

“If Pearles, hir teeth be pearles both pure and round”: Body as Text and Teeth as an Intersectional Metaphor in Two Anglo-American Novels

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Abstract

*This article examines two Anglo-American novels through their literary representation of teeth, published a hundred years apart: the American novel *McTeague: A Story of San Francisco* (1899) and the British novel *White Teeth* (2000). At first glance, they may not appear to have much in common—one belongs to the American naturalist literary period, the other to the British multicultural (hysterical realist) tradition at the beginning of the third millennium. However, both novels share a strong social and sociological element: a critical turn that addresses relevant social realities—namely, the rise of American capitalism and the somewhat impeded British multiculturalism—at the turn of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, respectively. These two case studies illuminate the metaphor of the body-as-text, with teeth stereotypically representing various social concepts such as power, greed, socially constructed beauty, ethnicity, and affiliation with a particular class, religion, or nation.*

Keywords: medical humanities, race, teeth as metaphor, Zadie Smith, Frank Norris.

1 Introduction

The English Renaissance “Sonnet XV” from the sonnet cycle *Amoretti and Epithalamion* (1595) by Sir Edmund Spenser, evoked in the first part of the title of this essay, celebrates the beauty and inherent worth of the speaker’s beloved lady. It employs the traditional imagery of precious stones and metals to refer to her physical qualities, comparing her eyes to sapphires, lips to rubies, teeth to pearls, etc.: “If Pearles, hir teeth be pearles both pure and round.” However, the poem’s focus transcends the sheer physical body-as-text description, emphasizing the speaker’s love and the superiority of mind over material wealth. Typical for its time period, the poem reflects the Renaissance emphasis on individualism and the idealization of women, yet its focus on inner beauty ultimately sets it apart from the superficial descriptions typical of the Petrarchan tradition.

The great Renaissance Bard William Shakespeare, in turn, in his famous “Sonnet 130” (1609), makes the speaker of the poem conclude that, even if the physical beauty of his beloved mistress cannot truly be compared to the conventional imagery of love poems, his love is nonetheless very valuable, and his mistress no less beautiful. In this way, Shakespeare suggests that love and beauty should not be reduced to abstract comparisons but should be valued for being real—even banal—thus rejecting superficiality. William Shakespeare famously mocks the traditional conventions of courtly love sonnets:

My mistress’ eyes are nothing like the sun;
Coral is far more red than her lips’ red;
If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;
If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.

The two more contemporary Anglo-American novels of high repute discussed in the continuation of this essay both employ teeth as a metaphor and are a far cry from Spenser’s, and to a lesser extent Shakespeare’s, down-to-earth Renaissance perception of the body as text.

2 *McTeague: A Story of San Francisco*

Just outside his window was his signboard--a modest affair--that read: "Doctor McTeague. Dental Parlors. Gas Given"; but that was all. It was his ambition, his dream, to have projecting from that corner window a huge gilded tooth, a molar with enormous prongs, something gorgeous and attractive. [...] It was the Tooth--the famous golden molar with its huge prongs--his sign, his ambition, the one unrealized dream of his life; and it was French gilt, too, not the cheap German gilt that was no goo... How immense it looked in that little room! The thing was tremendous, overpowering, the tooth of a gigantic fossil, golden and dazzling. Behind it everything seemed dwarfed.

(Norris)

In Frank Norris's novel, the protagonist McTeague's interest in acquiring the gilded tooth as a decoration for his practice clearly reveals his obsession with wealth and social status, as well as his desire to appear prosperous to others. He desperately wants the gilded tooth because he believes that, if placed outside his dental parlor, it will signify his success and relative prosperity. McTeague eventually realizes his dream of owning the tooth, although it is Trina, not he himself, who buys the golden tooth for him as a gift. Not long after he receives it, however, the authorities force McTeague to close down his practice upon discovering that he has been practicing dentistry without a license.

The gilded tooth gradually becomes a symbol of his moral degeneration, hidden beneath the desired veneer of social respectability. His increasingly violent and greedy behaviour contrasts sharply with the false image of success the tooth represents. Once a source of pride, the gilded tooth comes to symbolize the hollowness of McTeague's achievements in his relentless pursuit of wealth, prioritizing base human instincts over acquired social norms. Teeth are literally used to bite, tear, chew, and gnaw; in this regard, they symbolize power. Conversely, the loss of teeth may represent a form of (social) powerlessness—something McTeague tries to avoid at all costs:

And the tooth, the gigantic golden molar of French gilt, enormous and ungainly, sprawled its branching prongs in one corner of the room, by the footboard of the bed. The McTeague's had come to use it as a sort of substitute for a table. After breakfast and supper Trina piled the plates and greasy dishes upon it to have them out of the way.

"Well, I don't figure on living in one room," growled the dentist, sullenly. "Let's live decently until we can get a fresh start. We've got the money."

"Who's got the money?"

"WE'VE got it."

"We!"

"Well, it's all in the family. What's yours is mine, and what's mine is yours, ain't it?"

"No, it's not; no, it's not," cried Trina, vehemently. "It's all mine, mine. There's not a penny of it belongs to anybody else. I don't like to have to talk this way to you, but you just make me. We're not going to touch a penny of my five thousand nor a penny of that little money I managed to save—that seventy-five." [...]

The dentist circled about that golden wonder, gasping with delight and stupefaction, touching it gingerly with his hands as if it were something sacred. At every moment his thought returned to Trina. No, never was there such a little woman as his—

the very thing he wanted—how had she remembered? And the money, where had that come from? No one knew better than he how expensive were these signs; not another dentist on Polk Street could afford one. Where, then, had Trina found the money? It came out of her five thousand dollars, no doubt.

(Norris)

McTeague is, in fact, a quintessentially naturalist American story of a San Francisco miner who becomes a dentist and eventually murders his wife Trina because she refuses to share her lottery winnings with him. Before that, he even bites her (with his sharp teeth) and is reduced to an animalistic, naturalist literary depiction. He ends up handcuffed to a corpse in Death Valley—doomed, a loser, but not a tragic hero. Norris, a follower and self-proclaimed disciple of Émile Zola, tries to depict the hereditary, Zolaesque “beast within” (cf. Zola’s novel *The Beast Within*)—the monster hiding in McTeague due to the milieu he originally comes from. The huge tooth that once advertised McTeague’s business ceases to be a commodity and a sign, and—sat “in one corner of the room, next to the window, monstrous, distorted, brilliant, shining with a light of its own” (Norris)—instead becomes a thing: reobjectified, the material presence triumphing over everything human(e) per se. Towards the end of the novel, McTeague strangles his friend Marcus, whose handcuffed corpse he drags through Death Valley, where McTeague also eventually meets his death:

Then followed a terrible scene. The brute that in McTeague lay so close to the surface leaped instantly to life, monstrous, not to be resisted. He sprang to his feet with a shrill and meaningless clamor, totally unlike the ordinary bass of his speaking tones. It was the hideous yelling of a hurt beast, the squealing of a wounded elephant. He framed no words; in the rush of high-pitched sound that issued from his wide-open mouth there was nothing articulate. It was something no longer human; it was rather an echo from the jungle [...]

As he rose he caught Marcus's wrist in both his hands. He did not strike, he did not know what he was doing. His only idea was to batter the life out of the man before him, to crush and annihilate him upon the instant. Gripping his enemy in his enormous hands, hard and knotted, and covered with a stiff fell of yellow hair—the hands of the old-time car-boy—he swung him wide, as a hammer-thrower swings his hammer. Marcus's feet flipped from the ground, he spun through the air about McTeague as helpless as a bundle of clothes. All at once there was a sharp snap, almost like the report of a small pistol. Then Marcus rolled over and over upon the ground as McTeague released his grip; his arm, the one the dentist had seized, bending suddenly, as though a third joint had formed between wrist and elbow. The arm was broken.

(Norris)

McTeague is shown throughout the novel as a violent and murderous person, full of rage and revenge. Avarice is definitely not one of his traits; rather, other people are characterized by it, which enrages him. He never attended a dental college or was trained in dentistry, so he is a fake—an unlicensed dentist from a poor family in San Francisco. One day, his friend Marcus brings a pretty young woman, Trina, with an aching tooth to his parlor. After a minor dental surgery, Trina is impressed by him and soon marries McTeague:

By and by she said, "I never felt a thing," and then she smiled at him very prettily beneath the rubber dam. McTeague turned to her suddenly, his mallet in one hand, his pliers holding a pellet of sponge-gold in the other. All at once he said, with the unreasoned simplicity and directness of a child: "Listen here, Miss Trina, I like you better than any one else; what's the matter with us getting married?" [...]

"Say, Mac," interrupted Trina, looking up from the notice, "DIDN'T you ever go to a dental college?"

"Huh? What? What?" exclaimed McTeague.

"How did you learn to be a dentist? Did you go to a college?"

"I went along with a fellow who came to the mine once. My mother sent me. We used to go from one camp to another. I sharpened his excavators for him, and put up his notices in the towns—stuck them up in the post-offices and on the doors of the Odd Fellows' halls. He had a wagon."

"But didn't you never go to a college?"

"Huh? What? College? No, I never went. I learned from the fellow."

Trina rolled down her sleeves. She was a little paler than usual. She fastened the buttons into the cuffs and said:

"But do you know you can't practise unless you're graduated from a college? You haven't the right to call yourself, 'doctor.'"

McTeague stared a moment; then:

"Why, I've been practising ten years. More—nearly twelve."

"But it's the law."

"What's the law?"

"That you can't practise, or call yourself doctor, unless you've got a diploma."

"What's that—a diploma?"

"I don't know exactly. It's a kind of paper that—that—oh, Mac, we're ruined." Trina's voice rose to a cry.

"What do you mean, Trina? Ain't I a dentist? Ain't I a doctor? Look at my sign, and the gold tooth you gave me. Why, I've been practising nearly twelve years."

Trina shut her lips tightly, cleared her throat, and pretended to resettlement a hair-pin at the back of her head.

"I guess it isn't as bad as that," she said, very quietly. "Let's read this again."

(Norris)

McTeague yearns for the huge golden molar (a naturalistic symbol and, I would argue, also an intersectional metaphor), but only as a symbol of his apparently successful struggle upward from mining work to professional success in the city of San Francisco. The city itself carries special significance, as it is the site of the original California Gold Rush—an emblem of false promise—and a city of "open" possibilities. The gold featured in his office, which the avaricious Maria often steals and sells, is to McTeague merely a dental material he enjoys using in his profession. He does not kill Trina out of avarice for her lottery prize money, but out of revenge; he is enraged that he cannot spend it. So he steals it and ultimately kills her. He represents, in the best naturalist fashion, the generations of "hereditary evil" in man, which lie beyond his control—determinism distilled, as Norris would have us believe. Did he truly desire it? Was he to blame? These are some of the issues Norris grapples with. Of course, he could have opposed it and fought it—free will is still, to a certain extent, always undeniable.

3 *White Teeth*

White Teeth is British author Zadie Smith's first published novel (2000). It primarily focuses on the lives of two World War II friends—the Bangladeshi Samad Iqbal and the Englishman Archie Jones—and their extended families in London. The novel is grounded in Britain's relationship with immigrants from the British Commonwealth. Teeth in her novel serve as a symbol—or rather, an intersectional metaphor—addressing issues of race, history, and the relationships among a wide range of characters and their families. In *White Teeth*, Zadie Smith, contrary to the naturalist American author Frank Norris, argues against fate and the illusion of randomness that the concept of predestination brings with it. In contrast, she places her faith in self-determination.

Is *White Teeth* an example of “hysterical realism,” a term coined in 2000 by James Wood, or is it better understood as an example of metamodernist writing (as defined by Timotheus Vermeulen, Alison Gibbs and Robin van den Akker 2018)? I would argue for the latter since Smith emphasizes that individual metanarratives still matter, and that the concept of the grand narrative should not be completely rejected. James Wood introduced the term “hysterical realism” in a 2000 essay published in *The New Republic*, in which he discussed Zadie Smith's newly released novel *White Teeth*. He used the term pejoratively to denote the contemporary conception of the “big, ambitious novel” that pursues “vitality at all costs” and consequently “knows a thousand things but does not know a single human being.” He critiqued this form of writing as an attempt to “turn fiction into social theory” and an attempt to tell readers “how the world works rather than how somebody felt about something” (Wood).

The plot of *White Teeth* is really extensive, both in the number of characters and in the time span it covers. It ranges from the memories of World War II, through the 1970s and 1990s, ending up in the 2000s, even referring back to history in the 19th century. The main story develops around two middle-aged men who live in London: a Bengali Muslim, Samad Iqbal, and the Englishman Archie Jones. They are good friends, bound together by their shared experience of serving in a tank crew during World War II. Samad is married to Alsana, whom he married in a traditional arranged marriage after emigrating to England post-WWII. They have identical twin sons named Magid and Millat. Archie's partner is a Jamaican woman named Clara, with whom he has a daughter named Irie, who is the same age as the Iqbal children. As the plot develops, certain trials of the two families are shown. Samad struggles to reconcile his “Western” lifestyle habits—for example, having an extramarital affair and consuming alcohol—with his traditional Muslim values. In an attempt to appease his conscience, he sends one of the twins to Bangladesh, thinking this will ensure he receives proper moral principles. However, his plan is to no avail, as Magid returns to England a staunch believer in science, while his younger brother Millat becomes a member of a Muslim fundamentalist brotherhood. There is also a third family that is inextricably connected to the lives of the Joneses and the Iqbals. The Chalfens—and their “Chalfenism”—are, on the other hand, the quintessential representation of a white, middle-class British family.

The novel shows how the beauty standards that prevail in England at the turn of the millennium—with London being more multicultural than most of the rest of the country—turn out to be very much a typical, and to a degree racialised, Western tradition. The quest to become conventionally beautiful in a Western sense takes up a significant part of Irie's life, as she is desperately preoccupied with fitting in. A description of visiting a hair salon with predominantly Black customers offers particularly good insight into how beauty standards function to emphasize the racialised Other. The hair-braiding and beauty parlor identity issues

pertaining to race are, in both a metaphorical and literal sense, strongly reminiscent of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel *Americanah* (2013), written thirteen years later—both novels exploring the desire to belong and assimilate in a white people's world:

Here, the impossible desire for straightness and “movement” fought daily with the stubborn determination of the curved African follicle; here ammonia, hot combs, clips, pins, and simple fire had all been enlisted in the war and were doing their damndest to beat each curly hair into submission.

“Is it straight?” was the only question you heard as the towels came off and the heads emerged from the dryer pulsating with pain. “Is it straight, Denise? Tell me is it straight, Jackie?”

(Smith)

Teeth appear again and again throughout the novel: molars, canines, wisdom teeth, missing teeth, the roots of teeth. In this book, they seem to symbolically represent a fundamental human sameness that goes beyond cultural, historical, racial, and personal differences. Teeth become a defining characteristic of each individual person, ranging from white to non-white, from healthy to unhealthy, from aesthetically pleasing to those seen as ugly. Michael Meyer points this out precisely by stating, “the relevance of genetic inheritance and cultural heritage is also captured in the leitmotif of white teeth and root canals. These dental metaphors suggest the relevance of biology and history” (Meyer 2017: 484).

While visiting the local school, a minor character named Mr. Hamilton describes his experiences of the Congolese war. He terrifies the children with his stories about the war in Africa, explaining that he could identify a Congolese soldier “by the whiteness of his teeth.” His description is not very different from those in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and blatantly reveals Mr. Hamilton's colonialist attitude. His racism exposes his prejudice, for the teeth of the Congolese people seem whiter to him only because he is so focused on the darkness of their skin. In other words, teeth in the novel serve as a kind of root metaphor:

But like all things, the business has two sides. Clean white teeth are not always wise, now are they? Par exemplum: when I was in the Congo, the only way I could identify the nigger [sic] was by the whiteness of his teeth, if you see what I mean. Horrid business. Dark as buggery, it was. And they died because of it, you see? Poor bastards. Or rather I survived, to look at it in another way, do you see?

(Smith)

Zadie Smith's novel *White Teeth* addresses multiculturalism, ethnicity, gender, and identity in contemporary England. Issues of multiculturalism are especially pertinent in (North) London, where communities tend to be more ethnically and culturally diverse. Teeth in the book, therefore, symbolize the power and persistence of identity. Teeth have roots, just as identity is rooted in the past and in one's traditional culture. The root canals of individual characters in the novel symbolize their origins and the histories of both individuals and their larger communities. *White Teeth* tackles, intersectionally, many issues: immigration, assimilation, colonialism, multiculturalism, racism, patriarchy, sexism, feminism, domestic violence, genetic engineering, British colonial history, the purpose of existence, and other serious topics. However, the book, in all its complexity, also contains a great deal of humour—an achievement in itself.

O what a tangled web we weave. Millat was right: these parents were damaged people, missing hands, missing teeth. These parents were full of information you wanted to know but were too scared to hear. But [Irie] didn't want it anymore, she was tired of it. She was sick of never getting the whole truth.

(Smith)

“What is past is prologue.” This well-known Shakespearean reference, used as the book's motto, emerges in a discussion about how significantly history shapes the choices we make in the present moment. In *White Teeth*, the past—whether colonial heritage or personal traumas—greatly influences the protagonists' lives. The quote emphasizes how history is never far away; its influence persists in shaping our identities and decisions in ways we often could not have anticipated.

The novel's concluding chapters present an array of outcomes, showing where individual characters end up in their lives. One thing remains clear: the fates of the different families and the identities of the characters in the novel are impossible to fully disentangle or understand in isolation. *White Teeth*, this “family saga of immigrants” (Meyer 2017: 482), offers valuable insight into how personal lives are closely linked to larger historical and cultural traditions. Nick Bentley argues that it is this “nexus of family relationships [that] offers a microscopic image of multicultural Britain at the end of the millennium” (Bentley 2008: 53).

4 Conclusion

Both novels discussed are essentially centred on the theme of fitting in—*McTeague* through the lens of class, and *White Teeth* through gender and race, respectively. Through their intersectional interconnectedness, the social categories of race, gender, and class (less so sexuality and ability) are addressed. The complexity of various forms of discrimination intersects in the lived experiences of socially marginalized individuals and ethnic groups. The body as text, and the overarching intersectional metaphor of the tooth or teeth, allow us to perceive both social interconnectedness and forms of social disenfranchisement.

McTeague desperately wants to climb the social class ladder and become a member of the middle class—by foul means, however. His insatiable greed and heredity eventually strip him of everything; the brutish animal within the person triumphs, as Frank Norris would have us believe in the best naturalist manner. For Clara and Irie, the two female non-white protagonists of *White Teeth*, the eponymous white teeth represent an important aspect of their identities—both in how they see themselves in the mirror and how their faces are perceived by the outside world. Zadie Smith's image of white teeth in the novel clearly carries racial connotations.

The two novels elucidate the body-as-text metaphor, with teeth stereotypically representing various social concepts—power, greed, beauty, and ethnicity. Social belonging and acceptance are the focal points, as both novels share a strong social and sociological dimension. They critique contemporary social realities: the early emergence of capitalism in the United States, and the challenges of impeded multiculturalism in the United Kingdom, respectively.

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