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INTRODUCTION

The Death-Humor Paradox

Peter Narváez

In October 2002, after soliciting and critiquing over 40,000 jokes from seventy countries, Richard Wiseman (University of Hertfordshire), in collaboration with the British Association for the Advancement of Science, proclaimed the “world’s funniest joke,” a narrative submitted by Gurpal Gosall (Manchester, UK):

A couple of New Jersey hunters are out in the woods when one of them falls to the ground. He doesn’t seem to be breathing, his eyes are rolled back in his head. The other guy whips out his cell phone and calls the emergency services. He gasps to the operator: “My friend is dead! What can I do?” The operator, in a calm soothing voice says: “Just take it easy. I can help. First, let’s make sure he’s dead.” There is a silence, then a shot is heard. The guy’s voice comes back on the line. He says: “OK, now what?”

www.laughlab.co.uk/winner.html: October 3, 2002

As the essays in this volume reveal, the fact that the winning joke features a theme of death is hardly surprising, nor are its mechanisms of humor. Laughter, humor theory suggests, is a socially constructed form of communication (Carrell 1997; Fine 1997a, 1997b; Norrick 1993) that expresses pleasure (Morreall 1983, 38-59). Moreover, as Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) argued in 1650 with his famous descriptive, “sudden glory” (see Bergler 1956, 46; Gruner 1978, 29-30; Holland 1982, 44-47), laughter is often prompted by a sudden perception of incongruity (Alden et al 2000; Forabosco 1992; Koestler 1964; Morreall 1989; Oring 1992, 1-15, 1995a), that makes us feel superior to others. From Sigmund Freud’s point of view, the aggressive pleasure of tendentious humor is a transformative, defensive process that can provide relief for repressed energies (inhibitions, thoughts, feelings) (Freud 1960 [1905]:181-236; also see Portous 1988). In conflating humor and death, the previous joke suddenly juxtaposes a serious matter, concern for the health of a collapsed hunting companion, with an absurd, murderous action—shooting him.
We are surprised by this incongruity and we laugh. More specifically, however, the depiction of the hunter protagonist as a fool, for his thoughtless misinterpretation of procedural advice from an operator, develops social distance between “us,” the group comprised of the sophisticated narrator and laughing audience, and the inferior character in the joke. Derision is furthered by the protagonist’s association with New Jersey, for this identification reifies a negative trait (stupidity) of a widespread country bumpkin “Jersey” stereotype, particularly relished by New Yorkers. Thus, in commenting on this joke, New York Times columnist Pamela LiCalzi O’Connell quipped, “it appears there is one element that universally adds to a joke’s appeal: mention New Jersey” (2002). Whether the laughter of persons bearing such politically incorrect thoughts releases repressed energies is debatable, but familiarity with how the stereotype has been expressed in the past through humor, means that the “cognitive shift” (see Latta 1999) involved in the anticipation of foolish behavior from jocular New Jersey personae, greatly depends on memories of past emotional experience, a common characteristic of laughter affirmed in recent humor theory research (see Cetola 1988).

Given the importance of the past for our recognition of the comic, it follows that some “traditions,” i.e., creative re-enactments through time, dispose us to ludic responses. The studies in this anthology, which takes its title from childhood wordplay, examine specific traditions of text (jokes, poetry, epitaphs, iconography, film drama) and social context (rites, festivals) that shape and generate laughter and drollery. Uniquely, however, these essays explore the remarkable paradox exhibited in the above joke—the convergence of death and humor.

THE DEATH-HUMOR PARADOX

My research into this paradox has centered on the “merry wake” in Newfoundland (see essay in this volume). Initially, however, my interest in the subject was triggered by encounters with similar instances of death-humor mixes in Newfoundland vernacular song (Narváez 1995). Having one of the world’s great fisheries, numerous Newfoundland traditional songs concern disasters at sea (“The Southern Cross,” “The Loss of the Jubal Cain,” “The Greenland Disaster”). Folksong scholar Kenneth S. Goldstein persuasively argued that the lyrics of many such songs contain meanings of “religious fatalism” (Goldstein 1985). The last lines of “The Schooner Huberry” as sung by ballad singer Dorman Ralph typify this sentiment.
It is a sad occurrence but it happens every year,
The sea takes to the cemetery the lives of one’s most dear,
They will be buried throughout our land in summer, spring and fall,
And how that they got cast away it’s a mystery to us all.
No more to watch on a stormy deep and expecting them to come;
They got the call both one and all, for God has called them home.

(Ralph 1999)

Yet, as I have found, not all Newfoundland songs concerning the
death of community members treat the subject so seriously. One exam-
ple that unexpectedly juxtaposes the solemn and the frivolous is the
Collected in 1961 by musicologist Kenneth Peacock from singer Patrick
Rossiter of Fermeuse, the song exhibits a moving, mournful minor
melody with lyrics that presumably pay tribute to a deceased friend. As
similar items of occupational folklore which extol the skills of worker
heroes, the first three stanzas generally praise fisher Jim Jones for his
craftsmanship, speed, strength, physical endurance, and courage while
on the job—the pursuit of fish (cod).

Old Jim Jones the fisher, the trapper, the trawler,
Jim Jones the fish-killin’ banker [the Grand Banks] is dead.
No fisherman surely never stepped in a dory [small fishing craft]
Like Jim Jones the fisher who died in his bed.
Was there any old fellow tied sods or made bobbers
And set out his trawls in the dark it is said?
No fisherman ever braved such stormy weather
Like Jim Jones the trawler who died in his bed.
Jim Jones he would surely go out in a dory
And set out his traps all weighed down with lead.
No fisher from side on hauled traps with such tide on
As Jim Jones the trapper who died in his bed.

While wonderfully specific with regard to fishing equipment (uses of
cod traps, trawl lines, sods and bobbers [as floats], lead weights), the
sentiments of these verses are in keeping with heroic eulogies, for they
focus on Jones’s extraordinary efforts. The fourth stanza continues in
this vein, but describes more mundane occupational operations, praising
the protagonist for his ability to sort his fish trap catches by ridding
them of unwanted species, such as dogfish, a necessary, but perfunctory
task.
In the foggiest of weather he’d set out the leader [leading net to cod trap],
But who in the devil this side of the Head [place name]
Could haul up such codfish or pick out the dogfish
Like old skipper Jones who died in his bed.

The fifth and sixth verses similarly cite Jones’s workaday dealings with
gutting fish, saving valuable cod livers (for oil) and salting fish. But the
flow of such positive sentiments about routine occupational techniques
is suddenly shattered when the singer becomes humorously critical of
the deceased, shifting his focus to Jones’s avarice, wryly depicting him as
a “glutton” for eating excessive amounts of cods’ heads (cheeks) and as a
common dog (“crackie”) for consuming large amounts chewing tobacco.

There was never such a salter this side of the water
There was never such a glutton for eating cods’ heads.
There never was a crackie who could chaw tobaccy
Like old skipper Jones who died in his bed.
Was there any old fisher or any old fellow
Cut throats or split fish or tear off the head?
For I’m darned if I ever saw one who’d pick liver
So fast as our skipper who died in his bed.

In final humorous aspersions, the last stanzas portray Skipper Jim
Jones as a unique captain who aroused anxieties in others when he
sailed the Atlantic (made them “frantic”) and who, unlike heroic worker
role models who gasp their last breath while engaged in colossal occu-
pational effort (e.g. “John Henry”), peacefully “died in his bunk.”

Is there any old fellow this side of the harbour
Sailed out of the harbour or tacked round the Head?
It would make you all frantic to sail the Atlantic
With old Skipper Jones who died in his bed.
His fishing days ended, his traps are unmended,
His trawls are all rotten, his fishing boat sunk,
And his days as a rover are finished and over,
Old Skipper Jim Jones who died in his bunk.

(Fowke 1984; Peacock 1965 I, 127–128; my explanatory brackets)

Thus, even though he is honored, the deceased Skipper Jones
becomes the butt of humorous raillery which falls solidly into what
Edward Ives long ago observed as the “satirical song tradition” of the
Northeast (Ives 1962).
This example from Newfoundland song stems from long-established fishery traditions, but its blending of the serious and the ludic is most contemporary. Paradoxical juxtapositions of death and humor in today’s world are on the rise, and an understanding of traditional combinations of this nature may assist us in coping with present realities. As our understandings of space and society have altered through communication technologies that offer global perspectives, the universal enigma of death looms as never before. Real and fictive visions of war, genocide, murder, natural catastrophes, disease and simply the biological process of aging, regularly appear at the flick of a remote control, all constantly reminding us of the fragility of our mortality. For many, therefore, death strikes both virtually, via electronic communications, and actually, as they experience the social reality of death amongst family, friends and acquaintances. Whether such experiences are immediate or virtual, individuals today may grieve (mild to intense) in response to a wide variety of death events. Bereaving persons may conventionally turn to traditions of institutionalized religion for the solace that their encompassing metanarratives offer, comfort based on doctrines which promise immortality, such as that offered in “The Schooner Huberry.” However, they may also turn to more paradoxical traditions, such as the satirical song tradition represented by “The Fisher Who Died in his Bed” or the other vernacular traditions studied in this book, all of which offer humorous avenues for understanding and coping with death in less cosmological and more egalitarian ways.

FOLKLORISTICS AND DEATH

This work joins a growing number of folklore studies that focus on private and public traditions of death (Barrera 1991; Bennett and Rowbottom 1998; Brady 1988; Butler 1982; Cooper and Sciorra 1994; Everett 2002; Griffith 1992; Kvideland 1980; Meyer 1993; Pocius 2001; Santino 1994, 2001; Zeitlin and Harlow 2001). The majority of these works have dealt with serious sides of bereavement. Folklorists studying humor, however, have sometimes examined themes of death and the dead, especially as part of “sick,” “cruel” and disastrous event joke cycles (see Nilsen 1993, 78-84; Gruner 1997, 41-73). Some of the best known of these studies are the psychological analyses of Alan Dundes (1987, 3-38). His treatment of “The Dead Baby Joke Cycle” of the 1960s and 1970s interpreted such jests as products of the rapid social changes that took place in American culture during the period. The cycle provided,
therefore, “a means for adolescents … to relieve their anxiety about impending parenthood” and remain a child, through the fantasy of “avoiding or disposing of unwanted babies” (13-14). In an examination of “Auschwitz jokes,” Dundes scrutinized a cycle of anti-Semitic jests told in post World War II Germany. Quite unlike “gallows humor” (Obrdlik 1942; Hertzler 1970, 134-135; Goldstein and McGhee 1972, 104-105), humorous bravado expressed by condemned persons, these orally circulated hate jokes have been generated by oppressors. His analysis emphasizes the psychological function of catharsis for the bearers of such traditions. Tellers, he argues, have assuaged guilt feelings for the horrors of genocide “through an insidious form of projection,” wherein “Jews are depicted as masochists; they enjoy being victimized” (35-37). As Dundes sadly observes, “prejudice, stereotyping, gross inhumanity, and even ethnic genocide do not seem to be on the wane” (38).

Unlike the contributions of Dundes, the essays in this volume provide ethnographic rather than symbolic expositions. Some of the forms examined in joke cycles, like those treated by Dundes, express extreme ethnocentrism, particularly the responses to the terrorist attacks on New York’s World Trade Center. The majority, however, do not, and in many ways are testimonies to the resilience of the human spirit. In face of death, life’s most solemn mystery, people frequently play and laugh. As the authors show, the juxtaposition of death and humor arises in many circumstances—occasions of direct bereaving for the passing of a known loved one; contexts of local, regional, national and global mourning for deceased persons known about but not known personally; encounters with the dead in material, carnivalesque, spiritual and symbolic forms; and finally in the contexts of fictive entertainments. Most of these events reflect traditional, small group, face-to-face human communications (folklore) both in content and enactment. As well, technologically mediated communications evidence similar messages globally, in virtual, rhetorical communities.

In their sociocultural contexts, the humorous responses to death described in this collection cover the full gamut of the ludic, from mild mirth (death iconography) to outright hilarity (jokes, pranks). Traditional manifestations of death dealt with include: death as cosmological design—an otherworld of magico-religious significance, reified through ritual; death as divine or semi-divine being(s) possessing extraordinary magico-religious powers; death as restless soul, sometimes trapped in a liminal area; and death as a sociable cadaver who interacts with the living; and
death as space and time—sites of death and calendar events concerning death and its history, often related to specific structures and spaces, as well as places of tragedy and interment.

THE ESSAYS

The essays in this book have been divided into four sections based on folkloric genres (jokes, rites of passage, festivals) and the culture of popular entertainments (music events, dramatic film comedy). Contributors to the first section on “Disaster Jokes” treat the most widespread contemporary examples of the death-humor paradox. In his initial essay on jokes which follow mediated disasters, sociologist Christie Davies argues that until the 1960s, when the medium of television triumphed, there were no “set piece jokes about particular disastrous events or the deaths of celebrities.” Far from viewing the popular jests that followed as “sick,” Davies’ examination of joke cycles concerning celebrities and disasters convincingly interprets them as having been spawned through the mediating reportage of television, which given its emotional manipulation and its mosaic presentation of juxtaposing the serious and the ridiculous, truth and fantasy (e.g., disaster vis-à-vis trivial advertisements or game shows), provided appropriate contexts of incongruity and paradox for humorous response.  

From such a reading, the creation and proliferation of contemporary disaster jokes, through oral and Internet means, may be understood as “resistance to a hegemony of feeling” and “one of the most modern and most democratic forms of folklore.”

Bill Ellis’s important essay on the role of humor in the construction of a global response to the tragic events of September 11, 2001 delineates the appearances of verbal and graphic World Trade Center (WTC) jests from a variety of sources, but primarily from the Internet through the author’s monitoring of message boards. As he notes, this particular method allowed him to examine “the emergence of WTC jokes in unprecedented detail.” Thus Ellis is able to describe “risible moments,” i.e., points “at which making and passing on jokes provokes laughter and provides social rewards that outweigh the social risks of being thought sick or insensitive,” as well as waves of popularity for specific forms of WTC humor in national and international contexts. His findings stress the distinctness of North American and British expressions and note the paucity of sentiments that might reflect a unified global community.

In his remarkably insightful work An Essay on Laughter (1907), James Sully discerned that a social occasion highly conducive to laughter was
one “in which an unusual degree of solemnity is forced upon us” (79). Perhaps nothing could be more incongruous, and therefore potentially funny (despite taboos), than living persons socializing with and/or physically manipulating the dead in the midst of solemn religious ritual. Yet this is exactly what is described in the next section, “Rites of Passage,” in articles by Harlow and Narváez on the rite known as the “Irish wake” or the “merry wake” (also see Abrahams 1982; Glasgow 1997, 136-137). Harlow's research on Irish wakes details a variety of ludic activities which once flourished before official religious intervention. Focusing on practical jokes involving corpse manipulation, she finds that wake humor of this kind reflects a more general tendency in Irish tradition that is still maintained today, the “provocative ludic impulse,” exhibited in activities in which protagonists “create situations” through verbal dueling (“slagging,” “blaggarding”) and verbal deception (“winding people up,” “coddling”).

My own essay centers on both the Newfoundland context of the merry wake as a cultural scene of courtship amongst youth, as well as the wake amusements themselves—the games, jokes, and songs that were popular at such events in Newfoundland's recent past. In face of measures taken by official religious authorities to curb the revelry of such occasions, the counter-hegemonic tactics developed by participants to maintain wake activities (e.g., hiding the corpse) may be viewed as popular subversive attempts to maintain egalitarian, local traditions.

In contrast to the collective activities of wakes, the verbal and graphic texts of American graveyard humor analyzed by Richard Meyer accent the expressions of unique individuals in response to a last rite of passage—interment. A valuable overview of a complex subject, which has generated its own popular culture of spurious epitaph books, Meyer observes that historically, gravemarker commemoration has voiced “communal rather than personal perspectives and values,” but that “since the 1960s commemoration has moved toward its individualized, personalized opposite.” Thus contemporary American gravemarker texts incorporate idiosyncratic, recreational, occupational and popular culture elements in melanges that retrospectively celebrate activities of life “not death, the hereafter, or abstract metaphysical principles.” Within this populist context, however, humor is linked to strong personalities who could “find a laugh even in death.”

As R.D.V. Glasgow has written, overcoming death often means celebrating something that “cannot be genuinely separated from life,” i.e., engaging in activities that “acknowledge that life and death are mutually
interdependent, two sides of the same mortal coin” (136). The studies in the third section examine social leveling through celebratory laughter at festivals and calendar customs associated with death. All four articles cite syncretistic, cultural blending linked to Christian calendar holidays—All Hallows Eve (“Halloween,” October 31), All Saints Day (November 1), All Souls Day (November 2), and additionally in the case of Haiti, Carnival (celebrations before Lent). In the first essay, Jack Kugelmass considers a localized Halloween tradition that has become one of New York City’s major festival events—the Greenwich Village Halloween parade. As he explains, contemporary Halloween festivities blend Christian and Celtic (Samhain) elements that intertwine “notions of death, rebirth and celebration.” However, the syncretistic roots of this North American festival are not the reasons for its popularity in Greenwich Village. Rather, it is the frame that Halloween provides for licentious behavior that attracts parade participants, whose masquerades and bizarre antics celebrate “a Bohemian, artistic, and frequently, gay way of life.” The frequent uses of death masks (amongst many others, often displaying themes of playful sexuality) in this annual community validation of non-normative lifestyles, has been particularly significant in the context of the AIDS pandemic (also see Tannen and Morris 1989). Emphasizing the complex motivations for such events, however, Kugelmass suggests that the individualism exhibited in unique parade costumes and behaviors reflects the privatization of late capitalism, an expansion of the sexual self, and “an implicit rejection of the collective self prescribed within the Judeo-Christian tradition.”

The essays by Kristin Congdon and Stanley Brandes focus on humorous calaveras (literally skulls, skeletons), traditions of Mexico’s Día de los Muertos (Day of the Dead). The calaveras traditions researched by Congdon—customs (dancing with smiling cardboard skeletons, eating skulls made of sugar), the popular political art of José Guadalupe Posada (1852-1913), and the papier-mâché objects of the Linares family—all provide skeletal representations whereby the poor symbolically strip the wealthy of their sartorial elegance and pomposity to celebrate, as she notes, “the democratic spirit of death.” Brandes’s close examination of Day of the Dead literary calaveras, a parallel journalistic form stemming from the mid-nineteenth century, shows how these mock epitaphs constitute an anti-authoritarian satirical tradition which continues to scathingly critique Mexico’s power elite (politicians, police, clergy). As Brandes relates, the death symbolism of this poetry “situates these public figures on the level of the common man.”
In a similar vein, Donald J. Cosentino’s personal ethnographic account, entitled “Death and Laughter in Los Angeles and Port-au-Prince” highlights the role of the Haitian family of playful, erotic death spirits known as Gedes during Carnival 1991. A particularly momentous time because of the democratic defeat (December 1990) of the despotic Duvalier regime by John-Bertrand Aristide, power reversal was dramatized by counter-hegemonic Gedes who as “bums, louts, and outlaws” were “all the more popular for their bad manners.” Consentino observes that the equitable ideological implications of Gede antics have long been clear: “as state authority has refined its mechanisms of oppression, so too has Gede sharpened his flip-off.”

Egalitarian chords are also struck in the last section, which features essays on death and humor in popular music and film. The first by LuAnne Roth on The Grateful Dead (a.k.a. “The Dead”), shows how the folkloric name and ludic iconography of this rock band nurtured participatory, cultural scenes of collective merriment. Similar to collective uses of calaveras, Deadhead subculture has embraced and parodied death (“I’d rather be Dead,” “Born again Deadhead”). As Roth notes, an iconography of grinning skeletons has transformed death imagery “into a celebration of life manifested in music, dance and community.”

After providing a fascinating survey of traditional “corpocentric” elements (motifs, tale types, legends involving corpses) in contemporary film, Mikel Koven’s concluding essay deals with the popular aesthetics of “vernacular cinema,” i.e., “films which demonstrate high resonance with an audience.” For his case study, he inspects Weekend at Bernie’s, a film employing the humorous manipulation of a corpse, which was universally dismissed by critics but supported at the box office. In considering this “dissonance between reviewers and audiences,” Koven applies his adaptation of Walter Ong’s “psychodynamics” theory of orality (formulaic repetition, crudeness in characterization, agonistic tone) and finds that Bernie’s addresses today’s “neo-orality” (1982). Ultimately, however, he contends that the film’s success depended on its combination of oral address with traditional elements which have “stood the test of time.” As a humorous idea, Koven maintains, “problematic corpse disposal still has currency today.”

**Death in the Multicultural Matrix**

While death may be viewed as a biological state that prompts psychophysiological responses from the living, such as weeping, hysteria (see
Morreall 1983, 57), and the uncontrolled laughter of bereaving persons (fou rire), what we perceive and communicate about death, that is, our ideas and attitudes toward that state, and their resultant behavioral and material manifestations, are cultural constructs. Such a construct is portrayed by Philip Ariès in his brilliant historical treatise, *The Hour of Our Death*. This influential work chronologically traces Western attitudes toward death, from an early orientation (500 to 1100 AD), wherein death was accepted as a part of life (“tame death”), to the invisibility of death in the twentieth century orientation of “death denied.” His argument is convincing, meticulously documented and undoubtedly true. Yet it is an oversimplified picture by virtue of its emphasis on normative elite thought. While he admits the existence of “vestiges” (Ariès 1981, xv) of previous attitudes concerning death at any given time, his account exhibits a trajectory that does not deviate from its course in interpreting the documentation of dominant groups (clerics, lords, mercantile interests, corporate entities), to the neglect of working-class and marginalized voices. The essays in this volume provide a foil for Ariès’ argument of “death denied” in our contemporary world, for they reveal a rich tapestry of varying views toward death, in these cases reflecting humor, that have simultaneously evolved in twentieth and twenty-first century multicultural environments. In the West and on its margins, alternative streams of thought concerning death continue to sustain themselves in great variety while co-existing with dominating currents, one of which Ariès describes so well.

*En toto,* these essays provide a wide variety of interpretations for complex expressive forms that link death and humor. Such forms may be understood as provocative socializing agents, celebrations of life, counter-hegemonic means of resistance, customs that facilitate courtship, or neoralt oral statements. But a point of commonality with regard to their social functions is that whether it is in the context of a graveyard, wake, festival, joking session, or movie theatre, all of these expressions appear to unite groups through their own aesthetics of laughter. By disengaging themselves, i.e. letting down their guard together within play frames of humor, people collectively communicate in ways normatively judged as unsavory, affirming their own meanings, both in the face of official culture and death itself. Whether it alleviates the pain of loss, lessens fear of the unknown, or celebrates life in face of demise, the commingling of humor and death in informal and ritualistic circumstances appears to be a human universal, a technique for communicating and dealing with the enigma of our precarious mortality.