

"telephone
conversation", "on the
subway", "on an
afternoon train from
purley to ...



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“ Telephone Conversation”, “ On the Subway”, “ On an Afternoon Train from Purley to Victoria” and “ Homecoming” Essay Sample

The essay must show

- * Awareness of the “ distinctive cultural context” of the poems – that is, the way in which the poems reflect the 20th century concerns with ignorance, racism, prejudice, urban alienation, violence, and the inheritance of colonialism and slavery.
- * Your understanding of the writer’s purposes in writing the poems.
- * The writer’s use of linguistic devices to create effects.
- * An ability to explore comparisons between poems
- * Your ability to consider different approaches to poems and alternative interpretations – that is, that there is rarely only one interpretation of a poem.

Wole Soyinka, a Nigerian man who grew up in his homeland before moving to England and gaining a degree in English Literature, wrote the poem “ Telephone Conversation”. He became a playwright and a poet at a young age and throughout his career his poems and plays attacked racism and colonial repression in Africa. “ Telephone Conversation” is an example of one of these poems.

The poem is written in solid text and it begins, “ The price seemed reasonable, location indifferent.” From this we learn that the man is looking

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for a flat to live in. Immediately we get a sense that the man is alienated from the rest of the world, he has nowhere he can call home and that perhaps to him all locations are indifferent; even his homeland has been disconnected from him. The Nigerian man tells the landlady on the phone that he is African, a silence follows and the landlady then asks him " How dark? ... Are you light or very dark?" Wole Soyinka very effectively shows how the man feels about this question, he looks out of the window of the phone booth and he sees a " Red booth. Red pillar box. Red double-tiered omnibus squelching tar."

All the man can see is red, the colour of anger and outrage it is also a symbol of western society. There is then the image of " squelching tar". This could be interpreted as the man being squashed underneath the huge red bus and the heat of the mans anger causing the tires to melt; it shows that there is a lack of respect and that the man along with his fellow Africans are inferior.

When the woman repeats her question, this time varying the emphasis " Are you dark? Or very light? The man answers " You mean - like plain or milk chocolate?" The idea of using chocolate as an example is very clever, it perverts and destroys the innocence of chocolate, just like the innocence of the man has been destroyed. In an attempt to work his way around the question, the man finally answers " West African sepia". The Man knows that the woman will not learn any more about him from this, as she is extremely ignorant. Then " as an afterthought" the man explains that that is " down in my passport", again in an attempt to make him sound eloquent and to ensure the woman that he is not an immigrant.

The man soon realises that he is fighting a battle he cannot win and approaches the woman in a rather different way. He explains the exact colour of his body including his palms and soles and that sitting down has turned his "bottom raven black". As the woman hangs up he begs her to wait and finally announces "wouldn't you rather see for yourself?"

"Homecoming" is another poem that concentrates on the topic of racism. It was written by Derek Walcott. Born on the island of St Lucia, he studied in Jamaica and the United States. Similarly to Wole Soyinka much of his poetry dealt with the difficulties of racism and cultural heritage.

Walcott depicts a native man who has become famous and rich for his poetry, returning to his homeland, Anse La Raye. The man predicts he will return a hero; an idol for young children who wish to succeed in life. He does not receive this welcome however. He is not even recognised by the native people and is mistaken for a tourist in the area, "Your clothes, your posture seem like a tourist's." The man realises that western civilisation has changed him to be one of them on the outside, but inside he is not.

He is not as welcome in the west as the west-born people are and he is no longer welcomed in his homeland, he has no home. Many parallels with the Ancient Greek story of Odysseus are made throughout the poem. Odysseus fought abroad in the Trojan Wars for many years, and on his return he was not recognised as the hero he was, in fact he was not recognised at all. The story of the native man is very similar to this, as both are full of sadness and bitter disappointment. Ancient Greece is well known as being the cradle of western civilisation.

The surroundings and environment of his homeland are no longer welcoming; they are hostile. The coconut leaves look like " salt - rusted swords" and the seacrats look like brittle helmets; both the swords and helmets are objects of war which is certainly not friendly. Even the ocean, which " sucks its teeth" is hostile; sucking ones teeth is often known as an insult. The man sees a pair of old fishermen playing draughts, a game involving black and white counters which can be ' taken' by ' crossing' them, this is possibly a reference of white, western civilisation taking over the blacks and of war and hostility. Walcott explains the place as being " infinite, boring and paradisaal"; this comment really sums up his views of the island. Although the definition of paradise is " a place or state of bliss, felicity or delight, Walcott effectively uses this word to mean the opposite. He sees the island as a paradise in some ways but he knows that the rest of the world has much more to offer.

The final poem I will analyse is " On an Afternoon Train from Purley to Victoria" by James Berry. James Berry was born in Jamaica, where he grew up. When he was 17 he travelled to America but made a hasty return as he was so opposed to the treatment of the blacks there. On his return to his homeland he found it extremely boring and claustrophobic so he moved to Britain. To this day he is a leading campaigner for black people and helps young black writers.

The poem " On an Afternoon Train from Purley to Victoria" really reflects the ignorance of white people towards blacks at the time. We also get a sense that the man in the poem has been completely divorced from his homeland, much like " Homecoming". An example of such ignorance is when the <https://assignbuster.com/telephone-conversation-on-the-subway-on-an-afternoon-train-from-purley-to-victoria-and-homecoming-essay-sample/>

Quaker asks the man "What part of Africa is Jamaica?" It is of course a well-known fact that Jamaica is in North America. The man however is used to these sort of comments and answers "Where Ireland is near Lapland". The Quaker does not debate this untruthful fact, clearly as he does not know the situation of the two countries.

The first and most obvious comparison I can make with these three poems is that they are all on the topic of racism and identity. They are also all written by men of black origin. Another interesting comparison is that all three poets are writing about them entering hostile environments. In "Telephone Conversation" the man is in London and because he is black he is not even allowed to live in a flat of his choice. "Homecoming" writes about an island which was once home, turning into place where is not liked or recognised. And James Berry's poem is about how people know nothing about his traditions or origins; even the people fighting for "racial brotherhood".

For many people at the time the poems were written black people still had the reputation of being 'slaves'. Most of the black people's ancestors had been but times had changed without peoples views changing. It is a very difficult subject to deal with however; take "Telephone Conversation" as an example. The landlady tries not to be rude to the man but if she did let a black man inhabit one of her flats then it would be hugely frowned upon by the other residents and she would probably lose business.