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An Odd Couple

In 1924, Erich von Stroheim christened his onscreen rendition of Frank Norris' *McTeague* with what many critics would call an apt title: *Greed*. "That was the film's name and the novel's vital center," wrote Eric Solomon, years later, in his introduction to the Signet Classics edition of the text. "In this view, success equals money; failure is measured by poverty" (vii-viii). Norris himself resisted so blunt a name despite his work's overwhelming focus on wealth, its indulgent depictions of gold, and its dramatic climax in the mines of Death Valley. By presenting the text as a study of character rather than craving, he achieved a more nuanced portrait of the former and a more damning judgment of the latter. Contrary to Solomon's take, it is not quite greed that characterizes McTeague and Trina. The thrill of their desire is not a rational ambition—wealth—but the pathological impulse to possess something more physical at all costs, prudence be damned. Norris' protagonists reinscribe "greed" as more compulsive than covetous—an urge that dooms its own possessor not by aspiring to excess but by defying its apparent objective.

Norris foregrounds this distinction in an exaggerated characterization of Zerkow, who embodies the denotative greed that fails to describe McTeague and Trina. In a novel that many say centers on greed, the word appears but three times. Norris reserves it for descriptions of the Polack alone: "It was impossible to look at Zerkow and not know instantly that greed—inordinate, insatiable greed—was the dominant passion of the man" (34). This extreme description—applied, by overt stereotype, to a Jewish character—

posits Zerkow's simple desire against the more complex yearning that motivates McTeague and Trina. Unlike those two, whose bad habits ironically subvert their search for wealth, Zerkow is eternally aware of his greater aim and of the costs he incurs in seeking it; in an exchange with Maria, he purchases stolen gold but resents himself for the price, "grudging each piece of money as if it had been the blood of his veins" (35). Whereas Trina receives a windfall and ultimately forfeits its interest by withdrawal, he keeps scheming for more wealth without pausing to appreciate his store; although, as Miss Baker hints, "Zerkow has lots of money" (168), the rag picker seems to keep it stashed and lives in destitution instead, among "a world of debris" (33). His primary purpose is to pursue abstract riches rather than stockpile their physical form—this, Norris suggests, is true greed. He gluts himself on Maria's stories of gold not just to indulge but to strategize: "Some day," he imagines, "he would hit upon the right combination of questions" to determine the fortune's whereabouts (189). Trina glibly suggests he marries Maria "just so's [*sic*] he can hear that story every day" (169). In fact, he marries her to verify the story, kills her when he can't, and winds up dead himself, clutching "tin dishes—fully a hundred of them"—in clear pursuit of his goal (253). It is the objective, rather than just the longing, that predictably governs him.

In Trina's case, however, the need to cherish wealth sabotages every rational effort to increase it; greed is too meek a descriptor for such self-defeating desire. Her longing assumes an intent of its own that thwarts logic. While Trina fears poverty—reducing her husband and household to ascetic frugality, withholding funds from even her family—she makes decisions that ensure her financial demise. After McTeague flees with her savings, she resolves not to earn more money but to withdraw her only stores

against Uncle Oelbermann's advice. What drives her is not a clear target of wealth but "love of money for the money's sake" (278), or, in plainer terms, "a veritable mental disease" (281). Although this "mania" presents, initially, in a fashion similar to Zerkow's, it differentiates itself in foolishness and extremity (278). There is neither foresight nor inhibition in Trina's economic considerations—indeed, her erotic hunger for money in its material form "exclude[s] every other sentiment" (283). She goes as far as to "spread all the gold pieces between the sheets" and strip herself, "taking a strange and ecstatic pleasure in the touch of the smooth flat pieces" (283). Trina fetishizes coinage over capital, and it is this consuming obsession that not only impoverishes her but also hastens her death. Threatened by a murderous McTeague, she protests that she "can't" relinquish her money even in her final moments, feeling not panic but "sudden resolution" despite danger (294). Like Zerkow, she dies in the throes of desire, but her desire is distinct. Trina does not die in a calculated search for more money; she dies in a futile effort to protect the supply her own oversight has diminished.

McTeague, too, suffers from this specific pathology, although the object of his longing is his canary, the consequence his capture by Marcus. Like Trina, he exhibits not greed but irrational attachment that forfeits his future prospects: the bird—once a reminder of home—ends up identifying McTeague to the authorities who chase him through Death Valley. Throughout the text, Norris emphasizes his protagonist's bizarre affinity for the bird, which "would have been maddening to any one [*sic*] but McTeague" (14). The canary's almost irksome presence ironizes his resistance to part with it in favor of self-interest. Indeed, due to his "strange obstinacy," McTeague consents to sell neither the bird nor the cage during Trina's apartment sale, locking both in his bedroom (288).

Again and again, he clings to the canary, even when the compulsion harms not just him but the bird as well. Although the "curious detail" of the canary incriminates McTeague himself, the sweltering conditions in the desert literally threaten the bird's life, forcing its owner to dampen flour sacks around the cage (340). Even Cribbens notices this hassle, calling McTeague's commitment to the bird the "craziest idea [he] ever heard of" (314). Perhaps the least subtle depiction—and critique—of McTeague's dedication to the bird appears in Norris' epithet for the canary's cage: repeatedly he refers to it as a "gilt prison," the image that concludes the book (347). Just as the bird remains trapped, so too does McTeague, preserving an inane attachment that leaves him and his pet in the same hopeless state: "half-dead," though only for the moment (347). Were McTeague a victim of simple greed, he would act with some awareness of his self-interest and destination. As it stands, Norris suggests, the protagonist occasions his own ruin.

Echoing Norris' own descriptions of McTeague's "brute strength" (26), Eric Solomon calls this characterization "too bestial" (xii): "McTeague is a massive, slow-thinking beast—an animal surviving on *instinct*" (xi, my italics). The novel's conclusion seems to disprove that assessment: McTeague does not survive, in part because his irrational impulses override his animal instinct. An animal's endgame would be survival; an animal would abandon the canary instead of cherishing it, or, in Trina's case, would hold its money in the safe burrow of a bank. Although Zerkow dies, he at least seeks material advancement. But McTeague, like Trina, suffers from an animal's passion without any of its pragmatism. His human tics complicate his beastly motivations, and Norris is careful to preserve that tension in his language, calling the animalism, by turns, "a strange sixth sense" (306), a "lower faculty" (306), a "perverse, vicious thing…within

him" (25), and a "brute close to the surface" (184)—but never the man himself. Norris works in simile, not metaphor, confining these instincts of the main lovers to a "second self" (24, 70). That precise sensibility unites the otherwise odd couple. Indeed, they share not a beast's greed but something subtler.

Works Cited

Norris, Frank. *McTeague*. New York: Signet Classics, 2011. Print.