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THE LESSON

Short Story by Toni Cade Bambara

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TONI CADE BAMBARA

- Toni Cade Bambara was born March 25, 1939, in Harlem, New York.
- Her family moved around frequently, so she spent her childhood in different neighborhoods of New York and New Jersey.
- Bambara studied English and theater arts in college.
- In 1959, she published her first work of fiction, "Sweet Town."
- In addition to writing, Bambara worked as a social worker for the Harlem Welfare Center, and was heavily involved in several neighborhood programs.
- From 1969 to 1974, Bambara taught in the English department at Livingstone College in New Jersey.
- In 1972 she published "Gorilla, My Love," which became her most widely read collection.
- The collection includes 15 stories, including the short stories "Raymond's Run" and "The Lesson," that highlight the adversities and relationships in African-American communities.

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"THE LESSON"

- Using her own experiences growing up as a Black girl in New York during the 1950s, Bambara challenges her characters to rethink ideas of accepted social values and norms.
- In the short story "The Lesson," the narrator, speaks in a dialect, also known as African American Vernacular English.
- This is an appropriate dialect for the narrator because she is a Black girl about twelve years old who lives in a New York ghetto, most likely Harlem.
- The dialect adds authenticity, realism, and humor to the story.
- In her work, Bambara will often juxtapose the realities of Black culture and white culture based on the historical truths of the time periods which she sets her stories.
- This can be seen in "The Lesson" as a group of Black children are brought on a field trip to New York City to visit an extravagant toy store.

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FAO SCHWARZ

- FAO Schwarz is an iconic toy store located in New York City founded by Frederick August Otto Schwarz.
- The company is known for its expensive high-end toys, life-sized stuffed animals, and interactive performances.
- FAO Schwarz is the oldest toy store in the United States, first opening its doors in 1862 in Baltimore — then relocating to NYC in 1870.
- Many people visit FAO Schwarz for the experience; it's not just a toy store or place to shop.



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VOCABULARY & SLANG

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sachet (noun)

a small perfumed bag used to scent clothes

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VOCABULARY & SLANG

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junk man (noun)

a term for a person who buys or trades
scrap items then tries to sell or trade
these items at a profit to other
individuals

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VOCABULARY & SLANG

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wino (noun)

a person who drinks excessive amounts of alcohol, especially one who is homeless

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VOCABULARY & SLANG

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spruce up (verb)

to make neat or smart in appearance

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VOCABULARY & SLANG

gofer (noun) NOT FOR EDUCATIONAL USE

a person who is treated like a low-level employee or servant because of their ability to “go for” anything or to go retrieve anything

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VOCABULARY & SLANG

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saddle (verb)

to burden someone with an onerous responsibility or task

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VOCABULARY & SLANG

La-de-da (adjective)

If you describe someone as la-de-da, you mean that they have an upper-class way of behaving, which you think seems unnatural and is only done to impress people

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VOCABULARY & SLANG

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pinafore (noun)

a collarless, sleeveless dress worn over a blouse or sweater; like a jumper or an apron

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VOCABULARY & SLANG

surly (adjective)
describes bad-tempered and unfriendly

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VOCABULARY & SLANG

slum (noun) EDUCATIONAL USE

a dirty and overcrowded urban area
inhabited by very poor people

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VOCABULARY & SLANG

ferocious (adjective)
describes savagely cruel or violent

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VOCABULARY & SLANG

rolling (verb)
to laugh intensely

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VOCABULARY & SLANG

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wail (verb)

to thrash something in a brutal, forceful,
or relentless manner

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VOCABULARY & SLANG

goose (verb) NOT FOR EDUCATIONAL USE

to pinch or jab someone in the rear in order to startle them

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VOCABULARY & SLANG

treachery (noun)
a betrayal of trust

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VOCABULARY & SLANG

sorrowfully (adverb)
in a way that shows grief and misery

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"The Lesson" by Toni Cade Bambara — Suggested Lesson Procedure

1. Have students complete the before reading word splash activity. Students will write a brief creative short story based off words that are pulled directly from the story "The Lesson." Set a timer for 5 minutes. Then let students pair and share to give students a laugh. Next, give the class the opportunity to read their stories aloud to everyone—they really enjoy this. This word splash strategy helps students make connections to words that will be part of the story and consider how these words may be connected to one another. It also builds anticipation for what "The Lesson" will be about.
2. Review background information on Toni Cade Bambara as well as the story "The Lesson" using the Powerpoint presentation.
3. Provide students with academic vocabulary and slang phrases from the story using the Powerpoint presentation. Students will copy the definitions down on their graphic organizers.
4. Read the story "The Lesson" by Toni Cade Bambara. This takes about 20 minutes without stopping. I like to read the first two paragraphs as a class and then have the students read the rest of the story silently/independently to themselves.

WARNING: there is offensive language in this story, so prepare your students for this before reading to set expectations and boundaries.

5. Give a copy of the literary analysis questions to students. Students can complete this activity in pairs. Give students a time range to work, and then come together as a class to review the answers. It is essential to discuss the literary analysis questions to help students work on building this skill.
6. Assign students to groups of 3-5 and pass out the discussion questions. Have students discuss the questions and their personal responses with one another. Walk around and monitor students. Optional: take time to require each group to share with the whole class their discussion regarding at least one of the questions.
7. Assign students the after reading journal prompt to be completed individually.
8. Have students participate in the cost of living activity. Read the directions aloud as well as the different options students can choose from on how to spend their "money." This activity will not precisely represent the cost of living for people in different areas—as people from all over the world have different salaries and different expenses—but it is definitely a fun and interesting tool to highlight some of the extreme expenses that people are burdened with.

Note to teachers: Due to copyright law, I am unable to offer a full text version of the story. If you enter "The Lesson by Toni Cade Bambara" into any search engine, you will find a copy of the story available for you to print and use in class. Here is the link I used: ["The Lesson" by Toni Cade Bambara](#)

Name:

Class:

Before Reading
“The Lesson” by Toni Cade Bambara

Write a brief short story using all of the following words. You have five minutes.

money
fur coat

microscope
desk

sailboat
clown

democracy
shame

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Name:

Date:

“The Lesson” by Toni Cade Bambara
Vocabulary and Slang

sachet	Noun	
junk man	Noun	
wino	Noun	
spruce up	Verb	
gofer	Noun	
saddle	Verb	
la-de-da	Adj	
pinafore	Noun	
surly	Adj	
slum	Noun	
ferocious	Adj	
rolling	Verb	
wailed	Verb	
goose	Verb	
treachery	Noun	
sorrowfully	Adverb	

Name:

Date:

“The Lesson” by Toni Cade Bambara
Literary Analysis Questions

1. What is the point of view of this story? How does the point of view impact the plot?

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2. Why do the children dislike Miss Moore? What does her appearance have to do with it? How do the parents perceive Miss Moore?

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3. Why does Miss Moore believe it is her civic duty to bring the children on field trips?

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4. What would the children rather be doing in the summer? How does this affect their attitudes during the field trip?

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5. Why might the children be fascinated with the meter ticking?

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6. What evidence is there in the story that the children don't have the same educational opportunities as other kids?

7. How much do you think a yacht cost? How much does Sylvia think one costs? Why does Miss Moore tell her to research it and report back to the group instead of just telling her right there and then?

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8. What is the meaning of the following quote? “Let’s go in,” she say like she got something up her sleeve.” What figurative language does Bambara use?

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9. What is the meaning of the following quote? “Then the rest of us tumble in like a glued-together jigsaw done all wrong.” What figurative language does Bambara use?

10. Why does Sylvia connect the shame that she feels upon entering the toy store to her feelings when she and Sugar "crashed" the Catholic church during a Mass? How are these two events related and why does Bambara establish this connection?

11. Why do the children have trouble understanding why the items cost so much money?

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12. Why does Miss Moore choose to bring the kids to FAO Schwartz? Why a toy store and why this specific one? What is the symbolism?

13. What is the significance of the following quote? "...poor people have to wake up and demand their share of the pie." What figurative language does Bambara use?

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14. How is Miss Moore trying to empower the children? What is "the lesson" as stated in the title?

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15. Why does Sylvia feel betrayed by Sugar?

16. Give an example of how Sylvia shows vulnerability. How does it differ than the usual persona she wants people to see?

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17. Was Miss Moore's lesson successful? Why or why not?

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18. What is the theme of this story?

Name:

Date:

“The Lesson” by Toni Cade Bambara
Discussion Questions

1. In what ways does culture and economics hinder or benefit someone’s education? Explain.

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2. Explain what Miss Moore means when she says, “where people are is who they are.” Do you agree? Why or why not?

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3. Miss Moore is a different type of adult than the children are used to being around. Is it important for you to interact with others who think and act differently than you? Why or why not?

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4. What is a democracy? What is a fair society? What’s the difference between fair and equal?

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5. Do you think social inequalities exist today? Does everyone have a fair chance to make a good living?

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6. Why do you think Miss Moore called her own community a slum? Why would she say this in front of the children?

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7. At one point, Sugar asks if she can steal. She is old enough to know that stealing is always *wrong* but she obviously views stealing as okay in certain situations. In your opinion, is stealing ever OKAY or is it always morally wrong? When is it justifiable?

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8. What do you think is the most important lesson the youth of today's generation needs to be taught? Consider lessons you've learned or philosophies/wisdom you would like to pass on to others.

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Name:

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“The Lesson” by Toni Cade Bambara
After Reading Journal

Who is an adult that has been influential in your own life? How has this person impacted you?

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Name:

Date:

Costs of Living Activity

IMAGINE: you make \$1200 a month working 40 hours a week, so your salary is \$14,400 a year before taxes.

Directions: Look at all of the monthly living expenses below. Circle the options that represent how you would prefer to live based on the income provided above. Everything is considered *optional*. Add up all your expenses. Make sure your monthly income is enough to cover your monthly expenses.

Housing Options:

\$500 a month for a 450 square ft. apartment
\$900 a month for a two bedroom apartment
\$1050 a month for a mortgage on a house

Food Options:

\$100 a month to grocery shop at bargain stores and never eat out at restaurants
\$210 a month to grocery shop at reasonably priced stores and sometimes eat at restaurants
\$320 a month to grocery shop at high-end stores and visit restaurants frequently

Bills:

\$50 a month for internet
\$100 a month for gas and electric
\$50 a month for water
\$50 a month for cell phone bill

College Options:

\$300 a month for student loan bill
FREE — earn an academic or athletic scholarship

Entertainment and Leisure (clothes, games, movies, streaming services, haircuts, etc)

\$50 a month for personal purchases
\$150 a month for personal purchases
\$300 a month for personal purchases

Toiletries and Human Needs (deodorant, shampoo, toothpaste, soap, etc)

\$20 a month for off-brand products
\$40 a month for brand-name products

Car and Transportation Options:

\$100 a month to lease a car or make car payments
\$20 a month for car insurance
\$40 a month for gas
FREE — Bike or walk everywhere
\$80 a month for a bus pass

Philanthropic Donations (give to charity)

FREE — Donate your time by volunteering
\$20 a month to a charity of your choice

****NOW HIRING:** Pick up an extra job part-time working overnight 20 hours a week...which would bring in extra cash. You now have an extra 600 dollars to spend a month, bringing your total to \$1800 a month.

If you still need more money, what can you do? If you sacrifice your health insurance, you will receive an extra 450 dollars in your pocket a month!

In the lines that follow, explain your economic choices from above and answer the following questions.

1) Do you feel like your choices reflect a comfortable standard of living? Explain.

2) What other expenses exist that you do not see on the list?

3) Do any of the living expenses seem unfairly priced? How so?

4) What ways could you ensure that you have a great standard of living?

ANSWER GUIDE

“The Lesson” by Toni Cade Bambara Vocabulary and Slang

sachet	Noun	a small perfumed bag used to scent clothes
junk man	Noun	a term for a person who buys or trades scrap items then tries to sell or trade these items at a profit to other individuals
wino	Noun	a person who drinks excessive amounts of alcohol, especially one who is homeless
spruce up	Verb	to make neat or smart in appearance
gofer	Noun	a person who is treated like a low-level employee or servant because of their ability to “go for” anything or to go retrieve anything
saddle	Verb	to burden someone with an onerous responsibility or task
la-de-da	Adj	if you describe someone as la-de-da, you mean that they have an upper-class way of behaving, which you think seems unnatural and is only done to impress people
pinafore	Noun	a collarless sleeveless dress worn over a blouse or sweater; like a jumper or an apron
surly	Adj	describes bad-tempered and unfriendly
slum	Noun	a dirty and overcrowded urban area inhabited by very poor people
ferocious	Adj	describes savagely cruel or violent
rolling	Verb	to laugh intensely
wailed	Verb	to thrash something in a brutal, forceful, or relentless manner
goose	Verb	to pinch or jab someone in the rear in order to startle them
treachery	Noun	a betrayal of trust
sorrowfully	Adverb	in a way that shows grief and misery

ANSWER GUIDE

“The Lesson” by Toni Cade Bambara Literary Analysis Questions

1. What is the point of view of this story? How does the point of view impact the plot?

“The Lesson” is told in first-person point of view. All the events are perceived through the protagonist, Sylvia, who is a young Black girl. Readers can’t completely rely on her narrative though because Sylvia is naive (due to her age). Sylvia has an attitude and she puts on a front to always appear tough; this makes readers wonder if the other characters are as bad as she describes them to be. Readers must infer the intentions of the other characters based solely on the information Sylvia provides.

2. Why do the children dislike Miss Moore? What does her appearance have to do with it? How do the parents perceive Miss Moore?

The kids do not like Miss Moore because she does not conform to the community and the community does not like anyone who is an “outsider.” Her appearance rejects the societal expectations of women for the time period: she does not wear makeup and she wears her hair natural—which the kids call “nappy”—plus she is unmarried. The kids also don’t approve of her speech because she speaks with grammatical correctness. The parents dislike her because she doesn’t use her first name and doesn’t go to church. Sylvia notes that the parents talk about Miss Moore behind her back. The community fears anyone who is different and the fact that Miss Moore is educated makes people question Miss Moore’s ego—meaning they assume that she thinks she is better than everyone else.

3. Why does Miss Moore believe it is her civic duty to bring the children on field trips?

Miss Moore is college educated and takes it upon herself to help educate the local children. She has no kids of her own, but she wants to make a difference for the children in her community through education. Knowledge is power, and if she could show the kids that they could better their own lives, she would be helping them individually, but also it would help Black communities as a whole.

4. What would the children rather be doing in the summer? How does this affect their attitudes during the field trip?

The children would rather be swimming, resting, and playing at home. They don’t want to be “learning” anything during the summer because school is out. This makes Miss Moore’s objective more difficult to achieve because the kids are irritable and cynical during the field trip.

5. Why might the children be fascinated with the meter ticking?

The children are used to walking everywhere and have never taken a taxi ride. It’s fascinating to them how much money people spend just to get around the city. They are fascinated because the cost of the ride keeps going up as they drive around and it’s becoming more and more expensive. They are curious as to how much it will cost in the end.

6. What evidence is there in the story that the children don’t have the same educational opportunities as other kids?

The kids don’t know what a microscope is. The use of language—slang and incorrect grammar—also exemplifies the quality of education the children receive.

7. How much do you think a yacht cost? How much does Sylvia think one costs? Why does Miss Moore tell her to research it and report back to the group instead of just telling her right there and then?

Sylvia figured a real yacht must cost \$1,000. In reality, the cost is closer to \$500,000 or more. Miss Moore knows that a yacht costs much more, but she thinks the information will be more powerful if Sylvia figures it out herself. Miss Moore knows when Sylvia finds out the real cost, it will be quite a shock to her, but it won’t be as meaningful if Miss Moore just tells her herself because Miss Moore senses Sylvia’s doubtfulness.

8. What is the meaning of the following quote? “‘Let’s go in,’ she say like she got something up her sleeve.” What figurative language does Bambara use?

“Up her sleeve” is an idiom meaning to have a secret plan, much like a magician keeps a secret trick up their sleeve. Sylvia recognizes that Miss Moore is a smart woman and brought them here for a reason.

9. What is the meaning of the following quote? “Then the rest of us tumble in like a glued-together jigsaw done all wrong.” What figurative language does Bambara use?

“Like a glued-together jigsaw” is an example of a simile meaning that the children are pushed together while entering the store, but they do not belong. They did not enter smoothly but rather were forced. The simile further symbolizes how the children feel like they don’t belong in such an extravagant store.

10. Why does Sylvia connect the shame that she feels upon entering the toy store to her feelings when she and Sugar “crashed” the Catholic church during a Mass? How are these two events related and why does Bambara establish this connection?

Bambara’s connection of the high-end toy store shows the almost-religious power of money in the eyes of people who live in poverty or simply don’t have money. People who can’t afford luxury items often dream or worship the lifestyle of those who do; they covet the valuable items they can’t access. Sylvia feels like once again she doesn’t belong because she embraces her lifestyle of living in a poor neighborhood as a tough girl. In the church memory, Sylvia could not follow through with messing around with the altar just like in the store; she feels paralyzed like she shouldn’t touch anything or mess with anything despite her efforts to not care. This memory and connection shows Sylvia’s softer side, and although she likes being rebellious and intimidating, she has her limits. She also has real feelings of insecurity; she is still a child despite her best efforts to seem older. Her conscience shows her benevolent side.

11. Why do the children have trouble understanding why the items cost so much money?

The children look at items in the store like a paperweight, a sailboat, and a clown. The two quotes below demonstrate that the children struggle to make connections to these items because they know how much items cost back home and it doesn’t make sense as compared to the prices they are seeing now.

“Who’d pay all that when you can buy a sailboat set for a quarter at Pop’s, a tube of blue for a dime, and a ball of string for eight cents?”

“Thirty-five dollars could buy new bunk beds for Junior and Gretchen’s boy. Thirty-five dollars and the whole household could visit Granddaddy Nelson in the country. Thirty-five dollars would pay for the rent and the piano bill too.”

Sylvia tries to fathom how she would even find the nerve to ask her mother for a \$35 birthday clown. She imagines how her mother would think she is absolutely crazy to spend money on such an opulent item with no practical purpose whatsoever.

Lastly, the children struggle to understand the costs of these items because they don’t have any use for these items. The children don’t know what a paperweight is because many of them don’t have desks in their own homes.

12. Why does Miss Moore choose to bring the kids to FAO Schwartz? Why a toy store and why this specific one? What is the symbolism?

Miss Moore knew this store would anger and upset the kids. She brings them to a toy store because toys are something the kids might be interested in seeing. These toys are a luxury item meant for enjoyment. The store FAO Schwarz is America’s oldest and most famous toy store, known for its high-end toys. This symbolizes the unfair wealth gap between Americans, specifically the adversity that Black families and communities suffer from.

13. What is the significant of the following quote? "...poor people have to wake up and demand their share of the pie." What figurative language does Bambara use?

"Their share of the pie" is a metaphor where the pie represents a fair chance to make a living in America. In America, the rich get richer due to laws that prevent people in poverty from ever escaping, particularly for Black Americans. The social injustice will continue if poor people do not demand change.

14. How is Miss Moore trying to empower the children? What is "the lesson" as stated in the title?

Miss Moore wants the children to realize that while their families are struggling to put food on the table, there are others who are spending hundreds or thousands of dollars on toy clowns. She wants the children to feel like they are owed something; they are worthy of more than what they currently have. This would require them to speak up, and to be different; thus, she tries to empower them by making them aware that there's something unfair they should be upset about.

15. Why does Sylvia feel betrayed by Sugar?

Sugar is clearly understanding and even enjoying the lesson Miss Moore is trying to teach them. Sugar connects to Miss Moore by saying, "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?" Sugar realizes that there are not equal opportunities to make money in America which gives an unfair advantage to the wealthy. This upsets Sylvia because her and Sugar are supposed to be tough together and not care about lessons or activities that someone educated like Miss Moore is trying to teach them. They are supposed to hate Miss Moore together.

14. Give an example of how Sylvia shows vulnerability. How does it differ than the usual persona she wants people to see?

Sylvia wants to be seen as someone you do not mess with. She is street smart and a tough girl. She teases others and plays pranks on her friends in order to keep up with this persona. Sylvia shows her vulnerable side when she is nervous to enter the toy store; she is vulnerable because she feels like she must look out of place in such a fancy store. Her attitude toward Miss Moore also reflects her discomfort with those whom she believes are "superior" to her in a superficial sense. Sylvia's constant need to attack Miss Moore (in her thoughts) shows how emotionally affected she really is by feeling inadequate.

15. Was Miss Moore's lesson successful? Why or why not?

Although Sylvia does not give Miss Moore the satisfaction of her approval, Miss Moore's lesson was set successfully in motion. Her goal of igniting the children's sense of injustice and leading them to enact societal change may or may not be followed through, but she has at the least informed the children about how others are living and she highlighted the economic inequities in their minds. The kids took note of how much everything costs in the store.

16. What is the theme of this story?

Wealth is unequally and unfairly distributed in American society.

Stand up for what is fair and right in the world.
Let the things that make you angry serve as motivation to ignite positive change.
If you don't stand up for yourself, people will continue to take advantage of you.
If you don't demand change, things will stay the same.

ANSWER GUIDE: answers will vary

“The Lesson” by Toni Cade Bambara Discussion Questions

1. In what ways does culture and economics hinder or benefit someone's education? Explain.

Possible answer: Finances for resources that students need in education are important but not always met such as: textbooks, pencils, paper, comfortable seating, food in the cafeteria, instruments, gym equipment, science equipment, literature, technology, etc.

2. Explain what Miss Moore means when she says, “where people are is who they are.” Do you agree? Why or why not?

Possible answer: Miss Moore means if you never try to leave the poor neighborhood and accept the slums as your standard of living, you will stay there, and never change your life.

3. Miss Moore is a different type of adult than the children are used to being around. Is it important for you to interact with others who think and act differently than you? Why or why not?

Possible answer: Yes it is important to learn other perspectives and open your mind up to new opinions.

4. What is a democracy? What is a fair society? What's the difference between fair and equal?

Possible answer: Democracy is a form of government in which the people have the authority to deliberate and decide legislation, or to choose governing officials to do so.

5. Do you think social inequalities exist today? Does everyone have a fair chance to make a good living?

Possible answer: Students might discuss racial inequalities or class inequalities like taxes. The fact that higher-paying jobs require higher education, but higher education is unaffordable to many is unfair.

6. Why do you think Miss Moore called her own community a slum? Why would she say this in front of the children?

Possible answer: Miss Moore wants to be real with the children because she knows they defend their community despite the horrible conditions. She wants them to be angry and upset because she wants them to want more for themselves. Miss Moore wants the kids to demand better. She believes they can achieve more.

7. At one point, Sugar asks if she can steal. She is old enough that stealing is always *wrong* but she obviously views stealing as okay in certain situations. In your opinion, is stealing ever ok OR is it always morally wrong? When is it justifiable?

Possible answer: Stealing is acceptable if you are trying to survive or help your family survive, like stealing food.

8. What do you think is the most important lesson the youth of today's generation needs to be taught? Consider lessons you've learned or philosophies/wisdom you would like to pass on to others.

Possible answer: Be yourself and don't pretend to be someone you are not. You are valuable and worthy as you are.