

Fluid Sexualities in Frank Norris's *McTeague*

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Thesis submitted to the faculty of the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts
In
English

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April 30, 2013
Blacksburg, VA

Keywords: American literature, Frank Norris, *McTeague*, queer theory, sexuality

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ABSTRACT

Frank Norris's novel *McTeague* can be read as an intense reflection on the limitations of language surrounding fluid sexualities in late-nineteenth century America. Through a queer theoretical lens, I examine the ways in which Norris collapses his characters and narrative in order to demonstrate those limits. Trina and McTeague suffer acutely from their inability to articulate their sexualities, and the narrator of the novel does little to compensate for the characters' failure to speak. The novel, which is a collection of broken genres, further exposes the fact that various kinds of rigid narrative forms cannot sufficiently frame or articulate fluid sexualities. Through character, narrative, and genre breakdown, Norris reflects how the nineteenth century's lack of language regarding those who occupy a variety of sexualities can tear people and language apart.

Acknowledgements

I sincerely thank my director, Dr. Sorrentino, for his guidance and patience. I have been a student of his since my undergraduate career at Virginia Tech, and without his support I would not have had the courage to pursue my education at the graduate level. I also thank my readers, Dr. Powell and Dr. Gardner, for their helpful and diverse feedback and for their engaging classes.

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Chapter 1: Reading Sexualities

The recent inclusion of queer theory to literary studies encourages scholars to examine any kind of sexual activity or identity that falls into normative or deviant categories as expressed by an author. However, conceptualizing a queer analysis of a piece of literature proves difficult for several reasons. In order to recognize the complications of queer analysis with regards to a novel, it is important to understand queer theorizing. Eve Sedgwick's "Axiomatic," a seminal work in queer studies, explains:

...the primary challenge posed by queer theory...is the hegemonic understanding of the relations between identity, sex, gender and sexuality. Whereas Western culture has attempted to ossify these relations in the name of patriarchy, and feminism has tended to want to reconfigure them while preserving their conventional descriptive force, queer theory politicizes sex, gender and sexuality in a way that severs the notion of identity from any stable reference points. In this way, queerness resists the regimes ... of measuring, categorizing, and knowing the truth of sexual orientation. (Morland and Willox 4)

Expanding on this explanation, queer theorist Annamarie Jagose states, "Queer is widely perceived as calling into question conventional understandings of sexual identity by deconstructing the categories, oppositions, and equations that sustain them" (97). Therefore, to examine literature through a queer lens means a reader needs to discard those conventional lenses of understanding. Sexual identity cannot be understood through hegemonic conceptualizations because queer resists hegemonic order. Additionally, sexuality should not get discussed through a Western or feminist perspective because these perspectives continue to adhere to conventional (hegemonic or heteronormative) descriptions even as they try to

reconfigure them. And finally, because queer theory rejects regimes of categorization and asserts that gender and sexuality lack stability, therefore, discussing sexuality and gender through “stable” references works counter to queer theorizing. Cumulatively, queer theory itself is “unstable” because it constantly resists the constraints imposed by definition. Therefore, reading with a queer lens means approaching a text with the allowance that the characters might resist heteronormative sexual categorization or that they might resist sexual categorization entirely. Concurrently, when conducting a queer analysis the reader should not put the theory “on top of” the text since queer, by definition, rejects stable conventions of analysis and therefore cannot be “applied.” With all of these caveats regarding queer theory in mind, queer analysis proves a purposefully difficult and troubling endeavor.

But regardless of the challenge queer analysis presents, reading texts through a queer lens has changed the way many approach literary analysis and has provoked the need to reexamine several seminal texts. However, in literary analysis, queer theorists have stayed away from particular genres of late-nineteenth century American literature. In “Reconsidering *McTeague*’s ‘Mark’ and ‘Mac’: Intersections of U.S. Naturalism, Imperial Masculinities, and Desire between Men,” Denise Cruz points out that, “although studies of sexuality have been foundational in reconceptualizing the 1890s, oddly this influence has not transferred widely to the canonical figures of U.S. Naturalism, the literary genre most often linked with the period” (488). Therefore, while some critics have considered sexuality in the literature of the late nineteenth century, literary naturalism as a genre seems exempt from this reconceptualization. One of these canonical, naturalistic texts in which sexuality has gone unconsidered is Frank Norris’s *McTeague*.

Though topics including gender, gender dynamics, sex and homoeroticism have merited scholarship, the study of queer or, as I will refer to it, *fluid* sexualities has not been a focal topic in *McTeague* criticism. When discussing sexuality in *McTeague*, I use the word *fluid* instead of *queer* in a conscious effort to remove the politicized connotation that the word queer has taken on in recent years. The conflation of “queer” as a derogatory term, as a reclaimed political statement, as a rejection of sociopolitical norms, and as a movement unnecessarily complicates the sexuality that I discuss regarding *McTeague*. “Fluid,” on the other hand, describes an inclusive continuum of sexualities including, but not limited to, preference, identification (both self and perceived), and deviance. I have taken this stance because analyses that do consider sexuality in the novel tend to strictly label and categorize gender and sexuality. As a result, a queer consideration or a read that rejects sexual binaries and includes sexually deviant behavior is missing. My project pushes the boundaries of sexual categorization as I argue that *McTeague*’s primary conflict centers on the fluid nature of sexuality and, more precisely, characters’ inability to articulate that fluidity. Furthermore, I argue the novel itself functions as an early queer project in that Frank Norris’s text does not work towards an understanding of sexuality but rather acts as an exploratory work which examines a variety of sexual “deviances.” Norris does this in order to demonstrate the fluid nature of sexuality and to illustrate the difficulty in articulating that fluidity. In the end, the problems and stresses surrounding articulating fluid sexualities causes the novel to devolve narratively to crisis.

The narrative devolution of *McTeague*, which I will continually reference throughout this thesis, is significant for several reasons. For instance, in *McTeague* scholars have argued that that the broken dialogue in *McTeague* indicates a lack of narrative ability on Norris’s part. Additionally, some cite the genre shift which occurs in the last three chapters of the novel as an

awkward move by Norris, especially since the “westward movement” of the text, in fact, moves east. Critics also complain about the difficulty in identifying the narrative voice of the novel. Readers express that they have a difficult time determining whether or not the narration and exposition reflect the narrator’s voice or the character’s voice. As a result, this confuses the text at times and gives critics reason to reflect on Norris’s skill as an author. But, rather than calling it bad writing, I argue that all of these points of confusion in the text (dialogic breakdown, genre breakdown, narrative breakdown) are deliberate moves by Norris to purposefully reflect the ways in which the inability to articulate sexuality can tear a novel’s convention and language apart. Norris fully understands the limits of language. People in the nineteenth century barely spoke about sexuality because it was still a largely taboo subject; therefore, there was little to no language available to articulate the various kinds of sexualities that existed. This issue presents itself at the beginning of the novel, and as the characters push to attempt to articulate those things (sexuality) which they cannot put into language the text breaks down more and more. To compensate for the characters, the narrator often steps in to attempt to explain the issues which the characters face but fails to speak their sexualities as well. And finally, as a result of the failure to articulate by the characters and by the narrator, the novel itself gets pushed to total collapse. Norris, fully aware of the boundaries of language with regards to sexuality, uses the entire narrative form as a way to demonstrate the failure of language and purposefully collapses his text by breaking genre conventions and his own characters.

With this in mind, reading *McTeague* with a queer theoretical lens means reconceptualizing the structure of the novel itself by exploring the ways in which the novel works as a reflection of nineteenth century issues with “language-ing” deviant sexualities. However, some scholars criticize reading alternative sexualities (deviant, homoerotic, asexual or

otherwise) specifically because those desires could not be articulated in the years before those sexualities existed as a social position. In *Monumental Anxieties*, Scott Derrick argues that the lack of vocabulary available to articulate such a social position (specifically, male-male desire) does not mean literary scholars should ignore the attempt to read homoerotic desire in fiction. Derrick also points out that while an author of a text might not identify himself as homosexual his orientation should not preclude homoeroticism as a possible theme in his fiction (4). Furthermore, Derrick lists various ways to read and uncover homoerotic behaviors and tendencies in American literary characters, and his methodology and justification for his project's endeavors create the most comprehensive and current argument for homoeroticism. But, because Derrick does not consider Frank Norris's texts, I apply Derrick's methodology to *McTeague* in order to expand on the discussion of all deviant sexualities. Concurrently, I reject Derrick's implications that late-nineteenth century literature can only be queered by reading to uncover male-male desire. Denise Cruz explains: "for urban immigrants, nonwhite Americans, migrant workers, and the working class, conceptualizations of sexual desire were much more fluid, often pivoting on definitive aspects of gender rather than sexual object choice or including multivalent social and sexual relationships not indexed or rendered visible by the lens of a heterosexual-homosexual binary" (491). As Cruz points out, the sexual binary of categorizing people as either heterosexual or homosexual does not accurately portray sexualities in the late-nineteenth century; instead, for the types of people Cruz lists, sexual desire was fluid and more open in late-nineteenth century America and therefore does not and cannot be considered by a sexual binary. With this in mind, I expand on Derrick's premise to consider the potential that the sexuality of the principle characters in *McTeague* exists on a fluid continuum.

So, while performing a queer analysis of *McTeague* opens up a series of possible interpretations of the text, the primary problem with discussing queer or fluid sexualities is that “queer,” by definition, rejects being defined. Queer theory insists on constantly changing and adapting to the times and rejects pigeonholing itself into being definable as a theory. As a result, attempting to articulate all the varieties of sexualities in *McTeague* might appear to be a fruitless or wrongful practice of queer theory. However, my project does not endeavor to identify all the various sexualities present in *McTeague* and subsequently label each individual character as either hetero or homo; rather, my project focuses on exposing how *McTeague* reflects a world that lacks the language characters need to understand themselves. Because the late nineteenth-century did not have the speech available to understand how a person could occupy a variety of sexualities, the characters in *McTeague* die off in tragic and violent ways and the novel itself devolves into crisis and chaos all because language, genre, and convention fail these characters, who exist outside of the strict categorizations of the late nineteenth-century.

Chapter 2: Realizing Trina Siette

In order to delve into the language crisis of *McTeague*, the first necessary step concerns filling in the queer gaps of *McTeague* scholarship and criticism. While homoeroticism is an important aspect of nineteenth century literature and *McTeague*, and while I will discuss homoeroticism later in this project, a primary problem with existing queer scholarship regarding *McTeague* concerns the fact that it frequently ignores McTeague's wife Trina. Reading queerness and sexuality in *McTeague* cannot function as a complete project without considering her presence and sexuality. To do otherwise would oversimplify Trina, especially since ample evidence exists throughout the text and in literary scholarship that suggests Norris's portrayal of her is purposefully and meaningfully complicated. For those pieces that have considered the ways in which queerness (or, more specifically, homosexuality) manifests in *McTeague*, Trina gets "explained away," and she gets relegated to either a springboard character which McTeague plays off of, or she gets portrayed as nothing but a body or object which blocks the relationship between McTeague and Marcus. Furthermore, critics focusing solely on Trina view her as passive, conniving, or de-sexed. She is, however, far more active and sexually awake than they have acknowledged.

Additionally, considerations of Trina seem determined to focus on whether or not she accurately represents late-nineteenth century New Womanhood. However, this focus is limiting because, ultimately, Trina's status as a New Woman has little to do with the complexities of female sexuality. Furthermore, when Trina gets addressed as a "New Woman" by scholars, her sexuality often gets conflated with her sense of economic independence. And, for those critics who argue that Trina is a failed attempt by Norris at a New Woman character, they demonstrate how her sexual behavior is purposefully written as a perversion to demonstrate the ways in

which acting like a New Woman can hinder a woman's life and the lives of those around her. Furthermore, critics conflate Trina's persona as a reflection of Norris's relationship with the New Woman. For example, in "'For His Own Satisfaction': Eliminating the New Woman Figure in *McTeague*," Maria Brandt states that though Trina seems to be a New Woman, Norris distorts her most recognizable New Woman traits, which reveals "the complexity of Norris's relationship with the New Woman figure, [and] also [encourages] readers to overlook the horrors endured by characters whose flirtation with New Womanhood leads ... to violence, regression, and (of course) greed" (5). While Norris's relationship with the New Woman is certainly worth considering, Trina is purposefully composed as a complex character, and her confusing characteristics exist in order for Norris to convey the fluidity of female sexuality. However, because the nineteenth century considered female sexuality and sexuality in general as taboo subjects, Norris reaches limitations in his language to convey this fluidity. As a result, the language Norris's characters use often breaks down when they deal with issues of sexuality. With this in mind, exploring the dialogue and silences in *McTeague* between its two principle characters, Trina and McTeague, allows the text to speak for itself and demonstrate the ways in which Norris's language mimics the complexities of articulating fluid sexualities.

Maria Brandt writes, "It is a long-recognized feature of Norris's novel that the central woman subjected to abuse tends to be read with waning sympathy" (6). Even though Trina gets abused and murdered in *McTeague*, critics and readers tend to empathize with her husband and pinpoint Trina's actions as the source of McTeague's demise. However, contemporary readers, especially feminist or queer readers, should identify Trina's sexual and physical abuse as inexcusable, and yet she still gets ostracized. This phenomenon of how people read and interpret Trina negatively is due in large part to the portrayal of Trina's sexual "perversions" and Trina's

inability to articulate her sexuality. Throughout history female sexuality as a subject has been silenced, met with contention, and suppressed, and the refusal to acknowledge aspects of female sexuality still exists today. As a result, contemporary readers emotionally distance themselves from feeling any sort of sympathy towards Trina because of the difficulty in labeling her sexuality. In other words, readers have a hard time aligning themselves with or understanding a character with whom they do not identify. Furthermore, the fact that Norris allows Trina to attempt to express aspects of her sexuality through dialogue, silence, and masochism turns readers of the past and present away because any attempt by a woman to articulate her sexuality, whether successfully or not, is inappropriate.

Another problem with reading Trina's sexuality Paul Civello's addresses in "Evolutionary Feminism, Popular Romance, and Frank Norris's 'Man's Woman.'" He explains that Frank Norris, "attempts to create a heroine who is far different from the hackneyed maiden of popular romance," and "this attempt is threatened by his inability to overcome or transcend the dominant patriarchal ideology" (Civello 8). While Norris does attempt to create a heroine different from a romantic maiden, Norris is not so embedded in the patriarchal ideology as Civello imagines. Rather, the complexities of Trina's character, her faults, flaws, and failures demonstrate Norris's struggle to work through the complex nature of female identity. The complications surrounding Trina do not indicate Norris's inability to transcend patriarchal ideology; rather, because *McTeague* literarily reflects the complexities of sexuality Norris does not attempt to work *towards* anything at all. Regardless, some argue that Norris is trapped in gender normative roles and uses Trina as a didactic way to explain the dangers of the New Woman; however, ample evidence from scholarship and the text itself suggest otherwise.

To dispel the idea that Norris created Trina to didactically disparage the New Woman, Maria Brandt explains, “Despite popular assumptions that Norris feared independent women, evidence suggests he appreciated independent women especially those who could be labeled New Woman figures” (9). Her evidence includes Norris’s essays “Novelists of the Future,” “Why Women Should Write the Best Novels: And Why They Don’t,” and “A Question of Ideals” along with his portrayal of women in other pieces of his fiction (Brandt 9-10). These pieces contribute to the idea that although Norris occasionally portrayed women in stereotyped or sexist ways, he also was aware of the New Woman identity. The most significant or important thing to take away from this evidence is that Norris understood, to a degree, the complexities of the New Woman identity and its difference from the feminine “norm.” Because his writing attempts to articulate these complications, his portrayal of Trina is complex.

Additionally, textual evidence supports the idea that Norris partly understood the complexities of female sexuality. The narrator of *McTeague* explains, “With [Trina] the feminine element suddenly entered [McTeague’s] little world. It was not only her that he saw and felt, it was the woman, the whole sex, an entire new humanity, strange and alluring, that he seemed to have discovered” (Norris 21). The fact that McTeague “seems” only to discover this humanity is significant because it reveals that this new humanity and sex cannot be completely understood.

Later, the narrator reflects on Trina’s feelings about her sexuality:

McTeague had awakened the Woman, and whether she would or no, she was his now irrevocably; struggle against it as she would, she belonged to him, body and soul, for life or for death. She had not sought it; she had not desired it. The spell was laid upon her. Was it a blessing? Was it a curse? It was all one; she was his, indissolubly, for evil or for good. (Norris 70-71)

Here, Trina questions her sexuality or, more specifically, her sexual awakening and sees her sexuality, and therefore herself, as tied to McTeague. Norris makes it clear that Trina's female sexuality is separate from male sexuality and regular sexuality and that her sexuality is difficult to locate, identity, define, and understand.

A major point of concern for unsympathetic readers of Trina stems from Trina's acquiescence when McTeague forces himself upon her at the beginning of their courtship and when he begins to physically abuse her later in their relationship. Readers and critics alike not only ostracize Trina for being a "bad" New Woman for allowing the submission to occur but also cringe at the idea that Trina seems to enjoy her submissive position. Critics write this phenomenon off as an indication of Norris's misogyny. However, in "'A Vast and Terrible Drama': Frank Norris's Domestic Violence Fantasy in *McTeague*," Mary Beth Werner explains Norris's inclusion of the domestic abuse plotline:

...there is good reason to believe that Norris was quite aware of this mode of abusing women, reacting to it accordingly in *McTeague*. Because Trina and Maria are actually not to blame for their victimizations, their abusers meet horrible fates... While Norris may appear to endorse domestic violence, he ultimately undercuts that position by illustrating what happens to men who use violence against women. (3)

So, for those readers and critics who argue that Norris, as a product of the nineteenth century, must therefore hate women and feel the need to dominate them in his texts, the final fate of McTeague seems to suggest that Norris, in fact, felt that domestic abusers should end up punished. With Norris's intentions thus defended, Trina's apparent "thrill" regarding her

physical domination deserves analysis. Trina's submission-by-force occurs in two primary places: during Trina and McTeague's courtship and in their marriage.

When Trina rejects McTeague's initial proposal of marriage he continues to pursue her, which she allows. Eventually, Trina and McTeague engage in a questionably consensual kiss when McTeague "crushes" her with his "immense strength" (Norris 66). Trina turns her head to him and they kiss, grossly, and then she struggles for McTeague to release her. In this scene the reader does not have access to Trina's thoughts. A few pages later, Trina reflects on the kiss and her feelings about the kiss through a series of questions: "Why did she feel the desire, the necessity of being conquered by a superior strength? Why did it please her? Why had it suddenly thrilled her from head to foot with a quick, terrifying gust of passion, the like of which she had never known?" (Norris 70). The careful selection of words in this passage, along with the fact that this reflection is constructed as a series of questions, tells a great deal about Trina's preferences. First she wonders why she felt the "desire" of being conquered, but that word quickly gets replaced by "necessity." She needs to be conquered by a superior strength and the fact that she needs it appeals to her. She is "thrilled" and feels "passion" at both needing to be conquered but also because of the conquering itself. This reflection gets articulated through a series of questions because Trina and the narrator lack the language to accurately describe what is happening to Trina. What happens to Trina, it would seem, is that she enjoys feeling the need to be conquered and the act of being conquered—it invokes in her a sexual awakening. A couple lines after Trina asks herself the questions, the following floats through the mind of the narrator, "Until that day ... Trina had lived her life with as little self-consciousness as a tree...At once there had been a mysterious disturbance. The Woman within her suddenly awoke" (Norris 70). Trina enjoys and desires the submission she experienced with McTeague because it allowed her

to recognize an aspect of her being which she had not yet acknowledged. The sexual part of Trina, until the point of their kiss, had lain dormant. As a result of her sexuality being awakened by McTeague's bodily force, she will forever conflate her sexuality with McTeague. The narrator explains, "McTeague had awakened the Woman, and whether she would or no, she was his now irrevocably ... she had not sought it; she had not desired it. The spell was laid upon her" (Norris 71). This passage explains that Trina had not sought out her sexuality, or even desired to realize it, but since it has awakened she cannot ignore it. Additionally, McTeague as the catalyst for her sexual awakening means that her sexuality, in Trina's mind, now belongs to him. When this idea terrifies her, the narrator wonders "Was it a blessing? Was it a curse?" and ultimately settles on the idea that "It was all one; she was his, indissolubly, for evil or for good" (Norris 71). Trina's sexuality, from here on out, is tied to McTeague's physical dominance over her.

The second place where Trina submits by force to McTeague's physical dominance (and enjoys it) is during their marriage. McTeague begins to pinch Trina and gnaw on her fingers, supposedly because he wishes to extort money from her. While Trina does tell him to stop pinching and gnawing her, Trina's response to the violence provides an interesting twist. The narrator suggests, "...in some strange, inexplicable way, this brutality made Trina all the more affectionate; aroused in her a morbid, unwholesome love of submission, a strange, unnatural pleasure in yielding, in surrendering herself to the will of an irresistible, virile power" (Norris 244). In this passage, Trina reflects on what contemporary readers might identify as masochistic indulgence. Her morbid love of submission is pointedly, and sexually, aroused by the brutality McTeague puts her through. The narrator identifies this love of submission as "morbid," "unwholesome," "strange," and "unnatural" in order to demonstrate to the reader that he does not understand Trina's penchant for pain. Furthermore, she surrenders herself to "the will of an

irresistible, virile power,” but the passage does not explain whether or not that virile power is her own or McTeague’s. Arguably, Trina could perceive the brutality as the virile power, but she could also perceive her *submission* as the virile power. Therefore, the question remains why Trina would experience any kind of enjoyment out of something like masochism. Mary Beth Werner explains, “Current arguments regarding feminine masochism seek to demonstrate that some women use masochism as a strategy to maintain identity” (3). To elucidate this point, Trina’s sexual identity has been formed through her relationship with McTeague and through the physical dominance he asserts over her. Trina, as a result, wants to cling to that aspect of her identity (her sexuality) and therefore feels pleasure when McTeague dominates her and inflicts pain on her. She associates pain with an acknowledgement of her sexuality, and as a result it arouses her. Masochism, then, works as a strategy for Trina to maintain her identity because the pain inflicted on her re-realizes her sexuality. But, one might also consider simply that Trina simply enjoys the pleasure of pain for the sake of pain. Queer theory asks that people accept previous notions of deviant sexuality as non-deviant; therefore, Trina’s sexual pleasure as a result of the pain inflicted on her may indicate nothing more than pleasure because of pain.

Concurrently, Trina’s relationship with money often gets discussed in literary analysis with confusing and conflicting results. Her “miserly” attitude towards her lottery winnings and refusal to share her funds with her husband or anyone else arguably functions as the catalyst for McTeague’s violence against Trina. Trina comes in to the money accidentally, which is akin to the way she comes in to her sexuality. Also, prior to her sexual awakening and winning the lottery, Trina does not express any desire for learning about her sexuality or for money. However, unlike her sexuality, Trina begins to progressively hoard her money away. Literary critics have not known what to do with this aspect of the novel, though Maria Brandt articulates

the primary line of thought when she explains, “[Trina] gains a warped form of ownership over her sexuality by overlapping her physical desires with this same hyper-economic independence [of the New Woman], fairly ‘quivering with pleasure’ while counting her cold pieces” (13). In other words, Brandt feels that Trina conflates her physical desires with her desire for money and argues that Trina’s obsession with money serves as a way for Norris to criticize the New Woman figure’s economic independence. However, Trina’s obsession with money has nothing to do with a critique of the New Woman’s economic independence; instead, her obsession with money illustrates the fact that she recognizes and understands that her body is a commodity which can be purchased and sold for consumption. When McTeague says to Trina, “What’s yours is mine and what’s mine is yours, ain’t it?” Trina responds, “No, it’s not; no, it’s not; no, it’s not...It’s all mine, mine” (Norris 214). Trina repeats the phrase “no, it’s not,” because characters use, as Brandt explains, “repetition as a technique ... when faced with some new information they are unable to assimilate” (12). In this case, to Trina, the “new information” does not just concern the idea that she might need to share her money. Rather, Trina has learned throughout the novel that her body is a commodity which money can purchase. So when Trina says that the money is all hers, she also lays claim to her body. Trina believes that because she has the money, she also has ownership of her body and therefore cannot be shared. The use of repetition acts as a way for Trina to reinforce this idea for herself. After she makes this repetitive declaration, Trina talks about the money because talking about money is easier than talking about her own body. Trina cannot talk about her body for two reasons: first, because that would mean she has to actually *acknowledge* her body which Trina has consistently resisted, and second, because she does not have the language to discuss body ownership. Trina’s inability to discuss her body indicates many women’s position during the time. In “Talking Sex: Deciphering Dialogues of American

Female Sexuality in the Mosher Survey, 1892-1920” Tanfer Emin Tunc explains the results of a survey which was conducted in the late 1890s that gathered information about women’s biology, specifically pertaining to sex, childbirth, and menstruation. Because the discussion of sex and women’s bodies was a new concept in the 1890s, the survey revealed that women were just learning to talk about these topics (Tunc 130-53). Therefore, Trina would clearly have lacked the vocabulary to discuss her own body.

When McTeague bites and grinds on Trina’s fingers, (“sometimes he extorted money from her by this means, but as often as not he did it for his own satisfaction” (Norris 244) it follows that Trina might learn to conflate her body and the pain that her body experiences with money as well. In “Mining and Rape in Frank Norris’s *McTeague*,” Philip Acree Cavalier argues that “gold replaces the female body as the object of male sexual desire” (15). However, it seems more likely that gold *becomes* the female body and vice versa for McTeague and Trina. The narrator explains, “Trina’s emotions had narrowed with the narrowing of her daily life. They reduced themselves at last to but two, her passion for her money and her perverted love for her husband when he was brutal,” which pairs Trina’s passion for money with her passion for the brutality of her husband (Norris 244). If Trina learns to associate her body with money and her money with her body to the point that they become one, then her obsession over gold changes from an issue of American greed to a necessity to exercise ownership over her body. By withholding her money from McTeague, she controls her body, much like the way she might withhold her body, or sex, from her husband. Some might counter that Trina knows McTeague uses violence against her body to extort money and so perhaps she wants to be dominated or chewed or bitten and withholds the money for the reason. And certainly, there are passages in the novel which suggest that Trina does enjoy, to a certain extent, the pain that McTeague inflicts on

her. However, the fact that McTeague “sometimes” uses the method of grinding Trina’s fingers as a way to extort money from her reveals that the reasons McTeague enacts violence upon Trina is not just for money. As a result, Trina could easily be confused about why he behaves violently towards her, which therefore would make the argument that she withholds money so that she can be abused as unlikely, if not entirely, invalid.

Because Trina conflates her body with money and realizes her objectification, her conversations with Maria become increasingly significant. Though the conversations and relationship between them is only explained in a brief page, the significance of the passage is worth noting: “They critically compared each other’s bruises, each one glad when she could exhibit the worst” (245). The language suggests that these meetings occurred more than once and that during their meetings, they show one another their bodies, most likely in various stages of undress. On a surface level, this passage seems to suggest that each woman carries a certain sense of pride regarding her abuse since they are “glad” when one person’s body is visibly more abused than the other’s. Additionally, the line “They had long and excited arguments” (Norris 245) incorporates an element of erotic complexity to the exchange as Maria and Trina compare their wounds. For instance, those “excited” arguments could signify that they are sexually aroused by the violence enacted upon them. The more likely interpretation, though, is that these women become excited and glad when talking about their bodies because it gives them an opportunity to recognize their body as its own entity. In an 1841 study, *Treatise on Domestic Economy* Catharine E. Beecher explains, “I never observed, that the women of America considered conjugal authority as fortunate usurpation of their rights or that they felt themselves degraded by submitting to it. It appears to me, on the contrary, that they attach a sort of pride to the voluntary surrender of their own will, and make it their boast to bend themselves to the yoke,

not to shake it off” (Werner 1). This idea that women enjoy surrendering and feel a sense of pride in sexual and domestic submission could be true for Maria and Trina, which would reassert the idea that they both feel a deep conflict regarding the harm inflicted on them because they need and sexually desire it.

Finally, the complications surrounding Trina and Trina’s purpose come to a head when readers consider Trina’s voice. According to Maria Brandt,

Almost as soon as McTeague begins beating Trina, the narrative voice begins to replace Trina’s voice, beginning the process of Trina’s apparent loss of language, which begins the process of Trina’s erasure from the novel ... it appears that the novel and Trina’s husband are working together to rid themselves of this woman who was once such a joy but who has become such a problem. (16)

However, it would be a counterintuitive project for the narrator to work with McTeague to dismiss Trina’s character entirely since, as I have suggested, the narrator works hard to realize and articulate her complexities when Trina’s language fails. Trina’s loss of language and the dissolution of her voice is a purposeful narrative technique Norris uses in order to demonstrate what happens when characters and language reach the end of their ability to put issues of sexuality into language.

Brandt posits that because Trina remains silent and her body disappears that the pivotal event or the climax of the novel is McTeague and Marcus’s showdown at the end (19). In essence, she explains that the murder of Trina could never take the place of the climax of the novel because her voice is so diminished. While it would certainly appear that narratively Trina’s murder is not the climax of the novel, the murder exposes the problems and disasters present in the breakdown of language and the inability to articulate or express oneself. Adding Trina to the

conversation about sexuality in *McTeague* elucidates her issues of articulating a fluid female sexuality. However, women's sexuality in the novel contrasts slightly with male sexuality. Therefore, the next step to clarify the ways in which *McTeague* reflects the problems regarding the limits of language is to explore how McTeague's fluid masculinity and sexuality gets exposed in the novel.

Chapter 3: Collapsing McTeague

Herbert Sussman and Anthony Rotundo created works centered on the problematic nature of American masculinity in the nineteenth century. While Sussman's work, *Masculine Identities: The History and Meanings of Manliness*, places a larger emphasis on defining and understanding middle-class economic manhood, Rotundo's work, *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era*, clearly articulates and explores the complications surrounding men and manliness in the late-nineteenth century. During this period, defining and understanding manliness went through several conflicting stages including communal manhood, self-made manhood, and passionate manhood, and where one encouraged masculine identity construction through economic agency and achievement, the other insisted upon extreme competitiveness and physical aggression (Rotundo 2-7). These variants of manhood and manliness functioned as socially constructed ideals of manliness, and the constant shift in that constructed ideal presented a confusing and nearly impossible-to-achieve sense of manliness. In *McTeague*, the novel's protagonist embodies these conflicts physically, emotionally, and mentally.

Arguably, Norris's awareness of these conflicting idealized masculinities materializes in the setting of *McTeague*. As a general rule, the criteria for manliness were often determined first by the standards set on the East coast. For example, Sussman's middle-class economic man became a popular masculine identity as a result of a post-Industrial Revolution lifestyle. With the rise of the machine, strong, physical laborers were no longer a necessity, and men could make their money and livings without the inclusion or necessity of physical labor. Their worth was determined by their income and profession, and a new intellectual manhood was born which pushed the physical laboring man westward away from eastern cities. The western adventure

novel as a genre focuses entirely on finding identity and meaning in the West and the manly cowboy often ends up forced to saddle-up and move further westward once the domesticating East enters his territory. As a result, *McTeague*'s setting in San Francisco says something significant about masculinity. San Francisco's westernmost location serves as a place where the cowboy persona takes its last stand. In *McTeague*, it would appear the cowboy has already lost and economic manhood pervades. However, neither extreme is true; instead, a conglomeration of manhood exists. Denise Cruz explains:

Norris's placement of McTeague and Marcus within San Francisco's racial, sexual, and class disorder thus underscores what the novel figures as the troubling yet intriguing convergence of the model of virile masculinity popularized among white, middle-class men with working-class immigrant and ethnic others and alternate formulations of sexual desire. (496)

In this excerpt, Cruz adds an important element to this issue of available masculinities in San Francisco—the issue of class and race. In the late-nineteenth century, the city played host to a variety of ethnicities, classes, and sexual preferences, and, as a result, a bevy of masculinities presented themselves to Norris's characters. Men of all different racial and ethnic types, backgrounds, and sexual preferences lived in this particular area. While the diversity of men might seem like a beneficial place for a sexual outlier like McTeague to exist in, McTeague's conflict centers on the fact that he does not fall into *any* category of manhood. Despite the available masculinities San Francisco presents, nineteenth century society still demands that a man adhere to a specific type or classification of masculinity. Consequently, the necessity for McTeague to adhere to a specific category and the inability for him to do so has disastrous consequences.

Because McTeague cannot fit into any definitive categorization of manliness, he embodies a fluid manliness which is a separate anxiety from his fluid sexuality. For instance, while he has his own business, he practices his business without a license. He has not been deemed “fit” by societal standards to be a proper economic man. Even though he has practiced dentistry for several years and has aspirations within his field (however material—i.e., the desire for a gold tooth sign) his occupation requires precision, skill, and schooling, and he has met none of the criteria for his profession. Concurrently, McTeague does not occupy the status of the old masculine ideal either. His physical body makes him seem fit for the physical labor required of the pre-Industrial era, but his body and physicality have no place in a post-Industrial world. Therefore, even though McTeague seems to get by, the novel later reveals his failure at achieving a proper manliness because he occupies neither the old masculine ideal nor the economic man. From the beginning of the novel, McTeague’s profession seems like a bizarre match for his body type. His domestic interests in his canary and concertina conflict with his “brutish” appearance, and the deftness required of his task appears at odds for his oversized limbs. However, Norris intentionally keeps readers believing in McTeague’s proficiency in his skill since it demonstrates his manliness. Norris also does not reveal McTeague’s lack of a license until Marcus exposes him for a fraud. Once that information gets out to the open, McTeague loses his last claim to an identifiable masculinity, and his identity breaks down into chaos.

Additionally, McTeague does not exercise his sexuality in a manner appropriate to late-nineteenth century American standards. First, he seems almost asexual and devoid of any sexual desire. Again, his domestic interests conflict with his apparent status as an economic man and his obsession with routine does not suggest an interest in any particular women. But, and here most

scholars agree, upon meeting Trina McTeague's sexuality gets awakened and as a result he, at the age of thirty, seems to accelerate from a naïve adolescent sexuality to a fully realized brutish and sadomasochistic sexual desire. According to the standards of the late nineteenth-century, men were expected not only to meet certain criteria with regards to an occupation, but also with regards to their relationships with women. Rotundo explains, "Middle-class men . . . were confronted by two ethics of sexual conduct, one urging the 'natural' expression of aggressive impulses and the other demanding stringent self-control" (122). Furthermore, romantic love, at this point, was a norm though abstinence until marriage was still widely practiced. However, even though reasons to marry included romantic love, sex was perceived as an act which had almost nothing to do with romantic love; therefore, it was permissible for young men to have loveless sex with younger, lower-class women. As a result, sex with wives lost meaning. But this ideology conflicted with McTeague's relationship with Trina because they clearly express sexual desire towards one another.

Men were expected to exhibit sexual proficient and express sexual desires and dominance without appearing brutish or overtly sexual. Therefore, by first appearing as asexual and later appearing as sexually domineering, McTeague fails in the standards set forth regarding masculine sexuality. To complicate the matter further, he surely demonstrates homoerotic desire towards his friend Marcus, and the deviancy of that relationship and desire further complicates McTeague's self-identification. However, this "failure" to ascribe to a proper masculine sexuality is not a fault of McTeague's but rather of society's stringent need to sexually categorize. McTeague constantly seeks a category in which to define himself in order to understand and realize himself as a man. However, he fails over and over again due to the fluid nature of his sexuality. Constantly in flux, McTeague's sexuality cannot orient itself according to

society's standards. As a result of not fitting into any definitive categorization of manliness with regards to his occupation and to his sexuality, and because he cannot articulate this fluidity of masculinity and sexuality, he spirals out of control. In order to demonstrate that spiral in a more conclusive way, I expand on McTeague's relationship with Trina and Marcus.

McTeague's relationship with Trina proves complicated. Most scholars agree that McTeague is sexually awakened by her presence and by his introduction to Trina and that his sexual awakening leads to his proposal of marriage. Once married, Trina and McTeague love one another, but as Trina becomes more possessive of their finances and as McTeague loses his job and other claims to manhood their relationship devolves into a relationship of abuse and eventually murder. But, before one can consider this devolution, McTeague's initial attraction to Trina must get outlined. Because *McTeague* has often been classified as a piece of literary naturalism, it is necessary to consider the historical implications of men's relationships with women. Rotundo outlines the complicated nature of romance in the late-nineteenth century by explaining the conflicting messages men received regarding women. He writes, "At the basis of women's appeal lay two characterizations of femininity that survived well into the twentieth century: 'the fair sex' and 'the weaker sex.' ... The 'fair ones,' as they sometimes called women, evoked such 'romantic passion' that men felt they had lost control of their feelings" (Rotundo 105). For McTeague, his wife initially seems to fall into the former category of the "fair one." McTeague, quite literally, loses control over his feelings and actions when he encounters Trina. The narrator outlines this growing obsession and loss of control early in the novel: "[McTeague] found himself thinking of her constantly ... At night he lay awake for hours ... tormented with the idea of her" (Norris 21-22). This brief passage demonstrates how Trina might get classified as a "fair one" since she makes him lose control of his feelings. McTeague expresses a disturbing

preoccupation with Trina and even keeps her tooth as a trophy. Additionally, the narrator makes a point to explain how Trina compares to other women. McTeague is aware of the other young women of Polk Street who do not express an interest in him, and McTeague does not express an interest in them either. Therefore, these women who flirt with the other dentist seem coquettish, which was an attribute that was not desired in the “fair ones.” Trina gets contrasted with these women because she interests McTeague when the other women do not and because she pointedly is not a flirt.

However, as soon as McTeague and Trina kiss, he expresses an immediate distaste for her. This distaste highlights the other aspect of how men perceived women as “the weaker sex.” Rotundo explains,

...Once drawn out of that protective all-male world, young men found that other feminine qualities attracted them further. Among these traits was what they saw as women’s ‘weakness.’ This did not refer primarily to women’s lack of physical strength, and certainly did not connote a want of moral or spiritual power. Men used the word to describe a set of traits that were the opposite of their own presumed aggression, boldness, and worldly self-confidence ... Feminine weakness attracted men for another reason, too. The word weakness directly implies a power relationship, and men had been training themselves in the uses of power ever since boyhood ... Young men seized eagerly on this cultural difference. (105-106)

In this section of his work, Rotundo explains men’s attraction to women’s weakness and the complicated nature of desiring such a weakness. Men were simultaneously disgusted by their weakness but also demanded women’s weakness in order to establish their own power.

Therefore, readers can vaguely understand why McTeague might have expressed such revulsion towards Trina's submission to his kiss. His anger and frustration towards her submission demonstrate an inner conflict within men of the late-nineteenth century. Although McTeague needs Trina to submit to him physically and be physically weak, he simultaneously hates that weakness because of its "otherness" and because it demonstrates a woman's inability to be a man's equal. With the complications of men's relationships to women thus outlined, McTeague's conflicts and issues surrounding Trina become clearer.

Finally, in the late-nineteenth century, the average middle-class male did not marry until he was nearly thirty, which increased the pressure on men to marry (Rotundo 115). As a result, men at this age were especially eager to marry because marriage exhibited "a mark of full manhood" (Rotundo 115). Accordingly, once McTeague meets, interacts, and becomes obsessed with Trina, he also becomes obsessed with the idea of marrying her to the point where he does not even consider that she might possibly reject him. Until he meets Trina, McTeague's contentment with his bachelor lifestyle seems genuine, but in order to establish a "true" manhood McTeague knows that according to the standards set forth by society he must marry. McTeague's relationship with Trina therefore seems to concern itself with two primary factors: his sexual awakening and his need to establish his manhood through marriage. However, McTeague's destruction does not just depend on his newly found sexual awareness and failure at his marriage.

One of the ways Norris continues to demonstrate McTeague's fluid sexuality and manhood is through the descriptive language he uses to describe how McTeague perceives Trina. When McTeague first meets Trina, the narrator reflects on Trina as a woman. He explains, "...doubtless the woman in her was not yet awakened; she was yet, as one might say, without

sex. She was almost like a boy, frank, candid, unreserved” (Norris 18-19). First, Trina gets described as being “without” the woman in her; next, she gets stripped of “sex” altogether, but then, to drive the point home, the narrator uses a simile to explain Trina’s mannerisms. This is significant because it appears that both the narrator and McTeague are unable to place Trina on the spectrum of womanhood and have to describe her as *almost like* something else; her fluid occupation confuses McTeague and his attraction to her sexlessness and boyish behavior complicates McTeague’s sexuality as well. Initially, McTeague feels awkward with Trina and reflects that he does not like young girls due to his “intuitive suspicion of all things feminine—the perverse dislike of an overgrown boy” (Norris 18). In this brief line, the reader is supposed to see and understand McTeague as an overgrown boy who, like Trina, also lacks sexual awareness. Boys in the late-nineteenth century were conditioned to dislike anything feminine, and McTeague’s distrust of Trina’s femininity makes it clear that McTeague has, at this point in the novel, not progressed sexually into manhood (Rotundo 97-98). However, McTeague quickly becomes comfortable with Trina, which arguably has to do with her boy-like behavior. McTeague feels comfortable with the sexless version of Trina, perhaps because as a “boy” himself he does not feel threatened by her femininity (since she does not fully exhibit it) or perhaps because McTeague is attracted, in some manner, to the boy-like part of her. Denise Cruz expands on this homoerotic idea:

Although McTeague eventually becomes interested in aspects of Trina’s femininity ... a close examination of their first meeting reveals that his initial attraction stems more from what he sees as Trina’s nascent manhood ... Revising the initial characterization of Trina as asexual, the narrator indicates that McTeague is intrigued by her boyishness, not her femininity. (501)

While this passage does consider McTeague's attraction to boy-type figures, Cruz does not expand on what it means that McTeague eventually does become interested in aspects of Trina's femininity. Instead, her argument focuses on McTeague as a virile homosexual which trivializes and ignores the passionate relationship that McTeague and Trina do express towards one another. Despite the reasons for why McTeague feels more comfortable with Trina than any other woman, his sexuality awakens before hers as he begins to obsess over her. It is interesting to note as well that McTeague's awakening was conjured by the act of gazing at Trina, whereas Trina's sexuality is awakened through her submission to McTeague's brutal kiss. McTeague is aware that he has to change his tastes and become sexually mature, and because Trina straddles the lines of femininity and asexuality, McTeague arguably feels more comfortable with her since she aligns with his own sexual fluidity.

However, the honeymoon phase for McTeague and Trina quickly dissipates. Readers get little to no insight regarding their engagement, and so the couple quickly moves from a couple in courtship to a married pair. At the beginning of their encounter, the narrator and McTeague muse, "To hurt Trina was a positive anguish for McTeague, yet an anguish which he was obliged to endure at every hour of the sitting. It was harrowing—he sweated under it—to be forced to torture her, of all women in the world; could anything be worse than that?" (Norris 23). McTeague is aghast at the idea of harming Trina while he performs dental work on her, but of course, that quickly changes. In their marriage, McTeague and Trina appear to express a passion and love towards one another, and the transition from a courtship-couple to a married-couple seems seamless and effortless. Much of the transition from one life to the other gets brushed over by the narrator, who explains the ways in which Trina domesticates McTeague. Trina has him dress better and changes his drink, and the couple engages in a new routine which McTeague

seems altogether fine with. Possibly, McTeague's acceptance of his new role aligns with his desire to achieve a conventional manhood through marriage, but once Trina becomes possessive of her money McTeague becomes violent towards her. This cause-and-effect relationship has served as a point of discussion for many scholars who focus on the theme of greed as the force which moves the novel forward, but McTeague expresses very little interest over money at all. When Maria steals McTeague's gold from him "almost under his very eyes..." (Norris 33) McTeague pays no mind and does not appear to even know it has gone missing. Additionally, when he and Cribbens strike gold in the Panamint hills, McTeague abandons the prospect of millions of dollars. So, the question persists why McTeague begins to act out violently towards Trina when she withholds their money since McTeague, consistently, shows little regard for possession of wealth?

In *Why Men Hate Women*, Adam Jukes explains that "One of a man's greatest failings – if not crimes – in the eyes of other men is that he does not exercise sufficient authority over his wife" (108). Accordingly, McTeague might perceive Trina's possession of their funds as a loss of control over his wife. And, when that power dynamic gets compromised, McTeague begins to act out violently. In order to expand on the complexities involved in domestic violence, Jukes explains his own position regarding it:

I believe that male violence is a sign not of the collapse of the patriarchy but of a particular patriarch's feeling that he has lost, or is in danger of losing, control over his partner. The violence is an attempt to maintain or re-establish that control, and it is predicated on the belief that it is appropriate and right for a man to control a woman. Violence is about power; it is the attempt to assert control over another.

(261)

With this in mind, McTeague's violence does not result from a desire for money but rather results from a need to regain control over his wife. McTeague makes requests of Trina frequently and does so from the very beginning of their relationship when he asks her to marry him. Just as frequently, Trina denies him. After Trina rejected his first proposal of marriage, McTeague exercised his physical dominance over Trina by enveloping her in oppressive embraces and smothering her with sloppy kisses. Ultimately, Trina acquiesces to his physical dominance, which establishes McTeague's power. Physical dominance and coercion work for McTeague to the point where Trina submits to McTeague sexually (allowing him to kiss her) and socially (through marriage). But once Trina begins controlling the money in their relationship, McTeague senses a loss of his control and resorts to physical acts against Trina. This is the only way McTeague knows how to exercise his masculinity and establish his power and even though he knows, to a degree, that the brutish man is no longer an idealized version of manhood, McTeague desperately needs to assert himself in order to regain power and control. For McTeague, it is better to be a brutish man than no man at all; for McTeague, he would rather get categorized as an outdated form of masculinity than have to deal with society's claim that he has no masculinity at all. However, explaining all the reasons why McTeague resorts to violence against Trina does not mean that Norris would have agreed with domestic violence as a proper way to handle a loss of control. Rather, McTeague's grotesque violence against Trina serves as a cautionary tale against domestic violence since McTeague ends up alone in the desert. Furthermore, violence towards women decreased in the late nineteenth-century so Norris's inclusion of it would signify to the reader its perversity as an act (Brandt 8). McTeague's physical abuse of Trina demonstrates that when male characters cannot put their frustrations

about masculinity into language they resort to the only thing left to them which, in McTeague's case, is his physical body and ability to enact violence.

While McTeague's violence signifies several important aspects about McTeague's ongoing struggling with masculinity and asserting masculine power, his violence also says something significant about his sexuality. McTeague's desire to grind Trina's fingers as a way to "sometimes" extort money from her demonstrates that he not only uses physical violence as a method of extortion but also alludes to McTeague's sexual perversion and enjoyment in inflicting pain upon Trina. Additionally, this is not the first time McTeague has gnawed on fingers. Early in the novel, when McTeague reflects on Trina's rejection of his first proposal of marriage, Maria encounters him "gnawing at his fingers in an excess of silent fury" (Norris 32). A modern reader might read this as a form or manifestation of sadomasochistic desire. Sadomasochism can be described as "a derivation of the human impulse to master and control. This impulse, an essentially admirable one, is innately connected with the duality between passive and active wishes – between doing as a subject and being done to as an object" (Jukes 235). When McTeague gets caught grinding his own fingers, he does so as a sexual outlet. Trina has enraptured McTeague and he cannot stop thinking of her or of her rejection of his proposal of marriage. As a result, McTeague tries to control his primal being and desire by gnawing on his own fingers. When Trina withholds money from McTeague he acts out and begins to gnaw her fingers as well and gains a sexual pleasure from doing so.

However, some scholars, including Denise Cruz, have claimed that McTeague's violence towards Trina stems from the need to suppress his homoerotic desire for Marcus. In *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, Eve Sedgwick explored how men

become violent towards female characters as a result of homoerotic suppression. Denise Cruz explains this perspective most concisely:

McTeague finally succumbs to the raging beast of the gothic hero within as same-sex desire emerges. Norris's text returns to the paranoid gothic paradigm by culminating in what Sedgwick has described in other novels as a destructive explosion eliminating the woman standing between these men ... The eruption of the paranoid gothic in *McTeague* thus underscores Norris's version of same-sex desire as aggressive, violent, and concerned with hyperbolic masculinity rather than submerged effeminacy. (494)

Cruz, taking a note from Sedgwick's arguments about homoeroticism, argues that McTeague feels compelled to destroy Trina because she stands in between him and his relationship with Marcus. Furthermore, she argues that, as a result, Norris takes on a perspective that same-sex desire can appear in dominant and non-effeminate men, but does so violently and aggressively. But, this perspective with regards to *McTeague* excludes the important fact that McTeague does not just take pleasure in Trina's pain or celebrate in her disposal; he pointedly takes pleasure in her *feminine* presence. Though McTeague at first seems nervous around Trina and uncomfortable with her womanhood, he also enjoys it and takes pleasure in her femininity. McTeague fetishes her clothing and caresses the objects in her bedroom; the perfume of her hair has an intoxicating effect on him; he enjoys her smallness and dainty appearance. With this in mind, McTeague should not have to be categorized as either entirely heterosexual or as a repressed homosexual; instead, McTeague's sexuality and sexual preference exist on a fluid continuum. McTeague desires Trina and Marcus. Accordingly, McTeague's relationship with

Marcus needs its own discussion to defend the homoerotic read and to simultaneously push the boundaries of literary sexual categorization.

Most of the arguments concerning the homoerotic relationship between McTeague and Marcus stem from the language in the novel. One of the most cited passages in making the case for a same-sex desire between them is the following: “They took a great pleasure in each other’s company, but silently and with reservation, having the masculine horror of any demonstration of friendship” (Norris 32). This quote demonstrates to readers that both men are concerned with demonstrating too much “pleasure” in one another’s company. This alludes to the idea that these men are aware that if they appear to enjoy one another too much in public, society might make an assumption about the nature of their relationship. Again, the setting of the novel becomes significant because San Francisco had a gay community even in the late-nineteenth century. Therefore, people who lived in the area would be conscious of the presence of men who desired other men and would be able to identify or suspect those types of men even though they would not have been able to strictly categorize them as “homosexual.” McTeague and Marcus also feel a “masculine horror” at the idea of demonstrating too much affection or friendship towards one another. This horror stems from the fact that men who were perceived as exhibiting same-sex desire were also perceived as unmanly. Therefore, the horror which the narrator refers to concerns the fear of losing their identity as proper “manly” men.

Herbert Sussman elucidates the popular opinion about same-sex desire in the late-nineteenth century in *Masculine Identities: The History and Meanings of Manliness*. Masculinity in the late-nineteenth century was determined by an imperative of marriage and of economic agency. The “self-made” or economic man pervaded as the popular form of masculinity and manhood. As a result, any masculinity that worked in opposition to the popular form was labeled

as deviant and unmanly. Accordingly, a primary concern for men was appearing unmanly, hence McTeague and Marcus's "masculine horror." Herbert Sussman explains, "Gay identity in the nineteenth century with its emphasis on aesthetic enjoyment formed itself in self-consciousness opposition to this construction of bourgeois manliness" (139). This means that gay identity centered on aesthetic enjoyment which did not align with the productive manhood of the economic-man. A gay identity meant enjoying niceties and expressing contentedness at the idea of living a "bachelor" lifestyle; however, this identity opposed the pervading ideal masculinity, which demanded practicality, a wife, and a nuclear family. Clearly, many of McTeague's characterizations align with the gay identity Sussman briefly outlines. McTeague enjoys playing his concertina and owning a songbird, which demonstrates an enjoyment in aesthetics. Additionally, until he meets Trina McTeague seems content with his bachelor lifestyle until he begins to panic in "masculine horror." Furthermore, his attraction to Trina suggests he might align with what in Ancient Rome would be called the man/boy relationship (Sussman 93). Trina's boy-like appearance certainly suggests that could be the case; however, McTeague's attraction to her feminine qualities undercuts that idea.

Despite McTeague's feelings towards Trina, the case for the relationship and desire between McTeague and Marcus is strong. Marcus treats McTeague much like a dog, "'We'll get the duck's dog, and then we'll take a little walk, huh? You got nothin to do. Come along.'" (Norris 9). Also, McTeague accepts this subservient position to Marcus, which, in turn, Marcus appreciates about McTeague. When Marcus talks to McTeague about concepts and issues that McTeague does not understand, the narrator explains, "Stupefied with his clamor, McTeague answered, wagging his head, 'Yes, that's it; I think it's their livers.' Suddenly Marcus fell calm again, forgetting his pose all in an instant" (Norris 11). McTeague is not Marcus's intellectual

equal and “wags” his head like a dog, blindly agreeing with whatever Marcus says. This master-dog relationship is significant because McTeague, who is the more physically masculine of the two men, assumes a submissive position in their relationship. McTeague does not simply assume this role because he lacks intelligence; after all, his physical strength easily grants him all the authority he needs in his relationship with Marcus. Rather, McTeague’s role in his relationship with Marcus indicates that, with other men, McTeague does not mind taking on a submissive position. His masculinity does not feel threatened by Marcus’s dominance, which demonstrates that McTeague desires playing the role of a submissive and playing the role of dominator. McTeague just happens to accept that submission with Marcus rather than with Trina. However, once Trina begins to assert her dominance in the relationship, McTeague lashes out. He wants to experience both positions, and Trina compromises his duality. Additionally, Marcus seeks approval from McTeague. Marcus “[falls] calm” and forgets his “pose,” which demonstrates that when he is around McTeague he feels wound-up and poses as if to keep himself from feeling too relaxed. However, when McTeague praises Marcus, Marcus cannot help but feel comfortable and lets down the guard that his “masculine horror” puts up.

Another indication that McTeague and Marcus’s relationship has an element of homoeroticism involved gets portrayed through McTeague and Marcus’s speech. When Marcus talks to McTeague about a subject he does not understand, McTeague “Absolutely stupid and understanding never a word, [answers], ‘Yes, yes that’s it—self-control—that’s the word.’” (Norris 10). McTeague repeats “yes, yes” and punctuates his speech with awkward pauses signified by the dash. This response of McTeague is particularly telling as well because it suggests that McTeague does not understand whatever Marcus is talking about, which is arguably a subject about self-control. McTeague must exercise self-control in his relationship

with both Marcus and Trina, and when he fails to control himself and kills Trina, McTeague takes off to the Panatine hills for fear that he might lose self-control with Marcus and act out on his sexual desire for Marcus. Marcus's language also breaks down when he feels forced to explain the nature of his relationship with McTeague. Marcus says:

“I know um well. I could pick um out in a million. I can identify um, and you fellers can't. And I knew—I knew—good God! I knew that girl—his wife—in Frisco. She's a cousin of mine, she is—she was—and I thought once of—This thing's a personal matter of mine—an' that money he got away with, that five thousand, belongs to me by rights.” (Norris 339)

Much like McTeague's speech, Marcus's language gets broken up with dashes. He claims he knows McTeague well and positions himself as knowing something that the other men do not. When Marcus begins to explain what he “knew” about McTeague, he cuts himself off and is unable to say anything more. Marcus dances around his sexual desire for McTeague through dashes and stuttering language, which signifies his inability to put into language what he feels, knows, and thinks about McTeague and signifies the fact that he knows that he should not speak of such things anyway. Marcus desires to find McTeague, but instead of talking about desiring McTeague, Marcus claims he desires the money as a way to divert his speech away from language that might implicate his feelings.

The final showdown between Marcus and McTeague drives home the idea that homoeroticism between these two men acts as a veritable force within the novel. McTeague enters Death Valley without his gun, which signifies a loss of identifiable phallic manhood and potency. When Marcus sneaks up on McTeague, he points his gun at him, which forces McTeague to acknowledge Marcus's figurative manhood. McTeague has been running from

facing Marcus and subsequently his homoerotic desire for Marcus, but in this moment in a desolate landscape, Marcus and McTeague must acknowledge away from society the reasons for their “masculine horror.” However, things quickly go awry in this scene, and Marcus empties his revolver at the mule (a creature incapable of sexual reproduction) and also becomes unarmed (Norris 347). Now both men are sexually incapable of acting upon their desire so they must talk to one another, but because they do not have the language to express their desire, the two men act out their frustration physically by fighting. The narrator explains, “Suddenly the men grappled, and in another instant were rolling and struggling upon the hot, white ground” (Norris 347). Marcus and McTeague wordlessly roll and struggle with one another to assert dominance on a white hot ground of passion only to end up in the same position. Forced once again to put their desire in to words, McTeague kills the object of desire when faced with the inability to articulate that aspect of his sexuality. Marcus dies, clamping a handcuff on McTeague to signify that even though they could not articulate their desire, they are bound to one another until death.

While the homoerotic read of McTeague and Marcus is significant to queer analysis, for the purpose of my project establishing this sexual undercurrent in the text elucidates the complexities and crisis which occur as a result of an inability to articulate fluid sexuality. In *Gay New York*, George Channcey mentions that in the late-nineteenth century gay culture in the Bowery district created what some referred to as the “third sex” or “faeries” (Sussman 143). This public identification and acceptance of the idea of a “third sex” mean that Norris arguably was aware of this social phenomenon and therefore intentionally played with the ideas of multiple sexes and sexualities in *McTeague*. But Norris understood that it was more complex than just labeling a “third sex.” Denise Cruz explains, “McTeague ... engages a different version of male-male desire that goes beyond the stereotype of the effeminate invert or homosexual yet does so

without naming it explicitly” (Cruz 492). Norris, therefore, breaks stereotypes of homosexuality in an attempt to explore the ways in which multiple forms of sexuality exist. However, the existence of these multiple sexualities does not change the fact that his characters and even his narrator did not have the language to articulate such complexities, and thus, McTeague, in a moment of crisis, kills the embodiment of his homoerotic desire and simultaneously himself.

Lastly, McTeague’s body as force in the novel merits discussion since the narrator frequently describes McTeague’s sheer bodily power. His body, undoubtedly, is connected to his masculinity. As I have already mentioned, the late nineteenth-century demanded the economic-man be held up as the masculine ideal. The days of muscular power disappeared with the appearance of mechanical power during the Industrial Revolution (Sussman 83). Therefore, McTeague’s body was devalued by society and represented a work ethic that was no longer applicable or valued in American society. The narrator indicates this lack of bodily value:

His hands were enormous, red, and covered with a fell of stiff, yellow hair; they were hard as wooden mallets, strong as vises, the hands of the old-time car boy ...

His head was square-cute, angular; the jaw salient, like that of the carnivore.

McTeague’s mind was as his body, heavy, slow to act, sluggish. Yet there was nothing vicious about the man. Altogether he suggested the draft horse,

immensely strong, stupid, docile, obedient” (Norris 3)

The narrator assures the reader that McTeague is not a vicious creature, which conflicts, of course, with the violence he later enacts against Trina. McTeague’s hands are like “mallets” and “vises,” which are machine-like objects. However, these objects now have a literal machine replacement, so his hands are useless just like “the old-time car boy.” Society does not need car boys anymore because they have automated machines to do the work a man like McTeague

would have been perfectly equipped for. Additionally, his jaw is like a carnivore's, which expresses primitiveness in his appearance; his intellect directly correlates with his physical appearance. McTeague is physically slow and heavy, just like his mind, and he gets compared to a draft horse that, though strong, is also docile. However, in a world that does not need a body like McTeague's, McTeague experiences a crisis of identity. Several years prior, his body and physicality would have made him a masculine ideal, but now he is oversized and underused. His profession shows, on a small scale, the power McTeague has since he is able to pull out teeth with his bare hands. Additionally, this parlor trick of McTeague's also shows the misuse of his strength, and his inability to exercise his body to its full extent and capability causes McTeague to eventually explode in a fit of physical rage against Trina.

After the silent demise of Trina, the novel abruptly shifts location as McTeague escapes from his crime. He lingers in the mountains in the Big Dipper mine. The reader quickly realizes the familiarity of the area to McTeague; he used to work and mine here only one or two years prior to his life as a dentist. He easily falls back into his routine as a miner and engages in the manual labor his body seems built to perform. This shift in location and change in McTeague's occupation, however informal, marks the fact that McTeague has wholly succumbed to his body and his existence as a more primitive, or manual-labor oriented man. After losing his job, McTeague knows he cannot perform the necessary role of the economic man. And, more significantly, after he murders Trina with the sheer brute force of his body, it becomes clear to McTeague immediately that he also does not qualify as the domesticated man. Because he has missed out on two possible categories of masculinity, he resigns himself, quite contentedly, to the life of a laborer in a last-ditch effort to categorize his manliness. After exercising his body to the extreme by murdering his wife, McTeague *must* live the rest of his life acknowledging the

power of his body in order to adhere to an older masculine ideal of brute strength. However, the fact that McTeague can relate his old profession of dentistry with his new-old profession of mining demonstrates his awareness regarding the brute force required for his tasks while mining. He considers, “[Mining] was the same work he had so often performed in his Parlors, only magnified, made monstrous, distorted, and grotesque, the caricature of dentistry” (Norris 304). McTeague realizes the separation and connection between his old occupation and his new occupation. Mining, to McTeague, is dentistry on a larger and more brutal scale because he uses his body more actively and more forcefully. Also, because McTeague has lived in the domestic world he now understands the primitive nature of his occupation and, concurrently, of his masculinity. McTeague knows that this type of labor and the kind of man that he is as a result of his labor is monstrous, distorted, and grotesque just like his murderous body. He knows this is not the masculine ideal for the time he lives in, but it is the only category he has left.

Despite McTeague’s seeming contentment with mining and residing in Big Dipper mine, he quickly becomes suspicious and paranoid in his new location and with his new occupation. In the middle of the night, McTeague suddenly awakes due to a force he cannot recognize:

“There is something now. There it is again—the same thing.” He sat up in bed with eyes and ears strained. “What is it? I don’ know what it is. I don’ hear anything, an’ I don’ see anything. I feel something—right now; feel it now. I wonder—I don’ know—I don’ know.” (Norris 306)

He awakes suddenly unable to identify the reasons why, but sure nonetheless that a presence exists which requires some acknowledgement on his part. The “it” he works to describe is “now” and “the same”; he cannot hear and see it, but he feels it “now.” McTeague’s speech, as though he says this aloud to himself, gets punctuated by dashes which signify his broken language.

McTeague cannot figure out how to talk about this force which has awoken him, which should indicate to the reader that it must be an inner force. Attempting to recover McTeague's inability to speak on this subject, the narrator interjects with a series of questions: "What strange sixth sense stirred in McTeague at this time? What animal cunning, what brute instinct clamored for recognition and obedience? What lower faculty was it that roused his suspicion..." (Norris 306). However, the narrator's insertion of the questions which McTeague cannot articulate does not help the reader understand his inner struggle. All that is clear is that whatever moves McTeague comes from within him; it is a force and a feeling which the narrator calls a "sixth sense," "animal cunning," "brute instinct," and "lower faculty" indicating a base level of thought. Because McTeague's sexuality wakes his body up and turns him into a physical brute, it follows suit that his sexuality also wakes up his mind once he finally accepts his body. This new consciousness about his body and sexuality makes him uncomfortable, and McTeague for the first time becomes fully conscious that he cannot articulate his sexuality. The oppressive force of his sexuality needing identification and articulation presses McTeague to move forward, and he "obeys" the will of the sense. When this sixth sense provokes McTeague again in the Panamint hills, the narrator uses significant language to further elucidate his desire to move onward: "It was aroused again and clamoring to be obeyed. Here, in these desolate barren hills, twenty miles from the nearest human being, it stirred and woke and roweled him to be moving on..." (Norris 323). The narrator uses the word "aroused" to signify a sexual aspect in this force. Additionally, even in a barren, sexually impotent world devoid of people, his sexuality still exists as a force to be reckoned with. McTeague resists listening to the force for awhile, but then gets overwhelmed by its presence and abandons the gold he has found. This makes for an overall easy decision on his part since McTeague never truly cared for money. McTeague leaves Cribbens and the gold

behind and journeys to an even more devoid landscape, Death Valley, in an attempt to adhere to the Western tradition of rejuvenating and finding oneself in the wilderness. However, Norris proves the Western narrative tradition is just as incapable of addressing and dealing with McTeague's problems, and in the final chapters of the novel Norris reveals the result of his failed characters, language, and narrative form.

Chapter 4: Broken Genres

In *Spatial Form and Narrative Time*, Jennifer Boyd explains, “Norris stated that one of his aims in *McTeague*, in addition to telling an interesting story, was to raise a ‘protest against and a revolt from the ‘decadent,’ artificial and morbid ‘prose fancies’ of latter day fiction’” (Boyd 43). In other words, throughout his lifetime Norris exhibited an awareness regarding the genre conventions of his era. Additionally, Norris purposefully used his work to actively resist and “protest” against types of fiction in the late-nineteenth century. Accordingly, “[McTeague] confirms Norris’s consciousness of the novel as an artifact and reveals his continuing exploration of the art of novel writing” (Boyd 43). Norris adheres, mostly, to the guidelines of a linear narrative and balances his novel into two major sections (life during courtship, life during marriage). Additionally, he tells a primarily chronological story, but the final scenes of the novel, including McTeague’s escape to the Panamint hills and the scene in Death Valley, proves troubling for many scholars because the novel as a linear form begins to devolve.

Another troubling aspect of the novel is its inclusion of a variety of genres. While *McTeague* starts as a city-novel, the second chapter of the novel reveals a romance of sorts. Norris’s “contempt” for historical romances (Dean 50) makes the inclusion of the story about Old Grannis and Miss Baker particularly confusing. One of the possible reasons to include this subplot between the old lovers is to serve as a foil for the relationship between McTeague and Trina. They admire one another and their relationship is the one relationship in the novel that does not end in disaster and violence. However, their relationship critiques the romantic novel as a genre. The narrator indicates his personal distaste for the romantic genre when Miss Baker talks to McTeague about Old Grannis. She says she has heard that Old Grannis is the son of a baronet and lacks a title due to an “evil” stepfather. However, the narrator immediately comments on her

story and adds, “No one had ever said such a thing. It was preposterous to imagine any mystery connect with Old Grannis. Miss Baker had chosen to invent the little fiction, had created the title and the unjust stepfather from some dim memories of the novels of her girlhood” (Norris 15). The potentially romantic story between Old Grannis and Miss Baker gets ridiculed by the narrator, thus rendering it ridiculous. Additionally, this romance story lacks potency because it is not a virile relationship. Both Old Grannis and Miss Baker are described as either impotently old or impotently young. Either way, they lack sexuality. Norris includes their story in order to parody the romance genre, to disrupt the novel at large, and to demonstrate that characters who “lack” sexuality are not a threat.

The inclusion of the romance plotline between Old Grannis and Miss Baker demonstrates that from the very beginning, *McTeague* is a broken novel that does not adhere to any specific convention. However, when McTeague kills Trina, the genre completely devolves. McTeague and Trina and their sexualities have escalated into complete and total frustration. One of the last clear images the reader has of Trina involves her rolling in bed naked with her money, inserting coins into her mouth and jingling them, and taking sexual pleasure in her indulgence. At that point, Trina has fully realized her inability to articulate her body and her sexuality and even as the narrator attempts to describe what Trina does, the narrator cannot discuss or explain her actions. Eventually, the narrator gives up trying to speak for and about Trina and as a result her voice becomes diminished until it gets completely silenced by McTeague. Similarly, throughout the novel McTeague deals with conflicting feelings for Trina, Marcus, the feminine, the masculine, and the deviant, and uses his bodily power to exercise his frustration since language fails him. However, after losing all claims to an identifiable masculinity and after losing Marcus, McTeague lets his body control him completely and murders Trina. Both characters are lost; the

narrator's attempt to work out issues about their sexuality through language ultimately fails. Since the characters and the narrator fail, the novel breaks down its already unstable genre and completely switches modes in an attempt to recover itself.

In the end of the novel, the genre shifts from a city-story of San Francisco to a poorly executed Western showdown. Marcus and McTeague embark on a western adventure of sorts in which Marcus tracks down McTeague and attempts to engage him in a final shootout. All of this action occurs within the final three chapters of the novel, and therefore creates a conundrum for readers regarding the significance of such a brief and drastic shift of location. Several scholars have complained about the finale of *McTeague* (Boyd 1-67). They argue a variety of grievances against such a stylistic shift which include complaints that the section is too brief, that it does not thematically align with the rest of the novel, and that the section does not "do" the western genre properly. Jonathan S. Cullick's article "Configuration of Events in the Narrative Structure of *McTeague*," however, argues that "Norris was in full command of his writing process as he composed the ending" (37) and cites Norris's conversation with William Dean Howells as evidence of his intentionally bizarre ending. I concur with the argument that Norris intentionally shifts to the genre of a western and agree that there are clear reasons for this shift.

One of the most popular reasons arguing for the positive significance of the western setting in *McTeague* gets elucidated in "Domestic Horizons: Gender, Genre, Narrative Structure and the Anti-Western." Thomas K. Dean, argues that Frank Norris inserts this genre form in an attempt to "[critique] the middle-class Western by showing the inaccessibility and fragility of the domestic horizon of the genre ... he illustrates the inadequacy of the genre as a tool for establishing social ideology" (48). In other words, Dean believes Norris inserts the Western into *McTeague* in order to critique the genre as a social ideology of always looking "west" and away

from the domestic. This idea agrees with Norris's statement about using *McTeague* to resist certain forms of prose and also explains that turning away from the domestic does not provide solutions for characters. Dean also explains how Norris creates his critique about the Western genre: "...he begins with a prefabricated genre—a dominant text with its singular language—sets his characters loose in it, and then introduces a non-heterogeneous subtext into the tale, rupturing the dominant text ... and [creates] an unstable narrative that casts doubt on the viability of the genre itself" (Dean 50). In Dean's opinion, the subtexts which Norris sets loose primarily deal with race and ethnicity. However, while race and ethnicity do disrupt the novel, those factors are secondary to the inability to articulate sexuality. That inability to articulate acts as the catalyst which forces the novel's genre to change and also disrupts the Western genre itself.

Thomas Dean explains, "In middle-class American culture and in middle-class Western, an emasculated man would have gone into the Western wilderness to regenerate... *McTeague* actually travels east from San Francisco into Death Valley" (57). This excerpt explains one of the genre conventions of the Western and also illustrates that a genre-shift cannot recover the broken narrative. Chronology and movement disintegrate at a rapid rate. Jennifer Boyd writes, "In a more traditional form, the character's early life would have been given either as history or even as flashback, but Norris reveals *McTeague*'s early innocence and simplicity—a life consisting of working in the earth, eating, and sleeping—in the present" (47). The reader does not receive most of the information about *McTeague*'s former occupation until the end of the novel which signals a break in Norris's near-perfect chronological story-telling. Additionally, the movement of the novel breaks down from a linear narrative so much so that the Western "accidentally" moves east into Death Valley. The path that *McTeague* takes to get to Death Valley literally goes in circles and swaying lines, which reiterates the break of the linear narrative (Boyd 49). While

Norris's story has demonstrated a simple mastery of story-telling conventions, McTeague's escape from the city destroys that narrative convention to show that even the rigid rules of a novel break and dissolve into chaos as a result of the complicated nature of sexuality.

The novel continues to fail as a Western in the final shootout between McTeague and Marcus. Dean writes, "In the traditional Western, firing a gun is usually a controlled action and establishes manhood and civilization ... McTeague's wild shot, on the other hand, assures his destruction, for it alerts Marcus to his location, forcing this process of decline toward its end" (59). Not only does this wild shot demonstrate Marcus's impotency and lack of control over his sexual desire, but it also shows the ridiculous failure of the novel's new genre (the Western) to deal with the complexities which McTeague and Marcus face (the attempt to realize their sexuality). Therefore, *McTeague* as a Western not only demonstrates the collapse of the novel but also the collapse of its characters. Everything in the novel has led up to this complete and utter disruption. The characters lack the language to discuss their fluid sexualities and when they do, the narrator attempts to recover for them. When the narrator fails at trying to recover the language for the characters in order to explain their sexual fluidity, the structure of the novel breaks down. In a last-ditch effort, the novel transforms genre in an attempt to rejuvenate, but at this point, it is too late. The genre fails McTeague and Marcus, and the two are left, one dead and one on the verge of death, in a vast and empty desert with no one around, no one to talk to, and no language to save them.

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