

“Rip Van Winkle as Comic Hero and Children's Literary Character”

An Honors Thesis

by

Autumn M. Benjamin

California; Pennsylvania

2019

California University of Pennsylvania

California, Pennsylvania

We hereby approve the Honors Thesis of

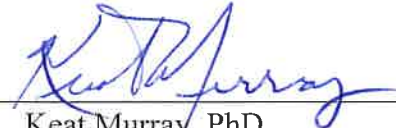
Autumn M. Benjamin

Candidate for the degree of Bachelor of Arts

Date

Faculty

11/19/2019



Keat Murray, PhD
Honors Thesis Advisor

11/19/2019



Kimberly Vanderlaan, PhD
Second Reader

11/19/2019



Craig Fox, PhD
Associate Director, Honors Program

19 March 2019



M. G. Aune
Honors Advisory Board
Director, Honors Program

Introduction

The adaptation of classic tales into children's stories is a common occurrence. The stories of 19th century author Washington Irving have undergone such adaptations, perhaps because his standout, almost caricature like characters, or his detailed descriptions of setting make the worlds he creates easy to imagine. Arguably his most famous fiction, "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," has been adapted in every category imaginable. Another Irving story, "Rip Van Winkle," has been adapted and republished, specifically in the form of various children's picture books; these adaptations are made suitable for children while still telling the same core story. For this honors thesis, I have studied four recent versions of "Rip Van Winkle," published in 1995, 2004, and 2012. The first version was the original text, written in 1818 by Washington Irving; the other three versions were children's picture book adaptations: the first retold by Rick Meyerowitz, the second by Carol Ottolenghi, and the third by Luke Hayes. These versions will hereafter be identified throughout the paper by their adaptor's last name. Along with the multiple versions of "Rip Van Winkle," a multitude of scholarly articles were implemented into this study. I consulted articles on the history of children's literature, the process of adapting adult stories for children, many analyses of the story of "Rip Van Winkle," as well as sources on humor and its educational value with particular emphasis on the comic hero. Rip Van Winkle's identity as a comic hero is such an integral part of the narrative, as it parallels the potentially tragic outcome of the plot and adds humor to what could have been a humorless story, that it has remained a major feature in all three of the selected children's picture book adaptations, even when the adaptors are taking other liberties with the original story.

A few decisions about the definition of “children” had to be made before this paper was able to be written. The terms “child” and “children” will be used in this paper to refer to juveniles in the roughly defined age category of eight to eleven years old, or third through fifth graders, essentially, children with the potential to read a story book on their own without adult assistance. This age grouping was selected based on the reading levels for the selected adaptations, which were found in the descriptions of the books on Amazon, where they were purchased. I chose to explore this topic because of my work as a children’s librarian, and the opportunities that I have had to witness how children consume stories. Humor is an important part of many, if not all, children’s stories, and the story of Rip Van Winkle in particular has many instances of a variety of humor types. Children’s picture book versions of Irving’s story are able to capture this humor, and the key aspects of the original story in a way that allows children to experience and enjoy a story that has been told since the 19th century.

The Original Story of Rip Van Winkle

Irving begins the story with a description of the setting, the Hudson River of New York. He writes, “Whoever has made a voyage up the Hudson must remember the Kaatskill Mountains” (Irving 9). His protagonist Rip Van Winkle is an irresponsible husband and father but a kind and helpful neighbor. He neglects his household, “the most pestilent little piece of ground in the whole country,” and his children are described as being “as ragged and wild as if they belonged to nobody” (Irving 12). He leaves as much work as he possibly can to his “termagant wife,” even though he is often described as a “hen-pecked husband” (Irving 10). However, the minute a neighbor needs help, he is there: “in a word, Rip was ready to attend to anybody’s business but his own” (Irving 11).

One day, after he is goaded by his wife, he ventures into the woods with his dog to hunt. It is in these woods that he meets some revelers and takes many drinks from them, even though they have not offered him one. Rip then wakes up twenty years later, although he is not aware of this at first. He is confused by the absence of his dog and the troupe of men that had been with him when he fell asleep, "Surely," Rip said, "I have not slept here all night." (Irving 20). When he walks back down to his village, and walking is harder for him to do which is concerning to him, the villagers do not know who he is. He tells them that he is loyal to the king, but to his surprise they seem appalled by this. They call him a "tory" and a "spy" and demand his arrest (Irving 26). It is when he is reunited with his children that the villagers accept Rip as the person he claims to be. Rip then spends the rest of his days living happily in the village in his daughter's home where he is not expected to do any chores. This is a rather happy ending for a man who wished to get out of work in the first place.

The Meyerowitz Adaptation

Rick Meyerowitz's 2004 retelling of "Rip Van Winkle" features cartoon-like illustrations drawn by the author himself. The front cover depicts Rip after the twenty-year sleep, sporting a comically long white beard and scratching his head in confusion. The illustrations in this adaptation are important when analyzing its value in the realm of humor and therefore Rip's status as the comic hero. The front cover is already attention grabbing, and children may select this book because it looks like it will be funny. This art style is consistent throughout the book and helps maintain a cheery tone even during the plot points that are not so lighthearted. For example, page thirteen features a full-page illustration of the "peculiar-looking men, with old-fashioned clothing and odd faces"

(Meyerowitz 12). These men are all scowling and have long beards or mustaches and are wearing clothing that a child may find humorous: one man towards the back wears a neck ruff, the man closest to the front wears a hat that curls at the top and ends with a bell. These strange men could be frightening to children, but Meyerowitz counteracts that potential fear with their humorous depiction. In doing this, Meyerowitz increases the chance that his readers will be paying close attention as he sets up for the climax of the story.

The Meyerowitz adaptation begins, in the same vein as the original story, with some historical context. Henry Hudson, what would become the Hudson River, and the Catskill Mountains are all mentioned on the very first page. Hudson and his crew members are said to have sailed in on the Dutch ship named *Half Moon* and landed on “the most beautiful [landscape] on earth” (Meyerowitz 1). They then sail their ship north. Meyerowitz writes, “The way history books tell the story, Henry Hudson and his men were never seen again and never returned to those magical mountains or to the river that now bears his name. But there is more than one way to tell a story” (Meyerowitz 1).

Another way that this adaptation gives historical context is by creating a timeline of the events that occur during the twenty-year span that Rip sleeps through. This takes place on pages seventeen and eighteen of the book through illustrations. The top four illustrations depict Rip sleeping through each season, the leaves slowly fall from the tree until he is sleeping in a snowbank in the final picture. The four illustrations at the bottom show the reader what is happening while Rip sleeps; the Revolutionary war begins, the Declaration of Independence is signed, and George Washington rides horseback.

Meyerowitz says of Rip, “Great events passed him by. The pages of history, turning

slowly, began a new chapter without Rip Van Winkle” (Meyerowitz 18). The style of the illustrations gives the reader some historical background while also maintaining that same humorous tone as the reader can view Rip asleep as all of these important events pass him by.

Meyerowitz takes some slight liberties with the characterization in his adaptation. This version introduces Rip as “good-natured though lazy” and his wife, Dame Van Winkle, as “upset again,” allowing reader to presume that arguments between Rip and his wife occur frequently (Meyerowitz 3). One major way in which this adaptation deviates from Irving’s original text has to do with the characterization of Dame Van Winkle. In the original story she is the “termagant wife,” and Irving does not provide insight as to why she may be so disagreeable (Irving 15). In the Meyerowitz adaptation, it is explained to the reader, at the moment she is introduced, that Dame Van Winkle is upset because of “years of not having food to put on the table, only rags in which to dress Rip Jr., and little Sarah, and hard work day in and day out-while Rip was fishing, or napping, or off with his friends” (Meyerowitz 3). Another important instance in Dame Van Winkle’s characterization that separates Meyerowitz’s story from the original story and the other children’s adaptations is what happens to her after Rip’s twenty-year sleep. While originally Dame Van Winkle is dead by this time, Meyerowitz has her remarry and leave the village; Rip’s daughter tells him, “it has been two years since she [Rip’s wife] married a traveling peddler, and traveled with him to South America” (Meyerowitz 28). Dame Van Winkle’s remarriage allows Rip to be pleased by her absence, as he is in the original story, without giving her a dark ending that could potentially be upsetting for young readers. This helps the story maintain a light, comedic tone.

The Ottolenghi Adaptation

Unlike Meyerowitz, Ottolenghi did not illustrate her 2004 retelling; the illustrator of this version is Francis Phillips, and his drawings are in a vastly different style than Meyerowitz's. The pictures in this story are realistic looking. The front cover still depicts an old Rip with a white beard and a hand on his head, but this Rip looks sad and in pain, not comically confused. This version's illustrations also feature a drabber color scheme than the bright colors in Meyerowitz's, and though Ottolenghi and Meyerowitz published their adaptations within the same year, the illustrations in the Ottolenghi version, because of their more realistic style and color pallet, make the book look much older than the other adaptation.

This version of the story also provides historical context by introducing the reader to the area in which the story is set. Ottolenghi begins the book with, "In New York, the Hudson River winds deeply through the Catskill Mountains. Long ago, hard-working Dutch settlers built towns along this river and farmed the rich but rocky land" (Ottolenghi 1). She then goes on to write that that the story of Rip Van Winkle is always told when farmers who live in the Hudson Valley get together to celebrate the harvest (Ottolenghi 1). This is a change made exclusively by Ottolenghi; this seasonal retelling is not present in the original story, or the other two children's picture book adaptations examined for this thesis project. Perhaps Ottolenghi includes this element in her story to introduce children to the concept of stories that are told over time. This could be important, as Ottolenghi's adaption was written almost two hundred years after Irving's original story. She is retelling a story that has been told before, and she introduces that same concept into her retelling.

Ottolenghi describes Rip as “a fun, friendly fellow” who would “rather do anything than work” (Ottolenghi 2). The illustration on the following page demonstrates Rip’s tendency to avoid work, as it depicts him laughing and flying a kite with the village children. This image, along with Ottolenghi’s word choice, sets a light-hearted tone for the beginning of the story that starkly contrasts the cover of the book.

The way that Ottolenghi depicts the characters is different from the caricature-like style of Irving. Rip’s wife, who is given a name, Mary, in this version, is much more subdued than the original Dame Van Winkle. She is not even the one who sends Rip off into the mountains, he makes that journey on his own accord because he thought it was “a beautiful day for a hike” (Ottolenghi 4). Mary’s disapproval is clear on her face in the illustration on page three where she stands with her hands on her hips, but she never says a cruel word to her husband. This may be why, in this version, one of Rip’s first thoughts when he awakes from his long slumber is, “What will I tell my wife? She’ll never believe the adventure I had” (Ottolenghi 16). Dame Van Winkle’s kinder treatment towards Rip makes him appear less pathetic than in other versions. He genuinely appears to feel remorse for the way he has treated his family; he is less self-centered in Ottolenghi’s adaptation.

The Hayes Adaptation

The version of “Rip Van Winkle” written by Luke Hayes in 2012 is the only edition in this study that is divided into chapters. The story contains four chapters: the first ends with Dame Van Winkle heading towards the inn to berate Rip in front of his friends, the second ends with Rip falling asleep in the woods, the third ends with Rip causing a commotion by stating he is a loyal subject of the king, and the fourth and final

chapter ends with Rip telling his story to travelers. Hayes's adaptation contains no illustrations aside from the image on the front cover. This image shows Rip waking up with a long white beard, similar to what he sports on the Meyerowitz and Ottolenghi covers, but this time Rip is waking up under a pile of leaves. The illustration on this cover is a somber and realistic drawing, much like Ottolenghi's cover.

Hayes's version does not offer the same historical context as the other two adaptations. Instead his story begins with dialogue: "Rip!" (Hayes 1). Hayes introduces his adaptation of the story by focusing on the relationship between Rip and Dame Van Winkle, the latter of whom is most similar to Irving's original character, than the other two adapted stories. When Rip thinks about his wife he describes her as "always telling him to get to work, get busy, do this, do that," and thinks "she nagged him in the morning noon and night" (Hayes 6). Though Rip calls his wife pet names like "dear" and "my sweet," he is consistently resentful of Dame Van Winkle's expectations of him, which is evident in the way he rolls his eyes and shrugs his shoulders when she asks him to complete household tasks (Hayes 2).

The most historical context given in this adaption is in the scene where Rip declares himself a follower of the king. Hayes has Rip wake and make his way back down to the village on election day. The villagers ask him if he is a Federal or a Democrat, and if he is trying to start a riot by bringing a gun to town on his way to vote (Hayes 24). After Rip is almost locked up for declaring himself what the villagers consider to be a "tory," Hayes goes on to reveal that Rip's old friends and neighbors are elsewhere fighting in the war or have died. In this way, Hayes gives historical context without explicitly telling the reader the time period of the story.

The Adaptation of “Adult” Literature to “Children’s” Literature

An easy way to define children’s literature would be to say that it is literature suitable, or “appropriate” for children, yet there is no standard for what is appropriate for children (Hui). For the longest time, what was suitable for children was dependent on what morals adults wanted children’s literature to impart on its readers. By the mid-nineteenth-century “a considerable range of attitudes toward children and childhood was reflected in American literature for the young, ranging from the harsh cautionary story to the gentle monitory one” (Stahl). Over time, the definition of what is appropriate for children has been blurred and involves a combination of morality, entertainment, and educational value. While the plot of “Rip Van Winkle” has the potential to be a captivating children’s story because of the morals it teaches and the humor it presents, picture book adaptations of the story must be modified so that they are consumable for young readers. These changes, in the Meyerowitz, Ottolenghi, and Hayes editions, include simplification of language and shortening the length of the story, a heavy portrayal of Rip as “good” despite his laziness, and a kinder, more fleshed out Dame Van Winkle who can invoke empathy in the reader.

It is important for readers to keep in mind that adults, not children, make the decisions about what pieces of children’s literature are published. An article by Encisco, et. al states that books selected for children should contain “appropriate representations of the psychological, social, and historical experiences of childhood” (253). As children are currently experiencing “childhood,” they do not even possess a chance at having the ability to decide if a story depicts the experience accurately. While every human has individual childhood experiences, the more universal aspects of those experiences can be

shared by adults. Though literature for children is arguably no longer written solely to instruct, children's literature still contains "implicit expectations for the 'good child'" (Encisco, et al. 254). By the late eighteenth century, children's literature was "flourishing" as its own genre (Grenby). As a result of this, fewer adult authors were focusing on "the moral center" of literature, and instead pursuing storytelling that was entertaining and appealed to young readers' senses of imagination (Encisco, et al. 254).

Whether or not "Rip Van Winkle" can be considered a work used to teach morality is debatable. While Rip is, in a way, punished for his laziness by waking up twenty years in the future, he is soon rewarded by being allowed to live in his daughter and son-in-law's home without any responsibilities. Because this ending is an essential part of the original plot, all of the picture book adaptations include it. This leaves room for young readers to argue that because Rip was lazy, he got everything he wanted in the end; he does not have to work anymore or live with his wife. However, the adaptations do make Rip seem much more concerned upon his awakening, and maybe this moment aids in teaching morality through the story. Perhaps children can sense Rip's fear, which is stronger in the children's adaptations than the original, and children will likely feel this is punishment enough for the now old man. Frankly, the teachability of morality in the story rests solely on the child and/or the adult reading alongside him or her.

Adaptations of Rip's Physical Description

It can be argued that "Rip Van Winkle" is a character-driven story. The plot is fairly simple; it is the characters and their actions that make the story intriguing to readers, even years after the story's publication. In an article titled "Characterization in Rip Van Winkle," Marvin E. Mengeling writes, "Washington Irving was always far more

interested in people than in great themes and ideas,” and, perhaps more importantly, he states, “In his most widely known tale ‘Rip Van Winkle’ Irving can be observed at the zenith of his powers of characterization” (643). This idea of characterization expands beyond physical descriptions of the story’s inhabitants. In fact, Rip Van Winkle and the other few characters in his story are given little to no physical descriptions at all. Whether or not Rip is “fat, thin, tall, or short, one has no real way of knowing,” and this is because Rip’s physical appearance has nothing to do with what drives the story onward (Mengeling 643).

Only the Meyerowitz and Ottolenghi children’s versions contain illustrations, but curiously, in both of these books Rip is drawn very similarly. Before his long sleep, he has blond hair that he wears in a ponytail, he sports a three-cornered hat, and his clothes are patched up and tattered. While the Meyerowitz version of Rip looks more like a cartoon, and the Ottolenghi Rip is illustrated as life-like, both versions share all the same defining features. This is particularly notable since the original story contains no physical description for Rip.

Dame Van Winkle in Children’s Literature

One of the most significant and noticeable changes made during the adaptation process is the characterization of Rip’s wife, Dame Van Winkle. In the original story she is described as “termagant” as well as a “shrew” (Irving 15). Rip’s relationships with his family and the villagers are paramount in defining Rip’s own character. Because of this, “the other characters, most especially Rip’s ill-natured Dame, are painted through the method of caricature” (Mengeling 643). The other wives of the village are comparatively

called “all of the good wives of the village,” implying that Dame Van Winkle is not a good wife. These other women who take Rip’s side in every argument would quickly “lay all blame on Dame Van Winkle” (Irving 11). The original version of “Rip Van Winkle” focuses on all of Rip’s wife’s negative characteristics. She is arguably unfair to Rip, and she even looks at Wolf with “an evil eye” (Irving 13). At the end of the story, not only has Dame Van Winkle died, which pleases Rip greatly, her daughter explains that she died by breaking a blood-vessel “in a fit of passion at a New-England peddler” (Irving 28). Dame Van Winkle dies the way she lived: angry.

The Dame Van Winkle described in the Meyerowitz, Ottolenghi, and Hayes editions is drastically different from Irving’s original character. It appears that these authors feel that Rip’s wife deserves more sympathy from the reader than Irving’s story originally inspired. This is a successful tactic to implement into the versions of “Rip Van Winkle” that children will be reading, as it gives children the opportunity to learn that one’s neglectfulness can have consequences; Dame Van Winkle is so grumpy and miserable because she is running a household all on her own. She is still overbearing, and Rip is still displeased with her, but the reasons behind her actions are more clearly explained. For example, in the Meyerowitz version, instead of dying in a fit of rage, Dame Van Winkle survives, marries a traveling peddler, and moves to America (Meyerowitz 11). In the Ottolenghi edition, Dame Van Winkle is even given a first name, Mary. On the very first page of the picture book, the text evokes sympathy for Rip’s family over sympathy for Rip. The section reads that while Rip’s tendency to avoid work and spend all day playing was alright for him “it was a bit hard on his wife, Mary, and their two children, Rip Jr. and Judith” (Ottolenghi 1). In this adaptation of the story,

Dame Van Winkle is not even the one to send Rip off into the woods to hunt; Rip leaves on his own accord to go for a hike because “he decided work could wait” (Ottolenghi 4). Later on in the story, when Rip wakes up from his twenty-year sleep, his first thoughts are of Dame Van Winkle. “What will I tell my wife?” he says, “She’ll never believe the adventure I had” (Ottolenghi 9). In the original story, Rip gives little to no thought to Dame Van Winkle’s thoughts and feelings about him. This care for her does dwindle a little bit at the very end of the picture book. When Rip discovers that his wife is dead, he does not seem surprised or saddened. In this way, the ending of this adaptation is much like the original text, where Dame Van Winkle’s death gives Rip “a drop of comfort” (Irving 28).

Rip’s Redeeming Qualities

All three of the children’s picture book adaptations place a heavy focus on Rip Van Winkle’s positive traits, particularly when it comes to his relationship with his family members. For example, in the Meyerowitz version, when Dame Van Winkle calls Rip to get out of bed and get to work, he “smiles sheepishly” (Meyerowitz 4). This response is different than that of the original text, where Rip is “reduced almost to despair” by his wife’s wishes (Irving 15). Both of these reactions lead to the same result: Rip heads out into the forest to go hunting. The major plot of the story is unchanged, but the reader’s perception of both characters can be noticeably different in each story. In the Meyerowitz adaptation, Rip and his wife appear to be more equal; Rip is lazy, but not reluctant, and Dame Van Winkle is bossy, but not too harsh. Irving’s original text portrays Rip as an abused husband, and his wife as the uncaring abuser. This

relationship could potentially take away from the main plot of the story. Downplaying Rip and his wife's relationship from abuse to bickering not only makes for a more pleasant relationship for children to read, it also simplifies the plot, allowing the story to be shortened.

There are many other instances in the children's stories where Rip is portrayed as kind and good. Aside from helping his neighbors, he also helps the men in the woods with their barrels. In the Ottolenghi version, Rip offers the men his assistance even when they appear to be ungrateful for his help, though they do accept it. When Rip says, "That looks heavy. Could you use some help?" the man puts the barrel onto Rip's back without saying anything and proceeds to frown the entire way up the mountain (Ottolenghi 9). Rip's kindness is also shown in the way that he treats Wolf. In the Hayes adaptation, Rip is often speaking aloud to Wolf in the way that he would speak to a good friend. He asks him things about Dame Van Winkle and the little men on the mountain, and sometimes even gets a response, such as when he asks the dog why the men are so quiet, and Wolf shakes his head as though he does not know either (Hayes 13). Rip's close relationship with his dog seems to be further evidence that he is generally a good person.

Along with his more positive traits, there are other aspects of Rip that make him an appealing character for young readers. He is an isolated, lonely individual; he "finds it difficult with a world of realistic practicalities" (Mengeling 644). Rip's loneliness and his wife's inability to accept him as he is makes it easy for the reader to feel sympathy towards him. In the original version, the term "Poor Rip" is used when Rip is sent away from his friends and off into the woods after his wife publicly embarrasses him (Irving 15). Irving sneakily pushes this sympathy for Rip on the reader by hiding emotional

appeals within the text. The children's versions of the story attempt to do the same but go about it in different ways. In the Ottolenghi version, Rip decides to go out on his own, no prompting from Dame Van Winkle necessary. What makes him appear pitiful to the reader is the scene after he has awoken from his twenty-year sleep. He says things like "What will I tell my wife?" and "Those men took my watch!" (Ottolenghi ?). Rip has found himself in a rather pathetic state, and because he was not portrayed as a horrible husband at the start of the tale, it is easy for readers of this picture book to see him as a poor, confused man.

In the Meyerowitz version, Dame Van Winkle threatens that Rip will not be allowed to return home unless he "has something to show" for himself (Meyerowitz 9). When Rip cannot find anything he asks, "How can I go home now?" (Meyerowitz 9). He may say this out of embarrassment, or perhaps out of fear for his wife, but the fear that Rip feels can invoke sympathetic feelings from the reader, and, in the end, that sympathy is what makes Rip redeemable despite his mistreatment of his family.

Rip Van Winkle as the Comic Hero

Rip Van Winkle is faced with a potentially tragic situation, but his story is in no way a traditional tragedy; Rip can be classified as a comic hero despite his tragic tale. The comic hero can be any main character that displays "at least the minimal level of personal charm or worth of character it takes to win the audience's basic approval of support" (Simpson). There is nothing comical or enjoyable for the audience in watching a character they do not like triumph in the story (Simpson). It is important that Rip is "likeable" to readers. This likability is established at the very beginning of the story.

Though Rip is described as lazy in his home, he is characterized as a good neighbor. Irving writes that even the neighborhood kids adore him; “whenever he went dodging about the village, he was surrounded by a troupe of them” (Irving 11). The fact that “Rip was ready to attend to anybody’s business but his own” gives the reader mixed feelings about him. It is not fair for him to not do his part at home, but at the same time it is hard for readers to dislike this man who is so kind to his neighbors (Irving 11). This kindness proves his worth of character which makes him a candidate for the role of comic hero. The comic hero is rarely a “spotless” one (Simpson) and Rip Van Winkle is a prime example of this quality.

In order to be funny, Rip is flawed as well as likable, and this can be related back to Dan O’Shannon’s explanation of the superiority theory of humor. This theory states that “seeing someone painted as a buffoon can cause us to feel a sudden jolt in elevation in our own status, which is then expressed as laughter” (O’Shannon 8). Essentially, there is humor to be found in another’s missteps. This theory of humor is, for some reason or another, particularly accessible for children. There are numerous children’s stories that feature the superiority theory of humor. An example of this can be found in the popular children’s tale *There Was an Old Lady Who Swallowed a Fly*. Children find this story humorous because the main character repeatedly makes mistakes that the readers are conscious of. As the woman keeps swallowing animals to catch other animals, children feel a sense of elevation over her because they know that her ideas are not going to lead to the result she wants. In the same way, as Rip continually makes mistakes, children feel that same sense of superiority.

While Rip Van Winkle is not as straight-forwardly comical as the old lady who swallowed the fly, there are instances in his story that would invite children, and readers of all ages, to feel the sense of elevation that occurs when the superiority theory of humor is present. One example of this occurs when Rip returns to his village after his twenty-year sleep, he is naturally very confused. In the Ottolenghi version he thinks things like, “He thought he knew everyone in the village” and “There wasn’t a decent three-corner hat among them” (Ottolenghi ?). Children will know, if not from the text then definitely from the illustrations, that Rip is now much older than he was when he first ventured into the woods; he now has a long white beard and a wrinkly face. Having this knowledge rises one above Rip and gives a sense of superiority that, while it may not be explicitly funny, is humorous. Mengeling describes the opposing forces driving the plot of Irving’s story when he writes that “Rip Van Winkle” is a “story of magic and melancholy happenings” (Mengeling 643).

The classic comic hero tale is made up of three different segments: the journey, the minor adventures, and the final struggle (Gorfkle 32). Van Winkle’s journey is a short one, only to the forest by his village. The minor adventures ensue when he runs into the man in the forest and drinks the mysterious drink. He meets “a company of odd-looking personages” that are dressed in “a quaint, outlandish fashion” (Irving 18). The final struggle is when Van Winkle has to come to terms with the fact that he has slept through twenty years. He has to learn which side of the war he should be on, what has happened to his family and friends, and how he will live with these changes. The way that Rip’s journey is set up does not change once adapted for children; the same journey, minor adventures, and final struggle are present in all three children’s versions of the story.

Humor as an Instructional Tool

An ever-present element of children's literature is imparting knowledge to readers. This knowledge could be educational or moral, glaringly obvious or hidden in the text. The story of Rip Van Winkle teaches morals in a subtle fashion. In this tale, humor is used as an instructional tool, making it possible for children to learn as they laugh along to Rip's unfortunate, but still humorous, situation. The children's adaptations of "Rip Van Winkle," through a humorous lens, have the potential of teaching children the dangers of laziness and neglecting duties. Readers witness that Rip's neglectful attitude towards his family ends in embarrassment many times over, and eventually he even loses years off of his wife. However, Rip is popular among his neighbors because he is so helpful to them. Through just one character, Rip, children learn that being helpful can make one well-liked, while being lazy can have the opposite effect.

There are many negative emotions that can be linked to schoolwork and critical reading for elementary aged children. Some of these emotions include stress, frustration, anxiety, and fear (Morrison 49). Incorporating humor into education allows children to feel relief in place of fear. While Dan O'Shannon's superiority theory of humor was discussed earlier, it is not the only theory of humor, nor is it the only one that can be experienced by children when reading a humorous story like "Rip Van Winkle." Another of O'Shannon's theories is called the Relief Theory. This theory states that "the relief caused by the use of humor is a release of tension" (O'Shannon 8). A child who is anxious about the feat of reading may feel a sense of relief when reading about Rip's

antics, and this relief may aid in the child's positive perception of both the particular story, and in the act of reading itself.

There is a science behind this phenomenon. When one is experiencing fear, the reflexive response center of the brain is focused deeply on the environment to discover the source of that fear (Morrison 49). Once humor is introduced into the environment, "the surprise brings relief that often generates laughter or humor" (Morrison 49). In the book *Using Humor to Maximize Learning: The Links Between Positive Emotions and Education*, Mary Kay Morrison writes that her approach to using humor in education involves the "hook, line and sinker" (Morrison 50). The methods she presents in her book are for using humor in education specifically, but can be applied to young, independent readers in general. The aforementioned method involves "hooking" the readers by changing up their daily routine to alert the part of their brain that recognizes change. Irving's story, and many others, includes twists and turns in the plot that leave readers guessing at what will happen next. This element of the story has been carried over to all of the children's versions as well. It seems that Rip lives a fairly normal life in a fairly normal village, but then suddenly he is the victim of a magical happenstance that a reader unfamiliar with the story would be unable to see coming. Rip's twenty-year sleep has the ability to "hook" readers and keep them invested in the story.

After the hook, Morrison writes that it is important to keep readers on a "line." The line is described as "a direct connection that links past experiences with new information" (Morrison 46). The line is what keeps readers returning to reading and looking forward to participating to reading discussions in their classes as well as their everyday lives. The brain contains pathways and neurons that "fire," and then "wire

together” when introduced to repetition, and this aids in developing a successful long-term memory (Morrison 47). When brain pathways are used frequently, “learning is quicker, more automated, and more efficient” (Morrison 47). The more that readers enjoy their learning, the stronger their neural pathways will become, and it will be more likely that schoolwork, or in the argument for “Rip Van Winkle,” educational reading will be easier and more enjoyable for them (Morrison 47). Introducing children to classic stories like “Rip Van Winkle” in an accessible format like a picture book helps them to develop the skills to understand the original story when they reach an age or reading level that allows for it.

The third component of Morrison’s method is the “sinker.” This component revolves around the importance of discussion and feedback from readers in an educational setting. This is important in literature, as readers need to be able to convey their thoughts, feelings, and ideas about the piece that they have read in order to be assessed on it or give their opinions on what they have read. This element becomes important for promoting lifelong readers and reading classic stories like “Rip Van Winkle” can provide adults with context when making decisions on how to lead a discussion on the literature that the children they are interacting with are reading. There will be much more material online and in educational literature on topics to cover in stories like “Rip Van Winkle,” than they may be on newer children’s book releases.

Alongside the “hook, line, and sinker,” Morrison writes that there a few “emotional indicators” that must be present in order for children to develop an appreciation for what is humorous (Morrison 38). These emotional indicators are trust, hope, optimism, and love, and each is potentially felt by the reader when reading the tale

of Rip Van Winkle. When the reader has a certain degree of trust in the story, and in their own capabilities in reading but that is another subject, he or she is able to find humor in the tale (Morrison 38). This can be applied to “Rip Van Winkle,” and many other stories, in that the reader must trust that the story will get a happy ending. When the reader has faith that Rip will make it through his dismal circumstances, he or she has time to appreciate moments of humor such as when Rip tells a village full of patriots that he supports the king. If the reader seriously thought that Rip was going to be hurt or exiled, there would be a lack of humor in this silly scene.

The indicator of trust then leads to the indicator of hope. The reader must hope that a character, in this case Rip, will be able to survive “tragedy, difficulty, and change” (Morrison 38). When Dame Van Winkle is giving Rip a hard time, it is comical, in part because he deserves it and in part because the reader has hope that Rip will be able to escape his unsatisfactory marital arrangement. When Rip has trouble with the villagers, the reader has hope that he will be able to prove to them that he belongs there.

In this same scene, the reader feels optimistic about Rip’s situation, which leaves space for the reader to find humor in the situation. When the villagers threaten Rip’s arrest, the reader can safely find it humorous because the faith and hope that they have leaves room for optimism. Despite Rip’s sometimes negative life circumstances, the story, in all of its versions, maintains a light tone. This tone could indirectly be influencing readers to stay optimistic when it comes to Rip’s misadventures. The steady light tone is another aspect of the story that makes it read like a children’s story.

Conclusion

The story of “Rip Van Winkle” features the classic comic hero plotline: the journey, the minor adventures, and the final struggle. The story also features a classic comic hero; Rip is likeable, while simultaneously being incredibly flawed, and remains so even as he is put into tragic circumstances such as his wife’s abuse or his accidental twenty-year sleep. The comic hero makes for an exceptional children’s book protagonist because of that aforementioned likability. Through characters like Rip, children can learn that it is possible to be a good person while still making mistakes or bad choices. Authors like Rick Meyerowitz, Carol Ottolenghi, and Luke Hayes saw Rip’s potential to be an appealing character for young readers, and their adaptations of the original story are the evidence of that. Though the adaptors take liberties in their retellings of “Rip Van Winkle,” Rip’s station as the comic hero remains unchanged. “Rip Van Winkle” is just one of many well-known stories originally written for an adult audience that has been adapted many times over for children. This story makes an exceptional adaptation for children because of the way that it teaches lessons through humor. This is engaging for early readers and will hopefully aid in turning them into lifelong readers.

Works Cited

- Enciso, Patricia, et al. "Children's Literature: Standing in the Shadow of Adults." *Reading Research Quarterly*, vol. 45, no. 2, 2010, pp. 252–263.
- Gorfkle, Laura J. "The Making of the Comic Hero." *Discovering the Comic in Don Quixote*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 1993, pp. 31-59.
- Grenby, M.O. *The Child Reader, 1700-1840*. Cambridge University Press, 2011.
- Hayes, Luke. *Rip Van Winkle for Kids*. J. Porter Publishing, 2012.
- Hui, Haifeng. "The Changing Adaptation Strategies of Children's Literature: Two Centuries of Children's Editions of 'Gulliver's Travels.'" *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies*, vol. 17, no. 2, 2011, pp. 245-265.
- Irving, Washington. "Rip Van Winkle." *The Literary World Seventh Reader*, edited by John Calvin Metcalf, Sarah Withers, and Hetty S. Browne, 2006, pp. 9-31.
- Mengeling, Marvin E. "Characterization in 'Rip Van Winkle.'" *The English Journal*, vol. 53, no. 9, 1964, pp. 643–646.
- Meyerowitz, Rick. *Rip Van Winkle*. Spotlight, 2004.
- Morrison, Mary Kay. *Using Humor to Maximize Learning: The Links Between Positive Emotions and Education*. R&L Education, 2008.
- O'Shannon, Dan. "What Are You Laughing At?" *Humor: A Reader for Writers*, edited by Kathleen Volk Miller and Marion Wrenn, Oxford University Press, 2015, pp. 2-20.
- Ottolenghi, Carol. *Rip Van Winkle*. Brighter Child, 2004.
- Simpson, David L. *Comedy and Tragedy*. DePaul University, 1998.
- Stahl, J.D., "Struwwelpeter and the Development of the American Children's Book." *The Princeton University Library Chronicle*, vol. 62, no. 1, 2000, pp. 31-44.