The Affinity between the Grotesque and Naturalism in the Works of Stephen Crane and Frank Norris

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Abstract: *When nineteenth century Naturalism emphasized the grotesque and sordid side of life as one of its characteristics, many critics and readers strongly objected to this presentation, wondering why anyone would wish to expose this unattractive phenomenon. What they may not have realized was that the grotesque was an integral part of the movement—one that could not be ignored or falsely beautified. For Stephen Crane and Frank Norris, two American naturalists of the fin-de-siècle, the grotesque became an integral part of their works, both as a result of the new subject matter which they attacked and as an attempt to achieve their didactic purpose of drawing the attention of the refined genteel readers, who preferred to ignore anything distasteful in literature, to the illusive concepts of their age. This article discusses the way the grotesque becomes a tool in the hands of Norris and Crane as they deliberately apply it to their writings in order to portray the reality of human nature as it really exists, rather than the grotesque merely existing as an element of this dark and pessimistic movement.*

During the last decade of the nineteenth century, both Stephen Crane and Frank Norris rejected the common daily events which occurred in the homes of the middle classes as subjects no longer suitable for fiction. They began to direct their attention to a completely different environment as they wandered through the squalid slums and entered the homes of the lower classes. The new atmosphere presented them with a darker and more tragic perspective of life than the one to which readers had previously been accustomed. Throughout their works, the reader repeatedly comes upon terrible events, abnormal behavior by th e characters, and vicious scenes of violence and traumatic death that evolve into the grotesque. This grotesque was a result of the new subject matter with which they occupied themselves. Simultaneously, it helped them to achieve their purpose in writing as naturalists out to reveal an antagonistic world in which man is devoid of any free will or say in determining his direction in life. By dealing with the grotesque in such an emphatic manner, they were able to call their readers' attention to the false concepts which had been established earlier in that age, thus proving the grotesque to be an essential tool in what they wished to accomplish in relation to social awareness rather than the grotesque merely existing as a *fait accompli* in naturalistic writing.

While the "grotesque" was first designated to refer to certain artistic works going back to ancient Roman times, the term underwent such a drastic

evolution that it is difficult to pinpoint a specific definition to the word.[1] In twentieth century literature, the term "grotesque" covers such a large array of meaning that it varies from one novel to another as each author uses it in a specific manner. One of the most common uses is to apply it to characters that are either physically or spiritually deformed. These deformities result in the performance of actions that become ludicrously abnormal, often reducing the characters to the level of being portrayed as animalistic. The term "grotesque" is also applied when the author presents a commentary on the social status existing in the novel. When the characters deviate from normal human behavior or common daily events, the deviation naturally evolves into the bizarre and perverse. Last of all, the "grotesque" may also refer to a certain kind of irony when the tragic and comic merge to result in grotesque humor—a humor increasing the pain of the readers rather than alleviating their fears and anxieties. Regardless of how the grotesque is used, it has become prevalent in modern literature as Thomas Mann (qtd. in O'Conner 1962: 5) explains:

> . . . the striking feature of modern art is that it has ceased to recognize the categories of tragic and comic, or the dramatic classifications, tragedy and comedy. It sees life as tragi-comedy, with the result that the grotesque is the most genuine style—to the ext indeed, that today that is the only guise in which the sublime may appear. [2]

One of the primary reasons for the existence of the grotesque in naturalism was Norris and Crane's rejection of the type of literature that William Dean Howells, Henry James, Mark Twain and other realists were offering. Crane and Norris believed that literature should portray something of more significance than a mere tea party, a social gathering or an everyday event which might occur to anyone. For them, the time had come for the Genteel Tradition of writing to cease. Incapable of finding any vitality of life among the middle classes, they searched for it among the lower classes where they believed that life revealed its true colors. To do so, these writers realized that naturalism was the answer to their quest. It presented the essential environment for their writings as it contained the real pulse of life. In "Zola as a Romantic Writer," Norris (**1986: 1107**) explains the events, characters and environment from which a writer should extract his material:

> The naturalist takes no note of common people, common in so far as to their interests, their lives, and the things that occur to them are common, are ordinary. Terrible things must happen to the characters of the naturalistic tale. They must be twisted from the ordinary, wrenched out from the quiet, uneventful round of everyday life, and flung into the throes of a vast and terrible drama that works itself out in unleashed passions, in blood, and in sudden death. . . . Everything is extraordinary, imaginative, grotesque even.

In "The Novel with a Purpose," Norris (1928: 25) advocates that the true purpose of the novel is to present "a record of suffering, a relation of tragedy". Where better could agony and suffering be found than on the streets of the city slums and in the homes of the poor; the innocent victims of the cruel heredity

and determinism of naturalism. The readers of the novels belonged to the upper classes and this proved to be the most efficient means through which the authors could grasp their attention. Those who rejected reading about such suffering, claiming that they already saw too much of it, were answered by Norris (1928: 25) that, "If there is much pain in life, all the more reason that it should appear in a class of literature which in its highest form is a sincere transcription of life," for literature is simply an expression of life.

Indirectly, the grotesque serves a didactic purpose for the two writers by offering an alternative to direct preaching as it arouses their audience through the shock it creates in them. In a letter of his, Crane (1960: 158-159) states that, "Preaching is fatal to art. . . . I try to give readers a slice out of life; and if there is any moral or lesson in it, I do not try to point it out. I let the reader find it for himself". By using the grotesque to shock his readers into realizing the harsh facts of the world around them, Crane was able to avoid direct preaching—which might have offended rather than influenced them. Therefore, the more shocking the grotesque used, the more successful the reaction received. Norris (1928: 23), likewise, advocates the same belief, declaring that, "The preaching, the moralizing is the result not by direct appeal by the writer, but is made—should be made—to the reader by the very incidents of the story". This is quite apparent in Norris' novels as his technique in *McTeague* is that of presenting one horrible example after another in order to present his case without proclaiming any words of direct preaching. Characters become bizarrely animalistic, scenes of nauseous horror evolve—ending only with their violent bloody deaths. The grotesque in *McTeague: A Story of San Francisco* prevails to such an extent that when it was first published, the reviewers did not favorably embrace it. One wrote, "It is a misfortune that Norris should have devoted so much skill and virility to the description of a life so essentially without spiritual significance, and so repulsive in its habit and quality" (Ahnebrink 1950: 115). Another critic was even more violent in his attack upon the novel, oblivious to the fact that the grotesque was a fundamental issue in it, "Seven tenths of the story the normal reader will peruse with a mixture of depression and disgust. . . . Mr. Norris riots in odors and stenches. He might have changed his sub-title and called his book 'McTeague: A Study in Stinks' "(qtd. in Ahnebrink 1950: 116).

Just as the use of the grotesque is related to the subject matter which they deal with, it is also relevant to their style of writing as naturalists. The grotesque becomes a means which enables them to write frankly as naturalists without any delicacy which might obstruct the reality they wish to reveal. Norris refuses to use a genteel style which expresses ideas delicately for, "A literature that cannot be vulgarized is no literature at all and will perish just as surely as rivers run to the sea" (Marchand 1942: 12). The ideas and the manner in which they are expressed should be violent and shocking enough to leave a strong impression in the readers' minds. At the same time that Crane rejected middle class values, he revolted "against the smug complacency of the genteel tradition and the conventional standard of American literature. Sentimentalism, melodrama and romanticism were alien to his concept of life" (Ahnebrink 1950:

150). While analyzing the background of the movement, Richard Lehan (1999: 69) sees naturalism as "a mode of narrative reality that begins with nature and moves towards the culturally grotesque". One critic adequately summarized the goal behind Norris and Crane's use of the grotesque when he defined it as such:

> (The grotesque) makes the known strange through the interplay and mixing of heterogenous parts into new and autonomous entities. . . . It partially or completely revokes or reverses recognized norms and consciously disappoints expectations. It intends to baffle, intimidate and shock the viewer or reader and to stimulate his own (critical) thought process. (qtd. in Remshardt 2004: 8-9)

Thus, the grotesque becomes the scalpel with which Crane and Norris attempt to dissect the social maladies during that period.

Crane presents *The Red Badge of Courage* to criticize the sentimental values which glorified the illusory glamour of the Civil War. His novel is an attempt to do away with the romantic views of war and show the harsh reality as it really exists. He even blames the books of his age for the character's false illusions of war as they filled Henry Fleming's mind with sentimental falsities, encouraging him to enlist:

> He had . . .dreamed of battles all his life—of vague and bloody conflicts that had thrilled him with their sweep and fire. . . .Tales of great movements shook the land. They might not be distinctly Homeric, but there seemed to be much glory in them. Henry had read of marches, sieges, conflicts, and he longed to see it all. His busy mind had drawn for him larger pictures extravagant in color, lucid with breathless deeds (Crane 1984: 83).

To the contrary, Crane presents the grotesque in war in order to show that this is not the case. Through the grotesque scenes, he is able to shatter and eliminate the romantic illusions of heroic deeds and glamorous battles which Henry had conceived of as a youth. As the novel advances and Henry gets closer to the battle fields, he begins to perceive the falsity of his visions; there is no glamour in war, just harsh, bloody facts. At first he is so naïve that he believes nature is void of the tragic and horrible and that it is about to present him with a religious calm and soothing power in its serene green chapel, "This landscape gave him assurance. A fair field holding life. It was the religion of peace. It would die if its timid eyes were compelled to see blood. He conceived Nature to be a woman with a deep aversion to tragedy" (**Crane 1984: 125**). Henry could not have been further from the truth as Crane, in a grotesque scene, annihilates both the serenity of nature and the glory associated with a soldier's death:

> Near the threshold he stopped, horror-stricken at the sight of a thing . . . He was being looked at by a dead man who was seated with his back against a columnlike tree . . . The eyes, staring at the youth, had changed to the dull hue to be seen on the side of a dead fish. The mouth was open. Its red had changed to an appalling yellow. Over the grey skin

> of the face ran little ants. One was trundling some sort of bundle along the upper lip (1984: 126).

Henry is so horrified at first that he freezes in place, only to then flee terrified. Nevertheless, he cannot forget the haunting scene he has just witnessed for "he was pursued by a sight of the black ants swarming greedily upon the gray face and venturing horribly near to the eyes" (Crane 1984: 127). This is definitely a far cry from the glorious burial of a war hero being honored by his country for the services he rendered as a soldier.

The grotesque in Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* lies in the social conditions of the novella and in the events which occur to the characters rather than in the characters themselves. Crane objected to the way in which people contemplated the world around them. The hypocrisy of his age had blinded the people to such an extent that they avoided the distasteful facts of life such as the existence of saloons, prostitution and the severe poverty of the lower classes. Wishing to present these problems in their true form, Crane:

> . . . .laid bare on every page of *Maggie* the whole underworld of conflict and emotion which his age pretended did not exist. The slang was spelled out; the vilest scenes minutely described; no sordidness escaped his pen. In a few, brief terse chapters, he pulled the rug from under sentiment and showed all the dirt, squalor, fear, misery and sordidness of much of life that his generation chose to gild with an artificial thing called "good taste" (Morgan 1963: 5).

The novella proved so disdainful to publishers that Crane was forced to publish it at his own expense as no one else was willing to do so. Both Condor (1984: 45) and Pizer (1984: 122) emphasize the fact that the gross and the distorted are Crane's means of criticizing the "double standards" and the "conventional beliefs" which lead to Maggie's destruction rather than an inherent evil within her character.[3]

The incidents of *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* take place against a violent background. No happy childhood exists in the squalid Rum Alley where she lives. Our first introduction to the Johnson family is through Maggie's brother, Jimmy, the little champion:

> His coat had been torn to shreds in a scuffle, and his hat was gone. He had bruises on twenty parts of his body, and blood was dripping from a cut in his head. His wan features wore a look of a tiny insane demon. . . . A stone had smashed into Jimmie's mouth. Blood was bubbling over his chin and down his ragged shirt (Crane 1984: 7).

The reader's reaction is that of shocking horror for the description is of a small boy fighting with the other neighborhood boys rather than one of a man caught in a brawl in a saloon. The grotesque heightens even more when the boy reaches home, only to receive another thrashing from his drunken mother rather than soothing words and a gentle hand to cleanse his wounds. Here we are

introduced to Mary as a grotesque female figure who appears when she greets her son after he has been involved in the fight with the boys of the alley. All hope of any domestic tranquility is immediately eliminated, as the terror which the mother arouses in Jimmy and Maggie becomes extremely pathetic (Crane 1984: 12-15). Mary's appearance, aggressive behavior and hypocrisy are all signs of the "monstrous anti-mother" who emerges as the antithesis of the ideal "sentimental mother" that readers had grown accustomed to seeing in realistic novels of the preceding period (Irving 2008). As the story advances, the grotesque depiction of her degenerate nature and intoxicated condition contradicts with any images the reader may have of a caring and affectionate mother, "His mother's great chest was heaving painfully . . . Her face was inflamed and swollen from drinking. Her yellow brows shaded eye-lids that had grown blue" (Crane 1984: 18). Even in her sleep, she proves to be a horror to her children who are terrified of the consequences of awakening her for "…she need only to awake and all fiends would come from below" (Crane, 1984: 19). Thus, what should be motherly affection has evolved into a grotesque relation of abuser and abused, void of any tender care or loving devotion.

As Jimmy and Maggie grow up, they enter an even more violent world of prostitution and saloons. Abandoned by her lover, rejected by her family, and unable to find sanctuary after having become a 'fallen woman,' Maggie turns to prostitution. Even the clergyman to whom she turns for salvation does not risk his respectability to help her (Crane 1984: 69). Therefore, the only way left for Maggie to rid herself of the terrible life around her is suicide. By writing the story, Crane realized that he was presenting a shock to his age and he expected a certain reaction in return. In a letter to Hamlin Garland, he explained, "It is inevitable that you will be greatly shocked by this book . . . the reader of this small thing may consider the Author to be a bad man, but, obviously this is a matter of small consequence to THE AUTHOR" (Crane 1960: 14). Crane was not out to create a favorable image of himself as a writer. To the contrary, his main purpose was to incite readers to shatter the false standards which they mistakenly advocated, for only then could any hope of reformation present itself to the lower classes.

In a short story of his, "The Monster", Crane is really describing the town's grotesque inhumanity when faced with the deformed face of a black man. After Henry Johnson saves a young boy, Jimmy Trescott, from a fire, Crane does not simply end Henry's life as a dead hero or allow him to escape the fire unscathed. Rather, he presents the bizarre scene in which Henry's face is burned off. The whole image of the advancing snake-like flames and the spilt acid is grotesque enough to allow the reader's mind to conjure up the result of the horrifying fire on Henry:

> Suddenly, the glass splintered, and a ruby-red snakelike thing poured its thick length out upon the top of the desk. It coiled and hesitated, and then began to swim a languorous way down the mahogany slant. At the angle it waved its sizzling molten head to and fro over the closed eyes of the man beneath it. Then, in a moment, with mystic impulse, it moved again, and

> the red snake flowed directly down into Johnson's upturned face (Crane 1984: 406).

Crane describes the terror and fear that Henry's deformity arouses in the town. Even his veiled face is enough to terrify the people, causing them to forget that there is a human being underneath the veil. Crane's technique in showing the grotesque here differs from that in *The Red Badge of Courage*, where he goes into precise detail in describing the dead man's face which Henry Fleming sees. While Crane gives minute details as to the color and shape of the corpse's features, here he never really describes Henry Johnson's deformity after his face has been burned away, but depicts the horror through the comments of the town folks and the people's reactions whenever Henry appears. In his review of the story, Robert Bridges describes the success of Crane's technique as he leaves the conceiving of the deformity up to the reader's imagination:

> In depicting horrors he shows more restraint than he had previously thought wise. To paint a horror and pile it on thick seemed to be a part of his stock in trade. But in this tale he follows the admirable Hawthornesque plan of suggesting the horror by showing its effect upon various observers. The black veil over Johnson's disfigured face is far more terrible than any gruesome anatomical details (qtd. in Weatherford 1973: 258).

Just as Crane presents *The Red Badge of Courage* as a criticism of the false concepts of war, he also uncovers another misconception in "The Monster." At the beginning, he presents the reader with a small town whose folks are quite ordinary. The fire then occurs and Johnson's distorted face completely disrupts the serenity and brings out the inhumanity in mankind which exists in small towns as well as in the sophisticated city circles. He is able to disclose the true nature of these people:

> Stephen Crane's quiet accomplishment in "The Monster" is remarkable for he has simultaneously derided the tradition of most sentimental small town fiction—and deepened the tone of desperation that was a part of seriously realistic small-town novels . . . . Crane's portrait of small-town life is both harsh and problematic, despairing and enigmatic (Solomon 1966: 199-200).

Thus, the grotesque is no longer limited to Henry's deformity only; Crane develops it into a spiritual deformity in the town folks. In other words, the grotesque does not remain at a physical level for the 'monster' symbol gradually shifts from the physical level to that of moral significance. The reader becomes appalled at the moral grotesquery of the citizens who wish that Henry had been allowed to die, completely oblivious to the fact that his deformity has occurred as a result of saving a child's life (Crane 1984: 422). Dr. Trescott's decision to shelter Johnson and take care of him in gratitude for saving the doctor's son takes on dire consequences. The doctor's refusal to place him in a public institute has a ruinous effect on the doctor's career and even upon his wife who is ostracized by the ladies of the town (Crane 1984: 447-448). As a result, the monstrous beast does not actually reside in the deformed Johnson, but in the

inhumane attitude of the people towards anything abnormal and alien to their mentality.

Humor in Crane's works takes on a grotesque nature as it is not of a kind which offers relief to the reader. Instead, it increases the readers' horror and disgust at the events of the stories. One magazine review commented on the nature of his humor as "what little humor is to be found is of a grim nature" (Weatherford 1973: 53). At the same time that Crane's reader may laugh at the incident, the reader experiences sorrow as a result of the tragic implications existing beneath that very humor. Grotesque humor is clearly visible in the chaotic reactions Henry Johnson causes when he appears at the Farragut home (Crane 1984: 429). The tragic humor reaches its climax as the narrator explains Mrs. Farragut's health conditions which do not prevent her from fleeing so quickly: "At the back of the house, Mrs. Farragut, who was of enormous weight, and who for eight years had done little more than sit in an armchair and describe her various ailments, had with speed and agility scaled a high board fence" (Crane 1984: 430).

Likewise, Maggie in *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* disappears from the story in a quiet manner while readers are ironically left to witness the ugly hypocrisy of both the neighbors and Maggie's mother whose ". . . good motherly face was wet with tears" (Crane 1984: 77). A grotesque humor arises as a result of witnessing the abnormal grief of a mother who never cared for her daughter while she was alive, let alone mourn her now, especially as Mary had previously denounced Maggie because of her sin. Mary's mourning is made even more ironically ridiculous by the fact that she does not instantly react to the news of her daughter's death, but first, "She continued her meal. When she finished her coffee, she began to weep" (Crane 1984: 77). The faded baby shoes which Mary recalls and the neighbors' interference cause the reader to feel the tragedy even more. Furthermore, the grotesque reaction instills a fear of life in the readers rather than that of death. Maggie's enemy bizarrely is <u>not</u> prostitution and poverty; rather, it abides in the religious hypocrisy and double standards that afflict the society to which she belongs.

Pessimistic determinism, one of the major elements of naturalism, also plays a role in the existence of the grotesque. In order for determinism to really affect the character, it must become stronger than ordinary as it goes to the extreme length of abnormality, sometimes even to the degree of becoming ugly and grotesque. Because of a fault in personality or of a condition in which they are placed, most of Norris' characters undergo a spiritual degradation. They become grotesque caricatures as they take on animalistic traits. Lehan (1999: 69) comments on the similarity between Norris and the French novelist Zola and other naturalists who "show how the further we become removed from the rhythms of nature, the more grotesque our behavior can become". The emergence of the animal in man, to such a degree that the human in him is nearly gone, can be seen in *Vandover and the Brute,* his first novel which was rejected by two publishers. It was not until 1914 that it was posthumously

published as it was believed to be "too advanced" for its age (Pizer 1966: 32). The very nature of Vandover's degradation is grimly grotesque when one remembers what Vandover was at the beginning and what he finally evolved into:

> The steady decline from gentleman to scrubman, told with remorseless fidelity to facts,horrifies, even the modern reader. Its last half, cataloging the brute's emergence, is a walk through hell with reality turned into a compelling unreality (Morgan 1965: 114).

The spiritual deformity is taken to extremes by Norris who afflicts Vandover with a disease (lycanthropy) which eventuates in animal-like behavior. This becomes horribly grotesque when the readers recall that they are witnessing the actions of a young man who is a Harvard graduate and who comes from a decent upper class family background. The more Vandover seeks physical pleasure, the more the brute in him emerges. On one occasion, Ellis finds Vandover, naked and down on four limbs, in the act of imitating a wolf so it seems that a semi-physical deformity simultaneously accompanies the spiritual deformity within (Norris 1986: 203-204). Everything of value disappears, leaving the protagonist with the crude essentials of life. The brute finally takes over and Vandover evolves into a derelict with the bare instincts of an animal instead of a finely cultured artist.

In addition, Norris condemns the animalistic instinct for survival, which may become so intensified and horrible that it turns people into gross creatures forgetting what humanity is. Norris presents the awful description of a grotesque murder—for it can be called nothing less—of a Jew drowning in the sea after the ship on which Vandover is traveling sinks and the passengers are left in lifeboats waiting to be rescued:

> When the Jew was at length beaten from the boat he caught again at the oar; it was drawn in, and the engineer clubbed his head and arms and hands till the water nearby grew red. The little Jew clung to the end of the oar like a cat, writing and grunting, his mouth open, and his eyes fixed and staring. When his hands were gone, he tried to embrace the oar with his arms. He slid off in the hollow of a wave, his body turned over twice, and then he sank, his head thrown back, his eyes still open and staring, and a silver chain of bubbles escaping from his mouth (Norris 1986: 103).

Throughout Norris' *McTeague*, the main theme of greed transforms the characters who are attributed with animalistic traits. Obsessive greed prevails in such a way that they act savagely for ". . . engaged in the fanatical effort to become wealthy, all become subhuman grotesques, progressively animalistic" (Martin 1967: 252). In his grotesque descriptions of McTeague, Norris (1986: 393) goes into detail of McTeague sleeping with his gigantic limbs, his terrible snoring and red face especially after drinking beer. From the start, he presents McTeague's enormous strength and body as a kind of physical deformity in order to pave the way for the oncoming nauseatingly bizarre events.

The love between Trina and McTeague develops in an abnormally degraded manner. From the very start, there is no spirituality in it as Norris definitely relates it to the sexual instincts of the lower brute in man. Their gross kisses are propelled, not by love, but by desire. The animal in McTeague is disgustingly aroused by the sight of the unconscious Trina in the dental chair. Although he struggles against it, McTeague is fighting a losing battle which ends with him kissing her "grossly full on the mouth" (Norris 1986: 284). Later, McTeague's marriage proposal, which should have been romantic, becomes grotesquely bizarre when one views it in the light of Trina's reaction to it. Rather than an ecstatic acceptance or a flat refusal, the terrified Trina is "suddenly taken with a fit of vomiting" (Norris 1986: 286)—a dire foreshadowing of the type of relationship the two will share further on in the novel. Their second kiss, even though Trina is conscious that time, is not much better as it is also described in a similar manner (Norris 1986: 322).

As the events advance, Norris (1986: 479) presents an ugly picture of the way in which the drunken McTeague enjoys extracting money from Trina by biting her swollen and purple fingertips, for, "when he had been drinking, used to bite them, crunching and grinding them with his immense teeth, always ingenious enough to remember which were the sorest . . . . but as often as not he did it for his own satisfaction". His conquering actions appear to verge on the nature of a sadistic pleasure while Trina's love for McTeague has become so perverted that she does not try to rid herself from this brutality which arouses in her "a morbid, unwholesome love of submission, a strange unnatural pleasure in yielding" (Norris 1986: 479). As a result, Trina's reaction has taken the form of masochistic pleasures in his brutal treatment towards her. [4]

Moreover, Trina's avarice takes on a disgusting form as she derives her pleasure from the mere touch of the gold coins she had miserly collected, sometimes even placing them in her mouth; in a way replacing McTeague's kisses (Norris 1986: 478). This worsens as the novel advances for she cannot bear to spend a single coin, so her life of poverty becomes even more disgustingly gross while she derives her happiness in other ways:

> She had her money, that was the main thing . . . . 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 (Norris 1986: 514-515).

Trina achieves a gross sexual satisfaction from the coins which have usurped her husband's marital duties, replacing him completely—only to leave him out in the cold.

Due to the way in which Norris' characters lead their lives, the conclusion is inevitable as they meet with a violent bloody death. Norris (1986: 1140) once stated his opinion of death scenes in literature by claiming that "death-bed scenes are notoriously tame".[5] True to his word, rarely do Norris' characters remain in their degraded status at the end of the novel. Perhaps one of

the most morbid scenes created by Norris is that of Trina's death. In reading of the struggle between her and McTeague, the horror is heightened by the memory of the intense strength of McTeague in comparison with Trina's delicacy, as he beats her to death with his enormous fists:

> Trina lay unconscious, just as she had fallen under the last of McTeague's blows, her body twitching with an occasional hiccough that stirred the pool of blood in which she lay face downward. Towards morning she died with a rapid series of hiccoughs that sounded like a piece of clockwork running down (Norris 1986: 526).

He then brutally leaves her to bleed to death alone in the cloakroom of the school where she works. What makes Trina's death scene even more grotesque is that McTeague is ironically incapable of leaving behind a canary for fear that it might starve:

> The canary would be days without food; it was likely it would starve, would die there, hour by hour, in its little gilt prison. McTeague resolved to take it with him. He took down the cage, touching it gently with his enormous hands [the same hands that had minutes before mercilessly beaten his wife to death], and tied a couple of sacks about it to shelter the little bird from the sharp night wind (Norris 1986: 526).

In comparison with Norris, other naturalists are much gentler, even Crane. Maggie's last appearance is very tragic as Crane presents a scene of her final customers and the area in which she lives. Yet, the river which "appeared a deathly black hue" merely foreshadows the suggestion of drowning (Crane 1984: 72). When Maggie dies at the end, the reader does not bear witness to her death, and only learns of it through the other characters. Even the nature of her death is not mentioned, but the earlier description of the river subtly suggests her suicide.

Even though the novel ends with McTeague still alive, Norris tensely builds up the grim facts which foreshadow McTeague's terrible death. Throughout the last two chapters, Norris continuously presents remarks about McTeague's thirst in the scorching desert as the heat grows more intense minute by minute. Even when Marcus shows up, McTeague is concerned only with finding water. The novel concludes with the scene of a man, half-dying of thirst, without any means of transportation out of the desert and with his enemy's dead corpse chained to his wrist in the midst of the burning, scorching "measureless leagues of Death Valley" (Norris 1986: 572).

Nevertheless, these deaths are no less gruesome than the ending of Vandover, who remains alive while a little boy ridicules him (Norris 1986: 259). Donald Pizer (1966: 48) comments as to where the strength of the novel lies through the grotesque finale, "The novel is strongest, then, in making vividly real the decline of a weak man incapable of controlling his appetites or of rousing himself to fight the battle of life against his fellows or his environment". The fact that Vandover is hardly capable of standing straight because of the pain in his back (Norris 1986: 255) is quite symbolic of the degrading level to which

he has finally stooped. What is even more grotesque is the description of the ex-artist down on his belly, cleaning out from beneath the sink:

> The sink pipes were so close above him that he was obliged to crouch lower and lower; at length he lay flat upon his stomach. Prone in the filth under the sink, the sour water, the grease, the refuse, he groped about with his hand searching for the something grey that the burnisher's wife had seen (Norris 1986: 255).

As such, readers may come to the conclusion that a swift death would have been much more merciful for Vandover. Conclusively, the grotesque reaches such an extreme that the concept of death becomes more merciful than life itself.

In conclusion, the relationship between naturalism and the grotesque is an interrelated one. The grotesque exists not only as a result of the naturalistic styles of Crane and Norris, but also serves the didactic purpose of shocking the readers into putting aside any false illusions of life and trying to understand the realities of the age in which they lived. By means of this technique, Crane and Norris were successfully able to avoid any direct preaching which may have antagonized their readers into rejecting their works and remaining unaffected by what really needed to be addressed at that time.

Endnotes

[1] For a more in depth introduction to the 'grotesque' and how it is applied to art and literature, see *Staging the Savage God: The Grotesque in Performance*, by Ralf Remshardt, pages 4 -10.

[2] For a more extensive discussion of other American writers who viewed the grotesque as essential to modern works, see William Van O'Conner's book *The Grotesque: An American Genre and Other Essays*.

[3] See also Larzer Ziff's book *The American 1890s: Life and Times of a Lost Generation.* New York: Viking, 1966, for a more detailed explanation on how the grotesque setting in *Maggie* is due to Crane's challenge of the religious and ethical pieties that ruled the society in which he lived.

[4] See William Freedman's article "Oral Passivity and Oral Sadism in Norris's *McTeague*". *Literature and Psychology* 1980. 30: 52-61, for a detailed description of the degenerative transformation that occurs to McTeague, as the images of his mouth and jaws change into a deadly tool.

[5] A weekly letter dated August 3, 1901, in the C*hicago American Literary Review.*

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