

Topics and Comments

An Inversion of the 'You're Going to Die!' Joke

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The first time I heard the "You're going to die!" joke¹ discussed in Linda Kinsey Adams' note (1987), one of the men present responded by describing a scene from Woody Allen's film, "Bananas." Since the scene in question represents an inversion of the joke Adams interpreted, it might shed additional light on the issue.

In the movie, Allen plays a character who finds himself embroiled in a revolution in a Latin American country (a "banana republic," hence the title). As memory serves, in the scene in question Allen's character and several Latinos are instructed how to suck the venom from a snakebite. A short while later a buxom young woman runs through the camp, her hands pressed to one of her breasts, crying, "I've been bitten by a snake!" Allen's character, face twisted with glee, races off after her, accompanied by several other men, obviously eager to offer the requisite treatment.

This scene inverts the "You're going to die!" joke in several ways. 1) The instructions come before, not after, the snakebite. 2) A woman, rather than a man, is bitten on a "private part." 3) The task of sucking out the venom is not seen as humiliating or undesirable (quite the reverse!). 4) The bite victim is active (running off) rather than passive (waiting for his friend to contact the doctor and then administer aid). There is some implication that the woman is "playing hard to get," whereas the male bite victim is clearly easily accessible.

Further, 5) there are several men available to administer the aid, implying competition for the woman's sexual favors.

Clearly if the "You're going to die!" joke is homophobic, Allen's scene is (to coin a phrase) heterophilic. Only a cursory knowledge of Allen's other films is needed to realize that this visual joke fits well with Allen's typical character—full of lust for women, with a self-image as a suave lady-killer but the outward appearance of a complete nebbish who, self-image notwithstanding, can hardly get to first base (to use the folk idiom).

The relative ease of access to the victim in the two versions seems instructive. In the homophobic version, the male victim waits passively and is clearly eager to be helped (i.e., sucked), but the companion is unwilling to render assistance. In the heterophilic version, the victim presumably wants help (else why is she screaming?), but actively runs away from her potential benefactors; nevertheless, Allen's character and the other men pursue her vigorously.

It is also important to note that the homophobic version is set (and presumably often performed) in situations characterized by what has come to be known as "male bonding," i.e., situations where men pursue "masculine" activities in isolation from women. Considered in conjunction, perhaps the scene and the joke can be seen as a folkloric answer to the riddle: What is the difference between a hunting trip and a homosexual tryst?

Adams' interpretation, that the "You're going to die!" joke expresses homophobia in response to the greater visibility of the gay community (1987:111), only goes half way. I would like to suggest that the joke also makes a specific and forceful assertion about "male bonding." The anxiety expressed is not only about gays "out there," but about sexuality "in here." The joke addresses an ambivalence about close relationships between men and asserts that it is possible to be close but not *too* close, that two men can be hunting buddies without being lovers. Why should this be a problem? The contrast between the joke and Allen's inversion gives us a good hint. In the joke, as mentioned above, the snake-bitten man passively waits to be treated, but in the movie scene the woman runs away from her would-be benefactors; the man is sexually available while the woman is sexually elusive. This contrast reflects long-held stereotypes about sex roles. According to the stereotypes in question, the male has a vast sexual appetite and will act to satisfy it at the least opportunity, but the female is less interested in sex and must be wooed and coaxed and won; it only takes a "come-hither look" to seduce a man, but it takes flowers and candy and probably marriage to seduce a woman. Thus

in Allen's scene the woman "plays hard to get" but the men pursue her eagerly.

While Allen's scene reflects the stereotypes, the joke, in a way, challenges them, or at least challenges a logical corollary. Logically, if all men are sex-crazed and all women are sex-indifferent, there ought to be rampant male homosexuality. Combine the male's stereotypically high sexual appetite with male bonding and physical isolation from women and society (as on a hunting trip) and, according to some of the premises of our culture, homosexuality is inevitable. The "You're going to die!" joke takes these factors, combines them, and emphatically denies the "logical" conclusion; in the joke, the difference between a hunting trip and a homosexual tryst is as great as the difference between life and death. Furthermore, a case could be made that the joke rejects even latent homosexuality, since the man could administer the treatment and then claim that he is not a fellator; given the urgency of the situation, it is clear that sexual contact is (logically) secondary to medical contact. But if we really thought that way, there would not be any joke here.

Note

1. Here is the "typical example" of the joke provided by Adams:

Two ole guys were out in the pasture and they was messin' around out there, and one of them thought he'd go take a shit. He just squatted there by a bush, and a little old rattlesnake was there and bit him on the balls.

"My God, I've been bitten on the balls." He said to his partner, he said, "My God, help me, I've been bit."

And his partner said, "My Lord, let me run to the truck and call it in and find out what to do." And he went back to the truck and called and got the hospital on the radio, and the ambulance was on the way and all this, and he said [to the doctor], "Whatdaya want me to do?"

And the doctor said, "What you want to do is go back down there and take your pocketknife and cut a little square and go down there and suck all the poison out."

And he said, "What happens if I don't?"

"Well, if you don't, he's going to DIE."

So he goes back down there, and the guy's laying on the ground, and he said, "What are you going to do? What did the doctor say?"

"He said you're going to DIE!"

[Transcribed from tape recording. Collected from a 38-year-old male paint-shop owner and snake handler, on July 3, 1985, in the bar of the Holiday Inn in Sweetwater, Texas, during a three-hour conversation at a table with three other men and one woman.]

(Adams 1987:109-110; bracketed information in original)

Work Cited

Adams, Linda Kinsey

1987 "The 'You're Going to Die!' Joke as a Means of Expressing Homophobia."
Folklore Forum 20:109-114.