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A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THOMAS PYNCHON'S *VINELAND*, ROBERT COOVER'S
RIP AWAKE

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ABSTRACT

The present paper traces the origins of Thomas Pynchon's novel *Vineland* and Robert Coover's dramatic monologue *Rip Awake* to Washington Irving's short story "Rip Van Winkle" and attempts to analyze both adaptations. Though Irving's short story dates back to an earlier time period in the American landscape, it nonetheless forms the foundation of both Pynchon's and Coover's work. Though Irving's writing style has often been considered exceedingly British sounding, his narratives are steeped in American history and the American way of life. Both Thomas Pynchon and Robert Coover on the other hand belong to the postmodern age and deal with experimental fiction in America. If Pynchon's fiction has often been termed encyclopedic, labyrinthine and convoluted then Coover's is termed otherworldly and surreal. Despite the fact that most critics see both Pynchon and Coover as being as dissimilar as chalk and cheese, they nonetheless use experimental forms and techniques that are distinctly postmodern as the present study will depict.

Keywords: Comparison, postmodern themes, Awakening, Disorientation, Crows, Blue jays, Narrative style, Familiarity and Reconstruction

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INTRODUCTION

Washington Irving (1789-1859) was a cultural and diplomatic ambassador to Europe who went to publish his first work, *Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon* in the year 1820 using Geoffrey Crayon as his pseudonym. This work contained his two most popular short stories, "Rip Van Winkle" and "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow". Irving usually picked the subjects of his stories from American history, the discovery of the new world, its first President, who surprisingly also happened to be a national hero that every American citizen reveres even today.

Washington Irving's short story "Rip Van Winkle" was published in the year 1819; however, the subject matter in the short story is so relevant even today that it allows one to compare it to a novel written in 1990 about the 1980s or more precisely, 1984 and a monologue written in the year 1972. This is precisely why Pynchon and Coover modeled their work on Irving's short story. Though many others have also attempted to do the same, Pynchon's and Coover's attempts are singularly appealing because they stay true to the very

essence of what Irving wanted to portray in his work. As David Thoreen in his article "Thomas Pynchon's Political Parable: Parallels between *Vineland* and "Rip Van Winkle"" says:

Vineland is Pynchon's wake up call to the American voter, who like, Rip Van Winkle and Pynchon's own protagonist Zoyd Wheeler, has been asleep for twenty years.

Thomas Pynchon's *Vineland* was published during the 90s and follows some of the most essential tenets of the postmodern era. As said by most critics, Pynchon's subject of choice is America and his passion is for politics and in his fourth novel, *Vineland* takes up the issue of how power, especially power that comes with no checks or controls can run roughshod on people's civil liberties as it did during the reign of both Nixon and Reagan. Both *Vineland* and Irving's "Rip Van Winkle" are seen as political parables, something that every American who lived from the 1960s to the 1990s can identify with. Both works deal with the abuse of power, for instance, in *Vineland* one can see this seizing of power taking place under orders coming right from the White House during the 1980s.

Washington Irving's short story begins before the American Revolution and comes to an end after the revolutionary war with the main action takes place in a small village resting on the Catskill Mountains in New York. Rip personifies goodness and the entire village seems to be extremely fond of him, most particularly the children in the village who see him as a giver of toys to play with and a storyteller who seems to enjoy telling the stories as much as they love hearing them.

However, if there is a flaw in him, it is his habit of avoiding work that to his wife's disgust whips his entire household into a frenzy. Even her constant nagging seems to not make any difference to him and he continues to avoid work whenever he can. On a nice and pleasant day in Autumn, he along with his dog, Wolf travel up to the mountain when he suddenly hears someone calling out his name and discovers that the voice belongs to a man dressed much like a Dutchman who is carrying a vat or a drum like container up the hill and notices that the man is having trouble taking it uphill. He immediately offers help which the man eagerly accepts and when they reach a hollow, it soon becomes apparent that there are raised voices that are coming from a group of bearded men who are dressed quite extravagantly and are busy playing nine-pins, a bowling game. He joins them and without bothering to even ask their names, starts drinking their moonshine and is soon sound asleep. Once he wakes up he finds startling changes in both himself and the things surrounding him. The first thing he notices is that the musket he was carrying has rusted and that his beard seems to have not been cut in a very long time. He further realizes that he cannot find Wolf anywhere.

Rather puzzled he comes back to the village and comes to realize that he can hardly recognize his own village. He wanders around the village looking for the inn and instead finds:

A large rickety wooden building stood in its place, with great gaping windows, some of them broken and mended with old hats and petticoats, and over the door was painted, "The Union Hotel, by Jonathan Doolittle".

He enters the inn. Not knowing about the American Revolutionary War, he calls himself a loyal servant of King George III. Another thing he notices in the inn is that the portrait of the British Monarch, George III, has been replaced by the portrait of another George, George Washington. He becomes visibly shaken when he notices that there exists another man who calls himself Rip Van Winkle, who turns out to be his own son.

Meanwhile out in the town he comes to know that the bearded men he met before he got intoxicated are allegedly are the ghosts of Hendrick Hudson's men, who had disappeared a long time back. His surprise knows no bounds when he realizes that his sleep lasted for twenty years. An old man in the village finally recognizes him and begins living with his now grown up daughter. However, he reverts to his original state of idleness which leads the other Dutch settlers to wish for his kind of life, especially for men who had wives that constantly nagged them. They also wish that like Rip, they too could have slept away in order to avoid the hardships that they had to endure during the American Revolution. This in short is the story that Irving had created during the early nineteenth century, and in order to take up a comparative study it is imperative to trace the similarities as well as the dissimilarities in the works created by Thomas Pynchon and Robert Coover. e.in *Vineland* and *Rip Awake*, a monologue that begins where Irving left off.

Thomas Ruggles Pynchon Jr. (1937-), born in Long Island, New York and graduated from Cornell University has become known for his complicated and experimental novels such as *V.* (1963), *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), *Mason & Dixon* (1997), *Against the Day* (2006), *Inherent Vice* (2009) and *Bleeding Edge* (2013). He has also written short stories that have been grouped together in a compilation entitled *Slow Learner* (1984). Pynchon has often been recognized as the most celebrated postmodern writer of all time. His novels which critics call "complex" are on closer inspection only seem complicated because of his inventive and quirky plot lines. Pynchon is so notoriously challenging that the Cambridge University Press felt the need to provide a companion for readers who needed help in understanding Pynchon and his writings. Other than the novels and short stories that he has come up with, he also actively participated in writing short reviews and essays for magazines such as "A Journey Into the Mind of Watts" (1966), "Is It O. K. to Be a Luddite" (1984), "Nearer My Couch To Thee" (1993), "Lunch with Lotion" (1996), "Hallowe'en Over Already" (1999) and "The Evolution of the Daily Show" (2006).

The following paragraph gives a brief overview of Thomas Pynchon's *Vineland*, and as mentioned previously, it delves into the reasons behind how and why it has been called a political parable or a political satire. The origin of the *Vineland* can be traced all the way back to pre-colonial America, with its first explorers being not of British or French origin, but of a Scandinavian one. Hence, the first written account of explorers landing in America were written in the Scandinavian language, and was entitled *Vinland Saga*, which details the adventures of Leif Erickson and his army of Norsemen. These Norsemen arrived on the Atlantic coastline of the present province of Nova Scotia in Canada in the 11th century, almost four centuries before Christopher Columbus "discovered" America.

Vineland tells the story of Frenesi Gates and her tryst with leftist politics and some of her questionable activities during the 1960s and how the effect of her activities had changed the course of many of the other characters in the novel. Frenesi's revolutionary acts, her leftist political ideology, her treachery, her shrugging off of her responsibilities and her questionable ethics are offered by Pynchon in the form of a quest that Frenesi's daughter embarks upon in an attempt to find out the truth about her mother. The plot revolves around her and even when she is not a part of the narrative, Pynchon does not let one forget that the novel is chiefly wound around Frenesi. It depicts a group of individuals whose life alters dramatically as she breezes past them. The main action in the novel is set in the fictional town of *Vineland*, which happens to be located in Northern California and is a logging town, where most of the inhabitants are involved in the business of logging or are related to people involved in logging.

Zoyd Wheeler is the abandoned husband of Frenesi is preparing for his once –in-a-year insane act that he participates in and his fourteen year old daughter Prairie open the novel. When Zoyd gets know that Brook Vond, a federal prosecutor, who also is the ex-boyfriend of Frenesi, is looking for Prairie, he sends her away from *Vineland* in order to make sure that Vond does not find her. Vond is the FBI operative who is apparently still in love with her and is preparing for a full assault on *Vineland* in order to find Prairie. While escaping from Vond, she encounters DL Chastain, a former friend and lover of Frenesi, who also happens to be a ninja and is connected to a commune in Northern California called the Sisterhood of the Kuniuchi Attentives. DL along with Takeshi Fumimota, an insurance investigator and partner of DL take Prairie to the commune and introduce her to Sister Rochelle and turn the kitchen duties to her. After leaving Zoyd and baby Prairie, Frenesi enters the Witness Protection Program and gets remarried. Only when she realizes that the monthly check that she receives is no good, does she understand that the funding for this program was cut due to monetary issues under the Ronald Reagan reign. Frenesi intends to come to *Vineland* on the occasion of her family picnic, hoping to meet Prairie, whom she hasn't seen after abandoning her.

Though initially she is reluctant to come to *Vineland*, she is persuaded by Hector Zuniga, Zoyd's friend and federal drug enforcer with secret hopes of making her direct a movie which he wants filmed. The novel ends with all the principal characters in the novel gathering at the Traverse-Becket Family Picnic, an annual meeting place for Frenesi's family. The movie ends with Vond and his secret armed forces lowering him from a helicopter in a wooded area, where Prairie lies and just before he is about to grab hold of her, the funding for

his mission is cut and is hauled back into the helicopter and one can see Prairie's longing and wishing him to come back and carry her someplace.

The first parallel that one can draw between these novels is the fact that they deal with the American political system. Though many critics are a little skeptical regarding Irving's work being labeled as an American short story due to the fact that his style is often considered to be excessively British, it still retains its American sensibility and makes it a uniquely American story. While discussing Pynchon one realizes that most of the readers consciously or unconsciously tend to stencilize the texts and strive towards a sense of order and begin forcing intertextual elements on texts which in no way even hint at these elements.

The parallels that one can observe in these two texts are not merely parallels in themes but also parallels related to plot and place. Both the male protagonists in *Vineland* and *Rip Van Winkle* experience a wakeup call after sleeping for some twenty odd years and in both the novels there are awakening scenes, as seen in *Vineland*. Pynchon's *Vineland* opens with the sentence (Pynchon 3),

"Later than usual one morning in 1984, Zoyd Wheeler drifted awake in sunlight through a creeping fig..."

In *Rip Van Winkle* there is a passage that can be found in the middle of the story: (Irving 55)

"On waking he found himself on the green knoll... He rubbed his eyes eyes-it was a bright sunny morning. The birds were hopping and twittering among the bushes"

Rip after waking from his sleep calls out to Wolf and in response only hears the cawing of a flock of crows. The crows mentioned in "*Rip Van Winkle*" are transformed into blue jays in *Vineland*. The primary reason why David Thoreen compares *Vineland* with "*Rip Van Winkle*" is because both the stories deal with political transition, be it from monarchy to democracy as seen in "*Rip Van Winkle*" or democracy to fascism. However, one realizes that power can never be absolute and that no matter how overwhelming the power can be it still breeds resistance. It is this resistance that Pynchon showcases in *Vineland*. Writing in the same vein as Pynchon is Robert Coover, another experimental writer closely associated with postmodern literature. However, though Coover does not enjoy the same popularity as Pynchon does, he nonetheless is well respected in academic circles. Coover also won the William Faulkner Award for Best First Novel in the year 1966 for his work *The Public Burning* (1977).

Robert Coover's *Rip Awake* is a dramatic monologue that can be seen as a follow-up of what happens to Rip after Irving finished his tale. In the monologue one finds Rip feeling disoriented and attempting to figure out whether he is still sleeping or if he has finally woken up. As seen in Irving's short story Rip is aware that most of his friends are deceased, however, in *Rip Awake* he begins to talk to these long-dead friends as he attempts to fight off sleep because he is afraid of his own dreams and has since begun to hallucinate. Things turn drastic when Rip's hallucinations get so bad that they make him kill his daughter, shoot his dog and make him doubt his own existence. Rip becomes so deluded that in spite of knowing that his existence is fictitious and has been created by Irving he goes back up the mountain looking for the Dutchmen in order to undo the damage that they did.

Both Pynchon and Coover, as mentioned earlier are postmodern writers whose work though seemingly different nonetheless stays true to some of the major tenets of postmodernism one of which being disorientation that often results in a fragmented and disintegrated state of mind. To cite an explicit example one can look at the final scene in *Vineland* where Prairie is almost disappointed when she does not get picked up by Vond, the same man whom she had been attempting to evade throughout the novel. The same can be seen in the final scene in *Rip Awake* too, wherein one can find Rip's disoriented state of mind causing him to harm his own family and going back up the mountain in a bid to find the men who have caused him so much of grief. A deep sense of loss and confusion as seen in most postmodern texts it rings true in this instance too. Most postmodern critics believe that this fragmentation is not to be seen as an aesthetic device that can be exploited by the writer but is in fact a "cultural aspect of the economic and social fabric" as Charles Newman puts it. () This further explains why most postmodern writers deny that literary art needs to be realistic as seen in many nineteenth-century realistic works of literary art.

Having said this one also comes across a major difference between Pynchon's *Vineland* and Coover's *Rip Awake* which is again palpably noticed in the way both works end. *Vineland* concludes with what can be called a Hollywood style happy ending whereas *Rip Awake* concludes with Rip losing his sanity and perhaps his life too as he goes uphill to find the same people who led to his downfall.

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