

Twain's style in the celebrated jumping frog of calavares county

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Introduction

Mark Twain emerged onto the American literary scene in 1865, when he gained “national notice” for his short, dialectic piece, “The Notorious Jumping Frog of Calaveras County”, first published in November 1865’s *The Saturday Press* as, “Jim Smiley and His Jumping Frog” (Cain, McDermott, Newman, Wyss 11). The short story was an instant success, reprinted in newspapers and magazines across the country. After further editing, the tale was used as Twain’s title story in his first collection, “The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras Country, and Other Sketches” published in 1867 (Cain et al. 11). During the mid-to-late 19th century, American authors focused on a distinct type of realism known as regionalism. Twain’s “The Notorious Jumping Frog of Calaveras County” is an excellent and humorous execution of this literary trend, which “worked to express [authors’] specific understanding of reality” (Cain et al. 8). Although Twain’s use of dialect removes the reader from the reality of the story’s events as they occurred, his use of regional realism accounts for “the middle and lower classes, [...] and the ordinary circumstances of such people’s lives” (Cain et al. 3-11). Within Twain’s story, the readers are introduced to an unnamed narrator who transfers the narrative to a second character, Simon Wheeler. By the end of the story told by Wheeler, the narrator feels his time has been cheated by the far less educated man. Within Wheeler’s story, a lucky mountain man named Smiley is cheated out of forty dollars and victory by an uneducated frog. Through Twain’s use of frame narrative and dialectic realism, he instructs his audience to educate themselves unless they are cheated out of their time or money.

Structure

The tall tale of the jumping frog is told through the structure of a traditional Southwestern frame story, where the unnamed, educated narrator recounts a story he has heard from a seemingly uneducated Simon Wheeler, who gives his account of an “uncommon lucky” gambler, Jim Smiley, who gets cheated out of forty dollars by a stranger passing through town (Twain 14). The narrator’s dialect infers his genteel status, while used to explicitly state his irritation with Wheeler: *I have a lurking suspicion Leonidas W. Smiley is a myth; [...] Simon Wheeler backed me into a corner and [...] reeled off the monotonous narrative which follows [...] However, lacking both time and inclination, I did not wait to hear about the afflicted cow, but took my leave.* (Twain 13-18) In the story’s conclusion, the reader is exposed to a situation where the educated are cheated by the uneducated for the second time, or in the meta-frame of the story, the educated narrator is cheated out of his time by the uneducated Simon Wheeler. The narrator expected to hear a story about Leonidas Smiley, but suspects he has been pranked by the friend who recommend he ask for it, and therefore feels cheated.

The narrator instead hears from the ‘good-natured, garrulous’ Simon Wheeler, who although cannot remember a Leonidas Smiley, does remember a Jim Smiley who lived in the camp around 1849 or 1850 (Twain 13). Without encouragement, Wheeler begins his extended narrative about the gambler Smiley and his exploits. He explains Smiley was ‘uncommon lucky,’ and had a reputation for betting on anything whenever he could: *If there was a horse race, you’d find him flush or busted at the end of it; if there was a dog fight, he’d bet on it; if there was a cat-fight, [...]; if there was a chicken-fight, [...];*

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why if there was two birds setting on a fence, he would bet you which one would fly first . (Twain 14)

Whenever Smiley bet on his aged, “ fifteen-minute nag”, she always seemed to win “ and always fetch up at the stand just about a neck ahead” (Twain 14-15). His bullpup, Andrew Jackson, also won all his fights except for his last. It seems when Andrew Jackson felt the fight was too unfair, “ *He give Smiley a look, as much as to say his heart was broke, and it was his fault, for putting up a dog that hadn't no hind legs [...] then he [...] laid down and died* ” (Twain 15). Andrew Jackson had been trained by Smiley to fight, in that way Jackson was educated, and would rather die than win in an unfair fight. Smiley's educated bullpup would rather die than win by cheating.

Local Characterization and Dialect

Smiley, Wheeler goes on, also once caught a frog, which he named Dan'l Webster, and trained him to jump. Twain's use of local characterization and dialect becomes apparent in Wheeler's description of Dan'l Webster, “ *[Smiley] ketched a frog one day, and took him home, and said he cal'lated to educate him; and so he did [...] learn that frog to jump. And you bet you he did learn him, too* ” (15). The frog was a remarkable jumper and could beat any frog brought from all corners of the county to challenge him. Wheeler explains, one day, a stranger passing through town came by the mining camp, and after seeing Smiley's frog, “ *The feller took the box again, and took another long, particular look, and give it back to Smiley and says, very deliberate, “ Well,” he says, “ I don't see no p'int about that frog that's any better'n any other frog “*” (Twain 16). Smiley bet the man \$40 Dan'l Webster

could out-jump any other frog in the County. Without a frog to bet against, Smiley left the bar to find the stranger a frog. While gone, the stranger fed and filled Dan'l Webser with quail-shot. When Smiley returned with the new frog, it jumped forward while Dan'l Webster could not budge. The stranger “*took the money and started away; and when he was going the door,[...] says again, very deliberate, “ Well,” he says, “ I don't see no p'int's about that frog that's any better'n any other frog ”*” (Twain 18). When Smiley examines his frog and realizes what had happened, he takes off after the stranger, but never catches him. Through Twain's stories of the narrator feeling cheated out of his time by Simon Wheeler, and the stranger cheating Smiley out of his rightful \$40, Twain presents a reoccurring moral lesson that the educated can only be outwitted through cheating which is also seen again in his later works.

Conclusion

With its charming characterization, narrative structure, and controlled style, ‘ Jim Smiley and His Jumping Frog’ was the best piece Twain had written to date, and marks a turning point in his development as a writer. While the sketch is located within a Southern frame story, Twain's individual writing style heavily influences its tone and outcome, and is also found in his later writings. Major themes found in the story of the jumping frog resemble those commonly found in Southwestern folktales, including the educated being outwitted (or cheated), as when the career gambler Smiley is cheated by the stranger; the confrontation between the educated and uneducated, as represented by the narrator and Simon Wheeler; and the fantastic, as Wheeler's account of Smiley's tales and his talents becomes more and more

ridiculous. Twain elevates the typical Southwestern frame narrative to new levels of humor and execution with the creation of charming characters and fantastic events, combined with his use of shifting points of view and believable, regional and dialectic narrative voices.