

Volume 11 Issue 1
03 / 2013
tamarajournal.com



A Matter of Joke and Death

Magdalena Pancewicz

Graduate School for Social Research, Poland

meguson@o2.pl

Keywords

Jokes

Death

Rites of passage

Abstract

Jokes are as well a part of an everyday life, as a source of knowledge about the society as well. They are not only to amuse but might also integrate groups or societies, inspire reflection, relieve tension, or even point out the incongruities in cosmologies or dogma. Jokes often concern matters of relationships, religion, politics, or everyday human life, and jokes on death often relate to all of the indicated areas of human existence. Improper as it might seem, joking on death may play an important part in human life. However jokes on such a delicate issue might sometimes be perceived as offensive, a suggestion of investigating the mere idea or image of death underwritten in jokes appears much tempting. Therefore through text and content analysis of approximate 70 jokes on death from a few internet websites, the hidden definition of death was attempted to be reconstructed together with the socially accepted attitude towards death and its conventions concerning the *rites de passage*.

Introduction

The joke is a form of humor, which like all humor does, is meant to amuse. This specific genre is a *short humorous story, ending with a punch line, which the teller usually does not claim to invent himself* (Kuipers 2006). Known from everyday life jokes are not only meant to amuse, yet they might integrate groups, cause to reflect, relieve tension, point out the failures in cosmologies or dogma or be an useful source of knowledge about society. Some jokes are exclusively bounded with a certain group of people or nationality (like stories about Welsh in Britain or Poles in U.S.A), others are universal and widely known (ex. blond jokes). The latter type of joke, being universal, is spreading by “anthologies” (being a translated collection of jokes from different countries), internet websites or cross-cultural contacts. Every joke refers to a certain stereotype or behavioral pattern, so does the universal joke. Yet the patterns and stereotypes embedded in universal jokes are shared not only among people of one nationality but a whole culture. Thus examining the shared ideas on death underwritten in jokes might prove much interesting.

The Joke

Jokes were mostly a subject of analysis for linguists, psychologists and philosophers. Yet, jokes are a social phenomenon and products of living in society – the stories are invented through interactions, they circulate and are being changed accordingly to the specific conditions. After great catastrophes or deaths of famous people new jokes appear or old ones are changed and adapted to be used again (ex. jokes on Steve Jobs death or jokes on terrorists). How the joke function is still a matter of scientific perspective – Aristotle, Hobbes, Kant, Schopenhauer and many more like Spencer, Leach or Freud – tried to discover the jokes' mechanics.

What appears to be generally known about the jokes is, that they are intentional action meant to amuse. They are also believed to be funny through combining features of two antagonistic ideas or interpretations – the clash of the ideas, what is expected according to one of them and what is presented according to the others surprises and evokes laughter. Jokes have the characteristics of absurdity and paradox and that would be what is supposed to make them attractive. According to Freud (Freud 1905) joke is a “condensation” in which two ideas are telescoped into a phrase or a single word. The major techniques of the condensation are: displacing the emphasis from relevant to irrelevant, double – meaning, absurdity, faulty – reasoning, representation by the opposite, multiple use of the same material and indirect representation. Employing the deviations from normal thought and representation is a prerequisite for achieving the amusement (Freud 1905) and from sociological point of view shall be much interesting subject.

Methodology

The internet enabled jokes to spread much faster and wider than ever before. Special websites with jokes contain all kind of humor and types of jokes. Because of English being nowadays the most popular language (in Western civilization), the English lingual internet websites with jokes were examined. The chosen websites were five best positioned that contained death humor: www.e-jokes.net (22), www.near-death.com (22), www.family-source.com (21), www.greatcleanjokes.com (5), and jokes4all.net (2). The analysis did not contain “occasional” jokes on death – which usually appear after death of celebrities or a major disasters – such jokes present rather an attitude towards a disasters or certain celebrities than “common” reaction to death, and what is more, such jokes are not categorized by websites as “jokes on death”. Jokes from each of the websites were collected and examined with use of text and content analysis techniques with semantic field analysis as the major tool. Finding a pattern or an idea of death embedded in joke was based on the Reconstructing Hidden Equivalent Definition Method (Kłosiński 1994). After identifying equivalents, oppositions, attributes, associations, actions of and towards the subject (here: death) the reporting definition of the subject might be constructed in which all the elements are derived from the semantic field of the subject.

Chosen methods and techniques are to present the context of death and its hidden definition by jokes present in everyday life.

Analysis

Jokes on death in comparison to some other types of jokes are not numerous. However there are some groups of jokes on death that might be further identified. That shall be jokes on: dying (cause of death, preparation for death), a funeral (ceremony and the preparation), mourning and a life after death, and the afterlife. Astonishingly among the analyzed material there hardly were jokes on death itself, nor expected ones on grim reaper (as the personification of death). What is more the character (while) dying was hardly a cause of amusement. That may suggest that death is perceived as such a serious topic it should not be laughed at, even in jokes. What is, however a subject of amusement, are the social *rites de passage*, ceremonies and conventions that accompany death.

Much frequently the action of the story is held, at least partially, in afterlife – not only in the jokes belonging to the afterlife type, but in others as well. This might sometimes be explained by the specificity of the story, yet the existence of a whole type of “afterlife” jokes on death would rather depict that not only for the purpose of the plot does man want to believe there is life after death.

The causes of death in jokes are sudden and unexpected like car accident, falling down the window or heart attack. In the minority of jokes in which a person is dying presumably for an illness the name of the disease is not mentioned – possibly because the stories told in jokes should be universal but partially not to unintentionally offend or upset a listener, as the main purpose of a joke is obviously to amuse.

The characters dying in the joke – stories are usually intimates: siblings, parents, spouses or best-friends. From the joke’s perspective the intimate relation stresses the mourning and grief after death – but that also suggests the social requirement of sadness after loss of the close friends or family. Many jokes concern losing one of spouses - interestingly in majority of those the husband is the one who dies – which would reflect the demographic statistics according to which men die earlier. Another reason might be, that joke, is a genre created, developed and received by men (Kuipers 2006). Thus men are the main characters, and what is more jokes often make fun from women, also as unfaithful or mean widows.

The reactions to death described in jokes are usually compatible with the social convention. The attributes, emotions and behaviors that accompanied the death in the jokes were: *tearfulness, praying with profound intensity, private grief, demonstration of pain, mourn so deeply, being furious, being upset, wailing and crying, sadness that weighs heavily on heart, being unable to speak or being sorry.* The idea of joke is often based on dualism and conflict of antagonistic attitudes or ideas – the socially approved rules are then faced with the immoral, or unaccepted. Thus jokes do not question social convention, but rather strengthen it, by laughing at behavior incongruous with the pattern.

Death Definition

The idea of death presented in the jokes is rather consistent. -Although there seemed to be minor contradictions in example whether one dies peacefully and happily or unfortunately and terribly, yet other elements of semantic field of the subject appeared rather coherent.

Table 1: Death in jokes. Attributes, associations, oppositions, equivalents, actions of subject and action towards subject.

Attributes	Associations	Oposition	Equivalents	Actions of Subject	Actions towards the subject
Terrible	Dead and gone	Life	Dearly departed	Gathered the entire family	Have to die
Unforeseen	No one knows when	Remaining time	Inevitable event.		Going to die
Sudden	Die some day	Rise	The Great Judgment Day		Getting one’s affairs in order.
Unfortunate	All die	Send back by God	Killed		
On the spot		Alive	Pass away		
Peaceful		Come back	Drift off		
Happy		Near death experience	Sleeping		
Tragic		Afterlife	Decomposing		
		Moving	New location		
		Being violated in front of hundreds of tribesman*	Falls off. He is killed instantaneously.		
	Booka*				

Through collecting all the semantic elements and choosing the most frequent ones the definition of death might be formed:

Death, an inevitable event, **meaning** departure, passing away, drifting off **or** the Great Judgement Day, **in contradiction to** life, rising, being alive **or** having time remaining **is a** sudden, unfortunate, unforeseen event **that might**

be peaceful **and** happy **or** terrible **and** tragic. **Death is associated with** being gone, uncertainty as to the time **and** knowledge that everyone dies. **It** gathers the entire family **and** one have to prepare themselves for it **and** get one's affairs in order.

The reconstructed definition emphasize the main points of dying and death – death is usually unexpected yet one should (and would like to) be prepared for it. Death is also treated much as a journey. -Not only because a person moves to a new location or afterlife, but one should prepare themselves – get affairs in order before departure.

Internet being a thoroughly modern communication channel might be expected to pass very modern ideas and beliefs. However in spite of common knowledge that people no longer believe in God or afterlife the jokes seem to suggest that the idea of life after death is still present and necessary (not only for the joke's plot).

The underwritten rules

Jokes on death are not merely on death and should not be analyzed in alienation to human relations, customs, beliefs and religion. The four subcategories of jokes: on dying, funeral, mourning and afterlife present models of socially approved behavior in such situations and deviations from the pattern as well. It is the tension and opposition of *sacrum* and *profanum* that is mostly exploited by jokes on death.

Jokes on dying concern the cause of death or preparation for it. A person usually dies in an accident which may be a humorous event itself, or in a hospital - yet usually not for a disease but because “their time just came”. One should also prepare themselves for dying, usually by making a disposal as to the ceremony or at least by writing a will, so that in the last hour they could peacefully pass away thinking about afterlife. The preparations and waiting for death of beloved ones may be the trigger of amusement – as the emotions and pragmatic organization work are clashing:

An elderly Irishman lay dying in his bed. While suffering the agonies of impending death, he suddenly smelled the aroma of his favorite chocolate chip cookies wafting up the stairs. He gathered his remaining strength, and lifted himself from the bed. Leaning against the wall, he slowly made his way out of the bedroom, and with even greater effort, gripping the railing with both hands, he crawled downstairs. With labored breath, he leaned against the door-frame, gazing into the kitchen. Were it not for death's agony, he would have thought himself already in heaven, for there, spread out upon waxed paper on the kitchen table were literally hundreds of his favorite chocolate chip cookies. Was it heaven? Or! Was it one final act of heroic love from his devoted Irish wife of sixty years, seeing to it that he left this world a happy man? Mustering one great final effort, he threw himself towards the table, landing on his knees in a rumpled posture. His parched lips parted, the wondrous taste of the cookie was already in his mouth, seemingly bringing him back to life. The aged and withered hand trembled on its way to a cookie at the edge of the table, when it was suddenly smacked with a spatula by his wife....."Back off!" she said, "They're for the funeral."

Basing on this and similar jokes one may stand that the social demand would be to accompany the dying in their last minutes (the other attitude is presented as ruthless and thus laughed at). However overconcentration on passing away may also be criticized – suffering or praying for the one instead of helping in order to reduce their pain is also laughed at:

Lying in the hospital bed, a dying man began to flail about and make motions as if he would like to speak. The priest, keeping watch at the side of his bed, leaned quietly over and asked, “Do you have something you would like to say?” The man nodded to the affirmative, and the priest handed him a pad and pen. “I know you can't speak, but use this to write a note and I will give it to your wife. She's waiting just outside.” Gathering his last bit of strength, the man took them and scrawled his message upon the pad which he stuffed into the priest's hands. Then, moments later, the man died. After administering the last rites, the priest left to break the sad news to the wife. After consoling her a bit, the priest handed her the note. “Here were his last words. Just before passing on, he wrote this message to you.” The wife tearfully opened the note which read: “GET OFF MY OXYGEN HOSE!!”

Another cause of amusement might be the way of death, mostly sudden in jokes. The reason might be that through laughter people try to familiarize themselves with the idea of death, especially the unexpected one.

A man goes into his doctor's office for an annual physical. After a while, the doctor comes out and says, "I'm sorry Bill, but we have discovered you have a condition which only allows you another 6 weeks to live." "But Doctor," Bill replied, "I feel great! I haven't felt better in years. This just can't be true. Isn't there anything I can do?" After a moment the doctor said, "Well, you might start going down the street to that new health spa and take a mud bath every day." Excitedly Bill asked, "And that will cure me?" "No," Replied the doctor, "but it will get you used to the dirt."

In the jokes about the mourning and life after loss of the intimate usually a grief is opposed to starting a new life, which if too soon might be inappropriate and thus – in joke – funny.

Miriam was dying and on her deathbed, she gave final instructions to her husband Sidney. "Sidney, you've been so good to me all these years. I know you never even thought about another woman. But now that I'm going, I want you to marry again as soon as is possible and I want you to give your new wife all my expensive clothes." "I can't do that, darling," Sidney said. "You're a size 16 and she's only a 10."

Usually the female character symbolizes grief and emotions which are opposed to male's lack of sadness or pragmatism. The emotional influence of death is even strengthened by the fact that in jokes mainly relatives or close friends are those who die, thus the unwritten rule is that those alive should mourn after the deceased – the closer the person the grater the grief after loss.

A man placed some flowers on the grave of his dearly departed mother and started back toward his car when his attention was diverted to another man kneeling at a grave. The man seemed to be praying with profound intensity and kept repeating, "Why did you have to die? Why did you have to die?" The first man approached him and said, "Sir, I don't wish to interfere with your private grief, but this demonstration of pain is more than I've ever seen before. For whom do you mourn so deeply? A child? A parent?" The mourner took a moment to collect himself, then replied, "My wife's first husband."

There also seems to be a convention (in jokes) to talk only good things about the deceased. In the jokes concerning the funeral ceremony many social conventions are to be observed. The honor of the dead person and their corpse is noticeable in jokes either about cremation or traditional burial (in coffin).

Dorothy is very upset as her husband Albert had just passed away. She goes to the mortuary to look at her dearly departed and the instant she sees him she starts wailing and crying. One of the attendants rushes up to comfort her. Through her tears she explains that she was upset because Albert was wearing a black suit and that it was his dying wish to be buried in a blue suit. The attendant apologizes and explains that they always put the bodies in a black suit as a matter of course, but he'd see what he could do. The next day Dorothy returns to the mortuary to have one last moment with Albert before his funeral the following day. When the attendant pulls back the curtain, Dorothy manages to smile through her tears as Albert is now wearing a smart blue suit. She asks the attendant "how did you manage to get hold of that beautiful blue suit?" "Well, yesterday afternoon after you left, a man about your husband's size was brought in and he was wearing a blue suit. His wife explained that she was very upset as he had always wanted to be buried in a black suit" the attendant replied. He continued "After that it was simply a matter of swapping the heads around".

The funeral itself is to be a serious and sublime event that should gather the entire family. In several jokes the funeral is an unquestionable excuse from going to work.

Yet another part of funeral ceremonies is the last wish of the deceased, which should be fulfilled by the family and the last will that should be read in front of all family members. The last will is also presented as a way of not only dividing the legacy but also expressing true opinions about family members and to once again have a fling on someone:

The attorney gathered the entire family for the reading of the will. Relatives came from near and far, to see if they were included in the bequests. The lawyer somberly opened the will and began to read: "To my cousin Ed, I leave my ranch. To my brother Jim, I leave my money market accounts. To my neighbor and good friend, Fred, I leave my stocks. And finally, to my cousin George, who always sat around and never did anything, but wanted to be remembered in my will, I say, 'Hi, George'."

There also is a distinct category of afterlife jokes. These jokes do support the traditional Christian idea of afterlife – the Great Judgment (or at least a "test" before entering the gates of heaven), heaven and hell are indispensable parts of the jokes. Except for (human) protagonists other characters appearing in the stories are: angels, devil, God and St. Peter. These jokes are firmly related to the religion and Western based on the Bible culture, which contradicts the theory of losing the religious beliefs by modern society. Although one may claim the "afterlife" function in jokes on the same basis as fairies and genies – for the use of plot, it rather seems that humans do want to believe there is something after death, which would make sense to the life on earth (even in the plot of joke).

Joking on death

The reasons why people joke were examined as many times as jokes themselves. Lots of theories have been invented some of which seem fairly applicable to jokes on death. Jokes might integrate groups, cause to reflect, point out the incongruity in cosmologies, strengthen the accepted conventions or relieve tension.

As to the jokes on death, which is quite an emotional and difficult topic, it seems that jokes do bring a relief. Many of the stories in jokes do support Kant's relief theory (1790) which defines laughter as an *affectation arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing*. Indeed the stories told in jokes suggest or threaten audience with (emotional) harm then proving inconsequential. Assuming that a man is driven by *Thanatos* jokes on death would release the lifetime tension and be vital for the human's well being. Fear of loss of one's intimates and pathos that are inseparably related to the topic of dying, might also be released by jokes. Laughing at ideas or phenomenon that are threatening seems not only to release the tension but also to accustom people to them (ideas and phenomenon). Tension and anxiety might also refer to the customs related to the burial ceremonies that are rather detailed and official, the customs that should be fulfilled in a proper way.

Jokes present much a traditional image of death – in example dying on the deathbed surrounded by the family, together with the traditional attitude towards dying (grief and pathos) and also traditional burial. All the exceptions from the conventions are triggering amusement; and laughter might be a negative sanction, a way of symbolic violence towards those, who do not obey the social rules. Thus, jokes on death seem to strengthen the tradition and accustomed ways of dealing with loss of the intimates. That would be also the integrative function of the joke.

Yet another function of jokes is to point out the incongruities. Jokes on death appear to depict differences between what is declared and what is done as to the situation of loss of someone intimate. The inconsequence seems to be "stigmatized" by laughter. Interestingly incongruities in religion (in example the idea of afterlife) were hardly present in jokes on death. That might suggest that the belief in afterlife is still needed in society, at least in concern to a matter of passing away.

Conclusion

Joke is mostly an orally transmitted funny story embedded in the social relationships. Jokes in Internet might be perceived as a form of joke especially prone to social change (as anyone may submit a joke). Yet however the analyzed jokes presented a much traditional idea, conventions and attitude towards death and dying. What is more, jokes on death seem not to question but to constitute the traditional perspective. They also serve not only as a source of amusement but

play important part in human life as “tension releaser” so that one could not only dispense with negative emotions like fear but also accustom to the inevitable which is death.

References

- Brzoskowska D., (2000): *O dowcipach polskich i angielskich. Aspekty kulturowo – językowe*. Opole: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Opolskiego.
- Cohen T. (1999): *Jokes: Philosophical Thoughts on Joking Matters*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Freud S. (1966 [1905]): *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Kant I. (1790): *Kritik der Urteilskraft*. Berlin: Lagarde.
- Kłosiński M. (1994): Semantyczna analiza pojęć „bezrobocie” i „bezrobotny” („bezrobotni”) w wypowiedziach prasowych. „Kultura i Społeczeństwo” (3), 151-161.
- Kuipers G. (2006): *Good Humor, Bad Taste. A Sociology of the Joke*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Kwiatkowska A., Dżereń – Głowacka S., [Edit.] (2008): *Odcienie humoru*. Piotrków Trybunalski: Naukowe Wydawnictwo Piotrkowskie.
- Wilson Ch.P. (1979): *Jokes. Form, Content, Use and Function*. London: Academic Press.