

# Feudal Aristocracy's Escape: A Marxist Approach to "Rip Van Winkle"

Liu Liu and Yu Sun

**Abstract**—"Rip Van Winkle", published in 1819, is a short story by American writer Washington Irving. The story is set in New York's Catskill. Main character of the short story is Rip Van Winkle, a Dutch-American villager living around the time of the American Revolutionary War. The relation between Rip Van Winkle and his cantankerous wife is quite unusual. This paper aims to analyze the short story from the perspective of Marxism, and the theory of economic determinism and symbolism will be applied in the analysis. From the Marxist perspective, some characters and plots all have their symbolic meanings related to class struggles. Through this Marxist analysis, a better understanding of Rip Van Winkle's family relations and the social circumstances of that time can be reached.

**Index Terms**—"Rip Van Winkle", Marxism, economic determinism, class conflict.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Washington Irving (1783 - 1859) is an American short story writer born in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. "Rip Van Winkle" is one of his best-known short stories. The story is set around the time of the American Revolutionary War in the state of New York's Catskill Mountains. Before the American Revolutionary War, which lasted from 1775 to 1783, America was still under the colonial domination of England. America was also a patriarchal society at that time, in which the male rather than the female has the dominant power both in the family and in society. The main reason is that the male has much more advantages in producing activities than the female, and most females at that time had not gained their economic independence. However, in Rip Van Winkle's family, things are quite different from the common family situation of that time. Rip Van Winkle is at a much lower position than his wife, and he is quite afraid of her. His wife often scolds him: "his wife kept continually dinning in his ears about his idleness, his carelessness, and the ruin he was bringing on his family." [1]

Marxism is regarded both as "a political science and a literary approach." [2] "The classical Marxist flourished chiefly in a period from Marx and Engels to the Second World War. It characterizes itself by an insistence on at least the following basic tenets: materialism, economic determinism, class struggle, surplus value, reification, proletarian

revolution, and communism." [2] The Marxist critics focus more on the content of literature than its form, for "content was much more ideologically charged." [2] With the Marxist theories, an ideological criticism to "Rip Van Winkle" can be achieved. Some Marxists believe that "the features of a cultural text were strictly determined by or interpreted in terms of the economic and social conditions of its production and by the class status of its author." [2]

## II. RIP VAN WINKLE AS A REPRESENTATIVE OF THE FEUDAL ARISTOCRACY

The short story was published in 1819. At the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the American Industrial Revolution began. The traditional agricultural civilization was struck by the emerging industrial civilization. The author Washington Irving himself has witnessed this revolution. Washington Irving is not only a writer, but also a statesman who could be very sensitive to social changes. Irving had served as the U.S. ambassador to Spain. From this perspective, the ongoing social upheaval may influence his creative work. If "Rip Van Winkle" is interpreted with its social background, many implicit clues and symbolism can be found.

### A. Rip Van Winkle's Lifestyle

Rip Van Winkle is a farmer in a village near the Catskill Mountains. Irving describes Rip Van Winkle's disposition like this, "the great error in Rip's composition was an insuperable aversion to all kinds of profitable labor." [1] He wastes his assiduity and perseverance on some unnecessary trifles, like fishing, hunting, and helping neighbors. As Winkle refuses to do the farm work and housework for the family, the burden is on his wife's shoulders. Winkle has a bad relation with his wife, who often curses at him. He often goes to a club in the village when driven from home. The club is composed of "sages, philosophers, and other idle personages of the village." [1] "Here they used to sit in the shade through a long lazy summer's day, talking listlessly over village gossip, or telling endless sleepy stories about nothing." [1] Nicholas Vedder is the leader of this junto, who is also the patriarch of the village. The author describes Nicholas Vedder's life with a sarcastic tone: "at the door of which he took his seat from morning till night, just moving sufficiently to avoid the sun and keep in the shade of a large tree; so that the neighbors could tell the hour by his movements as accurately as by a sun dial." [1] It can be drawn from the text that Winkle is not a particular case in his time, there is a group of people who live a similar life to Rip. In other words, Rip Van Winkle represents a group of people in the agricultural society, and he is the most typical one. Rip

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Van Winkle and his fellows try to escape the family burden, and live a carefree life. "The production of ideas, concepts and consciousness is first of all directly interwoven with the material intercourse of man, the language of real life. Conceiving, thinking, the spiritual intercourse of men, appear here as the direct efflux of men's material behaviour..." [3] Rip and his fellows' lifestyle and life concept are reflections of their laggard production mode -- the agricultural production method. All in all, the idle lifestyle of Rip and his fellows is determined by their backward production mode.

"Lazy" is not the only feature of Rip Van Winkle and his fellows' lifestyle. They live a life behind their time. Sometimes they have "profound discussions" when "by chance an old newspaper fell into their hands from some passing traveller." [1] "How sagely they would deliberate upon public events some months after they had taken place." [1] The way they get information about the outside world is through passing traveller, and the news they discuss heatedly about is already out-of-date. It seems that they have been abandoned by the fast-developing world. It is quite ironic to put "profound discussions" and "old newspaper" together. It is completely meaningless to discuss profoundly about old news. From this ridiculous contrast, we can see that the small village of Rip is ignorant and uninformed, which is the typical feature of the agricultural society. The village is left behind by the outside world.

#### *B. Rip Van Winkle's Family Status*

The family status of Rip symbolizes the status of the feudal aristocracy. The family status of Rip Van Winkle is very low. He is an "obedient hen-pecked husband" to his shrewish wife. "Morning, noon, and night, her tongue was incessantly going, and everything he said or did was sure to produce a torrent of household eloquence." [1] Besides, Winkle is often driven out of home by his wife. His wife's bad temper is not the only reason for this situation. Winkle gives up his dignity along with his duty. His farm is "the most pestilent little piece of ground in the whole country." [1] Due to Winkle's laziness, "his patrimonial estate had dwindled away under his management, acre by acre, until there was little more left than a mere patch of Indian corn and potatoes, yet it was the worst conditioned farm in the neighborhood." [1] Winkle's children also suffered from his laziness, "his children, too, were as ragged and wild as if they belonged to nobody." [1]

The decline of the agricultural society is reflected through the situation of Rip. Rip's ancestors were once honorable, "he was a descendant of the Van Winkles who figured so gallantly in the chivalrous days of Peter Stuyvesant, and accompanied him to the siege of Fort Christina." [1] But the honor does not last to Rip's days, "he inherited, however, but little of the material character of his ancestors." [1] It symbolizes that the prosperity of the traditional agricultural society has gone, and people who cannot adapt to the changes of the society like Rip, will be left behind by the time.

### III. THE CONFLICT BETWEEN FEUDAL ARISTOCRACY AND THE CAPITALIST

The reason for the unusual family relations of Rip Van Winkle is his family's economic situation. In Rip Van

Winkle's family, his wife but not him is the breadwinner, and Rip Van Winkle does not take the responsibility of working and earning money. According to Marx, the superstructure is determined by the economic base. So, the family positions of Rip Van Winkle and his wife are determined by their economic positions. As the bred-winner in the family, Dame Van Winkle has more right of speech than Rip Van Winkle.

The story is written during the American Industrial Revolution. The industrial society is beginning to strike the agricultural society, and will replace it later. According to Marx, "The economic structure of capitalist society has grown out of the economic structure of feudal society. The dissolution of the latter set free the elements of the former." [4] From the perspective of Marxists, "literature grows out of and reflects real material/historical conditions." [5] Take a look at the character of Rip Van Winkle and his wife with this historical background, it is not difficult to find that Rip Van Winkle and his wife Dame Van Winkle actually represents two social classes. Rip Van Winkle represents the feudal aristocracy, while his wife represents the capitalist class. And the conflicts between Rip Van Winkle and his wife can be seen as the conflicts between the two social classes.

The feudal aristocracy does not join producing activities, but to exploit the capitalist class and peasantry. In the story, Rip Van Winkle does the same thing. He depends on his wife for a living instead of working by himself, and he hates working, "The great error in Rip's composition was an insuperable aversion to all kinds of profitable labor." [1] The feudal aristocracy exploits the other classes by its remaining feudal influence, and Rip Van Winkle exploits his wife by the remaining patriarchal power. Besides, like the feudal aristocracy, he hates working and leads a life of pleasure, "If left to himself, he would have whistled life away in perfect contentment;" [1], "Here they used to sit in the shade through a long lazy summer's day, talking listlessly over village gossip, or telling endless sleepy stories about nothing." [1] The lifestyle of Rip Van Winkle is the idyllic life, which is very typical in the traditional feudal society. With the rising of modern industry, the power of the feudal aristocracy are declining. Similarly, Rip Van Winkle's economic condition is worsening and his life quality is falling, "His fences were continually falling to pieces; his cow would either go astray, or get among the cabbages; weeds were sure to grow quicker in his fields than anywhere else; the rain always made a point of setting in just as he had some out-door work to do." [1] His condition in family assembles the feudal aristocracy's social condition. Rip Van Winkle is mild-tempered, polite, and glad to help the women in the village, which is like the well-bred and genteel feudal aristocracy.

As for Dame Van Winkle, she works hard to earn food and money, just like what the capitalist class do during the accumulation of capital. And she has to provide for her lazy and incompetent husband, which assembles the capitalist class that has been exploited by the feudal aristocracy. And her lifestyle is much more practical than Rip Van Winkle. She manages the whole family without the help of Winkle, so it's not difficult to see that Dame Van Winkle is quite competent and has little time to have entertainment. As Winkle's family position keeps falling, "Times grew worse and worse with Rip Van Winkle as years of matrimony rolled on; a tart temper

never mellows with age, and a sharp tongue is the only edged tool that grows keener with constant use.” [1], Dame Van Winkle’s family position is rising, which assembles the capitalist class’s rising social position. Dame Van Winkle is a cantankerous woman. The author uses words like “termagant” and “virago” to describe her. Similarly, the capitalist class are used to be criticized as a vulgar class.

The conflicts between Rip Van Winkle and Dame Van Winkle symbolize the combat for economic and political hegemony between the feudal aristocracy and the capitalist class. In this combat, the capitalist class are beginning to have the upper hand. But the capitalist class still has to compromise with the feudal aristocracy. For example, they still have to put up with the feudal aristocracy’s exploitation. In the story, Rip Van Winkle cannot bear his wife’s curse and runs into the mountain to find himself some comfort. Then he drinks the beverage of an old man and falls asleep. When he wakes up, twenty years have passed, and everything has changed. Actually, Winkle uses a long sleep to escape his wife. When he wakes up, his wife is already dead, “Rip had but one question more to ask; but he put it with a faltering voice: ‘Where’s your mother?’ ‘Oh, she too had died but a short time since; she broke a blood-vessel in a fit of passion at a New-England peddler.’” [1]

Winkle’s long sleep symbolizes feudal aristocracy’s escape in the combat against the capitalist class. At the end of the story, Winkle’s wife is dead, but everything in the village has changed. “The very village was altered; it was larger and more populous. There were rows of houses which he had never seen before.” [1] That is the outcome of the industrialization. The village scales up and develops. Rip’s familiar haunts has disappeared, and his old acquaintances all passed away or left. It symbolizes the disassembly of the traditional agricultural society. The industrialization has changed the village and the way people lives. The villagers cares about the election now. Winkle’s son, who is a copy of him, has to abandon his old lifestyle for the time has changed, “As to Rip’s son and heir, who was the ditto of himself, seen leaning against the tree, he was employed to work on the farm; but evinced an hereditary disposition to attend to anything else but his business.” [1] At last, the capitalist class wins by changing the society with some prices and compromises. The ending of the story can be seen as a compromise of feudal aristocracy and the capitalist class.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

All in all, family positions and social positions are determined by economic positions. Rip Van Winkle represents the feudal aristocracy with backward productive forces and traditional idyllic lifestyle in the agricultural society; while, his wife Dame Van Winkle stands for the capitalist class with advanced productive forces and practical lifestyle in the industrial society. In their combat for economic and political hegemony, the feudal aristocracy chooses to

escape under a disadvantaged condition. Finally, the capitalist class wins for they represent advanced productive forces and are in a much better economic condition. But, the social changes are a gradual process. It is not possible for the capitalist class to defeat the feudal aristocracy completely during the Industrial Revolution, and there are still some compromises for the capitalist class to make.

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