

COMMONWEALTH LITERATURE

UNIT – I

Telephone Conversation – Wole Soyinka

The price seemed reasonable, location
Indifferent. The landlady swore she lived
Off premises. Nothing remained
But self-confession. "Madam," I warned,
"I hate a wasted journey--I am African."
Silence. Silenced transmission of
Pressurized good-breeding. Voice, when it came,
Lipstick coated, long gold-rolled
Cigarette-holder pipped. Caught I was foully.
"HOW DARK?" . . . I had not misheard . . . "ARE YOU LIGHT
OR VERY DARK?" 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! Shamed
By ill-mannered silence, surrender
Pushed dumbfounded to beg simplification.
Considerate she was, varying the emphasis--
"ARE YOU DARK? OR VERY LIGHT?" Revelation came.
"You mean--like plain or milk chocolate?"
Her assent was clinical, crushing in its light
Impersonality. Rapidly, wave-length adjusted,
I chose. "West African sepia"--and as afterthought,
"Down in my passport." Silence for spectroscopic
Flight of fancy, till truthfulness clanged her accent
Hard on the mouthpiece. "WHAT'S THAT?" conceding
"DON'T KNOW WHAT THAT IS." "Like brunette."
"THAT'S DARK, ISN'T IT?" "Not altogether.
Facially, I am brunette, but, madam, you should see
The rest of me. Palm of my hand, soles of my feet
Are a peroxide blond. Friction, caused--
Foolishly, madam--by sitting down, has turned
My bottom raven black--One moment, madam!"--sensing
Her receiver rearing on the thunderclap
About my ears--"Madam," I pleaded, "wouldn't you rather
See for yourself?"

Introduction : **Poet:** 'Wole' Soyinka (1934) is one of the brightest Nigerian writers of his generation and the first person from Africa and the Diaspora to be honored with a Nobel Prize in Literature (1986).



The speaker of the poem, a dark West African man searching for a new apartment, tells the story of a telephone call he made to a potential landlady. Instead of discussing price, location, amenities, and other information significant to the apartment, they discussed the speaker's skin colour.

The landlady is described as a polite, well-bred woman, even though she is shown to be shallowly racist. The speaker is described as being genuinely apologetic for his skin colour, even though he has no reason to be sorry for something which he was born with and has no control over.

In this short poem, we can see that the speaker is an intelligent person by his use of high diction and quick wit, not the savage that the landlady assumes he is because of his skin colour. All of these discrepancies between what appears to be and what really is create a sense of verbal irony that helps the poem display the ridiculousness of racism.

"The price seemed reasonable, location / Indifferent"

The first sentence of the poem includes a pun that introduces the theme of the following poem and also informs us that things are not going to be as straightforward as they appear. "The price seemed reasonable, location / Indifferent"

If we read over these lines quickly, we would assume that the speaker meant "Being neither good nor bad" by the use of the word indifferent . But, indifferent is also defined as "Characterized by a lack of partiality; unbiased." This other definition gives the sentence an entirely different meaning. Instead of the apartment's location being neither good or bad, we read that the apartment's location is unbiased and impartial.

However, we quickly learn in the following lines of the poem that the location of the apartment is the exact opposite of unbiased and impartial.

The speaker is rudely denied the ability to rent the property because of bias towards his skin color. This opening pun quickly grabs our attention and suggests that we as readers be on the lookout for more subtle uses of language that will alter the meaning of the poem.

"Caught I was, foully"

After this introduction, the speaker begins his "self-confession" about his skin color (line 4). It is ironic that this is called a self-confession since the speaker has nothing that he should have to confess since he has done nothing wrong. He warns the landlady that he is African, instead of just informing her. "Caught I was, foully" he says after listening to the silence the landlady had responded with.

I hate a wasted journey—I am African

Again, the word caught connotes that some wrong had been done, that the speaker was a criminal caught committing his crime. By making the speaker actually seem sorry for his skin color, Soyinka shows how ridiculous it really is for someone to apologize for his race. To modern Western thinkers, it seems almost comical that anyone should be so submissive when he has committed no wrongdoing.

ARE YOU DARK? OR VERY LIGHT?

Her goodness is seemingly confirmed later on when the speaker says that she was "considerate" in rephrasing her question (line 17). Her response to the caller's question included only "light / Impersonality" (lines 20-21). Although she was described as being a wealthy woman, she was seemingly considerate and only slightly impersonal. The speaker seems almost grateful for her demeanour. Of course, these kind descriptions of the woman are teeming with verbal irony. We know that she is being very shallowly judgmental even while she is seeming to be so pleasant.

The landlady, on the other hand, is described with nothing but positive terms. The speaker mentions her "good-breeding," "lipstick coated" voice, "long gold-rolled/Cigarette holder," all possessions that should make her a respectable lady (lines 7-9). These words describing her wealth are neutral in regard to her personal character, but allow that she could be a good person.

"How dark?,"

After recording the all-important question, "How dark?," the poem pauses for a moment and describes the surroundings to give a sense of reality that shows that the ridiculous question had really been asked (line 10). The speaker describes the buttons in the phone booth, the foul smell that seems to always coexist with public spaces, and a bus driving by outside. His description gives us an image of where the speaker is located: a public phone booth, probably somewhere in the United Kingdom.

The "Red booth," "Red pillar-box," and "Red double-tiered / Omnibus" are all things that one might find in Leeds, the British city in which Soyinka had been studying prior to writing this poem). In addition to the literal images that this description creates, a sense of the anger running through the speaker's mind is portrayed by the repeated use of the word red. This technique is the closest that the speaker ever comes to openly showing anger in the poem. Although it is hidden with seemingly polite language, a glimpse of the speaker's anger appears in this quick pause in the conversation.

In the end, the landlady repeats her question and the speaker is forced to reveal how dark he is. "West African sepia," he says, citing his passport . She claims not to know what that means. She wants a quantifiable expression of his darkness. His response, feigning simplicity is that his face is "brunette," his hands and feet "peroxide blonde" and his bottom "raven black". He knows that she just wants a measure of his overall skin-color so that she can categorize him, but he refuses to give it to her. Instead he details the different colors of different parts of his body.

"wouldn't you rather / See for yourself?"

As it was meant to, this greatly annoys the landlady and she hangs up on him. In closing, he asks the then empty telephone line, "wouldn't you rather / See for yourself?" The speaker, still playing his ignorance of what the lady was truly asking, sounds as though he is asking whether the landlady would like to meet him in person to judge his skin color for herself. The irony in this question, though, lies in the fact that we know the speaker is actually referring to his black bottom when he asks the woman if she wants to see it for herself. Still feigning politeness, the speaker offers to show his backside to the racist landlady.

Throughout the poem, yet another form of irony is created by the speaker's use of high diction, which shows his education. Although the landlady refuses to rent an apartment to him because of his African heritage and the supposed savagery that accompanies it, the speaker is clearly a well educated individual.

Words like "pipped," "rancid," and "spectroscopic" are not words that a savage brute would have in his vocabulary (lines 9, 12, 23). The speaker's intelligence is further shown through his use of sarcasm and wit in response to the landlady's questions. Although he pretends politeness the entire time, he includes subtle meanings in his speech. The fact that a black man could outwit and make a white woman seem foolish shows the irony in judging people based on their skin color.

Wole Soyinka's "Telephone Conversation" is packed with subtleties. The puns, irony, and sarcasm employed help him to show the ridiculousness of racism. The conversation we observe is comical, as is the entire notion that a man can be judged based on the colour of his skin.

Outline of the poem: "Telephone Conversation" is a 1963 poem by the Nigerian writer Wole Soyinka that satires racism. The poem describes a phone call between a landlady and the speaker, who is black, about renting an apartment. The landlady is pleasant until she learns that the speaker is "African," at which point she demands to know how "light" or "dark" the speaker's skin is. In response, the speaker cleverly mocks the landlady's ignorance and prejudice, demonstrating that characterizing people by their skin color diminishes their humanity.

The paraphrase of the poem: Written in the first person narrative form, "Telephone Conversation" by Wole Soyinka grapples with the issue of racism. The poet has placed before his audience a telephonic conversation between a white landlady and an African man, with the latter looking for a place to rent. The poem is a bitter comment on racism and racist prejudices.

In the poem Wole Soyinka talks about two strangers speaking over the telephone. It reveals the attitudes that some people have about others, particularly judging someone without knowing him or her personally but by just recognising the colour of someone's skin.

The initial lines make the readers aware of the reason behind the African man's arrival at the phone booth that makes him to call a landlady. The price of the room and the location, and other essentials are agreeable to him. During the course of the dialogue, the man gets to know the premises. Then the moment comes when the man makes up his mind to consider the offer. But in the midst of his conversation, he mentions that he is black. At the other end of the line there is nothing but silence. The African man notices the abrupt silence and he takes it to be an impolite gesture of refusal.

However, the silence is soon broken as the landlady starts to speak again and asks him to explain exactly how dark he is. At first, the man thinks that he might, have misheard the question but when the landlady repeats the same, he understands that it is something very important for her to know before she allows him to rent her house. This turns to be entirely devastating for the man. At that moment he feels disgusting with the question and fancies himself to be a machine, like a phone. He reduces to being a button on that phone. He smells the stench from his words and sees “red” all around him.

The idea behind the poem Telephone Conversation is to depict how brutal and devastating it can be for a man who is subjected to racial discrimination.

The black African man is reduced to shame by the sudden silence at the other side and he gets into a state of make believe, when he sarcastically thinks that the lady has broken her silence and has given him the option to define “how dark” he is like “Chocolate or dark or light?”. Then he goes on to answer that his skin colour can be pictured as “west African sepia”. The man replies that it is almost similar to being a dark brunette.

Meanwhile the man holds on to codes of formality which breaks down at the landlady’s insensitivity. The African man now shouts out loud saying that he is black but he is not that black for anyone to be put to shame. He also says that the soles of his feet and the palms of his rear are black as a result of friction. He knows that the landlady will never be convinced with his black complexion and he senses that she might slam down the receiver anytime. At such a crucial juncture, he makes a desperate and silly attempt pleading her to come and take a good look at him but could not prevent the situation from getting better. Finally the landlady slams down the receiver on his face.

The poem reflects the conflict between the black and the white landlady. The poem points at the absurdity of racism. The practice of judging someone on the basis of his colour/race/caste/social status instead of his inner capabilities presents the highly corrupt image of the society where individuality is at stake.

Theme of Telephone conversation

The theme of “Telephone Conversation” rests upon the conflict between the protagonist i.e. the black man, and the absurdity of racism that makes the antagonist i.e. the white landlady, take a negative stance towards the former. The problem begins with the protagonist’s confession of being a black African man, which reveals the racist inclinations of the white lady. The fear of being judged on the merit of being a black man puts forth a highly corrupt image of the society where individuality is at stake.