

Stepping into the Structured World of “Rip Van Winkle”

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Published: 25 April 2022

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Sponsoring information: Sponsored by the Seed Foundation of Innovation and Creation for Graduate Students at the School of Foreign Studies, Northwestern Polytechnical University (WY2021004)

Abstract:

“Rip Van Winkle” was published in 1820, and it has been discussed for hundreds of years. The story of Rip describes the surroundings of Rip’s families. The relations among characters are complex, and they share different characteristics. This paper tries to illustrate three binary oppositions identified in the Rip’s structured world: the first is the choices Mrs. Rip has made, the second is the different positions between Rip and his wife, the last is the difference of the world between the reality and the dream of Rip.

Keywords: Structure world, binary opposition, Rip Van Winkle

The short story “Rip Van Winkle” (1820) depicts stories which are related to Mr. Rip and his wife. There exist many binary oppositions in those stories. Upon the reading, Mrs. Rip are irritated with the idler Mr. Rip when he chats with his friends, while it is Mrs. Rip that shoulders the responsibility for Rip’s family, for instance, raising their children and farming. Compared with his wife, Mr. Rip seems to be kindlier and accommodating. He usually helps his neighbors instead of taking care of his own farm. Mr. Rip wants to escape from the hen-pecked and ruled life with the clamor of his wife. However, he feels contemptuous of democracy in his dream, and he prefers to come back to the previous kingdom. Thus, those binary oppositions have successfully formed the structured world of Rip.

1. Malicious or Gentle: The Choice of Mrs. Rip

The first binary opposition exists in the description of the character Mrs. Rip. The author describes Mrs. Rip as an irritable and blaming woman. She continuously complains about Mr. Rip’s “idleness, carelessness” (Charles, 2003, p.237) and “the ruin he brought on his family” (Charles, 2003, p.237). Mr. Rip’s dog Wolf also feels afraid of such an irritable woman. Wolf is extremely courageous and brave when it hunts for other animals. However, When Wolf comes back home, it just places his tail on the ground and curls at the side of Mr. Rip. When it receives a glance from the woman, it can “fly to the door with yelping precipitation” (Charles, 2003, p.238). What is more, When Mr. Rip chats with his friends Nicholas Vedder and Derrick Van Bummel, Mrs. Rip suddenly interrupts their talks, and blamed Rip’s friends because Mrs. Rip believes that they make Mr. Rip exposed into the atmosphere of idleness.

On the contrary, the story also presents another perspective of characteristics of Mrs. Rip. When Mr. Rip enters his house after several years, he finds that “the house is empty, forlorn, and apparently abandoned” (Charles, 2003, p.243). He begins to consider about all the efforts Mrs. Rip made before. She can keep their house “in neat order” (Charles, 2003, p.243) and take care of their children. This contrast depicted by Mr. Rip proves that Mrs. Rip is not a rude and unreasonable woman. Although she is usually irritated with her husband, she can also shoulder the duties for her families including not only raising their children, but also farming.

Based on the analysis of the first binary opposition, it can be found that Mrs. Rip has totally different perspectives. It is akin to both sides of the coin. She can be not only fractious but also responsible for her families. She is the traditional woman of taking care of families as well as the concrete pillar of families. Therefore, it is reasonable for her to complain about the idleness and irresponsibility of Mr. Rip who ought to take care of families.

2. Controlling or Obedient: Rip’s Marriage

The second binary opposition appears between the masculine awareness and the feminism. The characteristics of Mrs. Rip have been previously discussed, and she is irritated about the idleness and carelessness of her husband Mr. Rip. However, what reactions does Mr. Rip take? Mr. Rip just prefers to escape from that crazy woman. Those residents of the small village believe that Rip is a “simple good-natured” (Charles, 2003, p.236) man. He prefers to get rid of “all kinds of profitable labor” (Charles, 2003, p.237) instead of shouldering the responsibilities for his families. He likes to fix the stone-fences for neighbors without a murmur. He also likes to play with children such as flying kites and shooting marbles. In addition,

He can chat with two elderly men for the whole day as well. When Mr. Rip quarrels with his wife, all neighbors just contribute all the blame on his wife instead of Mr. Rip.

However, when he faces her wife, the kindly and popular Rip has gone, and what is left is the hen-pecked man. Compared with Mrs. Rip's dinning, Rip just responses with "shrugging shoulders, shaking head, casting up eyes, and keeping silence." (Charles, 2003, p.238) Mr. Rip came back home a little bit late, and he is worried about the excuse made to Mrs. Rip. When Mr. Rip knows that his wife has been died because of a broken blood-vessel caused by the quarreling with a peddler, He is not sad or disappointed but comfortable. What makes him released is the death of Mrs. Rip, and he believes that he gets rid of the "petticoat government" (Charles, 2003, p.247).

According to the description of the irritated but responsible Mrs. Rip and the kindly but hen-pecked Mr. Rip, the second binary opposition is revealed. Within the relation between Rip and his wife, Mrs. Rip usually complains about the idleness of Mr. Rip, which means that Mrs. Rip occupies the dominant position. What is more, although the feminine taking Mrs. Rip as a representative have some impacts on the muscular awareness, Mrs. Rip is also died in agony, which proves that those behaviors taken by Mrs. Rip still cannot change the dominant position of muscular awareness.

3. Dreaming or Realistic: Contrast From Rip's Eyes

The third binary opposition shares the differences between the reality and the world in Rip's dream. The story describes the leisure and cozy living surrounds of the village colonized by England. They usually gather in front of the small inn and kill the time with each other. They would like to spend "a long lazy summer's day" (Charles, 2003, p.238) on gossiping or sharing "endless sleepy stories about nothing" (Charles, 2003, p.238). Derrick Van Bummel, Nicholas Vedder and Rip become three good symbols for the idleness. Van Bummel is schoolmaster, and usually talks about the public events deliberately. Nicholas Vedder is "the landlord of the inn" (Charles, 2003, p.238) and often shares something that is only understood by his adherents. Rip totally does not want to finish any kind of profitable labor, instead, he prefers to make his wife shoulder the responsibility for his families. When Mrs. Rip complains about his idleness, he just escapes from the din instead of making any difference for his families. However, it cannot be denied that the muscular awareness still occupies the dominant position in this small village, and Mrs. Rip cannot even have her own name in the story but Dame Van Winkle.

He comes back to the inn "the Union Hotel, by Jonathan Doolittle" (Charles, 2003, p.243) in his dream. The paint "his Majesty George the Third" (Charles, 2003, p.238) has been changed into "General Washington" (Charles, 2003, p.243). The flag with "a singular assemblage of stars and stripes" (Charles, 2003, p.243) has been hung on the pillar in front of the inn. All changes are so "strange and incomprehensible" (Charles, 2003, p.243) from the view of Mr. Rip. When talking about old friends Nicholas Vedder and Van Bummel, Nicholas has been died for eighteen years, and Van Bummel "is now in congress" (Charles, 2003, p.244). Mr. Rip witnesses the election as well, and all the muscular residents begin to pursuit democracy and freedom for themselves. As for Mr. Rip, he says nothing but "a loyal subject of the king" and "God bless him" (Charles, 2003, p.244). "The changes of states and empires" (Charles, 2003, p.246) cannot impress him.

If Mr. Rip represents the new America which just got free from England, Mrs. Rip can be the symbol of old England. America gets rid of the colonizing of old England, while Mr. Rip successfully escapes from the dominance of his wife. With the death of Mrs. Rip, Mr. Rip obtains the power of making decisions for his own. America and its people also begin to make decisions for their own such as elections after the revolutionary war.

The third binary opposition focuses on the differences between the reality and Rip's dream. Comparing the different reactions Mr. Rip takes in the reality and in his dream, the bewilderment of Mr. Rip can be easily discovered. Rip prefers to live in the village colonized by old England, instead of the federal government and the "petticoat government" (Charles, 2003, p.247), and he begins to tell stories happened before to all the strangers who arrives at the hotel. This opposition, to some extent, reveals the Mr. Rip's nostalgia for the colonial governing of old England and the query and worries of the new American government.

Those three binary oppositions includes the different characteristics of Mrs. Rip, the muscular awareness and the feminism, and the reality and Rip's world of dream, which forms the structured world of "Rip Van Winkle". All those binary oppositions thoroughly influence the life of Mr. Rip.

Within the reality, Mr. Rip is welcome by all neighbors, yet lives with the dinning and quarrels of Mrs. Rip. What is more, residents like Mr. Rip in the village colonized live in a cozy life, and men like Mr. Rip receive the superior social position because of the dominant muscular awareness of the society. Within the Rip's dream, it is unnecessary for Rip to be hen-pecked, and his wife is died for the broken blood-vessel, which means that the fight between the muscular awareness and feminism ended as the former still occupies the dominant position. Besides, muscular residents begin to concern about the election as well. However, Mr. Rip deems that all those changes are quite ridiculous and preposterous, and still believes in his Majesty and God.

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