**The Dinner Party**

The country is India. A large dinner party is being given in an up-country station by a colonial official and his wife. The guests are army officers and government attaches and their wives, and an American naturalist.

At one side of the long table a spirited discussion springs up between a young girl and a colonel. The girl insists women have long outgrown the jumping-on-a-chair-at-the-sight-of-a-mouse era, that they are not as fluttery as their grandmothers. The colonel says they are, explaining women haven't the actual nerve control of men. The other men at the table agree with him.

"A woman's unfailing reaction in any crisis, "the colonel says, "is to scream. And while a man may feel like it, yet he has that ounce more of control than a woman has. And that last ounce is what counts. "

The American scientist does not join in the argument but sits and watches the faces of the other guests. As he looks, he sees a strange expression come over the face of the hostess. She is staring straight ahead, the muscles of her face contracting slightly. With a small gesture she summons the native boy standing behind her chair. She whispers to him. The boy's eyes widen: he turns quickly and leaves the room. No one else sees this, nor the boy when he puts a bowl of milk on the verandah outside the glass doors.

The American comes to with a start. In India, milk in a bowl means only one thing. It is bait for a snake. He realizes there is a cobra in the room.

He looks up at the rafters-the likeliest place - and sees they are bare. Three corners of the room, which he can see by shifting only slightly, are empty. In the fourth corner a group of servants stand, waiting until the next course can be served. The American realizes there is only one place left - under the table.

His first impulse is to jump back and warn the others. But he knows the commotion will frighten the cobra and it will strike. He speaks quickly, the quality of his voice so arresting that it sobers everyone.

"I want to know just what control everyone at this table has. I will count three hundred - that's five minutes - and not one of you is to move a single muscle. The persons who move will forfeit 50 rupees. Now! Ready!"

The 20 people sit like stone images while he counts. He is saying ". . . two hundred and eighty . . ." when, out of the corner of his eye, he sees the cobra emerge and make for the bowl of milk. Four or five screams ring out as he jumps to slam shut the verandah doors.

"You certainly were right, Colonel!" the host says. "A man has just shown us an example of real control."

"Just a minute," the American says, turning to his hostess, "there's one thing I'd like to know. Mrs. Wynnes, how did you know that cobra was in the room?"

A faint smile lights up the woman's face as she replies. "Because it was lying across my foot."

“The Dinner Party” feedback.

The ironic short narrative “The Dinner Party” mainly focuses on issues of gender, promoting the idea that women have just as much nerve in a dangerous situation as men. It is an argument for the equality of the sexes in the face of a patronizing male assumption that women lack self-control. It is also a recognition that men and women must co-operate with one another to achieve optimal outcomes. The story is set in colonial India at the eponymous dinner party. A male guest, a colonel, asserts lack of female self-control only to have his claim almost immediately disproven by the bravery of his female host who has a deadly snake draped across her foot, under the table. The hostess is aided through the crisis by the quick thinking of a male American scientist. The ideology of the narrative thus disapproves of patriarchal assumptions made by the colonel and agreed to by most of the other men present.

The main binary structuring the narrative is obviously male/female with the author questioning the usual privileging of the male half of the binary and the male assumption that women are the weaker sex. The binary is initially established in a conversation between the dogmatic colonel and “*a young girl*”, who also suggest the dualism youth/age. The presumably older colonel maintains that women invariably scream in a crisis, drawing on the culturally dated myth of woman as the weaker sex. He also metaphorically suggests that men have “*an ounce more of control than a woman has*”. The “*young girl”* has more progressing views, arguing that women are “*not as fluttery as their grandmothers”*. The girl’s perspective is subsequently supported by the hostess’s nerve in response to the cobra resting on her foot. The reader is initially positioned to agree with the contemporary ideas of the girl rather than with sexist and unsupported opinion of the colonel. This agreement is then reinforced through the chain of subsequent events. A woman’s nerve is equal to a man’s.

The initial exchange about the relative merits of each gender and the events which follow are reliably narrated from a third person omniscient point of view. Focalisation is external, shifting from character to character as the plot unfolds. The dialogue between the colonel and the young girl, overheard by all, is initially the centre of attention but then the focus moves to recount the perspective of an American naturalist who “*sits and watches the faces on the other guests”* as befits an objective scientist. His factual thought process, from when he observes “*a strange expression come over the face of the hostess*” until the snake is completely secured, adds to the veracity of the account. He systematically searches for the snake in the room, “*he looks up to the rafters*…..*Three corners of the room are empty*”. Furthermore, the narrative is written in the present tense which adds authority to the telling. “*The country is India.”* This positions the reader to regard the telling as factual and impartial; they feel that these events really did occur, a woman really did show nerve, disproving the colonel’s condescending and sexist remark.

The archetypal characters are mostly unnamed in order to emphasize the universality of the text’s underpinning feminist ideology. The bombastic colonel is shown making unsupported patronizing comments about the weakness of women, presumably to bait the progressively minded “young girl”. The more the girl insists that “*women have long outgrown*” screaming at a mouse, the more the colonel exerts his power through broad generalization and exaggeration, “*A woman’s unfailing reaction in any crisis is to scream”.* As the narrative is set in colonial India in the time of British rule, we are positioned to view the colonel as living in a male-dominated past along with the other colonial men at the table. The American scientist, however, is an outsider and it is inferred that he may not agree with the misogynist sentiment of his fellow male guests. He is certainly more objective in his observations and, being from a ‘new country’, perhaps more liberal in his views. He and the hostess work together to outwit the snake. The hostess is hardly described except for “*staring straight ahead, the muscles of her face contracting slightly”.* When we understand the reasons for her stare, we are positioned to admire her ‘nerve’. Thus the representation of the central characters positions the reader to accept the theme of female equality and the ideology of mutual respect.

The narrative rejects dated cultural ideas pertaining to the hierarchy of male/female by demonstrating the unquestionable bravery of women. The courageous hostess is aided in the dilemma posed by the snake on her foot by the quick thinking scientist who commands the dinner party guests to not move “*a single muscle*” for five minutes in order to allow time for the snake to be distracted by a bowl of milk. The scientist realizes that the hostess knows the snake is in the room but, further to that, he uses this realization to disprove the colonel’s position. By asking the hostess how she knew the cobra was in the room, the scientist simultaneously has his answer to the question and a refutation of the colonel’s un-based assertion about women’s lack of nerve. In addition, the author has demonstrated that men and women each have reserves of strength which are optimally employed when used together.