The Lesson

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF TONI CADE BAMBARA

Toni Cade Bambara, originally named Miltona Mirkin Cade, was born in Harlem in New York City in 1939. She grew up in Harlem, Queens, and Brooklyn. As a child she changed her name to Toni, and later, in 1970, she added "Bambara" to her surname, referencing a West African ethnic group of the same name. Bambara studied theater and English at Queens College, earning her BA in 1959. That same year, she published her first short story, "Sweet Town," which would later be included in her most well-known short story collection, *Gorilla, My Love* (1972). During the latter half of the 1960s, Bambara worked with City College of New York's SEEK program which assists economically disadvantaged young people, particularly people of color, with attending and succeeding at college. In 1970 and 1971, Bambara compiled, edited, and published two collections of poetry, short fiction, and essays by a number of famous Black authors. She titled the collections *The Black Woman* (1970) and *Tales and Stories for Black Folk* (1971). *Gorilla, My Love* was published in 1972 and was edited by Toni Morrison, a contemporary of Bambara. Later in life, Bambara wrote and produced numerous screenplays, including *The Bombing of Osage Avenue* (1986), which depicted the 1985 Philadelphia police assault on the headquarters of the Black revolutionary community organization MOVE. Throughout her life, Bambara was politically active, and she visited the communist countries Cuba and Vietnam in an effort to learn about the lives of women who lived there. Bambara died of colon cancer in 1995.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Toni Cade Bambara was active in the Black Arts movement, a literary and cultural movement which began alongside the growing civil rights movement of the 1960s and 70s. The goal of the movement was to promote Black pride as well as new cultural institutions that would resist white Western artistic traditions. In "The Lesson," this movement can particularly be seen in the character of Miss Moore, who wears her hair naturally and attempts to instill an understanding of racial and economic cultural issues in the children who live in her neighborhood. Additionally, Bambara's work incorporates African American Vernacular English, also known as AAVE, in an effort to demonstrate that this dialect spoken by many Black Americans was worthy of a role in serious literature. While "The Lesson" doesn't mention the civil rights movement happening in the 1960s (when the story is likely set), it is, in a sense, about raising race and class consciousness, as Sylvia begins to understand systems of inequality in New York City and throughout the United States.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Many of Bambara's short stories, including "The Lesson," depict young Black girls living in New York City during the civil rights movement. "Raymond's Run" and "Gorilla, My Love," are two examples. One of Bambara's most notable literary contemporaries is Toni Morrison, whose novels *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and *Sula* (1973) both center on young women navigating race and class issues, albeit in earlier time periods. Bambara edited and published two collections of Black literature: the first was *The Black Woman* (1970), which centers on Black women writers and contains work by Audre Lorde and Alice Walker among others. The second was *Tales and Stories for Black Folk* (1971), which contains work by Langston Hughes, as well as some of Bambara's students from the SEEK program. Additionally, Bambara, like many members of the Black Arts Movement, drew on the Black literary tradition begun by writers during the Harlem Renaissance, such as Zora Neale Hurston, Claude McKay, and Nella Larsen.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Lesson
- **When Published:** 1972
- **Literary Period:** Black Arts Movement
- **Genre:** Realistic Fiction
- **Setting:** Harlem and Midtown Manhattan, likely in the 1960s
- **Climax:** Sylvia lets Sugar run ahead of her and thinks "ain't nobody gonna beat me at nuthin."
- **Antagonist:** Economic inequality
- **Point of View:** First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Mime Over Matter. Bambara briefly studied the art of mime in Paris, France.

PLOT SUMMARY

"The Lesson" takes place in New York City in the mid-20th century and centers on a group of Black children from Harlem and their self-appointed teacher, Miss Moore, who is also Black. One of the kids, a girl named Sylvia, is particularly frustrated with Miss Moore, whom she finds patronizing and annoying.

Miss Moore is a Black woman who's college-educated and wants to teach the kids about issues that affect them (like

poverty), but Sylvia and the other children pay much attention to her lessons. Sylvia and her friend Sugar especially resent Miss Moore's college education and hate her "nappy" hair, "proper speech," and formal clothes The adults in the neighborhood similarly talk about Miss Moore behind her back, though they always make the kids dress up and attend her lessons.

One day, Miss Moore decides to take the kids on a trip to FAO Schwarz, an extravagant toy store in a much more affluent part of the city. Miss Moore gives Sylvia a few dollars to pay for the **taxi fare** and tells her to calculate a 10-percent tip. But Sylvia isn't able to do the calculation in her head, so when they arrive, she doesn't tip the driver and pockets the extra money.

When the group reaches Fifth Avenue in Manhattan, they ogle at the extravagantly dressed white people on the streets, whom Sylvia thinks are "crazy." At FAO Schwarz, the children begin to look through the windows at the toys on display. They're astonished by both the high price tags and the items themselves: Big Butt wishes he could afford a $300 telescope, and all of the children are shocked by a $480 paperweight. The kids are particularly fascinated by a **toy sailboat** that costs $1,195, and they wonder why any parents would ever spend that much money on a toy when it would be so fragile, and they could just make their own toy boat for cheaper.

Eventually, Miss Moore suggests that they go into the store. Sylvia and Sugar lead the way, but both of them feel suddenly anxious and ashamed as they get to the front door. Sylvia remembers feeling the same way when she and Sugar snuck into a Catholic Church—they were going to pull a prank on the parishioners, but Sylvia couldn't go through with it. Another one of the kids, Mercedes, marches confidently into the store, pushing past Sylvia and Sugar. The kids are too nervous to touch any of the incredibly expensive toys until Sugar decides to reach out and run her hand along the sailboat they had seen through the window. For some reason, this action upsets Sylvia, who goes to Miss Moore and asks why she brought them to the store. Miss Moore doesn't answer and instead asks if Sylvia is upset about something. Sylvia just tells Miss Moore that she thinks they should leave.

On the way home, Sylvia thinks over the experience. She imagines how the money that wealthy people are spending on toys could help her family buy basic necessities and wonders how people exist who have enough money to spend on luxuries like the toys at the store. She remembers Miss Moore's lessons about inequality and injustice, which makes her angry again.

When the group gets back to Harlem, Miss Moore asks the kids what they've learned. To Sylvia's surprise, Sugar volunteers and expresses her own frustration with the economic inequality she has seen. Sylvia is annoyed and tries to step on Sugar's feet to get her to stop talking, but Sugar moves away from Sylvia and continues. Miss Moore asks if anyone else has anything to say, making a point of looking at Sylvia, but Sylvia just walks away. Sugar catches up with her to ask if she wants to get ice cream with the money from the taxi fare, but Sylvia decides that she needs to take some time to think about everything that happened that day. She lets Sugar run ahead and decides that she isn't going to let anyone beat her.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Sylvia – The protagonist and narrator of the story, Sylvia, is a young Black girl who lives in Harlem with her cousin Sugar and the rest of her family. Their extended family moved to New York City from the South together, and they struggle to make ends meet. Sylvia sees herself and Sugar as a single unit, separated from the rest of the world and especially opposed to Miss Moore, the self-appointed mentor of the kids in Sylvia's neighborhood. Sylvia is a rebellious child who prides herself on her independence, and she clashes with Miss Moore because she resents Miss Moore's college education, "proper" way of speaking, and patronizing lessons. She has little interest in learning about social justice issues or listening to Miss Moore's lectures on racial discrimination and economic quality—she'd rather focus on having fun with Sugar. Sylvia also has a lot of anger and lashes out verbally and physically when she is upset. This anger is first directed toward Miss Moore—but over the course of the story, she comes to better understand Miss Moore's lessons about economic inequality and social justice and realizes that some people are wealthy while others, like her own family, suffer. After an eye-opening trip to the upscale toy store FAO Schwarz, Sylvia begins to redirect her anger away from Miss Moore and toward the wealthy patrons of the toy store.

Miss Moore – Miss Moore is the self-appointed teacher of the kids in her Harlem neighborhood, as her college education makes her feel that it is her responsibility to teach them about the world. However, she doesn't fit in with the rest of the community: Sylvia notes that she is "the only woman on the block with no first name," and that she has "nappy hair" and "proper speech." The story heavily implies that Sylvia and the other people in her community disapprove of these qualities because they don't fit into their expectations of how a Black woman should look and act. In other words, the way Miss Moore presents her racial identity is a point of conflict between her and other Black people. The kids in the neighborhood don't pay much attention to her lessons, particularly Sylvia, who resents her and finds her patronizing. While Miss Moore has good intentions in her desire to teach, her use of formal speech and obtuse questions often alienates the kids. She is rarely straightforward with her lessons, instead encouraging the kids to figure out answers to their problems on their own, which frustrates her students but ultimately helps Sylvia start to reconsider her understanding of the world. Miss Moore is

representative of the conflict between Black intellectuals and less formally educated Black people. While she has the knowledge and desire to educate her community, she is viewed as an outsider and struggles to connect with the people that she's trying to help.

Sugar – Sugar is Sylvia's friend and cousin who, like Sylvia, lives in Harlem with their extended family. While Sugar and Sylvia at first seem to be on the same page about everything, including their resentment of Miss Moore, over the course of the story Sugar starts to distance herself from Sylvia—first by touching the **toy sailboat** at FAO Schwarz and later by speaking up about what she learned on the trip to the toy store. Sugar's journey over the course of the story seems to parallel Sylvia's, as they both learn to recognize the wealth inequality in their society. But while Sylvia is unable to effectively understand and vocalize her feelings due to her anger, Sugar is able to learn from Miss Moore's lesson without feelings of resentment. This difference leads to a change in Sylvia, as she has to deal with a new gap in understanding between her and Sugar.

Mercedes – Mercedes is one of the children from the Harlem neighborhood who Miss Moore decides to take under her wing. Mercedes's comments throughout the story imply that she comes from a somewhat wealthier family than the rest of the group, as she has a desk at home (whereas the other kids don't) and seems much more comfortable with the expensive prices of the toys at FAO Schwarz. Whenever she mentions her family's money, the other kids in the group, particularly Rosie Giraffe, shove and mock her. Mercedes's character thus demonstrates the potential differences in wealth even within their impoverished Harlem neighborhood, and the potential for this inequality to breed resentment.

Flyboy – Flyboy is one of the kids in Miss Moore's group. He is poor like the other children and claims that he's homeless, but Sylvia implies that he only says this to make people feel sorry for him. At one point in the narration, Sylvia uses a homophobic slur to describe Flyboy because he doesn't mind the girls putting lipstick on him.

Big Butt – Big Butt is one of the kids in Miss Moore's group; he's related to Junebug. He wants to buy an expensive microscope he sees in the window of FAO Schwarz, but because his family is poor, it would take him years to save up for it. Big Butt's real name is Ronald, although only Miss Moore calls him that.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Rosie Giraffe – Rosie Giraffe is one of the kids taught by Miss Moore. Rosie is outspoken in the group, and she mocks Mercedes and the wealthy patrons of FAO Schwarz for their money.

Junebug – Junebug is one of the kids in Miss Moore's group. She is related to Big Butt.

Q.T. – Q.T. is one of the kids in Miss Moore's group. He is smaller than the rest of the kids.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

WEALTH, POVERTY, AND INEQUALITY

In "The Lesson," a group of Black children and Miss Moore, their self-appointed mentor, take a trip from their poor Harlem neighborhood to FAO Schwarz, an upscale toy store. Here, Sylvia (the narrator) and the other kids are both fascinated and baffled by the exorbitant prices in the store, and they also become aware of their own poverty in contrast to the wealthy people who can afford to shop there. In moving from their homes, which Miss Moore describes as "slums," to this center of extravagant wealth, the children must confront how different social classes have different relationships with money: in the kids' Harlem neighborhood, money is only spent on necessities, while FAO Schwarz customers use money to buy beautiful but impractical luxuries. Sylvia is thus forced to reckon with the fact that the poverty she and her friends face is the result of a system of inequality in the U.S. that allows some people to get ahead and stay ahead, while others—like her family and community—struggle to survive and have few opportunities to better themselves financially.

Most of the people in Sylvia's community struggle to afford even basic necessities, so the lavish items at FAO Schwarz are shocking to the children in Miss Moore's group. Miss Moore and the children take taxis to FAO Schwarz, and Miss Moore gives Sylvia five dollars to spend on **the taxi fare**. But Sylvia keeps both the tip and the change, deciding that she needs the money more than the driver. Because her family has so little, even this relatively small sum of money is important enough to her to cause her to disobey Miss Moore and risk upsetting the driver. Then, when Miss Moore and the children arrive at the toy store, Big Butt decides he wants to buy a $300 microscope he sees in the window. But when Miss Moore asks how long it would take him and Junebug to save up their allowances to afford it, they realize that it would take years. While Miss Moore is excited to encourage Big Butt's interest in science, it's clear that his family's finances make it difficult for him to pursue that interest. Just after this, the group sees a $480 glass paperweight in the store window, and none of the kids recognize what the object is. When Miss Moore explains what it is and asks if the kids have desks at home that they might need a paperweight for, almost all of them say no, emphasizing

how little they have compared to the people who shop at this store. Indeed, the expensive items in the window make the children realize that the customers here must have enough money that it wouldn't matter to them if the toys were lost or broken, whereas the kids from Harlem must scrimp and save to afford the simplest items.

In fact, the environment in and around the store is so different from the children's neighborhood that it makes them feel ashamed and self-conscious of their poverty. The moment the kids reach Fifth Avenue (the street in Midtown Manhattan where FAO Schwarz is located), the environment changes. Sylvia notices that "everybody dressed up in stockings," and one woman is even wearing a fur coat in the middle of the summer. These conspicuous displays of wealth mark the class divide between the kids and the people that surround them in this more affluent part of New York City. The wealthy people in Midtown and the expensive toys in the window make Sylvia feel self-conscious: she hesitates to go into the toy store because she feels "feel[s] funny, shame," even though she knows she has "as much right to go in as anybody." Then, once inside, the children "walk[] on tiptoe and hardly touch[] the games and puzzles and things." Aware of their poverty (seemingly for the first time) in contrast to the wealthy people who shop at FAO Schwarz, the children feel ashamed and unworthy of even browsing the store.

Ultimately, the story presents this economic inequality that the children notice as part of an unjust system that allows some to thrive while others suffer in poverty. On the ride home from FAO Schwarz, Sylvia thinks about a $35 dancing toy clown she saw there and imagines all of the things her family could use that amount of money for. Notably, the purchases she imagines are all practical: they could buy new beds, visit Sylvia's grandfather, or pay for their rent. She is angry and confused at the idea that anyone could justify spending so much money on toys, when her family barely has enough to survive. In essence, she has an epiphany that some people live totally different lives than her and possess an amount of money that dwarfs that of her and her family. Back in Harlem, Sylvia's friend Sugar vocalizes a similar thought: she reflects on the trip by telling the group that she doesn't see how the United States is a democracy given the huge wealth disparity between the richest and poorest Americans. She points out that poor people don't have an "equal crack at the dough," meaning that they don't have as many opportunities available to them. This implies that those who are poor tend to stay poor because the system works against them. Sugar thus recognizes that there's severe economic inequality in New York City and in the U.S. more broadly, and that their Harlem community is suffering as a result.

At the end of the story, Sugar suggests that they use the four dollars Sylvia has left from the taxi to buy some junk food. But Sylvia brushes Sugar off and lets her run ahead, resolving to go "think this day through" rather than spending her money. Finally, she reflects that "ain't nobody gonna beat me at nuthin." Together, Sylvia's decision to save her money and her resolve to win suggest that she's begun to understand that the U.S. has profound, systemic wealth inequality, which has deeply affected her life without her knowledge. And, as a result, she has decided to resist this system rather than passively accept it, which means taking any opportunity she's given to better herself financially—she isn't going to let the system "beat" her.

EDUCATION AND ANGER

In "The Lesson," a woman named Miss Moore moves into a poor area in Harlem and begins teaching a group of neighborhood children about a wide range of subjects, from basic skills like arithmetic to social issues like poverty. The narrator, Sylvia, is initially angry at Miss Moore because she finds the lessons boring and patronizing. She is particularly upset when Miss Moore takes the children to FAO Schwarz, an upscale Manhattan toy store, as a lesson in wealth inequality. But this educational exercise ends up reorienting Sylvia's anger—by the end of the story, she's angry not at Miss Moore, but at the fact that wealthy people are able to spend exorbitant amounts of money on pointless trinkets at FAO Schwarz, while her own family struggles to make ends meet. This transition suggests that while anger can hold people back from learning, as it does when Sylvia first resists Miss Moore's lessons, it can also propel them forward, motivating them to better understand issues and injustices that affect them directly.

At first, Sylvia is angry at Miss Moore because she finds Miss Moore's teaching style patronizing and frustrating. Sylvia is resentful of Miss Moore's college degree—which no one else in the neighborhood has—because she feels that Miss Moore uses it as a tool to control others and force them to listen to her (though, notably, Miss Moore never actually mentions her degree in the story). She also resents the patronizing questions Miss Moore asks, such as whether the kids in the group (who all come from poor families) know what money is. As a result, Sylvia refuses to listen to Miss Moore or to participate in the lessons, essentially allowing her anger and resentment to hold her back from taking Miss Moore's points seriously. On the day that the group goes to FAO Schwarz, Miss Moore gives Sylvia five dollars to spend on the **taxi fare** and asks that Sylvia calculate a 10-percent tip for the driver. While Sylvia at first tries to figure out the tip in her head, she ultimately fails and instead decides to just pocket the tip and extra change as a way to get back at Miss Moore. This choice demonstrates Sylvia's conflicting attitudes toward Miss Moore and education. She'd like to solve the problem to prove her own intelligence, but she is also willing to give up on learning to calculate percentages just to make herself feel like she's defeating Miss Moore. Later, outside the toy store, Sylvia is so intrigued by the **toy sailboat**

in the window that she asks Miss Moore about the cost of a real boat. Miss Moore responds by telling Sylvia to research the question on her own, which is frustrating for Sylvia, who wanted a simple answer to her question. She isn't at all interested in finding the answer herself, again allowing her anger at Miss Moore to usurp her desire to learn new things.

However, the trip to FAO Schwarz is a lesson that gets through to Sylvia, as it presents an alternative target for her anger: the injustice in her society. The first instance of this new avenue for Sylvia's anger comes when she reads the high price tag for the toy sailboat at FAO Schwarz: $1,150. Sylvia doesn't seem to understand her anger in this moment, but it's implied that she's upset because she's confronting the inequality between poor people like her (who can barely afford basic necessities) and wealthy people who can easily afford toys like the sailboat. This shift is actually a result of Miss Moore's hands-on method of teaching, though Sylvia doesn't seem to realize this either. Miss Moore forces Sylvia to encounter wealth inequality firsthand—an issue she's never had to think deeply about before—and, in doing so, pushes Sylvia's anger in a new direction. Sylvia deals with another sudden and confusing surge of anger when she witnesses her friend Sugar touch the toy sailboat in the store. Some of her reaction is based in jealousy, but it also seems to be rooted in the anger and shame she feels because of her poverty. She goes to Miss Moore to ask why Miss Moore brought the children here—and, perhaps, to get an explanation for her own unexpected feelings. But Miss Moore again refuses to give Sylvia a straight answer. In this case, Miss Moore's refusal is useful to Sylvia, as it forces her to spend time privately considering why she feels angry and what she's learned over the course of the day. Indeed, the impact of these lessons is evident when, on the way home from the toy store, Sylvia again gets angry as she begins to realize that there's a stark difference between her family's financial situation and that of the wealthy people who shop at FAO Schwarz. She recognizes how unfair it is that the cost of a toy at FAO Schwarz could pay for her things her family really needs, like rent money or new beds. This new awareness of how wealth inequality affects her life shows that while anger and resentment can close people off from learning, it can also motivate them to better understand problems that impact them.

The concluding line of the story offer insight into the new perspective Sylvia has gained: as Sylvia storms away from the rest of the group, she thinks about the four dollars she has left from the taxi and reflects, "Ain't nobody gonna beat me at nuthin." By this, she seems to mean that no one is going to take her money away from her or prevent her from succeeding in life. So, by the end of the story, Sylvia's anger is still evident—she's is still defiant and fiercely independent. Yet here it seems that her target has become more productive, as she understands that her anger should not be directed at Miss Moore, but at the societal conditions that have forced her and her community into poverty.

RACE, IDENTITY, AND SOCIAL DIVISION

Toni Cade Bambara's "The Lesson" takes place in New York City sometime in the mid-20th century. The narrator, Sylvia, is a young Black girl whose family moved to Harlem from the South, where it's likely that they lived under Jim Crow laws that enforced racial segregation. And although segregation was never legally mandated in northern states like New York, race is still a point of conflict in the story, reflecting the overall atmosphere of racial tension in the U.S. at this time. For instance, Sylvia resents her neighbor Miss Moore (who is Black) because Miss Moore wears her hair in a natural style, but also because she has a college education and uses what Sylvia calls "proper speech" rather than the African American Vernacular English (AAVE) dialect that Sylvia and her peers speak. Moreover, there's a clear divide in the story between Black people and white people, as the white people whom Sylvia and the other Black characters encounter never speak during the story and are portrayed as alien and distant from the Black characters' lives. Through these details, the story shows that the way people present their racial identity can create tension and resentment, even among people of the same race. Furthermore, it suggests that even in places where segregation isn't enforced, racism can still divide people from one another.

When Miss Moore moves into Sylvia's neighborhood, Sylvia and the other Black people in the community see Miss Moore as an outsider because of how she presents her racial identity, even though she is also Black. Miss Moore has several qualities that make her stand out: she speaks "proper" English rather than AAVE, has a college education, dresses formally, and goes by Miss Moore rather than just her first name. Sylvia—along with the other kids and even the adults in the community—find all of these things alien. And given the way that Sylvia lists these qualities just before noting that Miss Moore has very dark skin, it's implied that they find Miss Moore strange specifically because she doesn't fit the stereotype of how they expect a Black woman to behave. Alongside this, Miss Moore embodies Blackness in a way that the other members of the community don't: namely, she wears her hair naturally, in a style that Sylvia describes as "nappy." This derogatory, racially charged term suggests that Sylvia (and perhaps others in the neighborhood) have a contradictory view of how Black people are supposed to look and act: they shouldn't use "proper speech" that's stereotypically associated with white people, but they also shouldn't be proud of their Blackness and embrace their natural features. From this, it's clear that the community doesn't really know what to make of Miss Moore, whose way of presenting her racial identity is very different from the other Black people in Sylvia's neighborhood. The adults talk about her

behind her back, and Sylvia resents Miss Moore's college degree and mocks her appearance and way of speaking. The other characters' reactions thus show how differences in the way people think about and present racial identity can cause tension, even among people of the same race.

White people, meanwhile, are presented as wholly alien to the Black characters. Notably, there are no white characters in the story, and the few white people mentioned are portrayed almost as exotic. This is particularly evident when Miss Moore takes the kids on a field trip to Midtown Manhattan (an affluent and predominately white part of New York City): she welcomes them to the neighborhood "in the voice she uses at the museum," emphasizing the surrounding white people's otherness relative to the main group. Sylvia finds white people strange, noticing one white woman on Fifth Avenue wearing a fur coat in the middle of the summer. Both Sylvia and later Rosie Giraffe comment that white people are "crazy." In presenting white people as outsiders or others, the story subverts the trope of white writers exoticizing other races and offers a reversal of the usual perspective, which still suggests that there's an unspoken but evident racial divide between white and black people in the city.

Furthermore, the Black children's discomfort in predominately white spaces suggests that the New York City of the story *feels* racially segregated, even though segregation isn't legally mandated. Midway through the story, Sylvia and Sugar are confronted with the idea of entering the upscale toy store FAO Schwarz, a space that seems associated with whiteness because of its location in a wealthy white neighborhood. But the girls are too timid and ashamed to enter until Mercedes shoves them inside the store, emotions that Sylvia likens to the feeling of entering a Catholic church, another traditionally white space. Even after the kids enter FAO Schwarz, they're nervous and overly cautious about touching the toys, a feeling that is unfamiliar for the usually outspoken Sylvia. Together, the Black characters' feelings of unbelonging and inferiority suggest that although New York City was not legally segregated like the Jim Crow South at this time, Black people still felt excluded from predominately white neighborhoods and establishments. As a whole, then, "The Lesson" shows that even in an ostensibly equal and racially integrated society, race can still divide people.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE TOY SAILBOAT

The toy sailboat, which Sylvia and the other kids first see in the window of FAO Schwarz, represents wealth inequality. The boat, a hand-crafted toy that costs $1,195, astonishes the children both because of how beautiful it is and how much it costs. The kids recall the cheap sailboats they've made in the past and how quickly they've all fallen apart or been lost, and they realize that anyone who would spend over $1,000 on a toy sailboat has enough money that they wouldn't care if it broke. Sylvia is angered by this idea, and her feelings toward the sailboat become increasingly complex. She seems to associate the sailboat with wealth itself: she covets the toy and wants to touch it, as demonstrated by her jealousy when Sugar later reaches out and strokes its surface, but she also finds its very existence upsetting. This is because it represents money that could be so valuable to her and her family—she later reveals that even $35 would be a lot of money for them. The sailboat thus symbolizes Sylvia's complicated relationship with wealth: while it is exciting to see the luxuries wealth provides, the boat is also a grim reminder of the poverty faced by many people in Sylvia's Harlem neighborhood.

THE TAXI FARE

The taxi fare that Mrs. Moore gives Sylvia represents Sylvia's shift from anger at Miss Moore to anger at injustice. Before Miss Moore takes Sylvia and the other neighborhood children on a field trip to the toy store FAO Schwarz, she gives Sylvia a five-dollar bill for her taxi fare and tells her to calculate a tip for the taxi driver. After spending some time trying and failing to calculate the tip, Sylvia decides not to tip the driver, and keeps the leftover money after the fare. Over the course of the story, Sylvia's relationship to this small amount of money represents the changing dynamics between Sylvia and Miss Moore's lessons.

In her initial gift of the money to Sylvia, Miss Moore makes the money a math lesson, which makes Sylvia angry because she finds Miss Moore's lessons boring and patronizing. By giving up on calculating the tip, Sylvia rejects Miss Moore's attempts to teach her and feels that she has gotten one over on Miss Moore. The money thus represents Sylvia's anger, resistance, and independence at this point, as well as Miss Moore's inability to get through to her.

By the end of the story, though, Sylvia's attitude toward the money shifts. On the way home from FAO Schwarz, Sylvia gets angry about the wealth inequality she became aware of at the store. Then, Sugar voices what Sylvia was privately thinking—that people in the U.S. don't have equal opportunities to earn money—before suggesting that they go to buy ice cream with the leftover four dollars from the taxi fare. But Sylvia brushes her off, and she thinks to herself that "ain't nobody gonna beat me at nuthin." Sylvia's decision to keep the money and her resolution to succeed are connected: now, she sees money as a valuable resource she can use to advance in life, not as a petty way to get back at Miss Moore. The taxi fare

thus represents her shift from resenting Miss Moore to understanding what Miss Moore was trying to teach them and directing her anger toward economic inequality instead.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Vintage edition of *Gorilla, My Love* published in 1992.

The Lesson Quotes

Back in the days when everyone was old and stupid or young and foolish and me and Sugar were the only ones just right, this lady moved on our block with nappy hair and proper speech and no makeup.

Related Characters: Sylvia (speaker), Sugar, Miss Moore

Related Themes:

Page Number: 87

Explanation and Analysis

These first few lines of the story characterize Sylvia and her friend Sugar as confident to the point of arrogance—they believe that everyone except them, regardless of age, is "stupid" or "foolish." It also makes Sylvia's anger apparent: she seems to hate the lady who moved onto the block (whose name is Miss Moore) simply for the way she looks and talks. Right away, then, the reader gets the sense that Sylvia is dismissive and judgmental of the people around her rather than open to the lessons they might teach her.

Furthermore, Sylvia's description of Miss Moore as having "nappy hair and proper speech" sets up the idea that Sylvia dislikes her because the way Miss Moore presents her racial identity confuses Sylvia. She sees Miss Moore's formal dialect as odd and foreign, since Sylvia and the other Black people in the community speak with the African American Vernacular English (AAVE) dialect. Sylvia seems to view this type of speech as a trait that all Black people are supposed to have, whereas Miss Moore's style of speaking could be seen as more stereotypically white and also a marker of her college education. All in all then, Sylvia and other people in the neighborhood might see Miss Moore's "proper speech" as condescending and incompatible with how they think Black people are supposed to act.

On the other hand, "nappy hair" is a pejorative, racially charged term to describe Miss Moore's natural curly hairstyle and suggests that Miss Moore expresses her Blackness in a way that others in the community do not. (It's possible that the other Black people in the neighborhood straighten their hair or wear other sorts of hairstyles that hide their hair's natural texture.) Overall, this mishmash of stereotypically white and stereotypically Black traits makes Miss Moore a mystery and a challenge for Sylvia; in this way, race sows division between them despite the fact that they're both Black.

And the starch in my pinafore scratching the shit outta me and I'm really hating this nappy-head bitch and her goddamn college degree. I'd much rather go to the pool or to the show where it's cool. So me and Sugar leaning on the mailbox being surly, which is a Miss Moore word.

Related Characters: Sylvia (speaker), Miss Moore, Sugar

Related Themes:

Page Number: 88

Explanation and Analysis

As Miss Moore gathers the neighborhood children outside and begins one of her lectures, Sylvia thinks about her frustration with being forced to attend lessons in the middle of the summer. This quote reiterates Sylvia's hatred of Miss Moore as identity-based, again referring to her "nappy" hair (a derogatory, racially charged term for tightly coiled natural hair) and college education. Sylvia finds Miss Moore pretentious and incompatible with her idea of how a Black woman should look and act, which causes her to rebel against Miss Moore's attempts to teach. In this way, Sylvia's anger prevents her from learning new things.

Yet, interestingly, a bit of Miss Moore's language has entered Sylvia's narration: she notes that "surly" is "a Miss Moore Word." While Sylvia's confident rejection of Miss Moore might lead readers to believe that she hasn't learned anything from her lessons, this line shows that her relationship to the lessons is more complicated. Sylvia is able to adapt the word "surly" to herself in a way that makes her feel more confident in her own identity. So, although she dislikes Miss Moore's lessons, when she gets a chance to use something she's learned on her own, she seems to understand its potential value.

Then the driver tells us to get the hell out cause we there already. And the meter reads eighty-five cents. And I'm stalling to figure out the tip and Sugar say give him a dime. And I decide he don't need it bad as I do, so later for him.

Related Characters: Sylvia (speaker), Miss Moore, Sugar

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 89

Explanation and Analysis

In this section, Sylvia attempts to finish calculating a tip for the taxi driver just as they've arrived at their destination. Calculating the tip was an assignment from Miss Moore, so it's a bit surprising that Sylvia has decided to take it so seriously given her contentious relationship to her teacher. This begins to hint that Miss Moore's teaching style (encouraging the children to solve problems on their own) is effective in spite of Sylvia and the other kids' resistance to it. Although Sylvia complained about her boredom during Miss Moore's arithmetic lesson earlier in the story, when she is forced into a real-life situation in which she has to use math, she is suddenly invested in using the skills she has learned.

This changes, however, when Sylvia decides that after paying the fare, she will just keep the money for herself rather than tipping the driver, which she claims is because she needs it more than the driver does. This is perhaps true, since she later reveals that even $35 would be a life-changing amount of money for her family. But it's unclear if this is the real reason for keeping the money—it could just as easily be that Sylvia is embarrassed about her inability to figure out the tip and decides to find a simpler solution to the problem. Her motivation also seems to come in part from a desire to get back at Miss Moore for making her struggle with the problem in the first place, which would again suggest that Sylvia is allowing her anger toward Miss Moore to get in the way of a learning opportunity. Most likely, it is a combination of these elements. For all of these reasons, Sylvia is happy to use her poverty to justify pocketing the money, although she objected to Miss Moore describing their neighborhood as poor earlier in the story.

> Then we check out that we on Fifth Avenue and everybody dressed up in stockings. One lady in a fur coat, hot as it is. White folks crazy.
>
> "This is the place," Miss Moore say, presenting it to us in the voice she uses at the museum. "Let's look in the windows before we go in."
>
> "Can we steal?" Sugar asks very serious like she's getting the ground rules squared away before she plays. "I beg your pardon," say Miss Moore, and we fall out.

Related Characters: Sylvia, Miss Moore, Sugar (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 89-90

Explanation and Analysis

As the group arrives at their destination, Fifth Avenue in Midtown Manhattan (a wealthy and predominately white part of New York City), Sylvia and the other characters begin to notice their surroundings. There is a noticeable shift in the characters' demeanor as they realize that they are in a majority-white and affluent neighborhood as opposed to their own majority-Black and impoverished neighborhood in Harlem. Their reaction at this point is not caution so much as confusion; Sylvia is particularly struck by a white woman wearing a fur coat in spite of the summer heat. The coat is an open display of wealth (fur coats are usually very expensive), but the idea that anyone would do something so impractical is strange to Sylvia. It's eventually revealed that Sylvia's family struggles to afford basic necessities, and seeing this frivolous and luxurious fur coat sets the stage for Sylvia's later realization that this level of wealth inequality is unjust.

Moreover, this passage makes clear that although racial segregation was never legalized in Northern states like New York, race still divides New Yorkers from one another in an unspoken way. The white world seems entirely alien to the main characters (who are all Black), which is emphasized by Miss Moore treating the trip like a museum tour. The children are in a world that is fundamentally different from the one they have left, even though it is only a short taxi ride away. Sugar's comment about stealing reflects another difference between their Harlem neighborhood and the environment they've entered. While stealing is obviously frowned upon anywhere, the consequences for doing so as a Black girl in a wealthy white neighborhood might be more severe than they would be elsewhere.

"At home, then," she say. "Don't you have a calendar and a pencil case and a blotter and a letter-opener on your desk at home where you do your homework?" And she know damn well what our homes look like cause she nosys around in them every chance she gets.

"I don't even have a desk," say Junebug. "Do we?"

"No. And I don't get no homework neither," say Big Butt.

"And I don't even have a home," say Flyboy like he do at school to keep the white folks off his back and sorry for him. Send this poor kid to camp posters, is his specialty.

"I do," says Mercedes. "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."

"Who wants to know about your smelly-ass stationery," say Rosie Giraffe fore I can get my two cents in.

Related Characters: Sylvia, Miss Moore, Junebug, Big Butt, Flyboy, Mercedes, Rosie Giraffe (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 91

Explanation and Analysis

This exchange takes place when the kids ask Miss Moore what a paperweight is after seeing an expensive one in the window of FAO Schwarz (an upscale toy store in Midtown Manhattan). Their discussion reveals economic inequality, both within the city as a whole and within the group. Most of the kids don't even have a desk at home, whereas anyone spending $480 on a paperweight is presumably very wealthy. The kids' needs and knowledge are totally different from the store's usual clientele, and as a result, they wouldn't need (nor could they afford) an item like the paperweight.

Mercedes and Flyboy's comments make clear, though, that the kids' families vary in terms of wealth. Both of them seem to be maligned for their differences: Sylvia believes that Flyboy lies about the extent of his poverty for his own advantage, and Rosie Giraffe mocks Mercedes for her pretentiousness. The other kids' reactions to these two characters suggest that they feel some discomfort about the economic divides in their own community, even if they can't fully articulate this idea.

Sylvia's observation about Miss Moore ("she know damn well what our homes look like") is also interesting, as it reveals more about Miss Moore's teaching style. Miss Moore asks a leading question that she already knows the answer to, which causes the kids to have a frank discussion about their relative wealth and consider inequality in a way they likely hadn't before. While Sylvia is smart enough to realize that Miss Moore is asking a question she already knows the answer to, she seems angry about it rather than open to learning from it. Again, Sylvia allows her resentment of Miss Moore to interfere with a potential learning opportunity.

So once again we tumble all over each other to gaze at this magnificent thing in the toy store which is just big enough to maybe sail two kittens across the pond if you strap them to the posts tight. We all start reciting the price tag like we in assembly. "Handcrafted sailboat of fiberglass at one thousand one hundred ninety-five dollars."

"Unbelievable," I hear myself say and am really stunned. I read it again for myself just in case the group recitation put me in a trance. Same thing. For some reason this pisses me off. We look at Miss Moore and she lookin at us, waiting for I dunno what.

Related Characters: Sylvia (speaker), Miss Moore, Flyboy

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 91-92

Explanation and Analysis

After Flyboy notices a sailboat in the toy store window, the rest of the kids go over to take a look. Sylvia's anger is intriguing here, as she can't seem to figure out what is causing it. While Sylvia has previously expressed anger and frustration, particularly with Miss Moore, she has always given clear and direct explanations for these feelings. Given that this anger is in reaction to reading the price tag on the sailboat, it seems that her reaction must be related to its extremely high price, though Sylvia isn't able to draw this connection.

It's notable that just moments before this, the sailboat evoked awe and admiration in Sylvia and the other kids. In a vacuum, the sailboat is beautiful and "magnificent"—but when the price is revealed, it sours Sylvia's perception of the boat. Given the kids' poverty, the price is appalling and demonstrates the vast wealth inequality between their part of the New York City (Harlem) and this part of the city (Midtown Manhattan).

"Let's go in," she say like she got something up her sleeve. Only she don't lead the way. So me and Sugar turn the corner to where the entrance is, but when we get there I kinda hang 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, so I step away for Sugar to lead. But she hangs back too. And I look at her and she looks at me and this is ridiculous. I mean, damn, I have never ever been shy about doing nothing or going nowhere.

Related Characters: Miss Moore, Sylvia (speaker), Sugar

Related Themes:

Page Number: 93

Explanation and Analysis

After looking at the toys on display in the window of FAO Schwarz, Miss Moore finally tells the kids to go into the toy store. Sylvia and Sugar's hesitance indicates that they're both less comfortable in the space than they've been trying to let on. Sylvia struggles to comprehend her emotions here, as they seem to go against her sense of identity: she is a confident, unashamed person who has rarely struggled to make her presence known. This space, though, makes her feel "funny, shame." This is likely because it's in a predominately white and wealthy area, and Sylvia and Sugar seem to have realized that being poor and Black makes them unwelcome here, even if neither of them is able to vocalize this feeling.

Sylvia even notes that she has "as much right to go in as anybody," a loaded statement given that her family used to live in the South. Under Jim Crow (racial segregation laws in Southern states), it would have been illegal for a Black person to enter an elite and predominately white space like the toy store, but Sylvia knows that living in the North should mean that those restrictions are absent. The reality of the situation says otherwise, though, implying that New York City still *feels* segregated even though segregation is not legally mandated there.

Again, Miss Moore gives the kids a push, forcing them to go into the toy store ahead of her and hoping that they will intuitively recognize the differences between themselves and the people who shop at this store. And on some level, this strategy is working: Sylvia is too focused on the new and confusing feelings she's experiencing to even get angry at Miss Moore for forcing them to learn. She's beginning to realize a new level of complexity in her world—namely, the economic and racial inequality that exists in her city.

And I watched Miss Moore who is steady watchin us like she waitin for a sign. Like Mama Drewery watches the sky and sniffs the air and takes note of just how much slant is in the bird formation. Then me and Sugar bump smack into each other, so busy gazing at the toys, 'specially the sailboat. But we don't laugh and go into our fat-lady bump-stomach routine. We just stare at that price tag. 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.

Related Characters: Sylvia (speaker), Sugar, Miss Moore

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 94

Explanation and Analysis

As Sylvia and other kids cautiously walk around FAO Schwarz, they're nervous about touching any of the expensive toys. The way Miss Moore quietly observes the kids is a change of pace from her lectures earlier in the story, as she seems to want the children to learn a lesson on their own rather than telling them what they should think or feel. The comparison Sylvia makes between Miss Moore and Mama Drewery, presumably another older woman in their neighborhood, implies a shift in Sylvia's attitude toward her teacher. Whereas Miss Moore has seemed confusing and alien to Sylvia because of the way she presents her racial identity, Sylvia now sees similarities between Miss Moore and a person Sylvia respects. Miss Moore's change in teaching style, then, seems to have caused a change in Sylvia's perspective on Miss Moore.

The sailboat again acts as a focal point for Sylvia's confusing new feelings about economic and racial inequality. Sugar reaching out to touch the boat is also a shock to Sylvia. Prior to this point in the story, Sylvia and Sugar seemed to act as a unit; the story even opens with Sylvia claiming that only she and Sugar are "just right." Although Sylvia can't figure out why this action is so disturbing to her, it still creates a divide between the two of them.

The reader can intuit that Sylvia is upset because she feels both a desire to possess the beautiful sailboat, but also an anger at its decadence. But she can't understand these feelings; she wants to punch somebody, because her standard response to anger is to find a person to blame it on. In the past, that person was Miss Moore, but now, she wants to project her anger onto Sugar. Importantly, though, the root of her anger can't be resolved with violence or rejection—Sylvia will have to think more deeply about the

inequality she's become aware of in order to understand what she's feeling.

> I'm thinkin about this tricky toy I saw in the store. A clown that somersaults on a bar then does chin-ups just cause you yank lightly at his leg. Cost $35. I could see me askin my mother for a $35 birthday clown. "You wanna who that costs what?" she'd say, cocking her head to the side to get a better view of the hole in my head. 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 kinda work they do and how they live and how come we ain't in on it?

Related Characters: Sylvia (speaker), Miss Moore

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 94

Explanation and Analysis

As Sylvia and the rest of the kids ride back home from FAO Schwarz, Sylvia ponders the events of the day. The feelings she has struggled to understand over the course of the trip begin to come into focus here. The $35 clown exemplifies the differences between Sylvia's family and the wealthy people who can afford to shop at the toy store. That amount of money, which shoppers at the toy store might be willing to throw away on a toy, could represent a massive improvement in quality of life for Sylvia's family (it could pay for "new bunk beds" or "rent and the piano bill," for instance).

With this, Sylvia begins to hone in on the source of the anger she felt when she was browsing the expensive toys in the store, realizing the injustice of a system that allows some people to live in luxury while others (like her and her family) struggle to afford basic necessities. Indeed, Sylvia makes the very leap that Miss Moore has been trying push her toward by observing the injustice at play in these differences. She wonders "how come we ain't in on it?," essentially questioning why some people seem to have more opportunities than others to earn money and better their lives. Sylvia's anger, previously devoted to petty disputes with her teacher, now comes out directed against the systemic wealth inequality that has affected her and her loved ones' lives.

> 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 pie and don't none of us know what kind of pie she talkin about in the first damn place. But she ain't so smart cause I still got her four dollars from the taxi and she sure ain't gettin it. Messin up my day with this shit. Sugar nudges me in my pocket and winks.

Related Characters: Miss Moore, Sylvia (speaker), Sugar

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 94-95

Explanation and Analysis

On her ride home, Sylvia considers the events of the day and her revelation about the economic divides that exist between her community and white elites. The reintroduction of Miss Moore into her thought process, however, interrupts the progress she has been making. Miss Moore's saying, that "where we are is who we are," is exactly what Sylvia was starting to realize—essentially, that the economic and racial demographics of where a person lives determines which opportunities they have access to and how people will perceive them. But Sylvia's resentment of Miss Moore's pretentiousness leads her to avoid learning the lesson.

Instead, Sylvia uses the taxi fare as a reminder of her victory over Miss Moore. By keeping the leftover money that Miss Moore gave her rather than giving it back, Sylvia is trying to feel superior to Miss Moore and to avoid confronting the idea that Miss Moore's ideas about class and race might be correct. For a moment, then, it seems that nothing has really changed since the start of the story for Sylvia—especially as Sugar once again appears to be on Sylvia's side. Notably, though, the four dollars are a stark contrast to the extravagance Sylvia and the other kids saw at FAO Schwarz. So, although focusing on the taxi fare is Sylvia's way of avoiding thinking deeply about the Miss Moore's lesson on economic inequality, the fact that four dollars seems like a lot of money to Sylvia actually makes the wealth divide between her and the wealthy white people she saw in Midtown Manhattan all the more obvious.

> We start down the block and she gets ahead which is O.K. by me cause I'm goin to the West End and then over to the Drive to think this day through. She can run if she want to and even run faster. But ain't nobody gonna beat me at nuthin.

Related Characters: Sylvia (speaker), Sugar, Miss Moore

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 96

Explanation and Analysis

These are the final lines of the story, coming just after Sugar suggests that she and Sylvia race to the store to spend the leftover taxi fare that Miss Moore gave Sylvia earlier in the story. Despite Sylvia's refusal to vocalize her thoughts about the trip to the toy store, this passage makes it clear that the events of the day have changed Sylvia. The taxi fare, which earlier seemed like just an exciting bonus or a distraction, now seems to take on newfound importance for Sylvia. Her refusal to spend the four dollars frivolously implies that her newfound awareness of the economic inequality that affects her and her community has made her more appreciative of the value of money. In addition, Sylvia's anger, which was once purely directed at Miss Moore and her efforts to teach Sylvia about the world, is now more abstract.

The last line of the story, "But ain't nobody gonna beat me at nuthin," gives a sense of Sylvia's new outlook on life. Where she was once apathetic about Miss Moore's efforts to make her consider issues of economic and racial inequality, she has now seen firsthand the results of those societal problems. As a result, Sylvia is no longer angry at Miss Moore for trying to get her to learn. Instead, she seems frustrated by the societal injustice she's learned about, which suggests that anger isn't necessarily an impediment to learning—rather, it can help people recognize and understand problems that affect them directly. In the end, Sylvia resolves to fight for success in a society where poor people (like her and her community) are at a severe disadvantage, which shows that Miss Moore's titular lesson has had a meaningful impact on her.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

THE LESSON

The narrator (whose name is later revealed to be Sylvia) recalls a period from her childhood when an older, college-educated woman moved into her neighborhood. Sylvia and her friend Sugar mock the woman because of her "nappy hair" and "proper speech." Sylvia compares her hatred for the woman to her hatred of the alcoholics who get in the way and stink up the neighborhood. The woman, who has very dark skin, is the only one in the neighborhood without a first name; she's only called Miss Moore.

Sylvia's hatred of Miss Moore is rooted the way Mis Moore presents her racial identity. She uses "proper speech" (which presumably means a stereotypically white dialect rather than the African American Vernacular English that the other characters use) and has a college education. Because of these qualities, Sylvia views Miss Moore as fundamentally different from the other Black people in the neighborhood (including Sylvia herself). At the same time, Miss Moore's natural hair—which Sylvia refers to as "nappy," a derogatory term for tightly coiled hair—and dark skin are open displays of her Blackness. In Sylvia's view, these traits don't match up with the non-Black way that Miss Moore acts. Miss Moore's formal name also makes her an outsider in the community, where everyone else goes by their first name (like Sylvia) or a nickname (like Sugar).

Miss Moore is constantly planning activities for the kids on the block. Sylvia's cousin, Sugar, lives on the same block; their whole family moved north at the same time and lived together in an apartment before spreading out a bit. Although Sylvia finds Miss Moore's activities boring, the children's parents always insist that they go with Miss Moore, and that when they do, they dress formally like Miss Moore does. The other adults mock Miss Moore behind her back, but because she's the only one in the neighborhood who's college-educated, she's able to convince the adults that it's only right for her to educate the kids on the block.

Even though the other adults mock Miss Moore for her differences, they also seem to find something aspirational about her college education, which is why they force their kids to dress formally like she does and attend her lessons. This detail that Sylvia finds the lessons boring could suggest that she's letting her resentment of Miss Moore stand in the way of learning new things. On another note, the fact that Sylvia's family is from the South implies that before moving to New York City, they probably lived under Jim Crow (racial segregation laws in Southern states that were in place from the 1870s until 1965). Segregation was never legally mandated in Northern states like New York, which may be why Sylvia's family chose to move there.

One hot summer day, Miss Moore gathers the neighborhood kids at the mailbox and starts to lecture them about arithmetic. Sylvia thinks that summer should be a break from school; she hates Miss Moore (who she thinks of as a "nappy-head bitch") and her college degree. Sylvia and Sugar look "surly," which Sylvia notes is a Miss Moore word. The other kids present don't pay much attention to the lesson either. Flyboy, Big Butt, and Junebug are distracted by what everyone has brought for lunch, while Rosie Giraffe is waiting for someone—preferably Mercedes—to ask her if she's from Georgia, so she has an excuse to beat them up.

Sylvia's thought that Miss Moore is a "nappy-head bitch" (a racially charged insult) again implies that her hatred is rooted in the way Miss Moore presents her racial identity. It's implied that Sylvia and the other children are Black, and so is Miss Moore. But Sylvia doesn't approve of Miss Moore's combination of stereotypically white traits (like "proper speech") and stereotypically Black traits (like her natural hair), as this way of expressing racial identity doesn't fit with Sylvia's idea of how a Black woman should look and act. Though Sylvia resents Miss Moore, her narration also includes a word that she picked up from Miss Moore's lessons, suggesting that Sylvia is learning something in spite of her anger. Meanwhile, Rosie Giraffe's desire to fight Mercedes over whether or not she's from Georgia suggests a conflict between Northern and Southern states, the implication being that Georgia (and the South in general) is an undesirable place to be from. This is perhaps because of the Jim Crow laws that were in effect around this time (the 1960s). It also hints at a tension between Mercedes and the rest of the group, as Rosie targets her specifically.

Miss Moore asks the kids if they know what money is, which Sylvia finds patronizing. She tells Miss Moore that she would rather go Sunset Park to harass the West Indian kids and take their money than listen to this lecture. She is sure Miss Moore will bring that comment up in a future lesson on brotherhood. Then, Sylvia suggests that they go down to the subway to cool off (she and Sugar are also hoping to meet boys there). As the group begins to walk down the street, Miss Moore bores the kids by talking about poverty in their neighborhood and inequality in the U.S. Sylvia wants to object to the idea that they're all poor, but she doesn't get a chance before Miss Moore hails some cabs for the kids.

While Miss Moore clearly has important ideas to convey to the kids, they feel patronized by the way she begins her lesson. She seems to assume that because the children are from a poor neighborhood, they don't understand what money is or why it's important—when, in reality, it's possible that their poverty makes them more *aware of money than middle- or upper-class people. Although Sylvia claims to want to leave, her interest in debating Miss Moore's ideas about poverty and inequality suggests that she is more invested in the lessons than she lets on. Her comment about West Indian kids also demonstrates that she's aware of racial differences between people and of her own racial identity.*

Miss Moore gives Sylvia five dollars for **cab fare** and tells her to figure out the tip for the driver. Sylvia, Sugar, Junebug, and Flyboy joke around in the car during the ride. At the same time, Sylvia is focused on trying to figure out how much money to give the driver. She suggests that they all jump out and go to a barbecue, but the other kids are too focused on talking about the cab's meter and don't want to go along with her plan. When the driver tells the kids they've gotten to their destination, Sylvia can't figure out the tip and then decides not to give him one, because she needs the money more.

Sylvia's focus on trying to calculate the tip is at odds with her earlier dismissive attitude toward Miss Moore's arithmetic lesson; by placing Sylvia in a hands-on situation, Miss Moore forces her to engage with the problem. Yet Sylvia maintains her rebelliousness, as she tries to convince the other kids to escape and then pockets the money herself rather than figuring out the tip. In this way, Sylvia's anger toward Miss Moore and dismissal of her lessons prevents her from learning new things—even something that she initially seems invested in. In addition, Sylvia's decision that she needs the leftover money (presumably just a few dollars) hints that her family is *struggling financially, contradicting her previous objections to Miss Moore labeling her as poor.*

Sylvia realizes that they're on Fifth Avenue, where everyone is dressed in expensive clothing. When she sees that one woman is wearing a fur coat in the summer, she thinks to herself that white people are crazy. Miss Moore tells the kids that this is their destination in a tone that sounds like she's announcing their arrival at a museum. Sugar asks if she's allowed to steal, which offends Miss Moore. Then, the group walks over to the windows of the nearby toy store to take a look.

Sylvia probably thinks the woman wearing a fur coat is crazy both because the coat signifies extreme wealth (most fur coats cost hundreds or thousands of dollars) and because wearing it in the heat is impractical. Sylvia associates this frivolousness and open display of wealth with whiteness, drawing a connection between the racial and economic differences she notices. This race and class divide is compounded by Miss Moore acting as if their arrival in Midtown Manhattan is like arriving at a museum, as this characterizes the wealthy white people in the area as exotic and alien in relation to Miss Moore and the children.

The kids, excited by the toys in the window, begins to point out things they want. Big Butt tells everyone he's going to buy the microscope he sees in the window. He knows that it's for looking at things, but when Miss Moore asks him to be more specific about what it's for, he doesn't have any idea. Miss Moore tells the kids about all the tiny things one can see through a microscope that are invisible to the naked eye. But when she says the word "naked," the kids all start laughing.

Big Butt's sudden interest in a microscope, an educational tool, is surprising given the way the kids have dismissed most of Miss Moore's lessons. Yet her attempt to capitalize on that interest fails, as the kids find her formal word choice too entertaining to actually pay attention to what she has to say. In this way, Miss Moore's "proper speech" alienates her from the children (who all speak in African American Vernacular English), making it harder for them to relate to her and absorb what she's trying to teach them.

Miss Moore asks how much the microscope costs, and the kids see that it is $300. She asks Big Butt and Junebug how long they would need to save their allowances to be able to afford it. Sylvia and Sugar tell Miss Moore that it would take too long to save that much money, and that Big Butt and Junebug would outgrow the microscope by then. Miss Moore objects and starts to lecture them about how you can't outgrow "learning instruments," which annoys Sylvia and Sugar.

This passage introduces a contrast between the children (who come from a poor, predominately Black neighborhood) and the toy store (which serves wealthy customers in a predominately white area). Big Butt's potential interest in science is crushed by the extreme cost of the microscope, which he would never be able to afford. This begins to hint that Miss Moore is trying to teach the kids a lesson about economic inequality—but she avoids discussing this outright, choosing instead to focus her lecture on the importance of "learning instruments." In doing so, she again loses the kids' attention, as they don't care about what they see as her pointless obsession with education.

Rosie Giraffe finds a decorated block of glass that costs $480, and Sylvia is confused as to why it costs that much. Miss Moore explains that it's a paperweight made of semi-precious stones, but the kids don't know what a paperweight is. She tells them that it's for keeping a desk tidy. Sylvia and Sugar curtsy at Mercedes, who they know likes to keep things neat. Miss Moore asks the kids if they have desks at home that they keep papers on, although she knows that most of them don't. Flyboy says that he doesn't even have a home, which is what he always tells white teachers at school so they'll feel sorry for him and let him get away with things. Mercedes tells everyone that she has a desk, as well as scented stationery, which Rosie Giraffe mocks her for.

This section shows the economic disparity even within the group: although Miss Moore has suggested that they're all from a poor neighborhood, Mercedes's family is wealthier than the others. While most of the kids can't even afford a desk for their home, Mercedes is wealthy enough to have a desk and fancy stationery. Rosie Giraffe's mocking is similar to Sylvia's reaction to Miss Moore: because of her relative wealth, Mercedes seems strange and doesn't fit in with the rest of the kids, just as Miss Moore's mannerisms and education level make her an outlier in the neighborhood.

Flyboy interrupts the conversation to show everyone a **sailboat**, which he stares at as if it belongs to him. The kids crowd in the window to look at it and are amazed. They look at the price tag and read the cost aloud in unison: $1,195. Sylvia is shocked. She reads it again and gets angry, although she's not sure why. Miss Moore stares at the kids, as if she's waiting for something. Sylvia wonders why anyone would pay that much when you can build your own sailboat for just 50 cents.

The sailboat presents a stark contrast between the group of kids and the people who can afford to shop at this store, as Sylvia recalls her own boat that she made for only 50 cents. Sylvia is confronted with economic inequality seemingly for the first time, although she's not yet able to articulate why the price of the boat is so frustrating to her. Miss Moore's silence forces Sylvia and the other kids to work through this problem of inequality on their own.

Q.T. is particularly fascinated with the **boat**, although Sylvia thinks that he's so little that even if he got the boat, someone would just take it from him. Rosie Giraffe thinks that it doesn't make sense for parents to buy the boat when it would just break, and Sylvia says that it should last forever if it's that expensive. Mercedes says her father would buy it for her if she asked, and Rosie Giraffe mocks her again. Q.T. observes that rich people must shop at this store. Sylvia asks Miss Moore how much a real boat costs in comparison, even though she usually never speaks to Miss Moore because she dislikes her so much. Miss Moore tells her to research it and tell the group later, which upsets Sylvia, who just wanted an answer to her question.

Once again, Mercedes makes her higher class status known, and Rosie Giraffe again mocks her for flaunting her family's relative wealth. This interaction makes it clear that the children are becoming more aware of economic inequality and are beginning to feel that it is unjust for some people to be wealthy enough to shop at this toy store when most of them have so little. Meanwhile, Miss Moore's response to Sylvia's question about a real boat, while well-intentioned, frustrates Sylvia, who only wanted a simple answer and didn't even want to speak to Miss Moore in the first place. Sylvia's resentment of Miss Moore makes it impossible for her to see past the momentary frustration and take an interest in learning independently.

Miss Moore says that they should go into the store, but she doesn't lead the way. Sylvia and Sugar reach the entrance, but they both hang back. Sylvia feels strange and ashamed, even though she doesn't think she should feel that way. Sylvia is confused because she's never been shy in the past. Then, Mercedes and the other kids push them in the door, and Mercedes walks past the other kids confidently. When the rest of the kids stumble into the store, it reminds Sylvia of sneaking into a Catholic church service with Sugar. They had originally planned on pulling a prank in the church, but Sylvia couldn't go through with it once she saw how quiet and holy the place was. Sugar mocked her for her hesitation afterward.

The toy store's association with wealth and whiteness frightens Sylvia and Sugar, although Sylvia again struggles to identify why. Her only other association with this feeling of shame is when she entered a Catholic church, another traditionally white space. This shame is also tied to class: two girls are contrasted by Mercedes, whose wealth allows her to enter the store with confidence while the rest of the kids struggle with whether or not they belong there.

The kids walk cautiously through the store, avoiding touching anything. Sylvia and Sugar are both mesmerized by the toys, the **sailboat** in particular. Sugar reaches out and touches the boat, which makes Sylvia jealous and angry. She asks Miss Moore why she brought them there, and Miss Moore asks if Sylvia is upset about something. As Miss Moore watches the children browse the store, Sylvia finds her smile condescending and is annoyed by how closely Miss Moore is watching her. Sylvia suggests that they leave.

The kids' caution about touching any toys is the result of them feeling out of place because they're poor and Black in a space that predominately caters to wealthy white people. Sylvia's mix of jealousy and anger at Sugar touching the toy sailboat demonstrates her two reactions to the extravagant wealth of the toy store: she both admires it and is disturbed by it. Afterward, Miss Moore once again evades Sylvia's question, but this time she is able to read Sylvia's emotions and pushes her to think about them more deeply.

On the ride home, Sylvia sits in thought, remembering a toy clown from the store that does tricks and cost $35. She imagines how ridiculous it would be to ask her mother to spend that much on a toy clown. Sylvia thinks about all the things that much money could pay for in her family: new beds, a trip to the country to visit Granddaddy Nelson, rent, and more. She can't believe that people exist who would spend so much money on toys, and she wonders why she and her friends and family can't make money like that.

At last, Sylvia's introspection allows her to figure out the source of the anger she felt in the toy store. Her realization about the inequality she has witnessed explains her previous frustration, as she begins to truly grasp the stark differences between her family and community and the people who shop at the toy store. In recognizing this unfairness, she begins to understand Miss Moore's lessons and redirect her anger away from Miss Moore and onto societal injustice.

Sylvia recalls Miss Moore saying that "where we are is who we are," but that it doesn't have to be that way. Thinking about Miss Moore suggesting that "poor people have to wake up and demand their share of the pie" makes Sylvia angry again, and she remembers that she still has the **money** she saved from the taxi.

In this section, Sylvia makes the connection between Miss Moore's ideas and her own thoughts about wealth inequality. The idea the Miss Moore (whom Sylvia still views as strange and alien) might have been right frustrates her, likely because it makes her feel ignorant. Sylvia also recalls Miss Moore's suggestion that "poor people have to […] demand their share of the pie," meaning that poor people shouldn't accept the injustice that effects them and should demand better resources and opportunities. In remembering the leftover money from the cab fare, Sylvia seems to be reassuring herself that she isn't actually poor, and that she's smarter than Miss Moore. But although a few dollars seems like a lot of money to Sylvia, this sum is miniscule compared to what the wealthy customers at the toy store must have, which makes it clear that Sylvia is poor by comparison. The idea that the poor need to demand their fair share also recalls the moment when Sylvia decided to keep the money in the first place, deciding that she needed it more than the taxi driver.

Miss Moore gathers the kids in front of the mailbox again. Sylvia feels like it's been years since they were last there, and she's exhausted from thinking about everything from the day. Instead of lecturing, Miss Moore asks what the kids thought of FAO Schwarz, the toy shop they just visited. Rosie Giraffe mumbles that white people are crazy. Mercedes says she wants to go there with her birthday money, and the other kids all shove her. Sugar tells Miss Moore that she thinks the **sailboat** costs more than all of the kids in their group spend on food in a year, which excites Miss Moore. Sylvia is annoyed and stands on Sugar's foot to try to get her to stop talking.

The main characters' encounter with white people was alien and bizarre to them. Even though there is no official racial segregation in New York City, then, race clearly divides people from one another, creating the sense that places like FAO Schwarz are implicitly white spaces despite allowing people of any race to shop there. On another note, Sugar takes another opportunity to act independently of Sylvia. In telling the group her thoughts on the inequality she witnessed, she demonstrates the effectiveness of Miss Moore's teaching style, as Sugar has been able to come to these conclusions on her own. Sylvia's frustration with Sugar shows that even though she seems to have learned something from the day too—indeed, what Sugar says echoes Sylvia's own thoughts during the ride home—she still doesn't want to give Miss Moore the satisfaction of knowing that.

Miss Moore asks Sugar to think about what this difference in wealth says about the society they live in. Sugar pushes Sylvia off and says that she thinks that the U.S. isn't much of a democracy, given that not everyone has equal opportunities to earn money. Miss Moore is ecstatic over this response, while Sylvia feels betrayed. Sylvia stands on Sugar's foot again to make her stop talking. Miss Moore, looking at Sylvia, asks if anyone else learned something. Sylvia begins to feel something that she can't explain and walks away.

Sugar clearly identifies the lesson Miss Moore has been trying to teach the kids about economic inequality in the U.S. (which, as Rosie Giraffe alluded to in the previous section, is also tied to racial inequality). Although Sylvia tries to silence Sugar, the fact that she feels an unfamiliar emotion rather than anger implies that she knows Sugar is right and that Miss Moore's lesson was worthwhile. Rather than lashing out angrily, Sylvia chooses to walk away, presumably to think things through on her own. This marks an important shift in Sylvia's character: instead of blaming Miss Moore for her confusion and anger, she's turning inward and trying to get a better handle on her emotions.

When Sugar runs to catch up with Sylvia, Sylvia brushes her off. Sugar suggests they race to get ice cream with the **four dollars** leftover from what Miss Moore gave Sylvia, but Sylvia lets Sugar run ahead. She decides she needs to take some time to think over everything that's happened. She doesn't care if Sugar runs fast, because no one is going to beat Sylvia at anything.

This final section demonstrates how much Sylvia has changed in the course of a single day. She now blows off Sugar, whom she was once attached to at the hip, and rather than use the leftover money to buy junk food, Sylvia decides to go off alone to think about what she has learned. Whereas earlier, Sylvia probably would have joined Sugar in spending the money frivolously, it appears to hold a deeper significance for her now. She doesn't want to spend the money impulsively, and it seems like she can no longer shield herself from her complicated feelings about Miss Moore's lesson. Indeed, Sylvia's attitude that no one is going to beat her at anything suggests that she has taken Sugar's thoughts about systemic economic inequality to heart, and that she's determined to not let anyone keep her in poverty. It also suggests that although she still remains defiant and independent, her anger will now be directed toward the injustice she has come to recognize rather than toward Miss Moore.

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