Walking into the Reality

Tina Kou (郭文婷)

Washington Irving, “the father of American literature,” has published many typical American short stories. One of his classic American short stories is Rip Van Winkle. He wrote this work to show the issue of national identity, the disillusion and the darkness of the American dream at the early period after the American independence.

Firstly, through the awakening of Rip Van Winkle, the author showed the issue of national identity at the time when the American became independent. At the time the Americans were just set free from the old English government. They entered a new era, and most of them were confused with their new identity of being an American. They did not know if they should live the way they did or had another way of living. Irving used Rip Van Winkle to emphasize this issue. When Rip Van Winkle awoke, he faced a world where things and people were all changed and were all different from the world he used to be familiar with. He was terrified and disquieted with his situations, and questioned himself of his own identity. In the story, “he doubted his own identity, and whether he
was himself or another man…does nobody here know Rip Van Winkle?” However, he finally went back to the reality. Life went on, and he became the witness of the old generation and the new generation.

Furthermore, Rip Van Winkle’s awakening represented an idea of the awakening from the American dream. Before Rip Van Winkle went into the mountain, he had led a simple, idle American life under the colonization of the English government. When Rip met “a short square-built old fellow,” he encountered a transition of his life. Although the people he met were strange, he still joined them and had a drink with them; he couldn’t resist the temptation of the drink. All the enjoyments were like dreams to him. Like Rip, the Americans at the early stage of the independence of the America also faced the dreamlike situations of being independent. Then when Rip was awaken, he confronted a new world where things and people were different from the world he used to know. He was frightened. He knew things were changed; nevertheless, he had to face the reality, just like the Americans who had to face the disillusionment of the American dream.

Another point worth mentioning is in Rip Van Winkle, the author uses his unique techniques to enrich the story such as the ambiguous description for the reliability of the story and the detailed description about the views and characters. The feminist idea is also revealed in the story.
Are They Justified?

Picker Chen (陳比軻)

Our female heroines of the feminist classics—the wife in The Yellow Wallpaper, Minnie Foster in Trifles, and Celie in The Color Purple—bear the brunt of sexual discrimination despite the level of their social standing. As a female, they are physically inferior to men, incapable of self-defense when confronted with fists and kicks, and mentally incapable of anything more than household chores and domestic affairs. These three women have each overcome this stereotyped condescension by men, but the results are quite twisted and devastating because the fear and oppression marked by their past are still preserved. Even though the protagonists manage to triumph over their men, the women are still not justified because the men have driven them to insanity, depression, and into a life of a constant shadow of the past.

“I kept on creeping just the same, but I looked at him over my shoulder.” This occurs at the end of the story The Yellow Paper when to the reader’s mind the wife has seemingly turned insane. Witnessing his wife’s ghoulish state and horrific words, the husband faints and the narration finishes with this climatic terror. It is the end of the story, but what has happened to the protagonist? It can be assumed that making her husband faint is the
protagonist’s payback to a condescending patriarch, but it is at the price of her sanity. Earlier in the story, the protagonist is able to keep her thoughts clear through the expression of writing. She is normal and thinks that “congenial work, with excitement and change” would do her good for her post-natal psyche. However, she is denied of this natural treatment, and the lack of it drives her to madness that can temporarily scare her husband, but that is not good for the rest of her life because she will neither become normal nor live an oppression-free life.

What equals insanity and the husband’s horror in *The Yellow Wallpaper* is the combination of depression and murder in *Trifles*. Clues such as the dead canary, a symbol of a vibrant character being forced to be silent, lead the reader to believe that the depressed Minnie Foster, wife of John Wright, could no longer endure her oppressed life with a “hard man,” who according to the character Mrs. Hale, was like “a raw wind that gets to the bone.” Also according to the talk of the two women in *Trifles*, Minnie foster “used to sing real pretty,” and would wear “a white dress with blue ribbons” when singing in the choir. But after getting married, John Wright’s male dominance and cold, unflinching temperament has caused her to become “shabby” and “silent.” Being too ashamed to meet with other women at the Ladies’ Aid and having no company at all, the dreary surrounding and unyielding spouse after decades of marriage would cause any woman to have chronic depression. This was especially common during the period when ideas such as women should be seen and not heard was prevalent in society. Murdering her own husband in exchange for what would seem like a better life actually puts Minnie Foster into a more complicated situation, bearing the sin of homicide, society’s scrutiny, her own fostered guilt and fear, and a possible life imprisonment if evidence finds her guilty. Again, the heroine is not justified through the murder of her husband. It is merely an eye for an eye since he has killed her voice and spirit decades ago, making her live an unfulfilled life in the past, and possibly so in the future.

Of the three readings, Celie probably has the cruelest life thrust upon her as she suffers the three layers of discrimination against gender, race, and status. Physical abuse has ruled
her life since the budding age of adolescence, and this treatment has also molded her thinking into one of inferiority and shame. Celie is ashamed of her smile because in all her life men say that she is ugly, so she hides her smile with her hand when she smiles. This habit, along with the habit of thinking that women are like children and ought to be beaten into obedience, makes her a victim of the oppression that she does not fully realize. However, with Shug Avery’s help, she is able to find self-respect and self-love. She triumphs over the men in her lives through the death of her abusive stepfather, and her bravery of leaving her husband for good. With the reward of inheriting her house and the reunion with her children, this happiness has been far removed from her for a long time, and she cannot again experience a happy childhood and relive her younger years. This ending is relatively optimistic compared to the other two stories, but having known that Celie could have such a better life makes the men who have ruined it unforgivable.

These feminist works portray all the sufferings that women have gone through in order to fight for their peace of mind and soul. But sometimes, as shown in *The Yellow Wallpaper* or *Trifles*, the cost is high, and the satisfaction temporary. It seems as though women may never entirely escape from men’s control. But whatever choice made by the protagonists, it is the courage and persistence that is truly admirable in these heroines.
Three Main Subgenres of Fiction

Charles Lin

Fiction, according to its length, content, and structure, can be divided into three subgenres: short stories, fairy tales, and novels. Short stories can always enlighten us as to the meaning of life, fairy tales evoke the memories of our childhood, and novels share with us many life lessons. Therefore, from fiction we gain insights into our minds, the phenomena of society, and the world of inspiration.

Denotatively, a short story is defined as a prose narrative which is too brief to be published as a single book. Usually it is a focused narrative in which one or two main characters are presented. For instance, Amy Tan’s *A Pair of Tickets* is a narrative which lays stress on the protagonist’s awareness of self-identity and cultural shock when she discovers her long-lost twin sisters in a foreign country. Kate Chopin’s *The Story of an Hour* is a tale depicting the main character who after her husband died realizes her hunger for freedom and new life, which were dominated by patriarchal order. Nathaniel Hawthorne’s
Young Goodman Brown depicts a man named Brown who loses faith in his wife named Faith when he discovers that his wife, regardless of his words, tricks him. From such an incident, he then knows that faith cannot exist without mutual trust.

A fairy tale refers to a short narrative folklore in which main characters would fight against supernatural beings such as witches, giants, or animals. For instance, Rapunzel, a well-known fairy tale, depicts an evil witch’s wicked deeds to a girl named Rapunzel and to a prince who deeply falls in love with the girl. The Little Riding Hood expresses a little girl’s interactions with a thirsty wolf, which is eager to swallow the girl. Cinderella portrays a poor girl’s struggle to bravely bear her misfortune by the assistance of a witch, and a prince’s search for his true love, Cinderella. All the three stories have a happy ending. No doubt, they remind us of our childhood.

Apart from the above two subgenres, a novel is an extended work of a fictional prose narrative which has more characters and varied scenes than a short story, and which focuses on the deeds or thoughts of the protagonist. For instance, Ernest Hemingway’s The Old Man and the Sea describes the interactions between an old man and the sea, from which the old man realizes a life lesson—the significance of persistence and the enjoyment of loneliness. In Tuesdays with Morrie, Mitch Albom vividly presents his memories of his professor’s life lessons, trying to teach readers the essence of love, family, and life. The Kite Runner by Khaled Hosseini pictures a child’s confession of his childhood to his best friend whom he betrayed. From his confession he eventually learns the real meaning of his life.

To sum up, reading different types of narratives can give us distinct feelings and meanings. After reading short stories, I am always enlightened as to my self-identity and the significance of freedom and faith. When I go through a fairy tale, I feel some nostalgia not only in my heart but also deep in my soul. A novel is just like a teacher because it teaches me the precious life lessons. For example, from the novels I have read, three life lessons are taught—how to enjoy loneliness, how to learn something from our daily life, and how to confess to what I did in the past. I become more mature after I have learned many valuable lessons in life from fiction. Therefore, I can say fiction enriches my life.