

## The War of the Wall

Short Story by Toni Cade Bambara

VIDEO TRAILER



KEYWORD: HML7-338

# What makes a COMMUNITY?

### COMMON CORE

**RL 1** Cite several pieces of textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text. **RL 2** Determine a theme; provide an objective summary of the text.

Belonging to a community can give people feelings of identity and security. What things in the community help contribute to those feelings? In “The War of the Wall,” an “outsider” comes to a town and challenges its residents’ idea of what it means to be a community.

**DISCUSS** Think about the different communities, or groups, that you belong to, such as your school, your neighborhood, and your town. With a group of classmates, discuss how you would welcome someone new to your school or town.



### ● TEXT ANALYSIS: MULTIPLE THEMES

A story usually has one main theme, but it may also have other themes. To determine the story's theme or themes,

- note the **setting** of the story and how it might relate to the plot and characters
- make inferences about **character** motivations and relationships
- note what **conflicts** arise and how they are resolved

A theme may be indicated through the lessons learned by the characters in a particular setting. As you read "War of the Wall," keep these tips in mind in order to identify the story's themes.

### ● READING STRATEGY: MONITOR

Active readers check, or **monitor**, their understanding as they read. One way to monitor your understanding is to pause occasionally and ask yourself questions. Sometimes you'll need to reread to find the answer. Other times you'll want to read on, because your question might be answered later in the story. Either way, asking questions will help you focus on and better understand what you are reading.

As you read "The War of the Wall," record questions and answers about what is happening and why characters act the way they do. Use a chart like the one shown.

<i>My Questions</i>	<i>Answers</i>
<i>What is the lady painting on the wall?</i>	

### ▲ VOCABULARY IN CONTEXT

The following phrases could be newspaper headlines for articles about the artist's painting in "The War of the Wall." Write a definition of each boldfaced word.

1. **Aroma** of Paint Was Promise of Future Beauty
2. Artist's **Masterpiece** Creates Sensation
3. Viewers in **Trance** over Splendid Work
4. Colors and Subject Matter **Beckon** to Wide Audience
5. **Inscription** on Mural Provides Dedication

## Toni Cade Bambara

1939–1995

### Creative Beginnings

Born Miltona Mirkin Cade, Toni Cade Bambara announced at five years old that she was changing her name to Toni. Her mother, who supported all of Bambara's creative efforts, agreed. Bambara began writing as a child and never stopped. She went on to become an award-winning author, teacher, filmmaker, and a leading activist in the African-American community. Although set in a small town, "The War of the Wall" was inspired by Bambara's memories of growing up in the Harlem neighborhood of New York City.

### BACKGROUND TO THE STORY

#### Murals

A mural is a large picture painted on an interior or exterior wall of a building. Many murals illustrate scenes from history or reflect the people of local communities. In the 1960s, African-American artists began a "wall of respect" movement. They painted murals as symbols of their respect for different groups. Walls of respect appeared everywhere from Eastern cities such as New York to Western cities such as Los Angeles. They were also painted in small Southern towns such as the one in which "The War of the Wall" takes place.



Complete the activities in your **Reader/Writer Notebook**.

Author  
Online



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KEYWORD: HML7-339



# THE WAR OF THE WALL

TONI CADE BAMBARA

**M**e and Lou had no time for courtesies. We were late for school. So we just flat out told the painter lady to quit messing with the wall. It was our wall, and she had no right coming into our neighborhood painting on it. Stirring in the paint bucket and not even looking at us, she mumbled something about Mr. Eubanks, the barber, giving her permission. That had nothing to do with it as far as we were concerned. We've been pitching pennies against that wall since we were little kids. Old folks have been dragging their chairs out to sit in the shade of the wall for years. Big kids have been playing handball against the wall since so-called integration<sup>1</sup> when the crazies 'cross town poured cement in our pool so we couldn't use it. I'd sprained my neck one time boosting my cousin Lou up to chisel Jimmy Lyons's name into the wall when we found out he was never coming home from the war in Vietnam to take us fishing. **A**

"If you lean close," Lou said, leaning hipshot against her beat-up car, "you'll get a whiff of bubble gum and kids' sweat. And that'll tell you something—that this wall belongs to the kids of Taliaferro Street." I thought Lou sounded very convincing. But the painter lady paid us no mind. She just snapped the brim of her straw hat down and hauled her bucket up the ladder.

"You're not even from around here," I hollered up after her. The license plates on her old piece of car said "New York." Lou dragged me away because I was about to grab hold of that ladder and shake it. And then we'd really be late for school.

**W**hen we came from school, the wall was slick with white. The painter lady was running string across the wall and taping it here and there. Me and Lou leaned against the gumball machine outside the pool hall and watched. She had strings up and down and back and forth. Then she began chalking them with a hunk of blue chalk.

1. **since so-called integration:** from the time in the 1960s when segregation, the separation of the races in public places, was outlawed. The narrator is being sarcastic, suggesting that integration has not been successful.

## Analyze Visuals ▶

Look closely at this picture. What details of **setting** does it include?

### **A** MULTIPLE THEMES

After reading the first few lines of this story, what do you think the main **conflict** will be? As you continue reading, think about what message this conflict might communicate.

Detail of *Harlem Street Scene* (1942), Jacob Lawrence. Gouache on paper, 21" × 20¾". Private collection. © 2008 The Jacob and Gwendolyn Lawrence Foundation, Seattle/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.



HOTEL

BAR AND GRILL

MEATS

30 The Morris twins crossed the street, hanging back at the curb next to the beat-up car. The twin with the red ribbons was hugging a jug of cloudy lemonade. The one with yellow ribbons was holding a plate of dinner away from her dress. The painter lady began snapping the strings. The blue chalk dust measured off halves and quarters up and down and sideways too. Lou was about to say how hip it all was, but I dropped my book satchel on his toes to remind him we were at war.

Some good **aromas** were drifting our way from the plate leaking pot likker<sup>2</sup> onto the Morris girl's white socks. I could tell from where I stood that under the tinfoil was baked ham, collard greens, and candied yams.

40 And knowing Mrs. Morris, who sometimes bakes for my mama's restaurant, a slab of buttered cornbread was probably up under there too, sopping up some of the pot likker. Me and Lou rolled our eyes, wishing somebody would send us some dinner. But the painter lady didn't even turn around. She was pulling the strings down and prying bits of tape loose.

Side Pocket came strolling out of the pool hall to see what Lou and me were studying so hard. He gave the painter lady the once-over, checking out her paint-spattered jeans, her chalky T-shirt, her floppy-brimmed straw hat. He hitched up his pants and glided over toward the painter lady, who kept right on with what she was doing.

50 "Whatcha got there, sweetheart?" he asked the twin with the plate. "Suppah," she said all soft and countrylike.

"For her," the one with the jug added, jerking her chin toward the painter lady's back.

Still she didn't turn around. She was rearing back on her heels, her hands jammed into her back pockets, her face squinched up like the **masterpiece** she had in mind was taking shape on the wall by magic. We could have been gophers crawled up into a rotten hollow for all she cared. She didn't even say hello to anybody. Lou was muttering something about how great her concentration was. I butt him with

60 my hip, and his elbow slid off the gum machine. **B**

"Good evening," Side Pocket said in his best ain't-I-fine voice. But the painter lady was moving from the milk crate to the step stool to the ladder, moving up and down fast, scribbling all over the wall like a crazy person. We looked at Side Pocket. He looked at the twins. The twins looked at us. The painter lady was giving a show. It was like those old-timey music movies where the dancer taps on the tabletop and then starts jumping all over the furniture, kicking chairs over and not skipping a beat. She didn't even look where she was stepping. And for a minute there, hanging on the ladder to reach a far spot, she looked like she was going

70 to tip right over.

**aroma** (ə-rō'mə) *n.*  
a smell; odor

### Language Coach

**Homonyms** Words that are spelled and pronounced the same but have different meanings are called homonyms. Reread lines 35–36 and 59–60. The word *hip* can mean "joint connecting the leg to the waist" or "stylish." Use context clues to figure out the meaning for each sentence.

**masterpiece**  
(mās'tər-pēs') *n.*  
a great work of art

### **B** MONITOR

Why do you think the **narrator** says, "We could have been gophers . . . for all she cared"? How is the narrator feeling?

2. **pot likker**: the broth or liquid in which meat or vegetables have been cooked.

“Ahh,” Side Pocket cleared his throat and moved fast to catch the ladder. “These young ladies here have brought you some supper.”

“Ma’am?” The twins stepped forward. Finally the painter turned around, her eyes “full of sky,” as my grandmama would say. Then she stepped down like she was in a **trance**. She wiped her hands on her jeans as the Morris twins offered up the plate and the jug. She rolled back the tinfoil, then wagged her head as though something terrible was on the plate.

“Thank your mother very much,” she said, sounding like her mouth was full of sky too. “I’ve brought my own dinner along.” And then,  
80 without even excusing herself, she went back up the ladder, drawing on the wall in a wild way. Side Pocket whistled one of those oh-brother breathy whistles and went back into the pool hall. The Morris twins shifted their weight from one foot to the other, then crossed the street and went home. Lou had to drag me away, I was so mad. We couldn’t wait to get to the firehouse to tell my daddy all about this rude woman who’d stolen our wall.

**A**ll the way back to the block to help my mama out at the restaurant, me and Lou kept asking my daddy for ways to run the painter lady out of town. But my daddy was busy talking about the trip to the country  
90 and telling Lou he could come too because Grandmama can always use an extra pair of hands on the farm.

Later that night, while me and Lou were in the back doing our chores, we found out that the painter lady was a liar. She came into the restaurant and leaned against the glass of the steam table, talking about how starved she was. I was scrubbing pots and Lou was chopping onions, but we could hear her through the service window. She was asking Mama was that a ham hock in the greens, and was that a neck bone in the pole beans, and were there any vegetables cooked without meat, especially pork.

“I don’t care who your spiritual leader is,” Mama said in that way of  
100 hers. “If you eat in the community, sistuh, you gonna eat pig by-and-by, one way or t’other.”

Me and Lou were cracking up in the kitchen, and several customers at the counter were clearing their throats, waiting for Mama to really fix her wagon<sup>3</sup> for not speaking to the elders when she came in. The painter lady took a stool at the counter and went right on with her questions. Was there cheese in the baked macaroni, she wanted to know? Were there eggs in the salad? Was it honey or sugar in the iced tea? Mama was fixing Pop Johnson’s plate. And every time the painter lady asked a fool question, Mama would dump another spoonful of rice on the pile. She  
110 was tapping her foot and heating up in a dangerous way. But Pop Johnson

**trance** (trāns) *n.*  
a condition of  
daydreaming or  
being unconscious  
of one’s surroundings

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3. **fix her wagon:** a slang expression meaning “put her in her place; bring about her downfall.”

was happy as he could be. Me and Lou peeked through the service window, wondering what planet the painter lady came from. Who ever heard of baked macaroni without cheese, or potato salad without eggs? **C**

“Do you have any bread made with unbleached flour?” the painter lady asked Mama. There was a long pause, as though everybody in the restaurant was holding their breath, wondering if Mama would dump the next spoonful on the painter lady’s head. She didn’t. But when she set Pop Johnson’s plate down, it came down with a bang.

When Mama finally took her order, the starving lady all of a sudden  
120 couldn’t make up her mind whether she wanted a vegetable plate or fish and a salad. She finally settled on the broiled trout and a tossed salad. But just when Mama reached for a plate to serve her, the painter lady leaned over the counter with her finger all up in the air.

“Excuse me,” she said. “One more thing.” Mama was holding the plate like a Frisbee, tapping that foot, one hand on her hip. “Can I get raw beets in that tossed salad?”

“You will get,” Mama said, leaning her face close to the painter lady’s, “whatever Lou back there tossed. Now sit down.” And the painter lady sat back down on her stool and shut right up. **D**

130 All the way to the country, me and Lou tried to get Mama to open fire on the painter lady. But Mama said that seeing as how she was from the North, you couldn’t expect her to have any manners. Then Mama said she was sorry she’d been so impatient with the woman because she seemed like a decent person and was simply trying to stick to a very strict diet. Me and Lou didn’t want to hear that. Who did that lady think she was, coming into our neighborhood and taking over our wall? **E**

“Welllllll,” Mama drawled, pulling into the filling station so Daddy could take the wheel, “it’s hard on an artist, ya know. They can’t always get people to look at their work. So she’s just doing her work in the open, that’s all.”

140 Me and Lou definitely did not want to hear that. Why couldn’t she set up an easel downtown or draw on the sidewalk in her own neighborhood? Mama told us to quit fussing so much; she was tired and wanted to rest. She climbed into the back seat and dropped down into the warm hollow Daddy had made in the pillow.

All weekend long, me and Lou tried to scheme up ways to recapture our wall. Daddy and Mama said they were sick of hearing about it. Grandmama turned up the TV to drown us out. On the late news was a story about the New York subways. When a train came roaring into the station all covered from top to bottom, windows too, with writings and drawings done with  
150 spray paint, me and Lou slapped five. Mama said it was too bad kids in New York had nothing better to do than spray paint all over the trains. Daddy said that in the cities, even grown-ups wrote all over the trains and buildings too. Daddy called it “graffiti.” Grandmama called it a shame.

### **C** MULTIPLE THEMES

Reread lines 96–113. How is the painter different from the people who live in the community?

### **D** MONITOR

What **questions** do you have about what is happening in this scene? Record them in your monitoring chart.

#### COMMON CORE RL.2

### **E** MULTIPLE THEMES

**Setting** is the time and place where a story happens. Setting can influence a story in several ways. It can affect how characters act and it can even cause a conflict. Reread lines 130–136. What does the **setting** have to do with the **conflict** between the community and the painter?

**W**e couldn't wait to get out of school on Monday. We couldn't find any black spray paint anywhere. But in a junky hardware store downtown we found a can of white epoxy<sup>4</sup> paint, the kind you touch up old refrigerators with when they get splotchy and peely. We spent our whole allowance on it. And because it was too late to use our bus passes, we had to walk all the way home lugging our book satchels and gym shoes, and the bag with the epoxy.

When we reached the corner of Taliaferro and Fifth, it looked like a block party or something. Half the neighborhood was gathered on the sidewalk in front of the wall. I looked at Lou, he looked at me. We both looked at the bag with the epoxy and wondered how we were going to work our scheme. The painter lady's car was nowhere in sight. But there were too many people standing around to do anything. Side Pocket and his buddies were leaning on their cue sticks, hunching each other. Daddy was there with a lineman<sup>5</sup> he catches a ride with on Mondays. Mrs. Morris had her arms flung around the shoulders of the twins on either side of her. Mama was talking with some of her customers, many of them with napkins still at the throat. Mr. Eubanks came out of the barbershop, followed by a man in a striped poncho, half his face shaved, the other half full of foam.

"She really did it, didn't she?" Mr. Eubanks huffed out his chest. Lots of folks answered right quick that she surely did when they saw the straight razor in his hand. **F**

Mama **beckoned** us over. And then we saw it. The wall. Reds, greens, figures outlined in black. Swirls of purple and orange. Storms of blues and yellows. It was something. I recognized some of the faces right off. There was Martin Luther King, Jr. And there was a man with glasses on and his mouth open like he was laying down a heavy rap. Daddy came up alongside and reminded us that that was Minister Malcolm X. The serious woman with a rifle I knew was Harriet Tubman because my grandmama has pictures

#### **F** MONITOR

Reread lines 171–176.

Why do people agree with Mr. Eubanks so quickly?

**beckon** (bĕk'ən) *v.* to summon or call, usually by a gesture or nod

4. **epoxy** (ĭ-pŏk'sē): a plastic used in glues and paints.

5. **lineman**: a person who repairs telephone or power lines.





of her all over the house. And I knew Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer 'cause a signed photograph of her hangs in the restaurant next to the calendar.


Then I let my eyes follow what looked like a vine. It trailed past a man with a horn, a woman with a big white flower in her hair, a handsome dude in a tuxedo seated at a piano, and a man with a goatee holding a book. When I looked more closely, I realized that what had looked like  
190 flowers were really faces. One face with yellow petals looked just like Frieda Morris. One with red petals looked just like Hattie Morris. I could hardly believe my eyes.

“Notice,” Side Pocket said, stepping close to the wall with his cue stick like a classroom pointer. “These are the flags of liberation,” he said in a voice I’d never heard him use before. We all stepped closer while he pointed and spoke. “Red, black and green,” he said, his pointer falling on the leaflike flags of the vine. “Our liberation flag.<sup>6</sup> And here Ghana, there Tanzania. Guinea-Bissau, Angola, Mozambique.”<sup>7</sup> Side Pocket sounded very tall, as though he’d been waiting all his life to give this lesson.

200 Mama tapped us on the shoulder and pointed to a high section of the wall. There was a fierce-looking man with his arms crossed against his chest guarding a bunch of children. His muscles bulged, and he looked a lot like my daddy. One kid was looking at a row of books. Lou hunched me 'cause the kid looked like me. The one that looked like Lou was spinning a globe on the tip of his finger like a basketball. There were other kids there with microscopes and compasses. And the more I looked, the more it looked like the fierce man was not so much guarding the kids as defending their right to do what they were doing. **G**

Then Lou gasped and dropped the paint bag and ran forward, running  
210 his hands over a rainbow. He had to tiptoe and stretch to do it, it was so high. I couldn’t breathe either. The painter lady had found the chisel marks and had painted Jimmy Lyons’s name in a rainbow.

“Read the **inscription**, honey,” Mrs. Morris said, urging little Frieda forward. She didn’t have to urge much. Frieda marched right up, bent down, and in a loud voice that made everybody quit oohing and ahing and listen, she read,

*To the People of Taliaferro Street  
I Dedicate This Wall of Respect  
Painted in Memory of My Cousin  
Jimmy Lyons* 

220

## SOCIAL STUDIES CONNECTION



Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, Harriet Tubman, and Fannie Lou Hamer (shown here) were all African Americans who fought for freedom and equality.

### **G** MULTIPLE THEMES

Reread lines 200–208. Here you see the story’s main **characters** through the painter’s eyes. How does this show that she understands the community?

**inscription**  
(ĭn-skrĭp’shən) *n.*  
something written, carved, or engraved on a surface

6. **Red, black and green . . . liberation flag:** a banner of red, black, and green horizontal stripes has been used in the United States as well as Africa to stand for the liberation, or freedom, sought by people of African heritage.

7. **Ghana . . . Tanzania. Guinea-Bissau, Angola, Mozambique** (mō’zəm-bēk’): countries in southern and western Africa.


## Comprehension

1. **Recall** Why is the wall special to the narrator and Lou?
2. **Represent** Who is related to whom in this story? Use web diagrams to show the family relationships mentioned.
3. **Clarify** Why don't Lou and the narrator carry out their plan to recapture the wall?

## Text Analysis

4. **Monitor** Review the chart you filled in as you read. Which questions and answers were most important for understanding the story? Why?
5. **Make Inferences** Reread lines 210–220. How do you think the two boys feel about having bought paint once they read the inscription on the wall? Explain.
6. **Analyze Characters** Mama's reaction to the painter seems to change over the course of the story. Her first impression of the painter seems to be negative. Why does she then defend the painter to the narrator and Lou?
7. **Identify Multiple Themes** Summarize what the characters learn about themselves and the painter. Then tell what you think is the main theme of the story. Then identify another theme in the story. Explain your answers.
8. **Evaluate** Was the painter an outsider or part of the community? Explain.

## Extension and Challenge

9. **Readers' Circle** "The War of the Wall" is told from the **first-person point of view**. Everything we learn about the characters and plot comes from what the narrator chooses to tell us. For that reason, we don't know very much about the painter's thoughts and feelings. With a small group of classmates, talk about what the painter may have been thinking about the community. Support your responses with evidence from the story.
10.  **SOCIAL STUDIES CONNECTION** Read the article "Back to the Wall" on page 349 about artist Judith Baca's mural restoration project. Identify similarities and differences between Los Angeles's Great Wall and the mural in the story. Think about the subject of each mural and the way each was created.

### What makes a COMMUNITY?

Describe a community or group to which you belong.

### COMMON CORE

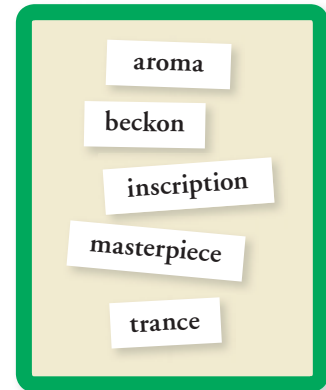
**RL 1** Cite several pieces of textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text. **RL 2** Determine a theme; provide an objective summary of the text.

# Vocabulary in Context

## ▲ VOCABULARY PRACTICE

Choose the letter of the situation that you would associate with each boldfaced vocabulary word.

1. **aroma**: (a) arguing with a friend, (b) writing a letter, (c) smelling a rose
2. **masterpiece**: (a) a game of catch, (b) a prize-winning play, (c) a stormy day
3. **trance**: (a) walking a dog, (b) snoring loudly, (c) not paying attention
4. **beckon**: (a) hailing a taxicab, (b) passing a test, (c) eating lunch
5. **inscription**: (a) military service, (b) words on a tombstone, (c) parts of a car



## ACADEMIC VOCABULARY IN SPEAKING

- clause
- context
- cultural
- symbol
- theme

The author of “War of the Wall” uses many **cultural** references, such as a wall where kids play handball and a pool hall, to make the neighborhood come to life. With a small group, discuss which references had the most impact on the story. Use at least one of the Academic Vocabulary words in your discussion.

## VOCABULARY STRATEGY: DENOTATIONS AND CONNOTATIONS

A word’s **denotation** is its literal meaning—that is, the meaning found in a dictionary definition. A word’s **connotation** comes from the shades of meaning it has beyond its definition. For example, a stubborn person could also be described as *strong-willed* or *pig-headed*. But *strong-willed* connotes “independent in thinking and acting,” while *pig-headed* connotes “inflexible.” The context of a phrase, sentence, or paragraph can sometimes help you determine the connotation of a word.

**PRACTICE** Use the context in the following sentence pairs to determine the connotation of each boldfaced word.

1. There was a **gathering** of neighbors in the street to welcome the soldier.
2. An angry **mob** appeared in front of the courthouse to protest the verdict.
3. Her **slender** frame allows her to wear many different styles of clothing.
4. His **skinny** build prevented him from playing football.
5. People admired Joel for his **self-confidence**.
6. Mya is **arrogant** and thinks she’s the only one who makes good decisions.

### COMMON CORE

L5c Distinguish among connotations of words with similar denotations. L6 Acquire and use accurately grade-appropriate general academic words.



## Reading for Information

**MAGAZINE ARTICLE** In “The War of the Wall,” a woman paints a mural in a Southern town. In the following article, you’ll read about the real-life artist Judith Baca and the people who helped her create and restore a large mural in Los Angeles, California.



Judith F. Baca, *Triumph of the Hearts* from *World Wall: A Vision of The Future Without Fear*, 1986–present. © SPARC/www.sparcmurals.com.

# Back to the Wall

from *People Weekly*

**W**orking in a city known more for freeways than museums, Judith Baca may be the quintessential Los Angeles artist, painting not on canvas but on concrete. Since 1974 she has overseen the creation of roughly 550 murals in public spaces, providing summer work for inner-city kids while she brings color and life to highway underpasses and parks. “I want it to continue,” Baca, 58, says of her work. “I want future generations to see it.”

One of her most famous pieces is the 13-foot-high, half-mile-long Great Wall, which depicts world and L.A. history on a flood-channel wall. Some 400 youths—many from poor, crime-ridden

areas—worked on the mural, and 30 years later, some of their kids worked on its restoration. “People come first for Judy,” says Priscilla Becker, 40, who, as a teen from a poor family, worked with Baca for three summers. Now CEO of a software company, Becker adds, “From Judy I learned that dreams are not just dreams.”

Baca was teaching art in an inner-city park when she began planning murals to build bridges between rival gangs. She still wants her projects to meet the same goal. “All these people made the wall together,” she says. “That’s the story—what they made together.”