



## Frank Norris

**A**FTER BRET HARTE and Mark Twain, Frank Norris was the next seminal writer to explore the literary possibilities of the American West. Unlike Harte and Twain, Norris was a westerner through and through. Although born in Chicago, in 1870, he considered San Francisco his true home. His family moved there when he was fourteen, and Norris later liked to say in typical western fashion that he had been “born ’n raised” in California.<sup>1</sup> Norris was a city youth, his father a man of wealth and entrenched bourgeois values, his mother a former actress devoted to conventional Victorian culture.

Like the city itself, Norris was played upon by contrary forces. On the one hand there was college, Europe, the East—Norris spent considerable time in all three—and on the other, there was the primitive life of the wild West, of Zola’s Europe, of the blood-and-adventure tales of Stevenson and Kipling, both of whom were strong early influences upon Norris’s literary tastes. The San Francisco that Norris knew as a young man was a city as colorful as any in America. It had a Chinatown mysterious and evil-seeming to the Anglo-Saxon mind; it had a romantic shipping trade; it had a proletariat of lower-class shopkeepers and immigrants; it had a red-light district famous since the days of the forty-niners. It also had coteries of artists, painters, illustrators, architects, and writers who thought they were going to produce a Renaissance on the West Coast. San Francisco stood with one foot in the Old West, the other in Nineties aestheticism. Norris signed letters as “the boy Zola,” and left his mark beneath, a drawing of a six-shooter. He dressed like a Parisian dandy and defended football games as the purest expression of Anglo-Saxon virility.

In a sense there were two Wests in Norris’s life. One was personal, the other literary. His personal West was a place Emersonian in its salutary powers. When Norris came back from Cuba, where along with Stephen Crane and Richard Harding Davis he had covered the Spanish-American War for eastern magazines, he was scarred by the experience. California could heal him, he wrote to a friend:

I want to get these things out of my mind [in particular the rape and murder of a fifteen-year-old girl that he had witnessed] and the fever out of my blood and so if my luck holds, I am going back to the old place for three weeks and for the biggest part of the

time I hope to wallow and grovel in the longest grass I can find in the Presidio Reservation on the cliffs overlooking the Ocean and absorb ozone and smell smells that dont [sic] come from rotting and scorched vegetation, dead horses, and bad water.<sup>2</sup>

After recovering from the Cuba experience, Norris was summoned East to pursue his career as a novelist. Three novels—*Moran of the Lady Letty* (1898), *McTeague* (1899), *A Man's Woman* (1900)—appeared in rapid succession, and Norris, now married and a father, seemed to be comfortable in his role as a professional writer living in New York City, literary capital of the U.S. But by the time he returned to San Francisco in 1900, to gather background for *The Octopus*, he knew that the West was where he wanted to live. He explained in an earlier letter (1899):

There is not much color here [the East] and very little of the picturesque. I have almost forgotten how a mountain looks and I can never quite persuade myself that the Atlantic is an Ocean—in the same sense as the Pacific. I miss the out of doorness of the West more and more, and the sea fogs and the Trade Wind, and I don't suppose I shall ever feel at home away from there. Indeed I have come to look forward to the time when I shall come back to San Francisco to live for good and all.<sup>3</sup>

At the time of his premature death in 1902, Norris had recently purchased land near Gilroy, south of San Francisco. Apparently he intended to establish residence there.<sup>4</sup>

Norris's literary West involved a good deal more than the familiar dialectic of East versus West apparent in his life. Early in his brief but prolific career he wrote highly original fiction about the West; at the height of his powers he wrote *The Octopus*, a seminal western novel if there ever was one; and towards the end of his career he wrote conventional "red-shirt" western stories, the kind he had lambasted in newspaper articles on American fiction.

By realizing that urban experience was an important part of the American West, Norris achieved a great advance over previous western writers. After *Moran of the Lady Letty* (1898), his first published novel, Norris wrote in a letter of his conception of western themes:

I have great faith in the possibilities of San Francisco and the Pacific Coast as offering a field for fiction. Not the fiction of Bret Harte, however, for the country has long since outgrown the 'red shirt' period. The novel of California must be now a novel of city life, and it is that novel I hope some day to write successfully.<sup>5</sup>

In fact, Norris had already completed two novels of city life, though neither had been published.

*Vandover and the Brute* (published posthumously in 1914) is subtitled "A Story of Life and Manners in an American City at the End of the Nineteenth Century." The San Francisco of *Vandover and the Brute* is at one level a city of genteel society debts and parlor-polite manners and marriage-minded courtships and at another level a city of bars and prostitutes and relentless commercial competition. Vandover falls from the top to the bottom; he falls as low as one can and still remain alive. Educated at Harvard to be a painter, Vandover fails to achieve a career in art for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is his weak-willed innocence. He is unable to survive as a painter or as a human being. Suffering from a syphilis-like disease that in its worst phases makes him crawl and howl like a wolf, Vandover winds up at the novel's end cleaning out filthy rental houses for a former college friend. *Vandover and the Brute*, a study of failure in a modern city, is hardly a story unique to the conditions of life in the Golden West. The West of *Vandover and the Brute* is a landscape dominated by the hard facts of city life, and its portrayal of young men in society and the fast girls they pursue is one reason it found such an ardent admirer in the young F. Scott Fitzgerald.

*McTeague* is a novel also dominated by the city-scape until, in its famous and often criticized last three chapters, it explodes into the desolate wastes of Death Valley and becomes a kind of prototypical Western movie replete with posse, an exciting man-for-man pursuit, and a powerful and ironic capture. Before this slam-bang ending, however, Norris depicts in memorable and effective detail the quality of lower-middle-class life in a large city. The essence of Norris's sociological terrain in *McTeague* is "one of those cross streets peculiar to Western cities, situated in the heart of the residence quarter, but occupied by small tradespeople who lived in the rooms above their shops." <sup>6</sup> Here McTeague lives among the ebb and flow of diverse throngs, practices his crude dental work, and enjoys life lived at a low frequency of expectation and accomplishment.

Then something interrupts the smooth routine of his existence, and the chain of circumstances that will lead to his flight back to the mining country of his childhood begins. The woman Trina enters his life, and McTeague, inexorably drawn to her by the power of sexual attraction, woos her and marries her. Under Trina's management McTeague leads a totally conventional lower-middle-class urban existence. He works hard, lets her decorate the apartment, dreams of owning a little house, and bathes more often than he used to. For five years their marriage goes well, but beneath the placid surface dangers lurk. Trina's fondness for money turns into an all-consuming greed, McTeague loses his right to practice dentistry, and a sea-

son of brutality and decline is launched, ending when McTeague murders Trina.

Before this final deterioration of their marriage, there have been suggestions of McTeague's need for an expansive landscape. The seashore, for example, becomes a place of solitude and freshness far more pleasing than the cramped, sordid quarters where he and Trina have been forced to live. So the ending, the opening into vast spaces, is not unprepared for or illogical. Norris understood that McTeague was in some respects a victim of the closed frontier. The best symbol of McTeague as a man dispossessed of his proper landscape is the Indian that he encounters at a train station. "An immense Indian buck" presents McTeague a letter "to the effect that the buck Big Jim was a good Indian and deserving of charity." As the train continues on its way, the Indian becomes a "solitary point of red, lost in the immensity of the surrounding white blur of the desert."<sup>7</sup> McTeague at the end, chained to the dead body of his pursuer, is also a mute figure lost in the immensity of the desert. Norris's image of the West in this novel—city and frontier—is a grim one indeed. It is a land of pulsing but unfocused energies, a place where civilization has failed to provide an adequate environment for the dispossessed frontiersman and urban peasant.

*The Octopus* (1901), Norris's most important novel about the West, combines city and frontier and reconciles the tough-minded pessimism of the city novels with a new-found cosmic optimism. One of Norris's late essays, published in 1902, gives a good picture of his broad conception of the West:

But as yet the West is midway of the two extremes. It is true that the West is a place of banks, of schools, of policemen and law courts, but it is equally true that as yet the Desert is a tremendous immovable fact, that the Apache and the Sioux are just where they were when we found them seventy years ago, and that the expression of personal physical courage is more often and to a greater degree called upon in Arizona, Montana, Idaho, New Mexico and Nevada than anywhere else in the United States.'

Other ideas in the late essays are pertinent to Norris's thinking about the "huge conglomerate West" and to the novel that tries to capture this "ultimate" West.<sup>9</sup> One is that the single most expressive figure in the modern West, just as in the days of the forty-niner, is the adventurer. The portrait of Magnus Derrick, owner of Los Muertos Ranch and the head of the Ranchers' League, is Norris's fictional version of the adventurer.

Another symbolic figure is the lawman, the legendary cowboy whom Norris imagined as the hero of the neglected epic. The epic of the West had not been written, Norris felt, because dime novels, which he called "tradic-

ing and falsifying," had preferred to glamorize lawless heroes, men such as Deadwood Dick and Buffalo Bill. The true epic would dramatize the subjugation of a wild land by Anglo-Saxons fighting for "law and justice and liberty."<sup>10</sup> Norris never put this cardboard figure into a novel, and his description of the lawman in an essay suggests that he was wise not to. Norris's lawman is familiar to us all; he is the hero of a thousand Western B-movies:

He did not lounge in barrooms; he did not cheat at cards; he did not drink himself to maudlin fury; he did not "shoot at the drop of the hat". . . . He died in defense of an ideal, an epic hero, a legendary figure, formidable, sad. He died facing down injustice, dishonesty and crime; died "in his boots."<sup>11</sup>

Norris's idea of the good man willing to die for a cause is captured in *The Octopus* in a brilliantly realistic manner, however. This is the portrait of Annixter, a selfish, eccentric, willful man who, through the love of a good woman, Hilma Tree, changes into a brave, selfless, loving, and thoroughly convincing hero. Annixter is just one among several who die in the encounter with the railroad posse, but it is Annixter's death that the reader cares most about. At the center of *The Octopus*, often considered the very type of the deterministic novel of naturalism, is a brave man with the intelligence to slough off a bad self.<sup>12</sup>

Despite Norris's dislike of dime-novel heroes, he seems to have incorporated some of the elements of the dime novel into the plot of *The Octopus*. There are, for example, the gunfight between Annixter and the cowpoke Delaney at the barn dance; the train robbery by Dyke, the little man forced to turn outlaw, and the posse's pursuit and capture of him; and above all, the portrayal of S. Behrman as a supreme villain, a fat, oily capitalist who finally, in an unforgettable scene, receives his comeuppance for all his crimes against the ranchers.

The violent, melodramatic West of the dime novel is but one of several layers of western experience present in *The Octopus*. In fact, one way of looking at the novel is to define the extent to which Norris was able to delineate his "huge conglomerate West." In doing that, it is first necessary to distinguish between the poet Presley and the novelist Frank Norris. Though sometimes a viewpoint character for the narrative, Presley is not an authorial mouthpiece and is often explicitly condemned by the narrative voice. Presley is an aesthete struggling to break away from effete eastern culture and the corrupted tastes of phony artists in San Francisco, whom Norris savagely satirizes in Chapter I of Book II. By coming to the San Joaquin Valley, Presley has already made an essential first step. He has repudiated his early work, such sonnets as "The Better Part," and is searching for new material for a more vital art. He has the right idea and is deter-

mined to write a poem about “the world’s frontier of Romance, where a new race, a new people—hardy, brave, and passionate—were building an empire.”<sup>13</sup>

But three factors keep him from realizing his aim. One is that he is overeducated, a poet by training, not by nature. Another is that he is lured, for a while at least, by the attractiveness of the more romantic aspects of western experience. Thus he is drawn by California’s Spanish past with its legendary stories of De La Cuesta, the first owner of Los Muertos. He is also drawn by the strange gothic tale of his mystic friend Vanamee’s lost love and by Vanamee’s account of the solitary, poetic spaces of the Southwest. But the chief obstacle to Presley’s realizing his artistic goal is that he cannot accept certain unpleasant realities of ranch life. Uncouth farmers annoy him. Like many liberals, he prefers capital-P People over thorny individuals such as Hooven, the “slovenly little Dutchman.” The hardest fact of all to reconcile with his desire for pastoral beatitude and romantic beauty is the railroad, “that stubborn iron barrier against which his romance shattered.” The clash between the railroad and the ranchers, however, is precisely what constitutes the true epic subject. Although Presley’s sympathies are enlarged as he is pulled into the conflict between ranchers and railroad, the most he is able to accomplish artistically is a socialistic poem called “The Toilers.” Even this is derivative, and inferior to the painting that inspired it. Despite his growth, Presley remains at best a would-be epic poet. The life that he comes to appreciate, such as the Homeric “simplicity and directness” of the feast following the rabbit hunt, is not his subject, but Norris’s. It is Norris who achieves the broader perspective that Presley struggles toward.

This perspective entails a complex synthesis of the two spheres that typify Norris’s West—the city and the frontier. The San Francisco of *The Octopus* is a city of pleasure, wealth, apathy, and cultural sham. It is, Norris writes, “a place where the luxuries of life were had without effort; . . . a city that offered to consideration the restlessness of a New York without its earnestness; the serenity of a Naples without its languor; the romance of a Seville without its picturesqueness.”<sup>14</sup> In the opinion of the eloquent capitalist visionary, Mr. Cedarquist, San Francisco is a Midway Plaisance, a term he borrowed from the Chicago World’s Fair to describe crowds of vulgar pleasure seekers. This is the world of his pretentious wife and of the phony artist Hartrath, whose ambition is to construct a model of California, heroic-sized, out of dried apricots. But San Francisco is also a city of potential, a great seaport from which ships laden with wheat for starving Asians depart on their manifest destiny to extend American power and benevolence.

The frontier is also complexly analyzed. The railroad, which connects

city and frontier, serves the city best, but this imbalance is no cause for lasting pessimism. The economic misalignment leads the railroad to gouge the ranchers through unfair practices and exorbitant rates, but it also leads the ranchers to exploit their land ruthlessly and to engage in corrupt politics. Both sides, however, are in the service of a higher natural force, the Wheat, and it is this symbol that allows Norris to be optimistic about such personal tragedies as the death of Annixter. Norris dramatizes three regenerative moments that transform the lives of the three central characters. Annixter realizes his unselfish love for Hilma Tree as he observes a field of wheat, seeing in it an expression of a benevolent life force. On the same night Vanamee connects the felt presence of Angèle, mother or daughter—it makes no difference to him—with the cycle of life out of death symbolized by the burgeoning wheat. And Presley, who has to struggle the most to reach an optimistic view, does so by realizing that the wheat in the hold of the ship on which he is sailing to India is a benevolent force that outlasts evil.<sup>15</sup> *The Octopus* simultaneously criticizes economic injustices and celebrates the good earth. It also presents characters who are free to make ethical decisions and therefore capable of moral growth.<sup>16</sup>

After *The Octopus* Norris's use of western materials shows a distinct falling-off. During 1901, the year *The Octopus* appeared, Norris published several western short stories. They were mostly hack work intended to make quick money. Probably written earlier and possibly revised in 1901, such stories reveal Norris's awareness of a pulp West to be mined and exploited.<sup>17</sup> "The Passing of Cock-Eye Blacklock" is a prime example of Norris ransacking western pulp fiction instead of imagining a West in original terms. This story uses a frame device to introduce the vernacular narrator, Bunt McBride, a western cowboy and roustabout. One problem is that the plot of the narrative within the frame is the hackneyed one of a retrieving dog that persists in returning a lighted stick of dynamite to the man who was using it to blast fish from a river. Of course man and dog are blown to scraps. The other problem is that Bunt McBride speaks an eccentric, unconvincing western dialect directly traceable to the Old Cattleman of Alfred Henry Lewis's Wolfville books. If Norris's contribution to western fiction depended upon stories like this one or "A Bargain with Peg-Leg," another Bunt McBride tale, Norris would deserve to be forgotten as merely another imitator of a decadent local-color tradition.

"Dying Fires" is the only interesting western story in this minor phase of Norris's career. It deals with a familiar Norrisean preoccupation, the fear of losing one's western vitality in the enervated, genteel circles of dilettantish coteries. A young writer from the West named Overbeck produces a strong first book called *The Vision of Bunt McBride* (an inside reference to the rough-hewn character who appears in the red-shirt stories), but is un-

able to repeat the performance. Instead he abandons primeval western life and falls under the influence of eastern artists and pseudo-intellectuals. His new work is a pale, bloodless novel called *Renunciations*. With the exception of this little artistic parable, none of the other western stories have any lasting merit.

*The Pit* (1902), Norris's next and last novel, continued the Epic of the Wheat trilogy but was a different kind of novel from *The Octopus*. Excellent in its own right, *The Pit* focused on Howellsian motifs, depicting the moral struggle of a bourgeois financier and his lovely, spoiled wife to save their souls in the midst of rampant materialism. Set in Chicago, *The Pit* ends with the couple defeated by economic forces beyond the hero's power to control. But hope remains as the pair depart for the West where they intend to achieve a new beginning. Their West is mythic, a spiritualized place where simplicity and fresh starts are still possible.

Death foreclosed Norris's career in 1902, leaving behind a reputation as one of America's foremost naturalistic writers. This view of Norris has persisted until fairly recently, when other facets of his writing have begun to be appreciated. Among these is his singular contribution to western American literature. Norris's exploration of land-centered values versus economic-political considerations was a prescient discovery for western fiction. Later writers like John Steinbeck and Edward Abbey owe much to his groundbreaking analysis of ecological and social themes. This is especially the case with Steinbeck. It is hard to imagine *The Grapes of Wrath* without *The Octopus* in the background. Both novels aspire to epic scope; both use melodrama to highlight a titanic struggle between the People and the System; both abound with panegyrics to the earth, visionary preachers, earth mothers, and a lyrical tenderness on behalf of spontaneous, primal responses. More than any figure of his era, Norris was a true literary trailblazer of the Far West.

DON GRAHAM, *University of Texas*

## Notes

1. Letter to Isaac F. Marcossou, Dec. 1898, in *The Letters of Frank Norris*, ed. Franklin Walker (San Francisco: The Book Club of California, 1956), p. 22.
2. Letter to Ernest Peixotto, August 1898, *The Letters of Frank Norris*, p. 19.
3. Letter to Mrs. Elizabeth H. Davenport, March 22, 1899, *The Letters of Frank Norris*, p. 31.
4. For evidence pointing in this direction, see Joseph R. McElrath, Jr., "Frank Norris: A Biographical Essay" in *Critical Essays on Frank Norris*, ed. Don Graham (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1980), pp. xlvi–xlvii.
5. Letter to Isaac F. Marcossou, December 1898, *The Letters of Frank Norris*, p. 23.
6. Frank Norris, *The Complete Edition of Frank Norris* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, Doran & Co., 1928), vol. VIII, p. 4.
7. *The Complete Edition of Frank Norris*, vol. VIII, pp. 333, 334.
8. "'The Literature of the West': A Reply to W. R. Lighton," *The Literary Criticism of Frank Norris*, ed. Donald Pizer (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1964), p. 104.
9. *The Literary Criticism of Frank Norris*, p. 107.
10. "A Neglected Epic," *The Literary Criticism of Frank Norris*, p. 121.
11. *The Literary Criticism of Frank Norris*, p. 122.
12. See Joseph R. McElrath, Jr., "Frank Norris's *The Octopus*: The Christian Ethic as Pragmatic Response" in *Critical Essays on Frank Norris*, pp. 138–152.
13. *The Complete Edition of Frank Norris*, vol. I, p. 7.
14. *The Complete Edition of Frank Norris*, vol. II, p. 3.
15. The most thorough examination of Norris's positive adaptation of nineteenth-century ideas about nature and force appears in Donald Pizer, *The Novels of Frank Norris* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966), pp. 131–133.
16. For a detailed exposition of this theme, see Richard Allan Davison, "Frank Norris's *The Octopus*: Some Observations on Vanamee, Shelgrim and St. Paul" in *Critical Essays on Frank Norris*, pp. 99–115.
17. For a keen appreciation of Norris's professional sense of specific audiences to whom he addressed his writings, see Robert A. Morace, "The Writer and His Middle Class Audience: Frank Norris, A Case in Point" in *Critical Essays on Frank Norris*, pp. 53–62.

## Selected Bibliography

### Primary Sources

1. Books by Frank Norris (in chronological order)

*Yvernelle: A Legend of Feudal France*. Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1892 (1891).  
*Moran of the Lady Letty: A Story of Adventure off the California Coast*. New York: Doubleday & McClure, 1898.

- McTeague: A Story of San Francisco*. New York: Doubleday & McClure, 1899.
- Blix*. New York: Doubleday & McClure, 1899.
- A Man's Woman*. New York: Doubleday & McClure, 1900.
- The Octopus*. New York: Doubleday, Page, 1901.
- The Pit*. New York: Doubleday, Page, 1903.
- A Deal in Wheat and Other Stories of the New and Old West*. New York: Doubleday, Page, 1903.
- The Responsibilities of the Novelist and Other Literary Essays*. New York: Doubleday, Page, 1903.
- The Joyous Miracle*. New York: Doubleday, Page, 1906.
- The Third Circle*. New York: John Lane, 1909.
- Vandover and the Brute*. Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Page, 1914.

## 2. Additional writings

- Frank Norris of "The Wave": Stories and Sketches from the San Francisco Weekly, 1893-97*. Edited by Oscar Lewis. San Francisco: The Westgate Press, 1931.
- The Letters of Frank Norris*. Edited by Franklin Walker. San Francisco: The Book Club of California, 1956.
- The Literary Criticism of Frank Norris*. Edited by Donald Pizer. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1964.
- A Novelist in the Making*. Edited by James D. Hart. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1970.

## Secondary Sources

- Crisler, Jesse S., and Joseph R. McElrath, Jr. *Frank Norris: A Reference Guide*. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1974. Invaluable annotated bibliography of criticism on Norris, plus a useful essay reevaluating Norris's standing during his lifetime.
- Dillingham, William B. *Frank Norris: Instinct and Art*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1969. Useful biographical research into Norris's study of visual arts in Paris and their influence upon his writing.
- French, Warren. *Frank Norris*. New York: Twayne, 1962. Stresses Norris's ties with the transcendentalist themes of Emerson *et al.* Especially good on *The Pit*.
- Graham, Don, ed. *Critical Essays on Frank Norris*. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1980. A gathering of reviews and critical essays intended to portray Norris as an artist rather than merely a crude naturalistic author. Includes a bibliographical essay evaluating Norris criticism, with special attention to work done in the seventies.
- . *The Fiction of Frank Norris: The Aesthetic Context*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1978. Explores connections between Norris and the aesthetic environs of San Francisco in the nineties. Traces the effect of aesthetic reference in the novels, revealing Norris as more of a continuator of the Howells tradition than of naturalism.
- McElrath, Joseph R., Jr., and Katherine Knight, eds. *Frank Norris: The Critical Reception*. New York: Burt Franklin & Co., 1981. A comprehensive picture of how Norris's contemporaries viewed his works, plus an introductory essay evaluating Norris's standing in his own time.

## A Literary History of the American West

- Marchand, Ernest. *Frank Norris: A Study*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1942. First full-length study of Norris the writer. Still useful for placing Norris in the critical context of his era.
- Pizer, Donald. *The Novels of Frank Norris*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966. Widely regarded as the most influential critical study of Norris. Places the writer within an intellectual context of evolutionary theism, seeing Norris as a synthesizer of popular science and traditional moral perspectives.
- Walker, Franklin. *Frank Norris, A Biography*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, Doran, 1932. The only life of Norris to date. Solid, well researched, but with perhaps too much emphasis on Norris as an exuberant adolescent who never quite achieved maturity.

