The Dead Baby Joke Cycle

ALAN DUNDES

Dead baby jokes are not for the squeamish or the faint of heart. They are told mostly by American adolescents of both sexes in joke-telling sessions with the intent to shock or disgust listeners. "Oh how gross!" is a common (and evidently desired) response to a dead baby joke. Teenage informants of the 1960s and 1970s indicate that dead baby jokes were often used in a "gross out" in which each participant tries to outdo previous joketellers in recounting unsavory or crude folkloristic items.

Dead baby jokes are a form of sick humor and it cannot be denied that there is a sick streak—and a longstanding one at that—in American humor. Perhaps it is partly a reaction to the traditional failure of Americans to discuss disease and death openly. Folklorist Louise Pound once amassed a considerable number of popular euphemisms for death and dying, although she declined to offer any comment on the possible sociological significance of the existence of so large a corpus of conventional circumlocutions.[1] It would seem obvious enough that the higher the incidence of euphemisms, the greater the anxiety about the subject matter, the direct mention of which is so scrupulously avoided. Even today, many Americans prefer not to say that an individual is dead or has died. Rather they are more comfortable saying that so-and-so has "passed away" or "passed on" or "is no longer with us" or "is no longer living." If someone is no longer living, he is dead! Yet saying "no longer living" is somehow less blunt than saying "dead." In written discourse, one can employ the adjective "late" to communicate politely the status death, as in paying a scholarly tribute to the late Professor such-and-such, though it is by no means altogether clear how long after the death of an individual it remains appropriate to use this means of reference. If an individual has been dead for twenty years, can one still refer to him as "late"? Maybe "late" is

1. Louise Pound, "American Euphemisms for Dying, Death, and Burial," *American Speech* 11 (1936): 190–202, reprinted in Louise Pound, *Nebraska Folklore: Selected Writings of Louise Pound* (Lincoln, 1959), 139–147.

a shortened form of "late lamented," in which case "late" should cease to be used after the customary period of mourning or lamenting has ended.

Folklore provides a socially sanctioned outlet for the discussion of the forbidden and tabooed. American idealism proclaims the Christian principle of "love thy neighbor" and celebrates such political rhetoric as "all men are created equal." Yet not all Americans really love their neighbors or believe in equality. Accordingly, American ethnic humor permits the expression of hate and the indulgence in the articulation of inequality. In similar fashion, we can see that if Americans worship health and refuse to deal with disease—even after being struck by it—then it might reasonably be expected that American folklore would in this as in so many analogous instances treat in fantasy what is avoided in reality.

It is not easy to pinpoint the beginnings of sick humor in America. However, surely one of the earliest and most influential sick humor cycles was the series of "Little Willie" quatrains which date from the turn of the century and which lasted well into the 1930s. It has been argued that this cycle was inspired by a minor English poet Harry Graham, who specialized in light verse and amusing doggerel. In 1899 he published *Ruthless Rhymes for Heartless Homes* and one rhyme in this volume ran as follows.

> Billy, in one of his nice new sashes,
> Fell in the fire and was burnt to ashes;
> Now, although the room grows chilly,
> I haven't the heart to poke poor Billy.[2]

In time, the folk transformed Billy into Willie. In one of the Little Willies published in 1936, we find this version.

> Little Willie, in bows and sashes
> Fell in the fire and got burned to ashes.
> In the winter, when the weather is chilly,
> No one likes to poke up Willie.[3]

In any event, the Little Willie series involved much murder and mayhem. Typically, Willie killed off parents and siblings:

---

2. Harry Graham, *Ruthless Rhymes for Heartless Homes and More Ruthless Rhymes for Heartless Homes* (New York, 1961), 10.

3. Lewis Copeland, *The World's Best Jokes* (New York, 1936), 290. Copeland includes twenty-four Little Willies (290–294).

Willie poisoned his father's tea;
Father died in agony.
Mother came, and looked quite vexed:
"Really, Will," she said, "what next?"

Little Willie hung his sister;
She was dead before we missed her.
Willie's always up to tricks.
Ain't he cute? He's only six.[4]

Supposedly the ghoulish quality and popularity of Little Willies led to creation of the folk metaphor "to give someone 'the Willies' " which continues in oral tradition to the present day.[5]

Of special interest in the light of our consideration of dead baby jokes are the occasional Little Willies which mention babies. Actually, poet Harry Graham had also included one or two references to infanticide. An 1899 rhyme entitled "Calculating Clara" went as follows:

O'er the rugged mountain's brow
Clara threw the twins she nursed,
And remarked, "I wonder now
Which will reach the bottom first?"[6]

And a rhyme in the 1930 sequel *More Ruthless Rhymes for Heartless Homes* begins with a motivation for the action. The rhyme "L'enfant glacé" runs.

When Baby's cries grew hard to bear
I popped him in the Frigidaire.
I never would have done so if
I'd known that he'd be frozen stiff.
My wife said: "George I'm so unhappé!
Our darling's now completely *frappé*!"[7]

Several of the Little Willies are in the same vein:

Willie, with a thirst for gore,
Nailed the baby to the door.
Mother said, with humor quaint,
"Willie dear, don't spoil the paint."[8]

4. Ibid., 290–291.

5. Evan Esar, *The Humor of Humor* (New York, 1952), 282. Esar's suggestion sounds plausible but "the willies" allegedly dates from circa 1895 which would precede even Harry Graham's 1899 poem. See Harold Wentworth and Stuart Berg Flexner, *Dictionary of American Slang* (New York, 1967), 580.

6. Graham, 19.

7. Ibid., 51.

8. Copeland, 290. In the version reported by Esar, the last line is "Willie, dear, don't mar the paint." See Esar, 282.

Willie split the baby's head
To see if brains were gray or red.
Mother, troubled, said to father,
"Children are an awful bother!"[9]

The last line of the latter quatrain may well contain a clue to the psychological rationale underlying the wish to kill babies.

Sometimes it was a girl rather than a little boy who disposed of a baby sibling rival:

Baby sat on the window-seat;
Mary pushed her into the street.
Baby was split all over the area
And mamma held up her forefinger at Mary.[10]

Here is another version:

Baby sat on the window-seat.
Mary pushed Baby into the street.
Baby's brains splattered the 'arey,'
And mother smiled "Tchk, tchk!" at Mary.[11]

Incidentally, the variations in these versions attest to the traditional nature of the little Willies. Although popular in print, Little Willies also circulated orally.

The Little Willies cycle was followed by other sick humor series, e.g., Little Audrey.[12] Surely the best known of these are the sick or cruel jokes. Brian Sutton-Smith published a selection of 155 cruel jokes collected between September and December of 1958 in his article "Shut Up and Keep Diggin': The Cruel Joke Series" and his compilation was supplemented by Roger Abrahams in his follow-up essay "Ghastly Commands: The Cruel Joke Revisited."[13]

9. Copeland, 292.

10. Louis Untermeyer, ed., *A Treasury of Laughter* (New York, 1946), 303.

11. Copeland, 292.

12. Cornelia Chambers, "The Adventures of Little Audrey," in *Straight Texas*, ed. J. Frank Dobie and Mody C. Boatright, Publications of the Texas Folklore Society 13 (Austin, 1937), 106–110, reprinted in B. A. Botkin, *A Treasury of American Folklore* (New York, 1944), 372–375.

13. Brian Sutton-Smith, "'Shut Up and Keep Digging': The Cruel Joke Series," *Midwest Folklore* 10 (1960): 11–22; Roger D. Abrahams, "Ghastly Commands: The Cruel Joke Revisited," *Midwest Folklore* 11 (1961–1962): 235–246. A series of paperback anthologies made sick jokes readily available to the general public. See *Sick Jokes, Grim Cartoons & Bloody Marys* (New York, 1958); *More Sick Jokes and Grimmer Cartoons* (New York, 1959); and *Still More Sick Jokes and Even Grimmer Cartoons* (New York, 1960). The combined contents of these three books were then reissued as Max Rezwin, ed., *The Best of Sick Jokes* (New York, 1962). It should also be noted that sick or black humor is also an important part of literature. One critic has gone

In the 1970s, sick humor has been manifested in a number of forms. There are, for example, sick Jesus jokes. Do you know why Jesus can't eat M & M's? Because they fall through the holes in his hands.[14] A more common format for sick humor is provided by the good news/bad news opposition. Representative texts might include the following:

> A governor of a southern state goes for a long overdue physical examination. Concerned about his health, the governor calls the doctor the next day and asks for a report. The doctor says he has good news and bad news. "Well," the governor says, "what's the good news?" "The good news is that you have six months to live." "The good news is I have six months to live? What's the bad news?" "The bad news is you have sickle-cell anemia."[15]

Actually, a number of the sick humor good news/bad news jokes are centered around conversations with doctors:

> A man goes for a check up. The doctor examines him and says, "I have bad news and worse news." "What's the bad news?" "The bad news is you have one month to live." "Oh my god, what's the worse news?" "It's February."

> A man is in a hospital for a hernia operation. A nurse enters the operating room and drops a tray of instruments. This causes the surgeon to make a slip and he accidentally cuts off the patient's testicles. When the man wakes up, he asks how he is. The doctor tells him he has bad news and good news. The bad news is that he cut off both testicles; the good news is there was no cancer.

> A man who had to have a leg amputated woke up in the hospital. He asked his doctor how he was. The doctor said, "I have bad news and good news. The bad news is we took off the wrong leg. The good news is the other leg is getting better."

---

so far as to claim that Black Humorists have restored the American novel to relevance. See Douglas M. David, *The World of Black Humor* (New York, 1967), 22. For further references to the considerable scholarship devoted to black humor, see Lutz Röhrich, *Der Witz* (Stuttgart, 1977), 313.

14. For additional sick Jesus texts, see Sutton-Smith, 20–21, and Abrahams, 245–246.

15. I collected this joke from my colleague Professor Sherwood Washburn in the mid-1970s. Professor Washburn is a distinguished physical anthropologist. The point of this joke about racism is that sickle-cell anemia is a disease which occurs almost exclusively among blacks in Africa and the New World. The sickle-cell trait appears to be genetically transmitted and seems to be positively correlated with resistance to malaria. Thus originally it may have been a useful adaptive feature. All of the other good news/bad news joke texts were collected in Berkeley in 1978–1979. The majority have to do with medical malpractice, unnecessary surgery, and the like. It is certainly appropriate for sick humor to treat illness and hospital care.

A man who was in an automobile accident wakes up in a hospital bed and asks the doctor how he is. "Well, I have bad news and good news." "What's the bad news?" "The bad news is that we had to amputate both your legs. The good news is that there's a man in the next bed who wants to buy your shoes."

A few good news/bad news jokes have dead baby content:

A doctor comes in to the maternity ward and tells a woman who just gave birth to a baby, "I have good news and bad news." "What's the good news?" "The good news is that your baby's alive and it's a giant eye." "Oh my god, doctor, then what's the bad news?" "The bad news is: It's blind."

This is similar to another sick joke involving a doctor in a maternity ward:

A doctor enters the maternity ward with a baby and he slings it around several times and finally throws it against the wall. It goes Splat! The mother screams, "Oh doctor, oh doctor, that was my baby." The doctor replies, "Don't worry. It was dead anyway."[16]

Another recent sick joke involving a baby requires a knowledge of football ritual:

A fire breaks out in Houston. The firemen arrive and they see a black woman with her baby up on the balcony of the thirtieth floor of an apartment building. A fireman steps forward and tells the woman to drop her baby to him. She is afraid to do so. She says, "I ain't gonna drop my baby to no white man." She refuses to drop the baby. The flames grow higher and higher. Finally, a black man steps out of the huge crowd which has gathered. He yells, "Throw down your baby. I'm Billy 'Whiteshoes' Johnson, the great pass catching football player. I'll catch your baby." He convinces her and she throws down her baby. Billy "Whiteshoes" Johnson circles around and makes a great one-handed catch of the baby. The crowd goes wild and cheers and cheers. Then doing a little dance (as if in the endzone), Billy "Whiteshoes" Johnson takes the baby and spikes it (dashes it to the ground as is done with the football upon scoring a touchdown).

None of these jokes are really part of the dead baby joke cycle. For one thing, dead baby jokes are in riddle form beginning with

16. This is a common sick joke. Sutton-Smith, 15, reports "Son, will you quit kicking your sister." "Oh, that's all right. She's already dead." Similarly, Roger Abrahams remembered a joke current in his childhood in Philadelphia (circa 1942): "This boy was walking down the street kicking a baby. A policeman walked up to him and said, 'What are you doing there?' 'I'm kicking the baby down the street.' 'You're what?' 'Oh, it's all right, he's dead.' " See Abrahams, 239–240. In other versions, a nurse brings the baby in to the new father and either drops it several times or throws it across the room saying, "April Fool. Born Dead." (cf. Sutton-Smith, 17–18.)

a "What" question. The only reference to dead babies in Sutton-Smith's 1960 article is in the form of a folk simile rather than a riddle: "You're about as funny as a carload of dead babies."[17] Abrahams calls the form "sick proverbial comparison" and gives as his first example "As funny as a barrel of chopped-up babies on Mother's Day."[18] The nature of the dead baby joke form will become abundantly clear from the following examples.

Probably the most common dead baby joke is:

What's red and sits in a corner?
A baby chewing (teething on, eating, sucking on) razor blades.

A text which may occur in tandem with the preceding text is:

What's green and sits in a corner?
Same baby two weeks later.

The "What's red?" formula is found in other, less common, dead baby jokes:

What's red and swings?
A baby on a meathook.

What's red and green, red and green?
A baby going through a lawn mower.

What's red and white, red and white, pink, pink, pink?
Baby in a blender.

Other colors are reported. For example, a very popular dead baby joke uses blue instead of red:

What is blue and sits in a corner?
A baby in a plastic bag. (A baby in a baggie.)

As was the case with red, the blue text may also be followed by a related joke:

What's blue and kicks? A baby in a plastic bag.
What's blue and stiff? Same baby three days later.

Not all the dead baby jokes depend upon color:

What's harder to unload, a truck full of bowling balls (or bricks) or a truck full of dead babies?
A truck full of bowling balls because you can't use a pitchfork.

17. Sutton-Smith, 22.

18. Abrahams, 242. A version from the University of California, Berkeley, Folklore Archives collected in Grass Valley, California, in 1958 is: "As funny as a truckload of dead babies."

This common joke also has a sequel:

> What's more disgusting than a truckload of dead babies?
> A truckload of dead babies with one live one eating his way out.

Related to this imagery pattern of a necrophagous nightmare is the following text:

> What's worse to be buried under: bowling balls or dead babies?
> Bowling balls—you can't eat your way out.

or

> What's the difference between a bowling ball and a baby?
> You can't eat a bowling ball.

The cannibalistic theme continues:

> How do you make a dead baby float?
> Two scoops dead baby and one pint of root beer.[19]

Sometimes the dead babies are mutilated rather than eaten:

> What's more fun than nailing a dead baby to a wall (tree)?
> Ripping it off again.

Another example of body mutilation is an updated parody of an old riddle:

> How did the dead baby cross the road?
> He was stapled to a chicken.

There are other examples of dead baby jokes, e.g., "What is baby powder used for? Blowing up babies." "What is baby oil used for? Frying babies." But these are not as common as the ones cited above. Still, sometimes it is the exceptional text which may provide an important clue for those concerned with trying to discover underlying meanings. Thus "What's red and goes round and round? A baby in a garbage disposal" may be of interest. Another text "What's the difference between a baby and a spoon? You can't get a spoon down a garbage disposal" confirms the association. Babies are like garbage—recall the texts in which they are placed in plastic bags—and the abiding concern seems to be with disposal. The issue literally seems to be how to get rid of babies?

Yet the meaning of the dead baby joke cycle is elusive. There are a number of possibilities and they are not necessarily mutually ex-

19. This is clearly an updated revision of an older elephant joke from the 1960s: "How do you make an elephant float?" "Two scoops of elephant in root beer (or ginger ale)."

clusive. The joke cycle appears to have begun in the early nineteen sixties and it has continued to flourish up until the late nineteen seventies. The visual reporting of the Vietnam war with its unending pictures of carnage and death may have had something to do with the popularity of the cycle. Like gallows humor, the dead baby joke cycle tries to make light of the worst kind of human atrocity.

Another plausible interpretation might turn on the growing fear of technology. As western cultures become more and more mechanized, there is concern lest man be mastered by machines rather than controlling them. Certainly a large percentage of the dead baby jokes explicitly describe babies being ground up by a variety of modern "conveniences," e.g., lawnmowers, blenders, razor blades, garbage disposals. Is the joke cycle warning of the possible or probable fate of modern man? Are we doomed to be destroyed by uncaring machines that we ourselves have created allegedly to make life easier and more pleasurable?

It is also possible that there may be an undercurrent of racism in the cycle. The repeated references to colors, e.g., red, blue, etc. would suggest that it is specifically "colored" babies who are—in terms of folkloristic wishful thinking—being killed off. Even supposedly liberal northern communities in the United States have opposed integration and this opposition comes also from the white children in such communities. The dead baby jokes are particularly popular with junior and senior high school students. This would explain why an elephant joke was selected to be converted into a dead baby joke (How to make a dead baby float?) since the elephant joke cycle may have been a socially sanctioned subterfuge to express white hostility and aggression against blacks.[20] In this connection, it may be noteworthy that one variant to the "baby in a blender" joke (which also depends upon color) is: "What is green and goes two hundred and fifty miles an hour? A frog in a blender." If a red object (in the dead baby joke cycle) is symbolically equivalent to a frog, and if a frog (e.g., a wide-mouth frog) is a symbol for a black, then the cycle may well represent white protest against what is perceived as an unwelcome intrusion of hundreds of colored babies.[21]

20. For this interpretation of the elephant joke cycle, see Roger D. Abrahams and Alan Dundes, "On Elephantasy and Elephanticide," *Psychoanalytic Review* 56 (1969): 225–241, reprinted in Alan Dundes, *Analytic Essays in Folklore* (The Hague, 1975), 192–205.

21. For evidence pointing to the use of the frog as a symbol of the white stereotype of the black, see Alan Dundes, "Jokes and Covert Language Attitudes: The Curious Case of the Wide-Mouth Frog," *Language in Society* 6 (1977): 141–147.

But the most obvious interpretation of the cycle would seem to be a protest against babies in general. The attempt to legalize abortion and the increased availability of improved means of contraception, e.g., the pill, have brought the debate about the purpose of sexual activity into the public arena where even teenagers can participate. There is, of course, the element of sibling rivalry—the fear of any child of being displaced by a younger sibling—which we can clearly see in the Little Willies from the turn of the century, but sibling rivalry alone would not account for the popularity and growth of the dead baby joke cycle in the 1960s and 1970s. Sibling rivalry has been a factor in human societies from the beginning of man's existence; the dead baby joke cycle in its present form has flourished for only two decades.

The highly publicized improved means of contraception and the initiation of sex education classes in the public schools have made teenagers more aware of the dangers of pregnancy. Women's liberation ideology may have contributed too by insisting that women's place was not necessarily in the home and that motherhood was not the only career open to women. More and more, babies were perceived as a perfidious male plot to keep women subjugated. "Keep 'em barefoot, pregnant, and in the kitchen" is a folk dictum expressing this male chauvinistic point of view. Thus for women to be liberated, they need to keep from getting pregnant, or if they become pregnant, they might wish to consider abortion as a means of retaining their newly found freedom.

But a price is paid for contraception and abortion. That price includes the guilt of preventing the creation of or destroying a potential human being. Planned Parenthood does try to separate sexuality from procreation, but that does not alter the essential biological fact that any heterosexual act of intercourse can in theory produce a new being. (Perhaps the repeated references to the color red in the joke cycle may allude to menstruation, that is, a signal that the onset of puberty has occurred.) It is just possible that one way of fighting the fear or gilding the guilt is to tell gross dead baby jokes. It is as if one could dehumanize babies and by so doing allow one to destroy them through modern technology (which includes contraceptive devices). The razor blade is perhaps analogous to the sharp instrument used (unwisely) in non-medical abortions; the baby trapped in a plastic baggie is perhaps the fantastic realization of a potential being trapped in a condom or stopped by a

diaphragm. Whether the means is a pitchfork or a garbage disposal unit, the baby is to be thrown away forever.

Sometimes what is thrown away forever may come back to haunt the guilty party. In a joke which depends very much upon convulsive gestures and stuttering speech for its impact, this is precisely what happens:

> A greatly misshapen, bent-over man with twisted gnarled limbs clambers up a long flight of stairs and knocks on the door of an apartment. The door is opened by a kindly, apple-cheeked, gray-haired woman. The man says, "E-E-Excuse m-m-me, a-a-are y-y-you, M-M-Mrs. Sm-Sm-Smith?" The woman replies, "Why, yes I am." "D-D-Did y-y-you u-u-used t-t-to l-l-live in M-M-Milwaukee?" "Why, yes I did." "I-I-In 1932, d-d-did y-y-you h-h-have a m-m-miscarriage?" "Why, yes I did, but how on earth did you know?" "M-M-Mother!" [said with arms outstretched to embrace the woman].[22]

Folklore is always a reflection of the age in which it flourishes and so whether we like it or not, the dead baby joke cycle is a reflection of American culture in the 1960s and 1970s. If we do not like the image, we should not blame the mirror. If anything is sick, it is the society which produces sick humor. Eliminating the humor —even if such censorship were possible, which it definitely is not— would not solve the problems which led to the generation of the folklore in the first place. Our concern therefore should not be with dead baby jokes so much as with dead babies. We need to prevent wars which modern technology has modified to the terrifying point that human beings including babies can be instantly converted into garbage. We need to see that machines work for us, not against us; that machines improve the quality of life, not end it. We need to oppose racism and allow babies of whatever color an opportunity to lead full productive lives. And finally we need to work towards solving the difficult problem of balancing the rights of individuals with the rights of the children of those individuals. Parents should not sacrifice *their* lives for their children nor sacri-

---

22. I remember hearing (and telling) this joke in the early 1950s in New Haven, Connecticut. No doubt its popularity among college undergraduates had something to do with its theme of apparent parental rejection. College freshmen while enjoying their independence from home and family may also feel cast out and perhaps inadequate to face the new challenging environment of college life. There is a wish to return to the safety of the protective home (symbolized by the rosy-cheeked mother) even though to do so would be an admission of failure (to cope successfully in the outside world).

fice their *children's* lives for their own selfish, self-centered interests. To the extent that greater longevity and lesser infant mortality have made overpopulation a real danger in the modern world, planned parenthood is probably necessary. If this is so, then Americans (and other peoples of the world as well) are going to have to come to terms with limiting human population growth. Surely contraception is infinitely preferable to abortion, but in either case the dead baby configuration is going to have to be dealt with in reality. It is no joke but rather a serious matter of the greatest importance.[23]

But as Americans become more and more self-indulgent, it becomes increasingly difficult to find the proper balance. The higher incidence of divorce and of so-called broken homes reflects the growing tendency for individual Americans to seek personal self-fulfillment at the expense of their children, their babies. A recent joke parodies parents who defer their own needs because of their children:

> Two octogenarians are in divorce court. She's 81; he's 84. The judge inquires why at their age do they wish to get a divorce? The woman explains, "We haven't gotten along for years." "If that's the case," says the judge, "why did you wait until now?" "Oh," says the woman, "we both decided that we would wait to get a divorce until all our children were dead."

This is not a dead baby joke, but its content is related. The audience expects the woman to say that the couple decided to wait until the children were grown up, finished with college, self-supporting, etc. The point is that the younger generation does not want to wait until their children grow up and die before pleasing themselves. Better to kill off the babies right at the start, the dead baby joke cycle would seem to argue.[24]

---

23. One must keep in mind that other cultures have folklore about dead babies. But usually this folklore is in the form of legends about ghostly dead children who return to earth to haunt their relatives. (Sometimes the infants have died before having been baptized.) For examples of such folklore, see Finnish folklorist Juha Pentikainen's comprehensive monograph, *The Nordic Dead-Child Tradition: Nordic Dead-Child Beings, A Study in Comparative Religion*, FFC 202 (Helsinki, 1968). These narratives may also reflect guilt about actual or wished-for infanticide, but they are generally devoid of humor. In American folklore, in contrast, it is jokes, not supernatural legends or memorates, which treat dead babies.

24. One representative articulation of the anti-baby tendency in American culture is Lance Morrow's essay "Wondering If Children Are Necessary" which appeared in *Time Magazine*, 5 March 1979, 42, 47. Morrow suggests that the increase of child abuse may be related to the same movement. Teenage alcoholism, drug use, and suicide

The cycle provides a means for adolescents and young teenagers to try to relieve their anxiety about impending parenthood. The transition from child to parent, accomplished biologically by producing a baby, is a traumatic one in most societies and American society is no exception. We prolong childhood as it is, in American culture. The cultural definition of adulthood, (e.g., age 21 or age 18 or whatever the age of drinking, driving, voting, or marrying without parental consent may be in a particular state) is long after the onset of puberty when individuals are physically and physiologically capable of conceiving and bearing children. Avoiding or disposing of unwanted babies—at least in dead baby joke fantasy terms—is thus a means of wishful thinking, a means of remaining a child. Parenthood means responsibility; childhood in theory allows irresponsibility. An adult must legally be responsible for a child. The difference between the biological ability to have babies and the cultural norms for when marriage and procreation should ideally take place creates stress. Adolescents could have babies and do have sexual drives, but in theory society insists that they postpone such activities. With sex education in the public schools and the greater availability of contraceptive devices, the gap between biology and culture has perhaps narrowed, but the guilt cannot so easily be removed. Having sexual relations without wishing to have babies or even the very knowledge of the fact that abortion clinics are a part of modern society has provided a source of anxiety which I believe is clearly a factor in the generation and transmission of dead baby jokes.[25]

University of California
Berkeley, California

may also be in part a consequence of real or imagined parental rejection and resentment of children. In that context, one might speculate that the dead baby jokes told by adolescents may also be about themselves vis-à-vis their parents.

25. There is evidence suggesting the increasing popularity of dead baby jokes. In a paperback anthology published in July 1979, we find seven texts of dead baby jokes (plus versions of "sickle-cell anemia," "the fellow in the next bed wants to buy your boots," "it's blind," "it was dead anyway," and "we wanted to wait until the children died," etc.). See Larry Wilde, *The Official Book of Sick Jokes* (Los Angeles, 1979). Dead baby jokes may be spreading to Europe. My daughter Alison collected texts in Paris during the summer of 1979 from two Scottish teen-age girls, One of these texts is: What's pink and screams? A peeled baby in a bag of salt.