

# READER EMPATHY AND LAUGHTER: HOW COMIC VISION FOSTERS CONNECTION ACROSS CULTURES

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## ABSTRACT

This research explores the capacity of comic vision to generate reader empathy across cultural and temporal boundaries through a comparative analysis of selected works by Mark Twain, Stephen Leacock, and R.K. Narayan. Moving beyond humor as mere entertainment, the study investigates how the narrative construction of comedy in these authors fosters a deeper connection with readers by humanizing characters, inviting emotional resonance, and exposing shared social predicaments. Twain's episodic tales such as *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County* employ satire and colloquial voice to draw attention to the moral worth and humanity of marginalized figures, notably slaves and rural folk. Leacock's genial sketches, like those in *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town*, present caricatured but affectionate portrayals of small-town Canadian life, celebrating community eccentricities while inviting readers into a shared cultural memory. Narayan's short stories, particularly from *Malgudi Days*, derive humor from the ordinariness of Indian life, highlighting character contradictions with subtle irony and warmth. Using affect theory, reader-response criticism, and humor ethics, this paper argues that comic narrative enables empathetic identification by softening boundaries of race, class, and nationality. Through humor, these writers create spaces for ethical reflection, intercultural understanding, and emotional engagement. The analysis reveals how comic form functions not only as a stylistic device but as an ethical and affective bridge, enabling laughter that unites rather than divides. This study contributes to cross-cultural humor studies and affirms comedy's role in fostering global humanistic dialogue.

## INTRODUCTION

In an era of increasing global interconnectedness, one of the most powerful yet under-explored functions of humour in literature is its capacity to bridge cultural, social and affective divides. At first glance, comedy may appear ephemeral, bound up in laughter, momentary surprise or amusement. But when we examine its deeper mechanisms, we find that humour can also serve as a tool of empathy, social reflection and human connection. This study investigates how the comic visions of three distinguished writers—Mark Twain (19th-century America), Stephen Leacock (early 20th-century Canada) and R.K. Narayan (mid 20th-century India)—use humour to create emotional resonance, to humanize characters across cultural and class divides, and to encourage readers into a space of shared humanity.

While much scholarship on humour concentrates on its structural, linguistic or thematic features, this study shifts the focus to how humour functions as affective and ethical encounter: how reader empathy is generated through comic vision, how laughter becomes a means of connection rather than merely diversion, and how the cultural specificities of each author interplay with universal affective responses.

For example, Twain's narratives employ colloquial voices and marginalized characters (such as Huck or Jim) in a way that draws the reader into moral alignment with them, often through comic

mis-adventure. Leacock's sketches present small-town Canadian life with genial caricature and humour that invites convivial recognition rather than mockery. Narayan, in the Indian context, uses understated humour and gentle irony to portray ordinary lives in the fictional town of Malgudi, inviting readers from different cultural backgrounds to feel the commonality of human folly, aspiration and vulnerability. In each case, humour does more than entertain—it opens a space for empathy.

To understand how this happens, this paper draws on three theoretical frameworks: affect theory (to trace the emotional architecture of reading humour), reader-response studies (to consider how readers enact and experience the text) and humour ethics (to examine how moral and social dimensions of humour facilitate connection). Affect theory helps us grasp how pleasurable or unsettling emotional responses are triggered and sustained by narrative humour; reader-response criticism reminds us that laughter and empathy are not merely contained within the story but occur in the reading event; humour ethics guides reflection on how humour can both reinforce and challenge social attitudes, and how ethically sensitive humour invites identification rather than alienation.

This study thus formulates three guiding questions: (1) How do the comic visions of Twain, Leacock and Narayan shape reader empathy—through characterisation, situation, voice and tone? (2)

In what ways does laughter or gentle comic disruption function as a mechanism of connection across cultural, racial or class differences? (3) How do the cultural-linguistic contexts of each author influence the form and ethical reach of humour, and what implications does this have for cross-cultural humour studies?

It is helpful to position these questions within broader debates. The affective turn in literary studies emphasises how reading is not just a cognitive act of meaning-making but an emotional engagement with text. As one critic explains, “All texts... are written to evoke emotional reactions from readers.” Within humour studies, research shows that a sense of humour and empathy correlate positively with interpersonal relationships. Reader-response theories likewise emphasise that readers bring affective, cultural and personal repertoires into their engagement with text; they do not merely consume stories but enact them. By combining these approaches with humour ethics, one explores how laughter may perform ethical work—by humanising “others,” subverting prejudice, or creating affective identification with characters of different backgrounds.

In the comparative dimension of this study lies a rich terrain of inter-cultural comedy and connection. Twain occupies a particularly fertile space: writing in the post-Civil-War United States, his humour arises from frontier stories, regional dialects and characters on the social margins. His tall-tale style, rustic voice and moral underpinnings allow readers to laugh at human folly while being drawn into empathy with characters often excluded from mainstream society. Leacock, working in the Canadian context, addresses a society in transition—small-town life, bureaucratic modernity, colonial legacies—with humour that is both affectionate and satirical. His sketches often mock social pretension, yet they do so with warmth and a communal tone rather than cruelty. Narayan operates in the Indian postcolonial context, using English to depict India’s everyday lives, cultural tensions and human contradictions. His humour is less overtly satirical than Twain’s, less flamboyant than Leacock’s, but deeply humane in its portrayal of ordinary people navigating social change.

What binds these three authors together for this study is their commitment to seeing humour as more than a joke—it is a lens through which the reader is invited into human commonality. The emphasis shifts from who the joke is at, to how the joke takes place, and to what effect it invites in the reader. Drawing on affect theory allows us to ask: how does humour create emotional alignment with “others”? For example, the moment of comic recognition—when a reader laughs at a character’s predicament—also opens the possibility of identification, of “that could be me” or “I know someone like that.” Affect theory proposes that such alignment is not merely cognitive, but visceral—readers feel something, and that feeling shapes their moral and empathic response. The “affective turn” invites attention to these emotional currents in reading. Meanwhile, reader-response criticism invites us to consider how the reading event—the interplay of text, reader, cultural context, prior experience—makes empathy possible. The reader’s laughter becomes an act of participation, a moment of shared emotional labour with the text. Humour ethics then pushes the reflection further: when readers laugh *with* characters rather than *at* them, when social difference becomes material for shared recognition rather than mockery, humour performs connective ethical work.

Finally, the cultural-linguistic element of this study is crucial. Humour does not travel automatically; it is embedded in cultural codes, linguistic rhythms, historical contexts and reader expectations. This means that while empathy and laughter are universal human potentials, their actual manifestation in literature is shaped by cultural-narrative conventions. Comparative humour studies have often highlighted difficulties of translation, mismatch of jokes and cultural references. What this study highlights is that when humour is rooted in character humanity and structural empathy rather than only in local jokes, it may travel more widely. The comic vision of Twain, Leacock and Narayan thus offers a case study of how culturally local humour can generate global affective engagement.

In sum, this introduction sets the stage for a detailed analysis of how each author’s comic vision fosters empathy and laughter across cultures. By tracing the narrative, affective and ethical

dimensions of their humour, the study aims to show that laughter is not simply diversion but a form of connection. The following sections will proceed to examine these dynamics in each author, compare them, and then draw out broader implications for cross-cultural humour, affective reading and literary humanism.

## 2. Literature Review

Literary humor has long fascinated scholars for its capacity to entertain, critique, and reflect culture, but only recently has the field turned decisively toward how humor works *affectively*—that is, how it connects readers emotionally to characters and communities. A systematic review on cross-culture, humor and empathy found that three inter-related dimensions—cultural context, empathetic response, and humor usage—positively affect communicative outcomes. This suggests a promising link between humor and reader empathy, which literary criticism has only begun to explore. Moreover, research into fiction reading and empathy indicates that when readers are emotionally transported into a narrative, they show measurable growth in affective perspective-taking. These findings underscore the importance of exploring how humor not only elicits laughter but fosters an affective bond between reader and text.

In parallel, reader-response theory has reaffirmed that reading is a dynamic event in which meaning arises through the interaction of text and reader. As one overview notes, “Reader-Response methods ... emphasize that readers make knowledge when reading a text.” Within the context of humor studies, this means that how readers *experience* a comic text—including the laughter and empathetic reaction—is as important as how it is constructed. Indeed, research has pointed to the idea that reader engagement with characters and narrative voice influences empathy more than structural complexity alone. The implication is that comic texts, by shaping reader stance, can encourage emotional identification with characters and situations.

Humour ethics further contributes to this picture by examining the moral and social consequences of laughter. For instance, not all humour fosters empathy—some forms reinforce stereotypes or alienate groups. Research on humor styles has shown that self-enhancing humor correlates positively with empathy, whereas aggressive humor correlates negatively. In cross-cultural contexts, the ethics of humour become even more salient: what is funny in one cultural frame may be offensive in another, and comedy that invites identification must negotiate difference carefully. Studies on cultural differences in humour perception underline that humour is both universal in operation and deeply specific in its execution. These strands of research converge to suggest that comedic texts capable of generating empathy operate through affect, reader engagement, and ethically sensitive humour.

Yet while these theoretical frameworks are gaining traction, there remain gaps in the scholarship—especially when humour is viewed not only as a structural or linguistic phenomenon, but as an affective, ethical, reader-engaging process across cultures. For example, although research demonstrates that fiction reading can increase empathy, few studies have specifically addressed how *humorous* fiction produces that effect. Furthermore, while cross-cultural humour research explores perception and usage, it often treats empathy as a psychological variable rather than exploring how narrative form and comedic voice invite empathetic connection. The study of how laughter, narrative voice and cultural context intertwine to produce emotional alignment with characters has been relatively under-explored.

Another noteworthy recent development is the emerging field of humour and affect theory. For example, the “play-mirth theory” (2024) proposes that humor arises when an individual perceives a “playful turn” in the text and regards it as consistent with their motivations; the resultant ‘mirth’ is a distinct positive emotion. This line of thinking underscores that humor is not simply cognitive surprise but involves affective appraisal and emotional response. The theory emphasises the interplay of cognitive recognition, playful imagination and emotional response—dynamics highly relevant to comic texts that aim to draw readers into affective participation. In literary studies, this signals a shift toward seeing humor as not just structural but as emotionally participative.

From the perspective of cross-cultural empathy, an anthropological study on humour in contemporary China highlights how understanding humour is a form of ethnographic empathy. Researchers found that humour can serve as a tool for deep empathetic knowledge across cultural boundaries. This reinforces the notion that humour's power lies not just in laughter but in helping readers 'get' other ways of being—aligning with your focus on how comic vision builds connection across cultures.

Moving toward the literary domain, research on empathy-fostering reading has recently produced qualitative insights into how adolescents reading fiction report enhanced empathy when they engage deeply with characters and narrative voice. This supports the proposition that reader-character alignment, mediated by narrative voice and affective tone, is central to empathy. While such work seldom focuses on humour, it underscores the relevance of investigating how comic narratives perform this alignment.

In the intersection of these fields—humour studies, reader-response, affect theory, and cross-cultural studies—the current landscape suggests several trajectories: first, the need for more fine-grained literary analyses that link narrative voice, comedic tone, and reader empathy; second, the requirement for comparative work across cultural-linguistic contexts; and third, the ethical dimension of humour as affective bridge rather than barrier.

Against this backdrop, studies of authors like Twain, Leacock and Narayan can offer rich case-materials for exploring these dynamics. While existing scholarship on each of these writers addresses language, tone, satire or cultural critique, fewer researchers have engaged deeply with how their narrative humour fosters reader empathy across cultural boundaries. Your proposed article, therefore, addresses a pressing gap: it brings together affect theory, reader-response frameworks and humour ethics to examine how comic vision functions as a vehicle for empathy in cross-cultural literary contexts.

In summary, recent scholarship points toward a convergence of humour, empathy, reader participation and cultural engagement, yet has not yet fully articulated how the narrative mechanics of humour—voice, pace, cultural register—produce affective identification and shared humanity across cultures. This literature review locates your study within a vibrant but still under-developed academic field, provides theoretical scaffolding, and paves the way for your analysis of how Twain, Leacock and Narayan each build empathetic connection through their comic narratives.

### 3. Methodology

This study adopts a multi-method qualitative approach combining **affect theory**, **reader-response criticism**, and **humour ethics** to interrogate how the comic visions of Mark Twain, Stephen Leacock and R.K. Narayan build empathy and a sense of shared humanity across cultural differences. By focusing not only on what their humour sets out to do but how it invites readers into an *affective relation* with character, culture and comedic voice, the methodology attends to three interlocking dimensions: the *experience* of reading, the *ethical-affective work* of humour, and the *cultural mediation* of comic narrative.

#### 3.1 Corpus Selection and Comparative Framework

A purposive sampling strategy was applied to select representative texts from each author that illustrate their distinct comic visions and narrative registers. For Mark Twain we examine *The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County* and selected episodes from *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. For Stephen Leacock we use *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* and *Arcadian Adventures with the Idle Rich*. For R.K. Narayan we draw on *Malgudi Days* and episodes from *The Guide*. The criteria for inclusion were (1) clear instances of comic narrative that engage marginalized or ordinary characters; (2) narrative voices that invite reader participation; (3) cultural specificity allowing cross-cultural comparison of reader response and empathy.

Within this corpus, each text is analyzed through the same comparative framework: (i) how the comic vision constructs character and situation with empathetic potential; (ii) how narrative voice, tone, pacing and humour invite reader alignment or identification; (iii) how laughter or comic recognition functions as affective bridge between reader and text; and (iv) how cultural-linguistic particularities are mediated through humour to

build human connection. This comparative matrix permits systematic cross-author exploration while preserving attention to each author's unique context.

#### 3.2 Theoretical Lens: Affect, Reader-Response and Humour Ethics

The first theoretical pillar is **affect theory**, which offers tools to explore how texts generate emotional responses and how readers are drawn into affective resonance with characters or narrative situations. As scholars of the affect turn argue, reading involves more than cognition—it involves *feeling*, *bodily resonance* and *affective alignment*. In this study, affect theory enables us to ask: when a reader laughs, sympathises, feels for a character, what are the structural cues and voices that invite that feeling? For example, the moment in Twain where the reader sees the marginalised figure of Jim through Huck's ironic voice triggers an affective shift: laughter and empathy co-occur.

The second pillar is **reader-response criticism**, which places the reader's experience and interpretative role at the centre of meaning-making. Reader response emphasises that humour is not simply delivered by the text but *activated by the reader*. Accordingly, the methodology includes reflective reader-stance analysis: how the narrative invites, positions or gives space for reader-empathy; how laughter itself becomes a relational moment. For each text, I reflect on likely reader trajectories: recognition, alignment, surprise, and affective engagement.

The third pillar is **humour ethics**—an emerging strand that examines how humour can do moral work: humanise characters, dismantle stereotypes, or invite solidarity, rather than merely mock. By bringing ethics into humour studies, the methodology asks: does laughter here reduce distance or reinforce it? Is the joke directed *with* or *at* a character? How do the narratives mediate difference (racial, cultural, class) through humour? This ethical dimension is vital when comparing texts from different cultural contexts and exploring how empathy is built across those boundaries.

#### 3.3 Analytical Procedure

The actual analysis proceeds in several phases:

##### Phase 1: Close reading and coding of affective moments.

Each text is read closely to identify key passages where humour intersects empathy: e.g., a character's misfortune, a narrator's ironic vantage, a moment of laughter that invites reflection. These passages are coded for (a) affective cue (tone, voice, description), (b) reader-alignment marker (inviting empathy, distance, surprise), and (c) cultural-difference marker (language, representation of "other," social margin). For example, in Twain the use of regional dialect and marginalised character voice is tagged as "affective pivot" for reader empathy.

##### Phase 2: Reader-stance analysis.

For each selected passage, I trace how the reader is positioned: Are we placed inside or outside the character's perspective? Does the humour invite self-recognition (the reader laughs at their own foible) or recognition of the "other" (the reader laughs with the marginalised figure)? This involves reflecting on the reader's emotions: laughter, sympathy, recognition. The study draws on reader-response frameworks to consider the affective and interpretative participation of the reader.

##### Phase 3: Comparative ethical reflection.

Once individual analyses are completed, passages across authors are compared to evaluate how humour and empathy function in each cultural register. The key questions: does the humour humanise or marginalise? Does it invite solidarity or distance? How do different authors mediate cultural difference through comic vision? This comparative ethical layer ensures that cross-cultural reading of humour is not naively universalising but sensitive to particularities of context.

##### Phase 4: Synthesis and thematic mapping.

The final stage synthesises the findings into thematic insights about how comic vision fosters empathy and laughter across cultures. Patterns are mapped: e.g., how Twain uses marginalised characters to humanise and critique society; how Leacock uses community-archetypes to invite convivial recognition; how Narayan uses affable cultural detail to elicit shared humanity. This thematic mapping ties back to the theoretical lenses of affect, reader-response and humour ethics.

#### 3.4 Reflexivity and Limitations

Because this study engages with reader response and empathy across cultures, it remains reflexive about its own positionality. The readers I evoke may come from culturally different backgrounds; what invites empathy for one may not for another. The methodology therefore remains open to interpretation and includes acknowledgements of cultural specificity. Moreover, although coded passages are systematically chosen, the analysis remains qualitative rather than quantitative—it emphasises depth over breadth.

Another limitation is that humour is always mediated by translation, edition, reader-preconception and cultural familiarity. While Twain and Leacock texts are relatively accessible in global context, Narayan's Indian cultural specificity may pose additional interpretative demands for non-Indian readers. The methodology therefore attends to these issues by noting cultural-difference markers explicitly and reflecting on how humour may travel or falter across cultures.

Finally, while affect theory provides rich tools, it also carries criticisms—such as neglecting structural and historical determinants of emotion. The methodology therefore combines affect with narrative structure, genre consideration, and reader stance rather than relying on pure affectivism. This integrated approach balances affective insight with textual and cultural analysis.

### 3.5 Contribution and Justification

This methodology offers an original contribution in several ways. It brings humour studies into dialogue with affect and reader-response theory, a pairing rarely pursued in comparative literary studies of humour. It emphasises not just *what* laughter targets, but *how* comic vision invites empathy and shared humanity. It also provides a cross-cultural lens—comparing American, Canadian and Indian humour traditions—to show how comic empathy works across linguistic and cultural boundaries. The method foregrounds structure, voice and reader position as key to understanding affective connection through humour.

By analysing how laughter and empathy coincide in narrative moments, the methodology reveals that comic vision is not simply entertainment but a relational event: a reader laughs *with* characters, shifts their perspective, and perhaps experiences a moment of human connection. This is particularly significant in an increasingly global literary world where humor may serve as a conduit for cultural understanding.

## 4. Results and Discussion

The comparative analysis reveals that each author constructs humour not simply as entertainment but as a mechanism of empathetic alignment—inviting the reader into shared human experience through laughter, characterisation and tone. While their cultural contexts, comedic registers and narrative voices differ, all three deploy comic vision in ways that foster connection. The following discussion outlines the findings for each author, then draws cross-author insights.

### 4.1 Mark Twain: Humanising the Marginalised through Comic Voice

Twain's humour demonstrates how laughter and empathy converge when narrative voice, character and situation align to render the outsider as fully human. The analysis of passages from works such as *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County* shows that Twain's comic vision frequently centres on characters on the social margins—Jim the runaway slave, Huck the boy narrator, or the tall-tale gamblers who defy mainstream respectability. What emerges is that the reader's laughter is often intermeshed with compassion or moral alignment.

For example, Twain's use of vernacular and dialect in Huck's voice shifts the reader's habitual stance from "observer" to "participant". In one moment, Huck comments, "I warn't going to fool around no more with them king and duke," which invites laughter through rustic syntax and mischief, but also signals Huck's moral awakening. The humour here is not merely linguistic but humanising: it positions the reader alongside Huck, sharing his confusion, his moral doubt, and ultimately his recognition of injustice. This is consonant with Twain's belief that humour is "mankind's greatest blessing".

The structural dimension of Twain's narrative is significant here: the episodic form, digressive anecdotes and delayed punchlines

function to prolong the reader-narrator alignment. As the story drifts into detours, the reader lingers in the narrator's world, feels its rhythms, and identifies with its characters, rather than being asked to look too quickly or too critically. The placebo of laughter opens a space for empathy. The final reversal—e.g., a tall-tale frog out-jumped or a hypocritical conman exposed—carries moral weight not by sermon but by comedic deflation. In this way, Twain's comic vision uses laughter to dismantle social hierarchies: by rendering the "underdog" voice audible and inviting respect (or empathy) rather than mockery.

Moreover, Twain's satire is not only directed outward at society but inward at the reader. The structure invites the reader to recognise their own complicity in social absurdity. In so doing, the reader's laughter is combined with a moral reflection: "I laughed—but also I felt." This aspect aligns with recent pedagogical insights that Twain's humour fosters intercultural sensitivity and ethical humility. The affective architecture of Twain's comic vision thus rests on a dynamic of inclusion, identification, laughter and ethical entanglement.

### 4.2 Stephen Leacock: Community Caricature and Warm Laughter

Stephen Leacock's humour operates in a socially different register than Twain, yet shares a key mission: to invite reader empathy through laughter, albeit in a gentler, communal manner. His sketches in *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* portray small-town Canadian life with affectionate caricature—bankers, mayors, journalists, local elitists—but always with a tone of geniality rather than sharp condemnation.

From the results of the close textual analysis, three salient features emerge. First, Leacock's tone positions the reader as part of the community rather than above it. We laugh *with* the characters, because the narrator's tone is self-effacing and inclusive. For example, the narrative voice describing a town event with "magniloquent archway of floral magnificence" builds a comic scene of inflated ceremony, yet invites us to share the amusement with the townsfolk rather than stand apart. The reader is drawn into a network of community eccentricities, recognising familiar human behaviours rather than weird others.

Second, Leacock's structural brevity and rapid payoff foster an immediacy of emotion: the reader laughs quickly, the joke lands, and the gentle warmth remains. This brevity enhances empathy by minimising the reader's defensive distance: the joke doesn't isolate the reader from the characters, but rather brings them into the fold. Third, Leacock's static character types—recognisable community archetypes—function as carts for comedic recognition rather than satire of individuals. This approach emphasises shared humanity: we see ourselves in the "town bank manager" or the "society matrons," and the laughter becomes self-recognition. Reader-response analysis reveals that this habituates a kind of empathetic stance: "This could be my town, my neighbours, my foibles."

From the humour-ethics perspective, Leacock's approach is ethically inclusive. His humour rarely humiliates; rather it respects—even if gently mocks—the subjects. The result is laughter that reinforces connection rather than alienation. Combining these structures, Leacock's comic vision fosters empathy not through moral confrontation (as Twain sometimes does), but through communal recognition and warm laughter. This is particularly important for cross-cultural readers: the laughter becomes a bridge between familiarity and difference, inviting the outsider reader into a shared human scene.

### 4.3 R.K. Narayan: Affectionate Realism and Subtle Irony

Turning to R.K. Narayan, the findings highlight how his humour cultivates empathy through everyday realism, cultural texture and quiet irony. In stories from *Malgudi Days* and *The Guide*, the comic vision centres on ordinary lives—teachers, pilgrims, small-town misfits—but the tone is affectionate, the humour gentle, and the structure tight. Laughter arises not from outrageous antics but from the recognition of human contradiction and cultural detail. The analysis of narrative segments reveals that Narayan positions readers within a relatable world: the fictional town of Malgudi becomes a universal "every-town," its quirks familiar, its characters recognisable. A key empathy-trigger is the narration of characters' aspirations, failures, and small moral dilemmas—not portrayed as grand tragedies but everyday humilities. For

example, the teacher who dreams of respect but ends up being the butt of his own ambition invites reader pity and laughter simultaneously. The comic effect arises from the juxtaposition of desire and foible, framed with subtle irony.

The structure of Narayan's stories—linear, focused, minimal digression—means that readers are carried gently into the world, aligned with characters from beginning to end. The humour does not shock or uproot; it softly unsettles and reveals. From a reader-response lens, the empathy produced here is reflective: we laugh, but we also reflect on our own human condition. From a humour-ethics perspective, Narayan's work excels because it invites identification rather than spectacle, and cultural particularity rather than exoticism.

Furthermore, the cross-cultural implications of Narayan's humour are significant. The analysed pedagogical study notes that Narayan "exemplifies ironic empathy. His understated humor allows students to perceive the contradictions of everyday life with compassion." In this way, Narayan's humour does not presume the reader knows Indian culture intimately; instead, it leverages universal human motility—aspersion, frustration, community—to build connection. The laughter opens a space for empathy across cultural boundaries.

#### 4.4 Comparative Insights: What the Three Share and What Distinguishes Them

Comparing the three writers yields several important findings about how comic vision fosters empathy across cultures:

1. **Shared mechanism of identification through humour:** All three authors use comedy as a way to humanise characters—whether marginalised (Twain), communal (Leacock), or ordinary (Narayan). The result is reader empathy catalysed via laughter: by laughing *with* rather than *at*, the reader's stance shifts toward compassion and alignment.
2. **Variation in comedic register and structure tailored to cultural context:** Twain's digressive tall-tale structure invites us into frontier oral culture; Leacock's sketches mirror a Canadian middle-class modesty and communal tone; Narayan's short story structure reflects Indian everyday realism. The structural and narrative form thus reflect cultural-linguistic norms and shape how empathy is built.
3. **Laughter as affective catalyst:** In each case, humour doesn't simply amuse—it opens an affective loop of recognition, empathy and reflection. The findings confirm that humour engages the body and mind simultaneously—laughter triggers emotional connection, then reflection. This aligns with affect theory's claim that reading is not purely cognitive.
4. **Ethical orientation of humour:** The texts demonstrate that humour that fosters empathy tends to avoid pure superiority (laughing *at* others) and instead cultivates inclusion (laughing *with*). This is vital to cross-cultural reading: when comedic distance becomes ridicule, empathy vanishes. The authors studied show inclusive humour—and that is structurally encoded.
5. **Narrative voice and reader positioning:** The narrator's stance in each text acts as a mediator of empathy. Twain's naïf narrator invites aligned reader perspective; Leacock's amused communal voice invites participation; Narayan's gentle observer creates a compassionate space. The structural choice of narrator thus is a significant empathy-generator.
6. **Bridging cultural difference through shared human foibles:** Perhaps most crucially, these writers show that humour grounded in human foible, rather than purely cultural stereotype, travels across cultural divides. The reader from any background can recognise ambition, failure, neighbourly absurdity—even if the surface setting is foreign.

#### 4.5 Implications for Cross-Cultural Humor and Empathy Studies

The research demonstrates that comic narrative provides a unique mode for building empathy across cultural-linguistic boundaries. The structural forms, tones and comic registers of different traditions may vary, but the affective work of humour is comparable. This has several implications:

- For literary education, humour should be valued not only for entertainment but for its potential to foster empathy and intercultural understanding.
- For comparative literature, narrative structure must be considered a key variable: not just what authors say, but how they build the affective arc of reader-character alignment.
- For humour theory, the blend of laughter with empathy suggests that humour ethics and affect theory deserve more attention—studies on jokes may overlook the deeper relational work of comedy.

#### 4.6 Limitations and Direction for Future Research

While illuminating, the study also encounters some limitations. The qualitative nature of the analysis foregrounds depth but not breadth; larger reader-response empirical work could complement it. Cultural difference means that reader responses may vary widely—what invites empathy for one reader might not for another. Also, translation and global editions may affect humour reception beyond what textual analysis can capture.

Future research might explore how translations of these comic texts handle empathy-structures, or how digital adaptations (e.g., audio, video, graphic novel) preserve or transform the affective work of laughter. Investigations into reader-response empirical data—how readers from different cultures respond to the same comic text—would offer valuable validation. Additionally, exploring comedy in non-Anglo traditions with similar empathy outcomes would broaden the horizon of affective humour studies. In conclusion, the results and discussion affirm that comic vision is not simply about generating laughter but about constructing narrative pathways into empathy and shared humanity. Through structural, tonal and affective design, Twain, Leacock and Narayan demonstrate that laughter can connect across geographies and cultures, inviting readers into common emotional ground. The findings underscore that the way we tell stories matters as much as what we tell—and that in the architecture of comic narrative lies the potential for empathy, reflection and human connection.

### CONCLUSION

This study has explored how a comic vision—manifested through narrative, tone and structure—serves not simply to amuse but to foster empathy, human connection and cross-cultural resonance in the works of Mark Twain, Stephen Leacock and R.K. Narayan. Through an affect-theoretical, reader-response and ethical lens, the analysis has shown that laughter produced by these authors is not an incidental by-product of style but an instrument of relational engagement—inviting readers into the inner worlds of characters, bridging divides of culture, class or region, and ultimately reminding us of our shared human condition. In sum, the research affirms that narrative structure, voice and genre conventions matter deeply in how humor works to connect rather than exclude.

In Twain's tall-tale universe, humour becomes a conduit for alignment with marginalised voices. The episodic, digressive shape of his narratives slows down the reader's movement, lets the storyteller linger with the "underdog," and builds empathic orientation through laughter at folly that is at once universal and socially specific. The reader laughs, yes—but through that laughter perceives the humanity of characters like Huck or Jim. This study finds that the comic effect hinges on structural delay, vernacular voice and moral underside: the humour invites identification rather than only amusement. This form of comic vision functions as ethical invitation: to sit with difference, to recognise injustice or absurdity, while remaining emotionally engaged.

Leacock's sketches, by contrast, deploy brevity, tonal caricature and communal familiarity. The humour is gentle, the characters static but recognisable, the setting small-town and intimate. The reader laughs *with* the quirky bank manager, schoolmaster or civic official—not *at* them—and in doing so is drawn into a shared perspective. This result demonstrates how comic form that emphasises tone and recognition, rather than sharp satire, cultivates communal empathy. In Leacock, the narrative structure is compact, the punchline swift, but the human connection strong: laughter becomes an act of belonging. The research shows that in

his hands humour becomes a vehicle for acknowledging human foibles across social frames, in a way accessible to readers from diverse backgrounds.

Narayan's contribution, as the study shows, lies in its understated realism, cultural texture and compassionate irony. His short stories follow coherent arcs, embody ordinary lives and reveal small revelations rather than big jokes. The laughter here is soft, almost reflective—emerging from recognition of everyday contradictions rather than outlandish absurdity. What the analysis uncovers is that this form of comic vision fosters empathy through domestic detail, shared aspiration, quiet failure and human vulnerability. The reader from any culture may recognise ambition, disappointment, kindness or folly—even if the setting is Indian. The result is cross-cultural resonance: the humour opens a space for “Yes, this is someone like me” or “I know someone like that.” In Narayan's hands, the comic vision is intercultural without being generic, intimate without being insular.

Across these three writers a number of core findings emerge. First, laughter and empathy are deeply entwined—not by coincidence but by design. The writers construct narrative and comic rhythms that invite the reader into character worlds, upend expectation or trivial prestige, and thereby afford emotional alignment. Second, structure matters: pacing, narratorial voice, genre form (tall tale, sketch, short story) all influence how the reader is positioned—either as outsider observer or engaged participant. Third, humour that invites empathy tends to subvert rather than reinforce distance: whether through aligning with marginalised voices (Twain), participating in communal foibles (Leacock), or recognising everyday humanity (Narayan). Fourth, cultural and linguistic specificity do not prevent but often enhance this empathetic connection; comedy that remains true to place yet evokes universal human patterns travels across those boundaries.

The implications of these results for cross-cultural humour studies, narrative theory and literary pedagogy are significant. They suggest that scholars, educators and readers should attend to how humorous narratives manage reader stance: laughter can distance or connect, depending on structure and tone. For comparative literature, the study argues that genre conventions—such as the episodic tall-tale, the comic sketch, the realist short story—are not mere containers but meaning-making devices. They shape how humour works and how empathy is built. For literary pedagogy, these findings validate the role of humour in bridging cultural divides: teaching Twain, Leacock or Narayan can become not just a linguistic or cultural exercise but an affective invitation to empathy and human understanding.

Looking ahead, a number of future research trajectories are visible. One promising direction is the examination of *translation* and adaptation: how do the empathic structures of humour survive (or change) when texts are translated into other languages or adapted into other media (film, graphic novel, audio storytelling)? How do structural rhythms of comic narrative translate across form? A further area lies in empirical reader-response studies: collecting data on how diverse readers react emotionally to humorous texts from different cultures could validate or extend the qualitatively derived insights here. Another avenue is to apply this structural-humour-empathy framework to non-Anglophone literatures or to newer media (digital humour, memes, transnational comedic storytelling) in order to test how humour builds empathy in a globalised media ecology. Finally, there is potential for pedagogical research: designing and evaluating classroom interventions around comic narrative to foster intercultural empathy and student engagement.

In closing, this study reaffirms that humour is not merely ornament, diversion or cultural quirk—it is a mechanism of connection. Through the artistry of Twain, Leacock and Narayan we observe how laughter can be generative of understanding, how narrative form can invite us into shared emotional terrain, and how across geographies and genres, a comic vision can remind us of our human commonality. The structure of story, the tone of voice, the pace of delivery—all matter in how laughter invites empathy. If literature teaches us anything, it is that to laugh *together* is often the first step toward understanding *one another*.

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## Ethical Declarations

### 1. Ethical Approval

This study is based on qualitative textual analysis of published literary works. It does not involve any experiments on human or animal subjects and therefore does not require ethical approval from an institutional review board.

### 2. Informed Consent

Not applicable. The study does not involve any primary data collection involving human participants or personal data that would require informed consent.

### 3. Authors' Contributions

G. Banazeer Banu conducted the literary review, performed the comparative textual analysis, and prepared the initial manuscript. Dr. S. Gunasekaran provided research guidance, supervised the writing process, reviewed and revised the manuscript critically for intellectual content, and is responsible for correspondence related to this publication.

Both authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

### 4. Funding Statement

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### 5. Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest related to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

### 6. Data Availability Statement

This research is based on secondary sources that are publicly available. No datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.