

The Water Writing in “Rip Van Winkle” from the Perspective of New Materialism

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Abstract: *As one of Washington Irving’s most renowned short stories, “Rip Van Winkle” (1819) delves profoundly into America’s historical shifts, social transformations, and human nature within a concise narrative. Traditional interpretations often overlook the value of the non-human subjects in the story, such as water in the tale is not a passive backdrop but a core element with agency and performative capacity. In Irving’s writing, water demonstrates a certain degree of agency through its interactions with characters and the plot, it demonstrates a certain ability to perform tasks. The manifestation of the natural Hudson River and the man-made magic liquor demonstrate agency through interactions with characters and the plot, directly shaping the trajectory of Rip’s subject identity in Irving’s writing. This article tries to analyze the active role of the Hudson River and the magic liquor that lulls rip in the story through New Materialism’s methodologies including key concepts such as Jane Bennett’s “Thing-Power” Theory and Bill Brown’s Thing Theory, explore how water deconstructs and reconstructs Rip’s identity and demonstrate it own agency. This perspective can provide a new interpretive path for the deep-seated mechanism of the social and historical transformation in the United States in the 19th century.*

Keywords: *“Rip Van Winkle”, New Materialism, water, thing-power, agency of thing, identity, American social revolution, Washington Irving*

I. INTRODUCTION

Washington Irving (1783-1859), a leading 19th-century American Romantic writer, is good at blending idyllic pastoralism and European nostalgia with fantastical natural landscapes. His “Rip Van Winkle” tells the story of the eponymous protagonist Rip Van Winkle. Rip escapes secular strife by being immersed into the Hudson rivers’ beautiful scenery and drinking enchanted liquor so he sleeps for decades, after awakening, he has to faced a radically transformed world. The natural scenery also occupies an important position in this story. Excluding animate non-human entities such as plants and animals, the most striking among these inanimate natural entities would undoubtedly be the mysterious liquor and the Hudson River. Water is often regarded as a constant poetic symbol in literature which stands for human powers that are more hidden, simple, and simplifying [1] and this is a long-standing exploration of water from a human perspective. In Irving’s story,

water plays a more special role, Irving uses unique technique to portray the Hudson River and the mystical lethargy liquor (a water-based substance), it can be seen that the interactions between these “waters” and the characters as well as the plot in the story largely go beyond human control, these interactions open up the possibility of a new analytical perspective: water is no longer a ‘background prop’ or ‘accessory’ for the development of the story, but an independent subject with agency. This article tries to break away from the perspective centered on human cognition and re-examine the role of ‘water’ in the story.

Since the 21st century, changes in the ecological environment, the development of artificial intelligence and biotechnology have prompted people to rethink the relationship between humans and the surrounding material environment, more and more focuses have been put on the dynamic role of “thing” in literary works. Emerging in the 21st century, the trend of New Materialism challenges anthropocentrism by positing that inanimate matter possesses agency and significance independent of human interpretation [2]. Essentially, New Materialism is a deconstruction of anthropocentrism, this theoretical framework views all material entities --- including natural environments and abstract concepts --- as dynamic contributors to global systems, helping humans reinterpret the physical world [3]. As a milestone work in the exploration of thing, Bill Brown’s Thing Theory discusses the distinction between things and objects from a philosophical perspective, revealing the multiple roles of things in modern society and their impact on human subjectivity. As a leading figure in the study of Object-oriented Ontology and New Materialism, Jane Bennett pointed that the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle, this is called Thing-Power [4]. Bennett’s research is based on the ‘Actor-Network Theory’, which is mainly proposed by Bruno Latour, Michel Callon, starting from the multiple interactions between different agents in any cognitive or material participation process, it endorses the agency of non-human ‘things’ and blurs the boundary between humans and non-humans [5]. Humans and non-human natural entities exert their agency through ‘intra-actions’ [6]. The two parties involved in such intra-actions are on an equal footing, and it is emphasised that the agency of both parties is shaped by the connections between them.

Most previous studies on “Rip Van Winkle” have focused on issues such as characters, setting, history, and national identity, while there has been relatively little research on the analysis of the subjectivity of non-human things and the deconstruction of human subjectivity in the story. From a posthumanist perspective, Quan Wang analyzed the suspension of human agency embodied in Rip’s twenty-year slumber and the prominent manifestation of non-human agency in animals and inanimate objects in his paper. However, his research mainly focused on the depiction of animals and did not take water as the key focus of description, there is still a lack of research on the agency and initiative roles of water in “Rip van Winkle”. This research addresses this gap by examining how water, as an agentic material force, interacts with characters and plot to shape thematic meaning.

II. THE LIQUOR AND THE DECONSTRUCTION OF RIP’S IDENTITY

The research scope of thing is extensive, including not only those considered inanimate objects (man-made attribute), but also animals, plants and even human beings themselves [7]. The two types of ‘water’ to be

discussed in this article are both closely related to human beings. Liquor is water processed by human techniques. The difference between it and the Hudson River lies in that the physical existence of the Hudson River is not given by humans. The concept of 'vibrant thing' reminds people to pay attention to how a text's narrative reproduces the power of thing, highlighting the agency of thing --- especially its role in determining characters' actions and emotions [8]. Thing can influence people's emotions, thereby affecting their behavior, the liquor is the most wonderful derivative of water in the story, and Rip sleeps for twenty years after drinking the liquor, which creates the climax of the whole story. The liquor mentioned in the text was made by the Dutch and the Dutch has a long history of enjoying liquor beverages, among which the most famous one is gin, also known as juniper, it is a typical and common local drink that has a history of more than three hundred years. The 'Dutch liquor' that Rip drinks is a kind of magic liquor, since it is liquor, it has water as its material basis. But it has the dynamic effect of paralyzing people's nerves and makes Rip sleep for twenty years.

The liquor, as a substance endowed with physical properties by humans, is beyond human control in the story. While Rip falls asleep, he doesn't continue to age or feel unwell, his physical and mental stages are as usual. Drinking the magic liquor is a fantastic and novel experience for Rip, and it is also an opportunity to escape from reality for him. Although the birth of liquor inevitably reflects the anthropocentric effect, the liquor itself can transcend its state as a 'thing' and demonstrate independence and influence. Agency is not unique to humans but is distributed in the assemblages of human and non-human. Rip experiences interesting psychological changes after drinking the liquor:

"He was naturally a thirsty soul, and was soon tempted to repeat the draught. One taste provoked another; and he 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 [9]".

It is certain that it is the liquor that lures Rip into a sleep which lasts twenty years --- and these twenty years are real and keep consistent with the real world, not the kind of twenty years that exist in some parallel timeline or imaginary realm. The characteristic of 'a thirsty soul' destined Rip to be unable to avoid this process, it's a result of the combined interaction between the human and thing and a consequence of a human being conquered by thing. Previous studies on non-human things have often been based on human experience, failing to describe the ontological experience of things [10]. However, in the story, liquor is a thing that transcends human cognition; the inherent power it contains manifests itself in Rip, rendering human experience no longer applicable. No one can comprehend how this experience occurs, to the extent that when Rip wakes up and recounts his experience to the villagers, 'some always pretended to doubt the reality of it, and insisted that Rip had been out of his head, and that this was one point on which he always remained flighty' [11]. People speculate about this incident based on Rip's experience as human being. Since no one has ever drunk such liquor before --- which exists only in legends --- the liquor can no longer be regarded merely as a pure, objective thing. It has exerted an undeniable impact on Rip's life and the story, standing as an unfamiliar material existence. When discussing the concept of defamiliarization, Russian Formalism once put forward views on 'thing' for making perceiving the existence of things becomes the fundamental purpose of art, and the way to achieve this purpose is to 'defamiliarie

things.’ In this way, readers are brought face-to-face with things directly, thereby gaining artistic perception and deepening their understanding of things through a sense of unfamiliarity [12]. The liquor Rip drinks is precisely such a thing. Endowed with mysterious properties, the liquor exerts a profound impact on Rip’s life and the most striking power is embodied in its role in the construction of Rip’s identity. Rip’s move from the village to the mountains was a process that stripped away his original cultural and social perceptions. Initially, he voluntarily chose to undergo this stripping, seeking to escape the trivialities he encountered in his anthropocentric life. However, after encountering the mysterious liquor, he was lured by this unfamiliar substance and then ‘one taste provoked another’. In turn, he lost his agency, eventually falling into a deep sleep. This is a process where Rip sought to shed his old identity, yet is completely deprived of it in his interaction with the thing. The liquor aligns with his desire, yet exceeds his control, ultimately robbing him of the identity he has once held in human society.

The Thing-Power emphasised by new materialism actually ‘gestures toward the strange ability of ordinary, man-made items to exceed their status as objects and to manifest traces of independence or aliveness, constituting the outside of our own experience’ [13]. The experience of things and the experience of humans are equal, not hierarchical (one encompassing the other). The exploration of things is not about arguing for priority; rather, it is about bringing things --- long marginalised or overlooked --- into the foreground. The liquor exhibits independence: it lures Rip into drinking more and more, plunges him into an unimaginable twenty-year slumber, and leaves him disoriented from society when he wakes. From the perspective of natural things, Rip remains just Rip; viewed through the lens of the Hudson River or the liquor, he is an ordinary human being who is unable to control these non-human things and was forced to adapt to them. Subsequently, he is carried by the liquor into an alien spatiotemporal realm, where the rules of human linear time are suspended. During this period, things and humans form an interconnected network of interaction [14].

The liquor in question is Dutch liquor, which epitomises the old civilization of the colonial era. The creation of this story is influenced by European folk tales, and its overall style reflects Irving’s nostalgia for and adherence to the old civilization. In the story, the descendants of Holland colonists have long lost the adventure spirit of their ancestors, and the old civilization is gradually declining [15]. As a product of the old Holland civilization, liquor’s agency comes into conflict with the new civilization. The old civilization represented by liquor has lost its legitimacy in the new post-Revolutionary War society, and liquor embodies a confrontation between the old and the new civilizations. Unlike the Hudson River, which can continue to exist throughout history, liquor disappears once Rip drinks it. Liquor severs Rip’s connection to the old civilization and, at the same time, prevents him from integrating into the new one. And in the new civilization, during the period in the story, American society is in the midst of a complex period of transition: while people are excited about the sweeping social changes, they are also deeply troubled by unease and upheaval, making the entire social atmosphere fraught with crises. Meanwhile, the connection between humans and nature is gradually eroded by industrial development, and Irving embodies his concerns about this social state in Rip [16]. Amid the liquor and the breathtaking beauty of the Hudson River Valley, Rip comes to understand humanity’s place within non-human things. The only proactive action he takes during his interactions with water is to drink liquor uncontrollably.

Ironically, this act only further undermines his autonomy [17]. Upon returning to the village, the children and dogs he once played with now treat him as a stranger; the villagers even mistake him --- with his gun --- as an outsider intent on inciting a riot. All the people Rip knows have departed and he is unable to prove his identity. A sense of isolation wells up within him: 'And every thing's changed --- and I'm changed --- and I can't tell what's my name, or who I am!' [18]. Since he has no way to verify his identity, Rip belongs neither to the small community of the village, nor to the 'Federalist Party' or 'Democratic-Republican Party' that he cannot comprehend, nor even to the larger community represented by the Stars and Stripes and the portrait of Washington [19]. All of this stems from the fact that he was lured into drinking liquor and fell into a twenty-year slumber.

After the American Revolutionary War, there existed disunity and uncertainty regarding the national identity of the American nation [20]. The disputes among various political parties have permeated every aspect of human social life, involving even the most ordinary citizens and evolving into a prevailing trend. People passionately align themselves with the parties they support, yet this trend of disputes carries the risk of causing division and the loss of a communal identity [21]. The impact of liquor on Rip reflects this danger to a certain extent: it deconstructs Rip's original identity as a villager of Dutch colonial descent from the old era and casts him into an entirely different time period, severing his connection to the communal identity of society. This manifests a form of subjectivity of liquor. Human initiative and central authority are dissolved by liquor, demonstrating liquor's inherent ability to transform people. Such deconstruction embodies Irving's anxiety about the transition between the old and new American national identities during the period of revolution. Meanwhile, the deconstruction of the old identity paves the way for Rip to later attempt to establish a new identity and embark on a new life.

III. THE HUDSON RIVER AND THE RECONSTRUCTION OF RIP'S IDENTITY

If liquor deconstructed Rip's original identity, revealing the loss of social identity that Irving was anxious about, then the Hudson River played a role in redeeming this loss to a certain extent. The liquor reveals the disintegration of the old civilization and the disappearance of identity. Rip loses his old identity, but after returning to his hometown, he is still striving to find a new one so that he could survive in the new society. The Hudson River, as another kind of water, to some extent, helps him complete this process.

To simply regard the liquor and the Hudson River as symbols of Irving's representation of and nostalgia for the old civilization is not very accurate. Unlike liquor, the existence of the Hudson River does not rely on human beings. There is already water flowing in this river before it is discovered by human. It's a huge natural water body essentially. The rainwater in nature enables it to exist for a long time. Even without human involvement, it will keep flowing. This characteristic makes it can witness all social changes of human being. Jane Bennett criticised the deeply rooted concepts in modern thinking: people pay attention to how inanimate things form human beings, affect human beings and the social life of things, but they ignores the work related to the material production of thing, and ignores the study of thing itself [22]. The habit of recognizing thing as passive stuff, as raw, brute, or inert should be innovated. To break through this mode of thinking, people now need to shift

perspective from human to the things themselves. By analyzing water on its own terms, one can more clearly perceive the unique capabilities of water as a substance. Since Henry Hudson's first mate Robert Juet remarked in his journal about the Hudson River, artists and entrepreneurs began to shape special impressions of the valley in a conscious way. Then *The Sketch Book* --- the first American literature that gained the attention of readers in Europe were born [23]. Before it was named the 'Hudson River,' the entire waterway was called the 'North River' by the Dutch colonial empire [24]. Later, in 1609, the English explorer Henry Hudson was hired by the Dutch East India Company to find a water route across North America. Although he ultimately failed to discover a waterway to Asia, the river was named the Hudson River in commemoration of his expedition. It can thus be seen that the name 'Hudson River' is a human construction --- a mark imposed on the natural body of water by people to commemorate their own historical activities. Furthermore, the name itself is derived from a human being. This is a typical manifestation of absolute anthropocentrism, which regards humans as the 'measure of all things' [25]. Human needs and interests serve as the criterion for determining whether other natural objects possess existential value; it is only because the Hudson River holds value in serving the advancement of human history that it has become the "Hudson River" as people know it. However, the fact that humans have given the Hudson River a name and a symbolic identity does not mean the river will submit to or obey human will. This name implies no form of constraint: although later generations named the river after Henry Hudson, yet the river itself will never comply with anyone's commands. For Henry Hudson, the waterway he called the 'Great River of the Mountaynes' turned out to be a place of dashed hopes and thwarted dreams [26]. Humans have given it a name because it has brought convenience and historical significance to human society. The river is a military river, a sacred river, a pirate river, and a bountiful river. It is an inspiration to the poet and the painter; a home; a source of good health; and a hub of world trade [27]. The geographical and physical properties of the river itself bring benefits to humans. As the saying goes, 'backer has mountain, rely on water draft.' People define their national culture and identity through this river. However, these beneficial properties are inherent to the river itself, humans merely discovered and then made use of such advantageous traits. Navigation accidents on the Hudson River are by no means rare: in 1824, the sloop *Neptune*, laden with cargo, sank off Little Stony Point, a section of the river known to the Dutch as the *Wey-Gat*, or *Wind Gate*. The fast currents, winds, and eddies that create dangerous sailing conditions [28] are also inherent characteristics of the river itself. However, neither the numerous sailing accidents that occur in turbulent river waters nor the changes in human society have anything to do with the river itself. The river simply exists there, participating in these events either directly or indirectly.

In Rip's story, nearly a hundred years have passed since the river was given its name by humans. By then, the United States had won the Revolutionary War, freed itself from colonial rule and undergone drastic changes in its entire social system. Yet the Hudson River retains its original physical properties and name and continues to flow consistently, witnessing the dramatic transformations of human society. Just as Dunwell said: 'It flows to its own beat, apart from human wishes and desires, yet it also dwells in hearts and memory' [29]. For the 'new' about New Materialism, the general consensus seems to be that it embraces a non-anthropocentric realism grounded in the recognition of matter's intrinsic activity [30]. However, discussions about the narrative

function of non-human entities cannot be separated from the constraints of human language and cultural frameworks. For instance, any discussion of the Hudson River is inevitably tied to the name 'Hudson' --- a designation derived from human cultural attribution. The ecological non-human subjects presents themselves as 'textual forms' and tells their own stories through the material imagination of their human counterparts, or examines non-human subjects through personification. These are compromise approaches to the inability to understand the language of non-human matter and does not necessarily contribute to the development of anthropocentrism. Instead, these approaches can reveal similarities and symmetries between the human and the nonhuman [31]. As the natural water body depicted by Irving, the Hudson River increasingly breaks free from the state of being merely a human-imposed label and transcends the constraints of human culture and language. The river's inherent power gradually comes to the fore, transforming the human-given label into a meaning that can sustain itself independently.

Rip's communication with the Hudson River before he fell asleep is the important part to illustrate his mental stage. In order to escape the pressure from his wife, Rip goes deep into the mountain. Rip comes here to get a bit of relaxation and respite, the beautiful river scenery let him relax and escape the things below the mountain. He sees the lordly Hudson River 'moving on its silent but majestic course' [32], he feels free and quiet and loses in the company of nature. At the same time, the river also has an effect on other things, those clouds and trees reflected in the river, are embraced by the river, but also lost in the river: the purple cloud and a lagging bark 'sleeping on its glassy bosom', which 'lost in the blue highlands' [33]. The river is constantly flowing forward, the appearance of things reflected in the water at this moment will change in the next second due to the flow of water, but what remains unchanged is the progress of the water flow. The Hudson River seems to have an internal 'state of mind', it is this state of mind that affects human beings, and Rip is relaxed at the sight of Hudson river, his indolent temperament and detachment from familial responsibilities resonate with the river's tranquil and transcendent aura. This lifestyle, detached from societal norms, molds him into an outsider --- a figure belonging more to nature than to human society. Rip's harmonious coexistence with non-human agencies on the mountain is incompatible with anthropocentrism. Thus his return to the village is greeted with an identity crisis [34].

However, it was precisely because of the Hudson River that Rip is able to find his identity anchor after waking up. This river became the reliance for him to establish his identity after waking up. When Rip wakes up from slumber, he sees the Hudson River still flowing, everything around him has changed, and he seems to be out of step with the environment. From the empty gully, 'to his astonishment a mountain stream was now foaming down it' and the stream became an actant with its own language: 'leaping from rock to rock, and filling the glen with babbling murmurs' [35]. The streams in the valleys have all changed. But 'there ran the silver Hudson at a distance --- there was every hill and dale precisely as it had always been' [36]. With the Hudson River and the mountains, Rip is certain that he is still in his hometown. The Hudson River is like a beacon; it just stands there, providing direction for people to determine their position in the waves of society. The old society that Rip knows has gone away, and the wife he fears has died.

What's more, no one around knows him. After he gets through the period of confusion and adaptation, he begins to tell his own story. 'Rip's story was soon told, for the whole twenty years had been to him but as one night' [37]. Rip stabilises in the waves. He keeps telling the stories of his experiences to others and soon became 'a chronicle of the old times "before the war"' [38]. After experiencing the collapse of his identity, he attempts to transform this incomprehensible interaction with non-human nature into a way to reconstruct his own identity, not to control nature, but to try to prove his existence through this experience. Like the Hudson River, he has become a part of history, a history that points more to the history of nature than that of human society. Compared with the connection with human society, what Rip embodies is more about the connection with nature.

Matter has the 'potential to initiate meanings and participate in semiotic processes' [39]. The Hudson River has the ability to serve as a symbol of human culture, but its ability does not end there. It can break through the name 'Hudson' that originally belongs to human beings and now has the meaning that can be independently continued. As the New Materialism's exploration of things deepens gradually, the breakthrough of the symbolic meaning of things has become an inevitable trend. Bill Brown breaks through the limitation of traditional semiotics that reduces things to mere cultural symbols or functional carriers, revealing the 'thingness' manifested by things in specific contexts, he turns to exploring 'how things organise our private and public affection' [40]. The thing itself is a material reality that cannot be fully captured by language or social meanings. The American society after the War of Independence is a period of rapid development, free from the ideological constraints of the old European society and the consciousness of the native nation begin to take shape. The Hudson River is the most important trade route at that time, driving the rapid development of this new country in various aspects such as trade, transportation and economy. The Hudson River is not a landmark bestowed by humanity, but rather a microcosm of the entire development and changes in American society. It has become an immortal treasure in public legends, giving rise to numerous artists like Irving. The Hudson River is a carrier of collective memory. In modern civilization, from the Holland and British colonial period to the American War of Independence and postwar development, it has connected human society in different historical periods and has become an important engineer in building national identity and civilization.

As mentioned earlier, this is not a 'restriction' imposed by humans on the Hudson River, but rather based on the material reality that the river merely stands there and human earn benefits from it. Rip naturally takes such a river as a reference system of time and space to determine where he could be when he wakes up. When facing the lose of the original identity, Rip has to regard his interaction with the river and liquor as the basis for constructing his own identity. After returning to the village, Rip focuses more on living a leisurely life of his own than actively integrating into the reformed American society. However, in order to reconstruct his own identity and regain control of his agency, he constantly recounts his story --- seeking to reclaim his sense of status and recover memories of his incomprehensible slumber, all of these does not come from his senses, but is already present in his surroundings, guiding him to action [41]. This constitutes a story belonging to the Hudson River and Rip: human emotions and identity constructions are the phenomenal expression of interaction with water, and this phenomenon itself is the ontological unfolding of the world.

IV. CONCLUSION

Literature may serve as a restorative materialised model, a re-interpretation of the fixity and rigidity of materialization, enabling us to access things that are still ambiguous in the material world [42]. The enchanted liquor, the Hudson River and mountain streams, all aqueous entities, emerge not merely as passive backdrops but as dynamic actors shaping Rip's identity and the story's thematic depth. The enchanted liquor, a transformative derivative of water, epitomises the 'thing-power' theorised by Jane Bennett. As both a catalyst for Rip's temporal escape and a metaphor for the intoxicating yet disorienting passage of time, the liquor disrupts linear human-centered narratives. Rip's twenty-year slumber, induced by this mystical substance, underscores water's capacity to suspend individual agency, in this story, the non-human subject plays an extraordinary role, and water is one of them. The two different kinds of 'water' discussed in this article, one is a derivative of human craftsmanship and the other is a natural thing. Both have had a huge impact on Rip's identity construction and the properties they exhibit are beyond human control. Irving is a Romantic skeptic who romanticises the old world pastoralism yet acknowledges the futility of resisting change. The river and liquor collectively construct a non-human space where natural and societal temporalities collide. Water's eternal flow and power to stagnate Rip's existence reveal Irving's layered commentary: nostalgia for pre-industrial harmony coexists with a reluctant acceptance of progress, this not only expands the discourse of New Materialism in literary studies but also repositions Irving as a thinker who foresaw the entanglement of human and non-human agencies in shaping cultural memory.

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