SHAMROCKS, STEREOTYPES AND SOCIAL NETWORKING

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Introduction

Throughout this book, the theme of narrating Ireland is taken up in a multitude of ways, ranging across the mainstays of Irish studies such as poetry and drama, through to the more contemporary media formats of film and television. This chapter takes the lead from narratives produced on paper, onstage or onscreen to those we now find online. Within all of these varied narrative forms Ireland is often, not only the source, but also the subject. Indeed, both online and offline acts of narrating Ireland are regularly characterised as expressions of 'Irish identity'. Rather than necessarily expanding our understanding of Irish literature and culture, the presumed link between the place and the person, might be seen to constrain or limit. National identity is a highly complex psycho-philosophical notion, all too often reduced to the shorthand of symbolic objects; coins and colours, passports and flags. Early-twentieth-century Irish nationalism thrived on this model of differentiation, making strenuous efforts "to distinguish Ireland from Britain through language, literature, drama and other expressive culture" (Brady 28). While these complex modes of expression, in particular literature and drama, form the basis of much Irish Studies research, both material culture and digital ephemera can prove equally revealing. The discussion here will consider these ideas through 'identity icons', as they have evolved in online forms and the process which turns symbol to stereotype.

The link between computer technologies and economic, cultural and social change in Ireland is now well established, from the first advertising campaigns of the Industrial Development Authority, that boasted of an "electronic not an industrial revolution", through to the economic boom of the Celtic Tiger and beyond. As "the old rural national image" faded, Ireland sought "to represent itself as a thriving, energetic, cosmopolitan place, a vibrant multicultural hub of postindustrial, information age entrepreneurial activity" (Cleary and Connolly 1). The adoption of information technology in domestic as well as institutional settings led to what Gerry Smyth describes as "a revolution in home-computing" in Ireland (124). The uptake of such technology for the purposes of leisure as well as increased productivity was supported by government initiatives and so widely welcomed by the population that "Few countries" could be said to have "embraced the IT-sponsored information revolution with as much alacrity as Ireland" (Smyth 126). Although this enthusiasm might be pragmatically linked to the large IT companies who set up their European bases in Ireland such as Dell™ and Apple™, generalisations detract from the impact on individuals who adopted web technologies as integral to daily life. More than that, attributing Ireland's embrace of web culture to business or political objectives fails to take account of the ongoing cultural impact which will outlast the most recent recession and the probable with-

drawal of the large corporations that typically accompanies financial crisis. Online technologies alter individuals as well as economies and cultures.

Indeed, this chapter is not about the increased uptake of web technology in Ireland; rather, it is about the narratives formed in response to Irish engagement with online cultures. Technology leaves footprints in languages and societies; this methodology helps us to keep track of where they lead. Web technology, it will be argued, is able to generate both individual and collective narrative forms, since computers are understood here as things that do things "to us", not just for us (Turkle 26). The chapter considers the presence of stereotypical symbols of Irishness online, why they remain prevalent and what we might learn from them. Since stereotypes grow out of reductive and often harmful characterisations of people, their reproduction online is of considerable interest to those who have noted the "urgent need to theorise online identity" (Boon and Sinclair 99). Technology, now and always, has a socio-cultural as well as a practical function. While web technologies have provided new genres of narrative in the form of blogs, social networks, live feeds and virtual worlds, the core narrative function persists from other written forms. As Kearney argues:

> Every human existence is a life in search of a narrative. This is not simply because it strives to discover a pattern to cope with the experience of chaos and confusion. It is also because each human life is always already an implicit story. (129)

Those who use social networks and other narrative technologies do so with the unspoken understanding that they have a "story" to tell. In the Irish context considered here, pre-existing patterns of explanation, in particular the yoking of the personal to the national are often employed in intriguing ways. The online narratives observed here frequently employ clichéd images of Irishness as well as words in order to produce a narrative "pattern" which links and repeats. In online narratives, as will be shown, stereotypical symbols in the form of harps, shamrocks, leprechauns and the colour green hyperlink images to ideas.

Part 1: Narrative Images

The study of images and their symbolic meaning offers us several insights into the way a static image can convey both an instant instruction (such as a road traffic sign) or a many-layered idea (such as a religious painting). In the computer age, the term 'icon' has taken on yet further meaning, linking an onscreen image with a function or programme. The image or 'icon' of an envelope, for instance, is widely used to indicate email; the icon draws on its predecessor in correspondence, the letter, while also indicating the name of the new format, electronic *mail*. The icon of the envelope, in other words, stands in for other words. In the early-twenty-first century where web users are more accurately described as web authors, the images produced, edited and shared with known and unknown recipients may be said to take on a similarly communicative function. Unlike email which retains an essentially epistolary form, communication via an image invites, even demands, aesthetic interpretation from the

unseen interlocutor. The combination of images and words to convey a narrative of identity, therefore, requires both linguistic and visual decoding.

Such a combination of language and image is far from the preserve of the computer age. In his postcards of Ireland, capturing the limits of Irish modernity and tradition, John Hinde (1916-1997) emphasised the visual tradition of property and place when narrating Ireland to an international audience. In their hyper-real colours and highly-staged tableaux, the postcards literally sent messages and images of Ireland around the world at a time when the internet was the stuff of science fiction. Now, the sustained impact of these images can be seen in the work of artist Sean Hillen's *Irelantis* project, created between 1994-1997 and described by Claire Connolly as meshing "an eclectic range of current issues (religion, environmentalism, futurology, space travel)" (4). While Hillen's radical montages create something entirely new from Hinde's original postcards, the possibility of viewing both image collections, simultaneously, online, destabilises their relationship. It is equally possible, for example, to view the original images as pared down versions, or fragments, of the *Irelantis* interpretations. Both the original and hybrid formats of these images of Ireland then have different potential meanings when 'read' in isolation or combination.

The postcard, whether in its original or hybrid form, invites the reader to engage with the idea of Ireland, not the place itself. Tourist imagery relies upon symbols and icons to stand in for real people and places; postcards capture the hyper-real, the unblemished shoreline, the flawless hillside. In doing so they stray into the realm of virtual reality, expressing a parallel ideal which belies experience, as Wulff puts it:

> Everyone is surely not all that hospitable, and there are also prejudices, criminality and economic problems in Ireland. There are cities with stressful settings, air pollution and not very attractive concrete suburbs. (538)

While postcard images are understood to distort the attractiveness of the holiday location (just as the postcard text invariably distorts the success of the holiday), online images are unfixed and unsettlingly plural. The online galleries of Hinde and Hillen's respective images present the opportunity for limitless further editing and transformation by web users around the world. These, already self-conscious, representations of Ireland may then continue to evolve, contributing further to the visual narrative of Ireland via the stereotypes they both confirm and reject.

Understanding the symbolic as well as any literal meaning of an image is, in the most basic sense, a matter of reading it. In online narrative forms an image may be included to be illustrative, decorative or indeed ironically irrelevant. An online image may have been generated and uploaded by website authors/contributors or linked or copied from another location, necessitating not only the need to interpret the meaning of an image, but where relevant, its provenance. Importantly, for all of the potential for originality provided by photographic and sketching technologies, online images frequently revert to the types of stereotypical images Hillen queried in the 1990s.

Part 2: Stereotyping

John Hinde's postcards of Ireland, featuring thatched Galway cottages, the round tower at Glendalough or red-headed children leading their turf-laden donkey across the bog, feed off of the stereotypes of Irish hospitality, tradition and rural virtue. Created to be dispersed, the postcards perpetuate the currency of the stereotypical images while at the same time rendering them unreal in their constant repetition. As Pickering explains:

> Stereotyping imparts a sense of fixedness to the homogenised images it disseminates. It attempts to establish an attributed characteristic as natural and given in ways inseparable from the relations of power and domination through which it operates. (5)

Certainly in these postcard images, poverty and cultural isolation are erased by idealised tradition. The smiling (and very thin) red-headed children, we are led to believe, collect turf with a donkey because they enjoy it, not because they are forced to by necessity, or more probably, by the photographer. By presenting an "attributed characteristic as natural" a stereotype is given the misleading appearance of having been at some point based on truth. A core function of the postcards, for instance, is as a tool of the tourist industry, ensuring the characterisation of Ireland as a welcoming and hospitable location. These sympathetic stereotypes, propounded by the Irish tourist industry, focus on "people, place and pace" (O'Leary and Deegan 213), somewhat implying the relative unfriendliness of other locations. The same ideas form the basis of the interactive website and Twitter stream from "Discover Ireland", from which beautiful images of idyllic locations are sent daily to smart phones around the world, unsurprisingly excluding any unattractive "concrete suburbs" (Wulff 538). The re-use of stereotypical images like these in online formats is important in a basic sense because of the potential to reach a larger and more diverse audience. These same images which were once used as symbolic weapons in regional or historical disputes can even be recast and repurposed in the age of the internet.

The visual stereotyping of the Irish people is, of course, long-established, with the English magazine *Punch* (1841-2002) a renowned proponent (see John Tensile's "Two Forces", available at www.punch.co.uk, for example). The impact of visual stereotypes can be seen clearly in the way that *Punch* readers learnt to interpret the caricatures so that "Images representing Irishness became tied to physiognomic messages offering character information that became increasingly legible to both artists and their viewers" (Pearl 183). The recurrent personification of Ireland as a simultaneously threatening and ineffectual figure with simian features has been the subject of much critical analysis. Indeed, even in more recent times, the fact that the Irish were "stereotyped as stupid, feckless and idle" (Foster 171) is so well-ingrained in the popular imagination that the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* continues to use the example of "a drunken Irishman" to illustrate the very word "stereotype" and the associated concept of a "stock" racial or ethnic image (McArthur).

Stereotypes emerge from the repetition of derogatory characterisations by one set of people about another in order to gain or maintain primacy. In the nineteenth century, media representations of the work-shy, feckless Irish, just at the point when their hard work was so crucial to Britain's growing infrastructure, reflected the distinction between the economic dominance of British 'captains of industry' and the vital Irish labour that facilitated their success. More to the point, of course, propagating the idea that the Irish were incapable of self-government furthered political justifications for British imperial policy. As Pickering points out, the "Irish were increasingly caricatured as ugly and ape-like, content to live in social squalor and prone to drunkenness and violence" (142). The effectiveness of the stereotype may be noted in the way it was not simply wiped out over time but rather, adapted for re-use under different circumstances such as ethnic jokes. Research into the Irish ethnic joke during the twentieth century, for example, has pointed out that the primary purpose was "to depict the Irish-man as an inept, incapable individual" (Kravitz 278), thereby taking up the same pernicious aims of the visual images and ideas of previous ages depicted in *Punch*.

Alongside the manifestation of fear and hatred which jokes such as these ultimately represent, stands evidence of contested familiarity. As the original source of antagonism fades or socio-economic dynamics shift, stereotypes evolve. The stereotypical idea of the Irish propensity for drunkenness, for instance, has been considerably re-fashioned since the early days of *Punch*. In recent decades, this supposed deficiency of Irish self-governance has merged with the favourable stereotype promoted by the tourist industry of the Irish as hospitable and humorous. When in 2011, images and videos of the US President Barack Obama drinking Guinness were viewed by millions online it became evident that the hyperlink between Irish culture and alcohol was to be seen as admirable not deplorable (RTE). Obama's performance of the stereotype (the drinker) and appropriation of the icon (the pint) linked him to a network of Irish signifiers, particularly pertinent to diasporic audiences. As Murphy explains:

> The act of consuming that distinctive national product Guinness is intimately bound up with Irish identity. Further, the role that Guinness and its marketing and advertising producers play in evoking Irishness and in-group membership as a strategy constitutes a complex and commercially potent element of Irish identity worldwide. (51)

As Murphy points out, it is not just the act of liquid consumption that is significant here but also the cultural consumption of marketing and advertising images which Guinness is so famous for, of which the image of Obama may now be considered part.

Whether a stereotype is considered favourable or otherwise is a highly subjective matter. Obama and his advisors were clearly confident that the association with that familiar Irish icon, the pint of Guinness, replete with harp logo, would produce an image suitable for worldwide distribution and positive interpretation. The image and video footage of the US President drinking Guinness was strewn across the web, shared between friends, posted on Irish diaspora blogs, linked to international news

websites, Tweeted and re-Tweeted. The image provides an apt example for the way that "technological embodiments of narrative […] have forced a re-evaluation of the role of readership in narrative" (Cobley 205). Where readers are also sharers, re-distributing images alongside their own evaluations, reading itself becomes a communal act. At its most dangerous, one's reading is limited by the "technological embodiment", the meaning pre-digested, the significance pre-explained. Those reading the image of Obama with his pint, for instance, are required to link the symbols: Guinness means Ireland, Ireland means hospitality. Where this has already been glossed by millions of online readers in the form of blogs, comments and tweets, alternative readings are increasingly hard to defend.

As the Obama example demonstrates, the use of images as well as texts to express Irish stereotypes emphasises the reticular structure created by the presence of hypertexts in online narratives. Since hypertexts (understood here as connections with, references to and imitations of, other texts) can be made by producers of online narratives as well as consumers; the chain of links is both perpetual and multi-dimensional. In other words, connections between online narratives are made by the producers who directly insert hyperlinks but also by the consumers who unconsciously browse and think as they read an image online. Obama's referencing of the pint of Guinness then is a descendent of those who engaged the "harp and the shamrock" to symbolise "Irish nationality for generations" (Orser 83). These 'icons of Irishness' are shortcuts to understanding the origin of the object they adorn and are also hyperlinks to the historical and cultural values they reflect. The harp, for example, a proto-multimedia icon, symbol in sound and image, has been utilised "over many centuries" so that each instance "of political, social, and cultural discourse involving the Irish harp built on the previous one" (O'Donnell 255). Printed on flags and stationery, or moulded into souvenirs and statues, simple symbols took on complex meanings. Yet for all of the potential symbolism, overuse of the same symbols inevitably erodes their potency. W.B. Yeats famously teased those nationalist sympathisers drawn to buy "a pepper-pot shaped to suggest a round tower with a wolf-dog at its foot", noting how many Irish writers preferred "harp and shamrock and green cover" for their books (Yeats 172). The success of these icons, in Yeats' time as in ours, relates to their potential to act as a metaphor. Like the President's pint, the harp and the shamrock have ceased to be simply a musical instrument and a small plant and come to 'mean' Ireland and Irishness in these highly simplified contexts. This transmission of such a meaning is only possible, of course, if a shared understanding of iconography is in place. These connections continue to be mirrored in online narratives, because, as Castells puts it, "the hypertext is inside us" (202). Links between images and ideas are not solely formed with the click of a mouse but also through learned knowledge and shared experience.

Part 3: The Shamrock

Yeats' disdain for the shamrock was repeated in 1926 when he rejected it as an "outworn" national symbol in his role as chair of the Coinage Committee (King 144). The poet's repeated denunciation is in itself evidence that the symbol was considered stereotypical by the early-twentieth century. By this point the shamrock had become ubiquitous as a symbol of Irishness and in the process rendered 'inauthentic' through overuse. All the more interesting then that almost a century later the same symbol would have a resurgence of visibility in online formats. Both the supposed 'meaning' of the plant itself and graphic representations of it have an extensive history. References to the wearing of shamrock on St Patrick's Day can be traced back to at least 1681 and the associated legend of St. Patrick explaining the Trinity was first recorded in 1726 (S. J. Connolly 510). Shamrocks were widely used in Volunteer flags and other Irish military insignia during the second half of the eighteenth century and have subsequently been employed in a wide range of logos and advertising, from football clubs and pottery to breakfast cereal and soap. As shorthand for Ireland, the shamrock is frequently used to endorse organisations which transmit concepts of Irishness internationally, notably Aer Lingus, the Irish Development Authority and the Irish Tourist Board. The symbol is equally meaningful in diasporic contexts, marking locations, products and even people in the form of tattoos. As Yeats had noted, the overuse of a symbol simultaneously instils and undermines its meaning. Commercialisation reinforces this, converting the symbol into merchandise:

> The North American celebration of St Patrick's Day on or near March 17 has, during recent decades, been marked by an ever-growing accretion of slogans and symbols. In practically any gift shop, posters of rainbows and pots of gold announce the approach of the holiday, as do greeting cards whereon leprechauns declare "Top o' the mornin' to ye", and command, along with the familiar lapel button, "Kiss me I'm Irish." (Quinn 18)

The purchase of these "slogans and symbols" described by Quinn, and with them the associated kudos of 'Irishness' on St Patrick's Day, might well be interpreted as an opportunistic and even erroneous appropriation of national identity. The acts of superficial association Quinn witnesses in gift shops are similarly repeated in the already 'unreal' space of the Internet. Indeed, web users from all over the world brand their online identities with shamrocks, leprechauns and pots of gold all year round, as well as on St Patrick's Day. On homepages, blogs, Twitter feeds and Facebook profiles Yeats' "outworn" symbols are thriving.

Online, both the narrator and narratee are bound by the narrative they co-produce on screen. If the central aim is communication, an understandable temptation exists, to resort to stereotype to share meaning, nevertheless, as with all communication, interpretation is unstable. The shamrock, attributed to St. Patrick's explanation of the trinity is, as a consequence, a reminder of Ireland's Christian heritage, just as its convenient proximity to St Patrick's foot is a reminder of Ireland's rural landscapes.

Equally, the prominent appearance of the shamrock, embroidered in gold on Prince William's collar for his wedding in 2011, invites a reading of Ireland's colonial past and so on. This very same symbol which decorates shops and bars across the world on St Patrick's Day is now re-appropriated in online forms to narrate Ireland in the twenty-first century, cultivated from flag, to advertising hoarding, to smart phone.

A clear example of this organic process can be seen in an Application called "Do You Have the Luck of the Irish?", available via Apple's App Store™. Upon downloading the App users are invited to "Use the amusing calculator below to see how long you'd live if you were born Irish!" Users enter their actual age into an onscreen box, click the "calculate" box and are provided with another in "St Paddy's Years". Perhaps most notable in this evidently meaningless activity is the reliance on the one image, the shamrock, to provide significance and relevance. In cultural-historical terms, shamrock-branded applications like this are all the more significant because their value and meaning is not immediately apparent. The application does not increase the user's productivity or knowledge and can barely be described as entertainment or a game. Nevertheless, it contributes to the narrative of Ireland, not because it is the emergence of something new (an App), but rather, because it depends upon the repetition of the same old icon (the shamrock). Several assumptions are made by the App, not least of all that the user was not actually "born Irish" in the first place. Most significant, however, is the trading on the well-founded assumption that online users will want to seek a connection to Irishness. The App then acts as a reminder of the power of narrative. Those who use this App do so in the knowledge of the wider story and their desire to be a part of it.

It is often assumed that the World Wide Web contains and displays the same information worldwide. In fact, proprietorial tactics by governments and corporate organisations often shape the content made available through a basic web search. A Google™ search conducted in Germany or the US, for instance, on St Patrick's Day 2011 would have presented the web user with the standard primary coloured corporate logo. From the Irish domain of the search engine, Google.ie, however, the water-colour image of four swans would have appeared on screen to assist online adventures (Google; see "Doodles Archive" at http://www.google.com/doodles). Web users with some knowledge of Irish mythology would have recognised the swans as the Children of Lir, tragically transformed and banished. Google 'Doodles' like this appear on the banner of the search engine at regular intervals, commemorating national holidays, religious festivals or the lives of historical figures. This image, made available in Ireland in honour of St Patrick's Day, does more than venerate, it invites users to find literal and imagined hypertexts. The image of the swans may lead (in the imagination or through web surfing) to the Garden of Remembrance in Dublin in which they are in statue form, to Lady Gregory's adaptation and numerous other incarnations on stamps, in picture books and on websites. It is clear then that Google adopted a recognisable and widely known image to signify Irishness on St Patrick's Day, but can it be described as a stereotype? One might well argue the contrary

since the meaning and relevance of the image relies on at least a rudimentary knowledge of Irish mythology, literature and culture. Is this why the Doodle was geographically restricted? An odd strategy since, it goes without saying, Irish people do not live only in Ireland, just as people living in Ireland need not be Irish. Equally, nationality or locality are surely no prerequisite for an interest in folklore. A closer look at the image reveals something of a lifeline for the uninitiated reader. In the fuzzy plant life which surrounds the ill-fated swan-children a familiar shape emerges; the tri-partite leaf emblem of the shamrock, hinted at, just enough, to act as a reference point among the green haze. Here, in this two-dimensional image we see the multiple layers of narrative. The story of the children condemned to be swans for 900 years cross-references other tales of wicked stepmothers and shapeshifting which span centuries of mythology across many cultures. At the same time, the image speaks of rural tranquillity without obvious reference to the Celtic origin of the tale or the Christian sub-text associated with it. Rather than offering a wholly obvious icon for St Patrick's Day, the Google Doodle allows for multiple narratives and readings depending on prior knowledge or current curiosity. Indeed, as the Children of Lir so aptly remind us, form can very often disguise content.

Part 4: Social Networking

Beyond the apparently endless repetition of images and patterns, translated from print to digital, or object to virtual, what does all of this mean? Does the incessant duplication of already well-worn images and patterns of national identity in online formats enhance or simply dilute our understanding of Ireland? Barwell and Bowles take these questions further when they consider the future of cultural nationalism, asking whether we can "continue to distinguish between the global and the universal? And if cultural difference is to be erased, whose cultures precisely will be lost?" (702). Since so many of the technologies which assist us in day-to-day work, communication and entertainment might be considered "universal", maintaining cultural distinctions will surely become increasingly difficult or irrelevant. Technologies, particularly those developed for the internet, are by nature accessible and relevant beyond the limits of one nation. That cultures may be lost as a consequence of an increasingly globalised narrative is a particularly prescient concern in an Irish context due to the linguistic and ideological overlaps suggested by the new contexts and old ideas. Not least of these is the concept of the internet as an 'electronic frontier', apt for colonisation, suggesting interesting points of comparison with Ireland's history of linguistic and cultural precarity in previous centuries.

Within this, social networks may be seen to link the individual and the local, encouraging people to connect across borders and time zones, maintaining contacts that defy geographical limitations. Facebook™, launched in February 2004, is arguably the current world leader of the social networking format, described by its developers as "a social utility that connects people with friends and others who work,

study and live around them" (Facebook). As the archetypal virtual community, Facebook captures the paradox of that term; simultaneously about making connections as well as accessing the world from a position of isolation. As Rheingold describes:

> Virtual communities are social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace. (5)

The "sufficient human feeling" highlighted here is expressed in the human urge to narrate which is so evidently at the core of these sites. In the profile, the status update, and the creation of groups and events the subject contributes to his or her own story as well as to the story of the time and place in which they exist. More recently, as Facebook has adopted the timeline format, users are presented with a chronological narrative of their comments and interactions. As a result, the sense that life is a story to be told is both increased, as one scrolls through photos and conversations, and subverted, as so much that happens in 'real life' is so obviously absent from the screen. Similarly, in the act of online narration people make links with and influence each other. Online reputations are based on the number of 'friends' and 'followers', creating a scenario where individuals can make powerful pronouncements to partially or wholly unknown audiences. When Yeats wonders "Did that play of mine send out / Certain men the English Shot? / Did words of mine put too great a strain / On that woman's reeling brain?" (Heaney 39), the dangers and fears of writing to an unknown, unseen audience are underlined. Words and images do translate ideas into action but, as Yeats asks, to what cost?

Contemporary researchers are often anxious about the anonymity of online communication, observing that:

> An increasing number of people are finding their lives touched by collectivities which have nothing to do with physical proximity. A space has opened up for something like community on computer networks, at a time when so many forms of 'real life' community seem under attack, perhaps even by the same techno-cultural forces that make Internet culture possible. (Wilbur 45)

This paradox, that computers make communities as well as break them, is closely tied up with the idea of propagating national stereotypes. Since virtual communities award power through popularity, both fluent and reckless individuals may be taken as representative by default. The risk of Facebook and other virtual communities seizing control of public opinion is often sensationalised by educators and journalists, but let us push this argument to its logical limit. Just as revelations of adultery or tax-evasion on Twitter have shown it to be possible for an individual's reputation and legacy to be irreparably damaged by comments and opinions stated online, is it not imaginable that the same might be possible on a national scale? While individuals do not simply stand in for nations, those with powerful political and media profiles are often seen to speak for them. Images and ideas have an inherent power certainly, but it is those who narrate and disseminate who wield it.

Conclusion

Since the content of a Facebook profile is shaped by the in-built questions and categories, expressions of individuality can result in caricature. In addition, despite the illusion of continuous change created by status updates and checking in, these online narratives might as well be etched in stone since "All personal information submitted to Facebook is held by them in perpetuity" (Boon and Sinclair 103). In this way, the narratives we currently produce online are part of a long repeated pattern of technological advancement, both transient and permanent and only partially understood. In 1915, when feature films were in their infancy, Vachel Lindsay wrote to George Brett, editor-in-chief at Macmillan's claiming that:

> [Movies] are as revolutionary in our age as the invention of Hieroglyphics was to the cave-man […] The Egyptian Tomb-painting was literally nothing but enlarged Hieroglyphics. We now have Hieroglyphics in motion and they can be made as lovely as the Egyptian if we once understand what we are doing. (Marcus 274)

These "Hieroglyphics in motion" which amazed audiences of the early twentieth century are already vividly distinct from the three-dimensional audio-visual extravaganzas now produced for the cinema. In film, as in other narrative forms, change is inevitable; how much further will our current web technology go once we begin to "understand what we are doing"? Certainly, the impact of our current age of narrative transition remains to be seen, but as Burns forewarned in 2007: "A future Taoiseach or president of Ireland" has already left an online trace of his or her adolescence (4).

It may well be that the current manifestations of online narrative come to mark our age only once they become as outmoded as hieroglyphics. What appears clear at present is that narratives which record connections and community and are not so much about *who* but *what* one is. The very notion of social networks applies meaning to the individual only as they fit within a group. Connections, shared friends, family, professional and social groupings all converge to show the individual life as a node within a communal narrative network. As Boon and Sinclair put it: the "success of many groups and applications on Facebook appears to be achieved largely through social pressure and, thus, 'community' can seem disturbingly similar to conformism and forced community" (105). While online communities are broadly understood to grow organically, "conformism" may very well be observed through the particular network an individual associates him or herself with as well as the means of self-expression employed. On Facebook and the now defunct MySpace, Irish groups promoting Irish music and local events used the platforms to shape a visual sense of Irish identity through their profiles. In the most crude examples of MySpace accounts, lurid pages dominated by highly stylised and often distorted symbols included neon green shamrocks and, perhaps more unexpectedly, IRA slogans and cartoons of masked gunmen. The powerfully emotive language which accompanied the use of these images unsurprisingly incited fierce conflicts among MySpace users, proving that some issues divide even virtual communities.

On Facebook profiles, national symbols are more typically seen in the form of the colours and emblems of flags. While some users include or overlay flags on their profile pictures, others merge national symbols to visually represent a hybridised identity. During the early decades of the twentieth century, when the concept of independent Irishness was most conspicuously under construction, Anglo-Irish writers were among those who toiled over how centrally to place the dividing hyphen in their identity. As Irish-Americans and other emigrants would similarly discover, the hyphens that stitches together the identities of second and third generation emigrants can "be read as sites for the staging of transgressive subjectivities" (Harte 95). Hybridity is a highly complex issue, requiring the subject to combine multiple and even contradictory, identity markers, making them simultaneously both and neither. As the online icon indicating an Irish-Canadian group on Facebook demonstrates, overlaying a green shamrock on a red maple leaf captures something written language cannot. The creation of icons such as these captures the real value of online efforts to express an individual or group sense of identity. Although they may rely upon over-used, even clichéd imagery such as the shamrock (and indeed the maple leaf) as their source material, once recycled and reformed they begin to narrate a new, hybrid and hyphenated, Irish identity.

With duality and pretence at the very core it is perhaps no surprise that simple images have been recruited to do that which complex words have failed to do. Facebook groups are, in this sense, works of art, or at least works of artifice, yet that is not to say that they are always inventive or free from traditional restrictions. Take for instance the Facebook group called "It's 'Cause I'm Irish". Again, the group relies upon the classic shamrock symbol as its logo linking it to that long tradition evident in the other examples discussed above. Beyond this, the group moves in interesting directions in regard to the question of stereotype. Analysis of the group's profile demonstrates how the members seek to break down the geographical boundaries of Irishness (by reinforcing an Irish-American identity) but also open up questions of reclaiming negative stereotype such as excessive drinking or a propensity to violence (valorising the "fighting Irish"). Both the appropriation of stereotypes and the reclassification of characteristics are indicative of a change in narrative direction. Expressions of identity are, of course, expressions of difference and stereotypes are no exception. Affiliation to a group may well preclude membership of others. In the Irish context this too frequently permits a politically charged, perhaps even aggressive use of visual imagery to reinforce division. The group "Get the IRA off Facebook", for instance, uses imagery familiar from the murals and iconography of unionist groups in Northern Ireland. It is significant that the online preservation and dissemination of these identity symbols simultaneously extends the global audience by placing them online while also perpetuating a sense of localised conflict. The union flags and red, white and blue colours are used by the group's creator to symbolise a national identity manifestly not captured by the green shamrock of the "It's Cause I'm Irish" group,

hinting once again at the simultaneous significance and arbitrariness of such symbols.

In contrast to such attempts to maintain established imagery, the online environment can also make space for the new, combining symbols which might have once been considered antithetical. The flag marking the banner of the "Gay Ireland" group on Facebook fuses the Irish tricolour with the rainbow of gay pride, challenging, rejecting and appropriating the national symbol. This too has taken on additional symbolic significance in light of Belfast City Council's policy decision to make St Patrick's Day "a more neutral celebration", bypassing the political quagmire of the symbolic green by opting for a multi-coloured shamrock (McDonald n. pag.). The council's oversight of the dual symbolic meaning of the rainbow colours inadvertently shifted the nature of the celebration "prompting delight from the city's gay rights campaigners" (McDonald n. pag.). Such an unintended translation of symbolic meaning underlines the flexibility of symbols as well as the potential for stereotypes to be inverted.

Paradoxically, the World Wide Web, a forum which is by definition 'global', appears to frequently lead people into 'local' frameworks. Users seem inclined to form virtual links with those they actually could or do have real access to, rather than using the full potential of the resource to make contact with those whom they are unlikely or unable to meet. Facebook in particular creates virtual communities of students who may well be using the interface to communicate with others on the same campus or within the same lecture room. As Fintan O'Toole notes, the internet has changed our "perception of space and time" (O'Toole). With sites such as Facebook we are able to constantly monitor people through a News Feed, bringing the 24 hour news age to act upon friendships, changes in 'relationship status' can inform us if a couple have parted and conversations can be 'overheard' by reading through an exchange of messages posted to the 'walls' of fellow community members. Online, even in theoretically anonymous narratives, a group identity is always implied since on a webpage "one's identity emerges from whom one knows, one's associations and connections" (Turkle 258). A clear weakness then of virtual communities is in their careless disregard for the real people who produce virtual versions of themselves for the sites. While they facilitate connections and sustain relationships, social networks also permit a conscience-free freedom of speech when the narrator feels uninhibited due to the barrier of the screen which shields them from others. UNICEF Ireland's "Changing the Future: Experiencing Adolescence in Contemporary Ireland" (2010) captures the impact of this when reporting that 1 in 5 young people in Ireland has experienced cyber bullying. While as the report points out, the majority of bullying reported in schools still takes the "traditional forms" of "words and actions" it is clear that online formats play an increasing role in playground cruelty in Ireland and how young people present themselves to others (UNICEF 19). Virtual communities are by necessity voyeuristic, facilitating a process of mutual observation more often than actual interaction. As Sherry Turkle explains "In the real-time communities of cy-

berspace, we are dwellers on the threshold between the real and the virtual, unsure of our footing, inventing ourselves as we go along" (10).

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