

**THE RUINOUS ALLURE OF POWER: OBSESSION AND SELF-DESTRUCTION  
IN THE PIT BY FRANK NORRIS**

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**Abstract:** The article focuses on Frank Norris's novel *The Pit*. Writer in *The Pit* explores themes of ambition, greed, and the overwhelming power of economic forces. Set in late nineteenth-century Chicago, the novel revolves around the wheat trade on the Chicago Board of Trade. At the center of the narrative is Curtis Jadwin, a prosperous businessman whose growing fixation on dominating the wheat market ultimately leads to his downfall. Through Jadwin's tragic trajectory, Norris illustrates how unchecked ambition and grand aspirations can result in both financial collapse and emotional devastation.

**Key words:** novel, obsession, self-destruction, power, symbolic, illusion of power

**Introduction.** *The Pit*, the title of the novel, is not only a trading floor, but also a symbolic one. It is a dangerous place where people enter with confidence and often emerge broken and hopeless. It can bring instant wealth, but it can also destroy just as quickly. It is like a real pit, it is very difficult for a person to get out of it.

At the beginning of the novel, it is given a character beautiful and intelligent woman named Laura Dearborn is introduced. She has several suitors, one of whom is the wealthy and reliable Curtis Jadwin. Laura chooses him and they get married. At first, their life is happy and prosperous. Curtis main character of the novel has made a lot of money in real estate and does not need to take financial risks. Laura is happy with this life. But after some time, Curtis becomes interested in the wheat trade. He starts out as a small investor, but soon becomes completely absorbed in this business. Prices on the stock exchange change every day, and people win or lose a lot of money. Curtis considers himself smart and tries to beat the market. He buys a lot of wheat and tries to raise the price. The plan shows results early on. Others follow him, prices rise, and Curtis becomes very rich. He thinks he is invincible and does not listen to the warnings of those around him. Meanwhile, Laura notices that her husband is changing. He is now cold, nervous, and only interested in work. He spends his time on the stock exchange. Laura is left alone and begins to think deeply about her life. Due to Curtis' actions, prices reach artificial levels. Traders panic and sell their wheat. Curtis cannot hold the market. He has borrowed too much and can no longer make money. Prices begin to fall sharply, and the market completely collapses. Jadwin loses everything his wealth, his reputation, his power. He realizes that he has become an ordinary trader, a victim of the system. The wheat market, like nature, obeys no one. Whoever tries to control it, will be defeated. When Curtis is ruined, he returns to Laura. Laura forgives him. She understands that love and peace are more important than wealth. They leave Chicago and try to start a new life. Although Jadwin loses his money, he learns what is truly important in life. The novel shows that wealth and ambition, when taken to the extreme, can ruin a person. He thought he could control the market, but in the end, the market controlled him.

The title *The Pit* has a deep symbolic meaning:



1. As a trading place: *The Pit* is a place where traders shout and buy and sell wheat in the stock exchange. It is noisy, and rich, but also dangerous.

2. As a trap: Curtis falls into the trap of greed. He thinks he is strong, but the market pulls him into its trap. The more he wins, the deeper he sinks.

3. Greed and fate: The novel implies that no one can completely control the forces of nature and the economy. Curtis and the other traders chase wealth and ruin themselves.

**Method.** The novel is about the illusion of power, wealth, and control. Jadwin starts out as a wealthy man, but his greed destroys him. The market is an uncontrollable force. Anyone who goes against it suffers. *The Pit* shows how economic forces control human destiny. Curtis Jadwin destroys himself by trying to take over the wheat market. In comparison just as *The Octopus* portrayed the railroad as a wild force, *The Pit* portrays the market in this way. Researcher Katherine Biers in “Frank Norris’s Common Sense: Finance as Theatre in *The Pit*” research work examines how financial markets in the novel function like theatrical performances and spectacles<sup>1</sup>.

Jadwin believes he is powerful, but the market defeats him. The wheat market is like a battlefield, people fight for power and wealth. But there is no true victory in this conflict. The market is in constant motion, it continues on its path. Jadwin thinks he can control it, but in the end he realizes that this is not possible. He has previously been successful in real estate, and now he enters the market in the same way. He is initially successful, but gradually begins to think he has unlimited power. This illusion of control destroys him. He ignores warnings and thinks he has control over the market. But economic forces are not subject to human will, they are determined by factors such as nature, politics and global supply. Curtis, like the farmers in *The Octopus*, falls into a trap. In naturalistic literature, man is not in control of his destiny. He thinks he is making his own choices, but in reality he is acting under the influence of the market. He is not a financial master, he is just an ordinary man who has got lost in the system. Don Graham analyses *The Pit* in relation to Norris’s literary style and naturalism<sup>2</sup>. He tries to explore writer’s style through naturalism in *The Pit*. Early criticism, by Don Graham (1978; 1980), situates Norris within the naturalist tradition, emphasizing how environmental and economic pressures dictate human behavior. Graham argues that Curtis Jadwin’s downfall exemplifies the naturalist idea that individuals are powerless against larger social and economic systems.

In the novel *The Pit*, Frank Norris likens the financial system to a powerful and uncontrollable force of nature. This force is like a hurricane, a flood, or an earthquake. It does not choose people, it neither punishes nor rewards. It simply follows its own laws. Anyone who tries to control this system will ultimately be severely affected by it. This illustrates the naturalistic idea that people are shaped by external forces and circumstances. Curtis’s situation is similar to other naturalistic characters. Like the farmers in *The Octopus*, he thinks he can control his life. But just as the railroad crushed the farmers, the wheat market defeats Curtis. He is neither a villain nor a great hero just an ordinary man alone against a very large system.

Curtis becomes increasingly involved in the wheat trade, which causes him to distance himself from his family life. He stops spending time with his wife Laura, and the wheat speculation takes over his mind. His mental state deteriorates. This shows that money problems

<sup>1</sup> Biers K. Frank Norris’s Common Sense: Finance as Theatre in *The Pit*// Textual practice Vol 25, № 3, 2011. -P. 121.

<sup>2</sup> Graham D. The Fiction of Frank Norris: The Aesthetic Context. EBSCO research 1978. -P. 76.



are not only financial, but also emotional and spiritual problems. This is a very important theme in naturalistic literature, external forces also shape a person's inner world. Curtis was initially a confident businessman. But the market crash makes him insecure, anxious and hopeless. He comes to the realization very late. He is trapped in the system, and no amount of money or intelligence can save him. His downfall is not only a blow to his wealth, but also to his heart and soul.

Although *The Pit* focuses on the wheat market and *The Octopus* on the railroad system, both novels have the same idea: man cannot fight against powerful economic forces. In *The Octopus*, the farmers oppose the railroad, but they are defeated. In *The Pit*, Curtis claims to control the market, but ends up losing everything. Both works portray capitalism as an uncontrollable force. Anyone who tries to seize this power ends up falling victim to it.

**Discussion.** At the beginning of the novel, Curtis Jadwin is presented as a wealthy and influential businessman. But he enters the wheat market and wants to take it over. He doesn't just want to make money, he wants to control the entire market. The following quote is an example of this: "*But all this took not only his every minute of time, but his every thought, his every consideration. He who had only so short a while before considered the amount of five million bushels burdensome... was now called upon to watch, govern, and control the tremendous forces latent in a line of forty million... He could control the Chicago wheat market, and the man who could do that might well call himself 'great,' without presumption.*"<sup>3</sup> These words show how powerful Curtis thinks he is. At first, five million bushels of wheat seemed like a lot to him, but now he is trying to control forty million. The words "He could control the Chicago wheat market" show how he has become attached to power. He no longer hesitates to call himself "great." Norris shows how greed for power can change a person. Throughout the novel, he takes increasingly dangerous actions. He bets his entire fortune on wheat. His wife Laura is worried about this, but Curtis does not listen to her. This situation shows that once a person becomes greedy, it is very difficult to stop it. Eventually, the market turns against him. The demand for wheat falls, and he cannot control it. His belief that he has control over the market is shattered. This situation shows the idea of naturalism: man is helpless in front of powerful systems.

"J., you're mad, old fellow. You're ruined—don't you understand?—you're ruined." "Then God curse you, Sam Gretry, for the man who failed me in a crisis." And as he spoke Curtis Jadwin struck the broker full in the face. "Into the Pit." "If you won't execute my orders, I'll act myself. I'm going into the Pit, I tell you."<sup>4</sup> This passage clearly shows Curtis's downfall. Hearing the words "you're ruined," he explodes with rage. He hits Gretry. He no longer acts with money or reason, only his obsession drives him. "The Pit" - a place that used to be a symbol of power, now becomes his place of destruction. Through this, Norris shows how the capitalist market swallows man. Curtis's tragedy is this: no matter how strong he is, he cannot fight against forces greater than himself. Through the story of Jadwin, in the novel *The Pit*, Frank Norris criticizes the capitalist system. In this system, everything works on the basis of greed. This market, a speculative market, a place of trading, is not governed by logic or morality, but by human emotions, deceit and force. Here people can suddenly get rich or lose everything. Norris shows through his story that in capitalism, unlimited desires can consume a person. Jadwin's downfall is

<sup>3</sup> Norris F. *The Pit: A Story of Chicago*. - New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1903. -P. 226.

<sup>4</sup> Norris F. *The Pit: A Story of Chicago*. - New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1903. -P. 315.



not just an accident. It is the result of the dangerous system he has chosen. The market rewards courage in the short term, but ultimately punishes those who go too far.

Norris portrays greed and desire as forces that humans cannot control. They are like instincts: an inner feeling. Jadwin was cautious at first, but gradually he became addicted to the game. The pleasure of winning had him hooked. He couldn't stop, even when he saw that things were going badly. This is a common idea in naturalism: people are controlled not by their own will, but by external forces. Jadwin was also an intelligent man, but the pursuit of money blinded him. He didn't want to stop even when the opportunity was not yet gone. Norris contrasts Jadwin's situation with his wife, Laura. Laura eventually realizes that money and power are not the most important things in life. She wants a steady life and contentment. Jadwin, in the end, becomes a tired, broken man and realizes that his desires are in vain.

Through this story, Norris shows how people become simple numbers and transactions in the financial system. People are absorbed into the system losing their sense of self. Also, wheat is not a simple crop, it is people's lives, food, the labor of farmers. But in the Chicago trading center, wheat is not food, it is a product sold for profit. Curtis Jadwin and the other sellers think only about profit. They do not think about who needs the wheat, who grew it, this is not the case. Jadwin does not see the wheat at all. He only handles statistics without real-world involvement. With his actions, the price of bread for thousands of people changes. But he gives no thought to this. This reinforces the idea that capitalism only cares about profit, not people's needs. When the price of wheat rises, the poor cannot buy bread, but for the sellers this is good news. On the contrary, when the market crashes, they lose money, but no one cares about their personal problems. In this system, people are treated only as economic units. There is another important idea in the novel: capitalism turns people into simple parts of a machine. The market is a huge mechanism in which everyone plays a role, but no one can control their own destiny. Jadwin feels strong at first. He thinks: "*I control the market.*" But then he realizes that he is simply responding to larger forces. Even the strongest people are powerless in the face of this system. It is not only the sellers. Brokers and employees also become automatons. They only calculate, carry out orders, do not ask questions. They exist only so that the system can function. The farmers are also victims. They work on the land, but prices are set by people sitting far away. No matter how hard the farmer works, his success depends only on speculative prices. Norris shows that even real producers are powerless in the financial system. As capitalism grows stronger, people in *The Pit* lose their true identity and moral values. Money and power replace relationships between people. Even personal values become small means to an economic survival. In 2021 researcher Jason Puskar in his "Frank Norris's Common Sense: Finance as Theatre in *The Pit*" research work analyzes how the novel represents space, globalization, and abstraction in commodity markets<sup>5</sup>. Here he explored that Norris portrays Chicago as a site where local realities are transformed by global economic forces. Puskar emphasizes how the novel reflects the transition toward modern capitalism, where physical commodities become increasingly detached from their material origins. In addition to economic interpretations, critics such as Barbara Hochman (1988) have examined Norris's narrative techniques, noting his blend of realism and symbolism<sup>6</sup>. Hochman highlights the dual function of "the pit" as both a literal trading space and a metaphor for chaos and destruction.

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<sup>5</sup> Puskar J. Frank Norris's Common Sense: Finance as Theatre in *The Pit*. Cambridge: Cambridge university press 2021.- P. 143.

<sup>6</sup> Hochman B. The Art of Frank Norris: Storyteller. Columbia: University of Missouri Press 1988. -P. 54.



**Result.** Curtis Jadwin becomes indifferent to his relationship with his wife Laura. Their previously loving family life is gradually eroded. Jadwin spends more time on the Stock Exchange, giving more attention to wealth than to his family. This situation shows the author's main idea through the novel: if money becomes the main goal in life, a person can lose the people closest to him. The other traders in the novel follow the same path. They also choose profit, not morality. In the financial environment, whoever deceives, whoever wins over others, that is the winner. Here, honesty is not considered a strength, but rather a weakness. Only lies, deceit, and cunning can lead a person to success. This problem is not limited in the stock market. The author also shows how this situation affects the entire society. The capitalist system changes not only people, but also society itself. Now people consider values such as honesty, justice, and compassion to be useless. Whoever gets rich, no matter how, is respected by society. Even those who realize the wrongness of this system cannot get out of it. At the end of the novel, Curtis Jadwin completely collapses. The money and power he dreamed of eventually exhausts him. Now he is left powerless, alone, and depressed. This is not just a loss in business, but a loss of humanity. Jadwin becomes a man who only aspires to wealth, but in the end is left with nothing. Through this, the author shows how the capitalist system eats people from the inside, leading them to an empty and meaningless life.

**In conclusion,** in the novel *The Pit*, Frank Norris shows how human life is devalued through financial trading and speculation. The stock market is likened to a cold and emotionless machine. This system sees people as simple numbers. They are forced to act not on their own decisions, but according to market demand. An extreme form of capitalism puts profit above morality and human relationships. This leads to the loss of people's individuality. If we look at how Curtis Jadwin's path, which began with a high head, ended, we will clearly see this. He was a smart, strong and rich man. But he lost his whole life because of his greed for money. This story is not just about him, but about the entire system. This topic is still relevant today, as financial systems completely control the lives of ordinary people, Norris's warning has not lost its force.

### The List of used literature

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