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Analyzing True Self-Reliance and Individualism

The story of “Rip Van Winkle” by Washington Irving remains a favorite throughout generations, and for good reason, considering the abnormal circumstances that its main character, Rip, undergoes. Given the vast number of people that enjoy this work, it is only natural that several different interpretations concerning it abound. One critic, Daniel Plung, focuses on what he notes as the themes of individualism and self-reliance throughout the story. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines individualism as “the habit of being independent and self-reliant; behaviour characterized by the pursuit of one's own goals without reference to others; free and independent individual action or thought.” Based on this definition, readers can compare Plung’s article, “‘Rip Van Winkle’: Metempsychosis and the Quest for Self-Reliance” against the original piece to see how Plung’s ideas about individualism and self-reliance correspond with the actual story. Although Plung states that individualism and self-reliance have always been goals that Rip seeks to achieve, that he develops these characteristics upon his return from the mountain, and that he reaches a state of solitude after his experience, I do not completely agree with Plung’s assessment.

First, Plung notes in his article that Rip has always sought the goal of becoming self-reliant and attaining individualism. He supports this by stating, “This ability to dominate one’s

personal universe is actually what Rip had been seeking all along” (Plung 79). Since the story says that Rip is always willing to help with his neighbors’ needs yet shows reluctance towards assisting in his duties at home, Plung reasons that Rip simply desires to be in control of his own actions, as opposed to catering to his wife’s desires: “It is not the labor or work that he detests and avoids; it is external pressure he resists. He wants to be self-reliant” (Irving 79). However, when readers study the story of “Rip Van Winkle,” they can also note that Rip’s trips to the mountain are not motivated out of a desire to assert his individuality but rather to escape the chaos and responsibilities of his home life and to find peace. This is evidenced in the portion that reads, “Poor Rip was at last reduced almost to despair; and his only alternative to escape from the labour of the farm and the clamour of his wife, was to take gun in hand, and stroll away into the woods” (Irving 33). Additionally, Irving writes that as a result of Rip’s laziness, his children lack proper clothing and behave as orphans. These are definitely not signs of a man who aims to be self-reliant and individualistic, for he cannot even care for his own family. If Rip were truly self-reliant and individualistic, his family would not be in need of others’ pity and handouts. Therefore, Plung’s assessment of Rip’s desires contradicts details within the story.

Next, Plung concludes that Rip becomes self-reliant and individualistic upon his return from the mountain. He writes, “Originally, Rip was incapable of countering the forces represented by Dame Van Winkle; now he is successful in denying these forces; he is also successful in succeeding Nicholas Vedder as village patriarch, the position he most envied” (Plung 78). However, this point is not entirely true. Before he leaves for the mountain, Rip struggles with the difficulties of managing his farm, tending to his children, and maintaining a healthy marriage. This is evidenced in the passage that reads, “But as to doing family duty and keeping his farm in order, it was impossible” (Irving 31), as well as later when Irving writes that

“His children, too, were as ragged and wild as if they belonged to nobody” (Irving 31). When Rip returns, he no longer holds the responsibility of working his farm, his children are grown, and his wife has passed. Additionally, the story goes on to say that Rip reunites with his daughter and proceeds to live with her family. “Rip’s daughter took him home to live with her; she had a snug, well-furnished house, and a stout cheery farmer for a husband, whom Rip recollected for one of the urchins that used to climb upon his back” (Irving 39-40). Although Rip may have established some kind of individuality in gaining freedom to do as he pleases, free from the responsibilities he once held, he certainly does not achieve self-reliance, as he depends on his daughter to provide housing for him. Thus, despite Plung’s belief that Rip develops self-reliance and individualism, evidence in the story suggests otherwise.

Finally, Plung determines that Rip is able to achieve solitude when he returns. He writes, “After his return from the mountains, Rip finally achieves this solitude in the midst of society; he manages to attain the ideal condition” (Plung 79). He supports this by all of Rip’s noble accomplishments and how he can now choose who he interacts with. After all, Irving does write that Rip “took his place once more on the bench, at the inn door, and was revered as one of the patriarchs of the village, and a chronicle of the old times ‘before the war’” (Irving 40). However, how is his condition ideal? The story says that many of his friends have died, and he misses not only the events of an entire war but also the opportunity of watching his children grow into adults. Yes, he proceeds to establish great relationships within his village, but he ultimately misses out on twenty years of his life. Irving writes, “It was some time before he could get into the regular track of gossip, or could be made to comprehend the strange events that had taken place during his torpor” (Irving 40). Although Rip eventually assimilates into society again, the fact remains that he loses twenty good years of his life that he could have spent raising

his children. One can only imagine the negative effect that his absence had on his children, as they grew up without a father-figure. Hence, the idea that Rip achieves a better life and solitude when he returns from the mountain remains a debatable matter of perspective.

In conclusion, although Plung makes great points in support of his ideas regarding the themes of individualism and self-reliance throughout the story of “Rip Van Winkle,” other details contradict his perspectives. Plung writes, “Irving was depicting, twenty-two years before Emerson labeled the idea, the American concept of self-reliance” (Plung 77). This theme of self-reliance certainly prevails throughout the story. However, to claim that Rip exhibits self-reliance negates his habitual lazy behavior, both before and after his mountain experience. Likewise, although Rip attains individualism to a degree, he still remains connected to the community and lives with his daughter when he returns. Hence, aspects of self-reliance and individualism are only seen to a small degree. Because of this, while Plung utilizes pieces of the story to support his beliefs that Rip seeks and attains self-reliance and individualism as well as peace, it is easy to suggest the opposite. Thus, depending on one’s interpretation of the story, analyzing the aspects of self-reliance and individualism within “Rip Van Winkle” may reap diverse results.

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