

Assignment 3: Ritual Analysis

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An analysis of St. Patrick's Day through participation in
the annual 'Shamrock' event

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St. Patrick's Day is celebrated each year on March 17th. Originally a religious holiday, the purpose of St. Patrick's Day was to honour Saint Patrick, one of the Patron saints of Ireland. St. Patrick is believed to have played a major part in the bringing of Christianity to Ireland, sharing his religious beliefs with all. March 17th is the date of his death.

St. Patrick was actually not Irish, but Scottish. After being kidnapped by raiders and made a slave, he eventually escaped and made his way to England. After becoming a priest, St. Patrick apparently followed a dream that he was to go to Ireland and become a missionary. Though not the first to spread notions of Christianity, St. Patrick is believed to have been the most influential and successful. He is also attributed with driving snakes from Ireland. However, this is believed to be a myth as no snakes have ever lived in Ireland. It is more likely that the snakes were representative of paganism, as symbols related to snakes were often used in pagan rituals in early Ireland and paganism was a frequent practice prior to St. Patrick's influence.

Although the origins of St. Patrick's day are Irish, its annual celebration has spread to many different countries. St. Patrick's Day was celebrated for the first time in Canada in Quebec City, 1765. However, St. Patrick's Day in several nations, including Canada, has become more of a celebration of Irish culture in general, with many participants unaware of its original purpose.

Traditionally, participants of this ritual would attend church, wear green (which is still a popular tradition wherever it's celebrated), and enjoy a temporary break from the restrictions on food and liquor that many abided by during the religious practice of Lent.

This paper will discuss the celebration of St. Patrick's Day at a Thunder Bay location and analyze how the celebration of this holiday at the selected destination is a ritual.

Participant observation took place at the annual 'Shamrock'cer', held at the Coliseum. Doors opened at 4PM and didn't close until 1 AM. Observation took place between 9-11 PM.

PART 1: Ethnography

Before describing my observations, I'd like to explain my reasoning for selecting 'The Shamrock'cer' as the site for my ritual analysis. I wanted to observe St. Patrick's Day in Thunder Bay, as my family and I have always celebrated St. Patrick's Day 'traditionally'. Both my parents were born in Limerick, Ireland and, as such, were raised with Irish values. On St.

Patrick's Day, my family didn't go to church as their families did, but we were expected to each say a lengthy prayer at dinner. Dinner was comprised of a potato, corned beef, and cabbage casserole served with thick slices of soda bread. We were able to each have a glass of wine, once we turned twelve, and were blessed with alcohol by my father prior to eating. My parents, raised in the Catholic tradition, enforced Lent until we were old enough to decide for ourselves (around 16). St. Patrick's Day was viewed as a relaxation day, in which rest from work and Lent could be enjoyed and we could eat as much as we wanted. Many of my family members would also join us; I recall up to 34 people one St. Patrick's Day crammed into my tiny little house.

In contrast, I have come to the realization that St. Patrick's Day in Canada is a day of green cupcakes and cheery leprechauns to young children and a day for drinking and going crazy for, adults who choose to partake in this behaviour. I've never actually participated in a 'traditional Canadian' celebration of St. Patrick's Day, so my participation in the Shamrock was quite the experience.

I chose my location for participant observation after hearing about the event from a friend. She told me of mechanical bulls, almost non-existent green skirts, the 'Molson Girls', and dyed alcoholic beverages of all shapes and sizes. I was so intrigued by these different practices, I felt this was an event I could truly take interest in and definitely feel an outsider upon my arrival.

After entering the Coliseum, admission was purchased prior to going into the club at a desk in the front. There was a big sign on the desk that read 'If you're wearing green, enter to win St. Patrick's Day Rickard's Red Prizes!' Those who paid their five dollars were stamped on the hand with a green shamrock. I noticed individuals who left the club to smoke or get a breath of fresh air showed the stamp to the security guard and were allowed in immediately.

The first observation I made as I walked into the club, was how many people and how much green was crammed into one room. Green was everywhere; most clothes worn by the participants and employees were green (even the security guards wore green with 'Security' written in marker across the front and back of their green shirt), many of the drinks were green, whether it be beer, cocktails, or what looked like mudshakes or milkshakes, and green lights were used to illuminate the band towards the front of the area. The band was composed of four members, two held bagpipes and one held a fiddle, while the fourth played the drums. They didn't play throughout the event, but twice when I was participating. Between their playing, a mix of pop, rock, and a few 'Irish-themed songs' would play. I recognized songs by a few fairly modern Irish bands like the Dropkick Murphy's and Flogging Molly. Most of the individuals were dancing or talking on the dance floor and would cheer when a song they liked came on.

Shamrocks, like the colour green, were everywhere. They decorated the ceiling, they were on the walls and the bar, they were attached to many pieces of clothing attire, including big floppy hats and little green skirts, and they were painted or tattooed on many a body. One individual wore plastic shamrocks over her breasts and wore green heels, a green skirt made of tinsel strands, and was covered from head to toe with green sparkles.

Concerning the many big green floppy hats in the room, I spotted at least twenty on different individuals. They all seemed to look the same, which made me wonder if someone may have been selling the hats at the event before I arrived. There were also a lot of the same t-shirts, which read 'Kiss Me I'm Irish'. Others read 'Luck of the Irish', 'Ireland Forever!', 'Gaelic Gal', and, worn by a tall guy with a big grin, 'I'll put some Irish in ya!'

All this green attire made a small number of girls wearing red bikinis stand out. They stood by the DJ up on a kind of stage and signed shirts, cups, and, in one case, a guy's back. 'Molson' was written in white letters on the back of their bikini bottom and the DJ announced them at least three times as the 'Molson Girls'. Two security guards stood with them at all times and, when one guy who slurred and stumbled tried to touch one girl's foot, they were escorted out of the room.

Though the Molson girls were easily spotted, possibly the most obvious event ongoing in the room was the big, green mechanical bull off to the left side upon entry. The bull was decorated with shamrocks and had a shamrock-shaped seat. After paying three dollars, an individual would sit on it while it jerked about. Mats were placed around the bull, I'm assuming for in case the participant was thrown off. Three security guards stood by this area all the time; I noticed some switched posts between the front door, the back of the room with the band, and the bull. Keeping my eye on the bull, I saw several young women go on, most of whom had their 3\$ fee paid by one or more guys. I saw the girl with shamrocks on her breasts teetering a bit before she got on the bull. Security told her to grip the 'saddle' and she didn't or couldn't comply. Security then asked her to get off the bull but she continued to sit and giggle on the contraption. Eventually, the guy who had paid her 3\$ went over and helped her get off. He supported her while she stumbled, still giggling. I saw them leave the room. They didn't return.

I sat at a table for a bit and listened to conversations while having a green beer with a friend I brought along. I overheard an interesting conversation between a girl and a guy in the centre of the room, each with a green beer in hand. The boy was short, well-built, with dark skin, black hair, and black eyes while the girl was tall, blond, with green eyes, and a very short green shiny skirt. It seemed as though they knew each other well as they addressed each other by name. At first smiling and chatting with each other, the boy put his hand on the girl's hip and said something about being Irish. The girl pulled away, rolled her eyes, and laughed. The boy did not smile and asserted in a raised voice that he was half Irish. The girl put a hand on her hip, looked at him with scrunched down eyebrows and mouth open and curled before yelling 'Both your parents are from India!' The boy looked confused and replied that his grandmother gave birth to his father in Ireland. The girl rolled her eyes and exclaimed, slurring a bit, 'You're such a liar! I'm Irish-look at me!' She holds out her blonde hair and points to her green eyes. 'I have red hairs! That's what Irish looks like ***! Gooooood!' She then walked away in her heels to the bar and talked to a girl who she seemed to know. The other girl's eyes widened and she giggled,

looking back at the boy. The boy walked quickly over to them and began arguing in a raised voice. The two girls laughed some more while the boy shrugged and muttered something.

I also saw a few girls at the bar who had three green beers each on the table in front of them. A group of four boys chanted, 'Chug! Chug! Chug! Chug! Chug! Chug!' while the girls drank the beers. After one of the girls finished first, she raised her hands amidst cheering and clapping. The other girl finished the last beer slowly before swearing loudly at the girl, slurring while she commented on the girl's promiscuous behaviour. The girls started to bicker and then one of the girls shoved the other. They began pushing each other and one girl even slapped the other, while the same boys who encouraged them to drink chanted 'Fight! Fight! Fight! Fight! Fight!' A security guard came over and told the girls to stop fighting or they'd be kicked out. One of the boys said, 'Oh come on officer, it's St. Patty's Day, lighten up and have some beer!' The security guard yelled at the boy and threatened to kick him out. The boy was silent and the guard left.

While at the bar, I had a chat with one of the bartenders, a middle-aged man with a dark beard and hair. I asked him if this was the first 'Shamrock' and he responded that it was the second, with the first attracting a lot less people as few knew about it. There were also a lot of younger kids with more older individuals coming out to the last. The Molson girls, the bull, the Rickard's prizes, and the DJ were all apparently new additions. The live band, however, had come out last time. He said he hoped they'd have them again next year but that one individual had tried to throw a cup of beer at them. He missed, apparently by a lot since he was drunk, but this action had offended the band.

At around 10:30 PM, a group of over twenty people entered the Coliseum. Most of them were fairly young, all wore green clothing, without exception, and many started yelling 'Fogra!!!!' when they entered the room. I asked the same bartender if he knew anything about this new group and he responded that they were likely from the party bus that was going around from bar to bar for the occasion of St. Patrick's Day. I asked him if he knew what 'Fogra!' meant. He shrugged his shoulders and grinned. 'They're probably too hammered to know what comes out of their mouths,' he said.

I researched the word later on, and discovered 'Fogra' was a word for the action of toasting in Ireland.

Part 2: Ethnographic Analysis

To analyze this ritual, I believe the definition requires some clarity. Loosely defined in the text, a ritual is said to be a 'collection of symbols'. Later on, the definition is extended to 'the symbolic expression of the sentiments which are attached to a given situation', in which situation can refer to a person, place, time, occasion, conception, or thing.

To put 'appropriate sentiments' into context, the text goes on to include a metaphor by Honigmann, in which he explains that a ritual is form and can be compared to a vessel holding wine. The vessel, representing form and control, holds wine, representing a collection of appropriate sentiments. If a ritual is functional to its culture and embraced by that culture's people, the vessel will be full, but not overflowing, with good wine. This can be compared to a 'proper' ritual, with a perfect balance of form and sentiments. A ritual that is no longer functional to a culture can be compared to a dry and empty vessel (all form and no sentiments), while an overflowing vessel represents uncontrolled and inappropriate sentiments (all sentiments, little or no form). Neither of these maintains the balance that a true ritual requires.

A successful ritual exhibits the notion of a well-formed vessel full of good wine, in that behaviour and practices that are exhibited are somewhat controlled and 'orderly'. With this in mind, the event of St. Patrick's Day, filled with several routine symbols, behaviours, and practices that can be observed on a yearly basis, is indeed a ritual. If these symbols, behaviours, and practices were non-functional (not a ritual) to the culture of participants, they wouldn't be repeated every year. And though of course several participants may be silly and intoxicated on this day, the sentiments aren't so uncontrolled and inappropriate that the 'vessel overflows'. Indeed, though St. Patrick's Day is representative to many as day for drinking, partying, and celebration of the 'wild Irish spirit', annual repetition of the same symbols and the same behaviours ironically reveals this event to be quite orderly and controlled.

Examples of control I saw through my participant observation were the number of security guards in the room. A few by the door, three by the mechanical bull, guards for the 'Molson girls' and several scattered throughout the Coliseum; they were present to ensure the safety of the entertainers and the participants while allowing for the crowd to have their 'wild' fun. This could be observed when the two girls started to get physically aggressive and a security guard stepped in, threatening to throw them out. Another example, though not observed directly but heard by the bartender, was that a guy had tried to touch one of the Molson girls and was promptly thrown out by a guard. Also, the girl on the mechanical bull, who seemed unable to safely ride as she couldn't grip the saddle, was asked off by a guard.

This scene appeared to give the illusion of a wild, carefree, rebellious environment, with mechanical bulls, clothing on many girls that revealed much of their bodies, and chugging competitions. However, when a situation threatened the security of those in the Coliseum, the cause of the inappropriate and potentially dangerous action, was talked with or removed immediately.

The fact that this kind of celebration, with the alcohol, the display of green, and images that are representative of Ireland is celebrated annually with many participants (the availability of a party

bus, transferring the St. Patrick's Day participants from bar to bar, is an example of its popularity) yet simultaneously has certain controls and limits to the behaviours participants can exhibit, does in itself provide evidence for the argument that St. Patrick's Day is a ritual. However, to further investigate the Shamrock's legitimacy as a true ritual, the symbols associated with this event will be separately analyzed. As well, the types of rituals that encompass St. Patrick's Day and the different functions it serves will later on be discussed.

To start off with, Irish music, played by the bagpipe band and by the d-jay, is symbolic of St. Patrick's Day and Irish culture overall. Long ago, the Celts would pass down their history with songs and stories. Music was utilized for remembering events of historical value and bringing the community together, as well as for entertainment purposes. When the Irish were conquered by the English, music was heavily embraced for the same purposes-to bring together the community to rebel against oppression and to remember important historical events for enhancement of their patriotism. Similarly today, Irish music brings together members of the community and is representative of an important piece of Irish culture.

The colour green and the presence of alcohol are also representative of Irish culture, or at least how outsiders portray the nation. St. Patrick was actually associated with the colour blue, not green. However, Ireland is seemed to be better represented overall by the colour green, likely as Ireland is known for its lush, green land. As well, though St. Patrick's Day is more treated as a day of feasting and some drinking by many in Ireland, the somewhat Americanized version of a 'drink all you can day', is likely representative of the fact that Ireland is also associated with alcohol, as pubs and bars in the nation are frequently visited and the location of many social activities.

Shamrocks, which adorned the walls, many items of clothing, and were tattooed on many a participant, were initially used by St. Patrick to explain the Holy Trinity, using each leaf to represent the Father, the Son, or the Holy Spirit. The shamrock also came to represent the return of spring and, later, Irish nationalism after the English conquered the nation and subjected the inhabitants to major cultural oppression. Again, the Irish likely clung onto this symbol as a major part of their heritage to enhance patriotism and, outside of Irish borders, the shamrock has again become a symbol of Irish culture overall.

Finally, the floppy hats seemed to bear resemblance to the kind of head attire that many leprechauns seem to sport in illustrations. Leprechauns are also a frequent symbol used to represent St. Patrick's Day and Ireland overall. Interestingly enough, leprechauns were minor characters in Celtic mythology, serving as mere 'shoe repairmen' for the more important fairies. In contrast to the smiling, plump little dancing men represented in several modern illustrations, leprechauns were rather grumpy characters in Irish mythology, who would go to great means to

protect their beloved treasure. The cheery character of today can be attributed to Walt Disney's 'Darby O'Gill & the Little People' in 1959, which first demonstrated the Americanized version of leprechaun that is so accepted today in North America. Leprechauns have really nothing to do with St. Patrick, but, yet again, have come to represent Irish culture overall.

The last symbol is the general display of merriment portrayed by the participants in the Shamrock. St. Patrick's Day is an occasion in which those celebrating can relax, drink, and enjoy themselves. Admittedly, the Americanized version of a 'drink all you can day' differs from the traditional feasting and some drinking, , the sentiments of these two different methods of celebration are still similar; a chance to enjoy a break from the daily norms and certain responsibilities. The Irish looked upon St. Patrick's day as a rest from their Lent restrictions while those in North America have come to look upon it as an excuse to enjoy themselves, socialize, and have some fun with green beer in hand.

These were some of the major symbols used to represent St. Patrick's Day at the Shamrock. These symbols can be observed at several other celebrations and festivities in the name of this day throughout North America. Overall, St. Patrick's Day has become a celebration of all things Irish and, even with the transformation of the way it's celebrated, still awakens a sense of national pride in event the furthest of descendents and engages the community overall in a themed day of good fun.

Concerning the type of ritual I witnessed being practiced at the Shamrock, the event seemed undoubtedly a Rite of Intensification by its function of value reiteration. The Shamrock welcomed all who were interested in celebrating this Irish holiday, and brought many people from the community together in the celebration of a common cause. In this sense, it worked to intensify social bonds and create an overall feeling of community amongst the participants.

In addition, referring to the statement 'Everyone's a little Irish on St. Patrick's Day', those who were Irish were proud of their heritage and would boast of it. Referring back to the boy who claimed to be half Irish as his grandmother had his father in Ireland, and the fact that the girl's mockery of this statement caused him to raise his voice and argue back, suggests that it was important to him that his claim to Irish heritage was accepted. As well, the girl's insistence that *she* was Irish and she looked Irish seemed important to her and the boy's insistence that he was Irish seemed to annoy and frustrate her.

In my two years in Thunder Bay, I have never witnessed such loyalty to the Irish nation, even when speaking to Irish immigrants about their background on any average day. This ritual definitely serves the function of 'enhancement of patriotism' as the celebration of the event seems to be driven by the pride of those who have Irish ancestry, despite how far back, and

interest of others in this vibrant culture. Indeed, some may even untruthfully claim to be Irish on St. Patrick's just to feel a great part in the festivities.

St. Patrick's Day is also a Rite of Reversal as rules and expectations usually enforced are lifted or bent. As stated in the text, there are certain 'rules for breaking rules'. Similarly to my experience on Halloween during my first year in residence, I discovered that girls can dress in very little clothing and get away with it. By this, I mean it seemed to be more acceptable for a girl to wear nothing but shamrocks on her breasts on this day in contrast to a different celebration in the Coliseum like the Lakehead exhibition, which I attended and witnessed quite a drastic change of attire. As well, the floppy hats worn by guys and gals would likely have been ridiculed in another setting. In this ritual, however, leprechaun-like dress seemed to be accepted by the other participants.

The amount of drinking accepted was also a unique aspect of this ritual. I witnessed quite a few individuals be thrown out of the event for stumbling, pulling pranks, or, in one case, continuing to lie down on the ground even when a security guard demanded they stand up. I can relate St. Patrick's Day to a person on a diet who is given one day to partake in gluttony. Many of the participants were young and may have been students, who probably couldn't afford the time or money to participate in a wild and crazy night of drinking every night. St. Patrick's day provided an excuse to break the rules that are indirectly enforced on them by deadlines, obligations, and expectations from certain social relations.

As well, the theme of Irish culture in the room, with green beverages and clothing, shamrocks, etc., certainly differed from the Thunder Bay status quo, in which celebrations of Irish culture rarely, to my knowledge, take place. St. Patrick's Day provides an opportunity to experience this 'culture' whether you're Irish or not, and many choose not to miss out on the fun.

In the text, Alice Reichs states, 'Rituals create connections with larger communities of belief'. As I observed a room packed full of dancing, green-wearing, drinking, bull-riding, Molson-girl ogling individuals, I realized that this Shamrock celebration wasn't necessarily accurately portraying Irish culture, but what the participants wanted to believe. The Shamrock brought together a large chunk of the Thunder Bay community to experience an undoubtedly Americanized version, but a fun collection of themed activities that allowed them to socialize, take a break, and have some fun. Perhaps it doesn't honour St. Patrick, but the transformation of this religious holiday to a purely festive occasion for many is a likely reason for its survival in North America.

Sources

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