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BETWEEN IRONY AND FOLK WIT: SATIRICAL STRATEGIES IN O. HENRY'S AND GAFUR GULOM'S SHORT STORIES

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Abstract: This article investigates the divergent satirical strategies employed by the American short-story writer O. Henry (William Sydney Porter, 1862–1910) and the Uzbek writer Gafur Gulom (1903–1966), focusing on the distinction between structural irony and folk wit as two culturally rooted mechanisms of comic social criticism. Drawing on satire theory (Highet, 1962; Griffin, 1994; Test, 1991) and on theories of carnivalesque folk humor (Bakhtin, 1968), the article argues that O. Henry's satire is organized around the reversing *trick ending* and a detached, ironic narratorial voice, while Gulom's satire is organized around the oral anecdote tradition associated with the trickster-fool Nasreddin Afandi, in which comic effect accumulates through dialogue, repetition, and self-incrimination. Close reading of representative stories from both authors reveals that, despite their different mechanisms, both writers direct laughter toward the correction of recognizable social vices — poverty, greed, vanity, bureaucratic hypocrisy — while adapting their comic techniques to the literary economies and censorship conditions of their respective societies. The article concludes that irony and folk wit should be understood not as opposed genres but as two historically distinct branches of a single satirical impulse.

Key words: satire; irony; folk wit; O. Henry; Gafur Gulom; comparative literature; short story; social criticism; carnivalesque humor; Nasreddin Afandi.

1. Introduction

Satire has always depended on a paradox: it must please in order to persuade, and it must amuse in order to correct. Writers who wish to expose social vice without provoking outright rejection from their audience have, across cultures and centuries, developed remarkably different technical solutions to this paradox. This article compares two such solutions, embodied respectively in the short fiction of the American writer O. Henry and the Uzbek writer Gafur Gulom. The comparison is organized around a specific conceptual distinction — between irony, understood as a rhetorical structure of reversal typically controlled by an authorial or narratorial consciousness, and folk wit, understood as a comic mode rooted in oral performance, anecdote, and the self-revealing speech of type-characters.

O. Henry, writing for American newspapers and magazines at the turn of the twentieth century, perfected a highly compressed narrative form in which social criticism is delivered through a single climactic reversal of expectation. Gafur Gulom, writing within a Central Asian oral-literary tradition later reshaped by Soviet cultural policy, drew instead on the anecdote form long associated with the trickster-fool Nasreddin Afandi, in which humor accumulates gradually through dialogue and the exposure of a character's own logic. Although both writers pursue a broadly similar civic goal — using comedy to correct social vice — the technical machinery by which they achieve this goal differs substantially, and this difference is the central object of the present study.

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The choice of these two authors is not arbitrary. Both occupied comparable positions within their national literary systems: both were prolific, popular, and closely tied to periodical publication rather than to an insulated literary elite; both wrote at moments of significant social transformation — O. Henry amid the rapid urbanization and commercialization of early twentieth-century America, Gulom amid the accelerated modernization of Soviet Central Asia; and both used humor as a primary vehicle for engaging directly with ordinary readers about the moral conditions of everyday life. A comparative reading of their satirical strategies therefore offers a productive case study in how a broadly universal comic impulse is shaped by locally specific literary and oral traditions.

The present study also responds to a gap in existing comparative scholarship. While O. Henry's technique of the surprise ending has been extensively analyzed within American literary criticism (Current-Garcia, 1965; Long, 1966; Eikhenbaum, 1968), and while Gulom's satire has received substantial attention within Uzbek literary scholarship (Sharafiddinov, 1983; Karimov, 1987; Rahimov, 1976), the two bodies of criticism have rarely been brought into direct comparative dialogue. Most existing comparative work on satire remains oriented toward Western literary traditions descending from Horace, Juvenal, and the eighteenth-century English satirists, leaving oral-anecdotal traditions such as the Central Asian latifa comparatively underexamined within international scholarship on comic form. By foregrounding the specific technical distinction between irony and folk wit, this article aims to contribute a conceptual vocabulary capable of describing satirical strategies that arise from oral as well as print-literary traditions.

2. Theoretical background: Irony, folk wit, and the comic mode

Classical and modern satire theory generally treats irony as satire's principal rhetorical instrument. Gilbert Highet describes satire as an attitude capable of inhabiting any literary form, unified by the deliberate exposure of a gap between appearance and reality (Highet, 1962). Dustin Griffin extends this view by arguing that satire operates rhetorically, seeking to persuade the reader toward a specific moral judgment while remaining entertaining (Griffin, 1994). Paul Simpson, working from a stylistic and pragmatic perspective, treats satirical irony as a discourse structure in which the text invites the reader to recognize and reject an implied, target-associated viewpoint (Simpson, 2003). George Test likewise stresses satire's dependence on a shared communal norm against which comic deviation is measured (Test, 1991).

Folk wit, by contrast, belongs to a related but distinguishable tradition of comic discourse rooted not in authorial irony but in collective oral performance. Mikhail Bakhtin's account of carnivalesque folk humor emphasizes its communal, participatory, and often self-directed character: folk comedy does not merely expose an external target from a position of authorial superiority but temporarily inverts social hierarchies, allowing ordinary voices — including the voice of the fool — to speak truths that formal discourse suppresses (Bakhtin, 1968). Arthur Pollard notes that satire across many oral traditions frequently adopts precisely this fool figure, whose apparent simplicity conceals a corrective wisdom (Pollard, 1970). In the Central Asian context, this figure is embodied above all by Nasreddin Afandi, whose anecdotes (latifalar) construct comedy through dialogue, self-incrimination, and the deflation of pompous authority by ostensibly naïve logic (Rahimov, 1976).

The distinction proposed in this article, then, is not between satire and non-satire, but between two historically distinct engines of the satirical effect: an ironic engine, in which meaning is reversed by an external narratorial or structural device (as in O. Henry), and a folk-wit engine, in which meaning is exposed through the internal logic and speech of characters embedded in a recognizable

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oral-anecdotal tradition (as in Gulom). Both engines serve the same general social function identified by satire theory — the correction of vice through laughter — but they achieve this function through markedly different narrative technologies.

3. Methodology

This article adopts a qualitative, comparative close-reading methodology. Representative short stories by O. Henry — including *The Cop and the Anthem*, *The Ransom of Red Chief*, and *Mammon and the Archer* — are analyzed alongside representative satirical prose and verse by Gafur Gulom, drawing on the scholarly characterization of his satirical corpus provided by Sharafiddinov (1983), Karimov (1987), and the author's own collected works (G‘ulom, 1975). The analysis proceeds in three stages: first, an identification of the dominant comic device operating in each author's texts (situational irony, verbal irony, dialogic self-incrimination, or accumulative repetition); second, an identification of the social target implicated by that device (individual folly, class aspiration, bureaucratic institution, ideological hypocrisy); and third, a comparative discussion of how each device positions the reader in relation to the text's moral judgment. This method allows the article to move beyond a purely thematic comparison — noting that both writers criticize greed or hypocrisy — toward a technical comparison of how each writer's narrative architecture produces that criticism.

4. Irony as satirical strategy in o. Henry's short stories

4.1 Structural and situational irony

O. Henry's satire depends structurally on what Boris Eikhenbaum, in his classic study of the short-story form, identifies as the organizing function of the unexpected ending (Eikhenbaum, 1968). In *The Cop and the Anthem*, the homeless protagonist Soapy deliberately commits a series of petty offenses in order to secure a winter's lodging in jail, yet every calculated transgression fails to attract arrest; only when he resolves, under the influence of a church anthem, to reform his life honestly, is he arrested for loitering. The situational irony here is total: the story's entire plot exists to produce this single reversal, through which O. Henry indicts a social and legal apparatus that punishes the innocent gesture while overlooking calculated wrongdoing.

A comparable structure organizes *The Ransom of Red Chief*, in which two small-time criminals kidnap a boy expecting easy profit, only to be so thoroughly tormented by their captive that they must pay his father to reclaim him. The situational reversal here satirizes the mythology of American entrepreneurial cunning: the self-styled clever men are outwitted not by a rival schemer but by the supposedly powerless figure of a child, and the story's comic force depends entirely on the gap between the kidnappers' initial confidence and their eventual humiliation.

4.2 Verbal irony and narrative voice

Beyond situational irony, O. Henry frequently deploys verbal irony through a narratorial voice that appears to endorse a character's self-flattering logic before quietly undermining it. In *Mammon and the Archer*, the wealthy father Anthony Rockwall dismisses the value of romantic sentiment in favor of financial engineering, boasting that money can manufacture love as efficiently as it manufactures anything else; the narrative voice reports his claims with surface plausibility, only for the story's resolution — in which chance, not calculated manipulation, secures the romantic outcome — to expose the hollowness of his boast. This narratorial irony allows O. Henry to satirize the

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nouveau riche faith in commercial calculation without ever directly condemning the character in the narrator's own voice (Current-Garcia, 1965; Long, 1966).

4.3 The ethics of O. Henry's irony

What distinguishes O. Henry's ironic satire ethically is its underlying tenderness toward its targets. His irony rarely humiliates a character beyond recovery; instead, it exposes a recognizable human weakness — vanity, greed, self-delusion, sentimentality — while allowing the character, and by extension the reader, a measure of sympathy. The criticism embedded in his irony is aimed less at a specific political structure than at universal human frailty as it manifests within the commercial pressures of American urban life.

4.4 A further example: Class satire in The Trimmed Lamp

A further instance of O. Henry's ironic method appears in *The Trimmed Lamp*, which contrasts two working shop-girls pursuing opposite strategies for social advancement: one cultivates modest, unglamorous respectability, while the other cultivates showy, borrowed elegance in pursuit of a wealthy suitor. The story's irony inheres in its refusal to reward the seemingly prudent strategy in any straightforward way; instead, O. Henry complicates easy moral judgment by allowing the ostensibly frivolous character a form of romantic success that the narrative neither fully endorses nor fully condemns. This calculated moral ambiguity is characteristic of O. Henry's broader satirical method: rather than delivering a single unambiguous verdict on class aspiration and commercialized self-presentation, his irony holds two competing social values in tension, inviting the reader to recognize the absurdity of a social system in which respectability and desirability are so unevenly and arbitrarily rewarded (Long, 1966).

5. Folk wit as satirical strategy in gafur gulom's short stories

5.1 The legacy of Nasreddin Afandi and oral anecdote

Gafur Gulom's satire draws on a substantially different comic genealogy: the centuries-old Central Asian anecdote tradition (*latifa*), embodied above all in the figure of Nasreddin Afandi, whose deceptively simple stories expose the hypocrisy of judges, clerics, and officials through the fool's own apparently naïve logic (Sharafiddinov, 1983; Rahimov, 1976). Gulom transplants this indigenous oral-comic sensibility into modern prose and journalistic feuilleton, using it to mock social types generated by rapid Soviet modernization: the bureaucrat who hides behind paperwork and procedure, the opportunist who repeats ideological slogans without conviction, and the pretentious pseudo-intellectual who craves status without substance (Karimov, 1987).

5.2 Self-incriminating dialogue and type-characters

Where O. Henry's irony is chiefly narratorial, Gulom's folk wit operates chiefly through dialogue: his characters indict themselves through their own speech, a technique inherited directly from the anecdote tradition in which the fool's own logic — rather than external commentary — becomes the source of comedy. Gulom's satirical narratives typically unfold not through a single reversing twist but through accumulation: a mounting sequence of self-serving statements, excuses, and contradictions that gradually strip away a character's pretensions. His targets are less often unique individuals than recognizable social types — the meeting-obsessed official, the empty propagandist, the patriarchal elder clinging to outdated privilege beneath a nominal veneer of new Soviet equality (G‘ulom, 1975).

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5.3 Folk wit under ideological constraint

Because Gulom wrote under conditions of state censorship and explicit ideological expectation, his satirical folk wit displays a characteristic duality. On its surface, it appears to support official campaigns against *backwardness* and *bureaucratism*; yet the specificity and sharpness of its comic detail simultaneously implicates the very system that produced these vices. Quronov, Mamajonov, and Sheralieva describe this duality as characteristic of much Soviet-era Uzbek satire, which learned to voice genuine social criticism within — rather than against — officially sanctioned rhetorical boundaries (Quronov et al., 2004). This double-voicedness situates Gulom's folk wit within Bakhtin's broader account of carnivalesque humor as a socially permitted space in which ordinarily suppressed truths can be spoken under the cover of laughter (Bakhtin, 1968).

5.4 Verse satire and the self-mocking mask

A distinctive extension of Gulom's folk wit appears in his satirical verse, a form largely absent from O. Henry's prose-based irony. In several of his satirical poems, Gulom adopts the first-person voice of the very figure he wishes to mock — the boastful minor official, the idle student, the self-important petty clerk — allowing rhythm, exaggerated self-praise, and comic rhyme to expose the speaker's absurdity from within, without any need for an external narratorial commentator. This first-person satirical mask is a direct extension of the anecdote tradition's reliance on the fool's own speech as the vehicle of comedy, and it grants Gulom's criticism an intimate, quasi-theatrical quality: the reader is invited not merely to observe a satirized character from the outside, as in O. Henry's third-person irony, but to hear that character indict himself in his own words, occupying — however briefly — the position of his own voice before recognizing its absurdity.

6. Comparative discussion: Irony versus folk wit

The comparison developed above suggests that O. Henry's ironic satire and Gulom's folk-wit satire differ along at least three dimensions: narrative architecture, locus of comic authority, and relationship to communal performance. Structurally, O. Henry's satire is concentrated at a single climactic point — the trick ending — which retroactively reorganizes the reader's understanding of the entire preceding narrative. Gulom's satire, by contrast, typically accumulates gradually across a sequence of self-revealing statements or incidents, a structure inherited from the oral anecdote's tendency toward episodic repetition and escalation rather than singular reversal.

In terms of comic authority, O. Henry's irony is largely narratorial: the reader recognizes the reversal because an implicit, controlling narratorial consciousness has arranged the plot to produce it. Gulom's folk wit, by contrast, locates comic authority chiefly within the character's own speech: the fool, the bureaucrat, or the pretentious official exposes himself through dialogue, without requiring an external ironic commentator. This difference reflects a deeper distinction between a literary tradition organized around the individually authored short story as a modern print form, and an oral-performative tradition in which comic material is understood as collectively owned, endlessly retold, and only secondarily fixed in written form.

Finally, the two traditions differ in their relationship to communal performance. O. Henry's irony, though warm and sympathetic, remains the product of a single controlling authorial perspective addressed to an individual reader of a printed magazine page. Gulom's folk wit retains, even in its literary form, the imprint of communal oral performance — the anecdote told and retold among listeners, its comic effect dependent on collective recognition of a shared social type. This distinction

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corresponds to Bakhtin's broader claim that folk humor is inherently participatory, temporarily leveling hierarchies between speaker and audience, in contrast to the more hierarchical relationship between an ironic narrator and a solitary reader (Bakhtin, 1968).

Despite these differences, both strategies converge on a shared social function: each uses laughter to expose vice while avoiding the direct confrontation that unmediated moral accusation would provoke. O. Henry's ironic reversals gently correct individual human folly as it is shaped by American commercial life; Gulom's folk wit corrects collective institutional and ideological failings as they are shaped by Soviet bureaucratic life. Both, in Highet's phrase, write not out of contempt but out of an underlying commitment to the possibility of improvement (Highet, 1962), and both confirm that satire, whatever its local technical form, remains fundamentally a rhetoric of corrective laughter.

It is worth acknowledging certain limitations of the present study. First, the analysis relies on English-language and secondary Uzbek-language scholarship rather than a full original-language stylistic analysis of Gulom's verse, which may obscure certain formal features — meter, wordplay, and dialectal register — that are difficult to render fully in translation. Second, the comparison necessarily selects a limited number of representative texts from each author's substantial output, and a broader sample might reveal exceptions to the ironic/folk-wit distinction proposed here — for instance, moments where O. Henry approaches a more dialogic, self-incriminating comic mode, or where Gulom experiments with a single climactic reversal closer to the Western trick ending. These limitations suggest directions for further empirical and stylistic research rather than undermining the article's central comparative claim.

7. Conclusion

This article has argued that O. Henry and Gafur Gulom represent two historically distinct, technically differentiated branches of a single satirical impulse: an ironic branch, organized around structural reversal and narratorial control, and a folk-wit branch, organized around oral anecdote, dialogue, and self-incrimination. Reading these authors together clarifies that satire is not a single uniform rhetorical device but a family of related comic technologies, each shaped by the literary economy, oral tradition, and political conditions of the society that produced it. O. Henry's magazine-driven short story favors the concentrated, single-point reversal; Gulom's anecdote-inflected prose and verse favor gradual, dialogic accumulation suited to communal oral performance and adapted to the constraints of Soviet censorship.

Future research might extend this comparative framework to other national satirical traditions that similarly combine an inherited oral-anecdotal comic form with the pressures of a modern print or broadcast literary economy, further testing whether the ironic/folk-wit distinction proposed here holds more broadly across world literature. Such research would deepen our understanding of satire not as a fixed genre but as a historically adaptive rhetorical strategy, endlessly reshaped by the specific comic traditions and social conditions available to any given writer.

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