

# Doomed Tragedy of McTeague from Naturalistic Perspective

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**Abstract :** Frank Norris' *McTeague* is considered as a naturalistic novel. This paper explores the doomed tragedy through the lens of naturalism. The paper first introduces Frank Norris, *McTeague* and then the concept of naturalism and its emphasis on determinism. Second, the author analyzes *McTeague*'s character traits and how they are influenced by heredity and environment. Third, the author reflects on the enduring relevance of *McTeague* and naturalism in contemporary discussions about free will, determinism, and social responsibility. The paper invites readers to engage with the novel's themes on a deeper level and to consider their implications in the context of modern society.

**Keywords:** Naturalism; Determinism ; *McTeague*; Doomed Tragedy

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Frank Norris (1870-1902) was an American author known for his naturalistic portrayal of life. *McTeague*, published in 1899, is one of his most acclaimed novels, depicting the tragic life of *McTeague* in San Francisco. It tells the story of a dentist in late 19th-century who is trapped by his circumstances and driven by his primal instincts. The novel explores themes of materialism, greed, and the struggle for survival, illustrating the deterministic nature of life as seen through the lens of naturalism. *McTeague*'s life takes a tragic turn when his marriage to the greedy Trina spirals into a struggle over wealth, ultimately leading to a series of devastating events that highlight the harsh realities. In *McTeague*, Norris presents a vivid portrayal of life in San Francisco during the gilded age, a period marked by stark contrasts between the wealthy and the poor, and a time when the American dream was increasingly elusive for the working class. The novel's setting is a microcosm of the societal ills that pervade the lives of its characters, reflecting the broader themes of materialism, greed, and the struggle for survival that were characteristic of the era.

This paper explores the doomed tragedy through the lens of naturalism. The author analyzes how the protagonist, *McTeague*, is depicted as a character whose destiny is predetermined by hereditary and environmental factors, leaving him with little to no autonomy over his life choices. The paper first introduces the concept of naturalism and its emphasis on determinism. Second, the author analyzes *McTeague*'s character traits and how they are influenced by heredity and environment. Third, the author reflects on the enduring relevance of *McTeague* and naturalism in contemporary discussions about free will, determinism, and social responsibility.

First, if we want to analyze the doomed fate from the naturalistic perspective, we need to know what is naturalism. As a literary movement, it emerged in the late 19th century as a response to the limitations of realism, which it sought to deepen and extend. The movement was heavily influenced by the scientific and philosophical developments of the time, particularly the theory of Charles Darwin (Norris and Pizer, 1977). The movement is characterized by its pessimistic outlook, often depicting characters that are trapped in a cycle of degradation and despair, unable to overcome the circumstances into which they are born (Pizer, 1999). Whether European naturalism or American naturalism, they share the common ideas: the rules of the society are not different from animals. Characters are determined by heredity or by the environment. They have no free will and they are not responsible for their own

decisions. The deterministic nature of naturalism is evident in the life of *McTeague*, whose character is shaped by a combination of hereditary traits and the harsh realities of his environment. The novel illustrates how the protagonist's innate tendencies, such as his brute strength and simple-mindedness, are exacerbated by the social conditions of the gilded age.

The second part of the paper delves deeper into the character of *McTeague*, examining how his traits are a product of his genetic makeup and the environment in which he lives.

Heredity determines the fate of all through the story, and it reaches the climax in the figure of *McTeague*. At the beginning of the book, his mother is presented as an energetic and fierce woman. His father was a miner and he died because of alcohol "Every other Sunday he became an irresponsible animal, a beast, a brute, crazy with alcohol" (Norris, 1977). *McTeague* inherits the energy from his mother, which will manifest in his fight against Marcus and his loss of control in the murder of Trina. From his father, he has received the addiction to alcohol and at the end of the novel he will work on the mine. Besides that, *McTeague*'s profession as a dentist, which he inherits from his father, is indicative of the hereditary influence on his life. This is evident when the text states, "McTeague had 'the hands of his father'" (Norris and Pizer, 1977). His inherited traits not only symbolize the deterministic pull of heredity but also places him within the working-class milieu of San Francisco, where his aspirations are inherently limited by his social standing. Norris' description of his appearance seems to describe a "bull-like" animal. And at the end of the story, *McTeague* finally killed his wife and friend under his animal impulse. "His hands were enormous, red, and covered with a fell of stiff yellow hair...his head was square-cut, angular; the jaw salient, like that of the carnivora" (Norris and Pizer, 1977). Though he was looked like an animal, fortunately, after learning from a quack doctor, he became a seemingly decent dentist. Later, he was attracted by Trina's petite delicacy and innocent kindness under the introduction of his friend Marcus and his "male virile desire in him tardily awakened." (Norris and Pizer, 1977). Unsurprisingly, they got married. His wife gave him a gold-plated teeth, and hope of the heart aroused by the money. However, because of money, he finally fell into the abyss of desire. His friend Marcus was jealous of him and reported to the government that *McTeague*'s dentist clinic was off specification, it was revoked. He lost a source of income. And as Trina

constantly requested and restrained McTeague's life consumption, making his violence and abnormal psychology increasingly reflected. McTeague failed to escape his fate controlled by environment and desire. He brutally killed his wife and become vestigial into a giant beast. At the end of the article, McTeague foolishly looked around at the far horizon, where he sat, and the dying canary in his gilded cage. Like the bird, he can never break free from the cage of a merciless life.

The environment is another determining agent of the actions and progress of the characters in *McTeague*. The human and natural environment they all lived in does not allow them to find a better life and above all causes their complete failure. At the end of the story we find that every one dreadfully fallen under joint forces of sever environment and instinct. (Surur and Senbeta,2019).The environment in which McTeague operates is described as a grimy, working-class neighborhood, which is a microcosm of the societal constraints that shape his life. The text paints a vivid picture of his surroundings, noting, "The air was thick and heavy, and the reek of gasoline was suffocating" (Norris and Pizer ,1977). This environment is not just a physical space but also a representation of the social and economic limitations that define McTeague's existence.The relationships McTeague forms, particularly with his wife Trina and his friend Marcus, are central to the narrative and are deeply influenced by the environment. Trina's avarice and manipulative nature are portrayed through her actions, such as when she "counted her money every night" (Norris and Pizer ,1977), reflecting the materialistic ethos of the Gilded Age. This trait, combined with the pressures of their social standing, drives a wedge between the couple and contributes to the tragic unraveling of their relationship.Marcus, as McTeague's friend, also plays a significant role in the protagonist's life. Their friendship is tested by the harsh realities of their environment, as illustrated when Marcus is described as being "driven by the same instinct of hoarding that actuated Trina" (Norris and Pizer 102). This shared trait of greed further emphasizes the deterministic forces at work within their social circle.

The tragic trajectory of McTeague's life is a direct result of these relationships and the deterministic forces that shape them. The novel illustrates this through the escalating tension between McTeague and Trina, culminating in the tragic events that unfold. The text describes the culmination of their relationship as "a struggle for existence, a warfare of each against all" (Norris and Pizer 1977), highlighting the naturalistic theme that individuals are often at the mercy of their circumstances. So the character of McTeague and his relationships are intricately tied to the deterministic themes of naturalism. Through specific examples and citations from the novel, we can see how heredity, environment, and societal pressures converge to shape McTeague's tragic fate.

In the third section, the paper contemplates the contemporary significance of McTeague and naturalism. Despite being set in a historical context, the novel's themes of determinism, free will, and social responsibility remain relevant today. The struggles faced by McTeague and the characters in his life resonate with modern discussions about the extent to which individuals can control their destinies and the role that societal structures play in shaping individual lives. The novel's exploration of determinism, free will, and social responsibility can be connected to current debates on social inequality, the impact of environment on personal development, and the influence of genetics on behavior. Firstly, the theme of determinism in "McTeague" finds a modern counterpart in discussions about the impact of socio-economic background on life outcomes. Today, there is a growing awareness of how poverty and limited access to resources can restrict an individual's opportunities and perpetuate cycles of disadvantage. This mirrors the constraints faced by McTeague, who, despite his efforts, is unable to escape his working-class status and the hardships it entails. Secondly, the concept of free will is a central philosophical debate that continues to this day. Advances in neuroscience and psychology have led to deeper understandings of how our brains function and the extent to which our decisions are influenced by subconscious processes. This scientific inquiry parallels the naturalistic perspective that McTeague's actions are not entirely his own but are influenced by his inherited traits and environment. Thirdly, the role of societal structures in shaping individual lives is a prevalent topic in contemporary social policy and activism. Discussions around systemic racism, gender inequality, and economic disparities reflect the same societal pressures that McTeague and his peers face in the novel. The characters' struggles to navigate these structures echo the modern struggle for individuals to assert their agency within a world that often seems to predetermine their paths. Lastly, the novel's portrayal of materialism and greed can be related to today's consumer culture and the pursuit of wealth, which can overshadow more material gain, reflect the modern preoccupation with financial success as a measure of worth and happiness.

In conclusion, this paper introduces the naturalism, analyzes the how the environment and heredity determines McTeague's tragic fate and connects the contemporary society with naturalism. Despite the passage of time, the story of McTeague serves as a poignant reminder of the human condition and the ongoing quest for autonomy in a world of inherent constraints.

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