| **RESEARCH ARTICLE**

Gothic and Historical Elements in Washington Irving's "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow"

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| **ABSTRACT**

Washington Irving's short story "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" still haunts us today 200 years after it was written. Irving incorporated Gothic elements such as ancient and isolated settings, nature, superstitions, and supernatural ambiguity into his short story. Irving also included historical figures such as the British Major John André and the headless Hessian soldier. The author wove elements of the Gothic with historical facts from the American Revolution to create a memorable, uniquely American story.

1. Introduction

Though it is well-established that "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" is a Gothic satire, the Gothic elements of the story continue to haunt and thrill us in various forms two hundred years after Washington Irving wrote the story into his *Sketch-book*. Many versions of this story have appeared in both writing and film, as both horror and humor. This brief essay will focus on the Gothic aspects of the story and their connection to America. The enduring fascination with this tale and its unfortunate pedagogue Ichabod begs the question of how Irving created it to uniquely fit the American experience, thrilling even the modern reader. It is given that the Gothic necessarily centers on the past. Irving's "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" (LSH) contains elements of the Gothic particularly suited to the American experience and to American history. Irving wove Gothic elements of ancient and isolated settings, nature, local superstitions, and a sense of supernatural ambiguity, as well as actual historical figures together to create a story in LSH at once brilliantly entertaining in its thrills as well as finely crafted enough to become a classic of American literature.

2. Ancient and Isolated Setting

Sofi and Khurrana (2023) opine that "the setting is very important in Gothic literature as it evokes an atmosphere of dread and horror" (574). The setting in LSH serves to create an atmosphere of horror but also sequesters the legend to a specific, isolated area frozen in time. At the beginning of the story, the author describes the setting as a "sequestered glen" (12) wherein "population, manners, and customs remain fixed" (14). Mnassar (2023) characterizes the Dutch village of Sleepy Hollow, New York (then called North Tarrytown), as "a static and changeless community...an isolated and hidden place in which time moves at a different speed or direction" (4).   Time seems to stand still in this type of isolated place. The people who live there seem to be unaffected by the changing times around them. In such a remote setting, far from the rational, modern, and civilized urban reader, Irving's phantom headless horseman would have been somewhat more plausible. Johansen (2017) commented that such spaces represent "a cultural locality that no longer communicates with its surroundings in a rational, common-sense manner" (9).

According to Hillard (2009), Gothic literature is especially suited to give the reader a thrilling experience of evil but in a safe setting, for the story takes place in "a time long ago and a place far away" (690) to establish historical distance. A note at the beginning of LSH advises the reader that the manuscript was "found among the papers of the late Diedrich Knickerbocker"

(Irving,1987, P.11) so that any passing down of evidence for or against the account has been truncated. The story, therefore, situates itself outside of the experience of the average reader and so thrills in its very otherness. Yet, a very real sense of actual and, at the time, recent American history pervades the story through the inclusion of Major John André and the headless Hessian soldier, two figures from the American Revolution.

3. Nature

Instead of the crumbling castles and dark passageways which figured large in European Gothic literature, American Gothic literature is replete with rural settings. William Bradford called the American landscape a "hideous and desolate wilderness" (cited in Hillard 692). Many Gothic American stories have as their setting a forest, and LSH is no exception. "The haunted forest is a Gothic setting that is alive and crawling with horror. Functionally, the forest serves the same purposes as the architecture in a haunted castle" (Fall and Kapler). Smith (2012) remarks that early American Gothic writers such as James Fennimore Cooper and Charles Brockden Brown "appreciated the Gothic possibilities of the American wilderness" (367). These primeval outdoor locations, so different from the civilized city or town, presented readers with open, undefined, uncivilized areas in which anything could happen. Irving, too, used the natural environment of the vast American wilderness as a hostile setting for human beings.

For Ichabod, specifically, "nature is...transformed from a quiet and peaceful place into a restless and hostile region which is full of danger and evil" (Mnassar 10). It is in the natural environment of the forest where Ichabod encounters both André's moaning. seemingly-haunted tree and the headless Hessian. The scariness of the dark forest stands in contrast to the safety of the home and hearth wherein Ichabod eats to his heart's delight as a guest and exchanges stories of the supernatural. Once on his way home on dark winter nights, every natural shape and sound becomes, in Ichabod's mind, a supernatural source of terror: "How often was he appalled by some shrub covered with snow, which, like a sheeted spectre, beset his very path!" (Irving, 1987, P. 21). The setting itself became for Ichabod a source of terror, almost a character in its own right.

One aspect of the natural setting in Sleepy Hollow consists of a tree around which were built many superstitions. The tree concerned Major John André of the British army who was involved in Benedict Arnold's treasonous West Point plot against the Continental Army. Though Major André's stated intention was to pass British intelligence what he believed to be a neutral area, he was captured as a spy by the Continental army near Tarrytown, Westchester County, New York, in September of 1780. Irving describes the tree near where Major André was captured:

> In the centre of the road stood an enormous tulip-tree, which towered like a giant above all the other trees of the neighborhood, and formed a kind of landmark. Its limbs were gnarled, and fantastic, large enough to form trunks for ordinary trees, twisting down almost to the earth, and rising again into the air. It was connected with the tragical story of the unfortunate André, who had been taken prisoner hard by; and was universally known by the name of Major André's tree. The common people regarded it with a mixture of respect and superstition, partly out of sympathy for the fate of its ill-starred namesake, and partly from the tales of strange sights and doleful lamentations told concerning it. (Irving, 1987, pp. 39-40)

Irving deftly expands on the historical fact of Major André's arrest near Tarrytown and subsequent hanging a few weeks later less than one-half mile from the location where he was arrested. The tree near which Major André was purportedly arrested still stood in the time period of LSH and became part of the setting for the story. The gigantic tree was an object of superstition and fear in the story because of what had happened there during the revolution. Not content to allow the tree to be simply a normal plant, Irving grows it out of proportion into a gnarled and twisted hyperbolic giant with limbs large enough to be tree trunks themselves. The tree was heard to emit frightening groans when its enormous branches rubbed against one another in the wind (40). "The striking of the boughs against each other produces unwonted sounds which seem like tearful moans and wails" (Mnassar 12). The landmark tree, with its connection to the tragic story of Major André, became a likely setting for local ghost stories, giving Ichabod a fright on his way home on dark evenings..

Later, it was near this monstrous tree that Ichabod encountered the phantom horseman at the climax of the story. "In the dark shadow of the grove, on the margin of the brook, he beheld something huge, misshapen, black, and towering" (42). Kennedy (2020) views the pairing of the fabled tree with the specter of the headless Hessian as a sideways allusion "to André's controversial hanging by George Washington" (53). Apparently, many in the Continental army preferred that the young, charismatic British officer be pardoned by Washington. André himself, resolved to die, wrote to General Washington just before his scheduled execution to request death by firing squad. He wrote: "Sympathy towards a Soldier will Surely induce Your Excellency and a military Tribunal to adapt the Mode of my death to the feelings of a Man of honour" (founders.archives.gov). Though the Americans were relieved that Benedict Arnold's plot was thwarted, the men of the Continental army and the citizens of the nearby areas had come to respect Major André because of his polite, honorable, and respectable manner. A portion of a

letter from a general in the Continental army to a New Hampshire delegate summarizes the ambivalence of the people toward the execution of the major:

> This brave, accomplished officer was yesterday hanged; not a single spectator but what pitied his untimely fate, although filled with gratitude for the providential discovery; convinced that his sentence was just, and that the law of nations and custom of war justified and rendered it necessary. Yet his personal accomplishments, appearance and behavior, gained him the good wishes and opinion of every person who saw him. He was, perhaps, the most accomplished officer of the age—he met his fate in a manner which did honor to the character of a soldier. (founders.archives.gov)

The circumstances of Major André's death perhaps lent an air of regret and tragedy to his tale
and thus also to the tree connected with his fate, but it was not Major André that caused Ichabod's greatest fear.

4. Superstitions

Local superstitions are a popular basis for the cultivation of the terrorized imaginations of characters in Gothic stories. Already mentioned was the superstition concerning Major André's tree. The second historical figure in the story was a nameless (and headless) Hessian soldier. The Hessians were Germans conscripted to fight for the British in America. The ghost of this unfortunate soldier was said to haunt the vicinity as "the apparition of a figure on horseback without a head...whose head had been carried away by a cannon-ball, in some nameless battle during the Revolutionary War" (Irving, 1987, P. 12). There is actual historical evidence of a Hessian soldier decapitated by a cannon-ball during the Battle of White Plains (The New York Historical 2024). It was even established by local lore that the headless body was buried in the churchyard nearby. "Having been buried in the churchyard, the ghost rides forth to the scene of battle in nightly quest of his head" (12). Irving employed the fact of the Hessians fighting on the British side as actual history in this story, weaving the factual with the fantastical superstitions of the people of Sleepy Hollow. Again, as with Major André, the manner and circumstances of the unnamed Hessian's death may have led people to concoct stories about his nightly haunts.

Another superstitious element of the story was the firm belief of Ichabod in Cotton Mather's History of New England Witchcraft (Irving, 1987,P. 20). Ichabod's familiarity with this work provided him with ample stock from which to reimburse the Dutch wives for their tales of the headless horseman: "He [Ichabod] would delight them equally by his anecdotes of witchcraft, and the direful omens and portentous sights and sounds in the air, which prevailed in the earlier times of Connecticut" where he was from (Irving, 1987, pp. 20-21). In addition, Ichabod, according to Irving, had himself seen ghosts "and been more than once beset by Satan in divers shapes" (Irving, 1987, P. 22), allowing him to recount his own personal ghost stories for the eager Dutch wives.

5. Supernatural Ambiguity

Irving never decisively tells the reader whether the ghostly headless horseman was a real flesh-and-blood human being or a possible specter. Readers of LSH draw various conclusions about the cause of Ichabod Crane's disappearance from Sleepy Hollow at the end of the story. Indeed, some critics consider the "ghost" to be obviously a man – namely Ichabod's rival in romance, "Brom Bones" – in disguise. Mnassar (2023) cites Bendixen's (2017) opinion of how the bully "Brom Bones" (Abraham Van Brunt) ultimately defeated Ichabod "by appealing to his superstitious nature and creating a headless horseman...Bones transforms a harmless item from nature – a pumpkin – into a weapon to arouse a fear of the supernatural" (12). This interpretation of LSH follows a naturalistic explanation for the seemingly supernatural happenings in the story. Coad (1925), writing roughly one hundred years after Irving wrote the story, compared LSH to Robert Burns's poem "Tam O'Shanter," based on a Scottish legend in which a Scottish farmer nicknamed Tam encounters a coven of witches in the ruins of an old church on his way home from the pub (Johncock). The main difference between the two accounts, according to Coad, is that "Burns's fiends...are authentic inhabitants of the pit [*viz.,* Hell]... Irving's, in keeping with the American practice of explaining such matters, is only a very human Dutchman armed with a pumpkin" (84). Coad confidently expressed his belief in the rational view of the "ghost."

Other critics focus on the supernatural ambiguity created by Irving in leaving the interpretation of the headless "ghost" open to the reader. Maurer (2017, in Davison) comments that "Irving is careful not to solve the mystery of Ichabod Crane's disappearance, providing his readers with both the 'supernatural' and the 'realistic' solutions as possible answers to an unresolved problem" (81-82). The author detailed the headless horseman's pursuit of Ichabod, ending with the pumpkin "head" (as it seemed to Ichabod) sailing through the air to "encounter his cranium with a tremendous crash" (Irving, 1987, P. 44). Irving does not reveal whether Ichabod disappeared supernaturally from Sleepy Hollow with this incident or whether Ichabod, having been properly frightened, took it upon himself to leave the area. We are simply told that "the next morning the old horse was

found without his saddle, and with the bridle under his feet, soberly cropping the grass" (44). A body was never recovered, though Ichabod's hat and a smashed pumpkin were found.

The fact of the supernatural ambiguity in the disposition of LSH may have the effect of making the story all the more eerie and memorable to readers. Sawczuk (2010) cites Edmund Burke's (1999 version) view that the "not knowing" aspect of a fright renders it much more terrifying: "When we know the full extent of any danger, when we can accustom our eyes to it, a great deal of the apprehension vanishes" (2). It is the ambiguity, the obscurity, that frightens us the most, says Burke. Without the supernatural ambiguity of the story, that is, if Brom Bones in disguise was established as without a doubt, in fact, the horseman that Ichabod encountered, then LSH "would take on the somehow disappointing hue of a story that could have actually happened. But leave open the possibility that Ichabod may have in fact been spirited away by the ghost of a decapitated Hessian trooper? Now there's a story" (Smith 178).   Irving seems to have intentionally left the question of supernatural involvement in the story up to the reader's speculation.

6. American Gothicism
Washington Irving created in "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" a uniquely American, superbly popular tale with both fantastical and historical elements. Coad (1925) stated that "of all our weavers of legends of fear prior to Poe, by far the most skilful [sic.], the most artistic, the most eery [sic.] is Washington Irving. In his hands the story of terror for the first time becomes unmistakably literature" (83). Not detracting from the popularity of such stories, modern scholars such as Teresa A. Goddu (1997) define the problem of American Gothicism as "an historical mode operating in what appears to be an historical vacuum" (cited in Kenchington p. 3).

That is, with the Gothic mode dependent on the past for its material, early American writers were at a loss since American history was yet young. Though Goddu's thesis is that slavery established the need for Gothic literature in America, which is outside the scope of this essay, her point about the historical vacuum is one worth considering here. Perhaps in order to establish the Gothic mode as truly American literature, though drawing heavily from the European Gothic mode, Irving sought historical figures from the recent American past to incorporate in his stories and so incorporated Major André and the headless Hessian. It is said that Nathaniel Hawthorne "fully realised the possibilities of resonance between the Gothic tradition and the American past" (Roberts 267- 268). Irving in the "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" may have approached Hawthorne's combination of Gothicism and American history.

7. Conclusion
Though early American colonists attempted to do away with the supernatural such as during the Salem witch trials of 1692-1693, America finds itself unable to do so, returning again and again to tales of terror even up to modern times. "Irving's tales engage in this ironic dialogue between the need to get rid of ghosts and shadows and the insistent, almost obsessive need to tell 'ghost stories'" (Maurer 78).   If, as Goddu (1997) contends, "national identity is founded on the gothic," (cited by Kennedy, p. 52), Irving seems to have accomplished a small part of forming the national identity of the fledgling American nation just after the revolution by combining Gothic elements with recent history to produce a memorable tale.   As Maurer stated, "Seemingly dead history returns to haunt the living" (78).   Irving combined the "dead history" of the two headless Revolutionary War figures with several Gothic elements to create this memorable piece of classic American literature. Interestingly, capitalizing on the perennial fame and popularity of the Washington Irving story, the village of North Tarrytown, New York, officially renamed itself "Sleepy Hollow" in 1996 (Steiner). Washington Irving is himself buried there in the Sleepy Hollow Cemetery which is near the old church, both featured in the story.

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