

Naturalism of Frank Norris : A Critical Study

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Frank Norris is an outstanding prolific American Writer, who has so well, aptly and convincingly explained, expanded and developed the theme of naturalism in his works. In almost all his novels he has worked extensively on this theme of naturalism. Whether it is realism, romance, romanticism, determinism or even fatalism, Frank Norris has brought all of them under the all-embracing ambit of naturalism, something which even his predecessor in France, Emile Zola, perhaps, could not achieve. Therefore, to assert that Frank Norris went ahead of all the naturalist writers of his time, would not be an exaggeration at all. It can be safely said that the naturalism of Frank Norris is definitely more comprehensive and complete than what it was in his predecessors. This fine welding or fusion of these different strains in naturalism is very much in evidence in almost all the works of Norris.

McTeague and Vandover and the Brute display the powerful dominant sex-urge, which is the prime-mover and governor of all human actions, good and evil. How McTeague marries Trina, how to get possession of her gold superior physical power, all these display Mc Teague's basic instincts of sex, wealth and prowess at different occasions and at different levels. Similarly, under the influence of excessive drinking and inherited mental malady, that of lycanthropy, Vandover, after seducing Ida Wada, ran away from his responsibility of a father. These were inherited weaknesses Vandover suffered from and this was why he became a tragic hero ultimately. In Vandover and the Brute, this has been very well brought out.

The next three novels of Norris – Moran of the Lady Letty, A Man's Woman and Blix show very well the second phase of exploration and experimentation in the expansion and development of his naturalistic theory. Moran, a strong, primitive sea-woman would not brook her life-partner, Ross Wilbur, to be, in physical power, inferior to her. This is a primitive instinct. But here, the civilized-looking Ross shows a bit of Victorian restraint when both of them are seen lying, in all solitude, side by side, on a beach, without any romantic overture on Wilbur's side. In "A Man's Woman", further experimentation, as regards a man's power and its impact on the evaluation of a civilized man, is carried on very convincingly. Ward Bennett kills, with one stroke, the uncontrollable horse, which Llyod Seasright rode. This unique feat of Bennett ultimately wins for him the lady-love, and binds them together in a wedlock. Seasright is so influenced, rather so enthralled by her lover's superior might and strength that she gladly surrenders her career, her loyalty and her ideals to Bennett's will. Is this not a Nietzschean development of the tendencies of both these lovers here? Besides, atavism is also very much in evidence in his novels, including Blix, which has a strange fusion of Darwin and Mammon.

Frank Norris further develops naturalism working in unison with all the forces of determinism. Free-will of man looks apparently to be conflicting with the two urges of heredity and environment but, ultimately, they work together in a mysterious way to bring about the total good and happiness of man. Tragedies and unhappiness arise only from the defiance of these basic urges and instincts. The Pit very well brings out this truth that happiness is the ultimate product of the synthesis of these basic urges and instincts. The Pit portrays the struggle of Jadwin to capture the wheat-market, the romance between Jadwin and Laura, and Laura ultimately exercising her civilizing influence on Jadwin. The local colour is also there in the depiction of the situation and the scene of Chicago, but this depiction is not so successful as it is in The Octopus,

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because Norris himself was not so familiar with Chicago as he is with California in *The Octopus*. So, local colour in *The Pit* is not so complete and effective as it is in *The Octopus*, which depicts the railroad and ‘the wheat’ movements going on in those days very picturesquely and realistically. Besides, the romance of Anniter and Hilma Tree enhances and glorifies the contents of the novel a great deal. There is ample local colour in the portrayal of Californian life almost in all its fullness and richness. With this Californian life Norris is very familiar, and thus the local colour, comprising the living of the people in the region and their dialect, etc., lends a great charm to the novel, no doubt. Hence, this novel *The Octopus* scores a point over *The Pit*.

Frank Norris’s greatest contribution to the theory of naturalism is the introduction of the element of chance or fatalism in his novels. So far, and held responsible for, a particular phenomenon of nature. Nature and particularly its mysteries were not accounted for in the theory of naturalism, as if the mysteries of Nature were alien to naturalism. Norris did one great remarkable work by including fatalism also as a sine qua non of naturalism. He, thereby, widened and broadened the scope of naturalism.

In *Vandover and the Brute*, Van’s actions are determined often by chance. He reads an article on obstetrics and the brute in him is aroused and awakened instantaneously. At every step accidental circumstances come the way. Now the same element of chance accounts for his friend, Dolly Haight’s happiness. In *McTeague* it is chance that breaks Trina’s tooth and brings her to McTeague and it is mere chance that she wins a lottery. It is again a chance that her gold, won in a lottery, accounts for her death. And it is chance again that McTeague is tied to a dead man in the Death Valley.

To say that, through showing the chaos, unhappiness and tragedies, Norris upheld the moral virtues, is, to me, to negate all his

philosophy, development and extension of the dimensions of naturalism, by adopting a negative approach, which is unwarranted here by his quite amoral expatiation of this theme of naturalism. Besides, there are happy endings, too, in his novels.

Thus it can safely be said that in the advocacy, propagation and projection of naturalism, with all its richness and ramification, there is hardly any writer in the American fiction who is akin to Frank Norris.
