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# The Hidden "Homo" in "Rip Van Winkle:" A Queer Theory Reading

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THE HIDDEN “HOMO” IN “RIP VAN WINKLE:”  
A QUEER THEORY READING

ENGL-274: Introduction to Criticism and Theory  
Dr. Meg Gillette  
Winter 2014-2015

Short Analytical Essay

## THE HIDDEN “HOMO” IN “RIP VAN WINKLE:” A QUEER THEORY READING

Consciousness is power. To create a new understanding of our literature is to make possible a new effect of that literature on us... To expose and question that complex of ideas and mythologies about women and men which exist in our society... It [American literature] must be entered into from a point of view which questions its values and assumptions and which has its investment in making available to consciousness precisely that which the literature wishes to keep hidden.

~Judith Fetterley, *The Resisting Reader*~

“Rip Van Winkle” has been analyzed from multiple sides of the gender perspective, especially on a side of feminism with Judith Fetterley’s famous claim that American literature villainizes women and makes readers into “women-haters,” but “Rip Van Winkle” has not been read from a point of view that goes beyond gender to sexuality. Part of Fetterley’s claim, similar to many other critics’ claims, is that Rip’s main goal is to escape, both work and women. But Rip is not just trying to escape work and women; he is, possibly subconsciously, trying to escape the heteronormative society that he and we as members of modern America are victims of today. “Rip Van Winkle” by Washington Irving, although appearing “innocently” or normatively heterosexual is coded, consciously or subconsciously, in support of homosexuality. There are four factors that most clearly display how “Rip Van Winkle” explores queer desire: the characterization of Dame Van Winkle, the homosocial relationships of Rip Van Winkle to his male friends, Rip’s experience on the mountain, and the overall transformative or revealing nature of the text. What this text achieves is a step forward in the promotion of awareness for queer text and subtext as it also reveals the negative aspect of heteronormative life and reading that critics over the nearly 200 years have ignored or simply missed, enforcing the presence and power of heteronormativity.

Dame Van Winkle's characterization, as presented to the reader through the narrator's and Rip Van Winkle's perspectives, disparages heterosexual women and heterosexual/heteronormative relationships. Dame Van Winkle is domineering. Her overbearing personality dictates Rip Van Winkle and because of her power over him, his masculinity, or traditional masculine role, is undermined. Rip is described as "an obedient, henpecked husband" who, like other men "under the discipline of shrews at home" has his "tempers... doubtless rendered pliant and malleable in the fiery furnace of domestic tribulation" (Irving 428). This description of negative heteronormative relationships is not solely depicted by Rip and Dame but includes other men and their "shrews" of wives. Fetterley supportively says that "the opposition of Rip and Dame is extended to women and men in general" (5). Through Rip's reaction when he discovers that his wife has died, the negative view of heteronormative relationships becomes especially clear. When Rip ascertains that his wife has died at the end of the story he is relieved: "there was a drop of comfort, at least, in this intelligence" (Irving 439). As the story closes, although he is perplexed about the new world he has entered into, he is most happy about the fact that "...he had got his neck out of the yoke of matrimony, and could go in and out whenever he pleased without dreading the tyranny of Dame Van Winkle" (Irving 440). Rip's relationship with Dame Van Winkle enforces time and time again Rip's desire to escape from not only his personal heteronormative relationship but the heteronormativity of the society that surrounds him. Their relationship also provides a good comparison to his homosocial relationships with his friends.

The poor heterosexual relationship between Rip Van Winkle and his wife makes the strong homosocial relationships Rip has with his male friends, and even his male dog, seem better and in turn more natural. In comparison to Rip's positive reaction to the death of his wife his negative reaction to the death of all his male compatriots shows a stronger "homo" relationship

than “hetero.” “He looked in vain for” his friends upon his return and he didn’t look for Dame Van Winkle or even inquire about her until the very last question he asked (Irving 436). Rip “sighed” for the loss of his dog’s love and “Rip’s heart died away” when he heard of the loss of his friends and their homosocial relationships (Irving 438). They were who he sought out for support and escape from his wife.

In comparing Rip’s reaction to the death of his wife vs his male friends it is clear that the homosocial relationships Rip formed with his male counterparts before their deaths was more natural to his character than any relationship he had with women. Rip’s original attempts to escape from Dame Van Winkle and the heteronormative expectations of society were to seek solace in the companionship of his male cohorts. “Times grew worse and worse with Rip Van Winkle as years of matrimony rolled on...For a long while he used to console himself, when driven from home, by frequenting a kind of perpetual club of sages, philosophers, and other idle personages of the village...” (Irving 430). As Fetterley put it: “...men provide Rip with the opportunity and instrument of escape” (7). The men were indeed Rip’s solace from the “hetero” expectations in the village. Rip was allowed from time to time the idleness and companionship of men who respected him and valued his company but “from even this stronghold the unlucky Rip was at length routed by his termagant wife, who would suddenly break in upon the tranquility of the assemblage, and call the members all to naught...” (Irving 431). With the presence of his ever “normative” wife, Rip could not find true escape in the village. Rip had to seek solace from reality, “poor Rip was at last reduced almost to despair; and his only alternative, to escape from the labor of the farm and clamor of his wife, was to take gun in hand and stroll away into the woods” (Irving 431). When escaping to his homosocial relationships

does not succeed in relieving him from the terrors of Dame Van Winkle and the heteronormative society he lives in he escapes alas into his dreams and fantasies.

Rip Van Winkle's experience on the mountain, made up of exclusively men, can be read as a homosocial and homosexual fantasy or dream because it is an escape from heteronormative society, there are sexually coded double meanings throughout, and it unveils Rip's homosocial/homosexual nature. As Rip's journey into his homosocial/homosexual dreams begins, he remains for a time in the reality of heteronormative society. When he meets the man on the mountain "he [thinks] his fancy must have deceived him" he also "felt a vague apprehension stealing over him" (Irving 432). These quotations are examples of the subconscious affects heteronormativity has on people. Rip does not know why, but for some reason he feels uncomfortable with his "homo" fantasy. The text then becomes sexually coded with double meanings. For example, Rip and his *companion* end up "mutually *relieving* each other [emphasis added]" (Irving 432). He also then later refers to his company in the mountains as a "party of pleasure" (Irving 433). Irving's diction is a strong indication of the queer subtext, of homosexual desire and pleasure, contained in this mountain adventure. As Rip's voyage continues he experiences moments when he tries to fight his queer urges, but he begins to realize that they come more naturally to him: "...yet there was something strange and incomprehensible about the unknown that inspired awe and checked familiarity" (Irving 432). I equate this revelation to Rip finally discovering his natural inclinations which draw towards the "homo," which to society is strange, and away from the "hetero," which to society is familiar/normal. Another moment when Rip begins to understand his natural leanings is when the men in his fantasy begin to stare at him and "his heart turned within him, and his knees smote together" (Irving 433). Under their gazes he felt flustered, so flustered in fact that his body naturally

reacted. Nearing the end of Rip's fantasy he begins to accept and even indulge in his queer desires. The coded meaning in the following quotation very simply sums up his acceptance and indulgence.

By degrees Rip's awe and apprehension subsided. He even ventured, when no eye was fixed upon him, to taste the beverage, which he found had much of the flavor of excellent Hollands. He was naturally a thirsty soul, and was soon tempted to repeat the draught. One taste provoked another; and he repeated his visits to the flagon... (Irving 433)

The flagon and the beverage inside it represent queer acts. When Rip begins to accept his queer desires his "apprehension subsides." When he begins to embrace his yearnings he indulges in pleasures: "to taste" and to be "tempted." To put it simply: he tried it out, and he liked it.

Overall, navigating through the rough terrain of heterosexual/ heteronormative relationships as well as homosocial/ homosexual relationships, "Rip Van Winkle" tells a tale of discovery and revelation of Rip's natural queer desires. The world that Rip returns to after his 20-year-dream is changed, but it is also strangely familiar. The houses are the same or there are buildings in the same locations but the names above the doors are different and the portrait of King George III is replaced with a portrait of George Washington. This is a reflection of Rip's change or newly revealed true self because it maintains things that were already present and reveals something that is different or was once hidden. "He doubted his own identity, and whether he was himself or another man" (Irving 438). Rip Van Winkle discovered through his homosexual fantasy in the mountain his own queerness that had only been hidden before by the expectations of heteronormativity.

Ultimately, what is at stake in the conscious queer reading of this text is the general population realizing their contribution, through unconscious heteronormative readings of any and all literary text, to the ongoing presence and growth of heteronormative thinking. "Rip Van

Winkle” is a coded text that explores queer desire through its portrayal of heterosexual women and relationships as well as its portrayal of homosocial relationships and homosexual fantasy. Although the possible queerness in “Rip Van Winkle” may seem of concern only to a small group of people it should, in fact, concern the general populace because as Fetterley said “consciousness is power” (xix). Being conscious of our heteronormative thinking and, in turn, the possibility of its reversal is key to change.

#### WORK CITED

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