

Breaking the tortilla curtain



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In T. C Boyle's novel *The Tortilla Curtain*, the author offers a distorted lens to highlight the differences between two couples from separate cultures brought together through a series of unfortunate events. Candido and America Rincon are illegal immigrants from Tepoztlan, Mexico, and come into contact with Delaney and Kyra Mossbacher, an upper-middle-class couple from Southern California. Social and physical boundaries play a large role in this novel as Boyle unveils the clashes between a typical white 'American' family and their lower-class Mexican neighbors. Thus, through irony and visible and invisible boundaries, Boyle pokes fun at the American dream and, in doing so, reveals these characters' true identity. Boyle creates visible boundaries in the novel by in his description of Arroyo Blanco, the vivid community where the Mossbachers live. Although the residents of Arroyo Blanco, which means 'white creek' in Spanish, are mostly non-Hispanic Americans, they appropriate Mexican culture by building houses in the "Spanish mission style, painted in one of the three prescribed shades of white, with orange tile roofs". On the lower edge of Arroyo Blanco is low-income housing where many illegal immigrants from Mexico live, including the Rincons. The residents of Arroyo Blanco stand a different level of the social ladder than their Mexican neighbors. However, Kyra, despite being slightly racist, never pays attention to the immigrants. However, when a coyote kills Kyra's dog, she now has an excuse to build a giant wall around Arroyo Blanco, which would physically block any communication or contact between the Arroyo Blanco residents and the people living in low-income housing. Meanwhile, Delaney disagrees with his wife and defends the Mexicans, yelling, "This isn't about coyotes, don't kid yourself. It's about Mexicans, it's about blacks. It's about exclusion, division, hate." Through the

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conflict over the wall, Boyle mocks suburban American culture. The Mossbachers are willing to idealize the Mexican culture with their Spanish mission home, but they want a gated community in order to keep the actual Mexicans out. Kyra tries to isolate herself from the reality of life outside the wall, but ends up creating a physical embodiment of the conflict between the two cultures. In the irony of this situation, Boyle reveals the inherent racism of upper middle class families like the Mossbachers. Boyle creates an additional physical boundary in the title of the novel itself, which shows the contrast between these two social standards. The "tortilla curtain" refers to the border that divides Mexico and Southern California and represents the richer upper middle class. On one side of that border are families like the Mossbachers, and on the other side, the Mexicans who crossed illegally, the Rincons. Both couples are in pursuit of the American dream, but from opposite sides of the curtain. One family is living an easy, comfortable life while the other is struggling every day just to survive. However, at the end of the novel, life and death becomes the great equalizer between human beings. Both Delaney and Candido are both in danger. Delaney is about to drown in a flood, "But when [Candido sees] the white face surge up out of the black swirl of the current and the white hand grasping at the tiles, he reache[s] down and [takes] hold of it." In this moment, Candido breaks through the tortilla curtain to save his enemy's life. This gesture ultimately helps the two men discover their own humanity. Although they both come from different backgrounds, they realize that they are both human beings and should treat each other with respect. Boyle shows the physical breakthrough of this invisible boundary, which allows him to highlight the commonalities between these two characters. Social class plays a large role

in "The Tortilla Curtain" as a tool for Boyle to explore the differences and similarities between families from opposite backgrounds. Once racism is put aside, the humanity in all the characters is revealed and this helps the community grow as a whole. Over the course of the novel, Boyle breaks boundaries, which ultimately allow him to contemporize the concept of the American Dream.