

A Study of Mark Twain's : *The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County*

Hiroko Ikeda

Abstract

The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County (hereinafter referred as to as JF) is one of Mark Twain's masterpieces. It is not simply his first great success as a writer; it also clearly showcases the author's literary style, particularly his skillful management of the narrative framework. G. Bellamy points out that this framework is one of the reasons JF is considered a masterpiece. This work uses a first-person style in which "I" is used by the storyteller (Twain) to introduce the narrator of the story (Simon Wheeler). "I" has a number of roles in the work: first and foremost, it allows the narrator of the story to relate his tale and, second, it allows the storyteller to describe the appearance and characteristics of the narrator. Twain insisted that it was extremely difficult to tell a story in a humorous way and it required a very polished technique. Wheeler, in this story, is just the right character for this humorous role. In contrast to ordinary criticism which directly describes the subject in hand. Criticizing a fictional example intentionally causes people to associate the example with something real, and produces the same result as criticizing the actual thing itself. Thus, satire is euphemistic criticism. With JF, Twain creates a humorous fable that criticizes the society of the day. Twain has been described not only as a humor writer and satire writer, but also as a social critic and social philosopher.

PREFACE

Before introducing the main subject of this thesis, let us first look at why Mark Twain went into writing and examine the process and motives involved in the writing of his first successful work *The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County*.

Mark Twain was born Samuel Clemens, in a poor village in Missouri in 1835. When he was four years old, he moved to Hannibal, alongside the Mississippi River, where he spent his childhood. It was with the publication of his first book *The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County* (hereinafter referred to as JF) in 1867 that such a boy became the author known as Mark Twain. When Twain published the book however, he did not have much confidence in the piece. He even told his fiancée, Olivia, not to read it. But after the book was well received and his fame as a writer grew,

he gradually became more satisfied and confident about the work's theme and humor.

As is generally known, in his writing Twain drew upon his various experiences before becoming a author and put them to practical use in other literary works such as *Roughing It*, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. The success of JF created opportunities for him to bring his many and varied subsequent literary works to the public's attention. In this sense, JF was where his talent as a humor writer germinated. Even today, in an age when human beings can live and work in space, his works still remain as vibrant as ever. Against this background, there is great value in studying the meaning and significance of JF.

I

In 1857, Twain became a student pilot on the Mississippi River and acquired his official pilot's license in 1859. He spent the next two years as a steamboat pilot, working up and down the Mississippi River. (His riverboat experiences are recalled in a striking work of hyperbole in *Life on the Mississippi*.) However, when civil war broke out in 1861, the river was closed and Twain left his job as a pilot to join the Confederate Army, which he left after two weeks. In July of that year, he went to Nevada to join his older brother Orion, who was Territorial Secretary of Nevada. Besides assisting his brother as an administrative officer, he worked in mine-related jobs and, over time, had many interesting personal experiences and heard many stories from others.

In September 1862, he became a reporter for the Territorial Enterprise Co. in Virginia City in the Territory of Nevada. It was there, in February 1863, that he first used the pen name "Mark Twain", a riverboat pilot's term meaning the water depth is about 3.6 meters. It is a shallow water caution against running aground. Some years later, he left Virginia City over difficulties with a rival reporter and went to San Francisco. There he became active as a journalist, newspaper and magazine reporter, and freelance writer, publishing work in the *Morning Call*, the *Golden Era*, the *Sacramento Union*, and the *San Francisco Bulletin*. In addition to continuing his own writing efforts, he developed friendships with writers of the day such as the humorist and lecturer Artemus Ward (1834–1867). In fact, he was not only learning from Ward but also training himself to be a more self-reliant writer, as explained in detail in Chapter 5. These efforts culminated in Twain's publication of JF in its original short story form, a story based on subject matter he had gathered while in a mining town. The

original version was known as *Jim Smiley and His Jumping Frog* and was first published in the literary weekly newspaper the *Saturday Press* in New York on November 18, 1865. I think that the literary expressive technique Twain used to develop the framework of the story and the descriptions of the characters in JF were uniquely his own, and they can be seen in some of his later masterpieces also. This is discussed in detail in a thesis by Edgar Branch on the background of JF.

While in a mining town, Twain had heard a story from Ben Coon that a man named Coleman had trained a frog to be an extraordinary jumper so he could use it to make wagers. Twain immediately took note of this and used it as the subject matter for this story, around which he showcased his impressive humor and narrative style. This observation by Paine was borne out by what Twain himself said about how he gathered his material, and so it appears clear that his stories were drawn from a much earlier time in his life.

II

G. Bellamy points out that the excellence of JF is, in part, due to Twain's skillful management of the narrative framework. Twain casts Ben Coon as the narrator Simon Wheeler in the book. Twain was also a humorous lecturer, and was said to be an excellent storyteller. Whenever he made a draft in the process of story-writing, he would show it to his wife and children, winning their favor and making them anxious to wait for the sequel.

Jim Smiley and His Jumping Frog, the original source of JF, used a first-person style in which the narrator, Simon Wheeler, used "I" in his introduction of the story. Like me, G. Bellamy believes there is great significance in the narrative style framework of the work. "I" has a number of roles in the work and I will now give some examples of its uses. First and foremost, it allows the narrator to relate his tale. Any drama requires a narrator to explain lapses of time, changes in background, situation, or circumstances, and other subsidiary events. In JF, the use of "I" by the narrator performs the function of driving the story forward or ending it at a proper place. In other words, the use of "I" in this way actually forms the framework of this story. It also allows the storyteller (Twain) to expedite the narration of the story he has constructed in his mind.

Second, “I” is used by the storyteller (Twain) to describe the appearance and characteristics of the narrator (Wheeler). The storyteller, using “I”, describes Wheeler as follows: “I noticed that he was fat and bald-headed, and had an expression of winning gentleness and simplicity upon his tranquil countenance.” Here “I” works to show the storyteller’s purpose and allows the reader to experience the story as the listener.

“I” also signifies the listener of the story when Wheeler takes on the role of listener in the tale he is recounting. In the literary essay *How to Tell a Story*, Twain insists that it is extremely difficult to tell a story in a humorous way and it requires a very polished technique. Wheeler, in this story, is just right for such a role. Let us examine more closely how Wheeler is used to tell the story. The first intent is merely for Wheeler to take the role of “storyteller” and be appealing to the reader. Another important intent is for humorous effect. There is a clever mixture of solemnity and humor in the story, which is told in a lingering, seemingly endless but solemn manner—like a seriously important talk—yet is still funny and interesting. This means that there is a bigger discrepancy between the storyteller’s style, attitude, and state of mind and the contents of Wheeler’s story, which creates the humor. This, I think, was Twain’s aim in this work.

Wheeler is one of the best examples of Twain’s storyteller characters, and I think the worth of the story rests with how this specific character is employed in it. From the standpoint of literary art, Cox said of this work that Wheeler was ultimately Twain’s chief means of transforming the story into art. As literature is an art form, needless to say, its expression is most important. Besides what is being told however, the method and framework of expression are also important. Twain showcased all of this in JF. By the time he published JF, I think he had already mastered much of his storytelling technique; as Twain himself commented, “The teller does his best to conceal the fact that he even dimly suspects that there is anything funny about it.”

Twain uses Wheeler to reflect his own ideas and opinions in the story. He was also an author who was a critic of his work. His criticism takes a satirical form in most cases, and this satire is indirect criticism. In contrast to ordinary criticism which directly describes the subject in hand, satire is a humorous and sometimes indirect attack. Criticizing a fictional example intentionally causes people to associate the example with something real, and produces the same result as criticizing the actual thing itself. Satire is then euphemistic criticism. For example, in JF, he gave to a poor, humble

looking dog the same name as the 7th president, Andrew Jackson² (1767–1845). He also gave the jumping frog, which was used for wagering, the same name as a well-known politician, Daniel Webster³ (1782–1852). This is clearly satire, and is certainly no accident. The description of the dog and frog with those names recalls the actual persons in the reader's mind, and it was through such satirical means that Twain criticized society of the day.

In JF, Twain created in a humorous fable his own criticism of society around him as he saw it. Twain gave as many examples as possible to describe how much the character named Jim Smiley enjoyed wagering. In this, Twain wanted to reveal Jim's inner self, that is, he tried to criticize the fact hidden behind a series of examples. That this was his aim can be seen in an example where Jim Smiley meets a preacher whose wife is sick in bed and offers him a wager. I think the essence of this is that Twain tried to show that the general public gave lip service to the idea they were pious and speculative philosophically oriented, and that this was not really what was in their minds at all. Twain honestly tried to show that it meant their spirit was not actually religious. This did not come from his own views on religion, but from his viewpoint as a critic of how the general public grasped religion and took it for themselves. He criticizes the general public for pretending they were true believers. In other words, this is a criticism of people who breached the creed of Christianity.

We must not forget that, through his examples of a wager with a preacher, other scenes of a series of wagers, and the dog named Andrew, Twain tries to show the trend of public opinion and the idea that people's spirit is soaked with materialistic civilization, which gradually corrupts their spirit. In short, as examples that people will do anything for money, he includes many scenes of wagering in JF, using the dog named Andrew as a typical example. In this way, he criticizes the social condition where most people are making every effort to make money, which is in contrast to his moral viewpoint on life.

The idea of doing anything to make money was deeply ingrained in the spirit of American society in those days, when capitalism was rapidly growing. This tendency was not just limited to the U.S. In general, following the growth of capitalism, the reference value for everything became money—money became the measure of the worth of everything. As a result, mammonism and “Materialism Almighty” ruled the world. Values contrary to material prosperity, such as spirituality, religion, or moral sense,

were gradually falling away. American society in those days was a society in which, alongside the growth of materialistic prosperity, the spirit had decayed. Twain exactly grasped this fact. By casting Jim and Andrew in JF, he satirizes and criticizes real society. It is really meaningful that Twain, as an author and a thinker (or in the same manner as a critic), criticizes and pokes fun at society indirectly through satirical means, using humor as an undercurrent in JF.

CONCLUSION

Generally speaking, Twain learned a great deal from Artemus Ward, but he also had innate talent as a writer. This talent actually exceeded Ward's and as P. Fatout⁴ points out, Twain was a better writer because his material was more solid—it showed none of Ward's straining for effect—and because his humor was his own, not borrowed. JF was Twain's first masterpiece, both nominally and virtually. It was not simply a successful work which brought him fame and reputation as an author; more importantly, it showcased his eminent literary style, the ways and means of expression and the framework of which can be seen in his later works. Twain has been described not only as a humor writer and satire writer, but also a social critic and social philosopher. JF shows that his specific characteristics as a writer were not a borrowed thing and that his talents had already germinated early in his career. It has been said that as an author and thinker, Twain's own thoughts and opinions clearly color his work. Thus, with humor as an undercurrent, JF not only reflects Twain's didactic ideology but also, I think, speaks of the human condition. It is for all these reasons that JF remains popular today, more than 100 years since it was first published.

NOTES

1. Artemus Ward was the nom de plume of Charles Farrar Browne, an American humorous writer.

アメリカのユーモラスな作家の筆名。

2. Andrew Jackson、第7代アメリカ合衆国大統領、黒人奴隷農場主。ジャクソンは貴族生まれでない最初の大統領。「オールド・ヒッコリー」の愛称で呼ばれた。「アメリカン・フロンティア」に暮らし、独立13州に関係しなかった最初の大統領。

3. Daniel Webster はアメリカ上院議員兼国務長官。彼の能力で有名なので、ウェブスターは弁論家として第2の政党組織で最も重要な人物。

4. P. Fatout は、マーク・トウェインが話すこと編集した人物、The Devil's Dictionary の編纂にもかかわる。

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