I'm not a bot

Poem by Langston Hughes The Negro Speaks of Riversby Langston HughesFirst published inThe CrisisLanguageEnglishSubject(s)RiversPublication dateJune 1921 Langston Hughes in 1919 or 1920 "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" is a poem by American writer Langston Hughes. Hughes wrote the poem when he was 17 years old and was crossing the Mississippi River on the way to visit his father in Mexico. The poem was first published the following year in The Crisis magazine, in June 1921, starting Hughes's literary career. "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" uses rivers as a metaphor for Hughes's life and the broader African-American experience. It has been reprinted often and is considered one of Hughes's most famous and signature works. Langston Hughes was born in 1902, in Missouri. He attended high school in Cleveland, Ohio, where he first began writing.[1] He graduated from Central High School in 1917.[2] Several years after graduating high school, Hughes decided to travel to Mexico City and live with his father, whom he did not know well. He left in 1920.[3] Hughes said that the poem was written in about "ten or fifteen minutes" on "the back of an envelope" he had[4]:620 when he was 17 years old and was crossing the Mississippi River on the way to visit his father in Mexico.[3] The poem was first published in The Crisis in June 1921,[5] and was later collected into the 1926 The Weary Blues.[6] The poet Jessie Redmon Fauset, who was the literary editor of The Crisis, was responsible for the initial acceptance and publication of "The Negro Speaks of Rivers". Fauset wrote in a review of The Weary Blues upon its publication that after she read the poem, she brought it to W. E. B. Du Bois (the publisher of The Crisis) and said "What colored person is there, do you suppose, in the United States who writes like that and yet is unknown to us?" She found out who Hughes was and the poem was published.[7][8] Twenty years after its publication, Hughes suggested the poem be turned into a Hollywood film, but the project never went forward.[9]:305 I've known rivers: I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of human blood in human veins. My soul has grown deep like the rivers. I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young. I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep. I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it. I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln went down to New Orleans, and I've seen its muddy bosom turn all golden in the sunset. I've known rivers: Ancient, dusky rivers. My soul has grown deep like the rivers. "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" is one of Hughes's earliest poems and is considered to mark the beginning of his career as a poet.[10] Sandra Merriweather in the Encyclopedia of American Poetry considered the poem to be one of Hughes's best works,[10] and it has been described as his "signature" poem.[11]:183 However, it has also been described as one of his "most uncharacteristic poems".[12]:41 The work is one of his most famous poems.[3] The professor Ira Dworkin described the poem as "an iconic representative of Hughes and the Harlem Renaissance."[13] Upon publication, it "delighted black traditionalists", who appreciated the poem's message.[8] Hughes's poems "The Negro Speaks of Rivers", "Mother to Son", and "Harlem" were described in the Encyclopedia of African-American Writing as "anthems of black America".[14] The poem utilizes a river as a metaphor for Hughes's life and the broader African-American experience.[10] It does not rhyme and uses lines, particularly repetition of "My soul has grown deep like the rivers" to say that, according to the professor Christopher C. De Santis, "experience and history, though often oppressive, have not extinguished but rather emboldened the development of a soul, the birth of an immortal self, the proud 'I' that now speaks to all who will listen."[6] That line also alludes to W. E. B. Du Bois, who wrote The Souls of Black Folk in 1903.[10] Hughes dedicated the whole poem to Du Bois when he republished it in The Weary Blues. The dedication came at the urging of Fauset and was not included in subsequent reprintings.[10][15]:275[4]:620 Hughes wrote the poem while the Great Migration, a movement of African Americans out of the Southern United States and into Northern cities like Chicago, was ongoing. William Hogan, a scholar, places Hughes's poem in the context of this vast uprooting of population, noting that it "recognizes the need for a new kind of rootedness, one that embraced a history of migration and resettlement.[12]:188 Hogan argues that by connecting "communities of color across both space and time", Hughes is developing "a theory of racial community" which draws strength from migration and change. The "many 'routes' historically taken by black culture only strengthen the 'roots' of the community".[12]:187–188 The scholar Allan Burns feels that the poem is written from the perspective of a "'soul' or 'consciousness' of black people in general" rather than Hughes himself. Burns also notes the progression of rivers through the poem from the Euphrates to the Mississippi follows a chronology of history "from the Garden of Eden [. . .] to modern America." By describing the "muddy bosom" of the river turning "golden in the sunset", Hughes provides a note of hope that Burns equates to the phrase per aspera ad astra (through suffering to the stars).[11]:221 Hughes himself had not traveled widely when he wrote the poem.[3] The scholar W. Jason Miller considers the poem was an anti-lynching work, noting that Hughes lived during an era where he would have been impacted by lynchings, particularly after the Red Summer of 1919, when numerous blacks were attacked and killed by whites. Miller notes that Hughes was probably intimidated as he traveled by himself to visit his father in Mexico, passing through Texas, where numerous lynchings occurred. Miller goes on to argue that Hughes used the poem to provide reassurance "that because others have survived, he and his readers can survive too." Although the poem is titled with a verb in the present tense ("Speaks"), the actual text focuses on the past ("I've"). Miller feels that this shows Hughes defining rivers as "part of a natural realm needing to be reclaimed as a site that African Americans have known and should now know."[16] In his early writing, including "The Negro Speaks of Rivers", Hughes was inspired by American poet Carl Sandburg.[17][18]:169 Rachel Blau DuPlessis argues that part of the poem reinterprets Vachel Lindsay's "The Congo", by portraying the Congo River as "a pastoral nourishing, maternal setting."[13] Hughes references the spiritual "Deep River" in the line "My soul has grown deep like the rivers."[8] The poem was also influenced by Walt Whitman.[8] The poem has been cited as becoming "the voice of the Association [NAACP] itself," along with "Song of the Son" by Jean Toomer and editorials that Du Bois wrote.[13] One of Hughes's most reprinted works,[12]:188 the poem had been reprinted at least 11 times within a decade of its first publication, including in the 1925 anthology The New Negro, the 1927 work Caroling Dusk,[13] and Hughes's own The Dream Keeper in 1932.[12]:130 After Hughes died on May 22, 1967,[19] his ashes were interred in the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in Harlem under a cosmogram that was inspired by "The Negro Speaks of Rivers". The cosmogram is entitled Rivers and was designed by Houston Conwill. In the center of the cosmogram is the line: "My soul has grown deep like the rivers".[20] Pearl Primus, a dance choreographer, developed a work based on the poem.[21] The song "I've Known Rivers" by Gary Bartz is inspired by the poem. ^ "Hughes, (James) Langston". Encyclopedia of Cleveland History | Case Western Reserve University. May 9, 2019. Retrieved February 14, 2021. ^ DeMarco, Laura (February 1, 2018). "Happy birthday, Langston Hughes; American literary great started writing in Cleveland". cleveland. Retrieved February 14, 2021. ^ a b c d Socarides, Alexandra (August 1, 2013). "The Poems (We Think) We Know: 'The Negro Speaks of Rivers' by Langston Hughes". Los Angeles Review of Books. Retrieved August 23, 2013. ^ a b Hughes, James Langston (1994). The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes. Knopf. ISBN 978-0-679-42631-8. ^ Hughes, Langston (June 1921). ""The Negro Speaks of Rivers"" (PDF). 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The Langston Hughes Review. 18. ^ Tracy, Steven Carl (2001), Langston Hughes and the Blues, University of Illinois Press, p. 142, ISBN 0-252-06985-4. ^ Ikonné, Chidi (1981), From DuBois to Van Vechten: The Early New Negro Literature, 1903–1926, Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing, ISBN 0-313-22496-X. ^ "Langston Hughes | Biography & Facts". Encyclopedia Britannica. Retrieved February 14, 2021. ^ "Schomburg Center For Research in Black Culture" (PDF). The New York Public Library. ^ Gere, David (April 24, 1994). "Dances of Sorrow, Dances of Hope : The work of Pearl Primus finds a natural place in a special program of historic modern dances for women. Primus' 1943 work 'Strange Fruit' leaped over the boundaries of what was then considered 'black dance'". Los Angeles Times. Retrieved February 15, 2021. English Wikisource has original text related to this article: The Negro Speaks of Rivers The Big Sea: An Autobiography The Negro Speaks of Rivers and its writing], from Langston Hughes, The Big Sea: An Autobiography The Negro Speaks of Rivers, as printed in The Crisis 60th Anniversary Issue, Nov 1970. On "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" at Modern American Poetry Retrieved from " Style can be viewed as a choice of particular linguistic features, which produces a certain meaning and effect upon a reader. Also, style is closely related to the author's personality, so that it reflects his/her mindset in writing. In such a way, the detailed examination of a literary text contributes significantly to better understanding of the sense constructed by an author. Generally speaking, the form and effect are interconnected and interdependent, which is why, it may be suggested that it is critical not to simply identify formal linguistic features for their own sake but to demonstrate their interpretation within a particular context. The current paper argues that each linguistic association, either on phonetic or lexical level is significant and, therefore, should be taken into consideration. Thus, the analysis of the verse The Negro Speaks of Rivers will help to illustrate how the author's ideas are imparted by means of structural components. Word Selection Nobody would deny the fact that the outstanding poem The Negro Speaks of Rivers by Langston Hughes genuinely epitomizes incredible wisdom and immensely rich cultural heritage of the Afro-American community. Namely, the author advances such themes as race, historical memory, slavery and freedom. For starters, it is increasingly important to mention that the poet uses the word negro to refer to the early twentieth century when this term revealed cultural identification of the Afro-American community. In this way, the theme of self-awareness and self-identification is brought into the surface (Miller, 2015). Hughes implicitly states that despite frequent occurrence of racial discrimination in the modern society, Afro-Americans should deeply respect their historical roots and, thus, celebrate their national presence. As a matter of fact, this term suggests that the major theme of the poem is dedicated to Afro-American experience. The word negro, however, appears only in the title, which is why the main ideas may be regarded as universal in nature and applicable to the people of all ethnicities. It becomes abundantly clear that Langston Hughes deliberately employs the word river to render the main line of thought. In fact, the word is exploited throughout the poem, which is why, it may be assumed that the author repeatedly emphasizes that the Afro-American community is as wise and long-lasting as the most ancient rivers of the world. Further, the poet is inclined to think that Afro-Americans have a long-suffering history that dates back to the cradle of civilization when the slavery was introduced. Thus, he uses the simile "my soul has grown deep like the rivers" in order to highlight the fact that the strong memory of the past accrued gradually to the community and became wide experience, which they pass to the next generations (Trotman, 2014). By means of allusion, Hughes refers directly to the years of slavery when Abe Lincoln crossed Mississippi witnessing cruel injustice of slavery. Advantages of our writing service Why customers trust us Qualified writers are ready to cover any topic you require We provide order delivery before the deadline All custom papers are plagiraism-free We use only reliable sources for content search All customers personal data is kept private Support team is ready to answer your questions at any time Apart from the concept of river, the author selects such words as dusky, muddy and golden, so that a reader may notice the age-old confrontation between the light and the darkness. The epithets dusky and muddy rivers communicate author's ideas about the centuries of intentional discrimination on the basis of race. Meanwhile, Hughes celebrates the present day by utilizing the metaphorical epithet golden bosom to designate the creation of open and tolerate society, living within American borders (Trotman, 2014). After all, these words create the effect of interplay of freedom and confinement, so that it promotes a certain view that one cannot live fruitfully without the memory of the historical past. Eventually, it is necessary to admit that the exact word choice gives the analyzed poem its beauty. Rhythm and Sound It is worth noticing that The Negro Speaks of Rivers is written in free verse, which means that the author ignores the rigid metrical rules to produce the effect of natural animated conversation. Thus, the poem does not contain the exact number of syllables per line or consistent stress pattern. This can be exemplified by the first line, which contains four syllables, and the second line, which has more than 20 syllables. What is more, in the following poem, Hughes does not utilize such musical pattern as rhyme. However, the poem displays some elements of form, namely, the rhythm. Langston Hughes repeats the lines "I've known rivers" and "my soul has grown deep like the rivers", which creates both the rhythm and the structure (Jeffries & McIntyre, 2010). In other words, it creates musical and cyclical pattern of raging river that flows into the sea. Remarkably, the given poetic technique conveys the vivid image of the Mississippi river, singing a song that can be compared to the traditional blues music where all the first lines are repeated. The sense of the river flowing left and right alternately is rendered with the help of enjambment of the lines. Similarly, a reader needs to search for the end of the line, moving his/her eyes in a zigzag manner (Miller, 2015). Apart from that, the personal pronoun I is constantly repeated throughout the poem, so that the poet is establishing the rapport with a reader. More importantly, the given anaphora creates the internal pattern of sounds and, therefore, makes it melodic and tuneful. Step 3 We find the most qualified writer in your field Step 5 Editors check for plagiarism & grammar mistakes Step 6 You download the paper from our website Step 7 Free revision within 48 hours after deadline expire In the same way, the presence of alliteration imparts melodic effect to the poem. The repetition of the consonant n in the fifth line and l in the sixth line in close succession supports the poet's idea of flowing and signing river. Thus, the repetitive consonants prompt the sense of tranquility and security, since the author speaks of eternal nature (Trotman, 2014). Nonetheless, the sound produces emotional effect, which a reader may interpret in different ways. For the same purpose, Langston Hughes exploits assonance "my soul has grown" to create internal rhyming within the fourth and thirteen lines, as well as to introduce the new structural component. Indeed, the following assonance compensates the absence of a full rhyme and gives the poem a strong rhythmic quality (Trotman, 2014). Nevertheless, it does not necessarily mean that it determines the structure of the poem in contrast to the alliteration. This phonetic stylistic device is generally viewed as an ornamental element, which, as a matter of fact, does not bear any lexical or other meaning. The above-mentioned are the main points regarding the rhythm and sound of the poem The Negro Speaks of Rivers. Overall, this poem maintains the rhythmic precision, while the rhyme schemes, stress pattern and meter appear random. Conclusion In conclusion, it is appropriate to make a general comment on linguistic materials that help the author to communicate his ideas in the verse The Negro Speaks of Rivers. Langston Hughes stresses the wise and experienced nature of Afro-American community by means of word selection. In other words, the repetition of the noun river fixes readers' attention on the concept of wisdom and heritage and, therefore, intensifies the whole poem. The words dusky, muddy and golden are utilized to illustrate the turning point in the American history, when slavery was abolished. Besides, these words add weight to the poem's message that slavery was the greatest crime committed against humans. Eventually, complicated rhythmic structure and sound build an intricate pattern that produces strong emotional effect. by Langston HughesI've known rivers:I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of human blood in human veins.My soul has grown deep like the rivers.I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln went down to New Orleans, and I've seen its muddy bosom turn all golden in the sunset.I've known rivers:Ancient, dusky rivers.My soul has grown deep like the rivers.Meanings of The Negro Speaks of RiversThe poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" shows Hughes commitment to African American community, cultural identity, and this community's association with rivers. The poem highlights the main idea of the role of rivers in spreading civilization and African American community's association with these civilizational cradles.Meanings of Lines 1-3I've known rivers:I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of human blood in human veins.My soul has grown deep like the rivers.Langston Hughes speaks about rivers. He claims that he has known rivers but has not stated since when. However, he is clear that he had known rivers since ancient times and adds that they had flown on the land since time immemorial when there were no human beings. Exactly like this ancient quality of rivers, Hughes claims that his soul is also deep and has grown further deeper with the passage of time. This simile highlights the role of rivers and the association of the African American community with rivers.Meanings of Lines 4-7I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln went down to New Orleans, and I've seen its muddy bosom turn all golden in the sunset.Hughes claims that he has done several things with several greatest rivers of the world. Obviously, he has not done everything himself; rather, his community has lived on the banks of these rivers. He states that when the earth was quite young, he bathed in the Euphrates he found lulling himself to sleep on the bank of Congo and that he looked upon the Nile and raised pyramids in Egypt. He also refers to Lincoln, his departure to New Orleans, and the river of Mississippi. He has seen its muddy waters turning to golden during the sunset. These activities he has associated with himself show the main idea of the poem that rivers are cradles of civilizations and that African American community has lived on their banks.Meanings of Lines 8-10I've known rivers:Ancient, dusky rivers.My soul has grown deep like the rivers.Hughes reverts to rivers saying that rivers are dusky and ancient and that his soul is also dusky and ancient. His irony is directed at the White Man's burden. He means that African American community has lived on the banks of rivers, spreading civilization long before the known world. These verses complete the main idea of the poem, which is the role of rivers in the spread of civilizations and the role of African American community in spreading civilization.Summary of The Negro Speaks of RiversPopularity of "The Negro Speaks of Rivers": The poem was written by Langston Hughes, a great American poet, social activist, and playwright. 'The Negro Speaks of Rivers' is one of the famous free verse poems about African people and their life before and after leaving their land. It was first published in 1921 in the journal The Crisis. The poem presents the voice and memory of the Africans who were forced into slavery, including the time when Abraham Lincoln fought to abolish it. The speaker speaks from the depth of his heart and provides glimpses of his heritage and memories attached to ancient rivers in Africa."The Negro Speaks of Rivers", As a Representative of History: This poem is written from the perspective of an old soul who tries to establish a link between the past and the present. He uses rivers as symbols to reflect the African experience in history. Additionally, he says that his soul is as deep as a river, implying he has seen and experienced tremendous changes in his civilization. Also, he speaks about his past activities near the Euphrates, the Congo, and the Nile, which provide a clue to his philosophical approach, love of nature, and the origin of his race.Major Themes in "The Negro Speaks of Rivers": Pride, heritage, and nature are the major themes of this poem. The poet talks about the origin and historical existence of the African race. By using the reference of rivers, he says that the African race is deeply attached to knowledge that is as old as the ancient rivers. Also, the mood of the poem suggests that the speaker takes pride in his color, ancient culture, and race.The use of literary devices is intended to allow words to have different meanings. Though the poem is a simple free verse, Langston Hughes has used literary devices to describe the rivers that blend eastern and western cultures. Some of the literary devices are explained below.Assonance: Assonance is the repetition of vowel sounds in the same line such as the sound of /o/ in "My soul has grown deep like the rivers".Imagery: Imagery is used to make readers perceive things involving their five senses. For example, "I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep"; "Ancient, dusky rivers" and "seen its muddy bosom turn all golden in the sunset".Simile: It is a figure of speech used to compare an object or person with something else to make meanings clear to the readers. There are two similes used in this poem. The first example, "I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of human blood in human veins". Here the poet compares the rivers with the ancient world. The second example is in the third line, "My soul has grown deep like the rivers" here the depth of his soul is compared with the depth of the rivers.Enjambment: It is defined as a thought or clause that does not come to an end at a line break instead moves over the next line. For example,"I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln went down to New Orleans, and I've seen its muddy bosom turn all golden in the sunset."Symbolism: Symbolism is a use of symbols to signify ideas and qualities by giving them symbolic meanings that are different from their literal meanings. For example, "the flow of human blood in human veins" and all the rivers mentioned in the poem. Here 'river' represents the passage of time and the blood is the symbol of life.Anaphora: It refers to the repetition of a word or expression in the first part of some verses. For example, "I've known rivers" in the opening lines of the poem to express his knowledge of his ancient culture before the slavery period.Personification: Personification means to give human attributes to inanimate objects. For example, the Mississippi River is personified, "I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln went down to New Orleans" as if the river is human that can sing.Analysis of Poetic Devices in "The Negro Speaks of Rivers"Poetic and literary devices are the same, but a few are used only in poetry. Here is the analysis of some of the poetic devices used in this poem.Stanza: A stanza is a poetic form of some lines. This poem doesn't follow a particular stanza form. It comprises of one couplet, a single verse, and then a quatrain followed by another couplet and a single verse.Free Verse: Free verse is a type of poetry that does not contain patterns of rhyme or meter. This is a free verse poem with no strict rhyme or meter.Repetition: There is a repetition of the phrase "I've known rivers," which has created a musical quality in the poem.Refrain: The lines repeated at some distance in the poems are called refrain. The phrase "I've known rivers" is repeated and has become a refrain.Quotes to be UsedThe lines stated below can be used by a nature lover who likes to explore or learn more. These could also be used to narrate any personal experience of visiting ancient cities."I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it." 1Well, son, I'll tell you:2Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.3It's had tacks in it,4And splinters,5And boards torn up,6And places with no carpet on the floor—7Bare.8But all the time9I'se been a-climbin' on,10And reachin' landin's,11And turnin' corners,12And sometimes goin' in the dark13Where there ain't been no light.14So boy, don't you turn back.15Don't you set down on the steps16'Cause you finds it's kinder hard.17Don't you fall now—18For I'se still goin', honey,19I'se still climbin',20And life for me ain't been no crystal stair. We are a reliable and trustworthy writing service that offers its college paper writing help to the despaired and frustrated students from different countries. 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Contact our support team and learn about the benefits that you can get by putting your trust in our professionalism. 1Droning a drowsy syncopated tune,2Rocking back and forth to a mellow croon,3 I heard a Negro play.4Down on Lenox Avenue the other night5By the pale dull pallor of an old gas light6 He did a lazy sway. . . .7 He did a lazy sway. . . .8To the tune o' those Weary Blues.9With his ebony hands on each ivory key10He made that poor piano moan with melody.11 O Blues!12Swaying to and fro on his rickety stool13He played that sad raggy tune like a musical fool.14 Sweet Blues!15Coming from a black man's soul.16 O Blues!17In a deep song voice with a melancholy tone18I heard that Negro sing, that old piano moan—19 "Ain't got nobody in all this world,20 Ain't got nobody but ma self.21 I's gwine to quit ma frownin'22 And put ma troubles on the shelf."23Thump, thump, thump, went his foot on the floor.24He played a few chords then he sang some more—25 "I got the Weary Blues26 And I can't be satisfied.27 Got the Weary Blues28 And can't be satisfied—29 I ain't happy no mo'30 And I wish that I had died."31And far into the night he crooned that tune.32The stars went out and so did the moon.33The singer stopped playing and went to bed34While the Weary Blues echoed through his head.35He slept like a rock or a man that's dead. The Negro Speaks of Rivers Langston Hughes The Negro Speaks of Rivers I've known rivers: I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of human blood in human veins. My soul has grown deep like the rivers. I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young. I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep. I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it. I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln went down to New Orleans, and I've seen its muddy bosom turn all golden in the sunset. I've known rivers: Ancient, dusky rivers. My soul has grown deep like the rivers. Line 1 The speaker sounds like an old man telling stories "I've known" tense indicates that much time passed since first encounter with rivers "known" implies that the speaker has spent quality time with riversI've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the Line 2 Simile-old as the planet earth Provides a sense of time, historyFlow of human blood in human veins. Line 3 The speaker knows rivers older than humans Again, provides a sense that he goes back to the beginning of time Creates a metaphor: the rivers represent history, heritage, spirit, wisdom of Africans and African Americans (Negroes in this era)My soul has grown deep like the rivers Line 4 "Soul" represents the black community "Soul" is old and has lived through much "grown deep" illustrates the depth of the river, the depth of history (around 4.5 billion years), and the depth of the speaker's existenceI bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young. Line 5 "Euphrates" in Mesopotamia, the location of the first human civilization The longest river in Western Asia The land between the Euphrates and the Tigres Rivers is referred to as the "cradle of civilization The ancient city of Babylon was on the banks of the Euphrates Provides a sense of history, "dawns" "young"—beginning of time I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep. Line 6 The Congo runs through three countries in Africa (Republic of Congo, Democratic Republic of Congo, and Angola) Personification- the Congo "lulled" me to sleep provides a sense of maternal attention to the speaker; the speaker is the offspring of the river I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it. Line 7 The Nile is the longest river in the world running through the continent of Africa The Nile has very fertile banks, implication of continual growth Speaker implies that he was involved in the building of the pyramids (one of the seven wonders of the world); they were once believed to be built by 100,000 slaves, but later discovered to be built by peasantsI heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln Line 8 The Mississippi flows through 10 states, beginning in Minnesota and spilling into the Gulf of Mexico This river was instrumental in the transportation of slaves Abraham Lincoln, at ages 19 and 21, rode a flatboat down the Mississippi to New Orleans and witnessed the horrors of slavery. Personification: the river is "singing," perhaps to preserve faith and hope like Negroes singing spiritualswent down to New Orleans, and I've seen its muddy Line 9 "muddy" The Mississippi is known for its murkiness from soil and dirt displaced on the bottom of the river---great for Catfish "muddy" may also reference skin color of the slavesbosom turn all golden in the sunset Line 10 Personification- the river is presented as a woman, "bosom" source of nourishment and nurture "golden" the muddiness is changed, brightened and perceived as positive which represents emancipation Imagery- the river gold from the sunsetI've known rivers: Line 11 Again, the speaker has a significant bond with riversAncient, dusky rivers. Line 12 "dusky" referring to skin color "dusky" representing shadows of the past that continue to haunt the speakerMy soul has grown deep like the rivers. Line 13 This refrain adds musicality to the poem and provides a cyclical effectRIVERS... have a source, a place where they begin flow in one direction , like time are powerful (consider the Grand Canyon); they leave a scar on the earth Attract people to their banks because they offer transportation, fertilization, and foodEnjambment The continuation of the sense and therefore the grammatical construction beyond the end of a line of verse or the end of a couplet. Enjambment in this poem creates the sense of the rivers' flow and winding path. I've known rivers: I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of human blood in human veins. My soul has grown deep like the rivers. I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young. I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep. I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it. I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln went down to New Orleans, and I've seen its muddy bosom turn all golden in the sunset. I've known rivers: Ancient, dusky rivers. My soul has grown deep like the rivers.Light and Dark Images of light and dark throughout this poem remind the reader of the confinement and eventual freedom of the Negroes Muddy, dusky, nights asleep by the Congo Golden sunsets, the Mississippi turns goldenThe Rhythm Ossie Davis (actor, playwright, activist): "Langston Hughes belongs to whoever is listening. A possession in common, like the sights and sounds of a streetcorner hangout, or the barbershop debate over pretty girls' legs, and baseball players: Open your ears and your heart if you've got one; Langston will walk right in and do the rest. His thoughts come naked, conceived in the open, only at home in the public domain. Free without charge, like water, like air—like salted peanuts at a Harlem rent party. Come in, have one on me—that's Langston's style; a great host; a perfect bartender; dishing it up, iambic pentameter on the rocks and on the house, fresh wrote this morning. Dead now, but still alive. Ol' Langston in the corners of my mind." This poem rocks us like a boat on its way down a gentle river at night. Themes Perseverance-The speaker's soul is as deep as the rivers because he has persevered Race-The image of the Mississippi River turning to gold is a symbol for freeing the slaves Memory and the Past-The speaker in "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" redefines history Freedom and Confinement-At the end of the poem, our speaker is freeInception Langston Hughes wrote "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" while on a train ride to Mexico, where he would live with his father for one year. He had just graduated from high school in Cleveland, Ohio, making him a mere eighteen years old. The poem was published in Crisis Magazine in 1921, a year later. When his train crossed the Mississippi River, Hughes was inspire by its beauty and was also reminded of its role in sustaining slavery in America. The sun was setting and Hughes had a long journey ahead of him He took out a letter his father had written him and wrote this poem on the back of its pages. 1To fling my arms wide2In some place of the sun,3To whirl and to dance4Till the white day is done.5Then rest at cool evening6Beneath a tall tree7While night comes on gently,8 Dark like me—9That is my dream!10To fling my arms wide11In the face of the sun,12Dance! Whirl! Whirl!13Till the quick day is done.14Rest at pale evening . . .15A tall, slim tree . . .16Night coming tenderly17 Black like me. The Full Text of "Dream Variations" 1To fling my arms wide2In some place of the sun,3To whirl and to dance4Till the white day is done.5Then rest at cool evening6Beneath a tall tree7While night comes on gently,8 Dark like me—9That is my dream!10To fling my arms wide11In the face of the sun,12Dance! Whirl! Whirl!13Till the quick day is done.14Rest at pale evening . . .15A tall, slim tree . . .16Night coming tenderly17 Black like me. To fling my arms wide In the face of the sun, Dance! Whirl! Whirl! Till the quick day is done. Rest at pale evening . . . A tall, slim tree . . . Night coming tenderly Black like me. Select any word below to get its definition in the context of the poem. The words are listed in the order in which they appear in the poem. Variations Fling Whirl Pale See where this vocabulary word appears in the poem. The Jazz Aesthetic — Read about the jazz aesthetic that Hughes pioneered: a form of poetry that draws on the musical traditions of jazz and the blues. Smithsonian Article on Black Like Me — Learn about Black Like Me, the 1961 nonfiction work by John Howard Griffin that takes its title from the last line of "Dream Variations." In the book, Griffin, who was white, documents his experiences traveling through the segregated American South while passing as Black. A Biography of Langston Hughes — Learn about Langston Hughes's life and work in this biographical article from the Poetry Foundation. The Weary Blues — Learn more about The Weary Blues, the 1926 collection that included "Dream Variations," in this essay by contemporary American poet Kevin Young. Langston Hughes' classic and eloquent examination of African American history and heritage is The Negro Speaks of Rivers. This poem, a pillar of Hughes's body of work, is written with profound lyricism and cultural resonance, capturing the tenacity, richness, and enduring spirit of the African American experience. Writing during the early 20th century's Harlem Renaissance, when art and culture were thriving, Hughes encapsulates a rich and varied cultural heritage. The title, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," sets the theme right away—rivers are strong symbols of cultural memory, history, and continuity. By means of the speaker's voice, Hughes evokes a deep connection to these rivers, connecting the personal experience to the larger story of African American history. The Negro Speaks of Rivers Poem I've known rivers: I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of human blood in human veins. My soul has grown deep like the rivers. I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young. I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep. I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it. I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln went down to New Orleans, and I've seen its muddy bosom turn all golden in the sunset. I've known rivers: Ancient, dusky rivers. My soul has grown deep like the rivers. Lines 1-2: The poem begins with the speaker declaring, "I've known rivers." This line immediately establishes a sense of personal connection and historical depth. The use of the pronoun "I" emphasizes an individual's intimate knowledge of rivers, suggesting a deep, personal relationship with these natural features. Lines 3-6: In these lines, the speaker mentions specific rivers — the Euphrates, the Congo, the Nile, and the Mississippi. Each river is associated with significant historical and cultural contexts. The speaker's claim to have bathed in the Euphrates, built a hut near the Congo, and raised pyramids by the Nile connects the speaker to the ancient civilizations and cultures associated with these rivers. Lines 7-10: The phrase "I heard the singing of the Mississippi" introduces the element of sound and music, emphasizing the cultural significance of the Mississippi River in the context of African American history. The river is personified as singing, suggesting a vibrant and living connection to the heritage of the speaker. Lines 11-12: The speaker asserts that rivers have been a part of their soul, emphasizing a profound spiritual connection. The use of the word "ancient" suggests a timeless and enduring link to the rivers, reinforcing the idea that the speaker's connection goes beyond the temporal boundaries of history. Lines 13-16: These lines further explore the metaphorical significance of rivers. The speaker describes rivers as "muddy" and "strong," suggesting the resilience and strength of African heritage despite the hardships and struggles. The reference to the soul remaining "muddy" underscores the challenges faced by African Americans throughout history. Lines 17-20: The repetition of the phrase "I've known rivers" is used as a refrain, reinforcing the speaker's personal connection and experience with these bodies of water. This repetition serves as a rhythmic and thematic anchor throughout the poem. Lines 21-22: The speaker declares, "My soul has grown deep like the rivers." This line encapsulates the central theme of the poem — the profound connection between the speaker's soul and the historical depth and cultural richness represented by the rivers. The use of "deep" suggests a depth of experience, wisdom, and resilience. Lines 23-26: In these lines, the speaker reflects on the historical journey of African Americans from Africa to the Americas. The mention of the "muddy bosom" of the Mississippi River symbolizes the harsh and challenging passage endured by enslaved Africans during the transatlantic slave trade. The river becomes a symbol of both struggle and continuity. Also Read- Lines 27-30: The speaker references Abraham Lincoln, the sixteenth President of the United States, and the Emancipation Proclamation. The phrase "I heard Abraham Lincoln" suggests a figurative connection to the leader who played a crucial role in the abolition of slavery. The mention of the "Emancipation" links this historical event to the speaker's assertion of the depth of their soul. Lines 31-34: These lines celebrate the resilience and endurance of African Americans. The speaker states that they have seen rivers "ancient as the world," emphasizing the timeless nature of their heritage. The imagery of the rivers "telling" their stories suggests a living narrative embedded in the cultural memory of African Americans. Lines 35-38: The poem concludes with a powerful affirmation of the speaker's identity and connection to rivers. The repetition of "My soul" emphasizes the personal and individual nature of the speaker's experience. The closing line, "I've known rivers," reiterates the en

had guided his boat down the Mississippi as a young man of nineteen (did that journey, and his encounters with Black people which Lincoln must have had during his time in Louisiana, imbue him with a greater sympathy for the plight of Black slaves, one wonders?). The fact that the ‘muddy’ waters of the river turn ‘gold’ suggests that the Black speaker, and all Black people, are finally coming into the inheritance they have been owed for so long. Religion And ‘The Negro Speaks of Rivers’ bears the influence of religious verses: there is something psalm-like about its rhythms, about the repetition (that repeated line, almost a refrain, about the speaker’s soul growing deep like the various rivers of the world) and the anaphora Hughes uses. Anaphora is a rhetorical device that consists of repeating a sequence of words at the beginnings of successive clauses, as Hughes’ speaker does when he says, ‘I’ve known rivers’ at the beginnings of the poem’s first two lines, and then begins each line of the third stanza with the word ‘I’ (‘I bathed …’, ‘I built …’, ‘I looked …’, ‘I heard …’). So, there is almost something of the preacher in Hughes’ speaker, and it’s worth noting that he is speaking, rather than writing (contrast him with the young speaker of Hughes’ ‘Theme for English B’, who is writing his college homework assignment). So there is a sense that the speaker is declaiming – proclaiming even – and speaking with an authority and a confidence that is almost religious in its flavour. Rivers have long had spiritual meaning to peoples and cultures around the world. Just twenty years after Hughes published his poem, T. S. Eliot, in ‘The Dry Salvages’ (1941), would describe the river as a ‘strong brown god’; curiously enough, he, too, is thinking specifically of the Mississippi. So the fact that the speaker’s soul has grown deeper like the rivers that have watered and nourished him need not surprise us. It has become part of his identity, formed who he – and his ancestors – have become, and played a key role in his history. And as well as betraying a biblical inspiration, the rhythms of Hughes’ short poem also recall the long, rolling lines of Walt Whitman: another great emancipator in nineteenth-century history, although this time of verse rather than slaves. Whitman (1819-92) was an important early guide for Hughes’ own poetry, and his own free verse compositions are often celebratory, recalling the sprawling lines of the Old Testament psalms. ‘The Negro Speaks of Rivers’ would continue to be an important poem in Langston Hughes’ oeuvre, and one of his most defining works, even though it is, in many respects, atypical of his work in terms of its rhythms, style, and structure. But it was this poem, rather than his later jazz- and blues-influenced lyrics, which was read at Hughes’ funeral in 1967. Form As we remarked above, ‘The Negro Speaks of Rivers’ is influenced by the free verse of Walt Whitman, and Hughes’ poem is an example of free verse, too: it is unrhymed and has no regular metre or rhythm (contrast it with, say, Claude McKay’s near-contemporary poem, ‘If We Must Die’, and you can immediately hear the difference between the two poets). ‘The Negro Speaks of Rivers’ also has lines of varying lengths and its stanzas range from just one line to four lines. This style is entirely appropriate for a poem that surprises us with its unexpected connections between very different places and historical periods, and conveys the excitement of the speaker concerning the spiritual link between these rivers and his own soul. Subscribe to get the latest posts sent to your email. The speaker claims that he has known rivers as “ancient as the world,” older than the blood that flows in our veins. His soul has grown deep, just like the rivers. He writes about bathing in the Euphrates at the beginning of civilization, and later, he built a hut along the Congo and listened to the river as he fell asleep. He looked at the Nile and watched the pyramids rise nearby; he heard the muddy Mississippi sing when Abraham Lincoln traveled to New Orleans. He repeats that he has known “ancient, dusky rivers,” and his soul has grown deep like the rivers.Analysis:“The Negro Speaks of Rivers” is Langston Hughes’s first mature poem. He wrote it in 1920 at the age of seventeen, while traveling by train to visit his father in Mexico. The young Hughes was inspired to pen this verse when his train crossed over the Mississippi River. It was published in 1921 in the journal the Crisis, which had a predominantly African American readership. Although Hughes did not technically write "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" in or about Harlem, he addresses themes that would later become closely associated with the Harlem Renaissance. Hughes dedicated this poem to W.E.B. DuBois a few years after its initial publication. It was also read out loud at Hughes's own funeral service in 1967. When Langston Hughes was writing "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," he was most influenced by the work of Carl Sandburg and Walt Whitman. He particularly cited Whitman's “Song of Myself” as an inspiration for the longer lines in “Negro.” The poem is free verse but has the rhythm of a gospel preacher. Hughes utilizes anaphora, which is the repetition of words or phrases at the start of each line, like “I built,” “I looked,” and “I heard.”In this poem, the speaker links himself to his ancestors, firmly placing them in important historical, religious, and cultural sites all over the world. The speaker begins by claiming a connection to the world's ancient rivers that predated human beings, and that has made his soul grow "deep like the rivers." This insightful and articulate description indicates the speaker's immense intellect, and allows him to make a definitive connection between people of his race and the rest of human civilization. In the early 20th Century, white Americans often viewed their darker-skinned counterparts as less than human, and here, Hughes offers concrete proof of historical equality. The speaker mentions four great rivers, starting with the Euphrates, which historians and archaeologists often label as the birthplace of human civilization. Then, he mentions the strong and mighty Congo, along which many great African kingdoms have flourished. The speaker then cites the long, winding Nile and the great Egyptian pyramids. He witnessed the creation of these structures, which are amongst man's greatest feats of architecture. Finally, he writes about the muddy and golden Mississippi, which he links American slavery and Abraham Lincoln. Although the speaker shares many of Langston Hughes's beliefs, he is a universal figure rather than an autobiographical depiction of Hughes himself. The speaker serves as a voice for all African Americans, as he traces their lineage to the cradles of civilization. Onwuchekwa Jemie extols the merits of the poem:It is a sonorous evocation of transcendent essences so ancient as to appear timeless, predating human existence, longer than human memory. The rivers are part of God's body, and participate in his immortality. They are the earthly analogues of eternity: deep, continuous, mysterious. They are named in the order of their association with black history. The black man has drunk of their life-giving essences, and thereby borrowed their immortality.Death is one of the main themes in the poem, although it is subtle. Critic Arnold Rampersad writes: With its allusions to deep dusky rivers, the setting sun, sleep, and the soul, [the poem] is suffused with the image of death and, simultaneously, the idea of deathlessness. As in Whitman's philosophy, only the knowledge of death can bring the primal spark of poetry and life. Here Langston Hughes became ‘the outsetting bard,’ in Whitman's phrase, the poet who sings of life because at last he has known death.