Summary of Washington Irving's "Rip Van Winkle"

At the base of the Kaatskill Mountains there was an old Dutch village, and in this old town there lived a "good-natured" man named Rip Van Winkle. His descendants accompanied Peter Stuyvesant (the governor around the time the village was founded) to the siege of Fort Christina. Rip did not inherit his ancestral lust of war. He was a nice man, who was beloved by his neighbors. His overbearing wife made him meek in spirit, and he generally complied with the demands placed before him. The village wives loved him, and always took his side when Mrs. Van Winkle was upset at him. The children all loved him to, and he could scarcely go about town with a hoard of them surrounding him.

Rips one flaw was that he had no drive to do profitable labor. He was by no means lazy or impatient; in fact, he always helped his neighbors in their laborious tasks when asked. He was always willing to help others with their business, but he could never seem to muster up the willingness to tend to his own business. He maintained that working on his own farm was useless, because no matter how hard he tried things always went wrong. He was perfectly content, and he would "rather starve on a penny than work for a pound" (20). His wife would nag him constantly about his responsibility to the family, which led Rip to dread coming home to her. Rip's dog Wolf was also scared of her, and would cower in her presence.

When home life wore on him too much, he would take respite with some of the sages from the village. They would discuss the town gossip or tell each other meaningless stories. Every once in a while a traveler would discard an old newspaper in town, and the sages would ponder and discuss its contents. Derrick Van Bummel, the schoolmaster, would read it aloud for them. The opinions of this group were controlled by Nicholas Vedder, the landlord of the inn. He smoked his pipe incessantly and rarely spoke, but his followers knew how to tell what his opinion on something was-when he was upset he would smoke his pipe intensely and blow frequent puffs of angry smoke, but when he was happy he would smoke slowly and blow smoke clouds. Mrs. Van Winkle did not shy away from this group, and she would sometimes break up their assemblage, and chastise Nicholas Vedder for encouraging her husband to be lazy. When all else failed, Rip would take his gun and Wolf, and go off into the woods. He would sit under a tree, and share the little amount of food that he had in his pocket with his trusty friend.

One autumn day, Rip went on one of these walks and ended up on one of the highest peaks of the Kaatskill Mountains. He had been hunting squirrels, and hadn't noticed where he was heading. From his perch on this mountain top, he could see the entire countryside below. On one side of the mountain was the village, but on the other side it was "wild, lonely, and shagged, the bottom filled with fragments from the impending cliffs, and scarcely lighted by the reflected rays of the setting sun" (22). He sat there for a long time contemplating the dark side of the mountain. It started to grow dark, and he knew that he would never get home before nightfall; he cringed at the thought of his wife's angry face.

Rip got up and was about to descend the mountain when he heard someone call out "Rip Van Winkle!" He turned around, but he didn't see anyone. He then looked down the dark side of the mountain; he saw a strange man carrying something heavy on his back. He figured that it must be one of his neighbors, so he went down to help him. The strange man was "a short square-built old fellow, with thick bushy hair, and a grizzled beard. His dress was of the antique Dutch fashion-a cloth jerking strapped round the waist-several pairs of breeches, the outer one of ample volume, decorated with rows of buttons down the sides, and bunches at the knees" (23). Rip was unsure about this man, but helped him anyways; they shared the burden of the stout keg that the strange man had been carrying. They continued up the mountain together in silence.

On the way up the mountain, the two men came to an area that was like a small amphitheatre-it was "surrounded by perpendicular precipices, over the brinks of which impending trees shot their branches" (23). When they entered the amphitheatre they saw a group of men playing ninepins. These men "were dressed in [the same] quaint outlandish fashion" as Rip's guide (24). All of the men had beards and melancholy faces. They were completely quiet while playing their game, which Rip found strange. When the men noticed Rip they looked at him crudely. His guide filled large flagons with the liquor from his keg and motioned for Rip to serve them, which he did. When they had finished their drinks they returned to their game.

As time went by Rip felt more at ease, and even ventured to taste the liquor. One sip led to two, two led to three, and so forth until Rip fell into a deep sleep. When he awoke it was morning, and he was atop the mountain where he had been the previous day when a voice had called out for him. He was confused and tried to recall what had happened the previous day. He finally remembered the flagon, and became upset. He looked for his gun, but he found an "old firelock lying by him, the barrel incrusted with rust, the lock falling off, and the stock worm-eaten" in its place (25). He thought that the men must have robbed him. His joints felt stiff when he tried to get up. He proceeded to find the amphitheatre from the previous night. When he reached its previous location it was no longer there, so he decided to go home.

He saw a number of people on his way home, but he did not recognize any of them. Their dress also seemed peculiar to him. They all looked at him strangely and stroked their chins; he duplicated their gesture and found that his beard was a foot long.

The village was larger than he remembered, and there were more people. It took him a while, but he managed to find his house. It looked dilapidated-the roof had caved in, the windows were broken, and the doors were off their hinges. There was an emaciated dog hanging around that looked like Wolf; Rip called to Wolf, but the dog snarled at him. His family was not there.

He walked about town, but did not recognize anyone. The familiar buildings of the past were gone, and King George's image was replaced with a man called General Washington. He came upon a crowd where a man was shouting about civic responsibilities, such as voting. Rip attracted attention and the man who was shouting about voting approached Rip, and asked him which side he voted for. Rip was confused. A man in a cocked hat came up to Rip and asked if he was trying to start a riot-Rip was still carrying the rusty gun on his shoulder. He told them that he was born in this town, and he was loyal to the King. The crowd called him a spy and wanted him arrested, but the man in the cocked hat quieted them down. The man asked Rip why he was there. Rip asked about Nicholas Vedder. An old man told him that he had died eighteen years before. Rip then asked about Brom Dutcher, and the old man said that he had gone off to the war and never came back. Rip asked about Van Bummel; he had gone to the war and was now in Congress. Rip was saddened by these answers. He asked if anyone knew of Rip Van Winkle. They said that Rip was across the way, leaning on a tree. The man leaning against the tree looked as Rip when he first ventured up the hill. The man in the cocked hat asked Rip who he was.

A woman came through the crowd with a baby in her arms. The baby started to cry when it saw Rip, and the mother said "Hush, Rip." Rip (the eldest) asked her what her name was, and she said that it was Judith Gardenier. He asked her what her father's name is, and she said poor Rip Van Winkle, he left twenty years ago and they never heard from him again. He asked about her mother, and Judith said that she had died. He took his daughter into his arms and told her that he was her father. Everyone was shocked. An old woman came through the crowd to look at him, and she said that it was true, he was Rip Van Winkle. Rip told his story, and everyone shook their heads in disbelief. Old Peter Vanderdonk, who was a descendant of the historian of the same name, corroborated Rip's story. Judith took her father home with her to live on the farm that she had with her cheery farmer husband. Rip Jr. worked on the farm, but he had inherited his father's laziness. Rip became known as "one of the patriarchs of the village," and he lived happily ever after, no longer having to endure his wife's sour disposition.

http://www.easylitnotes.com/2012/01/summary-of-washington-irvings-rip-van.html

Guiding questions while reading “Rip Van Winkle” - answer in complete sentences:

1. What changes have taken place in the country between the end of the story and the beginning?

1. How does the author use the technique of “doubling” (character doubles, landscape/building doubles, situational doubles) in the story to emphasize these changes?  As part of your answer, give three examples of “doubles” that you noticed.

1. When does Rip have his “identity crisis”, and what causes this?

1. Which characters in the story seem to fit in with a more structured, strict class system (you will always be, or might as well be what you were born as)?  Why?

1. Which characters seem to fit in better with the new “hustling” attitude?  Why?

1. How does this story have an ambiguous (i.e., seems to weigh both the good and the bad) attitude about the formation of a new American character?  What is lost, and what is gained?

1. How is this seemingly “nonsense” story also about the very formation of a distinct American identity(ies), one that Rip has a hard time adjusting to?