

23 CRITICS DISCUSS

Frank Norris

(1870—1902)

“Personally, the young novelist gave one the impression of strength and courage that would hold out to all lengths. Health was in him always....I never met him but he made me feel that he could do it, the thing he meant to do, and do it robustly and quietly....Norris heard nothing, or seemed to hear nothing, but the full music of his own aspiration.”

William Dean Howells
North American Review
(December 1902) 777

“A nearer contemporary of Crane, Frank Norris (1870-1902), had a larger part in the development of the new school of fiction. A leader in a conscious movement to continentalize American literature as a protest against local color, he was himself one of the least sectional of novelists....Norris had a vision of American life which was geographically very wide. Zola, his chief teacher, and Kipling had taught Norris how much the strength of Realism depends upon facts observed in their native places. And though one of his earliest passions was for Froissart, and his first book *Yvernelle* (1892) was a verse Romance upon a medieval French theme, his mature plots were laid almost entirely in settings with which he was familiar. That so many of them are Californian must be explained by his early death; he meant later to turn to other regions.

What gave Norris his continental view of his materials was a certain epic inclination in him. He tended to vast plans and conceived trilogies. His Epic of the Wheat...was to have dealt with the relieving of a famine in Europe by American wheat—he thought of it as three distinct novels, bound together only by the cosmic spirit of the wheat which comes up from the abundant earth and moves irresistibly to its appointed purpose, guided, of course, by men, and fought and played over by them, but always mightier than they and always their master as well as their substance. Another trilogy he meant to give years of work would have centered in the battle of Gettysburg, one part for each day; he would have sought to present what Norris considered the American spirit as his Epic of the Wheat sought to present an impersonal force of nature. Such conceptions explain the grandiose manner which Norris never lost and they help to explain, too, the passion of his naturalism.

Love in Norris’s world is the mating of Vikings and Valkyries. The simplest version of such heroic passions may be found in *Moran of the Lady Letty* (1898), the story of a civilized young San Franciscan who is shanghaied upon a Pacific fishing boat and, among many adventures, meets and loves the splendid Norse savage, Moran, whom he wins with the valor aroused in him by a primitive life. *A Man’s Woman* (1900) and *The Octopus* and *The Pit* only repeat this pair of lovers in varying costumes and occupations. In *McTeague* (1899) the man of the pair, married to a woman of a different type, finally murders her. But love is by no means the chief concern of Norris’s novels, which were packed with detailed phases of life then unknown or at least uncommon in American fiction: shark-fishing and beachcombing; vulgar people in San Francisco and its Bohemian aspects; the perils of Arctic exploration; the enormous conflicts of trading in the Chicago wheat pit; the ugly dissipations of undergraduates in the posthumous but early *Vandover and the Brute* (1914). Norris set himself to find the basic elements in human nature and to present them with unhesitating accuracy.”

Carl Van Doren
The American Novel 1789-1939, 23rd edition
(Macmillan 1921-68) 233-36

“The most stimulating and militant of our early Naturalists—the only one who wrote consciously with a definite creed. He had thought out a Naturalistic philosophy under the inspiration of Zola. ‘He was never without a yellow paper-covered novel of Zola in his hand,’ wrote his brother of him. His two chief novels reveal the twin tendencies as revealed in *Nana* and *La Debacle*: The study of the individual in his reaction to environment, and the study of social forces and their impact upon a group of related individuals. His

work falls into three groups: (1) Romance—*Blix, Moran of the Lady Letty*; (2) Naturalism—*McTeague, Vandover and the Brute*; (3) *The Pit* and *A Deal in Wheat*. Between the two latter groups stands *The Octopus*. The dates of the earlier works uncertain. Commonly believed that Norris began as a Romantic and worked out of it slowly. Another view that he wrote Romances as a means of arriving, side by side with his serious work. Thus he seems to have begun *McTeague* about 1894—although it was not published till 1899.

Theory: His passion for truth more ardent—or more noisy—than Crane's: his objectivity less. The strong conviction of a deterministic universe was on him, but he never quite attained the scientific detachment. His nature large and eager. Like Zola he loved large canvases. This induced him rather to the sociological than to the individualistic study. *The Octopus* more representative of his genius than *McTeague*. Man in society, his theme: not mere men and women as ends in themselves. This grew on him—the second phase. The novelist must deal 'with elemental forces, motives that stir whole nations. These cannot be handled as abstractions in fiction....The social tendencies must be pressed by means of an analysis of the characters of the men and women who compose that society...' Above all, avoid propaganda....He never quite arrives at the amoral attitude. Ethical values persist in intruding themselves, sometimes quite incidentally, as in *McTeague*, but increasingly, as in *The Octopus* and *The Pit*."

Vernon L. Parrington
Main Currents in American Thought III
(Harcourt 1927, 1930) 329-30

"To him fiction-writing was a branch of reporting. In this may be found the genesis of his peculiarly perverse attitude and the origin of many of his weaknesses. Norris did not have the analytic intelligence of an iconoclast. His rebelliousness was emotional and disorderly. He did not possess the faculty of concentrating his intelligence with piercing, destructive consistency upon his enmities. Instead, he shouted his blasphemies and trusted to the emotional force of his assertions to win him adherents."

C. Hartley Grattan
Bookman
(July 1929) 506

"Here is what makes Frank Norris such a fascinating problem: The weakest side of his work is, in a way, the strongest side of the man. His moral passion, his idealism, his desire to make fiction contribute somehow to the good of his country and the needs of men—all this was intimately bound up with what we may call his journalism....He had the exuberant temper of Romanticism; he had been profoundly moved by the ideals of Zola; he admired the chastened, decorous Realism of William Dean Howells; and on the weak, immature, journalistic side of him, he suffered a bad attack of Richard Harding Davis! Is it any wonder that he was not able to resolve all these elements and to bring them to a harmonious adjustment by the time he was thirty-two?"

Edward Wagenknecht
Virginia Quarterly Review
(April 1930) 314, 317

"Life for him was an adventure in which fiction-writing was his greatest pleasure. He wrote as he lived: with enthusiasm, with gusto. His successes as well as his failures were due to his intense affirmation of the creed of youth. It was his fortune to see, as few people see, at the beginning of an epoch; to impress his name ineffaceably on American fiction at a time of flux when old patterns were melting away and a new literature was taking form. This he did because he affirmed rather than denied, because he lived rather than meditated, because he saw with clarity and wrote with enthusiasm."

Franklin Walker
Frank Norris
(Doubleday 1932) 3-4

"In order to realize the extent to which the genteel tradition prevailed, one has but to read Frank Norris's *The Pit* (1903). This story made, with *The Octopus*, a brave attempt at realism in the treatment of contemporary business methods, at least as much as was involved in the production of wheat, its

distribution, and the trading of it on the floor of the Chicago Board of Trade. And this marked a distinct innovation and progress toward the bold handling of business in Dreiser's *The Financier*, *The Titan*, *The Genius* (1912, 1914, and 1915, respectively). But so far as the treatment of society and private relations goes, *The Pit* gives one a sense of quaint formality, of a willingness to accept conventional patterns in human motivation and behavior which reminds one of Edith Wharton's *The Fruit of the Tree* (another novel dealing with business) more than of *The Financier* and *The Titan*."

Joseph Warren Beach
The Twentieth Century Novel: Studies in Technique
(Appleton-Century-Crofts 1932) 322

"The incongruities in American literature at the edge of the century are represented by the stunning contrast of Walt Whitman and Henry James. Beside the high-strung Impressionism of Stephen Crane ...now crouched the sociological novel, a grotesque offspring of Realism and industrialism. Frank Norris, a journalistic dynamo, damned, in *The Octopus* (1901) and *The Pit* (1902), the soulless buccaneers of railroad and exchange....Realism was tinged not with the romance of Clemens, but with the pessimistic warp of Naturalism...The base of the heady cocktail was a mixture of frankness, energy, and aggressive distrust of nineteenth-century moral idealism. After all, Norris and Sinclair had been naïve; had they not hoped to reform the social structure? Now the Naturalists counseled the acidulous depiction of evil, with indifference and cynicism as their props."

Stanley T. Williams
American Literature
(Lippincott 1933) 141-42

"These works exhibit his divided loyalty to the currently popular romantic Realism of Kipling and the Naturalistic attitude of Zola....The best type of novel, according to Norris, 'proves something, draws conclusions from a whole congeries of forces, social tendencies, race impulses, devotes itself not to a study of men but of man.' In *McTeague* and *The Octopus*, despite their Romantic elements and occasional extravagances, he is considered to have achieved his idealistic purpose and to have presented a vivid, authentic portrayal of contemporary life in California."

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

"Without in the least impairing his capacity for minute observation, he was enamored of vastness, of all things large, powerful, and excessive; enormous, tremendous, colossal, gigantic, titanic, immense, mammoth, inordinate—these words form the backbone of his vocabulary. Crowds, great cities, even inanimate nature in its larger features—mountains, forests, deserts, seas—these have for him an independent life of their own; they breathe, and the sound of that breathing, composed of innumerable smaller sounds, manifests itself to the ear attuned to catch it in the form of a ceaseless, profound, all-pervading monotone. This almost mystical sense of an exhaustless life reaching down into the very roots of being stirs and excites him; it is almost an obsession."

Ernest Marchand
Frank Norris
(Stanford 1942) 177-78

"Among the few to join Howells and Garland in critical appreciation of *Maggie* was a young man from San Francisco, Frank Norris of the *Wave*....The kinship and the contrast in the work of these two pioneers of American Naturalism are both revealed...Norris instantly recognized the common debt to Zola, but he objected to Crane's aesthetic objectivity, his feeling for style rather than for 'life.' Other critics were not slow in linking the names of the two men when Norris' *McTeague* finally appeared in 1899, three years after *Maggie* became known.

The most striking fact about Norris and his work is that by temperament, education, and written statement of his philosophy of art, he denies kinship with the realists and allies himself with 'Romance.' In the year before his death, 1901, he proclaimed his creed to be derived from Zola and Kipling, denying the fiction of Howells as 'respectable as a church and proper as a deacon.' Accepting Howells as spokesman

for the method, he rejected his limitations in so far as he could. In thus aligning himself with the Romantics, according to some critics, he read himself out of the society of Naturalists entirely...a man who plunged directly from feeling into action and then paused briefly afterward to think out his reasons. His critical terms may not be carefully weighed and his logic not always perfect, but he gave American fiction another dimension.

He was a novelist because of his passionate conviction that the novel 'expresses modern life better than architecture, better than painting, better than poetry, better than music.' The novel can speak directly to the people, as all art should, because the people will read and reread it. At her best, 'the muse is a teacher, not a trickster.' The Realist who stops short at the surface fact, or the 'Bohemian' who loses himself and his sincerity in the intricacies of style, tone, and effect, are equally at fault. To Norris, fiction was a vital, two-fisted art, the art of the future....

His work does not show a steady advance...Nevertheless it is possible to trace his development with a fair degree of accuracy. It falls into four stages: his youth when he was completely immersed in the far away and the long ago; his college years when, under the spell of Zola, he did his best work; his years as a newspaper man and social dilettante when, in trying to find his own metier and at the same time to gain a hearing, he wrote his Romances; and the last years of his life when, as publisher's reader and free-lance novelist, he undertook his trilogy of wheat. A further confusion arises from the fact that most of his short stories and sketches were potboilers, and many of them were gleaned from novels already written. Few are useful to the critic either as sources or as representative art. Unlike Crane, Garland, and London, Norris was a novelist, and he cared for no other prose form...

Let it not be forgotten that when Norris made his final plea for Romance, he was offering a justification for his own deepest nature. Why then his sudden discovery of the first and greatest of the Naturalists when he was a student at the University of California? Sensitive, acute, energetic, he instinctively turned to life rather than to books for his learning, but Zola gave his love of Romance a present anchorage in the world he saw and felt and smelled."

Robert E. Spiller
Literary History of the United States, 3rd edition
(Macmillan 1946-63) 1026-28

"It is easy now to see the faults of his work. He was a borrower of literary effects; he took those he needed wherever he found them, in Kipling, Stevenson or Tolstoy, as well as Zola. He depended on instinct rather than intelligence for his choice of borrowings, since he thought viscerally, with his heart and bowels instead of his brain....His great virtues were...freshness, narrative vigor, a marvelous eye for the life around him and courage to portray it in its drama and violence, besides the ability to construct his novels, like Zola's, in massive blocks."

Malcolm Cowley
New Republic
(5 May 1947) 33

"Frank Norris had only three more years of life than Crane. In some ways he was considerably less grown up at the time of his death. But unlike Crane he was most emphatically a novelist. And though his large conceptions still had something boyishly grandiose about them, he put an achievement behind him which still seems a large one.

Norris completely missed Zola—and apparently all modern French literature—during his years in Paris; here all his enthusiasm was for Froissart, the opera, fencing, and medieval armor and tapestry. He tried to paint an immense picture of the Battle of Crecy; and his first book, published at his mother's expense, was *Yvernelle* (1891), a romantic, chivalric poem in three cantos. There can be no question as to his enthusiasm for Zola during his college days and afterwards, but it must not be forgotten that he interpreted Zola as a romanticist. Materialistic determinism was foreign both to Norris's buoyant nature and to his moral idealism, and even when he thought he was accepting it, he seems not fully to have grasped its implications. 'Norris accepted determinism only in so far as it appealed to his dramatic sense....He

followed Zola because the latter, in presenting man as the victim of external laws, allowed for big forces and hence big conflicts.' [Franklin Walker, *Frank Norris*, 85]

The simple note of conflict is most clearly sounded in *A Man's Woman*--Norris's only really bad book--and in *Moran of the Lady Letty*. Here Norris appears as one of the founders of the 'red-blooded' school of Jack London. *Moran* was a deliberate attempt to write a short novel of adventure in the Stevenson tradition, but back of Stevenson lay its author's affection for the Scandinavian saga materials he had first savored at Berkeley. Norris had a weakness for 'strong' women. The young Viking Moran fights, eats, swears, and drinks like a ruffian, and it is not until after Wilbur has slugged her in a fair fight that she can bring herself to love him. As a love story, the book is bad; but it is good in so far as it savors of the sea, of the sagas, and of *Treasure Island*. Norris had sense enough not to permit Wilbur and Moran to marry. Instead, a vengeful Chinaman sticks a knife into the girl, and she and her ship float out to sea together.

Blix, a fictionalized treatment of Norris's courtship of Jeanette Black, whom he married in 1900, and of all his own beginnings as a writer, is much better. The simplest of all Norris's books, it catches the spirit of a sweet, absurd youth, and even when it seems ridiculous, it is endearing....As for *Vandover and the Brute*, its theme--the degeneration of a well-meaning young man through dissipation--is very Naturalistic, very French; but Norris handles it in the spirit of an Anglo-Saxon moralist; this almost frightening book is surely one of the most powerful sermons ever preached. But the very title shows Norris's bias; the division of man's nature between body and soul is foreign to the whole spirit of Naturalism.

It would be unreasonable to go to Frank Norris for an elaborate theory of fiction, but this is not to say that there are no penetrating observations in *The Responsibilities of the Novelist* (1903). There are as many definitions of Romance as there are definers; Norris's definition is that Romance is 'the kind of fiction that takes cognizance of variations from the type of normal life.' He knows that neither Realism nor Romance is an accident of geography, that there is 'as much romance on Michigan Avenue as there is realism in King Arthur's Court.' And he is as sure as Stevenson ever was that no novelist can represent life as it is....

The book is not all as good as that. The discussion of education and educational problems is that of a barbarian, and Norris's consideration of style is not much better. It would be absurd to say that Frank Norris was not an artist. His effects are coherent and carefully planned, and he knew how to build effectively toward an end. Yet he was capable, too, of very bad art....Yet it is precisely this kind of thing which makes Frank Norris such an interesting writer....There was one whole side of him that was not an artist at all but journalist, sociologist, reformer. His social consciousness was deepening toward the end of his life. Would the sociologist have killed the artist in him at last? Or would he have brought his varied rich endowments into harmony?"

Edward Wagenknecht
Cavalcade of the American Novel
(Holt 1952) 216-20

"Beneath the delicate and skilful texture of Norris's prose at its best, and the very often attractive tone of what was essentially a leisure class temperament and view of experience, there were, to be sure, other elements of feeling not far from the morbid. As in the case of Scott Fitzgerald, it was this strain which gave to Norris's work--work based on his own sense of life rather than on literary programs or social polemics--an underlying tension and interior dynamics different from the façade of virility and action which he stressed.... And wasn't it after all the presence of the 'Brute' in Frank Norris himself--that is to say, his awareness of the sensual drives even in terms of morbid sin or 'evil,' and his own sense of a certain isolation and exile because of this--which enabled him to break through the restrictions of his craft to the degree that he did?...The wound was also the source of his power; the animal instincts were the origins of his most human insights; and even the tormented rites of reversionary emotions became a path of liberation in the works of art."

Maxwell Geismar
Rebels and Ancestors
(Houghton 1953) 51-2, 66

“He did not completely master the art of the novel. When he was successful it was the success of vividness and vitalism, of realistic scenes and intense, violent emotions, of poetic though not always fully realized characters. When he failed it was a failure to achieve a balanced tension between conflicting but reconcilable methods of approach. His novels as a whole do not indicate a steady development as an artist, but they do reflect consistently the tenets of his responsibility as a novelist as he saw it: a realistic fidelity to life in all its variety and color and mystery, a sincerity of purpose, and a seriousness and complexity of theme, character, and content.”

Charles G. Hoffman
South Atlantic Quarterly
(October 1955) 515

“Frank Norris’ humanitarianism was a later growth in his brief life, for he was a worshipper of force in his early stories, one who shared ‘the gladiatorial theory of existence.’ Celebrating the ‘man with his shirt off---fighting for his life,’ Norris became the founder of the ‘red-blood’ school, the school of the ‘primordial,’ the primeval, that ended in the pulp magazines and the Tarzan books. Norris, preparing for his *McTeague*, studied low life in San Francisco not long after Crane had studied the Bowery in New York, and the two were to meet in the Spanish-American war....

Norris despised what he called the ‘literature of chambermaids,’ the historical Romance that was popular in the later nineties, with the sickly pallor of the genteel and all that was thin and insipid in the work of American novelists and story-tellers....Norris was to satirize in several stories what he regarded as the insipid culture of New England. When he began to write novels, in *McTeague* and *Vandover and the Brute*, he went to the other end of the human scale. In *The Octopus* Norris offered a vast panorama of California, with its ranch-life, barbecues, feuds and Homeric feasts and the dying Mexican world that lay behind them. His careful eye for detail gave a massive reality to the Zolaesque *McTeague*, to the portrait of the ponderous dentist, the ox-like giant with the salient jaw and the vast red hands that were covered with stiff yellow hair. Norris’ portraiture was one of the merits that Howells pointed out when he reviewed *McTeague* in 1899, denouncing the hypocrisies of the old-fashioned novel and praising a novel that was fit for the experienced and mature.”

Van Wyck Brooks & Otto L. Bettmann
Our Literary Heritage
(Dutton 1956) 213

“There is...all through his work a tension between Norris the liberal humanist and ardent democrat and Norris the protofascist, complete with a racist view of Anglo-Saxon supremacy, a myth of the superman, and a portentous nihilism (some of Norris’s anti-intellectual and reactionary views seem to have been derived from reading Kipling and from misreading Nietzsche, as well as from nativist sources). By way of contrast one might recall the more sympathetic view of Melville who shares Norris’s love of the sheer poetry of power and death. At the end of *The Octopus* we are left to contemplate an irresistible force which supposedly works for ‘good’—but for the good of whom or what? Is it the ‘human swarm’?—whereas in *Moby-Dick* we are left with Ishmael on his coffin-lifebuoy...

“What we usually have...in the novels of Norris (and this would apply to Zola as well) is the chronicle of the degeneration of characters under the pressure of heredity and environment, the tone of the story varying from straight novelistic Realism to melodrama, epic, and grotesque comedy. Norris makes of his Naturalism, even though it may seem to be merely a ruthless Realism, a means of restoring to the novel some of the dramatic actions, mysteries, colorful events, and extreme situations, along with the mythic and symbolic motives, that used to be brought into the novel under other auspices. He does not, in other words, abandon the Romance or romance-novel; he merely recreates it and reconstitutes it on new grounds.

Different as he was in temperament and background from the older American romancers, and limited though his genius was, Norris continued in certain respects the tradition of Brockden Brown, Hawthorne, and Melville, a process that was inherent in his attempt to adapt the practice of Zola to American conditions. Historians have often observed how easily in many people’s minds Calvinism modified itself during the nineteenth century into the philosophical determinism that stood behind the Naturalistic movement in fiction. Hawthorne and Melville understand fate as being an inner or psychic predisposition.

The ruin of the hero, or hero-villain as he often is, comes about as a result of the clash between his will and the adamant circumstances he finds himself in. Naturalistic doctrine, on the other hand, assumes that fate is something imposed on the individual from the outside. [not always]

The protagonist of a Naturalistic novel is therefore at the mercy of circumstances rather than of himself, indeed he often seems to *have* no self. Psychologically he is a more simplified character even than the already simplified characters in the older Romances, although by way of compensation his life is more richly endowed with concrete detail than is theirs. Nevertheless the sense of the dark necessity that controls human actions is vividly caught by both the Naturalists and the older romancers. And despite the shifting of the spotlight from the inner mind to the outer world, it is often caught by the same procedures. Norris, for example, shares with the older writers a melodramatic extravagance, a tendency toward the tone if not the actual method of allegory, and an interest in symbols (cf. The gold symbolism in *McTeague*).

To be sure, much had happened to the American novelist since the time of Cooper, Hawthorne, and Melville. What had happened can be suggested by the words Realism and anti-intellectualism. The Realism which was introduced into the older Romance-novels only sporadically became after the Civil War the primary prerequisite of the serious novel, whether as practiced by James, Howells, Mark Twain, Stephen Crane, or Norris. With the advent of these writers an era began on the operational base of Realism. Historically involved with this Realism, although not logically necessitated by it, is the anti- or non-intellectualism shown by most of the important modern novelists except those who belong to the school of James and Howells. The older writers, from Brown and Cooper to Melville, thought of themselves, not perhaps as 'intellectuals' in any of the modern senses of this term, but at least as writers a part of whose task it was to have a commerce with the life of ideas and with certain traditional values. Norris is a classic case of the modern lowbrow novelist, something of an intellectual himself to be sure, and yet a lowbrow because of his native temperament and conviction—but also because, let us not fail to add, lowbrowness is one of the most successful poses in modern America.

Compared with Cooper and Melville, nurtured as they were on a fairly complex Anglo-American culture, Frank Norris is a semibarbarian out of the new West. And yet nothing so confirms one's belief in the existence of an American tradition of the Romance-novel as the fact that Norris's background and upbringing furnish him with an imagination which is so similar to that derived from quite different sources by the older writers. Take, for example, two of the leading imaginative ideas of Melville: first, the golden age with its simple life of innocence and genial emotions, which he generically calls 'Typee'; and, second, his idea of Evil, the 'great power of blackness' which...he finds in Hawthorne's tales and which he thinks 'derives its force from the appeals to that Calvinistic sense of innate Depravity and Original Sin, from whose visitations, in some shape or other, no deeply thinking mind is always and wholly free.' To a considerable extent Melville consciously derives these two leading ideas from literary and intellectual tradition, however native they may have been to the demands of his temperament.

One finds new versions of Melville's ideas in the novels of Frank Norris. But they have been derived not so much from reflection and reading as from Norris's instinctive imaginative sympathy with the doctrines of American Populism, the movement of agrarian protest and revolt which was in its heyday when Norris was forming his ideas in the 1880's and 1890's. The importance of Populist doctrine in understanding the art of Frank Norris is suggested by his own remark...that Romance derives from the 'People.' It was not really the plain facts and concrete injustices behind the Populist protest that appealed to Norris. Rather, it was... 'the folklore of Populism.' For our purposes, this folklore may be understood as having two origins. First, there is... 'the agrarian myth' that ever since the time of Jefferson has haunted the mind, not of the vast commercialized middle class or perhaps after the earliest times the farmers either, but of reformers and intellectuals. This 'myth' involves the idea of a pastoral golden age—a time of plain living, independence, self-sufficiency and closeness to the soil—an idea which has been celebrated in various ways by innumerable American writers. Second, there is the mythology of Calvinism which especially in the rural West and South has always infused Protestantism, even the non-Calvinist sects, with its particular kind of Manichaeon demonology.

If, as we have been saying in this book, American fiction has traditionally enhanced Realism with nostalgic idle and with melodrama, it is evidently akin in its imagination to 'the folklore of Populism,'

which has always done the same. This is pointed up sharply when we perceive how close a writer like Norris actually is to Populism—not, it must be re-emphasized, to its genuinely liberal or its genuinely realistic reformist program but to its vaunting, mythic ideology (an ideology often reactionary in its political implications). In Norris's *McTeague* and *The Octopus* one finds this ideology more or less exactly represented; one finds... 'the idea of a golden age....the dualistic version of social struggles; the conspiracy theory of history; and the doctrine of the primacy of money.'

McTeague is not literally an agrarian hero; yet he does come out of a simple rural America, and he is corrupted and defeated by the customs and laws of the evil city. The fact that Nature is thoroughly Darwinized in Norris's imagination and that McTeague, though appealing in his masculine simplicity, is not far above the brute, does not quite conceal the underlying myth of Adam and the fall from Eden that makes McTeague a sort of brutalized Billy Budd. The dualistic version of social struggles is apparent in *McTeague*, though not nearly so strongly dramatized as it is in *The Octopus*. In both books the social question is conceived as a clear-cut, black and white war between the grasping capitalist and the plain American. And although Norris does not campaign for silver, he accepts the idea of the primacy of money. Gold is shown, especially in *McTeague*, to be as fertile a source of evil and misery as the devil himself and its sinister powers are melodramatized with an exaggerated symbolism. In *The Octopus* we find a full use of the conspiracy theory of history—the theory that all would be well with American life if only it were not for the machinations of the money power—the bankers, the railroad magnates, and their panoply of venal journalists and lawyers, suborned marshals, and hired assassins.

The main difference between the folklore of Populism and the imagination of Frank Norris is that Naturalist doctrine has given him an underlying pessimism about Nature itself and man's place in it. Norris appears to accept... 'the concept of natural harmonies' [quoting historian Richard Hofstadter], a utopian faith in the natural order and in the virtue of man's living in harmony with it; but this view of things always has to contend in Norris's mind with a radically pessimistic view. As with most American Naturalistic novelists, the pessimism wins out in the end, but in doing so it seems to take over from the idyl of Nature some of its poetic, utopian quality, so that what we have is not hardheaded Darwinism but Romantic nihilism, the final implication of which is that death itself is utopia.

Norris's Romance-novels succeeded in reclaiming for American fiction an imaginative profundity that the age of Howells was leaving out—a fact which Norris's crudity and passages of bad writing cannot conceal. *McTeague* introduced to the novel a new animal vitality and a new subject matter drawn from lower-class life. From a moral and intellectual point of view, *The Octopus* has to be called a sort of subnovel. Yet no sympathetic reader can forget its enormous panoramic power. The book has, as D. H. Lawrence says, a brooding, primitive tone, an astonishing sense of a world instinct with sinister forces, that remind one of Cooper's *The Prairie*.

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, although like Dreiser, Norris was unable to tell whether the English he himself wrote was good or bad. *McTeague* and *The Octopus* prove again that it is possible to master certain fundamental aspects of the art of prose fiction despite the imperfection of the language in which the feat is achieved. One does not destroy either Norris or Dreiser by pointing out their bad grammar and their false rhetoric. On the other hand neither can you write a very great novel unless you are a master of your language, as Hawthorne, Melville, Mark Twain, James, and Faulkner are masters....

Many later writers, the two greatest being Dreiser and Faulkner, have shown that Naturalism remains a usable technique. Dreiser performed the considerable service of adapting the colorful poetry of Norris to the more exacting tasks imposed upon the social novelist—very much as James assimilated Hawthorne's imagination of Romance into his novels. Faulkner, a more universal genius than Dreiser and less specifically deriving from Norris, allies the naturalistic procedures with certain of the classic motives of fiction. But it is in Norris that we see the glories and perils of Naturalism in their sheerest form."

Richard Chase
The American Novel and Its Tradition
(Doubleday/Anchor 1957) 198-204

“Norris’ reputation as the first important Naturalist in American literature rests on *McTeague*, *Vandover and the Brute*...and *The Octopus*. These books embody Norris’ debt to Zola, his attempt to transfer Zola’s literary technique to American materials, and his great contribution to the liberation of the American novel from the vapid sentimentalism of the 1890’s. *McTeague* tells of a brutal, stupid dentist who is pushed from his profession, becomes a drunkard, murders his wife, and is trapped fleeing across the California desert toward the hills where he had spent his youth. The plot is sensational, but the story is told with a care for detail and with a fairly successful use of ‘scientific’ concepts of heredity and environment. It is also true that *McTeague* produces outsized, grotesque effects, sensational rather than scientific, and in this respect is perhaps more Romantic than Naturalistic; but this is the kind of Romance that Norris found in Zola.

Vandover and the Brute is a study of a degenerative disease, lycanthropy, which reduces a charming and talented young man to abject poverty, misery, and attacks of mania during which he crawls about naked, barking and snarling like a wolf. Zola had believed that such a novel could give so minute and circumstantial an account of disease that it would be a valuable scientific document, treating psychological phenomena as if they were chemical reactions. But Norris did not adhere strictly to the formula; *Vandover* is a really a moral tale, somewhat confused, in which the responsibility for the protagonist’s degeneracy is sometimes placed on himself, sometimes on a remorseless and purposeless universe, sometimes on society....

The accomplishment of Norris should not be underrated. He was the necessary groundbreaker for the great flowering of American fiction which followed him in the 20th century. Beyond that, his best novels remain readable and intelligent. But Norris was probably more interested in the purely novelistic aspects of Zola’s technique than he was in the philosophical implications of Naturalism. Because his novels express a confused view of reality, they fail to achieve the degree of consistency and integration that is required of permanently viable works of art.”

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

“The first members of this rising generation to come into prominence did not live past the turn of the century and stand somewhat apart from its distinctive effort. Frank Norris (1870-1902) and Stephen Crane (1871-1900) are Nineties writers in character as well as chronology. An element of willfulness and affectation hangs about their work (in the case of Crane, by far the finer talent, this element is not easily distinguishable from an extraordinary originality). It seems to be the price paid for precociousness. With Norris in particular the impression is strong of a writer who never got beyond the synthetic ambitions of his apprenticeship. His continuing reputation as a serious figure in American literature is hard to understand.

University trained (at California and Harvard) and widely read, though scarcely ‘educated’ in any serious sense of the word, he worked hard at the role of the Important Writer, the explorer of new tendencies, and published a succession of essay-manifestoes on topics like ‘The Novel with a “Purpose,”’ ‘The “Nature” Revival in Fiction,’ ‘The Great American Novelist,’ and ‘A Plea for Romantic Fiction’ (collected in *The Responsibilities of the Novelist*), the first characteristic of which is their emptiness of genuine critical intelligence. Norris’s fatal weakness as a writer is that he is never able to suggest that there is any real pressure of necessity, even idiosyncratic private necessity, in what he chooses to say....

Frank Norris may be the writer this history will be most unjust to. But his incapacities are worth specifying. He can not write credible dialogue (or dialect, which he unwisely attempts); he can not describe appearances convincingly; the whole tendency of his conveyor-belt sentences, pieced together like exercises in a grammar workbook, is to obscure rather than substantiate the matter at hand. His development of plot and incident is always arbitrary, fantastic without being interesting. Human characters appear to baffle him totally; his own characters, distinguished principally by the presence or absence of ‘virility,’ act out the parts assigned to them with comic-strip predictability. All in all, composition in Norris’s novels seems to be reckoned exclusively in calculations of decibels and gross tonnage. He is a fair example of the writer who proceeds by echoing other writers—Kipling for one, and poorly, as in the Three Black Crows stories collected in *A Deal in Wheat* (1903)—and by exaggerating currently fashionable

effects; who aims at 'something big' and then can only aim at something bigger. Norris's reputation as a novelist seems an accident of publicity. Word was abroad that 'realism' was giving way to 'naturalism,' and Norris was pressed—pressed himself, after taking note of Zola—into service."

Warner Berthoff

The Ferment of Realism: American Literature, 1884-1919
(The Free Press/Macmillan 1965) 223-25

"To those who loved her, San Francisco in the 1890s was as irresistible as a beautiful woman. Fabled with adventures of the Gold Rush days, her robustness tempered by a Spanish ease of life, resplendent in a glorious natural setting, she combined vitality and sophistication....A group of writers made California's name famous, and San Francisco was their home. They bore the stamp of her influence, and she bore the marks of their passage. Bret Harte, Joaquin Miller, Mark Twain, Edwin Markham, Ambrose Bierce, and Frank Norris fed color and excitement into the city's literary life....As Will Irwin recalled: 'In those days San Francisco had a literary tradition and atmosphere. The very bartenders were trying their hands at writing. To all of us aspirants, he [Frank Norris] was the local hero...'

He was the first great Naturalist in American fiction, but he was also the bridge between the old and new, combining in his work traditional American values with new concepts. Because of his confusion of purpose and often disordered style, many dismiss him as 'a successful failure.' Like Thomas Wolfe, of a later generation, critics and readers often either misread his main purpose or catalogue his stylistic imperfections. Norris took for his subject man in crisis, which differed little from that of Howells and Realism. But if his technique often seemed realistic, his point of view was deeper. He infused fresh vitality, sheer energy, into American letters. He left behind a series of works that catalogue the life of his time. He extended Realism's themes into the dark places of life and man's consciousness. His description of man's duality, probing of the unconscious, interest in all the details of life, and his awareness of the disorder and complexity of his era make him a major figure in American fiction."

H. Wayne Morgan

American Writers in Rebellion
(Hill & Wang 1965) 104-05, 144

"Crane apparently, however, did not impress a confident young man named Frank Norris....one year Crane's senior...Undoubtedly Norris was envious of Crane's earlier success in carrying on Howells's tradition. He would, in fact, always speak scornfully of Crane's work...Even more desperately than Crane, Norris wanted to write the Great American Novel.... Norris, much the same as the hero of his autobiographical novel *Blix*, had 'suffered an almost fatal attack of Harding Davis.' Norris began by following Davis's, rather than Crane's, version of Howells's tradition. Norris (himself an earlier Hemingway) had followed Davis's romantic trail to Africa...Norris's version of the National Novel is essentially a romantic one. Although he is frequently called a Naturalist, and does show some acquaintance with Zola in *McTeague*, where he attempts naturalistically to define city life, his other novels celebrate the romance of force. In them Norris made the battle for food or justice modern equivalents for the chivalric contests of the Middle Ages....

Norris's interest in things chivalric is well documented. *Yvernelle* (1892), a jingling Romance of chivalry in octosyllabic couplets, was his first book, the product of several years of interest in Froissart's *Chronicles* and other chivalric literature. His first published essay concerned medieval armament. As an art student in Paris he had decided to make his masterwork an enormous canvas of the Battle of Crecy....He would become a writer...who...carried a sense of the epic grandeur of Froissart's battles into his portrayals of modern life. Even in his acquired Naturalism Norris sifted Zola through the evolutionary historical transcendentalism of Spencer, Fiske, Sumner, and others who insisted that the cosmic plan worked, however cruelly, for progress and good. Norris inherited this Social Darwinism from his father (the hero of *The Pit*, Curtis Jadwin, was modeled after him)...

A romantic attitude influenced by Richard Harding Davis, a dose of Zola's Naturalism, a popular updating of the chivalric ideal, and the ethic of Social Darwinism—these are the basic ingredients of Norris's romance of force. Again and again in his books, Norris would celebrate the romance of universal history as it transcends the debris of personal failure. His conclusion to *The Octopus* (1902) is well-

known... 'all things, surely, inevitably, resistlessly work together for good.' Chronicling and applauding the triumph of impersonal forces, Norris nevertheless found the drama for his novels in characters whose greatness is measured precisely in terms of their ability to compete with immutable laws. Magnus Derrick and his subordinates struggling against the iron coils of the Octopus (the encroaching railroad); or Curtis Jadwin attempting to corner the wheat—these must inevitably be defeated; yet the strength of mind and will which makes their personal victory seem almost possible reflects their almost superhuman heroism. Thus Norris reaffirms the traditional American emphasis on the individual (his full name was Benjamin Franklin Norris) by writing novels in which *great* failure comes to suggest the highest human attainment....

On the one hand, then, force is all-powerful, overwhelming characters who are not even individuated by first names—Vandover, Annixter, McTeague, Osterman, Vanamee. On the other hand, Norris as a novelist suggests, it is only through the epic greatness of the characters who are placed in conflict with natural law that the power of its immutability can be recognized. Far from conflicting, these two tendencies point equally to Norris's romantic glorification of power. Though he swore allegiance to Zola, he was never a scientific materialist...he was not a muckraker. Basically concerned with the elemental romance of life in all its varying multiplicity, Norris used the concepts and clichés of Naturalism or reform that his age made available as metaphors in portraying the vitality of that life....

By the time Norris wrote his essay on 'A Neglected Epic,' Frederick Jackson Turner had already announced the significance of the closed frontier. Like Turner, Norris insisted that the conquering of the West was 'the last great epic event in the history of civilization'...The American epic, he said, would necessarily be based on characteristic American aspirations, and must deal with business: the modern businessman is the equivalent of the Epic Warriors of earlier ages. Arguing from the precepts of Social Darwinism, Norris contended that in trade there is the same kind of spirit of competition as earlier was expressed in war. Had the crusaders been alive in America, they would have headed steel companies... Norris, of course, was already laying ambitious plans to succeed Howells, to whom he first announced his plan for the 'Epic of the Wheat.'...

Finding all American literature past and present hopelessly provincial, shortsighted, degenerate, or blighted by imitating the standards Europe, Norris offered his own way with fiction as the American way: He alone would be the truly national American novelist whose absence he lamented in his essays. Disposing of Cooper, Hawthorne, James, and Twain—even of Howells—he left himself in possession of the field....Whitman-like, Norris wished to contain multitudes—to be a DeForest, a Howells, a James, a Crane. Then in 1902, two years after Crane, Norris died."

Jay Martin

Harvests of Change: American Literature 1865-1914
(Prentice-Hall 1967) 70-77

"*McTeague* was often praised by contemporary reviewers for its 'power' but was even more frequently attacked for its 'degraded' subject matter. In any case, with four novels published in three years, Norris's career in early 1900 was fully launched. There was still the need to keep the pot boiling, particularly after his marriage, and he continued to produce much literary criticism in a semipopular vein. But from mid-1899 to his death most of Norris's energy went into the preparation and writing of an ambitious trilogy of novels in which the growth, marketing, and distribution of wheat would serve to dramatize the relationship between man and Nature. The first novel in Norris's Trilogy of the Wheat, *The Octopus*, deals with the raising of a crop of wheat in the San Joaquin Valley of California during the bitter conflict between the farmers and the railroad for control of the valley. The fictional range and thematic depth of *The Octopus*, as well as Norris's skill in weaving together several complex threads, make *The Octopus* a major epic novel. *The Pit* is much less successful, though Norris's rendering of the collapse of a wheat corner in the Chicago grain exchange is still good melodrama. Norris was planning the third volume in the trilogy, *The Wolf*, when he died....

Much of the interest in *McTeague* as an early and provocative example of American literary Naturalism has centered on the origins of the novel, and, more specifically, on Norris's documentary source in a San Francisco murder, on his borrowing from Zola, on his use of contemporary scientific beliefs, and on his final shaping, through composition and revision, of these and other sources into a compelling narrative

which also constitutes a new force in American fiction. In addition, Norris was the foremost theorist of American literary Naturalism. His conception of Naturalism casts light not only upon *McTeague* but upon the nature and direction of the Naturalism movement in America....

Early criticism of *McTeague* was dominated by the issue of the impropriety of the novel. More recently there has been an effort to come to grips not only with the vexing but still productive question of the distinctive nature of Norris's Naturalism in *McTeague*, but also with the artistic strength of the novel and with its relationship to significant ideological and cultural characteristics of its time. Norris's sexual and economic themes, his reliance on the material of popular culture, his manipulation of complex patterns of plot and event, as well as the relationship of the novel to Erich von Stroheim's 1924 film classic *Greed*, have been explored through the lens provided by major trends in theoretical and historical criticism of the last two decades. And as Richard Chase remarked in 1957, it is easy to note Norris's obvious lapses in taste and credibility, but nevertheless one does not forget (among other scenes) *McTeague* in his dental parlors or the murder of Trina. Whether we approach *McTeague* as a historically significant work or (as Norris wished) a 'good yarn,' the novel continues to hold."

Donald Pizer, ed.
Preface, *McTeague*
(Norton Critical Edition 1977, 1997) x-xi

"Norris is a better, more interesting stylist and strategist than either his backers or foes usually suggest. He is uneven and overblown on many occasions, yet often surprisingly skillful. If he were always a wholly bad and technically incompetent writer, he would not intrigue his critics so; even Berthoff's hammer blows connote a certain fascination. We need to recognize that Norris fails when measured against the Jamesian standards of moral delicacy and formal consistency that still inform our critical judgments, but we should then move beyond this obvious fact. Norris is not a great writer in these terms, but he is an extremely powerful one in his own terms and forceful in his imaginative tactics. The heightened rhetoric, the verbal disorder, the swollen energies of the style, the depiction of characters as if in a funhouse mirror—all intimate a range of novelistic power that makes Norris both compelling and problematical....

He is a divided writer, aristocratic and high-minded yet aggressively self-advertising as 'a man of the people.' He labors to rivet his reader's attention on shabby environments, shocking us with the truth about cruelly depressed lives lived in the San Francisco slums. But Norris is not a muckraker or reformer, and he seems more intent on exhibiting and intensifying the scene than decrying it....Norris shows a weird mixture of deep empathy for, and snobbery toward, his characters, and the gaps and overexertions of his style are in part testimony to his self-divisions."

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

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 20th 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 (1970-present) 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 (2015)