

ANALYSIS

McTeague (1899)

Frank Norris

(1870—1902)

“There is no need of apology in dealing with *McTeague*. In it is some of the best work Norris ever did.... It is inexorable in its unrelenting lifelikeness.... It is gray, gray and cold, in tone.... Norris’s interest was not that of the ethical teacher, the reformer who turns on the light. He rejoiced in *McTeague* and Trina as terms in a literary theorem. Their suffering leads to no conclusions. They are in the book because they appealed to his dramatic sense, his love for character. This book is without direct prototype. You may say it reminds you of Flaubert in treatment, or of Zola in theme, but in reality it is without fellow. Its originality is unquestionable.”

Hamlin Garland
Critic (March 1903) 216

“The first considerable contribution to Naturalism by an American writer. His carefully written work over which he labored five years. Theme: A study in character disintegration that follows upon economic pressure. The unmaking of a man and woman by the caprice of events. The characters are simple. *McTeague* is heavy and stupid, slow in his movements but a blind bull when aroused. Trina neat and pretty but with unhappy potentialities in her thrift. In neither is there a will-to-power strong enough to give strength of character.

The Note of Determinism: A world of chance that victimizes them. The note struck by the lottery and the \$5,000. By chance *McTeague* became a dentist, met Trina, proposed. But the chance that was making a man of him and a woman of Trina was preparing their downfall through Marcus Schouler. The wrestling-match was the turning-point. The two disintegrate together, each aggravating the weakness of the other. As Trina’s neatness was pulling Mac up and making him self-respecting, so her thrift grew into miserliness under pressure of his failure to provide, and this embittered the essentially fair and generous nature of Mac.

Inner Drives: Little sex in the book after the first complication. Both Mac and Trina caught unexpectedly, yet handled differently. The latter pure Naturalism.... But in *McTeague*, oddly enough, the same instinct is judged and pronounced evil.... The entire handling of sex in Trina, from the first frightened yielding to the later docile submission to Mac’s brutality, his sadism, is admirably handled from the point of view of modern psychology. Norris was not a psychologist but in this he succeeded surprisingly.

Romantic Elements: Yet even in this severe study Norris has yielded to his romantic tendencies. (1) His patent effort to give dramatic unity to the whole through the symbol of gold. An exaggeration that is almost Dickens-like, with its warping singleness. The gold tooth, the \$5,000, Trina’s twenty-dollar gold pieces, the imaginary gold plate of Maria Macapa, the absurd canary in the gilt cage, the discovery of the gold mine. The wonder is that he didn’t give Trina gold hair instead of black. (2) The use of a minor action: Maria Macapa and old Zerkow. The same pursuit of a phantom and the same outcome in murder. *McTeague* and Trina are real; Maria and Zerkow are grotesques. (3) The use of foils: Old Grannis and Miss Baker. Justified in romantic literature by contrast. The self-effacing, timid drawing together contrasted with the brute directness of *McTeague*. They do not marry, and preserve their dream world. (4) The use of the revenge motive: Marcus Schouler—the dramatic pursuit into Death Valley and the end.”

Vernon L. Parrington
Main Currents in American Thought III
(Harcourt 1927,1930) 330-32

“*McTeague*, a strong but stupid San Francisco dentist, marries Trina Sieppe, having met her through Marcus Schouler, her cousin and his friend. Trina wins \$5,000 in a lottery, and by careful saving,

investment, and shrewd deception increases the sum. Schouler, who formerly hoped to marry Trina, feels he has been cheated of this fortune. In revenge, he exposes McTeague's lack of either diploma or license, so that, forbidden to practice, he becomes mean and surly. Trina, grown miserly, refuses to let him use her money, and they sink into poverty. Greed, the motive underlying these events, also dominates the two figures of the subplot, Maria Macapa, a mad charwoman, and Zerkow, a Jewish junk dealer; fascinated by her obsession with a set of gold plate, he marries her, becomes insane, kills her, and commits suicide. Meanwhile, McTeague has deserted Trina, stealing some of her savings. In an attempt to obtain the remainder, he murders her. Fleeing, he tries to cross Death Valley, where he is apprehended by Schouler. McTeague kills his captor, but before he dies the latter manages to handcuff their wrists together, so that McTeague is doomed to die of thirst, locked to the body of his enemy."

James D. Hart
The Oxford Companion to American Literature 5th edition
(Oxford 1941-83)

"*McTeague* (1899) was his first sustained experiment in fiction. This novel and *Vandover and the Brute* (1914)...follow the Zola formula strictly but, in spirit if not always in execution, are sincere explorations of his own experience rather than imitations. The one a story of a Polk Street dentist, the other of a privileged youth of his own class, they are both studies of slow degeneration through an overwhelming of the finer instincts and aspirations by the suppressed brute Nature. McTeague has all the physical and mental characteristics of the brute, but he is harmless—almost admirable—in his childish acceptance of life. But he and Trina, his 'mate-woman' as Jack London would have called her, relapse atavistically into avarice, as Norris notes step by step the slow inroads of poverty, the creeping degeneration of all his principal characters. The inherent ugliness of life, the gold symbols of aspiration—false because merely material—the dual nature of man, are examined with ruthless power. Up to the magnificently restrained scene of the murder the novel is a unified masterpiece of Naturalism, superior in execution to *Maggie*, unequalled for a generation in American literature. Even Dreiser is less successful in fundamental grasp of motivation and in sensuous description of significant details.

There are Romantic flaws: The love story of Old Grannis and Miss Baker, introduced into Norris' original plan with the valid intention of providing contrast but sentimentalized in the conventional fashion, and the melodramatic conclusion of pursuit and death in the desert—added later after the manuscript had long lain fallow—are the most striking. Both, however, are so well presented that they do not offend, and the total effect of the story is unified and powerful."

Robert E. Spiller
Literary History of the United States, 3rd edition
(Macmillan 1946-63) 1029

"Norris seems more Naturalistic in *McTeague* than he does in *The Octopus*, but this impression may be due merely to the more sordid character of his materials.... The grotesquerie of Maria Macapa's tragedy is, perhaps, more questionable because less realistic; and the difficulty with McTeague's symbolic canary—surely the hardiest bird in all literature!—is simply that one cannot believe in him. McTeague's 'sixth sense,' which warns him of approaching danger, also creates some difficulty.... *McTeague*, the story of the unlicensed dentist whose fiber collapses under adversity, while his pretty little wife is increasingly possessed by the lust of gold until we find her at last wallowing naked in a bed full of gold pieces while her estranged husband starves outside her window, is the prime manifestation of its particular kind of power in American literature before Dreiser. But Norris himself told Howells that he did not get the whole truth into *McTeague*, and he was right."

Edward Wagenknecht
Cavalcade of the American Novel
(Holt 1952) 219, 221

"McTeague, the hero of the book, is an illiterate dentist in San Francisco, an innocent animal-like man who falls victim to the corrupt ways of city life. In telling the story Norris sticks close to the heredity-environment-degeneration theme. Marcus Schouler, McTeague's supposed friend, informs the authorities that McTeague is practicing dentistry without a license. This activates the fatal forces of environment and heredity and starts the hero off on his undeviating path to disaster.

McTeague is Norris's best book, having all the hallmarks of young genius and forming in its crude way a genuine artwork. Like many American novels, *The Octopus* is all 'picture,' and the few 'scenes' we are given are perfunctory, with the exception of one or two that stick in the mind, like the ranch festival and accompanying jack-rabbit hunt, though even here everything is done with the wide brush. But *McTeague* has several closely observed and adequately dramatized scenes—even though others are so far overdramatized as to exceed the bounds of calculated distortion and to become self-parodies. But we do not easily forget McTeague in his Dental Parlors, the fight at the beach between McTeague and Trina, the evening at the vaudeville, McTeague's weird and brutal murder of Trina, nor, melodramatic as it is, the final death struggle between McTeague and Marcus. Norris had an eye for social behavior when he chose to use it—although his overt comments on human manners are likely to be banal ('no people have a keener eye for the amenities than those whose social position is not assured'). He often gets off passages of quiet and effective factual observation...

Having come to know McTeague and Trina in the circumstances of their ordinary lives, we are able to feel for them as their story unfolds. Thus they have an existence apart from the puppets they become as the pressure of their Fate, in the latter parts of the book, hurries them on to their annihilation. These scenes are more successful in telling us about the characters than are Norris's theoretical devices. One of these latter is the trick of giving everyone a sort of Darwinian double existence, so that on the surface people are domesticated and conventionalized, whereas underneath they are carnivorous beasts. In the Naturalistic novel the beast shows through the human exterior as in the older fiction the devil did; the modern Mephistopheles is a werewolf or, more likely, an apeman. There is a rampant animal imagery in *McTeague*, and often it occurs where people are being metaphorically hustled up and down the evolutionary ladder, between the animal and the human levels. There is a memorable moment in the book when, before she is married to McTeague, Trina reclines prettily in the dentist's chair. She is under ether, and McTeague's emotions are described thus: 'Suddenly the animal in the man stirred and woke; the evil instincts in him...'

To quote from the several passages of this sort is really unfair, because they tend to be rather trashy expressions of what, taking the book as a whole, is a satisfactory poetic metaphor. But it is certainly not much of a device of characterization. Nor are the pseudo-Homeric epithets Norris attaches to his people, repeating over and over again that Trina's hair is 'moist' and 'regal,' that her ear lobes are 'anemic' (though she herself does not seem to be), or that McTeague has 'the hands of the old car boy' (the boy, that is, who pushes cars in mine tunnels, as McTeague had done before learning dentistry). There is little attempt to characterize lesser figures like Zerkow, the junk man, and Maria Macapa, the demented Mexican woman whom Zerkow marries in the hope of finding a solid gold table service she crazily remembers as having been once in her family's possession. Zerkow and Maria are only slightly less absurd than the pathetic Dickensian comic lovers, Miss Baker and Old Grannis.

Over against the scenic realism and the characterization of the main figures, however, there is a powerful tendency towards abstraction. In *McTeague* the circuit of life between the real and the ideal often ceases to operate and the two fly wildly asunder. One reason for the abstractness that makes so notable a part of the book is that McTeague himself is semi-legendary; we should have to change our feeling about him if his name were Joe McTeague, say, instead of apparently just plain McTeague. He is of the confraternity of the blond beast, the 'Nietzschean' or 'Darwinian' Adam, so much admired by Norris and Jack London. In this respect McTeague is the spiritual father of mass-media heroes like Edgar Rice Burroughs's Tarzan. Also we feel blowing through the novel the cold ideology of the era of Herbert Spencer, as when Norris poetically exclaims of McTeague and Trina that 'chance had brought them face to face, and mysterious instincts as ungovernable as the winds of heaven were at work knitting their lives together.'

And we come to see that Norris is moved most deeply (this is more obvious in *The Octopus* than in *McTeague*) not by people and their daily tragedies and adventures but by abstractions, by Forces, Environments, Accidents, and Influences. Like almost every other interesting American Naturalistic novel one might name, from the works of Norris himself to those of Faulkner, *McTeague* succeeds because the author is able to write instinctively out of his natural genius and with his considerable grasp of ordinary novelistic procedures. When he obtrudes his pet ideas and prejudices, his writing begins to be meretricious.

The effects are forced, and the language sounds faked. The strong parts of *McTeague* are the dramatic scenes and the central fable of degeneration, melodramatic as this is. There is also a kind of crude but effective poetry that lends its somber color to the whole. The concluding lines of *McTeague* are in Norris's characteristic convention of Romance, with its broadly effective symbolism of fate (the handcuffs) and of greed (the canary that McTeague has absurdly carried in its gold cage, even in the extremity of his flight into Death Valley)."

Richard Chase
The American Novel and Its Tradition
(Doubleday/Anchor 1957) 188-92

"One of the first naturalistic novels in America, *McTeague* treats the gradual degeneration of a stupid, but initially harmless, giant of a man whose instincts are nearer brute than human. McTeague practices dentistry without a license in a poor section of San Francisco's Polk Street, and marries a girl who has just won \$5,000 in a lottery. He soon loses his job and takes to drink. His wife, Trina, becomes a miser. He murders her in a fit of rage and steals her money but is tracked down and killed by her cousin. Many critics consider *McTeague* to be the finest Naturalistic novel prior to the work of Dreiser."

Max J. Herzberg & staff
The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962)

"Frank Norris' *McTeague*...has been called the 'first important Naturalistic novel' in the United States. William Dean Howells thought it brought a new mode into American literature with the 'effect of a blizzard.' A few leading American critics had accepted European literary Naturalism in the 1880's, and a few earlier works of fiction had pointed toward Naturalism. Stephen Crane's short novel, *Maggie* had been published six years before *McTeague*. But because of the greater extent to which *McTeague* imported into the United States the attitudes and devices of European Naturalism and because of its greater length and force, it outweighs *Maggie* as a pioneering work. Despite numerous weaknesses *McTeague* is the aesthetic superior of *Maggie*....

"Though Norris sometimes seems snobbishly contemptuous of McTeague, on the whole he presents him with sympathy as lonely and put upon.... His tendency to violence when drunk—presented as an inheritance from his father, in the oversimplified biology of the early Naturalists—he had admirably learned to control by avoiding whiskey entirely. He could have lived on happily at the mine. But his mother's ambition for her son to 'better himself' forced McTeague to leave the mountains and set up his modest dental office in San Francisco.... There, in what passed for civilization on Polk Street, he retained some primitive contentment, with huge, cheap meals and steam beer and concertina music on Sundays.

When Trina entered his life and, like his mother, set about improving him, he developed a taste for better clothing and better food, thus taking one more step away from the simple world of the Big Dipper Mine. So far McTeague's life seems by conventional measures to be a progress, and it seems so to him when, his dreams fulfilled, he at last can afford to buy an enormous gilded tooth to hang outside his office as the sign of his profession and of his success.

But the trap has already closed on McTeague, as the mousetrap symbol at the end of the fifth chapter points out too obviously. Ironically, on the day McTeague uncrates the golden tooth, he and Trina's cousin Marcus, who is enraged because he has relinquished Trina's money to McTeague, are irrevocably set at odds and McTeague's destruction becomes inevitable. When Marcus arranges for him to be barred from practice as a dentist, McTeague becomes entirely vulnerable to Trina's avarice. Finally, on a night when he is especially depressed by fatigue and exposure brought on by her morbid refusal to give him carfare, McTeague begins to drink and the latent viciousness inherited from his father starts to dominate his life. Later he steals from Trina and after the money is gone returns to beg. When Trina refuses him help and his last remaining self-control slips away, he kills her.

Escaping from civilization back to the Big Dipper Mine, McTeague regains the contentment of his boyhood.... But the city pursues him for his crime, and he flees. In the mountains, ironically, he discovers

a rich vein of the metal for which Marcus has betrayed him and Trina has driven him to murder. But the pursuit begun in the city forces him on, to final destruction.

Looked at in this oversimplified summary, the novel, like much Naturalism, is moralistic. The theme of its moralizing is ancient: civilization is corrupt and its vice destroys a man who could have remained innocent in simpler surroundings. Norris' development of this theme in *McTeague* seems to owe much to an amalgam of the literary Naturalism he borrowed from Europe with the ideas he picked up from American social and revolutionary thinkers of his time... Norris held many ideas or prejudices in common with the American historian, Frederick Jackson Turner, whose primitivistic theory of the frontier was first published in 1894 and began its great wave of popularity during the years Norris wrote. Among Turner's ideas—which were to dominate the academic study of American history for decades—was the oversimplification which locates good in the country and evil in towns [in the agrarian pastoral tradition of Thomas Jefferson]. This idea Norris put to work in *McTeague*: The dentist, who has come to the city from the mountains, is the only foreground character not ruled by avarice.

Though gold, which appears throughout the book in the familiar naturalistic use of a single dominating symbol, causes the downfall of other characters because of their avarice, when it is associated with McTeague it does not suggest that he is avaricious but that he is sensitive and has aspirations. This is a crude type of symbolism, but is meant to be somewhat touching. The gold in his office, which Maria, an avaricious servant, often steals and sells to a gold-mad junk dealer, is to McTeague a dental material which he delights to shape for use in his profession. He takes the money from Trina not so much because he is avaricious as because he is angry for the depths to which her avarice has brought them and because he wants to spend it—which he promptly does. And he does not kill Trina out of avarice for her golden lottery prize but for revenge. McTeague's downfall seems to come not from avarice or even, perhaps, from his extremely bad physical heritage but from the destruction by the city of his control over that heritage. His self-control has kept him harmless for many years, but surrounding him on Polk Street are the corrupt, for whom gold is a mania. These others are like McTeague, victims of forces outside themselves. But the author treats them with less sympathy than he treats McTeague. For their avarice he punishes them all by violent death before McTeague is finally destroyed.

'We are, in a word, experimental moralists, showing by experiment in what way a passion acts in certain social conditions.' So Zola wrote in *The Experimental Novel*, that handbook which attempted to simplify and rationalize the multifarious practices of literary Naturalism. If it is true that Norris had in mind something of this sort, he may have owed to Zola the general intention of *McTeague*. He certainly owed to the French Naturalist much else that is in the novel. Most of its general structure is similar to that of Zola's *L'Assommoir*, as Lars Ahnebrink has shown in great detail. In each novel the married couple has a happy period before trouble starts. Then both men become idle and, though they formerly had made a point of avoiding alcohol, take to drink. In their decline both wives become scrubwomen. The account of the passage of people of various types along Polk Street in the first chapter of *McTeague* owes much of its structure to an early scene in *L'Assommoir*. The marriage ceremonies in the two books are closely similar. So are the wedding feasts, which also have a parallel in Zola's *Nana*.

La Bête Humaine was probably the novel of Zola's from which Norris drew most in his study of 'the brute within'—though his unintelligent adaptation of this element, especially in the second chapter of *McTeague*, shows in its awkward moral rigor slight relation to its model. *McTeague* is also indebted to *La Bête Humaine* for its subplot: the episodes of Maria and her husband are similar to those in which one of Zola's characters obsessively searches a house in an effort to find his wife's hidden gold and kills her when he does not succeed.

There can be little doubt that in *McTeague* Norris' major literary source was Zola's work, from which he drew these and several other specific motifs and devices in addition to the more general Naturalistic elements of low milieu, emphasis on heredity, environment, and degeneration, and the use of such subordinate symbols as the quarreling dogs and the mousetrap as well as a single predominant symbol, gold. But Norris's imitation of Zola was not slavish. He was able to make the book his own, giving much of the action verisimilitude by remarkable observation and selection of significant detail. The novel has monumental faults: the crude symbolism is overworked; the conception of the central character is often

unsure because of inadequate social and biological theories which Norris had assimilated incompletely; and in the final chapters there is an excessive increase of melodrama. But these failings are not enough completely to demolish the force of the book or the tenacity with which many of its scenes and episodes remain in the mind of its reader.”

Carvel Collins
“*McTeague: A Story of San Francisco*”
The American Novel from James Fenimore Cooper to William Faulkner
(Basic Books 1965) 97, 102-05
ed. Wallace Stegner

“*McTeague* (1899) is surely his best book. Most effective in passages of preliminary description, like the opening paragraphs of Chapter I, it suggests now and then that Norris’s real talent might have been for a kind of laconic satirical comedy delivering (in the manner, roughly, of Eliot’s early ‘observations’ of Sweeney and others) simple cartoon images of certain debased and unregarded figures characteristic of contemporary life.

The overriding weakness of the book appears to be its formulaic devotion to a rather crude species of ‘Naturalism,’ and to the crude apparatus of dominant passions, environmental determinism, and garish symbol-brandishing that typifies rudimentary examples of that curious school of prose fiction. Literary Naturalism, we know, evolved as both a ‘philosophy’ of life and a strategy of expression. Human behavior is understood as being determined by absolute biological and social forces and is therefore most truthfully characterized through a set of fixed symbols or leitmotifs signifying the domination of such forces. But it is a question whether the method of Naturalism is really compatible with the genre of the novel. For drama and for opera this question does not arise. The formal abstractions characteristic of Naturalism are in fact standard and generic in the theater, where the real presence of human voice and gesture, of actors in company, secures a relation to familiar human experience that the most thoroughgoing artificiality can hardly break. So the greater masters of literary Naturalism have been dramatists: Wagner, Hauptmann, Strindberg, Brecht, Eugene O’Neill....

It is worth noting that what is weakest in *McTeague*—the crudely deterministic psychology, the Gothic exaggerations of landscape and of physical violence—become elements of positive strength in the film, *Greed*, which Erich von Stroheim abstracted from it. In this mutation the bad writing matters not a bit, and we are left with a workable scenario for an impressive *silent* movie. The California that would have served Norris’s ambitions did not come into existence until twenty years after his death.”

Warner Berthoff
The Ferment of Realism: American Literature, 1884-1919
(The Free Press/ Macmillan 1965) 226-27

“*McTeague* was the first widely recognized American Naturalistic novel. It came upon the literary scene with more force and caused greater controversy than Crane’s work, for it was told with a raw gusto and lack of stylistic charm that made Crane’s work seem almost academic in comparison. *McTeague* presented the brute horror of life in the squalid environs of San Francisco’s Polk Street.

Opening with the famous scene describing McTeague’s office, filled with the smell of ether, leather, the sweat of his lower-class patients, steam beer, and dirt, the novel ruthlessly described life’s lower depths. McTeague, who had no first name, was too stupid to learn dentistry from books. Spawned and abandoned by his mother in a mining camp, he learned his profession from an itinerant quack. He capitalized on the brute power of ‘a young giant’... He had a dimly lit better self, for he lavished loving care on a canary in a fancy gilt cage. McTeague’s chief disability was his acceptance of whatever fate offered him. He could not grasp life’s scheme. This flaw destroyed him, for he ‘never questioned himself, never looked for motives, never went to the bottom of things.’...

Desperately clutching the gilded canary cage and its tiny twittering occupant whose presence and fate symbolized both man’s entrapment in the world and McTeague’s own unwitting kindness, the dentist was caught by Marcus Schouler.... Though essentially the story of McTeague’s decline and death at the mercy of impersonal forces, the book was woven with the strands of several minor subplots. Its characterizations

made it one of the most memorable of all American novels and revealed the measure of Norris' growth in the years since *Yvernelle*.... The novel abounded with great scenes in the manner of Zola and the Continental naturalists.... The scenes rose up like images on film...

McTeague was a major statement of the Naturalism which insisted that man's actions were determined by hidden forces, but it also protested the artificial inequalities of life that could be rectified. It insisted on the redemptive powers of love, a theme to which Norris returned in his last works. It was a plea for understanding the submerged personality in every man, and a statement of the value of subjects not regularly treated in American fiction. *McTeague* suffered from faults that were Norris' trademark: verbosity, repetition, opaqueness, and inconsistency. He had a passion for curious words like 'osseous,' and described physical features endlessly.... His dislike of discipline and academic purity made Norris rely on his story, character development, and vivid incidents to carry his main points. In *McTeague*, his vitality, color, and his commitment to his subject made the novel compelling and real, despite its structural faults. He made essentially dull people interesting, controlled his crowded background enough to develop individual character, and gave the reader a moving portrait of one man's life that became all men's life.

McTeague came upon the scene in the twilight of the Gilded Age, when readers still pored over historical romance and the sensational press. Howells commanded an audience with his Realism, but it doubtless consisted of the same people year after year. Those who bought novels preferred something 'different,' something to raise them above their humdrum existence. During the years in which Norris worked, the American public savored *When Knighthood Was in Flower*.... If the public had read 'Naturalism,' it came from abroad, in yellow paperbacks hidden from polite company and read in locked rooms. Zola's name was akin to the devil's in many minds; for Naturalism dealt with sex, life in the gutter, the sordid, and undecorative. Minds attuned to the principle that the novel should not preach but please offered little welcome for *McTeague*.

Norris expected adverse critical reception and was not surprised to hear the book labeled '*McTeague: A Study in Stinks*.' Nor was he surprised to read one reviewer's comment: 'It is about the most unpleasant story that anybody has ever ventured to write.' He was not mollified by the sanctimonious injunction to make his future work 'not less true but a good deal more agreeable.' He was more pleased by the grudging admission from one reviewer that though the story was depraved, '*McTeague* seizes and holds in a vice-like grasp that is almost painful from the beginning to the end...' Most reviewers thought it reflected the French Naturalism that was already dying. It was in fact the prelude to a movement that dominated American fiction for the next generation."

H. Wayne Morgan
American Writers in Rebellion
(Hill & Wang 1965) 115, 117-19

"A good deal of *McTeague* is devoted to depicting the routine, ordered world of Polk Street, the lower middle class service street in San Francisco on which McTeague practices and lives. The life of Polk Street enters the novel in two ways—through set pieces describing street activities or the daily lives of the central characters in relation to the life of the street, and through constant incidental allusion to its activities and inhabitants. Norris dramatically establishes Polk Street as above all a life of the repetitious and constant. The street exists as a source of the ordered and the routine in McTeague's life, as a world where the harness shop, the grocery, and the car conductors' coffee joint are always available in their set roles, where the children go to school at the same time each day, followed by the shop clerks coming to work, and soon McTeague is settled and content in this life, and we recognize that his inner needs and outer world are in harmony.

A central theme in Norris's work is that beneath the surface of our placid, everyday lives there is turbulence, that the romance of the extraordinary is not limited to the distant in time and place but can be found 'in the brownstone house on the corner and in the office building downtown.' Norris therefore used the incident which had stimulated him to write the novel, a vicious murder in a San Francisco kindergarten, as a controlling paradox in *McTeague* as in scene after scene he introduces the sensational into the commonplace activities and setting of Polk Street. So we have such incidents as McTeague grossly kissing the anesthetized Trina in his dental parlor, or the nearly murderous fight between Marcus and McTeague at

the picnic. Some of the best moments in the novel powerfully unite these two streams of the commonplace and the extraordinary. In one such moment the frightened and incoherent Trina, having just found Maria's corpse with a cut throat and its blood-soaked clothes, rushes out into the everyday routine of Polk Street and has difficulty convincing the butcher's boy that something is wrong or even convincing herself that it is not improper 'to make a disturbance and create a scene in the street.'

Norris believed that the source of this violence beneath the surface placidity of life is the presence in all men of animal qualities which have played a major role in man's evolutionary development but which are now frequently atavistic and destructive. Norris's theme is that man's racial atavism (particularly his brute sexual desires) and man's individual family heritage (alcoholic degeneracy in McTeague's case) can combine as a force toward reversion, toward a return to the emotions and instincts of man's animal past. McTeague is in one sense a 'special case' of reversion, since his atavistic brutality is in part caused by his degenerate parents. He is also, however, any man caught up in the net of sex, and in this second aspect of man's inherited animal nature Norris introduces a tragic element into McTeague's fall, an element which contributes to the novel's thematic tension.

In describing the courtship of Trina and McTeague, Norris is at pains to stress their overt sexual innocence yet intuitive sexuality. The woman in Trina 'was not yet awakened; she was yet, as one might say, without sex.' For McTeague, Trina is his 'first experience. With her the feminine element suddenly entered his little world. It was not only her that he saw and felt, it was the woman, the whole sex, an entire new humanity...' Despite their innocence and lack of experience, both react intuitively and atavistically—McTeague desiring to seize and possess her, she instinctively withdrawing yet desiring to be conquered.

The most important sexual encounter between McTeague and Trina occurs at the B Street station where McTeague for a second time proposes. When Trina hesitates, he seizes her 'in his enormous arms, crushing down her struggle with his immense strength. Then Trina gave up, all in an instant, turning her head to his. They kissed each other, grossly, full in the mouth.' Within the literary conventions of the day, this kiss symbolizes Trina's sexual submission. At this moment the strands in the web of sexual determinism begin to pull taut, for 'the instant she allowed him to kiss her, he thought less of her. She was not desirable, after all.' McTeague senses this diminution along with a dim awareness 'that this must be so, that it belonged to the changeless order of things—the man desiring the woman only for what she withholds; the woman worshipping the man for that which she yields up to him. With each concession gained the man's desire cools; with every surrender made the woman's adoration increases.' Norris is concerned in this second meeting not with a special flaw in McTeague or Trina but with a sexual determinism affecting all men. The possessive sexual desire of the man aroused by the first woman he experiences sensually, the instinctive desire of the woman for sexual submission responding to the first man who assaults her—these are the atavistic animal forces which bring Trina and McTeague together.

A major theme in *McTeague* is therefore that of the sexual tragedy of man and woman. Caught up by drives and instincts beyond their control or comprehension, they mate by chance. In *McTeague* sex is that which comes to all men and women, disrupting their lives and placing them in relationships which the sanctity of marriage cannot prevent from ending in chaos and destruction. Norris does not tell the old tale of the fallen fornicator, as he does in *Vandover and the Brute*, but rather reaches out toward the unexplored ground of the human dilemma of sexual attraction.

The tension between this deterministic aspect of *McTeague* and its humanistic element does not lie in McTeague as a fully developed tragic figure. Rather, it is contained in the theme that man can seldom escape the violence inherent in his own nature, that man's attempt to achieve an ordered world is constantly thwarted by man himself. Norris devotes much attention to the element of order in the details of McTeague's life not only because of his belief in the romance of the commonplace but because the destruction of that order is the source of the tragic quality in McTeague's fall and of our own compassionate involvement with him despite his grotesqueness. Norris carefully documents McTeague's life as a dentist and as an inhabitant of Polk Street because the habitual tasks and minor successes of his life represent the order and stability which McTeague requires. In the course of the novel we begin to feel compassion for him as he becomes a victim of Trina's avarice and as we recognize that his emerging brutality is at least partly the result of the destruction of his world.

When McTeague learns that he can no longer practice dentistry, his reaction is that of a man whose life is emptied of all meaning. In a scene of considerable power Trina comes upon him sitting in his dental chair, 'looking stupidly out of the window, across the roofs opposite, with an unseeing gaze, his red hands lying idly in his lap.' We are never completely one with McTeague; his brute strength and dull mind put us off. But because he is trapped in the universal net of sex, and because we recognize the poignancy of the loss of his world, we respond to him ultimately as a human being in distress, as a figure of some significance despite his limitations—as a man, in short, whose fall contains elements of the tragic.

For *McTeague* is in part a tragic novel. True, McTeague neither bears full responsibility for his fate nor is he in any sense noble or profound. He is rather like Gervaise in *L'Assommoir*: They are both poor creatures who want above all a place to rest and be content, yet who are brought low by their needs and desires. There is a sense of common humanity in McTeague's fall, and that quality is perhaps the modern residue of the tragic theme, since we are no longer certain of man's transcendent nobility or of the reality of major responsibility for our fall, but that tragedy is inherent in the human situation given man's animal past and the possibility that he will be dominated by that past in particular circumstances. Norris does not deny the strength of man's past or present animality, but neither does he deny the poignancy of the fall of even such a gross symbol of this animality as McTeague. It is out of this tension that much of the meaning and power of the novel arises."

Donald Pizer
"Late Nineteenth-Century American Naturalism"
Realism and Naturalism in Nineteenth-Century American Literature
(Southern Illinois U 1966) 11-19

"Until recently, *McTeague* (1899) has been seen as a purely Naturalistic novel embodying such standard assumptions as sexual determinism, atavistic degeneracy, the influence of sordid milieus, and the operation of chance. There is no question that quasi-scientific theorizing is one side of *McTeague*. Like Theodore Dreiser and Jack London, Norris often chose to round his fiction in the presumably authoritative scientific opinion of the day. (The difference between his faith and a present-day novelist's reliance upon post-existential assumptions is slight.) Still, there is no reason to believe that Norris and the other Naturalists were preoccupied with content and truth to the point of not caring about the art of fiction.

Recent criticism of *McTeague*, which represents the most lively evaluation of Norris's accomplishment to occur in years, is impressive because critics have begun to approach the novel from new perspectives and without the tedious repetition of Naturalistic shibboleths. Thus, critics are examining the tonal variations that create both comic and compassionate effects, the image patterns, and the appropriations of Dickensian methods in exploring lower-class life, all of which testify to the novel's craftsmanship and humanity. McTeague as sympathetic bottom dog replaces McTeague as animalistic draft horse.

Norris's own comments on the nonideological purposes of fiction are relevant to any reconsideration of his work. In an essay on the desirability of suppressing the novelist's personality, Norris wrote: 'After all in fiction the main thing is fiction.' Further, a record of his avowed intentions in *McTeague* reflects a pronounced nonideological bent. In a brief statement to the *Philadelphia Book News* in 1899, Norris said of *McTeague* that his 'chief object' was to 'produce an interesting story—nothing more.' A second aim, he went on, was to raise a 'protest against and a revolt from the "decadent," artificial and morbid "prose fancies" of latter-day fiction.' Too much can be made of such statements, but they do help to correct the earlier overemphasis on didactic Naturalism....

Norris, in *McTeague*, undertook to explore a decidedly low milieu.... Moments of...genteel revulsion occur...: 'This poor crude dentist of Polk Street, stupid, ignorant, vulgar, with his sham education and plebian tastes...' Nor is this the only instance of pronounced class consciousness...Norris takes a superior tone: 'No people have a keener eye for the amenities than those whose social position is not assured.' But fortunately these are exceptions; most of the time the taste of Norris's 'plain people' is rendered through descriptive documentation rather than through summary pejorative judgments. His decision to incorporate this level of taste into his novel is one of the most successful uses of popular culture in American fiction in the nineties, easily matching Stephen Crane's skillful dramatization of lowbrow culture in *Maggie, A Girl*

of the Streets (1893) and anticipating Dreiser's equally skillful employment of similar materials in *Sister Carrie* (1900)....

In one respect *McTeague* is a guidebook to plebian taste, a kind of manual of kitsch art. The quality of taste is mirrored in the cultural activities that McTeague and Trina enjoy during their courtship.... One of the most famous sections of the novel wonderfully captures the tastes of McTeague and Trina. This is the visit to the Orpheum in Chapter 6, a chapter that has not always been appreciated fully because of the attention that has been given to the famous pants-wetting episode and the attendant question of Norris's expert revision of the offensive passage.... In their responses McTeague and Trina reveal themselves to be the perfect audience for popular culture. After listening to the minstrels 'wrestle a tune out of almost anything,' McTeague is deeply moved... The Orpheum was the perfect objective correlative of dental-parlor taste. The aesthetic milieu of *McTeague* serves far more complex purposes than merely providing opportunities for broad comedy such as is evident in the Orpheum chapter. The double feat of Norris's achievement is to portray an age's vulgarity and yet to enlist our respect for the integrity of the hero's aesthetic response, even though he lives amidst a world of dreck and of single-minded commercialism. McTeague's aesthetic integrity is defined by his loyalties and by his wife's disloyalties....

The steel engraving, the pug dog, the concertina, and the canary are sacred objects to McTeague; they engage his loyalties, and he gives them up only with great regret. In one of those pivotal acts in the novel that accelerate the downward slide, Trina sells everything in their household in order to keep from drawing on the lottery prize money.... He refuses absolutely to yield either the concertina or the canary, and puts a Not for Sale tag on each. Later, after they are living apart, Trina pawns the concertina on which for many years he has played his 'six lugubrious airs.' This treachery moves McTeague to murderous rage and is an important motivating factor in his killing his wife. The canary, of course, he never relinquishes, carrying it even into Death Valley. By comparison, Trina's aesthetic possessions are merely things, material manifestations of status, and are charged with less intense emotions and elicit no permanent loyalties....

Trina will sell anything; McTeague will not. His attachment to aesthetic objects testifies to a humanity that his wife lacks. Thus Trina's statement about her love of the 'pretty things' is the shallowest kind of sentimentality... Their limited artistic activities illustrate the same point. McTeague plays on his concertina for pleasure and self-expression. Trina easily gives up her melodeon and carves her wooden animals only for money... McTeague's aesthetic integrity is apparent as well in his perception of the single most vulgar object in the novel, the golden tooth. Uniformly interpreted as a symbol of greed and Gilded Age values, the tooth is also an aesthetic entity and is so perceived by McTeague. True, the tooth expresses his ambition and his envy of the more successful dentist who first owns it, and true, in McTeague's eyes it signifies status. But he also thinks of the tooth as 'gorgeous' and 'wonderful, beautiful.' Further, he touches it 'as if it were something sacred.'...

Pastoral assumptions underlie the couple's countryward excursions. Trina, the city girl, captures the essence of the pastoral in her excitement over a picnic.... There are no pure escapes to arcadian country in *McTeague*. Thus, one of those wrestling marches turns into an ear-biting, arm-snapping brawl. Also, the landscape that evokes the pastoral repose is anything but arcadian... Trina's constrictive aesthetic defines McTeague's life from the moment he is ensnared by the mystery of sex until the time when that aesthetic is pushed to its narrowest limits and McTeague makes a stunning Darwinian aesthetic judgment. From that moment on, the outward counter-movement resumes, climaxing in the desert scenes. The dynamics of constriction versus expansion are noted with barometric exactness in the extensive descriptions of rooms and their furnishings. The married life of the McTeagues begins on the top floor in a lower-middle-class tenement house and ends in a sordid lower-depths apartment on the bottom floor....

What happens to the rooms is paralleled by what happens to the tooth, for Norris carefully notes the tooth's relation to each setting. In its first location, outside McTeague's dental parlors, when everything is happy in his life and marriage, the tooth has curious, transforming effects upon the objects inside. The stone pug reflects its light, the canary is stimulated to sing... In the second living quarters the tooth is stored in a corner and gives off a 'monstrous, distorted' light. The only aesthetic object in the room, it is a vivid image of the gigantic figure rendered ludicrous by a constrictive milieu. Like its owner, it needs space for the restoration of aesthetic harmony. In Zerkow's place the tooth reaches its ultimate debasement: 'The

gigantic golden molar of French gilt, enormous and ungainly, sprawled its branching prongs in one corner of the room, by the footboard of the bed. The McTeagues had come to use it as a sort of substitute for a table.' The words describing the tooth are identical to those applied to McTeague throughout: gigantic, enormous, ungainly, sprawled. Its degradation mirrors his, mirrors the loss of space, the neglect of beauty....

As the Harvard themes show, the ending was not just tacked on, as once thought, but was present in Norris's original conception of the novel. Interestingly, the desert scenes have also drawn praise as a unit without respect to the rest of the novel. Edward Dahlberg, for example, has proclaimed: 'Death Valley is what makes Frank Norris.' Thematically and structurally the ending of *McTeague* is justified; far from being anticlimactic, it climaxes the evaluation of landscapes, of interior and exterior space, that forms the central and controlling tension in the novel....

The desert chapters contain one description of an interior, the office of the Big Dipper Mining Company... Millet is outside the experience of McTeague, who recognizes neither the artist nor the cultural context of the painting. But *Angelus* does a great deal more than reflect McTeague's lowbrowness; it projects a pastoral and traditional world, a peasant culture unavailable to McTeague, a peasant himself. ...Other details in the Big Dipper Mining Office suggest both its distance from Millet's world and the reasons for this distance. The telephone, a product of an industrial civilization, has penetrated even this primitive mining country. It is one of those machines that symbolize city life and the kind of complexity before which McTeague, who understands neither urban communication nor transportation, is largely helpless. Another symbolic detail is the bullion bag, one of the countless versions of the gold motif in the novel. The central impulse of McTeague's world, whether he is in the city or in Placer County, is to get gold. Significantly, it is not McTeague's central impulse. The third detail is the revolver in the pouch, emblematic of the frontier ethic and one of the echoes of recurring violence in the novel. (Another is the calendar advertising rifles that hung in McTeague's dental parlors.) Telephone, gold, and gun deny the pastoral quietude evoked by the Millet painting....

McTeague winds up...lost, in Death Valley, and he is a kind of Indian himself, a primitive with nowhere to live, harried by forces that he cannot understand. On the run, dime-novel fashion, from the man he does not yet know is his former friend and permanent enemy, Marcus Schouler, McTeague heads for Mexico by way of Death Valley. He enters, literally, a place of descent that parallels the kind of descent measured by the declension of rooms. What McTeague needs, what any pastoral hero needs, is stasis. He had it in his dental parlors before Trina came, he had it with Trina in their first living quarters, and he had it briefly in the resumption of his mining career in Placer County. But certain incomprehensible factors—sexual attraction, greed (Trina's, not his), the law (and Marcus's hatred)—intervene each time to disrupt his equipoise. So McTeague finds himself in Death Valley, a landscape that completes the evaluation of man and setting begun with the opening pages of the novel. It is a landscape paradoxically beautiful and inimical.... The alkali soil is the antithesis of Millet's ploughed ground; this 'primeval lake' is the Darwinian opposite of the restorative ocean where McTeague found solace. Here McTeague has too much space, space without any human dimension.

The counterforces of constriction and space merge in the last scene. McTeague slays his captor and is handcuffed to a dead body in the immensity of the desert. Here McTeague, in a state of perceptual confusion, once again sees without understanding; and the canary, representing his aesthetic and human response to the world, sings weakly in its cage. The cage, we cannot forget, is a gilt prison; and, given all that the novel has told us about the aesthetic milieu, the gilt prison also represents the civilization available to McTeague."

Don Graham
"Art and Humanity in *McTeague*"
The Fiction of Frank Norris: The Aesthetic Context
(U Missouri 1978) 43-65

"The sentences jump from the informative and essential to the irrelevant and the words jar against one another ('crawly and graceful'). The dialogue is woeful, but of course it is intended to be so—in all its rather touching craziness and ineptitude.... But while Norris's stylistic 'awkwardness' is pointedly used...it

hardly seems intentional on other occasions, as when he describes the romantic yearnings felt by Old Grannis and Miss Baker.... William Death Howells admired *McTeague*, but regretted the sections dealing with 'the silly elders.' Top-heavy with adjectives, dependent on simple oppositions ('old' and 'young' Grannis), and ungainly in its usages ('treasure up'), this passage seems amply to support Howells's judgment. Norris bathes the characters in sentimentality and alludes to problems of motivation that he does not explore, or cannot handle, or does not care about....

Like Norris's other novels, *McTeague* suffers from a great deal of adjectival over-insistence. But here most of what William B. Dillingham calls 'the vocabulary of super-adjectives' are specifically deployed to flaunt and celebrate McTeague's terrible strength. Often exaggerated and heightened, Norris's style reveals his obsessions about power and complicity in its violent enactments. Though anxious to distance himself from McTeague, Norris is enthralled by him, and he even conceives of his novelistic projects in terms of power and victimization... Nowhere is Norris's own commerce with power more evident than in his treatment of desire and sexuality, which critics have agreed is the novel's major achievement....To condemn Norris's description as 'bad writing,' as many critics do, is to miss the point. The passage is interesting not for its overblown prose, but rather for Norris's own investment of energy in the scene he represents. To put the matter more precisely: the style is grandly exaggerated and overblown, but revealing of Norris's spectacular presence in his own text. He is as much gripped by sexuality and desire as McTeague, and as obsessed by its violent forms, terrifying dynamics, and unnerving hallucinations.... Norris's strenuous style, surging metaphors, and wrenched syntax reflect his commerce with power with an almost physical immediacy....

If anything, McTeague is a greater victim than Othello, because while he does suffer from his antagonist Marcus's treachery, his sexual desire itself is his true enemy—one that he will never 'understand.' Already containing destructive energies and poisons, McTeague is his own Iago, all the more degenerate because the subversive forces are within and basic to the workings of desire.... In Norris's sternly insistent view, desire brings men and women together only to drive them apart, immediately 'undoing' them. In the relentless logic of this scheme, a man and a woman can therefore be truly bonded only when sexual desire and power disappear. Old Grannis and Miss Baker survive as if in the pages of a sentimental Romance."

William E. Cain
"Presence and Power in *McTeague*"
American Realism: New Essays, ed. Eric J. Sundquist
(Johns Hopkins U 1982) 199-214

"Seeking to account for the impact of the novel, recent critics of *McTeague*, like myself, have become increasingly suspicious of its Naturalistic concepts and of readings that take the narrator's interpretive comments too literally. Even without the 'Naturalistic' armature, however, the disparate characters and multiple actions of the text remain difficult to integrate within an organizing structure. Yet the imaginative coherence of *McTeague* is impressive, and its coherence is not derived from Naturalistic issues. The imaginative focus of *McTeague*, like that of *Vandover*, centers on the problem of personal loss and its implications for the self. Readers of *McTeague* have long taken the problem of greed as a crux, whether moral, psychological, or social. What animates this novel, however, is not the desperate lust for gain but the haunting fear of loss, to which greed is but one represented response within the text. *McTeague* is full of characters who are preoccupied with loss.... Trina's hoarding of gold is only one among many strategies employed by the characters of *McTeague* to protect themselves from the experience of loss, or from the fear of disintegration that follows such experience....

Donald Pizer's analysis of Norris's concern with the turbulence 'beneath the surface of our placid, everyday lives' has long been useful to students of American Naturalism.... Although the story of Old Grannis and Miss Baker has consistently been seen as the most anomalous subplot of *McTeague*, it fits clearly into the pattern of loss implicit in the novel. Like Maria's habits, or the organizational frenzies of Papa Seppe, Old Grannis's routine, especially his bookbinding, serves to insulate him from exposure to others and to protect him both from sudden changes in his environment and from troublesome impulses within himself.... The Old Folks' structure of habit protects them both from the instabilities of the surrounding world and from their own wish for and fear of contact with one another. The unexpected can

threaten inner balance from without, as Marcus does when he threatens to run down the stairs naked... The Old Folks are not as self-encapsulated as they seem. Their doors remain slightly ajar not only to Marcus's possible nakedness but also to each other, and they are virtually the only characters in *McTeague* who apprehend the vulnerability or pain of another being....

It is illuminating to consider the major characters in *McTeague*—McTeague and Trina—in the light of the Old Folks, Maria and Zerkow. Perhaps the greatest critical problem in *McTeague*, after that of incorporating the subplots, is that of Trina's transformation from a trim, orderly housekeeper to a driven, ravaged, obsessive miser. The text's occasional references to Trina's 'instinct of hoarding' or her 'penurious ancestors' do not begin to provide a convincing explanation for the change. Criticism has been increasingly concerned with the apparent unaccountability of this shift. However, Trina herself fears and envisions it at a very early stage, and the terms in which she does so are revealing.... Trina's thoughts imply that she imaginatively apprehends the fragility of her 'pretty ways, her clean, trim little habits,' which are, in effect, her only bulwark against chaos.... If *McTeague* projects an image of man as a creature of habit, whose habits define him both to himself and to others, it is not surprising that Trina's terror of loss of self should be conceptualized in terms of loss of habit...

The 'final surrender' is sexual, of course, but for Trina, sexual surrender means surrender and submission of many kinds, culminating in her feeling that she has lost control and, therefore, lost herself. It is the meaning of surrender for Trina herself that accounts for her fear and finally for the conversion of her 'little habits' into her uncontrollable obsession.... To Trina sexuality means inner chaos and dependency on another person, while greed appears to promise control and self-sufficiency.... Trina buys the 'lucky' lottery ticker on the morning she first meets McTeague. Both events have the same implications. Great gain stimulates fear of great loss, implying the vulnerability of the self. Trina's winning of the lottery, like her contact with McTeague, makes Trina fear her own impulses... As the idea of Trina Sieppe, the withheld sexual object, disrupted McTeague's original structure of habit, so after the loss of economic stability, the idea of Trina the withholder of money disrupts the new, retrenched order. Thus passion, like obsessive preoccupation, is twice elicited in McTeague by what Trina withholds. Here, as elsewhere in the novel, deprivation spurs the self toward obsession and chaos.... The more McTeague 'storms,' the more tightly Trina draws the strings of her...[money] bag...'

The crux at the end of the novel is McTeague's feeling of deprivation, not his lust for gold as such. McTeague feels that Trina is stealing what by right belongs to him. He experiences this withholding as an intolerable threat. Even as Trina feels threatened because of her intimacy with McTeague, so McTeague comes to feel undermined by his 'submission' to Trina—especially to her ever-increasing stinginess.... Fittingly, it is not merely Trina's withholding of money—or even of food—that goads McTeague to murder. McTeague decides to kill Trina when he finds his concertina in a pawnshop... McTeague's refusal to leave his canary behind is a measure of his inability to adapt, to change, and to make his peace with loss.... The issue of adaptability as a criterion for survival is perhaps the one element of Darwinian thought that seems directly relevant to *McTeague*, as to *Vandover*.

Despite the various statements of naturalist 'philosophy' within the text, the question of adaptation itself is not placed in the foreground by the narrative voice of *McTeague*. Nonetheless, the characters in the novel are certainly marked by a crippling incapacity to adapt to change, and more particularly to loss. It is as though Norris seized intuitively upon this aspect of Naturalistic doctrine—the issue of adaptability—and incorporated it imaginatively into his vision without explicitly conceptualizing it. Ironically, it is the discursively formulated doctrinal material in the novel, the polemical statements about instinct and Chance, that resists integration into the governing structure of the text... It is certain, however, that as Norris's career continues, his 'Naturalistic' formulations play an ever smaller role within his work."

Barbara Hochman
"Loss, Habit, Obsession: The Governing Dynamic of *McTeague*"
The Art of Frank Norris, Storyteller
(U Missouri 1988) 61-75

“Imagine this scene [McTeague trying to help Trina move belongings] as part of a Buster Keaton film, and its slapstick quality immediately becomes obvious. Although the comic element in *McTeague* has been noted by Joseph McElrath, he refers to it as an ‘impure trait that mars the Naturalistic shape.’ Admittedly, laughter is not the response which comes to mind when one thinks of the deterministic philosophy associated with Naturalism.... As a declared disciple of Zola, Frank Norris seems anything but the author of a funny story.... Nevertheless, I believe *McTeague* should be read as a funny story, but not one split by its comic aspect. Rather, *McTeague* offers the intriguing prospect of a close relationship between laughter and Naturalism....

Reading *McTeague* as a comic text requires a shift in the attitude of the reader toward the dentist, as the comic techniques first emphasize the distance of *satire* and then create the proximity of *humor*. The other major characters in the story are also represented as targets for satiric laughter because of their rigidity.... The techniques used to create the laughter are the derogatory ones of the satiric mode, meant to present the characters as inferior or less than human in some way, forestalling the sympathy of the reader. Thus McTeague is compared to an animal as well as a machine; Maria, when speaking about the gold plate service, sounds like a tape recorder...

Apparently, everybody is laughable—except perhaps Trina, who is the only character not introduced derisively in the slapstick terms that characterize much of the early chapters... The presentation of Trina is remarkable in another way: as the chief means by which Norris can elaborate a connection between the comic and standard themes of Naturalism as well as alter the tone of the narrative from hilarity to horror.... What makes McTeague most satiric and worthy of derision at first—his rigidity—can be construed as humorous and worthy of sympathy in the wake of the betrayal of Marcus. ‘McTeague had continued to work, acting from sheer force of habit...’ But his rigidity can also produce sympathy, as when McTeague obstinately refuses to sell his canary and concertina. The mode of satire is thus leavened with the more tolerant perspective of the mode of humor. Once McTeague stops practicing dentistry, his character generates this complex laughter....

McTeague and Trina, then, are comic in a profound sense. They are caught in the universal net of sexual passion, driven by the Horatio Alger ideology of American culture, alienated from and made grotesquely powerless by the natural world. In the face of these ‘truths’ and their laughable presentation, the implied reader as the third person in Freud’s model for jokes is invited to laugh not just at characters but at the ideas that give them their force....

What is the significance of the comic in *McTeague*? First, the text does not clearly represent a hard determinism, as some critics argue. The satiric mode suggests a soft determinism by virtue of the distance it creates between characters and the implied reader. From this perspective McTeague and company are a type; they do not represent all people. The humorous pole is more complicated, suggesting both a hard and a soft determinism. The humorous perspective supports the hard position, since it insists upon no distinction between the implied reader and the characters. Everyone is subject to the harsh and degrading circumstances that constitute existence and create alienation, and so all one can do is make grim jokes to ease momentarily the effects of those circumstances. Yet the humorous perspective also allows for a more hopeful position. Precisely because of harsh and degrading circumstances, people can become aware of the need for a flexible charity toward one another, not the blind charity of the lottery machine....

Comic laughter in *McTeague*, containing an idea of freedom couched in terms of adaptability, can be an endorsement for the production of a moral value that lifts humanity beyond a hard determinism... Recall the final image of the story: McTeague standing under the blazing sun of Death Valley, handcuffed to a corpse. When McTeague and Marcus proceed to fight over the gold, having chased the mule and shot it, thus spilling their only water supply, it is palpably ridiculous. But the consequences of those actions are fatal, violating a traditional definition of the comic....

In *McTeague* people are at once less than human and all too human. A comic presentation of this idea means that the laughter generated will become strained, like Selina’s, possibly preventing the sense of liberation which the discharge theory claims is at the core of laughter. Once again we touch the funny, that is, peculiar nature of the comic in *McTeague*. A comprehensive view of its laughter suggests a trajectory

that might cross the grotesquerie of *Wise Blood* or *As I Lay Dying*, include the absurdist visions of *Waiting for Godot* or *The Rhinoceros*, and perhaps end up with the violent zaniness of *The World According to Garp*.... Finally, *McTeague* as comic text suggests general studies of how Naturalism, in both its European and American variants, functions when mixed with laughter.”

James L. Caron
“Grotesque Naturalism: The Significance of the Comic in *McTeague*”
Texas Studies in Literature and Language 31
(Summer 1989) 288-317

“Like many other young gentlemen in the 1890s proud of their ‘Anglo-Saxon descent’ [Norris] became fascinated by the seemingly easy reversion of the human to the ‘beast.’... *McTeague* is about a ‘blond beast’ who was a miner in the gold fields of California, is now a self-proclaimed dentist without a license, and until he runs amok under extreme provocation from his insanely stingy wife is not beastly so much as he is torpid and comically awed by the simple pleasures of life in San Francisco’s lower middle class. Norris owed his interest in ‘hopelessly stupid’ brutes like *McTeague* to his passion for both Kipling and Zola, writers sufficiently ‘red-blooded.’...

“‘Things can happen in San Francisco,’ Norris said. Five of his seven novels were to be laid in the city.... [McTeague] plays his concertina and is pleased by the sight of his yellow canary in its gilt cage. He too is all yellow colored, and his mop of blonde hair and his great blond mustache are likened to an animal’s fell. But though *McTeague* is somnolent looking through his dentist’s window at the street, it is Norris in his own voice who picks up on the street as it looks during the week. The details go on heavily for pages, in one of those exercises special to American naturalists newly fascinated by the life of a great city—Stephen Crane in *Maggie*, Theodore Dreiser in *Sister Carrie*. From the outset *McTeague*... is offered up to us as a specimen looking at a city made up (to Norris) of other specimens. What holds us is the astonishment of a city scene where everything is being described for the first time. This was the great source of Norris’s power, as it was of Dreiser’s.

What is entirely new is life ground down to the primitive without exception. Norris said the Realism already familiar in American fiction was banal. What he liked in Zola the naturalist was Zola the ‘romantic,’ enthralled by what was precisely unusual and unexpected in life. Although Norris the literary gent is clearly writing ‘down’ in *McTeague*, he is mesmerized by characters almost demonically possessed by their immediate interests, so easy to categorize in the class consciousness of the time, so reducible psychologically and socially—but always on the verge of terrible upheaval, like San Francisco between earthquakes. Respectable enough himself (unlike Dreiser and Crane), Norris was seized by the idea of human reversion to the primitive. Without any discernible social sympathy, he saw the drama in the always fretful lower middle class sinking to the bottom of the city and turning desperate....

Objects in themselves had a great allure for the Naturalistic novelist, since the world was now all outside.... *McTeague* and *The Octopus*, the only two Norris novels that have survived for artistic reasons, are remarkable not least for their propulsion, a driving, wildly rhythmic stampede of scenes that takes hold of us as the violently compressed characters themselves do.... Norris’s topical sense of things is that people are nothing but their material circumstances. Hence the details of city living he so pointedly lists in the opening pages.... As a theory, the total materialization of life as seen by Naturalists born in the 1870s within a few months of each other—Norris, Crane, Dreiser—is so obviously limited that the survival of *McTeague*, *The Red Badge of Courage*, and *Sister Carrie* can still seem a matter of wonder. Many students today find *McTeague* just too ‘crude.’ But in their different ways—Crane was the most intelligent and ironic of the three, Norris never felt the injustice of Herbert Spencer’s ‘the survival of the fittest’ as did Dreiser.”

Alfred Kazin
Introduction, *McTeague*
(Vintage/The Library of America 1990) xi-xv

“Read against the Naturalism of *McTeague*, the story of Miss Baker and Old Grannis, an elderly, genteel pair straight out of local color fiction, turns the novel at one level into a parable of literary choices available to the turn-of-the-century novelist. By first contrasting and finally integrating the Old Grannis-Miss Baker

story with that of the McTeagues and the Zerkows, Norris explored the problems inherent in the convergence of three late nineteenth-century literary movements: Realism, Naturalism, and women's local color fiction [the local color movement included men.]... When he wrote *McTeague* (1899), Norris was evidently determined to make it a Naturalistic test case, writing to Howells that it 'is as Naturalistic as *Moran* was romantic and in writing it I have taken myself and the work very seriously.'

Taking himself seriously in *McTeague* meant writing a novel of 'straight Naturalism with all the guts I can get into it,' as he later said in comparing *McTeague* to his Wheat trilogy. As might be expected, Norris' conception of romance includes something altogether freer and more all-encompassing than the 'Realism [that] stultifies itself' by noting 'only the surface of things' or the mundane 'cut-and-thrust stories' that constitute conventional romance. For Norris, romance itself sweeps through the house from high to low, gathering material from all quarters, dragging with it both realistic techniques and the tenets of Naturalism, both of which it uses unstintingly in order to convey the image of 'real life.'...

The Old Grannis-Miss Baker plot could have appeared in any number of local color stories, but the two characters bear a particularly striking resemblance to David Emmons and Maria Brewster of Freeman's 'Two Old Lovers' (*A Humble Romance*, 1887)... Norris' rendition of this type of story in *McTeague* is strikingly similar, but, in keeping with the movement away from local color and toward Naturalistic or 'romantic' excess, he exaggerates the elements that Freeman has already stretched to the limits of credibility... In the words 'commonplace and uneventful lives,' Norris provides the key to one of the old lovers' functions in the novel. Of the three pairs of lovers in the work, Old Grannis and Miss Baker represent the almost excessive restraint, manners, asexuality, and spiritual self-denial characteristic of local color fiction, just as the junk dealer Zerkow and Maria signify the excessive passions of Zolaesque Naturalism. Despite some Naturalistic flourishes, the *McTeague* plot begins as a story of Realism, with its lower-middle-class protagonists striving for respectability and a better place in life. Unlike the steady degeneration through sloth of, say Zola's Gervaise Coupeau in *L'Assommoir*, Trina and McTeague more or less maintain their equilibrium until dual calamities, in the form of the lottery winnings and McTeague's loss of his license, overtake them.

Circumstances and instincts conspire to drive Trina and McTeague to recapitulate Maria's murder and Zerkow's flight; the characters only then cast off the world of Realism in which they began and descend to the depths of the novel's Zolaesque underworld. Thus each pair of loves functions on several levels: as representatives of varying social levels and codes of manners; as unwitting victims of the world of forces; as 'owners' in several senses—of money, of passions, of restraint; and finally as characters in plots suitable to the differing genres that the novel explores. Their associations thus resonate with meaning as the varying stories and characters become enmeshed with one another. As Trina slips further into her obsessive miserliness, for example, she visits Miss Baker less and Maria Macapa more, signifying her descent from the restraint and middle-class respectability of Realism to the lower-class excess and squalor that characterizes Zolaesque Naturalism....

Seen thus as an exploration of local color fiction, the Old Grannis-Miss Baker plot does not deserve the condemnation it has received. As recently as 1982, William E. Cain in 'Presence and Power in *McTeague*' complained that 'Norris bathes the characters in sentimentality and alludes to problems of motivation that he does not explore, or cannot handle, or does not care about.' Norris' skill at handling motivation in the local color story is problematic, but that he took such pains to ground his characters in an extant literary tradition should put to rest the idea that he simply 'does not care about' the characters. The characters and their storyline are limited because Norris felt that the local color form itself was limited. Having allowed the old people to consummate their relationship with Old Grannis' kiss on Miss Baker's 'faded cheek,' Norris sends them to their room for the remaining four chapters of the novel. Quite simply, as Norris sees it, neither the old couple, their story, nor local color fiction has anywhere else to go.

With the local color story effectively packed away, the Naturalistic story opens out in all its force, complete with sordid elements of setting and action. It is no accident that only now does *McTeague* light out for the territories, meeting nature on terms of adventure and disaster on a grander scale than was possible in the cramped rooms of Polk Street. He even meets Norris at the Big Dipper mine, 'a tall, lean young man, with a thick head of hair surprisingly gray.' Norris, his creature *McTeague*, and Naturalism

itself have all moved beyond the stuffy rooms and limited space of local color fiction. With the theme of storytelling, Norris shows the danger of believing in false fiction and simplistic plots that provide happy endings, particularly if, as is true of Trina and McTeague, one inhabits a more dangerously complex genre. In his story of the Old Folks, Norris pays tribute to the stories of Mary E. Wilkins Freeman. Yet he explores and judges wanting the conventions of local color, finding its limitations unworkable in the real world of Polk Street.

Published in 1899, the novel reads both as a handbook of the novelist's options at century's end, and as a parable of the path that American fiction was taking. Disdaining, like Norris, the limitations and small rooms of the old lovers, American fiction took its chances with the great world. Beset by calamities and world change, American Realism, like the McTeagues, took up residence in the house of Zolaesque Naturalism."

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The Old Grannis-Miss Baker Plot in *McTeague*"
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