



## NATURALISM IN FRANK NORRIS'S NOVELS

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**Abstract:** This article is devoted to the theme of naturalism in Frank Norris's novels, exploring how the deterministic forces and harsh realities of life are vividly portrayed in his works. In works such as "McTeague" and "The Octopus: A Story of California," Norris presents characters whose actions are driven by instinctual desires and shaped by external forces beyond their control. Through his exploration of social determinism, economic realities, and the role of environment in shaping characters, Norris offers a compelling examination of the complexities of the human condition.

**Key words:** Naturalism, environment, social determinism, economic realities, Charles Darwin, fate, fatalism, brutality, complexity of the human condition.

Naturalism in literature is a literary movement that emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It is characterized by a focus on depicting reality as it is, without idealization or romanticism. Naturalist writers sought to present a scientific and objective view of human behavior, often exploring the influence of social, economic, and environmental factors on individuals. Frank Norris, an influential American novelist who is widely regarded as a key figure in the naturalist literary movement. His novels are characterized by their gritty realism, exploration of human behavior, and unflinching portrayal of the harsh realities of life. Norris depicts the deterministic forces that govern human actions, shedding light on the impact of environment, social factors, and primal instincts on his characters. In this article, the theme of naturalism in Frank Norris's works is explored by examining how he masterfully captures the complexities of the human condition through his vivid and evocative storytelling. One of the key foundations of naturalism in literature is its connection to Darwin's theory of evolution. Norris's novels



such as “McTeague” and “ The Octopus” reflect this influence through their portrayal of characters as products of their environment, driven by instinctual desires and subject to the laws of nature.

One of the most famous novels, “McTeague” is a stark example of naturalism. The novel follows the life of McTeague, a dentist who starts off as a simple and well-intentioned man but gradually descends into a state of brutality and violence. McTeague, initially content with his modest dental practice, falls in love with Trina, his best friend Marcus's cousin. They eventually marry and win a large sum of money in a lottery. However, their marriage becomes strained as McTeague's greed and jealousy take hold. Trina becomes obsessed with saving their newfound wealth, causing further tension in their relationship. As the story progresses, McTeague's descent into brutality becomes more pronounced. He becomes involved in a violent argument with Marcus and later murders Trina in a fit of rage. Fleeing from the law, McTeague ends up in Death Valley, where he succumbs to his own fate, dying of thirst and exhaustion. The novel "McTeague" exemplifies naturalism through its portrayal of characters who are driven by their environment, social determinism, and biological predispositions. Norris explores the forces of existence that shape human behavior, illustrating how individuals are often trapped by their circumstances and unable to escape their fate. The complexity of the human condition is highlighted as the characters struggle against their own instincts and the harsh realities of life. Norris's pioneering voice in naturalistic literature shines through in his examination of the darker aspects of human nature.

Another significant work by Norris is “Octopus” which is a set in California during the late 19th century and is based on the struggles between wheat farmers and the powerful railroad monopolies. The story revolves around the conflict between the wheat growers, represented by the protagonist, Presley, and the railroad company, symbolized by the "Octopus." The novel depicts the harsh realities faced by the farmers, who are at the mercy of the railroad's unfair practices and exploitation. As the farmers attempt to resist the oppressive control of the railroad, they are met with violence and economic ruin. The narrative culminates in a dramatic showdown between the farmers and the forces of



corporate greed, underscoring the struggle of individuals against larger societal and economic forces. Naturalism is evident in "The Octopus" through its portrayal of characters who are shaped and ultimately destroyed by their environment and circumstances. Norris emphasizes the deterministic nature of human existence, illustrating how the farmers' fates are tied to the economic and social structures that govern their lives. The novel exemplifies naturalistic themes by highlighting the characters' struggles against powerful external forces that often lead to their tragic downfall. Norris's depiction of the brutal realities of life and his exploration of human helplessness in the face of larger societal and economic pressures make "The Octopus" a typical work of naturalistic literature.

One of the fundamental tenets of naturalism in literature is its connection to Darwin's theory of evolution. Norris's novels are heavily influenced by Darwinism, portraying characters as products of their environment and biological predispositions. In his most famous novel, "McTeague," Norris presents McTeague as a primitive creature whose actions are dictated by his animalistic instincts. This portrayal aligns with the naturalist belief that human behavior is determined by biological and environmental factors.

Norris's naturalistic approach also explores the impact of social forces on individual behavior. He examines the effects of poverty, class divisions, and societal expectations on his characters' lives. In "The Octopus: A Story of California," Norris depicts the struggles of farmers at the hands of powerful railroad companies, illustrating how economic circumstances can shape people's lives and limit their choices. Through this, Norris highlights the deterministic nature of society and its influence on individuals.

Norris's novels often emphasize the significance of environment in shaping characters' lives. Whether it is the landscapes of California or the dirty streets of San Francisco, the settings in Norris's works mirror the harsh realities faced by his characters. Another aspect of naturalism present in Norris's novels is the notion of fate. Characters in his works often find themselves trapped in a predetermined path, unable to escape their circumstances. In "McTeague," McTeague's descent into violence and destruction is seen as an inevitable outcome, driven by his inherent nature and external influences. This



fatalistic perspective aligns with naturalist themes, emphasizing the idea that individuals are bound by forces beyond their control.

Norris's naturalistic approach portrays the darker aspects of human nature. His characters often exhibit base instincts, succumbing to greed, jealousy, and violence. Norris presents a bleak view of humanity, suggesting that these primal desires are an inherent part of human existence. Through this portrayal, he emphasizes the naturalist belief in the inherent brutality and instinctual nature of humans.

In conclusion, Frank Norris's novels are typical examples of naturalism in American literature, offering a raw and unflinching examination of society and human nature. Through his portrayal of characters influenced by their environment and driven by instinctual desires, Norris provides profound insights into the complexities of the human condition. His works continue to be celebrated for their realistic depictions and exploration of deterministic forces, solidifying his legacy as a key figure in the naturalist literary movement.

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