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4/ 29/ 04
ENG 254
Paper 2

INTERLACINGS: NATURALISM AND CHRISTIANITY IN FRANK NORRIS'S *MCTEAGUE*

Through Frank Norris's *McTeague* (1899) run the intertwined threads of two discrete vocabularies, two conflicting discourses. The first depicts human beings as manipulated both by external and internal forces beyond their control, while the second borrows from a Christian ideology that necessarily implies an element of free will. These two discourses seem to be in competition— it is curious that an ostensibly naturalistic novel that wrests the prospect of control from its characters incorporates so many Christian references. Examining the pervasiveness of both the naturalistic and Christian elements in *McTeague* reveals the tensions between the incompatible ideologies that underwrite Norris's novel and threaten to unravel it.

Apart from the Calvinist conception of predestination, which places certain constraints on human freedom, naturalism and Christian theology are deeply at odds with one another. Naturalist literature expresses a deterministic universe in which man is shaped by the forces of heredity and environment. In a naturalistic novel there is little room for the Christian conception of the individual as endowed with a measure of free will. Since *McTeague* purportedly endorses the view that people are determined, the novel's frequent allusions to a religious doctrine that views human beings as free— and therefore accountable— moral agents seem incongruous.

In many ways *McTeague* certainly enacts the formula of relentless determinism. Norris's characters are manipulated both by arbitrary fate and a brute-like instinctual predisposition. The pivotal events of the novel are engineered by fate. When McTeague and Trina decide to marry, forming the primary relationship in the novel, it is not of their own volition; rather, "Chance had brought them face to face, and mysterious instincts as ungovernable as the winds of heaven were at work knitting their lives together" (71). Trina's offhanded purchase of a lottery ticket, which results in a five thousand dollar win, is a "fillip of fortune striking in there like some chance-driven bolt," and it is this "stroke of luck" that proceeds to destroy the lives of Trina, McTeague, and Marcus (87).

These characters are not only controlled by outside forces, but are manipulated by insuperable inherited traits. In McTeague "ran the foul stream of hereditary evil, like a sewer. The vices and sins of his father and his father's father, to the third and fourth and five hundredth generation, tainted him. The evil of an entire race flowed in his veins" (25). Furthermore, Trina's addiction to money "was a passion with her, a mania, a veritable mental disease, a temptation such as drunkards only know" (281). In almost identical language, McTeague's "rage was a kind of obsession, an evil mania, the drunkenness of passion" (184). Such powerful inborn propensities do not allow individuals much recourse to choice or agency. These instinctive, animal-like qualities are usually portrayed as considerably more powerful than the beings they control. For example, McTeague is incapable of ignoring his instinctual warning to leave his newfound goldmine: "'I can't,' he cried alone to the desert; 'I can't, I can't. It's stronger than I am'" (327).

Interestingly, the instinctual brute-like qualities that operate as controlling forces are often linked with the seven deadly sins of Christianity. In fact, Norris conjures up pride, envy, gluttony, sloth, avarice, wrath, and lust with such frequency that *McTeague* reads as a veritable catalogue of the seven deadly sins. McTeague's persistent line, "You can't make small of me" (75), and Marcus's refrain, "I've been played for a sucker long enough" (109), are both characterized as sins of pride and unwarranted vanity. Marcus is also the novel's poster-boy for envy, as he "daily recalled the fact that he had given up his girl to his friend—the girl who had won a fortune...[he was] fairly sick with envy... 'And you might have had it all yourself, Marcus Schouler,' he muttered to himself on the stairs" (173-74). The excesses of Trina and McTeague's wedding supper exemplify gluttony:

For two hours the guests ate, their faces red, their elbows wide, the perspiration beading on their foreheads. All around the table one saw the same incessant movement of jaws and heard the same uninterrupted sound of chewing...McTeague ate for the sake of eating, without choice; everything within reach of his hands found its way into his enormous mouth. (133)

McTeague's general routine before marrying Trina was to ingest vast meals and then degenerate into sloth—he would sprawl satiated and drowsy in his operating chair "while his food digested; crop full, stupid, and warm" (1). As Trina and McTeague's standard of living plummets, they both devolve into slothfulness: McTeague regresses to his earlier habits and a once neat Trina abandons the housekeeping and "slovened all day about the room in a dirty flannel wrapper" (265).

The depictions of the deadly sins of avarice, wrath, and lust rely on animalistic imagery that resonates simultaneously with the tenets of naturalism and Christianity. As avaricious Zerkow wheedles Maria into telling the story of her family's fabled gold service, "He was breathing short, his limbs trembled a little. It was as if some hungry beast of prey had scented a quarry" (36). Similarly, Trina's "avarice had grown to be her one dominant passion; her love of money for money's sake brooded in her heart...her small pale mouth and little uplifted chin grew to have a certain feline eagerness of expression" (278). When the "friendly" wrestling match between McTeague and Marcus turns into a vicious brawl, Marcus, "because of the impotent wrath of his own powerlessness," curses McTeague, "spitting the word as a snake spits its venom" (184). He bites McTeague, whose "bestial fury" explodes (186); "The brute that in McTeague lay so close to the surface leaped instantly to life...It was the hideous yelling of a hurt beast, the squealing of a wounded elephant" (184). When McTeague first feels attraction for Trina his lust is characterized as a hungry beast—"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" (24). Such imagery borrows both from naturalism's vision of man as instinctual and brute-like and Christianity's conception of the sinful condition of unchecked, and therefore bestial, man.

In Christian theology, however, man can combat and overcome the seven deadly sins, instead exemplifying their counterparts, the seven cardinal virtues. Indeed, in Christian thought, it is the battle with inborn evil that differentiates man from beast. Since McTeague is referred to several times in the text as a "child of man," and many figures throughout the Old and New Testaments are referred to as the son or child of

man, the novel seems to imply that he has a capacity for choice between his lower and higher selves (25). On occasion, McTeague does attempt to fight his animalistic impulses in language that conjures up images of Jacob wrestling with the Angel, who is of course Satan in disguise. For example, at the moment of crisis upon McTeague's first sexual awakening Norris tells us that:

Within him, a certain self, another better McTeague rose with the brute; both were strong, with the huge crude strength of the man himself. The two were at grapples...It was the old battle, old as the world, wide as the world—the sudden panther leap of the animal, lips drawn, fangs aflash, hideous, monstrous, not to be resisted, and the simultaneous arousing of the other man, the better self that cries, “Down, down,” without knowing why; that grips the monster; that fights to strangle it, to thrust it down and back. (24)

In fact, it is the better McTeague who prevails in this battle of will; “he had himself once more in hand...he was the master; the animal was downed, was cowed for this time at least” (25). This imagery of Jacob wrestling with the Angel, man battling his own beast, actually tangles the naturalist and Christian discourses. Such a moment of struggle is also echoed in McTeague's two frays with Marcus, though the symbolism is muddled as the sides of man and brute are not as distinctly drawn (183).

McTeague also references Christianity through its enactment of the paradoxical and often misogynistic view of woman promulgated by the Bible. Trina, for example, is a nineteenth-century daughter of Eve. Her hair is referred to again and again as a Medusa-like crown of snakes; she is an Eve with the cunning serpent coiled around her

head. Of course the first reference wanders into the vocabulary of Greek mythology, but both female figures are held responsible for man's downfall— one's gaze turns man to stone while the other's curiosity brought evil into an idyllic world. Trina's primary allure and sexual power conveniently reside in her remarkable hair, which is mentioned twenty-six times in the novel. For instance; "But it was to her hair that one's attention was most attracted. Heaps and heaps of blue-black coils and braids" (18). Adding to this image of woman, Norris also refers to her as a vehicle of strife. McTeague once led a peacefully rhythmic life, but upon meeting Trina, "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" (42). On the reverse side of the Christian view of woman Old Grannis says, "It is not good that man should be alone," in a direct echo of the Old Testament command for man to find himself a wife (123).

An undercurrent of Christian thought is also conveyed throughout *McTeague* by a subtly recurring reference to prayer in pictures noted in the text. In the first flat of the happily married McTeagues is a lavishly framed picture, the centerpiece of the wall, entitled "Faith," which is "a colored lithograph of two little golden-haired girls in their nightgowns. They were kneeling down and saying their prayers" (124). Later in the novel appears a print of Jean-François Millet's "Angelus" in the office of the Big Dipper Mine (301). Originally entitled "Prayer for the Potato Crop," "Angelus" has been characterized as "radiating a deep religious feeling" and depicts two peasants praying quietly in their field at twilight while the Angelus rings from the steeple of the church in the painting's background ("Angelus" n.p.).

Though Norris's novel has been read as championing the naturalist creed, the persistent recurrence of Christian imagery and allusion calls this easy identification into question. Is there a way to justify the simultaneous existence of the naturalist and Christian discourses in *McTeague*? Are the religious references perhaps slyly ironic, poking fun at a deluded Christian mentality? Instead, do they suggest the possibility of resistance to seemingly overpowering natural forces? Or do both elements call one another into question, representing the tension between religion and determinism at the time Norris wrote? It is tempting to return *McTeague* to the pretense of self-unified coherence and resolve the ambiguity generated by the presence of these two conflicting discourses. However, letting the question remain open and the interlacings of meaning go off again in different directions restores the novel to its tensions, signifying the discontinuity that makes literary analysis worthwhile.

WORKS CITED

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