
McTeague's Gilded Prison

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“By the one window, chittering all day in its little gilt prison, hung the canary bird, a tiny atom of life that McTeague still clung to with a strange obstinacy” (259). Of all the excessive images in Frank Norris’ 1899 novel *McTeague*, none is more excessive than the gigantic gilded tooth that hangs from the window of McTeague’s “Dental Parlors” and the pet canary kept in a little gilt cage by the window (107, 3). Though McTeague willingly, albeit grudgingly, parts with most of his possessions after he loses his dental practice, including the gilded tooth, he refuses to part with the canary no matter what circumstances befall him. The obstinacy with which he clings to the canary is not just strange; it is downright fierce. He carries it with him from one San Francisco tenement apartment to another, to the mines of Placer County, to the remote gold prospects of the Sierra Nevada Mountains, and finally to his demise on the alkali flats of Death Valley. While a number of critics note the canary’s presence, most also elide its importance, treating the bird and its gilded cage as either unintentionally placed or as an otherwise unremarkable aspect of the San Francisco cityscape. However, the canary is more important than simple room decoration or company for an oafish ex-miner. It provides the key to understanding McTeague’s own transformation from a “sluggish” yet “docile” middle-class man to a violent transient who murders his wife and makes off with her savings (4). The novel aligns the canary’s chittering in its little gilt prison with McTeague’s middle-class life in San Francisco, and thus positions McTeague’s life as a life imprisoned by the city. Cut off from the landscape of his youth, McTeague, and his neighbors, are driven mad by an insatiable desire to possess the “things” of the city, items that signify wealth but are themselves worthless. It is this desire for possession, rather than the biological determinism often used to categorize American Naturalism, that incites confusion, greed, and eventually animalistic violence in otherwise rational men and women.¹

The novel opens with an image of urban imprisonment: McTeague sleeps “crop-full, stupid, and warm” in the dental chair before the bay window of his “Dental Parlors” (3). The “Parlors,” ironically plural, is a single room in a boarding house that doubles as McTeague’s living quarters. McTeague and the canary occupy in

the same place in the room, the bird “just over his head” (3). Both man and bird live in a cage; McTeague’s is only slightly larger. When the canary sings, McTeague, as if in accompaniment, takes up his concertina and plays his “six lugubrious airs” while watching the city below (3):

The street never failed to interest him. It was one of those cross streets peculiar to Western cities, situated in the heart of the residence quarter, but occupied by small tradespeople who lived in the rooms above their shops. There were corner drug stores with huge jars of red, yellow, and green liquids in their windows, very brave and gay; stationers’ stores, where illustrated weeklies were tacked upon bulletin boards; barber shops with cigar stands in their vestibules; sad-looking plumbers’ offices; cheap restaurants, in whose windows one saw piles of unopened oysters weighted down by cubes of ice, and china pigs and cows knee deep in layers of white beans. At one end of the street McTeague could see the huge powerhouse of the cable line. Immediately opposite him was a great market; while farther on, over the chimney stacks of the intervening houses, the glass roof of some huge public baths glittered like crystal in the afternoon sun. (6)

McTeague repeats his ritual of city watching “Day after day... The bay window of his ‘Dental Parlors’ was for him a point of vantage from which he watched the world go past” (8). The street below him is replete with the necessities of middle-class life. Polk Street is an “‘accommodation street’ in the residence quarter of the town,” and therefore outside the city center (4): in other words, the 1890s version of the suburbs. McTeague views the entire expanse of his existence in a single look, the boundaries of his life ranging from the huge powerhouse of the cable line to the public baths. The cables feeding into the powerhouse and the roof of the baths, “glitter[ing] like crystal,” form the bars of the dentist’s cage. Polk Street, moreover, is filled with images of gilded bars, from the colored liquids in huge jars in the corner drug stores, to the cigar stands in the vestibules of the barber shops, to the chimneys of the houses. McTeague’s greatest dream is to have “a huge gilded tooth, a molar with enormous prongs, something gorgeous and attractive... projecting from that corner window” (5). The link between the canary’s gilt cage and the gilded tooth is almost too obvious: McTeague’s desire for the tooth is a desire to interrupt his view of the city with the prongs of the molar, to turn his bay window into a gilded cage. The gilded tooth and the cityscape further suggest that the desire to live in a cage is endemic to and produced by the city, for the very things that McTeague and the Polk Street residents employ to attract customers and increase their stature among the neighbors become the “signs” of their imprisonment within the domesticated landscape of city and its middle-class, (sub)urban economy. Success is not measured

by the ability to move into better housing or away from the ghettos of the city; rather, success is measured by who has the most beautiful cage.

Although the novel does not connect the canary to a specific memory in McTeague's past, we do know that before becoming a dentist, he was a miner. Mining is a job peculiarly suited to McTeague's "immense limbs, heavy ropes of muscle" and "enormous, red [hands] covered with a fell of stiff yellow hair...hard as wooden mallets, strong as vises, the hands of an old time car-boy" (4). McTeague's body is built for manual labor, for thrusting against the physical world, even though the role of the miner has changed as the mining industry, in step with the city economy, has modernized. Ronald Brown points out that "mechanization began to alter mining techniques...[a]s early as 1860. Subsequently, cages replaced ore buckets; wire cable rope; dynamite, gunpowder and nitroglycerin; machine drills, hammers and hand drills; and steam and electricity, human and animal labor" (qtd in Cavalier 127). McTeague's body is a relic of a by-gone age that required physical human strength to extract gold from the land, his body now replaced by machines that separate the miner from the mine, the laborer from the product of his labor.

The canary, too, is a relic of a past age. Once carried into the mines in wooden and metal cages to alert miners of carbon monoxide, canaries were, according to the Mine Safety and Health Administration, replaced by the monoxor CO indicator in the late nineteenth century. Despite its uselessness in the city, the canary reminds McTeague of the life he lost to the expanding urban economy, symbolizes his imprisonment, and warns him that he is in a place where he does not belong. He is an anomaly among the "small tradespeople" of Polk Street who neither produce nor extract anything from the land, nor even barter one good for another, but simply exchange their goods and services for small pieces of gold (4).

San Francisco is ripe with get-rich-quick schemes that promise abundant riches with little or no work. Maria Macapa's setting the "entire flat in commotion" in search of junk, Zerkow's desire for Maria's fabled gold plates, and even McTeague's own dental practice are notable examples (27). Though McTeague served as an apprentice to another charlatan dentist, he nonetheless recognizes the irony of Polk Street calling him "the 'Doctor'" in that he has circumvented the training and certification process required of American dentists (4). Yet, no other get-rich scheme contains quite the promise and wonder of the lottery. When Trina receives the news that she has won five thousand dollars, the crowd of neighbors and the lottery agent gathered in the Dental Parlors recount "the legends and myths that had grown up around the history of the lottery" (83). The neighbors do not simply tell stories; they continually re-express the shared truth of the urban community: in the city, you can get rich by being lucky, without expending a single calorie of energy. Of all

moneymaking schemes available within the urban economy, the lottery best embodies the myth of the city, maximizing the inverse relationship between investment and earnings. Trina's single dollar "invested" for the lottery ticket returned her money at a rate of five-thousand percent, involving neither intelligence nor foresight on the part of the investor.

McTeague retains a unique position in the city economy in that he alone uses his hands in his profession. Dentistry is particularly linked to mining given that McTeague often "dispensed with forceps and extracted a refractory tooth with his thumb and finger" (4).² Dentistry, though, is not mining, but rather the business of maintaining the urbanite's capacity to consume. What better represents the hunger for consumption than an enormous gilded tooth? So long as McTeague's profession remains connected to consumption, it has the potential to draw him away from the contented feeling that "his life is a success...he could hope for nothing better" and into an urban socio-economy whose unquenchable desires for consumption threaten to, ironically, consume him (4). McTeague clings to the bird with such strange and unconscious obstinacy because he understands, on some level, its value as a warning system and a mine's dangerous ability to swallow the miners inside its noxious stomach. Yet separated from the mine and his old miner's life, he does not recognize the canary's feeble chitterings as signs of distress.

McTeague, moreover, does not recognize the fact that he is imprisoned by his own middle-class status. The term "middle-class" quite literally suggests an economic position between poverty and wealth. In *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, published the same year as *McTeague*, Thorstein Veblen argues that the middle-class household at once lacks the "pretense of leisure" enjoyed by the wealthy, but continues to desire the signs of wealth: "household adornment and tidiness" appeal to a taste "which has been formed under the selective guidance of a canon of propriety that demands just these evidences of wasted effort" (82). The objects that constitute what Veblen terms the "'presentable' portion of middle-class household paraphernalia" are thus items of "conspicuous consumption": wasteful objects desired and possessed in order to make middle-class life appear more luxurious (83). Middle-class life, moreover, maintains a constant tension between the desire to possess the lifestyle of the wealthy and the fear of losing what is already owned. McTeague's arguments with his wife over his desire to spend and her desire to hoard the lottery winnings exemplify this tension. Likewise, in other American Naturalist novels, a strange twist of fate or the sudden loss of a job can catapult the middle-class citizen into vast amounts of wealth or sink him into abject poverty.³

Before encountering Trina Sieppe in his Dental Parlors, McTeague is only half-heartedly entranced by the city. His desires extend no further than the gilded tooth.

Once Marcus Schouler brings Trina into McTeague's Parlors—the first woman to enter the room—the dentist discovers a new dimension to his fascination with the city, which consequentially awakens the sleeping brute inside him:

Never until then had McTeague become so well acquainted with a girl of Trina's age. The younger women of Polk Street—the shop girls, the young women of the soda fountains, the waitresses in the cheap restaurants—preferred another dentist.... Trina was McTeague's first experience. With her the feminine element suddenly entered his little world. It was not only her that he saw and felt, it was the woman, the whole sex, the entire new humanity, strange and alluring, that he seemed to have discovered. How had he ignored it so long? It was dazzling, delicious, charming beyond all words. His narrow point of view was at once enlarged and confused, and all at once he saw that there was something else in life besides concertinas and steam beer. Everything had to be made over again. His whole rude idea of life had to be changed. The male virile desire in him tardily awakened, aroused itself, strong and brutal. It was resistless, untrained, a thing not to be held in leash an instant. (21)

McTeague does not locate in Trina a singular desire for a particular woman, but rather a general desire for the “whole sex,” a desire intimately connected with the city. He views the “women of Polk Street” in terms of their functions within the economy. As part of the scenery of Polk Street, women are linked to the objects that dazzled McTeague's view of the city in the novel's opening pages—the huge jars of colored liquid, the illustrated weeklies, the cigars and cubes of ice—none of which are desired for their utility or ability to improve the quality of life, but simply as consumables. Thorstein Veblen, in similar fashion, identifies the middle-class housewife as a possession of the middle-class man who functions as a vicarious consumer for her husband, deliberately decorating and cleaning the family's living accommodations in a “conspicuously wasteful expenditure of time and substance” in order to ensure the “reputability of the household and its head” (Veblen 82-83). Women are the apex of possession in McTeague's economy because the city itself is a feminized space, organized around the activities of the housewife and principally fueled by the desire to possess the signs of wealth, consumption, and wastefulness.⁴ In aligning women and the objects of consumption, Norris shows how both the fetishization of objects and the objectification of women entwine into a single desire for middle-class, city life.⁵ It does not matter who Trina is, so long as she is a woman; likewise the objects themselves are not important, even irrelevant. It is the act of possession that counts. As a result, Trina changes McTeague's “whole rude idea of life” and thus causes him to reorganize his desires to accord with the structures of middle-class society (21). When Trina rises from her gas-induced sleep, McTeague does not proposition her for sex, but for the legal contract that will “give him to

her": "Listen here, Miss Trina, I like you better than anyone else; what's the matter with us getting married?" (25).⁶

McTeague's position as a relative newcomer to the city shows that the conflation of sexual desire and middle-class life do not necessarily stem from biological factors, but are rather produced by the conditions and environment of middle-class life itself. Because McTeague can demarcate in himself the boundary between wanting and not-wanting, he alone is able to deliberate over whether or not his desires are good or bad. Standing over the anesthetized Trina in the dental chair, McTeague "seemed to realize that should he yield now, he would never be able to care for Trina again. She would never be the same to him, never so radiant, so sweet, so adorable; her charm for him would vanish in an instant" (24). His awareness is so acute that during his struggle to honor Trina's virtue, he feels a "certain second self, another better McTeague [rising] with the brute" (23). In the separation between McTeague's two selves, one rational and human, the other animalistic and brutish, the dentist confronts the disjunction between desire and desire's fulfillment. His rational self understands that the fulfillment of his desires is empty: once he possesses, his desire for the thing itself will wane. On the other hand, the "brute" in him reacts to and desires the temptations of the city. The brute cannot *not* want. McTeague successfully "downs" the monster within him, but recognizes that "the brute was there...at last alive, awake," a concession that he is becoming the middle-class man (24, 25).

McTeague may be unique in his awareness of the change that occurs within him, but he is by no means unique in his desire for possession. Antithetical to McTeague's desire for Trina, his neighbors configure their economic desires in explicitly sexual terms. For example, Old Grannis' connection to his "binding apparatus" that binds pamphlets "he never read," allow him to persistently ignore his affection for Miss Baker (14). Only when he sells the apparatus does he seek to replace "his tardy romance" for pamphlets with "the long retarded romance" of a "commonplace and uneventful" life with Miss Baker (229, 233). Meanwhile Maria Macapa uses her femininity, "pursing her lips and putting her chin in the air as though wounded in some finer sense," to swindle McTeague out of his "junk" (32). She promptly takes the junk to Zerkow the junk dealer where the two begin a "long wrangle" over every item in Maria's pillowcase (33). It is significant that Maria collects junk in a pillowcase, for her "wrangle" with Zerkow and the subsequent account of her family's gold dishes are narrated in the language of sexual intercourse, the couple's conversation across the fabric akin to the lovers' pillow talk. Maria's story "ravished [Zerkow] with delight," causing him to "breath[e] short" and "gnaw at his bloodless lip" (35). Once Maria finishes her story, an orgasmic "spasm of anguish passes through him," and Zerkow begs to "have it all over again" (36).

More than any other character, Trina conflates sexual pleasure with the possession of money. She often refers to her gold as “beauties” and declares “I love you” as she calls out “Mine, mine, mine—all of you mine” (252). In one of the novel’s most famous scenes—famously dramatized in *Greed*, the 1924 film adaptation of *McTeague*—Trina spreads the coins between the sheets, strips naked, and sleeps “all night upon the money, taking an ecstatic pleasure in the touch of the smooth flat pieces the length of her entire body” (255). Trina’s orgasm at the touch of money is intended to appear perverse. The scene marks the culmination of the city’s corruptive power to dehumanize its inhabitants, reducing them, in Alfred Kazin’s words, to “nothing but their material circumstances” (xiv). The novel links the material reduction to an animalistic brutality and madness, for all characters forced to account for their lives in terms of what they do and do not possess descends into an insane relationship with the city, one characterized by either unending and self-inflicted imprisonment or outbursts of violence.

The initial lines of Chapter X portray Trina, much like McTeague in the opening chapter, sitting “All day long. . . in the bay window of the sitting room that commanded a small section of Polk Street. . . Everything in the range of Trina’s vision, from the tarpaulins on the market-cart horses to the panes of glass in the roof of the public baths, looked glazed and varnished” (131). However, while McTeague looked down on the street and was tempted by its promises, Trina feels lost inside the city, “her hands falling idly into her lap, her eyes—her narrow, pale blue eyes—growing wide and thoughtful as she gazed, unseeing, out into the rain-washed street” (132). She understands now what will take McTeague several years and the loss of his dental practice to realize: that as a woman in the city she is merely “part of the order of things” (202). Her life appears meaningful only insofar as she possesses and is possessed. She loves McTeague “because she belonged to him” and she loves her lottery money because her possession of it allows her the potential to participate in the city economy (132). Ironically though, she can only feel economically powerful so long as she holds onto the money and abstains from participation in the economy. The moment she spends she becomes just another part of the mass; the moment her money is gone she will cease to exist.

Trina’s desire to save causes an incendiary friction with McTeague’s desire to spend, even though the desires to save and spend are both values of the middle-class, urban economy. Trina persistently structures her saving in the language of middle-class value, labeling it “a good fault,” and claiming that she saves money “against a rainy day” (151, 240). Likewise, McTeague replaces his dream of the gilded tooth (now-fulfilled) with the “dream” of owning “A little house all to themselves, with six rooms and a bath, with a grass plat in front and calla-lilies” (138). His desire

for the house extends beyond just the building; he wants the middle-class life that home ownership signifies:

He would have a son, whose name would be Daniel, who would go to High School, and perhaps turn out to be a prosperous plumber or house painter. Then this son Daniel would marry a wife, and they would all live together in that six-room-and-bath house; Daniel would have little children. McTeague would grow old among them all. The dentist saw himself as a venerable patriarch surrounded by children and grandchildren. (138)

McTeague's desire for a middle-class life is the product of a narrow vision for the future that, fueled by the city economy, cannot see beyond the city. Before his marriage, McTeague occupies a unique position on Polk Street, known among the neighbors for his miner's past and his ability to extract teeth with his fingers. Now he has "passed easily into the new order of things without a question...he was married and settled. He accepted the situation" (137). In desiring a house and children, he seeks the erasure of his particularity in order that he might become an anonymous part of the city mass. Trina and McTeague are aligned, then, by an ironic lack of desire to move beyond their positions within the city. Trina does not save in order that she might transgress her class, but rather that she might firmly entrench herself in it. McTeague's desire for a house and children similarly lacks the romantic sensibility for an enlarged vision of the self whereby McTeague and Trina might imagine their lives as more meaningful than the simple accumulation of objects.⁷ Their relationship is held together by their shared short-sightedness, an absence of ambition masked by the hunger for frivolous possession, the hunger to possess masking for love.

Once McTeague loses the objects of his "prosperous" Polk Street life, he quickly loses his desire for Trina. While his desire for her "had been dwindling for a long time," it takes the loss of his dental practice and "those little animal comforts" that move him away from participation in the city economy to force him to realize that "it was no longer a pleasure for him to kiss her and take her in his arms; she was merely his wife" (202). Trina, as a woman, is such a part of McTeague's relationship to the urban economy that he cannot desire women without desiring the objects women represent. By tightening her grip on her finances and reducing the household's spending and consuming, Trina commits the cardinal sin of the middle-class housewife: she fails to maintain the "reputability of the household and its head" and instead "forfeit[s] their good name and self-respect" (Veblen 83-4). In McTeague's words, Trina prevents them from living like "Christians and decent people" (212). He becomes trapped inside the city without the ability to spend or possess and paces "their one narrow room...with the restlessness of a caged brute"

(215). It is this restlessness—not his biological constitution, not his alcohol consumption—that ultimately incites him to violence.

The novel even goes so far as to allow the city itself to act as a disembodied beast that directly disrupts the McTeagues' lives. A strange letter arrives at the Dental Parlors, informing McTeague that "he had never received a diploma from a dental college and that in consequence he was forbidden to practice his profession any longer" (185). In contrast to Selina's "elegant" handwritten letter, which arrives for Trina along with the notice for McTeague, the letter from City Hall is typewritten and unsigned. The city has agency, but not personhood; it remains an anonymous force that feeds upon the people within it. Even Marcus Schouler, blamed for informing City Hall of McTeague's illegitimate practice, knows what action to take because of his involvement in the "Polk Street Improvement Club," an organization that had "developed into a quite an affair and began to assume the proportions of a Republican political machine" (159). Marcus acts not as his own person, for alone he is powerless against the massive McTeague, but as an extension of the city. Marcus' own moral sensibilities have been transformed by the machine of the city, displacing his ability to act as a "very noble, self-sacrificing" man able to sacrifice "himself for the sake of his friend" with "that quickness of temper and passionate readiness to take offence which passes among his class for bravery" (43, 159). The city has consumed Marcus; now, as part of the city, he helps the city to consume Trina and McTeague.

McTeague's fall from the comforts of middle-class life temporarily renews in him a capacity to want things other than the comforts of Polk Street. Unemployed and restless, McTeague takes long walks through the city to "the Point" where he could see "the full sweep of the Pacific" (235). On the edge of San Francisco's most sublime landscape, McTeague finds himself restored by the "solitude of the tremendous, tumbling ocean; the fresh, windy downs...the gusty Trades flogging his face" (235). His reconnection with the landscape helps to discover his "passion for fishing," whereby he "sits all day nearly motionless upon a point of rocks, his fish-line between his fingers, happy if he caught three perch in twelve hours," stopping only at lunch to cook his fish on a stick and eat them "without salt or knife or fork" (235). Freed from trying to own or possess the fish, McTeague devours it "slowly and with tremendous relish, picking the bones clean, eating even the head" (236). Though it is certainly possible to read McTeague's devouring of the fish as another example of consumption, this particular consumption is by no means frivolous. He is penniless and hungry and the fish constitutes a meal. Moreover, the process of sitting near the ocean, catching fish, and eating returns him to his memories of his miner's life in Placer County, memories absent since he first met Trina. The scene

connects McTeague's memory—his ability to account for his own history—with his ability to look upon the world with a somewhat romantic sensibility, and to express an awareness of a world larger than his immediate surroundings.

The ocean offers a possible, if ironic, explanation for McTeague's strange obstinacy in keeping the birdcage. In refusing to part with the canary, he refuses to completely part with his past life, or to become wholly consumed by the city. By keeping the canary in the cage, he keeps the sign of his imprisonment separate and distinct from his own body, and thus refuses to completely accept his life as a caged animal. But does McTeague refuse to accept his state or does he simply fail to acknowledge it? Both answers seem possible, even contiguous with each other. At the ocean, Norris writes, "the instincts of the old-time miner were returning" and "in the stress of his misfortune, McTeague was lapsing back to his early estate" (236). "Lapsing back" suggests a negative regression to a more primitive, more brutish state. McTeague does experience just such a regression, but not a negative one. He lapses back to a state that precedes his middle-class city life—one that precedes his desire to own and possess the frivolous objects of the city, and in which his romantic sensibilities are expanded.⁸ His point of view extends beyond the borders of the city and he rediscovers the capacity to think both backwards and forwards in time. He connects his sudden passion for fishing not with his desire for the objects of the city, but with his memories of Placer County. Fishing and mining are linked not by the products they extract from the earth, but by their ability to connect McTeague directly to the earth itself.

His walks to the ocean further restore in him the temporary capacity to temper his violence against Trina. Directly after Norris' long description of McTeague at the Point, the dentist returns home to find his wife preparing to move into the apartment where Zerkow murdered Maria Macapa. Instead of reacting violently, McTeague calmly acquiesces, an action that "surprises" Trina (236). The ocean cannot abate McTeague's brutal behavior entirely, for he does rob and murder his wife in the proceeding pages; however, the fact that a change in landscape can temporarily quell him suggests that his violence originates more in his being caged in by the city than by any overarching biologically hereditary factor.

American Naturalism is most often categorized as the offspring of Émile Zola's French Naturalism, specifically Zola's notions that hereditary defects can cause, or determine, aberrant behavior, including alcoholism, perverse sexuality, and animalistic violence. Donald Pizer locates McTeague's violence as the result precisely such hereditary factors (Pizer, "The Biological Determinism"). Under closer scrutiny, however, heredity fails to provide a comprehensive explanation for McTeague's behavior. When McTeague battles his desires for Trina, Norris writes, "Below the

fine fabric of all that was good in him ran the foul stream of a hereditary evil, like a sewer. The vices and sins of his father and his father's father, to the third and fourth and five hundredth generation, tainted him. The evil of an entire race flowed in his veins" (25). Had the regression of McTeague's evil stopped at the fourth generation, we might be more justified in reading *McTeague* as the American cousin of Zola's most violent novel, *La Bête Humaine*. However, the fact that the novel extends McTeague's "hereditary evil" to the "five hundredth generation" indicates that the capacity for evil originates not just in McTeague's direct forefathers, but in all of mankind, in the inheritance of original sin. The factors that incite one person to evil cannot be reduced to simple biological factors and therefore seem more plausibly the result of a corruptive environment awakening the capacities for evil shared by all humankind.

One might refute this argument against McTeague's hereditary violence by pointing to the dentist's alcoholism, a late-developing habit seemingly linked to his father. In the novel's opening pages, we learn that every other Sunday McTeague's father "became an irresponsible animal, a beast, a brute, crazy with alcohol" (3). On a superficial level, McTeague reacts to alcohol in exactly the same way. The alcohol "made him vicious" and McTeague's drinking is linked to his "pleasure in annoying and exasperating Trina, even in abusing and hurting her" (216). Alcohol, though, does not have exactly the same effect on McTeague as it does on his father. Instead of making him crazy, he becomes "active, alert, quick-witted, even talkative" (216). Moreover, McTeague's drinking is explicitly separated from his violence: "He drank no more whiskey than at first, but his dislike for Trina increased with every day of their poverty, with every day of Trina's persistent stinginess. At times—fortunately rare—he was more than ever brutal to her" (219). Trina's stinginess, not the alcohol, incites McTeague to violence, while violence itself is configured as a direct reaction to his frustrated and unfulfilled economic desires. He "box[es] her ears," hits her with "the back of her hair brush," and bites the "tips of her fingers" in reaction to Trina's refusal to participate—and her refusal to let him participate—in the consumer economy (219). In biting her fingers, McTeague effectively attempts to consume Trina, to devour her in place of the bottled beer and "animal comforts" that she has forced him to give up. Trina is the only consumable possession McTeague has left.

McTeague's murder of Trina, though, is not simply motivated by his desire to steal her money and reclaim the luxuries of his former life. When Trina refuses to give her husband "every nickel" of her money, McTeague tells her, "You ain't going to make small of me this time," which suggests that McTeague recognizes that his desire for the spoils of middle-class life, including his desire for marriage, have reduced him as a human being (264). Now that he has spent time at the ocean and

has reconnected with the romantic enlargements of the landscapes outside the city, he seems to recognize his life in the city as a dehumanized imprisonment, one that has turned him into a brute, or more precisely, allowed the brute in him to reign. His murderous violence results from his reconnection with the romantic landscape beyond the city and his frustrated inability to transgress the city. His murder and robbery of Trina is both a final attempt to possess the city and a desperate effort to break free of it. The very choreography of his punches suggests his struggle to break out. He sends “his fist into the middle of her face with the suddenness of a relaxed spring” (264), which, as Philip Cavalier suggests, undoes his own reconstruction of Trina’s dental work at the start of the novel, the scene in which the lusts of the city first assume control of him (Cavalier 142). McTeague’s punches push outward and away from his body, a sharp contrast to his previous violence in which he “boxed” Trina’s ears and gnawed on her fingers in an effort to enclose and consume her. Moreover, this is McTeague’s second robbery of Trina; in the first he stole her “little savings” and lived “absolutely reckless of the morrow” (245, 257). This time McTeague does not go back to the same indulgent lifestyle. He spends hardly a dime of the money and chooses instead to flee with the canary back to the rugged landscape of the Sierra Nevada Mountains (266).

I do not mean to diminish McTeague’s brutality in this scene or the fact that his violence results in the murder of a woman; even Norris calls the scene “abominable” (265). What is most abominable, though, is not the form and magnitude of the violence, but that violence itself is the inevitable end result of the city’s corruptive power. McTeague is not the only character driven to insanity and violence by their economic frustrations. Zerkow the junk dealer becomes so crazed by the story of Maria Macapa’s mythical gold dishes that when she stops telling the story, he believes her to be deliberately hiding the dishes from him and consequently slits her throat in an effort to “bleed” his wife of her gold dishes. Zerkow is found the next day drowned in the San Francisco Bay, clutching a bag of “old and rusty pans” that he presumably believed to be made of gold (227). Though Zerkow has been read as McTeague’s cousin in violence and his atrocities against Maria foreshadowing McTeague’s violence against Trina, Trina’s own self-reflexive act of violence when she learns that McTeague has stolen her “little savings” is often overlooked (see Pizer, “Frank Norris’s *McTeague*”):

Her grief was terrible. She dug her nails into her scalp, and clutching the heavy coils of her thick black hair tore it again and again. She struck her forehead with her clenched fists. Her little body shook from head to foot with the violence of her sobbing. She ground her small teeth together and beat her head upon the floor with all her strength. (245)

The violence Trina inflicts upon herself is hardly different from or less than the violence McTeague later inflicts upon her. Had Old Miss Baker not found her the next morning, her death may have been the result of suicide instead of murder. Trina sees herself, like McTeague sees her, as the locus-point of the city's corruptive power and striking against herself, she strikes against her own imprisonment. Unlike McTeague, Trina is wholly a product of the city, and as such, her punches are recursive. Her blows express the extent to which her imprisonment within city has driven her mad, but fails as an attempt to break free from the bars of her cage.⁹

It would be difficult to link the city to the brutality and insanity of *McTeague's* characters if the novel did not offer an alternative landscape as a corrective. Following Trina's murder, McTeague flees San Francisco for the East California Mountains. Norris' description of the landscape constitutes one of the most romantic and elegiac passages of the entire novel, evoking not just the terrain's expansive beauty in relation to the city, but suggesting it as McTeague's rightful place:

The day was very hot, and the silence of high noon lay close and thick between the steep slopes of the canyons like an invisible, muffling fluid. At intervals the drone of an insect bored the air and trailed slowly to silence again. Everywhere were pungent, aromatic smells. The vast, moveless heat seemed to distil countless odors from the brush—odors of warm sap, of pine needles, and of tar-weed, and above all the medicinal odor of witch hazel. As far as one could look, uncounted multitudes of trees and manzanita bushes were quietly and motionlessly growing, growing, growing. A tremendous, immeasurable Life pushed steadily heavenward without a sound, without a motion. At turns of the road, on the higher points, cañons disclosed themselves far away, gigantic grooves in the landscape, deep blue in the distance, opening one into another, ocean-deep, silent, huge, and suggestive of colossal primeval forces held in reserve. At their bottoms they were solid, massive; on their crests they broke delicately into fine serrated edges where the pines and redwoods outlined their million of tops against the high white horizon. Here and there the mountains lifted themselves out of the narrow river beds in groups like giant lions rearing their heads after drinking. The entire region was untamed. In some places east of the Mississippi nature is cosey, intimate, small, and homelike, like a good-natured housewife. In Placer County, California, she is a vast, unconquered brute of the Pliocene epoch, savage, sullen, and magnificently indifferent to man. (268)

To recall the novel's opening, McTeague's own body is described in precisely similar terms to the landscape from which he originates. Norris compares the dentist's head to "that of a carnivora" while here the mountains are "giant lions" (4). In Placer County, McTeague is at last free from the imprisonment of the city and from Trina, because the terrain itself denies Trina, and those like her, the ability to exist here. The landscape refuses to become domesticated "like a good-natured housewife"

and McTeague becomes ennobled simply by being in the landscape. His stupidity is transformed into a useful navigational tool in the stark and vacant geography as he returns to the Big Dipper mine by “following a blind and unreasoned instinct” (272). And he is more than just instinctual; he is self-aware. Walking from Iowa Hill to the mine, he pauses “as if suddenly remembering something,” and then proceeds to actually remember: “‘There ought to be a trail just off the road here,’ he muttered. ‘There used to be a trail—a short cut’” (269). In the rugged, romantic landscape, McTeague rediscovers his lost capacity for self-reflection, remembering small details about a massively expansive chunk of land and moving himself through it as freely and as easily as if it were the Dental Parlors. He even picks up on slang, interpreting the phrase “cousin Jack” as a pejorative reference to Cornishmen and accordingly hiding his identity and his ethnicity by giving himself an alias (271). More remarkably, the landscape awakens in McTeague a kind of sixth sense that forewarns him of impending danger (275). It is tempting to read the description of the sixth sense as a purely animalistic faculty, like a deer sensing hunters, and to thereby argue that McTeague has returned to an even more brutish and animalistic state than he was in the city. Yet, McTeague’s strange sixth sense allows him to take rational and deliberate steps to avoid his pursuers: he sleeps in his clothes and walks “wide around sharp corners” (275). When at last he deciphers the danger pursuing him, he “utter[s] an exclamation as of a man suddenly enlightened,” then gathers up his few belongings, including the birdcage, and flees (276).

McTeague’s return to the Sierra Nevada wilderness seems, at least in part, reflective of the late nineteenth century’s burgeoning ecological movement and nostalgia for the primitive, especially associated with the frontier. Roderick Nash writes, “From the perspective of city streets and comfortable homes wilderness inspired quite different attitudes than it did when observed from a frontiersman’s clearing...Specifically, the solitude and hardship that had intimidated many a pioneer often proved magnetically attractive to his city-dwelling grandchild” (520). Pizer, as well as Joseph McElrath and Jesse Crisler, have noted the influence on Norris by Joseph Le Conte, the animated Berkeley life-sciences professor, charter member of the Sierra Club, and close associate of naturalist John Muir. Muir’s two essays, “The Treasures of the Yosemite” and “Features of the Proposed National Park,” both published in *The Century* in 1890, directly influenced Congress to set aside the Yosemite Valley as a national park. Norris’ divinely-infused description of the landscape’s “tremendous, immeasurable Life push[ing] steadily heavenward” resonates with Muir’s view of the Sierras from Pacheco Pass: “miles in height, in massive, tranquil grandeur, so gloriously colored and so radiant that it seemed not clothed with light, but wholly composed of it, like the wall of some celestial city.” Yet the

difference between the two depictions is key: while Muir portrays the wilderness as “a noble mark for the traveler” within accessible reach of San Francisco, Norris’ landscape is remote, “very hot,” and “magnificently indifferent to man”—a terrain fit to rival the wiles of the city.

Perhaps even more than Muir, Frederick Jackson Turner influenced Norris’ longing for wild spaces.¹⁰ In a series of influential essays published in the early 1890s, Turner declared, “The free lands are gone, the continent is crossed, and all this push and energy is turning into channels of agitation...the conditions of a settled society are being reached with suddenness and with confusion” (219). For Turner, the frontier was the site of a “perennial rebirth” of “the forces dominating American character,” which in turn promoted and propagate democracy (2). Turner writes, “the frontier is productive of individualism. Complex society is precipitated by the wilderness into a kind of primitive organization based on the family. The tendency is anti-social. It produced antipathy to control, particularly any direct control. The tax gatherer is viewed as a representative of oppression” (30). The social pitfalls and lawlessness that often characterize frontier towns—“lax business honor, inflated paper currency and wild-cat banking”—are not qualities of the frontiersman, but are precipitated by the “men of capital and enterprise” who buy out the settler’s lands and set about transforming a small outback village into a “spacious town or city” (32, 20). The frontiersman, in Turner’s formulation, appears much like McTeague in Placer County: “coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness...masterful grip of material things, lacking in the artistic but powerful to effect great ends...restless, nervous energy” (37).

With the frontier closed, McTeague’s obstinate possession of the canary and its little gilt prison takes on a different and greater significance. In San Francisco, the gilded birdcage symbolized McTeague’s unwillingness to fully succumb to the city’s imprisonment; in the rugged country, it symbolizes the fact that the city has infiltrated both his life and the landscape. Though he has fled San Francisco, he can never fully escape the person/prisoner he became while he was there. The final three chapters of the novel may be read as the pursuit of McTeague by the city. The romantic panorama of Placer County, indifferent to and therefore seemingly unconquerable by man, is everywhere disrupted by the city’s technology. Mechanized drills and “hydraulic ‘monitors’” tear away “the great yellow gravelly scars” of the mountains, “sucking their blood, extracting gold” (268). McTeague himself perceives the city’s infiltration of the country, describing the Burly drill as “a queer counterpart of his old-time dental engine” and calling his job as a chuck-tender “the caricature of dentistry” (273). The passage remarkably displays McTeague’s capacity for ironic self-reflection far beyond the previous intellectual range of the

“crop-full, stupid, and warm” dentist in San Francisco, consequently forcing him to recognize that the miner is the same man who was a dentist in San Francisco, and thus, the same man who married and murdered Trina Sieppe. The deputy’s comment at the beginning of Chapter XXI that, “we’ve about as good as got him. It isn’t hard to follow a man who carries a bird cage with him wherever he goes” speaks directly to the fact that the city, having once imprisoned McTeague, will always imprison him and will follow him even into the most desolate and remote corners of the globe (277).

There is a long-standing debate over how to categorize the fiction of Frank Norris and Norris’ brand of Naturalism. In the 1960s, some critics fashionably labeled Norris the product of transcendentalism and romance, an argument that gets plenty of support from Norris’ own essay, “A Plea for Romantic Fiction,” in which he calls Émile Zola, “the very head of the Romanticists” (*Responsibilities* 280; cf. French, and Johnson). Contemporary readers tend to favor naturalism’s link to realism, pointing out Norris’ and others’ fascination with the lower classes, sordid details of city life, and bawdy descriptions of sexuality, all of which cast aside the Victorian constraints and mores in ways that the Romantics and Transcendentalists dared not attempt. Both arguments have weight and Norris’ debt to Zola is undeniable. American Naturalism, however, seems best positioned as a tension between romance and realism. Naturalist writers chiefly chronicle the frustration created when the romantic image of a better life—the alternative to one’s social and/or environmental conditions—is thwarted by the constraints and boundaries of those social and environmental conditions. The Naturalist hero dreams romantically, but denies himself the possibility of exiting reality. McTeague’s exclamation in Death Valley, “Good Lord! What a country!” seems a recognition of both the desert’s sublimity and its punishing physical realities (297). He appears most alive, and most romantic, when alone in the desert: though he is “tortured for thirst” and “flagellated with heat,” the “brute that in him slept so close to the surface was alive and alert, and tugging to be gone” (302). And while the desert challenges McTeague’s life, it does not seem to necessarily threaten it with death. McTeague recognizes that he has “to get out of his place in a hurry, sure,” but abstains from the realization that if he doesn’t, he will die (300). It is Marcus Schouler, bringing with him the city and all its hoary metaphors, who names death by telling McTeague that “we’re done for,” implying that the desert will cook them, and by cooking, consume them, just as the city always does (311).

In his polemical apologia of Naturalism, *The Experimental Novel*, Zola writes, “in this consists the practical utility and high morality of our naturalistic works, which experiment on man, and which dissect piece by piece this human machinery in order to set it going again through the influence of the environment” (25-26). Humans

may be machines, Zola suggests, and therefore subject to certain “pre-programmed” forces, but they are ultimately moved and changed by their environments. And if one’s environment is the agent of dehumanization, then it also contains the potential for rehumanization. Death Valley reduces McTeague and Marcus to an almost animalistic baseness, forcing them “in the face of common peril” to chase down the mule that carries McTeague’s water (309). Their efforts to drink are consumptive acts, but are so fundamental to their survival that they serve as correctives to the frivolous, conspicuous consumptions of the city. Their animalism is not brutal, not cruel, but something approaching civility, for in chasing the mule, “the sense of enmity between the two weaken[s]” (309). But even here the city haunts them, the money in the chamois bag causing “their ancient hate” to “flam[e] up again,” even though the money can do nothing to save their lives (311). The final scene of McTeague and Marcus fighting over the money, a scene which leaves McTeague shackled to Marcus’ dead body and staring down at the “half-dead canary chattering feebly in its little gilt prison,” suggests that the prison of the city is more than just a matter of location and environment, but is ultimately a prison of the mind (312). Having spread outward from the domesticated urban pockets to the rugged natural landscape, the modern city is an inescapable confinement, one that transcends the boundaries between city and country and follows McTeague and his pursuer into the most remote deserts where it condemns them to die beneath the burning sun, their mouths filled with sand. ✱

Notes

¹Johnson suggests that *McTeague’s* city is “perverse and perverting,” but does so only in passing and leaves the argument undeveloped. For a discussion of *McTeague’s* relationship to biological determinism, see Pizer, “The Biological Determinism of *McTeague* in Our Time.” It is also important to note that violence is not an exclusive province of McTeague’s behavior; Zerkow the junk dealer, Marcus Schouler, and Trina McTeague all commit uniquely cruel and brutal acts against their family and friends. I argue that each character is not inherently brutal, but rather is driven to brutality by the lusts of the city.

²Near the conclusion of the novel, McTeague compares mining to dentistry, calling his work as a chuck tender “the caricature of dentistry” (273). I discuss the quotation in a different light below.

³I am specifically alluding to Dreiser’s 1900 novel, *Sister Carrie*. Through a series of fortunate coincidences, Carrie moves from an amateur actress and middle-class housewife to one of New York’s most sought after and glamorous stage stars. In contrast, her husband Hurstwood, through a series of small misfortunes, descends from a respected position as a department-store

manager to a sick and starving homeless man forced to beg for food and shelter, eventually committing suicide to escape his hopelessness.

⁴Cavalier argues that after killing Trina, McTeague returns to Placer County to “tame the feminized landscape” (131). While Norris’ descriptions of Placer County do employ feminine pronouns, the passage seems to position the city as a more feminine space than the desert. Women are linked to the economy and geography of the city, domestic spaces, and frivolous “conspicuous” consumption, all of which the rugged Placer County landscape denies. I argue the point in more detail below.

⁵Value divorced from utility and sexual desire for material objects are, of course, illustrations of Marx’s notion of Commodity Fetishism, in which “by being exchanged...the products of labor acquire value, as values, one uniform social status, distinct from their varied forms of existence as objects of utility” (321). Norris, however, pushes Marx’s theory one step further: the fetishized objects in *McTeague* can hardly be called commodities at all, at least not in the same way that Marx calls the wooden table a commodity. These objects, epitomized by the gilded tooth, have neither use-value nor function, except as signs of material wealth.

⁶Norris makes this point even more explicitly at the end of Chapter IX, the night of McTeague’s and Trina’s wedding. As McTeague stands desirously before his new wife in the bedroom, “An immense joy seized upon him—the joy of possession. Trina was his very own now” (130).

⁷I use the term “romantic” here because Norris himself uses it throughout his critical writings collected in *The Responsibilities of the Novelist*. In “A Plea for Romantic Fiction,” Norris writes, “Romance, as I take it, is the kind of fiction that takes cognizance of variations from the type of normal life” (280). Norris repeatedly insists on a romantic sensibility as a tool for navigating the “hum-drum world of today,” and complains that modern readers and writers easily locate romance in “King Arthur’s court” but deny its place in the “realistic” world of “Michigan Avenue” (279, 280). Trina’s and McTeague’s failure to imagine themselves beyond the cityscape is a fault they share, in Norris’ view, with the general population of readers and writers. Norris positions this failure as endemic to the city, thus depicting middle-class life and values as constraining the imagination and destroying a relationship to the world.

⁸Nash discusses “popular interest in the primitive,” which was “in evidence in 1890 [and] attained the dimension of a national cult in the first years of the present century” (518). The American frontier and pioneer heritage was viewed as the kitchen of “many desirable national characteristics” (521). The savage was seen as “the embodiment of virility, toughness, and a fighting instinct,” while nature became the site for “genteel contemplation and worship” (522). McTeague both exhibits Nash’s characteristics of the savage—virility, toughness, and a fighting instinct—and regresses into atavistic contemplation during his hours at the Pacific shore.

⁹My analysis challenges Pizer’s claim that the violence in *McTeague* is connected to a particular ethnic identity. While many of the characters may be ethnically stereotyped, their violent behavior is not necessarily connected to ethnicity. McTeague, Trina, Zerkow, and Maria display a rather common insanity and thirst for violence irrespective of their ethnic backgrounds. The hunger for money is a more appropriate common denominator for violence. Moreover, in contrast to the conspicuously “ethnic” characters, Old Grannis and Miss Baker, the Anglo-Saxons whom Pizer claims “lack significant weakness traceable to ethnic stereotypes,” seem so bound to their Victorian sexual politics that they live for years on either side of a paper-thin

partition without ever speaking (“Frank Norris’s *McTeague*” 24). When they at last confess their love for each other, Grannis and Baker “enter upon the long retarded romance of their commonplace and uneventful lives,” destined to die not by violence, but by idleness—another expression of the city’s imprisonment (233). However Norris suggests that idleness, too, is a form of insanity, and though Old Grannis and Miss Baker do not strike out against each other or their neighbors, they are just as imprisoned by their particular urban mores and appetites as the other characters. Given their “commonplace and uneventful” exit from the novel, the old couple seems hardly pardoned from the vices of the city. Rather, as representatives of the Victorian society that founded the city, Old Grannis and Miss Baker remain passive within the city because they can conceive of no life beyond it.

¹⁰McElrath and Crisler write that Norris’ 1902 article, “The Frontier Gone at Last,” reprinted in *The Responsibilities of the Novelist*, “echoes Frederick Jackson Turner’s 1893 thesis concerning the national significance of the closing of the American frontier” (409).

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