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Rip Van Winkle and the Generational Divide in American Culture

Rip Van Winkle prospers as an American literary hero and an international favorite from the moment he appears in Washington Irving's *Sketch Book* from 1819. Leading critics do not exaggerate by much when they claim that Rip "presides over the birth of the American imagination" (Fiedler 6) as the "guardian angel" and "symbol of the mythic American" (Leary 22–23).¹ These phrases do more than praise. The imagination is the seat of low thoughts as well as high. Guardian angels protect the unwary from ruin and evil. Myths explore alternative sides of a mystery. We continue to hold Rip in such high esteem because he is a failure that succeeds and because his failure indicates something about us that we can face only indirectly. That he gets away with failure is a great relief.

Everyone knows the story of the henpecked but lovable and comic vagabond who wanders away from Sleepy Hollow into the Kaatskill Mountains to return 20 years later with the excuse that he has just awakened after drinking out of the flagon of Hendrick Hudson. The fantasy involved is clear enough, but it is told from the irascible point of view of a highly suspect historian named Diedrich Knickerbocker. Elaborately qualified in three addenda to the body of the tale (a preamble, an added note, and a postscript), Knickerbocker operates as one of the first exercises in ambiguity of American fiction. The device forces the reader into a game of levels—levels that confuse but also protect us from our worst fears and thoughts.² For although Rip's failures are evident, he manages to solve problems that we cannot solve. Moreover, the remaining problem that his solution leaves us with is one that tells us more about ourselves than it does about either Rip or Diedrich Knickerbocker, or Washington Irving. "Rip Van Winkle" unfolds as a story of many meanings, and it speaks through them to every new generation of readers.

The man who wanders into the hills has refused to accept adult responsibility in his community. He plays at work instead of working. Rip has

allowed his farm to fall into wrack and ruin, and he does little to provide for a large and growing family, which explains at least some of the shrewish behavior assigned to his wife. As the imputed explanation of Rip's flight, Dame Van Winkle never receives so much as the courtesy of her full name. The only other trait ascribed to her comes late in the story after she is dead: we enter with Rip on his return into her deserted house, "which, to tell the truth, Dame Van Winkle always kept in neat order."³ The familial discrepancy noted here is a significant one. Rip is the one who has failed to hold up his end.⁴ A symbol of American infancy and misplaced innocence, he is the adolescent who refuses to grow up and gets away with it. The success of the story that he tells on his return to Sleepy Hollow allows him to pass conveniently from childhood to second childhood without assuming the obligations of maturity in between. Rip, at this superficial level, embodies an escapist mentality. He is the dreamy alternative in a culture driven by mundane prosperity and social conformity.⁵

All of these matters have been noted at length by readers over the years, but surprisingly little attention has been given to the device that allows Rip to remain a comic hero. Lovable Rip trumps irresponsible Rip only because he is taken care of. Vulnerable and out of control on his return, he needs help. All ends well because other people decide to come to his aid, but their decision is notably complex and a close call. Exactly how Rip comes to be taken care of will be our main subject here. Consider, for the moment, an alternative ending that is hinted at in Irving's story. As before, the preternaturally old and bewildered Rip returns to a bustling republican town instead of the quiet colonial village of Sleepy Hollow. He wears tattered out-of-date clothes, sports a grisly unkempt beard, and carries a rusty flintlock. He is clearly a homeless person and possibly a dangerous one. Again the once friendly children and dogs hoot and snarl at him, and again he angers the villagers by failing to understand the Revolution that has taken place during his absence. But in this darker version, the villagers, "a mob at his heels," do not wait for explanations and follow their original inclinations. They "hustle him" out of town.

As before, Rip has alarmed the inhabitants of Sleepy Hollow. He is an uncouth stranger bearing a gun on a controversial election day, an unwelcome vagrant with no visible means of support, and he turns alarm into open hostility as "a tory" and "a spy" when he unwittingly declares loyalty to King George against "the spirit of '76." What if these same villagers

act upon their first fears and spurn their former neighbor as “a Refugee”? Irving has told us that Rip is “famished.” He has returned because “it would not do to starve among the mountains.” Forced out of town to beg for his bread and perhaps to die of hunger and exposure, this less fortunate adaptation of Rip paints a decidedly uncomic figure, and Irving means for his readers to see the possibility. An opportune village leader keeps the mob from acting but only “with great difficulty.” In Irving’s words, “[T]he self-important man in the cocked hat restored order, and having assumed a ten fold austerity of brow demanded again of the unknown culprit, what he came there for and whom he was seeking.” The pompous interrogator’s questions are hostile, even cowardly, ones, but they hold the mob at bay just long enough for Irving’s happy ending to unfurl.

The ending, in effect, is doubly fortuitous. First, it requires the right individuals to show up in proper order for the bewildered Rip to find his way in a community that has dismissed all thought of him. Second, the same chance chronology of appearance, all in minor characters, encourages the unreceptive villagers to believe Rip’s outlandish tale of hibernation even though it runs against every probability known to human existence. Never a realist, Washington Irving always keeps the practical explanations for behavior lurking in the shadows as part of the twist in his humor, and for that reason, it does not destroy the comic effect to ask what a realist would have understood about Rip’s situation. Indeed, there is considerable craft in Irving’s constant juxtaposition of the fantastic against the real in “Rip Van Winkle”—a craft that stages Rip’s communal metamorphosis from shunned pariah into an instant hero “reverenced as one of the patriarchs.”

The best example of the way in which Irving layers meaning between the imaginary and the actual is also the most important. It comes in the tag to his story. For even though some inhabitants continue to “doubt the reality” of Rip’s explanation, they all note “a common wish of all henpecked husbands in the neighborhood, when life hangs heavy on their hands, that they might have a quieting draught of Rip Van Winkle’s flagon.” A humdrum certainty competes with whimsy in this final quip. The truth of the matter is that Rip has been an alcoholic on a 20-year binge, and many aspects of the story lend themselves to that explanation. In the end, the knowing villagers assign the flagon to Rip, not to Hendrick Hudson, and their identification raises a factual basis within the fairy tale.

Studies of the use of alcohol in the United States calculate that consumption per capita reaches its highest point during the first third of the nineteenth century, the same years in which Irving wrote his most important fiction, including “Rip Van Winkle.” Endemic drinking, to be sure, is a natural source of humor everywhere, and it should surprise no one to find it a prominent subject in Irving’s satires between 1807 and 1819. Nor was the writer alone in identifying the phenomenon. Irving’s contemporaries saw intemperance as “the fashionable vice of the day.” Visitors from Europe claimed “no other people ever indulged, so universally.” The early republic, said some, “was fast becoming a nation of drunkards.” Of course, male citizens, like Rip, were not the only imbibers, but they made up the population that most frequently drank to excess in public. “White males were taught to drink as children, even as babies,” and a “male drinking cult pervaded all social and occupational groups.” The same studies of early American drinking habits replicate the male drinking cult as it appears in “Rip Van Winkle.” The typical village inn of the day did accept guests, but the lion’s share of its business came through local regulars who gathered to share their purchases of liquor on the spot, a convivial practice in which “every man was expected to treat in turn” (Rorabaugh 5–16, 225–30).⁶

It is not hard to place Rip Van Winkle within this early republican cult of drink. Rip frequents the local inn whenever possible along with “other idle personages” who tell “endless sleepy stories about nothing.” The “habits of idleness” that he enjoys at the village tavern would have included his share of drink until he is routed from “the assemblage” by his wife, who thereby breaks the custom of each drinker treating in turn. Dame Van Winkle’s interruption would also have left an imbalance in accountable shares that could only have added to Rip’s public embarrassment—perhaps explaining why he does not return. Along the way, the reader also learns that Rip is “foremost man in all country frolicks,” that he attends to “any body’s business but his own,” that his patrimonial estate, once considerable, has “dwindled away under his management, acre by acre,” that what remains is “the worst conditioned farm in the neighbourhood,” that his children become “as ragged and wild as if they belonged to nobody,” that times in general “grew worse and worse with Rip Van Winkle,” and that Rip lives every aspect of his life carelessly as “one of those happy mortals of foolish, well oiled dispositions.” The code words of drink and its consequences are everywhere in these descriptions, and they provide an explanation for Rip’s

mysterious lack of success. Habitual drinking keeps him from the steady application that every good farm requires. Similar accounts are familiar fodder in the temperance narratives of the period.

Rip's propensities are important because they explain his confrontation with drink in the Kaatskills. Hesitant when first summoned up the hill at twilight by an ominous-looking stranger dressed in "antique Dutch fashion," Rip joins anyway when he notes that the stranger "bore on his shoulder a stout keg that seemed full of liquor." In the ensuing "frolick" or "evening's gambol," phrases that suggest regular experience, he lives in the exaggeration of the moment that his drinking companions provide: "One had a large head, broad face and small piggish eyes. The face of another seemed to consist entirely of nose." These distortions merge in the fog of Rip's own drunkenness:

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.

Rip, like many drunks with a hangover, wakes to blame his difficulties on "that flagon! That wicked flagon!" Everything else is the fault of the companions who "dosed him with liquor" before cheating him. Similar to other married men on an extended spree, he then worries about how he will explain himself and his condition to the person that he has let down and ignored. "I shall have a blessed time," he moans, "with Dame Van Winkle." Irving arranges these classic rationalizations of the drinker to correspond with Rip's descent from the magic of the night into the light of day.

Exposing Rip as a problem drinker tramples on some of the fun in Irving's lightly styled and subtly rendered fairy tale. Yet, in a deeper sense, the real fun, as well as the power of the underlying story, lies here in the writer's conflation of fantastic and realistic explanations. The synergy between lovable Rip and alcoholic Rip resonates within other contrasts. The mythic extension in the figure, as well as the timeless appeal of the story, flows from the play between perspectives even as they carry us beyond the humor of the plot. We value Rip most of all because we find something of our own foibles in him, not because we worry about drink or because we fear an encounter with Hendrick Hudson when we enter the Kaatskill

Mountains. Rip's faults—his laziness, his unconcern, his ability to rationalize away every trouble—are our own bad habits carried to extremes. Irving keeps to the lighter side of these extremes. He isolates Rip from the problems that his faults create. With each difficulty minimized, Rip's decision to opt out, his stubborn capacity to live life on his own terms, and his ability to win out over the system turn into attractive traits.

The reader is drawn by the bizarre triumph of honest but characterological weakness over hypocritical social strength. Rip, a communal failure at everything he has tried to do, returns to Sleepy Hollow at the convenient moment when nothing need be done. He has "arrived at that happy age when a man can be idle with impunity," and so he finds himself easily resuming "his place once more on the bench at the inn door." But that is not all. Amidst the idle, Rip learns to do something very well. There, where other members are "telling endless sleepy stories about nothing," he tells one with a point *about* sleep, and in so doing, he gets the account of his own life story right. Admittedly, it takes awhile for this to happen. Rip is "observed at first to vary on some points, every time he told it," but, with calculation, his repetitions "at last settled down precisely to the tale" that we hear. Precision is indeed the key term of choice here. To fashion one's meaning out of mere "torpor"—Irving's most telling phrase for the big sleep—reveals the accomplished storyteller. Rip *is* the story, but he subsequently learns to make it his own in a way that everyone accepts with pleasure. What reader can resist the satisfaction of this dual accomplishment? To fashion success out of one's failure is the stuff of dreams. Who in this fallen world can ask for more?

The fallen world is, in fact, everywhere in "Rip Van Winkle," and dealing with it represents a part of Irving's appeal. Much of *The Sketch Book* thrives on the writer's self-conscious manipulation of the terrifying facts in life. Grieving mothers, dead sons, jilted lovers, sailors lost at sea, disgraced bankrupts, and funerals proliferate in the larger work, but somehow we do not mind. Irving's great talent lies in casting these problems into the middle distance of a detached point of view. An intervening voice, whether that of Diedrich Knickerbocker or of Geoffrey Crayon (the persona who presides over *The Sketch Book*), raises fears in the human condition while keeping them at one remove. Rip typifies this pattern at several levels. He is the alarming norm in "a nation of drunkards" and the equally alarming

exception in his persistent transgression against communal obligations. Diedrich Knickerbocker's articulation of these negative traits winks at the present by casting them into the past and by delivering them in wry tones that soar high above Sleepy Hollow and even the Kaatskill mountains. Rip's failings seem less from afar. They devolve into the rustic idiosyncrasies of an earlier America that readers would like to remember for its charming ways. Nonetheless, the "wink" in Winkle is also on us. Every reader intuitively grasps that these are contemporary problems.

Irving realizes that satire depends on a sense of distance, which encourages a departure from literal truth, and he wields both devices in a variety of ways—some obvious, some not. A satiric fiction "is an attack upon *discernible, historically authentic particulars*." Irving, a gentle satirist, uses the distance between the fictional and the authentic in satire to create a special brand of comedy—a comedy that lightly spoofs his own times through the rose-tinted lens of a previous one. All comedy involves "a bite out of the now." It finds the ridiculous in the actual from another level of perception. We laugh when we recognize the difference between what is and what ought to be, but we only laugh if we are safely detached in some way (Rosenheim 17–25; Feibleman 178, 182, 191).⁷ Irving manipulates these truths about satire and humor to project an aura of fantasy around the predicaments that he presents.

The power of fantasy in satire is particular. It allows a writer to probe human sorrow and failure without scaring the reader. Irving even had a term for the fanciful twist that he gave the troubles in life. In an earlier work he called them "the whimwhams"; the "whim" softens the "wham." Grim realities thus become laughable antics in Irving's fiction without losing their grimness (Salmagundi 1–10).⁸ We are jolted just enough to pay attention. To illustrate through a modern parallel, magazines like *The New Yorker* play lightly with death, grief, failure, hopelessness, and even pain through stock cartoons. We find the grim reaper knocking at the apartment owner's door, the unsuccessful surgeon giving a new widow the news, the boss firing his subordinate with a cruel quip, marooned men exchanging ridiculous plans from their scrap of an island, two naked capitalists comparing notes in hell, and so on. No one ever wants to be on the receiving end in these engagements. As with Irving, we laugh because we accept the problem without having to deal with the emotional consequences. None-

theless, and in each case, some identification with the human predicament must poke through the detachment of tone and form or the humor loses its edge.

“Rip Van Winkle” works in precisely this way, and at a level of concern that touches every American. The terrors in life that it addresses are the basic ones but with a twist that heightens their impact. Figuratively, Rip dies and miraculously comes back to life on his own terms, thwarting a community that has consigned him to oblivion. Rapid change in America compounds the normal fear of death by forcing the elderly toward obsolescence before their time. These patterns begin in the early republic, and Irving sees them with great clarity. Because they believe that they have created a new world, the first citizens in the new nation dismiss the immediate past and everyone associated with it. Irving illustrates the problem by turning his protagonist into nothing in just 20 years. Most of Rip’s peers have passed away during this hiatus, and the few who remain are of no account in post-Revolutionary society. When Rip goes to sleep as a colonial British subject and awakens in ignorance of republican ways, the disconnect makes him a type for each generation’s eventual failure to adapt to change in the unfolding democratic experiment.

Tom Paine predicted these conditions as early as *Common Sense* in 1776. When Paine declares that “a new method of thinking hath arisen” and that “all plans, proposals, etc. prior . . . to the commencement of hostilities, are like the almanacks of the last year; which, though proper then, are superseded and useless now,” he invites every American to kill the past (82). Rip proves that Paine’s first readers follow that advice. He returns to his community an utter irrelevancy. He has died twice — once in the deep sleep on the mountain and next in the understanding of *Sleepy Hollow*. Suddenly and awkwardly alive before his neighbors, he loses all identity in the face of their resentment. “I can’t tell what’s my name or who I am!”

Irving dramatizes the new nation’s ruthless rejection of its own past by having Rip ask for the former “patriarch of the village”:

Rip bethought himself a moment and enquired, “Where’s Nicholas Vedder?” There was a silence for a little while, when an old man replied, in a thin, piping voice, “Nicholaus Vedder? Why he is dead and gone these eighteen years! There was a wooden tombstone in the church yard that used to tell all about him, but that’s rotted and gone too.”

The past is “rotted and gone” in *Sleepy Hollow*. True, an ancient quavering figure finally remembers but only after a painful pause and with a dismissive answer. Stripped of every important connection to his previous life, Rip begins to sink, “finding himself thus alone in the world.” As such, he moves from the fable of *Sleepy Hollow* into a recognizable problem in democratic life. “Those who went before are soon forgotten,” Alexis de Tocqueville would soon write in his description of the new United States and “of those who will come after no one has any idea; the interest of [democratic] man is confined to those in close propinquity to himself” (2: 105–6). What remains of Rip has been dispatched by the village into a history that no one has any interest in remembering. Inconveniently back, he belongs with the forgotten dead, where he is spoken of in formulaic terms: “poor man . . . whether he shot himself, or was carried away by the Indians no body can tell.” Nobody can tell, and no one has cared enough to find out. This moment is where the real story takes hold. Pushed so casually out of existence, Rip must struggle to re-create himself. The present is his enemy, and he must battle against it as a phenomenon hostile to his very being.

Not the least handicap of the returning vagabond, one that must be turned into an advantage for Rip to survive, has to do with age. How old is Rip? As with another famous protagonist in American literature, Ishmael in *Moby-Dick*, the matter is left to conjecture and operates as a variable depending on context. American society before 1850 tended to blur age distinctions more than later periods (Chudacoff 9–28). Rip, on the other hand, has a desperate need for just such a distinction. Irving puts the issue clearly in the crucial moment of Rip’s familial claim: “I am your father!” cried he — “Young Rip Van Winkle once — old Rip Van Winkle now! — does nobody know poor Rip Van Winkle!” Rip, the father of a young family, could not have been above 35 years of age at the time of his disappearance, which makes him no more than 55 and probably less on his return. Even so, his plight calls for helpless old age, and he announces the transition himself, making it complete through a declaration of dependence. The final act of self-naming in the claim of fatherhood, “poor Rip,” conjures up the need for pity with the corollary of care. The designations that Rip must avoid at all costs are the social and vocational responsibilities that go with middle age. He *was* young but *now* must be absolutely old.

The overall tone and development of *The Sketch Book* eases Rip’s ability

to create his own age category. Each “sketch” presents a “tableau vivant” or emotional pause during which the reader contemplates a universal moment in the human condition. Rip, in his vulnerability, represents the plight of every old person who has lost track of the world. Preceding his tale are “Roscoe,” in which a bankrupt uses his intellect to rise above worldly claims—“like Pompey’s column at Alexandria, towering alone in classic dignity” (20)—and “The Wife,” in which an excellent woman reduces her husband to tears by insisting on their happiness despite descent into poverty. Each sketch or tableau contradicts a form of low materiality or practicality through emotional acceptance of “a moment of more exquisite felicity” (27). Both stories overcome adversities comparable in degree to those of “Rip Van Winkle” through a similarly inclusive perspective or point of view somewhere above it all (16–27). Time, in effect, can become whatever it wants to be as long as it pauses in this instant of recognition. Certainly the rest of the nineteenth century embraced the concept of time that Irving wanted for his story. Its many depictions of Rip returning to *Sleepy Hollow* invariably portrayed an ancient figure.⁹

Rip’s success brings a shock of recognition as well as comic release to generations of readers, but the precise means of that success remain to be probed. Recovery comes through a clever manipulation of generationality, and Irving is clearly obsessed with the possibilities.¹⁰ Three generations of Rip Van Winkles appear in the story. Rip, the returning father is matched by Rip, the son, who looks and acts exactly like his father when the first Rip disappeared into the Kaatskills. This second Rip also contemplates the return of his father with a strange but apparent indifference. Finally, there is Rip, the baby grandson, who cries in fear at his first encounter with the long-lost grandfather. Underneath Irving’s humor of confused identities, generational wars are at work. Rip, the father, is thrown into confusion by the sight of his indifferent son (“that’s me yonder — no — that’s somebody else got into my shoes”), but he immediately draws the connection that he needs by recognizing his crying grandson. Since all Rips are lazily alike in their essential self-absorption, no Rip helps any other Rip, but the third Rip, held in his mother’s arms, functions as a catalyst to restore the first Rip to his place.

These coordinated interstices do not happen by accident. Many a grandparent and grandchild know the magic of skipping a generation. There is, however, a direct link, and it represents the hidden factor in transmis-

sions. Her name is Judith Gardenier, the keeper of the garden (so named), and, as Rip's daughter, she appears only in this highly charged, thoroughly restricted moment. "A fresh likely looking woman" with her baby in her arms, she has "pressed through the throng to get a peep at the greybearded man" who is being so rudely interrogated, and she will pay for her curiosity. Judith is "fresh" because utterly new to the story and "likely" because sorely needed for plot resolution. When the child that she carries cries, she reprimands him. "'Hush Rip,' cried she, 'hush you little fool, the old man won't hurt you.'" Old Rip is literally saved by these words. He takes in "the name of the child, the air of the mother, the tone of her voice" and promptly asks the questions that justify his place in her lineage: "I am your father!" A strange, gray-bearded curiosity no longer, he turns himself into the parent who must be cared for.

To cement Judith Gardenier's obligation, Irving introduces several of his creatures, starting with another woman, this one unnamed but uncannily useful in a cameo appearance. "An old woman tottering out from among the crowd" recognizes Rip, verifies his claim to identity, justifies his return, and disappears as quickly as she came. "Sure enough!" she confirms, "it is Rip Van Winkle — it is himself — welcome home again old neighbor — why, where have you been these twenty long years?" The question within her welcome is a good one, and it demands an immediate answer for Rip to be reintegrated into Sleepy Hollow. Irving responds by conjuring up a village historian who excuses Rip on the spot. This new figure, almost as ephemeral as the last, introduces the legend of Hendrick Hudson to authenticate Rip's story. Rip can be generally irresponsible, but he cannot be responsible for his own lengthy disappearance from the village. Otherwise, daughter Judith is not just a new mother with a child but a deserted child herself.

Realistically, Judith Gardenier *is* that deserted child. Unnamed to this moment, she has been one of Rip's poor children, and she has had to grow up like the rest of them "as ragged and wild as if they belonged to nobody." Judith has recovered herself not through her family's help but by the traditional mechanism of the clever young woman: she has married well. She owes nothing but her earlier pain to her father. Of course, Irving knows better than to give any scope to this uglier narrative, but he wants the reader to glimpse it. He gives priority instead to the old people in a story about a hero who has grown suddenly old and realizes it only through his helplessness. Old Rip, the tottering woman who confirms his identity, and the

ancient village historian who authenticates his story join forces to make youth serve them in their crying need. This, too, is a familiar story, and in gesturing toward it, Irving gives one more light touch to the battle for place between the generations in his America. Not for the last time, the elderly band together to protect themselves from their own progeny in a youth culture. Their effort amounts to a rear guard action against “the demeaning of aging rooted in modern culture’s relentless hostility toward decay and dependency” (Cole xxvi).

Comic resolution depends on the dutiful daughter who willingly takes Rip home to live in her “snug, well furnished house.” Provided for without further explanation, Rip reaps a renewed existence of greater idleness and pleasure, this time as the teller of his own unexpectedly marvelous life. Judith Gardenier, for her part, takes in her father without murmur or complaint because she must if she is to conform to the understanding of her time—an understanding that applies to dutiful daughters into the twentieth century if not beyond. As the poet Robert Frost famously put the issue, “Home is the place where, when you have to go there, / They have to take you in.” (53).¹¹ But the ready solution in this premise is not without a complication for the modern reader. Old Rip detects his wife’s former asperity when his daughter scolds her child, and his recognition introduces another level of meaning. The exchange slips a nugget of realism as well as a loose end into Irving’s conclusion. The words that Judith Gardenier utters—“Hush, Rip . . . hush, you little fool, the old man won’t hurt you”—do indeed save old Rip, who occupies the logical alternative of old fool, but will the daughter be impatient and shrewish like her mother? And what of the youngest Rip? Are his mother’s words true? Is it a fact that “the old man” can’t hurt him?

Each generation of Rip Van Winkle is exactly like the one before it except in one stark detail. Portentously, each Rip is less than the one that came before him. Old Rip owned a farm; his son Rip, “the ditto of himself,” carries on in laziness, but he has less to start with and ends up a hired hand working another’s land. Downward mobility applies to every Rip that we have seen, and the prospect for later Rips implies further declension. How many Rips will duplicate old Rip’s miraculous escape—an escape that he has done nothing to earn beyond the telling of it? Disaster awaits any future Rip who fails to find a nurturing female to support him. The littlest and

latest Rip in Irving's story faces this implied reality, and it is no wonder that he cries out in alarm at what he sees. He must also ponder whether Mother Judith has the time, the means, and the inclination to take care of both of them.

Two out of every five Americans today will end up *not* in a dutiful daughter's home or daughter-in-law's house but in what are euphemistically called "planned communities."¹² These communities are run by keepers who take care of patients called "loved ones," and they remain what they have always been, old-age homes. Institutions rather than residences, they are filled with helpless elderly people, modern Rip Van Winkles who are separated not just from time but from their internally looking nuclear families. The more acidic side of Robert Frost describes this new reality in a horrifying poem entitled "Provide, Provide":

Better to go down dignified
 With boughten friendship at your side
 Than none at all. Provide, provide! (404).

When the littlest Rip cries at the sight of his decrepit and confused grandfather pleading to be taken in, he is an integral part of Irving's comedy, but if he sees the future as well as the past, he is no fool, no matter what his mother says. Baby Rip cries as part of a simple and yet complicated story about men who refuse to grow up. "Rip Van Winkle" is plain enough in its narrative trajectory as a story. A child can read it, understand its plot, and put it down. The surviving myth of Rip, though, is more complicated and tenacious in its grip over us. This myth, Rip as "guardian angel," presents human terrors in a light than can be borne—even laughed at. Rip triumphs in his desire not to grow up, and Diedrich Knickerbocker wittily concludes with the boast that his account is "beyond the possibility of doubt."

Perhaps so, but read as myth, Rip's story entralls because of the possibilities in doubt that it presents. Irving uses the generations to expose the sequent toil and casual hostilities in the life cycle. Laughter and pleasure guide us through the cohorts before and after us, but so do anger, fear, indifference, conflict, and inevitable tears. "Rip Van Winkle" survives as a story because it loads the balance of transfixing time in our favor. The lonely, confused, anachronistic vagrant who comes out of the hills enjoys

astounding and timely good fortune. His comic rebirth against the facts inspires us. It gives us hope that help will come when we ourselves are left alone to face the torments of existence.

The right voice, one steeped in cunning as well as wit, will also be there. Whatever happens, the ancient and seemingly independent Diedrich Knickerbocker will somehow make it right. There is, however, a final catch, a last whimwham from this ambiguously intrusive narrator. The speaker is dead as his story speaks. Irving has given us “a Posthumous Writing of Diedrich Knickerbocker,” and from the outset, that nominally first writer has deserted the generations that come after him. In a sly epigraph, the historian of his time and ours leaves us a warning: “Truth is a thing that I ever will keep,” but only “*Unto thylke day in which I creep into My sepulchre —*.”¹³ All is truth, but all is also fabrication and decay on one level of meaning. The task of the reader is to see the truth while understanding, enjoying, and, in the end, coping through fabrication with the merciless march of life.

NOTES

1. Leary quotes Hart Crane in calling Rip the “guardian angel.” The second quotation is his own.
2. For the complicated game of levels in Irving’s mastery of “the fictional sketch,” see Rubin-Dorsky.
3. All quotations from “Rip Van Winkle” are from the standard modern edition of *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.*, ed. Haskell Springer, in Richard Dilworth Rust, ed., *The Complete Works of Washington Irving* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1978), 8: 28–42. All other quotations from *The Sketch Book* are also from this source.
4. For feminist readings of the story in which Dame Van Winkle is the symbol of long-suffering womanhood in its dealings with irresponsible husbands, see Fetterley 3ff and Banks.
5. For previous accounts about how a dreamy, impractical Rip remains comic rather than tragic through his evasion of maturity and through his ability to make a success out of inadequacy and failure in a world dedicated to material prosperity, see Young, 568–71; Hedges, *Washington Irving*, 140–42; and McLamore, 47–48.
6. For the consumption of liquor as a prominent subject of humor in Irving’s earlier writings, see in general *Salmagundi*; or *The Whimwhams & Opinions of Launcelot Langstaff, Esq., and Others* (1807) and *Diedrich Knickerbocker’s A History of New York* (1809).
7. I paraphrase as well as quote from Rosenheim and Feibleman in this paragraph.

- Feibleman quotes Sherwood Anderson approvingly with the claim that all comedy involves “a bite out of the now.”
8. Speaking generally of Irving’s ability to burlesque his own pessimism, William Hedges finds in him “a melancholy realization that there is considerable excuse for a man’s being stupid in this world.” See Hedges, “Knickerbocker, Bolingbroke, and the Fiction of History,” 319.
 9. See, for example, the aged man in the painter John Quidor’s “The Return of Rip Van Winkle” (c. 1849) and representations of the actor Joseph Jefferson’s regular portrayals of Rip on stage starting in 1865 in *Rip Van Winkle As Played By Joseph Jefferson With Illustrations*, 141, 154, 170, 188.
 10. Warner (785–90) also reads the story as “obsessed with generationality” but with different purposes in mind.
 11. The poem in question is “The Death of The Hired Man” from *North of Boston*.
 12. “For those over 65, there is a 41% chance they will spend an average of 2.5 years in a nursing home.” The combined lifetime risk of needing home and community care as well as nursing home care is 6 out of 10. See “A Shopper’s Guide to Long-term Care Insurance” (2004).
 13. Emphasis added. The epigraph is from William Cartwright (1611–43), a lesser-known English poet, preacher, and dramatist in the doomed court of Charles I.

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