first to use allegory to deal with the topic of the self-identity. This paper is to discuss and analyze how Washington Irving successfully creates an allegory which describes a human being’s anxieties and ambivalence on his journey to look for his self and self-identity. As a typical allegory Rip Van Winkle works through the means of employment of lots of rhetorical devices, such as exaggeration, simile, metaphor, contrast, supernatural event, etc., to add the rich and diverse symbolic meanings to a superficially simple story. What impresses me most about this allegory is the writer’s skillful use of various symbols to reveal and emphasize the significant and intricate theme: the conflict between the dream and the reality, a problem of self-identification crisis the modern man has to face. The analysis in this paper is to be carried out in a chronological sequence, with the narration of the twenty-year’ cave sleeping as a boundary.

Washing Irving and his Rip Van Winkle
Washington Irving is the first American writer enjoying the international reputation. He is the first writer to introduce the short story as a genre in American literature, the first famous American man of letters and “first gave American literature a place in the European mind.” Washington Irving’s works cover a wide range and the readers all over the world are fascinated by his fantastic stories and serious historical biographies. The legend of Rip Van Winkle is collected in The Sketch Book (1819-1820), which is considered to be the most striking one, a landmark work in American fiction, and remains Irving’s best known work and the greatest achievement.

Rip Van Winkle is a short story published in 1819, which is set in the years before and after the American Revolutionary War. The protagonist is a villager of Dutch descent, who cannot bear his nagging wife, he feels so confused that finally he decides to escape from home. One day he wanders up Kaatskill Clove near his home town, and comes into a cave, where he sees dwarfs playing a game of ninepins and joins the game. The dwarfs give him a magic drink that makes him fall asleep for twenty years. He wakes up 20 years later and returns to his village. He finds out that his wife is dead and his close friends have died in a war or gone somewhere else. He once again gets into bewilderment because he doesn’t know that during his twenty years’ sleep the American Revolution has taken place, which makes everything look so strange to him. On the journey to look for his self and individual identity, he fails again.
In Rip Van Winkle, Washington Irving employs varying styles from being tenderly pathetic to being broadly humorous, and uses many types of figure of speech, such as symbol, etc. so as to fulfill his writing purpose. In the next section we shall make a practical analysis.

Practical Analysis

Towards Symbolism

The word symbol derives from the Greek verb symballein “to throw together”, and its noun symbolon “mark”, “emblem”, “token” or “sign”. It is an object, animate or inanimate, which represents or “stands for” something else.

A lot of linguists have made detailed and reasonable definition and classification of symbols. Symbols which are used to combine images with implications can be divided into two broad types: universal symbols and contextual symbols. The former refers to those whose associations possess the common nature of a society or culture, and have been so widely recognized and accepted that they can be regarded as having universal characteristics. These types of symbols are also called traditional symbols and widely used in western literature. When using these symbols, the writer always assumes that readers have already known what the symbol represents. For instance, universal symbols such as flag stands for the ideals of nation, the color of green for freshness and growth, rose for beauty and love and dove symbolizes peace. However, universal symbols have strong cultural property, namely the same thing may bear different symbolic connotations in different cultures, like the red color, in Chinese culture which symbolizes happiness while in Western culture indicating danger, and the color of white which is the symbol of purity in Western culture, but in China, is always related to the death.

Different from universal symbol, contextual or private symbols are those whose associations are neither institutional nor traditional, instead, they derive their symbolic meaning, largely if not exclusively, from the context of the work in which they are used. Symbols employed in literary works usually belong to this type, for they don’t have a common social acceptance. Literary symbols are adopted by the poet or the writer for special purposes in their works, and they can be understood only in the context of that work, that’s why they are called contextual or private symbols.

Symbol can contain both literal and symbolic abstract meaning by using a specific image, which can help the writer and the reader to seek the profound and potential idea in a specific context.

Symbolic Implication in Background Description

In this short story, Irving employs a supernatural event: Rip’s twenty-year cave sleeping, which may be regarded as a boundary to help constitute two different political conditions, with the first metaphorically referring to that before the American Revolution, and the second after the American Revolution. The story consists of 59 paragraphs, the first political conditions is composed of 12 paragraphs and the second 25 paragraphs. 12 paragraphs are used to describe Rip’s twenty years’ sleeping.

In the twelve paragraphs before entering the cave, Irving successfully creates the tale’s background in metaphorical way by presenting it through the protagonist’s eyes. Rip could see the lordly Hudson 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.” Rip looked down on the other side, he could see “a deep mountain glen, wild, lonely, and shagged, the bottom filled with fragments from the impending cliffs, and scarcely lighted by the reflected rays of the setting sun.” (Rip Van Winkle in The Norton Anthology American Literature, 2017: 33, afterwards shortened as RVP in NAAL) The descriptions of what Rip saw are two different landscapes, and the implications of the scene represent two choices America is faced with, whether continue to maintain the original condition of British colony or rise up and drive the British soldiers from their homeland. Another overt metaphor also worth noticing is the Catskill mountains, which are described as “a dismembered branch of the great
Appalachian family” (RVP in NAAL, 2017: 30), a symbol suggesting that America is to be out of British rule, foreshadowing at the same time the second condition following Rip’s twenty-years’ cave sleeping.

In addition to the symbolic description of the natural scene, in the first condition the reader can also see the other types of symbolic background description. At the beginning of the story, Irving sets the tale in a small inn of a village “designated by a rubicund portrait of his majesty George the Third” (RVP in NAAL, 2017: 32), and the country is yet “a province of Great Britain”, (RVP in NAAL, 2017: 30), all of which can be regarded as an overt metaphor, implying time of the story: in the colonial period of the United States.

When Rip wakes up, he turns his steps homeward. Then he finds himself in a strange world, quite different from what he used to be familiar with. Everything has changed: his house “gone to decay”, the little village Dutch inn replaced by “The Union Hotel”, the great tree topped by a flag with “a singular assemblage of stars and stripes” fluttering, “the ruby face of King George” replaced by the head of General Washington, the red coat of King George changed for the blue and buff, a sword to a scepter, all of these emblematizing the political change from the colonial English past to the post-revolutionary American present.

Before entering the cave, Rip sees on the one side is “the rich woodland”, “the lordly Hudson”, moving on “its silent but majestic course”, the reflection of a “purple cloud”, while on the other side, looking down into “a deep mountain glen”, “scarcely lighted by the reflected rays of the setting sun.” (RVP in NAAL, 2017: 33). These two different landscapes, in my opinion, may imply a kind of conflict between the protagonist’s dream and reality. Rip has lost his self in the home which is just like a lonely valley seldom lighted by the sun. However, in his heart he is longing for the rich and lordly dream: gaining his freedom and self by escaping “petticoat government” of his wife, and developing his real self on a “majestic course”.

Symbolic Implication in Figure Description

At the beginning of the 19th century, American people were still indulged in American dreams, and few people could see the confusing prospect after getting rid of the colonial reign. It is Washington Irving who successfully reveals the American public’s bewildering psychology before and after its freedom from English rule through the short story Rip Van Winkle. In the first condition before entering the cave, the symbolic background of before the Revolution, namely, America was still subordinate to Britain; the writer successfully creates the protagonist as “a simple, good-natured” man Rip. He is “a kind neighbor” (RVP in NAAL, 2017: 30). The children love him and “would shout with joy whenever he approached”, because he taught them make playthings, “fly kites and shoot marbles”, and told them stories about “ghosts, witches, and Indians.” He is ready to give a helping hand to anyone in difficulty, but is unwilling to do anything for his family, “Rip was ready to take care of anybody’s business except his own. As for his family duties, and for keeping his farm in order, he found such work impossible.” (RVP in NAAL, 2017: 31) Rip’s irresponsibility for his family, according to the context, can imply that America was more and more unsatisfied with their colonial status, and more and more reluctant to be subordinate to England government.

However, this kind and honest Rip is also characterized as “hen-pecked husband,” ((RVP in NAAL, 2017: 30)) suffering from the suppression of his demanding and monarchic wife.

“Morning, noon, and night, her tongue was incessantly going, and everything he said or did was sure to produce a torrent of household eloquence.”(RVP in NAAL, 2017: 32).

The sentences serve the description of Rip’s miserable situation at home under his wife’s oppression. “Morning, noon, and night,” three adverbials placed at the beginning of the sentence serving as the Theme, or departure of the clause, to emphasize his wife’s continuous snagging for the whole day with no break. Another thing worth giving attention is that Irving employs a vivid metaphor “a torrent of household eloquence”, to actually indicate trivial domestic affairs, thus creating a kind of ironic effect. Faced with his wife, Rip has no choice but to “shrug, shake his head, cast up his eyes.” Faced with his wife, Rip has no choice but to “shrug, shake his head, cast
up his eyes.” The three verbs vividly present Rip’s inability when facing his wife’s ferocious reviling like “a fresh volley”.

Rip’s only domestic adherent is his dog named Wolf. Just like his master, he who is a “hen-pecked” dog. Wolf is “courageous an animal as ever scoured the woods”, but whenever he meets Dame Rip’s evil eye, “his tail drooped 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 broom-stick or ladle, he would fly to the door with yelping precipitation.” (RVP in NAAL, 2017: 32) He is regarded as a companion or even the cause of his lazy master. Irving can’t help remarking “what courage can withstand the ever-during and all-besetting terrors of a woman’s tongue?”

He has to endure his wife’s “a curtain lecture” in “the fiery furnace of domestic tribulation”. His wife continually “dines in his ears” about his laziness and idleness, with her “tongue incessantly going” from morning to noon and to night. His wife’s bad temper “never mellows with age”, and her “sharp tongue” grows “keener by constant use”. With the living condition becoming “worse and worse”, Rip feels more and more perplexed and worried, losing his self and pride. How he desires to leave the oppressive environment to find his freedom and independent self. At first, Rip has to take a passive resistance to deal with her by pretending to be “pliant and malleable” and subservient. He said nothing, but often sat on a rock, fishing all day “without a murmur”. But in his heart, Rip does not lie down, and then find a pretext to run away from “clamor of his wife”, (RVP in NAAL, 2017: 33). He takes gun in hand, and goes into the woods, and sleeps in a cave for twenty years, which constitutes an active rebellion against the monarchic wife, the symbol of the “petticoat government.” It can be seen that a supernatural interruption is employed by the writer to help realize the looking-for-self allegory.

**Symbolic Implication in Dialogues between Rip and Politicians**

Washington Irving makes advantage of the supernatural event to sleep in the cave for twenty years to provide a chance for the protagonist Rip to escape the Revolution. When he woke up, he found himself unfamiliar with the world he used to live in. “There was a busy, bustling, disputatious tone about it, instead of the accustomed phlegm and drowsy tranquility. He looked in vain for the sage Nicholas Vedder,… uttering clouds of tobacco smoke instead of idle speeches;” (RVP in NAAL, 2017: 37) The people in the village seem to become easily irritated by the different opinions of other people. They discuss the politics instead of talking listlessly over village gossip, or telling many sleepy stories about nothing. Even the style of the dresses the villagers wear is of different styles, and the strange family names were put over the doors. After twenty years’ sleep, he found he had become a stranger to the larger village and the present inhabitants.

The symbolic meaning is also reflected through a series of dialogues Irving employs between Rip and politicians cannot be ignored, since it symbolically political environment after returning home from the cave. On arriving at the village which had been changed greatly, he was asked the politicians on which side he voted, and whether he was Federal or Democrat. Rip was “at a loss” because he couldn’t “comprehend the question”, including “war-Congress-Stony Point!” What’s more, Rip’s heart seemed to be “penetrated by keen eyes and sharp hat of a knowing, self-important old gentleman”, making him feel extremely puzzled. He “cried out in despair”, beginning to doubt “whether he was himself or another man”, and even has no idea what his name is. It can be seen that only in the two paragraphs, plenty of negative adjectives and expressions are employed to vividly present poor Rip’s lost heart and his miserable condition of identity lost, such as “in vacant stupidity”, “at a loss to comprehend the question” “dismayed”, “bewildered”, “confused”, “puzzled”, “in bewilderment”, “at his wit’s end”, “no courage”, “completely confounded”, etc.. After freeing himself from his demanding wife’s control, he is now cast into a worse condition and has to face a more serious self-identity crisis problem. Rip’s life dream seems to be so distant, inaccessible and unattainable, beyond his reach.

With the flooding-in population mobility, the conflict between the new comers and the local people was unavoidable, making many people feel perplexed and in a dilemma, which took place in
the postwar American society, symbolizing the social problem a lot of American people were faced with during this period of time. Rip here is the symbol of a lot of American people in this period of time. And his problem of self-identity crisis is also the representative problem most contemporary American people have to face.

Conclusion

Rip Van Winkle is an important work of Washington Irving, the father of American literature. This story has been studied by many scholars at home and abroad from different perspectives. His paper discusses and analyzes how Washington Irving creates a successful allegory with the help of a lot of rhetorical devices such as metaphors and symbols to reveal a human being’s long and difficulty journey to look for his independent self but still without success. This issue, looking for one’s self-identity, is not just a problem for the western people, but for people all over the world. In modern society, the bigger government and a lot of things such as never-ending wars and even the advanced industry, bring about people’s loss of their self and spiritual sustenance. Modern people yearn to get their independent self, but how? Rip Van Winkle, a modern allegory, vividly and symbolically describes such kind of confusing condition of self-identity crisis. But how to find one’s initiative self in a highly organized industrial society? The modern man still has a long way to go before finding the solution.

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References