

# The Last Thing . . . Said: The Challenger Disaster Jokes and Closure

by BILL ELLIS

On 28 January 1986, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) committed itself to launching its Challenger space shuttle, despite warnings from engineers that the cold weather experienced overnight might prevent essential safety seals from containing the blast of the rocket engines. The flight, already postponed once, was important to NASA – it carried the first average citizen on board, the elementary school teacher Christa McAuliffe, and hundreds of classes of schoolchildren were waiting impatiently for the launch. They got a more spectacular media event than they expected: a little over a minute into the flight, the seals gave way, allowing a plume of flame to burn into the main fuel tanks, and observers on the ground and in front of television sets watched Challenger disintegrate into a spectacular fireball. The official reaction was predictable in a country used to public tragedies – formal speeches by the president, detailed technical reconstructions of the wreck, widespread public sympathy for the families of the astronauts, many of whom watched the event live at Cape Canaveral and whose private grief was likewise recorded by the media's cameras and transmitted into millions of homes.

A less official reaction was signalled by the number and popularity of disaster jokes that the event produced. By 23 February, this form of humour had become so widespread in Los Angeles that columnist Roger Simon protested about their popularity, suggesting that the jokes satisfied 'some, deep, dark urge within us . . . to push against the limits of decency'.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, the presence of these traditions, coinciding with the American Folklore Society's call for papers for its autumn meeting,<sup>2</sup> led to several attempts by folklorists to analyse their significance. Three have been published. Elizabeth Simons sees the jokes as manifest ventings of conscious anger and disillusionment in the space programme, the media, and the public school system.<sup>3</sup> Willie Smyth,<sup>4</sup> and Elliott Oring (1987)<sup>5</sup> in their different ways, suggested deeper, more symbolic Freudian interpretations: Smith found the psychological need to distance oneself from the threat of death to be a central issue; Oring, the need to rebel against the media's blithe juxtaposition of real death

and commercial products.

All these analyses, however, are flawed by the authors' reluctance to examine the jokes as part of an event. All three draw their conclusions from normalized joke texts that are presented in the form of lists, stripped of informant data or even dates of collection. The implication is that all the shuttle jokes appeared at the same time and in invariable form, all were equally popular, and all were told by approximately the same people. Simons alone makes some comments on these issues: she identifies two as 'widely told', and several others as 'popular', and she notes that 'young' people were the most willing informants.<sup>6</sup> But her comments are not quantified in any way, and her interpretations thus remain provocative but imprecise.

My study, based on 260 questionnaires distributed to college students in Hazleton and Bloomsburg, Pennsylvania, on eight different days during the peak period of shuttle humour, seeks to focus on the cycle as a process rather than as a stable canon or list. By choosing this method of in-depth collecting at the outset of the cycle, and continuing it until the questionnaires showed that students' interest in the jokes was declining, I was able to document some of the event's dynamics. In particular, the surveys show that the shuttle jokes did not appear all at once, but arrived in at least two waves. The most popular of these jokes was offered by half the respondents; the least popular, by no more than two or three informants. Some jokes declined in popularity; others consistently gained throughout the period. While males and females accepted most of the same jokes in the same numbers, sex roles did seem to affect overall participation in the cycle. By looking closely at these data, we see the Challenger joke cycle as a complex event, and we can make better guesses about how it relates to the equally complex human reaction to disaster.

The Wednesday after the Challenger exploded, I chatted informally with my three writing classes about the disaster and commented that, as a folklorist, I expected that sooner or later it would be the topic of humour. I asked my students to be on the lookout for such a phenomenon and let me know. The first evidence that

Table One: Dates of First Collection

	Hazleton	Harrisburg	Shippensburg
2/14	NASA No, Bud Light		
2/15			No, Bud Light
2/17		NASA	NASA Wash up on shore What's this button
2/18		No, Bud Light	
2/20		What's this button?	
2/21	What's this button? She's history		
2/22			Can't get 7-up Launch meat Head & Shoulders She's history Blue eyes
2/23		Through his head	[No more reports]
2/24	Blue eyes Launch meat Vacation all over Wash up on shore		
2/25	Can't get 7-up Head & Shoulders		
2/26	An arm & a leg Through his head Blew up in class VW ashtray		
2/27	Cover the ocean	Vacation all over Blue eyes Head & Shoulders	
Between 3/1 and 3/6		Cover the ocean	
3/4		Blew up in class	
3/6		New England Pats She's history	
[Note: on 3/7, the remains of bodies of the astronauts were recovered by an underwater search team.]			
3/10		I'll feed fish	
3/11	New England Pats		
3/12	I'll feed fish		

a cycle had emerged came on Monday, 17 February: one of my students informed me that he had heard the first two shuttle jokes the previous Friday. On the same day, a folklore student at Shippensburg University

collected five jokes for Mac Barrick. What was happening during the preceding seventeen days? Folklorists have frequently assured me that they heard some of the Challenger jokes as early as the afternoon of the dis-

aster; many of my questionnaires assured me of the same thing. But this assertion remains undocumented. I did learn of persons who immediately reacted to the event with humour: a colleague at Pennsylvania State University at Hazleton reported that the night of the explosion a bartender in his local tavern quipped, 'I'm withdrawing my application to be the first bartender in space.' And I later learned that he had told his class the next day that he was withdrawing his application to be the first sociologist in space. But whenever I have asked for some kind of documentation that disaster jokes were actively circulating within a day of the event, my friends have departed promising to send the evidence right to me. And like the long-promised identity of the 'friend of a friend' who actually poured the concrete into the parked car, such evidence has never arrived. From what can be documented by dated collections or publications, shuttle jokes did not circulate as an organized cycle until two and a half weeks after the astronauts' deaths.

At this point, students quickly began to pass items to me, and I formulated a questionnaire to survey the phenomenon. This was given, first to my classes, then to those of sympathetic colleagues at the Pennsylvania State University campus. Because of the logistics of printing and distributing the forms, the classes were surveyed on five successive academic days, from Friday, 21 February, to Thursday, 27 February. At this point, Pennsylvania State University's week-long spring vacation intervened, so classes were next surveyed on Tuesday and Wednesday, 11-12 March. Finally, on 13 March, I was able to survey a class at nearby Bloomsburg University. Simultaneously, Alan E. Mays compiled a list of shuttle jokes as they emerged at Pennsylvania State University's Capital Campus in Middletown (near Harrisburg), noting the dates they first appeared, and Mac Barrick's students continued to bring in material. These reports are collated in Table One.

In all three areas, we see, the jokes arrived in at least two waves corresponding approximately to weekends when students would naturally leave the campuses and associate with family and friends, then return to share new items. The first wave, covering the week from 14 February to 21 February, is linked at all three locations to these three jokes:

'Nasa':?

What's NASA stand for?  
Need another seven astronauts.  
(Middletown, 17 February)

What does Nasa stand for?  
Need another seven astronauts.  
(Shippensburg, 17 February)

'Do you know what NASA stands for?'  
Need Another 7 Astronauts  
(Hazleton, 21 February)

NASA = National airshow of seven astronauts.  
(Hazleton, 21 February)

NASA - Needed Another Shuttle Anyway.  
(Hazleton, 26 February)

What NASA stands for?  
How to get rid of a teacher.  
(Hazleton, 11 March)<sup>8</sup>

'No, Bud Light':

They found the voice recorder on the space shuttle.  
The only thing you hear is, No, Bud Light.  
(Shippensburg, 14 February)<sup>9</sup>

What did the controll [sic] centre say when the shuttle blew up?  
Nope! Bud light!  
(Shippensburg, 17 February)

What did the astronauts say when the shuttle blew up?  
No. Bud lite.  
(Middletown, 18 February)

What were the last words on the flight recorder box?  
Give me a light - No Bud Light  
(Hazleton, 21 February)

What did the space shuttle Challenger's captain say right before the explosion: Give me a light.  
What did he say after the explosion: Bud light.  
(Hazleton, 21 February)

What did the ground crew say just before the explosion?  
Give me a lite.  
(Hazleton, 25 February)<sup>10</sup>

'What's this button?':

What was the last thing the teacher on board said?  
What does this button do?  
(Shippensburg, 17 February)

What were Christa McAuliffe's last words?  
What's this button for?  
(Middletown, 20 February)



Plate 17 'One blew this way and one blew that way.' The space shuttle Challenger exploding after takeoff on 28 January 1986. PHOTO BY AP/WORLD WIDE PHOTOS.

What is the last thing the Commander of the space shuttle said?  
What is this red button for?  
(Hazleton, 21 February)

What were Christa McAuliffe's last words?  
What's this red button for?  
(Hazleton, 25 February)

What was the last thing Christa said before the shuttle blew up?  
What does this cute little button do?  
(Hazleton, 26 February)<sup>11</sup>

The second wave, comprising the next week from 22 February to 28 February, is marked by the arrival of considerably grimmer jokes, making direct reference to the apparent dismemberment of the astronauts in the shuttle explosion and the scattering of their bodies over the area:

'Blue eyes':

Did you know Christa McAuliffe had blue eyes?  
One blew this [arrow left] way and one blew that [arrow right] way.  
(Shippensburg, 22 February)

Did you hear Christa McAuliffe had blue eyes.  
One blew right, one blew left.  
(Hazleton, 24 February)

All the astronauts had blue eyes.  
One blew this way, one blew that.  
(Hazleton, 26 February)

Did you know that Christa McAuliffe's eyes were blue?  
Yeah, one blew this way and one blew that way.  
(Middletown, 27 February)<sup>12</sup>

'Vacation all over':

Where did Christa McAuliffe take her last vacation?  
All over Florida.  
(Hazleton, 24 February)

Where does the crew of the Challenger take their vacation?  
All over Florida.  
(Hazleton, 25 February)

Did you hear that the astronauts are not dead - they are vacationing all over Florida.  
(Hazleton, 26 February)

Where did McAuliffe teach?

All over Florida.  
(Hazleton, 27 February)

Did you hear where Christa McAuliffe went on vacation?

All over Florida.  
(Middletown, 27 February)

Did you hear where they are looking for astronauts?

All over Florida.  
(Hazleton, 12 March)<sup>13</sup>

*'Launch meat':*

What do sharks off the coast of Florida eat?

Launch meat.  
(Shippensburg, 22 February)

What are the sharks eating?

Launch meat.  
(Hazleton, 24 February)

What type of food washed up on Florida's coastline?

Launch meat.  
(Hazleton, 25 February)

What did the ground crew eat for dinner?

Launch meat.  
(Hazleton, 25 February)<sup>14</sup>

*'Head & Shoulders':*

How do you know Christa McAuliffe had dandruff?

They found her head and shoulders on the beach.<sup>15</sup>  
(Shippensburg, 22 February)

How did they know that the astronauts had dandruff?

They found head and shoulders on the beach.  
(Hazleton, 25 February)

How did they find out McAuliffe had dandruff?

They found her head and shoulders.  
(Hazleton, 25 February)

Christa McAuliffe had dandruff.

They found her 'head and shoulders' on the beach.  
(Hazleton, 26 February)

How did they discover that Christa McAuliffe had dandruff?

They found her head and shoulders.  
(Middletown, 27 February)<sup>16</sup>

*'An arm and a leg':*

What did NASA pay for the whole Kaboom?

An arm and a leg.  
(Hazleton, 26 February)

What did the launch cost NASA?

An arm and a leg.  
(Hazleton, 27 February)<sup>17</sup>

*'Through his head':*

What was the first thing that went through Christa McAuliffe's mind when the shuttle blew up?

Her asshole.  
(Middletown, 23 February)

What was going through the pilot's head as it blew up?

The control panel.  
(Hazleton, 26 February)

What is the last thing that went through Christa McAuliffe's mind?

The control panel.  
(Hazleton, 11 March)

What was the last thing to go through the crew of Challenger's mind?

The control panel.  
(Hazleton, 12 March)<sup>18</sup>

*'Blew up in class':*

Did you hear that Christa McAuliffe was a bad teacher?

She blew up in front of her class.  
(Hazleton, 26 February)

Did you hear that Christa McAuliffe was in trouble with the Board of Education?

She has a reputation for blowing up in front of her class.  
(Middletown, 4 March)

Did you know that Christa and her husband had a fight the night before the launch?

It's the first time the kids saw her blow up.  
(Hazleton, 5 March)<sup>19</sup>

*'Cover the ocean':*

McAuliffe: 'Tomorrow, class, we'll cover the Atlantic Ocean.'

(Hazleton, 27 February)

What did Christa McAuliffe tell her geography students? Tomorrow, class, we're going to go over all the Atlantic Ocean.

(Middletown, between 1 and 6 March)<sup>20</sup>

Contained in this wave were a few other items that involved clever wordplay or reworked older topical jokes.

*'Wash up on shore':*

Why didn't the shuttle crew shower before lift-off?

They figured they'd wash up on the shore.  
(Shippensburg, 17 February)

Why didn't the astronauts take showers?

They knew they would get washed ashore.  
(Hazleton, 24 February)

Did you know they asked the space shuttle astronauts if they'd like to take a shower before launching but they said, 'No, that's OK, we'll just wash up on shore!'

(Hazleton, 11 March)<sup>21</sup>

*'VW ashtray':*

How do you fit 11 astronauts in a VW Bug?

2 in front, 2 in back, and 7 in the ashtray.  
(Hazleton, 26 February)

How many astronauts can you fit in a Volkswagen?

11-2 in the front, 2 in the back, and 7 in the ashtray.  
(Hazleton, 12 March)<sup>22</sup>

*'Can't get 7-up':*

What's the official drink of NASA?

7up.  
(Shippensburg, 22 February)

What do the astronauts drink?

Seven-up  
(Hazleton, 25 February)

Why did the shuttle astronauts drink Sprite?

They couldn't get Seven-up.<sup>23</sup>  
(Hazleton, 25 February)

Did you hear that NASA is buying out Sprite?

Because they couldn't get Seven-up.  
(Hazleton, 27 February)

Why is Sprite the official soft drink of NASA?

Because they couldn't get 7-up.  
(Hazleton, 12 March)<sup>24</sup>

*'She's history':*

That teacher used to teach science - now she's history.

(Hazleton, 21 February)

What subject did Christa McAuliffe teach?

I don't know but she's history now.  
(Shippensburg, 22 February)

What class is Christy McCullen [sic] teaching now?

History  
(Hazleton, 24 February)

What kind of teacher was Christa McAuliffe?

She was a science teacher but now she's history.  
(Middletown, 6 March)<sup>25</sup>

A final wave, covering the week 1-10 March, may be represented by the final two jokes:

*'New England Pats':*

What did the New England Patriots and the space shuttle have in common?

They both lasted about 1½ minutes.<sup>26</sup>  
(Middletown, 6 March)

What do the New England Pats and the Space shuttle have in common?

They both looked good for the minute.  
(Hazleton, 11 March)<sup>27</sup>

*'I'll feed fish':*

What did Christa McAuliffe tell her husband when she left to go to Florida?

You feed the dog, I'll feed the fish.  
(Middletown, 10 March)

What was the last thing Christy [sic] said to her husband?

You feed the dog, and I'll feed the fish!  
(Hazleton, 12 March)<sup>28</sup>

By this time, though, the cycle had run its course: no new jokes appeared, and more and more students admitted that they had forgotten those they had heard.

The process by which shuttle disaster jokes emerged, then, involved three major stages. During the first, or latent stage, from 28 January to 13 February, joking was suppressed in social settings. If these jokes existed, which remains unproved, they did not circulate widely. The second stage, beginning 14 February, covered about four weeks, as two or three waves of jokes entered Pennsylvania and travelled quickly among informants. Finally, from about 10 March, interest

declined rapidly, and the jokes became less fresh in the informants' minds. Later collections surveyed memories of an event, rather than a living phenomenon.

It may be that elsewhere the cycle ran its course earlier or later. Nevertheless, the dates of collections in other areas correspond markedly: Willie Smyth found his from 14 February to 14 March in Los Angeles,<sup>29</sup> while Elizabeth Simons's nationwide sample began 27 February and continued until June.<sup>30</sup> It also seems likely, given the rapid spread of the jokes nationwide, that the first wave in Pennsylvania was not simply a regional trend but an indication of which jokes circulated first in all areas. Elizabeth Simons's brief comments on the event bear this out: she observed that 'NASA' and 'No, Bud Light' were popular partly because they were irreverent, but not gruesome: they provoked responses like 'that's clever'. However, once these had circulated and been accepted, a 'second wave' dealt more explicitly with the grim facts of the accident; these provoked responses more like 'that's awful!'<sup>31</sup> It is perhaps no coincidence that columnist Roger Simon's protest appeared 23 February, the same time that the second wave of 'gross' jokes appeared in Pennsylvania. Although comparative data is patchy, there is no reason to doubt that the shuttle disaster jokes functioned nationwide as a dynamic but transient social phenomenon, beginning with a short but significant latent period, climaxing with an intense phase of verbal play with the most threatening elements of the disaster, then rapidly declining in popularity.

**Table Two: Relative Popularity of Shuttle Jokes Volunteered** (Percentages of respondents in parentheses)

	Males	Females	Total
NASA	77 (59)	40 (64)	117 (60)
No, Bud Light	40 (30)	5 (8)	45 (23)
Blue eyes	31 (24)	16 (25)	47 (24)
Vacation all over	29 (22)	14 (22)	43 (22)
Head & Shoulders	27 (21)	12 (19)	39 (20)
What's this button?	17 (13)	9 (14)	25 (13)
Can't get 7-up	11 (8)	8 (13)	19 (10)
Washed ashore	10 (8)	3 (5)	13 (7)
Launch meat	10 (8)	1 (2)	11 (6)
She's history	7 (5)	4 (6)	11 (6)
All others	25 (9)	21 (16)	46 (11)
N=	131	63	194

The in-depth collecting method of my questionnaire allowed me to gauge also which jokes proved most successful in tradition. Hazleton students volunteered 21 jokes found in other parts of the country, plus 11 apparently unique quips. Of these, only 10 were accepted in large numbers, as shown in Table Two. Like Simons,<sup>32</sup> I observed that 'NASA' was clearly the most popular of the jokes, perhaps because it served as a leader in initiating humorous exchanges. If the listener showed that jesting about the subject was acceptable, the teller could continue to offer more; if not, the joke contained nothing intrinsically offensive.

Turning to the rest of the jokes, I speculated that female respondents might react differently to different jokes, accepting the clever ones but turning away from the grosser quips. But when I tabulated the sexes separately, I found practically no difference between males' and females' acceptance of the three most popular 'gross' jokes: 'Blue eyes', 'Vacation all over', and 'Head & Shoulders'. The only joke that provoked distinct responses was 'No, Bud Light'. Since the beer commercial on which the joke is based was aired during male-oriented programming, it is likely that females unfamiliar with the commercial had less reason to remember it. Otherwise, both kinds of joking, the clever and the gross, were accepted by both sexes in the same proportions. In fact, when I compared the popularity of the jokes before and after the spring vacation (Table Three), I found that females, from the beginning, were more likely than males to volunteer two of the most popular gross jokes,

**Table Three: Relative Popularity of Shuttle Jokes Over Time** (Percentages only)

	Males Feb. Mar.	Females Feb. Mar.	Total Feb. Mar.
NASA	55 66	70 58	59 62
No, Bud Light	26 37	15 3	24 22
Blue eyes	16 39	22 28	18 34
Vacation all over	20 27	30 17	22 22
Head & Shoulders	18 25	11 25	17 25
What's this button?	11 16	19 11	13 14
Can't get 7-up	6 14	7 17	6 15
Washed ashore	5 14	4 6	4 10
Launch meat	6 11	0 3	4 8
She's history	5 7	15 0	7 4
N=	87 44	27 36	114 80

'Blue Eyes' and 'Vacation all over'. After the break, both males and females were more likely to give me 'Blue eyes' and 'Head & Shoulders', while females less frequently offered the two most popular clever jokes - 'NASA' and 'No, Bud Light'. At the end, males did relate as many or more of all the gross jokes, but only because they consistently offered more jokes of all kinds in March. Clever jokes, that is, appeared to become less attractive to females during the cycle, while all jokes, both clever and gross, became more attractive to males.

One final trend appeared. Initially the average number of jokes offered by males seemed to be only slightly higher (1.8) than the average number offered by females (1.4). But finer analysis showed that this average levelled two details: females were three times more likely to claim that they had heard none of the jokes. Males, by contrast, were three times more likely to show repertoires of four or more jokes. This suggests that more females than males were non-informants i.e. not involved with the cycle, and males were more prone to be super-informants, who not only told the jokes but collected strings of them. Possibly this is a function of context: the jokes often served as a way of showing verbal superiority in male-dominated convivial situations like parties, and females may not have had social reasons for telling more than three jokes. On the other hand, proportions of males and females who were active informants (knowing 1-3 examples) were virtually identical, and the presence of five super-informants among the females indicates that this distinction is not a sharp one. Their questionnaires

showed normal sources of the jokes; that is, the five did not simply mimic super-informant boyfriends.

In general, the main finding was a negative one: males and females did not differ as much as expected in the kinds of jokes they preferred. This suggests that, whatever function the cycle served, it apparently was not sex-linked, and, popular stereotypes of femininity aside, grossness did not seem to be a male prerogative. In fact, females seemed to accept some gross jokes and also drop some clever ones before males did. Perhaps a smaller percentage of females participated actively in the cycle, due to differences in social roles. Still, the bulk of the jokes offered were offered by what we might call the average informant who volunteered one, two, or three jokes - and here males and females were found in equal percentages (58 per cent male and 61 per cent female).

With this detailed picture of how the jokes emerged and circulated in a typical community of young adults, we can now turn to the global interpretations proposed by folklorists. The short-lived nature of the cycle initially supports Smyth's speculation that the jokes were 'a ritualistic way of ending the grieving process'.<sup>33</sup> An important question, though, is whether the jokes actively played a role in terminating the grieving process. They may simply have marked the moment at which the tellers felt able to announce in public that they were not grieving. Dundes, among others, argued that the shuttle jokes were therapeutic, reducing feelings of horror by allowing witnesses to share their feelings.<sup>34</sup> But if this were the case, we would expect

joking to begin immediately and be most intense among groups most grief-stricken by the disaster. In fact, there was a lengthy latency period before the beginning of the cycle, and many who participated actively in joke-telling had no personal stake in the event. Perhaps it is premature to say that the jokes concerned grief, as such, especially since the term implies that those who passed on the jokes felt some kind of personal loss over the deaths of seven strangers. An alternative way of looking at the cycle is that they instead evoked closure – that is, they were quite consciously attempts to be the last thing said about a topic that Americans had already begun to come to terms with.

Analysts of humour have noted that children appreciate jokes most when they rely on mental skills that they have just acquired. Those who had not learned the necessary skills, obviously, could not get the jokes' 'point' – but children who had mastered the skill some years previously also appreciated such jokes less.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, Simon Bronner, in studying grosser than gross jokes, has suggested that self-consciously sick jokes allow adolescents to 'one-up someone and outdo something' already available in social language; hence they are ways 'to test the limits of social acceptance'. Despite the rebelliousness inherent in adolescence, he suggests, joke-tellers still 'anticipate the conflicts and tensions of society, since they are in the process of socializing into it'.<sup>36</sup> If jokes generally demonstrate recent mastery of social skills, and if sick jokes potentially test the audience's perception of social limits of acceptable discourse, then it would follow that Challenger jokes would have been most appreciated shortly after the tellers and listeners had gained control over their reactions to the tragedy. How this control is gained may or may not be therapeutic, and in any case it has little to do with the jokes, which seek to mark closure, or terminate public discussion of the event.

Previous studies collected in the volume *Children and the Death of a President*,<sup>37</sup> have examined the reactions of children and adolescents to the publicity over John F. Kennedy's assassination. One suggestion that the book's editors, Martha Wolfenstein and Gilbert Kliman, make, is that such media disasters, being a technological innovation, invoke a normal human biological response known as the disaster syndrome. Shortly after natural disasters such as tornadoes or floods, emotions are dulled and altruistic willingness to help out survivors is heightened. As a result, the community impulsively pulls together into a common work effort.

In the case of media tragedies, however, severe imbalances occur. A tragic event is pressed on millions of people who otherwise would be unaffected by it and who cannot respond to the initial shock with cathartic physical labour. Hence media viewers are bombarded

with stimuli to act, while in reality they can provide no actual help. Thus individuals must fall back on a variety of improvised passive activities.<sup>38</sup> In the case of the Kennedy assassination, these included obsessive reconstructions of the tragedy in the guise of finding a cause; anger and search for a scapegoat to punish (particularly after Oswald himself was assassinated by Jack Ruby); and refusal to believe that the dead are really dead. Long-range effects in the realm of folklore were the formation of intensely committed conspiracy buffs who sought shadowy underground figures who engineered both killings, along with a persistent contemporary rumour that Kennedy was still alive, though comatose, on some mythical Greek Island.<sup>39</sup> And, several of the researchers note, a cycle of Kennedy assassination jokes circulated 'a few weeks after', though only one is reprinted: 'What did you get for your birthday, Caroline? Jack-in-a-box.'<sup>40</sup>

Wolfenstein and Kliman conclude that one of the cultural problems revealed by the Kennedy media event was inarticulateness: 'It is our impression that on all age levels spoken words were inadequate to express much of what was felt.'<sup>41</sup> Added to this was the common perception that children needed to be protected from the impact of the tragedy; hence adults needed to exercise emotional control.<sup>42</sup> But, in so doing, they gave younger generations ambiguous models for how to react to death in public. And contemporary America, as Philippe Aries has observed, has participated in the European trend of removing the 'tabooed' realities of death from public discourse, but has also retained many of the elaborate mourning and burial rites characteristic of earlier times. 'It is as if one whole part of the culture were pushing America to erase every vestige of death,' he comments, 'while another part is holding on to it and keeping death in a place that is still quite visible.'<sup>43</sup> Hence contradictions inevitably arose: privately, we were encouraged to view and re-view the moment of death; yet the burden of reacting to it verbally fell on mass-media spokespersons and politicians.

And what models did young people find there? Those who watched the day-long national coverage of the Challenger's explosion recall how incoherent and ill at ease the newscasters were. Faced with official silence from NASA, the broadcasters compulsively re-viewed their videotapes of the fireball in slower and slower motion, attempting to find some clue as to what happened. And, as columnist Nicholas Von Hoffman noted in his critique of the media's response, eventually they adopted a forced 'let's all pull together' stance that lacked conviction:

They left behind ordinary news bathos, and took up as the voice of the unitary society... whatever scepticism they may have once brought to their work vanished. They pledged to carry on 'the

mission' of the seven heroes, now gone to the red, white, and blue where America's freedom fighters from Bunker Hill to Cape Canaveral sleep in glory. No hyperbole was too overblown.<sup>44</sup>

Such a critique is not new: Michael J. Arlen labelled the media's response to Robert Kennedy's assassination 'Griefspeak' and documented many of its clichés: obsession with trivial details, interviews with and pronouncements by inarticulate authorities and government officials, the jarring juxtapositions with commercials, and the discovery of ironies in the death, such as Robert Kennedy's statement, 'We were killed in Oregon. I hope to be resurrected in Los Angeles.'<sup>45</sup>

It is tempting to agree with Von Hoffman that jokes are Americans' way of striking back at the media's trivial handling of death, but a broader view suggests that the media simply reflect a general lack of strategies for coping with media death. Many people, especially older generations, may have found the media's official language of mourning adequate to express grief and satisfy the unresolved desire to do something about the tragedy. But for younger generations such formal language seemed as phony as the commercials so jarringly coupled with real, horrifying death. The shuttle disaster thus fell squarely on a hidden weak point in American cultural language, where standards of etiquette were ill-defined and contradictory. And such 'states of flux', as Bronner notes, themselves produce apparently immoral jokes that 'actually act to define social boundaries and value systems'.<sup>46</sup>

Silence is the enemy. Roger Simon attributes the shuttle jokes to a desire to 'speak the unspeakable',<sup>47</sup> yet he feels it unnecessary to say why frank descriptions of the astronauts' deaths could not be spoken. One irony of the disaster, as Elliott Oring notes, is that the explosion occurred in such a way that it left the specifics of the astronauts' deaths to the imagination. Hence the moment of death was deemed viewable in a way that explicit real-life killings normally would not have been screened on television.<sup>48</sup> The disaster put an impossible strain on public and private language: we were compelled to view death and encouraged to feel grief – but we were not given moral ways to express it.

From this point of view, the two-part nature of the cycle becomes more understandable. The cleverness of the first jokes conceal a complex mix of emotions: the search for causes; assignment of blame; anger over the public viewing of death; denial of the disaster's reality. Take 'No, Bud Light', for example. The presence of a commercial that focused on a spectacular fireball was an irony too great to ignore. Indeed, two of the people surveyed claimed that they had made this joke up: as the commercial aired throughout the time following the event, it's entirely possible that more than one

person could have spontaneously seen the coincidence. Like the ironies dwelt upon by TV commentators, this perception imposes some structure on the event by suggesting that the world is not totally random. But the joke may also contain multiple messages. It may express anger at the way the media sold the disaster in the same way as a commercial product, as seen in variants like this:

What did the young man in the bar say when he saw the shuttle explode?  
'Bud Light'.  
(Hazleton, 26 February)

A light beer commercial saying 'Give me a light', and then showing the space shuttle blow up. 'No, Bud light'.  
(Hazleton, 12 March)

The anger certainly seems to surface more explicitly in unique quips like:

What did the government give the families of the victims?  
A videotape of the event.  
(Hazleton, 26 February)

But this may not be the only function a single joke may play. Simons suggests that 'No, Bud Light' implies that 'the commander had mistakenly asked for a light and exploded the shuttle', making him a kind of moron.<sup>49</sup> Certainly the same explanation is contained in other, less popular jokes that did not make it to the Hazleton area:

What was going on in the shuttle right before it blew up?  
The crew was freebasing Tang<sup>50</sup>

What were Christa McAuliffe's [sic] last words?  
Do you mind if I smoke?  
(Shippensburg, 4 March)<sup>51</sup>

Other scapegoating tendencies seem to be contained in jokes that play on conventional ethnic slurs, such as the anti-black joke, found twice in Hazleton:

How come the shuttle blew up?  
They let the black guy drive  
(Hazleton, 12 March)<sup>52</sup>

or variants on the popular 'What's this button?' that rub in its implicit anti-feminist message:

What was the last thing Christa said before the shuttle blew up?  
What does this cute little button do?

But it would be rubbish to follow up this point with a global interpretation of 'No, Bud Light' as a scapegoating joke. Variants of both jokes give the numskull line variously to the flight commander, Christa McAuliffe, the ground crew, and ground control. When the words 'No, Bud Light' come from one of the astronauts after the fireball, they may just as easily incorporate a fantasy that the crew did not really die. Like the beer drinker in the commercial, who survives the special-effect explosion, McAuliffe and Co. might be having a good time getting drunk in the red-white-and-blue Valhalla beyond the sky. Many variants of 'Vacation all over' made this denial explicit:

Did you hear that the astronauts aren't dead?  
They are just vacationing all over Florida.

It seems, therefore, that the first wave of shuttle jokes reflects a desire to express many of the normal initial reactions following a national tragedy like this. The extreme variability of many of these clever jokes signals a move towards closure, a willingness to bring the shuttle explosion back into private discourse, incorporating many different emotions, not one monolithic reaction to the event. Interestingly, all these jokes declined in popularity among women, suggesting that females moved through this stage more quickly than males to become involved in the second wave of gross jokes.

The major role that Christa McAuliffe plays in these quips may partially express students' anger over poor teaching in public schools, as Elizabeth Simons suggests.<sup>53</sup> But my survey showed that the jokes that specifically related to her teaching composed no more than 8 per cent of the total. The most popular jokes that mentioned her name were 'Blue eyes', 'Vacation all over', 'Head & Shoulders', and 'What's this button?' - all of which were found with variants that make 'the astronauts' or 'the pilot' the subject of the joke (see Table Five). Interestingly, the first collected Hazleton variant of 'What's this button?', predominantly a McAuliffe joke, blamed the accident on 'the Commander of the space shuttle'. 'Head & Shoulders', too, first appeared at Hazleton in the form 'How did they know that the astronauts had dandruff?' and only later did it settle into the canonical form 'Did you hear Christa McAuliffe had dandruff?' 'Vacation all over', did start out as a McAuliffe joke: 'Where did Chrissy McAuffe [sic] spend her vacation?' But during February, 21 per cent of variants mentioned other astronauts, a percentage that increased to 35 per cent in March as 'the astronauts aren't dead' variation gained ground.

Given this evidence, and the persistent presence of non-McAuliffe variants of jokes that normally mentioned her, it seems fairer to say that the cycle focuses on her not as a teacher but rather as an example of an

**Table Four: Numbers of Variants Volunteered (Percentages in parentheses)**

	Males	Females
Non-informants (had heard none)	11 (7)	22 (22)
Passive informants (could remember none)	31 (19)	13 (13)
<i>Active informants</i>		
Number volunteered		
One	43 (27)	22 (22)
Two	33 (20)	22 (22)
Three	18 (11)	14 (14)
<i>Super-informants</i>		
Four	12 (7)	0 (0)
Five	8 (5)	5 (5)
Six	3 (2)	0 (0)
Seven	1 (1)	0 (0)
Eight	1 (1)	0 (0)
N=	161	98
Active informants	94 (58)	58 (58)
Super-informants	25 (16)	5 (5)
Variants	284	133
Variants/person	1.8	1.4

**Table Five: McAuliffe vs. Non-McAuliffe Variants (Percentages in parentheses)**

	McAuliffe mentioned	Others mentioned
Blue Eyes	41 (95)	2 (5)
Vacation all over	32 (74)	11 (26)
Head & Shoulders	29 (74)	10 (26)
What's this button?	23 (92)	2 (8)

ordinary person who died in an extraordinary way. This phenomenon would parallel what Gary Alan Fine has termed 'The Goliath Effect' in corporate urban legends: once a rumour about food contamination begins to circulate, it will tend to become attached to the brand that Americans recognize as the most dominant.<sup>54</sup> In this case, a joke cycle about humans who have died in an especially gruesome way will tend to concentrate on the individual who was given most media attention. Certainly the gross jokes begin by describing her, and the other victims, in an ordinary way. She has blue eyes; she showers when she is dirty; she eats and drinks commercial products; she enjoys vacations, like my students; random thoughts go through her head; she feeds her pets - all eminently trivial and speakable details. But in the jokes, as in real life, her head is blown to bits; her body is torn apart, burned, and scattered over the landscape; part of her is eaten by sharks and other fish - all unspeakable tragedies.

From this point of view, we might reinterpret the comment 'that's terrible' as a reaction, not to the joke, but to the event itself, brought briefly into consciousness and then packaged and disposed of by the joke's shrewd use of acceptable language. Tentative confirmation of this interpretation comes from the cycle of Budd Dwyer jokes that circulated in Hazleton exactly a year later.<sup>55</sup> Dwyer, Treasurer of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, had been convicted of political corruption and was about to be removed from office and sentenced to prison. On 22 January, he called a press conference, during which he was expected to announce his resignation. Instead, he read a rambling protestation of his innocence, passed around a series of sealed envelopes, then as video cameras continued to roll, he drew a revolver from a manilla folder, put it in his mouth, and killed himself.

Coincidentally, a heavy snowstorm had cancelled classes in many Pennsylvania school districts, so an unusually large number of children were at home entertaining themselves with morning TV shows. Without warning, the leading station in Harrisburg interrupted programming and broadcast the videotape in unedited form, showing Dwyer blowing his brains out in public. After hearing protests from parents, the channel made a public defence of its decision - and played the unedited tape again.<sup>56</sup> A Philadelphia channel, carried via co-axial cable in the Hazleton area, also broadcast the whole suicide; another Philadelphia station showed the action only to the moment when he put the gun to his mouth, then froze the image while the soundtrack reported the shot.<sup>57</sup> The Associated Press also distributed a still picture of Dwyer with the gun in his mouth, which was widely published. For many it became the event's key image, just as the fireball was the key image for the shuttle disaster.

On 11 February, I collected 81 variants of 13 jokes



**Plate 18** 'Now Honey, don't go shooting off your mouth.' Pennsylvania State Treasurer Budd Dwyer a moment before he committed suicide at a public press conference in Harrisburg, PA, on 22 January 1987. PHOTO BY AP/WORLD WIDE PHOTOS.

from Hazleton college students. Many of these, similar in rhetoric to the shuttle jokes, punned on the connection between Dwyer's first name and popular Budweiser beer slogans. One was purely clever:

What did one mortician say to the other?  
This Bud's for you.  
(10 per cent of variants collected)

Another was more pointed but still not explicit:

What's the difference between Bud Light and Budd Dwyer?  
Bud Light has a head on it.  
(17 per cent of variants collected)

But the most popular was also the one that most explicitly used conventional language adequate to describe the key image:

What did Budd Dwyer's wife say to him before going to give his speech?  
Now Honey, don't go shooting off your mouth.  
(40 per cent of variants)

As with the shuttle jokes, males and females showed no preferences for gross vs. clever quips, but offered this joke in nearly identical percentages (57 and 52 per cent).

This survey was less comprehensive than the previous one, partly because fewer colleagues were willing to administer it. One actually destroyed the questionnaires after scanning them, explaining that he found the material wicked. But the picture can be extended through surveys conducted by Simon Bronner at Middletown and by Mac Barrick at Shippensburg, even though they are equally scanty (26 students at both campuses). Bronner, teaching at a campus where Dwyer's son was enrolled, found that 22 of 26 students had heard jokes in the cycle by 28 January, or six days after the event. Five students claimed to have heard Dwyer jokes 'the day after the suicide', but the others encountered them 'three to five days after the suicide'. By 4 February, a week later, all of Mac Barrick's students in Shippensburg were aware of the jokes. Bronner's enquiries indicated that the cycle was current among both sixth-graders and adults in their thirties, but was most prevalent among adolescents and youngsters in their early twenties, with men apparently taking the lead in telling them. Although no statistics are cited, Bronner also observes that 'Shooting your mouth off' was the most popular joke of the cycle, followed by Budd Dwyer/Budweiser puns.<sup>58</sup>

Bronner's investigation suggested that this cycle, like the shuttle disaster jokes, followed a similar pattern: a brief latency period, a multi-wave fad for the jokes, and, 'by the end of February', a sharp decline in popularity. In addition, all but two of those offering jokes had seen the unedited tape of Dwyer's suicide, and, when interviewed after the survey, most of them acknowledged that humour 'eased the tension in the air, and in them'. Others 'derived adolescent satisfaction' from the jokes' 'irreverence', and Bronner holds out the possibility that 'telling the jokes was a sign of their toughness, an aggressive demonstration of their ability to be unshaken'.<sup>59</sup>

The demographics of such jokes support this second idea - that such jokes do not induce closure but mark when it occurs. We have noted already the unusual numbers of male super-informants (83 per cent male to 17 per cent female) among Hazleton shuttle disaster informants. Bronner likewise notes that males seemed to take the lead in telling Dwyer jokes. These observations fit closely with data gathered by Carolyn Pratt and Robert E. Lane among students at Yale University after John Kennedy's assassination. Overall, it was found, males reached closure more quickly than females, and, among those who had overcome shock soon after the event - the 'compulsive closers' - 82 per cent were male,<sup>60</sup> a figure nearly identical with the male ratio of Hazleton super-informants.

It is likely, therefore, that male 'compulsive closers'

are at the centre of joke cycles, which again indicates that they help not only air feelings but display willingness to rebel against boundaries of moral discourse. Nevertheless, audiences of normal closers must collaborate with those who skirt these boundaries; otherwise the material would not circulate so widely. Further, no evidence exists to prove that compulsive closers are in any way sick or deviant. If we were to assume this, then what of the equally compulsive folklorists who distribute questionnaires and compile lengthy lists of such jokes? It seems equally valid to say that, since no real disaster affected most Americans save the apparent one of viewing death, then those who invented and circulated jokes about the event saw its significance more realistically than the normal closers who allowed themselves to be manipulated by media hints of proper behaviour.

Overall, the primary social function of disaster joke cycles appears to be to speak the last word about otherwise unspeakable events by transforming acceptable language to fit the most dissonant images of the event. The traditional form of the joke allows both the teller and the listener to disclaim responsibility for the content of the joke. Nevertheless, by frankly admitting common emotions about the event - anger, denial, scapegoating - or by frankly describing the most unmentionable elements of the deaths, the jokes extend media-generated language in ways that, ironically, allow people to find the very models that the media fail to provide.

Further studies, however, are needed to verify this and other suggestions raised by this survey. No data exist linking participation in the shuttle joke cycles with exposure to media coverage of the disaster itself. Did school-children who saw the fireball live prove especially willing to joke about it? Likewise, we can only speculate that super-informants were compulsive closers. Opinion-oriented questions might help distinguish the varieties of personalities who circulate the jokes. Pratt and Lane, for instance, found that compulsive closers overwhelmingly agreed with statements like 'There's been too much attention paid to the President's death'.<sup>61</sup> Hypotheses like those raised subjectively by previous folklorists could be tested by polling respondents on questions like 'The media commercialized the disaster too much'. Also, given the lack of evidence that there is anything compulsive or abnormal about closure, a more neutral term for tradition-leaders is badly needed.

Admittedly, given the quicksilver nature of such cycles, it may not be easy to formulate sophisticated instruments quickly enough to detect the tradition and gauge its meaning. Since adults have conventionally reacted to such jokes with 'dismay or indignation',<sup>62</sup> it may be impractical to circulate such questionnaires to children or grownups. Still, future investigators should make the effort to collect such topical jokes with as

much context as possible. Only surveys of future events will show whether the multi-wave dynamics seen in the shuttle and Dwyer cycles are typical of all such events, or whether males do in fact take the lead in spreading the tradition. In any case, normalized lists of jokes, lacking information on variants or degree of popularity, cannot tell us what the cycle's overall function is. We need to comprehend jokes as part of a complex human phenomenon, not as discrete items of denatured collectanea. The final irony, though, is that to confirm these hypotheses about disaster jokes, folklorists must wait, questionnaires in hand, in eager anticipation of some new, spectacular, and gruesome tragedy.

Many individuals gave valuable assistance in this

project. Steven Kroll-Smith helped design the questionnaire. Eugene Miller, Vince Gutendorf, and Judy O'Donnell of Pennsylvania State University's Hazleton Campus, and Carol Ann Ellis of Bloomsburg University gave up class time to allow me to administer the questionnaire to their classes. Wendy Chung produced a preliminary tabulation of the questionnaires. When an earlier draft of this paper was presented at the International Seminar on Humour at Sheffield University, Sheffield, England, in August 1988, Christie Davies and Gillian Bennett gave valuable criticism. Alleen Nilsen and Simon Bronner helped enrich the list of references. Finally, Monica Gregory of Pennsylvania State University's Hazleton Campus kindly critiqued my use of statistics. I remain responsible for any errors of fact or interpretation.

## FOOTNOTES

- 1 Quoted in Elliott Oring, 'Jokes and the Discourse on Disaster', *Journal of American Folklore* 100 (1987), 281.
- 2 Among the papers delivered at the 1986 Annual Meeting of the American Folklore Society that mentioned this cycle were: Joseph P. Goodwin, 'Unprintable Reactions to All the News That's Fit to Print'; Patricia N. McLaughlin, 'Shuttle Jokes, How America Copes with a National Tragedy'; and C. W. Sullivan III, 'Children's Coping Mechanisms: The Space Shuttle Jokes'.
- 3 Elizabeth Radin Simons, 'The NASA Joke Cycle: The Astronauts and the Teacher', *Western Folklore* 45, (1986), 261-77.
- 4 Willie Smyth, 'Challenger Jokes and the Humor of the Disaster', *Western Folklore* 45 (1986), 243-60.
- 5 Oring.
- 6 Simons.
- 7 These and all following sets of examples include the first collected versions from Middletown, Shippensburg, and Hazleton, plus a few additional examples from Hazleton to suggest the extent of variation in the joke type. They are reproduced exactly as they were collected with no attempt to normalize. My thanks to Alan E. Mays and Mac Barrick for sharing their collections with me.
- 8 Also Smyth, 244; Simons, 266-7; Oring, 280.
- 9 The allusion is to a Budweiser beer commercial series that was airing at the time. In it, a beer customer demands 'Give me a light!' and some kind of unexpected pyrotechnic explosion results. The customer then says sheepishly, 'No, Bud light', and the pitch for Budweiser's low-calorie brand follows. See Simons 271.
- 10 Also Smyth, 245; Simons, 270-1; Oring, 280.
- 11 Also Smyth, 244; Simons, 272-3; Oring, 280; Simon Bronner, "'What's grosser than gross?': New Sick Joke Cycles', *Midwestern Journal of Language and Folklore*, 11 (1985), 30.
- 12 Also Smyth, 244; Oring, 280; Bronner, *American Children's Folklore* (annotated edn) (Little Rock, 1988), 130.
- 13 Also Smyth, 244; Oring, 280; Bronner (1988), 130.
- 14 Also Simons, 269; Oring, 280.
- 15 Head & Shoulders is a brand name of a leading anti-dandruff shampoo made by Proctor & Gamble.
- 16 Also Smyth, 245; Oring, 280; Bronner (1988), 130; Smyth notes that this joke circulated after celebrity Vic Morrow was beheaded by a crashing helicopter while making the movie *Twilight Zone*, 250.
- 17 Not collected elsewhere.
- 18 Also Smyth, 245; Simons, 273; Oring, 280.
- 19 Also Smyth, 244; Simons, 273; Oring, 280; Bronner (1988), 130.
- 20 Not collected elsewhere.
- 21 Also Smyth, 245; Simons, 272; Oring, 280; Bronner, 130; Smyth, 249, and Bronner (1988), 130; note that earlier versions of this joke had been told about drowned celebrity Natalie Wood, and terrorist victims Leon Klinghoffer and Lord Mountbatten.
- 22 Also Simons, 270. Simons, 270 and Bronner (1988), 123 give the earlier variant alluding to Jews killed and incinerated during the Holocaust.
- 23 Sprite and 7-up are virtually indistinguishable rival citrus-flavoured carbonated soft drinks.
- 24 Also Smyth, 245; Simons, 267-8; Oring, 280.
- 25 Also Simons, 274; Bronner (1988), 130.
- 26 On 26 January, the New England Patriots played the Chicago Bears in the Super Bowl, the US's most highly-touted professional football championship game. On the second play of the game, the Bears fumbled, giving the Pats an easy field goal and an early 3-0 lead. After that, the Bears ran up 44 straight points on the way to a 46-10 victory, the most lopsided in Super Bowl history.
- 27 Also Smyth, 245; Simons, 268-9.
- 28 Also Smyth, 245; Simons, 274; Oring, 280; Bronner (1987), 130.
- 29 Smyth, 244.
- 30 Simons, 263.
- 31 *ibid.*, 276.
- 32 *ibid.*, 266.
- 33 Smyth, 257.
- 34 Quoted in Oring, 281.
- 35 P. E. McGhee, 'Children's Appreciation of Humor: A Test of the Cognitive Congruency Principle', *Child Development* 47 (1976), 420-6.
- 36 Bronner (1985), 44.
- 37 Martha Wolfenstein and Gilbert Kliman, *Children and the Death of a President: Multi-disciplinary Studies* (Garden City, NY, 1965).
- 38 *ibid.*, xvi.
- 39 Bruce A. Rosenberg, 'Kennedy in Camelot: The Arthurian Legend in America', *Western Folklore* 35 (1976), 52-9.
- 40 Wolfenstein and Kliman, 67.
- 41 *ibid.*, 207-8.
- 42 *ibid.*, xvi.
- 43 Philippe Aries, *The Hour of Our Death* (New York, 1981), 596.
- 44 Nicholas Von Hoffman, 'Shuttle Jokes', *The New Republic* 24 (March 1986), 14.

- 45 Michael J. Arlen, *Living Room War: Writings About Television* (New York: Viking, 1969), 224.
- 46 Bronner (1985), 44.
- 47 Oring, 281.
- 48 *ibid.*, 282-3.
- 49 Simons, 271.
- 50 Smyth, 244; Simons, 263, 267; the allusion is to the rumour that celebrity Ricky Nelson, who died when his tour plane caught fire in mid-air on 31 December 1985, had been 'free-basing' cocaine on the flight, an extremely risky procedure involving flammable ether. Compare the unique quip, 'First Ricky Nelson, then the space shuttle' (Shippensburg, 17 February).
- 51 Also Christie Davies, 'Nasty Legends, Sick Humour and Ethnic Jokes about Stupidity', a paper delivered at the Sixth International Seminar on Perspectives on Contemporary Legend, Sheffield, England, 1988.
- 52 Ronald E. McNair, physicist and laser specialist, was the second African-American astronaut. Others killed in the flight were Ellison S. Onizuka, a Hawaiian oriental, and Judith A. Resnik, the US's second female astronaut. Neither inspired any shuttle jokes, so far as I can tell.
- 53 Simons, 275. Bronner (1988), 298 also observes that grade-school children preserved McAuliffe-oriented jokes more often and longer than others like 'NASA', suggesting that they 'commented on their school experience'.
- 54 Gary Alan Fine, 'The Goliath Effect: Corporate Dominance and Mercantile Legends', *Journal of American Folklore* 98 (1985), 63.
- 55 Simon Bronner, 'Political Suicide: The Budd Dwyer Joke Cycle and the Humor of Disaster', *Midwestern Folklore* 14 (1988a), 82-4; this gives an excellent overview of the historical events and the media's involvement in them, as well as a more complete description of the joke cycle it produced.
- 56 *ibid.*, 82.
- 57 William K. Stevens, 'Official Calls in Press and Kills Himself', *New York Times*, 23 January 1987, A10.
- 58 Bronner (1988a), 84-5.
- 59 *ibid.*, 86.
- 60 Wolfenstein and Kliman, 160.
- 61 *ibid.*, 168.
- 62 *ibid.*, 67.

# Wisdom in a Melting-pot: Nigerian Urban Folk and Pidgin English Proverbs

by J. O. J. NWACHUKWU-AGBADA

Writing about the urbanization of the Nigerian Igbo, Geoffrey Nwaka points to comments which imply that such people are to be pitied:

The panic caused by the worsening 'urban crisis' accounts in part for the general antipathy to the city, as well as the antiquarian nostalgia often expressed about the virtues and innocence of village life where most adult urban-dwellers were born and bred.<sup>1</sup>

He proceeds to demonstrate that there is little cause to regret urbanization in Igboland and in Nigeria as a whole, although the cities need a higher standard of management 'through the efforts of government agencies, individual townspeople and voluntary organizations in order to improve the quality of city life'.<sup>2</sup> The Nigerian urbanite is not one to carry his chin in his palm on account of 'the squalor of alien ugliness'<sup>3</sup> of his environment; rather, he is anxious to find the means of expressing himself, of recreating his cultural heritage, and making a home in his new and strange abode. Today the Nigerian city is folksy in a way that may not strike the casual observer. 'Most of our urban communities and groups', remarks Afam Ebeogu, 'are quite traditional, if not in settlement patterns, at least in attitudes, allegiances, sentiments, cultural associations and clubs'.<sup>4</sup>

Possessing Pidgin English as their common language, Nigerian urbanites have developed a creative consciousness, a tradition of art through which they exercise their aesthetic values. Everyday Nigerian Pidgin English changes because of the vibrancy of the city originators who are its users and owners. As Bernard Mafeni says, the city is the home of Nigerian Pidgin:

The rapidly growing towns of Nigeria have increasingly become melting pots of the many tribes and races which constitute Nigeria, and Pidgin seems to be today a widely spoken *lingua franca*, many town and city dwellers being at least bilingual in Pidgin and an indigenous language.<sup>5</sup>

This view is endorsed by Katzner who has described Pidgin and Creole as 'languages that arise to bridge the gap between people who could not otherwise communicate with each other'.<sup>6</sup> It was Gumperz and Hymes who suggested that population resettlement and intensive intergroup contact were the two factors responsible for the development of these new languages.<sup>7</sup> Nigerian Pidgin English developed from the desire to satisfy those communication needs which native languages and the metropolitan - nearly always colonial - language failed to fulfil in the cities. Although one would agree with Charles Mann that Pidgin is largely 'the fruit of a language-to-language rapport',<sup>8</sup> it is important to note that it results from new environmental demands, the city being a strange setting. This has been underlined by Louis Wirth who wrote in 1938 that in urban areas:

The bonds of kinship, of neighbourliness and the sentiments arising out of living together for generations under a common folk tradition are likely to be absent or at best relatively weak in an aggregate, the members of which have such diverse origins and backgrounds.<sup>9</sup>

The Nigerian urban dweller finds setbacks are soon overcome when he makes use of his cultural knowledge and skills in the attempt to come to terms with his environment.

Pidgin owes its dynamics to the nature of urban formation in most of the developing world. That is to say, whereas urban aggregation in some developed regions of the world owes much to industrialism, war and conflict, the process of urbanization in, say, Nigeria, resulted from 'the penetration of a peasant society by a capitalist system and this induces a geographic mobility without social mobility. Towns exert a psychological pull and the peasantry moves to the city seeking the products and standards presented by the new capitalist order'.<sup>10</sup>

The migrating individual brings with him his culture and skills, including the linguistic and artistic elements of his heritage. One of these expressive modes is the proverb which he knows well in his native language,