

Performativity and Metacommentary in Jewish American Mother Light Bulb Jokes

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Q: How many people does it take to change a light bulb for a Jewish mother?

A: None, Dahlink, I'll sit in the dark.

Q: How many Jewish mothers does it take to change a light bulb?

A: Don't worry about your mother. You go have a good time. I'll just sit here in the dark again. Alone.

- ¹ The Jewish American Mother light bulb jokes cited above are illustrations of a special categorical form that is performative. They are quite different from their traditional,
- ² non-performative counterparts. Moreover, they are, as Della Chiaro puts it, "doubly clever (or funny) because, as well as the punch[es], [they seem] to make fun of [themselves] too" (73). Performative versions from the Jewish American Mother light bulb joke cycle reveal an inherently metacommunicative tone. Among the non-performative variants, replies like "None. They'll sit in the dark and bemoan their fate" are more common. In the performative versions, a role shifting occurs, and the joke teller changes from his or her role as an answer provider who uses a third person voice to "become" the person about whom s/he is telling the joke: the Jewish mother.
- ³ Folklorist Barre Toelken uses the terms "dynamism" and "conservatism" to describe verbal and material folkloristic content that ranges across a spectrum of styles from flexible to formulaic. Applying Toelken's schema to address light bulb jokes, it seems clear that this joke genre's form is typically more conservative and formulaic than dynamic and flexible (39-43). Although a joke teller has the capacity to use intonation and subtle intervening style to her advantage, the joke's form cannot be changed too extensively or the form's point will be lost. However, like proverbs that are parodied, light bulb jokes can be altered to create another category of variants that, while being recognized as illustrative of the form, manage to make up a new form within the form. This is the case with performative light bulb jokes.
- ⁴ A performative light bulb joke's narrator/joke teller and audience may experience an enhanced potential to perceive nuanced critiques during the joke event. This heightened perceptibility is less likely to be available during non-performative joke encounters due to the absence of role shifting. Role shifting as a storytelling event technique or element is well known for its effectiveness. Performative jokes demonstrate what Bauman refers to as "the creation of social structure in performance" (43) that can, as he says, promote transformation as social control for multiple reasons. Given the potential for sharpened perception, the narrator and audience may feel keenly affected by this joke.
- ⁵ At the moment when the joke teller becomes the Jewish mother answer giver, the audience and the joke teller hear several 'voices' manifest instead of the expected answer motif present in non-performative versions. The metanarrative¹ is especially poignant because not one but two other 'characters' beside the narrator exist within this

joke: the Jewish mother, and the one toward whom ironic affection and other complex feelings are projected - a child role or "Dahlink."

⁶ When Mother 'answers' the narrator, the narrator occupies the Dahlink and Mother roles simultaneously. In this way, the joke teller can 'become' his or her own Jewish mother. The answer "Don't worry about your mother" succinctly demonstrates this concept. Moreover, the joke listeners (a joke's audience) can think of themselves as being addressed by the mother as "her" Dahlinks. The audience may also envision itself as being 'outside' of the joke, watching it as an event. Alternately, audience members may feel kinship with the characters who are being indexed. In re-telling the joke, audience members turned narrators can experience all the joke's roles.

⁷ If the narrator is both the mother and the child, it can be said that there is only one, multi-voiced character all along, a trickster-like changeling. Georges and Jones suggest that mastery over difficult or problematic situations is accomplished (or at least attempted) through joke telling. They cite Jung's and others' treatments of trickster cycles to emphasize their point (239). The hybridized, trickster self is summoned during the joke event, when it embraces its myriad voices and, perhaps, the audience. Many choices exist within this joke-telling event moment, depending upon who is listening, who is telling, and what local knowledge exists among all parties involved.

⁸ The themes of insider versus outsider in terms of who tells, listens to, and 'gets' the joke can turn the ethnic slant of the joke into overt anti-Semitism. It is arguable that 'even Jews' telling the joke can be seen as self-disparaging, anti-Semitic, anti-Jewish mother, and misogynistic. In the full length version of this essay, I critique both the reductive argument that Jewish jokes are mostly self-flagellating and the Freudian aggression hypothesis in humor theory in order to explore some of the nuanced feelings I believe the narrator as Mother and Dahlink, and different joke audience members are expected to internalize. I will now examine who Mother and Dahlink 'are' - who they represent. This discussion potentially provides some insights into the messages the joke is geared to promote, how it is intended to be received, and within what audiences it is likely to be told, heard, and understood.

⁹ Among many Jewish Americans of Eastern European descent, the Yinglish (or 'Yiddishified' English) term "Dahlink" ("Darling"), while not definitionally diminutive, is usually reserved as an endearment for a person younger than the person using the term. Although a person who is referred to as Dahlink may not be younger than the person using the term, one who is called Dahlink is often treated like an offspring. During the joke event, Dahlink has a child's role in relation to Mother's expertise and parental authority. In psychotherapeutic terms, the joke's Dahlink is infantilized.

¹⁰ Mother communicates ironically, the paradoxes she feels layering and finding life in her speech, and in what she says by not saying it. Potential interpretations of examples adopted from the joke cycle variants include: "Don't worry" could mean "Of course you should worry, don't you love me?"; "Don't do it" conveys "Do it"; "I'll sit in the dark" translates as "I don't want that at all, and I'm scared"; "I want to suffer, here in the dark (unaware)" means "I don't want that at all, and I can't stand not knowing what's going on. Okay, okay - sometimes, I admit, I like not having to know everything."

¹¹ By way of inversion, there is a distinct opportunity for Mother to question and express annoyance with her stereotypical job of being overprotective, intrusive, caretaking and responsible for Dahlink. More than merely articulating aggression, here in the joke's location she has the license to request the help that she is not supposed to ask for or need. Thus, the performative joke suggests a profound critique regarding her positionality as a woman and a mother. With local knowledge and perspective, those who tell, listen to, and experience this joke have the chance to hear this critique. The performative joke event functions through irony in conjunction with a Bakhtinian sense of double-voiced discourse (Bahktin), interpreted by Barbara Babcock as "a phenomenon

characteristic of the 'Others' among us; both a strategy for dealing with oppression and a form of survival" ("Personal").

¹² The inversion messages in the joke highlight many motherly anxieties. Not only is she worried that her child can live without her, she may realize with concern that maybe she cannot live without her child. Who changes her light bulbs when her kids move away? Is she alone, divorced, widowed? Why can't some other person change the light bulb? Why can't she change the light bulb for herself? The joke's irony provides a space for anxiety to be safely uttered, and for these and other questions to be asked of the teller, Dahlink, Mother, and the audience.

¹³ I conjecture that the complex subject of mothers' relationships with their children is helpfully and creatively negotiated through performative joke telling.

Notes

¹⁴ This essay is dedicated to the memory of my friend, Faye Glazer, a Polish-born, Jewish American whose patience with my Yiddish (and with me) will always be appreciated and never be forgotten.

¹⁵ 1. My usage of "metanarrative" in this essay is borrowed from Barbara Babcock, with gratitude. See her piece "The Story in the Story".

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