

The Significance of “Breakfast”  
Compared with the Revised Version in  
*The Grapes of Wrath*

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John Steinbeck's "Breakfast" (1936) is a very short story which is included in The Long Valley (1938). It has been often thought a warmup for his later work, The Grapes of Wrath (1939), even though Jackson Benson insists that it is a preparation for In Dubious Battle (1936).<sup>1</sup> The revised version of "Breakfast" appears in Chapter 22 of The Grapes of Wrath, however, the impressions of the original version and the revised one are very different; the former has the greater impact than the latter, even though it is more abstract. Then what is the importance of "Breakfast"? I would like to study about this subject comparing "Breakfast" with Chapter 22 of The Grapes of Wrath.

First of all, John Steinbeck uses a first-person narrator in "Breakfast". During the summer of 1934, he met some migrant workers in Salinas, where his hometown was located, and listened to their stories. Therefore, it is likely that he wrote "Breakfast" not a little based on his experience. Of course in The Grapes of Wrath, too, there are some parts that he wrote on his experience, but he uses a third-person narrator this time. The first-person narration impresses the readers that "I" tell "you" (the readers) the story directly. On the other hand, the third-person narration rather impresses them that somebody just tells something whether there are listeners or not. In short, the first-person narration gives the readers the stronger impact than the third-person narration.

Also, it is remarkable that Steinbeck uses the anonymities in "Breakfast". The characters are just called "I", "a young woman", "a baby", "a young man" and "an older man"; Steinbeck does not specify anybody but describes them as mere ordinary people. This is partly because people have very little existence in the huge world, but at the same time, it proves that the author watches such people who belong to the working class very well. Since he does not give any character his name, the situation can be fit not only for the particular people but also for anybody, and it helps "Breakfast" to be the deeper work than the story in The Grapes of Wrath.

As mentioned above, there appear only five people in "Breakfast". It is the characteristic feature of Steinbeck's works that the situation is very simple, and "Breakfast" is not the exception. The author uses the totally limited subject matter and takes in no extra thing. As a result, the casual scene stands out, and it becomes a very good tight work.

The narrator, "I", sees a tent when he walks along a country road. There is nothing else around it. Compared with that, in the revised version, since the story takes place at the government camp called Weedpatch, there appear a lot of migrant people. These situations give the readers very different images. That is, the condition in "Breakfast" makes them feel more impressive. One person walks along all by himself and finds a tent that is totally alone ahead of him.

When the lonely meets the lonely, the encounter becomes dramatic; the more people are lonely, the more they feel at ease when they communicate with others. The author emphasizes the unexpected meeting and the unity of the strangers in "Breakfast".

Besides, it is important that a young woman and a baby are included in the characters. The young woman, who plays the same role as Rose of Sharon in The Grapes of Wrath, is the key person. She suggests that life comes around over again and that it never dies out. The author implies the strong power of life even in a hard time.

Next, the conversations in "Breakfast" are rarer than those in Chapter 22 of The Grapes of Wrath. Since they do not talk much, the readers must enter into the characters' feelings by imagining. If they do not read carefully, the readers may feel only little. However, since they can find various meanings in it, the story can get more mysterious.

Steinbeck sometimes leaves the readers how they interpret the story. The ending of The Grapes of Wrath is one of the examples, and the way continues to his later work, even in East of Eden:

He (a reader) will take from my book (East of Eden) what he can bring to it. The dull witted will get dullness and the brilliant may find things in my book I didn't know were there.<sup>2</sup>

The most different part of the conversations between "Breakfast" and the revised version in The Grapes of Wrath is whether the young man (Tom Joad in The Grapes of Wrath) refuses the proposal of a job or not. In the latter work, Tom receives Wilkie's offer and gets a job. And he goes to work before the rest of the family wake up. After that, the morning comes, and the Joads' new life in the Weedpatch government camp begins.

On the other hand, in "Breakfast", the first-person narrator refuses the young man's offer, and he walks away. Their last conversations are as follows:

"Got to get going," the older man said.

The younger man turned to me. "'F you want to pick cotton, we could maybe get you on."

"No. I got to go along. Thanks for breakfast."

The older man waved his hand in a negative.

"O.K. Glad to have you." They walked away together. The air was blazing with light at the eastern skyline. And I walked away down the country road.<sup>3</sup>

From this description, the readers can not exactly know what will happen to the narrator, "I", after that. However, it is not a very important point for Steinbeck, because he mainly stresses on the warm connection between the unknowns; he does not want to write about concerns of jobs but just wants to focus on the kindness of people.

Therefore, the readers feel vague relief in the ending of the work. Nobody is sure where the young man will go or what he will do after leaving the family, but he expects that the young man will get along somehow. The brightness of the air implies that his future will be hopeful, too.

Moreover, the shortness of "Breakfast" makes the story very firm. Steinbeck picks out a short moment, from right before the dawn to the morning. The descriptions of nature are delicate and beautiful. No special thing happens in it. It is only about the dawn and the strangers' talks.

However, once the readers examine the relations between the descriptions of nature and those of the characters, they will find that these two elements are in perfect harmony; first, when "it was very early in the morning" and "the earth was that lavender grey of dawn", "I walked along a country road and ahead of me I saw a tent".<sup>4</sup> The first-person narrator sees a young woman next, and when "I was close (to the tent)", "from the east the light grew swiftly".<sup>5</sup> Then, a young man and an older man come out, and "they stood looking quietly at the lightening east".<sup>6</sup> After saluting, they eat breakfast. Even though it is not luxurious, it is like a function. When "there was color in the light . . . and their faces were lighted by the dawn", "I saw the image of the mountain and the light coming over it reflected in the older man's eyes".<sup>7</sup> They finish their breakfast and the first-person narrator refuses

the younger man's offer of a job. And finally, when "I walked away down to the country road", "the air was blazing with light at the eastern skyline".<sup>e</sup>

Like this, the contrasts between the descriptions of nature and those of the characters make the story dramatic. Steinbeck does not write only about the beauty of nature, but also emphasizes the generosity of the strong and kind people, who do not surrender either to the great depression or to the dust storm.

In The Grapes of Wrath, too, the same thing can be said. The author repeats that a man is strong and kind enough to survive in a hard time; the readers sometimes get the message from the actions or the conversations of such main characters as Tom Joad, Ma Joad, Jim Casy, or Rose of Sharon. And they can understand it, too, from the animal or the plant such as a land turtle or a geranium.

However, there will be only few readers who are conscious of the author's message from the revised version, because Chapter 22 is a very long chapter, and the main theme of the chapter is not about the warm encounter of the unknowns. Instead, it is about the new life of the Joads; they arrive at the Weedpatch government camp after a long trip, and Tom eats breakfast with the Wallaces and receives Wilkie's offer of a job. After Tom leaves the tent to go to work with the Wallaces, the rest of the Joads wake up, and their new life

begins. That is, the revised version in Chapter 22 becomes only a connection between the scenes, and this is why the significance flags.

On the contrary, in the "Breakfast", Steinbeck takes just one casual scene and focuses on it. Every extra part is taken away, and the subject is strictly limited. It is not too much to say that the shortness of "Breakfast" makes the story stand out.

One more big difference between "Breakfast" and the story in The Grapes of Wrath is the beginning and the closing paragraphs. "Breakfast" opens as follows:

This thing fills me with pleasure. I don't know why, I can see it in the smallest detail. I find myself recalling it again and again, each time bringing more detail out of a sunken memory, remembering brings the curious warm pleasure.<sup>9</sup>

In the closing paragraph, the author says a similar thing, too. He arouses the readers' attention before and after the episode.

The first-person narrator remembers a casual meeting and tries to tell the readers why it makes his heart warm. Even though he can not explain it well, it is obvious that there is something he wants to say.

Steinbeck sometimes does not draw an explicit conclusion. This time, too, he just arouses the readers' interest and gives



them a chance to make their own interpretation. Each reader thinks and tries to understand what the author's message is. By doing this, he emphasizes the episode, and moreover, he tightens the work.

It can be said that "Breakfast" is more delicate than the revised version in The Grapes of Wrath. Even though it is very short, it does not mean that there is no theme in it. Instead, it has some significance; the casual encounter of the limited nameless characters gives the readers a dramatic impression, and the shortness makes the story firm. Moreover, not only do the opening and the closing paragraphs emphasize the author's feeling, but they tighten the work.

Taking these elements into consideration, "Breakfast" is not a poor work, even though it has been sometimes considered as "a 'warmup' exercise, an 'episode', a set of 'working notes', a 'fragment', and 'the slightest of stories in The Long Valley'",<sup>10</sup> or "lacking any specific plot".<sup>11</sup> "Breakfast" contains some significance which the revised version in The Grapes of Wrath does not have.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Jackson Benson, The True Adventures of John Steinbeck, Writer (New York: The Viking Press, 1984) p.291.

<sup>2</sup> John Steinbeck, Journal of a Novel: The East of Eden

Letters (New York: The Viking Press, 1969) p.182

<sup>3</sup> John Steinbeck, "Breakfast" in The Long Valley, The Chrysanthemums and Other Stories Ed. Masaji Onoe (Tokyo: Nan'un-do, 1953) pp.84-85

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p.81

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p.82

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p.82

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p.82

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p.84

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p.81

<sup>10</sup> R.S.Hughes, John Steinbeck: A Study of the Short Fiction (Boston: Twayne, 1989) p.48

<sup>11</sup> John H.Timmerman, The Dramatic Landscape of Steinbeck's Short Stories (London: Pinter Publishers, 1990) p.205