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A Legend That Will Knock Your Head Off:
a review on Washington Irving's "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow"

SUMMARY
The superstitious Ichabod Crane comes to Sleepy Hollow, New
York as the new schoolmaster. Falling for the rich and beautiful Katrina
Van Tassel, Ichabod must compete against the town's local hero Brom
Bones to win her hand. Meanwhile, residents continue to tell ghost stories
- one in particular of the Headless Horseman, who ranks as the dominant
spectre in Sleepy Hollow.

INTRODUCTION
"There was something in the moody and dogged silence of this pertinacious
companion, that was mysterious and appalling. It was soon fearfully accounted for. On
mounting a rising ground, which brought the figure of his fellow-traveller in relief against
the sky, gigantic in height, and muffled in a cloak, Ichabod was horror-struck, on
perceiving that he was headless!—but his horror was still more increased, on observing
that the head, which should have rested on his shoulders, was carried before him on the
pomme of the saddle: his terror rose to desperation; he rained a shower of kicks and
blows upon Gunpowder, hoping, by a sudden movement, to give his companion the slip—
but the spectre started full jump with him. Away then they dashed, through thick and
thin; stones flying, and sparks flashing at every bound."
The scene previously described is from Washington Irving's most famous story, "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow." The climax of this supernatural tale, it is the start of the famous chase between the Headless Horseman and the terrified Ichabod Crane. It is not surprising that "Sleepy Hollow" has stood the test of time, engraving itself as one of America's most beloved folklores and inspiring people of all generations. "Sleepy Hollow" is the ultimate, classic ghost story complete with superstition and mystery in a supernatural setting. The story helped Washington Irving rise to fame, and it would end up bringing fame and tourism to the real-world town of Sleepy Hollow, New York thanks to several adaptations of the story—the most famous being the Disney animation and the Tim Burton movie. This beloved legend involving two completely different men competing to win the hand of the wealthy Katrina Van Tassel provides us with a rich narrative, memorable characters, and a definite focus on imagination.

**HOW I WAS INTRODUCED TO "THE LEGEND OF SLEEPY HOLLOW"**

While I vaguely remember watching Disney's 1949 animation *The Adventures of Ichabod and Mr. Toad* as a child, it was Tim Burton's 1999 film *Sleepy Hollow* that ultimately introduced and got me hooked on the legend. I'm a huge fan of both Johnny Depp and Tim Burton, so I was really excited about *Sleepy Hollow* when I first watched it back in high school. Even though Burton changed quite a few important things from Irving's original story, he still manages to present the same chilling, superstitious, and dreamy atmosphere of the Sleepy Hollow village and residents—an the main characters still possess a lot of the same qualities that they had in the original short story. The competition between Ichabod and Brom still has a strong presence and Burton's interpretation of the Headless Horseman is absolutely everything that I would want and expect from the ghost of the Hessian soldier. Today, Ichabod Crane still ranks as one of my favorite characters played by Johnny Depp. Although the Ichabod Crane in this film isn't a schoolmaster, but a detective looking to solve murders caused by the Headless Horseman, he is
just as timid and jumpy as he is in the original story. If it was up to Depp, he would have transformed himself into looking more like the character described by Washington Irving, complete with big ears (Paramount denied his requests). After watching _Sleepy Hollow_ and becoming immersed in the story, I then read Washington Irving’s "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow."

**WHY IT IS SO GOOD, AND WHY I LOVE IT**

Of course, I love "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" for reasons other than the fact that I adore the Tim Burton movie. The imagery and narrative is remarkable and is written in such a way that readers gain a real and detailed understanding of each scene. The entire story plays out and is described as if it were a film. It makes for some really strong visual images, such as the glamorous party at the Van Tassel residence or Ichabod first seeing the Headless Horseman silhouetted against the sky - followed by the short and abrupt (yet powerful) chase through the forest. Images such as these are probably why the story has been such a popular choice to visually adapt - whether in movies, television, or art.

The story is set during the late 18th century along the Hudson River Valley in New York. Within the first few pages of the story in the Washington Irving collection _The Legend of Sleepy Hollow and Other Writings_ by Barnes & Noble Classics, Irving gives a detailed description of where Sleepy Hollow is located: in a valley not far from Tarry Town. He describes Sleepy Hollow as "one of the quietest places in the whole world." Irving goes on to describe the setting and atmosphere of Sleepy Hollow as if he were establishing a character. He writes that "a drowsy, dreamy influence seems to hang over the land." Sleepy Hollow seems to be an enchanted place, as it "still continues under the sway of some witching power, that holds a spell over the minds of the good people, causing them to walk in a continual reverie." Irving continues describing to what extent the residents are bewitched by their land in the following:

"They are given to all kinds of marvellous beliefs; are subject to trances and visions; and frequently see strange sights, and hear music and voices in the air. The whole
neighborhood abounds with local tales, haunted spots, and twilight superstitions; stars shoot and meteors glare oftener across the valley than in any other part of the country..."

With this, Irving gives us an excellent narrative of what type of atmosphere hangs over Sleepy Hollow. "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" is an example of American Romanticism with elements of Gothic literature. This detailed narrative sets the mood for this supernatural tale that deals heavily with emotions such as jealousy, desire, and sheer terror. As I just described, Washington Irving puts a great emphasis on the setting, to the point where Sleepy Hollow itself becomes more like a character, especially because of how much influence it has over its residents.

In regards to the story's other characters, they are another reason why "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" is such a classic, and Irving invests as much care and thought into developing them as with the setting. While his descriptions may seem a bit exaggerated or over-the-top, they are oddly appropriate in that they help showcase the characters' personalities. Based on Irving's description, Ichabod Crane is one of the quirkiest characters that I have come across:

"He was tall, but exceedingly lank, with narrow shoulders, long arms and legs, hands that dangled a mile out of his sleeves, feet that might have served for shovels, and his whole frame most loosely hung together. His head was small, and flat at top, with huge ears, large green glassy eyes, and a long snipe nose, so that it looked like a weather-cock, perched upon his spindle neck, to tell which way the wind blew."

Irving also mentions that, from a distance, Ichabod could very well be mistaken for a scarecrow. He's very interesting, but his morals are incredibly lacking - especially in that he wants to marry Katrina only because of her beauty and because of how rich her family is. Despite his lanky build and timid personality, Ichabod is ironically the only man brave enough to go up against Brom Van Brunt for the hand of Katrina. Brom is the complete opposite of Ichabod. He's incredibly confident, brave and strong. He is
described as having a "Herculean frame" and it earns him the nickname Brom Bones. Ichabod, who recently moved to Sleepy Hollow as the new schoolmaster, is superstitious (like many of the other residents) and he takes pleasure in learning about the supernatural - which leads to his creative imagination.

And it is a combination of Ichabod's superstition and imagination that ultimately messes with him. His imagination causes him to be completely jumpy and terrified of anything that seems out of the ordinary. And that's why he is so entertaining to read about. Imagination is a strong theme in "Sleepy Hollow." It is mentioned that anyone who goes into Sleepy Hollow, if they stay there long enough, then they develop a really strong imagination and begin seeing things. It happened with Ichabod. While Ichabod definitely encountered a figure riding a horse in the woods that scared him out of town, the threat was probably not like he imagined, as it is hinted that Brom Bones had disguised himself as the Headless Horseman. One, Irving emphasizes that Brom is a fantastic horseman and that he is constantly riding with his friends late into the night. Also, whenever someone mentions the disappearance of Ichabod or the shattered pumpkin, Brom would always laugh and it led people to "suspect that he knew more about the matter than he chose to tell." Finally, Brom had motive to want Ichabod gone since he wanted to marry Katrina.

WASHINGTON IRVING & CONCLUSION

First published in 1820 in Washington Irving's collection The Sketch-Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent., "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" is Irving's most popular work (along with "Rip Van Winkle"). It was an instant success, establishing Irving as a celebrity in the literary world and it proved that America was more than capable of creating a unique and rich culture of her own. English professor Peter Norberg states that Washington Irving "helped sketch the contours of a cultural landscape that was unique to the United States, not a pale imitation of the literature of England and Europe" and that "Sleepy Hollow is
an early example of American authors self-consciously setting out to create an imaginative space for artistic creativity." With "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," Irving introduced to us a location in America that was just as intriguing as anywhere in Europe. Irving accurately modeled the Sleepy Hollow village in his story off of North Tarrytown, New York. Today, it is known as Sleepy Hollow because the residents voted to change the name in honor of Irving's story.

It's actually one of the coolest things about the short story because you can actually go there and follow the route in which the Headless Horseman chases Ichabod; the only things that aren't still standing today are the schoolhouse, Major André's tree, and the original bridge that Ichabod crossed in hopes of escaping the Headless Horseman. The real-life town of Sleepy Hollow, New York has become a popular tourist destination thanks to Washington Irving. It is especially popular around Halloween, when the residents really go all-out on cemetery tours, dramatic readings of the short story, haunted hayrides (complete with a Headless Horseman) and a haunted trail known as Horseman’s Hollow. The characters from "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" are likely based off of residents from the area, such as the Van Tassel family. Even the Headless Horseman himself was more than likely inspired by the headless corpse of a Hessian soldier that was found in Sleepy Hollow and he is apparently buried near the Van Tassels in the Old Dutch Burying Ground, his grave unmarked. Not far from the Old Dutch Burying Ground is the Sleepy Hollow Cemetery, where Washington Irving is buried.

Today, "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" continues to hold a strong audience of all ages and it is one of those tales that mostly everyone is familiar with regardless of whether or not they have actually read the short story. Children know it through the Disney animation, along with illustrated child-friendly storybook versions of the story. Teenagers and adults know it through either reading the original story in school or by watching any of the more terrifying movie adaptations, such as Tim Burton’s Sleepy Hollow, or they just know its iconic characters such as the Headless Horseman (who is no doubt a popular figure.
around Halloween, as well as in other horror and ghost stories). Regardless, "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" is one of America's most loved short stories, and it'll make one think twice the next time they hear the galloping of hooves nearby.

REFERENCES/SOURCES USED

- *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow and Other Writings* by Washington Irving, with Introduction and Notes by Peter Norberg. Published by Barnes & Noble Classics in 2006.

- Wikipedia.org
  
  

- Visit Sleepy Hollow: http://www.visitsleepyhollow.com/

CONTRIBUTOR'S NOTE

Chelsea Lowe is majoring in Digital Media at ETSU. She has been captivated by "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" ever since reading it and watching Tim Burton's *Sleepy Hollow* in the 10th grade.