

## INTRODUCTION



Frank Norris

(1870-1902)

Frank Norris rebelled against genteel Victorian culture and liberated the American novel from its vapid sentimentalism with two novels, *McTeague* (1899) and *The Octopus* (1901). He was the first American to write deliberately according to a Naturalist credo. In *McTeague*, he set out to write “straight Naturalism” modeled on Zola, though the result is actually more than Naturalism. Norris had the head of a Realist and the heart of a Romantic. In his time, Realism had been defined by William Dean Howells, whose novels Norris found too commonplace and limited to the surfaces of life and human nature. He seized upon Naturalism as a philosophical outlook, a powerful literary method and a movement of cultural rebels like himself, yet he did not deny the existence of free will, usually a defining doctrine of Naturalism. This is most evident in *The Octopus* (1901), the first novel in an intended “Epic of the Wheat,” a vivid epic of old California dramatizing the conflict between wheat ranchers and the railroad, based on the Mussel Slough Massacre (1880).

*McTeague* and *The Octopus* have qualities that appeal to the common reader: (1) Norris tells a “good yarn” and (2) his linear narrative is easy to read and to understand. There is no iceberg of implications under the surface to tease and perplex a reader. Norris is abundantly and often redundantly explicit with his meanings. (3) He evokes the illusion of real life--the basis of Realism--as well as any novelist ever has. In *The Octopus* the reader can smell the fertility of the fields and picture the vast expanse of wheat in the hot dry buzzy air of the valley back when California still felt like Eden. That is the mythic dimension in Norris. At the same time, when he brings old San Francisco to life in *McTeague*, he adds to mythopoeic Realism the exaggeration of satire and caricature in the manner of Charles Dickens.

(4) He visualizes like a painter; and (5) he has a panoramic vision with mythic depth like the master director of westerns John Ford. (6) At the risk of his career, he wrote about controversial subjects of great social importance, especially in his attack on monopoly capitalism in *The Octopus*. Unlike most Postmodern novelists, Norris had the guts to take clear stands on big issues, based on actual events, performing a public service. (7) Again unlike the Postmodernists, Norris excels at characterization--as well as caricature--and fills his novels with colorful human types based on objective observation. The reader is likely to identify with certain of his characters and to be moved by what happens to them. (8) His fiction is dramatic--full of emotional conflict, excitement and violent actions, with powerful conclusions. (9) *McTeague* and *The Octopus* are the best evocations of old California in print. (10) There is a spiritual dimension in Norris, a more comprehensive representation of humanity than in the Postmodernists.

## BIOGRAPHY

Norris was born in Chicago to parents affluent enough to have servants and a carriage adorned by a coat-of-arms. His father came from a farm in Michigan and rose to head one of the major wholesale jewelry companies in the Midwest. When Frank was 12, his parents bought a mansion on Michigan Avenue and Park Row. His mother descended from old New England and Virginia stock, she had been a schoolteacher and at the time of her marriage she was a successful actress. Young Frank read the hugely popular romances of Sir Walter Scott and in the evenings his mother read aloud to him from other Victorian classics. He resisted dancing lessons and fancy suits, rebelling against gentility from an early age. In 1878 the family traveled through Europe and in 1884, the year *Huckleberry Finn* was published, they moved west, first to Oakland then to San Francisco, into a house on Sacramento Street.

## EDUCATION

Frank attended Belmont Academy, a boarding school where he broke his arm playing football. His father wanted him to get a practical education, while his mother encouraged his interest in art. At 16 he enrolled at the San Francisco Art Association to study painting. The following year, advised that art instruction was superior in Paris, his parents moved to France. He attended the Julien Academy, where he immersed himself in medieval French chronicles and worked on a monumental painting of the Battle of Crècy, displaying a romantic love of grandeur in the past. While in Paris, he paid no attention to Zola, nor to the avant-garde Impressionist painters outside the academy, unlike Stephen Crane in New York. His father thought he was wasting his time and called him home to San Francisco. Norris's first publication was an article on the history of armor and his first literary effort a long narrative poem, *Yvernelle: A Legend of Feudal France*, which he began in 1889 after returning to San Francisco.

In 1890 he failed the mathematics portion of the entrance exam at the University of California at Berkeley, but was admitted to the literary program. He took courses in English, French and history. He smoked a pipe, twirled a cane, wore spats and a mustache and sometimes even a Sherlock Holmes cap. Although his professors graded his fiction down for crudity of style and lack of coherence--and still do as literary critics--he began publishing stories in magazines, heavily indebted to Rudyard Kipling and to Richard Harding Davis the romantic adventure novelist. He joined a fraternity, Phi Gamma Delta, and published *Yvernelle* (1891). The following year he was influenced by courses in geology and zoology from Joseph Le Conte, who popularized ideas reconciling religion with evolution. His story "Lauth" expresses his agreement with Le Conte. He was also influenced by the Social Darwinism of his father and by the Naturalist philosopher Herbert Spencer. Then he discovered Zola, who became his model for what he defined as "romantic" Naturalism. In October 1893, his third year at Berkeley, a charwoman was murdered by her drunken husband in a San Francisco kindergarten, news that inspired the plot of *McTeague*. Norris left Berkeley after 4 years without taking a degree, having never passed mathematics.

## CAREER

His parents divorced, reaching a settlement that provided support for his mother and his younger brother, but nothing for Frank, then 24. He spent a year at Harvard, working on drafts of *Vandover the Brute* and *McTeague*, under the direction of Professor Lewis Gates. In 1895, the year Stephen Crane created a sensation with *The Red Badge of Courage*, Norris returned to San Francisco and contracted with the *Chronicle* to report on the war in South Africa. Once there he covered the abortive Jameson Raid, then fell ill in Johannesburg and was deported by the Boer government. After recuperating in San Francisco, he joined the staff of the *San Francisco Wave*, a regional weekly, and associated with a group of artists and bohemians, including an artist who became the model for Vanamee in *The Octopus*. In 1897 he moved up to the Big Dipper Mine in the Sierras, a setting in *McTeague*, where he completed that novel.

His volume of short stories was refused by a New York publisher, who advised him to write an adventure novel. Accordingly, his first novel to be published was *Moran of the Lady Letty* (1898), a romance about treasure hunting in southern California, with a powerful liberated heroine. S. S. McClure read it serialized in the *Wave* and called Norris to New York to work for Doubleday & McClure as an editorial assistant. In New York, Norris met William Dean Howells, who offered to read *McTeague* in

manuscript. When the Spanish-American War broke out, he got sent to Cuba by *McClure's Magazine* and met Stephen Crane and Richard Harding Davis, fellow war correspondents and rivals as fiction writers.

Norris had belittled *Maggie* in a review and just the year before he had published a parody of Crane. In an unpublished article he described Crane in Key West: "The Young Personage was wearing a pair of duck trousers grimed and fouled with all manner of pitch and grease and oil. His shirt was guiltless of collar or scarf.... His hair hung in ragged fringes over his eyes. His dress-suit case was across his lap and answered him for a desk. Between his heels he held a bottle of beer..." Both Crane and Norris were poets and both were painterly fiction writers, but they had contrasting sensibilities, techniques and styles: Crane is an Impressionist, Norris a painter of panoramas suitable for a state capitol rotunda. Crane is compressed, objective, ironic and polished; whereas Norris is expansive, declamatory, romantic and prone to faults, especially his prose style. After witnessing only one battle in Cuba, Norris came down with a fever, repeating his experience in South Africa and leaving him in poor health.

*McTeague* was published in 1899 to strong disapproval from genteel reviewers, which prompted Norris to revise it for its second printing, in particular the notoriously offensive scene in the Orpheum Theater in which little August wets his pants. Even so, the novel got condemned overall for its "lurid" subject matter--the ungentle lower class. Howells defended it, pronouncing *McTeague* "altogether a remarkable book." However, Doubleday then rejected *Vandover and the Brute* for being even more offensive to prevailing taste. Norris's sentimental novel *Blix*, about his romance with Jeannette Black, soon to become his wife, appeared serially in a women's magazine, the *Puritan* (1899). Jeannette is the heroine of the romance, Travis Bessemer, called Blix. She is the New Woman of the 1890s, a strong Viking type with an independent mind, unlike the conventional heroines in women's romance novels.

#### EPIC OF THE WHEAT

Norris planned a trilogy of novels he called "the Epic of the Wheat," describing it to Howells as: "First, a story of California (the producer); second, a story of Chicago (the distributor); third, a story of Europe (the consumer) and in each to keep to the idea of this huge, Niagara of wheat rolling from West to East." Back in California, he lived for awhile on a wheat ranch and did research on the Missel Slough Massacre of 1880, the historical basis for the first novel of the trilogy, *The Octopus*.

In 1900 Norris accepted a position with Doubleday as a special reader, he married Jeannette Black and they moved into an apartment on Washington Square. Doubleday published his second romantic adventure novel, *A Man's Woman*, about another strong heroine, this time on an Arctic exploration. Norris gave masculine names to a number of his women characters--Moran, Travis, Lloyd, Turner, Sidney, Page. Meanwhile, as a reader of submitted manuscripts, he discovered *Sister Carrie* (1900), the first novel by Theodore Dreiser, which later in the century was to rival *McTeague* as the preferred example of Naturalism taught in American literature courses.

*The Octopus* (1901) had the largest sale of any book Norris published in his lifetime. He began researching the second novel in his trilogy, based on an attempt by Joseph Leiter to corner the wheat market in 1897-98. While he was writing *The Pit*, Jeannette got pregnant. He quit his job as a reader and supplemented his book royalties by writing articles, stories and columns. A daughter, Jeannette, Jr., was born and Norris called her Billy. The weakest of his serious novels, written for money, *The Pit* became a bestseller, then got produced successfully on Broadway.

#### DEATH

In 1902, not long after they bought some land for a homestead in the Santa Cruz Mountains south of San Francisco, Jeannette had to undergo surgery for appendicitis. Only a month afterward, to his annoyance Norris himself had abdominal pain. He dismissed it as indigestion. By the time he entered a hospital, an operation exposed gangrene. Three days later he died of infection. He must have felt himself a victim of overwhelming Force, recalling the ranchers cut down like wheat in *The Octopus*.

#### PASTORAL TRADITION

The basic plot of *McTeague* is as old as ancient Greek literature: the innocent simpleton from the Countryside goes to the evil City and finds a place in society, then gets corrupted and destroyed. This is the view of the City expressed in the agrarian pastoral tradition in American literature, first exemplified by the farmers Crèvecoeur and Thomas Jefferson. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century the opposing interests of City and Countryside were expressed politically in the agrarian Populist movement, as dramatized in *The Octopus*: The machine from the City invades the Countryside and destroys the lives of the farmers, who prove to have been corrupted themselves.

Some of the bias against Norris among professors is due to the fact that many of them are urban liberals who see rural people as “reactionary.” From within their city limits they have called the pastoral tradition a “myth” in the sense of not true--an outdated fantasy--denying that throughout our history millions of Americans have enjoyed fulfilling lives in the countryside as envisioned by Jefferson. There is more to America than New York. Not since the Civil War has the polarization of City and Countryside been so intense in many states and in the nation as a whole--displayed on television as urbanized blue coasts thinly corseting the red interior of America. The dynamics of City versus Countryside are archetypal, basic to human life and to the structure of the human brain, contrary to the efforts of the politically correct elites to force everyone onto mental mass transit.

#### CRITICISM OF NORRIS

Some critics have called Norris’s symbolism “too obvious.” Like the scarlet letter and the white whale? To the contrary, the golden tooth of Norris is no more “too” obvious than the golden bowl of Henry James, who even sets his symbol before the reader on the platter of his title to be sure its importance is not missed. James gets away with being obvious because overall he is so indirect and subtle and has a fine style, whereas Norris often surges into turgid prose and overstatement. The limitations of Norris are comparable to those of James Fenimore Cooper, who likewise compensated for deficiencies with great storytelling, appealing characterization, dramatic action, an epic grandeur of vision and mythic power.

Categorized as Naturalism, *McTeague* is easily oversimplified. And its cartoony qualities also make it appear to be simple. *McTeague* anticipates Postmodernism in mixing high and popular culture. It is also Realism, pastoral tragedy, spiritual allegory, satire and caricature in the manner of Dickens. Naturalism more pure, as in Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie* (1900), tends to be monotonal, whereas Norris blends tones--humor, pathos and the grotesque--in some episodes with a complexity that is comparable to the mixed tones in *Huckleberry Finn*. Also like Twain, Norris is a divided soul, resulting in contradictions: For example, in the scene of McTeague kissing Trina on the mouth while she is unconscious in his dental chair, his lust is condemned from a puritanical Victorian perspective, with disgust at an “evil instinct,” evidence of the genteel conditioning Norris never entirely overcame, whereas the awakened sexuality of Trina is portrayed from a Naturalist perspective as maturation. What is reprehensible is taking advantage of the woman while she is unconscious, yet Norris focuses on McTeague’s sexual instinct.

More significantly, at the same time Norris displays great intellectual skill in paralleling subplots and integrating themes to create a unified work of art. The vivid symbolism of the conclusion in Death Valley echoes themes and wasteland symbolism in the *Bible* ahead of T.S. Eliot in the most influential poem of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. *McTeague* ends as the reverse of *Pilgrim’s Progress*: as an allegory of going to Hell because of gold--material gold in contrast to spiritual gold. The tragic irony is that McTeague is not greedy like Trina and nearly all the others in the city. He has gold hair and his canary in a gilt cage is a metaphor of his soul, the best in himself, a sweetness and charity evident in his caring that much for his little bird--the beauty in the brute. McTeague is a precursor of Benjy in Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* and of Lennie in Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men*.

Norris wrote *The Octopus* in sympathy with the wheat ranchers in their losing but gallant fight against monopoly capitalism, as symbolized at the beginning of the novel in the dramatic image of the locomotive charging into and slaughtering a herd of sheep. Then he interviewed the head of the Union Pacific Railroad, Collis P. Huntington. He had assumed the ranchers were innocent victims, but Huntington informed him of how the ranchers had engaged in bribery themselves and were equally culpable. Norris

had to rethink his novel. In his revision, the moral outrage of rural Populism--supported by urban anarchists and "Reds"--got replaced by a Naturalist vision of supreme Force--paradoxically confirmed by the mystic Vanamee. Norris does not persuasively reconcile moral outrage at injustice with a mystical cosmic determinism that nullifies all fault. At the end, having been led to identify wholeheartedly with the ranchers all along, the reader is likely to feel betrayed, just like the ranchers were betrayed by the railroad.

Norris's tendencies to redundancy and preachy philosophizing are compounded in the last chapters as he attempts to patch his novel back together by assertion rather than by convincing dramatization. Also, he makes the mistake of using conventions of epic poetry such as the heroic refrain which are anachronistic in a modern novel. Readers accustomed to economy may become annoyed by the repetition of passages. So skim. There is much else to enjoy. *The Octopus* is ambitious in scope, bursting with pastoral motifs, rich in ideas and aesthetically complex, interweaving relationships and subplots: Transcending all, like a scripture, is the mystic Vanamee's loss of his beloved Angéle, who was raped and died in childbirth, an allegory of the tragic fate of innocence, goodness, justice and ideals in this world. Fate is determined by Force. However, the daughter born from that evil redeems it--she is Christ-evoking--affirming Nature and history as part of a transcendent order in which all is working together for the ultimate good. The pure relationship of Vanamee to Angéle (ideals) is paralleled and contrasted to the relationships of Presley to Minna, Magnus to Annie, Annixter to Hilma, and Dyke to Sidney. Each pair has one or more nemesis: The rapist of Angéle, Behrman, Genslinger, Lyman, Ruggles, Delaney, Shelgrim. Naturalists philosophize, making themselves characters in their novels, subject to disagreement. Norris's sympathetic story of the ranchers, addressed to the heart, is far more powerful than his rhetoric explaining his reversal at the end, addressed to the head. He cannot undo what he has done so effectively through a long novel with an ineffective argument at the end. Nevertheless, because of its many qualities, *The Octopus* is the rare case of a novel that is more interesting because of its defects than it would have been as a Naturalist novel without such faults.

Most critics agree with Richard Chase that, "In view of their imaginative achievement one does not worry too much, in reading Norris's books, about their sentence-to-sentence faults of syntax and language." Only critics who reject literary history and the consensus of scholars share the bewilderment of Warner Berthoff, who found it "hard to understand" the continuing reputation of Norris. Bewilderment is common among Postmodernists. Berthoff rejects Norris's expansive vision and shrinks his own focus to style alone. His dismissal of the novel in 1965 was contradicted by a new Norton Critical Edition of *McTeague* in 1997 with articles indicating a more discerning appreciation for the novel.

Norris has been compared to Hemingway. In 1982, the male feminist William E. Cain confessed to being frightened by Norris. Cain sees him as a threat to political correctness, an "embarrassment": "...one cannot commend Norris for his achievement [because he is] an unnerving advocate of the imagination of power, and an exhibitor of the stark realities..." If Norris were female or black, Cain would not have criticized him for writing about stark realities with literary power. Feminists like Cain revived the old genteel resistance to Realism. His criticism exemplifies the devaluation of white male writers during the Feminist Period (1978-2008) based on gender and race, which was most conspicuous in the case of Hemingway, whose last novel was censored by Feminists in 1986.

Michael Hollister

#### NORRIS SUMMARIZES *McTEAGUE*

"McTeague who is a third class dentist on an uptown street marries Trina a kindergarten teacher. Their misfortunes begin after a few years. McTeague, having no diploma, is forbidden to practice and begins to drink heavily. For a long time Trina supports the two, until she finally loses her place and in a short while the household falls into great poverty and misery. McTeague goes from bad to worse and finally ends by killing his wife. He manages to escape and goes back to the mines where the first part of his life has been spent. The facts concerning him come to light here and he is obliged to run for it. His way is across an arm of an Arizona desert, here he is ridden down by a deputy sheriff. The two are sixty miles from the nearest human being and McTeague determines to fight, he kills the sheriff and is about to go on when he discovers that even in the fight the sheriff has managed to handcuff their wrists together. He is chained to the body sixty miles from help."

Frank Norris  
Frank Norris Collection  
Bancroft Library  
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