

Sleeping As a Way to Cure: “Rip Van Winkle” Revisited

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Abstract:

“Rip Van Winkle” tells a story that Rip finds his village changes completely after sleeping in the mountains for 20 years. Since the story is related to the establishment of the USA, previous researchers paid more attention to the relationship between the text and history. This paper, from the perspective of psychoanalysis, sorts out the repeating objects of the uncanny, discusses them to examine the personality grade of Rip, and finally proposes a new chronological sequence to understand the novel. Additionally, through dreaming, Rip successfully connects himself with females again to cure his trauma of failing to adapt the new world. However, the final identity construction does not necessarily mean this novel is a comedy.

Keywords:

“Rip Van Winkle”, Psychoanalysis, Identity

1. Introduction

Washington Irving’s novel “Rip Van Winkle” (The following titles of the novel are abbreviated as “Rip”) has long been considered the originator of the modern short story (Xue 83) [1]. Rip, an obedient “henpecked husband” (Irving 12) (All the citations of “Rip Van Winkle” are from Irving, Washington. Rip Van Winkle. New York: Penguin Classics, 2016. The following citations are just marked with its page number.) scrambles to the Kaatskill mountains to escape from Dame Van Winkle, but he has fallen asleep. When he wakes up, he finds himself having slept for 20 years, during which a new country, the US, has been established. At first, Rip feels uncomfortable and strange, but he later gets used and tells his incredible experience to villagers. In “Rip,” Washington Irving showed readers the life of common people confronted with great political changes in a mysterious style, capturing the interests of researchers.

Researchers have already explored “Rip” from various perspectives, including the writing style (Plung 65-80) [2], feminism (Xue 83-87) [1], historicism (Rubin-Dorsky 393-406) [3], post-colonialism (Baga 113-26) [4], etc. Among them, identity is one of keywords. However, they made more efforts to explain the identity issue of Rip by historical writing background, failing to depict the process of the psychological changes of the protagonist. For example, to discuss the atypical nostalgia, Liu Kun

has presumed that the sleeping of twenty years is Rip's solution to escaping tyranny (Liu 78-103) [5], but this presumption is lack of specific explanation. Thus, this paper, from the perspective of psychoanalysis, aims at sorting out the developing process of Rip's psyche to fill the gap in current studies. Section 2 is the theoretical framework of psychoanalysis.

In section 3, the first part of this paper would analyse the repeating objects in the text to examine the uncanny of Rip. The second part would discuss how these paired objects reflect the desires and repression of Rip to delineate the main grade of his personality in different periods. The last part would portray the developing process of Rip's identity to propose another possible chronological order to understand "Rip." In the end, this paper attributes the superficially harmonious ending to Rip's rebuilding connection with females.

2. Theoretical Framework

Psychoanalysis, namely, is the analysis of the psyche, which is the deep structure of the mind (Zhu 94) [6]. There are three essential parts for psychoanalysis: three structures of conscious experience, three structures of personality, and "uncanny." The conscious experience consists of conscious (Cs), preconscious (Pcs), and unconscious (Ucs). "Being conscious" is "resting on the most immediate and certain character to the external world" (Freud 4) [7], so Cs are transitory with the changing world. Ucs refer to those not capable of being conscious, and desires are deeply hidden there. However, not all Ucs are latent, and the ones that can become Cs again are called Pcs. Dreams are the perfect fulfillment of desires (Lanselle 8) [8].

The three structures of personality: id, ego, and superego, play an important role in psychoanalysis theory. Regarding that Cs combine physical and mental world, Freud put forward the ego, which follows the principle of reality and "controls the approaches to motility — that is, to the discharge of excitation into the external world" (Freud 8) [7]. Id is one grade in the ego, driven by instincts and impulses, following the principle of pleasure to satisfy any desire. Another grade in the ego is the superego, related to Cs as everyone needs to obey some social and moral rules (Zhu 95) [6]. The id believes in the principle of pleasure and the superego has to follow the principle of morality, which might lead to turbulence and arouse unsatisfying experience. Then, to stay harmonious, the ego has to mediate the conflicts by repression, which is defensive to prevent incompatible ideas (Boag 75) [9].

Based on repression from the structures of personality, Freud brought up "uncanny," which refers to the fear when someone feels familiar things strange or strange things familiar. The uncanny is something "secretly familiar, which has undergone repression and then returned from it" [7]. The writer attempted to conclude that the uncanny is a psychological state where someone tries to repress their fear into Ucs but this experience might be aroused occasionally. As a result, they would fall into the circulation of fearing and repressing repeatedly. Thus, important features of the uncanny are fear, familiarity, and repetition.

To summarize the above introduction of psychoanalysis, there are two keywords: dream and repetition. Dreaming is a pivotal channel combining the three structures of conscious experience with three structures of personality. Repetition is the consequence of fear of inability to satisfy desires and instincts, and this hidden fear is called "uncanny." Dream reflects the desires and instincts of the id while repetition is

a way to repress these incompatible ideas. Once someone has neither dream nor repetition, they might get the grade of the superego. Coincidentally, both dream and repetition can be found in “Rip.”

Thus, from the perspective of psychoanalysis, this paper would like to answer the following questions. What are the representations of dream and repetition in “Rip”? What desires are reflected in Rip’s dream? What does Rip want to repress through repetition? “Rip” has been long regarded as a comedy, so does the protagonist reach the personality grade of superego? How is the development of Rip’s identity?

3. Main Text

Most of previous studies followed the superficial chronological order to understand the story, but there is another version. The story can be divided into four parts: background information, before the fighting, in the mountains, and after the fighting, and we refer to the last three as Sequence A, B, and C respectively, and the sequence C can be further divided into C1 and C2, which depends on whether Rip takes in the occurrence of the fighting. Previous studies took for granted this textual order, A-B-C, and accepted time travel. However, this section would demonstrate the chronological order to be C1-B-A-C2.

3.1. Repeating Objects in “Rip Van Winkle”

The repeating objects are represented in two ways: make familiar things strange and make strange things familiar. The former kind contains the natural environment, gun, dogs, and villagers. In sequence C, on waking up, Rip notices a manly eagle “wheeling aloft” (pp. 18) in the mountains, while the animal flying in the sky is a crow “winging its solitary” (pp. 18) in sequence A. It is widely acknowledged that eagles are the symbol of the US. Another strange point is the mountain stream. In sequence C, “the dry bed of a mountain torrent” (pp. 18) changed into a mountain stream. The main difference is whether there is water, which was considered necessary for salvation (Cocoris 8) [10]. These strange differences expose the Ucs that the new country carries a sin and needs salvation.

The second strange thing is the gun. The old and dust-encrusted gun in sequence C is a “clean well oiled fowling piece” (pp. 18) in sequence A. Undoubtedly, guns stand for dominant force. The third strangeness is about the dogs. The average lifespan of dogs is from ten to thirteen, so the dog in sequence C should not be Wolf in sequence A. Wolf is an adherent of Rip, and “every great man has its adherents” (pp. 14). Therefore, it is reasonable to say that the malfunction of the gun and the death of Wolf indicate the ambition and desire to be dominant and great are repressed.

The last foreignness is from villagers, which is directly narrated in the text: “The very character of the people seemed changed” (pp. 20) from tranquil to disputing. Once realizing that villagers are not the same as his impression, the uncanny of Rip is so foregrounded that he is “somewhat dismayed” (pp. 21). People are products of their society, and different society has different default principles of morality. As a result, this unfamiliarity makes Rip reconfirm that he has to adjust himself to the new principle of morality.

The latter kind includes inn and hotel, portrait, children and rising generation, and his son. In Sequence A, every time being accused by Dame Van Winkle, Rip would go to an inn to “console himself” (pp. 14). People gather in this inn and organize their club to gossip or discuss public issues profoundly. In Sequence C, a “rickety

[rickety]” (pp. 20) hotel, “mended with petticoats,” takes the place of the “perpetual” (pp. 14) club. The inn, or hotel, is a container of many strange but familiar things. What Rip has “long groaned” (pp. 24) is “petticoat government” (pp. 24). Besides, the portrait in the hotel is incomprehensible: the color of the cloths has changed from red to blue and buff; the hand-held from sceptre to sword; the man in the portrait from George the Third to General Washington, despite not changing the appearance.

The second and third pairs are the offspring of the village: children and rising generation, and the son of Rip. In sequence A, the children will surround Rip once he goes “dodging about the village” (pp. 13). In sequence C, Rip is also surrounded by the younger. The difference is that children are playing with him while the rising generation reverences him as a patriarch. In addition, the son of Rip in Sequence C is also strange but familiar; he is the repetition of his father. Once looking at his son, Rip thinks he is “a precise counterpart of himself” (pp. 22), which makes him fall into complete confusion and begin to “doubted[doubt] his own identity” (pp. 22).

To sum up, the uncanny is constituted by repeating objects: the familiarity with strangeness and strangeness with familiarity. On the one hand, unfamiliarity in the natural environment reflects Rip’s divergent Ucs about the new country. And from the analysis of the gun and dogs, these Ucs might be the very ones repressed. Finally, villagers of changed characters thoroughly expose the fear of Rip when he confronts the principle of morality. On the other hand, the familiar combinations from the strange hotel constitute the uncanny for Rip, so he exclaims “I can’t tell what’s my name, or who I am!” (pp. 22)

3.2. Desires and Repression Behind the Objects

Sense of Identity is significantly related to personality traits (Lounsbury 51) [11]. To tell who Rip is, it is necessary to sort out the grade of personality he represents in different sequences. First, it is apparent that the personality of Rip is mainly represented as the id in Sequence B. At the beginning of this sequence, Rip scrambles in the mountains “unconsciously” (pp. 15). Ucs accords with the id. Then, he follows “his favorite sport of squirrel shooting” (pp. 15). In American culture, squirrel is a symbol of change and adaptability (“Squirrel Symbolism & Spiritual Meaning”) [12]. The action to destroy squirrels exposes the desire of Rip to defend himself from changing and reject to adapt himself.

Second, “before the revolutionary change” is Sequence A, where the grade of personality is mainly represented as the ego. When introducing the composition of Rip, it is mentioned that his temper is the consequence of “a curtain lecture” (pp. 12), which shows that the behaviors of Rip do not match his instincts. Instead, he repressed his instincts to be gentle to adapt himself to what Dame Van Winkle lectures and what the society of village expects. Another special feature of Rip in Sequence B is that he is willing to “attend to any body’s business but his own” (pp. 13), which is similar to “the adolescent who refuses to grow up and gets away with” (Ferguson 530) [13] his family. Adolescence is an important period of socializing. Attempting to balance the principles of morality and pleasure, Rip would make use of cathartic therapeutic method (Vives 1009) [14] by going fishing or to the inn to repress this tiredness. Thus, the representative personality in Sequence A is the ego.

In Sequence C, the personality structure is more complicated and can be divided into C1 and C2. On returning to the village, Rip gives his exclamation: “Who I am!” (pp. 22) It obviously shows that he is in his ego, which would feel painful due to the

imbalance of mind and external world. In sequence C2, Rip adapts himself to the strange society: “he took his place once more on the bench at the inn door and was revered as one of the patriarchs” (pp. 24). The inn is the hotel “mended with petticoats” (pp. 20), but the narrator sticks its original name: inn. Besides, “petticoat” refers to a costume as a noun, and equals to “female” as an adjective. Combining these two meanings together, it is “female costume.” As mentioned above, “petticoat government” (pp. 24) is what Rip has “long groaned” (pp. 24), but now he gathered with the rising generation in the inn with petticoat (Yang 76) [15]. In other words, the influence of petticoat government is pervading Sequence C as well, and Rip has learned to get along with it, so it is reasonable to say that Rip reaches his superego in Sequence C2.

In short, the representative grade of Sequence A is the ego; Sequence B, the id; Sequence C1, the ego; Sequence C2, the superego. And the desire of Rip is to blame the new-born country and be a great personage. Repressing the desire finally lead to the trauma. By virtue of this conclusion, it is possible to deal with the identity issue of Rip.

3.3. The Identity Developing Process as Narrative Sequence

According to the conclusion drawn in the last part, this part portrays the developing process of Rip’s identity: anxiety–isolation–constructing–constructed, suggesting another possible chronological sequence of “Rip” to be C1–B–A–C2. In Sequence C1, Rip puts forward his anxiety about his identity by exclaiming “who I am!” (pp. 22). This anxiety troubles Rip after the ego witnesses so many uncanny things. Two roads diverges in front of the ego in sequence C1: retreating to the id or pushing the ego to reach the superego.

The former is a much easier choice and he has tried in Sequence B. The failure of this solution can be supported by a detail. When Rip wakes up at the end of Sequence B, he “found his beard had grown a foot long” (pp. 19), which does not match the scientific calculation. The length of the beard without shaving for 20 years could reach about 2.5 meter. This conflict proves the identity isolation from the society cannot make a difference.

Then, Rip has realized the key point to construct his identity is to cure the trauma by trying the latter harder solution as Sequence A. The trauma of Rip is examined by finding the uncanny, which is a mixture of familiarity and strangeness. Thus, to find the cure of the trauma, the writer turns to something totally different between Sequence C1 and A. The seventh paragraph has mentioned that Rip has children but only introducing his son specifically. His daughter is neglected and his wife is horrible unconsciously. In other words, he has separated himself from females in Sequence C1. Separating from females is cutting off his contact with love. [16] Love can cure spiritual trauma. Thus, dreaming to Sequence A offers Rip a chance to link himself with females again and recollect his memory and love.

After Rip’s returning from Sequence B, his “daughter took him home to live with her” (pp. 23) in Sequence C2, which proved that he regained link with females and finish his identity construction. However, it is worth mentioning another necessary condition for the success is that Rip had “arrived at that happy age when a man can be idle, with impunity” (pp. 24). That is to say, if Rip is not fortunate enough to be at this suitable age, whether he could reach his superego deserves questioning. Hence, the writer disagreed to consider as a complete comedy.

In general, based on the personality of different sequences, this section portrays the identity developing process of Rip as anxiety–isolation–constructing–constructed, which leads to the new chronological sequence: C1–B–A–C2.

4. Conclusions

In conclusion, this paper, from the perspective of psychoanalysis, sorts out the repeating objects of the uncanny, discusses these repeating pairs to examine the personality grade of Rip, and finally proposes a new chronological sequence. Rip might have not slept for 20 years, and the sleeping is not merely his imagination to escape from the revolutionary change but also a process of curing his trauma. By reconnecting himself with females in his imagination, he finally persuades himself to adapt to the new society. The identity developing process of Rip is “anxiety–isolation–constructing–constructed,” leading to the the new chronological sequence. However, time is essential to the success in identity construction, so it might be hasty to consider “Rip” as a comedy.

Conflicts of Interest

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