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Comment on Artistic Features of Washington Irving's *The Sketch Book*

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Abstract

Washington Irving is a great American romantic writer. He employs his beautiful works, unique description to create different genders of literary works. *The Sketch Book* is seen as his masterpiece, because of its language like poems, the author's contemplation of scene he darts his eyes into as well as his detailed description of what he associated with the scene he saw. This paper aims to make a comment on the artistic features of Washington Irving's *The Sketch Book* from three respects. The first is insert of poem functioning theme interpretation of his articles. The second is the author's evaluation knitted with the narration. The last is the minute description of the scene by refine words.

Key words: Washington Irving; *The Sketch Book*; Insert of poem; Evaluation knitted with the narration; Scene minute description by refine words

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INTRODUCTION

Washington Irving is the famous American writer who is regarded as father of American literature. He creates the first American short story *Rip Van Winkle*, and also writes a lot of biographies of some great men such as George Washington, the first president of his country, the world-famous navigator Christopher Columbus, and British

famous novelist Oliver Goldsmith. As a historian, he publishes his *The History of New York* and many volumes of Spanish history. His great book *The Sketch Book* marks the beginning of American romanticism. Washington Irving is noteworthy for his minute description, his humorous style and foreshadowing writing. His devotion to American literature lies in not only his a variety of writing genders, but also his unique writing style and artist features embodied in his works. *The Sketch Book* is Washington Irving's masterpiece. It is in *The Sketch Book* perhaps more than another of his works that the qualities of style and mind which have so characterized Washington Irving, and endeavored himself to English-speaking people. This book is so popular for most varied forms, covering a wide range of humanity and a plenty of humor. Reading between the lines, we can touch the grace, grandeur and pathos. The fancy and the genial atmosphere are unfolded in front of readers. The characters' life and their being and movements are reappeared in a detailed and vivid way.

The Sketch Book affords the charming glimpses of the good old English society from the Christmas's dinner of English family to venerable Westminster Abbey. It depicts the tatterdemalion *Rip Van Winkle*, timid-hearted school master Ichabod Crane, which enable us to associate with the weird witchery of legend through its author's fascinating writing techniques. Next, the author of this paper makes the analysis of Washington Irving's artistic features displayed in his great book *The Sketch Book*.

1. POEM INSERT AS THEME INTERPRETATION OF AN ARTICLE

Washington Irving possesses of a broad and genial nature, a poetic temperament and an ornate power of vivid description. His delicate touch of beauty and his refined imagination have revived the romantic legends in his *The Sketch Book*. These poems can be read almost at the

beginning of his article and amidst of his text. They can mingle with the context, the contents, echoing Irving's emotion he conveys. From these poems, we can have a good comprehension of the author's theme he wants to deal with and his joy and sorrow, for example, at the beginning of Christmas, Irving cites an old song named *Hue and Cry after Christmas* to begin with his topic of Christmas in England and recall the pictures his fancy used to draw in the happy and harmonious Christmas in England.

A man might then behold,
At Christmas, in each hall.
Good fires to curb the cold,
And meat for great and small,
The neighbors were friendly bidden,
And all had welcome true,
When this old cap was new.

By using this old song with topic of Christmas at the beginning of his article, Washington Irving then focuses on his subject by such a statement "there is nothing in England that exercises a more delightful speed over my imagination than the lingering of the holiday customs and rural games of former times." From the old song relating to the traditional Christmas customs in England and Irving's fancy of the former rural games, we can see Irving's attitude towards old, old, good old days.

In *The Voyage*, another text of *The Sketch Book*, we can also read Irving's citation of old poem which makes an introductory remark of the topic of an American visiting Europe on sea.

Ships, ships, I will describe you,
Amidst of the main,
I will come and try you,
What you are protecting,
And projecting,
What's your end and aim,
... ..

One goes abroad for merchandise and trading,
Another stays to keep his country from invading,
A third is coming home with rich and wealthy lading,
Hallo, my fancie, whither wilt thou go.

In this old poem, it is easy for the author to interpret Irving's topic and theme before our reading his text. In Irving's time, a ship is only a kind of transport tool for people, who pay their visit to Old and New Continents.

Irving cites the old poem about ship with the intention of leading up to his subject of the theme of *The Voyage*—making an excellent portrayal of author's long voyage from the United States to Europe, and producing a state of mind peculiarly fitted to receive new and vivid impressions. The examples mentioned above fully demonstrates Irving's artistic feature from the respect of the function of poem and song citation. They interpret the topic and the theme of Irving's articles in *The Sketch*

Book helping readers understand his works in their pre-reading of the texts.

2. AUTHOR'S EVALUATION KNITTED WITH THE NARRATION

In *The Sketch Book*, another artistic feature consists in Irving making his evaluation and conveys his emotion while describing the scene and characters he encounters in his *The Sketch Book*. He skillfully knits his vivid, minute description of the scenes he saw with his strong expression and emotions he gives to in his articles of *The Sketch Book*, especially in his article *Westminster Abbey* writing. Its artistic feature of author's evaluation knitted with the vivid scene description can be touched clear in this article, for instance, at the beginning of this article Irving reveals his respect and awes to the former great figures buried in *Westminster Abbey* and draws the pictures of the glory and decay by selecting such settings: "one of those sober and rather melancholy days in the latter parts of autumn"; "the shadowy vaults and many sepulchers" to exchange the scene he is making glimpses of and his sense with readers. Having passed in Poet's Corner of Westminster Abbey and watched the simple monuments of the former great poets, Irving makes his evaluation that the lives of literary men afford no striking themes for the sculptor, but the great part have busts, medallions, and sometimes mere inscriptions. The Irving conveys his emotion after his contemplating poets' tombs in this way:

"The world cherishes poet's renown for it has been purchased not by deeds of violence and blood, but by the diligent dispensation of pleasure."

Irving's evaluation always accompanies his description of scene he is moved by. In each scene which provokes his emotion, he will make a lot of association with it. For example, in his account of Westminster Abbey, after he depicts his stroll from the haughty Elizabeth tomb to the lovely and unfortunate Mary's tomb. He makes such evaluation that "two small aisles on each side of the kings' sepulchers present a touching instance of equality of the graves, which bring down the oppressor to a level with the oppressed, and mingled the cluster of the bitterest enemies together". Through this evaluation we can easily percept the author's idea and point of view in this article: The idol of today pushes the hero of yesterday out of our recollection, and will, in turn, be supplanted by his successor of tomorrow. How false and fugitive are human's reputation and honor.

From the analysis of Irving's evaluation knitted with the description of the scene, we can find out the author has a strong romantic temperament, and skillful writing technique. He can convey his emotion in his descriptions to make a sincere atmosphere for his readers.

3. MINUTE DESCRIPTION OF THE SCENE BY THE REFINE WORDS

The popularity of *The Sketch Book* is due to Irving's minute description feature. Irving has made a great achievement of his graceful style. Yet his graceful style is formed partly by employment of his refined words and minute description. In his first story *Rip Van Winkle*, Irving used his refine words to portray the magic scene of Catskill Mountains in this way.

"Every change of season, every change of weather, indeed every hour of the day, produces some change in magical hues and shapes of these mountains ...when the weather is fair and settled, they are clothed in blue and purple, and print their bold outlines on the clear evening sky..." From such description, Irving lies a shadowing of the main character *Rip Van Winkle's* adventures in these mountains. And we can imagine the vivid picture of the Catskill Mountains and percept the beauty and mystery of that place.

Irving uses his refine words not only to make a detailed description of the settings of his story, but also to make detailed humorous description of his main characters. His words are put in the use of them, thus a humorous effect can be made, for example, in *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*, Irving employs a lot of humorous and refine words to depict his main character Ichabod Crane's appearance characteristics in the followings:

"He was tall, but exceedingly lank, with narrow shoulders, long arms and legs, hands that dangled a smile out of his sleeves, feet that might have served for shovels..." From this description of Ichabod Crane, we can see that the author uses two attributive clauses modifying crane's hands and feet. Such two descriptive clauses

display Irving's graceful style and feature of diction. By these two exaggerations we can touch the humorous male by Irving. This detailed description of the main characters creates a light and amusing atmosphere in his work.

To sum up, Irving applies many graceful and new writing techniques in his *The Sketch Book*. His refine words, minute description of the scene and character, the romantic touch as well as his evaluation knitted with his description impress the world deeply. Washington Irving's citation of old songs and poems can easily give a guidance for readers reading his masterpiece and interpret his topic and theme well. His evaluation of matters as well as the characters knitted with description make vivid scenes and humorous plots and convey the author's contemplation and strong emotion. Irving's minute description by refine words creates the good settings and sense of mystery in *The Sketch Book*. All these artistic features have built up Washington Irving's graceful, humorous style; his unique writing techniques and aesthetic point of view. We can make a thorough analysis of Irving's works by such artistic features.

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