THE ROLE OF PRESLEY IN NORRIS' THE OCTOPUS

A Monograph
Presented to
the Faculty of the Department of English
Morehead State University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
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June 1972
Accepted by the faculty of the School of Humanities, Morehead State University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts degree.

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June 26, 1972
(date)
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CHAPTER I

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Frank Norris' novel The Octopus is a novel that shows a relationship between the primitive forces in nature and human nature. The forces of human nature are shown primarily through the ranchers in their battle with the Pacific and Southwestern Railroad; the primitive forces in nature are the forces of the wheat as it grows and sustains the earth with its life force.

Norris himself explained that when the conception of The Octopus first dawned on him, its theme was "as big as all outdoors."

The characters in the novel show the "bigness" of the theme because they are caught between both physical and economic forces. The wheat is the predominant symbol since it fulfills its function as the appeaser of human hunger. The dramatic action of the novel is supplied by the struggle between the ranchers and the railroad, for the railroad resorts to all types of methods in dealing with the ranchers—from discriminatory rates to the

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corruption of legislatures and courts. It has opened for settlement certain areas of the San Joaquin Valley under promises and inducements, but the title of the land has remained with the railroad with the understanding that the settlers could eventually purchase it at a nominal price. After the settlers lease, cultivate, and enhance the value of the land, the railroad offers to sell it at exorbitant rates. The ranchers protest heatedly, and law officials are sent by the railroad commission to evict the farmers from the land.  

Against this conflict is the character Presley who must come to some kind of understanding of the conflict going on around him. Presley is that character who witnesses all the destruction and who reports the action. Of course, Presley, in the beginning, is an outsider, a man who is not really concerned with the conflict. He merely reports. Yet, his involvement with the ranchers grows, and we see him emerge as not the dreamy figure he was in the beginning but the violent one he is when he strikes out against the railroad.

Presley's growth as a sensitive, educated man is also noted when he reports the action around him. If he emerges somewhat disillusioned at the end of the novel, he has still profited from his experiences--he is less dreamy and less romantic and more prone to live

\[2\text{ibid.}\]
in a world of tragedy and renewal. Presley is capable of existing in this type of world because he has been involved in the affairs of the ranchers.

The subject dealt with in this monograph is an interpretation of the role of Presley as the character in the novel who offers an educated and sensitive view of the destructive elements in the conflict between the ranchers and the railroad. In interpreting Presley's role in the novel, his growth as a character will also be reported, for it is through his involvements with the ranchers, especially Annixter, and Vanamee, that we see Presley develop as a realistic character. He functions as both an observer of the social phenomenon of the ranchers and the railroad and as the artist in search of materials for his literary attempts. Presley must reconcile himself to the problems of the ranchers against the railroad before he can find his identity as a poet.
PROCEDURE

Sensitivity and insignificance are key words in the discussion of Presley from Frank Norris' *The Octopus*. Presley is that sensitive, often romantic literary man who is forced from his reverie to the destruction of both man and universe. This movement of Presley's growth from romantic literary agent to involved spectator is noted in this monograph. Presley as both social agent and literary agent is discussed, for Presley's success as both character and poet hinges upon his roles of social responsibility and literary concern.

Chapter II deals with Frank Norris' views on literature; specific emphasis is placed on Presley as that character who reinforces Norris' views on the writer's responsibility to the reading public.

Chapter III deals explicitly with the role of Presley as that sensitive, educated reporter of the ranchers in conflict with the powerful Pacific and Southwestern Railroad. Presley's growth as a character is also noted, for through his emergence as an involved person one can see his sensitive nature. Chapter III also deals with two characters who greatly influence Presley, Annixter and Vanamee. They stand as representative of the two roles of Presley: Annixter as the man of action and Vanamee as the poet of instinct.
The last part of the monograph is a conclusion that summarizes Presley's growth as person able to exist in the world because he shared experiences with the ranchers; and in his sensitive way achieved some understanding of the affairs of man.
CHAPTER II

NORRIS' VIEWS ON LITERATURE

Frank Norris refused to believe that the novelist was completely independent about consulting his readers about what he should write. He felt that the novelist was definitely limited in the nature of his work and that he certainly should be selective about what he says in his novels. Norris believed that the novelist should always have his audience in mind, watching every word he writes and testing its effect on his reading public.3

According to Norris, the novel is the most powerful tool at expressing truth—truth that is essential to the civilization of man. The novel is that form of art that helps to make man less savage and gives him a powerful method of expressing his thoughts.4

Norris asserts that the novelist is the person who reaches the greatest audience.

Right or wrong, the People turn to him [the novelist] the moment he speaks, and what he says they believe.5

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4Ibid., p. 5.

5Ibid., p. 7.
According to Norris, the three greatest modes of moulding public opinion were the pulpit, the press, and the novel.

The Pulpit, the Press, and the Novel—these indisputably are the greatest moulders of public opinion and public morals today. But the Pulpit speaks but once a week; the Press is read with lightning haste and the morning news is waste paper by noon. But the novel goes into the home to stay. It is read word for word; is talked about, discussed; its influence penetrates every chink and corner of the family.⁶

Norris certainly did not believe that the writer of novels should be he who writes for royalties and mere profits. Since truth is the indispensible tool of the novelist, it should not be sacrificed for material gains.

The people have a right to the Truth as they have a right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. It is not right that they be exploited and deceived with false views of life, false characters, false sentiment, false morality, false history, false philosophy, false emotions, false heroism, false notions of self-sacrifice, false views of religion, of duty, of conduct, and of manners.⁷

Above all, the novelist must be he who is sincere and responsible to the many people who read and believe what he says. The novelist must be in constant quest of the truth, for that is what he owes his reading public.

In explaining that "truth" which he feels the novelist owes his reading public, Norris goes ahead

and states in his essay "A Problem in Fiction" that "truth" and "accuracy" are not always the same thing.

In the fine arts we do not care one little bit about what life actually is, but what it looks like to an interesting, impressionable man, and if he tells his story or paints his picture so that the majority of intelligent people will say, "Yes, that must have been just about what would have happened under those circumstances," he is true. His accuracy cuts no figure at all. He need not be accurate if he does not choose to be. If he sees fit to be inaccurate in order to make his point--so only his point be the conveying of a truthful impression--that is his affair.8

The novelist, according to Norris, when expressing this truth for all mankind, would become a type of transcendent being, expressing a degree of universal truth.

If an American novelist should go deep into the lives of the people of any one community that he could find the thing that is common to another class of people a thousand miles away, he would have gone too deep to be exclusively American. He would not only be American, but English as well. He would have sounded the world note. He would be a writer not national but international, and his countrymen would be all humanity, not the citizens of any one nation.9

The novelist who is able to speak for all mankind possesses, according to Norris in his essay "The True Reward of the Novelist," a sixth sense--a sense that

8Ibid., p. 173. 9Ibid., p. 67.
sets him apart from the mere writer of tales.

Not only this [close study of people and actualities], but to know the life around you, you must live—if not among people, then in people. You must be something more than a novelist if you can, something more than just a writer. There must be that nameless sixth sense or sensibility in you that great musicians have in common with great inventors and great scientists, the thing that does not enter into the work, but that is back of it; the thing that would make of you a good man as well as a good novelist.10

This sixth sense might be called sincerity—sincerity to the task before the novelist and the value of his mission at striving to state the truth for all mankind. Norris did not feel that this sixth sense, this sincerity, this sensibility could be learned through scholarship in the colleges.

One chooses to believe that the college of the end of the present century will be an institution where only specialized work will be indulged in. There will be courses in engineering, in biology, in electricity, in mining, etc., and the so-called general "literary" or "classical" courses will be relegated to the limbo of things no longer useful. The man who studies law at college finishes his work a lawyer... But the student in the "literary" courses does not—no, not in a thousand instances—graduate a literary man.11

To Norris, the ability to write was in part in-born. In his essay "Story-Tellers vs Novelists," he contends that the story teller is he who is involved

10Ibid., p. 17. 11Ibid., p. 203.
with instinct—like the small child who feels the need to express himself.

But sometimes the little storyteller does not die, but lives on and grows with the man, increasing in favour with God, till at last he dominates the man himself, and "the playroom of the old days" simply widens its walls till it includes the street outside, and the street beyond and other streets, the whole city, the whole world, and the storyteller discovers a set of new toys to play with, and new objects of a measureless environment to dramatize about, and in exactly, exactly the same spirit in which he trundled his tin train through the halls and shouted boarding orders from the sofa he moves now through the world's playroom making up stories; only now his heroes and his public are outside himself and he alone may play the author.12

Norris categorized novels into three kinds—those that tell something; those that show something; and those that prove something. The ordinary novel is that novel that tells something, such as any tale of adventure. The second type of novel, the novel that shows something, devotes itself to the mind of human beings. The third class of novel and the best, according to Norris, is the novel that proves something and devotes itself to the study of man.13

Norris places the novel with a purpose as the highest form because it must tell something, must show something, and must affect the minds of its

12Ibid., pp. 31-32. 13Ibid., p. 21.
readers. Its success lies in its ability to picture social and elemental forces of men and women in the society.\textsuperscript{14}

The social tendencies must be expressed by means of analysis of the character of the men and women who compose that society and the two must be combined and manipulated to evolve the purpose—to find the value of $x$.\textsuperscript{15}

Norris contends that the novel with a purpose is a preaching novel but that it is a preaching novel in that it preaches by telling and showing things. The author is the manipulator because he selects what is to be told or to be shown and the reader absorbs these incidents. Through this absorption on the part of the reader and the manipulation on the part of the author, the purpose of the novel is brought about full force.\textsuperscript{16}

The novel with a purpose is sometimes that novel which records human suffering and tragedy and does not always end happily.

If there is much pain in life, all the more reason that it should appear in a class of literature, which, in its highest form, is a sincere transcription of life.\textsuperscript{17}

To Frank Norris, fiction was not merely imagination and sentiment; it was an art that was broad, imaginative, and yet representative of common life and men in general. Norris wanted to say of himself:

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{14}Ibid., p. 22.
\item \textsuperscript{15}Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{16}Ibid., pp. 22-23.
\item \textsuperscript{17}Ibid., p. 25.
\end{itemize}
He had dealt with it [life] honestly; he did not dab at the edge of the busi­ness; he had sent his fist straight through it.18

Presley in The Octopus expresses many of Frank Norris' views concerning the literary man and what he should express in his literary works. For example, Norris felt that the novelist or poet was not completely independent about the content of his work. Presley in The Octopus is unsuccessful as a writer in the beginning because he refuses to accept the people of the area. His dream is to write the great epic poem of the West, but he does not write anything until he becomes involved in the people and their problems. Thus, Presley is dependent on his audience, the farmers of the West, for the success he attains when he writes "The Toilers," his first literary attempt.

Presley further echoes Norris' views of the literary man when he is advised by Vanamee to publish his poem not in a literary magazine, but in a newspaper. Since Norris felt that the writer must write for his audience, it would be appropriate for Presley to publish his poem in the newspaper, for Presley's poem must be read by the common man, the man involved in the affairs of the railroad, and not merely the literary people.

Truth, according to Norris, is that tool by which the author gains success. Presley's search for the truth is important in his quest for success as a poet. Only when he forsakes his detached, romantic views of the old California and concentrates on the affairs of the ranchers, is he able to write any poem at all.

Along with truth goes sincerity, and Presley must be sincere to the task of writing his poetry. Before he can achieve sincerity, Presley must come to a degree of understanding as to the problems that the ranchers are having with the railroad. As long as he remains aloof from the affairs, he will not write a poem that will be accepted by mankind.

Presley's sensibility as a literary man is not that sensibility learned in the college. His experience comes from his relations with mankind. He must become seeped in the life around him. He must embrace the affairs of the land before he can possibly write about them. Only until he becomes involved is he able to produce any literary work. He is that learned writer who must come to some degree of understanding to the affairs of the land if he is to become a responsive poet—a poet responding to the troubles around him.

Of course, of the three classes of novels that Norris speaks of, The Octopus is that novel with a purpose. The Octopus is that novel that definitely
does record human suffering and tragedy. It is that novel that expresses a truth for all mankind, and Presley is that character who strives to understand the tragedy that he witnesses. In a sense, the sensitive romantic is that type of person who must, in the end, come to some degree of understanding the problems around him. He is typical of the literary man in quest of the truth which will make him free.

Presley, like Norris, tries to understand the tragic events that he witnesses, for life is his main subject and a study of man should be the end result of his work. Presley works in that direction as he comes to grips with himself in relation to the tragic events around him.
CHAPTER III

THE ROLE OF PRESLEY IN THE OCTOPUS

Presley's role in Frank Norris' The Octopus is to provide the view of the educated and refined sensibility—a sensibility that enlarges his education because he is forced into a recognition of the insignificance of the individual in comparison to the operation of the forces of nature.

Warren French in his book Frank Norris maintains that:

Norris treats Presley with mild contempt as a type illustrative of the ineffectiveness of the literary man in coping with the violent forces of the world.¹⁹

True, Presley at the beginning of the novel is naive and romantic. His big dream is to write the grand epic poem of the West, and in order to write this poem he must live close to the area and the people. Presley is a young, romantic intellectual who is not really involved with the area. He is more of an observer, but

as he becomes more involved as a person he is able to appear more human.

Presley is that character who is given the responsibility of reporting and stating the action of the ranchers against the railroad. He views the dramas from the first conflict to the final destruction; he is present at every crisis; witnesses all the suffering; suffers, too, with the ranchers; and in the end still emerges as the dreamy, solitary figure he was at the beginning of the novel. If at the beginning he is the romantic poet, at the end he is the disillusioned one, trying to console himself with the view that the wheat is on its way to feed the starving children of India.\textsuperscript{20}

Presley is both literary agent and social agent in the novel. He feels moved to write the great epic poem about the West even before he becomes accustomed to the area, even before he realizes the epic struggle going on around him. He is the social agent in that he witnesses and reports the action of the ranchers and the railroad, a struggle that will undoubtedly force him to an awareness of the affairs of men. This struggle awakens him from a type of romantic, dreamy reverie and places him in a realm of realization of the problems of the ranchers.

\textsuperscript{20}Marchand, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 73-74.
At the beginning, Presley gives us the descriptions of the San Joaquin Valley in California. He, the dreamy poet, does not seem concerned with the troubles of the ranchers against the railroad. He does not want to be bothered by these affairs and when asked by Hooven, a hired hand, to intercede for him so that he will not lose his job on the ranch, Presley becomes impatient.

Presley was impatient to be on his way again. He had nothing to do with the management of the ranch, and if Hooven wanted any advice from him, it was so much breath wasted. These uncouth brutes of farmhands and petty ranchers, grimed with the soil they worked upon, were odious to him beyond words.21

Presley is in direct contrast to the "uncouth brutes" as he calls the ranchers. He is described as having a delicate and highly sensitive nature. It was said that he was the kind of person who would avoid evil through good taste.22 Presley is a romantic in that he does not fit into the struggle the ranchers are having with the Pacific and Southwestern Railroad. In the midst of the turmoil, Presley wants to write the great epic of the West. He is determined that the poem should be written about the hardy, brave people.

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22Ibid., p. 6.
who were building an empire in the West. He is unaware that the struggle going on around him is material for his poem. He wants to write about something magnificent and sweeping.

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 people should be included—they and their legends, their folk lore, their fightings, their loves, and their lusts, their blunt, grim humour, their stoicism under stress, their adventures, their treasures, found in a day and gambled in a night, their direct and crude speech, their generosity and cruelty, their heroism and bestiality, their religion and profanity, their self-sacrifice and obscenity—a true and fearless setting forth of a passing phase of history, uncompromising, sincere.23

To Presley, the new California seems somewhat unimportant and crude compared to the romantic stories as told by the old Mexican. Presley thinks:

On one hand it was his ambition to portray life as he saw it—directly, frankly, and through no medium of personality or temperament. But, on the other hand, as well, he wished to see everything through a rose-coloured mist.24

This predicament is characteristic of the refined Presley; not only is he confused about how to portray his epic but also he is unmoved by the action around him. He is unmoved by Harran's announcement that the farmers have lost their case in court against the railroad. However, he is moved by the old man's

23 Ibid., pp. 7-8.  
24 Ibid., p. 10.
stories of old California. This rose-coloured mist is the dreamy-eyed Presley's way of looking back to the romantic stories of old. He wants to write an epic of the people in all their moods and movements; yet, the talk of the bickerings irritated him, and he concludes that he did not care for any of those things.

Presley feels far removed from the wearying news of the railroad. Finally he reflects:

Never would he grasp the subject of his great poem. To-day, the life was colourless. Romance was dead. He had lived too late.25

It is at this point that Presley comes to some degree of realization with the current problems. He reflects that he does not want to write of the past, but of the present.

Romance was dead. Reality was what he longed for, things he had seen.26

He reflects on how to make the reality of the present compatible with the romance of the past. He feels the need to reconcile himself to the present and yet somehow retain some spark of the past—the romantic. But at this point the conflict of interest of the railroad and the ranchers assumes such importance in Presley's world that he comes to some realization to the signifi-

25Ibid., p. 20.  
26Ibid.
cance of the present. With this change of view, Pres-
ley develops as a character involved in the conflict,
rather than just a mere reporter. Reconciling himself
to the reality of the present troubles that the men
are having with the railroad is his first step toward
becoming a character, rather than a disillusioned
romantic.

Presley, as the romantic poet, confesses his de-
sire to write the great epic poem.

It is the man who is lacking, the poet.
We have been educated away from it all.
We are out of touch. We are out of
tune.27

He is reprimanded by Vanamee, the mystic poet,
when Vanamee tells him:

But why write? Why not live in it?
Steep oneself in the heat of the
desert, the glory of the sunset, the
blue haze of the mesa and the cañon.

Presley is again confused and does not recognize
the epic proportions of the land in relation to the
people who are a part of it. He is the dreamy one--
the person who is removed from the area and yet does
not recognize this separation. As he walks on in his
dreamy state, he is suddenly brought back to the present
when the speeding locomotive slams through a herd of
sheep, scattering them along the tracks. The accident

27Ibid., p. 38. 28Ibid., p. 39.
almost kills Presley. Along with his near accident comes the reality of the power of the locomotive. He is shaken from his reverie and is left troubled by the scene.

Presley turned away, horror struck, sick at heart, overwhelmed with a quick burst of irresistible compassion for this brute agony he could not relieve. The sweetness was gone from the evening, the sense of peace, of security, and placid contentment was stricken from the landscape.²⁹

It is at this point that Presley, to a degree, is brought forth as a flesh-and-blood character, trying to cope with the destructiveness of the railroad. He concludes that the railroad is:

The galloping monster—the symbol of vast power, huge, terrible, flinging the echo of its thunder over all the ranches in the valley, leaving blood and destruction in its path.³⁰

Presley is brought closer to an understanding of the land and its problems; yet, he is still a spectator, expressing his views of horror at the destructiveness of the monster—a force created by man and yet destroying man.

Although in the beginning Presley fails to see the importance of the land to the ranchers, he becomes more aware of its importance through his acquaintance with the ranchers, especially Annixter and Vanamee.

²⁹Ibid., p. 47. ³⁰Ibid., p. 48.
Not only is he brought to a realization of the land, but also he is brought to a realization of himself. He is involved in a power struggle between the ranchers and the railroad officials, and through this involvement he develops as a character and a person.

Just as Presley is observant in his views of the destructive power of the railroad, he is also observant to the omnipresence of it, for he sees that the railroad can be a force that moves upon the earth, not only as a destructive element but also as a tranquil one.

But the moving train no longer carried with it the impression of terror and destruction that had so thrilled Presley's imagination the night before. It passed slowly on its way with a mournful roll of wheels...leaving a sense of melancholy in its wake.31

Here, we see Presley as the interpreter of the duality of the railroad—the force and the tranquility of it. The railroad, like Presley, has two roles. He is both observer and interpreter, and the railroad is both destructive and utilitarian.

As Presley becomes more involved with the affairs of the ranchers, he is invited to the meetings held by the ranchers at Magnus Derrick's house. As the men discuss the latest news that the railroad officials have increased the price of the land, Presley, showing

31Ibid., p. 89.
no involvement, smokes and lounges on the sofa. The threat by the railroad to take away the land from the ranchers is a threat to break the unity of man and land. Presley, of course, does not feel this threat and so rubs the cat, Princess Nathalie.32

Presley is confronted by Magnus when he asks him if he telephoned Osterman, the man who is responsible for the formation of the Ranchers' League. Presley assures him that he telephoned Osterman, but this is the extent of his involvement at this point. Even when Osterman launches the proposal to bribe the railroad commission, Presley remains uninvolved.

When Annixter storms out of the meeting because of his refusal to take part in the business of bribery, it is interesting to note that it is Presley who reprimands him.

What's the use of making a fool of yourself, Annixter? You act just like a ten-year old boy. If Osterman wants to play the goat, why should you help him out?33

Presley, the outsider, is the one who tries to placate Annixter, the one who is struggling to win over the railroad. After the meeting is over, Presley is left alone to contemplate the stillness of the room. Here, Presley serves his function as observer. He is

32Ibid., p. 95. 33Ibid., p. 118.
the character who sees both sides of the situation and yet remains actively uninvolved, even though the people around him are being destroyed.

Presley's first real reaction to the ranchers' problems is shown when he overhears Dyke tell about his being ruined by the railroad. Dyke, who is destroyed by the railroad, becomes a vicious animal. He is that character who dreams of wealth so he can take care of his mother and send his daughter to school. He is destroyed by the unfair practices of the railroad--practices he cannot change. Upon hearing Dyke's story, Presley becomes outraged and decides to write about his feelings even before he has a clear idea of what he wants to say in his poem. Presley has definitely become involved with the problems of social injustice dealt to the ranchers by the unfair railroad practices.

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.34

Presley sees that he had never before been able to write the great epic because he had never really cared for the people and had not been touched by the problems they faced. He now considers himself a part

of the people, a part of the "uncouth brutes" that 
before he had hoped to shun.

Presley's finished poem "The Toilers" now has a 
message and according to Norris, all literary works 
must have a message. Presley is delivering that 
message because he was aroused by the social injustice 
he witnessed. His poem expresses that awareness of 
the ranchers' problems with the railroad and there­
fore shows Presley's development from mere reporter 
to sensitive observer and participant in the affairs 
of the ranchers.

Presley in his excitement over writing the poem 
takes it to his close friend Vanamee. Vanamee con­
siders the poem great and advises him not to publish 
it in a literary magazine, for it would be read only 
by literary people, and not by the people for whom it 
was meant.

Don't publish it in the magazine at 
all events. Your inspiration has come 
from the People. Then let it go 
straight to the People.35

Vanamee states another of Norris' views on literature, 
for according to both Vanamee and Norris, the liter­
ary work, if inspired by the people, must be addressed 
to those people.

After writing his poem "The Toilers," Presley is

35Ibid., p. 90.
again outraged by the death scene at the clash between the eleven ranchers led by Magnus Derrick and the eleven railroad men. Among those killed is Presley's friend Annixter, and Presley is frustrated and angered by the senseless killing. He becomes so frustrated by the death that he declares himself an anarchist like Caraher, a saloon keeper who is against both the league of ranchers and the railroad. Caraher's anarchism is partly the result of his wife's being accidentally killed by the police during a railroad strike. He strikes out against the railroad. Presley admits to Caraher:

Caraher, give me your hand. I've been wrong all the time. The League is wrong. All the world is wrong. You are the only one of us all who is right. I'm with you from now on. By God, I, too, I'm a Red! 36

To relieve his anger and frustration, Presley decides to write about the tragedy in a journal. In the journal, Presley concludes that "the Railroad will prevail." 37

Just as Presley was involved in his writing the poem, he becomes involved when he gives his speech on his idea of freedomaat a protest meeting in town after the fatal clash between the ranchers and the railroad officials.

36Ibid., p. 246.  
37Ibid., p. 249.
There is one major difference—the difference being that the ranchers do not sympathize with his oratorical methods because they do not understand them. Vanamee advised Presley to write his poem but to publish it in a newspaper so the people could read it. When Presley gives his speech, he violates the lesson Vanamee taught him. If the literary work should carry a message, be honest and sincere, then Presley has failed in his speech. He is unable to get the ranchers' attention because he has obscured the message with his many Biblical allusions. Instead of aligning himself with the farmers, he has separated himself from them. He has sidestepped the element of truth and sincerity that Norris mentions and is now the intellectual poet, the poet who sacrifices truth for intellectualism.

Presley was sincere in his poem about the unhappy circumstances of the ranchers. In his speech to them, he forsakes the sincerity and seems again torn between his romantic notions about the epic poem of the West and the realistic view of the problems of the land. There is this conflict in Presley's mind between his romantic and realistic views that forces him to fail to see the other side of the land—the glory of the earth as shown by the growing seed of wheat. He becomes a fanatic who is blinded by the destruction of the ranchers and who sees only the sordid side of life.
Presley's becoming an anarchist, too, marks his strong response to the present situation. At first, he is a dreamy observer, a romantic poet and certainly not a man of violence. He slowly has become involved in the ranchers' affairs, and the peak of his involvement is shown when he tosses the bomb into Behrman's home.

Behrman is the power behind the Pacific and Southwestern Railroad, and he is portrayed as a despicable man, fat and repulsive to look at. Presley's action in this episode coincides with Norris' view that the novelist or poet has a social responsibility to the world. His sensibility forces him to respond to the social responsibility he feels toward the cruel injustices done to the ranchers.

Presley, like Annixter, realizes this feeling of social responsibility. He has come to the realization that he must live with other people and that by living with other people, he owes some degree of responsibility to those people. Presley has progressed in his role of being the educated, refined sensibility, but he has somewhat sidestepped his role as social agent when he throws the bomb.

When Presley visits Shelgrim, the head of the Pacific and Southwestern Railroad, Shelgrim tells him that the railroad is a force much like the wheat is a force of nature. He tells Presley that the railroad is
no single man and that it will exist because California and the rest of the world needs it. The railroad exists to transport the grain that nature has bestowed on the earth.38

Presley advances to a degree of understanding that nature is indifferent to man. He sees that men are free to act without any resistance from nature. He is shocked by the disasters that are partly due to this conflict between the railroad and the ranchers. He sees the disasters of Annixter, Dyke, Minna Hooven, who declines into prostitution, and the pitiful death of Mrs. Hooven, who dies of starvation. Realizing that many lives have been destroyed by the railroad, Presley turns away somewhat disillusioned.

Presley's journey from a romantic, uninvolved character has progressed. As he looks over the San Joaquin Valley, he comes to an understanding of the forces of the universe. He sees that life and death are co-existent—creation replaces the destruction that nature inflicts. He realizes that the individual is unimportant compared to the forces of the world.

Vanamee's last speech to Presley ends on a note of optimism.

Evil is short-lived. Never judge the whole round of life by the mere segment you can see. The whole is, in the end, perfect.39

38 Ibid., p. 360. 39 Ibid., p. 345.
This idea of the goodness of the universe is Presley's conclusion as he boards the Swanhilda for a passage to India. He concludes that the goodness in the world has prevailed.

Greed, cruelty, selfishness, and inhumanity are short-lived; the individual suffers, but the race goes on. Annixter dies, but in a far-distant corner of the world a thousand lives are saved. The larger view always and through all shams, all wickednesses, discovers the Truth that will, in the end, prevail; and all things surely, inevitably, resistlessly work together for good.40

The refined and educated Presley has been matured by the events that he has experienced and witnessed. He has been forced into an acceptance of the forces of the world and has turned away partly disillusioned but with an understanding of the insignificance of the individual compared to the forces of nature.

Presley, the romantic poet, retreats without having written his great epic poem of the West and without having contributed substantially to the ranchers' fight with the railroad. Yet, he has progressed with an understanding that man will exist in a world that is often destructive, for the end result is truth, and truth will prevail.

40Ibid., p. 361.
A. The Character of Annixter

Presley's development as a character is enhanced by his relationships with the ranchers, especially Annixter and Vanamee, two men whose philosophies greatly influence him and cause Presley to respond to the world around him.

Annixter is introduced to the reader as a rather bitter and pessimistic man, a man troubled by the affairs of the farmers against the railroad. He is intelligent, having been educated in the university; yet, he is out of sorts with the people around him and even with himself. Annixter is described as:

...a ferocious worker, allowing himself no pleasures, and exacting the same degree of energy from all his subordinates. He was widely hated and as widely trusted. 41

Presley and Annixter, although completely opposite in temperament and idea, have a very close relationship—something unusual for Annixter because he has shunned all human connections. He has great admiration for Presley because of his ability to write verse. Presley is the only person that Annixter responds to positively.

They are directly contrasted to each other.

41 Ibid., p. 22.
Presley was easy going; Annixter alert. Presley was a confirmed dreamer, irresolute, inactive, with a strong tendency to melancholy; the young farmer was a man of affairs, decisive, combative, when only reflection upon his interior economy was a morbid concern in the vagaries of his stomach.42

It is interesting to note that this relationship between Presley and Annixter brings about a change in both personalities--Presley begins to become less dreamy and more interested in the affairs of the land; and Annixter becomes more outgoing and interested in human relationships such as the one he has with Presley and the one he eventually establishes with Hilma Tree. Both Presley and Annixter develop genuine concerns in other affairs.

Presley is like Annixter in the sense that where Annixter tries to avoid human entanglements and remain a loner, Presley tries to shun the ranchers because he feels that they are crude and are standing in his way of writing the epic poem. In the beginning, both men share the same sentiments about human contacts.

Annixter feels out of place with women as Presley feels out of place with the ranchers and their problems. This similarity in feeling is one of the reasons for the closeness of the relationships.

42Ibid., p. 25.
Even though they are alike in many ways, there is one main difference between them. Annixter, unlike Presley, is deeply involved in the affairs of the land. He is devoted to the pushing ahead of the ranchers' organization, due to the success of Osterman, the man who has succeeded in engaging the services of one representative for the organization. Annixter is successful in his engagements with the organization, but he is completely at a loss in his relationship with Hilma Tree, a dairy maid. He tries desperately to subdue his attraction for Hilma; yet, he realizes that the feeling is certainly present. Being fairly ignorant of man's relationship with women, Annixter has managed to stay away from them and convince himself that love is foolish.43

Annixter feels strongly annoyed with himself when he realizes that there is a definite interest in someone other than himself. He does not see himself in love with a dairy maid or any woman. Furthermore, he does not know how to act around women; and once alone with Hilma, he acts rashly by trying to kiss her.44

A whole new side of Annixter's personality has been awakened. He is no longer a man existing only for the organization; he is a man whose life has

43Ibid., p. 175.  
44Ibid., pp. 163-164.
been changed by something beautiful and warm. He is so awakened by Hilma that he desires to be proper when he gives the barn party. When sending invitations for the party, it is appropriate that Annixter, the rancher, would send for Presley to help him—Presley, the educated, sensitive poet.\(^{45}\)

Just as Annixter is awakened to the idea of love, Presley is forced into a recognition of the importance of the conflict between the ranchers and the railroad officials. Annixter is troubled by his sudden interest in Hilma, and Presley is troubled by the destruction of human lives brought about by the unfair practices of the railroad. Annixter shows his rashness when he tries to kiss Hilma, and Presley shows his rashness when he tries to write "The Toilers" before he has thought of what he is going to say. Both react strongly to the new interests in their lives and both influence each other in their thinking.

Eventually, Annixter and Hilma share the need of being together. They are able to communicate that need to each other, and Annixter declares his love for Hilma. He comes to a recognition of the beautiful thought of love and confesses to her:

\(^{45}\text{Ibid., pp. 175-176.}\)
I can't do without you, little girl, and I want you. I want you bad. I don't get much fun out of life ever. I am dog-tired of going it alone. 46

It is at this point that Annixter becomes a complete man--a person no longer thinking about himself but now thinking of other people. He and Hilma marry, and Annixter's life reaches full fruition.

Annixter talks to Presley about his happiness with Hilma and admits to Presley that he never thought of anyone else but himself. When the full realization of love overcame him, his whole attitude changed and he began to see that he, like all human beings, has problems. Annixter gives us his full philosophy when he admits to Presley:

A fellow can't live for himself anymore than he can live by himself. He's got to think of others. 47

Annixter has progressed as a person because he realizes that he has a social responsibility to other people. If a man possesses more talent or wealth than other men, he is indebted to his fellow man in that he must help him. He tells Presley:

I'm going to get in and help people, and I'm going to keep to that idea the rest of my natural life. 48

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46 Ibid., p. 47.  
48 Ibid.
Annixter, the man who feels a social responsibility to others, is destroyed partly by this need. When he and the other ranchers face the eleven railroad men, he is killed. It is important to note that love had transformed Annixter into a complete human being and had brought him to an understanding of being a tolerant, kind, and loving individual.

Annixter illustrates the idea that man must become aware of other people, for he is socially responsible for them. Annixter, the man who was saved by his love for Hilma Tree, is the character who is changed from being selfish and pessimistic to being kind and generous.

This idea of social responsibility and love that Annixter expresses to Presley is Presley's first awareness that he, too, surely owes that same regard to the ranchers around him. Presley's world cannot be a world of only one person; he lives in a world of men and therefore, he must feel a certain degree of concern for them. This is the lesson that Presley learns from Annixter.
B. The Character of Vanamee

Vanamee, another person who influences Presley's growth as a character in *The Octopus*, is the only major character who emerges triumphant. He illustrates the idea that in the end good prevails and he, like Presley and Annixter, benefits from social involvements.

Vanamee's withdrawal from the world is a permanent policy, and the only close relationship he has in the beginning is his friendship with Presley. They stand in contrast to each other.

Living close to nature, a poet by instinct, where Presley was but a poet by training, there developed in him a great sensitiveness to beauty and an almost abnormal capacity for great happiness and great sorrow; he felt things intensely, deeply. He never forgot.49

Warren French points out in his book *Frank Norris* that Norris thought the sensitive, introspective person could regain harmony with nature only by completely rejecting civilized society.50 This idea is true in that Vanamee, the poet by instinct and the mystic, does regain harmony by ostracizing himself from direct relationships with the ranchers. He remains to himself.

49Ibid., p. 33.
50French, op. cit., p. 97.
except for occasional exchanges of ideas with Presley and Father Sarria, the priest at the mission.

William Frohock in his book *Frank Norris* feels that Vanamee represents the spiritual in a situation where the other characters represent the material—the land and the railroad. Vanamee does embrace the spiritual, mystical element because he is a man who has lost his beloved Angele, a girl who was raped and who later died giving birth to the child. After her death, Vanamee withdrew from the world and from other people.

Eighteen years had passed since Angele had died, but the thread of Vanamee’s life had been snapped. Nothing remained but the tangled ends. He had never forgotten the long, dull ache, the poignant grief had now become a part of him.

Although Presley and Vanamee are in direct contrast to each other, there is a close relationship between them. Presley is a poet by training while Vanamee is a poet by instinct. Presley seems to bridge the gap between the completely unpoetical Annixter and the instinctive, mystical poet Vanamee. Vanamee’s association with Presley teaches Presley and brings about his development as a person, not just a dreamy-eyed character.


It is Vanamee to whom Presley confides his desire to write the epic poem, and it is Vanamee who reprimands Presley, giving him some advice. Vanamee tells Presley that he should live in the beauty of the countryside, and by enjoying the beauty of the world, he would not need to write.53

Vanamee is a man who has a strange prophetic ability and although living apart from the ranchers, he is in touch with their problems and can understand them. He is the poet of the land, of the soil, and of the people; he is as involved as Presley is uninvolved.54

It is Vanamee's practice to call out to Angele with his mystical powers at her grave.

Then instinctively, his hand left the stone and rested upon the low mound of turf, touching it with the softness of a caress; and then, before he was aware of it, he was stretched at full length upon the earth, beside the grave, his arms about the low mound, his lips pressed against the grass with which it was covered.55

The person to whom Vanamee narrates this strange experience at the grave is Presley. They are unable to come to any definite explanation of these experiences at the grave. Vanamee, the mystic poet, confronts Presley, the learned poet, but both are unable to explain the occurrences. Vanamee reflects:

53Ibid., p. 39. 54Ibid., p. 38.
55Ibid., p. 147.
I believe in a sixth sense, or, rather a whole system of other unnamed senses beyond the reach of our understanding. People who live much alone and close to nature experience the sensation of it. Perhaps it is something fundamental that we share with plants and animals.56

Hidden truths are revealed to Vanamee, the poet of nature. He is the poet who is pushing ahead to understand the realm of experience that is often shut to man. Presley, certainly, cannot understand the experience because he is a trained poet, not a mystical one. He is ineffectual in coming to grips with the problem, and Vanamee is left alone with his ideas.

Vanamee, like Annixter, is a man who is enlarged by love. As has been his custom, he goes to the mission to invoke Angèle, his beloved. He is answered not by Angèle, but by her daughter, and once again he has found the woman he loves. The mother and the daughter are of the same flesh and blood, and in a sense Vanamee is reunited with Angèle. Triumphanty, Vanamee concludes that he became victorious over death.57

Vanamee's influence on Presley is shown when Presley expresses a degree of understanding as to the forces of the universe. He has come to a degree of

mysticism, and it is Vanamee who extends that vision. He says to Presley:

Death and life are little things. They are transient. Life must be before death, and joy before grief. Death is only the absence of life, just as night is only the absence of day.58

Vanamee expresses the idea that life and death are short-lived—life is a vast thing in which each being shares a space for a short time and then relinquishes it for another to share for a short time. For Vanamee, life never disappears. Only the being that occupied it passes away.

Before Vanamee leaves Presley, he gives him one last thought to ponder.

We shall probably never meet again, but if these are the last words I ever speak to you, listen to them, and remember them, because I know I speak the truth. Evil is short-lived. Never judge the whole round of life by the mere segment you can see. The whole is, in the end, perfect.59

Vanamee remains triumphant because he is closer to the ideas of love and nature than he is to the corrupt practices of the railroad. Although he is aware of the unfair practices of the railroad, he is still able to keep his faith in love. To him, love is a more important possession than wealth.

58Ibid., p. 344. 59Ibid., p. 345.
Presley is that character who is enlarged in his views of the world because he has shared a relationship with Vanamee, a character who sees and understands the duality of the universe.
CONCLUSION

Presley is that character in The Octopus who strives to understand the insignificance of both the ranchers and the railroad. His journey through the San Joaquin Valley is a journey of understanding and growth, for we see him develop as both social and literary agent. Only until he becomes seeped in the life around him is he able to produce any kind of literary work. If in the beginning of his journey he is the romantic, it is partly because he fails to see the significance of the ranchers against the railroad. He must become involved in the affairs of the land if he is to write about the land. Presley as poet cannot remain detached and succeed as a literary agent.

Eventually, Presley becomes so involved with the conflict that he loses sight of his purpose—-to write the great epic poem of the West. If at one time he is too romantic, at other times he is too fanatical. He must achieve a balance between his romantic dreams of writing the epic poem and his fanatical views of becoming an activist in the face of destruction.

Presley's achieving that balance is primarily the result of his associations with Annixter and Vanamee,
two characters who advise him. Annixter's advice is that of a man who has found something beautiful in his relationship with Hilma. His advice to Presley is that a person must have regard for other people and that a person must think of others. He expresses the idea of social responsibility to the less fortunate.

Vanamee is that character who also advises Presley, but he advises him differently. He, too, is aware of the power of love, but he is also aware of the force of the land and of man's place in that force. He is the person who judges Presley's literary attempts, and he is the one who is aware of the duality of the universe. Presley learns much from his association with Vanamee, for Vanamee is the mystic who instructs Presley in his role as both social agent and literary agent.

Presley is finally able to produce a literary work although it is not the great epic poem of the West. His inability to write the epic stems from his disillusionment he feels toward the destruction he has witnessed. Still, he emerges as a figure who has come to grips with the idea of man against the land. He has recognized the importance of man in relation with his environment. Presley may not have written the great epic, but he lived it and to Vanamee, living it (the epic) was more important than writing about it.
Presley is certainly that sensitive character in *The Octopus* who reports the action, participates in that action, and emerges as a character who is aware of the social responsibility of the literary man to his fellow man. He truly is the character who offers a sensitive view of the conflict between the ranchers and the railroad, and *The Octopus* is Presley's account of that conflict as seen from the eyes of the literary man.
BIBLIOGRAPHICAL ENTRIES

PRIMARY SOURCES


SECONDARY SOURCES


