Breakfast by John Steinbeck

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In Breakfast by John Steinbeck we have the theme of contentment, gratitude, struggle, determination, insecurity and kindness. Taken from his The Long Valley collection the story is narrated in the first person by an unnamed narrator and after reading the story the reader realises that Steinbeck may be exploring the theme of contentment. The family of migrant workers appear to be content. Both the older man and the younger man who the reader assumes are father and son are happy that they have been working for the last twelve days. Which may leave some readers suspecting that both father and son (and the young woman) have experienced hardships previous to finding work. If anything there is a sense that all concerned are grateful for the fact that their lives are a little bit better than it had previously been. This may be important as Steinbeck may be placing a spotlight on the difficulties that migrant workers incurred at the time the story was written. Never knowing how long they may be working for before they had to continue travelling in search of work. If anything migrant workers lived an insecure life when it came to gaining employment.

It might also be important that Steinbeck appeals to the reader’s senses throughout the story. In his description of the mountains (eyes). When the narrator reaches out to the stove to heat his hands (touch). The narrator smells the bacon (smell). When the bacon is crackling (ears) and finally the father chewing on his breakfast (taste). This may be important as Steinbeck by introducing the reader to all the senses may be trying to draw the reader into the story and at the same time give each character life. With the reality being that Steinbeck may be suggesting to the reader that each character mentioned is a real person who lives a real life. A life that is full of struggle and hardship. Though at the same time it is a life that is full of gratitude. The simple matter of the father and son wearing new clothes would seem unimportant to some people but both father and son are grateful that they have new clothes to wear. Leaving the reader to suspect that both father and son may have been left to wear rags such was the conditions for migrant workers at the time.

The fact that the narrator has never forgotten his encounter with the migrant workers is also interesting. It suggests that the narrator is not only impressed by the charity or kindness that was shown to him but the narrator may also be impressed with the fact that despite the hardships encountered by the migrant workers. They remain upbeat and undefeated. If anything Steinbeck may be highlighting the resilience or determination of migrant workers at the time. They would have had to leave their homes with very few of their belongings. Live outdoors and keep on travelling till they found work. Something that would have been deemed unimaginable by many at the time. However for others it was a reality. Life in general was a struggle for migrant workers. They worked to survive and to feed their families. Having to deal with long periods in whereby they could not find work. There was nothing permanent in the life of a migrant worker. Plans for the future could not be made as there was no income to help shape the future. Life was lived in the present on a day to day basis. Should an employer not wish to hire a migrant worker they would move on to some other place in the hope that they might find work.

It may also be significant that the father offers to get the narrator a job picking cotton as already the reader has seen how generous the father has been to the narrator by asking him to stay for breakfast. No matter what difficulties the father has found himself in he is still willing and prepared to be kind to another human being. He does not transfer his own misfortune negatively towards the narrator. In fact he does the opposite by being so charitable to the narrator. If anything Steinbeck may be highlighting the fact that regardless of the dismal circumstances some people might find themselves in. They can still be kind to another person. That an individual’s character does not have to change just because their circumstances have. Which is possibly the reason as to why the father, son and wife remain undefeated. Their circumstances might have changed but their character has shone through. At all stages of the story each character has been kind, courteous and helpful to the narrator. Even though he is a complete stranger to them. They have not judged him nor has the narrator judged them. Something which may not have been true for other people when it came to their opinion of migrant workers.