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Frank Norris's "Critical Illness" and Death: Two 1902 Perspectives

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Two 1902 articles in which Frank Norris is treated prominently, though not exclusively, were published in periodicals hailing from familiar Norris locales, Chicago and San Francisco. The earlier one, by the novelist Henry Blake Fuller (1857-1929), appeared in the Chicago *Evening Post*. Part 2 (6 September 1902), p. 9. Fuller disagreed with the critical comments Norris had written in his "Salt and Sincerity" column in *The Critic*, 41 (September 1902), 267-270. There Norris claimed that the notion "of literature as a cult, as a refinement to be kept inviolate from the shoulderings and elbowings of the Common People is . . . false, misleading, and pernicious" (267). Fuller preferred instead Jack London's more elitist position in "Again the Literary Aspirant," *The Critic*, 41 (September 1902), 217-220, that the critic is an indispensable force in helping the masses to become "discerning": "The critic hammers, hammers, hammers, praising and blaming, interpreting, explaining, making clear and plain, on his own responsibility guerdoning the artist and forcing the large number of people finally to guerdon him" (219). The later article which featured commentary on Norris was an obituary by Austin Lewis (1865-1944), a Bay Area lawyer and prominent socialist lecturer and author. There is no evidence that Lewis knew Norris personally, but in his "Monthly Review" column in *The Raven*, 3 (Christmas 1902), 31-32,¹ he indicated that he was well acquainted with his work and saw in it a perceptive, though sometimes aesthetically flawed, idealistic analysis of contemporaneous social conditions.

The texts of these articles have not been editorially emended.

FRANK NORRIS AND JACK LONDON ON LITERARY ART AND THE MULTITUDE

Doctrine of the Plain People and That of the Few
and Fit Compared—Small but Well-Qualified
Number Makes Ultimate Appraisal.

The last time Mr. Frank Norris and Mr. Jack London came together was in the case of the story of the fisherman, the stick of dynamite, the retriever and the explosion, where the coincidence was quite marked, and where character and incidents were in substantial accord.² These two writers have just come together once more in the pages of the September *Critic*. This time, however, anything like accord is missing, and the views and opinions expressed in their respective essays are as far apart as the poles. They are both busy with the relation between literary art and the multitude, and with the relation of the genius and the critic to both. Mr. Norris is for the here and the now, and the predominance of the Plain People.³ Mr. London takes a wider and a longer view; he is for the artist who, upon the highest ground, would address the Few but Fit, and for the discerning commentator who bears the artist aloft and makes for him his ultimate and lasting reputation.

"A Grand and Awful Time."

It is Mr. Norris's conspicuous assumption that we are "dwelling in a grand and awful time," as the old hymn puts it. In his own words, fiction is "at present undergoing the most radical revolution in the history of literature." But it is a characteristic of almost every time to regard itself as rather grand and awful; this is not the first period, nor is Mr. Norris the first man, to be afflicted by the measles of modernity. The disease is as proper to a growing young man as to a growing young nation.

Mr. Norris believes that fiction calls for the Man of

the World. He would have him busy himself very keenly and exclusively with the vital and actual Affairs of Men. The function of the novelist of this present day is to comment upon life as he sees it. And if he does not address himself directly and simply and intelligibly to the Plain People he will fail.

Other views than these regarding the function of the novelist have been held, are held and will continue—with increasing tenacity—to be held. There is the novelist who prefers to present life not as it is, but as it ought to be. There is the novelist who prefers to present life not as it is, but as he himself would personally like to have it. And there are many more variations from the stiff type that Mr. Norris sets up as the sole norm. While as for the direct, simple and intelligible address to the Plain People, I find much more breadth and steadiness in the view of Mr. London.

Idols That Totter.

The Plain People have lately had their idols set up for them—set up in large numbers and in substantial accord with their own plans and specifications. But these idols have not worn; they have not held their place. Some of them have quickly crumbled away by reason of their own inherent cheapness. Others of them—worthy, perhaps, of a better fate—have been blown down by the very vehemence of the worshipers. One "Trilby,"⁴ for example: Many of these victims have not only been pushed from their pedestals but have had to endure the ungrateful ridicule of those who were once most vociferous in praise. Clearly, in the long run, Mr. Norris's Plain People can scarcely be depended upon.

For poise and reasonableness I prefer the other idea—that of Mr. London, who maintains that "a different and small number of people make the ultimate appraisalment." These are the people who, in his own expressive phrase, say the good word for the worthy thing and damn bald-erdash. These men, according to the writer's own expressive figure, stand upon the heads and shoulders of the rest; from this position of advantage they continue to praise the worthy thing and to condemn the unworthy until combined authority and reiteration have crystallized current opinion into a standard view.

The Ideal Critic.

Such men as these the writer calls the "critics." His critic, however, need not be the paid reviewer, nor the man who speaks professionally; indeed, he may not speak through print at all. I take him, then, to be a person of some such qualifications as these: he is sufficiently informed regarding the broad trend of culture and of events to have some adequate realization of the limited value of the mere passing moment in its relation to the general course of time—not being disposed, as is Mr. Norris's ideal modern, to shun the library and to give an undivided allegiance to the daily press; and he is master of his leisure and of his own inner quiet to a degree that allows him the formulation of a deliberate and well-balanced opinion—not quite permitting himself, like Mr. Norris's ideal again, to be completely dazed by those actual and vital Affairs of Men, nor to go altogether blind in the dust-cloud raised by the lively yet evanescent heels of the Here and Now.

True, times are changing, as both our authors plainly enough declare, and as everybody realizes without any declaration at all. We all understand that the center of gravity has shifted, in literature, as in everything else, with the new predominance of the democracy; but that the ultimate tribunal of criticism is lodged in the mass, is to be dominated by the rank and file—such is and always will remain far from true. If the general public wishes for a participation in the decrees of the general court the general public must raise its level of cultivation and of thoughtfulness. There is no reason why such an advance should not presently come to be accomplished; surely he would be a pessimist indeed who should allow himself to stiffen into the belief that the present half-baked stage of the American public was to endure indefinitely. Just now we are midway between hay and grass, but time is likely enough to ripen us and to bring about such a harvest as even the most optimistic among us all may desire and await.

Henry B. Fuller

LITERARY
Monthly Review
by Austin Lewis

The death of Frank Norris was one of the most disastrous events which has befallen American literature in the last few years. It was the destruction of possibilities upon which the observers of current literature had already begun to speculate. This does not imply that Norris had not achieved; he had, and much; but he had not even begun to accomplish that of which he was capable. Much that he had written was marked by real merit and possessed intrinsic value, even when judged from the best standards of literary criticism. His, however, was a genius which needed time to mature. His very comprehensiveness and grasp of large ideas was his first impediment in expression. The pictures came so thickly, and the powerful descriptions, in which he loved to indulge, so cumbered his pages, that the stream of the story lost itself, at times, in the luxuriant growth with which Norris adorned its banks.

He was a realist in the best sense in which that term can be applied to American writers. He saw the connection of phenomena; he could combine so many factors to bring out one great idea that the narrowness of literary specialism seems all the smaller and the thinner for his having written. His very faults were the faults of his real inherent greatness. The repetitions in which he indulged, the occasionally careless writing, the strange, and, sometimes unlawful effects which he produced, were merely served as foils of the strength with which we held to the main idea of his work. He was carried along with the swirl and rush of his conception and took the reader headlong with him.

If ever modern conditions could find an interpreter, a seer, who could look through the tangled meanness and contemptible avarice of to-day, and see lying within the welter the essential truths of right and wholesome living, Norris was the man, and in his death we lose the one man who has given promise of being a really great exponent of a very sordid time.

This is the pity of the death of Frank Norris. It is not that he died young; some of the immortals have passed away even younger than he, and we cannot feel even a passing regret for their departure; they had sung their

songs, they had written their story and deserved "the rest that remaineth."⁵

At a time when literary work has become almost synonymous with commerce, when the man that speaks out what he thinks is but little more rare than the man that thinks at all, when the budding writer regards a bank account as the full fruition of his hopes, it is our misfortune that a young man who had high ideals and individual views, and, who could strike at a wrong without his eyes being blinded by the wealth of the wrong doer should have passed from our midst. [The rest of this column deals with Jack London, Gelett Burgess, David Starr Jordan, and Helen Huntington.]

Notes

¹The less well-known *Raven*, which advertised itself as "California's Popular Magazine," was edited by Theo Lowe and published in San Francisco.

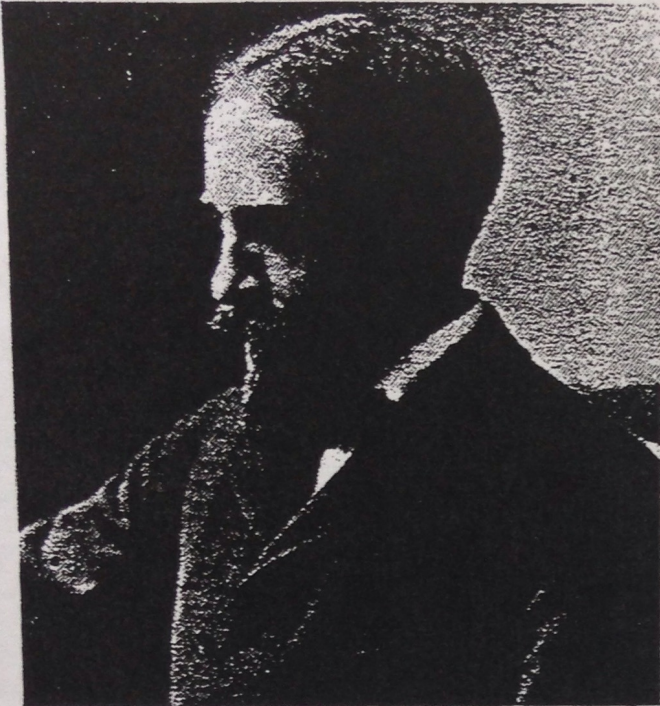
²Jack London's story "Moon-Face" was published in *The Argonaut*, 51 (21 July 1902), 36; that same month *The Century* published Norris's "The Passing of Cock-eye Blacklock," 64 (July 1902), 385-91. London explained the incident in a letter of April 6, 1906 to S.S. McClure: "It is a common practice of authors to draw material for their stories, from the newspapers. Here are the facts of life reported in journalistic style, waiting to be made into literature. So common is this practice that often amusing consequences are caused by several writers utilizing the same material. Some years ago, while I was in England, a story of mine was published in the *San Francisco Argonaut*. In the *Century* of the same date was published a story by Frank Norris. While these two stories were quite different in manner of treatment, they were patently the same in foundation and motive. At once the newspapers paralleled our stories. The explanation was simple: Norris and I had read the same newspaper account and proceeded to exploit it" (*The Letters of Jack London*, ed. Earle Labor, Robert C. Leitz, III, and I. Milo Shepard, vol. 2 [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988], 568-69). For a discussion of this episode, see also Franklin Walker, "Frank Norris and Jack London," *Mills College Magazine* (Spring, 1966), 15-23.

³Norris, in his May 1902 "Salt and Sincerity" column in *The Critic*, 40, 447-50, identified the "Plain People" as the "condemned bourgeoisie" (450).

⁴*Trilby* (1894), a novel by George DuMaurier, achieved such popularity that during its heyday *The Critic* created a department of "Trilbyana."

⁵Lewis is probably misquoting Tennyson's "In Memoriam A.

H. H.," section XXXI, l. 14: "The rest remaineth unrevealed.
..."



Lewis E. Gates, 1860-1924

Polish Academic Writing on Frank Norris

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Master's theses and doctoral dissertations on American writers written at Polish universities provide us with some insight into who is popular in that country and why. With the exception of Henry James and Mark Twain, the early American Realists (1865-1895) have attracted marginal interest. On the other hand, those American realists published between 1915 and 1939 have received extraordinary attention in the Polish academy. Seven of the nine most popular writers there flourished during the inter-war years (see the table below); inferable is the fact that, for better or worse, Poles feel that our Realists of this period capture the essence of the "American experience" much better than any other group before or after. In passing, one also notes, then, that their defining literary image of modern America is derived from literature published fifty-five to seventy-five years ago. For better or worse, the dominant

image of *mass* culture is derived from American TV and film.

On the other hand, The American Naturalists whose works appeared between 1895 and 1915 (see table) have not fared so well, though the socio-economic significance of their writings has contributed in important ways to the Polish conception of American cultural history. While aesthetic concerns are apparent in the dissertations and theses, particularly with regard to the works of Crane and Lewis, and while the war theme and the subject of the "American Dream" bring many students to Crane and early Dreiser, respectively, Naturalists owe their popularity in large part to their anti-capitalist or pro-socialist stances. Thirty-seven percent of the Norris studies fall into this category, while an even higher percentage on social-political themes prevails in works on London, Lewis, and Sinclair. Finally, Polish academics, well aware of scholarly trends in USA, echo the American professoriate's preference for Crane and Dreiser over Norris and London.

THESES AND DISSERTATIONS

1865-1895:	Twain, M. 53 James, H. 42 Dickinson, E. 18 Howells, W.D. 7 Bierce, A. 6
1896-1915:	Crane, S. 23 Lewis, S. 18 London, J. 15 Dreiser, T. (early) 14 Norris, F. 8
1916-1939:	Fitzgerald, F.S. 80 Hemingway, E. 71 O'Neill, E. 62 Faulkner, W. 59 Eliot, T.S. 52 Steinbeck, J. 41 Dos Passos, J. 27 Dreiser, T. (late) 13

Eight master's theses, five of which are comparative in

focus, have been written on Frank Norris since 1955:

Zakrzewski, Bogusław. "Frank Norris and His Fight Against Capitalism." Warsaw: Warsaw University, 1955.

Wieczorek, Andrzej. "Frank Norris: His Literary Theory of the Novel and His Practice." Warsaw: Warsaw University, 1971.

Wesołowicz, Małgorzata. "The Impact of Industry and Society upon the Fictional Characters of Upton Sinclair, Frank Norris, and Sinclair Lewis." Warsaw: Warsaw University, 1977.

Łuczyńska, Bogumiła. "Naturalistic Elements in *Maggie*, *Sister Carrie*, and *McTeague*." Poznań: University im. Adam Mickiewicz, 1983.

Sołkiewicz, Nel. "The Role of Environment in American Naturalistic Fiction: Stephen Crane, Frank Norris, and Theodore Dreiser." Kraków: Jagielloń University, 1986.

Ziółkowski, Wojciech. "Stephen Crane, Frank Norris, Theodore Dreiser—American Naturalists: Inspirations." Gdańsk: Gdańsk University, 1988.

Strzelecka-Rypniewska, Grażyna. "The Romantic and Naturalistic Elements in Frank Norris' *The Octopus*." Poznań: University im. Adam Mickiewicz, 1991.

Law, Monika. "Social Problems in Frank Norris's *The Octopus*, John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, and James T. Farrell's *Studs Lonigan*." Kraków: Jagielloń University, 1993.

Current Publications: Update

Thomas K. Dean
Cardinal Struch College

Presented here is an eleventh installment designed to complement *Frank Norris: A Reference Guide* (1974). The arrangement of items is chronological and alphabetical within years.

Please forward new and omitted items to Thomas K. Dean.

Vernon, John. *Money and Fiction: Literary Realism in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984. Realistic novels like *McTeague* appear "when the social world undergoes a gradual erosion by the material" with a resulting "sharp division between self and world" (65).

Anderson, Jennifer, and Robert C. Leitz, III. "Norris Notices in *The Conservator*," *Frank Norris Studies*, No. 11 (Spring 1991), 5-8. Reprints Horace Traubel's reviews of *The Octopus*, *The Responsibilities of the Novelist*, *The Third Circle*, and *Vandover and the Brute*.

Blues, Thomas. "A Note on Frank Norris's Banjo," *Frank Norris Studies*, No. 12 (Autumn 1991), 7-10. Describes Norris's banjo on display at the Phi Gamma Delta Fraternity museum in Lexington, Kentucky, including Norris's notations on the instrument's head. Also includes biographical data regarding Norris's banjo-playing and literary uses of the banjo.

Boyd, Jane Jennifer Jones. "Frank Norris: Spatial Form and Narrative Time," *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 51, No. 7 (January 1991), 2378-A. Considers pictorialism, spatial form, and narrative time in the major works.

Clark, William Joseph. "Naturalism, Revitalization and the Fiction of Frank Norris," *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 52, No. 5 (November 1991), 1793-A. Norris's novels document the "cultural crisis" of the 1890s and offer solutions according to Anthony F. C. Wallace's model of "revitalization movements."

Cook, Don L. "*McTeague* at Ninety: The Novel and Its Tensions," *Frank Norris Studies*, No. 11 (Spring 1991), 2-5. The tension between "rational thesis and random effects" in *McTeague* is an intended



Alphonse Mucha, a contemporary of Norris who also studied at the Académie Julian, was to have provided the cover art for the recently published edition of *The Pit* (Penguin) from his *Documents Décoratifs* (1902), plate 47 above. The publisher instead substituted the now-familiar scene from the Board of Trade, thwarting the plan to pictorialize Norris's desire to make the sometimes *femme fatale* Laura the central character and to "interest the reader more in the problems of her character and career than in any other human element in the book."

development resulting from Norris's narrative technique and constitutes an essential part of the reading experience provided.

scope.

Fine, David. "Running out of Space: Vanishing Landscapes in California Novels," *Western American Literature*, 26 (1991), 209-218. Representation of the landscape in California literature like Norris's *McTeague* illustrates that, in the West, people repeatedly discover spatial and temporal limitations rather than the openness and freedom one might expect them to encounter.

Litton, Alfred G. "The Kinetoscope in *McTeague*: 'The Crowning Scientific Achievement of the Nineteenth Century,'" *Studies in American Fiction*, 19 (1991), 107-112. A kinetoscope film of new dentistry techniques may have inspired some specific details in *McTeague*. Thematically, the misnaming of the vitascope as the then-obsolete "kinetoscope" in the novel is important: lower-class inability to keep up with scientific progress foreshadows *McTeague*'s own impending obsolescence.

Heddendorf, David. "The 'Octopus' in *McTeague*: Frank Norris and Professionalism," *Modern Fiction Studies*, 37 (1991), 677-688. Norris's contempt for *McTeague*'s lack of professionalism as a dentist affirms middle-class values of professional status and thereby Norris's own status as a professional writer, yet his sympathy for *McTeague* later in the novel indicates ambivalence toward an impersonal professional system which destroys individuals.

Lutz, Tom. *American Nervousness 1903: An Anecdotal History*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991, pp. 132-165. The logic of Norris's contradictions, particularly relating to gender, is the logic of neurasthenia.

Horwitz, Howard. *By the Law of Nature: Form and Value in Nineteenth-Century America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991, pp. 146-167. *The Pit* harmonizes the themes of speculation and marriage too readily, and is thus indicative of Norris's "fear of the cultural transformation to a credit economy he insisted it was the artist's job to narrate."

McElrath, Joseph R., Jr. "Frank Norris's Blix: Jeannette Black as Travis," *Frank Norris Studies*, No. 11 (Spring 1991), 8-11. Reprints society notices from *The Wave* demonstrating that Jeannette's entry into and withdrawal from high-society resemble Travis Bessemer's in *Blix*.

Hug, William J. "McTeague as Metafiction? Frank Norris' Parodies of Bret Harte and the Dime Novel," *Western American Literature*, 26 (1991), 219-228. The final section of *McTeague* comments on the flaws of Western stories by parodying dime-novel Westerns and Bret Harte's sentimental mining tales.

McFatter, Susan Prothro. "Parody and Dark Projections: Medieval Romance and the Gothic in *McTeague*," *Western American Literature*, 26 (1991), 119-135. *McTeague* parodies the medieval romance and the Gothic tale for thematic purposes.

Johnson, Amy. "A Recent Definition of Naturalism," *Frank Norris Studies*, No. 12 (Autumn, 1991), 5-7. June Howard's definition of naturalism and her interpretation of Norris in *Form and History in American Literary Naturalism* are too narrow in

Myers, Robert M. "Dreiser's Copy of *McTeague*," *Papers on Language and Literature*, 27 (1991), 260-267. Dreiser's markings in his personal copy of *McTeague*, now at the University of Miami, may help scholars understand Norris's literary influence on Dreiser—despite Dreiser's downplaying of the same.

Shawhan, Ralph Thompson. "Work and Play in the Novels of Frank Norris," *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 52, No. 6 (December 1991),

2153-A. Analyzes Norris's ambivalent use of play and work in the plots and metaphors of the novels.

Stronks, James. "B. F. Norris (Senior) in Probate Court, with New Light on Frank Norris as Son," *Frank Norris Studies*, No. 12 (Autumn 1991), 3-5. Describes the contents of documents in the Cook County (Chicago) archives relating to probate of the last will and testament of Norris's father.

Thomas, Brook. "Walter Benn Michaels and the New Historicism: Where's the Difference?" *Boundary 2*, 18 (1991), 18-59. Analyzes Michaels' analysis of *The Octopus* in *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism* (1987), claiming that Michaels unsuccessfully argues for unity between non-homologous cultural phenomena such as corporate capitalism and naturalism.

Wertheim, Stanley. "Frank Norris and Stephen Crane: Conviction and Uncertainty," *American Literary Realism*, 24 (1991), 54-62. While Norris may have been influenced by Crane, his deterministic world-view was not as nihilistic as Crane's.

Wutz, Michael. "Technology and the Novel: Narrative Engines in Modern Fiction," *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 52, No. 4 (October 1991), 1305-1306-A. Among other novels which explore the conceptual relationships between the machine and fiction, *McTeague* uses the cable car as a "narrative engine" of the novel's structure.

* * *

AT RIGHT is not the very "molar of some vast Brobdingnag" that graced Polk Street; rather, Professor Clare Virginia Eby of the University of Connecticut has tastefully given a new twist to the concept of the materiality of the text via this reinscription of the most toothsome signifier of all.

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