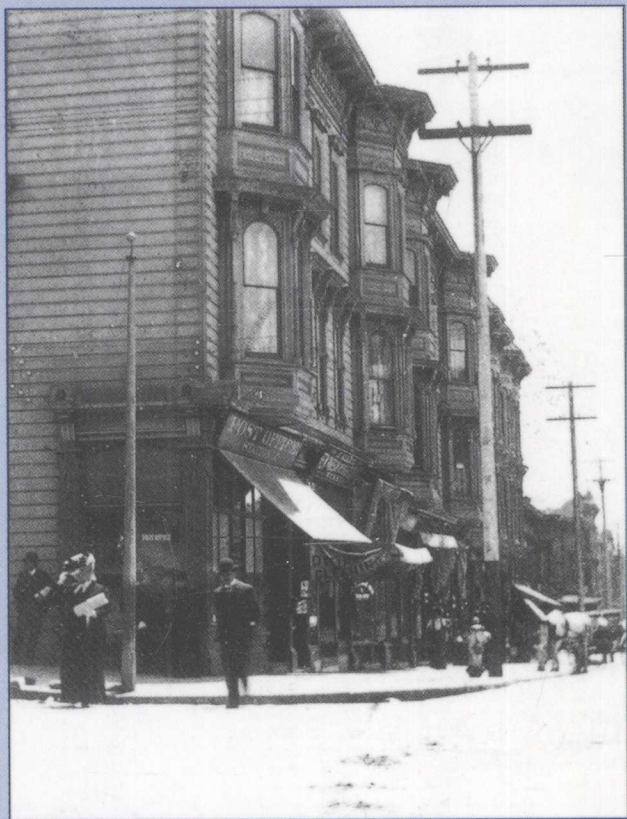


# McTEAGUE

FRANK NORRIS



EDITED BY DONALD PIZER

A NORTON CRITICAL EDITION  
SECOND EDITION

A NORTON CRITICAL EDITION

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Frank Norris  
McTEAGUE  
A Story of San Francisco

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AUTHORITATIVE TEXT

CONTEXTS

CRITICISM

Second Edition

*Edited by*

DONALD PIZER

TULANE UNIVERSITY

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## Preface

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Frank Norris died of peritonitis (following a ruptured appendix) in October 1902, at the age of thirty-two. His death was almost universally lamented as the premature termination of a great career. Today, we are less certain that Norris would have fulfilled the expectations raised by his best work, but we are agreed that this work—in particular *McTeague* and *The Octopus*—has the vitality and depth which make for permanence.

Like Stephen Crane, Norris came to the study of human degradation and violence from a middle-class background. His father was a wealthy Chicago merchant, his mother was vaguely literary. After desultory schooling in Chicago and San Francisco (the Norris family moved from Chicago to the Bay Area in 1884), Frank drifted into an interest in painting and spent two years in Paris as an art student. He returned to America in 1889, and in the fall of 1890 enrolled in the University of California. At Berkeley he devoted himself primarily to fraternity life. In his junior year, however, he also became deeply absorbed in the novels of Emile Zola and in the theories of evolution expressed by his geology teacher, Professor Joseph Le Conte. By this time he was determined to be a writer. After four years at Berkeley, he entered Harvard in the fall of 1894 in order to escape the distractions of San Francisco and to receive guidance while he undertook several writing projects. Out of his Cambridge year and his work in Professor Lewis Gates's writing class came two novels—*Vandover and the Brute* and *McTeague*. Neither work was in publishable form at the end of the year. But even if they had been completed, it is doubtful that two Zolaesque studies of human sexuality by an unknown writer could have been published in America in the mid-1890s. *McTeague* had to wait until Norris issued a successful popular novel and had a base in a publisher's office, while *Vandover* did not see print until 1914. It was clear to Norris that he could not begin his career by writing naturalistic novels. So after a brief misadventure reporting the opening stages of the Boer War in South Africa, he returned to San Francisco and for almost two years, from April 1896 to February 1898, was a reporter and editorial assistant on the *San Francisco Wave*.

Norris often stressed the importance of his literary apprenticeship on the *Wave*. He wrote San Francisco sketches and short stories, inter-

viewed celebrities, contributed editorials, reviewed books, and undertook whatever else was required of the principal writer on a regional weekly. He derived from this experience a firm sense of popular taste and a conviction that he could do better than merely meet its demands. Initially, however, he exploited his awareness of what the public wanted by writing a fast-moving sea romance, *Moran of the Lady Letty*, which appeared serially in the *Wave* and which brought his work to the attention of the publisher S. S. McClure, who invited him to join his firm in New York. But he also revised and completed *McTeague* in the fall of 1897. Once in New York in early 1898, Norris ground out two more popular novels—*Blix*, a San Francisco story of his courtship of Jeannette Black, and *A Man's Woman*, a romance of Arctic exploration. And after considerable difficulty he also persuaded Doubleday & McClure to publish *McTeague* in early 1899.

*McTeague* was often praised by contemporary reviewers for its "power" but was even more frequently attacked for its "degraded" subject matter. In any case, with four novels published in three years, Norris's career in early 1900 was fully launched. There was still the need to keep the pot boiling, particularly after his marriage, and he continued to produce much literary journalism, including a substantial body of criticism in a semipopular-vein. But from mid-1899 to his death most of Norris's energy went into the preparation and writing of an ambitious trilogy of novels in which the growth, marketing, and distribution of wheat would serve to dramatize the relationship between man and nature. The first novel in Norris's Trilogy of the Wheat, *The Octopus*, deals with the raising of a crop of wheat in the San Joaquin Valley of California during the bitter conflict between the farmers and the railroad for control of the valley. The fictional range and thematic depth of *The Octopus*, as well as Norris's skill in weaving together several complex narrative threads, make *The Octopus* a major epic novel. *The Pit* is much less successful, though Norris's rendering of the collapse of a wheat corner in the Chicago grain exchange is still good melodrama. Norris was planning the third volume in the trilogy, *The Wolf*, when he died.

The present edition of *McTeague* seeks to present an authoritative and annotated text and a body of background material and criticism which contributes to an understanding of the novel. The text is that of the first edition, a printing which Norris saw through the press and which contains his later expurgated passages on little Owgooste's incontinence. (See "A Note on the Text," p. xiii.) Norris subtitled his work "A Story of San Francisco," and the annotation, in conjunction with Robert Lundy's pioneering study of the Polk Street background of the novel, attempts in particular to reveal the extent and accuracy of Norris's use of his California setting.

Much of the interest in *McTeague* as an early and provocative ex-

ample of American literary naturalism has centered on the origins of the novel, and, more specifically, on Norris's documentary source in a San Francisco murder, on his borrowings from Zola, on his use of contemporary scientific beliefs, and on his final shaping, through composition and revision, of these and other sources into a compelling narrative which also constitutes a new force in American fiction. In addition, Norris was the foremost theorist of American literary naturalism. His conception of naturalism casts light not only upon *McTeague* but upon the nature and direction of the naturalism movement in America. Both the genesis of *McTeague* and Norris's theory of fiction are amply documented in the Contexts section of this edition.

Early criticism of *McTeague* was dominated by the issue of the impropriety of the novel. More recently there has been an effort to come to grips not only with the vexing but still productive question of the distinctive nature of Norris's naturalism in *McTeague*, but also with the artistic strength of the novel and with its relationship to significant ideological and cultural characteristics of its time. Norris's sexual and economic themes, his reliance on the material of popular culture, his manipulation of complex patterns of plot and event, as well as the relationship of the novel to Erich von Stroheim's 1924 film classic *Greed*, have been explored through the lens provided by major trends in theoretical and historical criticism of the last two decades. And as Richard Chase remarked in 1957, it is easy to note Norris's obvious lapses in taste and credibility, but nevertheless one does not forget (among other scenes) *McTeague* in his dental parlors or the murder of Trina. Whether we approach *McTeague* as a historically significant work or (as Norris wished) a "good yarn," the novel continues to hold.

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## A Note on the Text

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The first edition of *McTeague* was published by Doubleday & McClure in February 1899. Since Norris's handwritten manuscript served as printer's copy for this edition, and since Norris was also a member of the firm of Doubleday & McClure at the time, it can be assumed that the text of this edition is authoritative.

Portions of the manuscript that have survived reveal considerable minor revision but little major substantive change. A significant exception is a passage present in the manuscript but absent in the published novel which describes in sensational detail the murder of Trina by McTeague. The manuscript of *McTeague* was dispersed in 1928 in connection with the publication of the *Argonaut Manuscript Limited Edition of Frank Norris's Works*, when a page of the manuscript was included with each set of the edition. Many of these manuscript pages were later recovered in a campaign led by James D. Hart of the Bancroft Library, University of California, but many more are still missing. The full account of Trina's death appears to have occupied several manuscript pages, of which one has been known for some time and another has recently come to light. (This fuller account of Trina's death is reproduced on p. 206 of the present edition. I wish to thank Charles E. Kern, II, for making a page of the manuscript of *McTeague* available to me.) The passage contains some minor revisions in Norris's hand but no indication that the material is to be cut, which suggests that this fuller description of Trina's death was removed at the proof stage of the publication process.

Shortly after publication, many reviewers commented unfavorably on the unsavory subject matter of the novel, including the scene at the Orpheum Theatre in which little "Owgooste" Sieppe wets his pants. Grant Richards, the English publisher who was negotiating with Norris for a British edition of *McTeague*, insisted that the scene be altered. Sometime during the spring of 1899 Norris carefully revised several passages in the scene to remove all traces of the incident (see pp. 61-64 of the present edition). This second impression of *McTeague* served as the text of the novel for all later printings until the Colt Press private printing of 1941. Norris died in 1902 without making any further changes in the text of *McTeague*. Later editions of the novel—in particular the edition in the *Complete Edition* of 1928, which contains

Anglicized spelling and revised punctuation—have no textual authority. The present text of *McTeague* is therefore that of the first impression, except for the correction of obvious typographical errors, listed below. Page and line numbers and words in boldface are from this Norton Critical Edition; the corresponding words in the first impression are in roman type.

**hers** her's 12:29  
**waistcoats** waiscoats 31:36  
**inaccessible** inacessible 50:39  
**Old** old 55:34  
**Parlors'?** "Parlors?" 55:28  
**mitts** mits 57:19  
**flat."** flat. 80:32  
**passed** past 84:8  
**the-machine** the machine 89:22  
**Doktor** Dokter 101:28  
**Mechanics'** Mechanic's 112:18  
**'Parlors'** "Parlors" 126:28  
**went,** went 146:2  
**now?** now?" 147:30  
**she** She 156:24  
**tell."** tell?" 164:14  
**murmured** murmured 180:27  
**it if** 181:14  
**McTeagues** McTeague's 185:27  
**'Dentist'** "Dentist" 186:17  
**counsel** council 193:14  
**look** looked 199:43  
**jackknife** jacknife 207:19  
**clenching** clinching 229:21



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The Text of  
McTEAGUE





*Dedicated to*  
L. E. GATES  
OF HARVARD UNIVERSITY



It was Sunday, and, according to his custom on that day, McTeague took his dinner at two in the afternoon at the car conductors' coffee-joint on Polk Street.<sup>1</sup> He had a thick gray soup; heavy, underdone meat, very hot, on a cold plate; two kinds of vegetables; and a sort of suet pudding, full of strong butter and sugar. On his way back to his office, one block above, he stopped at Joe Frenna's saloon and bought a pitcher of steam beer.<sup>2</sup> It was his habit to leave the pitcher there on his way to dinner.

Once in his office, or, as he called it on his signboard, "Dental Parlors," he took off his coat and shoes, unbuttoned his vest, and, having crammed his little stove full of coke, lay back in his operating chair at the bay window, reading the paper, drinking his beer, and smoking his huge porcelain pipe while his food digested; cropfull, stupid, and warm. By and by, gorged with steam beer, and overcome by the heat of the room, the cheap tobacco, and the effects of his heavy meal, he dropped off to sleep. Late in the afternoon his canary bird, in its gilt cage just over his head, began to sing.<sup>3</sup> He woke slowly, finished the rest of his beer—very flat and stale by this time—and taking down his concertina from the bookcase, where in week days it kept the company of seven volumes of "Allen's Practical Dentist," played upon it some half-dozen very mournful airs.

McTeague looked forward to these Sunday afternoons as a period of relaxation and enjoyment. He invariably spent them in the same fashion. These were his only pleasures—to eat, to smoke, to sleep, and to play upon his concertina.

The six lugubrious airs that he knew, always carried him back to the time when he was a car-boy at the Big Dipper Mine in Placer County,<sup>4</sup> ten years before. He remembered the years he had spent there trundling the heavy cars of ore in and out of the tunnel under the direction of his father. For thirteen days of each fortnight his father was a steady, hard-working shift-boss of the mine. Every other Sunday he became an irresponsible animal, a beast, a brute, crazy with alcohol.

McTeague remembered his mother, too, who, with the help of the Chinaman, cooked for forty miners. She was an overworked drudge, fiery and energetic for all that, filled with the one idea of having her

1. For Norris's use of specific Polk Street business establishments, see Robert D. Lundy, "The Polk Street Background of *McTeague*," pp. 257–62 below. Norris places McTeague's "dental parlors" on Polk between Bush and Sutter.

2. A cheap form of beer which was particularly popular in California. It could be fermented quickly at normal temperatures, unlike lager beer which requires slow fermentation at low temperatures. The "steam" refers to the strong carbonation in this form of beer.

3. McTeague's fondness for his canary can perhaps be explained by his earlier experience as a miner. Canaries were used in the mines to warn of poisonous gases. When the canary ceased to sing, the presence of gas was assumed.

4. One of the principal mining areas of California, midway between Sacramento and Reno.

son rise in life and enter a profession. The chance had come at last when the father died, corroded with alcohol, collapsing in a few hours. Two or three years later a travelling dentist visited the mine and put up his tent near the bunk-house. He was more or less of a charlatan, but he fired Mrs. McTeague's ambition, 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.

Then one day at San Francisco had come the news of his mother's death; she had left him some money—not much, but enough to set him up in business; so he had cut loose from the charlatan and had opened his "Dental Parlors" on Polk Street, an "accommodation street" of small shops in the residence quarter of the town. Here he had slowly collected a clientele of butcher boys, shop girls, drug clerks, and car conductors. He made but few acquaintances. Polk Street called him the "Doctor" and spoke of his enormous strength. For McTeague was a young giant, carrying his huge shock of blond hair six feet three inches from the ground;<sup>5</sup> 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, the hands of the old-time car-boy. 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 carnivora.

McTeague's mind was as his body, heavy, slow to act, sluggish. Yet there was nothing vicious about the man. Altogether he suggested the draught horse, immensely strong, stupid, docile, obedient.

When he opened his "Dental Parlors," he felt that his life was a success, that he could hope for nothing better. In spite of the name, there was but one room. It was a corner room on the second floor over the branch post-office, and faced the street. McTeague made it do for a bedroom as well, sleeping on the big bed-lounge against the wall opposite the window. There was a washstand behind the screen in the corner where he manufactured his moulds. In the round bay window were his operating chair, his dental engine, and the movable rack on which he laid out his instruments. Three chairs, a bargain at the second-hand store, ranged themselves against the wall with military precision underneath a steel engraving of the court of Lorenzo de' Medici, which he had bought because there were a great many figures in it for the money. Over the bed-lounge hung a rifle manufacturer's advertisement calendar which he never used. The other ornaments were a small marble-topped centre table covered with back numbers of "The Amer-

5. However, on p. 150 Norris describes McTeague as six feet two inches.



ican System of Dentistry," a stone pug dog sitting before the little stove, and a thermometer. A stand of shelves occupied one corner, filled with the seven volumes of "Allen's Practical Dentist." On the top shelf McTeague kept his concertina and a bag of bird seed for the canary. The whole place exhaled a mingled odor of bedding, creosote, and ether.

But for one thing, McTeague would have been perfectly contented. Just outside his window was his signboard—a modest affair—that read: "Doctor McTeague. Dental Parlors. Gas Given"; but that was all. It was his ambition, his dream, to have projecting from that corner window a huge gilded tooth, a molar with enormous prongs, something gorgeous and attractive. He would have it some day, on that he was resolved; but as yet such a thing was far beyond his means.

When he had finished the last of his beer, McTeague slowly wiped his lips and huge yellow mustache with the side of his hand. Bull-like, he heaved himself laboriously up, and, going to the window, stood looking down into the street.

The street never failed to interest him. It was one of those cross streets peculiar to Western cities, situated in the heart of the residence quarter, but occupied by small tradespeople who lived in the rooms above their shops. There were corner drug stores with huge jars of red, yellow, and green liquids in their windows, very brave and gay; stationers' stores, where illustrated weeklies were tacked upon bulletin boards; barber shops with cigar stands in their vestibules; sad-looking plumbers' offices; cheap restaurants, in whose windows one saw piles of unopened oysters weighted down by cubes of ice, and china pigs and cows knee deep in layers of white beans. At one end of the street McTeague could see the huge power-house of the cable line.<sup>6</sup> Immediately opposite him was a great market; while farther on, over the chimney stacks of the intervening houses, the glass roof of some huge public baths glittered like crystal in the afternoon sun.<sup>7</sup> Underneath him the branch post-office was opening its doors, as was its custom between two and three o'clock on Sunday afternoons. An acrid odor of ink rose upward to him. Occasionally a cable car passed, trundling heavily, with a strident whirring of jostled glass windows.

On week days the street was very lively. It woke to its work about seven o'clock, at the time when the newsboys made their appearance together with the day laborers. The laborers went trudging past in a straggling file—plumbers' apprentices, their pockets stuffed with sec-

6. McTeague can see the power house of the Sutter Street cable car line. The cable car was invented and developed in San Francisco during the 1870s to provide transportation over hilly streets. Power generated by steam maintained the continual motion of a cable slotted under the street; a car moved when its driver attached his car to the moving cable with a gripping device.

7. The Lurline Baths, at Larkin and Bush streets. Public baths provided both swimming and bathing facilities.