

English
4/15/96

McTEAGUE

McTeague, a novel written at the turn of the century by Frank Norris, is a classic

example of naturalist writing. This novel is written with the harsh realities that were this

time period. There are many themes that occur in naturalism. Some of them that appear in

this novel are greed, lust, strife, as well as Darwinism and animal imagery. All of these

themes help Norris describe with vivid detail his tragic account of human degradation.

One of the forces that drives many characters such as Zerkow, Trina, and McTeague is greed. Zerkow is an old man who has gold fever. All he ever thinks of is

where he can get some more gold from. When he hear Maria telling her story of the gold

bowls and dinner service he is immediately interested. On page 38 it reads "It was impossible to look at Zerkow and not know instantly that greed-inordinate, insatiable greed

-was the dominate passion of the man." This shows us that greed is what turns this guys

wheels He ends up marrying her only with the hope that she might be able to locate these

missing riches. When she is unable to find the gold he becomes mad at her and slits her

throat before killing himself. It is possible that he put so much of himself into his greed

that when he could not quell it with the gold he felt his life was not worth living. Trina

shows how greedy she is when she wins the 5,000 in the lottery. She will not spend any

money where it is needed, and because of this the couples standards of living decline.

Although Trina and Zerkows' greed for riches was almost identical, Zerkow is vied

as a

lost soul, yet Trina is viewed as a proper young lady. This is one of the things that leads to

her death and the downfall of McTeague#. McTeague shows that he is greedy also after

Trina wins the money. He wants to control the money as if it belongs to him. In a way

greed also drives Marcus who feels like Trina's money should be his.

Another force that fuels a characters fire is lust. This can be greatly seen in

McTeague. From the minute Trina sat down in his dentist chair McTeague felt like he wanted her, like he MUST have her. this can be seen on page 25. " The male, virile desire

in him tardily awakened, aroused itself, strong and brutal. It was restless, untrained, a

thing not to be held in leash an instant." This lust is what drove McTeague in the early part

of this novel. Another important scene that shows us the development of McTeagues' lust

for Trina is in the rail yard where he proposes to her, kisses her violently, then says "I've

got her!" # Another character driven by lust is Zerkow. He does not lust for a person, he

lusts for the gold and riches that Maria has told him about.

Another thing that drives these characters is strife. Strife is a vigorous or bitter

conflict, discord or antagonism. This can be mainly seen in Marcus. After Trina wins the

lottery he begins to have internal and external strife. He is very mad at himself because he

gave up courting Trina for McTeague, and now she has \$5,000. He feels in a way that this

money should somehow be his money. He also began to fight with McTeague at every given opportunity and feels an extreme rivalry towards his former friend.

One thing can be seen in almost every character over and over again throughout

the book. This is animal imagery. This is seen mostly in McTeague. While he has Trina

etherized in his chair, on page 27 it reads "Suddenly the animal in the man stirred and

woke; the evil instincts that in him were so close to the surface leaped to life, shouting and

clamoring." This gives us an insight to what was brought out in McTeague by seeing Trina, a young and beautiful women. It also shows us many of the primal instincts that

dwell in the oaf of a dentist. This can also be seen when McTeague was trying to get Trina

to kiss him in the rail yard when she went "Suddenly he took her in his enormous arms,

crushing down her struggle with his immense strength." This does not sound like the work

of a human man. This sounds like it could be the work of a beast of burden, or some other

massive creature. In fact throughout this novel McTeague is referred to many times as an

ox ("McTeague crashed down upon him like the collapse of a felled ox.") and in one case

even as a hungry swine ("McTeague ate for the sake of eating, without choice; everything

within reach of his hands found its way into his enormous mouth.") All of these images

give us a better understanding into the mind of McTeague. They help us to see how he

thinks, and they help us interpret what he feels.

All of themes in McTeague, Social Darwinism stands out the most. This can be seen in all parts of the novel, and especially in the closing sequence. The whole flow of the

events can be interpreted using natural selection#. All of the relationships seem to follow

the same pattern. The first half of the story shows how the different characters came

together. It shows how Marcus and McTeague become friends, how Trina and McTeague, Maria and Zerkow tie the knot. Now is when we really start to see natural

selection.

Zerkow killed Maria, then he killed himself. McTeague kills Trina, then Marcus hunts

down McTeague to avenge Trina. The fight in the desert, and McTeague ends up killing

him, then dying himself, possibly of dehydration or starvation. This shows a clear pattern

of the survival of the strongest. In the end the only thing that remains is the desert, the

strongest of all the elements in this mix.

In conclusion Norris uses all of the above elements to paint a picture of what the

world was like during this time. He gives us in great detail events that could have possibly

occurred during this time. He used all of the above elements to try and show us realistically what the world was like.

Jason Resputini, "The McTeague page," [Http://www.merkan.com/~Jason/McTeague](http://www.merkan.com/~Jason/McTeague), Revised August 29, 1995 ed.: 1.

Thomas k. Dean, "The Flight of McTeagues song bird." *Literature/Film Quarterly* volume 18, Number 2 (1990): 20.

Richard D. Alexander, *Darwinism and Human Affairs* (New York, NY: Random House, 1979) 213.

