

# Dynamics Of Authority And Resistance: Analysing Authoritarianism, Anti- Authoritarianism, And Their Cyclic Patterns In 'Rip Van Winkle' By Washington Irving

<sup>1</sup>\*Dr. Shiney Sarah Lionel W

## Abstract

*This research paper delves into the intricate interplay between authoritarianism and anti-authoritarianism in Washington Irving's "Rip Van Winkle." Through an impartial lens, the narrative navigates the dominance of figures like Dame Van Winkle and the historical legacy of Hendrick Hudson's crew, uncovering authoritarianism's reach in familial, societal, and historical contexts. Simultaneously, it explores the emergence of anti-authoritarianism through Rip's escapism and societal resistance, emphasizing the cyclical nature of these forces. Amidst the cycles, the narrative underscores the inevitability of authority's influence, both shaping and challenging human dynamics. The paper underscores that our lives are perpetually shaped by authoritative facets, extending beyond politics.*

**Keywords:** Authoritarianism, Anti-Authoritarianism, Escapism, Majoritarianism, Cyclic Patterns, Resistance, Dynamics of power

## Introduction

Literature embraces a blend of colours and opposing views, with different writers presenting their unique stances. Rip Van Winkle exemplifies this as a story where multiple viewpoints intertwine to create a captivating narrative. Across the ages, people have consistently favoured two divergent concepts – Authoritarianism and anti-authoritarianism – from ancient times to the contemporary era. In contrast to typical works where writers often embrace either authoritarianism or anti-authoritarianism, this particular short story presents a unique approach, as the writer remains impartial, allowing readers the freedom to choose and interpret their preferred standpoint. The short story "Rip Van Winkle" by Washington Irving weaves a compelling narrative that delves into the complex interplay between authority and resistance. This paper engages in a meticulous examination of the multifaceted relationships between authoritarianism and anti-authoritarianism as portrayed within the story's tapestry. Through the lens of characters like Dame Van Winkle and the spectre of Hendrick Hudson's crew, it navigates the broad spectrum the influence of authority across familial, societal, and historical domains. In tandem, the emergence of anti-authoritarianism through Rip's escapism and societal defiance reflects a recurring cycle of power dynamics.

## Navigating Authority's Complexities: Insights from "Rip Van Winkle"

Authoritarianism, in politics and government is the blind submission to authority and the repression of individual freedom of thought and action. It is commonly associated with political regime which is characterised by a central authority figure exercising excessive control and power, often leading to limited personal freedoms and individual autonomy. However, this concept extends beyond politics, encompassing various aspects of life, including family dynamics. In Washington Irving's narrative "Rip Van Winkle," the character Dame Van Winkle exemplifies an authoritarian figure within the familial context. She assumes a dominant role over her husband, Rip Van Winkle. The character Dame Van Winkle embodies the whole picture of authoritarianism. She constantly nagged Rip for his easy-going nature, and her authority over him increased substantially from the day of their marriage. Even Rip's dog was afraid of her:

True it is, in all points of spirit befitting an honorable dog, he was as courageous an animal as ever scoured the woods—but what courage can withstand the ever-during and all-besetting terrors of a woman's tongue? The moment Wolf entered the house his crest fell, his tail drooped to the ground or curled between his legs, he sneaked about with a gallows air, casting many a sidelong glance at Dame Van Winkle, and at the least flourish of a broomstick or ladle, he would fly to the door with yelping precipitation. ("Rip Van Winkle" 11)

Through its portrayal of authoritarian tendencies in familial dynamics, Irving's narrative underscores the broader implications of such behaviour, extending beyond political realms.

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<sup>1</sup>\*Assistant Professor, Department of English, Nesamony Memory Christian College, Marthandam, Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University Tirunelveli.

Dame Van Winkle's conduct serves as a microcosm highlighting how authoritarianism's effects can infiltrate personal relationships and households, transcending political structures. This form of control bears resemblance to how authoritarian leaders manipulate citizens' lives in political contexts. The power dynamics within their relationship heavily favour Dame Van Winkle, as evidenced by her unilateral decision-making and influence over the trajectory of their lives. She asserts a substantial degree of control over Rip's actions and decisions, consistently pressuring him to conform to her desires. These mirrors the way authoritarian rulers make choices for their constituents without seeking input. Rip's individual agency is stifled by Dame Van Winkle's dominance, leaving him unable to exercise personal choices without invoking her disapproval or ire. This mirrors the constraints imposed on individuals in authoritarian political systems. Furthermore, Dame Van Winkle isolates Rip from his social circle and community, further solidifying her dominion over him. This isolation tactic reflects the strategies employed by authoritarian leaders to detach individuals from external influences, ensuring their continued control. This narrative serves as a poignant reminder that the impact of authoritarianism extends beyond politics, manifesting within the most intimate spheres of human interaction.

In *Rip Van Winkle*, one does not only witness the revelation of familial authoritarianism through Dame Van Winkle, but also the presence of other authoritarian elements. In every society, history plays a significant and authoritative role in influencing various aspects, including shaping the ideology of the people, morality of the community and its economic opportunities. Moreover, its influence extends to the realm of authoritarianism, where it can contribute to the establishment and maintenance of authoritative systems of governance. In "*Rip Van Winkle*," Hendrick Hudson's crew embodies the authoritative influence of history. As a renowned explorer from the Dutch colonial era, Hudson represents the enduring impact of the past on the present. His ghostly presence serves as a reminder of colonial Dutch heritage, symbolising the weight of tradition. When Rip encounters the crew, it evokes a sense of connection to historical roots and a yearning for the past. Washington Irving skillfully highlights how history shapes individuals and communities, moulding beliefs, values, and cultural identity.

At times, majoritarianism can exert an authoritative influence on shaping the beliefs and values of society. Rip's two-decade slumber causes him to re-enter a society that has evolved and adopted new cultural norms. His outdated attire and traditional thought processes set him apart from the majority, and as a result the prevailing American culture seeks to marginalize him. This social exclusion mirrors the dynamics of majoritarianism, where the dominant beliefs of the majority shape the societal narrative and lead to the marginalization of those who deviate from the norm. During Rip's absence, the American Revolution took place, ushering in a period of significant social and cultural change. The values and ideals that emerged from this revolution contributed to the establishment of a new national identity, and those who did not align with these evolving beliefs faced social exclusion. Rip's non-conformity to the new cultural norms symbolises the challenges faced by individuals whose perspectives differ from the majority, particularly during times of significant societal transformation. The story illustrates how prevailing social conditions can lead to the marginalization of those who do not align with the dominant cultural trend. Majoritarianism's influence on shaping societal beliefs can create an environment where individuals who deviate from the established norms are pushed to the fringes of society. Rip's experiences serve as a commentary on the complexities of cultural change and the tensions that arise between those who hold traditional values and those who embrace new ones in the face of evolving social conditions.

Dame's outburst, breaking a blood-vessel in a fit of passion at a New England peddler, highlights the breakdown of her authoritative nature. This event shows the failure of authoritarianism when relying on inflexible policies and rigid control. It reveals the consequences of enforcing strict rules without considering human emotions. Similarly, in history, authoritarian regimes face challenges while imposing oppressive measures without recognizing the needs and desires of the people. The lack of flexibility and empathy can lead to discontent, resistance, and eventual failure. "*Rip Van Winkle*" serves as a cautionary tale, showing how rigid authoritarian approaches can have adverse consequences, neglecting the importance of understanding human complexities.

The authority fight between Rip and his wife can be likened to the Laffer curve in economics.

The Laffer curve is a concept that shows that if tax rates are increased too rapidly, they will eventually reach a point where they begin to produce less revenue. This is because people will start to work less and invest less, as they will be less willing to pay such high taxes:

The curve explains that as the tax rate rises, there is an increase in tax revenue. However, after reaching the maximum point, the tax revenue starts decreasing with further increase in tax rate as many people start evading tax payments. Thus, with the help of Laffer curve, the optimum tax rate can be found so that the tax collected by the Government can be maximised. (Singhania 6.22)

In the same way, Rip's wife's constant nagging eventually pushed him to the point where he could take it no more. He leaves for hunting, which results in his disappearance for twenty years. During this time, his wife had no one to nag and she eventually stopped. This can be seen as the "descending" part of the Laffer curve, where the authority figure's power

has peaked and then started to decline. The “anti-authoritarian” stage is reached when the authority figure no longer has any power. This is what happened to Rip’s wife, who was unable to control Rip once he was gone.

### **Counterbalancing Authority: Navigating the Intricate Landscape of Anti-Authoritarianism in the Context of Authoritarianism**

According to the Laffer curve, the next stage after peak authoritarianism is anti-authoritarianism. When authority reaches its maximum, the victim’s equilibrium collapses and they enter a state that is the opposite of the former. This state can be called anti-authoritarianism. It often manifests as violence, extremism, and revolt, such as the Angry young man movement of the 1950s. However, in this narrative, Irving makes his characters to achieve this state through escapism. In escapism, people are often pushed to seek relief from reality or evade responsibilities due to external pressures or compelling factors that can be seen as authoritative. Escapism manifests in two distinct forms: physical escapism, characterized by a shift from one specific geographic location to another, and mental escapism, which involves retreating from the real world through various means, often pursuing activities that bring personal pleasure and solace. Rip’s escapism takes both forms: physical and mental. His physical escape to the Kaatskill Mountains represents a departure from his everyday reality. This physical retreat allows him to temporarily distance himself from the demands and challenges of his domestic life, seeking respite and perhaps a form of release from his responsibilities. Furthermore, Rip’s mental escapism is evident in his preference for spending time away from the village and his home. He engages in leisurely activities, such as fishing or storytelling, which provide him with personal pleasure and solace. These activities allow his mind to wander and detach from the mundane concerns of his village life. In both instances, Rip’s escape to the mountains reflects the dual nature of escapism. His physical journey involves a change of location, providing a break from his routine, while his mental retreat involves immersing himself in activities that offer mental relief and a sense of tranquility.

History manifests how the authoritative control promoted by colonization has been dismantled through acts of resistance. The American Revolution was a significant historical event characterized by a rebellion against British rule. It is a typical example of struggle against authority as the colonists yearned for freedom and recognition of their individual rights. Inspired by ideals such as liberty, equality, and self-governance, the revolutionaries dared to challenge the supremacy of the British monarchy. Their resolute determination and willingness to engage in armed conflict paved the way for the establishment of a new nation grounded in democratic principles. The Revolution stands as a testament to the immense strength of a united people who boldly resisted authoritarian rule, thereby laying the foundation for the birth of modern-day America. The change of the portrait from King George III to George Washington in the inn can be interpreted as a symbolic representation of this transformative period. It proclaims the shift from British colonial dominance to embracing the emerging identity and leadership of George Washington, a central figure in the fight for independence.

Authoritarianism and anti-authoritarianism are often interconnected in a cyclical pattern. The cycle begins with the rise of authoritarian systems or figures asserting their control. This can lead to dissatisfaction and opposition from those who disagree with such authority. These opponents then form anti-authoritarian movements or engage in actions to challenge the established order. As these anti-authoritarian efforts gather strength and successfully break down or weaken the existing authoritarian structures, new systems or leaders might emerge in response. However, with time, these new entities can also adopt authoritarian tendencies or exhibit controlling behaviour. This, in turn, can spark renewed resistance from individuals or groups who uphold anti-authoritarian principles. This cycle persists as anti-authoritarian movements continue to confront and dismantle newly established authoritarian systems. The process can repeat itself with subsequent cycles of resistance and control. It’s important to recognize that the balance between authoritarianism and anti-authoritarianism is fluid and influenced by historical, social, and political factors. “Rip Van Winkle” illustrates the precise cyclical nature of authoritarianism.

In “Rip Van Winkle,” the progression from authoritarianism to anti-authoritarianism is depicted critically through the lens of escapism. The narrative highlights the fragility of authority and the inherent tension between those in power and those seeking liberation. The historical context of the American Revolution serves as a stark reminder of the consequences of authoritarian rule, as individuals rise to challenge oppressive systems. The cyclic nature of authority and anti-authority underscores the perpetual struggle for equilibrium, revealing the complexities of power dynamics.

### **Conclusion**

In Washington Irving’s “Rip Van Winkle,” the interplay between authoritarianism and anti-authoritarianism offers a nuanced understanding of human dynamics. The narrative’s impartial perspective navigates the dominance of figures like Dame Van Winkle and Hendrick Hudson’s crew, revealing the far-reaching effects of authoritarianism within familial, societal, and historical contexts. Concurrently, the emergence of anti-authoritarianism is explored through Rip’s escapism and societal resistance, emphasizing the cyclical nature of these forces. The narrative underscores the inevitability of the influence of authority, shaping and challenging human interactions. Ultimately, Irving’s portrayal captures the cyclical pattern of authoritarianism and anti-authoritarianism, underscoring their fluidity and impact on societal landscapes. The game of nine pins becomes a symbol of liberation from one authority while hinting at the potential for its resurgence. In conclusion, “Rip Van Winkle” intricately weaves authority and resistance, extending

beyond politics. The narrative invites contemplation on the delicate balance between these opposing forces that shape our lives.

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