



## The Schoolmaster of "Stingy Hollow"

Alain Geoffroy

### ► To cite this version:

Alain Geoffroy. The Schoolmaster of "Stingy Hollow". Alizés : Revue angliciste de La Réunion, 1998, A Critical Edition of William Austin's The Man with the cloaks and others stories, the Original Text, 15, pp.135-146. hal-02348372

**HAL Id: hal-02348372**

**<https://hal.univ-reunion.fr/hal-02348372>**

Submitted on 5 Nov 2019

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

## The schoolmaster of "Stingy Hollow"

Published in the 8 July, 1825 issue of the *New England Galaxy*, "Some Account of the Sufferings of a Country Schoolmaster"<sup>1</sup> presents a dismal vision of the life of a young teacher in New England and is staged in a remote place which appears as a satirical negative counterpart of Washington Irving's "Sleepy Hollow."<sup>2</sup> The numerous pairs of sometimes common and sometimes strictly opposite elements in the two stories seem to indicate that Austin was familiar with Irving's famous tale, but instead of depicting an "enchanted region" (SH 1059), he manages to conjure up an awfully "desolate place" (19).

Considering the main protagonists of the two tales, they are surprisingly not without some resemblance. First, both of them are not only schoolteachers but they appear, each in his own way, to be scholars and come from places where the quality of education is renowned. Ichabod Crane "was a native of Connecticut, a place which supplies the Union with pioneers for the mind" (SH 1060), and he was seen "by the women as a man of great erudition, for he had read several books quite through" (1063). As to Austin's unfortunate hero, he "received [his] education at the University in Cambridge" (17) and was appreciated because he was a "learned" (18) man. Coming, both of them, from supposedly more advanced regions, Ichabod "'tarried' in Sleepy Hollow,

---

<sup>1</sup> All further references are to this edition.

<sup>2</sup> Washington Irving, "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" (1820) in *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon — Washington Irving: History, Tales and Sketches*, (New York: The Library of America, 1983), 1058-1088.

for the purpose of instructing the children of the vicinity" (*SH* 1060), as his young counterpart was hired for the purpose of "giving the boys a complete education" (17). Another common trait they share is their extreme leanness. Austin's hero was reduced by his too long starvation to "to such a gossamer, that Zephyr would have blown [him] about at pleasure" (31) whereas Ichabod, though he could eat his fill, could have been, "on a windy day . . . mistaken [...] for the genius of famine descending upon the earth" (*SH* 1061). Ultimately, both of them, though obviously for different reasons, seem to be afflicted by an inordinate appetite. Ichabod "was a huge feeder, and though lank, had the dilating powers of an Anaconda" (*SH* 1062). As for Austin's hero, he eventually became "more voracious than ever" (31) for "to one who has never palled his appetite in a pastry shop, and whose spartan diet only rendered hunger more keen, the idle ceremony of daily holding a knife and fork, tended only to increase the desire to eat" (22). But though they were both "according to country custom in those parts, boarded and lodged at the houses of the farmers" (*SH* 1062), Austin's hero was less fortunate for when the question of accommodating him came up before the town council, it was decided that "the master should be put up at auction, and whoever will take him for the least money, should have him" (17). Here, their destinies seem to diverge radically, together with the economic condition of their respective hosts.

The economic resources of their host countries is first of all symbolized by the seasons in which the two stories are staged. As Ichabod Crane's adventures actually began on "a fine autumnal day [when] the sky was clear and serene" (*SH* 1074), Austin's hero arrived at his school "in the month of December, and no snow had fallen — all was frost-bound" (19). But, beyond the transformations of the landscapes linked to the natural cycle of the seasons, the appearance of the countryside is quite relevant to their respective lots. In *Sleepy Hollow*, the fields and the forests display "the treasures of jolly autumn" (*SH* 1074) and reveal the presence of the abounding game:

Nature wore that rich and golden livery which we always associate with the idea of abundance. The forests had put on their sober brown and yellow, while some trees of the tenderer kind had been nipped by the frosts into brilliant dyes of orange, purple, and scarlet. Streaming

files of wild ducks began to make their appearance high in the air; the bark of the squirrel might be heard from the groves of beech and hickory nuts, and the pensive whistle of the quail at intervals from the neighbouring stubble field. (*SH* 1074)

Austin's hero was by no means so lucky and instead of contemplating, like Ichabod, "some of the goodliest scenes of the mighty Hudson" (*SH* 1074), he was immediately struck by the apparent sterility of the scenery: "At a distance I saw a house in the midst of a landscape, abrupt, broken, and mountainous. The herbage far and wide was so sere and withered that it was doubtful if any future spring could refresh it. Such will be the desolation when time, with his scythe, shall visit that place at his last call" (19). Moreover, no animal seemed to dwell in the area, which ominously suggests that food was scarce and poor: "we should have reason to rejoice at the sight of a wild beast ; he would soon take off the rust from our spits" (17).

In Irving's tale, the house of Heer Van Tassel — "a perfect picture of a thriving, contented, liberal hearted farmer" (*SH* 1066) — is the paragon of the prosperity prevailing in these parts, and the author lingers lengthily over the innumerable signs of abundance arousing Ichabod's desire and greed:

His strong hold was situated on the banks of the Hudson, on one of those green, sheltered, fertile nooks, in which the Dutch farmers are so fond of nestling. A great elm tree spread its broad branches over it, at the foot of which bubbled up a spring of the softest and sweetest water . . . Hard by the farm house was a vast barn, that might have served for a church, every window and crevice of which seemed bursting forth with the treasures of the farm . . . Before the barn door strutted the gallant cock, that pattern of a husband, a warrior, and a fine gentleman, clapping his burnished wings, and crowing in the pride and gladness of his heart — sometime tearing up the earth with his feet, and then generously calling his ever hungry family of wives and children to enjoy the rich morsel which he had discovered. (*SH* 1066; 67)

The description of the Cambridge schoolmaster's dwelling is far less lavish with details and Austin merely mentions "a tottering house, the top of which was covered with moss, and shone like an emerald" (19) with "an ill-shapen door-stone that looked as if it had

grown there" (19). The same contrast is to be noticed for the interiors of their respective hosts. Ichabod is immediately seduced by the riches he beholds in his thriving host's dwelling:

When he entered the house, the conquest of his heart was complete. . . . The hall [...] formed the centre of the mansion, and the place of usual residence. Here, rows of resplendent pewters, ranged on a long dresser, dazzled his eyes. In one corner stood a huge bag of wool ready to be spun, in another a quantity of linsey-woolsey just from the loom, ear of Indians corn, and strings of dried apples and peaches, hung in gay festoons along the walls, mingled with the gaud of red peppers, and a door left ajar, gave him a peep onto the best parlour, where the claw footed chairs, and dark mahogany table, shone like mirrors. . . . strings of various coloured bird's eggs were suspended above [the fireplace]; a great ostrich egg was hung from the centre of the room, and a corner cupboard, knowingly left open, displayed immense treasures of old silver and well mended china (*SH* 1068).

When he entered his hosts' house, Austin's protagonist is faced with quite a depressing view:

If the scenery without the house was appalling, a fine lesson was read to you within doors. Here, nothing was superfluous, and every thing within reach. You could stand before the fire, and reach every article of the kitchen establishment, from the gridiron and warming pan, down to the pudding bag and dripping pan. There was no separate kitchen to the house, and, from necessity, the keeping-room served for "kitchen and parlour and all." "How few things," thought I, "will satisfy our real wants. Thousands in Boston would die of chagrin, to be reduced to this necessity (19).

Even the smallest details contrast with what Ichabod experiences at the Van Tassel's. The fireplace, for instance, is fitted with all the utensils that should be found in it: there were "andirons, with their accompanying shovel and tongs, glistened from their covert of asparagus tops" (*SH* 1068). But what Austin's unfortunate hero discovers in his room is far from being as encouraging: "There was only one superfluous thing in the room, a fireplace, but there was no tongs nor shovel nor andirons, nor any signs that a wreath of smoke had ever passed up chimney" (20). But the most striking contrasts to Ichabod Crane's surroundings is the quantity and the quality of the food offered

to the guests. Irving's description of the various dishes and gastronomic delights is almost Rabelaisian in its diversity and profusion:

Such heaped up platters of cakes of various and almost indescribable kinds, known only to experienced Dutch housewives. There was the doughty dough nut, the tenderer oly koek, and the crisp and crumbling cruller; sweet cakes and short cakes, ginger cakes and honey cakes, and the whole family of cakes. And then there were apple pies and peach pies and pumpkin pies; besides slices of ham and smoked beef; and moreover delectable dishes of preserved plums, and peaches, and pears, and quinces; not to mention broiled shad and roasted chicken; together with bowls of milk and cream, and mingled higgledy-piggledy, pretty much as I have enumerated them... (*SH* 1076)

But Austin's protagonist had to content himself with a much more modest meal:

The table was immediately set, and a slice of bread and a slice of cheese, with a pewter pot of cider were presented to me. The cheese was beautifully white, it looked exactly like Stilton cheese ; but to the taste it was quite different. I have since heard the same sort of cheese called white oak. The bread was sweet enough, but rather too solid ; the knife cut as smoothly through it as it would through the cheese-like clay near Hartford Asylum. The cider was as clear as a rivulet, and would have been excellent had it tasted of the apple. (20)

Such was his welcoming lunch, but his ordinary fare was still more plain and restricted:

the whole dinner consisted of one dumpling, which they called a pudding, and five sausages, which in cooking shrunk to pipe-stems. There were five of us at table. My portion of pudding was put on my plate ; I swallowed thrice, and it disappeared. My one sausage was put on my plate — I swallowed twice, and my dinner was ended. (22)

When Ichabod fancies some tea, he beholds "the motherly tea pot sending up its clouds of vapour from the midst" (*SH* 1076), whereas Austin's host family had "no tea in the house ; they said they had conceived a prejudice against tea ever since the Revolution" (21).



However, despite the huge gap separating Irving's and Austin's imaginary worlds, the two countries, despite many obvious contrasting elements, produce on the two protagonists quite similar effects. Sleepy Hollow is well known for its mysterious capacity to make people fancy things even when they are awake:

A drowsy, dreamy influence seems to hang over the land, and to pervade the very atmosphere. . . . Certain it is, the place still continues under the sway of some witching power, that holds a spell over the minds of the good people, causing them to walk in continual reveries. They are given to all kinds of marvellous beliefs; are subject to trances and visions, and frequently see strange sights... (SH 1059)

Such a weird influence does not spare Ichabod, though he was not born in the enchanted valley:

The visionary propensity I have mentioned is not confined to the native inhabitants of the valley, but it is unconsciously imbibed by every one who resides there for a time. However wide awake they may have been before they entered that sleepy region, they are sure, in a little time, to inhale the witching influence of the air, and begin to grow imaginative — they dream dreams, and see apparitions. (SH 1060)

Though he experiences quite different conditions of living, Austin's protagonist is also inclined to find refuge with increasing frequency in sleep and dreams "for [he] soon learned that all the time [he] could consume in sleep was clear gain to [his] stomach" (24). Moreover, hunger stimulates his imagination so much that he no longer sees himself in his new mental attitude and feels deprived of the control of himself: "By degrees the cravings of hunger, changed my nature, and took absolute possession of my imagination" (22). Indeed, from then on, he can no longer discriminate between dream and reality: "Thus would my distempered fancy prepare the greatest delicacies ; so that I often detected myself in the act of working my jaws, as though I were actually eating substantial food" (23). The line between waking and sleeping becomes blurred and hunger often makes him mistake dreams for real life events:

Strange fancies haunted me in my sleep. I rambled through the country milking, in my own way, every cow I met, and hamstringing every ox, and cutting steaks from them. So jealous did I become, that I often questioned myself in my sleep, and argued the point whether I was really eating or dreaming. Once in particular, I well remember that I insisted I was eating a beef steak, and took it on my fork and held it up, and said, "this is a real beef, this cannot be a dream, I am certain I am eating an excellent beef steak, I cannot be dreaming now." So inveterate and persisting, busy and alert is excessive hunger. It haunts you by night and by day, awake and asleep. (27)

Innumerable details of the kind punctuate Austin's tale, whose narrative — not unlike Irving's — literally *revels* in such fantasies, rendering the protagonist a desperate, but no less imaginative, counterpart of Ichabod Crane:

In his devouring mind's eyes, he pictured to himself every roasting pig running about with a pudding in his belly, and an apple in his mouth; the pigeons were snugly put to bed in a comfortable pie, and tucked in with a coverlet of crust; the geese were swimming in their own gravy; and the ducks pairing cosily in dishes, like snug married couples, with a decent competency of onion sauce; in the porkers he saw carved out the future sleek sides of bacon, and juicy relishing ham; not a turkey, but he beheld daintily trussed up, with its gizzard under its wing, and, peradventure, a necklace of savoury sausages; and even bright chanticleer himself lay sprawling on his back, in a side dish... (SH 1067)

However, compared with Ichabod's refined fancies, what Austin's hero imagines in the pangs of hunger appears to be much less sophisticated, and instead of "geese swimming in their own gravy" he contents himself with a somewhat rustic vision:

Then, half delirious, my imagination carried me to the first inhabitants of Charlestown. Happy people, instead of the crows coming after them, wild geese in a time of famine, were ready to fly down their chimnies on to their roasting hooks. These people had appointed a thanksgiving, which threatened to change itself into a fast. The night preceding the day of thanksgiving was intensely cold ; and while an immense flock of wild geese were pursuing their way to the South, the frost suddenly seized their wings, arrested their progress, and they all fell down into Charlestown square. Every family not only filled their bellies, the whole winter, but also filled their beds with down.



Whereas, I was reduced to the extremity, that a crow, a hundred years old, would have been to me the richest treasure. (26)

Similarly, instead of "a necklace of savoury sausages" those he was offered had "in cooking shrunk to pipe-stems" (22), and the slices of pork he managed to steal from the Boston peddler, though no less appetizing in his eyes, were not prepared into "sleek sides of bacon, and juicy relishing ham" but had a much more elementary aspect: "with my penknife I cut two as handsome steaks as Eumæus cut from the two porkers with which he regaled Ulysses. O, the beautiful steaks of red and white !" (29) Undoubtedly, the necessities of his stomach brought him to a more primitive mental state than Ichabod's comfortable greed, which the allusion to cannibalism confirms beyond doubt:

I ought to observe that a man consumed by hunger becomes by degrees destitute of all moral principle. There was at school, one little round faced, chubby, fat fellow of about forty pounds weight, on whom I cast my evil eye. For the extremity of hunger makes cannibals equally of the civilized and savage. (23)

Ichabod's comparatively more comfortable situation is even quite ironically paralleled in Austin's narrative, though on a far less glamorous level. Having the opportunity to revel with so many excellent dishes, Ichabod's greed is soon oriented toward more romantic aims. But instead of searching some charming company like that of Van Tassel's daughter — "she was a blooming lass of fresh eighteen; plump as a partridge; ripe and melting and rosy cheeked as one of her father's peaches (*SH* 1065) — Austin's protagonist develops more prosaic dreams: "I lived in hope of meeting with that beautiful cow again, but unhappily I never saw her more" (17). This probably involuntary analogy is nevertheless quite relevant of the respective psychic structures of the two tales: as "Sleepy Hollow" develops the various aspects of desire, Austin's story stages the deconstructing of human wish and its regression, under extreme circumstances, into the more primitive field of animal need. This would account for the difference of tone in the two short stories, as well as that of the nature of the fancies involved. This makes Austin's piece a much more subversive and caustic tale than Irving's bittersweet story: his frequent references to money and his

insistence on pettiness and avarice makes it a stinging social criticism of the mores of his time, on a personal mode which he develops sharply in all his other fictions.

Finally, despite the differences previously noticed, Irving's and Austin's protagonists share a common destiny as both of them eventually run away from their home towns and go back to college.

[Ichabod Crane] had changed his quarters to a distant part of the country; had kept school and studied law at the same time; had been admitted to the bar, turned politician, electioneered, written for the newspapers, and finally had been made a Justice of the Ten Pound Court. (*SH* 1086)

As for Austin's hero, he equally went back to his studies and took advantage of his biting experience to spread the good word: he "returned to college, protesting in favour of country schoolmasters, against public auctions and rye coffee" (32). However, the ending of the story of the unfortunate country schoolmaster seems to echo another of Austin's tales, "Peter Rugg, the Missing Man." For not unlike Peter Rugg who was lost for so many years, the young teacher remained secluded in a *lost* place for what seemed to him like "a thousand years . . . crowded into [a] period of sixty days" (33). Moreover, if Peter Rugg "appeared . . . to be a man not of this world" (*PR* 23), Austin's protagonist was confined in a place "which appeared to be outlawed from the rest of the world" (19). Similarly, the occasional witnesses saw both of them eventually run away with unmatched supernatural speed. If Peter Rugg travels in a chair which, "like a Nantucket coach, would answer for every thing that ever went on wheels" (*PR* 42), the young schoolteacher can assuredly take his place alongside his bewitched carriage: "the hyppogriff could not have overtaken me. I saw nothing, horse or sleigh, that I did not instantly overtake, and as quickly leave far behind" (31). It is also worth noticing here that Austin uses the same metaphors: the winged hippogriff matches Rugg's formidable horse with "his hind flanks rising like wings, [who] seemed to devour all before him, and to scorn all behind" (*PR* 24) and his mentioning of a sleigh echoes metonymically the "Nantucket coach," a half-disguised hint at the local idiomatic phrase "a Nantucket ride" or "sleigh" referring to a boat

drawn full speed by a harpooned whale. The ability of both protagonists to run at this incredible speed makes them appear as exceptionally interesting phenomena worthy of being studied by scientists. When Rugg is caught on board the Hudson ferry, the ferryman refers to him as an object which would have interested a famous ichthyologist of these days: “Mr. Dunwell, we have got a curiosity on board, that would puzzle Dr Mitchill” (*PR* 41). As to the young schoolteacher, he fancies himself as an object of scientific curiosity:

I was fearful, if a physician should see me, he would seize me as a stray anatomy ; and to render me perfectly helpless, would dislocate my arms, pin up my tongue, and fasten me to the wall of his dissecting room. Had I stopped at a tavern, I might have been arrested for a mummy, shut up in a lemon box, sent to Boston, sold to Greenwood, placed in the New-England Museum beside the little black Egyptian, and there exhibited among a thousand notions. (32)

Like Peter Rugg who was “held in light esteem by all innholders, for he never stops to eat, drink, or sleep” (*PR* 22), Austin’s protagonist refuses to stop and have some rest at the taverns he passes: “life depends on speed, I would not stop to feast with an Alderman” (32). Similarly, both of them are seen as fugitives who run away so quickly because they have infringed the law. Their very flight is seen as illegal and right-thinking people think they ought to be arrested : the toll-gatherer accuses Rugg of robbing him of the toll fare many times over, and when the latter eventually comes back and passes the toll-gate again, he shouts at him ““stop, sir, on your peril!”” (*PR* 39). Similarly, people on the passage of Austin’s hero cry at him: “stop thief” (31). Obviously, their coming from “outlawed regions” makes them *outlaws* in the eyes of the right-minded people who happen to meet them.

Even when both protagonists eventually managed to come back home, neither of them was recognized by the people who had never left the world from which both of them had once been expelled. Rugg’s noisy arrival perturbing the auction sale of his estate was mistaken for an earthquake (*PR* 51), whereas the appearance of Austin’s hero at his home triggered off fright and confusion: “before I could make myself known, they all fled in consternation” (32). However, the return home

seems in both cases an indispensable key to the final recovery of their identity. Soon after his arrival, Rugg was recognized by the bystanders: "The confident look and searching eyes of Rugg, to every one present, carried more conviction, that the estate was his, than could any parchment or paper with signature and seal" (*PR* 51). As for the young schoolteacher, his family eventually welcome him as one of them and "in a few weeks [he] recovered [his] personal identity" (32). Coming back home also means to return to normality, not only spatially, but also in terms of temporality. Peter Rugg has to accept the consequences of the historical event he has missed — the American Revolution; its currency, and its tolls <sup>3</sup> — and Austin's protagonist finds his true family "at tea" (32): far from his host family who "had conceived a prejudice against tea ever since the Revolution" (21) — as if, arrested in the past, they had not yet realized that the Revolution was over —, he is thus reintroduced into the present. In both stories, things are settled by the readjustment of the once excluded protagonists into the normal course of History and by their return to "true" American values, themes which Austin obviously cherished to the point of spicing with them his entire work of fiction.

*Alain Geoffroy*<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> See Terramorsi (126-37).

<sup>4</sup> Université de La Réunion, Faculté des Lettres & Sciences Humaines, 15 rue René Cassin, B.P. 7151 - 97715 SAINT DENIS cedex 9 (FRANCE).

## REFERENCES

- Austin, William.** *Peter Rugg, the Missing Man, a Critical Edition*. Ed. by Alain Geoffroy, *Alizés* n° 11, Université de La Réunion, June 1996.
- Irving, Washington.** "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" (1820) in *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon — Washington Irving: History, Tales and Sketches*, (New York: The Library of America, 1983).
- Terramorsi, Bernard.** *Le Mauvais Rêve américain*, (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1994).
-