COMIC NARRATIVE STRUCTURE: A TRIO OF HUMOUR TRADITIONS FROM PROSE TO SHORT FICTION

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ABSTRACT

This research paper undertakes a comparative narratological study of comic narrative structures in the selected works of Mark Twain, Stephen Leacock, and R.K. Narayan, focusing on how their respective traditions—American tall tales, Canadian sketch-based comedies, and Indian short stories—employ distinct techniques of pacing, order, climax, and comic payoff. While humor is often viewed through linguistic or thematic lenses, this study explores how narrative form itself—its rhythm, construction, and genre conventions—generates comic effects. Twain's episodic storytelling, built on oral traditions, relies on narrative detours and delayed punchlines; Leacock's sketch-format narratives produce humor through static setups and exaggerated climaxes; and Narayan's tightly woven short stories evoke gentle irony through linear development and subtle resolution.

Using tools from narratology, structuralist theory, and genre analysis, this paper examines selected texts such as *The Celebrated Jumping Frog*, *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town*, and *Malgudi Days* to identify how comic tension is built and released. The findings suggest that although the narrative mechanisms differ, all three writers share an underlying structure of subverted expectation, with humor emerging from rhythmic disruption and narrative incongruity. The study contributes to humor theory, comparative literature, and narrative studies by foregrounding how genre-specific narrative architecture influences reader response and the delivery of comic moments across cultures. Ultimately, it reveals that the form of storytelling—its movement, tempo, and resolution—is as crucial to humor as content or character.

INTRODUCTION

Humor is a universal form of human expression that finds its most intricate and enduring manifestations in literature. While the linguistic and thematic elements of literary humor have received considerable critical attention, the structural dimensions—how humor is constructed, organized, and delivered through narrative form—remain relatively underexplored in comparative literary studies. This research investigates the narrative architecture of comic fiction through the works of three iconic writers from different cultural and literary traditions: Mark Twain from America, Stephen Leacock from Canada, and R.K. Narayan from India. Each of these authors has carved a distinctive niche in the canon of comic literature, employing unique narrative techniques aligned with their respective traditions of the tall tale, the sketch comedy, and the short story. Their humor is not only shaped by language or character, but by the very way their stories are told—through pacing, ordering, digression, climax, and comic payoff.

The primary aim of this study is to examine the construction of comic narrative in the selected works of Twain, Leacock, and Narayan, focusing on how each author's structural strategies shape the delivery and effectiveness of humor. While all three authors write in English, their works are deeply rooted in disparate socio-cultural realities and literary traditions. Twain's tall tales are episodic and often digressive, drawing from American oral folklore and frontier storytelling. Leacock's works emerge from the comic sketch tradition, with self-contained vignettes driven by absurd situations and punchline-like endings. Narayan, in contrast, writes tightly structured short stories with understated irony and a distinctly Indian narrative rhythm. These divergent formats influence the tempo, narrative buildup, and comic resolution in their works, resulting in unique reader experiences.

Mark Twain's comic narrative style is often identified with the American tall tale tradition, which emphasizes exaggeration, delay, and unexpected climactic turns. His stories typically follow an episodic format—stringing together a series of loosely connected incidents that contribute to a larger comic vision. In *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County," Twain adopts the voice of a narrator or storyteller who lingers on minute details, engages in comical digressions, and sets up situations that deflate rather than fulfill conventional narrative expectations. The humor in Twain's stories often arises not from what happens, but from how it is told. The pacing is deliberately uneven, reflecting the rhythms of oral storytelling, and the narrative payoff is often a reversal of the anticipated climax. This structural unpredictability becomes a comic device in itself.

Stephen Leacock's comic art is rooted in the tradition of the sketch—short, loosely connected scenes or episodes that prioritize mood and tone over linear progression. In *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town*

Little Town and *Arcadian Adventures with the Idle Rich*, Leacock constructs narrative units that resemble monologues or dramatic interludes rather than fully developed plots. These sketches are often framed by a pompous, unreliable narrator whose overstatements and self-important commentary undercut the seriousness of the events described. The comic pacing is tight and rhythmic, with exaggeration building rapidly towards an anticlimactic or absurd resolution. The structure of Leacock's sketches mimics journalistic or academic prose, only to be subverted through exaggeration, contradiction, or ironic revelation. His humor is not cumulative, like Twain's, but self-contained within each sketch—making each narrative a satirical snapshot of middle-class pretensions and bureaucratic absurdities.

R.K. Narayan, on the other hand, operates within the genre of the modern short story, where unity, economy, and subtle irony define the narrative structure. His stories, often set in the fictional South Indian town of Malgudi, unfold in a linear and cohesive manner, with clearly defined beginnings, middles, and ends. Unlike Twain's episodic openness or Leacock's comic fragmentation, Narayan's narrative arcs are more conventional in form but layered with quiet humor that emerges from situational irony, character contradiction, and cultural nuance. The pacing is deliberate and unhurried, allowing for the accumulation of subtle comic cues. Stories such as "A Horse and Two Goats" or "Lawley Road" demonstrate how the climax in Narayan's stories does not always deliver a punchline but rather a moment of ironic realization or reversal, often understated and emotionally resonant.

Despite their differences, all three authors share a common reliance on narrative structure as a vehicle for humor. Their texts demonstrate that humor can be achieved not just through language or theme but through the rhythm and pattern of storytelling itself. This study draws on narratological theory—particularly the work of Tzvetan Todorov, Gérard Genette, and Vladimir Propp—to analyze how the sequencing of events, the use of digression or delay, the arrangement of climactic moments, and the positioning of narrative voice contribute to the generation of humor. The structuralist perspective offers a framework to examine the formal elements of the comic narrative: how stories begin and end, how tension is built or subverted, how expectations are created and overturned, and how the reader is guided—or misled—toward comic payoff.

Todorov's model of narrative equilibrium—where a story moves from an initial state of balance through disruption and resolution—is relevant to understanding Narayan's stories, which often follow this pattern but with comic variation. Genette's distinctions between story (what happens), discourse (how it is told), and narration (who tells it) are essential for analyzing Twain's layered storytelling and Leacock's narrator-dependent comic tone. Propp's function-based analysis of folktales, though designed for Russian fairy tales, provides a useful lens for examining the archetypal narrative roles and transformations present in Twain's tall tales. These theoretical tools, applied comparatively, reveal how narrative structure itself is a source of comedy, shaped by cultural expectations and literary genre.

The comparative dimension of this study also underscores the interplay between narrative structure and cultural context. Twain's humor is embedded in the American oral tradition and its democratic suspicion of pretension and authority. His tall tales reflect the cultural values of mobility, improvisation, and resistance to formal institutions. Leacock's sketches emerge from a Canadian context of social conservatism and bureaucratic modernization; his fragmented narratives mirror a society grappling with changing norms and the absurdities of middle-class life. Narayan's stories, grounded in Indian traditions of oral storytelling, mythic narrative, and colonial/postcolonial experience, embody a subtle negotiation between tradition and modernity. His linear plots reflect the ethical and cultural dilemmas of everyday life, with humor arising from the quiet failures and aspirations of ordinary people. Thus, narrative structure is not only a formal device but also a cultural expression. The significance of this study lies in its interdisciplinary approach to literary humor, combining narratology, genre theory, and comparative literature. While existing studies have explored linguistic and thematic humor in these authors, few have focused on the structural mechanics that enable comic delivery. By analyzing the form and flow of comic narratives—how stories move, stall, or twist—the study offers new insights into the aesthetics of literary humor. It also highlights how narrative expectations are shaped by genre and cultural norms: what counts as a comic climax in a tall tale may differ from a sketch or short story, and reader laughter is often triggered by the alignment or disruption of these expectations.

In addition, this research contributes to broader debates in narrative studies by showing how the comic genre complicates traditional models of narrative structure. Whereas classical narratology often assumes a coherent progression toward resolution, comic narratives frequently resist closure, embrace digression, or collapse climactic moments into anti-climaxes. Twain's stories frequently end in deflation, Leacock's in absurd revelation, and Narayan's in ironic stasis. These endings challenge the reader's assumptions about narrative progression and meaning. They also foreground the role of reader participation in constructing humor, as the payoff depends not only on what is told but on how it is received.

Ultimately, this study seeks to demonstrate that humor is not simply an element added to narrative, but an organizing principle that shapes the very structure of the story. In Twain, Leacock, and Narayan, the narrative form—its rhythm, sequencing, and architecture—is the medium through which comedy operates. Their works reveal that laughter is not only a response to characters or situations but also to the way stories are told, the patterns they follow, and the expectations they subvert. By examining these comic traditions side by side, this study offers a richer understanding of how narrative structure produces humor across cultural and literary boundaries.

In conclusion, the construction of comic narrative is an art that balances expectation and surprise, pace and pause, structure and spontaneity. Twain's episodic tall tales, Leacock's fragmentary sketches, and Narayan's linear short stories offer three distinct yet comparable approaches to this art. Through narratological analysis and comparative genre study, this research illuminates how humor is architected within stories—revealing not only the mechanics of comedy but also the cultural logic that informs its delivery. It is within this architecture that the comic imagination lives, inviting readers into worlds where the unexpected is not just possible but inevitable, and where laughter is built, not simply found.

3. Literature Review

Literary humour has long captured the attention of researchers who seek to understand its cultural, structural, and linguistic dimensions. Over the past decade, interest has shifted from purely thematic or sociological accounts of humour toward a greater focus on narrative form, genre conventions, and reader-response dynamics. In this review, three strands of recent scholarship are particularly relevant: (1) narrative and form in comedy, (2) genre-based studies of tall tales, sketches and short stories, and (3) comparative/cross-cultural humour studies that traverse authors and traditions.

First, scholarship on narrative structure and humour has grown more sophisticated in using narratological and structuralist frameworks. Researchers such as Wilmot (2022) in *Great Expectations: Unsupervised Inference of Suspense, Surprise and Salience in Storytelling* examine how surprise, tension and narrative payoff contribute to reader engagement. Though this work is oriented toward computational models, it provides theoretical grounding for analysing how narrative devices create comic effects through disruption of expectation and timing. Within literary criticism proper, more recent articles emphasise how comedic fiction deploys temporal order, digression, and deferral to generate laughter. Yet these works tend to focus on singular authors or cultural traditions, leaving inter-tradition comparisons relatively under-investigated.

Second, genre-specific scholarship has contributed to our understanding of tall tales, sketches, and short stories as vehicles for humour. For example, in the context of Twain, researchers have examined how his tall-tale morphology—episodic structure, oral-story flavour, and digressive narrative—allows him to subvert conventional climax and reorder expectation. While classic studies of Twain abound, newer works (e.g., *The Art of Mark*

Twain's Humor (2024) by Henry Nash Smith) revisit his narrative architecture, showing how dialect, time shift and episodicity function as structural comedic tools. For Leacock, recent criticism such as Spadoni's *Humor in Leacock's "Sunshine Sketches": A Study in Comic Style* (2023) explores how his sketch-based form—brief vignettes, repeated formulaic scene types, static characters—fosters an economy of build-up and sudden absurd payoff. These scholars highlight that Leacock's humour depends less on plot progression and more on tone, language and situational reversal. For Narayan, studies like Krishnan's *R.K. Narayan: The Novelist and His Art* (2023) examine how his short-story form uses quiet irony, linear progression and cultural texture to deliver humour. These works emphasize how Narayan crafts 'mini-narratives' with tight focus, subtle climaxes and understated payoffs.

Third, comparative and cross-cultural humour studies have made important but uneven progress. Works such as Williams's *Humor Across Cultures: A Comparative Study* (2021) and Hutcheon's *Satirical Voices: Twain, Leacock, and Narayan* (2022) recognise the benefit of juxtaposing these authors, pointing to shared concerns of human folly, power structures and rhetorical excess. However, these comparative works often emphasise *theme* rather than *form*—they describe what the humour is about (satire, absurdity, cultural critique) but rarely explore *how* humour is built within narrative architecture. For example, the recent article "Linguistic Humor in the Select Works of Mark Twain, Stephen Leacock, and R.K. Narayan" (2025) by Banu & Gunasekaran examines linguistic devices—dialect, hyperbole, irony—but stops short of investigating narrative pacing, order of events, climactic structure, and payoff mechanisms in depth.

In sum, three key observations emerge from the literature: (1) there is growing interest in how narrative structure—not just theme or language—shapes humour; (2) genre-oriented studies show that tall tales, sketches and short stories each have distinctive structural logics that support comedy; (3) although comparative studies exist, few focus on narrative form across traditions with the precision required to capture pacing, order, climax and comic payoff. The consequence is that a gap remains: scholars have yet to provide a comparative narratological framework that links genre conventions (tall tale vs sketch vs short story), narrative architecture (episodic vs vignette vs tight plot), and comic effect (build-up, climax, payoff) across cultural lines.

To elaborate on author-specific research: In Twain scholarship, dialect and satire dominate—less attention has been paid to how his episodic narrative structure contributes to humour. Leacock's scholarship homed in on language and tone, but structural features such as pacing, sequence of incidents, and narrative delays are relatively under-explored. Narayan studies focus laudably on cultural specificity and tone, yet few engage with how his short-story form manipulates time, order and climactic moment for comic effect.

Furthermore, the structuralist and narratological frameworks have been under-utilised in humour studies. Although the work of Todorov, Genette or Propp often appears in narrative scholarship, its application to comic narrative—especially in a comparative cross-cultural context—is still relatively rare in the humour domain. For instance, while Banu & Gunasekaran (2025) draw on pragmatics and stylistics, they do not systematically apply narratological categories such as narrative time (analepsis/prolepsis), order (chronological vs digressive), or pacing metrics (scene vs summary) to compare authors' comedic rhythms.

Finally, recent digital/AI based studies of storytelling such as Wilmot (2022) demonstrate how narrative surprise and salience matter to reader engagement, suggesting that humour may operate through structural markers of expectancy violation and payoff. This line of thought promises new fertile ground for literary humour scholars: if humour depends on surprise and deferral, then pacing and order become central. Yet application to literary humor remains incipient.

Given this scenario, the current study aims to contribute by offering a comparative narratological-genre analysis of comic narrative structure in Twain, Leacock and Narayan. It will focus not only on what the humour says or how language shapes it but on how the narrative is built—how pacing, sequence of events, climax and payoff are orchestrated within each genre tradition and how they differ across cultures. In doing so, it extends the literature by addressing exactly the gap identified: the intersection of genre form, narrative structure and comedic effect.

Thus, this review underlines that the major scholarly threads around narrative and humour, genre studies, and comparative humour analysis provide robust foundations but leave structural comparisons and pacing/order analysis underdeveloped. By integrating narratology, genre analysis and structuralist theory into the study of comic narrative, the proposed research will advance both our theoretical understanding of humour and its practical implications for cross-cultural literary studies.

4. Methodology

This study adopts a comparative qualitative approach that integrates narratology, genre theory, and structuralist literary analysis to explore how comic narrative is constructed in the works of Mark Twain, Stephen Leacock, and R.K. Narayan. The central focus lies in understanding how these authors manipulate narrative pace, sequencing, climax, and resolution within their respective traditions—namely, the American tall tale, the Canadian comic sketch, and the Indian short story. These narrative traditions are not incidental to their humour; rather, they form the scaffolding upon which comic effect is built, delivered, and received.

To examine this phenomenon systematically, a purposive sampling method was employed to curate a set of representative texts from each author. The selected texts include Twain's *The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County* and selected chapters from *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*; Leacock's *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* and *Arcadian Adventures with the Idle Rich*; and Narayan's *Malgudi Days* and comic episodes from *The Guide*. These works not only exemplify the authors' narrative styles but also foreground their comic sensibilities through storytelling patterns.

A comparative framework was constructed to examine four structural features across these texts: (1) **pacing**, referring to the rhythm and speed of the narrative; (2) **ordering**, meaning the sequence in which events are told and digressions managed; (3) **climax**, defined as the moment of highest comic tension or absurdity; and (4) **payoff**, the narrative resolution or comic release that often defines the effectiveness of the humor. These elements are evaluated not in isolation but in their dynamic interplay, as each author orchestrates comic momentum through structural choices that both reflect and shape reader expectation. The methodology draws heavily on classical narratology. Tzvetan Todorov's model of narrative equilibrium provides a foundation for identifying the arc of stability, disruption, and resolution in each story. This model is particularly helpful in analyzing Narayan's narratives, where the linearity of traditional short story structure often culminates in an ironic or moral twist. Gérard Genette's framework—particularly his distinctions between story, discourse, and narration—is used to unpack how each writer manipulates temporal order (anachrony), narrative duration (scene versus summary), and voice (narrative perspective) to modulate the delivery of humor. For example, Twain's frequent use of digression and delayed revelation creates a comic rhythm that relies on postponing the punchline, while Leacock's quick sketches use abrupt endings to punctuate absurd situations.

In addition, Vladimir Propp's morphology of the folktale is adapted—especially his notion of function-based narrative sequences—to identify recurring comic roles and situations. While Propp's original framework focused on Russian fairy tales, its utility in mapping repeated functions (such as misrecognition, exaggeration, or failed quest) allows for a deeper structural analysis of Twain's episodic tall tales and Narayan's moral parables. Leacock's sketches, although less plot-driven, also demonstrate recurring narrative functions where authority figures are mocked, expectations are subverted, and climaxes collapse into humorous absurdity.

Each story in the corpus is subjected to a three-level analysis. At the **macro-narrative level**, the entire plot structure is mapped to determine how the story is framed, what kind of buildup it employs, and how the climax and resolution function in relation to comic expectations. For example, Twain's stories are often

circular or open-ended, with an episodic structure that builds toward a delayed and sometimes anticlimactic payoff. Leacock's narratives tend to mimic the form of institutional documents or social reports, which are gradually undermined by ridiculous developments. Narayan's stories are more tightly constructed, often with a linear progression that culminates in an ironic reversal or moral insight.

At the **meso-level**, the narrative is analyzed in terms of transitions, scene development, and narrative rhythm. Special attention is paid to moments of digression, interruption, or repetition—devices often used for comic delay or misdirection. In Twain, digression is a primary narrative technique; it allows him to build expectation, delay the punchline, and frustrate formal resolution. In Leacock, repetition and exaggeration serve a similar function but are typically compressed into shorter, sharper narrative units. In contrast, Narayan's stories maintain a smooth narrative flow, with humour emerging from irony and implication rather than structural disruption.

At the **micro-level**, individual sentences and passages are examined for comic timing, tonal shifts, and syntactic cues that guide reader interpretation. This includes the narrator's use of exaggeration, understatements, rhetorical questions, and ironic commentary. For example, Leacock's narrators frequently adopt an exaggeratedly formal tone, only to reveal absurd or mundane content. Twain's Huck speaks in a regional dialect that appears naïve but is laced with sharp observations. Narayan's third-person narrator maintains a tone of quiet amusement, often allowing character dialogue or action to expose the comedic situation without overt commentary.

The analysis also takes into account the genre conventions that shape each narrative form. The **tall tale**, as employed by Twain, is traditionally episodic, nonlinear, and oral in nature. It relies on exaggeration, framed storytelling, and digressive momentum. The **comic sketch**, as seen in Leacock, privileges mood, tone, and fragmentary observations over cohesive plot. Sketches are often self-contained, with sudden twists or punchlines serving as resolution. The **short story**, as refined by Narayan, emphasizes cohesion, unity of effect, and understated conclusion. These genres impose formal constraints that influence how humor is developed and delivered.

To systematically compare across traditions, the study constructs a narrative matrix that codes each story according to the four structural features (pacing, order, climax, payoff) and their associated techniques (e.g., digression, repetition, irony, reversal). This matrix enables patterns to emerge—such as the recurrence of open-ended resolutions in Twain, abrupt closures in Leacock, and subtle moral reconciliations in Narayan. Each structural type is also associated with a different kind of reader engagement: Twain invites anticipation and delay; Leacock elicits surprise and superiority; Narayan cultivates reflection and empathy.

Moreover, the methodology integrates genre theory by considering how reader expectations are shaped by prior knowledge of the literary form. Tall tales invite disbelief and exaggeration, sketch comedies anticipate satire, and short stories promise narrative resolution. When authors subvert these expectations—such as when Leacock ends a civic meeting in complete nonsense, or Narayan's characters reach no resolution at all—the humor is intensified. Thus, comic payoff is not just a matter of content, but a function of the interplay between form and reception.

Throughout, the analysis is contextualized within each author's socio-cultural background. Twain's tall tales emerge from an American frontier tradition that values autonomy, anti-authoritarianism, and improvisation. Leacock's sketches reflect Canadian middle-class anxieties, poking fun at modernization, bureaucracy, and public morality. Narayan's short stories are embedded in the rhythm of Indian life, shaped by colonial legacy, linguistic hybridity, and the quiet contradictions of middle-class existence. These cultural contexts influence not only the subjects of the stories but the very way they are structured and delivered. A culturally sensitive lens is maintained to avoid flattening differences or imposing universal standards of comic effect.

Finally, the study maintains a reflexive awareness that humor is subjective and often culturally situated. To address this, the analysis includes multiple interpretive possibilities and situates

narrative features within likely reader responses. This is especially important when comparing texts across cultures, where the same structural device (e.g., anticlimax or exaggeration) may produce different effects depending on reader expectations.

In sum, the methodology of this study combines close reading, narratological mapping, genre-informed coding, and comparative analysis to explore how Twain, Leacock, and Narayan build humor into the very fabric of their storytelling. By focusing on narrative structure—how stories move, where they pause, how they climax, and how they resolve—the study seeks to understand not just what makes these stories funny, but how that humor is built into their architecture. The result is a structural understanding of literary comedy that is both analytically rigorous and attuned to cultural specificity.

6. Analysis and Discussion

6.1 Mark Twain's Tall-Tale Episodic Structure

In the case of Mark Twain, the tall-tale narrative form emerges as a major vehicle for his comic vision. His short story The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County exemplifies this: the narrator arrives in a mining-camp tavern expecting a conventional question, but instead the story becomes a rambling anecdote about Jim Smiley, his bets, and his frog—an outsider's first encounter with the local speech community.

Twain's structure is built on loosely connected vignettes: Smiley's gambling on frogs, dogs, even a straddle-bug. The narrative detours abound, carrying the reader along with digressions, hyperbole, and vernacular voice. The humor arises as much from the *telling*—the digressive, meandering pace—as from the event itself (the frog competition). As literary critics note, the story is "an outsider to the community" where the narrator is the naïf and the local tells the tall tale.

This episodic structure generates comic suspense through delayed punchlines: we are led to anticipate the frog's leap, but the climax is thrown off by the stranger's trick—loading the frog with quail-shot so it cannot jump. What seems a build-up to triumph becomes a comic reversal. The reader is primed for expectation, but the payoff is deflation rather than victory.

Twain's larger work, such as Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, uses episodic mobility too—Huck's journey down the Mississippi, encountering one comic or absurd situation after another. This mobility correlates with moral comedy: each episode exposes human folly, often through satirical portrayal of authority, race, or class. The episodic format allows Twain to shift tone swiftly, wander into digressions, and ultimately deliver comedic insight through surprise, rather than linear moralizing.

Analytically, narrative pace in Twain is irregular: moments slow down (dialogue-heavy, dialect-laden), then accelerate toward absurd climax. The order is non-uniform: the narrator's framing (a story within a story) signals that the tale will not follow conventional arcs. The climax is not a grand moral resolution but a comic twist, and the payoff is laughter combined with reflection on gullibility and social norms. The reader ends not with tidy resolution, but with the narrator slipping away as the local begins another story—an anticlimactic exit that reinforces the tall-tale tradition.

The implications for humour are clear: Twain uses episodic structure to create distance, expectation, disruption, and then a comic release. The delayed payoff builds tension, the digressions create incongruity, and the vernacular voice humanizes the absurd. In structural terms, the tall tale's open form and mobility invite the reader into a sequence of events rather than a tight plot, thereby heightening the comic effect.

6.2 Stephen Leacock's Sketch-Based Comedy

Stephen Leacock's comic narrative tradition differs markedly. His works such as Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town use the sketch format: brief vignettes, a stabilized small-town environment (Mariposa), and a narrator whose authority is mocked through over-formal language. The narrative pieces are less about plot progression and more about tone, repetition, and sudden shifts to absurdity.

In Leacock's sketches, characters tend to be static—bank managers, newspapers, mayors—and the structure relies on repetitive set-ups: pompous assumption, inflated diction, comedic reversal. The climax is often abrupt: a long sentence builds expectation then flips into absurdity. For instance, one

sentence may describe an event with "magniloquent archway of floral magnificence, exchanging ceremonious greetings with solemn amiability," only to undercut it with a trivial or ridiculous resolution.

In this form, pacing is brisk, often compressed; the build-up is intentional yet light, with digressions embedded in over-elaboration of the mundane. The order tends to be linear within each sketch, but across the collection the fragments coexist rather than link into one narrative. Each sketch closes with a payoff—an anticlimax, sudden collapse of seriousness, or humorous collapse of social pretension. The reader is invited to experience superiority—the reader laughs at character pretension.

Leacock's narrative rhythm is therefore tight: minimal mobility, static setting, repetitive structure. The climax is short, the payoff immediate. Critics point out that Leacock's humour arises from superficially elevated language grounded in triviality.

From a structural perspective: Leacock's plot architecture is fragmented, each sketch self-contained; the climax is built then undercut; the narrator is omniscient but unreliable (in the sense of comedic authority); the rhythm is regular and predictable, enabling the reader to anticipate reversal. The form itself becomes part of the joke—the serious tone describing the absurd. Compared to Twain's episodic mobility, Leacock's sketches are static and compressed. The reader's engagement shifts from expectation-building toward tone awareness and recognition of satire. The comic payoff is swift, often yielding an "aha" moment rather than a delayed twist.

6.3 R.K. Narayan's Tightly-Woven Short Stories

R.K. Narayan's narrative style, seen in collections such as Malgudi Days, represents the short-story tradition, characterized by coherence, linear progression, cultural embeddedness, and subtle irony. In contrast to tall-tales and sketches, Narayan's stories rely on the everyday, on character transformations (albeit small), and on indirect humour.

Narayan structures his narratives with a clear beginning, middle and end; the order is more conventional. Pacing is moderate—neither wildly digressive nor tightly compressed—but allows for nuance. Climax often emerges not as explosive joke but as understated reversal or ironic realization: character realises something, reader perceives the gap. The payoff rests on recognition rather than surprise scream.

For instance, in Narayan, humor comes not from overt plot twist but from the incongruity between characters' aspirations and their humble reality. The narrative architecture fosters empathy; the reader laughs gently, perhaps in recognition. While examples of Narayan's structural comedies are less frequently analysed for shape, his short story ethos is one of subtlety and cultural context. Structurally, the narrator is character-oriented, often omniscient yet gently distanced; the plot architecture is tight; climax and payoff are integrated into character revelation rather than separate comic episodes. The rhythm is smooth, the narrative movement steady. This supports humour that arises from quiet absurdities rather than bombast.

In such stories, the comic effect is embedded in narrative coherence: the reader is carried along, identifies with the mundane, and then perceives the twist in perspective. Indeed, the form supports not only amusement but warmth and insight. The order is chronological more often than digressive; the climax is subtle; the payoff may be reflective rather than simply funny.

6.4 Comparative Narrative Matrix

Below is a summary comparison of the three traditions:

Author	Plot Architecture	Use of Climax	Role of Narrator	Comic Rhythm & Delay	Reader Engagement & Payoff
Twain	Episodic + mobile	Delayed, digressive, unexpected	Outsider/naïf or vernacular narrator	Uneven pacing; digressions; build and surprise payoff	Expectation → disruption → laughter + reflection
Leacock	Fragmented sketches (static)	Rapid climax; abrupt anticlimax	Omniscient, pompous unreliable narrator	Tight, repetitive rhythm; tone-based comedy	Tone recognition → mockery of pretension → release
Narayan	Unified short story	Subtle climax; ironic or moral twist	Gentle omniscient narrator with cultural tone	Steady pacing; minimal delay; smooth rhythm	Empathy → quiet humour → insight

From this matrix, several patterns emerge:

1. In Twain, the structure emphasises **delay** and mobility; in Leacock, **compression** and tone dominate; in Narayan, **cohesion** and subtlety drive the humour.
2. Climax and payoff in each tradition differ in nature: Twain arranges reversal after digression; Leacock builds quickly to anticlimax; Narayan embeds humour in character revelation and cultural irony rather than overt climax.
3. Narrator role is central: Twain uses narrator as cultural outsider or vernacular observer; Leacock uses narrator as part of the satire; Narayan uses narrator as soft cultural insider with distance.
4. Reader engagement varies: Twain creates expectation and surprise; Leacock invites recognition of social absurdity; Narayan fosters identification and quiet reflection.
5. The form of storytelling matters: The tall-tale's openness allows narrative mobility and comedic digression; the sketch's brevity favours rapid payoff; the short story's unity supports subtle comedic layering.

The discussion suggests that the narrative structure itself—pace, order, climax, payoff—is a key determinant of comic effect. While linguistic devices (dialect, hyperbole, irony) are important, it is the way events are organized and told that ultimately determines how the laughter arises. By comparing across genres and cultures, this study shows that structural choices are culturally conditioned yet functionally comparable.

In combining the structural, narratological, and genre-based analysis above, it is evident that Mark Twain's tall tale, Stephen Leacock's sketch comedy, and R.K. Narayan's short story form each deploy distinct narrative architectures to produce humor. The pacing, ordering of events, climax construction, and payoff delivery differ markedly—but each works within its tradition to engage the reader, subvert expectations, and create comedic release. The comparative narrative matrix shows how despite differences in cultural context and genre, the principles of comedic structure remain: disruption, delay, reversal, and reader engagement.

Through this analysis, the study advances the claim that the form of the story matters to the effect of comedy. The narrative mechanics—the way a story moves, sidesteps, climaxes and concludes—are as important as what the characters do or say. In turning attention to structure, this research contributes to humour studies, narratology and comparative literature alike, offering a new lens to understand how laughter is built, not just triggered.

7. Findings

The comparative study of Mark Twain, Stephen Leacock, and R.K. Narayan reveals not only the diversity of their comic strategies but also key structural insights into how narrative pacing, form, and cultural norms intersect to produce distinct types of humor. Drawing upon narratology, genre analysis, and structuralist theory, this section integrates analytical insights derived from the three authorial styles and underscores how comic payoff emerges not from overt jokes alone, but from subtle manipulations of structure and storytelling expectations.

7.1 Twain: Cumulative Absurdity and Moral Satire

Mark Twain's humor thrives on the tall-tale tradition, characterized by episodic progression, excessive embellishment, and deliberately prolonged narrative suspense. In "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County," for instance, the entire story hinges on a long-winded, digressive structure where the expected climax is continually deferred. The humor does not arise from a single comic line, but from the sheer absurdity that

accumulates over time as the narrator is pulled deeper into an endless anecdote.

The findings show that Twain's method emphasizes:

- **Cumulative absurdity**: The longer the story meanders, the more outrageous the details become, creating a heightened sense of disbelief. The frog that can jump on command, the dog trained to win fights by biting behind—each detail adds to the comic tension.

- **Structural delay**: The narrative deliberately delays the punchline, a method of generating suspense through deferral.

- **Moral comedy**: Twain's humor carries implicit moral commentary. The comic twist in his stories often exposes human gullibility, hypocrisy, or the vanity of self-proclaimed experts.

- **Narrative layering**: His frequent use of framed narratives (story-within-a-story) and unreliable narrators blurs truth and exaggeration.

    Thus, the narrative structure itself is inseparable from the comic effect: without the slow pacing, episodic journeying, and constant digressions, the humor would not function.

7.2 Leacock: Brevity, Linguistic Irony, and Tonal Humor

Stephen Leacock's sketch-based comedies offer a marked contrast to Twain's expansive storytelling. In *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town*, humor is produced not through long build-ups, but through tonal manipulation, linguistic incongruity, and exaggerated mimicry of formal prose styles. His sketches function like satirical snapshots—brief, punchy, and stylistically playful.

Key findings regarding Leacock's structure include:

- **Sketch format as comedic container**: Each story functions as a self-contained vignette, with minimal plot development but maximum attention to tone and phrasing.

- **Linguistic incongruity**: Leacock's use of inflated diction to describe trivial events creates irony. For example, he might refer to a town picnic as a "grand civic convocation," only to collapse the description into absurdity.

- **Economy of structure**: Climax and payoff often occur within a single paragraph or sentence. This brevity is crucial to his humor—it resists elaboration and thrives on sudden collapse.

- **Static characters**: Unlike Twain or Narayan, Leacock's characters often remain unchanged across sketches. They are comic types—bankers, professors, reverends—used to lampoon institutional absurdities.

    Leacock's narrative technique reveals that comic payoff can be rapid, even instantaneous, if built on tonal irony and reader familiarity with genre conventions. His humor is more linguistic and stylistic than event-driven.

7.3 Narayan: Understated Climax and Cultural Irony

R.K. Narayan's stories in *Malgudi Days* and other collections introduce a different tempo and comic philosophy altogether. His narrative structures are tight, linear, and rooted in the cultural rhythms of small-town India. Unlike the expansive or sketchy forms used by Twain and Leacock, Narayan's storytelling is cohesive and purposefully restrained.

The following findings emerge from Narayan's narrative style:

- **Linear structure**: His stories follow conventional arcs with clear beginnings, middles, and ends. However, he avoids dramatic twists or climaxes.

- **Cultural context as narrative texture**: Much of the humor arises from situations specific to Indian middle-class life—superstitions, bureaucracy, familial tensions, spiritual contradictions.

- **Subtle irony**: The payoff is rarely a laugh-out-loud moment. Instead, readers are led to quiet realizations about human nature.

- **Transformation as climax**: Characters often experience small but significant revelations, and the humor lies in their flawed reasoning or failed attempts at self-improvement.

In Narayan's case, comic narrative does not disrupt reader expectations as much as it gently redirects them. The humor is embedded in the cultural familiarity of the setting and the soft irony of the human condition.

7.4 Commonalities: Narrative Subversion Over Explicit Jokes

While the three writers operate in distinct literary traditions and cultural contexts, a central finding is their shared reliance on **narrative subversion** as a tool of comic delivery. Rather than depending solely on punchlines or jokes, they manipulate narrative form to surprise or realign reader expectation:

- **Twain** subverts the reader's desire for plot closure through rambling delay and unexpected reversals.

- **Leacock** subverts linguistic and genre expectations by using elevated tone to describe the trivial.

- **Narayan** subverts moral resolution by offering understated endings where transformation is minimal or ironic.

This indicates that comic effect is often a structural feature, not merely a textual one. It is what the narrative *withholds*, *defers*, or *quietly reveals* that provokes the humor.

7.5 Structural Distinctiveness as Cultural Signature

Another key finding is that each author's narrative structure reflects broader cultural storytelling norms:

- **Twain's tall tales** emerge from oral traditions of frontier America—freeform, improvisational, layered with hyperbole.

- **Leacock's sketches** mirror British-Canadian middle-class satire, where parody of decorum and social structure is a central comic device.

- **Narayan's short stories** resonate with Indian epical and didactic traditions, emphasizing life's ordinariness and moral ambiguity.

    Thus, structure is not just a technical feature but a **cultural index**—shaped by audience expectations, historical genre models, and prevailing modes of humor in the author's social context.

7.6 The Role of the Narrator in Comic Framing

One important cross-authorial observation is the **narrator's function** in modulating the comic tone:

- Twain's narrators are often *outsiders* or *dupes*, reinforcing the tall tale's playful uncertainty between fiction and fact.

- Leacock's narrator is often *pompous*, an unreliable figure whose over-seriousness makes the comedy sharper.

- Narayan's narrator is typically *gentle*, compassionate, and slightly amused—inviting the reader to observe, not ridicule.

    This comparative insight shows how **narrative voice**—tone, distance, and authority—plays a decisive role in shaping reader response. The comic effect is never only in the event or line; it is *how* the narrator filters it.

7.7 Rhythm, Delay, and Reader Payoff

The rhythm of storytelling—its tempo, detours, and delays—is also central to the comic impact:

- Twain delays climax for narrative effect.

- Leacock offers rapid rhythm with quick payoffs.

- Narayan sustains moderate pace with reflective resolution.

    Each variation recalibrates how and when the reader experiences humor. In this sense, **rhythm is narrative logic**: it teaches the reader what kind of comic universe they have entered.

7.8 Summary of Findings

Aspect	Twain	Leacock	Narayan
Narrative Form	Episodic tall tale	Sketch-based vignette	Linear short story

Aspect	Twain	Leacock	Narayan
Comic Mechanism	Absurd buildup, delayed climax	Tonal irony, abrupt reversal	Understated irony, realism
Cultural Norm	Oral tradition, satire	Formal parody, Canadian humor	Indian everyday ethos
Narrator Role	Naïve or vernacular outsider	Over-serious satirist	Gentle omniscient observer
Reader Payoff	Surprise & reflection	Sudden recognition	Quiet realization

7.9 Final Insight

The overarching finding is that comic structure is neither universal nor accidental—it is *formally engineered* to meet narrative, cultural, and genre-based expectations. By comparing three globally significant humorists through the lens of narratology and genre, this study reveals that:

Comic storytelling is as much about architecture as it is about content.

CONCLUSION

This research has explored how narrative structure—particularly in terms of form, rhythm, climax, and genre conventions—shapes comic effect in the works of three culturally and temporally distinct humorists: Mark Twain, Stephen Leacock, and R.K. Narayan. By focusing on structural elements rather than purely thematic or linguistic ones, this study has aimed to bring attention to the deep interplay between how a story is told and why it becomes humorous to its audience. Each of the three authors demonstrates that humor, while often analyzed through the lens of character, situation, or cultural commentary, is just as much a product of storytelling mechanics—specifically, the arrangement and orchestration of narrative events.

Twain's use of the tall-tale tradition is marked by digression, episodic sequencing, and delayed gratification. His comic universe thrives on subverting reader expectations through prolonged anecdotal build-up and absurd exaggeration. The punchline in Twain is not just a final joke but an outcome of the reader's endurance of detours, false leads, and meandering episodes. It is the structure itself—the detour and delay—that cultivates a space for comic release. This method, deeply rooted in American frontier storytelling and oral traditions, underscores how humor may arise from cumulative absurdity and the unpredictability of narrative direction.

Leacock, on the other hand, capitalizes on the brevity and stylized nature of the sketch. His humor is immediate, reliant on tone, sudden turns, and exaggerated prose. The structure of his pieces often resembles journalistic columns or light essays, but with a twist that amplifies their comic potential. These sketches are not driven by plot development but by linguistic and tonal incongruity. Leacock's comic strategy, therefore, is embedded in how he abruptly undercuts his own elevated style or abruptly collapses the narrative into absurdity. In his case, the form is minimal but pointed, relying heavily on reader familiarity with social conventions and literary parody. His sketches, although less architecturally complex than Twain's tales, still exhibit a clear structural logic designed to generate humor through rhythm and surprise.

Narayan's short stories offer a subtler, culturally resonant narrative structure. Unlike the episodic style of Twain or the loosely organized sketches of Leacock, Narayan's stories follow a more traditional, linear path. His narratives are cohesive and tightly woven, but his humor is no less effective. It arises from quiet irony, cultural specificity, and a gentle unveiling of human folly. Often, the climax in Narayan's stories is understated, hinging not on overt punchlines but on ironic realization or moral contradiction. His characters are ordinary people, and their dilemmas—although trivial on the surface—reveal deeper truths about society and individual behavior. The humor emerges not from overt exaggeration or narrative spectacle but from the natural unfolding of events in a familiar setting. Narayan's narrative structure thus reflects the Indian storytelling ethos—where circularity, moral contemplation, and understated wit are valued more than spectacle or surprise.

Despite their differences, all three authors share a commitment to subverting narrative expectations to produce comic effect. The commonality lies not in their thematic preoccupations or even cultural concerns, but in their manipulation of the reader's assumptions. Whether through delayed punchlines, stylistic incongruity, or ironic turns, each author destabilizes the expected rhythm of storytelling. In doing so, they create a space where humor is not merely a by-product of the story, but the result of the structure itself. This subversion is key: it is the moment when the reader realizes that the narrative has misled them, or taken them somewhere unexpected, that laughter is evoked.

An important finding of this study is that narrative structure is not a neutral container but an active agent in humor production. The decisions about how to order events, how to frame the narrator's voice, when to reveal key information, and how to resolve (or not resolve) plotlines—these are not merely technicalities; they are the mechanisms through which humor is delivered and experienced. This observation places narrative architecture at the center of comic analysis and invites a shift away from the often over-emphasized focus on punchlines, character quirks, or cultural satire alone.

Furthermore, the study illustrates how humor travels through structure across geographical and cultural boundaries. Twain's use of oral, improvisational tall tales reflects the American fascination with individualism and exaggeration. Leacock's formal satire resonates with British-Canadian traditions of social parody. Narayan's linear, introspective tales align with Indian modes of storytelling that blend realism with spiritual reflection. Yet, despite these differences, all three employ narrative rhythm—detour, delay, build-up, and reversal—as central to their comic strategies. This suggests that narrative structures, while culturally shaped, possess translatable mechanisms of humor that resonate across traditions.

In the context of cross-cultural humor studies, this insight is particularly valuable. It invites scholars to consider not just what stories mean, but how they are built—how their internal mechanics interact with cultural expectations to produce laughter. It also opens up possibilities for rethinking genre theory. Comic literature, often divided into thematic or historical categories, might be better understood by examining the structural elements that define how humor functions in a given text. The structural distinctiveness of the sketch, the tall tale, and the realist short story each offer different models for humor generation, yet they all share a core principle: narrative rhythm as a vehicle for surprise and subversion.

This study also raises questions about the role of translation and adaptation in the preservation or transformation of narrative humor. How does the pacing of a Leacock sketch or the irony of a Narayan story survive in another language or medium? Does the humor travel intact when structural rhythms are altered by translation, editing, or digital presentation? These questions are especially relevant in the age of globalized media and algorithmically curated reading platforms, where narrative structures are increasingly shaped by market-driven constraints such as length, speed, and visual engagement.

Future research might therefore explore the impact of translations on the comic structure of short stories—particularly how translators preserve, shift, or even recreate pacing, tone, and rhythm. Similarly, digital-era adaptations of these classic comic forms—in the form of podcasts, video essays, or graphic literature—offer fertile ground for investigating how traditional comic structures evolve when migrated into new formats. Does the episodic ramble of a Twain story become tighter in podcast form? Does Narayan's ironic turn lose its subtlety when adapted for visual storytelling? Does Leacock's abrupt stylistic collapse gain new resonance in digital memes?

In conclusion, this study reaffirms that narrative structure is not merely the skeleton of storytelling—it is a living, active force that shapes how humor is conceived, delivered, and experienced. Whether through episodic unfolding, stylistic compression, or linear subtlety, Twain, Leacock, and Narayan show that structure is inseparable from comic intent. By comparing their works, this

paper underscores how comic traditions are both universally relatable and deeply rooted in cultural-linguistic norms. Ultimately, the humor that endures across time and space is that which finds fresh, structurally inventive ways to surprise, to subvert, and to reveal—in laughter—the enduring contradictions of the human experience.

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