

# THE U.S. SOCIETY IN TRANSITION: STRUCTURES OF FEELING IN WASHINGTON IRVING'S SELECTED STORIES

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## ABSTRAK

*Abad ke 19 merupakan periode penting dalam sejarah Amerika. Dari segi sosial politik, periode ini sangat menentukan dalam perjalanan bangsa Amerika menjadi super power di kancah global. Hal ini bisa terlihat dari ekspresi-ekspresi kultural (kesasteraan) Amerika yang merespon perubahan sosial politik yang terjadi pada saat itu. Berangkat dari fenomena diatas, tulisan ini mencoba menelaah respon kultural dari seorang penulis kenamaan Amerika yang hidup pada periode awal abad 19—Washington Irving. Tulisan ini menggunakan pendekatan “Structures of Feeling (Struktur Rasa)” dari Raymond William untuk melihat budaya yang dominan dari generasi Amerika pada periode tersebut. Dengan membatasi analisis pada 2 karya (cerpen) utama Washington Irving—The Legend of Sleepy Hollow dan Rip van Winkle—tulisan ini menyimpulkan bahwa: pada cerpen pertama, Irving melihat adanya ketidakstabilan sosial dalam masyarakat Amerika di awal abad 19; sedangkan pada cerpen kedua, Irving menyoroti kecenderungan masyarakat Amerika untuk mengabaikan sejarah masa lalunya.*

**Kata Kunci:** *Residue, Budaya Dominan, tradisi aristokrat, tradisi kapitalis.*

## ABSTRACT

*The 19th century is a significant epoch in American history. This epoch, socially and politically, is decisive for development of America to be a superpower in the globe. There are numbers of cultural expressions (literary works) which respond the social and political changes at the moment. This study attempts to analyze cultural responses from a well-known 19th century American author—Washington Irving. The concept of ‘Structures of Feeling’ is employed to study the dominant culture which the generation on that period presents. Limiting the analysis to two significant works of Washington Irving—the Legend of Sleepy Hollow and Rip van Winkle—the study concludes that: in the first story, Irving portrays social instability of American society in the beginning of 19th century; and in the second story, he dramatizes American public tendency to ignore their past.*

**Keywords:** *Residue, dominant culture, aristocratic tradition, capitalistic tradition.*

## I. Introduction

For those who are fans of the famous DC fictional superhero, Batman, they must be familiar with Gotham City—a city of chaos where Batman attempts to restore justice by fighting villains like the Joker, The Penguin, Catwoman, and many more. However, long before Gotham became pseudonym for New York City. Edwin

Burrow and Mike Wallace (cited in Nigro & Stephen, 2011) states that Washington Irving is the first American author to introduce the name Gotham City and associated it with New York City. Irving used ‘Gotham’ as the setting for one of his stories published in the *Salmagundi Magazine* in 1907. It is believed that Irving was inspired by a place named Gotham in the tale of Robin Hood, where the inhabitants were known for their madness.

The fictional city of Gotham is only one of Irving’s popular legacies in the realm of American culture. Other evidence like the expression ‘the almighty dollar’ (Safire, 2008), and the name of New York Basketball team, ‘New York Knicks’, (Knicks History) are also the living influence of the great American author. Irving is “the first important American author to put to literary use the comic mythology and popular traditions of American character” (Hoffman, 1953). In the early 19th century, Irving is one of the first American authors to begin exploring more material from the New World in his fiction. His short stories, e.g., *Rip Van Winkle* and *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* contains more American themes, although he has many stories that speak about Europe, specifically England, as well.

In this essay two important works of Irving will be examined, *Rip Van Winkle* and *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*. These two short stories contributed greatly to his fame during the 1800s. Both *Rip Van Winkle* and *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* are compiled with other “travels, vignettes, essays, and fictions that shuttles back and forth through time to investigate linkages between present-day Europe and the United States and their shared colonial history” (Sizemore, 2013), in a collection titled *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent* or *The Sketch Book* (1819-1820). Irving’s works are samples of American cultural expression toward the endeavor to define a new American identity. With gothic style narrative, Irving crafts beautiful stories which intend to question and criticize the mainstream social and political situation derived from capital and industrial society in a developing America.

## **II. Theoretical Framework**

To discuss the interconnection of the individual as well as social and political aspects in everyday life, this study employs the concept of ‘Structure of Feeling’ from Raymond Williams, and will demonstrate how Irving creates a ‘Structure of

Feeling' in his works. However, considering the limited space of discussion, this essay will only focus on the two of Irving's short stories: *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* and *Rip Van Winkle*. In both short stories, Irving eloquently depicts the transition of the United States from a colony to an independent Republic. In *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*, he portrays social instability rooted from drastic economic change in the late 18th century, while in *Rip Van Winkle*, Irving dramatizes the ignorance of the U.S public towards its past.

According to Williams (1977), Structure of Feeling is an alternative method to explain the complete human experience. It is a structure constructed from elements "with specific internal relations, at once interlocking and in tension" (Williams, 1977). These elements refer to human affective (emotional) consciousness which is either articulated through culture or covered by the dominant hegemonic force. The relation among elements is actually real but "it operates in most delicate and less tangible parts of our activity" (Williams, 1961). In *Marxism and Literature*, Williams states:

A 'structure of feeling' is a cultural hypothesis, actually derived from attempts to understand such elements and their connections in a generation or period [...]. It is initially less simple than more formally structured hypotheses of the social but it is more adequate to the actual range of cultural evidence: historically certainly, but even more (where it matters more) in our present cultural process (1977).

Dissatisfaction toward how history is presented encourages Williams to formulate a distinctive approach which is able to incorporate various meanings, values and experiences. Williams' Structure of Feeling, is expected to cover more representative human lived experiences often discarded by any social and political reasons. Imaginative literature, in relation to the discussion, carries a plethora of lived experiences which can be utilized for comprehensive history. Williams, in a very convincing way, claims that "it is through literature - that is, through the articulated [...] structures of feeling - that we can have our most complete access to real social experience" (Warwick).

### **III. Findings and Discussion**

#### **3.1. Social Instability in the early 19th century**

In the *Legend of Sleepy Hollow* (LSH), Irving writes about a place called Sleepy Hollow near Tarry Town<sup>1</sup> which most of its inhabitants are enthusiastic on ghost and supernatural tales. One of the specters haunting the place is Headless Horseman, a ghost of ex-mercenary in the time of American Revolutionary war who always appears around the village at night, looking for his lost head. The story centers on three main characters: Ichabod Crane, Brom Bones, and Katrina Van Tassel. Ichabod Crane is a school master from Connecticut, who is a big fan of ghost tales. He falls in love with Katrina van Tassel, a beautiful 18-year-old daughter of a rich Dutch farmer. Nevertheless, he has to face a competitor, Brom Bones, who is a very masculine local hero. The tension of the story focuses on the conflict between Ichabod and Brom Bones, which Irving depicts in scary yet humorous manner.

Katrina van Tassel is a musical student of Ichabod. They meet weekly for a singing psalmody class. Ichabod is extremely attracted to the ‘blooming lass of fresh eighteen girls’(1065). However, the sincere love of Ichabod soon turns out to be more a materialistic desire after he visits and watches the wealthy mansion of Baltus van Tassel, Katrina’s father. Being surprised with abundant wealth of Katrina, ‘his heart yearned after the damsel who was to inherit these domains’ (1067). Irving uses the inconsistency of Ichabod’s personality to symbolize certain social experiences derived from a massive industrial revolution. J.G.A. Pocock (cited in Anthony, 2005) argues this inconsistency of personality is a portrayal of vulnerable and unstable society which experienced the transition from permanent-property holder to a society where property values fluctuate. Before 1776, the New England colonies were basically agricultural and conservative. Almost every property (wealth) were fixed in land, crops, animals, and slavery (Quirk, 2005). Nevertheless, after the Atlantic revolution, a new class of independent society began to rise, setting aside the pro-monarchy (feudalistic) class.

What is being depicted by Irving is the common anxiety from a pro-feudalistic class. When the U.S was still subject to the British throne, this particular

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<sup>1</sup> Tarry Town, at present, is a village in Westchester county, New York.

class was experiencing economic comfort due to the properties they had. Along with the mercantile economic system run by the Empire, this class evidently experienced economic benefit and protection. Nevertheless, after the revolution, the U.S. was involved in a free enterprise economy which, inevitably threaten the position of this pro-British class. The industrial orientation of the young nation slowly raised a new middle-class within the U.S. society which appreciated hard-work, productivity, and democracy.

It is broadly acknowledged that Irving embraces a semi-feudalistic and aristocratic point of view (Anthony, 2005). Through LSH (and almost all stories in *The Sketch Book*), he searches for old time values, meanings and experiences. The characterization of Ichabod (i.e., inconsistency) is a manifestation of a dangerous, unstable, and unpredictable world which is rooted from a capitalistic mode of economy. Perhaps this relates to his 'lived experience' when his family business went bankrupt due to a massive economic turbulence called Panic 1819 (Moffet, 1929).

The longing of a heavenly old time atmosphere, for Irving, is a prominent escape amid the rude industrial life at that time. It fits what Raymond Williams argues about dominant culture.

In the subsequent default of a particular phase of a dominant culture there is then a reaching back to those meanings and values which were created in actual societies and actual situations in the past, and which still seem to have significance because they represent areas of human experience, aspiration and achievement which the dominant culture neglects, undervalues, opposes, represses, or even cannot recognize (Williams,1977)

Using Williams' thought, it can be inferred that the dominant free enterprise culture does not entirely erase the residual aristocratic culture. Although the U.S. is free from the British rule and is beginning to put aside its colonial legacies, there is no a clear separation between British and American cultures. The relation between the past and present is rather complicated. When a majority of the U.S public is glorifying the future of the New World, Irving views it with skepticism, anxiety; he feels that the U.S. is heading to a new dark age.

Besides the element of inconsistency, Irving also presents the voracious nature of Ichabod. He is 'a huge feeder' who has 'a dilating power like Anaconda' although he has lank posture (1062). The narrator, then, exaggerates further the greedy nature of Ichabod in eloquent analogy of intellectual capacity: 'his appetite for the marvelous and, his power of digesting it were equally extraordinary [...] no tale was too gross or monstrous for his capacious swallow' (1064). Here, Irving seems to downgrade the quality of the main character, attempting to present a sense of comedy which amuses the reader. This ridiculous depiction of Ichabod, in contrast, is hugely different with his competitor, Brom Bones, who represents the common masculine character in most literature.

Anthony (2005) argues that "Ichabod prodigious appetite figures voracious nature of post-war capitalism." It is a manifestation of a rapid economic and social change which Irving perceives as rude and destructive. The war of 1812 marks a new cornerstone for the U.S. development since it was the last devastating war with the British. The U.S. after the war had never been attacked by any foreign force, that consequently pushes the nation to more focus on economic development. Irving, however, is afraid of this rapid industrial change, believing that the nation has a potential to collapse like what beset his family enterprise.

LSH represents the author's practical consciousness within a dominant industrial culture. This practical consciousness is essentially social even though, sometimes, it is articulated through personal (minority) voice. In other words, as long as it is felt or thought, regardless the recognition of the dominant culture, it is indeed a living practical consciousness. Williams asserts that:

Practical consciousness, in specific relationships, specific skills, (and) specific perceptions [...] is unquestionably social [...] that [...] dominant social order neglects, excludes, represses or simply fails to recognize (125).

For the U.S public in the early decade of the 19th century, which has experienced almost a half century of independence from the British empire, the experiences before 1776 is a mere history; it is not necessary to look back at the past times. Conversely, for Irving and other aristocratic-minded supporters, the past is always a better place to visit and is still promising.

The unstable society of post-war America becomes the main theme of the Irving's LSH. Through the characterization of Ichabod Crane, Irving implies the society that is inconsistent and veracious in nature. The main thrust of this situation is significant economic change in the early 1800s due to industrialized agriculture. In addition, it is also inseparable with the notion of 'nation without history' which means the history of the U.S. starts at the time of revolution, so that what happened in New England colonies (values, experience and meaning) should not be taken into account.

### **3.2. *The ignorance of the U.S. public toward its past***

Another extraordinary story of Irving's that contribute to his recognition as American writer is *Rip van Winkle*. Along with LSH, *Rip Van Winkle* grabs the popular and critics' attention as the finest sketches in *The Sketch Book* (Bowen, 175). *Rip Van Winkle* is the story of 'a simple good natured man, an obedient and henpecked husband' named Rip Van Winkle who lives in a village in the foot of the Catskill Mountains (770). Rip's story starts before the time of the American Revolution and ends when America has already been independent. He is loved by many people in the village especially children, but due to abandoning his family and farm, his wife to scolds him very often. One day, he runs into the wood accompanied by his dog Wolf, to escape his wife's nagging. In the woods, Rip and Wolf encounter a group of people dressed in an 'antique Dutch fashion'. Without investigating his new acquaintances, he blends with them, eating and drinking their liquor. In the next morning, he wakes up in huge confusion; his dog and gun are gone, he feels weak and his joints are stiff. After struggling to walk in the woods and return to his village, Rip was shocked to learn that he slept for 20 years, and anything belong to his time is now gone.

When Rip slowly enters the village, 'people stared at him with equal marks of surprise'. He then, encounters 'a troop of children hooting at him, the dogs barked at him, and strange faces at the window', which he has never experienced before. Finally, after having troubles locating his home, 'he found his house gone to decay' (778). The scene presents how Irving dramatizes the ignorance toward Rip. Rip belongs to a period where all the people are still the subject of King George of

England. Then suddenly he appears amid the society that is not part of the empire anymore, a society which acknowledges George Washington as their president. Robert (2005) argues that the act of dramatizing communal ignorance toward Rip figures how the new Republic attempts to forget its past. Things from colonial America does not seem to fit the present democratic America. Irving attempts to depict: in a very short time, for example one night's sleep, a very significant shift of human life might prevail. Irving was showing how that happened to the U.S. at the moment. Robert goes further arguing:

“when Rip goes to sleep as a colonial British subject and awakens in ignorance of republican ways, the disconnect makes him a type for each generation’s eventual failure to adapt to change in the unfolding democratic experiment (2005)

Breaking apart from British tradition does not guarantee the smooth process towards democracy. Irving himself witnesses many obvious practices that violated the democratic purpose in the early 1800s. The economic turbulence of 1819, the frontier conflict with Native Americans, and the issue of slavery in the south are some of the bewildering problems the new nation experienced. Therefore, it is not only Irving finding himself a stranger, but also the 19th century Americans who were confused about the reason they were fighting.

Perhaps, through Rip van Winkle, Irving attempts to propose the appropriate meaning of being American. The colonial and independent America is inseparable entities which define the present America. A new national consciousness should not discard the things categorized belong to the Old World, but negotiate and incorporate them. R.W.B Lewis (cited in Sizemore, 2013) asserts “Rip Van Winkle as a tale of national genesis or bildungsroman of the nation’s self-development”. This acknowledgement, indeed, has reasonable confirmation since Irving is one of the earlier American authors who explores materials from America for his imaginative works<sup>2</sup>. Although many of his works (e.g., *The Sketch Book*) conveys more materials

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<sup>2</sup> In Michelle R. Sizemore’s *Temporal Convergence, Early National Comparisons, and Washington Irving’s Sketchbook* (2013), Washington Irving, together with Charles Brockden Brown, Susanna Rowson, and William Cullen Bryant are the earlier American authors exploring themes from American land. They also advocate cultural exchange between the U.S. and Britain with the hope of expanding the narrow partisan perspectives dividing the two nations.



from England, he eloquently mixes them with materials existing in the New World, building a new sense of literature—American literature.

The expression of dominant culture conveys meanings, values and experiences which are not just from the present, but also from the past. Williams (1977) called these elements ‘residue’: “They have been effectively formed in the past, but still active in the cultural process, not only [...] as element of the past, but as effective element of the present.” Residue does not mean archaic; however, it is the past which is dynamically involved in cultural formation of the present. The materials of the story, e.g., the Dutch community, the ghost of Hendrick Hudson, and King George III are from the time of New England colonies. Irving deliberately employs those materials to remind the industrial society in 19th century America about historical fragments which contribute to their existence. The disappointment toward social and political circumstance at the moment encourages him to make fun of it, considering it as a joke, as represented through Rip (and Ichabod).

As a Romantic American author, Irving loves to present the landscape of rural area and its community, e.g., the old Dutch village in *Rip Van Winkle* and Sleepy Hollow in LSH. To some extent, the scene of a rural village may evoke sense of the past and tranquility, compared to noisy and smoky industrial city. Related to the idea of dominant industrial culture, Williams argue:

The idea of rural community is predominantly residual, but is in some limited respects alternative or oppositional to urban industrial capitalism, though for the most part it is incorporated, as idealization or fantasy, or as an exotic-residential or escape- leisure function of the dominant order itself (1977).

It is obvious that Irving fantasizes about the old Dutch community for the interest of his story. Even though, in reality, the fictional setting (Rip’s village) is inspired by history of Dutch settlement that had existed since the arrival of Dutch explorers in 17th century. By presenting the life of rural Dutch community, Irving attempts to contrast with the developing New York City in early 1800s. Nevertheless, it is complicated to conclude whether he is performing an oppositional or alternative stance toward Industrial America. In the further development of his professional career, Irving becomes the representative of the U.S. government in Europe, which more or less, influences his political views on America.

“The concept of Structure of Feeling aims to comprehend the [...] evident forms of residual and dominant” (Williams, 1977). The residual elements will consciously or unconsciously illuminate the dominant order although there is hegemonic forces that suppress it. Together with other elements, the residual elements contribute to define the dominant present order which give a sense of generation or period at the moment. Irving has portrayed the obvious dominant order of his period through these two short stories. Hopefully, his works could be taken into account for those who seek for an alternative (mental) explanation about America.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

The huge economic shift in the beginning of 19th century had transformed America to be more industrious and capitalistic. It is evidently portrayed by Washington Irving through his well-known tales: *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* and *Rip Van Winkle*. As a man with semi-feudalistic stance, he implies—in *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*—the portrait of unstable industrial society. Using the characterization of Ichabod Crane, he presents the symptoms of destructive personality (mostly communal) which he believes can collapse the nation. Another crucial anxiety he has toward developing America is the public tendency to put aside the nation’s past. Irving eloquently dramatizes this ignorance through Rip in *Rip Van Winkle*. The best formulation of national consciousness should encompass meanings, experiences, and values from the past. What determines the existence of independent America is partially derived from colonial America.

Elements of the past (residual culture), along with the present dominant order is inseparable entity which reflects the ‘Structures of Feeling’ of a period. The dominant industrial culture of America must encompasses residual feudalistic elements, which might be consciously or unconsciously, acknowledged by American public, or repressed by hegemonic order during that time.

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