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Western American Literature, Volume 26, Number 4, Winter 1992, pp. 303-311 (Article)

Published by University of Nebraska Press
DOI: *https://doi.org/10.1353/wal.1992.0152*

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When John Steinbeck's *The Long Valley* was published in 1938—just a year before *The Grapes of Wrath*—it received a mixed critical reception, even though it contained several short stories which eventually came to be recognized as some of Steinbeck's masterpieces. The volume included "The Chrysanthemums," "Flight," "The Snake," and the three short stories that make up "The Red Pony." Yet reviewers gave scant praise to these. Eda Walton, writing for *The Nation*, noted that Steinbeck's "stories are competent, but reading them one goes through no authentic experience."[1] Stanley Young, in the *New York Times Book Review*, wrote that all the stories have "a directness of impression that makes them glow with life, small-scale though it is."[2] And Clifton Fadiman, in *The New Yorker*, suggested that though some of the stories were beautifully written, "Mr. Steinbeck is trying just a mite too hard to be sensitive and Open to Beauty."[3]

In choosing four of the best stories from the volume, Fadiman selected "The Chrysanthemums," "The White Quail," "The Harness," and "Breakfast," and in so doing he was the last critic for some time to nod a kind head towards "Breakfast." Since that time it has received little critical attention. One of the reasons for this might be its length; it is by far the shortest story in the collection, taking only four pages. And Steinbeck's almost verbatim repetition of the tale in chapter twenty-two of *The Grapes of Wrath* seemed to imply that the earlier piece was a mere draft, a short scene which had no artistic integrity of its own but which needed a larger context.

And so Peter Lisca has called it a "short sketch" and a "fragment."[4] Jackson J. Benson refers to it as little more than a scene, though a "very moving and very real scene."[5] When the editors of the *Steinbeck Quarterly* decided to devote part of their fifth volume to the stories of *The Long Valley*, no essay on "Breakfast" was included. Tetsumaro Hayashi's ratio-

nale for this was that "Breakfast" is "a comparatively insignificant piece and a rarely anthologized one."[6] When Pascal Covici selected the story for the Viking Portable Library's *Steinbeck* in 1943, he entitled the story simply "A Fragment" and introduced it as "one of many working notes for *The Grapes of Wrath*."[7] (It actually came out of research for *In Dubious Battle*.) But recently R.S. Hughes has argued that the work is a completely worked out, symmetrical "sketch" that finds its unity in the slow progression of the dawn.[8]

The literary criticism of this short story is correspondingly slight. James Hanby has suggested that "Breakfast" is a humanistic vision of the twenty-third psalm, in which the Salinas Valley becomes the Valley of the Shadow of Death and the hospitality of the migrant family mirrors the hospitality of the Good Shepherd, a hospitality that Edwin M. Moseley has interpreted as a "ritual communion." In his Jungian analysis of the story, Carroll Britch has seen the older man as a god-man, lord of the archetypal human family as well as the elements of the world. The narrator, Britch suggests, finds in the old man an unconscious projection of his own more primal tendencies. And most recently, John H. Timmerman has found the significance of the story in its emphasis on the family, pointing ahead to Steinbeck's great theme of the family of man.[9]

Certainly "Breakfast" is not Steinbeck's most important short story. And in many ways it is a simple scene, gathered from his walks around the migrant camps of the Salinas Valley from the summer of 1934, when Steinbeck set out to experience first-hand what he would be writing about in *In Dubious Battle*. The narrator—apparently a migrant picker (but perhaps the writer?)—comes upon a small family on the side of the road just before dawn. The young mother fixes hot biscuits and bacon while nursing her child. The father and grandfather come out of a tent and offer breakfast to the narrator. Dawn breaks as they finish and the two men invite the narrator to come to the cotton fields with them to see if they can get him on; they have been working for twelve days and have new dungarees. The narrator refuses and walks away down the country road.

If "Breakfast" were only a sketch or fragment—a simple preparation for a chapter in *The Grapes of Wrath*—we might expect that Steinbeck would have transferred it bodily into the novel with little change. But that is not the case. There is a wholeness about the story, a completeness about its scene, about the moment which has stayed with

the narrator. It is a wholeness not necessarily maintained in the later version. While many of the details are the same, the major difference lies in the perspective of the character who comes upon the family group. In *The Grapes of Wrath* this character is Tom Joad, who has spent the first two-thirds of the novel taking care of his family. He comes upon the group after they have settled in a government camp, having fled a Hooverville that had been burned by the Farm Association.[10] That is, he comes upon the scene bearing with him a context which differs starkly from the image now before him. Steinbeck includes more dialogue in the novel's version. The girl greets Tom (she averts her eyes in "Breakfast") and there is an amiable exchange before they all sit down to eat. Tom announces that he plans to look for work, and then the dawn begins to show. The light seems to call the other two from their eating, for they stop as soon as it shows on their faces, bringing with it the promise of another day of work. There is no certainty that Tom notices the dawn; it is unclear if he, like the narrator of "Breakfast," sees the light reflected in the older man's eyes. When they ask if Tom wishes to come with them, he agrees almost with joy, and there the scene ends. Steinbeck will later subdue the joy when they go to lay pipe and hear that the Farm Association has lowered their wages.

The emphasis in the scene from *The Grapes of Wrath* is very much on the sheer activity; it is a single part of the general waking up of the Weedpatch Camp. It also stresses the absolute kindness and goodness of the migrant workers, the unity of their families, and their willingness to extend their generosity and concern outside of their own family circles. In the novel this works towards Steinbeck's increasingly wide definition of the family and contrasts with the hardheartedness of the Farm Association. But the concerns of "Breakfast" are quite different, and though many of the same details are used, most of them work in different ways and towards different meanings. This comes about because of the much stronger presence of the narrator in the short story. The reader is consistently aware of the presence of the narrator, consistently aware that all of the events are perceived and interpreted through his perspective. It is also a scene which is in the narrator's past. Though there is no clue as to how long ago it occurred, it is clear that this incident has had a strong effect on him, one which he recalls with pleasure again and again.

The narrator calls the scene "a sunken memory" and finds himself bringing more and more detail out of it with each remembering. When

he presents the scene, then, it is as a creation of his memory, and presumably includes what he recalls only upon ordered reflection. The story is a culmination of his attempt to articulate the meaning which he feels is in the scene, a meaning which still eludes him at the end of the story. For remembering is not enough to make the details cohere in a meaningful way, even though it brings "the curious warm pleasure."

By the end of "Breakfast," the narrator's memory has produced a vivid scene, but he is conscious of his own failure to find the source of the beauty in it. Claude-Edmonde Magny suggests that the narrator recognizes "that the scene is pregnant with a profound poetry that he cannot elucidate, that he cannot communicate to the reader."[11] And though Magny does not examine the real source of that poetry, it is true that this tension—this inability to communicate what he knows is beautiful—is at the very center of the story. Much of what the narrator reports are details which seem to elicit no reaction from him. The opening paragraphs emphasize the visual, particularly light in relationship to objects. Light colors the rims of the mountains which seem to circle this family and set it apart. The light colors the earth lavender. It seeps out of the cracks of the rusted stove and reflects on the tent, announcing the presence of this family to the narrator. When the two men come out, they stand and watch the growing light, water dripping from their cheeks, and as the dawn comes it reflects in the older man's eyes and shines on their faces. By the end of the story the very air is blazing with light. But the narrator, though he remembers the details, takes no meaning from them. The light has no meaning for him other than as a phenomenon acting upon the natural world. Instead of seeing the light as part of a larger pattern, he simply "walked away down the country road."[12]

Other sensory details are similarly vivid. He smells the frying bacon and baking bread—"the warmest, pleasantest odors I know" (90). He hunches his back against the cold. He hears the baby sucking and tastes the bacon and scalds his throat with the coffee. All of these details are vivid and he recognizes that something in them holds significance; but when he walks away it has clearly eluded him. And when he admits "that's all," he is confessing his ignorance about their significance.

Steinbeck stresses the importance of memory by framing the story with the narrator's attempts to remember. But memory has failed, for it has brought no order to all the details. The narrator is unable to bring the fragmented impressions into an ordered whole, and the story suggests that this is principally because he is alone and hardened against

the very thing that suggests beauty to him. He claims, "I know, of course, some of the reasons why it was pleasant" (92). The phrase, "of course," is directed at the reader and is really an equivocation. It implies that he recognizes why the scene was pleasant, though this is undercut by the uncertainty of the following sentence.

The reader has no assurance that he does really know why it was pleasant or beautiful. The food itself is the thing which brings him the most pleasure; indeed, eating brings all of the characters great pleasure. Even the baby does nothing but feed. "We all ate quickly, frantically, and refilled our plates and ate quickly again until we were full and warm" (92), the narrator reports, and the compound sentence and repetition of "quickly" seems to emphasize the frenetic activity. Certainly this would be one of the reasons the narrator would give as to why the scene was pleasant.

But the final line brings to a climax the tension in the story, for he recognizes that the source of beauty lies in categories with which he is not familiar, or from which he is cut off. Perhaps with a sigh he says, "But there was some element of great beauty there that makes the rush of warmth when I think of it" (92). His previous emphasis on the visual suggests that he thinks it might be a sort of aesthetic beauty which gives this warmth, and certainly this is part of it. The two men are struck by the light on the mountains; they stand looking quietly at it, and their faces are lit by the dawn. But perhaps this is only the narrator reading this interest into them. After they watch quietly, "they yawned together and looked at the light on the hill rims" (90). Yawning hardly suggests aesthetic rapture. When the dawn comes, they are perhaps simply facing east so as to judge the time. Once the light comes up they know they "got to get going" (92).

To the men, then, the light may be the harbinger of a new day of work and prosperity and hope, or it might be a thing intrinsically beautiful in itself. What is significant is that to the narrator it means neither of these things. It is simply there, like the valley itself. Even if he is able to sense that there is a beauty in the surroundings—the fact that he is at least able to list off the details suggests this—he is cut off from its effects.

But there is a stronger source of the beauty, one which Steinbeck was to use more in the version in *The Grapes of Wrath.* The narrator does not come upon a simple group, but a family which is bonded in many complex ways. They represent three generations bound closely together, living in a common tent, working towards a common purpose:

survival. The woman is the giver of life, feeding both her child and the men. The men have taken on the traditional role of providers, and they are filled with joy because they have been able to provide well for the last twelve days.

There is a great sense of life in this family. The two men look alike and are presumably father and son. The child makes its presence felt not by wailing, but by sucking as its mother keeps it from the cold. There are food and warmth and pleasant cooking smells and new clothes. And there are water and light, so that when the men come out of the tent the water shines on their faces and drips from their beards. All these are images of fertility and fecundity.

The family is marked by a routine, but it is a routine which they all happily participate in. When the narrator first sees the camp, he is struck by the activity of the girl. "The mother moved about, poking the fire, shifting the rusty lids of the stove to make a greater draft, opening the oven door; and all the time the baby was nursing, but that didn't interfere with the mother's work, nor with the light, quick gracefulness of her movements. There was something very precise and practiced in her movements" (90). There is a splendor in these ordinary, mundane movements which betoken the morning ritual. The men rejoice in the meal she has prepared, and she rejoices in the way they have provided, expressing her happiness in pointing out their new clothes—her only line. And when the men go off to work, they seem to go anxiously, grateful for the chance, walking into the light.

But this is not an exclusive family unit. Like some of the families that Steinbeck was to write about in *The Grapes of Wrath,* this family extends its boundaries to include another, thus sharing their prosperity. The older man's invitation to eat breakfast comes almost as a command: "Well, sit down with us, then" (91). The narrator calls this a signal and squats on the ground by the packing case. They all eat together and throw the dregs of their coffee on the ground like a libation. When they prepare to leave, the younger man offers to help the narrator get a job picking cotton with them, even though it means that the picking will be done that much sooner. In *The Grapes of Wrath,* Tom notes this after the two men offer to help him get a job laying pipe, and when he asks why they are cutting their own throats, the older man says, "I dunno. Got no sense, I guess." In both cases the reason for the offer is that for a moment, the narrator and Tom are included in a widened family circle.

Yet the narrator willfully cuts himself out of that circle, even though it seems at first that he is clearly one of them. They are not

suspicious or threatened by him. They recognize his situation and needs, offering him food and the chance at a job. But at the same time he is not one of them. No names are exchanged (the characters in *The Grapes of Wrath* learn each others' names only after they are headed towards the job). He is alone, walking down the valley even before dawn, with no apparent destination except the country road. Steinbeck uses parallel sentences to emphasize his aloneness: "They [the two men] walked away together. . . . And I walked away down the country road." Instead of moving towards work—and towards the dawn—he moves in the other direction, away from the family group, unable or unwilling to enter into the family in the way Tom Joad would.

The narrator gives no reasons for his turning away. But he does not leave these rich images of new life unaffected. The family itself—their commitment, their bonds, their living—is the source of the beauty. But the narrator, who has no bonds like these and seems unwilling to establish them, cannot articulate the meaning of what he has seen. His groping after details leaves him still ignorant, still unable to see what the reader sees. Here is Steinbeck the writer focusing on the significance of narrative choices. All that we as readers see is seen through the limited and bound perspective of this laborer/wanderer, who feels beauty—visually in the light, tangibly in the warmth of the oven and the goodness of the food—but remains apart, unable to judge the impact of the beauty. The narrator of the story is affected, and perhaps directs the reader towards the source of what has affected him, while remaining himself unable to articulate fully how the reader should see and judge the significance of the events he relates.

There is another leave-taking going on when the narrator turns away from the family: the artist turning from the subject. In some ways the narrator here is equivalent to Steinbeck the author. He too wandered the Salinas Valley, meeting workers and their families, sitting by their fires and eating with them. But none of these encounters developed into longlasting relationships; they were things of a moment. In part these meetings came out of a genuine concern for the hardships of these families during the Depression years, but as a writer he was also on a fact-finding mission and so must inevitably be displaced from them. The narrator of "Breakfast" stays for a moment, gathers the impressions, and then detaches himself, moving towards an unknown goal down a country road. Steinbeck the writer could hardly have been much different.

But this narrator is more than a persona for Steinbeck. He is a

paradigm for all authors. The quandary posed about the nature and efficacy of memory for the narrator is a quandary which faces all who work towards producing a coherent work of art, a work which shapes details into a meaningful unity. When the narrator is unable to articulate meaning or to find the source of beauty which is obviously there and which he senses, he is struggling with the same sorts of difficulties which all artists struggle with: How does one go about creating a work of art? How does one lead a reader to the significance of what is being written? And he finds—as all artists must—that simple remembering is not enough.

And so the artist fashions sunken memories, trying to bring more details out of them, choosing from among these, moving beyond the mere curious pleasure. Here the author and the narrator of "Breakfast" part company, for memory does not fail for Steinbeck, who allows for its limitations. He is able to articulate the great beauty and he is able to create a thing of art. And though he would later incorporate much of it into a larger work of art, "Breakfast" still maintains its own artistic integrity and wholeness.

NOTES

[1]Eda Lou Walton, "Review of *The Long Valley*, by John Steinbeck," *The Nation* 1 October 1938: 331-32.

[2]Stanley Young, "Review of *The Long Valley*, by John Steinbeck," *The New York Times Book Review* 25 September 1938: 7.

[3]Clifton Fadiman, "Review of *The Long Valley*, by John Steinbeck," *New Yorker* 24 September 1938: 72.

[4]Peter Lisca, *John Steinbeck: Nature and Myth* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1978): 189, 191.

[5]Jackson J. Benson, *The True Adventures of John Steinbeck, Writer* (New York: The Viking Press, 1984): 291.

[6]Tetsumaro Hayashi, "Introduction," *Steinbeck Quarterly* 5 (1972), 67.

[7]Pascal Covici, ed., *The Portable Steinbeck* 2nd ed. (New York: The Viking Press, 1946), 417.

[8]R. S. Hughes, *Beyond The Red Pony: A Reader's Companion to Steinbeck's Complete Short Stories* (Metuchen, New Jersey, 1987), 70-71.

[9]James A. Hanby, "Steinbeck's Biblical Vision: 'Breakfast' and the Nobel Acceptance Speech," *The Western Review: A Journal of the Humanities* 10 (1973), 57-59; Edwin M. Moseley, *Pseudonyms of Christ in the Modern Novel* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1962), 182; Carroll Britch, "Steinbeck's 'Breakfast': Godhead and Reflection," in *Rediscovering Steinbeck: Revisionist Views of His Art, Politics, and Intellect,* eds. Cliff Lewis and Carroll Britch (Lewiston, New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1989), 7-34; John H. Timmerman, *The Dramatic Landscape of Steinbeck's Short Stories* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1990), 205-7.

[10]Much of "Breakfast" appears in chapter twenty-two of John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* (New York: The Viking Press, 1939): 394-98. For a detailed comparison of the short story and its reappearance in the novel see Robert Benson, "Breakfast," in Tetsumaro Hayashi, ed., *A Study Guide to Steinbeck's* The Long Valley (Ann Arbor, Michigan: The Pierian Press, 1976): 33-39.

[11]Claude-Edmonde Magny, *The Age of the American Novel* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1972): 170.

[12]John Steinbeck, *The Long Valley* (New York: The Viking Press, 1938): 92. All further quotations from the story are from this edition and will be parenthetically marked in the text.