

**Conversations with the Supernatural: Imagination, Satire and Ambiguous Fantasy in
the Works of Washington Irving and Mary Shelley**

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‘Bleak skies...are kinder to me than your fellow beings’ (Shelley 91)

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Washington Irving's short stories challenge the rules of nature, 'excit[ing] a feeling, analogous to that of the supernatural, by awakening the mind's attention to the lethargy of custom and directing it to...the wonders of the world' (Coleridge 527). Shelley's *Frankenstein*, written following the age of the Enlightenment and rational thought, comments on the dangers of science, as well as the conditioning of society on individuals. Therefore, although Shelley's supernatural creature is accepted as a reality in her novel, its purpose alludes to Shelley's own comments on society. This limits the novel's ability to fully commit to the supernatural and convince readers to accept its fantasies and the creature's existence as reality within the text. In comparison, Irving's short stories provide a tension – his references to German folktales allow the reader to indulge in their imagination, whilst providing constant questions throughout as to whether he has fully committed to the reality of the supernatural. This essay will therefore argue that both authors do not dedicate themselves to the existence of the supernatural, but rather its allusions. Instead, by stimulating the 'strongest emotions which the mind is capable of feeling' (Burke 59), the authors highlight their socio-political perceptions. Shelley comments on her distrust in the progressions of science, whereas Irving mourns the disregard for America's primitive Dutch past in favour of American idealism following the American War of Independence.

Both Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Irving's short stories are incredibly emotive, in turn allowing the reader to commit to the supernatural elements. H.P. Lovecraft's description of the supernatural highlights that 'atmosphere is the all-important thing, for the final criterion of authenticity...[is] the creation of a given sensation' (Smith 175). Therefore, in order for both authors to indulge in the supernatural, they must evoke intense feelings. Irving and

Shelley create a sensory experience for the narrator in their portrayal of the relationship between nature and the supernatural. In Irving's 'Rip Van Winkle', Rip falls asleep on the Kaatskill mountains, 'a landscape defined by eighteenth-century travellers as the locus of the sublime' (Mellor 130). Edmund Burke's claim that the sublime 'excite[s] the idea of pain and danger' (58) is reflected in Irving's descriptions. The personified mountains, 'swelling up to a noble height' (Irving 6) as well as the 'impending cliffs' (10) exert control in their dynamic and overwhelming movement. Furthermore, Irving creates a semantic field of royalty in the adjective 'lord' and the 'crown of glory' (6) created by the light. Therefore, Rip's submissive position accentuates the transcendental quality of the supernatural occurrence, in turn leaving him dumbfounded and fearful. Light is described in Shelley's depiction of Mont Blanc, when Victor 'saw the lightning playing on the summit of Mount Blanc in the most beautiful figures' (Shelley 67). Light is used to connote enlightened thought, and the fact that lightning is personified, 'playing on the summit' (67), increases the supernatural quality of Victor's experience, as it seems engrained in nature. Irving and Shelley's depiction of the protagonist's sightings of the fantastical creatures underlines the authenticity of the supernatural experience, which instils horror and distress in both author's characters. Irving's 'The Legend of Sleepy Hollow' describes Ichabod, the protagonist and a descendent of New England Puritans, as seeing 'something huge, misshapen, and towering...gathered up in the gloom' (28), an overwhelmingly threatening image, especially due to his inability to make out the figure. Similarly, Frankenstein remarks on the creature's 'gigantic structure' as lightning 'discovered its shape' (68), revealing that only with the agency of nature was Victor able to make out a silhouette. Both Frankenstein and Ichabod are reminded, through Shelley and Irving's depiction of the supernatural, that they are subordinate to nature's actions, which in turn instils feelings of trepidation and fright. Wetzels comments, 'the presence of

supernatural beings in Gothic fiction can be seen as a reaction to the Enlightenment' (4), as Shelley rejects the limitations of rational thought in favour of inciting extreme emotional reactions. Therefore, in both Shelly's novel and Irving's short stories, the credulity of the supernatural relies on the characters' intense and irrational imagination.

Both Shelley and Irving provide a conversation between the effects of impulsive emotional reactions and rationality; the author's discussion of knowledge ultimately allows the reader the autonomy to determine whether the existence of the supernatural is credible. In Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Victor's creation merely represents a collection of physical deformities, rather than a human being. Jennifer Buckley states that 'Victor psychologically dismembers the creature by focusing on his individual parts, rather than his appearance as a whole' (Buckley, 244). Victor methodically describes each aspect – his hair, complexion, lips and eyes. He notices his 'shrivelled complexion and straight black lips' (Shelley 46), which both seem ghostly and lacking in life, the description of 'straight' lips suggesting an inability to determine any kind of emotion characteristic of a human. Denise Gigante builds on Victor's disconnection to Frankenstein, suggesting that 'Victor's description takes on the form of what might be called an "anti-blazon"', as the monster seems to be an amalgamation of human parts with 'monstrous qualities' (Buckley, 244). Therefore, Shelley offers the reader full control in deciding whether to commit to the creature's authenticity and, in turn, the supernatural, or to see the creation merely as a gruesome scientific experiment.

Irving similarly articulates ambiguity surrounding the authenticity of the supernatural aspect in both 'The Legend of Sleepy Hollow' and 'Rip Van Winkle'. The 'Postscript' of the 'Legend of Sleepy Hollow', narrated by Knickerbocker, states that the story was just for amusement, therefore overturning any sense that the supernatural aspect was genuine. He states, 'Faith, sir...I don't believe one half of it myself' (Irving 36). Knickerbocker's position

as an omnipresent narrator suggests he is reliable, yet the fact Irving never clarifies whether or not Ichabod was attacked by the headless horseman leaves the story and the existence of its supernatural element up to the reader. Knickerbocker's role 'preserves the ambiguity concerning the supernatural which provides many great ghost stories with their lasting resonance' (Smith 175). Smith's statement, claiming the 'ambiguity'(175) of supernatural existence in Irving's novel, underscores the reader's autonomy in determining the authenticity of the headless horseman.

Irving's 'Rip Van Winkle' similarly presents ambiguity surrounding the authenticity of the supernatural, again allowing the reader to come to their own conclusion. Irving draws on the supernatural as 'reveal[ing] some force beyond...the laws of nature' (11), which leaves the protagonist, Rip, dumfounded. Through indirect discourse, Rip realises 'there was something strange and incomprehensible about the unknown that inspired awe' (11), as he was met by the concealed figure who was about to send him to sleep for 20 years. Yet, Irving suggests that Rip made the story up in an attempt to get rid of his nagging wife, as he returns fixated on ensuring she is dead. The intricacy with which Irving describes Rip's overwhelmingly emotive experience clashes with its convenient and comical nature, as Rip returns home freed from obligation, bypassing the political turmoil of the American Revolution. Martin Scofield states, 'the political realities of scarcely two generations before are distanced into myth and legend' (12), thus clarifying the possibility that Rip in fact ran away for 20 years in order to escape responsibility. The tension between the two aspects – rational and reasonable explanation in contrast to a supernatural occurrence – underpins Irving's refusal to commit to either, ultimately allowing the reader to come to their own conclusion regarding the authenticity of the supernatural. Irving's introduction of alcoholism potentially satirises the reader's belief in the supernatural, as Rip's drunk state could suggest

a reasonable explanation for his absence in society. Rip is portrayed as ‘quaff[ing] the liquor in profound silence’ (Irving 11), essentially escaping from the realities of his duties. Therefore, there is a tension between supernatural activity and alcoholism – both of which provide a distraction from reality. Robert A. Ferguson alludes to drink explaining ‘Rip’s failure and escapism’ (22), which can be paralleled in Keats’ ‘Ode for a Nightingale’ as Keats longs to ‘fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget’ (21). Irving’s discord between the supernatural and alcoholism culminates in Rip’s disorientation as he wakes, seemingly hungover, yet with brilliant clarity in the resolution that he is able to return home under the care of his daughter. Rip’s convenient conclusion underpins Irving’s satirical comment on American idealism, a concept stemming from the American War of Independence, in which qualities of hard work and diligence were valued. Irving’s socio-political comment, whereby Rip is able to bypass the war due to his indulgent drunk behaviour (contrary to the novel model American citizen’s values), seems more coherent if the reader believes the exaggerated account of a drunken daze as opposed to a supernatural experience. Regardless, the ambiguous nature of the story allows the reader to determine whether the event was down to supernatural experience or Rip’s alcoholic tendencies.

Both Shelley and Irving’s strong authorial voice ultimately limits their commitment to the supernatural, as the stories’ supernatural element is overturned by the author’s wider socio-political views. ‘The Legend of Sleepy Hollow’ echoes Dutch myths and superstitions, providing a politically charged comparison between Puritan schoolmaster, Ichabod, and Brom Bones, ‘the precursor in epitomised Romance form of [the] “average sensual man”’ (Scofield 13), an American cultural stereotype of the straight thinking and simple countryside dweller. Ultimately, as Scofield states, Ichabod’s experience with the headless horseman ‘symbolises the comic crisis of the Puritan tradition of belief in witchcraft and the supernatural, the final

routing of Romance and superstition by the hard-headed practicality of Brom Bones' (Scofield 14). Therefore, there is a sense of irony in Irving's presentation of 'The Legend of Sleepy Hollow' as a myth, ultimately overruling the validity of supernatural experience. Irving's ambiguous description of Ichabod's encounter with the questionably supernatural figure exposes the reader's gullibility; the description of the figure 'hurl[ing] his head at him' is debunked when a 'shattered pumpkin' (30) was found the next day. Irving's use of satire culminates in the finding of the pumpkin, especially as Brom Bones 'burst into a hearty laugh' (31) on its discovery, his reaction simultaneously alluding to the possibility that Brom Bones had pursued Ichabod, not the Headless Horseman. Therefore, Irving's commitment to the mythical Headless Horseman allusion is undermined by his use of satire, preventing him from fully committing to the supernatural.

Unlike Irving, who finds comedy in both the reader and protagonist's naivety, Shelley uses the supernatural to enlighten the reader on societal issues, outlining the difference between nature and nurture. She discusses society's power of manipulation and conditioning in relation to the creature's reaction. Both William and Justine are terrified of the creature, concluding that he is 'malicious because [he is] miserable' (Shelley 133). Subsequently, Mellor questions whether he was 'born good and corrupted by society, or born evil and justly subjected to the condemnation of society' (136), which alludes to Rousseau's adage, 'Man is born free, but everywhere he is in chains' (Froese 585). The creature claims the 'bleak skies...are kinder to me than your fellow beings' (Shelley 91), and therefore although he attempts to distance himself from humankind, referring to humanity as '[Victor's] fellow beings' (91), his unhappiness in isolation displays the inadvertent effects of his exclusion from society. As such, while Shelley warns the reader of the dangerous powers of science, she also highlights the intrinsic and established powers of conditioning within society. Not

only is the book an occasion of self-reflection for the reader, but also for Walton, who decides to abandon his trip in favour of his crew's health, given Victor's deathly journey. Walton observes 'if we are lost, my mad schemes are the cause' (196), ultimately displaying rational and empathetic emotions in the face of his original 'mad schemes' (196). This didactic note suggests Shelley does not commit to the supernatural, as she allows Walton to turn away from his adventure and Victor's actions. Ultimately, both Shelley and Irving use the supernatural to comment on the powers of perception, both in terms of society's reaction to Victor's monster and his subsequent isolation, as well as Irving's test of the reader's credulity; in turn, they are unable to commit to the fantastical realm as Irving creates doubt, while Shelley discredits Victor's relationship with the supernatural.

Irving and Shelley play around with the supernatural and its ability to instigate an authentic emotional reaction in both their characters and the readers. *Frankenstein* and Irving's short stories challenge the reader's credulity; Irving embraces satire, presenting a series of comical allusions in the face of the protagonist and the reader's fear and Shelley leaves the reader with unresolved questions, most notably whether the whole story was in fact a figment of Walton's imagination. Ultimately, whilst Shelley's use of the supernatural foreshadows the dangerous potential science holds, Irving reflects on America's Dutch heritage, utilising the supernatural as a nostalgic allusion to fantastical Dutch folklore. Therefore Shelley and Irving's commitment to their stories' fantastical allusions is undermined by their wider socio-political commentary.

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