

Chapter 12

Telephone Conversation

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Word Meanings

Notice these expressions in the poem and guess their meaning from the context:

rancid breath	squelching tar
spectroscopic flight of fancy	
rearing on the thunderclap	brunette
peroxide blonde	clinical assent
raven black	

Answer

rancid breath: Rancid means a matter which is offensive or disagreeable. Thus, the voice in which the lady speaks to the poet is under an immensely nasty or insulting breath.

squelching tar: The verb squelch means to strike or press with crushing force. Thus, the expression used here is that of a huge amount of compressed tar, the dark coloured product obtained after distillation of coal or wood, expressing the complexion of the poet.

spectroscopic flight of fancy: The word spectroscopy originated from the concept of dispersion of visible light into seven different colours. Thus, the word explains the dispersed flow of thoughts of the lady after talking to the erudite poet. Her fancies of a “dark” man gained wings and attained new levels of interpretations when she had to submit to the fact that she knew lesser than the person on the other side of the line.

rearing on the thunderclap: A thunderclap refers to something resembling the sudden occurrence of a thunder, as in loudness or unexpectedness.

brunette: Brunette here refers to dark hair and, often, dark eyes and darkish or olive skin.

peroxide blonde: This expression refers to a harsh or unnaturally bleached palm and sole of feet rather than a natural fair complexion. Peroxide is a chemical which is used as a bleaching agent.

clinical assent: The voice of the lady in the poem seemed clinical while assenting to the poet's revelation. It refers to the concerned voice based on a vivid and actual observation of the poet, giving in to the situation after a lot of thought and inspection.

raven black: Here, raven black is a metaphorical expression to describe the intensity of the colour black. Raven is supposedly a very large, dark complexioned bird of the crow family. This metaphor is usually used to describe dark-skinned people.

Understanding the Poem

1. State the central issue in the poem.

Answer

The central issue dwells around the ironical fact that when a person is in search of shelter, the questions being asked are based on his skin colour and not the usual queries exchanged like that of the rent, the amenities provided and other basic requirements in an apartment. The landlady is shown to have possessed a very shallow racist behaviour in the poem and ironically, the poet is shown to be sorry for something which he was born with. 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.

2. There are intervals of silence in the interaction between the landlady and the prospective tenant. What are the reasons for this?

Answer

There are intervals of silence in the interaction between the landlady and the prospective tenant. The main reason behind this was the fact that the landlady felt inferior in the face of the poet and realised her lack of knowledge as compared to the erudite intellect of the poet. The sudden silences are prominent in the poem emphasizing the impact of the African's race being revealed to the landlady. The ignorance of the landlady is also portrayed with humour on a very subtle level.

3. How is colour highlighted in the poem and why? List all the words in the poem that suggest colour.

Answer

The various colours highlighted in the poem exemplify the difference between the landlady and the poet, based on the skin-colour of both. The use of the colour red is magnified to explain the various things which are red in colour like the telephone booth, the double-tiered bus and the pillar-box. It explains the colour of the dark-skinned poet who was not fair-complexioned like the landlady on the other side of the line. The expression 'gold-rolled' shows the elite class to which the 'fair-skinned' people are said to belong.

Various colours which are used in the poem are: Red, Black, Gold, milk chocolate, brunette and blonde.

4. Which are the lines in the poem that impressed you the most and why?

Answer

'West African Sepia' is the phrase which impressed me the most. This phrase seems to be a befitting reply to the ignorant white woman. This phrase in the poem projects humour on a very subtle level where the poet, when asked again and again, about his color, turns to reply like a person with a high level of intellect. Through these words Soyinka tries

to emphasise on the fact that it is wrong to judge a person's level of wisdom and knowledge based on his color.

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5. You know what 'hide-and-seek' is. What would 'hide-and-speak' mean?

Answer

The expression 'hide-and-speak' here expresses the taboo of the dark-skinned people being inferior to those who claim themselves to be 'fair-skinned' and thus, more learned, sophisticated, civilised and superior.

6. Certain words in the poem are in capital letters – why?

Answer

Certain words in the poem which are in capital letters are: "HOW DARK?", 'ARE YOU LIGHT?', 'OR VERY DARK?', 'OR VERY LIGHT?'

These words exemplify the purpose of the poem which is to showcase the racist mentality of the fair-skinned. When a landlady talks to a tenant, the only matter of concern should be whether the person is suitable for staying with respect to his behaviour, financial position, etc. and not on his skin colour. These capital letters magnify the fact that it is more important for the landlady to know how dark-skinned the person on the other side of the phone is, rather than how erudite or intellectual or well-behaved he might be.

7. Why do you think that the poet has chosen the title 'Telephone Conversation'? If you were to suggest another title for the poem, what would it be?

Answer

'Different- are We?' could be another suggestion for the title of the poem. However, the poet has chosen a very appropriate title for the poem - 'Telephonic Conversation'. It refers very aptly to the shallow racism being projected by the conversation between the landlady who is 'white' and the poet who is 'dark'. The telephone symbolises the gap between the two ends of the line, the impossibility for both the ends to meet.

8. The power of poetry lies in suggestion and understatement. Discuss this with reference to the poem.

Answer

Understatement means to state or represent less strongly or strikingly than the facts would bear out. Thus, it is a very well known fact that it is very understating to decide one's status or level of knowledge based on his/her color. The play of words between the landlady and the poet clearly proves that a man's color and region has nothing to do with the levels of education he has attained and the power of wisdom he possesses. The questions posed by the landlady became a mockery at her own level of intellect. Thus, the poem very strongly suggests that the question of civilisation does not rest on own's color. Soyinka humorously uses sarcasm as he says 'Shamed/By ill mannered silence" when it is obvious that is the woman who is the ill mannered of the two.