

Hoaxes as a Defamiliarized Humour in “The Celebrated Jumping Frog”

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Abstract: In “The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County”, Mark Twain deploys narrative deception to produce his signature defamiliarized humour. He utilizes hoaxes at multiple levels: the extradiegetic narrator frames Simon Wheeler’s intradiegetic storytelling as serious and authoritative, yet Wheeler’s digressive, repetitive, and earnest narration gradually undermines both narrator and reader expectations. In addition, Twain structures the story around anticlimax, inflating trivial events through prolonged buildup and solemn pacing, only to deliver inconsequential outcomes. These strategies destabilize conventional reading habits, delaying recognition and subverting anticipation, climax, and narrative authority. The humour emerges not from overt jokes but from the reader’s eventual awareness of the narrative artifice, making the story an exercise in perceptual estrangement. Twain’s tale thus exemplifies a form of comic defamiliarization where storytelling itself becomes the source of amusement.

Key words: Defamiliarization; Hoaxes; Humour; Mark Twain

Introduction

Narrated in the first person, “The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County” (hereafter “Jumping Frog”) constructs a layered hoax that implicates both narrator and reader. Sent to inquire about Leonidas W. Smiley, the narrator instead becomes trapped in Simon Wheeler’s interminable anecdote about Jim Smiley, an obsessive gambler whose seemingly extraordinary luck culminates in the training of a jumping frog. Wheeler’s deadpan seriousness, together with his digressive and repetitive narration, encourages the narrator and reader to search for significance in an increasingly absurd account. The hoax culminates when a stranger secretly fills the frog with quail shot, turning Smiley’s expected victory into an anticlimactic defeat. Twain thus juxtaposes solemn narration with trivial and absurd events, generating humour through the manipulation of expectation and narrative authority.

Previous scholarship has examined “Jumping Frog” from several related perspectives. Studies of Twainian humour have identified deception, surprise, and the gap between expectation and outcome as central to his comic technique. Other critics emphasize the story’s frame structure, arguing that the interaction between the outer narrator and Wheeler produces a comic redistribution of narrative authority. Scholarship on anticlimax and defamiliarization further demonstrates how prolonged buildup, delayed information, and abrupt reversal disrupt habitual expectations and intensify comic effects. These studies establish deception, layered narration, and anticlimax as important components of Twain’s humour, but they have rarely been examined as interconnected forms of hoax that estrange the reader’s habitual mode of narrative perception.

This article argues that Twain constructs humour through two interconnected hoaxes. The first operates within the layered narration: the extradiegetic narrator’s limited perspective and Wheeler’s seemingly authoritative storytelling

restrict the reader's access to narrative knowledge, making narrative authority itself an object of uncertainty. The second operates through anticlimax and the deferral of anticipation: Twain prolongs narrative buildup and encourages expectations of meaningful resolution only to frustrate them with trivial or absurd outcomes. Together, these strategies produce defamiliarized humour by delaying recognition and disrupting habitual expectations about narrative authority, coherence, and payoff. The article therefore examines how hoaxes function not merely as deception within the story but as a formal strategy through which Twain makes the familiar act of storytelling strange and comic.

1. Hoaxes through Unreliable Extradiegetic and Intradiegetic Narrative

In narratology, diegesis refers to the hierarchical levels through which a narrative is produced and embedded. Genette distinguishes between the extradiegetic level, where the first narrative is told from outside the story world, and the intradiegetic level, where characters within that narrative can themselves become narrators (Genette 228). A further metadiegetic level occurs when an intradiegetic narrator tells another story within the primary narrative (Genette 232). Such layering creates distance between the act of narration and the events narrated, allowing narrative authority to be established, transferred, and manipulated.

"Jumping Frog" exploits this structure through the interaction between the unnamed extradiegetic narrator and Simon Wheeler's intradiegetic storytelling. The story initially establishes the authority of the outer narrator, who explains his visit to Wheeler: "I called on good-natured, garrulous old Simon Wheeler, and inquired after my friend's friend, Leonidas W. Smiley" (Twain 5). His controlled and reflective voice provides a seemingly stable frame for Wheeler's subsequent account. When Wheeler begins, however, the narrative shifts into an embedded story: "There was a feller here once by the name of Jim Smiley, in the winter of '49 or maybe it was the spring of '50, I don't recollect exactly..." (Twain 7). Wheeler's colloquial, repetitive, and digressive speech contrasts sharply with the outer narrator's controlled style. Yet his uncertainty about dates does not weaken his authority. His "impressive earnestness and sincerity" (Twain 6) instead encourages the narrator and reader to treat his increasingly absurd account as meaningful.

The significance of this layered structure lies not simply in the presence of a "story-within-a-story," but in its redistribution of narrative authority. Once Wheeler begins speaking, the outer narrator has little access to information beyond what Wheeler provides. Neither he nor the reader occupies an external position from which Wheeler's account can be evaluated in advance. Wheeler therefore temporarily commandeers the narrative space, while his digressive narration continually delays the clarification of meaning. His description of Smiley's horse illustrates this process: the mare suffers from "the asthma, or the distemper, or the consumption, or something of that kind," yet remains useful for betting (Twain 8). The accumulation of qualifications creates an excess of detail without establishing clear significance. Narrative information is continually extended rather than resolved.

This restriction of knowledge is central to the hoax because it makes narrative authority itself unstable. Booth defines unreliable narration through a divergence between the narrator's presentation and the norms against which readers evaluate it (Booth 158–59). Rabinowitz further emphasizes that unreliability concerns the narrator's relationship with the narrative audience: a narrator may "tell lies, conceal information, [or] misjudge" in relation to that audience (134). In "Jumping Frog," Wheeler's unreliability does not arise primarily from explicit falsehoods. Rather, it emerges from the disproportion between his solemn presentation and the triviality or absurdity of the events he recounts. His narration therefore induces the reader to assign significance to details that ultimately prove inconsequential.

The frog episode intensifies this manipulation. Wheeler's narration accelerates through a sequence of actions connected by repeated conjunctions: "And then he see how it was... And—" (Twain 14). The repeated "And" sustains narrative momentum while postponing interpretation. Just when anticipation reaches its peak, the narration is interrupted: "[Here Simon Wheeler heard his name called from the front yard, and got up to see what was wanted.]" (Twain 14). The interruption abruptly returns control to the extradiegetic level. Wheeler's authority, which has gradually displaced that of the outer narrator, is suddenly suspended.

The final exchange exposes the instability of this authority. Wheeler immediately begins another anecdote—"thishyer Smiley had a yeller one-eyed cow" (Twain 15)—as though his storytelling were entitled to continue indefinitely.

The outer narrator finally interrupts: “Oh! hang Smiley and his afflicted cow!” (Twain 15). His irritation terminates Wheeler’s narrative and reveals how thoroughly the outer narrator has been drawn into the storyteller’s logic. What began as a seemingly purposeful inquiry has become an experience of narrative entrapment.

The hoax therefore operates as a gradual transfer and subsequent disruption of narrative authority. The extradiegetic narrator initially appears to control the story, but Wheeler’s earnestness and digressive narration gradually make the intradiegetic level dominant. Because the outer narrator lacks independent access to the events, he shares the reader’s restricted epistemic position and is unable to anticipate the eventual joke. Only when Wheeler’s story is interrupted does the extent of this narrative manipulation become apparent. Twain thus turns the layered narrative structure itself into a hoax: both narrator and reader are led to invest attention in Wheeler’s account before recognizing that their confidence in its authority has been deliberately exploited. The humour consequently arises not only from the absurdity of Smiley’s defeat but from the delayed recognition of how completely the narrative has controlled their expectations.

2. Hoaxes through Anticlimax and Deferral of Anticipation

Anticlimax is a narrative strategy that deliberately descends from the serious or elevated to the trivial or inconsequential, often producing a comic effect. Abrams defines it as “a writer’s deliberate drop from the serious and elevated to the trivial and lowly in order to achieve a comic or satiric effect” (28). Its comic force depends on a disparity between accumulated expectation and subsequent outcome: the narrative encourages readers to anticipate a significant resolution only to replace it with an unexpectedly minor or absurd one. Anticlimax therefore functions not merely as a concluding joke but as a means of manipulating narrative pacing and reader expectation.

Twain’s use of anticlimax is closely connected to the anticipation generated by the story’s layered narration. At the beginning, the extradiegetic narrator prepares the reader for Wheeler’s account by anticipating an excessively long but ostensibly meaningful anecdote, warning that asking about Smiley would “bore me nearly to death with some infernal reminiscence of him as long and tedious as it should be useless to me” (Twain 5). The remark establishes both skepticism and expectation: although the narrator anticipates tedium, the reader is encouraged to assume that the forthcoming story will nevertheless contain some point worth discovering.

Wheeler’s narration then prolongs this expectation through accumulation and delay. His description of the frog’s preparation is deliberately extended through a chain of actions: “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 tea-spoon and filled him full of quail shot filled him pretty near up to his chin and set him on the floor” (Twain 13). The repeated conjunctions and excessive details slow the narrative while implying that the elaborate preparation will lead to a significant payoff. Yet the expected spectacle never materializes. Instead, Smiley looks at the frog in confusion: “I do wonder what in the nation that frog throw’d off ... he ‘pears to look mighty baggy, somehow” (Twain 14). The anticipated triumph is reduced to the trivial observation that the frog appears “baggy.” The prolonged buildup therefore collapses into an inconsequential outcome, producing humour through disproportion.

This pattern extends beyond the frog episode. Wheeler repeatedly devotes extensive narrative attention to minor bets, animals, and incidental events, giving them an importance that their outcomes do not warrant. His digressive narration continually raises the possibility of a meaningful resolution while postponing or abandoning it. Anticipation thus becomes part of the hoax: the reader is encouraged to invest attention in the expectation that each accumulation of detail will eventually yield a clear narrative payoff. Instead, Twain repeatedly converts narrative investment into comic deflation.

The mechanism can be understood through Genette’s concept of anticipation, particularly prolepsis, which refers to a narrative movement “going forward to the future with respect to the ‘present’ moment” (Genette 67). More important than explicit flashforward in “Jumping Frog,” however, is Twain’s manipulation of narrative time to create a prospective orientation. By controlling the order, duration, and emphasis of information, the narrative directs readers toward events that have not yet occurred and encourages them to anticipate their significance. Twain then exploits this expectation through delay rather than direct revelation.

The interaction between the two narrative levels intensifies this process. The extradiegetic narrator initially establishes a measured framework, describing Wheeler as sitting by the stove with “winning gentleness and simplicity” (Twain 5–6), while Wheeler’s vernacular narration becomes increasingly accumulative and digressive. The contrast between the narrator’s restraint and Wheeler’s excessive detail makes the latter’s account appear to be moving toward an important climax. Wheeler even “backed [the narrator] into a corner and blockaded him there with his chair” before beginning his story (Twain 6), turning narrative control into a physical and rhetorical constraint. The narrator and reader are therefore compelled to follow Wheeler’s pace, while each repetition and digression postpones resolution.

The frog episode provides the clearest realization of this strategy. Wheeler’s narration reaches its greatest intensity precisely when the anticipated climax is approaching, only to be interrupted by his sudden departure when his name is called from outside (Twain 14). The interruption itself becomes part of the anticlimax: narrative tension is not resolved through a grand conclusion but through an ordinary interruption. When Wheeler immediately begins another anecdote about Smiley’s “yeller one-eyed cow” (Twain 15), the outer narrator finally rejects the endless cycle with “Oh! hang Smiley and his afflicted cow!” (Twain 15). The reaction exposes the mechanism that has governed the narrative from the beginning: the apparent promise of significance has repeatedly been used to sustain attention without delivering conventional resolution.

Anticlimax and deferral therefore constitute a second form of hoax. While the first hoax destabilizes narrative authority by allowing Wheeler to control the reader’s access to information, this hoax manipulates the reader’s expectation of narrative payoff. Twain repeatedly builds anticipation, extends perception through digression, and then substitutes triviality for culmination. The humour emerges from this disproportion between narrative investment and outcome, as readers recognize that the seriousness of the buildup has itself been part of the deception.

3. Defamiliarized Humour through Layered Hoaxes

Defamiliarization, formulated by Viktor Shklovsky in “Art as Technique,” refers to the disruption of habitual perception through which familiar objects, actions, and forms become automatic. Shklovsky argues that “the purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known,” and that art makes objects “unfamiliar” by increasing “the difficulty and length of perception” (16). Defamiliarization therefore does not necessarily require unfamiliar content; rather, it alters the way familiar content is perceived. In narrative, this effect can be produced through formal disruptions that delay comprehension, frustrate expectations, or draw attention to the mechanisms through which a story is understood.

The two hoaxing strategies examined above, unreliable narration across diegetic levels and anticlimactic deferral of anticipation, operate precisely in this way. They do not merely deceive the reader about what happens in the story. More significantly, they disrupt habitual assumptions about how a story should communicate meaning. Twain makes the familiar act of listening to a story strange by combining prolonged seriousness, excessive detail, restricted information, and delayed recognition. The humour consequently emerges not from a conventional punchline alone but from the reader’s gradual realization that the narrative process itself has been manipulated.

The first hoax defamiliarizes narrative authority. At the beginning, the extradiegetic narrator appears to provide a stable framework through which Wheeler’s account can be understood. Once Wheeler begins speaking, however, his intradiegetic narration gradually takes control of the narrative space. His digressive and accumulative style encourages the reader to treat even trivial details as potentially significant. The description of Smiley’s horse, for example, accumulates ailments—“the asthma, or the distemper, or the consumption, or something of that kind” (Twain 8)—without providing a clear reason for their relevance. The excessive detail prolongs perception while delaying interpretation.

This delayed recognition is essential to the comic effect. Wheeler’s unreliability is not immediately exposed as a simple falsehood; instead, the reader is required to remain within his mode of narration. The solemnity of his delivery creates an expectation of narrative significance, while the absurdity of his content gradually undermines that expectation. When the frog episode reveals the trick played on Smiley, earlier details acquire a different significance. The reader

retrospectively recognizes that the seriousness, repetition, and accumulation that had seemed to promise narrative importance were themselves part of the hoax. Twain thus makes the reader's trust in narrative authority an object of perception.

The second hoax extends this defamiliarization through anticlimax and deferred anticipation. Twain repeatedly gives trivial events disproportionate narrative attention, encouraging readers to expect a meaningful climax. The frog episode provides the clearest example. Wheeler carefully describes the preparation of the frog, filling it with quail shot and placing it on the floor (Twain 13), thereby extending the moment before the expected contest. Yet the anticipated spectacle collapses when Smiley notices only that the frog "‘pears to look mighty baggy" (Twain 14). The extensive buildup produces an outcome that is physically and narratively underwhelming. The comic effect arises from the discrepancy between the reader's investment in the event and its trivial resolution.

This mechanism makes anticipation itself perceptible. Readers ordinarily follow narrative progression with the assumption that buildup will lead toward meaningful resolution. Twain frustrates this assumption by repeatedly delaying the expected payoff. Wheeler's digressions, repetitions, and excessive details extend the time required to reach an outcome, while the eventual outcome fails to justify the importance suggested by the buildup. The reader is therefore made conscious of a normally invisible process: the expectation that narrative prominence should correspond to narrative significance.

The two hoaxes consequently converge in producing a distinctly defamiliarized form of humour. The first disrupts expectations about who can be trusted to tell a story; the second disrupts expectations about where a story is supposed to lead. In both cases, Twain prolongs the reader's engagement before allowing recognition to occur. The humour emerges at the moment when the reader realizes that both narrative authority and narrative payoff have been constructed as traps. What initially appears to be a serious account is revealed as an elaborate exercise in misdirection, while what appears to be a carefully prepared climax dissolves into absurd triviality.

Importantly, Wheeler need not be understood as a consciously deceptive storyteller for the hoax to function. The reader is implicated regardless of whether Wheeler is deliberately misleading or simply committed to his own manner of storytelling. What matters is that the reader assumes that his anecdotes should possess coherence, significance, and eventual payoff. Twain exploits these assumptions by allowing the narration to continue long enough for them to become visible. Thus, the humour of "Jumping Frog" lies not simply in being deceived but in recognizing the conditions of that deception.

In this sense, Twain's hoax is itself a technique of defamiliarization. By delaying recognition and disrupting expectations about authority, coherence, and climax, he makes the familiar act of narrative comprehension strange. The reader does not merely encounter an absurd story; the reader becomes aware of the habits that normally make storytelling appear coherent and meaningful. Humour emerges from this delayed awareness: the recognition that one has been led to expect significance where Twain has deliberately prepared only a joke.

Conclusion

This article has examined how Mark Twain constructs defamiliarized humour in "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County" through two interconnected hoaxes. The first operates through the layered narration of the extradiegetic narrator and Simon Wheeler, whose shifting narrative authority restricts the reader's access to knowledge and delays recognition of Wheeler's unreliability. The second operates through anticlimax and deferred anticipation: Twain repeatedly extends narrative buildup and encourages expectations of meaningful resolution before reducing them to trivial or absurd outcomes. These strategies transform narrative authority and reader expectation into mechanisms of deception.

The comic effect therefore lies not simply in the absurdity of Smiley's defeat but in the reader's gradual recognition of having been led by the narrative. Twain's serious tone, accumulative detail, digression, and delayed resolution prolong perception and disrupt habitual assumptions about coherence, significance, and narrative payoff. This process accords with Shklovsky's concept of defamiliarization, in which art extends perception by making familiar forms

difficult to apprehend automatically (16). In “Jumping Frog,” the familiar act of listening to and interpreting a story becomes strange because its conventions are deliberately manipulated. Humour emerges when readers recognize this manipulation and become aware of their own expectations as part of the hoax.

Twain thus makes storytelling itself the object of comic perception. By turning narrative authority and anticipation into sources of deception, he demonstrates how humour can arise from the formal disruption of reading habits rather than from an isolated punchline. The story’s enduring comic force lies precisely in this delayed recognition: readers laugh not only at what happens to Smiley but at how successfully the narrative has made them expect something else.

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