‘Telephone Conversation’ by Wole Soyinka

1. What is the poem about?
2. What is the theme of the poem?
3. How does the poem relate to Soyinka’s own experiences of England in the 1950s?
4. Why do you think ‘self-confession’ is necessary in line 4? What previous experiences do you think the man might have experienced?
5. ‘Lipstick coated, long rolled/Cigarette-holder pipped.’ How does the writer use imagery here to create a mental image of the white landlady?
6. What is the shocking reaction of the landlady when he confesses that he is African? How do you know that the man is ill-prepared for such a question?
7. What words show that the man feels reduced to the status of a machine as a result of her question?
8. How does the writer use the senses to show the man’s disgust at her question?
9. Despite the offensive questions from the landlady, she continues to be portrayed in a positive way as if she is sophisticated and well-bred. This is called irony (words not having their usual meaning or being used in a mocking way). How does the writer use irony when describing the landlady’s voice, actions, manners and class to add humour to the poem? Pick out examples from the poem.
10. What colours does the man use when trying to describe his shade of ‘dark’. How do the man’s attempts to describe his colour add to the irony of the poem?
11. What is the significance off the final plea from the man?
12. The landlady’s prejudice is based on the fact that an African will be a wild savage. However, how is the African man depicted? Think about his manners and vocabulary compared with hers. Give examples from the poem.
13. Despite the poem being about racism and prejudice, what is surprising about the tone of the poem? How successful do you think the writer is at making the reader consider the absurdity of racial prejudice?
14. What are your own thoughts and feelings about the poem and its subject matter?