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**A MODERN MEPHISTOPHELES: *McTEAGUE* AND THE  
FAUST LEGEND**

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In his book on the aesthetic aspects of Frank Norris's fiction, Don Graham emphasizes the influence of Gounod's *Faust* on two of Norris's best known novels, *Vandover and the Brute* (1914) and *The Pit* (1903).<sup>1</sup> Graham does not, however, mention the Faustian characteristics implicit in another of Norris's controversial works: the brutal, bleak, Zolaesque "story of San Francisco," *McTeague* (1899). I believe that many variations of the Faust theme intertwine and interlock throughout the intricate plots and subplots of *McTeague*, ultimately producing a precise, cohesive statement about the vulnerability of human nature.

In 1887 the Norris family attended a showing of Gounod's operatic version of the Faust legend at the Grand Opera House in Paris.<sup>2</sup> Later, when he was studying art in Paris, Frank would join in with his fellow students in singing the opening lines of the famous opera. Familiarity with Gounod's work may have been his first exposure to the Faust legend, but possibly, considering his wide reading, he was also acquainted with the celebrated Goethe rendering of the Faust saga. Indeed, he prefaced his long poetic work, *Yvernelle*, with a quotation (in the original German) from Goethe. By the time he began *McTeague*, about 1891, therefore, the tale of Dr. Faust, in at least one version, must have been an integral part of his literary consciousness. Thus, only four years after the Paris performance of *Faust*, Norris was inspired with the idea for a novel conspicuously based on the merciless and gory murder of a San Francisco woman "slaughtered by her husband because she would not give him money."<sup>3</sup> Before completing *McTeague* he started to write *Vandover and the Brute*, an action indicating that the "satanic brute" motif was gaining an important place in his writing at that time.

McTeague metamorphoses from a harmless, domesticated brute, like Marcus's dogs, into a grotesque, diabolical animal, like the dogs who fight savagely in the streets in front of the McTeague home. Goethe's Mephistopheles was frequently accompanied by a dog, much in the same manner that the dogs are prominently present during the moments of tension between Marcus and McTeague. The presence of these dogs suggests that Norris intended for Marcus to be interpreted as a Mephistophelean figure.

Regardless, as pointed out by Richard Chase's astute criticism of *McTeague*: "In the naturalistic novel the beast shows through the human exterior as in the older fiction the devil did; the modern Mephistopheles is a werewolf, or, more likely, an ape-man."<sup>4</sup> McTeague is described in terms of animal imagery within numerous passages through the novel. He is termed a carnivora (p. 2), a draught horse (p. 2), and a wounded elephant (p. 133), to mention only a few of many examples. When McTeague becomes angry at Trina, he bites her fingers and, later, when he comes to her begging for money, protesting that he "wouldn't let a *dog* starve,"<sup>5</sup> she replies bitterly: "Not even if he's bitten you, perhaps." (p. 203). Trina was unaware that she was provoking the wrath of an atavistic "demon" inside her husband's body who would inevitably seal her doom and jeopardize her soul.

The brute in *McTeague*, like Dr. Faust, is a malcontent. His melancholy "lugubrious airs," "No one to love, none to caress, / Left all alone in this world's wilderness." (p. 35), remind us significantly of the dismal speech in the opening of Goethe's play in which Dr. Faust bemoans: "Ah, am I still imprisoned here alone? / Damnable dungeon wall of stone ... / That is your world!"<sup>6</sup> Also, like the historical Faust, McTeague is a self-made doctor, having acquired the title over the years through his illegal dental practice.<sup>7</sup> From the beginning of the narrative, McTeague is presented as a mythical figure. Like some dark devil, he has migrated to the city from a dubious and mysterious background. His father had worked in the depths of the earth as a miner, and McTeague eventually returns to the "underworld" when he is searching for gold in the mines at the end of the novel.

McTeague's physique is so extraordinary that many of his acquaintances attribute it to supernatural powers:

Polk Street called him the "Doctor" and spoke of his enormous strength. For McTeague was a young giant, carrying his huge shock of blond hair six feet three inches from the ground; moving his immense limbs, heavy with ropes of muscle, slowly, ponderously. His hands were enormous, red, and covered with a fell of stiff yellow hair; they were hard as wooden mallets, strong as vises, the hands of the old-time car-boy. Often he dispensed with forceps and extracted a refractory tooth with his thumb and finger.<sup>8</sup>

The dreadful strength of this powerful body appears to acquire demonic proportions when provoked. Trina is helpless when under his

influence, fearing that he has cast a spell on her: "McTeague had awakened the woman and, whether she would or no, she was now his irrevocably; struggle against it as she would, she belonged to him, *body and soul*, for life or death. She had not sought it or desired it. The spell was laid upon her. Was it a blessing? Was it a curse? It was all one; she was his, indissolubly for evil or for good" (p. 51, italics mine).

Trina, too, becomes entangled in a Faustian pattern that leads her to an inescapable annihilation: physical devastation by McTeague, and moral damnation by her own neurotic rapacity for gold. Her husband virtually gains possession of her body and soul. McTeague's process of implanting a bit of gold in Trina's tooth is symbolically prophetic of Trina's impending doom. The role of gold was incorporated into the Faust legends in the eighteenth century as a result of the puppet plays popular in Germany at that time. The theme of lust for gold began to take precedence over that of the desire for knowledge in the plays. Indeed, the ruination of almost every major character in *McTeague* can be attributed either directly or indirectly to greed, especially greed for gold and money. Erich von Stroheim, in fact, chose the word "greed" as the title for his classic silent film version of *McTeague*. The gold motif as a symbol of unbridled rapacity is literally magnified by McTeague's acquisition of a gigantic meretricious gilt tooth that he places outside his "parlors". Furthermore, as a result of uncontrolled rapacity, Zerkov murders his poor, demented wife, Maria, and is later discovered floating in the river clutching a large sack of junk, which must have forced him to sink.

Another common characteristic of the Faust myth is the transaction of the fatal bargain in which immediate gratification of a desire is granted to an individual at the expense of eternal damnation. Such a bargain transpires when Marcus valiantly concedes his girl friend to his pal, McTeague. Soon afterwards, however, McTeague finds himself in a position in which he is indebted to Marcus, and at enmity with him. Marcus's "sacrifice," then, finally results in a diabolic struggle between the two men in the "hell" of Death Valley, where Marcus handcuffs McTeague to himself and thus forces the fallen brute to follow him toward eternal damnation. The final epithet in Stroheim's *Greed* illustrates well the fate of the central characters of *McTeague*: "Oh cursed lust of gold:/ When for thy sake/ the fool throws up his interest in both worlds./ First, starved in this, then damned in that/to come."<sup>9</sup>

The Faustian motifs and patterns in *McTeague* serve as a medium

for Norris to communicate to the reader the possible consequences of obsession and unrestrained cupidity. Unlike the temptors of the old German legends, the modern Mephistopheles resides *within* the human body, which is used by the "satanic forces" as an instrument to destroy other human beings by preying on their desires. Probably McTeague is unaware of this catastrophic power that dwells within him. Norris instead presents him as a victim — a big, dumb brute; the hairy ape; the steppenwolf. McTeague's impotence and susceptibility can best be illustrated by the moving lines of the last paragraph of the novel, describing the aftermath of the struggle between McTeague and Marcus in Death Valley, in which Marcus, just before dying, succeeds in handcuffing himself to his adversary, thus making the other's doom inevitable: "McTeague remained stupidly looking around him, now at the distant horizon, now at the ground, now at the half-dead canary chattering feebly in its little gilt prison" (p. 249). *McTeague* is, clearly, more than a mere tale of a young dentist who goes astray; likewise, it is more than a sensational, melodramatic retelling of a San Francisco homicide. It is, on the contrary, a prime example of the Faust metaphor, brilliantly adapted to naturalistic literature. Like all other good artists, Norris, in *McTeague*, transcends the medium of his art. *McTeague* is a vicious, hard-hitting diatribe against the human condition, or, perhaps more appropriately, the *bête humaine*. Norris suggests in this disturbing novel that a large share of the human race exists superficially "chattering feebly in its little gilt prison" (p. 249), victimized by its own destructive passions.

The Faust motif in *McTeague* thus provides an effective means of conveying Norris's themes and ethical speculations. Moreover, as a result of the Faustian effects in the novel, the power of *McTeague* is accentuated by a diabolical irony that underlies the action of the story and intensifies the impact of the themes and the tragedy of the characters. The Faust myth is normally considered chiefly a romantic theme, yet in *McTeague* we find the same theme employed equally effectively in a product of the Age of Realism. Perhaps Norris wished to prove that the two literary movements were not necessarily incompatible.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Don Graham, *The Fiction of Frank Norris* (Columbia, Mo., 1978), p. 18.

<sup>2</sup> Franklin D. Walker, *Frank Norris: A Biography* (Garden City, 1932; rpt. New York, 1963), p. 27.

<sup>3</sup> "Twenty-nine Fatal Wounds," *The San Francisco Examiner*, 10 October 1893, p. 12.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Chase, *The American Novel and Its Tradition* (Garden City, 1957), p. 189.

<sup>5</sup> Frank Norris, *McTeague: A Story of San Francisco*, ed. Donald Pizer (New York, 1977), p. 203.

<sup>6</sup> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust* (New York, 1959), p. 15.

<sup>7</sup> J. W. Smeed, *Faust in Literature* (London, 1975), p. 1.

<sup>8</sup> Norris, p. 2. Variations of the phrase "enormous, mallet-like hands" appear throughout *McTeague*, e.g., pp. 2, 49, 133, 152, 169, 209, & 210. The German word "*Faust*" is translated into English as "hand" or "fist." Norris's pronounced repetition of the words "fist" and "hand", therefore, may be more than incidental.

<sup>9</sup> *The Complete "Greed" of Erich von Stroheim*, ed. Herman G. Weinberg (New York, 1972), unpagged.