

## ANALYSIS

### *The Ox-Bow Incident* (1940)



Walter Van Tilburg Clark

(1909-1971)

“A trailhand, Art Croft, in 1885 tells the story of cattle rustlers who murdered a rancher and stole his stock near the Nevada mountain town of Bridger’s Wells. A posse is formed to find and lynch the culprits, although the storekeeper Arthur Davies, the sanctimonious Reverend Osgood, and pompous Judge Tyler argue weakly for a fair trial. They are quickly overwhelmed by the old Confederate Major Willard Tetley, a prominent rancher, the touch stage driver Bill Winder, the town drunk Monty Smith, and others who ride out and in a small valley with an ox-bow-shaped river find the Mexican Juan Martinez, the senile Alva Hardwick, and a young rancher, Donald Martin, with cattle which they cannot prove they own. Despite Martin’s convincing statement about his innocence, the three are hanged. Martin in a bungled way by Tetley’s son Gerald, who is forced to the act by the Major. Upon returning to town the posse finds that the three men were innocent. Gerald hangs himself in his father’s barn, the older Tetley kills himself with his old cavalry sword, and Davies, filled with self-pity as much as with remorse, takes up a collection for Martin’s widow and children.”

James D. Hart

*The Oxford Companion to American Literature*, 5<sup>th</sup> edition  
(Oxford 1941-83) 565

“Set in Nevada in 1885, this powerful story tells how three supposed cattle rustlers are lynched—just as word comes that they are innocent. The novel had implications of World War II and the struggle between democracy and totalitarianism, justice and ruthlessness. In 1942 an equally powerful motion picture with the same title was produced.”

Max J. Herzberg & staff

*The Reader’s Encyclopedia of American Literature*  
(Crowell 1962) 842

“According to Clark, *The Ox-Bow Incident*, his best-known novel, had started as a parody of formulaic fiction about cowboys, ‘horse operas,’ but with Nazism a growing horror in Europe and war looming, the

story becomes a fable of Fascism, dramatically exploring the themes of justice and demagoguery. The story opens in the fictional Bridger's Wells, a sleepy town near the Sierra Nevada. News comes that cattle rustlers have killed a local cowboy. Angry debate ensues, and a natural leader organizes a vigilante posse; event those who doubt the legality or morality of this action go along with the group. They set off as a late snowfall turns the landscape into a vision of harsh contrasts, with black cliffs and white ground. Nature itself seems to oppose the expedition. The posse eventually hangs three suspicious-looking men; returning to town, however, the group discovers that no crime has been committed at all, and each vigilante must face the fact that he has given in to the mob's impulse to follow any strong leader and thus, is party to murder.”

Roger Smith  
*Cyclopedia of World Authors II*, Vol. 1  
Frank N. Magill, ed.  
(Salem 1989) 347

Michael Hollister (2015)