

AN ANTHOLOGY OF AMERICAN LITERATURE

**A Textbook prescribed by S.R.T.M University,
Nanded as per CBCS Pattern**

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An Anthology of American Literature

A Textbook Prepared as per CBCS Pattern
for College Students of UG Second Year Optional English

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An Anthology of American Literature, A Textbook prepared as per CBCS Pattern for College Students of UG Second Year Optional English and prescribed by Swami Ramanand Teerth Marathwada University, Nanded.

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Mark Twain

ABOUT THE TEXT

Published in November, 1865, this short story became an immediate sensation in America. Though Twain's major novels are often at the centre of appreciation by the readers and the critics, this work of shorter fiction too is reckoned for his art of characterisation and marked humour. It is thinly based on an actual event reported in a newspaper in 1853. Revised and published under many titles by the author himself, now the readers identify it simply as "The Jumping Frog Story". Twain, at the prime of his art of storytelling, narrates this story in a classic style of 'frame narrative'. It is an account of the career of a crafty gambler Jim Smiley residing near a fictitious old mining camp called Boomerang. The story leads to several comic climaxes through the monotonous, expressionless narration of the events by a simple character, Simon Wheeler. The humour evokes from the disappointments and character flaws. The readers experience a roller-coaster ride of rising expectations and anti-climaxes intertwined with triumphs and defeats.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mark Twain (1835-1910) is the pseudonym of the great American writer, humourist, journalist, entrepreneur, publisher and lecturer Samuel Langhorne Clemens. His worldwide reputation as a humourist and moralist rests mostly upon his works of shorter lengths. His major works such as *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn* have a broader social significance by the way they speak for the class of the common Americans neglected by the major writers and despised by the elite class. He skilfully brought to life a variety of characters. Notably, his writing exhibits his fascination with alternative selves- the twins and the lookalikes, the paired and the disguised characters, the mistaken, switched and assumed identities. His magnum opus, *Huckleberry Finn*, is appreciated by general readers and the critics alike for its socio-cultural aspects and its aesthetic qualities. Through his

popular travel writings, he earned a reputation as 'a key figure in establishing cultural connections and exchanges across national and international borders in his period.' He conveyed the complexity of race and racism better than any other contemporary writer through a gallery of vividly portrayed characters.

The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County

In compliance with the request of a friend of mine, who wrote me from the East, I called on good-natured, garrulous old Simon Wheeler, and inquired after my friend's friend, Leonidas W. Smiley, as requested to do, and I hereunto append the result. 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 nearly to death with some infernal reminiscence of him as long and tedious as it should be useless for me. If that was the design, it certainly succeeded.

I found Simon Wheeler dozing comfortably by the bar-room stove of the old, dilapidated tavern in the ancient mining camp of Angel's, and I noticed that he was fat and bald-headed, and had an expression of winning gentleness and simplicity upon his tranquil countenance. He roused up and gave me good-day. I told him a friend of mine had commissioned me to make some inquiries about a cherished companion of his boyhood named Leonidas W. Smiley—Rev. Leonidas W. Smiley—a young minister of the Gospel, who he had heard was at one time a resident of Angel's Camp. I added that, if Mr. Wheeler could tell me anything about this Rev. Leonidas W. Smiley, I would feel under many obligations to him.

Simon Wheeler backed me into a corner and blockaded me there with his chair, and then sat me down and reeled off the monotonous narrative which follows this paragraph. He never smiled, he never frowned, he never changed his voice from the gentle-flowing key to which he tuned the 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

GLOSSARY

- Garrulous:** talkative
Conjectured: guessed
Infernal: troublesome
Reminiscence: memory
Dilapidated: broken-down
Interminable: endless
Finesse: skill
Exquisitely: finely
Feller: fellow
Exhorter: spur
Foller: faller, the horse that falls down in the race
Dangdest: dandiest, excellent
Harnessed: bound
Lattice: frame
Canary: a small yellow singing bird
Vagabond: tramp, wanderer

DISCUSSION

This humorous sketch of a compulsive gambler Jim Smiley is set in a classic 'frame narrative' structure. Mark Twain draws upon the native theme of tell-tale tradition of Southwest America. He begins the story in the form of a letter written by the narrator (most probably Twain himself) to his friend Mr Artemus Ward living in New York. Mr Ward wants the narrator to seek some information regarding the whereabouts of Rev. Leonidas W Smiley from Mr Wheeler residing at a mining camp in Boomerang. The story then shifts to the narration of Mr Wheeler of the adventures and humorous habits of Jim Smiley. The original narrator of the short story – Mark Twain, is overridden by the narrative skills of Wheeler.

The narrator reaches out to Wheeler and enquires about Rev. Leonidas Smiley. The name reminds Wheeler of his acquaintance; Jim Smiley about whom he becomes quite eager to talk. The narrator also declares his suspicion that perhaps there never was

any Rev. Smiley and that his friend has played a hoax upon him. Most probably, he fears, Mr Ward knew that Simon Wheeler is the one whose tongue will be set into motion once someone mentions of Jim Smiley. Though annoyed and humiliated by Wheeler's endless rumblings about Jim Smiley, he does not interrupt him. The narration appears realistic as Wheeler tells it with great earnestness, innocence and garrulity. This tale, which earned Twain the title "People's Author", is both a regional tale as well as a narrative of universal appeal.

The characters, both human and animals, show a variety of traits and set of behaviours. Mark Twain adds drama to the plot by juxtaposing characterisations and attitudes like bored and serious, eastern and western, as well as the naïve and the shrewd against each other. Naïveté and ignorance play a major role in the humour and the dramatic situations which provoke laughter (Railton 7). The characters are full of ignorance about the identities and motives of the other characters: Wheeler does not know who exactly is Jim Smiley nor does the narrator know about Wheeler. Moreover, the narrator is doubtful of both firstly, whether Jim Smiley ever existed and secondly, whether his friend Artemus Ward has played a joke upon him. This hoax played on the narrator forces him to suffer at the hands of Wheeler's interminable ramblings about Jim Smiley.

Jim is portrayed as a comic character with an eccentricity of behaviour through his habit of gambling upon almost everything. His gambling exploits include racehorses, dogs, frog and even the prospects of someone's health too! An uncommonly lucky fellow Jim, however, sometimes loses too. The personality traits of the animals described by Wheeler share similarity with their owner too; Jim is conniving, shrewd, determined and odd. The titular frog of the story is celebrated and jumping just as its owner, Jim Smiley. He too, like his pet frog, is popularly known throughout Calaveras County.

As in a race, there is a juxtaposing of the two opposing characters in the story. Twain in the story is a fussy Easterner, who is appalled rather than amused by the antics and roughs at the mining camp; whereas the westerner, Wheeler is rougher, more western. Though readers are charmed by the language, the choice of words, and the dramatic situation in the story, the narrator remains deaf to the sound and sense of Simon Wheeler's fantastic homespun poetry.

and he flees the scene before Wheeler can launch into another episode about 'a yaller one-eyed cow that didn't have no tail only just a short stump like a bannanner' (Wonham 361). The narrator escapes from Wheeler but the readers are full of expectations for one more interesting story from Wheeler.

Wheeler first speaks of a mare, much underrated by the onlooker boys as 'fifteen-minute nag' suffering from a disease which the narrator too is oblivious of. Despite naming the disease using diverse names like asthma, distemper and consumption, he mentions that the mare was slow, and always trailed behind the other horses by hundreds of yards. He narrates without a dint of expressions on his face that despite her weaknesses, the mare was always successful in winning the race. Simon Wheeler tells that she would get excited and desperate-like just well before the race would end. He reports how she would reach the winning mark, 'cavorting and straddling up, and scattering her legs around limber, sometimes in the air, and sometimes out to one side amongst the fences' coughing and sneezing along the way.

Similarly, his pet dog whom he calls Andrew Jackson has no winning looks either; however, he always wins by grabbing the hind side of the opponent dog. He often meets a defeat in a contest against a dog that has no hinds where he can have his favourite bite! Next, Wheeler talks about a frog by revealing the minute details. The smaller the pet he narrates, the deeper and the subtle its characterisation is. The frog named Daniel Webster is caught and trained by Jim Smiley to jump higher than any other frog in the county. He would punch the frog from behind and the next minute it would be, 'whirling in the air like a doughnut' and also capable of a summerset or two. He, too, meets a tragic defeat due to a hoax played by a stranger. Daniel Webster is stuffed with the quail shot so full that it is no longer able to jump higher than any other frog.

The stories narrated by Wheeler illustrate the themes of pride, deception and false appearances. For instance, Artemus Ward most probably deceives Twain by sending him to Wheeler. Similarly, Jim is deceived by a stranger in the frog jumping race. It is evidently clear that both the mare and the bull-pup, in contrast to their deceptive appearances of weakness, have hidden potentials. The appearances of the mare, the pup and the frog can be deceptive,

and the outward expression of strength and prowess may actually work against a competitor. Finally, in Jim's eagerness to win a sure bet, he places himself on the wrong side of another contest between apparently unequal athletes (Wonham361). They also serve to illustrate the most elemental qualities of human nature such as vanity, pride, greed and credulity. The language used by Wheeler is equally noteworthy. His regional flavours of American English vivify working-class character. He is described as 'fat and bald-headed,' with 'an expression of winning gentleness and simplicity upon his tranquil countenance' by the writer. His pronunciations are conveyed through altered spellings which add a regional tone and a flavour to the narration.

EXERCISES

I. Short answer type questions.

1. Explain the term 'frame narrative' with reference to the above short story.
2. Why does Daniel lose the race?
3. Attempt a character sketch of Jim Stanley.
4. Describe the character of Simon Wheeler.

II. Answer the questions given below in about 300 words each.

1. Comment on the title of the short story "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County."
2. Comment upon the humour in this short story.
3. Elaborate on the use language of the short story "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County."

III. Classroom Activities.

1. Students can be given a task of adapting the short story for a role-playing.
2. The students can be given a practice of reading with 'voice acting' with help of the dialogues in the story.
3. A group discussion on the varied characters, their moods, the pranks played by the characters upon each other can be organised among the students under teacher's guidance and supervision.
4. Teachers can recommend select YouTube videos for a better understanding of the text.

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