

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for The Legend of Sleepy Hollow by Washington Irving

Book Information

Washington Irving, The Legend of Sleepy Hollow
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William Morrow & Company Inc, 1990
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105 Pages
Book Level: 11.0
Interest Level: UG

This is the rollicking tale of Ichabod Crane, a schoolmaster, who challenges his rival, Brom Bones, for the love and fortune of Katrina Van Tassel.

Topics: Classics, Classics (All);
Fantasy/Imagination, Misc./Other;
Humor/Funny, Funny; Mysteries,
Hauntings/Ghosts; Popular Groupings,
Upper Grades Popular Authors/Starred
Reviews; READNOW - Demco Media
Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read
Now Grades 9+; Short Stories, Short
Stories (All)

Main Characters

Baltus Van Tassel wealthy father of Katrina
Brom Bones Katrina's burly suitor, who is known
for being mischievous
Ichabod Crane spindly schoolteacher who is
smitten with Katrina Van Tassel
Katrina Van Tassel attractive only child of a
wealthy Dutch farmer
The Headless Horseman alleged beheaded
specter who roams the countryside

Vocabulary

incessant continuing without interruption
indolence laziness
onerous imposing great hardship or strain
pedagogue someone in the art or profession of
teaching
pertinacious obstinately persistent
ratiocination process of reasoning

Synopsis

The Legend of Sleepy Hollow begins with a detailed description of the town. It is revealed that it was inhabited by Dutch settlers. It is described as a sleepy, peaceful place with "a drowsy, dreamy influence" that pervades the atmosphere. The residents are superstitious people, and they are even subject to visions and trances; they hear music and voices, and they see strange things. It is then explained that the dominant spirit which is alleged to haunt the place is that of the Headless Horseman. Many have pondered his origins. Some say he is the ghost of a Hessian trooper who lost his head in the Revolutionary War.

Soon, we meet Ichabod Crane, the local schoolmaster. He is described as very tall and gangly. Some might even mistake him for a scarecrow. He is a well-educated and polished man. Unfortunately, his job does not pay very well, so he must live with others. In addition to teaching school, Ichabod gives lessons in psalmody, and it is rumored that his voice floats around on the other side of the water.

Ichabod is taken with Katrina Van Tassel, only child of the wealthy farmer, Baltus Van Tassel. The problem facing him is the competition with the score of other suitors who also desire her affections. He determines to use his position as her psalmody instructor to win her hand in marriage. He is also quite obsessed with the amount of money and land Mr. Van Tassel has and how he will acquire it if he succeeds in marrying her. Brom Bones is his major rival in her affections. He is a muscular man, but he cannot match Ichabod in intelligence. He is quite jealous, however, and ridicules Ichabod in front of Katrina. Then, he and his companions break into his schoolhouse, which convinces Ichabod that witches must be holding meetings there.

Soon, Ichabod receives an invitation to attend a quilting frolic at the Van Tassel home where he once again indulges his greedy nature, and where he hears various ghost stories and learns about Major Andre and the Headless Horseman. Brom Bones

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matches and exceeds the first story told of the Horseman. He claims he encountered the Horseman and raced him, but just as they approached the bridge, the headless rider took off and vanished in flames.

Afterward, Ichabod is determined to have a one-to-one chat with Katrina. Apparently, this does not go well, as Ichabod leaves the house desolate and races off on Gunpowder. It is dark and his imagination starts to get the best of him as he nears the area where the Horseman is rumored to frequent. At first he thinks he hears a whistle, and then realizes it was only the wind. As he approaches the stream, his horse bucks and horse and rider go into the bushes. Soon, though, he sees a figure mount the rising ground and is terrified to see that it has no head on its shoulders. Ichabod thinks that if he can just make it to the bridge, he will be safe. But the Headless Horseman pursues Ichabod and throws his head at him. He tumbles into the dust and the rider scoots away.

The next morning all that is found of Ichabod is his hat and, next to that, a smashed pumpkin. His disappearance causes some speculation, and many assume he was carried off by the Headless Horseman. In a postscript, however, Mr. Knickerbocker claims that the tale of Sleepy Hollow was heard at a "Corporation meeting of the ancient city of Manhattoes." He claims that an older gentleman told the story, but there was another "dry-looking old gentleman ... who maintained a grave and rather severe face throughout...."

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

How are the town and its inhabitants depicted?

Sleepy Hollow is described as a restful and peaceful town. Its citizens are quite superstitious, and everyone will eventually succumb to the town's spell. Plus, most of the folks have over-active imaginations.

Literary Analysis

Who is the antagonist of this story? Why?

It could be Brom Bones, due to the way he treated Ichabod Crane. Or, it could be the Headless Horseman, preying on the innocent villagers--if students believe that he existed, that is. Or, it could even be the dark imaginations of the townspeople, which kept them steeped in superstitions and myths.

Inferential Comprehension

How is Ichabod's personality complex? Give examples of contradictions between his beliefs and his actions.

He is presented as an upstanding member of the community, being a schoolteacher. He is active in church and enjoys religious psalms. However, he is obsessed with greed. Also, he uses his standing as a psalm instructor to try to gain an unfair advantage with Katrina.

Constructing Meaning

What do you think happened to Ichabod Crane?

Answer could be that he was killed by the Headless Horseman, or he may have been attacked by Brom Bones. He could have even fled the town, unharmed, after being rejected by Katrina.

Teachable Skills

Recognizing Setting The author states that the residents of Sleepy Hollow in early 1800s New York are descendents of the original Dutch settlers. Names such as Van Tassel are decidedly Dutch in origin. For a project, have students trace their own ethnic origins. When did the first person

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from their family come to America? Where did they settle? Also, have them make lists of first and last names that are common to their cultures. Examples are O' and Fitz for Ireland, Mac for Scotland, and so on.

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors This story first appeared in 1819. In the book, the Revolutionary War is specifically mentioned. This was a tumultuous time in American history. For a project, have students research the military and war events that shaped this period. One example would be the clash between the United States and Britain in the War of 1812. The war's end eventually came in late 1814. Have students consider how war may have shaped the legends and myths of the time.

Comparing and Contrasting There are some remarkable parallels between *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* and William Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*. Irving's story was probably written in the early 1800s, whereas *The Taming of the Shrew* is considered one of Shakespeare's earliest works, written around 1592. For a project, have students read *The Taming of the Shrew* and write a compare/contrast essay. Such things to focus on would be the similarities between Ichabod and Petruchio, as well as the similarities and differences between Kate and Katrina.

Deriving Word or Phrase Meaning The author uses many similes in *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* to describe everything from people to natural settings. Have students make a list of five common similes and rewrite them in a more descriptive and original version. One example might be: dark as night--dark as the deepest recesses of an evil soul.