

Exemplar ii for Unit 2: Poetry
Telephone Conversation by Wole Soyinka

Telephone Conversation

Opening lines establish the situation — the narrator is looking for lodgings

The warning indicates that the narrator is familiar with this situation — he has suffered rejection before

Single word sentence indicates shock and a pause while the landlady thinks

Short staccato sentences indicate the narrator checking off items around him to reassure himself of the reality of the situation

The use of capitals for the landlady helps characterise her as authoritative, insistent and tactless

The narrator's vocabulary indicates an educated and sophisticated man, while the landlady's ignorance suggest her inferiority, yet she holds the power in the conversation

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 dumbfoundment 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, wavelength 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 —

Confession indicates a sense of guilt and wrongdoing

Only now do we learn his 'crime', which is his race. Note how Soyinka delays the revelation while expectation is increased in the previous lines

The features the narrator imagines characterise the landlady's social position — but he could be said to be stereotyping her just as she does him

Language indicates the narrator's feelings of inferiority — he is 'ill-mannered' while she is 'Considerate'. Soyinka creates an ironic distance between the narrator's and the reader's perception

The narrator begins to counteract her prejudice with humour

Ironically, this is what she won't do because of her prejudice

The narrator again attempts to overcome prejudice with humour, his comic timing emphasised by the hyphens. His reference to taboo body parts is perhaps also a sign of his frustration and predictably brings the conversation to a close

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?’

Again this is what the landlady will not do, and the narrator ends the poem still subservient, having to plead

The poem has no formal structure, the telephone conversation itself creating the form. It moves frequently between the spoken conversation and the narrator’s internal thoughts, providing the reader with a constant contrast. The two speaking voices are also distinct, with different vocabularies and Soyinka’s choice of capitals for the landlady. The poem has a comic tone in the final verbal exchanges, but the political point is completely serious. Though the narrator is presented as more intelligent than the landlady, he is in the subservient position throughout, feeling he has to confess his African origins, explain his colour precisely and plead for a chance of a lodging. The characterisation and access to the internal thoughts leads the reader to sympathise with the narrator, creating a mixed response to the poem — an appreciation of the humour combined with shock at the trials the narrator must endure to find a place to live.