

Teaching American Literature: A Journal of Theory and Practice

Summer 2017 (9:1)

Ripping up the Syllabus: Teaching "Rip Van Winkle" on Day One of the Early American Survey

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Abstract: This essay argues for the merits of introducing students to Washington Irving's "Rip Van Winkle" during the first class meeting in the traditional early American literature survey course, providing a theoretical rationale and logistical plan for doing so. The approach is intended to create a cohesive framework for highly diverse course readings and stave off the resistance of students who fail to recognize many of the genres of the early canon as "literary." It does so by close-reading various "non-literary" texts and then subtly transferring that critical approach to Irving's familiarly "literary" story. As a result, students may begin to internalize on day one an interpretive methodology that puts various types of texts in conversation with one another, thereby giving more cohesion to the various forms and purposes of early American writing. This discussion-based plan also offers numerous metacognitive strategies for turning a critical analysis of "Rip Van Winkle" and its contextual documents into a reflection on the politics and practices of literary study.

Introduction

In the typical early American literature survey course in which students struggle to navigate the unfamiliar genres of the colonial and early national eras, the stories of Washington Irving are a soft runway. After weeks of sermons, autobiographies, and contact narratives, students are often relieved to spot a strip of fiction with characters, dialogue, and plot, reminiscent of the literary works they studied in high school. Grounded in students' awareness of Irving's characters from popular culture and their secondary-level experiences with the short story genre, classroom discussion of "Rip Van Winkle" and "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" from *The Sketch-Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.* (1819) tends to be livelier and more participatory. For students, examining Irving's stories often leads to a retroactive appreciation for earlier course texts that they may have found initially puzzling due to an unfamiliar generic, cultural, or polemical orientation. For instructors, Irving's recognizably "literary" style combines with overt references to American history in such a way that teachers are able to effectively model—often for the first time in the semester—how a formalist close-reading of a text's literary/rhetorical devices often leads to a discussion of its cultural/political messaging. It is relatively easy, for instance, to get students to sense in

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"Rip Van Winkle" a latent political meaning in the fact that a painting of King George III can be so simply transformed into a painting of George Washington after the American Revolution. At the same time, the text is complex enough that students will disagree about what precisely that meaning is, hence fostering healthy critical debate.

In my career so far—first as a graduate student instructor, then as a visiting lecturer, and now as a tenure-track faculty member—I have had the opportunity to teach the early American survey at a range of educational institutions including research-focused universities, selective liberal arts colleges, rural open-admissions colleges, and middle-tier professionally-oriented universities. Despite varying levels of reading and writing skills across institutions, the overall experience of teaching this class has proven remarkably consistent due to its common position as a general education selective, its similar enrollment numbers (around twenty), and the students' uniformly low interest in early American literary study at the start of the course. For numerous semesters at these various institutions, I taught Irving's two canonical stories back-to-back, four weeks into a chronologically sequenced reading list that began with Native American oral traditions and accounts of European-Indigenous contact. No matter how successfully I taught Irving's stories or other individual works, I still struggled (especially so in the earlier weeks of the course) to trace common intellectual questions and approaches across the pre-Civil War canon without artificially collapsing the formal and contextual differences among the writings we would examine. That is not to say that the course had no thread at all. Rather, it tended to fit Robert T. Tally's description of the unevenness of the standard chronological early American survey, possessing a "rough and awkward trajectory, with fits and starts" (112).

More recently, my course has improved through the adoption of a new sequencing and contextual approach early in the semester that draws upon the opportunities that Irving's stories present to synthesize student learning from other readings and to spotlight the way early American writings sought to define and/or critique ideas of national identity or communal belonging. Put simply, I now bookend the first half of the semester with Irving's two stories. I begin the course with "Rip Van Winkle," move all the way back to colonial texts and indigenous oral traditions, and then progress chronologically through an array of genres until reaching "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," right before the midterm.

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For the predominantly non-English-major students who enroll in my lower-level general education survey, Irving's two stories accessibly introduce and review key concerns of the first half of the course while setting the stage for the themes of later antebellum texts. Readers of *Teaching American Literature* will surely recall that Rip sleeps in the mountains for a number of years and then wanders back into Tarrytown, unaware that the American Revolution has taken place in his absence. Since "Rip Van Winkle" depicts a moment in which an American national identity is being forged out of a formerly colonial community – subtly mixing celebration and critique of that created nationhood – the story clears a broad path for students to set out upon an examination of the democratizing yet exclusionary mythos of American nationhood as it is expressed in (or prefaced by) its earliest literature. By helping students early on to recognize a famous and seemingly apolitical text's subtle subversiveness, instructors can anticipate and preempt the resentment that students often display when confronted with what they consider to be "non-literary" works, which often happen to be (as Marci L. Carrasquillo notes) pieces by women and/or minority writers who are critical of the then-status-quo (63). Showing the cultural work and political critique inherent in a genre that students already recognize as "literary" quickly crumbles the false dichotomy they often bring into the course between so-called real literature and (what a student once called) "stuff for history class." Consequently, this early dismantling of generic hierarchies in the course readings can lead to a more egalitarian and diverse classroom dynamic in which unearned privilege is checked and multiple perspectives are encouraged.

The specific strategy outlined below describes an effective model for using "Rip Van Winkle" on the first day of class to introduce general education students to college-level literary analysis and to help them make sense of the wide-ranging generic content of early American literature. Since my complementary lesson on "Sleepy Hollow" at the midterm varies greatly depending upon the progress of each individual course, I only discuss here my unvarying method of introducing the semester with a pre-reading discussion of "Rip Van Winkle." The lesson plan draws upon Sonya L. Armstrong and Mary Newman's research on the postsecondary pedagogical use of intertextuality, which they define as "an analogical process of simultaneously building—and immediately applying—schemata that are introduced by supplemental texts" (9). While Armstrong and Newman focus on college

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reading classrooms, they note that many disciplines, including literature, are conducive to an approach that utilizes such "scaffolding" to help students understand core content questions and to synthesize material throughout the semester (12-13). In my course, this strategy amounts to introducing, on the first day of class, a series of contextual documents for "Rip Van Winkle" and then immediately interrogating their content the way we eventually will the work of fiction itself. By having the class close-read the contextual documents—a painting, an excerpted essay, and a contemporary advertisement—I am able to unsteady the hierarchical notion that only traditional literary works are worthy of analysis. The non-literary contextual materials are presented as engaging in a conversation about national identity that Irving's story then seems to join. Thus, students' very first dealing with a traditional literary text is immediately framed in relation to the claims of so-called non-literary works, on rather equal footing. This approach, on the first day of class, accustoms students to the shifting between genres that will characterize most of the early American survey prior to the 1820s.

Yet I also see this introductory tactic in the early American survey as drawing upon the definition of "intertextuality" from the field of literary studies to unseat student prejudice toward works that do not neatly fit the categories of fiction, drama, or poetry. By beginning with a literary work that is composed long after those to be studied in the first few weeks (i.e., colonial texts), I am able to immediately complicate students' expectation that all connections in literary history can be understood as a series of individual acts of author-to-author influence, in the way that, say, Herman Melville was influenced by Nathaniel Hawthorne. It is especially important in early American literary study to dissuade students from relying solely upon this rigid influence-based approach due to the diverse nature of the early American canon and the fact that many of the important works from the colonial and early national periods were virtually unknown or unpublished until relatively recently.

As opposed to an "influence" model that depends upon authors having read one another's work and that often implicitly assigns each text a univocal aesthetic or message, the more open-ended notion of intertextuality entails the Bakhtinian concept of a "polyphonic" text, one that contains an array of voices and discursive elements (Landwehr 2). The continuity in the course thus derives from an evolving conversation about American

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identity that texts are seen to partially join at different points in history. For this reason, I steer class discussion away from the notion that texts respond to one another, preferring to stress how *readers*, through diligent study and class discussion, can build conversations among and even within individual texts to see how they speak to their historical moments and to our own. As Armstrong and Newman explain in a slightly different context, we might help students see the text itself as "a conversation that is informed by other conversations" and to recognize the students' own role as "active participants" (17).

To that end, "Rip Van Winkle" itself is helpfully embedded with multiple "meta" moments in which matters of interpretation are tied to historical context and the shared assumptions of a particular social group (what Stanley Fish has famously called "interpretive communities"). For instance, when Rip returns to Tarrytown, unaware of American independence, he innocently declares his loyalty to the king and is nearly arrested for treason (Irving 44). Since Rip has "missed" the historical context into which he has stepped, he completely misreads the rhetorical situation and jeopardizes his own safety. At the same time, the infectious nationalism of the time and the occasion of it being a public election day makes the community eager to suspect only political treachery, leading them to "miss" Rip's distinctive situation and see his harmless attempt at self-identification as an enemy affront. When we get to discussing this passage in the second class period, it helps me to crystallize for students the need to balance our own personal responses with the historical moment of a text's production. To ignore historical context when analyzing literature and project only our own identities into the work is to be a clueless, drowsy vagrant stumbling in from the hills – while too firmly cementing all utterances into a particular historical or political context may lead us to tar-and-feather the innocent.

Lesson Plan Part One: Gathering Existing Knowledge of Rip

The "Rip Van Winkle" lesson on the first day serves the dual purposes of sampling course content and modelling a college-level approach to critical inquiry. Students, however, will be expecting a quick meeting in which we do little more than read over the syllabus. In an essay highly critical of the obligatory "syllabus day," Kevin Gannon argues that instructors do a better job of acclimating students on day one by replicating what an

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actual class meeting will look like, thereby letting students "peek under the hood and see the method and purpose of certain aspects of the course." After directing students to consult a pre-recorded mini-lecture on the syllabus that I have posted to the course website and scheduling a syllabus quiz for the second week of class, I announce that we will immediately begin a two-day sequence on Irving's "Rip Van Winkle." I start by casually asking students what they already know about the title character. The students, who have not been assigned any reading before the first day of class, are often eager to speak up in this discussion. The lack of any prior responsibility for the material excludes the possibility of their revealing any failures in comprehension. Engaging them in a pre-reading discussion also communicates that I value their thoughts and intellectual companionship regardless of their level of subject matter expertise. Very few students will likely have read the Irving story in the past, but most will know something of the legend from popular culture and folklore (some confusing him with Rumpelstiltskin). This discussion often takes a humorous turn, breaking the ice at the start of the new term. Given free rein to reminisce about childhood stories, students will often flock to the conversation, politely disagreeing with one another, comparing their own memories of Disney cartoons, and eagerly explaining the character to any classmates who may be unaware of the story. Interestingly, no student has ever seemed to know that Rip's nap straddles the American Revolution, which is itself a testament to the way political subtexts are often submerged in discussions of works that are esteemed as literary classics.

During this open-ended part of the class, I have cued up some anecdotal information, should the conversation lag. These tidbits include:

- North Carolina is known as "The Rip Van Winkle State." (A reliable overview of North Carolina's relationship to Rip is available on the web) ("Rip Van Winkle").
- Irving modelled his story on an older German folktale (Students may respond to this fact by supplying memories of Grimm's fairytales and how surprisingly macabre they are. This might also be a good time to lightheartedly remind students to review the plagiarism policy in the syllabus).

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- "Rip" is an unusual name in the US these days. Where else do we usually see the word "Rip"? (Rest in Peace)

Again, such information may be withheld or shared with the class, as the primary goal is to get as many students as possible weighing in on the topic. Like Irving's writing itself, the classroom conversation at this stage is intentionally relaxed, humorous, and playful, which is an especially important tone to strike at the start of the course, for as William Spengemann glibly notes, "Early American Literature has never been a subject to make the heart leap" (ix). In an article that praises the use of stand-up comedy strategies to facilitate student learning in the otherwise "solemn" early American course, Kevin McCarron convincingly argues for humor's role in helping instructors aim for what he calls "continuous student response" (52). For McCarron, such consistent participation requires the instructor's use of the sort of "omission strategies" that comedians employ in telling jokes, a manner of leaving things unsaid to invite student/audience participation through anticipation and something akin to collaboration (55). The next stage in the lesson plan thrives precisely on this idea of keeping the conversation ongoing by supplying some but not all of the instructor's preparation and knowledge.

Lesson Plan Part Two: Close-Reading Supplemental Documents

At some point during the preceding conversation, I ask students whether they know where "Rip Van Winkle" takes place. Occasionally students from northern states may have visited the Irving tourist attractions north of New York City. Pitched merely as an attempt to help them get a sense of this area, I project onto the screen the following image of a painting, without revealing its title:



Figure 1 James Hamilton, *Scene on the Hudson (Rip Van Winkle)*, 1845, Smithsonian American Art Museum

When I ask students for their general impressions of the piece, they will usually comment on the autumnal beauty of the painting, the leashless dog, or the shabbily dressed man who looks as though he has met with some misfortune. We make predictions about the community in the story. Perhaps a highly visual student will note the difference between the haunting thicket and the clarity and peacefulness of the river backdrop. I try, if possible, to have students note the lack of commercial enterprise on the river and the apparent lethargy of the man in the center of the piece. I then reveal that the work of art is an 1845 painting by James Hamilton entitled *Scene on the Hudson*, neglecting at this point to tell them that the full title is *Scene on the Hudson (Rip Van Winkle)*.

I inform students that the Hudson River was considered so beautiful and so distinctive to the United States that it spawned an entire early American artistic movement known as the Hudson River School. At this point, I show the first two minutes of a widely available YouTube-posted documentary entitled "The Establishment of an American Landscape and the Hudson River School" (Cohen). Against a backdrop of majestic natural landscapes, art historian Linda S. Ferber explains how these painters along with prominent

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early US writers such as William Cullen Bryant and James Fenimore Cooper "were very busy self-consciously fashioning a cultural identity for the United States" (qtd. In Cohen). After the clip, I click to a PowerPoint slide featuring the above quote from Ferber. Students are asked to turn to one another, in groups of two or three, and discuss Ferber's meaning for two minutes. When time is up, I call on groups to share what they spoke about. My goal with this "think-pair-share" tactic (in addition to getting students to know one another) is for the class to begin to conceptualize the difference between "expressing" a cultural identity and "self-consciously fashioning" one, as the first half of the course will deal explicitly with the efforts of early writers to invent or challenge ideas of the precise historical/religious/cultural significance of various American communities.

To help students clear this first significant theoretical hurdle in the course, I invite analogies between the nation-building goals of early US artists and the students' own goals in curating their personal profiles on social media platforms. Noting the benefits of using Facebook to teach rhetorical analysis, Jane Matheson Fife points out that traditional-age students tacitly possess a sophisticated understanding of the way in which Facebook postings are neither fully representative nor fully fabricated (559). They really did go to that exclusive club last night, and the US really does have breathtaking Catskill Mountains, but the artistry of a Facebook posting or a work of US nationalistic literature lies in how well those clearly exceptional moments or objects can be made to seem representative of the subject.

I then pose a follow-up query: why would the US use art and literature to fashion an identity for itself? As we ponder this question as a class, I click to a PowerPoint slide projecting this famous slogan and image from the National Endowment for the Arts:

In full Socratic mode, I seek the class's help in walking me through the claim being made by the NEA, asking them to clarify for me terms like "great" and "deserves." I may remind students at this point that our course is titled "American Literature I." Many students who will have taken for granted the connection between literature and nationhood after years of schooling on the topic find it empowering to question this nation-based



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classification of literature. Like most of these pre-Irving discussions, the goal is to inspire students' critical thinking and metacognitive awareness of the enterprise in which the course (and their previous literary educational experiences) are engaged. It turns out that art, or at least the way we learn about it, has been political all along. As students and evaluators of "American literature," we are joining the same conversation in which our course texts are involved.

While individual responses vary, students usually come to believe from analyzing the NEA advertisement that the building of a national literature is an inherently competitive enterprise, which, as I point out, means that to understand American literature we have to think about writings we would not consider American. At this point, I introduce (as many instructors do in teaching Irving) the English preacher Sydney Smith's infamous 1820 piece, written around the time of Irving's stories, that has come to be known as "Who Reads an American Book?" Keeping in mind the social media analogy, I present Smith as a sort of nineteenth-century Internet troll, and I often choose a rather smug picture of him to display on a slide alongside these selected railings against American culture:

- 1) The Americans are a brave, industrious, and acute people; but they have hitherto given no indication of genius...
- 2) Their Franklins and Washingtons, and all the other sages and heroes of their revolution, were born and bred subjects of the King of England...
- 3) During the thirty or forty years of their independence, they have done absolutely nothing for the Sciences, for the Arts, for Literature...
- 4) In the four quarters of the globe, who reads an American book? or goes to an American play? or looks at an American picture or statue?
- 5) Finally, under which of the old tyrannical governments of Europe is every sixth man a Slave, whom his fellow-creatures may buy and sell and torture? (Smith 79-80)

At this point, I break the class up into groups, asking each group to concentrate on paraphrasing one of the five points listed by Smith. In the process, students become aware of the following external criticisms of the early United States of which Irving and his

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contemporaries would be aware: the country is too practical and business-minded to be artistic; too newly founded to have any ancient legends; too delayed in picking up the pen; too uniformly mocked by the international community to be taken seriously; and too steeped in the immoral slave trade to presume to offer anything beautiful or humanistic to the world. These various critiques, presented to students on the first day of the semester as a context for "Rip Van Winkle," moisten the soil for an array of genres, including typological expressions of early American exceptionalism like John Winthrop's sermon "A Model of Christian Charity" (1630); historical romances that attempt to locate a national identity in the colonial past like *Last of the Mohicans* (1826) and *Hope Leslie* (1827); Emersonian essays like "The American Scholar" that carve out a space for aesthetics in a busy, business-driven nation; and works that frame the racist hypocrisies of national liberty like Phillis Wheatley's poem "On Being Brought from Africa to America" (1773), William Apess's speech "Eulogy on King Philip" (1836) and Frederick Douglass's speech "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?" (1852).

With Smith's criticism in mind, we turn back to Hamilton's painting. At this point I facetiously announce that I had forgotten to inform them of the painting's parenthetical subtitle, "Rip Van Winkle." Students enjoy this revelation and are usually eager to draw conclusions about Irving's story based on this miniature rendering of the character. What will he be like? Why is his name relegated to a parenthetical? Why is he so small? Where is his beard? What is he drinking? Why does he have a gun? When the conversation begins to die down, I suggest to students that Rip's small position in this painting provides us with a useful visual metaphor for how college-level literary study requires a careful balance of text and context. Approaching early American literature demands subtle and focused reading (we need to look closely to make out the character of Rip) but we also need to see the backdrop of its cultural and historical moment. Hamilton's painting makes clear that to only pay attention to Rip is to fail to appreciate the "Scene on the Hudson," which occupies nearly the entire painting. Conversely, to read with too much emphasis on the broader context is to miss the distinctiveness and complexity of Rip as a character. As Colin Irvine argues, instructional materials for this story routinely push students toward a reductive interpretation of "Rip Van Winkle" and its relation to its historical context by (for example)

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simplistically aligning Rip's unhappy marriage with pre-Revolutionary unrest (59). In such an interpretation, presumably, Rip's nagging spouse is akin to the King who cruelly polices the colonists. The Revolutionary years, so the interpretation goes, "free" the colonies through war and free Rip through the death of his wife. Certainly Irving invites a parallel of sorts between these situations. Yet any close reading of the language of the text also pushes back against this interpretation by noting many of the undesirable consequences of the successful Revolution, not to mention the legitimacy of Dame Van Winkle's grievance against Rip.

Lesson Plan Part Three: Opening Passages from the Text

To solidify the point about balancing text and context – and also the need to pay close attention to passages depicting natural landscape, which students are otherwise likely to skim – I distribute two pre-printed passages from near the beginning of "Rip Van Winkle," one of which introduces the landscape and setting of the story and the other of which introduces Rip himself. Students are asked to return to their groups, take turns reading the passage aloud, and then answer a few short discussion questions printed below the text. The first passage is more or less the opening paragraph of the story proper:

Whoever has made a voyage up the Hudson must remember the Kaatskill mountains. They are a dismembered branch of the great Appalachian family, and are seen away to the west of the river, swelling up to a noble height, and lording it over the surrounding country. Every change of season, every change of weather, indeed, every hour of the day, produces some change in the magical hues and shapes of these mountains, and they are regarded by all the good wives, far and near, as perfect barometers. When the weather is fair and settled, they are clothed in blue and purple, and print their bold outlines on the clear evening sky, but, sometimes, when the rest of the landscape is cloudless, they will gather a hood of gray vapors about their summits, which, in the last rays of the setting sun, will glow and light up like a crown of glory. (Irving 34)

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Discussion questions printed beneath the passage lead students to read closely for familiar literary devices like theme, personification, and foreshadowing but also to unite those devices with the historical and cultural context we have spent most of the class period building. By asking students in the discussion questions to circle the words that describe the landscape and look for any pattern in them, they recognize the monarchical imagery that surrounds natural setting (terms like "noble," "lording," "purple," and "crown" proliferate) and how the theme of "change" that repeats through the passage. I also lead discussion in a way that helps students to recognize how the passage also insists on the posterity of the mountains, so that themes of changing and unchanging coexist in the passage. Students may recall our contextual discussions and begin to think about the relatively recent change in the American political system from a monarchy to a republic. Will things change yet remain the same in the story, too? More broadly, in early American course readings, will we see how the rights of some advance but not those of others?

To conclude the class, students are given a second passage, the following early description of Rip:

The great error in Rip's composition was an insuperable aversion to all kinds of profitable labor. It could not be from the want of assiduity or perseverance; for he would sit on a wet rock, with a rod as long and heavy as a Tartar's lance, and fish all day without a murmur, even though he should not be encouraged by a single nibble. He would carry a fowling-piece on his shoulder for hours together, trudging through woods and swamps, and up hill and down dale, to shoot a few squirrels or wild pigeons. He would never refuse to assist a neighbor even in the roughest toil, and was a foremost man at all country frolics for husking Indian corn, or building stone-fences; the women of the village, too, used to employ him to run their errands, and to do such little odd jobs as their less obliging husbands would not do for them. In a word Rip was ready to attend to anybody's business but his own; but as to doing family duty, and keeping his farm in order, he found it impossible. (Irving 35)

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Discussion questions invite students in small groups to use their smart phones to look up the definitions of any words they do not know, and then to define Rip's "error." When reconvening as a class, I prod students to both denounce and defend the character's actions. There is a lot going on in this passage, but I am satisfied if students come away with a sense of ambivalence about Rip, recognizing him as somehow both hard-working and lazy. I also try to show how such contradictions parallel the first passage's paradoxical coupling of change and changelessness. I usually also ask students whether they too behave like Rip in their own coursework, preferring to study materials for any class but the one whose assignment is most pressing. As the class period ends, students are assigned "Rip Van Winkle" for the next meeting, and the semester is usually off to strong start.

In concluding this essay, it seems fitting to reaffirm two important ways in which this lesson plan opens routes of communication among the various complex and distinct readings we will encounter. Any teacher of the early American survey will be familiar with the challenge that course readings pose for those students who cherish a belief in the unvarnished goodness of the founding myths of colonial America and/or insist that politically motivated writing is not literature (or that one should not read literature politically). Without meticulous planning, some of these students will simply deem many of the course readings to be anti-American attacks and refuse to engage. Most often, in my experience, this resistance plays out in two ways: student expressions of resentment toward any critique of the colonial legend of American foundation and grumblings about ruining literature by "reading into" texts for political statements. The early "Rip Van Winkle" lesson (and that of the second class meeting, in which we discuss the text more fully) helps eliminates such defensiveness by marketing the text's political agency as a product of authorial ingenuity, thereby meeting the students' desire for celebratory aesthetic reading without turning a blind eye to the text's cultural work. Thinking of Smith's critique that Revolutionary leaders were unfit to serve as American legendary heroes due to their being born as Englishmen, students can be led to see something both aesthetically pleasing and politically motivated in Irving's use of the Henry Hudson crew as a national legend born out of a colonial Dutch past. Through Irving's own efforts to build a national legend, they come to see the idea of a cultural pre-history for the United States not as a matter of historical fact but as a retroactive

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and competitive enterprise on behalf of succeeding generations looking to judge or justify some aspect of the present. Such a conversation unfolds throughout the term, lending some much-needed cohesiveness to the difficult texts that often serve as mythic origin moments in American literary culture, including works by Christopher Columbus, Bartolomé de las Casas, John Smith, William Bradford, and various indigenous oral traditions (on this last example, it is also worth pointing out that Irving's use of oral storytelling as narrative frames in his "origin" myth for the United States nicely prepares students for thinking about orality's function in traditional indigenous narratives about cultural origin).

Having been exposed to Smith's highly critical essay also dispels the illusion, unwittingly propagated by literary anthologies, that slavery plays no part in American culture until the tumultuous decades immediately preceding the Civil War (Toni Morrison's 1992 study *Playing in the Dark*, which I put on reserve, also exposes the academic myth of non-African presence in early American literary culture, and I find it to be a rare accessible work of theory for undergraduates to peruse in writing research papers). Students aware of Smith's critique of American slavery may now see significance in the way self-consciously "national" stories like "Rip Van Winkle" seem to say so remarkably little about the peculiar institution for which the young nation's reputation was already stained (a silence I amplify by pointing to the *Sketch-Book's* indignation at writers who gloss over the harsh treatment of Native Americans in "Traits of Indian Character"). Providing students with all of these possible directions for interpreting what is and what is not said in the text creates a heightened excitement for course readings, gets students reading on multiple levels, and builds clearer avenues through the diverse terrain of the early American survey.

Although I have detailed an approach to using "Rip Van Winkle" on the first day of class as an introduction to the methodology and subfield of early American literature, I believe that instructors might similarly benefit from opening the semester with other carefully chosen texts that match the same criteria, those being that the text is immediately recognized as "literary" by graduates of the American high school system; it can be easily put in conversation with a range of "non-literary" supplemental texts; it is not the earliest chronological reading in the course; and it is embedded with memorable "meta" moments in which the text itself is concerned with the act of interpretation. If possible, the text should

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also pair naturally with some other work (as "Rip Van Winkle" does with "Sleepy Hollow"), preferably by the same author so that students get the opportunity to revisit the chosen writer's work in a more organic, chronological context. This reviewing of the writer's work later in the course, in proximity to its contemporary works, also helps discourage any notion that the instructor believes this writer's work is somehow exemplary and not beholden to any particular historical context in the way other readings are. Choosing an opening text and context on the first day of class is the best way I have found of enlisting students in the effort to build a framework that supports enthusiasm for the course and an equally attentive discussion of the assorted genres that currently make up the early American canon.

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