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The Octopus: A Story of California

Frank Norris · *1901 · original English text*

Just after passing Caraher's saloon, on the County Road south from Bonneville, Presley hears a steam whistle from the railroad shops. The book that follows is a story of California wheat ranches and of a railroad whose arms reach everywhere. The hosted text is Norris's original English, Project Gutenberg #268, complete.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

What happens when wheat ranchers in the San Joaquin are closed in by a railroad that sets the rates and claims the land, and how should a school read a book that ends in blood at an irrigation ditch and in a harvest sent halfway around the world?

"Just after passing Caraher's saloon, on the County Road that ran south from Bonneville, and that divided the Broderson ranch from that of Los Muertos, Presley was suddenly aware of the faint and prolonged blowing of a steam whistle that he knew must come from the railroad shops near the depot at Bonneville."

Book 1, Chapter I

The railroad is the octopus. Magnus Derrick, Annixter, and the other ranchers of Los Muertos try to stand, and are broken. There is violence at the irrigation ditch. The last pages turn from the dead to the wheat itself, rolling outward, and to Norris's claim that falseness dies and that the larger view discovers a truth that will prevail. Teach the injustice, the blood, and the close, for older students (11–12). Do not soften the ditch, and do not skip the last movement of the wheat.

KEY CHARACTERS

Presley
The guest and poet of the wheat, who hears the whistle on the County Road and lives through the fight

Magnus Derrick
Of Los Muertos, a leading rancher drawn into the struggle with the railroad

Annixter
The stubborn rancher whose life and death the last pages still name

S. Behrman
The railroad's agent in the valley, the near face of the octopus

Hooven
A tenant at Los Muertos, called "Bismarck," met early on the road

A WHISTLE, AND A HARVEST

> *"Falseness dies; injustice and oppression in the end of everything fade and vanish away. Greed, cruelty, selfishness, and inhumanity are short-lived; the individual suffers, but the race goes on."*
>
> the close

Grades 11–12
Read the full text free at classicslaunch.org.

01

The County Road and the Whistle

BOOK 1, CHAPTER I

Presley, out from the ranch house of Los Muertos, passes Caraher's saloon and hears the railroad shops at Bonneville. The land, the ranches, and the iron already share the first page.

- The opening sentence is exact, including Caraher's saloon, the Broderson ranch, and Los Muertos
- Hooven, called "Bismarck," is among the first people met on the road
- The whistle is not scenery only; the railroad is already in the air
- This is "A Story of California," as the title page says

> *"Just after passing Caraher's saloon, on the County Road that ran south from Bonneville, and that divided the Broderson ranch from that of Los Muertos, Presley was suddenly aware of the faint and prolonged blowing of a steam whistle that he knew must come from the railroad shops near the depot at Bonneville."*
>
> Book 1, Chapter I

02

Wheat, and the Ranchers

BOOK 1

Magnus Derrick of Los Muertos, Annixter, Broderson, and Osterman are men of the wheat. The crop, the land, and the hope of a just rate are the matter of their days.

- Keep the place-names as printed: Los Muertos, Bonneville, Guadalajara in this California sense, the irrigation ditch
- Annixter's stubbornness and later change are part of the human story, not only the political one
- Presley is the observer and the poet of the wheat; he is also inside the fight
- The book is large; help a student hold the ranches and the railroad as two powers, not as a blur of names

03

The Railroad's Arms

THE MIDDLE OF THE BOOK

The Pacific and Southwestern, through its agents, sets rates, delays, and claims upon the land. The ranchers organize, and find that the law and the market may both be turned against them.

- S. Behrman is the railroad's visible man in the valley; the "octopus" is larger than one agent
- The struggle over the land and the freight is the political heart of the book
- Teach the legal and economic pressure as Norris wrote it; this is not a mere adventure of cowboys
- For older students (11–12)

04

The Irrigation Ditch

THE VIOLENCE

The conflict comes to blood at the irrigation ditch. Men the reader has lived with are killed. The book does not look away.

- Annixter is among the dead; the last pages will name him
- Teach the violence with gravity; this is the cost, not a thrill
- The wheat continues; the men do not
- Do not invent a last-minute legal victory the book does not give

05

The Harvest, and the Larger View

THE CLOSE

The great harvest of Los Muertos rolls outward, even through the welter of blood, toward famine relief on far plains. Norris ends with a claim about falseness, greed, and a truth that will prevail.

- "The individual suffers, but the race goes on. Annixter dies, but in a far distant corner of the world a thousand lives are saved."
- "Falseness dies; injustice and oppression in the end of everything fade and vanish away."
- The last sentence says that all things, "surely, inevitably, resistlessly work together for good." Teach it as the book's close, and let a class weigh it against the ditch
- The hosted text is complete, PG #268, original English, 1901

> *"Falseness dies; injustice and oppression in the end of everything fade and vanish away. Greed, cruelty, selfishness, and inhumanity are short-lived; the individual suffers, but the race goes on."*
>
> the close

Land and Justice · The Wheat · A Railroad's Power · Courage and Cost · California · The Individual and the Race

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 11–12

1. The opening is exact: "Just after passing Caraher's saloon, on the County Road that ran south from Bonneville, and that divided the Broderson ranch from that of Los Muertos, Presley was suddenly aware of the faint and prolonged blowing of a steam whistle that he knew must come from the railroad shops near the depot at Bonneville."
2. The railroad is the octopus. This is a story of California wheat, rates, and land, not a light Western.
3. There is violence at the irrigation ditch. Teach it with gravity, for older students (11–12). Do not invent a last-minute legal victory.
4. The close turns to the harvest of Los Muertos and to Norris's claim that falseness dies and that all things "work together for good." Let a class weigh that claim against the ditch.
5. The hosted text is complete, PG #268, original English, 1901.

Quotations are verbatim from the original English text, Project Gutenberg #268, the public-domain text hosted at classicslaunch.org/works/the-octopus/. Citations give book and chapter (or canto and line) so every line can be checked.