

## FRANK NORRIS: THE NATURALIST AS VICTORIAN

ROBERT W. SCHNEIDER

One of the most perplexing problems for the intellectual historian has been that of continuity and change. Each historian, if he is to make history meaningful, must deal with the problem of periodization; in order to periodize he must demonstrate the various ways in which one era differs from those which preceded and followed it. Most historians agree that no era has ever broken completely from its predecessor, but beyond this there is little agreement.

The problem is even greater for the historian of ideas than for the political or economic historian. Who would deny that the American Revolution or the Civil War constitute breaks in American political history? But ideas do not change in so sharp and definite a pattern. For instance, American intellectual historians have long sought a satisfactory breaking point between the secular, scientific, intellectual climate of twentieth century America and the traditional attitudes and morality of nineteenth century America. Most of them have settled upon the Progressive period between 1890 and 1917; some have narrowed it down to the decade of the 1890's. During this exciting period of national re-evaluation Americans in all walks of life supposedly took on a new secular, scientific, pragmatic attitude.

It is the contention of the present writer, however, that whatever value the "watershed" interpretation of the 1890's may have for political and economic history, it has only limited application to the realm of ideas. American intellectual historians, in an attempt to demonstrate the change from nineteenth to twentieth century attitudes, have tended to distort the balance between continuity and change. Professor David W. Noble has helped to redress the balance through his study of the Progressive social scientists, like Thorstein Veblen, Charles H. Cooley, James Baldwin, and Herbert Croly.<sup>1</sup> In sharp contrast to the usual textbook treatment of these men, Professor Noble has shown quite conclusively that their basic beliefs were grounded not in scientific, matter-of-fact knowledge but in a traditional value structure.

The literature of the Progressive period still needs to be subjected to this kind of analysis--that is, an analysis of basic, underlying assumptions. There has been some excellent work done on the writers of the period, but in reading most of the general and monographic studies, one gets the impression that, in the field of literature, the "watershed" period of the 1890's was

peopled with a totally new breed of writers called naturalists--men who rejected the traditional assumptions and values of the past for the new cult of science.

What were the basic tenets of this American creed which the naturalists are supposed to have overthrown? First, and perhaps most important, was the philosophic side of the code, centering around the doctrine of the free individual.<sup>2</sup> Americans had been the inheritors of the dual concept of man postulated by the seventeenth century English political theorists. This concept, found in its most familiar form in the writings of John Locke, held that the natural man was essentially good, rational and unselfish, but in his social relations gave expression to the evil, selfish, irrational side of his nature. This essentially benevolent individual was free and creative and could construct or reform society in the light of human reason. During the nineteenth century the scope of man's freedom and creativity was so emphasized that the complexity of the earlier concepts was obscured. The idea of man as good, rational, free and creative came to be looked upon as the American concept. The qualifying factor was that man was basically good only so long as he remained the natural man apart from the corrupting influence of institutions and traditions. This philosophy found its most extravagant expression in the laissez-faire creed of the Gospel of Wealth.

Man's freedom to will and act, however, placed a grave responsibility on his shoulders. He lived his life in a universe that operated on a system of moral law and he could understand this moral law through the exercise of his reason. Because he had the freedom and rationality to direct his own life, he was held totally responsible for his own actions. Both his material success and his eternal salvation were his own responsibility.

This was one side of the traditional creed that is supposed to have been overthrown by the naturalistic code that was being formulated in the 1890's. Under the pressure of the new, chaotic industrialism and guided by the evolutionary philosophy of Darwin and Spencer, the writers of this "watershed" period supposedly rejected the traditional notion that man was the free and creative center of a moral universe for an amoral philosophy of biological determinism. Critics and literary historians have disagreed rather violently as to the exact nature of this new philosophy of naturalism, but Ernest Marchand has given a good working description of the naturalistic view of man which indicates some of the basic ideas.

Man was seen to be a complex of instincts, desires, hungers, toward the satisfaction of which all his energies were bent. All the elaborate machinery of law and custom developed by civilization is scarcely sufficient to hold in check the self-assertive impulses, the hard-driving force of the ego. Hence the continual aggressions, unscrupulous acts, crimes of all sorts, which

trouble society. It was readily imagined that man in his primitive state would admit no restraints to the fulfillment of his desires but superior force, whether of things, of beasts, or of other men. . . . Concentration on the animal in man and on instinct tended to diminish the importance of reason and of ethics in human life and to magnify brute strength and energy.<sup>3</sup>

Here then is a philosophy which not only rejected the traditional assumptions about morals, ethics and human nature, but which also was in complete revolt against the Victorianism of the so-called Genteel Tradition. The young writers of the 1890's could not tolerate what they considered to be the over-fastidious, prudish character of contemporary writing. The notion that sex was evil and a subject to be avoided at all cost was supposedly foreign to them. The grip of the Genteel Tradition, where all was sweetness and light, where all love was platonic, and sexual intercourse was a degradation of noble womanhood, had to be broken.

In the field of literature, as in many other fields, the picture of the 1890's has been distorted by overemphasis on change. Were these writers actually in rebellion against the intellectual and moral world of their own day? If so, to what extent did they manage to free themselves from traditional assumptions and value judgments? This essay will be concerned with answering these questions in the instance of a man who is considered by most literary historians to be a prime example of pre-War American Naturalism but who was, in many ways, typical of the Victorian Age--Frank Norris.

Frank was the eldest son of a rather typical upper-middle class family in post-Civil War America. His father had made a modest fortune in the jewelry business in Chicago before moving his family to California; his artistically inclined mother was of colonial lineage and a gracious asset to her ambitious husband. When Frank decided to forego business training for the study of art, all the tensions inherent in this situation exploded.<sup>4</sup>

Mrs. Norris and the artistic side of life won the first battle and young Frank was sent to the Julien Antelien in Paris where he displayed his dilettante tendencies by studying French medieval history and participating in a clique at the opera instead of working at the development of his supposed craft as an artist. Mr. Norris soon lost patience with his son's lack of diligence and decided to prepare him for the jewelry business by sending him to the University of California at Berkeley. Again Frank spent most of his time in extra-curricular activities and left the University after four years with a reputation for being a good fellow, but without a degree.

The divorce of his parents in 1894 meant that Frank, now twenty-four, would not participate in his father's million dollar estate and this may have had a sobering effect on the young author, who, for the first time, dropped

his sophomoric attitude and took a serious look at life. With his mother's encouragement and financial support he entered Harvard's famous class in creative writing, and from that point on Frank's energies were directed toward his ultimate, though short-lived, career as a man of letters.

Although it was not published until 1914, Vandover and the Brute was the first novel Frank Norris completed, and the theme--the degeneration of an upper-middle class youth--would seem to be a perfect one for a naturalistic novel. In the beginning Vandover was a complete innocent; when he learned about sex he could not believe that people were so "vile." Yet, even as he was shocked "the innate vice stirred in him, the brute began to make itself felt."<sup>5</sup> Norris suggested that this side of Vandover's nature might have corrupted the boy in his early teens, had it not been that the other side of his nature--the artistic side--began to develop at the same time. Here, as later, Norris, like a good Victorian, seemed to see evil epitomized in the sex act.

At college Van spent most of his time studying art and trying to be collegiate. When he returned to San Francisco he established a studio and entered into the life around him. In the social whirl, Van again found that his purity and clean habits made him an exception, and again his pliable character gave way as he entered into the night life of the city.

Finding that his respect for women stood in the way of desired sensual pleasures, Van set out to destroy that respect, knowing as he did so that "it was the wilful and deliberate corruption of part of that which was best in him."<sup>6</sup> He permitted the beast to satisfy its demands, "feeding its abominable hunger from that part of him which he knew to be the purest, the cleanest, and the best."<sup>7</sup> Norris continually emphasized that this was an act of will on Van's part--a wilful action taken with knowledge of the consequences.

Three years passed during which Van engaged in occasional debauches and, at the same time, carried on a courtship of the pure and lovely Turner Ravis who, Norris wrote, "influenced him upon his best side, calling out in him all that was cleanest, finest and most delicate."<sup>8</sup> Meanwhile Van struck up an acquaintance with a "gay" girl named Ida Wade, who committed suicide when she discovered she was pregnant with Van's child. This was the beginning, and a causal factor, in a series of disasters that resulted in the death of Van's father and his own exile from the social circle of his friends. Van was upset by the exile, "yet he took his punishment in the right spirit. He did not blame anyone but himself; it was only a just retribution for the things he had done."<sup>9</sup>

Now, beyond the restraining bonds of society, Van entered upon a year-long period of dissipation during which he lost contact with all his old friends. Then one night he found himself at the opera where, for the moment, his love of beauty saved him and he came to understand himself. In this rather extended passage Norris reveals many of the ethical and moral presuppositions upon which the novel is based.

There came over him a vague sense of those things which are too beautiful to be comprehended. . . . To be better, to be true and right and pure, these were the only things that were worth while, these were the things that he seemed to feel in the music. . . . The appeal had been made directly to what was best and strongest in Vandover, and the answer was quick and overpowering. . . . He had not yet destroyed all that was good in him; now it had turned in one more revolt, crying out against him, protesting for the last time against its own perversion and destruction. . . . He had been lured into a mood where he was himself at his very best, where the other Vandover, the better Vandover, drew apart with eyes turned askance, looking inward and downward into the depths of his own character, shuddering, terrified. Far down there in the darkest, lowest places he had seen the brute, squat, deformed, hideous. . . . And with the eye of his better self he saw again, little by little, the course of his whole life, and witnessed again the eternal struggle between good and evil that had been going on within him since his earliest years. He was sure that at the first the good had been the strongest. Little by little the brute had grown, and he, pleasure-loving, adapting himself to every change of environment, luxurious, self-indulgent, shrinking with the shrinking of a sensuous artist-nature from all that was irksome and disagreeable, had shut his ears to the voices that shouted warnings of the danger, and had allowed the brute to thrive and grow.<sup>10</sup>

Norris makes it quite evident that Vandover's problem was his own dual nature and his failure to curb the evil, sensual side of that nature. It was his surrender to the animal in him that was the basic cause of Van's decline. One by one he had separated himself from, or caused to be separated from him, all of the influences that had cultivated the better part of him--his father, Turner Ravis and society itself.<sup>11</sup> Even his ability as an artist had slipped away through neglect. "It was gone--his art was gone, the one thing that could save him. That, too, like all the other good things of his life, he had destroyed."<sup>12</sup>

A final reverse came when Van lost the remainder of his money through a law suit instituted by the father of Ida Wade. Van was now a prisoner of his unreasoned fear. "It was the punishment that he had brought upon himself, some fearful nervous disease, the result of his long indulgence of vice, his vile submission to the brute that was to destroy his reason."<sup>13</sup> The disease, a nervous condition called Lycanthropy-Mathesis, was, in Norris' mind, a result of Vandover's dissipated life and not, as many critics have suggested,

a primary causal factor in his destruction. Van's decline was not the result of amoral, scientific forces that moved along a predetermined path; it was a decline for which Van himself was responsible. "Great God!" Norris wrote, "his whole life has been one long suicide."<sup>14</sup> Heredity, environment, and amoral forces were all incidental to the major motif which was the destruction of a young man who wilfully allowed the evil side of his dual nature to triumph over the good. The whole book is the kind of lesson in morals to which the Victorians were addicted.

Norris' other early novel displays many of the same ethical and moral judgments that linked Vandover to the Victorian intellectual climate. In McTeague, however, the connection is not presented so blatantly. Most of the literary historians seem to be in agreement that Trina and McTeague were not free individuals in charge of their own destiny, as was Vandover, but prisoners of hereditary and environmental forces. Carvel Collins, in an introduction to McTeague, has written, "The novel records the destruction of an innocent."<sup>15</sup> But does it?

Has not the critic's emphasis upon heredity and environment been rather misplaced? In the case of McTeague himself, the inherited tendency toward viciousness when drunk was undoubtedly a factor, but that appears to have been the only inherited characteristic which Norris stressed. Environment was not important at all. It is true that Norris gave some rather detailed descriptions of Polk Street, but he did not show that these conditions were causal factors in the lives of his principals. The story could have been set in another place and another social stratum without injury to the plot or the logic of the events.

What then were the controlling factors in the fall of Mac and Trina? Mac was a fairly good dentist and was happy in his little world. Then the snake entered the Garden of Eden as Trina awakened his sexual instincts. So long as the affair continued on a rather platonic plane Norris treated it with quiet amusement. But when McTeague's sexual instinct rose to the flood as Trina was helpless under the ether, Norris' tone changed accordingly. He wrote, "Suddenly the animal in the man stirred and woke; the evil instincts that in him were so close to the surface leaped to life."<sup>16</sup> If McTeague had been solely an animal he would simply have followed his instinct, but here a crisis arose because man for Norris is not simply a predatory animal--he has a dual nature.

Blindly, and without knowing why, McTeague fought against it, moved by an unreasoned instinct of resistance. Within him, a certain second self, another better McTeague rose with the brute; both were strong, with the huge crude strength of the man himself. . . . There in that cheap and shabby "Dental Parlor" a dreaded struggle began. It was the old battle, old as the world, wide as the world--the sudden

panther leap of the animal . . . and the simultaneous arousing of the other man, the better self.<sup>17</sup>

McTeague wondered why it was that this perverse urge arose to defile a love that was pure and clean. Then occurs this famous passage.

Below the fine fabric of all that was good in him ran the foul stream of hereditary evil, like a sewer. The vices and sins of his father and of his father's father, to the third and fourth and five hundredth generation, tainted him. The evil of an entire race flowed in his veins. Why should it? He did not desire it. Was he to blame?

But McTeague could not understand this thing. It had faced him, as sooner or later it faces every child of man.<sup>18</sup>

Most of the critics apparently have not read beyond the first sentence of this quotation, for almost invariably they have stressed the fact that this evil was inherited by McTeague. But the rest of the quotation makes it obvious that this evil is part of the nature of man. McTeague inherited it as a man, not as the son of a particular family.

In these two passages Norris' close connection with traditional ideas again becomes clear. His Victorian attitude toward the sexual relationship was clearly shown in McTeague's thoughts and actions. As much as the huge dentist desired Trina, he realized that if he took her she would never be the same to him. "Under the shadow of her royal hair, he would surely see the smudge of a foul ordure."<sup>19</sup> Indeed, this was what happened when she did surrender to him--a kiss only--at the railroad station. Immediately she became less desirable; he thought less of her.

Equally traditional is Norris' attitude on the nature of man. Each man has within him an instinct toward both good and evil; the life of man is a battle between these two sides of his own nature. The destruction of Trina and McTeague arose from the instincts within them and the strange operation of fate or chance. As with Vandover, the basic problem was a dual nature, the evil side of which was too much for them to control. But, whereas he had held Vandover responsible, Norris excused them from responsibility. He did not continually lecture them on their lack of will power as he had Vandover, but on the contrary appears to have assumed from the beginning that they would surrender to their evil instincts. More important for present considerations, however, is the fact that Norris does retain the moral faculty of the traditional attitudes toward man, even though he moves beyond the Genteel Tradition in his willingness to discuss the evil side of man's nature.

Both of Norris' early novels, then, show that traditional morality, ethical codes, codes of conduct, and theories of man still retained a strong influence on the young novelist. But these after all were the products of his

extreme youth (in their production, not in their publication). What about the so-called "red-blooded" adventure stories? Does this strong residue of traditional ideas remain in those works?

Although the first of these novels was named after the heroine, Moran of the Lady Letty is essentially the story of Ross Wilber, a young member of the San Francisco social set who was shanghaied and placed on a ship bound to hunt sharks off the lower California coast. What followed was an adventure of a civilized man in the lawless world of the open sea. For present considerations this novel is unimportant except for one factor: Ross Wilber, removed from the restrictions of civilization, still retained a moral sense that, at least in part, directed his actions.

When Ross and Captain Kitchell agreed to take The Lady Letty for salvage, "the predatory instinct of his Viking ancestors" rose within Ross.<sup>20</sup> But when he realized that Moran was the legal owner of the ship, "then the instincts of habit reasserted themselves. The taxpayer in him was stronger than the free-booter after all. He felt that it was his duty to see to it that the girl had her rights."<sup>21</sup> Similarly, the difference between Wilber's Lockean interpretation of their state of nature and Moran's Hobbesian one came out before the fight with the crew of the junk, when Wilber pondered over their right to take the valuable ambergris. Rights did exist for Wilber, the civilized man, even beyond the sound of the policeman's whistle.<sup>22</sup>

In this novel Norris also displayed his continued adherence to the sexual code of the Victorian. As Ross and Moran were lying side by side, alone on a deserted beach, he wondered what it was that kept him from making love to her on the spot. Was it because of moral scruples, of fear, or because she did not appeal to him as a love partner? Then he leaned over and breathed the aroma of her warm body and decided that he abstained because of moral scruples.<sup>23</sup>

More important for purposes of this paper is the second of the adventure stories, A Man's Woman. Most of the literary historians have agreed that in this novel Norris abandoned even the pretense of determinism--it is rather a glorification of the human will, the will of the superman who is outside the moral and ethical codes of society. But again this analysis collapses when one looks at the actions of the characters themselves, for Ward Bennett and Lloyd Searight are about as moral as two people could possibly be.

In the march southward from the North Pole, Norris pitted the giant, determined, self-controlled Bennett against the forces of nature. He was a rough and brutal leader; when one man wanted to lie down and die, Bennett forced him to his feet and made him go on. When another could not proceed under his own power, Bennett left the man behind to die and forced the others to continue their march. This looks very much like the action of an amoral superman who is outside the dictates of conventional morality.

But still Bennett is a moral man. After all hope of survival had been abandoned, Bennett saw one of the dogs which had run off hovering on the



edge of the camp. With the dog for food he could make it to the settlements. He alone had the strength left to do it.

He would live; he, the strongest, the fittest, would survive. Was it not right that the mightiest should live?

Was it not the great law of nature? <sup>24</sup>

He had left one man to die, but that had been to save the rest. Could he now abandon his men to death? He could not and did not. Even in the frozen wasteland, his own life in grave danger, the primitive cannot put aside conventional morality. At least not in a novel by Frank Norris.

Both Bennett and Lloyd emerged from the story as essentially noble savages in the tradition of the eighteenth century. They possessed dual natures, and the evil side of them--again associated primarily with sex--posed problems over which both triumphed by force of will. They were rational, free to will and to act, and essentially good. Lloyd's belief in duty and right, her conflict between duty and self-interest, and her freedom to act apart from the forces of heredity, environment and social tradition, all mark her as the superwoman--but a superwoman with a very strong ethical and moral code.

Even before A Man's Woman was released Norris had moved on to more thoughtful writing. It is in the Wheat Series, and especially in The Octopus, that his thoughts on the ethics of human existence reach their most complete and, at the same time, most confused level. Again the question of whether man directs his own affairs through ethical considerations, or is simply a prisoner of some kind of forces whose operation is completely outside the realm of morals, occupies a central position. To this question Norris provided at least three mutually conflicting answers.

In The Octopus, Norris' main emphasis with regard to the efficacy of human moral action was that man is insignificant in comparison with the fecundity of the wheat and the force of the railroad. All of the ranchers of the San Joaquin valley had united to defeat the railroad, but they had failed. Why? Because man is an insignificant gnat in the totality of things.

What were these heated, tiny squabbles, this feverish, small bustle of mankind, this minute swarming of the human insect, to the great, majestic, silent ocean of the Wheat itself! Indifferent, gigantic, resistless, it moved in its appointed grooves. Men. Lilliputians, gnats in the sunshine, buzzed impudently in their tiny battles, were born, lived through their little day, died, and were forgotten; while the Wheat, wrapped in Nirvanic calm, grew steadily under the night, alone with the stars and with God. <sup>25</sup>

In this and dozens of similar passages throughout the novel, Norris presented man as an insignificant insect in an amoral universe. The railroads built themselves and the wheat grew itself; everything operated automatically

through natural laws. By sheer weight and bulk this was the predominant picture which Norris presented in The Octopus.

But, on the other hand, the most carefully presented character study in the novel was that of Magnus Derrick, whose destruction, Norris implied, lay on his own head. Magnus was a man about sixty, tall, broad and erect, a man of great dignity. People looked up to him as their natural leader and he was proud that they did so. He had abandoned politics because he refused to lower his principles, but it looked as though any victory over the railroad required the securing of a friendly railroad commission, and to do this he would have to acquiesce in some crooked political dealings. But what about his honor? His wife reminded him of this, and "again Magnus wavered, about to yield to his better instincts and to the entreaties of his wife."<sup>26</sup> In this and similar passages, Norris indicated that Magnus had a free moral choice about whether or not to enter the League against the railroad. But at other times he presented the old rancher as a prisoner of circumstances.

But now it was too late. He was pledged. He had joined the League. He was its chief, and his defection might mean its disintegration at the very time when it needed all its strength to fight the land cases. More than a mere deal in bad politics was involved. There was the land grab. His withdrawal from an unholy cause would mean the weakening, perhaps the collapse, of another cause that he believed to be righteous as truth itself. He was helplessly caught in the mesh. Wrong seemed indissolubly knitted into the fabric of Right.<sup>27</sup>

At still other times Norris speaks of Magnus as a great gambler, risking all on one cast of the dice. One wonders if Magnus was actually the free man capable of choice, the moral man caught in a dilemma where his freedom of action was limited to a choice between two evils, or "the gambler, willing to play for colossal stakes, to hazard a fortune on the chance of winning a million."<sup>28</sup>

Norris' solution was presented in the events of the story. Magnus, as president of the League in its fight against the railroad, achieved the position he had so long sought--to be honored, well-known and respected. But it brought him no pleasure. He had suddenly aged and his old erect carriage slumped. He could not forget that he was a briber. All his life he had been honest, but now he had succumbed to the harrassment of the railroads; he had fallen from virtue. Consequently, he lost his old assurance and with it his old mastery.<sup>29</sup> Norris' conclusion was presented when it became known that the man whom the League had elected by bribery, Magnus' own son, was really in the pay of the railroad. The author wrote, "Gambler that he was, he had at last chanced his highest stake, his personal honor, in the greatest game

of his life, and had lost." 30 There seems to be no question that Norris held Magnus morally responsible for his own destruction.

Here, then, is moral and ethical confusion--a confusion in the view of man itself, man held responsible for his actions in a universe that takes no account of those actions. But there is yet a third view presented in The Octopus, a view in which good will triumph and the forces of evil be confounded, not by human action but by the forces of benevolent nature.

This view was presented in the sub-plot dealing with the young ascetic, Vanamee, who had the power to call people to him by intense concentration. It would not be particularly important were it not for the fact that in the end Presley, through whom Norris pulled together all the various strands of his complex story, came to accept Vanamee's position. According to this view, the ranchers of the San Joaquin were defeated in this battle not by S. Behrman and Mr. Shelgrim, but by the force of the railroad itself. This, however, was an individual instance, unimportant in the totality of things, and in the end the forces of good would prevail. Men, individuals, would be shot down; misery and death were their lot. But the wheat remained and it would go in its appointed grooves to feed the world despite the evil forces of the railroad. Presley's analysis, and the novel, end with this paragraph.

Falseness dies; injustice and oppression in the end of everything fade and vanish away. Greed, cruelty, selfishness, and inhumanity are short-lived; the individual suffers, but the race goes on. Annixter dies, but in a far-distant corner of the world a thousand lives are saved. The larger view always and through all shams, all wickednesses, discovers the Truth that will, in the end, prevail, and all things, surely, inevitably, resistlessly work together for good. 31

In this novel Norris tackled, for what is really the first and only time, the problem of man and the cosmos. Is there any clear view of man's ethical position presented here? Are human affairs directed by moral decisions or by amoral forces? Did Norris himself have a clear understanding of his own ideas? None of these questions can be answered completely, yet it is possible to reconcile, at least partially, the contradictions which have been pointed out. Through Magnus Derrick one sees that man can bring about his own destruction, and through another sub-plot one sees that man can achieve his own moral salvation. Buck Annixter did so before he was shot down by the railroad men. Man can bring about his own personal salvation or destruction, and to that degree he is free; the efficacy of the moral decision is upheld. But in his fight with the forces of evil, as here represented by the railroad, he can be defeated. Over and above this, however, is the great life force, the spirit of the universe, which, in the end, will bring about the greatest good for the greatest number. It is not a very clear view and it is clouded with confusions

and contradictions, but it appears to be what Norris was trying to demonstrate in his most ambitious novel.

The essential answer which Norris presented in the second volume of the Wheat Series appears to be quite similar to that presented in The Octopus: namely, that man is responsible for, and free to achieve, his own personal salvation, but that he cannot control the great "forces" of the universe, in this case the wheat. The individual may be annihilated, but the race will prosper. Norris presented some vague statements along this line in a conversation between Laura and Corthell. They agreed that the individual wasn't important; it was the "type" that counted. The individual may deteriorate and, in this sense, he is free, but the type never recedes and can grow better. It can't get back to the original good, but something--nature or God--prevents it from going below a certain point, and it is up to the individual to lift it higher and higher.<sup>32</sup> All of this gives the individual a good deal of freedom and moral responsibility not only for himself, but for the future of mankind as well.

Natural forces, Norris insisted, dominate man, but these forces ultimately lead to the good. To what extent, therefore, is man morally responsible for the evil that exists? If social evil is a result solely of forces which are beyond the control of man, social reform is impossible. If Norris had totally accepted this view, he would have taken a giant step away from the traditional position. But by this time he was probably less ready than ever to accept such a view totally, for by 1899 he seems to have acquired some interest in social reform. This is apparent in a letter to Mrs. Lilli Lewis Parks dealing with his position on the trusts.

As the title of this first book--"The Octopus"--suggests I am enlisted upon the other side. The Corporation (which is another name for trust) of the Southern Pacific R.R. is a very poignant issue with us in California and from what we know of it there we are not led to consider it as legitimate or tolerable, and I am afraid the S. P. is only a sample of its breed.<sup>33</sup>

Norris showed very little recognition of society as traditions and institutions, or of the social order, but in The Pit he did recognize that the consequences of the failure of the corner on wheat did not stop with Jadwin. He mentioned that smaller failures followed; banks and businesses folded and many depositors and investors lost their money. The over-all impression conveyed by both volumes of the Wheat Series seems to be that the evils in the operation of the natural laws arise from the attempt of individuals to interfere with the operation of those laws. Man is responsible, at least in part, for the existence of social evil. And to the extent that the author holds man morally responsible for these evils, he is clinging to traditional ideas, ideas that are in direct opposition to his supposedly deterministic philosophy.

It is interesting to note that Norris retained his rigid Victorian outlook on sex to the very end. In The Octopus, where Presley finds that the daughter of one of the displaced families has been driven by hunger to her first experience as a prostitute, he abandons his attempt to help her. She had been touched by evil and was apparently beyond salvation. "Presley regained his room at the club, white and trembling. Worse than the worst he had feared had happened."<sup>34</sup>

Before attempting a summary of Frank Norris' adherence to traditional ideas, it is interesting to examine some of his non-fictional work. Most of these articles, the last things he wrote, deal with the writing and publication of fiction and are not of interest here, as such. But in them he made assumptions which are important for the purpose of this paper. For example, he contended that the highest form of novel--which is a study of man--<sup>35</sup>

. . . may be a great force, that works together with the pulpit and the universities for the good of the people, fearlessly proving that power is abused, that the strong grind the faces of the weak, that an evil tree is still growing in the midst of the garden, that undoing follows hard upon unrighteousness, that the course of Empire is not yet finished, and that the races of men have yet to work out their destiny in these great and terrible movements that crush and grind and rend asunder the pillars of the houses of the nations.<sup>36</sup>

So the purpose of the novel would seem to be the instruction of men as to how great is the area of freedom in which they may work out their destiny, and to spur man to the good by showing him that destruction follows evil doing.

Further, Norris insisted, the novelist himself must be a good man if he is to produce artistic fiction.

The mind capable of theft, of immorality, of cruelty, of foulness, of falseness of any kind, is incapable, under any circumstances, or by any degree of stimulation, of producing one single important, artistic, or useful piece of fiction. The better the personal morality of the writer, the better his writing.<sup>37</sup>

Even William Dean Howells, who has been pilloried by the literary historians for his Victorian cast of mind, never indulged in more traditional assumptions than these.

Perhaps enough has been quoted here to show the naive idealism that slipped into Norris' writings and which was reflected in his view of man and morals, but one last quotation is here appended to show the heights this idealism reached. Making a plea for the western hero, Norris described him in terms that would bring a blush to the cheeks of a modern television scenario writer.

. . . a fighter for peace, a calm, grave, strong man who hated the lawbreaker as the hound hates the wolf.

He did not lounge in barrooms; he did not cheat at cards; he did not drink himself to maudlin fury; he did not "shoot at the drop of the hat." But he loved his horse, he loved his friend, he was kind to little children; he was always ready to side with the weak against the strong, with the poor against the rich. For hypocrisy and pretense, for shame and subterfuges he had no mercy, no tolerance. He was too brave to lie and too strong to steal . . . He died in defense of an ideal, an epic hero, a legendary figure, formidable, sad.<sup>38</sup>

Those who have tried to present Frank Norris as a complete rebel against the Victorian code of his own day have insisted upon separating his essays about fiction, which they admit are traditionalist, from his fiction itself. But it is the contention of the present writer that such a separation should not be made. The same Victorian sexual code is as prominent in the novels as in the essays. The same belief in the efficacy of human freedom in the face of naturalistic forces can be seen in both. The same insistence that personal salvation or destruction is dependent upon the moral actions of the individual forms an integral part of nearly all his writings.

This is not to say that there are no deterministic, amoral elements in Norris' writings--certainly there are. The story of the destruction of Vandover because of his surrender to the beast must be balanced by the rise of the amoral Charlie Geary and the innocent suffering of Dolliver Haight. But it is very seldom that evil doing is not punished in a Norris novel, and where he is deterministic, as he tries to be in the Wheat Series, that determinism is of the progressive, Spencerian variety and not strictly evolutionary and amoral.

Norris himself was probably not aware of the many cross currents of his mind. Like most men, he was largely a product of the intellectual and moral climate in which he was nourished. He tried to break out of that climate of opinion toward a new way of thinking in which he consciously believed, and it is this unassimilated combination of strong moral and ethical assumptions with conflicting intellectual ideas that brings philosophical confusion to his novels.

It is the contention of the present writer that in the case of Frank Norris, as in that of so many of his contemporaries, the traditional cluster of ideas had more force in directing his thinking than the new concepts. Here again intellectual and literary historians have distorted the climate of opinion and missed the drama of transition in their honest attempts to solve the problem of periodization and dramatize the changes in the intellectual climate of America in the dynamic years between 1890-1917. An examination of individual

beliefs, like those of Frank Norris, and those of the Progressive social scientists, would seem to indicate that those changes were not so great as has sometimes been suggested.

## Northern Illinois University

## Footnotes:

- <sup>1</sup> David W. Noble, The Paradox of Progressive Thought (Minneapolis, 1958).
- <sup>2</sup> For a more complete discussion of the traditional American creed see this author's "Man and the Progressive Novelists" (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1959).
- <sup>3</sup> Ernest Marchand, Frank Norris: A Study (Stanford, California, 1942), 98.
- <sup>4</sup> For the facts of Norris' life see Frank Walker, Frank Norris (Garden City, 1932).
- <sup>5</sup> Frank Norris, Vandover and the Brute (Garden City, 1914), 11.
- <sup>6</sup> Ibid., 29.
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid., 30.
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid., 52.
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid., 204-05.
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid., 213-15.
- <sup>11</sup> Ibid., 215-18.
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid., 229.
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid., 243.
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>15</sup> Frank Norris, McTeague (New York, 1950), xiii.
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid., 22.
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>18</sup> Ibid., 23-24.
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid., 23.
- <sup>20</sup> Frank Norris, Collected Works of Frank Norris, 10 volumes (Garden City, 1928), III, 215.
- <sup>21</sup> Ibid., 218.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid., 273-73.
- <sup>23</sup> Ibid., 265.
- <sup>24</sup> Works, IV, 38.
- <sup>25</sup> Frank Norris, The Octopus (New York, 1957), 310.
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid., 128.
- <sup>27</sup> Ibid., 201.
- <sup>28</sup> Ibid., 206.
- <sup>29</sup> Ibid., 276-77.
- <sup>30</sup> Ibid., 319.
- <sup>31</sup> Norris, The Octopus, 454.
- <sup>32</sup> See Frank Norris, The Pit (New York: Grove Press, n.d.), 244-47.
- <sup>33</sup> Frank Walker, The Letters of Frank Norris (San Francisco, 1956), 44.
- <sup>34</sup> Norris, The Octopus, 409.
- <sup>35</sup> Norris, Works, VII, 22 and 66-67.
- <sup>36</sup> Ibid., 26.
- <sup>37</sup> Ibid., 218.
- <sup>38</sup> Ibid., 49.