

RESEARCH ARTICLE

WWW.PEGEGOG.NET

Irony and the Reproduction of Systems: The Short Story Collection *Don't Forget to Tuck Your Pants* by Aziz Nesin

Dr. Ikram MEKHFI

Abdelhamid Ben Badis University, Mostaganem, Algeria . Email: ikrammekhfi44@gmail.com

Received: 13/05/2025 ; Accepted: 17/10/2025 ; Published: 12/12/2025

Abstract:

The Enlightenment was a direct catalyst for the emergence of the short story, integrating it into the fabric of human concerns and daily life. The short story became a medium to express human anxieties and seek solutions. Perhaps its most significant contribution lies in its engagement with the unconscious impulses—what cultural criticism terms "systems"—that are embedded within linguistic signs. This characteristic has enabled the short story to persist and dominate vast areas of human narrative. Among these systems, the system of irony stands out as a comprehensive framework, giving rise to an infinite number of subordinate systems operating within it.

This study aims to uncover the implicit systems within this corpus through two approaches:

1. A theoretical approach that discusses the origins of both irony and the short story, followed by an overview of cultural criticism.
2. An applied approach that seeks to reveal the subordinate systems functioning within the overarching system of irony.

Keywords: Short story, system, societal politics, herd, form.

Introduction:

It is frequently mentioned in many cultural forums that the origin of the short story dates back to the time of the Pharaohs in Egypt, with some attributing its emergence to ancient Greater Syria, while others have adopted a peculiar doctrine by considering the *One Thousand and One Nights* and the Arabic *maqāmāt* as the first narrative model. These are views that lack a genuine artistic justification derived from the history of genres and ideas. Otherwise, what would have been the role of modernity and the Renaissance in Europe if this art form had already reached its level in a country other than the country of modernity? And why does the history of literary genres insist that narration in general began in the Arab world, if not for that process of cultural enlightenment brought about by the missions initiated first by Ibrahim Pasha, the ruler of Egypt?

The short story emerged later than other forms of narrative precisely because it did not gain recognition due to its brevity. It goes without saying that some even claim it is one of the late offshoots of modernity. It could not have matured without its intelligent response to the call for enlightenment and its undertaking of the task of liberating humanity from the confines of the conventional.

The short story will continue to insist on engaging with everyday human life despite its

limited geographical scope—a feature that, after various stages of harassment by many genres, has ultimately become its strength. It has succeeded in amassing a distinctive artistic richness through a discourse open to many directions, the most important of which is the realist orientation. Born out of an enlightenment impulse, the short story has sought to mirror reality and offer the approaches it deems necessary for its transformation. To achieve this, it must adopt successful discursive biases alongside multiple narrative epistemologies. It will benefit from Marxism in all its hues and historical nuances, aligning itself with workers, the common marginal, women, and childhood. Moreover, it will reflect phenomena such as poverty, injustice, and despotism, and draw on various psychological approaches to enrich its pool of characters—subverting the notion of the “lunatic” to render it a positive force. Social phenomena, in turn, will not remain distant from the short story, as they will be reflected in it in an exaggerated manner. The most remarkable aspect of all of this is the short story’s capacity to accommodate latent systems embedded within the human unconscious. It is thus hardly surprising that the short story continues to enjoy such vast popularity and receives both widespread public acclaim and critical praise.

This study attempts to track the phenomenon of irony in this collection as an overarching system within which subordinate systems are in motion—a phenomenon akin to systemic reproduction. To what extent did this collection reflect what is stored within the human interior in terms of systems, and how did the phenomenon of this systemic reproduction manifest within it?

1. Irony as a Civilizational Imperative:

Irony, in its simplest definition, is the contrast between what is said and what is meant,

whereby the creator expresses one thing yet intends another in a mocking context. To put it more clearly, the creative person takes an indirect route to expose reality. “However, this definition remains elementary in light of the definitional controversy it has sparked in many critical essays, to the extent that a critic like Wayne Clayson has feared that this term might lose its meaning.”¹

Perhaps the most reassuring definition is the one provided by Porker Dwight, who asserts that irony can only be defined by its function; it is that theme “which presents itself as a virtual reality in opposition to tangible reality with the aim of changing it, thereby transforming perspectives and creating a divergence between what is said and what is meant, as it always implies contradiction.”²

Using Porker Dwight’s definition, many of the motivations for employing irony in creative work can be observed. Some of these are of a psychological nature—embodied in the creator’s intrinsic tendency toward condescension as part of the ongoing conflict between authority and culture. By ridiculing the behaviors of authority, the creative individual assumes the role of a gentle overseer, in contrast to the coercive power wielded by that authority. Similarly, irony serves as a form of revenge for the creator, as the impulse to rebel drives him to seek retribution against anyone who deliberately marginalizes him, particularly those in power.

From a material standpoint, irony is an effective means of camouflage or evasion from the scrutiny of authority. This is because it is not easy to pinpoint ironic discourse due to its capacity to entertain multiple layers of interpretive ambiguity; thus, the creative individual is safeguarded from the pre-packaged accusations and labels that authorities might impose.

¹ Karima Al-Safadi, *Black Irony*, Africa for Advertising, Rabat, 1st Edition, 2012, p. 155.

² Porker Dwight, *Socratic Irony*, translated by Ibrahim Rashid, Ibn Rashi Publishing, Kairouan, Tunisia, 2000, p. 19.

From a purely philosophical perspective, irony expresses a desire to search for the ideal that has been abandoned through human practices. Consequently, it seeks to construct a counter-system to the system of ruin manufactured by chaos at every turn. Perhaps this is why the intellectual—regardless of his reference point—is inclined toward irony. “Irony, then, is not mere gratuitous mockery and farce; it can be imbued with a solemnity that is absent from tragedy, which may have been Aristotle’s intent when he required that tragedy contain an element of irony.”³

Assuming that narrative texts are subject to a realistic approach to phenomena, that approach often turns out to be tedious—especially when it becomes overwhelmed by the darkness and gloom resulting from the brutality of reality. There is no way—if one assumes so—that the audience can continue engaging with the text without a touch of irony. This touch serves as a combination of art, knowledge, and delight. Otherwise, how can we explain, for example, the audience’s preference for satirical theater over other theatrical forms?

Moreover, can we really alter a reality that has made mockery a unifying tool among community members? It is undeniable that amid the constraints of harsh reality, a person longs to find an outlet that provides some relief through joy and laughter—almost as if in search of his innate nature; or more clearly, in search of his humanity—since man is the only creature capable of a smile.

For Aziz Nesin, the reasons compelling him toward irony are countless—beginning with his constant sorrow for his mother, a victim of a backward society, for whom he relentlessly expiated, having never given her her due. Aziz once stated, “I used to imagine my eighteen-year-old mother embroidering, not with colored threads, but with her tears and the radiant light of her eyes. I wished that for every

single piece she embroidered, I could be granted all of my books and everything I will write.”⁴ This dramatic bond with his mother left scars on the walls of his soul and marked his intellectual trajectory with harsh strokes that invariably manifested as a grim irony. The impulse to rebel was therefore ingrained in Aziz from an early age. Added to this were his experiences of imprisonment and harassment under military rule in Turkey, about which he remarked, “Four years of life as a prisoner; during that time, my limping pen became the target of burning resentment from rulers, dictators, their followers, and sycophants.”⁵ Alongside all these were numerous paradoxes that characterized his life—as he transitioned from being a military officer to working in a grocery, then as a bookseller, a journalist, and other jobs forced upon him by his family’s poverty. Such a life, replete with both rich and bitter experiences, inevitably gave rise to a satirical writer of Aziz Nesin’s stature, who went on to win the Golden Feather Award twice in Italy, followed by the Golden Crocodile, the Golden Hedgehog, and the Lotus awards—achievements that for many years remained unsurpassed.

2. On the Culture of the Text and the Concept of the System:

The roots of the cultural approach go back to the ideas advanced by the German Frankfurt School, which was predominantly Marxist-critical in nature. This approach, however, gained its legitimacy as an independent critical endeavor in conjunction with the Birmingham Centre in England. It was the critique of these two schools of modernity and their rigid final propositions that generated the need for an alternative reading—one that transcended literary criticism and its main subdivision, aesthetics. It became no longer tenable to continue reading the text solely as a linguistic structure inaccessible to nonlinguistic frameworks, for we tend to forget that the text

³ Bakri Abu Al-Anin, *Irony in Umayyad Poetry*, Dar Al-Nahda, Egypt, 2001, p. 258.

⁴ From an interview with Aziz Nesin in *Aragoz* magazine, Issue 8, January 1966, p. 18.

⁵ Aziz Nesin, *Don’t Forget the Trouser Button*, translated by Hashim Hamadi, Dar Al-Hussa for Publishing and Distribution, 1st Edition, 1992, p. 5.

is nothing more than a cultural event; the product of intersections of preexisting texts—viewed, from an intertextual perspective—and secondly, the result of an age-old struggle between ancient systems within the human unconscious, which are inscribed on pages whenever their urgency reaches its zenith.

In the wake of the collapse of grand narratives and the rise of cultural pluralism, clinging to a totalizing reading of the text has become tantamount to placing it on a “Procrustean bed.”⁶ Thus, cultural criticism has adopted its “binary” tint by opening itself to a myriad of knowledge domains such as psychology, sociology, politics, and history. This does not mean that we revert to a contextualism in which “there is nothing outside the text,” as Derrida famously stated—“there is no fixed external reference to which we can appeal for meaning in order to arrive at its true sense.”⁷ Rather, it indicates that there are countless reference points, which leads the pioneers of this criticism to present it as a critical activity rather than a strict methodology.

The concept of the system is the most prominent preoccupation of cultural criticism and its major subdivision. It is the collection of beliefs, visions, and inclinations that the human unconscious harbors involuntarily, and that emerge from the cunning tricks of rhetoric on the pages when the self is exposed. As noted, the text is the product of the urgency of an ancient system. In this sense, the system is somewhat akin to the phenomenon of fate in theological studies. The reader, consequently, faces both an implicit system and an explicit one, as well as an overarching system within which subordinate systems operate—a phenomenon that this approach will attempt to expose by mapping the system of irony as an overarching system within which a number of subordinate systems move, in a short story

⁶ Referring to Procrustes, a Greek bandit and blacksmith who would stretch or amputate his victims to make them fit his bed.

⁷ <https://www.aljazeera.net/> – Walid Zahari, "Jacques Derrida: From Creativity to Sophistry", 24/06/2019.

collection that stands among the most exquisite works penned by Aziz Nesin.

3. The Practical Section:

It is important to note from the outset the nature of the texts chosen as the corpus for this research, which range across the political, social, and cultural spheres. If one believes that this diversity lends richness to the study, it is further evidence of the inherent quality of Aziz Nesin’s storytelling and its preeminent position in the cultural landscape as a luminous landmark in the history of human narrative.

3.1. The Herd System

Credit is due to the philosopher Nietzsche for formulating the concept of the “herd.” Although he did not provide a specific definition for this concept, he conveyed it indirectly through many representations of the phenomenon—most notably in his immortal work *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. In that text, he depicts the masses listening to the wise Zarathustra while they simultaneously gravitate toward a buffoon, applauding and celebrating him as if they were determined to remain in their primitive state. Thus, the basic notion of the herd mentality is defined as “that innate attraction of human groups toward a particular behavior without any serious rational inquiry into its nature, motives, or consequences.”⁸ There is, however, significant variation regarding why individuals adopt herd behavior—some attribute it to a culturally induced humility, while others see it as a fear of reprisal from authority.

In his collection *Don’t Forget to Tuck Your Pants*, Aziz Nesin offers several examples of the herd phenomenon. Two models that pertain specifically to herd behavior are as follows:

⁸ Na’ila Abdul Hussain, *Approaches to the Illusion of the Tribe*, Dar Al-Nahda Publishing, Manama, 1st Edition, 2009, p. 77.

A. The Herd Creation in *Mad by Coercion*

Mad by Coercion tells the story of “Rasem Bey,” who eventually agrees—after much reluctance—to the demand of his community to assume the role of district governor because of his marked prudence, wisdom, and honor, and because he was not “mad” in the same way as the previous governors chosen by them. Initially, the narrator poses a satirical question in the voice of the community: Why does every person who takes on the role of governor become mad? Is it something inherent in the position, or “were they not normal before they became governors—having no occasion to display their madness?”⁹ Through this inquiry, the narrator portrays the state of “Rasem Bey” after his acceptance of the post, through a series of scenes in which the community obligates him to comply with all the requisites for the position—bowing, formal greetings, gifts, compliments, and flattery—causing him to flee down the street “as if escaping a natural disaster.”¹⁰ Eventually, he succumbs and transforms completely into his opposite: “He turned his house into a museum,”¹¹ “he spat in the face of one of our city’s sons,”¹² “he drank until he was intoxicated, then climbed onto the banquet table and performed a belly dance.”¹³ By the very next day, even his own eyes agree that he has become mad, and he ultimately ends up in a mental institution.

This clearly illustrates the narrator’s point that the herd produces the herd in a cyclical manner. The community, represented by the inhabitants of the district, transforms “Rasem Bey”—a man of honor—into an element of the herd. When he succumbs to reckless indulgences such as drunkenness and dancing after assuming the office, it is precisely

because he has himself become a significant part of the herd. In other words, the herd, by its very own will and perception, manufactures itself; meaning that the sufferings of the herd are not confined solely to the authorities, as is commonly presumed.

One of the finest narrative moments in the collection is when the narrator depicts “Rasem Bey” (prior to his transformation) fleeing “as if escaping a natural disaster.”¹⁴ This image perfectly embodies the phenomenon of the overwhelming force of the system—where the system becomes stronger than the individual’s inclinations, compelling him to behave in a certain way. This is the point where the concepts of fate and system converge, as noted earlier.¹⁵

B. The Post-Domestication Herd in *I Will Organize My Life*

It is no secret that there has long existed an unspoken, age-old enmity between authority and the governed—one that appears and disappears in tandem with the evolving nature of their relationship. To maintain their control, those in power resort to an array of coercive measures (as Michel Foucault notes, including prisons and mental institutions):¹⁶ “and at some point, the body gets tamed, becoming receptive to the practices of authority—a mere conduit for its directives without any interference.”¹⁷ Cultural studies interpret this as the domination of authority transforming into a rigid system within the human unconscious—one that is not easily shaken off.

In *I Will Organize My Life*, Aziz Nesin vividly portrays the phenomenon of taming both the body and the mind with dark irony. The

⁹ Aziz Nesin, *Don’t Forget the Trouser Button*, p. 38.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 44.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 48.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.,

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 44.

¹⁵ Sayyida Nazim Al-Basri, *The Theological System in the Yazidi Religion*, Al-Wifaq International Library, Baghdad, 1st Edition, 2020, p. 205.

¹⁶ Through his books *Discipline and Punish* and *The Birth of the Clinic*, Michel Foucault argues that the prison and the clinic are among the most significant instruments of authority's repression.

¹⁷ Toukan Al-Sa’adi, *The Phenomenon of the System in Political Literature*, The German-Lebanese Centre, Beirut, 2004, p. 96.

protagonist decides to eliminate the chaos left behind by his “mischievously light”¹⁸ books by arranging them methodically, making lists with inventory cards similar to those found in forbidden libraries—all in order to ease the burden on the police who come to search his library! He even hopes that the public prosecutor will respect the system, asserting, “They will only summon me for questioning at the designated time; there is no alternative—this is the system,”¹⁹ as the protagonist declares. Then, on Wednesday, he is seen waiting for the police to search his house, pleading, “I only hope that the police will meet me at the appointed time!”²⁰ According to the narrator, it is absolutely unacceptable for “the police... or the judges to be idle.”²¹

At the peak of his dark irony, the narrator credits oppression with having made him a distinguished writer: “Had it not been for all these summons, interrogations, sessions, and searches, I would never have become a writer.”²²

This is domestication in its most complete and practical form. It occurs when authority—especially a totalitarian one—exploits the system of fear in an optimal manner, establishing a framework through which the community lives. There is no room for dissent: initially, there is an enforced silence regarding practices; later, the individual—by his own choice—becomes part of the system, reinforcing its tenets and defending its foundations, whether out of fear or self-interest, regardless of the motive. What matters is attaining that state of herd consciousness.

3.2. The Form System:

The system of form is one of the overarching systems governing humanity. It is presumed to originate from man’s concern to appear acceptable before others. This concept

naturally led to the famous literary debate regarding form and content, and later to classifications proposed by mystics who contended that the common people manifest the religious form, while the elite embody its essence. Soon, this system of form takes over when it permeates everyday life, manifesting in phenomena of split identity and in various representations that have become powerful symbols of individuality—such as dress, food types, architectural style, and more.

Aziz Nesin endeavors to present the system of form on two levels representing the most important manifestations of human existence: politics and society.

A. The State of Form in *Don’t Forget to Tuck Your Pants*

In *Don’t Forget to Tuck Your Pants*, Aziz Nesin tells the story of a simple citizen who struggles under poverty and scarcity, often failing to meet the needs of his household—from the bedroom up to the city street. To justify his inadequacy, he invents the phrase “Oh... I completely forgot!”²³ which no longer convinces his family and has come to resemble a joke.

Amid this distress, the protagonist writes a letter to “the great official” pleading with him to stop the state from selling “...cheese, trouser fasteners, meat, light bulbs, soap, and coffee...”²⁴ The problem here is not the contents of the letter as much as its ascent up the ladder of responsibility without anyone taking note of its absurdity! “How can the head of the office send that to some other department?” “And if the head were distracted, where would the manager be?” asks the manager: “But me—how did you send this mess to the general manager?” “What would happen if the general manager forwarded it to the minister without reading it?” Along with

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 15.

²⁰ Ibid., same page, with modifications, see pp. 15–16.

²¹ Aziz Nesin, *Don’t Forget the Trouser Button*, p. 21.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., p. 22.

²⁴ Ibid.

such questions, the text reveals the absurdity that pervades the administrations of total power, where “degradation” runs deep. In the eyes of governments, a human being is nothing more than a piece of paper—like a birth certificate or a death certificate—meaning that we are not dealing with a state where discipline is meant to serve human interests, but rather with a state of form that only materializes when there is opposition.²⁵ This is akin to a seal with which the narrator concludes his story by summarizing: “In order to reduce wastage, the institution dismissed twenty-two employees and replaced them with three hundred officials.”²⁶

B. The Society of Form in *The Miraculous Mirrors: Two Faces*

The Miraculous Mirrors: Two Faces stands out as one of the most inventive stories in the collection, due largely to the strong connotations imbued by its tone of irony. The story recounts a farcical party organized by the wealthy, where conversations revolve around money and business, and the acquisition of life’s luxuries using public funds—all while some struggle to secure their daily bread. Then, everyone’s attention turns to the radio news announcing a unique invention that will revolutionize human history. This invention involves applying the effects of corn (maize) to mirrors, causing these mirrors to reveal everything that has occurred before them in human history. “This mirror displays everything it has witnessed over the past twenty years... the miraculous invention will help you resurrect... your memories of days filled with love and passion.”²⁷ In other words, these mirrors will transform into an artificial archive that restores to people their history—including that nostalgic childhood to which the rich so tenderly cling.

Amid their jubilation at the possibility of recovering the happy history of their

childhoods, these wealthy individuals suddenly become aware of the danger that those same memories might now undermine their current bliss. They begin to recall unsavory actions they committed while confronting their own mirrors: one mirror, for instance, might reveal an intimate encounter with a wealthy man’s daughter—forcing him to yield to blackmail in order to avert scandal; another reveals a rich man’s wife engaging in extramarital relations with a driver; yet another exposes a sordid past before marriage that a woman desperately concealed from her husband; still another shows a man who had an affair with his maid; and finally, one displays the plight of an individual forced by the police to sign a report confessing that he struck himself... As if the narrative itself requires a confession technique in its telling—a detail added to the man’s record. All these disgraceful actions took place in front of the mirrors, which were barely a hair’s breadth from being exposed. This compels the wealthy to shatter every mirror—a fact that astonished the cleaning crew that morning.

In a masterful twist of reception, the narrator then reveals that the news of the invention was nothing more than an advertising ploy devised by the owner of the “Miraculous Mirrors” factory to sell his merchandise.

What truly matters here is the duality in the way the rich live their lives: a sordid side they are keen to hide, and a public face they meticulously polish. “This could very well extend to the behavior of totalitarian governments and may indicate an overwhelming desire for revenge against the upper classes—of a psychological nature,” as alluded to in the first section of this study. Thus, they do not constitute a true society but rather a society of form—a society characterized by acute fragmentation, which

²⁵ Na’ila Abdul Hussain, *Approaches to the Illusion of the Tribe*, p. 103.

²⁶ Aziz Nesin, *Don’t Forget the Trouser Button*, p. 20.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 30.

manifests in deviant behaviors marked by corruption, extremism, and absurdity.

4. Conclusion

From the foregoing, the following points can be deduced:

- The short story has an Enlightenment origin; from its inception it aimed to celebrate humanity and its inherent dignity, which is why it has survived decay and the undermining efforts of many genres that sought to render it obsolete.
- The short story has drawn on numerous fields of knowledge, including Marxism in all its variations, enabling it to serve as the voice of humanity while steadfastly preserving its brevity and distinct stance. Perhaps its greatest asset has been the adoption of an ironic tone—a tone that is by no means gratuitous but has evolved into a literary doctrine with its own rules and theorists.
- The cultural approach offers an alternative reading in our present era, distinguished by the collapse of grand narratives and the emergence of relativism and pluralism. The text is a cultural event; therefore, it cannot be reduced solely to language in order to be engaged with.
- Aziz Nesin has produced a wealth of stories through which many underlying systems operating within the overarching system of irony can be traced. Among these systems are:
 - The Herd System: Presented on two levels regarding its origin, either as something manufactured by authority or as something generated by the herd itself.
 - The System of Form: One of the most important human systems currently under study due to its perilous nature, as it reflects the acute fragmentation

experienced by humanity—a fragmentation that profoundly affects values.

5. References:

A. The Novel:

- Aziz Nesin, *Don't Forget to Tuck Your Pants* (لا تنس تكّة السروال), translated by Hashim Hamadi, Dar Al-Hussa for Publishing and Distribution, Vol. 1, 1992.

B. References:

- Porker Dwight, *Socratic Irony* (التهكم السقراطي), translated by Ibrahim Rashid, Ibn Rashi Publishing, Kairouan, Tunisia, 2000.
- Bakri Abu Al-Anin, *Irony in Umayyad Poetry* (السخرية في الشعر الأموي), Dar Al-Nahda, Egypt, 2001.
- Na'ilah Abdul Hussain, *Approaches to the Illusion of the Tribe* (مقاربات عن وهم القبيلة), Dar Al-Nahda Publishing, Manama, Vol. 1, 2009.
- Toukan Al-Sa'adi, *The Phenomenon of the System in Political Literature* (ظاهره النسق في الأدب السياسي), The German-Lebanese Centre, Beirut, 2004.
- Sayyida Nazim Al-Basri, *The Theological System in the Yazidi Religion* (النسق اللاهوتي في الديانة الإيزيدية), Al-Wifaq International Library, Baghdad, Vol. 1, 2020.
- Karima Al-Safadi, *Black Irony* (السخرية السوداء), Africa for Advertising, Rabat, Vol. 1, 2012.

C. Website:

- <https://www.aljazeera.net>