HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Burak Sevingen, MA

Greed 1924

Erich von Stroheim (1885-1957)

OVERVIEW

> And strange to say, this picture was by far my least successful one. I refer, of course, to *Greed*.
>
> Erich von Stroheim

In turn-of-the-century San Francisco, an unlicensed dentist and his parsimonious wife's life gradually spirals out of control; greed is the prime mover; jealousy and contempt are transformative. When asked to name his favorite picture in 1927, Erich von Stroheim selected his troubled masterpiece *Greed* (Rosenbaum, 2020).

Naturalist Adaptation. Von Stroheim wanted to direct a faithful adaptation of Frank Norris' 1899 naturalist novel *McTeague*. Norris was influenced by Emile Zola, and he was an influence on Theodore Dreiser (*An American Tragedy*). Norris' inspiration was a real-life homicide: Patrick Collins' 1893 murder of his janitress wife Sarah to steal her money. A previous 1916 adaptation of the novel is considered a lost film. Norris' novel was adapted as an opera in 1992 by William Bolcom.

Greed's shooting was eventful and took nine months. Upon its release, it failed commercially and critically. Its appreciation increased over the following decades and despite the loss—currently permanent—of most of its original footage, it is generally considered one of the most important films of all time.

Significance. *Greed* is an unusual entry from the decade known as the Roaring Twenties—typically associated with jazz music, Art Deco, flapper style, exciting modern innovations and design, consumerism, and other transformative social dynamics. The 1924 film has a turn-of-the-century setting, so it is a look back at the periods that led to the Roaring Twenties—the last years of the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era (the two roughly corresponding to the Belle Époque in France and Europe).

Greed is one of the pioneers of location shooting; all the scenes were shot in real locales, including those that took place indoors. Notable outdoor settings are the old gold mine, dental parlor, and most famously, the Death Valley—where, filming the deadly denouement put extreme physical pressure on the actors and crew. As a side note, the city depicted in Norris' novel and von Stroheim's film was altered by the 1806 earthquake.

Von Stroheim uses interesting camera angles that prefigure film noir. Another technical accomplishment is the excellent use of deep focus—while a wedding ceremony takes place, the viewer is able to clearly see, through a window, a funeral procession out on the street. This is one of the many visual clues that foreshadow the characters' future disaster and enrich the narrative.

Another innovation is the use of color: von Stroheim uses hand tilting by stencils to introduce a bright yellow color for gold ore, as well as golden, brass, and gilt objects. Same color is used for the leading man's beloved canary. The black and white photography sometimes assumes a blue-grey hue to convey a sense of disintegration, and the entire blistering Death Valley sequence has a bright yellow-orange color (the actor Jean Hersholt and several members of the crew were hospitalized as a result of the physical demands of this part of filming).

Greed offers a profound psychological study; it is one of the first great psychodramas. As in von Stroheim's debut film *Blind Husbands*, the characters are complex and palpable. McTeague is rather dull and slow-witted, except when his delayed reactions become destructive; Trina (played by comedienne ZaSu Pitts) is timid, then domineering, and later reclusive; her transformation is shaped by greed. The interactions of the three main characters are intensified by cross-cutting. *Greed* employs Soviet-style montage a year before Sergei Eisenstein's *The Strike* and *Battleship Potemkin*. A notable sequence shows a cat approaching McTeague's birds, while the threat parallels Marcus' sinister final interaction and subsequent destructive blow to the McTeagues.

Greed suggests that humans are essentially gluttonous. Those scenes in which the characters eat, they devour food savagely—unlike other films of the era, which would typically associate eating with civility. Their gluttony anticipates Luis Bunuel's *Viridiana* (1961) and Marco Ferreri's *La Grande Abbuffata* / *The Grande Bouffet* (1973).

On a side note, *Greed* is one of the first films that featured a dentist character, it was followed by *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1934, Alfred Hitchcock), *The Great Moment* (1944, Preston Sturges), *The Strawberry Blonde* and *One Sunday Afternoon* (1941 and 1948, Raoul Walsh)—these and other films mostly had rather low self-esteem characters, which certainly changed with Laurence Olivier's Dr. Szell in *The Marathon Man* (1962, John Schlesinger).

Film Maudit. Von Stroheim already had a reputation as a difficult and uncontrollable director; yet he somehow managed to shoot about eighty hours of footage, which he edited down to approximately eight hours. His original plan to show this in two long screenings was overruled and he executed an editing—which was followed by another major one, carried out with his approval, by his friend, the director Rex Ingram (*The Four Horseman of the Apocalypse*). At this point, a screening arrangement could have mirrored that of Fritz Lang's *Die Nibelungen* from the same year, with two films shown within a few days or weeks. However, the two reductions of duration were deemed insufficient by the Studio. Its executives took total control of the editing and further editions resulted in an approximately two hour version, which von Stroheim said, gave him heartache. He lamented that "the release print can be compared to a novel which has had two-thirds of its pages indiscriminately torn out (Rosenbaum)."

Von Stroheim had intended to include two subplots: the first one about characters who are even more greedy (scrap yard proprietor who becomes obsessed by the Mexican charwoman's story about gold) and meet a terrible end much faster; the second one with an older couple, whose lack of greed helps them live a happy and peaceful life. In the novel and von Stroheim's original version, these were intended to contrast with the John McTeague-Trina Sieppe marriage and add new layers of meaning to it—yet both subplots were entirely removed from the film.

The loss of *Greed*'s footage (von Stroheim claimed that film stock was permanently destroyed for the little silver content in it) remains to be saddening, especially considering our times' notion of binge watching entire TV series in one sitting; the long version that only a handful of people watched at the time, could now fit in, and exist, with no trouble. In 1999, a new version was edited by using still photographs from the archives. Hundreds of high quality images, some of them originally intended to be used as lobby cards and in press releases, substantially contribute to our understanding of the original *Greed*, as von Stroheim intended. As the camera zooms and pans them, more insight is provided about events and characters.

Even in its currently available heavily mutilated version, *Greed* remains a timeless and intensive study of the titular human flaw.

Note: The following sections follow the contemporary editing which was edited to approximately two hours. Additional notes that pertain to the full version are provided in italics. Some of the screenshots are taken from the longer version; these are mostly frames using the still photographs, which have far superior visual quality and help to provide a better idea about von Stroheim's original approach and intentions.

CHARACTERS

McTeague. John McTeague is a gentle giant, who is somewhat slow-witted and generally placid---except when he has terrible bursts of anger. Initially, McTeague works as a gold miner; he leaves his home town to become a dentist's apprentice and eventually opens his own practice in San Francisco.
Trina. Trina Sieppe is the daughter of German immigrants and the cousin, as well as the would-be fiancée, of Marcus, who chooses to step aside so that McTeague could go ahead and woo her.
Marcus. Marcus Schouler is an assistant at a veterinary clinic and a friend of McTeague. After Trina wins the lottery, the friendship quickly deteriorates; his jealousy and contempt for McTeague gradually becomes deadly.
Maria and Zerkow. Maria Macapa is the charwoman of the building; she sells the lottery ticket to Trina. The subplot involving her was entirely removed during the editing process. She sells scrap metal to Zerkow, the owner of a junkyard. When opportunity presents itself, she helps herself with the gold McTeague uses for dental fillings. In the novel and the complete version of *Greed* that von Stroheim intended to create, she is murdered by Zerkow, who then commits suicide.
Miss Baker and Grannis. The second subplot which also does not exist in the standard edited version. The elderly tenants have liked each other for a long time and finally get married, to live happily ever after.

SYNOPSIS

McTeague lives with his poor and alcoholic parents in California gold country. The extremely powerful McTeague is generally tender and somewhat slow-witted, but is also prone to fits of rage. Thanks to his mother's efforts, he becomes a travelling dentist's apprentice and after a few years, opens his own—unlicensed—parlor in San Francisco. Here he befriends Marcus, whose cousin and would-be fiancée Trina bedazzles McTeague. Marcus nobly withdraws so that his friend can woo her. The couple seems to get along well and eventually marry. Trina wins the lottery, but refuses to spend any of her prize money.

The substantial prize makes Marcus envious—he feels he could have been the husband—and gradually wrathful. The friendship deteriorates and finally Marcus leaves the city—not before reporting McTeague to the City Hall, which leads to the end of his dentistry. Trina continues to keep her entire capital invested and the McTeagues live miserably, until one day he abandons her, after torturing and taking the cash she kept at home. Sometime later, he murders her and steals her entire hoard of gold coins. He escapes to the Death Valley, pursued by a sheriff's posse and Marcus—who incessantly tracks him on his own. The showdown under the brazen sun ends with Marcus' death, but McTeague finds himself handcuffed to a corpse, with all the gold, but no water. He frees his canary, which quickly drops dead.

SCENES



McTeague. John McTeague is a gold miner working with his father at the Big Dipper Mine in Iowa Hill. Young McTeague is a man of enormous strength; although he is typically placid, his rare bursts of anger can be destructive. McTeague loves animals; when a nasty co-worker tosses away a bird, McTeague becomes furious and, with no difficulty, throws the man from the bridge to the stream.



Dentistry. McTeague lives in a poor and boisterous home; his parents drink heavily and his father is prone to violence. One day, a travelling dentist, a charlatan named "Painless" Potter, visits the little town. His mother views this as an opportunity to save her son from their miserable life and requests that Potter take him as an assistant. Thus begins McTeague's apprenticeship. He learns how to extract teeth, and thanks to his immense strength, makes a name for himself by his ability to extract tooth by his bare hands without instruments.



San Francisco. Five years pass and McTeague's mother dies. He quits working with Potter and uses his inheritance money to open his own practice in

San Francisco's Polk Street. The "dental parlor" is a success and patients are pleased with his work.



McTeague saves money to purchase a mate for his beloved canary; he also sets his eyes on a gigantic and gilt tooth shaped prop to decorate his office window.



Subplots *Among McTeague's neighbors are Maria Macapa and Zerkow. Maria is the charwoman of the building and Zerkow operates a dilapidated scrap yard right behind the place. Maria occasionally sells lottery tickets and also sells to Zerkow the scrap metal that she collects —which may mean stealing precious metals, such as the gold McTeague uses for dental fillings. She likes to tell a story about a solid gold tableware she owned back in Mexico. The depiction of the golden serving set obviously fascinates Zerkow; he presumes that she still has the invaluable pieces and hides them somewhere close by. This subplot is to culminate in a murder and a suicide.*



There are also two elderly neighbors: Miss Baker and Grannis, the proprietor of the Modern Dog Hospital where Marcus is employed. Grannis is a kindhearted man, who likes to fix parchments in his spare time—while Miss Baker sits quietly and listens to the sounds he makes from behind the wall. Even though they are not formally acquainted, Grannis and Baker love each other and eventually happily marry. This subplot underscores the elderly couple's true love and has nothing negative about it.



Trina. Five more years have passed. McTeague is good friends with Marcus Schouler, an assistant at the nearby veterinary clinic. Marcus brings his girlfriend (and cousin) Trina Sieppe to McTeague's parlor to get her broken tooth fixed (*the result of an accident she had during one of Sieppe family's picnics*). McTeague is instantly bedazzled. After administering anesthesia, he kisses the unconscious woman; he is immediately ashamed and proceeds to work on her bridge. The work takes a few weeks and once it is over, she exits his life.



Picnic. A love-struck McTeague admits to Marcus that he is hopelessly in love with Trina. After thinking for a little while, his friend decides to graciously step aside—McTeague is erratic and grateful. Trina is the older daughter of "Mommer" and Hans "Popper" Sieppe, proud German immigrants and patriotic Americans. McTeague and Marcus join the Sieppe family for picnics and visits to the amusement park.



Lottery. McTeague and Trina continue to date. Finally, he proposes and to his delight, she accepts. He takes her family to a musical to celebrate; when they return to his parlor, the agent of the lottery company is awaiting them—the ticket Trina had purchased while waiting with Marcus at the dental parlor has win a substantial prize. The couple soon wed and Trina's parents leave California. Marcus doesn't look happy at all.



Greed. Trina invests the entire prize money in her uncle's toy shop business, and in return, earns a handsome monthly payment—which she also does her best to save. In spite of McTeague's urging, she refuses to spend any of her money to rent a better and larger place. She also becomes vigilant of financial support requests from her own family. A brief but unsettling sequence features two cadaverous arms grabbing golden coins; this sequence recurs in the film. It foreshadows and parallels Trina's increasingly miserly behavior.

Bitterness. While Marcus had been understanding and gracious upon learning about McTeague's infatuation with Trina, his whole demeanor changes right after she wins the lottery. Marcus evidently feels that he had been tricked out of a small fortune and his grudge grows. He is often snippy and increasingly quarrelsome. Finally, his scolding turns into a physical attack and he breaks McTeague's clay pipe before throwing a knife at him, which narrowly misses his face.



Farewell and Notice. After a while, Marcus shows up at McTeagues' apartment to let them know that he has decided to leave San Francisco to embark on ranching. The civil, but tense, dialogue ends when the old friends bid farewell. McTeague—and especially—Trina are overjoyed to see the toxic Marcus leave for good. A few days pass and one day McTeague receives a notice from the City Health Administrator to stop working as a dentist—or face jail time. Apparently, his total lack of proper education was reported to the commission.



Downfall. Trina right away infers that the snitch can be no other than Marcus. They curse him, but prepare to liquidate the dental parlor. The end of McTeague's dentistry comes in the form of a gradual transition. He is able to treat patients for a little longer and quits working at the specified deadline. Then he sells his equipment; rest of their belongings is auctioned. Except for their wedding photo and a few key items, little else is left—also gone is the parlor's huge gilt display tooth. They leave their apartment and move to a dilapidated place near the building. At this point, Trina is unbearably miserly and still refuses spend any of her money to improve things. She works at home and carves toy figures for her uncle's shop.



Contempt. After the termination of his dental practice, for a while McTeague works at medical equipment plants and eventually gets fired from all of them. He is unable to find a job and turns to drinking, spending most of his time at the local bar with old acquaintances. One day, he snaps and forces Trina to hand out the cash she keeps with her (at this stage, the lottery price is still intact and is invested in the toy business). When she resists, he maliciously bites her fingers, which makes her submit. Then he tells her that he is going to go fishing to make some money. He takes his beloved canary with him and leaves—unbeknownst to Trina, not to return.



Wrath. The wounds on Trina's fingers cause an infection and they result in a partial amputation. She begins working as a janitor at a kindergarden and begins to live there. She withdraws the capital from the toy business and keeps her hoard of gold coins by her bed, often caressing them. One evening McTeague comes to her lodging, but is unable to enter. He tells her to hand him her gold and is flatly refused. *Zerkow murders Maria Macapa and Trina discovers her corpse—she has terrible nightmares; Zerkow commits suicide.*



Murder. He returns once again and finds her scrubbing the floor. They have a fight and he beats her to death. He takes all the gold and goes away, partners with a prospector in search of quartz. McTeague is wanted for murder; a posse is assembled to hunt him down. *Grannis and Miss Baker happily marry.*



Death Valley. Marcus joins the posse to personally capture the man he hates so much. The chase eventually ends in the blistering and arid Death Valley. While the Sheriff is reluctant to proceed, Marcus doesn't hesitate to go right after the wanted man on his own.



Marcus finally catches up with McTeague and shoots his mule—the bullet also destroys the only water jug around. They attack each other and McTeague kills Marcus, but not before the latter somehow manages to get the handcuff on his wrist—making them inseparable. McTeague is now sitting under the brazen sun with his hoard of gold coins; he is tied to a corpse and has no water. He releases his canary, which quickly drops dead.



CHARACTER ANALYSIS

McTeague. **CLOSED** (Simpleton, Monster)

McTeague is formidably strong, but looks calm and peaceful most of the time. He enjoys eating, smoking, and playing his accordion; he loves birds. Then again, he is capable of extreme violence. The actor Gibson Gowland had portrayed the laconic mountain guide and poet "Silent" Sepp in von Stroheim's *Blind Husbands* (1919).

Simpleton. McTeague is an introvert and simpleton. He loves birds, enjoys eating and smoking his clay pipe. He is rather slow witted, sometimes giving delayed reactions, especially when he gets angry. As a husband, he is quite docile, when he is fired from his job at the medical instruments factory, he obligingly hands Trina all the money he has—which subsequently causes him to be soaked under the rain.

Monster. McTeague's reactions may be slow, but they are destructive. In his younger days, he is harassed by a fellow miner, who tosses a bird he found; a couple of seconds later, he throws the man from the bridge to the ravine below. Similarly, Marcus obnoxiously keeps scolding and insulting him at the inn. He merely looks surprised, even after Marcus physically and viciously attacks him—throwing a knife, which narrowly misses his face. Then he notices that his beloved clay pipe was broken during the brawl; this triggers a violent reaction—several men are unable to control him; luckily, Marcus has already left the scene. After several years of marriage and putting up with Trina's increasingly unbearable miserliness, he savagely attacks her, biting her fingers (which soon cause an infection and require amputation. The denouement of the story is his clash with Marcus, the climax comes earlier, when he viciously attacks Trina and beats her to death. A title card explicitly states that McTeague's violence has to do with his heredity; it is inevitable.

Trina Sieppe (McTeague). **CLOSED** (Prim and Demure)**; DISAGREEABLE** (Obsessive and Haunted); **EMOTIONAL** (Self-Indulgent and Mercurial)

Comedienne ZaSu Pitts portrays Trina as a complex and palpable character. In spite of the lost footage that would have documented her progression to miserliness in detail, aspects of her character and her transformation are sufficiently highlighted.

Prim and Demure. Trina is initially Marcus' cousin and girlfriend, yet their relationship appears somewhat distant, more like something encouraged by her Mommer than her own choice. Trina is very pleased with the work McTeague performs on her broken tooth, but hardly shows any interest in him except for his work. When he does so, she is quite surprised. Since she doesn't care at all for Marcus, it is easy for her to rule him out as a consideration. Their first date with McTeague is visually interesting, but strange—it takes place at the sewer, where he plays his accordion for her. Then comes his proposal and a forceful kiss, which she doesn't seem to like too much.

Self-indulgent and Mercurial. Trina is a complex and ambiguous character, so while she is quite prim, she can be sensual and might sometimes prefer the bestial side of McTeague—this point is underscored with a title card. They have their affectionate moments up until McTeague is disbarred from dentistry. Trina can be unpredictable, sometimes passive and at other times brusque and controlling.

Obsessive and Haunted. Trina is initially annoyingly thrifty (lies about not having any coins for the flower seller after Sunday church service), then she becomes even more unpleasantly so (no money for renting a better house), and in the advance stages of her stinginess, she turns into a haunted miser—reaching its peak as she lies naked with her contorted body on her gold coins; symbolically making love with her treasure. She is a savvy investor with her lottery prize funding her uncle's toy shop; the problem is that, she refuses to spend much of her accumulating interest as well. During McTeague's final days as a dentist, she advices him that he should make the most of his remaining time, as they 'are losing money every second'. She is annoyed when her mother requests her support, and she makes sure that the unemployed McTeague hands her all the remaining money he has. At the butcher, she is content to buy cheap rotten mean and save some of her shopping budget.

Marcus Schouler. **DISAGREEABLE** (Sour, Clownish Tyrant)

McTeague's friend is an assistant at the veterinary clinic. Initially, he looks like a happy-go-lucky character, who graciously encourages his friend to carry on wooing his own girlfriend. After the lottery, he becomes extremely envious and contemptuous. He is the one who catches McTeague and just before he gets killed, handcuffs him to his own wrist.

Sour. How does the unselfish friend become such a bitter and hateful enemy? It is his greed that makes Marcus envy and hate McTeague; Trina's lottery win is the turning point in their relationship. Marcus doesn't care about losing her, the issue is the prize money that he feels entitled to—and cheated out of.

Clownish Tyrant. Marcus initially appears as a light-hearted character, who promises to deliver some comic relief. He impersonates Napoleon, supposedly to amuse Trina and McTeague, appearing as a clownish tyrant at the dental parlor to pick up Trina (at this point, he is still her would-be fiancée). Subsequent events show that the Napoleonic parody may actually hint to more about Marcus than simple comedy. He is possessive, scheming, and sneaky. He destroys everything (surely, not by himself): his friendship with McTeague, the latter's livelihood, marriage, and ultimately, the lives of all three of them. The lost footage of *Greed* (and Norris' novel) includes many more details about this character, as well as others. One disturbing scene is particularly illustrative and is not present in the standard version of the film; hence, it takes longer to realize the essential wickedness of Marcus. As he works at Grannis' veterinary clinic, Marcus keenly, almost sadistically, administers ether to a few puppies. Still photographs about this scene are present in the 1999 edition.

THEMES

SOCIETY – (Modernity, Commodification, Immigration)
RELATIONSHIPS – (Marriage)
JUSTICE – (Violence and Law Enforcement)
PSYCHOLOGY – (Fatalism)
FLAW – (Greed and Gluttony)

SOCIETY

Modernity. Looking back from the 1920s to the previous two decades, Greed highlights the changing dynamics of 20th Century modernity. As a young man, McTeague's only way out from the small town (at least that is what his mother feels) is to approach the travelling dentist. This character, half entertainer and half medical service provider, "Painless Potter" is referred to as a charlatan—yet he is the only available fixer of dental problems. He performs what may be referred to as a form of artisanal dentistry, at a time when a health inspectorate and enforced regulations were non-existent or lax. Following the five-year-long apprenticeship, McTeague practices unlicensed dentistry in a more formal manner in his clinic. He has no problem carrying on for another five years—this is when tighter municipal regulations and standards force him to cease his operations as soon as Marcus reports him to the City Hall. Transformative dynamics of Modernity are experienced less as urbanization, and more as standardization of education and occupational practices.

Commodification. Prospectors are searching for gold and precious metals; McTeague is initially a gold miner and finally becomes a quartz prospector. The quest to exploit nature's resources goes hand in hand with a relentless search to recycle commodities. Looking back to the last years of the period referred to as the Gilded Age, growth can be seen (such as the rapidly developing city, forms of mass entertainment, such as the amusement park). The dental parlor, the veterinary clinic where Marcus works, and the theater that McTeague takes Trina's family to celebrate their engagement are nodes of a developing city. Then again, there is considerable poverty and misery behind the façade. McTeagues and their neighbors enjoy a relatively decent life in their building—which happens to be in front of a scrap yard (the lost subplot involving Zerkow). Maria Macapa is the building's janitress and occasional lottery ticket seller; she is also an avid scrap metal collector. She sells whatever she can salvage (occasionally steal). The dilapidated scrap yard turns junk metal into cash; Zerkow and Maria's greed even exceeds that of Trina and Marcus.

Immigration. It is a time of influx; the Sieppe family are proud German immigrants (and so is Trina's cousin Marcus Schouler). Popper and Mommer Sieppe are sympathetic and comical characters, who are trying to blend in. They like to go the theatre and amusement park, entertain themselves with their piano at home. Popper is a patriotic American; during picnics, he drills and marches his family, like a caricature of a Prussian officer. He can be quite quirky—all of a sudden savagely spanking the little Sieppe boys for some mischief.

Maria Macapa (the mostly removed subplot) is a Mexican, who has a mysterious past involving a legendary serving set. Her hyperbolic and most likely fictitious story about a golden tableware fascinates Zerkow, who ultimately murders her.

RELATIONSHIPS

Marriage. Trina's approach to marriage is initially ambiguous. Her reaction seems positive when McTeague proposes, what follows is him kissing her forcefully. Subsequently, she is reluctant and seeks her mother's support. Mommer simplifies things by putting it as a choice between Marcus and McTeague; hence Trina finds herself become a somewhat unwilling bride. During the ceremony, she is visibly irked by McTeague's gift (a bird), but a bigger crisis takes place in the evening. Trina is terrified to see her mother leave and begs her to stay longer. Mommer refuses and points out to her husband as the new authority. What follows is more or less a sexual assault, and arguably Trina's progressively neurotic stinginess is somehow associated with her traumatic experience of marriage.

JUSTICE

Violence and Law Enforcement. McTeague gradually becomes a domestic abuser (there were signs early on) and the level of violence increases during the later parts, with him savagely biting Trina's fingers—eventually, the tips would be amputated. Following the murder, he is a wanted man and a wanted poster circulates. He is trailed by a sheriff's posse and ultimately Marcus catches up with him. Law enforcement practices belong to the late 19th century; they parallel the artisanal dentistry of McTeague being replaced by institutional standards of 20th century modernity.

PSYCHOLOGY

Fatalism. Norris' novel underscores hereditary factors to explain character traits and the events they lead to. Von Stroheim also adheres to this approach, in the mostly removed background footage of McTeague's dysfunctional family, both of his parents are depicted as alcoholics and his father happens to be a violent person and domestic abuser. McTeague, who is essentially an easy-going and good-natured person, can also become very violent—his enormous strength makes him dangerous too. One way to look at it is that he was bound to become such a person due to the environment and the way he was raised. Trina, on the other hand, ends up becoming a haunted miser because she was essentially greedy; so is Marcus, who destroys his friendship with McTeague because of his jealousy. It looks almost natural and inescapable that these two characters suffer and cause suffering because of their greed. Similarly,

the subplots stress such a fatalistic outlook, the older couple are destined for a peaceful and happy marriage, while Maria Macapa and Zerkow's relationship not surprisingly culminates in a homicide and suicide—because of their lust for gold.

FLAW

Greed and Gluttony. The lottery man is awaiting Trina as McTeague and her family are out celebrating the engagement at a theater (McTeague is offended by the ticket seller's words and has a fight; but they still have a good time). This is the turning point in the plot: up until then, McTeague and Marcus seem to be good friends; his relationship with Trina appears to promise a happy marriage. The lottery prize immediately transforms Marcus—he can barely hide his jealousy that evening and his contempt increases with time. Trina's greed turns her into a terrible miser, ruining her marriage with McTeageue. She keeps her prize as an investment at the toy shop and only withdraws it when McTeague has left her—she ends up caressing the gold coins. Their greed is a flaw, but it may also be a commentary on human nature—that humans are basically gluttonous. Those scenes in which the characters feast and celebrate shows them devouring food quite savagely; for the period, this is an unusual approach to depicting eating—typically associated with at least minimal civility and some degree of moderation. Their gluttony anticipates Luis Bunuel's *Viridiana* (1961) and Marco Ferreri's *La Grande Abbuffata* / *The Grande Bouffet* (1973).

Discussion questions

What are animal motifs in *Greed* and what do they symbolize?

What is the significance of hands, especially those of Trina, in various situations?

In *The Death of the Author*, Roland Barthes argues that a text's unity lies not in its origin, but its destination. What may this idea tell us in light of the sad history of the mutilated original *Greed* (as von Stroheim intended), its surviving intact version, and the 1999 effort to partially reconstitute and reclaim what may be lost forever?

How does McTeague's giant gilt tooth and McTeagues' wedding photo play parts in the turning points of the story?

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