

The Ox-Bow Incident Study Guide

The Ox-Bow Incident by Walter Van Tilburg Clark

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Plot Summary

The Ox-Bow Incident is a novel by famed western writer Walter Van Tilburg Clark. In this novel, two cowboys return to town after a long winter caring for a herd of cows. Within hours the men become a part of a mob outraged both over the theft of some cattle and the murder of a popular cowhand. Arguments are made for and against tracking the criminals and hanging them before the law can interfere. Finally the mob goes after the killers, cornering them in a meadow known as Ox-Bow. The mob hangs the men despite some doubt as to their guilt, only to learn they should have waited. The Ox-Bow Incident is a study in mob mentality that will stick with its readers for a long time after the final sentence is read.

Gil Carter and Art Croft come into town after wintering with a herd of cattle. The boys stop at the local saloon to have a few drinks. Gil gets into a poker game and nearly fights with a local man named Farnley over his stroke of good luck. Art tries to get Gil to give the money he won back to soothe ruffled feathers. Art is concerned because there has been talk of a cattle rustler and Art worries that because he and Gil are not as well known in town as some of the others suspicion might fall on them. Gil agrees to give the money back, but before he can bad news comes to the saloon.

A cowhand on a local ranch called Kincaid is said to have been shot in the head that afternoon. Again Art worries that suspicion might fall on he and Gil, so he tries to stay in the background. However, when a group of angry men begin talking about finding the killers and hanging them, Art finds himself forced to pick sides. While Gil agrees to join a posse that plans to track down the killers, Art agrees to go find the sheriff and local judge. Art discovers the sheriff is out at the ranch where the murder took place, but the judge is at home. Art tells the judge about the murder and the growing mob, hoping the judge can talk the men into waiting for a proper posse to be formed to bring the men to justice. However, the judge is a weak man and he allows the temporary sheriff take control of the situation.

The situation grows while Art is gone. Fueled by the support of Tetley, a local rancher and ex-Confederate officer, the mob once again becomes impatient to find the killers. Several people make speeches, trying to talk the mob into trusting the legal system, but the men are afraid that the killers will get away with their crime if they are left to the legal system. News that three men with cattle from the Drew ranch were seen going in the opposite direction as the men had assumed the killers had gone inspires the mob into action, hoping they can find and hang the killers before the sheriff even learns of their actions.

The mob moves up a steep trail into the hills as darkness descends. Art speaks with Tetley's son, a feminine boy who is always overshadowed by his masculine father, and becomes convinced the young man is suicidal. Art, however, forgets about this encounter as the mob meets a stagecoach headed in the opposite direction. The men try to stop the stagecoach to ask if they have seen anyone suspicious, but the driver and security guard believe they are thieves and begin to shoot. Art is shot in the



shoulder. The stagecoach driver realizes his mistake and stops, allowing his passengers to disembark on the dark road. Among the passengers is Gil's girlfriend, newly married to a man from San Francisco.

The mob learns that there are three men on the road ahead of them in a meadow known as Ox-Bow. The mob approaches carefully, sneaking up on the killers. Most of the men are shocked to find the three killers sleeping when they approach. The men are awoken and interviewed. Each man denies the crimes, claiming innocent explanations for why they have cattle from the Drew ranch and why one of them has the dead man's gun. The mob decides to hang the men anyway, despite their claims to innocence, but they delay the event until dawn. At dawn, the three men are hung and the mob begins to make their way back down the hill. On the trail they run into Drew and the sheriff who tell them that the three men they have just executed are not only innocent, but that the man thought murdered, Kincaid, is alive and well.

The mob returns to town minus a handful who have joined the legitimate posse hunting the cattle rustlers. The local store owner, the most verbal against the hangings, comes to speak to Art. The man feels guilty because Tetley's son has committed suicide. The man, Davis, feels he should have worked harder to stop the hangings. As they speak, Gil and Canby come into the room and announce that Tetley Sr. has also killed himself out of a sense of remorse for the hangings.



Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

Walter Van Tilburg Clark is a critically acclaimed author of three novels who, although born in Maine, has always been considered a Westerner by his fans.

Gil Carter and Art Croft return to the city of Bridger's Wells, Nevada after a long winter watching over a herd of cows. The men stop first at the local saloon, a small place owned by a man named Canby. Gil and Art are happy to have someone new to talk to after spending the entire winter with only one another's company. Gil immediately asks after Rose Mapen, a young woman he considered his girlfriend when he left in the fall. Gil is disappointed to learn that Rose left town a few weeks before, apparently run out by the other women in town who were threatened by her presence. Gil takes this news hard, drowning himself in whiskey.

Canby tells Art that there have been some cattle that have come up missing recently and that the county sheriff has been spending most of his time in the area. This worries Art because he knows not everyone knows he and Gil well, therefore some of them might suspect them of the crimes. This idea does not appear to occur to Gil, who quickly becomes involved in a game of poker with some other men who have come into the bar, including a local cowboy called Farnley. Art plays just to keep an eye on Gil. When Gil begins to win big, Art tries to get him to leave the game out of fear that someone might accuse him of cheating. However, Gil does not get the hint and he continues playing. Finally Farnley suggests a simpler game, hoping to win some of his money back. When Gil wins this hand as well, Farnley becomes upset and a fight breaks out. Canby, however, knocks Gil out to keep him from hurting an already unconscious Farnley.

Art takes Gil outside where he revives in the cool night air. Art tells Gil how Canby knocked him unconscious and they discuss the poker game. Art convinces Gil he should return ten dollars to Farnley just to mend fences. Gil agrees, but when he goes back into the bar he finds Farnley agitated again. After a few minutes, Art and Gil learn that Kincaid, a cowboy buddy of Farnley's, has been shot by cattle rustlers.

Chapter 1 Analysis

The first chapter of the novel introduces the narrator, Art Croft, and his partner, Gil Carter. These two men have been alone for a long winter while watching over a herd of cattle. Anxious to talk to other people and to blow off some steam, they go to the local bar where they hear the news they have missed all winter. Art is the more cautious of the two men, worried that a recent wave of cattle theft might be pinned on him and his partner since they have not had contact with anyone in months and therefore have no alibis for the crimes. At first this fear seems a little unwarranted, but after a while the

reader becomes aware of the dangers associated with this lifestyle and the accusations that can fly quickly with little provocation.

Gil and Art blow off steam through alcohol and a poker game. This leads to a fight with a man they both know fairly well, someone they might even consider a friend under different circumstances. The reader is given the impression that this is all in good fun despite the hurt feelings. However, the tone changes when news of the murder of Kincaid reaches the saloon. Farnley is devastated and talk of a lynching comes into the discussions almost immediately. This again reflects the quick jump to judgment that is common in this setting.



Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

Farnley mounts his horse and announces his intention of finding the killers himself. The men caution him, promising to build a posse to search for the men as a group. The local store owner, Davies, tries to convince Farnley that it would be best to get the sheriff and let the law take care of the killers, but others try to convince Farnley that it would be better if the men are hung the moment they are found rather than risk them getting away with the crime. The local preacher, Osgood, comes down on Davies' side, but he is the only one. Others join the group, including Winder, a local stagecoach driver, continuing to encourage Farnley to lynch the killers.

Davies goes into the saloon for a drink and begins to make his argument against a lynch mob to Gil and Art. Art does not know why Davies would waste his time on them, but finds himself drawn in by Davies' argument for law and order. Gil, however, falls on the other side of the argument and promises to ride with Farnley if he goes after the killers. Davies pulls Art aside and asks him to escort his assistant, Joyce, to the local judge's house to notify the sheriff of the situation. Art feels every eye in the mob on him as he walks away. At the judge's house, Art and Joyce discover that the sheriff is not around, but Mapes, the newly deputized deputy, is there. Art tries to keep the news from Mapes because he knows Mapes will only fuel the mob, but fails.

Art and Joyce make their way back to the saloon with Judge Tyler's promise to address the mob. Art notices the chaos in the street, wives begging husbands not to go and children being escorted home to safety. The mob has grown in Art's absence. Now the group includes Sparks, a black preacher who does odd jobs in the area, and Jenny Grier, a local boardinghouse owner known as Ma. The group is prepared to leave as soon as Barlett, a local rancher, arrives. When he does, however, he announces that Tetley, another rancher and ex-Confederate officer, will be joining them as well. Again talk turns to allowing the law to take control of the situation when Judge Tyler arrives. Canby even offers everyone free drinks while they decide what to do. The wait seems to have swayed some of the men to wait. However, the arrival of Tetley changes the situation. Tetley's cowhand, Amigo, announces that he saw three men running cattle with Drew's brand on them up the hills to a town called Pike's Hole. This is in the opposite direction the men assumed the killers had gone. This information fuels the lynch mob mentality once again as the men become concerned that the sheriff will never find the killers if he is not looking in the right direction. Mapes deputizes the mob, calling them a posse, and the men set out for Pike's Hole, Art and Gil among their number.



Chapter 2 Analysis

A mob begins to form with the intention of tracking down Kincaid's killers and hanging them. The mob is lead by Farnley, one of Kincaid's closest friends. Davies, the local store keeper, is against this and tries to convince the men to allow the law to do its job. Art is on his side and he even tries to find the sheriff, but has no luck. Anger continues to push the growing mob toward a lynching, leaving those who argue for law and order in the minority. The fact that this is even a discussion shows the setting in vivid detail and explains to the reader why Art is so afraid of being accused of a crime he knows he has not committed. Men are hanged with little to no evidence in this time period and it appears that this is exactly what this angry, grieving mob intends to do.

A whole cast of characters are introduced in this chapter. Bartlett, Ma, Farnley, and Tetley are the leading force behind the lynch mob. These men believe that a crime has been committed and the criminals must face justice immediately, not wait the year or more it will take for the criminals to come to trial. This group is leading the charge for a lynching. On the other side is Davies, Osgood, and Sparks. These men believe that the justice system works as long as the people allow it to work. They also believe that when men take justice into their own hands they only hurt those who believe in the legal system. However, this argument does not sway the other side of the coin. Therefore these men go along with the mob in the hopes of continuing to sway their audience before anyone can be harmed.



Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

The posse heads out past the ranches lying on the outside of town and into the mountains. When they reach the mountain path leading to Pike's Hole they stop and examine the tracks. It is clear by the tracks in the mud that forty or more head of cattle passed this way along with at least three men on horseback, just as Amigo said. As they continue on the path, Art speaks with young Tetley. Art knows that Tetley and his son do not get along because the younger man is effeminate and does not enjoy ranching as his father does. In fact, rumors say that the older Tetley only keeps his son around because of his strong resemblance to his mother. With this in mind, Art finds himself feeling some sympathy for young Tetley, especially as the man speaks of life with futility. Young Tetley then promises to kill himself if they find the killers and hang them. Art then moves back to Gil's side. Gil too is thinking hard about the hanging that is about to take place. Gil saw a hanging once and is not excited to witness another. However, Gil continues to support Farnley's right to avenge his friend's murder.

The men riding the narrow mountain trail begin discussing where the killers might be stopped. Some think they must have ridden up to Eagle Pass where there is enough space to pull the cows off the road. Gil and Art think Ox-Bow, a large valley up high in the mountain would be a more likely place to stop. The posse stops a short time later to rest the horses. Someone calls out that there is someone coming toward them. The men scatter into the woods. Art finds himself next to Sparks. Sparks has no winter clothing on, so Art makes him take his jacket. As they wait, Art becomes convinced that no one is coming, so he lights a cigarette, causing some ire from the leaders of the posse. However, others light their cigarettes as well, so it is decided the group should just move on.

As the posse gets back on the road they suddenly become aware of a stagecoach headed their way. The men move out of the way, but then decide they should stop the coach to ask if they have seen anything on the trail. The driver and guard on the coach panic, deciding the men are robbers out to hurt them. The driver urges the horses on while the guard takes aim with his rifle. Art is shot in the shoulder before Winder is finally able to convince the driver to stop. When the stagecoach stops, the passengers disembark. Gil is shocked to discover the passengers are his girl, Rose Mapen, her new husband and his sister. The men in the posse circle around Rose out of curiosity, but Gil stays back. It is then that he realizes Art has been shot. A group of men gather around Art and clean off his shoulder, stopping the flow of blood with the heated end of a rifle and bandaging it with a torn shirt. Art is urged to return to the town with the stagecoach, but Art refuses. As the posse begins mounting their horses to return to the hunt, Rose's husband comes over and warns Gil to stay away from his wife. Gil quietly agrees, resisting the fight Art was convinced he would engage in.



The posse continues up the trail toward Ox-Bow where the stagecoach driver mentioned seeing a fire. The posse can see the fire as they approach because it is a large one. The leaders decide to divide the posse into several groups. Winder is to lead one, Ma and Bartlett two others. Art finds himself assigned to Tetley's group. The other groups move into place as Tetley's group waits.

Chapter 3 Analysis

The posse begins its hunt in the mountains above Bridger's Wells, convinced a group of men seen by Amigo with cows marked with Drew's brand must be the killers. This goes against the assumption that the killers made their way out of Drew's property through the south draw, the direction in which the sheriff will more than likely be looking when he learns of the murder. This puts the posse ahead of the law, something they have wanted to be from the moment they received the news of Kincaid's death.

Although most of the men are eager to find and hang the killers, there are some among the posse who are reluctant. Gil has seen a hanging, therefore he is not eager to see another. Art has doubts, based on the lecture Davies gave to the men. Young Tetley, the effeminate son of the rancher Tetley, promises to kill himself if the hanging takes place. All this shows that some of the men understand that what they are engaging in is morally, if not legally, wrong. However, they are going along with it for various reasons, perhaps in a hope that it will not happen. This touches on the idea of a mob mentality and does not bode well for the men being sought by this mob.

Art is shot and Gil discovers his girlfriend has gotten married. These two events happen simultaneously, suggesting a sense of connection between the two men that impacts their lives in good and bad situations. Art's wound is bad, but he remains determined to stay with the posse. The reader sees this as a manly need to prove he is not weak, but it is also suggested that Art's need to stay with the posse has more to do with Gil's heartbreak and Art's loyalty toward him. There is a strong friendship here that will impact both men's lives as the plot continues to develop.



Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

Tetley's group moves into the valley at Ox-Bow and approaches the fire where it is thought the killers lay in wait for them. However, when they approach the fire they discover three men sleeping without a guard. This surprises some of the men. Tetley has the three killers awakened. They are tied together and interrogated. The younger man among them tells Tetley and the others that he is a rancher in Pike's Hole and that he just bought the cattle from Drew. However, the young man called Donald Martin, cannot show a bill of sale. Martin claims Drew was out in his pasture and could not give him one. No one believes this, however, especially Drew's long time foreman who happens to be among the posse. Martin tells the posse the other two men with him are his employees.

A member of the posse who lives in Pike's Hole says that there are no new people there and that there are no available properties there. Martin swears he met a man in California who sold him his ranch in Pike's Hole. However, the ranch in question is not owned by the man but by another rancher. Martin claims he did not know and thought he owned the ranch outright. Then another member of the posse looks at the younger of Martin's two employees and claims he is a wanted man named Francisco Morez. This seems to give more credence to the idea that these three men are criminals rather than the innocent men Martin claims they are.

Martin begs the men not to hang them. When Tetley and the others refuse to budge, Martin asks them to wait until dawn so that he might write a letter to his wife. Tetley agrees. The three men are freed so that Martin can write his letter. In the mean time, Ma makes a meal out of Martin's food stash. Art lies down to sleep and is awoken when the younger of Martin's men tries to escape. The man is caught and when he is, it is discovered he has Kincaid's gun. Farnley insists that Kincaid would never part with his gun, therefore Martin's story that the cowhand found the gun in a field and took it to return it later is deemed untrue. This last bit of evidence appears to condemn Martin and his two cowhands.

Martin writes his letter and gives it to Davies. Davies shows it around, hoping the sincerity of Martin's words to his wife will convince the posse that Martin is not a killer. However, this does nothing to sway the posse because most believe Martin would lie to save his own life. Dawn arrives and Davies tries to stop the hanging. Tetley calls for a vote. Five people stand with Davies, including Tetley's own son. However, the majority vote to hang Martin and his cowhands. A tree limb is chosen and three horses for the condemned to stand on. Tetley chooses three people to urge the horses into a run when the moment comes. These three include Ma, Farnley, and Tetley's own reluctant son. Ma and Farnley have no trouble condemning the two cowhands, but Tetley cannot make himself smack the horse under Martin, condemning Martin to death. The horse walks off, but the lack of speed causes Martin to simply fall, not to break his neck as the



others did. Tetley hits his son on the head out of shame and orders Farnley to shoot Martin in order to put him out of his misery.

Chapter 4 Analysis

The posse finds the three men they have been searching for. Immediately the men begin making excuses for the evidence that makes it appear as though they are the cow rustlers who killed Kincaid. They have Drew's cows, but the young man claims they bought them legally. They have Kincaid's gun, but the men claim to have found it and that they intended to give it back. However, this evidence is overwhelming for the posse that has been filled with anger and a need for revenge all day. However, the posse decides to wait for dawn out of respect for the condemned.

The reader watches the activities in Ox-Bow and wonders if the three men could be innocent. Martin's story sounds plausible even as it is picked apart by the leaders of the posse. The reader wonders if maybe Martin is new to Pike's Hole and the man who says he is not simply was not aware of his new neighbors. The reader also wonders if it is possible that Drew would go against his practice of always giving a receipt would change his policy just once in unique circumstances. It is difficult to know for sure, which is why Davies continues to argue that the posse should have turned the three men over to the law so that they might check out Martin's story.

Five men stand up against the hanging, but the majority of the men either urge the leaders on or simply refuse to offer an opinion. This allows the leaders to force their own opinions on everyone else. Tetley in particular seems to have something to prove. It has been Tetley who has led the charge toward hanging all night and it is also Tetley who decides how, when, and where the men will be hanged. Not only this, but Tetley forces his own son, whom he knows to be against the hangings, to urge the horse under Martin into a run in order to cause Martin's death. This is a cruel thing to do to someone who does not want to participate in this event, putting blood on the hands of a man who has promised to kill himself if the hangings proceed.



Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

The posse turns and begins to make its way back down the mountain trail. A few minutes later, the posse runs into the sheriff. Not only the sheriff, but Drew and Kincaid. It turns out Kincaid was only injured, not killed. Drew also corroborates Martin's story about his purchase of the cows. The sheriff understands what has happened and he announces he will not arrest anyone as long as a handful of men agree to join a legitimate posse to track down the cattle rustlers. Immediately the entire posse volunteers and the sheriff picks the men he wants.

As the remaining men turn to return to town, Art becomes aware of a disturbance at the side of the trail. Young Tetley has gone down to the creek to shoot himself, but he is stopped by Smith, the town drunk. Young Tetley is placed on a horse and guided back into town with everyone assuming he does not have the guts to really kill himself.

Art and Gil arrive at Canby's to find Smith talking about the experience. Gil warns Smith to keep his mouth shut, but Canby assures them he was only talking about Young Tetley. Canby gives Gil and Art a room above the bar where he looks at and dresses Art's gunshot wound. Gil leaves to board the horses at Winder's. Art falls asleep and wakes a time later to find Davies in his room. Davies begins talking to Art, telling him that Young Tetley committed suicide, hanging himself in his father's barn. Davies blames himself not only for Tetley's death, but for the murders of Martin and his two cowhands. Davies feels as though he should have fought harder to stop the hangings. Art tries to convince Davies it is not his fault and just about has him convinced when Gil and Canby come into the room. Gil announces that the older Tetley also killed himself. Davies runs out of the room. Canby arranges for Sparks to sit with Davies.

Gil tells Art that he no longer cares about Rose Mapen and has no intention in fighting her weaker husband. Gil also tells Art that he has arranged for Winder to give Farnley the ten dollars from their poker game. Gil and Art then turn their attention to their next stint watching over the cow herd.

Chapter 5 Analysis

The posse learns that the men they just hung are not guilty. Not only this, but Kincaid, the murder victim, turns out to be alive and well. Now all these men who were so angry and so determined to get justice discover that they have committed an injustice themselves. It is a sobering thought, but instead of facing the law for their own crimes, these men blame the elder Tetley for leading them into their crime. Once again the mob mentality takes over and everyone finds a scapegoat, someone else to hang.

Davies was against the hanging from the very beginning, therefore the knowledge that the three men hanged were innocent drives him into a dark depression. Davies turns to



Art for some reason that Art cannot figure, only that Davies insists that Art is different from the others. However, the knowledge that both Tetleys have committed suicide over this event only drives Davies into a darker depression. Art and Gil appear to have brushed off all this darkness, but they are also looking forward to the same solitude they were in such a hurry to get away from the day before.



Characters

Art Croft

Art Croft is a cowboy who has just come into Bridger's Wells after spending the entire winter alone with Gil Carter as they watched over a herd of cows. Art is a cautious man who does nothing to extreme, a contrast to his heavy drinking, fight loving partner. In fact, the reader is left with the impression that Art often appoints himself babysitter of his partner to avoid the trouble Gil can sometimes get into.

When word of Kincaid's murder reaches Bridger's Wells, Art knows that Gil will want to ride with the quickly forming posse. Art thinks he will ride as well, but when he hears Davies speak out against a vigilante mob, Art wonders if maybe it would not be better to allow the law to take care of the situation. Art even goes to find the sheriff for Davies, though he knows this could cause the forming mob to turn against him. In the end, however, Art rides out with the posse because this is what Gil does.

Art is shot, but he continues with the posse and is a bystander when the three men caught by the mob are hung. Art also stands by as Young Tetley kills himself even though Art knows that Young Tetley has vowed to kill himself should the hangings take place. Art feels no remorse for this, however, but does console Davies as he struggles with his role in the murders.

Gil Carter

Gil Carter is a cowboy who likes to blow off steam by picking fights. Gil celebrates his first day back in town by getting drunk and winning big at poker. This leads to a fight with Farnley, another cowhand Gil knows well. Just as Art gets Gil calm and recommends he give Farnley some of his money back, the crowd at the bar hear that Kincaid, another cowhand, has been killed.

Gil joins the group of men growing around Farnley as he vows to get revenge for the murder of his friend. Gil is a straight shooter and he believes a man should have the right to take revenge in his own hands. This opinion stands despite Gil's own experience having seen a hanging. Gil is also a bystander in this event, watching but not offering any opinions about the situation. In the end, Gil appears to take the stand that all difficult situations are best handled by not becoming involved.

Arthur Davies

Arthur Davies owns the general store in Bridger's Wells. Davies comes out against the vigilantes the moment he learns of the situation. Davies makes a strong argument against the people making small decisions that affect the larger population, an argument that expresses the basic principles of law and order. Art agrees with Davies as does the



local preacher, Osgood. However, Davies fails to get anyone else to agree with him. Despite this, Davies continues to speak out against the hangings up until the final moments.

Davies returns to Bridger's Wells convinced that he is responsible for the three dead men at Ox-Bow and the suicides of the two Tetley men. Davies believes he should have fought harder to convince these men to turn the three men at Ox-Bow over to the law. Art tries to convince Davies it was not his fault, but Art's arguments are undermined by the death of the elder Tetley, the man all the other members of the vigilante mob blame for the mistake at Ox-Bow.

Gerald

Gerald Tetley, the Young Tetley, is the son of a rancher and ex-Confederate officer. Young Tetley does not enjoy ranching and would rather spend his days reading books. This deeply shames Young Tetley's father, causing a great deal of animosity between the two. In fact, many in town believe Tetley would have killed his son long ago if not for the fact that Young Tetley looks just like his mother.

Young Tetley speaks out against the hangings from the very beginning and sides with Davies when a vote is taken in the moments before the hangings. Despite this, or perhaps because of it, Young Tetley's father forces him to participate in the hanging of Martin. Young Tetley fails at his job and his father is so ashamed that he hits him with his gun. Young Tetley is then convinced he must die for what he has done. Young Tetley tries and fails to shoot himself, but later hangs himself in his father's barn.

Elder Tetley

The Elder Tetley is a rancher and ex-Confederate officer who never really gets over the failure of the South to win the Civil War. Tetley is a very manly person, a man who likes to ride the range and watch over his herd. Therefore, Tetley is deeply ashamed of his son for being effeminate, unable, or unwilling, to participate in manly activities. For this reason, there is a great deal of animosity between father and son.

When word of Kincaid's murder reaches Tetley, he immediately arranges to join the vigilante mob. As the biggest landowner next to Drew, Tetley automatically becomes the leader. Tetley enjoys interrogating Martin when they find the suspected killers and drags out the hanging for hours out of a sense of enjoyment. In the end, Tetley forces his own son to help hang the suspected killers. When Tetley learns of his son's suicide later that morning, he shows no emotion. In fact, Tetley is more concerned over the fact that the men of the vigilante mob are blaming him for the mistake they made hanging Martin and his men. It appears that this is Tetley's motive in his own suicide.



Jenny 'Ma' Grier

Jenny Grier, or Ma, is a local woman who runs a boardinghouse. Ma is known by her nickname because she often cares for the men when they come in from long months of watching over the herds. Ma is well respected in town and thus becomes a leader in the vigilante mob. In fact, Ma is one of the people who executes one of the suspected killers by urging the horse under him to run. Ma encourages the mob, using words to propel them on, becoming a part of the mob mentality.

Sheriff Risley

The county sheriff is Sheriff Risley. When word of Kincaid's murder comes to Canby's, Davies sends his employee and Art Croft to find Sheriff Risley with the hope that he will be able to talk the growing mob down. However, Sheriff Risley is already out at Drew's, perhaps already investigating the attack on Kincaid. For this reason, the mob continues with their plans rather than wait for the sheriff. In the end, the sheriff realizes what the men have done, but he decides to do nothing about it despite Judge Tyler's urging that the entire mob be arrested.

Kincaid

Kincaid is a young, dark Irish man who works as a cowhand on Drew's ranch. Kincaid is a quiet, unassuming man who has apparently made a lot of friends during his time at Drew's. The word of his death inspires Farnley to vow to avenge his death, leading to the vigilante mob that hangs Martin and his two cowhands. However, it turns out Kincaid was never dead.

Jeff Farnley

Jeff Farnley is a cowhand who once worked on a ranch with Gil. Farnley and Gil get into a fight at the beginning of the novel when Gil beats him at poker multiple times. Gil vows to return some of the money to Farnley, but does not have the chance because word of Kincaid's death causes Farnley to become upset and determined to track down the killers. It is Farnley who initially suggests they find the killers and hang them rather than allow the slow cogs of the justice system to allow them to go free. It is also Farnley who shoots Martin in the head when Young Tetley fails to hang him properly.

Donald Martin

Donald Martin is a young rancher who has brought his family from California to Pike's Hole in order to begin a ranch of their own. Martin has bought cows from Drew, but failed to get a receipt and one of his men has possession of Kincaid's gun. These facts

together cause the vigilante mob to decide that Martin and his men killed Kincaid and to hang them. However, it turns out that Martin is innocent of the crime, as are his men.



Objects/Places

Whiskey

Whiskey is the drink of choice in Canby's.

Cards

Many of the cowboys play cards, specifically poker, while spending recreational time in Bridger's Wells.

Kincaid's Gun

One of Martin's employees is found to have Kincaid's gun. The man claims he found it lying on the ground and he took it with the intention of sending it back to Drew's.

Woman with Parrot

Woman with Parrot is the name of a painting in Canby's that Art Croft finds fascinating.

Drew's Cows

Kincaid's killer is said to have gotten away with more than forty head of Drew's cows. When the vigilante mob comes across Donald Martin and his employees, they find forty head of cattle with Drew's brand on them.

Blue-Boy

Blue-Boy is Art Croft's horse.

Canby's

Canby's is the saloon/hotel in Bridger's Wells.

Judge's House

Art Croft goes to the judge's house in search of the sheriff when word of Kincaid's murder reaches Canby's.



Tetley's Barn

Young Tetley commits suicide in his father's barn after he participates in the hanging of Martin and his two cowhands.

Drew's

Drew's is a ranch outside of Bridger's Wells owned by a man named Drew. This is where the murder of Kincaid is reported to have taken place.

Bridger's Wells

Bridger's Wells is the name of the town in Nevada where the novel is set.

Pike's Hole

Pike's Hole is the town over the mountain from Bridger's Wells where Donald Martin has recently bought a ranch.

Themes

Vigilante Justice

Many Western movies show men hanged at the drop of the hat for reason varying from stealing, cheating at poker, to murder. In this novel, the author explores the impact of such an act. A well liked cowhand is rumored to have been shot in the head by a cattle rustler who has been targeting local ranchers all winter. This man's closest friend, Jeff Farnley, vows to get revenge. Farnley has little hope that the legal system will bring these men to justice. Soon others join him in the immediate excitement over the situation. In a matter of minutes a mob forms.

When the vigilante mob reaches Ox-Bow and comes across three men with a small group of cattle from the same ranch where Kincaid was reportedly killed, they automatically assume these are the killers. The men interrogate their suspects, but they discount everything they say. In fact, some of the excuses do seem too coincidental. However, in the end it turns out that the suspected killers were innocent all along. Had these men waited just a day they would have learned the truth.

Vigilante justice is exactly what courts and laws hope to avoid. Vigilante means that the suspected criminals will not get a fair hearing and that their alibis will not be checked out. While many people believe that the legal system is flawed, the writer appears to be making the statement that a flawed system is better than no system at all.

Responsibility

When the people at Canby's learn about the murder of Kincaid, they immediately make assumptions about the identity of the killers. These men assume the killers are the same cattle rustlers who have been stealing cows in the area all winter. These men also assume these killers deserve to die for their actions. They assign responsibility to a group of men they do not know and have never met.

As the mob forms and begins its journey into the mountains several leaders stand out. These include a rancher named Tetley. When the group arrives at Ox-Bow, Tetley again stands out as the leader. In fact, Tetley interviews the suspects and decides when and how they will die. When the group learns that Martin and his men were innocent, they immediately blame Tetley, claiming he took responsibility and it is his fault if a mistake was made.

Davies was against the hangings from the beginning and he is overwhelmed with guilt when he learns the truth about Martin and about the suicide of Young Tetley. Davies accepts the responsibility that no one else seems to want to take. However, it seems to the reader that all the men are responsible, but none of them are willing to take that responsibility, but would rather shove it off on someone else.



Mob Mentality

It is said that when a large group of people gather together, the opinions of one tends to spread to all of the others. In this novel, the author presents a mob that becomes convinced of the need to hang a group of men for the murder of a man these people are not even sure is dead. As more people gather and hear Farnley talk about the need for justice against these killers, the more people become convinced that hanging the guilty men is necessary.

There are men who try to talk the mob out of their actions. However, as new people join the group, more and more begin to believe in the need to hang the guilty men. This need for vigilante justice only grows as more people learn about it. For this reason, three innocent men are hung and two men commit suicide. For this reason, mob mentality is an important theme in the novel.

Style

Point of View

The point of view of this novel is first person. The narrator is Art Croft, a young cowboy who has just come into town after spending a long winter watching over a herd of cows. The first person point of view shows the events that unfold in the plot from Art's point of view only. This is a tightly restricted point of view, showing the events from the sideline rather than from the point of view of the other people who populate the novel.

The point of view is very narrow in this novel, but it works well with the plot because Art takes part in almost all of the events that are important to the overall plot. The reader sees the mob build and become convinced of the need to counter vigilante justice, but does not see the murder that is the catalyst to the mob formation. Due to this, the reader gets to see only what is necessary for the reader to understand the mentality of the mob and the consequences of their actions.

Setting

The novel is set in Bridger's Wells, Nevada sometime after the end of the Civil War. The town has grown up around several large ranches owned by Drew and one owned by Tetley. These men have great influence over the town because of their wealth and the fact that they employ many of the cowboys living in the area. There is only one sheriff in the county and the county is so large that he cannot be everywhere at once. There are also several judges, but the time period is such that the judge is not as powerful or respected as a modern judge might be.

The setting of this novel is important on several levels. First, the setting is important because it is a Western town in a time period that fits with the genre of the novel. Second, the setting is during a time in which vigilante justice often takes place, such as the hanging of Martin and his cowhands. Finally, the setting is such that men like Farnley are believable and his desire to seek vengeance for his friend likely. The setting is essential to the overall plot because it makes the plot possible and believable.

Language and Meaning

The language is English. The words are a combination of a more formal language mixed with the more casual slang that men might have spoken at the time in which the novel is set. There are few foreign phrases in the novel, but there is a character who speaks Spanish so his language is often broken and he uses a grammar that does not compliment the English he is attempting to speak.

The language of the novel fits the characters who populate its pages. The language is simple enough that the youngest readers will understand it, but filled with language that

suggests the writer is a highly educated man attempting to write in a language that is simpler than his own grasp of language. The dialogue in some places is broken and uses bad grammar, an attempt to show the difficulty of a Spanish speaker's difficulty with the English language. The language overall, however, is clear and easy to comprehend.

Structure

The novel is divided into five chapters. Each chapter is fairly long and covers multiple scenes. The novel is told in both exposition and dialogue, showing the story as well as telling it. The plot is told in a linear fashion, beginning in the afternoon of one day and moving through the evening, night, morning, and ending in the afternoon of the following day. Despite the small amount of time that passes in the novel, a great deal happens in a twenty-four hour time period, bringing the main characters full circle.

The novel has one main plot and several subplots. The main plot follows a group of people who decide to find and hang the men responsible for killing a cowhand. One of the subplots concerns the friendship between two of the main characters, Gil Carter and Art Croft. Another subplot deals with a broken relationship between Gil and a girl called Rose Mapen. Other subplots deal with relationships among other characters, most notably the relationship between Tetley and his son, Gerald. All the plots come to a satisfying conclusion at the end of the novel.

Quotes

"It was good to be on the loose on that kind of a day, but winter range stores up a lot of things in a man, and spring roundup hadn't worked them all out." Chapter 1, p. 6.

"A long roundup makes you restless inside houses for a while." Chapter 1, p. 27.

"I wanted to feel the way the others did about this, but you can feel awful guilty about nothing when the men you're with don't trust you." Chapter 1, p. 30.

"That hatred of the railroad was Winder's only original notion, and when he got mad that always came in some way." Chapter 2, p. 45.

"And it's infinitely more deadly when the law is disregarded by men pretending to act for justice than when it's simply inefficient, or even than when its elected administrators are crooked." Chapter 2, p. 47.

"In the shadow under the mountain we felt hurried because of the lateness." Chapter 3, p. 99.

"But know this,' he said, 'if we get those men and hang them, I'll kill myself. I'll hang myself.'" Chapter 3, p. 107.

"Then, like an officer enjoying mapping out a battle plan that pleases him because of the surprise element is with him, he directed our attack." Chapter 3, p. 138.

"Martin swallowed and wet his lips with his tongue, but couldn't speak." Chapter 4, p. 157.

"The Mexican's courage, and even, in a way, young Martin's pride in the matter of the letter, had won them much sympathy, and I think we all believed now that the old man was really a pitiful fool, but whatever we thought, there was an almost universal determination to finish the job now." Chapter 4, p. 178.

"Croft,' he said, 'I killed those three men.'" Chapter 5, p. 198.

"Then Gil said, 'I'll be glad to get out of here,' as if he'd let it all go." Chapter 5, p. 217.



Topics for Discussion

Who is Art Croft? When is the reader introduced to him? How does the reader learn his name? Why has Art come to Bridger's Wells? What does he plan to do there? Who is with him? Why does Art worry that people in Bridger's Wells will accuse him and his partner of stealing cows? Why does Art worry about crossing the mob that forms after news of Kincaid's death reaches town? Why does Art go with the mob in search of Kincaid's killers?

Who is Gil Carter? Why has he come to town? Why does he refuse to stop playing poker despite tensions that are building? Why does he fight with Farnley? Why does Gil promise to return ten dollars to Farnley? Does he? Why does Gil agree to go with the mob in search of Kincaid's killer? Does Gil have any reservations about the mob's goal? What might they be? What is Gil's relationship with Rose Mapen? Why does Gil decide not to fight Rose's new husband?

Who is Davies? What is Davies' opinion of the mob's desire to kill Kincaid's killers? What does he do to express his opinion? Why does Davies go into the mountains with the mob? Why does Davies show Martin's letter around to the people attempting to hang Martin? What does Davies believe the letter shows? Does it? Why does Davies give the letter for Martin's wife to Drew? Why does Davies feel responsible for the hanging deaths of Martin and his men? For Gerald Tetley's suicide? Is he?

Who is Tetley? Why does Tetley join the mob? How does Tetley become the leader of the mob? Why does Art believe Tetley puts off the hangings? What does Tetley think of his son? Why? What does Tetley do when his son votes against hanging Martin and his men? What does Tetley do when his son fails to properly hang Martin? Why? Why does Tetley not react to his son's death? Why does Tetley kill himself?

Who is Martin? How does Martin come to be at Ox-Bow the night Kincaid is killed? What does he have that makes it appear that he is the cattle rustler? What does his cowhand, the older man, say about the crimes the men are accused of committing? Why? What evidence does Martin's younger cowhand have that causes the men to become convinced of their guilt? Does Martin ever admit to hurting Kincaid? To stealing cows? Why is Martin hung? What might have happened if Tetley and the mob had waited just thirty minutes longer?

Define justice. Discuss how justice is achieved. Is hanging a killer justice? How does someone know for a fact that a man has committed a crime? How does the justice system help prevent the condemnation of innocent men? How could the justice system have saved Martin and his men in this novel? Was justice served in this novel? Explain.

Discuss the mob mentality. What is mob mentality? How does the opinion of one man become the opinion of others? What might have happened in this novel if Farnley had not decided Kincaid's killers must be hung? What might have happened if more people

had listened to Davies? Would Martin have hung? Was Martin guilty? Did Martin deserve what he got? Could Tetley have defended his actions?