

The Legend of Sleepy Hollow: An Ambiguous Ghost Tale

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The Legend of Sleepy Hollow: An Ambiguous Ghost Tale

Faith is not a choice that comes naturally. ‘Seeing is believing’ is a notion that many people choose to live by, limiting their views of the world and the universe to the confinement of their experiences. Donald Anderson seems to express the same belief in his critique entitled, “Irving’s ‘The Legend of Sleepy Hollow.’” Anderson interprets the legend as being an ordinary story about the undoing of Ichabod Crane by Brom Van Brunt and himself. However, there is more to the tale. While “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” is in part about the undoing of Ichabod, Irving also intentionally uses ambiguity to develop a supernatural ghost story.

One way that Anderson says Ichabod causes his own undoing is by allowing his mind to dwell on subjects that obscure his view of reality. He supports this with the fact that Ichabod spends so much time reading Cotton Mather’s writings about the Salem witch trials (Anderson 208). He further supports this belief by discussing Ichabod’s love for the ghost stories of Sleepy Hollow. Ichabod not only exposes himself to these superstitious tales, but he allows the stories to dominate his thoughts (Anderson 208). One thing Anderson does not discuss is that Ichabod repeatedly puts himself in eerie environments. The narrator reports that Ichabod often spends his afternoons reading his mythical and supernatural narratives until he could no longer see. With his mind full of the unnatural events he would read about he would then walk home through the dark forest that was full of obscure and startling sounds. All of these are habits that would be sure to alter a person’s sense of reality.

While Ichabod put his mind in a place where it would be hard not to go crazy, Anderson's interpretation is incomplete. Sleepy Hollow is also described as a place that captivates both natives and newcomers alike with its superstitious air. It is said that, "however wide awake they may have been before they entered the sleepy region, they are sure, in a little time, to inhale the witching influence of the air, and begin to grow imaginative—to dream dreams and see apparitions" (Irving 757). The narrator not only describes Sleepy Hollow as being bewitched, causing dreams and illusions, but it is also the home of a ghost known as the headless horseman, "that haunts this enchanted region" (Irving 757). The narrator uses straightforward language leaving no room for uncertainty or ambiguity that Sleepy Hollow is haunted. Anderson's interpretation is valid in the sense that Ichabod's mind is already in a compromised state because of his reading of Cotton Mather and dabbling in the local ghost stories. However, it is also invalid because it is not his imagination and mind alone that cause his frazzled state. The atmosphere and the Hessian trooper are also significant contributing factors.

Anderson interprets "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" very logically, believing that Ichabod's encounter with the headless horseman is simply Brom Van Brunt playing a practical joke on him to scare him away from their mutual love, Katrina Van Tassel. Anderson attributes Ichabod's interaction with the headless horseman to the result of his "overreaching imagination, that eelpot of self-deception that seems to have no ground in reality," and a practical joke of Brom (Anderson 208). He further supports his belief with the finding of the smashed pumpkin the day after the disappearance of Ichabod and the old farmer's report that Ichabod was still alive (Anderson 209-210). Each of these arguments can be rebutted. Ichabod is not simply a madman with an overactive imagination; there is good cause for his superstition because of the nature of Sleepy Hollow.

Brom's laugh at the downfall of Ichabod could easily be taken as proof that he is behind the incident and pretending to be the headless horseman. The finding of the pumpkin may seem to be a confirmation that the interaction between the teacher and the Hessian trooper was fake and a prank of Brom. However, these two items do not eliminate the possibility that what happened between Ichabod and the ghost was real. It is apparent that Brom wants to eliminate Ichabod from his relationship with Katrina by all the pranks he plays on the educator. When the story of Ichabod's ruin is relayed, Brom "always bursts into a hearty laugh at the mention of the pumpkin; which led some to suspect that he knew more about the matter than he chose to tell" (Irving 775). This does not definitively say that Brom was involved in the event. It is part of the ambiguity that the author is trying to develop to create a good ghost story. All this statement says is that Brom found this detail of the story particularly funny. Perhaps it shows that he does not believe the supernaturalism of the story, but even that is a conclusion that cannot be made with confidence. While the pumpkin could be a sign that the whole incident was a mean trick, it is also not a definite indicator. It is possible that the pumpkin was already there before the event happened. These are just a few proposals, but there are many possibilities in regards to how the pumpkin got there. The pumpkin's presense is not a sign that the ghost was not real.

Finally, the report of the old farmer that Ichabod still lives is not definite proof that the event was a joke. All the narrator says is that, "it is true, an old farmer...*brought home the intelligence* that Ichabod Crane was still alive" [emphasis added] (Irving 775). The narrator does not say that it is true that Ichabod still lives, but that it was true that the farmer said so. The old farmer may have made it up, or met another man who he thought was Ichabod. If the farmer's claim is true, the possibility that the supernatural encounter was real still exists. Ichabod could have seen a real ghost and still continued to live elsewhere.

Furthermore, Anderson has neglected to value the significance of the closing paragraph. The narrator states that, “the old country wives...who are the best judges of these matters, maintain to this day that Ichabod was spirited away by supernatural means” (Irving 776). This is a detail that the author uses to further create ambiguity, and makes it impossible to make a confident conclusion.

Donald Anderson is right that “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” is a tale of the undoing of Ichabod Crane. However, his direct and definite interpretation that “Ichabod has been the victim of Brom Bones’s practical joke, but even more, given the eelpot nature of his own mind, the joke he has unwittingly played on himself,” ignores several important aspects of the story such as the nature of Sleepy Hollow, the significance of the wives tales, and the alternate interpretations of the pumpkin and the old farmer’s report. Washington Irving intentionally wrote “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” with some ambiguity to leave the possibility that the supernatural events occurred, and to ignore this is to reduce the complexity of Irving’s work.

Works Cited

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