

Tortilla Flat by John Steinbeck

GT Novel Guide

Four Big Essential Questions:

(We'll always talk about these during class discussions! Come to class with ideas for answers!)

- Do the main characters prove or disprove the idea that a quality life can be achieved without the blessing of money or education? Do the main characters prove or disprove the idea that man is inherently good or flawed?
- Are the *paisanos* a synergetic group, or are they better off as individuals? Are they spiritual even though most of them are not openly religious?
- How can you apply this quote by Robert Green Ingersoll to this story: "Happiness is the only good. The time to be happy is now. The place to be happy is here. The way to be happy is to make others so."
- **Thinking like a writer:** What does Steinbeck do as a writer to portray his characters in a way that—even though they have obvious foibles—they can be seen as model citizens or heroes?

High-Level Vocabulary Challenges:

(How can you apply these vocabulary words to this novel?)

...vagabond
...chivalry
...selflessness
...magnanimity

...camaraderie
...morality
...altruism
...redemption

Academic Vocabulary:

(be able to apply these vocabulary words to this novel)

...theme
...motif
...direct/indirect characterization

...symbol
...setting
...tone

Be able to apply these chivalric codes to the characters

Here is an "Order of Chivalry at the Court of King Arthur" as outlined by poet Sir Thomas Malory (1420-1471):

- To never do outrage nor murder
- Always to flee treason
- To by no means be cruel but to give mercy unto him who asks for mercy
- To always do ladies, gentlewomen and widows succor
- To never force ladies, gentlewomen or widows
- Not to take up battles in wrongful quarrels for love or worldly goods

Poet Giovanni Boccaccio (1313-1375) outlined the twelve basic rules of the Knights of the Round Table were:

- To never lay down arms
- To seek after wonders
- When called upon, to defend the rights of the weak with all one's strength
- To injure no one
- Not to attack one another
- To fight for the safety of one's country
- To give one's life for one's country
- To seek nothing before honor
- Never to break faith for any reason
- To practice religion most diligently
- To grant hospitality to anyone, each according to his ability
- Whether in honor or disgrace, to make a report with the greatest fidelity to truth to those who keep the annals

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Discussion Questions

Preface & Chapter 1

1. Do you think it is fair that Danny receives a shorter sentence for his crimes because of his military service? Why or why not?
2. Do you trust Danny? Why or why not? Support your answers with examples from the book.
3. How does Danny's home ownership become a symbol for honor? Do you think that Danny will remain honorable throughout the book?
4. Why do you think the author's preface compares Danny, his house, and his friends to *King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table*?

Chapters 2 & 3

1. Why do Danny and Pilon assume that what belongs to Mrs. Morales they can have access to (i.e., the chickens and the water)?
2. If Pilon has never seen \$15 before, why does he have faith that he will find it every month?
3. Pilon seems to have two different personalities—one is contemptible, the other spiritual. Which personality do you think will dominate as the story progresses? Why?
4. "When they are broken you become sad. It is much better never to have had them." Do you agree with Pilon that it is easier to not have had something that breaks? Explain your response with a specific example from your life.

Chapters 4 & 5

1. How does the question of money affect the characters in this passage? Why is the question of money always an issue, yet the characters always select activities that don't allow for optimum earnings and/or savings of money?
2. Jesus Maria Corcoran is an 'innocent' character—how does Steinbeck use literary devices in his writing to convey his innocence?
3. How does Steinbeck create a backdrop of moral and wholesome community despite the antics of the characters?
4. "In the sky, saints and martyrs looked on with set and unforgiving faces. The candle was blessed. It belonged to Saint Francis. Saint Francis will have a big candle in its place tonight." Using examples from the book, describe how the theme of faith interplays with the relaxed moral code of the characters?

Chapters 6 & 7

1. Are you surprised by Danny's reactions to the house fire? Explain your response.
2. Why do you think the characters seem to be continually distracted from their initial plans?
3. How does the introduction of The Pirate change the dynamics of the core characters?
4. "To think all those years I lay in that chicken house, and I did not know any pleasure. But now, oh, now I am very happy." Explain how The Pirate was completely comfortable in his previous life, but only now find happiness with moving in with Danny and the group? How does this acceptance and friendship change him?



Chapters 8 & 9

1. Does Big Joe prefer freedom or incarceration? Why?
2. St. Andrew's Eve is an important event to the community. Why do you think that a group of men who routinely flaunt conventional behavior place so much reverence and importance on this celebration?
3. The vacuum cleaner symbolizes domesticity. How does this symbol become ironic by the end of this passage?

Chapters 10 & 11

1. It seems that every few chapters, a new character is invited to live with Danny and the group. Why do they keep inviting new people to join them? Will they run out of resources to provide for everyone? Why or why not?
2. What lesson do you think the group learns from their interactions with the soldier and the baby? How do you think these lessons will affect the group as the story progresses?
3. "The six friends looked at him admiringly. They were proud to have known such a man." Why is it important to know people of whom you are proud? Describe a person whom you know that made a difficult, yet good decision.

Chapters 12 & 13

1. Explain how The Pirate's money is valued differently than other money in this story? What do you believe The Pirate's money symbolizes? Explain your response using examples from the book.
2. Why do you believe that Big Joe had no idea what to do with \$250? What do you think he should have done with the money?
3. "What pillow can one have like a good conscience?" Using examples from the book, explain how this group of thieving, conniving men can be described as good. Does this make you think people need to look beyond a person's deeds to find their true character? Why or why not?

Chapters 14 & 15

1. How has living in Danny's house changed the various characters? Do you believe these changes to be good, bad or indifferent? Select one character and explain your response using examples from the book.
2. How does the story of Cornelia Ruiz's pig symbolize the Danny's sharing of his house with his friends?
3. "Where is there a friend like our friend? He takes us into his house out of the cold. He shares his good food with us, and his wine. Ohee, the good man, the dear friend." Why do you think Danny is embarrassed by this speech? Explain your response by using examples from the book.

Chapters 16 & 17

1. Explain the metaphor of Danny's fate.
2. Why do you believe the friends torched Danny's house? Why is this important?
3. Did you like this book? Why or why not?
4. What did you learn about yourself while reading this book?

A Brief Summary of The Legend of King Arthur

Arthur was the first born son of King Uther Pendragon and heir to the throne. However these were very troubled times and Merlin, a wise magician, advised that the baby Arthur should be raised in a secret place and that none should know his true identity.

As Merlin feared, when King Uther died there was great conflict over who should be the next king. Merlin used his magic to set a sword in a stone. Written on the sword, in letters of gold, were these words: "Whoso pulleth out this sword of this stone is the rightwise born king of all England." Of course all the contenders for the throne took their turn at trying to draw the sword, but none could succeed. Arthur, quite by chance, withdrew the sword for another to use in a tournament. Following this he became King.

He gathered Knights around him and fought back against the Saxons who, since the Romans left Britain, were slowly but surely taking the country over. After many great battles and a huge victory at Mount Badon the Saxons' advance was halted.

Arthur's base was at a place called Camelot. Here he built a strong castle. His knights met at a Round Table. They carried out acts of chivalry such as rescuing damsels in distress and fought against strange beasts. They also searched for a lost treasure, which they believed would cure all ills - this was the 'Quest for the Holy Grail'.

Under the guidance of Merlin, Arthur had obtained a magical sword from The Lady Of The Lake. This sword was called 'Excalibur" and with this weapon he vanquished many foes.

Queen Guinevere, Arthur's beautiful wife brought romance to the story while his equally beautiful half sister Morgan le Fay added a dark side.

Unfortunately, as peace settled over the country things turned sour within the court of Camelot and civil war broke out. In the final battle at Camlan both Arthur and Mordred, Arthur's traitorous nephew, were mortally wounded. Arthur was set upon a boat and floated down river to the isle of Avalon. Here his wounds were treated by three mysterious maidens. His body was never found and many say that he rests under a hill with all his knights - ready to ride forth and save the country again.

