

FRANK NORRIS'S TRILOGY

ON

AMERICAN LIFE

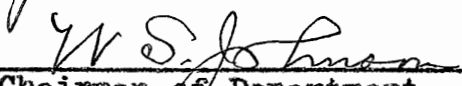
By

Ethiel Virginia Morris
A.B., Ottawa University, 1927

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Approved by:


Instructor in charge.


Chairman of Department.

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PREFACE

I chose Frank Norris's novels for a thesis subject for several reasons, chief of which is, perhaps, that, to *my* Frank Norris is outstandingly interesting as a writer. His high purpose in the choice of subjects, his sane interpretation and his great earnestness in what he writes make him a particularly excellent novelist; and as there has been so comparatively little written on him, I have attempted in this thesis to make an intensive study of his Trilogy of Wheat, hoping in this way to give a clearer, wider knowledge of the man.

I wish to express my deepest appreciation and sincerest thanks to Dr. Josephine Burnham and Dr. John Herbert Nelson who, by their excellent advice, untiring assistance, and understanding sympathy, have so greatly aided and encouraged me in the writing of this thesis.

Ethiel Virginia Morris.

CHAPTER I.

THE IDEA OF THE TRILOGY OF WHEAT.

One day, in the very first year of the twentieth century, a man hurried into his office in San Francisco. "I have got a big idea," he exclaimed excitedly. "The biggest I have ever had!" The man was Frank Norris; and his "big idea" was the trilogy of wheat.

It was a big idea, and it developed naturally from the belief which seemed to grow stronger daily within him, that there was a large place -- almost an actual need -- in literature for an American prose epic, a work depicting in Homeric scope the steady growth of this country, and its part in the advancement of a civilization which marched with unfaltering tread from sunrise to sunset and back again to the place of its nativity.

Frank Norris believed that in this westward movement, America held a most important position. In his essay, The Neglected Epic, he laments the fact that this part has not been celebrated in a national epic as have been the roles played by other countries in this great progress of civilization from east to west. He says, in this essay, that the Trojan War has given to literature the Iliad, the Odyssey, and the Aeneid; the campaign of the Greeks in Asia Minor is told in the Anabasis; the conquest of Europe after the fall of Rome has been celebrated in a number of famous works: the Song of

Roland, the Nibelungenlied, the Romance of the Rose, Beowulf, The Scotch Border Ballads, The Cid, The Heimskringla, Orlando Furioso, and Jerusalem Delivered. The more that Norris considers what excellent pieces of literature, such as these, have been produced to give the world for all time the story of the triumph of the civilizations of these peoples, the more indignant does he become at the apparent lack of effort and interest in the making of an American epic. He says:

The West -- our Far West -- was conquered in about forty years. In all the vast campaign from east to west, here is the most signal victory; the swiftest and completest, the most brilliant achievement -- the wilderness subdued at a single stroke. But when, at last, one comes to look for the literature that sprang from and has grown up around the last great epic event in the history of civilization, the event which, in spite of stupendous difficulties, was consummated more swiftly, more completely, more satisfactorily than any other like event since the westward migration began -- I mean the conquering of the West, the subduing of the wilderness beyond the Mississippi -- What has this produced in the way of literature? The dime novel! The dime novel and nothing else. The dime novel and nothing better.¹

This deep need which Norris seemed to feel for an American epic is due to an innate quality of his mind and soul which made them great enough in their powers of comprehension to grasp the possibilities of such a work, and to realize how important it is ~~to celebrate~~ ^{to celebrate} America's accomplishments. Because of this ability to appreciate vast ideas and themes it is only natural that he should desire to write on such a scale himself. For the one characteristic of Norris's on which all critics agree

1. Frank Norris, "The Neglected Epic," World's Work, V, 2904.

is the largeness of his conceptions. In the Athenaeum for February, 1914, is this statement:

He had a fine feeling for the bigness of things, the grandeur of nature, and the absorbing interest of life, bare life, with its millions of intersecting and conflicting currents.²

A commentator in World's Work even goes so far as to say that Frank Norris had a larger conception of American life than perhaps any other writer of fiction.³ The well known critic, Arthur Goodrich, says:

His earlier work had an elemental force that cannot be escaped, a brood sympathy for men and women which was universal in its tenderness, a sweep and vigor that was epic, a creative and constructive faculty that was masterly.⁴

Several phrases from various critical articles by F. T. Cooper on Norris's powers show this critic's idea of this inherent urge which Norris felt toward the choice of colossal themes: "He was first and last an artist who depended on bold lines and sweeping brush strokes."⁵ "Big words, big phrases, big ideas, an untrammled freedom of self-expression."⁶ "A characteristic of Norris was his love of big ideas and his insistence upon some great, central symbol."⁷

In The Octopus, one of the most important characters is Presley, a poet, who has a deep desire to write a Song of the West. It is probable that the description of Presley's struggle to find an emblem, and his emotional experiences when at last

2. Review of The Pit, Athenaeum, I (1903): 205.
3. "The Death of Mr. Frank Norris", World's Work, V (1902), 2830.
4. Arthur Goodrich, "Frank Norris", Current Literature, XXXIII (1902), 764.
5. F. T. Cooper, "Deal in Wheat", Bookman, XVIII (1903) 312.
6. "Persisting Influence of Frank Norris", Current Literature, LII (1912), 228.
7. F. T. Cooper, "Frank Norris", Bookman, XVI (1902), 335.

he grasps the idea for which he has been seeking -- it is very probable that these passages describe truly the sensations of Frank Norris in his search for and discovery of his vast, basic theme, the Trilogy of Wheat.

In the character of Presley, Norris suggests the strength of his own desire for Homeric symbols:

He [Presley] strove for the diapason, the great song that should embrace in itself a whole epic, a complete era, the voice of an entire people wherein all people should be included. That was what he dreamed, while things without names -- thoughts for which no man had yet invented words, terrible, formless shapes, vague figures, colossal, monstrous, distorted -- whirled at a gallop through his imagination.⁸

The character, Presley, voices the persisting, insisting, compelling demand of Norris's own soul for expression, for the putting into form the thoughts that come from the fascination and inspiration and sense of meaningfulness which the West gives:

"I must find expression. I could not lose myself like that in your desert. When its vastness overwhelmed me, or its beauty dazzled me, or its loneliness weighed down upon me, I should have to record my impression. Otherwise I should suffocate."⁹

Through this poet, Norris expresses the mind's travail at the first stir of his idea -- an idea as yet unformed, but nevertheless alive, and quivering with immense possibilities. The reader needs only to put Frank Norris into Presley's place, and substitute the Trilogy of Wheat for the Song of the West, to have a vivid, pulsating record of the agony of the author's

8. The Octopus, pp. 9-10.

9. Ibid., pp. 41-2.

mind before the great plan of the Trilogy became clearly defined.

"The great poem of the West. It's that which I want to write. Oh, to put it all into hexameters; strike the great iron note; sing the vast, terrible song, the song of the People; the forerunners of the Empire! . . . Epic, yes, that's it. It is the epic I'm searching for. And how I search for it. You don't know. It is sometimes almost an agony. Often and often I can feel it right there, there at my fingertips, but I never quite catch it. It always eludes me. I was born too late. Oh to get back to that first clear-eyed view of things; to see as Homer saw. . . . Life is here the same as then; the Poem is here; my West is here; the primeval epic life is here, here under our hands in the desert, in the mountains, on the ranch, all over here from Winnipeg to Guadalupe."¹⁰

But the mind and soul of the writer grow in comprehension and wisdom, and through his character, Presley, Norris voices the glorious emotions at the sight of the first bright rays of the light of realization and power:

Ha! there it was, his epic, his inspiration, his West, his thundering progression of hexameters. A sudden uplift, a sense of exhilaration, of physical exaltation appeared abruptly to sweep Presley from his feet. As from a point high above the world, he seemed to dominate a universe, a whole order of things. He was dazzled, stunned, stupefied, his morbid, supersensitive mind reeling, drunk with intoxication of mere immensity. Stupendous ideas for which there were no names drove headlong through his brain. Terrible, formless shapes, vague figures, gigantic, monstrous, distorted, whirled at a gallop through his imagination.¹¹

Then came the rishing, blending force of power perfected in the full, dazzling light of complete understanding.

He went up to his little room and paced the floor with clenched fists and burning face till at last the repression of his contending thoughts all but suffocated him, and he flung himself before his table and began to write. For a time, his pen seemed to travel of itself; words came to him without searching, shaping themselves into phrases -- the phrases

10. Ibid., pp. 40-1.

11. Ibid., p. 47.

building themselves up to great forcible sentences, full of eloquence, of fire, of passion Presley laid down his pen and leaned back in his chair with the certainty that for one moment he had touched untrod heights. His hands were cold, his head on fire, his heart leaping tumultous in his breast. Now, at last, he had achieved. . . Now . . he had been stirred to his lowest depths. His earnestness was almost a frenzy. He believed, as so to him all things were possible at once.¹²

This then must have been Frank Norris's experiences during the conception, birth, and realization of the idea which he said was the biggest idea he had ever had -- the Trilogy of Wheat.

This choice of subject was a wise and brave one. It has that epic quality which was so necessary in a theme that would satisfy Norris. He wanted a symbol large enough to represent the whole of America. In McTague, a novel of California, he represents that state with the emblem of gold -- a gold dentist's tooth sign, golden sunshine, a service of gold plate, a gold hoard. But later he was not content to write of just a state. He wishes to find a greater subject, a more colossal emblem as the vehicle of expression, for he could see only with a large vision, feel only the deepest emotions and think only great thoughts. He had to have a theme which would represent America, and, in fact, the whole world. And as this theme he chose wheat. The Trilogy was to represent life in western and eastern America and in Europe; and the wheat, the staff of life, the chief and ultimate source of America's wealth and growth -- wheat, unchanging, indomitable, rising, spreading, gathering force, rolling in a golden wave across the country

12. Ibid., pp. 371-2.

and the world, was to represent the progressive and all-powerful spirit of the agricultural, industrial and financial America.

In order for the Trilogy to be truly representative of the common people and the everyday life, Norris has the action of the novels take place far down at the very roots of organized society. The books deal with the most primitive, humble and universal needs -- the production, distribution and consumption of daily bread. He relates how the grain is planted in hope, harvested in fear, only to be exploited far away at commercial centers, by spectators who supply it or deny it, for their own selfish gain, to the multitudes who toil at the base of the social pyramids.¹³

According to an article in The Outlook, the very choice of the subject suggests that Norris was something of a genius.

Norris was artist enough to seize the dramatic aspects of the raising of wheat, its transportation and its final distribution. It was an immense theme, demanding the energy of a Zola and the genius of a Tolstoi . . . He had the genius to recognize the epical quality (of life) on the wheat fields in the Far West, and in the exchange in Chicago.¹⁴

A few quotations from Norris himself in the books of the Trilogy will show his own opinion of the power and significance of the central symbol -- wheat.

There, before him, mile after mile, illimitable, covering the earth from horizon to horizon lay the wheat -- a vast, silent ocean, shimmering a pallid green, under the moon and under the stars; a mighty

13. H. W. Preston, "Novels of Frank Norris", Atlantic Monthly, Vol. 91, p. 691.

14. "A Significant Novel", Outlook, Vol. 13, p. 153 (1903).

force, the strength of nations, the life of the world . . . Oh yes, the Wheat -- it was over that the Railroad, the ranchers, the traëtor false to his trust, all the members of an obscure conspiracy were wrangling. As if human agency could affect this colossal power! What were these heated, tiny squabbles, this feverish, small bustle of mankind, this minute swarming of the human insect, to the great majestic, silent ocean of Wheat itself! Indifferent, gigantic, resistless, it moved in its grooves. Men, Liliputians, gnats in the sunshine, buzzed impudently in their tiny battles, were born, lived through their little day, died, and were forgotten; while the Wheat, wrapped in Nirvanic calm, grew steadily under the night, alone with the stars and with God.¹⁵

The vision of the greatness and strength of Wheat comes to the spectator in The Pit, on the day of his financial ruin:

Why, the Wheat had grown itself; demand and supply, these were the two great laws the Wheat obeyed. Almost blasphemous in his effrontery, he had tampered with these laws, and had roused a Titan. He had laid his puny, human grasp upon Creation, and the very earth herself, the great mother, feeling the touch of the cobweb that the human insect had spun, had stirred at last in her sleep, and sent her omnipotence moving through the grooves of the world, to find and crush the disturbers of her appointed course.¹⁶

Some of the phrases which Norris used to describe the wheat emphasize the importance which he attached to this central theme of his Trilogy: "Nourisher of Nations",¹⁷ "Almighty blood-brother to the earthquake, coeval with the volcano . . . the whirlwind, that gigantic world force, that colossal bellow."¹⁸

It is because of this vast meaning which his basic idea held for Norris that he called it the "Trilogy of the Epic of Wheat." An epic is the story of some great, widely-important

15. The Octopus, p. 448.

16. The Pit, p. 374.

17. Ibid., p. 420.

18. Ibid., p. 373.

event, told in a lofty, grand style. This Trilogy may be appropriately termed an epic, as far as the subject matter is concerned, if we accept Norris's interpretation of the significance of wheat, and its importance to all people in all countries, and its immensity as he has given it in these quotations and phrases. Whether or not he has reached the epic heights in his style is a matter for further study in this thesis.

Equally important with the comprehension of the scope and magnitude of this underlying theme, in a study of the Trilogy, is a knowledge of this theme. An extract from the preface of The Pit explains very definitely and concisely his scheme:

The Trilogy of the Epic of Wheat includes the following novels:

The Octopus - a story of California.

The Pit - a story of Chicago.

The Wolf - a story of Europe.

These novels, while forming a series, will be in no way connected with each other, save only in their relation to (1) the production, (2) the distribution, (3) the consumption of American Wheat. When complete, they will form the story of a crop of wheat, from the time of its sowing as seed in California, to the time of its consumption as bread in a village in Western Europe.

The first novel, The Octopus, deals with the war between the wheat growers and the Railroad Trust; the second, The Pit, is a fictitious narrative of a "deal" in the Chicago wheat pit; while the third, The Wolf, will probably have as its pivotal episode, the relieving of a famine in an Old World Community.¹⁹

W. D. Howells said when writing of Frank Norris and his Trilogy, in the North American Review:

Norris believed himself peculiarly qualified for the work by the accidents of his life; for he was born in Chicago, and had lived there until he

19. Ibid., preface.

was fifteen years old; then he had gone to California. He had grown up into the knowledge of the scene and action which he has portrayed so powerfully; later he had acquainted himself with Europe by a long sojourn; and so he argued, with an enthusiasm tempered by a fine sense of his moral and artistic responsibilities, that he had within himself the means of realizing the whole fact to the reader's imagination. . . . He expected to dedicate the best part of his strong young life to the work.²⁰

Although Norris was evidently qualified to undertake such a work, yet when he first realized the greatness of his theme, the immensity of the plan which he had chosen, he hesitated before beginning. In that time of hesitation, he wrote several short stories, one of which was distinctly a test story for the great work which he was planning, a preliminary trial of his powers. F. T. Cooper says of these short stories: "To call them short stories is to misname them. They impress one as fragments, rather splendid fragments, too, of the author's strength before he launched forth upon a really serious work."²¹

In A Deal in Wheat, which is evidently a trial story for the Trilogy, the first division, forecasting The Octopus, tells of the troubles of the wheat grower, Sam Lewiston, who was forced to give up his ranch and go into bankruptcy because he was unable to get a price for his crop above the cost of production. The cause of this low price was a battle between speculators. This battle is given in the second, third and fourth sections, which forecast The Pit. The last division, forecasting The Wolf, tells of the result of this speculation

20. Wm. D. Howells, "Frank Norris", North American Review, Vol. 175, p. 769.

21. F. T. Cooper, "Deal in Wheat", Bookman, Vol. 13 (1903), p. 315.

on the consumer. The price of wheat was forced so high by the battle in the pit that the bread line was refused the customary loaf which was distributed every night in the Chicago slums, and which meant that starvation for many of those in the line was postponed for another day.

Such, then, is the plan of the Trilogy of Wheat as foretold in A Deal in Wheat, and as explained in the preface of The Pit, a plan giving in narrative form the complicated story of the production, distribution and consumption of a world commodity. Whether or not he succeeded in carrying out this plan, in rising to the epic height in style required in the treatment of such a symbol, will be discussed in the following pages.

CHAPTER II.

THE OCTOPUS.

I.

The Octopus, the first book of the Trilogy, has Wheat, as does the other completed book of the group, as the underlying symbol; but of equal importance as a theme is the means of transportation of the wheat, the railroad, which Frank Norris keeps constantly before his readers, now as a dim shadow and now as a great, domineering, menacing force. Perhaps the best means of studying Morris's treatment of these two themes would be a synopsis of the book, dealing with those parts in which the action on the characters are influenced by the railroad, or the wheat. First, then, will be a summary of those sections concerned with the influence of the railroad.

The first mention of the railroad is in the scene in which the poet Presley, on a pleasure bicycle ride, read this sign on a county watering tank: "S.Behrman, Real Estate, Mortgages, Main Street, Bonneville, opposite the Postoffice", and then: "S. Behrman has something to say to you." S. Behrman was the railroad to the people of that district. He acted as mediator, political worker, representative in law suits and real estate deals, for the P. and S. W. Whatever business was transacted by the railroad in that section, S. Behrman did it. "He was a large, fat man with a great stomach; his cheek and the upper part of his thick neck ran together to form a great tremulous

jowl, shaven and blue-grey in color; a roll of fat, sprinkled with sparse hair, moist with perspiration, protruded over the back of his collar."¹ His very corpulence was indicative of the wealth and power of the railroad which he represented. He seldom became angry, for he was sure of his influence and strength, sure of the greatness and the potency of the force that was backing him.

The next glimpse which Norris gives of the railroad is when Harrin Derrick received a letter from his father Magnus or "Governor" Derrick, stating that they had lost their law suit that day against the P. and S. W. Some time before, the Railroad Commission had made drastic cuts in the freight rates, and the railroad issued an injunction preventing the rates from taking effect. The affair had gone to court, and the judge decided that such low rates as the Commission had required did not allow the road a legitimate profit on its operations. He added that, since he had no right to fix the rates, he could only put them back at what they originally were before the Commission had made the cut. At this news, Harran's indignation flamed high against such injustice:

*Legitimate profit, legitimate profit. Can we raise wheat at a legitimate profit with a tariff of four dollars a ton for moving at two hundred miles to tide water, with wheat at eighty-seven cents? Why not hold us up with a gun in our faces and say, 'hands up', and be done with it?"²

The justice of Harran's anger was evident to Presley,

1. The Octopus, p. 66.
2. Ibid., p. 11.

who was a guest at the Derrick wheat ranch in lower California; and yet all these bickerings between the wheat grower and the railroad seemed so petty. Presley had come west when he was threatened with consumption, hoping to find material for a Song of the West. But since his arrival, all he had heard was the continual complaint of the farmers that the railroad daily threatened, by exorbitant rates, to bankrupt them. It was always the railroad, everywhere Presley turned, the great, heartless monster of iron which seemed to stretch out its tentacles to reach and crush all who dared oppose it, or own the land which it desired, or even dream~~d~~ of making a profit from the raising of grain. For Presley, this horrible monster had spoiled the beauty of the West, and all but killed his inspiration:

He had set himself the task of giving true -- absolutely true -- poetical expression to the life of the ranch, and yet, again and again, he brought up against the railroad, that stubborn, iron barrier against which his romance shattered itself to froth and disintegrated, flying spume. . . . He searched for True Romance, and found in the end, grain rates and unjust freight tariffs.³

The same day of the arrival of the letter, Presley found another example of the injustice of the railroad. He was crossing the tracks in Bonneville when Dyke, an engineer, called to him. Presley climbed into the cab of the engine to have a chat with his friend. Dyke told him that he was on his last run, that he had been discharged by the P. and S. W. for refusing to take a cut in wages along with those blacklisted

3. Ibid., pp. 12-13.

during the strike. Now he was planning to raise hops, and was putting all his savings of the past ten years into the enterprise, hoping to make enough by fall to send his little motherless daughter, Sydney, whom he fairly worshiped, to a seminary in San Francisco.

Later in the evening, Presley returned to ~~Los~~ Muertos, the Derrick Ranch. Thrilled by the beauty of the night, and the country, he seemed to feel the call of his Song of the West more clearly than ever. Here Norris gives a splendid description of the poet's mood, and tells of a significant interruption of his exaltation by a train.

Everything was still. The stars were all out. There was not a sound other than the *de Profundis* still sounding very far away. At long intervals, the great earth sighed dreamily in its sleep. All about, the feeling of absolute peace and quiet and security and untroubled happiness and content seemed descending from the stars like a benediction. The beauty of his poem, its idyl, came to him like a caress; that alone had been lacking

But suddenly, there was an interruption He had only time to jump back upon the embankment, when, with a quivering of all the earth, a locomotive, single, unattached, shot by him with a roar, filling the air with the reek of hot oil, vomiting smoke and sparks; its enormous eye, cyclopean, red, throwing a glare far in advance, shooting by in a sudden crash of confused thunder; filling the night with the terrific clamour of its iron hoofs.⁴

The next day Harran went to Bonneville to meet his father, who had been in San Francisco during the trial dealing with the injunction of the railroad against the grain rates. At the P. and S. W. station, they noticed two flat cars loaded with bright-painted machinery which was addressed to Magnus

4. Ibid., pp. 48-9

Derrick. These were the ploughs which had been ordered for so long. And now they had arrived just~~at~~ the right time, for the first rain of the season was in the air, and they would be needed within a day or two. Just then, however, S. Behrman appeared. He pleasantly assured Magnus that he would hurry the machinery through as soon as possible. Magnus failed to understand what he meant, and S. Behrman explained one of the unfair rules of the P. and S. W., which was that when freight was shipped into a state, it must first go to a central shipping point (San Francisco in this case), and from there to its destination. Realizing what the rule would mean to them, Harran became indignant:

"What next? . . . Why don't you break into our houses at night? Why don't you steal the watch out of my pocket, steal the horses out of the harness, hold us up with a shotgun; yes, 'stand and deliver; your money or your life'. . . . Think of it! Here's a load of stuff for Bonneville that can't stop at Bonneville where it is consigned, but has got to go up to San Francisco first, by way of Bonneville, at forty cents per ton, and then be reshipped from San Francisco back to Bonneville again at fifty-one cents per ton, the short haul rate. And we have to pay it all or go without. Here are the plows right here in sight of the land they have got to be used on, the season just ready for them, and we can't touch them.*5

That evening, at Los Muertos, Broderson, ~~Ann~~exter and Osterman, prominent ranchers of Tulare County, were dinner guests. Like Magnus, they did not actually own all the land which they worked. The greatest part of the wheat lands of the San Joaquin Valley belonged to the P. and S. W. which had received them from the government as a bonus for railroad con-

5. Ibid., p. 71

struction in the early days of its history. This land had been thrown open by the P. and S. W. for settlement, whereupon these four men had secured the choicest sections in the county. Once the settlement was assured, however, the railroad seemed in no hurry to fix the value of the tracts and offer them for sale, first to the men who had staked their claims and were working them, and then to the public, in accordance with the plan announced when the lands were thrown open.

This evening the four men discussed a rumor that the railroad was intending to make a settlement presently. The ranchers believed that the price should be from two-fifty to five dollars an acre, for this was the price promised by the railroad in the circulars earlier sent out. Of course they had greatly advanced in value; but it was the ranchers who had made the improvements which had increased the value, not the railroad, so that the P. and S. W. should not expect to profit by the greater worth of the tracts. The gentlemen also discussed the law suit which Magnus had lost the day before. In realization of the pressing necessity for self-protection, the ranchers, that very evening, organized themselves into a committee to pool funds and through bribery, which was the railroad method, to buy the new Railroad Commission, and so secure lower grain rates. Magnus Derrick refused to join them, denouncing their scheme as corrupt. The next day, Harran came into the committee, Magnus having said that he could do as he thought best.

A few days later, Presley, accompanied by Vanamee, an old friend, went to visit Dyke. The former engineer's homestead was in a flourishing condition, with its heavy crop of hops, and prospects were bright for the man who believed the harvest would be so great that he could easily pay off the mortgage on his homestead to S. Behrman, and have more than enough to send Sydney to the seminary. It is here that Norris gives an example of the great hatred of the people for the P. and S. W. In talking of Sydney, Mrs. Dyke, the engineer's mother, said:

"She says the other little girls at school, and the boys, too, are all the same way (in hating the railroad). . . . And to think of all the grown up people who hate the road, women and men, the whole county, the whole state, thousands and thousands of people. Don't the managers and directors of the road ever think of that? Don't they ever think of all the hate that surrounds them, everywhere, everywhere, and the good people that just grit their teeth when the name of the road is mentioned? "No", she murmured, the tears starting to her eyes, "No, I tell you, Mr. Presley, the men who own the railroad are wicked, bad-hearted men who don't care how much the poor people suffer, so long as the road makes its eighteen million a year. They don't care whether people hate them or love them, just so long as they are afraid of them. It's not right, and God will punish them sooner or later."⁶

That evening the whole countryside gathered at Quien Sabe, Annexler's ranch, for a great barn dance to celebrate the completion of that immense structure. In the midst of the gaiety, letters came from S. Behrman to the ranch owners of the valley, saying that the P. and S. W. was putting their lands on the market the next day at from twenty-seven to thirty dollars an acre, and that the present holders had an option on their sections. Too stunned, at first, to grasp the full significance

6. Ibid., p. 221.

of this move on the part of the railroad, the ranchers sat silent. Then with the realization that this meant ruin, that they were all land-poor, too poor to pay the price named by the railroad, that it was their own improvements that had increased the value of the lands to this amount, and that their very homes were going to be sold to strangers -- with this realization came the need for action, and the League was organized as a protection. Under stress of the excitement and indignation, and unable to withstand this opportunity to be an important leader, Magnus Derrick joined, thus consenting to the bribery which the executive committee would have to use in order to gain control of the next Railroad Commission, and so be able to compete with the P. and S. W. in their own game. This is the way Norris describes the indignation of the ranchers that evening, and the power of their demand that Magnus Derrick join them, become their president, and lead them to battle against the railroad.

It was the uprising of The People; the thunder of the outbreak of revolt; the mob demanding to be lead, aroused at last, imperious, resistless, overwhelming. It was the blind fury of the brute, many tongued, red-eyed, bellowing for guidance, baring its teeth, unsheathing its claws, imposing its will with the abrupt, resistless pressure of the relaxed piston, inexorable, knowing no pity.⁷

A few days later, the State Supreme Court in San Francisco decided that the P. and S. W. had full title to the ranch lands, and that they were acting within their rights in the matter of price-fixing. So the railroad corrupted not only

7. Ibid., p. 279.

individuals but the courts.

Then comes one of the tragedies of The Octopus. Dyke, before starting to raise hops, had inquired at the freight office about the rate on hops. The clerk had told him that it was two cents a pound. This was low enough to allow a good profit on the crop. So, mortgaging his home and lands and putting all his savings into the enterprise, he had planted hops. Now they were ready to be harvested, and he went to the freight office to engage several box cars to carry the crop to San Francisco, where he had already agreed to deliver it for six cents a pound. This time, however, the clerk told him that the rate on hops had been raised to five cents a pound. Enraged at being thus so utterly ruined, he demanded of S. Behrman the basis for the fixing of rates. Tapping with his fingers on the desk, to emphasize the words, S. Behrman told him the rule of the railroad for fixing freight rates: "All-that-the-traffic-will-bear."⁸ To Presley the awfulness and the pity of the ruin caused by the slowly strangling hold of the tentacles of the iron monster, was forcefully exemplified by this incident:

The whole drama of the doubled freight rate leaped salient and distinct in the eye of his (Presley's) mind. And this was but one instance, an isolated case. Because he was near at hand he happened to see it. How many others were there, the length and breadth of the State? Constantly this sort of thing must occur -- little industries choked out in their very beginnings, the air full of the death rattle of little enterprises, expiring unobserved in far-off counties, up in Canons, and arroyos of the foothills, forgotten by everyone but the monster who was daunted by the magnitude of no business, however great; who overlooked no opportunity of plunder, however, petty.

8. Ibid., p. 350.

who with one great tentacle grabbed a hundred thousand acres of wheat and with another pilfered a pocketful of growing hops.⁹

Annexter, a gruff quarrelsome man, had been entirely changed and softened by his great love for Hilma Tree, a fine, lovely girl. Their romance, before and after their marriage, is one of the most beautiful parts of The Octopus. It was on their trip home after their honeymoon that they were present at the acting of the second chapter of the tragedy of Dyke's struggle with the railroad. About midnight, the train stopped suddenly, with loud screechings of the emergency brakes. After an hour of waiting, they learned that Dyke had forced the engineer, at the point of a gun, to stop the train. Then, uncoupling the express car from the rest of the coaches, Dyke had run the engine and express car about a mile down the track where he had blown open the Wells-Fargo box and taken five thousand dollars of railroad money. He had killed the conductor, who attempted to interfere. When the train finally arrived at Bonnevile, Genslinger, editor of the local Mercury, and in the pay of the railroad, according to the ranchers, hurried to Annexter and asked for his version of the hold-up.

Annexter turned on him abruptly.

"Yes," he exclaimed fiercely, "You and your gang drove Dyke from his job because he wouldn't work for starvation wages. Then you raised freight rates on him and robbed him of all he had. You ruined him, and drove him to fill himself up with Caraher's whiskey. He's only taken back what you plundered him of, and now you're going to hound him over the State, hunt him down like a wild animal, and bring him to the gallows at San Quentin. That's my version of the affair, Mister Geslinger, but it's

9. Ibid., p. 358.

worth your subsidy from the P. and S. W. to print it."¹⁰

Annexter and Hilma drove to Dyke's ranch a few days after the robbery. The change in the little homestead was shocking. In the fields, the hops were in unkept, tangled masses. The house was littered with papers and telegrams telling of the hold-up and of the search for Dyke which the posses were making. Mrs. Dyke seemed only semi-conscious and could talk of nothing else but her son. Annexter and Hilma persuaded her and Sydney to come with them, and to stay at Quien Sabe until Dyke should be found.

That evening, the ranchers met at Los Muertos to learn of the action of the new commission regarding grain rates. Lyman Derrick, Magnus's oldest son, came from San Francisco to bring them the schedule, and, as he said, explain it. Lyman's election to the Commission had been secured by the Leaguers, who believed that he would use his influence on behalf of the ranchers, since his father was one of the most prominent. When Lyman gave them the rate list that evening, he warned them that they could not expect the commission to do all they desired in the matter of cutting rates, in so short a time; "but," he assured them, "an average ten per cent. cut has been made all over the state." The Railroad Commission, elected by the ranchers, had pledged the people a ten per cent. cut in grain rates. When the ranchers examined the schedule, they found that an average ten per cent cut had been made, but only between those points where little or no grain was shipped. The rates between the San

10. Ibid., p. 423.

Joaquin Valley and tide water had not been lowered. Then the ranchers realized that Lyman had been bought by the P. and S. W. -- that they -- the ranchers -- had been duped, tricked. Heartbroken, Magnus disowned Lyman, when he realized his corruptness and disloyalty.

When the members of the League refused to purchase the lands on which they lived, at such an exorbitant price, the P. and S. W. sold these ranches to dummy buyers who purchased them for the railroad. Recent rumors had been that the road planned to put these representative buyers into possession of the ranches immediately. The holdings of Magnus Derrick, Osterman, Annexter, and Broderson had been the first to be sold. Other lands were to be put on the market later. In order to protect their homes against this invasion of the railroad, the ranchers purchased firearms, and began military drill.

A few days after the discovery of Lyman's treachery, Genslinger, the editor of The Mercury, came to see Magnus. He told Mr. Derrick that Lyman had been pledged to the P. and S. W. for two years in return for the road's promised support in his campaign for the governorship of the State. Genslinger threatened to print the story of the bribery of the chairmen of delegates at the election of the State Commissioners, unless Magnus paid him ten thousand dollars. In order to maintain his personal integrity, and the respect of the Leaguers who did not know that dishonest means had been used in the election, Magnus paid the amount demanded by the editor. A little later in the

day, Mr. Derrick received a letter from an influential ranch owner saying that there had been some unpleasant intimation concerning the election of commissioners, and suggesting that Magnus write him an explanation which he would use to quiet these rumors. Mr. Derrick was forced to realize, now, that he was losing the power he once had to command respect and obedience. He had stooped to dishonesty and in doing so had lost the self-assurance that came of a clear conscience and the control which had once held multitudes because of their belief in his personal integrity. Magnus takes his place with Dyke and Lyman as an example of the cruelty of the railroad, which, not content with ruining men financially, robbed them of self-respect, and drove them to damn their own souls.

That day, after being hounded for two weeks by posses, Dyke was captured.

Then came the day of the great tragedy -- a tragedy based on an actual incident, the Mussel Stough Affair.¹¹ During a jolly rabbit hunt at Osterman's, word came that the railroad was putting the dummy buyers into possession of the ranches which they had purchased. When a call to arms was made, only nine of the six hundred Leaguers responded. These hid in a big, uncompleted irrigation ditch on Derrick's ranch, and waited the arrival of the P. and S. W. men, who, they learned, numbered about a dozen. When they appeared, Magnus called to them to halt. Then, climbing out of the ditch, he and two other ranchers went to talk with the railroad men, for the Leaguers

11. See B. O. Flower, Arena, Vol. 27, p. 549.

had agreed to prevent bloodshed, if possible. However, to those waiting in the ditch, the talk seemed to develop into a wrangle, and the three representatives of the ranchers seemed surrounded and so unable to return to their comrades. One of the men who accompanied Magnus was accidentally knocked down by the horse of one of the P. and S.W. men, and Hooven, of the ranchers' party, an excitable German, misinterpreted this, and with a shout fired into the group of arguing men. Instantly rifles and revolvers seemed to go off of themselves. When the smoke had cleared away, the men of both parties were lying about, some wounded, some dead.

This, then, was the fight between the ranchers and the railroad; this was the battle in which men lost their lives in striving to protect their homes; this was the result of the insatiable greed of the railroad. Horrified at the tragedy, Presley wrote of it:

" They have done it, S. Behrman and the owners of the railroad have done it while all the world looked on, while the people of these United states looked on. Oh, come now and try your theories on us, us of the ranches, us, who have suffered, who know. Oh, talk to us, now, of the 'rights of Capital', talk to us of the Trust, talk to us of the 'equilibrium between the classes.' I cannot tell you whether or not your theories are excellent. . . . I do not know if the Railroad has a right to our lands, but I do know that Harran is dead, that Annexer is dead, that Broderson is dead, that Hooven is dead, that Osterman is dying, and that S. Behrman is alive, successful, triumphant; that he has ridden into possession of principalities over the dead bodies of five men shot down by his hired associates.

"I see the outcome. The Railroad will prevail. The Trust will overpower us. Here in this corner of a great nation the great iron hand crushes life from us, crushes liberty and the pursuit of happi-

ness from us, and our little struggles, our moment's convulsion of death agony causes not one jar in the vast clashing machinery of the nation's life; a fleck of grit in the wheels, perhaps, a grain of sand in the cogs -- the momentary creak of the axle is the mother's wail of bereavement, the wife's cry of anguish -- and the great wheel turns, spinning smooth again, ever again, and the tiny impediment of a second, scarce noticed, is forgotten. . . . Is not our death struggle typical? Is it not one of many, is it not symbolical of the great and terrible conflict that is going on everywhere in these United States? Oh you people, blind, bound, tricked, betrayed, can you not see it? Can you not see how the monsters have plundered your treasures, and holding them in the grip of their iron claws, dole them out to you only at the price of your blood, at the price of the lives of your wives and little children? You give your babies to Molock for the loaf of bread you have kneaded yourselves. You offer your starved wives to Juggernaut for the iron nail you have yourselves compounded.*¹²

The next day, at the indignation meeting in the Civic Opera House in Bonneville came the final denunciation of the railroad, of the trusts, by Presley. It is Frank Norris speaking through his poet character:

"They own us, these task masters of ours; they own our legislature. We cannot escape from them. There is no redress. We are told we can defeat them by the ballot-box. They own the ballot-box. We are told that we must look to the courts for redress; they own the courts. We know them for what they are, -- ruffians in politics, ruffians in finance, ruffians in law, ruffians in trade, bribers, swindlers, and tricksters. No outrage too great to daunt them; no petty larceny too small to shame them; despoiling a government treasury of a million dollars, yet picking the pockets of a farm hand of the price of a loaf of bread.

"They swindle a nation of a hundred million and call it Financeering; they levy a blackmail and call it commerce; they corrupt a legislature and call it Politics; they bribe a judge and call it Law; they hire blacklegs to carry out their plans and call it Organization; they prostitute the honor of a State and call it Competition.*¹³

12. Ibid., pp. 538-40.
13. Ibid., p. 551.

After the first excitement of the meeting had subsided, the people called for Magnus to come before them and explain the charges of bribery made against him. Magnus hesitated. He would not lie; he could not explain. Yet he went to the platform and began to speak. As though this were a signal, men, hired by the P. and S. W., threw into the crowd thousands of pamphlets printed by Genslinger and containing the details of the bribery. The editor had betrayed Mr. Derrick after receiving the blackmail money. When the members of the League realized the truth concerning the dishonest election, they left the meeting. One by one those who had so firmly stood by Magnus slipped away, until he was left alone, dishonored, disgraced, utterly ruined. The railroad had robbed him of everything. It had corrupted his older son; it had shot down his younger son. It had stolen his integrity; it had ruined his manhood. It had alienated his friends, and appropriated his home.

But the effects of the ranchers' struggle against the railroad reached even farther. After Hooven was killed by the railroad men, in the fight at the irrigation ditch, his wife, and Hilma, his little daughter, and Mina, the older daughter, went to San Francisco. Here Mina became separated from her mother and sister. She wandered about, asking for employment, but always without success. She spent the little money she had for food, and when that was gone, she was forced to go without. Entirely ignorant of the city, she became lost and went through terrifying experiences in China Town, into which she

had unknowingly gone. A week later, when Presley, who had gone to San Francisco to see if she needed any assistance, found her, she was a professional woman of the streets. It was either that or starve, she said. She had never found her mother and little sister. Presley made every effort to locate them, but without success. They, too, had wandered about, having no money, and knowing nothing of the city. They slept on the benches in the park at night, and during the day Mrs. Hooven begged from the passers-by. The little money which she obtained in this way she spent on milk and fruit for Hilma; she herself ate nothing. So that one evening, as Presley dined at the home of one of the officials of the P. and S. W., Mrs. Hooven died of starvation, under a bush on one of the spacious lawns of a rich resident of San Francisco. The woman who found her, with Hilma crying beside her, took the little girl home with her.

At the dinner, Presley noticed the beautiful appointments, and the expensive food, almost with horror:

It was wealth, in all its outward and visible forms, the sign of an opulence so great that it need never be husbanded. It was the home of a railway "magnate", a Railroad King. For this, then, the farmers paid. It was for this that S. Behrman turned the screw, tightened the vice. It was for this that Dyke had been driven to outlawry and a jail. It was for this that Lyman Derrick had been bought, the Governor (Magnus) ruined and broken, Annexer shot down, Hooven killed!¹⁴ . . .

The fancy grew big in his mind, distorted, caricatured, terrible. Because the farmers had been killed at the irrigation ditch, these others, Gerard and his family, fed full. They fattened on the blood of the People, on the blood of the men who had been killed at the ditch¹⁵

14. Ibid., p. 604.

15. Ibid., p. 608.

At the end of The Octopus, Norris gives a summary of the power and the results of the acts of the railroad:

Yes, the Railroad had prevailed. The ranches had been seized in the tentacles of the Octopus; the iniquitous burden of extortionate freight rates had been imposed like a yoke of iron. The monster had killed Harran, had killed Osterman, had killed Broderson, had killed Hooven. It had beggered Magnus and had driven him to a state of semi-insanity, after he had wrecked his honor in a vain attempt to do evil that good might come. It had enticed Lyman into its toils to pluck from him his manhood and his honesty, corrupting him, and poisoning him beyond redemption; it had hounded Dyke from his legitimate employment, and had made of him a criminal and a highwayman. It had cast forth Mrs. Hooven to starve to death upon the city streets. It had driven Mina to prostitution. It had slain Annexter at the very moment when painfully and manfully he had at last achieved his own salvation and stood forth resolved to do right, to act unselfishly, and to live for others. It had widowed Hilma in the very dawn of her happiness. It had killed the very babe within the mother's womb, strangling life ere yet it had been born, stamping out the spark ordained by God to burn through all eternity
. Men -- motes in the sunshine -- perished, were shot down in the very noon of life, hearts were broken, little children started in life lamentably handicapped; young girls were brought to a life of shame; old women died in the heart of life for lack of food. In that little, isolated group of human insects, misery, death, and anguish spun like a wheel of fire.¹⁶

Coequal with the theme of the railroad, is that of the wheat. Norris gives much less space to the wheat theme, however, confining it almost entirely to descriptions of the planting and harvesting and loading of the grain; and to the great symbolic significance which he attaches to it and which is discussed a little later in this chapter.

One of the parts concerned with wheat is a discussion of the causes of the low price of the grain. Harran, in a moment

16. Ibid., pp. 650-1.

of discouragement, seemed to feel that everything was against the farmer in his struggle to get fair profit for his labor in wheat raising:

Everything seemed to combine to lower the price of wheat. The extension of wheat areas always exceeded the increase in population; competition was growing fiercer every year. The farmer's profits were the object of attack from a score of different quarters. It was a flock of vultures descending upon a common prey -- the commission merchant, the elevator combine, the mixing-house ring, the banks, the warehouse men, the laboring man, and above all, the railroad. Steadily the Liverpool buyers cut and cut and cut. Everything, every element in the world's market tended to force down the price to the lowest possible figure at which it could be profitably farmed.¹⁷

One of Norris's best descriptions in The Octopus is the graphic one of the wheat lands before the fall plowing began:

The whole gigantic sweep of the San Joaquin expanded, Titanic, before the eye of the mind, flagellated with heat; quivering and shimmering under the sun's red eye. At long intervals, a faint breath of wind out of the south passed slowly over the levels of the baked and empty earth, accentuating the silence, marking off the stillness. It seemed to exhale from the land itself, a prolonged sigh as of deep fatigue. It was the season after the harvest and the great earth, the mother, after its period of reproduction, its pains of labour, delivered of the fruit of its loins, slept the sleep of exhaustion, the infinite repose of the colossus, benignant, eternal, strong, the nourisher of nations, feeder of an entire world.¹⁸

Of equal force and striking power is the description of the preparation of the lands of Annexter's ranch for the wheat seeds.

All about, between horizons, the carpet of the land unrolled itself to infinity. But now, it was no longer parched with heat, cracked and warped by a merciless sun, powdered with dust. The rain had done its work; not a clod that was not swollen with fertility,

17. Ibid., p. 56.

18. Ibid., pp. 46-7.

not a fissure that did not exhale the sense of fecundity. One could not take a dozen steps upon the ranches without the brusque sensation that under foot the land was alive; roused at last from its sleep, palpitating with the desire of reproduction. Deep down there in the recesses of the soil, the great heart throbbed once more, thrilling with passion, vibrating with desire, offering itself to the caress of the plough, insistent, eager, imperious. Dimly one felt the deep-seated trouble 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.¹⁹

There were thirty-five ploughs, each drawn by a team of ten horses, and each with five shears. It is indeed a picture which Norris paints of the long line of moving plows, the shining blades, the glistening, broad backs of the horses, the black mellow furrows of upturned earth.

It was the long stroking caress, vigorous, male, powerful, for which the Earth seemed panting. The heroic embrace of a multitude of iron hands, gripping into the brown, warm flesh of the land that quivered responsive and passionate under this rude advance, so robust as to be almost an assault, so violent as to be veritably brutal. These under the sun and under the speckless sheen of the sky, the wooing of the Titan began, the vast primal passion, the two world-forces, the elemental Male and Female, locked in a colossal embrace, at grapples in the throes of an infinite desire, at once terrible and divine, knowing no law, untamed, savage, natural, sublime.²⁰

Next in the process of the growing of wheat is the first movement of life in the germinating seed. Vanamee, who had been helping with the plowing on Quien Sabe, explained this to Presley:

*On Quien Sabe all last week, we have been seeding the earth. The grain is there now, under the earth, buried in the dark, in the black stillness under the

19. Ibid., p. 127

20. Ibid., pp. 130-1.

clouds. Can you imagine the first -- the very first little quiver of life that the grain of wheat must feel after it is sown, when it answers the call of the sun, down there in the dark of the earth, blind, deaf; the very first stir from the inert, long, long before any physical change has accrued, -- long before the microscope could discover the slightest change -- when the shell first tightens with the first, faint premonition of life."²¹

Then comes the initial appearance of the wheat.

It was there, before him, around him, everywhere, illimitable, immeasurable. The winter brownness of the ground was overlaid with a little shimmer of green. The promise of the sowing was being fulfilled. The earth, the loyal mother, who never failed, who never disappointed, was keeping her faith again. Once more the strength of the nations was renewed. Once more the force of the world was vivified. Once more the Titan, benignant, calm, stirred and awoke.²²

The last process in the production of wheat is the harvesting. This work of preparing the wheat for market is vividly described by Norris:

The harvester, shooting a column of thick smoke straight upward, vibrated to the top of the stack, hissed, clanked, and lurched forward. Instantly, motion sprang to life in all its component parts; the header knives culling a thirty-six foot swath, gnashed like teeth; beltings slid and moved like smooth flowing streams; the separator whirred; the agitator jarred and crashed; cylinders, augers, fans, seeders, and elevators, dropers, and chaff-carriers clattered, rumbled, buzzed, and clanged. The steam hissed and rasped; the ground reverberated a hollow note, and the thousands upon thousands of wheat stalks, sliced and slashed in the clashing sheers of the header, rattled like dry rushes in a hurricane as they fell inward and were caught up by an endless belt, to disappear into the vowels of the vast brute that devoured them.

It was that and no less. It was the feeding of some prodigious monster, insatiable, with iron teeth, gnashing and threshing into the fields of standing wheat; devouring always, never gluttoned, never satiated, swallowing an entire harvest, snarling and slobbering in a welter of warm vapor, acrid smoke, and blinding,

21. Ibid., p. 216.

22. Ibid., p. 369.

pungent clouds of chaff. It moved, belly deep, in the standing grain, a hippopotamus, half-mired in river ooze, gorging rushes, snorting, sweating; a dinosaur wallowing through thick, hot grasses, floundering here, crouching, grovelling there, as its vast jaws crushed and tore, and its enormous gullet swallowed, incessant, ravenous, an inordinate.²³

In this paragraph, Norris sums up the occurrences of The Octopus, in their relation to wheat, which, as we shall see later in the chapter, is the underlying symbol of the book:

The Wheat remained. Untouched, unassailable, undefiled, that mighty world-force, that nourisher of nations, wrapped in Nirvanic calm, indifferent to the human swarm, gigantic, resistless, moved onward in its appointed grooves. Through the welter of blood at the irrigation ditch, through the sham charity and shallow philanthropy of famine relief, committees, the great harvest of Los Muertos rolled like a flood from the Sierras to the Himalayas to feed thousands of starving scarecrows on the barren plains of India.²⁴

It is such descriptions as these that give Norris's book a claim to the title "epic," for here the style is no less epic than the subject. It is difficult to define or analyse this style, to determine wherein that quality lies, how it is achieved; but it is there nevertheless. Norris sees in such scenes not only the outward, physical quality, but also their significant, metaphorical importance. He has the power to sense this, and more than that, to give it to the reader in such vital, vivid terms and impressions that the epic quality of his subject becomes Homeric, grand, extremely impressive and powerful by his treatment of it.

23. Ibid., p. 616.

24. Ibid., p. 651.

II.

This group of novels is well named the "Trilogy of American Life", for in them Norris gives many excellent pictures of the life in this country through characters, scenes, incidents and comments. In The Octopus, He presents many characters who are excellent representatives of the various classes into which the American people are divided. Although these characters are highly individualized, nevertheless, they clearly exemplify certain types of people. For example, Presley is a typical poet: sensitive, irresolute, nervous, brooding; one who feels the urgent need for expression, yet hardly knows what to express, and who is always waiting for the inspiration which so seldom comes. Dyke is an excellent representative of the engineer type: large in build, strong, uneducated, honest, jolly, and friendly. There is also ~~the~~ typical Spaniard of high birth, who settled in Southern California: noble, gallant, rich, proud, grave, brave, generous, altogether the gentleman. However unusual he is in himself, Vanamee is the true aesthete: well educated, spiritual, brooding, sensitive, reticent, a hermit, a searcher of the future and an explorer in the realms of the mind. Magnus Derrick stands for the wealthy ranch owner: proud, grave, courteous, friendly, dignified, self-assured, scrupulously honest, a leader, and a dealer only in big things; big propositions, big crops, big chances. Lyman Derrick is the representative politician: smooth-tongued, insatiably desirous of power, friendly to those whom he might use, well-

groomed, and corrupt, providing it furthers his ends to be so. In Hilma Tree, Norris has created a true woman of the West: beautiful, strong, brave, healthy, resourceful, happy, loyal, industrious, sincere, innocent, fine. Hooven is a typical German: hard-working, honest, one who believes "Vhair der wife is, und der kinder --- dere is der vaterland."²⁶ Mrs. Cedarquist represents the American Society Woman: fashionable, extravagant, narrow, class-bound, restless, discontented, a searcher after thrills, new experiences, and new fads.

Many of the scenes which Norris presents are typical of Western life, which is a large part of American life. As a basic setting for the scenes in the book, he first gives a general description of the West where he has the poet Presley search for subject-matter and inspiration:

But whatever he wrote, and in whatever fashion, Presley was determined that his poem should be of the West, that World's frontier of Romance, where a new race, a new people -- hardy, brave, and passionate -- were building an empire; where the tumultuous life ran like fire from dawn to dark and from dark to dawn again, primitive, brutal, honest and without feat. . . . He strove for the diapason, the great song that should embrace in itself a whole epoch, a complete era, the voice of an entire people, wherein all the people should be included -- they and their legends, their folk lore, their fightings, their loves, and their lusts, their blunt, grim, humor, their stoicism under stress, their adventures, their treasures found in a day and gambled away in a night, their direct, crude speech, their generosity and cruelty, their heroism and bestiality, their religion and profanity, their self-sacrifice and obscenity.²⁷

The scenes which Norris describes vary greatly in range, from the poverty-stricken home of a ranch laborer with its grimy buildings, its swarm of dogs, its stray hogs and chicken,

26. Ibid., p. 175.

27. Ibid., p. 10.

and brokendown farm implements, to the splendid home of a railroad magnate -- with its rich hangings, its beautiful table service, its heavy, carved furniture, its perfect appointments, and its atmosphere of ease and luxury. He describes with equal vividness the old Spanish-American town, all but deserted, its adobe buildings crumbling into ruin and infested with rats, lizards and insects, and occupied by pigeons and hens and cats, its few inhabitants, sitting lazily on the doorsteps in the sun, smoking and dreaming of past glories; and a new, growing town with its freshly-painted buildings, its paved streets crowded with all kinds of vehicles, its sidewalks filled with all types of people, and its atmosphere of energetic, prosperous life. The description of the ranches, however, are more frequently found in The Octopus than are these. Very pleasant is a typical ranch house, white and cool in its frame of great trees, and invitingly hospitable with the long, wide varandas. This is one of Norris's descriptions of a great wheat ranch as it seems to one accustomed to small farms.

. . . A ranch bounded only by the horizons, where, as far as one could see, to the north, to the east, to the south, to the west, was all one holding, a principality ruled with iron and steam, bullied into a yield of three hundred and fifty thousand bushels, where, even when the land was resting, unploughed, unharrowed, and unsown, the wheat came up. . . . The direct brutality of ten thousand acres of wheat, nothing but wheat as far as eye could see, stunned her a little. . . . She did not want to look at so much wheat. There was something vaguely indecent in the sight, this food of the people, this elemental force, this basic energy, weltering here under the sun in all the unconscious nakedness of a sprawling, primordial Titan.²⁸

28. Ibid., p. 60.

This is the description of the ranch during the first rain of the season:

On the other side of the track he could see the infinite extension of the brown, bare land of Las Muertos, turning now to a soft moist welter of fertility, under the insistent caressing of the rain. The hard, sun-baked clods were decomposing, the crevices between drinking the wet with an eager sucking noise. But the prospect was dreary; the distant horizons were blotted under the drifting mists of rain; the eternal monotony of the earth lay open to the sombre, low sky, without a single adornment, without a single variation from its melancholy flatness. Near at hand, the wires between the telegraph poles vibrated with a faint humming under the multitudinous fingering of the myriad of falling drops, striking among them, and dripping off steadily from one another.²⁹

Norris has given, also, some splendid descriptions of an old Spanish Mission in Southern California, and its quaint garden.³⁰

Although these scenes of the old mission is not representative of a large part of American life, yet they are very typical of the lower half of California. An even more familiar sight to the ranchers west of the Rocky Mountains is the great herd of sheep:

Hundred upon hundreds of grey, rounded backs, all exactly alike, huddled, close packed, alive, hid the earth from sight. It was no longer an aggregate of individuals. It was a mass, huge, without form, like a thick-pressed growth of mushrooms, spreading out in all directions over the earth. From it, there arose a vague murmur, confused, inarticulate, like the sound of very distant surf, while all the air in the vicinity was heavy with the warm, ammonical adour of the thousands of crowding bodies.³¹

In The Octopus are also accounts of typical activities of American life. These scenes deal with the action of a group of people under certain circumstances and are representative

29. Ibid., pp. 92-3

30. Ibid., pp. 42, 136-7, 140.

31. Ibid., p. 31.

of certain definite phases of American life. Several of these scenes are descriptions of mobs, examples of mob action and impulse. One of these concerns the anger of the ranchers when they receive the letters telling them of the exorbitant price demanded by the railroad, for their ranch lands:

Then suddenly the tempest burst. A dozen men were on their feet in an instant, their teeth set, their fists clenched, their faces purple with rage. Oaths, curses, maledictions exploded like the firing of successive mines. Voices quivered with wrath, hands flung upward, the fingers hooked, prehensile, trembled with anger. . . . For a second, there was nothing articulate in that cry of savage exasperation, nothing even intelligent. It was the human animal hounded to its corner, exploited, harried to its last stand, at bay, ferocious, terrible, turning at last with bared teeth and upraised claws to meet the death grapple. It was the hideous squealing of the tormented brute, its back to the wall, defending its lair, its mate and its whelps, ready to bite, to rend, to trample, to batter out the life of an enemy in a primeval, bestial welter of blood and fury.³²

Closely related to this scene, as a description of mob action, is that of the indignation meeting which gathered after the tragedy of the irrigation ditch.

The crowd, a solid mass, was wedged tight from store front to store front. And from all this throng, this single unit, this living, breathing organism -- the People -- there arose a droning, terrible note. It was not yet the wild, fierce clamor of riot and insurrection, shrill, high-pitched; but it was a beginning, the growl of the awakened brute, feeling the iron in its flank, heaving up its head with bared teeth, the throat vibrating to the long indrawn snarl of wrath.

Around him rose and fell wave after wave of faces, hundreds upon hundreds, thousands upon thousands, red, lowering, sullen . . . then suddenly the whole mass of struggling, stamping, fighting, writhing men about him seemed, as it were, to rise, to life, multitudinous,

32. Ibid., pp. 272-3.

swelling, gigantic There was a moment's whirl of confused sights, congested faces, open mouths, bloodshot eyes, clutching hands; a moment's burst of furious sounds, shouts, cheers, oaths; a moment's jam and he was carried dazed, breathless, helpless, an atom on the crest of a storm-driven wave.³³

Similar to this in demonstration of the seeming dominance of brute tendencies, is the description of the man hunt, in which posse after posse went in search of the bandit, Dyke. When they failed to find him, they guarded the watering places and the trails. Finally, after a week of hiding, he was forced by hunger and thirst to come down from the mountains. It was the day that Annexter and Hilma were preparing for a picnic, that Dyke galloped into the yard, breathless, weak from lack of food, and with eyes bloodshot from lack of sleep. Annexter furnished him with provisions and the fastest horse in his stables, and Dyke, thus refreshed, galloped out of the yard and down the road that led to the hills, just a few minutes ahead of the new posse that had started in search of him. He easily distanced these men, but just as he reached the tracks in Guadajajara, he saw a second posse coming from another direction. Thus trapped, he took possession of one of the engines on the switch and started down the track at the highest possible speed. The sheriff of the posse commandeered a second engine and started in pursuit. There was a fight as the two engines passed each other, and Dyke, jumping from the engine, started running through a wheat field. When the posse reached the place, they were able to trace the fugitive by his tracks in the high, standing wheat.

33. Ibid., pp. 544-5.

Finally they cornered him, in the dry bed of a ~~run~~ rivulet. Here they took him prisoner, and again the railroad was victorious.

The various activities of American life which Norris presents vary as widely as the scenes he describes. These activities range from a train robbery to a famine relief committee of society women, and include blackmail, a rabbit drive, the loading of wheat in a ship, a barn dance, a dinner at the rich railroad magnate's home, an afternoon at an exclusive club, a proposal of marriage, the heart-breaks of a beggar, and, as described, the planting and harvesting of wheat. And related to the ploughing and planting of the seed is this scene of the hungry working men, after a day of strenuous labor in the fields, eating the evening meal:

The table was taken by assault; the clatter of iron knives upon the tin plates was as a reverberation of hail upon a metal roof. The ploughmen rinsed their throats with great draughts of wine, and, their elbows wide, their foreheads flushed, resumed the attack upon the beef and bread. . . . All up and down the long table, where the kerosene lamps reflected themselves deep in the oilcloth cover, one heard the incessant sounds of mastication, and saw the uninterrupted movement of great jaws . . . It was no longer a supper. It was a veritable barbeque, a crude and primitive feasting, barbaric, heroic.³⁴

Not only does Norris give characters, scenes, and incidents representative of American life, and particularly Western American life, but he also gives his opinion on several subjects which are entirely impersonal, yet certainly American. One of these is of the faker, the imposter who, wrapped in a

34. Ibid., p. 132.

costume costing a few cents, makes thousands of dollars from women who are searching for just such an experience as sponsoring and feting the deceiver:

It was the Fake, the eternal, irrepressible Sham, glib, nimble, ubiquitous, tricked out in all the paraphernalia of impostures, an endless defile of Charlatans that passed interminably before the gaze of the city, marshalled by "lady presidents", exploited by clubs of women The attention the Fake received, the time devoted to it, the money which it absorbed was incredible.³⁵

Another subject which he discusses, or rather describes, in this case, is the great army of the homeless that continually walk the streets of the lagger American cities:

Ah, that via dolorosa of the destitute; that dhemin de la croix of the homeless. Ah, the mile after mile of granite pavement that must be, must be traversed. Walk they must. Move they must, onward, forward, whether they cannot tell; why, they do not know. Walk, walk, walk, with bleeding feet and smarting joints; walk with aching back and trembling knees; walk, though the senses grow giddy with fatigue, though the eyes droop with sleep, though every nerve, demanding rest, sets in motion its tiny alarms of pain. Death is at the end of that devious winding maze of paths, crossed and recrossed and crossed again. There is but one goal to the via dolorosa; there is no escape from the central chamber of that labyrinth. Fate guides the feet of them that are set therein. Double on their steps though they may, weave in and out of the myriad corners of the city's streets, return, go forward, back, from side to side, here, there, everywhere, dodge, twist, wind, the central chamber where Death sits is reached inexorably at the end.³⁶

Through the mystic Vanamee, Norris offers a bit of sarcasm on reformers:

"You preach a doctrine of abnegation, of self-obliteration, and you sign your name to your

35. Ibid., p. 314.

36. Ibid., pp. 594-5.

words as high on the tablets as you can reach, so that the world may see, not the poem but the poet. . . . There are many like you. The social reformer writes a book on the iniquity of the possession of land, and out of the proceeds, buys a corner lot. The economist who laments the hardships of the poor, allows himself to grow rich upon the sales of his book.³⁷

Although Norris does not give much space to the subject, he suggests in a paragraph the trend of modern politics. When Magnus Derrick refused to countenance the bribery which the ranchers were planning in order to buy the favor of the new Railroad Commission, Osterman said that he should not hesitate on that account:

"Governor, standards have changed since your time; everybody plays the game now as we are playing it -- the most honorable men. You can't play it any other way."³⁸

Of Magnus's stand against the policy of bribery, Norris says:

It was the last protest of the Old School, rising up there in denunciation of the new order of things; the statesman opposed to the politician; honesty, rectitude, uncompromising integrity prevailing for the last time against the devious manoeuvring, the evil communications, the rotten expediency of a corrupted institution.³⁹

Through the old priest, Father Sorria, Norris brings this indictment against Americans as a religious people:

"You Americans are not good churchmen. Sundays you sleep -- you read the newspaper."⁴⁰

Concerning the typical California spirit, he says:

37. Ibid., p. 377.
38. Ibid., p. 202.
39. Ibid., p. 184.
40. Ibid., pp. 173-4.

It was the true California spirit, . . . 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.⁴¹

And of the tendency of the American people to run after pleasure at the expense of business life, Norris has a manufacturer say in arguing against it:

"We don't want fairs. We want active furnaces. We don't want public statues and fountains and park extensions and gingerbread fetes. We want business, enterprise. . . . San Francisco! . . . It is not a city, -- it is a Midway Plaisance. California likes to be fooled. . . . Indifference to public affairs -- absolute indifference stamps us all."⁴²

Norris enlarges on this subject of the indifference of American people to public affairs. The view is expressed through an experienced manufacturer in his conversation with Magnus Derrick:

"If I were to name the one crying evil of American life, . . . it would be the indifference of the better people to public affairs. It is so in all our great centers. . . . If it is not a railroad trust, it is a sugar trust, or an oil trust, or an industrial trust that exploits the People, because the People allow it. The indifference of the people is the opportunity of the despot The People have but to say "no", and not the strongest tyranny, political, religious, or financial that was ever organized could survive one week. . . . We are well met, indeed, the farmer and the manufacturer, both in the same grist between the two millstones of the lethargy of the Public, and the aggression of the Trust, the two great evils of modern America."⁴³

III.

41. Ibid., p. 298.

42. Ibid., p. 303.

43. Ibid., pp. 304-5.

III.

There is a great deal of symbolism in The Octopus. The co-
themes, the railroad and the wheat, are, of course, the main
symbols. The first of these is the railroad.

In the opening chapter, Presley was walking through the
fields, enjoying the beauty and peace of the night, when sudden-
ly an engine swept past, roaring and panting, and making the
earth tremble with its rush. As the noise died away, Presley
was about to start on his walk again when he " . . . was con-
scious of a confusion of lamentable sounds that rose into the
night from out the engine's wake. Prolonged cries of agony,
sobbing, wails of infinite pain, heartrending, pitiful."⁴⁴
He turned back to ascertain the cause of these cries and found
that a flock of sheep had been on the track at the moment of
the engine's passage, and the sight was heartrending:

It was a slaughter, a massacre of the innocents.
The iron monster had charged full in the midst, mer-
ciless, inexorable. To the right and left, all the
width of the right of way, the little bodies had been
flung; backs were snapped against the fence posts;
brains knocked out. Caught in the barbs of the wire,
wedged in, the bodies hung suspended. . . . The
black blood, winking in the starlight, seeped down
into the clinkers between the ties with a prolonged
sucking murmur. . . .

In the distance, the engine . . whistled for
road crossings, for sharp curves, for trestles, ominous
notes, hoarse, bellowing, ringing with accents of men-
ace and defiance; and abruptly Presley saw again, in
his imagination, the galloping monster, the terror of
steel and steam, with its single eye, cyclopean, red,
shooting from horizon to horizon; but saw it now as
the symbol of a vast power, huge, terrible, flinging
the echo of its thunder over all the reaches of the val-
ley, leaving blood and destruction in its path; the

44. Ibid., p. 49.

leviathan, with tentacles of steel clutching into the soil, the soulless Force, the iron-hearted Power, the monster, the Colossus, the Octopus.⁴⁵

This incident not only forecasts the bloodshed in the struggle between the P. and S.W. and the ranchers at the irrigation ditch; but on a larger scale, it represents the misery and sorrow and the spilling of the life-blood of the people by that great force, the Trust, which the railroad symbolizes.

Lyman Derrick had in his office a map, which, on a white background, pictured in red lines the system of the P. and S. W. Norris explains the significance of this:

It was as though the State had been sucked white and colorless, and against this pallid background, the red arteries of the monster stood out, swollen with life-blood, reaching out to infinity, gorged to bursting; an excrescence, a gigantic parasite fattening upon the life blood of an entire Commonwealth.⁴⁶

The map is significant of the mighty Trusts which crush the individual, or the private enterprises that dares to enter into competition with them; and which are not satisfied with merely the death of their opponents, but feed, like vultures, on the lifeless forms.

Dyke, in the matching of his puny strength against the P. and S. W., is symbolic of the few who dare to revolt against the selfish and unjust imposition of the Trusts, and who have their reward -- death.

He had been merely the object of a colossal trick, a sordid injustice, a victim of the insatiate greed of the monster, caught, and choked by one of those millions of tentacles suddenly reaching up from

45. Ibid., pp. 50-51.

46. Ibid., p. 281.

below, from out of the dark beneath his feet, coiling around his throat, throttling him, strangling him, sucking his blood.⁴⁷

The tragedy of the fight between the railroad and the ranchers at the irrigation ditch is also symbolic of the struggle between the iron monster and the few who dare defy it.

S. Behrman represents the railroad, and beyond that, the trusts: fat, well-fed, well dressed, sleek, sure of his power, certain of victory, backed by colossal capital and influence. Several times attempts had been made on his life, but he escaped, almost miraculously each time, until it seemed to prove the futility of attempting to vanquish him, or the railroad, or the trusts, or evil, for the railroad and the trusts stand, in the great, final symbolism, for Wrong, the Wrong in all the world, powerful, influentially backed, a force which, it seemed, could never be downed, which would always be triumphant.

There are three important symbolisms in regard to the co-theme, wheat. The first is the wheat as emblem of eternal life, the inviolable pledge of the Earth, which becomes the personification, under Norris's treatment. Many of the quotations in the preceding pages contain references to the earth as the great Mother, fulfilling her promise of new life with each new harvest. Norris strengthens the symbolism of wheat as representative of everlasting life by illustrating it with Vanamee's love story.

Vanamee and Angele had been much in love with other. They were both quite young, and the little mission garden was made for romance. Each night they met there for an hour, watching

47. Ibid., pp. 352-3.

the friendly stars and listening to the music of the little fountain. One night, Angele came a little earlier than usual. She saw a dark form waiting at the gate, and, supposing it to be Vanamee, she gave herself unhesitatingly into its arms. When Vanamee came a few minutes later, he found his sweetheart lying beside the gate, unconscious. Angele died when the baby was born. After her death, Vanamee grieved continually. At times he felt that he must see her again or he could not live. It was at those times that he visited the little mission garden where she was buried. Here he talked with Father Sarria about his sorrow. Vanamee could not understand why Angele had to die, why the awful tragedy had to occur. To comfort him, the priest quoted from Corinthians: "But some man will say . . . "How are the dead raised up," . . . Thou fool! That which thou sawest is not quickened except it die."⁴⁸ However, Vanamee, blinded by his grief, even after sixteen years after Angele's death, refused to understand, to be comforted. He had a strange power, that of calling people to him, almost forcing them to come, by concentrating his thoughts on them, and willing them to him. One night, half-unconsciously, he called to Angele in this manner. Somehow, he felt that he had an answer. Startled, almost frightened at the inexplicable sensation, he hesitated to try that mystic power which he possessed, again. But after a few nights, he called to Angele a second time. Again the answer came, nearer than before. He did this for several evenings, and each time the answer seemed to come nearer. And

48. Ibid., p. 144.

then, one night he called again:

It was the full period of spring. The air was a veritable caress. The infinite repose of this little garden, sleeping under the night was delicious beyond expression. It was a tiny corner of the world, shut off, discreet, distilling romance, a garden of dreams, of enchantments

. . . . The fields of blowers . . . glowed like incandescence in the golden light of the rising moon. The air was thick with perfume, heavy with it, clogged with it. The sweetness filled the very mouth. . . . Overhead wheeled the illimitable procession of the constellation. Underfoot, the earth was asleep. The very flowers were dreaming. A cathedral hush overlay all the land, and a sense of benediction brooded low, -- a divine kindness manifesting itself in beauty, in peace, in absolute repose.⁴⁹

It was across such a night as this that Vanamee sent his call to Angele. He felt an answer, felt it approaching. With his head bowed on his arms as he lay prone in the grass, he felt some one coming to him, nearer and nearer, until he knew, without seeing, that it stood before him. Raising his head, he looked, and beheld Angele, young, beautiful, pure, just as he remembered her to be:

Called from out the darkness, from the grip of the earth, the embrace of the grave, from out the memory of corruption, she rose into light and life, divinely pure.⁵⁰

It was Angele's daughter. When she had gone, Vanamee looked about him and saw the wheat that had come up that night, emblem, as Angele's daughter was emblem, of the eternal life:

Life out of death, eternity rising from out dissolution. There was the lesson. Angele was not the symbol, but the proof of immortality. The seed dying, rotting, and corrupting in the earth; rising again in life, unconquerable and in immaculate purity Death was swallowed up in Victory.⁵¹

49. Ibid., pp. 389-90.

50. Ibid., p. 391.

51. Ibid., pp. 392-3.

It was the mystery of creation, the stupendous miracle of re-creation; the vast sythm of the seasons, measured, alternative, the sun and stars keeping time as the eternal symphony of reproduction swung in its tremendous cadences like the colossal pendulum of an almighty machine -- primordial energy flung out from the hand of the Lord God Himself, immortal, calm, infinitely strong.⁵²

The wheat, always growing, leaving men powerless to hinder its upward movement to the light and to new life, is an appropriate emblem of force, a force which is, perhaps, nature.

Even Norris can only speculate on this:

Force, conditions, laws of supply and demand, -- were these the enemy of the people after all, Not enemies; there was no malevolence in Nature. Colossal indifference only, a vast trend toward appointed goals. Nature was, then, a gigantic engine, a vast, cyclopean power, huge, terrible, a leviathan with a heart of steel, knowing no compunction, no forgiveness, no tolerance; crushing but the human atom standing in its way, with Nirvanic calm, the agony of destruction sending never a jar, never the faintest tremour through all that prodigious mechanism of wheels and cogs.⁵³ . .

Men were naught, death was naught, life was naught; Force only, existed -- Force that brought men into the world, Force that crowded them out to make room for succeeding generations; Force that made the wheat grow, Force that garnered it from the soil to give place to the succeeding crop.⁵⁴

The third and greatest symbolism of wheat is that it represents Good; and it is at this point that the two main themes of The Octopus meet: the P. and S. W., the railroad, representing Evil, and the wheat standing for Good. S. Behrman, who typifies the railroad, and thus Evil, was shot at by Dyke, but

52. Ibid., p. 634.

53. Ibid., pp. 322-3.

54. Ibid., p. 634.

the gun failed to discharge. Presley threw a stick of dynamite into Behrman's home. The building was shattered, but he was unharmed. It seemed that nothing could kill him, or even harm him. He represented the railroad which, it seemed, nothing could hurt, or overthrow; which was always successful. In a broader sense, as Behrman symbolized Evil, it seemed that nothing could overcome Evil, that it would always live, strong, triumphant. But when S. Behrman said that nothing could hurt him, he reckoned without the wheat. When Evil believed nothing could shake its power, it reckoned without Good.

S. Behrman planned to send a shipload of his wheat, the wheat of Los Muertos, to India, and he went on board to watch the process of loading the grain. Somehow his foot became tangled in a coiled rope, and he fell headlong into the hold, which was slowly filling with wheat. Strangled and blinded by the dust and chaff, frantic with fear, pelted and cut by the sharp, flying grains, S. Behrman staggered desperately about the hold. There was no outlet, no escape. He tried to cry for help, but no one heard. He sank into the grain.

The wheat, leaping continuously from the chute, poured around him. It filled the pockets of the coat. It crept up the sleeves and trouser legs, it covered the great, protuberant stomach, it ran at last in rivulets into the distended, gaping mouth. It covered the face. In the hold of the "Swanhilda" there was no movement but the ever-widening ripples that spread, flowing from the ever-breaking, ever, reforming cone; no sound but the rushing of the wheat that continued to plunge incessantly from the iron chute in a prolonged roar, steady, persistent, inevitable.⁵⁵

So Evil, unconquerable by everything else, is overcome by Good.

55. Ibid., p. 646.

This is the final conclusion of The Octopus, the great abiding lesson of its symbolism:

The good never dies; evil dies, cruelty, oppression, selfishness, greed -- these die, but nobility, but love, but sacrifice, but generosity, but truth, thank God for it, small as they are, difficult as it is to discover them -- these live forever -- are eternal.⁵⁶

And again:

Falseness dies; injustice and oppression in the end of everything fade and vanish away. Greed, cruelty, selfishness, and humanity are short lived; the individual suffers, but the race goes on - - - The larger view always and through all the shams, all the wickedness, discovers the Truth that will, in the end, prevail, and all things, surely, inevitably, resistlessly work together for good.⁵⁷

IV.

In The Octopus, Frank Norris was not only trying to tell a story of a certain phase of American life. He wanted to do this, and more than this, he wanted to write a novel which would give through its scenes and characters views and representations of America and Americans as they are, and which, by its symbol, would represent the spirit of America, growing, eager, resistless in its progressive strength. Through this symbolism he desired to teach the ultimate lesson that Good can and will overcome Evil, and that belief in this should be a sustaining faith to the peoples of the world. But as much as he desired to do this, also as much did Norris wish to write an epic, an American prose epic. Since America is the

56. Ibid., p. 636.

57. Ibid., pp. 651-2.

chief wheat growing country, and since wheat is the basis of the peoples' food, he treated the production of wheat in this first book of the Trilogy, because he believed that it was epical in quality since the production is on such a vast scale and since the product is of such far-reaching importance and significance.

CHAPTER III.

The Pit.

I.

In The Pit, the second book in the Trilogy of Wheat, Frank Norris employs the same basic method of treating the main themes, the wheat and the Pit, as he does in The Octopus; but he does not emphasize them as persistently as in the first book. There are times in The Pit when, for several pages, Norris allows his reader to forget the central ideas entirely. He also gives the love motif more attention than in The Octopus; and he has the action center around fewer characters, thus making the plot of The Pit much less complicated than that of the first book.

It will be well, perhaps, to employ the same plan in the study of the two chief symbols in this book as that used in the second chapter of this thesis, that is, the use of a synopsis of the story in The Pit as it is related to the co-themes, the wheat and the Pit. In fact, a study of the narrative as it is influenced by or deals with these two principal emblems would be a fairly complete investigation of Norris's treatment of the basic subjects themselves. It is not necessary to take up a study of each of these separately, for the two are so closely connected, so inevitably interwoven, that it would be difficult to divide definitely the narrative on this basis, saying that this incident belonged to the story of the Pit, and that that occurrence was related to the story of the wheat, for, as Norris

has written it, the story of one is the story of the other.

The first appearance of the Pit is during the performance of a well-known opera. Into that atmosphere of culture and refinement and pleasure came echoes of the tragic failure which had occurred at the Pit that day. Laura Dearborn, with her sister, Page, and her aunt, Mrs. Wessel, were guests at the theater of Mr. and Mrs. Cressler, who had been exceedingly kind to the orphaned sisters since the death of their father, two years before. Laura, whose sensitive nature was deeply moved by the beautiful music of the opera, as it was by beautiful paintings or good literature, was listening intently, when she became aware of a discordant element. In a neighboring box, a conversation carried on in low, hoarse whispers began to intrude itself upon her consciousness.

"--- one hundred and six carloads ---"

"--- paralysed the bulls ---"

"--- fifty thousand dollars ---".

These unpleasant interruptions continued all through the evening.

It was that night, too, that she met and talked with Curtis Jadwin, who was also a member of the theater party. He was a great financier; and although Laura knew nothing of the Pit yet, as she looked at him, she realized how small and cheap all the posing and attitudinizing of those pleasure-seeking people in the theater must seem to him after the great, almost primitive

battles of the pit.

Abruptly, midway between two phases of that music-drama of passion and romance, there came to Laura the swift and vivid impression of that other drama that simultaneously, even at that very moment, was working itself out close at hand, equally passionate; but more than that, real, actual, modern, a thing in the very heart of the very life in which she moved.¹

-- that is the financial struggles of the Pit.

On the road home after the opera that evening, the sisters and Mrs. Wessel went through La Salle street, where the Pit is located. Here, again, Laura realized the contrast between the business and the cultural world; here, again, the power and the drama of the Pit came to her with startling force.

Here it was, then, that other drama, that other tragedy, working on furiously, fiercely through the night, while she and all these others had sat there in the atmosphere of flowers and perfume, listening to the music. Suddenly it loomed portentous in the eye of her mind, terrible, tremendous. Ah, this drama of the "Provision Pits," where the rush of millions of bushels of grain, and the clatter of millions of dollars and the tramping and the wild shouting of thousands of men filled all the air with the noise of battle! Yes, here was drama in deadly earnest -- drama and tragedy and death, and the jar of mortal fighting. And the echoes of it invaded the very sanctuary of art, and cut athwart the music of Italy and the cadence of polite conversation; and the shock of it endured when all the world should have slept, and galvanized into vivid life all these sombre piles of office buildings. It was dreadful, this labour through the night. It had all the significance of field hospitals after the battle -- hospitals and the tents of commanding generals. The wounds of the day were being bound up, and the dead were being counted, while, shut in their headquarters, the captains and the commanders drew the

1. The Pit, p. 34.

plans for the grapple of armies that was to recommence with daylight.²

This, then, was the Pit as it seemed to Laura, and before Norris gives a scene in the Pit itself, he describes the power and importance of the Pit as it seemed to Jadwin:

. . . some great, some resistless force within the Board of Trade Building that held the tide of the streets within its grip, alternately drawing it in and throwing it forth. Within there, a great whirlpool, a pit of roaring waters spun and thundered, sucking in the life tides of the city, sucking them in as into the mouth of some tremendous Cloaca, the maw of some colossal sewer; then vomiting them forth again, spewing them up and out, only the catch them in the return eddy and suck them in afresh.³

And concerning its wide-spread influence:

Thus it went, day after day. Ednlessly, ceaselessly the Pit, enormous, thundering, sucked in and spewed out, sending the swirl of its mighty, central eddy far out through the city's channels. Terrible at the center it was, at the circumference, gentle, insidious, and persuasive, the send of the flowing so mild, that to embark upon it, yielding to the influence, was a pleasure that seemed devoid of all risk. But the circumference was not bounded by the city. All through the Northwest, all through the center of the world of the Wheat the set and whirl of that innermost Pit made itself felt; and it spread and spread and spread, till the grain in the elevators of Western Iowa moved and stirred and answered to its centripetal force, and men upon the streets of New York felt the mysterious tugging of its undertow engage their feet, embrace their bodies, overwhelm them, and carry them bewildered and unresisting back and downwards to the Pit itself.⁴

It is here in the little interlude in the narrative that Norris makes a definite connection between his two basic sym-

2. Ibid., p. 40.

3. Ibid., p. 79.

4. Ibid., pp. 79-80.

bols.

There in the center of the Nation, midst of that continent that lay between the oceans of the new world and the old, in the heart's heart of the affairs of men, roared and rumbled the Pit. It was as if the Wheat, Nourisher of the Nations, as it rolled gigantic and majestic in a vast flood from West to East, here, like a Niagara, finding its flow impeded, burst suddenly into the appalling fury of the Maelstrom, into the chaotic spasm of a world-force, a primeval energy, blood-brother of the earthquake and the glacier, raging and wrathful that its power should be braved by some pinch of human spawn that dared raise barriers across its courses.⁵

Some days after the theater party, on the advice of Gretry of Gretry, Converse and Co., a substantial brokerage firm, Jadwin put fifty thousand dollars into a speculation deal. Jadwin had dabbled occasionally in the Pit in the past, but he had no special interest in speculation, and certainly he did not need the money, for the monthly rent from the business buildings which he owned amounted to thousands of dollars.

In following the phases of the deal which Jadwin commissioned Gretry, Converse and Co. to undertake, Norris presents a splendidly vivid picture of the Pit itself. On the customers' room, Norris spends little time, merely mentioning the crude gas fixtures, and the great blackboard which was covered with columns of chalked figures indicating the price of stock or grain. The author is more interested in the people in the room, tired-eyed, shabbily-dressed men who sat in the rows of chairs before the great board and talked, smoking and expectorating intermittently. These nondescripts were always there, they hard-

5. Ibid., p. 80.

ly knew why. *There they sat inert, stupid, their decaying senses hypnotised and soothed by the sound of the distant rumble of the Pit that came through the ceiling from the floor overhead.*⁶ These were the leavings of the Pit, the men who once had fought in its battles with the best, and when the crashes came had found no help from the Pit to whom they had given the best of mind and body and fortune. Still they followed, ever-faithful, the commanding roar of the great monster, coming every day to sit there where they might hear the voice of their master. This is one of the examples which Norris presents of the strange, almost supernatural, power of the Pit.

The author gives a concrete illustration, in his general picture, as to how just a word concerning some foreign situation will grow in significance until the whole market is affected by it. Landry Court, a clerk for Gretry, Converse and Co., waiting for the opening gong in the Pit, one morning, met a friend who told him of a party which he had attended the evening before in honor of a friend who had just returned from Europe. The traveler had related many amusing experiences and had casually mentioned during the conversation that in the "Higgins-Pasha" incident, the British agent had "put it pretty straight to the Sultan's secretary." Some one in the Pit overheard the remark, and spoke of the "Higgins-Pasha" incident to a friend. Within an hour it seemed to be authentic information that the British Secretary of State for War had forwarded an ultimatum and that diplomatic relations between England and

6. Ibid., p. 83.

Turkey were about to be suspended. The mob in the Pit seemed to talk of nothing else; and when the market opened, wheat was one and a fourth points higher than the closing price of the day before.

The complete account of a morning in the Pit, which Norris gives, is very detailed. First is the scene at the opening:

Then suddenly, cutting squarely athwart the vague crescendo of the floor came the single incisive stroke of a great gong. Instantly a tumult was unchained. Arms were flung upward in strenuous gestures, and from above the crowding heads in the Wheat Pit a multitude of hands, eager, the fingers extended, leaped into the air. All articulate expression was lost in the single explosion of sound as the traders surged downward to the center of the Pit; grabbing each other, struggling toward each other, tramping, stamping, charging through with might and main. Promptly the hand on the great dial above the clock stirred and trembled, and as though driven by the tempest breath of the Pit, moved upward through the degrees of its circle.⁷

After the first flurry at the opening, there was a definite lull in the morning's business. For a time a sense of sheer horse-play took possession of the brokers and the clerks. They folded their telegrams into pointed javelins and sent them sailing across the room. Several traders organized themselves into an impromptu "anti-cravat committee" and made the rounds of the Pit, twitching carefully tied scarfs out of place. One powerful speculator stuck a file of paper javelins around an excitable Jew's hatband, and then set them on fire. Suddenly, for no discoverable, immediate reason, wheat amid an explosion of shouts jumped several points. Then came the Report on the Visible Supply. This was so much larger than anyone had antici-

7. Ibid., p. 98.

pated that the price of wheat dropped considerably. "By degrees the clamor died away, ceased, began again irregularly, and then abruptly stilled. Here and there a bid was called, an offer made, like the intermittent crack of small arms after the stopping of a cannonade.*8 Then the gong struck, and the traders began to leave the Pit, and business was over for the day. Soon the room was deserted.

Jadwin was successful in his speculation. But one evening when he and Laura and Page were dinner guests at the Cressler home, Mr. Cressler warned him against speculation. He could speak, too, from experience, for several years before he had lost a small fortune in a deal in the Pit. He was still wealthy enough to live luxuriously, but he had learned the danger and the fascination of the game, and he feared for Jadwin:

"Oh the fine, promising, manly young men I've seen wrecked -- absolutely and hopelessly wrecked and ruined by speculation! IT's as easy to get into it as going across the street. They make three hundred, five hundred, yes, even a thousand dollars sometimes in a couple of hours, without so much as raising a finger. Think what it means to a boy of twenty-five who's doing clerk work at seventy-five a month. Why, it would take him maybe ten years to save a thousand, and here he's made it in a single morning. Think you can keep him out of speculation then? First thing you know he's thrown up his honest, humdrum position -- oh, I've seen it hundreds of times -- and taken to hanging around the customers' rooms down there on La Salle street, and he makes a little, and makes a little more, and finally he is so far in that he can't pull out, and then some billionaire fellow, who has the market in the palm of his hand, tightens one finger, and the young man is ruined, body and mind. He's lost the taste, the very capacity for legitimate business, and he stays on hanging round the Board, till he gets to be -- all of a sudden -- an old man . . . I tell you the fascination of this Pit gambling is something no one who hasn't

8. Ibid., p. 104.

experienced it can have the faintest conception of. I believe it's worse than liquor, worse than morphine. Once you get into it, it grips you and draws you, and the nearer you get to the end, the easier it seems to win, till, all of a sudden, ah! there's the whirlpool.*⁹

This comment on the fascination of speculation reinforces the example which Norris has already given of the powerful attraction of the Pit, that is the group of nondescripts who continually haunt the customers' rooms. But a more forceful proof than these of the destructive attractiveness of this gambling game is the specific example of Curtis Jadwin, and to this, Norris devotes the rest of the book.

Laura and Jadwin had been married about three years. During this period, he had speculated from time to time, always successfully, always for the excitement he gained thereby. By now he was "blooded to the game." The spell of the Pit had caught him. He had once been very near defeat, but with a true gambler's luck he had swung from defeat to victory.

Then, one day, warned by some unaccountable sixth sense, he felt a change in the market. Acting upon this, and against the advice of Gretry, he bought five hundred thousand bushels of September wheat. In May, the Jadwins and Page went to their summer home at Geneva Lake. Laura hoped that here her husband could spend his entire time with her; but in this she was disappointed, for Jadwin went to Chicago every day. The market was unsteady, and he had invested a large amount of money in

9. Ibid., pp. 130-1.

his last venture. Laura regretted that there were so few opportunities for her husband to spend his evenings at home with her, since he had become so involved in this recent deal. When she spoke to him about it, he was regretful, but said that it was necessary for him to be at his office. "But even Mr. Gretry says that you don't need to be right in your office every minute of the time," she answered. "He says you can manage your Board of Trade business from out here just as well, and that you only go into town because you can't keep away from La Salle Street, and the sound of the Wheat Pit."¹⁰ Such a frank statement startled Jadwin. He wondered if it were true. But he had no time for conjecture, and so the matter passed.

Meanwhile his luck held. The harvest all over the country was the smallest it had been in six years. The day that the price of wheat reached eighty cents, Curtis Jadwin bought a seat upon the Board of Trade. After this, Laura saw less and less of him. He was in the biggest battle he had yet fought in the Pit, and it absorbed all his thoughts. For the second time Laura protested:

"Curtis, dear, when is it all going to end -- your speculating? You never used to be this way. It seems as though, nowadays, I never have you to myself. Even when you are not going over papers and reports and that, or talking by the hour to Mr. Gretry in the library -- even when you are not doing all that, your mind seems to be away from me -- down there in La Salle Street or the Board of Trade Building."¹¹

Later when she asked him why he continued to speculate, he an-

10. Ibid., p. 226.

11. Ibid., p. 230.

swered: "It's the fun of the thing, the excitement --"

"That's just it", she answered, "the excitement. You don't know, Curtis. It is changing you. You are so nervous sometimes, and sometimes you don't listen to me when I talk to you. I can just see what's in your mind. It's wheat -- wheat -- wheat, wheat-- wheat -- wheat, all the time. Oh, if you knew how I hated and feared it!"¹²

That day he promised to quit speculating entirely, when he had sold his present holdings. He made the final disposition of his wheat about a week later, at a gain of half a million dollars.

The events of the next few days are examples of the hold which the Pit had on Jadwin. It was unnecessary to go to the Board of Trade, since he had no investment there; so he attempted to interest himself at home. He read, and drove, and rested; but in spite of all Laura could do to entertain him, he became more and more restless. Seeking amusement for her husband, she invited the Cresslers and the Gretrys and several other of their friends to Geneva Lake for a house party. For a while, Jadwin enjoyed the winter pleasures at the lake, but even then he could not escape the Pit. Landry Court came up from the city each evening, bringing bits of news of the deals consummated that morning and of conjectures concerning the price of wheat for the next day. This made Jadwin more restless and discontented than ever. So the house party failed to accomplish its purpose, and the guests with their host and hostess returned to Chicago. Still the fascination of the Pit held:

12. Ibid., p. 231.

Try as he would, the echoes of the rumbling of the Pit reached Jadwin every hour of the day and night. The Maelstrom there at the foot of La Salle Street was swirling now with a mightier rush than for years past. Thundering, its vortex smoking, it sent its whirling far out over the country, from ocean to ocean, sweeping the wheat into its currents, sucking it in, and spewing it out again in the gigantic pulses of its ebb and flow.

And he, Jadwin, who knew its every eddy, who could fortell its every ripple, was out of it, out of it. Inactive, he sat there idle while the clamour of the Pit swelled daily louder, and while other men, men of little minds, of narrow imagination, perversely, blindly shut their eyes to the swelling of its waters, neglecting the chances which he would have known how to use with such large, such vast results. That mysterious event which long ago he felt was preparing, was not yet consummated. The great Fact, the great Result which was at last to issue forth from all this turmoil was not yet achieved. Would it refuse to come until a master hand, all powerful, all daring, gripped the levers of the sluice gates that controlled the crashing waters of the Pit? He did not know. Was it the moment for a chief?

Was this great upheaval a revolution that called aloud for its Napoleon? Would another, not himself, at last, seeing where so many shut their eyes, step into the place of high command?¹³

About a fortnight after the house party at Geneva Lake, the papers contained accounts of the movements of a powerful, unknown Bull in the wheat market. The Pit had gained a leader, at the cost of a man's broken promise to his wife. It was only a few days later that the world knew that the Unknown Bull had cornered the market.

In April, with the Unknown Bull steadily supporting the market, wheat went to a dollar; and all over the country spread

13. Ibid., p. 259.

the resultant wave of prosperity. But with dollar wheat came the first warning growl of the Great Bear. This was Calvin Hardy Croakes. One morning he stopped to talk with Cressler, who stood feeding the pigeons at one of the windows in the Pit. At the end of the conversation, he asked Cressler to meet him and his two partners at lunch that noon. This conference resulted in the involving of Cressler's name and capital in a contest to down the Unknown Bull. Of course Cressler did not know that the man he was fighting was his friend.

The battle was on. It took every moment of Jadwin's time, and every ounce of his energy and strength. He seldom saw Laura. Often he stayed downtown all night, planning, planning his movements for the next day. The Pit mastered him completely, the Pit and that other factor so closely and inevitably related to it, wheat:

By now his mind was continually upon this one great fact -- May Wheat -- continually. It was with him the instant he woke in the morning. It kept him company during his hasty breakfast; in the rhythm of his horse's hoofs, as the team carried him down town he heard, "wheat-wheat-wheat, wheat-wheat-wheat." No sooner did he enter La Salle Street than the roar of traffic came to his ears as the roar of the torrent of wheat which drove through Chicago from the Western farms to the mills and bake-shops of Europe. . . . At dinner time, he left the office, and his horses carried him home again, while again their hoofs upon the asphalt beat out unceasingly the monotone of the one refrain, "Wheat-wheat-wheat, wheat-wheat-wheat." At dinner, he could not eat. Between each course, he found himself going over the day's work, testing it, questioning himself, "Was this rightly done?" . . . After the meal the papers, contracts, statistics and reports he had brought with him . . . were to be studied. As often as not Gretry called, and the two, shut in the library, talked, discussed, and planned till long after midnight.

Then at last, when he had shut the front door upon his lieutenant and turned to face the empty, silent house, came the moment's reaction. The tired brain flagged and drooped; exhaustion, like a weight of lead, hung upon his heels. But somewhere a hall clock struck, a single, booming note, like a gong -- like the signal that would unchain the tempest in the Pit tomorrow morning. Wheat-wheat-wheat, wheat-wheat-wheat! Instantly the jaded senses braced again, instantly the wearied mind sprang to its post. He turned out the lights, he locked the front door. . . . In the cold, dim silence of the earliest dawn, Curtis Jadwin went to bed, only to lie awake, staring up into the darkness, planning, devising, new measures, reviewing the day's doings, while the faint tides of blood behind the eardrums murmured ceaselessly to the overdriven brain, "Wheat-wheat-wheat, wheat-wheat-wheat, Forty million bushels, forty million, forty million."¹⁴

This was the life, the reward of the man who had mastered the Pit.

Sometimes to Laura, Jadwin would exclaim: "You think I am willfully doing this! You don't know, you haven't a guess. I corner the wheat! Great heavens, it is the wheat that has cornered me!"¹⁵

Once Laura persuaded her husband to spend an evening at home with her. She played for him, sang for him, danced for him. It seemed like one of the pleasant evenings of their first year together. But the Pit could not allow itself to be forgotten. Gretry came hurrying in with information of the next day's battle. He and Jadwin went to a hotel to formulate their plans for defence, and Laura was left alone:

To the wife of the great manipulator, listening with sinking heart to this courier from the front, it was battle. The Battle of the Streets was again in array. Again the trumpet sounded, again the rush of thousands of feet filled all the air. Even here,

14. Ibid., pp. 282-3.

15. Ibid., pp. 283-4.

here in her home, her husband's head upon her lap, in the quiet and stillness of her hour, the distant rumble came to her ears. Somewhere, far off there in the darkness of the night, the great forces were manoeuvring for position once more. Tomorrow would come the grapple, and one or the other must fall -- her husband or the enemy. How keep him to herself when the conflict impended? She knew now the thunder of the captains and the shouting appealed to him. She had seen him almost leap to his arms out of her embrace. He was all the man she had called him, and less strong, less eager, less brave, she would have loved him less.¹⁶

The next day came -- and the battle. Jadwin retreated just enough to encourage Croakes and his clique to sell five million bushels, "going short" and to allow the market to close at ninety-five. The next day, Gregry-Converse traders bought another five million bushels, and the price went to a dollar and one cent, and Croakes and his clique were defeated. A week later, Cressler, unable to sustain his losses, committed suicide.

Had Jadwin been content with his victory, the tragedy would not have occurred. But the Pit would not lessen its hold. Victory seemed too sweet; power was too pleasant. Jadwin continued to buy, to support the market, to hold his corner. Now, however, he was on the defensive. He tried to sell, but each time the market dropped. He must buy, buy, buy. Then came the calamity. He had not taken into account the new harvest, and because he had not taken it into consideration he was forced to fight it. No longer was he fighting men, or cliques, but the new harvest. He mortgaged his property; he borrowed every cent from whatever source he could. It was the great general bringing his entire artillery to bear on the enemy. But the

16. Ibid., pp. 315-16.

buyers of the Pit were no longer afraid of the Great Bull. The new harvest was behind them, and Jadwin Must continue to buy in order to support the market. This he did until he had no more funds. Frantic, half-crazed, he still commanded that Gretry-Converse and Company buy for him. Realising the situation, they refused to obey; and it was then that Jadwin went into the Pit himself crying, "Give a dollar for July -- give a dollar for July!" He was not fighting men but the wheat:

And the avalanche, the undiked Ocean of the Wheat, leaping to the lash of the hurricane, struck him fairly in the face.

He heard it now, he heard nothing else. The Wheat had broken from his control. For months, he had, by the might of his single arm, held it back, but now it rose like the upbuilding of a colossal billow. It towered, towered, hung poised for an instant, and then, with a thunder as of the grind and crash of chaotic worlds, broke upon him, burst through the Pit, and raced past him, on and on to the eastward and to the hungry nations!¹⁷

The end came when the secretary of the Board of Trade appeared on the floor and announced that all business with Gretry, Converse and Co. must be closed at once.

Some days before Laura had told her husband that he must plan to be with her the evening of the thirteenth -- that he would leave all business and come to her on that day, if he loved her, for that was her birthday. It was on the thirteenth that the final battle was fought, although Laura did not know

17. Ibid., p. 392.

that; she only knew that it was eight o'clock and her husband had not come; no one had remembered her birthday. It was then that Sydney Carthill came bringing her a great bouquet of roses. He was an artist and had been deeply and sincerely in love with Laura ever since she came to Chicago. He had been her companion frequently while Jadwin was occupied with the business of the Pit, and tonight he alone had remembered her. Tortured at the sight of Laura's evident misery, Carthill asked her to go with him that he might devote his life to making her happy. Weary, heart-sick, discouraged, longing for someone to love her completely and entirely, Laura almost consented, when her husband came stumbling into the room, the old call on his lips: "Old girl Honey."

After Jadwin had recovered from his nervous collapse, he and Laura started on their way to the West, where they planned to live. Laura's small fortune was enough to provide comforts and luxuries, even, for the two of them. So they faced a future that promised to be happy, since they had freed themselves from the shackles of the Pit.

II.

The means by which one may study Norris's ideas on American life as he gives them in this book is by an examination of the typically American characters, the scenes and incidents representative of life in this country, and the comments which he makes on American life. All these are much fewer, however, and

much less varied in The Pit than in The Octopus.

As far as the representative characters are concerned, there are really only three. Curtis Jadwin, as the typical American speculator, has already been discussed. Sydney Carthill was seldom mentioned in the summary of The Pit, given in this chapter, for he has no connections with the story of the Pit and the wheat. However, he is a characteristic artist of the higher type; distinguished in appearance, wealthy, cultured, sensitive, deeply devoted to the beautiful in all types of art, emotional, discriminating in taste. Landry Court is an excellent example of the clerks of a brokerage firm, although he is an outstandingly excellent one. Except when at work in the Pit, he was absent-minded, impractical, easily excited; but once the gong sounded for the opening of business, no one was more alert, more shrewd, more sure and dependable than he. And he had the gift of the successful broker:

He could feel -- almost at his very finger tips -- how this market moved, how it strengthened, how it weakened. He knew just when to nurse it, to humor it, to let it settle, and when to crowd it, when to hustle it, when it would stand rough handling.¹⁸

Besides these three representative characters, there are the nondescripts who gathered every day in the customers' room below the Pit, and are examples, to a certain extent, of the small group of those who have gambled there, and lost. These men were tattered, unshaven, old, devoid of energy or ambition, coming from no one knew where, and going no one knew whither.

18. Ibid., p. 100.

They seemed content to sit there listening to the roar of the Pit, eating a dry sandwich, reading an old paper, dozing, or talking aimlessly with their neighbors. This then completes the list of those characters which are representative of certain social and business classes in America and from which one may gain a suggestion of life in this country from Norris's viewpoint.

The scenes which are typical of various phases of American life are almost as few, and are largely those of the activities of members of the upper strata of Chicago society -- their dinners, opera parties, house parties, yachting trips, summer outings, theatrical interests, and sports

This paragraph, describing a crowded vestibule of a theater, will suffice as an example of these scenes.

With every instant the number of people increased; progress became impossible, except an inch at a time. The women were, almost without exception, in light-coloured gowns, white, pale blue, Nile green, and pink, while over these costumes were thrown opera cloaks and capes of astonishing complexity and elaborateness. Nearly all were bareheaded, and nearly all wore aigrettes; a score of these, a hundred of them, nodded and vibrated with an incessant agitation over the heads of the crowd and flashed like mica flakes as the wearers moved. Everywhere the eye was arrested by the luxury of stuffs, the brilliance and delicacy of fabrics, laces as white and soft as froth, crisp, shining silks, suave satins, heavy gleaming velvets, and brocades and plushes, nearly all of them white -- violently so -- dazzling and splendid under the blaze of the electrics. The gentlemen, in long black overcoats, and satin mufflers, and opera hats, their hands under the elbows of their women-folk, urged or guided them forward, distressed, preoccupied, adjuring their parties to keep together; in their white-gloved fingers'

they held their tickets ready. For all the icy blasts that burst occasionally through the storm doors, the vestibule was uncomfortably warm, and into this steam-heated atmosphere a multitude of heavy odours exhaled -- the scent of crushed flowers, of perfume, of sachet, and even ¹⁹ occasionally -- the strong smell of damp sealskin.

We have already examined an example of a morning in the Pit. However, besides these Chicago pictures, Norris does give an excellent description of a little New England town, a variation in the setting. Here Laura spent two years along after her father's death, before she joined Page, who had gone to Chicago to school. The Dearborn home was an old-fashioned colonial building with low ceilings and ample fireplaces where once minute men had swung their kettles, and here Laura lived alone: Norris gives a glimpse of the town through her eyes:

It was picturesque, but lamentably narrow. The life was barren, the "New England Spirit" prevailed in all its severity; and this spirit seemed to her a veritable cult, a sort of religion, wherein the Old Maid was the priestess, the Spinster the officiating devotee, the thing worshipped the Great Unbeautiful, and the ritual unremitting, unrelenting Housework.²⁰

Norris is as generous with his descriptions of Chicago street scenes, as he is of those of the Pit. These are typical of a business street of any metropolis:

It was about nine o'clock; the weather was mild, the sun shone. La Salle Street swarmed with the multitudinous life that seethed about the doors of the innumerable offices of brokers and commission men of the neighborhood. To the right, in the perestyle of the Illinois Trust Building, groups of clerks, of messengers, of brokers, of clients, and

19. Ibid., pp. 5-6.

20. Ibid., p. 44.

of depositors formed and broke incessantly. To the left, where the facade of the Board of Trade blocked the street, the activity was astonishing, and in and out of the swinging doors of its entrance²¹ streamed an incessant tide, coming and going.

. . .

Or, again, it was South Water Street -- a jam of delivery wagons and market carts backed to the curbs, leaving only a tortuous path between the endless files of horses, suggestive of an actual barrack of cavalry. Provisions, marked produce, "garden truck" and fruits in an infinite welter of crates and baskets, boxes and sacks, crowded the sidewalks. The gutter was choked with an overflow of refuse cabbage leaves, soft oranges, decaying beet tops. The air was thick with the heavy smell of vegetation. Food was trodden under foot, food crammed the stores and warehouses to bursting. Food mingled with mud of the highway. The very dray horses were gorged with an unending nourishment of snatched mouthfuls picked from backboard, from barred top, and from the edge of the sidewalk . . . It was the Mouth of the city, and drawn from all directions over a territory of immense area, this glut of crude subsistence was sucked in as if into a rapacious gullet, to feed the sinews and to nourish the fibres of an immeasurable colossus.²²

Equal in vividness with this description of the city market street, is that of one of the railroad section:

Just before crossing the bridge on the north side of the river she [Laura] had caught a glimpse of a great railway terminus. Down below there, rectangular, scientifically paralleled and squared, the Yard disclosed itself. A system of grey rails, beyond words complicated, opened out and spread immeasurably. Switches, semaphores, and signal towers stood here and there. A dozen trains, freight and passenger, puffed and steamed, waiting the word to depart. Detached engines hurried in and out of sheds and round-houses, seeking their trains, or bunting the ponderous freight cars into switches; trundling up and down, clanking, shrieking, their bells filling the air with the clangour of tocsins. Men in visored caps shouted hoarsely, waving their arms and red flags; drays, their

21. Ibid., p. 78.

22. Ibid., pp. 61-2.

big dappled horses, feeding in their nose bags, stood backed up to the open doors of freight cars and received their loads. A train departed, roaring. Before midnight it would be leagues away boring through the Great Northwest, carrying Trade -- the life blood of the nations -- into communities of which Laura had never heard. Another train, reeking with fatigue, the air brakes screaming, arrived and halted, debauching a flood of passengers, business men, bringing trade -- a galvanising elixir -- from the very ends and corners of the continent.²³

Another description of Chicago as a representative of American cities is of a scene during a rain in the spring:

At length came three days of steady rain, followed by cloudless sunshine and full-bodied, vigorous winds straight from out the south.

Instantly the living embers in the tree top and the grass flats were fanned to flame. Like veritable fire, the leaves blazed up. Branch after branch caught and crackled; even the driest, the deadest, were enfolded in the resistless swirl of green. Tree tops ignited tree top; the parks and boulevards were one smother of radiance. From end to end and from side to side of the city, fed by the rains, urged by the south winds, spread billowing and surging the superb conflagration of the coming summer.

Then, abruptly, everything hung poised; the leaves, the flowers, the grass, all at the fullest stretch, stood motionless, arrested, while the heat, distilled, as it were, from all this seething green, rose like a vast pillar over the city, and stood balanced there in the iridescence of the sky moveless and immeasurable.

From time to time it appeared as if this pillar broke in the guise of the summer storms, and came toppling down upon the city in tremendous detonations of thunder and weltering avalanches of rain. But it broke only to reform, and no sooner had the thunder ceased, the rain intermitted, and the sun again came forth, than one received the vague impression of the swift rebuilding of the vast, invisible column that smothered the city under its bases, lowering higher and higher and higher into the rain-washed, crystal-clear atmosphere.²⁴

23. Ibid., pp. 60-1.

24. Ibid., pp. 198-9.

It is here that Norris seems to rise to those heights demanded by an epic subject. The sense of immensity and the feeling of grandeur and rather overwhelming meaningfulness which he gives to this background makes them, even standing alone, almost Homeric in significance.

Although Norris does not voice as many opinions concerning Americans and their characteristics and problems in The Pit as in The Octopus, nevertheless he does speak through his characters on certain topics. For example, he says of the importance of Chicago as a typical American city and its wide reaching influence:

The Great Grey City, brooking no rival, imposed its dominion upon a reach of country larger than many a kingdom of the Old World. For thousands of miles beyond its confines was its influence felt. Out, far out, far away in the snow and shadow of Northern Wisconsin forests, axes and saws bit the bark of century-old trees, stimulated by this city's energy. Just as far to the wouthward peck and drill leaped to the assault of veins of anthracite, moved by her central power. Her force turned the wheels of harvester and seeder a thousand miles distant in Iowa and Kansas. Her force spun the screws and propellers of innumerable squadrons of lake steamers crowding the Saulte Sainte Marie. For her and because of her all the Central States, all the Great Northwest roared with traffic and industry; sawmills screamed; factories, their smoke blackening the sky, clashed and flamed; wheels turned, pistons leaped in their cylinders; cog gripped cog; beltings clasped the drums of mammoth wheels; the controverters of forges belched into the clouded air, their tempest breath of molten steel.²⁵

Norris speaks, also, of the typical business man as he appears to him:

Ah, these men of the city, what could women ever

25. Ibid., p. 02.

know of them, of that other existence through which, freed from the influence of wife or mother or daughter or sister -- they passed every day from nine o'clock till evening? The gentle-mannered fellow, Clean-minded, clean-handed, of the breakfast or supper table was one man. The other, who or what was he? Down there in the muck and grime of the business district raged the Battle of the Street, and therein he was a being transformed, case hardened, supremely selfish, asking no quarter; no, nor giving any. Fouled with clutchings and grapplings of the attack, besmirched with the elbowing of low associates and obscure allies, he set his feet toward conquest, and mingled with the marchings of an army that surged forever forward and back; now in merciless assault, beating the fallen enemy under foot, now in repulse, equally merciless, trampling down the auxiliaries of the day before in a panic dash for safety; always cruel, always selfish, always pitiless.²⁶

The author's opinion of speculation has already been quoted.²⁷ This, then, is the sum of the few opinions which Frank Norris gives of phases of American life in The Pit. They are few, perhaps, because in this book he was more interested in giving the vivid portrayal of the Pit, its fascination, its importance, and its influence, rather than asserting his ideas on so many topics, as he seems to have delighted to do in The Octopus.

III.

Equally small is the amount of symbolism in The Pit. It would be almost safe to say that there is practically none, compared to the elaborate system in The Octopus. There are a few minor ones, however. His description of the Pit: "the Board of Trade building, black, monolithic, crouching on its foundations like a monstrous sphinx with blind eyes, silent, grave."²⁸

26. Ibid., p. 64.

27. See above, p. 8.

28. Ibid., p. 421.

might of course signify the unconquerable power and the blind injustice of the Pit. Also, to Norris, Chicago holds a certain symbolism which he himself explains:

It was Empire, the resistless subjugation of all this central world of the lakes and the prairies. Here, midmost in the land, beat the heart of the nation, whence inevitably must come its immeasurable power, its infinite, infinite, inexhaustable vitality. Here, of all her cities throbbed the true life -- the true power and spirit of America; gigantic, crude with the crudity of youth, disdaining rivalry; sane and healthy and vigorous; brutal in its ambition, arrogant in the new-found knowledge of its giant strength, prodigal of its wealth, infinite in its desires. In its capacity boundless, in its courage indomitable; subduing the wilderness in a single generation, defying calamity, and through the flame and the debris of a commonwealth in ashes, rising suddenly renewed, formidable, and Titanic.²⁹

So to him Chicago represents the unconquerable, optimistic spirit of America.

Norris speaks of business as reflecting the heartbeats of the nation; but this is only a minor symbolism. When Laura's pleasure at the opera is ruined by the continual murmur of voices discussing the failure in the Board of Trade, it is significant of the unhappiness that she was to suffer at the hands of the Pit which held her husband in its power. Norris speaks of business as a battle, of the Pit as a whirlpool, of the wheat as a flood, but, again, all these are only lesser symbolisms. Perhaps the greatest symbolic handling in the book is that of the wheat, although it is stressed very little. Wheat represents the great law of supply and demand; it is

29. Ibid., pp. 62-3.

indicative of the eternal rule that food must go to the people. The Pit emblemizes the puny strength of men who attempt for a time to monopolize the food, control it for their own gain; but the tide of the New Harvest comes sweeping across the country, breaking down all barriers, all obstacles made by man, and rushes on its way to the peoples of the world. Just as the wheat ruined Jadwin on its road to the east, so does food, the nourishment of the nations, keep to its appointed grooves, advancing steadily, continually, unswervingly on its way to those who must have it as they desire life.

IV.

In The Pit, Frank Norris pictures and exemplifies the spirit of America, the same spirit which he presented in The Octopus: the great, joyous spirit of a new country, brave, progressive, daring, colossal in conception, vast in enterprising industry, and unconquerable in its strength and ability to plan and execute, to desire and obtain. Jadwin in his great ventures in the Pit represents this industrial spirit of enterprise and adventure; still more does the wheat symbolize the higher spirit of advancement, victorious achievement in its life task to sustain and uphold the peoples of the world.

CHAPTER IV.

The Wolf.

The Wolf will never be written. It has passed into the realms of "might-have-been". Its form and faults and merits can be only a matter of conjecture now. In the preface to The Pit, Frank Norris suggested only this much of his plan: "The Wolf will probably have for its pivotal episode the relieving of a famine in an Old World community."¹ There are foreshadowings of this theme in some of his other works, and they are the best means by which the reader may understand a little more clearly something of what The Wolf would have been.

For example, in A Deal in Wheat there is an illustration of the hunger and suffering even in the United States as a result of speculation. It was on a dark, cold, rainy night that a long bread line stood shivering before a closed window, waiting. There was no talking; there was no life or desire to talk; there was only the sodden, hopeless silence of the line as it waited, waited for the loaf of charity bread which meant that starvation would be postponed for another day at least. Presently, the window opened, and a faint stir of expectation ran through the line. But the man at the window hung a card on the side of the building, and shut the window. The card said that no more bread could be distributed, for the time being, because of the high price of wheat due to speculation.

1. The Pit, preface.

In The Octopus the theme of The Wolf is mentioned, but only twice. One of these occasions is in Cegarquist's conversation with Magnus in which he suggested that the ranchers send their grain direct to the Orient and so obtain a good price for it, rather than allow the railroads to exploit them as it did. The East must buy the wheat, the manufacturer said, and it must look to America for the grain, because there is no other adequate source. The second occasion is when Mrs. Gerard told Presley of the relief committee of San Francisco society women who planned to send shiploads of wheat to India to relieve the awful famine there. Norris does suggest the importance of wheat to Europe in certain phases which he uses: "Nourisher of the Nations"; and "the great harvest. . . rolled like a flood". . . . to feed thousands of starving scarecrows on the barren plains of India";² and "strength of the nations".

In The Pit, however, the subject is repeatedly mentioned. According to A. B. Paine, Norris has, in The Pit, projected thoughts into the scenes and atmosphere, of the final book to come. He has suggested the final book throughout. Mr. Paine wonders if Norris felt that The Wolf would never be written, and so tried to complete the Trilogy in this way.³ In the second book of the Trilogy, Norris first explains the far-reaching influence of the Pit's control on wheat:

Nor was the Pit's centrifugal power any less. Because of some sudden eddy spinning outward from the middle of its turmoil, a dozen bourses of continental Europe clamoured with panic, a dozen Old-

2. The Octopus, p. 651.

3. A. B. Paine, "Octopus and Pit", Bookman, XVI, 565-7.

World banks, firm as the established hills, trembled and vibrated. Because of an unexpected caprice in the swirling of the inner current, some far-distant channel suddenly dried, and the pinch of famine made itself felt among the vine dressers of Northern Italy, the coal miners of Western Prussia. Or another channel filled, and the starved moujak of the steppes, and the hunger-shrunken coolie of the Ganges' watershed fed suddenly fat and made thank offerings before ikon and idol.⁴

On the subject of speculation and its effect, Norris expresses his opinion still more definitely through Mr. Cressler:

"Those fellows in the Pit don't own the wheat; never even saw it. . . . They don't care in the least about the grain. But there are thousands upon thousands of farmers out here in Iowa and Kansas or Dakota who do, and hundreds of thousands of poor devils in Europe who care even more than the farmer. I mean the fellows who raise the grain, and the other fellows who eat it. It's life or death for either of them. . . . It's like this: If we send the price of wheat down too far, the farmer suffers, the fellow who raises it; if we send it up too far, the poor man in Europe suffers, the fellow who eats it. And food to the peasant on the continents is bread - not meat or potatoes, as it is with us. The only way to do so that neither the American farmer nor the European peasant suffers, is to keep wheat at an average, legitimate value. The moment you inflate or depress that, somebody suffers right away. . . . Think of it, the food of hundreds and hundreds of thousands of people just at the mercy of a few men down there on the Board of Trade. They make the price. They say just how much the peasant shall pay for his loaf of bread. If he can't pay the price he simply starves."⁵

A definite example of this effect of speculation on Europe is in the ventures of Jadwin in the Pit. When he had cornered the wheat, he was able to demand any price he desired of European buyers, who clamored for wheat, that meant food to the people of their lands. When he explained the situation to

4. The Pit, p. 80.

5. Ibid., p. 129.

Laura, she asked him why he did not give the millions of bushels of wheat which he owned to the ones who were starving for it. The suggestion was ridiculous to Jadwin's mind. The speculator did not worry about the humane side of his deals in the Pit. With the passing of the suggestion, passed the momentary thought of charity to those dying from lack of food, and Curtis Jadwin continued to hold the wheat for an exorbitant price. Then he heard a story, a very unpleasant one. It came indirectly through Cortshell and concerned an American art student who was making a tramping tour through northern Italy.

"And I met this boy", the student had said, "on the high road, about a kilometre out of Arezzo. He was a fine fellow of twenty or twenty-two. He knew nothing of the world -- but when I announced myself American, he roused at once.

"Ah, American", he said. "We know of your com-patriot, then, here in Italy -- this Jadwin of Chicago, who has bought all the wheat. We have no more bread. The loaf is small as the fist, and costly. We cannot buy it, we have no money. For myself, I do not care. I am young. I can eat lentils and cress. But' -- and here his voice was a whisper -- 'but my mother -- my mother.'"⁶

Here it is that "we hear the wolf bellow and roar; the gaunt cry of hunger, the snarl and bark and blighting curse of greed."⁷ This sample of Norris's ability to describe effectively such a situation leads Mr. Paine to say that the details of a famine by Norris would be masterly, somber, terrible.⁸

There is even a more excellent example of the skill and power which Norris would have had at his command in writing The Wolf. In the essay, Comida, he relates an experience of his

6. Ibid., pp. 334-5.

7. and 8. A. B. Paine, "Octopus and Pit", Bookman, XVI, 565.

own in Cuba during the Spanish-American War. He and a friend, having gone to Caney to look into the situation there, found Dr. Bangs attempting to cook and serve food to thousands of refugees. Touched by the sight of the starving natives and forgetting their own business in the town, the two men stayed to help the good doctor. These three, who made up the impromptu relief committee, intrenched themselves behind a terrace by the church, and there over three huge fires set cornmeal mush to cooking in great camp kettles. When the food was nearly done, Norris called to the crowd who waited that the children should come first. A little later and the mush was ready to be served:

I went to the edge of the terrace and leaned over. It was yet light enough to see, to see about three thousand children, half of them naked, the other half ragged beyond words. What a mass! Close to the gate, the jam was terrific; they were packed as sand is packed, so that they moved, not as individuals, but as groups and masses, swaying forward and back, and from side to side without knowing why. I could see but a pavement of faces, crushed together cheek to cheek, upturned, pinched and agonized, shrill-voiced with the little rat that nipped and gnawed at their poor starved stomachs. Further on, where the press was not so great, the children reached toward me empty cans, p pots, pails, tin cups, vessels of all sizes and descriptions, and they put their hands (not their fingers) into their mouths with always the same cry of unutterable distress, "Comida! comida!"⁹ (which is, being interpreted, "food")⁹

The next day, the relief committee attempted to serve everyone, but found the work difficult.

They fought on the steps of the terrace -- men, women, and children, -- and gnashed one another with the sharp edges of their tins as they struggled for first place in a way that was sickening to see.¹⁰

9. Comida, Atlantic Monthly, LXXXIII (1899) 344.

10. Ibid., p. 347.

Finally the two volunteer workers were forced to go on to their next assignment.

Food and workers were alike insufficient to meet the demands of thirty thousand starving people in those first two days. We stayed and worked as long as we could, and a little after noon we rode away in a drenching rain. But for nearly half a mile down the road, as our steaming horses toiled through mud, fetlock-deep, the vague murmur of the crowd on the plaza, came back to us, prolonged, lamentable, pitiful beyond expression -- the cry of a people dying for lack of food: "Comida! Comida!"¹¹

From these examples, then, one may be able to realize, to a certain extent, something of the spirit and atmosphere which The Wolf would have had; and to appreciate the power and force and skill which Frank Norris would have been able to command to make The Wolf a glorious and fitting finale of the Trilogy of Wheat.

11. Ibid., p. 348.

CHAPTER V.

CONCLUSION

Frank Norris conceived and wrote his Trilogy with a definite purpose in mind. This purpose was to portray, as truly as he could, American life, representative American life. And he felt that the underlying theme which he chose, Wheat, would symbolize the spirit of America better than any other subject which he might have used as his basic emblem. He realized that the three phases of the movement of wheat from the producer to the consumer; that is, the production, distribution, and consumption of the grain, would, as he planned it, include the activities of more classes of people than any other single emblem. In this assumption Norris was correct; and because of his choice of subject he was more able to accomplish the purpose he had set for himself than if he had selected a less representative theme. For he has accomplished his purpose, even though he did not live to complete the Trilogy.

The Octopus is indeed valuable for its comment on American life. In Chapter Two of this thesis, there is a detailed study of the various pictures which Norris presents, and the comments which he makes concerning them, so that here only a brief summary of these will be necessary. There are many characters typical of as many classes of people in the United

States: the rancher, the poet, the manufacturer, the society woman, the German-American, the engineer, the mission priest, the aesthete, the politician, the railroad manager. The scenes which Norris presents in the book are true to American scenes in various sections, but, of course, in the western part of the country, especially: ranches, mountains, an old German homestead, a Spanish-American mission, old deserted towns, a new, thriving city, a flower-seed farm. Particularly in some of the incidents which he relates does Norris catch the true spirit of the West. These are especially representative of life west of the Mississippi: rabbit-round-ups, barn dances, the sowing and reaping of acres and acres of wheat, great flocks of sheep, the fight at the irrigation ditch, a train robbery. Incidents and scenes which he depicts might occur anywhere in the United States, but some of them belong especially to the West: a man-hunt, a fight between the occupants of two engines, the raffling of a picture at an exclusive club, a dinner at the home of a great railway magnate, the loading of wheat on a ship bound for India, farm laborers eating their evening meal after a day of hard work, the activities of mobs, poetry writing, and begging on a city street. In The Octopus, Norris gives several opinions, also, of American characteristics: Americans are not churchgoers; Americans follow and encourage fakers, Americans are indifferent to public affairs, and Americans allow themselves to be exploited by the trusts.

The Pit presents a narrower section of America than the

first book of the Trilogy, but the life and scenes and incidents in those districts in which the action takes place are very important in the completed picture of American life. The artist, the speculator, and the brokerage clerk are the only characters which might evidently stand for a certain class; and the scenes are representative of only three places: a small New England town, a summer home on Lake Geneva, and Chicago. There are many good descriptions of Chicago as a typical American city - descriptions of its business streets, its residential section, its markets, its river and railroad districts, its theatres, and its Pit. The actions which Norris describes are as narrowly bounded: a visit of the "good women" of the New England village to reason with a more frivolous inhabitant; attending the theater, a house party, horseback riding in the parks, and speculation. In this novel, the author makes no general comments on American life or characteristics.

Frank Norris has succeeded in giving his readers widely representative pictures of American life, yet what is the value of these? To the student of history any such scene is valuable, merely because it is an example of life in America. But the views and incidents which the author uses are important for more reasons than this. The first is that these glimpses of American life are exceptionally real. Norris lived for a number of years in Chicago and in San Francisco. He was a guest on a ranch near San Francisco. So when he planned these novels, he made a careful and thorough study of

the manners and customs of the people of the sections, of the geography of the country, and of the plans of the cities which he was going to use in his books. Because of this preparation, and because he had the gift for observing his characters and settings so clearly and surely;¹ and because it was his creed to treat his subjects realistically, sympathetically, and truthfully, he was able to give his readers more than mere pictures of American life; rather he has given us vivid, pulsating, never-to-be-forgotten scenes of life the world over. These two novels, as we have seen, stand for the two great divisions of our country's industrial life: The Octopus represents Agriculture or Labor, and The Pit, Capital; and in picturing these two great phases, Norris has written of the whole of America. And herein lies the chief value of these books: they reflect that spirit of optimism that potency, and self-assurance which makes America one of the leading nations of the world.

The Trilogy is valuable from the literary viewpoint, also. The epic quality of the subject alone would make it important, for the theme is vast in its scope and possibilities;

The characters in The Octopus and The Pit are thoroughly lifelike. As Mr. B. O. Flower contends in a review of Norris's books, the main characters in The Octopus are strongly individualized and powerfully and impressively drawn, and those in The Pit are very real.² Hamlen Garland in The Critic says

1. In The Critic, XLII, 216, in an article, "The Work of Frank Norris", Hamlin Garland says that he seemed to absorb life without effort.
2. B. O. Flower, "Octopus and Pit", Arena, XXIX, 440.

that Curtis Jadwin is worthy to sit beside Silas Lapham.³ William Dean Howells believes that there is something elemental in Norris's characters, something which gives them the pathos of tormented Titans.⁴ Titans, characters with almost superhuman power and personality, are necessary in books of epical quality; and Norris therefore lived up to his high standard. It is this ability to make his characters unforgettable, to make them stand out vivid and alive in the reader's mind, to make their joys and their sufferings so real as to become a part of the reader's own experiences -- it is because of this that Norris must be accounted one of the most forceful writers of his century.

The literary value of the Trilogy which has been assured because of the importance of the central theme, and the excellence of the characters, is augmented by Norris's own style. There is a certain ease of phrase, a sincerity and veracity in the choice of words that wins the reader's interest and confidence. But more than this is the great forward-sweeping movement of words, the breathless rush of a succession of expressions vast in connotation, a colossal building up of sentence on sentence until the result is a sensation as of a sudden dizzied exaltation almost physical as well as mental. Such a powerful, startling manner of writing was necessary to uphold the epic subject which he chose; Norris did not fail to support his Homeric theme in a Homeric style. It might seem that such

3. H. Garland, "Work of Frank Norris", Critic, XLII, 216.

4. W. D. Howells, "Frank Norris", North American Review, CLXXV, 769.

a continuous use of words with such great meanings and intense suggestions might become wearying; but it does not prove so. The effect is rather one of increasing strength and impressiveness.

A method of description which he uses in The Octopus is the introducing of important characters with the same phrases. To some readers this might seem a little formal and monotonous; and yet the result is happy. It has the same effect as the air with which the appearance of more important singers are always heralded in an opera.

Especially excellent and worthy of being called good literature are Norris's descriptions. He has the talent for seeing the significant details and for setting them forth in the proper relationship, and then attaching to them an unusual and allegorical meaning which impresses them most clearly and vividly on the mind of the reader. It would be practically impossible for some writers to handle these symbolic ideas without making them appear ludicrous and far-fetched; but Norris has the gift of making his emblematic conclusions seem so real and plausible that they are all the more impressive because of their unusualness.

The Octopus and The Pit are not the same in style. The former is much more complicated in plan, and reflects a much greater dramatic power, while the latter is more mature and concise and polished. But in them both is evident proof of Norris's talent, for colossal conceptions, his genius for supporting

these conceptions, and his ability to create tense, dramatic, soul-stirring situations, and real, flesh and blood characters.

The certain proof that the novels of the Trilogy are real literature cannot be in explanations and discussions by someone. but by actually reading these books, and thus putting oneself under Norris's power.

What will be the effect on the readers of coming generations when they have done this? Will they pronounce Norris an excellent writer, or will his Trilogy be a lost epic, a "neglected epic"? It is not altogether conjecture to say that to future generations The Octopus and The Pit will still be compelling, just as they are now. There are several reasons. In the first place, they will always be valuable historically as a picture of Western life and of a typical American city. The fight between the railroad and the ranchers is a true picture of a certain phase of the westward development of this country, and therefore the account of it is valuable to the student of economics and history. According to B. O. Flower, The Octopus is one of the most powerful and faithful social studies in literature.⁵

These novels are final in their record of this phase of the growth of America and this part of the struggle between Capital and labor. A second reason that the Trilogy will be regarded as excellent literature by coming generations is the interest which they must have because their characters are treated so realistically and sympathetically, because their plots are so well conceived and executed, and because their

5. B. O. Flower, "The Octopus", Arena, XXVII, 547.

style has a power which is as inexplicable as it is peculiarly Norris's own. The readers of the next generation cannot fail to appreciate the fine passages of description in these books, passages which are unsurpassed in their beauty and startling forcefulness. These novels will live because of the epic quality of their theme and the Homeric style in which they are written. But above all, they will live because they present in such a convincing manner and represent in such a splendid way the fine, forward-moving, achieving, resistless spirit of America.

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