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Literary Criticism  
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**Psychoanalytic and Archetypal Analysis  
of “Rip Van Winkle” by Washington Irving**

It didn't surprise me to find out that “Rip Van Winkle” was written long before Psychoanalysts and Archetypal theorists existed. It seems as though people have always had fears and desires that were hidden underneath the surface of their daily life and activities. Freud, Lacan, Frye, Jung, and other theorists simply came up with the system of how to understand and interpret the signs that existed since the beginning of time. And now we can subject any work and any behavior to the thorough investigation of hidden motives of the unconscious.

According to Peter Barry, Lacanian critics excavate the support for their analysis from the text itself, and not the author or the character. However, so much of “Rip Van Winkle” is the description of characters that it would be impossible to analyze the story without addressing them. Rip Van Winkle sounds like an ordinary specimen of a villager in the Dutch settlement at the foot of Catskill Mountains. We can tell that, even though Rip is described as a “simple, good-natured man,” he is not as simple as he seems. First, even his name suggests a certain complexity. ‘Rip’ is a something that splits away, that it cut away from the whole. A ‘rip’ can also be something that has damage within itself. It may simply mean the turn in the plot when he is ripped away from his village for twenty years, or it may mean that his unconscious is completely separated from his conscious.

Rip is torn from his family; he is removing himself from marital and fatherly responsibilities. Part of his life is ripped out of time since he spends it sleeping in the mountains. He is also ripped out of history and misses the revolutionary war. “Winkle” according to the

Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary<sup>1</sup> is a freshwater snail. And since in psychoanalysis nothing is accidental, the meaning of his last name is probably a sign of his disposition or his slowed down understanding of the world. Another meaning of “winkle” is “extracting from its shell” which may mean that the hope is for Rip to break out of the shell that he has created by his laziness and fears.

Second, we never learn about Rip’s real family, aside from his descent from Van Winkles, “who figured so gallantly in the chivalrous days of Peter Stuyvesant, and accompanied him to siege of Fort Christina.” (par 6) This gives us a reference to who his ancestors may have been. Considering that the siege of Fort Christina was completed without firing one shot, we can assume that Van Winkles weren’t very assertive or violent people. We assume that Rip Van Winkle has no living parents, for he never mentions them. The parents are replaced by mother figures—the Dame Van Winkle and Rip’s daughter later in the story and several father figures—Derrick Van Bummel, who is an educated schoolmaster; Nicholas Vedder, who is the patriarch of the village. Interestingly, Rip is reversed in his psyche in terms of family romance—he hates his mother and loves his fathers. The fathers are as lazy as he is, and he sides to pass the time in their company and to ignore his fatherly and marital responsibilities.

If we were to analyze the story in Lacanian terms, we would have to address the three main orders Lacan proposes in his theories. The first Lacanian order—the Imaginary seems to be represented in the story in a very convoluted way. In response to his wife’s accusations, Rip “shrugged his shoulders, shook his head, cast up his eyes, but said nothing.” (par 11) He has no language here, which makes him look like a child who has no language to explain the world around him. Rip also exists in his own internal world—imagination full of ‘imago’ (images). Of

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<sup>1</sup> <<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/winkle>[3]>

course, the Imaginary is unattainable unless one is a small child, which means that Rip Van Winkle would not be able to stay in this order.

Also, Rip exists in the Symbolic order, where he is drawn to the father figures of the village. He acquires their language, confides in them his break away from his wife. Lacan talks of the Symbolic order as a type of castration, which would be appropriate application to this story, since Rip has no relationship with his wife other than unpleasant interaction. He distances himself from his mother figure, and we see no intimate relationship between them (I would assume that having children was her initiative.)

Rip Van Winkle also tries to impose order on reality, as he attempts to enter the Real order. But since he has a language and cannot be reunited with his mother figure, it is impossible for him to achieve the Real order (as it is impossible to do for any human).

Another way of looking at Rip's transformation is his constant reversal to the mirror stage of development. He is constant search for his reflection and understanding of what matters. He doesn't actively pursue the analysis of his unconscious, but he finds mirroring images in others. For instance, his dog Wolf (which in itself is an interesting name) is his "sole domestic adherent" who is "as much henpecked as his master." Wolf is both the reflection of Rip's Ego and his counterpart—the other. Rip is loyal to his idleness as a dog, he is mindless of where it may lead and what it can do to him.

It is interesting, however, that Van Winkle finds another mother figure in his daughter and another mirror in his son when he returns to the village. But the image of an idle life that his son leads doesn't bother Rip. Rip junior is just a reflection. "That's Rip Van Winkle yonder, leaning against the tree," say the villagers to rip senior. At this moment I started wondering if Rip had moved out of his body to see himself from the outside, but that wasn't it.

Also, it seems to me that the “personages” in the amphitheater that he discovers in the woods are “evidently amusing themselves, yet they maintained the gravest faces, the most mysterious silence, and were, withal, the most melancholy party of pleasure he had ever witnessed.” (par 22) First, the easiest connection we can make is Rip himself. The men are like a mirror of him, and that is why he drinks with them. Second connection we can make, using Frye’s inductive method, is with the society at the time. If we take a step back and look at the villagers’ lives, they seemed to be fond of the king’s rule—they were dancing with him and “celebrating,” but, on the other hand, they were silent and were almost conspiring against something. The dancing men’s faces reflected the tension of the society as well as the tension inside Rip.

Throughout the story, Rip experiences constant lack things—lack of peace (his wife wants him to work), lack of education (as he compares himself to Van Bummel), lack of entertainment (as he wants to run away instead of doing the work on the farm), lack of courage (when he can’t stand up to his wife), lack of knowledge (when he is interested in old news), and the biggest lack—lack of love from villagers. He was satisfied when other wives and children and dogs all loved him, but he constantly had to maintain that love by doing things for them. When he returns after twenty years, the biggest concern of his is lack of recognition, and barking dogs who don’t love him anymore. He is only satisfied when he finally gets recognized by older citizens and his daughter. Interestingly, though, he fulfills the most superficial of his desires--he “arrive[s] at that happy age when a man can do nothing with impunity” and “[gets] his neck out of the yoke of matrimony.” (par 61). This makes him a model for “henpecked husbands” of the village, but it also makes him a laughable model of a man to the reader.

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The story is full of archetypal myths. Many of the archetypes described in “Chapter Four: Mythological and Archetypal Approaches” of Guerin’s *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature* are present in “Rip Van Winkle.” First, the presence of the Hudson river brings the context of death and rebirth to the story—Rip’s falling asleep and his waking up looking over the river gives a new meaning to its presence in the story. Rip falls asleep at sundown (which is an archetype of death) and wakes up at dawn (archetype of rebirth).

Colors introduce another set of archetypes to the story. Before Rip meets the short man, he sees the blue and purple colors of the mountains, which in archetypal analysis mean security, spiritual purity, highly positive feelings. His last look before he follows the men to the amphitheatre, his eye falls on the “azure sky and the bright evening cloud.” (par 20). The clear blue sky now shows a red twilight cloud. Red signifies blood, sacrifice, disorder—which is what Rip experiences after entering the amphitheatre. In “Rip Van Winkle” colors are constantly foreshadowing the story.

Even though Guerin does not specify the meaning of the number twenty among other archetypes, I assume that there is deeper archetypal meaning behind this number. It seems to me that twenty would signify youth, a man between birth and 20 is being formed, but Rip seems to miss out on that maturity.

Rip wakes up under the tree in the “garden” in the mountains. This archetype brings the images of innocence, paradise, fertility, and unspoiled beauty. Van Winkle then comes back to his village to find the paradise he was looking for—his wife is dead; everyone thinks he is important because of his story; and he is allowed to do whatever he wants since he is now an old man.

At the same time, Rip's farm, his garden, is dying and he doesn't attend to it. He doesn't fertilize his garden as he ignores his duties. He comes back to a completely destroyed farm. His fertility is gone in terms of the garden and in terms of being able to love and have a relationship.

The dog named Wolf is very symbolic in the story. 'Wolf' is a loner, a predator. He is almost like a shadow of Rip. Wolf is loyal, but in an odd way—he could run away to chase a squirrel if he wanted to, but he hangs around—kind of like Rip is still with his wife, but he takes off to attend to more 'important' things. Wolves also run in packs—I wonder if the community of the villagers is in a way Rip's pack and he tries to impress them.

A hero archetype <sup>2</sup> is a tricky one in "Rip Van Winkle" since the hero sets off to undergo all three types of the heroic journeys, but ends up sleeping through his own transformation. The quest hero archetype can be traced as Rip sets off to go to the woods and meets a man and enters a strange place where bizarre men with unfamiliar behaviors are performing foreign rituals. As a reader, I expected the story to unravel here, but our hero falls asleep instead. Initiation of the hero, similarly, doesn't follow through in this story. Rip never changes his ways. The journey we expect is the journey to adulthood. We expect him to come back an older changed man, but instead he finds a new mother figure in his own daughter and leads on his worthless life. Furthermore, in a way, Rip becomes this sacrificial hero, who sacrificed twenty years of his life in order for the younger men to "identify" with. (Guerin 154) The young men of the village "when life hangs heavy on their hands, that they might have a quieting draught out of Rip Van Winkle's flagon." ("Rip Van Winkle 62) But there is no real suffering and no real sacrifice. Again, the journey is not complete.

In conclusion, this attempt to analyze the psyche of the story is in no way full. The theory behind the psychoanalytical approach is so broad and convoluted that the fact remains--as we

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<sup>2</sup> Archetypes are taken from Guerin <<http://www.scils.rutgers.edu/~mjoseph/guerin.html>>

cannot successfully interpret our own unconscious, we can never fully discover the unconscious of the text. However, analyzing the behaviors and the archetypes of the story made me wonder if the author is ever fully aware of all of the symbolic meaning he puts into a story. Reading a text with the purpose of finding undercurrents and archetypes made the reading itself a completely different experience.