

## The Freshman Themes of Frank Norris

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*The Bancroft Library*

In the fall of 1890 Frank Norris, aged 20, entered the University of California as a freshman, only recently returned from the study of painting in Paris, with preparatory school quite far behind him. He was required to take the elementary course "Freshman Themes" during his first semester but because of his serious interest in writing he also enrolled in a course on the subject of English Prose Style. Both classes were taught by William Dallam Armes, a rather young and undistinguished faculty member.

Norris was already a published though anonymous author whose article on medieval armor, "Clothes of Steel," printed in the *San Francisco Chronicle* on 31 March 1889, was an outgrowth of the romantic enthusiasm that had led him while in Paris to undertake a huge canvas depicting the Battle of Crécy. During his first semester at Berkeley he also published romantic poems with medieval themes in a student journal, signing them "Norriss"; he was also at work on his first book, *Yvernelle*, a turgid metrical romance set in France during the Middle Ages. But such literary achievements were evidently not of the sort to impress Armes. Norris had equally little use for Armes, his methods, and his assigned topics, which Norris often disregarded as he chose to write quite persistently on medieval matters. A few years later Norris contributed an article to the *San Francisco Wave*<sup>1</sup> in which he spoke caustically of the themes Armes's students had to write, "the subject chosen by the instructor and the matter found in text books and encyclopedias." Instead of looking at life and thinking about it, which Norris declared the only way to create literature, he found Armes's method inhibiting, for "the conclusion of the whole matter is that the literary courses of the University of California do not develop literary instincts among the students who attend them." He also said, though elsewhere, that when a student exhibited any individuality in treating an assigned theme, he was scolded and marked down, as when Armes wrote "Fustian" across Norris's paper on Thomas à Becket.<sup>2</sup>

Those papers have long since disappeared but recently in the files of the Department of English at Berkeley there turned up Armes's own book of comments on the compositions his students wrote. It provides an interesting insight into the subjects that Norris selected (not always from the list of approved topics) and into his instructor's views of the way they were handled. Norris's first two papers for October and November, 1890, were given the grade of 4, corresponding to the conventional modern mark of D. For the rest of the academic year through May, 1891, Nor-

ris never wrote anything valued above the numeral 2 (or B), twice given to his monthly papers. Three times the grade of 3 was given to his work. The result was that in his first semester Norris received an overall grade of 3:2, raised in the second semester to 2:3. Like all candidates for a B.A. his instruction in the writing of themes was continued in his sophomore year, when he was required to turn in four additional compositions. For this group his initial grade of 4:2 finally rose in the spring of 1892 to 2:1. This ultimate honor ranking came about because at the very last moment, June of 1892, Norris earned a 1 with a paper simply noted by Armes as "A Story." Whatever the story may have been, Armes at least recognized Norris's ability as a writer of fiction.

Just ten years later when Norris died an established author, Armes reminisced:

Student essays are seldom very good or very bad, but about twelve years ago I received one that was both. The descriptions in it were so vivid that the thousands of student papers that I have since read have not effaced them from my memory; but the style was marred by mannerisms and affectations, the essay as a whole lacked unity and consecutiveness, and the best passage in it was an echo of a famous apostrophe by DeQuincey, whose work the class was studying at the time. The paper was signed Benjamin Franklin Norris. In conversation with the writer, a slender, dark, foreign-appearing youth of twenty, I learned that he had recently returned from studying painting in Paris, that he had definitely abandoned that profession, and that he intended to devote himself to literature. I believed he would be successful, for he had what no teacher could give him, great power of invention and a quick eye to discern the picturesque and the dramatic; and the crudities in his style, I thought would soon disappear. But not so. By no means ignorant of his own ability, he was self-sufficient and impatient of criticism, and almost to the end of the chapter each of his papers, no matter what the subject, proved to be a string of almost unconnected pictures, each excellent in itself, but the whole not forming an adequate treatment of the topic. It was not till he submitted an original story that he attained the highest grade.<sup>3</sup>

Armes filled his grade sheet on Norris with fuller comment that presents more detail about the freshman as apprentice author. Armes's page of judgments reads:

Norris, B. F.

1890		
Oct.	Quentin Durward. Showing some real ability, but marred by an entire lack of precision. Sentence structure and punctuation very faulty.	4
Nov.	Harold. Containing some really excellent writing combined with great carelessness of the essentials of English compositions. A fondness for recondite allusions and unusual words shown	4
Dec.	Thomas à Becket. An improvement, though not free from the errors noted. No deep study, but merely a series of pictures. Continual striving for effect; continual	3

introduction of irrelevant, distracting picturesque touches.

1891

- Jan. European Civilization at the Outbreak of the Hundred Years' War. Quieter in tone, and simple and direct in statement. Lack of true historical spirit. 2
- Feb. Joan of Arc. Full of curious information and interesting incidents, many of them having but little to do with his subject. Pedantry. 3
- Mch. Heroes of the Iliad. Mainly a comparison of Roland and Charlemagne. Pedantic, inaccurate, and badly proportioned. 3
- Apr. Jongleurs and Trouvères of Mediaeval France. Sober and restrained in style and well introducing occasional picturesque concrete touches; but not well arranged, pedantic, and careless in spelling. 2
- May Alfred the Great. Late. Ex[cused]. The same preference of picture-ness to accuracy, strength to truth, cleverness to sober, careful treatment of the subject. 3  
R. C. [Record Clear]

Norris, B. F.

1891-92

- Nov. A Young Englishman at an English University in the Early Part of the Sixteenth Century. 4  
Not on the subject, lack of unity, method.
- Feb. The French Dwelling House of the Middle Ages. 2
- April Constitution of 1791. 2
- June A Story. 1

#### Notes:

<sup>1</sup>"The 'English Courses' of the University of California," *The Wave*, 15 (28 November 1896), 2-3.

<sup>2</sup>Franklin Walker, "Frank Norris," Diss., University of California, 1932, p. 61.

<sup>3</sup>"Concerning the Work of the Late Frank Norris," *Sunset*, 10 (December, 1902), 165.

#### Annual Meeting of the Society

The membership of the Frank Norris Society is invited to two events at the 1986 Modern Language Association Convention in New York City (27-30 December). The first is a Special Session entitled "New Critical Approaches to the Canon of Frank Norris." It will be held in the Brecht Room of the Marriott on Sunday, 28 December, from 8:30 to 9:45 a.m. The speakers are: Lee C. Mitchell, Princeton University ("The Determining Vocabularies of *Vandover and the Brute*"); Robert Newman, Texas A&M University ("Supernatural Naturalism: Norris and Hermeticism"); and Ben Fisher, University of Mississippi ("Dramatic Adaptations of Norris's *The Pit* and 'The Guest of Honor'").

The second is the meeting of the Society itself. Because it will be at least one more year before the Society can become an MLA-affiliated organization and thus have a regular place in the annual convention schedule, a makeshift arrangement is necessary. The business meeting will be conducted in one of the suites at the Marriott, at 4:00 p.m. on 28 December. A new Secretary of the Executive Committee will be elected; the Society's activities for 1987 will be discussed; preliminary plans for the MLA convention in

San Francisco will be made. A social gathering will follow.

The room number for the business meeting will be announced at that morning's Special Session. If you miss the Special Session, please call Joseph R. McElrath, Jr. who will be staying at the Marriott.

#### "Popular Naturalism"

The Norris Society was the sponsor of a session on "Popular Naturalism" at the annual conference of the Popular Culture Association in the South (2-4 October, in Chattanooga). This was the first of a planned series of such meetings focusing on Norris and the literary school of which he was a member. "Writing for the Mass Readership: Frank Norris in 1895-1900" was the presentation by Joseph R. McElrath, Jr. Richard Allan Davison spoke on Frank's brother in "Charles Norris: The Adaptation of Naturalism for the Popular Readership." Earle Labor's paper was "Jack London: 'Impassioned Realism' and the Marketplace." Stephen C. Brennan spoke on "Theodore Dreiser and the Myth of the American Woman." Jesse S. Crisler served as the chairman of the session. Members interested in participating in a like session at next year's PCAS conference should direct inquiries and proposals to the Society's business office at Florida State University. The general topic is the strategies devised by American Naturalists to maximize impact upon the popular readership.

#### The Library of America: The Norris Volume

Donald Pizer's edition of *Novels and Essays* was published by The Library of America in September. The volume includes *Vandover*, *McTeague*, *The Octopus*, and twenty-two essays and reviews by Norris. Members of The Frank Norris Society are entitled to a 40% discount: \$16.50 versus \$27.50 (or the series subscription price of \$21.95). Please use the order form inserted in this issue of *Frank Norris Studies*.

#### Norris Texts

Conducting a seminar on, or including, Frank Norris is problematic if one does not have a library with multiple copies of the secondary works. While *Vandover*, *McTeague*, *The Octopus*, and *The Pit* are available in paperback, *Moran*, *Blix*, *A Man's Woman*, *A Deal in Wheat*, and so on, are accessible only in expensive reprints marketed to libraries. Xerographic reproductions in simple bindings can prove a practical alternative. *Moran* or *Blix*, for example, can be made available for less than nine dollars per copy. The Norris Society can provide this service, should there be sufficient interest. This will be an item for discussion on the agenda of the business meeting at the MLA Convention in December.

#### Library Subscriptions

Members can help the Society maintain and expand its publication program by securing institutional memberships/subscriptions. The present *Studies* situation—spring and autumn issues—costs approximately four hundred dollars per year. A more sizeable and stable subscription base will allow for larger issues, or a greater number of issues each year, or the publica-

tion of special issues devoted to particular topics. That is, the educational function of the Society can be enhanced—with your cooperation. Please note that at ten dollars per year our institutional membership/subscription fee is not greater than that for individuals. This might please your serials librarian since many societies' journals are offered to institutions at an inflated price.

### 1987 MLA Convention

Barbara Hochman, 1986 Vice-President of the Executive Committee, will propose a Special Session entitled "Implications of the Narrative Structure in the Work of Frank Norris." Papers exploring Norris's conceptions of story-telling, fiction-writing, and narrative structure should be sent directly to her at The Department of English and American Literature, Tel Aviv University, Sharett Building, Ramat Aviv, Tel Aviv, Israel.

### Current Publications: Update

Joseph R. McElrath, Jr.  
Bonnie Woodbery  
Florida State University

Presented here is a first installment designed to complement *Frank Norris: A Reference Guide* (1974). The arrangement below is chronological and alphabetical within years; and the next issue of *FNS* will include a continuation. Please inform the editors of omitted items and, if possible, forward copies for annotation. Copies of works described as "not examined" will be especially appreciated.

Salzman, Jack. "The Publication of *Sister Carrie*: Fact and Fiction," *Library Chronicle*, 33 (Spring 1967), 19-33. Suggests that, after advocating the publication of *Sister Carrie*, Norris withdrew his support from Dreiser.

Giles, James. "Some Notes on the Red-Blooded Reading of Kipling by Jack London and Frank Norris," *Jack London Newsletter*, 3 (1970), 56-62. London and Norris formed their impressions of Kipling via their readings of his early writings.

Etulain, Richard W. *Western American Literature: A Bibliography of Interpretive Books and Articles*. Vermillion, South Dakota: University of South Dakota Press, 1972, pp. 101-03. Checklist of forty-nine items on Norris.

Frohock, W. M. "American Realism and the Elegaic Sensibility: Stephen Crane and Frank Norris." In *Geschichte und Fiktion: Amerikanische Prosa im 19. Jahrhundert; History and Fiction: American Prose in the 19th Century*. Ed. Alfred Weber and Hartmut Grandel. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1972, pp. 216-37. The elegaic tone, a dominant feature of nineteenth-century literature, manifested itself in *Octopus* and *McTeague*.

Graham, D. B. "Fitzgerald's Valley of Ashes and Frank Norris's 'Sordid and Grimy Wilderness.'" In *Fitzgerald/Hemingway Annual, 1972*. Ed. Matthew J. Bruccoli and C. E. Frazier Clark, Jr. Washington, D.C.: NCR Microcard Editions, 1972, pp. 303-06. Presents a passage in *Vandover* as a possible influence on the Valley of Ashes imagery in *Gatsby*.

Isani, Mukhtar A. "Frank Norris on the Purpose of *McTeague*," *American Notes & Queries*, 10 (1972), 118. Reprints Norris's statement of the intentions that shaped *McTeague*.

Recchia, Edward J. "Naturalism's Artistic Compromises in *Sister Carrie* and *The Octopus*," *Literatur im Wissenschaft und Unterricht*, 5 (1972), 277-85. The plot of *Octopus* is subordinated to Naturalistic ideology to such a degree that the novel is more a tract than a work of fiction.

Blanck, Jacob. "Benjamin Franklin (Frank) Norris," *Bibliography of American Literature*, vol. 6. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973, 455-67. A primary bibliography describing separate book and pamphlet publications, volumes collecting Norris's work wholly and volumes collecting Norris's and others' works, collected editions of Norris's writings, reprintings, and "books containing material by Norris reprinted from earlier books."

McElrath, Joseph R., Jr. "Norris's Return from Cuba," *American Literary Realism*, 6 (1973), 251. Cites the specifics of Norris's return from Cuba in 1898.

Stronks, James. "A New Frank Norris Letter," *Quarterly News-Letter* (Book Club of California), 38 (1973), 40-42. First publication of an 1899 letter to Herbert Stone.

Crow, Charles L. "The Real Vanamee and His Influence on Frank Norris's *The Octopus*," *Western American Literature*, 9 (1974), 131-39. Explains how Bruce Porter served as the model for Vanamee and how the Vanamee subplot embodies the story of *Octopus* "in miniature."

Eichelberger, Clayton L. *A Guide to Critical Reviews of United States Fiction, 1870-1910*, vol. 2. Metuchen, New Jersey: Scarecrow Press, 1974, pp. 201-02. Cites seventeen reviews of Norris's books.

Gardner, Joseph H. "Dickens, Romance and *McTeague*: A Study in Mutual Interpretation," *Essays in Literature*, 1 (1974), 69-82; reprinted in Pizer, ed., *McTeague: A Norton Critical Edition*, 1977, below. When Norris called for a revival of the Romantic he had in mind the Dickensian method that he used in *McTeague*, the themes and characterizations of which were influenced by *Copperfield*.

Graham, D. B. "Frank Norris's Afternoon of a Faun," *Papers on Language & Literature*, 10 (1974), 307-12. Describes Mallarmé's "L'Après-midi d'un Faune" as an influence on the beginning of *Octopus*.

Johnson, Lee Ann. "Western Literary Realism: The California Tales of Norris and Austin," *American Literary Realism*, 7 (1974), 278-80. Norris and Austin "achieve realism with subjects previously treated in romance."

Pagetti, Carlo. "La Tradizione Narrative Inglese in America," *Studi Americani*, 18 (1974), 175-216. Responsibilities and other works indicate Norris's theoretical consideration of "The Great American Novel" concept.

and his desire to make a significant contribution to American fiction.

Poenicke, Klaus. "Evolution als Erzählstrategie: Frank Norris's *McTeague*." In *Der Amerikanische Roman im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*. Ed. Edgar Lohner. Berlin: Erich Schmidt, 1974, pp. 126-37. *McTeague* tragically manifests the evolutionary model in Spencer's *First Principles*, even more faithfully than Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* does.

Sheppard, Keith S. "A New Note for *McTeague*'s Canary," *Western American Literature*, 9 (1974), 217-18. Song birds were used by miners to detect lethal gases.

Budd, Louis J. "Objectivity and Low Seriousness in American Naturalism," *Prospects*, 1 (1975), 41-61. Observes that elements of "low seriousness"—satire, sarcasm, and comedy—are present in Naturalistic writings like *McTeague*.

Cohn, Jan. "Women as Superfluous Characters in American Realism and Naturalism," *Studies in American Fiction*, 1 (1975), 41-61. From 1880 to 1910 the main object of interest in fiction was the male struggling for success, and females such as the heroine of *Pit* were relegated to a secondary role.

Davison, Richard Allan. "Frank Norris's *The Octopus*: Some Observations on Vanamee, Shelgrim and St. Paul." In *Literature and Ideas in America: Essays in Memory of Harry Hayden Clark*. Ed. Robert Falk. Athens: Ohio University Press, 1975, pp. 182-203; reprinted in Graham, ed., *Critical Essays*, 1980, below. Paul's optimistic philosophy (I Cor. 15) directly informs the transcendental view of life expressed by Vanamee in *Octopus*.

Folsom, James K. "The Wheat and the Locomotive: Norris and Naturalistic Esthetics." In *American Literary Naturalism: A Reassessment*. Ed. Joshinobu Hakutani and Lewis Fried. Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1975, pp. 54-74. Norris's works are characterized by a dualistic world view that is Jungian.

Graham, D. B. "Aesthetic Experience in Realism," *American Literary Realism*, 8 (1975), 289-90. Interior decor is frequently significant vis a vis theme and characterization in Realistic fiction like *McTeague* and *Octopus*.

———. "Art in *McTeague*," *Studies in American Fiction*, 3 (1975), 134-55; reprinted in Graham, ed., *Critical Essays*, 1980, below. The settings of *McTeague* are psychologically significant.

McElrath, Joseph R., Jr. "The Comedy of Frank Norris's *McTeague*," *Studies in American Humor*, 2 (1975), 88-95. *McTeague* is informed by a comedic attitude toward the characters until a shift in narrative tone occurs as the novel becomes more Naturalistic.

———. "Frank Norris," *American Literary Realism*, 8 (1975), 307-19. Description and analysis of dissertations on Norris.

French, Warren. "'Johnny Bear': Steinbeck's 'Yellow Peril' Story." In *A Study Guide to Steinbeck's The Long*

*Valley*. Ed. Tetsumaro Hayashi. Ann Arbor: Pierian Press, 1976, pp. 56-64. Steinbeck's prejudices against Orientals reflect a widespread American attitude which was displayed by Norris in works like "The Third Circle."

Graham, D. B. "Frank Norris, Actor," *Quarterly Newsletter* (Book Club of California), 41 (1976), 38-40. Describes Norris's experience as an amateur actor in 1896-97.

Katz, Joseph. "'Novelists of the Future': Animadversions Against the Rigidity of Current Theory in the Editing of Nineteenth-Century American Writers." In *Editing British and American Literature, 1880-1920*. Ed. Eric W. Domville. New York: Garland, 1976, pp. 65-76. Describes the textual histories of Norris's novels to illustrate the need for flexibility in editorial thought.

Kwiat, Joseph J. "Stephen Crane and Frank Norris: The Magazine and the 'Revolt' in American Literature in the 1890's," *Western Humanities Review*, 30 (1976), 309-22. The new American magazines of the 1890s allowed writers such as Crane and Norris to publish a "truthful expression of life."

Leekley, Richard. "Addendum to Lohf and Sheehy: Frank Norris," *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America*, 70 (1976), 121. Identifies a 1900 printing of *Moran* by Jameson-Higgins not noted by Lohf and Sheehy.

Love, Glen A. "Frank Norris's Western Metropolitans," *Western American Literature*, 11 (1976), 3-22; reprinted in Graham, ed., *Critical Essays*, 1980, below. Norris did not embrace the notion that urban life is evil; rather *Octopus* and *Pit* defined the "new man" who will have to function in an increasingly urban world.

Mannucci, Loretta Valz. "I Saggi di Frank Norris," *Studi Americani*, 21-22 (1976), 129-52. *Responsibilities* and *Octopus* indicate that Norris attempted to express the essence of American experience, and particularly that in the West.

McElrath, Joseph R., Jr. "Frank Norris's *Vandover and Brute*: Narrative Technique and the Socio-Critical Viewpoint," *Studies in American Fiction*, 4 (1976), 27-43; reprinted in Graham, ed., *Critical Essays*, 1980, below. *Vandover* is a critical analysis of conventional moral and social values of the late nineteenth century.

*Frank Norris Studies* is a publication of The Frank Norris Society Inc. Manuscripts should be addressed to either of the two editors: Robert C. Leitz, III, Department of English, Louisiana State University in Shreveport, Shreveport LA 71115; or Jesse S. Crisler, Communications and Language Arts, Brigham Young University—Hawaii Campus, Laie HI 96762. All business correspondence should be directed to Joseph R. McElrath, Jr., Department of English, Florida State University, Tallahassee FL 32306. Members of the Editorial Advisory Board include: Don Graham, University of Texas; William B. Dillingham, Emory University; Don L. Cook, Indiana University; and Charles L. Crow, Bowling Green State University.