

## MA ENGLISH

**SEMESTER: III PAPER:CC-IX**

**SUB CODE: 18PEL9 NEW LITERATURES IN ENGLISH**

### **Telephone Conversation by Wole Soyinka**

Soyinka is a Nobel Laureate from Nigeria. He is a versatile writer who has dabbled with poetry, drama and novel. He uses his native Yoruba myths and culture to deal with both African and Universal human predicament. *Lion and the Jewel*, *The Road* and *Kongi's Harvest* are some of his celebrated plays.

“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, crude 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, even “swearing” that “she lived / Off premises.” She can't detect the speaker's race through the phone, a fact that emphasizes a) that the speaker's identity is comprised of *more* than his or her race and b) that skin color is irrelevant to the speaker's suitability as a tenant.

But when the speaker makes a “self-confession” about being “African,” the conversation abruptly shifts to a discussion of skin tone. Here the speaker is ironic in the use of “confession” here, a word typically associated with the revelation of something criminal, to undermine the racist notion that being “African” is a bad thing. 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 landlady is playing into the ignorant idea that black people with lighter skin (and, as such, whose skin is closer in appearance to that of white people) are superior to those with darker skin. 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*. For instance, the speaker describes him or herself as "West African sepia" (a kind of reddish-brown hue seen in old monochromatic photos) in the speaker's passport, a joke that goes right over the slow-witted landlady's head; essentially this is like saying, "Well, in a black and white photograph my skin is gray."

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, binary choice between "dark" or "light," between "Button B" or "Button A."

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.

### **THE CITY PLANNERS --- MARGARET ATWOOD**

Margaret Atwood, is a Canadian author, poet, critic, essayist, feminist and social campaigner. Best known as a novelist, she is also an award-winning poetess. *Surfacing*, *Edible Woman*, *Lady Oracle* and *The Blind Assassin* are some of her famous novels ; She has brought out volumes of poetry on Nature, Canada, Feminism etc., "The City-Planners" is an

indictment on the superficiality of progress, and the attribution of incorrigible rationality to the same.

In the poem, the word “cruising” implies to move along, in an unhurried or unconcerned fashion. As the poet moves about in a residential area, she is offended by the “sanities” of the area. The word ‘sanities’ may possess a double meaning here. Firstly, it may allude to the unnatural ‘sanitariness’ of the place. Secondly, it may denote the saneness of minds, or soundness that render them sophisticated, uniform and therefore boring. The “dry August sunlight” alludes to the province from which the speaker hails: Canada. The houses in rows appear too pedantic to be real. The trees have the appearance of being planted to render the scene picture-perfect. The levelness of surface further provokes the poetess as it appears to be a rebuke to the dent in their car door. There is no shouting there, no shatter of glass. No instinctive action takes place here: everything is after-thought and preplanned. There are no shouts here, no loud wants as people are economically well-off and complacent. The only noise is the rational whine of a power mower. It is that rationality that makes this noise- ‘a voice’. In the era of applied technology, this sound is more pleasing to the ears than emotional echoes. The power mower cut a straight swath in the discouraged grass; and thus established the victory of Science over Nature.

The driveways neatly side-step hysteria by revealing even roads. that appear like mathematical units. Hysteria is conveniently side-stepped as nothing can defy logic. The roofs also display the same slant to the hot sky. The act of displaying a slant also means the projection of an angle. This angle of avoidance is everywhere whether it to the hot sun, the smell of spilled oil, or a faint sick smell lingering in the garage. Even a splash of paint on a brick is as amazing as a bruise. A domestic entity like a coiled pipe appears as poisonous as a snake, as it is out of place. The windows portray a fixed-stare as though everything is static, and nothing is kinetic.

The natural scenery appears to be at the back of this residential area. The speaker hopes that the future cracks in the plaster will enable one to view the breathtaking natural view behind.

Man's mistakes seem to offer more than his creations in this stanza. The poetess seems to plead and demand at the same time when she opines "give momentary access."

Atwood claims that there will come an inevitable stage when nature will ultimately conquer, and houses will capsize into clay seas. Is the poetess foreboding a natural disaster, most probably a Tsunami? It would then only take a minute to put years of city-planning to naught. They will appear like glaciers then. The speaker utilizes the metaphor of ice to connote transience. Nobody comprehends how fleeting all this is.

These City Planners-calculating and manipulative in their approach to reach their ends are no less than political conspirators. In such a situation, they will be subjected to unsurveyed territories they had not even envisaged. They will be hidden from each other, where competitiveness will take a back-seat. In such state of affairs, :

guessing directions, they sketch  
transitory lines rigid as wooden borders  
on a wall in the white vanishing air  
tracing the panic of suburb  
order in a bland madness of snows

The words "glacier" and "snow" once again bring forward the image of ice symbolic of transience, particularly of material glory. To the speaker, this madness of snow is 'bland' and 'non-irritating' as opposed to the 'offending' uniformity she visualized at the outset. The term 'bland madness' thus functions as an oxymoron.

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A FAR CRY FROM AFRICA – DEREK WALCOTT

Derek Walcott, a poet and Dramatist, was born in 1930 in Saint Lucia. As he belongs to both African and European roots, he identifies himself as a mongrel. This mixed heritage makes him able to identify the post colonial situation more effectively and successfully. He was awarded for the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1992 for his epic poem *Omeros*. In the poem *A Far Cry from Africa*, the poet ironically describes how he rejects the British culture and the colonial ideology and how at the same time, he is under the spell of English language.

The poem *A Far Cry from Africa* belongs to post colonial poetry. Mainly the poem discusses the events of the Mau Mau uprising in Kenya in the early 1950s. It was a bloody battle during the 1950 between the European settlers and the native Kikuyu tribes in Kenya. Kikuyu was the largest and most educated tribe in Kenya. As the British people invaded more and more their land they courageously reacted. The Kenyan tribes rebelled against the British who stole the motherland of them. The rebellion was under a secret organization called Mau Mau. It is estimated a large number of Kikuyu as well as whites were slaughtered during the process.

The poem starts with the painful, jarring and the harsh experience of the rebellion that changed the tranquil peaceful setting of the country. The nation itself compared to an animal, as it indicates it is an animal like a lion. "tawny pelt" And how Kikuyu started the bloody battle. The Kikuyu are compared to flies who are feeding on blood. Next we are informed the aftermath of the rebellion. The poet describes that the country before the conflict was a 'paradise' and with an ironical comment he indicates the death, inhumanity and destruction occurred in the land. There is the juxtaposition of the conflict against something divine with the image of corpses scattered through a paradise. The worms that can be seen as the ultimate emblem of stagnation and decay, cries at the worthless death. Sarcastically, the poet indicates how the humans are reduced to statistics. And at the same time though scholars justify the presence of white men in Africa and the process of

civilizing the natives, the poet indicates the fact that it was a failure with the brutal death of the small white child and his family. People behave like animals 'savages' hints and remind us the persecution endured by the Jews. Jews were killed in millions due to their ethnicity during the time of Hitler. Though the time and the place is different the same kind of situations repeat in the world time to time.

Next the poet creates a picture of white men in searching for natives who are hiding behind the bushes. The sound of 'ibises' hints a bad omen. Again the repetition is shown through the word 'wheeled'. The civilized men thrived on conquering others. This process of violence and conquering each other indicates the law of the jungle. The violence of 'beast on beast' can justify according to the law of nature, the law of jungle. Yet it cannot be applied to the 'upright man' who are stretching out themselves to reach the 'divinity'. Apart from the task of stretching themselves to reach 'divinity' they end up with 'inflicting pain' which is killing and which is the law of jungle; killing for prey. They call for the massacre they create by killing as war. Ironically, wars between people are described as following the beat of a drum — an instrument made of an animal hide stretched over a cylinder. Though the natives think the act of killing white men brings them 'courage' it ends up with fear. Moreover the poet emphasizes the fact that though the natives justify their task mentioning it as a 'brutish necessity' and considering it as a national cause they just clean their hands with 'the napkin of dirty cause'. So the poet suggests the fact that the natives' cause is dirty and ugly though they consider it as right and nationwide. He sees a comparison with the West Indians who had their share of harsh experiences with Spain. The fight is just as the gorilla wrestles with superman. The gorilla in this context is compared to natives and superman is compared to white men.

The last two lines indicate the situation of the poet, as he belongs to both cultures how he feels inferiority regarding the situation. The mixed heritage of the poet makes him unable to decide to which he should be partial. The title itself too indicates the speaker's

**undergoing mental conflict, a cry from a great distance away and moreover it shows the alienation and the inferiority of the poet. The poem ends with a picture of violence and cruelty and with the idea of searching for identity.**

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### **GREEN RAIN – DOROTHY LIVESAY**

**Dorothy Livesay belongs to the breed of the earliest Canadian writers. She was a socialist and was influenced by Imagism in her poetry.**

In the short poem "Green Rain," Livesay repeatedly compares nature scenes and sounds to her grandmother's things and her grandmother's house. The first comparison occurs in the first stanza. The narrator of the poem tells readers about the "long veils of green rain." The narrator says that those long veils were feathered like her grandmother's shawl. This information about how the rain and feathered shawl are intricately tied together in her memory is again highlighted in the last line of the poem.

But now I remember the day

As I remember my grandmother.

I remember the rain as the feathery fringe of her shawl.

Another great comparison comes in the second stanza when the narrator says that the rain's "silence" was a lot like her grandmother's parlor. The parlor was the place that was filled with her grandmother's voice rising and falling, as the rain and wind tends to do during various storms.

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The Dying Eagle by E.J. Pratt

E. J. Pratt, was "the leading Canadian poet of his time." He was from Newfoundland who lived most of his life in Toronto, Ontario. A three-time winner of the country's Governor General's Award for poetry, he has been called "the foremost Canadian poet of the first half of the century."

"The Dying Eagle" deals with both the decaying flesh and the sagging spirit of a dying eagle; especially its bewilderment after seeing a strange bird (an aero plane). A light had gone out from his vanquished eyes; His head was cupped within the hunch of his shoulders; His feathers were dull and bedraggled; the tips of his wings sprawled down to the edge of his tail. He was old, yet it was not his age Which made him roost on the crags Like a rain-drenched raven On the branch of an oak in November. Nor was it the night, for there was an hour To go before sunset. An iron had entered His soul which bereft him of pride and realm, Had struck him today; for up to noon That crag had been his throne. Space was his empire, bounded only By forest and sky and the flowing horizons. He had outfought, outlived all his rivals, And the eagles that now were poised over glaciers Or charting the coastal outlines of clouds Were his by descent: they had been tumbled Out of their rocky nests by his mate, In the first trial of their fledgling spins. Only this morning the eyes of the monarch were held in arrest by a silver flash Shining between two peaks of the ranges- A sight which galvanized his back, bristled the feathers on his neck and shook his sensibility.

Catapulting from the ledge, He flew at first with rapid beat, level, direct: then with his grasp of spiral strategy in fight, He climbed the orbit With swift and easy undulations, And reach positions where he might Survey the bird - for bird it was; But such a bird as never flew Between the heavens and the earth Since pterodactyls, long before The birth of condors, learned to kill And drag their carrion up the Andes.

The eagle stared at the invader Marked the strange bat-like shadow moving In leagues over the roofs of the world, Across the passes and moraines, Darkening the vitriol blue of the mountain lakes. Was it a flying dragon? Head, Body and wings, a tail fan-spread And taut like his own before the strike; And there in front two whirling eyes That took unshuttered The full blaze of the meridian. The eagle never yet had known

A rival he would not grapple, But something in this fellow's length Of back, his plated glistening shoulders, had given him pause. And did that thunder Somewhere in his throat not argue Lightning in his claws? And then The speed - was it not double his own? But what disturbed him most, angered And disgraced him was the unconcern With which this supercilious bird Cut through the aquiline dominion, Snubbing the ancient suzerain With extra-territorial insolence, And disappeared.



So evening found him on the crags again, This time with sloven shoulders And nerveless claws. Dusk had outridden the sunset by an hour To haunt his unhorizoned eyes. And soon his flock flushed with the chase Would be returning, threading their glorious curves Up through the crimson archipelagoes Only to find him there - Deaf to the mighty symphony of wings, And brooding Over the lost empire of the peaks.

The poem could be interpreted in many ways. The Eagle could stand for the Native Canadians who were politically and culturally dethroned by the Whites. Also, the Eagle stands for Nature while the aeroplane stands for technology ; that is, technology's taming Nature. Yet another interpretation is the vanishing away of the old order, yielding place to new.

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### **LITERARY EVENING IN JAMAICA BY MERVYN MORRIS**

Mervyn Eustace Morris- the Jamaican poet is a Rhodes scholar. He has been instrumental in shaping the Caribbean Writers' Summer Institute which gave many Well known poems – 'Little Boy Crying', 'On Holy Week', 'Literary Evening, Jamaica' etc. He has published several volumes of poems besides editing the works of other Caribbean writers. He is known for his generosity and readiness to champion the case of young Caribbean poets and younger Caribbean poets a chance to attend poetry workshops.

'Literary Evening, Jamaica' – In this poem Mervyn Morris expresses his sympathies for the budding Caribbean poets whose poetry, though often loud, brash and bold, is characterized by a sense of genuine anguish , pain and disillusionment. Mervyn Morris contrasts the writings of the young Caribbean poets with those of the subdued sensibilities of English poets like Larkin and D.J.Enright. His sympathies are undoubtedly with the young Caribbean poets who are struggling to find a place in the literary world. He advises the budding Caribbean poets to instill hope and faith in their writings because he feels that the Caribbean are too young for disillusionment.

The poem has a postcolonial theme ; rebuilding the nation from shambles. The old building in which the literary meeting takes place is a metaphor for Jamaica itself. The vociferous nature of the young Jamaicans mark their energy and passion for their Nation's Cause.

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AFRICA ---- DAVID DIOP

David Diop (1927-1960) was a revolutionary African poet born in France to parents of West African descent, and an active member of the Negritude Movement. Diop's poems highlight African problems brought about by colonialism and give a message of hope and resistance to people of the continent.

The poem starts with the narrator reminiscing about Africa, which he has not yet seen but knows from his grandmother's songs of his childhood. Despite not having been to Africa, he calls it "My Africa" to emphasize his sense of belonging as he describes the "black blood" which flows in his veins as a descendant of the continent.

The verses assume an angry and accusatory tone as he stresses that it is the blood and sweat of his people which is irrigating the fields of the colonialists without any benefit to the black people of Africa. Diop goes on to urge the black African people to stand up to the humiliation and pain that they suffered in their own motherland, reminding them of the strength and pride they have in them. He stresses the need to say no to the whips of the colonial masters who make them work under the hot midday sun leaving ugly scars on their backs. Despite this suffering the narrator urges Africans to be strong and resist being broken by the heavy weight which colonialism symbolizes. Africa is then personified as an elder who chides the narrator for thinking "impetuous" thoughts, implying that the continent is aware of impending changes or revolution. The tree "young and strong" represents the young generation of Africans who are patiently but "obstinately" waiting until they get the liberty they are waiting for.

The tree is standing among the "white and faded flowers", by which the poet means the colonialists who will fade in time while the youthful Africans will grow in

strength and wait for the moment to seize their freedom from the invaders. Diop realises that freedom will not be acquired on a silver platter, but will have to be fought for so that the black people will eventually acquire “the bitter taste of Liberty” in the end. The poem remains significant even after many years of “independence” from colonial rule because the continent still experiences neo-colonialism up to this day.

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### **The Bear on the Delhi Road - Earl Birney**

**Earle Birney is a Canadian writer of fiction and poetry. He has visited India and “The Bear on the Delhi Road” is the fruit of his experiences in India.**

This short poem is about a dancing bear and the two men who captured him and are now attempting to train him. They encountered the bear in the hills where they caught it and are now engaged in the struggle of training it while staying out of reach of its dangerous claws and teeth. The bear merely want to go back to being a bear in nature. It does not want to learn how to dance and wants to exist on four feet and eat berries in the mountains. In the final stanza the narrator declares that all three are joyless in this situation; the bear can no longer be a bear, while the men are forever trying to stay out of reach of its claws.