

THE PROGRESSIVE ERA

Link to Literature

Frank Norris (1870–1902) was a novelist who often wrote about the harmful effects of industrial growth. His novel *The Octopus* describes a struggle over land in California between ranchers and the Southern Pacific Railroad. He wrote the novel as part of a planned trilogy that would trace the cultivation, sale, and shipping of wheat, but he died before he completed the final volume. In the passage below, a farmer named Dyke argues about freight rates with a railroad clerk and S. Behrman, a representative of the railroad. ♦ *As you read, think about how Norris’s writing reflects important concerns of the Progressive Era. Refer to the passage entitled “Roosevelt Takes on the Railroads” in Section 4 of your textbook for more information on the problems between railroads and farmers. Then, on a separate sheet of paper, answer the questions that follow.*

The Octopus

All his [Dyke’s] calculations as to a profit on his little investment he had based on a freight rate of two cents a pound. He was under contract to deliver his crop. He could not draw back. The new rate ate up every cent of his gains. He stood there ruined.

“Why, what do you mean?” he burst out. “You promised me a rate of two cents and I went ahead with my business with that understanding. What do you mean?”

S. Behrman and the clerk watched him from the other side of the counter.

“The rate is five cents,” declared the clerk doggedly.

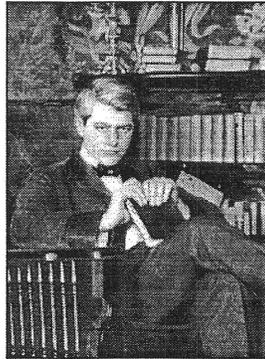
“Well, that ruins me,” shouted Dyke. “Do you understand? I won’t make fifty cents. MAKE! Why, I will OWE,—I’ll be—be— That ruins me, do you understand?”

The other, raised a shoulder.

“We don’t force you to ship. You can do as you like. The rate is five cents. . . .”

“Good Lord,” he [Dyke] murmured, “good Lord! What will you people do next? Look here. What’s your basis of applying freight rates, anyhow?” he suddenly vociferated [shouted] with furious sarcasm. “What’s your rule? What are you guided by?” . . .

In a second the whole affair, in all its bearings, went speeding before the eye of his imagination like the rapid unrolling of a panorama. Every cent of his earnings was sunk in this . . . business of his. More than that, he had borrowed money to carry it on, certain of success—borrowed of S. Behrman, offering his crop and his little home as security. Once he failed to meet his obligations, S. Behrman would foreclose. Not only would the Railroad devour every morsel of his profits, but also it would take from him his home; at a blow he would be left penniless and without a home.



Frank Norris, The Granger Collection, New York

The Octopus, by Frank Norris (Doubleday & Company, 1901).

Questions to Think About

1. Why is Dyke upset with the railroad?
2. Why is Dyke afraid that he will lose his money and his house?
3. **Draw Inferences** The railroad clerk tells Dyke that he isn’t forced to ship his goods on the Southern Pacific Railroad.

Yet why might Dyke have little or no choice but to ship his goods on the Southern Pacific Railroad?

4. **Apply Information** How does this passage reflect the concerns of the Progressive Era?

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Reading Strategy**Main Ideas and Details**

The main idea is the most important point of a passage. It often appears in the first sentence or two, and may be stated directly or implied. To identify the main idea, read through a passage and ask yourself what concept the passage explains. The main idea connects other details in a passage. Details are pieces of information that explain and extend the main idea. To identify details, look for facts and other information that support the main idea.

Read the following passage:

The people who made up the Progressive Movement came from many walks of life. They came from all political parties, social classes, ethnic groups, and religions. Many Progressive leaders came from the ranks of the growing middle class, whose power and influence was rapidly spreading. Dissatisfied industrial workers also became Progressives. So did a few wealthy Americans driven by an increasing feeling that they needed to act for the good of society.

Main Idea: Many different people helped build the Progressive Movement.

Details:

1. Progressives came from all political parties, social classes, ethnic groups, and religions.
2. Progressive leaders came from the growing middle class.
3. Many Progressives were dissatisfied industrial workers.
4. Wealthy Americans who wanted to act for the good of society became Progressives.

Directions: Read "Protecting Children and Improving Education" in Section 1 of your textbook. Then answer the questions below on a separate sheet of paper.

Hint: Ask yourself what central concept the passage explains. Remember that the main idea connects the other details in the passage.

1. What is the main idea of this passage?
2. What details support the main idea?
3. Is the main idea in this passage stated directly or implied?