
Frank Norris Studies

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"A Talent for the Inappropriate": Bertha Monroe Rickoff as a Foil to Frank Norris

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Bertha Monroe Rickoff, a financially independent socialite from the East Coast, played a number of roles once she reached San Francisco and became associated with the Norris family. By the early 1890s, she was on first-name terms with Frank; the close companion of his mother, Gertrude; a blue-stocking lecturer for various San Francisco social groups such as the Century; and a contributor to local periodicals such as the San Francisco *Examiner* and *The Wave*. However, it is unlikely—among her various interests, activities, and real or imagined duties—that she was either a kindred spirit or mentor to Frank Norris. In a 1930 interview with Franklin Walker, Rickoff claimed that honor, saying that she "really taught [Norris] how to write," and "persuaded him of the necessity of a soul in his work."¹ By "soul"—we soon find in her writings—Rickoff was referring to "spirit" or "spirituality," the kind usually associated with the evolutionary theism of Berkeley's Professor Joseph LeConte or like attempts to meld traditional Christianity with the complexities of the burgeoning field of science and evolutionary thought. For evolutionary theists, the more disturbing consequences of Darwinian thought—materialism and pessimistic determinism—were to be recast in rosier shades. Thus, Rickoff and thinkers like her redefined evolution as a morally correct process, instituted by a benign God, working toward perfection; and, regarding human relations, evolution's prime mover—sex—was accordingly described in traditional religious terms as a sacred union, not between two material beings, but between two semi-divine creatures.

Among critics concluding that Norris himself was of this spiritualistic breed is André Poncet, who, in his biography of Norris, asserts that after a brief sojourn in dandyism, if not decadence, Norris, like Condy Rivers, changed directions, matured, and indeed found the necessity of "a soul" in his fiction. Like a number of scholars, Poncet believes that Norris was influenced by Professor LeConte at Berkeley, but he also considers Rickoff a mentor when it came to spiritualized evolution. According to Poncet, Rickoff awakened Norris to the relationship between evolutionary theism and literary Naturalism. In turn, Poncet argues, Norris paid tribute to Rickoff in one of his works. Poncet reads *Blix* as autobiographical, but the character Blix is not a fictional rendering of Jeannette Black Norris, as popularly argued, but a composite of Jeannette, Viola Rodgers, and Bertha Rickoff. According to Poncet, a Rickoffian Blix plays the part of a moral instructor who reforms Condy during a period of character crisis related to gambling and helps him on his way to becoming a morally-centered, successful writer in New York.²

Poncet, that is, takes Rickoff at face value in her interview with Walker, basing his argument on Rickoff's report of her encounter with Norris after he, like Condy, had been gambling all night. Trying to comfort Norris's mother who was worried about her son's behavior, Rickoff confronted Norris and said that he need not reform to please his distraught mother, but that he could "go to hell if he had no more strength." Rickoff concluded by saying that she had the intended effect on Norris: he was penitent.

However, one can easily wonder how seriously Norris took this prudish socialite who, in her own words, "bawled Frank out" for the pants-wetting scene in *McTeague*. Further, Rickoff's veracity is doubtful in her interview with Walker: after all, she was, most probably, a scorned lover. Rickoff apparently had

romantic designs on Norris; she claimed that Gertrude encouraged the match, having concluded that Rickoff was of the "proper literary background for Frank to marry"; and, one infers from the Walker interview, Rickoff was of the proper social and economic position as well. Indeed, Rickoff implied Norris's reciprocal affection in her boast that she rejected him because he was too worldly, too "fast": he was "interested in a woman only to live with her," code words for sex-before-marriage.

The more likely truth is that Rickoff was the one scorned by Norris. In the interview, her assessment of Jeannette was one of pious disgust and possible jealousy as she suggested a moral gulf between Jeannette and herself. For Rickoff, Jeannette was virtually a guttersnipe, "terribly common," "dumb," from a family of "no importance," whose lack of morals allowed her to engage in pre-marital sex with Norris. The result, according to Rickoff, was an unwanted pregnancy. Walker quoted Rickoff as saying "Frank had to marry her." He next wrote in his notes "a shotgun affair," but then crossed-out the words which (intentionally?) remained distinctly readable. At any rate, Rickoff reported that, for the purpose of keeping up appearances, either before or after the marriage Jeannette had an abortion and the family cloaked it as a "mastoid" operation. Evidently, Gertrude strongly opposed the match, threatened to "tear [Jeannette's] hair out" if she ever talked about the abortion, and proclaimed her a "hussy." Norris, on the other hand, appears to have been unmoved by his mother's and Rickoff's protestations. Rickoff frankly admitted that Norris had no social aspirations, was "very democratic," and "did not give a hang what social class people came from," or, one can imagine, what moralistic accusations of impropriety Rickoff and Mrs. Norris heaped upon him and his wife-to-be.

Later in her interview with Walker, Rickoff, perhaps without realizing it, made a revealing assessment of Norris's attitude toward her. She described her mortification when Norris, at Rickoff's house for a formal dinner party, deliberately picked up a macaroon from the floor and ate it. Emerging from such a scene is the image of Norris's sardonic delight in embarrassing the priggish crowd that Rickoff had more than likely

assembled. Rickoff finally granted that, regarding a match between Norris and her, she was "simply not his kind."

Norris himself, a year before marrying Jeannette, made a brief but pointed reference to Rickoff in an 1899 letter to his friend Harry M. Wright. Citing Wright's being a "victim," presumably of Rickoff's invective, rumor-mongering, or love, Norris agreed to "deny [the] story whenever the occasion permits." Norris also pointed out that he too had been the object of Rickoff's attention; and he dismissed her credibility thus: "Miss Rickoff seems to have a talent for the inappropriate that at times amounts to pure genius."³

Further insight into the woman with whom Norris finally had so little in common is provided by her writings appearing in various periodicals on the east and west coasts. In a piece in the March 1893 *North American Review*, Rickoff took issue with an article by a best-selling author of popular fiction, Amélie Rives. Rives, a bi-continental writer whose personal and literary worldliness had shocked some Victorian readers in the prior decade, had taken up the issue of moral training for young girls in her September 1892 article. Rives concluded, quoting Browning, that "Ignorance is not innocence but sin." In particular, she advocated that young girls be instructed, even "more impressively" than young boys, about human reproduction. She wrote: "A knowledge of the laws which govern physical nature seems to me not only the right of every thinking being, but the only means by which people will ever be brought to look simply, wisely, and innocently at certain fundamental facts, upon which rest the whole structure of existence."⁴ Rives was not a radical feminist, but her views were those of the more moderate and positivistic wing of the 1870s free love movement, which assumed that a woman's knowledge of her own and her partner's sexuality was essential. Rives' pragmatic views as expressed here would hardly seem shocking to open-minded readers viewing sex the way Rives did—simply, wisely, and innocently—as a normal, healthy human act, not something to be hidden from sexually-maturing adolescents as "forbidden" and "naughty."

Bertha Rickoff, on the other hand, was outraged. Not an evolutionist, but an evolutionary *theist*, Rickoff found Rives' failure to mention "spirituality" offensive. Several months later, Rickoff's indignant reply appeared. She wrote: "But were we to admit the revelation of evil as necessary for the child's self-defence, that very revelation would necessitate a too complete instruction in physical truths, the communication of which to an undeveloped nature would tend to materialize love—a result which should occur only when the nature has reached its highest spiritual possibility."⁵ Rickoff went on to say that although a young girl would eventually have to "know the physical and spiritual truths of her being, she should never acquire knowledge of a world where love has lost its spiritual element."⁶

Rickoff concluded with a paean to idealized love: "The only preservation of purity is ideality, and the young girl, dreaming of the ideal lover who shall one day waken her lips to life, in keeping herself holy for this consecration, is armor proof against the evils of the world."⁷ The moral superiority Rickoff felt over Jeannette is grounded in this spiritualistic fussiness, but, as evinced by Norris's refusal to heed Rickoff's and his mother's protests against his relationship with Jeannette, Norris did not subscribe to such an idealistic courtship code.

In October of the same year, Rickoff published an essay titled "Women and the World" in *North American Review*. Rickoff's theme changed slightly as she examined the married society woman's role. Rickoff called for these women to find a "purpose [in life] which will contribute to [their] more rounded development."⁸ Instead of being completely dependent upon their husbands, Rickoff advised women to find fruitful work—in addition to their domestic duties, of course.

At first, Rickoff sounds like Rives, who advocated the educated, working woman as more appealing to a potential mate than a helpless debutante. Rickoff also seems to foreshadow Norris's views on the New Woman, those he delineated in *Blix*, where the title character leaves behind the trappings of society life in order to forge both her own career and a deeper, lasting relationship with her beau, Condy. But, Rickoff predictably reverted to type. It was not enough that a

woman redefine herself as a sentient being who could have a career and enter marriage on an equal footing with a man; according to Rickoff, she must cease exhibiting "womanishness" and strive for "womanliness." Then "her home will become, not merely a hotel which best cares for one's physical necessities, but a divine institution where woman's spirit is supreme."⁹ (Thank you, John Ruskin.) If a young woman seeking to attract a husband followed Rickoff's agenda, "she [would] have the opportunity to show the attributes of her character as well as her personal charm, and be able to command a love in which the spirit rules the flesh," since physical attraction "must come to an end as soon as its novelty has worn off."¹⁰ To sum up, a woman in marriage could not be "just" a partner, friend, working person, and lover; Rickoff insisted that she must rise above these roles to become a spiritualized idea of herself, a divine keeper of the hearth, with a job on the side.

Rickoff's most vacuous statements on the role of women were printed in the 26 August 1896 issue of the *San Francisco Examiner*. Rickoff wrote her letter in response to one of her critics—a working woman who found Rickoff's comments regarding women offensive. The writer pointed out that Rickoff was not qualified to judge the role of working women since she spoke from the "charmed circle" of the wealthy upper class. Rickoff, however, stood her ground, retorting that not only the poorest of working girls had it rough; so did debutantes. In fact, Rickoff veritably wept over the rigors placed on society girls. She declared: "Strong as are my sympathies for the working girl, 'with her head tied up in a towel,' they are equally strong for the society girl, who is sent to Dr. Weir Mitchell to recover from the strain of social life in a city like New York." Rickoff continued with a list of society women's chores: "[Society life] is often a tiresome bore, and while it is the duty of every woman to be a society woman to a certain extent, the hours spent in writing acceptance and regrets, the weary days with the dressmaker, are but ill paid by a round of insincere formalities. Society has its charms, but it also has its burdens. . . ."¹¹ Rickoff went on to lament the fortunes of a friend, a woman of social position, who often fell asleep in her opera box from "sheer

fatigue." Finally, she referred yet again to a woman's duty to rise above material concerns: "Your correspondent says women lack the moral courage to stand up for their rights, whereas if women stood up for their higher duties with half the courage with which they nag the world about their rights they would get their rights without asking for them."¹² Those "higher duties" are, of course, related to the ideality and spirituality Rickoff described in previous essays.

Again, if Norris's idea of the New Woman is best expressed in *Blix*, then Rickoff's assumptions are polar to his. Blix's and Condy's attraction for each another develops not within the artificial high society scene, but in their willingness to leave the trappings of the fashionable social set and be "just friends." Condy's attraction to Blix's corporeality—her skin, her athleticism—grows after Blix has left society life and begun to forge her own identity, complete with career goals. Blix's attraction to Condy develops as he begins to see her thus—not as an ethereal creature, but a person of flesh and blood, with a mind and future of her own. Further, there is no evidence that the couple's desire for one another is short-lived, a passing fancy. In fact, their passion seems to grow as they get to know each other on an equal footing—as natural human beings, not artificial social constructs fashioned by Victorian culture.

The strongest evidence of the dissimilarity between Norris and Rickoff is provided by their views in one shared area of interest—Naturalism—seen in their respective contributions to *The Wave* in 1896. Rickoff read Zola's works and gave at least one paper on the French Naturalist before the Century Club in San Francisco. Her published views on Naturalism appeared in the 18 July 1896 issue of *The Wave*, in a letter to the editor titled "Realism and Naturalism." Reminiscent of her attack on Amélie Rives in 1893, Rickoff was negatively responding to Norris's article, "Zola as a Romantic Writer," which had appeared in the 27 June 1896 issue. Norris had argued that Zola was not a Realist in the sense that Howells was, since Howells was interested in "small passions," "restricted emotions," and "crises involving cups of tea." Zola's art could rightly be called Naturalism, but not as some had defined it—as an inner circle of Realism; on the

contrary, Zola had inherited the best from Romanticism in the tradition of Hugo and tempered it with his choice of a modern "Milieu," that of the lower classes instead of the feudal aristocracy. Thus, Zola's Naturalism was defined by Norris as having a Romantic basis, although Zola had made it a "school by itself, unique, somber, powerful beyond words."¹³

Rickoff took issue with Norris, arguing that the true Naturalist of the time was the Southern, genteel writer James Lane Allen, as was clear in his recent novel *Summer in Arcady* (1896). Rickoff's letter to *The Wave* follows—transcribed in full because of its further revelations of her eccentricities and because, by way of contrast, of the light it sheds on Norris's conception of Naturalism.

* * *

REALISM AND NATURALISM.

In a recent article in *The Wave*, on Zola as a romanticist, Mr. Howells is given as the typical realist. There may be a difference as to what one understands as real, but because Mr. Howells has dignified himself by that title is there any reason why we should uphold him on his self-erected pedestal?

When Mr. Howells arose, he said he was a realist, and we thought perhaps he was; perhaps life and love were a joke after all! But another current of criticism set in, and writers began to ask, Is it just to call real what is only superficial? Is there no reality in feeling, sentiment and passion, let alone flesh and blood? Is the outer shell of conventionality the man himself? In saying that Mr. Howells paints life as it is, perhaps your critic has committed himself to paper in that moment when the reception and the tinsel seemed real. But because one does not bring one's hobgoblins to afternoon tea, does that argue that they are not waiting for us outside? If the denizens of the world walked abroad with their attendant spectres we would flee our fellow man and there would be no afternoon teas. Society and Mr. Howells are those artificialities to which one flees to escape the real.

If society is what one asks, Mr. Howells has his uses, but it is only a moment; then we pierce to the real pain of existence. When Tolstoi enters the arena, Howells sinks to the level of a mere materialist. His work is incidental, biographical, never real, for it is neither typical nor universal. True realism affords us, not a

superficial half-hour, but the intimate companionship of a friend who explains us to ourselves.

While secondary in importance to the renting of flats, love comes in for its share of sarcastic attention from Mr. Howells, but this does not prove his non-existence, for, as a recent writer cleverly said, by the very bitterness of the satire heaped upon him, one may judge of the wounds love has inflicted.

But to take from Mr. Howells the name of realist is not to give it to M. Zola. On the near view he appears a gross materialist, and the popular prejudice against him is not without reason. His dissection of the human animal frightens the ordinary mind, which can only grasp what bears immediately upon the present, and is incapable of translating larger humanitarian motives. The movement of Zola is slow, the results of his crimes percolate through so many generations that to grasp his quality of universal romanticism demands a deep artistic perception—a quality in which your critic is not lacking—but to acknowledge Zola as the painter of the morbid, the grotesque, as he does, hardly justifies him in pronouncing him the typical naturalist.

It is true that naturalism is the cult of those denying that the processes of nature move by the guidance of a supernatural will from without, but this does not argue that naturalism is the school of what is contrary to nature. Zola's acknowledged aim is to write the history of crime, not the history of nature, and only to the spirits of Dante's inferno could he be justly supposed to paint naturalism.

In placing Zola and his criminology as an example of naturalism, your critic also assumes that because naturalism takes no account of the supernatural, it has no respect for law, whereas were there nothing stronger than human reason that reason would establish law, for preservation of life.

However, in the recent elevation of nature to a higher stand, misconceptions have arisen, and nature has been placed above law by such writers as Mr. Grant Allen. These forget that obedience to law is the only tie to our brother man, and that if this tie be severed not only does the individual deteriorate, but the very love for which law is sacrificed dies out for lack of cohesion with the world and its purposes. The best illustration of this fact is in "Anne Karenina" by Tolstoi.

With Zola as the huge romanticist, Tolstoi as the realist, and Howells as merely the representative of a passing fad, who is the naturalist, the painter of nature, unaided by the supernatural?

Since the discovery of evolution does the supernatural exist apart from the natural? The old conception of God was that of an unsympathetic personality, who dwelt in a circle outside the world, and doled out justice with a ladle, while all that was natural fought his decrees in the shape of a horned devil.

The evolutionists declare God as permeating every atom of the universe, deifying the flesh and making sacred what is natural. To them there is no war between God and nature, no natural law which is not one of his holy ordinances. The belief in God, in throwing off the idea of the supernatural finds God as the heart of nature itself.

This new type of naturalism greets us in a little book by James Lane Allen called "Summer in Arcady." While Mr. Howells' work is a survival of the puritanism which would put bloomers on the Venus of Milo, while he infers that nature is something for which we must apologize, Mr. James Lane Allen announces that there is nothing in nature which may not be respected, nothing which puritanism is constrained to ignore.

Mr. Allen is eminently an artist, one to whom may be trusted a subject which would be profaned by grosser handling. While he interweaves the divine quality through nature and human nature he illuminates it and shows it for what it really is. In the quality of pure naturalist Mr. Allen says, "This is love," and in the quality of divine interpreter he adds, "This is sacred."¹⁴

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As she had similarly done with Rives, Rickoff chided Norris for his materialistic assumptions about nature, that is, his associating Naturalism with the "gross materialist" and "criminologist," Zola. Naturalism, for Rickoff, must take note of the spiritual, which, according to evolutionary theism, now resided in the natural.

Rickoff could not have picked a representative of her theory more removed from the Zolaesque style than James Lane Allen, who was typically linked in literary terms with Thomas Nelson Page. While *Arcady* did depict nature as an all-compelling force, drawing men and women together for procreative purposes, it was by Zola's standards—and Norris's as seen in works like *McTeague*—quite innocuous. Rickoff's letter was obviously a vindictive jab at Norris

and his work, as she dismissed Zola altogether, redefined Naturalism in terms of her own spiritualistic ideology, and selected for her example a book by an author known not for his kinship with literary Naturalism but for his idealism and gentility.

Norris was quick to respond, albeit not directly. The following week, Norris reviewed *Summer in Arcady* for *The Wave*, and he slyly took the advantage by beating Rickoff at her own game. He graciously agreed that Allen indeed wrote from the Naturalistic point of view; however, what Norris found Naturalistic was not the divine-in-nature, but the absence of it. Norris praised Allen for frankly presenting the passion of two "natural, wholesome human brutes, drawn to each other by the force of Nature . . . irresistible, blindly, *moved only* by an unreasoned animal instinct [*italics mine*]."¹⁵ If Norris did subscribe to Rickoff's spiritualistic creed as a basis for his concept of Naturalism, he clearly had the opportunity to second her and thereby acknowledge his debt to LeConte and evolutionary theism; but he did not. On the other hand, Norris could have confronted Rickoff and her ideas in the editorial column, but it is doubtful that he took her seriously enough to make such a direct reply. Instead, Norris in the review did what he seemed to do best when it came to Bertha Rickoff: he ate the macaroon from the floor.

NOTES

¹Bertha Monroe Rickoff, interview, 29 May 1930, Franklin Walker Collection, Bancroft Library.

²André Poncet, *Frank Norris (1870-1902)* (Paris: Librairie Honoré Champion, 1977), tome 1, 162, 399-400.

³Frank Norris, "To Harry Manville Wright," 5 April 1899, letter 31 of *Frank Norris: Collected Letters*, ed. Jesse S. Crisler (San Francisco: The Book Club of California, 1986), 74-75.

⁴Amélie Rives, "Innocence Versus Ignorance," *North American Review*, 155 (September 1892), 289.

⁵Bertha Monroe Rickoff, "A Reply to Amélie Rives," *North American Review*, 156 (March 1893), 378.

⁶Rickoff, "A Reply," 378.

⁷Rickoff, "A Reply," 378.

⁸Rickoff, "Women and the World," *North American Review*, 157 (October 1893), 452.

⁹Rickoff, "Women," 454.

¹⁰Rickoff, "Women," 455.

¹¹Rickoff, "Letters from the People: Miss Rickoff's Reply," *San Francisco Examiner*, 26 August 1896, 6.

¹²Rickoff, "Letters," 6.

¹³Frank Norris, "Zola as a Romantic Writer," *The Wave*, 15 (27 June 1896), 3.

¹⁴Rickoff, "Realism and Naturalism," *The Wave*, 15 (18 July 1896), 3.

¹⁵Norris, "A Summer in Arcady," *The Wave*, 15 (25 July 1896), 9.

Jack London in 1900: Besting Norris in the Far North

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While *A Man's Woman* (1900) was Frank Norris's best-seller until the publication of *The Octopus* in 1901, its reviews were decidedly mixed. Indeed, many who did not care for it were as outraged by its vivid brutalities as the reviewers of *McTeague* were a year earlier. Among these was the writer signing himself "The Ringmaster" in the 19 April 1900 issue of *Town Topics*, where his "Fine Stories of the Far North by a New Writer" appeared. However, the special pertinence of this previously unknown review—a clipping of which is preserved in the Jack London scrapbooks at the Huntington Library—is its author's discovery of another writer, Jack London, who had succeeded where Norris had failed. While Norris nowhere indicated that he was aware of it, a competition between the two men had begun; and the newcomer to the field was seen, by The Ringmaster at least, as clearly ahead of the more seasoned and famous writer.

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In almost exactly the field where Mr. Frank Norris failed, by reason of the unpleasant smells he delights in transcribing, Mr. Jack London has succeeded; the field, namely, of the Far North, the Polar region. Mr. Norris, it is true, wrote of Polar explorers, while Mr. London contents himself with the region just this side of the circle, the region where red man and white man now meet in quest of gold and adventure. Mr. Norris, because his efforts are so painfully evident, succeeds only in making us feel that he wishes to impress the cold and

the hardships of the climate upon us; Mr. London, because he seems merely to be telling his story, not going out of his way to belabor us with pages labeled realism, makes the actual impression and leaves us wondering how he did it. That is the difference between the artist and the artisan. We can dissect Mr. Norris's work, and say, "Here the writer wishes to show his knowledge of Arctic terms; here he is going to shiver us with the cold; here he will insert a chemist's catalog."

I purposely make this comparison, despite the popular prejudice against comparisons, because Mr. London's book is so entirely the model writers should adopt rather than the method of Mr. Norris. In every one of the stories in "The Son of the Wolf," Mr. London gives us the real picture of the Far North that, in the other man's work, we had been unable to find, being all eyes for the spectacle of the writer shrieking at us: "Watch, be a realist."

No book that has yet been published has given the world a more vivid notion of what it is men find when they seek gold in the Far North than does "The Son of the Wolf." We have had volumes of description concerning the Klondike, but we have had nothing that so gives us the real texture of the land that lies in the shadow of the Arctic circle, where the Indian shoulders the miner and French Canadians consort with British and Americans. Mr. London's tales have, for the most part, appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly*, and the one called "An Odyssey of the North," when it lately appeared in that magazine, was not infrequently held a worthy rival to Mr. Kipling's "The Man Who Would Be King." No student of the short story, at all events, can afford to miss comparing the tale of him they called Ulysses in Mr. London's story to the tale of "The Man Who Would Be King."

McTeague Lives!: The Opera

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Gertrude Doggett Norris, with her interest in and devotion to the stage, would certainly be proud of the recent transformation of her son's best-known novel, this time into operatic form. *McTeague*, by William Bolcom, with a libretto by Arnold Weinstein and Robert Altman, had its world premiere at the Lyric Opera of Chicago on 31 October 1992. Weinstein and Altman (the Hollywood director who also staged the

production) have necessarily made many changes in their adaptation. This brief note will deal with the most vital ones.

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The most startling revelation to one familiar with the novel is the opera's first scene: McTeague wandering in the blazing heat of Death Valley, just before he encounters Marcus Schouler, and soliloquizing about his former power and his present fears. The theme of gold occurs in the very third line, as he characterizes the sun as a "big ball o' gold"—a verbal identification made visible in the second scene. The sun is transformed into the giant gilded tooth we see being hoisted into place outside his Polk Street "Parlors." (This occurs even before he has met Trina; in the novel, of course, the golden tooth is acquired just before their marriage.) The opening scene defines the structure of the opera: all the action before the desert sequences is presented in flashback; we return to the present—that is, the desert—four more times during the course of the opera. The final scene picks up exactly where the first one ended, with McTeague staring, hypnotized, at his hand. Such a structure stands, interestingly, in direct contrast to Erich Von Stroheim's in the film version, *Greed*, which follows the novel faithfully, scene by scene.

Weinstein and Altman have dropped many incidents and some characters in trying to streamline the novel to under two hours' playing time. The most important missing person is Zerkow. With the old miser removed from the plot, Maria Macapa now relates her fantasies to Marcus, who comes to believe them. Instead of dying at Zerkow's hands, therefore, she is allowed to wander off into the desert when Marcus realizes that she is mad, her English disappearing, singing of her "flying squeerel," and still pursuing her service of golden plate. In the novel, ironically, it is the recovery of her sanity that leads to her death; provided instead in the opera is a brilliant "mad scene" for the mezzo-soprano playing Maria.

Trina's downfall is also registered differently in the opera. She does not paint Noah's Ark animals, she suffers no amputation of her fingers, and she does not become a scrubwoman in a kindergarten. But the

opera intensifies the irony of her decline by having her work as a scrubwoman for the "New Dentist" (in the novel, the "Other" Dentist), who has taken over McTeague's offices. Thus, she now works where she had lived, and she lives—and dies—in what had been Maria's old hovel. (This dentist, by the way, *wants* to buy the Golden Tooth.)

In the opera, the start of McTeague's downfall is unambiguously attributed to Marcus. In revenge, he brings in a "patient" who identifies himself as a Public Health Inspector and tells McTeague that he can no longer practice dentistry.

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Many minor characters disappear in the opera: Cousin Selina; the Ryers; Uncle Oelbermann; Heise the harness-maker (although his wife and daughter are both referred to); Augustine, the "decayed French laundress," and her spirit-medium husband; and—wiping out an entire sub-plot—Old Grannis and Miss Baker. In a somewhat ghostly echo, however, a silent Old Man and Old Woman occasionally appear in crowd scenes. An important non-human character is also eliminated: McTeague's mule, who "spooks" in the desert. The canary, however, is present prominently throughout, finally falling dead from the birdcage as McTeague and Schouler scuffle in the sand.

A few passages are taken verbatim from the novel. For example, the "monotonous" recitation of a dental procedure (chapter 5) is used in the opera as McTeague tries to tell Trina how he will treat her broken tooth. A more poignant scene is lifted almost literally from the end of chapter 13: Trina weeps upon and wipes clean the slate containing the names of McTeague's patients, singing "Rub them out, rub them all out. That's it . . . all gone, all gone." Another recurring verbal echo from the novel is McTeague's familiar refrain, "Nobody makes small of me."

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McTeague, the opera, has become an immediate critical and popular success. It stands a good chance of entering into the repertoire of successful twentieth-century opera.

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American Literature Association News

The Frank Norris Society was one of the original individual-author organizations involved in the formation of the ALA; all members of FNS are also members in good standing of the ALA and are welcome at its annual meetings. In 1994, the convention setting is the Bahia Resort Hotel in San Diego (2-5 June). Though the date and time are not yet fixed, a session entitled "Contextualizing Frank Norris" will be in the program. The speakers are: Jesse S. Crisler (who has left Hawaii for Utah and a new position with BYU), "Frank Norris and John Steinbeck: The Critical Reception of Naturalistic Art"; David Marut (University of Georgia), "Frank Norris's Representation of Economic Fact in 'A Deal in Wheat'; and Gwendolyn Jones (Florida State University), "Frank Norris's Reconstruction of *The Pit*." The topics for two sessions at the 1995 convention are: "*Vandover and the Brute*: Reconsiderations" and "Norris's Non-novelistic Writings: Short Fictions, Articles, and Literary Essays." Please submit papers to the FNS Program Committee (address below).

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