Breakfast by John Steinbeck

Name___________________________________________ Date__________________

Text: Short Story: Breakfast

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 sunken memory, remembering brings the curious warm pleasure.

It was very early in the morning. The eastern mountains were black-blue, but behind them the light stood up faintly colored at the mountain rims with a washed red, growing colder, grayer and darker as it went up and overhead until, at a place near the west, it merged with pure night.

And it was cold, not painfully so, but cold enough so that I rubbed my hands and shoved them deep into my pockets, and I hunched my shoulders up and scuffled my feet on the ground. Down in the valley where I was, the earth was that lavender gray of dawn. I walked along a country road and ahead of me I saw a tent that was only a little lighter gray than the ground. Beside the tent there was a flash of orange fire seeping out of the cracks of an old rusty iron stove. Grey smoke spurted up out of the stubby stovepipe, spurted up a long way before it spread out and dissipated.

I saw a young woman beside the stove, really a girl. She was dressed in a faded cotton skirt and waist. As I came close I saw that she carried a baby in a crooked arm and the baby was nursing, its head under her waist out of the cold. 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. The orange fire flicked out of the cracks in the stove and threw dancing reflections on the tent.

I was close now and I could smell frying bacon and baking bread, the warmest, pleasantest odors I know. From the east the light grew swiftly. I came near to the stove and stretched my hands out to it and shivered all over when the warmth struck me. Then the tent flap jerked up and a young man came out and an older man followed him. They were dressed in new blue dungarees and in new dungaree coats with the brass buttons shining. They were sharp-faced men, and they looked much alike.

The younger had a dark stubble beard and the older had a gray stubble beard. Their heads and faces were wet, their hair dripped with water, and water stood out on their stiff beards and their cheeks shiny with water. Together they stood looking quietly at the lightening east; they yawned together and looked at the light on the hill rims. They turned and saw me.

“Morning,” said the older man. His face was neither friendly nor unfriendly.

“Morning, sir,” I said.

“Morning,” said the young man.

The water was slowly drying on their faces. They came to the stove and warmed their
hands at it.

The girl kept to her work, her face averted and her eyes on what she was doing. Her hair was tied back out of her eyes with a string and it hung down her back and swayed as she worked. She set tin cups on a big packing box, set tin plates and knives and forks out too. Then she scooped fried bacon out of the deep grease and laid it on a big tin platter, and the bacon cricked and rustled as it grew crisp. She opened the rusty oven door and took out a square pan full of high big biscuits.

When the smell of that hot bread came out, both of the men inhaled deeply. The young man said softly, “Keerist!”

The elder man turned to me, “Had your breakfast?”

“No.”

“Well, sit down with us, then.”

That was the signal. We went to the packing case and squatted on the ground about it. The young man asked, “Picking cotton?”

“No.”

“We had twelve days’ work so far,” the young man said.

The girl spoke from the stove. “They even got new clothes.”

The two men looked down at their new dungarees and they both smiled a little.

The girl set out the platter of bacon, the brown high biscuits, a bowl of bacon gravy and a pot of coffee, and then she squatted down by the box too. The baby was still nursing, its head up under her waist out of the cold. I could hear the sucking noises it made.

We filled our plates, poured bacon gravy over our biscuits and sugared our coffee. The older man filled his mouth full and he chewed and chewed and swallowed. Then he said, “God Almighty, it’s good,” and he filled his mouth again.

The young man said, “We been eating good for twelve days.”

We all ate quickly frantically, and refilled our plates and ate quickly again until we were full and warm. The hot bitter coffee scalded our throats. We threw the last little bit with the grounds in it on the earth and refilled our cups.

There was color in the light now, a reddish gleam that made the air seem colder. The two men faced the east and their faces were lighted by the dawn, and I looked up for a moment and saw the image of the mountain and the light coming over it reflected in the older man’s eyes.

Then the two men threw the grounds from their cups on the earth and they stood up together. “Got to get going,” the older man said.

The younger turned to me. “’Fyou 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.” The walked away together. The air was blazing with light at the eastern skyline. And I walked away down the country road.

That’s all. I know, of course, some of the reasons why it was pleasant. But there was
some element of great beauty there that makes the rush of warmth when I think of it.

**Study Notes for Steinbeck’s “Breakfast”**

In "Breakfast," author John Steinbeck depicts scenes from a migrant work camp in northern California in the 1930s. Some critics say that he touched upon “scientific naturalism, the dominant worldview in western culture, California migrant workers; the plight of the farmer, economic depression, poverty, human relationship, survival, the battle for the underdog, family relationships and conflicts, and colloquialism.” He also touched upon the human spirit – and the

List some of the details and descriptions about the setting and characters that Steinbeck uses throughout his story.

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<tr>
<th>Character/Setting</th>
<th>Details and Descriptions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>setting</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>young woman</td>
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<tr>
<td>Food items</td>
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<td>young man</td>
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<td>older man</td>
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</tbody>
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When you finish reading “Breakfast,” answer the questions below.

I. The *theme* of a piece of literature is a dominant idea—often a universal message about life—that the writer communicates to the reader. What do you think the theme or implied message of “Breakfast” is? What details and descriptions support this theme? (Teacher note: one of the most popular classroom questions asks for the implied theme of this story – so if you only have time for a little bit of analysis – be sure to cover the implied theme, because writers do not always
Breakfast by John Steinbeck

state the theme outright and instead reveal it through dialogue, events, and descriptions. Some say one of the implied themes in this story is about the simplicity of life).

II. In the box below, draw a picture to go with the story. Use Steinbeck’s vivid descriptions to help you create your picture, pay particular attention to Steinbeck’s use of colors to create his setting. Have fun with this – we have a few students that drew the bacon in a pan – or the cup showing the coffee grounds. Others lightly sketched the people walking away with the sunrise lighting the day.

III. How did you react to the characters in this story? Explain. (5 sentences)

IV. What does the family Steinbeck describes seem to value?

V. How might the setting of the story have an impact on the characters? (2 sentences)

VI. What does the narrator say about his memory at the end of the story? What might his attachment to this memory suggest about his life? What deeper understanding or awareness of life does he seem to gain? (3 sentences)
VII. The reader never learns why the narrator is walking on a country road or where he is going. Why do you think Steinbeck chose not to reveal much about the narrator?

Points to Ponder

**Nostalgia:** The narrator finds joy in remembering life events that capture the human spirit. This memory of being taken in and fed by a working family reminds him of common human decency, a thing, in his view, of "great beauty". The "curious warm pleasure" he describes, like the fire, which warmed his chilled hands, has a thawing effect on the cold, hard reality of an itinerant life marked only by such fleeting pleasures as a satisfying meal.

Mrs. Prior notes, “But it is more than just the meal that stirs up warm pleasure here – it is the unspoken feel of the shared human spirit that is exchanged among the folks as they enjoy Breakfast. A time when all the fluff or materialism is put aside – and a time when food is appreciated – and maybe the splurge of bacon never tasted so good – and then also shared in survival mode.”

**Hospitality:** In "Breakfast" Steinbeck celebrates the hospitality that was once common in America (and may still be common among certain classes). The migrant workers, who are simply blessed enough to have had twelve straight days of work, and therefore food, unhesitatingly and graciously offer to share their breakfast with a complete stranger, though they are obviously poor. Their invitation seems natural and automatic, indicating hospitality is a well-practiced virtue among them. (And highlighting the brotherhood that is shared among certain social groups).

**Migrant Work:** Steinbeck implies much about the migrant workers' life in the story. The family is obviously poor as they are living in a tent on the side of a country road. The two men's mild sheepishness about their new clothes indicates humility! The new clothes are a rarity and the only reason they have such a breakfast to share is because they have been lucky enough to have had twelve days of work. Also the invite for the stranger to join them on their work – there is a feeling of brotherhood shared.