

Main Points

- 'Telephone Conversation' is written by Wole Soyinka.
- He is the first African to receive the Nobel Prize for literature(1986).
- In his poem 'Telephone Conversation' Wole Soyinka has presented a bitter satire on racism and racist prejudices.
- The poet has placed before his audience a telephonic conversation between a white landlady and an African man who is looking for a place on rent to live in.
- The price of the room and the location and other essentials are agreeable to the African man.
- But in the midst of his conversation, he mentions that he is black.
- Quite opposed to his expectation, the white landlady becomes silent as soon as she gets his identity as an African.
- This silence reflects her indifference and discrimination towards the black.
- However, the silence is soon broken as the landlady starts speaking again and questions how dark he is.
- At first he thinks that he might have misheard the question.
- But when the lady repeats the same question, the man feels very disgusting.
- In the end he pleads her to come and see herself how black he is.
- The lady slams down the receiver.
- The idea behind the poem is to depict how brutal and inhuman it can be for a man who is subjected to racial discrimination.

MULTIPLE CHOICE QUESTIONS

1. The poem 'Telephone Conversation' is written by _____.
a. P. B. Shelly b. Ted Hughes
c. Wole Soyinka d. John Keats
2. 'Telephone Conversation' is a _____.
a. Dramatic dialogue
b. Lyrical dialogue
c. Political dialogue
d. Economic dialogue
3. 'Telephone Conversation' is a conversation between-
a. Two Africans
b. Two Americans
c. An Indian and a European
d. A Negro and a White lady
4. Who is the man in 'Telephone Conversation'?
a. An African
b. An Indian
c. A European
d. An American
5. 'Telephone Conversation' opens with the lines of _____.
a. Indian speaker
b. Russian speaker
c. Chinese speaker
d. African speaker
6. Who is other speaker with whom the African speaker is conversing ?
a. A white lady
b. A black lady
c. A brown lady
d. A tribal lady
7. In 'Telephone Conversation' the conversation takes place between/among –
a. Three b. Four
c. Two d. Many
8. The conversation in 'Telephone Conversation' is on _____.
a. Tax
b. Fair
c. Accommodation on rent
d. Exam datesheet

VERY SHORT QUESTIONS

1. **Who were the people having the telephone conversation?**

Ans. An African Negro and a White landlady were conversing on the phone.

2. **How was the landlady's voice ?**

Ans. The landlady's voice was lipstick coated and muffled transmission of pressured good breeding.

3. **What facts did the man learn about the apartment he was to rent?**

Ans. The man learnt that the rent was reasonable, its location was good and the landlady lived off the premises.

4. **What was in red colour?**

Ans. The booth, pillar box and double-tiered omnibus were the only objects that were red in colour.

5. **What do you mean by clinical assent?**

Ans. The voice of the lady in the poem seemed clinical while assenting to the man's revelation. It refers to the poet's concerned voice, which is based on his vivid and actual observation after a lot of thoughts and inspection.

6. **What is a raven black?**

Ans. It's a figurative expression to represent the intensity of the colour black. It's a term for persons with dark skin.

7. **Why does the poet describe the different colours of his body parts?**

Ans. The poet becomes so angry and disgusted at the racist questions of the lady that he describes the different colours of his body parts.

8. **What is peroxide blonde?**

Ans. Rather than a natural light and fair complexion, it refers to harsh or unnaturally bleached palms and soles of feet.

9. **What was 'hide and seek' in the poem?**

Ans. Hide and seek is used in the poem to explain the taboo against dark-skinned people. People who claimed to be fair-skinned or white were thought to be more intellectual, learned, and superior than those who claimed to be dark-skinned or white.

10. **What was the effect of friction on the man's body ?**

Ans. The man said to the white lady that while sitting down, friction has made his bottom raven black.

SHORT QUESTIONS

1. **What is the theme of the poem?**

Ans. Racism is the central theme of the poem. In the poem, the lady behaved in a prejudiced manner towards the dark man. The poet has expressed regret for something he was born with and has produced a feeling of poetic irony by implying that people have racist views about others.

2. **What is highlighted in this poem?**

Ans. In this poetry, the author has used colour to emphasise his point. The only difference between the landlady and the dark man was their skin colour, she was fair and white, while he was dark and black. The poet was a dark-skinned man, but skin colour does not imply social position.

3. **Why do you think that the poet has chosen the title 'Telephone Conversation'? If you agree to suggest any other title for the poem, what would it be?**

Ans. 'The Black and the White' could be another suggestion for the title of this poem. However, the poet has chosen a very appropriate title for this poem. The landlady is a white-skinned lady and the poet is dark-skinned. This title refers the shallow racism through a telephone conversation.

4. **Why there was silence between the conversations?**

Ans. There was no complete stillness, but there were brief pauses between the lady's and the man's conversation. The lady's hesitancy was the main cause of such long periods of silence. She was hesitant to speak with the man since he was dark-skinned.

5. **What is the intention of the poet?**

Ans. The poet's intention is evident, yet he's also satirical. In order to make his point against racism, the poet uses comedy and sarcasm. He wants people to understand that colour is merely a matter of visibility and has nothing to do with a person's personality or behaviour. Because the poet is dark-skinned, he understands how people regard dark-skinned people as inferior and low-status individuals, which he wishes to change.

6. **Justify the title of the poem.**

Ans. The poet has given his poem a very apt title. It refers to a phone conversation in which the lady,

who is white, and the poet, who is dark or black, plainly demonstrated the shallow prejudice of the lady that was displayed by their dialogue. The telephone represents the distance between the two ends of the line and the fact that they cannot meet at a location.

LONG QUESTIONS

1. State the central issue in the poem.

Ans. The central issue in the poem moves around the ironical fact that questions are asked about his skin colour but no conversation is about the rent, the amenities provided and other basic requirements. The landlady is shown having a very shallow behaviour and ironically the poet is shown to be sorry for something which he was born with. The poem displays the ridiculousness of racism.

2. How is colour highlighted in the poem and why? List all the words in the poem that suggest colour.

Ans. The landlady has been depicted as using gold rolled cigarette pipe. This shows that she belonged to some high class society. The question comes - How Dark? This shows that the white skinned landlady is not ready to accept a tenant who is black skinned. However, she shows some relief and wants to be confirmed about the intensity of his darkness. The African man feels awkward at such meanness. The red colour suggests this idea. Plain chocolate and milk chocolate also give the idea of dark colour. West African sepia, brunette and raven are words that suggest the colour.

3. Which are the lines in the poem that impressed you the most and why?

Ans. 'West African sepia' is the phrase which impressed me the most. This phrase seems to be a proper reply to the ignorant white woman. This phrase in the poem projects humour on a very subtle level. Through these words the poet tries to emphasize on the fact that it is wrong to judge a person on the basis of his colour.

4. Certain words in the poem are in capital letters - Why?

Ans. Certain words in the poem are in capital letters. These words exemplify the purpose of the poem and the purpose is to show the racist mentality of the fair-skinned. When a landlady talks to a tenant, the only matter of concern should be his behaviour and financial position and not his skin colour. These capital letters magnify the fact that it is more important for the landlady to know how

dark-skinned the tenant is.

5. The power of poetry lies in suggestion and understatement. Discuss this with reference to the poem.

Ans. Understatement means to represent less strongly than the facts would bear out. It is understating to decide one's level of knowledge based on one's colour. The play of the words between the landlady and the poet clearly proves that a man's colour has nothing to do with the levels of education. The questions asked by the landlady became a mockery. Thus, the poem very strongly suggests that the skin colour of a person cannot define him.