

The Notorious Jumping Frog of Calaveras County

Short Story by Mark Twain



RL 3, RL 4, L 1a, L 5a

● TEXT ANALYSIS: TALL TALE

The **tall tale** is a distinctively American form of storytelling featuring outlandish characters and events, often with a comic effect. Based on oral tradition, the tall tale generally aims to fool or impress the listener or reader, using various devices. Look for these techniques and consider their impact:

- **Hyperbole**—a figure of speech exaggerating or overstating a claim or point
- **Understatement**—the technique of downplaying the significance of the outlandish, often to ironic or humorous effect
- **Local color**—writing that brings a region alive by portraying its dress, mannerisms, customs, character types, and speech

■ READING SKILL: UNDERSTAND DIALECT

Dialect is the distinct form of a language spoken in one geographic area or by a particular group. Writers use dialect to establish setting, provide local color, and develop characters. In this story, Twain uses a frontier dialect. Because of its unfamiliar usage, idioms, and strange spellings, dialect can be challenging to read. These strategies will help:

- **Read slowly**—Try reading aloud to help you recognize words you may have heard but don't normally see in print.
- **Use context clues**—When Twain writes, "You'd see that frog whirling in the air like a doughnut—see him turn one summerset," context tells you that *summerset* must mean the same as *somersault*.

As you read, jot down unfamiliar words and what you think they mean.

▲ VOCABULARY IN CONTEXT

Which of the following words do you know? Write definitions for the words and then check the definitions as you read.

WORD LIST	cavorting	enterprising	infamous
	conjecture	garrulous	tranquil
	dilapidated	indifferent	

Can you spot a TALL TALE?

You listen to a friend recount the events of the weekend and you're pretty sure the story is way too wild to be true. You hear a politician describe great accomplishments and you just know it's a stretch. These situations inspire the skepticism you need to read about a frog that turns somersaults.

DISCUSS Work with a small group to play the game "Two Truths and a Lie." Take a few minutes for each of you to come up with two truths and one lie. The statements can be about anything from personal experience to oddball facts. Take turns sharing statements. Can you guess which are the lies and which are the truths? Compare your answers and explain what made you believe or disbelieve each statement.



Complete the activities in your **Reader/Writer Notebook**.

The Notorious JUMPING FROG of Calaveras County

Mark Twain

BACKGROUND Twain got the idea for this story during his days panning for gold in California. Local storytellers told this tale without cracking a smile, teaching Twain two important lessons about humor: one, that the manner in which a person tells a story is what makes it funny, and two, that a humorist should always pretend to be dead serious.

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 append¹ 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 to death with some exasperating reminiscence of him as long and as tedious as it should be useless to me. If that was the design, it succeeded.

Analyze Visuals ►

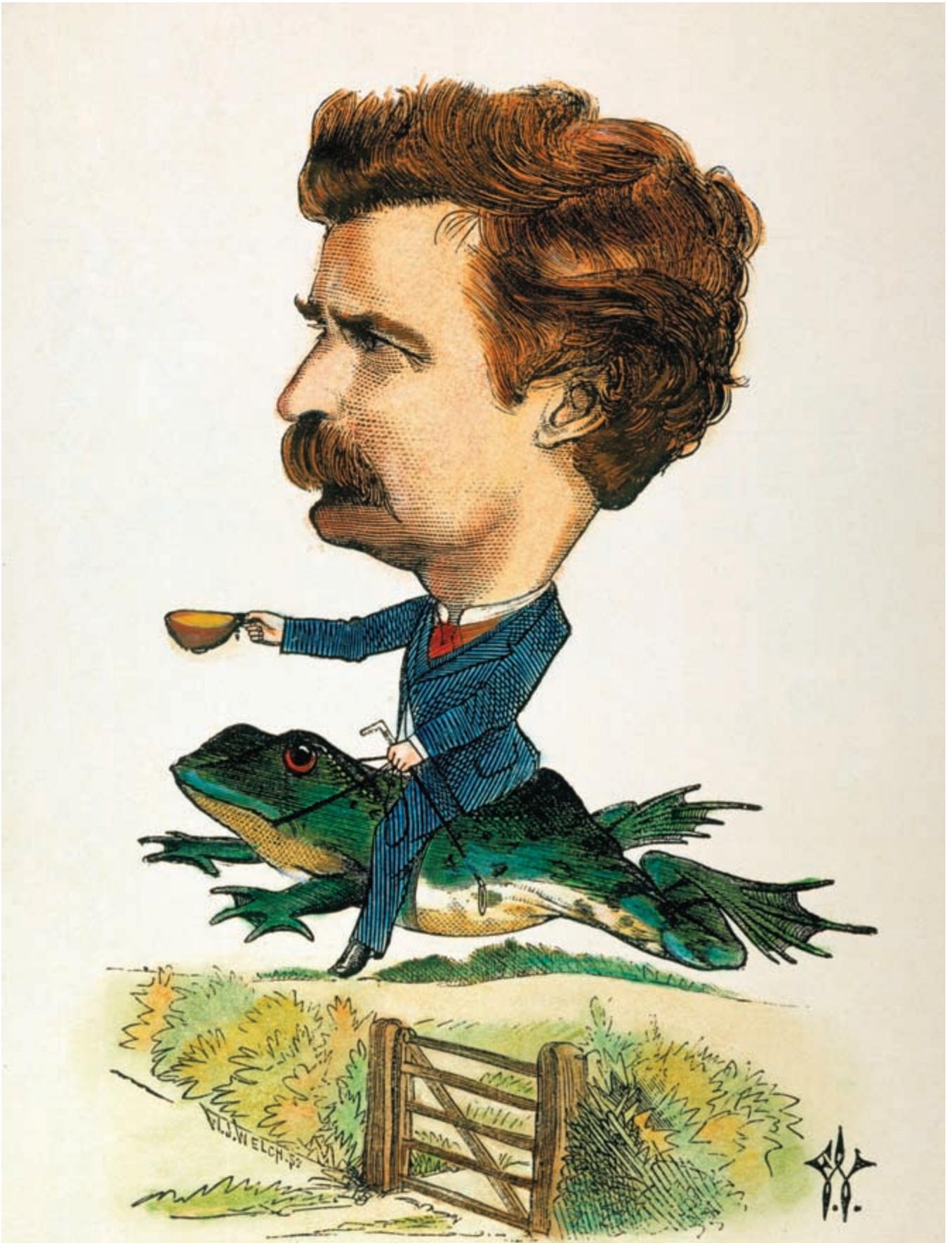
What techniques in this illustration can be compared with the storytelling techniques of a tall tale? Explain.

garrulous (gǎr'ə-ləs) *adj.*
extremely talkative

conjecture (kən-jěk'chər)
v. to guess

infamous (ɪn'fə-məs)
adj. having a very bad reputation; disgraceful

1. **hereunto append**: add to this document.



10 I found Simon Wheeler dozing comfortably by the barroom stove of the **dilapidated** tavern in the decayed mining camp of Angel's, and I noticed that he was fat and baldheaded and had an expression of winning gentleness and simplicity upon his **tranquil** countenance. He roused up and gave me good day. I told him that 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, 20 and then sat 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 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*.² I let him go on in his own way and never interrupted him once.

“Rev. Leonidas W. H'm, Reverend Le—Well, there was a feller here once by 30 the name of *Jim Smiley*, in the winter of '49—or maybe it was the spring of '50—I don't recollect exactly, somehow, though what makes me think it was one or the other is because I remember the big flume³ warn't finished when he first come to the camp; but anyway, he was the curiouset man about always betting on anything that turned up you ever see, if he could get anybody to bet on the other side, and if he couldn't he'd change sides. 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. He was always ready and laying for a chance; there couldn't be no solit'ry thing mentioned but that 40 feller'd offer to bet on it and take ary side you please, as I was just telling you. If there was a horse race, you'd find him flush or you'd find him busted at the end of it; if there was a dogfight, he'd bet on it; if there was a cat fight, he'd bet on it; if there was a chicken fight, he'd bet on it; why, if there was two birds setting on a fence, he would bet you which one would fly first; or if there was a camp meeting, he would be there reg'lar to bet on Parson Walker, which he judged to be the best exhorter about here, and so he was too, and a good man. If he even see a straddlebug⁴ start to go anywheres, he would bet you how long it would take him to get to—to wherever he was going to, and if you took him up, he would foller that straddlebug to Mexico but what he would find out where he was bound for and how long he was on the road. Lots of the boys here has seen that Smiley and 50 can tell you about him. Why, it never made no difference to *him*—he'd bet on

dilapidated
(dĭ-lăp'ĭ-dā'tĭd) *adj.*
in a state of disrepair;
rundown **dilapidate** *v.*

tranquil (trăng'kwəl) *adj.*
undisturbed; peaceful

Language Coach

Word Definitions

Monotonous (line 20) means “having little variety in tone or pitch.” Reread lines 21–23. What surrounding words and phrases hint at the meaning of *monotonous*?

COMMON CORE L 5a

TALL TALE

In his tall tales, Twain perfected a mixture of humor and exaggeration that calls on readers to go along with wildly unbelievable events. The characteristics of the tall tale that we see in Twain's story can also be found in comic-book superhero films. What are some examples of tall tales that you have enjoyed recently in novels, plays, or movies?

2. **men of . . . finesse**: exceptionally brilliant men.

3. **flume**: a wooden trough built as a channel for running water—used in gold mining for separating particles of gold.

4. **straddlebug**: a long-legged beetle.

any thing—the dangdest feller. 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 inf’nite mercy—and coming on so smart that with the blessing of Prov’dence she’d get well yet; and Smiley, before he thought, says, ‘Well, I’ll resk two-and-a-half she don’t anyway.’ **B**

“Thish-yer Smiley had a mare—the boys called her the fifteen-minute nag but that was only in fun, you know, because of course she was faster than that—and he used to win money on that horse, for all she was so slow and always had the
60 asthma, or the distemper, or the consumption,⁵ or something of that kind. They used to give her two or three hundred yards’ start and then pass her under way, but always at the fag end⁶ of the race she’d get excited and desperatelike, 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.⁷

“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
70 something. But as soon as money was up on him he was a different dog; his underjaw’d begin to stick out like the fo’castle⁸ of a steamboat and his teeth would uncover and shine like the furnaces. And a dog might tackle him and bullyrag⁹ him, and bite him and throw him over his shoulder two or three times, and Andrew Jackson—which was the name of the pup—Andrew Jackson would never let on but what *he* was satisfied and hadn’t expected nothing else—and the bets being doubled and doubled on the other side all the time, till the money was all up; and then all of a sudden he would grab that other dog jest by the j’int of his hind leg and freeze to it—not chew, you understand, but only just grip and hang on till they throwed
80 up the sponge,¹⁰ if it was a year. Smiley always come out winner on that pup till he harnessed a dog once that didn’t have no hind legs, because they’d been sawed off in a circular saw, and when the thing had gone along far enough and the money was all up and he come to make a snatch for his pet holt,¹¹ he see in a minute how he’d been imposed on and how the other dog had him in the door, so to speak, and he ’peared surprised, and then he looked sorter discouragedlike and didn’t try no more to win the fight, and so he got shucked out bad. He give Smiley a look, as much as to say his heart was broke, and it was *his* fault for putting up a dog that hadn’t no hind legs for him to take holt of, which was his main dependence in a fight, and

B DIALECT

Paraphrase the passage written in dialect in lines 29–56. What point is Simon Wheeler making about Smiley?

cavorting (kə-vôr’tĭng)
adj. prancing about in a playful manner **cavort** *v.*

COMMON CORE L1a

Language Coach

Regional Dialects Reread lines 57–67, paying special attention to the dialect. As noted on page 683, Twain uses frontier dialect in this story to reflect the usage and pronunciations conventional to a certain group of people. Using the Internet or a history of the English language—a historical reference book that discusses the origins and uses of English—make a list of regional dialects in the United States.

5. **distemper . . . consumption:** Distemper is a viral disease caught by dogs and other four-legged mammals. Consumption is an old-fashioned name for tuberculosis.

6. **fag end:** final part.

7. **cipher** (sī’fēr) **it down:** calculate it; figure it.

8. **fo’castle** (fōk’səl): forecastle—here, the protruding front deck of a steamboat.

9. **bullyrag:** harass.

10. **throwed up the sponge:** gave up.

11. **pet holt:** favorite grip.

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 hisself if he'd lived, for the stuff
90 was in him and he had genius—I know 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. It always makes me feel sorry when I think of that last fight of his'n and the way it turned out. **C**

“Well, thish-yer Smiley had rat terriers, and chicken cocks, and tomcats and all them kind of things till you couldn't rest, and you couldn't fetch nothing for him to bet on but he'd match you. He ketched a frog one day and took him home, and said he cal'lated¹² to educate 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 you he *did* learn him, too. He'd give him a little punch behind, and the next minute you'd see that
100 frog whirling in the air like a doughnut—see him turn one summerset, or maybe a couple if he got a good start, and come down flatfooted and all right, like a cat. He got him up so in the matter of ketching flies, and kep' him in practice so constant, that he'd nail a fly every time as fur as he could see him. Smiley said all a frog wanted was education and he could do 'most anything—and I believe him. Why, I've seen him set Dan'l Webster down here on this floor—Dan'l Webster was the name of the frog—and sing out, ‘Flies, Dan'l, flies!’ and quicker'n you could wink he'd spring straight up and snake a fly off'n the counter there, and flop down on the floor ag'in as solid as a gob of mud, and fall to scratching the side of his head with his hind foot as **indifferent** as if he hadn't no idea he'd been doin' any more'n
110 any frog might do. You never see a frog so modest and straight-for'ard as he was, for all he was so gifted. And when it come to fair and square jumping on a dead level, he could get over more ground at one straddle than any animal of his breed you ever see. Jumping on a dead level was his strong suit, you understand; and when it come to that, Smiley would ante up money on him as long as he had a red.¹³ Smiley was monstrous proud of his frog, and well he might be for fellers that had traveled and been everywheres all said he laid over any frog that ever *they* see. **D**

“Well, Smiley kep' the beast in a little lattice box, and he used to fetch him downtown sometimes and lay for a bet. One day a feller—a stranger in the camp, he was—come acrost him with his box and says:

120 “‘What might it be that you've got in the box?’

“And Smiley says, sorter indifferent-like, ‘It might be a parrot, or it might be a canary, maybe, but it ain't—it's only just a frog.’

“And the feller took it and looked at it careful, and turned it round this way and that, and says, ‘H'm—so 'tis. Well, what's *he* good for?’

“‘Well,’ Smiley says, easy and careless, ‘he's good enough for *one* thing, I should judge—he can outjump any frog in Calaveras County.’

“The feller took the box again and took another long, particular look, and give it back to Smiley and says, very deliberate, ‘Well,’ he says, ‘I don't see no p'int¹⁴ about that frog that's any better'n any other frog.’

C TALL TALE

Reread lines 68–93. What device characteristic of the tall tale is on display in this paragraph?

indifferent (ín-díf'ér-ent)
adj. having no particular interest

D DIALECT

Reread lines 110–111. How does the dialect in this sentence, and throughout the paragraph, help to characterize the frog?

12. **cal'lated**: calculated; intended.

13. **a red**: a red cent (slang for a penny).

14. **p'int**: points.



Frog of Calaveras County. The Granger Collection, New York.

130 “‘Maybe you don’t,’ Smiley says. ‘Maybe you understand ’em; maybe you don’t understand ’em; maybe you’ve had experience and maybe you ain’t only a amateur, as it were. Anyways, I’ve got *my* opinion, and I’ll resk forty dollars that he can outjump any frog in Calaveras County.’

“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.’

“And then Smiley says, ‘That’s all right—that’s all right—if you’ll hold my box a minute, I’ll go and get you a frog.’ And so the feller took the box and put up his forty dollars along with Smiley’s, and set down to wait. **E**

140 “So he set there a good while thinking and thinking to himself, and then he got the frog out and prized his mouth open and took a teaspoon and filled him full of quail shot¹⁵—filled him pretty near up to his chin—and set him on the floor. Smiley he went to the swamp and slopped around in the mud for a long time, and finally he ketched a frog and fetched him in and give him to this feller, and says:

“‘Now, if you’re ready, set him alongside of Dan’l, with his forepaws just even with Dan’l’s, and I’ll give the word.’ Then he says, ‘One—two—three—*git!*’ and him and the feller touched up the frogs from behind, and the new frog hopped off

E TALL TALE

Reread the dialogue in lines 120–138. What does the straightfaced understatement reveal about the two characters?

15. **quail shot:** small lead pellets for firing from a shotgun.

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. Smiley was a good deal
150 surprised, and he was disgusted too, but he didn't have no idea what the matter was, of course. **F**

“The feller took the money and started away, and when he was going out at the door, he sorter jerked his thumb over his shoulder—so—at Dan'l and says again, very deliberate, ‘Well,’ he says, ‘I don't see no p'int about that frog that's any better'n any other frog.’

“Smiley he stood scratching his head and looking down at Dan'l a long time, and at last he says, ‘I do wonder what in the nation that frog throw'd off for—I wonder if there ain't something the matter with him—he 'pears to look mighty baggy, somehow.’ And he ketched Dan'l by the nap of the neck and hefted him,
160 and says, ‘Why, blame my cats if he don't weigh five pound!’ and turned him upside down and he belched out a double handful of shot. And then he see how it was, and he was the maddest man—he set the frog down and took out after that feller, but he never ketched him. And—”

[Here Simon Wheeler heard his name called from the front yard and got up to see what was wanted.] And turning to me as he moved away, he said: “Just set where you are, stranger, and rest easy—I ain't going to be gone a second.”

But, by your leave, I did not think that a continuation of the history of the **enterprising** vagabond *Jim* Smiley would be likely to afford me much information concerning the Rev. *Leonidas W.* Smiley and so I started away.

170 At the door I met the sociable Wheeler returning, and he buttonholed me and recommenced:¹⁶

“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—”

However, lacking both time and inclination, I did not wait to hear about the afflicted cow but took my leave. 

F **GRAMMAR AND STYLE**

Reread lines 144–151. Notice how Twain uses **coordinating conjunctions** and **dashes** to convey Simon's breathless retelling of the story.

enterprising
(ĕn'tər-prī'zīng) *adj.*
possessing imagination
and initiative



16. **buttonholed . . . recommenced:** detained me for conversation and began talking again.

Comprehension

1. **Recall** How does the narrator hear the story of the jumping frog?
2. **Recall** What is Smiley always willing to do?
3. **Summarize** What happens to Smiley’s frog?

Text Analysis

4. **Make Inferences About Characters** What can you infer about Jim Smiley based on each of the following examples?
 - Smiley betting on the health of the parson’s wife
 - Smiley spending three months teaching a frog to jump
 - Smiley studying why the frog couldn’t jump
5. **Understand Dialect** Review the dialect and translations you recorded as you read. In general, what does the use of dialect contribute to **characterization** and **setting** in this story? Cite specific examples.
6. **Analyze Overstatement** Simon Wheeler makes liberal use of overstatement, or hyperbole, in describing Jim Smiley; some of what he says is totally improbable, and some is simply a bit of a stretch. List several examples of overstatement and rate each on a scale of one to five, with five being the most outrageous. At any point, did your doubts prevent you from enjoying the story? Explain.
7. **Make Judgments About the Tall Tale** Twain sets this story in a **frame**—a story within a story—in which the first-person narrator asks about a man named Leonidas Smiley but gets a story about Jim Smiley instead. In the end, the narrator makes a show of going away disappointed. How does this device contribute to the impact of the tall tale? Explain how the story would have been different if the original first-person narrator had simply told the story in his own voice, or if Wheeler himself had been the first-person narrator. Do you think this frame is an effective technique? Why or why not?

Text Criticism

8. **Critical Interpretations** According to one critic, Twain’s organization of this tale “seems wholly directionless,” yet “actually it is carefully molded for climax.” Do you agree? Look back at the story and explain how the elaborate setup affects the impact of the story’s punchline. Use examples from the story to support your ideas.

Can you spot a TALL TALE?

A tall tale, like this one by Twain, usually makes people laugh because they know it’s not true. What stories and ideas in real life cause people to be skeptical? Do you think any of those stories have a basis in fact? Why or why not?

COMMON CORE

RL 3 Analyze the impact of the author’s choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story.

RL 4 Analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone.

RL 5 Analyze how an author’s choices concerning how to structure specific parts of a text contribute to its overall structure and meaning as well as its aesthetic impact. **L 1a** Apply the understanding that usage is a matter of convention. **L 5a** Interpret figures of speech in context and analyze their role in the text.

Vocabulary in Context

▲ VOCABULARY PRACTICE

Choose the word that is not related in meaning to the other words.

1. (a) dilapidated, (b) decaying, (c) neglected, (d) lonesome
2. (a) chatty, (b) argumentative, (c) garrulous, (d) verbose
3. (a) serene, (b) tranquil, (c) unhappy, (d) placid
4. (a) unusual, (b) infamous, (c) disreputable, (d) notorious
5. (a) comfort, (b) condolence, (c) consolation, (d) conjecture
6. (a) imaginative, (b) expensive, (c) enterprising, (d) resourceful
7. (a) unconcerned, (b) detached, (c) indifferent, (d) unnoticeable
8. (a) cavorting, (b) trembling, (c) shaking, (d) jarring

ACADEMIC VOCABULARY IN WRITING

• apparent • confine • expose • focus • perceive

Tall tales often **focus** on larger-than-life heroes and amazing exploits. In a short paragraph, discuss some modern-day people and events that could be made into tall tales. Be sure to include why you think the people and events are worthy of a tall tale. Use at least one Academic Vocabulary word in your paragraph.

VOCABULARY STRATEGY: THESAURI AND WORD KNOWLEDGE

A thesaurus is a reference book that helps you find specific, or precise, words for more general terms. In a thesaurus, words are arranged by their meanings and by their parts of speech rather than by alphabetical order, as in a dictionary. You can use a thesaurus to choose a specific word to show a subtle difference in meaning or to avoid monotony in your writing. For example, to replace the vocabulary word *infamous*, you could find *wrong*, *disreputable*, and *dishonorable*.

PRACTICE Use a thesaurus to identify the following words.

1. Three nouns you might use when talking about “wealth”
2. Two or three verbs related to the noun “flattery”
3. Words that could replace “middle” in referring to distance or space
4. Three adjectives to describe the feeling of being “cold”
5. Words to suggest what you might do rather than “advise”

WORD LIST

cavorting
conjecture
dilapidated
enterprising
garrulous
indifferent
infamous
tranquil

COMMON CORE

L4c Consult general and specialized reference materials to determine or clarify a word's precise meaning.

L5b Analyze nuances in the meaning of words with similar denotations. **L6** Acquire and use accurately general academic words and phrases.

Interactive Vocabulary **THINK** central

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Language

◆ GRAMMAR AND STYLE: Create Realistic Characters

Review the **Grammar and Style** note on page 690. Mark Twain creates convincing dialogue to help establish the character of Simon Wheeler. Look at this example from the story:

And a dog might tackle him and bullyrag him, and bite him and throw him over his shoulder two or three times, and Andrew Jackson—which was the name of the pup—Andrew Jackson would never let on but what he was satisfied and hadn't expected nothing else. . . . (lines 72–75)

Notice how Twain uses the highlighted **coordinating conjunctions** to reflect Simon's long, rambling sentences. He also uses **dashes** to show how Simon interrupts himself. Finally, the underlined word is **dialect**, showing that Simon is rooted in his local culture.

PRACTICE After you respond to the prompt below, rewrite the conversation in dialect. You may use either the same Western dialect that Twain uses or a dialect from a different place and time that is familiar to you. Make use of coordinating conjunctions, dashes, and regional vocabulary, as well as any special spellings or contractions that will help your reader “hear” the dialect as it would be spoken.

EXAMPLE

“My goodness! If I had known you felt that way about it, I never would have said anything in the first place.”

“Well, shut my mouth! If I'da known you felt that way 'bout it, I never woulda said nothin' in th' first place.”

READING-WRITING CONNECTION



Expand your understanding of Twain's writing by responding to this prompt. Then use the **revising tips** to improve your dialogue.

WRITING PROMPT

WRITE A DIALOGUE A **conversation** can reveal a great deal about its participants. Characters' words and gestures as well as the pace and flow of their speech all make a story's characters believable.

Write a **one-page conversation** between two real people or fictional characters. Like Twain, have them share amazing—and possibly exaggerated—experiences.

REVISING TIPS

- Start a new paragraph to indicate a change in speakers and to reflect the pacing of the conversation.
- Be sure to set punctuation, such as commas and periods, inside closing quotation marks.
- Use exaggeration and irony to make your experiences humorous.

COMMON CORE

L 1a Apply the understanding that usage is a matter of convention and can change over time.

L 2 Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English punctuation and spelling when writing. **W 3b** Use narrative techniques, such as dialogue and pacing, to develop characters.

Interactive
Revision

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