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PREVIEW

University of Texas at El Paso
Thesis no. 184

**Author: Hatfield, Frances
Harris**

Title: *A study of the life and
works of Frank Norris, American
author, 1870-1902*

OCLC# 2531112

A STUDY OF THE LIFE AND WORKS OF
FRANK NORRIS, AMERICAN AUTHOR
1870-1902

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A STUDY OF THE LIFE AND WORKS OF
FRANK NORRIS, AMERICAN AUTHOR
1870-1902

A Thesis
Presented to
the Faculty of the Department of English
Texas Western College

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in English

by
Frances Harris Hatfield
June 1957

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Grateful acknowledgment is made to the following persons whose courtesies have made this paper possible:

Joseph Leach, Haldeen Braddy and Robert N. Burlingame of the Department of English of Texas Western College, with appreciation to Dr. Burlingame for the past year of advice and instruction;

Clyde C. Kelsey of the Department of Psychology of Texas Western College and to Chester Lee Reynolds, director of the El Paso Guidance Center, for advice related to psychological and psychiatric materials;

Baxter Polk, librarian, and the staff members of the Library of Texas Western College for generous assistance in obtaining reference materials.

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PREVIEW

ABSTRACT

This study is an introduction to the complete Norris, not merely the pioneer among writers of naturalistic fiction, but that Frank Norris who was the author of all sorts of stories, and who, although he was a novelist by trade, was a poet at heart.

INTRODUCTION

It's Life that we want, the vigorous, real thing, not the curious weaving of words and the polish of literary finish. Damn the "style" of a story, so long as we get the swing and rush and trample of the things that live.¹

Frank Norris was a pioneer among American writers in the naturalistic tradition. He portrayed in his writings those concepts of life and the image of man derived from theories of evolution and socio-economic determinism; he ascribed to the naturalistic formula developed by Emile Zola. However, the critic or student who evaluates Norris as a naturalistic writer per se uses only superficial judgment. Norris is more than a naturalist; he is a romanticist and a realist. At times he combines all of these modes of expression in one manuscript, and tells his story with an impressive disregard for traditional form and style of writing.

As indicated in the introductory quotation, Norris aimed at an art beyond ordinary literary expression. He sought something better than photographic reconstruction and anatomical dissection. He tried to capture the mood and color of reality that he might render in simple, sincere language the heart's heart of Man, unchanged throughout Time, unaltered by circumstance, custom or costume. Like Pygmalion, he hoped that his art would become enlivened, and to this end he dipped his pen

¹Frank Norris, "An Opening for Novelists," Collected Writings (Vol. X of Frank Norris, Collected Works. 10 Vols.; New York, 1928), p. xii. This reference appears as Works in following footnote material.

into the inks of all literary schools.

In addition to considering these factors, a study of Norris must come to terms with an accumulation of heterogeneous critical opinions. Typical of these are the following: Bernard Smith calls Norris the last of the militant realists;² Lewisohn describes him as first among American naturalistic writers;³ Ernest Peixotto refers to him as avant-gardist among American realists but a romanticist at heart;⁴ Van Doren says he was a "leader in the little movement to continentalize American letters."⁵ Grattan comments on the 1928 edition of the collected works of Norris as a pious but futile gesture, and adds that the books, McTeague, Vandover and the Brute, and The Octopus are "imbedded in a mass of what must be called trash."⁶ William Dean Howells anticipated this reaction to Norris when he commented on his work in 1902. Howells shifts the focal point of his assertion from the content of Norris's books to the inner meanings of the stories. "There will never come a day," he wrote, "when criticism will be of one mind about him, when he will be no longer a question and will have become a conclusion. . . . He will live as a question, as a dispute, an affair of inextinguishable debate; for the two principles of

²Bernard Smith, Forces in American Criticism (New York, 1939), p. 184.

³Ludwig Lewisohn, Story of American Literature (New York, 1939), p. 322.

⁴Ernest Peixotto, "Romanticist under the Skin," Saturday Review of Literature, IX (May 27, 1933), pp. 613-15.

⁵Carl Van Doren, The American Novel (New York, 1927), p. 260.

⁶C. Hartley Grattan, "Review," The Nation, Vol. 135, (November 20, 1932), pp. 535-36.

the human mind, the love of the natural and the love of the unnatural, the real and the unreal, the truthful and the fanciful, are inalienable and indestructible."⁷

The fusion of romance and reality in Norris's writing does stimulate critical debate, and at the same time it stirs the imagination. If one is to discover the answer to what Norris was saying it must be found in the totality of his work, the product of the twelve years of his writing.

Norris's first manuscripts were medieval romances in verse and prose forms. He began writing short stories on numerous subjects, in many modes of expression. He wrote news articles, reviews, essays, and interviews. He completed seven novels. Norris began his career as an artist to whom literary expression was embellishment or annotation for his sketches. He became a journalist, a sports editor, a travel commentator, a war correspondent, a publisher's reader, a columnist and critic, a free lance writer and full-fledged author.

The purpose of this study is to follow the course of this career and consider it "in transit." The conclusion will then become the evaluation of Norris, the author and his accomplishments.

⁷William Dean Howells, "Frank Norris," North American Review, Vol. 175 (December, 1902), p. 769-78.

CHAPTER I

EARLY LIFE AND EDUCATION

Happiness in this world is being able to devote all your time to the work you love; nothing else matters.⁸

Frank Norris was born in Chicago on March 5, 1870. He was christened Benjamin Franklin, Junior, son of B. F. and Gertrude D. Norris. Theirs was the life of an American family grown wealthy during the post war years of expansion and prosperity. They enjoyed social position and indulged their tastes in elegant appointments for their home on Michigan Avenue. Frank attended private schools, developed an aptitude for drawing, went to the opera with his parents, mingled with their friends from business and theatrical circles. His mother taught him to enjoy literature by reading aloud to him every day. Usually, she selected passages from her favorite authors: Dickens, Scott, Meredith or Browning. When Frank was eight years old his parents took him abroad with them for the "grand tour" of Europe.

In 1884 Mr. Norris sold his jewelry business in Chicago and moved his family to San Francisco. There were two other sons by then: Lester who was born in 1879 and Charles Gilman, born in 1881. Established in a handsome home in a fashionable neighborhood, the Norrises resumed their active civic, cultural and social affairs. Mr. Norris opened a wholesale

⁸ Frank Norris, as quoted by Charles G. Norris, in Frank Norris of The Wave, Oscar Lewis, editor. (San Francisco, 1931), "Foreword." The pages of the "Foreword" are not numbered.

jewelry firm, invested in rental properties and real estate. Mrs. Norris saw to the transferring of the family's membership to the nearby Episcopalian church, formed the proper social and cultural associations, and formed a Browning Club. Frank was enrolled in Belmont Academy, a private boarding school for boys in nearby San Mateo.

During his second year at the academy, Frank received a broken arm during a football game. He was sent home to recuperate and decided to take art lessons to relieve the monotony of his convalescence. A tutor, Virgil Williams, was engaged. His progress and talent so encouraged him that he decided upon art as a career. When he could have returned to Belmont, he chose instead to remain in the city to be near his art teacher. He finished his year at the local high school and supplemented his private lessons with classes at the San Francisco Art Association.

At the art academy Frank met Ernest Peixotto. The two became fast friends, an association that would continue throughout their lifetimes. Their favorite pastime was to walk about the countryside, sketching bits of scenery and animals. The old presidio was a vantage point for the aspiring young artists. They could enjoy the comfortable surroundings and sketch the spirited horses that belonged to the cavalry officers stationed at the military reservation. Numerous reminders of Spanish colonial days remained in the old missions and haciendas. They liked to hear old legends of past pageantry, romance and intrigue. The impressions made by these experiences would be recreated years later in the literary and artistic work of both youths. Each dreamed of being able to go to

Paris and study art.

Sometimes dreams do come to pass, as Frank's did. He went to Paris in 1887 and studied under the famous painters, Bougereau and Lef-abvre, at the Atelier Julien. His parents and younger brother, Charles, accompanied him on his voyage, the other brother, Lester, having died shortly before their departure. Sensing the loneliness of the little Charles, then aged six, Frank spent a major share of his spare time with him. He invented exciting tales to enliven their play with toy soldiers. He made detailed drafts of battlefields, concocted plots filled with intrigue and colorful dramatis personae. He utilized his new interest in medieval history to bring the romance of chivalry into his make-believe.

Charles mentioned these games in biographical accounts of his brother, and Frank dedicated his last book, The Pit, with the following inscription: "To my brother, Charles Gilman Norris, in memory of certain lamentable tales of the round (dining-room) table heroes of the epic of the pewter platoons, and the romance of 'Gaston Le Fox' which we invented, maintained and found marvelous when we were both boys."⁹

When his family returned to San Francisco Frank continued the illustrated stories by letter. Thus he began his literary career. In the beginning his stories were after-thoughts of his art and play for a little boy. Frank was not the first young artist to beguile himself with the witchery of his inventiveness, to yield to the delight of an enchanted listener. From the beginning of story, the artist has been enspirited by

⁹Frank Norris, The Pit, (Vol. IX of Works), p. v.

his patron's applause, "the steady wind that fans the fire of his creative ability."¹⁰

Ernest Peixotto came to Paris during the autumn months and began lessons at Julien's. He and Frank made sketching tours of the art galleries and museums, learning the background of medieval life. They developed an enthusiasm for armor and ancient costume. Frank filled notebooks with sketches of castles, knights and weapons. He pursued his interest in research through old records, especially Froissart's Chronicles. His first full-scale canvas was an enormous scene from the Battle of Crecy. He barely finished the charcoal sketch, however, when his interest waned and he abandoned the project.

At home, Mr. Norris discovered the contents of the numerous long letters Frank was writing to Charles. He considered them utter trivia and cabled his elder son to return home at once. Frank gave his art supplies to Ernest and left for San Francisco.

During the early months of 1890, Frank studied in preparation for college entrance exams. He continued to sketch and write. One article, "Clothes of Steel," was printed in The San Francisco Chronicle, but a long romance entitled Robert d'Artois was rejected by several publishers. The latter was a rambling, immature manuscript and was never published. As a complement to a series of sketches, Frank composed a medieval ballad entitled, Yvernelle. This was published later, and is his first important literary work.

¹⁰Mazo de la Roche, Ringling the Changes (Boston, 1957), p. 113.

Frank passed his entrance examinations and enrolled at the University of California with English and French as his major studies. He was a popular, if not a scholarly, student. He joined a fraternity, supported literary and dramatic groups, wrote for all the college publications. He served as historian of his classes for several years, and was art editor for the annual. Stories and illustrations appeared in local magazines and newspapers.

In 1894 Mr. and Mrs. Norris were divorced so that Mr. Norris might remarry. The break up of the family brought Frank to a cross-road in his life. He was forced to decide upon the future course of his work. He had not been successful in his school work because he had not made passing grades in subjects required for graduation. He was not established as an artist or writer. He could accept a job in his father's jewelry firm, and this would insure him of an adequate income. However, Frank did not wish to work at a business career, especially with his father. They did not get along too well, and Mr. Norris was bitterly opposed to Frank's writing. The artistic young man and his stern, practical father seemed to have no common meeting ground.

Mrs. Norris disapproved of the type of stories Frank wrote and offered him no encouragement. On the other hand, Jack Cosgrave, editor of The Wave, had bought several stories from him and strongly urged him to devote his time to writing.

Frank's decision was not easy. It took real courage. "From rags to riches" became "from riches to rags" and far from a dramatic plot in

his life story. Frank's only assets were his faith in himself, Cosgrave's encouragement, and a few successful stories.

Yvernelle was published in 1891 by Lippincott and Company.

It was a medieval ballad composed as an embellishment for a group of sketches of knights and fair ladies. The publishers agreed to publish it on the condition that the art work be replaced at the author's expense. Mrs. Norris undertook this and paid several well-known artists the sum of \$400.00 to re-illustrate her son's book of poetry. It appeared in a handsome white and gold binding, was never widely circulated nor was it ever considered other than a minor work of its youthful author.

Yvernelle consists of an introduction and three cantos. The structure is generally consistent although verse-lengths serve the story rather than fit a traditional framework. The rhyme scheme is "a,b, a,b," with ten-syllable lines in the introduction and eight-syllable lines in the cantos.

The introduction is not an explanation of the story which follows. It embodies an entirely separate idea, the idea that evil has a long history; romance and chivalry perished with the last of the knights-errant. Evil continues today in the role of the "modern moneyed lord" with his gold, machinery and power. (This certainly was not calculated to win his father's affection.)

Canto One begins in a farewell speech of the Spanish siren Guhaldrada to Sir Caverlaye of Voysvenel. She woos the knight with sweet speeches, in an effort to rekindle his love for her. She had once so bewitched him that he forgot his mission and his own true love, the fair

Yvernelle of France. When Guhaldrada cannot persuade him sweetly, she utters a dreadful curse, "drear as the pall that sheets the dead," upon her whom next he kisses.

Sir Caverlaye rides back to Touraine and the blue hills of Voysvenel. When he meets Yvernelle and her guardian, Sir Raguene! he shocks them with his cold manner. The old knight is insulted by this lack of affection toward the lady and challenges him to a duel. The young knight refuses the gauntlet and will not explain. Sir Raguene! takes Yvernelle away as she in anguish calls out to her lover:

O life, O love, O joys that swell
 Love's trusting heart, farewell! farewell!
 Love's little day its course hath run --

 O my beloved, I wait,
 . . . calm, trusting, and serene.¹¹

Canto Two relates the sorrowful wandering of Sir Caverlaye. He performs knightly deeds, trying to win some measure of release from the dreadful curse. One day he met the Wyvern Knight in search of the vile wretch who betrayed his sister, Guhaldrada. They engage in a battle to the death. Guhaldrada appears and her treachery is discovered. The Wyvern Knight dies, Guhaldrada kisses Sir Caverlaye and becomes the victim of her own curse, "disowned, dishonored, and despised."

In Canto Three, Caverlaye goes to find Yvernelle and explain all that has happened. He learns that she has entered a convent and will take her vows that very night at midnight. Caverlaye mounts his steed,

¹¹Frank Norris, Yvernelle (Vol. VI of Works), p. 267.

the noble Bayard, to ride to the rescue. The gallant horse gives his best for his master, falling in one last impossible leap across the final barrier, a flooded river. Caverlaye runs from there to the convent, arriving as the bells begin to toll the midnight hour. The two lovers are reunited. Bayard revives to bear his brave master "through full many a bloody fray" and the idyllic love story of Yvernelle and Caverlaye becomes a favorite legend of the people.

Yvernelle is reviewed for several reasons. It is Norris's first published work. It identifies the romantic interests of its author and demonstrates that his interpretation of romance was in keeping with the mode of expression used in his times. It reveals his familiarity with economic determinism, an element which would overbalance the romantic content in later stories. The following quotation, taken from the introduction of the poem, illustrates the author's viewpoint:

For misery is the same in ev'ry age;
Oppression, famine, poverty, and strife
Ground down the Pharoah's swart vassalage
E'en as with us they grind the humbler life.

.....

The feudal baron yet remains to-day,
But changed into the modern moneyed lord,
Still o'er the people holds more cruel sway,
But 'tis with hoarded gold and not with sword.

Still do his vassals feel his iron heel,
His power awes--his government alarms;
Still rings the world with sounds of clashing steel:
'Tis of machinery and not of arms.¹²

This is doubly important to the analysis of Norris's author-viewpoint

¹²Ibid., pp. 249-51.

because the introduction has neither structural nor interpretative connection with the story of the ballad. It is a somewhat vague apostrophe which elaborates its first line, "The evil men do lives after them."

In 1901 the narrative of Yvernelle reappeared in prose form in the short story, "The Riding of Felipe." Norris reconstructed the exact plot in a colonial California setting with aristocratic characters of Spanish blood. No incident is changed; the tempo seems more dramatic in the second version. None of the mystery or romance of the tale is lessened. To point out that "The Riding of Felipe" appeared in print after the publication of McTeague and long after Norris had written many works in strict naturalistic mode adds weight to the opinion that its author was both a romanticist and a realist.

"Le Jongleur de Taillebois" was the second of Norris's works to be published. It appeared in the Christmas Issue, 1891, of The Wave. It was illustrated by Ernest Peixotto, who had returned from Paris for a short visit in San Francisco. Although its setting is in England during the Norman conquest and its characters are knights, its story is Darwinistic-Freudianism. Amelot, the main character, was a professional soldier but governed himself by the high ideals of knighthood. That is, for appearance's sake, he assumed the chivalric code of conduct. The story began during a battle in which Amelot mortally wounds an opponent. He watches the death struggles of the dying knight with masochistic delight. He is reminded of his childhood when he had tortured his pets in the same fashion. The brute in the inner man lay close to the thin veneer of the

outer trappings of knighthood.

Amelot buried the body to hide his crime, but he had unconsciously invoked a curse upon himself through his fiendish and unchivalrous behavior. Relentlessly and with Aeschylean finality, the curse dogs his heels until it destroys him.

Norris's interpretation of romance in "Le Jongleur" appears only in technical details of setting and incidental description. Brutality occupies center stage. "Le Jongleur de Taillebois"¹³ is not well written, and its sophomoric expression detracts from its story.

The third in this triptych of primitive romances is "Lauth,"¹⁴ a short story which appeared in The Overland Monthly in March, 1893. Lauth, a youthful warrior of the twelfth century is described as he goes into battle for the first time. He discovers he can kill and a sense of power changes him into a maniacal killer.

In an instant a mighty flame of blood lust thrilled up through all Lauth's body and mind. At the sight of blood shed by his own hands all the animal savagery latent in every human being woke within him--no more merciful scruples now. He could kill. In the twinkling of an eye the pale, highly cultivated scholar, whose life had been passed in the study of science and abstruse questions of philosophy, sank back to the level of his savage Celtic ancestors. His eyes glittered, he moistened his lips with the tip of his tongue, and his whole frame quivered with the eagerness and craving of a panther in sight of his prey.¹⁵

This is the genesis of McTeague and Vandover, the later full-scale characters of Norris's naturalistic novels. It is the pattern he would

¹³Collected Writings, (Vol. X of Works), pp. 3-20.

¹⁴Ibid., pp. 115-148.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 119.

use to portray the baseness in Man and the ease with which that baseness could destroy all that Man struggled to make of himself.

Lauth died in the battle that day. Jacquemart de Chavannes and associates, doctors, experimented with his body using sheep's blood in transfusion and artificial respiration to restore its life. Gradually, Lauth regained his former habits of mind and body, but not for long. He suffered a peculiar relapse and cried out one day, in a fearful voice, "This is not I; where am I? For God's sake, tell me where I am!"¹⁶

From then on his body began to decay. For a while he snarled and behaved like an ape. His body took on the appearance of an animal. It changed into some lower form. A crab? Who knows? It "scuttled" under its bed. It lost its senses; but still it lived. The limbs and features dissolved into a horrible shapeless mass. It lived as protozoa until the last feeble spark of life disappeared. The thing died.

Chavannes was disappointed that his experiment failed. Anselm, an associate, explained why: "Life cannot exist without the soul-- Lauth died. You found means to call back life; you could not recall the soul."¹⁷

Without his soul man degenerates into a brute; and the difference between the most brutish man and the most human brute is the Soul. Lauth's devolution into primordial slime was conditioned by the removal of his soul as the controlling factor. By 1895 author and hero would

¹⁶Ibid., p. 143.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 146.