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How Many Lawyer Jokes are There? Just Two—The Rest are All True:
Lawyer Jokes in the Age of Political Correctness

In contemporary society, jokes about lawyers vastly outnumber jokes about any other profession by a large margin. While it is unclear from my preliminary research when this genre of jokes was formally codified, a website entitled *Lawyer Jokes Etcetera* catalogues the historical tradition of lawyer-mocking and features entries dating as far back as the days of the early Roman empire. Among the more colorful statements is one made by King Louis the XII (1462-1515) who theorized that “lawyers use the law as shoemakers use leather; rubbing it, pressing it, and stretching it with their teeth, all to the end of making it fit their purposes.”¹ Barten Holyday in 1618 contended that: “A man may as well open an oyster without a knife as a lawyer's mouth without a fee.”² Lord Brougham (1778-1868) stated that “the lawyer is a gentleman who rescues your estate from your enemies, and keeps it to himself.”³ These same disparaging attitudes have been updated in the contemporary lawyer joke as well.

Lawyers in these jokes are characterized as being excessively materialistic. Such is true of the following joke:

A lawyer was driving his big BMW down the highway, singing to himself, “I love my BMW, I love my BMW.” Focusing on his car, not his driving, he smashed into a tree. He miraculously survived, but his car was totaled. “My BMW! My BMW!” he sobbed.

A good Samaritan drove by and cried out, “Sir, sir, you're bleeding! And—oh my word---your left arm is gone!”

The lawyer, horrified, screamed, “My Rolex! My Rolex!”

Part of the illicit pleasure of the joke comes from the suggested mutilation of a lawyer, but its humor

mostly stems from the incongruity between the way a normal human being would react to the loss of an appendage and the way in which the lawyer reacts. The lawyer is more concerned about the loss of his expensive watch and car than the loss of his arm or the threat of losing his life. This suggests that lawyers are more concerned with wealth and status than life itself.

The stock lawyer character is unfeeling, uncaring, and ultimately self-interested, as is the lawyer in the following anecdote:

At the United Way in a fairly small town a volunteer worker noticed that the most successful lawyer in the whole town hadn't made a contribution. This guy was making about \$600,000 a year so the volunteer thought, "Why not call him up?"

He calls up the lawyer.

"Sir, according to our research you haven't made a contribution to the United Way, would you like to do so?"

The lawyer responds, "A contribution? Does your research show that I have an invalid mother who requires expensive surgery once a year just to stay alive?"

The worker is feeling a bit embarrassed and says, "Well, no sir, I'm..."

"Does your research show that my sister's husband was killed in a car accident? She has three kids and no means of support!"

The worker is feeling quite embarrassed at this point. "I'm terribly sorry..."

"Does your research show that my brother broke his neck on the job and now requires a full-time nurse to have any kind of normal life?"

The worker is completely humiliated at this point. "I am sorry sir, please forgive me..."

"The gall of you people! I don't give *them* anything, so why should I give it to you!?"

The humor of this joke comes from the fact that it initially appears to depart from the traditional generic norms of the lawyer joke. In the first portion of the joke, the lawyer is portrayed as sympathetic and the volunteer consequently feels ashamed for having misjudged the lawyer as heartless and uncaring. At first this joke seems to call the lawyer stereotype into question, but the punch line effectively reestablishes the traditionally greedy and uncharitable lawyer caricature.

Attorneys are frequently equated with animals, as in the following three jokes:

What's the difference between a lawyer and a catfish?

One is a slimy, bottom dwelling, scum sucker. The other is a fish.

Why won't sharks attack lawyers?
Professional courtesy.

How can you tell the difference between a dead skunk and a dead attorney on the road?
The vultures aren't gagging over the skunk.

Drawing a parallel between animals and lawyers essentially objectifies the lawyer figure. These jokes suggest that all lawyers are deplorable and greedy beasts who consistently act the same way by virtue of their chosen profession.

The following three jokes play upon another common trope which equates lawyers with criminals or portray lawyers as being worse than criminals:

What do you call a criminal lawyer?
Redundant.

How can you tell when a lawyer is lying?
His lips are moving.

A gang of robbers broke into a lawyer's club by mistake. The old legal lions gave them a fight for their life and their money. The gang was very happy to escape. "It ain't so bad," one crook noted. "We got \$25 between us."
The boss screamed: "I warned you to stay clear of lawyers—we had \$100 when we broke in!"

Lawyers are ironically supposed to be the defenders of the law but are here portrayed as its transgressor.

Lawyers are also frequently portrayed as placing their own interests before the clients they represent:

The lawyer's son wanted to follow in his father's footsteps, so he went to law school. He graduated with honors, and then went home to join his father's firm.
At the end of his first day at work he rushed into his father's office and said, "Father, Father, in one day I broke the accident case that you've been working on for ten years!"

His father responded, “You idiot, we've been living on the funding of that case for ten years!”

This joke of course infers that lawyers deliberately keep trials tied up in the courts so as to effectively suck their clients' finances dry. Jokes that deal with the greediness of lawyers seem to express an underlying fear of helplessness on the part of the client. Most clients are ignorant of the finer points of the law and must depend upon their lawyer to arbitrate for them in what are usually expensive court cases. Already feeling somewhat vulnerable by virtue of being in a court case, clients may sometimes feel alienated from their lawyer because they are in a position of weakness. A website entitled “Mad About Lawyers and What to Do When You're Mad” claims to know why people tell lawyer jokes. It cites a 1996 *Consumer Reports* poll that indicates 32% of clients feel that lawyers don't expedite the resolution of their case. 27% of clients feel that their lawyer did not keep them adequately informed. That same percentage of clients felt that lawyers overcharged them for their services. 25% of clients indicated that their lawyer did not protect their rights and financial interests and 21% did not feel that their lawyer paid adequate attention to their case. The website does not elaborate on why this opinion poll can be directly linked to the sharing of lawyer jokes, but the inference is that telling lawyer jokes is a way of expressing a deeper distrust of their lawyers from first-hand experience.⁴

While there is some validity to this claim, it is important to note that lawyer jokes are certainly not told by disgruntled clients alone. Lawyer jokes are told across all demographics in America—by members of both genders, of all ethnicities, of all socioeconomic levels, of nearly all ages, and of all professions. Lawyer jokes are even told by lawyers themselves. People who have never been inside a courtroom tell lawyer jokes. Therefore, to understand why lawyer jokes are so widely shared, one must examine the generic idiosyncrasies of the lawyer joke. To summarize what

has been discussed so far, lawyer jokes essentially reduce lawyers to a single stereotype. Lawyers in these jokes are typically portrayed as:

- (1) wealthy and excessively materialistic
- (2) uncaring, unfeeling, and unsympathetic
- (3) greedy and self-interested; putting their own interest before their clients
- (4) inhuman and, by implication, inhumane
- (5) immoral—willing to lie, cheat, or steal to get money or win a case.

Another important feature of the lawyer joke is the fact that almost all the lawyers in these jokes are identified as males. Lawyers are always identified as “he’s.” In my research, the only female attorney joke I found was the following:

What’s the difference between a female attorney and a pit bull?
Lipstick.

While the virtual absence of female attorney jokes may be a subtle patriarchal message that law is a male-only profession, a deeper analysis of the stock lawyer character in these jokes reveals more fundamental underpinnings.

On one level, the lawyer joke is clearly about class. Lawyers occupy the upper and middle classes of the social stratus and generally have a high degree of social prestige. Characterizing lawyers as corrupt and greedy may be a subtle jab against the wealthy sector of American society. Lawyer jokes send a clear message that court rulings on issues of guilt, innocence, and morality can potentially be swayed by the wealth of the client who can afford the “perfect” lawyer(s). In this sense, lawyer jokes are a way of coding societal anxieties that the government, its laws, and tax loopholes can be bought at the expense of justice and morality. This is a valid concern for those who cannot afford the privilege of “the best lawyer money can buy.”

However, I would postulate that lawyer jokes serve an even more important social outlet. Although I do not have substantial research to back my claim, I would conjecture that lawyer jokes have become more widely distributed and shared at the same time the societal preoccupation with politically-correct language began. Lawyer jokes have begun to serve the outlet in our society that ethnic jokes and racial slurs used to serve. This is clear when examining the nature of the joke form in general. For one, jokes frequently rely on reductive stereotypes or archetypal characters: the blonde, the Pollock, the rabbi. Jokes have to rely on stock characters because jokes are generally too short to establish any complex personality traits or characterization. Therefore, jokes assign convenient social tags that stand in for character traits that are supposedly “given” (e.g. blonde = ditzy, Pollock = stupid, etc.). Furthermore, jokes are typically shared for the purpose of establishing some sort of rapport between the teller and the listener(s). Jokes are consequently only shared when the teller feels that the joke will be well-received. A teller will not share a joke if he or she believes their joke will offend his or her listeners.

With the increased societal sensitivity towards political correctness, ethnic jokes are not as socially acceptable as they may have one been. Jokes about one’s nation of origin, hair color, skin tone, or sexual orientation have been labeled “insensitive” and “offensive” because they focus on those aspects of a person’s physical attributes or background over which he or she has little control. Telling a racial joke runs the risk of being “poo-pooed” or even ostracized to a greater degree than it would have been thirty or forty years ago. By contrast, lawyer jokes are not considered as insensitive because one’s profession is largely a matter of choice and opportunity. Although there are stories of young sons being forced into law by their overbearing parents, becoming a lawyer is still a conscious decision made later in life.

Attorneys are also a convenient target because lawyers and doctors are considered the careers of the privileged classes. As has been indicated above, lawyers are usually perceived as individuals who possess great amounts of wealth or who at least maintain the appearance of wealth. It is significant that the lawyers are males because feminists would take greater offense to females being portrayed in a negative light. But there is nothing wrong with attacking educated white upper-middle class males, the historic oppressors and colonizers.

Jokes still perform a vital social function in our society: they are an outlet for our anxieties, prejudices, and protests. However, the impulse to vituperate or differentiate ourselves from the Other has not disappeared simply because liberals have told us it is no longer socially acceptable to tell racial jokes; the impulse has merely been redirected into new genres which attack different groups, in this case the class of privilege.

1. "What Oft Was Thought." *Lawyer Jokes Etcetera*. 19 Mar. 2004. <<http://members.aol.com/twh427/quotations.htm>>.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. "Mad About Lawyers and What to Do When You're Mad." *New York City Tenants*. 20 Mar. 2004. <<http://www.tenant.net/Court/nolo/lmad.html>>.