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Sample MonkeyNotes

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The Ox-Bow Incident

by

Walter Van Tilburg Clark
1940



MonkeyNotes Study Guide Edited by Diane Sauder

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KEY LITERARY ELEMENTS

SETTING

The novel is set in the 1880's, when the western frontier in America was being shaped. The opening action of *The Ox-Bow Incident* takes place in Bridger's Wells, Nevada, a little frontier town located in a big valley on the western side of the continental divide. The town was formed to serve the many ranchers in the area, who come into Bridger's Wells to buy supplies, drink at the saloon, play poker and find

LIST OF CHARACTERS

Major Characters

Art Croft - the narrator of the story, who is an intelligent man. He comes to Bridger's Wells, a town on the Western Divide, with his friend, Gil Carter. He desperately wants to be

Gil Carter - Art's friend, who is a simple, but aggressive, cowhand. He has stayed with Art for.....

Arthur Davies - the owner of the general store in the town. An admirable character who speaks out for justice, he tries hard to stop the posse in the absence of the Sheriff Risley, but.....

Major Tetley - a previous confederate cavalry officer. It is under his leadership that the.....”

Gerald Tetley - the son of Major Tetley. A sickly, sensitive, and effeminate young man, he is

Minor Characters

Bartlett - the owner of a small ranch. Worried about the cattle rustlers, he gives an impassioned

Canby - the owner and bartender of the saloon that is the popular meeting place in Bridger's Wells.

Carnes - the guard on the stagecoach who fires into the posse, wounding Art's shoulder.

Drew - the owner of the largest ranch in the valley. Most of the hands seen in the novel work on his ranch, including Kinkaid and Farnley.....(Many other characters are listed).....

CONFLICT

Protagonist - Law and order, symbolized by the sheriff, Davies, and other people who uphold it, is the protagonist of the novel. Above everyone else, Davies tries to maintain.....

Antagonist - The antagonist of the novel is a variety of people who go against law and order. The first group is composed of the cattle rustlers, who have stolen a thousand.....

Climax - The posse arrives in Ox-Bow Valley, where the cattle rustlers are.....

Outcome - The story ends in a tragedy. One of the cattle rustlers is shot, and two of them are lynched. Then Gerald Tetley kills himself to keep his word that he will die if a

SHORT PLOT SUMMARY (Synopsis)

The novel begins as two friends, Art and Gil, cross the eastern divide on their horses about two in the afternoon. They are headed to the town of Bridger's Wells, which they have visited several times in the past. Hoping to settle in the town, they are eager to arrive; therefore, they encourage their horses to go speedily.

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Upon arriving, they head to Canby's Saloon, the local meeting place. They are surprised to find the atmosphere in the bar quite serious; there is no laughter and no cracking of jokes, as is normally found.

Art and Gil soon learn that Bridger's Wells has been beset with the problems of cattle rustling. The locals in the bar are plotting to catch the thieves. Since Art and Gil are newcomers, there is even suspicion cast upon them. When Canby talks to Gil and offers him another drink, he is putting a stamp of approval on the newcomers. To prove that they have been accepted, the locals invite Gil and Art to a.....

THEMES

Major Theme - The major theme of the novel revolves around the necessity of law and order. The problem in Bridger's Wells begins with a gang of cattle rustlers who steal from the Drew ranch. The lawlessness intensifies when Kinkaid, one of the hands on the Drew ranch, is killed. The men in.....

Minor Theme - A minor theme in the novel is the danger of going along with the crowd simply to be accepted by others. Art and Gil, as newcomers to Bridger's Wells, are anxious to be accepted in.....

MOOD

The mood of *The Ox-Bow Incident* is largely somber and tragic. From the moment that Art and Gil enter the bar and find the men in serious discussion, rather than laughing and telling jokes, the mood indicates that there are large problems to be solved in the novel. When it is learned that Kinkaid has been killed, the.....

BACKGROUND INFORMATION - BIOGRAPHY

Walter Van Tilburg Clark was born on August 3, 1909, in East Orland, Maine, the oldest of four Clark children. His brilliant father, Walter Ernest Clark, was a teacher, an economist, and the president of the University of Nevada in Reno. His mother, Euphemia Murray (Abrams) Clark, was also intelligent and interested in books, learning, and art. Both mother and father had a great influence on their son.

Walter's parents moved from New York to Nevada when he was only eight years old. Most of his education took place in Nevada, where he attended public schools and completed his B.A. at the University of Nevada in 1932. He also earned his first Master's degree there within the year, after writing a.....

HISTORICAL INFORMATION

The Ox-Bow Incident is a novel about the American West in the period when it was expanding. Beginning with Mark Twain's *Roughing It*, published in 1872, the Western genre of literature became popular among American writers, including Bret Harte, Owen Wister, Hamlin Garland, O.E. Rolvaag, and Zane Grey. In the beginning, most of the fiction written about the West gave a romanticized picture of frontier life, almost like a tall tale. In the 20th century, however, all types of American literature became.....

CHAPTER SUMMARIES WITH NOTES

Chapter I

Summary

The novel is narrated by Art Croft from the first person point of view. The book begins as Art and his friend, Gil Carter, cross the Eastern Divide about two o'clock in the afternoon. They pause to look down into the big valley below and excitedly spy the little town that is their destination. Traveling for a long time, often in winter weather, they both look forward to being in civilization once again.

Art and Gil start down the steep road into the valley. They notice that it has been washed clean by the run-off

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from the winter storms. They also notice bits of brush beginning to grow again, signaling the start of spring. The squirrels and chipmunks have also emerged from their winter hibernation and are scurrying to and fro. Art and Gil have been traveling together for five years. Totally comfortable in each other's company, they do not feel the need to fill their time with idle chatter; silence does not bother them. As they ride into the valley, all is quiet. They finally reach Bridger's Wells, the little town spied from above, at about three o'clock.

Bridger's Valley is a typical Western frontier town. There is a wooden church with peeling paint. Most of the houses and other buildings, usually made of wood, have been left unpainted. Only a few structures are constructed of brick. Since Art and Gil have visited here before, they recognize Arthur Davies' general store, Canby's saloon, the Bridger Inn, and the Union Church. They also know that there are ranches to the north and south of town.

Art and Gil immediately head to Canby's saloon, the local gathering place. Passing the Bridger Inn on the way, they note that there are a few horses tied out front. They also spy the town bum, Monte Smith; he is the only man on the street. As they enter into the dark, cool bar, Art and Gil notice the strong smell of stale beer and tobacco. They also see that there are still four green-covered tables on one side of the bar, and the same pictures hang on the walls, including the oil painting called "Woman with Parrot" that Canby calls "The Bitching Hour." Gil comments on the picture, saying that he feels sorry for the man who always seems to approach the woman with the parrot, but is never able to reach her. Canby says he like the man in the picture.

Canby asks Gil and Art what they will have to drink, but Gil answers that he has not yet decided. Canby grumpily responds that he does not like men who cannot make up their minds. When he suggests whisky to them, Art and Gil both order a drink. They note that it is the first drop of whisky that they have had since Christmas. It is also the first time that they have been in Bridger's Wells since the fall. Art tells Canby that in the interim, he and Art have been traveling over the range. He has had to listen to Gil sing the same three songs and tell the same stories about women and himself. He admits that the two of them have fought often during the winter, for Gil is aggressive by nature and does not take criticism well.

As the three men talk, Monte Smith enters. Art and Gil ignore him, but Art pays for him a drink, which he takes and then goes off. Art asks Canby about Rose Mapen, Gil's girlfriend in town. Canby tells them that the married women have driven her out of town, which makes Gil feel bad. He asks Canby what he and Art can do to entertain themselves in Bridger's Wells. He answers that they can eat, sleep, drink, play poker, or fight. As the three continue their conversation, the foreman from Drew's ranch enters and orders a drink. Canby asks him about Sheriff Risley and the cattle rustlers, but it is obvious that Moore does not want to discuss anything in front of the two strangers. Gil continues to order whiskies and gets a little drunk. Canby offers him and Art some hard bread and dried beef. At first Gil refuses the food, but later eats without pretense.

As more people come into the bar, Art notices that there is "a difference underneath." The mood is more solemn and serious; no one laughs or cracks a joke. Canby explains to Art and Gil that the people in and around Bridger's Wells have been troubled for awhile by cattle rustling, and a huge number of cattle have been lost. Still uncomfortable with the conversation, Moore invites Art and Gil, to play a game of poker with him. As they play, more townsfolk enter the bar. Davies, the owner of the general store, comes in with his clerk, Joyce. The minister (Osgood), an old rancher (Bartlett), and another hand from Drew's ranch (Farnley) also enter the bar. Moore asks them all to watch the poker game.

Even though Gil is winning, Art is concerned because his friend is drunk and does not take his success "right." After Gil wins two more rounds, Farnley suggests a game of "double draw." Gil says that it is a game for old ladies, but he agrees to play even though he is irritated by Farnley's interference. Gil continues to win in the new game, stacking his money on the table. Farnley is obviously irritated and hints that perhaps Gil is a cattle

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rustler. Gil, losing all patience, hits Farnley hard, banging his head against the sill. Canby tops the fight by hitting Gil with a bottle, causing him to fall down. Art puts Gil's money in a sack and waits for his friend to regain consciousness. When he is back to himself, Gil decides to give Farnley his money back, saying he has not won the last pot fairly. He takes out ten dollars for Farnley.

Suddenly there is a sound of a running horse. The men in the bar look out and see that the rider has his hat pulled down, hiding his face. He rushes behind the saloon and stops. A young man dismounts the horse and comes to the door of the bar. He says that Kinkaid, who works on Drew's ranch, has been murdered. Farnley is enraged at the news. Canby tells Art that even before this murder the men in town have been talking about lynching the rustlers. This news makes matters even worse.

Art and Gil leave Canby's saloon. Art says he wants to be accepted by the men in Bridger's Wells, but he knows that they do not trust him and Gil. Gil admits that he would also like to be accepted.

Notes

The novel opens with the introduction of the two main characters, Art and Gil. Art will serve as the narrator of the entire story from the first person point of view. It is immediately obvious that this is a Western tale. The two men have just passed the Eastern Divide into the frontier land of the West.

Art and Gil are friends who have traveled together for five years; they have grown so comfortable with each other that they feel no need to talk, often riding in silence. Sometimes, however, they get into a fight, for Gil tends to be aggressive and does not take criticism well. For most of the winter, Art and Gil have been traversing the range. They are excited to finally come close to civilization and spy the little town of Bridger's Wells in the big valley below. They want to ride proudly into the village and be accepted by its citizens. The happiness of the men is reflected in the weather. The winter storms have passed, clearing the road into the valley. The first signs of spring are also everywhere, with the green of the first plants emerging and the squirrels and chipmunks scampering about. The sun is also warm and the sky clear blue.

As the friends ride eagerly into town, where they have visited before, there are ominous hints presented. Bridger's Wells seems too quiet and half-empty. Also the paint on the church is peeling, and the other houses and buildings are unpainted and somber in appearance. Art and Gil notice that there are few horses tied in front of the inn, and only one man, the local bum, is seen on the main street. When they enter Canby's saloon, the local gathering place, everything is very quiet and serious, even though nothing much has changed inside. There are still four covered tables and several familiar pictures hanging on the walls. The four men playing poker, however, seem almost lifeless.

Canby immediately recognizes Art and Gil. As he always does, Gil comments on the picture of the woman with the parrot; he supports the woman in the picture, while Gil defends the man. Canby wants to take their orders, but Gil says he has not decided what he wants. Canby says he does not like indecision, which irritates Gil, revealing his short temper. Finally, Art and Gil begin to drink whiskey; Gil gets a little drunk, which worries the calmer Art, for he knows his friend often gets in a fight when he is intoxicated. Art tells Canby about how he has fought with Gil during the winter, usually because of boredom or minor irritations. He explains how Gil has sung the same three songs and told the same old stories all winter long. Gil defends himself by saying that he had to talk because Art never said anything. Art does not answer, for he does not want to get in a fight with Gil.

Gil asks Canby about Rose Mapen, the beautiful woman that Gil has dated during his previous visits to Bridger's Wells. Canby explains that she has been driven out of town, not because she did something wrong

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but because the married women were afraid that she might do something wrong with their husbands. Canby succinctly states, "The place is small," an accurate description of Bridger's Wells in more ways than one. Before long, it will be apparent just how small-minded the town can be.

When Moore, one of the workers from Drew's ranch, enters the saloon, Canby asks him about Sheriff Risley and the rustlers, but Moore refuses to have a discussion in front of Art and Gil, for he does not trust them since they are outsiders. Canby later explains to the newcomers that the town has been plagued with cattle rustling for months, losing over a thousand head of cattle. There has even been talk of a lynching party to find and punish the rustlers.

Moore invites Art and Gil to play poker with him. Gil constantly wins, causing the other men to become suspicious of him. Farnley even hints that perhaps he is a rustler. Infuriated at the comment, Gil hits Farnley hard, and a fight erupts. No one in the bar makes a move; they simply watch the two men fighting. Canby finally hits Gil with a bottle to stop the fight. When Gil regains consciousness, he decides he has not won the last game fairly and decides to return ten dollars to Farnley. In spite of his aggressive nature, he is

OVERALL ANALYSES

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Art Croft - Art Croft is the narrator and focal point of the novel. The reader sees the events in Bridger's Wells and at the lynching through his eyes. At the very beginning of the story, he rides into this small village with his friend Gil. He is eager to leave the winter and the range behind and enjoy himself in civilization. His main hope is that he will be accepted by the society of Bridger's Wells. Much of what he does in the course of the novel is shaped by his desire to fit in and be liked.

Art is a quiet, intelligent thinker and listener. As Judge Tyler, Osgood, Davies, Farnley, and Tetley discuss the various and opposing viewpoints of forming an illegal posse to hunt down the rustlers, turned.....

Gil Carter - In appearance, Gil Carter is the epitome of a cowboy. He has a big, freckled face, which never darkens with emotion. His nose has been broken three times, and his mouth is thick and straight. He has a large build, looking like a fighter. Although he is a good singer, he can only remember the words to three songs, which he sings over and over again.

In spite of their many differences, Gil is Art's close friend; the two of them have traveled together for five years. In contrast to Art, Gil is illiterate, never studying books or thinking deep.....

Davies - Davies, the owner of the general store in Bridger's Wells, becomes the key spokesman for law and order in the novel. As soon as the posse begins to form, he questions its purpose and speaks out for proper justice. He tries to convince the others that Sheriff Risley and Judge Tyler should

Major Tetley - Major Tetley is a former Confederate Cavalry officer, filled with pride and self-assurance. He is the natural choice to become the leader of the posse, for he has a "sharp and quiet head for management." He also has lots of experience, for he is the eldest man in the valley except Drew; but

Gerald Tetley - Gerald is the sensitive, weak, somewhat effeminate son of Major Tetley. He is hated by his father for his lack of courage and manliness. Tetley admits that he might be tempted to kill his son for his weakness if he did not look so much like his mother. Tetley forces Gerald to join.....

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Kinkaid - Although Kinkaid is only seen once in the play, he has a very important part in the book. It is because of his supposed murder that the posse is formed. His supposed death is also the reason that most of the men in the posse can justify the lynchings.

Kinkaid, a little, dark Irishman, is described as a quiet, gentle man who works as a

PLOT STRUCTURE ANALYSIS

The Ox-Bow Incident is divided into five parts that follow the classic pattern of plot construction. The first chapter is largely introductory, presenting the conflict, the major characters, the theme, and the setting. The second and third parts contain most of the rising action, leading to the climax, the lynchings, in the fourth section. The fifth and final section presents the falling action and the outcome of the lynchings.

The plot is unified by time, place, and character. The entire story is told by Art Croft, the first person narrator of the Ox-Bow incident. Most of his attention is directed to four main characters, other than himself: Gil Carter, Major Tetley, Gerald Tetley, and Davies. The entire novel takes place within a few days in the early spring. The entire book is set in or around the small town of Bridger's Wells, Nevada. In the.....

THEMES - THEME ANALYSIS

Major Theme -The major theme of the novel revolves around the need for law and order, even in a frontier cowboy community. The small town of Bridger's Wells has been plagued by lawlessness in the form of cattle rustling. The news of Kinkaid's murder further incites the people. Many of the local men.....

Minor Theme - The minor theme of the play is the danger of going along with the crowd just to be accepted. Art and Gil ride into Bridger's Wells with the hope of becoming a part of the society

STUDY QUESTIONS - BOOK REPORT IDEAS

1. Name and describe the narrator of the novel. What role does he play in the action that takes place?
2. Describe, compare, and contrast the two key settings in the novel – the town of Bridger's Wells and the natural world, including the range, the mountains, and the valley.....

End of Sample MonkeyNotes for *The Ox-Bow Incident*

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