
No. 28, Autumn 1999

Frank Norris Studies

Edited by Joseph R. McElrath, Jr.

©1999, The Frank Norris Society



Frontispiece, *Shanghaied: A Story of Adventure off the California Coast*
(London and Edinburgh: T. Nelson & Sons, [1910]).

Commemorating the meeting between Moran Sternersen and a startled Josie Herrick at the close of Chapter XII, this illustration may have appeared in the first English edition published in London in 1908 by Arthur C. Pearson, Ltd., and may have initially graced a serialization in an English periodical. No one has as yet located a copy of the Pearson edition or discovered a transatlantic serialization.

Unanswerable Questions in *McTeague*: The Maria-Zerkow Subplot as an Allegory of Norris's Naturalism

Nathanial B. Smith

North Carolina State University

The ever-growing band of Frank Norris critics has largely ignored the third plot of *McTeague*, the dirty, back-alley, shadowy exchanges between maid Maria and rag-picker Zerkow. Perhaps the blatant racism of the subplot—the tribulations of a (so-called) stupid-Mexican/Central American-greaser and a perverted-Polish-Jewish-miser—causes understandable blind-spots to form in some readers' eyes.¹ The story of this dark couple, however, enacts some interesting complexities in Norris's theory of fiction-writing (his "Naturalism"): the subplot is an allegory of Norris's anxiety about referentiality, source, and imagination in *McTeague*. Several critics have noticed a certain "anxiety" in the novel's narrative voice: Mary Lawlor finds a "distrust for the signifier" in Norris's work, "a wariness of any mark's pretension to 'stand for' something else."² Specifically, Norris seems anxious about the referentiality of his writing—whether *McTeague* is empirically "realist" or imaginatively "romantic." William E. Cain, addressing "the forms of power" Norris evokes in *McTeague*, finds a similar anxiety manifest in the "curious" repeated motif of questions—about characters, situations, motivations—that the narrator cannot answer.³ These unanswerable questions, I will show, reveal a deeper novelistic anxiety about genre, about whether the novel is "realism," written from eye-witness experience, or "romance," an ultimately imaginary, fictional headbirth. If *McTeague* is "realism," there should be no unanswerable questions, but if "romance," the narrative voice should not be so anxious about the novel's empirical referentiality. The narrative voice of *McTeague* is at pains to conceal the perceived referential gap between the "fictional" story and the "real" world, and the anxiety about its ultimate failure to do so gets displaced onto Norris's story of Maria's story of gold plate, two stories without referents.

Norris, of course, was not the only author in his generation with writerly anxieties about referents. As Amy Kaplan has observed, many late-19th century realist writers made a desperate attempt to represent the real "at a time when such knowledge no longer seemed available to

common sense."⁴ Realism—a turbid genre Kaplan calls "the fiction of the referent"—is a desperate attempt to construct reality in an insubstantial world where the breakdown of traditional centers of cultural authority has created a general fear of "unreality."⁵ Strongly influenced by empirical notions about "truthful" representation, the purported ideology of journalism, late-19th century realists like William Dean Howells theorized that the perceived gap between sign and referent could be bridged by writing from direct, eye-witness experience.⁶ Realists, as is well known, defined their genre against the "imaginative," fanciful, non-empirical writing of romance.

Norris's theory of fiction—his "Naturalism"—seeks to bridge these categories, combining "imaginary" romance with empirical, referential "realism." Naturalism, he writes, "is midway between the Realists and Romanticists, taking the best from each."⁷ Norris appears anxious, however, about the part of his Naturalism which (romantically and imaginatively) breaks the realist's empirical strictures.⁸ Norris's literary essays both support and contradict the tenets of realism, an equivocation noticeable in his "Fiction is Selection": "You can't imagine anything that you have not already seen and observed," writes the empirical Norris. On the other hand, good writers *can* describe things they have read or heard about second-hand: "Fiction is what seems real, not what is real." This is Norris's "romantic" side. "But for all this," he continues, as if to apologize for breaking the empirical law, "the story writer must go to real life for his story. You can never think out, or invent or imagine a tale that will be half so good as the things that have 'really happened.'"⁹ This is Norris the "realist."

Fiction does not have to be real, for Norris, but it somehow must come from the real, must have its "source" in the real. This is, in essence, a description of *McTeague*. Parts of the story of Trina and McTeague "really did" happen: Norris read about the brutal murder—plus much background information—in the newspaper.¹⁰ "Norris was a diligent worker and researcher," writes Cain, "priding himself on studying the settings and backgrounds (even reading up on dentistry) for *McTeague*" (p. 203). Yet *McTeague* ultimately is a fictional novel, not a journalistic, eye-witness reporting of events. The story both has its source in the real and is imagined. This tenuous combination of journalism—where Norris began his writing career—and fiction parallels the

dialectic of Naturalism.

The Maria-Zerkow plot allegorically enacts Norris's attempt to merge realism and romance into Naturalism and illustrates Norris's anxiety about referentiality, source, and imagination. (That Norris does literary theory in narrative form should not surprise anyone familiar with his literary essays, many of which are, essentially, collections of anecdotes.) Judging by Norris's own ideas of fiction, Maria starts the novel as an even better "Naturalist" than the narrative voice of *McTeague*. She has a direct, eye-witness relationship with the characters of Polk Street, just the kind of immediate, inside information that the narration—because the story is partly "imagined" and mediated through the newspaper—can never achieve. As the novel continues, however, Maria becomes dangerously romantic: her gold-story is "romance" in that it has no actually-observable referent: it's imagined, fanciful, all in her head. Maria's husband Zerkow plays "realist" to his wife's romance. He tests the referentiality of Maria's story by asking questions about the "reality" behind Maria's words—questions, like those of the narrative voice, which are ultimately unanswerable—but Zerkow finds only "imaginary" signifiers. In the end, the two characters are erased as a critical step in the narration's subtle dialectic where the categories of real and imaginary are both cancelled and preserved, that is, synthesized into "Naturalism."

The best critical approaches to the Maria-Zerkow plot—those of Barbara Hochman and Walter Benn Michaels¹¹—read Maria as raconteur, but critics have failed to notice Maria's (and Zerkow's) complex relationship with *McTeague's* (storytelling) narrative voice. One of the best critical studies of the novel's narrative voice is Cain's "Presence and Power in *McTeague*," yet, like most other studies, Cain ignores Maria, mentioning her only once in connection to her similarity to Trina (p. 211); Zerkow is completely absent from his study. Cain is interested in "Norris's spectacular presence in his own text" (p. 206), stressing that, for Norris, the Naturalist novelist must exert powerful, almost violent control on the plot and characters of the story. In a passage Cain quotes, Norris writes that

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.¹²

To write his kind of fiction, Norris must depict forces that "twist" and "wrench" characters from realistic conventions, and for Cain, this "testifies to [Norris's] sense of the novelist's power" (p. 205).

Although unrecognized by Cain, Maria's first appearance in *McTeague* functions precisely as this sort of catalyzing activation for Norris's naturalist plot; the novel's narration, in effect, uses her as a kind of device to "wrench" the *McTeagues* out of a realist setting and into the tragic world of Norris's Naturalism. For Norris, the defining quality of realism is based not on how the story is told but on the story's content. "Realist" fiction—exemplified by Howells—tells a story about normal life: for Norris, it "is the drama of a broken teacup . . . the excitement of an afternoon call, the adventure of an invitation to dinner."¹³ At the novel's beginning, *McTeague* clearly is "in part a creature of [Howellsian] realism," living a rather commonplace, ordinary life despite his idiosyncratic habits.¹⁴ Maria's first appearance disrupts this realist scene, setting in motion what many critics call the novel's "pivotal event": Trina's winning the lottery, which arguably triggers her tragic transformation.¹⁵ *McTeague's* friend Marcus is waiting with his cousin Trina for her first dental appointment when Maria enters the room to clean. Completing her work, Maria starts to leave but stops to ask Trina if she will "'Buy a ticket in the lottery?'"¹⁶ Despite Marcus's warnings that "'it's against the law,'" Trina, "very uneasy," buys a ticket "for the sake of being rid of her. Maria disappeared" (p. 13). As if to foreground the change Trina will experience, this scene shows how Trina "is neither miserly nor even frugal" at the beginning; Joseph Gardner observes as well that acting thus "would be unthinkable to [Trina] later in the novel when she refuses to give her husband even a nickel for carfare on a rainy day."¹⁷ Maria—introducing the lottery, the beginning of Trina's miserliness—activates a plot-line leading to ruin for Trina, Marcus, and *McTeague*, who leave the realm of commonplace realism and enter into the domain of Norris's tragic Naturalism.

Even though Cain does not discuss this pivotal scene, it seems clear that his reading would see Norris exerting authorial power and using Maria to help stage "the 'vast and terrible' acts of [Norris's] naturalistic theater" (p. 208). The argument indeed works to explain Maria's role in Trina's lottery-winning, yet Cain's reading is weakened

by its commitment to discovering Norris's own conscious intentions, a point made clear from his emphasis on Norris's "presence" in *McTeague*. It is possible, on the other hand, to locate in the novel a less conscious, less intentional struggle to hide the discrepancies between Norris's novelistic theory and his actual fictional practice. This struggle occurs not with the "author" (and his "presence") but at the level of the narrative voice. Rather than reading Norris as overtly "using" his characters, this study will search out a latent narrative strategy of displacement where the characters of Maria and Zerkow enact or model aspects of Norris's fictional ideals.¹⁸

Despite its limitations, Cain's argument offers the best close reading of the novel's narrative voice. He calls attention to the strange, repeated motif of unanswerable questions the narrative voice asks. The first volley of questions occurs immediately before Maria's first appearance—at the start of the novel's second chapter—when McTeague realizes he has an appointment with Miss Baker that afternoon. The narrator begins to tell of the "affair" between the "little old maid" and Old Grannis, but the description quickly unravels into a much-quoted series of questions:

Was it the first romance in the lives of each? Did Old Grannis ever remember a certain face amongst those that he had known when he was young Grannis—the face of some pale-haired girl, such as one sees in the old cathedral towns of England? Did Miss Baker still treasure up in a seldom opened drawer or box some faded daguerreotype, some strange old-fashioned likeness, with its curling hair and high stock? It was impossible to say. (p. 9)

Cain finds this "impossible to say" "oddly withholding"; it is an instance, he argues, when Norris "questions his power" as a novelist to reveal his characters' "history." Sometimes Norris powerfully controls his characters, forcibly twisting and shaping their destinies, "yet he also appears detached from them, finding their world absorbing but their actions mystifying"; Cain argues that the unanswerable questions manifest Norris's awareness (and anxiety) that "there are limits to the novelist's knowledge and authority" (p. 203).

These novelistic "limits," I want to suggest, have much more to do with genre than with Norris's intentionality. To write with "absolute authority," argues William Dean Howells, the chief theorist of realism, "you must not go

outside of your own observation and experience; you cannot tell what you have not seen."¹⁹ The Grannis-Baker questions, as Cain notes, involve the characters' "histories," past events necessarily beyond the narrator's eyewitness observations. By admitting that it cannot answer these extra-empirical questions, the narrative announces or foregrounds its claims to "realism": the novel will not offer up "romantic" conjecture about things outside the narrator's experience. We might begin to wonder, though, why the narrative is so interested in *appearing* realist unless it is anxious about not *being* so. After all, the narrative voice is not ignorant of every character's past: on the novel's first page we are told of McTeague's childhood at the Big Dipper Mine, and of course we meet Trina's family. A second glance at the Grannis-Baker questions, in fact, reveals that the questions are not so empirically unanswerable as might first appear. The realist writer who goes "to real life for his story," as Norris claims in "Fiction is Selection," could quite simply ask the Old Grannis and Miss Baker characters about their memories of youthful love. The difference between McTeague's past and that of the elders involves referentiality: Norris discovered the McTeague character's story from "real" newspaper articles; Old Grannis and Miss Baker's past is unsayable because the characters are purely imaginary and thus referentially sourceless.

The narrative strategy of modestly yet deceptively admitting that "it was impossible to say" creates in *McTeague* something that Derrida might call a "law": questions about the referential source of things cannot be answered. The narrative's questions must remain unanswered for Norris's Naturalism to work. Because Naturalism is suspended between the empirical and the imaginary, the reader must not probe the "actual" source of the novel too deeply. These questions will upset the delicate balance; they will uncover the "imaginative" nature of the text. The part of Norris's narrative that asks these referential questions is precisely the realist part of the narrative: it questions the novelist's "authority" (as Cain has it) to know the entire truth of a story that has not been witnessed first-hand. That part of the narrative which is unable to answer these questions, however, shows that *McTeague* operates like an imagined, "romantic" text. Don't ask if the story is "real," Norris's law tacitly states; it's real, after all, if it seems real.

It is in this quite convoluted context—indeed immediately following these “impossible to say” Grannis-Baker questions—that the narrator introduces the character about whom “the flat knew absolutely nothing further than that she was Spanish-American,” Maria Miranda Macapa (p. 13). Occupying a room “in the garret” (p. 71), she is a “fixture” in the flat, having located there before any of the current lodgers; there are “legends” about Maria but no facts (p. 13). It is “impossible to say” Maria’s past. As with Grannis and Baker, the narrative foregrounds its lack of information about Maria’s past and makes readers conscious of her status as an imaginary character out of “Romance.” If it is true that Norris modeled Maria on a story his mother told about a quirky servant, Maria’s “romantic” nature—derived from second-hand accounts—becomes increasingly evident.²⁰

Maria’s inexplicable origins are only one particularly vivid instance of the narrative’s more general problem of presenting imagined, fictional details as if they were experienced facts. There is no witness to Maria’s past, and perhaps because of this, she is in the position of being a witness of the other Polk Street lodgers, and the narration uses her as a “source” of narrative information—as an answer to some of its unanswerable questions. She has gathered information seemingly unavailable to (read: “impossible to say” for) the narrator. “Maria,” the narrator relates, “had been the first to call the flat’s attention to the [Grannis-Baker] affair, spreading the news of it from room to room, from floor to floor. Of late she had made a great discovery” (p. 9). The narrator goes on to tell about the couple’s synchronized, habitual behaviors behind almost-closed doors but fails to “cite” Maria as the source of this information. The narrator takes these details from Maria and then describes the couple’s habits in the omniscient voice; after the narrator details Maria’s “discovery,” the character herself simply disappears.

If any character is in the position to answer the narration’s unanswerable questions about the Grannis-Baker affair, it’s Maria. She has a mysterious, writerly relationship to the Grannis-Baker plot, a point highlighted with the narrative description of one of her junk raids. “Once every two months,” recounts the narrator, “Maria Macapa set the entire flat in commotion. She roamed the building from garret to cellar, searching each corner, ferreting through every old box and trunk and barrel” (p. 20). The narrative of her search begins in Old Grannis’s room: “she began

rummaging about in Old Grannis’s closet shelves” where she finds an old pitcher which she convinces its owner to relinquish (p. 21). She then moves on to Miss Baker’s: “Got any junk?” cries Maria at the old woman’s door. “Peering into the corners of the room,” Maria finds a pair of old shoes in the closet (p. 21).

Snooping in closets, peering inside rooms, and gaining first-hand, empirical knowledge of Grannis and Baker, Maria personifies Norris’s ideal Naturalist writer. As she does with the McTeague plot, Maria here disrupts the realist setting—the “drama of a broken teacup,”²¹ a virtual description of the Grannis and Baker affair.²² Norris writes that his Naturalism is a “realist” setting seen from a romantic “point of view.”²³ Naturalists must take romance with them when they call on their (Howellsian realist) neighbors:

So you think Romance would stop in the front parlor and discuss medicated flannels and mineral waters with the ladies? Not for more than five minutes. She would be off upstairs with you, prying, peeping, peering into the closets of the bedroom.²⁴

The Naturalist writer must investigate, must dig below the surface to find the truth of things. “Romantic” Maria, peeping into Grannis’s and Baker’s closets, quite literally—or is it “allegorically”?)—acts out Norris’s vision of the Naturalist project. Maria is both an eye-witness and an investigator, prying beneath the surface of “realist” Grannis and Baker.

Norris has projected onto Maria the qualities of the Naturalist writer—a strategy that in part contradicts Norris’s own theories on good fiction-writing, that stories must be based not on second-hand “Literature” but on direct, immediate “Life.” “Give us stories now,” writes Norris, “that are happening every hour of the time. It’s the Life that we want, the vigorous real thing, not the curious weaving of words and the polish of literary finish.”²⁵ In the “imaginary” realm of Polk Street, however, Maria acts as Norris’s eyes and ears. Her rumors are perfect Naturalist tales; she is a repository of the Naturalism unavailable to Norris’s narrative voice. The latter even uses Maria as a source to answer some questions (about, for instance, Grannis-Baker), yet other questions are left unanswered, as if the narrative is using these questions as a kind of foil to protect itself against the charge that it is too imaginary, revealing Norris’s anxiety about his failure

to write empirical realism. While Maria herself enacts Norris's Naturalism, then, Norris's "use" of Maria as a fictional device (or, better, the displacement of his literary theories onto her) exposes the contradictions inherent in the kind of fiction he calls "Naturalist."

The nascent connections between Maria and *McTeague's* narrative voice get more complex with the introduction of Zerkow. Just as Maria introduces the reader to the Grannis-Baker affair—telling stories seemingly unavailable to the narrative voice—she introduces the reader to Zerkow. Maria's visits to Zerkow's hovel mirror some of Norris's writings on the Naturalist writer who, for Norris, must take the romantic point-of-view "among the rags and wretchedness, the dirt and despair" of tenement houses.²⁶ As she has before, Maria again embodies this (Naturalistic) romantic point-of-view. Back from "his daily rounds" of rag-picking for the day, Zerkow is at home when Maria peers into his junk shop:

On the walls, on the floor, and hanging from the rafters was a world of debris, dust-blackened, rust-corroded. Everything was there, every trade was represented, every class of society; . . . Zerkow's junk shop was the last abiding-place, the almshouse, of such articles as had outlived their usefulness. (p. 25)

Maria comes to Zerkow's door bearing a "dirty pillowcase" (p. 24) full of the junk collected from her earlier raid, the treasures all good Naturalist writers need to tell "real" and true stories. Maria's appearance at Zerkow's door enacts the ending of Norris's theory-story of the "Romantic" raids on private boxes and closets:

And she [Romance] would pick here a little and there a little, making up a bag of hopes and fears, and a package of joys and sorrows—great ones, mind you—and then come down to the front door, and stepping out into the street, hand you the bags and package, and say to you—"That is Life!"²⁷

If Romance's "bag" or "package" of collected odds and ends is the Naturalist writer's raw material, Maria's pillowcase full of collected junk and Zerkow's junk-house which contains "everything" (p. 25) precisely represent Norris's concept of "Life," the Naturalist subject *par excellence*.²⁸

Zerkow's hovel and Miss Baker's closet have this much in common: they are metaphors of the source of "real" Naturalist fiction. Not surprisingly, then, they also have in common the mediation of Maria. Just as Maria and not the

narrator is the "source" of inside information about Grannis and Baker, she is the sole source of information about Zerkow. The reader, in fact, witnesses Zerkow only in the presence of Maria: at no point does the narrator describe Zerkow without "seeing" him through the eyes of Maria, as if the maid herself and not the narrative were writing about the old miser. Thus, while Zerkow represents "Life"—the "real"—this source can only be narrated through a fictional character, "imaginary"; because Norris's novel operates within the dialectic of real and imaginary, it cannot avoid using (imaginary) literary devices to tell the Naturalist tale of "Life."

Many critics have noticed this "derivative" quality to the Maria-Zerkow plot, but they have failed to find its (allegorical) complexity in relation to the narrative voice. Maria embodies certain aspects of the narration: before Zerkow appears in *McTeague*, the narrator takes Maria's rumor-telling (her incipient storytelling) for narrative "truth." Zerkow is introduced into the plot as another aspect of the narration: the question-asker. Zerkow becomes an embodiment of the narrative's early Grannis-Baker questions: his dialogue reads like those questions put in quotation marks, character-ized. Like the narration's questions, Zerkow asks about the referential veracity of Maria's autobiographical stories: the anecdote of her name ("'Had a flying squirrel an' let him go'") and the tale of the golden plate. Zerkow not only asks, but—unlike the narrative voice—gets some (limited) answers to his questions.

For Zerkow, the most precious item Maria brings him is gold. The maid has a habit of stealing bits of gold from *McTeague's* Dental Parlors, and Zerkow—the stereotypically greedy Jew—"was not one who would let gold go out of his house" (p. 26). "It was impossible to look at Zerkow and not know instantly that greed—inordinate, insatiable greed—was the dominant passion of the man"; gold, in particular, "was his dream, his passion; at every instant he seemed to feel the generous, solid weight of the crude fat metal in his palms. The glint of it was constantly in his eyes; the jangle of it sang forever in his ears as the jangling of cymbals" (p. 25). Perhaps even more precious than "the virgin metal" itself is the linguistic gold Maria brings to Zerkow's imagination. The first time we meet Zerkow, he asks the maid to repeat her story "about those gold dishes you told me last time you were here" (p. 26). The relationship which begins as one

between a seller and a buyer quickly shifts to one between a storyteller and a listener. "Well, it was this way," begins Maria, "looking straight in front of her with eyes that saw nothing":

"It was when I was little. My folks must have been rich, oh, rich into the millions—coffee, I guess—and there was a large house, but I can only remember the plate. . . . There were more than a hundred pieces, and every one of them gold. You should have seen the sight when the leather trunk was opened. It fair dazzled your eyes. It was a yellow blaze like a fire, like a sunset; . . . every [piece] was like a mirror, smooth and bright, just like a little pool when the sun shines into it." (p. 27)

Zerkow listens to the story with a combination of "misery" (p. 27) and "delight" (p. 28); he asks Maria to repeat the story, and when she finally gets up to leave, he invites her to "'come again any time you feel like it, and tell me more about the plate'" (p. 28).

Those critics who take up the Maria-Zerkow subplot with any care have tended to focus on Maria's story, comparing it with the other appearances of gold in *McTeague* and, more recently, examining the way the story sets up models of signification.²⁹ For our purposes, the story can be seen as a kind of answer to the narrator's earlier queries about Maria's past history. We have speculated that, because Maria is the first resident at Polk Street, there is no witness to her earlier life. The story of the gold plate, if we can take it for narrative truth, would at least partially satisfy our curiosity about Maria's past.

It is precisely this leap of faith—taking Maria at her word—that the narrative for some reason wants to discourage readers from making. Our reaction to Maria's story is highly influenced by those of *McTeague's* characters themselves. Before we ever hear the story from Maria's mouth, indeed before we even hear Maria quoted directly, *McTeague's* friend Marcus judges the truth-value of the gold story, as he explains to his cousin Trina: Maria's "'queer in the head. She ain't regularly crazy, but I don't know, she's queer. Y'ought to hear her go on about a gold dinner service she says her folks used to own'" (p. 12). Marcus's language is very telling, containing within it some of the paradoxes involved with the narrative's treatment of Maria. The remarkable thing about Maria is that she's "queer," mentally disturbed; yet the only piece of evidence

supporting this diagnosis is the story of the plate; even Marcus admits, "'I don't know'" about her mental condition for sure. Without evidence one way or the other, it seems "impossible to say" whether to trust in the validity, the referentiality of Maria's story, and yet most every character seems to have faith in the story's unreliability.

The narrative voice has precisely this same equivocal-yet-judgmental attitude about Maria's story. Immediately after Maria recites the full story to Zerkow, the narrator delivers a kind of mocking praise: "Illiterate enough, unimaginative enough on all other subjects, her distorted wits called up this picture with marvellous distinctness" (p. 27). Presumably, Maria's illiteracy serves to strengthen the story's validity: it is not likely that Maria has read this story in any book, and she is "unimaginative" about other things ("'she ain't regularly crazy'"). The narrative's loaded adjectives, however, reveal its actual opinion that the story is pure fiction, the product of "distorted wits." While ultimately agreeing with Marcus, the narrative for some reason does not want to answer the question definitively, as revealed in a remarkable string of questions one paragraph after Maria's story:

Did that wonderful service of gold plate ever exist outside of her diseased imagination? Was Maria actually remembering some reality of a childhood of barbaric luxury? Were her parents at one time possessed of an incalculable fortune derived from some Central American coffee plantation, a fortune long squandered in the support of revolutionary governments?

It was not impossible. (p. 27)

The narrative leaves this string of questions open-ended so that readers can either affirm or deny them, but the leading adjectives—"diseased" and "distorted"—again make it clear that, whether the narrative will admit it or not, the questions have already been answered. Did that plate exist? Impossible.

Along with revealing the narrative's equivocal judgment of Maria's gold-story, the string of (un)answerable questions solidifies the criteria by which Maria's story—and indeed fiction itself—should be examined. The story is either a product of a "distorted," "diseased *imagination*"; or it is "actually" a true, verifiable account of "some *reality*" from Maria's childhood (p. 27, my emphasis). Framed by *McTeague's* narrative as an

imaginary, "romantic" example of fiction, the story seems to have an "imaginary" relationship with the story's purported referent, the "actual" gold plate.

In contrast to all the other characters in *McTeague* (except Old Grannis at Trina's lottery party [p. 70]), Zerkow believes Maria's story. He "chose to believe it, forced himself to believe it, lashed and harassed by a pitiless greed that checked at no tale of treasure, however preposterous" (pp. 27-28). At first, Zerkow is content to treat the story as purely imaginary, something that brings the gold vividly into his dreaming mind: "As he listened, with closed eyes and trembling lips, he fancied he could see that wonderful plate before him, there on the table; under his eyes, under his hand, ponderous, massive, gleaming" (p. 73). He enjoys the story because of its power to evoke imaginary images. The tale functions for Zerkow as a kind of fantasy out of a romance novel, a "tale of treasure" which the reader can imaginatively share.

At the same time, however, Zerkow is tortured by the tale: "what misery Zerkow endured as he listened. . . . What exasperation" (pp. 27-28). His "spasm[s] of anguish" ultimately are caused by his awareness of the split between sign and referent: the words are only tantalizing reminders of the lost gold. Zerkow, in essence, has trouble accepting Maria's story as "romance" and wants to read it as "realism," as something Maria "actually" observed and that "actually" exists. This bent towards realism is apparent in (what else?) the questions with which he "plied" Maria, "questions that covered every detail of that service of plate":

It was soft, wasn't it? You could bite into a plate and leave a dent? The handles of the knives, now, were they gold too? All the knife was made of one piece of gold, was it? And the forks the same? The interior of the trunk was quilted, of course? Did Maria ever polish the plates herself? When the company ate off this service, it must have made a fine noise—these gold knives and forks clinking together upon these gold plates.

(p. 73)

These questions might remind us of the narrative's own questions except that, in their context, they are answerable, even though we do not hear Maria respond.

The real trouble begins when Zerkow begins to ask the one question Maria cannot answer, the only question, ironically, Zerkow really wants answered: "Where did it all

go? Where did it go?' Maria shook her head. 'It's gone, anyhow'" (p. 36). What began as a friendly conversation between social outcasts develops into Zerkow's obsessive desire—"a veritable mania"—to locate the source of Maria's signification (p. 73). Using an empirical definition of (Howells's) realism, Zerkow believes that Maria's story must have come from eye-witness experience:

For it stood to reason, didn't it, that Maria could not have described it with such wonderful accuracy and such careful detail unless she had seen it recently—the day before, perhaps, or that very day, or that very hour, that *very hour?* (p. 137)

Zerkow begins to believe that, "not only had that service of gold plate once existed, but it existed now, entire, intact; . . . It was to be searched for" (p. 136). In large part to pry facts from Maria, Zerkow marries her, but the strategy backfires: she cannot answer questions about the gold's source, and after giving birth, she forgets the story altogether. Zerkow then begins to hunt, to imagine places where the referent could be hidden: "Perhaps it's buried near your old place somewhere" (73). Almost like a journalist investigating his hunches, the miserturned-miner literally digs for the (golden) referent: "Maria showed Trina the holes in the walls and the loosened boards in the flooring where Zerkow had been searching for the gold plate. Of late he had been digging in the back yard" (pp. 174-5). After all this, the referent is no-where to be found. It is absent. The referential question has been answered: there is indeed no-thing behind the referent; the sign is devoid of meaning; the signifier glitters in its own imaginary light.

As much as is possible within empirical ontology, Zerkow's search "answers" the referential question about Maria's signifiers. His questions have tested the story's referentiality using empirical criteria, and as we have suspected all along, it is "impossible" to locate the actual referent of her story. We have seen how Maria's rumor-stories (about the Grannis-Baker affair) function as Naturalist tales taken from "real life"; yet the phantasmic gold-story itself comes all too close to Norris's actual fictional practice. Both comprise signs with deeply problematic relationships to their referents. The main difference between the two stories involves the question of source: albeit second-hand and mediated, there is a source to Norris's novel: the newspaper articles. Maria's story is a purer form of romance than Norris's Naturalism, which

struggles to keep hold on its referentiality (its source) amidst the imaginary. Maria's story, unlike Norris's, is apparently sourceless. Just as the narrative's unanswered questions serve to deflect attention from Naturalism's inherent "imaginariness" by refusing to imagine answers, Zerkow's follow-up questions expose the imaginarity of Maria's story, insulating the narrative from questions about its own "imaginary" source. The narrative sets itself against—or above—this "bad" use of the imagination.

To complete this gesture of setting itself apart from the story of Maria and Zerkow, the narration must purge, remove, indeed kill off these characters. Maria's gold story is too much like *McTeague* itself, and Zerkow's questions probe referentiality too vigorously, homicidally. The narrative, like Zerkow, has asked referential questions, yet the "law" of Norris's naturalism dictates that referential questions must be left unanswered: questions about "real" and "imaginary" can be asked but must not be pursued. Zerkow's questions threaten to unravel the narration's sneaky technique of avoiding such questions, leaving them unresolved, and not probing imaginarity too deeply. His aggressive questions and their (partial) answers thus violate the narrative's law. The reader should expect the violators to be punished.

Questions of source again arise in the context of Zerkow's brutal murder of Maria. The trouble with narrating—and interpreting—the homicide is that the narrator cannot describe the actual murder. The narrative's sole access to Zerkow, we remember, is through the point-of-view of Maria: Zerkow never appears first-hand in the text without Maria's presence. Because that mediator does not survive to tell the story, the narrative voice cannot "witness" the murder. In essence, there is no one left alive—no "source"—to tell the tale. The reader thus gets the information about the murder second-hand and after the fact: "Trina found Maria sitting in front of the kitchen stove . . . She was dead. And as Trina touched her shoulder, her head rolled sideways and showed a fearful gash in her throat under her ear" (p. 177). While it seems clear that Zerkow is the murderer, the reader must rely on Heise the harness-maker's surmise: "'Zerkow, by God! he's killed her. Cut her throat. He always said he would'" (p. 179). The whole incident is filled with more rumors (stories) than hard evidence: someone in the crowd says "'[Zerkow's] skipped to San José.' Where the rumor started, and how, no one knew" (p. 180). Based on unreliable sources, the

questions surrounding the murder are, once again, unanswerable.

The rumors, however, are wrong: Zerkow has been framed by the narrative voice itself. All of Zerkow's digging for facts, sources, and referents gets the narrative a bit anxious: if Zerkow is so intent on finding the actuality of Maria's signifiers, perhaps the old miser will begin to work on *McTeague*'s signifiers the same way, exposing the actuality of Naturalism's imaginarity. Zerkow must be punished for violating the narrative's law. He asks the kinds of questions about stories that readers must not ask of Norris's Naturalism: questions about the empirical, eye-witness referentiality of the text. The death of Maria and Zerkow, furthermore, almost seem to vindicate the narrative's position on leaving questions open. Searching for referents can get you killed, the narrative warns; just don't do it.

The reader learns of Zerkow's death exactly the same way Norris learned of Trina's death, from the San Francisco *Examiner*:

Polk Street read of it in the morning papers. Towards midnight on the day of the murder Zerkow's body had been found floating in the bay near Black Point. No one knew whether he had drowned himself or fallen from one of the wharves. (p. 180)

Now that Maria, the narrative's witness or "source" for information, is dead, the narrative must mediate Zerkow differently; it must use another set of eyes to witness the miser's death. By "citing" this second-hand, mediated information, Norris exposes the actual source of *McTeague*: he has not witnessed these characters first-hand; he has merely read about them in the newspaper and has invented a narrative from this second-hand source.

Norris's displacement of Naturalism's inherent tensions and contradictions onto Maria and Zerkow seems cathartically to remove the narrative's anxiety. Once *McTeague* is rid of the subplot—about three-quarters of the way through the novel—the narrative apparently has overcome its anxiety about referentiality. There are few narrative questions after this point in the novel; the narrative, in any case, has never exhibited much anxiety about representing *McTeague* and Trina.

After tracing the machinations of Norris's allegory of genre, source, and referentiality, the fictional devices and narrative strategies of his novel, the question of realism

and romance again arises: if Norris's "allegorical" novel is not "Romance," what is? Norris's fiction, however, both supports and breaks the laws of realism, both critiques and uses the devices of romance. The contradictions, the laws and law-breakings, the anxiety about reference: all these make up Norris's fiction-writing strategy. *McTeague*, I think, continues to be read not because of its generic uncertainty, its philosophical complexity, or even its unanswered questions (although each plays a part in enhancing the novel's appeal). Readers will continue to enjoy *McTeague* precisely for its "imaginary" signifiers and equivocal fictionality—and because of the grotesque little tragedy of Maria and Zerkow, a largely unattributed source of textual pleasure.

Notes

¹For a discussion of Norris's "well-known nativist prejudices," see Hugh J. Dawson, "McTeague as Ethnic Stereotype," *American Literary Realism*, 20 (Fall 1987), 34-44.

²Mary Lawlor, "Placing Source in *Greed* and *McTeague*," in *Intertextuality in Literature and Film: Selected Papers from the Thirteenth Annual Florida State University Conference on Literature* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1994), pp. 98-9. In Lawlor's excellent examination of *McTeague*'s and Cribbens's gold-hunt, she reads the Western landscape as a "source" that Norris tries (yet knowingly fails) to represent.

³William E. Cain, "Presence and Power in *McTeague*," in *American Realism: New Essays*, ed. Eric J. Sundquist (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), p. 201. Subsequent page references appear within parentheses.

⁴Amy Kaplan, *The Social Construction of American Realism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 13.

⁵Kaplan, pp. 8, 19-20.

⁶Many critics have found similarities between realism and journalism. For an interesting reading of this intersection, see Kaplan, especially pp. 1-43.

⁷Frank Norris, "A Plea for Romantic Fiction," rptd. in *The Literary Criticism of Frank Norris*, ed. Donald Pizer (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1964), p. 75. The essays quoted in this study were all originally published in newspapers between 1899 and 1903. Subsequent references to Norris's literary essays are keyed to Pizer's edition.

⁸Harold Bloom would call this phenomenon *The Anxiety of Influence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973). Norris wrote that Howells was the most important fiction writer of his era and thus might conceivably have judged his own work by Howells' standards.

⁹"Fiction is Selection," pp. 52, 51.

¹⁰On "sources" of *McTeague* see Donald Pizer, *The Novels of Frank Norris* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966), pp. 52-63. Pizer excerpts news stories from the *San Francisco Examiner* and collects several relevant essays in his Norton Critical Edition of *McTeague* (see n.16).

¹¹Barbara Hochman, *The Art of Frank Norris, Storyteller* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1988); Walter Benn Michaels, *The Gold Standard and the Logic of American Naturalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

¹²"Zola as Romantic Writer," p. 72.

¹³"A Plea for Romantic Fiction," p. 76

¹⁴George Johnson, "Frank Norris and Romance," *American Literature*, 33 (March 1961), 59.

¹⁵Hochman calls Trina's transformation from house-wife to miser "the greatest critical problem in *McTeague*" (p. 68).

¹⁶*McTeague*, ed. Donald Pizer (New York: Norton, 1977), p. 13. Subsequent references to this edition appear within parentheses.

¹⁷Joseph H. Gardner, "Dickens, Romance, and *McTeague*: A Study in Mutual Interpretation," *Essays in Literature*, I (Spring 1974); rptd. in the Norton *McTeague*, p. 373.

¹⁸In the attempt to bypass authorial intentionality, my syntax at points will seem to ascribe a kind of intentionality and action to the narrative voice. This should not be taken literally, however; it simply feels like the clearest way to describe the allegorical movement of the plot.

¹⁹William Dean Howells, "Novel-Writing and Novel-Reading," *W. D. Howells: Selected Literary Criticism*, Vol. III: 1898-1920, ed. Don L. Cook et al. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 229.

²⁰See Franklin Walker, *Frank Norris: A Biography* (Garden City: Doubleday, Doran, 1932), p. 231.

²¹"A Plea for Romantic Fiction," p. 76.

²²Reading *McTeague* as a "convergence" of literary movements, Donna Campbell sees the *McTeague* plot as "realist," the Maria-Zerkow plot as "naturalist," and the Grannis-Baker plot as "women's local color fiction" (p. 41). While Campbell's argument is strong, she does not fully distinguish "realism" and "local color." Grannis and Baker—with "commonplace and uneventful lives" (p. 185)—might be examples of both "local color" and Howellsian realism.

²³"The True Reward of the Novelist," p. 86.

²⁴"A Plea for Romantic Fiction," p. 77.

²⁵"Weekly Letter" (August 24, 1901), p. 30. As Lawlor writes, Norris claims "a distaste for design and theory in favor of the spontaneous impulses of 'life,'" but the fiction still "relies on a certain limited range of artistic conventions in order to support itself—largely a mode we call Realism, or its relative, Naturalism" (96).

²⁶"A Plea for Romantic Fiction," p. 77.

²⁷"A Plea for Romantic Fiction," p. 77.

²⁸In the best reading of Zerkow, Walter Benn Michaels argues that the miser is less a junk "dealer" than a junk "collector": "instead of trying to turn his junk into gold by selling it, he keeps it around him as if it already were gold" (p. 153). Zerkow is, in this reading, an "alchemist" (p. 151). Future *McTeague* scholarship may benefit from a comparison between Jewish Zerkow and Walter Benjamin, whose notions of the collector, the storyteller, the alchemist, and *la chiffonière*—Baudelaire's "rag-picker"—correspond with elements in *McTeague* in general and Zerkow in particular.

²⁹Maria's story has been read as a microcosm of the process of signification. Critics argue that, overall, gold in *McTeague* operates as a recursive linguistic symbol, an image of signification. Walter Benn Michaels notices that gold in Maria's story is "like" both a source of light (blaze) and a reflection of light (mirror) (*McTeague*, p. 27); therefore, gold reflects itself and is its own reflection; it becomes itself by representing itself (Michaels, p. 158). Gold shares this self-referential quality with signification. Like signs, writes Lawlor, gold can "be exchanged for anything" while lacking "inherent value . . . gold is what we might call the ultimate signifier" (p. 93).

A Funerary Wedding in Frank Norris's *McTeague*

Nan Morelli-White

Eckerd College

To the first-time reader of Frank Norris's novel, it may appear that *McTeague* salvages what might have been a disastrous situation when, after struggling with his passion for Trina as she reclines unconscious in his dental parlors, he succumbs only to the urge to kiss her and, upon her awakening, elects to propose marriage. However, an examination of the imagery Norris uses in picturing their wedding reveals ample signification of the doom that awaits this union.

Norris's comment on the "strange inappropriateness" of *McTeague*'s serenade to himself as he shaves before the ceremony initially appears a simple statement of the obvious. Much later, however, we find that the lines from the song he sings

"No one to love, none to caress,
Left all alone in this world's wilderness."¹

prove Norris's reflection a darkly ironic one, linking the unfortunate pairing of *McTeague* and Trina Sieppe to the novel's final scene in which *McTeague* finds himself in the vast expanse or "wilderness" of Death Valley. But the phrase "strange inappropriateness" is more immediately meaningful when it is read as a descriptor of the language used by Norris to relate the details of the wedding ceremony conducted later that same day.

Strikingly discordant notes are sounded when Norris describes the father-in-law-to-be as he informs *McTeague* that the time for the service is at hand:

"Are you reatty?" he asked in a *sepulchral* whisper. "Gome, den." It was like King Charles summoned to *execution*. Mr. Sieppe preceded them into the hall, moving at a *funereal* pace. (p. 92; italics mine)

As those present at a normally joyous occasion are depicted, more imagery of the kind accumulates rapidly. The minister who conducts the brief ceremony appears "rigid, erect, impassive." Marcus Schouler, his demeanor a consequence of *McTeague*'s good fortune in wedding the winner of a sumptuous lottery prize, contributes to the dour atmosphere: he is, to say the least, "gloomy." Young Owgooste is "stupefied and a little frightened." When all of the witnesses are in place, a "profound silence ensued. . . . The most solemn expression pervaded every face. . . . Mrs. Sieppe . . . was crying" (pp. 92-93).

In this context, the flat statement—"Then Trina and the dentist were married"—takes on a ponderous weight. "The guests stood in constrained attitudes. . . . Mrs. Sieppe cried. . . . one could hear the low tones of the minister . . . and the suppressed sounds of Mrs. Sieppe's weeping." As the pair to be united for life kneels before the minister and their God, *McTeague*'s "knees thudded" upon the floor, and Trina "sank at his side" (p. 93). As if to avoid an unpleasant spectacle, the "company bowed their heads, Mr. Sieppe shutting his eyes tight" (p. 94). Echoed, it seems, is Norris's allusion to Charles I, who kneeled and bowed his head, submitting to his fate: decapitation. At the end of these "disappointing" proceedings, Trina—and "perhaps *McTeague* as well—felt that there was a certain inadequateness about the ceremony" (p. 94).

After the Rabelaisian wedding supper is concluded, Norris returns to the peculiar imagery employed earlier. He closes the wedding event as he opened it, with a song

being sung and with a comment suggesting its "inappropriateness":

The company had left the table and had assembled about the melodeon, where Selina was seated. At first they attempted some of the popular songs of the day, but were obliged to give over as none of them knew any of the words beyond the first line of the chorus. Finally they pitched upon "Nearer, My God, to Thee," as the only song which they all knew. Selina sang the "alto," very much off the key; Marcus intoned the bass, scowling fiercely, his chin drawn into his collar. They sang in very slow time. The song became *a dirge, a lamentable, prolonged wail of distress*:

"Nee-rah, my Gahd, to Thee,
Nee-rah to Thee-ah."

(p. 99; italics mine)

It appears, then, that through his choice of inverted imagery, Norris has presented in McTeague's and Trina's wedding the obsequies for the deaths of their souls as well as the only funeral rites the reader is to see for this doomed couple. Moreover, this dark union foreshadows the darker one that closes the novel, when McTeague finds himself bound to another kindred spirit, the depraved Marcus Schouler, in the hell of Death Valley.

Notes

¹Frank Norris, *McTeague: A Story of San Francisco*, ed. Donald Pizer (New York: Norton, 1977), p. 91. Subsequent page references within parentheses are to this edition.

§

Frank Norris Studies is a refereed journal published twice per year for the members of the Frank Norris Society. Dues of \$10.00 are payable each November. Submissions by Society members are welcomed. A printout and a diskette (text in WordPerfect or Microsoft Word) should be addressed to the Society at Department of English, Florida State University, Tallahassee FL 32306-1580. Please make the endnotes section a part of the continuous text rather than use the program's footnote or endnote function.

Editorial board members are: Richard Allan Davison, University of Delaware; Benjamin F. Fisher, University of Mississippi; Charles L. Crow, Bowling Green State University; Jesse S. Crisler, Brigham Young University; Robert C. Leitz, III, Louisiana State University in Shreveport; and Donald Pizer, Tulane University.

NEARER, MY GOD, TO THEE

by

MRS. SARAH ADAMS, 1841

Nearer, my God, to Thee,
Nearer to Thee,
E'en though it be a cross,
That raisest me;
Still all my song shall be,
Nearer, my God, to Thee,
Nearer to Thee.

Though like a wanderer,
Weary and lone,
Darkness comes over me,
My rest a stone;
Yet in my dreams I'd be
Nearer, my God, to Thee,
Nearer to Thee.

There let my way appear
Steps unto heaven;
All that Thou sendest me
In mercy given;
Angels to beckon me
Nearer, my God, to Thee,
Nearer to Thee.

Then with my waking thoughts
Bright with Thy praise,
Out of my stony griefs
Altars I'll raise;
So by my woes to be
Nearer, my God, to Thee,
Nearer to Thee.

Or if on joyful wing,
Cleaving the sky,
Sun, moon, and stars forgot,
Upward I fly,
Still all my song shall be
Nearer, my God, to Thee,
Nearer to Thee.

Hymn 344, *The Hymnal, Revised and Enlarged* (1892),
the Episcopalian source familiar to Norris.