The Octopus Study Guide

The Octopus by Frank Norris

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BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

The Octopus: A Story of California, first published in 1901 by Frank Norris, presents modern readers with a view of a specific time and place in American history when California was a new, open land of promise. The country's ability to produce agricultural abundance seemed endless, threatened only by greed and the interference of laws that serve the rich. The novel takes place in the San Joaquin valley, in the middle of the state. Wheat farmers struggle to grow crops and send them to market for a profit, while being beleaguered by the inflated prices of the giant railroad conglomeration□the "octopus" referred to in the title. This novel was the first one in what Norris planned to be a "Trilogy of Wheat," examining every aspect of the modern world through the progression of wheat, from seed to consumption. The second novel was *The Pit: A Story of Chicago,* about the commodities market. The third novel, *The Wolf,* was intended to follow what happened to the wheat crop once it was exported to Russia, but Norris died of a burst appendix before that book was written.

The novels of Frank Norris are considered to be clear and powerful examples of the literary movement that took place around the turn of the nineteenth century: American naturalism. As a response against the inflated prose and romantic ideals that marked most American novels that came before them, there rose a generation of writers who tried to focus their work on the harsh realities of modern life. By today's standards, Norris' characters may seem idealistic, and his plot lines might seem contrived, but, as a reaction to novels that steered clear of sexuality and the degrading effects of capitalism, Norris' works were groundbreaking.

Author Biography

Benjamin Franklin Norris Jr.□Frank Norris, to his readers□is remembered for being one of the founding figures of American naturalism, a literary movement that flourished at the end of the nineteenth century and the start of the twentieth. His novels reflected the places that he had lived and his view that the world was changing for the worst, with humanity's baser instincts overrunning its nobility.

Norris was born on March 5, 1870, in Chicago, Illinois, to a wealthy and artistic family. His father was a wholesale jeweler, and his mother, who had once been an actress, encouraged her children toward cultural affairs. When he was fourteen, his family moved to San Francisco, which is a prominent setting in *The Octopus,* as well as several of his other novels. He was educated at private schools, and in 1887 he moved to Paris, to attend the famous Académie Atelier Julien art school. In 1890, he returned to the United States, enrolling in the University of California in a course of studies aimed at preparing him to take over his father's jewelry business. Norris published his first book, a long, romantic narrative in verse called *Yvernelle: A Legend of Feudal France,* in 1892, when he was still an undergraduate.

His parents' divorce while he was in college relieved Norris of the pressure of going into a business career. He left school without a degree, deficient in mathematics credits. He transferred to Harvard as a special student and studied under Lewis E. Gates, learning to appreciate the works of European naturalists such as Émile Zola. During that time Norris produced *McTeague,* a novel about the social and moral descent of a San Francisco dentist and his wife that is considered one of the great works of naturalism. He was hired by S. S. Mc- Clure to work as a journalist for *McClure's Magazine* and as a reader for McClure & Doubleday Publishing Company, and Doubleday published his first few novels.

In 1899, Norris began work on an "epic of wheat," which would trace the cycle of America's wheat crop, from production in California to distribution in the Chicago Board of Trade to its consumption in Europe. The first of these books was *The Octopus,* finished in 1901; the second, *The Pit,* was finished in 1902. The third book of the trilogy was never finished because an attack of appendicitis overcame Norris soon after *The Pit* was finished, and he died at the young age of thirty-two on October 25, 1902, in San Francisco.

Plot Summary

Book One

The first chapter of *The Octopus* starts with Presley riding his bicycle across the countryside, from the Los Muertos ranch to the seed farm past the mission, encountering various key characters along the way: Hooven, Harran, Dyke, Annixter, and Vanamee. It ends with an ominous event: the sheep that Vanamee was supposed to be watching are run over by a train. It is here, at the end of the first chapter, that the book's title is alluded to for the first and only time. Presley imagines that the sheep scattered around the tracks were run over by "the leviathan, with tentacles of steel clutching into the soil, the soulless Force, the iron-hearted Power, the monster, the Colossus, the Octopus."

The next day, Magnus Derrick arrives back at his ranch from San Francisco. An argument ensues with S. Behrman, the railroad's agent, when Magnus sees some ploughs he has bought on a flatbed at the train station. Because of regulations, the ploughs must ship all of the way through to San Francisco and back out to Guadalajara before he can take possession of them. Magnus arranges to have some of the local wheat growers come over to his house that night to discuss the railroad's rate increase. At the same time, Annixter, on the Quien Sabe ranch, notices that Hilma Tree, the daughter of a couple that works for him, is attractive. Annixter finds himself thinking about her, even though he is a confirmed woman-hater. He sees her flirting with Delaney, one of the ranch hands, and in an inexplicable fit of anger he fires Delaney.

At Derrick's ranch that evening, the discussion among the wheat growers is about the railroad "grading" the land. Years ago, when the railroad first came through, growers were given rights to all of the odd-numbered parcels within a twenty-mile radius of the track. The government owned the even-numbered parcels. The farmers had bought the government's parcels. They had farmed the even parcels and made improvements to them with the understanding that after they were graded, the railroad would sell the land to them for about two and a half dollars an acre. Some of the ranchers believe that since the railroad has bribed the Railroad Overseeing Commission, the farmers should bribe commission members. Magnus Derrick insists that he will not be involved in dirty politics.

In chapter four, Vanamee, whose true love was killed by an unidentified assailant eighteen years ago, has returned to the valley. He works as a shepherd among the laborers at Annixter's ranch and at night stalks the Mission where he used to meet his lover every night.

Annixter, still enchanted by Hilma Tree, shows interest in her work on his farm's dairy. When he is alone with her, he tries to kiss her, clumsily stepping on her foot in the process. She flees, and he curses himself for frightening her away. He devises a plan to throw a party upon the completion of the gigantic barn that he is having built. When he

goes to the railroad office to buy off his land, he is told that the price has not been set. He also hears Dyke being told that the rate for shipping hops is two cents per pound.

At the dance when the barn is finished, the farmers all have a merry time, interrupted only by the intrusion of Delaney, whom Annixter had fired. Delaney shows up drunk on a stolen horse, wielding a pistol. Annixter sees in Hilma's eyes that she is concerned about him, and he draws his own gun. Circling each other, he and Delaney shoot at each other until Delaney leaves, making Annixter a hero. The dance continues.

A messenger arrives at the dance, having ridden his bicycle from the telegraph company in town, with envelopes for each of the major ranchers in the valley. The telegraphs, from the railroad, contain the prices for their parcels of land. Instead of the two dollars and fifty cents per acre they are expecting, the prices range from twenty-two to thirty dollars an acre, which most of them cannot afford to pay.

Book Two

Book two opens with Lyman Derrick, Magnus's son, in his law office in San Francisco. He has been elected to the railroad commission with the help of money spent by his father and the other wheat growers, pledged to an average 10 percent in the rates for grain shipments. Lyman tells his father and brother that it will not be done easily or quickly. Presley visits with wealthy friends, who discuss the possibility of shipping California wheat oversees to China, giving Magnus Derrick grand plans for the future of his empire.

Annixter meets with Hilma and explains that he wants her with him all of the time. When she mentions marriage, he says that he is not the marrying kind. Horrified that he is suggesting something improper, she leaves, and the next day her family moves away from the ranch. He realizes that he actually could be a marrying man and vows to find her.

Dyke finds out at the railroad office that the rates have changed since he planted his crop, from two cents to five cents per pound. His profit wiped out, he becomes an alcoholic.

After seeing the way that the railroad has destroyed the farmers in the area, Presley writes a poem, "The Toilers," which gains nationwide attention. It is a poem about the exploitation of laborers. Throughout the rest of the book, rich people bring it up in conversations with him, amused but not threatened by his words.

On the way back to the valley from San Francisco, where Annixter has found Hilma and persuaded her to marry him, their train is robbed by an armed bandit, who is identified almost immediately as Dyke.

Lyman Derrick meets with the committee of wheat growers to report that the promised 10 percent cut in shipping rates for wheat has been enacted. But the cuts are averaged across the state: deep cuts in the rate were made in areas that do not even grow wheat.

Where they live, and where most of the wheat is grown, there is no rate cut. The board members turn on Lyman and accuse him of selling out to the railroad. Later, Genslinger, who runs the local newspaper, blackmails Magnus for his part in bribing the commissioners, saying that he knows all about it because Lyman has worked for the railroad for years and took the farmers' money with no intent to help them. Magnus pays him ten thousand dollars to keep quiet.

Dyke arrives at Annixter's ranch, pursued by a posse of men hired by the railroad. He borrows a horse and water, and tries to run, but is captured.

During a huge round-up and slaughter of jackrabbits, word comes that the railroad has started evicting farmers from their land, putting their possessions out and putting in new tenants to live there. There is a shoot-out between the farmers and the railroad employees, during which Harran Derrick, Hooven, Osterman, Annixter and others are killed.

Presley goes to San Francisco, where he meets the president of the railroad and finds that he is not an evil man. He meets Hooven's daughter Minna, whom poverty has driven to prostitution. Chapter seven alternates scenes of a splendid, opulent dinner in the home of a railroad vice president with scenes of Hooven's widow starving on the city street. In the end, Behrman, the cold-hearted railroad agent who destroyed so many wheat ranchers, is buried under tons of wheat being dropped into the hold of a ship on which Presley is sailing. The ship is one that the wealthy people of San Francisco have arranged, with charitable contributions, to take wheat to the starving people of India.

Characters

Annixter

Annixter is Presley's best friend, a gruff man who is bad at social relations, especially with women. He is the proprietor of the Quien Sabe ranch, where he lives a simple lifestyle, often reading *David Copperfield.* Like Presley, Annixter is college-educated, with his degree in civil engineering. The responsibility of the ranch has given him chronic stomach troubles.

Annixter finds himself attracted to Hilma Tree, the daughter of a couple who live and work on his farm. His only other significant relationship with a woman, a clerk in a glove-cleaning establishment in Sacramento, ended poorly, driving Annixter to declare himself a woman-hater. With Hilma, he is awkward, and several times his attempts to develop a relationship with her are misinterpreted as lewd suggestions. Finally, after she and her family move away from the ranch after he has offended her, he follows them to San Francisco and proposes marriage.

After Hilma Tree marries him, Annixter becomes a much more thoughtful and generous man, suggesting moderation in situations where he previously might have advocated violent action. At the shoot-out between the farmers and the railroad employees at the irrigation ditch, Annixter is killed.

S. Behrman

Behrman, whose full first name is never given, is the villain of the piece. He is the banker in Bonneville, but that is just one of his jobs:

> He was a real-estate agent. He bought grain; he dealt in mortgages. He was one of the local political bosses, but more important than all this, he was the representative of the Pacific and Southwestern Railroad in that section of Tulare County.

As the railroad representative, Behrman is responsible for the ruin of Dyke, first because of his layoff and later because he changes the rates Dyke would have to pay to get his grain to market. Dyke tries to kill Behrman as a last desperate act before he is captured, but his gun misfires. Frustrated, Presley throws a bomb through the window of Behrman's house, but it does not injure him.

The railroad gives him Magnus Derrick's farmland for a cheap price in exchange for his loyalty, and he ends up taking possession, evicting all of the characters that have survived the tragic gunfight. To add insult to injury, he humbles Magnus by offering him an assistant clerk position if he will swear allegiance to the railroad. After getting

Magnus to grovel, Behrman says that he will think it over and get back to him, adding, "you're getting pretty old, Magnus Derrick."

Behrman's end comes when he is looking over a ship that is to take his grain to India. Too cheap to spend four cents a bag to have the grain packaged, he instead has it poured into the ship's hold, but, tripping, he falls in with it and is smothered under tons of wheat.

Bismark

See Hooven

Caraher

Saloon owner and communist, Caraher encourages his customers to stand up against the railroad with violence. Dyke spends weeks at Caraher's bar, drinking and listening to his ideas, before he becomes a train robber; Presley learns from Caraher how to build a bomb.

Cedarquist

One of Presley's connections among the social elite of San Francisco, Cedarquist owned the Atlas Iron Works, but closed it because it was not making enough money. By the end of the book, he has started a new venture, exporting American wheat to other countries.

Annie Payne Derrick

Annie is Magnus' wife, the mother of Lyman and Harran. She is a cultured woman, educated at the State Normal School in the teaching of literature, music, and penmanship. Annie insists that Magnus stay out of the League's blackmail scheme, but he eventually joins them anyway. In the end, Annie is left—somewhat reluctantly—to watch over her half-insane husband, supporting him by teaching literature at the seminary where she worked long ago.

Harran Derrick

Harran is Magnus and Annie's son; he looks and acts more like his father than his mother. He has a great share of the responsibility for managing the day-to-day operations at Los Muertos. He is one of Presley's closest friends. Harran's main problem is that he is a little excitable, jumping at the opportunity to bribe the Board of Railroad Commissioners, and all too willing to engage the opposition from the railroad in

a gun battle. When shooting does occur at the irrigation ditch, Harran is shot, and he later dies in his parents' home.

Lyman Derrick

Magnus and Annie's younger son is seldom present in the novel. He lives in San Francisco, and is active in political circles. When the league of wheat growers needs someone to represent their interests on the Railroad Commission, they pay to get Lyman elected. They feel cheated by him when he announces the new reductions in shipping rates and find out that, despite their support, none of the reduced rates apply to them. At the meeting announcing this, he denies it. Later, though, when he is threatening to blackmail Magnus, Genslinger explains that Lyman had been on the railroad's payroll for two years, that he was the person that they wanted elected to the board, even though it had been the farmers' money that had elected him. After all of the death and misery caused by the railroad's pressure on the San Joaquin Valley farmers, Lyman ends up as a candidate for governor of California.

Magnus Derrick

One of the novel's key figures, Magnus is a proud, successful wheat farmer, the proprietor of the Los Muertos ranch. He comes from the old school of California gold miners, having been a prospector in his younger days. Magnus sold his share in the Corpus Christi mine just before the famous Comstock Lode of 1859, one of the richest mining deposits ever found. Magnus' mining background has formed his character, making him a man who is willing to take risks, and to sink all that he has into an uncertain prospect if there is a possibility of a huge payoff at the end. He is a leader of men, and he called "the Governor" by the people who know and respect him.

Having lost money on bad crops in the past two years, Magnus gambles heavily that the current year's crop will more than make up his losses. He invests in irrigation ditches and equipment. When the railroad threatens to take the property that he has cultivated, he finds himself faced with two horrible prospects; either lose his land, or compromise his moral standing by involving himself in a shady bribery scheme. Under pressure, he opts for bribery. His sufferings increase when the people whom he bribed, one of them being his own son Lyman, tell Genslinger the newspaper editor about the bribes. Genslinger blackmails him for a huge sum of money. After Magnus' other son Harran and others are killed in a shoot-out with railroad officials, Genslinger prints the truth about the bribe. Magnus ends up scorned by the people who had once looked up to him. He becomes penniless, half-insane, babbling, and unable to think.

As the ultimate indignity, S. Behrman, the railroad employee who takes over the Los Muertos ranch, offers Magnus a humiliating job as an assistant in the freight manager's office.

Dyke

At the beginning of the book, Dyke is an engineer for the railroad, but he receives news that he has been fired. He shifts his focus to growing hops, which he has heard would be a good, profitable crop to grow in the region. He leases a field and plants a crop, checking with the railroad to determine the rates for shipping his product, feeling assured that he can make a decent profit. Dyke is concerned about money because he has a daughter, Sydney, that he dotes on, and he wants to send her to a good school. When the crop is ripe, he prepares for the harvest and he goes to the railroad, only to be told that in the six months since he asked, the rate for shipping hops has more than doubled. At those rates, his profit margin is ruined, and he does not even bother to harvest the hops.

Devastated, Dyke takes to hanging around in Caraher's saloon, drinking and listening to the bartender's talk about anarchy. He eventually robs the Pacific and South Western train, using his knowledge of railroad operations to take over the engine and to go straight to the safe. For weeks, Dyke is a fugitive from justice, with a high reward on his head. He is finally chased down by a posse. Before they take him into custody, he draws aim on S. Behrman, the railroad agent who is most responsible for his ruin, but his gun misfires. They take Dyke into custody, and word later comes to Presley that Dyke had been sentenced to life imprisonment.

Genslinger

Genslinger is the editor of the local newspaper, the *Mercury.* It is well known that Genslinger is on the railroad payroll, that he will report news in a way that is favorable to the railroad. After Magnus Derrick arranges to bribe members of the Board of Railroad Commissioners, Genslinger goes to him and explains that the commissioners have given signed affidavits, explaining Derrick's crime. Genslinger agrees to not print the news in his paper for ten thousand dollars. After the shoot-out, which leaves Magnus' son Harran and others dead, Genslinger destroys Magnus' reputation by printing the information about the bribes in his newspaper anyway.

The Governor

See Magnus Derrick

Hooven

Hooven is a character of German origin, easily recognizable when he speaks because his dialogue is written with a thick accent. He is a tenant on the Los Muertos ranch who is able to keep his position because he asks Harran Derrick if his family can stay when the other tenants are dismissed. He dies during the gun fight between the farmers and the railroad employees.

Minna Hooven

Much earlier in the novel, when he and Harran are discussing Minna, Presley observes, prophetically, that she is the kind "who would find it pretty easy to go wrong if they lived in a city." In fact, Minna does "go wrong": she goes to San Francisco after the death of her father to find her mother and sister and, after spending her last nickel, becomes a prostitute.

Osterman

Osterman is one of the wheat farmers. He is a man with a sense of humor who dresses peculiarly and is willing to act like a buffoon for a laugh.

Presley

Presley is the most prominent character in the book: he is not really the protagonist because much of the action has nothing to do with him, but he is the novel's conscience, observing what happens and understanding the significance of it. Presley is the character at the beginning and at the end of the story, first travelling across the countryside to neighboring ranches in a sequence that introduces other main characters and finally leaving on a wheat-laden ship bound for India. Because he has connections in San Francisco high society, he is able to see characters on both sides of the central dispute.

Presley is thirty years old and is a poet who graduated with honors from an Eastern college. He came to live on the Los Muertos ranch for his health after nearly dying of consumption (tuberculosis). At the beginning, his artistic inspiration is dried up:

He was in search of a subject; something magnificent,
he did not know exactly what; some vast,
tremendous theme, heroic, terrible, to be unrolled in
all the thundering progressions of hexameters.

After witnessing Dyke's destruction because of the railroad company, Presley returns to his room at Los Muertos and works on "The Toilers," a poem that he started once and abandoned. When it is finished, he sends it to a San Francisco newspaper, which publishes it; it is then reprinted in other newspapers around the country and in a glossy national magazine, making Presley's name famous nationwide. Shelgrim, the railroad president, is familiar with the poem and is unimpressed with it, not because it takes a pro-labor stand, but because he finds the painting that inspired it to be more complete. Mrs. Gerard, the wife of the railroad vice president at whose home Presley has an extravagant meal, is also familiar with the poem and says that she was inspired to join with other society matrons to start a relief organization for the starving people of India. She is oblivious to the suffering of the farmers in the San Joaquin Valley that provide her with the chance to be extravagant and generous.

Frustrated with all the suffering and distraught over the ruin and imprisonment of Dyke, Presley briefly decides to take matters into his own hands. With the help of Caraher, he builds a bomb, which he throws into S. Behrman's house. The railroad employee is unharmed. Later, when he takes over the Los Muertos ranch, Behrman mentions in a condescending way that he knows Presley threw the bomb.

Shelgrim

Shelgrim is the president of the Pacific and South West Railroad. He is the man ultimately responsible for the farmers' misery. When Presley goes to Shelgrim's office, however, he finds Shelgrim to be a compassionate man. When an aid suggests firing an employee who constantly misses work because of alcoholism, Shelgrim wants the man's salary raised instead. He is a cultured man, with intelligent opinions about art and a philosophical attitude toward the problems between the railroad and the farmers. His attitude is that the wheat will grow and the trains will move, regardless of the sufferings of individual people.

Hilma Tree

Hilma is the nineteen-year-old daughter of a couple that lives on Annixter's ranch, Quien Sabe. Annixter notices her beauty one day, and he tries to kiss her, but she runs away, embarrassed, thinking that he was just making a pass at her. After a few months, he explains that he did not mean anything disreputable, and that he would like to become involved with her, but when she mentions marriage he complains that he has no intention of marrying, leaving her once more believing that he intended to use her sexually. Hilma and her parents leave the ranch and move to San Francisco, where Annixter finds her and convinces her that, after her rejection, he became convinced that he loves her and wants her to be his wife.

They have a loving marriage, but it is ruined when he is killed in a gun battle with the railroad people. In her grief, Hilma loses the baby that she is carrying.

Vanamee

Vanamee is a strange, mystic figure who has been away from the San Joaquin Valley for years. He is able to summon Presley to him by sheer mental energy, and later in the novel he does the same with Father Sarria, a mission priest. His supernatural powers help Vanamee cope with the grief of losing the one great love of his life.

Eighteen years earlier, when he was a young man, Vanamee was involved with a girl, Angéle Varian. They would meet at night, by the old Mission. One night, when he arrived to meet her, Vanamee found Angéle raped and beaten. No one ever found out the identity of the man who did it to her, and she died months later, giving birth to the daughter of her assailant.

Throughout the story, Vanamee tries to use his power of mental conjuring to bring Angéle back from the dead. He finally achieves it when his dead lover returns to him in the form of her daughter, who was born at the same time that Angéle died. Vanamee finds happiness, and he is able to cope with all of the suffering of his life. His final advice to Presley is helpful in putting the whole tragedy of the wheat farmers in a larger perspective: "Evil is short-lived. Never judge of the whole round of life by the mere segment you can see. The whole is, in the end, perfect."

Themes

Culture Clash

The Octopus appeared at a time when the character of American life was assumed to be defined by the opportunity for endless growth, symbolized by the millions of acres of hearty grain that grew abundantly from the country's fertile soil. Literature has traditionally used California to represent the country's growth potential because European settlers arrived on the eastern shores and expanded westward, making the west coast the last area to be developed. Whenever it seemed that America's natural potential was in any danger of facing limitations, there was always the promise that California had to offer. From mineral richness to agricultural bounty, California remained, time and again, a land that promised greatness.

In this novel, the farmers represent a natural culture. Not only do they work with soil and seed to produce nutritious wheat, but they also have a close-knit, moral society, willing to lend a hand to others who are temporarily down on their luck and careful to maintain traditional moral behaviors. Their society is presented as being almost perfect, but it is threatened from without by heartless and amoral aggression of the railroad.

The railroad, in this novel, represents a culture driven solely by profit, with no human concern. It is a product of technology, which allows it to be run from edicts passed far away, by people who make decisions affecting lives that they will never encounter. Norris does not try to present this money-hungry culture as being inherently evil, or controlled, in all cases, by evil people. Most railroad employees, such as S. Behrman and Genslinger, are in fact liars, driven by greed and the head of the railroad, Shelgrim, is overly generous in the case of an employee whom he knows personally. He proves to be a cultured, thoughtful man who is powerless to stop the personal destruction that his railroad might cause: "Blame conditions," he explains to Presley, "not men."

The destruction of the farmers is thus presented as the destruction of a culture of honor and truth by a senseless machine that devours culture in the name of profit. In this novel, there is no hope offered for the finer things in life: they are doomed to lose in an unfair struggle.

Moral Corruption

The economic destruction brought about by unchecked greed forces a decay of morals in this novel. Minna Hooven, for instance, is left with no recourse after the financial destruction of her family. She starts out a sweet, bright-eyed country girl, but when her money runs out and she is faced with starvation, Minna sells herself as a prostitute. Having made the decision to do so, she embraces her new, wicked ways: "Oh, *I've* gone to hell," she says scornfully. "It was either that or starvation." Another case of economic ruin leading to moral ruin is Dyke. At the start of the story, he is a loving family man,

entirely devoted to the upbringing of his young daughter, but when his dream of financial independence is shattered by the railroad's reorganized rate structure, he becomes a desperado, killing innocent railroad men for money. He ends up hunted and humiliated, crazed with thirst, fighting like an animal who has lost any semblance of humanity.

The most obvious and disappointing example of moral corruption is Magnus Derrick, who begins the novel as a leader of men with uncompromising principles and ends up, after losing his ranch, a broken man. The first huge step in Derrick's moral corruption comes when he decides to participate in the League's plan to bribe the railroad commissioners. His initial reaction to this scheme is to dismiss it immediately, as the sort of thing that is beneath him. Faced with the railroad's almost certain victory in the matter of rate hikes, he eventually gives in to pressure from his cohorts, who insist that bribery is a necessary evil, preferable to letting the railroad progress without any opposition. Magnus' "temporary" moral lapse has a continuing effect, however, as the bribery leaves him vulnerable to blackmail by Genslinger, making him spend any money he has left after his legal battles to pay for the newspaperman's silence. After the shoot-out between the farmers and the railroad employees, his moral corruption is made public, and the supporters who had stood by him when they admired his self-control leave him almost immediately. The worst part of his downfall is that Magnus has no way of justifying his behavior to himself, even though a less moral person might easily excuse the moral complications that he goes through as being beyond his personal responsibility.

Politics

A political system can be seen as an equalizing force, gathering the electoral power of the masses to protect them from those who have all of the economic power. This is not, however, the vision presented in *The Octopus.* When the wheat growers feel that the railroad is taking advantage of their situation, they openly mock the idea that politicians might offer any help because they know that the railroad controls the state's political structure. The only way they seriously consider political involvement is through bribing the politicians themselves. Any possibility of an honest judgement from the political forces is unthinkable. Political corruption is so bad that Lyman Derrick betrays the wheat ranchers, in spite of both the fact that they have bribed him and that his father, Magnus, is the president of the ranchers' commission.

For a long time, the wheat growers hold out the hope that the United States Supreme Court will rule in their favor and put an end to the railroad's battle to take away their land. The court is not a regional body so it would not be under the influence of the California railroad the way that most of the politicians considering the case are. It is expected to be beyond corruption, impartial of the merits of the case. The fact that the Supreme Court rules against them indicates that, legally, the farmers' case is indeed weak, that the moral right that they see so clearly does not translate to a political system organized for the benefit of the rich.

In the novel's conclusion, Presley, one of the few surviving characters, notices that Lyman Derrick is running for governor of California with a good potential for winning. He has the support of the Republican party and the financial support of the railroad. He is also the man who betrayed his father and brother, sending them to ruin and to death, respectively, to support the railroad, which has him on the payroll. The book's final word on this subject, then, is that the relationship between politics and wealth is both undeniable and unstoppable.

Style

Naturalism

Frank Norris' writings, especially his earlier novel *McTeague,* are considered by literary critics to mark the very first experiments in the American strain of naturalism. Naturalism is often spoken of along with realism because both came about as reactions to the same trends. Realism developed first, in the mid-1800s, a rejection of the unearned optimism that the romantic movement proposed. If romanticism showed humans as innately kind and sympathetic, naturalism focused on the harsher elements of life. Realistic literature reminded its readership of the many social ills that humanity created for itself. Artists of the realist movement tried to capture all of the details of their subject, regardless of how unpleasant they may be, with a sharp focus that modern audiences take for granted because of the wide-spread ease of photography. Writers who were realists strove to shock audiences with their frankness and honesty about the unappealing aspects of human behavior. Charles Dickens' descriptions of poverty and pollution in London in his day present a good example of realism, as do Mark Twain's willingness to record the moral ambiguity that plagued his character Huckleberry Finn.

Realistic writers presented misery while commenting on the ways that human suffering is terrible. The difference that naturalism added was to step back from making any moral commentary whatsoever. Naturalism started in the mid 1800s with French writers such as Edmond Louis Antoine de Goncourt and especially Émile Zola, a particular favorite of Norris'. At the same time that Charles Darwin's theories showed human evolution as a mechanical progression of broader rules, and Karl Marx wrote about economical evolution that followed *its* own established rules, novelists tried to describe human behavior without judgement. These writers assumed that every movement was neither bad nor good, just a reaction to the environment it occurred in. In *The Octopus,* the head of the railroad tries to make Presley see that his behavior is not his own, but the fulfillment of forces beyond his control. The place where Norris drifts away from naturalistic principles is in portraying other railroad functionaries, such as S. Behrman, as conniving and evil, giving them free will instead of showing them as products of nature.

Setting

A generation earlier, *The Octopus* may have been set in one of the plains states when the railroad was just crossing the center of the country and impeding on the land used for farming. There are several reasons why California is a more powerful location. California is located at the end of the country where economic development has nowhere to turn, backed by the Pacific Ocean. A novel of this type taking place in Nebraska or Iowa would implicitly offer the downtrodden farmers open land to the west, where they could move and be free. In *The Octopus,* there is no free place to escape to, making the hard situation the farmers find themselves in more hopeless. Because

California marks the end of westward expansion, an air of fatalism persists about the possibility for a fair settlement. If, as the book presents, the interests of the farmers are inherently at odds with those of the railroad, then there can only be one winner. With the opportunity for expansion, both interests could go their separate ways, but locked in battle at the end of the continent like this means that there is only going to be one winner. The farmers lose because they are simple, land-loving people who are stranded in the middle of a big state with their crops, and they need the railroads to move their crops to distant consumers.

Symbolism

This novel follows the actions of its characters in full details, but it also uses large symbols. While not central to the human emotions that drive the story, these symbols still tell readers much about the characters' overall positions in the world. One clearly symbolic segment is the slaughter of jackrabbits at the Osterman ranch. Coming in the chapter following the capture of Dyke by railroad employees, and before the gun fight between the farmers and the authorities, it is clearly meant to raise readers' sense of frustration with the unfair way that the farmers are being driven off of their land. The details of the rabbit hunt, and the language that is used, are more weighty than this segment would deserve if it were considered just for its significance to the plot of the story. The sheer scope of the rabbits, who are never mentioned as a significant part of the environment anywhere else in the book, gives them meaning beyond their role in the story. Suddenly, they are everywhere:

A panic spread; then there would ensue a blind, wild
rushing together of thousands of crowded bodies, and
a furious scrambling over backs, till the scuffing thud
of innumerable feet over the earth rose to a reverberating
murmur as of distant thunder, here and there
pierced by the strange, wild cry of the rabbit in distress.

Men and boys, armed with clubs, go into the corral to beat the animals to death. It is a scene of horrifying violence, and it has nothing to do with the story except as a parallel to the merciless killing of the farmers by the railroad.

The other segment that is clearly symbolic is the "drowning" of S. Behrman at the end of the book. This character's general villainy makes readers wish for his destruction, but when he gets away from all of the other characters it seems that this wish will go unfulfilled. The reason that his death is appropriately symbolic is that it does not come at the hands of another person: he performs his job in a soulless, mechanical way, and it is in just such a way that he dies. Also, the image of Behrman being buried under a pile of wheat presents a neat reversal, since he has symbolically been "burying" the wheat farmers with bureaucracy throughout the whole story. Unlike the jackrabbit segment, this aspect is fully integrated into the story: the torrent of wheat that falls on him happens because Behrman is too cheap to put the wheat in bags, and cheapness is a trait of his character that is clearly established throughout the book.

Historical Context

Big Business

The American economic system is based on the principle that anyone with enough determination can start a business, regardless of size, and with luck make a living out of it. At first, the government encouraged Americans to settle in the West by giving away land, which in turn gave people an incentive to fight against the people who already lived there: poor families who owned practically nothing could cultivate a piece of free or cheap land and build their fortune. Similarly, in urban areas, a person starting with little could open a small business or a small manufacturing concern and make ends meet. This was the ideal of a capitalist democracy.

By the year 1901, the small business model had given way to corporate growth. Investors found that they could pool their money in the stock market to create powerful industrial entities that would have greater control over all spheres of their business operation, including government. One good example is U.S. Steel: when it was incorporated in 1901, it had investment capitol of over one billion dollars, more than twice the annual budget of the federal government that year. The people who benefited from this growth were the people who were already rich. These people had extra money that they could invest. Small entrepreneurs, on the other hand, found themselves squeezed out of business by giant companies that could consolidate services, getting better prices from related businesses. For instance, a company that owned mining or growing concerns, manufacturing businesses, shipping and retail businesses could absorb deep discounts from one step of the process to the next, and offer lower prices to consumers. Small businesses that lacked such connections were driven into bankruptcy.

By the turn of the century, Americans were already worried that consolidation into bigger and bigger businesses was damaging to their way of life. John D. Rockefeller created the first trust company in 1882. This sort of legal corporation was meant to drive out competition by owning all of the manufacturers in any given industry, creating a monopoly. For instance, Rockefeller's Standard Oil Company at one time owned 90 percent of the oil refineries in America, giving it the power to set pricing at will. In 1890, the Congress of the United States passed the Sherman Anti-Trust Act, prohibiting any company from owning a monopoly in one field or from actively seeking to bar others from competing in that industry. To this day, the line between healthy competition and ruthless monopolistic tactics is unclear, as is evident from the split in public opinion over the government's charges of unfair trade against Microsoft Corporation.

Law Breakers

At the time this book was published, America had already been through its age of expansion. The West, as it is presented in books and movies with stereotypical cowboys

and Indians, had been settled by farms and businesses. That age was not far enough in the past, though, to have been forgotten. Jesse James, the celebrated gunfighter, had died less than twenty years earlier, in 1882; William Bonney (Billy the Kid) was shot down in New Mexico a year earlier. At the same time, the nation saw a rise of a new class of "criminal"□the notorious "Robber Barons" of the 1880s and 1890s. This name was given to the rich industrialists who presided over the nation's largest industries such as J. P. Morgan (railroads), Andrew Carnegie (steel), John D. Rockefeller (oil), and Cornelius Vanderbilt (shipping). As the country became less rural and more urban, the threat of stagecoach robbers seemed tame, almost quaint, beside the economic threats posed by huge industries that could fire workers, increase their hours, lower their pay, or even have them relocated from their land.

The Mussel Slough Affair

Norris alluded to real-life events in *The Octopus,* such as the Mid-Winter Fair in San Francisco in 1894 and the famine that hit India in 1897. His main source of inspiration, however, was the Mussel Slough Affair of 1880, an event that happened in the San Joaquin Valley almost exactly as described in the novel's fictionalized account.

In the mid-1800s, the railroads grew at a tremendous pace, from twenty-three miles of track in the United States in 1830 to 30,000 miles thirty years later□a jump of over a 1000 percent. In another ten years the distance of track had increased to 53,000 miles. Much of this growth was due to government assistance. For the federal government, encouraging the railroads' growth meant increasing the country's wealth, since new roads spread out into areas with untapped resources.

In California, the government granted the Southern Pacific and Central Pacific Railways the rights to odd-numbered parcels of land along their tracks as a reward for laying the track. The two companies operated under one board of directors, and were, in effect, one company. When the line through the San Joaquin Valley was completed in 1872, the Central Pacific sent out flyers telling farmers that they would be able to buy the land from the railroad. The flyers named no particular price, but they implied that the land would be made available for just a little over the $2.50 per acre that the government charged for the even-numbered parcels. Farmers came, even though the land was dry and not good for farming, and they erected irrigation methods that made it more usable. In addition, they built houses and barns. The railroad circulars indicated that the price of the land would not be raised because of improvements that the farmers made.

As in the novel, the farmers found, when they tried to buy the land they were living on, that the railroad wanted considerably more than they had indicated would be the price. The farmers fought it in court, but, also as in the novel, the railroad moved to evict farmers while the court suit was in progress. Most of the farmers in the Mussel Slough area were at a countywide picnic to celebrate a new irrigation canal when railroad officials and marshals arrived to take possession of the lands. There are differing reports of what happened that day□ of what was said, who fired first at whom. There were five deaths among the farmers, with two more dying later. A plaque was erected at

the scene of the battle, and for years the name "Mussel Slough" was mentioned among opponents of the railroad to remind each other of the struggle they faced.

Critical Overview

Today, critics find it easy to agree that Frank Norris' novels hold a significant place in the history of American literature, even though there is little agreement about their worth as pieces of fiction. Norris usually ends up being grouped with such naturalistic writers as Theodore Dreiser and John Dos Passos despite the fact that they both produced their most significant works more than twenty years after his death. His works fit so strongly in with the writers that followed him that critics who are not careful tend to forget what his world was actually like, and they obscure his true importance as a forerunner and visionary.

From the very start, there has been little agreement among critics about the value of Norris' works. Some critics found his characterizations moving, while others found them trite. Some felt that he changed the nature of intellectual discourse with his philosophy, but still more thought that he was only borrowing from works that came before, that were clearer and more coherent. Most found it easy to agree, though, that Norris had brought to America the sort of fiction that Émile Zola, one of his heroes, had outlined in his 1880 essay "The Experimental Novel." In his first published novel, *McTeague,* critics recognized the power of Norris' naturalist style, even though the crass brutality offended their sensibilities, which were cultivated in a genteel tradition of romanticism. Many critics took the work seriously. In *The Literary World,* John D. Barry noted that the book seemed "worthy to rank among the few great novels produced in this country." However, many lamented the book's unpleasantness. A reviewer for the *Outlook* in 1899 hoped "that Mr. Norris will find subjects better worthy of his power," while the *Review of Reviews* echoed that, saying it was "to be hoped he may henceforth use [his ability] in the writing of books that will be not less true but a good deal more agreeable."

After the groundbreaking start of *McTeague,* critics took Frank Norris as a major literary force, and they accepted his subsequent literary works in terms of their expectations. The novelist Jack London, whom critics similarly chided when his realistic style led to sentimental plot lines and characterizations, recognized that Norris may have added excessive details in *The Octopus* that dilute the story, but he felt the end justified the means. He *has* produced results," London wrote in *American Literary Realism 1870-1910* upon the book's release in 1901.

> Titanic results. Never mind the realism, the unimportant detail, minute description ... Let it be stated flatly that by no other method could Frank Norris or anybody else have handled the vast Valley of the San Joaquin and the no less vast-tentacled *Octopus.*

William Dean Howells, who was one of Norris' earliest supporters, saw a clear maturation from *McTeague* to *The Octopus,* but he was also willing to see the later book without holding it up to its predecessor. "He is of his time," Howells wrote, "and, as I have said, his school is evident; and yet I think he has a right to make his appeal in *The Octopus* irrespective of the other great canvases beside which that picture must be put."

Looking at the novel in its own right, Howells praises it, commenting that "[t]he play of an imagination fed by rich consciousness of the mystical relations of nature and human nature, the body and soul of earthly life, steeps the whole theme in an odor of common growth." Just because Howells appreciated the realism of Norris' early works did not mean that he could not accept the later work's broader, mystical, perspective.

As the years passed, critics could look at Norris' works as a lifetime progression, and they could take a broader perspective on the literary movement that Norris preceded. It did not help the reputation of *The Octopus* that the second book in his proposed trilogy, *The Pit,* was considered a weak effort, marred by the fact that he was writing about a world that he did not know well, and that the third novel was never written. Granville Hicks noted in 1935 that *The Octopus* "can scarcely be called a great book; it is too confused, and in the end too false." By that, he meant that the philosophy that dominates the novel, about the wheat and the railroad being bigger things than the humans whose lives are built and ruined around them was not enough to justify the suffering that is presented. "The thoughtful reader, however, finds Presley's (final) rhapsody the most disturbing kind of anticlimax. As a theory, it is ridiculous, and it destroys the emotional effect of the book, for it means that the contemptible Behrman has worked as surely for the good as the noble Derrick, the impulsive Annixter, or the violent Dyke.... How many problems Norris leaves unsolved: Magnus Derrick's ethical dilemma, the whole question of the use of violence, and the place of the poet in such a struggle as that between the railroad and the ranchers! And how far he is from a consistent interpretation of character!"

Contemporary critics tend to appreciate the advances that Norris made in *The Octopus,* even as they realize that he was not nearly as advanced as he might seem. The author, who considered himself a hard-nosed realist, might have flinched at Alfred Kazan's 1942 description of him, although many modern writers would accept it as true:

> [T]he key to Norris' mind is to be found in the naive, open-hearted, and essentially unquenchable joy as radiant as the lyricism of Elizabethan poetry, a joy that is like the first discovery of the world, exhilarating in its directness, and eager to absorb every flicker of life. Norris wrote as if men had never seen California before him, or known the joy of growing wheat in those huge fields that can take half a day to cross, or of piling enough flour on trains to feed a European nation.

Detractors may emphasize the naiveté mentioned in Kazan's assessment, but Norris' supporters, of which there are many, see mostly the joy in his sad work.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Kelly is an instructor of creative writing and literature at two community colleges in Illinois. In the following essay, he argues that, in spite of the apparent simplicity of the novel's presentation of good and evil, there are morally complex characters who make readers question their own assumptions.

Reading a progressive, muckraking novel like Frank Norris' *The Octopus* tends to lead readers toward anger and indignation, of course; that is what novels of this type are supposed to do. These are books that call for change, and anger leads to change. There is a problem, though, when readers can tell that they are supposed to feel angry about matters that simply do not excite strong feelings. As years pass, the issues involved are not as outrageous as they once were. In a way, this is a natural and even desirable part of the muckraking process: if novels that are meant to incite change are effective, then the social situations they cover will in fact change, and in a few generations, if all goes well, nobody will have direct experience with the issues that once seemed so crucial.

As fiction writers, though, social novelists have a responsibility to create characters who stir up readers' emotions by the ways they interact within their own worlds. The best characters since the first recorded literature have remained untouched by time because they carry with them, in the stories that surround them, all that they need for making their own glory or failure. If the farmers of *The Octopus* are treated unfairly, then readers today should be able to empathize with their suffering; if the railroad officials in the book are abusing power, they should still make readers indignant in a far-off future when railroads have ceased to be. Too often, though, novels have been used to elicit social change by using thin, disposable characters that have no more lasting power than the day's headlines.

What makes Norris' novel a lasting piece of fiction is that it truly examines the varieties of good and evil, and doesn't just use these concepts to further its social agenda. This fact, though, is not always clear, and it almost seems as if Norris was consciously working to sabotage readers' sense of his own fair-mindedness. It is almost too easy to pick out the heroes and villains in this novel: all of the railroad people are bad, some from ignorance rather than from evil hearts, and all of the people who work the soil are good, if sometimes misunderstood.

What makes this book more worthy of serious consideration than standard melodramatic fare is that, within the two camps, good and evil, there are whole spectra of guilt and innocence. In general, readers are encouraged to forgive the transgressions of "the good guys," no matter how bad; such as Annixter's vulgar approaches toward Hilma Tree or even Dyke's spree of robbery and murder. At the same time, the bad people are obscene throughout the book, even in such morally neutral matters of S. Behrman's having an annoyingly pretentious single initial. A few characters go beyond their general categories, though, and they raise difficult questions about what is and is not right.

The most obvious of these morally tangled characters is Magnus Derrick, whose struggle seems to be about determining what is best when his duty to the people of his community pushes him to do something that his conscience knows is wrong. When the idea first comes up to bribe politicians to get sympathetic members seated on the railroad commission, Magnus is staunch in his refusal; practical though the scheme is, his moral sense is such that he is not even willing to think over its benefits. That changes, though, as it becomes more likely that the railroad might actually succeed in taking the land the farmers believe is theirs. For pages and pages of the novel, Magnus deliberates, with a motion that Norris actually describes as a pendulum swinging from one side to the other. On one side is the chance to crush his enemies, to defeat the injustice of their aggression against the farmers. On the other side is an admirable but impractical moral stance. By the time that he chooses to act, readers are so angered by the railroad's heartlessness that Magnus is forgiven any breach of ethics. His action to save his land and the people on it is presented as an act of selfdefense, and is therefore justifiable.

In a traditional, shallowly-conceived progressive novel, a farmer might be excused any measure necessary to defend his land, just as the customs of self-defense are usually seen to extend beyond a person's body to cover his or her family. But Magnus Derrick is not a traditional farmer who works the land he loves: he is a profiteer, with no more claim to moral righteousness than the people who have designs on the land that he calls his. He certainly does not have the mystical bond to the soil that true farmers can claim. In his first scene in the book, Annixter speaks maliciously about the greedy agricultural practices that take place on Derrick's farm: "Get the guts out of the land; work it to death; never give it a rest. Never alternate your crop, and then when your soil is exhausted sit down and roar about hard times." This is not even a case of Derrick's being an inept farmer who is bound, by his talent for leadership, to fight for his land on the behalf of the good people who farm on it; at the beginning of the book, he has dismissed all of his tenants.

The best indicator of Magnus' moral right to keep Los Muertos, a right that supposedly is more important than his own moral law against bribery, is found in his plans for post-bribery life. An act of desperation is excusable; an act of selflessness, even more so; but there is no doubt that Magnus is bribing politicians to regain some of his lost power and, mostly, to make money. When it is suggested that this bribe will only affect shipping rates during the current railroad commission's term, and that the rates will rise with the next commission, Magnus answers, with a twinkle in his eye, "By then it will be too late. We will, all of us, have made our fortunes by then."

That one statement realigns the book's entire moral structure. Up to that point, throughout the entire first book of the novel, the struggle is presented as one between the farmers' natural rights against the railroaders' heartless greed. Once it is revealed that farming is just a money-making venture, like shipping, then there is hardly any reason for the farmers to become indignant about getting the worst in their land deal. Presley, the novel's closest thing to a protagonist, is shocked by Magnus' words, and after mulling them over, ends up attributing his attitude to his past as a wildcatter, a miner who is used to gambling with his fortune. Almost a half a page after Magnus' frank

admission that greed is his motive, Norris, through Presley's musings, is able to regain some semblance of nobility by desperately appealing to the same patriotism that had previously been implied.

> It was the true California spirit that found expression through him, Presley thinks, the spirit of the West, unwilling to occupy itself with details, refusing to wait, to be patient, to achieve by legitimate plodding; the miner's instinct of wealth acquired in a single night prevailed, in spite of all.

What he is unable to explain is why this "instinct" is any more worth defending with guns than the greed of the railroad barons.

Dyke, the dismissed railroad man, is also presented as being on the side of good, even though his actions are clearly bad. In Dyke's case, the reason behind his immoral action is a little stronger: he does not just want profit for its own sake, or, as Magnus does, for the thrill of acquisition, but instead is trying to care for his little daughter, who is the focus of all that he does. But even though his motive is purer, his crime is much worse than bribery, and the railroad's provocation does not really deserve a bloody rampage. The railroad fired him from his job; the freight rates changed within half a year; are these supposed to be reasons enough to justify robbery and murder? Is the railroad supposed to take care to keep jobs open for employees based on how much they adore their children, or to raise rates only when everyone they deal with understands the principle of rate hikes?

At the very top of the railroad's evil empire is Shelgrim, who is at least as guilty by association as Magnus is innocent. Given Norris' ruthlessness in describing his evil characters, from S. Behrman's "great stomach" and "tremendous jowls" to the gruesomely narcissistic display of bourgeois wastefulness at the dinner thrown by Gerard, his presentation of Shelgrim is surprisingly mild. The sympathy Norris permits him is, after Magnus, the second clearest evidence of the novel's openness toward morals.

Norris quickly stops readers' expectations that Shelgrim will be a monster by having him double the salary of a troubled employee with three children, a man who could properly be fired for missing work while drunk. This act of mercy by him immediately separates Shelgrim from the heartless railroad bureaucracy that caused Dyke's dismissal. Shelgrim turns out, in his subsequent conversation with Presley, to have intelligent opinions about poetry and painting, and a humble philosophy about his own place in the grand scheme of life. Faced with a threat to his future like the one facing Magnus, it is difficult to tell how Shelgrim might behave, but in the moments Presley spends in his office, the railroad president proves, unlike the social machinery he controls, to have some sense of decency.

It seems that *The Octopus* has no great moral lesson, if all it is teaching is that people are individually better or worse than their circumstances. This is a lesson that literature

often displays. The point stands out here, though, because so much of this book deals with generalizations, playing into the way readers generalize about morality and immorality. It might have been a stronger novel if it did not offer such easy, broad categories with which to judge its characters, but the fact that Norris takes care to complicate a few of the main moral dilemmas is a sign that readers are encouraged to question their own assumptions.

Source: David Kelly, Critical Essay on *The Octopus,* in *Novels for Students,* The Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Bensen provides an overview of The Octopus, *including discussing Norris' inspiration for the novel.*

The Octopus was the sixth of the seven novels that Frank Norris wrote before his sudden death, at 32, in 1902. It is in most respects his best. In writing it, Norris was determinedly filling a gap in American literature: America had no adequate nonimitative "American novel" and no epic of the winning of the west.

By 1899 Norris had conceived an adequate subject: "the Wheat." Raised in the vast San Joaquin Valley of southern central California, it involved the labor of inhabitants of every ethnic and economic group. Then in "the Pit" in Chicago it was bought and resold to "the People" of the world. Finally, this product of American soil and labor sustained populaces of the farthest countries. *The Octopus* would be the first volume of a trilogy; *The Pit,* the second; and there would be a third, to have been called *The Wolf,* which Norris did not live to write.

The title *The Octopus* refers not, of course, to the wheat, but to the spoiling force, the railroad. The valley's fecundity gave rise to the railroad and made possible the abuses perpetrated by it. By the mid-1890s Norris had come to value and use various aspects of Zola's realism and naturalism contemporary topics, careful documentation, close observation, recognition of natural forces after a rather prolonged youthful period of captivation with medieval romance. The "Mussel Slough Massacre," the armed battle that had taken place between the agents of the Southern Pacific Railroad and the wheat farmers of Tulare County in May 1880, was the documented fact on which the action of *The Octopus* was based. In choosing to treat of the abuses of the railroad company, Norris was not taking a daring stand or even breaking new ground. The "unanimous hatred of the people of California toward the Southern Pacific Railway" already existed. The novel is more an epic than a work of propaganda.

The wheat and the need to transport it organize almost all of the action. The wheat grows on the new soil in generous abundance, ready to be used, but the railroad tycoons require farm machines to be moved by circuitous routes, raise rates prohibitively for small producers, cut wages despite high profits, fire those who protest, govern the local newspapers, and finally renege on the contracts made with the ranchers who have leased and improved the land. The company has bought the state government and the courts; the valley people are too disorganized to make a stand. Norris follows Zola in seeing the railroad as a living monster; it is a gigantic octopus with its tentacles clutching all.

Presley, an educated outsider and a poet, who has come to the west with the hope of writing a vaguely conceived grand romantic epic of the Indian and Spanish epochs, follows Norris's own development in jettisoning this plan and studying to depict the present valley situation. This observer is a friend of the young ranchers, drawn from friends of Norris: Harran Derrick, whose stately father Magnus had lost his bid for

governorship rather than engage in corrupt politics; Annixter—truculent but admirable—the most fully presented character; the sophisticated Osterman. And there is Vanamee, an educated man, a strange mystic rover, temporarily a farm laborer, whose ethereal sweetheart, Angele, raped by an intruder, had died in childbirth; his friendship with the old Spanish priest at the mission church sustains in the novel the Spanish background of the region. Many of the workmen are of Spanish or Portuguese descent. And there is the old German farmer, the anarchist bar-owner, and a scattering of womenfolk.

Memorable set scenes, Norris's forte, dramatize the life of those who tend the wheat: the big barn dance, the jackrabbit drive, the annual plowing: "The ploughs, thirty-five in number, each drawn by its team of ten, stretched in an interminable line, nearly a quarter of a mile in length.... Each of these ploughs held five shears, so that when the entire company was in motion, one hundred and seventy-five furrows were made at the same instant. At a distance, the ploughs resembled a great column of field artillery." Further animating the meticulous details of the scene is the metaphor of the earth—"the uneasy agitation of its members, the hidden tumult of its womb, demanding to be made fruitful, to reproduce, to disengage the eternal renascent germ of Life that stirred and struggled in its loins."

The wheat is the living witness of the evolutionary force. When Annixter, after a night of internal struggle, finally recognizes his total love for Hilma—herself a type of Love—he sees in the dawn light the young wheat that has burst through the ground: "the Wheat, the Wheat ... an exulting earth gleaming transcendent with the radiant significance of an inviolable pledge."

Though the struggle with the corrupt railroad causes the loss of Magnus Derrick's honor and the lives of Annixter, Harran, several other ranchers, and Hilma's baby, the promise of "life out of death" is sustained by the coming of the dead Angele's daughter the night of the first wheat, and by the unusually splendid harvest of the wheat itself. The book ends with an ambiguous passage in which the leading railroad tycoon justifies the railroad as itself being ruled by forces beyond it. Unambiguously, the railroad's local petty tyrant, S. Behrman, as he is exulting at seeing his wheat rushing down the chute into a ship for India, is himself caught into the downward rush.

Norris's exact descriptions, his recording, like Zola's, of scenes, sounds, and smells, produced a vibrant and memorable novel, despite some overwriting and unclear logic.

Source: Alice R. Bensen, "*The Octopus:* Overview," in *Reference Guide to American Literature,* edited by Jim Kamp, St. James Press, 1994.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay, French examines critical response to The Octopus, *and measures the consistency of the social theories presented in the novel.*

The traditional interpretation of *The Octopus* (1901) is summarized in the description of the novel in *The Oxford Companion to American Literature* as "dealing with the raising of wheat in California, and the struggle of the ranchers against the railroads." Coming as it did when the abusive practices of the railroads and the agitation of the enraged farmers were about to lead to major reform legislation, *The Octopus* has often been identified as either a result of the powerful Populist movement of the 1890's or a foreshadowing of the muckraking books of the early twentieth century□a kind of companion piece of Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle.*

Although Norris in 1899 wrote to a Mrs. Parks that he was firmly "enlisted upon the other side" from the railroad trust and did not consider the Southern Pacific "legitimate or tolerable," there is no evidence that he was actively interested in the Populist movement. The only specific political reference in the novel is a derogatory mention of Lyman Derrick as the candidate of the "regular Republican" party, and in both *The Octopus* and *A Man's Woman,* Norris offers encomia to enterprising, dynamic San Francisco businessmen. There is little evidence of any very liberal political leanings on the part of a writer who allows a sympathetically presented manufacturer to say of himself and an editor, "I don't think his editorial columns are for sale, and he doesn't believe there are blow-holes in my steel plates ... also it appears that we have more money than Henry George believes to be right". Ernest Marchand wondered why Norris had suddenly become interested in sociological questions when he came to write *The Octopus,* for "not a whisper" of such occurrences as the Homestead and Pullman strikes are heard in his earlier books. The answer very probably is that Norris was not so much interested in specific problems as in finding illustrations for his general theories of the proper conduct of life. We shall see that he does not really sympathize with either side in the struggle he depicts in *The Octopus.* He appears to have embraced Populist causes only when these chanced to coincide with his preconceived notions; and, although Norris was associated with *McClure's,* one of the magazines most closely connected with the muckraking movement, he left its employ and New York without regret before the movement had gotten up full steam.

As early as the socially conscious 1930's, in fact, reform-minded critics began to doubt if *The Octopus* was even the work of the socially enlightened determinist that Norris was sometimes reputed to be. Granville Hicks pointed out in *The Great Tradition* that it was impossible to reconcile a strict determinism with a faith in all things working inevitably toward the good, and others were quick to seize his point and to charge Norris with being "confused." That critics might have been confused and Norris perfectly consistent but misunderstood seems not to have occurred to anyone until the vogue for social reform literature had begun to wane with the passing of the worst of the Depression.

The road to a greater understanding of Norris' "lost frontier" epic was paved in 1940 by "Norris Explains *The Octopus,*" an article in which H. Willard Reninger compares the novelist's critical theories with his practice. Citing the shepherd Vanamee's important conversation with the poet Presley near the end of the novel, Reninger points out that the whole work demonstrates the viewpoint Vanamee enunciates when he tells his listener that if he looks at disaster "from the vast height of humanity ... you will find, if your view be large enough, that it is *not* evil, but good, that in the end remains." Thus Reninger explains that the "alleged inconsistencies" in the novel are reconciled by an all-encompassing philosophy:

> The novel dramatizes the doctrine that although men in a given locality can be temporarily defeated by combined economic and political forces, which in themselves are temporary and contigent on a phase of civilization, the *natural forces,* epitomized by the wheat, which are eternal and resistless, will eventually bring about the greatest good for the greatest number.

Reninger's analysis is helpful, but not sufficiently critical of Norris' failure to carry out his theories. Reninger cites the novelist's demand that artists probe deeply into the motives of those "type men" who stand for the multitude, but he does not observe that Norris understood little about underlying human motives and that he usually brushes aside hard-to-analyze behavior as instinctive. Reninger takes Norris' ideas too much at their author's declared value; and since he dismisses Vanamee's mysticism as "merely a technique" Norris used, he fails not only to ask why only the shepherd is triumphant in his quest but also whether Norris was really conscious of all the ideas that influenced his interpretation of the events he employed.

Weaknesses of previous interpretations of the novel, including Reninger's, are well demonstrated in George Mayer's "New Interpretation." Meyer is the first to point out that Norris' opinion of the ranchers in the novel has been misconstrued and that he saw them not as "poor folks"□like the migrants in *The Grapes of Wrath* or victims of the system like the workers in *The Jungle*□but as "reckless would-be profiteers, as speculators so unfortunate as to be less powerful and ingenious than their competitors in a ruinous struggle for economic power."

He also corrects a long-standing misapprehension of the book by identifying Shelgrim, the railroad president who talks of nature in order "to rationalize his own irresponsibility," and not Norris as the fatalist. He also points out that the poet Presley is not a self-portrait of the author and that the tragedy depicted here need not invariably be repeated, because the reader can learn from the misfortunes of others. He recognizes, too, that the novel is a kind of transcendentalist tract illustrating Norris' "conviction that Americans wrought unnecessary evil by supporting an economic system that clashed violently with the facts of nature," the principal one of which is that "the wheat will flow irresistibly from the field where it is grown to mouths that need to be fed" and that the

natural force of the movement "injures or destroys many individuals unlucky enough to be standing in its path."

Meyer's article might have provided a definitive reading of the novel if he had not considerably overestimated the author's capacity for abstract thinking. When he insists that Norris thought that, if men would cooperate with one another, they might eliminate the disastrous role that chance plays in human affairs, he fails to see the significance of the Vanamee subplot (he treats the shepherd only as a mouthpiece for certain views), and he ignores Norris' frequently reiterated preference for *doing* over *thinking,* since cooperation with other men (although not with the "forces of nature") requires even more thought than action.

A careful, thorough, rational scholar himself, writing during a period of grave international crisis, Meyer fails to give sufficient emphasis to the mystical elements in Norris' thought, his pre-occupation with "sixth senses," and his disdain for liberal education. The critic tries too hard to make the novel fit the pattern of the traditional reformist tract because he does not see that Norris was as suspicious of cooperation between individual men as he was of conflict between them.

Both Reninger and Meyer are correct in perceiving that *The Octopus* is internally consistent, but neither pays sufficient attention to the extent to which irrational elements influenced Norris' thought. Only by careful examination of the Vanamee subplot is it possible to observe the extent to which Norris tried to incorporate a good example, as well as several horrible ones, into the first volume of his epic trilogy.

This subplot has not always received the attention it deserves, because in *The Octopus*□as in other works□Norris' skill as a reporter caused the depiction of specific evils that were not his essential concern to overshadow the general moral he wished to convey. Although the book has been often reprinted and summarized, we should perhaps before beginning an analysis recall the major events of the involved plot Norris built around the notorious Mussel Slough affair, in which the exploitative practices of the railroads led to armed rebellion.

It is not always sufficiently acknowledged that the novel is an exercise in point of view. What it contains is what Presley, a poet somewhat reminiscent of Edwin Markham, sees during a summer that he spends in the San Joaquin Valley trying to discover a purpose and a direction for his own work. He is a guest of Magnus Derrick, an ex-governor who farms one of the largest ranches in the valley. Unfortunately Derrick□like most of his neighbors□does not have clear title to his property. Much of it belongs to the Pacific and Southwestern Railroad, "The Octopus," which has promised□but not contracted□sometime to sell the land to the ranchers at a low price. A crisis is precipitated when, at the height of a party, news arrives that the railroad demands that the ranchers either pay an exorbitant price for the properties they have improved or be evicted. When the railroad attempts to have a Federal posse evict the ranchers, an armed battle ensues in which six of the ranchers □including Derrick's son and his neighbor, Annixter □are killed. Derrick is further discredited when it is revealed that he has used bribery to buy a position on the state railroad commission for his son Lyman,

who sells out to the railroads anyway. Like Curtis Jadwin in *The Pit,* Magnus Derrick speculates desperately and is utterly shattered.

Others suffer as well. Dyke, a loyal employee whom the railroad unjustly discharges and then bankrupts, turns train robber and goes to prison. Mrs. Hooven, widow of one of the ranch-hands killed in the skirmish, starves to death in San Francisco. Even Behrman, the principal agent of the railroad, who seems immune to human justice, is in one of Norris' most spectacular scenes finally smothered in the hold of a ship that is being loaded with his own wheat. Presley survives, but he leaves California, saddened by the death of his friends and convinced that he is ineffectual as either poet or man of action.

The only major character to survive the holocaust is Vanamee, a shepherd who some years before the story begins had withdrawn from society after his sweetheart was mysteriously assaulted and died in childbirth. Living close to nature, he has developed mysterious telepathic powers, and he is finally rewarded for his renunciation of self-destructive ambition by winning the love of his former sweetheart's daughter.

All of these events are usually interpreted as adding up to an attack upon the railroad and to a paean of praise for the wheat the irresistible lifeforce that frustrates those seemingly beyond the reach of human justice. Such an interpretation does not, however, satisfactorily explain all of the novel especially the concluding sentiment that "in every crisis of the world's life ... if your view be large enough ... it is *not* evil, but good, that in the end remains."

A good approach to the matters needing attention is through Donald Pizer's recent "Another Look at *The Octopus,*" which restates Meyer's interpretation of Norris' attitude toward the ranchers as "speculators" and adds two further observations that aid understanding of the novel. First, Pizer shows that the story essentially concerns educating the poet Presley into a recognition of the insignificance of the individual in comparison to the operation of the great, benevolent forces of nature. Then he points out the novel's relationship to transcendental thought.

Basically, Pizer maintains, Norris is looking not confidently forward but nostalgically backward, since his "faith in individual perception of Truth and in the concomitant dependence upon a benevolent nature in discerning this Truth found its most distinctive statement in the transcendental movement." Pizer argues, as I do throughout this study, that Norris driven by fear and distrust of contemporary civilization sought principally to turn back the clock.

Ironically, Norris might have produced a more impressive work if he had been less nostalgic. As an angry plea for the rectification of specific evils, *The Octopus* is one of the most powerful tracts ever penned. Those who exract the story of the struggle between the ranchers and the railroad from the rest of the book are to a certain extent justified by the result. Judged, however, on the basis of what the author, and not posthumous editors, considered essential, the work fails to convey its full message convincingly not because of internal inconsistencies since the final pages advance arguments that reconcile seeming internal contradictions but because of the lack of

examples to support these arguments adequately. In the long run evil may be less enduring than good, but Norris as a journalist depicts the short-range victory of evil more convincingly than as a novelist he demonstrates the ultimate triumph of good.

But about the supposed inconsistencies charges that the novel is confused have generally centered upon two passages: Presley's incredible interview with Shelgrim, a railroad president apparently modeled on Collis Huntington of the Southern Pacific, and the concluding statement that "all things, surely, inevitably, resistlessly work together for the good."

Certainly the Shelgrim episode distorts the structure of the novel and begins to make us suspect the artistic integrity of a writer who peremptorily introduces a new viewpoint into a nearly completed work. To claim, however, as Ernest Marchand does, that after the interview "Norris walked arm in arm with [Presley] and shared his bewilderment" is to continue the unjustified identification of author and his character and to miss the real point of the incident.

During the interview, Shelgrim makes the often quoted statement, "You are dealing with forces, young man, when you speak of Wheat and the Railroads, not with men. ... If you want to fasten the blame of the affair at Los Muertos on any one person, you will make a mistake. Blame conditions, not men." Presley regains the street "stupefied." He cannot refute this new idea, which "rang with the clear reverberation of truth" and he asks if anyone were "to blame for the horror at the irrigating ditch" where so many of his friends died.

These doubts, however, are Presley's, not Norris'. What has happened here as elsewhere is that Norris has botched the writing. The book is easily misread not because it expresses subtle ideas the thinking is often quite simple-minded but because Norris' writing about ideas is often muddy, and it is not easy to distinguish between what he thinks and what his characters think. We must recall, however, that despite the furore over his poem "The Toilers," (a work similar to Edwin Markham's "The Man with the Hoe"), Presley as shown by an unsuccessful speech he delivers to a group of ranchers and by his abortive bombing of the villain's house is not effective as either thinker or doer, as a handler of either symbols or things.

Far from identifying himself with Presley (although they share some ideas), Norris throughout the book treats the poet with mild contempt as a "type" illustrative of the ineffectiveness of the literary man in coping with the violent forces in the world.

That Norris was also not taken in by the arguments he assigns Shelgrim is demonstrated later when at a society dinner he depicts Presley beginning to think things over and in what Maxwell Geismar calls "the intellectual climax of the novel" realizing that he has been duped by the fast-talking Shelgrim:

The railroad might indeed be a force only, which no
man could control and for which no man was responsible,
but his friends had been killed, but years

> of extortion and oppression had wrung money from? all of the San Joaquin, money that had made possible this very scene in which he found himself. ... It was a half-ludicrous, half-horrible "dog eat dog," an unspeakable cannibalism Presley foresees that some day the people will rise and in turn "rend those who now preyed upon them." As George Meyer points out, Shelgrim uses "natural forces" as a rationalization for his own irresponsibility. Despite his high position, the railroad president is simply a confidence man, one who overwhelms counter-argument by a skillful use of question-begging and of faulty dilemmas (irresponsible operation or bankruptcy.)

Norris puts his finger on the real trouble when he says that "No standards of measure in [Presley's] mental equipment would apply to [Shelgrim] ... not because these standards were different in kind, but that they were lamentably deficient in size." The forces at work are not necessarily uncontrollable (Marchand points out that "the growing of wheat is not a cosmic process, but a purely human activity"), but they cannot be controlled by the characters Norris has created.

To dwell on the insufficiency of his characters' mental equipment, however, would defeat the author's purpose, for it would conflict with the uncritical enthusiasm he expresses elsewhere when he asks about his "sturdy American" actors: "Where else in the world round were such strong, honest men, such strong, beautiful women?". The question is intended to be rhetorical; but it might be answered, "Anywhere that people are strong-minded enough to control the forces civilization has created." Norris has not proved that these forces cannot be controlled, but only that he cannot conceive the characters who could control them. He then proceeds to display unfounded confidence in himself by assuming that he knows as much about human capability as anyone.

This unwarranted confidence is responsible for what many readers consider the dogmatism of the conclusion. How did Norris know that "all things surely, inevitably, resistlessly work together for the good"? Why, he just knew it, and the reader who will not take his word for it is obviously as much out of harmony with the secret forces of nature as the ill-fated ranchers of the San Joaquin Valley. Part of the strength of Norris' work is that he never felt any doubt about his own perspicacity.

Probably more as model or "type" than proof of his theories, Norris did weave into his epic tale of the fall of the foolish, the tale of Vanamee as a kind of counter-narrative to guide those who seek the right road. This story is not usually credited with its proper importance in the over-all design of the novel, for the lonely shepherd is often ignored or mentioned only as spokesman for the philosophy that colors the final pages of the book. Yet even if Norris had not especially spoken in a letter to Isaac Marcosson of this subplot as "even mysticism ... a sort of allegory," the amount of space he lavished upon the story and the fact that it is Vanamee's philosophy that is repeated at the end of the

book should alert readers to the significance of the only major character in the story who emerges triumphant.

The shepherd enunciates the philosophy that "in every crisis of the world's life ... if your view be large enough ... it is *not* evil, but good, that in the end remains." We need not, however, take his word for this; his own story is supposed to illustrate the truth of the premise just as much as the story of the ranchers and their struggle against the railroad is supposed to illustrate the truth of the premise that those who stand in the way of irresistible forces will be destroyed.

Vanamee is a kind of latter-day Thoreau, "a college graduate and a man of wide reading and great intelligence, [who] had chosen to lead his own life, which was that of a recluse." Unlike Thoreau, however, his withdrawal from society is not an experiment, but a permanent policy. In view of the final contrast between what happens to him and to the others in the novel, we must conclude that Norris thought that the sensitive, introspective person could regain harmony with nature only by completely rejecting civilized society.

Vanamee loved Angèle Varian, who lived on a flower ranch near the mission where he met her nightly. One night, however, Angèle was met by a never identified "other," who raped her. When she died in childbirth, "the thread of Vanamee's life had been snapped."

As a result of his long isolation from society, Vanamee has developed a strange power to call other people to him. ("If I had wanted to, sir, I could have made you come to me from back there in the Quien Sabe ranch," he tells a priest.) He does not understand this power himself ("I understand as little of these things as you," he tells the priest, when asked about the power). Finally after eighteen years he returns to the scene of Angèle's rape and begins calling for her, demanding that God answer with "something real, even if the reality were fancied" Through a succession of scenes, we see the answer to this totally irrational call gradually materialize until at last "Angèle was realized in the Wheat."

The "answer" is Angèle's daughter, who has come in response to Vanamee's mysterious calls and who even more mysteriously loves him as her mother did. Her coming demonstrates specifically how good□in the large enough view□comes out of evil. The rape and death of Angèle were evil, but the child born of this bestiality is good. Norris even has Vanamee make this point specifically: "I believed Angèle dead. I wept over her grave; mourned for her as dead in corruption. She has come back to me, more beautiful than ever."

Does this example prove the sweeping generalization Norris makes at the end of the book? Probably many critics have overlooked the whole business because few could concede that it did. Even if we were willing to grant that one example might be enough to support a theory about the operation of the Universe, we could not overlook the extraordinary aspects of the particular situation□ Vanamee's mysterious ability to use a kind of telepathic hypnosis (he speaks of a "sixth sense" or "a whole system of other

unnamed senses" experienced by "people who live alone and close to nature"), and Angèle's daughter's remarkable duplication of not only her mother's appearance, but also her feelings.

What is Norris trying to say here? We cannot, of course, disprove telepathy, "sixth senses," and the transmigration of souls that he seems to be hinting at any more than he can prove their existence with this wild romance that most critics of the book have apparently found too embarrassing to discuss. But what we can say is that it is hard to imagine what Norris does mean if not that we must either put up with injustice and abuse, temporary "evils" of civilization, or else reject civilization altogether and take to the woods where we can develop "unnamed senses." If man's problem is to improve conditions in the world he has made, Norris is no help. He is rather like the man who, unable to do something himself, announces that it cannot be done and sits scoffing at those who try. Although he lived in a society full of worshippers of progress, with whom he is sometimes confused, he himself is a self-appointed propagandist for "hard" primitivism.

Another indication of the backwardness of Norris' thought is the really most remarkable part of the interview with Shelgrim, the railroad president □not the blatant sophistries about "forces," but the vignette of Shelgrim granting another chance to a drunken bookkeeper, an act that shatters Presley's concept of the executive as a bloodsucker. The reader may well ask along with Presley how the man who can handle an erring underling so intelligently and humanely can have treated so inhumanely the ranchers and Dyke, a once faithful employee whom the agents of the "octopus" drive to robbery, murder, and death.

The answer is that Shelgrim, as Norris conceives of him, is not really a competent administrator of a vast business, even though Norris may have drawn the incident from his own knowledge of the railroad executives. Actually the behavior that it illustrates can best be analyzed in the light of a passage from Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath,* in which a dispossessed tenant ponders:

"Funny thing, how it is. If a man owns a little property,
that property is him, it's part of him, and it's
like him. ... Even if he isn't successful, he's big
with his property. ... But let a man get property that
he doesn't see, or can't take time to get his fingers
in, or can't be there to walk on it□why, then the
property is the man. He can't do what he wants, he
can't think what he wants. The property is the man,
stronger than he is. And he is small, not big. Only
his possessions are big□and he's the servant of his
property."

This is a classic statement of the view of the "thing-handler" as opposed to the "symbol-handler" □that man can understand only that which he can actually see and feel. The tenant has grounds for his observation, because many men who have actually only the

education and intelligence to be "thing-handlers" have been forced into or have taken upon themselves the roles of "symbol-handlers," with the distressing result that conditions occur like those depicted in both *The Octopus* and *The Grapes of Wrath.*

Actually Norris foreshadows part of Steinbeck's tenant's speech in his analysis of Magnus Derrick, the elder statesman among the ranchers:

> It was the true California spirit that found expression through him, the spirit of the West, unwilling to occupy itself with details, unwilling to wait, to be patient, to achieve by legitimate plodding. ... It was in this frame of mind that Magnus and the multitude of other ranchers of whom he was a type, farmed their ranches. *They had no love for their land.* They were not attached to their soil. ... To get all there was out of the land, to squeeze it dry, to exhaust it, seemed their policy. When, at last, the land worn out, would refuse to yield, they would invest their money in something else; by then, they would all have made their fortunes. They did not care. "After us the deluge" (italics mine).

The charge here is the same as that against the bankers in *The Grapes of Wrath,* and those who have supposed that Norris was as critical of the ranchers as of the railroads have been right as far as they have gone; but they should have gone further. He is actually more critical of the ranchers, because the point of the incident of Shelgrim's kindness is to suggest that he does actually love those around him□those with whose problems he is personally acquainted.

What Norris failed to see is that a man of such limited vision would be incompetent to operate successfully a vast railroad or any comparable enterprise since he would be unable to do what competent administrators of vast affairs must do if they are not to court disaster□set up and administer equitably and impartially uniform regulations for those with whom they deal directly and those with whom they do not. Of course such competent administrators were uncommon in the nineteenth century (they are still not especially abundant), but commercial disasters were fairly common. Many businesses and institutions (including the railroads) are still paying for the incompetence of the "selfmade" administrators of the Gilded Age. Norris' shortcoming was that he reported ably enough what he saw, but he failed to perceive what was wrong. He stepped into the trap that awaits many uncritical admirers of the empire builder□the assumption that those who have the force and energy to put together an empire necessarily have the intelligence and patience to administer it adequately. A reporter, of course, would not be handicapped by making such an erroneous assumption, but it is likely to prove crippling to a man seeking to formulate rules for the conduct of life.

Ernest Narchand is right when he says that the real struggle in *The Octopus* is between "two types of economy"□the old, vanishing agricultural, and the rising industrial; but he

does not see that both economies are administered in this novel by the same type of chieftain, since the author had no concept that a more complicated economy demands a new, more thoughtful type of leadership.

Norris got close enough to the ranchers to see their weaknesses, but he did not get as close to the managers of the railroad. *The Octopus* has often been called one-sided, but it has not been pointed out that the result of the oversimplified treatment of the railroad's role in the controversy is that it actually comes off better than it might because Norris was too busy looking for evil to notice incompetence. Shelgrim easily rationalizes away charges of malfeasance by blaming evils on forces rather than men, but he could not so easily dispose of charges of misfeasance or non-feasance.

Norris' naïvetè in the presence of empire builders recalls that the one striking exception to his attack upon civilization is his praise in *A Man's Woman* and "The Frontier Gone at Last" of those conquerors of the physical frontier who are now tackling the economic frontier. In "The True Reward of the Novelist," he had also observed that the "financier and poet" are alike, "so only they be big enough." He was probably dazzled enough by Huntington, who supported the *Wave,* to suppose him a truly great and good financier, just as he probably supposed himself a great and good artist.

An illustration of his susceptibility to the wordmagic of the business titan occurs in *The Octopus* when Cedarquist, a prominent industrialist, after denouncing San Francisco's failure to support *his* iron works, which he calls an "indifference to *public* affairs" (my italics and shades of Charlie Wilson!), goes on:

> The great word of the nineteenth century has been Production. The great word of the twentieth century will be□listen to me, you youngsters□Markets. As a market for our Production ... our *Wheat,* Europe is played out. ... We supply more than Europe can eat, and down go the prices. The remedy is *not* in the curtailing of our wheat areas, but in this, we must have new markets, greater markets. ... We must march with the course of empire, not against it. I mean, we must look to China.

What Cedarquist advocates is not spreading civilization, but simply disseminating stuff□things not ideas. He simply seeks to exert some mysterious power over others, and he is no more willing than Vanamee to accept responsibility for it. His talk of "marching with the course of empire" simply advocates doing rather than thinking□action for its own sake, like the irresistible action of unthinking nature.

From this passage we can see how Norris can speak of nature at times as indifferent and yet at others as good. By *indifferent,* he does not mean what a non-teleological thinker would. He probably could not even conceive of the universe without "a sense of obligation" that Stephen Crane personifies in a poem. *Indifferent* to him simply means *unconscious.* Nature, he feels, does good without thinking about it□but it does do good

in the long run. Indeed his opinion is that most of the trouble begins when people start thinking instead of feeling. Without thought, of course, one can have no sense of responsibility; but this did not disturb Norris, for he assumed that one who acted according to the proper "natural" feelings could do no wrong and would not need to worry about consequences.

We should not be surprised, however, that Norris does not insist that his characters be responsible for their actions, since he is irresponsible himself. His lack of responsibility, in fact, accounts for some of the most striking features of *The Octopus.* An example is a section of the novel which some critics have praised in which glimpses of Mrs. Hooven starving to death outside are alternated with glimpses of the guests of a railroad magnate gorging themselves on fancy food inside. Actually this is one of the most meretricious pieces of writing in the novel since it directly contradicts Norris' principle of writing about representative situations in order to lead to general statements about the operation of the universe. Here he uses a most extraordinary coincidence to agitate the reader's feelings. The point is not that readers should not be moved by Mrs. Hooven's sufferings and infuriated that they can occur in such a place, but that□if Norris' main point that everything works inevitably for the good is true□the sensations provoked by this incident are gratuitous. Such material has a place in the novel of social protest, but here Norris appears merely to be exploiting misery in order to display his talent. He is obliging the reader to indulge in the worst kind of sentimentality□to revel in feeling for its own sake, a kind of emotional masturbation. It is not surprising that the man capable of producing this passage completely failed to understand Harriet Beecher Stowe's motives in writing *Uncle Tom's Cabin.*

Another big scene□that in which S. Behrman, the agent of the railroad whose principle is "all that the traffic will bear," suffocates in the hold of a wheat ship□is suspect for different reasons. Coming near the end of the novel, the scene at first appears a masterpiece of ironic symbolism: Behrman, seemingly impervious to any attack by man, is overwhelmed at last by the irresistible force of the wheat he had hoped to exploit. The fat, rich man is killed by the very substance that promises life to starving Asiatics. The scene very well demonstrates Norris' doctrine that men, "motes in the sunshine," might perish while the WHEAT remains (capitals Norris').

Yet once again in creating this scene, Norris was gambling□quite successfully□that the reader would respond uncritically, unthinkingly. Behrman had been depicted in such a way that the reader would wish to see him punished for his offenses and would view the suffocation as a punishment□ the wheat operating not as an indifferent force, but as a *deus ex machina.* To see what is wrong with the scene we need to remember that the incident could have happened to anyone; there is nothing earlier in the novel nor in the scene itself that justifies interpreting Behrman's death as retribution, except our own feelings.

As Charles Walcutt points out in *American Literary Naturalism,* Behrman is an unsatisfactory character anyway, since "his actions could be explained only by a deep-seated hatred which he is not shown to harbor." In medieval literature, he would be a stock figure□Mephistopheles, a manifestation of complete evil, immune to human

attack; but in "naturalistic" fiction, he is incredible unless the work is intended primarily as a morality play.

Perhaps, however, Norris was being truly naturalistic and emphasizing the irony of the coincidence that Behrman, invulnerable to other men, was killed during a moment of triumph by natural forces beyond his control. Why then have the wheat□which in this book has been endowed with a special symbolic significance as a *creative* force□do the dirty work? It would be far more naturalistically ironic to have this self-controlled, scheming man inconspicuously killed in a situation he had no part in creating□by a bullet intended for another or a falling object. Actually Norris is trying to provide further evidence that things work inevitably, irresistibly for the good by having benevolent natural forces dispose of Behrman, but he forces his point. Sending the forces of nature to do a man's specific job both overly sentimentalizes nature and excuses man's irresponsibility□includingthe artist's when he falls back on gothic machinery to dispose of behavioral problems he has raised.

Earlier in this chapter, I questioned Norris' artistic integrity. The scenes I have just discussed are further evidence that defending this book against its earlier critics does not vindicate it but simply brings to light more serious flaws. But lest it appear that my only aim is to "debunk" *The Octopus,* I must make it clear that the novel is a magnificent imaginative achievement, one of the few American novels to bring a significant episode from our history to life in such a way that the reader feels he is participating in the ponderous events. Like *McTeague, The Octopus* compensates for its defects with vivid reporting. When we strip away the naïve arguments and the blatant attempts to titillate the reader's sentiment, we uncover a remarkable panorama of the life of a confused society torn between its desires, on the one hand, to return to the irresponsible, formless life of the frontier and, on the other, to move on to a state that might be more stable but also more chafing because one's rights and responsibilities would be spelled out by regulations.

Norris was consciously trying to produce an epic. He called his work "The epic of the Wheat," and he twice insists on comparisons with Homer. Despite his avowed lack of interest in style, he experimented with epic devices in this novel. The long scene in Annixter's barn was obviously influenced by the description of revels in the Homeric poems, and it even pretends to poetry through the use of refrains ("Two quarts 'n' a half. Two quarts 'n' a half." "Garnett of the Ruby Rancho, Keast from the ranch of the same name"), and they are justified only as they tie together the whirl of scenes composing this long, climactic chapter.

In a great measure, Norris himself wrote the work that he demands in "A Neglected Epic," the tale of the conquest of the West that would "devolve upon some great national event" and depict a hero who "died in defense of an ideal, an epic hero, a legendary figure, formidable, sad," who "died facing down injustice, dishonesty, and crime; died 'in his boots.'" Annixter meets the requirements □the clumsy misogynist who learns to love first his own wife, then "others," until his love expands to embrace the whole world on the very day that he rides to his death in defense of his homestead.

Curiously, most epics appear not at the zenith of the societies they celebrate, but in their dying days. Milton definitively stated a theology that was just losing its grip on the minds and hearts of men; Dante gave final form to the neat pigeonholes of medieval cosmology just as this rigidly structured era was about to collapse into the Renaissance; and that even Homer wrote during the last days of the patriarchal society he depicts is suggested by the mildly satirical treatment of those gods who must earlier have been fervently worshipped. By the time a way of life has become clearly enough defined and seriously enough threatened to need defending, it has usually lost its impetus and is about to collapse from physical, intellectual or moral defects.

The Octopus is the epic of the conquest of the frontier by powerful, undisciplined forces. *Doing* rather than *thinking* was needed to overcome vast and often hostile geographical forces. But with the frontier gone, the kind of freedom it had permitted and even demanded for its conquest could only either disappear too, or turn upon itself self-destructively as it does in the battle between the rancher and the railroad here celebrated. Not long after the publication of *The Octopus,* both sides were to find that because they had failed to discipline themselves they were subjected to increasing external regulation, and "frontier psychology" was to become an anachronism after the last claims were staked. Some have speculated that *The Octopus* helped to bring about the regulation of the conditions it describes, but it is more likely that the regulation was already imminent, since, like many epics, the novel dealt with conditions that could not have persisted much longer.

Like *McTeague, The Octopus* is a valuable document because it expresses a philosophy that is not a lesson to its time, but a reflection of it. Norris could not achieve the detachment of a Conrad or even a Crane, because his own ideas, fears, and prejudices were too much like those of his characters. His lack of artistic integrity is not the result of hypocrisy, but of inadequate self-analysis. In his behalf it must be pleaded that he was not like the artistic prostitutes of Madison Avenue and Hollywood who cynically manipulate the public for their own temporary advantage. Rather he was like his own characters□especially Shelgrim and Magnus Derrick, the leaders of the contending parties, who were giants in their own time□whose offense was not that they deliberately did wrong but that because of adolescent self-infatuation, they failed to perceive the limitations of their own powerful gifts.

Norris did not really know how to cope with the evils of his times; he could only advise flight. Yet he enables us to see why his contemporaries could not cope with these evils. *The Octopus* is quite unintentionally a powerful tract, because the author who trusted action over thought shows us the dangers of sharing his beliefs.

Source: Warren French, "A Large Enough View," in *Frank Norris,* Twayne's United States Authors Series, Twayne, 1962.

Adaptations

While adaptations of *The Octopus* are scarce because of the novel's sprawling nature, Norris's book *McTeague* is available on an audiocassette recording from L.A. Theater Works, published in 1989.

Topics for Further Study

Airplanes and trucks, neither of which existed when this story took place, have significantly changed the influence of rail freight. Research the different types of shipping used to move grain today, explaining what power each has.

Which states produce the most American wheat today? Which countries consume the most American wheat? Which countries produce the most wheat in the world?

California is not associated with wheat production today. Research the decline of the California wheat industry and report on how other concerns have taken its place.

Aid agencies to help people stranded without money are common in most big cities. Report on what a person like Mrs. Hooven, alone with her little girl and penniless in a city, could do today.

Magnus Derrick sees his plows on a railroad car at his local station, but he cannot have them until they travel all of the way to San Francisco and back. Report on modern-day examples of laws that require actions that contradict common sense.

Frank Norris chose to write a three-novel series about wheat because he saw it as one product that has an impact on every aspect of social life. Choose one product that you think is as universal today and write an outline for three books that are each independent, but tell the whole story.

Compare and Contrast

1901: The automobile has been invented, but few people can afford them. Under 20,000 motor cars are sold in the United States this year. Henry Ford, chief engineer for the bankrupt Detroit Automobile Company, starts his own company. He goes on to change the face of industry with his methods of mass production.

Today: Car ownership among Americans of all ages and social classes is common. Eight and a half million cars are sold in the United States each year.

1901: The president of the United States, William McKinley, is shot to death by a Polish-American anarchist.

Today: Because of the threat of assassination, the president is kept separated from the people and surrounded by security guards.

1901: Males born this year are expected to live 48.2 years. Females have a life expectancy of 51.1 years.

Today: Males born today have an average life expectancy averaging around 73 years; for females, the figure is around 79 years.

1901: 45.1 million Americans live in rural locations while only 30.2 million live in urban locations.

Today: 75 percent of America's population of 260 million people live in urban area. Of the 25 percent in rural areas, only 7 percent live on farms.

1901: Meats and vegetables have to be served near where they are grown. Refrigerated railcars are available for long-distance shipping, but most households can keep things fresh for just a few days, using boxes cooled by ice.

Today: Food chemists have developed methods of packaging perishable meals so that they can sit on shelves for months without refrigeration.

1901: A temperance crusade, led by Carry Nation, attempts to stop the sale and distribution of alcohol in the United States.

1920: Alcohol becomes illegal in the country with the passage of the eighteenth amendment, also known as the Volstead Act.

1933: The twenty-third amendment is passed to repeal the eighteenth amendment, making alcohol legal again.

Today: Alcohol is still legal, despite the fact that science has found many more adverse physical effects associated with it than were known in 1901.

What Do I Read Next?

Norris' novel *McTeague,* published in 1899, is considered by some to be his greatest work and one of the most influential pieces of American naturalism. It concerns a San Francisco dentist and his wife who slide into moral degradation when he loses his job and they both are forced to live on the streets.

The Pit: A Story of Chicago by Norris is the second part of a trilogy about wheat that started with *The Octopus.* It examines the financial exchanges in Chicago, where the decisions regarding the value of wheat are made. The third part of the trilogy was never finished before Norris died.

Upton Sinclair's classic 1904 novel *The Jungle* takes a cold, unflinching look at the brutal conditions in the Chicago beef processing plants. Like this novel, it examines the ways in which the social order corrupts and destroys ordinary, well-meaning people.

Norris is usually mentioned along with Hamlin Garland, another master of American realism. Hamlin Garland's short-story collection, *Main- Travelled Roads,* captures the same sense of rural America in the late 1800s and gives readers a basic, moving example of this literary genre.

One of Norris' most important influences was the French writer Émile Zola, whose novels movingly capture the dehumanizing effects of the industrial age. Of all of Zola's books, *Germinal* is most similar to *The Octopus:* it concerns the suppression of coal miners.

Many students know of Stephen Crane because of his book *The Red Badge of Courage,* which is one of the great war books of all time. He is also a prominent figure of American naturalism. Crane's novel *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets,* created a panic upon its first publication in 1893, due to its frank portrayal of sexuality.

John Dos Passos' novel *Manhattan Transfer* was written much after Norris's time, in 1925, but it shows the same naturalistic tendencies that Norris pioneered, telling a broad, panoramic story of city lives following nature's laws.

Further Study

Hochman, Barbara, *The Art of Frank Norris, Storyteller,* University of Missouri Press, 1988.

Hochman's area of expertise is the age of American Realism: here she drives home Norris' importance to the development of American literature.

Hussman, Lawrence E., *Harbringers of a Century: The Novels of Frank Norris,* Modern American Literature series, Vol. 21, Peter Lang Publishing Company, 1999.

This major new work examines Norris' philosophy, especially as it regards materialism, and puts his thoughts into the context of the facts of his life.

Orsi, Richard J., "*The Octopus* Reconsidered: The Southern Pacific and Agricultural Modernization in California, 1865-1915," in *California Historical Quarterly,* Vol. 54, No. 3, 1975.

Orsi uses the perspective of time to see how the events of the novel reflected the situation in California at the turn of the century.

West, Lon, *Deconstructing Frank Norris' Fiction: The Male-Female Dialectic,* Peter Lang Publishing Co., 1998.

West's book goes beyond the standard examinations of Norris as a Realist, to look at Jungian psychology behind the development of some of his characters. The book is based on West's Ph.D. dissertation at the University of Maryland.

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London, Jack, "On Norris' *The Octopus,*" in *American Literary Realism 1870-1910,* Vol. 6, No. 1, Winter 1973, pp. 66-69.

Review of *McTeague* in *Outlook,* March 18, 1899.

Review of *McTeague* in *Review of Reviews,* June 1899.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, NfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in NfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by NfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

NfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Novels for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Novels for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Novels for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from NfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from NfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Novels for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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