

**Springfield: A Constructed Community within American Pop-Culture and the Nature of Identity**

*"I'm never going to find that tree, this whole raid's been as useless as that yellow-shaped rock over there...hey, there's a lemon behind that rock...the tree"-Bart Simpson*

As Bart so eloquently put it, the uselessness of the yellow shaped rock can be used as a metaphor to represent the Simpsons as a cultural phenomenon. If we take the Simpsons at face value, simply being a childish cartoon show that is nothing more than comedic entertainment, of no concern to nationalist study, it becomes a “useless rock” like the one found by Bart. But if we delve deeper using analytical tools of nationalism to deconstruct the Simpsons, looking beyond the façade of the “rock” which impedes our analysis, it is soon evident that the Simpsons as a case-study is as useful as the concealed lemon used to symbolize the identity of Springfield as a constructed community.<sup>1</sup>

Whether the show was intentionally filled with nationalist rhetoric by the writing staff or if it is by pure coincidence, it makes no difference, the examples are abundant.

There are four notable episodes which provide examples of Springfield as a constructed community – a land area with defined boundaries whose people share a common identity, traditions, symbols, and ceremonies of commemoration used to support these idealized notions of who the people of Springfield are and what their town represents to them in terms of nationalist principles. These four episodes being: Lisa the Iconoclast; Lemon of Troy; The Telltale Head; and Whacking Day. Using theoretical concepts of nationalist study, this paper will engage the content of the above episodes in analysis in order to first and foremost determine if Springfield is a nation, in the sense that its inhabitants share a common (though constructed) identity, history, symbols and

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<sup>1</sup> After the split between Springfield and Shelbyville, the people of Springfield planted a lemon tree to commemorate that “Sweet, sweet day...lemons being the sweetest fruit available at the time”.

traditions. Upon discovering if Springfield is a nation, the paper will then turn to analyze the idea of a constructed community, namely what nationalist processes are ongoing within this community in order to solidify its national identity. For example what sort of identity-building activities or ceremonies of commemoration are continuously present in the life of Springfield, ensuring Springfield's national solidarity by continuously reminding its' citizens of their identity as Springfieldianites and loyalty to the nation as citizens.

The idea of identity politics and more specifically, national identities is a complex one. People may derive their identities from affiliation to the nation, but individual interpretation of what this means will most often vary. Yet, this does not always skew the idea of a single identity embraced by the nation. Varying interpretations of the national identity can co-exist within a communal framework so long as one defining characteristic is non-negotiable, though this characteristic can change over time.<sup>2</sup> If we take Ross Poole's interpretation of what national identity is based upon, there are essentially three conditions which must be met: the allegiance to the nation must supersede all other allegiances; political identity must be derived from membership or allegiance to the nation; there must be examples of common unity, and these examples must fundamentally divide the nation from other groups.<sup>3</sup> Temporarily neglecting all other examples of commonality in factors shaping identity, perhaps the most poignant example lays within the constructed myth surrounding the founding of Springfield by its leader Jebediah Obediah Zachariah Jebediah Springfield.

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<sup>2</sup> John R. Gillis, In *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity*, edited by John R. Gillis, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 3

<sup>3</sup> Ross Poole, *Nation and Identity*, (London: Routledge, 1999), 32

Within the episode “Lemon of Troy”, Abe Simpson reflects upon the founding of Springfield and the symbolism regarding the Lemon Tree which resides on the border of Springfield and their rivals Shelbyville. The story outlines how Springfield and his associate Manhattan arrived to new lands in search of religious freedom, yet irreconcilable differences forced the people following the two leaders to divide into two separate camps based upon their beliefs and due to a competing ideology. The main issue surrounding this split was the ability to “marry one’s cousins”, which led to Springfield and Shelbyville to be founded on competing principles, forever preserving the competitiveness and dissatisfaction towards each party from that day. According to Hobsbawm, this myth of Springfield’s founding becomes a part of history, ingrained within the collective memory of Springfield, it is both constructed in a manner that promotes Springfield’s identity as in opposition to the principles of those in rival Shelbyville and as we will see in further examples, is institutionalized with specific objectives to preserve national identity.<sup>4</sup> By creating a myth which puts Springfield in opposition to Shelbyville, it is fulfilling one of Poole’s requirements that the identity of a nation must contain a fundamental divide from others, no matter how one were to interpret the past, there is no possibility of confusing the symbols and dogmas of Springfield of being like those embraced within Shelbyville.<sup>5</sup>

A more personalized example of identity and the notion of Shelbyville as an external other which reinforces the identity of Springfield is prominent within the marital relationship between Kirk and Lou-Anne Van Houten. Expressing his distaste for Shelbyville and the people which inhabit it is essential to the construction of Kirk’s

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<sup>4</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, “Inventing Tradition”, In *The Invention of Tradition*, edited by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 13; Poole, 35

<sup>5</sup> Poole, 32

identity. The constructed identity of Springfield which persuades Kirk that he must dislike Shelbyville in order to embrace his own identity as a Springfieldeanite, Kirk exclaims “I hate those Shelbyville Jerks”, to which Lou-Anne replies, “Honey, I’m from Shelbyville”. Kirk acknowledges as such by stating, “...I know, and it tears me up inside.” Kirk is obviously feeling a confliction within his own identity. Although Lou-Anne has most likely lived in Springfield for a long-time as the Van Houtens have raised a family in Springfield, there is no escaping the fact that she will always be a Shelbyvillean in Kirk’s eyes. Therefore Kirk’s identity as Lou-Anne’s husband as legitimized through the institutions of the church and the state is superseded by his allegiance to the nation and the doctrines which construct his political identity.

Through the use of myths, symbols and traditions the founding story of Springfield was indoctrinated within the psyche of its citizens. All Springfield’s traditions and symbols stem from this crucial distinction of their identity as the opposite of Shelbyville. According to Bhabha, the constructed idea of an other is never outside one's own nationalist discourse, symbols used to reinforce the nation’s identity are always created against the framework of the identity of the other.<sup>6</sup> These aspects are crucial to the identity construction of Springfield, because much to the nation’s dismay, though founded on conflicting values, Springfield and Shelbyville are ultimately carbon-copies of each other. Without these symbols and myths to remind Springfield’s citizens that their identity is unique and being a member of the nation is ultimately valuable, Springfield’s identity becomes conflicted and meaningless. The Lemon of Troy episode parallels the two nations in earnest. Springfield’s token Quick-E-Mart is mirrored in Shelbyville’s

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<sup>6</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, “Narrating the Nation”, In *Nations and Identities*, edited by Vincent P. Pecora, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2001), 363

Speed-E-Mart; Moe's Tavern becomes Joe's Tavern; Springfield elementary becomes Shelbyville elementary with the same cookie-cutter school and even includes a female version of Groundskeeper Willie. Without the use of national symbols and traditions which differentiate the two nations, they are quite similar. If we take Anderson's idea of education as the basic means of developing a national consciousness within the citizenry of a nation, the fact that Springfield and Shelbyville elementary are carbon-copies of each other should serve to prove that it is only the founding ideology and traditions which grew from it that separate the two nations and their constructed identities.<sup>7</sup>

Symbols as legitimized through invented tradition are designed to shape the way citizens analyze their own identity and view the nation. According to Hobsbawm, an invented tradition serves three purposes: establishes social cohesion; legitimizes institutions; and most importantly, to socialize, shaping the values and behaviour of the nation's citizens.<sup>8</sup> Within the episode *Lisa the Iconoclast*, Lisa soon discovers that Springfield's beloved town founder, the man whose ideology shaped the identity and symbols of the nation was not who he purported himself to be. Jebediah Obediah Zachariah Jebediah Springfield's image as a brave pioneer and selfless leader is actually a constructed myth started by Hans Sprungfeld (murderous pirate) to mislead people about his past. Upon discovering this, Lisa's faith in the nation is shaken and the symbols and institutions of the nation have lost legitimacy in her eyes. This is due to the fact that identity and memory are not constant, they are continuously in flux and shaped by a subjective rather than objective view of reality.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Spread of Nationalism*, (Thetford: Thetford Press Limited, 1983), 106-114

<sup>8</sup> Hobsbawm, 9

<sup>9</sup> Gillis, 3

While trying to share her findings with the town, Lisa's claims fall upon deaf ears. Springfield has been socialized through the symbols and traditions of this constructed myth in a manner where even the truth will not be accepted because it clashes with their identity as Springfieldanites. Ultimately, Lisa drops her quest to have Jebediah exposed. Her rational being, "the myth of Jebediah has value too, it has brought out the best of everyone in this town, regardless of who said it... "A noble spirit embiggens the smallest man". Lisa's morality as constructed by her education, her socialization within the nation and values of the nation have shaped her behaviour; myths and symbols are too important to the town to be ignored even if the history is proven false, the messages can still be used to shape identity.

*"If you know who cut off Jebediah's head, I don't care if it's your brother, your sister, your father or your mommy, turn them in and Krusty will give you this free slide whistle, just like side show bob"-Krusty the Clown*

Within the episode "The Telltale Head", Bart is caught vandalizing the statue in the center of town which commemorates and celebrates the myth of Jebediah Obediah Zachariah Jebediah Springfield's killing of a bear to save the town from attack. The quote above exemplifies how powerful a symbol this statue is to the nature of Springfield's identity. With Krusty using the media as a means of addressing the citizens and representing the nation, he is crying out for the loyalty of the citizens in quite a fascist nature. Krusty is asking the nation's citizens to put the good of the nation ahead of both the individual and family, suggesting that the symbols representation of the constructed community is of greater value to the citizen's identity. Essentially, this desecration of a statue is a constructed crisis and in this time of "national crisis", the goals of the nation

and national identity are supposed to supersede all other allegiances.<sup>10</sup> Also, as Anderson notes, the nation is an imagined community, a constructed idea which encompasses the belief that those who belong to the community are connected, even though it is impossible to know everyone within the nation.<sup>11</sup> Krusty's speech is appealing to an audience that is imagined or invented. By using the medium of television, he does not address anyone specifically to exact retribution for this crime against the nation but assumes that those who share an imagined national identity will feel the need to undertake retribution as they share the same national duties as him.

The above paragraphs served to characterize Springfield as a nation with a common founding, history, constructed set of myths and identity. It is unimaginable to have a nation exist long without a system of institutions or set of processes which encourages its solidarity and stability. Springfield is no exception. Ceremonies of commemoration and ongoing processes of nationalism affect the everyday life of Springfieldeanites, one notable example is Whacking Day.

Whacking Day is a fictitious ceremony created for use in the episode of the same name, it is described by Kent Brockman as "a tradition that dates back to founding Father Jebediah Springfield, every May 10<sup>th</sup> local citizens gather to drive snakes into the centre of town and whack them into snake heaven...".<sup>12</sup> An annual ceremony which reminds Springfieldeanites of the created myth of their nation's founding is crucial because like the example above surrounding the desecration of Jebediah Obediah Zachariah Jebediah

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<sup>10</sup> Poole, 67

<sup>11</sup> Anderson, 15

<sup>12</sup> Whacking Day even has its own theme song: Oh whacking day, oh whacking day, our sacred skull cracking day (Solo) – we'll break their backs, gouge out their eyes, their evil hearts we'll pulverize; Oh whacking day, oh whacking day, may god bestow his grace on thee

Springfield's statue in the town square, most citizens' national identity lives dormant within their subconscious. Ceremonies or forms of crisis which break the monotony of everyday life and bring citizenship and the nation to the forefront of attention are necessary in order to remind citizens of their identity.<sup>13</sup> Yet, simply creating a ceremony is not possible without other factors, such as legitimisation of the event the ceremony is commemorating through the use of symbols and institutions.

Whacking Day is legitimized throughout the episode both through institutions of power and the use of tradition. Institutions which represent the nation-state such as the government and Springfield Presbyterian Church are both vocal in propagating Whacking Day and its importance to Springfield. The historical museum run by the government uses educational videos to propagate the constructed myth of Jedediah's first whacking experience, but when Bart exposes inaccuracies within the film, he is immediately escorted out by security which represents the bureaucracy of the State. The government apparatus within Springfield uses traditions and ceremonies to engage in a process of creating a collective memory, one which ultimately suits their needs.<sup>14</sup> In this instance, a book "The Truth about Whacking Day" suggests that the State created this ceremony in order to cover up an attack on Irish immigrants within Springfield, who at some point represented an external other to Springfield's identity, possibly due to the conflict of Irish Catholicism versus the "WASP" tradition present within Springfield.

Another elite institution or institutions of power which was used to legitimize the "sham" traditions inherent within Whacking Day is the Springfield Presbyterian Church. Lisa's moral convictions regarding the treatment of animals force her personal identity

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<sup>13</sup> Hobsbawm, 12

<sup>14</sup> Gillis, 10



into conflict with the national identity promoted by the tradition of Whacking Day. Attempting to seek guidance from the local pastor in reconciling her identity crisis, the advice she's given is a quote from the bible used to legitimize the ceremony, "and the lord said, whacken (sic) all creatures which crawl upon their belly and thy town shall be a beacon unto others...even God himself endorses whacking day". Reverend Lovejoy's passage is ultimately attempting to legitimize the ceremony of Whacking Day by using the power of religion, especially the belief that faith is not to be questioned.

Finally, another example of an ongoing process within Springfield used to ensure the maintenance of its nationalism is the process of designing a collective memory through selective remembering (or forgetting in some instances) and the rationalization of history.<sup>15</sup> Within the "Lemon of Troy" episode, after Bart and Homer had rescued the lemon tree from rival Shelbyville, the episode ends with the story of events which had transpired being told from two competing viewpoints.

The Springfieldean perspective suggests as follows: "...and with that, a might cheer went up for the heroes of Springfield, they had brought the 'sacred' tree back to its native soil...". This is an example of the creation of a collective memory, as the children of Springfield are being educated by an adult through a constructed myth with an obvious agenda.<sup>16</sup> That agenda being that Springfield is filled with heroes willing to sacrifice their own lives for the good of the nation against their enemies, the Shelbyvilleans.

The Shelbyvillean rationalization of the event is as follows: "and with that, a might cheer went up for the heroes of Shelbyville, they had banished the lemon tree forever, because it was haunted...now lets all celebrate with a cool glass of turnip juice".

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<sup>15</sup> Gillis, 17

<sup>16</sup> Anderson, 114

The Shelbyvilleans rationalize this defeat through the use of collective forgetting, the event is deemed as a success because they construct an idea propagated through myth that the tree was haunted, so it was fortuitous to be rid of it. They even go so far as to mark the event with a new symbol, the turnip. Through this example, it becomes evident that the maintenance of strong nationalism within Springfield is an ongoing process.

Identities, myths, symbols and traditions are constructed in a manner that benefits the nationalism which they represent, neglecting moments in history which are detrimental to nationalism and legitimizing them through institutions of state, power and citizen participation.

Through the analysis of symbols, traditions, and myths present within several episodes of the Simpsons, the constructed identity of Springfield as both an imagined community representing a nation and as a rival to the identity of Shelbyville becomes apparent. Most importantly, the legitimacy of these nation-building devices is maintained through ongoing processes of commemoration and ceremonies such as Whacking Day are designed to bring nationalism and citizenship to the forefront of the citizen's consciousness through the display of symbols and the shaping of memories.

### **Works Cited**

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