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### Word Meanings

Notice these expressions in the poem and guess their meaning from the context:

1. rancid breath
2. squelching tar
3. spectroscopic flight of fancy
4. rearing on the thunderclap
5. brunette
6. peroxide blonde
7. clinical assent
8. raven black

Answer:

1. rancid breath: Rancid means a matter which is offensive or disagreeable. Thus, the voice in which the lady speaks to the poet is under an immensely nasty or insulting breath.
2. squelching tar: The verb squelch means to strike or press with crushing force. Thus, the expression used here is that of a huge amount of compressed tar, the dark coloured product obtained after distillation of coal or wood, expressing the complexion of the poet.
3. spectroscopic flight of fancy: The word spectroscopy originated from the concept of dispersion of visible light into seven different colours. Thus, the word explains the dispersed flow of thoughts of the lady after talking to the erudite poet. Her fancies of a “dark” man gained wings and attained new levels of interpretations when she had to submit to the fact that she knew lesser than the person on the other side of the line.
4. rearing on the thunderclap: A thunderclap refers to something resembling the sudden occurrence of a thunder, as in loudness or unexpectedness.
5. brunette: Brunette here refers to dark hair and, often, dark eyes and darkish or olive skin.
6. peroxide blonde: This expression refers to a harsh or unnaturally bleached palm and sole of feet rather than a natural fair complexion. Peroxide is a chemical which is used as a bleaching agent.
7. clinical assent: The voice of the lady in the poem seemed clinical while assenting to the poet’s revelation. It refers to the concerned voice based on a vivid and actual observation of the poet, giving in to the situation after a lot of thought and inspection.
8. raven black: Here, raven black is a metaphorical expression to describe the intensity of the colour black. Raven is supposedly a very large, dark complexioned bird of the crow family. This metaphor is usually used to describe dark-skinned people.

Understanding the Poem

1. State the central issue in the poem.

Answer: The central issue dwells around the ironical fact that when a person is in search of shelter, the questions being asked are based on his skin colour and not the usual queries exchanged like that of the rent, the amenities provided and other basic requirements in an apartment. The landlady is shown to have possessed a very shallow racist behaviour in the poem and ironically, the poet is shown to be sorry for something which he was born with. 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.

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

Answer: There are intervals of silence in the interaction between the landlady and the prospective tenant. The main reason behind this was the fact that the landlady felt inferior in the face of the poet and realised her lack of knowledge as compared to the erudite intellect of the poet. The sudden silences are prominent in the poem emphasizing the impact of the African's race being revealed to the landlady. The ignorance of the landlady is also portrayed with humour on a very subtle level.

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

Answer: The various colours highlighted in the poem exemplify the difference between the landlady and the poet, based on the skin-colour of both. The use of the colour red is magnified to explain the various things which are red in colour like the telephone booth, the double-tiered bus and the pillar-box. It explains the colour of the dark-skinned poet who was not fair-complexioned like the landlady on the other side of the line. The expression 'gold-rolled' shows the elite class to which the 'fair-skinned' people are said to belong. Various colours which are used in the poem are: Red, Black, Gold, milk chocolate, brunette and blonde.

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 seems to be a befitting reply to the ignorant white woman. This phrase in the poem projects humour on a very subtle level where the poet, when asked again and again, about his color, turns to reply like a person with a high level of intellect. Through these words Soyinka tries to emphasise on the fact that it is wrong to judge a person's level of wisdom and knowledge based on his color.

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