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A Character Analysis of: "The Lesson"

"The Lesson" by Toni Cade Bambara investigates themes of racial and economic inequity through the experience of African American adolescents discovering the true value of the dollar for the first time. While this first person narrative follows the experience of a young, ignorant, troublemaker named Sylvia, the other characters are just as colorful and really come together to paint the narrative of racial and economic inequality. The story starts off as an innocent trip to the toy store, but takes a turn when the children are rudely awakened to their financial predicament. This unravels when each character spots a toy that they desire but are turned off by the price tag and left wondering "Who spends this much money on toys?" How author Bambara illustrates each child's distinct reaction to the "unreasonable" price of their toy is what makes this story so captivating and profound.

As mentioned previously, it's the characters that truly make this tale of racial and economic inequity compelling. "The Lesson" is centered around our strong willed narrator Sylvia, a group of children roughly her age, and one adult who takes it upon herself to impart the lesson, Ms. Moore. At the start of the story, the children are ignorant to the harsh truths of the world and display a sort of bliss and confidence that comes with ignorance. Sylvia shows this when expressing her aversion to Ms. Moore, stating "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" (Bambara 2).

As well as, “Poor people have to wake up and demand their share of the pie and don’t none of us know what kind of pie she talking about in the first damn place” (Bambara 6). For better or worse, the truths of the world are hard to avoid. At first Sylvia doesn’t think there’s anything wrong with the way her life is, but at the end of Ms. Moore’s lesson, her way of viewing her life and the world changed forever.

Subsequently, the story comes to a head when the ignorance of youth is shattered and the children discover the true value of the dollar. This unfolds during the trip to F. A. O. Schwarz, a high end toy store on Fifth Avenue. The process takes place quite naturally as each child’s heart is captured by rather innocent toys such as a microscope or a paperweight. Then their heart is immediately crushed by the ridiculously large and unreasonable price tag, at least in their perspective. This is seen when Ms. Moore asks the group how long would it take for Junebug and Big Butt to save up their allowance to purchase a \$300 telescope, to which Sylvia and Sugar respond “Too long” and that it would be outgrown it by then (Bambara 3). One after the other, each child’s ignorance of where they stand in the world is shattered. My personal favorite response to such a tumultuous day is Flyboy saying “I’d like a shower, tiring day” (Bambara 6). This subtle line encapsulates the essence of a child exposed to the harsh realities of the world, all too well.

Lastly, this story does an amazing job of exploring racial and economic inequity through the experience of African American adolescents. While it is not explicitly said, there is a racial tension that is subtly felt throughout the experience of these adolescents. From Sylvia casually saying “White folks crazy” about a woman wearing a fur coat in the summer to Rosie responding to Ms. Moore’s question about what she thought of the F. A. O. Schwarz with the same “White folks crazy” (Bambara 6). It is also noticed with how uncomfortable the usually rambunctious

children are in a toy store and especially comes to a head when Sylvia expresses jealousy towards Sugar getting to touch the toy sailboat. Sylvia, not understanding where her anger is directed, then says “I’m jealous and want to hit her. Maybe not her, but I sure want to punch somebody in the mouth” (Bambara 5). Sylvia then reflects on how her parents would react to her asking for the cheapest toy there, a \$35 clown. To which she contemplates the amount of essentials her family could put that money to instead. Finally, she questions “Who are these people that spend that much for performing clowns and \$1000 for toy sailboats?” (Bambara 6). This moment is a reflection on racial inequality and a moment of realization towards the unfair nature of our economic system.

In conclusion, “The Lesson” is a well constructed tale that tackles deep themes of racial and economic inequality. Cade Bambara does a great job of capturing our attention with the use of vivid and relatable characters. However, we must remember these characters are catalysts for opening our eyes to the truths of the world regarding inequality.

Work Cited

Bambara, Toni Cade. "The Lesson." *Gorilla, My Love*. Random House, 1972:

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