

"the lesson" by toni cade bambara essay sample

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“ The Lesson” by Toni Cade Bambara is a short story set in the inner part of New York City that gives the reader an opportunity to briefly see into the lives of children living devoid of wealth and education. It takes place in the early seventies, following the civil rights movement and during a time when the imbalance of wealth in terms of race was immense. Bambara, through the use of narrative point of tone, symbols, setting and characterization, brings out and develops what I believe to be the two main themes of the story: materialism and social inequality.

The narrator in “ The Lesson” is a young girl named Sylvia who tells the story in first person. Through her we get a picture of the difficulties experienced from growing up in a poor urban area where the gaps in social classes and quality of living are so evident. Sylvia is an intelligent girl, but more street smart than book smart. Her experience outweighs her education, and at the time when the story takes place she doesn’t seem to have any aspiration of ever leaving the slums. As we are exposed to more of Sylvia’s personality throughout the story, it becomes clear that the story is told in two different tones.

The first tone is one of a child who is still growing, learning and experiencing. The second tone is different, but not drastically. The use of coarse language remains consistent, but the level of intelligence seems to elevate, demonstrated when Sylvia says, “ what’s there to be afraid of, just a toy store. But I feel funny, shame”. (423) By saying this, she is showing she has

more life experience and understands the feeling of shame and what causes it. We also get the impression that the story is being told by Sylvia as an adult, looking back on the scene. Sylvia's different tones, and her use of voice play an important role in adding to the lesson that is drawn from the story.

Symbols play an important role in the meaning and depth in this story and contribute to the main themes of materialism and class disparity. Bambara uses material goods such as a paperweight and sailboats in order for the importance of money to relate to education and social freedom. This use of tangible items plays into the setting based on children, and the fact that youngsters grasp concepts better when they are presented visually. The paperweight, an object used on desks to keep papers in place, is used to symbolize the force oppressing the African-American community, pertaining to the lack of education that keeps them from achieving their full potential. The paperweight allows for the realization that the lack of education in the children's lives plays into their social status when one of the children comments, " I don't even have a desk"(422)

We realize that education is not a big part of the children's lives, and this concept of holding valuable items down with a weight is difficult for them to grapple because their lives lack anything of monetary value. The sailboat was a clever way for Bambara to incorporate a childhood norm of having a special toy that gives us the power to use our imagination. Some children fantasize that the toy can take them so faraway places, away from reality and give us our much-coveted freedom. For every child this fantasy is

different, but for the kids in the story, their dreams seem to be based on money and a life more rewarding than the one they are living. Miss Moore is trying to help teach kids through using these symbols that all the wonders at F. A. O. Schwartz are all within their reach, but to be able to ever have such luxuries, one must work hard and overcome social obstacles that stand in the way.

The setting in "The Lesson" is what really creates the atmosphere for the story, and it allows us to understand what issues the children are dealing with. Basically, Bambara is showing that it isn't easy to grow up a poor kid in the inner city. The story takes place right after the civil rights movement, in a time when African-Americans were still struggling to find their place in society. They were trying to get their own piece of the American pie, while having to deal with racism and inequality. The setting of the poor inner city helps us realize how unevenly the pie is split up between members of society. As close as the inner city is to Manhattan, they are worlds apart in terms of social class and wealth.

The lesson that the children take out of the field trip with Ms. Moore directly related to the fact that these children have been raised less fortunately than some, and to get out of oppression and poverty, they will have to work. The children realize the value of money and how unfair it is that there is so much wealth in Manhattan and a stone's throw away in the inner city, there is extreme poverty. The children learn social gaps are very wide, and by leaving their ghetto area they come to see that in comparison to Manhattan, they are all receiving the small slice of the American pie. Miss Moore and the

Manhattan trip help the children realize that poverty is not found everywhere, and that education can give them the power to elevate their status.

Characterization in this story ties together all the elements that help strengthen the themes in "The Lesson." The two most important characters are Sylvia and Miss Moore, but the children as a group also play an important role. There are different types of characters and roles. For example, if we look at the big picture, we have a teacher/student or authority/subject relationship between Miss Moore and the students. If we look at the smaller picture we have Sylvia as the protagonist, and from Miss Moore as the antagonist. However, as readers we realize that society seems to be the antagonist, not Miss Moore who simply allows the children to come to the conclusion that life isn't fair. Both Sylvia and Miss Moore play important parts in combining elements into relating to the themes of class disparity and inequality. Sylvia is the feisty young girl who narrates the story and provides the reader with the view of how difficult it is to grow up in the urban slums. Sylvia is clever and strong when she is comfortable in her environment.

However, we realize as soon as she is in an uncomfortable setting, for example in Manhattan, when she backs off from being a leader. Sylvia demonstrates her discomfort and shame walking into the toy store. Sylvia also does not tolerate other people telling her what to do, especially people with more authority such as Miss Moore with her college degree. This is exemplified in Sylvia's spiteful attitude towards Miss Moore, "I am really

hating this nappy-head bitch and her goddamn college degree" (420). She is not familiar with dealing with people with a higher level of education, and this is why Miss Moore is alienated from Sylvia and also the community in general. Basically, Sylvia proves that she has a false sense of security, and both Miss Moore and the trip to Manhattan make her feel uncomfortable and inferior. It seems that all the children take a lesson from the field trip, but what Sylvia gains she chooses to disregard as important and valid.

The last statement in the story by Sylvia is, " But ain't nobody gonna beat me at nuthin" (426). This proclamation demonstrates that although the trip into the city has had an effect on the young girl, she is reiterating her hardheaded personality, and refuses to change the way she looks at life. The trip has demonstrated that if one works hard, a better life can be achieved, but Sylvia is not going to let anyone make her realize her life isn't fine as is it. And most of all, Sylvia does not want to give in to the idea that working hard will get her farther in life. Sylvia's character does represent the theme of class disparity, in the simple fact that she is denied many of the basic needs such as a proper education while she is exposed to a wealthy society that has more money than they possibly need.

Miss Moore is a very interesting character. We never really come to understand why she is still living in the slums if she has a college degree. It seems hypocritical and counter productive for Miss Moore to teach the children that education is the key to obtaining a better lifestyle while she is fully educated and it has seemed to lead her nowhere but back to the inner city. She is a strong, caring, and patient woman. Her compassion is shown

when Sylvia says, " She'd been to college and said it was only right that she should take responsibility for young ones' education" (419). Her character plays an important role in revealing the themes in the " The Lesson." She knows the lesson that the children will take from visiting the " greener pastures" of Manhattan. She understands that society is unfair and class inequality is present in everyday life even if the rich do not associate with the poor, and the poor aren't exposed to the rich.

This is clear when she says, " Imagine for a minute what kind of society it is in which some people can spend on a toy what it would cost to feed a family of six or seven" (425). Miss Moore understands the value of money, and how and how it is obtained. She sees that the children, being young are not naturally aware of social inequality. She wants the children to realize that money and success are all relative. For example, Mercedes is considered fortunate amongst her peers, but in comparison to the Manhattan class she is less fortunate. Miss Moore is also an example of this relativity, in that while she is viewed as being highly educated within her community, in comparison to many scholars she is still an everyday person. Miss Moore chooses to stay living in her community because she wants to use her knowledge to help a younger generation. Also, the feeling of being outstanding in a community is a great feeling, and she seems to be very dedicated to bettering the slums starting at the roots, which in this case are the children.

" The Lesson" draws important themes of life together while still achieving an interesting plot that keeps the reader's attention. Through the use of the essential elements found in a short story, Bambara allows the reader a

realistic idea of the difficulties growing up a poor minority. The themes of class disparity and the value of money are shown through the plot, setting, tone, symbols and characterization. Bambara's message is clear, money matters.