

Telephone conversation

[Sociology](#), [Racism](#)



The Nigerian poet Wole Soyinka uses the poem the telephone conversation to express the apathy one, particularly the black has, against Apartheid. Through an ironical dialogue over the telephone the poet criticizes the strong feeling of hatred that has arisen due to racial discrimination. The poem starts on a mild note where the poet negotiates the renting of an apartment with the landlady over the telephone. They were agreeable on the ' price' the ' location' and privacy. The price was ' reasonable' to the poet, the location, has been described as ' indifferent'. It may mean that the poet is not bothered with the neighborhood or it might indicate that the neighborhood is free of racism about which the poet is touchy. Another factor which was favourable to the tenant is that the landlady lived ' off premises' that is, the property ensured privacy and independence. In the second phase of the dealing begins with a ' self confession'. The very word self confession in the poem signifies the bitter experience the poet has gone through because of skin colour. The black poet knows the adverse effect his skin has on the white society, hence the ' self-confession.' It is ironic that this is called a self-confession since the poet has done nothing wrong to confess his wrongdoing. As a warning he points out to the landlady that " I am African". He says this as a precautionary measure against a ' wasted journey, as if the poet knows the immediate reaction the white lady would have. He derisively condemns the polite English woman whose so called ' good breeding' does not allow her to come up with the aversion which the poet knows she has for the black. Hence his admission is met with silence. Irony is used in the description of the landlady. The landlady is described with nothing but positive terms. The speaker mentions her " good breeding", " lipstick-coated

voice"; these qualities suggest the woman is a dignified and respectable woman. In the expression of " long gold rolled cigarette holder pipped", the adjectives " long gold" even shows the woman is wealthy and sophisticated. After listening to the silence the landlady has responded with, the speaker says " Caught I was, foully." Again, the expression connotes that something wrong has been done by the speaker and he is now being caught committing his crime. By making the speaker feeling guilty and sorry for his skin color, the poet illustrates the silly and illogical nature of racism. The woman's clipped ' HOW DARK' . The question makes the poet pause as if he cannot believe one can ask such a question. His rancid rancor makes him concentrate rather on the surrounding than the circumstances. But even there the stale smell of the public booth, the telephone buttons- the telephone booth- the pillar box- the omnibus. Red is the color used for public utilities in England but even as the poet describes these we feel the red haze of his anger. His dumbfoundment demanded clarification of the rudely asked question which the poet describes as ' shamed surrender', The lady repeats her question with emphasis on the colour tone.. Again the poet sarcastically calls her ' considerate' giving an impression that he is grateful for the landlady's demeanor. it helps emphasizes the knowledge that the landlady is a shallow and judgmental racist. The poet meets this absurd question with a reference to dark and milk chocolates which in its very tenor was sarcastic. Her need for clarification has been described as calculative and inconsiderate and insulting in its impersonality. The poet now suddenly comprehends the tenor of the conversation and all veneer of politeness is dropped. The poet decides to resort to equal rudeness as the situation called

for. He describes his skin-colour as ' West African Sepia' after the passport description. The poet sarcastically compares her effort to understand with the operating of a spectroscope as if she had such a machine in her mind. The landlady's voice now loses all its polish and seems to hit against the receiver as she bluntly says that she has not understood. The poet has so far established of the persona of the African origin and the landlady of the western European society but now we see the lady floundering to understand even that simple description while the poet's vocabulary establishes him as a well educated man. The instant victory he had over the landlady in this part of the conversation demonstrates the obvious difference in their education and knowledge, also illustrating the fact that beyond the landlady's lavish exterior, she was simply a superficial bigot. The poet turns the table completely against her, as he took a firm control over the conversation, defending the dignity and integrity of his ethnic identity from the ruthless onslaught of the racist landlady. To effectively show this, the poet juxtaposes various major European hair colors together in a deliberately confusing manner, suggesting that although being an African, the poet is nonetheless a person no different from any Europeans. He bluntly describes the colours of his body part of which parts have been bleached while others have been turned darker through friction. By such an uncouth description the poet tries to demean the so called polished woman who had the audacity to be so blatantly racist. Sensing the landlady's " receiver rearing on the thunderclap", which indicates the landlady's slow but finally furious realization that she had been outwitted, he rushed to ask sarcastically, " Madam,wouldn't you rather / See for yourself? " The quasi politeness of

the tone the poet uses here can hardly conceal the ultimate insult, which shows how indignant the man was as he outwitted her by inviting her to see his bottom, thus ending the poem with a tremendous sense of humour, apart from the obvious sarcasm. The poet illustrates that a dark African persona is eventually capable of confronting the racial discrimination aimed towards him, and retaliates against it by taking an upper hand on the landlady, the poet sends out a clear message - dark skinned people are no less intelligent than people that are lighter in skin colour.