

Satire in tortilla curtain



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The issue of immigration and American attitudes towards it are the object of satire in T. C Boyle's novel 'Tortilla Curtain'. Boyle uses sarcasm to attack what he sees as the self-obsessed nature of middle-class America and their naïve view of the world. He laments the extent to which the United States seems out of touch with problems in the rest of the world. The author's use of irony depicts a breakdown of human society fuelled by fear and jealous materialism, but the continuing interdependence of human beings is also portrayed throughout the novel. The self-absorbed nature of modern American society is depicted through Boyle's use of sarcasm. The character Delaney, who epitomises liberal middle-America, magnifies his own problems out of proportion. This can be seen in the tone of disbelief when Delaney, a "liberal humanist with... a freshly waxed Japanese car..." (p1) hits a Mexican. The tone turns to one of annoyance as he asks: "Why did this have to happen to him?" (p6). Boyle's sarcastic tone when describing Delaney's troubles clearly shows how Delaney bemoans his own problems whilst ignoring that of the Mexican. 'Tortilla Curtain' depicts American society as desiring a secure view of the world. On many occasions in the novel, the liberal middle-class residents of Arroyo Blanco avoid addressing complex social issues, as can be seen in Delaney's desperate enthusiasm for clear-cut issues and morality: "This was what mattered. Principle... an issue as clear-cut as the on/off switch..." (p152). The simplicity of this view reflects Boyle's belief that the world is actually very complex. Also suggested is the lack of moral direction that lies behind a desire to see the world in simple terms. This disconnection with reality can also be seen in Boyle's attack on the 'highbrow' interests of the affluent. Through ironic symbolism, Boyle denounces the affluent as hypocritical and out of touch in their support of 'liberal' views. An example

of this can be seen in the issue of the coyote, which symbolises environmental conservation, but is also allegorical of Mexican immigrants. It is ironic when Delaney, who progressively becomes anti-immigration, declares: “ The coyote is not to blame... he is only trying ... to make a living... ” (p214). Astonishing to the reader is the way Delaney sympathises with the wild coyote but cannot do the same with his fellow man. Satirical attacks of other liberal interests can also be seen in Delaney’s encounter with Candido. Confronted with the badly-injured Candido, Delaney is helpless. He cannot even communicate as Candido is speaking Spanish, to which Delaney’s “ ... four years of high school French...” give him “ ...little access.” (p8) The irony that American schools would teach French, widely considered the language of sophistication, but not Spanish is not wasted on Boyle who uses it to reflect America’s lack of interest in Mexico and its problems. This satirisation of the liberal middle-class can be seen to be part of Boyle’s commentary on trends in modern society and the persistence of cultural barriers and prejudices. The novel expresses Boyle’s concern at the growing disconnectedness and fragmentation of community in modern society. The affluent residents of Arroyo Blanco are often wary of society as a result of jealously guarding their wealth. The irony of their fears and actions can be seen when Delaney instructs the workmen to shut the gate: “ we wouldn’t want any of the neighbourhood kids wandering in...” (p243). Even as the wall is constructed to make the Arroyo Blanco community safer, the apranoia of the residents is undiminished; they turn on each other, as implied above. This trend in society is diagnosed by Boyle to be part of a shift towards materialism. ‘The Tortilla Curtain’ promotes the view that societal breakdown is due to increasing materialism. This can be seen in <https://assignbuster.com/satire-in-tortilla-curtain/>

Boyle's parody of the community organisation: " Arroyo Blanco Property Association". This is a meeting where no-one seems to know anyone else. Moreover, consumeristic tendencies can be seen in the name: the residents are not united through friendship but through the ownership of property. Despite the problems the novel highlights, Boyle's use of satire also reminds readers of humanity's interdependence. Amidst all the anti-Mexican sentiment perpetuated by Arroyo Blanco residents, Boyle notes that Candido "... go work once... hauling rock for a wall some lady was building around her property." (p181) The statement shows, heavy with irony, that immigrants have a practical and valuable place in society. In addition the ending of the novel depicts Candido saving Delaney from drowning. When taken in combination, these passages promote the author's view that human beings are dependent on each other, practically and emotionally and that this dependence transcends both race and class. 'The Tortilla Curtain' as a satire is scathing in its attack on contemporary American middle-class values which Boyle sees as individualistic, puerile and ' avant-garde'. Readers look on with concern at the novel's portrayal of the modern world's ' broken society'; fragmented through pursuit of material wealth and the fear of losing it. This dystopian vision is however tempered by the depiction of human interdependency which Boyle believes will overcome the social and economic divides of the present. By satirizing of the issue of United States immigration Boyle has identified many contemporary societal problems. His ridicule of the conflict between rich and poor, illegal and citizen is applicable not only to United States' society but to Western society in general.