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46A – Close Reading 1

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*“What seemed particularly odd to Rip, was, that though these folks were evidently amusing themselves, yet they maintained the gravest faces, the most mysterious silence, and were, withal, the most melancholy party of pleasure he had ever witnessed.” pg. 460*

This quote from Washington Irving’s “Rip Van Winkle” highlights the dualistic nature of the text, character, and culture, which it is about. The key phrases in which Rip describes the legendary – and rather imaginary – crew of Henry Hudson consist of almost opposing ideas, reinforcing the dualistic tendencies of the story. Theses phrases  “particularly odd,” “evidently amusing,” “gravest faces,” “mysterious silence,” and “melancholy party of pleasure” are almost paradoxical, and reflect the contradictory ways American society was founded on and still exist today. “Odd,” “evidently,” “gravest,” “silence,” and “melancholy” infer negativism, deviancy, and general sense of foreboding, whereas “particularly,” “amusing,” “faces,” “mysterious,” and “party of pleasure” infer seduction, enjoyment, and a sense of legend.

  Aside from reflecting the hapless and loveable oaf Rip, the negatively connoted words (“Odd,” “evidently,” “gravest,” “silence,” and “melancholy”) reflect the colonists’ loss of identity following the Revolutionary War. All of a sudden the colonists went from having a specific identity and culture within the British Empire to being quite literally on their own. Further, they were across the ocean and quite segregated from most European (and comparable) cultures, found within “silence.” Post-war correspondences must have been awkward and stifled due to tense interconnected relationships and identities between the colonists and British. This would have been amplified between patriots and royalists, leading to a further sense of “melancholy” and “odd[ness].” “Gravest” could refer, quite literally, to the graves of fallen friends and foes from the war.

As a newly liberated nation in its infancy, Americans likely did not know what it meant to be an “American,” and consequently felt “odd.” They fought for freedom and autonomy, but once they had it they didn’t know what to do with it. It’s like a teenager fighting incessantly again their parents until they are out of the house, but once they are out of the house they realize how hard it is to be an adult. “Evidently” suggests superficiality, delusion, and deception. It reinforces not only Rip’s unreliable drunkenness, but also the possible superficial happiness of the colonists. The word itself reflects the Age of Reason in which evidence is a key component; however, "evidently" itself implies doubt, suggesting that science and reason are not the end-all and be-all of the human condition, consequently ushering in the fluidity of Romanticism. This head versus heart conundrum has plagued American society since, submitting the American public to fundamental spiritualists and die-hard scientists, but rarely anything inbetween.

The use of “odd” reflects the puritanical notion of what is proper and acceptable behavior, and that any deviance from the acceptable is “odd,” which would consequently lead to a sense of “melancholy” within the individual. It also reflects the drunken lens in which Rip is viewing the world from. An altered mindset is “odd” at best, “melancholy” in the intermediate, and “grave” at worst. “Odd” is not a negative word, per se, but it rarely followed with anything positive. In this case, it sets the stage of something different - even unimaginable and mythic - happening, which of course does so.

On the other hand, “particularly,” “amusing,” “faces,” “mysterious,” and “party of pleasure” are all connotatively positive at best, and neutral at worst. “Particularly” is the most neutral of all, and simply gives more emphasis to the following statements, and, story as an extension. Directly proceeded by “odd,” “particularly” takes on an even more important role by acting as a Volta, if you will, to the story. The tone changes, forcing the reader to see through the façade alcohol gives. It sets the stage for everything following by giving each positive adjective a darkside. This can also refer to the darkside of the winning the Revolutionary War; afterwards, colonists may have been liberated, equal, and democratic, but it came with a loss of identity, loss of lives, and the daunting need to start over. It is no wonder the 1820’s were one of the drunkest periods in American history.

 “Amusing,” on a more upbeat note, suggests cheerful charm and carefreeness. It is light, bright, and makes one think of spring; however, these lively connotations are dampened by “evidently,” giving it a superficial and almost condescending tone. “Evidently amusing” sounds like something an elitist would say about fart jokes. It is funny only in the most transparent and basic ways, with no lasting merit. This is a direct reflection of drunken humor, in which one finds almost anything funny. The distant tone created by “evidently” suggests a divide between Rip and the crew, perhaps inferring that Rip is still sober and simply watching the drunken antics of the crew in mild amusement. Further, having spent much time abroad, Irving was likely privy to European opinions of America, and it would not be a far stretch to see America’s rebellion against the British Empire as “evidently amusing.”

  The use of "themselves" as opposed to simply "them" or a more individuating pronoun implies the crew has a singular identity and occupies a world in and of themselves. Rip is on the outside looking in, and they are amusing "themselves" without a care in the world. Previous paragraphs physically described the crew, but no description was given to any single person, reinforcing their shared identity. The commander only "seemed" to be in charge and is worthy of a singular description, but could simply represent Dame Van Winkle's authority over Rip. After the initial description of the as "commander," he wields no authority and blends into the crew. This mirrors Dame Van Winkle's authority over Rip, which vanishes when he goes into the woods. This is in line with the concept of the "green world" in which the Great Chain of Being has no reality and is completely disregarded.  In the woods, the commander is a commander in name only, and Dame Van Winkle has no control over Rip, thus breaking the hierarchical norms, rendering Rip and the crew liberated. Reflecting not only the colonists schism from Britain, but also America vast and open land was the physically manifestation of the allegorical "green world."

As neutral as  “faces” seems at first, it is actually quite personal, inferring a shared identity between Rip and the crew. Facial expressions are one of the most identifying human features, and often betray secrets to those whom share in those secrets. This suggests that Rip recognizes the crew’s false amusement and “[grave] faces” in himself. The intimate connotations within “faces” also foreshadow Rip’s 20-year “sleep,” which is spent with the crew. He would not have spent 20 years with them had he not identified with their “melancholy,” “gravest of faces,” and generalized false entertainment. "Faces" is also an example of metonymy, consequently implying that the crew members occupy a grave, which indeed they do. This, in turn, tips the reader off to the imaginary (and indeed dead) nature of the crew members. It further reinforces the unreliability and mythic fallacies of the story as a whole.

 Implying a mythic nature to this story, “mysterious” reinforces the sense of deviance initiated by “particularly odd.” By using “mysterious,” Irving, through Knickerbocker, and Knickerbocker through an old Dutch family, and the Dutch family through the alleged story of Rip Van Winkle, hints that this story is filled with fantastical fallacies and skewed incidents, which, of course it is. It also foreshadows not only the strangeness of the crew, but also something “mysterious[ly] silen[t]” in the Catskill Mountains, namely, the calm before the storm of the Revolutionary War. This set of words further foreshadows the “silence” Rip hears while the Revolutionary War is happening, because, of course, he is sleeping. He wakes up to a “mysterious” new culture, which is intrinsically different yet occupied by the same people.

“Party of pleasure” most obviously refers to the rampant alcoholism as well as a celebration of liberty. The colonists are finally free from their British oppressors, and can rightfully engage in “pleasure.” This “party,” however, comes with a price due to the deaths amassed in the war, indicated by the use of “melancholy.” The colonists may be jubilant with liberation, but are now feeling the darkside and consequently turn to liquor. Thus, the “party of pleasure” is damped by a sense of “melancholy.” This phrase also reflects feelings often felt while engaged with alcoholism; the liquor is merely a mask, giving the illusion of “pleasure” when one is actually “melancholy.” “Party” reflects the social connotations with alcohol, as well as the shared identity Rip has with the crew.

 Understood in both its parts and its whole, this quote sheds light on not only Rip Van Winkle’s story, but also the story of America’s paradoxical nature, in which there is an opposite to every element. America was founded on the idealistic concept of liberty, yet has always imposed restrictions on said liberty; and claims the puritanical value of the greater good, yet mythicizes individualists like John Smith; and it claims to value to work ethic of Benjamin Franklin, yet mythicized the lazy and irresponsible Rip Van Winkle. The opposing values seen in Rip Van Winkle – and specifically this quote – shed light into the American mindset.