

Telephone Conversation' by 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?"

Line-by-Line Analysis of 'Telephone Conversation' by Wole Soyinka

Lines 1–5

The opening line takes the reader straight into an already existent conversation, the thoughts of a person engaged in some sort of negotiation over price. Here we have someone talking to themselves, weighing things up. The price is reasonable.

And the location—the whereabouts—is indifferent. That is an unusual word to use but rings true when looked at objectively. Indifferent means to be free of judgement one way or the other. In light of the theme of this poem, that has some gravitas.

It seems of importance that the landlady lived off premises. She swore, that is, she told the absolute truth honest to God, hand on the Bible or anything else used as a touchstone in a court of law or ritual. Was this stipulated by the caller? She must live at some other address?

OK, so there's the small matter of confessing. Confessing? Is the caller a criminal, has the caller committed a crime already? Together with a warning.

There's a polite address . . . 'Madam' . . . the caller doesn't want to waste time and money, so is willing to declare right now . . . 'I am African.'

Lines 6–17

There follows complete silence as the landlady's thoughts and feelings go round and round the racism tree. The speaker uses active words to get this feeling over, coupled with class distinction for good measure.

He (we can assume it's a he) sees the landlady, gold cigarette holder in lipsticked-mouth, her classy gears going through the motions, pressure building. She's obviously from good-breeding (whatever that means), in contrast to the caller, who is presumably from the common herd?

Then two little words posed as a question, holding so much baggage, centuries worth, enough to catch him off-guard:

'HOW DARK?'

That is painful. How poor? How stupid? How tall? How small? How disabled?

This was the norm back in 1960s Britain, when it wasn't uncommon to see NO BLACKS posted up in the windows of lodging houses and B&Bs.

We know the setting is in Britain from the red telephone booth and other very British things, like mail boxes and buses (Wole Soyinka was a student at Leeds University in the north of England in the 1960s). The landlady's question genuinely throws him.

Note the pun in line 13: *public hide-and-speak* . . . a play on hide-and-seek . . . a popular game played by children and families back in the day when hiding from someone for fun was experienced as fun. In this particular case, it is anything but fun.

It seems the silence made him feel as if he was the one being impolite? He wants clarity, please.

Lines 18–28

To clarify, she asks again, deemed to be a considerate thing to do from the caller's perspective. (Or is he being slightly sarcastic? I suspect the latter.)

Note the subtle difference, from HOW DARK? to ARE YOU DARK? OR VERY LIGHT?

The caller now sees what she is getting at. She wants an analogy and the perfect analogy is chocolate. His question thrown back is a gem:

'You mean - like plain or milk chocolate?'

She agrees, answering in the affirmative, which is yet another body-blow for the African man, because she's so impersonal with it.

He's a quick mover, however, and arguably gains the higher ground by saying that he is 'West African sepia' which is officially endorsed, because it's also in his passport.

There is silence again; the landlady knows not of sepia, especially that of West African origin.

Note the use of the word spectroscopic, which is a scientific term related to the colour spectrum and the way matter interacts with electromagnetic radiation. This is a curious word to find in a poem about racism . . . or is it?

Perhaps the caller is a student of science? Or the speaker is indirectly implying that the spectrum is indifferent when it comes to the matter of colour. Colour simply is; we humans are the ones who attach prejudices to it?

The African man informs the landlady that sepia is akin to brunette (French word for brown—associated usually with brown-haired girls). There is more enlightenment to come for the well-bred landlady.

Lines 29—37

The caller explains that his face is brunette but that other parts of his anatomy are not. In fact, the palms of his hand and soles of his feet are lighter . . . peroxide blond! Peroxide is a chemical used to turn hair really blond, bleached.

And he goes further, much further. He sarcastically admits to sitting down and that this causes his bottom (bum, ass, posterior) to turn raven black. Oh dear, this has a direct affect on the unfortunate landlady, and he senses her unease. She will soon clang the solid plastic receiver head down and hurt his ears.

But before he's cut off completely, he just manages to suggest that she herself should see with her own eyes . . . see his face, his palms, his soles, his . . . well, the idea is clear and some would say, ironically comical.

In a nutshell, the caller has turned the tables on racist bias and, with a mix of humour, moral stance and arguably charm, shown up the landlady for what she is . . . a racist, pure and simple.

Telephone Conversation Summary

Telephone Conversation is a poem about racism and the engrained mindset of certain white people who, for whatever reason, discriminate on the grounds of race and, in particular, skin colour.

Wole Soyinka's poem takes the shape of a dialogue between two people on the telephone, an African man and a white British landlady. The man is looking for somewhere to rent and needs a room, apartment or flat. But for the landlady, there is an obstacle: he's black.

He knows that this fact could potentially ruin his chances of gaining accommodation, so he preempts the prejudice and saves a wasted journey by confessing 'I am African.'

- What makes this poem special and different is the use of humour and quiet sensitivity to explore the very serious issue of inbuilt everyday racism—how the simple act of looking for accommodation can turn into a social disaster or moral dilemma.
- It is also written in a dramatic fashion—Wole Soyinka is both a playwright and poet, novelist and lecturer—and has the flavour of a dialogue within the scene of a play.
- Note the use of irony and sarcasm which serves to ridicule the idea of racism and make the landlady appear rather foolish.
- Here is a racist woman compelled to ask 'HOW DARK?' because, presumably, she had a scale of acceptance: the lighter, the higher chances of being accepted as a tenant.

- And here is an African male tempted into answering 'You mean - like plain or milk chocolate?' after which he describes to her several other parts of his anatomy . . . palms, soles and bottom, ranging in their darkness and lightness from blond to raven.

A Short Biography of Wole Soyinka

Born in Nigeria in 1934, Wole Soyinka has produced many literary works over the years. In 1986, he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. This poem dates from 1962 and was part of the anthology *Modern Poetry from Africa* in 1963, a classic book.

In addition to his work as writer and lecturer, he has for many years been a political activist. During Nigeria's struggle for independence from Britain, Soyinka was an outspoken critic.

He was imprisoned for his words and actions when Biafra, a secessionist state, fought Nigeria in the civil war which lasted from 1967 to 1970. Soyinka spent over two years in solitary confinement.