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Paul Carmignani

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P. CARMIGNANI
Pr. de Littérature américaine
Université de Perpignan-*Via Domitia*

F. NORRIS

*MCTEAGUE**

An Introduction

Frank Norris was born in Chicago in 1870 and moved with his family to California in 1884. He was the son of a self-made man, a well-to do businessman who worked his way up the social scale from farmer to wholesale jeweler. F. Norris first studied painting in San Francisco then went to Paris where his interest shifted to literature. When he returned to the States, he studied briefly at Harvard and then entered journalism. In 1894 his parents divorced; it was a terrible shock to F. Norris and this, in part, explains why the question of the relationship between man and woman bulks so large in his work.

F. Norris worked for "McClure's Magazine", the organ of the "muckrakers", *i.e.* reporterswho searched for and exposed real or alleged corruption, scandal, and the like in politics or business. In 1898, F. Norris began to publish a series of hastily composed novels. The first was an adventure story: *Moran of the Lady Letty*, which appeared serially in "The Wave". Then there followed *McTeague* in 1899 and *The Octopus* in 1901. The latter was the first of a trilogy called *The Epic of the Wheat*, which was to include *The Octopus*, a Story of California; *The Pit*, a story of Chicago and *The Wolf*, a Story of Europe. They dealt with the production, the distribution, and the consumption of American wheat. It was while composing the second volume that F. Norris died of peritonitis at the age of 32.

McTeague is dedicated to L. E. Gates, a professor at Harvard whose writing class Norris attended. Norris started work on *McTeague* in 1892; he composed a first version of the narrative up to the murder of Trina but not knowing how to go on with it – *i.e.* what to do with the murderer –, he put it aside and did not get back to it until he entered Harvard. He revised and completed the novel in the fall of 1897 during his stay at the Placer County mine of his friend Seymour Waterhouse and managed after considerable difficulty to have it published in early 1899.

The initial inspiration for *McTeague* was probably a San Francisco murder in late 1893, when Norris was a student at Berkeley and absorbed in the novels of E. Zola. Norris was deeply influenced by the French master of the naturalistic school, as witness the fact that he called himself "Zola boy". *L'Assommoir* and *La bête humaine* had the greatest effect on the development of *McTeague*. Zola based his literary practice on the theories of the French philosopher H. Taine, who stressed the influence of race, milieu and moment (in other words, social climate) on the destiny of man. E. Zola hoped to raise the novel to the level of science by applying the method of positivism to literature.

F. Norris was also influenced by the prevailing philosophy of his time: the social Darwinism preached by Spencer and his American admirers. Spencer argued that man's life was a struggle for survival and that in the social jungle the fittest were naturally rewarded by success. The unfit were crushed and destroyed, and it was normal and even desirable that they should be eliminated. This was the natural order of things, and it was not to be tampered with. Therefore, government should not try to regulate socio-economic life: the State had no business interfering with individuals' actions.

Needless to say, Norris rejected such a doctrine. As most American realists and naturalists – S. Crane; W. Dean Howells; H. Garland; Th. Dreiser – he felt sympathy for the "underdog", the casualties of Progress, Society's rejects. As E. Marchand puts it:

> "It is unlikely that Norris ever read a political or economic treatise in his life; but it is clear from *The Octopus* and from his later critical writing that his awakening sympathy for the underdog was beginning to push him, somewhat uncertainly, in the direction of socialism."

In the latter novel, Norris revealed an instinctive imaginative sympathy with the doctrine of Populism[1], the movement of agrarian protest and revolt which was in its heyday when Norris was forming

* New York, Norton Critical Edition, 1977

his ideas in the 1880's and 1890's. Paradoxically enough, as R. Chase aptly remarked:

> "there is all through his work a tension between Norris the liberal humanist and ardent democrat, and Norris the protofascist, complete with a racist view of Anglo-Saxon supremacy, a myth of the superman, and a portentous nihilism." (p. 198)

Such racism is illustrated, for instance, by the anti-Jew slurs one comes across in Norris's novels, and – to stick to *McTeague* – by the portrayal of Zerkow, the rag picker. There is also in *McTeague* a certain cult of strength, which was then the new religion of the USA. McTeague "is of the confraternity of the blond beast, the 'Nietzschean' or 'Darwinian' Adam." (*Ibid*., 191) It seems unlikely that Norris was aware of such ideological implications, but it is impossible for the modern reader to overlook them. There is no allusion to ideology in Norris's description of his purpose in writing *McTeague*:

> "My chief object in writing *McTeague* was to produce an interesting story — nothing more. It has always seemed to me that this should be the final test in any work of fiction independent of style, 'school,' or theory of art. If I had any secondary motive in its production, it was in the nature of a protest against and revolt from the 'decadent,' artificial and morbid 'prose fancies' of latter day fiction. I believe that the future of American fiction lies in the direction of a return to the primitive elemental life, and an abandonment of 'elegant prose' and 'fine writing'."

However, underlying such a definition are certain theoretical – and, consequently, ideological – assumptions concerning the nature and function of literature. First of all, literature is seen as a neutral medium capable of representing life as it, hence, the rejection of 'fine writing' for 'life' and the choice of naturalism.

Naturalism was, according to Norris, the only literary genre trying to deal honestly with the richness and diversity of contemporary life, including the violent and low, and to show man at his most instinctive, emotional and fundamental. This is quite in keeping with Norris's demand for the practical and the useful, in both life and fiction. According to him, the aim of fiction was not merely to describe or entertain; it also served the moral purpose of revealing both the primary truths of human experience and the full extent of human injustice and deprivation, so that man might learn and mend his ways.

At this stage, one must point out a second paradox in Norris's literary practice: he believed that fictional form is an intellectual problem in selection and organization for the achievement of plausibility, effect and theme, but laid emphasis on the instinctive, the emotional and the natural as far as theme and content were concerned.

Norris's literary system rests upon this fundamental duality: "life, not literature" as far as theme and content are concerned, but "literature, not life" as far as form is concerned. Without life as a foundation, no amount of technical training would benefit a writer. The best novelist, however, was primitivistic in content and theme, sophisticated in form.

The duality in Norris's credo accounts for his importance in the development of American Letters. He combined with his primitivism (a faith in the life of action, instinct, and emotion) a demand that the novel be cultivated as an art form, and thereby represents a major bridge between the ungainly novels of a Cooper or Twain and the virtuoso techniques of a Hemingway or Faulkner. Much of America's best fiction answers Norris's key demands, since it often combines an intense thematic primitivism (E. Caldwell's *Tobacco Road* is a case in point) with a striking facility in the manipulation of point of view, time, scene and symbol. Another interesting feature of *McTeague* is that it also marks a transition between two periods or ages in the American novel: that of the Prairie, and the one of the Urban Jungle.

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1. Populism: from the people's party, a movement founded in 1891, and advocating expansion of currency, state control of railroad, etc. A mark of this influence is perhaps to be found in Norris's belief in the critical judgment of the people, his confidence in the instinctive judgment shared by all men regardless of position or education (cf. Donald Pizer in Norton Critical Editon, 306). The importance of Populist doctrine in understanding the art of F. Norris is suggested by his own remark that romance derives from the "People" (Cf. Richard Chase, *The American Novel and its Tradition*, p. 201)

Realism, Naturalism, and Romance in *McTeague*

« Le réalisme américain n'est pas une école comme en Europe. Il n'a ni unité, ni théorie. Il doit plus au scepticisme déclenché par la crise socile qu'à des considérations esthétiques. » (J. Cabau, *La Prairie perdue*)

A comprehensive study of *McTeague* must necessarily include a discussion of three related literary doctrines: realism, romance and naturalism.

As Norris himself put it in an article – "Fiction is selection" – published in *The Wave* (September 1897): "Fiction is what seems real not what is real," which means that the reader of fiction should guard against mistaking a literary representation of reality, however realistic, for reality itself. Norris's quotation raises the much-vexed question of ***mimesis*** *i.e*. the capacity of literature to represent or imitate reality. The term mimesis, first used by Plato to designate the direct rendering of speech (as opposed to ***diegesis***: indirect discourse), reappeared under the name of "showing" (diegesis became "telling") in Anglo-Saxon criticism, at the end of the last century, and was soon described as the highest ideal to which narrative fiction should aspire.

However as French critic, G. Genette, argues no text of narrative fiction can show or imitate the action it conveys, since all such texts are made of language, and language signifies without imitating. Language can only imitate language, which is why the representation of speech only comes closest to pure mimesis. All that a narrative can do is create an illusion, an effect, a semblance of mimesis, but it does so through diegesis (*id est*, a representation mediated by a narrator). Consequently, Realism is just a mode of fiction writing, a way of representing life in literature. The realist can at best create an illusion of actual experience or life. Literature is not a transcript or a replica of the outside world; it is an artefact, a construct of a linguistic nature. Even the very "slice of life" of the naturalist, despite its reportorial quality, is first and foremost, a verbal construct. One must bear in mind that the fundamental distinction, when dealing with literature, is not between reality and illusion, but between differing conceptions of reality, between differing modes of illusion; and realism is just one of them:

> « Le réalisme, qui repose donc sur une idéologie de la représentation littéraire, serait en dernière analyse, un ensemble de réponses techniques à des contraintes narratives. Sommé d'être à la fois vraisemblable et véridique, le récit fictif doit tout expliquer : "l'historien des mœurs doit rendre tout probable, même le vrai", écrivait Balzac dans *Les Paysans* ; les procédés du discours réaliste ont donc la double fonction d'assurer la véracité de l'énoncé, c'est-à-dire sa conformité au réel qu'il désigne, et leur propre vraisemblance, c'est-à-dire leur "naturalisation". Le roman réaliste est donc, à la limite, le type même du récit "motivé", ce qui implique l'omniscience du narrateur, "l'effet de réel", étudié par R. Barthes, venant à propos combler l'absence de motivation. » (A. Denjean, *Thèse d'État*, non publiée, 151)

What is then the strategy of mimesis? According to E. Auerbach whose study, *Mimesis* (1946) has become a classic of modern literary criticism, a realistic text is characterized by the fact that:

a) It is serious;
b) It merges various stylistic registers;
c) It does not rule out the possibility of describing any social class or milieu;
d) It makes a significant use of "hypotaxis" (syntactical subordination of clauses by the use of connectives);
e) It integrates the evolution of the characters within the larger framework of history.

Mimetic strategy relies on verisimilitude as a decoy to give the reader the illusion of actuality, which implies another set of features:

1) Emphasis on locale/topography (importance of places; place-names…) anchoring fiction in the palpable material world;
2) Fictional time is underpinned by historical time. Narrated time *i.e*. the chronology of the events related in the text is systematically geared to the chronology of the period in which the events take place;
3) Anthropomorphism of the characters; the realistic novelist deals with ordinary, average characters the reader can easily identify with. Romantics and heroics are both excluded from the province of realism;

4) Motivation: to lend plausibility and credibility to the events described, the realistic narrator refers to a set of beliefs, assumptions, opinions, psychological explanation, etc. that is common to both author and reader. This is what R. Barthes calls "***Doxa***";
5) Transparency: realistic fiction tends to eliminate all forms of ambiguity (the fantastic, the enigmatic are quite outside its realm), to reduce polysemy and to abolish all distinctions between seeming and being.

A parallel between this list of criteria and the principles put forward by Norris in his critical writings will show that his fiction only partially answers the definition of realism.

By way of conclusion on this score, I would like to stress the fact that in a successful work of art, the materials drawn from reality are completely assimilated into the form; what was "world" has become "language". Art is indebted to the natural world for its material, but it adds to nature new arrangings that reveal significances and this is, in the last analysis, the purpose of literature.

It is customary to divide American fiction into two categories: the novel and the romance. The distinction dates back to Hawthorne's preface to *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851) in which he defined romance in terms of the "latitude both as to fashion and material" which it affords the author. Since then, the definition of romance has become much more elaborate; in his classical study, *The American Novel and its Tradition*, R. Chase states that:

> "romance signifies besides the more obvious qualities of the picturesque and the heroic, an assumed freedom from the ordinary novelistic requirements of verisimilitude, development and continuity; a tendency towards melodrama and idyll; a more or less formal abstractness and on the other hand, a tendency to plunge into the underside of consciousness…"

The plot of the "'prose romance' emphasizes adventure, and is often cast in the form of a quest for an ideal, or the pursuit of an enemy; and the non-realistic and occasionally melodramatic events are sometimes claimed to project in symbolic form the primal desires, hopes, and terrors in the depths of the human mind, and to be therefore analogous to the material of dream, myth, ritual, and folklore." (Abrams, 112)

The novel, on the other hand, "is characterized as the fictional attempt to give the effect of realism, by representing complex characters with mixed motives who are rooted in a social class, operate in a highly developed structure, interact with many other characters and undergo plausible and everyday modes of experience." (*Ibid*.) The distinction between the two fictional modes seems eventually to lie in their respective attitude toward actuality, as R. Chase makes perfectly clear:

> "the main difference between the novel and the romance is in the way in which they view reality… Being less committed to the immediate rendition of reality than the novel, the romance will more freely veer toward mythic, allegorical, and symbolistic forms." (Ibid., p. 12-13)

Naturalism is claimed to be an even more accurate picture of life than is realism. But it is not just a literary manner, it illustrates a philosophical thesis deriving from Darwinian biology; naturalism claims that man is a higher-order animal whose character and fate are determined by two kinds of natural forces: heredity and environment. Naturalistic writers tried to present their subjects with an objective scientific attitude and with elaborate documentation, often including an almost medical frankness about activities and bodily functions usually unmentioned in earlier literature. They tended to choose characters exhibiting strong animal drives, such as greed and brutal sexual desire, and who are victims both of their glandular secretions within and of sociological pressures without. However, since we are dealing with the American variety of naturalism, I think it is necessary to add that certain tenets of this literary doctrine were akin to those characterizing Puritanism:

> « Le conditionnement du héros naturaliste américain destiné par ses antécédents ou son environnement à affronter la déchéance, se trouve en étroite harmonie avec la prédestination calviniste et les idées sur la nature du péché, exprimées par les Pères pèlerins et leur successeurs » (M. Saporta, *Histoire du roman américain*, 153)

In addition to providing a biological analogy for the struggle to survive that went on in the business world and in the teeming city streets, it lifted a load of guilt. Sins were no longer sins, if men's actions were determined by heredity and environment. Now to revert to the characteristics of the naturalistic novel: it tended to become a "documentary novel" based solidly on physical reality and crammed with facts and data actually seen and experienced.

To paint a "slice of life", to create an illusion of actuality, F. Norris set *McTeague* on a locale he was very familiar with – San Francisco – and used exact places, details and even names. Norris placed McTeague's dental parlors in an actual street in San Francisco: Polk Street. Even the large gilded tooth had its counterpart in reality: there was one hanging outside the offices of Dr. L.A. Teague, a former president of the San Francisco dental society. Frenna's, the name of the saloon where McTeague buys steam beer, came from a barber, Joseph Frenna who had a shop in Polk Street. The kindergarten where the murder takes place is modelled on the Lester Norris Memorial Kindergarten founded by F. Norris's family, as was then the custom for the well-to-do in San Francisco; the mine where McTeague returns to at the end of the narrative is also drawn from life. It would be easy to mention further examples of Norris's use of authentic details in his fictional work to give the action the stamp of reality and his characters the glow of life, but the point has already been abundantly illustrated.

The trouble is, however, that none of those clear-cut definitions can easily apply to the author; he cannot be pinned down as a realist or a naturalist for the very simple reason that in presents his naturalism as a new form of romance. How can one account for this new paradox? The answer is to be found in the author's own comments upon his practice of fiction. Norris actually rejected realism on the grounds that it was merely concerned with "the smaller details of everyday life, things that are likely to happen between lunch and supper, small passions, restricted emotions, dramas of the reception-room, tragedies of an afternoon call, crises involving cups of tea." (Norton, 309) What Norris criticized in realism was its limitation to the type of normal life, its choice of the ordinary, the untroubled and the commonplace. The naturalist, on the other hand:

> "takes no note of common people, common in so far as their interests, their lives, and the things that occur in them are common, are ordinary. 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 everyday 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." (*Ibid*., 309-310)

So Norris associates realism with the commonplace, the normal, and naturalism with "a world of big things" and he goes on to say: "the enormous, the formidable, the terrible is what counts; no teacup tragedies here." (*Ibid*.) Whereas, for most people Naturalism "is a sort of inner circle of realism – a kind of diametric opposite of romanticism, a theory of fiction wherein things are represented 'as they are,' inexorably with the truthfulness of a camera," Norris considers it as "a form of romanticism". His definition of romance is highly idiosyncratic:

> "It is a type of fiction that takes cognizance of variations from the type of normal life […] To romance belongs the wide world for range, and the unplumbed depths of the human heart, and the mystery of sex, and the problem of life, and the black, unsearched penetralia of the soul of man." (Norton, 316)

There is hardly any doubt that McTeague and, to a certain extent, Trina represent variations from the type of normal life and normal characters. As to the mysteries of sex or the soul, we will see later on that a large part of the novel is devoted, if not to probing, at least to suggesting them.

To account for his very original position as regards the questions of realism and romance, Norris made a distinction between "***Accuracy***" and "***Truth***", contending that "a story can be accurate and yet lamentably – even wickedly – untrue" (Norton, 311). The author insisted on the fact that:

> "Accuracy is not necessarily Truth, and the novelist, who relies upon the accurate presentation of a crisis in life, hoping by this means to create the impression of Truth, is leaning upon a broken reed. For further – life itself is not necessarily True – not necessarily True to life."

Therefore, according to Norris, the realist merely aims at Accuracy and the romanticist at Truth. Hence, the vindication of the school of Naturalism, which is midway between the Realists and Romanticists and taking the best from each, strives hard for accuracy and truth. It is also to Norris's credit that he managed to unite the two streams of the commonplace and the extraordinary; he tried to show, as a critic put it, that "the romance of the extraordinary is not limited to the distant in time and place but can be found in the brownstone house on the corner and in the office building downtown." (Norton, 351)

In *McTeague*, Norris achieved a fusion, labelled naturalism, of the main categories of American fiction, *i.e.* realism and romance. *McTeague* fits into neither categories, but partakes of both: it is, in R. Chase's own words, "a romance-novel" and as such an apt illustration of the evolution of American fiction, which, according to Chase, manifested over the centuries "a gradual assimilation of romance into the substance of the novel." (p. IX) In his practice of fiction, Norris steered a middle course; he used realism with its reportorial bias to point up the failure of the 1880's to keep the promises of the Land of opportunity, to expose the contrast between, the dream – the House of Have – and the actuality – the House of want; he resorted to naturalism to stress the role of atavism and environment in McTeague's fall and finally through romance, transcended the limitations of realism to reactivate certain myths and symbols characteristic of American society and history. On this particular point, R. Chase's opinion is worth quoting in full:

> Norris makes of his naturalism, even though it may seem to be merely a ruthless realism, a means of restoring to the novel some of the dramatic actions, mysteries, colorful events, and extreme situations, along with the mythic and symbolic motives, that used to be brought into the novel under other auspices. He does not, in other words, abandon the romance or romance-novel; he merely recreates it and reconstitutes it on new grounds. […] Norris's romance-novels succeeded in reclaiming for American fiction an imaginative profundity that the age of Howells was leaving out – a fact which Norris's crudity and passages of bad writing cannot conceal." (p. 199/203)

Symbolical and allegorical dimensions in *McTeague*

Naturalism as defined by Norris and illustrated in *McTeague* evinces "a tendency towards the tone if not the actual method of allegory[2] and an interest in symbols[3]." (R. Chase, *op. cit*., 200) Apparently, all naturalistic novels have secondary meanings and effects, which are not even implied by the philosophical or scientific theories of naturalism, and *McTeague* is a case in point. The novel is characterized by its dual nature and a certain imbalance between its first and second parts; it starts as a naturalistic tale in an urban setting with all the trappings of the genre and ends as a romance in the mythical land of California. The novel actually seems to record and mourn the passing away of some sort of Golden Age when the West was still a virgin expanse, a land of plenty and opportunity where the pioneer – the trapper; the farmer; the cattleman or the miner – could dream of finding a shortcut to fortune. This Age is now a thing of the past; the last of the gold-digger is a crazy dentist, a failed pioneer, and the last cowboy, Marcus Schouler, a mean, vicious caricature of the he-man of the West. Both McTeague and his deadly enemy are attracted to the West by the hope of materializing their dreams: McTeague runs after gold, and Marcus yearns for the life of a cowboy:

> He realized his former vision of himself, booted, sombreroed and revolvered, passing his days in the saddle and the better part of his nights around the poker tables in Modoc's one saloon. To his intense satisfaction, he even involved himself in a gun fight that arose over a disputed brand, with the result that two fingers of his left hand were shot away (242)

Before going deeper into the study of elements pertaining to either allegory or symbolism in the novel, it is necessary to define the respective meanings of both terms. By symbol is usually meant "anything which signifies something else." It is an association either personal or conventional between a word or a set of words and an object, an idea, a value, etc. Allegory (etymologically: "speaking otherwise than one seems to speak") is a narrative in which the agents and action, and sometimes the setting as well, are contrived not only to make sense in themselves, but also to signify a second, correlated order of persons, things, concepts, or events."

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2. Description of a subject under the guise of some other subject of aptly suggestive resemblance (SOED)

3. Something that denotes or represents something else not by exact resemblance, but by vague suggestion or by some accidental or conventional relation (SOED)

The most obvious example of symbolism in *McTeague* is the gold symbolism. This is clearly indicated by the statistically relevant recurrence of the terms "gold" or "gilt" which are mentioned over 140 times in the text. I'll venture the guess that the importance of gold has something to do with the action's taking place shortly after the Gold Rush of 1849 and also is set in the period of American history known as the Gilded Age *i.e*. the period of intense economic development in the latter half of the 19th century thus labelled after the title of a satirical novel that Charles Warner and Mark Twain wrote in 1873. The label is quite appropriate since it calls up both the primary role played by capital and the spurious values of the age (gilded and not golden).

The novel is structured upon images of gold; it is everywhere to be found: in the mats that McTeague prepares for his patients; in the huge gilt molar hanging outside his parlors; in the service of gold plate that Maria, the servant claims to have been in the possession of her family; in the form of the $5,000 that Trina wins in the lottery, etc.; we get all kinds of gold: either found, stolen, buried, lost, given by chance and bringing bad luck to those who come by it, as opposed, for instance, to the money honestly earned by old Grannis. The underlying motif of the novel is actually the quest for gold: Zerkow searches for it among the garbage; Marcus runs after the $5,000; McTeague prospects for gold and basks in its splendor. Each character, with the exception of Old Grannis and Miss Baker, is looking for some Eldorado and driven by the dream of "wealth easily gained and quickly spent" (p. 75), but the Eldorado turns out to be a Helldorado as the ironical ending of the novel suggests with the image of the "half-dead canary chittering feebly in its little gilt prison" (249). Thus, gold serves a dual function: it is the symbol of all the things the characters covet, but also the source of all evil and misery; it is the deterministic force that destroys them all.

Trina exemplifies the frenzy of passion that the lust for gold can work up in a character; there is an interesting association between gold and sex in Trina's attitude. When McTeague leaves her, gold becomes a comfort, almost a substitute for the missing male; as a critic put it, "she turns her thwarted sexual feelings into a physical love for money itself." (Norton, 335): "Her five thousand dollars…was a glittering, splendid dream which came to her almost every hour of the day as a solace and a companion for all her unhappiness." (173) She lies down upon her gold: "Next she laid herself upon the bed and gathered the gleaming heaps of gold pieces to her with both arms, burying her face in them with long sighs of unspeakable delight." (210)

She even goes to the length of "put[ting] the smaller gold pieces in her mouth" (173). Cf. also the sexual connotations attached to the terms used to describe her attitude: "abstinence"; "debauch" (200); "love"; "ecstasy of delight", etc. Gold becomes, in a word, the symbol of her fulfillment as a woman; it even stands for the child she never got: "She wept over them as other women weep over a dead baby's shoe" (198). Gold has become a fetish, and Trina the high priestess of its cult.

Besides gold, another object is endowed with an important symbolic value: "teeth". They represent a key image suggesting not only "greed" but also an aggressive disposition:

> « La dent est un instrument de la prise de possession, tendant à aller jusqu'à l'assimilation: la meule qui broie, pour fournir un aliment au désir. Les dents symbolisent la force de mastication, l'agressivité due aux appétitions des désirs matériels. Les dent du Dragon figurent l'agressivité de la perversion dominatrice: la mastication dévorante […] Les ambitieux aux dents longues. » (*Dictionnaire des symboles*)

McTeague, with his square jaws, his devouring instincts, his voracity (he takes to biting Trina's fingers, p. 174) is a perfect illustration of the different connotations attached to teeth. Greed actually is the dominant passion of the main protagonists of the story. When McTeague gives way to his overpowering desire for Trina in the climactic parlor scene, he is described as a beast of prey about to pounce upon and devour its victim: "the sudden panther leap of the animal, lips drawn, fangs aflash, hideous, monstrous, not to be resisted" (18). One of the fundamental images of the narrative can also be expressed in terms suggesting the act of crushing with the teeth: the characters are ground down by the obscure forces of society, environment and nature; they are also consumed by a devouring passion for gold.

If *McTeague* is, to a certain extent, a symbolical novel, it can also be described as an allegory of ideas *i.e*. a narrative in which the characters represent abstract concepts and the plot serves to communicate a doctrine or thesis. McTeague's quest, for instance, can be seen as a sort of pilgrimage in reverse: instead of going westward, the traditional direction/tropism of the Frontier, McTeague goes east,

through Death Valley in order to reach a mysterious Gold Mountain (p. 243). The flight to Placer County (Cal.) is an instinctive return to the origins, to Nature (cf. the comparison to the "homing pigeon", p. 216). McTeague feels an instinctive kinship with the primeval landscape of the mining area, and enjoys "the play of crude and simple forces" (217) that he finds there. It is thus possible to see *McTeague* as:

> « Un roman de l'innocence perdue. McTeague, c'est le cowboy qui a mal tourné, parce qu'il a quitté la Nature pour la Ville. C'est l'innocence corrompue qui, au moment de mourir de ses fautes, retourne spontanément à la Nature. Il prend le Far West, comme on prend le maquis. Car dans le cœur du plus coupable, du plus cupide Américain, il y a toujours la nostalgie de la Prairie où fuit McTeague, de la Prairie que les Rapaces[4] ont changée en désert. » (J. cabau, *La Prairie perdue*, 183)

Another aspect of allegory is to be found in *McTeague*: it is the fact that every character is an embodiment, a personification of such abstract entities as greed, malice (Marcus), avarice (Trina, Zerkow, Maria), lust (McTeague), sloth, etc. In the same way, each is associated with an animal representing his or her essential nature: McTeague, the brute, is compared to a "young bull" (18), "a draught horse" (2) "an elephant" (16), "an old bear" (77). When he is drunk, he is endowed with "an ape-like agility" (210) and he eventually "bites Trina like a dog" (188). Trina with "her rows of little round teeth" (14), her hair "like a rat's nest" (188) is suggestive of a rodent (a mouse or a rat); Zerkow, with his "cat-like eyes" is likened to a "lynx" (25). The animosity between the setter and the collie dog parallels the opposition between Marcus and McTeague. Everyone is thus given:

> "a sort of Darwinian double existence, so that on the surface people are domesticated and conventionalized, whereas underneath they are carnivorous beasts. In the naturalistic novel, the beast shows through the human exterior as in the older fiction the devil did; the modern Mephistopheles is a werewolf or, more likely an ape-man." (Chase, 189-90)

This is a consequence of the novel's underlying thesis presenting American society "as a state of warfare and a game of chance in which each man fights and bets against fearful odds." (W. D. Howells)

The Characters

In *McTeague*, the characters always go in pairs and form couples at odds with each other→mere guidelines for an analysis:

1) The original Adamic couple: Marcus Schouler & McTeague

"In our native mythology the tie between male and male is not only considered innocent, it is taken for the very symbol of innocence itself." (L. Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel*, 351). The friendship between the two men, at the beginning of the story, can be seen as an example of "the archetypal relationship which haunts the American psyche." (*Ibid*. 192) *viz.* innocent homosexuality, "the pure marriage of males – sexless and holy, a kind of counter-matrimony." (Fiedler, 211), and the ending of the novel, with the two friends locked in mortal embrace, confirms this reading.

McTeague's flight is another *topoï* (commonplaces) of American fiction:

> "Ever since [Rip Van Winkle] the typical male protagonist of our fiction has been a man on the run, harried into the forest or out to sea, down the river or into combat – anywhere to avoid 'civilization', which is to say, the confrontation of a man and woman which leads to the fall to sex, marriage and responsibility […] This strategy of evasion, that flight from society to nature, from the world of women to the haunts of womanless men, which sets our novel apart from that of the rest of the Western world.' (Fiedler, 76).

The saloon (in westerns) and the mine in *McTeague* are variants of the antitype of the home or refuge for escaping males.

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4. Titre de la traduction française du roman. Le cinéaste Erich von Stroheim en a, pour sa part, tiré en 1924 le scénario d'un des plus grands films de tous les temps, *Greed*, dont la première version (devenue mythique depuis sa disparition), durait 9 heures et ne fut projetée qu'une seule fois, en privé, avant de faire l'objet de coupes sacrilèges qui réduisirent l'œuvre à néant.

2) McTeague/Trina

The first Adamic couple formed by Marcus and McTeague is torn asunder by Trina's entrance upon the stage; she represents the seductive woman, the "*femme fatale*", yet, paradoxically enough, she is at first described as a being of an indefinite gender ("a sexual neuter", 7), then as "without sex" (14/50) and eventually, she is said to be "almost like a boy", which confirms the streak of male homosexuality running through the story. However, the meeting with McTeague brings about the awakening of the woman within her ("the woman within her awoke", 50), whereas in McTeague, it is "the beast", "the brute" that is aroused. Her relation with McTeague is very ambiguous, characterized by a form of fascination/repulsion for the male ("And then her ancient terror of him, the intuitive fear of the male, leaped to life again. She was afraid of him.", 169) and tinged with masochism (cf. p. 173: "And in some strange, inexplicable way this brutality made Trina all the more affectionate…") and sadism/fetishism ("With what a delicious odor was it [*i.e.* her hairbrush] redolent! That heavy, enervating odor of her hair—her wonderful, royal hair! The smell of that little hairbrush was talismanic." 44). McTeague arouses drives and desires in Trina that she is afraid of and that he eventually ceases to satisfy when they become too overwhelming; the possession of gold and money will provide an alternative mode of satisfaction.

3) Three other couples stand in opposition to McTeague/Trina:

– Old Grannis/Miss Baker

Their belated romance acts as a foil to the former characters' broken couple. However, their happy relationship is perhaps to be accounted for by its asexual nature; be that as it may, they clearly symbolize the coupling of impotence and innocence vs. sexuality and greed as embodied by McTeague and Trina.

– Zerkow/Maria

They share the same form of craziness and represent the final condition McTeague and Trina couple might result in.

– The Sieppes:

A caricature of the couple of immigrants in quest of middle-class respectability; the Babbitts-to-be of 20th-century American society.