

**WESTERN CIVILIZATION IN CARK'S *THE OX-BOW INCIDENT*
(PERADABAN BARAT DALAM *THE OX-BOW INCIDENT*
KARYA WALTER VAN TILBURG CLARK)**

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Abstrak

This scientific paper discusses the problem of the Western region, where in American history, the West (western region) is the ultimate goal of the American nation. The Ox-Bow Incident is a popular literary work in the form of a novel written by Walter in 1940. This novel tells the story of the adventures and experiences of Americans in the Wild West around the 19th century where cowboys and ranchers were busy producing cows and cattle. beef for the growth of the American nation at the end of the civil war between 1861-1865. For the development of its colonies, America continues to focus its territorial development towards the West and immigrants are moving to the West to get a new life. The West is a promising land and a place where there are always opportunities for side by side between them.

Keywords: *western civilization, american experience, new life, innocent people, tragic punishment*

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. The Background of the Study

Understanding American Popular Literature, it's better to know first what it means by the term popular literature itself. The term popular literature has several connotations : it may mean literature intended for the masses, or literature that finds favor with large numbers of people, or it may be a literature of the people. The types may overlap, or they may remain distinct. Thus, "popular literature" can describe ballads, verse, tales realistic and picaresque, romances and confessions, jest books and chapbooks, westerns and thrillers, science fiction and fantasy literature, allegory and satire, emblem books, strip cartoons, comics, and even picture postcards; it may be applied to pamphlets and certain kinds of journalism;

and it encompasses a whole range of dramatic literature, from monologue and comic turn to full length play. Referring to the above definition and explanation, we can say that American popular literature is the great literary works of American writers, such Hawthorne, Edgar Allan Poe, James Fennimore Cooper, Mark Twain, Stephen Crane, and other great American authors in the nineteenth century.

However, some other American experience was not recorded by these great writers above. In the course of becoming a great nation, with the opening of the new Western frontier, the American colonists spread and moved to the Wild West towards the Rocky Mountains and the Pacific Ocean. They moved from the New England States towards the Western Wilderness and open a new settlement for agriculture, trade, business, industry, and

cattle rearing. The movement of the new nation towards the West has been enhanced by the construction of the railways that had connected the East and West, the North and the South states of the USA by the 1870s, enabling a great number of new immigrants to settle in the West, such Iowa, Colorado, Montana Kansas, California, Nevada, and others.

During the process of becoming such a great nation with a big number of population, great writers like Hawthorne had written *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), exposing the inner conflict of religious man, a priest Arthur Dimmesdale who had committed adultery with a beautiful woman Hester Prynne, and begot a child Pearl. Hawthorne's great novel had become a classic.

In the mean time, Emerson wrote many deep penetrating thoughtful essays such as *Self Reliance*, *The Over Soul*, and *Nature*, while Thoreau wrote on *Civil Disobedience*, *Walden*, and *Life Without Principle*. Whitman wrote *Leaves of Grass*, while Melville created *Moby Dick*, *Billy Budd*, and Mark Twain wrote *Huckleberry Finn*, *Tom Sawyer*, *Life on the Mississippi*, and *The Gilded Age*. The works of these great nineteenth century writers are considered as the masterpieces of American Literature.

Although there are many great American classical and famous writers, two of them are considered to be greatly influential in the development of this new literary genre. Among the most responsible are the famous creator and adventure and the father of The Western, James Fennimore Cooper (1789-1851) and Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849) the latter being the first writer of detective story. The works of James F. Cooper such as, *The Pioneers* (1823), *The Pathfinder* (1840), and *The Deerslayer* (1841) are popularly called the Leatherstocking Series novels about the famous western adventurer and hero Nathie Bumppo, or Hawkeye who roams in the American wilderness, fights the Red Indians, French in order to save the lives of

the white American settlers. The famous five novels about the American Wilderness gave inspiration to later American writers in the nineteenth and the twentieth century to write novels about the Wild West or the Western and the famous Cowboy stories.

1.2 The Problems of the Study

Having read and analyzed Clark's *The Ox-Bow Incident*, there are some problems conveyed to be discussed. In order not to have various issues, the writer determined to study the followings :

1. What are the idea of the term Western civilization on the American people ?
2. What are their efforts to achieve their own dream to reach West ?
3. How does the Western Civilization influence American Life ?

1.3 The Objectives of the Study

Based on the problems of the study above, the writer formulated the objectives of the study as follows:

1. To find out the idea of the term Western civilization on the American life ?
2. To find out their efforts to achieve their own dream to reach West ?
3. To describe how far the Western Civilization influences American Life ?

2. METOD

Firstly, the writer reads the novel several times in order to get some important ideas for further study. He then chooses some suitable theoretical approaches to analyze the novel such as traditional theories, intrinsic and extrinsic theory. This study also applies American studies approach, therefore the approach used is interdisciplinary. The analysis therefore, requires the unity among the disciplines to get a better and deeper interpretation from the data analysis provided. The analysis as McDowell says that "Today American Studies are using the resources of the new learning to bridge past and future, in terms which both the historian and the scientist can accept "(1948 : 4). Shortly the analysis certainly

reconcile the past, the present, and the future.

The discussion of this research begins by interpreting the novel as literary work. In this case, American studies scholar, in analyzing literary work, should consider the relationship between literary work and the society including its culture or its milieu where the literary work was produced. In this study, then, literary theory becomes essential where the expressive approach is applicable.

3. DISCUSSION

In this discussion, I would like to analyze the American popular literature theories applied in the writing of this Western novel, *The Ox-Bow Incident*. The analysis and interpretation in this chapter is made based upon the author, Walter Tilburg Clark's expressions and inferences in writing his novel. Those expressions to a certain degree will certainly provide some evidence about the applications of some theories, or literary formulas that might have been applied by Clark, as one of the most popular and successful Western novels. In analyzing this novel, it would be very interesting to get the results by comparing them with Jhon G. Cawetti's ideas and theories through his book, "*Adventure, Mystery and Romance*", since it is very useful in this discussion.

The Ox-Bow Incident begins as a Western horse opera with all the stage settings and characters of a cowboy thriller, but it ends as a saga of human misery. The story rises toward an inevitable climax and as it does so it states a harsh truth forcibly --the law of survival is linked to an incredible curse of relentless cruelty. In this case, the writer has made the Western thriller a novel of art.

Clark's *The Ox-Bow Incident* is a set against a Nevada landscape in 1885, but its portrayal of mob justice is timeless. The tragedy in the novel involves not only the obvious one of innocent people who are wrongly punished. The author, Clark, illustrates how unjust and cruel acts can be

carried out by intelligent and moral men who allow their sense of social duty to corrupt their greater, if less dominant, sense of human justice.

a. Plot of the Novel

As the story begins, Gil Carter and his partner Art Croft ride into town. Entering the saloon, they soon discover that ranchers of the region have recently lost a great deal of cattle to rustlers. When another rider brings word that Kincaid, a well-known rancher, has been shot and killed, the men in the saloon, bored with inactivity, are eager to ride out and captured the culprits. Because the sheriff is out of town at the time, the crowd is deputized by the sheriff's deputy, and after some ineffective objections to their taking the law into their own hands by the local judge and by Davies, an elderly storekeeper, the posse leaves town. Leadership is quickly assumed by Major Tetley, a Confederate officer of dubious background and credentials.

In the middle of the night they encounter three men--ranchers, Donald Martin, accompanied by a Mexican and a senile old man -- camped by the Ox-Bow. The crowd quickly discovers that Martin is in the possession of cattle owned by Kincaid; the Mexican also has Kincaid's gun. Martin protests their innocence of the crimes; the evidence of guilt is purely circumstantial. Again, Davis tries to speak reason and justice to the crowd, but he cannot overcome the demagoguery of Major Tetley. The mob sentences the three to hang. Only seven of the crowd's twenty-eight members, including Carter, Davies, and Major Tetley's son, vote for a legitimate hearing and trial in town. Martin is allowed to write a letter of farewell to his wife, and the three are hanged at dawn. In the ironic conclusion, the sheriff enters the scene and informs the group that Kincaid had not been killed after all, merely wounded, and that he has already captured the men who did it. At the end,

Carter reads Martin's letter and rides off to deliver it to Martin's widow.

b. Setting of the Novel

The story is set in Nevada in 1885. Bridger's Wells, Nevada, the initial setting for the novel's development, offered its citizens a limited variety of recreational diversions – eating, sleeping, drinking, cards, and fighting. Into that frontier setting stepped Gil Carter and Art Croft to learn that rustlers, who were at once murderers, had provided the place with an exciting alternative. Osgood, the Baptist minister from the only “working churches” in town, realized early how tempers could sublimate one's reason and sense of justice. For the minister, however, the timing, if not also the place, was wrong. In times of despair, reason and justice become less attractive when immediate action seems convenient. Bartlett, a rancher who found rustling a particularly vile threat, argued that “justice” often proved ineffective and worked too slowly to guarantee that guilty men would pay the penalties for their crimes. Bartlett proved effective enough to persuade two score townspeople into forming an illegal posse even though none of the men he exhorted owned any cattle, and only two or three even knew the allegedly murdered man.

The Ox-Bow Incident was something of a departure, since it is largely static with the second half staged entirely in a single setting. Saloon also becomes another setting of the story, where in the beginning of the novel, Gil Carter and his partner Art Croft, enter the saloon, and soon discover that the ranchers of the region have recently lost a great deal of cattle to rustlers. In short, their problem starts to be discussed and emerged in the saloon.

c. The Theme of the Novel

In *The Ox-Bow Incident*, the story and theme are all important. On the surface of the story, it tells a concise story of the tragic punishment of the innocent people.

Another theme that ordinary, moral persons can be induced “en masse” to commit acts of terrible cruelty and injustice – is meticulously worked out without the uncompromising style of a philosophical treatise. The novel catalogues a wide range of human faults—bloodthirsty revenge, cruelty, cowardice, moral weakness or ambivalence, demagoguery, and irrationality. The forces on the side of good, justice and reason in this story are, as is often the case in real life, relatively powerless and ineffectual.

The novel had been performed, and released in 1942. The audiences who saw the film during its first release in the early 1940's could not have missed an obvious implication : the same base human traits that Americans found so appalling in Nazi Germany existed here at home, embodied in the cherished frontier ethic of the American West.

d. Mystery

The sense of mystery is one of the important ingredients of the Western novel. In *The Ox-Bow Incident*, it is pictured the tragic punishment of innocent people. The three people were executed, the Mexican and the old man died cleanly, and Martin whose horse had been slowly started by Gerald, had to be shot by Farley.

The elements of human faults – bloodthirsty revenge, cruelty, cowardice, moral weakness or ambivalence, demagoguery, and irrationality – are harmful forces of human foibles and weakness are subdued. All the human faults should be overcome, by better human high motives and qualities, that is through pity, kindness and love. Another human faults such revenge must be avoided at all cost, but above all, justice must be done. Evil deeds and other form of injustice or irrationality should be crushed and wiped out and abolished. Respect for equality and democracy should be upheld, and a sense of honour is also very important.

By using these elements and other improvizations, and harmonizing his skill in literary arts, Clark's *The Ox-Bow Incident* is a good source for escapism and enjoyment. Its theme is usually very general and touching human basic emotions that are responsible for the growth of a strong powerful nation of The United States of America.

4. CONCLUSION

Having analyzed the novel, I come to the conclusion of this study. In concluding this study, I would like to say that the great Western novel, Clark's *The Ox-Bow Incident*, depicts that the tragedy in the novel involves not only the obvious one of innocent people who are wrongly punished. In this case, the author, Clark, illustrates how unjust and cruel acts can be carried out by intelligent and moral men who allow their sense of social duty to corrupt their greater, if less dominant, sense of human justice.

The novel version of Walter Van Tilburg Clark's Western novel, *The Ox-Bow Incident*, was a radical new contribution to the Western novel in the early 1940's. An uncompromising examination and condemnation of mob justice and lynch law, it is an early example of the psychological Western, in which character and motivation are more important than action.

The novel also depicts one of the great American adventures and experience happening in the Wild West in the middle of late 19th century, when the Cowboys and ranchers were busily producing cattle and meat for the growing American nation, after the end of the Civil War of 1861 – 1865. America was developing towards the West, all people ex soldiers both the Northern Yankees and Southern Confederates and the new immigrants were moving West to get new life. The West promised lots of lands and boundless opportunities for them.

The West of that era was not yet a peaceful land. There was wide wilderness,

wild animals, outlaws, and the lack of civility and culture. Some of the Red Indians were still very dangerous to the settlers, who were looking for lands for agriculture and raising cattle. Various interests caused lots of conflicts resulting in the lost of properties and wealths. Other human weaknesses such as greed, dishonesty, drinking, gambling, stealing, cheating, cowardice, hate, jealousy, and many other factors as social, economic, political, racial all may contribute to cause great difficulties among them. However, through sacrifice and love, some of these conflicts could be resolved, hence bringing joy and happiness.

The Ox-Bow Incident has no hero; yet it cries out for one in a world where the lessons of the Ox-Bow may not be remembered, much less learned. In as much as the novel was written in 1937 and 1938, while Nazism bullied a world into submission, it is not a theme which was then out of step with world developments. Neither, according to Clark (Magill, 1981 : 360), does the story lack American application. "What I wanted to say was 'It can happen here. It has happened here, in minor but sufficiently indicative ways, a great many times'".

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