

Poetry - 4.

Telephone Conversation

UNDERSTANDING THE POEM

Q. 1 State the central issue in the poem.

Answer:

The central issue of the poem relates to racism and discrimination. The poem was surrounded by an irony that a person seeking for a shelter, instead of asking about rent, identification and contract formalities, a person was asked questions about her skin color. The landlady's behavior in this poem towards a man was racist, and this poem signifies that being an African is a big disadvantage for that man. The poet was trying to show that Colour discrimination is a big issue which narrowed down the thinking of people towards Africans.

Q. 2 There are intervals of silence in the interaction between the landlady and the prospective tenant. What are the reasons for this?

Answer:

While conversation between landlady and tenant, when tenant said landlady that I warned, I hate a wasted journey and I am an African, with this a silence came into existence with a voice of breathing in it. Landlady started inquiring about how dark that tenant is as he was African. The main reason behind it was landlady felt inferior listening this and she had given a small pause before replying to an African. The sudden pause shows that when lady got to know about African's race she was bit disappointed and suddenly put a question on his skin Colour.

Q. 3 How is Colour highlighted in the poem and why? List all the words in the poem that suggest Colour.

Answer:



There are several colours highlighted in a poem signifying the difference between landlady and a poet which is based on the skin-colour of both. The use of colour red was used on several places like telephone booth, the double-tiered bus and pillar box. It signifies the colour of dark skin that poet has, he was not of fair complexion like landlady. The word used as colour “gold –rolled” shows the high class expression which belongs to fair coloured people. Various other colours are also used in a poem in regard to this and these are: Red, Black, Milk chocolate, Gold, brunette and blonde.

Q. 4 Which are the lines in the poem that impressed you the most and why?

Answer:

‘West African Sepia’ is the phrase which impressed me the most. This phrase was the correct answer or reply given by the poet (a tenant) to the arrogant landlady. When lady asked poet many times about his colour he had given this reply which shows that what people think about black people is just a mindset which is waste. Soyinka with these words tried to put a light on colour discrimination. He felt that a person cannot be judged by his colour or appearance, a person must always have identified by his intellect, knowledge and behavior. In this poem, Soyinka impressed me with his views and presentation on how black people get discriminated and instead of feeling low they should answer people that make them feel wrong in their opinion in regard to discrimination towards skin colour.

Q. 5 You know what ‘hide-and-seek’ is. What would ‘hide-and-speak’ mean?

Answer:

“Hide-and-seek” is a game which is mostly played by kids in their childhood. Several kids hide themselves at different locations and one kid who play a role of seeker try to find out hidden one. The expression



“hide-and-speak” in this poem expresses that the person who are black are inferior and are hidden in darkness and on the other hand people who are of white complexion put compliments on people who are black and inferior as they feel themselves as superior.

Q. 6 Certain words in the poem are in capital letters—why?

Answer:

Words in the poem which are in capital letters are as follows:

HOW DARK? ARE YOU LIGHT? OR VERY DARK? OR VERY LIGHT?

These words basically highlight the main idea of the poem which is on colour discrimination. These words are spoken by a landlady to a poet; she was putting emphasis on his skin colour when she got to know that he was an African. This shows the mindset of people who are of fair complexion. Landlady was actually trying to know about his tenant complexion so she was putting efforts to know his appearance and these efforts are highlighted by poet in capital words.

Q. 7 Why do you think that the poet has chosen the title ‘Telephone Conversation’? If you were to suggest another title for the poem, what would it be?

Answer:

The poet had chosen a title ‘Telephone Conversation’ because he wants to describe a scenario where he and a landlady was having a conversation and due to things are on call; landlady was not able to see his tenant when she got to know that he was an African and she started inquiring about his appearance. I would give a title “Inferiority over superiority.” I have given this title to show that inferiority is not one who is always one who will lay down in this poem superiority is evil and inferiority is kind so kindness always wins against evilness.



Q. 8 The power of poetry lies in suggestion and understatement. Discuss this with reference to the poem.

Answer:

Understatement means presenting something showing it less important than it really is. Thus, understatement expresses the idea of the poetry that it is very understating to decide someone's character with his or her colour. The suggestion with the reference to poem is that colour is never a fact that will decide what person actually is. The conversation between lady and tenant states that the thinking level of people still lies upon skin colour which actually shows that how biased people are in deciding others character.

TRY THIS OUT

Q. 1 Enact the conversation bits with your partner.

Answer:

Let's suppose there are two friends Shalini as land lady and Angad (he was black in appearance) as a tenant:

Shalini as landlady: Hello, Shalini this side. Who's this?

Angad as a tenant: Hello, ma'am I am Angad. I called you because I am seeking for a place to take on rent.

Shalini: Okay, so what you want to know say?

Angad: Like what is rent? How about the place?

Shalini: Rent is 10,000 per month and place is off premise.

Angad: Price is reasonable ma'am but off-premise this will be an issue and I am an African.

Shalini: With a strange silence, African? ARE YOU DARK? VERY DARK? ARE YOU LIGHT? OR, VERY LIGHT?



Angad: I am ‘West African sepia,’ facially, I am brunette but madam you should also see rest of me, the palm of my hand, soles of my feet “

And at last he ended up with a statement that ‘Wouldn’t you rather see for yourself?’

Q. 2 Attempt a description of:

- a. the place from which the call was made
- b. the lady at the other end
- c. the speaker in the poem.

Answer:

a: The place from where the calls were made was indifferent, strange and off premises. A poem was started with a scenic view of the location. It seems like a place was unfamiliar, mediocre in preference and not that well maintained.

b: The lady at the other end of the call was landlady which means she was the landlord of that place which a poet or tenant is seeking to take on rent. She was arrogant, biased and narrow-minded lady who judged his tenant on his skin colour as he was an African.

c: The speaker the poem was both landlady and tenant. They both are talking on call in regard to build a consent between them and finalize things so that they can build a relationship of landlord and tenant, but the conversation turned into racism talks which were done by a lady when she got to know that person who was talking to her on call was an African.

Q. 3 The poem evokes a mental picture of the scene. Draw a rough sketch to illustrate the episode.

Answer:

I will draw a sketch of an episode joining different points with each other which are as follows:

- a) The poem started with pulling a curtain on a conversation which was going on between landlady and tenant and there was consent of price between them as poem started with a line “The price seemed reasonable.”
- b) Further, the scenario of place where landlady will give on rent was described as; the place was indifferent, strange and off premises. A poem was started with a scenic view of the location. It seems like a place was unfamiliar, mediocre in preference and not that well maintained.
- c) Now with running conversation, a man who is seeking for rent told that he was an African this continued with a small silence as lady felt strange talking to him, she started the conversation again stating that “How dark?” this shows that she was asking about his skin colour. Lady owed her thoughts on her conversation stating colours dark or very dark and light or very light asking a man on call to describe his appearance and on the same line poem was running till the end.

Q. 4 The poem ends with ‘Wouldn’t you rather see for yourself?’
Imagine a personal encounter between the two people in the poem and write down the dialogue they might have had.

Answer:

In the poem the poet was trying to justify that colour is not only the factor on which he had been judged upon by the lady. He was telling her that “facially I am brunette but madam you should also see rest of me, the palm of my hand, soles of my feet “and in the end he ended up with a statement that ‘Wouldn’t you rather see for yourself?’

If I consider my dialogues it would be like this:

Lady: ARE YOU DARK? VERY DARK? ARE YOU LIGHT? OR,
VERY LIGHT?



Tenant: Ma'am, I am here to take your house on rent not to justify my colour.

Lady: But for me it matters, why don't you get that?

Tenant: But for me the thing matter is my self-respect so I am not going to justify things as I am not a racist.

Lady: Shouts loudly, you mean that I am racist?

Tenant: No ma'am, I am telling myself that I am not racist, would you see yourself as racist?

These lines show that poem was ended with a moral that a person himself know from inside that what he or she is doing is wrong and this conversation signifies that tenant calmly showed lady a mirror which reflected her real image.