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# Sleepy Hollow

## **Abstract**

This is a review of *Sleepy Hollow* (1999).

As a contemporary rewrite of Washington Irving's early 19th century story (itself a rewrite of a German fairy tale), *Sleepy Hollow* once again brings up the now centuries old debate between religion and science. As a 1999 film set in 1799 New England, the contemporary film shares a distrust of science with Irving's earlier Romantic story, showing the violent extremes of what happens when spirit and matter are split, when heads come off bodies: a real Cartesian nightmare. And it gives a nod to a similar Romantic story, *Frankenstein*, by including a borrowed scene from Whale's 1931 film version of Shelley's story. But *Sleepy Hollow* also shows the extremes of religion. The passion of/for religion can be hypocritical, torturing and killing. Both religion and science require faith, as director Tim Burton's version of the story would have it.

The story is a simple murder story, with Ichabod Crane (Johnny Depp) called in from the city to the rural village of Sleepy Hollow to solve the mystery of bodies found with their heads lopped off. The myth is that a headless horseman is the killer and keeper of heads. Crane has lost his faith at an early age (for reasons that won't be told here lest anyone still wishes to see the film) and he instead turned to science. Yet, his "science" is just as gruesome as the fanatical religion of his father, causing him to invent sinister-looking instruments designed to extract the truth; a truth that seems always to be held within the bodies of the dead. Crane is

the man-of-science, at first simply observing, but then poking, prodding, dissecting, getting to the heart of the matter.

One of the key shifts from the historical frame of Irving's earlier narrative to the contemporary setting of the film's production is the emphasis on visual perception. *Sleepy Hollow* shows the relativity of perception, and how the interpretive element of perception impacts matters of truth (Nietzsche is one key figure who stands between the original story and the current film). The half-blind Notary Hardenbrook exclaims at the beginning, "seeing is believing," and Crane himself distrusts the "magic" behind the supposed headless horseman until he sees it for himself and then goes into a brief crisis of faith (in science). When he recovers he takes a somewhat different tact in his solving of the crime. Before "seeing" the non-rational actions of the undead Horseman, Crane is depicted utilizing various optical lenses—absurd contraptions that seem to be borrowed from Terry Gilliam's films. After this crisis Crane no longer utilizes his instruments, though he does keep his head about him, reasoning through the crimes, relying on a sort of "inner vision."

Another important development in the interim between Irving's story and the current film is, of course, psychoanalysis and its artistic prodigy, surrealism. Burton's films are constantly shifting between dream life and lived life—although with his films' consistent dark exposures, it is difficult to tell the difference—and

the exquisite scenes here seem like dreamscapes, often borrowing from the ethereal, Romantic, Hudson River School paintings of Cole and Bierstadt. The internal, dark shades that pervade the first *Batman* films, or the *Nightmare Before Christmas*, are present here as various unconscious connections are made visible—a traditional mode of surrealism.

One of these unconscious connections is the repeated visual reference to both a womb and a tomb at the base of a tree. This point is the "meeting of two worlds," as Crane exclaims, and indeed this spot is bound to a slew of mythical elements: a place of life and death, and a place of good and evil. Within the world of the sur-real, distinctions between life and death, good and evil, birth and death dissolve, and the monstrous headless horseman may actually be seen as a symbol of justice, purging the community of its deadly sins of greed, lust, envy, etc. (Screenwriter Andrew Kevin Walker also wrote the screenplay for *Seven* and, apart from a similar emphasis on decapitations, *Sleepy Hollow* also briefly hints at the seven deadly sins.)

The film is gory (continually visualizing lopped heads) and not for the faint-hearted, but it typically bears a good deal of irony in its gore. Furthermore, it is highly entertaining even while it does not lay everything out in an easy-to-follow story, and even the climax moves so quickly that it is easy to leave the theater and

not know exactly what happened. Yet, it also suggests, in good surrealist fashion, that "knowing" is not everything, that "seeing" and "believing" are good options.