

THE TIGER IN THE TUNNEL

“The Tiger in the Tunnel” tells the story of an Indian family who faces the stark reality of their humble existence with honor and duty. These themes permeate the characters’ lives and actions, and highlight Bond’s take on the place of service and family, as well as the theme of protection in relation to family.

Tembu is a twelve-year-old boy who lives with his father, Baldeo, as well as his mother and younger sister. They live in a tribal village on the outskirts of a jungle, in India. The family faces a meager subsistence, as they are dependent upon a nearby rice field for produce, and the field provides very little. To earn more money, Baldeo works as a watchman for the railroad. He is stationed at a nearby way station, and must sit in a bare hut near the tunnel of the story’s namesake, which is cut into the rock. Baldeo’s job is to keep the signal lamp lit, and to also ensure that there are no obstructions in the tunnel so that the overland mail can pass through the tunnel.

Occasionally, Tembu accompanies his father on his job, thus sleeping inside the little hut. One night he awakens to find his father leaving to check the signal lamp, and thinks to go with his father. Baldeo, however, tells Tembu to remain in the hut, where it is warm and safe.

Baldeo heads to the tunnel, and while walking in the dark, thinks about the various animals he might encounter along the way. The villagers all tell stories of an infamous tiger known as a “man-eater.” The tiger has supposedly been seen quite often in the area, especially around the tunnel. Baldeo, however, has never seen or even heard the tiger while on his trips to check on the signal lamp. Even if he did, Baldeo feels certain that he can handle himself. Not only is he familiar with the jungle, he carries a weapon. It is a small axe that Baldeo knows how to use both deftly and expertly. It was given to Baldeo by his father, and he sees it as an extension of his own person.

When he arrives at the tunnel, Baldeo finds that the signal light is indeed out, and sets about relighting it. He then walks down the length of the tunnel to ensure that there are no obstructions in the way. The train is late on this night, but Baldeo soon feels the trembling of the ground, signaling the overland mail train's approach. Tembu is still awake back at the hut, and soon feels the trembling of the ground as well, so waits for his father to return as his work should be done.

Right before the train reaches the tunnel, a tiger springs into the entrance and charges at Baldeo. Baldeo knows he cannot run from the tiger, so stands his ground. He keeps his back to the signal lamp and brandishes his axe. When the tiger attacks Baldeo, he lunges to one side and manages to bury his axe in the tiger's shoulder. The fierce blow only upsets the tiger more, and it attacks Baldeo again. Baldeo jumps to the tiger's side and again buries his axe into the tiger's shoulder. This time, however, the axe lodges too deep into the shoulder blade and becomes stuck, leaving Baldeo defenseless. The tiger lunges at Baldeo one last time, finally managing to topple the defenseless Baldeo and rip him apart.

The tiger is so strained from its battle with Baldeo that it does not notice the fast-approaching train. There is no place for the tiger to escape to, so it rushes into the tunnel, with the train hot on its trail. The train finally exits at the other end of the tunnel, and everything is silent. When the train driver inspects his headlamps at the next station stop, he finds nearly half of the tiger's body stuck on the train, and realizes that the tiger must have been dissected by the train's engine.

Though the train driver is shocked and amazed at the find, Bond contrasts this amazement with Tembu's shock back at the tunnel. Tembu has arrived at the tunnel to find his father's broken body. The crying child remains with his father's corpse all night to protect it from scavenging animals like hyenas. The next day, Tembu's family mourns Baldeo's passing. They continue to mourn for the next two days as well. Once the mourning is over, Tembu takes up his father's

job at the tunnel, ensuring that the signal light is always lit and that there are no obstructions in the tunnel itself. The reader finds that the family's safety and survival has now fallen on Tembu. Tembu, however, does not seem afraid. He had his father's axe, after all. And Tembu knows how to wield the axe.

Bond's story highlights the theme of protection, and protection in relation to family, in several ways throughout the piece. First, Baldeo knows that his family cannot exist solely from what the small rice field alone produces, and so takes a job as a watchman, despite the perils. Baldeo, as most of the villagers know, understands that there are dangerous animals about, but he believes in himself and, ultimately, knows he must perform his duty to ensure his family's wellbeing. As such, Baldeo meets danger head on each night he goes to check the signal lamp. His family comes first, but Baldeo's actions also highlight the larger scope of protection as he is keeping the tunnel safe for the overland mail train. Baldeo's actions show that he is a watchman for both the public and private sectors of his life.

The theme comes full-circle when Tembu takes up his father's mantle by taking the job as watchman. As such, he is the provider for his family, thus the protector as well. In addition, he now protects the train. The ending alludes to the fact that Tembu now has the same confidence that Baldeo had, especially with the axe. More importantly, Tembu's role as protector shows that duty, courage and confidence are all necessary traits in ensuring survival for Tembu and his family, and for ensuring survival in a world that can often be harsh.