Frank Norris

The American Zola
His Novel,
'McTeague, A Story of San Francisco'

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Soon after my family and I arrived in San Francisco, a dental colleague invited me to a 'welcome to the City' dinner. His gracious gesture was encouraging because I knew few people here. At the time, I was overwhelmed by the many tasks involved in settling our family into a new flat, finding my way around a strange City, and establishing a dental practice in a new community.

That evening, my new colleague brought a gift: a copy of Frank Norris's novel 'McTeague, A Story of San Francisco.' I was unfamiliar with Norris's work, but I soon discovered that Mc Teague, the protagonist, was a dentist like me who practiced on Polk Street in San Francisco in the late 1800s.

I have always been interested in the dentist as portrayed in art and literature. Of the few novels in which the dentist plays a central role, 'McTeague' by Frank Norris became my favorite and has found a lasting place in my home library.

It's a gripping story that holds one's interest as the plot and characters develop. It captures the nature of those attracted to dentistry in the early years of the American West. But McTeague is, above all, an account of the lives of the ordinary people of San Francisco when San Francisco was in its early years and The Chit Chat Club was in its infancy.

I've chosen to present this essay about Frank Norris, his novel 'McTeague, A Story of San Francisco,' published in 1899, and the exuberant early years of San Francisco in honor of the 150th anniversary of The Chit Chat Club, which we celebrate this year.

Let me begin with some comments about San Francisco in the later decades of the 19th Century: The City was booming in the 1870s, 80s, and 90s. Although gold had been discovered in the Sierra only a few decades earlier, music, art, and good food were

readily available. Waves of emigrants arrived: both native Americans moving west and Europeans arriving by ship without first settling along the Eastern Seaboard. The newcomers created much of the vitality and excitement in the City. Many came with grand ambitions: to make a buck or to start a new life, some to reinvent themselves. There was breathtaking growth: commerce flourished, and universities, hospitals, medical schools, and schools of fine arts schools were established. Theaters and other entertainment houses sprang up, and hotels and gambling houses prospered. Industries grew and proliferated. Fortunes were made, and a social elite quickly evolved. The San Francisco Art Association was founded in 1871, The Bohemian Club in 1872, and The Chit Chat Club in 1874.

San Francisco became a destination for many artists and writers attracted by the chance to thrive in an open and welcoming society far from the restrictive conventions in the country's East.

Certain cities inspire fiction writers, and others do not. Paris, London, and Rome are 'good material.' From its beginnings, San Francisco was a place where 'things can happen.' Nob Hill, Chinatown, the Barbary Coast, The Mission, and Fisherman's Wharf. There's an air about all of these places that stimulates the observer. The people who frequent these places could walk right into a novel.

If there was a particular difference in the growth of San Francisco, it was its isolation. San Francisco's isolation attracted many business people, artists, and entrepreneurs. And many ordinary people, too. In the 1800s, no great city was to the north or south of us. The mountains and the desert were to the east, and the west was the vast Pacific. Isolation, like in San Francisco, can produce individuality and originality. From the outset, San Francisco spawned characters and habits that were unbiased by outside influences, which were admirably adapted to become fictional characters by authors such as Ambrose Bierce, Jack London, Brett Harte, Frank Norris, and others.

About Frank Harris:
He died young, at the age of 32, of peritonitis following a ruptured appendix in 1902. His death was almost universally lamented as the premature termination of a great career. Today, there is general agreement that one of his novels, 'McTeague, A Story of San Francisco', has the vitality and depth that makes for inclusion in the canon of great American novels.

Frank Harris was born in Chicago in 1870 to a wealthy wholesale jeweler and his artistic wife, a former actress. He was raised amidst the opulence of the Gilded Age.

In 1884, Norris' father, Benjamin Franklin Norris, was troubled by the effects of Chicago's winters on his bad hip. He moved his family to Oakland for a year in the sunshine. In 1885, he settled permanently in San Francisco in a large Italian-style Victorian house with grand bay windows to catch the morning sun at 1822 Sacramento Street, west of Van Ness Avenue, and just two blocks above Polk Street. His son, the young Frank Norris, was just 15 years old when he was introduced to the Pacific Coast metropolis he would capture so brilliantly as a journalist, short story writer, and novelist. Within a very short time, the Norris family was established among the social elite of San Francisco.

Frank Sr. wanted his son to follow him into the wholesale jewelry business. But Frank Jr. had no interest in a business career. He refused to identify with his hard-driving father and followed his mother's artistic path. As a result, Frank Jr. was bitterly repudiated by his father, who in turn felt rejected by his wife and son. Frank Sr. eventually deserted the family in San Francisco, returned to Chicago, and remarried soon after.

It's thought that Frank Jr. nurtured a lifelong fascination with the dominant male—a hero worship, for example, of football players, empire builders, and ruthless capitalists. Through these figures, he might become, figuratively at least, worthy of becoming his father's true son. By inventing the primally male Dr. McTeague, the dentist of Polk Steet in San Francisco, Norris comments on his fascination with and repulsion of brute male force.

We'll return to Frank Norris's life as an author later, but I'd like to introduce you to his novel,'McTeage, A Story of San Francisco, published in 1899,

Here's an overview:

'Dr. McTeague' is a slow, sluggish dentist whose office is in San Francisco on Polk Street, between Bush and Sutter Streets.

Here's how Norris describes McTeague.
'McTeague was a young giant standing six foot three inches tall with a shock of blond hair. His immense limbs, heavy with muscle, moved slowly and ponderously. His hands were immense and red: they were hard as wooden mallets, strong as vices, the hands of an old-time car-boy in the mines. His head was square-cut, angular, and the jaw salient, like carnivores.'

'McTeague's mind was as heavy as his body: slow to act, sluggish. Yet, there was nothing vicious about the man. He suggested the draught horse: immensely strong,

stupid, docile, and obedient.'

When he opened his Dental Parlor, McTeague felt that his life was a success and that he could hope for nothing better.

McTeague came to dentistry because his mother was obsessed with raising her son in life and entering a profession. Mrs. McTeague was an overworked drudge who, with the help of 'Chinamen', cooked for forty miners in Placer County, California. The chance to elevate her son came when a traveling dentist, Dr. Painless Potter, set up his tent near the miner's bunkhouse. He was more or less a charlatan, but he fired Mrs. McTeague's ambition, and young McTeague went away with him to learn his profession. McTeague learned dentistry after a fashion, primarily 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.

When McTeage's mother died, she left him some money—not much, but enough to start a business. He cut loose from the charlatan and opened his Dental Parlors on Polk Street, an 'accommodation street, ' as it was called in those days.

His clientele included butcher boys, shop girls, drug clerks, and car conductors. Polk Street called him 'The Doctor' and spoke of his enormous strength.

.Norris paints a picture of the mundane day-to-day lives of McTeague and his friends, characters of Polk Street. He introduces extraordinary, imaginative, and even grotesque events that lead them into a spiral of degradation and death. Norris traces the characters' innermost instincts and reports what happens when these instincts collide. His premise is that despite attempts people make to fight the forces of their nature, their environment and social class dictate their behavior and destiny. Norris' characters devolve into their primary animal states as their tenuous hold on civilization dissolves.

Norris uses San Francisco's cityscape, particularly Polk Street, the location of McTeague's Dental Parlor, and the landscape of California, to reflect humans' futility in rising above their natures. The result is a grim version of a hostile world indifferent to individuals. 'McTeague' sees humanity as ruthless. The author asks whether we are to blame for our choices when so much works against us.

'McTeage, A Story of San Francisco' is in the tradition of Naturalism, whose champion was the French writer Emile Zola. Naturalism and its close literary companion, Realism, were dramatic departures from the romantic fiction writer's styles of the day.

The story continues:
One day, his best friend Marcus brought his cousin Trina, whom Marcus planned to marry, to McTeague's office on the second floor above the branch Post Office on Polk Street. She had broken a tooth.

Mcteague was obliged to use anesthesia on Trina. While she is asleep, he wrestles fiercely with an urge to kiss her, ultimately succumbing and violently assaults her. When Trina wakes up, McTeague asks her to marry him. She refuses.

McTeague admits to his friend Marcus that he loves Trina. Marcus decides to step away so McTeague can have her. When McTeague kisses her again, she resists at first but then, compelled by the instinctive enjoyment of submission, returns his kiss. Tina agrees to marry McTeague.

Trina learned that a lottery ticket she had bought before she and McTeague married had won her $5000. Trina insisted they not spend any of it but rather invest it in her Uncle's toy store.

Marcus is furious that the lottery money would have been his if he had married Trina. And he blames McTeague for having money that he believes is rightfully his.

Trina and McTeague move into a larger apartment. Trina refines McTeague's habits, but she becomes even more miserly with money. She lies to McTeague about how much she has saved and even refuses to help her own mother when her father's business fails.

The couple's misfortunes deepen. Anger and jealousy inspire Marcus to report McTeague to the authorities for practicing without a license. McTeague is forbidden to practice dentistry, triggering his financial ruin and sparking the feud that leads to both his and McTeague's deaths.

McTeague begins to drink heavily. He needs money and wants to depend on Trinas's lottery winnings. But Trina refuses and insists they move from their large apartment to a filthy room in the back of the building to save money.

Trina is no longer scrupulously tidy about her appearance. McTeague slips into his old habits and stops looking for work. He spends much of his time drinking. When he returns to the shabby room they now occupy, he hurts Trina, often biting her fingers. While McTeague is out, Trina counts her money, plays with it, and hides it from

McTeague.

Trina supports them until they finally lose their room and move to a particularly dank one. In a short time, the household falls into poverty and misery. McTeage constantly asks Trina for money, but Trina refuses to give him any.

One night, McTeage fails to return from his wanderings around San Francisco. He's been fishing in The Bay, one of his significant pastimes. Trina stays out until the early morning hours, looking for him. Upon returning to their room, she finds her trunk empty, the lock broken. She becomes hysterical and wakes the neighbors, who call for a doctor. Upon noticing Trina's swollen fingers, the doctor informs her she has blood poisoning and tells her the affected fingers must be amputated. Now missing several fingers, Trina, a kindergarten teacher in better days, has become a scrubwoman in a kindergarten.

Her lottery winnings are her solace, but she becomes even more miserly and refuses to spend her lottery money. Instead, she begins to sell off their few possessions. She sells McTeague's beloved concertina to a music store. By a chance encounter, McTeague comes across his old concertina and is furious that Trina sold it.

That night, he returns to the kindergarten, where Trina is scrubbing the floors. McTeague berates her for selling his concertina. He asks for money. She again refuses to give him any, and McTeague becomes violent and kills her. He then goes to their room, takes Trina's money, packs his belongings in a blanket, and departs. The following day, the children find Trina's body in the cloakroom.

McTeague, now an outlaw, manages to escape. Following 'a blind and unreasoned instinct,' he finds his way back to The Big Dipper Mine in Placer County, where he had worked as a carboy in the mines before becoming a dentist. He's immediately given a job and 'is pleased beyond words.' He feels safe in the mountains.

Soon, 'a strange sixth sense' and 'animal cunning' inspired him to leave the mine site. Two days later, police officers arrive, having traced him from San Francisco to arrest him for Trina's murder.

But McTeague has already made a run for it. He heads South with a new-found friend in search of gold. They discover gold-bearing quartz, plan to become wealthy, perhaps millionaires, and start digging a mine. But McTeague senses danger again. He has 'a strange sixth sense', a 'brute instinct' that tells him to escape from his camp. In the middle of the night, McTeague abandons their rough mining camp, the gold-bearing

quartz, and his new colleague. He enters Death Valley near the mining site to throw his pursuers off his trail.

Several brutal days into his journey into Death Valley, he encounters his old friend, Marcus from Polk Street, now his enemy. Marcus is determined to help the police in their pursuit of McTeague. He wants to approach McTeage alone. Pointing his gun at McTeague, Marcus demands that McTeague tell him where the money he took from Trina is.

McTeague tells Marcus that the money is on his mule. Marcus attempts to take the money, but the mule escapes his grip. Realizing the mule also carries what's left of their limited water, McTeague and Marcus temporarily unite to try to catch the animal.

The mule starts to run away. Marcus shoots it. In the melee, McTeague's water canteen empties. The two men quickly realize that without water, their deaths are inevitable. They agree to work together to find water.

But when they remember Trina's money is still on the mule, they argue about who it belongs to, and a physical fight ensues. McTeague beats Marcus to death, but not before Marcus manages to handcuff himself to McTeague, who is now attached to Marcus' corpse in 'the vast, interminable, measureless leagues of Death Valley.' McTeague remained stupidly looking around him, now at the distant horizon.

'McTeage,' the novel, was not well received. It shocked the sensibilities of 1899 America. Norris had depicted a gruesome range of depravities and obsessions; rape fantasies, sadomasochistic behavior, and garden-variety drunkenness. The novel involves three murders, a torture scene, two fights (one of them to the death), sexual dominance, and psychological terror.

Some objected to Norris' descriptions of the people of Polk Street, particularly their drunkenness and greed from the lofty perspective of naturalism. They saw Norris punishing his characters for being what they are, a petit bourgeoisie with few options in life. After all, Norris was a wealthy narrator and God-like observer who lived in a mansion at 1822 Sacramento Street. Norris infers that their condition is a product of their class and suggests their behavior is their fault because they are doomed like men and women of the lower orders.

More about the author:
Frank Norris originally studied to become an artist. He studied at the San Francisco Art Association and the Academie Julien in Paris. Upon returning to California in the early

1890s, Norris enrolled at the University of California in Berkeley, where he devoted himself primarily to fraternity life. Norris left Berkeley without a degree- despite tutors and cramming sessions- because he could never pass the University's essential mathematics requirement.

At Cal, his attention turned to literature, and he became a professional author. After four years at Berkeley, he entered Harvard to escape San Francisco's distractions and receive guidance while he undertook several writing projects.
He left Harvard for San Francisco with three works in progress and a profound sense of gratitude to his professor, Louis E. Gates, which he expressed four years later in his dedication to 'McTeague.'

By the mid-1890s, Norris' principal mentor was the notorious French novelist Emile Zola, whose theory and methods Norris adopted enthusiastically. Zola pointed Norris towards his vocation: to deal with the drama of contemporary life through exact observation and boldness, including physical science and the budding fields of psychology and the social sciences.

Frank Norris, who read Zola in the original French, is credited with initiating the American tradition of Naturalistic novel writing. His work reflects his culture's rejection of Victorian values and tastes.

Like Zola, whose post-Darwinian frankness about 'the human animal' outraged puritanical American and English readers, Norris is credited with dramatically enlarging the scope and possibilities of American literature. His presentation of the human experience in his novels, 'McTeague,' 'The Octopus, ' and 'The Pit,' disturbed his contemporaries with what he called the 'mystery of sex' and with his graphic descriptions of abnormal behaviors and varying psychological states.

He took from Zola a view of grim materialism, life as a thwarted process devoid of higher meaning, and the idea that men and women, like McTeague and Trina, fall victim to dark forces beyond their comprehension. In Zola's and Norris' view, the writer's job was to research the facts and report upon the destruction of hopes and the smashing of lives.

Norris' historical importance directly relates to his reflections on his era's traditional and popular literary values and attitudes. He was an avant-garde artist who moved beyond the conventional in his choices of subject matter and deliberately violated late-Victorian proprieties to depict true-to-life experiences as he saw and understood them. Norris was of his time. He was also at the forefront of a long line of prominent literary figures

categorized the way Norris was in his time, including Norman Mailer, William Styron, John DosPassos, Saul Bellow, Edith Wharton, and John Steinbeck.

Frank Norris died at thirty-two, just as he was becoming an international celebrity. There were many eulogies. Book reviewers and literary historians recognized him as a remarkably versatile writer whose most innovative works marked a radical departure from most of his contemporaries. But Norris was almost wholly neglected for much of the 20th century by critics who were repulsed by the grimmer aspects of his writing. His cannon was relegated to a limited cadre of scholars and admirers, including Eric von Stroheim, who had become entranced by Norris' novel McTeague in the early 1910s while living in poverty in San Francisco.

In 1924, when Von Stroheim rose to become a respected Hollywood director, he shot the silent film version of McTeague, which he renamed 'Greed. He had become known for his attention to the smallest details, authenticity, and commitment to strictly following the novel's plot. He insisted upon filming the scenes 'on location' in and around San Francisco and its environs, a highly unusual and expensive process at the time.

The Death Valley scenes were shot during mid-summer. During the two months on location, many cast members became sick, developed heat stroke, and were sent back to Los Angeles.

Von Stroheim considered 'McTeague' to be similar to a Greek tragedy. He followed the Naturalist techniques of portraying lower-class characters whose lives are driven by fate and their inner nature through the new technology of motion pictures.

Von Sroheim insisted on following 'every comma' of the novel. The uncut version of 'Greed' ran almost 10 hours. Despite von Stroheim's efforts, the Hollywood studios heavily edited it, and the final cut ran just 2 hours and 10 minutes. Von Sroheim was devastated.

The attenuated version of "Greed" received primarily negative reviews and was a financial disappointment. A Hollywood trade paper called it 'the filthiest, vilest, most putrid picture in the history of the motion picture business. ' Other reviewers were more sympathetic.
But audiences were scandalized. When the film premiered in Berlin in 1926, it caused a riot which some thought was instigated by the nascent Nazi Party.

Von Stoheim stood by his film. He said that 'of all his pictures, only 'Greed' was a fully

realized work of total validity.'

It took critics many years to honor his silent film, 'Greed.'It was not until 1950 that "Greed" began to appear on lists of the greatest films ever made. Today, it is mentioned as a favorite film of many of the moving picture's most admired artists. The original version of 'Greed' has been called' The Holy Grail ' by film archivists.

The novel McTeague follows a similar path towards recognition as a masterpiece by literary critics. Kevin Starr considers McTeage 'the finest novel ever to be set in San Francisco.' Critics celebrate Norris for ignoring American art's long-standing boundaries for 'appropriate' subject matter,' for developing types of characters, kinds of experiences, and post-Victorian concepts that would not become commonplace themes among the literati until the 1930s. Norris' novel sold poorly during his lifetime but eventually reached 'magnum-opus' status in the 1970s, generations after its publication in 1899.

I am fortunate to have a fine art letterpress edition of 'McTeague, A Story of San Francisco' in my library. The Colt Press of San Francisco published it in Nineteen Forty-One. The introduction is by Frank Norris' brother, Charles G. Norris.

I treasure it.