

The Octopus

by
Frank Norris

StoryLines California Discussion Guide No. 5

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Discussion questions

In the mystical visions of Vanamee there is the suggestion of eternal reconciliation, a final moral rectitude in the universe. Is this vision justifiable given the fact that evil so obviously triumphs over good throughout the novel?

Although the outline of this novel is drawn from real events, are the actions of the characters and the outcome of their individual transformations entirely believable?

Additional readings

Frank Norris. *McTeague: A Story of San Francisco*, 1899.

Frank Norris. *The Pit*, 1903.

Josiah Royce. *The Feud of Oakfield Creek: A Novel of California Life*, 1971.

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The Octopus by Frank Norris

Frank Norris's epic novel of California's wheat ranching era (1870-1900) is an examination of an important issue in American life: the rights and freedoms of the individual versus the collective strengths of the impersonal corporation. This issue was a prominent concern in other turn-of-the-century novels such as Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*, as America became industrialized and big business monopolized markets. Large trusts (or corporations, as we call them today) such as the Pacific and Southwestern Railroad in *The Octopus*, in some cases ruthlessly exploited the country's resources and people to amass huge profits and vast corporate holdings. The 1880s through the 1920s were years of escalating resentment toward unrestricted corporate growth and power, culminating in labor unions, antitrust laws and child labor laws.

Norris based the pivotal events of this novel on a real-life drama that had unfolded in California's San Joaquin Valley in 1880: a bloody shoot-out between ranchers and representatives of the railroad. As an incentive for the construction of transcontinental railways, the federal government had granted to the railroads ownership of large tracts of land adjacent to the path of the rails, thus creating a checkerboard of railroad lands in alternating sections along the tracks. Because of this policy, the Southern Pacific Railroad was in 1880 the greatest landholder in California. Most of the railroad's lands were relatively worthless parcels of sand until they were leased to rancher-tenants, who arduously dug irrigation ditches and made enough improvements to plant successful crops.

The rancher-tenants expected to eventually buy their leased lands for \$2.50 to \$5 an acre, the price originally quoted by the railroad. But after ten years of improvements, the railroad insisted on revised sale prices of \$14 to \$40 per acre, bankrupting many ranchers and forcing them off the land. Ranchers organized a "League" in opposition to the railroad and attempted to outmaneuver the Southern Pacific in the courts first.

Consistently the railroad prevailed, proving itself to be an adversary as powerful as the great steam locomotives pounding down the rails, which reached out like great tentacles across the entire state. When the railroad finally assigned ownership of disputed lands to hand-picked dummy purchasers, the

ranchers fought against eviction, standing in armed resistance. In May 1880, in a famous shoot-out between ranchers, U.S. Marshals, and railroad representatives for ownership of wheat lands in Tulare County, California, eight men died.

But Norris's examination of these events is not as simple as the classic "good-guy" ranchers versus the "bad-guy" corporate profiteers. In *The Octopus*, he attempts to convey a broader understanding of how conflicting values between individuals and the corporation reflected a turning point in the history of the American West and in the development of the country in general. Norris was a student at the University of California at Berkeley in 1893 when the prominent historian Frederick Jackson Turner announced that with no more free land available to the public, the American frontier had come to an end. Turner had earlier postulated that in settling the West, the American character had been reshaped by frontier values such as "rugged individualism." Turner described frontier values as:

... that coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness; that dominant individualism, working for good or evil; that practical, inventive turn of mind, . . . that restless, nervous energy; . . . and withal that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom.

The ranchers of the San Joaquin Valley in *The Octopus* embody frontier values, but with the frontier coming to an end, their values are in conflict with those of the railroad giants who have supplanted the frontiersmen in dominating the California countryside. Historian Kevin Starr has written that corporate values "wanted things consolidated, organized, predicated—and fixed. The trust wanted ownership, not freedom; conformity, not rugged individualism."

Though Norris would appear to be the most sympathetic to frontier individualism, his characters Presley, the poet, and Vanamee, the mystic, transcend the clash of individual and corporate values and symbolize a point of view beyond easy judgments of good or evil. Norris portrays the ranchers as flawed by "gold rush mentality," aggressively ripping up the earth with

huge plows and planting crops year after year without regard to the depletion of the soil. They feverishly chase profits and stoop to bribery and murder to maintain control of their lands, all the while viewing themselves as honest, self-reliant, and dedicated to fair play.

On the other hand, although railroad profiteers like S. Behrman are depicted as openly ruthless, the business they are engaged in is necessary for transporting California wheat. Thus they contribute to feeding hungry populations in places as distant as India. Ranchers and corporate men alike die in the struggle for the possession of land. Yet the wheat continues to grow, giving sustenance to new life elsewhere.

Presley, the poet, understands the drama played out in the San Joaquin Valley as beyond human control, ruled by unseen currents and tides, a force that "brought men into the world," and "crowded them out of it to make way for the succeeding generation." It is the same force that caused the wheat to grow and to be ripped from the earth to make way for new planting. The mystic, Vanamee, a wanderer in the desert, concludes:

Look at it all from the vast height of humanity—"greatest good for the greatest numbers." What remains? Men perish, men are corrupted, hearts are rent asunder, but what remains untouched, unassailable, undefiled? Try to find that, not only in this, but in every crisis of the world's life, and you will find, if your view be large enough, that it is not evil, but good, that in the end remains.

About the author

Frank Norris (1870-1902) lived most of his life in San Francisco. He studied in Berkeley and Paris and worked as a journalist in San Francisco, New York and South Africa. *The Octopus* was the first book in a planned trilogy of novels about California wheat—its growth, its distribution, and its consumption in countries around the world. The second volume in this trilogy, *The Pit*, was published posthumously. Norris died at the age of 32 before beginning the third volume.