“AMERICA BECKONS, AMERICANS REPEL”: NATIVISM, RACIAL STEREOTYPES, AND THE NATURALISTIC IMPULSE IN FRANK NORRIS’S McTEAGUE

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Abstract

This thesis explores the ways in which Frank Norris's naturalism in his novel *McTeague* is at once compromised and sustained by his use of racial stereotypes. I begin by defining the term "nativism," and go on to clarify Norris’s relationship to the nativist movement in America. I also suggest that Norris relies on racial stereotyping not only as a strategy for ordering the complex milieu of turn-of-the-century San Francisco, but as a way of limiting his characters' ability to engage their environment in meaningful ways. Moreover, I argue that Norris's use of racial stereotypes is primarily responsible for compromising his naturalism because his stereotypical rendering of ethnic minorities subordinates his belief in objectivity to his ethnocentrism.
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For my Mother and Father
The group of naturalist writers to which I have the honor of belonging has enough courage and energy to produce powerful works containing their own defense. It takes all the deliberate blindness of a certain kind of criticism to force a novelist to write a preface. Since I have committed the sin of writing one because I am a lover of light, I crave the forgiveness of men of intelligence who do not need me to light a lamp for them in broad daylight to help them see clearly.

-Émile Zola, Preface to Thérèse Raquin
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Introduction

Since the early 1970s, critics have contributed lively re-evaluations of Frank Norris's novel *McTeague*. Originally, criticism of *McTeague* tended to dwell on the novel's shortcomings, and a seemingly bottomless critical pit was filled with moralistic reviews and articles declaring Norris's novel, in one early reviewer's words, devoid of "moral, esthetical or artistic reason for being" (Marchand 202).\(^1\) Norris's naturalism also received much attention from critics who debated-to-death the novel's inclusion within the naturalist rubric. Although critics continue to study Norris's brand of naturalism, it is no longer the central critical focus of the novel. As Don Graham points out, recent literary criticism approaches *McTeague* "from new perspectives and without the tedious repetition of naturalistic shibboleths" (43). Critics such as Donald Pizer, William B. Dillingham, and Barbara Hochman have breathed new life into the works of Frank Norris by exploring the manifold subtleties and complexities that distinguish his work. For Norris's creative legacy not only reveals insights into one of the most significant periods of American literary production, but augments our knowledge of a writer whose fiction was too often considered simplistic, obvious, or otherwise unworthy of sustained critical attention.

Aside from testifying to the complexity of Norris's novel, the aim of this thesis is to examine the relationship between *McTeague* and nineteenth-century American nativism, as well as to emphasize the importance of racial stereotyping

\(^1\) For more on the initial critical reception of *McTeague*, see Ernest Marchand's *Frank Norris: A Study*, 193-241.
in Norris's naturalistic formulations. Critics who frequently associate the term “nativism” with Norris’s ethnocentrism in the novel, insist on vaguely deploying the term or, more often than not, linking nativism almost exclusively with racial prejudice. There is no doubt that Norris’s ethnocentrism permeates the novel, and his belief in the physical, spiritual, and intellectual primacy of the Anglo-Saxon is represented in almost all his work. For Norris was a great believer in the Anglo-Saxons’ strength of character and, what he called, “the poetry of the Great March” (The Frontier 1183). But to characterize Norris as a nativist based on his admittedly ethnocentric vision in McTeague would be a misleading conflation of two distinct terms. Such a characterization is predicated on a misunderstanding of nineteenth-century American nativism, a misunderstanding that will be addressed throughout this thesis by examining in detail the political and social motivations of nineteenth-century nativists.

Accordingly, Chapter One investigates the rise of nativism in nineteenth-century America and broadens traditional understandings of the nativist movement in America by emphasizing that it was an organized social and political movement. Moreover, Chapter One illustrates that nativism was both primarily concerned with preserving a specific concept of national identity and motivated by a perceived need to preserve what was thought to be a threatened social stability and order. By examining immigration to America since its Colonial Period, it becomes clear that nativism was motivated by more than simply xenophobic responses to an increasingly foreign presence in America. Instead, it is evident that nativism was born from the desperate desire for community
experienced by many Americans who viewed certain immigrant groups as a threat to social order and stability. The polemics surrounding unregulated immigration to America, the establishment of nativist fraternal organizations, and the formation of organized nativist political parties in response to what was perceived as “immigrant” violence speaks to the fact that many Americans experienced a sense of dislocation as a result of the arrival of record numbers of immigrants during the nineteenth century. I delineate nativism, therefore, not as a movement that was racist as such, but as an organized political movement calculated to provide Americans with a sense of social community, stability, and order.

Chapter Two links Norris's ethnocentrism and, more specifically, his use of racial stereotypes in *McTeague* with contemporary nativist representations of ethnic minorities. Donald Pizer points out that “Norris characterizes [ethnic minorities] along racial lines,” and goes on to say that “[his] Chinese are crafty, his Latins hot-blooded, his Jews miserly, his Anglo-Saxons adventurous, and so on” (*The Novels* 73). And William B. Dillingham complains that “[t]he drama of degeneration is lost in [Norris's] treatment of Jews, Spaniards, and Orientals as types” (79). While Norris certainly employs contemporary racial stereotypes in his delineation of the ethnic characters, his representation of ethnic minorities as “types” is extremely significant to the portrayal of degeneration in the novel. By depicting ethnic minorities with rigidly stereotypical characteristics, Norris denies the characters the possibility of exerting individual agency in a world that is inexorably deterministic. In this way, racial stereotypes are an essential
component of the degenerative processes at work in the novel; stereotypical racial characteristics govern and, ultimately, limit characters' behavior by determining the extent to which they can meaningfully engage their environment. But despite the extent to which such stereotyping arguably reinforces the naturalism of *McTeague*, it also compromises his fidelity to naturalistic objectivity. For Norris's naturalistic mentors believed that pure naturalism required the artist to remain detached from his subject matter, a contention he embraced wholeheartedly in theory. However, Norris’s ethnocentrism in the novel ensures that his characters are delineated according to prevalent late nineteenth-century racial biases and, therefore, his characterizations belie his belief in the artist as a disinterested observer of life.

Chapter Three addresses critics' complaints that Norris's naturalistic formulations in *McTeague* are problematic because they frequently neglect to account for the degeneration experienced by the characters. Barbara Hochman notes, for example, that "even when theoretical formulations within Norris's work are unambiguously affirmed by the narrator, they shed very little light on the implications of the dramatic action" (4). Though Norris's critical essays "do not mention materialistic determinism or any other philosophical idea," it is plain from the extent to which his characters' lives are determined by their environment and the laws of chance that the major tenets of naturalism were never far from his consciousness as an artist (Pizer, *Literary Criticism* 69). There is no doubt that Norris develops in *McTeague* a cause and effect relationship between race and the likelihood of degeneration that on one level emphasizes the importance of
heredity in his naturalistic formulations. That is to say, the characters in the novel initially appear to occupy a seemingly inviolable space within which they comfortably exist. However, when external events infringe upon this space, the stability of Norris's main characters is often compromised in a manner determined by their racial origins and they frequently begin to degenerate accordingly. This process of degeneration, based as it is on racial stereotypes, ultimately subordinates Norris's naturalistic pretensions to his ethnocentrism.

This is not to say that all the characters with pronounced ethnic character traits experience degeneration. Implicit in McTeague is Norris's tacit acceptance of social Darwinism. The relationship between Old Grannis and Miss Baker, for example, evinces his belief in what Franklin Walker calls "the indomitable fighting spirit of the Anglo-Saxon" (Frank Norris 68). Despite the barriers that separate them, the Old Folks are able to maintain the integrity of their relationship; their Anglo-Saxon heritage imbues them with character traits, such as refinement, sensitivity, and self-consciousness, which allow them to fortify themselves against, and remain untouched by, the degenerative processes at work in the novel. Even though, like McTeague, Grannis loses his profession, he is able to persevere; his capacity to experience "a certain great tenderness" and overcome misfortune while immersed in an otherwise cruelly deterministic environment allows Grannis to resist the forces that eventually destroy McTeague (178). For Norris, this model of spiritual strength and emotional perseverance exemplified by the Old Folks illustrates the importance of the role of ethnic heritage in a deterministic world.
It is the aim of this thesis, then, to clarify Frank Norris's "nativism" in *McTeague*, and to examine the ways in which his naturalism is dependent upon, and arguably affected by, his reliance on racial stereotypes prevalent throughout late nineteenth-century American society. More specifically, this thesis not only establishes links between Norris's ethnocentrism, late nineteenth-century nativist discourse, and the text, but demonstrates that he invokes the notion that race and heredity are primarily responsible for either the preservation or degeneration of individuals within his fictional world of Polk Street.
Chapter One

American Immigration and the Search for Community

"It is in the deep traits of race that the fortunes of nations are written."
-Ralph Waldo Emerson, English Traits

In The Foundations of the Nineteenth Century, Houston Stewart Chamberlain commented that the nineteenth century was not only a "century of nationality," but a "century of races" (xciii). In Chamberlain's optimistic assessment, "national union" signifies "common memory, common hope, common intellectual nourishment; it fixes firmly the existing bond of blood and impels us to make it ever closer" (297). Despite the parochiality of Chamberlain's clearly ethnocentric view of British imperial history, his observations reflect the dominant philosophy of nineteenth-century nationalist thinkers: shared social and political values, as well as the "bond of blood," produce a culture's sense of identity. But in America there existed no single "common memory" or cultural heritage, let alone a common "bond of blood." In fact, among the first Europeans to inhabit the New World were dispossessed Protestants in search of religious freedom who brought with them their own brand of religious bigotry. The religious discrimination practised by Puritans was over time transformed, though not forgotten; the relatively uninterrupted stream of immigrants over the next three centuries prompted Americans to constantly re-evaluate the effects of immigration on America's growth as a nation. In particular, mass immigration to America during the middle and late nineteenth century irrevocably altered the cultural and ethnic demography of the
nation. Indeed, by the turn of the century, America resembled what playwright Israel Zangwill called a “melting pot” in its ethnic richness.³

But many Americans, especially those who believed in the superiority of their spiritual, physical, and intellectual inheritance, fostered antipathy towards immigrants. In their view, immigrants represented a kind of contagion threatening to corrupt America’s racial and cultural purity. Moreover, an interest in science and empiricism in the nineteenth century significantly exacerbated existing racial tensions. Advances in scientific methodology and the emergence of what were called the “new sciences” such as phrenology, emphasized the inherent differences among, and ultimately the inequalities of, the races. The “new sciences,” then, worked to explain scientifically the origins of the races, and served to justify proscriptive immigration laws, as well as to marginalize ethnic minorities living in America.

Legitimized in part by the “new sciences,” nativist organizations began appearing in increasing numbers during the nineteenth century. Nativists considered themselves the guardians of “American” culture and feared that certain immigrant groups would have a negative impact not only on America’s social, economic, and political institutions, but on the evolution of a distinctly American national identity. As Dale T. Knobel notes, nativists believed that “the freedoms of the American republic were imperiled because the nation was falling into the hands of aliens” (xvii). The term “nativist,” however, is something of a misnomer. Although nativists generally believed people born in the U.S. best

² Ralph Waldo Emerson, English Traits, 86.
qualified as American, they often viewed certain ethnic immigrants as meeting their requirements for "Americanism," while other native-born groups such as African-Americans or Chinese were excluded from the ranks of "real" Americans. As a result of their often contradictory sense of nationalism and concern for social stability, nativists vociferously condemned unregulated immigration.

Although the first organized nativist groups did not appear until the 1790s, discrimination against newcomers was practised in America as early as the colonial period. During the seventeenth and eighteenth century, a significant number of immigrants from Europe with diverse religious backgrounds arrived in America in the hope of escaping religious persecution. As a result, religious discrimination was the principal means of marginalizing potentially undesirable immigrants. Since the prevailing theory of government in the Puritan colony at Massachusetts Bay was based on the idea of religious stewardship, which viewed the State as a kind of corporeal extension of the Church, the Puritan theocracy that emerged in New England led civil leaders to frequently engage in "narrow and petty moral censorship" (Horton and Edwards 38). The Puritans' much mythologized intolerance was primarily directed toward non-Protestants, especially Catholic newcomers. In fact, by the eighteenth century, Rhode Island and Maryland were the only colonies to offer Catholics religious and political freedom. And at the time of the American Revolution, it was estimated that ninety-eight percent of Americans were Protestant (Cose 26).

But early settlers were not only suspicious of and antagonistic toward non-Protestants. In the early 1600s, English courts began substituting exile to the
colonies for the death penalty; this not only eliminated the expense of capital
punishment, but provided England with a convenient method of disposing of its
less than model citizens. The colonies were quick to protest, and many colonial
leaders responded with statutes and resolutions designed to keep "undesirables"
out. In 1670, Virginia, Maryland, and Delaware enacted laws that prevented ships
transporting criminals from unloading their human cargo. However, Parliament
simply ignored the colonial protestations and continued to send criminals across
the Atlantic, which fuelled anti-British sentiment throughout the colonies.
Protestants not only continued to harbour suspicions about Catholics, but began
carefully scrutinizing all immigrants to the colonies. Moreover, Colonial leaders
remained convinced well into the nineteenth century that Europe regarded
America as a depository for its most degenerate and undesirable citizens (Cose
34). A causal link, then, was formed early on in the minds of many Americans
between immigrants and the notion of undesirability.

By the eighteenth century, the colonists' resentment toward European
immigration shifted; the colonists' disdain for immigrants became focused on a
particular group of newcomers. Germans, who began immigrating to the New
World in the late 1600s, were reaching the colony in record numbers. During the
1740s, German immigrants were arriving in Pennsylvania at the rate of a thousand
per year. But the colonial reception of German immigrants was, if anything, less
than warm; Colonial leaders feared that these poor, "unrefined" newcomers would
fail to contribute productively to the colony. Even though German immigrants were
predominantly Protestant, colonial hostility toward the newcomers persisted. As
Ellis Cose observes, the colonists' contempt for German immigrants was significant because it "singled out an ethnic group rather than a religion and indicated the stirring of a belief that foreigners alone could represent a threat" (19). Benjamin Franklin later voiced concern over the effect of the German influx on the maintenance of the English language, and as early as 1782 Thomas Jefferson even questioned the active promotion of immigration (Knobel 85).

To the relief of those who contemptuously viewed German immigration as a threat to Colonial culture, immigration to America was constrained by ongoing European conflicts. In 1763, which marked the end of the Seven Years' War, a resurgence in immigration occurred, and large numbers of immigrants continued to arrive in America until the Revolution. However, in 1774 Parliament anticipated hostilities with America and prohibited emigration to the colonies. But even during the Revolutionary War, Americans actively encouraged immigration to the New World. In the wake of revolution, the founders of the constitution wanted to make immigration and the acquisition of American citizenship as simple as possible; their long subjection to (and frustration with) English social and political systems inspired them to pass America's first naturalization act in 1790, which took a fairly liberal view of immigration. Federalists disapproved of such liberal measures and successfully campaigned for more severe proscriptions. Although Jeffersonians were able to restore some of the liberties they believed the nation had lost after the

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4 J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782) is the most famous endorsement of American immigration. Crevecoeur describes America as an idyllic land of equality and opportunity: "There is no wonder that this country has so many charms [...] No sooner does a European arrive, no matter of what condition, than his eyes are opened upon the fair prospect [and] he meets with hospitality, kindness, and plenty everywhere" (16-17).

5 America's first naturalization act proposed that all free, white individuals who declared their allegiance to the
Federalists were removed from office in 1800, the xenophobia inherent in Federalist policy had lasting effects on American immigration policy.6

At the turn of the nineteenth century, immigration to America dramatically decreased. In fact, between 1790 and 1815 European immigration to America was so low that Congress felt that it was unnecessary to publish statistics on immigration until 1819 (Knobel 55). But even without official figures, immigrant populations in urban areas, especially in large port cities such as New York, experienced dramatic population increases. Despite such population explosions, post-1798 measures at regulating immigration were not aimed at discouraging foreigners from settling in America; rather, they were aimed at protecting the welfare of immigrants. The first of the Steerage Acts, for example, was passed in 1819, and its aim was to ensure that large numbers of immigrants aboard freighters were not forced to endure inhuman conditions while travelling to America. It mandated the absolute minimum amounts of food and water to be supplied to passengers and required captains both to conduct censuses of those entering the country and report the number of deaths that occurred en route (Cose 27). Although the Steerage Acts and other legislative provisions were intended to alleviate hardships, American immigrants during the mid-nineteenth century experienced the largest and most acrimonious wave of anti-alienism in American history.

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6 Jeffersonians primarily reacted against the Sedition Acts, which empowered the President to imprison or deport any immigrant suspected of threatening the security of the nation. Jefferson believed this Federalist policy was unconstitutional because it effectively gave the President the authority of the three bodies of government (Cose 24).
During the decade and a half before the Civil War, America experienced unprecedented immigration. The Napoleonic Wars, the Industrial Revolution, and the agricultural depression throughout Europe compelled many Europeans to seek refuge in America. Well into the 1840s, Irish and Germans comprised nearly three-fourths of America's immigrants. Earlier immigrants from Ireland had been Scotch-Irish Protestants with agricultural interests. However, the predominantly Irish Catholic immigrants of the 1820s settled in urban areas. Turn-of-the-century immigration also affected the population of Protestant communities throughout America by supplying the nation with ever-increasing numbers of Catholic newcomers. In 1807, there were approximately seventy thousand Catholics in the country, and by the 1850s Catholics formed one of the largest religious groups in America. Not only was the influx of Irish and German immigrants creating economic tensions as job competition increased and wages steadily decreased, but such large numbers of Catholics "fuelled a growing sense of unease among many Protestant Americans" (Cose 27). Moreover, many Americans found the newcomers truculent, less genteel, and generally more undesirable than immigrants of previous years (Cose 33).

The end of the Mexican War in 1848 also exacerbated growing tensions between immigrants and native-born Americans. The annexation of what is today Texas, California, Arizona, New Mexico, Nevada, Utah, and part of Colorado introduced a voluminous new population into America. Moreover, the discovery of gold in California during the years following the war and the construction of railroad

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7 The potato famine in Ireland was largely responsible for the crest in American immigration. In fact, more Irish immigrated to America in the 1840s than during any other period of its history. See Carl Wittke's "The
lines precipitated another wave of immigration not only from Europe, but from South America and China as well. When Lincoln came to office in early 1861, he subscribed to a policy of tolerance toward immigration. In light of the vast unsettled land in the West, he encouraged both Americans and immigrants to embrace the life of the frontier.\(^8\) The Civil War also prompted Lincoln to call for increased immigration; the war continued to exact its toll on the economy and workers were needed to access the country's natural resources. While Lincoln's attempts to stimulate immigration were successful and to an extent satisfied the country's growing need for manpower, his Republican policies aggravated tensions among immigrants. For example, while Congress exempted African-Americans and those claiming foreign citizenship from military service, immigrants in the process of naturalization were subject to conscription. Hostilities between minorities were further compounded by the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863; African-Americans increasingly moved to urban centres and began competing with immigrants for jobs, which lowered wages and increased unemployment (Horsman 76).

After the Civil War, hundreds of thousands of predominantly German, Irish, and English immigrants poured into America. Since the South desperately required human resources in order to aid its financial recovery, this wave of immigration was generally well received. But the increasing number of Chinese immigrants, who came to labour in American mines and on the transcontinental railroad, were greeted with hostility and resentment. Because Chinese labour was cheap (they

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\(^8\) The Homestead Act of 1862, for example, encouraged settlers by granting 160 acres to those who agreed to
paid for their own boarding, while whites were fed and housed at companies' expense) and considered expendable, additional workers were shipped directly from China to increase production. As a result, tensions between whites and Chinese immigrants in the East continued long after the Civil War. In fact, ethnic divisions throughout America continued well into the twentieth century; Irish-Catholics continued to believe their place in American society was tenuous, and lashed out at other minorities with even less social and economic stability. Such interethnic conflict not only hampered immigrants' struggle for social and economic equality, but reinforced the inexorable threat of foreign influences on the maintenance of social order.

"Scientific" theories of race, which extolled the virtues of Anglo-Saxon heritage and emphasized the inferior, degenerate nature of racial others, proliferated in the 1850s and legitimized the claims of those who believed that immigrants were corrupting the purity of American society. The idea that Americans were part of a superior, Anglo-Saxon branch of the Caucasian race appealed to many Americans, particularly politicians, and their growing sense of national greatness. The idea of Anglo-Saxon superiority was an exceedingly popular one because it was closely linked to the Puritan belief that they were a "chosen people" descended from the same Anglo-Saxon stock that inexorably expanded and civilized the western world. As Reginald Horsman explains, many nineteenth-century Americans "conceiv[ed]... themselves as the most vital and energetic of those Aryan peoples who had spilled westward, 'revitalized' the

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reside on the land for a minimum of five years.

9 For more on anti-Chinese legislation and sinophobia, see Ellis Cose's "An Aroused West, and Excluded East"
Roman Empire, spread throughout Europe to England, and crossed the Atlantic in their relentless westward drive. Americans had long believed they were a chosen people, but [...] they also believed that they were a chosen people with an impeccable ancestry” (5). Moreover, the development of natural history during the European Enlightenment was instrumental in the advancement of less speculative, more sophisticated racial theories in the early nineteenth century.\footnote{Stow Persons defines natural history as a comprehensive field “involving a descriptive approach to all the} Because many of these theories were biased towards Protestant Anglo-Saxons, they justified for many Americans the nation’s rapid territorial expansion and legacy of slavery, as well as the often overt bigotry toward the ever-increasing immigrant population.

The idea of Anglo-Saxon superiority stems from the settlement of Germanic peoples (known generically to the British as Saxons) in Roman Britain during the fifth and sixth centuries. Although there is evidence to substantiate the claim that the Anglo-Saxons were in certain respects a less capable people than the Romans (the Saxons built only in wood and used no coinage), they proved to be extremely competent agriculturists who, in a relatively short period of time, irrevocably transformed the social, political, and religious architecture of what was once Roman Britain. As H.R. Loyn notes, "By the seventh century the Anglo-Saxon had so tamed the land that it could support expanding and thriving communities capable of sustaining powerful kings, a prosperous aristocracy, and a new Church that made heavy demands on the faithful” (42). Many Americans sought to link their ancestral heritage to the Anglo-Saxons because they felt that they possessed the same virtue and formidable strength of character that allowed the Anglo-
Saxons to expand westward and prosper in the fifth century. In fact, the Mexican War was often justified by politicians who argued that American expansionism was, in the words of New Englander Caleb Cushing, characteristic of the "excellent white race [...] whose power and privilege it is, wherever they may go, and wherever they may remain, to Christianize and to civilize, to command and to be obeyed, to conquer and to reign" (qtd. in Horsman 253).

While Anglo-Saxonism in America became an increasingly popular belief in the nineteenth century, it had originally gained currency in England as early as the sixteenth and seventeenth century. In 1530, Henry VIII attempted to break with the Roman Catholic Church, and the history of the Saxon church was researched in order to provide evidence that the English church reflected the Saxon's purer, less corrupt religious practices. The establishment of the Anglican church under Elizabeth also stimulated interest in English history; establishing the antiquity of the customs of the new English church required researching England's Anglo-Saxon period. The publication of John Foxe's Acts and Monuments (1563), which was intended to delineate the evolution of the English church, had the double effect of revitalizing the country's pride in its Anglo-Saxon heritage by emphasizing that the English were "a chosen people." This idea of divine selection was transplanted by the Puritans in the colonies and became the essence of Anglo-Saxonism in America (Horsman 2-3).

It is important to note that the term "Anglo-Saxon" was repeatedly misused throughout history, and particularly in America. There never existed a race of phenomena of living nature and of physical nature as the environment of life" (111).

II See Fred J. Levy's Tudor Historical Thought, 79.
"Anglo-Saxons" or a distinct "Anglo-Saxon" people. The term was initially used simply to distinguish those Germanic people who settled in Roman Britain from those who stayed behind in northwest Germany (Old Saxons). Moreover, the population of Britain after the Anglo-Saxon invasion was by no means homogenous; Celts, Vikings, Normans, and various other groups of Northern Europeans all inhabited Britain by the end of the twelfth century. The term was loosely applied to these inhabitants and later came to denote a vague body of English-speaking people throughout the world. In nineteenth-century America the term was even more generally applied in order to distinguish white Americans from African-Americans, Mexicans, Spanish, and Asians. Nevertheless, the term came to symbolize for many Americans the epitome of humankind; not only did Anglo-Saxons demonstrate their ability to proliferate in Europe, but in America as well (Horsman 268).

Although political rhetoric infused with Anglo-Saxonism was enough to stir many Americans into a frenzy over their national destiny as a "chosen people," politicians required something more to justify their proscriptive national policies concerning ethnic minorities. Increasing contact with Aboriginals, Mexicans, Asians, African-Americans, and European immigrants during the nineteenth century prompted Americans to re-examine the racial theories of the Enlightenment in order to substantiate the nativist claims made by Anglo-Saxonists and the racial claims made by naturalists. Although Enlightenment thinkers adhered to the monogenetic view of creation and stressed the improvability of mankind, their racial theories emphasized the innate differences among races and
simply assumed that whites occupied the highest rung on the evolutionary ladder. There were four major racial theories offered during the Enlightenment that explained the superiority of the Caucasian race. The first purported that the mental capacities of non-whites was significantly inferior to whites. The second theory suggested that dark skin colour was a sign of degeneracy. The third noted that not all human races were indeed human. That is, some races were seen as purely savage, as links between man and animal. The fourth and least popular theory offered a polygenetic view of creation in which "inferior" races were pre-Adamite creations (Popkin 247). As Richard H. Popkin notes, these eighteenth-century theories "went through a transformation [...] so that [they] became a basis for a racist ideology" (247).

In America, there were several reasons for the transformation of racial theories into malicious racist ideologies. During the Enlightenment, many Americans had dispensed with the Biblical humanism that regarded all men as images of God; humankind was racially diverse and observably different. Moreover, the evolution of, and interest in, scientific methodology in the eighteenth and nineteenth century prompted American naturalists to engage in more detailed and extensive scientific research concerning race. But perhaps most importantly, Americans in the nineteenth century increasingly required justification for their government's policies toward racial others. The conflation of Anglo-Saxon ethnocentrism and racial science facilitated the transformation of the vague notions of Anglo-Saxon national identity, which were largely derived from literary and historical sources, into what John Higham calls "a sharp-cutting nativist
weapon and, ultimately, into a completely racist philosophy" (134).

By 1815 most Americans accepted the racial theories proposed during the Enlightenment and by the 1840s, scientists provided the public with a deluge of "scientific evidence" that supported the claims of proponents of Anglo-Saxon superiority. Perhaps the most significant development in the racial sciences was the study of anatomical measurement known as anthropometry. Although anthropometry was initially used by scientists who were intent on elucidating the scientific basis for racial and cultural differences, the three branches of anthropometry (physiognomy, craniology, and phrenology) also made possible the empirical justification of the inferiority of non-Anglo-Saxons. But scientific interest in physiognomy and craniology was ephemeral; conclusions were later questioned by the scientific community and the more popular anthropometrical study of phrenology, which purported to measure an individual's character and intelligence based on the shape and size of his/her head, emerged in America as the new science of the day (Kraut 111).

Phrenology was born in the work of Franz Gall and Johann Gaspar Spurzheim, whose strictly scientific studies neglected racial differences and were primarily concerned with the anatomy and the physiology of the human nervous system. After Spurzheim's death in 1832, Scotsman George Combe emerged as the leading phrenologist in both Europe and the United States. His influence on the evolution of the "new science," as it came to be called, was great; not only did his studies continue to concentrate on human anatomy and physiology, but he also stressed the importance of genetics and racial difference. Moreover, his personal
interest in the strength and greatness of Great Britain as a nation ensured that his phrenological conclusions would assume an Anglo-Saxon bias (Kraut 118). With regard to the American Indian, Combe wrote that their skulls were "in inferior in their moral and intellectual development to those of the Anglo-Saxon race, and that, morally and intellectually, these Indians are inferior to their Anglo-Saxon invaders" (92-3). By the end of the 1830's, Combe's phrenological conclusions answered both the political and public call for scientific evidence justifying the inferiority of not only American Indians and Mexicans, but of all non-Anglo-Saxon immigrants arriving in America at the end of the decade. However, like the other anthropometrical sciences, phrenology eventually lost the support of the scientific community in the 1840s, but not before providing those Americans who needed to justify proscriptions against ethnic minorities with exactly what they had been asking for since the beginning of the century. As Reginald Horsman notes, "American science provided Americans with a confident explanation of why blacks were enslaved, why Indians were exterminated, and why white Americans were expanding their settlements rapidly over adjacent lands" (137).

By the 1850s, many Americans accepted the inherent inequalities of the races as scientific fact, and discussions of racial differences were primarily concerned with the religious implications of polygenesis. Charles Darwin's The Origin of Species (1859) not only succeeded in reinforcing the idea of a polygenetic view of creation, but did much to reinforce the belief of Anglo-Saxon

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12 While the phrenological method of dividing the brain in order to study an individual's mental characteristics was dismissed by mid-nineteenth-century scientists, many of the phrenological claims regarding the relationship between cranial size and the mental adroitness of different races remained unchallenged. In fact, phrenologists continued to produce studies and articles which were eagerly consumed by the general public.
superiority in the minds of many Americans by emphasizing what Herbert Spencer called the "survival of the fittest." Darwin's theory of natural selection proposed that only the best-adapted species would prosper in an environment; their characteristics would be passed on to successive generations, ensuring the survival and evolution of that species. Darwin was convinced that "species are not immutable," and that change and development were the result of natural process (69). Influenced by the work of Malthus, Darwin adopted the idea that "many more individuals of each species are born than can possibly survive; and, consequently, there is a frequently recurring struggle for existence" (68). By incorporating these notions into his belief that there are similarities between species, as well as varieties within a given species, Darwin indeed had the theoretical basis for proposing his theory of natural selection.

It is important to note that despite the many vociferous objections to Darwinism, which was considered by some to be an abomination and a perversion of the natural design, the optimistic implications of evolution through the process of natural selection were not overlooked; the idea that weaker species would eventually yield to the "fittest" could be interpreted as a sign of the inevitable perfectibility of Anglo-Saxon America. In the words of American reformer Charles Loring Brace, "the law of natural selection applies to all the moral history of mankind, as well as the physical. Evil must die ultimately as the weaker element, in
the struggle with good" (qtd. in Hofstadter 16). For Brace, as well as other nationalist thinkers and Anglo-Saxonists, "fittest" meant "best," and referred to Anglo-Saxons. Although fittest implies, as Richard Morris suggests, "nothing more than survival of those best able to survive," many Americans interpreted it differently; in their view, Anglo-Saxons were the dominant racial group and, therefore, their behaviour was morally right because it was by definition superior or "fittest" (32). Many Americans, then, accepted Darwinism and glimpsed the future of America in which Anglo-Saxons slowly and irrevocably replaced or, at the very least, dominated inferior races in the struggle for existence.

The study of eugenics brought the realization of a purely Anglo-Saxon future a step closer. By espousing the improvability of humankind through the selective transmission of "good" genes, eugenics appealed to many Americans because of the potential rewards it offered the nation during a time of increasing social malaise. In 1869, Darwin's cousin and eugenics founder Francis Galton published *Hereditary Genius*, in which he argued that an individual's heredity plays a more important role in his/her development than environment. He also asserted that nations were in danger of suffering from "racial degeneration" unless measures were taken to protect the genetic make-up of its citizens. For Galton, the "ablest race of whom history bears record is unquestionably the ancient Greek" (340). As a result of immigration and miscegenation, the "high Athenian breed decayed and disappeared" (343). In Galton's estimation, Anglo-Saxons were also in danger of being "drugged into degeneracy" by an infusion of inferior genes (345). Although the eugenics movement in America evolved slowly, reaching
fruition in the 1900s, Galton's work caught the attention of late nineteenth-century Americans who feared that a similar wave of "degeneracy" would infect their nation. As Ellis Cose notes, American eugenicists suggested two courses of action: "keeping out those races (Slavic, Mediterranean, and all non-whites) whose genes are hopelessly substandard and keeping out those who exhibited traits (alcoholism, pauperism, insanity) that stemmed from tainted genes" (63). Uncertain social and economic conditions during the late nineteenth century lent urgency to the claims of those worried about the effect of such seemingly immeasurable waves of immigration on American culture. By "geneticizing" social problems, eugenicists offered another significant justification for discriminating against immigrants.

But viewing immigrants not simply as the carriers of disease, but as a contagion itself, threatening the stability and prosperity of Anglo-Saxon Protestant civilization, was nothing new. Since its Colonial period, America was seen as a fecund, Edenic land capable of nourishing generations of settlers. But as the frequency of outbreaks of diseases such as smallpox, measles, influenza, and yellow fever increased during the eighteenth century, many Americans became increasingly more willing to blame the epidemics on foreign influences; a land so pure and fertile, many believed, could hardly breed such vile contagion. Waves of immigration during the eighteenth century that coincided with outbreaks of disease prompted many to link the newcomers with the scourge. According to Allan Kraut, "the inexplicable devastation of epidemic diseases caused Americans to stigmatize whole nations of the foreign-born as disease carriers" (25). In 1832, for example,
cholera began spreading in New York and other eastern ports. This epidemic coincided with massive Irish immigration and, as Kraut notes, "the native-born, largely of Protestant English ancestry, reviled the newcomers, sometimes for their Irishness, at other times for their Catholicism, and increasingly after 1832 for cholera" (32). Moreover, the association of disease with immigrants was not only emphasized by politicians in order to justify proscriptions against immigrants; as Stephanie Bower observes, Anglo-Saxonists and nativists tended to "locate the source of disease in 'new immigrants' and warn[ed] that contact with these others [...] could turn healthy men and women into animalistic brutes" (36).

Discourses on degeneration (the reversion of "men and women into animalistic brutes") proliferated in Europe during the late nineteenth century, eventually gaining currency in America in the 1880s and 1890s. Interest in the natural sciences, anthropology, and empiricism, as well as significant increases in poverty, crime, and disease, revived and, to an extent, transformed the language and application of the concept of degeneration. While there was no single referent to which the term applied (its application embracing such disparate conditions as alcoholism, cretinism, and madness), Daniel Pick suggests that there was an observable "shift not only in the quantity of discussion [concerning degeneration] but in its very nature." Pick goes on to say that "[d]egeneration moves from its place as occasional sub-current of wider philosophies and political or economic theories [...] to become the centre of a scientific and medical investigation" (20).14

Indeed, increases in crime and cases of insanity in fin-de-siecle Europe elicited

14 For a more detailed discussion of earlier philosophical and political implications of the term "degeneration," see Pick 11-27.
much discussion and speculation regarding the causes and effects of social
degeneration. During this time of scientific awakening, psychologists and criminal
anthropologists produced a deluge of work that attempted to address objectively
and empirically the problem of social deterioration.

In 1857, French psychologist B.A. Morel, whose work emphasized the
correlation between declining social conditions and social deterioration, advanced
a theory of degeneration that profoundly affected the evolution of degeneration
theory in Europe, and later in America. According to Morel, degeneration
constituted pathological changes in the body (and society), changes that involved
a movement from one physiological or mental condition to another. For Morel, who
believed in the hereditary nature of degeneracy, there were observable stages of
degeneration: physical debility inevitably led to mental instability and, ultimately,
moral bankruptcy. 15 Individuals exposed to "intoxications, bad social surroundings,
and unhygienic conditions" were particularly vulnerable to developing degenerate
characteristics (qtd. in Bower 36). In his model of degeneracy, however, the
process of deterioration (physical to moral and vice versa) was not unalterable;
Morel believed that deplorable social conditions were responsible for incubating
degeneracy. If society could provide degenerates (and potential degenerates) with
what he called "moral therapeutics," then the hereditary cycle of degeneracy could
in time be controlled (qtd. in Bower 37).

15 This is not to say that Morel proposed that merely a single disorder reproduced itself in successive
generations of bodies; rather, he delineated a bewildering assortment of diseases and disorders and studied their
patterns of recurrence and transformation in individuals from one generation to the next. He argued that the
existence of various diseases and disorders in a single body over time (and over successive generations) led to
pathological transformations that produced in individuals such degenerative characteristics as madness,
criminal behavior, and, in particular, cretinism.
The man perhaps most responsible for introducing the concept of degeneration to America, and disseminating degeneration theory throughout Europe was German author-physician-critic Max Nordau. First published in Germany in 1893, and later in America in 1895, Nordau's *Degeneration* applied scientific principles to aesthetic criticism. For Nordau, degenerates were individuals exposed to "noxious influences" that caused a deviation from the "normal type of the species" (16). Since the work of degenerate artists can "exercise a deep influence" on society, he feared that societies were deteriorating into "abysses and waste places" (24) because artists such as Ibsen, Wagner, and Tolstoy were disseminating a vision of morality and beauty that was "a disturbing and corrupting influence on the views of a whole generation" (viii). Although a disciple of Italian criminal anthropologist Cesare Lombroso, who claimed that criminals were a separate biological subspecies at an earlier stage of evolution than man, Nordau viewed criminals as merely "a subdivision of degenerates" (17). Moreover, Nordau followed Morel's thinking when he defined degeneration as a "morbid deviation from an original type" (16). In this respect, Lombroso's theories were considered more optimistic because, as Donald Pizer notes, they "embodied an optimistic Darwinism in which the criminal was a reversion to an earlier epoch rather than a product of evolutionary progress" (Graham, *Critical Essays* 67).

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16 Despite the publication of other somewhat derivative studies during the almost forty year gap between the appearance of Morel's "Treatise on the Degenerations" and Nordau's *Degeneration*, these two works remain the most significant and influential nineteenth-century studies on the subject.

17 For a recent and concise explication of Nordau's *Degeneration* and the reviews it garnered in both America and abroad, see Linda L. Maik's "Nordau's *Degeneration*: The American Controversy."

18 Lombroso's most lasting contribution to degeneration theory was his claim that criminal behavior was characterized by atavism, which was a result of degeneration of the nervous system. Similar to Morel's study, Lombroso compiled a list of symptoms or "stigmata" that criminals exhibited. In acknowledgment to his indebtedness to Lombrosian theory, Nordau dedicated *Degeneration* to Lombroso and cites him throughout the
Nevertheless, late nineteenth and early twentieth-century discourse indeed reflected this "racial" worry. In 1898, Eugene Talbot's *Degeneracy: Its Causes, Signs, and Results* cautioned that intermarriage of "superior" and "inferior" races would inevitably lead to the corruption and degeneracy of the Anglo-Saxon race. While William Z. Ripley's *The Races of Europe* (1900) did not openly indict racial others as the root of social problems in America, it did provide the theoretical foundation for more vociferous condemnations of immigrants that appeared in the early twentieth century.19 In *The Old World in the New* (1914), for example, Edward A. Ross complained that "the blood now being injected into the veins of our people is 'common'" (285). He feared that low Anglo-American birth-rates would precipitate what he called "race suicide" (299). The reprinting of Count Joseph Arthur de Gobineau's *The Inequality of Human Races* in 1915, which was originally published in French before the Civil War, is indicative of a renewed interest in the possible consequences of America's increasing racial diversity. Influenced by B.A. Morel, Gobineau warned against the "mortal disease" of "degeneration," which was marked by "the mixture of racial elements" (qtd. in Bennett 164).

The most direct twentieth-century condemnation of America's ethnic richness was Henry Pratt Fairchild's *The Melting-Pot Mistake* (1926), in which he discussed the problem of assimilating new immigrants into Anglo-American culture, as well as "the fallacy of the Melting-Pot" (12). Fairchild's work at once adopted metaphorical language that likened the new immigration to a contagion work.

19 William Z. Ripley classified the races of Europe into three "racial types" (Nordic, Alpine, and Mediterranean). He argued that immigration to America had regrettably shifted from the first two types to the third.
threatening to corrupt the American body politic, and emphasized the importance of preserving the national character in light of the effects of mass immigration. He believed that the idea of assimilation "implies the conception of society as akin to an organism," and described immigrants as "various extrinsic substances" that are taken into the "body" (137). However, these immigrant "substances" are seemingly incompatible with, and represent a threat to, the national body:

But in the case of a nationality the foreign particle does not become part of the nationality until he has become assimilated to it. Previous to that time he is an extraneous factor, like undigested, and possibly indigestible, matter in the body of a living organism. (150)

For Fairchild, there is no compromise; ethnic diversity is simply incompatible with maintaining a unified sense of national identity. He emphasizes that "the attempt to mix nationalities must result not in a new type of composite nationality but in the destruction of all nationality" (150). Fairchild's work is significant not only because it represents the culmination of two hundred years of racial tension in America, but because it addresses an old problem: the creation and maintenance of a distinctly American national identity.

Indeed, the question of American national identity was a central concern for nativists. Formed during the political uncertainty of the 1790s and in the wake of mass European immigration, the first nativist organizations were skeptical of the nationalistic efficacy of the Revolution; they believed that what it meant to be an American could only be understood if the nation were able to create and maintain a sense of community on an ongoing basis. Early nativist organizations
stressed aspects of classical Republicanism, such as self-reliance, independence, and the need for participatory government, and regarded themselves as best qualified to judge what qualities were (and were not) American. In a sense, these organizations viewed themselves as microcosms of an ideal American society in which honesty and the maintenance of social harmony were requisite. According to Dale T. Knobel, nativists vigorously recruited members, and “local nativist fraternal organizations that stretched across states and even across the nation were calculated to remind members that they were part of a ‘national’ people” (35). Thus, the search for social stability, brotherhood, and nationhood became the basic tenets of early nativist impulses in America.

When more committed nativist movements began appearing in the 1820s, they organized in the form of fraternal benevolent societies and modeled themselves on established organizations such as the Masons and the Odd Fellows. This fraternal style of organization, with elaborate procedures for admission, secret handshakes, and grandiloquent titles for leaders, was particularly suitable for the nativist movement because each local society was a kind of community of “brothers” that stressed the importance of those qualities that best represented what it meant to be American. There were also incentives to belonging to a nativist organization. Like other fraternal societies, the nativist fraternity provided its more business-minded members with manifold economic contacts. Since members were encouraged to trade and do business within the fraternity, membership within fraternal organizations could prove economically

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beneficial. Members were also screened before admittance, making it possible to meet honest and reliable business associates. In fact, nativist societies fostered an entrepreneurial spirit and encouraged upward social mobility.\textsuperscript{21}

With the formation of the American Republican party in the 1840s, nativism began exerting significant social and political influence. The American Republican Party evolved from the Native Americans organization, which formed in New Orleans in 1841. These Louisiana militants espoused classic nativist doctrine; they believed that the naturalization period should be extended from five to twenty-one years and that political office should be held only by native-born Americans. The primary goal of the organization, as one member put it, was to use “every means in our power to diminish foreign influences” (qtd. in Bennet 54). By 1843, the Native Americans’ message quickly spread to New York, Philadelphia, Boston, and other major urban centres. But it was in New York that the organization received the most publicity, attracting the attention of many of the city’s editors and professionals. In an effort to increase the party’s appeal for those who considered themselves non-nativists, the organization changed its name to the American Republican party (Bennett 55).

While many viewed the Native Americans’ rhetoric as a possible vehicle for political and social reform, their less than moderate policies foreshadowed a somewhat stern social and political agenda. In fact, their overt disdain for foreigners and their anti-Catholic views clearly separated them from the more liberal views of cultural pluralists like Whig senator William Seward, who argued

\textsuperscript{21}Although Lynn Dumenil’s \textit{Freemasonry and American Culture, 1800-1930} does not deal explicitly with the nativist movement, it does provide information concerning the personal rewards and benefits of
that Americans should embrace immigrants with tolerance and respect in order to bind (socially and politically) the nation together. Moreover, it was difficult to reconcile the politics of moderate reform with the often violent tactics adopted by those who believed they were simply protecting their nation from the inexorable corruption of the foreign-born (Archdeacon 57-84).

Throughout the late 1830s and early 1840s, there were incidents that confirmed some of the American Republicans’ claims concerning the adverse social effects of American immigration. In 1834 and again in 1839, immigrant railroad and canal workers rioted in Maryland. In Florida, Indiana, Connecticut, and Michigan, there were well-publicized accounts of Irish-Catholics attacking and murdering native-born Protestants. In May and July of 1844, tensions between nativists and Catholic immigrants culminated in the infamous Philadelphia riots, in which hundreds of people were killed and wounded (Knobel 60-63). The effects of these riots on the American Republican party were ironic; on the one hand, news of the riots spread rapidly and the nation was reminded of the immigrant threat. As David H. Bennett observes, "By polarizing the country and reacquainting fellow-traveling nativists with the 'mailed fist of Papism,' the urban violence in one centre helped advertise the anti-alien cause everywhere" (58). On the other hand, those nativists seeking moderate reforms were shocked by the violence and their support for the American Republicans wavered. As one prominent New Yorker wrote, "the state of things in [Philadelphia] is growing worse and worse every day. I shan't be caught voting for a 'Native' ticket again in a hurry" (qtd. in Shannon 45). By 1847, the Republicans had lost much of their belonging to fraternal organizations.
support. More pressing issues now dominated American politics: war with Mexico, the issue of slavery, and the discovery of gold in California. The steam that fueled the nativist machine in the 1830s and 1840s had temporarily dissipated. But in the late 1840s and 1850s, increased immigration from Europe, mainly as a result of the potato famine in Ireland, re-kindled nativism in America.\textsuperscript{22}

The fraternal societies that formed at the turn of the nineteenth century continued to attract new members long after the nativist political parties of the 1840s disintegrated. These fraternities made few demands on their members. Members swore to uphold a rigid ethical code and engage in altruistic efforts that would enhance the standard of living in their communities. However, such fraternities also identified and united themselves against a common enemy: immigrants. These organizations proliferated, and one newspaper claimed that by the late 1840s there were forty-eight thousand New Yorkers and forty-two thousand Pennsylvanians involved in some form of nativist society.\textsuperscript{23} The most prolific of these nativist fraternities was The Order of United American Mechanics (OUAM), which formed in Philadelphia amidst the anti-alien riots in 1844-45. The OUAM created an agenda aimed specifically at subverting immigrant prosperity in America. Members were required to undertake efforts to publicize and campaign against the hiring of cheap foreign labor. The organization also insisted that its members only patronize “American” business owners. With

\textsuperscript{22} See Witke 3-13. The potato famine in Ireland was itself largely responsible for the crest in American immigration during the mid-nineteenth century. In fact, more Irish immigrated to America in the 1840s than during any other period of its history.

members such as John Harper, a successful publisher, and Thomas Whitney, a printer and nativist publicist, the OUAM prospered well into the next decade (Knobel 67-72).

In 1850, another nativist organization appeared and rapidly began increasing its membership. The Order of the Star Spangled Banner (OSSB), unlike its predecessors, was immediately politicized. All members of the organization were required to pledge never to vote for either an immigrant or Catholic candidate. Those who held office within the organization were required to submit to an oath, which bound them to actively seek and promote the removal of immigrants from positions of power throughout the nation. But most of all, the OSSB required the utmost discretion from all its members. When members were approached by outsiders inquiring about the organization and its activities, members were instructed simply to say, "I know nothing." It was Horace Greeley who labeled the members of the OSSB the Know Nothings in an article in the New York Tribune in 1853 (Bennett 110-16).

By 1854, the Know Nothing party reached the height of its popularity, attracting five thousand new members a week after the Kansas-Nebraska Act was passed. Politicians from both the North and the South looked toward the Know Nothings; their disdain for foreigners was initially enough to establish common ground on which these ideologically disparate politicians could comfortably tread. While urban violence in the North compelled Northern

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24 The Kansas-Nebraska Act precipitated lively debate on the matter of slavery and its expansion; the act permitted the territories to decide the fate of slavery within its jurisdiction. Southern politicians who feared the dissolution of slavery sought refuge within the Know Nothing party, believing that Know Nothingism best suited their pro-slavery agendas.
politicians to view nativism as a possible solution to the growing immigrant
problem, the slavery issue prompted Southern politicians to turn to nativism as a
means of protecting their economic interests in slavery (Bennett 87). This was
nativism's finest hour. Even Millard Fillmore took the oath of the OSSB and
irrevocably linked himself and his politics to the nativist movement.

Although the Know Nothings eventually lost support, nativism in America
did not disappear. Theories of race which extolled the virtues of Anglo-Saxon
heritage and emphasized the inferior degenerate nature of racial others
continued to proliferated in the 1850s and legitimized the claims of those who
believed that immigrants were corrupting the purity of American society.
Renewed waves of European immigration in the 1880s also brought issues of
national identity, stability, and prosperity to the forefront of the nation's political
consciousness. Vast new Catholic and Jewish immigration from southern and
eastern Europe and dramatic population explosions in Asia aroused racial
anxieties in turn-of-the-century America, and precipitated a wave of anti-alien
sentiment reminiscent of the late 1840s and 1850s. As David Bennett observes,
the "bonds of community seemed strained [...] and [racial worries] appeared at a
moment of uneasiness about the present and concern for the future. They

22 Immigrants arriving during the 1880s and 1890s were called "new immigrants" not only because they were
the most significant number of immigrants to arrive in America since before the Civil War, but because they
also represented a shift in the ethnic composition of past immigration. Between 1880 and 1915 more than
twenty million newcomers arrived in America, the majority arriving from southeastern Europe.
23 The official closure of the American frontier in 1890 also exacerbated many Americans' anxieties over
the future of their nation. Immortalized in Frederick Jackson Turner's famous essay "The Significance of
the Frontier in American History" (1893), the frontier was long-considered a symbol of American strength
and opportunity.
24 See Knobel 221. The establishment of the Immigration Restriction League (IRL) was one of the first
political responses to the "new immigration," and signaled the reemergence of national concerns over
immigration. Formed in 1894, the IRL was endorsed by nativist organizations, which were attracted to the
provided an added impetus for the reappearance of nativist feeling" (163-64). In fact, traditional nativism did not fade away in America until the 1930s. As such, it comprised an important aspect of American society throughout the nineteenth century, and played a crucial role in shaping the attitudes of many Americans, including Frank Norris, one of the most influential writers of American naturalism.

IRL's commitment to "admit only the 'best' prospects for citizenship."
Chapter Two

Naturalism and Frank Norris’s Interpretation of Otherness

"In a way San Francisco is not a city—or rather let us say, it is not one city. It is several cities. Make the circuit of these several cities and by the time you have come to the severalth you may say with some considerable degree of truth; "I have seen Peking and have walked the streets of Mexico, have looked on the life of Madrid, have rubbed elbows with Naples and Genoa, glanced in at Yokohama, even—though more remotely, perhaps—have known Paris and Berlin."  

-Frank Norris, Cosmopolitan San Francisco

In an early review of McTeague, W.D. Howells, champion of realism in American fiction, proclaimed the novel a “masterly work” and noted that “[Frank Norris] has done a picture of life which has form, which has texture, which has color” (327). Although Howells criticized Norris’s pessimistic assessment of the human spirit in the face of relentless determining forces, claiming that the novel was “a little inhuman,” he was pleased with the writer’s work, particularly with his attention to detail (327). In fact, Howells hailed him as one of the most promising young writers of American fiction. Although not usually considered a local colourist, Norris makes clear in McTeague through his long, descriptive passages of Polk Street and his attempt to represent accurately the dialects of his ethnic characters that he was committed to his belief in portraying life through, what Howells called in his review, “little miracles of observation” (327). Indeed, Norris’s depiction of Polk Street reflects his vision of the “form,” “texture,” and “color” of late nineteenth-century San Francisco.  

29 For Norris, realism was a significant component of naturalism; it conveyed the importance of “the smaller
But the local colour that pervades a novel like *McTeague* is but one requirement of literary naturalism, the movement with which Norris identified his work and to which he claimed to be committed. Naturalism, which is predicated in part on Darwinian and Spencerian principles of evolution and natural selection and generally considered a response to what later became known as the genteel tradition, has traditionally been considered nothing more than pessimistic determinism disguised as realism. Donald Pizer’s definition of American literary naturalism is perhaps the most useful, and his study *Realism and Naturalism in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* has done much to expand less precise understandings of the movement. While Pizer acknowledges that the “traditional approach to naturalism through realism and through philosophical determinism is historically justifiable and has served a useful purpose,” he believes that this definition diminishes the complexity of naturalistic novels (10). He argues that there exist two tensions within naturalism that “constitute the theme and form of the naturalistic novel” (10). The first tension is derived from the subject of naturalism and the vision of humankind it presents:

[The naturalist’s] characters are the poor, the uneducated, the unsophisticated. His fictional world is that of the commonplace and unheroic in which life would seem to be chiefly the dull round of daily existence, as we ourselves usually conceive of our lives.

But the naturalist discovers in this world those qualities of man details of everyday life, things that are likely to happen between lunch and supper” (Zola 1106).

30 For earlier definitions of literary naturalism, see Malcolm Cowley’s “A Natural History of American Naturalism” in *The Portable Malcolm Cowley*, 176-190; Lars Ahnebrink’s *The Beginnings of Naturalism in American Fiction*, vi-vii; Charles C. Walcutt’s *American Literary Naturalism, A Divided Stream*, 3-29; and
usually associated with the heroic or the adventurous, such as acts of violence and passion which involve sexual adventure or bodily strength and which culminate in desperate moments and violent death. (11)

The first tension Pizer identifies, then, is the result of ordinary characters becoming involved in "heroic" or "adventurous" circumstances. In this way, the naturalist "discovers in this material the extraordinary and the excessive" (11). The second tension results from the naturalist's portrayal of a deterministic world in which individuals are governed by heredity, environment, and the laws of chance, but which concomitantly affirms the meaning and importance of the individual. Pizer states that "[t]he naturalist appears to say that although the individual may be a cipher in a world made amoral by man's lack of responsibility for his fate, the imagination refuses to accept this formula as the total meaning of life and so seeks a new basis for man's sense of his own dignity and importance" (11). In Pizer's view, the tension between the naturalistic novel's subject matter and its vision of humankind, between its determinism and its humanism, renders naturalism a far more complex literary mode than the conventional definition suggests.

Pizer's clarification of American naturalism is an important one because it argues for the presence of complexity and uniqueness in a movement that was too often considered a perversion of realism or merely imitative of the French naturalists. Although often considered a derivative literary tradition, naturalism was not simply transplanted to America by writers who were attracted to the

Richard Chase's The American Novel and its Tradition, 186.
application of scientific methods and evolutionary principles to contemporary life by French writers such as Daudet, Goncourt, and, most importantly, Zola; rather, naturalism was transformed in America by writers such as Stephen Crane, Hamlin Garland, and Theodore Dreiser who, while adapting the French novelists' philosophies of materialism and scientific determinism, transformed them into a distinct literary aesthetic.31 As Donald Pizer notes, the American naturalist of the 1890s explored "a different aspect of American life through his own imaginative response to his world rather than in accord with a pattern and philosophy established by Zola." Pizer goes on to stress that "Zola was not the model for this effort but rather the leading wedge in a progressive literary movement" (The Theory and Practice 19).

But despite Pizer's claim, Norris greatly admired Zola for his contribution to shaping and directing his naturalism, going so far as to frequently sign his name "the boy Zola." For Zola's aesthetic incorporated and reflected the great discoveries and intellectual advancements of the nineteenth-century, particularly in the areas of the natural sciences, which were postulating new and innovative ideas about humankind. As Lars Åhnebrink puts it, "the century may be described as analytic, intellectual, and interrogative, in search of truth and exactness" (264). Zola believed that literature, like medicine, was no longer an art, but a science. And it was only through science that ultimate truth could be discovered. As a result, Zola, as well as other French naturalists, saturated their novels with "pseudo scientific terminology" in the hopes of discovering truth

31 For more on the American naturalists' indebtedness to French naturalism, see Lars Åhnebrink's The Beginnings of Naturalism in American Fiction, 21-29.
through the study of heredity and milieu, “the two basic factors which [...]” fundamentally transformed and reshaped human destinies” (Åhnebrink 265). In his preface to Thérèse Raquin, Zola partially explains his belief in accessing truth through science:

In the world of science, an accusation of immorality proves nothing whatsoever. I do not know whether my novel is immoral, but I admit that I have never gone out of my way to make it more or less chaste. What I do know is that I never for one moment dreamed of putting in the indecencies that moral people are discovering therin, for I wrote every scene, even the most impassioned, with scientific curiosity alone. (24)

Zola's dedication to “scientific curiosity” was one of the elements of his aesthetic that Norris found attractive; it demonstrated the means by which Norris could “truthfully” render a portrait of life. However, despite his allegiance to Zola, the sources of his literary influences were manifold; he was greatly influenced by writers who belonged to the Romantic school, such as Scott, Hugo, Kipling, and Stevenson. Norris also had his own ideas about fiction and the ways in which turn-of-the-century American culture would inevitably transform the application of the literary naturalism practised in late nineteenth-century France. Clearly his naturalism developed into “a literary mode which was both derivative and personal” (Pizer, The Novels 25).

For Norris, naturalism was not simply realism nor, despite his allegiance to Zola, was it a derivation of French naturalism. In fact, he objected to the
characterization of Zola as a naturalist writer. In his estimation, Zola’s aesthetic
was “misunderstood” and “misinterpreted” by critics who persisted in viewing
naturalism as “a sort of inner circle of realism—a kind of diametric opposite of
romanticism” when, in fact, naturalism was “but a form of romanticism after all”
(Zola 1106). As practised by Howells, whom Norris admired in many respects as
the archetypal realist, realism relates “the smaller details of everyday life, things
that are likely to happen between lunch and supper, small passions, restricted
emotions, dramas of the reception-room, tragedies of an afternoon call, crises
involving cups of tea” (Zola 1106). While he maintains that “Mr. Howells is not
uninteresting,” he complains that his characters are “ordinary” and “bourgeois,”
and, therefore, “simply not romantic” (Zola 1106). On the other hand, Zola’s
novels contain “a world of big things; the enormous, the formidable, the terrible
[...] [e]verything is extraordinary, imaginative, grotesque even, with a vague note
of terror quivering throughout” (Zola 1107). As a result of the imaginative force
inherent in Zola’s fiction, he finds it “a strange perversion” that “Zola should be
quoted as a realist, and as a realist of realists” (Zola 1106).

Although he viewed Zola as more of a romantic than a realist, he
maintained that the school of naturalism was distinct from both movements.
Norris believed naturalism was composed of the best qualities of romanticism
and realism, a point that he emphasized by placing the two in dialectical
opposition to one another. In his “Weekly Letter” to the Chicago American, Norris
partially explains this dialectic:

Is it permissible to say that Accuracy is realism and Truth
romanticism? I am not so sure, but I feel that we come close to a solution here. The divisions seem natural and intended. [...] Does Truth after all "lie in the middle"? And what school, then, is midway between the Realists and Romanticists, taking the best from each? Is it not the school of Naturalism, which strives hard for accuracy and truth? (1141)

In this paradigm, "Accuracy" refers to the accurate representation of "every detail" and "every particular" (1140). "Truth," on the other hand, is representative of universal experience, of "the broad truth of the thing" (1141). This dialectic is, of course, artificial; any authoritative claim to "accuracy" or "truth" is highly contingent and ultimately subjective. But for Norris, naturalism combined what he considered the "Accuracy" of realism and the "Truth" of romanticism in order to produce "a school by itself, unique, somber, powerful beyond words" (Zola 1108).

In *McTeague*, Norris's naturalism exhibits his attempt to portray life on Polk Street both "accurately" and "truthfully." The Zolaesque precision with which Norris describes McTeague filling a cavity for Miss Baker is illustrative of Norris's attempts to render objectively a portrait of McTeague's profession:

McTeague remembered now that [the cavity] was what is called a "proximate case," [...] He told himself that he should have to use "mats" in the filling. He made some dozen of these "mats" from his tape of non-cohesive gold, cutting it transversely into small pieces that could be inserted edgewise beneath the teeth and consolidated
by packing. [...] He continued with the other kind of gold fillings, such as he would have occasion to use during the week; "blocks" to be used in large proximal cavities, made by folding the tape on itself a number of times and then shaping it with the soldering pliers; "cylinders" for commencing fillings, which he formed by rolling the tape around a needle called a "broach," cutting it afterwards into different lengths. (14)

As Willard E. Martin and Charles Kaplan have pointed out, Norris withdrew a book on dentistry from the Harvard Library on March 19, 1895, which he studied in order to describe the technical aspects of McTeague's profession. But Norris did not incorporate this technical terminology, nor the names of actual people and places, merely because he had a particular allegiance to the school of realism. Instead, he attempted to record such details in order to construct an "accurate," coherent portrait of life into which his imagination could infuse "truth." As Robert D. Lundy puts it, "Norris imagines his characters in their setting and relates them fully to it. It is his imaginative comprehension of his materials that imparts to them the glow of life" (261).

But despite Norris's best efforts to render accurately and honestly a portrait of life on Polk Street, his representations of ethnic minorities are also heavily influenced by the often overt ethnocentrism that appears, in one form or another, in all his novels. For Norris's ethnic characters are frequently characterized as inferior and degenerate in comparison to his Anglo-Saxon characters, who are

32 See Ronald Martin's "Frank Norris's Reading at Harvard College" and Charles Kaplan's "Fact into Fiction in McTeague."
often delineated as epitomes of civilized humankind. Critics typically explain Norris's ethnocentrism as either a result of his education at the University of California in Berkeley or the product of the influences of Caesar Lombroso, New York journalist R.H. Davis, and Rudyard Kipling, whose assumptions concerning Anglo-Saxon superiority underpin many of his characterizations. Donald Pizer even suggests that Norris may have developed his ethnocentric biases from his association with "the Argonaut and the Overland Monthly, two San Francisco magazines that were militantly racist and to which he contributed" (Literary Criticism 100). Although it is likely they all contributed to his ethnocentric view of American society, it is undeniable that his representation of racial others in McTeague indicates that he was exposed to and accepted uncritically contemporary discourses that emphasized the innate inferiority and potential for degeneracy of non Anglo-Saxon groups. His characterization of the residents of Polk Street not only reflects contemporary nativist prejudice, but challenges assimilationist notions of integration and social cohesion. Moreover, despite claims that Norris sets forth "details plainly, carefully, and objectively" in a manner that "approaches the studied reserve of the case study," Norris's stereotypical renderings of ethnic minorities compromise his fidelity to objectivity and his belief in the artist as a disinterested observer (Walcutt 128).

Importantly, seemingly unaware of the compromise involved, Norris actually admits at one point that a novel should draw "conclusions from a whole congruies of forces, social tendencies, [and] race impulses" and devote itself "not to a study of men but of man" (The Novel 1196). In accordance with this principle, Norris's
characters are types rather than individuals, generalized epitomes of San Francisco's major racial and cultural groups as he conceived them. But Norris also believed that the successful artist should describe life objectively and impartially, that the artist must maintain objectivity and what he considered "a necessary detachment" from the experience being reproduced in art ("The Novel" 1199). Since he was determined to imbue his descriptions of Polk Street with a sense of realism or, as he called it, "real life," Norris decided to deal with the challenge of delineating San Francisco's ethnically diverse milieu on the basis of their stereotypical traits in order to assist him in the structuring of the novel and the formation of its plot (Zola 1106). As Barbara Hochman points out, the "vital center" of McTeague is comprised of ongoing processes that "serve directly, though not always effectively, to stabilize and neutralize hidden turmoil, whether within the individual, or in his surroundings" (62). Norris's use of racial stereotypes creates a stable and ordered relationship between the characters and their environment by structuring life on Polk Street into coherent patterns and routines. That is to say, his characters' actions and responses to events are not governed by individual passions or capricious desires that spring from their uniquely idiosyncratic personalities; instead, stereotypical ethnic traits deny them agency in an environment that is unrelentingly deterministic, and renders them type-figures. To the extent that these stereotypical traits shape and define the characters' place within Norris's fictional Polk Street, so they detract from his pretensions to

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33 Norris's belief in the novelist as a disinterested observer of life is also evident in a remark he makes concerning Harriet Beecher Stowe's seminal novel: "Do you think that Mrs. Stowe was more interested in the slave question than she was in the writing of 'Uncle Tom's Cabin'? Her book, her manuscript, the page-to-page progress of the narrative, were more absorbing to her than all the Negroes that were ever whipped
objectivity, to say nothing of his naturalism.

During his time as an undergraduate at the University of California, Norris was exposed to the idea of Anglo-Saxon intellectual and spiritual primacy through his study of medieval English poetry, the writings of Rudyard Kipling and Richard Harding Davis, and lectures in zoology and geology given by Professor Joseph Le Conte, who was known for his liberal instruction in evolutionary thought. Such exposure profoundly influenced the development of his aesthetic and reinforced the attractiveness of the idea "of the indomitable fighting spirit of the Anglo-Saxon" (Walker, Frank Norris 68). But it was only after leaving Berkeley that Norris cemented his belief in the inexorable strength and spirit of the Anglo-Saxon.

Nowhere in his writings is this more evident than in an essay he wrote for the San Francisco Wave in 1897, which emphasizes his support of student hazing:

We Anglo-Saxons are a fighting race; have fought our way from the swamps of Holland to the shores of the Pacific Coast at the expense of worse things than smashed faces and twisted knees. One good fight will do more for a boy than a year of schooling [...] it wakes in him that fine, reckless arrogance, that splendid, brutal, bullying spirit that is the Anglo-Saxon's birthright. (qtd. in Walker, Frank Norris 66-7)

or sold" (“The Novel" 1198).

34 Aside from the intellectual climate at Berkeley, which is perhaps most responsible for contributing to Norris's Anglo-Saxon bias, Norris's love of, and involvement in, college sports and activities also affected his burgeoning Anglo-Saxonism. He pursued fencing, fishing, and football, and believed that such sports represented "a dramatic struggle" that demanded "quick decisions and shrewd thinking" (Walker 65). Moreover, he enjoyed college rivalries, and reveled in the display of, what he called, the "primordial instincts" that manifested themselves in the constant conflict between freshmen and sophomores (qtd. in Walker 65). For a more detailed discussion of Norris's undergraduate life at Berkeley and its influence on his Anglo-Saxonism, see Walker's Frank Norris: A Biography, 53-77.
It is with sheer delight that Norris praises "that fine, reckless arrogance" and "splendid, brutal, bullying spirit" of the Anglo-Saxon. In fact, Norris was so attracted to the notion of Anglo-Saxon superiority that he infused much of his work, including his critical essays, with sentiment reflecting his belief in the "Anglo-Saxon's birthright."

The American frontier was also of particular interest to Norris throughout his literary career; he believed that America's uniqueness and its national greatness were personified by the frontier and its pioneers, whose Anglo-Saxon heritage imbued them with inexorable fortitude and unwavering strength of character. In an article defending romantic western fiction written for the *Boston Evening Transcript* in 1902, Norris states, "A scattering advance line of hard-grained, hard-riding, hard-working fellows, Anglo-Saxons, Americans, dash into this country, with its gigantic sweep of deserts, its inhospitable sands, its forbidding mountains, and in less than a generation have all but civilized it" ("Literature of the West" 1177). Like many late nineteenth-century historians, he consented to a view of American expansionism that understood the conquest of the American West as the latest advancement of a people who shared the same unyielding Anglo-Saxon blood and spirit.35 For Norris, the frontier personified romance and was "the place of the poetry of the Great March" ("The Frontier" 183).

However, Norris's interpretation of American urban life differs greatly from his romantic vision of the frontier. San Francisco's urban milieu, which permeates *McTeague*, was ethnically diverse and rich in the local colour of the nineteenth century. Initially a Spanish imperial outpost designed to counter Russian ambitions
in the area, San Francisco not only developed into a significant commercial centre by the 1820s (the outpost’s potential as a convenient port of trade with Hawaii and China was not overlooked by merchants on the eastern seaboard), but the discovery of gold in 1848 brought numerous settlers to the area and the city’s population grew rapidly. Perceiving a less competitive market in the west, merchants from New England and other large commercial centres increasingly migrated to San Francisco in the hopes of tapping the lively commerce that existed throughout California. By 1860, San Francisco was the fifteenth largest city in America and had attracted a population of approximately fifty thousand. A decade later, the city’s population had more than doubled and was becoming increasingly ethnic. Even before the Civil War, San Francisco was the nation’s third largest immigrant centre, with more than half the city’s population claiming immigrant status.35

Norris recognized the value of using San Francisco as the backdrop for his fictions; he believed that the city’s residents, as well as the city itself, represented the stuff of great novels. As an artist, he perceived in San Francisco’s urban landscape a ubiquitous source of inspiration: in theatres, in almshouses, and even in the names of the streets themselves. In “An Opening For Novelists,” Norris writes:

‘Things can happen’ in San Francisco. Kearny street, Montgomery street, Nob Hill, Telegraph Hill, of course Chinatown [...] There is an indefinable air about all these places that is suggestive of stories at

36 See William Issel and Robert W. Cherny’s San Francisco, 1865-1932: Politics, Power, and Urban
once. You fancy the names would look well on a book's page. The people who frequent them could walk right into a novel or short story and be at home. (1112)

However, Norris was also aware that the very qualities that made San Francisco an ideal locale, particularly its diverse socio-economic and ethnic population, would problematize his attempts to portray life honestly and accurately; it would be difficult to render a coherent portrait of an environment that was inexorably protean and demonstrably pluralistic. It was crucial, then, for Norris to ascribe a sense of coherence to San Francisco's diverse ethnic population in order to delineate meaningfully a story of San Francisco that was representative of the city's ineffable creative potential.

In a little-known article entitled “Cosmopolitan San Francisco,” which was published in The Wave in 1897, Norris expresses his vision of San Francisco's diverse ethnic population. He notes that the city's population is “agglomerate rather than conglomerate,” with ethnic minorities living as a “confusion of nations in California” (134-5). It is of particular significance the way in which Norris goes on to interpret and make sense of this “confusion.” Similar to his characterization of ethnic minorities in McTeague, he delineates ethnic minorities in “Cosmopolitan San Francisco” based on their stereotypical characteristics in order to produce a coherent vision of the city's ethnic population. After both emphasizing the “confusion” in which “nationalities flung off from the parent stock” (134) live, and breathing a sigh of relief over “how narrowly California escaped an influx of the Russians” (135), he describes the Irish and Chinese living in San Francisco:

*Development.*
The Irishman, besides, goes away from his wife and children—one is speaking now of the mass of them. He forgathers with individuals of his own sex and disports himself in saloons and bars and the public parks, and his enjoyment is not complete unless he embroils himself in a fight. (137)

It is significant that Norris relies on contemporary racial stereotypes to delineate the Irish, describing them as prone to alcohol and truculence; such generalizations allow Norris to speak “now of the mass of them” and render what is a clearly over-determined, but succinct and coherent vision of the Irish in San Francisco. In this portrait, the Irish are an identifiable and knowable group that frequents “saloons and bars and the public parks.”

Similarly, Norris’s depiction of the Chinese is based on stereotypical generalizations. He describes them as “secretive,” “stealthy,” and “ridden with superstitions” (139), and goes on to say that “[i]n every Chinaman there is something of the snake and a good deal of the cat” (140). Throughout the article he makes similar generalizations about the behaviour of Germans, who like the Sieppe family organize “interminable, more or less solemn ‘basket picnics’” (137), and the Japanese, who “get into their native regalia and fence with Bamboo swords from dawn to dusk” (139). For Norris, characterizing minorities with reference to ethnic stereotypes is clearly a strategy by which he structures and orders his environment in order to meaningfully engage and interpret life in San Francisco. This reliance on ethnic stereotypes is crucial to his ability to render a meaningful and coherent portrait of what he perceives to be a confused and
disordered cultural milieu, despite the fact that his portrayal of modern life in San Francisco, replete as it is with racial bias, flies directly in the face of his claims elsewhere concerning objectivity and the need for the artist to assume the position of disinterested observer.

*McTeague*, which he aptly subtitles *A Story of San Francisco*, employs racial stereotypes which reflect Norris's acceptance of contemporary nativist prejudice, as well as his desire to order the complex relationships of Polk Street's ethnically diverse milieu. Such stereotyping, which is primarily "a process of simplification which serves to make reality manageable," reduces the complexity of his characters by imbing them with representative characteristics that render them types rather than individual agents (Stereotyping 2). McTeague is perhaps the most recognizably stereotyped character. Despite his great physical strength, his blond hair and "blond mustachio of a viking" (79), he is not, as George W. Johnson suggests, "an Anglo-Saxon country boy" (58). Indeed, although physically strong, he possesses none of the refinement or sophistication in the use of that strength which, in Norris's mind, characterized the Anglo-Saxon. In fact, McTeague more closely conforms to nineteenth-century stereotypical notions of Irish immigrants living in America.

McTeague's name is perhaps the most blatant signifier of his characterization as a type. More specifically, McTeague's lack of a first name underscores his lack of identity and individuality. Variously called "Mac," "Dr. McTeague," "Doctor," or simply "McTeague" throughout the novel, Norris's central character is not presented as a self-conscious agent capable of uniquely individual
emotional or intellectual responses to his environment. Norris simply presents McTeague as an archetypal Irish-Catholic, and imbues him with those characteristics that nativists associated with Irish immigrants to America during the nineteenth century. As critics have pointed out, the word Teague is "a nickname for an Irishman" or a "Protestant term of contempt for a Roman Catholic" (OED).

Since the Irish tended to migrate toward urban centres, they were a highly visible minority in American cities and much reviled by the dominant Protestants. And Norris explicitly characterizes McTeague as Catholic. When Trina, a Lutheran, asks him if he is Catholic, McTeague, afraid of alienating himself, responds nervously, "No. No, I ---" (42). When he finally regains his composure, he distances himself from Catholicism by "suddenly remembering one of Marcus’s political tirades" (42). Despite McTeague’s disingenuous attack on Catholics and the school system, his uncharacteristically quick-witted response is unconvincing, and Norris identifies McTeague as Catholic by exposing the dentist’s over-reactive fear of being labelled as one. In this way, Norris explicitly renders McTeague’s ethnicity and religiosity significant by subtly emphasizing the relationship between his eponymous hero’s name and the contempt for, and fear of, Irishness and Catholicism.

As Hugh J. Dawson notes, the Irish were "popularly portrayed as musical and sentimental, but with personalities that were often sweetly sad" (37). Norris introduces McTeague as a man of habit and laxity who "invariably spent [Sundays] in the same fashion" enjoying "his only pleasures — to eat, to smoke, to sleep, and to play upon his concertina" (1). He is capable of playing only six "mournful" and
“lugubrious airs” (1), and knows only one song, which is a sentimental ballad called “No One To Love” that he delivers with a “bellowing roar” that sounds like a “lamentable wail” (38). For McTeague, in his “cropfull” and “stupid” way, is “sweetly sad”; he does not possess the intellect or the refinement to reproduce or even appreciate art, which in the novel is a signifier of individual complexity and sophistication (1). With more humour than malice, McTeague’s crude and primitive tastes are frequently contrasted with this signifier. For instance, he purchases the steel engraving of the court of Lorenzo de’ Medici for no other reason than “there were a great many figures in it for the money” (6). Also, McTeague’s response to the rather lowbrow vaudevillian entertainment at the Orpheum reveals the crudeness of his aesthetic sense, as well as what Norris’s audience would certainly have considered his boorish notions of what constituted high culture:

[The performers] seemed to be able to wrestle a tune out of almost anything—glass bottles, cigar-box fiddles, strings of sleigh-bells, even graduated brass tubes, which they rubbed with resined fingers. McTeague was stupefied with admiration.

“That’s what you call musicians,” he announced gravely. (60)

Although Norris does not explicitly link McTeague’s plebeian tastes to his ethnicity, the effect is not only to render his character impermeable to “high” culture, but to illustrate by contrasting his responses to art with those of the other characters that he is irrevocably out-of-step with even those of his own class.” In the first half of the novel, McTeague is presented as a lamentable and hopelessly pathetic figure.

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37 Trina and McTeague’s trip to the Mechanics’ Fair is a significant example of McTeague’s utter inability to critically engage art. When Trina attempts to solicit McTeague’s opinion of a painting, he simply nods.
Dawson also notes that "in American nativist legend, the love of music masked the Irishman's dark side, a laziness that turned to violence when his liquor-swilling propensities unleashed his inherent-brutishness" (37). Norris makes much of McTeague's weakness for alcohol; in fact, alcohol is what transforms the oafish dentist and rouses "the brute in the man" (169). Although Norris frequently emphasizes McTeague's "enormous strength," he also notes that "there was nothing vicious about the man" (6). He depicts McTeague as the epitome of gross docility:

The dentist sprawled his gigantic limbs over the worn velvet of the operating chair; his coat and vest and shoes were off, and his huge feet, in their thick grey socks, dangled over the edge of the foot-rest; his pipe, fallen from his half-open mouth, had spilled the ashes into his lap; while on the floor, at his side, stood the half-empty pitcher of steam beer. His head had rolled limply upon one shoulder, his face was red with sleep, and from his open mouth came a terrific sound of snoring. (105)

McTeague's indolence and lack of urbanity not only reinforce the stereotype of the Irish as "lazy" and "less genteel" than native-born Americans, but illustrate the extent to which strong alcohol affects him (Cose 27). For McTeague, when intoxicated with whiskey, becomes "active, alert, quick-witted, even talkative" (168); he is unequivocally "changed, distorted, and made monstrous by the alcohol" (171). And it is in this state of brutish transformation that McTeague is violent toward Trina. In fact, McTeague only beats Trina when he is drunk: "It was, his head, "bewildered, trying to understand" (113).
however, only when his wits had been stirred with alcohol that the dentist was brutal to his wife" (170). However, this in no way redeems McTeague’s actions because he is highly conscious of his weakness for alcohol and the fact that it makes him “go kinda crazy after two glasses” (112). As a result of his conscious decision to drink (a decision that he makes willingly, if not eagerly), his acts of violence toward Trina become alarmingly frightening and perverse, and expose a lack of civilized restraint that was at best only marginally present at the beginning of the novel.

It is significant, too, that Norris links McTeague’s weakness for the bottle, as well as the sum of all his brutal impulses, with inherited traits. McTeague is simply the product of his kind:

Below the fine fabric of all that was good in him ran the foul stream of hereditary evil, like a sewer. The vices and sins of his father and of 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. Why should it be? He did not desire it. Was he to blame? (22)

Norris connects McTeague’s “vices” not only with inherited traits (the “sins of his father and of his father’s father”), but with his Irishness (“The evil of an entire race”). Moreover, Norris here compromises any claim to scrupulous objectivity. Despite the narrator’s rhetorical questions (“Why should it be? He did not desire it. Was he to blame?”), which are also intended to establish the author’s disinterested position, it is obvious that Norris is contemptuous of his subject. For in McTeague’s
veins runs "the foul stream of hereditary evil." And the value judgement implicit in this statement is not only aimed at McTeague, but at "[t]he evil of an entire race."³⁸

But such obvious naturalistic rhetoric is more than simply a declaration of disdain for the Irish. Through his portrait of McTeague, Norris repeatedly challenges the notion of the Irish as well-integrated.³⁹ Despite the relative comfort in which McTeague lives, Norris repeatedly emphasizes that he is a "poor crude dentist," “stupid, ignorant, [and] vulgar, with [a] sham education and plebeian tastes” (20). McTeague often feels “hideously out of place” like an “intruder” (46). Even his new clothes, which are purchased for his wedding, do not fit: "He wore a suit bought for the occasion—a ready made ‘Prince Albert' coat too short in the sleeves [...] and new patent leather shoes—veritable instruments of torture" (93).

While Norris certainly believes that the brute lurking close beneath surface “sooner or later [...] faces every child of man,” his close association of McTeague’s identity with his Irishness makes it difficult to overlook the social implications of Norris’s rendering of McTeague; he is a stereotypical representation of the Irish and their “foul stream of hereditary evil” (22).

While Norris includes descriptions of Chinese, Hungarians, French, Mexicans, African-Americans, and "Indians" in his depiction of Polk Street’s ethnically diverse milieu, his representation of Germans, Zerkow, the Polish Jew,

³⁸ My italics.
³⁹ It is important to note that despite John Higham’s claim that the Irish were “generally well regarded” by the early 1880s, contempt for the Irish nevertheless persisted in late nineteenth-century America. Tammany Hall, for example, which became a political organization of the Democratic party in New York, was renowned for both its corruption and its connection with Irish immigrants, a connection that tarnished the Irish reputation in America well into the twentieth century.
and Maria Macapa, the Spanish-American charwoman, most prominently reflect his adoption of contemporary stereotypes of ethnic minorities. As Frederick C. Luebke notes, the most significant aspects of the American nativist stereotype of German immigrants were “industriousness, thrift, and honesty” (112). Because Germans, after all, shared a common racial origin with Anglo-Saxons, it followed that they were seen to possess traits that were not in themselves inevitably destructive. Trina, who is German-Swiss, possesses these qualities, as well as a purity and innocence that Norris associates with the Anglo-Saxon. When Trina is first introduced to McTeague, she is described as “very small and prettily made” with eyes “like the half-open eyes of a little baby” (17). She is “innocent, confiding, almost infantile,” and “doubtless the woman in her was not yet awakened; she was yet, as one might say, without sex” (17). Norris intentionally emphasizes Trina’s child-like qualities in order to underscore her purity, which stems largely from her lack of engagement with the world or, more specifically, Polk Street. As Warren French observes of Norris’s “idolization of perpetual childhood,” children have “a ‘purer’ vision” which harbours a deep “suspicion of civilization” (47). Trina evinces such suspicion of the world of Polk Street not only through her initially tacit interactions with its residents, such as Maria (of whom she is a “little frightened” (15)), but through her courtship with McTeague, which she “struggled against” (53).

Since Germans were commonly stereotyped as thrifty, Norris chooses Trina

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40 Norris inconsistently describes Maria as Spanish-American, Mexican, and Central American.
41 In Moran of the Lady Letty, Moran is Norris’s archetypal Anglo-Saxon heroine. She is a “hardy Norse type” (71), who is “coarse-fibred [...] mentally as well as physically” (72). However, she also possesses a purity and innocence that is “untouched and unsullied by civilization” (166). For Wilbur, a genteel young man who falls in love with Moran, she is “as yet without sex,” and “[h]er purity was the purity of primeval glaciers” (166).
as the central figure through which to illustrate the evils of parsimony and avarice. The first suggestion in the novel of Trina's economy is subtle; she decides to buy machine-made lace rather than handmade lace, which is more expensive: "I saw a pair of Nottingham lace curtains for forty-nine cents; isn't that cheap?" (77). Although the narrative voice states that she clings to her money with "a tenacity that was surprising" (89), Trina's thriftiness seems initially reasonable and justifiable; rather than spend her five thousand dollars "in some lavish fashion," she believes that they "must be sensible about it" (77). Despite this, Norris attributes Trina's frugality to her ancestors. Like McTeague, she too is a product of heredity:

Economy was [Trina's] strong point. A good deal of peasant blood still ran undiluted in her veins, and she had all the instinct of a hardy and penurious mountain race—the instinct which saves without any thought, without idea of consequence—saving for the sake of saving, hoarding without knowing why (79).43

Here Norris emphasizes the non-rational basis of such economy; he suggests that "the instinct which saves" is the result of a need or desire to persevere "without idea of consequence." For Trina's avarice clearly becomes an unreasoned response to external circumstances.

It is significant to note that Trina does, albeit briefly, exert a positive influence over McTeague. She realizes that "[i]nstead of sinking to McTeague's level, [...] she could make McTeague rise to hers" (107). Under Trina's tutelage, McTeague begins to "dress a little better" and "he relinquished his Sunday  

42 The relationship between the characters and their environment, as well as the causes of degeneration in the novel, will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3.
afternoon's nap and beer in favour of three or four hours spent in the park" (107). Not only does his behaviour change, but he "commenced to have opinions, convictions" and "most wonderful of all, [he] began to have ambitions" (109). Norris explicitly suggests that Trina, given her portion of Anglo-Saxon qualities, is able to exert a positive, though ultimately superficial, influence on McTeague's contemptibly "stupid animal life" (108). Even so, Norris emphasizes Trina's talent for whittling Noah's arc animals with heredity: "[S]ome long-forgotten forefather of the sixteenth century [...] had handed down the talent of the national industry, to reappear in this strangely distorted guise" (78). In other words, Trina's work is not the result of individual creative expression; rather, she embodies characteristics of a "national" people. Both her instinctive ability to whittle and her frugality, which dominate and influence her actions, render her a type-figure; her individuality is subsumed in, and distorted by, what Norris calls "race impulses" (*The Novel* 1196).

Norris also characterizes Trina's family using stereotypical characteristics which were commonly associated with German immigrants in the nineteenth century. Frederick C. Luebke notes that the "German male seemed strongly attached to his family; he was orderly, disciplined, and stable," and was often perceived as being "[a] bit too authoritarian" (112). Mr. Sieppe, and indeed the Sieppe family generally, is more than merely "disciplined" and "authoritarian." Norris delineates Mr. Sieppe as an officious and excessively domineering patriarch. He satirically describes him as "a little man of a military aspect, full of importance, taking himself very seriously" (40). And it is with a sense of militaristic propriety that Mr. Sieppe organizes the preparations for his family's move to the

43 My italics.
suburbs of Los Angeles: "The children were drilled in their parts with military exactitude; obedience and punctuality became cardinal virtues. The vast importance of the undertaking was insisted upon with scrupulous iteration. It was a manoeuvre, an army changing its base of operations, a veritable tribal migration" (88). Mrs. Sieppe, too, is delineated as immoderately authoritarian. In the infamous "pants-wetting scene," Mrs. Sieppe shames young Owgooste and violently strikes him after he involuntarily wets his pants at the Orpheum theatre:

"Owgooste, what is ut?" cried [Mrs. Sieppe], eyeing him with dawning suspicion; then suddenly, "What haf you done? You haf suin your new Vaunteroy gostume!" Her face blazed; without more ado she smacked him soundly. Then it was that Owgooste touched the limit of his misery, his unhappiness, his horrible discomfort; his utter wretchedness was complete.(63)

Owgooste is also the subject of Mr. Sieppe's rage when he refuses to follow his father's advice and the small tin steamboat explodes in the jetty on the day of the picnic at Schuetzen Park: "'Ach, idiot! Ach, imbecile! Ach, miserable! I tol' you he eggsplode. Stop your cry. Stop! It is an order. Do you wish I drow you in der water, eh? Speak. Silence, bube! Mommer, where ist mein stick?" (45). These scenes are essentially comic not only because of the Sieppes' overreactions, but because of their mispronunciation of words. Their inability to express themselves clearly emphasizes the Sieppe's attachment to the Old World, and is reminiscent of Benjamin Franklin's concern that eighteenth-century German immigration was

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Many of Norris's readers found the scene of little Owgooste's incontinence particularly graphic and offensive. When an English publisher of *McTeague* insisted that it be removed, Norris carefully revised the
corrupting the English language.\textsuperscript{45}

As James L. Caron notes, “laughter is mostly directed at Mr. Sieppe, who constantly enacts an ethnic version of the \textit{miles gloriosus},” and “[t]he relation of the parents with the older boy August [...] is consistently comic in its slapstick” (361). In fact, he argues that all the characters in \textit{McTeague} are “represented as targets for satiric laughter because of their rigidity” (360).\textsuperscript{46} For Caron, laughter “provides a way to adapt by offering a respite [for the implied reader], a temporary release, from the bonds that are postulated by naturalism” (373). While Caron argues that Norris offers his readers “the refuge of laughter’s freedom,” it is important to note that Norris emphasizes to the “implied reader” his characters’ inability to adapt to their environment. The link between the Sieppes’ characterization as Old World Germans who “came over in a sailing ship” and their ill-fated business venture in Los Angeles invokes classic social Darwinism (43). For the only explanation for their misfortune lies in Norris’s stereotypical rendering of the Sieppes as Old World Germans who possess personality traits that are distinctly foreign and seemingly incompatible with modes of behaviour that would be more apt to ensure success. Therefore, the stereotypes with which Norris characterizes the Sieppes negates any hope of them adapting to their environment in a meaningful way, and they are inevitably consumed by Norris’s deterministic world.

While Norris’s characterization of Trina’s cousin Marcus relies upon the German stereotype, it also challenges the notion of the well-integrated German stereotype in order to eliminate any direct reference to Owgooste’s pants-wetting.

\textsuperscript{45} See Archdeacon 20.

\textsuperscript{46} It is important to note that Caron’s article emphasizes the comic elements of the novel. Despite his comic rendering of the Sieppes, Norris delineates them as cruel and tyrannical, and there is little humor in the way
through parody. In accordance with the prevailing view of Germans as “quick-tempered” and “aggressive” (Wittke 115), Norris repeatedly emphasizes that Marcus is “[q]uarrelsome at all times” (82) and has a “quickness of temper and passionate readiness to take offence” (125). Although Norris imbues Marcus, as he did Trina, with certain Anglo-Saxon qualities, such as “reckless arrogance” and a “brutal, bullying spirit,” these qualities manifest themselves in Marcus as clumsy and undiscriminating expressions. When Marcus renounces his romantic intentions concerning Trina, Norris underscores the artificiality of his self-sacrifice:

The sense of his own magnanimity all at once overcame Marcus. He saw himself as another man, very noble, self-sacrificing; he stood apart and watched this second self with boundless admiration and with infinite pity. He was so good, so magnificent, so heroic, that he almost sobbed. (35)

Norris is careful to emphasize Marcus’s lack of self-consciousness and, ultimately, his selfishness and pettiness. For it is not Marcus who is magnanimous and noble, but “another man,” a kind of “second self.” And it quickly becomes clear that McTeague is not soon to forget Marcus’s gesture of goodwill; after he encourages McTeague to pursue Trina, Marcus frequently reminds the dentist of his beneficence “by giving evidences of an infinite melancholy” (48).

Marcus also imagines himself as a man of great experience and worldliness. But despite his pretensions, Marcus is able to react only “in the manner of a man of the world”; rather than exhibiting inherent social grace, his urbanity is affected and superficial. Marcus’s political acumen is equally artificial;
his tirades are merely the repetition of "half-truths of political economy" and composed of "stock phrases of the professional politician" (12). Although he is never directly referred to as stupid, Marcus, like McTeague, is described as "a bungler in [his] profession" (11). He manages to secure a job at the dog hospital only by bewildering Old Grannis "with a torrent of empty phrases" (11). While he is a passionate and vociferous speaker, Marcus evidences no critical understanding of what he espouses; it is merely parroted rhetoric. Although he principally identifies himself with the working-class and the Democratic Party, his fear of the Catholics gaining control of the schools and his belief that the Chinese are "ruining the cause of white labour" align him with the politics of the Republican party (72). As Donald Pizer notes, his "politics, in short, are those of inconsistent but opportunistic self-interest." By parodically constructing Marcus's character as the stereotypical German who is ensconced only superficially in "the dominant social and political values" of the late nineteenth century, Norris suggests that Germans' integration into nineteenth-century American society is similarly illusory and superficial; for Norris, they only appear to be civilized and well-integrated (Archdeacon 108).

Norris's depiction of Zerkow, the Polish Jew, and his relationship with Maria not only reflects the extent to which he accepted contemporary notions of Jewry, but provides the novel with structural and thematic balance. Like McTeague, Zerkow has no first name. However, he is rarely referred to simply as Zerkow; rather, Norris invariably refers to him as "the red-headed Polish Jew" or simply as "the Polish-Jew." In this way, Norris privileges the significance of Zerkow's ethnicity

47 See Footnote 4, McTeague 12.
by omitting from his characterization any other signifiers of individuality or identity, such as a first name. Zerkow's character, then, is merely the sum of stereotypically Jewish traits. As John Higham notes, "with the dispersion of Jewish peddlers and shopkeepers throughout the country, the European tradition of the Jew as Shylock came to life." He goes on to say that many Americans believed that Jews were "clothed in greed and deceit" (27). Zerkow embodies this pejorative view of American Jewry, a view that was, as Andre Poncet observes, "popularized by the American neo-nativists" (55). Norris delineates Zerkow not as a man, but as an animal: "He had thin, eager, cat-like lips of the covetous; eyes that had grown keen as those of a lynx from long searching amidst muck and debris; and claw-like, prehensile fingers" (28). Although an old ragman of "sixty odd," Zerkow is far from innocuous; he is as predatory as a "hungry beast of prey" (29). And Norris is sure to emphasize in his description of Zerkow that "greed—inordinate, insatiable greed—was the dominant passion of the man" (28). It is significant, too, that Norris mentions that money is "the blood of [Zerkow's] veins" (29). Like McTeague's drunkenness and Trina's frugality, Zerkow's perverse avarice is an inherited trait and, through Norris's close association of Zerkow's ethnicity with his identity, an intrinsic part of his being. This not only signifies his inability to assert individual agency, but renders him a type-figure representative of American Jewry.

Norris's inclusion of Zerkow, as well as his relationship with Maria, is also an

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During the late Middle Ages, Christians were forbidden to enter the profession of money-lending; charging interest was considered usury and was, therefore, sinful. It was, however, one of the few professions open to Jews, and they were encouraged to enter it precisely because it was "dirty." The view that Jews in America were dishonest and avaricious stems from the charge of disloyal profiteering during the Civil War, as well as the fact that many Americans felt that Jews were "a symbol of the parvenu spirit" (Higham 27).
essential component of the novel's structural and thematic balance. As George M. Spangler notes, Zerkow's avarice is "a moral parallel to Trina's" (95). While Donald Pizer agrees that Zerkow's lust for gold "anticipates Trina's gold mania," he comes closer to a satisfactory reading of the subplot by suggesting that it "reinforces the main plot not only by foreshadowing the tragic effects of avarice, but also by introducing the theme of the racial source of that flaw" (The Novels 73). Indeed, Zerkow serves as a measure of how far from grace Trina has fallen since her inheritance, and Norris certainly links Zerkow's avarice with his ethnicity. But it is also important to note that Zerkow's obsession with gold and, in particular, Maria's "famous service of gold plate" (16), is his "consuming desire" (29) throughout the novel. While the other characters experience degeneration gradually, as a process that results from a latent genetic trait (McTeague's "brute" has been "long dormant" (22)), Zerkow, as well as Maria, are constant representations of disease and degeneracy who are unable even to simulate being civilized for any sustained period of time. His characterization of Zerkow and Maria, then, represent what Charles Child Walcutt calls "the jungle at our back door" (130).

Zerkow and Maria's relationship also illustrates the problem of integration and adaptation. As Jared Gardner observes, Zerkow is "the most mixed (and, therefore, degraded) character in the novel" (58), and Donald Pizer notes that "both characters [are] in an advanced state of degeneracy" (73). Both Zerkow and Maria are products of miscegenation; Norris states that "curiously enough [Zerkow's] hair was fiery red" (28), and explicitly acknowledges that Maria is "a

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49 Although the fact that Zerkow's hair is clearly a symbol of his fiery passion and temper, it is also a signifier that he is of mixed heritage. For in his article "Among Cliff-Dwellers" (1897), he writes that there
strange woman of a mixed race" with a "diseased imagination" (30). For Norris, as well as turn-of-the-century eugenicists, the notion that people of "mixed blood" were degenerate and threatening the purity of Anglo-Saxon America was a central preoccupation. In a portrait of immigrant life in San Francisco entitled "Among Cliff Dwellers," Norris states that "a great milling is going on, and a fusing of peoples, and in a few more generations the Celt and the Italian, the Mexican and the Chinaman, the Negro and the Portuguese [...] will be merged into one type. And a curious type it will be" (264-65). In McTeague, Norris is less vague about the resultant "type." He describes the birth of Maria's baby as an event to which the couple, as well as the residents of Polk Street, are ambivalent:

The child was a mere incident in their lives, a thing that had come undesired and had gone unregretted. It had not even a name; a strange, hybrid little being, come and gone within a fortnight's time, yet combining in its puny little body the blood of the Hebrew, the Pole, and the Spaniard. (135)

Since their child "had come undesired and had gone unregretted," Norris does not merely attribute these responses to the couple; he implies that Polk Street collectively is indifferent to and relieved by the loss of the child. Moreover, the child dies because it contains in its "puny little body the blood of the Hebrew, the Pole, and the Spaniard." Norris suggests that the couple's sickly child, which he describes as a "being" rather than a baby, is unable to survive because of its hybridity. It is significant, too, that McTeague and Trina also have a childless

are "queerer combinations" than the "Spanish half-breed," and goes on to say that he saw "in a wine shop in the same Ohio street a child who was half Jew [...] and its hair was red" (263).
 Although McTeague imagines a future in which he is a "venerable patriarch surrounded by children and grandchildren," this vision is never realized. By constructing a world in which characters are denied the possibility of procreation, Norris implicitly underscores what Jared Gardner calls "the threat posed by biological reproduction [... and] the mixed marriage." In this way, Norris "exposes the link between this naturalist anxiety and nativist fears" (Gardner 57).

In contrast, Norris displays his belief in the purity of the Anglo-Saxon through his delineation of Old Grannis and Miss Baker. Hugh J. Dawson describes the old couple as "Norris's admirable Anglo-Saxons," (39) and indeed Norris imbues them with staple Anglo-Saxon characteristics. Old Grannis is an Englishman possessed of "a certain delicacy that was one of his characteristics," and he is variously described as "kind" and "good" (100). In fact, Old Grannis performs one of the only selfless acts in the novel when he purchases "the framed photograph of McTeague and his wife in their wedding finery" (157). Miss Baker, too, is kind, generous, and self-conscious; she becomes excessively embarrassed when she believes she is acting "'unladylike'" (180), and the "indiscretion of actually intruding herself into [Grannis's] room had never so much as occurred to her" (181). Norris's characterization of the old couple as refined, sensitive, and self-conscious emphasizes the extent to which they are insulated and protected from the degenerative process at work in the novel, and provides, as Charles Child Walcutt puts it, "a sense of sociological extremes" (129).

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50 In his first description of Grannis, Norris describes him as a "gentle" old man (11), and goes on to describe later the kind of life Miss Baker would have with a man who was "quiet, very calm, and peaceful" (99).

51 The importance of the Old Grannis and Miss Baker subplot in relation to the novel's naturalism will be
In *McTeague*, Norris not only challenges the notion of the well-integrated immigrant living in America, but illustrates his acceptance of contemporary racial stereotypes of ethnic minorities. His use of such stereotypes also irrevocably compromises his objectivity and his position as a disinterested observer of life on Polk Street. Moreover, through his stereotyped characterizations, he renders his characters type-figures, denying them individual agency and revealing that the structure of the novel is largely dependent upon the fixity of racial attributes. In the novel, Norris perceives San Francisco in a constant state of flux. Although he emphasizes the orderly and seemingly immutable qualities of Polk Street, the stasis in which the characters and their environment are suspended in the first half of the novel is artificial; *McTeague*’s sordid urban milieu is a site of (ethnic) tension, conflict, and, ultimately, the degeneration of those with the capacity for degeneration in their veins. While Hugh J. Dawson’s assertion that Polk Street resembles a “microcosm of the American melting pot” (39) underscores the ethnic richness of the novel’s urban milieu, it misrepresents the nature of the novel’s social dynamic. Norris does not delineate a melting-pot in which all people are inevitably fused into “the coming superman” (Zangwill 185). Instead, he emphasizes the problems inherent in the idea of social homogeneity in a city as ethnically diverse as San Francisco. For Norris believed that “the novel is the great expression of modern life,” and in *McTeague*, he expresses the problem or, more accurately, the illusion of ethnic integration and assimilation (*The Responsibilities* 1206). By attributing fixed racial attributes to his characters, attributes that reflect discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3.
contemporary nativist prejudice, Norris emphasizes the inability of his characters to assert individual agency in order to adapt or relate to their environment in meaningful ways.
Chapter Three

The Naturalistic Impulse in McTeague

"Life? Bah! It has no value. Of cheap things it is the cheapest. Everywhere it goes begging. Nature spills it out with a lavish hand. Where there is room for one life, she sows a thousand lives, and it's life eats life till the strongest and most piggish life is left."52

-Wolf Larsen in Jack London's The Sea-Wolf

As critics have pointed out, McTeague was likely inspired by the brutal murder of a charwoman by her husband in San Francisco in late 1893. John Collins, a lower-class laborer, viciously stabbed his wife to death in the cloakroom of a kindergarten after she refused to lend him money. At the time of the murder, Norris was attending Berkeley and was deeply immersed in the naturalistic novels of Zola and the evolutionary teachings of Joseph Le Conte, which stressed the lower, animal nature of humankind.53 The brutality of the murder, as well as the sordid lower-class milieu and sensationalism depicted in such Zola novels as L'Assommoir and Thérèse Raquin, impacted Norris's burgeoning conception of naturalism and compelled him to begin work on McTeague at Harvard in 1894-95. At this point in his career, Norris had a clear understanding of what he considered the essence of naturalism. In 1896, he wrote, "Terrible things must happen to the characters of the naturalistic tale. They must be twisted from the ordinary, wrenched out from the quiet, uneventful round of every-day life, and flung into the throes of a vast and terrible drama that works itself out in unleashed passions, in blood, and in sudden death" (Zola

This is not to say that Norris viewed his work as unrealistic or purely romantic; in fact, he believed literary naturalism portrayed life more honestly and accurately than realism, which he believed was unable to penetrate the placid surface of things because of its preoccupation with "the commonplace tale of commonplace people" (Zola 1106). For Norris, accurately representing life in late nineteenth-century America was a crucial responsibility. In Responsibilities of the Novelist, he writes,

To-day is the day of the novel. In no other way and by no other vehicle is contemporaneous life so adequately expressed; and the critics of the twenty-second century, reviewing our times, striving to reconstruct our civilization, will look not to the painters, not to the architects nor dramatists, but to the novelists to find our idiosyncrasy. (1207)

Norris viewed literary production as an almost sacred charge, and believed that writing fiction for any other purpose than to illuminate and express "the Truth" was an anathema (1210). In light of Norris’s association of the novel and his naturalism with the "expression of modern life" (1206), it is necessary to read McTeague as a novel that exhibits, what he called, "the completest expression of our civilization" (1209).

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53 See Donald Pizer’s The Novels of Frank Norris, 12-22.
54 The shift from realism to naturalism in the late nineteenth century is typically explained by the naturalist’s disdain for the realism practiced by such writers as Howells, Twain, and James. The naturalists felt that these writers observed life from a genteel position of comfort which denied them access to what they considered to be "real" life. Their subject matter, too, was believed to be limited in scope because it focused on the privileged and, what Norris contemptibly referred to as "the dramas of the reception-room" (Zola
Because surprisingly few critics of *McTeague* have attempted to elucidate the relationship between the novel's naturalism and Norris's ethnocentrism, the connection remains, in my view, unclear. George W. Johnson, for example, makes a vague allusion to the "nativist undertone of the book" in reference to what he perceives as a hierarchy of race in the novel (59). Even Donald Pizer makes only vague connections between Norris's depiction of degenerate racial others and his naturalism, simply noting that Norris's racial biases identify a "racial source" for the degeneracy of the characters (*The Novels* 73). Pizer insists on seeing Norris's stereotyped representations of racial others as merely a "stylistic weakness," rather than a crucial component of the naturalistic processes at work in the novel (*The Novels* 83). For *McTeague* not only exposes Norris's subordination of his naturalistic pretensions to objectivity and disinterest to his ethnocentric biases, but reflects his nativistic concern for what Jared Gardner calls "the assimilationist ambitions of [the novel's] immigrants" (58). Norris links himself to the politics of late nineteenth-century American nativism by expressing in the novel nativism's concern for the maintenance of social order and stability, together with its fear that certain immigrant groups invariably brought with them social instability. Moreover, Norris racializes naturalism by representing contact with racial others—invariably depicted in a stereotypical manner—as the primary threat to what proves to be a superficial social order and stability. Social degeneration in the novel, then, is seen as proceeding from contact and engagement with racial others that Norris considered innately

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1106). Naturalists viewed such an aesthetic as having little, if anything, to do with "real" life, which was to be found in the workshops, in the slums, and in the lives of common people.
degenerate or prone to degenerate behavior by virtue of their racial origins.

Although critics have failed to address adequately the relationship between the novel’s naturalism and Norris’s ethnocentrism, there is little critical dissent concerning the central theme of *McTeague*, which is generally understood to be degeneracy and atavistic criminality. Don Graham notes that the novel is typically seen as “purely naturalistic” and embodies “such standard assumptions as sexual determinism, atavistic degeneracy, the influence of sordid milieus, and the operation of chance” (312). While William B. Dillingham sees the thematic center of *McTeague* simply as an examination of “the dramatic subject of degeneration” (74), Charles Walcutt views the novel as “broadly deterministic” (130), concentrating on “the interaction of heredity and environment according to scientific principles” (131). And Donald Pizer argues that “Norris’s theme is that man’s racial atavism (particularly his brute sexual desires) and man’s individual family heritage (alcoholic degeneracy in McTeague’s case) can combine as a force toward reversion, toward a return to the emotions and instincts of man’s animal past” (*Realism and Naturalism* 14).

While critics generally agree that heredity and environment are the dominating determining forces in the novel, they also see that *McTeague* is not a purely naturalistic novel, arguing that there exist gaps between “the theoretical formulations in the text and the events they would seem to interpret” (Hochman 4).

One of the most notorious “gaps” between theoretical formulations in the novel and the events they interpret deserves a reevaluation. Critics have
complained that Norris’s emphasis on McTeague and Trina’s inherited traits
does not adequately explain the extent to which they degenerate. George W.
Johnson emphatically states that “[h]eredity, in any modern sense of the term,
has little to do with [McTeague’s] fall,” and goes on to say that “[a]rguments for
biological determinism must rest on two sentences describing his father” (58).55
Barbara Hochman also notes that “two references to the notion of inherited traits
provide the only theoretical or naturalistic ‘explanation’ for the transformation of
Trina Sieppe” (4).56 She believes that such discrepancies “threaten the
imaginative vitality and structural coherence of the text” (4). And Charles Walcutt
argues that the “cycle of degeneration” in the novel is not dependent upon
“internal forces [to] direct the movement, nor upon a cycle of change induced by
external pressures operating in their regular courses.” Instead, he views the
structure of McTeague as consisting of “very much the sort of plot that might be
found in any novel of adventure or intrigue—except it is not conceived in terms of
free will” (131). In my view, such readings neglect to address the ways in which
Norris’s naturalism is dependent upon race. Although Norris arguably relies on
too few references to inherited traits to satisfactorily explain degeneration in
terms of heredity, he links the naturalistic impulse in McTeague to race not only
by emphasizing the innate degeneracy of certain ethnic groups, but by
establishing a cause and effect relationship between interaction with racial others
and degeneration.

55 Norris writes: “For thirteen days of each fortnight his father was a steady, hard-working shift-boss of the
mine. Every other Sunday he became an irresponsible animal, a beast, a brute, crazy with alcohol” (1).
56 Norris writes: “Economy was her strong point. A good deal of peasant blood still ran undiluted in her
veins” (78), and “[i]hen suddenly all her intuitive desire of saving, her instinct of hoarding, her love of
Donald Pizer’s observation that “[a] central theme in Norris’s work is that beneath the surface of our placid, everyday lives there is turbulence” is a useful starting point because it succinctly characterizes the tone of the first half of the novel. Norris has two main objectives in the opening descriptive passages of *McTeague*. First, he imbues McTeague’s life, as well as Polk Street, with an overwhelming sense of order and routine. Norris introduces McTeague as a man of habit: “It was Sunday, and, according to his custom on that day, McTeague took his dinner at two in the afternoon at the car conductors’ coffee-joint on Polk Street” (5). Norris notes that McTeague “invariably spent [Sunday afternoons] in the same fashion” (5). Indeed, McTeague rarely falters from this routine, and after he marries Trina, who attempts to “raise him from the stupid animal life to which he had been accustomed in his bachelor days” (108), he simply replaces his old routine with a new one. Norris notes that McTeague’s “new life jostled itself into its grooves. A routine began” (109). Even the furniture in his “Dental Parlors” is arranged “with military precision” (6), and there is an undeniable sense of the order that permeates McTeague’s life on Polk Street.

The governing principle of Polk Street, too, is order and routine. Norris notes that the branch post-office opens between two and three o’clock on Sunday afternoons, “as was its custom,” and goes on to describe in great detail the routines of Polk Street (7). He states that “[b]etween seven and eight the street breakfasted,” and that “[t]owards eleven o’clock the ladies from the great avenue a block above Polk Street made their appearance” (8). He observes that “[f]rom noon to evening the population of the street was of a mixed

money for the money’s sake, rose strong within her” (119).
character" (8-9) until "[l]ights were extinguished" (9) at eleven o'clock. And it is "[a]t one o'clock [that] the cable stopped, leaving an abrupt silence in the air" (9). McTeague understands Polk Street as a series of routines that join seamlessly together to establish a coherent sense of order and meaning in his environment. As evidenced by the emphasis Norris places on McTeague's personal habits, order and routine are crucial in order for him to interpret his world. And despite the improbability of such a rigid interpretation, McTeague nevertheless sees "[d]ay after day [...] the same panorama unroll itself" (9).

Norris's second main objective in the opening chapters of the novel is to draw attention to the sense of isolation that dominates McTeague's life. Although Norris is careful to note that the "street never failed to interest him," McTeague is insulated from the world of Polk Street in his "Dental Parlors" and is capable only of a kind of voyeuristic engagement with his environment (7). For it is only "[f]rom his window" that McTeague clearly sees Polk Street, and it is only from this distanced vantage point that he can perceive in great detail a coherent vision of the world below (8). As Norris states, "The bay window of his 'Dental Parlors' was for him a point of vantage from which he watched the world go past" (9). It is significant that McTeague watches "the world go past"; he is clearly excluded from the activity on the streets below. There is also the suggestion that his life is in a kind of stasis since it is governed by habit and routine. However, it is also important to note that despite his exclusion from life on Polk Street, McTeague is satisfied and content. Norris notes that McTeague "felt that his life was a success, that he could hope for nothing better" (6).
In her excellent study of Norris's oeuvre, Barbara Hochman emphasizes the importance of order and stability in the characters' lives, and identifies in *McTeague* a fear of change and loss that threatens the stability and integrity of their sense of self. She argues that "*McTeague* is full of habits and obsessions, great and small, all serving to defend the self from whatever may threaten to subvert it in the present, or to buttress it against the reverberations of some threat experienced in the past" (62). She believes that "McTeague's rude habits" are what "define him and give him a sense of well-being and self-recognition" (71). When he loses his license to practise dentistry, for example, he becomes "morose" and "sulky" and begins to degenerate rapidly (158). Even venerable Old Grannis is at a similar loss when he sells his binding apparatus; his "acquainted work seemed to leave something out of his life" (178). Hochman argues that all the characters in the novel are subject to elements in their environment that threaten the stability of their sense of self. In response to such threats, they engage in various habits and obsessions that are intended to lessen the potential threat of the unknown: Trina hoards her money, Miss Baker makes tea, Old Grannis binds pamphlets, Zerkow obsesses about gold, and Maria, when asked about her name, irrationally repeats the phrase, "Name is Maria—Miranda—Macapa. Had a flying squirrel an' let him go" (16).

Moreover, Hochman identifies "Trina's intrusion into the midday serenity of Polk Street" as the first scene in *McTeague* where "the commonplace surface

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57 It is significant that Grannis, unlike McTeague, is able to overcome the loss of his profession; it identifies within Grannis an ability to adapt to the instabilities and uncertainties within his environment, and indicates that the personality traits with which Norris imbues Grannis are capable of sustaining him despite the pessimistic determinism that pervades the novel and destroys McTeague.
of life is disrupted by a sudden revelation of its turbulent depths” (62). For Hochman, the "sexual level" of the novel is important because McTeague elicits within her, as well as within himself, "uncontrolled sexual responses" (69) that threaten the stability of the self and eventually lead to "inner chaos and dependency on another person" (70). While Donald Pizer considers "the sexual tragedy of man and woman" the dominating theme of the first half of the novel, he also believes that chance is an essential component of the degenerative processes at work in the novel (The Novels 72). He observes that Trina's winning of the $5,000 lottery prize "activates her hereditary avarice and encourages Marcus' jealousy of McTeague." Pizer goes on to argue that the fact that McTeague loses his profession, an event that exacerbates McTeague and Trina's declining fortunes, highlights "the interaction between chance and a particular temperament, an interaction which exemplifies Norris' treatment of the theme of chance" (The Novels 69). And John Conder views chance and what he calls "sexual determinism" as inseparable elements which contribute to the degeneration of the characters and render the novel's "determinism all-pervasive" (70). While these readings of the ways in which Norris brings conflict to the stable and routine world of Polk Street certainly are representative of elements of Norris's naturalism, they do not adequately consider the relationship between racial interaction and degeneration. For although Norris's naturalism relies upon "sexual determinism" and the laws of chance, interaction, as well as an implicit fear of interaction, with racial others activates the naturalistic impulse in the novel and clarifies the perceived "gap" critics believe exists in Norris's
rendering of a causal relationship between heredity and degeneration.

Interpretations that cite Trina's arrival in the "Dental Parlors" as the initial destabilizing element in McTeague's world fail to acknowledge the presence of Maria, the Spanish-American charwoman, who arrives in McTeague's office before Marcus has introduced her to the dentist. Maria's presence in this scene is significant for two reasons. By introducing Maria, Norris makes the first explicit association between race and degeneracy. Norris introduces Maria as "Spanish-American," and, through Marcus's insensitive commentary, describes her as being semi-insane: "It's the girl that takes care of the rooms. She's a greaser, and she's queer in the head. She ain't regular crazy, but I don't know, she's queer" (15). Maria, like Zerkow later on, is presented as being in an advanced state of degeneracy. As William B. Dillingham notes, "Norris's Spaniards are usually not as unbalanced mentally as Maria Macapa [but] almost all of them are degenerates" (78). What is significant here is Norris's explicit association of Maria's racial heritage (she is Spanish-American) with her degenerate nature (her mental instability), an association that Norris makes with almost all the characters in the novel.

Maria's presence in this scene is also significant because it identifies within the characters a fear of racial others. Norris notes that "[a]bout Maria the flat knew absolutely nothing further than that she was Spanish-American" (16). Despite the fact that "Maria was a fixture [in the flat] as maid of all work," the tenants are only aware of her racial background, as if such knowledge precludes the desire or, more accurately, the need to know her in a deeper, more complex
way. For Norris so closely links her irrationality and uncomely behavior with her ethnicity that simply knowing Maria is Spanish is enough for the other characters to be aware and wary of her degenerate nature. Moreover, Trina exhibits suspicion, if not genuine fear, of contact with Maria. When Marcus tries to convince Trina to ask Maria her name, Norris notes that "Trina shrank back, a little frightened" (15). When Trina finally refuses to ask, Marcus replies, "[W]hat you 'fraid of?" (15). Implicit in Trina's reaction to Maria is a fear of interaction with racial others, a fear which is even evident in her interactions with McTeague. While critics tend to attribute Trina's initial fear of, and revulsion toward, McTeague to her sexual naivety, her reaction is also clearly linked to his Irishness. For Trina goes to great lengths to "improve" McTeague and "raise him from [his] stupid animal life," a life filled with slovenly habits that, as we have seen, Norris explicitly associates with the Irish (108).

In fact, almost all the central characters demonstrate a fear of coming into contact with racial others. Zerkow, for example, is perhaps the most degenerate character in the novel, and Norris explicitly links the characters' fear of Zerkow to a fear of Jewry. Miss Baker comments that "Zerkow is a horror [...] and then he's a Jew, isn't he?" (121). It is also telling that Zerkow is effectively isolated from the other characters; his "miserable hovel" (73) is located outside the Polk Street flat "around the corner and up [...] the alley" (27). In this way, Zerkow and the racial threat he represents are neutralized. But unlike Zerkow, Maria frequently comes into contact with the other characters who identify her as a destabilizing source in their environment. Norris notes that "[o]nce every two
months, Maria Macapa set the entire flat in commotion” by roaming “the building from garret to cellar, searching each corner, ferreting through every old box and trunk and barrel” (23). When Maria approaches Old Grannis, he is “terribly vexed at the interruption” (23) and “wish[es] that Maria were gone” (24). Miss Baker, too, is uncomfortable in her presence and “[h]er only thought was to be rid of Maria” (25). Even McTeague is dimly aware of the potential threat of interacting with racial others; he recognizes, for example, the difficulties presented by his love for Trina:

He never would have Trina, he saw that clearly. She was too good for him; too delicate, too prettily made for him, who was so coarse, so enormous, so stupid. She was for someone else—Marcus, no doubt—or at least for some finer-grained man. (31)

Although McTeague does not explicitly identify race as the source of their incompatibility, Norris’s close association of McTeague’s coarseness and stupidity and Trina’s goodness and delicacy with ethnicity indicates that McTeague’s doubts are predicated on a fear of, or at the very least, on qualms concerning, the efficacy of a marriage between racial others. And Trina is also aware of the potential threat of involving herself with McTeague. She worries that their relationship will be “one long continued revulsion” and that “all her pretty ways, her clean, trim little habits [...] would be thrown away upon her stupid, brutish husband” (106). As Barbara Hochman points out, “McTeague’s rude habits, like Trina’s ‘trim’ ones, define him and give him a sense of well-being and self-recognition” (71). McTeague threatens Trina’s conception of well-being and
self, and the threat is clearly a racial one since the habits that govern Trina and McTeague's lives are, according to Norris, motivated by heredity. The dramatic decline of their relationship, then, speaks to the threat implicit in the interaction of racial others.

Norris deals more explicitly with the threat posed by contact with racial others in the second half of the novel. After McTeague loses his profession, the McTeagues decline rapidly; they are forced to sell their possessions and acquire a smaller, less expensive flat, Trina's avarice grows more excessive, and McTeague begins to drink heavily and brutalize his wife. While Norris links their degeneration to McTeague's loss of his profession, he also suggests that racial origin is also responsible for the degree to which the McTeagues experience degeneration. After the McTeagues receive the letter from City Hall, the friendship between Trina and Miss Baker begins to deteriorate. Although Norris does not describe this in detail, he does note that Trina forges a new friendship with Maria:

 Occasionally Maria dropped in on Trina in this fashion and spent an hour or so chatting with her while she worked. At first Trina had been inclined to resent these intrusions of the Mexican woman, but of late she had begun to tolerate them. Her days were long and cheerless at the best, and there was no one to talk to. Trina even fancied that old Miss Baker had come to be less cordial since their misfortune.

(163)

In fact, Norris notes that "Trina had come to be on very intimate terms with
Maria Macapa" and that the two "became great friends" (171). He observes that "Maria was constantly in and out of Trina's room, and, whenever she could, Trina threw a shawl over her head and returned Maria's calls" (171). While the McTeagues' relationship deteriorates after the letter arrives; it is only after Trina begins increasingly spending time with Maria that she undergoes a dramatic transformation. Norris notes the changes in physical appearance: "Worst of all, Trina lost her pretty ways and her good looks. The combined effects of hard work, avarice, poor food, and her husband's brutalities told on her swiftly. [...] What odds was it if she was slatternly, dirty, coarse" (184-5). Trina loses her "trim" habits, which provide her with a sense of identity and imbue her life with meaning. The loss of these habits, then, not only signifies that they are not deeply engrained (like the personality traits of Grannis and Miss Baker), but that Trina experiences a transformation, a transformation that irrevocably changes the way she perceives and interacts with her environment. Norris links her prolonged contact with Maria to her transformation by emphasizing the ways in which Trina's life begins to resemble Maria's; she adopts a lust for money similar to Zerkow's mania for gold (McTeague actually tells her that she is "worse than old Zerkow") and the brutality of her marriage mirrors that of Maria's (both unions end in sudden death) (118).

As critics have pointed out, Trina and McTeague's marriage mirrors Maria and Zerkow's, and the inclusion of what W.D. Howells called "the love-making of those silly elders" represents an optimistic alternative to the two failed marriages (327). But Norris's inclusion of the Old Folks is extremely important not simply
because it serves "as an offset to the misery of the other love-making," but because it emphasizes the benefits of Anglo-Saxon ethnic heritage within the sordid, lower-class milieu of Polk Street (Grannis and Miss Baker are from English backgrounds) (Howells 327). While Donald Pizer acknowledges that the Old Grannis-Miss Baker subplot "is a foil to the two disastrous love stories," he complains that it is "thematically and dramatically weak" (74). Ernest Marchand also believes that the old couple's relationship detracts from the naturalistic "pattern" of the novel, stating that it is "broken by the sentimental love story of old Grannis and Miss Baker" (55). While the Grannis-Miss Baker subplot seemingly detracts from the naturalistic base of the novel, it is nevertheless consistent with Norris's ethnocentrism, upon which his naturalism in McTeague is greatly dependent. Moreover, Norris describes the love affair in an admittedly romantic and sentimental way because his ethnocentrism is more deeply engrained than his pretensions to disinterest and objectivity.

For Norris delineates the significantly Anglo-Saxon Old Folks as models of perseverance within an environment that is otherwise inexorably deterministic. Their relationship is characterized by isolation and detachment from the world of Polk Street. Like McTeague in the first half of the novel, their lives are governed by habit: "Old Grannis knew that at quarter of five precisely Miss Baker made a cup of tea over the oil stove [...] Miss Baker felt instinctively the exact moment when Old Grannis took down his little binding apparatus from the second shelf of his clothes closet." Norris emphasizes that "[t]hey had come to know each other's habits" (13). But more importantly, he stresses the fact that "they were
not even acquaintances; never a word had passed between them” (13). Since they have never been formally introduced, it would be inappropriate and uncivilized for them to be anything more than simply “acquaintances.” As Barbara Hochman points out, the Old Folks’ habits “protect them both from the instabilities of the surrounding world and from their own wish for and fear of contact with one another” (67). Old Grannis and Miss Baker represent the need to maintain distance and detachment from the sordid elements of Polk Street. By demonstrating, what Donna M. Campbell calls, “excessive restraint, manners, [and] asexuality,” the Old Folks’ relationship contrasts strikingly with the indulgent passions that dominate the other two love relationships in the novel and, therefore, provides the most significant reason for their ability to prevail (400). Norris maintains that their love relationship is possible only outside the environment of Polk Street; not only do they insulate themselves from the world before they meet, but they transcend it after their much forestalled romance begins: “They stood at length in a little Elysium of their own creating. They walked hand in hand in a delicious garden where it was always autumn. Far from the world they entered upon the long retarded romance of their commonplace and uneventful lives” (181-2). And it is precisely because they have limited their access to, and engagement with, the outside world (their lives are “commonplace and uneventful”) that they are able to successfully begin their “long retarded romance.” Moreover, by emphasizing the efficacy of Old Grannis and Miss Baker’s relationship, Norris emphasizes the importance of Anglo-Saxon heritage. As William E. Cain points out, “The reference to Elysium is the surest sign of their
difference from others, for in Elysium, those favoured by the gods enjoy a full and pleasant life—after death” (339). The success of the Old Folks’ relationship also explicitly identifies Trina’s contact with Maria as partly responsible for both her and McTeague’s degeneration; Miss Baker’s isolation, together with her Anglo-Saxon heritage, is sustaining, while Trina’s “trim” habits are superficial and, ultimately, her exposure to Polk Street’s racial representatives is destructive.

By both delineating a link between the characters’ interaction with racial others and degeneration, and emphasizing the threat posed to the stability of internal and external structures by racial others, Norris reflects in McTeague nativism’s concern for the preservation of social order and stability. For Norris presents McTeague in the first half of the novel as an Irishman who has established himself in modern American society only because he has managed to insulate himself from his environment. However, McTeague is not, in any relevant sense, a well-integrated element of late nineteenth-century American culture. As George W. Johnson notes, McTeague is “destroyed by an evil objectified in the city. […] Contact with this society […] unleashes The Brute in McTeague” (58-9). In fact, Norris denies almost all the characters the possibility of becoming integrated, competitive members of society. Jarred Gardner summarizes this point:

And [the characters] all dress up in costume: Marcus playing the cowboy hero; Mr. Sieppe marching around as a Bismarckian commander; on the night of the theatre party, McTeague arrives in a
Prince Albert coat, dressing as the Germanic prince who becomes prince-consort to Victoria; and Little August, in his Fauntleroy costume, is dressed as the naive American boy who becomes heir to a British estate. Norris points to these costumes to expose the assimilationist ambitions of these immigrants, ambitions that Norris brutally denies at every turn. (58)

By "brutally" denying the characters' "assimilationist ambitions," Norris reflects nativism's concern for what Dale T. Knobel calls "excessive foreign influence" in social and political realms (xix). Norris's ethnocentrism and racial prejudices, then, are not the only signifiers of his nativism; the emphasis he places on excluding racial others from meaningful interaction with their environment, as well as the underlying threat they pose to social order and stability, aligns him with nineteenth-century nativism in America.

The ending of the novel further exemplifies the superficiality of Norris's ethnic characters' integration into modern American society. Although most critics consider McTeague's flight into Death Valley as nothing more than "a good melodramatic chase," it is significant because it emphasizes both the superficiality of McTeague's integration into modern America and the stifling and corrupting elements of McTeague's experiences in the city (Pizer, The Novels 82). And in the novel's resolution, Norris presents a nightmarish vision of the consequences of such experiences. For although McTeague in the concluding chapters finds himself in a land that is "savage, sullen, and magnificently indifferent to man" (209), he is essentially reborn; Norris emphasizes that
McTeague's senses are heightened ("It was warning him again, that strange sixth sense" (226)) and notes that "not once did his instinct deceive him" (210). But even more surprisingly, McTeague demonstrates a capacity for quick-thinking and critical thought. Not only is he able to "promptly" (218) fabricate a new identity when he meets Cribbens ("Carter' came to his mind at once" (218)), but he connects drilling in the mines with dentistry:

Once it even occurred to him that there was a resemblance between his present work and the profession he had been forced to abandon.

In the Burly drill he saw a queer counterpart of his old-time dental engine; and what were the drills and chucks but enormous hoe excavators, hard bits, and burrs? It was the same work he had so often performed in his "Parlours," only magnified, made monstrous, distorted, and grotesqued, the caricature of dentistry. (213)

McTeague's suprisingly imaginative response to his work in the mines contrasts strikingly with the portrait of the "hopelessly stupid" dentist Norris delineates in the opening chapters of the novel (6). But more important than McTeague's growing capacity for reason and critical thought is the fact that he experiences a connection with the landscape that he did not possess in the city, where he was merely a passive observer "looking down into the street" (7). For McTeague experiences a visceral connection to his environment: "The still, colossal mountains took him back again like a returning prodigal, and vaguely, without knowing why, he yielded to their influence—their immensity, their enormous power, crude and blind, reflecting themselves in his own nature, huge, strong,
brutal in its simplicity" (213). Although Norris is careful to emphasize that
McTeague remains "huge, strong, [and] brutal," he underscores the fact that he
has a relationship with the "colossal mountains" that is comforting and liberating,
rather than stifling and corrupting; he is, after all, "a returning prodigal."

But despite Norris's attempts to contrast McTeague's behavior and
classical traits in the city with the "prodigal" McTeague in the wilderness, he is
reduced more completely in the concluding chapters of the novel to an animal
being hunted and relying alone on brute, animal instincts for survival. Like an
animal sensing approaching danger, "the strange impulse rose in [McTeague]
again abruptly, never so strong, never so insistent [...] spurring him to precipitate
and instant flight" (227). As Barbara Hochman points out, "[T]he issue of
adaptability as a criterion for survival is perhaps the one element of Darwinian
thought that seems directly relevant to McTeague" (75). Clearly McTeague
demonstrates an inability to adapt to the urban pressures of modern life; his
strategy of creating a buffer between himself and the world of Polk Street, which
relies largely on creating a sense of order and routine, as well as minimizing his
engagement with his environment, is hopelessly unsuccessful. But far from Polk
Street in the "savage" and "sullen" mountains "beyond the whirl of civilization,"
McTeague for a brief moment prospers; his instinctual, animal self leads him
away from his pursuers and imminent danger (209). As George W. Johnson puts
it, "The open sea, the looming mountains, and the unpeopled waste, which we
see between or after scenes of Polk Street, constitute the only scale, timeless
and cosmic, to which McTeague is adapted. And it is to an arena of stark and
simple forces that he returns to die" (59).

It is significant, though, that Norris denies McTeague, as he denies other characters in the novel (with the notable exception of the Old Folks), viable alternatives to death. For despite McTeague's so-called adaptability to the "unpeopled waste," he nevertheless engages Marcus in a death-struggle, re-living his murderous death experience with Trina. And like the murder of Trina, there is an irrationality in their struggle; they are both aware that they are "doomed men" (242) and rather than conserve their energy or join in a concerted effort to survive, they are both driven by an "old enmity" and "their ancient hate" (243). While Norris's naturalism is reinforced in this death-struggle with what Donald Pizer refers to as the "atavism theme," it exhibits, too, the inevitable result of the racial tensions that permeate the novel (The Novels 81). It is difficult to ignore the fact that Norris's racial minorities, to the degree that they self-destruct, effectively neutralize the threat they themselves pose to Anglo-Saxon society. But more obviously, Norris suggests in the ending of the novel that McTeague and Marcus's experiences in the city, as well as their proneness to degenerate behavior which Norris bases on racially inherited traits, are irrevocably corrupting and leave them no alternative but their mutual destruction. Their fates, of course, are literally linked; Marcus finds the strength to "handcuff their wrists together" and McTeague finds himself locked to his body amidst the "vast, interminable, [...] measureless leagues of Death Valley" (243).

_McTeague_, then, demonstrates throughout its narrative a close link between ethnicity and degeneration. The perceived "gap" between Norris's
philosophy of naturalism and the events which it interprets (i.e. the cause and effect relationship between heredity and degeneration), is not as problematic as recent criticism postulates; the naturalistic impulse in *McTeague* is not only clearly associated with race and, as a result, heredity, but subordinated to Norris's notions of racial inferiority. Norris identifies early on in the novel that racial others are destabilizing elements in the environment of Polk Street. Maria, for example, is explicitly represented as a racial threat. That is to say, Norris delineates her, as well as the other ethnic minorities in the novel, as destabilizing elements in Polk Street's urban milieu. It is not surprising, then, that Norris chooses Maria to introduce the theme of chance into the novel by selling the lottery ticket to Trina; Maria is the bearer of chance and, ultimately, representative of one of the many naturalistic forces operating within the novel.

George W. Johnson's assertion that "[t]he city is polyglot, and, in Norris's imagination, is therefore perverse and perverting" is telling; over the course of the novel, *McTeague*, as well as the other characters, are forced to engage their environment, as well as its racial representatives, in an attempt to integrate themselves efficaciously. However, contact with the racial representatives of their environment activates the naturalistic impulse in the novel, and they are irrevocably drawn into a Darwinian struggle for existence, a struggle that "works itself out in unleashed passions, in blood, and in sudden death" (Norris, *Zola* 1107).
Conclusion

A discussion of Frank Norris's ethnocentrism in his early fiction, in particular *McTeague*, inevitably leads critics to rather unsettling conclusions about a man whose fiction looms largest within the naturalist canon. Warren French, for example, notes that Norris's renderings of racial others as degenerate "strike modern readers as antagonistic because of our bitter experiences with the Nazis and other racists." He goes on to say that such experiences "have led us to suspect that all who speak of racial superiority are hate-mongers obsessed with and determined to preserve the notion that men are inherently and immutably divided into 'superior' and 'inferior' groups" (40). Although there is little doubt that much of Norris's fiction is engendered with what Stephanie Bower calls "image[s] of imperilled whiteness," it is important to note that Norris's views, in particular his perception of racial others, were not static (55). For as much as Norris was enamoured with the idea of Anglo-Saxon superiority and the innate degeneracy of certain ethnic groups, implicit in his later work are views that express a decidedly humanistic vision. The fact that his later naturalism in novels like *The Octopus* (1901) grapples with broader social and economic issues not only reflects his growing maturity as an artist, but the increasing complexity of his aesthetic.

In a letter to Harry M. Wright, a publisher at *Doubleday & McClure*, Norris enthusiastically wrote, "I've got an idea thats [sic] as big as all out-doors." He went on to say that "[t]heres [sic] the chance for the big, Epic, dramatic thing in this, and I mean to do it thoroughly. [sic]—get at it from every point of view, the social,
agricultural, & political” (Walker, The Letters of Frank Norris 35). Indeed, The Octopus is Norris’s most ambitious and arguably his best novel. In this first novel of what is referred to as The Epic of the Wheat, Norris poignantly describes the struggle of wheat growers in the San Joaquin valley in California with the Pacific and Southwestern Railroad to competitively transport their wheat. While Donald Pizer argues that the novel “is more a novel about man’s relationship to nature than a story of man as a social being” (121), he admits that it exemplifies the fact that “Norris’ awareness and experience of social evil had no doubt broadened and deepened over the years” (The Novels 119). Indeed The Octopus reflects the fraught relationship between individuals and their environment. Shelgrim, the president of the railroad, explains this to Presley, the naïve and idealistic central character: “You are dealing with forces, young man, when you speak of Wheat and the Railroads, not with men. [...] The Wheat is one force, the railroad, another, and there is the law that governs them—supply and demand. Men have only little to do in the whole business” (405). The wheat and the railroads, then, are representative of the vast, unsympathetic forces within the characters’ environment that ultimately dominate their lives.

While Norris explores a similar deterministic relationship between individuals and their environment in McTeague, he expresses in The Octopus a humanism that McTeague, as well as much of his early work, fails to exhibit. For although the wheat growers’ struggle against the railroad’s monopoly proves futile, Norris ends the novel with Presley ruminating on the disastrous events which

58 The Epic of the Wheat is comprised of The Octopus (1901) and The Pit (1903). Norris died of peritonitis in 1902 before he could begin work on the third installment of the trilogy, which was to be called The Wolf.
destroyed the wheat growers: "What then was left? Was there no hope, no outlook for the future, no rift in the black curtain, no glimmer through the night? Was good to be thus overthrown? Was evil thus to be strong and to prevail? Was nothing left?" (457). Certainly modern readers of *McTeague* would be justified in engaging in such ontological inquiries themselves; McTeague’s flight into Death Valley and subsequent death-struggle with Marcus leaves little room for optimism or a humanistic interpretation of experience. But in the final paragraph of *The Octopus*, Norris proffers an optimistic interpretation of experience or, what Charles Walcutt calls, an “affirmation of ultimate good” (150):

> Falseness dies; injustice and oppression in the end of everything fade and vanish away. Greed, cruelty, selfishness, and inhumanity are short-lived; the individual suffers but the race goes on. [...] The larger view always and through all shams, all wickednesses, discovers the truth that will, in the end, prevail, and all things surely, inevitably, resistlessly work together for good. (458)

Although critics are justified in complaining that Norris evades explaining satisfactorily whether or not railroads will continue swindling and oppressing those Americans participating in a free market economy, or if the actions of both the wheat growers and the railroad are justified, Norris nevertheless presents an optimistic vision of human experience in *The Octopus* that contrasts strikingly with the pessimistic determinism that pervades a novel like *McTeague*.

As Warren French rightly points out, Norris’s claim at the conclusion of *The Octopus* to the existence of a kind of beneficent universal order “could be
dismissed as an excited artist's metaphoric rationalization of his refusal to accept as final the distressing truth about a dismal situation" (39). But Norris's later critical essays are particularly revealing because they speak to his abandonment of his zealous Anglo-Saxonism and his adoption of a more humanistic vision of the world. In "The Frontier Gone at Last" (1902), for example, Norris asks, "[I]s it not possible that we can find in this great destiny of ours something a little better than mere battle and conquest, something a little more generous than mere trading and underbidding?" (1188). Although Norris still associates a "great destiny" with Anglo-Saxons, he emphasizes compassion and equality rather than "battle and conquest." Norris goes on to call for a "new patriotism, one that shall include all peoples" (1188). For Norris came to believe that progress required something more than what he eventually perceived as the artificiality of "that splendid, bullying spirit that is the Anglo-Saxon's birthright" (qtd. in Walker, Frank Norris 66-7). He states:

Will it go on, this epic of civilization, this destiny of the races, until at last at the ultimate end of all, we who now arrogantly boast ourselves as Americans, supreme in conquest, whether of battle-ship or of bridge-building, may realize that the true patriotism is the brotherhood of man and know that the whole world is our nation and simple humanity our countrymen? (1190)

It is important to note that Norris did not completely abandon his Anglo-Saxonism; he still believed that they were a formidable peoples "supreme in conquest." But instead of emphasizing the Anglo-Saxon's ability to conquer, subdue, and civilize,
he stresses the importance of "the brotherhood of man," which he came to believe was the "true patriotism." Rather than expressing a pessimistic social vision, which he does in *McTeague* by questioning the extent to which his ethnic characters have efficaciously integrated themselves into modern American society, he identifies a need to embrace "simple humanity."

Despite the overt ethnocentrism and Anglo-Saxonism that clearly marks his early fiction, Norris's aesthetic became more dynamic and complex as race became a less crucial component of his naturalism. As Donald Pizer notes, "It is a sign of [Norris's] growing maturity that in his later work he either replaces his earlier militant Anglo-Saxonism with a call for responsibility or at least provides for it socially beneficial goals" (*The Literary Criticism* 103). But even in *McTeague*, a novel which stresses the relationship between ethnic minorities and degeneration, Norris's humanism is evident. For Norris believed that the stories of the lower-classes were worth telling precisely because he viewed their lives as significant and meaningful. Although not as obvious as his later calls for "brotherhood," his humanism manifests itself in his belief that the lives of ordinary people possess the capacity to experience "the extraordinary, the vast, the monstrous, the tragic" (*Zola* 1007-8).
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