

Frank Norris' *McTeague*: An Entropic Melodrama

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Abstract—According to Naturalistic principles, human destiny in the form of blind chance and determinism, entraps the individual, so man is a defenceless creature unable to escape from the ruthless paws of a stoical universe. In Naturalism; nonetheless, melodrama mirrors a conscious alternative with a peculiar function. A typical American Naturalistic character thus cannot be a subject for social criticism of American society since they are not victims of the ongoing virtual slavery, capitalist system, nor of a ruined milieu, but of their own volition, and more importantly, their character frailty. Through a Postmodern viewpoint, each Naturalistic work can encompass some entropic trends and changes culminating in an entire failure and devastation. Frank Norris in *McTeague* displays the futile struggles of ordinary men and how they end up brutes. *McTeague* encompasses intoxication, abuse, violation, and ruthless homicides. Norris' depictions of the falling individual as a demon represent the entropic dimension of Naturalistic novels. *McTeague*'s defeat is somewhat his own fault, the result of his own blunders and resolution, not the result of sheer accident. Throughout the novel, each character is a kind of insane quester indicating *McTeague*'s decadence and, by inference, the decadence of Western civilisation. *McTeague* seems to designate Norris' solicitude for a community fabricated by the elements of human negative demeanours and conducts hauling acute symptoms of infectious dehumanisation. The aim of this article is to illustrate how one specific negative human disposition gradually, like a running fire, can spread everywhere and burn everything in itself. The author applies the concept of entropy metaphorically to describe the individual devolutions that necessarily comprise community entropy in *McTeague*, a dying universe.

Keywords—Animal imagery, entropy, Gypsy, melodrama.

I. INTRODUCTION

McTEAGUE is a novel by Frank Norris, first published in 1899, in San Francisco. Its protagonist is a simple dentist named McTeague whose first name is never revealed by the narrator. The novel covers many exciting events with emotional characters and miserable fatalities. From Naturalistic perspective, fate in the form of positivistic determinism and blind chance has trapped the individual within its "gilt prison" [1, p. 302], so man is a defenceless creature never able to transcend the mighty bars of an indifferent universe [2, p. 114].

The term 'melodrama' and 'melodramatic' are also, in an extended sense, applied to any literary work or episode, whether in drama or prose fiction, that relies on implausible

events and sensational action. Melodrama bears the relation to tragedy. Its plot revolves around malevolent intrigue and violent action, while the credibility of character and plot is sacrificed for violent effect and emotional opportunism [3, p. 110]. In Naturalism; however, melodrama reflects a conscious choice and has a particular function. Melodrama is, by definition, a genre in which characters are victimised by forces beyond their control [4, p. 205]. However, such failure is the result of their personal faults. Major texts of American Naturalism unfold an unrelenting logic of self-destruction. "A typical character of American Naturalism" such as *McTeague*, thus cannot be used for a social criticism of American society because, at a closer look, they are not "victims of the capitalist system or of a slum environment, but of their weakness of identity, or more precisely, the emptiness of their own character" [4, p. 207]. Therefore, sheer determinism and strict limitations of Naturalism are undermined by accepting the melodramatic perspective of Naturalism. Almost all the major characters' downfalls happen due to their own weakness which could have been controlled in some ways. Melodramas of savage self-destruction can produce the painful and masochistic effects which arouse the readers' sympathy.

From a postmodern perspective, each Naturalistic novel can follow entropic changes leading to a complete failure and decadence. Definitions vary with discipline, but in each case entropy is a measure of disorder, randomness, and probability. All systems tend to dissipate into a chaos without order or differentiation [5, p. 46]. Entropy in one sense means an inevitable and steady deterioration of a system on society. Entropic change makes repeated references to a dying universe and often depicts higher forms of life being broken down into lower forms, a process of degradation or a graded loss. It signifies the gradual degeneration of order to chaos, concentration to diffusion, surprise to probability, singularity and distinction to repetition and sameness.

Norris in *McTeague* depicts the struggles of common men and the slow reversion of a man to a brute. *McTeague*'s decadence had a gradual process. However, for the first three years of their marriage *McTeague* had been happier than ever before; in other words, as [5] asserts, "One certain past does not lead inevitably to one certain future" [5, p. 113]. When Trina wins the lottery the pace of entropy quickens, and it intensifies when *McTeague* loses his dental practice. Then, the entropic action precedes irrevocably and hastily to the climactic murder of Trina, or in Norris' term "the pivotal event" [6, p. 321]. Norris, according to [7], is often criticized for his melodrama and sensationalism. *McTeague* includes "drunkenness, abuse, and violent murders" [7, p. 65]. Norris' portrayals of the degenerating individual as a brute or in terms of [7], as "a massive human animal" indicate the entropic facet of Naturalistic novels [7, p. 68].

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Depicting apocalypse, Norris charts the decay of the West (a generally entropic universe), sometimes despairingly, sometimes mockingly. It seems that Norris comments on the fear that humankind is singly and collectively losing its humanity by writing novels in which characters appear to the reader as demons.

II. NATURALISM AND ENTROPY

Indebted to Thomas Pynchon's great effort, 'entropy' advances the extended application of thermodynamics from physics to psychology and sociology. We encounter an ongoing wild party composed of pseudo intellectuals who live empty lives usually in some facet of communications. Having no coherent or unified culture of their own, the characters of the novel stitch together, a rather grotesque substitute, a patchwork of clashing, unrelated parts. Gypsy-like characters fail to form any solid community even temporarily, and also later they are quickly scattered by death or immigration. McTeague, the son of a shift-boss of the mine, the old-time car-boy at the Big Dipper Mine in Placer County, went away with a charlatan travelling dentist to learn his profession [1, p. 4]. The Sieppes were a German Swiss family [1, p. 47]. As we read through the novel, "...a good deal of peasant blood still ran undiluted in [Trina's] vein [1, p. 95], Zerkow, "the red-haired Polish Jew, [a] rag-picker" [1, p. 88], Maria Macapa, "a strange woman of a mixed race" [1, p. 35], a Spanish-American, the Mexican woman, and Old Grannis, an Englishman and an expert dog surgeon, along with Miss Baker, an old English dress-maker. As [5] argues, "Their community quickly moves towards maximum disorder, randomness, and chaotic equilibrium" [5, p. 115].

According to the author of this article, almost all the events of the novel move gradually towards a decadence. From the very beginning of the novel, we can see in McTeague's behavior a blunt nature, limited wits, and a tendency for brutal strength. As a dentist, he often extracts directly a "refractory tooth with the thumb and finger" [1, p. 4]. The first two chapters of the novel give us an impression that McTeague, though immensely strong, is blunt, simple-minded, and not very smart [1, p. 4]. The tooth extraction description foreshadows the dentist's brutal actions and ultimately his murders at the end of the novel.

Reference [8] gives us a thematic reading of *McTeague* with the emphasis on human greed, pride, and violence, as the fundamental forces or elements most concerning the characters in the novel: "McTeague's pride and brutal strength, Trina's greed and possessiveness, and the vindictiveness of the jealous Marcus" [8, p. 1]. By meeting Trina, McTeague's "male virile" burning desire "tardily awakened" in him. "It was resistless, untrained, a thing not to be held in leash an instant" [1, p. 21].

Norris describes how the pal-like friendship between McTeague and Marcus also breaks as soon as Trina's winning of the lottery is known to everyone. Marcus, who has never thought of how much he may lose for giving up Trina, now regrets and feels deprived of the best chance in his life,

"You fool, you fool, Marcus Schouler! If you'd kept Trina you'd have had that money. You might have had it yourself. You've thrown away your chance in life—to give up the girl, yes—but this, ... to throw five thousand dollars out of the window—to stuff it into the pockets of someone else, when it might have been yours, ...—and all for what? Because we were pals. Oh, 'pals' is all right—but five thousand dollars—to have played it right into his hands—God damn the luck!" [1, p. 91].

In fact, as [8] argues, "his sense of deprivation proves even keener because it mingles in itself his jealousy and humiliation" [8, p. 7]. Feeling hurt, Marcus breaks with his old pal vehemently.

From above analysis, we see that Marcus' greed, sense of deprivation, and jealousy drive him to lose his mind and behave like a person who knows only money, hate, and violence. As [9] points out in his article, "American Literary Naturalism," it is in "the getting of money that modern man reveals his basic nature" [9, p. 537] in the world "where money is the final power" [9, p. 535]. Thus, the lottery is significant in the sense that it awakes people's greed, especially Marcus' and Trina's, deep down at the bottom of their hearts. Meanwhile, a lottery ticket is supposed to bring in fortune. However, it completely ruins the friendship between Marcus and McTeague, as a result, and changes the two old pals into foes, who will not stop fighting with each other till death.

In their picnic wrestling game, Marcus has twisted McTeague's head and bitten through the lobe of the dentist's ear. Feeling the blood bleeding at his ear, McTeague with "a yelling of a hurt beast," which "was something no longer human; it was rather an echo from the jungle" [1, p. 162], fights against Marcus and breaks his arm eventually. The bloody wrestling is significant in the sense that "it ruins the triangle relationship among Trina, Marcus, and McTeague" [8, p. 11]. In the entropic tragic ending of the picnic, "Norris seems to mock the stupidity of human pride and brutality" [8, *ibid*], by describing Selina's hysterical crying with a peal of laughter: "Oh, what a way for our picnic to end!" [1, p. 164]. Besides, Norris through one subplot, as asserted by [8], effectively parallels McTeague's sexual desire (lust) for Trina's body with Zerkow's intense greed for gold. He marries Maria because he is crazy after money and gold [8, P-9]. Zerkow attempts to use violence against Maria when she fails to tell him the whereabouts of the "gold dishes." After giving birth to a child that could not survive, Maria has forgotten all the details about her fabricated story, "the service of gold plates." Exasperated by his "ill success" in finding out the "gold dishes," Zerkow tries to "whip" the truth out of his wife [8, p. 12]. His "maniacal badgering of Maria for continual retelling of her ancestors' fabled gold dishes" [10, p. 14] is similar to "some hungry beast of prey [having] scented a quarry" [1, p. 33].

According to [10], Maria's false or falsely projected memory at once acts as "the engine of survival and spiritual renewal" in *McTeague* since it seems appropriate enough to keep greedy Zerkow in the distance. However, after giving

birth to a baby that failed to survive, the absence of the memory becomes fatal upon her. Maria is the target of the dual effects of both false and fatal absent memory; meanwhile, her case is an example of chaos in memory. Reference [10] describes,

Not only do her unlikely memories of a wealthier past beguile her into creating an illusory ancestry, but her inability to recapture that memory after undergoing childbirth also proves her ultimate undoing by her deranged husband, himself a victim of the allure of hollow memory [10, p. 26].

When greed cannot be fulfilled or satisfied, it drives Zerkow crazy and makes him aggressive and violent. Similarly, the bloody wrestling between McTeague and Marcus sheds light on violence and pride aggravating the status quo.

By reporting to the government about McTeague's illegal practice, Marcus retaliates upon McTeague for his loss, as well as his broken arm. Ironically, Marcus, who was once the match-maker of McTeague, now chooses to carry out his vengeance upon the dentist by ruining his life and career once and for all. The terms indicating gradual deteriorations (entropic changes) are widespread all throughout the novel. "Little by little Trina made the dentist understand the calamity that had befallen them" [1, p. 184].

Reference [1] depicts how McTeague's impulsive passion for Trina diminishes gradually. McTeague, who once could not help "kissing her, grossly, full on the mouth" [1, p. 24], while she was under the effect of anesthesia, after conquering Trina, finds that "she was not so desirable" [1, p. 60] as she used to be already. "With each concession gained the man's desire cools [1, p. 60]. The more Trina accumulates money, the more she behaves like a miser; even she admits so to McTeague, "Yes, yes, I know I'm a little miser, I know it" [1, P-131], and the more she is losing her husband's passion for it, "It was a passion with her to save money" [1, p. 131]. Drawing back her money from Uncle Oelbermann, Trina even spreads her coins on the bed and sleeps with them. Trina's sensual sleeping with the coins shows that she is now incapable of loving anyone or anything else except the gold coins.

There was no passion in the dentist's regard for his wife...But that tempest of passion, that overpowering desire that had suddenly taken possession of him that day when he had given her ether, again when he had caught her in his arms in the B Street station, and again and again during the early days of their married life, rarely stirred him now [1, p. 132].

To McTeague, Trina is becoming more intolerable for her greed and stinginess. In addition, alcohol is a factor that helps provoke McTeague's anger with Trina. However, he grows angry not because of alcohol but because of Trina's greed and stinginess. "McTeague's nature changed. It was not only the alcohol," that further turned him into a monster, but Trina's "avarice incessantly harassed him" [1, p. 210]. Indeed, in McTeague, alcohol is the catalyst of brutal violence, and a trigger for entropy. Norris describes,

It was curious to note the effect of the alcohol upon the dentist. It did not make him drunk, it made him vicious... he found a certain pleasure in annoying and exasperating Trina, even in abusing and hurting her [1, p. 209].

Remarkably, when McTeague turns to pinch and hurt Trina more violently, she responds to her husband's brutalities in a painful but "more affectionate" way. As [1] describes, this is "a morbid, unwholesome love of submission, a strange, unnatural pleasure" on Trina's part [1, p. 212]. She even discusses proudly with Maria Macapa about their "husbands' brutalities." Reference [1] describes,

They told each other of their husbands' brutalities, taking a strange sort of pride in recounting some particularly savage blow, each trying to make out that her own husband was the most cruel. They critically compared each other's bruises, each one glad when she could exhibit the worst. They exaggerated; they invented details, and, as if proud of their beatings, as if glorying in their husbands' mishandling, lied to each other, magnifying their own maltreatment [1, p. 213].

Their communication consists of depraved comparisons of wounds received from their respective husbands, and they engage in a perverse competition in which a terrible wound is accorded great admiration. Her innate fondness for money becomes a lust-filled obsession, and she permits and even enjoys a sadistic love. "Trina's emotions had narrowed with the narrowing of her daily life. They reduced themselves at last to but two, her passion for money and her perverted love for her husband when he was brutal" [1, p. 212]. This portrayal of Trina's masochistic tendency, according to [8], further shows that Norris is indeed a literary vanguard, who not only exhorts a "direction of a return to the primitive elemental life" for artistic representation, but also paves the way for the psycho-analysis portrayal of the characters [8, p. 16].

The entropic process of the novel or decadence is only a clear movement towards death or preferably, non-humanity. According to Thomas Pynchon's theory of entropy, the tendency of instinct is towards repeating or restating an earlier condition. Man seeks to become subject to the laws of physics; the death wish is what Freud himself called a kind of psychical entropy [5, p. 48]. Similarly, [11] has observed that "in the age of mechanism and decadence, mankind can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order" [11, p. 244].

Trina's masochism satisfies a need for pain, which arises from her guilt over losing her valuable senses due to greed. She needs suffering as reassurance for her. Sado-masochism, according to [5], might even lend a kind of community in which the injured and the injurer are joined in the behavior of the whole injury [5, p. 47]. Such sado-masochism is seen in the behavior of the two couples in the novel (Trina and McTeague, Maria and Zerkow).

Trina, as we perceive her career, devolves from a woman into a grotesque subhuman whose degeneration parallels with McTeague's. Greed keeps gnawing her nature as a normal person, so that she does not care to be scrupulously tidy and

civilised as in the old days. She is not beauty-conscious anymore. As [1] describes, “Worst of all, Trina lost her pretty ways and her good looks. The combined effect of hard work, avarice, poor food, and her husband’s brutalities told on her swiftly” [1, p. 229].

Norris depicts not only the characters’ mental and behavioral decadence, but also their gradual physical deteriorations. The doctor’s “eye fell upon the fingers of Trina’s right hand” [1, p. 239]; in fact, something was very wrong with them. The fingers of her right hand “had swollen, aching and discolored,” partly “cruelly lacerated by McTeague’s brutality,” and partly by her own work on the Noah’s ark animals, constantly in contact with the so-called “non-poisonous” paints [1, p. 239]. Still, when the doctor seriously alarms her, “You’ll have to have those fingers amputated, beyond a doubt, or lose the entire hand—or even worse” [1, p. 240], only one thing does matter to Trina, “And my work!” [1, p. 240].

Zerkow’s greed for gold drives him crazy and makes him a demon to cut his wife’s throat. When his “body had been found floating in the bay near Black Point,” [1, p. 220] people see “a sack full of old and rusty pans, tin dishes—fully a hundred of them—tin cans, and iron knives and forks, collected from some dump heap clutched in both his hands” [1, p. 220]. The entropy reaches to its zenith when their uncivilised and gypsy-like lives come to an end. In Zerkow’s example, we see that greed makes one behave morbidly, drives one crazy, and brings disaster upon oneself. Zerkow’s tragic end foreshadows the possible disaster that awaits to befall Trina.

McTeague’s nostalgia for the old days is only considered in his reluctance to depart from some of his old things. Disappointed as he is, McTeague maintains the same affection for his old belongings like the concertina, the cannery, and the bird cage, which are not for sale in the auction [1, p. 190].

“Under the lash of alcohol” [1, p. 251], which “had awakened in him an ape-like agility” [1, p. 256], McTeague comes to break the “street door of the schoolroom” and kill Trina bluntly by his brutal force [1, p. 255]. McTeague’s bluntness and brutal force to kill Trina remind us of what he did to extract directly a “refractory tooth with the thumb and finger” earlier in the beginning of the novel [1, p. 4].

McTeague’s extreme violence subsides with the death of Trina. Taking the “canvas sack crammed to the mouth with twenty-dollar gold pieces” [1, p. 256] together with the canary in “its little gilt prison” [1, p. 257], McTeague immediately escapes back to the Big Dipper mine in Placer County, California. He rolls up the canvas sack in his blanket, fastening the roll with a half hitch such as miners use, “the instincts of the old-time car-boy coming back to him in his present confusion of mind” [1, p. 257].

When the world of “order and precision crumbles,” as [2] asserts, “the primal self comes to the fore.” By losing his job, as a result, his civilised existence, McTeague reverts to the behavior set up in his “brutal childhood existence as man’s animalistic side dictates action.” Consistent with his unconscious alienation from civilisation, and with the

irrepressible brute within himself, after killing Trina, McTeague responding strictly by instincts flees to the wild reaches of California [2, p. 161].

Norris in *McTeague* depicts the struggles of common men and the slow reversion of a man to a brute. Meanwhile, closing the novel, Norris documents more grotesqueries so voluminously. Gradually, towards the end of the novel, the author focuses more on “the grimmer side of the California landscape, emphasising its inhospitable and arid aspects” [7, p. 63]. For instance, Death Valley appears at the end of *McTeague*:

Before him and upon either side, to the north and to the east and to the south, stretched primordial desolation. League upon league the infinite reaches of dazzling white alkali laid themselves out like an immeasurable scroll unrolled from horizon to horizon; not a bush, not a twig relieved that horrible monotony. Even the sand of the desert would have been a welcome sight; a single clump of sage-brush would have fascinated the eye; but this was worse than the desert. It was abominable, this hideous sink of alkali, this bed of some primeval lake lying so far below the level of the ocean. The great mountains of Placer County had been merely indifferent to man; but this awful sink of alkali was openly and unreservedly iniquitous and malignant [1, p. 290].

At the end of the novel, violence heads for McTeague’s and Marcus’ fatality; the entropy results in their violent death in Death Valley, where “the half-dead canary [is] chittering feebly in its little gilt prison” [1, p. 302].

III. NATURALISM AND MELODRAMA

As [2]—“Character in Later Nineteenth-Century American Naturalism”—quotes from C. C. Walcutt, Norris in *McTeague* assumes a superior position by merely making “his characters sound ignorant, without catching the flavor and quality of what they say that would do so much to admit the reader to their lives” [2, p. 141]. According to Walcutt,

Norris treats his characters as if they were exhibits in a side show, ridiculous monsters, or conversation pieces. He seems to delight in exhibiting their follies, to be grimacing at the reader over their shoulders, to be saying that these freaks from the grubby levels of society are at least as funny as they are pathetic [2, p. 141].

Character in *McTeague*, as [2] argues, is diminished by abundant references to “animal imagery, inadequate mental process, and the animation of things.” Polk Street is presented in an active voice while its occupants are presented in a passive voice [2, p. 142]. Even if there is some trace of love or unity, very soon it falls down to the abyss of unquenchable avarice and pride. The only ostensible different subplot is related to the elderly, Old Grannis and Miss Baker. By the end of the chapter seventeen, the old couple “far from the world and together entered upon the long retarded romance of their commonplace and uneventful lives” [1, p. 225]. By ignoring the old couple in the five closing chapters of the novel, Norris not only excludes them from the reality of life, “far from the world,” [1, p. 225] but also shows the rapid aggravating life

pace rushing to the decadence while pushing any irrelevant element aside. Old Grannis–Miss Baker episodes indicate a retarded clumsy romance that can never save anyone from the misery and the ongoing entropy.

The cage indicates that the self is unable to assert itself, not due to sheer determinism or blind chance as the fostered notions of Naturalism, but due to its own malfunction. The canary in its gilt cage symbolises any of the devastating characters trapped within their “gilt prison” [1, p. 302]. As the half-dead canary will perish on the scorched desert floor in the confines of its gilt cage, regardless of his intentions, McTeague shackled to Marcus yields to his melodramatic death on the parched desert floor.

Marcus in that last struggle had found strength to hand-cuff their wrist together. Marcus was dead now; McTeague was locked to the body. All about him, vast interminable, stretched the measureless leagues of Death Valley [1, p. 302].

As [2] resumes, by giving the characters unique physical qualities or mannerisms, Norris lends them a particular identity. We read several times throughout the novel that McTeague is with a “huge, square-cut head,” with a “salient jaw, with “shock of yellow hair”, his “heavy, lumbering body,” and with his “slow wits,” that Trina's hair is “a royal crown of swarthy bands,” that Zerkow is a “red-haired Polish Jew with grasping prehensile” or “claw-like” fingers, and that his wife, Maria Macapa, the Mexican maid-of-all-work puts “her chin in the air.” Norris’ descriptions of characters highlight them, thus gives them a distinct identity. Their peculiarities lend them a stamp of individuality, or in C. C. Walcutt’s term “a feeling for the desperation of human, or subhuman” whose “humanity is minimised somewhat by Norris’ facetious tone” [2, p. 150].

McTeague, as it was already mentioned, is resolved in some subplots. Some of them lead to dementia and death, and the others to a clumsy unity and love; each one is criticised by Norris in some way. Zerkow and Maria represent two mentally-imbalanced characters whose warped fascination with things draws them together. In their distorted relationship Maria as a female provider brings junk and bits of stolen gold to the desiring male and excites his insane attraction to riches by sensually relating the story of the fictitious golden service. She is the active figure in a perverse love, perpetually stimulating Zerkow's extraordinary lust by offering things and conversation about things. When she can no longer provide that stimulation, she is killed [2, p. 152].

In their lust for possessing things, particularly gold, Zerkow and Trina are very much alike. It is not the purchasing power of the gold, but its mere physical presence that attracts them so. Even McTeague notes the similarity between Zerkow and Trina. He yells at his wife, “Miser, you're worse than old Zerkow” [1, p. 144].

Norris distinguishes the old couple, Old Grannis and Miss Baker, from the Polk Street milieu further by using especially sentimental language to describe their awkward behavior and reserved personality. Their unnatural timidity prevents them from fulfilling their instinctual desire to be with one another,

only chance and the misery of the rest at the end of the novel unites them, as William Dean Howells felt that, “The one folly of *McTeague* is the insistence of the love-making of those silly elders which is apparently introduced as an offset to the misery of the other love-making” [2, p. 154].

In Norris’ world, ordered, complex, unique selves disappear. Norris’ few so-called multifaceted characters (The Old Grannis and Miss Baker) have trouble organising their disparate needs, drives, and emotions into integrated selves that can sustain a coherent and consistent pattern of action. By emptiness, barrenness, the void, and finally death, Norris creates a grotesque art and literature. Such metaphoric use of entropy reveals the “inroads that the animate and the inanimate are making into one another’s realisms: the alive are not so alive, but the dead human puppets driven by some inhuman motive power seem to be taking on a life of their own” [5, p. 51].

In some ways *McTeague* certainly enacts the formula of relentless determinism. Norris’ characters, as [12] argues in her article, “Interlacings: Naturalism and Christianity in Frank Norris’ *McTeague*,” are more manipulated both by arbitrary fate and a brute-like instinctual predisposition. Trina’s offhanded purchase of a lottery ticket, which results in a five thousand dollar win, is a stroke of luck that proceeds to destroy the lives of Trina, McTeague, and Marcus [12, p. 2]. However, the concept of lottery raises the possibility that all events in a supposedly infinite game of chance are guided by civilised society and its ubiquitous, invisible agents [5, p. 12].

It seems that Norris sometimes tends to clarify the role of instinct as a supportive guide. Norris comments that McTeague’s instincts are not any culprits for his downfall. “He knew exactly where to look for those trails; not once did instinct deceive him” [1, p. 261]. “Straight as a homing pigeon, and following a blind and unreasoned instinct, McTeague had returned to the Big Dipper mine” to his past [1, p. 263]. McTeague is incapable of ignoring his instinctual warning to leave his newfound goldmine, when he cries alone to the desert; “I can’t, I can’t. It’s stronger than I am. I can’t go back. Hurry now, hurry, hurry...” [1, p. 284].

Literary Naturalists conceive fictive worlds that are quite bleak, describing dismal conditions surrounding characters who struggle in vain against them. However, by accepting melodramatic conscious choice the other defeating factors are sometimes undermined. A case in point is Mr. Sieppe, Trina’s blustering father, indeed, an ineffective martinet. He perceives life as a perpetual series of military contests, and approaches even the most mundane tasks with a steady stream of commands issued to his family. Norris’ introduction of him typifies his behavior, “Mr. Sieppe toiled and perspired. Upon him devolved the responsibility of the excursion. He seemed to consider it [as] a matter of vast importance, a veritable expedition” [1, p. 47].

During a family outing Sieppe’s inadvertent destruction of his son’s birthday present, a toy steamboat, foreshadows his later inability to make an adequate living in Oakland and his subsequent failure to turn his “third interest in an upholstering business in the suburbs of Los Angeles” into a success [1, p.

106]. When mounting debt forces Sieppe to mortgage his house, he decides to immigrate to New Zealand in the hope of better prospects. Sieppe's problem, Norris implies, is not the unfairness of malevolent nature but his own inability to conduct his life well by using to advantage what talents or gifts he has. Thus, if living is the contest, he imagines it to be, his defeat by his environment is self-inflicted because he has refused to learn how to participate profitably in the game. Mr. Sieppe's case can be generalised to the other characters' situations, too. What makes them more prone to decadence is their own misfits.

Norris, according to [7], is often criticised for his melodrama and sensationalism. *McTeague* includes "drunkenness, abuse, and violent murders" [7, p. 65]. Following the best tradition of Naturalism, Norris focuses on common individuals. His portrayals of the degenerating individual as a brute, or according to [7], as "a massive human animal" indicate the entropic facet of Naturalistic novels [7, p. 68].

Exhibiting his apparent animalism and limitations at the outset, "McTeague's mind was as his body, heavy, slow to act, and sluggish. Yet there was nothing vicious about the man. Altogether he suggested the draught horse, immensely strong, stupid, docile, obedient" [1, p. 4-5], McTeague is not particularly savage or even unlikable, as [1] describes,

Trina took an infinite enjoyment in playing with McTeague's great square-cut head, rumpling his hair till it stood on end, putting her fingers in his eyes, or stretching his ears out straight, and watching the effect with her head on one side. It was like a little child playing with some gigantic, good-natured Saint Bernard [1, p. 95].

Norris writes that, even as the pretensions of civilisation fall from him when the disclosure of him as an unlicensed dentist drastically reduces their income, and through Trina's avarice he is victimised and forced to revert back to the ways of his bachelor days, McTeague remains at least partially sympathetic. He kills and injures, but he never means to; throughout the novel, "his abundant good nature is always in evidence and the reader's sympathies remain entirely with him." His complete simplicity, mental slowness, and unwitting physical strength connote his primitivism, by which Norris after all more fully explores McTeague's pathos [7, p. 70]. Ultimately, he leaves the reader with an immense sense of sympathy when he is left hand-cuffed on the scorched desert floor at the close of the novel.

Depicting apocalypse, Norris charts the decay of the West (a generally entropic universe), sometimes despairingly, sometimes mockingly. It seems that Norris comments on the fear that humankind is singly and collectively losing its humanity by writing novels in which characters appear to the reader as demons. Each character, a kind of deranged quester, symbolises *McTeague's* decadence and, by implication, the decadence of Western civilisation.

IV. CONCLUSION

In its melodramatic and sensationalist aspects, *McTeague* goes beyond the deterministic limitations of American Naturalism since man is given free choice to control his destiny. Following the best tradition of Naturalism, Norris focuses on common individuals. McTeague's downfall is partially his own fault, the result of his own free choice, not the result of pure accident. According to the author of this article, almost all the events of the novel move gradually towards decadence, and their continuity or gradual process of decadence undermines the strict Naturalistic determinism. Each character, a kind of deranged quester, symbolises *McTeague's* decadence and, by implication, the decadence of Western civilisation. *McTeague* denotes Norris' concern for a society woven by the threads of human negative dispositions bearing the intense potentials of collective dehumanisation.

Though Norris' novel has been read as championing the Naturalist creed, the persistent recurrence of entropic melodramatic changes calls this easy identification into question. Is there a way to justify the simultaneous existence of the Naturalist and entropic melodramatic discourses in *McTeague*? It is tempting to return *McTeague* to the pretense of self-unified coherence and resolve the ambiguity generated by the presence of these two juxtaposing or overlapping discourses. However, letting the question remain open and the intrusions of meaning go off again in different directions restores the novel to its tensions, signifying the discontinuity that makes literary analysis worthwhile.

With insistent repetition, the novel vividly portrays humanity or sexuality degraded into inhumanity, the triumph of a rootless existence (civilisation) over the rich organic life (culture), as [13] argues, "Civilisation is the inevitable destiny of culture" [13, p. 14].

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