

Madness for money in Frank Norris's *McTeague*

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Abstract

In this paper attempt is made to show that Trina, in Frank Norris's *McTeague*, is not the masochistic, money-loving monster she might appear to be. I refute Spangler's claim that Trina is Norris's version of the "fatal woman," who knowingly and willingly wreaks havoc on McTeague's life (as well as her own) because of her madness for money. I attempt to show that she is merely using what's at her disposal to grasp a certain amount of agency in a world that doesn't want her to have it. I demonstrate how she finds the comfort and control she needs in her work, in her management of the house and McTeague, and most explicitly, in the miserly, and sometimes erotic, relationship she has with her money. Trina is a victim and, as such, to blame for nothing but seeking comfort and lost control.

Keywords: madness, money, control, comfort, love, sex, power

George M. Spangler, in an article written in 1978 entitled "The Structure of *McTeague*," offered a reading of Frank Norris's novel that names McTeague the victim of Norris's version of the "fatal woman" (94). The second half of the novel, according to Spangler, sees Trina as a woman whose "economics are unnecessarily severe" (94) and who degrades her husband, as well as herself, until he has to turn to cruelty and ultimately murder to get what he wants. Spangler even suggests that though Trina's murder is abominable, "Norris quite skillfully manages to make the reader feel at least some sympathy for McTeague and none for Trina" (95).

What Spangler's reading does is recognize that something Trina possesses or can do is in some way not only threatening to McTeague but is willfully directed at or against him. This enables the reader to demonize Trina, as Spangler does, and suggests that her behavior is not only responsible for but also deserving of her punishment and death. . What is interesting about Spangler's reading is that he recognizes and is responding to something very important: the fact that Trina becomes a threatening figure. Recognizing Trina as this threat necessarily affords her a certain kind of power, or something like it, and Spangler understands this power to have everything to do with her owning and

hoarding of money. After a first reading of *McTeague*, it is rather easy to see Trina as a weird version of the classic "fatal woman." Norris calls Trina a "strange" (310) woman in her hoarding, but what is even more striking is that he seems to present Trina as a monstrous woman for her love of money. After *McTeague* has stolen her money:

Her love of money for the money's sake brooded in her heart, driving out by degrees every other natural affection. She grew thin and meager; her flesh clove and tight to her small skeleton; her small pale mouth and little uplifted chine grew to have a certain feline eagerness of expression; her long, narrow eyes glistened continually, as if they caught and held the glint of metal (354).

Her physical appearance changes for the worse; her health suffers. Trina is a mad woman, maybe a maniac with glistening eyes and only care in the world, her money. Furthermore, Norris turns Trina's interaction with the money into something erotic, and in his depiction of this eroticism renders her even more monstrous. In the following scene, one witnesses Trina sharing her bed with her money:

Not a day passed that Trina did not have it out where she could see and touch it. One evening she had even spread all the gold pieces between the sheets, and had then gone to bed, stripping herself, and had slept all night upon the money, taking a strange and ecstatic pleasure in the touch of the smooth flat pieces the length of her entire body (360-1).

A stripped and naked Trina literally spends the night in bed with her money experiencing the "ecstatic pleasure" of a lover. In reference to this scene, William

E. Cain, in an article that debates the extent to which Norris is present in the text and tries to understand Norris's dealings with power, suggests that Norris knows he's depicting something bizarre and horrifying when he depicts Trina's sex with the money.

Norris refers to her other innate desire, her "pleasure in yielding" as "strange and unnatural" (309), and what this might be evidence of is "discomfort" on Norris' part, his fear of Trina manifesting itself in the narrative. Norris moves beyond the less damaging critique of "strange" and calls her love of brutality "perverted" and "morbid" and "unwholesome" (309-10). His depiction of Trina in this regard as well becomes something bordering monstrous; Norris even depicts Trina taking a "strange sort of pride" (310) in her masochistic pleasure. In a startling and unsettling scene, Trina and Maria talk about their beatings, "each trying to make out that her own husband was the most cruel" (310). Both women "[glory] in their husband's mistreatment" (311) and even fabricate stories and invent details, "magnifying their own mistreatment" (311). Showing Trina participating in this bizarre contest, these "long and excited arguments" (311) seems to be another way for Norris to turn her pleasure in masochism into something that is horrifying and even monstrous.

In addition, a calm McTeague after the murder leaves his wife's unconscious and hiccoughing body, enters her room, takes her money, comments offhandedly on the weather, washes his hands and forearms and then changes into his work clothes without so much as a hint of guilt or remorse or even disbelief, and his complete lack of remorse for the rest of the novel is even more horrifying. There is no doubt that Trina is the victim, that the scene shows Trina as the victim of a horrific murder by a beast of a man, who possesses an "ape-like agility" (375) and the strength to tear the lock and bolt guard off the door and send "her staggering across the room" (373). I feel that readers are left thinking that McTeague has done a brutal and disgusting thing to a woman undeserving", of this and will want to condemn him.

Trina's control as the way in which she gains meaning in her life can be seen early in the text in her work. Trina's housework is something that allows her to find some meaning through her mastery of a skill, but more importantly, she's in charge of the domestic space and it is this ability to control and maintain their home that grants her power. Norris states that "Trina would be an extraordinarily good housekeeper" and that "economy" is her "strong point" (134). Trina is always busying herself with the housework, making breakfast, clearing away the breakfast things, making the bed, and dusting - it was a routine that seemed to offer Trina stability. She uses her housework and her control of the domestic sphere to comfort herself. For instance, following a fight with McTeague over money, "their first serious quarrel" (200), Trina begins to "cut the heads off a fresh bunch of onions" (207) and tells McTeague to go away by saying that she'd like to have her kitchen to herself. The kitchen is a space she feels she owns, that she has control over. Her heart breaks as she has to sell her kitchen utensils and the narrator exclaims, "How happy had she been the day after the marriage when she had first entered that kitchen and knew that it was all her own!" (275).

Even in her attempt to improve McTeague, "Trina was tactful enough to move so cautiously and with such slowness that the dentist was unconscious of any process of change" (190). Trina is successful in her attempts and the dentist improves under her influence. She breaks McTeague of his eating and drinking habits. She dresses him properly with clean linen shirts. Maybe most importantly, what the narrator says is "most wonderful of all" (191), Trina lends McTeague ambitions, "confused ideas of something better" (191) and it is through these that both share this dream of something better.

In addition to her mastery of her domestic space and the housework, Trina also works for her Uncle Oelbermann, whittling and painting Noah's Ark figurines. Trina performs her work on the figurines very quickly and easily:

One after another she caught up the little blocks of straight-grained pine, the knife flashed between her fingers, the little figure grew rapidly under her touch, was finished and ready for painting in a wonderfully short time, and was tossed into the basket that stood at her elbow (182).

Not only is her work finished quickly and effortlessly, but she's also very good at it: "She turns the little figurines in her fingers with a wonderful lightness and deftness" (288). She gains a genuine pleasure and pride as a result of her accomplishment. She enjoys her ability to do autonomous work and is "very proud to explain her work to McTeague as he had already his own to her (133), putting herself on his level, sharing with him the ability to do a craft and to do it well.

The most obvious and greatest source of Trina's power, the reason why she becomes such a threat in McTeague's eyes, is the money. Trina wins the lottery money and hoards both it and the money she makes from Mr. Oelbermann. The threat to McTeague's masculinity early in the novel begins with Trina's Winning of the lottery money, because it offers her the opportunity to possess something, to be an owner of something, which is a role really only granted men in the novel. Men possess not only material objects but also women in this world, and the narrative is not shy about the fact that "she belonged to him, body and soul" (89). So that shortly after McTeague has come to possess her through marriage, she happily comes to possess a rather large sum of money. And this money in addition to the money she earns, and hoards gives her great pleasure through ownership, and this ownership means much to her. When McTeague suggests they share ownership of the money, Trina cries out "vehemently": "'It's all mine, mine'" (272), and when McTeague has taken her money, she cries, "' ... my money's gone, my dear money - my dear, dear gold pieces that I've worked so hard for'" (347). Clearly, Trina feels a sense of pride in the ownership but maybe more so in her ability to earn the money, to have worked hard to be able to possess it.

Trina hides the money away in a brass match-safe at the bottom of her trunk, and this money she hoards, the dollars, half-dollars and gold pieces, is empowering for her in that it offers her the chance to act in many ways, experience many things, and enjoy it. Trina can watch the money accumulate and she can see the size of the money increase. She can actively add to the sum of her money and "each time she added a quarter or a half dollar to the little store she laughed and sang with a veritable delight" (188). What thrilled her was not that it was a large sum, "but that it could be made larger" (188). She found joy in counting it carefully, recounting and making piles with it, even arranging them "in patterns - triangles, circles, and squares" (357). She took care of it, and even "rubbed the gold pieces between the fold of her apron until they shone" (209). She plays with the money for long periods of time. She piles the money and then she "[draws] back. to the farthest corner of the room to note the effect" (308).

Trina can also completely control who knows about the money and what they know, and she begins to lie about how much money she begins to lie to McTeague about how much she's spending and how much she's saving. She appears to find pleasure in lying to him, in tricking him, and even in denying him any of her money, but Trina is not 'trying to degrade their lives as "the destroyer" that Spangler claims she is. Trina truly isn't intentionally manipulating McTeague, she doesn't want to have to manipulate him to keep her money, for she is not made happy in her manipulation of him. "I can't help it" (219) she says. In fact, often she experiences great regret over having denied him the

money he asks for and is "sorry she had refused to help her husband" (208).

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