



# The Dining Room

*A.R. Gurney*

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## **The Dining Room** A.R. Gurney

The play is set in the dining room of a typical well-to-do household, the place where the family assembled daily for breakfast and dinner and for any and all special occasions. The action is comprised of a mosaic of interrelated scenes-some funny, some touching, some rueful-which, taken together, create an in-depth portrait of a vanishing species: the upper-middle-class WASP. The actors change roles, personalities and ages with virtuoso skill as they portray a wide variety of characters, from little boys to stern grandfathers, and from giggling teenage girls to Irish housemaids. Each vignette introduces a new set of people and events; a father lectures his son on grammar and politics; a boy returns from boarding school to discover his mother's infidelity; a senile grandmother doesn't recognize her own sons at Christmas dinner; a daughter, her marriage a shambles, pleads futilely to return home, etc. Dovetailing swiftly and smoothly, the varied scenes coalesce, ultimately, into a theatrical experience of exceptional range, compassionate humor and abundant humanity.

## **The Dining Room Details**

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# From Reader Review The Dining Room for online ebook

## Kristin says

This is a unique play that I am currently rehearsing for in a local community theater. Reading it can be difficult as it's a bit different from the traditional linear storyline format. It is a series of often overlapping vignettes in which the actors go back and forth portraying different characters. It's not really a play to be read, nor is it really a play for the audience. This is a play for the actors. It was originally written for 6 actors (3 men, 3 women) that would play up to 11 characters each, but our director decided to cast 13 people to spread it out a bit more. As for me personally, I am playing 7 characters in ages ranging from a young girl to a couple of teenagers to a middle aged woman. There are no costume changes for us with the exception for a few small accessories depending on the character and the set is very simple: a dining room in an upper class household.

The stories range in time period from modern day to the days when a nuclear family sat down and ate together while the maid brought out the food. Some of the scenes are simple and funny, while some are more serious touching on the uncomfortable subjects of adultery, controlling parents, underage drinking, etc. From all of the plays that I have been a part of, this isn't exactly my favorite, but it does have its positive qualities. Some of the scenes end without any sense of fulfillment and leave you really wanting more. Which has its pros and cons. Like I said, it's a play for the actors. It is a challenge changing your voice, mannerisms, and the overall way you carry yourself for so many characters in one show, and that almost makes this an actor's masterclass instead of a play.

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## Melissa says

Really enjoyed this read as well as the play itself!

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## Rivkah. says

I really liked this play. I loved the concept of how one table can play so many rolls in so many people's lives. I normally don't like this contemporary short vinette type of play, but I really liked this one.

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## Bridgette Redman says

Who exactly are the upper middle class WASPs?

And if you had to pick one thing to symbolize them, what would it be?

A.R. Gurney sets out to answer both of these questions with a play he penned in 1981 called The Dining Room. It's an interesting script to read and an even more fascinating play to watch. Make no mistake though. This isn't a play that is written for the audience. Not really. It's a play written for the playwright. For the critics. And above all, it's a play written for the actors.

The Dining Room is a play set in a single dining room. This is a real dining room, by the way, not just a room attached to the kitchen where the table is set up. This is the sort of room in which a long wood table is accompanied by a matching hutch, buffet, and beautifully carved chairs. It's the type of room in which manners are of the utmost importance and the rules of behavior are as uncompromising as the crystal of the water glasses.

In some ways, the dining room table and chairs become a character in this play. Indeed, it is the only fixture that remains constant from scene to scene. While the play is written for six actors--three men and three women--there are 57 different characters who perform 17 scenes throughout the course of a "day." Gurney opens his play with detailed stage directions describing the dining room. He says:

The play takes place in a dining room--or rather, many dining rooms. The same dining room furniture serves for all: a lovely burnished, shining dining room table; two chairs, with arms, at either end; two more, armless, along each side, several additional matching chairs, placed so as to define the walls of the room....A sense of void surrounds the room. It might almost seem to be surrounded by a velvet-covered low-slung chain on brass stanchions, as if it were on display in some museum, many years from now.

Yet, to say the play is only about its title "character" would be deceptive. Gurney parades scene after scene before us not to give us warm fuzzy feelings about a room in a house. Rather, he is conducting an anthropological demonstration on what one of his characters describes as a "vanishing culture...the Wasps of Northeastern United States." That character goes on to tell his increasingly ire-filled aunt "You can learn a lot about a culture from how it eats...Consider the finger bowls, for example. There you have an almost neurotic obsession with cleanliness, reflecting the guilt which comes with the last stages of capitalism."

Of course, even that character is a parody of himself. Gurney isn't passing judgement, he's making us look and making us think. He wants us to see a slice of humanity and portrays it by giving six actors a challenge to revel in. In the space of 90 minutes the actors take on roles of stern parents, servants, senile adults, 5-year olds at a birthday party, teenagers sneaking alcohol, and professionals conducting business in a room fraught with memories. Often the actors have less than 30 seconds to switch from one character to another and the vignettes frequently overlap each other with one beginning as another ending.

It really is a play that defies easy description or categorization. But then, so do the people who make up the class he is writing "about." In the diversity of the 57 characters, we see that calling someone a WASP may define his or her socio-economic class, but it fails to tell you anything about the individual.

Gurney is generous with the stage directions--almost too generous. Yet, generosity is probably necessary when the actor has but two pages from which to draw his or her character. It also helps the reader who is stuck with just the script and no actors or stage to bring it to life. Certainly this play has achieved the stature in modern dramaturgy that it is already part of many drama curriculums and many students will be reading it without the benefit of a performance.

For the non-student, though, this is a play I would recommend you see before you read. The script is the blueprint, the performance is where Gurney's work attains its brilliance. I read the script this past summer in preparation for auditioning for a local production of it. Just a few weeks ago, I was able to watch it performed at Bath Community Theatre Guild and the script took on a much richer texture than was available in mere black ink on white pages. It dramatized for me in a new way why simply reading a script is to incompletely experience the art form. It is like reading the musical notes of a symphony without hearing the musicians play it. A skilled reader can appreciate the craftsmanship, but only in the proper medium can it truly be experienced.

So yes, if you must, read this play. But if you have the opportunity, go see it. You'll be treated to a wide range of humanity, an exploration of the traumas, joys, and tensions of a wide variety of people performed in a room that manages to symbolize all of them.

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### **Lauren says**

Similar to *The Gospel at Colonus* – another nominee for the 1985 Pulitzer – *The Dining Room* is light on plot. That's where the similarities end, as a better comparison play for *The Dining Room* would be Thornton Wilder's *The Long Christmas Dinner*. The latter focuses on one family over the decades while the former is about different households and families with the commonality being – you guessed it – a dining room. The vignettes are interesting snippets and a good commentary on changing American values and traditions, but I can't say I have any burning desire to see it performed.

An especially ambitious theatre group could have fun staging both *The Long Christmas Dinner* and *The Dining Room* in a single night. Quasi-recommended.

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### **Christina Pfeiffer says**

A remarkable play of a day gone by; the days of ol' when families sat around a table, talked and had dinner. A beautiful look at the conversations held around one table in one family. Surprising, yet familiar.

It reminds me of Andrew Bovell's play "When the Rain Stops Falling" because of the time collapses as well as the usage of so many characters.

More than worth the \$2 from a used bookstore in Vegas.

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### **Andrew says**

Sometimes very funny, and other times, very heartwarming/ A must read for theater majors.

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### **Nina says**

Fantastic social commentary. Funny. Poignant. Entertaining.

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### **Brandon Leatherman says**

I've been on a script reading binge here as of late. It would seem that I'm yearning to get back on stage again, and I'd like to read some of the shows that local theater companies are doing to maybe psych myself up for it.

One of the local ones is doing *The Dining Room*, and I therefore decided to read it. The actual stories in this play (and there are a lot of different stories in this play) are decent enough, I suppose. The thing that I like the most is that everything takes place in one room, and the stories move from one to the next in a fluid movement, and the one that's coming on never seems to impede on the one that's going off. At least, that should be the case if everything is done right on stage. I guess what I'm trying to say is that, even if the stories and characters themselves don't make this script a must-read, the architecture of the story does.

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## **Jt says**

In the right hands, it could be brilliant. In the wrong hands, it could be execrable.

This is an actors' play. The audience might not get it - and that is okay. This is not a show for the costume people, nor is it a show for the sound or lighting techies. It is not a show for the set director. It is a show for the director, and most importantly, for the actors.

An austere, single set. Minimal costume changes which consist of nothing more than putting on/taking off an apron or hat. Few, if any, sound effects or lighting changes.

This is a show wherein the director is allowed to exercise near unlimited creative control, and it a show in which actors, should they be competent and talented, are allowed given what very well may be the roles of their careers.

However, should the director exercise too much creative control, or too little, the show could be a most unpleasant experience indeed. And should the actors, and I mean any of the actors, be incapable of performing an incredible abandonment of self multiple times, this show could be considered a waste of time as well as an overly audacious amateur high school show.

Essentially, the show consists of 57 characters (played by six or more - preferably no more than 10 - actors) performing various vignette scenes. The show has no plot. Literally. No plot. It's just a collection of a bunch of scenes that are completely unrelated to each other throw together. The only thing that unites them is the single setting, being the eponymous Dining Room which becomes a character in and of itself.

Some of the scenes are better than others. Some have the potential to pull at heartstrings, and others have the potential to cause sides to ache with laughter. Notice the word potential. None of the scenes are inherently funny nor sad. None of them are particularly effusive or moving on their own. However, if brought to life by the correct people, they can be fantastic.

And that about sums up the entire show. It has a lot of potential, but it needs to be handled with extreme care, lest it be a thoroughly terrible experience for cast and audience alike.

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## **Michael says**

Lovely and delicate. *Our Town* only without the tragic overtones.

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## **Mary von Thron says**

I'm not the greatest at analyzing plays, so take my review with a grain of salt. However, this play was not my favorite. It was difficult to keep track of and there was often no resolution with the vignettes. The scenes were short and being vignettes, there was not a lot of character development, which is something I usually enjoy to see when I am reading a book. I was also surprised at how there was not a set time and place that the story began and ended. The back of the play says it takes place over several generations, but it is not mentioned at anytime what time period this takes place in. Apart from a mention of a war, and the reaction to an unseen characters homosexuality, the reader has no clue what time period this takes place.

Like I said, I am not a play analyzer and maybe I need to do more research on A.R. Gurney and his plays to get a better understanding of his themes in playwriting and his intentions, but this is not a play I would recommend to someone who wants to read a play that has little experience in the world of theatre.

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## **Mercedes says**

A simple, two-act play, full of social commentary, delivered very humorously.

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## **Ayelet Waldman says**

A play. Which was supposed to be useful. And wasn't.

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## **Signe says**

"since when have WE had a dinner party?"

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