

Telephone Conversation" by Wole Soyinka 'Telephone Conversation' is a poem written by Wole Soyinka, a renowned African writer in English. The poem exposes the presence of racial discrimination at the individual level in society even after the passing of laws against it. Wole Soyinka Nationality: Nigerian Wole Soyinka is an internationally celebrated poet from Nigeria. Soyinka is the author of eight books of poetry, thirty plays, three novels, and many other works. Key Poem Information Central Message: The absurdity of racial discrimination. Themes: Disappointment, Identity, Relationships Speaker: A Black man inquiring about renting an apartment. Emotions Evoked: Confusion, Freedom, Frustration Poetic Form: Free Verse Time Period: 20th Century The poem masterfully employs irony and satire to critique societal prejudices, turning a seemingly mundane interaction into a revealing snapshot of racial bias. The poem is a conversation between a white woman and a black man over the telephone. The poet can capture the essence of human interaction across racial differences. This piece of literature becomes significant as it presents both the attitude of the white woman towards black people and the black man's anger towards discrimination Summary 'Telephone Conversation', as the title suggests, is a conversation over the telephone. It is between a black man seeking a room for rent and a white landlady who had advertised such an offer. Over the conversation, the hypocritical nature of the landlady as a racist is brought to light. An African man is looking for a room to rent, and he finds an advertisement in a newspaper. The ad says that there is no problem with race – white or black. As the man had bitter experiences with such ads earlier, he makes a telephone call to the landlady from a public telephone booth. He tells the lady that he is a black man and asks if it is acceptable. The lady hesitates for a while; she wants to know if he is completely black or half-black. When the man says that he is not completely black because his palms and soles are white. The lady goes silent and hangs the phone even though the man pleads with her to at least meet him in person to see for herself if he is totally black. The poem shows how racial discrimination prevails hidden in the hearts of individuals. Even though there are laws against discrimination in the country, they become ineffective if individuals do not change their mindset. The landlady shows double standards. Publicly, she shows that she is not a racist, but privately, she shows her true attitude. The poem also captures the frustration of the black man. He is angered by the double standards of such individuals as the landlady. First, he is angry over the lady's questions about his exact shade of color. Then, he becomes enraged and sees red all over. But, at the end of the telephone conversation, he is found pleading with the landlady to consider him. Structure and Form Wole Soyinka's 'Telephone Conversation' is a lyric poem written in free verse. The poem is a dialogue involving a black man and a white woman. The two are indulged in a phone call throughout the poem. The poem, to a considerable extent, follows the question and answer pattern. That is, the white landlady fires away one question after another and the black man, who is desperate for a place to stay, patiently answers them all. Also, a major chunk of the poem is written in the present tense. Literary Devices Although 'Telephone Conversation' appears to be a short and simple poem, it is layered and, therefore, complex due to the techniques used in it. The techniques used, in terms of the use of language, make the ultimate message of the poem heard loud and clear. It does the same without deviating from its focus, and neither does it give room to ambiguity. On one hand, for the most part, Soyinka uses repetition to emphasize the idea of the practice of racism by the so-called elites. The words "dark,"

"light," and "red," which are often used in the poem, could be cited as examples of repetition used to emphasize racism. Similar Poetry There are a few other poems that explore the themes of racism, too: o 'Nothing's Changed' by Tatamkhulu Afrika – is a poem that portrays and picturizes the problems rampant in South Africa between whites and blacks. Central Theme In this poem, 'Telephone Conversation', Wole Soyinka exposes the prevalence of racial discrimination in society regardless of the stringent laws against it. He brings to light how it is practiced covertly by many white people. o 'Primer for Blacks' by Gwendolyn Brooks – speaks on the necessity of accepting one's black heritage and the unified future that will result from that acceptance. Lines 31–35 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 ?' On the other hand, the use of words describing colors and shades serves as a reminder of the prevalence of racism in white society, where everything light and very light represents the upper class, and everything dark and very dark represents the lower class. o 'Power' by Audre Lorde – a graphic and impactful poem that takes on racism in the justice system, police brutality, and white supremacy. About Wole Soyinka Wole Soyinka is an acclaimed Nigerian poet, essayist, and playwright. Through a simple telephone conversation, the poet provides an insightful observation on how the racially discriminating society functions. He compares it with a double-decker omnibus squelching the black tar on the road. Numerous bitter experiences of racial discrimination must have made the black man vary. The speaker's African identity places him in a position where he is immediately subjected to racial prejudices. It allows the poem to explore the nuances of racism from a non-Western perspective. Through the uncomfortable phone conversation between the speaker and the landlady, the poem illustrates the casual racism that people of color often encounter. The phone booth serves as a metaphorical space where the speaker's identity is questioned and scrutinized. The speaker employs humor as a coping mechanism to deal with the uncomfortable and demeaning situation. Silenced transmission of Pressurised good-breeding.(...) Pushed dumbfounded to beg simplification.