English Literature 48A

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Washington Irving Literary Response

*“He recognized on the sign, however, the ruby face of King George, under which he had smoked so many a peaceful pipe; but even this was singularly changed. The red coat was changed for one of blue and buff, a sword was held in the hand instead of a scepter, the head was decorated with a cocked hat, and underneath was painted in large characters, General Washington.”* (Irving)

This quote from Washington Irving’s short story “Rip van Winkle” uses some fascinating imagery to illuminate a disturbing undercurrent in the work. A succinct, if crude, summary for the concept espoused would probably be something along the lines of “same shit, different day.” The fact that such a scathing indictment of our country’s first president has survived and thrived in the American canon can be attributed either to the subtlety with which the sentiment is proffered or the wonderfully American idea that, not only should speech be free, but dissent should be lauded.

The quote, is, essentially, a list of differences in a sign that Rip van Winkle had stood under since youth, now transformed during his long absence. It is emblematic of the changes that the world has undergone during Rip’s rest, and the magically induced macguffin that transported him twenty years into his own future takes on a sudden meaning that it didn’t have before. It gently insinuates that this sign was painted over out of necessity, when America’s independence was achieved. A scepter, a symbol of divine right, was removed in favor of a sword -- An inherently violent object, and one of revolution and carnage rather than the rule of law. There is no crown mentioned, but the hat placed upon King George’s head knocked off the implicit one that was there. A loss of wealth and class might be read into this. Hats, especially “cocked hats,” were common objects, whereas crowns and circlets were items of great value (Irving). The style of coat has also experienced a descent. They have gone from King George’s royal red robes to a cheaper blue, and the style has changed into a practical overcoat called a “buff” coat (Irving). Furthermore, just in case it wasn’t clear, “General Washington” has been written underneath the image “in large characters,” so no accusation of underhanded allegiance to the king or crown could be easily levelled. The owner of this sign wanted it made very clear that he was absolutely a loyal supporter of the violent, low class George Washington, as long as this loyalty didn’t require the purchase of a new sign, because signs are expensive.

All of these differences, though, serve to highlight the similarities rather than overrun them. No new sign was commissioned. Nobody felt patriotic enough to paint over the face of King George, leaving it with its original “ruby” hue (Irving). Even the first names of the subjects are identical. Irving is quietly poking fun here, going almost far enough to say “the king is dead, long live the general” outright, but not quite far enough to forsake plausible deniability.

There are a number of different interpretations that can be applied to this quote. First, since the differences are the focus, it might be said that Irving is making the fairly banal observation that things can change a lot in twenty years. This can be dismissed because of the way the quote opens. If Irving was attempting such an easy observation, Rip van Winkle would not have recognized the sign at all. Since the ruby face of King George is still the same, an anarchist sentiment might be read into it -- An idea that it doesn’t matter how you dress your master, because you are still a slave. Maybe the quote is more specific than that. It could be saying that King George and George Washington both have the same flaws, and both should be treated with caution.

 Or perhaps the message of the quote runs deeper and is more universal. The quote does equate George Washington to King George, but the message therein could say something about human nature itself, rather than these historical figures in particular. The events of our past serve as a foundation on which our future is built. This gradual buildup of changes are things we might not notice at all, and the only reason they are so shocking to Rip van Winkle is because he never saw the interim. It is true that underneath George Washington lies King George, in the same way that underneath our current selves lie the echoes of our past. That doesn’t invalidate who we are, though. If anything, it is a jubilant notion. Vestiges of our past remain, underneath thin coats of paint and inexpertly chiseled letters saying that we are something or someone different than who we were, but the paint *is* there, and the letters *are* chiseled. Rip could smoke “many a peaceful pipe” underneath George Washington as easily as he had smoked it under King George, and the taxes on the tobacco would be cheaper and the days would be just as bright.

Works Cited

Irving, Washington. The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent. N.p.: n.p., 1819. Print.