

## The Corporate Sepulchre In Frank Norris's *The Octopus: A Story Of California*

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### Abstract

This research paper tries to bring out the struggle of Californian wheat farmers in the San Joaquin Valley against the powerful Pacific and Southwestern Railroad Monopoly. The novel, *The Octopus: A Story of California* depicts the monopolistic, land-grabbing railroad, consolidation, organization, conformity, tough-minded, self-reliant people, exploited the land, subversion, coercion and outright violence. This novel is dealt with the tensions between the railroad, the ranchers and rancher's league and also exhibits corporate greed, monopolistic power, exploitation of the working class, struggle between the labor and capital, the decline of the individual and the transformation of California.

**Key words:** political discourse, economical exploitation, clash of frontier and monopoly, impersonal forces represented by technology and corporate structures, problem of social justice, reconciling power of nature, confrontation and corruption.

Frank Norris is one of the reputed American novelists, who is considered as one of the most important writers of the naturalist movement in the United States. He published the novel *The Octopus: A Story of California* in 1901. This novel explores the struggle between wheat growers and railroad monopolies in California. Magnus Derrick is the central figure in the novel who is a former politician and also a leader of the ranchers who resists against the Pacific and Southwestern Railroad. Lyman Derrick is the elder son of Magnus Derrick who is a lawyer. He supports the farmer at first but later betrays them by siding with the railroad. Harren Derrick is an elder son of Magnus who struggles with his own identity and loyalists. Another important character in the novel is Presley. He is a young poet and idealist, who embodies the conflict. S. Behrman is the main antagonist of the novel who is the representative of the Pacific and Southwestern Railroad. Shelgrim is the central character of the novel who is a cunning and ruthless president of the Pacific and Southwestern Railroad. Annixter is a youngman who fights against the railroad along with his friend Magnus. Vanamee is a mystic and shepherd who is a close friend of Presley. Angele Varian is a beautiful and young independent woman. Finally, Hilma Tree is a young dairymaid, Mrs. Derrick is the wife of Magnus and the mother of Layman and Harren. Osterman, Dyke and Broderson are the minor character in this novel. This novel explores the themes of corporate greed, monopolistic power, exploitation of the working class, struggle between the labor and capital, the decline of the individual and the transformation of California.

Presley eventually wants to seek his own conflict which is against the offices of Pacific and Southwestern Railroad. A spatial is spread out as a stronghold to a heart, a web, a pool of corruption, a citadel keeps, and an engine seat. Presley is dejected a poet who wants only to approach to the corporate headquarters. He has taken necessary steps to take in an arbitrary and self-conscious effort at termination.

"Why not see, face to face, the man whose power was so vast, whose will was so resistless, whose potency for evil so limitless, the man who for so long and so hopelessly they had all been fighting" (570).

His question is rhetorically framed which reflects with the profound absence underneath the answer. There is no human will fit into the above description of the passage in the novel. The corporation cannot physically appear "face to face" even in its office sanctum to keep the challenge. Instead, Presley is a politically exhausted poet who wants to resort to an aesthetically imagined conflict with a human representation of some "vast," "resistless," and "limitless" sublimity. This novel retreat the language of art that is to illustrate corporate potential and that eventually becomes indefensible in the face of the real presence of the railroad president. Shelgrim is a magnanimous and frail man who has both surplus and undermined Presley's romanticized anticipations of the Pacific and Southwestern Railroad. The desire has filled with the question and answer of Presley's aestheticized hope and that is the need for termination which is more similar to the narrative terms of the novel and then the social justice which is inspired by political and legal discussion of the novel. Norris wants to suggest that this conflict in corporate headquarters is not staged for the answer. It might give but rather for the symbolic reflection of the profound vacancies which is at centre of the corporate system.

Norris has modelled one of the characters in the novel Shelgrim, who is the president of the Pacific and Southwestern Railroad. He is the only one who is physically present throughout the novel. Collis P. Huntington is the real president of the Southern Pacific Railroad. His name signifies as an emblem of corporate potential so that it is strong and it can stop the discourse of Pacific and Southwestern Railroad. It resonates along with a symbolic document of the grim shell, a desolate persona and an empty of any real human content. This moniker would ring ironically what Shelgrim signifies persistent cataract of allegorical illustrations of all the functions of corporate business in the late nineteenth-century

America which includes “the New Movement, the New Finance, the reorganization of capital, the amalgamation of powers, the consolidation of enormous enterprises” (104). These descriptions are wondered that which descriptions is counteracted by a profound debasement of the novel. Shelgrim is a powerful man as “commanding genius” and has physically “giant with an “ogre’s vitality.” He is the product of sucking “the life-blood from an entire people” of San Joaquin Valley in California (571). Before the actual physical conflict with farmer and Pacific and Southwestern Railroad, Shelgrim has been introduced in this novel as the corporate person who is physically monstrous, abstract, propulsive, evil and inhuman.

Shelgrim has fantasy which is signified as the corporate Octopus. Mythical monster gives a comfortable answer to Presley who wants to shoot the corporate inhuman. This manifestation of the corporation that is significantly undermined by his placid blue eyes “a little watery” and a face which is splashed with “moth spots.” Shelgrim has consumed from a saucer of shelled filberts. He increases the salary of his drunken book-keeper who has with a huge family members so in order to get incentive which helps him to develop his socioeconomical status in the society. While at the same time he is giving a sarcastic criticism to Presley because he has written a poem “The Toilers.” Presley has imagined that he is meeting with a living embodiment of the Pacific and Southwestern Railroad and that is a “terrible man of blood and iron,” and not a gentle but a cultured man who is eating nuts. Instead, Presley is the poet who tries to find his own calibre that is insufficient to him. Finally, he is also not able to measure a man.

“not only great, but large; many-sided, of vast sympathies, who understood with equal intelligence, the human nature in a habitual drunkard, the ethics of a masterpiece of painting, and the financiering and operation of ten thousand miles of railroad” (575).

Clare Eby gives a suggestion that Norris has his own ambivalence about the discerned obstacles that is between art and business which becomes legible in Presley’s narrow perspective of writing a poem. Art and finance have shared a common imaginative language and it is also an extensive sympathy which is exemplified far better by the railroad president and then the poet, Presley. Eby need to advocate that Norris has “discredits” the calibre of the poet, who has written a poem which does not deal with an epic narration that might compete with Shelgrim’s own (40). In this sense, Shelgrim is the central character in this novel neither who cannot be characterized as an antagonist nor who cannot be identified into a simple story of villain which is retaliated by Presley. He is more or less than the Corporate Octopus of the novel. Eventhough, he is a powerful man but a limited human being.

Norris continually tries to find the effects of this figure through the novel other than visual descriptions because he is the monstrous corporate person but who never physically appear in this novel. This same impulse is supported to the system of capitalizations and italicizations which is setting off words such as “Railroad,” “Wheat,” and “Force.” He needs to suggest that in order to show the limitation of literary embodiment that is sufficiently holding upon things as both solid presences and theoretical ideals in the novel. This novel is marked with the impact of these impalpable determined things which gives result in a graphic novel and that is also filled with idiosyncrasies of punctuation, type, and style. This system of syntax indicates the discourse which is dealt with Shelgrim. We would not listen his voice in this novel. The narrator wants to depict it to us through this novel to know what has happened regarding the Pacific and Southwestern Railroad. His speech, loud and emphatic at first, when the idea of what he had to say was fresh in his mind, lapsed and lowered itself at the end of his sentences as though he had already abandoned and lost interest in that thought, so that the concluding words were indistinct, beneath the grey beard and moustache. Also at times there was the faintest suggestion of a lisp. (575)

The sentence style of this novel traces a decreasing flow along with spectrum of potential. The novel follows Shelgrim, who has given powerful human speech through a serious of linked pairs which is contained in dependent clauses from “loud and emphatic” to “lapsed and lowered” and finally to “abandoned and lost interest.” They are fastened off by the “grey beard and moustache.” The lisp gets only as a coda if the human Shelgrim who cannot maintain him as a corporate persona. The voice that should be the corporation’s own in this noisy naturalist novel. A voice like that of the Pacific and Southwestern Railroad and the Wheat which carries all the humiliating humankind of a frail and mortal body from the faintest of lips to the strolling mind of an elderly grey beard.

Shelgrim has given a response to Presley who tremulously accused him that he has purposefully destroyed the farmers with his ironical human voice. Shelgrim is the corporate president who avoids the personal responsibility by postulating a deterministic universe in which the Pacific and Southwestern Railroad follows the same law of force as the Wheat itself. The plants would grow without human supporting in the earth and the Pacific and Southwestern Railroad would proliferate with savage fecundity. The intentions of any person who mean to do nothing in the face of the abstract and material forces, which forces a scant supply and rapacious demand that produced the Wheat and the Railroad.

“But-but,” faltered Presley, “you are the head, you control the road.” “You are a very young man. Control the road! Can I stop it? I can go into bankruptcy if you like. But otherwise if I run my road, as a business proposition, I can do nothing. I cannot control it. It is a force born out of certain conditions, and I-no man-can stop it or control it.” (576)

Shelgrim has given a speech in this novel in which critics have found models for the naturalization of social processes which alleviate concerns of agency and causality under corporate capitalism. Adam Wood depicts this declaration as part of the novel which reflects that what he says the myth construction that “inherent in the reification of the market of wheat as a natural phenomenon.” Shelgrim describes away the confrontation between farmers and corporation by naturalizing

the railroads into the equivalence of the wheat itself. A sublime natural object which is beyond and detachment to human understanding. Mark Seltzer portrays the logic of Shelgrim who has given a discourse which is a part of the rewriting of production and reproduction into a masculine model, that organized the desires of men to reappropriate the potential of women's physical in naturalist novels. This is alternative to biological reproduction that might displace the menace which is constituted by female bodies to masculine productive hegemony.

These interpretations are illuminated by the broader philosophical ramifications of the discourse. But it focuses on the particularity of this conflict between president and poet. It is revealed as a profound vacancy at the heart of corporate capitalism. The poet tries to find a dangerous space on a quest in the inner sanctuary of the company for a physical representation of the corporate will. The corporation might be the absent centre of this naturalist text and it cannot be manifested by anyone from president to poet. There is no single character in this novel who can stand exactly in its place and even no single character might be called to attest for its offences. Finally, *The Octopus* is a novel of displacements in which it embodies proliferate, split, and metastasize. It is disappeared absolutely because the exact representation is itself indefensible under the corporate system. There is no other sentence in this novel which is symbolized in this futility more than Shelgrim who likes to give delightful assurance of his own impotence that "if I run my road, as a business proposition, I can do nothing." These words would beset the twentieth century as an expression not of a paralysing loss of agency but rather than knowing the respite of responsibility. The denial of authority is that "I can do nothing" which becomes a means to authority. The modern corporate system is too big to remark, too big to be fragile and too big to shoot.

*The Octopus* is a wonderfully superfluous novel and it can provide an excessive resolution with a hidden solace. A pleasure is furnished to the reader alone in the novel. If Shelgrim cannot or would not stand in favour of the corporation, one another character remains who might represent the corporate form. Presley and S. Behrman are now the "Master of the Wheat" amidst the wreck of total defeat for the farmers. They are involved in a conversation which only makes sense in the context of the intensified romance of the naturalist novels. This novel is prized and produced by Norris as a novelist in the text.

"I guess it was you, wasn't it, who threw that bomb into my house?" "It was." "Well, that don't show common sense, Presley," returned S. Behrman with perfect aplomb. "What could you have gained by killing me?" "Not so much probably as you have gained by killing Harran and Annixter. But that's all passed now. You're safe from me." The strangeness of this talk, the oddity of the situation burst upon him and he laughed aloud. "It don't seem as though you could be brought to book, S. Behrman, by anybody, or by any means, does it? They can't get at you through the courts, -- the law can't get you, Dyke's pistol missed fire for just your benefit, and you even escaped Caraher's six inches of plugged gas pipe. Just what are we going to do with you?" (626-27)

Even Presley simply accepts the assassination attempt and he does not give any real threat to S. Behrman. Presley is a poet, who was only an observer, futile, paralyzed and limited. S. Behrman finally personified the corporation too much to be murdered by the people of the San Joaquin Valley. But unlike Shelgrim who never get another side of the corporation which is remaining an enigmatic and untouchable manifestation of the corporate system. "Who can we shoot" is stated again to be bewildered and exasperated from the beginning of the novel towards the end of the text *The Octopus* "what can we do?" There is no assertive answer to Presley who asked the question that "we" can't do anything to this corporate person.

The final destiny of S. Behrman which might be a symbolic action more fantastic than Presley who unexpectedly embraced the optimistic and transcendental moral philosophy of his mystic friend Vanamee. He is a mystic and shepherd and who is a close friend of Presley. S. Behrman is the corporate agent who watches the grain which he has donated for the welfare of the Indian Famine Relief Committee which is being loaded onto a ship that is carried by the exhausted Presley. S. Behrman finally falls into the granary and he was also simply striped on a rope. In *Octopus*, Norris tries to trace out the logic and this is disgustingly represented and found that cryptically corporate person dies shrieking and then silent later in an overripe sepulchre of his own making.

"He could no longer see; his eyes, crammed with dust, smarted as if transfixed with needles whenever he opened them. His mouth was full of the dust, his lips were dry with it; thirst tortured him, while his outcries choked and gagged in his rasped throat" (644).

The problem of the representation of the corporate person who is an abstract figure, irresponsible, limitless and potential that is here briefly suspended. Frank Norris tries to furnish the corporate form with a puppet body that might be manipulated into a properly melodramatic fall. There is no one triggered, no one thrown dynamite and finally no one filed a suit. The Corporation sends the selected political candidate onto office and congregates its oppressive rates and ultimately distributes its wheat across the world in triumph. The novel finally concludes with this specific corporate person who is vile and victorious, evil and embodied and finally dying in dramatic silence.

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