

Rip Van Winkle's Wicked Flagon

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Although Washington Irving, who was arguably the most celebrated American author of the early nineteenth century, is not widely read today, our culture has long since assimilated a number of his memorable fictional characters, most notably the gangly, terrified schoolmaster Ichabod Crane, and Rip Van Winkle, who is usually depicted carrying his rusty flintlock and gazing out from behind the long, grey beard that grew during his famous twenty-year nap in the deep woods of the Catskills. Ah, that sweet, sweet sleep, which so few of us forget! But I find more fascinating the *cause* of Rip's famous snooze, which so few of us remember: he was stone cold drunk. Absolutely bombed. In fact, Rip never falls asleep at all; instead, he simply passes out.

"Rip Van Winkle" first appeared in *The Sketch Book*, Irving's illustrious short story collection, which was published serially in 1819-20 – though internal textual evidence suggests that Rip's trip to the woods occurs sometime between 1763 and 1769. The tale of course concerns a happy-go-lucky man who was beloved in his small, rural village, but who nevertheless had a number of very good reasons to drink. Some of these were personal; others were related to the cultural pressures of the historical moment in which he lived. Within his domestic sphere, Rip was a deeply unhappy man who was mercilessly henpecked by his wife, Dame Van Winkle, a figure so termagant that her character inspired what may be Irving's most famous aphorism: "[A] sharp tongue is the only edged tool that grows keener with constant use." Repeatedly assailed by this indefatigable nag, Rip retreats to the corner bar, where to this day one may find men seeking shelter from their responsibilities generally,

and from their wives specifically. Rip's local tavern is named for "His Majesty George the Third" – a fact that becomes important later in the story. But although Rip is perfectly satisfied with drinking and "telling endless sleepy stories about nothing," Dame Van Winkle ultimately drives him from the inn as well, and it is only *then* that Rip is provoked to head for the hills. Rip's journey to the woods is no Thoreauvian pilgrimage; if he could, he'd much rather sit lazily in the tavern, tipping his way through his tough day.

And it was a tough day for American farmers on the eve of the Revolution. In addition to the ongoing challenges of eking out a living on the frontier, families like the Van Winkles were also being asked to choose sides in a brewing conflict that threatened to erupt into war. Even Crèvecoeur, whose pastoral idyll of the American Farmer profoundly shaped American nationalist identity, was himself a Tory loyalist – which suggests that choosing sides in the looming conflict with England was far from easy. For these reasons, and many others, pre-Revolutionary Americans experienced profound social, cultural, political, and economic instability. Especially for struggling frontier farmers, it was enough to make one want to take a strong drink, or perhaps a long nap.

And so it is under these embattled personal and cultural circumstances that Rip pulls up to the bar, and is then driven out of it by his wife. Even those who have never read the story know what happens next, for Rip takes his trusty gun and faithful dog and makes his escape into the green world of the Catskills – which are not so much mountains on the village outskirts as they are a purely mythic space far beyond the pressures of collapsing agricultural markets, bitching wives, and mustering armies.

Having tramped off into the solitude of the high mountains, Rip has a few remarkable, transcendental moments during which he experiences the sublimity of the Catskills, complete with ennobling views of "the lordly Hudson, far, far below him, moving on its silent but majestic course." But just as Irving's readers settle in to the sort of stylized, ro-

mantic landscape depictions that characterize the work of such early romantic writers as William Cullen Bryant and James Fenimore Cooper, something very strange happens. Rip's transcendental solitude is interrupted by the appearance of a "short square-built old fellow, with thick bushy hair, and a grizzled beard," who is dressed in the "antique Dutch fashion." Strangest of all is the old Dutchman's shouldered burden, a "stout keg" that, on the basis of no particular evidence, Rip assumes is "full of liquor." Elsewhere in *The Sketch Book* Irving famously observed that "they who drink beer will think beer," but here the opposite is the case: Rip *thinks* liquor, and so he *drinks* liquor. This odd turn in the narrative may tell us more about Rip's fantasy life than about the denizens of the high Catskills, but the fact remains that within the world of the story we are asked to shift focus from an ennobling mountain view of a lordly river to a Dutchman clambering through the mountains with a barrel of booze on his back.

And it gets better, as we soon learn that the booze hauler is headed for a nearby glen to join his cronies at a game of ninepins, the most widely practiced form of bowling in colonial America. What at first promises to be a spiritually elevating moment of illumination on the mountaintop thus degenerates into an alternative experience that is every bit as American: drinking and bowling! (Think the Coen brothers' film *The Big Lebowski* here.) It is also fascinating to note that ten-pin bowling, which prevails today, replaced ninepins at just about the time "Rip Van Winkle" was published, and did so only as a work-around after ninepins was widely illegalized out of concern that it promoted idleness and tippling – the very behaviors Dame Van Winkle deplores in her husband. In any case, Rip doesn't hesitate in swapping his transcendental moment for some good, free, hard drink. Remember, he never wanted to leave the tavern for the mountains in the first place.

It is what happens next that interests me most about the famous tale of Rip Van Winkle. The old Dutchman decants the liquor into flagons – large, pottery bottles with stout handles – and Rip soon finds himself taking satisfying gulps. *This* is the story's crucial moment, for without

the long slugs of hooch there would *be* no twenty-year sleep, and thus no story. Rip never *decides* to stay away from home for two decades; he does not, in fact, even *decide* to sleep. He decides only to drink; and drink he does. Irving writes that Rip “reiterated his visits to the flagon so often that at length his senses were overpowered, his eyes swam in his head, his head gradually declined, and he fell into a deep sleep.” But I want to ask a question that to my knowledge has never received serious consideration. It is a profound question, because it influences both the literary historical and literary critical contexts within which we interpret the story. *What is the liquor in Rip’s flagon?*



We might begin with what little internal textual evidence the story provides. We know that the hooch totter is Dutch, and that he is wearing an “antique” style of clothing that is characteristic of Dutch garb during the seventeenth century. And we are told that upon first tasting the liquor, Rip thought it “had much of the flavor of excellent Hollands.” *Hollands* is the period’s slang term for gin – or, more precisely, the precursor to gin. *Gin*, a term not used until the early eighteenth century, is a shortening of *Geneva*, which is itself a corruption of the old Dutch word *genever* (or *jenever*), which is derived, from Vulgar Latin by way of Old French, from *jeniperus*, or juniper, a reference to the berries used to flavor gin. The earliest gin, called *oude* (or “old”) *jenever*, was indeed created in Holland, we think by the influential seventeenth-century Dutch physician and chemist Franciscus Sylvius, who distilled jenever as a medicine, and sold it as a prophylactic against disease. In order to improve its taste and efficacy the Dutch soon began flavoring the liquor with the juniper berry – which is not a true berry but rather the female seed cone of the juniper tree – an innovation that radically improved the taste of the medicine and added medicinal value of its own, since juniper is a potent diuretic that is helpful in treating a variety of maladies including cardiac and hepatic edema. Mainly, though, juniper berry flavoring *tasted* good. Remember that before the invention of the column still in 1832 allowed for the distillation of neutral spirits – and ultimately led to the style of “dry” or “London” gin that we drink today –

old style liquors were distilled in pot stills, which could produce some rather nasty stuff.

So the keg from which Rip drinks is carried by a Dutchman dressed as if he hails from seventeenth-century Holland, the taste of its contents suggest Hollands, and we know that jenever is a product of that place and time. And while it might seem unlikely that gin would be carried in a keg, jenever was indeed matured in an oak cask, which seems to put the final stave in the barrel. Rip Van Winkle's sleep *must* have been induced by gin.



The problem with this interpretation (or, as I like to call it, *g*interpretation) is that it demands from readers excessive credulity, a Coleridgean suspension of disbelief. After all, Rip went to the woods not in a wild dream, like Nathaniel Hawthorne's Young Goodman Brown, but simply to escape his nagging wife. Why then should we believe that he has gone back in time more than a century? Isn't it more likely that Rip simply retreated to the hills as an escape from the pressures of his actual, eighteenth-century life, and that having met some partiers in the woods simply joins in and imbibes too freely? And if the year in which Rip does his drinking is thus closer to the 1760s than the 1640s, isn't it unlikely that he drinks gin? Jenever *was* consumed in the mid-eighteenth century, but it was uncommon, especially on the frontier. And while jenever was less potent than modern gin, it would still seem overkill to require a full keg of it, even for a protracted game of bowling. What's more, could Rip have "reiterated his visits to the flagon" so often if he had actually been chugging straight gin? For these reasons, our earlier *g*interpretation of the contents of Rip's flagon now appears troubled.

But if the gin theory is hard to swallow, what then is the most compelling alternative hypothesis? Let's begin by asking what Rip was drinking back at the inn, *before* he was driven to the hills. While the story never reveals what fills Rip's tankard at the King George tavern, likely it would have been *cider*, for the story is set on the eve of the Revolution, a period when Americans consumed much of their alcohol in the

fermented form of the apples that were so plentiful on the Hudson Valley frontier where the narrative takes place. Hard apple cider was ubiquitous in the villages of the rural northeast because it was made from a local agricultural product of modest market value, was much cheaper than rum or even beer, was easily scrapped and pressed locally, and was high in alcohol content because its preservation required that it be mixed with distilled spirits – often other apple products, such as apple brandy or applejack, but many other liquors as well. Drinking cider also had the advantage of being perceived as patriotic, since cider was a home-grown product, unlike the wines that were imported from Europe to the economically robust merchant communities of the coastal northeast. Even so shrewd a nurseryman as John Chapman, who has come down to us through legend as “Johnny Appleseed,” understood that his core market demanded not baking fruit but rather cider apples – and so he specialized in cultivars that would produce liquid comfort for eighteenth-century Americans.

Add to all this that cider was routinely casked in oak, and it seems probable that Rip’s flagon is brimming not with gin but rather with hard cider. But what of Rip’s observation that the hooch seems to taste like Hollands? First, cider’s maturation in oak would have given it a flavor in common with jenever. And Rip’s cider, if indeed it *was* cider, could have been spiked with any number of liquors whose flavor may have suggested jenever – or it might have been seasoned with jenever itself. Acknowledging that his bender occurs during the 1760s, it seems prudent to set aside our ginterpretation and instead assert that Rip’s sleep *must* have been induced by the Revolutionary period’s most widely consumed frontier libation: hard apple cider.



Having settled on cider, however, we run into another problem, again having to do with the multiple time frames in which the narrative simultaneously operates. In “Rip Van Winkle” we are at once in the timeless world of myth, in the seventeenth century of the keg-hauling Dutchman, and in the mid-eighteenth century of Rip himself. But the matter is even

more complex, for we are also in the early *nineteenth* century of Washington Irving and his readers – which is a moment especially important in the history of alcohol in America. For in the same year in which Irving's tale was published, American alcohol consumption reached its highest level ever. Neither before nor since the publication of "Rip Van Winkle" have Americans been such outrageous boozers. So Irving's celebrated account of Rip's binge is being received by a nation of readers who are also, as W.J. Rorabaugh put it in his masterful book *The Alcoholic Republic*, "A Nation of Drunkards." Rorabaugh estimates that the average annual consumption of distilled spirits among Americans in 1820 was an astounding five gallons or more – a reckoning which omits alcohol consumed in the forms of beer, cider, and wine – and it is probable that this figure would have been higher for men, higher still for men on the frontier, and highest for frontiersmen ne'er-do-wells like Rip Van Winkle.

Let us assume, then, that the temporal frame most important to our inquiry is in fact the early nineteenth century, when Irving's story was first published and read. What, then, might we say is the liquor in Rip's flagon? It is almost certain that it would not have been an old-style liquor like jenever, and while it might have been beer, that too is unlikely, since the average American of this period drank only one gallon of beer per annum (compared, for example, with more than twenty gallons today). It could have been cider, though that too is relatively unlikely, since cider consumption fell precipitously between the Revolution and the War of 1812, as hard liquor became widely available. There is a chance it was rum, but rum had become both expensive and ideologically problematic after the Revolution, when the British West Indian origin of rum and its core ingredient, molasses, made those goods objectionably un-American and thus subject to protectionist tariffs.

Of one thing, however, there can be no doubt. By 1819, when "Rip Van Winkle" appeared, we had become a nation of confirmed hard liquor drinkers – and, as Rorabaugh points out, binge drinkers as well. This period marked the decline of the more genteel and also more private ritual of dram drinking, and saw the rise of communal binge drinking on

a scale that is inconceivable today. Most Americans of the period frequently and publicly drank to extreme intoxication, and often viewed those who refused to do so as unsociable, élitist, or even unpatriotic. So closely was public binge drinking associated with American liberty that early temperance societies were often forced to allow their members a reprieve from their sobriety pledge on the Fourth of July.

So if rum had come to symbolize colonial submission, and if public intoxication was now associated with Republican freedom, what then was the alcoholic beverage of choice for the new nation? Whiskey. Specifically corn whiskey, which would only later come to be called bourbon. Whiskey's swift ascension occurred at about the time Irving's story was published, and its popularity was greatest on the frontier, which offered the ideal whiskey-making combination of plentiful water, local grain, cheap wood (to fire the stills), and thirsty neighbors. But the key to the ascendancy of whiskey on the frontier was simple geography. Frontier farmers were physically isolated from eastern markets, and the difficulty of transporting goods, especially through mountainous terrain, meant that local products were preferred over expensive imports – a factor that also accounts for the dearth of wine in frontier communities. Whiskey was home-grown, and it soon became so cheap and plentiful that frontier communities were awash in it, a circumstance that intensified the national drinking binge that peaked at precisely the historical moment Irving's "Rip Van Winkle" was delivered into the world.

So instead of asking what sloshes in the Dutchman's keg in 1640, or in Rip's flagon in 1765, let us instead ask what glows in the glass of that reader who, on a mellow evening in June 1819, puts his lousy day behind him and reclines in the porch rocker to read Washington Irving's brand new tale, "Rip Van Winkle." That beverage is our country's greatest – and arguably our only – native spirit: bourbon. If we analyze the story in the context of the readership that experienced it in 1819, there can be no doubt that Rip's sleep *must* have been induced by American corn whiskey.



When Rip Van Winkle awakens from his long sleep in a state of severe disorientation, he curses what he calls "that wicked flagon." But the tale's conclusion suggests that the flagon was not wicked but in fact blessed, for we discover that Rip has actually succeeded in using alcohol to escape his problems. He returns to the village to learn not only that he has avoided his responsibilities as a husband, father, and citizen, but also that he snoozed his buzz off during the most intense period of social turmoil in American history: he has slept through the Revolution! And even better news awaits him: Dame Van Winkle is dead and gone. Rip passes out as a subject of both his wife and his majesty, but awakens as a free man in a free country. And what price must Rip pay for his long absence, his complete drunkenness, his total irresponsibility? None whatsoever! Instead, he receives a hero's welcome and returns immediately to – you guessed it – the bar, which is now named not for George III, but rather for George Washington. Work, poverty, uncertainty, social stress, war, troubled marriage – Rip drank his way out of all of them, just as people today attempt to. But where we invariably fail in our desperate effort to use alcohol to escape the burdens of adult responsibility, Rip succeeds, and that is why it is crucial that we determine the contents of Rip's blessed flagon. Because we all need a belt of whatever that stuff is.

So what, finally, can we say is the liquor in Rip's flagon? Is it gin, or is it cider, or is it whiskey? And the answer is ... "yes." Generation after generation, we toiling mortals return to the cup of Irving's famous tale because it does for us what the contents of Rip's flagon do for him: it enables a brief escape from what ails us. And if, when we close the book, we awaken to the painful epiphany that the difficult reality of our actual lives has only been escaped for a short time, this does not mean that it was not a sweet, sweet sleep just the same.

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