

# Washington Irving and the beginning of fiction

# Where to frame Washington Irving?

## American Romanticism

- **Features of American Romanticism**
  - A. Foreign Influences
  - B. But with an identity of its own
    - i. peculiar American experience (landscape, pioneering to the West, Indian civilization, new nation and new democracy)
    - ii. Puritan heritage (more moralizing than mere entertainment; e.g. *The Scarlet Letter*)

# Washington Irving (1783-1859)

- Washington Irving was an American author, essayist, biographer and historian of the early 19th century. He was best known for his short stories "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" and "Rip Van Winkle", both of which appear in his book *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.* His historical works include biographies of George Washington, and several histories of 15th-century Spain dealing with subjects such as Columbus and the Alhambra. Irving also served as the U.S. minister to Spain from 1842 to 1846.



# Significance

- “Father of American fiction” (he wanted American literature to be an independent *art* free from the Puritan constraints of *utility* (serving moral or religious purposes) and *factuality* (telling ‘truths’)).
- The first American writer of fiction to gain international fame
- The short story as a genre in American literature began with Irving’s *The Sketch Book*
- *The Sketch Book* also marked the beginning of American Romanticism

# Biographical details

- Irving was born in New York into a merchant family of Scottish-English origin. His parents greatly admired General George Washington (hence his name)
- From a very early age, he showed literary talent. Later, he studied law, but practiced only briefly.
- His first book *A History of New York*, written under the name of Diedrich Knickerbocker, was a great success and won him wide popularity.
- In 1815, he went to England to take care of his family business, and when it failed, he had to write to support himself.

- With the publication of *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon*, he became a writer of international repute
- In 1826, as an American diplomatic attaché, he was sent to Spain, where he gathered material for his writing
- From 1829 to 1832, he was secretary of the U.S Legation in London
- Then when he was fifty, he returned to America, where he spent the rest of his life in Sunnyside”, except for a period of four years (1842--1846), when he was Minister to Spain.

# Sunnyside, by the Hudson River



# “Rip Van Winkle” (1820)

Included in *The Sketch-Book of Geoffrey Crayon* (1819-20), a miscellany of travel sketches, essays of opinion and ‘folktales’ like “Rip Van Winkle”, put together by a Geoffrey Crayon, a fictional persona of Irving’s own creation

It was based on German folktales



Old Rip

- Washington Irving uses fictional personas in his stories, like that of the fickle historian Diedrich Knickerbocker, the narrator of “Rip Van Winkle”, to mock a literary convention that had been created to counter the claim that ‘fiction tells lies’.

- The story starts in pre-revolutionary times and ends after Independence
- It involves a “dysfunctional” husband and a dominating wife
- It is told by an unreliable historian who has *researched* and *written* the tale. The story is bracketed by the comments of the person who *found* Knickerbocker’s manuscript and who offers it to the reader.
- The story is complex and invites a variety of readings.

# Topics for discussion

- Tradition and change
- American identity
- The power of nature in the American imagination
- Gendered dimension of American literature
- Domestic life vs. public life
- The power of myth

- In *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell defines the basic struggle of the traditional hero of myth and legend in terms of the symbolic sequence of **withdrawal-initiation-return**. The hero abandons his family or his community, undergoes an initiation, which is usually an encounter with supernatural forces from which he emerges victorious, and eventually returns to society, wiser than he was before. Is this pattern applicable to the story? Which elements in this archetypal sequence can be found in Irving's tale? In what respect does the tale deviate from the archetypal pattern theorised by Campbell?

# Critical readings of the tale

- A political allegory of freedom and change America
- A fable of masculine protest, an archetypal story of male flight from home and responsibilities into the wilderness (what Leslie Fiedler calls “the ‘home-as-hell’ archetype”)
- An archetypal story of American individualism
- A universal story of withdrawal, initiation and return

# Bibliography

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Sources from Internet and the Library of Congress

