

## Tortilla Flat (1935)

John Steinbeck

### OVERVIEW

*Tortilla Flat* tells the story of a group of *paisanos* (countrymen) who go through life just lazing around, drinking and completely ignoring social conventions. It is set in Tortilla Flat, a poor district above the town of Monterey, California, around the time America declares war on Germany during the First World War. Danny Alvarez inherits two houses in Tortilla Flat from his late grandfather, which occasions the gradual coming together of his other vagabond friends. Danny keeps a house for himself, and rents the other one to Pilon, his closest friend. As Pilon is penniless, he gradually manipulates each of the other 'paisanos' to move in his house as a way of passing the rent on to them. When Pilon's house burns down, they all move in Danny's. Danny gets more and more depressed under the burden of his new position as a property owner. He accidentally falls in a gulch behind his house and dies. Danny's second house also catches fire, but the friends do not intervene and go their separate ways.

### LITERARY/HISTORICAL NOTES

*Tortilla Flat* is one of John Steinbeck's early works, and the first to bring him fame and commercial success. Steinbeck took his inspiration from the stories of Susan Gregory, a teacher from Monterey, to whom he dedicated the novel. Her anecdotes were about the *paisanos*, residents of a shanty area near her place of residence. He was so entertained by these stories that he used them for his fictional characters in the novel. However, in a 1937 edition foreword, the author expressed his surprise at the public reception of the novel: "When this book was written it did not occur to me that *paisanos* were curious or quaint, dispossessed or underdogish. They are people whom I know and like, people who merge successfully with their habitat". He even seems to express his regret for having written the story of Danny and his drunkard friends when he says: "Had I known that these stories and these people would be considered quaint, I think I never should have written them".

Steinbeck's style in *Tortilla Flat* is remarkable: succinct grammar, rich use of adjectives and adverbs to describe nature and reflect the characters' actions, feelings and thoughts in a vivid way. The general tone bears some humorous nuances, meant to show his sympathy for his characters.

*Tortilla Flat* was adapted for the big screen in 1942 by Victor Fleming, one of the most popular directors at Hollywood at the time. The movie adaptation is a romcom version of the story, focusing only on some events and changing Danny's tragic ending in the novel into a happy one. The cinematographic story mainly revolves around Pilon's (Spencer Tracy) shrewd actions and the stormy romance between Danny (John Garfield) and Dolores (Hedi Lamarr).

### MAIN CHARACTERS

Danny	The protagonist at the heart of the story.
Pilon	Danny's closest friend, rents one of the two houses.
Pablo	The first room mate to move into Pilon's house.
Jesus Maria	The second room mate to move into Pilon's house.
The Pirate	The Pirate joins the group of 'paisanos' in Danny's house.
Joe Portagee	The last 'paisano' to move in with the group.

## PLOT

*'Paisanos'* The 'paisanos' are "a mixture of Spanish, Indian, Mexican and assorted Caucasian bloods" who live in Tortilla Flat, a hilly, impoverished area where a forest of tall dark pine trees meets the town of Monterey.

*The friends' enrollment* Danny, Pilon and Big Joe drink wine in the woods when they hear that America declared war to Germany. Heavily drunk, they walk into Monterrey, "cheering loudly for America", and stop in front of an enlistment station where the sergeant enlists them in the army.

*Danny inherits* On his return from the army, Danny finds out that his grandfather has died and left him two houses on Tortilla Flat. Danny gets into some "short but glorious fights", which get him arrested. One night, Tito Ralph, the jailer brings them two bottles of wine. They go out together to buy some more wine at Torrelli's. Danny falls asleep in the forest while Tito Ralph staggers back and reports his escape.

*Danny meets Pilon* Danny retires to the woods to cook his dinner and meets his old friend Pilon. As Pilon has a bottle of brandy on him, they build a fire, eat and drink together. Danny offers one of his houses to Pilon to counter his friend's insinuation that he will forget about his friends now that he is rich.

*Danny's hospitality* Danny chooses the bigger house for him and goes to town to ask the water company to turn the water on while Pilon inspects the premises. In the evening, Pilon and Danny have dinner by the fire in the stove. Pilon offers to rent the other house and they agree on fifteen dollars a month.

*The new tenants* Pilon makes two dollars cleaning squids for Chin Kee for a day, with the intention of giving the money to Danny, but buys wine instead. On his way home, he sees Pablo Sanchez sitting in a ditch by the road and invites him to his house to drink wine. Pablo accepts Pilon's offer to rent part of the house for fifteen dollars a month. Later, Pilon and Pablo run into Jesus Maria Corcoran, who is lying drunk in the bushes. They invite him to the house where they trick him into renting the house for fifteen dollars a month, and into paying a two-dollar deposit.

*Pilon's house burns down* One evening, after a long day of drinking at Torelli's, Pilon and Pablo build a "roaring fire". Jesus Maria staggers in, all battered after a fight with the four soldiers courting Arabella Gross. After some time of drinking, singing and dancing, they fall asleep. A wind sifts through the cracks in the wall, and the candle flame spreads around the room, and the rest of the house. After the house burns down, Pilon and his friends head towards the woods to avoid Danny's anger for a while.

*Friendship rekindled* After some time, with their arms loaded "with offerings of reconciliation", the three "penitents" go to Danny's house and confess their irresponsibility. Danny forgives his friends and brings some wine to share with them.

*The Pirate joins the group* Followed by his five dogs, the Pirate sells wood on the streets of Monterey. Pilon, who has observed his routine, realises that the Pirate must have lots of money hidden somewhere. One night, Pilon pays the Pirate a visit to find out where he keeps his money, but, despite giving him a sugar cookie, the Pirate does not give in. Sensing that the Pirate is lying, Pilon remains vigilant for a long time and watches the Pirate's moves hoping that he will find the treasure. Later the friends visit the Pirate together to convince him to take his dogs and go live with them in Danny's house.

*The Pirate's supreme gesture* After some time, Pilon brings up the subject of people's having their buried money stolen. At night the Pirate and his dogs creep out of the house regularly. In spite of several desperate attempts to follow him and find the hiding place, the friends lose his track in the forest. One night, as they return defeated again, they find "a large canvas bag" on the table. The Pirate asks his friends to take care of his money for him.

*One more joins the group* Joe Portagee gets out of jail and heads to Monterey, where he finds out about Danny's inheritance and that all his friends now live there with him. In the festival of Saint Andrew's Eve, the night of treasure hunt, he meets Pilon on the way to Tortilla Flat. Pilon has a revelation about the treasure spot in a depression in the pine forest, and they walk around for a while without any success. In the morning Pilon takes Big Joe to Danny's house.

*Big Joe's crime* Pilon finds out that Big Joe has stolen one of Danny's blankets and exchanged it for some wine. He gets very angry with Big Joe and makes him do all the digging work. Instead of the treasure, they find a United States Geodetic Survey plate.

*The vacuum cleaner story* Dolores Engracia Ramirez, or Sweets Ramirez, lives on the upper edge of Tortilla Flat, and does housework for some of the ladies in Monterey. She fancies Danny, and one day, as he passes by her house, she invites him in. Danny buys her a vacuum cleaner forgetting that there is no electricity in Tortilla Flat. As Danny spends more time at Sweets's house, Pilon starts making innuendoes to denigrate her, which Danny gullibly believes. One afternoon, Pilon waits for Sweets to go to the store, breaks into her house and steals the vacuum cleaner, which he trades at Torrelli's for two gallons of wine.

*A young soldier with a baby* Jesus Maria meets a young soldier of about sixteen who carries a sick little baby. Jesus takes the boy and his baby to the house. The friends try to feed the sick baby, but he won't eat. They find out about the young soldier's "adventure" back in Mexico, where he got shot at by a captain with whom his wife had gone away. The baby dies, and the young soldier decides to go back to Mexico.

*The bag of money is stolen* One afternoon, Danny reaches under the pillow and then realises that the Pirate's bag is missing. Danny knows that Big Joe is the thief. After being kicked and tortured, Big Joe reveals that he has buried the bag by the front gate, and promises to put the money he has taken from it back.

*The golden candlestick* The Pirate has now saved money to buy a gold candlestick for Saint Francis. The friends think it is better to give the money to Father Ramon, who listens to the story of the sick dog and how he got well after the Pirate promised a gold candlestick to Saint Francis, and agrees to buy the candlestick.

*The vision* As the Pirate looks too poor for the church on Sunday, they each give him different items to wear. During the sermon, the Pirate's dogs barge in, to everyone's amusement. He then walks to the pine forest where, while telling his dogs about his experience at the church and the miracles of Saint Francis, he thinks they had a vision of Saint Francis.

*Jesus Maria's humanitarian act* Teresina Cortez lives with her nine children and old mother in a cottage on the southern frontier of Tortilla Flat. Teresina keeps becoming a mother regularly without remembering who the father is. One very rainy year there is no bean harvest in all Monterey County. Jesus Maria is troubled by Teresina's situation and talks his friends into helping her and her children. They all start stealing food and bring it to Teresina's house until she asks them to stop because the food they bring makes the children sick. They then steal four one-hundred-pound sacks of beans, which they leave in Teresina's kitchen. Later on, Teresina discovers that she is pregnant again, wondering which one of Danny's friends is responsible.

*Danny's wild behaviour* Burdened with the weight of property and the responsibility of his friends, Danny gradually sinks into depression as he remembers his past adventures and begins to dream of the days of his freedom. One night he runs away and disappears for a week. Danny gets involved in a series of wild acts such as stealing, seducing Torrelli's wife, and even selling the house to Torrelli.

*The party* The friends try to find a way to make Danny feel better. They start working at Chin Kee's cutting squids to save money for a party. Everyone in Tortilla Flat helps with the preparations for Danny's party, and everyone has a good time, but Danny gets heavily drunk and attacks the people at the party with a table leg. He then falls in a gulch behind the house and, after some moments of agony, dies.

*Danny's funeral* Danny's funeral is a military one, as the government has promised to all its ex-soldiers. Too poorly dressed, the friends watch Danny's funeral from a distance. On the Friday Danny is buried, they tell stories about him and remember what a great friend he has been.

*Conclusion* The story ends with the friends heading back to the house, and a fire starting because of their careless smoking. They come out of the burning house and stand there until it turns into "a mound of black, steaming cinders". After a while, they walk slowly away on their separate paths.

## THEMES

*Poverty* The theme at the heart of the story is poverty. Poverty impacts the protagonists' life from a material and moral perspective. Firstly, it is linked to their precarious material situation. With the exception of the Pirate, they are homeless and sleep in the woods before they all get together in Danny's house. Secondly, poverty deeply affects their morality. They would rather steal or wait for some leftovers from the restaurants than work. For the six friends, in particular Danny and Pilon, poverty means freedom from financial concerns and social conventions. For example, once Danny becomes an heir, he cannot enjoy his newly acquired social status since he feels overwhelmed with "the worry of property". Poverty may also be associated with some of the characters' very simple minds and inability to judge things properly. For example, Pirate is described as a man "with no brain," whereas Mrs. Teresina Cortez is said to be "a mildly puzzled woman".

*Alcoholism* The group of 'paisanos' are notorious drunkards, with most of their actions revolving around any opportunity they can seize to procure wine. Danny's group of friends spend their days drinking so heavily that their physical and emotional reactions are completely numbed. For example, when Danny's rented house catches fire, they stand outside passively watching it burn down. Jesus Maria's only concern is with the jug of wine on the table that could be saved from the fire. Wine is more valuable than money. For instance, when Pilon cuts squids to earn some money for the rent, he concludes that Danny would appreciate the wine more. With the exception of the Pirate, whatever money the friends manage to make in a more or less legal way, they spend on wine. It is their addiction to alcohol that occasions their getting together as a group.

*Friendship* Another important theme of the story is friendship. The bond between the protagonists is quite twisted, and based on their shared vested interest in wine. It is Pilon who constantly seeks to benefit from his friends' credulity. He invokes friendship whenever convenient to him, such as when Danny inherits the house, or when he convinces the Pirate to move in with them. Big Joe, for example, considers Pilon as "one who takes care of his friends", and who makes sure that "even when they sleep, he is alert to see that no harm comes to them". The Pirate represents the epitome of trust and friendship as he hands his money to his friends. His bag of money becomes "the symbolic center of the friendship, the point of trust about which the fraternity revolved".

*Loneliness* Loneliness is an underlying theme in the story of the six 'paisanos'. Despite their occasional wine drinking encounters, they are solitary beings aimlessly roaming the streets. Danny's inheritance brings and holds them together for a while. The most illustrative example is at the end of the novel when Danny feels lonely "under the weight of the house" and "the responsibility to his friends" and falls into depression. At the party that Danny's friends and Tortilla Flat people organise to cheer him up, he drinks heavily and attacks those present with a table leg, shouting: "Am I alone in the world? Will no one fight me?" he laments. Once Danny dies, the friends go back to their lonely lives as "no two walked together".

*Consumerism* Tortilla Flat is meant to represent an ideal world that is "clean of commercialism, free of the complicated systems of American business" and has "nothing that can be stolen, exploited, or mortgaged". Danny's inheritance illustrates how easily human beings can become alienated when their lives are governed by property and social conventions. As Danny comes to realise later, property ownership has taken away his joy of living and brought about a constant sense of burden and a monotonous existence.

*Immorality* Closely linked to the theme of consumerism, the theme of immorality pervades as,

except for the Pirate, the rest of the 'paisanos' steal, get into fights and seduce women shamelessly. The few female characters are also present at this low moral scale. Pilon constantly makes misogynistic remarks about the women in his friends' life, especially Danny's. In his eyes, for example, women have "no virtue", they are "cheap and vicious" or only want to get married.

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

**Danny** Danny is a twenty-five-year-old "paisano" whom everyone likes. He is a free spirit who enjoys his unconventional life, often getting himself in trouble with the law and women. He remains faithful to his life principles and adapts to the new lifestyle as heir with difficulty. He generously shares his property with his vagabond friends.

*Free-spirited* Danny lives a free life, preferring "to sleep in the forest, to work on ranches and to wrest his food and wine from an unwilling world". For example, Danny shows complete disinterest when Jesus Maria gives him the news that house rented by Pilon is burning down. Danny dismisses him by saying that he cannot do more than the fire department does. One of the most relevant examples is perhaps when Danny feels stuck in a changeless routine with his "ubiquitous friends", and begins "to dream of the days of his freedom". As he comes to realise, the property has not only restricted his freedom, but also changed him as an individual. He remembers that "the name of Danny was a name of a storm" and starts longing for the taste of stolen food, fights and adventurous drinking. In an attempt to go back to his former self, Danny engages in some acts of wild behaviour.

*Generous* Danny's generosity is reflected in the way he deals with his property and attitude towards his friends. For instance, he never questions Pilon's decision to offer his house to the other friends. A notable example of Danny's generosity of spirit is his unusual reaction when Pilon, Jesus Maria and Pablo visit him some time after the other house was destroyed by fire because of their negligence. At first Danny pretends to be upset with his "careless friends" for the sake of convention, and "casually" asks how the fire started. By the evening, each of the four friends tacitly acknowledges that they are all going to live in Danny's house.

*Perceptive* Danny's innate perceptive nature emerges on various occasions in the story. He favours a "spiritual property" like friendship or freedom over "the transitory quality of earthly property" (houses, money). When the Pirate's bag of money disappears, Danny immediately knows who the thief is. His deepening depression at the end of the story is caused by his becoming aware of the profound impact that property ownership has had on his life and the restraints it has brought. He starts behaving wildly again for some time, but he understands that he cannot return to his former self. While everybody is celebrating, Danny is sitting "like a half-melted man giving no sign of interest in the surroundings" and "lonely as smoke on a clear cold night".

*Pilon* Pilon knows everybody in Tortilla Flat and everything about them. He shrewdly exploits his friends' weaknesses and credulity for his own benefit while he convinces himself that he is doing a good deed and helping them. However, the sympathetic and protective side of his personality emerges especially when it comes to Danny.

*Unscrupulous* Pilon shows no qualms when he uses veiled stories to subtly manipulate his friends to do what he wants them to. For example, when he meets Danny right after the inheritance news, he tells him the story of "a man who owned two whorehouses" to conveniently remind Danny of his own property. Pilon insinuates that now that Danny is rich he will forget about his old friends. Danny feels offended and tells Pilon that he can stay in one of his houses. Pilon acts in a similar manner when, after some time watching the Pirate's daily routine, he calculates how much money he must have saved since he has never spent any. Convinced that the Pirate has hidden his money, he pays him a visit and tells him that "the worry is killing his friends". As the Pirate does not give in, Pilon starts telling him stories of people whose hidden money got stolen in order to read Pirate's reaction. In the meantime, he has also talked the others into his "groundwork of pity" since the Pirate has "no brain" and cannot look after himself. "The Pirate has the money, but he has not the brain to use it".

*Moralistic* Pilon finds a moral in each important situation in which he or his friends find themselves and stresses the importance of learning from it: "In the whole matter only the lesson we learn has any value". One such example is when he and Big Joe go on a treasure hunt in the woods. Pilon has a

very spiritual moment when he urges his friend to give up “drunkenness and fighting and those girls” as “the sinner is never so bad that he cannot be forgiven.” Pilon thinks of some lessons that could be learnt from their unsuccessful attempts “the treasure might not have been good for Danny as he has always been poor” and “riches might make him crazy” and “happiness is better than riches” and punishment makes sense only if “something is learned”. Then, filled with his own wisdom about the “ethical lessons” that his friends can learn, Pilon reaches the conclusion that “we learn by this that it is great foolishness to trust a woman”.

*Sensitive* Pilon reveals his sensitive streak mostly with Danny, but also when the Pirate entrusts his friends with his bag of money. Despite his constant machinations, Pilon immediately reacts when friends try to play along with him and be critical of Danny’s actions or steal from him. The most relevant example of Pilon sympathy for Danny is towards the end of the story. Pilon gets concerned about Danny’s state of apathy and makes every effort to cheer him up through stories and wine. To everyone’s surprise, he and his friends even start cutting squids at Chin Kee’s to earn money so they can throw a party for Danny. After Danny’s death, Pilon together with the rest of the group continue to sleep on the floor while Danny’s bed remains empty.

**The Pirate** The Pirate is a “huge broad man” whom nobody knows well. He owes his nickname to his black bushy beard. He works hard, selling wood on the streets of Monterey, followed by his five dogs. He lives with his dogs in a deserted chicken coop in the yard of a deserted house in Tortilla Flat. The Pirate represents the epitome of faith, innocence and generosity, which instils some kind of unspoken affection in his friends.

*Innocent* When Pilon and his friends pay him a visit in order to convince him to move in with them so that they can watch him more closely and find the hiding place of his money, the Pirate has no suspicion of their real intentions. He is shocked when he hears that he has friends who worry about him and want to take care of him. He feels so overwhelmed when they tell him that he can take his dogs with him that he “pleadingly” asks them to go away as he will join them the next day. The most illustrative moment of his candid soul is when he entrusts all his savings to his friends, standing before them, with “tears of happiness in his eyes” for he “has proved his love” for them in this way.

*Kindhearted* Once the Pirate has moved in Danny’s house, he is the only one who works and provides food for the friends, which he does not mind. He makes the rounds of the restaurants and shares the food with his new friends, happy to be part of the group. He feels so deeply touched by “their acceptance of his gifts” that “there is a light of worship in his eyes as he watched them eat the food he brought”. His kindness is even more selfless towards his dogs without which he feels “naked and unprotected”. He loves them tenderly, feeding them the best part of the leftovers from the restaurants. He agrees to move in with his friends only when they reassure him that he can take his dogs with him.

*Faithful* The Pirate’s adherence to his promise to buy a gold candlestick for Saint Francis is unswerving. His story of how Saint Francis saved one of his dogs in the past and why he has saved every penny for the promised candlestick impresses his friends. The Pirate’s stories about his visions of Saint Francis make them look at him “with a new respect”. They no longer think of his intelligence as they are now convinced that his “meagre wits were supplemented with all the power of Heaven and all the strengths of the saints”.