**Rites of Passage in Washington Irving’s Stories**

Andreea Popescu[[1]](#footnote-2)

**Abstract**: In his short stories Washington Irving explores human nature in limit situations, focusing on the initiation in the unknown of the otherworld. Both *Rip Van Winkle* and *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* are instances in which the protagonist is challenged into entering the supernatural dimension and he has to accomplish an existential rite of passage. Such stories represent the analysis that the author makes of the American mentality in the colonial period when reality and imagination were two different realms. In the guise of the Headless Horseman or the crew of captain Hendrik Hudson one should see the fascination which the fantastic had on man and his success or failure in assimilating it.

**Keywords**: initiation, ritual, fantastic, satire, passage.

In the tradition of American literature the name of Washington Irving is often associated with the passage between the Enlightenment and the American Renaissance. Though he was interested in history as much as in literature Washington Irving chooses to present the reality of the frontier life in a way that combined the Romantic glow and the sensibility of a poet. Much of the work of Irving should be analyzed from the perspective of European culture because he spent long periods of time in different European countries whose traditions influenced him deeply. Yet, he preserved the American style of writing and originality about the life of the first colonies. Many of his stories deal with the daily activities of the Dutch colonies, but also with the life on the prairies and the untamed west. Irving should be considered the first American author to have gained his life by writing and the choice of his subjects was a definite proof of it. The originality of his themes is seen in the style he uses and the symbolic connotations of his stories.

One of his first successes was the *Sketch Book* attributed to his literary alter ego Geoffrey Crayon and which knew great popularity in America. The stories contained in the book tell of the life of the frontier and they depict it in a satirical way as if Irving were laughing at his own creation. The technique of assuming a literary mask was not something new in the age, Cooper had done it before with Natty Bumppo, but the mise-en-abime combined with satire was certainly new. The mise-en-abyme functions at both the level of the stories which mirror each other, and the level of the author and his work. Crayon is used to make a sketch, thus the author becomes part of a literary rite of passage allowing him to identify himself with the work itself. Moreover, the concept of drawing is like portraying an imaginary world out of another imaginary world as the vision of the writer already changed the reality around.

Life on the frontier got a different connotation with Irving. According to tradition the frontier was that imaginary line which separated civilization from wilderness, a line which once crossed offered initiation and knowledge beyond the limited space of the community. In the Puritan tradition the wilderness meant a place of danger, of the unknown trapping man in the labyrinth of his own fears. In all myths and folk tales the ritual of initiation presupposes three stages which once completed provide the protagonist with access to the other world. The first stage is the departure which coincides with the wish of the main character to leave the common world in order to discover the unknown existing beyond the limit. The limit can be physical or spiritual, yet in both cases it challenges the hero into passing over his condition and leaving. It is the moment when he proves that he is the chosen one, the one that can assume the challenge and accomplish the mission. The protagonist is different from the rest of the community due to his qualities and habits. The second stage represents the adventure proper, the special event that tests the hero and during which he changes morally and spiritually. The test always presupposes learning a lesson and acquiring or strengthening one’s moral values. The third stage is that of the return which is the most difficult because the otherworld fascinates and leaving it implies moral strength and volition. Much of the evolution of the hero depends on the way he manages to return and apply the moral lesson he has learned for the community. The return coincides with telling a story by which the protagonist completes his cosmic cycle of initiation.

In the stories of Irving the situation is reversed because the classical pattern of quest and initiation is changed in a satirical way. The two main stories of the *Sketch Book* are *Rip Van Winkle* and *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* which both display elements of initiation in the limits of human nature. Both have a protagonist who is marginal to society and who undergoes an experience that changes his position and destiny for ever. Both Rip and Ichabod are instances of human behavior that are different from the rest of the community and therefore have the chance of an exceptional fate. Yet, Irving presents them in a satirical way, though with the purpose of exposing the hypocrisy of the community and not to present them in an ironical way. In both stories one witnesses the transformation of the two protagonists in the mirror in which the community reflects itself. Their experience will change the society and themselves as there is a double mirroring which occurs in the stories.

In the story about Rip Van Winkle the pattern is that of deliberately plunging in the unknown of the otherworld. Apparently, the story is about the life in a pleasant village lying at the foot of Catskill Mountains, and it features the kindly Rip Van Winkle, a henpecked husband who loathes profitable work. One autumn day he goes to the woods with his dog wandering away from his home and wife. He has a meeting with a strange man wearing old clothes and he accepts to drink from his liquor. Falling asleep he remains there for 20 years and on waking up he returns to a completely changed world. The elements of this fantastic story should be decoded in a symbolical way. Rip’s sleep occurs in a period when nature prepares for winter. Falling asleep is like a small death and it coincides with the falling in the world beyond, a sort of descent downwards similar to a spiritual regression. The exploration of the unknown is done unconsciously in a dream, but it implies a spiritual change because man returns to the roots of his nature and begins to understand them better. From this perspective Rip should not be considered a simple-minded person, the object of jokes of the village. He possesses a wisdom that the others cannot understand since they have lost the innocence which once connected man with his roots and instincts.

Meeting the Dutch crew playing nine pins is the chance given to Rip to have a glimpse in the secrets of the unknown, a fact that is available only for the elected. Different from the majority of folk tales the story of Rip emphasizes the union between man and the supernatural in the most common way possible, showing that the protagonist already belonged to the fantastic world before being called there. Rip goes to the woods in order to be free from his nagging wife and because the woods are the place where he feels at home and at ease. In a symbolic perspective the forest is the place of imagination and of unexpected encounters. On the other side there is the community which is the place of reason and stability. Rip chooses the woods, therefore the place of adventures and imagination instead of the predictable and monotonous village. He fully adopts the rules of the otherworld which he considers as his own. The game of nine pins which the crew of presumably captain Hendrik Hudson is playing offers another interesting connotation to the story. Games carry a ritual meaning which transforms them into tests about the moral value of man. Any such game can be decoded in a mythological and a psychological way. In a mythological perspective a game is the equivalent of the descent in the primordial darkness of chaos, in the stillness that precedes the act of creation performed by the gods. Participating in the game brings the light out of which the cosmos will appear. In his book, *Homo ludens,* Johan Huizinga analyzes the ritual functions of games. Games provide man with “sacred knowledge, a secret and magical science as for him any knowledge lies in a direct relationship with the very cosmic order.” (Huizinga, 180) Though Rip only watches the game of the phantom crew he becomes part of the initiation because he accepts to be there, deliberately abandoning his previous life habits. As in any folk tale illumination comes after the protagonist decides to leave behind all the links connecting him to the common world. In order to be successful in the possible change one has to agree to be different so that starting afresh he could become the new man that he wants to be. Rip proves that he is part of the otherworld as he does not put any questions about the people playing the game and moreover he discreetly drinks the potion as he believes it is already his. The fascinating way in which he integrates himself in the supernatural demonstrates that he has returned in a way home as a mythical return to the origins.

Identity is another element that should be discussed. After having woken up from his ritual sleep, Rip goes back to the village where he is eventually recognized and occupies his place in the community in the same manner as before. In all folk tales and myths the rites of passage imply a deep change in the protagonist’s self. They involve crossing the threshold, a symbolical gesture which puts to test the hero’s valor. They reenact a spiritual event which marks a person’s transition from one status to another. The story of Rip coincides with the three part structure of a rite of passage, namely separation, transition and reincorporation. In his book *The Rites of Passage* Arnold Van Gennep mentions that in the first phase people withdraw from their current status and they prepare to move from one place to another. In the case of Rip the episode would be leaving the village and going to the woods, or in social terms abandoning his position of husband and becoming a free man. The transition stage or liminal as Gennep calls it is the period between the states during one has left the former status, but has not reached yet the next moment of transformation. At this point the person is at the threshold of experiences, it is the point when falling on one side or another can be dangerous and failure can follow. Gennep considers that the attributes of such liminal personae are often ambiguous. In the case of Rip sleep is the transition stage, a sleep which in ritual terms identifies with a spiritual cleaning, a purification from the influences of the common world and a gate towards transformation.

In a ritual interpretation sleep stands for the act of letting yourself assimilated by the primal forces which take the person to an inceptive stage out of which he can emerge as a new personality. As a rite of passage sleep is also the means to reach a superior level of understanding and a deeper insight into the mysteries of the unknown. Since reason does not function all that remains is imagination helping man to recreate his personality. The third stage is the reincorporation as Gennep names it, a stage during which the passage is consummated by the ritual subject. After completing the last stage and acquired or strengthened the new identity, the person can return to society. In the case of Rip the rite of passage presupposes abandoning the false mask of a member of the community and willingly integrating in nature and the universal spirit of the world. Sleep is a cleaning instrument because the protagonist needs to shake off all the aspects of reality which kept him locked in the world. The return to the village is like a genuine return from the dead, but again it is Rip who has the advantage while the community is opaque to his transformation. Irving’s satire resides with the people of the village who are unable to go beyond their limited vision and thus they miss the initiation. The story Rip tells, should have opened their eyes towards another reality. Yet, they continue living in the same habitual way as before. The attitude the community has makes Rip believe that he has had an exceptional experience, yet he ends up a solitary man. The solitude he undergoes is a sign of marginality and lack of communication with the others. His idleness is a special feature too. During his stay in the village Rip spends his time at the inn playing with the children to whom he gives toys and tells stories. He fulfils the role of the donator, the one who in ritual terms opens the path towards initiation for the potential heroes around. The donator is a positive cosmic function, allowing the hero to cross the threshold of the adventure. It is interesting that in the case of Rip the donator is the protagonist himself who in a double way offers material benefits to the innocent like himself and tells a moral story to the adults around him. In folk tales the donator is exterior to the hero, appearing only when the latter needs advice or some magical objects.

In Irving’s story Rip cumulates two ritual functions, yet the irony is that he does not use them as he continues to enjoy life as before. Another role which can be attributed to him is that of the observer, the one who being in a marginal position can see very well the vices and weaknesses of the others. Generally speaking, the observer is the character that has moral and spiritual powers over the others. In Rip’s case it is more like a mirror which is placed before the villagers and in which they can reflect. Anticipating Emerson’s theory about transparence, Irving suggests that only a mirror which reflects can change the identity of the on-looker. The mirror functions in two ways: generally and individually. In the first case it is the community mirror that refracts instead of reflecting, while in the second case Rip himself sees his image in his son and grandson. The temporal line is the theme to be discussed at this point. Time is treated in an original way, different from the chronological tradition of the classical novels. It is more like the subjective time of personal memories, a sort of combination between the time of one’s personal life and the historical time of the nation. During his sleep time is suspended for Rip because he falls in the trance of the supernatural time which can not be measured by common units. Rip thus belongs to two temporal dimensions, the supernatural and the natural. In any folk tale time is suspended once the protagonist enters the fantastic dimension as actually he loses all contacts with reality and it depends on him if he assimilates the unknown or is rejected by it. In the case of Rip the fact that he is called by his name is equally important. Being in the mountains Rip hears his name shouted and without wondering at how the stranger knows his name he follows. The situation proves that he was already part of the fantastic though he did not know it. Calling someone his name shows great power from the part of the caller who thus controls the other and gives him a ritual identity. By giving names one can create a whole new world and become a maker himself. The stranger calling Rip is one of Hudson’s spirits and he already has magical powers humans do not have. Calling Rip and actually asking him to join him, he includes the human in the sacred space of the spirit governed other world. The means by which Rip is integrated in the fantastic is the fact that he helps the stranger on the way to the hollow where the game is played. In ritual terms the stranger functions as the instigator, the one who challenges the protagonist by setting tests and obstacles before him. In Rip’s case the instigator rewards the hero for his help. Thus, the story becomes a tale about the human who is allowed in the world of the spirits and is rewarded for his kindness. Helping the stranger Rip fulfils the ritual and passes the test.

In *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* the story is about a different type of initiation, a reversed initiation as the protagonist Ichabod Crane confronts with a situation that has a negative result and ending. The story is set in the valley of Sleepy Hollow which has the reputation of being haunted by ghosts and it spreads a supernatural atmosphere which pervades the imagination of its inhabitants. The narrator presents it as a place of utter calmness and peaceful life, but it is only an ironical statement as the valley is often visited by the specter of the Headless Horseman, probably the ghost of a Hessian trooper who had his head shot away by a cannon ball during the war. From the very beginning the narrator is eager to set the magical background of the events as if to prepare the reader for some extraordinary events. Different from the story of Rip the *Legend* carries more ambiguous connotations as it is a more intellectual narrative given the activity as school teacher of the protagonist. At the same time the rites of passage differ because they do not imply the whole circle. The Headless Horseman himself is an ambiguous character. Apparently its source of inspiration was the German folk tale about the wild huntsman, a phantom that would chase intruders through the woods. Irving modified him by adding more features. Symbolically speaking, he accomplishes the role of the guardian of the threshold, a cosmic function which selects the ones that are allowed to enter the domain of the fantastic. The guardian is an already initiated person having the experience of the otherworld. The horseman guards the entrance to the forest as this space represents the place of the imaginary and of the unknown. It is the labyrinth in which the novice loses himself just like Ichabod loses his path in the forest at night when he meets the ghost. In mythical terms he forces the entrance to the otherworld which is a hubris punished by his being taken away to the land of the dead. The hybris is the mythical imposture, the false mask worn by the protagonist, which eventually turns against him.

In Irving’s story there are several instances of imposture which are visible at different levels. At the social level Ichabod tries to become the son-in-law of the rich Van Tassel family. In his dreams of power he imagines himself the master of the land and the husband of the beautiful Katrina. The social imposture is most ironical as Ichabod is a cultivated man who should have realized that he could be only a countryside school teacher. One could call this a cultural imposture combined with vanity and false glory. Since Ichabod quotes from Puritan writings, but believes in magic and superstition, he is a mocking image of the elect function of the Puritan leaders. The antinomy of contrasts is a source of satire just like the hymns sung by Crane in the forest during the night are a source of ridicule among the villagers. The villagers themselves practice their own kind of imposture. In order to frighten Crane Brom Bones and his fellows pretend that they are specters chasing him in the woods. In mythical terms a non-initiated cannot assume the identity of a superior entity because thus the balance of the world is broken. Challenging the unknown is a quality worthy only of a hero. In symbolical terms the role of Brom Bones is that of the instigator as he makes Crane enter the forest and have the ultimate encounter with the horseman. Yet, he is a false instigator because he cannot raise himself to the level of insight that such a cosmic function presupposes. The false mask which he wears links him more to the role of the trickster, a negative one since he indirectly causes the disappearance of Ichabod in the end. The trickster is usually the character which by playing games and making fun of others actually helps them to improve morally and spiritually. He stays in the margin observing and mocking at people. Eventually he is unmasked and his game ends. In Irving’s story the trickster wears a double mask, the one of the observer and the one of the impostor as in both cases Brom Bones has an identity to hide. There is also the imposture of the community itself which takes advantage of the selfishness and arrogance of Ichabod in order to play their jokes on him. The satire of Irving is directed towards it too because, being afraid to acknowledge their own limits and guilt, the people of the village choose an outsider as the scapegoat for their mistakes. In mythical terms the scapegoat is the innocent victim for different reasons. It could be a human being, an animal or an effigy of some sort, symbolically representing it. In many folk tales the ritual sacrifice practiced on the scapegoat turns against the people who plot it as they see themselves as they are in the mirror placed before them. In the character of Ichabod the community sees its own weaknesses and fears. The ritual of exorcizing should have been successful if the villagers had had the mind to understand and straighten their behavior. Yet, the shock of recognition does not take place and the revelation is lost. At this point one should say that Irving changes the traditional pattern of folk tales. The protagonist usually manages to convert the community by the story he tells in the end. In this story the rite of passage is not finished, the third stage of reincorporation is not present. There is an endless transition which emphasizes the lost chance of the community to change.

Irving’s satire is more acid here than in the story about Rip because there the people of the community eventually decide to follow Rip’s example, hoping that they will also have the chance he had. In the case of Ichabod the mirror is opaque and it blocks the reflection, namely the knowledge a successful revelation should have brought. On the contrary the people of Sleepy Hollow decide to continue their lives as if nothing has happened. Initiation is not possible for them. In a way they act like the horseman in the sense that they preserve the darkness around the place. Ichabod himself is a trickster, a false one again because instead of motivating the community to change, he leaves it as it used to be before. Thus, one should say that it is a reversed initiation because instead of revelation the mirror transmits opacity. From a ritual perspective the story displays a structure of a deliberate reversal of symbolism, namely in the sense that all the concepts attributed to initiation are deconstructed. It is not simply the work of Irving to deride a mentality and a whole age, it is as if the reality of the narrative made him adopt such a view. Considering Ichabod as the scapegoat of the community, he should have known that going alone in the woods meant a lot of danger and much sorrow due to a potential meeting with the horseman. Yet, he goes there no matter the cost. The ritual pattern is changed, as the protagonist goes blindly to his own death. Self-sacrifice is a feature of the civilizing hero, but Ichabod is not such a character. The way he delivers his classes in school portrays a man bored by his profession. Irving offers the alternative to the folk tales about good by making evil win the game. Deconstruction applies very well in this context.

The role given to evil emphasizes the quality of a fantastic story that the *Legend* has. Evil can function at its maximum potential during the night or in the shadows as it cannot be seen and exposed to the light. The mission of the civilizing hero is to put an end to this evil, a situation which does not happen in this story. The sleepiness of the hollow is the cause of the drowsy atmosphere. It is a place of magic which the other world has already taken possession of. It is like a curse which lingers on the village and makes it close to any exterior change. The limit between reality and fantastic is annulled as if the rite of passage has already been denied. It is impossible to see beyond the veil closing on the village. Irving analyzes human behavior in limit situations. Confronting with the limit is a ritual by which man has to show how worthy he is to assume a certain moral task. He confronts with his own self as that is the most difficult obstacle he meets. Rip has no problem in accepting the challenge since in his case the experience is not real as he never asks himself about the vision he has. It is the best sort of initiation when the protagonist fluidly crosses the limit to the otherworld. Ichabod’s case is more complex. The fear he has before the horseman is natural and human, the image of evil frightens and has a destructive effect. Yet, Ichabod proves that he is unfinished symbolically, he lacks the necessary moral values needed to have a special adventure. The meeting takes place at night also to show that his self is not yet prepared for such a meeting. His intellect and culture have nothing to do with the revelation because the soul and not the mind are at stake here. Ichabod makes the wrong choice; he uses the wrong instruments in the most inappropriate places. Singing religious hymns in the forest cannot defeat evil.

Irving offers a lesson on mythical culture, a sort of guide of how not to deal with the fantastic. Like in a mirror the story of Ichabod is an illumination for the reader who learns about the correct way of managing in limit situations. At the same time it is obviously a satire on the Puritan convictions and the ridiculous old-fashioned provincialism of the American society. Both of Irving’s stories carry the mark of disapproval that the author has about his predecessors. Thus, Irving opens the road for a different mentality in his texts, not only by adopting as alter-ego an imaginary person, but by challenging a whole pattern of thinking and behavior. His stories share both in reality and in the fantastic with the appropriate measure of mystery and suspense. Both Hendrik Hudson and the Headless Horseman rule over the community and the reader in equally fascinating ways.

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1. Andreea Popescu is Lecturer in the English Department of the University of Bucharest. She holds a PhD in medieval studies and comparative literature. Currently she delivers lectures and seminars in British and American literature and civilisation as well as seminars in translation studies. She has published many articles in national and international reviews and collective volumes. She has also published a book on learning English for children and translated several books for well-known Romanian publishing houses. She is a member of the International Arthurian Society. E-mail: andreea\_popescu9@yahoo.com [↑](#footnote-ref-2)