

Q. Write a note on the theme of the poem “Telephone Conversation”

Ans: “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. But when the speaker makes a “self-confession” about being “African,” the conversation abruptly shifts to a discussion of skin tone. 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 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*. 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.

To sum up, 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.