

SOCIAL INJUSTICE AND HUMAN DIGNITY IN ERNEST HEMINGWAY'S "THE KILLERS" AND ABDULLA QAHHOR'S "THIEF": A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Mamajonova Zebiniso Baxtiyor qizi

4th-Year Student, English Language Education Major

Kimyo International University of Tashkent, Namangan Branch

Tel: +998 (95) 368-78-71

E-mail: zebinisomamajanova719@gmail.com

Abstract

This article compares two short stories from two very different literary traditions: "The Killers" by the American writer Ernest Hemingway and "Thief" ("O'g'ri") by the Uzbek writer Abdulla Qahhor. Both stories were written within a decade of each other, and both place an ordinary, powerless person in front of a force he cannot control — organized crime in one case, a corrupt local government in the other. The article looks closely at how each writer builds this conflict, what it reveals about the value of human dignity, and how each author's cultural background shapes the way the story is told. It also compares the two writers' craft: Hemingway's short, restrained "iceberg" method, where most of the meaning stays under the surface, against Qahhor's rich, emotional, and detail-driven storytelling. The study argues that although these two stories grew out of completely different histories — one from Prohibition-era America, the other from an Uzbek village under colonial and early Soviet rule — they share the same underlying question: what remains of a person's dignity when the world around him refuses to be fair.

Keywords: Comparative literature, Ernest Hemingway, Abdulla Qahhor, iceberg theory, social injustice, human dignity, passive resistance, realism, narrative style, symbolism.

Introduction

Twentieth-century world literature returned again and again to one simple but painful question: what happens to an ordinary person when a much bigger force — war, government, poverty, or fate itself — stands in his way? This was not just an American question or a Central Asian question. It was a question that writers everywhere were forced to face, because the twentieth century gave almost every country its own version of the same problem: ordinary people caught between their own small lives and enormous historical forces they never chose and could not control.

In literature Ernest Hemingway is one of the clearest voices when it comes to this theme. He lived through the First World War and the disappointment that came after it and his short stories often show a character who has lost all illusions facing danger with few words and no complaints. In Uzbek literature the same theme. The fate of the person under an unjust system. Appears strongly in the work of Abdulla Qahhor, a writer known for his sharp eye for social injustice and his deep sympathy for simple honest people who are taken advantage of by those, in power.

This article compares Hemingways "The Killers" (1927) with Qahhors "Thief" (1936). The two



stories were written than ten years apart in the 1920s and 1930s and both focus on a weak ordinary character who suddenly finds himself face to face with a force he cannot fight. On the surface this looks like a coincidence of theme.. Once we look closer the two writers turn out to come from almost opposite worlds. Different cultures, different political systems, different literary traditions and completely different ways of telling a story. Hemingway writes in sentences and lets silence carry the weight of the story. Qahhor writes with detail and lets the reader feel every step of his characters suffering.

Comparing these two stories side by side is useful for more than one reason. First, it lets us see the idea of realism from two different angles at the same time — the quiet, minimal American style and the detailed, emotionally open Uzbek style. Second, it shows that even though Hemingway and Qahhor never knew of each other's work, they were independently exploring the same human problem, each shaped by his own country's history. This kind of direct comparison between American and Uzbek prose is still uncommon in literary studies, so this article also hopes to open a small new path for future comparative research.

Purpose and objectives of the study

The purpose of this study is to compare, in a systematic way, the themes, characters, and writing styles of Hemingway's "The Killers" and Qahhor's "Thief", using the comparative-typological method of literary analysis.

To reach this goal, the study aims to:

- describe the social and historical background against which each story was written, and explain how that background shapes the conflict in the story;
- compare the main theme and central idea of each work, paying attention to what kind of injustice each writer is really describing;
- analyze the main characters' personalities, inner lives, and reactions to the danger they face;
- compare the two writers' narrative styles, including their use of dialogue, description, and silence;
- examine the symbolism, structure, and endings of both stories, and what each ending suggests about the author's own view of the world.

The object of this study is the text of "The Killers" by Ernest Hemingway and "Thief" by Abdulla Qahhor. The subject of the study is the comparative treatment of theme, character, narrative style, and literary devices — including symbolism and structure — in these two works.

2. Literature Review

Hemingway's work and *The Killers* in particular has been studied widely both in the United States and internationally. Carlos Baker in his book *Hemingway: The Writer as Artist* (1952) was among the first scholars to give a full account of Hemingway's now-famous iceberg theory. The idea that a writer can leave most of a story's meaning unstated and still make the reader feel its full weight. Baker's later book, *Ernest Hemingway: A Life Story* (1969) traces Hemingway's biography alongside the development of Hemingway's voice showing how Hemingway's personal experience of war and loss shaped Hemingway's minimalist style. *The Killers* also holds a lasting place in teaching: it appears in Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren's classic textbook *Understanding Fiction* (1943) where it served for decades as a model text for the New



Criticism method of close reading.

Recent scholarship on *The Killers* has focused on the idea of the code hero. A Hemingway character type who lives by a private unwritten code of courage and dignity even when he has no real hope of winning. These studies also examine *The Killers*' dialogue in detail: its repetitive rhythm, its refusal to explain motive and the way meaning is created through what is left unsaid rather than what is spoken aloud. Scholars have also pointed out how the setting of *The Killers*. A diner. Becomes a kind of miniature stage on which much larger social forces play out.

Qahhor's work has received close attention within Uzbek literary studies. Sobir Mirvaliyev in his book *Uzbek Writers* examines Qahhor's mastery of the short-story form in stories that look back at pre-revolutionary and early Soviet village life, such as *Anor*, *Thief*, *The Patient* and *The Nationalists*. Recent academic articles on *Thief* tend to focus on its social criticism: the honest simple villager Qobil bobo is placed in direct opposition to a chain of corrupt local officials and the growing tension between these two sides drives the entire plot forward. Other researchers have studied how Qahhor builds believable characters out of very few words and how Qahhor's stories consistently return to the relationship between the ordinary individual and an unjust social system.

Despite this body of work on each writer separately a direct structured comparison between Hemingway and Qahhor remains rare. Few studies place *The Killers* and *Thief* side by side even though both stories were written within the same historical decade and explore strikingly similar territory: an innocent man, a silent threat and a world that offers him no real protection. This gap, in the scholarship. The absence of a focused study. Is exactly what gives the present article its purpose and its value

3. Methodology

This study relies on three complementary methods of literary analysis:

- the comparative-typological method, which is used to identify shared and distinct features across two different national literatures, without assuming that either tradition is the "standard" against which the other should be measured;
- close reading, which is used to examine the language, dialogue, and literary detail of both stories carefully, sentence by sentence where necessary;
- comparative stylistics, which is used to compare the two writers' use of language, sentence structure, and narrative voice, and to describe precisely how each writer creates emotional effect through very different technical means.

The study also draws on the theoretical framework found in Dilmurod Quronov's *Introduction to Literary Studies* and Hamidulla Umurov's *Theory of Literature*, both of which provide the conceptual vocabulary used throughout the analysis — terms such as narrative voice, subtext, and typological similarity.

4. Main Discussion: Comparative Analysis

4.1. Social and historical background

Every strong piece of literature grows out of a particular time and place, and both "*The Killers*" and "*Thief*" are deeply rooted in the world their authors actually lived in. "*The Killers*" was written in 1926–1927, during what American writers of the time called the "Lost Generation"



period. This was the decade right after the First World War, when Prohibition had turned much of the American liquor trade into organized crime, and when many young people — including Hemingway himself — felt that the war had destroyed their faith in old values like honor, patriotism, and a fair, orderly society. Hemingway's characters, including Ole Andreson in this story, usually do not fight back against the danger closing in on them. Instead, they accept it quietly, almost without emotion, and this quiet acceptance reflects the exhausted, disillusioned mood of the entire era.

"Thief" was written in 1936, during the early Soviet period in Uzbekistan, though the events of the story reach back to the final years of the Russian colonial administration and the uncertain years right after it. At that time, ordinary villagers were caught between old and new systems of power: local officials, tax collectors, and religious authorities all had ways of taking advantage of people who did not know their rights and had no one to appeal to. Qahhor addresses this problem directly and personally, through the honest, simple character of Qobil bobo, an old farmer who loses his only ox and then loses almost everything else while trying to get it back. So both stories reflect the particular social "sickness" of their time and place — but the sickness takes a different form in each case. In Hemingway, it is existential and philosophical: a crisis of meaning in a world that no longer makes sense. In Qahhor, it is social and political: a very specific, very local form of corruption and abuse of power.

4.2. Theme and central idea

Both stories are built around the same basic structure: a weak, ordinary person against a much stronger force. But the nature of that force, and the way it enters the story, is completely different. In Hemingway's story, the threat is vague and impersonal — two strangers, Al and Max, walk into a small-town diner and calmly announce that they have come to kill a man named Ole Andreson. The story never fully explains why. The killers themselves barely know their target; they are simply doing a job for someone else, as if murder were just another form of paid work. This creates a distinctive feeling of existential fear — a fate that makes no rational sense, and a man who is powerless not because he lacks strength, but because the danger itself has no clear cause he could fight against.

In Qahhor's story, the source of the threat is much clearer and more concrete: dishonest local officials and an unjust legal system. Qobil bobo's ox — his only real possession and his family's only source of income — is stolen. What matters most in the story is not the theft itself, but what happens next: as Qobil bobo tries again and again to get help and find justice, every official he turns to — the local headman, the assistant, even religious figures he visits for a blessing — takes something more from him instead of helping him. By the end, he has lost not only his ox but nearly everything else he owned. Here, the danger is not abstract or philosophical; it comes directly and repeatedly from the greed and corruption of real people who hold small amounts of power over him.

4.3. Main characters: personality and psychology

Ole Andreson, a former professional boxer, is physically large and strong, but emotionally and mentally he is completely broken. When young Nick Adams runs to warn him that two men are waiting to kill him, and urges him to go to the police, Ole Andreson does not move. He simply



lies on his bed, facing the wall, and says there is nothing to be done. He tells Nick that he is tired — tired of running, tired of hiding, tired of the whole situation. Through this character, Hemingway shows how completely powerless a person can feel in front of a force too large and too meaningless to fight. And yet, underneath this passivity, there is a strange kind of quiet dignity: Ole Andreson is not a coward. He has simply reached a point where he refuses to keep running from something he cannot outrun.

Qobil bobo, in "Thief", is a very different kind of character, even though he ends up in a similarly powerless position. He is not passive by nature at all. From the moment his ox disappears, he is constantly active — searching, asking questions, appealing to officials, praying, visiting religious figures for guidance, and offering whatever small possessions he still has in exchange for help. He never stops trying. But every attempt only pulls him deeper into loss, because the very people he turns to for justice are the ones exploiting him. Qahhor never blames Qobil bobo for his trust or his simplicity — instead, the writer presents these qualities as a form of honesty and moral purity, almost childlike in its innocence. The blame falls entirely on the corrupt officials who deceive him at every turn. So while both characters end the story in a state of defeat, the nature of that defeat is different: Ole Andreson is worn down by an existential fate he cannot argue with, while Qobil bobo is worn down, step by step, by real people who choose to cheat him.

4.4. Literary style

Hemingway's style is famous around the world for being short, plain, and restrained. According to his well-known "iceberg theory", a writer only needs to show the reader the small visible tip of a story — the rest of the meaning, the emotion, and the background can stay hidden below the surface, and the reader will still feel its full weight. In "The Killers", this technique shows most clearly in the dialogue: short, flat, almost emotionless lines, repeated back and forth between characters, that somehow build an enormous sense of tension underneath. Hemingway never tells the reader directly what his characters are feeling. There is no line that says "Ole Andreson was afraid" or "Nick was horrified." Instead, the reader has to sense these emotions indirectly, through pauses, through what is not said, and through small physical details — the way a character turns to face the wall, for instance.

Qahhor's style works in almost the opposite direction. It is descriptive, detailed, and openly psychological, giving the reader a full and intimate picture of the character's inner world, the social environment around him, and the texture of everyday village life. Qahhor uses folk expressions, proverbs, and the rhythms of ordinary spoken language, which brings the reader much closer to Qobil bobo and makes his suffering feel immediate and personal rather than distant or abstract. Where Hemingway creates emotional power through silence and omission, Qahhor creates it through accumulation — detail piled on detail, each one a small proof of how completely the system has failed this one honest man. If Hemingway asks the reader to imagine what is left unsaid, Qahhor makes sure the reader sees and feels everything.

4.5. Symbolism and ending

In Hemingway's story, the physical setting becomes deeply symbolic. Henry's lunch-room, with its bright lights and its ordinary customers, represents a small island of light and apparent safety,



set directly against the darker, more dangerous world just outside its windows. When the two killers walk in, that sense of safety is instantly destroyed, showing how thin the line really is between an ordinary evening and sudden violence. True to Hemingway's minimalist approach, the story ends with an open ending: readers never actually learn whether Ole Andreson is killed. The story simply stops, and the reader is left to imagine the outcome, which makes the feeling of dread even stronger than a clear resolution would.

In Qahhor's story, the home and the family carry the heaviest symbolic weight. Qobil bobo's poor but honest household stands in sharp, deliberate contrast to the greed of the officials who exploit him. Unlike Hemingway's open ending, Qahhor's story closes with a very clear and pointed social message. The writer does not hide behind neutrality; he openly criticizes the injustice his character suffers, and this open criticism gives the story a strong, almost journalistic emotional charge. By the final lines, the reader is left not with mystery, but with a very specific kind of anger and sympathy — anger at the system, and sympathy for a man too honest to protect himself from it.

4.6. Summary: similarities and differences

The analysis above can be summarized in the table below, which sets the two stories side by side across the main categories examined in this study.

Criterion	Ernest Hemingway, "The Killers"	Abdulla Qahhor, "Thief"
Year written	1926–1927	1936
Social and historical background	The American "Lost Generation" period, in the shadow of the First World War and Prohibition-era organized crime	Early Soviet period in Uzbekistan, following the final years of colonial administration; widespread official corruption
Main theme	Existential fear and quiet submission to an unexplained fate	Social injustice and the systematic abuse of power by local officials
Main character's behavior	Passive; accepts likely death in silence, without resistance	Active and persistent; searches for justice but is repeatedly deceived, and is never blamed by the author
Narrative style	Concise, built almost entirely on dialogue; follows the "iceberg theory"	Descriptive and psychological; rich in inner detail and social observation
Language	Short sentences, very few adjectives, plain and repetitive vocabulary	Rich in folk expressions and proverbs; lively, natural spoken rhythm
Type of ending	Open ending; the outcome is left entirely to the reader's imagination	Clear, closed social conclusion; strong critical and emotional tone
Author's position	Neutral observer; withholds judgment and explanation	Open social critic; sympathetic and clearly on the side of the victim

5. Conclusion

This comparison shows that although Hemingway's "The Killers" and Qahhor's "Thief" were written in strikingly different cultures, languages, and political systems, the two stories share the same basic human structure: an ordinary, powerless person comes face to face with a force far



bigger than himself, and in that confrontation, his human dignity is put to the test. This shared structure is not a coincidence of theme so much as a shared response to the twentieth century itself — a period that, across the world, kept placing individual people in front of systems that did not care about them.

At the same time, the analysis reveals real and important differences between the two writers, both in what they are criticizing and in how they choose to tell their stories. Hemingway approaches an existential and philosophical problem — the meaninglessness of violence, the impossibility of escaping fate — through a minimal, "iceberg" style built on silence and subtext; his authorial tone stays neutral throughout, and he deliberately leaves the reader to draw his or her own conclusions. Qahhor, by contrast, addresses a very specific and concrete social problem — corruption, official greed, and the powerlessness of the honest poor — through a descriptive, psychological style full of folk language and closely observed detail; his position is open rather than neutral, and he clearly takes the side of social justice and of his suffering character.

These differences reflect the deeper character of two different literary traditions: American minimalist prose, shaped by post-war disillusionment, and Uzbek psychological realism, shaped by a long history of resistance to unjust authority. Yet both stories, in the end, serve the same larger human purpose — defending the dignity of the ordinary person against forces that would otherwise treat him as expendable. It is this shared purpose, more than any surface similarity of plot, that places both "The Killers" and "Thief" among literature's most lasting and universally recognizable achievements.

Future research could extend this comparison in several directions: to other works by the same authors, such as Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* and Qahhor's novella *The Patient*, both of which explore related themes of endurance and injustice; to a wider set of texts from each literary tradition, in order to test whether the patterns identified here hold more generally; and to a closer study of how translation itself shapes the way readers in one culture experience the emotional world of the other.

References

1. Qahhor, A. *Anor: A Collection of Novellas and Stories*. Tashkent: Gafur Gulom Publishing House, 2024.
2. Mirvaliyev, S. *Uzbek Writers*. Tashkent: Fan Publishing House of the Uzbekistan Academy of Sciences.
3. Quronov, D. *Introduction to Literary Studies*. Tashkent.
4. Umurov, H. *Theory of Literature*. Tashkent: Merius, 2004.
5. Hemingway, E. *Men Without Women*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1927.
6. Hemingway, E. *The Snows of Kilimanjaro and Other Stories*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1936.
7. Baker, C. *Hemingway: The Writer as Artist*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952.
8. Baker, C. *Ernest Hemingway: A Life Story*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1969.
9. Brooks, C., and Warren, R. P. *Understanding Fiction*. New York: F. S. Crofts & Co., 1943.

