A Hero’s Journey In Analysis Of Rip Van Winkle

Literature has been shaped by the culture of people; their hopes and dreams, their battles in life and in love, and their ability to overcome obstacles. It characterizes the ambition and deepest desires of a group of people, their aim of success, and overthrowing their worst fears. As written by Karen Hunter in her biography, Joseph Campbell, he wrote a theory on the predictability of stories’ plots which include a ‘hero’, called A Hero’s Journey, “[A] … Monomyth, a term originally developed by author James Joyce,”(Hunter). He defined a monomyth as, “ … a universal heroic pattern replicated in all cultures and individual lives,”(Hunter). This monomyth would influence how people examined literary works, such as Rip Van Winkle, which can be compared to the Hero’s Journey framework and impact how people see heroes.

Rip Van Winkle begins with a predictable development of the setting and characters. Rip is described as, “a simple good-natured man; he was moreover a kind of neighbor, and an obedient, henpecked husband,”(Irving 472) overall giving the impression that he is someone that readers can easily relate to. He lives in an antique small town that has, “houses of the original settlers standing within a few years, with lattice windows, gable fronts… and built of small yellow bricks brought from Holland,”(Irving 472), a setting which readers associate with normal lives. This supports the idea that Kathee Jones pointed out in her article ‘An Exploration of Personality Development through Mythic Narratives’, saying that the ‘hero’ begins their journey with their, “...biological endowments: talents, disabilities, interests, desires, and habits. The hero’s ordinary world is a place of social certainty, where expectations are known and followed,”(Jones). The details of Irving’s story lead the reader to believe that Rip Van Winkle is a simple man living in a quiet and average town, where few turbulent events occur, which is the same as how Campbell laid out the Hero’s Journey. As the plot has followed the foundations of the Hero’s Journey, readers can predict a change in emphasis of the story.

After being introduced to Rip’s character and his surroundings, the setting and intensity of the story change as he leaves town. This happens because Rip’s wife yelled at all of his friends for encouraging him to sit around in a bar and smoke, which was so embarrassing and enraging that he sought, “to escape from the labor of the farm and the clamor of his wife, was to take gun in hand and stroll away into the woods,”(Irving 474). This defines a scene where Rip is troubled after being in conflict with his wife and gets away from her by going into the woods, introducing a new setting that is unfamiliar to the reader. According to Jones, this would perfectly entail the classic Hero’s Journey where, “ … a heralding event or character reveals other possibilities and the hero’s spiritual center shifts toward the unknown,”(Jones). Due to the movement away from native areas, the atmosphere of the story slowly culminates toward the climax in Rip Van Winkle, as the monomyth would predict.

After helping a stranger with a keg climb a nearby mountain, Rip indulges in the keg’s contents, where he falls asleep surrounded by odd men who did not speak: a predicament not many find themselves in. He wakes to find himself without a dog, gun, or explanation for his hounding wife, a situation which causes him to be understandably unnerved. However, when he finds his way back to town, his wife is not his considerable issue. He observed that “the very village seemed altered… there were rows of houses which he had never seen before and those which had been his familiar haunts had disappeared,”(Irving 477), he was completely confused and

scared. He went to the building that was his old friend's bar, but was turned against as soon as he walked in, and said, " … 'they've changed my gun, and everything's changed, and I'm changed, and I can't tell what's my name, or who I am!'"(Irving 480). These excerpts from the text show Rip in a very difficult position; he is unaware of what happened to his belongings, how to explain things to his wife, and when he finally gets to town, and nothing makes sense. At this point, he is on the verge of a mental breakdown in the middle of a busy bar, which leads readers to infer that this is the climax of the story, due to the increasingly trying situation that Rip has found himself in.

According to the Hero's Journey guidelines that Jones has described, this would fit because, "In the special world, the hero struggles through a series of trials,"(Jones) in the second element of the journey, 'Initiation'. Rip has lost all that makes sense to him, and he is faced with the issue of finding where to go, now that his old town is warped. However, this also skips several steps in the layout Jones predicted when she said, "Often a hero must undergo a test of character to cross the return threshold[to the ordinary world], showing commitment to finishing the journey,"(Jones). Rip Van Winkle does not conform entirely to the Hero's Journey, because he is technically back in the original location, but it is unrecognizable in every way. He has no place here, which is an absolute contrast to the setting described at the beginning of the story. As well, this is described in the 'Return' phase of the Hero's Journey, which is supposed to be after 'Initiation'(the conflict section), but in Rip's situation, this is the most difficult trial that he must face.

Sadly, after asking those in the bar about his friends and family, he finds that many of them are dead or gone due to the civil war. The result of all this new loss, "Rip's heart died away at hearing of these sad changes in his home and friends, and finding himself thus alone in the world,"(Irving 479). However, through finding out the melancholy fates of his friends, Rip is able to find his path to happiness when he finds his long-lost daughter who is willing to take him in. He then learns about the legend of the Kaatskill mountains, which provides clarification that his grave predicament happened because he clambered atop a mountain with the strange man. Peter Vanderdonk, a descendant of the historian who had written about the province at its earliest stages revealed, "it was a fact, handed down from his ancestor the historian, that the Kaatskill mountains had always been haunted by strange beings,"(Irving 481). They had caused him to fall asleep for 20 years, which consequently led Rip to miss the war in which he unknowingly was separated from his loved ones.

While these details were sorrowful to learn about and have to accept, they also provided the clarification that Rip had been waiting to find. Jones says, "Heroes are challenged to knit together knowledge of the special world with the realities of ordinary life, becoming a master of two worlds,"(Jones) and this concludes that often there is not always a completely happy ending in returning to the original world in the Hero's Journey. However, in the case of Rip Van Winkle, it was heartwarming for readers to find out that he was eventually reunited with his daughter and was able to resume his usual routines. After all of this chaos for a man shown as simple and kind, he was able to overcome the pain and difficulty to, "[make] friends among the rising generation, with whom be soon grew into great favor,"(Irving 481) and had "got his neck out of the yoke of matrimony, and could go in and out whenever he pleased, without dreading the tyranny of Dame Van Winkle,"(Irving 481). This lead to an ending that showed he had indeed mastered the ways of managing the past grievances and enjoying the present as is required in the monomyth as expressed by Campbell.

Through the lens of the Hero’s Journey, Rip Van Winkle fits the frame in most attributes. The protagonist did not acquire guidance from a wise helper or anyone else during the phase of trials, nor was the exact order in the rise and fall of the climax precisely the same. The added complexity of how the final setting was arguably not the same as at the beginning topped off the additional parts of the story that did not correspond to the protocols of the Hero’s Journey. However, in weighing all of the attributes in the story, these details only slightly veered the direction of the story from the marks the monomyth had laid out.

The main points in the Hero’s Journey start with the hero in a normal place, and then after a setting change faces trials and finally is able to return to a peaceful yet enlightened life are all hit in Rip Van Winkle. One of the most important ways that Rip fills in the protagonist's requirements of being a hero is how he is just a normal guy, yet is able to become something greater and have a further appreciation for adventure. According to ChangingMinds.org, this “ … much-admired and much-copied pattern has also been criticized as leading to 'safe' movie-making, in which writers use his structure as a template, thus leading to 'boring' repeats, albeit in different clothes,”(Campbell’s). This refers to the predictable rise of a cultured hero by the end in the outline of a Hero’s Journey, however, that is the reason why the Hero’s Journey affects literacy to such a great extent-- the pursuit of something better will be found in all cultures, and therefore in the things that they write about. Human nature is to want to have an adventure and become a better person through it, and by capturing this in their works, both Campbell and Irving have created something that ordinary people are able to relate to and use as a guide in their own life and pursuit of their goals.