

The Trope of Violence and Pride in Frank Norris's McTeague

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Abstract

In *McTeague*, we see McTeague's pride and brutal strength, Trina's greed and possessiveness, and the vindictiveness of the jealous Marcus. Technically, Norris makes good use of juxtaposition and parallel portrayals to present the distinctiveness as well as the relatedness of the characters involved. On the other hand, with the Old Grannis-Miss Baker episode, Norris also hints that love or human care for each other is the only possible way out for human beings and the sole core value of life for human society. In my opinion, it is the disparity between the conflicting forces that attracts our attention and interests us much. This novel denotes Norris' worry for a society woven by the threads of pride and greed; it designates as well the writer's hope for a society of love, warmth, and mutual help, a society which is advanced, civilized, and free from brutality and violence.

KEYWORDS: McTeague, American Literary Naturalism. Violence, pride, possessiveness, killing.

Richard Chase acclaims *McTeague* Norris' "best book, having all the hallmarks of young genius and forming in its crude way a genuine art work" (188). W. M. Frohock, however, says, that this novel is "the work of an inexperienced and still clumsy writer" (13). According to Frohock, the stylistic flaws of the novel, such as Norris' authorial comments and his all-knowing point of view, are which that may "undermine" Norris' "reputation among twentieth-century critics" (15). Concerning this, Warren French further points out that *McTeague* is "a considerable advance over *Vandover*," Norris' earliest novel but published posthumously in 1914, because the author "avoids comments and allows the characters to speak—often rather shrilly—for themselves" (63). Donald Pizer also holds that *McTeague* in general has "fewer stylistic flaws than *Vandover*" (82). He doesn't consider the "presence of some morally subjective passages in *McTeague*" a factor that may undermine Norris' reputation. Instead, he regards these passages as "authorial detachment" for "probably the result of greater artistic control" (82-83). In Stanley Wertheim's evaluation of *McTeague*, he sees in the novel more of Norris' "evolutionary preconceptions" than detachment. According to Wertheim, the "atavistic conclusion" of the novel "exemplifies" a nature law. That is, nature destroys "those individuals harmful to the race, and this ineluctable process benefits humanity as a whole" (59). The above arguments are debatable, but they, to some degree, testify to the fact that *McTeague* is indeed one of an important literary works in American literature and has kept attracting critics' attention since its first publication in 1899. As to my

following study, it is thematic with the emphasis on human greed, pride, and violence, because they are the fundamental forces or elements that most concern the leading characters in the novel. In *McTeague*, we see McTeague's pride and brutal strength, Trina's greed and possessiveness, and the vindictiveness of the jealous Marcus. Technically, Norris makes good use of juxtaposition and parallel portrayals to present the distinctiveness as well as the relatedness of the characters involved. On the other hand, with the Old Grannis-Miss Baker episode, Norris also hints that love or human care for each other is the only possible way out for human beings and the sole core value of life for human society. In my opinion, it is the disparity between the conflicting forces that catches our attention and interests us much. By analyzing how Norris presents life in *McTeague*, we see that Norris not only proves himself as an important writer of literary craftsmanship, but also denotes, in this novel, his worry for a society woven by the threads of human pride and greed. As far as this is concerned, this novel designates the writer's hope for a society of love, warmth, and mutual help, a society advanced and civilized in the sense that it is free from brutality and violence.

McTeague does not first appear as a man of violence, but we can see in his behavior a blunt nature, limited wits, and a tendency for brutal strength. As a dentist, he often dispenses "with forceps" and extracts directly a "refractory tooth with the thumb and finger" (2). On account of his interest in Trina, he is willing to "risk his reputation" to help solve her teeth problem (15). Thus, when he is trying the "technicalities" of Trina's case, *McTeague* grows "obstinate, resolving, with all the strength of a crude and primitive man, to conquer the difficulty in spite of everything" (15). However, urged by his sexual desire, he takes advantage of Trina by kissing her "grossly" full on the mouth when she is being anesthetized (18). He then proposes to her by saying: "Listen here, Miss Trina, I like you better than any one else; what's the matter with us getting married?" (19) *McTeague* expresses himself to a girl who has attracted him so much and this abrupt proposal corresponds, to some degree, with his style of extracting a decayed tooth directly with his fingers. In reaction to the dentist's bluntness, Trina is "seized with a fear of him," exclaiming "No, no," while the dentist is bewildered and can only "repeat the same thing over and over again" (19). The first two chapters of this novel give us an impression that *McTeague*, though "immensely strong" (2), is blunt, simple-minded, and not very smart. The tooth extraction description is exaggerative to some degree, but it highlights the dentist's brutal strength in the sense that it can be formidable and harmful if wrongly used.

McTeague's look also shows his stubbornness and mediocrity. As Norris describes, *McTeague* has a "square-cut, angular" head. His jaw is "salient, like that of the carnivore" (2). According to Pizer, Norris draws upon Cesare Lombroso's theories, which confirm "superstitions about criminal physiognomy and about the effects of alcohol," to portray *McTeague*'s atavism a "reversion to an earlier epoch rather than a product of evolutionary progress" (57). In Pizer's opinion, Norris uses "prognathism as a crude symbol of the primitive strength which breaks down all barriers in its drive toward a goal or possession" (190). However, we also see that *McTeague*, before meeting Trina, is enjoying contentedly his time for relaxation in his "Dental Parlors" on Sunday afternoons (2). He likes to stand near the bay window, "looking down into the street," which never fails "to interest him" (3). As *McTeague*'s bluntness and stubborn nature

exemplify his tendency for brutality, so does the routine life shed light on his contentment and easiness. It is this disparity between McTeague's latent violence and his contented feeling about life that marks his abrupt proposal to Trina a dramatic beginning for the novel.

In comparison with McTeague's, the love affair between Miss Baker and Old Grannis is quite different. Some critics, such as Ernest Marchand and Richard Chase, believe that the "affair" going on between the two who are "both over sixty" (9) is a comic relief or an "absurd" episode, which is for nothing but entertaining purpose. In my opinion, the "Old Grannis-Miss Baker" episode is one of Norris' literary devices which help shed light on the main characters and the main themes of the novel. Unlike McTeague's "male virile desire" for physical pleasures (16), Miss Baker's and Old Grannis's admiration for each other is asexual or even platonic. They like to sit quietly in their own rooms, drinking tea, feeling the company of the other by assuming that they are actually in "one room" (11). Their timid adoration for each other, in this sense, shapes a contrast to McTeague's blunt and open ask for love. By portraying the two old people's "second childhood" adoration for each other (9), Norris presents to us a spiritually elated relationship between man and woman, which grows itself not as an absurd digression but as his intended device to serve as a foil against McTeague's vulgar desire for Trina's female body.

On the other hand, McTeague's sexual desire parallels itself with Zerkow's insatiable greed for gold. On McTeague's part, as soon as his desire for sex awakens, it becomes "resistless, untrained," and a thing "not to be held in leash an instant" (16). As Norris describes, it is the "foul stream of hereditary evil," like a "sewer" (19), which has been flowing in McTeague's family blood from generation to generation and drives him eventually to kiss Trina, "grossly, full on the mouth." For his own sexual urge, McTeague is conscious that it has happened to him in a forceful way like an impact. Thus, in his meditation on what has happened to him, he admits that his life is changed because a woman has "entered his small world," and instantly he is "fixed" and there is "no going back" (31). On Zerkow's part, the junk dealer is also tied to his greed for gold. In contrast to McTeague's bluntness, Zerkow tends to be scheming and smart in his eager hunt for gold, a person who has "claw-like" fingers to "muck" gold out of debris (25). As Norris describes, it is impossible to look at Zerkow without knowing that the "inordinate, insatiable greed" is the "dominant passion of the man" (25). He keeps urging Maria Macapa to tell the same story about "those gold dishes" (26). However, whenever Maria finishes her tale, Zerkow becomes more hateful for the painful deprivation felt at his heart. He gnaws "at his bloodless lips, at the hopelessness of it, the rage, the fury of it" (28). In my opinion, the parallels between McTeague and Zerkow are significant in the sense that they are both stuck. Zerkow, cunning as he is, gets himself involved aghushly in his dream of gold; McTeague, however, is like "some colossal brute trapped in a delicate, invisible mesh, raging, exasperated, powerless to extricate himself" from his irrepressible sexual desire. (31)

As to Marcus, he is talkative, believing himself smarter than McTeague for his knowing of the world. He likes to criticize "the theme of labor question" and attack "the capitalists," a class which he has "pretended to execrate" (8). Whenever Marcus is

criticizing “biased” social affairs or interests, McTeague just listens and is “awe-struck” (8). Thus, when hearing McTeague’s confession about his obsession with Trina, Marcus is surprised that the dentist, whose mind is “as his body, heavy, slow to act, sluggish” (2), should have been “capable of a greater passion than himself” (32). As far as this is concerned, Marcus’s sense of superiority is apparent. Assuming his self-sacrifice, he decides to “pull out,” to give Trina to the dentist (32). In fact, Marcus himself knows that he has nothing to lose at all. Besides, he admits to himself that he “would not” marry Trina; if “it came to that, no, he would not” (32). In other words, it is unlikely for Marcus to marry Trina; however, to give her up also makes him a little bit sad emotionally. When Marcus’s sense of vanity soars, he feels nobler for his own sacrifice. Norris describes:

He saw himself as another man, very noble, self-sacrificing; he stood apart and watched this second self with boundless admiration and with infinite pity. He was so good, so magnificent, so heroic, that he almost sobbed. Marcus made a sweeping gesture of resignation, throwing out both his arms, crying; “Mac, I’ll give her up to you. I won’t stand between you.” There were actually tears in Marcus’s eyes as he spoke. (32)

Unlike Marcus, who immerses himself in his noble emotion of self-sacrifice, McTeague tends to be more sensible as soon as he wins Trina. When staying overnight in Trina’s room after the picnic at Schuetzen Park, McTeague opens Trina’s closet and is fascinated by “that feminine odor” in it (45). Being “seized with unreasoned impulse,” he opens his arms to gather “the little garments close to him, plunging his huge face deep amongst them” (45). McTeague caresses Trina’s dresses, which help satiate temporarily his burning desire with “supreme content” (45). Thus, when they later meet at B Street Station, he can’t help kissing Trina again “grossly, full in the mouth” (48). Significantly, McTeague conquers Trina but only finds that she is not “so desirable” as she was (45). His impulsive passion for Trina diminishes speedily. For McTeague’s dwindling desire, Norris describes:

Perhaps he dimly saw that this must be so, that it belonged to the changeless order of things—the man desiring the woman only for what she withholds; the woman worshipping the man for that which she yields up to. With each concession gained the man’s desire cools. . . . (48)

To be more precise, McTeague, by “dimly” seeing that “this must be so,” tries to rationalize for himself inwardly his weakening passion for Trina. In fact, the B Street Station scene further verifies the fact that it is McTeague’s sexual impetus rather than love that truly drives him to kiss and caress the “so confiding, so innocent, so nearly infantile” girl like Trina (45). Especially, McTeague experiences “a great joy” out of caressing Trina because he has finally “won” her and because he is, after all, a “man of extraordinary ability” (49), a man who can be very proud of himself after all.

Norris is a writer of life. As he himself asserts in “An Opening for Novelists,” it is the “life that lives” and “it’s reality, it’s the thing that counts” (255). In other words, to Norris, literature is life, and only those literary texts dealing with life as the subject matter can long live. Owing to this belief, Norris writes his novels in the way he observes life. As far as McTeague is concerned, Norris, technically, proves himself as a writer of literary craftsmanship, who not only, as we have seen, makes good use of his theory of

“pivotal event” but also achieves, in his parallel and juxtaposition portrayals, effective forms for story narration. On the other hand, we see that human greed, pride and violence, are, thematically, the negative forces which Norris cares about most in his portrayals about “life.” Indeed, Norris’ hope for a better life is obvious as are his cares and worries about man’s present conditions.

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