



THESIS - Vol. 9, No. 2, Autumn 2020

International Research Journal



Kolegji AAB
CILESI. LIDERSHIP. SUKSESI

ISSN: 1848-4298 (Print)

ISSN: 2623-8381 (Online)

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How to cite this article:

Mikado, N. (2020). Book Review on Rip Van Winkle and the Legend of Sleepy Hollow: Illustrated 200th Anniversary Edition. *Thesis*, 9 (2), 337-340.



Published online: December 23, 2020.



Article received on the 9th of October, 2020.
Article accepted on the 24th of November, 2020.



Conflict of Interest: Author declare no conflict of interest.

Book Review on *Rip Van Winkle and The Legend of Sleepy Hollow: Illustrated 200th Anniversary Edition*

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Abstract

This short essay reviewed *Rip Van Winkle and The Legend of Sleepy Hollow: Illustrated 200th Anniversary Edition*, which was just published in April of this year by SeaWolf Press. After clarifying the context in which it ought to be received and read, I explained that the new publication, containing a large number of exquisite illustrations drawn by Newell Convers Wyeth and Arthur Rackham, should be considered highly valuable in that it would help present-day people to read the two famous tales in the original by enabling them to vividly visualize a bygone world that has completely lost in material terms.

Keywords: American Literature, Washington Irving, *The Sketch Book*, "Rip Van Winkle", "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow"

Reviewed Work: Irving, W. (2020). *Rip Van Winkle and The Legend of Sleepy Hollow: Illustrated 200th Anniversary Edition*. Orinda, CA: SeaWolf Press.

Few will gainsay that Washington Irving occupies a distinguished position in the pantheon of world literature. The penman stood high in public esteem already in his lifetime, as evidenced by the following accolades that an anonymous critic contemporary with him expressed: “Mr. Irving is unsurpassed by any of his contemporaries as a writer of English undefiled” (“The Monthly Periodicals”, 1838, p. 296). Over a century has elapsed since his passing, and he is now sometimes called “the Father of American Literature” (Rozakis, 1999, p.39), though some may suppose that James Fenimore Cooper or Mark Twain should assume the title. With only a cursory search on the internet, one can realize that academic studies and journalistic essays on him are produced in liberal quantities every year.

Although many of his literary pieces are still widely read, one can safely presume that his magnum opus is *The Sketch Book*. Composed of thirty-four vignettes that are heterogeneous in style, setting, and subject, it has fascinated people of various generations and backgrounds and made a profound impact on succeeding writers. For example, it is well-known that Dickens, arguably the most significant novelist England has ever produced, drew much inspiration from it, as Davis (1999) confirmed: “The most immediate models for Dickens’s sketches were those of Washington Irving, whose *Sketch Book* influenced Dickens’s early work in particular” (p. 354).

Among the tales included therein, “Rip Van Winkle” and “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” are undoubtedly the most esteemed pieces. Set in old America that had hardly modernized, they sharply signalize themselves by their incredible degree of narrative perfection and have generated countless adaptations;

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Rip Van Winkle has become part of everyday vocabulary. Notwithstanding the recognition that they have obtained, however, it is questionable whether those who know their names have read them in the original, for they are written in antiquated English and laden with things and manners which have become unfamiliar to the current world where artificial materials, elaborate machinery, and electricity abound. In reality, to those who are unacquainted with the practices of nineteenth-century America, they are likely to come across as remote.

Allowing for the circumstances, we should deem *Rip Van Winkle and The Legend of Sleepy Hollow: Illustrated 200th Anniversary Edition*, which has been put on sale since April of this year by SeaWolf Press, to be a highly timely publication in diverse respects. Certainly, the volume is by no means a genuinely original work because its content is the titular two tales which, as I have just explained above, originally constituted *The Sketch Book* with other thirty-two episodes; in addition, bibliographically speaking, it is a compound of two booklets that were published decades ago. It, though, is different from many other slackly made reprints of out-of-copyright classics that currently inundate the market and has a variety of noteworthy merits. For example, both of the two narratives are neither abridged nor modified, and, besides, well-nigh free from misprints and omissions that are quite common in a reprint of a centuries-old text.

Yet, as the title so strongly suggests, the most remarkable excellence of this book consists in, of course, the dainty illustrations adorning the stories elegantly. Only by casually leafing through it, one will realize that most pages display one or two pictures that are so exquisitely rendered that they can greatly help the readers to vividly conjure up the daily customs and the spiritual mores of the far distant past. Although the majority of the readers would readily concur that the slightly

caricatural cuts in “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” are of sound and solid quality, they will obtain a deeper and indelible impression from the picturesque drawings in “Rip Van Winkle”. They are the artworks of Newell Convers Wyeth and Arthur Rackham, who are, albeit relatively marginal if compared with such renowned figures as William Hogarth and George Cruikshank, eligible to be counted as two of the greatest illustrators in modern art history. Evoking effectively a bygone world which is now completely lost in material terms, they make the stories familiar even to those who were born about two centuries after their first publication.

Naturally, it is not the case that the book has no blemishes at all. It would have been better if Rackham’s impressionistic paintings were printed in full color, and the publisher should have provided notice that the illustrations in “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” are not the works of Wyeth or Rackham. That said, these are never fatal defects, and the merits amply compensate for them. To sum up, we ought to cordially welcome the volume which will entice a new set of tenderfoots into Irving’s fabulous world.

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