

Tracey R. Mainer

English 201

Prof. Conway

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Eye of the Beholder

In “The Lesson.” by Toni Cade Bambara, readers are introduced to a group of children raised and currently living in a not-so-well-off neighborhood. Miss Moore, an older woman who is also a product of said neighborhood, takes particular interest in the select children and is trying to open their eyes to a world outside of their poverty-stricken environment. In her efforts, she tries to make them aware of the importance of education, the importance of being better than what is around them, and of having an introspective view of their identity, with a trip to a toy store in an affluent neighborhood. With the trip to the store, Sylvia, the protagonist in the story, goes through a struggle with her identity, becoming more aware of her surroundings, her worth and how others see her. Although readers are initially introduced to a smart-mouthed, short-tempered and maybe somewhat arrogant and bossy adolescent in Sylvia, layers of Sylvia’s character are revealed through her struggle with her worth, her identity, and the shame she hides behind pride.

With the description of the environment through Sylvia’s own words, readers are made aware that she lives in the “ghetto,” which often equates to “survival of the fittest.” Survival under any circumstances requires being able to go the distance, which does not include letting anyone see her weaker or vulnerable parts. Readers are able to understand that it is necessary to have a tough outer shell. In this story, the cracks in Sylvia’s rough exterior are revealed with every interaction she is involved in.

Readers are introduced to Sylvia's very pessimistic point of view of everyone immediately, with the exception of Sugar and herself. The first sentence of the story opens with Sylvia's words: "Back in the days when everyone was old and stupid or young and foolish and me and Sugar were the only ones just right....". While readers are greeted by Sylvia's judgmental and rough exterior, it also gives a peek into her vulnerability with the mention of her cousin, Sugar, not being foolish either.

Wading in the waters of Sylvia's personality and looking at what is seen from the shore, Sylvia's role is the protector, the decision maker and the muscle. In many instances, if not in all of the scenarios in the story, it is Sylvia who is speaking up with rebuttals and remarks to every word spoken by Miss Moore; but it is also Sylvia that Miss Moore entrusts the cab fare to on their way to the toy store. And even still, it is Sylvia who is the most observant and alert of the four in her cab on the ride to the store (calculating the tip but also trying to figure a way out of the trip with Miss Moore). Sylvia's shoulders are heavy with responsibility, which is often the case with leaders – bearing the weight of a hard exterior, to be strong enough to carry themselves and others.

Along with Sylvia's observation of her destitute surroundings, her critical description of everyone else, but "her and Sugar" also reveals her pride. Sylvia's exception of herself and Sugar reveal a proud nature, but in turn, alludes to shame. Sylvia's exclusion emphasizes she does not want to be categorized or seen as she sees everyone else – old and stupid or young and foolish. Sylvia knows who she is, but she struggles with being this person. Sylvia's battle comes into focus with her constant criticism of Miss Moore and how her family responds to Miss Moore; for example, her family dressing her in her best clothing whenever Miss Moore requests time with the children, exhibits the turmoil she feels. It is made apparent that she is well aware of her

impoverished and lower-class surroundings with the chosen adjectives used to describe her community.

Janet Ruth Heller remarks in “Toni Cade Bambara's Use of African American Vernacular English in ‘The Lesson’” that Richard O. Lewis notes: “The language of these characters marks impropriety; it signals commission of some taboo act that transgresses society’s limits. These challenge phrases indicate conflict between authority figures and subordinate figures” (Lewis 2). Sylvia’s snarky comments, pessimistic view and judgment while responding and reacting are defense mechanisms to hide the shame of the need to impress the articulate, college educated Miss Moore.

Diving a little deeper into the waters of Sylvia, the hardened exterior, the façade, begins to crumble the more she is forced to accept what she is not and does not have. Sylvia’s vulnerabilities are exposed while in the presence of “how the other side lives.” Sylvia is surrounded by opulence and excess, which is normal within the everyday, Fifth Avenue middle-class life. Viewing lavish toys, priced at a value that would feed her family for months, Sylvia is forced to face what she sees and lives daily: poverty. The prices of toys, which are more than the less than meager wages her family earns, begin to anger Sylvia, and the battle of her pride and shame rears its head yet again. Shame-filled and perhaps envious that she cannot live this lifestyle, but too proud to admit this shame, is evident in one simple question: “Watcha bring us here for, Miss Moore?” (Bambara 5). Sylvia’s exterior has cracked. Sylvia – proud and tough, ready to verbally fight or attack at the drop of a dime – is rendered speechless in one trip to a toy store. Heller states “One can interpret ‘The Lesson’ as emphasizing the need to question one's society and one's role within that society” (Heller 12). Who is Sylvia? Does she even know who

she is anymore? Although Sylvia's shame is revealed, the revelation of the inequalities of her society and lack of wealth causes her to also question her worth.

Not unfamiliar territory to anyone, are the battlegrounds of insecurity. Saying farewell to Sylvia, readers are left acquainted with a multi-faceted character struggling with an internal conflict that she may not have known ever existed, until exposed to what "could be." Her identity and worth have been uprooted and challenged, leaving her questioning who she is. Although unclear who Sylvia really is under the surface, what is clear is Sylvia's determination to mask her vulnerability with her last thought: no one was going to beat her at anything. Starting the fight against her insecurities and vulnerabilities, the battle of self-worth continues.

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