Frank Norris’ McTeague:

A Greedy Wrold of Pride and Violence

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Abstract

The following reading of Frank Norris’ McTeague is thematic with the emphasis on human greed, pride, and violence, because they are the fundamental forces or elements that most concern the 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 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.

Key Words: Frank Norris, McTeague, American Literary Naturalism
法蘭克·諾瑞斯的馬蒂克：
驕傲與暴力的貪婪世界

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摘要

本研究是對法蘭克·諾瑞斯所著馬蒂克這本小說中，關於其影響主要角色最根本且重要的元素，人性的貪婪、驕傲與暴力，所展開的一項主題研究。在這本小說中，我們看到了馬蒂克的驕傲與蠻力、崔娜的貪婪與執取，以及馬可斯因妒忌而生的恨意。就技巧而言，諾瑞斯善用並列與平行的論述方法，來鋪陳並比較書中各主要角色的特色特質與相互關係。另一方面，作者亦利用副情節方式，在穿插其書中主要情節之外，另外展開一段關老先生與貝克女士的戀情。藉此，作者似乎暗示：愛或相互的關懷才是人類社會唯一可能的出路，也是人類社會生活所應獨具的核心價值。個人認為，書中所述人類社會善、惡等種種衝突力量的極大差異，相當程度上，引起了讀者的關注與研究興趣。這本小說透露出作者對糾結人類社會的貪婪與傲慢的憂慮。另一方面，該書也反襯並揭明作者的期望之情：對於一個充滿愛、相互關懷社會的企盼，一個進步、文明，且免於蠻橫與暴力的溫馨社會。
It is commonly agreed that *McTeague* is an important novel by Frank Norris, but some earlier critics’ opinions on it are quite controversial. For example, 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.¹

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 agonishly 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)

In my opinion, 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.

Nevertheless, pride is hurtful. When McTeague’s pride swells for his winning of Trina, Trina’s mother, in the mean time, is setting a mousetrap “with such violence” in the kitchen (49). With this juxtaposition, Norris seems to imply that pride is like the mousetrap, which will spring up with a “sharp snap” whenever it is triggered (49). In other words, pride hurts people whether one gores others or feels himself gored. For example, thinking of continuing his success with Trina, McTeague decides to take her, Mrs. Sieppe, and little August to watch a show. However, the “real labor of the affair” begins with the buying of the tickets (53). In front of the theater wicket, the ticket-seller disdains reply because he doesn’t know what seats McTeague really wants. Standing “thoughtful on the steps of the entrance,” McTeague suddenly becomes “enraged” (54). The seller’s disdainful attitude hurts the slow-witted dentist and makes him feel “sighted” (54). McTeague’s rage inflames and cries out loud to the ticket seller: “You can’t make small of me,” “you—you can’t make small of me. I’ll thump you in the head, you little—you little—little—little pup” (54). Though McTeague decides to “let the matter drop” (55), he hardly can pacify his “sense of injury and outraged dignity” (55). As he goes off, he keeps muttering “I will—I will—I will—yes, I will” (55). In this example, we see how hurtful or wounding a man’s pride is and how appalling the dentist’s violence can be.

The pal-like friendship between McTeague and Marcus also breaks as soon as Trina’s winning of the lottery is known to everyone. Marcus, who has never thought of how much he may lose for giving up Trina, now regrets and feels deprived of the best chance in his life. He blames himself that he is a “fool,” who “might have had” the lottery money if he had kept Trina (74). If Marcus himself were not greedy for the lottery money, he wouldn’t appear to be so regretful. In fact, his sense of deprivation proves even keener because it mingles in itself his jealousy and humiliation. He is jealous because he is not the one who may share the lottery money with Trina; he feels humiliated because he assumes himself smarter than McTeague but fails to win. Feeling hurt, Marcus breaks with his old pal vehemently. Norris describes:

“I’ve done with you. Don’t you ever dare speak to me again”—his voice was shaking with fury—“and don’t you sit at my table in the restaurant again. I’m sorry I ever lowered myself to keep company with such dirt.

Ah, one horse dentist! Ah, ten-cent zinc-plugger. . . .” (82)

To Marcus, all faults are on the “horse dentist,” who has unfairly “soldiered out of five thousand dollars” from him (81). In his indignation, Marcus tries to find an outlet for his vehemence by flinging a “jack-knife” at the dentist, but misses (82). From above analysis, we see that it is Marcus’s greed that makes him feel deprived, and it is
his sense of deprivation that further turns him into a man of jealousy. Furthermore, according to what we have seen so far, we see that Marcus is, in fact, not that smart as he has thought of himself. He fails to recognize that life itself is capricious and that neither he nor McTeague is the winner. Jealousy drives Marcus to lose his mind and behave like a person who knows only money, hate, and violence.

To Marcus’s insult and provocation, McTeague does not react at once until he sees “the breaking of his pipe” (83), whose broken pieces are too offensive for him to ignore. As in the case of buying theater tickets, McTeague furiously tries to find out Marcus and is determined to pay him back for what he has done. When “storming up the street toward the flat,” the dentist keeps muttering vengefully: “Ah, Marcus would break his pipe, would he? Ah, he was zinc-plugger, was he? He’d show Marcus Schouler. No one should make small of him...” (83). McTeague would not drop the matter if it were not for the birthday gift of a golden tooth from Trina. As Norris describes, the tooth has “changed all that” (85). Compared with the golden tooth, the broken pipe is nothing. Besides, he cares little about Marcus’s “hatred to him,” because he is the one who has “had Trina’s affection” (85). What else, except the golden tooth, can best represent his pride or success as a dentist? McTeague is appeased for the time being because he has what Marcus doesn’t have. However, McTeague doesn’t know that Marcus, feeling humiliated, is not going to let the thing drop easily. To add dramatic effects to his portrayal of the feud between the two old pals, Norris, when ending the scene, further juxtaposes it with the Irish setter’s and the collie’s aggressive barking at each other in the deep night, “snarling their endless hatred into each other’s faces” (86).

On Trina’s part, she shows herself as a smart girl of intensive possessiveness in her dealing with money. Before getting married, Trina convinces McTeague that they need to be “sensible” about the lottery money. She says to the dentist: “We ought to go on just the same as before; as if we hadn’t won. We must be sensible about it, mustn’t we?” (76). By investing the money in Uncle Oelbermann’s business, Trina brings in for herself “twenty-five dollars a month” for the interest (76). In the mean time, she earns some more additional money “from three to four dollars a week” (78) by making “Noah’s ark animals for Uncle Oelbermann’s store” (76). For her “hoarding” of money, Norris describes:

Economy was her strong point. A good deal of peasant blood still ran undiluted in her veins, and she had all the instinct of a hardy and penurious mountain race—the instinct which saves without any thought, without idea of consequence—saving for the sake of saving, hoarding without knowing why. Even McTeague did not know how closely Trina held to her new-found wealth. (77)
Fairly speaking, it is “sensible” of Trina to manage her money by further investment in Uncle Oelbermann’s store. However, she appears to be too possessive when her husband speaks of Marcus and his care about the lottery money. Without hesitation, Trina replies to McTeague: “Why, it’s mine, every single penny of it” (88). Therefore, when Marcus questions McTeague about his share of the lottery money, the dentist has, in fact, answered him truthfully by saying “It’s ain’t mine to give” (81). Indeed, it is Trina who has had full control of her money ever since the fortune fell on her. To share her hoarding with anyone else is the last thing she ever wants to do. She is so possessive that she regards her hoarding “as something almost sacred and inviolable” (88). Despite her hoarding nature, she doesn’t forget to send McTeague a birthday gift of the “big gold tooth for a sign” (75),—a sign which can both represent McTeague’s profession and her care for him. From this, we know that Trina is possessive, and she is smart as well to know a good way to please her husband at the right time.

According to what we have seen so far, the lottery is obviously Norris’ intended device that has great influences on the development of the story. Or, to put it in Norris’ words, the lottery ticket is a device of chance, a “sport of chance” (51), which he has embedded in the early part of the novel. As Richard Lehan points out, it is in “the getting of money that modern man reveals his basic nature” (537) in the world “where money is the final power” (535). Thus, the lottery is significant in the sense that it awakes people’s greed, especially Marcus’s and Trina’s, deep down at the bottoms of their hearts. A lottery ticket is supposed to bring in fortune. However, it, as a result, completely ruins the friendship between Marcus and McTeague, and changes the two old pals into foes, who won’t stop fighting with each other till death. As to Trina, we are marveled at the disparity between the inconspicuousness of the lottery’s deal when Maria Macapa sold a ticket to her for just “a dollar” (13) and the great effects it has had upon Trina by changing her, after winning the lottery, from a girl of “innocent,” “charming poise” (14) to a stingy wife driven by greed, a woman who feels the woeful “wrench” to break with any small portion of her money (88).

Juxtaposition and parallel portrayals also appear to be Norris’ favorite techniques for story narration in this novel. When McTeague is delighted with his pride of winning Trina, Norris, as mentioned, further implies that pride is hurtful by juxtaposing the dentist’s disdainful manner with the tricky mousetrap set up by Mrs. Sieppe. Besides, Norris, as we have seen, effectively parallels McTeague’s sexual desire for Trina’s body with Zerkow’s intense greed for gold. Furthermore, for the new-born feud between McTeague and Marcus, Norris symbolically compares it to the Irish setter’s and the collie’s aggressive barking at each other, “snarling their endless hatred into each other’s faces” in the deep night. In addition to these impressive examples which we have seen earlier in this study, Norris makes it further
to parallel his portrayals of human greed with a picture of vulgar gluttony in his description of the McTeagues’ wedding supper. Norris describes:

All around the table one saw the same incessant movement of jaws and heard the same uninterrupted sound of chewing. Three times Heise passed his plate for more roast goose. Mr. Sieppe devoured the calf’s head with long breaths of contentment; McTeague ate for the sake of eating, without choice; everything within his reach of his hands found its way into his enormous mouth.

There was but little conversation, and that only of the food; one exchanged opinions with one’s neighbor as to the soup, the eggplant, or the stewed prunes. Soon the room became very warm, a faint moisture appeared upon the windows. . . . (96)

Most members, who enjoy the supper, are quite vulgar in their manners. They eat and sweat, caring nothing but the food in front of them. This vulgarity becomes even more conspicuous when compared with the shyness and politeness going on between Miss Baker and Old Grannis, who seem to be the only exceptions to the wedding supper, trying, on this occasion, to reach for their love by speaking “to each other after all these years of silence” (97).

Trina’s “revulsion” against her husband assaults her as soon as she has had a glimpse of his vulgarity in his “salient jaw,” enormous red hands,” and his “heavy, elephantine tread of those huge feet” (105). Norris describes:

For a moment Trina stood looking at him as he lay thus, prone, inert, half-dressed, and stupefied with the heat of the room, the steam beer, and the fumes of the cheap tobacco. Then her little chin quivered and a sob rose to her throat; she fled from the “Parlors,” and locking herself in her bedroom, flung herself on the bed and burst into an agony of weeping. Ah, no, ah, no, she could not love him. It had all been a dreadful mistake, and now it was irrevocable; she was bound to this man for life. . . . (105)

Having no choice, Trina now begins, as she herself assumes, to love the dentist “more and more,” not for what he is but for what she has given up to him (106). Like her cousin, Marcus, Trina considers herself smarter and more delicate than McTeague. She tries to improve McTeague’s tastes of life in wearing, eating, and drinking, not only because she has conceived herself above McTeague’s “level of steam beer and cheap tobacco” (105), but also because the dentist may disgrace her if he goes on with his sluggish way of life. Ironically, what she has done for McTeague, as seen above, is more out of her patronizing vanity than love.

The more Trina accumulates money, the more she behaves like a miser. As Norris describes, it is only since her “great winning in the lottery” that she has
become “especially penurious” (107). Trina admits to McTeague that she is “a little miser,” whose instinct of hoarding money is becoming stronger and “growing on” her (119) like a “passion” that keeps her hoarding “without knowing why” (107). However, when Trina is saving more money, she is losing as much her husband’s passion for her. In fact, there is “no passion in the dentist’s regard for his wife” (107). He has “accepted the situation,” in which his old passion for Trina has “rarely stirred him now” (108). Thus, in his quarrel with Trina about renting a bigger house, McTeague has no scruples to tell her that he has known very well about her hoarding money in the brass “match-safe” (115), and that she is likely to be “such a miser” who is even getting “worse than old Zerkow” (118). Trina’s passion for hoarding money reflects as well her growing greed which is becoming more and more insatiate. Owing to her greed, she appears to be stingier in her attitude toward her husband, living a life like “paupers” as McTeague calls it.

In the mean time, Marcus tends to be more jealous of his old pal. He hates the “horse dentist,” because he is smarter but has given up Trina stupidly as self-sacrifice. His noble sacrifice makes him feel like a fool in comparison with the slow-witted McTeague. Visiting Trina and hearing her talking merrily about marital life, Marcus can hardly keep his hate from inflaming. For this bitterness felt at Marcus’s heart, Norris describes:

Marcus had come away fairly sick with envy; his rancor against the dentist—and against himself, for that matter—knew no bounds. “And you might ‘a’ had it all yourself, Marcus Schouler,” he muttered to himself on the stairs. “You mush-head, you dame fool!” (125)

Marcus has never forgotten what a happy life he could have if it were not for McTeague. To Marcus, it is the dentist who has made him feel humiliated, his noble sacrifice stupid, and all the possibility of a happy life with Trina spoiled. No wonder, with a regretful heart, Marcus’s hatred of McTeague grows and knows “no bounds.”

Thus, in his dealing with McTeague, Marcus appears to be aggressive and vindictive. As Selina speaks of Marcus when picnicking with the McTeagues and the others, “Mister Schouler’s got an awful quick temper, but he ain’t afraid of anything” (132). Marcus’s “gorge” immediately rises at the dentist when seeing his “boasting swagger” in the picnic wrestling game (130). Fiercely, Marcus wrestles with McTeague. In their wrestling, he has twisted McTeague’s head and “bitten through the lobe of the dentist’s ear. Feeling the blood bleeding at his ear, McTeague fights against Marcus like a “hurt beast” and broke his rival’s arm eventually (133). Though broken-armed, Marcus shows himself unflinching by picking up “a jagged stone with his left hand and stood on the defensive” (134). The bloody wrestling is significant in the sense that it ruins the triangle relationship among Trina, Marcus, and McTeague.
With a broken arm, Marcus breaks with McTeague completely. To Marcus, his pain, bitterness, and wounded pride, all make ineluctable the impending retaliation on McTeague. In the tragic ending of the picnic, Norris seems to mock the stupidity of human pride and brutality by describing Selina’s crying with a peal of laughter: “Oh, what a way for our picnic to end!” (135)

Zerkow, too, attempts to use violence against Maria, who has always failed to tell him the whereabouts of the “gold dishes.” For this, Norris uses again the characters’ words, like what we have seen of Selina’s in the preceding paragraph, to help comment on the related events or characters in the novel. As Trina puts it when chattering with Miss Baker, Zerkow marries Maria because he is crazy after “money and gold and those sort of things” (121) and because he is “the only one” that believes the story of gold dishes (122). However, things change. Maria has forgotten all the details about the service of gold plates since she gave birth to a baby that failed to survive. It is Zerkow now who is able to “describe” the gold dishes “in a language almost eloquent” and believes that they are “still in existence, hid somewhere, perhaps in that very house, stowed away there by Maria” (137). Exasperated by his “ill success” in finding out the gold dishes, Zerkow tries to “whip” the truth out of his wife (138). Thus, Trina’s words help verify Zerkow’s condition that he is too crazy to be held back from his eager hunt for the gold. In Zerkow, we see that greed drives man crazy and makes him aggressive and violent when it can’t be fulfilled or satiated. Had it not been for Marcus, who took Zerkow’s knife and drove him away, Maria could hardly run away from her husband’s threat and whipping. In his “peering and peeping over Marcus’s shoulder (139), we see vividly Zerkow’s blazing greed for gold as much as his trying to find out his wife, who is now hiding herself behind Marcus’s back.

Zerkow’s example and the bloody wrestling between McTeague and Marcus both shed light on violence, like pride and greed, as an important theme of the novel. The three characters are alike because they choose to use violence as a means to get even with people who hurt them or stop them from getting what they want. No wonder, Marcus, when packing up his things before leaving, decides to take the knife with him, saying “I’ll just need you where I’m going” (140). As Marcus often appears as a smart and scheming character in the story, he takes the knife away with him not because of the knife itself, but because of what it represents. Besides, in his final farewell to the McTeagues, we see Marcus’s repressed sarcasm against the couple, who “have got the best fixed rooms in the whole flat” (144). Norris writes:

“Well, you two are pretty happy together, aren’t you?” said he, smiling good-humoredly.
“Of, we don’t complain,” answered Trina.
“Plenty of money, lots to do, everything fine, hey?”
“We’ve got lots to do,” returned Trina, thinking to head him off, “but we’ve not got lots of money.” (144)

Trina is wondering if Marcus might ask her for some money before he leaves. However, Marcus “evidently” wants no money (144). The young couple never think of the possibility that Marcus may look for some other way to turn against them, especially the dentist, who has broken his arm and played him “for a sucker” (81). Marcus’s leaving doesn’t mean the end of the feud between him and the dentist. Instead, it proves to be the beginning of a troublesome life for the MacTeagues.

II

Marcus’s report to the authorities about McTeague’s practice without license is the very “pivotal event,” which leads to the ruin of McTeague’s career. Marcus is not McTeague’s rival physically, but he is smarter than the dentist and more sophisticated in his knowing of the world. As mentioned, Marcus’s farewell to the MacTeagues is by no means well-intentioned. The “oblong letter,” which McTeague has received from the authorities (145), only proves Marcus’s vindictive deed against the dentist. This fact appalls Trina, who suddenly understands that it is “all true” (148). For “pivotal event,” Norris expresses his viewpoint in “The Mechanics of Fiction.” Norris writes:

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 must decline. (320)

By reporting to the government about McTeague’s illegal practice, Marcus, in Jonathan S. Cullick’s words, turns himself into “an agent of disruption” (39) to retaliate upon McTeague for his loss as well as his broken arm. Ironically, Marcus was once the match-maker of the McTeagues. But, he now chooses to carry out his vengeance upon the dentist by ruining his life and career once and for all.

To McTeague, Marcus’s report to the authorities is a fatal strike. The dentist has thought of going to the City Hall to fight for his rights, but he fails to insist when Trina persuades him not to. McTeague, as we know, has been portrayed as a slow-witted man, who seldom responds straight away, and who responds or gets angry only when he feels hurt with his pride. Thus, we are not surprised when he fails to react instantly and firmly to such a crisis. On Trina’s part, she naively thinks that the thing may get well of itself. Thus, she tells her husband not to sue for his rights but wait and see. The writer describes:

“No, no, don’t you do it, Mac,” exclaimed Trina. “Because, if Marcus has done this just to scare you, they won’t know anything about it there at the
City Hall; but they’ll begin to ask you questions, and find out that you never had graduated from a dental college, and you’d be just as bad off as ever.” (149)

As mentioned, Trina has conceived herself above McTeague’s “level of steam beer and cheap tobacco.” Her reactions to the imminent crisis, however, show that she isn’t much wiser than her husband. According to French, McTeague and Trina are “two of a kind,” or, the so-called “thing-handlers,” whom S. I. Hayakawa describes as people who are “likely to feel suspicious and uneasy in dealing with the symbol-handlers,” people who are smarter or more capable (72). Thus, when McTeague tells Trina about Heise’s suggestion to appeal to the courts, she exclaims: “No, no, don’t go near the law courts. I know them. The lawyers take all your money, and you lose your case. . . ” (157). Trina knows nothing about the lawsuit. She is simply “seized with a panic terror” (150), not knowing what to do with the changing situation.

Owing to her greed, Trina grows stingier despite the hard times. On the one hand, she wants to “continue to save in spite of all that had happened” (154). She drives McTeague hard to “find something else to do” (151), cuts all possible family expenditure, and plans to “get a good deal” out of the auction for the family belongings (154). Saving money has become her passion, or in Norris’ words, a “passionate eagerness” to have more and more. On the other hand, Trina appears to be more possessive than ever. For example, McTeague thinks of living “decently” because the money he had earned and the lottery money are “all in the family” (153). Trina, however, replies defiantly: “No, it’s not; no, it’s not; no, it’s not,” and “It’s all mine, mine. There’s not a penny of it belongs to anybody else” (153). McTeague knows that his wife is a miser, but he hardly knows that Trina is so selfish that she, as his wife, virtually refuses to help him have a decent life when he is out of job. Thus, when Trina claims that she is “supporting” him, McTeague deems it humiliation and replies to her vehemently: “Ah, shut up; you make me sick” (153).

McTeague’s nostalgia for the old days can also be seen in his unwillingness to depart from some of his old things. Frustrated as he is, he maintains the same affection for his old belongings like the concertina, the cannery, and the bird cage, which are not for sale in the auction (155). In a sense, these things represent McTeague’s decency or tastes of life that he once had. And for the gold tooth, it shows his pride and his life achievement as a dentist. Thus, it is understandable when the “Other Dentist” proposes to buy from McTeague the “big golden tooth” outside the window, he rebuffs the man by saying “You can’t make small of me. Go out of here” (156). Indeed, to McTeague, he has been denied by the authorities as a dentist; the gold tooth, nevertheless, is significant in the sense that it holds itself as part of the
remains for what he used to be. On Trina’s part, she can’t help it, either, when sadness overwhelms her in the “long agony” of the auction (154). Norris describes:

Trina’s heart nearly broke when the kitchen utensils and furnishings began to go. Every pot, every stewpan, every knife and fork, was an old friend. How she had worked over them! How clean she had kept them! . . . Night after night she sobbed herself to sleep at the thought of her past happiness and her present wretchedness. . . . (154)

As Norris describes, the result of the sale is like “a pillage, a devastation, the barrenness of a field after the passage of a swarm of locusts” (159). With the going away of the household things, the McTeagues’ decent life draws to an end completely.

To McTeague, Trina is becoming more intolerable for her greed and stinginess. The fact is that when McTeague is discharged from his work at the “manufacturer of surgical instruments” (161), Trina asks him to “go down this minute” to find some other new job (163). She ignores his needs and takes away all he has because she is sure “by instinct” that her husband has money about him and she does not “intend to let it go out of the house” (163). Being turned away in each case of his application, McTeague, with no money in his pocket, is forced to walk home and get soaked in the cold rain. His anger inflames. Norris describes:

By the time McTeague reached Polk Street his teeth were chattering with the cold. . . . All at once a sudden rage against Trina took possession of him. It was all her fault. She knows it was going to rain, and she had not let him have a nickel for car fare—she who had five thousand dollars. . . . “Miser,” he growled behind his mustache. . . . You’re worse than old Zerkow. . . . (164)

McTeague keeps repeating to himself that he is not going to “stand” Trina’s greed and stinginess “much longer” (164). The surging rage inflamed in him tells that he has had enough with Trina and that he will assert his own right by taking back whatever taken or possessed by his wife, who is to blame for the “humiliating position” he is now in (165).

In addition, alcohol is a factor that helps provoke McTeague’s anger with Trina. Having had some whiskey with Heise and Ryer, McTeague tends to be keener in finding words to argue with his wife. He cries loudly to Trina with “an alacrity in his manner and voice” that Trina has never observed before (167). She knows that her husband returns home angrily because he has been “drinking whiskey” (168). However, to McTeague, he grows angry not because of alcohol but because of Trina’s greed and stinginess. Thus, when his wife questions him about drinking, McTeague replies indignantly by saying: “Ah, yes, you’re right, I’ve been drinking whiskey. What have you got to say about my drinking whiskey?” (168) As Norris describes,
McTeague is now “changed” to be “monstrous” by alcohol (173). The effect of alcohol on his nature is obvious. It has turned the slow-witted dentist to be “quick-witted,” “talkative,” and “vicious” (172). He pinches Trina or bites her fingertips to extort more money from her. He even finds “a certain pleasure” in “annoying and exasperating” her and in “abusing and hurting” her (171). In McTeague, we see that alcohol helps lose one’s temper and cause family violence easily. Alcohol, in this sense, is the catalyst of brutal violence.

Remarkably, when McTeague turns to pinch and hurt Trina more violently, she responds to her husband in a painful but “more affectionate” way. As Norris describes, this is “a morbid, unwholesome love of submission” on Trina’s part (174). She even discusses proudly with Maria Macapa about the “husbands’ brutalities.” Norris describes:

They told each other of their husbands’ brutalities, taking a strange sort of pride in recounting some particularly savage blow, each trying to make out that her own husband was the most cruel. They critically compared each other’s bruises, each one glad when she could exhibit the worst. They exaggerated, they invented details, and, as if proud of their beatings, as if glorying in their husbands’ mishandling, lied to each other, magnifying their own maltreatment. . . . (174)

This example for Norris’ portrayal of Trina’s masochistic tendency further shows that Norris is indeed a literary vanguard, who not only exhorts, as he says in “To the Editor of Book News,” a “direction of a return to the primitive elemental life” (325) for artistic representation, but also paves the way for the latter in-depth portrayal of characters as what we call “psycho-analysis” today.²

Trina’s masochistic tendency also corresponds to her morbid greed for money. She loves “her money with an intensity” which she can hardly express (173). Greed keeps gnawing her nature as a normal person, so that she does not care to be “scrupulously tidy” as in the old days (162). As pointed out, Norris prefers to use juxtaposition and parallel portrayals as his favorite techniques for story narration. Seeing Trina’s growing greed, we can well compare her with Zerkow, who tears down walls of his junk house to hunt for gold dishes, which he believes to be hidden somewhere by Maria Macapa (166). Zerkow’s greed for gold drives him crazy to cut his wife’s throat. When he is found dead in the “bay near Black Point,” people see a sack full of old, rusty pans and tin dishes clutched tightly in “both his hands” (180). As Zerkow hunts for gold dishes, so does Trina try hard to save money more by renting “cheaper quarters” (173). She admits to herself that she has “slaved and saved” just for her money, so that she can “get more, more, more; a little every day” (173). In Zerkow’s example, we see that greed makes one behave morbidly, drives
one crazy, and brings disaster upon oneself. Zerkow’s tragic end foreshadows the possible disaster that may happen to Trina, who also feels “troubled” when her husband just says “All right” in response to her decision to rent the “dirty house” where Zerkow killed Maria (187). Like Zerkow, Trina is now shabbier, a greedier woman who cares no more about “her good looks” or her hair which used to be beautiful (188). She turns out to be the second Zerkow, driven by greed, to keep hoarding money by any possible means in the same dirty house where Zerkow once dwelled.

On McTeague’s part, he acquiesces in Trina’s decision because he has changed, too. As Norris describes, the dentist has “long since given up” looking for a job (186). Having nothing to do, he likes to walk alone “beyond the suburbs of the city,” fishing and sitting “nearly motionless” upon a point of rocks near the shore of the bay, and eating the cooked fish “without salt or knife or fork” (186-87). When McTeague just got married, he owned a dream for his family, a “house of their own,” and a son named “Daniel” (109). But, because of Trina’s greed and stinginess, he now can’t even have a decent life, let alone his dream for a happy family. As Norris describes, the dentist is “lapsing back to his early estate” (187). He insists no more for his way of life. On the contrary, when Trina grows greedier and stinger, he gives in to harsh realities and plans to desert his wife and take away all her money in the “chamois-skin bag” (193). In the “stress of his misfortune” (187), McTeague, by deserting Trina, gives up his life in Polk Street. Remarkably, with the selling of the tooth sign, he also deserts his identity as a dentist.

It is Trina’s morbid greed that incurs her violent death. For Trina, though she wails for the loss of her money with throes of “hysteria” (195), she, when deserted, virtually indulges more in greed, in her insatiable desire for money. For Trina’s greedy passion, Norris describes:

Little by little her sorrow over the loss of her precious savings overcame the grief of McTeague’s desertion of her. Her avarice had grown to be her one dominant passion; her love of money for the money’s sake brooded in her heart, drying out by degrees every of other natural affection. . . . (198)

Drawing back her money from Uncle Oelbermann, Trina even spreads her coins on the bed and sleeps with them. Trina’s morbid passion for money further heightens when she encircles “a pile of gold” with both her arms and buries her face in the gold coins “with long sighs of unspeakable delight” (201). Trina’s sensual sleeping with the coins shows that she is now incapable of loving anyone or anything else except the gold coins. No wonder, when McTeague comes back for her help, she refuses to have “a dollar” or “a dime” further departed from her (203). Trina’s cold-blooded rejection
surprises McTeague, who says: “Say, you—you must be crazy, Trina, I—I wouldn’t let a dog go hungry” (203). When the dentist leaves, he growls: “If I had hold of you for a minute, by God, I’d make you dance. An’ I will yet, I will yet. . . .” (203).

Though Trina later regrets and tries, “as loudly as” she dares, to call her husband back to her (204), McTeague doesn’t hear her voice but is “shaking with rage, hating her with all the strength of a crude and primitive nature” (204).

McTeague’s hatred for Trina increases “from day to day” (205). He will not forgive her because he knows from Uncle Oelbermann that she has just withdrawn all the five thousand dollars, that she has had so much ready money at hand but will not give him “a dime,” and that she simply ignores him and will see him “starving” to death when he is standing in the snowy day “not twenty feet away” (204). As McTeague’s wrath has “strangled” him (204), so will he wait for the chance to strangle Trina to “dance.” Besides, McTeague, as we have seen, cares much about his belongings. He “sadly” misses his concertina on Sunday afternoons when there is “no work to be done” (206). Thus, when he knows that Trina sold his concertina, his rage, which has been looming “big within him,” comes “back upon him like a returning surge” (207). It is in this bitter state of revengeful mood that McTeague becomes impatient “for the coming of evening” (207). Instead of supper, he drinks “some more whiskey” (207). Under the lash of the alcohol, McTeague comes to break the “street door of the schoolroom” and kill Trina bluntly by his brutal force (210). McTeague’s bluntness and brutal force to kill Trina remind us of what he did to extract directly a “refractory tooth with the thumb and finger” earlier in the beginning of the novel. His bluntness remains the same but more violent. Hatefully, McTeague demands “every nickel” of the five thousand dollars (209). When Trina resists, he, “to the top of his fury,” kills her (210). The killing scene is “abominable” (210), but it doesn’t deny the fact that greed incurs Trina’s violent death. Especially, when alcohol further inflames McTeague’s wounded pride and bitter hatred, he is determined to revenge, by violence, upon his wife who has made “small of him” so much (206).

In contrast to Trina’s death by violence, the affair between Old Grannis and Miss Baker presents warmth of love and companionship. After selling his “binding apparatus,” Old Grannis is at a loss for what he is going to do (181). Thinking of Miss Baker who used to keep company with him “on her side of the partition,” Old Grannis regrets that he has “broken up” the “customs” between them (181). Grannis conceives that he has “sold his happiness for money” (181), for the check in his hand brings him nothing but emptiness which pervades his heart as well as the whole room. This “long delayed affection” for Miss Baker moves Old Grannis to tears (181). Norris describes:

For thirty years his eyes had not been wet, but to-night he felt as if he were young again. He had never loved before, and there was still a part of
him that was only twenty years of age. He could not tell whether he was profoundly sad or deeply happy; but he was not ashamed of the tears that brought the smart to his eyes and the ache to his throat. (181)

It is in this moment of apprehension when he sees Miss Baker appearing “upon the threshold” of his room to invite him to have a cup of tea in her hand (182). Before Miss Baker feels embarrassed for her “intrusion” and is about to go, Old Grannis finds “his voice” just in time to welcome her by saying “Oh, oh, you are kind. I—I—you have—have made me very happy” (182-82). As mentioned in earlier part of this study, the Old Grannis-Miss Baker episode is far from a digression for comic relief but one of Norris’ literary devices to help light up love as the core value of life. In the two old people, we see that love and kindness help melt away the timidity between them and free them to walk out of each “side of the partition” in a courageous way.

As love sets Miss Baker and Old Grannis free to have “a little Elysium of their own creating” (185), so do greed and pride imprison McTeague and Marcus to head for their violent death in the Death Valley. Technically speaking, the main action of McTeague ends with the death of Trina. But Norris’ literary intention becomes more apparent in his dealing with McTeague’s immediate escape, with the cannery “in its little gilt prison” (211), back to the Big Dipper mine in Placer County, California. That is, so far as we have seen, McTeague is, actually like the cannery, imprisoned in the gilt prison of his pride, which not only inflames vindictive hate inside him but also goads him to use violence as the sole means for vengeance upon whoever hurts him. In this sense, we see that McTeague kills Trina out of wounded pride rather than greed, though he demands every nickel of the five thousands dollars. To Marcus, however, his greed becomes more apparent when he confronts the dentist in the Death Valley. With his “pistol” pointed at McTeague, Marcus questions his enemy by saying: “What did you do with that money, with that five thousand dollars?” (245) As Norris describes, a “gleam of satisfaction” comes into Marcus’s eyes (245). Seeing that the money is in the “canvas sack” hung on the horn of the saddle, Marcus feels relieved by saying to himself “Got it at last” (245). Marcus’s self-muttering testifies to the fact that he has never given up his greedy dream about the lottery money. In this sense, he is virtually like Zerkow, who was greedy for the “gold dishes” when first hearing about the story from Maria Macapa. The tragedy ends when McTeague finds that Marcus, with a “sudden return of energy before he died,” handcuffed “their wrists together” (249). The two old pals fight with each other to death. But, violence doesn’t solve their feud, whether it is caused by pride or greed. Violence only results in their fatal death when the “half-dead canary chittering feebly in its little gilt prison” (249).

Conclusion
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. The Old Grannis-Miss Baker episode is a sub-plot, but it doesn’t deny its effectiveness in telling us 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. Norris admits, in “To the Editor of Book News,” that his “chief object” in writing McTeague is to “produce an interesting story—nothing more” (325). On the one hand, the novel is about pride, greed, and violence; on the other hand, it nevertheless juxtaposes love as the sole “elemental” (325) force that can possibly help preserve humans and human society. This novel denotes Norris’ worry for a society woven by the threads of human 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.
Notes

1 William B. Dillingham, “The Old Folks of McTeague” in McTeague 344-48. Dillingham, for example, points out some critics’ deprecating opinions on “Old Grannis-Miss Baker” episode. He, instead, holds that the story of Old Grannis and Miss Baker serves “as an effective contrast and balance to the main plot.” Donna M. Campbell, too, asserts that the “Old Grannis-Miss Baker plot does not deserve the condemnation it has received” (Campbell 47).

2 Karen F. Jacobson, “Who’s The Boss? McTeague, Naturalism, and Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder” in Mosaic 32.2 (1999): 27-41. Jacobson’s critical study of McTeague is a good example of psycho-analytical reading in recent years. In his study, Jacobson believes that the “current theories of obsessive-compulsive behavior” can account for some of the abnormal deeds of the main characters as described in McTeague (28).
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