

Short Paper Outline: Animals in *McTeague*

Intro

- Frank Norris couches his characters' compulsions in the language of the "animal":
 - Alcohol turns McTeague's father into an "irresponsible animal, a beast, a brute" (2).
 - It is "the animal" in McTeague himself who kisses an unconscious Trina on the dentist's table (24).
 - Trina's housekeeping includes "animal" comforts that "constitute[] the enjoyment of life" (150).
- In his reductive portrayal of natural instinct, Norris is careful to subjugate animals beneath humans in more overt terms, too: Old Grannis tends to diseased dogs, Trina quite literally whittles figurines from Noah's Ark.
- And yet the appearance of physical animals in the novel ironizes their reduced status: animals, more than humans, embody prescience of the sad fate that befalls the latter. They cue readers toward the dismal end that human characters don't notice.
- **Working Thesis:** Norris ends up inverting human and nonhuman awareness of natural impulses to suggest that his characters suffer not because of their unchecked instincts but because of their ignorance of them.

Feuding Dogs

- Norris dramatizes the overt duel between these dogs to foreshadow the Marcus/McTeague fallout and underline the men's own oblivion to their future.
- Immediate conflict: "The dogs raged at each other, snarling and barking..." (48).
- Marcus understates their enmity: "By damn! ... They don't love each other" (48).
- Tenseness: "What a massacre should the two ever meet!" (98) & "Marcus paid no attention to the dogs" (101): this feels ironic, given their relevance.
- Dramatic faceoff: "Those two dogs hate each other just like humans" (170).

Worth considering further: other dogs, the dogs the men walk, the billiard scene

Cat

- Like the dogs, this perceptive creature presages Trina's murder and elevates the status of Norris' animals.
- Instant awareness/tension: "All at once he stopped purring..." (293).
- Intense personification: "The cat listened...wildly terrified...his eyes bulging like brass knobs..." (294).
- Cues the unaware children to the body they would not have noticed: "In fact, the cat was acting strangely..." (297)

Worth considering further: contrast between children and animals, their relevance

Mule

- This traditionally docile fixture of McTeague's getaway ends up ironically controlling his path and derailing his reunion with Marcus.
- Irony implicit in the mule's power: "He acted as if possessed..." (343)
- Strange bond between the men occasioned by the animal: "Enmity between the two had weakened in the face of a common peril" (343).
- Murdering the mule, emptying the revolver, seem to highlight the brute force of this animal—an emblem of animalism in general—that the men had ignored.
- Significance at climax of novel, paired with the lasting image of the bird...

Worth considering: analysis of mule's earlier appearance, before climax, etc.

Bird/Conclusion (potentially separate)

- Perhaps the most blatant animal installed in the plot, the bird serves as an ongoing reminder of McTeague's own trappings: he can't escape his greed as the canary can't escape its own guilt cage. That's evident.
- Irony inheres, of course, in McTeague's commitment to keeping the animal even as he ignores what it represents.
- What does the final image—aligned with the mule's rampage—say about McTeague's own fate, his sense of his animal vulnerability, etc.? How do they work together?

Worth considering: analysis of the bird separate from these concluding nuances