

# *The Tortilla Curtain* Analysis

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*The Tortilla Curtain* opens with a quote from Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*, "They ain't human. A human being wouldn't live like they do. A human being couldn't stand it to be so dirty and miserable.", a comment from a shopowner who actually helped the Joad's. But where *Grapes of Wrath* is a masterwork examining issues of class conflict and an approach to rebuilding the world based on solidarity and kinship, the writing in *The Tortilla Curtain* is very far from being a masterwork. While in some places, it was well written, and I found myself reasonably invested in the characters, in other places, the diction felt extraordinarily poorly chosen, almost fanfic quality, and the overall themes were, at best, confused and underdeveloped.

I'll do my best to stick to the structure of the ARNs and DIDLS, and focus on aspects where I think the writing was effective, but I apologize in advance if this devolves into invective about the aspects of the writing that I didn't like.

## ARN

I really couldn't pick a favorite passage; there are several which are passable or mediocre, but none which really stand out to me as extraordinary. Instead, I've chosen my least favorite passage, or at least one of them. I think this passage does quite a good job embodying most of the things that I dislike extremely succinctly.

## What?

He made a sort of game of it, counting the steps it took him to shut the windows against the coming day's heat, empty yesterday's coffee grounds into the mulch bucket, transform two kiwis, an orange, apple, banana and a handful of Bing cherries into Jordan's medley of fresh fruit, and set the table for two. He skated across the tile floor to the dishwasher, flung open the cabinets, rocketed the plates and cutlery into position on the big oak table, all the while keeping an eye on the coffee, and another eye on serving out two bowls of dog food and juicing the oranges he'd plucked from the tree in the courtyard.

...

Jordan began to rotate his spoon in the bowl of fruit, a scrape and clatter accompanied by the moist sounds of mastication. Delaney, his back to the table, was scrubbing the counter in the vicinity of the stove, though any splashes of cooking oil or spatters of sauce must have been purely imaginary since he hadn't actually cooked anything. He scrubbed for the love of scrubbing. "Okay, buckaroo," he called over his shoulder, "you've got two choices today as far as your hi-fiber bar is concerned: Cranberry Nut and Boysenberry Supreme. What'll it be?" (Chapter 3)

## How?

- **Word choice:** The diction throughout this section just feels over-the-top.
  - I don't know about you, but I've never "skated" or "rocketed" while preparing breakfast. Ever. I really do not think there is any argument that these phrases characterize Delaney, they simply sound comical and ridiculous.

- Rather than “preparing” a fruit medley, or “making” it, or Delaney transform[s]” some fruit into a “medley”. Does that *really* add anything?
- In perhaps the moist unappealing sounding phrase that I have *ever* heard in any book, Jordan’s “moist sounds of mastication”. Would it really have killed you to say “he chewed his food”?
- **Characterization:** The extent to which the Mossbacher’s are *constantly* characterized as a stereotype of a suburban middle-class American family is really tiring.
  - Middle class families have nothing to do, so they “ma[k]e a sort of game” out of everything
  - Delaney empty’s coffee grounds, and has a compost bin
  - The kids eat fresh fruit and granola bars for breakfast
  - They have pets, who are treated as additional children (getting food at the same time)
  - They are hyper-clean, “scrubbing the counter” despite any dirt being “imaginary”.

## Why?

This unnecessarily specific and awkward word choice is present throughout the book. There are phrases like “stained the color of tea brewed through a twice-used bag”, “negligee derealized”, “raging cataract of shit”, “staccato feet”, and many, many more. This word choice is consistently awkward and interrupts the flow of the story, making you stop and ask, “Excuse me, what now?”. It feels immature, as though the author has discovered these words for the first time, and like a high school student, eager to prove themselves, is overusing said words wherever possible.

I also take issue with the characterization of the Delaney family. Perhaps some of these characterizations I’m recoiling from because they feel too immediate, too personal, but for the vast majority, I’m simply disappointed by the extent to which middle class families are caricatured. While I have certainly seen all of these tendencies – staunch environmentalists with a hyperfocus on personal action, outspoken liberals who are very sure that something is racist without understanding why, moms obsessed with nutrition micromanging their child’s eating and 12 vitamins a day, animal lovers, hikers, bloggers, realtors – putting it all together, in one family, just feels like too much. The Mossbacher’s don’t feel like they have any personality. They’re a hyperbolic embodiment of a specific stereotype, and without anything else, they feel like they lack character. They’re a caricature, without nuance, unable to hold any emotional weight.

## DIDLS

I’m analyzing Chapter 4 in Part 1, specifically two crucial flashback sequences from Cándido and América, the first recounting his divorce with Resurrección and subsequent marriage with América, and the second regarding their attempt to enter America, upon which they were ambushed, América almost raped, barely saved by a border patrol helicopter, later described as “the most humiliating night of her life” (99).

These two flashback sequences are placed within the context of América trying to get work at the labor exchange, and Cándido is left behind to reminisce and get sick from polluted water. This chapter was definitely one of the better ones in my opinion, and I quite liked seeing Cándido and América’s backstory.

**Diction** The overall tone of this chapter is desperation. América is desperate to get a job and get food, Cándido is desperate to survive and maintain his dignity.

They are both suffering, Cándido from “pain that filmed his eyes”, América from the realization that “Someone has to go” (78, 79). At the labor exchange, América “brooded” as “this new place terrified her”. She’s suffering, but she recognizes the necessity of her working (90). While she’s “afraid to talk to anyone”, she gathers her courage and goes “straight to the man in charge” to ask for work. In essence, América is desperate, understanding that their situation is dire, but determined to get them out of it.

**Imagery** Cándido feels that it is emasculating to have América, a woman, be the breadwinner. The chapter opens with him speculating about “her in some rich man’s house, down on her knees scrubbing one of those tiled kitchens with a refrigerator the size of a meat locker”, letting the reader see the imagery in Cándido’s

imagination (78). To drive it in, that Cándido sees América working as an affront to his dignity, he goes on to imagine the “rich man watching [América’s] ass as it waved in the air” (78).

América, upon arriving at the labor exchange, finds “Traffic—amazing traffic—whined past on the canyon road, forty, fifty miles an hour, bumper-to-bumper, with barely room to breathe in between”. Boyle could not be more clear, showing the complete indifference the world has to their plight.

The imagery as América is almost raped is horrifying. She compares her attackers to “animals”, multiple times, and the man who brought them over the border to a “coyote” (97). Her clothes being jerked off are compared to “skinning a rabbit” (99). And once the helicopter light arrives, it’s “vermin” who run away.

**Details** The author chooses to illustrate Cándido’s loss of dignity with him suffering diarrhea after drinking unpurified water from the stream. While I *really* dislike the imagery here, “desperate uncontrollable rush that every man, woman and child knew so intimately in his country”, a phrase that feels clunky and unnecessary, and actual details presented here can’t help but invoke pity for Cándido (88). He’s “coated in sweat and sand” and his “trousers ballooning [are] round his ankles”, but even then, Boyle illustrates that Cándido is more concerned with América’s well being than his own. He has a fleeting thought that “[t]hey were coming for him”, but immediately afterward, he begins to worry that “[t]hey’d got hold of America”, wonders “where was América”. Cándido is wholly concerned with América, his mind taken over with worry that he’s powerless, and the details of his struggle with poop really drive home the extent of his complete lack of dignity.

Boyle often includes details regarding the race of his characters. Though in many places, the racial tension in the story feels artificial and unrealistic, it is quite well executed in chapter 4. América observes that if the leader of the labor exchange was a *gringo*, “she never would have had the nerve to open her mouth”, but because he was a *campesino* from Oaxaca, she was comfortable approaching him (90). She meets a woman, Mary, a *gringa*, whose also looking for work, and América is confused, unable to comprehend that a white woman would also be looking for work. The two white boys that arrive to trash Cándido’s camp are identified to be redheads, Cándido comparing their eyes to “clear glassy cat’s eyes . . . inherited from their mothers . . . from Sweden and Holland”. Boyle effectively illustrates that despite the racial tensions that exist, underneath them, there are people. People who can be kind and hard working, or who can be jerks. Steinbeck would take this a step further, and identify that the only reason the working class is at each others throats is because of the capitalist class, but nonetheless, Boyle settles for a more general interpretation, highlighting marked effect that racial divides have on people.

**Language** The language, especially in América’s flashback scene, is visceral. It places you in the action, in her head. You can feel “her mouth dry and heart racing” (97). Describing her as being “herded”, feeling “every eye on her”, elicits a clear emotional response, letting the reader feel the tenseness of the situation (99).

Cándido’s conflict is more internal, more personal, and the language reflects this. Where América is hurt by others, Cándido finds himself “prowl[ing] the streets” and “haunt[ing] the cinemas” on his own (82). He’s alone, lacks emotional support, and is unable to make ends meet or find his ex-wife. Boyle also demonstrates that Cándido is an unreliable narrator, that his worries have colored his recollections, as he is bested by a “perfidious wrestling move”.

**Syntax** While the vast majority of the sentences are long and winding, with extensive description and simile, they are punctuated throughout with shorter, more poignant sentences which effectively interrupt the reader with the grim reality of the situation.

While América is at the labor exchange, Boyle writes “She was bored. She was frightened.” This is followed by a long musing from América worrying about the border patrol, descriptions of a “car [which] pulled into the lot and two or three men gathered round it”, of América as she “held her breath in hope and fear, wanting work, desperately wanting it, yet mortally afraid of the bland white faces of the men staring out from behind the windshield”. Then, once again, these musings are interrupted, as we snap back to reality with “it didn’t matter”.

Something similar can be found in Cándido’s recollection of his fight. Cándido steadily grows more emotional in his recollection, going from “Cándido called him out” to calling him a “son of a bitch”, to decrying his loss

as due to a “perfidious wrestling move” (83). But then, Cándido is “stunned”, and much the same as he falls back into reality, the reader is snapped back to reality with a short sentence, “No one said a word.”

### **Some Closing Thoughts**

There was much that I didn’t like about this book, especially in the rhetoric. There were no end of sentences that made me step back and ask whether the book was reviewed by a copy editor at all, whether Boyle had just learned a new word and was itching to use it. Held up against masterworks like *Grapes of Wrath* and *The Great Gatsby*, *The Tortilla Curtain* pales in comparison, with both its rhetoric, themes, and characters light years behind. But nonetheless, the story features an interesting premise, and a number of the conceits were quite intriguing.