Lack of Truth in Fiction: Frank Norris's McTeague

Carolyn Payne
cp3355@aol.com

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.hollins.edu/malsfe

Recommended Citation
https://digitalcommons.hollins.edu/malsfe/35

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Master's Theses at Hollins Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in MALS Final Essays by an authorized administrator of Hollins Digital Commons. For more information, please contact kenkeltg@hollins.edu.
LACK OF TRUTH IN FICTION: FRANK NORRIS’S *MCTEAGUE*

by

Carolyn S. Payne

B.A. in Theatre Arts, Virginia Tech
1977

Presented in
partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Master of Arts in Liberal Studies
in Humanities

Hollins University
Roanoke, Virginia
May, 2019

Director of Essay: _______________________
Amanda Cockrell

Department: Children’s Literature
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.S. Attitudes Toward Immigrants Before Norris’s Birth</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norris’s Early Life</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Francisco</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norris’s School Life</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People of Color</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norris and Naturalism</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Treatment of Characters’ Ethnicity</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria Macapa</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zerkow, the Polish Jewish Peddler</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McTeague: the Brute Irishman</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Works Cited</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction

In December 1902, American author Frank Norris wrote an essay for The Critic magazine entitled, "Responsibilities of the Novelist". In it, Norris decried any author who wrote with the purpose of selling the largest quantity of books, with no conscience for veracity, no inclination for honesty in their writing. Norris declared in his essay, "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" (Pizer, Novels and Essays 1210).

A writer who promises the reader truth in a work of fiction aspires to a lofty goal, but it may be unrealistic depending on the author’s intention in his writing. According to Merriam-Webster Dictionary, fiction is “something invented by the imagination or feigned” or “a useful pretense or illusion.” By its very nature, fiction is not required to be grounded in fact or truth as works of non-fiction must. If a work of fiction is invented or imagined, how can it be true? “Fiction deals in untrue specificities, untrue facts” and these “make reference to specific details of time and place” (Roberts 11). The difference between a novel being a lie or a ‘truthful’ fiction arises “if its writer has knowingly made it factually untrue but also warns his readers he has done this” (Roberts 27). The author intends for his audience to understand that what he writes is a fabrication. In this way, the reader is in on the ploy and not deceived. If the writer does not let the reader know his intentions, then he is withholding the truth in his fiction.

Frank Norris was adamant in his essay that the reader must not be misled by untruths. Yet, only three years prior in his most famous novel, McTeague, The Story of San Francisco,
published in 1899, the main characters - immigrants of various ethnicities - were portrayed less than truthfully. Norris wrote these characters as exaggerated caricatures of people trying, but inevitably failing to carve out lives beyond subsistence, giving the reader a distorted picture of the characteristics and traits of immigrants in San Francisco. They were crafted as people to fear, to avoid. Norris wrote of the base nature of his eponymous character McTeague, "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 clamouring" (Norris 26). Nowhere within the novel, does Norris suggest or inform the reader that the characters in McTeague are deliberately presented as deviates, monsters in personal hells not of their choosing.

Norris’s depiction of representatives of various ethnicities was distorted and untruthful. What motivated him to write such a tale? When he wrote McTeague, he had not yet come to the realization he espoused in his enlightened 1902 essay. Why would he have failed to portray the ethnicity of his characters in an honest way? What was the truth of the immigrant story as the United States turned toward the 20th century which he failed to capture in his sensationalized and tragic novel? Examination of Norris’s upbringing, the prevailing societal attitudes before and during Norris’s lifetime, and the laws that encouraged and restricted immigration in the late 19th and early 20th century, will explain, not justify, his preference to create the characters of McTeague, Zerkow and Maria Macapa as outliers, as members of lesser races of human beings.

This script has repeated a number of times throughout the United States’ history, extending back even further than 120 years ago when Frank Norris published McTeague, The Story of San Francisco. Norris’s portrayal of immigrants in McTeague was rooted in attitudes of prejudice he developed as a young man in the 1880s and 1890s. He was influenced by the prevailing societal attitudes of his time toward the integration of immigrants and their impact upon the texture of
established communities. According to literary scholar Warren French, Frank Norris’s idea of Anglo-Saxon superiority was not racist. “His dream was of bringing all peoples up to the level of superior groups, not of exploiting “inferior” ones” (French 41). But French’s opinion of Norris’s intention does not appear to bear out. Norris’s treatment of the Irish, Jewish and Mexican characters in *McTeague* did not propel them toward improved lives, toward the elusive American dream, but rather extreme destitution and ultimately agonizing death.

The societal influences on Frank Norris consciously or unconsciously directed his disingenuous portrayal of immigrants in *McTeague*. Identifying these influences aids in the understanding of racism and bigotry toward immigrants and even some U.S. citizens of color, a disease yet to be eradicated from our country even into the second decade of the 21st century. The ways in which our country addressed the arrival of large numbers of immigrants in the mid-to-late 1800s is not dissimilar to many responses heard today. Arguments made both for and against welcoming immigrants instigated vigorous debate then as now. Representations of immigrants as threats or assets were weapons used by our predecessors to press their cases for immigrant population allowances or restrictions. Frank Norris was not immune to the tenor of criticism of immigrants in the communities where he lived as a young boy and adult. The truth about foreigners arriving in the United States, whether overland from Mexico or by boat into the New York harbor, was tainted by fear and jealousy.

In a 1946 essay titled *Melting-Pot Literature*, published in the journal *College English*, historian, author, and educator Carl Wittke stated, “The United States was born of the satisfying experiences of our forefathers who came from many lands and dedicated this nation to the principle that men of diverse racial and national origins and creeds can build a society based on liberty, equality, opportunity, and tolerance for individual differences” (Wittke 189). This was an
ideal that Americans strove to uphold in the early years of our country and continues today for many as an attainable goal. But our documented history has shown that since our nation’s founding, societal attitudes, as well as its laws, toward immigrants in the United States have ebbed and flowed, for and against. The so-called “tolerance for individual differences” at times has been completely absent, dismissed by a politically self-serving paternalistic government declaring to protect our nation from one elusive ethnic boogeyman after another.

U.S. Attitudes Toward Immigrants Before Norris’s Birth

Frank Norris was born in 1870 in Chicago after the United States was reunified into one country working to build a singular national identity with common values. Surprisingly, spurred by President Lincoln’s words, the Republican Party created the “Act to Encourage Immigration” in 1864. Its purpose was to increase the labor force in our country that had lost so many citizens to the Civil War fighting. “It lauded the contribution of European immigrants to the nation’s economy and celebrated a population that had blended European nationalities” (Gratton 132). In 1869, Harper’s Weekly magazine published a Thomas Nast illustration titled, Uncle Sam’s Thanksgiving. This image exemplifies the hopefulness of many that the nation was healing from the war and differences were set aside for the good of the country. “The guests represent many races and ethnicities and they dine at the table as equals. Nast does not insert them as mere tokens. He imbues them with respect and dignity. They are people capable of relationships and human emotion. The guests at this American banquet are all different, yet bounded by their common humanity. Only the Irishman exhibits any hint of mild caricature that could be seen as derogatory. Nast includes the stereotype to make clear to his audience of Protestant Americans, that Irish Americans had right to be at the table” (Walfred).
Harper’s illustrator, Thomas Nast, imagined this diverse group of people joining Uncle Sam’s dinner table just four years after the close of the Civil War, a time when many Americans were trying to re-envision national identity (Newberry).

But in the pre-Civil War decades, negative sentiment was voiced by a number of citizens, concerned that immigrant newcomers to the United States would not assimilate well, might create political unrest akin to that in European countries which they had left. Foreigners desperate for work could potentially take valuable jobs from native-born Americans. If they did not speak English, if they didn’t agree with the governing structure, if there was a job shortage due to employment of non-natives, the fabric of established and stable communities might deteriorate. Fortunately, those fears were not held by the majority of people in the country at that time. In general, the prevalent feeling before the Civil War was that the United States was welcoming to all who wished to start anew creating a prosperous life. “A pro-immigrant consensus long prevailed, a
consensus well described in President John Tyler’s 1841 message to Congress: ‘We hold out to the people of other countries an invitation to come and settle among us as members of our rapidly growing family’” (Daniels 7).

“It is not until about 1830 that there can be detected any well-marked current of thought opposed to the immigrant. From that date, however, objections to unregulated immigration became increasingly frequent and emphatic. These objections were all based on one common ground - the poor quality of the immigrants. The main defects observed in the existing stream of immigrants were four in number, criminality, disease, pauperism, and Roman Catholicism. In the anti-immigration agitation of the thirties, forties, and fifties particular stress was laid upon criminality and pauperism. One of the chief objects sought in this agitation was the assumption by the Federal government of the control and regulation of immigration” (Fairchild). Norris would reinforce this notion of ‘poor quality of immigrant’ by assigning three of the four defects listed above to his characters in McTeague – the criminality from the petty thievery of Maria Macapa to the murder of Maria by her husband Zerkow, the Polish Jewish peddler and the vicious murder of Trina by her husband McTeague. The disease of greed infected all of those characters, as did pauperism.

Until the late 1800s, there was minimal legislation placing restrictions on who would be allowed to enter the United States from other countries. According to the Migration Policy Institute, “Congress enacted the Immigration Act of 1882 (22 Stat. 214) which constituted one of the first attempts at broad federal oversight of immigration. The law levied a tax of 50 cents for each passenger arriving by ship from a foreign port who is not a U.S. citizen, to be paid by the ship’s owner. The law further established that the United States would screen arriving passengers
and that anyone deemed a ‘convict, lunatic, idiot, or person unable to take care of himself or herself without becoming a public charge’ shall not be allowed to land.”

The number of immigrants coming to the U.S. seeking relief from unemployment, hunger, and political and religious persecution steadily rose during the years before the Civil War. In spite of fears of the inferiority of the immigrants coming from the British Isles and Europe, newcomers were welcomed by those seeking to fill a labor void and others wanting to expand westward settlement of the new nation. “In the 1830s, 600,000 came, 1.7 million arrived in the 1840s, and 2.6 million in the 1850s, which amounted to a 433 percent increase over two decades. About a third of the immigrants were Irish, almost all of them Catholic and another third were German, a large segment of whom were Catholics” (Daniels 9). But the stirrings of dissatisfaction continued to grow with the onslaught of foreigners to the United States. “The influx of Germans and Irish Catholics in the mid-1800s gave rise to a number of nativist societies disturbed by the ‘alien menace’” (Hing 27). “The first anti-immigrant mass movement in the United States grew out of the anger Protestant nativists felt toward the large waves of immigrants entering the country, especially those of the Catholic faith” (Daniels 10). Over time, anti-immigrant sentiment melded into a “secret Protestant fraternal organization the Order of the Star-Spangled Banner, whose members had to be native-born white Protestants who took an oath to ‘[resist] the insidious policy of the Church of Rome, and all other foreign influences against the institutions of our country, by placing in all offices in the gift of the people, whether by election or by appointment, none but native-born Protestant citizens’” (Daniels 10). This group was commonly referred to as the Know-Nothings as they always replied, “I know nothing” when asked about the organization or their activities (Daniels 10). “Nativist fear led to widespread anti-Irish prejudice and an increase in ethnocentrism. For nativists seeking to protect the interests of native-born peoples from
immigrants, the Irish were more than an obstacle to the perceived formation of a national
community, they were an immediate and legitimate threat” (Dowd 8). “Anti-Irish sentiment
peaked in the period 1850-1880, the decades that saw both the arrival of Famine immigrants [from
the Irish homeland] and anxiety over American national identity” (Dowd 12).

Norris’s Early Life

This rejoined United States, built on diversity, yet rebuked in some corners for the same,
was the country into which Frank Norris was born. It continued to grow in population during the
later decades of the 1800s with an ongoing influx of immigrants from the British Isles, northern
and southern Europe, Russia, and Asia impacting both coasts as well as the heartland of the
country. The city of Norris’s birth, Chicago, characterized as “the dynamic hub of commerce in
the Midwest, where Norris lived until he was fifteen years old, epitomized urbanization,
technological progress, industrial expansion…” (McElrath, Jr. & Crisler 7). Though progressive
and forward moving, Chicago was “the fourth largest Irish urban center in America and the seat of
widespread anti-Irish prejudice. The Chicago Irish did not do as well as those in the ‘urban
frontier’ (i.e. San Francisco) because of pronounced nativism in the city” (Dowd 97).

“Norris’s boyhood years in Chicago appear on the surface as happy and trouble-free - the
luxury of a spacious, servant-furnished home; afternoon drives behind his father’s thoroughbred
horses; devoted attention from his doting mother, who read to him from Scott and Dickens in the
evenings” (Dillingham 4). From the vantage point of being born into a wealthy white Anglo-
Saxon family, Norris’s early exposure to the Irish or those of other ethnicities in Chicago would
have come from those in the employ of the family as domestic servants or vendors providing
services. He would have heard the invectives spat at those considered of inferior origin. Even if he
was too young to intellectually grasp the meaning of the general response to those different from
himself, Norris would have sensed the animosity. “As an adolescent, Norris might not have been aware of the political nuances of Chicago’s Irish problems, but he certainly would have been aware of the popular view of the Irish as a social threat” (Dowd 97). In 1884, Frank’s family moved to California. One year later, “the Norrises bought a large house on Sacramento Street in San Francisco” (Dillingham 4).

**San Francisco**

Frank Norris and his family left Chicago and moved to San Francisco when he was fourteen years old. Their new city was a thriving hub of businesses, diversity and communities. Dr. James N. Gregory, in his essay, *The Shaping of California History*, described the racial positioning of San Francisco as not unlike that of Boston a quarter-century earlier on the opposite coast.

By 1880 the [San Francisco] Bay Area housed forty percent of the state's population and the city itself had more than a quarter million residents…These first decades were California's "Boston" period, a time when the commercial and cultural commitments of New England imprinted decisively on the new state.

Boston in the 1850s was shared by Yankees and Irish, and so was San Francisco...

Working-class Catholic Irish and the WASP business class faced off repeatedly in these decades, at times with incendiary results.

Yet there was a uniquely California aspect to this Yankee/Irish contest. The overlapping tensions of class and religion were mediated by a third factor, race, that worked to the advantage of the white working class. The Chinese were, as Alexander Saxton put it, "the indispensable enemy." Just as in the South, the presence of a racial "enemy" made it possible for whites to transcend their differences. White ethnic and religious tensions were
muted and immigrants like the Irish would find greater economic and social opportunities in San Francisco than in Boston in part because of the political dynamics of race hatred (Gregory).

Very different from Chicago, San Francisco was “a city where the Irish thrived socially and politically” (Dowd 97), though they continued to confront racial prejudice. “As they did throughout the United States, Irish Catholics in postbellum San Francisco inhabited an ambiguous religio-racial space, considered neither fully white nor fully Christian” (Paddison 507).

Norris and his family were a stone’s throw from the vibrant and diverse community where he based his novel. “On Sacramento Street he was a block away from Van Ness Avenue and two from Polk Street (the setting for most of McTeague), with its beehive of small businesses, shops and dental ‘parlors’. Here young Frank Norris felt the pulse of life and for the first time sensed the drama of human struggle” (Dillingham 5). In the early pages of the novel, Norris called Polk Street, “‘an accommodation street’ of small shops in the residence quarter of the town” (Norris 2) and he vividly described the awakening of life on Polk Street that McTeague viewed each day from his ‘Dental Parlours’ office.

The labourers went trudging past in a straggling file – plumber’s apprentices, their pockets stuffed with sections of lead pipe, tweezers, and pliers; carpenters, carrying nothing but their little pasteboard lunch baskets painted to imitate leather; gangs of street workers, their overalls soiled with yellow clay, their picks and long-handled shovels over their shoulders; plasterers, spotted with lime from head to foot. This little army of workers, tramping steadily in one direction, met and mingled with other toilers of a different description – conductors and “swing men” of the cable company going on duty; heavy-eyed night clerks from the drug stores on their way home to sleep; roundsmen returning to the precinct
police station to make their night report, and Chinese market gardeners teetering past under their heavy baskets (Norris 5).

Warren French observed of Norris, “He loved the world around him especially San Francisco – enough to want to preserve it, so that he filled the ‘notebooks’ that his brother Charles says were his greatest treasures with affectionately enthusiastic descriptions of the sights and sounds and smells of a fascinating city” (French 70).

Norris’s School Life

Norris’s life of privilege segregated him from the ethnic masses, not only by his address, but where he attended school. Boarding school, art school, Harvard, each provided an environment where “white” persons of wealth and station were granted access. From 1887 to 1889, he lived in Paris, studying art at the Académie Julian under the renowned Adolphe William Bouguereau, “one of the great Academic painters of the nineteenth century France” (McElrath, Jr. and Crisler 84).

An important lesson “Norris learned from his ‘life study’ training: To depict real-world entities such as men…credibly, one must observe them carefully, understand them in the sense of seeing them as they actually are, and draw them as they are – from life” (McElrath, Jr. and Crisler 84). “In theory at least, real life was the ‘model’ from which he could not turn away if he was to render human experience credibly” (McElrath, Jr. and Crisler 98). But in McTeague, while Norris created a vividly realistic and accurate depiction of the Polk Street setting where residents and businesses conducted their daily lives, he did not fairly characterize the people living there. Norris did not see those immigrants as the vibrant, contributing members of their community. Through the lens of his Anglo-Saxon interpretation they were defective, destined to fail. While studying in Paris, Frank Norris was introduced to and came to be greatly influenced by the ideas of French critic-philosopher Hippolyte Taine. Taine had been Professor of Aesthetics at the École des Beaux-Arts,
resigning three years prior to Norris’s arrival in France. The influential academician believed "that man’s existence is largely shaped by forces – Taine called them race, surroundings, and epoch – which are beyond his control” (Dillingham 21). Encyclopedia Brittanica.com defined the three factors espoused by Taine in the following way. “By ‘race’ he meant the inherited disposition or temperament that persists stubbornly over thousands of years. By ‘milieu’ he meant the circumstances or environment that modify the inherited racial disposition. By ‘moment’ Taine meant the momentum of past and present cultural traditions”. “What we call the race,’ wrote Taine, ‘are the innate and hereditary dispositions which man brings with him to the light, and which, as a rule, are united with the marked differences in the temperament and structure of the body”’ (Dillingham 50). Norris was steeped in the belief that the Anglo-Saxon race was superior to all other races, so he did not fault the ‘inferior’ races for not being able to rise to the dignity and stature of their white counterparts. Based on Taine’s three forces, the inherent nature of their existence dictated this. He saw them shackled by natural causes, by factors beyond their control. As a young adult, it would have been logical for Norris to have sought answers to life’s universal questions in academia. Grasping theories and concepts that have come before, reshaping them to suit his outlook, he was taking hold of avant garde ideas to separate himself from the mainstream. “Norris seems to have swallowed in large quantities certain ideas on race and evolution which were current. While a student in Joseph Le Conte’s geology and zoology courses at Berkeley (1892-93), he felt an excitement that he seldom experienced in academic pursuits...he found Le Conte’s teachings on evolution deeply stirring...With Herbert Spencer, Le Conte saw man evolving through the process of natural selection through higher and higher forms, toward the ultimate good” (Dillingham 53). But Norris did not express any empathy or
acknowledge a higher form when choosing to describe McTeague as “the draught horse, immensely strong, stupid, docile, obedient” (Norris 3).

People of Color

The hallowed education available to Frank Norris was not possible for the working class people of color, which during those decades of the 1800s included the Irish, Italian, those of Jewish descent, anyone not white Anglo-Saxon Protestant.

Rebecca Nisetich offered a broad definition of race in an article she wrote in Studies in American Naturalism entitled, The Nature of the Beast: Scientific Theories of Race and Sexuality in McTeague.

At the time Norris was composing McTeague, the term race could refer to groups of people defined not only in terms of color but also in terms of genealogy, nationality, class and religion. The scientific discourse on race effectively placed human beings in a hierarchy of categories that posited the Anglo Saxon, or “Nordic,” race as the highest achievement of human evolution, higher even than other races, or ethnicities, that today would be considered equally white. In this milieu, “white” meant “native”…, Anglo-Saxon, and usually middle to upper class (Nisetich 2).

According to Victor Satzewich, “Many of the European groups that are now routinely thought of as white were far from being considered white as little as two or three generations ago. For much of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, scholars, politicians, trade union leaders, captains of business, and members of the public in North America and Europe thought of Europe as being made up of a plurality of ’races ’ that were inherently different from each other”
Satzewich correlates the perception of the Irish with that of African-Americans during the time of great migration of those fleeing Europe.

The story of the Irish in the United States is now reasonably familiar. In the early nineteenth century, the social, intellectual, cultural, and political capacities of Irish immigrants and their descendants were racially defined in ways that were little different from those in which the black population of the United States was defined. In popular culture, politics, and racial science of the day, the Irish were regarded as racial others whose presence constituted a significant threat to American democracy. As Roediger puts it: "low browed and savage, groveling and bestial, lazy and wild, simian and sensual - such were the adjectives used by many native born Americans to describe the Catholic Irish 'race' in the years before the Civil War" (Satzewich 8).

“Furthermore, in the period of mass migration, nativity [nativism] became racialized in both scholarly and popular culture. Irish, Jewish, or Italian racial traits were seen as causes of immigrants’ aberrant social behavior by those native-born whites concerned about the new arrivals’ ‘fitness for self-government.’” (Igra 20)

As an adult, Frank Norris “repeatedly enunciated his belief in the racial superiority of the Anglo-Saxon, which over time had become the Anglo-Norman, the British, and the Anglo-American type” (McElrath and Crisler 30). If one researches the terms naturalism, determinism, and nativism, it would not be surprising to find the name Frank Norris listed under their respective headings in indexes of critical histories of American fiction. His belief in these literary, social and political philosophies granted him the self-determined validation to write a so-called “truthful” representation of immigrants in his novel McTeague. According to Christopher Dowd, “scholars too often ignore, downplay or misinterpret the title character’s ethnicity, while at the same time
emphasizing the influence of nativism, evolution, and criminal anthropology on Norris. Ethnicity is central to all these concerns” (Dowd 95). He continues, “McTeague is also the product of his study of criminal anthropology, particularly the school of thinking developed by Cesare Lombroso regarding atavism, hereditary criminality, degeneration, and criminal physiognomy” (Dowd 98). Norris describes in detail the struggle between the good and evil nature of man when Trina comes to McTeague’s ‘Dental Parlours’ to have dental work done. While she is under anesthesia, McTeague’s desire for her takes hold of him and he cannot help but give in to his lust for her. “Suddenly he leaned over and kissed her, grossly, full on the mouth” (Norris 27). He regained his composure but recognized that he had unleashed the monster within. “But for all that, the brute was there. Long dormant, it was now at last alive, awake. 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 father and 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” (Norris 27). Lombroso’s theories provided Norris “a way to explain the behavior of his murderous protagonist – he was born a criminal, having inherited the degenerate traits and predilections of his Irish ancestors” (Dowd 98). “Norris became the founder of the ‘red-blood’ school, the school of the ‘primordial’, the ‘primeval’, that ended in the pulp-magazines and the Tarzan books. This was the beginning of the ‘cave-man’ tendency that reappeared in Hemingway and John Steinbeck a generation later” (Brooks & Bettmann 213). The negative, racist tenor of Norris’s 1899 novel highlights the chasm between his misrepresentation of the ethnically diverse, eclectic residents of a working class neighborhood on Polk Street in San Francisco and his idealism for the writing profession as proclaimed in his 1902 essay, demanding an author should write only the truth for his readers.
Norris and Naturalism

Adopting a naturalistic viewpoint of the world and to his writing gave justification to Norris to pigeonhole the characters in his novel with traits unbecoming, undignified, and antithetical to a civilized society. There was question as to whether he was a serious student of these new modes of social science or if it was simply expedient to inject those beliefs into his writing to create a sensational story. “Norris apparently ‘discovered’ Zola while studying French at Berkeley...he began to expound the virtues of naturalism, which there is little evidence he understood” (French 24).

“Norris had chosen in his mid-twenties to follow in the footsteps of Emile Zola, the French ‘father’ of a self-consciously post-Darwinian school of writing known as naturalism. The guiding principle of literary naturalism through the 1880s and into the 1890s was a radical fidelity to nature and thus the truthful depiction of the whole of the human condition in light of the most recent scientific findings and hypotheses. These included not only physical science but the budding fields of psychology and social science” (McElrath, Jr. & Crisler xi). But Norris was not propelled by new ideas and theories of science. “His aesthetic was not deeply rooted in abstract thought…” (Walcutt 116). His was a superficial grasp of this new ‘ism’, made more real by permitting life to dictate literature. “He was attracted by the sensational aspects of naturalism (which he considered ‘romantic’), and he imitated the spectacular effects of Zola without much thought for the underlying implications” (Walcutt 155). Norris used the principles of naturalism to justify his horror story rather than to depict real people striving to improve their lives.

McTeague is cast with characters that readily fit the criteria for the genre of literary naturalism. “The naturalist populates his novel primarily from the lower middle class or the lower class. His characters are the poor, the uneducated, the unsophisticated. His fictional world is that
of the commonplace and unheroic” (Pizer, Novels and Essays 10-11). No character is more “unheroic” than the lumbering McTeague. “This poor crude dentist of Polk Street, stupid, ignorant, vulgar, with his sham education and plebian tastes…” (Norris 24). In Norris’s novel, the lower middle class or the lower class Donald Pizer refers to will not be of the superior native, white Anglo-Saxon race.

Norris wrote an essay in 1896, for The Wave, entitled Zola as a Romantic Writer. In this essay, he describes what is required to write as a naturalist and which we will come to see accurately describes the fates of the characters in McTeague. “Terrible things must happen to the characters of the naturalistic 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” (Pizer. Novels and Essays 1107).

“The naturalist has had new fields opened to him by the right which science assumes to explore all areas of thought and action. These new fields contain many hideous and revolting subjects which the naturalist can exploit and render doubly effective by this ostensibly scientific approach to them…the naturalist is led to write about ‘sociological extremes,’ for it is in the sordid and unpleasant side of life that the operation of external force upon man is most satisfactorily displayed. When the higher ethical nature of man is either denied or ignored, the emphasis must per-force be placed upon the physical, racial, instinctive, brutal side” (Walcutt 135). Norris calls up this instinctive, brutal side of McTeague to the forefront early in the novel upon his initial professional encounter with Trina, the young woman who will ultimately become his wife. “The male virile desire in him tardily awakened, aroused itself, strong and brutal. It was resistless, untrained, a thing not to be held in leash an instant” (Norris 23). Some weeks later in a subsequent
dental appointment he places Trina under anesthesia. The physical nature of McTeague overtook any self-control he might have exerted. “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 clamouring…” (Norris 26).

**Treatment of Characters’ Ethnicity**

In *McTeague*, the characters were a reflection of what Norris believed the Irish, the Jew, and the Mexican to be in real life. “Norris treats his characters as if they were exhibits in a side show, ridiculous monsters, or conversation pieces” (Walcutt 129). But Norris opted to not uphold the ‘People’s right to the truth’ by casting them with only the worst stereotypical ethnic traits. The novel was extremely flawed having been derived from Norris’s belief that those not native born in the United States and white were naturally lesser human beings, if human at all. He crafted caricatures, rather than characters. They reflected his attitude toward ethnicities who were not white Anglo-Saxon Protestant, which represented for him, the ‘superior race’. “The assemblage of big and little monsters creates a sense of sociological extremes – of people or creatures who have to be seen in the new dimension of Darwinian thought rather than in the established frames of social conformity and orientation” (Walcutt 129-130). “In some ways the brute dentist and the grotesque creatures who surround him must have seemed to Norris slightly ridiculous. They were not simply placed in glass cages for study; they were also labeled and condescendingly described by their keeper, Norris, in terms that suggest his subconscious opinion of them” (Dillingham 113).

**Maria Miranda Macapa**

Early in the novel, the reader is introduced to Maria Macapa, a cleaning lady or “maid of all work” (Norris 18). She is referred to as Mexican, but “the flat knew absolutely nothing further than that she was Spanish-American” (Norris 18). Her family is noted often times in the novel as
being Guatemalan. Marcus Schouler, McTeague’s good friend, describes Maria thus, “She’s a greaser, and she’s queer in the head. She ain’t regular crazy, but I don’t know, she’s queer (Norris 17). In modern-day vernacular, according to CollinsDictionary.com, a greaser is a slang term for “a poor or working-class youth, esp. in the 1950s, often characterized as being rough in manner, wearing a leather jacket, having oily hair, riding a motorcycle, etc.” Norris used the word to describe Maria Macapa in a more disparaging context, which was consistent with the negative view of all Latin Americans before and after the Civil War and on into the twentieth century. “The term originated as a derogatory reference toward those of Mexican origin, but its use expanded over time to encompass Peruvian and Chilean miners during the California gold rush and, more broadly, to describe anyone of Spanish origin” (Bender xiii).

“GREASERS” - from Frank Triplett’s Conquering the Wilderness, published in 1883.
The term “greaser” was even used in actual legislation. In the Statutes of California, approved in the sixty-sixth session of the Legislature, April 1855, California passed the Vagrancy Act, also referred to as the Greaser Act because of language stated in Sec. 2: All persons commonly known as “Greasers” or the issue of Spanish and Indian blood, who may come within the provisions of the first section of this Act…

In the 1840s, experiencing the great magnet that was to become the American West, many men of varied occupations felt the pull of adventure to become explorers. Their written records are some of the earliest accounts of first-hand experiences in the uncharted territories of the Western frontier, lands newly part the United States of America. Sadly, a number of reports were extremely prejudiced against the native peoples they encountered in their explorations. It is not difficult to see how decades later as Norris crafted the Mexican-American cleaning woman for his novel, he easily made her into a negative representative of a people who were earlier diminished by their
encounters with usurping Anglo-Saxons. “Almost all Spaniards in Norris’s work are treated to a greater or lesser degree as racial degenerates” (Dillingham 77).

At one time, the Mexicans were thriving, industrious land owners that experienced great loss when the United States took over the lands that became California, New Mexico and Texas in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo to end the Mexican-American War. As Mexican-Americans, they became second-class citizens and were treated as an inferior race.

Rufus B. Sage, a writer, a mid-nineteenth century newspaper editor and traveler, wrote in 1846, *Scenes in the Rocky Mountains, and in Oregon, California, New Mexico, Texas, and the Grand Prairies* his impressions of people he encountered living in New Mexico, which at that time had not yet become part of the United States, “There are no people on the continent of America, whether civilized or uncivilized, with one or two exceptions, more miserable in condition or despicable in morals than the mongrel race inhabiting New Mexico” (Sage 174).

Almost thirty years later, one year after Norris was born, the perception of the Mexican people of the southwestern United States was relatively the same. “Reflecting the association of Mexicans with filth, the San Antonio Express newspaper editorialized in 1871 that ‘the hogs lived as much in the [Mexicans’] houses [as the Mexicans did]…and from the similarity it was hard to tell where the hogs left off and inhabitants began’” (Bender 115).

Maria may not be “regular crazy”, but she does have her quirks. Whenever she is asked her name, her response is, “Name is Maria-Miranda Macapa. Had a flying squirrel an’ let him go” (Norris 18). Yet, she is not so crazy that she can’t make a living as cleaning lady for all of the flats in the building. In addition, she scavenges any items that she can beg, haggle or even steal from the building tenants to sell to the Jewish peddler that has a shop in back of the building. “She sold the junk to Zerkow, the rags-bottles-sacks man…who sometimes paid her as much as three cents a
pound. The money that Zerkow paid her, Maria spent on shirt waists and dotted blue neckties, trying to dress like the girls who tended the soda-water fountain in the candy store on the corner” (Norris 30). More than a half-century earlier than McTeague, “Richard Henry Dana in Two Years Before the Mast (published anonymously in 1840), presented the first major image of Mexican women in California. According to Dana, “The fondness for dress among the women is excessive, and is sometimes their ruin…Nothing is more common than to see a woman living in a house of only two rooms, with the ground for a floor, dressed in spangled satin shoes, silk gown, high comb, gilt if not gold, earrings and necklace”” (Casteneda 162).

In an essay by Charles B. Churchill, entitled Thomas Jefferson Farnham: An Exponent of American Empire in Mexican California, the author describes how Farnham’s travel writings were resources for historians and researchers later writing their own histories of California. Farnham was a lawyer and expedition leader, who, in 1844, wrote his second book, Travels in California and Scenes in the Pacific Ocean. Most importantly, Farnham’s prejudicial viewpoint of native Californians (Mexicans) was to influence the attitudes of the white Americans that came after to stake their claim to land and resources not rightfully theirs.

Nowhere on the continent he [Farnham] declared, was there "anything Spanish, negro, indian, mulatto, or mestizo," with any qualities other than "volatility, ignorance, stupidity and pride, coupled with the basest and most cowardly cruelty." The Californians of mixed Indian and white blood used "freedom as a mere means of animal enjoyment." These people supplied the soldiers and were the herdsmen of the country. As soldiers they were treacherous and cowardly, never risking attack unless the enemy was helpless. The whites, who were "by courtesy" called white, were the descendants of the free settlers from Mexico. These people were not actually white at all, but a "light bronze" in color, which
Farnham called "a lazy color." They merely gave the appearance of being civilized. Their habits were of the most slothful: they arose around noon, ate breakfast, smoked, then took a nap again until dinner time. Only on horseback did they show some skill. And lest Farnham's readers be mistaken about his intentions in presenting such an unremittingly negative picture, he left no doubt about the implications he wished drawn: "In a word, the Californians are an imbecile, pusillanimous, race of men and unfit to control the destinies of that beautiful country (3).

The travelogues of both Thomas Farnham and Rufus Sage presaged Norris’s attitude toward people of Mexican or Mexican-American heritage. In McTeague, Norris exacerbated the imagery of the ethnically inferior by marrying Maria Macapa to the Polish Jewish peddler, Zerkow. All thought her to be mentally defective because she constantly prattled on about a supposed set of very expensive gold dishes belonging to her family in Central America. Zerkow likewise was viewed as crazy, because he was obsessed with hearing the detailed description of those gold dishes repeated over and over to him by Maria. The child born of their union was described as, “…a wretched, sickly child, with not even strength enough nor wits enough to cry” (Norris 204). It was ushered to an early death as it was of mixed blood, not of a pure race destined to survive and succeed. “It had not even a name; a strange, hybrid little being, come and gone within a fortnight’s time, yet combining in its puny little body the blood of the Hebrew, the Pole, and the Spaniard(Norris 204-205).

Though Norris didn’t use Rufus Sage’s words, “despicable in morals” to describe his Mexican character Maria Macapa, he portrayed her that way. Though Sage did go on in his book to clarify his remarks regarding Mexican women, with a somewhat backhanded compliment. “The ladies present a striking contrast to their countryman in general character, other than morals. They
are kind and affectionate in their disposition, mild and affable in their deportment, and ever ready
to administer to the necessities of others. But, on the score of virtue and common chastity, they are
sadly deficient, while ignorance and superstition are equally predominant (Sage 176).

**Zerkow, the Polish Jewish Peddler**

Norris’s writing of Zerkow the Polish Jewish Peddler was as hideous a portrayal as that of
any Jewish character in Western literature. “Norris’s Jews are money-grabbers with fat necks,
their skin puffing out over their collars…Racists of the time were particularly afraid of the Polish
Jew” (Dillingham 77). It may have been entertaining or even expected for the novel’s readership,
but it was unwarranted.

Zerkow was a Polish Jew – curiously enough his hair was fiery red. He was a dry,
shriveled old man of sixty-odd. He had the thin, eager, cat-like lips of the covetous; eyes
that had grown keen as those of a lynx from long searching amidst the muck and debris;
and claw-like, prehensile fingers – the fingers of a man who accumulates, but never
disburses. It was impossible to look at Zerkow and not know instantly that greed –
inordinate, insatiable greed – was the dominant passion of the man (Norris 37).

This description of a diminished creature-like human could not have set the character
farther apart from the true story of the Jewish immigrants who settled in America. Yet, Norris’s
literary treatment was consistent with the condemnation Jews suffered throughout history, as they
were driven from their homeland and forced from country to country over the centuries.

In an America riven by the Civil War, the Jews were attacked as the cause of suffering for
both the northern and southern populations. Those who lost family, homes, and livelihoods, at
times at the hand of their own family member fighting for the “other” side, looked to blame
someone and thus the Jewish members of the communities were targeted. “Anti-Semitism, or what
one historian refers to as ‘Judeophobia’, during and in the aftermath of the Civil War was as great
as anytime in American history. That Jews didn’t fight, but just made money off the war, is a
canard that gained great currency in the press during and in the years after the war. When the
presence of Jews in the South during the Civil War was even acknowledged, the image in the
Northern press was often of the cunning merchant – cheat and speculator. The Southern press
depicted Jews as ‘scavengers’ who were unpatriotic and…feeding off the troubles of the South at a
most desolate time” (Evans 49).

“The peak years of Jewish migration lie between 1881 and 1914, when approximately 2 ½
million Jews crossed national borders. They sought liberation from poverty and autocracy, usually
choosing countries undergoing large-scale economic development under liberal-democratic
regimes” (Gartner 49).

The year of Norris’s birth, 1870, saw well-established prejudice toward the minority
populations of Irish, Jews, and Mexicans, whose numbers were growing steadily. As a child
entering his teens in the 1880s, he would not have escaped the sharpened attitudes toward Jews,
especially the successful merchants, as their numbers increased exponentially in larger towns and
cities across the American landscape. “Through peddling, Jewish settlements sprang up in new
small towns and then, as small shopkeepers found the means to relocate to larger ‘regional’ centers
like Cincinnati, Chicago, and San Francisco, peddling expanded Jewish populations in midsized
cities. By 1870 Jews owned 1750 businesses in New York City, which had become a major Jewish
population center and one of the country’s largest mercantile centers. By the century’s last
decades, bankers Schiff, Seligman, Lehman, Kuhn, and Loeb and department store magnates
Strauss, Bloomingdale, Gimbel, and Altman comprised a Jewish elite” (Ashton 47). “An
impressive number of these immigrants experienced in their lifetimes a rapid rise from being
humble peddlers, to solid shopkeepers, to ‘merchant princes’” (Diner 75). Norris’s upbringing and pedigree would have made him very familiar with successful Jewish businesses like those of the men noted above; more so than with the dilapidated storefront of the gold-obsessed Zerkow.

To cement his stereotype of the Jewish character, Norris assigned Zerkow the occupation of peddler, as if being a merchant of assorted small goods was the most menial of jobs, equivalent today of a garbage collector. But a history of commerce in this country and the contribution of Jewish peddlers disprove that notion. In Hasia Diner’s book, Roads Taken: The Great Jewish Migrations to the New World and the Peddlers Who Forged the Way she makes a solid argument for the mutually beneficial relationship between the Jewish peddler and Gentile consumers.

Peddling transformed the lives of the people whose thresholds the Jewish immigrant peddlers crossed, stimulating in the women and men tastes for new goods and aspirations to higher standards of living. Jews had come to these new places as strangers and outsiders. Yet they became teachers, connecting the women and men whose homes they entered to cosmopolitan consumption, to new standards of clothing, personal hygiene, and home decorating. They exposed Christian customers to Jewish practice.

No one way street, the teaching went the other way too. From their customers the peddlers learned the languages of the land, ones they needed in order to put down roots in their new place. Customers instructed peddlers in the workings of local society, its preferences and taboos (Diner 113).

Norris set Zerkow’s shop/home in a seedy dump in back of an alley which he described in unflattering terms. “The interior of the junk shop was dark and damp, and foul with all manner of choking odours. On the walls, on the floor, and hanging from the rafters was a world of debris, dust-blackened, rust-corroded. Everything was there, every trade was represented, every class of
society; things of iron and cloth and wood; all the detritus that a great city sloughs off in its daily life” (Norris 37). In truth, the occupation of peddler provided a time-tested means of financial sustenance for Jews throughout history. “Extending backward into the Middle Ages Jews sold consumer wares from packs on their backs or, if a bit more affluent from animal-driven carts” (Diner, Wandering Jews 14). Norris would not let affluence touch Zerkow as reflected in his mode of transport for his goods. “His decrepit wagon stood in front of his door like a stranded wreck; the miserable horse, with its lamentable swollen joints, fed greedily upon an armful of spoiled hay in a shed in the back” (Norris 37).

Though the Civil War aggravated the negative and inaccurate perceptions of the Jewish immigrants in America, they continued to suffer indignities and abuse by the native communities long after the war ended. “Without understating the sting of anti-Jewish rhetoric, the bulk of discussion in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries about Jews as immigrants tended to see them as hard-working, if perhaps hyper-driven to make a profit, studious, if perhaps too eager to excel and overtake real Americans, adept, or maybe overly so, when it came to entrepreneurship, and set on a course, albeit one too rapid, toward economic mobility” (Diner, Encounter Between…12)

Like Maria Macapa’s ancestors who lived on the North American continent many centuries before the white man arrived, Jews settled on the East Coast over 200 years before Norris was even born. “American Jewish history began in the late summer of the year 1654, when early in the month of September, a small party of twenty-three Jewish men, women and children disembarked on Manhattan Island at the small town of New Amsterdam, the headquarters of the Dutch colony of New Netherland” (Faber 23). Norris and his white Anglo-Saxon brethren were comparative latecomers to staking their nativist claims to American soil. In Norris’s arsenal of the conqueror
were the weapons of falsity, prejudice and racism. Once again his dictum that the reader was owed the truth was ignored, as he purposefully wrote Zerkow as repugnant, with no dignity and no agency.

**McTeague, the Brute Irishman**

The portrait Frank Norris painted with words of Irishman McTeague in some ways may elicit from the reader more sympathy than for Maria Macapa or for Zerkow. It is not a more complimentary caricature, but McTeague’s simpleminded nature, his inability to follow conversations, to not understand situations in which he finds himself, calls for a small level of forgiveness for his abhorrent behavior. This tolerance is withheld from the Mexican and Jewish characters, as they are worldly wise enough to draw upon their wiles to survive. McTeague plods through life, unaware of what may bring harm to his life.

At the time *McTeague* was published (1899), there was little consideration or respect offered to the Irish immigrants who had resettled in America over the past half century. “Their ignorance, heavy drinking, brawling, criminal activities, mental disease, wretched poverty, and often dysfunctional families strained the social fabric” (McCaffrey 3). It was as though Norris had written the character based on this description of the Irish, possibly gleaned from his time spent in Europe. “Much of the American Anglo-Saxon racism originated in the minds of British Social Darwinist academics, journalists, and cartoonists. On their ladder of merit, Anglo-Saxons were on top and non-Aryan Irish Celts close to the bottom” (McCaffrey 6).

Trina, the Swiss-German woman, whom McTeague has fallen in love with and asked to marry him, did not see qualities in him that would capture a woman’s heart and debated within herself the merits of such an arrangement. “As she recalled McTeague – recalled his huge, square-cut head, his salient jaw, his shock of yellow hair, his heavy, lumbering body, his slow wits - she
found little to admire in him beyond his physical strength” (Norris 78). “McTeague’s physique is cartoonishly disproportioned to his environment, which only heightens his awkward presence in civilized spaces and emphasizes his ethnically odd features, which are repeatedly described in terms that blend recognizably Irish signifiers with gross physical distortions to such a degree that monstrosity and Irishness become one and the same thing…Norris uses the cliché of the animal-like Irishman to set McTeague physically apart from his civilized neighbors, patients, friends and ultimately the whole human race” (Dowd 102-103). The physical description of McTeague created a picture of an intimidating monolith. “For McTeague was a young giant, carrying his huge shock of blond hair six feet three inches from the ground; moving his immense limbs, heavy with ropes of muscle, slowly, ponderously. His hands were enormous, red, and covered with a fell of stiff yellow hair; they were hard as wooden mallets, strong as vises... Often he dispensed with forceps and extracted a refractory tooth with his thumb and finger. His head was square-cut, angular; the jaw salient, like that of the carnivore” (Norris 3).

As the novel moves toward its tragic end, the reader observes McTeague become more and more bestial. As he sinks farther into despair, relying on his wife for money, he becomes abusive. Trina will not readily part with her savings. Though they are married, she will not share. She hoards what she earned through work and won playing the lottery. “Trina had become more niggardly than ever since the loss of McTeague’s practice. It was not mere economy with her now. It was a panic terror lest a fraction of a cent of her little savings should be touched…” (Norris 233). Norris’s repeated reference to McTeague as “carnivore” becomes more and more true as his abuse of Trina involves chewing on her fingers. “…Trina’s fingertips were swollen and the nails purple as though they had been shut in a door…The fact of the matter was that McTeague, when
he had been drinking, used to bite them, crunching and grinding them with his immense teeth, always ingenious enough to remember which were the sorest” (Norris 263).

The Irish contributions to the communities where they lived were viewed with suspicion, more of a threat than a benefit, though they performed essential jobs to the daily running of towns and cities. “The Irish filled the most menial and dangerous jobs, often at low pay. They cut canals. They dug trenches for water and sewer pipes. They laid rail lines. They cleaned houses. They slaved in textile mills. They worked as stevedores, stable workers and blacksmiths” (Klein par. 15). Yet, Americans did not trust the Irish. “The native public’s reaction to the Irish included moving out of neighborhoods en masse as the immigrants moved in; stereotyping them all as drunkards, brawlers, and incompetents; and raising employment barriers exemplified in the stock
phrase, ‘No Irish need apply’” (Sowell 17). In contrast, “Irish journalist and politician John Francis Maguire visited America in the 1860s and observed that the Irish were “better off in all respects” in San Francisco than anywhere else in the Union. Maguire noted that the city had been laid out by an Irishman and that the police force, hotels, banks, philanthropic organizations, street railways, gasworks, foundries, and government all were run largely by Irishmen” (Dowd 97).

Norris gave McTeague a profession above the station of manual laborer, making him a dentist. Mockingly, Norris only permitted him to be a pseudo-professional. Upon the prodding of his mother, McTeague apprenticed himself to a traveling dentist. Norris wrote, “He was more or less a charlatan…and young McTeague went away with him to learn his profession. He had learnt it after a fashion, mostly by watching the charlatan operate. He had read many of the necessary books, but he was too hopelessly stupid to get much benefit from them” (Norris 2). McTeague’s identity was tied up in being a dentist, in being Dr. McTeague to his patients and neighbors. Later he receives notification that he can no longer practice dentistry. “The letter – or rather printed notice – informed McTeague that he had never received a diploma from a dental college, and that in consequence he was forbidden to practice his profession any longer” (Norris 221). He cannot comprehend how anyone can prevent him from doing what he wants to do, what he feels he was trained to do. “Ain’t I a dentist? Ain’t I a doctor? Look at my sign, and the gold tooth you gave me. Why, I have been practising nearly twelve years” (Norris 223). There are rules and regulations in civilized society that a person must adhere to, but being the dumb Irishman, McTeague cannot fathom how they could apply to him. He only needs to hang a sign and that legitimizes him. “He couldn’t understand. What had a clerk at the City Hall to do with him? Why couldn’t they let him alone? (Norris 225). “Norris formulates McTeague’s entire career as a kind of identity theft in which a crude, fraudulent Irishman usurps the persona of a legitimate, educated American” (Dowd
103). The brute Irishman epitomized by McTeague fed the fears of the public about all Irish immigrants. The bad choices and bad luck to which McTeague succumbs in the end could have happened to anyone. That Norris opted to falsely lay bad judgement at the feet of the Irishman reinforced his ideology that there can only be one “superior” race that could overcome such adversity. It would not be the Mexican, the Jew, or the Irishman to do so.

Conclusion

The reasons for Norris’s negative portrayal of immigrants and their failure to succeed in life sound familiar to contemporary ears and serve as a cautionary prologue to the insensitive, distorted representation of immigrants expressed by bigoted, racist politicians, as well as news broadcasters and opinion pundits across our country today, especially as they reference the Hispanic migrants attempting to enter the United States at the southern border or the Muslim immigrants attempting to relocate from Africa, the Middle East and Asia.

In today’s world, the topic of immigration may hardly be avoided. It is a pervasive subject in the media, in think tanks, in governmental agencies. It is an issue that impacts countries across the globe. Because of ceaseless migration and increases in population on multiple continents, the movement by immigrants across national borders is experienced on a larger scale by the native residents of those countries. Their resources stretch thin to accommodate those seeking to find more opportunities, where safety is more assured, where majority and minority ethnicities find acceptance. Their values toward humanity and their ideals allow them to do no less than offer respite to their fellow mankind in need. Yet, alarmist proclamations fueled by racist fear-mongering initiate extremist language and aggressive actions against those who seek only safety and peace of mind. An irrational fear of what may be lost by welcoming those from other countries to settle in the U.S. - jobs, property, religion, values - generates hatred for those
perceived as different. They are an “unknown”, multiplied by thousands. The unwarranted animosity is once again fueled by negative language and behavior inciting acts of violence, creating an ‘us’ (white Anglo-Saxon Protestants) vs. ‘them’ (all other ethnicities) world of conflict. This environment mimics the world of Frank Norris with competing goals vying for right of place between long-time native residents and the more newly arrived immigrants.

Delving into *McTeague*, one reads a story of immigrants so far-fetched that the reader must ask himself why would an author create such an untruthful tale. Looking at the details of Frank Norris’s life, education and the society around him, one understands why. What is tragic is that it is not unlike the falsehoods told of immigrants in our country today. Race wars, the battle over basic human rights, the denigration of people not like ourselves continue on generation after generation. In 2015, Donald J. Trump, in his Presidential announcement speech, spoke about the Mexican immigrants coming into the United States, “They’re sending people that have lots of problems, and they’re bringing those problems with them. They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists. And some, I assume, are good people.” Statements like that, not based in truth, serve to incite division, reinforcing prejudices held by people native to this country, people who feel that the “other” is getting ahead of them, gaining advantages that they are not. *McTeague* supported the notion that Mexicans, Jews, and Irish immigrants were lesser than their white counterparts and it continues today as the President pushes that same agenda targeting different ethnicities.

Frank Norris redeemed himself by arriving at a more enlightened viewpoint of immigrants over time. This was not an epiphany, but a gradual development of a person recognizing in maturity a responsibility for the role he plays in society. Participation in life reshaped his detached viewpoint of the ‘other’ created by a privileged upbringing. “Norris’ literary criticism of 1901-
1902…shifts the emphasis…from the excitement of ‘life’ to the social usefulness and duties of the sincere writer. The novelist must now not only delineate ‘life,’ but in so doing must picture vast social and racial truths and particular social injustices. He must now be a committed writer vitally concerned with his role as leader of men’s thoughts and actions” (Pizer, *Literary Criticism* xvii).

By the year 1902, he found the truth about immigrants, truth that he had earlier claimed a writer owed to the people. That year, his essay published in World’s Week entitled *The Frontier Gone at Last*, Norris wrote, “Every century the boundaries are widening, patriotism widens with the expansion, and our countrymen are those of different race, even different nations. Will it not go on, this epic of civilization, this destiny of the races, until at last and at the ultimate end of all, we who now arrogantly boast ourselves as Americans, supreme in conquest, whether of battle-ship or of bridge building, may realize that the true patriotism is the brotherhood of man and know that the whole world is our nation and simple humanity our countrymen?” (Pizer, *Novels and Essays* 1189). As a nation today, we can hope that this enlightenment eventually comes to those open to receive its wisdom for the good of the United States and the world.
Works Cited:


Bender, Steven. Greasers and Gringos: Latinos, Law, and the American Imagination. NYU Press, 2003. EBSCOhost,


http://cejsh.icm.edu.pl/cejsh/element/bwmeta1.element.desklight-fc9fd73d-09c8-4e07-9342-a4d7a36fabc:


  https://www.migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/publications/CIR-1790Timeline.pdf


  Newberry Digital Collections for the Classroom.

  https://dcc.newberry.org/collections/immigration-and-citizenship


