Telephone Conversation

SUMMARY

It seemed like a good price and the location was fine. The landlady promised that she didn't live in the building. The only thing left was to confess something important about myself. "Ma'am," I warned the landlady, "I don't want to waste a trip over there. Just so you know, I'm black."

There was silence on the phone. In that silence, I could hear the tension between the landlady's prejudice and her manners. When she finally spoke, she sounded like the kind of person who'd be wearing a thick smear of lipstick and have a long, gold-coated cigarette holder in her mouth. Now I was stuck in a terrible position. "How dark are you?" she asked bluntly. It took me a second to realize that I hadn't misheard her. She repeated, "Are you light skinned or very dark skinned?" It was like she was asking me something as simple as choosing between Button A and Button B on the phone booth: to make a call or to return my coins. I could smell her rancid breath hiding beneath her polite speech.

I took stock of my surroundings: a red phone booth, a red mailbox, a red double-decker bus, its tires squelching through the hot asphalt. So this kind of thing actually happens! Feeling ashamed at my rude silence, I gave in and asked, utterly confused and shocked, for clarification.She was nice enough to swap around the order of the words in the question: "Are you dark-skinned," she asked, "Or very light?" Finally it made sense. I replied: "Are you asking if my skin is the color of regular chocolate or milk chocolate?" Her confirmation was detached and formal, devastating in how thoughtless and impersonal she sounded. I quickly changed my tactic and chose an answer: "My skin color is West African sepia." And then, as an afterthought, I added, "at least it is in my passport." Then there was silence again, as she imagined all the possible colors I might be referring to. But then her true feelings took over and she spoke harshly into the phone.

"What is that?" she asked, admitting, "I don't know what that is." "It's a brunette color," I told her. "That's pretty dark, isn't it?" she asked. "Not entirely," I replied. "My face is brunette, but you should see the rest of my body, ma'am. My palms and the soles of my feet are the color of bleached blond hair. Unfortunately, ma'am, all the friction from sitting down has made my butt as black as a raven. Wait, hang on for a moment ma'am!" I said, sensing that she was about to slam down the phone. "Ma'am," I begged, "don't you want to see for yourself?"

THEMES

RACISM AND THE COMPLEXITY OF IDENTITY

"Telephone Conversation" is a poem that satirizes racism. The speaker, who is black, makes fun of a white landlady who won't rent to the speaker until she knows whether the speaker's skin is "dark" or "light." In contrast to the landlady's simple, reductive ideas about race, the speaker suggests that race and identity are complicated and multi-faceted. Judging a person based on their skin color, the poem argues, is thus ignorant, illogical, and dehumanizing.

At first the landlady seems ready to move forward with renting to the speaker, even "swearing" that "she lived / Off premises." She can't detect the speaker's race through the phone, a fact that emphasizes a) that the speaker's identity is comprised of *more* than his or her race and b) that skin color is irrelevant to the speaker's suitability as a tenant.

But when the speaker then makes a "self-confession" about being "African," the conversation abruptly shifts to a discussion of skin tone. Note that the speaker is being ironic in the use of "confession" here, a word typically associated with the revelation of something criminal, to undermine the racist notion that being "African" is a bad thing. Clearly, the speaker understands how black people's housing prospects are unfairly limited by a racist society.

Indeed, in response to this "confession" the landlady asks whether the speaker's skin is "light" or dark"—a question so absurd that the speaker briefly wonders if he or she has "misheard." The landlady is playing into the ignorant idea that black people with lighter skin (and, as such, whose skin is closer in appearance to that of white people) are superior to those with darker skin. The key thing that matters to her, then, is how black the speaker *looks*. Instead of asking what the speaker does professionally, what the speaker's habits are—that is, instead of treating the speaker like an actual human being and potential tenant—the landlady reduces the speaker to a single attribute: skin color. Racism, the poem thus makes clear, is inherently reductive and dehumanizing.

As such, the speaker refuses to answer the landlady's question directly, instead offering a series of clever replies that reveal the landlady's question to be not just *offensive* but also utterly *illogical*. For instance, the speaker describes him or herself as "West African sepia" (a kind of reddish-brown hue seen in old monochromatic photos) in the speaker's passport, a joke that goes right over the slow-witted landlady's head; essentially this is like saying, "Well, in a black and white photograph my skin is

gray."

The speaker also notes that the human body isn't just one color: the speaker's face is "brunette," but the speaker's palms and foot soles are "peroxide blonde." The speaker is being deliberately tongue-in-cheek in the comparisons here, but the point is that race and identity are far too complex to be reduced to a simple, binary choice between "dark" or "light," between "Button B" or "Button A."

The speaker doesn't just criticize the landlady's blatant racism, then, but also critiques the way she thinks about race itself. In doing so, the speaker refuses to let the complexity of human identity be reduced by the ignorant choice that the landlady offers. For all the speaker's ingenuity, however, the poem does not end on a triumphant note. As the poem closes, the landlady is about to hang up on the speaker—suggesting that, as a white person, she still holds the power in society to effectively silence the black speaker.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-35

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-5

The price seemed ...
... journey--I am African."

The poem begins with the speaker talking on the phone with a potential landlady, hoping to rent some sort of housing—likely an apartment or a room in a boarding house. The accommodation seems fine: it's not too expensive, the location isn't bad, and the landlady doesn't live on the premises. There's just one problem: the speaker is "African."

The speaker refers to this moment as a "self-confession," with the speaker's blackness being something that the landlady must be "warned" about. This language makes it sound as if there's something shameful or wrong about being "African," but the speaker is being deliberately tongue-in-cheek here. The speaker isn't *personally* ashamed of being "African"; rather, the speaker seems fully aware of society's racial prejudices and worries about what the *landlady* will think. The speaker confesses to being "African" to avoid taking a trip to see the rental only to be turned down simply for being black.

These opening lines also establish the poem's form. It's written in a distinctly casual tone, with many caesuras breaking up lines of various lengths. The form is free verse, meaning there isn't any overarching rhyme scheme or meter; instead, the poem flows along like a conversation–which, in a way, is exactly what it is.

It's also worth noting that until line 4, all the lines are enjambed. That gives the poem a kind of anxious speed, as though the speaker were rushing through the preliminaries, trying to get straight to the most difficult and essential point. Line 5 is then strongly end-stopped. This end-stop conveys certainty and self-assurance, especially after all the enjambed lines that precede it.

LINES 6-9

Silence. Silenced transmission ...
... Cigarette-holder pipped.

In lines 6-9, the speaker describes the landlady's initial response to the fact that the speaker is "African." She is silent: there's a long, awkward pause while she processes the speaker's "self-confession." The speaker conveys the length—and the awkwardness—of this moment by repeating a variation of the word "silence" twice in line 6 (technically an instance of the poetic device polypopton).

In the silence, the speaker hears a "transmission" from the landlady; in other words, her silence itself is meaningful and carries a message. The landlady is conflicted: she has "good-breeding," meaning she's been raised to display a certain amount of social grace and decorum, but that same "good-breeding" is now under pressure because she realizes she's talking to a black person. In other words, she may be well bred, but she's also a racist, and her racism quickly wins out over her manners.

The speaker then describes how the landlady's voice sounds when she finally responds to the speaker's "self-confession." For one thing, she is "pipped," meaning annoyed. Using a metaphor, the speaker also describes her voice as "coated" in "lipstick." Lipstick might be another mark of "good-breeding," or at least of wanting to give the *appearance* of such breeding; that her voice is metaphorically "*coated*" with lipstick suggests that the landlady is only trying to make herself *sound* good, to gloss over the deep racism and disrespect of what she's about to ask. And, with another metaphor, the speaker compares the landlady's voice to a "long gold-rolled / Cigarette-holder." The "cigarette-holder" here is a symbol for wealth and privilege. The speaker is saying that the landlady has a haughty, aristocratic voice, and that voice makes the social and economic power she has in this situation clear.

Like the first five lines of the poem, lines 6-9 are written in conversational free verse, filled with caesuras and enjambment that suggest the speaker isn't particularly concerned with presenting these thoughts in a highly structured manner. Though this, the speaker comes across as open and genuine—starkly contrasting with the snooty landlady. These techniques create a jerky, awkward rhythm that also might register the speaker's discomfort with negotiating this difficult phone call. Indeed, the poem's sentences are short and often fragmentary (Swolinka here is using a poetic device called parataxis). It's not like the poem is full of enjambment because

the speaker is using long, elegant sentences that pour down the page. Rather, the fragmentary, jerky sentences of the poem consistently fail to line up with the ends of the poem's lines. The enjambments thus capture the awkwardness and disorientation that the speaker experiences as he or she waits for the landlady's response to his or her "self-confession."

LINES 9-11

Caught I was ...
... B, Button A.

The landlady starts to respond to the speaker's "self-confession" following the caesura in the middle of line 9 ("... pipped. Caught I was ..."). She demands to know the speaker's skin color, asking if the speaker is "LIGHT / OR VERY DARK?" The question is obviously intrusive, inappropriate, and deeply racist. What does the speaker's skin color have to do with renting an apartment? Nothing, of course; the landlady seemed perfectly ready to rent to the speaker just a few moments earlier. The capital letters of the landlady's dialogue further convey the bluntness and harshness of her tone.

The implication is clear: the landlady isn't happy about renting to an "African," and probably won't rent to someone with "VERY DARK" skin. The poem here is exploring not just racism, but something called colorism—the prejudiced belief that people of color with lighter skin tones (and, as such, whose skin color is closer to that of white people) are superior to those with darker skin tones.

The speaker is justifiably horrified by the question and even seems momentarily stunned, as represented by the two sets of ellipses in line 10: "... I had not misheard ..." Then, using a metaphor, the speaker says this is like being asked to choose between "Button B" and "Button A." (This is a reference to the buttons on midcentury pay phones; pushing the "B" button would return your coins if whoever you were calling didn't pick up the phone.) In other words, the landlady doesn't give the speaker a chance to present racial identity with any nuance or complexity: there are just two options. Further, the caesura that separates "Button B" from "Button A" emphasizes that these options are mutually exclusive: for the landlady, the speaker has to be *either* dark or light. That's why the speaker feels "caught foully" by the question—that is, trapped or cornered; there is no way to answer without acquiescing to the landlady's racist binary.

Like the rest of the poem, these lines are written in free verse. Line 10 is enjambed—as are most of the lines in the poem, but line 9 is strongly end-stopped:

> Caught I was foully.

Like the end-stop in line 5, this one falls in a moment of confidence and self-assurance for the speaker. The speaker may be disoriented by the landlady's intrusive question, unsure how to respond, but is nevertheless certain that it puts the speaker in a "foul" position. This certainty allows the speaker, eventually, to develop a powerful critique of the question and the ideas about race it embodies.

LINES 11-14

Stench ...
... real!

In lines 11 and 12, the speaker describes the landlady's "breath," calling it "rancid." Since they're talking on the phone, the speaker can't *literally* smell her breath. Rather, this is a metaphor for her racism: underneath her "good-breeding," there's something rotten, something foul (in a way, this echoes the idea of her voice being "coated" in lipstick earlier in the poem).

The speaker is upset by this racism, but also latches onto the landlady's sheer hypocrisy. She presents herself as posh, polite, and aristocratic, but bubbling under the surface is hatred and bigotry. The speaker makes this explicit with a pun: the landlady is engaged in "hide-and-speak." Playing on the children's game "hide and seek," the speaker suggests that the landlady has been hiding her true feelings. The clear hatred inherent to those thinly-veiled (if they're veiled at all) feelings is also echoed by the harsh consonant sounds line 12:

> Of rancid breath of public hide-and speak

The hard /r/, /b/, /d/, /k/, and /p/ sounds feel as harsh and unpleasant as the landlady's question. The speaker does this throughout the poem, using hard consonant sounds to convey the way the bigotry, hatred, and disdain boiling under the landlady's voice.

Line 12 also notably ends with an end-stop—rare in a poem that relies very heavily on enjambment. It suggests that the speaker feels very confident about this judgment of the landlady, insisting that she is a hypocrite. Despite this certainty, the speaker is evidently taken aback by the landlady's question and needs to take stock of the situation at hand to steady him or herself. To that end, in lines 13-14, the speaker lists out surrounding objects: the red phone booth, a red "pillar box"—a standing mailbox used in the United Kingdom—a red double-decker bus. (On a separate note, these details suggest that the poem is set in England, where Soyinka studied as a young man.)

Describing these details, the speaker uses short, fragmentary sentences—another instance of parataxis. They each begin with the word "red"—an instance of diacope. These disjointed, repetitive sentences convey the speaker's disorientation, and perhaps a need for the speaker to ground him or herself after being unmoored by the utter ridiculousness of the landlady's question. But the speaker finally arrives at a realization: "It *was* real!" As line 14 ends, the speaker confronts the fact that the landlady really did ask her question—and that the racism it

embodies is an inescapable part of the speaker's world, as real as the red booth in which the speaker stands.

LINES 14-18

Shamed ...
... OR VERY LIGHT?"

In lines 14-18, the speaker is "dumbfounded" by the landlady's question: so surprised and taken aback that the speaker can't talk, let alone answer it. The speaker feels ashamed of this inability to respond, because the "silence" seems "ill-mannered." In other words, the speaker feels like it's bad manners not to respond to the landlady's question—even though the speaker also feels like the question itself is deeply offensive. So the speaker "beg[s] simplification." In other words, the speaker asks the landlady to clarify the question (perhaps as a way to buy time, to have an extra moment to think about how to respond).

The speaker doesn't feel good about doing this, even calling it "surrender." It feels like giving in. The speaker employs sibilance in "shamed," "silence, "surrender," and "simplification," the hushed, perhaps hissing sounds suggesting a sense of self-betrayal.

The landlady's response adds insult to injury. Instead of realizing that the speaker finds the question offensive—instead of apologizing or retracting the question—she doubles down. She simply *repeats* the question, this time switching things around. Instead of asking "ARE YOU LIGHT / OR VERY DARK?" as she does in lines 10-11, she demands "ARE YOU DARK? OR VERY LIGHT?" In line 17, the speaker describes her, ironically, as "considerate." Of course, there's nothing truly considerate in the landlady's behavior. The only accommodation she makes to the speaker's discomfort is switching up the order of her initial question—which isn't an accommodation at all. Clearly the landlady thinks what she's asking makes perfect sense,

This repeated question almost becomes a kind of refrain for the poem. And the repetition underscores the obsessive energy of the landlady's racism: all she cares about is skin color. None of the speaker's other characteristics matter to her—not, say, what the speaker does for a living, which would be much more relevant to the speaker's renting an apartment.

The repetition thus hints at one of the poem's key arguments: racism diminishes and dehumanizes the speaker. It takes away all that is nuanced, important, and complicated about the speaker as a human being and instead cuts the speaker down to skin color alone. The speaker experiences this as a kind of cruelty on the landlady's part.

Like the rest of the poem, these lines are in free verse. The speaker uses considerably more end-stop here than he or she does elsewhere in the poem: both lines 16 ("Pushed ... simplification.") and 17 ("Considerate ... emphasis—") are end-stopped. Elsewhere, end-stop has usually emphasized moments of confidence and self-assurance in an otherwise difficult and disorienting situation. In lines 16 and 17, it plays a different role: it slows the poem down, so the reader lingers on this moment and on the speaker's discomfort. Because the reader has had to pause over that discomfort, to really absorb it, the cruelty of the landlady's question feels all the more pressing when she repeats it in line 18.

LINES 18-23

Revelation came. ...
... in my passport."

In lines 18-23, the speaker starts to fight back. No longer dumbfounded by the sheer racist audacity of the landlady's question, the speaker begins to mock her obsession with skin color—and to suggest that her understanding of race is ignorant and simplistic.

First, the speaker finally understands what the landlady is asking—a moment the speaker describes as being like a "revelation." Then the speaker asks the landlady a clarifying question: is she asking whether the speaker's skin is "like plain or milk chocolate?"

This is a pretty lighthearted, even silly, simile, yet even this comparison suggests the speaker possesses a more sophisticated understanding of race than the landlady's. The landlady proposes an exact, unforgiving criteria—light or dark—but the speaker responds with a less definite, less exact, and therefore more nuanced option. But the landlady doesn't catch this quiet challenge to her terms: she simply agrees with the speaker in a cold, impersonal fashion. The hard alliterative and consonant /k/ sound in line 20—"clinical, crushing"—underscores the uncaring cruelty in the landlady's agreement.

After that, things really start to shift. The speaker describes this transformation using a metaphor: it's like a change in the "wave-length" of their conversation. In other words, the speaker's whole approach to the conversation changes "rapidly." And in line 22, the speaker finally responds to the landlady's question. Instead of choosing "LIGHT / OR VERY DARK"—instead of choosing even "plain or milk chocolate"—the speaker describes him or herself as "West African sepia." Sepia is a reddish brown color that often characterizes in old monochromatic photographs. The speaker makes it sound like this an official designation, even claiming that it's "down in my passport"—that the speaker is identified as "West African sepia" on government documents (the speaker could also be referring to the tone of an actual passport photo here). But, as becomes clear in the following lines, this answer is designed to confuse, not enlighten, the landlady—and, in doing so, to poke fun at her limited understanding of race.

Like the rest of the poem, these lines are in free verse. They are highly enjambed—with the exception of line 19 ("'You mean ...chocolate?'") . Even as the speaker gains confidence and decides how to respond to the landlady, the awkwardness and

discomfort of the situation is still registered in the poem's form.

LINES 23-26

Silence for spectroscopic ...
... WHAT THAT IS."

After the speaker (sort of) answers the landlady's question, there's another "silence"—an awkward pause in a conversation full of awkward pauses. In this "silence," the landlady tries to figure out what the speaker means, running through a range of different options. The speaker calls this a "spectroscopic / Flight of fancy." A spectroscope is a device that separates all the colors in beam of light; the landlady is going through all the different possible colors in her mind one by one.

Finally, though, the landlady gives up and asks harshly (if also honestly), "WHAT'S THAT?" The speaker has baffled her: she can't imagine what the speaker means by "West African sepia." Up to this point, the poem has relied pretty heavily on parataxis: using short, disconnected sentences and phrases. These broken up phrases convey the jerky, awkward rhythm of the conversation. Here, however, instead of two disconnected phrases, the speaker carefully indicates the relationship between "Silence for spectroscopic / Flight of fancy" and "truthfulness clanged her accent" using the word "till." "Till" explains how these two phrases relate to each other: first there's "silence," them "truthfulness clanged her accent." One might detect in this is a little bit of perverse pleasure on the speaker's part. The speaker wants to slow down, to explain how things relate to each other, because the speaker enjoys the landlady's discomfort, the way it makes her admit, for the first time, in the poem, her own ignorance.

These lines remain in free verse and they also remain highly enjambed. Perhaps this reflects the thrill—and the anxiety—the speaker experiences by challenging the landlady's ideas about race.

LINES 26-30

"Like brunette." ...
... a peroxide blond.

In line 26, the speaker explains to the landlady that it's "like brunette"—a dark brown hair color. The speaker has now compared him or herself to both a photograph and a hair color—comparisons that implicitly highlight how insulting and ignorant it is to reduce a person to their skin tone. And instead of offering a clear, definitive answer to the landlady's question, the speaker is purposefully trying to confuse her. But the landlady doesn't give in or give up. Instead, in line 27, she demands, "THAT'S DARK, ISN'T IT?" Despite the speaker's best attempt to befuddle her, she remains fixated on her original question: she continues to understand racial identity in terms of a choice between "LIGHT / OR VERY DARK."

In the next several lines of the poem, the speaker criticizes the landlady's ideas about race and identity. For one thing, identity can't be reduced to skin color alone. And even if it could, it's not like the speaker has a single, uniform skin color. "Facially" the speaker is "brunette," but, the speaker notes in lines 29-30, the "palm of my hands" and the "soles of my feet / Are peroxide blond." "Peroxide blond" describes bright yellow hair—usually dyed, rather than natural. It is also notably associated with white women—perhaps even a symbol of white femininity. The speaker thus again implies that racial identity is far more complex than the landlady thinks, and can't be reduced to a simple choice between light and dark. Further, the use of consonance in these lines also suggests that the differences between the speaker and the landlady may not be as strong as she thinks: note the way that an /m/ sound binds "madam" to "my," "me," and even "palm." The consonance links the landlord and speaker together, despite their racial differences.

Finally, the assonant /ee/ sound that runs through lines 28 and 29—in "see," "me," and "feet"—suggests that the landlady's desire to understand the speaker's racial identity through skin color is ridiculous. At first, the sonic connection between "see" and "me," suggests that the speaker's identity is something that can be seen—that it rests in the speaker's skin color. But the assonance also links in "feet," which suggests that the original connection between "me" and "see" is silly. No one thinks that they'll discover someone's identity by looking at the soles of their feet!

Like the rest of the poem, these lines are in free verse, with end-stops in lines 26 ("'Don't know ... brunette.'") and 27 ("'That's ... altogether.") and an enjambment in line 28 ("see / the rest"). The speaker is still using short, jerky, paratactic sentences. But here they feel different: instead of feeling broken and disoriented, a sentence such as "Not altogether" feels powerful, sharp, and controlled. The speaker takes control of the conversation, and seems to gain confidence and control over the poem itself.

LINES 30-35

Friction, caused-- ...
... See for yourself?"

To make things even more complicated for the landlady, the speaker declares that his or her "bottom" is a different color, "raven black." In other words, it's very dark—and, playing on the landlady's racist fears, associated with evil, since ravens are often symbols for evil. The speaker's body, then, is simultaneously like a natural hair color, an artificial hair color, a bird, and a photograph. In this way, the speaker turns the tables and mocks the landlady's racist and intrusive question—and, at the same time, challenges the racist ideas that underlie it by insisting that racial identity is complex.

As much as the speaker (and perhaps the reader) enjoys this clever takedown, the landlady still retains most of the power in the situation. She doesn't have to rent to the speaker, and she doesn't even have to listen to him or her either—she can just

hang up. In lines 32-35, the speaker recognizes this and begs the landlady not to hang up. If she were to do so, it would be, the speaker says, using a metaphor, a "thunderclap"—in other words, a catastrophe.

So the speaker asks the landlady, "Wouldn't you rather / See for yourself?" In other words, the speaker is asking the landlady to judge whether the speaker is "DARK ... OR VERY LIGHT" with her own eyes. This might seem like a last-minute capitulation—and perhaps it is. But since the speaker has just been talking about his or her "bottom" in might also be understood as a profane invitation to look at the speaker's butt.

Like the rest of the poem, these lines are in heavily enjambed free verse. Once again, the enjambments suggest the speaker's sudden apprehensiveness as the speaker realizes that the landlady is on the verge of hanging up. One almost feels the speaker's stomach drop—or, read differently, the speaker's righteous rage boil over—in the strong enjambment at the end of line 32 ("sensing / Her receiver rearing on the thunderclap").

The poem's final line is then only half as long as the rest of the lines in the poem, which strongly suggests that the landlady simply hangs up in disgust or frustration. The poem's form thus registers the irony and sadness of its ending. The speaker's critique of racism may be powerful and important, but the landlady has the power to simply disregard it—and that power, in a racist society, makes all the difference.

SYMBOLS

CIGARETTE-HOLDER

The speaker describes the landlady's voice by comparing it to a cigarette-holder, which acts as a symbol of wealth and privilege. A cigarette-holder is a long, narrow pipe that holds a lit cigarette at one end; on the other end, it has a mouthpiece so that the smoker can inhale. It's a very elegant and slightly old-fashioned device, the sort of thing one might expect an aristocratic lady to use. And the speaker notes that this cigarette-holder is "gold-rolled": in other words, it's gold-plated or painted gold. That only makes it seem even fancier.

The speaker uses the cigarette-holder as part of a metaphor to give a rich picture of the landlady's voice and the way it comes across to the speaker. It is an aristocratic voice, a voice whose accent and pronunciation expresses power, money, and social prestige.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 9:** "Cigarette-holder"

PEROXIDE BLOND

The speaker's "palms" and foot "soles" are described as "peroxide blond," a color referring to very bright blond hair that has been bleached. Broadly, this might symbolize whiteness, since blond hair is often associated with white people. More specifically, it suggests femininity, since most "peroxide blonds" when Soyinka wrote the poem in the 1960s were women (think of perhaps the most famous "peroxide blond" of all, Marilyn Monroe). In invoking this hair color, the speaker implies that racial identity is much more complicated than the landlady might like to admit. The speaker's skin is made up of many colors, and even contains a potent symbol of whiteness.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 30:** "peroxide blond"

RAVEN BLACK

In line 32, the speaker tells the landlady, "my bottom [is] raven black." In other words, the speaker's behind is very dark in color, like a raven—a bird with jet black feathers. Ravens are traditionally associated with evil. (Think, for instance, of the ominous raven that appears in Edgar Allen Poe's poem "The Raven.") In calling to mind the bird and its symbolic associations, the speaker's "bottom" becomes connected to something frightening, even evil. This is, of course, a joke: the speaker is playing on the landlady's racism and her prejudiced fear of black people. The speaker is mocking that fear: saying that the most evil and frightening thing about the speaker is the speaker's butt.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 32:** "raven black"

POETIC DEVICES

END-STOPPED LINE

"Telephone Conversation" uses a lot of enjambment: the speaker's anxiety and discomfort express themselves via sentences that spill from line to line as the speaker tries to get through this racist telephone conversation. The poem's end-stops, by contrast, tend to appear in the speaker's moments of self-assurance and confidence. Look, for instance, at the poem's end-stop in line 5:

> "I hate a wasted journey—I am African."

This pronouncement is strong and unequivocal. It feels as though the speaker's identity as an "African" offers a point of

certainty, even comfort, as the speaker negotiates the difficulties of being an immigrant in a majority white country.

Similarly, the end-stop in line 12 conveys the depths of the speaker's disgust with the landlady and her racism:

> ... Stench
> Of rancid breath of public hide-and-speak.

In these lines, the speaker describes the landlady as a hypocrite. She doesn't wear her racism on her sleeve; instead, the speaker says, using a pun on the phrase "hide and seek," she engages in "hide-and-speak." The end-stop underlines the force of the speaker's judgment: this is something the speaker believes deeply and is willing to insist on. Although the speaker doesn't use end-stop often, the speaker seems to turn to it to emphasize key moments in the poem, moments when the confusion and difficulty of this conversation give way to self-assurance and certainty.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "warned,"
- **Line 5:** "African."
- **Line 7:** "came,"
- **Line 9:** "foully."
- **Line 12:** "hide-and-speak."
- **Line 16:** "simplification."
- **Line 17:** " emphasis--"
- **Line 18:** "came."
- **Line 19:** "chocolate?""
- **Line 21:** "adjusted,"
- **Line 22:** "afterthought,"
- **Line 26:** "brunette.""
- **Line 27:** "altogether."
- **Line 30:** "caused--"
- **Line 35:** "yourself?""

ENJAMBMENT

"Telephone Conversation" uses a lot of enjambment, and the speaker often goes for long stretches without using end-stop at all. This gives the poem an anxious, rushing feel, as though the speaker is trying to speed through this awkward, racist phone call. One can see this effect in lines 23-26:

> "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." ...

Lines 23-25 are all enjambed, with only line 26 end-stopped. It's not like all these enjambments show up because the speaker is using long, complicated sentences that run down the page. Instead, the speaker and the landlady are using short, punchy statements. They just fail to line up with the ends of the lines. There is a mismatch between the sentences and the form of the poem. And as a result, the poem might feel awkward, unsteady, or unpredictable—which reflects the unsteadiness and awkwardness of the telephone conversation as the speaker tries to find a response to the landlady's invasive and racist question.

Later the speaker uses enjambment a little differently. As the speaker mocks the landlady and her understanding of racism, the speaker uses enjambment to build suspense and surprise. Look, for instance, at lines 29-30:

> ... Palm of my hand, soles of my feet
> Are a peroxide blond.

The speaker's hands and feet are "peroxide blond" even though the speaker's face is "brunette." In other words, the speaker's body contains many different colors; it cannot be reduced to a simple choice between light and dark. The enjambment at the end of line 29 creates a little moment of suspense, which heightens the surprise of the next line. The enjambment is almost like a comic pause: it gives the reader a moment to imagine what the end of the sentence might be, which then makes the next line all the more powerful and—for the landlady—all the more shocking.

The poem's frequent enjambments thus register the awkwardness and difficulty of the speaker's conversation with the landlady. And, once the speaker decides to mock the landlady's understanding of race, it helps the speaker build the suspense and surprise necessary to deliver a stinging critique.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "location / Indifferent."
- **Lines 2-3:** "lived / Off"
- **Lines 3-4:** "remained / But"
- **Lines 6-7:** "of / Pressurized"
- **Lines 8-9:** "gold-rolled / Cigarette-holder"
- **Lines 10-11:** "LIGHT / OR"
- **Lines 11-12:** "Stench / Of"
- **Lines 13-14:** "tiered / Omnibus"
- **Lines 14-15:** "Shamed / By"
- **Lines 15-16:** "surrender / Pushed"
- **Lines 20-21:** "light / Impersonality."
- **Lines 23-24:** "spectroscopic / Flight"
- **Lines 24-25:** "accent / Hard"
- **Lines 25-26:** "conceding / "DON'T"
- **Lines 28-29:** "see / The"
- **Lines 29-30:** "feet / Are"
- **Lines 31-32:** "turned / My"
- **Lines 32-33:** "sensing / Her"
- **Lines 33-34:** "thunderclap / About"

- **Lines 34-35:** "rather / See"

CAESURA

"Telephone Conversation" uses caesura quite a bit. This is partially a result of the poem's reliance on parataxis: it employs short, fragmentary phrases. These tend to end in the middle of lines, producing awkward pauses. The poem's caesuras work with its parataxis: together, the two devices convey the jerky, uncomfortable rhythm of the phone conversation between the speaker and the landlady. Look, for example, at lines 10-11:

> "HOW DARK?"...I had not misheard..."ARE YOU
> LIGHT
> OR VERY DARK?" Button B, Button A. Stench

The two ellipses convey the speaker's surprise and disorientation, confronted with this racist question. One hears the long, awkward silence on the line as the speaker tries to figure out how to respond.

In line 11, however, the caesura performs a different function. The speaker compares the choice between "LIGHT" and " VERY DARK" to a decision between two buttons. There's no possibility for ambiguity or complication: the speaker simply has to pick one or the other. The caesura in the middle of the sentence—"Button B, Button A"—conveys how stark and unforgiving this choice is. The caesura is like a wall that separates the two choices, cutting them off—and in doing so, cutting off the possibility of a middle ground, of ambiguity and complication in racial identity. The speaker thus uses caesura to convey the awkward rhythm of this conversation with the landlady—and to emphasize the painful, diminishing options she offers for the speaker to define him or herself.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "reasonable, location"
- **Line 2:** "Indifferent. The"
- **Line 3:** "premises. Nothing"
- **Line 4:** "self-confession. "Madam," I"
- **Line 5:** "journey--I"
- **Line 6:** "Silence. Silenced"
- **Line 7:** "good-breeding. Voice, when"
- **Line 8:** "coated, long"
- **Line 9:** "pipped. Caught"
- **Line 10:** "DARK?" . . . I had not misheard . . . "ARE"
- **Line 11:** "DARK?" Button B, Button A. Stench"
- **Line 13:** "booth. Red," "box. Red"
- **Line 14:** "tar. It," "real! Shamed"
- **Line 15:** "silence, surrender"
- **Line 17:** "was, varying"
- **Line 18:** "DARK? OR," "LIGHT?" Revelation"
- **Line 19:** "mean--like"
- **Line 20:** "clinical, crushing"
- **Line 21:** "Impersonality. Rapidly, wave-length"
- **Line 22:** "chose. "West," "sepia"--and"
- **Line 23:** "passport." Silence"
- **Line 24:** "fancy, till"
- **Line 25:** "mouthpiece. "WHAT'S THAT?" conceding"
- **Line 26:** "IS." "Like"
- **Line 27:** "DARK, ISN'T IT?" "Not"
- **Line 28:** "Facially, I," "brunette, but, madam, you"
- **Line 29:** "me. Palm," "hand, soles"
- **Line 30:** "blond. Friction, caused"
- **Line 31:** "Foolishly, madam--by," "down, has"
- **Line 32:** "black--One moment, madam!"--sensing"
- **Line 34:** "ears--"Madam," I pleaded, "wouldn't"

ALLITERATION

Alliteration appears throughout "Telephone Conversation." It's one of the ways the speaker makes the poem sound *poetic* in the absence of meter and rhyme. Alliteration not only makes the poem sound good: it also plays an important role in the poem's consideration of race and racism, highlighting the damage that racism does. For example, note the alliterative /s/ sound in lines 15-16:

> By ill-mannered silence, surrendered
> Pushed dumbfounded to beg simplification.

Here the speaker is reacting to the landlady's intrusive question, "ARE YOU DARK? OR VERY LIGHT?" The speaker is simultaneously ashamed and dumbfounded, unable to reply—except to ask the landlady to repeat herself, to clarify her question. The /s/ sound links all these things together: the speaker is ashamed because of this "silence," which the speaker understands as a kind of "surrender." Here, alliteration underlines the discomfort that the speaker feels in response to the landlady's racist question.

Elsewhere, alliteration underscores the cruelty of the landlady's racism, as in the hard /k/ sound in line 20:

> Her assent was clinical, crushing...

This sound is hard and harsh. It conveys the cruelty in the landlady's voice: she insists on learning the speaker's skin color even though the question clearly upsets the speaker. In this way, alliteration helps to clarify the poem's stakes. The landlady's ideas about race are not only simplifications; they are also hurtful for the speaker.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "I"
- **Line 2:** "I," "s," "I"
- **Line 4:** "w"
- **Line 5:** "w"
- **Line 6:** "S," "S"
- **Line 7:** "c"
- **Line 8:** "L," "c," "I"
- **Line 11:** "B," "B," "B"
- **Line 12:** "r," "b"
- **Line 13:** "R," "b," "R," "b," "R"
- **Line 15:** "s," "s"
- **Line 16:** "s"
- **Line 20:** "c," "I," "c," "I"
- **Line 21:** "I," "a"
- **Line 22:** "A," "a," "a," "a"
- **Line 23:** "S," "s"
- **Line 24:** "F," "f," "t," "t"
- **Line 28:** "b," "b"
- **Line 29:** "m," "m," "m"
- **Line 30:** "F"
- **Line 31:** "F"
- **Line 32:** "M," "b," "b," "m," "m"
- **Line 33:** "r," "r"

ASSONANCE

The speaker uses assonance throughout "Telephone Conversation." This makes sense: this poem is about a phone call, and assonance is one of the devices to which the speaker turns to capture the *sound* of the call. Note, for instance, the assonant /i/, /oh/, and /ow/ sounds in lines 8-10:

> Lipstick coated, long gold-rolled
> Cigarette-holder pipped. Caught I was foully.
> "HOW DARK?"

These lines are also filled with alliteration and consonance of /l/, /d/, and /k/ sounds. The effect is that this line feels gilded, in a way—like it is deliberately *poetic* in order to emphasize how self-consciously snooty and aristocratic the landlady comes across. The /ow/ of "foully" and "how" also directly connects the speaker's feeling of disgust to the landlady's racist question.

Elsewhere, the speaker uses assonance to underline resistance to the landlady's racism. Note, for instance, the long /ee/ sound in lines 28-29:

> Facially, I am brunette, but, madam, you should see
> The rest of me. Palm of my hand, soles of my feet

The speaker is mocking the landlady's question here—by noting that skin color is a bad way to describe someone. The speaker is not just one color: different parts of the speaker's body are different shades. The speaker thus plays on the landlady's prejudice and her obsession with skin color. At first, the assonance in lines 28-29 suggests that the speaker has given in and accepted the premise of the landlady's question. By linking "see" and "me," the speaker suggests that the speaker's identity is something that can be seen—that it does indeed rest in the speaker's skin color. But the assonance continues, bringing "feet" into the mix. This, in turn, suggests that the original connection between "me" and "see" is kind of ridiculous—after all, no one thinks that they'll discover someone's essence or identity by looking at the soles of their feet! The speaker thus uses assonance to capture the cruelty of racism—and, later, to underline the speaker's satirical response to it.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "ee," "e"
- **Line 2:** "I," "i"
- **Line 5:** "a," "a," "a," "a"
- **Line 6:** "i," "e," "i," "e," "io," "o"
- **Line 7:** "i"
- **Line 8:** "i," "i," "oa," "o," "o"
- **Line 9:** "i," "o," "i," "ou"
- **Line 10:** "O"
- **Line 11:** "u," "o," "u," "o"
- **Line 13:** "e," "e," "e"
- **Line 14:** "e"
- **Line 15:** "e," "e," "e," "e"
- **Line 16:** "e," "e," "i," "i," "i"
- **Line 18:** "a," "a"
- **Line 19:** "ai"
- **Line 20:** "i," "i," "i," "i"
- **Line 21:** "I," "i," "y," "i," "y," "a," "u"
- **Line 22:** "A," "a," "a," "a," "a," "a"
- **Line 23:** "y," "i," "o," "o"
- **Line 24:** "i"
- **Line 25:** "ie," "e"
- **Line 26:** "O," "O"
- **Line 27:** "I," "I"
- **Line 28:** "a," "a," "y," "a," "a," "a," "ee"
- **Line 29:** "e," "ee"
- **Line 30:** "o," "o," "au"
- **Line 31:** "a," "a," "a"
- **Line 32:** "a," "a"
- **Line 33:** "ei," "ea"
- **Line 34:** "ea," "ea"
- **Line 35:** "ee"

CONSONANCE

"Telephone Conversation" uses alliteration and assonance often. But it is almost overflowing with consonance. This is particularly true after the landlady asks her intrusive, racist question about the speaker's skin color. For example, look at line 12, with its /r/, /b/, /s/, /k/, and /p/ sounds:

Of rancid breath of public hide-and speak

Here, the speaker is describing the landlady's racism—and accusing her of being a hypocrite. The harsh consonant sounds that run through the line echo and reinforce the speaker's feelings of repulsion towards the landlady. The speaker uses so much consonance to convey the conflict, anger, and disorientation that runs through this telephone conversation: the poem itself sounds as bitter and difficult as the conversation itself.

Later, the speaker uses consonance to underscore the landlady's racism. Note, for instance, the /m/ sound in lines 28-29:

Facially, I am brunette, but, madam, you should see
the rest of me. Palm of my hand, soles of my feet

In these lines, the speaker challenges the thought process behind the landlady's question. She wants to know whether the speaker is light or dark skinned; the speaker responds by stressing that a person's skin is many colors—and thus that racially identity is far more complicated than a simple choice between light and dark. The consonance here adds yet more nuance to the speaker's critique. The /m/ sound appears in words like "am," "me," and "palm," and is thus strongly associated with the speaker. But it also appears in "madam," the polite word the speaker uses to address the landlady. This might suggest that there is an underlying link between the speaker and the landlady, that they are not as different as she assumes.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "n," "l," "l," "n"
- **Line 2:** "d," "n," "l," "d," "l," "d," "s," "l," "d"
- **Line 3:** "m," "N," "r," "m," "n"
- **Line 4:** "f," "f," "d," "w," "d"
- **Line 5:** "t," "w," "t"
- **Line 6:** "S," "l," "nc," "S," "l," "nc," "s," "ss"
- **Line 7:** "r," "ss," "r," "d," "d," "r," "c," "c"
- **Line 8:** "L," "ck," "c," "d," "l," "g," "ld," "ll," "d"
- **Line 9:** "C," "g," "r," "tt," "ld," "r," "p," "pp," "d," "C," "t," "ou," "ll"
- **Line 10:** "H," "W," "D," "R," "h," "h," "r," "d," "R"
- **Line 11:** "R," "R," "B," "tt," "n," "B," "B," "tt," "n," "S," "t," "n"
- **Line 12:** "r," "nc," "b," "r," "p," "b," "c," "s," "p," "k"
- **Line 13:** "R," "b," "R," "ll," "r," "b," "R," "d," "b," "l," "r," "d"
- **Line 14:** "b," "s," "s," "r," "r"
- **Line 15:** "ll," "nn," "r," "s," "l," "c," "s," "rr," "n," "d," "r"
- **Line 16:** "d," "d," "m," "f," "d," "d," "s," "m," "f"
- **Line 18:** "R," "R," "R," "R," "m"
- **Line 19:** "m," "l," "k," "l," "m," "k," "c," "l"
- **Line 20:** "ss," "nt," "c," "l," "n," "c," "l," "c," "l"
- **Line 21:** "p," "r," "l," "R," "p," "d," "l," "l," "d," "d"
- **Line 22:** "fr," "s," "f," "r"
- **Line 23:** "p," "ss," "p," "rt," "S," "c," "s," "p," "c," "t," "sc," "p," "c"
- **Line 24:** "F," "l," "t," "f," "n," "c," "t," "ll," "t," "f," "l," "n," "c," "l," "cc," "nt"
- **Line 25:** "n," "c," "c," "n," "c," "d"
- **Line 26:** "D," "N," "T," "KN," "T," "r," "n," "tt"
- **Line 27:** "T," "T," "T," "t," "t"
- **Line 28:** "ll," "m," "b," "tt," "b," "t," "m," "d," "m," "ld," "s"
- **Line 29:** "s," "t," "m," "P," "l," "m," "m," "s," "l," "s," "m," "t"
- **Line 30:** "r," "p," "r," "d," "d," "F," "r"
- **Line 31:** "F," "l," "l," "m," "d," "m," "tt," "d," "t," "d"
- **Line 32:** "M," "b," "tt," "m," "n," "b," "m," "nt," "m," "d," "m," "s," "n," "s"
- **Line 33:** "r," "r," "r," "r," "r," "r"
- **Line 34:** "r," "M," "m," "r," "r"
- **Line 35:** "S," "s"

PUN

The speaker makes a pun in lines 11-12 in accusing the landlady of having "Stench / of rancid breath of public hide-and-speak." The speaker is punning on a children's game, hide and seek. (In the game, a group of kids hide; someone runs around looking for them.) The speaker thus accuses the landlady of hiding something. But instead of hiding herself physically, like kids do during a game of hide and seek, she's hiding something in the way that she *speaks*.

It might be difficult, at first, to understand what the speaker means. The speaker uses a metaphor to describe this hidden thing, calling it the "Stench / Of rancid breath." In other words, it's something disgusting and bad. In the broader context of the poem, this is a metaphor for the landlady's racism. The pun suggests that the landlady hides her racism behind her "good-breeding"—that is, that the landlady is a hypocrite who disguises her racism under a polite exterior. That racism is always present, however: a "stench" that hangs on her breath.

Where Pun appears in the poem:

- **Line 12:** "hide-and-speak"

PARATAXIS

Telephone Conversation" is full of short sentences, sentence fragments, and disjointed phrases that pile up on top of each other—without any clear indication from the speaker about how to prioritize one element over another. These are instances of parataxis. A good example of the device at work comes in lines 13-14:

Red booth. Red pillar box. Red double-tiered
Omnibus squelching tar.

These lines refers to the speaker's physical surroundings in this

moment, as the speaker is talking on the phone with the landlady: a phone booth, a mailbox, a bus driving by. The speaker's sentences are short and fragmentary: each of them is grammatically incomplete. The speaker simply names each thing in view and moves on. In this case, the speaker's use of parataxis conveys the speaker's shock and dismay: the landlady has just asked the speaker an intrusive, racist question. The speaker focuses on the mundane details of the surrounding environment while attempting to regain his or her bearings.

In this instance, the use of parataxis emphasizes the discomfort the speaker feels with the landlady's question. The speaker also uses parataxis to convey the awkwardness of the phone call itself, as in lines 6-7:

> Silence. Silenced transmission of
> Pressurized good-breeding.

These repetitions and sentence fragments combine to give the reader a sense of the jerky, awkward rhythm of the conversation—and the uncomfortable silences that fill it—after the landlady asks her racist question. The speaker thus employs parataxis to help make the telephone conversation come alive for the reader—in all its disorientation, awkwardness, and unpleasantness.

Where Parataxis appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "The price seemed reasonable, location / Indifferent."
- **Lines 2-3:** " The landlady swore she lived / Off premises."
- **Line 5:** "I hate a wasted journey--I am African"
- **Lines 6-9:** "Silence. Silenced transmission of / Pressurized good-breeding. Voice, when it came, / Lipstick coated, long gold-rolled / Cigarette-holder pipped. Caught I was foully."
- **Lines 11-14:** "Button B, Button A. Stench / Of rancid breath of public hide-and-speak. / Red booth. Red pillar box. Red double-tiered / Omnibus squelching tar. "
- **Lines 14-14:** "It / was / real! "
- **Lines 14-16:** "Shamed / By ill-mannered silence, surrender / Pushed dumbfounded to beg simplification."
- **Lines 29-32:** "Palm of my hand, soles of my feet / Are a peroxide blond. Friction, caused-- / Foolishly, madam--by sitting down, has turned / My bottom raven black--"

REPETITION

"Telephone Conversation" regularly uses repeated phrases and words. These repetitions serve a wide range of different purposes in the poem, and they correspond to different poetic devices. For example, in line 6, the speaker uses polyptoton: "Silence. Silenced transmission…" This repetition isn't strictly necessary—it's almost redundant. But, by dwelling on the awkward silence that follows the revelation that the speaker is "African," the speaker conveys a sense of discomfort while waiting for the landlady to respond. Similarly, in lines 13-14 the speaker describes a series of red things:

> Red booth. Red Pillar box. Red double-tiered
> Omnibus squelching tar.

Here the speaker is describing nearby objects—the phone booth, a mailbox next to it, a bus driving by. The speaker stares at these things in disbelief, focusing on these mundane details because the speaker is so shocked by the landlady's question. The repetition conveys this sense of shock—and emphasizes the way the speaker lashes onto minute details to try to get a handle on reality again.

Elsewhere, the speaker turns to repetition to convey the force and insistence of the landlady's racism. The landlady's question—"ARE YOU LIGHT / OR VERY DARK?"—which first appears in lines 10-11 returns in line 18 and, partially, in line 27. It becomes a kind of refrain for the poem. Further, it suggests how narrow, how diminishing, the landlady's concerns are: all she cares about is whether the speaker is "LIGHT / OR VERY DARK"—nothing else about the speaker matters. In this way, repetition underscores the dehumanizing effects of racism.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** "Silence. Silenced"
- **Line 10:** ""HOW DARK?""
- **Lines 10-11:** ""ARE YOU LIGHT / OR VERY DARK?" "
- **Line 11:** "Button B, Button A. "
- **Line 13:** "Red booth. Red pillar box. Red double-tiered"
- **Line 14:** "Omnibus squelching tar. "
- **Line 18:** ""ARE YOU DARK? OR VERY LIGHT?""
- **Line 26:** "brunette"
- **Line 27:** ""THAT'S DARK, ISN'T IT?" "
- **Line 28:** "brunette," "madam"
- **Line 31:** "madam"
- **Line 32:** "madam"
- **Line 34:** "Madam"

METAPHOR

"Telephone Conversation" describes a disorienting experience. A mundane phone call between a landlady and a potential tenant devolves into an intrusive racist interrogation: the landlady demanding to know how dark the speaker's skin is. The speaker turns to metaphor to help describe the interaction. It helps the speaker characterize the landlady herself, the uncomfortable and dehumanizing position she puts the speaker in—and it also helps the speaker push back against the reductive position the landlady takes on race.

In lines 7-9, the speaker uses metaphor to characterize the landlady's voice:

... Voice, when it came,
Lipstick coated, long gold-rolled
Cigarette-holder pipped.

The landlady's voice isn't *literally* "coated" in "lipstick," nor is it literally a "gold-rolled / Cigarette-holder." But these things convey privilege, wealth, and prestige: by comparing the landlady's voice to them, the speaker suggests that her voice is haughty, aristocratic, and condescending.

Later, the speaker uses a metaphor to convey the unpleasant and dehumanizing nature of the choice the landlady has presented, using a short, fragmentary phrase: "Button B, Button A." The speaker compares the choice between "LIGHT / OR VERY DARK," to the two buttons that would have been found on British phone booths at the time of the poem's writing. The landlady doesn't give the speaker a chance to present racial identity in a nuanced way: there are only two options and those options are mutually exclusive. The speaker has to choose A or B.

These metaphors are strange and disruptive. There's something almost gross about saying that the landlady's voice is "lipstick coated." Similarly the metaphor in line 11 "Button B, Button A" erupts into the line, an isolated sentence fragment: the speaker doesn't give the reader any guidance as to how to understand it. In this way, the poem's metaphors convey the disorientation and frustration the speaker feels while confronting the landlady. Later, in the poem, as the speaker begins to mock the landlady's understanding of race, however, the speaker turns the tables and starts to use metaphors to confuse the landlady. For instance, in line 22, the speaker's skin color is described as "West African sepia"—comparing it to the reddish-brown color of old monochrome photographs. The metaphor puzzles the landlady: she demands clarification. In this way, the speaker uses metaphor to challenge her ideas about race—and to suggest a more nuanced view of racial identity.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 7-9:** "V / oice, when it came, / Lipstick coated, long gold-rolled / Cigarette-holder pipped"
- **Lines 11-12:** "Button B, Button A. Stench / Of rancid breath of public hide-and-speak."
- **Line 21:** "wave-length adjusted"
- **Line 22:** "West African sepia"
- **Lines 29-30:** "Palm of my hand, soles of my feet / Are a peroxide blond"
- **Line 32:** "My bottom raven black"
- **Line 33:** "thunderclap"

SIMILE

At the heart of "Telephone Conversation" is a racist and intrusive question: the landlady demands to know whether the speaker is "LIGHT / OR VERY DARK" skinned. The speaker refuses to answer this question directly. Instead, the speaker uses metaphor and simile to push back, offering answers intended to disorient the landlady and challenge her reductive views on race. Even in line 19, when the speaker asks the landlady for clarification, the speaker refuses to use her terms:

You mean—like plain or milk chocolate?

The simile compares skin color to the colors of different kinds of chocolate. The speaker is just rephrasing the landlady's question here, but still resists using the landlady's actual language. This already suggests a more sophisticated, nuanced view of race. The landlady proposes an exact, unforgiving criteria for skin color: light or dark. The speaker's simile is less definite, less exact: it holds open room for nuance and complication.

Later, in line 22, the speaker's skin color is described as "West African sepia." The landlady doesn't understand what the speaker means and asks for clarification. Instead of supplying that clarification, the speaker offers another simile: it's "like brunette," the speaker notes in line 26. The speaker again uses simile to confuse the landlady—and, in doing so, to suggest that racial identity is more complicated than her intrusive question admits.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Line 19:** "like plain or milk chocolate"
- **Line 26:** "Like brunette"

VOCABULARY

Indifferent (Line 2) - Good enough. The apartment isn't in a great location, but it's not bad either.

Premises (Line 3) - The apartment or house for rent. In other words, since she lives "off premises," the landlady doesn't live in the building.

Self-confession (Line 4) - Describing one's self. In this case, the speaker describes the continent that he or she comes from and, by extension, his or her race.

Transmission (Line 6) - The sound carried on the telephone wires. In other words, the landlady falls silent when she hears that the speaker is African—but the speaker learns a lot about her from that silence.

Pressurized (Line 7) - Strained or stressed. The landlady's "good-breeding" is in conflict with her prejudice against black people—and thus that "good-breeding" is under pressure.

Gold-rolled Cigarette Holder (Lines 8-9) - A device that holds a lit cigarette. It is an elegant, aristocratic device—all the more

so because, here, it has a gold stem.

Pipped (Line 9) - Annoyed or irritated. The landlady is peeved to learn that the speaker is "African."

Foully (Line 9) - Unpleasant or disagreeable. The speaker is trapped in a situation that he or she strongly dislikes.

Button B, Button A: (Line 11) - A choice between two different options. The choice doesn't allow for complication or ambiguity: the speaker simply has to choose between A and B.

Hide-and-Speak (Line 12) - A pun on the phrase "hide and seek." The speaker accuses the landlady of hiding her racism under her polite, polished speech.

Pillar Box (Line 13) - A large, free-standing mailbox. They are usually painted red. They are used across the United Kingdom, but they aren't common in the rest of the world.

Double-Tiered Omnibus (Lines 13-14) - A double-decker bus.

Squelching (Line 14) - Moving through something sticky and wet. The word refers to the sound the bus's wheels make as it drives through wet tar.

Dumbfounded (Line 16) - Surprised and befuddled. In a literal sense, this often means being unable to speak.

Impersonality (Line 21) - Formal, official. A statement without intimacy.

Wave-length (Line 21) - The frequency at which a sound travels. Here, the speaker is using the phrase metaphorically. It describes the speaker's approach, based on his or her understanding of the landlady's intentions.

Sepia (Line 22) - A reddish-brown color. The word often describes the color of old photographs.

Spectroscopic (Line 23) - A "spectroscope" is a device that allows one to measure the spectrum in a beam of light—all the different colors that make it up. So, the speaker is saying that, as the landlady imagines what the speaker could possibly mean, she comes up with a bunch of different colors.

Mouthpiece (Line 25) - The telephone receiver.

Peroxide Blond (Line 30) - Light blond hair, usually bleached rather than natural. The phrase is thus associated with white femininity.

Raven Black (Line 32) - Black as the feathers of a raven. In other words, jet black or very dark.

Thunderclap (Line 33) - The sound of thunder. Here, the speaker is using the word metaphorically to describe the end of the phone call. It would be like a thunderclap, a sudden and perhaps ominous change.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Telephone Conversation" is written in a single, 35-line stanza of free verse. That means it doesn't have a defined meter or rhyme scheme. The poem feels conversational rather than tightly controlled, and is also very unpredictable. It's not clear to the reader where this conversation will go next. The speaker also uses sharp enjambments to create suspense and surprise, alongside short phrases like "Red booth. Red pillar box." that create a punchy, staccato rhythm. This rhythm mimics the telephone conversation the poem describes, with all its short, curt exchanges and its awkward pauses. Even though the poem doesn't use meter and rhyme, then, its form still does important work, capturing the speaker's feelings—and the dynamics of the telephone conversation itself.

METER

t"Telephone Conversation" is written in free verse, which means that it doesn't follow a set meter. Instead of the steady, predictable rhythms of a metrical poem, the rhythms of "Telephone Conversation" vary much like they would in an actual conversation. This keeps the poem feeling surprising and unpredictable throughout, the reader never quite sure where the speaker will go next while formulating a response to the landlady's deeply inappropriate and racist question.

RHYME SCHEME

"Telephone Conversation" is written in free verse: it doesn't have a regular rhyme scheme. As noted in our discussions of form and meter, this keeps the poem feeling unpredictable; the reader doesn't know where this uncomfortable conversation is going to go next.

The closest thing to a rhyme comes in lines 28-29, which end with the words "see" and "feet." The /ee/ sounds in "see" and "feet" are assonant. That binds them together, creating an effect which is almost like rhyme, but the /t/ sound at the end of "feet" keeps this from being a perfect rhyme.

The lack of rhyme in the poem is potentially significant on another level. Rhyme creates links between words. When a reader encounters two words that mean different things but sound the same, they start to think about the connections between them, the underlying harmony that binds those things together. But there isn't any harmony between the speaker and the landlady—or, at least, her racism keeps them from finding it. The poem's refusal to use rhyme, even occasionally, thus mimics the divide between the speaker and the landlady.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "Telephone Conversation" is an unnamed

person from West Africa. This person is living in a majority white country, implied to be England (where red phone booths, "pillar boxes," and double decker buses are common). The speaker needs to rent an apartment in this country, but that's more or less all readers learn about the speaker (though they do get a funny and satirical account of the color of different parts of the speaker's body). The fact that readers never learn anything substantial about the speaker—where the speaker works, what the speaker likes to do, etc.—is part of the point. The speaker doesn't reveal any of this personal information during the phone conversation with the landlady because she doesn't ask the speaker to do so. She's only interested in the color of the speaker's skin. By avoiding revealing anything else about the speaker, the poem illustrates how racism reduces and dehumanizes people. It cuts away everything that's human and vibrant about the speaker, until only skin color is left.

SETTING

"Telephone Conversation" is set in an unnamed country, implied to be England (Soyinka studied in Leeds, a city in the north of England, as a young man, and the speaker mentions a "pillar box" in line 13—a kind of mail box that's used throughout the United Kingdom). Specifically, it takes place in a red telephone booth, during a phone call between the speaker and a landlady from whom the speaker wants to rent an apartment or room of some sort.

The speaker is careful not to provide too much detail, however, and never positively identifies which country the poem is set in. This is important: even though the poem zeroes in on a single phone call—a single racist incident—it reflects more broadly on the challenges that black people face in majority white countries like England. In other words, the poem is saying that incidents like this can and do happen to black people in a wide range of settings.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Wole Soyinka is an important figure in post-colonial literature. Colonialism was a political system that developed in the 19th century, in which European countries like England and Belgium ruled over countries in Africa, Asia, and elsewhere around the globe. When Soyinka was a young man in the 1950s and 1960s, this system began to come apart: countries like Nigeria, where he was born, won their independence. As these countries struggled against their colonial rulers, a group of artists and intellectuals arose, led by figures like Aimé Césaire, Franz Fanon, and Soyinka himself. They bitterly opposed the Europeans rulers who controlled their countries, and they worked to develop independent literary traditions: new kinds of poetry that testified to the complicated and difficult histories their countries had endured under colonialism. These poets and artists hoped to use literature to build resistance to colonial rule—and to create cultural pride among their countrymen.

Post-colonial artists and writers also hoped to bring attention to the injustices—large and small—they had suffered at the hands of their colonizers. "Telephone Conversation" contributes to this broader project. Even though it describes a relatively small injustice, it testifies to the difficult conditions that many artists and intellectuals like Soyinka faced while studying and working in Western countries. It documents the small, persistent, and dispiriting difficulties that colonized people faced in dealing with their colonizers, and the ways in which such difficulties diminish and dehumanize them. But, with its biting wit and linguistic virtuosity, the poem also makes a strong case for the resilience and brilliance of the people who endured such treatment—and their capacity to passionately resist it. The new traditions originated by post-colonial writers became some of the most vibrant and important literature of the 20th century. In recognition of this vibrancy, and of his crucial contributions to it, Soyinka was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1986.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Wole Soyinka was born in Nigeria in the 1930s and studied in England in the 1950s. He became one of the most important figures in African literature during a pivotal moment in that continent's history. Since the 19th century, most African countries had been ruled by Europeans under brutal and exploitative colonialism. After the end of World War II, many African countries fought to free themselves from colonial rule. In some cases, these struggles were peaceful. In others, they involved violent conflict. And even when nations won independence, the struggle wasn't over. Some countries slid into repressive dictatorships.

Soyinka's home country, Nigeria, was under British rule until 1960. It had a troubled history through the rest of the 20th century, with periods of democratic rule interrupted by a civil war between 1967-1970 and periods of military dictatorship thereafter. (In recent years, the country's fortunes have improved: it has enjoyed a period of democratic rule that dates back to 1999.)

African artists and intellectuals played important roles in these struggles: they bitterly opposed colonialism and, later, extended that opposition to the dictators who sprang up after colonial rule. Some writers, like Soyinka, even participated directly in these struggles. Beginning in 1966, he was imprisoned for 22 months for conspiring against the military dictator of Nigeria. He was finally freed when the Nigerian civil war came to a close. In 1971, concerned about the political situation in Nigeria, Soyinka fled the country and lived for many

years in exile, producing poems and plays that passionately protested both political conditions in Nigeria and racism more broadly. Soyinka's poetry and plays are thus inseparable from their historical context. They not only comment on racism, colonialism, and dictatorship; they actively seek to intervene in the historical struggles around these issues, and to use literature to make the world more just and more livable.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- 'There's One Humanity or There Isn't': A Conversation — A conversation between scholar Henry Louis Gates Jr. and the poet from the New York Review of Books. (https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2019/03/21/one-humanity-conversation-henry-louis-gates-wole-soyinka/)
- Wole Soyinka's Biography — A biography of Wole Soyinka from the Nobel Foundation. (https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1986/soyinka/biographical/)
- Out of Africa: A Conversation with Wole Soyinka — Alessandra Di Maio interviews Wole Soyinka. (https://www.doppiozero.com/materiali/why-africa/out-africa-conversation-wole-soyinka)
- Post-Colonial Literature — An introduction to post-colonial literature from Oxford Bibliographies. (https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780190221911/obo-9780190221911-0069.xml)
- Wole Soyinka Reads "Telephone Conversation" — Listen to poet read his poem aloud. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EP2yLdmn_bg)

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Altman, Toby. "*Telephone Conversation.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 1 Aug 2019. Web. 22 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Altman, Toby. "*Telephone Conversation.*" LitCharts LLC, August 1, 2019. Retrieved April 22, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/wole-soyinka/telephone-conversation.