ALLEGORY IN THE MAJOR FICTION OF FRANK NORRIS

Allegory in the Major Fiction of Frank Norris

by

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Abstract

Frank Norris is generally recognised by critics as American literature's first naturalist. But there is enough evidence in Norris' writing -- primarily the extensive use of allegory and allegorical symbolism -- to suggest another interpretation of his work. Norris seems to be much more in tune with the romantic literary heritage of America than he is with the Zolaesque naturalism he imported from France. Through a study of these allegorical tendencies in the major fiction of Frank Norris, the reader discovers the strong links that Norris has with his literary heritage and finds him to be as much an allegorist as a naturalist.

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Of course, the greatest thanks goes to my family, particularly my father and my mother, who saw me through this degree with understanding, concern, and the occasional nudge; to my friends -- especially Greg Bruni, who can always see the white within the black that I show him; and to Carol Maybury, who believes in me: "and it's you are whatever a moon has always meant/and whatever a sun will always sing is you".

* * *

This thesis is lovingly and respectfully dedicated to my grandfather, Carlo Camillo Fera.

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'So far may even the best man err, in judging the conduct of one with the recesses of whose condition he is not acquainted. But you were forced to it; and you were in time undeceived. Would that, in both respects, it was ever, and with all men.'

'You generalize, Don Benito; and mournfully enough. But the past is passed; why moralize upon it? Forget it. See, yon bright sun has forgotten it all, and the blue sea, and the blue sky; these have turned over new leaves.'

'Because they have no memory,' he dejectedly replied; 'because they are not human.'

'But these mild trades that now fan your cheek, do they not come with a human healing to you? Warm friends, steadfast friends are the trades.'

'With their steadfastness they but waft me to my tomb, Senor,' was the foreboding response.

'You are saved,' cried Captain Delano, more and more astonished and pained; 'you are saved: what has cast such a shadow upon you?'

'The negro.'

Herman Melville, "Benito Cereno"

(1855)

Chapter I

Frank Norris (1870-1902) has a critical reputation that is at best mediocre. Although he is widely regarded as the first proponent of naturalism in American literature, Norris' work has never found the prominence held by Dreiser and other American writers of naturalism. Most critics regard Norris as an inconsistent and flawed novelist who tried to transform the French naturalism of Zola into something uniquely American without succumbing to the great public pressure for contemporary novelists to produce, in Norris' own words, "mere sentimentalism". He produced a body of work which was, for naturalistic fiction, inconsistent with the theoretical aims of that type of fiction set out by its chief spokesman, Emile Zola.

While the critical emphasis falls upon the naturalism Norris developed in the last years of the nineteenth century, not nearly enough has been said regarding Norris' contribution to the literary tradition into which he was admitting himself. Indeed, few critics note the great debt Norris has to the tradition of romanticism present in nineteenth-century American literature; even fewer consider

Norris as a highly moralistic writer or as an allegorist. The purpose of this study is to consider the fiction that Norris produced not specifically as naturalism but as romance: romance which often becomes allegory. I wish also to give an extensive analysis to a comment Stanley Cooperman makes in his article "Frank Norris and the Werewolf of Guilt", namely that Norris "explains the downfall of his characters in terms of original sin" (253). What the reader finds in the major fiction of Norris is an on-going battle between the forces of "good" and "evil" that exist within the lives of his protagonists. The characteristics of naturalism which are present in his fiction are usurped by this tendency; Norris is primarily a romanticist with a strong moral sense, placing him within the well-established literary tradition of the American romance.

Nathaniel Hawthorne, in his preface to The House of the Seven Gables, discusses the "moral purpose" of the romance and how it must be genuinely presented to the reader; the romance was for Hawthorne the perfect form to both teach and delight his reader. The American literary tradition surrounding Hawthorne was already practicing the art of romanticism, from the tales of Washington Irving and the essays and poetry of the Transcendentalist writers, to the stories of Longfellow, Melville and Poe. Harry Levin, in his study The Power of Blackness, notes this trend in

American literature and traces it back to the Puritan ancestry of that country's history. He postulates that "American fiction sprang from religious allegory, a form that gave ample scope to the moralistic impetus" (Levin 20). The "moralistic impetus" itself springs from a religious and teleological concern, as well as a sociological and scientific one. How Frank Norris fits into this literary scheme becomes apparent only after a close examination of those ideas that originally influenced him and how those ideas were modified to function within his own fiction.

The critical literature written on Norris points inevitably to two sources regarding the naturalistic themes within his fiction. The first is, of course, Zola and French naturalism. The second is one of Norris' professors at the University of California, Joseph Le Conte, who was notorious for his outspoken opinion on evolution given in his lectures (Franklin Walker 58). LeConte believed that

> the brute instincts which remain in civilized man are a necessary part of his equipment for the social struggle, which parallels the earlier tooth-and-claw struggle of primitive man. But now it is a struggle carried on with established rules, and therefore if he yields to the brutality within him instead of harnessing it for the purposes of progress he will regress and be evil (Ziff 256).

This combination of ideas from Zola and LeConte adumbrated the type of hybrid naturalism that Norris would later try to develop as a literary mode "proper" to American fiction. It

is at this point that several important questions arise. How much and in what way was Norris influenced by Zola? To what extent did Norris rely on the ideas put forth by Le Conte? The answers to these questions become evident upon an examination of what the term "naturalism" represents, and how Norris embraced it for his own ends. We will see from this examination how Norris is much less a naturalist than he or his critics would admit.

Norris was interested in the naturalism that Zola extolled in the famous preface to the second edition of his first novel Therese Raquin (1868), and later developed and refined in the great Rougon-Macquart novels. In his landmark work "The Experimental Novel", Zola explained his theory:

> this is what constitutes the experimental novel: to possess a knowledge of the phenomena inherent in man, to show the machinery of intellectual and sensory manifestations, under the influence of heredity and environment, such as physiology shall give them to us, and then finally to exhibit man living in social conditions produced by himself, which he modifies daily, and in the heart of which he experiences a continual transformation. (Zola, Geismar tr., 12).

This represents the "scientific method" of Zola adapted from Claude Bernard's Introduction a l'etude de la Medicine Experimentale: the precise account of detail through objective observation (3-4). Donald Pizer explains the importance of Zola's ideas in the context of Le Conte's

teachings: "Zola's major attraction was that he sensationally portrayed within a contemporary setting that which Norris above all responded to in Le Conte's ideas . . . the theme that man contains within himself the powerful animal forces which often lead him to violence or degradation" (1973, 26).

What Zola postulated in "The Experimental Novel" and in the preface to Therese Raquin is regarded as the foundation of literary Naturalism: "a controlled scientific experiment in human relations or in the psychological development of an individual" (Walcutt 31). In America, before Norris emerged on the scene, the works of E. W. Howe, Joseph Kirkland, and Stephen Crane were already pushing the boundaries of realism into naturalism (Horton and Edwards 266-267). Norris, who presumably discovered Zola not while he was studying art in France but while he was an undergraduate at Berkeley (1890-1894), was to introduce Zola and naturalism into an accommodating literary atmosphere.1 As Harry Levin suggests, "naturalism, which is nowhere a spontaneous growth, came to [America] as a late and sophisticated importation from France, with a Frank Norris

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1 Walker, 53. Numerous critics have pointed out the fact that it is not known when exactly Norris discovered the works of Zola. Walker, however, seems quite sure that Norris discovered Zola while the former was at Berkeley. Other interpretations will vary; I assume that since Walker is officially Norris' biographer, his information is reasonably correct.

exploiting the methods of an Emile Zola" (18).2 Also, Pizer stresses, there are the theories of Le Conte which Norris constantly added to what he gleaned from Zola--theories which, for unknown reasons, "had an immediate and lasting effect" on him (1973, 16).3 What Norris hoped to combine, then, was Zola's form of the scientific novel of observation, and LeConte's theories regarding the instinctive brute nature of humankind.

The short sketch "Brute", published in the San Francisco Wave on March 13, 1897, illustrates this combination of Zola and Le Conte in Norris' fiction.

> He had been working all day in a squalid neighborhood by the gas works and coal yards, surrounded by lifting cranes, pile drivers, dredging machines, engines of colossal, brutal strength, where all around him were immense blocks of granite, tons of pig iron; everything had been enormous, crude, had been huge in weight, tremendous in power, gigantic in size.
>
> By long association with such things he had become like them, huge, hard, brutal, strung with a crude, blind strength, stupid, unreasoning. He was on his way home now, his immense hands dangling half-open at his sides; his head empty of thought. He only desired to be fed and to sleep. At a street crossing he picked up a white violet, very fresh, not yet trampled into the mud. It was a beautiful thing, redolent with the scent of the woods, suggestive of everything

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2 As Franklin Walker notes, Norris was probably influenced more by Zola's style than his theory (232).

3 Presumably these "unknown reasons" may be elucidated by the biographical evidence that Norris was acutely aware of his own "brutish" habits of drinking, gambling, and womanizing. I will address this point soon.

> pretty and delicate. It was almost like a smile-made flower. It lay very light in the hollow of his immense calloused palm. In some strange way it appealed to him, and blindly he tried to acknowledge his appreciation. He looked at it stupidly, perplexed, not knowing what to do; then instinctively his hand carried it to his mouth; he ground it between his huge teeth and slowly ate it. It was the only way he knew.4

Also contained within this sketch are certain character traits that would find their way into the protagonists of many of Norris' works, including the short story "Lauth" and the novels Vandover and the Brute, McTeague, Moran of the Lady Letty, and A Man's Woman. "Brute", then, is perhaps the best example of the naturalism that Norris sought in ideal to bring to American literature; it contains the character "type" that Le Conte postulated was within every human being, and cast this type into the deterministic universe of naturalism, fraught with the minutest attention to grotesque detail.

But Norris was not interested in the theoretical elements of literary naturalism for their own sake, but how they might be adapted and used for his own particular fiction. V. L. Parrington's theoretic "criteria of naturalism in fiction", as cited by Horton and Edwards,

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4 The Complete Works of Frank Norris, 10 vols. (Port Washington: Kennikat, 1967), X: 80-81. All excerpts from the stories and sketches are taken from this edition. Volume numbers and page references will be given parenthetically following the passage.

characterizes the mode of naturalism as: "An attempted objectivity"; "Frankness"; "An amoral attitude toward material"; "A philosophy of determinism"; "Pessimism"; "The projection of 'strong' characters of marked animal or neurotic nature" (268).5 Such a definition serves Norris' purposes adequately, since the sketch "Brute" corresponds comfortably to these criteria. But the body of Norris' work is far more complicated than this simple sketch, and by its nature requires a definition beyond the restrictions of the term "naturalism" and its meaning. To do this is to understand Norris on his own merits, not those administered to him through outside sources.

Norris' conception of naturalism embraces the drama of everyday life. The characters within his drama, however, are carefully drawn, often tragic figures who bear the distinct evolutionary and genetic mark of Le Conte's theories. Again, not all of Norris' characters are like "Brute", but that part of him is undeniably present. In his early essay "Zola as a Romantic Writer" (1896), Norris elaborates upon the naturalist's concerns:

> The naturalist takes no note of common people, common in so far as their interests,

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5 It is of interest to note that Horton and Edwards acknowledge the relative failure of naturalism to live up to its own criteria: "the purely naturalistic work has never been written and, if written, probably could never be read" (268).

> their lives, and the things that occur in them, are ordinary. 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. (McTeague, Pizer ed., 309).

This is an interesting observation for Norris to make; it is not written concerning his own art, but Zola's, supporting the fact that Norris ventured out on his own rather than writing Zolaesque naturalism in America (Franklin Walker 84-85). The characters within the framework of Norris' naturalism may live a "common" existence (the term is, of course, relative), but they are by no means "common" in character. They are representative of one part of a truth that Norris is expressing in his fiction. Norris had a strong sense of what kind of relationship literature should have to life because of his fervent belief in the intimacy between reader and writer as stated in his essay "The Responsibilities of the Novelist" (1902):

> How necessary it becomes . . . for those who, by the simple art of writing, can invade the heart's heart of thousands, whose novels are received with such measureless earnestness -- how necessary it becomes for those who wield such power to use it rightfully. Is it not expedient to act fairly? Is it not in Heaven's name essential that People hear, not a lie, but

the Truth? (8)6

"Every novel must do one of three things", Norris states in "The Novel With a 'Purpose'" (1902): "it must (1) tell something, (2) show something, or (3) prove something. Some novels do all three of these; some do only two; all must do at least one" (25). This suggests his belief in a didactic impetus behind the novel. Indeed: "The novel with a purpose is, one contends, a preaching novel. But it preaches by telling things and showing things" (27). But, interestingly enough, Norris qualifies his statement: "The moment, however, that the writer becomes really and vitally interested in his purpose, his novel fails" (28). This reflects back upon the characteristic in Zolaesque naturalism of the writer remaining an impartial observer. I do not believe that Norris ever achieved this negative capability: nor did Zola. What Norris tells and shows in his naturalism, his hybrid of realism and romance, is a "Truth" that he himself must believe in order to convince the reader. This cannot be achieved through detached observation because "Truth" implies a process of mental or moral consideration, an interpretation of observable facts. Norris offers no concrete definition of "Truth" in any of his critical writing, but one can safely be inferred. As we

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6 All references to the essays of Frank Norris are taken from the posthumous collection The Responsibilities of the Novelist (New York: Greenwood, 1903, 1968).

shall see, Norris', "Truth" is a moral absolute.

Norris posits in "A Plea for Romantic Fiction" (date unknown): "Romance, I take it, is the kind of fiction that takes cognizance of variations from the type of normal life. Realism is the kind of fiction that confines itself to the type of normal life" (215).7 While Norris in his own theoretical system tends to see naturalism as a synthesis of romanticism and realism, his writing often reveals a concern for issues that are beyond the capacity of naturalism. The presence of Norris' "Truth" in almost everything he wrote amply proves that romanticism replaces the naturalism of his fiction; while the naturalistic elements are present in his fiction, there is an allegorical level to the themes and symbolism within that fiction which denies any sort of scientific or sociological importance. The "reward of the novelist", then, is the ability to state the following without hesitation or fear of reprisal: "'I never truckled; I never took off my hat to Fashion and held it out for pennies. By God, I told them the truth. They liked it or they didn't like it. What had that to do with me? I told

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7 The literary terminology gets a bit confusing at this point. It is easier to understand that, in Norris' credo of naturalism, the two modes of romanticism and realism must be joined: romanticism without realism is sentimentalism: realism without romanticism is mimesis. This differs considerably from Frye's literary trinity of myth, romance, and naturalism (1973, 135-136); the difference, however, is important to understanding that what Norris created in his fiction theoretically corresponds to Frye's system more accurately than to his own.

them the truth; I knew it for the truth then, and I know it for the truth now'" (22).

"What had that to do with me?" Everything.

"Lauth", a short story published in the Overland Monthly in March of 1893, presents two elements of Norris' work that will appear in his fiction until his death: its naturalism combines the ideas of Le Conte and the style of Zola; and its thematic concern is essentially moral. The story itself was written during a time when Norris was studying under Le Conte (Pizer 1973, 18). It is set in medieval France and concerns the wounding and eventual death of a young man during a rebellion. Lauth's animal nature is brought to the surface when he first kills a man during the battle in which he is wounded:

> In an instant a mighty flame of blood lust thrilled up through all Lauth's body and mind. At the sight of blood shed by his own hands all the animal savagery latent in every human being woke within him -- no more merciful scruples now. He could kill. In the twinkling of an eye the pale, highly cultivated scholar, whose life had been passed in the study of science and abstruse questions of philosophy, sank to the level of his savage Celtic ancestors. (Works X: 119)

After Lauth dies of wounds received in the battle, his body is recovered by his friend Chavannes who is a doctor. A medical experiment ensues, and an attempt is made to bring Lauth back to life by re-filling his veins with the blood of live animals -- sheep. The story entertains an elaborate

debate between Chavannes and his companion Anselm, as to what constitutes and promotes life: force -- living energy-- or the soul. At first the experiment seems a success: Lauth returns to life, returns to the person he was before his death. But one day he exclaims, "'This is not I; where am I? For God's sake, tell me where I am!'". He then "fell in a fit upon the floor, foaming and howling" (143). From that point Lauth continues to "live", but in an "inhuman" state, rapidly deteriorating:

> But still it lived.
> Either it could not die or else was dying slowly. In course of time all likeness to the human form disappeared from the body. By some unspeakable process the limbs, arms, and features slowly resolved themselves into one another. And yet, until decomposition had set in, some kind of life was contained in it. It lived, but not as do the animals or the trees, but as the protozoa, the jellyfish, and those strange lowest forms of existence wherein the line between vegetable and animal cannot be drawn . . . .
> Decomposition had commenced; the thing was dead. (145)

The story ends moralistically with Anselm telling Chavannes that "'Lauth died: life and the soul departed together from the body; you found the means to call back life; the soul you could not recall . . .'" (146). Norris' preoccupation with this situation becomes the foundation of his moral sense. Norris "was at bottom a moralist . . . who came finally to believe that the novel

should expose evils in order to rouse the public conscience and prepare the way for their removal" (Marchand 90).

Has Norris inherited his American literary heritage? Horton and Edwards examine the relevance of naturalism in American literature with its history of Calvinist philosophy and its doctrine of Original Sin (260); naturalism's living centre is indeed moral, for it is derived out of man's awareness of his own innate depravity (254). Norris, somewhat like Hawthorne, functions within this realm of belief; the story "Lauth" makes this its thesis: "'The presence and absence of the soul was just the difference between the old Lauth and the new. It is just the difference between man and brute . . .'" (147). Without the soul, there is nothing to exercise dominion over the brute nature; life reduces itself to an animalistic existence.

The moral degree of Norris' work intensifies with his concern for free will as it operates within the existence of man. Free will decides whether man will rise above the brute, or fall prey to it, as the conscious ability to choose comes into direct confrontation with the deterministic nature of man's universe -- especially the universe of the naturalistic novel. This is the environment in which free will must function. The "terrible things" alluded to in the excerpt from "Zola as a Romantic Writer" are the trappings of sin -- the temptation of the beast at

bay: "The brute, to be sure, is nature, but it is also sin, and this is precisely the point at which Norris parts company with science, ostensibly the basis for every good naturalist's view of human behaviour" (Cooperman 254). Here, perhaps, is some insight into Norris' "Truth". Norris' excursions into allegory in search of this "Truth" is consistent with Levin's belief that at the centre of American literature's embracing of allegory is Melville's notion of `"the power of blackness' -- a power which `derives its force from its appeals to that Calvinistic sense of Innate Depravity and Original Sin, from whose visitations, in some shape or other, no thinking mind is always and wholly free'" (26). Arnold Goldsmith's essay "The Development of Frank Norris' Philosophy" is perhaps the most thorough and sensitive study of this aspect of Norris' work. According to Goldsmith, Norris believed that although "the individual had free will, it is strictly limited in a universe governed by certain natural and economic laws" (188). Norris, then, is interested in what happens to the individual making a choice of his free will within these precepts.8 Almost certainly, Norris' feelings regarding his own nature come into play at this point, since many of the

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8 Pizer (1973) also comments extensively on this characteristic of Norris' work.

situations in his stories comprise elements of the vices to which Norris knew himself to be prone.

This suggestion is not without supporting biographical evidence: "One must not lose sight of the fact that Norris inherited a strong puritanical strain from his mother, and that, as he remained under her control, this heritage was accentuated by training" (Franklin Walker 97). Norris' biographer also mentions that while Norris did not behave like a Puritan -- indeed, his fraternity brothers and friends from Berkeley and Harvard were well aware of his "petty vices": gambling, women, and drinking --he knew of his own weaknesses: "it was one of his favorite games to imagine himself a victim of excess" (97).9

The extent to which this moralistic tendency in Norris' work extended into his personal life is not completely known. His mother was High Church Episcopalian and his father Presbyterian; the only formal religious education Norris had, according to his biographer, was attending the Presbyterian Sunday-school taught by his father (Franklin Walker 14-15). There is extant, however, a short story written for the San Francisco Wave, October 9, 1897, entitled "The Joyous Miracle" (Works VII: 229-236). This story concerns another debate, this one more theological than the debate in "Lauth". Two men, Mervius and Jerome, discuss the status of "the carpenter's son":

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9 Pizer (1973, 17) makes a similar observation.

Jerome states that this person is "a dreamer . . . a mild lunatic", but Mervius, who has witnessed a miracle at the hands of this "carpenter's son", believes otherwise. "The Joyous Miracle" is a sensitive re-telling of Mervius' story by Norris, in which Christ appears to a group of children and brings to life the clay bird of a little girl. This is the only work of Norris' that has such a strong theological centre. But it does provide ample evidence that Norris was sensitive to his religious upbringing, and would call it to use within his fiction.

It has been established that Norris' practice of naturalism is not inextricably linked to the guidelines created by Zola, nor does it rest entirely on the theories of evolution and primitivism that Norris learned from studying under Le Conte. He has, in fact, created his own form of romance for proclaiming the "Truth".

As much as critics are right in stressing the importance of the sociological elements in Norris' writing, as well as the obvious influence of style and content from Zola, the allegorical nature of Norris' work must be considered. Had Norris lived beyond his thirty-two years, he might have come to more concrete conclusions regarding the nature of man and his place within the cosmos. What he has left is a body of work that exhibits plainly the kinds of questions he was asking, and the types of answers he was seeking.

Chapter II

In the latter part of the 1890s Norris wrote two complete novels, Vandover and the Brute and McTeague. While both novels are well-recognised as works of naturalistic fiction, they wrestle with an age-old issue and transcribe "the early Christian concept of a debate between the soul and the body" for the reading public (Levin 17). In each of these two novels the "debate" manifests itself under different circumstances; although essentially different novels in form and approach, both consider two sides of a similar issue.

Although it was not published until 1914, Vandover and the Brute was written simultaneously with McTeague while Norris was at Harvard, and was completed in 1895 when he stopped work on the latter novel because he could not bring its action to a sound conclusion (Franklin Walker 95-96). Norris could not find a publisher for Vandover because of the nature of its theme. Even when Norris' brother Charles Gilman Norris published the novel some twelve years after Frank's death, he still had to make some deletions before Doubleday and Page found it acceptable -- in its finished

form, the book was still somewhat harsh for its early twentieth-century audience.10

Vandover is very Zolaesque in its study of the fall of the lead character Vandover, an upper-class "gentleman" who is studying at Harvard and has aspirations of becoming a great artist. The plot of the novel follows Vandover as he enjoys the life of a college student within his group of friends. It emphasizes Vandover's love of his art, but it stresses his weaknesses for sloth, women, gambling, and alcohol. The plot also accentuates the novel's climax--the suicide of Ida Wade, a young woman seduced by Vandover--by assembling events around Vandover's moral transgressions: Vandover's drunken visit to a church; the gradual but steady loss of his art; the seduction and suicide of Miss Wade; the alienation of Vandover from his friends; and the series of misfortunes that hound Vandover after Wade's suicide is made public.

Many critics have pointed out the autobiographical elements in the novel, which also strengthen its overall theme: "In Vandover Norris dramatizes many of his basic worries about himself, doing so within the double context of Le Conte's ideas and Zola's studies of degeneracy" (Pizer 1973, 33). The reader should recall Norris' penchant for exaggerating the effects of his own vices mentioned in

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10 See Warren French's introduction to this edition of Vandover and the Brute.

Chapter I.11 It is a careful analysis of the demise of one young man who cannot control that part of him which is base, bestial. It is an allegory of sorts -- a moral and social parable. Like Lauth in the short story discussed in the previous chapter, Vandover in his bestial state has no soul, and is possessed of nothing human. Vandover illustrates the progressive decay of one man's self-control, and expresses it not exclusively in naturalistic terms (although the novel is written as a naturalistic study), but in very high moral terms.

Vandover presents its premise early on: the corruption of a young man through a surrender to vice. Its premise is also strengthened by the fact that within this corruption is always the means to escape, to refuse temptation; it is important that Vandover be a character whose personality reflects the dual nature of artist and brute. Vandover's thoughts illustrate this inevitable conflict, and foreshadow much more:

> Vice had no hold on him. The brute had grown larger in him, but he knew that he had the creature in hand. He was its master, and only on rare occasions did he permit himself to gratify its demands, feeding its

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11 It should be mentioned that the seduction and eventual suicide of Ida Wade and the misfortunes which follow Vandover afterward are merely narrative events that contribute to his declining mental, moral, and physical condition. They are hypothetical exaggerations, not biographical events; in fact, Norris would write Blix in 1899, a very pleasant novel devoted entirely to chronicling his successful romance with Jeannette Black.

> abominable hunger from that part of him which he knew to be the purest, the cleanest, and the best. (30)

Vandover rationalizes the struggle within him by asserting the power of his artistic self. The novel presents the reader with a portrait of an individual composed of these two parts: the artist and the beast, the sacred and the profane. This duality within Vandover reflects the moral tension at the heart of most Christian belief: the potential for both good and evil within every man; and, in accordance with that duality, the individual's decision to embrace for himself either the good or the evil. This allegorical level to Vandover is evident as the novel progresses.

Vandover begins with a brief look into Vandover's youth. He is close to his father, having lost his mother to an illness. When Vandover is fifteen, Norris notes the beginnings of a "crude virility" developing within the boy, who also had an enormous appetite and "ate heavy meat three times a day, but took little or no exercise" (9). Here Le Conte's beast is shown in its infancy, but it is presented as a "crude, raw innocence" that is still essentially free from any moral corruption. This is perhaps the naturalistic element of the novel first surfacing: the genetic determinism of Vandover's character. His youthful innocence is already at odds with what Norris refers to in McTeague as

the "evil of an entire race" (32)12, which is not an individual genetic defect, but a flaw within the entire race.13 The importance Norris places on this fact illustrates the extent to which allegory takes precedence over naturalism in this novel. But if the novel is to be read successfully in moralistic terms as opposed to strictly naturalistic ones, it must be stressed that this "evil" side of Vandover is recognised by him later. Unlike Coupeau in L'Assommoir, whose defects are blamed by Zola on heredity and who has no conception of what is happening to him, Vandover is constantly aware of what becomes of him while it happens; he constantly knows which side of his nature is winning out. The reasons for Coupeau's fall -- literally and figuratively -- are explained by Zola quite clearly: Coupeau's father, of the same occupation as Coupeau, suffered from both a fall from a roof, and from alcoholism. The point I am trying to make here is that in no way does Norris even suggest that Vandover's demise results from a genetic defect. It is because Vandover represents an Everyman that we might assume that the defect is in the fallen state of man as a species, thus moving Vandover from naturalism into allegory. Zola's characters seem destined

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12 References to McTeague in this and in subsequent chapters are taken from the Penguin edition edited by Kevin Starr.

13 Cooperman comments on this "flaw" and emphasizes the fact that this issue is indeed a religious one and not a biological one (255).

to become what they are by the very nature of their existence. This fact makes Vandover much more of a tragic figure than Coupeau.14

Vandover's boyhood "innocence" is clearly established by Norris early in the novel:

> Vandover was a good little boy. Every night he said his prayers, going down upon his huge knees at the side of his bed. To the Lord's Prayer he added various petitions of his own. He prayed that he might be a good boy and live a long time and go to Heaven when he died and see his mother; that next Saturday might be sunny all day long, and that the end of the world might not come while he was alive. (9)

A sexual curiosity is aroused in Vandover when, "one Sunday in church, when the minister was intoning the Litany, he remarked for the first time the words, 'all women in the perils of child-birth'" (10). Vandover, "with the instinct of the young brute", attempts to learn the meaning of the mysterious phrase. He was too embarrassed to ask his father, and was fascinated by yet reticent to disbelieve the explanations offered in the "abominable talk of the High School boys". Finally, the boy finds his answer in an article on "'Obstetrics'" found in one of the volumes of "the old Encyclopaedia Brittanica", which was "profusely

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14 For tragedy to be most effective the tragic figure must come to some sort of realization of the hamartia of his existence. Coupeau, at least, does not seem aware of what is happening: it merely happens because of the determining factors in both his environment and his heredity that push him in that direction.

illustrated with old-fashioned plates and steel engravings" (10). Norris describes young Vandover's fall from innocence with finality:

> It was the end of all his childish ideals, the destruction of all his first illusions. The whole of his rude little morality was lowered immediately. Even his mother, whom he had always believed to be some kind of an angel, fell at once in his estimation. She could never be the same to him after this, never so sweet, so good and so pure as he had hitherto imagined her.
> . . . Then little by little the first taint crept in, the innate vice stirred in him, the brute began to make itself felt, and a multitude of perverse and vicious ideas commenced to buzz about him like swarm of nasty flies. (10-11)

Innocence is corrupted by knowledge in Vandover's life (with an encyclopedia acting like a surrogate Tree of Knowledge), thus providing an unquestionable link between knowledge and sin and lifting the episode to the level of allegory. The quest for such knowledge on the part of Vandover seems to be frowned upon somewhat by Norris through his relation of this episode in the novel. Norris expresses Vandover's natural inquisitiveness as an "eager, evil curiosity", a "perverse craving for the knowledge of vice" (11). Norris even has Vandover looking up words in the dictionary, "finding in the cold, scientific definitions some strange sort of satisfaction" (11). Cooperman, in support of this notion, suggests that nature -- in this case, the nature of sexuality and the sexual development of

Vandover -- is presented not in terms of the naturalistic notion of scientific fact, "but rather in terms of original sin" (254). What Vandover has inherited, then, is Original Sin.

Norris also seems interested in the fact that Vandover learns a loveless kind of sexuality. Without the presence of his mother to bridge the gap between knowledge and its perception with some kind of interpretation, an interpretation made out of love for her son, Vandover learns from the encyclopedia a mechanistic type of biological sexuality: mere sensory stimulation and reproduction. Subsequently, all women in Vandover's life, with the exception of Turner Ravis, are "fallen". They become dual-natured, a union of Mary and Eve; he has the memory of his mother's innocence and the newly-acquired knowledge of the nature of the species. For example, one evening Vandover meets a girl on the street while he is out with a few of his friends. He is immediately attracted to her and somewhat bashful for reasons he does not know. But when she eventually asks him the question, "`Do you stand or walk?'", he reacts abruptly:

> Vandover's gorge rose with disgust. He stopped abruptly and pulled away from the girl. Not only did she disgust him, but he felt sorry for her; he felt ashamed and pitiful for a woman who had fallen so low. Still he tried to be polite to her; he did not know how to be rude with any kind of woman. (23)

This reaction illustrates the type of behaviour conditioned by his unceremonious discovery of sex *via* the cold and scientific depiction of reproduction and birth in a volume of his father's encyclopedia. Vandover's shock at the girl's advances can only be interpreted as a fear of succumbing to the "evil" sexual allurement he associates with most women.

As Vandover develops into manhood his artistic side also develops. It is throughout the novel associated with an aesthetic goodness that counters the "brute"; this aesthetic goodness takes on a moral dimension. The introduction of this side of Vandover to the reader is made immediately after the telling of Vandover's fall; his art is associated with his youth, and indirectly, with the innocent state Vandover occupied before he discovered sex. When he first learns he is artistically precocious Vandover is copying pictures from "`A Home Book of Art'", and the pictures Vandover is most taken with are ones entitled "`Spring'", "`Youth'", "`Innocence'", "`It Might Have Been'", and "`Memories'" (12). Intertwined among this symbolism of lost youth and innocence are the nymph-like figures within these pictures that suggest Vandover's other interests: "ideal `Heads' of gipsey girls, of coquettes, and heads of little girls crowned with cherries . . ." (13). It is a perfect union.

The reader now expects that whatever is associated

with the artistic side of Vandover is "good", and whatever is associated with the bestial side is "evil". Accordingly, Norris provides Vandover with an environment that accommodates both but stresses neither; the choice becomes Vandover's: Norris "gives Vandover freedom of choice, and condemns him when he does wrong" (Franklin Walker 99). Donald Pizer notes that Norris surrounds Vandover with a symbolic universe comprised of balanced entities (1973, 42-43). Vandover, the Harvard Gentleman, is surrounded by schoolmates of both positive and negative merit. The women in Vandover's life are either upstanding and moral, or vulgar and sluttish -- witness the character differentiation between Turner Ravis, Vandover's "steady", and Flossie, the prostitute that shares Vandover's and his friends' favorite bar, the Imperial (Pizer 43). The interior of the Imperial also contains symbols associated with Vandover's bestial side: "On [one] side of the room, facing the bar, hung a large copy of a French picture representing a Sabbath, witches, goats, and naked girls whirling through the air" (43). Here the artwork is perverted because the Imperial will be the scene of the turning point of the novel, Vandover's seduction of Ida Wade.

The moral lesson of Vandover begins, then, upon a typical assertion by Vandover of his "better half": "that other Vandover whom he felt was his real self, Vandover the true man, Vandover the artist, not Vandover the easy-going,

the self-indulgent, not Vandover the lover of women" (112). The reader notes that this "better half" is constantly referred to as the part of Vandover that will save him from the beast. The good and the evil constantly confront each other, and these confrontations are consciously observed by him.

Vandover promises his girlfriend Turner Ravis that he will meet her for morning communion. The night before Vandover goes out on a wild drinking binge with his school chums, and must meet Turner in a disheveled condition after only a couple of hours sleep. Vandover reflects upon his deed accordingly, accentuating the dualistic morality that develops out of his inner division:

> Ah, yes; it was an ugly thing he had done there, a really awful thing. He must have still been drunk when he had knelt in the chancel. Vandover shuddered as he thought of this, and told himself that one could hardly commit a worse sacrilege, and that some time he would surely be called to account for it. But here he checked himself suddenly, not daring to go further. One would have no peace of mind left if one went on brooding over such things in this fashion. He realized the enormity of what he had done. He had tried to be sorry for it . . . He would take care never to do such a thing again . . . (65-66)

If the issue in Vandover were not a moral one, then his demise would be illustrated in essentially naturalistic terms. But throughout the book Vandover's vices are depicted according to how much they stand outside of

religious boundaries. As Vandover contemplates with fear the decay of his character, Norris explains Vandover's dilemma in terms of religious deficiency: "Vandover could not fall back on any religious influence" (217). Vandover is at a loss to console himself against the consequences of his seduction of Ida Wade. The death of his father, the loss of his friends, and a massive shipwreck in which Vandover is one of the few survivors, can be considered divine punishment handed down from the great Old Testament God of Wrath.15 While Arnold Goldsmith and Donald Pizer agree that Vandover suffers at the hands of an indifferent universe, an "enormous engine, restless, relentless" (230), Norris postulates an alternative hypothesis: "the moment he rejected a concrete religion Vandover was almost helpless . . . He felt that somewhere, some time, there was punishment for evildoing . . . (218). When Ida Wade greets Vandover at her door on the rainy night he is to seduce her, she utters an oracular greeting that symbolizes Vandover's sin and eventual ruin: "'Come in out of the wet, as the whale said to Jonah'" (70). The only difference between Jonah and Vandover is the way in which their respective stories end--Vandover never makes it out of the whale.

The strongly religious perception of Vandover's

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15 Cooperman comments on the events aboard the ship that also support the notion of its wreck being divinely ordained, as Vandover is tempted by another woman on board the ship after he has vowed to abstain from sexual contact with women after the Ida Wade incident.

situation is ironic in light of the fact that religion "had never affected him deeply" (216). If this is the case, Vandover reacts to his condition appropriately when he views the cause of his demise through the naturalist's looking-glass: "It was Nature inexorably exacting. It was the vast fearful engine riding him down beneath its myriad spinning wheels, remorselessly, irresistibly" (243). What Vandover does understand, however -- and painfully so--is that he has lost his art as "punishment for evildoing". The blow is crushing, for that part of him "was the strongest side of his nature and it would be the last to go (208). For this episode in Vandover's demise Norris borrows directly from Zola's Therese Raquin. Vandover's loss of his ability to draw is similar to Lantier's discovery of a greater vision after he has murdered the simpering Camille. Lantier's art, unlike Vandover's, results from a "breakdown that had thrown his mind and body out of gear" (Therese Raquin 195), namely the animal passion he had for Camille's wife Therese. But once the murder is committed, Lantier's artistic life is restored:

> Since he had killed a man his flesh was, as it were, appeased, and his distracted mind seemed limitless; and in this sudden broadening of his thought there floated before him exquisite creations and poetic vision. (Therese Raquin 195-196)

Lantier's subjects, however, all have the same face: that of Camille. They would soon degenerate in his paintings to the

same green, putrid face of Camille's corpse Lantier witnessed in the morgue.

Unlike Lantier, Vandover's art was almost spiritual, a part of his higher self. After his self-proclaimed guilt in the "murder" of Ida Wade the subjects of his art were "no longer children of his imagination . . . they were changelings, grotesque abortions" (229). This is the final realization that his most valued possession had vanished:

> It was gone -- his art was gone, the one thing that could save him. That, too, like all the other good things of his life, he had destroyed. At some time during those years of debauchery it had died, that subtle, elusive something, delicate as a flower; he had ruined it. Little by little it had exhaled away . . . defiled by the breath of abandoned women, trampled into the spilt wine-lees of the Imperial, dragged all fouled and polluted through the lowest mire of the great city's vice. (229-230)

Within the process of this decline, however, Vandover makes an interesting observation: "with the eyes of his better self he saw again, little by little, the course of his whole life, and witnessed again the eternal struggle between good and evil that had been going on within him since his very earliest years" (215). If Vandover had been measuring the "brute" nature within him by these high moral standards as this passage seems to indicate, then the whole course of the novel has been designed for specific reasons. This realization on the part of Vandover would support what the reader was aware of all along; Norris has constructed

Vandover in such a way that it becomes a moral allegory by constantly placing Vandover's conduct within a moral and theological cosmos.

Since the canvas of **Vandover** displays the moral decrepitude of Vandover, his story should be appreciated as an allegory on the nature of sin. Norris himself presents the evidence clearly, and creates out of it a study of a compulsion to "sin". The brute in Vandover therefore is a lesser state of being than the artist, yet it is stronger because of Vandover's own moral sloth. Since the brute overpowers the artist -- evil overpowering the good -- it is meet and just that one of Vandover's final plagues is lycanthropy, a nervous disorder that causes the victim to writhe and howl like an animal. The parallel entities of man and beast have struggled, and the beast has won; one of the strongest scenes of the novel comes when Ellis, a friend of Vandover, witnesses one of Vandover's lycanthropic attacks, and tells how Vandover, naked and on "all fours", pads about in a closed room like a wolf in a cage, "rattling his teeth together, and every now and then he would say, way down in his throat so it sounded like growls, 'Wolf -- wolf -- wolf'" (276). His lycanthropy becomes an external symbol of the brute he has feared himself becoming all along.

Both Vandover and Lauth in their respective stories maintained a precarious balance between the higher and lower faculties of their personalities. Lauth, as educated and as

sensitive as he was, could kill; Vandover, similarly, could wantonly seduce women. Both characters end up in animalistic states, void of any human dignity. "[The] soul of the man is the chiefest energy of his existence; take that away and he is no longer a man". These words of Anselm are as fitting for Vandover as they were for Lauth; if there is a correspondence between Vandover's art and his soul--and I believe Norris meant his reader to assume such a thing -- then Vandover has suffered a similar loss to Lauth (Franklin Walker 99-100). Vandover still has his life, but it is empty and base; the once promising artist is last seen scrubbing filth out from underneath a sink of a row-house, hungrily eying a little boy eating a piece of bread and butter.

There is no denying that Vandover has within it characteristics of the naturalist school -- the careful attention to detail, the study of individual decline, the impressions of a deterministic universe. But these traits of naturalism are secondary to those of the moral allegory. One of the strengths of Vandover, as Donald Pizer suggests, is "in making vividly real the decline of a weak man incapable of controlling his appetites or of rousing himself to fight the battle of life against his fellows or his environment" (1973, 48); while this suggestion is certainly true of the naturalistic element of the novel, it also strengthens the sort of religious motif that shows up

throughout it. This is not to say that Vandover should be read exclusively in moralistic and allegorical terms. The point I wish to make here is that this tendency in Norris is much more original than the naturalism that he borrows from Zola's style, or the evolutionary theory that he learned from Le Conte.

If any conclusions can be drawn regarding the high moral element within Vandover, they are made amid a plethora of critical interpretation that is often as inaccurate as it is abundant. For much of its critical existence, Vandover has been assaulted and praised for the very reasons this study is being undertaken. The novel represents a division of Norris' own authorial intention as the text itself vacillates between naturalism and allegory; inevitably it is an issue that is unsolvable in Norris' case, for there is no mature world view to prove any critical interpretation right or wrong. Whether Norris intended this division within his novel, the fact remains that Vandover and the Brute reads much more like an allegorical romance than a naturalistic novel.

"My chief object in writing 'McTeague'", wrote Norris in 1899, "was to produce an interesting story -- nothing more".16 If one accepts this oversimplification on the part

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16 From a letter to the Editor of Book News, March 23, 1899, cited in the Norton edition of McTeague edited by Donald Pizer (325).

of Norris, then there is no need to examine the novel in any detail greater than that which is warranted by the simplicity of the above statement. There are few who will admit that McTeague (1899) is merely "an interesting story", and fewer still who will regard the novel as unimportant within the context of the development of American literature. It is argued that McTeague is the closest Norris comes to a work of pure naturalism. It is a study of primitivism and atavism, an analysis of the conditions of life of a small group of inhabitants of a section of San Francisco's Polk Street; this combination of interest weaves a grim and often despairing tale of the fall of the large, "stupid" dentist and his psychotically parsimonious wife.

McTeague is also less a moral tale than Vandover; Norris has much more an objective interest in the demise of his Polk Street characters. McTeague, then, is much closer to Zola's naturalism than Vandover in both character and event; it was in fact written during the period in which Norris was first interested in Zola (Franklin Walker 219). Thus it is not surprising to discover many narrative similarities between McTeague and Zola's L'Assommoir, Therese Raquin, and Germinale. It is a point that critics are quick to make, and it is not often made in Norris' favour.

McTeague is not, however, without its moral discourse. Simply expressed, its theme is universal: the destruction of

an individual through the forces of remorseless greed. Greed is so essential to the overall work that when Erich von Stroheim filmed Norris' novel in the early 1920s, he built its narrative completely around this concept and called it Greed (Weinberg 3).17 According to Herman Weinberg, two versions of the film's opening title (it was a silent film), were proposed by von Stroheim, and both illustrated the moral element of the film. It is an interesting point from which to launch an investigation of the novel's moral intent, for one of those opening titles, eventually employed in the finished film as a closing title, reads "Oh cursed lust of Gold! when for thy sake/The fool throws up his interest in both worlds;/First, starves in this, then damn'd in that to come" (255). The other title, much less dramatic in its didacticism, is more or less similar in intent. Gold is the novel's active leitmotif, shaping both character and event within.

The didacticism of McTeague, much more subtle than its celluloid counterpart, centres mainly around event rather than the character/event relationship in Vandover outlined in Chapter II. As Arnold Goldsmith observes, free will has little to do with the events of McTeague, which makes the novel much more of a naturalistic microcosm of the indifference of universal forces: "[Norris] unequivocally

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17 Greed was released publicly in 1924. It still remains one of the most important films in the history of the cinema.

denies free will to his characters and portrays them as victims of heredity, environment, and chance" (177-178). The presence of gold within this milieu becomes the outward representation of those hereditary and environmental forces through association with certain aspects of each individual's character.

Gold as a moral symbol functions symbiotically with the naturalistic elements surrounding its use in the novel. As is common within naturalistic fiction, the symbol tends to transsubstantiate the naturalistic elements of the novel into moral commentary. Within McTeague its function is similar, but it is much more pervasive. Donald Pizer's study of the gold motif in McTeague (1973, 75-78) is exacting and well-argued in its presentation of how gold motivates the main characters of the novel, and how Norris carefully knits symbol and character in his creation of his "Story of San Francisco".18 Pizer also complains of Norris' overuse of the gold motif. If the critic chooses to examine the gold motif as a naturalistic symbol, comparable to the symbol of Colombe's distilling vat which sits malignantly in the background of the bar in which Coupeau and Gervaise are

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18 I hope to avoid any repetition of Pizer's remarks in his consideration of the symbolism in McTeague. However, since his purpose and my own overlap somewhat, there may be some cross-over of ideas; any direct reference to Pizer's study will be appropriately documented.

first tainted with alcohol in Zola's L'Assommoir[19], then it is indeed overused. If the gold motif is examined as a moral symbol representing a universal greed in the persons occupying Norris' novel, its repetition has significance in spite of its incessant appearance.

McTeague depicts the ruin of a huge, hulking dentist. The character of McTeague is the epitome of Le Conte's primordial man: brutish, "stupid", and dominated almost completely by instinct. McTeague was born and raised at the Big Dipper Mines of Placer County, California, and his brute strength suited perfectly his occupation as a car-boy in the mines. When
McTeague moves to San Francisco and sets up practice as a dentist -- a trade he had learned from a travelling dentist who one day passed through the mining area -- he brings with him the instincts and habits of the mines to his profession. McTeague's primordial nature can exist in harmony with his new life in San Francisco, as Norris suggests:

> 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,

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19 The force of the image of Columbe's "still" is intensified upon discovering the literal translation of the name of his bar, "L'Assommoir", which means "beaten" or "downtrodden". The distilling vat, which is perceived by Gervaise as "the metallic entrails of some sorceress", is a much more effective symbol in the light of this translation, and gives the theme of the novel more power than the usual translation of the title "L'Assommoir" as "The Drunkard".

> and covered with a fell of stiff yellow hair; they were hard as wooden mallets, strong as vices, the hands of an 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. (3)

McTeague exists in a state of primordial innocence, performing his dentistry, smoking his pipe, drinking his steam beer, and playing his concertina. This contented portrait of the giant dentist deliberately counters the existence of the people whose paths soon cross McTeague's. The introduction of Marcus Schouler, Trina, Maria Macapa, and Zerkow imports into McTeague's world the vice of greed in the two manifestations it takes in the novel: material and sexual (Pizer 1973, 76). It is at this point that fundamental differences in how Norris thematically treats this intrusion of vice in Vandover and in McTeague arise.

While the bestial nature is seen as the immoral nature of Vandover, it becomes the instinct for self-preservation in McTeague. What is considered evil in McTeague is the material and sexual greed of the people who represent "civilization" -- Polk Street -- while innocence is epitomized in McTeague's primordial ignorance of these vices. McTeague does not instigate his own demise directly by consciously interfering with the course of its events--

he has not the mental capability to do so. "Civilization" is responsible for McTeague's drastic metamorphosis because it upsets the balance between his primordial and socialized selves, causing him to regress to a primitivistic animal intent on surviving in a dangerous environment.

Carvel Collins states the issue: "Civilization is corrupt and its vice destroys a man who could have remained innocent in simpler surroundings" (103). The introduction of moral decay into the stabilized world of McTeague through the person of Trina begins the dentist's long descent into ruin. Norris sets McTeague's first meeting up with Trina in much the same way as the scene in Vandover cited in Chapter II of this study when that character first meets a "fast" girl. McTeague's response to his sexual arousal is identical to Vandover's: "McTeague and Trina were left alone. He was embarrassed, troubled. These young girls disturbed and perplexed him. He did not like them, obstinately cherishing that intuitive suspicion of all things feminine -- the perverse dislike of an overgrown boy" (23). McTeague's indoctrination into adult sexuality, again like Vandover's, is described by Norris primarily in terms of sexual arousal and not affection or love: "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" (27).

The turning point for McTeague occurs when he treats

Trina for a broken tooth, and she sits, anaesthetized, in his dental chair. The Calvinistic struggle begins even in 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 clamoring" (30). What follows is a very Hawthornesque inner battle between the beast and the man -- "the old battle, old as the world, wide as the world" (30) -- with McTeague trying to control his bestial nature; his reaction to the situation is as allegorical as Hawthorne ever wrote, especially when McTeague views Trina's beauty as an unspoiled innocence about to be corrupted by sexual lust:

> Across her forehead, her little pale forehead, under the shadow of her royal hair, he would surely see the smudge of a foul ordure, the footprint of the monster. It would be a sacrilege, an abomination. He recoiled from it, banding all his strength to the issue.
> 'No, by God! No, by God!' (31)

Norris, at this point in McTeague, poses his reader with the issue at the heart of both Vandover and "Lauth":

> 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 of 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. Why should it be? He did not desire it. Was he to blame . . . . McTeague could not understand this thing. It had faced him, as sooner or later it faces every child of man; but its significance was not for him. To reason

> with it was beyond him. He could only oppose to it an instinctive stubborn resistance, blind, inert. (32)

Norris completes the image of McTeague's innocence by making his contact with sex purely an act of fate: not governed by free will. "Chance had brought them face to face, and mysterious instincts as ungovernable as the winds of heaven were at work knitting their lives together" (89). This element of chance strengthens an observation the narrator makes regarding the meeting of Trina and McTeague early in the novel:

> McTeague began dimly to feel that life was too much for him. How had it all come about? A month ago he was perfectly content; he was calm and peaceful, taking his little pleasures as he found them. His life had shaped itself; was, no doubt, to continue always along these same lines. A woman had entered his small world and instantly there was discord. The disturbing element had appeared. Wherever the woman had put her foot a score of distressing complications had sprung up, like the sudden growth of strange and puzzling flowers. (52-53)

The attention Norris gives to the atavistic flaws in the two principal characters of McTeague parallels the conscious self-appraisal of Vandover's dual nature in the novel bearing his name. Both McTeague and Trina are "flawed" in a way which determines their fates. McTeague's father, as the novel points out, is a vicious brute when he drinks, and eventually succumbs to his vice (2); Trina

possessed "'all the instinct of a hardy and penurious mountain race'".20 Their first personal contact is described by Norris in terms of a sexual awakening; all other subsequent intimacies between the two, even after their marriage, are described as being "gross" or even bestial. These contacts are seen as conquests; however, once the game has been snared, the thrill of the hunt diminishes: "The instant that Trina gave up, the instant she allowed him to kiss her, he thought less of her. She was not so desirable after all" (84). This is the basis of the relationship between McTeague and Trina. The sexual vice Norris hints at here then becomes transferred to the material greed of those others around the Dentist and his bride Trina. Gold is the representative symbol of this greed, and the inherent depravity of man becomes illustrated through social and material ambition.

Ambition was responsible for bringing McTeague out of the Big Dipper Mines. His mother was "an overworked drudge, fiery and energetic for all that, filled with the one idea of having her son rise in life and enter a profession" (2). She had him
learn from the travelling dentist who frequented the Mine. Trina, in many ways, replaces his mother's ambition as she tries to refine her husband's natural habits of drinking steam beer and lazing about the "Dental Parlors" while his

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20 From McTeague cited in Goldsmith, 178-179.

food digests. With her fortune, she hopes to raise herself and her husband socially. She tries to completely change his nature (190).

Trina's ambition for herself and her husband gives way to her morbid love of the gold she has won, and her refusal to let her husband or anyone else touch her fortune. McTeague drinks to forget his parsimonious wife, who has become obsessed with saving her lottery winnings, not even spending it on necessities like food and decent living quarters. The shame of the loss of his practice, and his anger at Trina's stinginess, turns him to drink, thus rousing the hereditary alcoholism of his father. Alcohol alters McTeague's nature: "It roused the man, or rather the brute in the man, and . . . not only roused it, but goaded it to evil" (306).21

His subsequent sexually violent -- "evil"-- behaviour counters Trina's own sexual deviance. Her material greed sublimates itself as a morbid oral-sexual lust, which is revealed when she counts her hoarded fortune:

> she would draw the heap [of gold coins] lovingly toward her and bury her face in it, delighted at the smell of it and the feel of

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21 It must be noted that a great didactic statement is here being made by Norris. "Joe Frenna's", the bar McTeague frequents, serves the same purpose as Columbe's bar L'Assommoir in Zola's novel: both are places in which the principal characters succumb to the "evils" of alcohol. Compare "Joe Frenna's" and "L'Assommoir" with the "Imperial" of Vandover, and the bar owned by Caraher in The Octopus, and Norris' moral concern is obvious.

> the smooth, cool metal on her cheeks. She even put the smaller gold pieces in her mouth, and jingled them there. She loved her money with an intensity she could hardly express. She would plunge her small fingers into the pile with little murmurs of affection, her long, narrow eyes half closed and shining, her breath coming in long sighs. (308)

She has deserted her husband for her money; the gold coins are a substitute for love, marriage, and sex: "One evening she had even spread all the gold pieces between the sheets, and had then gone to bed, stripping herself, and had slept all night on the money, taking a strange and ecstatic pleasure in the touch of the smooth flat pieces the length of her entire body" (360-361). It is not surprising, then, that when McTeague demands money from his wife he is demanding her love; when her money is withheld from him, he retaliates in a way that threatens the tactile, sensual bond she has with her money. Norris explains:

> The people about the house and the clerks at the provision stores often remarked that Trina's fingertips were swollen and the nails purple as though they had been shut in a door. Indeed, this is the explanation she gave. 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 sorest . . . [He] extorted money from her by this means, but as often as not he did it for his own satisfaction. (309)22

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22 The sadomasochistic overtones of this passage are obvious, as Norris admits in the following paragraph that "this brutality made Trina all the more affectionate;

This perversion of love generalizes to the friendship between McTeague and Marcus. Marcus is driven wild with envy when Trina wins the lottery because he had stepped out of courting Trina when he learned that McTeague was also interested in her. It is Marcus who informs the city of McTeague's practice of dentistry without a proper diploma, and dies at the hand of McTeague while both fight over the remnants of Trina's gold. The parallel plot of Maria Macapa and Zerkow also serves to outline the ravages of greed on individuals, as the greedy junkman marries and eventually kills the mentally unstable Maria because she tempts him with her story of a lost service of gold once owned by her family.

While the gold itself is a relatively passive entity in the novel, the characters react through its symbolic medium according to their nature. Thus, when gold is associated with McTeague it takes on a less pervasive significance since McTeague exists relatively innocent to the vice of those surrounding him. Gold to McTeague, as both Donald Pizer and Carvel Collins point out, becomes a useful tool (Collins 104). The gold becomes a natural aid to McTeague's practice; he respects it and does not exploit its material wealth. It becomes symbolic of his pride of his profession (Pizer 1973, 76-77). Pizer also notes the effort

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aroused in her a morbid, unwholesome love of submission" (309).

on Norris' part to strengthen the positive image of gold with McTeague by linking it to his primitive heritage at the Mines (75-76). He fails, however, to mention an image near the end of the novel where McTeague has fled back to Placer County after he has murdered Trina -- an image which locates in nature the same source of greed found within the microcosm of Polk Street. The mountains of Placer County are infested with human fortune-hunters in search of gold; as Norris illustrates, the natural landscape is violated by the same greed that destroyed McTeague. The dental imagery in this passage is obvious: " . . . there were men in these mountains, like lice on mammoths' hides, fighting them stubbornly, now with hydraulic 'monitors', now with drill and dynamite, boring into the vitals of them, or tearing away great yellow gravelly scars in the flanks of them, sucking their blood, extracting gold" (380).

The other images of gold associated with McTeague are the great golden tooth sign that McTeague desires, and the gilt birdcage and canary which are constantly associated with the dentist. The golden tooth sign represents the simple pride McTeague has in his profession, and his acquiring of the sign becomes a goal toward which he works. The tooth's value, its personal importance to McTeague, is strong enough to suggest that the great gilt molar is a meaningful substitute for the diploma McTeague never received. Trina's one gesture of magnanimous affection is

to purchase the golden tooth for McTeague with her recent winnings in the lottery. McTeague's joy and pride are simple yet strong; it makes him feel equal to the other dentist on Polk Street, the certified dental surgeon:

> And what a wonderful, beautiful tooth it was, to be sure, bright as a mirror, shining there in its coat of French gilt, as if with a light of its own! No danger of that tooth turning black with the weather, as did the cheap German gilt impostures. What would that other dentist . . . say when he should see this marvelous molar run out from McTeague's bay window like a flag of defiance? No doubt he would suffer veritable convulsions of envy; would be positively sick with jealousy. If McTeague could only see his face at that moment! (148)

The pride McTeague feels, while simple and not overextended, can be seen as the first taint of corruption of his innocent, natural state; the acquisition of the tooth by Trina for McTeague actually foreshadows the dentist's demise. The tooth sits overnight in McTeague's parlour like "a huge, vague bulk, looming there through the half darkness in the centre of the room, shining dimly out as if with some mysterious light of its own" (150). W. M. Frohock suggests that the tooth's gilt covering is symbolic of the greed which grows in the people around McTeague, providing an ironic contrast to the pride the dentist associates with it as well as foreshadowing the loss of his practice to both Marcus' jealousy of Trina's fortune and Trina's own avarice (62). On the symbolic level, the golden layer of the tooth

acts in much the same way that bacteria does as it eats in from the outside to decay a healthy tooth.

Working harmoniously with the image of the golden tooth is the persistent pairing of McTeague with one of his most valued possession: the canary in the birdcage. The canary in the birdcage represents the imprisonment of McTeague by the vice of those around him. McTeague's birdcage is made of gilt which represents the notion of gold as an ensnaring vice. The canary represents McTeague's symbolic state in the novel: the creature of nature confined by an unnatural force. The canary compensates for the loss of its natural state by chirping in its gilt cage in much the same way as McTeague sings and plays "mournful airs" on his beloved concertina. One of those "mournful airs" is the "lamentable wail", "'No one to love, none to caress/Left alone in this world's wilderness'" (62). In von Stroheim's film Greed the director symbolized the eventual rivalry between Marcus and McTeague by having Marcus' pet cat constantly prowling around the cage of McTeague's canary (Mast 114). Such an image completes the impression of McTeague as a victim of forces greater than himself, and is fully appreciated in the novel's closing paragraph which describes McTeague alone in the middle of the California desert, hand-cuffed to the corpse of his rival Marcus: "McTeague remained stupidly looking around him, now at the distant horizon, now at the ground, now at the half-dead

canary chittering feebly in its little gilt prison" (442). McTeague dies alone, crushed by forces beyond his ability to comprehend.

I anticipate a question with regard to what I have been discussing so far: Is McTeague an innocent victim of what befalls him, or is he in some way to blame? Indirectly, the question raised here is dependant upon how the novel is read and perceived. There is no question regarding the significance of McTeague as naturalism; however, there is less enthusiasm toward readings of the novel which emphasize its moral dimension. C. C. Walcutt stresses the fact that McTeague does not have the same moral significance that Vandover possesses because the reader is not as inclined to be sympathetic with the slow-witted dentist; the reader cannot identify with him: "There is interest but no purgation" (129). This is certainly true. But the narrative of McTeague corresponds to that of Vandover in its concern with the propensity for evil in the nature of man. It is because McTeague is much more a naturalistic novel that its moral elements are overlooked.

What Norris depicts in McTeague is a world void of morality, an exaggerated condition of complete depravity without any consideration of moral responsibility. Since none of the characters have been endowed by Norris with free will, there is nothing to interfere with the deterministic structure of the naturalistic universe Norris has

constructed for the novel. It is a projection of a world governed by that part of man which is by theological standards fallen. It is a world with life but without soul, recalling the dichotomy of existence presented in "Lauth". Free will cannot exist in McTeague; the chance for its existence is never given by Norris because of the primarily naturalistic form of the novel. It exists in Vandover in spite of the twists of fate at work in the novel -- the shipwreck, the death of his father, the suicide of Ida Wade -- because Vandover knows the difference between good and evil. Although the dominoes topple, Vandover is endowed with the free will to stop their action. McTeague depicts an antithesis of Vandover's world; the "beast" rules completely, its existence governed by the forces of greed and motivated through the various vices such a force manifests. The dominoes keep falling because there is nothing to stop them. Such is a world without soul.

There is absolutely no demand on the reader to consider the novel from a theological or moral perspective. But given Norris' own concerns outlined in my two earlier chapters, this option should be examined carefully. Norris' concern with the condition of man and his role within the natural universe has been expressed in two different fashions in the two novels discussed so far. The next major work to be considered in my study, The Octopus, is a bit of a consolidation of the ideas expressed in Vandover and

McTeague; yet the novel goes far beyond the simple allegorical considerations of innate depravity and free will, and develops its own teleological theory.

Chapter III

What Norris wrote between McTeague and The Octopus, while somewhat entertaining, hardly qualifies for consideration among the ranks of his major works. But while insignificant in literary accomplishment, these "public novels" entertain similar themes with the major novels, and indicate in a minute way the direction of Norris' moral and theological interests. Very little can be said critically of Moran of the Lady Letty (1898) -- it is generally regarded as Norris' poorest novel -- and A Man's Woman (1900) because of their conscious appeal to wide public favour and not much else. However, a number of significant observations regarding the Norris credo can be made from a brief analysis of Blix (1899).

Blix, while also written for mass appeal, is an important novel in the development of Norris' ideology. The romantic idyll of Blix opposes the frantic spiritual self-assessment of Vandover and the chaos of rampant vice in McTeague by presenting an ideal state of existence based upon the victory of virtue over vice. Travis Bessimer--"Blix" -- like her counterpart Turner Ravis in Vandover, is

a virtuous woman who is able to tame the "beast" within the bosom of her suitor, Condy Rivers. Hardly the gross monster present in the nature of the protagonists in the former novels, Condy's "beast" is more in tune with Norris' own personal "habits": gambling and occasional drink. It turns out that Rivers is a "lesser" McTeague and a "greater" Vandover because of his balanced nature, supervised by the feminine yet stern Blix.

The novel seems to represent Norris' romantic ideal of an earthly Paradise; sex becomes secondary to the developing love between Rivers and Blix, and the thematic emphasis of the novel concentrates on the idyllic universe opening up to the young lovers, a universe in which the good always triumphs. This assertion finds support in a paragraph from Blix that seems to encapsulate the spirit of the entire novel. After an "ideal" day together both Blix and Rivers observe a natural phenomenon; Norris' prose transcribes the episode into pure allegory:

> . . . the one incident that completed the happiness of that wonderful day occurred just as they were getting out of the boat on the shore by Richardson's. In a mud-hole between two rocks they discovered a tiny striped snake, hardly bigger than a lead pencil, in the act of swallowing a little green frog, and they passed a rapt ten minutes in witnessing the progress of this miniature drama, which culminated happily in the victim's escape, and the triumph of virtue. 'That,' declared Blix . . . 'was the one thing necessary. That made the day perfect'. (155)

The allegorical cosmos of mud-hole, snake, and frog, also existed in Vandover and McTeague. In Blix, though, the frog is victorious over the snake. The resolution of this allegorical condition materializes in Blix as a conscious choice for Condy to remain committed to virtue.23 While he does enjoy gambling and drinking, Condy lets himself be influenced by his girlfriend Blix who here is not as much an Eve figure as a Mother figure. She, while sharing the prelapsarian goodness of life with Rivers, is his teacher, his moral guide, for it is through her that Rivers is able to repress the "beast" that eventually devoured Vandover. She is what Trina could never be: her concern for Rivers is selfless and spiritual, as opposed to selfish and material. Blix completes Rivers -- she does not take from him. Thus, the relationship between Rivers and Blix is symbiotic, not parasitic: "Her sweetness, her goodness, appealed to what he guessed must be the noblest in him" (107). Norris emphasizes this simply, yet effectively:

> from the lowest, untouched depths in the hearts of each of them something was rising steadily to consciousness and the light of day. There is no name for such things, no

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23 Perhaps even Condy Rivers' name is allegorical in its association with running water; Condy is in a sense cleansed from the dirt that stained his counterparts in Vandover and McTeague in that he has the power to recognise and reject the vice within and surrounding him.

> name for the mystery that spans the interval between man and woman -- the mystery that bears no relation to their love for each other, but that is something better than love, and whose coming savors of the miraculous. (328)

The world in which this virtuous affair is conducted is governed neither by fate nor determinism; there is a sense of harmony between the two lovers and the universe in which they live. The malignant course of circumstance in both Vandover and McTeague appears to reflect the cosmological chaos of broken order; indeed, the order is often broken in the above novels when man becomes the "beast" which prowls the confines of the dark recesses of his being. Rivers chooses to quell the beast forever with the help of the virtuous Blix. The result is a world that practically sings out in its benign beauty the virtues of its principles.

Of course, this is the stuff of sentimentalism! Had Norris concentrated on the romance between Blix and Condy instead of examining the reasons why the romance is successful, Blix would have been a work that ranked with those contemporary sentimental novels that Norris himself despised. But the novel seems in deliberate contrast with the moral degradation of the two novels that preceded it. It is not enough to say that the contrast is due primarily to the different literary forms Norris employed: naturalism for Vandover and McTeague, popular romance for Blix. While

the novels differ fundamentally in effect, they are all thematically linked by, to use Harry Levin's expression, "the moralistic impetus". It is especially evident in Blix's autobiographical elements, which lead critics like Donald Pizer to examine Blix as a moral treatise on the virtues of love, attributing to Norris an opinion on the subject indicative of "a middle-class, puritan cast" (1973, 101). It gives Blix an importance beyond the romance it develops; it becomes, like most of Norris' work, a universal tale, didactic in its theme, and vehement in its intent. In spite of this, most critics see Blix as an idyll; and, as such, the novel does not offer the reader much beyond the presentation of how wonderful a virtuous romance can be in contrast to the moral vice extant in Vandover and McTeague. But within its pages is the same allegory, the same attempt to create a universal Truth, that is characteristic of both Vandover and McTeague.

A great deal has been said by critics about the philosophy of Norris' most ambitious and complex novel The Octopus -- that philosophy which speaks directly to the notion of man at the mercy of natural forces in the universe: "The novel above all seeks to dramatize the validity of such traditional paradoxes as the coexistence of free will and determinism, the eternity of life despite death, and the emergence of good out of evil" (Pizer 1973,

145). This explanation is valid considering Norris' own intention behind the composition of The Octopus, the first novel in the proposed trilogy The Epic of the Wheat. The idea was for Norris one "as big as all outdoors": "'I think a big epic trilogy could be made out of such a subject [as "Wheat"], that at the same time would be modern and distinctly American. The idea is so big that it frightens me at times'" (quoted in Franklin Walker 239). Also, Norris gave specific technical consideration to his epic: "' . . . I am going back definitely now to the style of McTeague and stay with it right along . . . Now I think I know where I am at and what game I play the best. The Wheat series will be straight naturalism with all the guts I can get into it'" (quoted Franklin Walker 253). But the ideas Norris works with in the novel are confusing; The Octopus attempts to solve all of the issues Norris has examined in his work all along. Unfortunately, the novel creates questions instead of resolving them.

Critics again point to Zola as an obvious pattern for The Octopus, postulating that it is reminiscent of the French naturalist's novels La Terre, Germinale, and La Bete Humaine in its careful handling of detail and its epic sweep (Philip Walker 156). The Octopus is indeed Zolaesque in its depiction of the tragic struggle between a small group of ranchers and the large, faceless entity of the Pacific and South Western Railroad. But it is hardly a return to the

"straight naturalism" of McTeague. The great difficulty in dealing with the novel is that it is an ideological melting pot. All of Norris is present in The Octopus, but there is no logic in its presentation of those ideologies. It attempts a teleological examination of man's place within nature and, subsequently, within the universe. It searches for a meaning to existence, and attempts a number of explanations before resolving the issue with a very nebulous concluding chapter. This makes for very difficult reading throughout the novel's 600 pages; and, more often than not, inconsistencies appear as Norris attempts to understand the forces at work within the universe. Both scientific and Christian explanations are offered, yet the overall conclusion he presents through Presley at the end of the novel is somewhat Transcendental in its approach; the "Force" of nature (and, ultimately, God) is ultimately benign and good. Nature is a "Force" as the Railroad is a "Force", and both are to a large degree manipulated by man. If the reader concentrates attention on this manipulation and not on the conflicting ideas, he notices patterns of allegorical symbolism similar to those in Vandover and McTeague; the thematic centre of The Octopus consists of the tension between good and evil, the significance of which outweighs the narrative inconsistencies of the novel.

The moral centre of The Octopus encompasses two

parallel plots: the plot concerning the conflict of the ranchers with the railroad; and the plot concerning the shepherd Vanamee and his obsession with the memory of the death of his fiancee Angele. Both plots are given an allegorical treatment as an epic battle between forces representing the "good" and the "evil" forces in the novel; Norris then considers these forces on a teleological scale through the character Presley, thus bringing the discussion inevitably to a consideration of existence as either deterministic in a naturalistic universe, or governed by the free will of man within a theomorphic universe.

Certain forces in the novel are viewed as expressly "evil". These include the collective body of the Railroad epitomized by the ruthless financier S. Behrman, and the technology represented by the railroad itself, as well as the farming implements of the farmers. These symbols of evil tend to be collectively represented by the dark force of "The Other", the rapist/killer of Vanamee's fiancee Angele; "The Other" becomes the force of evil commensurate with the "beast" of Vandover and the pervasive greed of McTeague. Countering the evil is goodness, symbolized by the presence of the Wheat, the Earth which nurtures it, and the life energy -- "Force" -- "flung out from the hand of the Lord God himself, immortal, calm, infinitely strong"

(634).24 The canvas of The Octopus is an immense fresco depicting an epic confrontation, and again Norris constructs his novel in a way that such an interpretation has a solid foundation in textual evidence.

The novel opens with the poet Presley on an excursion through the California countryside surrounding the farms of his neighbors. Presley is in search of inspiration, "some vast, tremendous theme, heroic, terrible, to be unrolled in all the thundering progression of hexameters" (9), for it is his dream to write an epic poem of the West. His concentration is destroyed when he is witness to one of the strongest images of destruction of the novel, the first of the many conflicts between the forces of good and evil. He witnesses the aftermath of an accident in which a herd of sheep who have wandered onto a railroad track are killed by a passing locomotive.

> It was a slaughter, a massacre of innocents. The iron monster had charged full into the midst, merciless, inexorable. To the right and left, all the width of the right of way, the little bodies had been flung; backs were snapped against the fenceposts; brains knocked out. Caught in the barbs of the wire, wedged in, the bodies hung suspended. (50)

The image is not unlike a ceremonial crucifixion. The scene of the slaughter affects Presley to the point that any

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24 Note also the Bunyanesque capitalizations of the forces themselves, giving them a significance far beyond any normal application of their generic meanings.

ideas he had for his poem are yanked from his memory; the scene actually becomes the foundation for Presley's consideration of good and evil throughout the novel:

> . . . abruptly Presley saw again, in his imagination, the galloping monster, the terror of steel and steam, with its single eye, cyclopean red, shooting from horizon to horizon; but saw it now as a symbol of vast power, huge, terrible, flinging the echo of its thunder all over the reaches of the valley, leaving blood and destruction in its path; the leviathan, with tentacles of steel clutching into the soil, the soulless Force, the iron-hearted Power, the monster, the Colossus, the Octopus. (51)

What can be constructed from such a powerful opening scene is a microcosm of the conflicts within the novel. Since these particular sheep belong to Vanamee, the locomotive symbolically becomes "The Other", the force behind the destruction of innocence depicted in the death of Angele. The scene represents other dialectics present in the novel: female and male; nature and technology; soul and "beast"; life and death. These other dialectics evolve out of the central dialectic of good and evil. In turn, all of these issues are seen within a teleological, cosmological perspective provided by both Vanamee and Presley in the novel's closing chapters. The Octopus, then, attempts to further the moral allegory attempted in Vandover, McTeague, and Blix by putting forth some kind of conclusion based on the interpretation of the events within the novel.

The force of good throughout the novel finds its

centre with the Earth, so capitalized by Norris because it represents a benevolent force. In the fourth chapter of Book I of The Octopus is the great ploughing scene, which Norris paints as a scene of sexual intercourse between man and Earth; both the sacred and the profane emerge in this passage:

> It was the long stroking caress, vigorous, male, powerful, for which the Earth seemed panting. The heroic embrace of a multitude of iron hands, gripping deep into the brown, warm flesh of the land that quivered responsive and passionate under this rude advance, so robust as to be almost an assault, so violent as to be veritably brutal. There, under the sun and under the speckless sheen of the sky, the wooing of the Titan began, the vast primal passion, the two world-forces, the elemental Male and Female, locked in a colossal embrace, at grapples in the throes of infinite desire, at once terrible and divine, knowing no law, untamed, savage, natural, sublime. (130-131).

The spiritual and physical coupling of man and Earth in this quasi-rape provides a parallel for the rape of Angele; together, both events symbolize a significant force of the novel -- the cycle of death and rebirth.25 The relationship between Vanamee and Angele appears sacrosanct: "the mingling of their lives was to be the Perfect Life, the intended, ordained union of the soul of man with the soul of

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25 Donald Pizer (1973, 132ff) discusses the motif of the death/rebirth cycle at great length; my discussion, while it overlaps with Pizer's somewhat, is aimed more at examining the allegorical/symbolic nature of that motif.

woman, indissoluble, harmonious as music, beautiful beyond all thought, a foretaste of Heaven, a hostage of immortality" (134). But Angele is violated and murdered by "The Other" in much the same way as the Earth is raped by the technological caress of man. Both the Earth and Angele bring forth life out of this rape-death scenario: Angele brings forth a daughter who becomes the spiritual incarnation of her mother for Vanamee; and the Earth brings forth the Wheat. Both, in fact, appear to Vanamee simultaneously. His response to this revelation depicts the novel's deep meaning:

> The Wheat! The Wheat! In the night it had come up . . . Life out of death, an eternity rising out of dissolution . . . Angele was not the symbol, but the <u>proof</u> of immortality. The seed dying, rotting and corrupting in the earth; rising again in life unconquerable, and in immaculate purity, -- Angele dying as she gave birth to her little daughter, life springing from death, -- the pure, unconquerable, coming forth from the defiled. (392-393)

Concurrent with Vanamee's epiphany is Annixter, the tough, unromantic farmer who discovers his genuine love for one of his servant girls through his guilt for making a sexual advance toward her. His revelation is also coincidental with his discovery of the blossoming Wheat (369).

The whole issue of the death/rebirth motif in <u>The Octopus</u> harkens back to the dialectic between good and evil.

The novel's theological debate also occurs in the fourth chapter of Book I, and its participants are Vanamee and Father Sarria of the San Juan Batista Mission located on the outskirts of Annixter's Quien Sabe Ranch. Vanamee goes to the Mission occasionally to brood over the death of Angele; Father Sarria becomes for him a confessor as Vanamee, before the revelation of the Wheat, refutes the existence of a God who would permit the "abomination" of Angele's death: "There is no God. There is only the Devil. The Heaven you pray to is only a joke, a wretched trick, a delusion. It is only Hell that is real" (146).

Good and evil exist simultaneously, though, as Norris reveals through the narrative of this episode. The Mission itself was the location of Angele's rape and murder, as well as her grave; its grounds are dilapidated and unkempt, and the reader only sees the Mission at night. The Mission grounds are bordered by a cloistered garden, which is itself walled in. One side of this wall "was crumbled away, its site marked only by a line of eight great pear trees, older even than the grapevine, gnarled, twisted, bearing no fruit" (139). The pear tree is a medieval and renaissance symbol of the Edenic Tree of Knowledge; here in the Mission garden the pear trees are withered and sterile.26

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26 William Faulkner makes this observation regarding the symbol of the pear tree in a discussion of the tree-climbing incident in the Benji section of The Sound and the Fury. Caddy's climbing the pear tree foreshadows her fall from "innocence" through the loss of her virginity. Here,

Father Sarria comforts Vanamee's despair with a lesson from 1 Corinthians 15: 36-44, providing the source for Norris' extended metaphor of the Wheat Seed as representative of re-birth. But Sarria himself embodies the duality of man with which the reader has become familiar since Vandover, which is revealed through a later meeting between Annixter and Sarria. Annixter sees

> . . . the priest, the Spanish churchman, Father Sarria, relic of a departed regime, kindly, benign, believing in all goodness, a lover of his fellows and of dumb animals, yet, for all that, hurrying away in confusion and discomfiture, carrying in one hand the vessels of the Holy Communion and in the other a basket of game cocks. (211)

What Sarria possesses are items which exemplify two very important opposing concepts: the holy vessels symbolize Life in that the Communion harkens back metaphorically to the Wheat; the fighting cocks symbolize violent Death which recalls the slaughter of the sheep and looks forward to the bloody confrontation between the ranchers and the Railroad at the novel's climax. The contrast between the symbols of the Communion vessels and the fighting cocks is astonishing, and it strengthens the novel's central issue.

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in The Octopus, knowledge is seen as a corrupting force as it is in Vandover. In both cases knowledge has a negative connotation with regard to sexuality; Sarria's Mission garden's dilapidated condition makes this association undeniable, since it is the place of both the murder of Angele and her grave.

It is not surprising, then, that Stuart Burns, in his article "The Rapist in Frank Norris's The Octopus", identifies "The Other" as Father Sarria (567). This identification completes the pattern of similarities between Angele and the Earth, since in both cases the perpetrator of the heinous act of rape is man. It also links this attitude of Norris in The Octopus to that of Vandover and McTeague regarding the evil of corrupt sexuality.

The Vanamee/Sarria section of the novel is by far the most telling as far as Norris' own beliefs are concerned. The issue becomes a bit clouded, though, as the scope of the novel widens to include the main plot of the ranchers versus the railroad. In this plot is the same confrontation between forces of good and evil, but their identification as one or the other is not clearly defined. The ranchers who battle the merciless railroad are observed as victims of the economic ruthlessness of the railroad, and are symbolized as the sheep slaughtered by the railroad engine. There is also a reversal of this motif immediately before the final bloody confrontation between the farmers and the railroad in the graphic depiction of the ranchers' wild-rabbit hunt in which the ranchers become the hunters preying on innocents (500-505). Norris is clear to establish the fact that the ranchers are not entirely innocent in their ordeal with the railroad -- after all, they are responsible for the rape of the land:

> They had no love for their land. They were not attached to the soil . . . To husband the resources of their marvelous San Joaquin, they considered niggardly, petty, Hebraic. To get all there was out of the land, to squeeze it dry, to exhaust it, seemed their policy. When, at last, the land worn out, would refuse to yield, they would invest their money in something else; by then they would have made fortunes. They did not care. (298-299)

Here man is directly responsible. This stands in direct opposition to the explanation which Shelgrim, the President of the Railroad, gives to Presley after he goes to the Railroad office to seek an explanation for the violent deaths of the ranchers in defence of their homesteads against the foreclosure proceedings of the Railroad. Shelgrim blames "conditions, not men" for the clash between the two parties, as he tells Presley that

> <u>Railroads build themselves</u>. Where there is a demand sooner or later there will be a supply . . . The Wheat grows itself . . . You are dealing with forces, young man, when you speak of Wheat and the Railroad, not with men . . . and there is the law that governs them -- supply and demand. Men have only little to do in the whole business. (576)

As Norris points out in the Vanamee/Sarria episode, man is a part of the process of "force": the ranchers are killed in defence of their homesteads; Presley does, after talking to Caraher in his Saloon, try to avenge the ranchers by making an attempt on S. Behrman's life; the rancher Dyke does

become an outlaw in an effort to strike back against the Railroad; Mrs. Hooven does die of starvation in the street because of the Railroad's foreclosure of her husband's homestead; S. Behrman does die under the crushing weight of tons of Wheat as it is loaded on to a ship bound for India.

It is clear by this identification of the way Norris employs the symbol of Wheat that it is an eternal, almost spiritual entity, as opposed to the temporal, corporeal existence of the men on either side of its presence. Its symbolic presence in the novel is tantamount to understanding what idea Norris arrives at upon the novel's conclusion.

Presley understands one thing from the events of the novel: "Men were nothings, mere animalculae, mere ephemerides that fluttered and fell and were forgotten between dawn and dusk . . . FORCE only existed -- FORCE that brought men into the world, FORCE that crowded them out of it to make way for the succeeding generation . . ." (634). Norris qualifies this "FORCE" as "primordial energy flung out from the hand of the Lord God himself" (634). Note the trinity Norris establishes: "FORCE"; Earth; Wheat. The Wheat becomes the saviour of people; it perpetuates itself out of the "FORCE" Presley identifies, however near-sightedly. The "FORCE" then becomes the masculine force of God, the Earth the feminine womb of Mary, the Wheat the

fruit of that womb as Christ: positive life force.

If the analogy is extended, it encapsulates what conclusion Vanamee offers to Presley at the novel's conclusion:

> Life never departs. Life simply is. For certain seasons it is hidden in the dark, but is that death, extinction, annihilation? I take it, thank God, that it is not. Does the grain of wheat, hidden for certain seasons in the dark, die? The grain we think is dead resumes again; but how? Not as one grain, but as twenty. So all life. Death is only real for all the detritus of the world, for all the sorrow, for all the injustice, for all the grief. Presley, the good never dies; evil dies, cruelty, oppression, selfishness, greed -- these die; but nobility, but love, but sacrifice, but generosity, but truth, thank God for it, small as they are, difficult as it is to discover them -- these live forever, these are eternal . . . . Never judge the whole round of life by the mere segment you can see. The whole is, in the end, perfect. (635-636)

What Vanamee states in his assertion of the power of goodness is not unlike an assertion of salvation through Kerygma: perhaps even an optimistic commentary on that side of man which is eternal -- the soul. Thus the reader will notice in The Octopus what differs from Vandover and McTeague, and is present in a naive form in Blix: optimism. If this is so, the cycle of the Wheat indicates a Christian teleology present in the universe of the novel, a positive diagnosis for the existence of man in that universe: "the individual suffers, but the race goes on . . . The larger

view always and through all shams, all wickednesses, discovers the Truth that will, in the end, prevail, and all things, surely, inevitably, resistlessly work together for good" (651-652).

What comes out of this final statement from Presley as he watches the Wheat steam off to relieve a famine in India is the key to the understanding of the novel proper. What The Octopus postulates is not a mere pantheism or transcendentalism, as Donald Pizer might have the reader think (1973, 130-131). The novel is clearly about good and evil in a theocentric universe.

The core of The Octopus is the Vanamee/Sarria episode. This episode deals specifically with the nature of evil in the figure of Sarria himself, the priest who speaks the Word of God at one moment and participates in the brutal sport of cock-fighting at another. The whole novel is patterned around the potential for either good or evil as chosen by free will, for it is the conscious actions of the novel's characters that determines its course. There is very little room for biological and scientific explanations of the events of The Octopus.

To explain further, Norris has postulated in the novel his opinion on the forces at work outside of the influence of man's free will, and he has attached to it a theological identification. The free will has the choice before it, and it knows full well the consequences of its choice -- things

happen in The Octopus because there are choices being made. If we were to view the novel's cosmos from the "inside-out" -- if our focus and perception of events and consequences moves from the lives of the individual characters to the larger picture of man struggling against nature -- a perception of the deterministic nature of the novel's events is inevitable. But if we were to view the novel by focusing upon the larger picture and then to the individuals functioning within the microcosm of human existence, the answer to "why?" takes on more than a naturalistic significance. We must view the novel not from an anthropocentric vantage point, but from one that is theocentric.

In this way, man functions within the "Force" rather than outside of and apart from it, going somewhat against the theories of nature and man postulated earlier by Shelgrim and Presley. Since the novel is structured around the natural cycle that the wheat completes throughout the seasons, this natural cycle becomes the novel's macrocosm, and man functions within this macrocosm in much the same way as he functioned within the macrocosm of San Francisco in Vandover, and the macrocosms of Polk Street and Placer County in McTeague. Man's microcosm is a part of this whole: a circle within a circle. The larger picture becomes, in a sense, the Shakespearean "stage" upon which actors perform for a brief time, and then exit into

darkness.27

But there is also a deeper level to this analogy. Within this microcosm is the realm of free will as exercised by man according to God's own Will when He cast Adam and Eve from the Garden. The choice between good and evil is man's, and his actions determine his own fate. There is no atavistic impetus to the actions of these characters. What has been illustrated in The Octopus is the exercising of free will in the lives of both the Railroad Company and the farmers. Thus the "laws" of economics and trade are mere extensions of human intent and interests; they have no basis in the "natural law" at work in the novel because that law issues from a theological centre -- the "Force" controlled by God. Thus the God-created universe in which the Railroad Company and the farmers exist can in fact be seen as "indifferent" ("indifference" is, of course, a relative observation) but not necessarily malevolent; it is God's "Force" that keeps the Wheat growing to feed millions of people while the men fight over profits and ownership.

Even the symbolic rape of the land by the farmers contributes to a larger good; in spite of the farmers' material concerns the Wheat still feeds millions of innocents, a function Norris stresses with great reverence in spite of the graphic, destructive images of the grain's

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27 A similar point is stressed in Psalm 90 in its depiction of man's already short life made shorter through sin.

harvest under the supervision of S. Behrman (616). It is man that is evil, man that corrupts a natural paradise through the exercise of his own will. There clearly are economic forces involved in the novel --another kind of corruption, another kind of greed. These, combined with the sexual depravity illustrated by the Father Sarria/Vanamee story, provide The Octopus with the same moral concerns as those other works by Norris previously discussed. Thus, the allegorical nature of The Octopus cannot be ignored because it serves to emphasize the human struggle in the choice between good and evil, a theme that is illustrated throughout the course of the novel.

It is difficult to give an all-inclusive reading of The Octopus. Although it is essentially a simply-crafted epic, it builds upon the two natures Norris has himself been nurturing throughout his literary career -- the allegorist, and, to a lesser degree, the naturalist. Again, while some naturalists tend to be moralists in their approach to their subject matter, Norris is much more in tune with the American literary tradition of allegory and romance that flows around him. The Octopus does not rely upon a naturalistic premise such as atavism or the social ills of alcohol. Its premise is moral -- indeed, religious: the eternal struggle between good and evil that man must face every day of his existence.

As much as critics adapt the theological dimensions to the naturalistic theory in the novel, they fail to consider those theological dimensions in and of themselves. The symbolism in The Octopus as well as the other novels studied here has a strong allegorical level to it which, if studied in light of Norris' own penchant for moralization and his awareness of the concept of the fallen nature of man, situates Norris firmly within the tradition of his American literary predecessors.

It is somewhat disappointing that in the second novel of the unfinished trilogy of the Wheat and the last novel Norris wrote -- The Pit (1902) -- there is little to actively illustrate the allegorical essence of The Octopus at work within The Pit. The Pit reads much more like A Man's Woman; critics have noted that it was by far the most popular of Norris' novels with his contemporary readers. To be sure, the novel concentrates on the love between the Wheat market speculator Curtis Jadwin and his well-to-do wife Laura Dearborn. It has not the allegorical power and sheer narrative force of the first volume of the Epic of the Wheat.

The themes in The Pit, however, display the same behavioral morality that was present in Vandover. In The Pit Norris has returned to the vice of gambling and pits its detrimental effect against the bond of love between Jadwin

and Laura. The Imperial of Vandover becomes the Chicago Board of Trade's "Wheat Pit", a stock exchange that deals directly with world wheat prices. Jadwin becomes obsessed with the gambling he does with wheat prices, and he eventually attempts to corner the world market and tempt bankruptcy. Norris associates the wheat pit with Jadwin's "brute" side; the symbolic representation of the wheat pit is carried out through images of brute force.

The pit itself is identified with two objects. The first is a maelstrom that attempts to pull Jadwin into its centre; it is a powerful natural force that Jadwin sees upon his first visit to the Board of Trade building:

> Within [was] a great whirlpool, a pit of roaring waters spun and thundered, sucking in the life tides of the city, sucking them in as into the mouth of some tremendous cloaca, the maw of some colossal sewer; then vomiting them forth again, spewing them up and out, only to catch them in the return eddy and suck them in afresh. (79)

Jadwin will be pulled into this maelstrom as his vice--gambling -- takes control of him. The "sewer" reference speaks for itself, in this case, when we consider the maelstrom as a dark symbol for the economics of wheat-trading.

The wheat pit as a natural, malevolent force counters the symbol of the Wheat carried over from The Octopus; the good versus evil motif reappears briefly in The Pit and is

presented in allegorical terms. Witness Norris' description of the life-saving wheat as it enters the trade market to have lots cast before it:

> It was as if the Wheat, Nourisher of Nations, as it rolled gigantic and majestic in a vast flood from West to East, here, like a Niagara, finding its flow impeded, burst suddenly into the appalling fury of the Maelstrom, into the chaotic spasm of a world-force, a primeval energy, blood-brother of the earthquake and the glacier, raging and wrathful that its power should be braved by some pinch of human spawn that dared raise barriers across its courses. (80).

The image of the "brute" nature of the trading pit is also perpetuated by the terminology surrounding its practice. The internal wheat traders are known as "Bears" and "Bulls" (the reader might recall Trina's sentimental epithet for McTeague during the early stages of their courtship: her "old bear"); the public who on occasion visit the wheat pit are known as "Lambs" -- "timid, innocent, feeble" (81). It is the "Lambs" who suffer the greater financial loss at the hands of the aggressive internal traders. The image strengthens as the book progresses and Jadwin corners the market through aggressive trading. He slaughters many "Lambs" in the process, wiping them out completely and capitalizing on their losses. The greed of Jadwin is perfectly harmonious with the nature of the wheat pit since it has now become an economic tool, a perversion

of the wheat's original depiction as a saviour of millions. Man's greed has again corrupted something that is essentially good.

But the moral dimension of The Pit, as strong as it could be, loses out to the love interests of Laura Dearborn. The centre of the novel is not the Wheat, as Norris promised. Even the pit itself, while it occupies a prominent position within the workings of the novel, is secondary to the feelings and passions of Laura. Her eventual marriage to Jadwin after he and two others vied for her hand becomes the focal point of the novel, as Jadwin's relationship with his wife is paralleled with his relationship with the pit. His eventual financial ruin is a direct result of his greed in the pit, and his neglect of his wife's emotional needs.

The romantic element of The Pit may itself be the moral element, for it is Laura who takes back Jadwin at the end; he, dejected, scared, happy for her love, atones for his greed. The epic proportions of the good vs. evil motif at the heart of The Octopus dwindle to the less-than-epic struggles of Jadwin in the midst of frantic trading in the weat pit. But the moral element is there nonetheless.

The novel's melodrama does spawn some insightful moments, though. Jadwin, like Vandover, Condy Rivers, Vanamee, and Presley, knows the spiritual value of the lesson he has learned during the course of the novel. His

trip to the depths of his own soul is completed when he returns to Laura's bosom in ruin. The allegory glimmers momentarily yet convincingly in his explanation to her of his actions. It is a fitting conclusion to the moral discourse Norris has held with his reader since the beginning:

> 'Honey,' whispered Jadwin after awhile. 'Honey, it's dark, it's dark. Something happened. . . . I don't remember,' he put his hand uncertainly to his head, 'I can't remember; but it's dark -- a little.'
>
> 'It's dark,' she repeated, in a low whisper. 'It's dark, dark. Something happened. Yes. I must not remember.' (411)

Chapter IV

In this study I have attempted to offer an allegorical reading of Norris' fiction. Critics, when they discuss Norris, insist on camping him with the naturalists; even then, criticism of Norris' handling of the themes of naturalism is seldom positive. Critics fail to consider the element of story-telling -- "yarn-spinning", as Norris would call it -- in his work: his books are good stories in and of themselves. Story-telling is the compelling characteristic of Norris' fiction, for it is this penchant for story-telling that brings the allegory in his work to the surface. Here he shares the same moral story-telling characteristics as Melville and Hawthorne, and his protagonists are of the same stock as the former's Captain Delano and the latter's Ethan Brand. Rather than concern ourselves with the obvious philosophical flaws in Norris' fiction, we should look to the continuing tradition of romance and allegory in his work.

It is not, I believe, a limiting of the ways in which Norris can be approached; I am not postulating that he be considered as nothing else but an allegorist since he obviously owes a great deal to the school of naturalism. But Norris' place amid the great American romanticists and

allegorists must also be stressed since his approach to the themes of his novels is highly moral, highly orthodox in a Calvinistic sense. If he were writing only naturalism, there would not be present any glimmer of hope in his work, and there certainly is that present in both the characters and the natural universe they inhabit. In the world of Norris there will always be that hope, and there will always be present a clear choice between the evil of succumbing to "instincts" and "passions" and the goodness of maintaining virtue in the face of various temptation.

All of the characters of Norris' major fiction have this choice presented to them amid the snares of various vices, be they sexual or material. Like Melville and Hawthorne, Norris sees the Original Sin of mankind -- "Il negro", "the blackness", -- recognises it, and develops his literature out of it. Even Vandover -- the character most like Ethan Brand -- recognises evil. The recognition is innate, and so is the will to remedy the situation. It rests solely in the hands of the individual. And, since this is the case, the universe Norris' characters find themselves in is, so to speak, an indifferent one.

For example, someone like Vandover would consider himself crushed in the gears (his nemesis is named Charley Geary) of the machine of nature because he allows himself to be destroyed by the "beast" he feels lurks within him. Hence the shipwreck, his alienation from his friends, and

the death of his father, all stem from his moral transgressions: the "guilt" of Vandover in the suicide of Ida Wade has weakened his father's already unhealthy condition, and has turned Vandover's friends away from him; and critics have commented on the melodramatic "twist of fate" of the shipwreck after Vandover again succumbs to his lechery while on the voyage. Thus, nature as destroyer is relative to the mind that perceives it; nature is a thing of beauty to Condy Rivers. But nature in its very essence is indifferent; there is no divine intervention because free will has ruled that option out. And free will functions in the universe of Frank Norris, so it is not surprising that many of his characters feel a formidable sense of indifference on the part of nature. Man has no control over it, but does have control over his actions. Such is also the case in The Octopus, as earlier discussed. The only real deviation from this pattern is McTeague, Norris' most successful attempt at "straight naturalism"; and even within its pages is an innocent victim of the savage vice that surrounds him.

It is these tendencies throughout Norris' fiction that spurs me to see Norris as an allegorist first, and a naturalist second. There can be no conclusive estimate of Norris' artistic intentions in his fiction because of the simple fact that his life was tragically cut short at the apex of his literary career; there has been no consolidation

of the many ideas and suppositions extant in The Octopus, which is probably why many of Norris' critics find the novel so elusive at times. As critics we must base our theories on what Norris has left us, however inconclusive.

What we have in Norris' fiction is a constant probing and analysis of our own dual nature, our aspirations for goodness and our penchant for succumbing to temptation. It is fiction in quest of meaning, of how the free will of man determines his own destiny in a largely theocentric universe; its impetus is not so much scientific as Platonic. It is fiction in search of Goodness in the face of Evil. It has faith in the Good, and it recognises this Good in man and illustrates the results of any turning away from this Good. This vision would be limited by the scientific, objective approach of the naturalist. Norris can write this kind of fiction because he knows what man is, and what man -- as a race and as an individual -- can become. This is why the allegorical nature of Norris' fiction must be considered as valid as the naturalistic elements of his work. After all, there is always some sense of hope in Norris' fiction: "The whole is, in the end, perfect".

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