

MARK TWAIN
Critical Assessments

Edited by
Stuart Hutchinson

Volume III

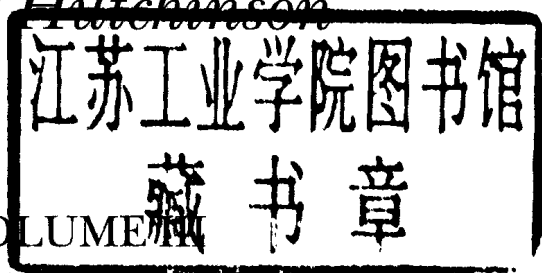
MARK TWAIN

Critical Assessments



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Stuart Hutchinson

VOLUME II
Critical Essays



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Frontispiece: Mark Twain with John Lewis who
worked for the Twains for 29 years and was
given a pension by them on his retirement.

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Critical Essays

‘The Celebrated Jumping Frog
of Calaveras County’

(1867)

The Art and Satire of Twain's 'Jumping Frog' Story

S.J. KRAUSE

Recent analyses of Mark Twain 'Notorious Jumping Frog of Calaveras County' tend to stress its projection of the traditional conflict between eastern and western values—or, more precisely, between the values of a gentle, civilized class and those of the frontier.¹ Taking in its broadest potential reference, Paul Schmidt has seen the 'Jumping Frog' as dramatizing those assumptions which, as he has it, 'make up the complicated Enlightenment case of Civilization versus the West.' Moreover, construing the tale as 'an attack on the genteel tradition,' Schmidt holds that it 'ultimately asserts the superiority of vernacular brotherhood over the competitive individualism which animates genteel attitudes'; while in Wheeler's story, the tale within the tale, he sees an attack on Rousseauesque romanticism.²

Schmidt's analysis seems to involve some high-powered assumptions for a fairly unsophisticated brand of fiction. Yet at least two reasons why the 'Jumping Frog' rises above its genre are that its simplicity—like Simon Wheeler's—is ironic and its social symbolism—like Wheeler's story—implies more than it asserts. A major artistic consideration is, therefore, the matter of how the inward moving structure of the tale accommodates its outward moving symbolic reference. An aspect of the symbolism that has remained relatively untouched is the extensive satire suggested by Jim Smiley's naming his bull-pup 'Andrew Jackson' and his frog 'Dan'l Webster.' With this in mind, I wish to consider three questions: the degree to which there is a complexity of form in the story to sustain its social

SOURCE *American Quarterly*, XVI, Winter, 1964, 562–76.

implications; the degree to which there is a secondary satire in the story to justify the inclusion of those implications; and the degree to which the satire implies a judgment of the East and West. To explore these questions is to see what Twain accomplished in bringing together the cream of the humor that preceded him. For his 'Jumping Frog' blends the political satire perfected in Down East humor with the framework and oral techniques perfected in Old Southwestern humor.³

Complex as the story is, the question of form—which has never been thoroughly described⁴—is rather easily handled. To begin with, Twain has more than just a tale within a tale. He has in fact at least eight levels of story interest, each of which has several sides to it, so that the design better resembles a nest of boxes than it does a frame. There is 1) the story of the narrator's spoken and unspoken attitudes toward a) the friend who wrote him from the East and lured him into a trap, toward b) Simon Wheeler whom he regards as a garrulous simpleton, toward c) Jim Smiley, the fabulous gambler, toward d) the animals that Wheeler personalizes, and toward e) the stranger who pulled a western trick on a Westerner and got away with it. Then there is 2) the story of Simon Wheeler's attitudes toward a) the narrator and through him and his friend, toward b) Easterners at large, toward c) Jim Smiley, toward d) the animals and toward e) the stranger. Wheeler, moreover, represents 3) the western community at large that is continuously entertained by Smiley's antics. Also there are the attitudes of 4) the stranger, and of 5) Sam Clemens toward the various parties in his tale. Finally, we have the more restricted attitudes of 6) Smiley himself, which are confined to his animals and such persons as he can get to bet on them; and not the least significant attitudes are those of the animals themselves, particularly 7) the bull-pup and 8) the jumping frog.

At the level of story movement, the 'Jumping Frog' has the same complexity as that of its multiple points of view. Twain employs an order of increasing detail and of ascending absurdity and fantasy. For example, after summary references to Smiley's willingness to bet 'on anything that turned up'⁵ (a horse-race, dog-fight, cat-fight or chicken-fight), Wheeler tosses in two eccentric types of wager, one on which of 'two birds setting on a fence ... would fly first' and the second on Parson Walker's being the 'best exhorter.' These are paired with two other situations, each of which is given in greater detail, and the first of which (number three in the sequence) is absurd and fantastic—Smiley's willingness to follow a straddle bug to Mexico, if necessary, to find out its goal. The last member of the group is crashingly absurd, figuratively fantastic and practically insane, though, based on past performance, completely understandable, as Smiley, on hearing that the Parson's sick wife seems to be recovering, blurts out, 'Well, I'll risk two-and-a-half she don't anyway.'

In the grouping of mare, pup and frog, one proceeds from lesser to

greater detail, complexity and surprise, but mainly from a lesser to a greater infusion of personality, one source of which is Smiley's hanging Jackson's name on the pup (which is connotatively apt) and Webster's on the frog (which is both connotatively *and* physically apt). Therein lies a considerable tale, for when such magisterial names are paired with the descriptions given these creatures, the reader has two of Twain's liveliest and most carefully developed burlesques. More of them in a moment. What should be noted here is the matter-of-factness of the impending satire, which deals with familiar history and can be called forth or not as the reader wishes, since, concurrently, there is so much else going on in the story.

The meshing of structure and satire in the interplay of eastern and western character traits may be seen not only in the sectional names given the animals, but, more obviously, in the various points of view, which polarize specifically eastern and western attitudes, in much the way that Webster and Jackson do. We rather guess that the stranger at the end is an Easterner, and this is borne out by Twain's subsequently having specifically labeled him a 'Yankee.'⁶ He is therefore an Easterner who plays the game of the Westerner and is specifically induced to play it on Smiley's terms, those, as Twain described Smiley, of a 'wily Californian.'⁷ Smiley is taken in by one of his own kind, and by a weakness—his avidity for gaming—induced by the wit which puts him into a class with the stranger. Moreover, as Twain recalled the original telling of the story (that is, original for him), he noted that the Westerners' major interest in it was in 'the smartness of the stranger in taking in Smiley' and in his deep knowledge of a frog's nature for knowing that 'a frog *likes* shot and is always ready to eat it.'⁸ The stranger whets Smiley's appetite first by his curiosity (What's in the box? What's the frog good for?), then by his smugness ('I don't see no p'int about that frog that's any better'n any other frog'), and further by the helpless innocence of his appeal for western hospitality ('the feller . . . says, kinder sadlike, "Well, I'm only a stranger here, and I ain't got no frog . . ."). At the moment when the stranger is filling the frog, Twain gives us a glimpse of Smiley, out in the swamp, where he 'slogged around in the mud for a long time.' Being a humor character in the Jonsonian sense, Smiley was duped by his own single-mindedness.

In essence, then, the structure of the Jim Smiley story is that of a moral satire in the classical mold: Smiley's gambling fever led him to relinquish the normal protective xenophobia that guilefully motivated Simon Wheeler in the instructive tales he told about the guile that strangers might practice on simple Westerners.

To this exposure of simplicity in Smiley, Wheeler was an excellent foil. Furthermore, the relation of Wheeler to our narrator, 'Mark Twain,' recapitulates the structure of moral satire given in the relation of Smiley to the stranger and, with an even subtler grade of irony and one that renders the Smiley story itself ironic. Again the mounting complexity is based on

characterization. This in part may be observed from what Twain did with Ben Coon of Angel's Camp, who inspired his sphinx-like Wheeler. Coon, according to Twain was

a dull person, and ignorant; he had no gift as a storyteller, and no invention; in his mouth this episode was merely history . . . he was entirely serious, for he was dealing with what to him were austere facts, and they interested him solely because they *were* facts; he was drawing on his memory, not his mind; he saw no humor in his tale, neither did his listeners; neither he nor they ever smiled or laughed; in my time I have not attended a more solemn conference.⁹

If the tiresome earnestness of Coon was what first made the story 'amusing' for Twain, in his retelling it, his own storyteller's earnestness is all ironic and 'Mark Twain's' comments upon that earnestness make him a butt of the irony. We see more than our outside narrator, Twain, does in the fact that Wheeler 'backed' him into a corner and 'blockaded' him there with his chair, and *then* reeled off 'the monotonous narrative.' Wheeler is always several steps ahead of the narrator and never so many as when the narrator thinks him oblivious to the importance of what he relates.

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*.

Here is Ben Coon, but with a world of difference in the meaning attached to his seemingly obtuse incomprehension.

The moral satire comes clearly into focus when we see that Wheeler is to some extent the West getting its revenge for the trick of an Easterner, at the same time that he plays an instructive joke on the fastidious Mark Twain, a Westerner trying to outgrow his background in exchange for eastern respectability. His pretensions can be immediately ascertained from his looking down upon Wheeler, from the difference between his language and Wheeler's,¹⁰ and from his failure to see Wheeler's story as anything but long, tedious and useless. The fictive Twain thus stands somewhat in the relation to Wheeler that Smiley does to the stranger.¹¹

Twain so completely maintains perspective on his characters that no single attitude can be strictly assigned to him as author. Yet that very condition reflects something of the final complexity of his own personal point of view on the interrelation of eastern and western attitudes. He had shown in the story that neither was morally sufficient unto itself, but that one could strengthen the other attitude, which was the view he would come to both in his life and subsequent writing. The fact that for several years after writing it he could, on and off, approve and disapprove of the

'Jumping Frog' indicates that he was at first uncertain of where he really stood on the sectional aspects of his story. Not only had he been embarrassed that a 'villainous backwoods sketch' should represent him in the East; he was also disturbed that his wife-to-be might judge him by 'that Jumping Frog book,' with its distinctively western contents. However, when oral readings began to bring out the richness of his story, Twain recanted and told Livy he thought it 'the best humorous sketch in America.' The national reference signifies a triumph over sectionalism in his own attitudes, and a recognition that his tale contains both a criticism and a union of eastern and western values. That Twain was fully aware of the complexities of structure and attitude in his story is intimated by his remark to Livy that 'a man might tell that Jumping Frog story fifty times without knowing *how* to tell it.' For this reason, he went on, 'I must read it in public some day, in order that people may know what there is in it.'¹²

The 'Jumping Frog' assuredly does have a good deal more in it than usually meets the eye. Twain said that during one reading, 'without altering a single word, it shortly [became] so absurd' that he had to laugh himself.¹³ Capital instances of the absurd were the sizable caricatures he had drawn of Andrew Jackson and Daniel Webster.

Twain did not name irrelevantly. Simon Wheeler was a free-wheeling yarn-spinner. Smiley, who was 'uncommon lucky,' had the perennial optimism of the gambler, which was the optimism of the West itself, and which also accounts for the superstitious naming of the pup and frog. In the pairing of the two animals, we get a western name pitted against an eastern one, a frontier democrat (supposedly) and National Republican against a Whig and spokesman for eastern capital. Added to this is the free and easy irreverence of the West indulging in one of its favorite democratic sports. Thus, Smiley's naming assumes a composite sectional and structural reference. On the one hand, actual correspondences between the animals and well-known traits of Jackson and Webster open up a considerable range of secondary meanings which are related to the basic story by their development of the East-West motif. On the other hand, the satire is functional. For while Twain seems to have been unacquainted with the earlier versions of his tale, he clearly had the imagination to recognize and exploit the vestigial ethos of its times, which Wheeler dates in the opening line of the internal story as 'the winter of '49—or . . . spring of '50.' In that context Smiley has the mood of a self-sufficient forty-niner; and as a means of dramatizing the assumptions of that mood, Twain endowed Smiley with the 'Territory's' compensatory indifference to the values of the 'States,' specifically to the exalted associations of two high-ranking names in national politics. Indeed, Jackson and Webster were household gods for Smiley's generation, and for 'old' Simon Wheeler's too. What better way for the western Adam to declare his worth than by smashing a few idols?

The events of the tale bring to mind some of the leading facts associated with the names of Jackson and Webster.¹⁴ Specifically, the bull-pup evokes the ironies of Jackson's reputation as a frontiersman, while the frog evokes the various flip-flops that characterized Webster's career. As the ironies surrounding Jackson are naturally different from those surrounding Webster, there are differences in the points Twain makes about them. However, with both men the central irony is that neither was what he seemed to have been.

Let us first consider Jackson and the bull-pup. For Wheeler to have had Jim Smiley casually compare his bull-pup with so stern a man as Jackson was to adopt the technique of insult used by the Whigs in Jackson's day when they associated him with the jackass. The technique was one of calculated insidiousness. Not only did the General not have the broad plebeian features of such animals as bulldogs and jackasses; he rather had the thinness, erect bearing and fine features of the true aristocrat that he prided himself on being.¹⁵ The nub of Twain's satire was that regardless of looks, it was how he acted and how he was thought of that counted; and Jackson, of course, had become identified with political democracy despite himself, and even with frontier ruffianism and the devious opportunism of Simon Suggs.¹⁶

In the pup's pugnacity, his combination of nonchalant confidence with tenacity in battle, his ferocity, his dependence on sheer will, his gambling spirit, his single-mindedness and iron nerve, as well as his having been 'self-made,' Twain's descriptions directly follow major aspects of Jackson's career. Like Smiley's dog, Old Hickory was the very image of toughness—to use the western idiom, he was just nothing but fight.¹⁷ But much of his actual fighting record was somewhat at variance with the idolatrous view of it. For example, his pointless victory at New Orleans was more the result of British mistakes than of his own military genius; while, staunch friend that he was of Aaron Burr's, Jackson the duelist had gained himself a name for rashness, brutality and peremptoriness, which was corroborated by his campaigns against the Creek and Seminole Indians, and his highhanded tactics in the Florida campaign of 1818, in which he had exceeded his orders. As for his famed truculence, outright brawling, frontier style, as in a dog-fight, was something the aristocratic Jackson—quite unlike Lincoln, for example—would not stoop to. In fact, one of the ironies of Jackson's association with frontiersmen was that while they had made him a celebrated commander, and while there was mutual affection between him and them, in his personal dealings, Jackson disdained to fight anyone of lower station. Nor was Jackson's 'indomitable perseverance'—so perfectly symbolized by the bulldog's grip—an unmixed blessing. His tenacity in battle was often in reality a euphemism for his equally well-known 'inflexity of purpose,' which netted him a hollow victory in his biggest political battle, that with Nicholas Biddle over the United States Bank.

Twain's description of the pup touches on several aspects of Jackson's relationship to the frontier. Take the opening statement about the pup: 'And he had a little small bull-pup, that 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.' With such a look as that, this pup might be Simon Suggs, Sut Lovingood, Thomas Jefferson Snodgrass or even Davy Crockett. However, his look is also an analogue of the legendary flashes of temper with which Jackson was known to have frightened opponents into submission. At the same time, the broad descriptive touches make this dog a caricature of the Jackson whom Whig cartoonists had ominously portrayed as an embodiment of the western frontier—and that is just what the pup was meant to be.¹⁸

Twain's second sentence about the bull-pup neatly captures the images in which the East and entrenched Whiggery at large viewed the specific threat of Jacksonism: 'But as soon as the 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.' In addition to its suggesting the fearful union of savagery with avarice, the idea that Smiley's pup has caught the gambling fever also carries a lurking reference to the stories of Jackson's fabulous exploits in gaming.¹⁹ Over and above other traits he shared with frontier gamblers, Jackson was exceedingly lucky, and in one well-known instance he helped his luck by adopting a special relationship with an animal he owned and bet on.²⁰

Twain's most incisive reflection on Jackson involves the manner of his having become a self-made man—a legend Twain explicitly satirized several years after writing the 'Jumping Frog.'²¹ Many of the eulogies on Jackson pictured him as a man who had been 'born ... of poor, but respectable parents' and had achieved greatness 'by no other means than the energy of his character.' *Character* in Jackson's case, invariably meant 'obduracy and vehemence of will.'²² In eulogizing the bull-pup, Wheeler gave a more meaningful account of character. He lamented that despite the inner quality of the dog ('it was a good pup'; 'the stuff was in him'; he had 'genius'), this Andrew Jackson had not had the chance to make a name for himself. In his last fight, seeing 'how he'd been imposed on' by Smiley's mania for garish betting situations, the dog

give Smiley a look, as much as to say his heart was broke, and it was *his* fault ... and then he limped off a piece and laid down and died. It was a good pup, was that Andrew Jackson, and would have made a name for himself if he'd lived, for the stuff was in him and he had genius—I known it, because he hadn't no opportunities to speak of, and it don't stand to reason that a dog could make such a fight as he could under them circumstances if he hadn't no talent.

The crucial, and often repeated, question about Jackson's rise to eminence had been raised rather early in his career when Samuel Putnam Waldo