

## AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL ELEMENTS IN WASHINGTON IRVING'S "RIP VAN WINKLE"

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**Abstract.** This essay examines Washington Irving's short story "Rip Van Winkle" from an autobiographical perspective by focusing on the commonality and resemblance between the author and his fictional hero. It suggests that Rip and Irving have many similar traits which underline the deeply personal and subjective dimension of the tale. It begins by considering some of these traits such as idleness, generosity and kind-heartedness. It claims that both Rip and Irving are characterized by their benevolence and altruism which account for their belovedness. After discussing these attributes, the essay focuses on other common characteristics such as the tendency to pull away from matrimony. In this matter, both Irving and Rip's possible homosexuality are considered. Although there is no clear evidence that they are homosexuals, this essay suggests that they both seem to have a repulsive attitude towards heterosexuality. The essay then concludes by examining some of the shared views and perspectives between the writer and his character. It suggests that both Irving and Rip are characterized by their aversion to politics and by their deep love of nature. Due to the numerous and striking resemblances between the fictional hero and his creator, this essay argues that Rip is a reflection of Irving's character and personality.

**Keywords:** Irving, idleness, generosity, kind-heartedness, homosexual, queer, politics, nature

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Washington Irving's "Rip Van Winkle" is a gothic fantasy that was published in 1819 and included in his collection of 34 essays and short stories entitled *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.* Along with "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," it is one of the most popular

fictional short stories in American literature for which Irving is best remembered. Although it is widely believed that this tale is based on Johann Karl Christoph Nachtigal's German folktale “Peter Klaus,” Irving uses typically American settings and materials through which he adapts it to the New World. Set in New York's Catskill Mountains in the Revolutionary War period, “Rip Van Winkle” describes the enchanted sleep of a Dutch American man who awakens after twenty years and finds himself in a totally changed world. He realizes that the King George the Third sign above the local tavern is transformed into a portrait of someone called General Washington and he recognizes none of the inhabitants of the village. He also notices that the character of these people is significantly changed as they talk about strange political parties and incomprehensible concepts such as liberty, elections, Congress and the rights of citizens. Rip's confusion and bewilderment are so great that he doubts his own identity and believes that he is another man. In his description of Rip's loss of identity in this new democratic world, Irving emphasizes the deep and enormous changes that have taken place in American life and culture during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In fact, the story represents “the transformation of America from pastoral innocence to ‘bustling’ and ‘disputatious’ commercialism” (Rosenblum 2003, 212). This transformation consists mainly of America's move from an agricultural to an industrial economy which promoted a culture of consumption and led to the emergence of a new lifestyle characterized by materialism and the worship of money. As is the case in “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow,” Irving expresses his dissatisfaction with these changes in “Rip Van Winkle” by portraying a world in which identity is fluid rather than fixed and in which people can easily lose their place in the world. In the latter tale, Rip largely “reflects the plight of Americans who emerged from their revolution aware that everything's changed but not fully aware of who they now were” (Bendixen 2017, 32). Through this character, Irving expresses his nostalgia for a stable and ideal past when life was simple, quiet, peaceful and happy.

To a large extent, the character of Rip mirrors Irving's own personality in the story since they both have not only similar traits and attributes but also identical beliefs and attitudes toward various issues such as matrimony, politics and the environment. For this reason, "Rip Van Winkle" might be considered as an autobiographical story in which Irving gives an account of his life and character by impersonating his fictional hero. Even though Irving might not have intended his tale to be autobiographical, the study of his parallels with Rip is undoubtedly significant because it underlines the author's remarkable ability to use his fictional tale as a description of his own nature and disposition. The importance of the study also consists in highlighting Irving's ability to use his story as a form of expression through which he articulates his own personal thoughts and beliefs. These aspects of his writing have been mentioned by some scholars and critics over the last century. In her 1908 prize essay on Irving's works and character, for example, Winifred Romney suggests that "[t]o know Irving the man is to know Irving the writer, for his works are but a reflection of his personality. He possessed to a greater degree than any other author the gift of impersonating himself in his books" (26). She argues that the "charm his books possess is but the reflection of the indescribable charm of his personality. In his books, his gentle spirit glows out as it did from his radiant nature" (27). The silent and half-concealed humour that characterizes Irving's personality, she further claims, is weaved into many of his works such as "Knickerbocker's History," "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" and "Rip Van Winkle." In her essay, Romney also suggests that there is a "marked resemblance between Irving and his humorously portrayed character, Rip Van Winkle" (25) and that they have similar characteristics. Although Romney briefly mentions some of these characteristics, she focuses mostly on Irving's qualities, literary style and contribution to American literature rather than on his resemblance to Rip and on the biographical evidence that demonstrates it.

More recently, Irving's use of his fiction as a form of expression

has been mentioned by Jeffrey Rubin-Dorsky in his 1986 essay entitled “Washington Irving and the Genesis of the Fictional Sketch.” In this essay, Rubin-Dorsky argues that the fictional stories in *The Sketch Book* are based on Irving’s actual physical and emotional experiences which are described within a narrative, rather than a documentary framework (226). Rubin-Dorsky also suggests that Irving uses the pseudonym of Geoffrey Crayon as a way of documenting these experiences without revealing their subjectivity. He states that this pseudonym enabled Irving to “examine and reflect upon these experiences while remaining detached enough to perceive their significance. Crayon, in other words, became a buffer between Irving and the world. Thus, the creation of a fictional traveller/persona solved an emotional need and concurrently led to the beginning of a new genre in American literature” (226-27). Through this pseudonym, Irving was able not only to adapt his fictional sketches to his own psychological purposes but also to endow them with an aesthetic appeal that went “far beyond the rather crude explication of scene and setting of the typical travel sketch” (Rubin-Dorsky 1986/87, 226). Irving’s use of the fictional sketch to describe his own physical and emotional experiences has also been mentioned by other critics in addition to Rubin-Dorsky. In “Love in the Catskills,” for instance, Richard Ellmann suggests that “Rip Van Winkle” is a “parable” of Irving’s life which consists in “the presentation, with as much directness as possible, of the meaning of Irving’s experience as a man in the world” (27). Ellmann also claims that Irving’s tale is a “sifting of his personal emotion” (27) and that it echoes his personal problems and psychological needs. Although Irving’s use of “Rip Van Winkle” as a means of expressing his own feelings and emotions has been emphasized by many critics, however, the autobiographical elements in this tale have not been thoroughly analyzed. In fact, most of the research on this topic has focused on Irving’s adaptation of the story to his own psychological needs rather than on his moral, intellectual and behavioural characteristics and the ways they are reflected through the character of Rip. The studies which raised this subject were also

fragmentary because they dealt exclusively either with Irving or with his fictional hero.

## 2. COMMON TRAITS BETWEEN RIP AND IRVING: IDLENESS, GENEROSITY AND KIND-HEARTEDNESS

One of the most common traits between Irving and his fictional hero is idleness. In Rip's case, his idleness is noticeable mostly through his negligence of his family responsibilities and his refusal to work on his farm. Because of his indolence, his family continuously suffers from poverty and his farm is badly kept. Its fences are broken down, weeds grow all over it and everything about it goes wrong. Irving underlines Rip's idleness by claiming that he has "an insuperable aversion to all kinds of profitable labour" and that he "would rather starve on a penny than work for a pound" (30-31). Obviously, Rip does not see any profit in labour and he does not mind eating white bread or brown. His indolence is also evident through his frequent visits to the local inn where he spends much time with other idle people who enjoy "talking listlessly over village gossip or telling endless sleepy stories about nothing" (32). Even after his twenty-year sleep in the Catskill Mountains, his aversion to work remains unchanged as he resumes his old habits of idleness and once again takes his place on the bench in the tavern where he keeps talking with his new friends and telling his story to every stranger who comes to the place. As an old man, he is no longer embarrassed or ashamed about being indolent. Having nothing to do at his daughter's house where he now lives, the tale's narrator states, he is proud of "being arrived at that happy age when a man can be idle, with impunity" (40). For these reasons, Rip might be considered as the typical indolent person whose indifferent attitude toward the accumulation of wealth runs counter to the principles of the American dream. Rip's attitude undoubtedly highlights his resemblance to his creator. Irving, too, was an easy-going man who disliked laborious work and enjoyed being idle. Like

Rip, he thought that work is not more important than leisure and he was not obsessed with wealth and material abundance. His “inclination to idleness” (Axson 1933, 183) was one of the most notable of his few and minor personal faults. This trait has been emphasized by many of his critics and biographers who examined his life and character.

One of the biographers who mentioned Irving’s aversion to work and his inclination to idleness is James Playsted Wood. In *Sunnyside: A Life of Washington Irving*, Wood claims that Irving

disliked regular work and, unless fascinated by some compelling subject, avoided it. He preferred play. Even more, he preferred doing nothing. Indolence and lassitude are only literary terms for what the Victorians condemned as laziness and modern American civilization applauds as leisure. Most people have always liked it, and they liked seeing Irving celebrate and practice it in *The Sketch Book* and his other books of essays and stories. Irving was often depressed, more often in his earlier years as a writer from doing nothing than from trying to do too much. When he was really interested, he worked tirelessly and, though sometimes disappointed in his daily performance, without depression. (154)

Wood’s claim underlines the fact that Irving was naturally indolent and that he celebrates rather than condemns Rip’s habits of idleness in the tale. Irving’s tendency to be indolent was noticeable not only in his early career as a writer but also in his boyhood when he disliked going to school and found it too tedious and boring. Although he enjoyed reading books outside the classroom, he was an indifferent schoolboy and he did not have any ambitions for school honours. As many of his biographers suggest, Irving was not a good student and he did not learn much at school<sup>1</sup>. Instead of attending school, he preferred exploring the byways of New York where he became familiar with “every spot where a murder or robbery had been committed, or a ghost seen” (qtd. in Jones 2008, 8). Moreover, Irving never attended college and he spent six years studying law at the office of Josiah Ogden Hoffman. Although he barely passed the bar exam in 1806, he did not care much for law as a career and he soon abandoned it to write full-time. When he

started his profession as a writer, his indolence was equally evident. Despite the enormous success of his 1809 book entitled *Diedrich Knickerbocker's History of New York* which brought him fame and popularity, he did not write another book for ten years and "his pen was almost wholly idle" (Hill 1879, 62). The reason why the success of the *History* did not immediately determine his choice of literature as a profession might be explained by the fact that "writing for a livelihood seemed to him too confining, too laborious, and too precarious" (Hill 1879, 60). In his account of Irving's life, George William Curtis also confirms this idea by claiming that Irving was still "a gilded youth who enjoyed the gay idleness of society, and who found in writing only another and pleasant recreation" (260). Although Irving edited a literary journal called *The Analectic Magazine* between 1813 and 1815, he also found this job so wearisome that he readily left it. Thereafter, he spent most of his time enjoying his leisure by travelling to many European countries such as Germany, France, Austria and Spain where he tried to find new subjects to write about. During this period, Irving's idleness was undoubtedly excessive and he himself later admitted it when he confirmed the fact that he "seemed to drift without aim or object" in these years and that he went to Europe because he hoped to overcome his "idle habits and idle associates" (qtd. in Bates 2010, 506).

Irving's inclination to idleness continued throughout his literary career. According to his biographer David Jayne Hill, the failure of his 1824 collection of essays and short stories entitled *The Tales of a Traveller* "was attributed by the highest authorities to Irving's indolence, rather than to his want of genius" (96). As a matter of fact, Irving's work was harshly criticized by many critics and reviewers<sup>2</sup> both in England and America. Most of them were disappointed with the work and they blamed Irving for his diversion from his original style in *The Sketch Book*. Irving was so deeply touched by these violent criticisms that his pen was once again almost totally idle. For instance, he soon abandoned the engagement to edit the British classics and he busied himself in studying the Spanish language. He even regretted his choice of literature as a

profession and, in a letter to his nephew, he dissuaded him from having such a career (Hill 1879, 97-8). In 1839, Irving once more admitted his idleness when he expressed his willingness to contribute to the pages of the *Knickerbocker Magazine* which was published in the city of New York. In his letter to Lewis Gaylord Clark, the editor of this magazine, Irving describes his aversion to hard work in the following manner: “I am tired, however, of writing volumes: they do not afford exactly the relief I require; there is too much preparation, arrangement, and parade in this set form of coming before the public. I am growing too indolent and unambitious for anything that requires labour or display” (qtd. in P. Irving 2001, 148). In his letter, Irving also accounts for his desire to be engaged with this magazine by his wish to be more at his ease in writing about the subjects that come to his mind. Irving’s connection to the *Knickerbocker Magazine*, however, lasted only two years after which time he focused on writing other books and biographies. When taking these facts into consideration, the similarity between Irving and Rip becomes obvious.

Another similar attribute between Irving and his fictional hero is generosity. From the beginning of the story, the tale-teller underlines Rip’s magnanimity by claiming that “he would never refuse to assist a neighbour even in the roughest toil, and was a foremost man at all country frolics for husking Indian corn, or building stone fences” (30). The women of the village often ask him to do some of the hardest jobs that their husbands refuse to do. Despite his indolence and aversion to work, he would never hesitate to offer his help and support on such occasions. His kind-heartedness is also evident through his tendency to assist not only his neighbours and friends but also the people he does not know. This idea is emphasized in Irving’s description of Rip’s actions and behaviour when he meets a strange man carrying a heavy keg full of liquor on his back in one of the highest parts of the Catskill Mountains. Despite his shyness and distrust of this individual, Irving states, Rip immediately complies with his request for help and, “with his usual alacrity” (33), he assists him in transporting the keg to the

desired location. Inside this location, Rip's kindness is noticeable when he serves liquor to the mysterious and odd-looking figures despite his fear and apprehension. The examples that illustrate Rip's generosity are numerous in the story. They all suggest that Rip is always "ready to attend to anybody's business but is own" (30). Like Rip, Irving was characterized by his benevolence and altruism which were some of his most remarkable qualities. In his life, he also tended to assist his friends whenever they needed his help or support. As Romney suggests, "[n]o one ever appealed to Irving for sympathy in vain. His sensitive disposition was always touched by the least suggestion of pain or sorrow, and, prompted by his kindness of heart, he quickly responded to the entreaties of all who were seeking alleviation from care or distress" (25). In fact, Irving's generosity was so great that he sometimes sacrificed his own interests for the benefit of other people even when they were strangers to him. This aspect of his character has been mentioned in many of his biographies.

One of the most well-known examples that underline Irving's generosity and kind-heartedness consists in his abandonment of the work upon which he engaged himself, "The History of the Conquest of Mexico," to the young writer William H. Prescott who was also working on the same subject. Not only did Irving voluntarily relinquish his intentions but also he assisted the latter by sending him all the works and materials he had collected in Spain. "What makes the act of surrender the more generous on Irving's part," Hill suggests, "is the fact that he had already sketched the first draught of his first volume, while Mr Prescott had not gone beyond the accumulation of materials" (147). Despite the fact that Irving's act left him in a difficult professional and financial situation<sup>3</sup>, he did not seem to regret it. Irving's magnanimity was also noticeable through his kind treatment of other writers in addition to Prescott. In fact, Irving was characterized by his utmost respect for the feelings of young authors as well as old and famous ones. He tended to encourage them and to avoid criticizing their work even when he perceived some flaws and defects. As Hill states in his biography,

Irving’s “generous treatment of other writers, many of whom were his competitors for public favour, is one of the most pleasing features of his life. Scarcely a word of disparagement can be found anywhere in his writings or remembered from his conversation” (214). One of the young writers that Irving encouraged and supported is George Ticknor. When this author sent his “History of Spanish Literature” to Irving, the latter responded as follows: “When I have once read it through, I shall keep it by me, like a Stilton cheese, to give a dig into whenever I want a relishing morsel” (qtd. in Hill 1879, 214). Similarly, Irving expressed his favourable opinion when he was asked about Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*. He said that it is “[m]asterly! masterly! masterly!” (qtd. in Hill 1879, 214). In his life, Irving encouraged many other writers such as Edgar Allan Poe, James Fenimore Cooper and Donald G. Mitchell.

Irving’s magnanimity and kind-heartedness are undoubtedly some of the main reasons that account for his belovedness<sup>4</sup>. As a matter of fact, he was greatly admired and well-liked by his friends and “[i]t is said that he had no enemies” (Romney 1908, 25). His belovedness was remarkable from his boyhood when his friends and acquaintances enjoyed his company and spent regular time with him. In his life, he was loved and esteemed not only in New York but also in many other places in America. As Stockton Axson suggests, Irving’s “handsome, smiling face, wholesomeness, ready wit, won him welcome from Ballston Spa to Baltimore, not excepting Washington, where glorious Dolly Madison had him for guest in the Executive Mansion, and the President himself would relax to listen to the easeful talk, salted with worldly wisdom, from this darling of society” (187-88). Evidently, Irving was liked not only by his friends but also by noted people and politicians. According to Axson, King George the Fourth was also attracted to Irving and enjoyed spending time with him. He claims that “George IV, like everyone else, was attracted to Irving, and seems to have put forward only whatever little good was in him in Irving’s society” (188). Similarly, Irving’s fictional hero is admired and beloved by everybody in the village, with the exception of his wife. As the tale’s narrator suggests,

Rip is a “great favourite” among the inhabitants of the community and he is possessed of “universal popularity” (30). The children shout with joy at his appearance and even the dogs seem to be contented as none of them barks at him. The women of the village appreciate his simplicity, good nature and meekness of spirit. They also often sympathize with him whenever things go wrong and they try to comfort him and ease his distress. After his enchanted sleep, Rip also makes many new friends among the rising generation “with whom he soon grew into great favour” (40). He becomes one of the most respected and venerated people in the community where is considered as a chronicle of the old times before the revolution. Rip’s belovedness further highlights the resemblance between him and his creator. In his description of Rip’s character and personality, Irving is largely portraying his own ones. Numerous other characteristics reflect the similarity between them.

### 3. RIP AND IRVING’S POSSIBLE HOMOSEXUALITY

Although there is no firm evidence that Rip and Irving are homosexuals, there are many undeniable hints of their repulsive attitude towards heterosexuality. As far as Rip is concerned, his same-sex attraction could be ascertained through his strong dislike of his wife and his hatred of matrimony. On the most superficial level, Rip escapes from Dame Van Winkle because he is a henpecked husband who cannot endure the scolding and tyranny of his termagant wife. On the most important level, he leaves his spouse because he is possibly a homosexual who detests the firmly established sexual norms and standards in his village. His rejection of these standards is underlined by his frequent visits to the local tavern where he enjoys socializing with people of the same sex. It is only in this place that he can find consolation and relief in times of distress. In the story, his seemingly queer sexuality is mostly emphasized at the moment when he is informed about the death of his wife. “There was a drop of comfort at least in this intelligence,”

Irving states, “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” (39-41). As the statement denotes, Rip feels uncomfortable with his wife probably because he cannot satisfy his sexual appetite with her. Her death might allow him to be freer in having same-sex relationships. As far as Irving is concerned, his homosexual orientation is also likely. In fact, he was a lifelong bachelor and he often expressed his animosity towards marriage after the death of his fiancée, Matilda Hoffman, in 1809. Although he might have proposed marriage to an English girl named Emily Foster in 1823, his proposal was undoubtedly rejected as most of his biographers claim. His misfortunes in love and matrimony could have had a significant effect on his sexual behaviour. “Frustrated in matters of the heart,” Jones suggests in his biography, “he never married and was, in all likelihood, a homosexual” (x).

Irving’s attempt to get married does not mean that he is a heterosexual. Although he might have liked and admired Matilda for her beauty and delicacy, for instance, his willingness to marry her might be explained by his desire to achieve his objective of financial stability and security. It might also be explained by his endeavour to hide his homosexuality in order to be loved and respected by his family, friends and readers. As Jones argues, “it is not unlikely that Irving, as a closeted homosexual, would willingly enter into a marriage with a woman he may have idolized but didn’t love, not only for the financial stability but also to keep up the public appearance that he was straight” (88). After Matilda’s death, Irving accounted for his distaste for marriage by his great sadness and disappointment at the loss of his beloved. This might have been another way of hiding his queer sexual behaviour from the public. Similarly, his possible marriage proposal to Emily can be explained by his eagerness to achieve the same purpose. Actually, Irving’s indulgence in homosexual behaviour may have started even before his attempt to get married<sup>5</sup>. In 1806, for example, he had a group of friends with whom he often used to drink and to do many leisure activities. Among the most notable of these friends are Henry

Brevoort, Gouverneur Kemble and James K. Paulding. According to many biographers, Irving's relationship with these people was not only strong but also unusual. In his biography of his father James Paulding, for instance, William Irving Paulding states that the relationship between them "became more closely bound in an unusual friendship. The relations which united this little group were of the most intimate. A confidence even beyond that of brothers existed among them; a confidence which, it is believed, was never violated under any circumstances, on any hand" (37). Paulding's statement justifies the claim that Irving might have indulged in homosexual behaviour with these friends. Although there is no clear evidence to determine the truth of this presumption, there are some signs which suggest that it is likely.

One of the main signs which point to the possibility that Irving had homosexual relationships with his friends consists in his feeling of deep anxiety when he learned, in 1816, that James Paulding got engaged to Gouverneur Kemble's sister and that Brevoort might also have been considering marriage. The latter probability worried him so greatly that he could not easily contain his "black mood" because he would certainly "miss the links that bind together bachelors" (Jones 2008, 142). Although he wrote Brevoort a letter in which he encouraged the marriage, he was undoubtedly against it. This was evident through his reaction when he found out that Brevoort was not actually seeking marriage. In fact, he was not only happy but also relieved that his intimate friend would not forsake him for a wife. His feelings of joy and delight were openly expressed in another letter to Brevoort in which he stated the following:

You will smile when I tell you that, after all the grave advice I once gave you about getting married, I really felt regret on fancying, from the purport of one of your letters, that you had some serious thoughts of the kind; and that I have indulged in selfish congratulation on finding nothing in your subsequent letter to warrant such an idea . . . if I am doomed to live an old bachelor, I am anxious to have good company. I cannot bear that all my old companions should launch away into the married state and leave me alone . . . it is a consoling and a cherished thought with me, under every vicissitude; that I

shall still be able to return home, nestle comfortably down beside you, and have wherewithal to shelter me from the storms and buffetings of this uncertain world. (qtd. in Jones 2008, 143)

Irving's letter underlines not only his opposition to marriage but also his unusual relationship with Brevoort. In many ways, their relationship seems to be as strong as that between husband and wife due to the fact that Brevoort provides Irving with comfort, affection and security in the upheavals and hardships of life. It is mainly for this reason that Irving feels anxious to be abandoned by his close friend. Irving's sentiment is somehow similar to that of Rip who also fears losing his male companions. In the story, Rip's fear is mostly emphasized at the moment when he is informed about the death of many of his old and close friends such as Nicholas Vedder and Brom Dutcher. At this moment, the tale's narrator states, “Rip's heart died away” (38). Rip is also disheartened at the disappearance of his companion Derrick Van Bummel, the schoolmaster, who went off to the wars. Rip's enormous sadness as a result of these changes might be considered as an indication of his homosexual orientation. The death and disappearance of his male friends mean that he is now “alone in the world” (38), without love and support. Consequently, he makes other male friends among the rising generation with whom he can have good company and with whom he can enjoy the freedom of bachelorhood without fear or distress.

In the story, Rip's seemingly queer sexual behaviour is also noticeable in the scene which describes his experience on the mountain where he meets multiple male figures. In this scene, Rip seems to be pleased and joyful when he encounters the man carrying the keg on his back. His initial feelings of anxiety and apprehension might be explained by his fear of Dame Van Winkle and of the dangers of breaking away from the heterosexual norms of his village rather than indulging in homosexual relationships. In fact, Rip's homosexual desire seems to be greater than his fear as he immediately complies with the request of this individual and they start “mutually relieving each other” (33) while ascending the

mountain. Rip seems to find it hard to control his homosexual needs as he thinks that “there was something strange and incomprehensible about the unknown, that inspired awe and checked familiarity” (34). In the amphitheatre where he later finds himself, Rip’s fear might also be explained by the same reason. Despite his distrust of the strange men playing at ninepins, however, his attitude gradually changes as he witnesses their “party of pleasure” (34). He even ventures to taste their beverage which he appreciates and drinks avidly. Throughout the scene, Irving’s use of such words as pleasure, tempted and reiterated are all indicative of a homosexual atmosphere. Whether Rip indulged in same-sex relationships with these figures is probable although not explicitly mentioned. Irving might have hinted at it by claiming that Rip’s “senses were overpowered, his eyes swam in his head – his head gradually declined and he fell into a deep sleep” (35). Although Rip’s lethargy and drowsiness seem to be caused exclusively by alcohol, they may also be caused by homosexual acts due to the fact that his relationship with his male companions appears to be more natural than that with his wife. Therefore, his experience on the mountain emphasizes the possibility that he has a negative attitude towards heterosexuality similar to that of his creator.

#### 4. RIP AND IRVING’S AVERSION TO POLITICS AND THEIR GENUINE LOVE OF NATURE

One of the common attitudes between Irving and his fictional hero is the aversion to politics. In Rip’s opinion, for instance, politics is not only uninteresting but also incomprehensible. This is most evident through the description of his confusion and bewilderment when he returns to his village on election day and hears many political terms which are a “perfect Babylonish jargon” (37) to him. When one of the tavern politicians asks him whether he is a Federal or Democrat, he is unable to comprehend and answer the question. When asked on which side he voted, he is equally at a loss to

understand the question and does not respond to it. Because he slept through the American Revolution and missed the war, he does not have any idea about such political matters and he even announces his loyalty to King George the Third which arouses the fury of the crowd around him. His disinclination for politics is so strong that he does not care to understand the strange events that took place during his torpor. The American independence from the British crown seems to him as an insignificant and trifling incident. As Irving states, “Rip in fact was no politician; the changes of states and empires made but little impression on him” (40). In his description of Rip’s distaste for politics, Irving largely articulates his own thoughts and beliefs about this issue. In his life, the latter was also averse to politics and found it unimportant and full of perplexity. As he himself wrote, “I am not a politician” (qtd. in Axson 1933, 188). Even though he had a long career in diplomacy and served as American minister to Spain from 1842 to 1846, he often expressed his strong disgust with politics. After he failed to obtain a position as a clerk in one of the courts, for example, he was deeply sickened by “the servility and duplicity and rascality I have witnessed among the swarms of scrub politicians who crawl about the great metropolis of our State like so many vermin about the head of the body politic” (qtd. in Curtis 1894, 261). Irving’s distaste for political life and his reluctance to take an active part in it were noticeable throughout his life.

Irving’s aversion to politics can be illustrated by many examples and incidents. In 1834, for instance, he declined a nomination for Congress offered to him by the Jackson party. In 1838, he also rejected the Tammany nomination as mayor of New York and refused an offer from President Van Buren to make him Secretary of the Navy (Myers 1976, 124). His declination of these posts might be explained by his great sensitivity to any sort of rebuke or criticism which he could have faced if he had accepted them. As he himself stated in his reply to Van Buren’s nomination, he rejected the offer because he shrank from “the harsh cares and turmoils of public and political life at Washington” and because he was “too sensitive to

endure the bitter personal hostility and the slanders and misrepresentations of the press which beset high station in this country” (qtd. in Adams 1870, 250). It is also for this reason that he reluctantly accepted to be appointed as Minister to Spain in 1842. His acceptance of this office from President Tyler might be accounted for by the fact that he would face less rebuke in representing his country than in representing its parties. His disinclination to engage himself in political life was also noticeable through his attitude toward many political issues of the mid-nineteenth century. According to Axson, Irving was “unagitated by the political conditions which were leading inevitably to war” (188). In fact, he ignored the 1846 proposal to ban slavery within the land acquired from Mexico in the Mexican-American War. This proposal, known as the Wilmot Proviso, was so controversial and disputatious that he was unwilling to comment upon it. Similarly, he did not want to comment on many other issues such as the Kansas-Nebraska Bill, the Fugitive Slave Law and the controversies between President Andrew Jackson and Vice President John C. Calhoun. His detachment from these issues highlights his disinterest in politics and his unwillingness to get involved in anything which might divide people<sup>6</sup>. This attitude further underlines his resemblance to the protagonist of “Rip Van Winkle” who also does not make any comment on the tumultuous political changes in his country.

Rip and Irving’s dislike of politics stands in sharp contrast with their genuine love of nature. Both of them are characterized by their deep appreciation of the beauties of the natural environment and by their close connection to it. In the story, Rip’s fondness for nature is emphasized by the fact that he spends most of his time in the woods and forests where he enjoys looking at the magnificent and charming scenes. To him, nature is an earthly paradise offered to humans by God. The tale-teller underscores his fascination with nature by claiming that he “would carry a fowling piece on his shoulder for hours together, trudging through woods, and swamps and uphill and down dale, to shoot a few squirrels or wild pigeons” (30). Rip’s frequent and extended retreats to nature are not solely

caused by his hatred of his wife and his eagerness to escape from her. Obviously, he considers nature as a source of inspiration and pleasure in which he can enjoy himself and have fun. The fact that his best companion is an element of nature, his dog named Wolf, also highlights his love of the natural environment and his communion with it. Rip not only adores Wolf but also sympathizes with him in his pains and sufferings whenever he is the target of Dame Van Winkle’s anger. “[N]ever mind my lad,” he would tell him, “whilst I live thou shalt never want a friend to stand by thee!” (32). The bonds between them are so strong that they seem to be inseparable. Rip usually takes Wolf with him in his walks to the Catskill Mountains where he enjoys his dog’s company. In these mountains, Rip’s love of nature is noticeable mainly through his great sensibility to the grandeur, sublimity and splendour of the natural landscapes surrounding him. When he beholds the Hudson River, mountains and dense forests from his highly elevated position, for instance, he evidently experiences feelings of admiration and awe as he lays for some time “musing on this scene” (33). It is mostly the majesty and glory of the Hudson scenery which surprise and amaze him. The river, forests and mountains all form an enthralling and charming panorama that is so striking that it appears to Rip as a world in and by itself.

Rip’s feelings and attitude when he first looks at this sublime natural landscape are similar to those of Irving during his first voyage up the Hudson in 1800. The latter, who travelled up this river on a sloop before the invention of steamboats and railroads, was also charmed and awestruck by its breathtaking beauty and magnificence. He expressed his admiration of the Hudson scenery in a letter in which he detailedly described this journey. In this letter, he states that he was intensely delighted by the wonderful beauties of the Hudson River whose glassy stream reflected trees, rocks, clouds and sky. Although he beheld many other notable rivers in Europe, he claims, the pictures of the lovely Hudson can never be dimmed or effaced. “To me, the Hudson is full of storied associations, connected as it is with some of the happiest portions

of my life”, he states, “[e]ach striking feature brings to mind some early adventure or enjoyment; some favourite companion who shared it with me; some fair object, perchance, of youthful admiration” (qtd. in Bruce 1913, 12). He suggests that the Hudson reminds him of his joyful boyhood and keeps his heart from growing old. Actually, Irving was the first American writer to describe the beauty and grandeur of the Hudson River. Through his writings and romantic tales, he largely popularized it by emphasizing its resplendence and impressiveness. In his voyage, Irving admired not only the river but also the various natural landscapes around it such as the Highlands and the Catskill Mountains. He thought that these mountains are the most alluring and enchanting of the entire scenery. In his letter, he articulates this belief by claiming that “of all the scenery of the Hudson, the Kaatskill Mountains had the most witching effect on my boyish imagination. Never shall I forget the effect upon me of the first view of them predominating over a wide extent of country, part wild, woody, and rugged part softened away into all the graces of cultivation” (qtd. in Bruce 1913, 11). While laying on the deck, he further states, he kept watching the changes and transformations of these mountains under the magical effects of the atmosphere. They sometimes seemed to approach and, at other times, appeared to recede. At one moment, they seemed to be melting into the misty distance; at another, they looked as if they were burnished by the setting sun. Irving’s pleasure and excitement in watching the various mutations of the Catskill Mountains and the grandness of the entire scenery highlight his genuine love of nature.

In “Rip Van Winkle,” Irving’s deep appreciation of the beauties of nature is underlined by his use of personification in the description of natural scenes and elements. In his depiction of the Catskill Mountains, for example, his use of this literary device is evident. He states that 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” (29). Here, the Catskill Mountains are compared to a tall

and wealthy person who seems to possess everything around him. They are also compared to a noble and dignified man who belongs to a well-known and highly esteemed family. When the weather is fine, these mountains “are clothed in blue and purple, and print their bold outlines on the clear evening sky” (29). Here also, the Catskill Mounains are attributed with human-like characteristics as they appear to be clothed and to have the ability to print their shapes on the sky. One of these mountains is also portrayed as having a “brow” (33) just like a human being. Irving’s use of personification is further noticeable in his description of the Hudson as a “lordly” river, moving with its “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” (33). Irving’s use of such words as lordly and majestic make the Hudson River appear as a handsome and impressive man who moves easily and gracefully. This river also seems to be clothed in blue and purple as it reflects the clouds, mountains and sky having these colours. Through his use of personification in the description of various natural elements in the story, Irving suggests that nature is not only beautiful but also important. He implicitly argues that human beings are not better or more valuable than the nonhuman natural environment which should be respected and protected rather than conquered and destroyed. He claims that humans are only members of nature without which they cannot live and exist. Thus, Irving’s recurrent use of personification also underscores his deep love of nature.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The numerous similarities and resemblances between Irving and his fictional hero justify the claim that “Rip Van Winkle” might be considered as an autobiographical story in which the writer gives an account of his life and personality. They also give a reason for the assertion that Irving has an unmatched ability to impersonate

himself in his writings and that the charm his books possess is a reflection of the charm of his character. In fact, many of Irving's virtues and qualities are perfectly illustrated through the character of Rip, who largely mirrors the writer's personality. For instance, the latter reflects Irving's generosity, the kindness of heart and unconditional sympathy with people. He also reflects some of Irving's defects such as his aversion to work and his inclination to idleness, especially during his early career as a writer. To a large extent, Irving uses Rip as a means of articulating his beliefs and attitudes towards various issues such as politics and the environment. For this reason, Rip might be considered as Irving's representative and spokesman in the tale. He might also be considered as another way through which Irving hides his identity in addition to the use of various pseudonyms such as Geoffrey Crayon and Diedrich Knickerbocker. Like these pseudonyms, Rip functions as a kind of protective barrier between the writer and the world. Through this protective barrier, Irving can express his opinion about sensitive and controversial issues, such as homosexuality, without endangering his public image. In fact, Irving's desire to maintain his privacy by describing his personal thoughts and beliefs within a narrative rather than a documentary framework might be explained by his deep sensitivity to rebuke and criticism from his readers and critics. Thus, the autobiographical dimension of "Rip Van Winkle" consists not only in Irving's adaptation of the story to his psychological and emotional needs but also in providing an account of his moral, intellectual and behavioural characteristics. Irving's use of the fictional sketch as an autobiographical framework might be considered as one of his greatest contributions to American literature. Through his style, he gave rise to a distinct literary genre and influenced many other writers such as Edgar Allan Poe.

NOTES

1. In his recent biography *Washington Irving: An American Original*, Brian Jay Jones claims that Irving learned little more than how to read and write at school. He suggests that Irving “was such a dismal student that one fellow classmate later remembered him as ‘a sluggish and inapt scholar of great diffidence – what teachers call stupid’” (5). Jones also suggests that although Irving often caused trouble in the classroom, he was largely unpunished by his teacher Benjamin Romaine who was also characterized by a “similar good-natured, easy-going attitude” (5).
2. One of these reviewers is John Neal, a writer in *Blackwood’s Magazine*. Soon after the publication of *The Tales of a Traveller*, Neal attacked Irving by saying the following: “You, Geoffrey Crayon, have great power, original power. We rejoice in your failure now, because we believe that it will drive you into a style of original composition far more worthy of yourself. Go to work: lose no time. Your foundations will be stronger for this uproar. You cannot write a novel, a poem, a true tale, or a tragedy. You *can* write another ‘Sketch-Book,’ worth all that you have ever written, if you will draw out from yourself” (qtd. in Hill 1879, 96).
3. After giving up his subject to Prescott, Irving did not have another theme to work upon and his financial situation was precarious. Shortly after the publication of Prescott’s work, Irving expressed this idea in a letter to his nephew by stating that “I doubt whether Mr Prescott was aware of the extent of the sacrifice I made. This was a favourite subject, which had delighted my imagination ever since I was a boy. I had brought home books from Spain to aid me in it and looked upon it as a pendant to my Columbus. When I gave it up to him, I in a manner gave him up my bread, for I depended upon the profit of it to recruit my waning finances. I had no other subject at hand to supply its place” (qtd. in P. Irving 2001, 143). However, Irving praised Prescott’s work and claimed that it “does honour to himself and his country, and I wish him the full enjoyment of his laurels” (qtd. in P. Irving 2001, 144).
4. Irving’s belovedness might be explained by other reasons in addition to his generosity and kind-heartedness. According to Romney, Irving was also admired for his charming personality, the gaiety of nature, brilliant conversational powers, modesty and contentment. For instance, Irving was so modest that he did not like to use his L. L. D. degree given to him by Oxford. Despite the success of his first books, likewise, he was far from being proud. “I feel almost appalled by such success,” he said to his friends, “and fearful lest it cannot be real or is not merited, or that I shall not act up to the expectations that may be formed” (qtd. in Romney 1908, 26).
5. According to Jones, Irving might have engaged in his first homosexual

relationship with the American painter and poet Washington Allston while he was in Italy (50). Irving met Allston in the spring of 1805 in Rome and they immediately became close and intimate companions. The latter also seems to have a homosexual orientation which might be discerned through some of his paintings. Irving was so influenced by Allston that he even considered painting as a profession.

6. As Axson argues, Irving has detached himself from the furious political turmoils of the mid-nineteenth century also because “it was not in his nature to reverse the habit of a lifetime which had been to labour in his bland way to promote that which unites people rather than that which divides” (189). This was evident through many of the duties which he performed as a diplomat. For instance, he contributed to the amicable settlement of the Oregon boundary dispute and played a significant role in promoting good relations between America and other countries such as Spain, Great Britain, Germany and France. As a matter of fact, “[i]nternational rancors were mollified by the presence of Washington Irving” (Axson 1933, 189).

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