

The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF MARK TWAIN

Mark Twain was born in 1835, two weeks after Hailey's Comet passed Earth in its 75-year-long orbit. He was raised in Missouri as the sixth of seven children. Twain's father died when he was eleven, and he left school to become a printer's apprentice when he was twelve. Slavery was legal in Missouri when Twain was a child, and Twain himself was an ardent supporter of emancipation, a perspective that appears in some of his works. As an adult, he lived next-door to Harriet Beecher Stowe, the famous abolitionist, in Connecticut. He also had many hobbies and passions, such as a fascination with electricity—he was a close personal friend of Nikola Tesla. Throughout his life, Twain worked as a printer, typesetter, riverboat pilot, miner, journalist, writer, and author. It is widely acknowledged that "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County" jumpstarted his career as a humorist author, as it brought him international acclaim. Twain is also famous for penning [The Adventures of Tom Sawyer](#) and [Adventures of Huckleberry Finn](#). He outlived his four children and wife of 34 years and died the day after Hailey's Comet passed in 1910, just as he had predicted.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

When "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County" was first published on November 18, 1865, its readers were still recovering from the American Civil War, which ended on May 9, 1865. Accordingly, the story's theme of regional differences across the country would have struck home with the hundreds of thousands of people who had sacrificed greatly in order to keep the United States united. Indeed, in the story, the protagonist names two of his pet animals after Andrew Jackson and Daniel Webster, diametrically opposed politicians who were at the height of their careers two decades before the story was published. This nod suggests a respect for the differing forces that made up American culture. By employing a light-hearted tone and advocating for the cohesion of the country in spite of regional divides, the story played to its contemporary audience and brought laughter to a dark period of mourning.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Mark Twain published "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County" in 1865 and reprinted it in 1867 as the first story in a collection of twenty-seven stories that had previously been printed in newspapers and magazines. The collection bore the name of this first story, which was widely popular when it

was first published in *The New York Saturday Press* and other subsequent publications. The book of short stories entitled "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County" only ran 1,000 copies in its first print run and is a valuable collector's item today. In 1952, Harriet Beecher Stowe published *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, a book that also addressed regional divides in the country. While Stowe's work served as a powerful and heavy testament against slavery, Twain's short story sought to celebrate and preserve the lighter aspect of cultural differences existing within the country, like Wheeler's distinctively Western dialect and mode of storytelling. Throughout his literary career, Twain was fascinated with regional subcultures found across the United States. His later book, *Life on the Mississippi*, published in 1883, chronicled his travels on the Mississippi River as a young man before and after the American Civil War. Like the unnamed narrator featured in "The Celebrated Jumping Frog," Twain was an outsider who observed the people he came in contact with as he passed through various towns and communities along the river. With this viewpoint, he recorded his experiences and created an anthropological study of people he discovered.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County"
- **When Written:** 1865
- **Where Written:** San Francisco, California
- **When Published:** November 18, 1865
- **Literary Period:** Realism
- **Genre:** Short story
- **Setting:** A tavern in a mining town called Angel's Camp in California
- **Climax:** The stranger cheats in a frog-jumping contest by filling the protagonist's frog full of heavy quail-shot and consequently runs off with Jim Smiley's money.
- **Antagonist:** The Stranger
- **Point of View:** First person and third person

EXTRA CREDIT

Instant Success. "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County" was hailed as Twain's first great literary success and brought him international recognition. He heard the story of the jumping frog while he was in the Angel's Hotel at Angel's Camp, California while he was working as a miner.

What's in a Name? The story was originally published as "Jim Smiley and His Jumping Frog" in *The New York Saturday Press*. It

has also been published under the name, “The Notorious Jumping Frog of Calaveras County.”



PLOT SUMMARY

In “The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County,” an unnamed narrator tracks down a man named Simon Wheeler in a tavern in a small mining town in California called Angel’s Camp. The narrator has been advised by his friend in the East to seek out Wheeler in order to ask him about a man named Leonidas W. Smiley. However, instead of telling him about Leonidas, Wheeler launches into a “monotonous” story about a different but similarly named man called Jim Smiley. The narrator begins to think that his friend tricked him into sitting through a long, rambling story.

Jim Smiley is a prolific gambler who is willing to bet on absolutely anything—including whether or not the Parson’s wife will survive her illness. Smiley owns many feeble-looking animals and trains them to be fierce fighters and racers. For instance, he trains his sickly looking mare to hold back in races and save all her energy for the final stretch so that she can barely win the race as an unexpected champion. This practice, combined with the horse’s dreadful appearance, causes many people to bet against her, consequently winning Smiley more money. Smiley also owns a bulldog puppy named Andrew Jackson, who, like the mare, doesn’t look like he would be able to win a competition. Indeed, he lets other dogs attack him without fighting back while the bets are being raised. When all the money is on the table, Jackson clamps onto the back leg of his opponent and holds on until the fight is over.

One day, a stranger came to town. Smiley had spent the last three months training his frog, Dan’l Webster, how to jump high, and was thus eager to bet on the frog’s jumping abilities. While speaking with the stranger, Smiley bet him 40 dollars that Webster could out-jump any frog in Calaveras County. The stranger replies sadly that he doesn’t have a frog, but if he did, he would accept the bet. Smiley hastily leaves for the swamp to catch another frog for the stranger, leaving Webster with the stranger in the process.

While Smiley is gone, the stranger quickly fills Webster with heavy quail-shot. The shot weighs Webster down so that he can’t jump. When Smiley returns with another frog for the stranger, the two men place their bets and encourage their frogs to jump. Much to Smiley’s dismay, Dan’l Webster won’t jump, and the stranger wins the bet. He promptly flees the town with Smiley’s 40 dollars. Upon discovering that the stranger cheated, Smiley is enraged but fails to catch the stranger or recovery his money.

Back in the present, when someone calls Wheeler’s name and interrupts his story, the narrator takes the opportunity to slip away; just as he reaches the door, Wheeler intercepts him and

launches into another rambling tale about Jim Smiley’s “yaller one-eyed” cow that had a stump for a tail. However, “lacking both time and inclination” for another one of Wheeler’s stories, the narrator leaves.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Jim Smiley – Simon Wheeler tells the unnamed narrator about Jim Smiley, an enthusiastic gambler who once lived in the mining town of Angel’s Camp in California. An honest and hardworking man, Smiley never cheats in his bets and instead spends his efforts training his weak-looking animals—including his mare, his bulldog named Andrew Jackson, and his frog named **Dan’l Webster**—to be unlikely champions. Although he presumably makes his living betting with his neighbors and others who pass through town, Smiley’s integrity allows him to be an accepted member of the community. However, Smiley’s integrity eventually leads to his downfall. When a stranger passes through town, Smiley is eager to challenge the man to a frog-jumping competition. The stranger accepts, but when Smiley isn’t looking, he fills Webster with quail-shot to weigh him down, causing Webster to lose the competition and thereby earning the stranger Smiley’s 40 dollars.

Simon Wheeler – Simon Wheeler is a simple old man who lives in a small mining town in the West called Angel’s Camp. Wheeler tells the bulk of the story, as later transcribed by the unnamed narrator. The narrator, an out-of-towner from the East who has been sent to ask Wheeler about a supposed acquaintance by the name of Leonidas W. Smiley, is instead forced to listen to Wheeler’s rambling story about a different man named Jim Smiley. Wheeler speaks with a heavy Western accent and spins a strange tall tale about Smiley and his pet frog, **Dan’l Webster**. Wheel loves talking, and at the end of the story, he attempts to launch into another tale about Jim Smiley’s one-eyed, stump-tailed, and yellow cow. However, the narrator declines to listen to another story and instead hurries away from the tavern.

Narrator – The unnamed narrator, a man visiting from the East, recounts Simon Wheeler’s tall tale about Jim Smiley. He visits the small mining town called Angel Camp at the request of a friend, who told the narrator to locate a man named Simon Wheeler and ask him about Leonidas W. Smiley. When the narrator does so, Wheeler embarks on an entirely unrelated tale about a similarly named man called Jim Smiley. The narrator finds this tale painfully boring, but his commitment to preserving Wheeler’s story as authentically as possible—he even phonetically spells out Wheeler’s accent—shows his interest in capturing the distinctively Western mode of storytelling. The juxtaposition of the stuffy, highly educated narrator and the coarse, unrefined Wheeler emphasizes the

regional differences between the Eastern and Western United States.

The Stranger – The stranger in Wheeler’s story comes to the mining town of Angel’s Camp and strikes up a conversation with Jim Smiley. When Smiley boasts that his frog, **Dan’l Webster**, can out-jump any frog in Calaveras County, the stranger responds sadly that he would accept the 40-dollar bet, if only he had a frog. Smiley promptly entrusts the stranger with Webster and goes to the swamp to catch another frog for his new acquaintance. While Smiley is gone, the stranger fills Webster with quail-shot so that he can’t jump. This enables the stranger to win the competition and take off with Smiley’s 40 dollars.

The Mare – Like many of Jim Smiley’s animals, his mare looks weak and unhealthy. Its appearance is deceiving, however, because it often wins races. Smiley has trained the horse to hold back in the race until the very end so that it can suddenly pull ahead of the other horses and unexpectedly win. This allows Smiley to up his bets with people who don’t think his mare will win, consequently making Smiley more money.

Leonidas W. Smiley – The unnamed narrator originally sought out Simon Wheeler in order to ask him about a man named Leonidas W. Smiley. A friend of the narrator’s had reportedly been a childhood friend with this “young minister of the Gospel,” who had lived in Angel’s Camp at one point. However, Wheeler instead launches into a wholly unrelated story about a similarly named man called Jim Smiley.

MINOR CHARACTERS

The Parson’s Wife – Jim Smiley is such a prolific gambler that he’s willing to bet on anything—including whether or not the parson’s wife would survive her illness. Even though she was beginning to improve, Smiley tactlessly placed a bet that she wouldn’t survive.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don’t have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



REGIONAL DIFFERENCES

Throughout Mark Twain’s “The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County,” Twain emphasizes regional differences. In the story, an unnamed narrator from the East visits a small mining town in the West, where he gets roped into hearing a long, rambling story from an old man named Simon Wheeler about a gambler

named Jim Smiley and his pet frog, **Dan’l Webster**. Through portrayals of foreign identity and differing communication styles, the story recognizes the cultural differences between the East and West but seeks to preserve and celebrate them both.

By emphasizing the differences between the regions, the story presents the East and West as being culturally distinct and irreconcilable. The very premise of the interaction between the unnamed narrator and the storyteller, Simon Wheeler, is based on an Easterner’s introduction to the West. At the beginning of the story, the reader learns that the narrator has been instructed by his friend “from the East” to visit Simon Wheeler at Angel’s Camp, Calaveras County, in Northern California, to hear a story. One of the characters in Wheeler’s tall tale, the stranger, is a named outsider. This man cheats Smiley by filling Smiley’s frog with gunshot so that it can’t jump, causing Smiley to lose his forty-dollar bet. In doing so, the stranger goes against the grain of the mining community’s small-town values, emphasizing that he doesn’t belong. The man’s dishonesty highlights the validity of retaining skepticism of strangers and underscores the cultural divide that exists between regional areas. Like the man in Wheeler’s story, self-described as “only a stranger here,” who broke the unstated local code of morality by cheating, the narrator is also labeled as a “stranger,” one who is unused to the rules and methods of living in the West and is considered an outsider.

Although the story presents these cultural differences between the East and West as being wholly distinct and irreconcilable, the story asserts that such differences should be celebrated and preserved. Even though the narrator finds Wheeler’s story to be agonizingly off-topic and largely uninteresting, the narrator still takes the time to write down the entire story. In this way, he views the interaction almost as an anthropological endeavor, studying the accent and delivery of the Western storyteller, and consequently implying that these cultural differences are worth recording. The narrator writes his own secondary commentary in grammatically correct, academic English, reflecting his sophisticated Eastern education and scholarly approach to recording stories. In contrast, his depictions of Simon Wheeler include phonetic quotes of Wheeler’s Western dialect. For instance, the narrator records Wheeler as saying, “Well, thish-yer Smiley had a yaller one-eyed cow that didn’t have no tail, only just a short stump like a bannanner, and—.” By clearly illustrating the differences in their respective pronunciations, the narrative further emphasizes their lived cultural divide between the East and West. However, by preserving Wheeler’s thoughts and the style of his delivery, the narrator also seeks to preserve Wheeler’s distinctively Western style of storytelling, deeming it different but inherently valuable. The story ends with the narrator cutting off the storyteller, Simon Wheeler, from launching into another story about Jim Smiley because the narrator lacks the desire to

sit through another long, “monotonous” story. Once again, the regional differences between the East and West are presented as being irreconcilable—there’s no sense that Wheeler will suddenly pepper his stories with lofty and academic words, while the narrator won’t suddenly find himself captivated by jumping frogs and unrefined tall tales. However, although the narrator finds the content of the story lacking, he is interested enough in Wheeler’s delivery to transcribe it for future readers, which is an effort to preserve the purity of the Western storytelling tradition.

The story highlights the sharp cultural contrast between the East and West in the hopes of celebrating, preserving, and advocating for distinct cultural identities in the United States. Even while emphasizing and honoring these differences, the story also gives some sense that such differences shouldn’t keep the country from being united. Readers simply have to look to Jim Smiley’s pet names to see as much. Smiley’s pet frog is named Dan’l Webster, named after the conservative senator from the East, Daniel Webster, who led the opposition to Andrew Jackson’s policies. Meanwhile, Smiley’s bulldog is named Andrew Jackson, after the southern U.S. President. By welcoming his own versions of those powerful politicians into his family, Smiley symbolically unites the regional divides in the country within the confines of his own backyard.



INTEGRITY AND COMMUNITY

In Mark Twain’s “The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County,” an old man named Simon Wheeler tells the unnamed narrator, an out-of-towner, a long and boring story about a man named Jim Smiley and his pet frog, **Dan’l Webster**. Wheeler depicts Smiley as a passionate gambler who is willing to place a bet on anything—once, he even openly bet money that the local parson’s wife would die from her illness. Although Jim Smiley is not particularly well-educated (or, in the case of the parson’s wife, not particularly tactful), he approaches his profession as a gambler with integrity, as seen through the way he trains his animals and conducts his bets. Although Smiley’s strong moral compass makes him easy to take advantage of—as the stranger does at the end of the story—his integrity is ultimately rewarding, as it earns him continued acceptance in the community and, presumably, continued business from his peers. Meanwhile, the stranger’s utter lack of integrity bars him from joining the community, permanently deeming him an outsider.

Smiley’s hard work and integrity allow him to be a successful member of his community, despite his unusual profession as a gambler, earning his money from the losses of those around him. While Smiley’s animals are deceptive in appearance because they don’t look like they could win, Smiley is an honest man and simply trains his animals effectively. For example, his bulldog, Andrew Jackson, looks unassuming and weak, but he’s

incredibly well trained: “to look at him you’d think he wan’s worth a cent [...] But as soon as money was up on him, he was a different dog; his underjaw’d begin to stick out like the fo’castle of a steamboat, and his teeth would uncover, and shine savage like the furnaces.” Likewise, Smiley’s frog, Dan’l Webster, also seems “modest,” but Smiley is dedicated to training it so that it’s truly the best jumper. Wheeler explains, “[Smiley] ketchd a frog one day, and took him home, and said he cal’klated to edercate him; and so he never done nothing for three months but set in his back yard and learn that frog to jump. And you bet he did learn him, too. He’d give him a little punch behind, and the next minute you’d see that frog whirling in the air like a doughnut see him turn one summerset, or may be a couple, if he got a good start.” Even though Smiley is a gambler, he’s not a cheat, and he’s genuinely dedicated to training his animals so that they will win in a competition—and consequently win Smiley money.

Prior to the stranger’s visit, Smiley’s integrity is not a hindrance, because everyone in his town seems to adhere to the same unspoken moral code. It’s only when an outsider comes into town, standing outside of the town’s value system, that Smiley’s integrity makes him vulnerable. When he goes down to the swap to find the stranger a frog of his own (so the two can have a frog-jumping competition), Smiley entrusts his precious frog with the stranger, never dreaming that the other man would harm his pet. A firm believer in a fair competition, Smiley is aghast when the outsider stuffs Smiley’s frog full of “quail-shot” so that it can’t jump—and consequently, so that Smiley loses the bet. Smiley is also appalled with the stranger runs away with Smiley’s losing bet of forty dollars, which the stranger clearly did not win fair and square. While Smiley never assumed that the stranger would break the unspoken code of honorable morality practiced in the area, the other man did not feel himself beholden to honesty in an area in which he would face no consequences. By nature of just passing through, the man stands outside of the moral code. This naivety allows Smiley to be taken advantage of when he fails to predict the stranger’s wrongdoing.

Although Smiley loses the bet with the stranger, he maintains his honesty and membership in his community. In contrast, the stranger earns forty dollars but must flee before the consequences of his actions catch up him, thereby isolating himself from the possibility of belonging to a community. It’s clear that the stranger runs away immediately after collecting the money from Smiley, because as soon as Smiley realizes that the stranger cheated, “he was the maddest man he set the frog down and took out after that feller, but he never ketchd him.” In contrast, by maintaining his honesty, Smiley is able to stay in the town and benefit from a stationary lifestyle. Rather than running from the law like the stranger, Smiley presumably is able to continue placing bet after bet in his town and be “lucky, uncommon lucky; he most always come out winner.” Because he

refuses to cheat in his bets, Smiley leads a popular and prosperous life in his town, even though he continually wins money away from his fellow townspeople. Even though Smiley may not be the quintessential role model, the story sings his praises, illustrating to the reader the value of living honestly no matter what.



APPEARANCES VS. REALITY

When the unnamed narrator visits a small mining town in the West, he meets with an old man named Simon Wheeler to ask after a man named Leonidas W. Smiley. However, Wheeler launches into an unrelated story about a similarly named Jim Smiley, whose pet animals are unlikely heroes. Smiley trains his animals for various competitions, which other people bet upon. Because Smiley's animals appear weak and unable to win, people are willing to bet against them. By investing his time and gambling-money in creatures that look frail but are actually incredibly capable, Smiley proves himself to be a clever businessman and illustrates how appearances can be deceiving.

Other people judge Smiley's animals based on their underwhelming appearances, assuming that the feeble-looking animals will consequently lose their races, fights, and competitions. In fact, Smiley's mare is "so slow and always had the asthma, or the distemper, or the consumption, or something of that kind." Since the horse appears to be sluggish and even sickly, people understandably assume that it doesn't have the adequate strength or energy to win a race. At one point, Smiley also owns a small bulldog puppy named **Andrew Jackson** "that to look at him you'd think he warn't worth a cent." To those placing bets, the dog just looks "ornery" and up to no good, as if it's looking "for a chance to steal something." In addition, at the beginning of each fight, the bulldog even lets its competition "tackle him, and bully-rag him, and bite him, and throw him over his shoulder two or three times." This seems to validate people's judgement that the dog is going to lose.

Smiley understands the human impulse to make judgments based on appearances, and he uses this bias to his advantage. In the case of Smiley's animals, appearances are misleading, as all of the animals have extensive training, which makes them formidable opponents. Smiley trains his sickly horse to hold back in the race until the very end, thereby increasing bets against him throughout the event because people thought that he would lose. When the mare nears the end of a race, she gets "excited and desperate like, and come cavorting and straddling up." The description of her sloppy racing technique makes her seem undignified in comparison to the image of a sleek, galloping racing horse. Only at the finish line does Smiley's horse pick up her pace and thus barely manage to beat the other horses at the last possible second. In this way, Smiley reinforces people's appearance-based judgments until the very last moment, consequently earning himself more money. This

racing technique also signifies a preservation of energy contained until absolutely necessary—the horse doesn't put in her maximum effort to run until the last possible moment. Her training and intelligence help her be a successful, if surprising, racehorse, illustrating that appearances are misleading. Similarly, Smiley trains his small bulldog, Andrew Jackson, to be a victorious fighter. Although he appears unassuming, the dog has a fierce spirit and an unbeatable grip once he bites his opponent's back leg—his surprising and characteristic move. Like the horse, the dog has been trained to allow himself to be beaten throughout his competition, only to emerge as a shocking victor when there's a lot of money on the line. He doesn't fight back as the other dog attacks him in the ring, and instead watches "the bets being doubled and doubled on the other side all the time, till the money was all up." Only then does Smiley's dog bite his opponent's back leg and hold on until the fight is over, again revealing that appearances can't always be trusted.

By training scruffy animals to withhold their strength until the very end of the battle, Smiley plays into people's deep-rooted habit of judging based on appearances. Although this technique speaks to Smiley's business prowess, Smiley himself learns this lesson the hard way at the end of the story. When a stranger comes into town, Smiley assumes the man is harmless and challenges him to a frog-jumping competition. The stranger answers in a "kinder sad" voice, saying, "Well, I'm only a stranger here, and I ain't got no frog; but if I had a frog, I'd bet you." Believing that the stranger is as downtrodden as he seems, Smiley quickly goes to the creek to catch a frog for the man, leaving his own frog unattended in the process. This allows the stranger to stuff the frog with "quail-shot" so that it can't jump, and so Smiley will lose the bet. In this way, Twain encourages his readers to stay on their guard and always remember that appearances can be misleading.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



SMILEY'S PETS' NAMES

The names of Jim Smiley's two prized pets, Dan'l Webster and Andrew Jackson (his frog and bulldog, respectively), symbolize regional differences in the country because the names hearken back to two important politicians hailing from different parts of the country who fought each other's policies. In real life, Daniel Webster and Andrew Jackson were political adversaries. Indeed, Webster was a conservative senator from the East who led the opposition to the policies of Andrew Jackson, the 7th President of the United States, who was born and raised in the South. Unlike Jackson,

Webster lost all three of his presidential elections. During their lifetimes, the politicians Webster and Jackson pursued different ideologies and career paths for enacting those beliefs, but they were both working toward the common goal of improving their country, the United States. Likewise, the bulldog and the frog compete in fundamentally different competitions (dog fights and jumping competitions, respectively), but they have different strengths that work toward the common good of making Smiley rich. By unifying two celebrity enemies within his own home, a symbolic United States, Smiley acts as glue binding his replicated country together.

Rather than focus on the friction between the different cultures and ideologies found across the United States, this story seeks to celebrate and preserve their unique identities. In naming two of his most beloved pets after two famous and diametrically opposed political figures, Smiley gracefully unites his own versions of the political enemies—hailing from different parts of the country—in his own backyard. In this way, Smiley brings together the regional differences in the country and demonstrates how their various strengths can be united into one whole.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Bantam Dell edition of *Complete Short Stories of Mark Twain* published in 1957.

The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County Quotes

☞ I have a lurking suspicion that *Leonidas W. Smiley* is a myth; that my friend never knew such a personage; and that he only conjectured that if I asked old Wheeler about him, it would remind him of his infamous *Jim Smiley*, and he would go to work and bore me to death with some exasperating reminiscence of him as long and as tedious as it should be useless to me.

Related Characters: Narrator (speaker), Jim Smiley, Simon Wheeler, Leonidas W. Smiley

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the unnamed narrator considers that his friend tricked him—at his friend's request, the narrator dutifully sought out Simon Wheeler to ask about Leonidas

W. Smiley, but Wheeler's subsequent story about Jim Smiley suggests that there is no Leonidas. The narrator thinks it was a ploy to make him sit through a long and boring story from Wheeler. Here, the narrator already haughtily assumes that the story will be of no use to him; it will merely be an "exasperating reminiscence" that is both "long" and "tedious." As Wheeler's story unfolds, much of this proves true—his story is fairly absurd, and his delivery is rambling and unpolished. However, as an outsider from the East, the narrator pays keen attention to Wheeler's style of Western storytelling. Even though he finds the story boring, the narrator appreciates the artistic value of the tale and writes it down, preserving Wheeler's delivery as authentically as possible.

☞ He never smiled, he never frowned, he never changed his voice from the gentle-flowing key to which he tuned his initial sentence, he never betrayed the slightest suspicion of enthusiasm; but all through the interminable narrative there ran a vein of impressive earnestness and sincerity, which showed me plainly that, so far from his imagining that there was anything ridiculous or funny about his story, he regarded it as a really important matter, and admired its two heroes as men of transcendent genius in *finesse*.

Related Characters: Narrator (speaker), Jim Smiley, Simon Wheeler

Related Themes:



Page Number: 2

Explanation and Analysis

As Simon Wheeler begins his story about Jim Smiley, the unnamed narrator provides a detailed description of Wheeler and his peculiar delivery. Although the narrator is candid about not being interested in the content of Wheeler's story, he is fascinated by Wheeler's distinctively Western presentation of this tall tale, which seems to go against the grain of the Eastern narrator's own approach to language, education, and storytelling. By recording Wheeler's story through the written word, the narrator demonstrates how he values the Western tradition of storytelling. The narrator is particularly intrigued by Wheeler's obvious passion for the story—Wheeler's delivery contains a "vein of impressive earnestness and sincerity," revealing his respect for the story and its characters.

“Any way that suited the other man would suit *him*—any way just so's he got a bet, *he* was satisfied. But still he was lucky, uncommon lucky; he most always come out winner.”

Related Characters: Simon Wheeler (speaker), Narrator, Jim Smiley

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 2

Explanation and Analysis

As Simon Wheeler begins his story about Jim Smiley, he describes Smiley as an avid gambler. Wheeler tells the narrator that Smiley was willing to place or accept any bet, even if it was based on his opponent's suggestion. He was a very talented gambler and loved placing bets with all of the people around him. This situates Smiley as a man who interacted with others and was an active member of his community. Often “lucky” gamblers are cheaters, but Smiley was an honest man who demonstrated integrity in his dealings.

In addition, by writing out the phonetic spelling of Wheeler's accent and grammar, the narrator transcribes Wheeler's exact presentation of the story. In this way, the Eastern narrator shows his appreciation for Western tall-tales by recording Wheeler's story as authentically as possible. The narrator's crisp grammar and elevated vocabulary juxtaposes with Wheeler's rough vernacular, further emphasizing the differences between the regions.

“Parson Walker's wife laid very sick once, for a good while, and it seemed as if they warn't going to save her; but one morning he come in, and Smiley up and asked him how she was, and he said she was considerable better—thank the Lord for his infinite mercy and coming on so smart that with the blessing of providence she'd get well yet; and Smiley, before he thought, says, ‘Well, I'll resk two-and-a-half she don't anyway.’”

Related Characters: Simon Wheeler (speaker), Narrator, Jim Smiley, The Parson's Wife

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Wheeler further emphasizes that Smiley was willing to bet on absolutely anything—even if it was

insensitive. One day, when the Parson's wife had been sick for a long time and finally seemed to be recovering, Smiley visited her and placed a bet that she wouldn't survive her illness. This was a shocking thing to bet on, especially because someone else's life was involved. Even though Smiley's bets were sometimes insensitive or downright rude, he remained an integral part of his community at Angel's Camp. The story implies that people in the community overlooked his bad manners and accepted him regardless of his shortcomings because he was an honest man who always dealt with others with integrity.

“They used to give her two or three hundred yards, start, and then pass her under way; but always at the fag end of the race she'd get excited and desperate like, and come cavorting and straddling up, and scattering her legs around limber, sometimes in the air, and sometimes out to one side among the fences, and kicking up m-o-r-e dust and raising m-o-r-e racket with her coughing and sneezing and blowing her nose—and always fetch up at the stand just about a neck ahead as near as you could cipher it down.”

Related Characters: Simon Wheeler (speaker), Narrator, Jim Smiley, The Mare

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 3


Explanation and Analysis

Here, Wheeler explains to the unnamed narrator that Smiley loved betting on animals, and he often won his bets regarding their various matches, fights, or races. This was due to the fact that Smiley would buy or find animals that looked very sickly or weak. A surprisingly keen businessman, Smiley knew that people would underestimate his animals' abilities because they didn't look like winners, so then his opponents would be willing to bet money against his animals. In this passage, Wheeler explains that the same held true for Smiley's mare, who looked terribly ill but was extremely well trained and often won its races due to its signature burst of energy at the very end. Smiley's mare, like all of his animals, highlights that appearances can be deceiving.

“But as soon as money was up on him he was a different dog; his under-jaw'd begin to stick out like the fo'castle of a steamboat, and his teeth would uncover and shine like the furnaces.”

Related Characters: Simon Wheeler (speaker), Narrator, Jim Smiley

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 3


Explanation and Analysis

After telling the narrator about Smiley's mare, Wheeler tells him about a bulldog puppy that Smiley owned and named Andrew Jackson. Like the mare, the bulldog looked weak and unassuming, so people didn't think that he would be able to win a fight. Although Smiley's method of choosing weak-looking animals is tricky, it's not necessarily dishonest—the animals' strength and success come from Smiley's dedication to training them well. For instance, at the beginning of the fight, Jackson would allow the other dog to beat him up while the stakes of the bets were increased. When Jackson noticed that everyone was done betting, he would begin attacking his opponent back and ultimately win the fight. This happened many times, showing that reality is not always as it appears.

“He ketch'd a frog one day, and took him home, and said he cal'lated to educate him; and so he never done nothing for three months but set in his back yard and learn that frog to jump.”

Related Characters: Simon Wheeler (speaker), Narrator, Jim Smiley

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis

After talking about Jim Smiley's mare and bulldog, Simon Wheeler begins telling the unnamed narrator about Smiley's pet frog, named Dan'l Webster. Like Smiley's other star animals, Webster didn't look exceptional. Smiley used

this to his advantage by training Webster to be extraordinary, defying the expectations of his appearance. For three months, Smiley dedicated himself to training Dan'l Webster how to jump high, underscoring Smiley's integrity and commitment to winning his bets honestly. Smiley demonstrated remarkable dedication and perseverance, and his efforts paid off when Webster became the most talented high-jumping frog in the entire county of Calaveras. Smiley was able to make the most of Webster's normal appearance by placing many bets with other people regarding how high he could jump—those who didn't know that Smiley had spent months training Webster were surprised and lost their bets to Smiley. Webster's appearance was deceiving because he was actually a very well trained frog, even though he looked normal. Webster's appearance is also deceiving at the end of the story, when the stranger secretly stuffs the frog with gunshot so it can't jump. Although Webster appears untouched, he is now entirely incapable of jumping, consequently losing Smiley the bet.

“Smiley said all a frog wanted was education, and he could do 'most anything—and I believe him.”

Related Characters: Simon Wheeler (speaker), Narrator, Jim Smiley

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Wheeler tells the narrator that Smiley once told him that a frog could do anything if he received a proper education. A man with integrity, Smiley believed in the value of hard work, and he was willing to dedicate time to training his animals to win his bets for him. Rather than cheating to ensure that he would win bets, Smiley concentrated his efforts on honest ways to win his gambling enterprises. He put hard work into training his animals to be winners, and in this way, he viewed these animal-focused bets to be competitions, rather than gambles on random chances of fate.

“And the feller studied a minute, and then says, kinder sad-like, ‘Well, I’m only a stranger here, and I ain’t got no frog; but if I had a frog, I’d bet you.’”

Related Characters: The Stranger, Simon Wheeler (speaker), Narrator, Jim Smiley

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis


In this passage, Wheeler tells the narrator about the stranger who came to Angel Camp and placed a bet against Smiley’s prized frog, Dan’l Webster. Before going through with the bet, the stranger revealed to Smiley that he was an outsider and didn’t own a frog. His tone, “kinder sad-like,” revealed a disappointment in his role as a roamer—he didn’t belong to this community at Angel’s Camp and would soon move on. Smiley, on the other hand, was a well-integrated member of his community and belonged at the camp. This dynamic is strengthened after the bet takes place; when the stranger cheats by filling Webster with gunshot, he’s forced to flee to avoid the consequences of his actions, thereby banning him from the community indefinitely.

The stranger’s “kinder sad-like” tone also shows how appearances can be deceiving. Smiley, an honest man who is eager to place a bet, assumes that the man is as downtrodden and innocent as he appears. However, like Smiley’s animals that appear weak and unassuming but are actually lethal opponents, the stranger also proves to be much more dangerous and crafty than he initially seems.

“[...] the new frog hopped off lively, but Dan’l give a heave, and hysted up his shoulders—so—like a Frenchman, but it warn’t no use—he couldn’t budge; he was planted as solid as a church, and he couldn’t no more stir than if he was anchored out.”

Related Characters: Simon Wheeler (speaker), Narrator, The Stranger, Jim Smiley

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 6

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Simon Wheeler recounts to the unnamed narrator how the stranger filled Dan’l Webster with heavy gunshot pellets while Smiley went to find the stranger another frog in the swamp. After Webster didn’t jump, Smiley was flummoxed and paid the stranger the agreed-upon forty dollars for losing his bet. While throughout the story Smiley had been aware of how the appearances of his animals were deceptive, this time the roles were reversed. When looking at Webster, Smiley had no idea that the frog was stuffed with heavy gunshot and would not be able to jump. The stranger plays Smiley at his own game, but in a dishonest way. While Smiley trained his animals to be unlikely victors, the stranger cheated and made Webster an unlikely loser.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

THE CELEBRATED JUMPING FROG OF CALAVERAS COUNTY

Following the suggestion of a friend, the unnamed narrator meets a man named Simon Wheeler to ask Wheeler about another man named Leonidas W. Smiley. The narrator, a man hailing from the East, finds Wheeler “dozing comfortably by the barroom stove” in a “dilapidated” tavern in a Californian mining town called Angel’s Camp.

When the unnamed narrator asks Simon Wheeler about Leonidas W. Smiley, Wheeler instead launches into a long story about a different man named Jim Smiley. The narrator thinks that there actually isn’t a man named Leonidas W. Smiley and that his friend intentionally set him up, knowing that the narrator would have to sit through a long, boring story from Wheeler. Indeed, the narrator writes that he thinks his friend knew Wheeler would “bore me to death with some exasperating reminiscence of [Jim Smiley] as long and as tedious as it should be useless to me.”

Simon Wheeler is “fat and baldheaded,” and he looks like a simple but content man. As Wheeler begins telling his story to the narrator, “He never smiled, he never frowned, he never changed his voice from the gentle-flowing key to which he tuned his initial sentence.” Not only is Wheeler’s story boring, but also his monotone delivery is just as dull. Regardless, Wheeler treats his story “as a really important matter” and forces the narrator to listen by “back[ing him] into a corner.” Despite not wanting to listen to this tangential and largely irrelevant story, the unnamed narrator lets Wheeler tell it in full and never interrupts him.

Simon Wheeler claims that Jim Smiley was the “curiosest man,” who was willing to bet on anything. He loved gambling so much that he didn’t even care which side of the bet he was on, just as long as someone was willing to bet him in the first place: “Any way that suited the other man would suit *him*—any way just sos’s he got a bet, he was satisfied.” Despite this, Smiley was “uncommon lucky,” and almost always won his bets on horse races, dogfights, catfights, and chicken-fights alike. He was even willing to place a bet on how long it would take a straddle-bug to walk to a given destination.

The unnamed narrator comes from the Eastern United States and thus stands as an outsider to Western culture. Right away, Wheeler and Angel Camp seem distinctively (and perhaps stereotypically) Western.



The unnamed narrator is irritated that his friend from the East set him up to listen to a monotonous story, which suggests from the outset that the narrator won’t exactly enjoy Wheeler’s tale. However, the narrator is fascinated by Wheeler’s method of conveying the story. As an Eastern outsider, the narrator records the Western storyteller’s words, thereby preserving and affirming the value of the Western tall tale.



While the Western Wheeler and Eastern narrator take vastly different views on the value of the content of the story—with the narrator finding it absurd, and Wheeler considering it “a really important matter”—the narrator appreciates and records Wheeler’s unpolished, Western style of storytelling.



Wheeler’s dialect reveals his lack of an Eastern education and emphasizes that he’s a bit rough around the edges. The juxtaposition between the unnamed narrator’s crisp diction and Wheeler’s unrefined but passionate delivery helps further delineate the cultural differences between the East and West.



Jim Smiley was so willing to place bets on anything that he even made some insensitive ones in the process. When Smiley visited the Parson's wife after she had finally recovered from a long illness, he told her that he bet "two-and-a-half" that she wouldn't survive her sickness. The subject of a bet "never made no difference to *him*—he'd bet on *any* thing—the dangdest feller."

Wheeler recounts how Smiley once trained an unassuming mare to be a racing horse. The mare looked very sickly and always ran at the back of the group, so people bet against her. She was "so slow and always had the asthma, or the distemper, or the consumption, or something of that kind." However, she would put in extra effort near the finish line while "coughing and sneezing and blowing her nose" to win the race, defying expectations.

Jim Smiley also owned and trained a small bulldog named **Andrew Jackson**. Jackson didn't look like a very good fighter; according to Simon Wheeler, "to look at him you'd think he warn't worth a cent but to set around and look ornery and lay for a chance to steal something." Because of the bulldog's appearance, people would place money down that Jackson wouldn't win the dogfight. Jackson would even passively allow dogs to attack him without putting up a fight while more bets were placed. However, after putting on a show of being a bad fighter, Jackson would clamp down on his opponent's back leg—his characteristic move—and not let go until the fight was over. This tactic caused Jackson to be a champion dog-fighter.

Once, **Andrew Jackson** was put into a fight with a dog that didn't have back legs. As usual, Jackson allowed the fight to go on until all the money had been placed. At that point, he went in to bite his opponent's back leg. However, when he discovered that he couldn't use his winning move, he gave up and died in the fight. Simon Wheeler is sad that Jackson died because he "had genius" and was a very talented fighter.

Jim Smiley owned and trained many types of animals for his bets, including rat-terriers, chicken-cocks, and tomcats. One day, he found and brought home a frog that he named **Dan'l Webster**. He decided to train him—"he cal'lated to educated him"—and began teaching the frog how to jump high.

Jim Smiley's willingness to bet on the life of the Parson's wife demonstrates the absurdity of his passion for betting—he would place money on anything. Though Smiley perhaps lacks tact, he doesn't appear to be a cheat, which allows him to remain an accepted member of the community.



The appearances of Jim Smiley's many animals are deceiving, as seen with his racing mare. Because the horse doesn't look like it could win, people confidently bet against her. When she emerges as an unlikely winner, Smiley is able to win money from his opponents. This illustrates that Smiley is a clever but honest businessman; he relies on other people's biases (and his animals' extensive training) to make his money.



Like the mare, Jim Smiley's bulldog does not look like a winner, consequently inviting people to judge him based on his appearance. Once again, Smiley uses this to his advantage. However, Smiley makes sure his animals win their competitions by training them effectively—not by cheating.



Jim Smiley trains his scruffy bulldog, Andrew Jackson, to be an excellent fighter. Even though people judge Jackson on his appearance, he defies expectations, winning many fights (and winning Smiley lots of money).



Jim Smiley loves to gamble, but he doesn't cheat. He's an honest man who puts hard work into training his animals to be winners. Smiley's integrity earns him a spot in the community, but it is also his downfall—as the following anecdote about Dan'l Webster will illustrate.



For three months, Jim Smiley did nothing but sit in his backyard and teach his pet frog, **Dan'l Webster**, how to jump higher. Smiley trained the frog to jump on command when he tapped its back, and he taught it to catch any fly with its tongue, no matter the distance. Simon Wheeler recalls watching the frog in action himself—once, when Smiley was in the same tavern that Wheeler and the narrator are currently in, Smiley shouted, “Flies, Dan'l, flies!” The frog leapt from the floor, snaked a fly from the counter of the bar, and flopped back down to the floor.

Dan'l Webster won many bets in frog-jumping competitions. He was very good at jumping from flat surfaces straight into the air. Many travelers said that Webster was the most talented frog that they had ever seen. Simon Wheeler explains that “fellers that had traveled and been everywhere all said he laid over any frog that ever they see,” and Jim Smiley was very proud of his frog’s accomplishments.

One day, a stranger came to town. Jim Smiley had brought **Dan'l Webster** downtown in a box in order to find someone to place a bet with. The stranger spotted the box and asked Smiley what it was; Smiley replied it was a frog, and the stranger asked what it was good for. Smiley boasted that his frog could “outjump any frog in Calaveras County.”

The stranger took the box holding **Dan'l Webster** from Jim Smiley and carefully analyzed the frog. Upon returning the box to Smiley, he declared that he couldn’t see anything special about the frog: “I don't see no p'int about that frog that’s any better'n any other frog.” Smiley retorted that he would bet 40 dollars that Webster could outjump any frog in Calaveras County.

Considering Jim Smiley’s bet that his frog, **Dan'l Webster**, could outjump any frog in the county, the stranger said, in a “kinder sad-like” voice, that he was only a stranger there and had no frog of his own to bet with. However, he said if he *did* have a frog, he would certainly accept Smiley’s bet.

After hearing that the stranger would accept the bet if only he had a frog, Jim Smiley hastily decided to go find him a frog in the swamp. He left the box holding **Dan'l Webster** with the stranger for safekeeping and set off to catch a frog.

Even though Dan'l Webster looks like an ordinary frog, Jim Smiley has put three entire months into training him how to be an excellent jumper. Smiley's hard work and integrity causes him to be a successful gambler—he doesn't have to cheat to win.



Jim Smiley approaches gambling as a profession, and he clearly is honest and straightforward in his dealings—rather than rigging his bets, he puts hard work into training his animals to be unlikely winners.



When the stranger enters town, Jim Smiley immediately trusts him and tries to engage him in a bet. Smiley is honest when he tells the stranger that his frog can jump higher than any other frog in the county, even though the stranger doesn't know if that is true or not. However, it seems that Smiley is growing prideful due to his nearly spotless track record, implying that he is perhaps about to be proven wrong.



Dan'l Webster's appearance is deceiving because he just looks like an ordinary frog; the stranger has no way of knowing that Jim Smiley has spent three months training the frog how to jump high.



The stranger doesn't belong to the community, and he is aware that he is an outsider to Angel's Camp. His acknowledgement of his status points back to the unnamed narrator, who is also an outsider to Angel's Camp.



Jim Smiley is full of good intentions and immediately trusts to the stranger to watch his precious frog, Dan'l Webster. It seems increasingly likely that Smiley will have to learn for himself the danger of trusting in appearances.



While Jim Smiley was off catching a frog in the muddy swamp, the stranger sat with the box holding **Dan'l Webster** and waited, thinking. Eventually, he took Webster out of his box, pried his mouth open, and used a teaspoon to fill the frog full of quail-shot (a pellet used to fill shotgun shells). When the heavy gunshot reached the frog's chin, the stranger set Webster back down on the floor. The weight of the gunshot made it impossible for Webster to move.

Jim Smiley returned from the swamp with another frog in hand for the stranger to use in his bet. Smiley placed both frogs down, counted to three, and both men tapped the back of their frogs in order to get them to jump. The stranger's frog flew off, but **Dan'l Webster** remained planted on the ground. Smiley was bewildered and disgusted, but he honored the bet and paid the stranger the promised 40 dollars.

After accepting the winnings from the bet from Jim Smiley, the stranger left. As he exited through the door, he jerked his thumb over his shoulder and informed Smiley that he didn't see anything special about **Dan'l Webster** in comparison to any other frogs, repeating, "I don't see no p'int about that frog that's any better'n any other frog." Smiley was crushed.

Bewildered by **Dan'l Webster's** behavior, Jim Smiley investigated what could be the matter with him. When Smiley picked up Webster, he was shocked to discover that he weighed "five pound[s]!" Smiley turned Webster upside-down and was enraged when quail-shot fell out of him. Infuriated, Smiley chased after the stranger but could never find him.

The story is interrupted when Simon Wheeler hears someone calling his name in front of the tavern. He asks the narrator to wait for him, and he leaves briefly to see who is looking for him. Rather than wait to hear more about a certain Jim Smiley, who is not the Leonidas W. Smiley that the narrator was enquiring after, the narrator leaves. The narrator meets Wheeler at the door, and Wheeler attempts to begin another story about a "yaller one-eyed cow that didn't have no tail, only just a short stump like a bannanner" that Smiley owned. However, the narrator lacks both the "time and inclination" to hear the story out. Instead, he bids farewell to Wheeler and leaves the tavern.

The story suggests that, as an outsider to the community, the stranger holds a different code of morality. He betrays Jim Smiley's trust by harming his frog, and the stranger presumably knows that he will have to leave town after this interaction, thereby escaping any punishment.



Jim Smiley has integrity, and it never occurs to him that the stranger would cheat or harm his frog. Even though Dan'l Webster's inability to jump is unexplainable in this moment—and should, perhaps, seem fishy—Smiley honors the bet and dutifully pays the stranger forty dollars.



As an outsider leading a roaming lifestyle, the stranger doesn't find himself beholden to the same code of integrity that Smiley honors. After cheating in the bet, the stranger leaves in order to escape punishment, permanently deeming himself an outsider.



While Jim Smiley can live a stationary lifestyle in the community because his honesty, the stranger has to immediately flee town in order to escape being punished for his deceitful behavior.



After sitting through Simon Wheeler's long story about Jim Smiley, the narrator is clearly relieved when an opportunity arises to excuse himself, suggesting that the regional differences between the East and West are irreconcilable. However, even though the Eastern narrator was largely uninterested in the content of Wheeler's tale, he writes it down, thereby preserving and celebrating the tradition of Western storytelling.





HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Bennett, Bonnie. "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 19 Oct 2018. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Bennett, Bonnie. "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County." LitCharts LLC, October 19, 2018. Retrieved April 21, 2020. <https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-celebrated-jumping-frog-of-calaveras-county>.

To cite any of the quotes from *The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Twain, Mark. *The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County*. Bantam Dell. 1957.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Twain, Mark. *The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County*. New York: Bantam Dell. 1957.