ABSTRACT: Frank Norris's *McTeague* is one of the most famous, most representative of the American Naturalistic Literary tradition in which characters are devoid of free-will and controlled by the two dominating forces of heredity and environment. The novel has always been taught in this context. However, reading into Frank Norris's article "Fiction is Selection," my students and I have been able to find a passage which foreshadows what will become of the triangular relationship of McTeague, Trina, and Marcus. This paper brings into light an unnoticed passage from the novel, which through scrutiny and analysis has helped acquire a better understanding of the aesthetics of naturalistic writings.

At Yarmouk University, I teach a Modern American Novel course at the graduate level. Established in 1976, Yarmouk University is one of the largest and most prestigious state-supported educational institutions in Jordan. The English Department at Yarmouk University was also established in 1976. It provides courses in language, linguistics, literature, comparative literature, translation, and writing. It also provides major and minor English programs. In addition to the B.A. English program, the Department offers two M.A. English programs: Language and Linguistics and Literature and Criticism. M.A. students can follow one of two study tracks: The Thesis Track or The Comprehensive Exam Track. There are about 200 M.A. students in the two tracks, and about 1000 B.A. students. A third M.A program in Translation was transferred to the Department of Translation as of the Academic year 2010/2011.

In this specific course, we explore modern American novels that represent different movements as well as different strands of cultural and social issues. While some of the works selected engage class and gender relations, others address questions of race and ethnicity. We also focus on the literary and aesthetic merits of each text in an attempt to map out the modern American literary scene. I start with late nineteenth century text and move up to the twentieth century. Some of the American texts that I choose to teach include Frank Norris's *McTeague*, Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*, Willa Cather's *My Antonia*, Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Katherine Anne Porter's *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*, Richard Wright's *Black Boy*, and Maxine Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*.

Instead of formal lecturing, we have open, in-class discussion of the issues to be studied as well as question and answer sessions, and the students are required to be actively involved in these discussions. Students are frequently given a list of questions to think about in order to help them improve their in-class performance.
I choose to teach *McTeague* because it is one of the most representative texts of the American naturalistic movement of the late nineteenth century. Published in 1899, *McTeague* tells the story of two individuals who, like any other naturalistic characters are caught in the uncontrollable trap of heredity and environment. The work *McTeague* has always been taught in this light—determined characters who lack free-will, and cannot, therefore, ultimately control their lives. American naturalistic texts vividly portray characters such as McTeague and Trina in Norris's *McTeague*.

Accordingly, when I teach the novel, it is read in light of the fact that "man has no free-will; either external or internal forces, environment of heredity control him and determine his behavior, for which he is not responsible" (Ahnebrink 184). Moreover, American naturalistic texts emphasize the element of tension between determinism and its antithesis. Charles Child Walcutt, for example, in *American Literary Naturalism, A Divided Stream*, argues that American naturalism at the end of the nineteenth century displays a tension between, on one hand, idealism, progressivism, and social radicalism, and on the other hand, mechanistic determinism (10). Lee Clark Mitchell, in *Determined Fictions: American Literary Naturalism*, echoes the key concept of contradiction in relation to characters in late nineteenth century naturalistic fiction. According to Mitchell, each text "defines a contradiction in its central character, between a self-image as an autonomous, integrated, freely willing agent, and the narrative's revelation of him as no more than a set of conflicting desires" (xv).

After teaching *McTeague* in light of the American naturalistic literary tradition where the focus is on the contrasts and conflicts individuals face in terms of the strong grip of heredity and environment, another issue I raise is that I ask the students to reread *McTeague* and keep their eyes open and try to find a passage within the novel that sums up the events of the novel.

This present paper explains and brings to light a simple passage in *McTeague* that has helped my students acquire a better understanding of the novel and of Norris's writings at large. However, before looking for this minor episode, I ask the students to read Norris's critical essay "Fiction is Selection." Norris, in his article, "Fiction is Selection," draws a comparison between a story writer and a mosaicist and argues that both do not "invent nor imagine" but rather "select and combine" (51). Bearing in mind Norris's "selection of details," I ask the students go on a scavenger hunt in search of a passage that is embedded within the narrative and basically foreshadows what will later take place in the novel.

Students, in their hunt, speculate and bring into light the two subplots of the novel which Norris creates within the narrative—that of Old Grannis and Miss Baker, and of Maria
Macapa and Zerkow. The two subplots are relevant and read in the context of the relationship between McTeague and Trina, the first as a model of the couple, the latter as a vision of what will become of the couple. However, I ask my students still to look deeper and with more focus on Norris's "selection of details."

After much speculation and discussion, I ask my students to read closely into the theater episode in the novel. The scene takes place during McTeague and Trina's period of engagement, when McTeague offers to take Trina to the theatre, only after Marcus Schouler persuades him to initiate such an act. After much anticipation, McTeague, Trina, her mother and her brother, arrive at the theatre, and "[w]hile waiting they studied their programs. First was an overture by the orchestra, after which came "The Gleasons, in their mirth-moving musical farce, entitled 'McMonnigal's Courtship'" (55). McTeague and Trina enjoy each other's company and enjoy the act in front of them. The musical farce starts and:

A girl in a short blue dress and black stockings entered in a hurry and began to dust the two chairs. She was in a great temper, talking very fast, disclaiming against the new lodger. It appeared that this latter never paid his rent, that he was given to late hours. . . . She sidled to one side of the stage and kicked, then sidled to the other and kicked again. As she finished with the song, a man, evidently the lodger in question, came in . . . . The man was intoxicated, his hat was knocked in, one end of his collar was unfastened and stuck up into his face, his watch-chain dangled from his pocket, and his yellow satin slipper was tied to a button-hole of his vest. After a short dialogue with the girl, a third actor appeared. He was dressed like a little boy . . . . He wore an immense turned-down collar, and was continually doing hand-springs, and wonderful somersaults. (81)

I then ask the students to draw a table and start to relate the scene to the events as well as the main characters in the novel. Upon doing so, we discover the numerous similarities that exist between this particular scene and the novel at large.

To begin with, reading closely into this scene, Trina and the girl in the short blue dress share common grounds. The girl in the short blue dress enters in a great temper, disclaiming against the new lodger the same way in which Trina is struggling with her newly aroused feelings toward McTeague. Trina has been content with her life, willingly accepting Marcus as her future husband, until McTeague enters her world and baffles her emotions. Trina has ambivalent feelings toward McTeague and is placed in a confusing position as a result of her feelings. Therefore, like the girl in the blue dress, Trina is in a great temper. Not
knowing how to direct her emotions, especially after the picnic she takes with McTeague, in which she was wearing "a blue cloth shirt" (55), Trina asks herself repeatedly whether or not she loves McTeague. Trina, although "frightened and bewildered" (29) at McTeague's outburst of emotions, nevertheless, "was delighted" and "appeared positively glad to see him" (56) on the day of the picnic. Trina's ambivalent feelings toward McTeague in the beginning of their courtship are echoed in the song in which the girl in the short blue dress sings. Although she is disclaiming against the new lodger, she is singing: "Oh how happy I will be, When my darling's face I'll see; Oh tell him for to meet me in the moonlight, Down where the golden lilies bloom" (81)

Next, we try to find the similarities between McTeague and the "new lodger." As the play moves on, the new lodger appears. The new lodger that appears in the life of the girl in the short blue dress is similar to the new lover that appears in Trina's life. Hitherto, Trina has lived in peace until the arrival of this new lover: "Nothing could have been more sudden, more unexpected . . . . For over a year, she had thought that Marcus would someday be her husband . . . . And then suddenly this crosscurrent had set in" (72). The description of the new lodger matches the description of McTeague—both are brutish and unorganized. Furthermore, the passage has implications of what will become of McTeague as well as the causes of the degeneration of his relationship with Trina: "It appeared that this latter never paid his rent, and was given to late hours." As the novel progresses, McTeague becomes more dependent on Trina's money, spends more and more hours away from home, and above all, becomes an alcoholic.

Finally, we take a closer look at the third party in this relationship who appears as "the girl's younger brother" (81); similarly, the third party in McTeague's and Trina's relationship is Marcus. An indication of a blood relation is intended on part of Norris. After all, Trina and Marcus are blood relatives. The girl's brother in the scene plays all sorts of tricks around the girl and the new lodger. Norris continues to describe the scene:

The "act" devolved upon these three people; the lodger [McTeague] making love to the girl in the short blue dress [Trina], the boy [Marcus] playing all manner of tricks upon him, giving him tremendous digs in the ribs or slaps upon the back that made him cough, pulling chairs from under him, running on all fours between his legs and upsetting him, knocking him over at inopportune moments. . . .The whole humor of the "act" seemed to consist in the tripping up of the intoxicated lodger. (81-82)
Likewise, Marcus plays all sorts of tricks on McTeague. Marcus never does forgive himself for easily giving Trina up to his friend McTeague. Occasionally, Marcus makes "McTeague unhappy and bewildered by wringing his hand," or "by venting sighs that seemed to tear his heart out. . ." (66). Marcus's jealous feelings are displayed in many instances before the marriage of McTeague and Trina: beginning by almost choking McTeague by challenging him into placing a billiard ball in his mouth, embarrassing McTeague on the day of the picnic by paying the fee for the park entrance, and embarrassing McTeague by making him give a speech on the night Trina wins the lottery.

After Trina wins the lottery, Marcus's bitterness toward McTeague reaches its peak, and the more he thinks about his loss, the more he becomes enraged with jealousy, envy, and anger. He tells himself: "You fool, you fool Marcus Schouler! If you's kept Trina you'd had have that money. . . . You've thrown away your chance in life . . . . to throw five thousand dollars out of the window. . . . when you might have had Trina and the money. . . God damn the luck" (103). Like the boy who pulls the chair from under the new lodger, Marcus, eventually ruins the career of McTeague by informing the authorities that McTeague is not a licensed dentist, hence the destruction of McTeague's career.

Successfully, the students and I find rich ground for investigation in this particular passage. The play in the theatre, therefore, serves as an effective parallel to the main plot. Norris brilliantly exposes, in this minor scene, what will become of McTeague.

In this respect, we have been able to go beyond the naturalistic context and the naturalistic view of determined characters living in a determined world. Donald Pizer, for example argues that "[Norris's] theme is that man's racial atavism (particularly his sexual desires) and man's individual family heritage combine as a force toward reversion—that is, toward a return to the emotions and instincts of his animal past—which under propitious circumstances controls and dominates him" (64). Lars Ahnebrink believes that the novel is "a study of two temperaments under the pressure of heredity and environment" (114). And, in his article "Norris Historically Viewed," Richard Chase claims that "the protagonist of a naturalistic novel is therefore at the mercy of circumstances rather than of himself, indeed he often seems to have no self" (297).

In our class, as Ahnebrink suggests about McTeague, that "no detail, however tedious, seems irrelevant" (197), we have been able to make parallels from a scene that
seems, at first, irrelevant but is laden with meaning and relevance. True, naturalistic writers usually employ a documentary style in which focus on the crude, the sordid, and the ugly does not leave ample space for the aesthetic. However, Norris's *McTeague*, as has been proven, includes a brief episode that subverts this notion and brilliantly serves as a foreshadowing of what will take place in the novel.

Thus, bearing in mind Norris's critical views as a writer, we have to read *McTeague* with open eyes. We as readers, by analyzing this simple, seemingly irrelevant passage, were able to predict the fate of McTeague. Ironically, however, McTeague enjoys the play so much, and "exploded in a roar of laughter" not realizing that "the whole humor of the "act" seemed to consist in the tripping of the intoxicated lodger" (82). In other words, not realizing that the joke is on him!


