

PAL: Perspectives in American Literature - A Research and Reference Guide - An Ongoing Project

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Chapter 6: Frank Norris (1870-1902)

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Like Crane, Frank Norris had a short life but it was rich in creative writing. The overriding theme in Norris' fiction is the impact of industrialization on peaceful agricultural communities and the consequent chaos in the lives of people who lived in these communities. His most glaring metaphor is that of the tentacles of the railway tracks spreading and choking the countryside in the appropriately titled book *The Octopus*. The spirit of the turn-of-the-century San Francisco is impressively captured in *McTeague*. Its theme, that of a powerful man failing against unexpected adversity, typifies the thrust of the best of Naturalistic writing.

Primary Works

Yvernelle, 1892; *Moran of Lady Letty*, 1898; *Blix*, 1899; *A Man's Woman*, 1899; *McTeague*, 1899; *The Octopus*, 1901; *The Pit*, 1903; *A Deal in Wheat*, 1903; *Responsibilities of the Novelist*, 1903; *The Joyous Miracle*, 1906; *Vandover and the Brute*, 1914.

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| [Top](#) | Frank Norris (1870-1902): A Brief Biography

A Student Project by Jill Baker

Benjamin Franklin Norris Jr. was born March 5, 1870 in Chicago. He was the first of five children born to the Norris's to live past infancy. Frank Norris Sr. was the head of a very prosperous wholesale jewelry business until the year following his son's birth. That year the Chicago fire burned down his business on October 8 (Gerstein 1). While Norris's father provided the family with an income it was Frank's mother that supplied the culture. She was born the daughter of a New England farmer and changed professions when she married. She gave up school teaching to become a lady of the stage. When her children were young, Norris's mother was said to have read Scott and Dickens aloud to them (French 21-22).

Frank was able to travel early in life. When he was just eight years old the Norris family toured Europe and spent the winter in Brighton, England (French 15).

In 1881 Frank's brother, Charles Gilman Norris, was born. He would follow in Frank's footsteps and also become a novelist. Shortly after Charles's birth the Norris family moved to a highly respectable mansion on Michigan Avenue. The family then later moved into the even more impressive Henry Scott mansion in San Francisco (Marchand 22). That same year Frank was sent to Belmont, California. In Belmont he attended a boys preparatory school, however it was not what he had hoped. While playing football there he broke his arm and dropped out of the school. He was directed by his father to attend Boy's High School to prepare for a career in business, but this was also not to his liking. Following his interest in art and dropping school once again Frank was finally permitted to enter the San Francisco Art Association.

In June of 1887 Frank's brother Lester died suddenly of diphtheria. At the time of the death Frank Norris Sr. had already taken the advice of a co-worker and made plans to send his son abroad to study. His family would leave California and join Norris for the trip to London. However, the Norris's found London's schools unsatisfying and prompted a move to Paris (French 23). In Paris, Frank enrolled in the Bouguereau Studio of Julien Atelier to study painting (Gerstein 1).

In 1889 Frank's interest in art declined. He gave up on art altogether and returned to California. It was in California that he published his first article "Clothes of Steel" in the San Francisco Chronicle (French 15).

Frank attended the University of California Berkeley in 1890 and enrolled as a student of limited status. He stayed at the school for four years without receiving a degree. He took no courses in mathematics and focused mainly

on English and French. According to Ernest Marchand, Frank took only classes that came easily to him and even then performed poorly. Frank did write for a campus humor magazine labeled *Smiles*, but it was short-lived.

Frank's parents divorced in 1884, but the effect that it had on him is unknown. The divorce could very likely correspond with his struggles in college (French 21).

One changing aspect of his years at college came when Frank joined the fraternity Phi Gamma Delta. Phi Gamma Delta became an asset to his education and noticeably changed his writing confidence. This can be seen in his earlier novels (French 20).

Frank would spend a year at Harvard and meet a professor that would change his perspective of writing. Frank was inspired under the teaching of Lewis Gates. He would turn in pieces of his works weekly (French 25).

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In 1895 Norris traveled to Africa for a journey that would allegedly lead him across the country, from Cape Town to Cairo. His journey was cut short when he became involved in the Jameson Raid. Shortly after the raid he caught South African Fever. He left the country and returned to San Francisco. He spent six weeks in recuperation (French 25).

Back in San Francisco, Norris becomes sub-editor and correspondent of the *Wave*. It is also in San Francisco that Frank meets Jeanette Black, his future wife. In 1897 Frank left his job at the *Wave* to complete *McTeague*. He attempted this and collected material for short stories at the Big Dipper Mine near Colfax, California (French 27).

| [Top](#) | The following year Norris began to serialize *Moran and the Lady Letty* for the *Wave*. It caught the attention of S. S. McClure of *McClure's Magazine* and in February of 1898 Frank moved to New York to start working. He made \$12.50 a week writing for *McClure's Magazine*. During the next few months his new job would introduce him to William Dean Howells, Stephen Crane, Richard Harding Davis, and Frederick Remington (French 28).

McTeague was published in February of 1899 and *Blix* followed shortly after. Frank returned to California to research for *The Octopus*. That year he would also become a reader for Doubleday, Page and Company. The new income and quick pace of his writing career would permit him to marry Jeanette Black on January 12, 1900. They first lived on Washington Square until October when they moved into a cottage in Roselle, New Jersey (French 29). At Doubleday, Frank would force the publication of Theodore Drier's novel *Sister Carrie*. Frank completed *The Octopus* and left with Jeanette for Chicago. There he gathered information for *The Pit*.

On February 9, 1902 Jeanette Norris Jr. was born. Frank and Jeanette moved the family to San Francisco and made plans to make a trip around the world. Before they could set off, Jeanette became ill with appendicitis and had an appendix operation. Frank Norris died of the same affliction on October 25, 1902 (Gerstein 1).

His death came before the completion of his epic trilogy based on the Battle of Gettysberg (Marchand 35).

In the years to follow his books would continue to be published. *The Pit* was published in the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1903. *A Deal on Wheat and Other Stories* and *Responsibilities of a Novelist* would also reach publication.

The Pit was produced as a play in 1904 and *The Third Circle* was published in 1909. In 1914 *Vandover and the Brute* was edited by his brother, Charles, and also published. *McTeague* would even become a film in a 1924 movie titled *Greed*.

Frank Norris became a sudden success. His fraternity and work after college played significant rolls in shaping his career as well as making his works outlast a century.

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Study Questions

1. Locate Norris's allusions to animals and animal-like behavior in the excerpt from Vandover and the Brute. Analyze what he is trying to say about human motivation and character.
2. Compare and contrast the correspondent from Stephen Crane's "The Open Boat " with Norris's Vandover. Analyze the prose style, thematic content, use of narrative point of view, and portrait of human nature that these works convey.

MLA Style Citation of this Web Page

Reuben, Paul P. "Chapter 6: Frank Norris." *PAL: Perspectives in American Literature- A Research and Reference Guide*. URL: <http://www.csustan.edu/english/reuben/pal/chap6/norris.html> (provide page date or date of your login).

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