

# **McTeague: A Story of San Francisco Study Guide**

**McTeague: A Story of San Francisco by Frank Norris**

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# Contents

<a href="#">McTeague: A Story of San Francisco Study Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Plot Summary.....</a>	<a href="#">4</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 1.....</a>	<a href="#">5</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 2.....</a>	<a href="#">6</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 3.....</a>	<a href="#">8</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 4.....</a>	<a href="#">10</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 5.....</a>	<a href="#">11</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 6.....</a>	<a href="#">13</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 7.....</a>	<a href="#">14</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 8.....</a>	<a href="#">15</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 9.....</a>	<a href="#">17</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 10.....</a>	<a href="#">19</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 11.....</a>	<a href="#">21</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 12.....</a>	<a href="#">24</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 13.....</a>	<a href="#">25</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 14.....</a>	<a href="#">26</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 15.....</a>	<a href="#">27</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 16.....</a>	<a href="#">28</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 17.....</a>	<a href="#">29</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 18.....</a>	<a href="#">30</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 19.....</a>	<a href="#">31</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 20.....</a>	<a href="#">33</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 21.....</a>	<a href="#">34</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 22.....</a>	<a href="#">35</a>



[Characters..... 36](#)

[Objects/Places..... 40](#)

[Social Sensitivity..... 42](#)

[Techniques..... 44](#)

[Themes..... 46](#)

[Style..... 49](#)

[Quotes..... 52](#)

[Adaptations..... 53](#)

[Topics for Discussion..... 54](#)

[Literary Precedents..... 55](#)

[Copyright Information..... 56](#)



## Plot Summary

Set in San Francisco, California, in the early years of the twentieth century, *McTeague* is the story of a young dentist named McTeague and of his emotional decline. McTeague is introduced to a beautiful, innocent young woman named Trina. Immediately, something is stirred within him, something he has never felt before. McTeague is instantly taken by Trina's beauty and perhaps more so by her innocence. It is a sexual awakening for him. When a dental procedure he is performing on Trina begins to hurt, he cannot bear the thought of causing her pain and agrees to administer an anaesthetic. Once Trina is unconscious, a different side of McTeague wells up. Seeing her helpless, defenceless and so desirable causes McTeague to lose control and to give in to his passions. He kisses her. The kiss serves not to quench his desires but rather to amplify it. When the effects of the anaesthetic wear off and Trina awakens, McTeague offers her a hasty proposal of marriage. Trina is appalled, refuses the proposition and leaves. This is the beginning of a tumultuous relationship that will last for the duration of their lives.

Trina's reaction does not sway McTeague away from his affections for her. One day, McTeague decides to confess his feelings for Trina to Marcus, her cousin. Marcus insists they call on Trina together, and the relationship between McTeague and Trina takes a turn. They begin courting and are eventually married. On the night they announce their engagement, the couple learns that a lottery ticket Trina purchased on the day she met McTeague has won the grand prize of fifteen thousand dollars, an event that will prove to be more disastrous than fortuitous.

Immediately following the McTeague wedding, Trina's parents leave the San Francisco area to follow a job opportunity in the southern part of the state. Trina is essentially left alone with her husband, her lottery winnings and her new life. As time passes, the newlyweds turn into a more settled-in married couple. The transformation doesn't stop there, however. Each falls into an ever-darkening spiral toward the ugly side of humanity, revealing a second self that is completely set apart from the person we meet at the beginning of the novel.

The novel is, as a whole, a depiction of the savage side of humanity, of the things that turn men into beasts: greed, despair, jealousy, rage and loneliness. The novel examines the idea that our actions and traits are not entirely determined by our conscious decisions. We are influenced by our actions and by a power that is larger than our existence.



# Chapter 1

## Chapter 1 Summary

McTeague is a bachelor, indulging in his usual Sunday custom of dinner at 2 p.m. in the coffee-joint frequented by the car conductors. After finishing his meal, McTeague heads to the local pub and picks up a pitcher of beer, which he then takes back to his dental office, or "Parlours," where he enjoys his drink and the music of his concertina. The music reminds him of when he worked at the Big Dipper Mine in Placer County.

The author gives a glimpse into McTeague's past. As a child, McTeague goes away with a travelling dentist to learn the trade and start his career, a career in which he is still engaged. While he undertakes his training, however, his mother dies and leaves him a good sum of money. With it, he starts his own dental business on Polk Street, and when the novel begins, McTeague is an adult living and working in the space wherein he has started that business. Marcus, McTeague's best friend, stops by the office and tells him that his cousin, Trina, has had a tooth knocked out. He'll bring her around the following day to have McTeague take a look at it.

## Chapter 1 Analysis

The first chapter serves as an introduction into the lives of some of the principal characters. The author goes to great lengths to set up the lives of these people, giving detail about the daily life of the Polk Street residents, the merchants and the "Other Dentist" down the way of whom Polk is jealous. McTeague's life is a small one, consisting largely of his Sunday ritual, his dental practice and his friendship with Marcus. He shows little or no ambition to change that and goes about his days without seeing much else than that which he can see at arm's length.



# Chapter 2

## Chapter 2 Summary

Marcus brings Trina, his cousin, around to the dentist's office so that McTeague may have a look at her damaged tooth. While Marcus and his cousin wait for the dentist to finish with another patient, Marcus teases Maria, the maid who tidies the units in the flat. He asks her name, and she gives the same curious response as she always does, which delights Marcus immensely, despite his having heard it innumerable times before.

Finally, McTeague is ready for Trina, and Marcus takes his leave. McTeague is awkward around her, having never quite been comfortable around women, least of all young, delicate, attractive ladies such as Trina. She, on the other hand, is quite content to be with him. She is, according to McTeague "without sex." In other words, she has yet to "discover" the male of the species and has therefore not experienced the awkward and nervous feelings one often has around someone of the opposite sex.

Upon seeing the injury to Trina's mouth, McTeague does not wish to disfigure her any further, so he agrees to try an experimental procedure, in an effort to save as many of her teeth as possible. The procedure will be a lengthy one, requiring her to come back to see him every other day. With each visit, McTeague becomes more comfortable with Trina, even becoming able to talk to her and work on her teeth at the same time, something he was previously unable to do with female patients.

McTeague feels that it is curious that Trina continues to come to him, while most of the other young women on Polk Street go to the "Other Dentist," a younger man whose practice is just down the road from McTeague's. He is content enough, though, for "with her, the feminine element had entered his little world." He begins to see things differently, and to experience feelings he has previously not known. Soon, McTeague finds himself thinking about Trina all the time, and his feelings begin to grow. "His narrow point of view was at once enlarged and confused, and all at once he saw that there was something else in life besides concertinas and steam beer."

On one occasion, when the dentist is working on her tooth, Trina winces in pain. Fearing the prospect of causing her any kind of pain, McTeague administers a dose of ether, and soon Trina is rendered unconscious. Then, McTeague can no longer hold back his desire for Trina. He kisses her fully on the mouth. When she awakens, the clumsy dentist proposes marriage to her. She responds by recoiling in fear and being overcome by waves of vomit.

## Chapter 2 Analysis

This chapter affords the reader the opportunity to gain even more insight into the nature of McTeague. With Trina now in his life, no matter how incidentally, McTeague undergoes the sexual awakening of a teenager. He is portrayed as being somewhat



intellectually slow, and this is mirrored in his "late blooming" with respect to feelings for someone of the opposite sex. We see him as a clumsy yet compassionate man, symbolized by his efforts not to disfigure Trina's mouth and by his willingness to administer the ether in order to avoid hurting her during his procedures.

Another side of the man is revealed, too, near the end of the chapter. In revealing this aspect of his character, through McTeague's decision to kiss Trina while she is under the ether, the author begins to reveal the duality in McTeague's nature, a duality that may exist in all of us. A question begins to form, one that the rest of the novel will attempt to answer: Are we fully responsible for our actions, or is something more powerful than us at work?

McTeague's social deficiencies begin to show themselves, too, in the fact that he is unable at first to be comfortable around Trina. He cannot even work and talk to her at the same time! At the end of the chapter, after she awakens, Trina is faced with a proposal from McTeague, a man she hardly knows and who, as far as she knows, is little more than her dentist. He has repulsed the first object of his affection.

This is also the first time two other characters, Old Grannis and Miss Baker, show their unspoken affection for one another. They do not speak to one another, but rather they sit and "keep company" with one another on either side of a mutual wall that separates their rooms in the flat.



## Chapter 3

### Chapter 3 Summary

Maria cleans the flat every other month, and in the course of her duties she collects junk from the residents, which she sells to Zerkow for money. She spends the money on fancy clothes, so that she may be more like the soda-water fountain girls of Polk Street. For her, looking like those other girls is of utmost importance. Maria collects a jug from Old Grannis and a pair of shoes from Miss Baker. Standing in the hallway between the two rooms, Maria all but forces the two people to speak to one another, by speaking to one and then the other about the items that each had given to her to sell. It is an uncomfortable moment for Old Grannis and for Miss Baker, a fact that appears to delight Maria.

When Maria reaches the dentist's room, she finds him laying in bed, lost in thought. It has been one week since his hasty proposal, and McTeague is now becoming obsessed with Trina. It has become apparent that Marcus is in love with Trina too, but so taken is McTeague with Trina that it doesn't occur to him to care. Trina, too, has been changed by the incident. She has become reserved, distant and even cold. The spark about her that McTeague has so admired is extinguished, and their relationship has been changed forever. McTeague becomes increasingly jealous that Marcus has the opportunity to spend time with Trina, and his thoughts are filled with little else than Trina and how to spend more time with her.

Maria brings the collected items to Zerkow in his shop in the alley of the flat. He invites her in for a drink, and they haggle over what each considers to be an acceptable price for the items. Afterwards, Maria recounts a story of a lost treasure, a gold plate service that once belonged to Maria's family. Zerkow, a great aficionado of riches and wealth, is enthralled by the story, and he listens intently. When she has finished the story, Maria takes her leave of the old man, leaving him to ponder her wonderful story.

### Chapter 3 Analysis

An underlying theme of this chapter is that of envy. McTeague is envious of Marcus for spending time with Trina, and Maria is envious of the young Polk Street girls whom she tries to emulate by buying all the same clothing. To Maria, looking like the young, trendy girls makes her more like them on a deeper level. This too, is a pervading theme throughout this book: the value of appearances. To Maria, it is enough to look like what one wants to be.

McTeague's desire for Trina is a visceral one, not an intellectual one. He doesn't know why he wants her. He knows only that he is feeling things for her that he has not felt for anyone else, and he is unable to rein in the desire to contain her, to possess her. This is





part of his envy toward Marcus. Marcus is able to have Trina, at least in some way, when McTeague cannot.

The reader gets an initial glimpse of Zerkow's obsession with wealth, too, which echoes Maria's preoccupation with appearances. Her story makes her sound grand, worthy of praise, and Zerkow's thirst for hearing the story is indicative of his thirst for riches and wealth, whether perceived or actual. These two themes, greed and the need to keep up appearances, are carefully woven together throughout the novel and will manifest themselves through the actions and words of several characters.



# Chapter 4

## Chapter 4 Summary

By now, the operation on Trina's tooth is finished, and she no longer has an obligation to stop by the Parlours. During the last few sittings, however, McTeague and Trina begin to make amends, and eventually find themselves being as congenial with one another as when Trina first came to the Parlours. McTeague begins to realize that Trina is not for him. She deserves someone more refined, someone who will not be so blundering as he is. McTeague's distaste for the "Other Dentist" begins to grow and turn to envy. Trina is much more likely to be attracted to someone such as the other dentist, and for all his shortcomings, McTeague knows he could not compete with such a man.

A few days after Trina's last appointment, Marcus meets with McTeague at the coffee-joint, and the two men embark on a long walk to Presidio. Along the way, the friends stop for a beer and some billiards at the Cliff House, where Marcus confronts his friend, asking him what the matter is with him as of late. When his friend does not answer, Marcus concludes that there must be a lady to blame. McTeague knows he cannot reveal the object of his affection to his friend. Finally, though, at Marcus' insistence, McTeague reveals his secret. Marcus handles it fairly well and resolves to "give" Trina to McTeague, even though he himself had plans to propose to her. Marcus thinks himself rather magnanimous for the gesture and is quite satisfied with himself. The two friends resolve to call on Trina the following Wednesday, so that she and McTeague may begin their courtship.

## Chapter 4 Analysis

The author uses this chapter to further develop the darker side of McTeague's psyche. McTeague is unable to control his desire for Trina, unable to put her out of his mind. His obsession with her is growing and beginning to take over his life. His insecurities begin to show, evident in his distaste for the younger dentist and by his resignation that Trina would be better off with someone more refined than he. This realization does not, however, prevent him from wanting her.

A darker side is revealed of another character in this chapter, too. Marcus, although appearing to be doing his friend a good deed in "giving" Trina to him, is quick to point out how good it is of him to do - an act that in itself negates the good act. He feels hurt by his friend's betrayal, but rather than show his weakness, he turns it on its ear and creates for himself an opportunity to look like the bigger man. Marcus is a man who cannot stand the thought of being lesser than anyone else, least of all this clumsy, slow oaf of a man he calls his friend.



# Chapter 5

## Chapter 5 Summary

When McTeague and Marcus call on Trina on the agreed-upon day, they are surprised to run into the entire Sieppe family at B Street Station. McTeague is taken aback by Trina's apparent delight in seeing him. The Sieppe family informs Marcus that, upon receiving his letter indicating Marcus and McTeague's intention to visit, they decided they should all go on a picnic. The party sets out on their way. McTeague finds himself walking beside Trina in the procession and is surprised once again to find that she is content to strike up a conversation with the man by whom she was only recently repulsed.

After the picnic, the Sieppes invite the two friends to stay the night at their home, and upon their arrival at the home it is decided that McTeague will stay in Trina's room. He surveys every inch of her room, taking in every detail of this young girl's world, even to the point of smelling her clothing. It is intoxicating to him.

The picnic serves as turning point in McTeague's relationship with Trina. He is now permitted to call on her and does so each Sunday and Wednesday. In spending this much regular time with Trina, McTeague begins to take Marcus' place, although Marcus sometimes goes along with McTeague, for the purposes of calling on Selina, Mrs. Sieppe's niece.

On a walk together one Wednesday afternoon, McTeague once again asks Trina to marry him, seeing no reason why they shouldn't be married. Once again, she declines. At that, McTeague takes Trina roughly into his arms and kisses her, in a sense for the first time, as it is the first time of which she is aware.

## Chapter 5 Analysis

While this is a turning point in McTeague's relationship with Trina, the beginning of their courtship, this same series of events has a double meaning. In solidifying his relationship with Trina, McTeague has experienced his first real physical/sexual interaction. What was previously only an act of his passion is now, at least partly, a reciprocal act. However, now that Trina has given herself to him, McTeague finds her less desirable. He has obtained that to which he aspired and, as is often the case with our goals, once they are achieved they are no longer desired. She is a disappointment to him now that she has given herself over to him, because he is no longer required to overcome her, to conquer her, in a sense. The reality is not as much as the fantasy, another theme that recurs in this book. He has won her. With that realization comes an increased sense of self-esteem and something darker: He knows he can control her and will stop at nothing to do just that. The author summarizes this with the words, "with



each concession gained, the man's desire cools, with every surrender the woman's adoration increases."

Trina's invitation for McTeague to come back again on Sunday is evidence of her desire to keep up appearances. She does not want to invite question from or bring shame to her family by casting aside yet another man, after having discontinued her "friendship" with Marcus and soon after, taking up with McTeague. She would rather put up with McTeague's brutish and inappropriate behavior than be seen as anything improper. The author also indicates that perhaps the fact that she has given herself over to McTeague has made Trina's feelings for him grow even stronger.



# Chapter 6

## Chapter 6 Summary

After her mother asks her if she loves the dentist, Trina is unable to answer. She begins to ponder the question and tries to understand why being overtaken by his strength excited her. When the dentist calls on her again, Trina intends to tell him that she will no longer see him. Instead, he shoves away her protesting hands and embraces her. Her resolve melts against the warmth of his kiss, and she exclaims, "I do love you!"

Later that week, Marcus and McTeague chat over lunch at the coffee-joint, where Marcus suggests that McTeague take their courtship to the next level. His idea is for McTeague to invite his lady to the theater. Of course, he warns, McTeague will have to take Trina's mother with them, for propriety. It is decided that McTeague, Trina, Mrs. Sieppe and August will go to the theater together, and they set out on the designated day. In order to avoid having to leave the theater early to catch the last ferry back, McTeague offers his Parlours. He and Marcus will sleep at the dog hospital. The Sieppes agree, and the matter is settled.

The group spends an enjoyable evening at the theater, tarnished only by August's childish behavior and unfortunate accident. Upon their return to the flat, the party is met by Maria, Old Grannis, Marcus and Miss Baker. They are brimming with good news: the lottery ticket Trina bought on her first visit to McTeague's Parlours has been drawn. She has won five thousand dollars!

## Chapter 6 Analysis

Trina's winning lottery ticket is a form of foreshadowing. The reader can surmise that what appears to be a fortunate windfall will not turn out to be all it at first seems. This is an example of how "all that glitters is not gold," and that appearance is not necessarily equal to reality, a recurring theme in the novel.

McTeague reveals more of his discomfort in social situations when he tries to buy tickets for the party, and he is confused by the clerk's question as to whether he wants tickets on the right or the left. Further, he fumbles with the tickets upon the group's arrival at the theater, forgetting where he has put them. He is very much out of his element, but he wants so badly to fit in and be the kind of person Trina should be with. He is willing to step out of his comfort zone in order to win the affections of his lady.



# Chapter 7

## Chapter 7 Summary

Joyful discussion ensues about what Trina should do with her windfall, and Marcus suggests she should use the money to get married. He is unaware of McTeague's two prior proposals. Amid the festivities, Trina and the dentist announce that they will, indeed, be married. With yet another reason to celebrate, the party becomes even more jovial.

After the party dissipates, Maria goes to visit Zerkow and tells him of Trina's newfound wealth. Again, he is taken in by the story, and again he asks Maria to recount the story of the gold plate service. In the same vein, Marcus reveals that he is more upset about losing the chance at five thousand dollars than he is about losing his girl to his best friend.

## Chapter 7 Analysis

The theme of greed is once again woven into this chapter, when Maria feeds Zerkow's greed with the stories of Trina's lottery winning and, again, of the long-lost treasure of the gold plate. Zerkow's insatiable hunger for such stories is symbolic of his need to possess as much wealth as possible, even through the stories of others.

Again, Marcus tries to prove that he is the bigger man, by suggesting that Trina use some of her money to marry the dentist. In making such a gesture, Marcus at once makes himself feel like the better man, and he reveals to the reader his true feelings on the matter. He is more upset about losing the five thousand dollars than he is about losing the girl! The weighing of Trina against the money underscores the fact that throughout the book, she has been more of a possession than a person.



# Chapter 8

## Chapter 8 Summary

McTeague and Trina spend an increasing amount of time together, and McTeague holds on to an obsession for having "a big gold tooth for a sign." Although he now has the girl, his sites are set on what he perceives to be an even grander conquest: the appearance of success, by way of a gilded sign in the shape of a tooth.

The dentist wants to spend Trina's winnings, but she thinks they ought to invest the money wisely. They decide that they will invest the money in Trina's Uncle Oelbermann's toy business, because he will offer his niece a greater interest rate than would the bank. In addition to this investment, Trina takes a side job, carving Noah's arks out of wood, to be sold in her uncle's store.

As McTeague and his betrothed spend more and more time together, McTeague and Marcus' friendship begins to crumble. They become more and more estranged, and their custom of taking walks together stops altogether. Essentially, the two are no longer friends. One day at the coffee-joint, McTeague suddenly turns to his former friend and asks for his money back. McTeague is puzzled, forgetting that Marcus loaned him the money to get on the ferry the day they accompanied the Sieppe family on a picnic. When the realization comes back to him, McTeague gladly hands over the coins. Marcus blows up at McTeague, declaring that he won't be taken for a sucker anymore.

A few days later, McTeague goes to Frenna's for a drink and finds his former friend there, carrying on in his usual way about some injustice or other. Upon seeing McTeague, Marcus blurts out, "All I know is I've been soldiered out of five thousand dollars." With that, Marcus announces that he no longer wants anything to do with McTeague and gets up from his seat. McTeague makes a motion to the other man, a motion that Marcus interpreted as a gesture of violence. In a defensive movement, Marcus raises his hand, knocking the pipe from the dentist's hand and sending it shattering to the ground. Marcus pulls out a jack knife and throws it at McTeague, narrowly missing him. The knife lodges firmly in the wall behind him. McTeague is left dumbfounded, not understanding what Marcus' problem is, for he has "no quarrel" with the man.

McTeague resolves to "show him." He does not care about the thrown knife or the fact that his former friend has just tried to kill him. He only understands that Marcus has broken his pipe, and for that Marcus is going to pay. McTeague storms out of Frenna's in search of Marcus. Finding Marcus' room empty, McTeague decides to retire to his own quarters and wait for Marcus to return. He has to, McTeague reasons, come back sooner or later.

Outside the door to his Parlours, McTeague stumbles in the dark over a large packing box. Puzzled as to what it could be, McTeague turns on the gas in his room and brings



the parcel inside. He excitedly opens the box and digs through the layers of packing materials to find a birthday gift from Trina. It is his gilded tooth sign for his Parlours! When Marcus does finally come home, McTeague is no longer in a combative mood, thanks to the gift from his soon-to-be bride.

## Chapter 8 Analysis

The attaining and maintenance of that which one thinks is most important is a major theme in this chapter. McTeague is unconcerned with the fact that his former friend has made an attempt on his life or with the fact that they are no longer friends. Instead, McTeague is more upset by the fact that Marcus broke his pipe. Although it is not the most refined or well made of pipes, it is his, and it is something tangible that others can see and perhaps even be impressed by. Marcus has broken it, taking from McTeague a certain degree of social standing.

When McTeague receives the gift from Trina, he is less touched by the fact that she has bought him a gift than he is motivated by the desire to make the other dentist envious. McTeague has spent enough time feeling envy toward the other dentist. Now it is the other dentist's time to feel envy. The tooth is symbolic of wealth or, more specifically, the appearance of wealth. Nothing in McTeague's life has changed that would give him enough wealth to afford the tooth (except that his future bride has won the lottery). It doesn't matter that McTeague's financial position hasn't changed. With the gleaming tooth out front, it will appear that the dentist is better off than he was, and that is enough for him. Before receiving the gift, McTeague could only obsess about it. Just as he is disappointed when he is able to "conquer" Trina, will he now be dissatisfied with his new sign, his new appearance of wealth? On what will he focus now?





# Chapter 9

## Chapter 9 Summary

The wedding festivities go on in grand style, with everyone enjoying himself or herself immensely. At the table, Old Grannis is forced to sit next to Miss Baker, despite all efforts to avoid this fate. During the meal, neither one speaks to the other. Marcus proposes a toast to the health of the bride, and they drink champagne. It is the first taste of champagne for most of them. McTeague says that it is the best beer he ever drank. The party laughs at his mistake, especially Marcus, who is pleased at the blunder of his former friend. He revels in the moment of being, at least in his mind, superior to his friend. Trina defends her groom, saying that he is aware of his mistake, that it was intentional.

The wedding party feasts on all manner of delicacies until their stomachs can hold not another bite. They are living in luxury. It truly is a celebratory feast. From the hired waiters to the champagne and the dining table heavy with food, everything is in excess. The group is not accustomed to the life of those with money. Trina has spent \$200 of her lottery winnings on the wedding, and it is quite the lavish affair.

Miss Baker, who has until this point been occupying herself with the concerns of the children (who are seated at another table) turns suddenly to Old Grannis and utters her first direct words to him: "I'm so very fond of little children." Grannis replies, "Yes, yes, they're very interesting. I'm very fond of them, too." Their long-cultivated silence is broken in the space of an instant.

When at last the dinner is over, the goose picked clean and the table an "abandoned battlefield," Maria and the waiter eat their supper in the kitchen, dining on the remains of the lobster salad and slices of goose. They sip the last of the champagne from teacups, as the wedding guests in the other room gathered around the melodeon and begin to sing together, off-key and not well, but nevertheless together. At the end of a rendition of "Nearer, my God, to Thee" (the only song they all know), Uncle Oelbermann puts on his hat and makes a motion to leave. Marcus jumps up to help him on with his coat, and Mr. Sieppe shakes Uncle Oelbermann's hand. Trina's uncle speaks for the first time the entire evening, saying to her father, "You have not lost a daughter, but gained a son." With that, he departs, leaving behind a "profoundly impressed" party.

The time arrives for the Sieppe family to depart for the south. Mr. Sieppe once again takes on an aura of control, shedding his relaxed demeanor, and begins marshalling the family into order. Old Grannis slips discreetly from the party, which precipitates the exodus of the rest of the "outsiders." It is felt that the Sieppe family should be afforded the privacy in which to bid their daughter and son-in-law goodbye. The Sieppes bid their daughter/sister a tearful goodbye, with Trina uttering promises to visit her parents sometime. McTeague stands alone in the corner, forgotten. He is, clearly, not one of them.



Her parents now gone, Trina is left alone to her new life with her new husband. Frightened and feeling alone, Trina retires to her new home. McTeague tries to take his new bride into his arms, and she once again pulls away in terror. When asked what she is afraid of, Trina is unable to answer. Her only thought is how very little she knows about this man with whom she is about to spend the rest of her days.

McTeague sits beside his wife and asks her again of what she is afraid. She admits, "I'm afraid of *you*." This admission fills McTeague not with sorrow or unhappiness that his wife is afraid of him, but rather with a sense of joy. He possesses her. She is his. He takes Trina in a strong embrace and kisses her fully on the mouth. As she has done before, Trina gives in to him and warns him to be good to her, saying, "Oh, you must be good to me - very, very good to me, dear - for you're all that I have in the world now."

## Chapter 9 Analysis

In this chapter, Norris is leading up to a crucial turning point in the novel. The mood of the chapter turns from joviality to sadness, isolation and despair, indicative of the overall emotional shift of the novel. Evident throughout this chapter is one of the novel's underlining themes: appearances versus reality. McTeague's blunder about the champagne and the hired waiters' made-up names for the exotic foods (bubble-water for champagne, for example) belie their appearance of wealth and social standing. These people are not the high-living, indulgent people they appear to be in this chapter. McTeague, especially, is unrefined and brutish, which is brought out in his mistake about the champagne. Trina's desire to keep up appearances is evidenced in her attempts to defend her husband, saying that his calling the champagne "beer" is intentional and meant to be humorous. It is quite clear, however, that this is not the case. McTeague has never tasted champagne before and may well have never even heard of it. This is a sign that he is not of the social class of people who would drink champagne.

Another underlying theme that is prevalent throughout the book appears in this chapter. From the first chapter to the last, the characters are obsessed with obtaining things, and they are disappointed and unsatisfied when they attain that which they desire. In this chapter, Old Grannis exhibits this trait, after having finally exchanged words with Miss Baker. His thoughts on this event are revealing: "How different he had imagined it would be! They were to be alone - he and Miss Baker - in the evening somewhere, withdrawn from the world, very quiet, very calm and peaceful. Their talk was to be of their lives, their lost illusions, not of other people's children." Although he finally is able to speak to her, opening up the possibility of a new friendship or romance, the way in which it occurs is unsatisfactory. The dream is better than the reality.

Norris uses foreshadowing, a glimpse of what is to come, in this chapter. At the very end of the chapter, Trina pleads with her husband: "Oh, you must be good to me - very, very good to me, dear - for you're all that I have in the world now." The author is alluding to the fact that Trina's words will become prophetic. What she wishes will hold a mirror of irony to the events that are to come.



# Chapter 10

## Chapter 10 Summary

Trina passes her days sitting in a bay window, watching life on Polk Street carry on around her. She continues to work for her uncle, carving the Noah's arks, and occupies the rest of her time with the keeping of the house. She has grown to love McTeague, a "blind, unreasoning love." She has given herself to him completely, inextricably. She is, in every sense, his. Nothing, not even his death, will change that now. She is no longer an individual. She is part of him, part of a greater whole. She has not always felt this way about her husband. After the freshness and novelty of their marriage wears off, Trina begins to be filled with misgivings about her marriage. On one particular day, after returning from a walk with Miss Baker, Trina finds her husband in his "Parlours," passed out from drink and with the stove overstuffed with coke, the room thick with heat. That sight solidifies in her mind and her heart that she could never love him. If it was to be like this only three weeks after their marriage, the future can hold nothing better.

Slowly and by degrees, Trina begins to refine her husband, inducing him to more gentlemanly behaviors, such as removing his hat upon greeting Miss Baker and bringing home beer to share with his wife rather than spending time at Frenna's. There comes a time when the dentist can even speak with his patients while he works on their teeth.

More than changing McTeague's behavior, he also changes social stature, becoming more than an individual. He is part of something bigger than himself, part of a class with convictions and views. He has taken to reading the papers and attending Church with Trina. Perhaps Trina's greatest achievement with regard to her husband is the instillation in her husband of ambition. McTeague begins to have goals, and Trina credits herself with that change, as with all the other things her husband has changed about himself.

McTeague and Trina's lives settle into routine, and the everyday business of keeping a house and creating a life for one another carries on uneventfully. Augustine, their French cook, comes each evening to prepare their evening meal. Trina hears every two weeks from her parents. The upholstery business is doing poorly, losing money hand over fist, and Mrs. Sieppe wishes she had never left B Street. In order to make up for the failing business, August is forced to earn a wage for the family, and Mrs. Sieppe has taken in lodgers in order to make ends meet.

Back in San Francisco, McTeague and Trina have experienced their first major argument, over the matter of a home. They have found the perfect little house. However, when the time comes to discuss purchasing it (after the occupying family has moved out), Trina is not willing to spend the money to live there. McTeague wants to spend some of Trina's lottery winnings to set up a nice home for them and to stop living "as though [they] were paupers." Trina's miserly way is the only thing standing between



the McTeagues and their dream of having a home of their own. They decide to put the matter aside and discuss it again later.

The following day, while Trina is out, McTeague seals the deal with the seller of the house, without consulting his wife. He cannot wait to tell her the news. Trina is outraged at her husband's hasty decision and that he did not discuss the matter further with her. While Trina is out, she discusses the house with a neighbour, who reveals that the Hungarian family who lived in the house previously has moved out because the basement is flooded! Trina is incredulous. She refuses to pay the first month's rent they are obliged to pay in order to forfeit on the sale. McTeague, she decries, will have to come up with the money himself. The dentist refuses to pay for the rent himself, saying that it is the responsibility of the couple to pay for it, half and half, as they would had they moved in. The couple doesn't make up for nearly a week, and when they finally are amicable to one another again, the topic of the house is never brought up.

In the weeks following the fight, Trina begins to feel sorry she has forced her husband to pay for the house all on his own. She devises a plan to "come up behind him unexpectedly, and slip the money...into his hand..." In a moment of hesitation, she decides she will give him *her* portion of the money, fifteen dollars. The amount is then reasoned down to ten dollars, which Trina decides is all she can afford. Upon going to her safe to retrieve the ten dollars, Trina decides she will not give her husband the gold piece because it is too pretty. Instead, she will repay her husband in silver pieces. Her resolve crumbles when she sees what a void the removal of the money has left in her safe. She decides that she will not, in fact, give her husband any money. Trina reasons that she can't help being stingy.

## Chapter 10 Analysis

Trina exerts her control over her husband by slowly refining his habits into those that are more in line with her sensibilities. She may not have married the ideal man, but she is equal to the task of creating the husband she could have had. As McTeague controls her through power, she controls him through manipulation.

Trina's obsession with hoarding her money starts to come through in this chapter even more clearly than before. We start to see the decline of this fine lady, brought about by her sudden wealth. This decline points a common thread throughout the book: That which one obtains easily has the power and the tendency to not only be a disappointment, but also to corrupt and change one's personality and viewpoint. Trina was never a miserly person when her family had only meagre means. As soon as a degree of wealth befalls her, she becomes miserly and selfish, wanting all of the wealth for herself.

Trina doesn't see her miserly ways as having anything to do with the money or with her own free will. She reasons that she doesn't have a choice in being the way she is and that she is justified in being stingy because she truly doesn't have a say in the matter. Her traits are born in her and, as a result, are beyond the scope of her control.



# Chapter 11

## Chapter 11 Summary

Trina calls to Miss Baker, who is returning home after a trip to the market. After exchanging pleasantries, Miss Baker reveals to Trina a secret: Maria and Zerkow are to be married! Trina supposes that Zerkow only proposed to Maria so that she can regale him with the story of her lost wealth - the service of dishes that she had back in her home country. It is the only wealth Maria has to offer him, and the old man is so hungry for wealth that he is willing to marry a woman just to hear stories of it. Maria must have agreed to the marriage so that she will have someone who will be willing to listen to her story often and at length, Trina supposes.

As the two women part company, Miss Baker turns to go to her flat. Just then, she comes face to face with Old Grannis, who is coming out of the flat. The two are overcome by embarrassment and clumsiness. Miss Baker is mortified that Old Grannis should see her carrying her wares, which consist of cabbage and fish, from the market. As they pass each other on the stairs, Miss Baker and Old Grannis, both in an effort to pass quickly and avoid contact, end up in a tumble. Old Grannis knocks the lady's basket from her arm, causing it to roll down the stairs and sending the contents scattering. Miss Baker's fish ends up on the landing of the stairs, her lentils like confetti across the whole of the flight of stairs.

Then, Marcus Schouler comes to the rescue, picking up the strewn items and escorting Old Grannis away from the situation. Miss Baker retires to her room and awaits Old Grannis' return to his own room. Upon his return, Old Grannis sets to his bookbinding. Miss Baker, now content, brews herself a cup of tea. The two "keep company" in this strange way for the remainder of the evening. Despite having been introduced to one another, having spoken to one another and now sharing this rather odd custom of "keeping company," the two have settled back into their old ways, and each is as content as the other with the way things are.

On this same day, McTeague suggests to his wife that they take a picnic in Schuetzen Park the following Tuesday. Trina's passion for picnics has not diminished, but she has her typical concern: money. On the proposed day for the picnic, the dentist's Parlours are to be papered, she reasons, and there is the gas bill to be paid. She agrees to go, but she insists that her husband pay for his half and that each of the other guests bring their own lunch and pay their own way.

The party meets on the agreed-upon day, for an "old folk's picnic," since they are all married couples. Once settled in on the ferry, the party notices Marcus coming up the way. He runs up to them and greets each of the members of the group, except for McTeague, whom he ignores entirely. One of the ladies in the group inquires why Marcus is dressed up, to which he answers, "I'm takun a holiday myself to-day. I had a bit of business to do over at Oakland, an' I thought I'd go up to B Street afterward and



see Selina. I haven't called on - - " Just then, it occurs to the picnic-goers that Selina is supposed to go with them! She is supposed to meet them at the Schuetzen Park station. It becomes clear that Marcus' business in Oakland is a farce, and that he is only headed there to see Selina. Marcus blames McTeague for once again coming between him and his girl, as he has been seeing Selina since shortly after the McTeagues' wedding.

Mrs. Ryer suggests that Marcus join them, and so as not to cause any scene, Trina is forced to agree. Seeing his opportunity to see Selina under innocent circumstances, Marcus gleefully agrees. The men of the party retire to the bar for drinks, leaving the ladies to themselves for the remainder of the ferry ride to the island. Over their drinks, Heise speaks up, asking that the dentist and Marcus put their differences behind them and make amends. Taking the opportunity to be the bigger man, McTeague extends his large hand. Marcus returns the gesture, and with that, the men lift their drinks.

All at the picnic spend a lovely day eating their packed lunches and keeping each other's company. McTeague entertains the group by displays of his strength and by regaling his friends with stories of his physical prowess from his younger days. Marcus becomes infuriated at McTeague's tall tales, in spite of the reconciliation just a short while earlier.

The men of the group decide to hold a wrestling match, and Marcus' opponent is to be McTeague. McTeague uses his advantage of strength to push his adversary to the ground, and then he gets up and announces himself the winner of the match. Marcus protests, saying that he was clearly not "down." The two men become outraged, and the entire group gets riled up over the matter. The group decides that there ought to be a rematch, and the two men prepare to fight again. This time, McTeague has to fight harder in order to overcome his opponent, but on the third attempt he is able to take Marcus down.

As McTeague is forcing Marcus' second shoulder toward the ground, the entire group holding its breath, Selina's voice breaks the silence: "Ain't Doctor McTeague just that strong!" This comment, especially coming from the objective of his affection, fills Marcus with a new resolve. "God damn you! Get off me!" he protests. Then, in an act of rage and retaliation, Marcus bites the dentist in the earlobe. McTeague springs to his feet, wailing in pain. He becomes his other self, something apart from the sluggish and level-headed man he is when unprovoked. The beast now fully awakened, McTeague grabs hold of his "friend's" arm, flinging him through the air, breaking his arm. The party breaks the fight up, tending to the injured man. In the midst of the confusion, Selina giggles and remarks at the hilarity of the events. What a way for their picnic to end!

## Chapter 11 Analysis

Again, Norris focuses on the clash of appearances and reality in this chapter. Trina's assumption that Zerkow would propose to Maria in order to hear the story of her wealth over and over is an example of this. If it is true, Zerkow would rather have a wife that



has the appearance of wealth (albeit lost wealth) than someone he loves but who appears, to outsiders, to have nothing. The apparent reconciliation between Marcus and McTeague is another example of this. Although the friends go through the motions of shaking hands (ostensibly to end their feud), the anger and resentment between the two remains simmering below the surface. It is not until the wrestling match that the two men reveal their true feelings for one another. Aggression is expected in this forum, and so the men's outburst does not seem, at first, to shatter the appearance of their reconciliation.

The description of the McTeagues' apartment, particularly of their wedding photo hanging on the wall, also contributes to the illusion of a happy household, full of only the good things in life. It becomes clear, however, that this is not the case. That which they want the world to see is not the reality of their situation. The photo of the couple and the wedding bouquet, pressed under glass and hung beside it, are ironic symbols of a perfect marriage, a marriage that does not exist in the McTeague household.



# Chapter 12

## Chapter 12 Summary

Zerkow and Maria are married one month after the picnic, and Maria gives birth to an unhealthy child. As a result of the birth, Maria lapses into a bout of dementia, which goes away just in time for her to bury her child. The baby lasts less than two weeks.

Zerkow's obsessive quest for information about his wife's lost treasure is unwavering. He resolves to get Maria to reveal to him where the treasure is located. He is shocked to realize that since her dementia, Maria has no recollection of the story she has recounted dozens of times! He is outraged, for the quest for this mythical treasure is the principal reason he married her. Zerkow resolves to find the treasure, at any cost. He will shake the truth out of his wife if he has to! Maria runs away from her crazed husband, finding refuge in Marcus' room.

Marcus decides to leave San Francisco. He has found an opportunity down south to follow his dream and start a ranching business. Trina discovers this news through correspondence from her mother. Marcus comes to the McTeagues' home to say goodbye. They exchange pleasantries, and he leaves.

## Chapter 12 Analysis

Several of the characters in this chapter exhibit a greedy obsession with wealth, usually at the expense of all else. Zerkow, upon learning of his wife's inability to recall the story he so desires to hear, becomes outraged. He marries her in order to "possess" the story and to someday find the treasure about which his wife has spoken so convincingly. When Trina's mother requests a loan of fifty dollars from her daughter, Trina convinces herself that she cannot afford to send it, when clearly she can. So hell-bent is she on not giving up her own wealth, she even lies to her husband, forcing him to contribute "his half" of the money, while neglecting to send hers. To Trina, the preservation of her own wealth is more important than helping her suffering family. Marcus' departure from San Francisco further isolates Trina from her family. Norris is using this plot point to emphasize that Trina is becoming more and more removed from her comfort zone, from the safety of those who care for her.





# Chapter 13

## Chapter 13 Summary

McTeague receives a letter from City Hall stating that, because he did not graduate from a dental college, he is not permitted to continue his practice. McTeague is forced to reveal the truth to his wife. He did not, in fact, attend a dental college, having learned all he knows through an informal apprenticeship with a travelling dentist. Suddenly, the realization hits Trina that Marcus must be behind this. He must have told the authorities of McTeague's lack of formal education in an effort to get in one final parting shot before vanishing from their lives.

Trina is afraid of what may become of herself and her husband if McTeague stops practicing. She does not want to face that possibility. Trina instructs her husband to continue on as though nothing has happened. When a second notice comes, this time delivered in person, Trina changes her mind. She insists that her husband find something else to do, rather than dip into her lottery winnings. She is unwilling to touch that money even under the direst of circumstances. When McTeague agrees to stop his practice, Trina does not want people to know the truth of their situation, for fear of how they might look. She decides to tell everyone that her husband is ill and must retire.

## Chapter 13 Analysis

Appearance is everything, once again. Trina does not want her husband to give up his practice, for fear of people knowing that they are in financial trouble. However, when the second notice comes, the prospect of going to jail, or rather the idea of other people *knowing* they are in jail, is too much to bear. Trina decides that having to live on limited funds is a more favorable alternative to the humiliation of having to go jail.

Marcus' intention to one-up McTeague continues, even from a distance. After he moves to the south, Marcus still does all he can to prove that he will never be taken for a fool again. McTeague will never have the upper hand, Marcus seems to be saying. For him, it is not good enough that he no longer has to live in the same flat as his former girl and his former friend. He still feels scorned and like a lesser man, and he is doing everything to give himself every advantage over McTeague, even if it means hurting Trina. It is more important to prove himself a worthy adversary than to leave the past behind him.



# Chapter 14

## Chapter 14 Summary

The couple moves into a one-room unit in the flat, at Trina's insistence. She will not spend her five thousand dollars to keep them in their current home, or even to fix up the smaller unit. She is content not only to hoard the money, but she also sells most of their belongings, intent on saving the money from the sale and adding it to her savings. McTeague refuses to part with his steel engraving, his stone pug dog, his canary, its cage and his concertina.

One day, the "Other Dentist" comes to the McTeague home and makes an offer on the gold tooth sign. When the McTeagues refuse, the man reveals that everyone in the neighbourhood is aware of the truth of the McTeagues situation. Trina is humiliated. After the sale of their items, only one thing remains untouched, still hung on the wall where it was originally when the McTeagues lived in the unit: Trina's wedding bouquet.

## Chapter 14 Analysis

Trina's emotional descent is underlined in this chapter. She will not part with her money and she tries to dictate the things her husband must sell, both in an effort to hold on to a shred of her independence, of her identity. She is satisfied to change their lifestyle, but as soon as she learns that their situation is not a secret, her life is turned upside down. The illusion is shattered, and she cannot accept this. The loss of the appearance of wealth is worse than the actual change in lifestyle.

After Trina and McTeague's items are sold, the couple returns to their old rooms, to find that everything is "a pillage, a devastation." These are the same words the author uses to describe, conversely, the dinner table after the wedding feast. At that time, the image is one of excess, of consumption, of luxury. Now, with their belongings scattered amongst the locals, the imagery is converted into one of devastation, poverty and emptiness. By using the same words to describe two polar opposites, the author creates a powerful contrast.

Trina's wedding bouquet has remained after the sale and is described in the same terms as when the quaintness of the couple's rooms is being described earlier. This creates for the reader another instance of powerful imagery. The happiness they once felt, whether real or perceived, has now vanished. The moment in time when they may have been happy is, like the flowers, pressed behind glass, frozen in time.



# Chapter 15

## Chapter 15 Summary

McTeague is fortunate to find another job, working for a company that manufactures dental implements. One day, however, he comes home and announces that he has been fired. Trina immediately orders him to head out into the cold, rainy night in search of another job. She demands that he give over his money, and he obliges, emptying his pockets to his wife's outstretched hand.

Returning home after an unsuccessful attempt to find another job, McTeague is caught in a downpour of icy rain. Suddenly, he becomes enraged at his wife. Surely she knew it would rain, and she purposely took away from him any money he might have used for cab fare. It is because of her that he is here, standing in a vestibule, wet, hungry and sore. McTeague takes refuge in a glass of whiskey at Frenna's, courtesy of Heise, then of Ryder.

Trina's stinginess is getting worse. Now she will not even afford Maria the simple luxury of a cup of tea when she comes around. Trina begins to ration food and to congratulate herself on her ability to make as much with so little. McTeague has changed, too. Upon his return from Frenna's, still cold and soaked through, he has a renewed fire in him, hatred for his wife and for her miserly ways. He is a new man, quicker, more self-possessed and more self-assured than ever before. He is not going to take any more demands from his wife.

Fuelled by whiskey and anger, McTeague tells his wife that he will no longer tolerate her bossy nature and her hoarding of their money. From now on, things will be different. When she will not stop crying, he raises a massive fist and makes a motion to strike her. She recoils, and McTeague leaves her to cry alone. He is going to bed.

## Chapter 15 Analysis

There is a dynamic shift in this chapter. Trina is no longer the head of the household. McTeague has finally asserted himself and stood his ground. Trina has, in an instant, changed from the self-assured, bossy woman in control of herself into a crying, acquiescing submissive, fearful of her husband once again.

Maria's visit to Trina's home brings forth some prophetic words, words that will come to haunt Trina upon her husband's arrival. Trina instructs her friend to leave her abusive husband, as if it were the easiest thing in the world to do. The reader is led to believe, however, that when it comes to Trina's marriage, the escape route is not quite as clearly marked.



# Chapter 16

## Chapter 16 Summary

As time passes, McTeague becomes more and more abusive to his wife. The beast inside of him is brought to the surface by alcohol, and when he is in this state he hurts his wife terribly. More than that, he begins to enjoy hurting her. That which he had previously loved about her he now loathes. She is nothing more than a bother to him.

One day, Trina decides to go to see Maria, with whom she has become very close, to see how much rent Maria pays for her living quarters. Upon arriving, Trina discovers an astonishing and horrific sight. Maria is dead! Murdered! Trina rallies the assistance of Heise, and together they call the police. As a crowd gathers round, it becomes clear that Zerkow is the culprit. That night, his body is found floating in San Francisco Bay, clutching some old and rusted dishes he has found in a trash heap.

## Chapter 16 Analysis

McTeague is moved to violence through alcohol. His actions are not his fault. He justifies his actions because he does not get drunk often, and when he does he is not staggering around and silly. The beast within him, once again, is awakened. Here again we see the duality of a person's nature. That which one really is different from that which one pretends to be.

Zerkow is finally driven past the threshold of madness. He can no longer stand the prospect of not finding his wife's treasure, and he kills her. When the police find his body, he is holding 100 pieces of gold plate, which he must have believed to be his wife's treasure. It is interesting, though, that if Zerkow believed he had found the treasure, why would he have killed himself? Perhaps it is the same as with McTeague's gold tooth: the fantasy is better than the reality.



# Chapter 17

## Chapter 17 Summary

Old Grannis has sold his binding apparatus, and sits idle in his room, not knowing what to do with himself. He begins to feel a deep sense of regret at selling his apparatus, for putting a price on his happiness. Not knowing what to do, he begins to cry. He can never again "keep company" with Miss Baker the way they have in the past, for his half of the ritual is gone. He has given up the only happiness he had in his life for a sum of money.

In the midst of Old Grannis' despair, he does not hear a soft knocking on his door. Miss Baker lets herself quietly into his room, her outstretched arms joined by a tray containing a cup of tea for her friend. She does not know what has brought about this sudden thrust of courage, but she is determined to carry it through. Old Grannis accepts the tea, and the two sit together, for the first time, with no wall between them.

## Chapter 17 Analysis

Norris utilizes a form of "comic relief" in this chapter, although the content of this section is far from humorous. It is, nonetheless, a release from the ugliness of the rest of the novel. The coming together of these two people is in sharp contrast to the falling apart of the couples with whom they share a flat. It is like a bright spot in a dark night, a bit of hope amongst despair. The reader is, temporarily, lifted out of a dark place and shown that good things can happen to good people.

Grannis too, has been obsessed with money, having tried to buy happiness by selling his apparatus. He, like Trina, finds that money does not buy happiness. The difference is, Grannis comes to this realization almost immediately, and in the same instant, he does find happiness, not because of his money, but in spite of it. Trina, for all her hoards and scrimping, can find no happiness in her marriage.



# Chapter 18

## Chapter 18 Summary

Things at the McTeague house begin to worsen still. Trina and McTeague move into the Zerkow's old house to save money, even though Trina has had nightmares about her friend's death in that very house. One day, McTeague announces that he is going to go fishing for the day, and he takes with him his canary and the money he got from the sale of his sign to the Other Dentist. Come dinnertime, when he does not return, Trina begins to worry. She searches for him in every place she figures he could be, and then thinks that perhaps he might have returned while she was out.

Upon returning home, Trina is astonished to find the lock on her trunk, the place where she has hidden her savings, broken and all the money gone. Her husband has left her and taken her money with him. Ironically, the money she has been saving for a rainy day has been taken by her own husband, the man who so desperately wanted to use that money to create a better life for them, on a rainy day. Sick with grief and anger, Trina collapses in a fit of tears and is found the next morning by the German lady living beneath them. The German lady calls Miss Baker, who then calls for a doctor. Upon seeing Trina's bitten and swollen fingers, the doctor diagnosis her with blood poisoning and declares that the fingers will have to be amputated, if not the entire hand. Not only has Trina lost her husband and her savings, she has now lost her livelihood, all as a result of the cruelty of her husband. He has finally gotten the better of her.

## Chapter 18 Analysis

Just as Trina's stinginess has robbed McTeague of the chance to live a comfortable life, her obsession with saving money has now driven him away from her, taking with him her money and her job, leaving her with nothing. Her money is no good to her now, and soon she will be unable even to earn her own living, having no fingers. McTeague's cruelty had escalated to greater heights, becoming much more vicious now than ever before. Trina has been forced to discover that money cannot guarantee happiness and that saving for a rainy day may not turn out to be the blessing you had anticipated.



# Chapter 19

## Chapter 19 Summary

Trina has been reduced to the position of a cleaning lady at a kindergarten. Despite having the five thousand dollars still invested in her uncle's toy shop, Trina refuses to spend it. She still denies herself simple things like heat and light so that she can save a dollar or two. Notwithstanding all that she has been through at the hands of her husband, Trina is still a miser.

Trina is still devastated, not by her husband's leaving her, but by the fact that he took with him all of her savings. In an effort to make herself feel better, Trina goes to her uncle's store and withdraws the exact amount her husband has stolen. This does not satisfy her, however, and she withdraws more and more, eventually asking for a cheque in the entire amount.

One night, while she is sleeping in her room above the kindergarten, Trina hears a knock on the window. It is McTeague. He implores her to open the window, and then asks for money and a place to sleep. Trina refuses, saying she'd sooner see him starve to death than give him any of her money. Infuriated, McTeague threatens Trina but leaves nonetheless.

A few days later, Trina is left to clean up at the kindergarten after a holiday celebration. Once she is alone, Trina becomes aware of someone else in the room. She turns to see McTeague stumbling toward her, drunk and angry. He demands the money from her, all five thousand of it. When she refuses, he goes into a flurry of blows. Soon, Trina lies dead on the cloakroom floor, where the children are sure to find her the following morning. McTeague then goes to Trina's room, pries open the trunk and once again steals her money.

## Chapter 19 Analysis

Trina's love for her money now outweighs her own self-respect. She is no longer concerned with appearing to others to be wealthy, because that would come at a cost of spending some of her money. She is happier living a pauper's life while still being able to keep the company of her money. Even the thought of her husband having left her alone and disfigured bothers her less than the thought of him having the audacity to steal her money. When McTeague comes to ask for money or a place to stay, Trina does not cite her disfigurement or the loss of a husband as her reason for refusing him any money or help. She gives only the fact that he stole from her as a reason. Clearly the loss of the money means more to her than anything else ever could.

The violent scene in which McTeague murders his wife is the final step in McTeague's decline. So obsessed is he with taking the money that his wife has withheld from him, that he is willing to kill her for it. He despises her so much that he can kill her for money

without a second thought. That money, he surmises, was rightfully his, at least in part, all along.

The author employs an interesting use of repetition throughout the novel, and there is a good example of this in this chapter. In the beginning of the novel, when McTeague is falling in love with Trina, he remarks about her hair, her eyes, her chin. Now, as he is ravaged by hatred for his wife, these same qualities are mentioned, in the same words. Again, as in a previous chapter, this creates a chilling contrast and powerful imagery. The very thing that first draws McTeague to Trina now fills him with disgust, just as the very thing that promises to afford the McTeagues a comfortable life has been the poison in their marriage, leading to the eventual murder of one spouse at the hands of the other.

Norris holds nothing back in this chapter. The murder is as violent and descriptive as it could be, and it puts McTeague's descent into madness front and center in the reader's mind. There is nothing left to wonder about: McTeague kills his wife, in cold blood, for the money she has kept from him for so many years.





# Chapter 20

## Chapter 20 Summary

McTeague makes his way back to the Big Dipper Mine, where he worked as a child before being sent away to learn dentistry. It seems like a lifetime ago. He finds himself a job in the mine, on the night shift, under the name Burlington. One night, McTeague is awakened by an unknown source. Standing peering into the darkness, McTeague sees the form of someone coming. The sheriff is after him. By the time they reach the bunkhouse, McTeague is gone.

## Chapter 20 Analysis

This short chapter serves to answer the question of what happens to McTeague after he kills his wife. We learn that he has settled in to a happy life as a miner, although he will never fully be free, despite having the money, because he is a fugitive. The money can't protect him from that. He has come full circle, as if the ugly parts of his life had never occurred.



# Chapter 21

## Chapter 21 Summary

McTeague is on the run when he meets up with a couple of miners, and the three decide to go prospecting. They find a spot full of gold. They set up camp, believing they will make a fortune. McTeague, however, is still paranoid. He cannot rest. Just as he has before, he keeps imagining that he hears someone coming, someone after him. He finally resolves to leave his gold fortune behind, to stay on the run from the authorities. After travelling through unyielding heat, encountering rattlesnakes and suffering through bouts of paranoia, McTeague decides he can travel no further. A short while later, McTeague is awakened by a shout. He looks up to see Marcus standing over him.

## Chapter 21 Analysis

This is the ultimate upper-hand play. Marcus has tracked down McTeague in the middle of the Nevada desert, and McTeague is now, once again, faced with his adversary. McTeague is forced, yet again, to yield to his conscience and leave behind the possibility of a good life. It appears that he will be on the run for the rest of his life. He cannot afford the luxury of friends, nor can he reveal who he really is. Again, the idea of keeping up appearances manifests itself, albeit this time in a rather twisted way. The ugliness of McTeague's true self cannot be revealed, and in order to keep his freedom he must pass up the chance at a good life, with friends and money and a job.



## Chapter 22

### Chapter 22 Summary

Marcus demands to know where the five thousand dollars is and then asks McTeague if he has any water. As Marcus turns to the mule to get the water, the animal takes off running, with their only water supply still on his back. The two men wonder how to solve this situation. Without water, they will never survive in the desert. They decide to shoot the animal, taking care not to shot through the canteen. A possibility they do not account for, however, is that the mule may fall, after being shot, and land on the canteen, bursting it and spilling the water. This is precisely what occurs. Now without water in the scorching desert, the two men turn their attentions to the matter of the money. Each feels he is entitled to it.

The two men fight over the money, despite the inhumane temperature of the valley and the fact that they now have no water with which to stay alive. Neither is willing to give up his claim to the money, not even if it means dying of exhaustion. In the fight, McTeague kills Marcus and thinks he has the upper hand once again. The final surprise comes when McTeague realizes that, just before he expired, Marcus slipped the handcuffs over his wrist and McTeague's. Marcus is dead, and McTeague is handcuffed to him, a certain death sentence.

### Chapter 22 Analysis

The final chapter in the book brings together all of the themes that have been building throughout the novel: greed, pride, money-lust, paranoia and one-upmanship. Marcus must find McTeague in order to avenge his cousin's murder, but more so to reclaim the money he has always felt should have been his. McTeague, having suffered from paranoia since running from San Francisco, is forced to face his captor, a man with whom he has had both the closest of friendships and the most vicious of rivalries. Marcus finds himself dependent on McTeague's water supply for survival, and the two men soon find that they are in exactly the same predicament. They will die together, in the desert, of heat exhaustion. They will spend their final moments together. This does not soften the edge of their rivalry, however. Even as the realization comes over the two men that they will certainly die in the desert, each finds in himself the desire to fight for the money. Although the five thousand dollars can be of no use whatsoever to the men at this point, the very possibility of obtaining it from the other is enough to spur them on to a fight. As was the experience during their entire rivalry, just when one thinks he has the other backed in a corner, his opponent shows his cards, and he's holding pocket aces. Marcus may have lost the fight to McTeague, but he ensures with his last breath that if he isn't going to make it out of the desert alive, neither is McTeague.



# Characters

## Trina Sieppe (McTeague)

The daughter of German-Swiss immigrants, Trina is a delicate, attractive and sensible girl. She prides herself on being tidy and precise in her actions and appearance. Initially courted by Marcus, her cousin, Trina eventually marries McTeague, whom she calls Mac. Just before they decide to marry, Trina learns that she has won the lottery, a prize of five thousand dollars! This money turns out to be the cause of her emotional and psychological decline, as she refuses to spend any of it, becoming obsessed with scrimping and saving.

Trina goes from having a loving family and an adequate home, to living in a room above a kindergarten, alone and maimed by her brute of a husband. Though her emotional state and physical appearance change dramatically over the course of the novel's twenty-two chapters, one thing never changes, her lust for money. She does not lust for the things money can buy or for the kind of life wealth can afford a person, but simply for having the money itself. Several times throughout the novel, Trina is faced with a situation which her money can get her out of her quite effortlessly, but she finds more pride and virtue in the saving. To her, saving a penny is worth living in squalor, worth alienating her husband and worth making her life so much more laborious than it needs to be. In the end, she ends up with neither a husband, nor a house, nor the money.

At the end of the novel, Trina ends up dead at the hands of her husband. She has been becoming increasingly more alone throughout the novel, and when she dies on the floor of her workplace in the middle of the night, at the hands of her husband, her isolation is complete.

## McTeague

McTeague, a dentist, is a giant of a man, with limbs like trees and the wits of a dim lantern. He is socially inept, lacking many social graces such as how to purchase tickets to the theater or entertain a lady. His mannerisms are unrefined, as are his tastes. In the beginning of the novel, McTeague is quite a likeable character, with his boyish clumsiness around women and his tenderness towards Trina. This starts to unravel, however, when another self emerges from within him. He reveals a beastly side of himself, one prone to outbursts of violence and inappropriate behavior. He also suffers from a greedy lust for money, but from a different perspective than Trina. It is not the desire to be wealthy that so intrigues and outrages McTeague. It is the fact of his wife's refusal to spend the money that so angers him. He does not like Trina's attempts to assert herself over him, and his need to control her eventually takes the form of an unstoppable hunger for the money, for control over it more than for the money itself. He begins to hate his wife and turns into a violent, sadistic monster, taking pleasure in hurting his wife and in asserting his authority over her.



McTeague undergoes a complete psychological metamorphosis in this book. In the beginning of the novel he is quiet, clumsy and submissive to a point. By the final chapter, he has maimed, stolen from, deserted and murdered his wife, skipped town and killed his former best friend, all in the name of power. His decline is at first barely perceptible, appearing only to be the natural process one goes through when a marriage leaves the honeymoon stage and enters into the rut of routine. Slowly, though, the reader is let into the psyche of McTeague, a place of unspeakable ugliness. At the end of the novel, when it becomes clear that Marcus really does get the better of McTeague, there reader is filled with a sense of justice, of having witnessed McTeague's getting his just desserts.

## **McTeague's "other self"**

The man into which McTeague transforms near the end of the novel is so far removed from the one he was at the beginning, it is worthy of being called a separate character. He does not just change certain characteristics of himself based on mood or weather or drink. He transforms into a completely different man, a beast, something inhumane and savage.

## **Trina's "other self"**

As with McTeague, Trina undergoes such a radical change that she can only be described in terms of being another character. Trina's second self is a money-hungry, cold-hearted person who cares for nothing and no one, not even herself, other than her beloved coins.

## **Mr. Sieppe**

Trina's father plays a minor role in the novel, appearing only in the first half of the story. He is a stern man, having come from a military background, and he tolerates no insubordination of any kind, from his family or otherwise. Despite his stern and straight-laced exterior, Mr. Sieppe is rather tender with his daughter, in his own way. He is something of a two-dimensional character in the novel, which may have been intentional, given that he is likely not the type of man to reveal his feelings or to be prone to emotionalism. Nonetheless, one does get a sense of likeability from this character, despite his gruff exterior. He likes order and precision and wants only the best for his family.

## **Mrs. Sieppe**

Trina's mother also plays a lesser role in the book, although she does figure more prominently than Trina's father. A plump woman of Swiss heritage, she speaks (as does her husband) with a thick Swiss accent, sometimes mixing up English words. This makes for a very likeable and real character, the type of woman you would like to have



as an honorary aunt or grandmother. She is concerned first and foremost with the lives of her children, Trina, August, and the twins. She can often be found tending after their needs in one way or another, whether it is during the preparations for Trina's wedding or during the theater show, when she brings fruit to keep August quiet. Devoted to her husband, she packs up her younger children and follows Mr. Sieppe to the south of the state, not knowing what the future is to hold for her.

## Old Grannis

Old Grannis is an elderly bookbinder who lives in the same flat as McTeague. He is a loner, who prefers to stay out of the way of other people. He is content to sit alone in his room, binding his books and "keeping company" with the lady next door, Miss Baker. It is not until nearly the end of the book that he actually passes any meaningful time with Miss Baker, when she comes into this room to bring him tea.

Grannis, too, is drawn in by the lure of money. When a company offers him a fair amount of money for his binding machine, Grannis cannot turn it down. He soon finds out, though, as do all of the other characters in the book, that money cannot buy happiness. That on which you put a price should probably never have been sold in the first place.

## Marcus Schoeler

Marcus is a young man about the same age as McTeague. He is Trina's cousin, and at the beginning of the novel is courting her with intentions to propose marriage to her. He "gives her" to McTeague, in a gesture he considers quite magnanimous. He is a man in need of validation, having low self-esteem. He is the type of man who feels he needs to put others down in order to make himself look better. Marcus goes through an emotional decline, too, but to a lesser extent than McTeague or Trina. Marcus feels scorned by his best friend and his girlfriend, and he is bent on making them pay for that sin. When Trina wins the lottery, Marcus' focus shifts. He is no longer upset about the loss of the girl. Now he wants the money that would have been his. Marcus is the eventual captor of McTeague, after the latter kills his wife and flees San Francisco. Marcus chases McTeague into the Nevada desert in search of justice for himself as much as for his cousin.

## Miss Baker

Another resident of the flat, Miss Baker is an elderly woman, a retired dressmaker. Like Grannis, she passes her time alone, in her room, all the while observing the ritual of spending time with Grannis, each on opposite sides of a shared wall. She is a very reserved and timid woman, easily flustered by Grannis' mere presence, and humiliated at his unresponsiveness when she goes to his room to bring him tea. She has a brief moment of courage, something quite out of character, and it is the catalyst that brings her together with Grannis. Miss Baker is called to tend to Trina after McTeague has left



her, and she takes on the role of a surrogate mother to Trina, with Trina's own mother so far away.

## **Maria Macapa**

Maria is the Mexican lady who cleans and tidies the flat every two weeks. Though she means well, she is generally accepted around the flat to be somewhat crazy. Marcus gets great joy out of teasing her. Maria becomes Trina's friend when they discover they each have an abusive husband. Trina eventually finds Maria's murdered body in her home. Ironically, both women end up murdered by their husbands.

Maria is famous among the people of the flat for telling a story about a gold plate service her family once owned, a tale that contributes to her reputation for being a little on the crazy side. She nonetheless tells the story with conviction, until one day after a bout of dementia, she no longer recalls the story.

## **Zerkow**

Zerkow is a miserly Polish-Jew who never tires of hearing Maria's story. He buys junk from her and hoards his treasures. He loves Maria's story so much, in fact, that he marries Maria just so he can hear it whenever he wants! Like the other characters, his appetite for wealth leads to his demise. After murdering his wife, he flees and is found dead in San Francisco Bay, presumably of suicide.



# Objects/Places

## The Concertina

Perhaps McTeague's most prized possession from his bachelor days, the concertina symbolizes, in turn, McTeague's independence, his renewed ability to stand up to his wife (when he refuses to sell it) and his loss of control (when he finds that Trina has sold it).

## The Canary

McTeague's pet throughout the whole of the novel, the canary is the creature who is with McTeague at his death, thus having accompanied him full-circle, from the beginning of his emotional journey to the end. He is the one constant in McTeague's life.

## Trina's Wedding Bouquet

Pressed behind glass and preserved, Trina's bouquet becomes symbolic of the state of their marriage. Both are frozen in time, untouched by the changing elements around them. The bouquet symbolizes an irretrievable moment of happiness.

## The Coffee-Joint

The place where McTeague takes his Sunday lunch, and where he and Marcus pass time together is the Coffee-Joint.

## Cliff House

The bar and billiard hall wherein Marcus "gives" Trina to McTeague is the Cliff House.

## B Street Station

The train station near Trina's family home is the B Street Station.

## Schuetzen Park

The park wherein several picnics take place throughout the novel is Schuetzen Park.





## **Polk Street**

The street on which most of the characters live, where McTeague's "Parlours" are is Polk Street.

## **The Five Thousand Dollars**

The amount Trina wins in the lottery and the source of obsession for several of the characters is \$5,000.

## **Handcuffs**

Marcus brings handcuffs with him into the desert.



# Social Sensitivity

Begun while Norris was a student at Berkeley and Harvard and published in 1899, *McTeague: A Story of San Francisco* is a masterpiece of American naturalism. Set in the 1890s, the novel narrates the story of McTeague, an innocent, animal-like man from the mines of Placer County, California, who at the opening of the book has achieved a degree of civilization and is working as an unlicensed dentist on Polk Street in San Francisco. Through marriage to Trina, a middle-class woman, he rises socially and enjoys a few happy years until, forced to abandon his profession, he turns to drink and declines into bestiality and murder.

After an atavistic return to the mining country of his youth, he meets a melodramatic end in the desert wastelands of Death Valley.

The initial inspiration for this novel was quite probably a murder committed in San Francisco in 1893, while Norris was a senior at Berkeley. A laborer whom newspaper accounts described as a drunken brute who would beat his wife whenever she refused him money, stabbed her to death in the cloakroom of the kindergarten where she worked as a cleaning woman. This vicious crime involving drunkenness, poverty, and brutality must have seemed a perfect topic for a young writer deeply immersed in Emile Zola's fiction and very interested in current scientific and anthropological theories. As Norris said in one of his essays, Zola's example had taught him that "terrible things must happen to the characters of the naturalistic tale," that something out of the ordinary must disturb their commonplace lives so that they can be "thrust into the throes of a vast and terrible drama." Norris had been introduced to contemporary ideas about the evolutionary process in his classes with Professor Joseph LeConte, who taught him about a theory of evolution which posited that, while humanity as a whole had slowly risen from the level of brute bestiality to civilization and would probably continue to evolve to higher levels, every individual retained an animalistic nature which, under certain conditions, could come to prominence and force that individual back to the brutal state. Through LeConte, Norris had also become acquainted with the ideas of the late nineteenth century school of criminal anthropology, in particular, with Cesare Lombroso's theory that the criminal is characterized by atavism resulting from degeneration of the nervous system, with alcohol being one of the chief causes of that degeneration.

As the subtitle of the novel announces, along with being a fiction about degeneration and atavistic criminality, *McTeague* is "A Story of San Francisco." The importance Norris gives to developing this aspect of his narrative derives from his belief that "the novel of California must be a novel of city life" and from his intuition that the reading public was eager for stories revealing modern urban realities. During the time that Norris's book was written, the 1890s, San Francisco experienced a period of rapid change and expansion due to urbanization, industrialization, immigration, and internal migration. Many of these changes are echoed in the novel. *McTeague* has come to San Francisco from a mining district in California while Trina's family are Swiss immigrants who arrived in the city via Los Angeles. The Polk Street district where much of the action takes place

is inhabited by a colorful mixture of people of various nationalities and professions while San Francisco as a whole is depicted as a city in transformation, with fluid geographic boundaries and a flexible social hierarchy. Thus, different socioeconomic and ethnic groups live side by side and an individual like McTeague, without wealth or education, can attempt to rise in life. Both the philosophy and the milieu of the novel made a strong impression on contemporary readers and are among the major reasons for the continuing popularity of this work.



# Techniques

McTeague has been criticized for the melodramatic elements present in its action, the simplifications of its philosophy, and its occasionally ponderous style. Yet, most critics agree that the novel possesses intensity and power.

These compelling qualities are in large measure due to Norris's able manipulation of his major techniques which, along with his particular method of characterization, include his attention both to the architecture of his narrative and to his use of symbols.

Because Norris shapes his story by adhering to the typical pattern of the degeneration tale, which traces the stages by which characters move visibly toward objective doom, the plot of his novel assumes bold outlines and a sense of inevitability. He further makes his story vivid by his choice of detail to render the actuality of his characters' lives and by his ability to create memorable scenes. Indeed, his descriptions of San Francisco, Placer County, and Death Valley, as well as his development of episodes and vignettes such as McTeague in his Dental Parlours, the wedding between McTeague and Trina, an evening at the theater, Trina's murder, and the death struggle with Marcus, all demonstrate the author's power of observation, his skill at dealing with physical settings, and his flair for dramatization. Norris's narrative also gains efficacy from the way he suits his tone and style to the overall evolution of the action. Through chapter ten, as he introduces his characters and sketches in their milieu, his tone is light and reveals a comic sensibility, but in the next ten chapters, as the tale moves toward its predestined climax in Trina's death, the style shifts toward pathos, while in the last three chapters, which follow McTeague's atavistic flight and his final confrontation with Marcus, the pace of the narrative speeds up and the tone assumes a note of tragedy.

Most of the characters in McTeague are associated with certain objects which through their constant physical or psychological presence become symbols around which the author organizes his narrative. Chief among these symbolic objects is the huge replica of a gold tooth which McTeague uses to advertise his practice and that sums up and interprets important aspects of his story. At the start of the novel, McTeague obsessively desires this gold tooth as proof of his status in society, and once he possesses it is thoroughly content. When his decline begins, he clings to the tooth and insists on keeping it in each of his ever-more-cramped apartments. Losing it is for him a shocking catastrophe that foreshadows his later tragedy. Other such symbols include Trina's lottery ticket and her gold coins, Maria's ill-fated gold plates, and the canary McTeague keeps in a gilded cage. Significantly, most of these objects are associated with gold, which becomes the novel's dominant symbol. In terms of the characters' individual psyches, gold is an appropriate image both for their initial dreams and for the consuming greed that eventually infects them all. Gold is a similarly perfect symbol for the larger socioeconomic implications of the novel. It evokes the Gold Rush which helped settle the state and determined the character of many of its original settlers. As currency and malevolent deity, it defines the materialism of an age when many human values and social ideals were sacrificed in the name of economic progress. With evident irony, it sums up the degradation of the American Dream, which, as the pioneers worked

their way across the continent toward California, had been transformed from one of equality and opportunity to one of wealth and exploitation.



# Themes

## Themes

As befits a classic naturalistic novel, the story told in *McTeague* asserts that the individual, rather than being the free creature described by Ralph Waldo Emerson in such essays as "Self Reliance" (1841), is conditioned by the ineluctable forces of heredity, environment, and chance, and moreover, is at every moment subject to physical and psychic deterioration. To give these themes dramatic form, Norris follows a pattern he took from the popular interpretations of evolutionary theory he had learned from LeConte and Lombroso. At the start of the novel *McTeague*, a massive, mentally slow, and psychologically primitive man, has reached the apex of his individual development. The simple routine of his daily life is upset when "mysterious instincts" attract him to Trina, a girl from a thrifty Swiss peasant background. Their courtship and marriage awaken his natural brutality and her hereditary desire for saving, two of the subconscious forces governing their lives. Circumstance and fate then reinforce their atavism. By chance, Trina wins five thousand dollars in a lottery and *McTeague* loses his profession when his wife's ex-suitor, Marcus, reports that he is practicing dentistry without a license. Deprived of work, *McTeague* takes to drink, while Trina becomes obsessed by greed. Their socioeconomic decline is thus accompanied by a psychological degeneration until *McTeague*, having completed his descent to alcohol-induced criminality, murders Trina, takes her money, and goes back to the mining country from which he came. Shortly, following an animal-like instinct that someone is tracking him down, he flees to Death Valley, where Marcus finds him. The novel closes in the desert, with *McTeague* handcuffed to Marcus's corpse.

Besides being a deterministic narrative, *McTeague* deals with some classic American themes and myths, all interpreted in the light of social Darwinism and presented with a certain turn-of-the-century taste for the monstrous and the grotesque. For example, *McTeague*'s decline reverses the standard story of the "self-made man" while Trina's miserliness contradicts the traditional American belief in the importance of thrift as a means of rising in society. The pictures the novel offers of *McTeague* as a miner and of Marcus as a cowboy deflate two of the nation's most enduring myths of life on the frontier and overturn idealistic concepts about the promise of the West.

Finally, the fact that Trina's avarice, *McTeague*'s criminality, and Marcus's jealousy are all in large part triggered by the gold Trina wins in the lottery certainly can be interpreted as a condemnation of the rampant materialism of the closing decades of the nineteenth century.

## Nature

The idea that one is not responsible for, or capable of changing, his or her own makeup is a predominant theme throughout this book. Trina justifies her miserly ways by saying



she "can't help it." McTeague alludes to the fact that his violent and drinking ways are due in part to his father's passing those traits down to him.

Often people use the "nature" argument ("it's in my nature") to justify their actions rather than having to face their flaws and potentially do something about them. In this book, this is certainly true of McTeague and of Trina. Neither wants to change their ways, and each finds it easiest to dismiss their flaws out of hand and to attribute them to nature or, to use a scientific word, heredity. In Trina's case, she does not want to admit that the money may be the cause of the stinginess. She would rather have nothing bad to say about the money and to claim that something bigger than her nature is at work, a theory that enables her to throw up her hands and simply carry on doing what she is doing.

McTeague, on the other hand, blames his father for some of his tendencies. With him, it is as though perpetuating his father's tendencies is a way for McTeague to throw back into his father's face the pain he caused him. He will exact on Trina the rage he feels toward his father and then blame it on his makeup and be able to go about his business. It is partially for this reason that he is able to murder his wife. He is so overcome by rage that he doesn't take the time, or doesn't want to take the time, to decide his actions for himself. Something else is in charge, something innate in him that makes him who he is. Perhaps this is why he gets a thrill out of hurting his wife. He feels like he can vent his rage and disgust, all the while thinking, "I couldn't have stopped myself; it's just who I am."

## Perception versus Reality

Another major theme in the novel is that of appearances versus reality. Trina would rather be thought to have a sick husband rather than have people know she is in financial trouble, but when the possibility of going to jail becomes an alternative, Trina decides that being perceived as poor isn't as humiliating as having people know you are in prison. For her, the appearance of going to jail is worse even than the actual prospect of it.

McTeague is obsessed with appearances, too, as evidenced by his desire for a gold gilded tooth for a sign. It doesn't matter that his office is also his home and that he lives on modest means. As long as someone walking down the street sees that sign, he will think that McTeague is successful, and that will be enough. People's perception creates enough of a reality for him. He is content to live only in the perceptions of the people around him, whether or not the perception matches his reality.

Grannis and Miss Baker fall into this category, as well. Although they are like two schoolchildren with schoolyard crushes, neither would ever want to reveal it to those around them, even though everyone knows they have feelings for one another. To them, as long as they believe their friends are unaware of their feelings, it remains a secret. In the same way, their nightly ritual of keeping company with one another isn't really spending time together, but it is enough that each of them thinks it is.



## Greed

This is perhaps the most all-encompassing theme of the novel. Each character is motivated to some degree by greed, and it is the quest to attain the object of that greed that leads to the demise of so many of the characters. Trina's greed for her money is the most glaring example. She will stop at nothing to preserve her wealth even though the money itself is of no use unless it is spent. She cannot part with a nickel of it, and it becomes such an obsession to her that she ends up lying to her husband, denying her mother and living like a pauper so as not to spend any of it. She is not greedy for material possessions, only for the money itself, for its physical qualities and for the power for which it stands, another kind of greed of which Trina is guilty.

McTeague is also driven by greed. His is a greed for money, for a better life and for control. He wants control over his wife, over their household and over their lives. Each of these leads back to the money that his wife hoards and will not allow him to spend. It is an attack on his manhood that she holds the purse strings, and he is greedy to regain the power, to shift the dynamic within his marriage back in his favor. He will stop at nothing, not even the murder of his wife and best friend, to achieve his goals.

Zerkow also exhibits greed, and as with the other characters, it is his downfall. Zerkow's greed for Maria's story and for the treasures she supposedly had at one point drives him, too, to murder his wife, and presumably to commit suicide. So all-encompassing is this greed that he is driven to madness over it.





# Style

## Setting

The novel is set in the early years of the twentieth century, in San Francisco, California. The characters live in a quaint neighbourhood on Polk Street. The novel takes place primarily inside the flat that most of the characters share, with some events (such as the argument between McTeague and Marcus) taking place at the local pub. This narrow view of the world in which the characters live serves to shine a bright light on the nature of the characters themselves and on the nature of their daily interactions, without the distraction of outside events.

A few key events in the story center on a park. This is where McTeague and Trina begin their relationship, and it is the scene of a wrestling-match-gone-bad between McTeague and Marcus. Towards the end of the novel, other settings are involved. A kindergarten that turns into a gruesome murder scene is Trina's new residence, and several scenes are depicted outside, on the streets of San Francisco. Generally, during these outdoor scenes it is nighttime and raining, another way the author adds to the dark and dismal tone of the novel through the use of setting. The final scenes in the novel take place in the desert, to which McTeague has escaped after committing an unspeakable terror. A search party is hunting him, and the vast expanse of the desert provides a fitting backdrop to the scenes that conclude the novel.

## Point of View

The novel is written in the third person, but the title character is the primary focus. The events are generally seen as centering around McTeague's life and his descent into madness. Although the point of view is that of an external, third person voice, the author creates subtle changes in point of view. The reader is seamlessly drawn into the psyche of McTeague, then Trina, and back again, throughout the novel. We are compelled to sympathize with characters at varying times, through the author's ability to show us both sides of a character's psyche. For example, we see in McTeague a violent madman, but there is something in the story that also allows us to sympathize with his situation, if only briefly. He is living with a woman who is stuck in the past, still essentially living in her father's home. She is, in effect, forcing the couple to live in squalor because of her obsession with hoarding and adding to her stash of money. His resentment toward his wife underlines his violent behavior.

Similarly, the readers see the secondary characters through the eyes of the primary characters, getting our information about them through a form of hearsay, wherein the primary characters words, opinions and actions serve to illuminate the traits of the minor characters. The relationship between Miss Baker and Old Grannis, for example, is illuminated through Maria's actions. She opens the door for the narrative voice to explain the subtleties of that dynamic. For example, Maria goes scavenging for junk



items in the two elderly characters' rooms and then stands between the rooms talking to each of them, essentially forcing them to talk to one another. This behavior invites curiosity about why this is significant, and the author is then ushered through the door to offer an explanation. This is one way in which the author gets around the limitations of third person narrative, such as not having an internal view of the "invisible" relationships between characters.

## Language and Meaning

The author employs literary devices such as foreshadowing, repeating identical phrases in opposing settings and the use of a cliffhanger ending to create tension and drama in the story. An example of a repeated phrase to illustrate contrasting situations is McTeague's repetition of the rhyme, "No one to love, none to caress, left all alone in this world's wilderness." Though the first time the rhyme is heard it evokes a feeling of sadness or empathy for this lonely bachelor, the second time it appears it creates an eerie, disturbed feeling. They are identical words, but the use of them in dramatically different scenes evokes in the reader dramatically different emotions.

The madness of the characters is depicted through several different means, including (in the case of Maria) nonsensical phrases and stories she later will not remember recounting. She is quoted as having said regularly, "Had a flying squirrel an' let him go," and the author never does explain whether this phrase has any meaning to Maria or not. To the reader, it is an early glimpse into a mind that will deteriorate further as the story progresses. McTeague's decline is illustrated through the use of his words toward his wife. He starts out somewhat tender to her but eventually speaks to her as one would speak only to an enemy, not the woman to whom he is wed. McTeague's cruel actions toward his wife (ultimately resulting in a gruesome death) are unspoken uses of language. Through the use of action, the author is utilizing a popular writing adage: "Show, don't tell." Instead of stating "McTeague went mad," Norris shows us the dark side of McTeague through his actions.

## Structure

*McTeague* is broken into twenty-two chapters of varying lengths. Some of the shorter chapters, such as the one in which Grannis and Miss Baker finally get together, serve as a break in the tension of the rest of the novel. They serve to allow the reader to catch his breath and, perhaps, to digest the events of the previous chapters. Others, particularly the more lengthy ones, provide the reader a more in-depth view of a character and his motivations. In order to show a psychological decay such as that which occurs in this novel, Frank Norris employs the use of lengthy chapters that allow a more dramatic illustration of the decline. Shorter chapter would have broken up the story to too severe a degree, and the effect would not have been as gripping.

These longer chapters generally employ the use of the cliffhanger, compelling the reader to turn the page. Invariably, at the end of a long passage, the author drops a

literary bomb, a clue to the reader that exciting things are to come, daring us to turn the page. In this way, the author creates pacing and tension.

The chapters in this book are simply numbered, rather than being named as in some books. This serves to unite the story as a whole, without delineating separate events in the story. The reader is given the impression that the story is more fluid, each part connected to the surrounding parts. The chapters are merely a way to break up the book, not the story.



## Quotes

"Name is Maria - Miranda - Macapa...Had a flying squirrel an' let him go."

"No one to love, none to caress, Left all alone in this world's wilderness."

"There were more than a hundred pieces, and every one of them gold - just that punch-bowl was worth a fortune - thick, fat, red gold."

"With each concession gained the man's desire cools; with every surrender made the woman's adoration increases. But why should it be so?"

"The whole place exhaled a mingled odor of bedding, creosote, and ether."

"This poor crude dentist of Polk Street, stupid, ignorant, vulgar, with his sham education and plebeian tastes...was living through his first romance, his first idyl."

"With her, the feminine element entered his little world."

"His point of view was at once enlarged and confused..."

"four, three oughts, twelve."

"You do not love me - no; Bid me good-by and go;"

"Why could he not always love her purely, cleanly?"

"You can't make small of me!"

# Adaptations

McTeague was made into a remarkable silent film by Erich Von Stroheim who said he had been attracted to Norris's novel because of the power with which it captured its time. Filmed over a nine month period ending in December of 1923 and released by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer exactly one year later with the title Greed, this movie starred Gibson Gowland as McTeague, Zasu Pitts as Trina, and Jean Hersholt as Marcus. The film had a difficult history. Von Stroheim's script followed the novel in almost every detail and, to assure a sense of authenticity, he systematically shot scenes in the locations described by Norris. The result of this exhaustive and scrupulous respect for the novel was a film that originally consisted of forty-two reels and ran for eight hours.

At the insistence of the producers, Von Stroheim reduced the film to an eighteen-reel version which he said was the minimum length necessary to do justice to the story and which he wanted to release in two parts. Metro-GoldwynMayer disagreed and had their story editor June Mathis trim it to ten reels running just under two hours, which is the only version ever seen by the public. Despite such drastic manipulation and cutting, Greed remains a masterpiece and is a classic of motion-picture naturalism. Taking as its major theme the dehumanizing influence of money, the film traces the moral decline of its protagonists as they succumb to the lust for gold. In its series of stunning sequences, the film clearly demonstrates Von Stroheim's skill at characterization, the rich detail of his social settings, and his talent for macabre violence. The acting is powerful, with Zasu Pitts superbly performing the only truly tragic role of her career and Gibson Gowland creating a memorable McTeague.



## Topics for Discussion

Is there anything which you would stop at nothing to achieve/obtain?

Can money buy happiness? At what price?

Do you think we are the victims of our nature, our environment or both?

Can greed ever be a good thing? Give examples.

Have you ever given up something you love in search of happiness? Did you find it?

Agree or disagree with this statement: Perception is reality.

Do you think it is wiser to be a thrifty person, saving for a rainy day, or to live well in the moment?

What really caused McTeague's madness? Was it his nature, his greed or something else?

Was Trina justified in lying to her husband in order to save money?

## Literary Precedents

Generally seen as a straight naturalistic novel in terms of its major themes, embodying such typical assumptions as biological determinism, atavistic degeneration, the influence of milieu, and the operation of chance, *McTeague* is considered to be one of the most important American novels of the 1890s to employ a naturalistic technique.

Scholarship has revealed numerous incidents and scenes that document the influence on this work of Zola's novels, in particular, of *Therese Raquin* (1881; original in French, 1867) for its study of an unhappy marriage between a nervous woman and a slow-witted man, of *L'Assommoir* (1879; original in French, 1877) for its description of a lower-class urban environment and for certain episodes like the wedding feast, and of *Human Brutes* (1890; *La Bete Humaine*, 1890) where an unrepentant murderer is also the victim of heredity alcoholism and insanity. Simultaneously, like all of Norris's fiction, *McTeague* is a peculiarly American novel which offers insight into the social and material world of its time and contains in its themes and action a revealing commentary on the ideology and myths of that period. Thus, even if cast in a Zolaesque mode, it could only have been written by an American novelist of the 1890s.



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