

English 1102

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Sylvia and The Struggle Against Class Consciousness in Toni Cade Bambara's "The Lesson"

"The Lesson" by Toni Cade Bambara is not just a spirited story about a poor girl out of place in an expensive toy store; it is a social commentary. "The Lesson" is a story about one African-American girl's struggle with her growing awareness of class inequality. The character Miss Moore introduces the facts of social inequality to a distracted group of city kids, of whom Sylvia, the main character, is the most cynical. Flyboy, Fat Butt, Junebug, Sugar, Rosie, Sylvia and the rest think of Miss Moore as an unsolicited educator, and Sylvia would rather be doing anything else than listening to her. The conflict between Sylvia and Miss Moore, "This nappy-head bitch and her goddamn college degree" (307), represents more than the everyday dislike of authority by a young adolescent. Sylvia has her own perception of the way things work, her own "world" that she does not like to have invaded by the prying questions of Miss Moore. Sylvia knows in the back of her mind that she is poor, but it never bothers her until she sees her disadvantages in blinding contrast with the luxuries of the wealthy. As Miss Moore introduces her to the world of the rich, Sylvia begins to attribute shame to poverty, and this sparks her to question the "lesson" of the story, how "money ain't divided up right in this country" (308).

Sylvia uses her daydreams as an alternative to situations she doesn't want to deal with, making a sharp distinction between reality as it is and reality as she wants to perceive it. For instance, as they ride in a cab to the toy store, Miss Moore puts Sylvia in charge of the fare and tells her to give the driver ten percent. Instead of figuring out the tip, she becomes sidetracked by Sugar, Junebug, and Flyboy, who are putting lipstick on each other and hanging out the window; Sylvia considers what she would rather do with the money: "So I'm stuck. Don't nobody want to go for my plan, which is to jump out at the next light and run off to the first bar-b-que we can find" (308). When it's time for her to pay the driver, Sugar has to tell Sylvia how much to give. Sylvia's thoughts are divided between childish play and adult responsibility: her daydreaming conflicts with her desire to respond to real situations. On the way to the F.A.O. Schwarz store, Sylvia devises a plan to escape from Miss Moore's educational trip: "I say we oughta get to the subway cause it's cooler and besides we might meet some cute boys" (308). By occupying her mind with what she would rather be doing, Sylvia creates a refuge in her mind where she is protected from uncomfortable situations. As soon as she doesn't like her circumstance, in this case a taxi ride, she counters it with an impulsive whim: "I'm tired of this and say so. And would much rather snatch Sugar and go to the Sunset and terrorize the West Indian kids" (308). She is frustrated when her circumstances don't line up with her "plans." In a similar way, Sylvia resists acknowledging the foreign world of wealth that Miss Moore and the toy store will soon introduce to her.

When they arrive at the toy store, Sylvia struggles with the "new" class consciousness that is surfacing in her by attacking the values of high-end consumerism. While Sugar, Rosie, and Big Butt are having fun and asking questions, Sylvia is disturbed by what she sees in the toy store. As the kids press close to the windows from outside on the street, each one points out something that interests him or her in the toys. Sylvia can't figure out why the toys cost so much. When she looks at a glass paperweight, she doesn't understand what it is, much less why it costs

hundreds of dollars: "My eyes tell me it's a chunk of glass cracked with something heavy, and different-colored inks dripped into the splits, then the whole thing put in an oven or something. But for \$480 it don't make sense" (309). In her opinion, the toys she sees in the store cost too much, and for reasons she can't explain, this experience makes her mad. Sylvia looks at a sailboat that costs \$1,195 and can't believe how expensive it is. The exorbitant prices are more than she can make sense out of: "Who'd pay all that when you can buy a sailboat set for a quarter at Pop's, a tube of glue for a dime, and a ball of string for eight cents?" (309). Sylvia begins to compare these expensive toys to what she has, and the comparison furthers her anger. She criticizes the rationale behind paying that much for a toy sailboat that she could make herself for under fifty cents. By finding fault in the decadence of the rich lifestyle, Sylvia contrasts it with her own, thereby alienating herself from it.

Sylvia begins to comprehend how she is alienated from the wealth she sees by comparing her own poverty with uninhibited consumerism. When she imagines herself asking her mother for one of the toys in F.A.O. Schwarz, she contrasts wealth with her personal experience and can see the dissimilarity more clearly. Sylvia knows that if she went to her mom asking for a thirty-five dollar birthday clown, her mother wouldn't even take her seriously: "'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" (311). In Sylvia's family, that much money pays for necessities like beds and bills or trips for the whole family, not one birthday gift. The idea that someone else actually has enough money to spend so liberally makes Sylvia consider uncomfortable questions: "Who are these people that spend that much for performing clowns and \$1,000 for toy sailboats? What kinda work they do and how they live and how come we ain't in on it?" (311). Sylvia confronts her poverty because she is faced with tangible evidence of wealth to which she is not privileged. The toy store has shaken her from the denial of "the part about we all poor and live in the slums, which I don't feature" (308). Miss Moore's lesson on social inequality is alarming: "Imagine for a minute what kind of society it is in which some people can spend on a toy what it would cost to feed a family" (312). Yet, Sylvia doesn't want to contemplate it. "Don't none of us know what kind of pie she talking about in the first damn place" (311). Before Sylvia sees the toys in F.A.O. Schwarz, she doesn't consider "the lesson" because she has never seen and acknowledged the luxury afforded by wealth, thus never facing her own poverty.

As Sylvia encounters the material wealth represented by the toys, her anger becomes a cover-up for increasing feelings of envy. Initially reacting to Miss Moore's teachings, Sylvia denies the importance and truth of her words: "And then she gets to the part about how we all poor and live in the slums, which I don't feature" (308). But once she compares her world with the excess she sees at the toy store, she becomes angry and resentful. Sylvia takes her anger out on others indiscriminately to guard herself from her new thoughts and feelings: "Then Sugar run a finger over the whole boat. And I'm jealous and want to hit her. Maybe not her, but I sure want to punch somebody in the mouth" (311). Sylvia is hiding her envy of wealth with anger. She doesn't want to admit to herself that she is jealous of the kind of people who can afford these toys. It is too traumatic for Sylvia to know and feel the helplessness of being born into poverty.

Sylvia's response to her new awareness of social inequality is retaliation. For Sylvia, anything that elevates her awareness of her relative poverty is a threat. She resists consciousness of the "new world" by mocking and ridiculing other characters in the story who are dabbling with it. The other kids' interaction with Miss Moore makes her especially derisive. It is as though Miss Moore herself represents social consciousness, and the other kids who make observations in agreement with her are equally threatening. When Sugar finally sums up Miss Moore's lesson,

"This is not much of a democracy if you ask me" (312), Sylvia responds, "I am disgusted with Sugar's treachery" (312). Moreover, when Mercedes tells Miss Moore about her stationery with "a big rose on each sheet" and "envelopes [that] smell like roses," Rosie, like Sylvia, joins in mocking traitors: "Who wants to know about your smelly-ass stationery?" (309). Mercedes's identification with Miss Moore's ideals is punished. Condemning those who side with Miss Moore is a means of discrediting her lesson.

As Sylvia leaves the toy store, she battles with an array of emotions--confusion, anger, denial, and envy. The complex response she has to visiting F.A.O. Schwarz awakens in Sylvia an internal struggle she has never felt, and through criticizing Miss Moore, Sylvia distances herself from realizing her poverty. In her responses to the toys, their prices, and the unseen people who buy them, it is evident that Sylvia is confronting the truth of Miss Moore's lesson. As Sylvia begins to understand social inequality, the realization of her own disadvantage makes her angry. For Sylvia, achieving class consciousness is a painful enlightenment. For her to accept that she is underprivileged is shameful for her, and Sylvia would rather deny it than admit a wound to her pride: "ain't nobody gonna beat me at nuthin" (312).

Works Cited

Bambara, Toni Cade. "The Lesson." Eds. Hans P. Guth and Gabriele L. Rico. Discovering Literature: Fiction, Poetry, and Drama. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1997. 307-12.