

ANALYSIS

Tortilla Flat (1935)

John Steinbeck

(1902-1968)

“*Tortilla Flat* was like nobody but Steinbeck. The paisanos of Monterey—that is, the descendants of the original Mexican population—were for him ‘good people of laughter and kindness, of honest lusts and direct eyes, of courtesy beyond politeness.’ His novel recounted the exploits of three amiable paisano rogues who find it as difficult to be law-abiding as to be unkind.”

Carl Van Doren
The American Novel 1789-1939
(Macmillan 1921-68) 364

“In the uphill district above Monterey, Cal., live *paisanos*, colored like ‘a well-browned meerschaum pipe’ and combining ‘Spanish, Indian, Mexican and assorted Caucasian bloods,’ a feckless, innocently amoral group of men and women. Among them is Danny, the chance owner of two houses, one of which he rents to his friend Pilon for \$15, which is never paid, and to their drinking companion Pablo. The three of them pilfer from their neighbors, drink gallons of wine from the saloon of the formidable Torrelli, and pursue amours with such gallant ladies as Sweets Ramirez, Tia Ignacio, Mrs. Morales, and the incredibly promiscuous Cornelia Ruiz. The circle of ‘Danny’s friends’ also includes Big Joe Portagee, Jesus Maria Corcoran, and the half-witted Pirate, always accompanied by five dogs. This ‘Round Table’ of friends, whose primitive love of pleasure is balanced by a superstitious love of the Church, comes to an end when an unusually uproarious party leads to Danny’s death and the burning of his house.”

James D. Hart
The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
(Oxford 1941-83) 766

“Above the town of Monterey on the California coast lies the shabby district of Tortilla Flat, inhabited by a colorful gang whose revels recall the exploits of King Arthur’s knights. As William Rose Benet wrote at the time of *Tortilla Flat*’s first publication: ‘The extraordinary humors of these curiously childlike natives are presented with a masterly touch. These silly bravos are soft and easily touched, and yet almost absentmindedly they live with atrocious disregard for scruple.’”

Advertisement
East of Eden by John Steinbeck
(Penguin 1979)

“*Tortilla Flat* is actually a set of connected incidents rather than a single integrated narrative; it has the structure of *Pickwick Papers* [Dickens]... The setting is the uphill Mexican district of Monterey, California, called Tortilla Flat, populated by the colorful Mexican-Americans Steinbeck calls *paisanos*. The chief characters of the narrative are Danny, prodigious drinker of wine and free-hand battler; his friends Pilon, Pablo, Big Joe Portagee, and Jesus Maria Corcoran; the beggar Pirate; the wine-merchant Torelli; and a number of sentimentally promiscuous ladies. Danny comes back from the First World War to find himself an heir and a property-owner; an uncle has died leaving him two houses in Tortilla Flat. Danny moves into one of the houses and rents the other to Pilon, who moves into it with all his friends and presently burns it down. Thenceforth, all of them live with Danny in his house, and when they discover that Pirate possesses a hoard of hidden coins they invite him to move in with them too, along with his five dogs. A fantastic and slipshod household is established.

The six men and five dogs live by occasional odd jobs, by begging handouts from restaurants and by adroit thefts from their neighbors. In spite of their basic amorality, however, and their many and colorful sins, they win the reader’s sympathy through their naïve and innocent charm. The chief incidents are a farcical hunt for buried treasure (VIII), Danny’s gift of a motorless vacuum cleaner to a lady-friend whose

house is not wired for electricity (IX), the poignant incident of the Mexican soldier whose baby dies in spite of the ministrations of the Tortilla Flat inhabitants (X), Pirate's gift of a golden candlestick to the Church (XII), Danny's madness, caused by brooding over the responsibility of his possessions (XV), and the gloriously destructive party at which Danny destroys himself heroically and magnificently by leaping into a ravine, and the novel closes with a description of his funeral and the dispersal of his friends, who solemnly burn the house before they go as a tribute to Danny.

This novel, the book which made Steinbeck famous, is the most successful of the three works of its type. In style it is a kind of mock epic; Steinbeck pokes fun at the epic tradition on the first page, and there is a thread of ludicrous heroism running through the narrative. The dialogues are sentimental; the style of lyrical 'translation' from the Spanish in which the familiar second person (thee-thou) is rendered literally lends a kind of spurious poetic quality to the conversations. The characterizations are romantic, although ironic, and little distinction is drawn between the characters of Danny and his friends. *Tortilla Flat* is far from realism; its characters are exotic to begin with, they are seen entirely from the outside, they are romanticized and poetized, and the novel in the end is almost a fantasy. Yet this is the source of its charm: it lacks the sordid realism of Steinbeck's more serious work, but it creates its own mythical world of great interest and fascination."

Donald Heiney
Recent American Literature 4
(Barron's Educational Series 1958) 231-32

"Written in a simple, lucid prose humorously reminiscent of Sir Thomas Malory's style, this episodic tale concerns the poor but carefree *paisano* Danny and his friends Pilon, Pablo, Big Joe Portagee, Jesus Maria Corcoran, and the old Pirate, all of whom gather in Danny's house, which Steinbeck tells us 'was not unlike the Round Table.' The novel (accepted after nine publishers had turned it down) contrasts the complexities of modern civilization with the simple life of the *paisanos*. There is in the story Steinbeck's usual glorification of irresponsibility when joined with kindness."

Max J. Herzberg & staff
The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962) 1147

Michael Hollister (2015)