

Telephone Conversation

Poem by Wole Soyinka



READING 3 Evaluate the changes in sound, form, figurative language, graphics, and dramatic structure in poetry across literary time periods. **RC-12(A)** Reflect on understanding to monitor comprehension.

DID YOU KNOW?

Wole Soyinka . . .

- was the first African to win the Nobel Prize in literature.
- is the cousin of Nigerian music star Fela Kuti.
- spent time working with inner-city kids in Jamaica.

Meet the Author

Wole Soyinka born 1934

Although Wole Soyinka (wō'lē shō-yīng'kə) may be best known for his challenging plays, he is also a distinguished poet and a passionate political activist. He has been arrested at least ten times for his outspoken criticism of government corruption in his native Nigeria. His activist impulses also inform his creative work, which often tackles difficult social issues through blistering satire. Soyinka's resolute advocacy, in art and in practical politics, has earned him the reputation as "the conscience of Nigeria."

Origins Soyinka grew up in an Anglican mission compound in western Nigeria, which was then under British colonial rule. He describes his childhood home as a place "where words were an integral part of culture." Soyinka's family were Yoruba, members of one of Nigeria's main ethnic or tribal groups. Soyinka's grandfather introduced him to Yoruban folklore,

including legends of the god Ogun, who governed both the creative and destructive essence. Soyinka frequently invokes Ogun in his work and considers this figure to be his muse.

An African Abroad In late 1954, Soyinka left Nigeria for England, to study at the University of

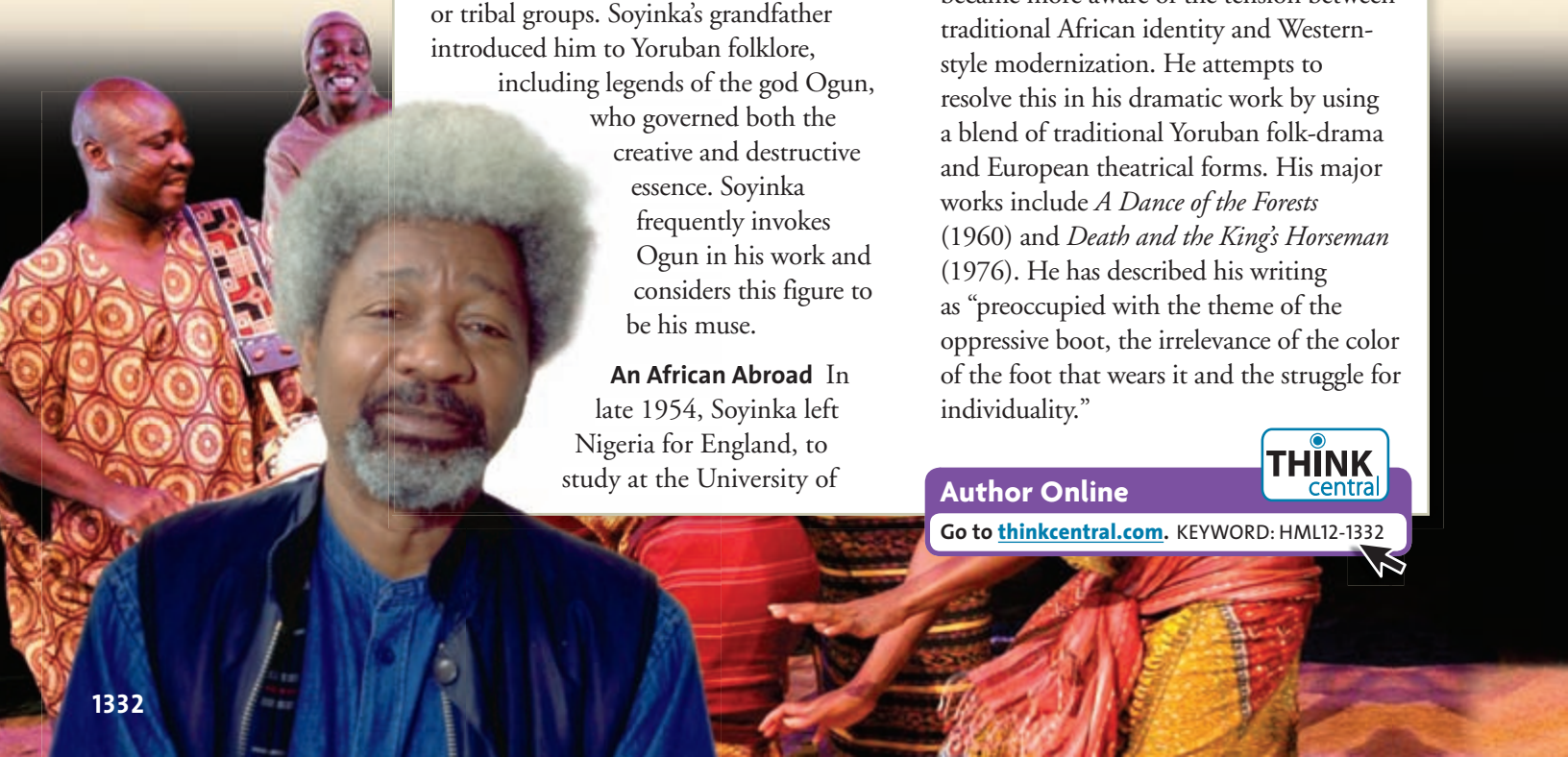
Leeds. After graduating in 1957, he worked as a script reader, actor, and director for London's Royal Court Theater. He also began to write his first serious plays. The *Invention*, the first of Soyinka's plays to be produced, is a satire about the chaos that ensues when black South Africans lose their pigment and can no longer be distinguished from whites.

During his years in England, Soyinka had many personal encounters with the indignities of racism. He satirized one such encounter in his poem "Telephone Conversation," written in 1960. That same year, Nigeria gained its independence from Britain and Soyinka returned to his homeland to study West African drama at the University of Ibadan.

Hybrid Style As Soyinka matured, he became more aware of the tension between traditional African identity and Western-style modernization. He attempts to resolve this in his dramatic work by using a blend of traditional Yoruban folk-drama and European theatrical forms. His major works include *A Dance of the Forests* (1960) and *Death and the King's Horseman* (1976). He has described his writing as "preoccupied with the theme of the oppressive boot, the irrelevance of the color of the foot that wears it and the struggle for individuality."

Author Online

Go to thinkcentral.com. KEYWORD: HML12-1332



LITERARY ANALYSIS: TONE IN SATIRE

As you've learned, **satire** is a literary form in which flaws in human behavior or social institutions are ridiculed in order to promote social change. Because the satirist relies on wit and humor to make a point, his or her **tone**, or attitude toward the subject, is a critical element in this kind of writing. Consider these lines from Soyinka's poem:

*"ARE YOU DARK? OR VERY LIGHT?" Revelation came.
"You mean—like plain or milk chocolate?"*

The comparison of skin color to varieties of chocolate highlights the absurdity of racial prejudice.

Writers choose words and details carefully to establish tone, which can range from light and humorous to sarcastic and bitter. In fact, the two main types of satire are defined primarily by differences in tone. In **Horatian satire**, the tone is playful and amusing, whereas in **Juvenalian satire**, the tone is biting and harsh. As you read Soyinka's poem, note how his tone helps to deliver his message.

READING SKILL: UNDERSTAND AUTHOR'S BACKGROUND

To understand why someone wrote a particular work, it can be helpful to examine the **author's background**. Background includes not only biographical details but also the values, traditions, and beliefs that have influenced the author's outlook. Before reading "Telephone Conversation," reread the biography of Soyinka on page 1332. Then, as you read the poem, consider how Soyinka's life experiences might have influenced his choice of subject.



Complete the activities in your **Reader/Writer Notebook**.

What causes RACISM?

Most societies have had to confront the problem of racism. But how does racism develop? Are people born with an instinct for prejudice, or do they learn these attitudes from the world around them? What causes a person to feel contempt for another on the basis of race?

QUICKWRITE Consider several possible causes of racism, such as human instinct, fear, ignorance, or hatred. What do you think causes racism? Is it a problem that can be solved? Write a paragraph briefly explaining your position.

THE LONDON

APRIL 13, 1981

Riots Continue for Sec



Telephone Conversation

Wole Soyinka

The price seemed reasonable, location
Indifferent. The landlady swore she lived
Off premises. Nothing remained
But self-confession. “Madam,” I warned,
5 “I hate a wasted journey—I am African.” **A**
Silence. Silenced transmission of
Pressurized good-breeding. Voice, when it came,
Lipstick-coated, long gold-rolled
Cigarette-holder pipped. Caught I was, foully.

10 “HOW DARK?” . . . I had not misheard . . . “ARE YOU
LIGHT
“OR VERY DARK?” Button B. Button A. Stench
Of rancid breath of public hide-and-speak.
Red booth. Red pillar-box. Red double-tiered
Omnibus squelching tar. It *was* real! Shamed
15 By ill-mannered silence, surrender
Pushed dumbfoundment to beg simplification.
Considerate she was, varying the emphasis—

A AUTHOR’S BACKGROUND
Reread lines 1–5. What aspects of Soyinka’s biography are reflected in the speaker’s situation?

13 **pillar-box:** mailbox on a pillar.

Language Coach

Etymology Words formed from another word or base are derivations. Look up the word *dumbfoundment* (line 16). What words are at its base? What does it mean? How can it “beg simplification”?



“ARE YOU DARK? OR VERY LIGHT?” Revelation
came.

“You mean—like plain or milk chocolate?”

- 20 Her assent was clinical, crushing in its light
Impersonality. Rapidly, wave-length adjusted,
I chose, “West African sepia”—and as an afterthought,
“Down in my passport.” Silence for spectroscopic
Flight of fancy, till truthfulness clanged her accent
25 Hard on the mouthpiece “WHAT’S THAT?”, conceding,
“DON’T KNOW WHAT THAT IS.” “Like brunette.”

“THAT’S DARK, ISN’T IT?” “Not altogether.

“Facially, I am brunette, but madam, you should see

“The rest of me. Palm of my hand, soles of my feet

- 30 “Are a peroxide blonde. Friction, caused—
“Foolishly, madam—by sitting down, has turned
“My bottom raven black.—One moment madam!”—
sensing

Her receiver rearing on the thunder clap

About my ears—“Madam,” I pleaded, “wouldn’t you rather

- 35 “See for yourself?” **B**

22 sepia (sē’pē-ə): a dark yellow brown or olive brown.

23 spectroscopic: pertaining to the analysis of colors.

B TONE IN SATIRE

What is absurd about the conversation in this stanza?

What in Soyinka’s **word choice** helps convey this absurdity?

Comprehension

1. **Recall** What is the speaker's situation at the start of the poem?
2. **Clarify** Why does he reveal that he is African?
3. **Summarize** Reread lines 27–32. What is the speaker's response to the landlady's question?



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Literary Analysis

4. **Make Inferences About Speaker** Compare the speaker's emotional state at the beginning and the end of the poem. How has the conversation affected him?
5. **Examine Author's Background** What personal experiences, values, or beliefs seem to have inspired Soyinka to write this poem? Cite details from the author's biography and the poem in your answer.
6. **Identify Tone in Satire** Describe the tone of this poem. How does the tone affect the way you read the poem? Explain your answer.
7. **Analyze Irony** Satirists frequently use **verbal irony**, which occurs when what is said is the opposite of what is meant. Explain the verbal irony in each of the following passages:
 - the speaker's initial reaction (lines 14–16)
 - the landlady's second question (line 18)
 - the speaker's self-description (lines 30–32)
8. **Make Generalizations** Consider what the landlady's concern with the speaker's precise color suggests about the nature of her racism. What does her reaction tell you about how some people adopt and apply racist beliefs?
9. **Compare Texts** Compare Soyinka's poem with Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal" on page 622. What do these two satires have in common? In what ways are they different? In your answer, compare the following elements:
 - tone
 - author's style
 - type of satire
 - the issue being satirized

Literary Criticism

10. **Critical Interpretations** South African writer Nadine Gordimer has described Soyinka's work as "overly self-conscious." Based on the poem you read, do you agree or disagree? Explain, citing details to support your answer.

What causes **RACISM?**

What do you think Soyinka believes to be the cause of racism? Explain why you agree or disagree with him.