

Creepy Hollow

Think you've read "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow?"

Gregory Feeley

Washington Irving's "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" has so thoroughly pervaded our cultural imagination that it has taken on the status of a myth, a story that flourishes independent of its original source. Just as everyone hears the tale of Icarus long before they encounter its earliest surviving appearance (it's in Apollodorus), we all know the story of Ichabod Crane and his meeting with the Headless Horseman whether or not we have read Irving's story. At least, we think we do.

Most Americans who can readily recall Don Quixote's battle against the windmill will admit, if pressed, that they may not have encountered it in Cervantes's novel (especially if you remind them that it's 900 pages long). But virtually everyone believes they have read "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow." Writers and teachers are especially confident on this point, asserting (and taking faint umbrage if they sense your doubt) that their knowledge of the tale is drawn from Irving's 1820 short story.

In fact "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow"—not the children's versions available in libraries, nor the numerous film versions, but the story that Irving wrote—is a good deal stranger than the versions everyone remembers. Not a short story at all, Irving's novella is nearly twice as long as any of the other stories in *The Sketch Book* (including "Rip Van Winkle," generally regarded as its companion piece in Federalist-era drollery), and considerably darker. The thrilling chase by the Headless Horseman—so memorably dramatized in the famous Disney cartoon—occupies less than a tenth of its length, which otherwise comprises a truly puzzling admixture of character study, social comedy, and peculiar sexual metaphysics.

Rereading the story for the first time in decades, I was struck by how oddly its emphasis fell other than where it seemed appropriate,

creating discordant gaps between the story I “knew” and the one I was reading. Most salient was the character of Ichabod himself, described with jocosity and bluff humor but nevertheless a figure of striking cruelty. However sympathetic the unnamed narrator may try to feel when describing Ichabod, he in fact shows us a schoolmaster who beats his students excessively, using various implements (and unjust rationales) that are described in passing but rather often.

The injustice of Ichabod’s punishments is apparent even by the standards of Irving’s time. Ichabod gives the slower boys one last gratuitous beating in his haste to close up his schoolhouse in anticipation of the merry-making to be held at the Van Tassel estate that evening, later kicks and cuffs his mount when disappointed in love, and thrashes it in panic when fleeing his headless pursuer. Describing Ichabod as he surveys the largess of the wealthy farmer whose daughter he expect to marry, Irving gives us this remarkable passage:

He was a kind and thankful creature, whose heart dilated in proportion as his skin was filled with good cheer, and whose spirits rose with eating, as some men’s do with drink. He could not help, too, rolling his large eyes round him as he ate, and chuckling with the possibility that he might one day be lord of all this scene of almost unimaginable luxury and splendor. Then, he thought, how soon he’d turn his back upon the old schoolhouse; snap his fingers in the face of Hans Van Ripper, and every other niggardly patron, and kick any itinerant pedagogue out of doors that should dare to call him comrade!

Ichabod, who lodges in rotation with the families of his students, kindly escorts home those “who happened to have pretty sisters, or good housewives for mothers, noted for the comforts of the cupboard.” He instructs young people in singing psalms, but only for the “bright shillings” and the pleasure of imagining himself upstaging the parson on Sunday. Irving consistently tells us of some virtue Ichabod possesses, then undercuts it (“He was, moreover, esteemed by the women as a

man of great erudition, for he had read several books quite through”). He is a figure of monstrous vanity and calculation, and if you recall him as a complacent and foolish innocent, you are probably remembering the Disney version (voiced, it should be remembered, by Bing Crosby).

Not only is Ichabod Crane entirely a creature of his appetites, but those appetites are murkier than we remember. Irving makes clear that Ichabod cares nothing for the “country damsels” he courts in general, nor for the beautiful Katrina in particular, save for what they can offer as hostesses or potential brides. This note (absent from every film version I have seen) is sounded gently but insistently, and stands in marked contrast to the ambitions of Brom Van Brunt, “the hero of the country round, which rang with his feats of strength and hardihood,” whose attraction to Katrina is plainly more passionate than mercenary. Portrayed as a bullying lout in most film versions, Brom emerges in Irving’s text as an affable trickster (Irving’s story leaves no doubt regarding his identity as the midnight rider), nimbly displacing a rival who had sought to insinuate himself between him and his love.

The novelist Thomas M. Disch once suggested that Ichabod Crane is in fact gay, and that the Sleepy Hollow Boys who are native to the region (as Ichabod is not) recognize this and treat him accordingly. It is an attractive notion, and finds some support in the text, whatever one may feel on the issue of Washington Irving’s own sexuality (discussed in Andrew Burstein’s recent biography). We never learn why Ichabod left his native Connecticut for the Hudson River valley, nor why he brings a passion to beating schoolboys that is absent from the attention he pays their older sisters. Bookish, effete, and hoping only to convert the Van Tassel estate to cash so that he can move on, Ichabod Crane is an unnatural figure in old-fashioned Sleepy Hollow, and the vigor with which he is repelled suggests something more than the mere vanquishing of a romantic competitor.

Is Ichabod in fact indifferent to (and perhaps impotent toward)

the community's women, and the pumpkin that Brom hurls at Ichabod's head a kind of sexual taunt? To say confidently yes would leave too much else unanswered, and speculations of Ichabod's sexuality, however suggestive, fail to unlock the story's secrets. This sexuality seems to be repeatedly evoked via synecdoche: When he is doing well, his essential nature is likened by Irving to the pliant shrub called the supple-jack ("though he bowed beneath the slightest pressure, yet, the moment it was away—jerk!—he was as erect, and carried his head as high as ever"), while in the aftermath of his defeat and disappearance, an inventory of his personal effects yields clothing, books, and "a broken pitch-pipe."

The phallic imagery is too insistent to be dismissed, especially when you consider the repeated evocation of Ichabod's "long snipe nose," the medium of his nasal singing voice that wins over the parish women. But the object of this insistent sexuality eludes us.

The nearest thing to genuine sexual experience for Ichabod turns out, in fact, to be neither sadistic nor gustatory: it is (and Irving is surprisingly explicit about this) the act of being terrified—in particular, by ghost stories. When Ichabod is beating, fawning upon, or courting others he is all calculation, but the late afternoons he spends reading Cotton Mather's *History of New England Witchcraft*, and long winter evenings devoted to hearing old women's fireside tales, are spent out of love—not so much for themselves, though Irving's narrator refers to their "fearful pleasure," but as preparations for the ecstatic terrors of his subsequent walks home. The manner in which Irving describes these solitary ordeals—Ichabod trudging "by swamp and stream and awful woodland" in the gathering dusk or, later and more intensely, in the total darkness of a winter night—strongly suggests that their effect on his "excited imagination" is one of ecstatic transport. Like the delighted terrors of a child's roller coaster ride, the buildup of "fearful shapes and shadows" rises to a frenzied pitch, and Irving's breathless description reaches its culmination with Ichabod "thrown into complete disarray by some rushing blast, howling among the trees, in the idea

that it was the galloping Hessian on one of his nightly scourings." This apotheosis of what must be called Ichabod's erotics of terror anticipates the story's own climax, when the object of his inchoate yearnings finally appears in the flesh.

However patiently we trace Irving's disturbing imagery, we still find leftover motifs that resist assimilation. We nod when Ichabod's long nose is facetiously likened to a weathercock, but another weathervane is prominently described (in connection with Mr. Van Tassel's conspicuous unconcern over the fate of his daughter) later in the story. That weathervane takes the form of a "little wooden warrior . . . armed with a sword in each hand" that spins in seeming battle with the wind. This ambiguous image (of resoluteness or of absurdity?) is soon linked with a further reference to a sword, a braggart's small-sword, supposedly used in the American Revolution and now available for display "with the hilt a little bent."

This means something (nothing in this story means nothing), but what? Male sexuality is likened to weathercocks and swords in one image cluster, and to pumpkins, heads (the Horseman's rests suggestively upon his pommel), and headlessness in another. A great war took place (over a woman who, it seems clear, only pretended to favor Ichabod in order to spur his rival's ardor), but the furious images that constitute its foot soldiers seem uncertain in their allegiance, and precisely how the battle played out seems lost in a textual fog of war.

Finally, "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" is not a Halloween story (for all that the pumpkin Brom hurls is frequently, though incorrectly, portrayed as a jack o' lantern); it is a tale of late autumn, when the harvest is over, the days grown short, and ghost stories potent to the susceptible. It is a story about New England innovation versus Knickerbocker conservatism, of bookish credulity versus stolid anti-intellectualism; but it also concerns matters not reducible to tidy dichotomies. Thirty years later, the narrator observes, "there

are peculiar quavers still to be heard” emanating from the church on Sunday morning, “which are said to be legitimately descended from the nose of Ichabod Crane.” These sounds continue to echo through the community that expelled him, entering the very harmonics of its spiritual life. It is a moment that anticipates Gogol—one thinks of the last lines of “The Overcoat” and wonders whether Gogol could have read Irving—more than later American folk-tales like Johnny Appleseed; and to ponder its elusive implications is to recover something of Washington Irving’s uncanny humor and mystery.

Gregory Feeley is the author of Arabian Wine and the forthcoming Kentauros.