
The Lesson By Toni Cade Bambara: Sylvia's Character Analysis

"The Lesson" by Toni Cade Bambara, is a short story about a girl who is learning about the economic inequality that exists through her teacher, Miss Moore, who tries to challenge her cynical perspective on life. This story emphasises the main character, Sylvia's, intense need for control. One major personality trait that this character has is her strong-willed nature. She is determined to make her own decisions and is not willing to listen to anybody but herself. Sylvia also is constantly displaying this need for control by her surly attitude and fierce disposition throughout the entire short story. She can become very vulgar and rude to anyone that is above her and expresses this through her harsh words. Furthermore, she is also very critical and judgmental to her peers and the authority figure in her life. Overall, Sylvia's strong-willed, surly, and judgmental disposition emphasizes her intense need to be in control of her life.

Sylvia is a very strong-willed character that is constantly striving to make her own decisions. When Miss Moore is asking the children if they know what real money is Sylvia lets the teacher know that she is tired of this. She says that she would rather wreak havoc on the West Indian kids, and suggests that they go to the subway where it is cooler. This displays Sylvia's independence and determination despite the fact that the teacher is actually in charge. She is constantly resisting authority because she wants to call all of the shots. This trait persists throughout the story. After a long day of looking at grossly overpriced toys, Sylvia says, "Ain't nobody gonna beat me at nuthin". By saying this, the main character is expressing that she is not going to settle with being poor or considered less than that of the people who can afford to shop in the overpriced store. Conclusively, Sylvia's strong determination and inability to follow authority makes her feel like she is in control.

Sylvia is also very surly throughout the entirety of the story. She is constantly getting fired up at her teacher, Miss Moore. For example, when she asks another student if she has any school supplies at home, Sylvia gets angry. She thinks to herself, "She know damn well what our homes look like cause she nosys around in them every chance she gets". This shows that she is very sensitive about being judged on how much money her family and community has. Another example of her bad tempered demeanor is when she asks Miss Moore a question but in her head she says, "I never talk to her, I wouldn't give the bitch that satisfaction". She is vulgar when it comes to how she really thinks of Miss Moore. To sum it up, the vulgarity and surly nature of Sylvia shows how she resents being told what to do and will not allow others to make decisions for her.

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Finally, the main character is very judgmental to the people around her because she doesn't like change. For example, when Miss Moore first moves into town Sylvia is put out by it. She says, "and quite naturally we laughed at her, laughed the way we did at the junk man who went about his business like he was some big time president and his sorry ass horse his secretary". She also goes on to say, "and we kinda hated her too, hated 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 goddamn gas mask". She is very unaccepting of anything new and different. This could mean that she feels threatened by Miss Moore because she might skew the path she wants to take. A new authoritative figure is not something that Sylvia feels is necessary because she wants to decide what is best for her, and a nosy teacher is not part of her plan.

Bambara creates a straightforward story in her narrative, "The Lesson," that expresses everybody's desire to create their own destiny. This universal theme is expressed through the main character, Sylvia. However, Sylvia seems to carry this out in interesting and sometimes questionable ways. The three main characteristics that this story expresses is Sylvia's strong-willed, surly, and judgmental nature. For example, the main character is very resistant towards Miss Moore because she is unwilling to listen to anyone but herself. She also expresses her feelings in a very vulgar, surly way. Additionally, she often uses profanity to express her distaste towards her teacher. Finally, Sylvia is very judgmental towards anything new that comes into her life, and she lashes out by criticising every aspect of the change. Overall, Sylvia is strong willed, surly, and judgmental and she behaves this way because she is determined to create the life she wants, even if she is not making the right choices.

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