

Scottish International Conference on Multidisciplinary Research and Innovation – SICMRI 2026

LAUGHTER WITH A PURPOSE: SOCIAL CRITICISM THROUGH SATIRICAL NARRATIVE IN O. HENRY AND GAFUR GULOM

Teshayeva Zebo Ilhom qizi

First-year Master's student, Asia International Universit

zilhamovna@icloud.com

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21272507>

INTRODUCTION

Satire occupies a distinctive place in world literature as a mode that fuses entertainment with ethical and social judgment. Long before printed literature existed, oral traditions across cultures relied on comic exaggeration, irony, and mockery to expose vice, folly, and injustice, while sparing audiences the bitterness of direct accusation. This paper examines how two writers from radically different cultural and historical contexts — the American short-story master William Sydney Porter, known by his pen name O. Henry (1862–1910), and the Uzbek poet and prose writer Gafur Gulom (1903–1966) — employed satirical narrative as an instrument of social criticism. Although separated by geography, language, and ideological environment, both authors share a fundamental conviction: laughter, when carefully constructed, can reveal truths that direct polemic cannot.

By comparing their narrative strategies, their preferred targets of criticism, and the worldviews underlying their humor, this study aims to demonstrate that satire functions as a universal literary mechanism, one adaptable to widely divergent societies — capitalist urban America on the one hand, and Soviet-era Central Asia on the other. The comparative approach adopted here is justified by the growing interest, within world literature studies, in tracing how similar literary strategies emerge independently within unrelated national traditions (Highet, 1962). Both O. Henry and Gafur Gulom wrote primarily for a broad popular readership, publishing in newspapers and magazines rather than addressing a narrow literary elite, a fact that shaped the accessibility, brevity, and colloquial tone characteristic of their satire.

The relevance of such a comparison for contemporary literary studies lies in its capacity to challenge the assumption that satire is a culturally bound genre, tied exclusively to Western rhetorical traditions descending from Horace and Juvenal. By placing O. Henry alongside a writer shaped by Central Asian oral comic tradition and twentieth-century Soviet literary policy, this paper seeks to illuminate the shared mechanisms — irony, exaggeration, reversal, and self-incrimination through dialogue — that satirists across unrelated traditions independently discover and refine.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: SATIRE AS A VEHICLE OF SOCIAL CRITICISM

Satire, as Gilbert Highet observed, is not merely a genre but an attitude capable of inhabiting any literary form — the short story, the poem, the fable, or the journalistic feuilleton (Highet, 1962). Its defining feature is the deliberate distortion or exaggeration of reality in order to expose a discrepancy between what is and what ought to be. According to Dustin Griffin, satire operates rhetorically rather than purely aesthetically: it seeks to persuade the reader toward a particular moral or social judgment while simultaneously entertaining (Griffin, 1994). George Test similarly emphasizes that satire is inherently social in nature — it presupposes a shared set of communal norms against which deviation can be measured, ridiculed, and ultimately corrected (Test, 1991).

Two broad satirical strategies recur across cultures and historical periods: the satire of character, which ridicules an individual's personal folly, vanity, or hypocrisy in order to provoke self-recognition; and the satire of institution, which targets systemic corruption, bureaucratic absurdity, or structural inequality. O. Henry, writing within the framework of American urban

Scottish International Conference on Multidisciplinary Research and Innovation – SICMRI 2026

realism at the turn of the twentieth century, leans toward the former, using the individual as a lens through which broader social conditions become visible. Gafur Gulom, shaped by the didactic and propagandistic demands of Soviet literature, more frequently directs his satire toward institutions, recognizable social types, and collective vices such as bureaucratism, careerism, and empty ideological formalism.

O. HENRY'S SATIRICAL NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE

O. Henry's satire is inseparable from his signature narrative device: the surprise, or trick, ending, in which the final sentence reverses the reader's understanding of everything that has preceded it (Current-Garcia, 1965). This structural irony is not merely a technical flourish; it functions as the very engine of his social commentary. In *The Cop and the Anthem*, the homeless protagonist Soapy repeatedly and deliberately commits petty offenses in order to be arrested and spend the winter in the relative comfort of a jail cell, yet every calculated attempt at wrongdoing fails, while the single moment he resolves to reform himself honestly, he is arrested for loitering. The irony exposes an absurd inversion of justice within a society that punishes an innocent gesture while overlooking the calculated offense, quietly indicting institutional indifference toward poverty.

Similarly, *The Ransom of Red Chief* satirizes both the mythology of American self-made ingenuity and the sentimental image of childhood innocence: two small-time kidnappers are outwitted and psychologically tormented by the very child they abduct, and are ultimately forced to pay the child's father to take him back. Beneath the story's slapstick surface lies a gentle mockery of get-rich-quick schemes and the overconfidence of self-styled clever men. In *Mammon and the Archer*, O. Henry satirizes the nouveau riche obsession with social status and courtship ritual, portraying a wealthy father who believes love can be engineered through deliberately manufactured traffic congestion, only for pure chance — rather than calculation — to decide the romantic outcome (Long, 1966).

What distinguishes O. Henry's satire is its underlying warmth. His narrator rarely condemns characters outright; instead, he exposes their follies through sympathetic humor, allowing readers to laugh at recognizable human weaknesses — vanity, greed, self-delusion, sentimentality — without cruelty. His criticism is aimed less at any specific political system than at universal human frailty as it manifests within the particular pressures of American urban life: poverty, commercialism, and the persistent myth of self-made success.

GAFUR GULOM'S SATIRICAL NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE

Gafur Gulom's satire draws on a different source: the centuries-old Central Asian oral tradition of the *latifa*, or comic anecdote, embodied in the figure of the trickster-wise fool exemplified by Nasreddin Afandi, whose deceptively simple stories exposed the hypocrisy of judges, clerics, and officials (Sharafiddinov, 1983). Gulom transplants this indigenous comic sensibility into a modern literary and journalistic context, using *feuilletons*, satirical verse, and short prose sketches to mock the social types produced by rapid Soviet modernization: the bureaucrat hiding behind paperwork and procedure, the opportunist who repeats ideological slogans without genuine conviction, and the pretentious pseudo-intellectual eager for status without substance.

Unlike O. Henry's reliance on a single reversing final line, Gulom's satirical narratives more often unfold through accumulation — a mounting sequence of absurd behaviors, contradictions, and inconsistencies that gradually reveal a character's hollowness. His satire frequently operates through dialogue and colloquial voice, allowing characters to indict themselves through their own words, a technique rooted directly in the oral anecdote tradition, where the fool's own logic becomes the source of comedy rather than external narratorial commentary. Gulom's targets are less often isolated individuals than recognizable social types or institutional patterns: the empty ritual of meetings and official reports, the gap between proclaimed slogans of equality and lived practice, and the persistence of older patriarchal attitudes beneath a veneer of new Soviet identity (G'ulom, 1975).

Scottish International Conference on Multidisciplinary Research and Innovation – SICMRI 2026

Because Gulom wrote under conditions of state censorship and explicit ideological expectation, his satire displays a characteristic duality: on its surface it appears to support official campaigns against backwardness and bureaucratism, while, through the sharpness and specificity of its comic detail, it simultaneously implicates the very system that produced these vices in the first place. This double-voicedness distinguishes his satire from O. Henry's more privately moral, individually focused humor, and situates Gulom's work within a broader tradition of socially engaged Soviet-era satire that sought reform from within accepted ideological boundaries rather than from outside them.

A further dimension of Gulom's satirical craft is his frequent use of verse as a vehicle for social comedy, a form largely absent from O. Henry's prose-based satire. In his satirical poems, Gulom often adopts the voice of the very figure he wishes to mock — the boastful official, the lazy student, the self-important petty clerk — allowing rhythm, rhyme, and exaggerated self-praise to expose the speaker's absurdity from within. This first-person satirical mask, inherited from the oral performance traditions of Central Asia, gives Gulom's criticism an intimate, theatrical quality distinct from the more detached, narratorial irony that defines O. Henry's third-person storytelling.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: CONVERGENCES AND DIVERGENCES

Despite their different cultural sources, O. Henry and Gafur Gulom converge in their shared conviction that comic narrative can accomplish what direct criticism cannot: disarming the reader's defenses and inviting recognition rather than resistance or denial. Both writers rely on concrete, everyday settings — the tenement street corner, the small-town post office, the collective farm meeting hall — rather than abstract moralizing, grounding their satire in recognizable, lived social texture. Both, moreover, wrote quickly and prolifically for periodical publication, a professional condition that favored compact, punchy narrative forms capable of delivering their social message within a limited space.

Their divergence lies chiefly in the object and mechanism of criticism. O. Henry's satire is structurally dependent on the surprise ending and is aimed primarily at individual human folly as it is shaped by the pressures of American capitalism — poverty, class aspiration, and commercialized romance. His tone remains largely affectionate, treating his characters' weaknesses as forgivable, even endearing, rather than as targets for eradication. Gulom's satire, rooted in the oral anecdote and shaped by the didactic imperatives of Soviet literary policy, more often targets institutional and collective failings — bureaucratic inertia, ideological hypocrisy, and residual social backwardness — and unfolds through accumulation of absurd detail rather than through a single reversing twist. His tone can carry a sharper corrective edge, consistent with satire's traditional civic function as an instrument of moral and social reform (Test, 1991).

Nevertheless, both authors illustrate Highet's broader claim that the satirist writes not out of contempt but out of an underlying commitment to the possibility of improvement (Highet, 1962). Their laughter is never nihilistic or merely cynical; in both cases it is laughter with a purpose — directed at correcting behavior, exposing hypocrisy, and reaffirming shared communal values, whether those values are the American ideal of authentic human connection beneath market relations, or the Soviet-Uzbek ideal of genuine social equality beneath the veneer of official slogans. In this sense, the comparison confirms that satirical narrative, wherever it arises, performs a stable and recurring cultural function regardless of the political or economic system that surrounds it.

It is also worth noting the differing narrative architectures within which each writer's satire is embedded. O. Henry's short story, as a modern literary form, is built around a single tightly compressed plot arc culminating in one decisive reversal; the satire is thus concentrated at the climactic point of the narrative, retroactively reshaping the reader's interpretation of all that came before. Gulom's satirical prose and verse, by contrast, often borrow the looping, episodic structure of the oral anecdote, in which comic effect accumulates through repetition, escalation, and the piling-up of incongruous detail rather than through a single climactic surprise. These

Scottish International Conference on Multidisciplinary Research and Innovation – SICMRI 2026

differing architectures reflect the differing literary economies in which each writer worked: the American magazine short story, optimized for a single powerful effect, and the Central Asian oral-literary tradition, optimized for memorability and retelling across many performances.

CONCLUSION

The comparative study of O. Henry and Gafur Gulom demonstrates that satirical narrative, though shaped by radically different literary traditions and political conditions, performs a strikingly similar cultural function: it uses humor to make social criticism palatable, memorable, and persuasive. O. Henry's ironic, twist-driven short stories gently expose the follies of individuals caught within American urban capitalism, while Gulom's anecdote-inflected satire, rooted in Central Asian oral tradition, exposes the collective absurdities of Soviet bureaucratic and social life. Together, they confirm that satire is not bound to a single cultural origin but is instead a flexible literary strategy through which writers across the world convert laughter into a tool of moral and social reflection.

Future comparative research might usefully extend this analysis to other satirists of the same historical period — for instance, placing O. Henry alongside early Soviet feuilletonists more broadly, or examining how translation has shaped the reception of Gulom's satire for non-Uzbek-speaking readers. Such further study would deepen our understanding of satire as a genuinely global literary phenomenon, one that continues to adapt itself to new social conditions while retaining its essential purpose: laughter that corrects, and correction that endures because it makes readers laugh.

REFERENCES

1. Highet, G. (1962). *The Anatomy of Satire*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
2. Griffin, D. H. (1994). *Satire: A Critical Reintroduction*. Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky.
3. Test, G. A. (1991). *Satire: Spirit and Art*. Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida.
4. Current-Garcia, E. (1965). *O. Henry (William Sydney Porter)*. New York: Twayne Publishers.
5. Long, E. H. (1966). *O. Henry: The Man and His Work*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.
6. Sharafiddinov, O. (1983). *G'afur G'ulom ijodi haqida (On the Work of Gafur Gulom)*. Tashkent: Adabiyot va San'at Nashriyoti.
7. G'ulom, G. (1975). *Tanlangan asarlar (Selected Works)*, Vols. 1–3. Tashkent: G'afur G'ulom Nomidagi Adabiyot va San'at Nashriyoti.