

Applying literary tools to Wole Soyinka's poem, "Telephone Conversation" yields valuable insights into its theme. In this poem one speaker, an African, phones a landlady seeking to rent a place to live, but encounters a landlady with a negative racist attitude who is more concerned with the darkness of his skin than in renting the rooms. "Telephone Conversation" illustrates how prejudice can transcend even the most civil interpersonal exchanges and can arouse the emotions of anger and frustration even though a person may have intellectually been prepared for it. This theme is revealed by a close examination of the form or structure of the poem.

This lyric poem is written in free verse, which is appropriate because the poem is a representation of a telephone conversation, and the lack of rhyme makes the conversation more realistic than it would be if rhyme were present. This also helps to develop the more serious tone of the poem, since rhyme could detract from the expression of racial prejudice and the speaker's reaction to that prejudice.

Heavy stress can suggest anger, defiance, strength, or fear. Certain words and ideas are clearly stressed in this poem, which emphasize the African's fear, his initial anger when asked his skin color, and his defiance towards the landlady at the end of the poem. The poet develops the stress mostly through the use of punctuation, line breaks, and typographical elements. For example, the poet uses dashes to emphasize key thematic ideas such as the African's initial fear of rejection in having to make a "wasted journey—I am African" (5). The use of the dash also appears frequently at the end of the poem where the speaker becomes more defiant towards the landlady. "Friction, caused—/Foolishly madam—by sitting down, has turned /My bottom raven black—One moment madam!" (30-31). His initial anger is emphasized by using line breaks and placing key words, such as stench at the end of a line so the reader will pause and examine it longer as in, "Stench/Of rancid breath of public hide-and-speak" (12). This same technique serves to illustrate his shame as in line 14, "Shamed/By ill-mannered silence..." The landlady's racial prejudice is stressed through the use of all capital letters, a typographical technique. When the reader merely looks at the poem, the bigoted words seem to jump off the page as the eye is drawn to the capital letters, "ARE YOU LIGHT/OR VERY DARK?" (10-11). The line break for emphasis applies in this instance also. Thus the stress or emphasis of these techniques highlights the African's emotions of anger, fear, and defiance as he reacts to the landlady's prejudice.

While the alliteration in this poem is minimal, some does serve to provide emphasis by slowing the reading of the line. This clue, coupled the use of assonance for a rich, solemn effect can be found in lines 8-9, "Lipstick coated, long gold-rolled/Cigarette-holder pipped." This line focuses the reader on the presumption the speaker makes about the landlady, showing the speaker's own bias against the woman. These lines suggest that the speaker sees the landlady as a wealthy woman with pretentious airs, symbolized by a "gold-rolled cigarette-holder." This example focuses once again on the central themes of prejudice and bias that runs through this poem.

Several instances of repetition can be found in "Telephone Conversation." The first occurs in line 6 with the repetition of forms of the word silence, "Silence. Silenced transmission of/Pressurized good-breeding." Often times, one of the first ways people indicate their prejudices is through silence. The repetition of this word seems to draw out the moment of silence, showing the tension caused by the speaker's announcement that he is "African." Later in line 11 the word button is repeated, "Button B. Button A" signifying the choice the speaker is trying to make—how to react to the question the landlady asks. Finally, the repetition of the landlady's slightly reworded question, "ARE YOU LIGHT/OR VERY DARK?" and "ARE YOU DARK? OR VERY LIGHT?" emphasizes the importance she attaches to this information. Clearly, the landlady might consider renting to the speaker if the speaker is not too dark in coloring, again focusing on discrimination based on racial prejudice.

"Telephone Conversation" has only one stanza and no breaks; therefore, one can not

look to breaks for additional insights. However, this is a relatively long poem for one stanza, 35 lines. So a careful reader should ask why the poet chose to have only one stanza. A close examination of the poem shows that the words of the landlady, the speaker, and the thoughts of the speaker all tend to follow one another instantly, often almost overlapping each other as in lines 10-11, “HOW DARK’. . .I had not misheard. . .’ARE YOU LIGHT/ OR VERY DARK?’ Button B. Button A.” Lack of breaks shows the spontaneity of the dialogue between the landlady and the speaker and of the speaker’s reactions to the conversation. The characters do not pause for reflection or to weigh their thoughts; therefore, the poem should not pause or break either.

The poem lacks rhyme; however, stress, or emphasis on certain words, does focus on key images, such as the “stench of rancid breath” or “shamed by ill-mannered silence.” In fact, the speaker also refers to the stress or emphasis employed by the landlady in the phrasing of her all-important question. The first time she asks, “ARE YOU LIGHT OR VERY DARK?” The second time the speaker recognizes the subtle change in the wording of the question, “Considerate she was, varying the emphasis—/ ‘ARE YOU DARK? OR VERY LIGHT?’ (18-19). However, ambiguous images tend to heighten the theme of this poem. For example, in response to the landlady’s question, the speaker responds, “You mean—like plain or milk chocolate?” (19) and then in the responses, “West African sepia” (22) and “brunette” (26). All of these terms are vague and variable. At no point does the speaker clearly answer “light” or “dark.”

The most noticeable syntactical characteristic is the brevity of the sentences and phrases. This tends to make the poem sound hard and brutally direct, which is exactly what the exchange between the two characters is like in revealing the landlady’s racial prejudice. Additionally, the phrasing of the sentences is not complete, often with words, particularly verbs and articles left out. “The price seemed reasonable, [but the]location [was] indifferent.” This goes along with the speaker’s statement that he is foreign—from Africa—and English may not be his native language. The diction of the speaker, however, indicates a well-educated person as seen in the following sentence: “Her assent was clinical,” and polite even to the end when he continues to address the landlady as “Madam.”

The tone does shift at line 27 in response to the landlady’s final question, “THAT’S DARK. ISN’T IT?” While the speaker’s diction remains short, direct, polite, and formal, he seems almost sarcastic by referring to the coloring of the various parts of his body. This tone peaks at line 30 when the speaker states that “Friction caused—/Foolishly madam—by sitting down, has turned/My bottom raven black....” The speaker then realizes that he may have said too much and urges the landlady’s patience before she hangs up. Then the tone returns to the more submissive one as he “pleaded” for the landlady to find out for herself. The poem ends with the question unanswered, but the implication clear—the landlady does not want to see for herself. No answer is necessary. The speaker has saved himself a “wasted journey” by his admission of his race.

Not only does the speaker come to realize the landlady’s attitudes, but the reader also gets the true message of this poem by examining one final clue—typographical effects. The use of capital letters for the landlady and mixed case letters for the speaker guide the reader’s understanding of who is speaking. The poet also clues in the reader to the speaker’s spoken and unspoken words by placing single quotation marks around the spoken words. Since it is the landlady’s prejudice that ultimately determines that the speaker will not be shown the apartment, it is appropriate that the landlady’s words are in the larger capital letters. They dominate the page as they dominate the message of the conversation. No, the landlady does not wish to see for herself. The apartment may be perfect in price and location; however, the overriding prejudice communicated in this “Telephone Conversation” shows that it is not for anyone of color whether “milk chocolate,” “West African sepia,” “peroxide blond,” or “raven black.”