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CREATING SITUATIONS
Practical Jokes and the Revival of the Dead in Irish Tradition

ILANA HARLOW

The playing of practical jokes involving the animation of corpses at wakes seems, at first encounter, to be a singularly bizarre practice, incongruous with its social context. Such amusements, however, were congruent with the behavioral norms of wakes as they were held in Ireland through the first half of the twentieth century. Furthermore, these seeming revivals of the dead quite possibly were part of a tradition of parodying “the revival of the seemingly dead” and “resurrection”—familiar themes in Irish folklore and popular culture. This essay documents that tradition through a presentation of narratives and dramas in which people who appear to be dead are ultimately revealed to be alive. The practical jokes under consideration should not be perceived as peculiar, for they exemplify aspects of Irish humor and an Irish proclivity towards provocative ludic behavior, introduced below by Brian Foley as the tendency to “create a situation.”

“There was all sorts of different wakes,” Brian Foley recalled as we sat in the home of his father-in-law Michael Walsh in Kilmacthomas (Kilmac), County Waterford one afternoon in 1992. (See “Notes” for transcription symbols.)

Brian: I can remember actually going to a wake here in the village—not here in the village but a mile or two out. And an old lady had died. And she suffered from, oh God, I’m not sure if it’s rickets.

But her legs were spread very wide when she was alive. And as she walked she swung her two legs—she walked like that [Brian demonstrates a bowlegged walk with his pointer and middle finger]. Like John Wayne in a Western film.

And . . . she died and rigor mortis had set in. And the body was discovered two days later. So they had to tie the legs before they put her in the bed for the wake. And they tied the legs together with binder twine down at the ankles.
And some clever fellow came into the wake and he was kneeling at the bottom of the bed and he slipped a penknife in under the clothes and he cut the twine and the two legs shot out and everybody scattered out and they said the woman wasn’t dead. And the priest was called and all.

And ye know that sort of thing went on at the Irish wakes all the time.2

Another one was they tied a bit of binder twine around the neck, and the corpse was lying back with the hands up here and the twine was running down the length of the body out to the end of the bed. [-] the local character came in at an appointed time and he gave a tug and—the head went up. And everybody scattered and ran out.

And then the body was left relaxed and everybody came in and said, “God, nothin’ happened.”

And while they were still looking, the body suddenly lifted again. [-]

At all wakes that sort of thing went on.

Ilana: Were you there when that happened?
Brian: No, no, I was never there. No.
Ilana: The legs one?
Brian: Yeah the legs one, yeah, yeah that one was in—she was a woman used to cure warts by puttin’ snails on them.
Michael: Oh yeah.
Brian: Neil, Kate Neil up there in—I don’t know what the name of the place is.
Ilana: Was that considered disrespectful or okay?
Brian: No I think the Irish didn’t worry too much about the word ‘respectful’ or ‘disrespectful.’ They just did whatever would create a situation.
Ilana: Create a situation? To put it mildly.
Brian: Yeah, exactly. Yeah. That sort of thing went on all the time.

Indeed, this was neither the first nor the last time I heard of such activities. Although I was surprised by the frequency with which they were reported to me, the reports of their enactment at wakes were less of a surprise. Scáin Ó Súilleabháin’s Irish Wake Amusements (1967b) had introduced me to various ludic activities that took place at these farewell parties. Throughout much of Europe, since medieval times and possibly earlier, feasting and drinking, dancing, singing and music, storytelling, riddling, and games were normal features of wakes.3 The design of the Irish wake has been explained by reference to a pre-Christian Celtic fear that the dead might return to avenge insults suffered during their lifetimes or
to harass those who had inherited their property (Christiansen 1946, 27; Ó Súilleabháin 1967b, 168–172). According to this theory, wakes were intended to appease the dead, “to show goodwill towards them, to sympathise with them in their decease” (Ó Súilleabháin 1967b, 171), and thus to ensure good relations between the living and the dead.

At the most basic level, the purpose of a wake is to watch the body during the period of time between death and burial. Since wakes lasted all night long, people attending them engaged in various activities simply to pass the time; and since Irish wakes are social events, some activities, such as playing games and drinking, were of the sort common to other social events. A number of activities managed to integrate the corpse, it being the guest of honor, into the social scene. This latter aspect of wake amusements will be elaborated upon below. Traditional wakes survived a slew of condemnations from the Church, including several bishops’ synodal decrees that disapproved of the drinking, singing, and dancing which took place. Eventually, however, wakes did become less boisterous when they started to be held outside the home—first in churches and then in funeral parlors. Still, wakes remain social affairs at which stories are told about the departed and drink is taken to toast their memory. Although wakes were occasions for merrymaking (Ó Súilleabháin 1967b, 159–160), it should be noted that amusements were restricted to the wakes of old people who had died of natural causes; the wakes of young people and of people who had died “bad deaths” were more somber and subdued.

THE REVIVAL OF THE SEEMINGLY DEAD

Practical jokes involving the seeming revival of the dead can be placed into a broader Irish context through juxtaposition with the widespread narrative theme of “the revival of the seemingly dead” which the jokes seem to parody. The violation of expectations which occurs when a pronouncement of death is found to be erroneous can inspire varied reactions of relief, horror, and humor. Various genres that deal with “the revival of the seemingly dead” and “resurrection from the dead” express different attitudes towards these themes. In myths, resurrection is usually attributed to a miracle, and thus is inspirational to the faithful. In the world of Märchen, where the boundaries between life and death, this world and the other, the ordinary and the supernatural, are easily crossed, resurrection is far from miraculous. Indeed, the resurrection of innocent victims is to be expected—it is
accomplished by the actions of another character in the tale, is often related to disenchantment, and leads to joyful reunions. In legends, the revival of the seemingly dead (more common than the miracle of resurrection found occasionally in religious legends) is usually a terrifying experience for those who encounter the revived. Their fear often has its source in the belief that the person has not simply revived from a deathlike state, but has actually returned from the dead; as illustrated in many ghost stories, when the dead return in spirit form, it is sometimes in order to exact vengeance.

If ghosts are startling, the revival of the dead, or of the seemingly dead, is shocking. Ghosts and other revenants are culturally recognized categories of being. People who encounter such entities can name what they are experiencing. Reports of resurrection are much rarer. In some cultures there is no name for such beings. They are either categorized under the general heading of “miracle,” or are falsely assumed to be ghosts. Ghosts—those returned from the dead in spirit form—are not considered below. Still, they are important to bear in mind, since jokes and comic dramas that deal with “resurrection” or with “the revival of the seemingly dead” seem to mock belief in ghosts as well as belief in the possibility of resurrection.

The Horror and Humor of Revival

A presentation of Irish narratives and dramas in which people who appear to be dead are ultimately revealed to be alive will demonstrate the prevalence of this theme. A likely initial response to the violation of expectations caused by an encounter with a person presumed dead is portrayed in Kevin Campbell’s narrative below about the man who died twice. Would-be grave robbers are themselves victimized by the shock of seeing the corpse they uncover sit up in its grave. Even in a macabre legend such as this, the potential for a slightly humorous effect exists in the terror experienced by the villainous grave robbers. Their fear is unfounded, since they have witnessed not a return from the dead but merely a regaining of consciousness; thus for some people they are implicitly made out to be fools. Their shock is paralleled ironically and tragically when the prematurely buried man’s mourning wife dies from the shock of seeing her revived husband. The husband subsequently dies of grief over the wife’s death.

This narrative (AT 990; K426) is widespread in Ireland. I first heard it in 1992 from Kevin Campbell, originally of Lurgan, County Armagh, in
Northern Ireland, as we sat late at night in the common room of a youth hostel in Tralee, County Kerry, and he told story after story:

But there are so many—I don’t know how classic these things are as well, how typical. There’s another one [·]—this particular one happened in my own town as well. This guy who . . . died twice you know.

What happened was—it’s kind of cruel in nature as well [Kevin chuckles]—this guy died and—he’s put in a coffin—all the rest. And he’s buried.

Anyway, these guys come in afterwards—knew he was pretty well-to-do, so he would have been buried with rings and things like that on his person. And they dug up the coffin and they tried to get the ring off his finger and they couldn’t. [·] They took his arm and they put it up on kind of a plank of wood and they had a big shovel and they just [Kevin slices the air with a downward motion of his hand] right down on his finger where the ring was. [·]

The guy woke up immediately . . . he woke up and he rose up more or less out of the coffin and they guys nearly shit themselves-like, really. He jumps up out of the grave anyway and they run away.

And anyway that guy got up himself—got up out of the grave. And he walked back. And he was wearing kind of a white kind of a cloth. They used to wear a kind of a white cloth—the same as now I suppose, a white kind of a thing—garment—after you die. . . . And he went back and he rapped on the door where he was living and his wife saw him and she dropped dead.

She actually dropped dead. And it sounds bad-like but she died-like, you know? She died of shock when she saw him. [·]

He was alive and he died shortly afterwards because of the fact that he blamed himself for that. And he was buried again.

Another Irish hosteller: That’s an old one. What it is, is they used to bury people who were in comas. They weren’t dead yet and just the shock of having the finger chopped off used to wake them up, you know?

Kevin: There’s so many where he appears back again and the wife drops dead. That’s particularly sad.

And you’re not even sure if that’s particularly true-like. An awful lot of these are hearsays and some of them are true, some of them are a bit true, some of them are totally untrue. But they’re great stories.

Two years later I was meeting in a pub with Martin Kiley, a former gravedigger who lives in Kill, County Waterford, and I mentioned this story to him. He responded by telling a similar story—one which does not focus as much on the shock of witnessing the revival of the seemingly dead as much as it affirms that such revivals did in fact occur:
Well that was a true story. That happened here in Ireland. Ye know.

That time they used to go into a trance, the people. They were only in a coma. They’d go into a coma and they’d have to cut their finger to wake ‘em up. They found that cure for ‘em.

A girl died and she had a lovely ring on her finger and this fellow wanted the ring.

And when they put her into the coffin he saw the ring and so he said, “I’ll dig up that grave some night,” he said, “and I’ll get that ring.”

So he did. He went off to the graveyard where she was buried and he opened the grave and he opened the coffin and he took out her hand. And he couldn’t get off the ring so he bit it off. And her finger started bleeding and she sat up in the coffin.

And she served in a public house after. That really happened.

Kevin calls his tale and related narratives “great stories.” What makes the revival of the seemingly dead a great story? And why does it have such comic potential? Wylie Sypher has actually proffered that resurrection belongs in the comic domain (Sypher 1956, 220). In *The Irish Comic Tradition*, Vivian Mercier writes that in order to appreciate parody, “It is necessary to recognize what is being parodied and to see the tendency to absurdity in the original which made the parody feasible” (1962, 2). It seems no wonder, then, that there is such a great tradition of parodying the return from the dead—resurrection is a phenomenon which seems desirable yet absurdly impossible. In the selection of traditional and popular texts below that deal with “resurrection” and with “the revival of the seemingly dead,” the motifs’ potentials for comic effect are evident.

The miracle of resurrection is a familiar motif in Irish folklore. It was enacted, for example, in the December folk drama of the mummers’ play, in which one character was stabbed and a mummer playing the part of a doctor brought him back to life. The resurrection was enthusiastically celebrated by the other mummers and by the audience, even though it was not a surprising twist of plot. Audience members were familiar with the annually performed play and knew that the fallen character would be revived. Its continued performance demonstrates the popularity of the theme. Revival of the dead and of the seemingly dead is a process that many people enjoy enacting and witnessing. Similarly, people enjoy listening repeatedly to traditional tales of the revival of the seemingly dead. The theme remains popular even when the plot is no longer surprising.

Some scholars have theorized that ritual plays like mumming, performed in the dead of winter, were at their inception a form of
sympathetic magic enacted to ensure the renewal of the seasons. Other scholars support metaphorical rather than causal associations between the revival of the dead in the play and the renewal of spring at winter’s end (Glassie 1983, 103, 180–81). It is also conceivable that the revival of the dead in the mummers’ play recalls the paradigm of resurrection in Western culture—Jesus’ miraculous rising from the dead. These ritual and religious associations tie mumming into serious realms of the cosmos; yet mumming was also a comic, ludic genre that included a clown or a fool as a standard member of the cast. In fact, the fool character used to be central in the life-cycle drama but, as time passed, became peripheral in mumming (Gailey 1969, 100).

The integration of religion and play in a single form might seem unusual, but it is actually quite typical, and supports insights into Irish humor made by Mercier that “comic literature in Gaelic shows the ambivalence towards myth and magic or sometimes towards Christian rites” (1962, 9).

This ambivalence was quite evident in a folk drama featuring a resurrection called “The Building of the Fort,” which used to be performed at wakes. As reported by W.G. Wood-Martin in his _Traces of the Elder Faiths in Ireland_, the play, which “was filled with sarcasms on various Christian rites and customs,” culminated in a battle between the leaders of each of the two groups of enemy soldiers portrayed in the play: After a well-sustained fight one combatant fell, as if mortally wounded, and was immediately surrounded by women in cloaks, with hoods drawn over their heads, who keened over the fallen warrior, whilst a bard recited his exploits, and pipers played martial music. It was then suggested that the prostrate man was not dead, and an herb doctor . . . was led in, and went through sundry strange incantations. The fallen man then came to life, and was carried off by his comrades with shouts of triumph (Wood-Martin 1902, 1, 314 ff.)

It seems particularly potent for a play featuring the resurrection of a dead body to be performed at a wake with an actual dead body in the room. Still, the play was a farce, a comedy. The resurrection was only one of many sarcastic references to Christian rites. Mercier writes, “the marvelous is but one stage in the development of many an Irish tale. In a later version the same story may appear as a parody” (1962, 12). Although parodies can develop only after the original has been established, they do not always replace the original. Tales that promote resurrection as sacred coexist with tales that mock it as absurd. Differential belief exists in society, and even
individuals waver back and forth in their beliefs. As Leszek Kolakowski has written, in every era the adversarial yet complementary characters of “priest” and “jester” exist; the former is the guardian of absolutes, while the latter questions what appears to be self-evident (1962, 323).

A well-known tale involving “the revival of the seemingly dead” tells of a stranger who comes to a house in which a dead man is laid out. The man’s wife asks the stranger to sit with the body while she goes to tell the neighbors of his death. When she leaves, the “dead man” sits up and tells the stranger he is only feigning death in order to catch his wife in her affair with another man (H466). Shortly after the wife’s return, her lover comes to visit and the “dead man” beats the adulterous couple. This traditional story (closely related to AT1350), in which the husband plays a vicious prank on his unfaithful wife, was told as a personal narrative by Aran islander Pat Dirane to J.M. Synge, who used it as the basis of his play “The Shadow of the Glen” (Synge 1935, 57–60). Synge also plays with the idea of resurrection in his comic drama “Playboy of the Western World,” in which the protagonist, Christy Mahon, seemingly kills his father twice, and twice the father rises from “the dead.” Synge’s dialogue, informed by his ethnography, illustrates the phenomenon noted earlier, that upon seeing someone presumed dead, it is more common to assume that the person is a ghost than to accept that he has revived. When Christy first sees his father after the supposed slaying, he fears him as “the walking spirit of my murdered da” and looks for a place to hide from that “ghost of hell” (Synge 1935, 47).

The theme of resurrection is probably most widely known from the comic recitation and song “Finnegan’s Wake,” which tells of tippler Tim Finnegan who falls off a ladder when drunk, breaking his skull. A fight breaks out at his wake, and amidst the brawl some whiskey spills on Tim and revives him (see Appendix). “Finnegan’s Wake” has inspired related songs and performances. Michael Walsh of Kilmac sang me a song composed by a local postman who is now dead and gone. The song, whose chorus begins “Then Pat Malone forgot that he was dead . . . ,” tells the story of a married couple who couldn’t make ends meet. The husband pretended he was dead so the wife could collect his life insurance. But he forgot that he was dead when he smelled the whiskey at his wake (see Appendix).

In Downpatrick, County Down, I met Bobby Hanvey, a photographer and member of a group that occasionally puts on a fundraising event called “Tim Finnegan’s Wake.” Bobby himself conceived of the idea. At these four-hour affairs, held at hotel pubs, Bobby, dressed in a shroud, lies
motionless for most of the evening playing the part of the corpse. Those who attend are the mourners. The ambiance of an old-time wake is recreated. The pub is lit by candlelight; drink, clay pipes, and snuff are passed around, music is played, and songs are sung. If it is a Catholic crowd, someone dresses up as a priest; if it is a Protestant crowd, someone dresses up as a minister. The mourners wash the corpse. Prayers are said. “And people come up and after they get enough drink in them and they see me laying still they imagine I am dead,” says Bobby. “A lot of them come up and touch you, you see, through the night, to see if you’re dead.” Towards the end of the evening Bobby, as Tim Finnegan, comes to life.

“Finnegan’s Wake” and related texts play both with the notion of resurrection and with the notion that the whiskey (which is denounced by the church, and which can make its imbibers dead drunk), is also the holy water of life.

I heard another parody of resurrection through anointment in a joke about a hare and a priest. Fourteen-year-old Yvonne of County Armagh told the joke, and it was commented on by her friends Tracy and Laura.

_Yvonne_: There was this man, right? and he was driving along you know, goin’ to chapel.

_Rmmmmmmmm_.

[Tracy tempers Yvonne’s tendency to get carried away with dramatization with an “Okay, Yvonne.”]

_Yvonne_: Okay. Slams on the brakes. [Yvonne makes a screeching sound]. He slams on the brakes. Oh no! He hit the hare—you know, a rabbit thing. Okay, he hit the hare ◆◆, the poor rabbit is dead.

And he goes, “Hail Mary, Hail Mary” and all that there. You see. And he didn’t know what had happened. He was sittin, there cryin’, and a priest came past. Okay.

_Laura_: Cryin’ over a rabbit?

_Tracy_: Aww.

_Yvonne_: The priest goes, “Oh, what have you done?”

And he said, “I’ve run over a hare, what am I gonna do?”

And [the priest] tells him, “Hold on a wee minute and I’ll put stuff on it you know, that could help it.”

But anyway [—he put the stuff on the hare—and the hare got up and the hare ran on down the field and kept lookin back and wavin’.

Ran on down the field, run back and wavin’.

And the man goes, “What did you put in that, anyway?”

“Permanent hare wave.” ◆◆
Some of the texts above play with the belief in the miracle of resurrection, others with the belief in the return from the dead. Some parodic forms mock the revival of the dead by setting up situations in which the dead are not actually dead at all, but only seemingly so. The practical jokes under consideration are the reverse of such parodies; jokers take an actual corpse and only seem to revive it. Most parodic forms claim that resurrection or revival is absurd by showing that it never really occurs, but only seems to when those who were never really dead are somehow revived. The practical jokes show the absurdity of the idea of revival by making a corpse move involuntarily, thus demonstrating how very dead the person is and how impossible it would be for the corpse to actually revive and move on its own.

The Humor of Corpses

It should be noted that even when a corpse’s movement is not the result of a practical joke, it could be considered amusing. Ned Flynn illustrated this to me as we sat with friends and family in his sister Mary’s kitchen in Faha, County Waterford:

My mother used to tell the yarn about this poor person died. An old person. And I think they were dead a long time. They were dead for quite a while and they were found.

So the legs were stiff—they couldn’t straighten them.

So they had to lay him in the coffin anyway.

And this fellow says, “I’ll straighten them,” he says. And he went out and he got a big stone, a big heavy rock of a stone and lifted it up onto his legs.

And as he did, he [the corpse] sat up. ●● Inside in the coffin.

Perhaps corpses, rigor mortis, and the image of a corpse suddenly springing up, like a jack-in-the-box upon being released from its binding, or like a see-saw when a weight is placed on its legs, is funny because of the mechanical quality of the motion. As Henri Bergson proposes in his essay on laughter and the comic effect, it is funny to us when a person acts involuntarily, without autonomy, like a machine. He also suggests that “appearance seeking to triumph over reality” is comic (1956, 96). When corpses move, there is motion without life; the appearance of life triumphs over the reality of death.

THE SEEMING REVIVAL OF THE DEAD

The above illustrations of various horrific and humorous developments of the theme of the seemingly “undead” dead, widespread in Irish narrative, enable greater understanding of the fabrication of the
“undead” dead through animation of a corpse, for they demonstrate that such practical jokes are thematically connected to other expressive forms of Irish culture. It is evident from the conversations surrounding the next account that the practical jokes fit into the spirit of old-time Irish wakes.

“What do you think makes a good story?” I asked the company assembled one night at the Flynns’ of Faha, County Waterford. Ned Flynn, a brother from nearby Dungarvan, and the Flynns’ friend Davey Whelan from County Tipperary responded to my query:

Ned: To hold people. To be able to hold people in suspense . . . until the end, ye know? [-]

Davey: Ye want a crowd in the house and you want someone dead-like in there.

Ilana: You’d wanna have someone dead?

Davey: You would.

Ilana: Why?

Ned: The wakes. He’s talkin’ about the wakes. In the wakes longgo—when a person died, they had what ye call a wake—in the house. Funeral parlors now take them [corpses] away. But at the wake they have drink—beer, and they have chalk pipes. [-]. They’re made of chalk ye know, white chalk. And they were given out to the people that came to the wake to pay their respects to the corpse. And they had chalk pipes for the men and they had snuff—the old women used snuff—and they’d give snuff to the women. But the women used to smoke the chalk pipe too, didn’t they Davey?

Davey: Oh yeah.

Ned: They were known as a dúidín [doodeen] and they usually—they’ve got a long stem on them, but there’s no point in having a long stem, because it broke off. They usually broke half the stem. Ye’d have a little pipe and about that much of a stem on it. That was known as a dúidín. And that word was used in song as well: “his dúidín in his gob”. His ‘gob’ is his mouth. [-]

Ilana: [-] And where do the stories come into it? What kinds of stories would people tell at wakes?

Ned: They’d tell stories about a wake—about this fellow died. It happened in Dungarvan. This happened actually.

He was a character. They were characters. A character now is a fellow up for devilment ye’d say—fooling and blaggarding [blackguarding], ye know—innocent fun now. There wouldn’t be anything in it.
He stole in. He got in some time of the day and he put a bit of cord around the corpse’s neck. And he brought it down the clothes to the foot of the bed.

The room was full, anyway, late in the night when he came back in again. And he knelt down at the foot of the bed—at the end of the bed, to say his prayers. And when he were nearly finished, he cut the twine and he pulled it and the body sat up in the bed. ♦ ♦ And they all ran out.

Ilana: Oh God. Were you there?
Ned: I wasn’t. No. ♦ ♦ My mother used to tell that story. ♦

I told Packie Manus Byrne of Ardara, County Donegal, an account of a practical joke and asked him if he had heard of such things. I was not recording him at the time so what follows is my summary of the response he gave me—an account which his eyes told me was being playfully embellished:

A man died sitting on the ground leaning against a wall with his knees pulled up to his chest. Of course, once rigor mortis set in they couldn’t fit him in a coffin, so they built a coffin in which he could be placed sitting up—a coffin that was higher than usual, more of a cube shape than a rectangle. Someone managed to rig up a string to him and at the wake, when one of the women was saying the Rosary, he pulled it and that made the corpse turn over and face the woman. Everyone was upset, especially the woman. The blaggard was beaten up when they found him out.

Other types of pranks at wakes also caused observers to momentarily think the corpse had come back to life. Andy McGuire of Glencolmcille (Glen), County Donegal, and I were sitting by the hearth in his house above the village as he told me an old story about Paddy the Tay (Paddy the Tea), who had called in to say a prayer at the house of a man who had recently died. The wake was held in Teelin, just down the road from Glen.

The dead man once had gotten a fishhook caught in his finger, and as a result his finger was crooked. Paddy the Tay came to the wake wearing a swallowtail coat. Paddy was on his way out of the room that the corpse was in, to get a cup of tea; when Paddy’s back was turned, some jokers or blaggards took the corpse’s bent finger and stuck it through the button hole at the back of Paddy’s coat, and the hand of the dead man “pulled” Paddy back into the room. This recalls a prank reported by Ó Súilleabáin which involved sewing a man’s coattails to the
corpse’s shroud (Ó Súilleabháin 1967b, 67). Andy’s account came as one among many remembrances of people who are no longer living:

God bless him. Oh they’re all dead and gone.
   There was another man lived out here in Teelin. I remember him.
   He was called Paddy the Tay.
   Paddy the Tay.
   There’s a disease called diabetes. [He would] go into the house [they’d]
   always give him a cup of tea.
   He was a Teelin man.
   So this night in question there was a wake in a house in Teelin, you know
   there was a man dead in the house, so Paddy thought he would call in to say
   a prayer in the house.
   And ye know he had one of these swallowtail type coats on him that time,
   ye know, that they used to wear.
   And a man was dead in the house. On the bed. And he [the dead man]
   got a hook into his finger one time. They were fishing cod. And the finger
   bent over like this, do ye see? [Andy motions a crooked index finger.]
   And some of the blaggards out in Teelin—Paddy [went into the] other
   room for a cup o’ tea and while he was out, a couple of them took the man’s
   hand and put it into the button hole like this, do ye see? [-]
   Hand of the man in the bed pulled Paddy back. It’s true.
   “Were you there?” I ask.
   No. I heard it, I heard it.

I heard another account from Eugene Gillan, originally of County
Sligo, in Kinsale, County Cork. And when I mentioned such practical
jokes to Kevin Campbell, who is at least a generation younger than the
men who had told me about them, he said that he had heard of such
pranks. He did not know what to make of them, however—whether they
had actually happened or were just told as jokes. In New York, an Irish-
American woman I met related it as something she had heard of as hap-
pening in Ireland, and an elderly Irishman in New York recollected
seeing such a prank as a young boy in County Sligo. I had read accounts
of such practical jokes in both Ó Súilleabháin’s *Irish Wake Amusements*
(1967b) and in Eric Cross’s *Tailor and Ansty* (1964).

In his description of pranks played at wakes, Ó Súilleabháin writes:

Even the corpse occasionally became involved through these pranks. One of
the commonest stories in this regard tells how the limbs of an old person
who had died were so bent through rheumatism or arthritis that they had to
be tied down with ropes to straighten them for the period of the wake. In the dusk-like atmosphere of the wake house some trickster would secretly cut the ropes, causing the corpse, as it were, to sit up, terrifying those around. (1967b, 67)

A similar situation is recounted by the Tailor, the great character who, along with his wife Ansty, inspired the book by Cross:

There was something like that happened in another wake years ago. They were waking a man who was found dead, sitting in a chair, and he had got stiff and his body was bent as he was sitting. He looked queer on the table with his knees sticking up. But if you pressed his knees down the rest of his body came up from the table.

Well, the divil a bit, but someone devised a plan for settling the business and to keep him straight. They tied a rope around his knees and under the table, and another round his chest, and he looked as decent a corpse as ever lay on a table then.

The wake went on, and a piece of the night was spent, and people were getting lively, when some boy cut the rope round the corpse’s chest and he popped up off the table as though he had been shot. The company thought that he had come to life again and there was the devils’ own hullabulo. (Cross 1964, 91)

Corpses have been made to move as though alive in other areas of the world, too. Petr Bogatyrev describes games in sub-Carpathian Russia in which the cadaver is made to participate, and includes a girl’s account of a prank:

They attach a string to the hand of the corpse and, while the psalter is being read, the boys pull the string and see! the corpse moves its hand. And they are frightened. (Bogatyrev 1977, 42)

Practical jokes were also played with corpses at wakes in the eastern Canadian province of Newfoundland and Labrador, much of which was settled by the Irish. Peter Narváez, who has compiled a catalogue of social interaction at Newfoundland wakes (1994, 268–271), has discussed the social functions of practical jokes along with other “tricks and fun” enjoyed at wakes in Newfoundland (1994, 263–93) [reprinted in this volume]. Monica Morrison writes that pranks played at Newfoundland wakes serve an anti-ritual function of relieving the solemnity of the event (1974, 288). There is a good deal of literature supporting the view that jokes are subversive of dominant structure and denigrate dominant values; jokes have even been described as anti-rites (Douglas 1991, 102).
alone, however, cannot adequately account for such jokes. As illustrated by the narratives and beliefs concerning the revival of the dead presented earlier, the jokes are thematically connected to other traditional forms in Ireland, and thus tie into a broader Irish cultural context.

THE WAKE

When a person dies a natural death, it does not prompt the violation of cognitive expectations that is experienced when a young person dies. It is part of the natural order of things for elderly people to die. The death of an intimate associate, however, does violate social expectations. Social relationships must be mutually enacted if they are to continue. When one member of a relationship dies, the survivor is left with the problem of how to maintain the relationship. Wakes are creative responses to the violation of social expectations that results when death spirits away a member of society. Wake activities, including practical jokes involving the animation of the corpse, were ways of integrating the corpse into the social scene while simultaneously ushering the dead person out of it. Such activities thus demonstrated, as parts of the rite of passage, that the dead person had acquired a new social status. The practical jokes under consideration focus attention on responses to both temporary and permanent disruptions of social relations; the former result from the playing of the practical joke itself and the latter are a consequence of death.

Practical jokes fit into the structure of oldtime Irish wakes. Wakes are recognized as forums for public grieving and as formalized means of showing respect towards the deceased and their families. Davey Whelan’s remark above, that having “someone dead in the house” inspires good storytelling, indicates the Irish wake’s status as a social function as well. It was a communal gathering that gave rise to traditional social activities such as storytelling, riddling, dancing, singing, and drama. Ó Súilleabháin enumerates the types of ludic behavior that occurred at Irish wakes: taunting and mocking; booby traps, mischief making, horseplay, rough games, and fights (1967b). A game in which mock priests performed marriage ceremonies was also played.15 Even this general description of wake activities makes it apparent that playing practical jokes at wakes is not as improper as it might seem to those unfamiliar with the format of oldtime Irish wakes. This does not mean that pranksters, when found out, were never banished from a given wake or that they were never berated, for sometimes they were (as indicated in Packie Byrne’s account above). It does mean, however, that joking was not considered completely
inappropriate behavior. Practical jokes entailing the seeming revival of the dead actually complement “The Building of the Fort” mentioned above—the somewhat spoofing play sometimes performed at wakes, in which characters acted out a death, a wake, and a revival.

The corpse was often animated, or at least treated as though it were alive, in other wake activities, too. If a game of cards were played at the wake, for example, the dead was sometimes dealt a hand; if people were smoking, a pipe was put into the corpse’s mouth; sometimes, the corpse was taken onto the floor to join in the dance (Ó Súilleabháin 1967b, 31–32, 172).

The wake marks a liminal moment in the social life of an individual. In the period between death and burial, a person being waked is physically still part of the community, is present at the social gathering, yet is unable to participate. (This, interestingly, is the reverse of the situation presented in supernatural legends that involve revenants. The dead in such legends are already buried, their bodies no longer in view. And in the absence of the body, the spirit or ghost of the person attests that the dead are part of society and can be active in social life). The wake must deal with the question of how to relate to a person in a liminal state of being, and how to integrate such a being into the social scene.14

Wake activities are a creative response to death and its disruption of social life. They enable friends to interact with the departed in such a way as to lessen the severance of mutually enacted social relations that occurs with death. Ó Súilleabháin writes that behavior at the wake showed that the deceased was still one of the company (1967b, 171–172). He posits that wake activities were an effort to show that “Death was but a trivial occurrence, which could be alleviated by the features of the wake” (1967b, 172). He theorizes that wake activities initially were inspired by a fear of the dead and of ghosts. The wake gave the deceased a good send off; this was necessary, since some people worried that the dead who were not waked or buried honorably would return for vengeance.15 Such beliefs do not prevail currently, but the notion remains that the wake is one last opportunity to have a good time with the deceased. Ó Súilleabháin comments that the wake was the last occasion on which the dead and the living could share each other’s company, and thus was an “attempt to do final justice to the deceased while he was still physically present” (1967b, 172). This sentiment is supported nicely by a comment Kevin Campbell made to me about these high-spirited affairs:
And there’s a lot of drinking going on even, and people laughin’ and there’s loads of emotion. But the next day it’s dead, dead atmosphere, it’s—as soon as the lid goes on the coffin it changes totally.

You’ll never see that person again. Not only that—there’s a big difference between seeing somebody dead and not seeing [him] ever again . . . in any context.

Practical jokes played with corpses do not necessarily honor the dead, but they certainly are a way of interacting with them and actively integrating them into wake activities. Building on Ó Súilleabháin’s notion that pranks actively involved the corpse in the wake (Ó Súilleabháin 1967b, 67), Narváez has made the intriguing suggestion that animating a corpse, far from victimizing or disrespecting the dead, actually enabled the deceased to take part in the fun as an “active participant in an alliance with the prankster” (1994, 272 and this volume 121).

Aside from the need to maintain a relationship with the departed, practical jokes were also inspired by, and contributed to, the merry-making going on at the wakes. Social gatherings that honor a deceased community member are often a mix of joy and sadness. Wood-Martin reported that at Irish wakes,

Tragedy and comedy, all that is stern and all that is humorous in Irish character, are displayed in unfettered freedom. Transition from deepest sorrow to mirth occurs with the greatest rapidity, so that there is melancholy in their mirth, and mirth in their melancholy. (1902, 1:314)

DIFFERENTIAL BELIEF

The origin of wake activities, as theorized by Ó Súilleabháin, and legends dealing with the revival of the seemingly dead, convey belief in the return from the dead. Practical jokes involving animated corpses played on the fear some people had that the dead could come back and do harm to the living. Thus, the effectiveness of the practical jokes was enhanced by the existence of differential belief; the perpetrators of the practical jokes who apparently were unafraid of the dead took advantage of the fact that some of their neighbors were afraid. They exploited the existence of differential belief.

A good deal of folklore consists of collective representations belonging equally to many members of a given community; but as Richard Bauman has pointed out, it is also possible for difference of identity to be at the base of a folklore performance (1972, 38). Folklore may be differentially
distributed, differentially perceived, and differentially understood; it can even be an instrument of conflict and aggression. The success of practical jokes depends not only on the joker and victim having different information states (Bauman 1988, 37, 40), but also on the fact that differential belief exists within a single society. One person’s belief is another person’s silly superstition or *piseog*. The resource of differential belief is mined by practical jokers in Ireland, who play on others’ *piseogs*. I was introduced to this form of entertainment before I even got to Ireland when the Irishman sitting next to me on the flight over told me accounts of such activity.

The potential for using differential belief as a resource in provocative play can be seen at a basic level in the following exchange between two children that I heard in Glencolmcille, County Donegal. Maria, age nine, reports a belief. Patrick, age seven and three quarters, blatantly defies and discounts it:

*Maria:* If a girl spits, blood comes out of Mary’s mouth.

*Ilana:* And if a boy?

*Maria:* Blood comes out of God’s mouth. And [-] if a boy and a girl whistles, Mary and God starts to cry.

*Patrick:* *I’m* whistlin’.* [He whistles.]

*Maria:* Sec. They’re cryin’ now. God and Mary is up in heaven cryin’ now cause you’re whistlin’.

*Patrick:* Sure but we *have* to whistle.

*Maria:* *Ye* don’t have to.

*Patrick:* If someone’s far away—can’t hear someone else—they whistle.

*Ilana:* So why do you think it’s wrong to whistle? Do you know?

*Maria:* It says in the Bible and our teacher told us.

Patrick’s dismissal of Maria’s belief, his implicit categorization of it as a *piseog*, enables him to make a valid point about the practical necessity of whistling to get someone’s attention, while he simultaneously gets a rise out of Maria. Mockery of belief seems to be at the base of many pranks. Michael Walsh of Kilmac recalled to me a practical joke that involved tying a thin length of twine to the door knockers of two houses across the street from each other. When the people in one house opened their door (note that the doors open inwards), the tension on the twine would cause a knock on the door across the way. The residents in that house would come to the door to find no one there. In a community where some members believe that ghosts exist, or that unexplainable knocks on
the door could be an omen of death, this sort of prank is more than an annoyance. Thus, it brings with it the added pleasure of playing on others’ piseogs.

Similarly, when people believe that someone can return from the dead to do harm to the living, the animation of a corpse in their presence is not only an unexpected shock, it is also frightening. Practical jokes entailing the seeming revival of the dead (along with comic songs, narratives, and dramas that deal with the revival of the seemingly dead) seem to mock belief in ghosts as well as belief in the possibility of resurrection.

**Legends and Practical Jokes**

The contrast of sacred and ludic, actual and parodic, horrific and comedic expressions of the same themes of resurrection and revival, highlights relations between the genres of legend and joke. As mentioned above, practical jokes consisting of animating a corpse seem to play on the belief held by some people in Ireland that the dead can return to do harm, and on the resulting fear of the dead. In both legends and in accounts of practical jokes, people’s initial reaction when they see their loved ones revive is not one of joy; instead they are frightened and run away.

Features of supernatural legends such as ghosts—the undead dead—confound and thus highlight the permeability of cognitive and cosmological categories. The practical joker who animates a corpse fabricates a being that confounds categories, and in doing so the joker seems to mock such legends. The legends suggest the possibility of the undead dead. The practical joker takes advantage of the belief in this possibility. The practical joke appears to actualize the possibility of the undead dead, but ultimately reveals itself as simulation. The potentially numinous is presented as humorous.

The comparison of legends and practical jokes, particularly in regard to the social contexts in which they are enacted, is illuminated by David Krause’s comment that “the tragic figure must come to terms with the distressed world and affirm sacred values; the comic figure must escape from the oppressive world and mock sacred values” (1982, 30). Supernatural legends are in the realm of the sacred. Practical jokes, of course, are ludic. Johan Huizinga has delineated the relationship between play and the sacred, beginning with a view of archaic ritual as sacred play (1950, 19–20). The realms of the sacred and the ludic are not mutually exclusive; furthermore, they actually involve kindred
processes. Both ‘religion’ and ‘play’ negotiate boundaries between categories, and help mortals transcend the limitation of situations in which they find themselves.

PRINCIPAL JOKES

Practical Jokes as Theater and as Play

Although practical jokes are occasionally malicious, they basically are regarded as a humorous form, even by the victims, when they consider their own duping in retrospect. A practical joke is a little piece of theater performed in front of an unwitting audience. Its essence is subjunctive. Richard Schechner, influenced by Victor Turner, describes the subjunctive character, the “as if” quality, of the theater. The quality is integral to its nature, yet in a good, successful performance, “the ‘as if’ has sunk out of sight and all the audience sees is the ‘is’ of the show” (Schechner 1981, 36). Like the theater, the practical joke is a temporary construction, a bounded strip of experience in the key of make-believe.

The violations of expectations resulting from the practical joke are temporary. The practical joke as a unit of behavior includes the eventual revelation to the victims that the experience was indeed part of a joke. Although it might affect ongoing social relations if the victims fail ever to see the humor in it, the practical joke generally does not have any effects “in the real world”. This comic violation of expectations is self-contained. There is relief and humor in this, especially when contrasted with the actual and long-term violations of expectations described in supernatural and tragic legends.

In most social contexts deception is considered immoral and unethical, but when the deception is defined even retrospectively as “play,” it is often considered a pleasurable and even admirable activity. The practical joke is considered “play,” which, by its very nature, often entails semblance and deception (Huizinga 1950, 35). “Play” is linked conceptually and etymologically to “appearances.” As Wendy O’Flaherty points out, “illusion” is an English derivative of ludo, the Latin word for “play.” And the English word “play” also has associations with illusion—a “play” is a makebelieve drama, the “play of light” causes mirages, and “wordplay” often creates double images (O’Flaherty 1984, 119).

Narrative Response to Practical Jokes

Narrative responses to practical jokes—accounts of the practical jokes often told by people who were not themselves victims—define
them as play; they thus suggest that social relations should not suffer because of them. Practical jokes, and people’s endorsement of them as “innocent fun,” are temporary abandonments of ideals of trust and community. Accounts of practical jokes praise those who violate the values; they are affectionately dubbed “the local character,” a “clever fellow,” a “blaggard,” a “fellow up for devilment.” Perhaps in part this is to emphasize that such pranks are recognized forms of diversion which should not have permanent disruptive effects on community life. The narratives encourage people to overlook feelings of victimization and to focus instead on the creative aspect of the prank and the characters who carried it out. When victims narrate their own duping as an amusing event, they publicly show an appreciation of the humor in the prank. Thus the telling of such narratives is linked to the restoration of social relations temporarily disrupted by the victimization and potential alienation which accompanies pranks. While the narrated event can be divisive, the narrative event can be unifying.

Richard Tallman suggests that practical jokes and the stories that recount them are two parts of the same expressive tradition (1974, 35, 249). The entertainment value of the practical joke clearly does go beyond the actual event itself, through its duplication in narrative form (Morrison 1974, 293). It seems that pranks are often funnier in the retelling than in the enactment. When I asked narrators if they had been present at the enactment of the practical joke they were recounting, most replied that they had not. The fact that they told me about practical jokes, even when they had not participated in or witnessed the particular practical joke recounted, supports the claim that telling about a practical joke is an extension of the tradition of its enactment. Their knowledge of the practical joke indicates that at some point people who were there at the wakes told the story to people who were not present. The situation was reportable, tellable. The accounts made their way into oral circulation; community members who did not witness the events found them worthy of recounting. The narrative accounts of such events also reinforce the notion among community members that such practical jokes are indeed enacted and that they are intended as diversion—that the appropriate response to such things is laughter. Part of the comic effect certainly lies in the pranksters’ and listeners’ delight in the reaction of the unsuspecting victims.

The antics of practical jokers differ from the deceptive activities of tricksters. Tricksters often engage in their deceptive activities for purposes
of personal gain, and are usually just as happy if their victims never find out what has transpired (Tallman 1974, 270). Practical jokers, however, revel in the revelation to the victims that they have been duped; part of the structure of the practical joke as a genre is for the victims to experience the violation of expectations. Richard Bauman has noted this as well, and refers to this part of the practical joke as the "discrediting of the fabrication" (1988, 45, 48).

IRISH HUMOR

The comic effect also derives from paradox and illusion. As Bauman has noted, practical jokes depend for their effect on things appearing to be something other than what they actually are. David Krause points to paradox as a source of laughter in The Profane Book of Irish Comedy (1982). An animated corpse creates the illusionary paradox of the undead dead. Paradox, something that appears to be what it is not, leads us to perceive contradiction (Napier 1986, 1). As Mary Douglas has suggested, humor is often based on contradicting or challenging dominant cognitive or social structures, or on the juxtaposition of the seemingly incongruous or disparate (Douglas 1991, 95–96).

Krause characterizes Irish comedy as a rebellious, liberating, anarchic, impulsive, creative behavior or life force, which functions against a cruel and oppressive reality. In a section entitled “The comical denial of expectations,” he writes:

Irish comedy is based on what might be called an oxymoronic view of life: losers can be winners, vices can be virtues, folly can be wisdom. This paradoxical approach to dramatic laughter thrives on contradictions and exaggerations that allow the comic characters to insulate themselves from the inevitable villainies of the world as well as from their own palpable frailties. (1982, 255–256)

The character of the humor that Krause observes does not apply to Irish comedy alone, but to the humor of many cultures. Also, it is too much of a generalization to ascribe all the humor of a culture to a reaction against oppressive conditions. It is, however, descriptive of much Irish humor. Although Krause is referring to underdogs’ use of deception and subterfuge as a survival tactic against political oppressors, it seems that his notion suitably describes the practical joke under consideration. Playing with death, making light of it, is a form of subversion. Though the entertainment value of the practical joke—it s ability to create a situation—is
probably its key function, the contradiction inherent in the seemingly
undead dead and the temporary defeat of the inevitable—our mortal
frailty—cannot be ignored.

CREATING SITUATIONS

When I asked Brian Foley whether the animation of a corpse would
be considered disrespectful, he replied that the Irish “just did whatever
[-] would create a situation.” This understated description of home-
made entertainment intrigued me. I pursued the idea with Brian, who
responded, “I don’t know what it is. I suppose boredom has a lot to do
with it. People that didn’t have lot to do—just did something, to create
a situation.”

He proceeded to tell me about another practical joke, played one
quiet night on three policemen who were “smoking their pipes and they
were fly-fishing. Very relaxed gentlemen . . . And he [the joker] decided
. . . the situation—the whole thing was too peaceful. He had to do some-
thing to upset it, get a little bit of excitement.” The joker caused a big
splash in the water by throwing a greyhound into the river from a bridge
above. “The lads were fishing and one of them thought they had a
salmon caught. And they were all pulling in their reels. ♦ And they saw a
greyhound coming in. They didn’t know where the greyhound came
out of ye know? ♦ But everybody made their own fun I suppose.”

Michael Walsh of Kilmac echoed Brian’s sentiments in a discussion
we had two years later about practical jokes played with corpses. He said
that although “you wouldn’t be welcome” to do that sort of thing today,
back then “it would only be done for a laugh . . . They made their own
enjoyment” in the days before television or radio. This attitude was also
conveyed to me by a Dubliner who had spent some time in jail, and
described to me a practical joke played by prisoners on fellow inmates as
“great crack”—good fun: “And it is, you know-like. It breaks up the
monotony. It’s entertainment you know. When you can’t get a film
[film] like—make a fool out of somebody. ♦”

As communities gathered to honor one of their dead, amidst an envi-
ronment of generous reciprocity in which guests paid respects and
offered prayers, and hosts offered food, drink and tobacco, and stories
were told, and cards were played, some guests chose to have some fun by
introducing a disruptive element—the undead dead who would
frighten the other guests. The framing of such behavior within a socially
integrative custom is reminiscent to me of the ambiance which develops
in many pubs. The reciprocity involved in patrons buying each other rounds is mixed with playfully abusive verbal dueling—known as slagging and blaggarding. Behavior that brings people closer together, which reaffirms social relationships through mutual generosity, is mixed with the temporary abandonment of cohesive social values.

The provocative ludic impulse in Ireland is manifested in practical jokes, in “winding people up,” in “codding” them, and in verbal dueling, among other expressive forms. When you wind people up you “get them going,” you tell them something false or provocative to “get a rise out of them.” When you “cod” someone, you try to make him or her believe what is not true. It can be thought of as a verbal practical joke.

For instance, when I first met Davey Whelan in a County Tipperary pub, acquaintances of his asked, “How’s the wife?” as they walked passed us. “She’s contrary today. Don’t go near her,” he replied. He told me his wife was bedridden and that she was quite disagreeable; I commiserated with him. One day I visited with Davey in his home for several hours, and thought it odd that he did not go in to see his wife at all, for even a crotchety woman needs to eat. I asked after her health, and he told me she was contrary. When I got back to the Flynns, my hosts, I asked them about Davey and his wife. It was revealed to me that Davey had no wife at all, and certainly not an invalid one. “He codded you rightly,” they laughed. On subsequent days I noticed that people often greeted Davey by asking, “How’s the wife?” It was a running joke regarding his bachelorhood. Since I did not know this, I presented Davey with an opportunity to have some fun with me. The Flynns’ amused response, “He codded you rightly,” told me I shouldn’t hold it against Davey, that it should not affect our relationship negatively, that his actions could be defined as a culturally recognized behavior called “codding,” and that he had done a particularly good job of codding me.

Many Irishmen I encountered told me or demonstrated to me that they take great pleasure in verbal repartee. The Irish word ‘craic,’ which is used in English as well (crack) to designate “fun,” literally means “chat.” Publican Gerry McCarthy told me he likes the spontaneity of craic, the “quick mindedness of people to come back with an answer”:

It’s very hard to describe what it really is. It’s just, I suppose it’s people’s imagination at work. [-] It’s generally saying something that immediately gets a response in another. [-] It’s a certain animation. Somebody says something, somebody comes back with something else.
A quick example of this can be seen in the following joke I heard when I asked for lies in a pub in Kilmac.

Did you hear that one? Did you hear that one about the world’s greatest liar? He said, “I swam across Niagara Falls.”
“I know,” said your man. “I seen ye.”

The situation created by the enactment of folklore is often playfully agonistic. In some storytelling contexts, listeners respond by telling a story that they think outdoes the first story in its effect—in bizarreness, scariness, or humor. In discussing the verbal dueling known as “flyting,” W. H. Auden noted a poetic aesthetic when he remarked that “the comic effect arises” from the fact that “the protagonists are not thinking about each other but about language and their pleasure in employing it inventively” (Krause 1982, 268). This is in keeping with Gerry McCarthy’s statement that “You may often have talk of no consequence really, but just—fun.” It seems not surprising that a form of verbal dueling, called “barging,” did occur at wakes. Eugene Gillan, currently of Kinsale, County Cork, thinks that the form of insult or verbal harassment called “slagging,” which sometimes develops into a verbal duel called a “slagging match,” happens all over the world, but is more prevalent in Ireland. He attributes this to the ability he thinks the Irish have “to sense people within a few seconds of meeting them,” the ability to determine “whether they’re good humor or bad humor [-] They would sense that a person is a kind of a braggart and try to bring him down to earth.”

In discussing the amusing pastime of “winding someone up,” Eugene noted that some people “are easy got at.” If a person is very serious, “you can tell them a story and get them going. You know what I mean like? You’d say ‘such a fellow is a great judge of the weather’ in front of someone who was actually a better judge.”

It seems to me that there is something very “Irish” about wanting to provoke a response in others, to “create a situation” as Brian Foley put it.25 This is quite evident when considering the practical jokes that are at the core of this essay. I was intrigued by my discovery that narratives of a corpse sitting up when a strap holding it down is broken are widespread in the American South. It is quite revealing to compare Irish and American versions, since in America the strap always breaks by accident, while in Ireland the strap is almost always broken intentionally.26 *Hoosier Folk Legends*, edited by Ronald Baker, includes two Southern accounts (his numbers 20 and 21) summarized below.
Corpse Sits Up at Wake
A hunchback who has died will not lie flat in his casket so he is strapped down. A cat running around the room jumps onto the corpse. A friend of the deceased attempts to hit the cat with the broom. The blow of the broom breaks the strap and the corpse sits up.

Corpse Sits Up During Funeral Service
A hunchback who has died will not lie flat in his casket so he is strapped down. During the funeral service, just as the priest says, ‘This body will rise again,’ the strap suddenly breaks loose and the body shoots up in the casket. All the people flee from the church. (1982, 50)

Ghosts along the Cumberland, edited by Lynwood Montell, includes two related stories. In #463 in his book, the contraction of a corpse’s muscles makes it sit up, and in #466 (which is similar to Baker #20), a cat who jumps on the hunchbacked corpse causes the strap to break and the corpse sits up (1975, 202–204).

American Negro Folktales, edited by Richard Dorson (1967), includes one account, his #197C:

On the Cooling Board
A hunchback who has died won’t lie flat on the cooling board so he is tied down. The string around his neck breaks and he sits up. (330)

Both American and Irish versions relate a situation which plays with appearance and reality. In both a dead person appears to be alive, but the Irish create this illusion; they encourage the schism, and emphasize the disjuncture, of appearance and reality.

It is noteworthy that in the Irish accounts (and in Bogatyrev’s sub-Carpathian account), the cord is usually cut while someone is praying for the dead. This has at least two practical reasons behind it: during those moments of prayer the attention of all present would be focused on the corpse, and the act of prayer affords the prankster a valid reason to be near the corpse. Still, on those occasions when the prankster seems engaged in the act of praying even as the string is being cut or pulled, the idea of perpetrating the joke precisely at the moment when those present assume he has the most pious of intentions certainly seems to intensify the sport of it all. This practical joke mocks the sacred, and also temporarily mocks the oppression of death.

Brian Foley’s characterization of the practical joke as being done to “create a situation” recalls the situational focus of Erving Goffman’s
sociological inquiries (1986). Goffman begins with the premise that when individuals attend to any current situation and try to make sense of it, they face the question “What is it that’s going on here?” They must “frame” the situation, define it, before they can react to it appropriately. Goffman, inspired by William James, is concerned with what individuals “think is real,” and with the ways that their subjective framing of situations is vulnerable. Goffman studied “fabrication”—“the intentional effort . . . to manage activity so that . . . others will be induced to have a false belief about what it is that is going on,” leading to— “a falsification of some part of the world” (Goffman 1986, 83). His investigation shows that fabrications, to greater and lesser degrees, are a standard feature of everyday life. Fabrication, the intentional falsification of reality, is also a standard feature in various folkloric texts. Goffman’s work can elucidate both traditional forms of fabrication and instances of fabrication in traditional narrative. In Bauman’s writings on the practical joke, which were influenced by Goffman’s work, he notes that the practical joker “intentionally manipulates features of a situation” (1988, 36); this could also be thought of as the creation of a situation. For as Bauman notes, “Fabrications’, the creation of appearances, are designed to elicit reactions” (1988, 39).

Brian Foley’s notion of “creating situations” struck me as particularly resonant. It is an apt description of the way in which folkloric texts are used to create, perpetuate, transform, or transcend situational contexts and ongoing social, cultural, and historical contexts. Brian’s comments on his community’s use of folklore suggest that the act of “creating situations,” the intervention in the flow of experience, is a local aesthetic and perhaps even an ethic.
Appendix to Chapter Three

FINNEGAN’S WAKE

Tim Finnegan lived in Walkin Street
A gentleman Irish mighty odd.
He had a tongue both rich and sweet
To rise in the world he carried a hod.
Now Tim had a sort of a tippling way
With a love of the liquor he was born.
And to help him on his way each day
He’d a drop of the crature every morn.

Chorus: Whack fol de da now dance to your partner,
Round the floor yer trotters shake.
Wasn’t it the truth I told you?
Lots of fun at Finnegan’s wake

One morning Tim was rather full
His head felt heavy which made him shake.
He fell from the ladder and broke his skull
So they carried him home, his corpse to wake.
They wrapped him up in a nice clean sheet
And laid him out upon the bed
With a gallon of whiskey at his feet
And a barrel of porter at his head.

Chorus

His friends assembled at the wake
And Mrs. Finnegan called for lunch
First they brought in tay and cakes
Then pipes, tobacco and whiskey punch.
Mrs. Biddy O’Brien began to cry
‘Such a neat clean corpse did you ever see
Yerrah, Tim, avourneen, why did you die?’
‘Ah hold your tongue,’ says Paddy Magee.

Chorus

Then Biddy O’Connor took up the moan
‘Biddy’ says she ‘you’re wrong I’m sure.’
But Biddy gave her a belt in the gob
And left her sprawling on the floor.
Oh then a mighty war did rage
’Twas woman to woman and man to man.
Shillelagh law did all engage
And a row and ruction soon began.
Chorus

Then Mick Maloney ducked his head
When a noggin of whiskey flew at him.
It missed him, falling on the bed
The liquor splattered over Tim.
Bedad, he revives and see how he rises
And Timothy rising from the bed
Says “Fling your whiskey round like blazes
Thunderin’ Jaysus, do you think I’m dead?”

PAT MALONE FORGOT THAT HE WAS DEAD

Michael Walsh of Kilmac sang me a song composed by a local postman who is now dead. They used to hold concerts in the halls, and the postman sang it several times on stage. Michael introduces it:

This is a song, ’tis—it’s a kind—I’ll tell you now what ’tis about.
It’s a story about a man and woman living together. And things went very bad with them. They couldn’t make ends meet. And the man was insured for a hell of a lot of money. And the woman—they had a chat one night and the man said to the wife, “You know,” he said, “I wonder,” he said, “if I pretended I was dead,” he said, “you know?” he said, “Put me up in the bed,” he said, “and tell your man that the man’s dead.” And it goes like this:

Times are hard in an Irish town
Everything was goin’ down
When Pat Malone was short for any cash.
He finally his life insurance spent
All his money to the cent
And all of his business gone to smash.

Then the wife spoke up and said
“Now dear Pat if you were dead
Tis a hundred thousand smackers I should take.”
So Pat got up and tried
To make out that he had died
Until he smelled the whiskey at the wake.

Then Pat Malone forgot that he was dead
He sat up in the wake room and he said,
“If the wake goes on a minute
The corpse he must be in it
You’ve got to make me drunk to keep me dead.”
So they gave the corpse a sup
Until they filled him up
Placed him back again upon the bed.
And before the morn was grey
Everybody seemed so gay
Sure they didn’t really think that he was dead.

So they took him from his bunk
Still alive but awful drunk
And placed him in the coffin with a prayer.
And the driver of the cart
Said “He’ll be dead before I start
I want to see that someone pays the fare.”

Then Pat Malone forgot that he was dead.
He sat up in the coffin and he said,
“If you dare to doubt me credit
You’ll be sorry that you said it
Drive on me boy or the corpse’ll break your head.”

So then they started out
On the cemetery route
All the neighbors tried the widow to console.
And when they reached the base
Of Malone’s last resting place
And then they lowered poor Patsy down the hole.

Then Pat began to see
Just as plain as ABC
He had no time to reckon on the end.
As the sods began to drop
He broke off the coffin top
And quickly through the earth he did ascend.

Then Pat Malone forgot that he was dead
He quickly from the cemetery fled.
Twas a lucky thing be thunder
He was nearly going under
And Pat Malone forgot that he was dead.

Wasn’t that a nice one?