

A Deconstructive Analysis of *Rip Van Winkle*

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Abstract

Rip Van Winkle is a famous short story written by Washington Irving, the father of American literature. The interpretation of this novel is based on two prominent binary oppositions: reformation versus conservatism, loss of self-identity versus identification of self-identity. This paper adopts Deconstruction theory to analyze the text to dismantle these two prominent binary oppositions in this novel. And it questions the scholars' comments on the nostalgia proneness and the loss of Rip's self-identity in this novel, so as to prove that the binary oppositions in a text rather than two strictly separated categories are in fact mobile and impossible to be completely separated, that is, a text's meaning is undecidable, and puts forward a new interpretation for this work.

Keywords: Deconstruction theory, Conservatism, Reformation, Self-identity, *Rip Van Winkle*

1. Introduction

In this novel, the deep sleep of Rip Van Winkle (Rip) for two decades serves as a watershed. Before that, people in the village embrace conservative thoughts and live a comfortable countryside life. And on the one hand, Rip gains self-identity among his neighbors and in his simple life; on the other hand, hen-pecked Rip loses self-identity under the oppression of his wife. After that, as the country gains independence, villagers are eager to participate in politics and follow the torrent of reform. For one thing, because of the death of Dame Van Winkle, Rip “gets his neck out of the yoke of matrimony” (Charles E. Bressler, 2003, p.247) and regains his freedom and gradually finds his identity. For another, everything around Rip has changed, but his mind is still in the past. When he returns to the village after a 20-year sleep, he is initially confused about his identity. Next, this paper is going to interpret these two pairs of binary opposition.

2. Conservatism Versus Innovation

2.1 Conservatism in *Rip Van Winkle*

The predominant binary opposition in the novel is conservatism versus innovation. Some critics comment that *Rip Van Winkle* reveals a nostalgic and conservative attitude. The novel begins with a description of the beautiful scenery of the mountain village, located “at the foot of these fairy mountains,” “swelling up to a noble height, and lording it over the surrounding country,” witnessing “change in the magical hues and shapes of these mountains,” “like a crown of glory” (Charles E. Bressler, 2003, p.236). These fascinating words like “fairy” “noble” “magical” “crown” imply that this is a place like a paradise. In this novel, there is a simple and peaceful atmosphere in the countryside, a leisurely and lazy pace of life, seclusion like arcadia, and ignorance of the outside world. “This is not only a kind of closure in the living state, but also a hint of serious conservatism in concept of the villagers” (Shao Xuesong, 2015, p.65-70). Although the scenery here is beautiful, it can be seen that the villagers are out of touch with reality. This kind of simple rural life like a “paradise” reflects villagers' complacency to the traditional rural life and their conservative attitude of reluctant to change.

“If left to himself, he would have whistled life away, in perfect contentment” (Charles E. Bressler, 2003, p.237), which shows Rip's old-fashioned attitude and unwillingness to change his leisurely lifestyle. In this novel, it never crosses Rip's mind to change the status quo, even if he is overwhelmed by his wife's criticism of his idleness. Instead, he chooses to escape and seek peace in nature. In this novel, he cannot bear his wife's nagging so that he goes hunting in the forest, away from civilization, away from the worldly noise, back to the nature, and sleeps for 20 years to escape social change, which reflects his conservatism. After two decades in a deep sleep, Rip is at a loss to know what's going on and misses his old friends and life. When Rip finds out what happened in the past, he “resumes his old walks and habits”

and “tells his story to every stranger that arrives at Dr. Doolittle’s hotel” (Charles E. Bressler, 2003, p.247), which to some extent, also mirrors his nostalgic and conservative attitude, unwilling to accept new things.

2.2 Reformation in *Rip Van Winkle*

At first glance, this novel shows conservative thoughts. Scratch under the surface, however, and you will see that this novel also reveals a reformative side. Twenty years later, the villagers actively advocate and practice democratic politics, embrace strong independent ideas, fight for their own rights, and are keen on voting and Party competition. Many new terms emerge, like “rights of citizens—elections—members of congress—liberty” (Charles E. Bressler, 2003, p.243), which reflects people's progress in politics. When Rip finally finds out what has happened in the last two decades, he makes friends with his younger generation, “with whom he soon grew into great favor” (Charles E. Bressler, 2003, p. 246), laments the end of tyranny and enjoys the freedom of his life. After being accepted into the village and reintegrated into the village life, he “prefers making friends among the rising generation” (Charles E. Bressler, 2003, p.246). From this point of view, Rip Van Winkle is not “the laggard of the times,” as some people think, but “the true adherent and follower of the times” (Yuan Yinru & Li Ying, 2012, p.46-48). Today, Rip prefers to make friends with young people who embrace new ideas. “He is no longer an alien but an elder in the village with a certain sense of participation and history” (Chen Jianqiong, 2015, p.55-56), which reflects his willingness to integrate into this era of reformation and accept new ideas. In addition, his wife's belief in “labor as a virtue and the accumulation of wealth as the main goal” (Ma Jun, 2008, p.157), which is dominant in the New England area at that time. The identification and pursuit of the rational utilitarian culture is permeated with the village that is brimming with new rapid changes.

Generally speaking, nostalgia does exist in this work, but there is no denying the existence of innovation. In other words, the whole novel is not conservative and nostalgic as the traditional perception, but “a true representation and a deep exploration of the transition between the old and the new, the reformation and the conservatism that is taking place in the American society at that time”(Shao Xuesong, 2015, p.65-70).

3. Loss of Self-identity Versus Identification of Self-identity

3.1 Loss of Self-identity of Rip

Another major binary opposition in the novel lies in the identification and loss of self-identity. Self-identity emphasizes the psychological and physical experience of the self and takes the self as the core. Many people think Rip is at a loss about his identity in the novel. As a husband, father and farmer, he does not identify with these three identities and is incompetent. As a husband, he is always scolded by his wife for his idleness. As a father, “his

children are as ragged and wild as if they belong to nobody” (Charles E. Bressler, 2003, p.237). As a farmer, “his patrimonial estate has dwindled away under his management” (Charles E. Bressler, 2003, p.237). After 20 years of deep sleep, Rip is at a loss for the changes in the village. At this time, Rip Van Winkle has doubts about his identity, not only about his physical signs, appearance and other changes in physical functions but also his inability to change his identity from “a subject of His Majesty George the Third” to “a free citizen of the United States” (Charles E. Bressler, 2003, p.246) . Especially in the face of his son sitting on a tree with the same name and similar appearance and spirit, he is faced with a huge confusion and choice in self-cognition:

“God knows”, exclaims he, at his wit’s end; “I’m not myself—I’m somebody else—that’s me yonder—no—that’s somebody else, gets into my shoes—I am myself last night, but I fall asleep on the mountain, and they’ve changed my gun, and everything’s changed, and I’m changed, and I can’t tell what’s my name, or who I am!” (Charles E. Bressler, 2003, p.245)

After undergoing great changes, Rip loses his identity completely. His home has become dilapidated, the architecture of the village has changed, and people's clothing style has become different. He doesn't know all the people in the village, and what saddens him most is that even his “sole domestic adherent” dog Wolf doesn't know him (Charles E. Bressler, 2003, p.238).

3.2 Identification of Self-identity of Rip

However, we can also trace Rip's self-identity in the novel. As a neighbor, he finds his identity, “he would never even refuse to assist a neighbor in the roughest toil” (Charles E. Bressler, 2003, p.237). Even to a strange old man, “though rather shy and distrustful of this new acquaintance, Rip complies with his usual alacrity, and mutually relieving one another” (Charles E. Bressler, 2003, p.240). He has won a great popularity in the village, gaining a sense of equality and identity. In addition, Rip Van Winkle finds his own identity in his simple tradition of being happy and content with life. “He would rather starve on a penny than work for a pound” (Charles E. Bressler, 2003, p.237). The honest and simple Rip Van Winkle, who do not change his lifestyle regardless of his wife's abuse, is content with his nonmaterial, non-utilitarian work ethic. Rip has no position at all in his family. In order to seek his status and identity, Rip “takes gun in hand and stroll away into the woods” and “is after his favorite sport of squirrel shooting” (Charles E. Bressler, 2003, p.239), from which he gets spiritual relaxation. It could be said that in the mountains and among his neighbors, he realizes his identity. After sleeping for 20 years, he struggles to establish his identity amid the heckling. Out of bewilderment and knowing everything, he identifies himself with a new identity: “a happy father, a happy widower, a free citizen of a bourgeois republic, and a respected senior” (Nan-nan L., 2019, p.5). In the end, Rip realizes his self-identity.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, Washington Irving's description of the profound changes that take place in Rip and his village before and after he falls asleep for 20 years reveals the binary oppositions of conservatism versus reformation, and loss of self-identity versus identification of self-identity. Rip has his conservative side, sticking to his old way of life; at the same time, he is willing to follow the changes of the times and makes friends with young people, showing his innovative side. In addition, Rip loses his identity in family life, but finds it among his neighbors. After dismantling these two pairs of binary oppositions by means of Deconstruction Theory, the stereotypical cognition is subverted and readers are provided with different interpretations of the text.

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