

KALEIDOSCOPE

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Law is Hell: Death and the Afterlife in American Lawyer Jokes

“The first thing we do, let’s kill all the lawyers.”
(William Shakespeare, Henry VI, Part 2)

1. Introduction

a) Background of Research

In the early 1980s, a new joke cycle appeared in the USA, and has continued to flourish ever since. This is a lawyer joke cycle. Lawyer jokes have been published in book form,¹ and have also been displayed on various American websites. According to a 1997 Internet search by a legal journalist 3 473 sites were devoted to lawyer jokes,² while only 17 sites displayed jokes about salesmen, 39 sites accountant jokes, and 227 sites doctor jokes. Theo Meder explains the sharp increase of lawyer jokes in recent years by the high legalization of American society. He stresses: “the quantity of lawyer jokes equals the rise of the number and the social status of lawyers, the excessive wages of top-lawyers and their sky-high compensation claims.”³ According to his opinion, this cannot be the only reason for such an expansion of lawyer jokes. “There

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¹ To name just a few, see Wilde, L.: *The Official Lawyers’ Joke Book*. New York, 1982; Knott, B.: *Truly Tasteless Lawyer Jokes*. New York, 1990.

² Yas, D. L.: First Thing We Do Is Kill All the Lawyer Jokes. *Massachusetts Lawyers Weekly*, 1997, 20 October, 11.

³ Meder, Th.: Tales of Tricks and Greed and Big Surprises: Laymen’s Views of the Law in Dutch Oral Narrative. *Humor–International Journal of Humor Research*, 21 (2008) 448.

are feelings of discontent about the impenetrable logic of justice, but above all the dominant ‘vulture culture’ of *suing*, *claiming* and *cashing*, as exposed in the news media.”⁴ Christie Davies even goes further, stating:

America is government not by men but by lawyers... Lawyers lie at the very heart of American society. American lawyers are the most American of Americans, and they represent the central American values of social mobility—as opposed to entrenched and inherited distinctions—and entail—due process and procedure as opposed to personal discretion and, of course, the pursuit of money. The lawyers *are* the very essence of what it means to be an American.⁵

As Marc Galanter points out, before 1980, the vast majority of jokes about lawyers dealt with topics such as “lawyers corrupting discourse, fleecing clients, fomenting strife, fraternizing with the devil, and compromising justice.”⁶ The jokes which have added to the corpus since 1980 were joined by “a new set of themes – jokes about lawyers as morally deficient, as betrayers of trust, as objects of scorn, and as desirable candidates for extermination.”⁷ According to Galanter, almost two thirds of the jokes which have added to the corpus since 1980 belong to these “new wave” categories.⁸

The aggressive tendency in jokes has been known of at least since publication of Sigmund Freud’s essay, “Wit and Humor in the Unconscious”⁹ in 1905, and has also been discussed by many humor researchers. Hostility towards law and lawyers has been a widespread phenomenon for a long time throughout the world. Grant Gilmore in “The Ages of American Law” stresses: “In most societies at most periods the legal profession has been heartily disliked by all non-lawyers: a recurrent dream of social reformers has been that the law should be (and can be) simplified and purified in such a way that the class of lawyers can be done away with. The dream has never withstood the cold light of waking reality.”¹⁰ The book entitled “Devil’s Advocates: The Unnatural History of Lawyers”¹¹ has shown a terrible scorn heaped on lawyers throughout human

⁴ *Ibid.* 449.

⁵ Davies, Ch.: American Jokes about Lawyers. *Humor... op. cit.* 373.

⁶ Galanter, M.: The Great American Lawyer Joke Explosion. *Humor... op. cit.* 390.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Freud, S.: *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*. New York, 1960 [1905].

¹⁰ Gilmore, G.: *The Ages of American Law*. New Haven, 1977,

¹¹ Roth, A.–Roth, J.: *Devil’s Advocates: The Unnatural History of Lawyers*. Berkeley, 1989.

history, and has even questioned the reasons why civilization has put up with lawyers at all. This compilation of negative anecdotes about lawyers from early times to the present includes numerous passages from the Bible, from literature, and, moreover, from the mouths of lawyers themselves. In 1911 the following humorous definition of a lawyer appeared: "LAWYER, n. One skilled in circumvention of the law."¹² This definition has been quoted in many legal books. The famous quotation "The first thing we do, let's kill all the lawyers" by William Shakespeare¹³ has provided fruitful soil for endless transformation, as in the titles of newspaper articles about lawyers, e.g. "First Thing We Do Is Kill All the Lawyer Jokes",¹⁴ "Modest Alternative to Killing All Lawyers",¹⁵ The hostile titles of some books of jokes or cartoons about lawyers also speak for themselves, e.g., "Dead Lawyers and Other Pleasant Thoughts",¹⁶ "Truly Tasteless Lawyer Jokes".¹⁷ The perennial criticism of attorneys is illustrated as "amoral [...] guns for hire".¹⁸

Why is it the lawyer, and not the representative of any other profession or occupation, who is permanently made fun of in so many American jokes? What are the dominant stereotypical traits of a lawyer? What negative features is he hated for? Does the lawyer's stereotype in American lawyer jokes contain any truth? These and many other questions could be asked in the regard to American lawyer jokes.

b) Organization of the Study

The present study focuses on two large segments of American lawyer jokes: jokes dealing with lawyers' extermination; and the place where lawyers go after they die. The study is divided into two parts. The first part of the study makes an attempt to analyze jokes, the butt of which is lawyers as candidates for removal from society or, more frequently, extermination. Different ways through which such extermination can be reached are discussed and exemplified. The second part of the study examines Hell as a place lawyers generally go to

¹² Bierce, A.: *The Devil's Dictionary*, 1911, see <http://www.dict.org/bin/Dict>

¹³ William Shakespeare: *Henry VI*, Part 2.

¹⁴ Yas, D. L.: First Thing We Do Is Kill All the Lawyer Jokes. *Massachusetts Lawyers Weekly*, 1997, 20 October, 11.

¹⁵ Miller, R. R.: A Modest Alternative to Killing All Lawyers. *Wall Street Journal*, 1991, 28 October, p. A16, Col. 3.

¹⁶ Miller, D. W.: *Dead Lawyers and Other Pleasant Thoughts*. New York, 1993.

¹⁷ Knott, B.: *Truly Tasteless Lawyer Jokes*. New York, 1990.

¹⁸ Horrigan, B.: *Adventures in Law and Justice: Exploring Big Legal Questions in Everyday Life*. Sydney, 2003.

after their death. All the jokes quoted and discussed in the study can be found with references to their Internet sources. The vast majority of jokes were collected from hundreds of websites in spring 2009.

2. Ways of Exterminating of Lawyers

The focus of our attention in this part of the study is on jokes which offer to remove lawyers from society, or even more frequently, to exterminate them. Different ways of such eradication will be discussed and exemplified here.

Quite a lot of texts suggest *drowning* as the proper fate of lawyers:

“Do you know how to save a drowning lawyer?”

“No.”

“Good!”¹⁹

If a lawyer and an IRS²⁰ agent were both drowning, and you could only save one of them, would you go to lunch or read the paper?²¹

What do you call 5000 dead lawyers at the bottom of the ocean?

A good start!²²

How do you save a drowning lawyer?

Take your foot off his head.²³

¹⁹ <http://www.ravnwood.com/archives/005647.php>

²⁰ International Revenue Service (IRS) is the United States government agency responsible for tax collection and tax law enforcement.

²¹ http://jokes.smashits.com/view-6697-if_a_lawyer_and_an_irs_agent_were_both_drowning_an.html

Many of the question-answer American lawyer jokes quoted in this study have taken patterns from American racist jokes. Observe just two examples:

What do you call 20,000 black people at the bottom of the ocean?

A good start. (<http://www.blackjokes.net>)

How do you get a black man out of a tree?

A: Cut the rope. (<http://www.blackjokes.net>)

²² <http://www.funnyandjokes.com/lawyer-q-and-a.html>

²³ <http://www.momsoftco.com/jfile/lawyers.txt>

Drowning lawyers is not the only way to exterminate them: American lawyer jokes suggest that there is more than one way to kill a lawyer. Let's observe some texts suggesting *hanging* or *cutting* attorneys:

How do you know if a lawyer is well-hung?
When you can't fit your fingers between the rope and his neck.²⁴

What's the difference between a lawyer and an onion?
You cry when you cut up an onion.²⁵

Another popular way of lawyers' removal from society is *killing them in a road accident*. They might be *run over and hit by a car or bus*:

How many lawyers does it take to stop a moving bus?
Never enough.²⁶

What do you do if you run over a lawyer?
Back over him to make sure. Then, make another notch on the steering wheel.²⁷

As hard as it might be to imagine lawyers walking down the road, it is almost impossible to imagine lawyers taking a bus, but anything might happen in a joke. Therefore, the following two texts describe lawyers' deaths while taking a bus. In the first one a *bus load of lawyers runs off a cliff*:

Good News: A busload of lawyers ran off a cliff. The bus was destroyed and there were no survivors.
Bad News: There were three empty seats.²⁸

The second joke shows a slightly different way of exterminating lawyers. First of all, a *bus load of lawyers runs off the road* and crashes into a tree, causing the death of many lawyers. Moreover, the lawyers who were not killed in the crash are *buried alive*. Besides containing a clear anti-lawyer sentiment and hostility towards attorneys (what can be more cruel and inhuman than burying

²⁴ http://www.lawsongs.com/lawyer_jokes.html

²⁵ <http://www.swapmeetdave.com/Humor/Lawyer.htm>

²⁶ <http://www.kaila.pl/humor/lawyers.htm>

²⁷ <http://jokeparty.com/>

²⁸ <http://www.terry.co.uk/jokes01.html>

someone alive?!), the following joke also stresses the idea that all lawyers are inveterate liars, and, therefore, they should not be believed or trusted under any circumstances:

A bus load of attorneys were driving down a country road when all of a sudden the bus ran off the road and crashed into a tree in an old farmer's field. The old farmer, after seeing what happened, went over to investigate. He then proceeded to dig a hole and bury the attorneys.

A few days later, the local sheriff came out, saw the crashed bus, and then asked the old farmer, "Were they all dead?"

The old farmer replied, "Well, some of them said they weren't, but you know how them attorneys lie."²⁹

Here is one more joke about burying attorneys alive:

What do you have if three lawyers are buried up to their necks in cement?
Not enough cement.³⁰

Lawyers could also be exterminated by *being eaten*, as the following two texts recommend. The anti-lawyer joke below expresses the fantasy of eliminating lawyers by feeding them to a pet, and employs a very popular technique of eliciting humor in jokes, punning, by playing on two different connotations of the word "serve".³¹

A man walks into a bar with a crocodile and asks "Do you serve Lawyers here?"

"We sure do", the bar tender answered. "Good", the man says "I'll have a beer and my croc will have a lawyer".³²

When the man from the text above entering the bar with a crocodile asks if they serve lawyers, we interpret his question as if lawyers, similarly to people of other professions and occupations, are allowed to consume in the bar; and we might even presume that he is a lawyer himself. And the bartender, naturally,

²⁹ <http://www.101funjokes.com/attorney-jokes.htm>

³⁰ http://www.answerbag.com/q_view/307855

³¹ This kind of punning is called homonymy. The word "serve" according to Webster Dictionary has more than twenty different meanings, see *Webster's New Universal Unabridged Dictionary*: Deluxe 2nd ed., 1983, 1658.

³² <http://www.fords-solicitors.co.uk/solicitors/news.cfm?ID=6>

gives him a positive reply. He obviously thinks the word “serve” is used in the following connotation: “to provide (customers or users) with goods or services”.³³ Indeed, why should there be any discrimination of lawyers? Why shouldn’t they be served? When we hear, however, the response of the customer ordering a lawyer for his crocodile, we realize that he is not a lawyer; contrarily, he hates lawyers, and what he means by his question is not whether lawyers are allowed to consume in the bar, but whether lawyers (as a meal) are served there, i.e., the word “served” is used in a different meaning: “to prepare and offer (food, etc.) in a certain way to others”.³⁴

One could also get rid of lawyers by *shooting* them, as the following two jokes (or variants of the same joke) suggest.

In the first text we are recommended, while stranded on a desert island, to shoot a lawyer twice instead of shooting Adolph Hitler and Attila the Hun:

If you are stranded on a desert island with Adolph Hitler, Attila the Hun, and a lawyer, and you have a gun with only two bullets, what do you do?
Shoot the lawyer twice.³⁵

Thus, the joke above states that the lawyer is more dangerous than Attila the Hun (the Emperor of the Huns from 434 until his death in 453 remembered in much of Western Europe as the epitome of cruelty and rapacity) and Adolph Hitler (one of the most brutal and devastating leaders in the history of the world, on the soul of whom there were endless atrocities and crimes, including the genocide of six million Jews).

The second text, although in a slightly different setting, and with different personages (a room instead of a desert island, and instead of some of the most dangerous and brutal people in the history of the world the personages are a tiger and a rattlesnake), contains similar anti-lawyer sentiment, and follows a similar scenario. In the same vein as the previous text, this joke also recommends shooting the lawyer twice, and draws a parallel between the lawyer and the rattlesnake (a venomous snake, the bites of which are very often fatal) and the tiger (one of the largest predators in the world). According to the text, the lawyer is considered to be even more dangerous than the tiger or the rattlesnake, animals very few people would like to be anywhere near:

³³ This connotation is listed in Webster under N 7, see *Webster’s New Universal Unabridged Dictionary*: Deluxe 2nd ed., 1983, 1658.

³⁴ This connotation is listed in Webster under N 9, see *ibid.*

³⁵ <http://www.funnyandjokes.com/lawyer-q-and-a.html>

You're trapped in a room with a tiger, a rattlesnake and a lawyer. Your gun has only two bullets. What should you do?
Shoot the lawyer. Twice.³⁶

The following text suggests lawyers should be exterminated by *being used in medical experiments* instead of rats. Similarly to the rat—a vicious, unclean, and parasitic animal,³⁷ spreading disease, and associated in people's minds with aggression, war, and death, a pest which has to be exterminated—the joke³⁸ below suggests that lawyers should also be in need of eradication:

The National Institute of Health has announced that it will no longer be using rats for medical experiments. In their place, they will use lawyers. They have given three reasons for this decision:

1. There are now more lawyers than there are rats.
2. The medical researchers don't become as emotionally attached to the lawyers as they did to the rats.
3. No matter how hard you try, there are some things that rats won't do.³⁹

The fact that in deciding which (lawyers or rats) should be used for medical experiments (that is, be vivisected), clear preference is given to lawyers, indicates that similarly to rats lawyers are just pests which American society should remove. The three reasons⁴⁰ for such a preference are quite forthright, and don't need to be further explained. The joke is also a clear manifestation of the retaliation of doctors (as well as scientists, and laboratory workers involved in medical experiments). One of the reasons for such revenge might be the fact that in American society, doctors are nowadays frequently sued by attorneys (for malpractice).

In the same vein as the famous anti-lawyer statement, "The first thing we do, let's kill all the lawyers",⁴¹ the following two texts also have fantasies about destroying all lawyers in the world. The first text suggests that they could find

³⁶ http://wilk4.com/humor/humorm353_lawyers.htm

³⁷ For more on the lawyer as animal in American lawyer jokes, see T. Litovkina, A.: *The Lawyer as Animal in American Lawyer Jokes*. *Ügyészek Lapja*, 16 (2009) No. 3–4 (in press).

³⁸ One can find dozens of variants of this joke on different websites.

³⁹ <http://www.terry.co.uk/jokes01.html>

⁴⁰ Some websites give even more reasons for such preferences.

⁴¹ William Shakespeare: *op. cit.*

their end on the equator, merely *being laid* there, “end to end”. No violence is needed, but the heat and the Sun will do their duty:

If you laid all of the lawyers in the world, end to end, on the equator – It would be a good idea to just leave them there.⁴²

Another way of exterminating every lawyer in the world, through *removing their kidneys*, even at the expense of one’s own health (losing one kidney), is clearly expressed in the following text:

A man walking along the beach found a bottle. When he rubbed it, lo and behold, a genie appeared.

“I will grant you three wishes,” announced the genie. “But there is one condition. I am a lawyer’s genie. That means that for every wish you make, every lawyer in the world gets the wish as well—only double.”

The man thought about this for a while. “For my first wish, I would like ten million dollars,” he announced.

Instantly the genie gave him a Swiss bank account number and assured the man that \$10 000 000 had been deposited. “But every lawyer in the world has just received \$20 000 000,” the genie said.

“I’ve always wanted a Ferrari,” the man said. “That’s my second wish.”

Instantly a Ferrari appeared. “But every lawyer in the world has just received two Ferraris,” the genie said. “And what is your last wish?”

“Well,” said the man, “I’ve always wanted to donate a kidney...”⁴³

The joke below recommends getting rid of lawyers by *defenestration*:

A Russian, a Cuban, an American and a Lawyer are in a train. The Russian takes a bottle of the Best Vodka out of his pack, pours some into a glass, drinks it, and says: “In USSR, we have the best vodka of the world, nowhere in the world you can find Vodka as good as the one we produce in the Ukraine. And we have so much of it, that we can just throw it away...”. Saying that, he opens the window and throws the rest of the bottle thru it. All the others are quite impressed.

The Cuban takes a pack of Havana’s, takes one of them, lights it and begins to smoke it saying: “In Cuba, we have the best cigars of the world:

⁴² http://www.jk9.com/lawyer_humor.htm

⁴³ <http://www.resourcesforattorneys.com/lawyersgeniejoke.html>

Havana, nowhere in the world there is so many and so good cigar and we have so much of them, that we can just throw them away...”.

Saying that, he throws the pack of Havana’s thru the window. One more time, everybody is quite impressed.

At this time, the American just stands up, opens the window, and throws the Lawyer through it...⁴⁴

As we know from our life experience, the more you have something, the less you appreciate it. And *in case of American lawyers, their high quantity naturally leads to the wish to get rid of them*, as the joke above suggests. Similarly to the enormous amount of vodka Russians might boast about, or the excess of cigars Cubans are proud of, Americans might brag about the abundance of lawyers they have. Interestingly, everybody in the joke above is quite impressed when the unfinished bottle of the Best Vodka, or the unfinished pack of Havanas are thrown away, but nobody shows any surprise, sorrow or sympathy for the lawyer, when he is thrown away through the window. For the American passenger it is not even necessary to boast about the best lawyers in the world or about their great numbers. He assumes that everyone is familiar with these facts. He simply throws the lawyer through the window: no explanation is needed. Indeed, as statistics show, during 1980s the US experienced not only a dramatic increase in the number of lawyer jokes, but also in the number of lawyers. Thus, the number of lawyers in the United States has grown from 285 000 in 1960 to over one million at the beginning of the 21st century.⁴⁵ Even before the American lawyer jokes’ explosion in the eighties, it was observed: “We already have at least 10 times as many lawyers as any rational society can tolerate, which doubtless accounts for the triumph of irrationality in American life.”⁴⁶

As we know from our real life, terrorists often threaten to kill hostages. In the text below, however, their threat is quite opposite: to “release one lawyer every hour”. Naturally such a statement can be a real threat only because there are too many lawyers in America, and they are the object of great scorn:

A group of terrorists burst into the conference room at the Ramada Hotel where the American Bar Association was holding its Annual Convention.

⁴⁴ http://www.101funjokes.com/funny_lawyer_jokes_4.htm

⁴⁵ Carson, C. N.: *The Legal Needs of the Public: The Final Report of a National Survey*. Chicago, 2004,

⁴⁶ Baker, R.: Terminal Jurisprudence. *New York Times*, 1977, 20 March, sec. 6, 12.

More than 500 lawyers were taken as hostages. The terrorist leader announced that, unless their demands were met, they would release one lawyer every hour.⁴⁷

There is a group of lawyer jokes which are about *lawyers' deaths, but don't mention what has been the reason of it*, as in the texts below. The following text stresses that lawyers are such desirable persons to kill that even a criminal who has murdered a lawyer is given only three days of prison sentence for his crime (quite a symbolic punishment for a murder!):

Two prisoners are talking about their crimes:

George: "I robbed a bank, and they gave me 20 years."

Herman: "Hmm. I killed a man, and I'm here for 3 days."

George: "WHAT??? I rob a bank and get 20 years; you kill a man and get 3 days???"

Herman: "Yeah, it was a lawyer."⁴⁸

Mr. Spenser, in the text below, is so happy and excited to hear the news about the death of his ex-wife's lawyer (one can imagine how outrageous and devastating someone's hatred towards one's ex-spouse's lawyer might be in America!) that he wants to hear this 'wonderful' piece of news repeated, calling a law firm reception again and again:

A law firm receptionist answered the phone the morning after the firm's senior partner had passed away unexpectedly. "Is Mr. Spenser there?" asked the client on the phone.

"I'm very sorry, but Mr. Spenser passed away last night", the receptionist answered. "Can anyone else help you?"

The man paused for a moment, then quietly said, "no" and hung up.

Ten minutes later, he called again and asked for Mr. Spenser, his ex-wife's lawyer. The receptionist said, "You just called a few minutes ago, didn't you? Mr. Spenser has died. I'm not making this up." The man again hung up.

Fifteen minutes later, he called a third time and asked for Mr. Spenser. The receptionist was irked by this time. "I've told you twice already, Mr. Spenser is dead. He is not here! Why do you keep asking for him when I say he's dead? Don't you understand what I'm saying?"

⁴⁷ http://wilk4.com/humor/humorm353_lawyers.htm

⁴⁸ <http://www.ahajokes.com/law067.html>

The man replied, "I understand you perfectly. I just like hearing you say it over and over."⁴⁹

When in the joke below a report of a lawyer's death in a local newspaper appears to be a mistake, such piece of news is corrected later with the greatest expression of sorrow. The sorrow, however, refers not to the fact of printing false information of the death of the town's oldest practicing lawyer, but to the fact that the news of his death was a mistake (quite a big difference!):

A local newspaper mistakenly printed an obituary for the town's oldest practicing lawyer. He called them immediately and threatened to sue unless they printed a correction.

The next day, the following notice appeared, "We regret that the report of Attorney Critchley's death was in error."⁵⁰

According to a number of jokes, the *cemetery* is one of the best places a lawyer might be found:

Where can you find a good lawyer?
In the cemetery.⁵¹

Why should lawyers be buried 100 feet deep?
Because deep down, they're really good people.⁵²

Many more jokes containing further fantasies about dead lawyers, or about their eradication from society could have been discussed here, and exemplified by hundreds of jokes, but we have to make a point here.

As Davies states: "Lawyers are very rarely attacked by clients or those they encounter in their work; the risks they face on a daily basis from the violent and the hostile are far less than those encountered by police officers, firemen, social workers, school teachers, and doctors and nurses treating accident and emergency cases."⁵³ According to his opinion, attorneys' chances of being persecuted or dispossessed in America are simply zero; "the existence of such jokes in widespread circulation in America is an indication of how safe

⁴⁹ <http://www.comedy-zone.net/jokes/laugh/lawyers/law007.htm>

⁵⁰ <http://www.swapmeetdave.com/Humor/Lawyer.htm>

⁵¹ <http://www.wakelydam.com/lawyers.html>

⁵² <http://www.nerdtests.com/jokes.php?id=1621>

⁵³ Davies: American Jokes about Lawyers. *Humor... op. it.* 382.

American lawyers are, for the jokes neither evoke the general unease nor the hysterical accusations of bad taste that would be aroused if American lawyers really were hated and menaced".⁵⁴ Jokes such as the ones quoted and analyzed in this part of the study are "a perfect example of how jokes that seem to have a viciously hostile content can be full of sound and fury yet signifying nothing".⁵⁵

Fred Rodell calls the law "an unnecessary and expensive nuisance".⁵⁶ He also points out: "The answer is to get rid of the lawyers and throw The Law with a capital L out of our system of laws".⁵⁷ Negative feelings against the legal profession are also epitomized by the following quotation: "If all lawyers were hanged tomorrow (...), we'd all be freer and safer, and our taxes would be reduced by almost a half".⁵⁸ Galanter states that the wish to live in a world without attorneys is "an enduring dream of making language transparent, eliminating ambiguity, and dispensing with the need for interpretation".⁵⁹

I would like to finish the first part of my study with Galanter's words:

Americans, who regard the rule of law as a defining and essential quality of their society, don't want to be rid of law, but of "lawyers' law"—of formal, complex, "artificial" law that only lawyers can understand. If only, it is fondly believed, we were rid of these lawyers we could return to a better law—simple, natural, direct and understandable. Lawyers are seen as obstacles interposed between us and harmonious natural state of social order.⁶⁰

3. After Death, Lawyers Go to Hell

While the first part of the study has discussed the different ways of exterminating lawyers offered in American lawyer jokes, the second part of the study focuses on the following question: What awaits lawyers after they die? The vast majority of jokes treating the lawyer's end sarcastically show that, after death, lawyers go to Hell. Some lawyer jokes on various websites are even

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Rodell, F.: *Woe Unto You, Lawyers!* New York, 1939, 245.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.* 249.

⁵⁸ H. L. Mencken, quoted in Rodgers, M. E. (ed.): *The Impossible H. L. Mencken*. New York, 1991, 286.

⁵⁹ Galanter: *op. cit.* 404.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.* 403.

grouped under the heading “Lawyers in Hell”.⁶¹ This is consistent with some old English legal proverbs, sayings and comparisons: “Few lawyers die well”, “Fair and softly as lawyer go to heaven”, “The devil makes his Christmas pies of clerks’ fingers and lawyers’ tongues”, etc.⁶² A very frequent scene of lawyer jokes is at the *entrance to Heaven*, a place where almost no lawyers get accepted, due to their plentiful sins. In spite of this, *some lawyers try to get entrance to Heaven*, and attempt to negotiate with St. Peter, but they almost never succeed.

The joke below takes place at the entrance to Heaven. A dead lawyer is treated by St. Peter with seemingly great respect and warmth. The lawyer can’t really understand why all the attention and warm greeting is given to him. The punch line of the joke, St. Peter’s reply (“Well, I’ve added up all the hours for which you billed your clients, and by my calculation you must be about 193 years old!”), however, makes us understand the reason for such ‘respect’. Without any doubts, this lawyer, for all his cheating, a stereotypical trait⁶³ of lawyers in jokes will not get admittance to Heaven either:

A lawyer died and arrived at the pearly gates. To his dismay, there were thousands of people ahead of him in line to see St. Peter. To his surprise, St. Peter left his desk at the gate and came down the long line to where the lawyer was, and greeted him warmly.

Then St. Peter and one of his assistants took the lawyer by the hands and guided him up to the front of the line, and into a comfortable chair by his desk.

The lawyer said, “I don’t mind all this attention, but what makes me so special?”

St. Peter replied, “Well, I’ve added up all the hours for which you billed your clients, and by my calculation you must be about 193 years old!”⁶⁴

Again, it is the lawyer who goes to Hell in the following joke. The setting of it is also at the gate to Heaven. A lawyer who has committed hundreds of sins in his life, nevertheless, wants to get acceptance to Heaven:

⁶¹ As for example, on the following site: http://www.lifeisajoke.com/miscellaneous17_.html.htm

⁶² For more on English legal proverbs, see Bond, D. F.: *English Legal Proverbs. Publications of the Modern Language Association*, 51 (1936) 921–935.

⁶³ See T. Litovkina, A.: *Greed, Lies and Negotiable Justice: Stereotyped Lawyers in American Lawyers Jokes. Acta Ethnographica Hungarica*, 55 (2010).

⁶⁴ <http://nationaljoke.com/home/tag/lawyer/>

A lawyer is standing at the gates of Heaven and St. Peter is listing his sins:

1. Defending a large corporation in a pollution suit when he knew the company was guilty.
2. Defending an obviously guilty murderer because the fee was high.
3. Overcharging clients.
4. Prosecuting an innocent woman because a scapegoat was needed in a controversial case.

The list goes on for quite a while. The lawyer objects and begins to argue his case. He admits all these things, but argues, "Wait, I've done some charity in my life also." St. Peter looks in his book and says, "Yes, I see. Once you gave a dime to a panhandler and once you gave an extra nickel to the shoeshine boy, correct?" The lawyer gets a smug look on his face and replies, "Yes!" St. Peter turns to the angel next to him and whispers, "Give this guy 15 cents and tell him to go to Hell."⁶⁵

Despite hearing all his sins listed by St. Peter, the lawyer tries to negotiate and argue (we know that lawyers are good negotiators!). He says that he has done some charity in his life as well, and he hopes it will help him to get acceptance to Heaven. When, however, St. Peter finds in his book the amount of money the lawyer gave to charity (a dime to a panhandler and a nickel to a shoeshine boy!), we cannot keep our laughter. To call a dime or a nickel 'charity'? Only a cynical lawyer could name such breadcrumbs "charity". Measure for measure: in return for his two extremely 'generous' deeds, the lawyer is given his money back (15 cents), and afterwards is sent to Hell.

Hell turns out to be fairly conventional setting for showing lawyers after their death. The following joke shows how some 'lucky' lawyers might be 'tortured' in Hell:

A man was sent to Hell for his sins.

As he was being taken to his place of eternal torment, he saw a lawyer making passionate love to a beautiful woman.

"What a rip-off," the man muttered. "I have to roast for all eternity, and that lawyer gets to spend it with a beautiful woman."

Jabbing the man with his pitchfork, the escorting Satan snarled: "Who are you to question that woman's punishment?"⁶⁶

⁶⁵ <http://www.jacksonlawoffices.com/Jokes>

⁶⁶ <http://www.lectlaw.com/files/fun09.htm>

While the beautiful woman is being punished for some terrible sins (maybe for adultery or for promiscuity?!) by an eternal torment—to have sexual intercourse with a lawyer, such punishment, however, might be quite a delight and not a torture for the lawyer (sic!). Naturally, if tortures like this are what is expected in Hell by lawyers for their sins, no wonder they commit so many sins.⁶⁷

Jokes might simply allude to Hell, without even mentioning the word. Although the scene of the following joke is a hospital ward and not Hell, nevertheless it might be proper to quote and analyze it here:

As the lawyer woke up after surgery, he asked, ‘Why are all the blinds drawn?’

The nurse answered, “There’s a big fire across the street, and we didn’t want you to think the operation was a failure.”⁶⁸

The lawyer waking up after an operation is surprised to see the blinds are drawn. At first we might not understand why the nurse would care about the big fire outside, as well as its relevance to the patient. The nurse’s answer, however, alludes to a popular belief that for their numerous sins, after death lawyers go to Hell. And since lawyers themselves, better than representatives of any other profession, know about their miserable fate, therefore, the operated patient should not be frightened by seeing the big fire outside. If he saw it upon waking up after the operation, he would think that his operation has not succeeded and, therefore, he has died and is in Hell. Thus, proper precautions have been made by the nurse, i.e., the blinds have been drawn. Although a great number of American jokes demonstrate the permanent fight between lawyers and doctors (as well as other medical personal including nurses and medical researchers), in this joke, on the one hand, the thoughtful nurse tries to save her patient’s life, and on the other hand, her answer, in a hidden form, still shows a popular belief that Hell is the place where lawyers go after they die. Thus, this joke pours more oil on the fire of hatred and scorn directed towards lawyers.

According to a number of American lawyer jokes, lawyers associate with the Devil. It would be very hard for God, in the following joke, to find a lawyer in Heaven, unless it’s a decent, honest lawyer from the last joke in the study (the category which hardly ever exists, according to jokes⁶⁹):

⁶⁷ See Litovkina: Greed, Lies and Negotiable Justice... *op. cit.*

⁶⁸ <http://www.lawlaughs.com/hell/index.html>

⁶⁹ See Litovkina: Greed, Lies and Negotiable Justice... *op. cit.*

God decided to take the devil to court and settle their differences once and for all. When Satan heard this, he laughed and said, "And where do you think you're going to find a lawyer?"⁷⁰

Many jokes discussed above point out that lawyers normally don't enter Heaven: after death they go to Hell. Exception, however, might only prove the rule. Let me finish the second part of the study with a joke about *the first lawyer who has ever entered Heaven*. It might be symbolic that the lawyer in the joke is accompanied by no-one else but by the Pope:

Following a distinguished legal career, a man arrived at the Gates of Heaven, accompanied by the Pope, who had the misfortune to expire on the same day. The Pope was greeted first by St. Peter, who escorted him to his quarters. The room was somewhat shabby and small, similar to that found in a low grade Motel 6 type establishment.

The lawyer was then taken to his room, which was a palatial suite including a private swimming pool, a garden, and a terrace overlooking the Gates. The attorney was somewhat taken aback, and told St. Peter, "I'm really quite surprised at these rooms, seeing as how the Pope was given such small accommodations."

St. Peter replied, "We have over a hundred Popes here, and we're really very bored with them. We've never had a lawyer."⁷¹

Undoubtedly, all decent lawyers who get further acceptance to Heaven will be treated by St. Peter with similar respect.

4. Conclusion

As it has been discussed in the first part of the study, quite a serious segment of American lawyer jokes express fantasies of lawyers being eradicated. There is more than one way to kill a lawyer in American lawyer jokes: dozens of ways have been demonstrated through which such extinction can be achieved, e.g., through drowning, burying alive, hitting by car or bus, running off a cliff, cutting, shooting, eating, using in medical experiments, laying on the equator, removal of kidneys, defenestration, and many others. In fact, many jokes also encourage killing lawyers by emphasizing that such murder will not be punished

⁷⁰ <http://www.scroom.com/SCROOMtimes/Humor/Lawyer.shtml>

⁷¹ <http://www.kinseylaw.com/JOKES/jokes.html>

severely. The attorneys' sins discussed elsewhere⁷² contribute to the existence of quite a large segment of jokes about Hell as the only place lawyers go after death, which has been the topic of the second part of the study. Although quite a number of lawyers go to the entrance gates to Heaven and try to negotiate and argue with St. Peter, very few of them are accepted to Heaven. Those few who are lucky to enter Heaven are, however, carried in St. Peter's hands, and treated with the highest respect and admiration.

Acknowledgement

The idea to write the present study came to my mind after reading a book "A jog humora" [The Humor of the Law],⁷³ as well as after preparing an interview with the editor of the book, associated professor of law, Hungarian lawyer Csaba Fenyvesi about humor in Hungarian legal system.⁷⁴ I would like to express my thanks to Csaba Fenyvesi for such inspiration. I also owe much gratitude to David Karla for his friendly help in proofreading the study, his critical comments, and suggestions.

⁷² See Litovkina: Greed, Lies and Negotiable Justice... *op. cit.*

⁷³ Fenyvesi, Cs.: *A jog humora* (The humour of law). Pécs, 2003.

⁷⁴ T. Litovkina, A.: Aki a humort szereti, rossz ügyvéd nem lehet? (Interjú Fenyvesi Csaba ügyvéddel *A jog humora* című kötetéről) [Who loves humor, cannot be a bad attorney? (An interview with Csaba Fenyvesi attorney about the volume entitled *The humor of law*)]. *Ügyészek Lapja*, 16 (2009) 87.