

The Poem: Telephone Conversation

Poet: Wole Soyinka

Question no 1. How is the landlady perceived by the man? Is the man's perception of the lady parallel with her behavior throughout the poem?

Answer: In [Wole Soyinka's](#) poem "Telephone Conversation", the first-person narrator has enough bitter experience of rejection to forewarn the landlady that he is African, giving her the chance to turn him down without a wasted journey. He is at least suspicious that she may be racist but this is based on the behavior of others. Her first question, however, takes him by surprise. How dark or light is he? This is a different variety of prejudice. Rather than dividing people into black and white, the landlady has a sliding scale of color. This exasperates the narrator, since it is no less racist than a simple bifurcation, still discriminating based on skin color, and seems even less rational.

The narrator becomes increasingly irritated by the landlady's inquiries and the difficulty of answering such a foolish question with any semblance of intelligence. He therefore resorts to sarcasm, classifying his body parts according to color with the pointless exactitude she demands. Although we hear very little from the landlady, her harping in the same point justifies his mounting annoyance in finding a new variety of color prejudice with which to cope.

Question no.2. What is the speaker's confession, and how is it received by the landlady?

Answer: The speaker has found what he believes to be a decent place to stay. Though the location is indifferent, the landlady lives away from the property and the price is reasonable, so he decides to give her a call. All that's now left is for the speaker to be honest and admit to the landlady that he's African. The suggestion is that racial prejudice is rife and that white people in post-war Britain will often refuse to rent out their properties to those they regard as racially inferior.

When the speaker tells the landlady that he's African, there's a long, pregnant silence over the phone. However, instead of coming right out and refusing to have anything more to do with the speaker, the landlady inquires as to the darkness of his skin. Eventually, the speaker describes himself as "West African sepia" but the landlady doesn't know what means.

After further assistance from the speaker, who tells her that it's like brunette, she responds by saying "That's dark, isn't it?" The implication is that the landlady doesn't want someone in her property whose skin she considers to be too dark. The speaker suggests meeting up so that the landlady can see his skin color for herself, but one gets the impression that she won't accept his offer.

Question no 3. How are the speaker's feeling conveyed to us throughout the poem?
How do we know he is stung by the landlady's insensitivity?

In "Telephone Conversation" by [Wole Soyinka](#), as soon as the narrator hears the landlady ask how dark his skin is, he starts taking stock of the objects around him:

Button	B.	Button	A.	Stench	
Of	rancid	breath	of	public	hide-and-speak.
Red	booth.	Red	pillar-box.	Red	double-tiered

Omnibus squelching tar. It was real!

Although he is used to racism, this is a new variety of color prejudice in which, apparently, the precise shade of his skin matters. The narrator is so incredulous that he looks around him to ensure that he is still inhabiting the real world. When he is sufficiently convinced by the solid objects around him, he bitterly describes himself as shamed and his silence as "ill-mannered" before ironically calling the landlady "Considerate" for laboring her point.

When she has repeated her question, the narrator employs devastating sarcasm. This is lost on the landlady, who agrees that she does mean "like plain or milk chocolate." He goes on to dehumanize himself further by describing himself like a paint color, then dissecting his body according to how dark each part of it is. The reader clearly senses his chagrin, but the landlady is obviously not the sort of person who understands [satire](#). In the end, he can only give up and suggest she see for herself, reversing their positions by sounding like a landlord unable to describe a lodging precisely enough for a particularly fastidious potential tenant.

Question no 4. What is the speaker's confession, and how is it received by the landlady?

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Question no 5. Consider "Telephone Conversation" by Wole Soyinka as a fine example of dramatic monologue.

Answer: The power of any dramatic [monologue](#) lies in the scale of the dramatic moment upon which it is focused and the charisma, or uniqueness, of its speaker. In [Wole Soyinka's](#) "Telephone Conversation," the drama of the poem centers upon the moment at which the speaker's potential landlady asks him, in reference to the color of his skin, "HOW DARK?"

"Telephone Conversation" was first published in 1963 when the civil rights movement in America was campaigning vociferously for equal rights for black citizens. This moment in the poem, when the landlady asks the speaker how dark his skin is, would have been particularly resonant at this time. For a modern reader, living in slightly more enlightened times, this moment in the poem might be even more impactful. It seems preposterous and outrageous that a landlady should ever ask such a question of a potential tenant. *****

The summary of the Telephone Conversation:

'Telephone Conversation' is a poetic satire against the widespread racism still prevalent in the modern western society. As the title suggests, the poem depicts a telephone conversation between a west-African man and a British land-lady who shockingly changes her attitude towards the man soon after he reveals his racial identity.



The motif of a microcosmic telephone conversation is employed by the poet to apply to a much broader macrocosmic level where racial bigotry is ridiculed in a contest of human intelligence, also portraying the poet's witticism and his ingenious sense of humor.

The poem begins on a

peaceful note, befitting the narrator's satisfaction for having found the right house-



' The price seemed reasonable, location Indifferent. '

The land lady also emphatically mentioned that she lived 'off premises', thereby ensuring that tenant would enjoy absolute privacy and freedom. The conversation however drifted to an unpleasant turn of events, soon after the man surprisingly decided to make a self confession to reveal his nationality-



**"Madam, " I warned,
"I hate a wasted journey-I am African."**

A sudden unexpected silence followed and the awkward pause in the conversation is strengthened by a caesura, trying to emphasize the impact of the African's race being revealed to the land lady. An uneasy atmosphere is created and the word 'silenced' reiterates the sudden change in the land lady's attitude as well as the man's intuitive sensitivity towards the unfriendliness on the other end of the phone.



**'Silence. Silenced transmission of
Pressurized good-breeding.'**

It seemed as if the narrator was caught in a foul act and the expression ' Pressurized good-breeding' is only an ironical manifestations of the polite manners the land-lady

was supposed to have for the job of renting premises. After considerable period of silence when the land-lady spoke again, her words seemed to come from between lipstick coated lips that held between them a long gold-rolled cigarette-holder and the impression she gave off was that as if her status in the society was all of a sudden upgraded. Undoubtedly, the poet's power of imagination enables him to visualize an affluent and sophisticated British land-lady belonging to the so-called progressive and urban world on the other side.

