

**ILLEGAL MIGRATION PORTRAYED BY T.C. BOYLE IN *THE TORTILLA CURTAIN***

**TO WHAT EXTENT DOES '*THE TORTILLA CURTAIN*' BY T.C. BOYLE  
PORTRAY THE IMPACT OF ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION IN THE USA?**

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## Introduction

Immigration has evolved to become one of the most controversial topics in society. That is why, the focus of this investigation will lay on to what extent the author T.C. Boyle was able to portray the impact of illegal migration in the United States of America. It is well known that there are many different views and opinions regarding the impact that illegal immigration. The aim of this work is to unveil in which way the effects of illegal migration have affected society and to what extent the novel "The Tortilla Curtain" was able to transmit them. The information utilized was found in different trusting websites and articles that contained material relating to the different aspects that were impacted by the effects of illegal migration. All of them, published from within the United States. At the beginning, I was faced with the difficulty of finding correct information about illegal migration in the state of California during the 90's. However, after searching for old newspaper articles and government documents I was able to find several trustworthy sources for this investigation. The process of illegal is known to be a harsh and difficult experience filled with fear and at the same time hope. Even though it was published during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, "The Tortilla Curtain" is still significantly relevant. Not only because of the story told, but because the topic is modern. In other words, it maintains itself as relevant due to the actual issues seen with migration today. Illegal migration as a modern topic should be known worldwide. That is because a great number of people suffer and strive to live a better and safer life. By informing oneself and gaining knowledge about the causes, process and impact of illegal migration, one can develop a better understanding about the world we live in today. As an international bachelorette student and person living in this world, I must educate and maintain an expanded view about the world and its many problems. As someone who has lived in many countries, I have gotten to meet many people who shaped me to be who I am today and increased my knowledge about the world. For instance, back in Canada, I met many young

friends, that came to the country with the hopes of a better life along with more freedom.

Each one, had very interesting things to tell me about their homelands, traditions,

problematics and experiences that led them to coming to Canada.

## Chapter 1/ Theoretical Framework

‘The Tortilla Curtain’ is a novel, written by the short story and fiction novel author, who as well currently is a distinguished professor of English in southern California, Thomas Corraghessan Boyle, also known as T.C. Boyle (Grimm, 2018). Today, he is an internationally recognized writer, who has written over 100 short stories and 14 novels. Along with so many finished projects, he has also won multiple literary awards and now lives with his family, close to Santa Barbara, California. The book was published for the first time in 1995, a year after the ‘*Save our state*’ initiative which intended the banning of undocumented immigrants from using major public services provided by the state of California (Onion, 2020). T.C. Boyle created a story expressing the troubles illegal immigrants had to go through, as well as the residents already living in California during that time period. On one side there is Delany Mosbacher's family: a classic middle-class American family living in California. Facing different random obstacles on a day-to-day basis.

On the other side is Cándido Rincón, a future father, married to his pregnant 17-year-old wife. Both came to the USA illegally, with hopes for a better and safer life. Currently, they live hidden in a park at a Canyon, hiding from the Border Patrol and working hard to find a roof to live under. In addition, T.C. Boyle included their thoughts, personal experiences and the standpoints developed throughout the Narrative. Having said this, it is claimable that “The Tortilla Curtain” explores all the possible connections and similarities found between the book and the real world, by using characters that strongly differentiate because of their cultural, financial and social characteristics, creating tension between them.

As for the main topic, Illegal migration is the act of living in a country without government permission. (Head, 2007) Such a phenomenon is usually caused by the state

of one's origin country, concerning economic, political and social aspects. Popular factors that lead to this issue connect to the improvement of the quality of life. (Thrive Agency, 2021) Meaning that labor standards, poverty, and the overall state of a country influence the urge to find a better place to live and develop as a person. (Thrive Agency, 2021) As said earlier, the factors connected to illegal immigration can be separated into different categories. The economic, social and political motives. Starting with the economic aspect, most immigrants have moved to locations where wages are higher and more jobs are open, because there was greater potential for economic growth. Following with social factors, most immigrants search for a place with adequate education and available medical services otherwise inaccessible in their country. (Thrive Agency, 2021) Finally, most people come to the US in order to flee from political tension and instability.

However, the focus of this investigation lays on the extent T.C. Boyle was able to vividly portray the social dilemma that is illegal migration. Because of this, it is important to acknowledge the topics that most accurately relate to the impact of its occurrence. One of the most frequently addressed issues within the novel, is Racism. Racism is the belief that humans can be divided according to their racial or ethnical background and so be distinguished as inferior or superior to one another. (Smedley, 2023) There are several forms, as which racism can be expressed. Those are, Representational Racism, Ideological Racism, Discursive Racism, Interactional Racism, Institutional Racism, Structural Racism and Systemic Racism. In general, all these forms represent a variety in which a discrimination is stated, showing that some racist beliefs may not appear obvious at first glance, but prove to be racist after relying on the stereotypical notions of an ethnicity or race. (Cole, 2019) No matter what kind of discrimination, the victim is always affected in some way. Most commonly, with mental health problems (Ayón, 2015)

Another theme the novel explores is the building of walls. There are multiple views regarding the meaning of a wall. On one side, it can represent protection, security and wellbeing. On the other hand, a wall can be seen as a violation of freedom and goodwill, as well as the oppression of freedom (Singer, 2019). Since the beginning of the plot, walls keep being a redundant topic mentioned throughout the story. Literal walls are mentioned, but while reading, one can discover symbolic walls being built among these. The Walls most often referred to are the Mexican border with the United States and the wall around the Arroyo Blanco complex.

Proceeding with Unemployment, which was presented as an urgent problematic among the residents and immigrants in the 1990's. That is because the gaining of immigrants and general increasing number of people living in California challenged the number of jobs available. During the 1990's California had around eight million immigrants, meaning that they represented one in four state residents (Camarota, 1998). In order to find jobs, most people went to a labor exchange and hoped to work and get paid for a day. The Labour Exchange provided a solution by letting employers advertise their jobs and finding unemployed people work (Moorhouse, 2018).

The final issue within the main question of this research is homelessness. Undoubtedly, homelessness has remained a problematic in California to this day, because of increasing real estate prices and the expanding population within the state. Homelessness first began to become a major issue in the state of California as well, as in the United States during the 1980's. Due to the significant reduction of the budget for public housing and the Housing Choice Voucher Program in 1981 (Dreier, 2004). After such drastic changes, the entire country witnessed a rise in homelessness. As the funding of needed housing and community-based services decreased, many people who were formerly institutionalized were forced to live on the streets as a temporary shelter (National Academies Press, 2018).

## Chapter 2/ Division

In this chapter, the previously mentioned themes will be explored, relating each to the novel's American citizens.

A product of illegal immigration in the story is racism. Racism is presented in both direct and indirect forms. Not only is this type of discrimination displayed, but it demonstrates the psychological debate that Delaney Mosbacher has regarding its use. An example of Delaney's questioning is when he has a discussion with his wife, Kyra, about the reasons behind the construction of the wall around where they live, Arroyo Blanco. "This isn't about coyotes, don't kid yourself. It's about Mexicans, it's about blacks. It's about exclusion, division, hate." (T.C. Boyle, 1995, p.220). By saying this, Delaney intends to delineate the truth behind why the people living in the residential community want to build a gate. Confronting the ideas of exclusion and racial division held by their neighbors. Which do not want the wall built for protection from the coyotes, but to stay away from foreigners. Therefore, the debate between spouses exhibits assumptions about racial categories, that in a way propagate a racially structured society, by limiting rights and benefits on the grounds of race. (Nicki Lisa Cole, 2019). In this manner, the author was able to represent racism in society, regarding illegal immigrants and people of other ethnicities.

Another example of racism is found when Delaney sees a man walking on the lawn of the Cherrystones, who were currently not home. As he notices the stranger, he begins to preoccupy and assumes he is a Mexican with bad intentions. However, the case is much more different than it seems. The man was simply handing out flyers. "The man was a liar, the stinking occupant of a stinking sleeping bag in the state forest, a trespasser, a polluter, a Mexican." (Boyle, 1995, p.229). The extract informs the reader of the immediate reaction Delaney had when seeing the stranger. Without much thought, he promptly assumes



his nationality and creates assumptions about him as a person due to his ethnicity. A race-based reaction, along with the suppositions established quickly are key components of racism (Cole, 2019). Because of this, T.C. Boyle effectively portrayed the racist assumptions present in society.

Proceeding with walls, which appear as one of the main subjects of the book and current affairs; the two most frequently mentioned walls in the novel are the Mexican Border with the United States and the wall around Arroyo Blanco. In the novel, the Arroyo Blanco wall, not only has the intent of keeping foreigners and the wilderness out, but it represents the division in society regarding the issue. “Not that he was indifferent to the issue— the gate was an absurdity, intimidating and exclusionary, antidemocratic even, and he’d spoken against it privately— but to his mind it was a *fait accompli*.” (Boyle, 1995, p.41). The character sees its construction as a separation of people, according to their state in social hierarchy.

This type of segregation is also not supportive of his liberal ideals, which can be noted in the fragment. As a symbol, the wall plays an important role in the story. The power to move people, to divide and unite them in certain instances (Singer, 2018). By implementing the gate in the plot, the author is able to portray different opinions on what a wall around a complex really represents. This way, providing the reader with realistic mixed ideas and perspectives in society around illegal immigration.

Continuing, unemployment also maintains an important role relative to the effects of illegal immigration in the United States. As mentioned above, unemployment rates rose due to the number of foreigners seeking jobs along with residents. Although the unemployment statistics were dire, the labor exchange businesses offered people the chance to get a job, even if it was only for a day. In “The Tortilla Curtain”, Cándido Rincón utilizes resources such as the labor exchange to support his soon to be family. However, the Arroyo Blanco Residents plan to close the business, because too many foreigners amass at the site daily.

Consequently, entailing the annoyance of the unemployed. An example of the thoughts and reasons why such a decision took place is demonstrated in the following extract. “Why should we be providing jobs for these people when we’re looking at a ten percent unemployment rate right here in California– and that’s for citizens.” (Boyle, 1995, p. 102). In fact, with immigration most employment opportunities went to immigrants rather than natives, and immigrants as a group did not pay enough taxes to cover their consumption of public services (Camarota, 1998). With this, the author depicts how the ignorance of the residents has evolved over time and the way they are bothered by the high unemployment rates. Depicting the problems present, through the opinions expressed by the residents featured in the novel.

Another moment, where the opinions and ideas of residents living in California are shared about the impact of the illegal immigrant's homelessness is when Delaney has an accident and hits Cándido Rincón with his car. After checking if he was alright, Delaney Mosbacher follows the new trail at the Topanga state Park, which leads to him finding out Cándido lived there. “Making trees and bushes and the natural habitat of Topanga State Park into his own private domicile, crapping in the chaparral, dumping his trash behind rocks, polluting the stream and ruining it for everyone else.” (Boyle, 1995, p.11). The fragment lays its focus on Delaney's thoughts about protecting the environment, instead of questioning Cándido living hidden at the park. As real estate prices kept increasing and the budget for public support with housing was lowered significantly, a lot of people were now homeless (Dreier, 2004). Because of this, along with the high unemployment rates, immigrants had an even smaller opportunity of living the life with the basic human needs they so much desired. Again, the author effectively provided the circumstances under which several illegal immigrants lived when they arrived in the United States. Emphasizing the shelter, they would stay in instead of a regular home.

### Chapter 3/ Despair

As said at the beginning of this investigation, T.C. Boyle not only portrayed the general issue of illegal immigration, but he depicted it and exposed the reader to two completely different sides of the issue. In this chapter the focus will be on the previous themes, but from a different perspective, which is that of the illegal Immigrant.

Beginning with racism, the novel proposes multiple encounters with unfriendly and discriminating people. An example of such an occurrence is when América finds herself walking nervously up to the canyon, hoping not to be found by the police. This segment demonstrates how affecting the psychological pressure was for an immigrant as a result of other encounters with discriminating people in the past. “She had to walk back up the canyon in the bleak light of the declining day while the cars swished by her in a lethal hissing chain, and in every one a pair of eyes that screamed, *Get out, get out of here and go back where you belong!*” (Boyle, 1995, p.19). Thus, addressing as a sub-theme of racism, the effects discrimination on immigrants. Accumulated effects of harassing interactions subject immigrants to a greater risk of suffering a series of negative repercussions, such as emotional stress, and increased social isolation (Ayón, 2015). Proving that the author effectively included the psychological effects of racism using America as a character, exhibiting accurate knowledge regarding illegal immigration.

Another important theme is walls. Cándido finds himself seeking food for his family after they run from the fire and América gives birth to their daughter Socorro. However, in order to find food, he jumps over a wall, which interestingly is the wall around Arroyo Blanco. One can see him jumping over the wall, as a representation of the urge he feels and the immediate need to provide for his family, which is also a reason behind why people migrate to the US illegally. “There was a garden in the house directly behind the wall and he

climbed silently atop the shed and slipped down over the wall without thinking how he was going to get back up again.” (T.C. Boyle) As can be read, Cándido seeks food and jumps over the wall without caring much about future consequences. So, in a sense, he is caring for his family while jumping over the wall, a symbol of violation. Being a violation of the values of freedom, difference and goodwill to humanity (Singer, 2019).

Proceeding with unemployment, T.C. Boyle also reveals the reaction and feelings felt by unemployed people upon discovering the closing of the labor exchange. “He was a criminal for daring to want it, daring to risk everything for the basic human necessities, and now even those were to be denied him. It stank. It did. These people, these norteamericanos: what gave them the right to all the riches of the world?” (T.C. Boyle, 1995, p.200). The fragment proves the rejection felt by Cándido Rincón because of the Americans. The labor exchange was his only place of real hope, to find a job, even if only for a day. Giving people the opportunity to find an employer in an uncomplicated and accessible manner (Moorhouse, 2018). As a result, the author managed to share the Mexicans perspective and demonstrated knowledge about labor exchanges, which were a fundamental part of the development process in people's lives.

As for homelessness, T.C. Boyle not only demonstrates the impact of homelessness on the environment and the opinion of residents, but he implements Cándido Rincón and América as examples of suffering, due to the lack of a proper home. This is shown at the beginning of the novel, where Cándido reflects on the promises he made to America before coming to the U.S. and where they were now. “—what else was he going to tell her? That they would get robbed at the border and live under two boards at the dump till he could make enough on the streetcorner to get them across? That they’d hide out like rats in a hole and live on a blanket beside a stream that would run dry in a month?” (Boyle, 1995, p.29). The excerpt evidences the humble conditions under which the Mexican couple manages to

survive, while living hidden from the outskirts due to low monetary conditions. Ultimately, conditions being the result of the loss of personal income experienced by many in the 1990s, as well as the disappearance of low-cost housing (National Academies Press, 2018).

## Conclusion

As a major issue, illegal immigration has proven to be relevant in several aspects of the overall well-being of a state, and even a country. One key factor to consider is the effect it has on both sides of society: the residents and the immigrants. Upon setting out to write a novel, the author had to verify the insights and perspectives presented to the reader which is maintaining the important role of staying relevant to the period in which these events took place. It is for this reason and the evidence given above, that the truth expressed through the characters in *The Tortilla Curtain* is prominent.

The research revealed a considerable amount of new knowledge concerning the context in which this book was written. The state of California suffered from a high rate of homelessness with little government support. Furthermore, cutting public funds to support people in dire need of a home, along with rising estate prices. Along with this, the increase in the number of people in the state, coupled with the addition of unregistered immigrants, decreased the likelihood of obtaining permanent employment.

The chapters succeeded in exposing the different consequences and realities surrounding illegal immigration. This way, providing the extent of their concerns and an extensive range of the human conditions under which the illegals lived. Portraying this situation, along with the perspective of Americans reacting to so many new foreigners, resulting in the development of a highly complex issue. However, the author not only showed two opposing sides of the issue, but with the character of Delaney Mosbacher, he managed to express the constant psychological debate he had regarding illegal immigrants. Notably, trying as a person, to be inclusive and to remain attached to his democratic ideals, but at the same time, altering his opinions due to events in the plot.

Being a book written in English, the most appropriate thing to do was to focus on sources in the same language. Not only because of the relationship between the project and the subject chosen, but also because working on a problem of such a global country, it was possible to find accurate information from a more universal point of view.

Ultimately, the issue of illegal immigration presents diverse aspects in terms of its impacts. As varied as its influences on society have been, T.C. Boyle approached the novel with a focus on the four most important themes. Creating a story that communicates effectively, passing through racism, unemployment, walls and homelessness in an alternative way. After extensive research, it can be fully affirmed that the author, accurately portrayed how society was affected by the problems of illegal immigration in the United States.

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