

75 QUOTATIONS



Frank Norris

(1870-1902)

Frank Norris wrote two major novels, *McTeague* (1899), pure Naturalism set in 1890s San Francisco, and *The Octopus* (1901), a panoramic epic of wheat ranchers versus the railroads that attacks monopoly capitalism and then qualifies the attack with a mystical form of Naturalism. Both these novels still appeal to a common reader looking for vivid Realism, entertaining characterization, historical depth, and lots of action. *McTeague* is cartoonlike, but ironic and powerful. Erich von Stroheim adapted it into one of the longest films ever made—about 9 hours!—*Greed* (1924), a silent melodrama overacted and packed with meticulous naturalistic detail. *The Octopus* evokes the great central valley of California when it was mostly huge ranches, people rode horses and the railroad became the monstrous Machine in the Garden. The novel is full of individualized characters, violent action and pastoral motifs. The main faults in *The Octopus* are a redundant style, preachy overstatement and a change of vision at the end. Fastidious critics have belittled and some have even scorned Norris for his faults, but most readers will not care and are likely to enjoy his novels for qualities lacking in Postmodern fiction approved by critics. Norris died of an infection following a ruptured appendix at the age of 32, leaving his trilogy Epic of the Wheat unfinished.

ORDER OF TOPICS: youth, education, the novel, Realism, Romance, Zola, Naturalism, commercial fiction, *McTeague*, ironic Naturalism, discovers *Sister Carrie*, *The Octopus*, machine in the garden, Crane, Sir Walter Scott, Cooper, Henry James, writing fiction, women writers, censorship, sex, Americans, Manifest Destiny, the People, a literary canon, distribution of writers, New England literary dominance, brotherhood of man, vision, credo:

YOUTH

The first ten years of childhood are the imaginative years, the creative years, the observant years, the years of a fresh interest in life.

At eighteen there comes sophistication—or a pretended sophistication, which is deadlier. Other men's books take the place of imagination for the young man; creation in him is satisfied by dramas, horse-races, and amusements.

EDUCATION

I entered college [UC Berkeley] with the view of preparing myself for the profession of a writer of fiction.

The best way to study literature is to try to produce literature. It is the original work that counts, not the everlasting compiling of facts, not the tabulating of metaphors, nor the rehashing of textbooks.

The most brilliant scholarship attainable by human effort is not, today, worth nine years of any young man's life.

He lived in the midst of a strenuous, eager life, a little primal even yet; a life of passions that were often elemental in their simplicity and directness.

If a man can be sure of his instincts, I think he has little to fear,—the rest he can work out of his own bowels and brains.

He had begun by an inoculation of the Kipling virus, had suffered an almost fatal attack of Harding Davis, and had even been affected by Maupassant. He "went in" for accuracy of detail; held that if one wrote a story involving firemen one should have, or seem to have, every detail of the department at his fingers' ends, and should "bring in" to the tale all manner of technical names and cant phrases.

THE NOVEL

The novel is the great expression of modern life.

The Pulpit, the Press and the Novel—these indisputably are the great molders of public opinion and public morals today.

Today is the day of the novel. In no other day and by no other vehicle is contemporaneous life so adequately expressed; and the critics of the twenty-second century, reviewing our ties, striving to reconstruct our civilization, will look not to the painters, not to the architects nor dramatists, but to the novelists to find our idiosyncrasy.

REALISM

The difficult thing is to get at the life immediately around you—the very life in which you move.

The important thing to decide is, which formula is the best to help you grip the Real Life of this or any other age. No romance in it? No romance in *you*, poor fool.

If there is much pain in life, all the more reason that it should appear in a class of literature which, in the highest forms, is a sincere transcription of life.

He was a large, fat man, with a great stomach; his cheek and upper part of his thick neck ran together to form a great tremendous jowl, shaven and blue-grey in color; a roll of fat, sprinkled with sparse hair, moist with perspiration, protruded over the back of his collar.

Realism stultifies itself. It [the Realism of Howells] notes only the surface of things. For it, Beauty is not even skin deep, but only a geometrical plane, without dimensions and depth, a mere outside. Realism is very excellent as far as it goes, but it goes no further than the Realist himself can actually see, or actually hear. Realism is minute; it is the drama of a broken teacup, the tragedy of a walk down the block, the excitement of an afternoon call, the adventure of an invitation to dinner. It is the visit to my neighbor's house, a formal visit, from which I may draw no conclusions. I see my neighbor and his friends—very, oh such very! probable people—and that is all. Realism bows upon the doormat and goes away and says to me, as we link arms on the sidewalk: "That is life." And I say it is not. It is not, as you would very well see if you took Romance with you to call upon your neighbor.

Also, Realism, used as it sometimes is as a term of reproach, need not be in the remotest sense or degree offensive, but on the other hand respectable as a church and proper as a deacon—as, for instance, the novels of Mr. Howells.... Let Realism do the entertainment with its meticulous presentation of teacups, rag carpets, wall-paper and haircloth sofas, stopping with these, going no deeper than it sees, choosing the ordinary, the untroubled, the commonplace.

ROMANCE

Romance and Realism are constant qualities of every age, day and hour.

Why should it be that so soon as the novelist addresses himself—seriously—to the consideration of contemporary life he must abandon Romance and take up the harsh, loveless, colorless, blunt tool called Realism?

Romance, I take it, is the kind of fiction that takes cognizance of variations from the type of normal life. Realism is the kind of fiction that confines itself to the type of normal life. According to this definition, then, Romance may even treat of the sordid, the unlovely—as, for instance, the novels of M. Zola.

To Romance belongs the wide world for a range, and the unplumbed depths of the human heart, and the mystery of sex, and the problems of life, and the black, unsearched penetralia of the soul of man.

When I wrote *Moran [of the Lady Letty]*, 1898] I was, as one might say, flying kites, trying to see how high I could go without breaking the string. However, I have taken myself and my work much more seriously since then.

EMILE ZOLA

[I am] the boy Zola.

The world of M. Zola is a world of big things, the enormous, the formidable, the terrible is what counts; no teacup tragedies here.

Zola has been dubbed a Realist, but he is, on the contrary, the very head of the Romanticists. [Critics today call Zola a Naturalist, in contrast to Romanticism; Norris sees Naturalism as a synthesis of Realism and Romanticism.]

NATURALISM

For most people Naturalism has a vague meaning. It is a sort of inner circle of realism—a kind of diametric opposite of romanticism, a theory of fiction wherein things are represented ‘as they really are,’ inexorably, with the truthfulness of a camera. This idea can be shown to be far from right, that Naturalism, as understood by Zola, is but a form of romanticism after all.

The naturalist takes no note of common people, common in so far as their interests, their lives, and the things that occur in them are common, are ordinary. Terrible things must happen to the characters of the naturalist tale. They must be twisted from the ordinary, wrenched out from the quiet, uneventful round of every-day life, and flung into the throes of a vast and terrible drama that works itself out in unleashed passions, in blood, and in sudden death.... It is all romantic...closely resembling the work of the greatest of all modern romanticists, Hugo. We have the same huge dramas, the same enormous scenic effects, the same love of the extraordinary, the vast, the monstrous, and the tragic.... Naturalism is a form of romanticism, not an inner circle of realism.

COMMERCIAL FICTION

It is essentially a love story. No sentimentality—everything healthy and clean and natural. *Blix* [1899] does not belong to any “school” so far as I can see. It’s not naturalism and it’s not romanticism; it’s just a story.

McTeague (1899)

There are just three cities in the United States that are “story cities”—New York, of course, New Orleans, and best of all, San Francisco.

Actual residence in New York is hostile and inimical to good work.

I have great faith in the possibilities of San Francisco and the Pacific Coast as offering a field for fiction.

I think it [*McTeague*] will be called “The People of Polk Street.” It will be as naturalistic as *Moran* was romantic and in writing it I have taken myself and the work very seriously.

I believe...you were quite right in saying that it was not the whole truth, and that the novel that is true to life cannot afford to ignore the finer things. I agree with every one of your criticisms always excepting the anti-climax, the ‘death in the desert’ business. I am sure that has its place. [Letter to W. D. Howells]

I think I am going to “get on” now, my stuff seems to take pretty damn well, much better than I expected, and lots of people,—big people in a way—have patted me on the head and chucked me under the chin.

But at this moment a dreadful accident happened to Owgooste; his distress reached its climax; his fortitude collapsed. What a misery! It was a veritable catastrophe, deplorable, lamentable, a thing beyond words! For a moment he gazed wildly about him, helpless and petrified with astonishment and terror. Then his grief found utterance, and the closing strains of the orchestra were mingled with a prolonged wail of infinite sadness. “Owgooste, what is ut?” cried his mother, eyeing him with dawning suspicion; then suddenly, “What haf you done? You haf ruin your new Vauntleroy gostume!”

IRONIC NATURALISM

As *McTeague* rose to his feet, he felt a pull at his right wrist; something held it fast. Looking down, he saw that Marcus in that last struggle had found strength to handcuff their wrists together. Marcus was dead now; *McTeague* was locked to the body. All about him, vast, interminable, stretched the measureless leagues of Death Valley. *McTeague* remained stupidly looking around him, now at the distant horizon, now at the half-dead canary chattering feebly in its little gilt prison.

DISCOVERS *Sister Carrie*

The best novel I had read in MS since I had been reading for the firm, and...it pleased me as well as any novel I have read in any form.... I shall do all in my power to see that the decision is for publication. [Letter to Dreiser (1899)]

The Octopus (1901)

Now I think I know where I am at and what game I play the best. The Wheat series will be straight naturalism with all the guts I can get into it.

The idea is so big that it frightens me at times, but I have about made up my mind to have a try at it.... It involves a very long, very serious and perhaps a very terrible novel.

Men, Lilliputians, gnats in the sunshine, buzzed impudently in their tiny battles, were born, lived through their little day, died, and were forgotten; while the Wheat, wrapped in Nirvanic calm, grew steadily under the night, alone with the stars and with God.

The Wheat is one force, the Railroad, another, and there is the law that governs them—supply and demand. Men have little to do in the whole business.... Blame conditions, not men.

MACHINE IN THE GARDEN

He had only time to jump back upon the embankment when, with a quivering of all the earth, a locomotive, single, unattached, shot by him with a roar, filling the air with the reek of hot oil, vomiting smoke and sparks; its enormous eye, cyclopean, red, throwing a glare far in advance; shooting by in a sudden crash of confused thunder; filling the night with the terrific clamor of its iron hoofs.... In some way the herd of sheep—Vanamee's herd—had found a breach in the wire fence by the right of way and had wandered out upon the tracks. A band had been crossing just at the moment of the engine's passage. The pathos was beyond expression. It was a slaughter, a massacre of innocents. The iron monster had charged full into the midst, merciless, inexorable. To the right and left, all one width of the right of way, the little bodies had been flung; backs were snapped against the fence posts; brains were knocked out. Caught in the barbs of the wire, wedged in, the bodies hung suspended. Underfoot it was terrible. The black blood, winking in the starlight, seeped down into the clinkers between the ties with a prolonged sucking murmur. [one of many pastoral thematic scenes and motifs in *The Octopus*]

STEPHEN CRANE

The young Personage [fellow Spanish-American War correspondent Crane in Key West, 1898] 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.

SIR WALTER SCOTT

And in spite of his errors, Scott gave us a real Ivanhoe. He got beneath the clothes of an epoch and got the heart of it, and the spirit of it (different essentially and vitally from ours or from every other, the spirit of feudalism); and he put forth a masterpiece.

COOPER

Cooper has tried to chronicle the conquest of the eastern part of our country. Absurd he may be in his ideas of life and character, the art in him veneered over with charlatanism; yet the man was solemn enough and took the work seriously, and his work is literature.

Cooper...was certainly American in attitude and choice of subject; none more so.... As a novelist he is saturated with the romance of the contemporary English story-tellers. It is true that his background is American. But his heroes and heroines talk like the characters out of Bulwer in their most vehement moods, while his Indians talk through all the melodramatic tableaux of Byron, and declaim in the periods of the border noblemen in the pages of Walter Scott.

HENRY JAMES

There can be no doubt that had Mr. Henry James remained in America he would have been our very best writer. If he has been able to seize the character and characteristics so forcibly of a people like the English, foreign to him, different, unfamiliar, what might he not have done in the very midst of his own countrymen, into whose company he was born, reared and educated? All the finish of his, and at the same time, by the very nature of the life he lived and wrote about, the concrete, the vigorous, the simple direct action would have become a part of his work, instead of the present ultimate vagueness and indecision that so mars and retards it.

WRITING FICTION

Fiction can find expression only in the concrete.

The simple treatment, whether of a piece of silversmith work or of a momentous religious epic, is always the most difficult of all.

It's not the things that have really happened that makes good fiction, but the things that read as though they had.

The art of fiction is, in general, based upon four qualities of mind: observation, imagination, invention and sympathy.

The pivotal event. All good novels have one. It is the peg upon which the fabric of the thing hangs, the nucleus around which the shifting drifts and currents must—suddenly—coagulate, the sudden releasing of the brake to permit for one instant the entire machinery to labor, full steam ahead. Up to that point the action must lead; from it, it must decline.

WOMEN WRITERS

Women should be able to write better novels than men. But under modern conditions there are many more reasons for this success of women in fiction than merely a natural inherent gift of expression. One great reason is leisure. The average man, who must work for a living, has no time to write novels, much less to get into that frame of mind or to assume that mental attitude by means of which he is able to see possibilities for fictitious narrative in the life around him. But, as yet, few women (compared with the armies of male workers) have to work for a living, and it is an unusual state of affairs in which the average woman of moderate circumstances could not, if she would, take from three or four hours a day from her household duties to devote to any occupation she deemed desirable.

The other reason is found, one believes, in the nature of women's education. From almost the very first the young man studies with an eye to business or to a profession. In many State colleges nowadays all literary courses except the most elementary...are optional. But what girls' seminary does not prescribe the study of literature through all its three or four years, making of this study a matter of all importance? And while the courses of literature do not, by any manner of means, make a novelist, they familiarize the student with style and the means by which words are put together. The more one reads the easier one writes.

Then, too...there is the matter of temperament. The average man is a rectangular, square-cut, matter-of-fact, sober-minded animal who does not receive impressions easily... But the average woman...is impressionable, emotional, and communicative...three very important qualities of mind that make for novel writing...women who have all the other qualifications of good novelists are...shut away from the study of, and the association with, the most important thing of all for them—real life. Even making allowances for the emancipation of the New Woman, the majority of women still lead, in comparison with men, secluded lives.

CENSORSHIP

The public taste will educate itself by *much* reading, not by *restricted* reading.

SEX

[Trina the dental patient is unconscious.] Suddenly the animal in the man stirred and woke; the evil instincts that in him were so close to the surface leaped to life, shouting and clamoring.... Within him, a certain second self, another better McTeague rose with the brute, both were strong, with the huge, crude strength of the man himself. The two were at grapples.... Suddenly he leaned over and kissed her grossly, full on the mouth. The thing was done before he knew it.... Ah, the pity of it! Why could he not always love her purely, cleanly? What was this perverse, vicious thing that lived within him, knitted to his flesh? Below the fine fabric of all that was good in him ran the foul stream of hereditary evil, like a sewer. The vices and sins of his fathers and of his father's father, to the third and fourth and five hundredth generation tainted him. The evil of an entire race flowed in his veins.

AMERICANS

Americans are peculiarly independent in thought and in deed, and have acquired abroad a reputation—even notoriety—for being original.

Hardy and adventurous enough upon all other lines, disdainful of conventions, contemptuous of ancient customs, we yet lag behind in the arts.

MANIFEST DESTINY

Our heroes died that the West might be subdued, that the last stage of the march should be accomplished, that the Anglo-Saxon should fulfill his destiny and complete the cycle of the world.

Every century the boundaries are widening, patriotism widens with the expansion, and our countrymen are those of different races, even different nations.

We liked the Frontier; it was romance: the place of the poetry of the Great March, the firing-line where there was action and fighting, and where men held each other's lives in the crook of the forefinger.

THE PEOPLE

Give the people time enough, and they will always decide justly. Literature is of all arts the most democratic; it is of, by and for the people in a fuller measure than even government itself.

It is all very well to jeer at the People and at the People's misunderstanding of the arts, but the fact is indisputable that no art that is not in the end understood by the People can live or ever did live a single generation.

The People have a right to the Truth as they have a right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. It is *not* right that they be exploited and deceived with false views of life, false characters, false sentiment, false morality, false history, false philosophy, false emotions, false heroism, false notions of self-sacrifice, false views of religion, of duty, of conduct and of manners.

If the modern novelist does not understand the Plain People, if he does not address himself directly to them intelligibly and simply, he will fail.

A LITERARY CANON

The survival of the fittest is as good in the evolution of our literature as of our bodies, and the best "academy" for the writers of the United States is, after all, and in the last analysis, to be found in the judgment of the people, exercised throughout the lapse of a considerable time.

DISTRIBUTION OF WRITERS

Literary centres produce literary men. Paris, London, and Boston all have their long lists of native-born writers—men who were born in these cities and whose work was identified with them. But New York can claim but ridiculously few of the men of larger calibre as her own. James Whitcomb Riley is from Indiana. Joel Chandler Harris is a Southerner. Howells came from Boston, Cable from New Orleans, Hamlin Garland from the West, Bret Harte from California, Mark Twain from the Middle West. Harold Frederick and Henry James found England more congenial than the greatest cities of their native land. Even among the younger generation there are but few who can be considered as New Yorkers. Although Richard Harding Davis wrote accurately and delightfully of New York people, he was not born in New York, did not receive his first impetus from New York influences, and does not now live in New York. Nor is his best work upon themes or subjects in any way related to New York. In view of all these facts it is difficult to see what the Great Unpublished have to gain by a New York residence.

NEW ENGLAND LITERARY DOMINANCE

The New England school for too long dominated the entire range of American fiction—limiting it, specializing it, polishing, refining and embellishing it, narrowing it down to a veritable cult, a thing to be safeguarded by the elect, the few, the aristocracy. It is small wonder that the reaction came when and as it did, small wonder that the wearied public, roused at length, smashed its idols with such vehemence; small

wonder that, declaring its independence and finding itself suddenly untrammelled and unguided, it flew off snobbishly toward false gods, good only because they were new.

BROTHERHOOD OF MAN

Is it not possible to hope that, as the progress develops, a new patriotism, one that shall include all peoples, may prevail? The past would indicate that this is a goal toward which we trend.

The whole world is our nation and simple humanity our countrymen.

The true patriotism is the brotherhood of man.

VISION

Never judge the whole round of life by the mere segment you can see. The whole is, in the end, perfect.

Falseness dies; injustice and oppression in the end of everything fade and vanish away. Greed, cruelty, selfishness and inhumanity are short-lived; the individual suffers, but the race goes on. Annixter dies, but in a far-distant corner of the world a thousand lives are saved. The larger view always and through all shame, all wickednesses, discovers the Truth that will, in the end, prevail, and all things surely, inevitably, resistlessly work together for good. [*The Octopus*]

CREDO

I never truckled; I never took off the hat to Fashion and held it out for pennies. By God, I told them the truth. They liked it or they didn't like it. What had that to do with me? I told them the truth; I knew it for the truth then, and I know it for the truth now.

