

# Critical Essay on "The Lesson"

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According to Teri Ann Doerksen writing in *The Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Toni Cade Bambara's first short story collection, ***Gorilla, My Love***, "celebrates urban African-American life, black English, and a spirit of hopefulness inspired by the Civil Rights movement." By 1972, when the collection was published, Bambara had already established herself as an advocate for African-American and women's rights, and many of her stories were a literary call to arms; Bambara saw in her writing the opportunity to initiate resistance to the cultural--and racist--norms of her day. Toni Morrison wrote of Bambara in ***Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions: Fiction, Essays, and Conversations***

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There was no doubt whatsoever that the work she did had work to do. She always knew what her work was for. Any hint that art was over there and politics over here would break her up into tears of laughter, or elicit a look so withering it made silence the only intelligent response.

**"The Lesson"** is one of several stories in ***Gorilla, My Love*** that feature a strong-willed adolescent female narrator. Over the course of one afternoon, Sylvia is forced to an unpleasant awareness of the unfairness of the social and economic system that prevails in the United States of the 1960s. Sylvia lives in a "slum" neighborhood. Her family has moved from the South--presumably to better their financial circumstances, as did so many southern African Americans throughout the twentieth century--but they find themselves living in the ghetto. Only one person in the neighborhood distinguishes herself--Miss Moore, a symbol of changing times. Unlike the other African Americans, Miss Moore is college educated and speaks in standard English. She disdains to go to church. Her physical appearance alone denotes her differences. She has "nappy hair" and

wears "no makeup." Most crucial for the neighborhood children, she takes upon herself the "responsibility for the young ones' education" and exposes them to the world outside of their neighborhood and the truths it holds. On the afternoon the story takes place, she takes a group of children, including Sylvia, to F. A. O. Schwarz, an expensive toy store. The lesson she wants to impart is the economic inequity that exists in the United States, and for the most part, she succeeds admirably in her goal.

One unusual aspect in a story of this brevity is the number of characters included. Miss Moore brings eight children to the store, and all of these children have a different perspective on the events of the day. The children are alike in that all of them recognize the exorbitant cost of the toys, particularly a sailboat that costs \$1,195. (Remember that **"The Lesson"** takes place within a decade after a study revealed that 42 million American families lived on less than \$1,000 per year.) The children, however, can be broken into three categories: those who acknowledge the outrageous prices of the toys (Big Butt, Rosie Giraffe, Junebug, Q. T., and Flyboy); those who show no understanding of the greater significance of these toys (Mercedes); and those who openly or tacitly acknowledge the economic injustice the toys demonstrate (Sylvia and Sugar).

Of the larger group of children, each child does react to the expensive toys in a somewhat distinctive manner. Big Butt reacts on a visceral level. He sees the microscope and declares "I'm going to buy that there," when he is not even sure what a person uses a microscope to look at. Junebug reflects a more simplistic approach. When Miss Moore explains what a paperweight is, he figures she "crazy or lyin'" because "we don't keep paper on top of the desk in my class." When she explains that people might use a paperweight on their desks at home, he says, "I don't even have a desk," but then turns to his older brother Big Butt for confirmation: "Do we?" Rosie Giraffe, vulnerable as a recent immigrant from the South, asks the pointed questions that the more hard-boiled northern children will not deign to ask, such as what is a paperweight. Q. T., the quietest and the youngest, says little but he stares "hard at the sailboat and you could see he wanted it bad." Q. T. also voices the obvious: "Must be rich people shop here."

Of this group of children, Flyboy is the most outspoken. The "wise man from the East" plays the know-it-all. He announces that a paperweight is "To weigh paper with, dumbbell," and Miss Moore is forced to correct him. Flyboy knows how to use his poverty and deprivation to make people, especially "white folks," feel pity for him; "Send this poor kid to camp posters, is his specialty." It is also Flyboy who first notices the sailboat that shocks all the children. His ultimate reaction to the afternoon, and to Miss Moore's final question, also chillingly echoes an adult's-- "I'd like a shower," he says. "Tiring day."--the words of a child too soon exposed to the harsh realities of the world.

At the far end of the spectrum is Mercedes. From the beginning of the story, she is presented as outside the circle of children, the butt of their irritation. As the story continues, differences between Mercedes and the others are continually raised. For instance, she is the only child who has a desk at home. "I have a box of stationery on my desk and a picture of my cat. My godmother bought the stationery and the desk. There's a big rose on each sheet and the envelopes smell like roses," she says in a statement that draws the anger of the other children; "'Who wants to know about your smelly--stationery,' says Rosie Giraffe fore I can get my two cents in." Mercedes aspires to these symbols of the "white" world, *because* they are the symbols of success. Her interest in education and her more articulated speech liken her to Miss Moore, but unlike Miss Moore, Mercedes does not see the signifiers of the white world as pointing out problems within the African-American world. She would emulate Miss Moore *in order* to be like whites, not to improve the circumstance of the African-American community.

Only Mercedes expresses no shock at the prices of the toys. She enters the store first, moving primly and properly, "smoothing out her jumper and walking right down the aisle." The other children, in contrast, do not belong. Their entrance is marked by chaos; they "tumble in like a glued-together jigsaw done all wrong." When the other children exclaim over the expensive sailboat, acknowledging that they buy sailboat sets that cost fifty cents, Mercedes attempts to deflate their pride: "But will it take water?" At the end of the day, when the group has returned to the neighborhood, Miss Moore asks what they thought of the store. Mercedes' only response is "I'd like to go there again when I get my birthday money." She has taken no greater lesson from the day than to learn to want to be more like the white people who can so recklessly and carelessly spend their money. Her exclusion from the group is physically symbolized as they "shove her out of the pack so she has to lean on the mailbox by herself."

On the opposite end of the spectrum from Mercedes is Sugar and Sylvia. They are allies before they enter the store. Sugar asks Miss Moore, straight faced, if she can steal, a sassy question that easily could have come from Sylvia. Also, the girls express the initial reaction to the toys in the store; they both scream in one voice, "This is mine, that's mine, I gotta have that, that was made for me, I was born for that." But once the real examination of the toys begins, Sugar is not seen or heard from again until they are in the store. There Sylvia and Sugar split up, signifying their ensuing division. Sugar's actions further anger Sylvia; Sugar "run a finger over the whole boat," something that Sylvia cannot bring herself to do. Once they are on the train returning to the neighborhood, Sugar and Sylvia seem to have regained their solidarity as Sugar motions to Sylvia's pocket where Miss Moore's money is. But Sylvia is again let down by her friend when Miss Moore asks what the children thought of F. A. O. Schwarz. Sugar speaks up with the

words that Miss Moore most wants to hear: "I think . . . this is not much of a democracy if you ask me. Equal chance to pursue happiness means an equal crack at the dough, don't it?" She pleases Miss Moore despite Sylvia's warning nudges.

Sylvia feels betrayed by Sugar's alliance with Miss Moore even though Sugar is verbally expressing the feelings that Sylvia shares, even if she has not yet acknowledged them within herself. It is clear from Sylvia's reactions that she is utterly shocked and appalled by the realization that some people can afford to spend so much money on toys. "'Unbelievable,' I hear myself say and I am really stunned," is her reaction to the sailboat. The word *stunned* has a double meaning. Firstly, Sylvia is stunned by the sheer cost, but she also is stunned that she is so moved that she *voluntarily* responds to Miss Moore's lesson. She attempts to stimulate her intense dislike of Miss Moore. When Sylvia asks how much a real boat costs, Miss Moore won't tell her, instead saying: "Why don't you check that out . . . and report back to the group?" This "really pains" Sylvia. "If you gonna mess up a perfectly good swim day least you could do is have some answers." What is clear, however, as Nancy D. Hargrove writes in *The Southern Quarterly*, is Miss Moore has "touched her deeply, messing up far more than one day."

Miss Moore's field trip also has produced in Sylvia an unwelcome sense of inferiority. The pride that Sylvia wears like shining armor is wounded. Sylvia, accustomed to owning her neighborhood and her own actions, feels out of place in this bastion of white wealth where Sylvia and the children "all walkin on tiptoe and hardly touchin the games and puzzles and things." When she and Sylvia "bump smack into each other" these two friends "don't laugh and go into our fat-lady routine." Intimidated by the store and the monstrous price tags, Sylvia grows increasingly angry that Miss Moore has forced this lesson upon her.

Unable to deal with her anger and not truly understanding where it is directed-- "And I'm jealous and want to hit her [Sugar]," Sylvia thinks when Sugar touches the boat. "Maybe not her, but I sure want to punch somebody in the mouth"-- Sylvia reverts back to her tough pose. "So I slouch around the store being very bored and say, 'Let's go.'" Once on the subway, though she and Sugar reconvene at the back of the train, Sylvia is unable to let go of the afternoon. She mentally compares what essentials her family could purchase with the lowest-priced toy she saw--a \$35 birthday clown.

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?

She is beginning to channel her anger toward a real focus as she reflects upon Miss Moore's previous lessons as well;

Where we are is who we are, Miss Moore always pointin out. But it don't necessarily have to be that way, she always adds then waits for somebody to say that 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.

Sylvia still cannot acknowledge that she feels the validity of Miss Moore's words. Instead, she congratulates herself on retaining Miss Moore's change from the taxi ride.

After Sugar's exchange with Miss Moore, Sylvia stands on her foot and finally gets her to be quiet. "Miss Moore looks at me, sorrowfully I'm thinkin. And somethin weird is goin on, I can feel it in my chest." Although Sylvia does not name it yet, and although Sugar, despite her previous disclosure, wants to return to their normal activities, Sylvia is unable to do so:

I'm going to the West End and then over to the Drive to think this day through. She can run if she want to and run even faster. But ain't nobody gonna beat me at nuthin.

The focus of the story's final sentence reaffirms Sylvia's determination and implies that Miss Moore's lesson, with the ultimate goal of igniting the children's sense of injustice and leading them to enact societal change, may very well have taken hold.

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