

# TORTILLA FLAT (1942)

Victor Fleming

## OVERVIEW

**Auteur** Victor Fleming was one of Hollywood's most popular film directors in the 1930s. He started his career in the film industry as a stunt car driver and a camera assistant. Due to his fast-track learning ability, he proceeded to direct several silent movies in the late 1920s, and then turned to 'talkies'. Fleming became an established director once he signed with Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer in 1932. Around that time he turned stage and novel adaptations into major box-office hits, including *Red Dust* (Wilson Collison's play) in 1932, *Treasure Island* (Robert L. Stevenson's novel) in 1934, and *Captains Courageous* (Rudyard Kipling's novel) in 1937. Soon after, Fleming made history with two film productions that became Hollywood's all-time classics: *The Wizard of Oz*, a musical fantasy adapted from L. Frank Baum's novel, and *Gone with the Wind*, based on Margaret Mitchell's saga. Fleming was not the original director of *Gone with the Wind*, but he was the only one who received all the credit and was awarded an Oscar for Best Director. In 1942, Fleming employed an all-star cast for *Tortilla Flat*, which won Frank Morgan an Oscar nomination for Best Supporting Actor for his poignant portrayal of one of the tramps, the Pirate.

**Film** *Tortilla Flat* is a sentimental and comical movie adaptation of John Steinbeck's eponymous novel. The story revolves around Danny Alvarez, Pilon and their 'paisano' friends (or fellow countrymen) right after Danny inherits a gold watch and two houses in Tortilla Flat from his grandfather. The newly-acquired ownership of the property becomes an ordeal for Danny, who seems unable to understand how he can make money out of it. Fleming offered a more romanticized version of Danny's life and diverged from the original story. He chose to focus only on some scenes in a gentler light, emphasizing the idea that even people of the lowest social condition and behaviour may have something good in them. Moreover, through the major role that Dolores Ramirez (Sweets) gets to play in Danny's life, female characters are more visibly represented than in Steinbeck's story.

**Background** Fleming recreated the poor area of Tortilla Flat in Culver City. According to Bosley Crowther's review of the film in the *New York Times* (1942), Victor Fleming directed a "winning motion picture...rich in flavour and sympathetic to human indolence". As Crowther continues his argument, *Tortilla Flat* "is a little idyll which turns its back on a workaday world. But it is filled with solid humour and compassion – and that is pleasant, even for folks who have to work". Fleming completely changed some story events for the screen version. For example, Danny did not die because of a terrible fall as his fictional counterpart did; instead, he recovered and married Dolores. Fleming also romanticized the story to a great extent as Danny is totally smitten with Dolores and all his actions following their first encounter are meant to impress her. In his extensive study of Fleming's mastery, Michael Sragow notes that *Tortilla Flat* came up at "an easy-going moment of his life", which explains the generally positive touch that the director put on this work. As Sragow observes, the "urban-ethnic cast, with its maelstrom of accents" adds to the "jolly incongruities" of the movie.

## CINEMATIC NARRATION

The cinematographic rendition of *Tortilla Flat* moves away from the gloomy and hopeless world described in Steinbeck's novel. The story generally unfolds on quite a humorous and positive note, which emerges from the characters' actions, dialogues and comical situations. Fleming's previous experience with the camera is evident in the framing technique he applies to enclose the characters' postures and even tilt of their heads in a very natural manner. The camera is often brought forwards to get a close-up of the characters' facial expressions, emotions or intentions. To put it in Sragow's words, "*Tortilla Flat* siphoned something deeply congenial out of Fleming's nature", some kind of work which "would never be so lighthearted again".

## MAIN CHARACTERS

|                                 |  |
|---------------------------------|--|
| <b>Pilon</b>                    | The protagonist who forms the group of tramps                          |
| <b>Dolores Ramirez (Sweets)</b> | A young woman, who becomes Danny's wife                                |
| <b>Danny Alvarez</b>            | The protagonist who splashes his inheritance out with his poor friends |
| <b>The Pirate</b>               | A hardworking tramp, who saves every cent he earns from selling wood   |
| <b>Pablo</b>                    | One of the tramps in Pilon's group                                     |
| <b>Tito Ralph</b>               | The jail guard   |
| <b>Jose Maria</b>               | One of the tramps in Pilon's group                                     |
| <b>Big Joe</b>                  | Another one of the tramps in Pilon's group                             |

## SYNOPSIS

Danny Alvarez inherits two houses and a gold watch from his late grandfather. He keeps one of the houses for himself and rents the other one to Pilon. As Pilon has no money for the rent, he sub-lets the house to Pablo, and then to two of their vagabond friends, Jose Maria and Big Joe. One evening Pilon's house burns down, and they all move in together with Danny. Pilon suspects that The Pirate has saved a lot of money, so he convinces him to join the group. Danny almost dies in a fight at Dolores's workplace, but in the end, he recovers and marries her. After the newlyweds leave, the fire spreads all over the other house. Pilon takes his friends and goes to sleep in the forest, relieved to have got rid of the property that caused Danny so much trouble.

## PLOT

**Paisanos** The 'paisanos' are "warm-hearted people of laughter and kindness" who live in a poor area called Tortilla Flat, situated in the hills outside the old seaport town of Monterey, California.



**Pilon's plan to get fish** Pilon and Pablo wake up at noon in the woods where they have been resting, hungry for some mackerel. Pilon thinks of a plan and instructs Pablo to go to the dock, throw some stones at the boats and call the fishermen names, hoping they will then throw fish back to him.



**The inheritance** A lawyer named Paul Cummings arrives, looking for Daniel Alvarez. Pilon sends Pablo away to bring the fish while he shows the lawyer the way to the local jail where Danny is under arrest for "disorderly conduct". Danny finds out that his late grandfather left him two houses in Tortilla Flat and a gold watch. Pilon tells Danny that they should celebrate. Tito Ralph, the jail guard, suggests trading the watch for some wine at Torrelli's. After some bartering with Torrelli, Pilon gets three gallons of wine and Danny's guitar back.



**Danny meets Sweets** When Danny passes Mrs. Teresina's house, he meets Dolores Ramirez from Salinas. Danny and Dolores, or Sweets, as he calls her, flirt with each other. Pilon warns Danny to stay away from her because her only ambition is to get married.



**Pilon's plan for rent** The four friends go to Danny's house. Later in the evening, after an argument over some pots that could be sold for a deposit for the water company, and after asking Danny's neighbour, Mrs. Morales, for some chicken, they have a party and sing happily. Pilon offers to rent Danny's second house. As they agree on fifteen dollars a month, Pilon passes the rent on to Pablo.



**Danny's courting Sweets** In the evening, Danny goes to see his friends, but they are all drunk and sleeping. He then pays Dolores a visit, but he finds Mr. Brown at her house. When Dolores goes to the kitchen, Danny asks Mr. Brown to leave. Alone with Sweets, they talk amiably for a while. Pablo comes to tell Danny that their house is on fire, but he sends him away when he hears that it is not his house. He then kisses Sweets, but when she realises Danny's intentions, she pushes him away angrily. She bites his hand and forces him at knifepoint to leave her house.



***A man with a sick baby shows up and Sweets comes and feeds the baby.*** While the four friends watch the house burn, a young man with a sick baby passes by. Pilon takes everyone to Danny's house. Danny lets everyone in without too many questions. Pilon sends Danny back to Sweets's house to ask for goat's milk to feed the baby. Sweets returns with Danny, takes care of the baby and makes everyone give the young man the little money they have to help him take the bus to Santa Cruz.



***Pirate accepts to go and live with his friends***

One afternoon, The Pirate passes by Danny's house while the friends are sitting on the front porch. Pilon says that the Pirate must be a rich man as he has never seen him spend any money, and insinuates that he needs some friends to show him how to use his money. Danny takes the milk pitcher that Sweets left there the night before and goes to her house to return it. In the meantime, Pilon pays the Pirate a visit to the chicken house where he lives with his dogs and tells him that his friends are very worried about him. The Pirate believes him and accepts Pilon's invitation to take his dogs and go live with them.



***Pirate's Treasure***

At night, the Pirate leaves the house with his dogs and the friends follow him in the woods. They lose track of him, and after a long night of searching, they return home very disappointed. The Pirate has brought the money from the woods for his friends to keep. The Pirate has been saving money to buy a golden candlestick for Saint Francis, who saved one of his dogs in the past.





***The Pirate's money is lost and found***

One day, they see that the Pirate's money has been stolen. As Pilon suspects, Big Joe is the one who stole the money, so they beat him up until he admits it and gives it back. After counting the money, Pilon realises there is enough money for the candlestick. Pilon argues with Danny over Sweets, and Danny storms out the house.



***The friends help Pirate get ready for church***

Pilon and the rest of the group help Pirate get ready for church. They all lend him different items of clothing so he is dressed properly for the church service.





**Danny gets a sweeping machine as a present to Sweets** Danny goes to Sweets's workplace to tell her that he has returned the pitcher, but she pretends to be still upset with him. They argue and Danny is kicked out of the factory. Danny trades his guitar for a sweeping machine for Sweets at the swap shop. She is impressed with his gesture and they make up. Later on, the sweeping machine is stolen by Pilon, who wants to break up the romance of Danny and Sweets.



***Pilon spreads rumours about Sweets*** Pilon goes to the port, where he has heard that Danny has been working for three days, and tells him that he has heard that Sweets has been telling everyone that Danny will put electricity in her house and that he will marry her. Danny gets angry, saying he has never promised anything like that. When he confronts Sweets, they argue and break up.



***The accident*** Danny is very unhappy, starts to drink and gets drunk. He goes back to Sweets's workplace and they start arguing. Some workers are trying to get him out of the factory, and he starts fighting them. One of the men pushes Danny and a wagon falls over him, leaving him severely injured and hospitalized. The doctor is sceptical of Danny's recovery.





***Pilon prays*** Pilon leaves the hospital very upset and walks to the woods where he hears the Pirate telling the dogs about the miracles and teachings of Saint Francis. Pilon goes to church and prays to Saint Francis to save Danny. He promises he will buy another candlestick for which he will cut squids for Chin Kee, and that he will even accept Danny's marrying Sweets, 'that girl from Salinas'.





***Danny recovers and marries Sweets*** Father Ramon comes looking for Pilon on the dock where he cuts squids and gives him the news of Danny's recovery. He tells him that Saint Francis does not need another golden candlestick, but that he could buy Danny a boat instead. Danny and Sweets get married. After the newlyweds leave the party, the house catches fire and the friends head back to the woods.



## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

**PILON** Pilon is the leading figure of the group of homeless friends which he creates to serve his pecuniary purposes. He manipulates all his friends and often bosses them around, taking advantage of their submissive and candid nature. He can be, however, quite friendly and funny around the children of Tortilla Flat. Despite his manipulative actions towards Danny, he shows deep concern when he is hospitalised with life-threatening injuries. He even goes to church to pray to Saint Francis for his friend's recovery and works to earn money to buy him a boat.

*Manipulative* Just like his fictional character, Pilon skilfully uses words and little stories or anecdotes to manipulate all his vagabond friends to his own benefit. He makes an exception towards Danny whom he is fond of despite his conniving actions to separate him from the woman he loves. Although at times he is angry about Danny's attitude now that he is a property owner, he does not allow anyone to speak badly of him. Except for Danny's near-death experience, he shows no remorse when he takes advantage of his friends' credulity and manoeuvres them around as he pleases. When he does not succeed, as happens with Danny when he tells him that Sweets is not the right woman for him, he steals and makes up stories. "Have you never heard of charity? To help others is the highest thing a man can do", he scolds Pablo when he insinuates that Pilon could take the Pirate's money

*Greedy* Pilon's greed manifests itself on any occasion that helps him get hold of things that can be then exchanged for wine. Such opportunities generally come with other people of whom he has no hesitation to take advantage. When Danny is given the news of his inheritance, Pilon cannot hide his disappointment that Danny's grandfather left him "no money, just the houses". He even calculates how much money the Pirate must have saved and, by using reverse psychology, he convinces all the friends that the Pirate needs being looked after. "His poor brain is no good...If he had some friends to show him how he could use his money". On the social level, Pilon's domineering and despotic attitude is indicative of another kind of greed, for power and control over his friends.

*Kind-hearted* Despite his get-the-money-quick schemes and overbearing control of the group, there are several scenes in the movie that also reveal the kind side of Pilon's character. For example, when they meet Mrs. Teresina in the street, Pilon enquires about the new baby and follows the two children, who ask him to go and see the black spider they found. There are other instances around children, for example, when Pilon either pats them on the head, smiles or winks at them. Deeply touched by the Pirate's plan of buying a golden candlestick for Saint Francis, Pilon takes his money to a safe place. Later on, he directly gets involved in helping him get ready for church. His greatest act of kindness is towards Danny when he lies unconscious in hospital. Overwhelmed with guilt and worry about Danny's state, Pilon promises to work so that he can buy a golden candlestick for Saint Francis. He starts cutting squids for Chin Kee "with his own hands" to save money that, later on, at Father's Ramon's suggestion, he is going to use to buy Danny a boat.

**DANNY** Danny is the protagonist who gets rich all of a sudden and generously splashes his fortune out on his friends. Most of the time, he allows Pilon to make the financial decisions for him as he considers his recent property ownership a burden. He loves his freedom so much that he rejects the idea of committing to Sweets through marriage for some time even when he has developed intense feelings for her. He is a cheerful and adventurous spirit who often acts on impulse.

*Free-spirited* Danny is an exuberant free spirit, an adventurer who loves wine and women, and often gets involved in fights. At the beginning of the movie, he is in jail for hitting a policeman. When Pilon asks him whether he prefers his grandfather's watch or wine, Danny immediately answers "wine" and that he hopes he can also get his guitar back. When it comes to finding a place to drink the wine they get in exchange for the gold watch, Danny says, "I don't need a place. You just drink it". It is Pilon's subtle hints that make Danny exclaim: "Two houses. I forgot." When Pilon reproaches him that he has already started to change since he became a property-owner, Danny says: "I wish you owned this house, and I could have come and lived with you." His free spirit emerges again the first evening he visits Sweets Ramirez, and she asks him about his job. He replies with an amused tone, "Work? Me, I got no time to work". When Pablo comes to tell him that his house is on fire, Danny is more preoccupied in seducing Sweets than in saving his house. He tells her: "What do I care? I got another house." He is often seen carrying around his guitar, which is a symbol of his carefree attitude to life.

*Generous* Danny is extremely generous with his friends once he gets possession of his inheritance. He allows Pilon to exchange the gold watch and some other objects in the house for wine and food for the party meant to celebrate his new social status. When Pilon suggests that he could rent one of his houses to him, he accepts without hesitation. When he does not get the rent money from Pilon, he feels frustrated more that he cannot buy Sweets a present than with the lack of cash. Moreover, when his second house burns down, Danny simply allows his friends to go inside without further questions: "Well, close the door. It's cold enough in here."

*Impulsive* Danny's non-conformist life style often involves impulsive and reckless behaviour. When it comes to drinking and women, he does little to resist the temptation. There are instances after his encounter with Sweets when his impulsiveness reaches such an extreme that it almost costs him his life. On the evening he and Sweets argue over the missing sweeping machine, he goes back home very upset and punches Pilon as soon as he starts making

malicious remarks about her. He takes the entire bottle of wine and rushes out of the house. Later on, he goes to the sardine cannery to talk to Sweets, but again, instead of explaining to her calmly that it is not he who has not stolen the sweeping machine from her house, he is jealous and makes a scene, resulting in a heated argument. Some workers try to remove him and he fights them off, which eventually leads to his near-fatal injury.

**DOLORES (Sweets)** Sweets is a young woman who is determined to change her life for the better. She is independent and sensible, working hard for her dream. She hopes to find a husband whom she is “crazy about” rather than one to simply provide for her. She sticks by her principles and is not afraid to stand up for herself when needed. She is very kind and caring when children are involved, as she generously helps Mrs. Teresina and the stranger with the sick baby.

**Spirited** From the first scene, Sweets reveals herself as an energetic and determined young woman, with clear goals in mind. When she first meets Danny who offers to “milk her goats”, she replies in a haughty tone: “That depends, amigo. My goats are high class goats. They don’t like to be pushed around by strange people right away”. She fiercely defends her honour when she feels Danny does not respect her enough, and she even threatens him with a knife the first evening he pays her a visit. Although she has feelings for him, she does not allow him to take her for a loose woman and throws him out of the house. Her conversations with Danny turn into fights most of the time.

**Motherly** Dolores shows her motherly instincts the evening Pilon’s house burns down and they take a stranger with a sick baby in the street into Danny’s house. When Danny asks Dolores for help, she holds the sick baby in her arms protectively, feeds him and organizes everyone around in order to create a safe place for the baby to sleep. Her maternal streak is first revealed as she gives Mrs. Teresina cheese and milk for her children. Later on she tells Danny about a better-paid job at the sardine cannery which is “what a girl with any sense ought to get” if she wants “a home with everything in it...and kids. Kids that don’t have to pick beans”.

**Outspoken** Dolores expresses her views without hesitation and is not afraid to face up to men, including Danny. When Danny struggles between life and death in hospital, she confronts Pilon directly. In tears and desperate, she shouts at Pilon: “Danny’s going to die, and it’s you who did it!” She blames Danny’s situation entirely on him, his “no-good friends” and “sneaky ways”. She is also aware of Pilon’s manipulative actions and harshly reproaches him: “You tried to make him like you, but you couldn’t do it! You couldn’t do it because he’s been taken away from you”. For the first time, Pilon is forced to face his true character and remains silent about Dolores’s accusations.

## THEMES

**1. Poverty** One of the main themes in *Tortilla Flat* is poverty and its profound impact on human nature and behaviour, emphasizing the worst features of man’s character, such as greed, selfishness and cruelty. The sense of being poor is so deeply ingrained in the characters’ minds that, for example, when Danny becomes a property owner, he shows hardly any interest in his inheritance. He cannot think of a way to make money out of it. Furthermore, poverty reduces the homeless friends’ necessities to very basic ones, such as eating and drinking, and most of the time, excessive drinking. When at the end, the fire spreads to Danny’s second house, Pilon leads the rest of the group to the woods, relieved that they, and Danny, implicitly, have no property to worry about. With the exception of the Pirate, the friends would steal or exchange whatever valuable objects that they can get rather than work.

**2. Laziness** Again, with the exception of the Pirate, none of the friends work to earn their living. Laziness is a way of living for them and a principle to stand by. From the opening scene, they laze around either in the woods or on the porch of Danny’s house. When Danny needs money to buy Sweets a present, and Pilon suggests that he could take up work, Danny reacts violently: “Me? Work?” Later on, Pilon is shocked when Pablo and Jose Maria tell him the rumour that Danny has been working in the port for three days. When Danny and Pilon find themselves in desperate need for money, and the only solution left is to get it through work, they are ashamed and afraid that they might be seen.

**3. Friendship** The movie features the five “paisanos”, including Danny, revolving around Pilon, the linchpin and brain of the group, to whom they all pay heed. They all share a great pleasure in drinking wine and lazing around. The Pirate makes an exception as he represents the innocent facet of their friendship. He is the epitome of genuine trust, kindness and safety. When the Pirate brings the money he hid in the forest for fear it might get stolen, he gives it to them and says: “You are my friends! My only friends! No one can steal my money if my friends watch it for me.” Pirate’s innocence prompts both Danny’s and Pilon’s good side as neither of them dares take advantage of his money as they had initially planned. It is also out of friendship and affection that Pilon prays to Saint Francis for Danny’s recovery.

**4. Humility** Father Ramon is a gentle presence in the life of the “paisanos” of Tortilla Flat. When he meets Danny and his friends in the street, he tells Danny that he should “frequent the church as much as the other places” he has been hearing about. Pilon agrees, but when Father Ramon turns to him, Pilon and Danny look down and dodge the question. The Pirate, on the other hand, genuinely believes in the miracles of Saint Francis, and his pious actions and kindness touch both Pilon and Danny so deeply that they cannot trick him as they would normally do with other

people. Even Pilon takes a humble stance in front of Saint Francis's statue when he prays for Danny's recovery.

**5. Freedom** Pilon often philosophizes about what owning a property does to a man. Whenever Danny hesitates to do something, Pilon uses the subject of property as a pretext to reproach to him for having changed. When the second house burns down, as well, Pilon looks relieved that they have returned to the times when they slept in the woods since "it was this house that caused all of Danny's troubles". A property comes along with social constraints such as "settling", as Father Ramon hopes, or marriage, as Pilon warns Danny when it comes to Dolores's intentions. At the end of the movie, Pilon and the rest of the group are happy to have regained their freedom since, Pilon concludes, the sky is "one roof that will never burn down" and that "will always be there" the next day.

**6. Love/romance** Fleming offers a completely different view from Steinbeck's weak representation of female characters and the romantic love between a man and a woman. He makes Sweets a strong female heroine and places her romantic involvement with Danny in the foreground. Although initially afraid that this girl from Salinas means the end of his freedom, according to Pilon's insinuations, all that Danny does is meant to impress her. He buys her a sweeping machine despite the fact that her house is not connected to electricity, and she loves the present. He starts working for the money he needs to buy her a present, which he has never done before. Their constant fights are but a prelude to their love story.