The Lesson Study Guide

The Lesson by Toni Cade Bambara

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Introduction

The stories in Toni Cade Bambara's first collection, *Gorilla, My Love,* celebrate African-American culture and community, sometimes in juxtaposition against white society. Bambara challenges her characters to rethink ideas of accepted social values and norms at the same time that she challenges her readers to do the same. Many of her stories also feature a young, intelligent female narrator living in a world that she questions and examines. The narrator's discoveries, again, mirror the discovery of the reader.

"The Lesson" examines the realization of economic inequity in 1960s America through the eyes of a young girl. In Sylvia, Bambara creates a proud, sensitive, tough girl who is far too smart to ignore the realities around her, even though she knows it might be easier to do so. At the same time, Bambara creates a host of characters, all of whom help Sylvia explore and demonstrate the issues that face poor people and minorities in the United States.

Throughout her career, Bambara used her fiction writing as a forum for teaching people how to better their lives and how to demand more for themselves. Critics at the time of *Gorilla, My Love's* publication saw in her fiction a true voice. At the same time that Bambara aptly drew the African- American community, she also taught about what it could become. With stories such as "The Lesson," she indeed, imparts a lesson without sacrificing her art form to didactic thought or morals.

Author Biography

Toni Cade Bambara was born March 25, 1939, in New York City in Harlem. Her family moved frequently, and Bambara spent her childhood in different neighborhoods of New York and New Jersey. She was drawn to the arts and learning, and her childhood included the following: trips to the influential Apollo Theater to hear music; Speaker's Corner, where she listened to political debates and was exposed to many different ways of thinking; and the public library.

She attended Queens College in New York, and she studied English and theater arts. In 1959, her first published work of fiction, "Sweet Town," appeared in *Vendome* magazine. She also earned her Bachelor of Arts degree that year, as well as a fiction award from her college.

Bambara enrolled for graduate work in modern American fiction at City College of New York. While attending classes, she also worked as a social worker for the Harlem Welfare Center. In 1961, she studied in Milan, Italy. Over the next few years, she completed her master's degree while doing social and therapy work. She also coordinated and directed several neighborhood programs.

After receiving her master's degree, Bambara taught at City College from 1965 to 1969. She also served as director/advisor for an African-American theater group and with several City College literary publications. During this period, more and more of her stories began to appear in national journals and magazines.

Bambara always put her community work at the forefront, and in 1970 she merged her sociopolitical and literary interests when she edited and published an anthology entitled *The Black Woman.* It featured works by African-American women who were involved in both the civil rights and women's movements.

From 1969 to 1974, Bambara taught in the English department at Livingstone College in New Jersey. She continued to work with the African- American community, and the students and faculty honored her efforts. Also during this time, Bambara edited her second anthology, *Tales and Stories for Black Folks.*

From 1959 to 1970, Bambara continued to work on her own fiction. In 1972 she published *Gorilla, My Love,* which became her most widely read collection. Its fifteen stories focus on the relationships in African-American communities and includes the story "The Lesson."

In the 1970s, Bambara visited Cuba and Vietnam, travels that spurred her continued involvement with fighting traditional gender and racial roles. Her 1977 collection *The Sea Birds Are Still Alive* was influenced by these travels and her continuing sociopolitical involvement. Bambara settled in Georgia, where she became a founding member of the Southern Collective of African-American Writers.

Bambara published two novels and one work of juvenile fiction in addition to her short story collections. She also worked on scriptwriting and conducted workshops to train community organizations on how to use videos to enact social changes. Bambara died of colon cancer in December, 1995. A collection of her fiction, essays, and interviews, edited by Toni Morrison, was published the year after her death.

Plot Summary

In "The Lesson," Miss Moore has moved into the narrator's—Sylvia's—neighborhood recently. Miss Moore is unlike the other African Americans in the neighborhood. She wears her hair in its natural curls, she speaks proper English, she goes by her last name, she has attended college, and she wants to teach the neighborhood children about the world around them.

One day Miss Moore takes the children on a field trip. She starts off by talking about how much things cost, what the children's parents earn, and the unequal division of wealth in the United States. She makes Sylvia angry when she says that they are poor and live in the slums.

Miss Moore hails two cabs, and she gives Sylvia five dollars to pay their driver. Sylvia suggests that they jump out of the cab and go get barbecue, but no one, including Sylvia's friend and cohort Sugar, agrees. When they get to their destination, Sylvia keeps the four dollars change.

Their destination is the famous Fifth Avenue toy store, F. A. O. Schwarz. Before the group enters, they look in the store windows. They see very expensive toys—a microscope that costs $300, a paperweight that costs $480, and a sailboat that costs $1,195. While they look at these items, they talk about what they see. Miss Moore explains what a paperweight is for. Most of the children don't see the need for it—only Mercedes has a desk at home. It is the sailboat that surprises them the most, however. Even Sylvia speaks: "Unbelievable," she says. The children discuss the sailboat in the window and the sailboats that they make from kits. Sylvia wonders what a real boat costs, but Miss Moore won't tell her; she says that Sylvia should check it out and report back to the group later.

The group then goes into the store. Sylvia hangs back, feeling funny and a bit ashamed, though she doesn't know why. The children walk quietly through the store, hardly touching anything at all. Sugar reaches out to touch the sailboat, and Sylvia feels jealous and angry; she feels like punching someone. She asks Miss Moore why she brought them here, and Miss Moore asks if she is mad about something.

They take the subway home. On the train, Sylvia thinks about a clown that she saw that cost $35. In her world, $35 buys a lot: bunk beds, a visit to Grandpa for the entire family, the rent, and the piano bill. She wonders who are the people who have so much money to spend on toys. She wonders why they have so much money, and she and her family and friends have none. She thinks how Miss Moore says that poor people don't have to remain poor, that they need to rebel against the status quo. Sylvia thinks that Miss Moore isn't so smart after all, because she won't get back her change from the taxi. Sylvia is unhappy with Miss Moore for unsettling her day with such thoughts.

Back in the building, Miss Moore asks what the children thought of the toy store. One of the children says that white people are crazy, and another girl says that she wants to go

there when she gets her birthday money. Sugar surprises Sylvia by speaking up. She notes that the sailboat costs more than the cost of feeding all the children in a year. Miss Moore gets excited by what Sugar says and encourages her to continue. Sugar does, despite Sylvia stepping on her feet to quiet her. Sugar says that she doesn't think the country is much of a democracy if people do not have equal opportunity to wealth. Miss Moore is pleased with Sugar's answer, but Sylvia is disgusted by her treachery. She stands on Sugar's foot again, and this time Sugar is quiet. Miss Moore looks at Sylvia and asks if she learned anything, but Sylvia walks away. Sugar follows. Sylvia mentions the money they have, but Sylvia doesn't really answer. Sylvia suggests going to Hascombs and getting junk food, and then she suggests that they race. Sylvia lets Sugar run out ahead of her. Sylvia plans on going off to be alone to think about the day.

Summary

Sylvia, the narrator, is a street-wise, wisecracking, black girl in New York City. On a hot summer's day, she and several of her friends wait by the mailbox for their new neighbor, Miss Moore. Miss Moore is not like the rest of the people in the neighborhood. In addition to being, as Sylvia says, "the only woman on the block with no first name" and "black as hell, 'cept for her feet, which were fish-white and spooky," Miss Moore is on a mission. She wants to educate the children about the difference between their world and the world that white people live in.

The children view Miss Moore as someone who interferes with their summer vacation plans, but their parents yield to this woman's plans because she has a college education and because she has voluntarily taken on the responsibility for educating the youngsters. Periodically, Miss Moore rounds up the neighborhood children for informal lessons, which usually involve math or language topics. On this day, however, the lesson is about money: who has it and what it can buy.

Sylvia strongly resents Miss Moore for making it difficult for her and her friends to do the things they would ordinarily do on a summer day. Sylvia would rather be bothering the West Indian kids by taking their money and hair ribbons. If Sylvia had her way, her friends would not be standing by the mailbox, dressed up in their best clothes in the afternoon heat, answering some college woman's questions about whether they know what money is. Sylvia thinks that Miss Moore is pretty stupid for all her education. When Sylvia mentions she would rather go and "terrorize" the West Indian kids, she can tell that Miss Moore will remember that remark for a future lesson on brotherhood.

As the group walks toward the subway, Miss Moore talks about the cost of things, how poor the children are, and how they live in the slums. She discusses the amount of money their parents make and the fact that wealth is not divided equally in the U.S. Sylvia is ready to argue with the woman about her perceptions of their poverty and living conditions, but she is surprised into silence when Miss Moore hails down two taxi cabs. Several of the children are put into the first cab to travel with Miss Moore. Then, the teacher gives Sylvia a five-dollar bill, tells her to tip the driver ten percent and puts the rest of the children into the second cab with Sylvia.

Sylvia, Sugar, Junebug and Flyboy occupy their time during the cab ride by hanging out the windows, yelling at people and putting lipstick on each other. Sylvia also tries to figure out how to spend the money Miss Moore gave her, but she doesn't get any help from her friends. They are fascinated by the taxi meter and occupy themselves by making farting sounds with their armpits. Sugar wonders how high the meter will read by the time they reach their destination. Nobody wants to hear about Sylvia's plan, which involves jumping out of the cab at the next stoplight and taking the money to the first barbecue place they can find.

When the taxi comes to its final stop, the meter reads 85 cents. Sylvia figures out the ten percent tip and then decides to keep it because she feels the driver doesn't need the

money as much as she does. In retaliation, the driver tries to leave with Junebug's foot in the door. This prompts the group to insult the driver's mother until he drives off. Only then do they realize that they are standing in front of a toy store on Fifth Avenue. Everyone around them is dressed up in furs and stockings despite the summer heat. Sylvia thinks that white people are crazy.

Miss Moore meets them on the street and "using the voice she uses at the museum" tells them to look in the windows of the toy store before they go in. Sugar asks if they can steal once they go inside. Miss Moore pretends to have misunderstood her and leads the children around to look in the windows of the store. Each child points to things in the windows and yells, "That's mine!" and, "That was made for me!" All the children say they are going to buy one thing or another once they get inside.

Big Butt sees a microscope and says he is going to buy that. The other children make fun of him, saying he would not know what to do with such a thing. Miss Moore, however, takes his desire seriously and asks him what he would look at through the microscope. Big Butt doesn't know, but Miss Moore takes the opportunity to tell the children about the millions of bacteria and other living things that are invisible to the naked eye. Then, she asks the children what the microscope costs, and they all look through the window at the price tag, which says $300. Miss Moore asks how long it would take for Big Butt to save his allowance to buy it. Sylvia says it would take too long, and Sugar says he would have outgrown it before he saved up enough to buy it. Miss Moore tells her that a person never outgrows instruments of learning. She goes on to tell them how medical students use microscopes. Her lecture goes on for so long that the children get angry at Big Butt for bringing the subject up in the first place.

Rosie Giraffe looks at a big chunk of multicolored glass in the window and reports that it costs $480. Miss Moore tells them that the object is a paperweight made of semi-precious stones that have been fused together under pressure. Rosie Giraffe asks what a paperweight is. Flyboy says it is for weighing paper, but Miss Moore corrects him, saying that paperweights are used to keep the papers on a desk from becoming messy. Junebug tells Miss Moore that they do not keep papers on top of the desks at his school. She says maybe he could use a paperweight on his desk at home then. Sylvia thinks to herself that Miss Moore knows there are no desks at home because the woman snoops around their houses every time she gets the chance.

Big Butt and Fly Boy join Junebug in talking about how they don't have desks, but Mercedes says she has a box of stationery on her desk. She says her godmother bought her the stationery and the desk, and she keeps a picture of her cat on the desk. Rosie Giraffe taunts her with, "Who wants to know about your smelly-ass stationery?" Miss Moore tries to explain that it is important to have a place to work.

She is interrupted by Flyboy, who has spotted a large sailboat in the toy store window. The children read the description of the boat on its price tag. They discover it is made of fiberglass. It costs $1,195. They are all stunned by the price. For some reason, Sylvia feels herself getting angry about it. The children wait for Miss Moore to say something, but she keeps quiet, wanting them to talk.

Sylvia wonders who would pay all that money for a sailboat when she could go to the local store and get a sailboat set for a quarter and a tube of glue for a dime and some string for eight cents and make her own. It would cost her about 50 cents to make a sailboat. Mercedes asks her if it would take water, and Flyboy says he took a similar boat to the local pond once and lost it because the string broke. Another boy says he tried to sail one in Central Park, but it keeled over and sank. He had to ask his father for another dollar. Big Butt laughs at the story and remembers how the boy got the strap for asking.

Q.T. has been staring at the boat during the entire discussion. He really wants it, but he is too little, he thinks. Someone would just take it away from him. He asks Miss Moore if the boat is really for kids. Rosie Giraffe says it would be silly for parents to buy a toy like that, which would just get broken. Sylvia says that amount of money should last forever. Q.T. says rich people must shop in this store. Flyboy asks sarcastically what gave him the clue. Sylvia asks Miss Moore what a real boat costs, figuring that $1,000 would buy a yacht. Miss Moore asks her to do some research on the cost of a real boat and report back to the group, and Sylvia resents both herself, for getting involved in the discussion, and Miss Moore, for giving her an assignment instead of just telling her the answer.

Miss Moore says they should go inside, but she doesn't lead the way. She holds the door open so the children can enter. They hesitate and hang back, however. Even Sylvia, who is ordinarily so sure of herself, does not want to be the first one inside. She tells herself that there is nothing to be afraid of. It is just a toy store, and she has as much right as anyone to go inside. Still, she cannot make herself go through the door. She feels ashamed, but she does not know what she should be ashamed about. Sugar hangs back, too. Sylvia is surprised at herself. She knows she has never been shy about anything before.

Eventually, Mercedes pushes through the children crowding in the doorway and walks right into the store and down the aisle. The rest of the children follow her. Sylvia thinks to herself that it feels like the time she and Sugar broke into a Catholic church on a dare. They were supposed to run up to the altar, do a tap dance and mess around in the holy water, but once they got inside the church, it was so quiet and holy that they couldn't go through with their plan.

The toy store is the same. The children walk on tiptoes and barely touch any of the things on display. Sylvia watches Miss Moore, who is watching them like she is "waiting for a sign." They find the sailboat and look at the price tag again. Sugar runs her hand along the whole boat, and this angers Sylvia so much for some reason she wants to punch somebody in the mouth. She asks Miss Moore why she has brought them here. Miss Moore says that Sylvia sounds angry and asks her why. Sylvia is angry, but she will not give Miss Moore the satisfaction of knowing that she is right. Sylvia instead pretends to be bored with everything and says they should go.

Riding in the back of the subway car with Sugar, Sylvia thinks about a toy clown she saw in the store. The clown did somersaults and chin-ups on a bar when his leg was pulled. He cost $35. Sylvia imagines how her mother would react if she asked for $35 to

buy this toy. She thinks about how that amount of money would buy new bunk beds for her brothers, pay for a trip so everyone in her family could visit their grandfather in the country or pay the rent and the cost of the piano rental, too. Sylvia wonders about the people who can pay $35 for a toy clown and $1,000 for toy sailboats. She wonders about the kind of work they do and how they live. She wonders why the people she knows don't seem to be "in on it."

Sylvia remembers how Miss Moore is always telling them that poor people need to become aware of economic injustice and demand their "share of the pie," although Sylvia and her friends don't understand what kind of pie she is talking about. At the same time, Sylvia thinks that Miss Moore isn't so smart after all. After all, Sylvia still has four dollars left over from the taxi money, and she isn't giving it back.

The group arrives back at the mailbox in their neighborhood where they started from just that morning, though it seems like a long time ago. The children prepare themselves for another boring lecture from Miss Moore, but she only asks them what they think about the toy store they visited. Rosie Giraffe says that white people are crazy, while Mercedes says she would like to go there again with her birthday money. The kids push her away so she has to stand alone by the mailbox. Flyboy says he is tired and wants a shower. Then Sugar surprises Sylvia by noting that all of them probably don't eat in a year what the toy sailboat costs.

Sylvia considers her friend's comment to be a betrayal because she and Sugar have previously agreed that Miss Moore should not be encouraged in any way. Sylvia steps on Sugar's foot to shut her up, but it is too late. Miss Moore uses the comment as an opening to ask the children what kind of society lets some people spend on a toy what it would cost to feed a family of six or seven in their neighborhood. Sugar says she thinks that maybe this society isn't much of a democracy. She says equal pursuit of happiness should mean an equal chance at getting money too. Miss Moore is excited that Sugar has made this connection. Sylvia, feeling even more strongly that Sugar has betrayed her, challenges her by standing on her foot again. Sugar takes the cue and stops talking.

Miss Moore is disappointed in Sylvia for this action. She asks if anyone else has learned anything from the day, and she looks straight at Sylvia. Sylvia just walks away, and when Sugar catches up with her, Sylvia doesn't welcome her. Sugar mentions the four dollars they have and suggests they go buy some cake and potato chips and ice cream sodas.

The girls run down the block toward the stores. Sugar gets ahead of Sylvia, but Sylvia doesn't mind. She has decided to go somewhere else, alone, to think about what happened during the trip to F.A.O. Schwartz. She thinks to herself that, while Sugar can run fast and may even pass her this time, nobody is going to beat Sylvia at anything.

Analysis

The story's theme focuses on education: the need for education and the results of knowledge. It illustrates how learning can lead to discomfort but that the discomfort is necessary for positive change. The author also examines different types of pride, the functions of leadership and the various ways people show respect or disrespect for each other. Underlying the entire story is the notion of economic inequality between whites and blacks in the United States.

Sylvia, the narrator of the story, is a born leader. She is used to being in charge of what the rest of her friends think and do. Sylvia resents the appearance of Miss Moore in her life. Miss Moore is an adult and so has more inherent authority. She also has a college education and some ideas that threaten to change Sylvia's life. Additionally, Sylvia resents Miss Moore because the woman challenges her to use her leadership qualities in more constructive ways. The language used by the two characters reflects these positions.

Miss Moore is a new kind of black woman. She has no first name but is always addressed with her title. She has "proper speech," wears no makeup, is unmarried and has no children. The neighbors are not quite sure how to respond to her, which is illustrated by the way Sylvia describes her as someone to laugh at, "the way we did at the junk man," who is considered arrogant and acting above his station. Sylvia also describes Miss Moore in terms of being an unpleasant obstacle, like the winos "who cluttered up our parks and pissed on our handball walls." The author thus uses Miss Moore as a symbol of uncomfortable changes to come.

Miss Moore also represents an unwelcome critical authority from the "outside." Her positive qualities, which are her education and her sense of mission, are balanced in the eyes of the neighbors by the fact that she does not attend church. Also, as an unmarried woman, she is somewhat suspect. Her zeal for education intimidates the children's parents, however, and they always send their offspring to Miss Moore when she suggests one of her outings.

While Sylvia's resentment and disrespect of Miss Moore are obvious, it is also true that the teacher is having an effect on the girl. At the beginning of the story, Sylvia complains about having to go on the daytrip with Miss Moore rather than to the swimming pool or movie theater where it is cooler. She describes her behavior and that of her friends at the mailbox as "surly," which she labels as a "Miss Moore word."

The mailbox where the children meet Miss Moore before going on their daytrips symbolizes a point of departure from their neighborhood. It represents contact with the world outside, and it is a place where local items are sent out into the greater society. Just like the letters that collect in the mailbox, Miss Moore gathers the children there to begin their journey into a larger world.

Miss Moore's informal lessons are aimed at educating the neighborhood children about how their lives differ from those of rich white children. She uses F.A.O. Schwartz, the

legendary toy store, to show them how the white people who shop there understand money. She is also teaching a lesson about the true nature of society as she sees it, a society that is supposed to be democratic.

The extreme differences between the children's neighborhood and the neighborhood of the toy store are first illustrated by the fact that the white people on Fifth Avenue wear furs and stockings even on a hot summer's day. The children are thrown off balance in this neighborhood, as if it were a foreign country where even the approach to temperature is different.

The interior of the store is compared to a church where Sylvia and Sugar once planned to play jokes. The fact that a commercial enterprise has an atmosphere as hushed and ceremonial as a church suggests that rich white people worship money and things it can buy. The store is a symbol of their materialism. It is the "church" of white people's wealth. It also suggests that the rich are a closed group and keep these things to themselves. The atmosphere acts as a barrier to keep out those who are not already "in on it."

The children, confident and self-assured in their own neighborhood, feel an unwelcome and confusing sense of shame as they try to enter the store. They can't quite make themselves go inside because of an atmosphere that seems to exist to keep them out. Sylvia in particular does not understand why she cannot make herself go inside or why she should feel ashamed. The feeling makes her angry, which is exactly the response Miss Moore had hoped to elicit when she brought the children to the store. She wants them to get angry about being kept away from a world that is available to rich white people.

To Miss Moore, education is the key to more money and improved social conditions. To Sylvia, being educated means seeing things as they are. This is why she thinks Miss Moore may not be so smart. How can she ask whether or not they know what money is, for example? By the end of the story, however, Sylvia begins to understand that there is another dimension to seeing things as they are, and it can be an uncomfortable assault to her pride.

The complaisant attitude of the children and their neighbors about their situation in life is illustrated by Sylvia's description of Aunt Gretchen, who has been "screwed into the go-along for so long, it's a blood-deep natural thing with her." The author uses this mention of Aunt Gretchen to symbolize the attitudes in black society that need to be changed. Miss Moore's character, with her emphasis on education, is the symbol of one way to fight the usual, fatalistic acceptance of economic conditions by the poor.

Miss Moore wants to change this attitude and encourages the children to demand more from the society that keeps them down. Sylvia's recognition of her aunt's low position in the family indicates that she intends to follow a different path in her own life. Sylvia's pride is shown by the way she thinks it is stupid to spend more than $1,000 for a toy boat when she can get the parts and make one herself for a fraction of that. When the other children note that the sailboats they can make for 50 cents tend to break and sink,

their observations only contribute to the girl's anger. She doesn't want to accept the fact that her world is not the best world she can live in.

For the same reason, most of Sylvia's friends make fun of Mercedes and put her down when she talks about having a desk at home or asks whether the 50-cent sailboats can really sail. They resent her for having things they don't have and feel she betrays them. Mercedes is the one child who is able to walk into the toy store, however, and they have to follow her in this situation. They get their revenge when they ostracize her back at the mailbox on their return to their own neighborhood. Mercedes seems to have more money, and therefore, a more socially acceptable set of social skills, which make her comfortable on Fifth Avenue.

Sylvia and Miss Moore both have a considerable amount of pride. Sylvia thinks Miss Moore shows disrespect when she describes their neighborhood as a "slum" and their families as "poor." The author has indicated that Sylvia's family is striving for better conditions through the mention of the "piano rental." For her part, Miss Moore views the children's acceptance of their economic condition as ignorance and their ignorance as disrespect for their race. By the end of the story, both of these characters have made their points. Sylvia realizes that she feels in competition not only with Miss Moore, but also with her good friend Sugar, who is ready to slide back into their usual behavior after having had some surprising insights about the day. Rather than accompany Sugar, Sylvia decides to go her own way and makes a promise to herself that no one will get ahead of her in the future.

Analysis

The story's theme focuses on education: the need for education and the results of knowledge. It illustrates how learning can lead to discomfort but that the discomfort is necessary for positive change. The author also examines different types of pride, the functions of leadership and the various ways people show respect or disrespect for each other. Underlying the entire story is the notion of economic inequality between whites and blacks in the United States.

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The complaisant attitude of the children and their neighbors about their situation in life is illustrated by Sylvia's description of Aunt Gretchen, who has been "screwed into the go-along for so long, it's a blood-deep natural thing with her." The author uses this mention of Aunt Gretchen to symbolize the attitudes in black society that need to be changed. Miss Moore's character, with her emphasis on education, is the symbol of one way to fight the usual, fatalistic acceptance of economic conditions by the poor.

Miss Moore wants to change this attitude and encourages the children to demand more from the society that keeps them down. Sylvia's recognition of her aunt's low position in the family indicates that she intends to follow a different path in her own life. Sylvia's pride is shown by the way she thinks it is stupid to spend more than $1,000 for a toy

boat when she can get the parts and make one herself for a fraction of that. When the other children note that the sailboats they can make for 50 cents tend to break and sink, their observations only contribute to the girl's anger. She doesn't want to accept the fact that her world is not the best world she can live in.

For the same reason, most of Sylvia's friends make fun of Mercedes and put her down when she talks about having a desk at home or asks whether the 50-cent sailboats can really sail. They resent her for having things they don't have and feel she betrays them. Mercedes is the one child who is able to walk into the toy store, however, and they have to follow her in this situation. They get their revenge when they ostracize her back at the mailbox on their return to their own neighborhood. Mercedes seems to have more money, and therefore, a more socially acceptable set of social skills, which make her comfortable on Fifth Avenue.

Sylvia and Miss Moore both have a considerable amount of pride. Sylvia thinks Miss Moore shows disrespect when she describes their neighborhood as a "slum" and their families as "poor." The author has indicated that Sylvia's family is striving for better conditions through the mention of the "piano rental." For her part, Miss Moore views the children's acceptance of their economic condition as ignorance and their ignorance as disrespect for their race. By the end of the story, both of these characters have made their points. Sylvia realizes that she feels in competition not only with Miss Moore, but also with her good friend Sugar, who is ready to slide back into their usual behavior after having had some surprising insights about the day. Rather than accompany Sugar, Sylvia decides to go her own way and makes a promise to herself that no one will get ahead of her in the future.

Characters

Big Butt

Big Butt most likely derives his nickname from his eating habits. Before the group leaves for the toy store, he is "already wasting his peanut-butter-andjelly sandwich like the pig he is." His response to the toys also reflects this rapaciousness. He wants things without knowing what they are.

Fat Butt

See Big Butt

Flyboy

Flyboy demonstrates the crafty sophistication of a ghetto child. He knows how to extract pity and financial assistance from whites. In his clear-eyed understanding of how to play the monetary game, he appears older than he really is.

Junebug

Junebug is relatively quiet at the store. He sees the expensive sailboat, which launches the children on the success and failure of the fifty-cent sailboats they sail in the parks.

Mercedes

Mercedes is unlike the other children because she wants to be like the rich, white Americans. She has her own desk at home for doing her homework. She is at home in F. A. O. Schwarz and wants to come back with her birthday money to buy herself a toy. Mercedes, alone of the children, is unperturbed by the price tags on the toys or what they represent about America.

Miss Moore

Miss Moore is a college-educated woman who has come to live in a poor, African-American neighborhood of New York. She takes upon herself the responsibility to teach the neighborhood children about the larger community and the problems that African Americans and poor people face in the world. She takes the neighborhood children on field trips and exposes them to various issues and ways of life. She challenges the children to think about what they see—like the prices on the toys in F. A. O. Schwarz—to question the status quo, and to find out more about the world around them. Miss

Moore also imparts her belief in the need for the poor people to step up and demand their fair share of America's wealth.

Q. T.

Q. T. is the youngest and quietest child in the group. His major contribution to the discussion is to openly long for the expensive sailboat and declare the unspoken—that F. A. O. Schwarz is a store for "rich people."

Sugar

Sugar is Sylvia's closest friend and her cohort. Despite the friendship, Sylvia feels an element of competition with Sugar. When Sugar gets up the nerve to touch the $1,000-dollar sailboat, Sylvia is so jealous that she wants to hit her friend. Sugar is the only child who tells Miss Moore exactly what she wants to hear—that the toys at F. A. O. Schwarz are indicative of the inequity of American society and do not aptly reflect the democratic principles on which the country was founded. She does, however, run off with Sylvia to spend the money left over from the cab.

Sylvia

Sylvia is the narrator of the story. She is a young, tough, smart girl. She is strongly affected by her surroundings and has the capacity to see the truth in things, for example, in the way her family treats Aunt Gretchen. Despite her ability to see the truth in things, she also acts in a dishonest manner; she speaks of wanting to steal hair ribbons and money from the West Indian kids; she doesn't give the cab driver a tip, preferring to keep the money for herself; and she doesn't give the change from the cab ride back to Miss Moore.

Sylvia gets very angry during the trip to F. A. O. Schwarz, even though she claims not to know why. This anger that people could spend so much money on useless items leads her to speak to Miss Moore about her feelings, which surprises even her.

Themes

Poverty and Wealth

The children in "The Lesson" all come from poor families. They live in apartment buildings where drunks live in the hallways that reek of urine; they live in what Miss Moore terms the "slums." The children's families, however, exhibit somewhat varying degrees of monetary security. Mercedes, for instance, has a desk at home with a box of stationary on it—gifts from her godmother—while Flyboy claims he does not even have a home.

The children, however, surely understand the value of money, and they easily comprehend that the amount of money charged for the toys at F. A. O. Schwarz is astronomical. They compare the handcrafted fiberglass sailboat, which costs $1,195, to the ones they make from a kit, which cost about 50 cents. Sylvia further thinks about what her family could buy with the $35 a clown costs: bunk beds, a family visit to Grandaddy out in the country, even the rent, and the piano bills. The disparity between the way the rich people live and the way Sylvia and her neighbors live is the lesson that Miss Moore wants to impart.

The children internalize this lesson in different ways. Sugar questions whether a nation in which some people have so much but others have so little is truly a democracy. Sylvia grows angry at the disparity that she sees, and she also recognizes the potential showiness of wealth, as represented by the woman who wears a fur coat despite the hot weather. Mercedes, in contrast, aspires more to be like the white people who spend so much money on toys.

The poverty in which the children live is further emphasized by Sylvia's constant attention to money and what she can use it to buy. Even before the group arrives at the toy store, she acknowledges what she uses money for, such as the grocer, presumably to buy groceries for the family. Barbeque, which she suggests purchasing with Miss Moore's cab fare, is a luxury, as is the chocolate layer cake and the movie tickets and junk food on which Sugar suggests they spend the remaining money.

Race

Although race is hardly specifically mentioned, it is the undercurrent of the story. That race is not made a point is not surprising; in Sylvia's world, everyone is African American. The only person who inhabits the exterior is Miss Moore, who actually is "black as hell." Miss Moore's otherness stems not from race, but from the way she is different from the African Americans who predominate in the neighborhood. She has a college education, she wears her hair in its natural curls instead of straightening it, as many African-American women of the era did, and she insists on being called by her last name.

Two important ideas—that wealth and race are intrinsically linked and that white people and African- American people are different—are revealed in one brief sentence: when Sylvia sees a woman wearing a fur coat even though it is summer, she says "White folks crazy." Skin color is mentioned only a few other times, when Sylvia relates that Flyboy tries to get the white people at school "off his back and sorry for him" and when Rosa Giraffe reiterates Sylvia's belief that white people are crazy. By the time the children leave the store, it is clear to the reader that they believe that only white people have so much money to spend—and to spend so foolishly.

Resistance

Bambara has used her writing as an attempt to empower the African-American community; she believed that African Americans needed to pursue a policy of resistance against the racism inherent in American society. Such a policy is evident in "The Lesson" as Miss Moore encourages the children and her neighbors to question the inequality in the world around them. On the way to the toy store she tells the children that "money ain't divided up right in this country." After the children leave the toy store she urges them to think about their society "in which some people can spend on a toy what it would cost to feed a family of six or seven." She is encouraging them to think about the world in order to resist it. She has already told the children that they live in a slum, and as Sylvia recalls,

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.

Miss Moore's task of promoting resistance is formidable, for Sylvia questions "none of us know what kind of pie she talking about in the first damn place." However, her tactics do have some effect on the children. She raises anger in Sylvia, though Sylvia can't articulate why she is mad. She also has gotten Sylvia, and several of the other children, thinking about these inequities. At the end of the day, Sylvia goes off alone to ponder the day—and thinking about something is often the first step to taking action to change it.

Style

Point of View

"The Lesson" is told from Sylvia's first-person point of view. This means that all the events are perceived through Sylvia. Despite this potentially restrictive viewpoint, Sylvia is able to present a wider view of her community. She compares Miss Moore to the rest of the adults. Not only does this show how different Miss Moore is, she also indicates certain cultural standards of the time, such as Miss Moore's wearing her hair "nappy," or curly, at a time when many African-American women straightened their hair, or that the adults dislike that Miss Moore does not go to church, indicating the importance of religion to the community. Sylvia also presents the different types of people who inhabit her community through the children in the group. Mercedes wants to be like the white people who shop at F. A. O. Schwarz; Flyboy seeks pity and charity as a result of his poverty and unstable homelife; Sugar, Sylvia's cohort, surprisingly shows both a desire to please Miss Moore and a clearheaded understanding of the inequities of American society. Sylvia's inner musings, her obvious intelligence, and her sudden feelings of anger when she is at the toy store show that she could very well grow up to be the kind of person that Miss Moore wants them all to be: one who resists and who invokes change.

Setting

The story takes place in New York City. The children live in an African-American neighborhood, most likely Harlem. The store they visit is on Fifth Avenue in midtown, which is a much more expensive part of New York. For much of its history, New York has been a place where the wealthy and the poor live, sometimes within only blocks of each other. It has also been seen as a land of opportunity. Starting in the 1910s, many southern African Americans migrated to the North—as did Sylvia's family—generally to find better employment and less racial prejudice.

Dialect

The characters in the story, with the exception of Miss Moore, speak in a non-standard form of English. They do not always speak with standard grammar or inflection. They say words like ain't, drop the final g off words like *pointing,* and leave words out of sentences, as in "she not even related by marriage" or "white people crazy." This aptly reflects how the people in Sylvia's African-American community talked. One of the first details that Sylvia relates about Miss Moore is that she has "proper speech," indicating how unique she is. The speech of Sylvia and her friends—though nonstandard—is more common in their world.

Black Aesthetic Movement

The Black Aesthetic Movement, which is also known as the Black Arts Movement, was a period of artistic and literary development among African Americans in the 1960s and early 1970s. It was the first major African-American movement since th Harlem Renaissance, and the civil rights and Black Power movements closely paralleled it. Black aesthetic writers attempted to produce works of art that would be meaningful to the African-American mass audience. The movement sought to use art to promote the idea of African-American separatism. Typical literature of the movement was generally written in African-American English vernacular, was confrontational in tone, and addressed such issues as interracial tension, sociopolitical awareness, and the relevance of African history and culture to African Americans. Alice A. Deck wrote in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography,* "In many ways Toni Cade Bambara is one of the best representatives of [this] group."

"The Lesson" demonstrates many attributes of this movement. Bambara draws on typical African- American urban culture in creating her characters and dialogue, and in focusing attention on issues of real concern. Miss Moore clearly advocates taking a strong position to achieve equality; she wants the poor African Americans to "demand" their fair share of American prosperity. The children demonstrate the racial tension they feel daily; they openly speak of how "crazy" white folks are. By the end of the story, Sylvia and Sugar have clearly internalized Miss Moore's lesson.

Historical Context

The Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s

African Americans began taking a more active stance in the 1950s to end discrimination in the United States. The 1952 Supreme Court case, *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* successfully challenged segregation in public schools. Then civil rights leaders launched the Montgomery bus boycott to end segregation on southern transportation systems. For close to a year African Americans in Montgomery, Alabama, refused to ride the public bus system, and in November 1956, the Supreme Court declared such segregation laws unconstitutional. Meanwhile, despite the earlier court ruling, school desegregation was slow in coming. In 1957, when nine African Americans attempted to attend Central High in Little Rock, Arkansas, the governor sent the National Guard to prevent them from doing so. The students were not able to enter the school until three weeks later and under protection from federal troops. Despite angry whites who resented this integration, most of the students graduated from Central High. In the midst of this crisis, President Dwight Eisenhower signed the Civil Rights Act of 1957. The first civil rights law passed since Reconstruction, this act made it a federal crime to prevent any qualified person from voting. Also that year, southern civil rights leaders formed the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SLCC), led by the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. to end discrimination.

The Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s

The SLCC advocated nonviolent resistance to achieve its goals, and many non-SLCC members took up nonviolent protests of their own. In February 1960, four African-American college students staged a sit-in at a lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina. Within weeks, similar demonstrations had spread throughout the South. White racists responded angrily to these demonstrators, and sometimes their harassment escalated into physical attacks, but the demonstrators remained impassive. By the end of the year, many restaurants throughout the South had been integrated.

In May 1961, a northern-based, integrated civil rights group launched the Freedom Rides to protest segregation in interstate transportation. These young activists set off by bus from Washington, D.C., with the intention of traveling through the South, but when the buses stopped, riders were attacked by white mobs. In Jackson, Mississippi, state officials arrested the riders. Outraged, more than 300 additional Freedom Riders traveled the South to protest segregation. Their numbers pressured the Interstate Commerce Commission to strengthen its desegregation regulations. Additionally, the white mob violence led to increased national support for the civil rights movement.

In 1963, more than 200,000 people gathered in Washington, D.C., to encourage support for a new civil rights act designed to end segregation. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 was passed the following year. It barred discrimination in employment, public

accommodations, and gave the Justice Department the power to enforce school desegregation.

In June 1964, activists turned their attention to voter registration, launching Freedom Summer, a campaign to register African-American voters in the South. They focused on Mississippi, a state where only five percent of African Americans were registered to vote. Violence quickly struck when two white northerners and one African American were abducted and killed. Many African Americans, fearing reprisal, refused to register to vote. After a similar registration drive in Selma, Alabama, ended in a fierce attack on marchers, President Lyndon Johnson asked Congress to pass a voting rights bill. Five months later, Congress passed the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which put the voter registration process under federal control. Within three years, over half of all eligible African Americans in the South had registered to vote.

Black Power

Despite these successes, many African Americans grew to question the effectiveness of nonviolent protest. Some felt they should use violence for self-defense, while others did not want to integrate into white society. These African Americans adopted the slogan "Black Power," which became widely used by the late 1960s. They argued for mobilization to gain economic and political power and even complete separation from white society.

Malcolm X was one of the Black Power leaders. He championed black separatism and believed African Americans should use any means necessary to achieve freedom. He was assassinated in 1965, but other activists carried out his ideas. In 1966 two college students founded the Black Panther party to promote self-determination in the African-American community. The Black Panthers armed themselves and patrolled the streets of their communities.

In August 1965, a riot broke out in an African- American neighborhood of Watts after an arrest. The riot lasted for six days and spurred more than one hundred riots around the country over the next two years. A federal report charged that white racism was largely responsible for the tensions that led to the riots. This report stated that "our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white— separate and unequal."

The War on Poverty and the Great Society

In 1962, Michael Harrington published his book *The Other America,* a well-documented study of poverty in the United States. It stated that more than 42 million Americans lived on less than $1,000 per year and shattered the widespread belief that most Americans had benefited from the post-war prosperity of the 1950s. The book also noted that racism kept many ethnic groups, especially African Americans, in poverty. Responding to such concerns, President Johnson launched the War on Poverty. In 1964, Congress passed a bill that authorized $1 billion to coordinate a series of antipoverty programs, including work-training and education programs.

Johnson also announced his desire to build a Great Society in which poverty and racial injustice would not exist. To this effect, Johnson persuaded Congress to establish national health insurance programs for elderly and low-income Americans. In 1965, Congress also passed an education act that allocated $1.3 billion to schools in impoverished areas. Other acts set aside billions of dollars for urban renewal and housing assistance for lowincome families.

Critical Overview

Before publication of her first book, Bambara had already made a reputation for herself as a short story writer, as an editor of anthologies of works by African-American writers, and as an activist in the New York African-American community. The impetus for publishing *Gorilla, My Love* came from a friend of Bambara's, who suggested that Bambara collect her stories, and indicated that Toni Morrison (then an editor at Random House) was interested in working toward its publication. With her first collection, Bambara established herself as a vital voice in the growing Black Aesthetic movement. Elliot Butler-Evans analyzed the collection in his *Race, Gender, and Desire: Narrative Strategies in the Fiction on Toni Cade Bambara, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker:*

The stories in *Gorilla* clearly locate the collection in the broad context of Black nationalist fiction of the 1960s. Employing classic realism as their dominant narrative form, Bambara constructed organic Black communities in which intra-racial strife was minimal, the White world remained on the periphery, and the pervasive "realities" of Black life were presented.

Published in 1972, *Gorilla, My Love* includes fifteen stories, mostly written between 1959 and 1970. They focus on the relationships among African Americans, primarily in the urban North of Bambara's childhood. They celebrate sassy and tough narrators—usually young girls—and explore the developmental experiences of young people as they learn about identity, self-worth, and belonging.

The backdrop for Bambara's tales is the African- American community. Martha Vertreace wrote the following in her chapter in *American Women Writing Fiction: Memory, Identity, Family, Space:*

For Bambara the community becomes essential as a locus for growth, not simply as a source of narrative tension . . . her characters and community do a circle dance around and with each other as learning and growth occur.

The collection drew immediate praise, both from the white and African-American audience, and for a variety of reasons. Bell Gale Chevigny of *The Village Voice,* appreciated the stories both for their artform and for what they had to say:

I find much of the writing here wonderful and well worth anyone's attention. . . . The stories are often sketchy as to plot, but always lavish in their strokes. . . . The black life she draws on . . . is so vividly particularized you don't feel the wisdom or bite till later.

Some critics also responded to the Bambara's message, which they felt was delivered in a more positive manner than similar ones given by other African-American writers of the time. C. D. B. Bryan expressed this idea in his review in *The New York Times Book Review:*

Toni Cade Bambara tells me more about being black through her quiet, proud, silly, tender, hip, acute, loving stories than any amount of literary polemicizing could hope to do. She writes about love: a love for one's family, one's friends, one's race, one's neighborhood, and it is the sort of love that comes with maturity and inner peace.

Many critics, both at the time of publication and since, have commented on Bambara's accurate portrayal of the African-American community and the relationships within it. The *Saturday Review* called *Gorilla, My Love "*among the best portraits of black life to have appeared in some time."

Several contemporary reviewers and literary scholars since have found "The Lesson" to be one of Bambara's finest stories. Nancy D. Hargrove suggested in an essay in *The Southern Quarterly* that it was "perhaps the best of the fifteen stories."

Bambara went on the publish another short fiction collection, as well as two novels, a juvenile book, and a collection of essays, interviews, and fiction, but she is still best known for *Gorilla, My Love.*

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Korb has a master's degree in English literature and creative writing and has written for a wide variety of educational publishers. In the following essay, she discusses the different reactions of the children in "The Lesson."

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*

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 firsts 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.

Source: Rena Korb, Critical Essay on "The Lesson," in *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #2

In the following excerpt, Vertreace identifies five stages of identity formation in Bambara's fiction and shows how the community plays a role in educating "beginners" in "The Lesson."

The question of identity—of personal definition within the context of community—emerges as a central motif for Toni Cade Bambara's writing. Her female characters become as strong as they do, not because of some inherent "eternal feminine" quality granted at conception, but rather because of the lessons women learn from communal interaction. Identity is achieved, not bestowed. Bambara's short stories focus on such learning. Very careful to present situations in a highly orchestrated manner, Bambara describes the difficulties that her characters must overcome.

Contemporary literature teems with male characters in coming-of-age stories or even female characters coming of age on male typewriters. Additional stories, sometimes written by black authors, indeed portray such concerns but narrowly defined within crushing contexts of city ghettos or rural poverty. Bambara's writing breaks such molds as she branches out, delineating various settings, various economic levels, various characters—both male and female.

Bambara's stories present a decided emphasis on the centrality of community. Many writers concentrate so specifically on character development or plot line that community seems merely a foil against which the characters react. For Bambara the community becomes essential as a locus for growth, not simply as a source of narrative tension. Thus, her characters and community do a circle dance around and within each other as learning and growth occur.

Bambara's women learn how to handle themselves within the divergent, often conflicting, strata that compose their communities. Such learning does not come easily; hard lessons result from hard knocks. Nevertheless, the women do not merely endure; they prevail, emerging from these situations more aware of their personal identities and of their potential for further self-actualization. More important, they guide others to achieve such awareness.

Bambara posits learning as purposeful, geared toward personal and societal change. Consequently, the identities into which her characters grow envision change as both necessary and possible, understanding that they themselves play a major part in bringing about that change. This idea approximates the nature of learning described in Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* in which he decries the "banking concept," wherein education becomes "an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor." Oppressive situations define the learner as profoundly ignorant, not possessing valuable insights for communal sharing.

Although many of Bambara's stories converge on the school setting as the place of learning in formal patterns, she liberates such settings to admit and encourage

community involvement and ownership. Learning then influences societal liberation and self-determination. These stories describe learning as the process of problem solving, which induces a deepening sense of self, Freire's "intentionality."

For Bambara the community benefits as both "teacher" and "student" confront the same problem— that of survival and prospering in hostile settings, without guaranteed outcomes. The commonality of problems, then, encourages a mutual sharing of wisdom and respect for individual difference that transcends age, all too uncommon in a more traditional education context. Bambara's characters encounter learning within situations similar to the older, tribal milieus. The stages of identity formation, vis-à-vis the knowledge base to be mastered, have five segments: (1) beginner, (2) apprentice, (3) journeyman, (4) artisan, and (5) expert.

Traditional societies employed these stages to pass on to their youth that information necessary to ensure the survival of the tribe, such as farming techniques, and that information needed to inculcate tribal mores, such as songs and stories. Because of Bambara's interest in cultural transmission of values, her characters experience these stages in their maturational quest. In her stories these levels do not correlate with age but rather connote degrees of experience in community. . . .

The movement from beginner to apprentice occurs when the beginner confronts a situation not explained by known rules. Someone steps in who breaks open the situation so that learning can occur. For Sylvia, in "The Lesson," Miss Moore was that person. Sylvia was an unwilling apprentice, resenting Miss Moore's teaching.

Miss Moore wants to radicalize the young, explaining the nature of poverty by taking her charges from their slums to visit Fifth Avenue stores, providing cutting-edge experiences for the children, making them question their acceptance of their lot. When asked what they learned, various ideas surfaced. "I don't think all of us here put together eat in a year what that sailboat costs"; "I think that 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?"

The children, encouraged by Miss Moore, coalesce into a community of support that encourages such questions. For these children these questions represent rules that no longer work, assumptions that are no longer valid.

The adult Miss Moore has stepped out of the adult world to act as guide to the children. Sylvia, for her part, profoundly affected by the day, concludes, "She can run if she want to and even run faster. But ain't nobody gonna beat me at nuthin.'"

Sylvia's determination to defeat her poverty represents movement to the next level, that of journeyman. No longer hampered by a strict adherence to established rules, the journeyman feels confident enough to trust instinct. Risk becomes possible as the journeyman extrapolates from numerous past experiences to stand alone, even if shakily. At this point the community must provide support without heavy-handed restraint or control as the journeyman ventures forth. . . .

Toni Cade Bambara's stories do more than paint a picture of black life in contemporary black settings. Many writers have done that, more or less successfully. Her stories portray women who struggle with issues and learn from them. Sometimes the lessons taste bitter and the women must accumulate more experience in order to gain perspective. By centering community in her stories, Bambara displays both the supportive and the destructive aspects of communal interaction. Her stories do not describe a predictable, linear plot line; rather, the cyclic enfolding of characters and community produces the kind of tension missing in stories with a more episodic emphasis.

Her characters achieve a personal identity as a result of their participation in the human quest for knowledge, which brings power. Bambara's skill as a writer saves her characters from being stereotypic cutouts. Although her themes are universal, communities that Bambara describes rise above the generic. More fully delineated than her male characters, the women come across as specific people living in specific places. Bambara's best stories show her characters interacting within a political framework wherein the personal becomes political.

Source: Martha M. Vertreace, "The Dance of Character and Community," in *American Women Writing Fiction: Memory, Identity, Family, Space,* edited by Mickey Pearlman, University Press of Kentucky, 1989, pp. 155-71.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay, Hargrove traces the painful process Sylvia undergoes as "she is forced to realize the unfairness of life."

[A] painful experience of disillusionment appears in what is perhaps the best of the fifteen stories, "The Lesson." Again, the story centers on and owes much of its vitality to its first-person narrator, a young girl named Sylvia. Arrogant, sassy, and tough, with a vocabulary that might shock a sailor, Sylvia is also witty, bright, and vulnerable. In the course of the story she learns a lesson which disillusions her about the world in which she lives, about the society of which she is a part. Against her will, she is forced to realize the unfairness of life and, as a black girl, her often low position in the scheme of things. Although she fights against this realization and indeed refuses adamantly even to acknowledge it, it is clear to the reader that the young girl is irrevocably affected by the events of the day.

In the opening paragraph, Sylvia sets the stage for the action to follow by introducing her antagonist, Miss Moore, while revealing some facets of her own personality as well as the kind of environment in which she lives. Having a college degree, Miss Moore has taken upon herself "responsibility for the young ones' education." Accordingly, from time to time she takes them on "field trips," during which they learn a great deal about life. Sylvia clearly does not like Miss Moore or her lessons: "And quite naturally we laughed at her. . . . And we kinda hated her too. . . . [She] was always planning these boring-ass things for us to do." In describing Miss Moore, Sylvia reveals her own toughness, which she communicates largely through strong language ("sorry-a-s horse," "g-d-n gas mask," "some ole dumb s-t foolishness"), as well as her own pride and sense of superiority ("[M]e and Sugar were the only ones just right"), both of which will be seriously damaged in the course of the story. Finally, she indirectly indicates the type of urban environment in which she lives: "And we kinda hated [Miss Moore] . . . the way we did the winos who cluttered up our parks and pissed on our handball walls and stank up our hallways and stairs so you couldn't halfway play hide-and-seek without a g-d-n gas mask." She also reveals that she and her cousin live with their aunt, who is "saddled" with them while "our mothers [are] in a la-de-da apartment up the block having a good ole time."

The action begins on a hot summer day when Miss Moore "rounds us all up at the mailbox" for one of her outings. This one will be on the subject of money, although the implications are much wider by the story's end: ". . . Miss Moore asking us do we know what money is, like we a bunch of retards." Even though Sylvia affects boredom with the subject, it is clear that the mention of their condition of poverty is unpleasant to her, apparently because it causes her to feel inferior: "So we heading down the street and she's boring us silly about what things cost and what our parents make and how much goes for rent and how money ain't divided up right in this country. And then she gets to the part about *we all poor and live in the slums, which I don't feature"* (italics mine).

To illustrate her point in a striking manner, Miss Moore takes the children to an expensive store on Fifth Avenue where they can see for themselves the extravagant prices and then realize the difference between their lives and those of the very wealthy. A skillful teacher who provides the opportunity for the children to have their own flashes of insight, Miss Moore simply leads them from window to window, casually asking or answering questions. They are amazed at a $300 microscope, at a $480 paperweight (an object with which they are not even familiar), and finally at a $1,195 toy sailboat. Even Sylvia, as superior and untouched as she has tried to be, is astonished at the latter, whose price seems beyond all reason: "'Unbelievable,' I hear myself say and am really stunned." Although she herself does not realize the cause of her anger ("*For some reason* this pisses me off"), the reader understands that it lies in the injustice of things in general, but more specifically in Sylvia's frustration at being unable to purchase and possess even one of the toys displayed tantalizingly before her.

Another unpleasant, and in this case unfamiliar, emotion overcomes her as Miss Moore tells the children to go into the store. Ordinarily aggressive and daring, Sylvia now hangs back: "Not that I'm scared, what's there to be afraid of, just a toy store. But I feel funny, shame. But what I got to be shamed about? Got as much right to go in as anybody. But somehow I can't seem to get hold of the door. . . ." Her shame arises from her sense of inferiority, of not belonging in such an expensive store, communicated indirectly and subtly by her comparison of the children's chaotic entrance to "a glued-together jigsaw done all wrong." Once inside, her painful feelings become intense: "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." Angry not only at her own deprivation but also at Miss Moore for making her aware of it, Sylvia bitterly lashes out at the older woman: "Watcha bring us here for, Miss Moore?" Attempting to help Sylvia acknowledge her anger, Miss Moore responds, "You sound angry, Sylvia. Are you mad about something?"

Although too proud to admit her emotions to Miss Moore, Sylvia on the way home reveals her longing for one of the toys, her realization that what it costs would buy many items desperately needed by her family, and her anguish at the injustice endured by the poor:

Thirty-five dollars could buy new bunk beds for Junior and Gretchen's boy. Thirty-five dollars and the whole household could go visit Granddaddy Nelson in the country. Thirty-five dollars would pay for the rent and the piano bill too. Who are these people that spend that much for performing clowns and $ 1,000 for toy sailboats? What kind of work they do and how they live and how come we ain't in on it?

When she seems toughly to dismiss the painful lessons of the day, "Messin' up my day with this s—t," the reader is aware that they have in truth touched her deeply, messing up far more than that one day. When she returns home, the overwhelming effects of her disillusionment are confirmed through her description of time (she seems years older than she had been that morning) and her revelation that she has a headache: "Miss Moore lines us up in front of the mailbox where we started from, seem like years ago, and I got a headache for thinkin' so hard."

Her only protection against further pain and humiliation seems to be in not acknowledging formally, aloud, what has been so powerfully demonstrated to her. Yet, when Miss Moore urges the children to express what they have learned, her cousin Sugar blurts out the harsh facts in what is to Sylvia a bitter betrayal, an admission of the injustice, inferiority, imperfection of her world. Responding to Miss Moore's question, "Well, what do you think of F. A. O. Schwartz?" Sugar surprises Sylvia by saying, "You know, Miss Moore, I don't think all of us here put together eat in a year what that sailboat costs." The older woman urges her on to further exploration of the subject by commenting, "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 of six or seven. What do you think?" (This is a rather blunt and heavy-handed statement of the theme). When Sugar, rejecting Sylvia's desperate attempts to silence her, asserts, "I think . . . that this is not much of a democracy if you ask me," Sylvia is "disgusted with Sugar's treachery." However, as the story ends, she is going "to think this day through," even though she still appears determined to maintain her former arrogance and superiority: "But ain't nobody gonna beat me at nuthin."

"The Lesson" is especially fine in its sensitive portrayal of Sylvia, in its realistic use of black dialect, and in the view of American society it offers from the vantage point of the poor.

Source: Nancy D. Hargrove, "Youth in Toni Cade Bambara's *Gorilla, My Love,"* in *Women Writers of the Contemporary South,* edited by Peggy Whitman Prenshaw, University Press of Mississippi, 1984, pp. 215-32.

Topics for Further Study

This story aptly reflects thoughts that were prevalent in the 1960s, which was a decade of great social change. Could it take place now? Explain your answer.

Compare Sylvia and Sugar. How are they alike? How are they different? Which child do you think is most affected by the events of the day? Why do you think as you do?

Conduct research to find out more about the Black Power movement. Do you think Miss Moore ascribes to the beliefs of this movement? Why or why not?

Think about present-day society and the inequalities inherent in it. What groups of people do you think suffer from economic inequities? From social inequities?

Miss Moore proposes one solution to the economic unfairness that existed in the 1960s: poor people should demand their piece of the pie. Do you think her solution would work? What are other solutions that could have helped poor people?

For the children in "The Lesson," F. A. O. Schwarz is a blatant symbolism of the failure of capitalism. What other symbols can you think of that might symbolize both the failures and successes of the capitalist system?

Sylvia briefly describes the physical environment in which she lives. Conduct research to find out more about ghetto life in the 1960s in northern cities. Write a few paragraphs about your findings.

Compare and Contrast

1970s: In 1970, of the 25.4 million Americans who live in poverty, 7.5 million, or 33.5 percent, are African American. The average income cutoff level for a family of four at the poverty level is $3,968.

1990s: In 1995, 36.4 million Americans, including 27.5 million families, live in poverty. Almost 10 million individuals, or 29.3 percent of the population, are African American. At the beginning of the decade, 44 percent of poor children are African American, while 15 percent are white. The average income cutoff level for a family of four at the poverty level is $15,569.

1970s: In 1970, Americans in the lowest 5 percent have a mean income of $7,281, and the top 5 percent have a mean income of $119,432, in 1996 dollars.

1990s: In 1994, Americans in the lowest fifth have a mean income of $7,762. The top five percent have a mean income of $183,044.

1970s: There are 9.7 million Americans who receive some form of welfare. In New York City in 1968, one million people, or one in eight residents, receive welfare, and one in five New York children depend on welfare payments. One quarter of the city's budget is spent on welfare. A family of four receives $278 per month, which still places them below the poverty line.

1990s: In 1995, the United States spends just over $22 million on Aid to Families with Dependent Children. An average of 13.7 million people receive this form of welfare each month.

1960s: In 1968, African Americans earn sixtythree percent as much as whites. The median household income for African Americans is $22,000 as compared to $38,000 for whites (in 1998 dollars).

1990s: In 1998, the median household income for African Americans is $25,500 and for whites it is $42,000.

1960s and 1970s: In 1968, 57 percent of nonwhites complete high school. In 1972, 27.2 percent of African Americans who complete high school go to college, as compared to a national percentage for all races of 31.9 percent.

1990s: In 1995, 356,000 African Americans graduate from high school, and 183,000 enroll in college. In 1997, 39.3 percent of African Americans who graduate from high school go to college as compared to a national percentage for all races of 44.9 percent. Also, 13.4 percent of African-American students drop out of high school, compared to a national percentage for all students of 8.6 percent.

What Do I Read Next?

Toni Cade Bambara's *Gorilla, My Love* collects fifteen stories written between 1959 and 1972. Many of the stories have a child narrator, as does "The Lesson," and they raise issues significant to the African-American community.

Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing (1968), edited by LeRoi Jones and Larry Neal, collects creative works that are part of the Black Aesthetic Movement.

Madhubuti's verse collection *Don't Cry, Scream* (1969) is representative of poetry produced during the Black Aesthetic Movement. His work is characterized by use of dialect and slang and the author's anger at social and economic injustice as well as his joy in African-American culture.

The play *Dutchman* (1964), by Amiri Baraka, is one of the writer's most well-known works. It illustrates the hatred between African Americans and white Americans through the chance encounter of a middle-class African-American man and a white woman. It also explores the political and psychological conflicts facing the African- American man in the 1960s.

The Black Woman (1970), edited by Toni Cade Bambara, is a collection of poetry, short stories, and essays by well-known African-American women writers. It was the first anthology of its kind published in the United States.

James Baldwin's essay book, *The Fire Next Time* (1963), warned white Americans of the violence that would result if attitudes and policies towards African Americans did not change. The first essay attacks the notion of African- American inferiority, and the second essay recounts Baldwin's coming-of-age in Harlem and his involvement with the Black Power movement.

Kaye Gibbon's novel *Ellen Foster* is told from the point of view of the child narrator. Ellen, a young, impoverished southern girl, grows up in an abusive home. This brief yet powerful novel chronicles her attempts to find a real family.

Further Study

Cone, James H., *Martin and Malcolm and America: A Dream or a Nightmare?,* Orbis Books, 1992.

This book examines the two most influential African- American leaders of the twentieth century and reveals that the visions of these two men were moving toward convergence.

Morrison, Toni, ed., "Bambara, Toni Cade," in *Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions: Fiction, Essays, and Conversations,* Random House, 1996.

This work is Bambara's final collection, including short stories, essays, and interviews.

Tate, Claudia, ed., "Interview with Toni Cade Bambara," in *Black Women Writers at Work,* Continuum, 1983.

This interview is a lengthy dialogue with Bambara in which she discusses her writing, creativity, and personal history.

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Project Editor
David Galens

Editorial
Sara Constantakis, Elizabeth A. Cranston, Kristen A. Dorsch, Anne Marie Hacht, Madeline S. Harris, Arlene Johnson, Michelle Kazensky, Ira Mark Milne, Polly Rapp, Pam Revitzer, Mary Ruby, Kathy Sauer, Jennifer Smith, Daniel Toronto, Carol Ullmann

Research
Michelle Campbell, Nicodemus Ford, Sarah Genik, Tamara C. Nott, Tracie Richardson

Data Capture
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Imaging and Multimedia
Randy Bassett, Dean Dauphinais, Robert Duncan, Leitha Etheridge-Sims, Mary Grimes, Lezlie Light, Jeffrey Matlock, Dan Newell, Dave Oblender, Christine O'Bryan, Kelly A. Quin, Luke Rademacher, Robyn V. Young

Product Design
Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

For more information, contact
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48334-3535
Or you can visit our Internet site at
http://www.gale.com

Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

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Editor, Short Stories for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535