# Use of Irony in Telephone Conversation

Basically irony is a figure of speech in which the intended meaning is the opposite of the literal meaning of the words used. Thus, words of praise and appreciation can be used to convey contempt for someone or something.

Nigerian poet Wole Soyinka uses irony to depict the absurdity of racism in his poem, "Telephone Conversation." The speaker of the poem, a dark West African man looking for a new apartment, tells the story of a telephone call he made to a potential landlady. Instead of discussing price, location, amenities, and other information significant to the apartment, they discussed the speaker's skin colour. The landlady is described as a polite, well-bred woman, even though she is shown to be shallowly racist. The speaker is described as being genuinely apologetic for his skin color, even though he has no reason to be sorry for something which he was born with and has no control over. In this short poem, we can see that the speaker is an intelligent person by his use of high diction and quick wit, not the savage that the landlady assumes he is because of his skin colour. All of these discrepancies between what appears to be and what really is create a sense of verbal irony that helps the poem display the ridiculousness of racism.

The first sentence of the poem includes a pun that introduces the theme of the poem and also informs us that things are not going to be as straightforward as they appear. "The price seemed reasonable, location / Indifferent" (lines 1-2). The word “indifferent” here literally means "characterized by a lack of partiality or unbiased". However, we quickly learn in the following lines of the poem that the location of the apartment is the exact opposite of unbiased and impartial. The speaker is rudely denied the ability to rent the apartment because of bias towards his skin colour. This opening pun quickly grabs the attention of the reader and suggests that we as readers be on the lookout for more subtle uses of language that will alter the meaning of the poem.

After this introduction, the speaker begins his "self-confession" about his skin colour. It is ironic that this is called a self-confession since the speaker has nothing that he should have to confess since he has done nothing wrong. He warns the landlady that he is African, instead of just informing her. "Caught I was, foully" he says after listening to the silence the landlady had responded with (line 9). Again, the word caught connotes that some wrong had been done, that the speaker was a criminal caught committing his crime. By making the speaker actually seem sorry for his skin colour, Soyinka shows how ridiculous it really is for someone to apologize for his race. It seems almost comical that anyone should be so submissive when he has committed no wrong.

The landlady, on the other hand, is described with nothing but positive terms. The speaker mentions her "good-breeding," "lipstick coated" voice, "long gold-rolled/Cigarette holder," all possessions that should make her a respectable lady . These words describing her wealth are neutral in regard to her personal character, but allow that she could be a good person. Her goodness is seemingly confirmed later on when the speaker says that she was "considerate" in rephrasing her question. Her response to the caller's question included only "light / Impersonality". Although she was described as being a wealthy woman, she was seemingly considerate and only slightly impersonal. The speaker seems almost grateful for her behaviour. Of course, these kind descriptions of the woman are teeming with verbal irony. We know that she is being very shallowly judgmental even while she seems to be so pleasant.

Throughout the poem, yet another form of irony is created by the speaker's use of high diction, which shows his education. Although the landlady refuses to rent an apartment to him because of his African heritage and the supposed savagery that accompanies it, the speaker is clearly a well educated individual. Words like "pipped," "rancid," and "spectroscopic" are not words that a savage brute would use. The speaker's intelligence is further shown through his use of sarcasm and wit in response to the landlady's questions. Although he pretends politeness all time, he includes subtle meanings in his speech. The fact that a black man could outwit and make a white woman seem foolish shows the irony in judging people based on their skin colour.