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Archetypes of the Artist in Washington Irving's "Rip Van Winkle" and Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

Washington Irving's "Rip Van Winkle" and Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* feature two portraits of the artist in transitional societies. Considered misfits, Rip and Unoka survive momentous historical changes thanks to their art. Rip serves as a bridge between colonial America and the age of independence. Unoka, reincarnated in Nwoye, responds to the vagaries of history and chooses to face the challenges posed by the imposition of colonial rule. Irving and Achebe both view the artist as a redeeming mediator capable of assuaging the mercenary character of their societies they live in.

More than a century separates Washington Irving from Chinua Achebe and literary historians hardly think of the two writers as being comparable. Irving's short story "Rip Van Winkle" was published in 1819. It is set in the revolutionary years during which America underwent a radical transformation and severed its political bonds from Great Britain. Rip's quarrelsome wife is often read as a metaphor for the British colonial administration that was defeated after the American War of Independence. Rip is made to sleep over the period of war, and awakens only after the war is over; his gun rusts over this time to suggest his pacifism. *Things Fall Apart* was published in 1958 and is set in Nigeria. The novel goes way back to capture the reverse transformation of a pre-colonial society into a colonial one. Like Rip, the ancestor Unoka is away from the main scene of action before the clash that ushers in the colonialists. Neither of the two characters is meant for situations in which violence may prevail. Unoka cannot bear the sight of blood; neither can Rip. Rip's awakening after twenty years of slumber can be compared to Unoka's death and reincarnation in his grandson, Nwoye. By accentuating their personalities as men of peace, both authors remove them from events of violence and introduce them in peacetime. Irving attributes to Rip the important roles of story teller and memory keeper: "he [...] was revered as one of the patriarchs of the village, and a chronicler of the old times before the war" (820).¹ Nwoye, Unoka's grandchild and spiritual heir, is christened Isaac and becomes a catechist in *No Longer at Ease*, a humble position that requires less physical strength than imagination and intuition.² The development given to their characters makes them stand out as figures of the artist. Rip is there to tell of the past, Unoka to prepare believers for the future.

My intention in this paper is to shed light on what I identify as archetypes of the artist in Irving's short story and in Achebe's novel. Both writers celebrate a certain vision of the artist and, in so doing, they also celebrate themselves. Both authors disguise their authorial intentions by what appears to be a surface indictment of their protagonists. Rip in "Rip Van Winkle" is clearly the protagonist and that need not be belabored. Al-

1. In "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," Irving's protagonist is a schoolteacher, story teller and locally acclaimed vocalist. His engagement with artistic heroes springs from his own artistic vocation; Irving was never a true diplomat. Writing was his true profession.

2. Achebe's trilogy runs from *Things fall Apart* through *No Longer at Ease* and finally *A Man of the People*. In *No Longer at Ease*, Nwoye is Isaac Okonkwo, a catechist who sires Obi Okonkwo, the protagonist. Obi inherits the artistic temperament when he chooses to read English rather than law.

though Unoka is not the protagonist in *Things Fall Apart*, he plays a central part which most critics are reluctant to recognize.³ My view is that Unoka's role is just as crucial as Okonkwo's although the former may initially appear less essential than the latter. Unoka's enduring qualities make him more remarkable than the character who achieves prominence by virtue of his pivotal role in the father-son-grandson triad. Okonkwo, however, is part of a constellation of relationships that rests upon Unoka and the qualities he has inherited from his ancestry. With Unoka, Achebe celebrates virtues that are characteristic of the artistic temperament, just as Irving does with Rip. True artists invariably live for spiritual rather than material aspirations and they are, as a result, more adapted to surviving the vagaries of history.

Critics frequently describe Unoka as a weakling, a good-for-nothing, as evinced by Eustace Palmer's somewhat judgemental view: "the society's culture embraces not just its customs and religious practices but also its art [...] And even the lazy Unoka, Okonkwo's father, had at least one point in his favour – his artistry on the flute, his devotion to his singing" (67). Although the description balances Unoka's flaws and his qualities, one may wonder to what extent the character may be simultaneously lazy and devoted to his art? Can Unoka be at once indolent and an accomplished musician? Palmer, like most scholars, judges Unoka with the yardstick of a society that is destined to "fall apart" because of its failings. Likewise, Charles R. Larson misses the manifest centrality of Unoka's portrait when he states: "in Ibo terms his life was a failure; during his life his only distinction was the accumulation of debts" (33). Larson's assessment mentions neither Unoka's passion for music, nor his capacity to have children that will take after him and flourish in future generations.

Rip, like Unoka, is often portrayed as passive and unable to direct the course of his life. Susan M. Catalano compares Irving's Rip Van Winkle and Hemingway's Francis Macomber, underscoring their evolution from emasculated husbands into autonomous individuals though, as she argues, Macomber's transformation is a short-lived one. She goes on to state that Rip "survives his wife to become the undisputed victor of the Van Winkles, so that his anti-heroism differs as something that happens to him as a result of fortunate circumstances, rather than within him as a result of directly confronting his fears" (114). She fails to realise Rip's innate potential as an artist whose lifetime is a preparation for his role as the repository of his community's culture and history. His idle and altruistic nature prepares him for the prime moment when he partakes of the ancestral drink and is metamorphosed.

The two narratives share strikingly similar concerns, as they both engage with transitions and endurance. Unoka is presented as Okonkwo's shadow, the figure he fights but cannot slough off.⁴ Unoka is portrayed in terms that make him inconsequential by the standards of his own society. He fails in almost everything his peers consider important in a man. He takes no title; he is a poor farmer. Worse, he is a notorious debtor. There is no doubt that his son tries to depart from him in every possible way. Yet Okonkwo is very similar to his father because the course of events will wipe out all his achieve-

3. Unoka has not elicited much critical attention even though his presence runs through Achebe's trilogy and even beyond. The characters of Nwoye, Udoche in *Arrow of God*, Obi Okonkwo in *No Longer at Ease*, Odili in *A Man of the People* are all artistic prototypes of Unoka.

4. Okonkwo is subjected throughout the narrative to a paranoid impulse to resemble his father. He finally succumbs to this when he is buried in even worse circumstances than Unoka.

ments and he will die in ignominy just like him. His demonstration of courage is a red herring that barely conceals the strength of his heredity. That Okonkwo should have a son in the very semblance of his father underscores what they have in common and the endurance of their lineage. At the end of the novel, he is buried in disgrace because he stands alone against the wind of change. Rip, like Unoka, is considered a failure; he is a very poor farmer unable to provide for his children who are malnourished and clad in tatters. Yet, despite the shortcomings defining the two characters, their authors strike an important note by giving them artistic traits that, though insignificant in their respective societies, empower them in the long term. They survive momentous historical transitions and will live to tell of the past. Through them, Irving and Achebe make a point about the necessity for men with an artistic temperament in their respective societies.

The short story and the novel can both be regarded as postcolonial texts. Rip is a renegade subject removed from the troubled years during which the American colonies fought for their independence. This suggests something about Rip's political persuasion. Rip is apolitical and so is Unoka. The political transition their respective countries went through is more favourable to them than the past circumstances in which they grew up. Irving and Achebe are concerned about the plight of the artist in societies undergoing profound historical transformations.⁵ Both view the artist as a mandatory agent of change. Both observe revolutionary periods through the eyes of a character who will ultimately survive the cultural and ideological antagonisms between coloniser and colonised. Their responses are analogous in reverse fashion: whereas Irving's America rises as victorious and independent, the traditional Igbo culture in Achebe's novel is encompassed in the British Empire. The artist figure remains, however, to tell the story of his people.

In Irving's case, the artist is quite apart from the colonising culture. The postcolonial status of the USA is rarely discussed on account of the special relationship between Great Britain and its former American colonies, but also because of the ascendancy American imperialism gained over the rest of the world in the twentieth century. American independence was nevertheless won through armed and ideological struggles. Irving presents the artist as an apolitical chronicler of the transition, even though he rejoices in the dawning of the new order. Rip's relationship to myth, history, the American landscape with its distinct flora and fauna, suggests that Irving sees in him the poet who will record and give names to the new world, recalling the Adamic impulse so frequently encountered in postcolonial literature (Ashcroft *et al.* 9). Irving's call for a fresh idiom was heeded by Emerson, Whitman and the Transcendentalists whose generation set about to coin a new language for the new nation.

Achebe welcomes the advent of colonialism, a view most will find contradictory to the critical *doxa* that considers his *oeuvre* a counter-discursive attack against colonial hegemony. I would be more nuanced as Achebe tolerated the positive and inevitably influential elements in the colonial enterprise.⁶ As he wisely pointed out, "The Igbo insist

5. Bryce Traister underlines this aspect when he writes, "Irving's famous status as bachelor, the man without his own family, mirrored his equally well known identity as expatriate author, a man without a country. At the same time, his chosen vocation as author rendered him a man without a profession" (112). When *Things Fall Apart* was first published, Achebe was also aware that his primary audience was not in Nigeria but in Europe, and that writing was yet to be recognized as a profession at home.

6. I have made this argument in "Achebe, Conrad and the Postcolonial Strain" which questions the alleged subversive nature of Achebe's writing. My view is that Achebe invites colonial powers to rid Africa of the acts of savagery his works graphically represent.

that any presence which is ignored, denigrated, denied acknowledgement and celebration, can become a focus of anxiety and disruption" (*Education* 110). Unoka's function in the novel is to celebrate the presence of the colonialist. In order to do so, Achebe endows his character with the artistic temperament and gifts that will make him fit to survive in the new era. Like Irving, Achebe is aware of the importance of the artist as the seer who can assuage the materialistic drives of society by awakening his contemporaries to altruistic and spiritual values. Unoka, on account of the ancestral virtues he embodies, bears the burden of the artist's responsibility to his community.

When reading the two works in parallel, the reader will be struck by the characters' resemblance. Irving describes Rip as a "simple good-natured fellow" and "a kind neighbour" (811). Unoka is portrayed as an equally generous and simple figure: when money came his way "he immediately bought gourds of palm wine, called around his neighbours and made merry" (4). Both of them are creative only when it comes to the supposedly idle things of life. Rip assists children in play, teaching "them to fly kites and shoot marbles, told long stories of ghosts, witches, and Indians" (812).⁷ Unoka's best moments occur during the harvesting seasons when music is much in demand: "He was very good on his flute, and his happiest moments were the two or three moons after the harvest when the musicians brought in their instruments" (4). Both characters decline any kind of labour that requires physical strain and leads to material profit. Yet Rip can bear any form of physical strain, as long as it serves a neighbour in need. Upon first scrutiny both characters seem to be misfits in their respective societies. Yet reading the short story and the novel in the light of another set of values may suggest the opposite. Indeed, Unoka and Rip are also worthy men. Unoka is a musician: "Sometimes another village would ask Unoka's band and their dancing *egwugwu* to come and stay with them and teach them their tunes" (4). He never stops playing the flute, teaching his tunes far and wide. Likewise, Rip's gathering with other men at the inn is far from useless: "it would have been worth any statesman's money to have heard the profound discussions that sometimes took place, when by chance an old newspaper fell into their hands, from some passing traveller" (913). By telling stories to children and partaking in the current affairs of the locality, Rip serves as an invaluable participant in the community's local life. Unoka stands out as an artist, contemptuous of materialistic preoccupations and true to his talent. He dies with his flute: "when they carried him away, he took with him his flute" (13). This is very suggestive insofar as Unoka is being carried to die in the evil forest probably because of a lack of knowledge about the cure of stomach diseases. Taking his flute along is a sign that the instrument he best mastered is neither recognised nor rewarded. It is also suggestive of the ignorance pervasive in his society.

Unoka and Rip are both attributed characteristics gendered as female in their respective cultures. Rip is henpecked while Unoka is considered a woman because he takes no title. This gender ascription is clearly seen in the role they and their progeny play. Art, the authors seem to suggest, does not abide by gender prescriptions. Alexander Eliot draws attention to this in his account of the legendary Chinese musician Lan

7. Irving's respect and admiration for Native Americans is obvious in *A Tour on the Prairies* in which he juxtaposes the adventurous frontiersman with the native simplicity of the Indian. "This youth, with his rifle, his blanket, and his horse, was ready at a moment's warning to rove the world; [...] We of society are slaves, not so much to others as to our selves; our superfluities are the chains that bind us, [...] and thwarting every impulse of our souls" (51). Irving defines Rip as the prototype of the natural man.

Ts'ai' ho: "the bisexual nature of the wild, birdlike, and distantly appealing creature reflects, perhaps, something ambiguous and harmonious at once in the very nature of art" (118). Eliot elaborates on the portrait of the artist reinforcing this correspondence between Unoka and Rip, their disregard for money and thirst for strong beverages. Rip drinks with the ancestors on Kaatskill Mountain lured to the site by his thirsty soul. Unoka gets into debt because of his craving for palm wine. Commenting further on the artistic nature of Lan Ts'ai' ho, Eliot states: "... she did not know the meaning of money. When listeners tossed coins upon the ground at her feet, she would stoop to toss the coins back again, thinking it was a game. She drank a lot of rice wine; that and the perfumes of the air seemed to be her only nourishment" (119). In their own way, both Rip and Unoka behave like vagabond artists showing absolute disregard for the accumulation of wealth. Unoka borrows money to spend on palm wine without thinking of repaying; money to him is transitory whereas art is everything. Rip and Unoka feature traits that are typical of artists. Both are selfless, showing a passion for things their respective societies consider valueless. Both characters have a thirst for potent drink; Rip's encounter with the human spirits on Kaatskill Mountain is sealed in their communal drinking. Hereafter he is metamorphosed into a folklorist endowed with a spiritual mission. Cirlot recalls that many different cultures have associated mountains with ideas of spiritual elevation: "The interior of the mountain has often been taken as the location of the land of the dead: the derivation of the Celtic and Irish fairy-hills, and of the legend, widespread in Asia and Europe, of a demiurge or hero asleep inside a mountain, one day to emerge and renew all things solar" (220). Unoka's artistry, we are led to understand, springs from his idle infatuation with palm wine. Both characters are closely associated with the wilderness; Rip spends two decades roaming the mountains, Unoka is carried away to die of exposure in the evil forest, with his flute as his sole companion. One can imagine the ailing man sitting with his back against a tree, blowing his last breath into the flute, filling the forest with sweet music that arrests the birds and animals in their flight. It is important to note that a Christian church will later be built in this same evil forest. The poetic hymns sung on these premises will prove just as irresistible as Unoka's flute. In their turn, they will attract his grandson Nwoye, Unoka's spirit and image: "it was the poetry of the new religion, something felt in the marrow. The hymn about brothers who sat in darkness and in fear seemed to answer a vague and persistent question that haunted his young soul" (106). Cirlot underlines the age-old connection between forests and the spirit world: "in contrast with the city, the house and cultivated land, which are all safe areas, the forest harbours all kinds of dangers and demons, enemies and diseases [...] this is why forests are among the first places in nature to be dedicated to the cult of the gods" (112). The moment when Nwoye visits the Christian church built among the trees where the spirit of his grandfather now resides coincides with Nwoye's initiation to art, as the grandson retraces the footsteps of his grandfather and embraces Christianity, yielding to the musical appeal of the hymns.⁸

An unexpected parallel can be drawn between Rip and Okonkwo, Unoka's unbecoming son. Rip's rusted gun is analogous to Okonkwo's failed gun. Okonkwo's gun can only kill inadvertently while Rip's is left to rust during a period of war. Unoka handles

8. Nwoye is at this point disowned by his father, Okonkwo, for joining the Christian church. The murder of Ikemefuna (his adopted brother) and other flaws in society draw him like an outcast to the missionaries. He is unconsciously seeking the path of his grandfather.

no gun – “Unoka was never happy when it came to wars. He was in fact a coward and could not bear the sight of blood” (5) – his sole weapon is the flute. The gun features in both narratives as a metaphor for fake courage and actual cowardice. Rip carries a gun that never kills; Okonkwo hits his target only by mistake, which leads to an act of manslaughter and his subsequent banishment. While Unoka does not touch a gun, Okonkwo does so in an attempt to prove his mettle. Yet the fact that he kills someone reduces the value of the gun as an emblem of courage. Okonkwo’s poor handling of the gun, the weapon the colonialists use to bring him to his knees, is suggestive of Achebe’s military emasculation of Africans. The gun is later seized by the white man. The machete the African masters and uses against his own kin cannot be wielded with success against the colonialists, who carry a more lethal arsenal.

Why do both writers choose artists as the characters who ultimately prevail, giving them the ability to procreate and outlive antagonists far more concerned with the material world? Rip is presented as weak-tempered, in direct opposition to his termagant wife and the wealthy citizens. Unoka is pitted against his son Okonkwo, another successful man. Yet the two characters survive change while Dame Van Winkle and Okonkwo are destroyed. Okonkwo commits suicide because his people surrendered to the imperialists. As for Dame Van Winkle, she succumbs to her seething temper and dies because of her own excessive nature: “she broke a blood vessel in a fit of passion at a New-England pedlar” (820). Although Unoka is left to die, we are encouraged to believe that he becomes reincarnated in his grandson, Nwoye. Rip’s son is a replica of his father much in the same way as Nwoye can be regarded as the replica of his grandfather: “Nwoye resembled his grandfather, Unoka, who was Okonkwo’s father” (110). This striking likeness is meant to suggest that Okonkwo cannot escape his lineage. Rip’s son is described as a “ditto of himself” with the same incapacity to attend to anything else but his own business. By giving these characters the ability to have children that take after them, the authors stress their eminence as enduring characters. Both authors seem to suggest that their respective societies are poised on the brink of change and must therefore plan the course of their future progress, as one set of values becomes obsolete and is succeeded by a new order. Their societies are undergoing a similar transition from agrarian to modern, experiencing the advent of a new era when muscular strength will not be enough to prevail and artistic vehemence will be much in need.

Unoka and Rip are given prophetic statures that prefigure the growing importance of art and the consolidation of the place of the artist in the future. Irving and Achebe are calling for the recognition of the role of the artist in the new circumstances. Bryce Traister recalls Irving’s concern about the precarious status of the writer in nineteenth-century America: “the self-deprecating tone of much of Irving’s prose emerges in part from a deeply felt self-loathing brought on by American culture’s dismissal of or hostility toward bachelordom and authorship alike” (128). Being himself a bachelor and a writer, Irving’s own circumstances may account for the sympathy he bestows on Rip as imperfect husband, widower and, finally, the redeemed folklorist of his community. Achebe’s authorial benevolence towards his character is evident in his portrayal of Unoka as an outsider, estranged from a traditional African culture incapable of granting him the artistic recognition he deserves. Achebe, as the son of a catechist, suffered hostilities

from traditionalists who viewed early converts as outcasts.⁹ Both writers, as a result, are calling for the recognition of art in their respective circles and indirectly creating spaces for their own productions as artists.

As figures of the artist, Rip and Unoka represent that minority who lives above material needs. They thrive towards the nobler ideals of life. Ralph Waldo Emerson in "The Poet" took up and made urgent Irving's call for the place and character of the poet in the young nation: "He stands among partial men for the complete man, and appraises us not of his wealth, but of the commonwealth" (985). Emerson disparages societies that judge the worth of men in terms of material success, disregarding spiritual and artistic accomplishment:

Criticism is infested with a cant of materialism, which assumes that manual skill and activity is the first merit of all men, and disparages such as say and do not, overlooking the fact, that some men, namely poets, are natural sayers, sent into the world to the end of expression, and confounds them with those whose province is action but who quit it to imitate the sayers. (986)

Concurring with Emerson, Lawrence Buell has documented the overwhelming need among leading nineteenth-century American writers of the period to question the mercantilist spirit that prevailed in the early decades of America's postcolonial independence. Rip and Unoka live for values that are not upheld by the majority but which, nonetheless, inform the very spiritual foundations of their societies.

To underscore the centrality of these characters, the authors place them on the threshold of historical change. Rip's society turns its back on the colonial past when the portrait of King George is replaced by that of General Washington. The Ibo society has to face the intrusion of external agents that are technically superior and equipped to upset traditional power structures. Both characters survive the dangerous transition between these two periods. After his wife's demise, Rip becomes free again – "he had got his neck out of the yoke of matrimony" (821) – much in the same way as America became free of colonial tyranny. As for Unoka's offspring, the new generation is free to live in a society where the artist finally has a place.

We may then conclude that the choice of these characters and their development in terms of characterisation and plot was the object of careful attention. Achebe suggests flexibility and adaptability to change help one face the vagaries of history. The meek will perhaps inherit the world while the mighty are destroyed. Irving's narrative emphasises the role of the poet as the collective consciousness of society. The values of a society, its past, present, and future, are incorporated in the poet. Rip's communion with the ancestors and his twenty-year slumber serve as an initiation rite preparing him for the role he will play later as the repository of societal values. His communion with the ancestors prepares him spiritually for the mission of folklorist. Rip and Unoka both go through a rite of passage: "every initiation," Mircea Eliade explains, "involves the symbolic death and resurrection of the neophyte [...], he acquires a new mode of being, which allows him to have relations with the supernatural world" (4). Unoka and his flute are exiled

9. In his essay "My Dad and Me," Achebe views his father's early conversion to Christianity as a welcome liberation from the savagery of tradition: "An orphan child born into adversity, heir to commotions, barbarities, rampant upheavals of a continent in disarray: was it at all surprising that he would welcome the explanation and remedy proffered by diviners and interpreters of the new word?" (37) This testimony lends weight to my hypothesis that, through the figures of Unoka and Nwoye, Achebe may embrace colonialism, notably the promise of order found in the Christian faith.

into the evil forest where the Christian church will soon be erected. His legacy will subsequently attract his grandson, bringing about the end of everything Okonkwo stood for. Rip wanders into the mountains where he is spiritually empowered by the drink that was proffered to him and that generations of henpecked husbands shall later envy him.¹⁰ Irving and Achebe are concerned about the destinies of their respective societies. Irving's defence of artistic rather than materialistic values was heeded by his followers, especially the Transcendentalists.¹¹ Achebe's call has not yet received the full attention it deserves, as evinced by the many public statements Achebe has later made and his scathing attacks on the political class in his country.¹²

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10. The story ends with the punch line: "[...] and it is a common wish of all henpecked husbands in the neighborhood, when life hangs heavy on their hands, that they might have a quieting draught out of Rip Van Winkle's flagon" (820).

11. Lawrence Buell locates the emergence of a resistance against nineteenth-century American materialism in the works of H. D. Thoreau.

12. "What is Nigeria to Me?" is just one example of Achebe's vitriolic attacks on the Nigerian political class: "My feeling towards Nigeria was one of profound disappointment. [...] The final consequence of this failure of the state to fulfill its obligation to its citizens was the secession of Eastern Nigeria as the Republic of Biafra" (*Education* 44).