

ENGLISH 1102

Student: Laura Bowden

Teacher: Ms. Mary Anne O'Neal

Real Money

When I was around eight years old I remember asking my mother why she always used words that no one ever understood. She liked to use words that sounded very proper and complicated, and sometimes her Southern accent would disappear when she pronounced these unfamiliar ideas. I knew that she was an intelligent person, but eight-year olds do not have an appreciation for those sort of things, and I let her know that. I resented the fact that she used words that were beyond my comprehension the same way I resented that kid in our neighborhood who was from Massachusetts and spoke real proper. That kid got beat up constantly back then just for the way he spoke. It always seemed as though he was trying to prove that he was a rung above the rest of us, or a little smarter, and that in itself was very irritating. We lived in a lower class neighborhood at the time, in the middle of Nowhere, Georgia, and any source of high class society outside of our own nook in the Southern woods came from the television, which was make believe. It wasn't a tangible idea.

In much of the same way that the kids in Toni Cade Bambara's short story, "The Lesson," feel resentment and confusion when confronted with upper class society, the kids that I grew up with felt that any sort of lifestyle, other than the one they had, was something to be envied. I remember feeling that way when I saw the TV shows that showed people living in big houses and driving fancy cars. It was a dream world that I had never seen before.

church, and was always planning “boring-ass” things for her and her cousin to do (723). Although Miss Moore clearly had an underlying agenda, she was trying to fulfill by taking the kids on educational outings, Sylvia wasn’t buying what she had to sell.

In Bambara’s story, the mentor is portrayed as an idea that is intrusive, uncomfortable, and a symbol of society that they have been excluded from. Miss Moore displays mannerisms that represent social mores and constructs that are thought of as oppressive rather than enlightening. At the same time, the fact that she is black and lives in the same neighborhood as Sylvia, provides a challenge to conventional roles that people tend to place themselves in unwittingly. Sylvia, although she may not be able to articulate exactly why she feels such disdain towards Miss Moore, understands this idea on some basic level and expresses her resentment through ridicule of her. What is interesting is that the parents of these children also find various things wrong with the mentor, such as the fact that she doesn’t go to church, but when she comes around to pick up their children, their tune suddenly changes and they treat her with respect. This seems to imply that what we may fear as children, often carries over into adulthood. There is a deep distrust among the lower class towards anyone who seems to have a higher social status or college education, but there is also a compliance towards social structure. The adults may chastise Miss Moore “behind her back like a dog” but will always make sure that their kids dress nice and look proper when they go on outings with her (723).

Throughout “The Lesson,” there seems to be a sort of back and forth tug-of-war being played between Miss Moore and the kids she is trying to enlighten, almost as if there are two lessons being taught. While the world of the upper class is unreal to Sylvia and her friends, Miss Moore also seems largely removed from the mentality that prevails among inner-city youth as she comes across as condescending and out of touch with reality. At one point in the story she asks the kids if they know what money is, and Sylvia takes this as if she is being spoken to like she is ignorant. She reacts to what seems to be an attack on her intelligence by telling Miss Moore she’s tired of her preaching about money and would rather be somewhere else. Throughout the story, Sylvia actually does show various ways she knows about money, just not the way Miss Moore is trying to teach them. Sylvia, instead, knows how to steal, hoard, and need money, and she shows this when she talks about terrorizing the West Indian kids and “taking their hair ribbons and their money too” (724). Soon afterwards she is planning to hold on to the five dollars that Miss Moore gives her for the taxi ride, but instead ends up stiffing the driver of the tip while deciding “he don’t need it as bad as I do” (724). Miss Moore, on the other hand, is trying to show these kids what “real money” looks like, or how the “other half” lives, as well as how cavernous the gap is between the classes. She does this by taking them to the wealthy side of town and to a very extravagant toy store where a sailboat costs one thousand, one hundred ninety-five dollars, and a paper-weight goes for four hundred and eighty dollars. This may be the very opposite of what the children consider reality.

Upon arrival to the store, Sylvia’s friend, Sugar, asks immediately if they can steal, which surprises Miss Moore. She seems to naively assume the kids would adjust to the standards of upper-class society just by being placed within its realm. The group stands outside of the store for awhile, gazing at the expensive toys displayed in the window, as if trying to get an idea of what they’re in for. When Miss Moore discusses the paper-weight after Rosie Giraffe points out the price tag, the kids seem befuddled as to why anyone would spend that much money on a fancy rock that holds paper to your desk. Miss Moore notices their amazement and goes on to

ask, “Don’t you have a calendar and a pencil case and a blotter and a letter-opener on your desk at home when you do your homework?” (725) What isn’t clear here is whether or not Miss Moore is being ironic or ignorant. She knows what kind of homes these kids come from, but she poses the question as if those were the most obvious things that a student should possess, as if to suggest that they need to stop thinking of luxuries as being ridiculous.

When the group moves on to the hand-crafted fiberglass sailboat, Sylvia shows a spark of interest. Upon further inspection, that interest begins to turn to anger, but the reason is unclear to her. The kids begin to wonder what was so special about that sailboat that would make someone spend that much money on it, and at this point they begin to mimic the sentiments that they’ve learned from their parents. They wonder why you wouldn’t just settle for that little boat that costs fifty cents down at Pop’s, when all you’re going to do is ruin it anyway? One thousand dollars could feed a whole family for a year. Money like that should last a lifetime.

Throughout the whole day there is also the antagonist, Mercedes, who likes to remind them that she is not poor like the rest of the kids, and at this point she claims that her dad would buy her the boat if she wanted him to, rubbing it in their faces. At this statement, Mercedes receives an automatic shove because they think she needs to be put back in her place. Mercedes, as even her name suggests, is the symbol of the other half who is forever reminding them that they are less than what decent society deems worthy, and this is why she is constantly rejected by the group.

When the kids finally decide to go into the store, a sort of transformation takes place. Just as their families had talked harshly behind Miss Moore’s back and then became submissive in her presence, as Sylvia walked through the doors of the toy store, she was on her best behavior. She feels that all eyes are on her, and she reacts with a sense of shame. When they approach the sailboat, her friend, Sugar, runs a finger over the length of it. Sylvia feels a surge of jealousy; perhaps because she doesn’t have the nerve to do the same. Her jealousy turns to anger, and she feels as if she wants to “punch somebody in the mouth” (727). This store, filled with expensive, untouchable toys made for other children, automatically imposes a sense of cultural isolation and division. It is as if this store represents a world that exists for only special people, and Sugar should not have the audacity to believe that she is entitled to any of it. That would make Sugar a little better than Sylvia. By entering a world where wealth is prominent, all of the flaws of Sylvia’s world become amplified like a neon sign, whereas she never noticed them in her own neighborhood. In her neighborhood, everyone had the same flaws, the same poverty.

Throughout the field trip to the toy store, Miss Moore is watching the kids for a response. Sylvia knows this, and refuses to give her the satisfaction. Instead, she pretends she’s bored and wants to leave, letting Miss Moore know that she couldn’t care less about stupid rich folks. She reacts with stubbornness because any sort of acknowledgment of what Miss Moore is trying to teach would mean that there is something amiss, that she is missing out on something big that plenty of other people take advantage of. She imagines how her mother would react if she asked for even a thirty-five dollar toy, never mind a thousand-dollar sailboat, and this just makes her want to forget the experience even more. She remembers that Miss Moore is always pointing out, “where we are is who we are, but it doesn’t have to be that way,” and feels frustrated that she doesn’t know how the hell she even got there, much less how to get out. No one told her (728).

Sylvia, the epitome of a tough, jaded youth culture, seems to finally come to grasp the harsh lesson that Miss Moore is trying to teach, but refuses to recognize her own defeat. Instead,

she stands defiant in front of the teacher, mouth shut, stepping on the toe of her friend who acknowledges the point Miss Moore was hoping to make. While Sugar describes how she is dismayed with what she sees as an unequal democracy, by asking “Equal chance to pursue happiness means an equal crack at the dough, don’t it?,” Miss Moore seems pleasantly surprised at her poignancy (728). Sylvia, on the other hand, is appalled that Sugar would stoop so low as to cross over to Miss Moore’s way of thinking. At this point, Sylvia becomes the symbol of a culture standing at the crossroads. She is young, with the potential for change and the realization of her options as well as her challenges. She realizes this, but stands defiant, not wanting to be a traitor to what she knows and cross over to the other side, and at the same time not wanting to be part of the “have nots.” In the end, Sylvia becomes more than a stubborn girl; she becomes a cultural idea that can manifest itself in more than one way depending on how much of the lesson she wants to believe. She can choose to stay comfortably ignorant in her environment just as she has always done, or she can choose to change her surroundings, which would mean a challenge to everything the system has taught her thus far. The lesson ultimately becomes a catalyst for Sylvia, and although she may not articulate any profound thoughts on the wage gap in democratic society, she begins to understand clearly that she can do better than where she is. While Sugar challenges her to a race as they leave Miss Moore’s lesson, Sylvia thinks to herself, “She can run if she want to, and even run faster. But ain’t nobody gonna beat me at nuthin,” and at that point, she has made up her mind (729).

Works Cited

Bambara, Toni Cade. “The Lesson.” *New Worlds of Literature: Writings From America’s Many Cultures*, 2nd Ed. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1994. 723-29.