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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, sassy 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. An unraveling then ensues when each character spots a toy that they desire but are immediately turned off by the enormous price tag and are then 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.

It’s the characters that truly make this tale of racial and economic inequity compelling. “The Lesson” is centered around the 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, “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).

Sylvia then continues to display her ignorance by mocking Ms. Moore, “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 changes 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. This process unfolds quite naturally as each child’s heart is captured by rather innocent toys such as a microscope or a paperweight. Then their heart are 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 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.

Additionally, a secondary source by Rena Korb titled Critical Essay on “The Lesson” expands on the unfairness of the social and economic structure of the United States in the 1960s. Korb provides more context regarding the financial hierarchy, stating, “a study revealed that 42 million American families lived on less than \$1,000 per year” (Korb). This puts into context the absurdity of how the toys are priced, particularly the toy sailboat which was priced at \$1,195. For these children who seem to fall into that \$1,000 a year bracket, these prices are ridicule and raise

questions of what is fair. While these events are eye opening and quite traumatizing, they are necessary to point out the gross cultural differences between African American culture and middle class America. Korb praises Bambara's narrative in how she accomplishes this writing, "The final sentence reaffirms Sylvia's determination...the ultimate goal of igniting the children's sense of injustice and leading them to enact societal change" (Korb). Bambara not only shows us the injustices, she also makes us question if we live in a fair and just society.

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 F. A. O. Schwarz with the same, "White folks crazy" (Bambara 6). It is also noteworthy how uncomfortable the usually rambunctious children are in a toy store and the inadequacy due to racial tension 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 regarding 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 readers' 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

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