

"the lesson" by toni
cade bambara essay
sample



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“ The Lesson” by Toni Cade Bambara Essay Sample

“ The Lesson” is written from the point of view of the protagonist, Sylvia, as she looks back on one memorable and definitive moment during her childhood. In this story, she recalls the summer the summer she was put under the care of a certain Miss Moore. Unlike the other people in Sylvia’s neighborhood, Miss Moore was educated and had a college degree.

Because of her privileged position, she took it upon herself to try and educate the young black children of the neighborhood, which included Sylvia and her cousins, as well as her friend Sugar. One afternoon, Miss Moore took the children to a trip in uptown New York to visit the FAO Schwarz toy store. It was through this trip that Sylvia and her friends realized the great social divide that separated them from the rich, white kids.

The power of Toni Cade Bambara’s story does not rely so much on the social message it tries to bring across to the readers. Rather, because of the use of the first person point of view, she has effectively brought Sylvia’s experience closer to the reader, allowing them to break down the barrier that would normally exist between the characters of the story and the readers. As such, the reader is able to relate directly with the story and the narrator.

The use of the first person point of view is established immediately at the start of the story: “ Back in the days when everyone was old and stupid or young and foolish and me and Sugar were the only ones just right...

(Bambara, par. 1).” Because of this opening line, the readers feel as if Sylvia were directly conversing with them, allowing them an intimate view of her thoughts, feelings, and character.

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Furthermore, using the first person narrative allows for more freedom in the choice of words, making the story feel like one rolling, intimate narrative. The power of this technique is that it gives a realistic tone to the story. In this case, as the story is told from the point of view of a black adolescent girl, there is the use of the African-American vernacular throughout the story. It is not limited to the conversations, which would happen if another point of view were used. As a result, Sylvia's character, as well as her social standing is highlighted:

So this one day Miss Moore rounds us all up at the mailbox and it's puredee hot and she's knockin herself out about arithmetic. And school suppose to let up in summer I heard, but she don't never let up... (Bambara, par. 2)

So we heading down the street and she's boring us silly about what things cost and what our parents make and how much goes for rent and how money ain't divided up right in this country. And then she gets to the part about we all poor and live in the slums which I don't feature. And I'm ready to speak on that, but she steps out in the street and hails two cabs just like that. (Bambara, par. 3)

Such is representative of the narrative in the story. If these lines were rephrased in proper, genteel English, the flavor and character would be gone - and so would Sylvia's character. Based on these lines, the reader gets the feeling that Sylvia is a tough girl, one who speaks her mind on things. She is also still naïve about the realities of life, or perhaps she just does not want to face up to it.

The use of the African-American vernacular language, however, is not only powerful and important because it allows for another way for Sylvia's character to shine forth. On the hand, the use of vernacular allows for a way for the unique African-American experience to be conveyed. This is, again, only possible in using the first person narrative. Because of this special opportunity, the theme of " The Lesson" is better illustrated. In this case, the theme of the story is the inequality faced by the blacks.

Though the country is very rich, as symbolized by the toy store they went to, this material wealth is not equitably distributed. By using the coarse, ungrammatical, and oftentimes wrongly spelled English that has come to be associated with the African-American variation, this theme of inequality shines forth. Because these children are poor, they have not been properly educated. As such, it shows in their actions and words.

Finally, in using the first person point of view, Bambara allows the reader to get deep under the skin and mind of the narrator. It gives the reader a lot of clues about what kind of person Sylvia is, clues that are not directly addressed nor exhibited in her narrative. For example, based on the way Sylvia describes the people around her, the places they were in, and the experiences they were having, she tells more about herself and the way she thinks than if she were to merely describe herself, the place she is in, or her experience:

I'm thinkin about this tricky toy I saw in the store. A clown that somersaults on a bar then does chin-ups just cause you yank lightly at his leg. Cost \$35. I could see me askin my mother for a \$35 birthday clown. " You wanna who

that costs what?" she'd say, cocking her head to the side to get a better view of the hole in my head. Thirty-five dollars could buy new bunk beds for Junior and Gretchen's boy. Thirty-five dollars and the whole household could go visit Grand-daddy Nelson in the country. Thirty-five dollars would pay for the rent and the piano bill too. Who are these people that spend that much for performing clowns and \$1000 for toy sailboats? What kinda work they do and how they live and how come we ain't in on it? (Bambara, par. 44)

Sylvia's observations, as well as her reflections about it, hints at a young girl who is not as naïve about the world around her, an image contrary to the one she seemed to portray at the start of the story. The questions she poses at the end of her ruminations further indicate to the reader that Sylvia was not comfortable with her position and that she was feisty, willing to fight the inequality that was preventing her from experiencing the life promised by the country's democracy. Her questions were indicative of the depth of her thoughts and feelings.

Because of the use of the first person narrative, Toni Cade Bambara has elevated "The Lesson" from a social commentary and into a real work of literature. The emotional depth afforded by this technique is powerful, allowing the reader to feel what Sylvia was feeling. Furthermore, this narrative allows for the use of the vernacular, which helps in furthering the theme of inequality that pervades the story. Finally, the use of the first person narrative enriches Sylvia as a character through the numerous indirect clues obtained from the way she describes her experiences.

Works Cited

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Bambara, Toni Cade. " The Lesson." 1972. 15 April 2007.