
“Psychological and Moral Conflict in Vandover and the Brute”

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Abstract:In Frank Norris’s novel *Vandover and the Brute*, the central character, Vandover, serves as a complex representation of human duality—torn between artistic sensitivity and carnal indulgence. Born into a wealthy upper-class family, Vandover is a Harvard-educated young man with the ambition to become a respected artist. From the outset, he appears to be a refined and morally grounded individual. Yet, as the narrative progresses, Vandover steadily declines into vice, immorality, and madness. This descent reveals the novel’s central theme: the internal struggle between the cultivated self and the instinctual brute, a battle that Vandover ultimately loses.

Vandover’s tragic story begins in the context of a privileged upbringing. His father, a successful and caring man, tries to guide him through life by playing multiple roles—parent, friend, and mentor—especially after the early death of Vandover’s mother. This maternal absence profoundly affects Vandover’s development. The novel suggests that the lack of maternal affection and feminine influence deprives Vandover of emotional maturity. Norris implies that, had Vandover been raised with a mother’s love and discipline, he might have been better equipped to resist the temptations that later destroy him. A mother’s nurturing is portrayed as a unique, irreplaceable force that shapes a child’s conscience and moral compass.

Despite his father’s genuine efforts to raise him properly, Vandover lacks consistent guidance throughout his formative years. He spends most of his youth in boarding schools, isolated from familial supervision. Without regular emotional reinforcement or behavioral correction, he becomes vulnerable to external influences, particularly the wrong kind. While children naturally err, the absence of a parent’s correction leaves these errors unchallenged, and in Vandover’s case, they evolve into habits of self-indulgence and moral carelessness.

The emotional gap created by parental absence—and the failure of surrogate structures to fill it—emerges as a root cause of his later moral and psychological collapse. This lack of mentorship is further emphasized by the fact that most of Vandover’s early education comes not from adults or moral examples but from his peers, who often lead him astray. His friendship circles become the source of his informal education—one shaped by

unc

hecked behavior, curiosity about vice, and increasing disregard for restraint. As he grows, Vandover develops a skewed understanding of human relationships, especially those involving women. Without the experience of familial bonds like that of a sister or a caring mother, Vandover fails to perceive women as individuals with dignity and complexity. Instead, he learns to view them through a lens of objectification and desire, leading to disastrous consequences later in life.

Norris's portrayal of Vandover's internal struggle between good and evil resonates with the allegorical tradition, even as it borrows from literary naturalism. Vandover's downfall is not presented as the product of heredity or environment alone, as in Emile Zola's *L'Assommoir*, where Coupeau's descent into alcoholism is tied to family history and social class. Instead, Norris makes Vandover's self-awareness central to his tragedy. Vandover is not blind to his actions—he is acutely conscious of the split within him between his noble self and the brute. He understands the moral implications of his choices, yet still repeatedly chooses vice. This awareness magnifies his downfall and imbues it with a sense of spiritual failure rather than mere biological determinism.

Norris carefully constructs Vandover's early innocence to highlight the moral potential that he squanders. As a child, Vandover is pious and well-behaved, praying nightly with earnest sincerity. Vandover's boyhood innocence is clearly established by Norris early in the novel:

Vandover was a good little boy. Every night he said his prayers, going down upon his huge knees at the side of his bed. To the Lord's Prayer, he added various petitions of his own. He prayed that he might be a good boy and live a long time and go to Heaven when he died and see his mother; that next Saturday might be sunny all day long, and that the end of the world might not come while he was alive. (9)

This depiction reinforces that Vandover's fall is not inevitable. The seeds of goodness are present in his character, but they are never sufficiently nurtured. His development lacks crucial moral correction and the emotional support necessary for resilience. As a result, he becomes susceptible to the temptations that accompany adulthood, particularly the allure of indulgence and power.

Another significant element in Vandover's psychological decline is his relationship with sexuality. His early ignorance and shyness around women eventually transform into unhealthy curiosity and desire. Without proper guidance, his learning about sex comes from impersonal sources—encyclopedias, whispered conversations, and voyeuristic observation. These methods foster an impersonal and exploitative view of women. Instead of seeing them as partners or equals, he comes to perceive them as sexual objects. Norris shows how this distorted understanding contributes to Vandover's moral deterioration and his later abuse of Ida Wade.

The brutality of Vandover's relationship with Ida is pivotal in the novel. Initially infatuated with another woman, Turner Ravis, Vandover experiences a series of emotional rejections and failures. His rejection by Ravis intensifies his insecurity, and he attempts to fill the void through impulsive pleasure. His encounter with Ida Wade, whom he seduces under the influence of alcohol, becomes the moment when the "brute" fully emerges. Despite Ida's resistance, Vandover's suppressed violent instincts overpower his sense of morality. The aftermath—Ida's suicide and the letter she leaves behind—marks a turning point in Vandover's awareness of his own depravity.

Following this event, Vandover is overwhelmed by guilt and emotional chaos. He confesses to his father, who, in an attempt to protect and heal him, arranges for a trip to Coronado. However, this change in environment fails to bring relief. Onboard the ship Santa Rosa, Vandover is visibly haunted by the weight of his actions. During a dangerous voyage, when faced with the decision to save a drowning man, Vandover's cowardice resurfaces. He watches, hesitates, and ultimately chooses to preserve his own safety. This scene reinforces the theme of moral failure—despite recognizing the right course of action, Vandover repeatedly fails to act upon it.

The death of Vandover's father soon after his return marks the final unraveling of his emotional stability. Now completely alone, Vandover loses his last anchor. Without family, friends, or purpose, he spirals further into alcoholism and despair. He attempts to numb his guilt through drink and denial but finds no relief. The deterioration of his artistic ability—the one talent that could have redeemed him—symbolizes the complete loss of his identity. His imagination and creativity, once vivid and full of promise, become twisted and grotesque:

It was gone; his art was gone, the one thing that could save him. That, too, like all the other good things of his life, he had destroyed. At some time during those years of debauchery, it had died, that subtle, elusive something, delicate as a flower; he had ruined it. Little by little, it had exhaled away, defiled by the breath of abandoned women, trampled into the spilled wine- lees of the Imperial, dragged all fouled and polluted through the lowest mire of the great city's vice. (229-230)

This deterioration reflects his spiritual corruption. The purity of artistic creation, which once connected Vandover to a higher sense of self, is now lost. His failure to live a moral life has defiled even his most sacred passion. Legal troubles further compound his misery. He is sued by Ida Wade's father, and his former friend, Charlie Geary—now an ambitious lawyer—betrays him by siding with the opposition. Geary eventually seizes Vandover's property under the guise of helping him, demonstrating the merciless nature of the world Vandover once naively inhabited.

In the end, Vandover is depicted as a shadow of his former self. Once the owner of grand apartments and a promising young artist, he is now a janitor in the building he used to possess. He cleans toilets and kitchens under the orders of the very man who manipulated him. His outward appearance—unkempt, unshaven, and wearing ragged clothes—mirrors his internal collapse. Vandover, who once dreamed of beauty and creativity, is now reduced to a life of squalor and servitude. Yet, he does not protest his fate. He accepts it as a consequence of his choices.

This acceptance marks the conclusion of Norris's moral argument. Vandover comes to understand that the brute within him—once fed and entertained—eventually took complete control. The novel closes with Vandover's realization that all the good in his life—his family, his friends, his artistic gift—has been destroyed by his own hand. The potential for greatness was present, but his failure to restrain his darker impulses ensured his destruction.

Vandover and the Brute becomes not only a psychological study but a moral allegory. Norris explores the eternal human conflict between discipline and desire, between higher ideals and base instincts. Vandover's tragedy lies in the fact that he always knew right from wrong—but he lacked the will, the guidance, and the emotional strength to choose wisely. His struggle for survival was not just physical but moral and spiritual. The novel stands as a stark reminder that awareness without action is useless, and that inner strength—not talent or intelligence—ultimately determines a person's fate.

Through this powerful narrative, Norris emphasizes the vital role of moral values in guiding human life. Vandover and the Brute warns of the dangers of unchecked indulgence, the need for inner discipline, and the tragic consequences that follow when we fail to confront the brute within ourselves.

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