

# The lesson: a study of sylvia's story as depicted in toni cade bambara's short st...

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## **“ The Lesson” by Toni Cade Bambara**

“ The Lesson” written by Toni Cade Bambara is not only a story about a poor girl who feels out of place in an expensive place but also a social commentary. It is a story about an

African-American girl struggling with her awareness of class inequality. The other character,

Miss Moore, provides the proof of social disparity to a group of city kids which includes

Sylvia, the main character, whose common belief shaken when she becomes conscious of social class in the world she lives in.

The conflict between Sylvia and Miss Moore is obvious when she refers the other woman as a “ bitch and her goddamn college degree”, which is far more than the common hatred for rich people that comes from a poor, young adolescent. The main character, Sylvia, has her very own perception of how things work, of her own safe world which she does not like to be invaded by Miss Moore’s prying questions. Sylvia knows deep inside that she is poor.

Yet, it never actually bothers her until she is able to see her disadvantages in contrast with the luxuries of the rich. As Miss Moore introduces her to the true world of the wealthy, Sylvia starts to feel ashamed of her poverty which leads her to question: how “ money ain’t divided up right in this country”.

Sylvia hides in her imaginary world as a solution to problems she wants to avoid, and makes a sharp borderline between reality and illusion. For

example, as they are riding in a cab to the toy store, Miss Moore assigns Sylvia to be in charge of the fare and instructs her to give the driver ten percent for the tip. However, Sylvia becomes distracted by the others, who are trying to put lipstick on others. She considers in mind what other things she would rather do with the money. That is when her thoughts are divided: her imaginary world conflicts with her inner desire to deal with real situations. On her way to the store, Sylvia comes up with a plan to escape from Miss Moore's trip. By this, her mind is occupied with what she would rather be doing while trying to create a shelter in her mind to protect her from her problems as soon as she dislikes the position she is in. She becomes frustrated when the results are not correspondent with the plans in her head. When they arrive at the toy store, Sylvia is overwhelmed with the class awareness and the value of high-end merchandise. As the kids are eager to point out what interests them in the store, Sylvia cannot figure out why toys could cost so much. In Sylvia's mind, the toys are too expensive for reasons she cannot think of, and it makes her confused and irritated. She starts to criticize rich people's lifestyle, and contrasts it with her very own poor life. Sylvia begins to realize the unequal distribution of wealth in the world she is living. In such families like Sylvia's, that amount of money is used for necessities like paying bills and food. This new evidence of luxuriance which she is not given has shaken her normal perception of the rich and the poor. She starts to become of Miss Moore's lesson about social class inequality, yet does not want to acknowledge it. Before Sylvia's trip to the toy store in F. A. O. Schwarz, she thought it was just a ridiculous idea since she has neither seen and acknowledged the luxury of rich people, nor

dealt with her own poverty. As the story goes on, Sylvia's feeling of anger and jealousy increases. She refuses to admit the truth in Miss Moore's words when the woman compares her world with the richness she witnesses at the toy store. She takes her anger, her resentment out on others to prevent herself from considering these new thoughts and her feelings, to retreat back into that little, safe world of hers. Sylvia is trying to hide her envy with the people who can afford these toys. Most of all, she tries to hide the feeling of helplessness for being born in poverty. For Sylvia, this new knowledge elevates her awareness of poverty which is a threat to her usual safety. Therefore, she denies consciousness of this new viewpoint by making fun of other characters, responds with mockery and disgust for those who considers Miss Moore's idea such as Mercedes's mention of Miss Moore's stationery or Sugar's conclusion on the lesson.

In the end, Sylvia leaves the toy store battling with overwhelming emotions of anger, frustration, jealousy, and denial. A new issue of social class left her confused which she tries to disregard by criticizing Miss Moore, and distancing herself from the acknowledgement of her poverty instead of considering the truth and value in Miss Moore's lesson. For Sylvia, her achievement of class consciousness is a resentful enlightenment. For her to accept her disadvantage is a shame, and Sylvia, in her small and self-conscious mind, would rather deny such lesson than admit it to protect her little pride.