



The Negro Speaks of Rivers

(Second Part)



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- Race, culture and Memory.



Negro Speaks of the Rivers

Composition and context

The poem was written while he was 17, and he was travelling from Ohio to Mexico to visit his father in 1920. The train was crossing the Mississippi River, and he drew his biggest inspiration from this journey.





MY FIRST PUBLISHED POEM

1921

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.

Langston Hughes
1941

Illustration by Aaron Douglas



Genre:

- “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” is probably the most anthologized of Langston Hughes’ poems. Although Hughes brought rhythmic innovations from **jazz and the blues** to his future poetry, this classic poem, written when he was only 18 years old, stands at the gateway of his entire body of work.



Composition and context

The poem was written while he was 17, and he was travelling from Ohio to Mexico to visit his father in 1920. The train was crossing the Mississippi River, and he drew his biggest inspiration from this journey.



1. This poem is written from the perspective of **an old soul** who tries to establish a link between the past and the present.
2. He uses rivers as **symbols** to reflect the African experience in history.
3. He says that his soul is “**as deep as a river**”, implying he has seen and experienced tremendous changes in his civilization.



<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1zIHcJTwwKfi3-8tS5k3GGD7xsKIC4A-BI8O9drEm9tl/edit>



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Literary Device: Assonance

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Culture and History:

- “I’ve known **rivers ancient** as the world and **older than** the flow of human blood in human veins.”
- Rich legacy of African culture through rivers.
- Experience, Memory



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.

Figurative Language:

- I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.

Personification:
close relationship,
human touch

Enjambment

- A literary device in which a line of poetry carries its idea or thought over to the next line without a grammatical pause.
- "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."

Imagery:

- "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"



slavery



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I've known rivers:

Ancient, dusky rivers.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

“I”

- The speaker's longing for freedom.
- “I” as a strong individual
- Representative of the community.

Literary Device: Assonance

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Metaphor

“Ancient, dusky rivers.”

- My soul has **grown deep** like the rivers.

Anaphora:

In rhetoric, an **anaphora** (is a rhetorical device that consists of repeating a sequence of words at the beginnings of neighboring clauses, thereby lending them emphasis.

Line no 5,6,7,8
“...I”



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Memory, culture, Trauma and Identity

- In psychology, **displacement** (German: *Verschiebung*, "shift, move") is an **unconscious defence mechanism** whereby the mind substitutes either a new aim or a new **object** for goals felt in their original form to be dangerous or unacceptable.

1. **Belonging** in this context is a social and emotional attachment to an environment.
- 2 The **self** as centered in a network of relationships established by shared personal characteristics, roles, and group memberships.
3. A component of self-concept is one's **relationship to land**.
4. Places embody **personal and social memories** because they are connected to our personal and social roles and relationships. These relationships and connections provide people with a sense of place, which may offer a sense of **belonging**.
5. Forced **displacement** and forced migration break down self-identity and instigate its reformation or reconstruction.

Erik Erikson: "identity crisis"

- Erik Erikson, the psychoanalytic theorist who coined the term "identity crisis", introduced the notion that **the social, cultural, and historical context is the ground in which individual identity is embedded**.
- "We deal with a process "located" in the core of the **individual** and yet also in the core of his **communal culture**... In psychological terms, identity formation employs a process of simultaneous reflection and observation, a process taking place on **all levels of mental functioning**, by which the individual judges himself in the light of what he perceives to be the way in which others judge him in comparison to themselves and to a typology significant to them." [E. H. Erikson, *Identity, Youth, and Crisis* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1968), p. 22]

"Double- Consciousness"

- "Black feels their two-ness, an American, and a member of Black community, two souls, two thoughts, two unrecognized strivings, two warring ideals." [Strivings of the Negro People by Du Bois, 1969]



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Summary:

- Background
- Title
- Analysis of Different Types of Devices
- Race, culture and Memory.



Questions:

- Critical appreciation of the poem
- The title
- Use of symbolism, imageries, themes
- Memory, culture, and difference: Critical reflections



Article:

- [Langston.Article.pdf](#)



References:

- **The Art and Imagination of Langston Hughes** by R. Baxter Miller.
- **Langston Hughes: Black Genius**, Edited by Therman B. O'Daniel.
- **Anthology of American Negro Culture**, Edited by V.F. Calverton.

