

## The Barren Spatial In Frank Norris's *McTeague: A Story Of San Francisco*

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### Abstract

This research paper tries to explore the nature of McTeague and Trina in Frank Norris's novel *McTeague: A Story of San Francisco*. Norris is one of the most important American novelists and his writhing is dealt with naturalism. He depicts the vast, monstrous and the tragic life of McTeague and social degradation and psychological disintegration. McTeague deals with the barren space, class determinism, social deterioration, destruction of identity etc., This novel exhibit's themes like destructive nature of desire, the corrupting influence of money and the impact of societal forces on individual lives, harsh realities of urban life, struggles of the working class, the deterministic forces that shape their destinies, pessimistic view of human nature, character trapped in a web of their own desire and circumstances, gritty atmosphere of the city and the moral decay he perceived in the society of his time. He explores the couple's courtship between marriage and their subsequent decent into poverty and violence of jealousy and greed.

**Key words:** barren space, class determinism, social degradation, psychological disintegration, deterioration in social exclusion, the decay of identity, the facades of class mobility, loss of work and the grotesque transgressions.

Frank Norris is one of the prominent American novelist. He published his first novel *McTeague: A Story of San Francisco* in 1899. This novel takes place in San Francisco, America and it portraits McTeague, who is the protagonist as well as the title character of the novel. Trina Sieppe is another important character in this novel and she is a young and beautiful woman. Marcus Schouler is the cousin of Trina Sieppe and friend of McTeague. Grannis Parker, Miss Parker, Zerkov and Maria Macapa are the minor characters in this novel. The story revolves around these three important characters of the novel. This novel is dealt with gritty, greed and materialism, violence and brutality, decline of the individual and American dream.

This novel depicts the working class people where the alkali flats of Death Valley take off the labor from the novel *McTeague*. The alkali flats of Death Valley are one of the important place in this novel. McTeague finds himself in the desert which is surrounded by "the terrible valley of alkali that barred the way, a horrible vast sink of white sand and salt below even the sea level, the dry bed, no doubt, of some prehistoric lake" (238). Nature offers a productive labor in the mining region of Placer Country and it does not give goods for men to harvest. The alkali flats are full of sand and salts in this novel. This scene exposes a new kind of surplus and inharmonious hardworking people of his time. The working class people are afraid by those who have been benefited from the wealth of industriousness, the empty space of surplus and natural space. McTeague has to travel through the way "white, naked, inhospitable" desert. He must challenge a space that prevents any labor identity (230). He is more importantly corresponding the novel of McTeague. He must conflict that how people responded when their known labor, class, and spatial infrastructures which is missing in their life. If working class people is a function of labor in space, and labor is impossible in the desolate. In the desert, class is exposed as a function of social control which can only exist where labor identities exit. Death Valley exhibits the stages of fear when they haven't done any manual work that identifies the members of the working class people. The structures are generally arranged to interact them with others.

Death Valley is a spatial that actually offers to McTeague and his friend Marcus what they need from the Death Valley. They expose the fragility of working class people's identity and their mobility but finally they loss both in dangers. When the people go to the Death Valley they are acquainted to the patterns of class, capital, and survival in the city. So, they act the ways in which inharmonious with the desert. When the desert gives response in ways that unlike the city they resort to violent survival instincts. At the same time, they get awareness of their terrible situation, they remember Trina who has money that she won it through a lottery ticket. They think that her money would remove their anxieties in their life. The consequent reading of the novel McTeague which depicts in the final scene in Death Valley as counterpoint to the study of the novel in labor class. The other spatial is also exposed that they are abandoned in an undeveloped space. They resort to violence and a grotesque obsession with capital which distract their fear from the death in their life. Their distractions are the heart of naturalism. Norris exemplifies that the "the vast, the monstrous, and the tragic" grotesque behaviour which is capable of lower-class people (274). Thus, the novel illustrates determinism which has to do less with what naturalism generally attributes it to eugenics, ethnicity, and race and more to do with labor and working class identity. Marcus and McTeague always belongs to the lower-class citizens. Their transgression has always been possible and it was only revealed by the organizing structures of working class people in the city. If the Gilded Age middle class people is afraid of the social and financial destruction, that people could demolish upon the culture. The end of the novel in McTeague, demonstrates not only confirms the fear the members of the lower-class people but also exiles themselves from society at a safe distant place.

Marcus ironically starts to speak about the process of their exiles when he has joined with the Keeler sheriff and his gang wants to watch McTeague. When they try to find McTeague who has left Cribbens and finally he is directed into the Death Valley. Marcus is the only one who likes to follow him which is against the better judgment of the sheriff.

"I don't figure on going into that alkali sink with no eight men and horses," declared the sheriff. "One man can't carry enough water to take him and his mount across let alone EIGHT" No, sir. Four couldn't do it. No, THREE couldn't" (247).

Marcus is denied to take law into the desert which marks Death Valley as a place outside of society's social and legal boundaries. A classification is emphasised that when we would learn that "In the haste of the departure from Keeler the sheriff had neglected to swear Marcus in." Moreover, Marcus goes for a journey into the desert which proves havoc early when the sheriff has given warning finally which comes true at the end. Two days in "Marcus's horse gave out" and that evening, "Marcus, raging with thirst, had drunk his last mouthful of water" (239). Marcus has committed an offence which is twofold. He ignores the legal decision which is given by the sheriff to stay out of the desert. He has also avoided the biological boundaries of man's survival by neglecting the desert's environmental obstacles. He says to the sheriff that he wants to get McTeague.

"There was no possibility of their missing the trail -- as distinct in the white alkali as in snow. They could make a dash into the valley, secure their man, and return long before their water failed them. He, for one, would not give up the pursuit, now that they were so close" (247).

But Marcus and indeed McTeague have taken a decision to travel into Death Valley. That is solely illegal and natural transgression but a socioeconomic one as well. Gold is an object to clandestine because it confirms the taking of individual's wealth as well as it provides its own commodity value in the novel McTeague. Marcus and McTeague both comprehend, that money is prominent in all walks of people in the context of the city earlier in this novel. McTeague "had imagined that they would spend the \$5000 in some lavish fashion; would buy a house, or would furnish their new rooms with overwhelming luxury." While Marcus has spent his money to get

"dress with great care. He wore a new pair of slateblue trousers, a black "cut away," and a white lawn "tie" (for him the symbol of a height of elegance). He carried also his cane, a thin wand of ebony with a gold head, presented to him by the Improvement Club in "recognition of services." (77,130)

They think about capital in terms of its purchasing potential. They can purchase house, furnishings and clothes. The illusion of status is the superficial "luxury" and "elegance" which finally comes to get with these objects of the novel.

McTeague and Marcus lose the \$5000 in the Death Valley but it is also a monetary value, a fact that departs them astonished in the Death Valley. When Marcus detains McTeague at first and eventually gets back the gold. He whispers that with "a gleam of satisfaction" and "Got it at last" (240). But they don't get satisfied for a long time and immediately after that "Marcus was singularly puzzled to know what do next to." Their final fight doesn't motivate by a desire to getting wealth, but rather by "The old enmity between the two men, their ancient hate" (243). Gold is a very precise ornament in all human walks of life in the society. In the final scene of the novel, gold plays more as a placeholder for greed and pride than a thing of value. This lack of value reveals that in spatial, McTeague and Marcus have not only transgressed from San Francisco to Placer Country and they finally reach into the Death Valley. In an organizational, Marcus does act on his own accord and McTeague has abandoned both the mining camp and Cribbens. Socially, the stolen money and the murders that is in this chase in terms of social boundaries in their journey but also socio-economic ones as well. Gold doesn't have purpose to keep in the desert because the potential for class mobility which makes the gold desirable to get everyone but it does not exist. In other words, they have trespassed with ill-intention which is beyond spatial boundaries and that determine where capital has purpose. Labor and its familiar craftwork are also absent in this novel. Norris has imagination in the Death Valley which is restricted to McTeague who is standing in front of an armed Marcus "With his big hands over his head." McTeague has an ominous realization that "Marcus in that last struggle before dying had found strength to handcuff their wrists together". A moment that is only digressively connected to the novel's labor and rather than exhibiting them as productive and which controls their productivity (240), (243). Now Marcus and McTeague have trespassed in the multiple boundaries of the city and even in the mining community and also only the mule and the water exist. Indeed, when they eventually shoot the mule and lose the water and that occasion is simply described by the words.

"There was no water left. Marcus flung the canteen from him and stood up, facing McTeague. There was a pause. "We're dead men." said Marcus. McTeague looked from him out cover the desert. Chaotic desolation stretched from them on either hand, flaming and glaring with the afternoon heat. There was the brazen sky and the leagues upon leagues of alkali, leper white. There was nothing more" (251).

There is no class, no capital, no labor, but only empty and it is also not a productive spatial. Where Norris has been banished into this vacant and unproductive space McTeague and Marcus have removed themselves and their devastation personally, socially and economically potential from society. Thus, the last moments of this episode that draws back the smokescreen of the city and its class. Labor provides a glimpse into the dangerous strength of those who were entrapped by lower class determinism. McTeague is "slipped back into the old habits... with an ease that was surprising" when he lost his dental practice as employment (159). Once he departs from San Francisco and his reversion into the lower-class world of mining which is seamless.

Straight as a homing pigeon, and following a blind and unreasoned instinct, McTeague had returned to the Big Dipper mine. Within a week's time it seemed to him he had never been away. He picked up his life again exactly where he had left it the day when his mother had sent him away with the travelling dentist, the charlatan who had set up his tent by the bunk house. (212)

The passage explores the routine life of McTeague which is monotonous, daily mining work and how this work and the life that is supporting him "pleased the dentist beyond words" (213). His living patterns and labor habits that are related with the lower-class people which is also familiar and pleasing to McTeague throughout the novel. His comfortable is also contrasted with his earlier moments in his life when McTeague had to know the new class habits over time. Trina tries to teach McTeague how to "dress a little better" and "relinquish his Sunday afternoon's nap and beer." He discovers that "she could make McTeague raise to her level." Norris is "Gradually," exemplified that "the dentist improved under the influence of his little wife" (107,108).

However, those improvements of McTeague and Trina that is a temporary one. McTeague has taken effortless reversion which reflects his lower-class identity. He inherits in his sense of self but not like the middle-class people who is forced once he learned that. He does not know only his lower-class roots which demonstrates his living condition and working habits of the people. But he also fights with his friend Marcus which reflects the persistent greed for money in this case for the stolen of \$5000. That is related with lower class people in the novel McTeague. He is like the "half dead canary" at the end of the novel and confined that "chattering in its little gilt prison. McTeague is ensnared by the class determinism which imprisons him in terms of socially lower class in the novel (243). June Howard records in her discussion of proletarianization because of the Gilded Age bourgeoisie that "fear of revolution and chaos, of the mob and the criminal... of becoming the outcast through social degradation and psychological disintegration." He is afraid to joining the lower class in the society. Therefore, McTeague's actions has become more terrifying to them (95). The final scene of the novel *McTeague* resolves middle class people's fear of the lower-class people's capability to commit these transgressions which finally comes true in this novel and that has been culminated in murder.

The desolate is the perfect stage to expose this unravelling because it gives a restrained area far from civilization. Where Norris can eliminate the lower-class people's danger which McTeague is embodied in the novel. McTeague has done his work in the desert which simultaneously affirms and eliminates the middle-class fears in his period. He brutally attacks for the gold that he has secured by committing an offence and he eventually murders another one with his empty hands but he finally assures his own death in the process at the end of the novel. When McTeague and Marcus want to meet in Death Valley they try to remember their encounter with each, Norris who has been described as a naturalist story which happened that "among the lower -- almost the lowest -- classes." They are in the American society "flung into the throes of a vast and terrible drama that works itself out in unleashed passions, in blood, and in sudden death" (274). Indeed, this episode is deranged that when the mule runs away from there. He is "squealed, threw up his head, and galloped to a little distance, rolling his eyes and flapping his ears". Marcus is given response by "dancing with rage, shaking his fists, and sweating horribly." Norris portrayed the landscape as "Chaotic desolation stretched from them on hand, flaming and glaring with the afternoon heat" (240, 242). But it is cruel and brutal, when they follow the mule, they run away from there into "Mile after mile, under the terrible heat of the desert sun, racked with a thirst that grew fiercer every hour." When they fight with each other in the "Clouds of alkali dust, fine and pungent, enveloped the two fighting men, all but strangling them" (241,242). Of course, it is violent that when they ask question who has owned the gold. McTeague's hands have "knotted themselves into fists, hard as wooden mallets" and "the men grappled, and in another instant were rolling and struggling upon the hot white ground" (243). McTeague's labor now look like the "wooden mallets" which is a tool, to be sure, but one who used it to create violence and murder and finally it is not used for labor.

The novel exhibits the final moments of the scene in which what the lower-class people are like. Earlier, Marcus's death in the desert, similarly pictures the terrible scenes of grotesque and excessive violent when Trina tries to find Maria who is also dead in the desolate. When McTeague murders his own wife Trina which is instigated by the lower-class people who are longing for wealth and class mobility. Trina finds Maria's dead body which reflects that "a fearful gash in her throat" and "the front of her dress... soaked through and through" (174). Zerkov murders Maria for fulfilling his lust for getting her family's legendary gold dinner set and finally it reaches climax in the novel. we are quite witnessed to see many deaths for a man who wants to enjoy bloody life with drinks and gambling which leads to destruction of their life shortly before, Maria said Trina that

"He's gettun regularly sick with it - got a fever every night - don't sleep, and when does, talks to himself. Says 'More'n hundred pieces, an' every one of 'em gold. More in hundred pieces, an' every one of 'em gold.' Then he'll whale me with his whip, and shout, 'You know where it is. Tell me, tell me, you swine, or I'll do for you.' An' then he'll get down on his knees and whimper, and beg me to tell um where I've hid it. He's just gone plum crazy" (178).

In this section Norris tries to eliminate from the original version of the novel, *McTeague*. McTeague wants to kill Trina that is "abominable" and "She was a repulsive sight. Her great mane swarthy hair was all down and over her face, her dress was torn to ribbons, and the little stream of blood running from the corner of her mouth stained as with ink the whiteness of her bare shoulder and breast" (206). McTeague was driven by an insane greed for getting \$5000 from his wife Trina. He threatens by Trina that "You won't, huh? You won't give me it? For the last time." When she is declared that "No, no," he "sent his fist into the middle of her face with the suddenness of a relaxed spring" (205). In these cases,

McTeague and Marcus want to fight with each one and one who wants to get capital of other ends of their life in disorder, violence and lower-class murder.

But there is another thing in these three scenes which is quite common in the novel, *McTeague*. Each scene of the novel portrays the spatial of social and economic exclusion. Maria is murdered in her own house and a “wretched hovel in the alley” which is so “dark and damp, and foul with all manner choking odors.” Where Zerkow saves his useless debris in his house that is “all the detritus that a great city sloughs off,” which is embodied that “every class of society” (134, 28). Trina is murdered in her house with “little room over the kindergarten schoolroom,” which lead “through a much poorer and more sordid quarter” and then into the Polk Street. Where she “saw no one” and is “lost in the lowest eddies of the great city’s tide” (193). Marcus is murdered in the desolate and a space of “brazen sky and... leagues upon leagues of alkali, leper white.” Where money has no purpose in the desert but greed still stimulates them to be violent which is against their own life. Each of these spatial which is marked by its isolation from the middle-class society whether it is an urban or rural. In *McTeague* the final scene of the novel thus brings us back to my opening question of what does it mean to the title of the novel, *McTeague: A Story of San Francisco*? What is this novel about? In this novel, it would see which is about spatial in and around San Francisco. Where Norris sees the romance in his eyes of the mother of naturalism which dwells that “slums ... the squalor of a dive, or the awful degradation of a disorderly house.” Spaces where “You, the aristocrats ... will not follow” (280). Thus, this novel exhibits the deterioration of social and economic exclusion, the destruction of identity, the facades of lower class mobility, the loss of work and the grotesque transgressions which happens in the spatial that is left in their wake.

## References

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