

To the Editor:

When presented with such a valuable article as Theodore Ziolkowski's "The Telltale Teeth: Psychodontia to Sociodontia," one is inhibited by proverbial wisdom from subjecting it to buccal inspection; nevertheless, I noticed a gap which, if plugged, would, I believe, improve the discussion's already incisive argument. While impressively wide-ranging, Ziolkowski naturally does not attempt to be encyclopedic in his discussion of dentistry and literature; however, I find it strange that he fails to give at least passing attention to an important American novel, Frank Norris' *McTeague* (1899).

Unlike most of the dentists mentioned by Ziolkowski, McTeague is not a secondary character, but rather the protagonist of the work which its author consistently referred to as "The Dentist." As background for his novel, Norris studied Thomas Fillebrown's *A Text-book of Operative Dentistry*, and the story is filled with the technical terminology derived from this study. Furthermore, dentistry is central to the plot; its catastrophe occurs when McTeague, lacking the legal credentials of his profession, is notified that he must cease his practice.

More important though, in respect to Ziolkowski's discussion, is Norris' symbolic use of teeth and dentistry, for this use forms a pattern related to, but somewhat different from, the thematic structures described by Ziolkowski. As I read Norris, teeth are associated with primitive instincts, while dentistry may be seen as representative of technological society's attempt to control these instincts. This attempt is at best a precarious one, for in Norris' view, civilization is a thin veneer spread over humanity's basic drives. And when a particular society is based in large part on greed, as symbolized in the novel by recurrent gold imagery, including that of gold teeth, it is even more subject to disruption. While there is no space here to develop this view, one might consider such points as McTeague's large teeth, which he customarily grinds in fits of passion, his biting of his wife's fingers, her "little round teeth, white and even . . . except when an ugly gap came at the side," the sublimation of the dentist's more violent instincts through the pride he has in his professional activities, and the comparison that is made between McTeague's work, first as a dentist and later, working with larger drills and bits, as a gold miner. Such a consideration would show, I think, that Norris was employing an interesting combination of "psychodontia" and "sociodontia." While this note is a mere temporary restoration, I hope that Ziolkowski's future treatment of dentistry and literature fits in place the bridge that I think Norris' novel may be.

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Mr. Ziolkowski replies:

The response to "The Telltale Teeth" has been delightful. Some colleagues have acknowledged the sense of playfulness underlying what Theodore Andersson (Stanford) called my "odd-ontological" reflections by sending along an astonishing assortment of cartoons, picture postcards, original poems, and clippings from *Time* and *Newsweek*—usually accompanied by a pun or two. Other odontophiles were inspired by the more serious implications of the topic to share with me a variety of probing comments ranging from the incisive through the mordant to the downright precarious. All in all, the reaction has substantiated my hunch that literary dentistry isn't necessarily a bore.

It is especially gratifying that the methodology suggested by my article, along with its historical framework, has been tested and found useful. That, at least, I take to be the implication of Timothy C. Blackburn's fascinating note on the inversion of tooth images in anti-Petrarchan poetry of the seventeenth century as well as Yakira H. Frank's plausible interpretation of Vronsky's teeth in *Anna Karenina*. I gratefully accept John Henry Raleigh's correction of my citation of *War and Peace*—a reminder that one should always double-check one's notes against the original! Yet the point made in that footnote remains valid: the pathological interpretation of history was so prevalent in the mid-nineteenth century that Tolstoy felt impelled to inveigh against it for an entire chapter.

Presumably no sensible student of theme, motif, or image aspires to the impossible ideal of completeness; any study of this sort demands rigorous selectivity in the interests of economy and representative relevance. So it was to be expected that I omitted, wittingly or unwittingly, many examples of literary teeth which would have served as a support for the intellectual bridgework that I was attempting to mold. Christine M. Bird (Georgia State Univ.) reminded me of Meyer Wolfshiem's cuff buttons, made of human molars, in *The Great Gatsby* as well as Anse Bundren's lust to acquire his wife's false teeth—which turn out to be a symbol of sexual potency—in *As I Lay Dying*. Coburn Freer (Univ. of Montana) cited the passing reference, in *Miss Lonelyhearts*, to "the First Church of Christ Dentist, where He is worshipped as Preventer of Decay." Other colleagues have drawn my attention to teeth in Homer, Virgil, Herodotus, Albrecht Haller, Lamb's essays, Dickens' *Dombey and Son*, Eyvind Johnson's *Days of His Grace*, Joseph Heller's *Something Happened*, Ionesco's *The Lesson*, and William Empson's poems. (My own files were already rattling, like Egaeus' box in Poe's "Berenice," with examples that I had extracted from various drafts along the way.)

But the single extraction that left most jaws tingling is Frank Norris' *McTeague*. I omitted Norris' novel