

The Negro Speaks of Rivers

--Langston Hughes

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 River by,Langston Hughes

“The Negro Speaks of Rivers” was the first poem published in Langston Hughes’s long writing career. The poem first appeared in the magazine *Crisis* in June of 1921 and was subsequently published in Hughes’s first volume of poetry, *The Weary Blues*, in 1926. Written when he was only 19, “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” treats themes Hughes explored all his life: the experiences of African Americans in history and black identity and pride. Hughes claimed that 90 percent of his work attempted “to explain and illuminate the Negro condition in America.” Through images of rivers, African civilizations, and an “I” who speaks for the race, Hughes argues for the depth, wisdom, and endurance of the African soul. The form of the poem reinforces these themes. Using a collective, mythic “I,” long lines, and repeated phrases, Hughes invokes the poetry of Walt Whitman, another bard who “sang” America. Onwuchekwa Jemie notes in his book *Langston Hughes: An*

Introduction to the Poetry, however, that unlike Whitman, Hughes “celebrates not the America that is but the America that is to come.”

About the Poet

Hughes was born in 1902 in Joplin, Missouri, to James Nathaniel and Carrie Mercer Langston Hughes, who separated shortly after their son's birth. Hughes' mother had attended college, while his father, who wanted to become a lawyer, took correspondence courses in law. Denied a chance to take the Oklahoma bar exam, Hughes' father went first to Missouri and then, still unable to become a lawyer, left his wife and son to move first to Cuba and then to Mexico. In Mexico, he became a wealthy landowner and lawyer. Because of financial difficulties, Hughes' mother moved frequently in search of steady work, often leaving him with her parents. His grandmother Mary Leary Langston was the first black woman to attend Oberlin College. She inspired the boy to read books and value an education. When his grandmother died in 1910, Hughes lived with family friends and various relatives in Kansas. In 1915 he joined his mother and new stepfather in Lincoln, Illinois, where he attended grammar school. The following year, the family moved to Cleveland, Ohio. There he attended Central High School, excelling in both academics and sports. Hughes also wrote poetry and short fiction for the Belfry Owl, the high school literary magazine, and edited the school yearbook. In 1920 Hughes left to visit his father in Mexico, staying in that country for a year. Returning home in 1921, he attended Columbia University for a year before dropping out. For a time he worked as a cabin boy on a merchant ship, visited Africa, and wrote poems for a number of American magazines. In 1923 and 1924 Hughes lived in Paris. He returned to the United States in 1925 and resettled with his mother and half-brother in Washington, D.C. He continued writing poetry while working menial jobs. In May and August of 1925 Hughes's verse earned him literary prizes from both Opportunity and Crisis magazines. In December Hughes, then a busboy at a Washington, D.C., hotel, attracted the attention of poet Vachel Lindsay by placing three of his poems on Lindsay's dinner table. Later that evening Lindsay read Hughes's poems to an audience and announced his discovery of a “Negro busboy poet.” The next day reporters and photographers eagerly greeted Hughes at work to hear more of his compositions. He published his first collection of poetry, *The Weary Blues*, in 1926. Around this time Hughes became active in the Harlem Renaissance, a flowering of creativity among a group of

African American artists and writers. Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, and other writers founded *Fire*, a literary journal devoted to African American culture. The venture was unsuccessful, however, and ironically a fire eventually destroyed the editorial offices. In 1932 Hughes traveled with other black writers to the Soviet Union on an ill-fated film project.

His infatuation with Soviet Communism and Joseph Stalin led Hughes to write on politics throughout the 1930s. He also became involved in drama, founding several theaters. In 1938 he founded the Suitcase Theater in Harlem, in 1939 the Negro Art Theater in Los Angeles, and in 1941 the Skyloft Players in Chicago. In 1943 Hughes received an honorary Doctor of Letters from Lincoln University, and in 1946 he was elected to the National Institute of Arts and Letters. He continued to write poetry throughout the rest of his life, and by the 1960s he was known as the “Dean of Negro Writers.” Hughes died in New York on May 22, 1967.

Summary

Lines 1–4

Speaking for the African race (“negro” was the preferred term in 1921), the “I” of this poem links people of African descent to an ancient, natural, life-giving force: rivers. By asserting that he has “known rivers ancient as the world,” the speaker asserts that he, and people of African descent, have an understanding of elemental forces in nature that precede civilization. The repetition of “rivers” and “human” lends these lines a wise, resonant tone, like that found in Biblical passages. In the first two lines, the speaker refers to rivers as a natural force outside himself. Line 3 likens the human body to earth by comparing rivers to “human blood in human veins.” Line 4 personalizes that comparison as the speaker compares the depth of his soul to the depth of rivers. In the space of four lines the speaker moves from historically and symbolically associating himself and his people with rivers to metaphorically imagining rivers as part of his blood and soul. Rather than one human relationship to rivers emerging as true or primary, each of these associations intertwines.

Lines 5–7

Line 5 lets the reader know that the “I” is no mortal human speaker, but the mythic, timeless voice of a race. To have “bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young,” in prehistory, the speaker must be millions of years old. In lines 5 through 7, the speaker establishes the race’s ties to great, culturally rich civilizations along famous rivers in the Middle East and Africa. The Euphrates River was the cradle of ancient Babylonia. It flows from Turkey through Syria and modern Iraq. The Congo originates in central Africa and flows into the Atlantic. The Nile, which runs from Lake Victoria in Uganda in Africa through Egypt to the Mediterranean, was the site of ancient Egyptian civilization. The speaker’s actions show that he reveres the river and depends on it for multiple purposes. He bathes in the water, builds his hut next to it, listens to its music as he falls asleep, and is consoled or inspired by the river when, as a slave in Egypt, he builds the great pyramids.

These actions reinforce the notion (from lines 1-3) that peoples of African descent have ancient spiritual and physical ties to nature. When Hughes wrote this poem in 1921, ideas and images of primitive, tribal cultures were very chic in American art and literature. After Hughes visited Africa in 1923, he no longer viewed Africa as a mythic, exotic land where black identity was rooted, but instead as a land ravaged by Western imperialism, a symbol of lost roots. In his later writing, Hughes steered away from images of African primitivism, for he saw such depictions of African and African-American culture as impeding rather than advancing the cause of racial equality.

Lines 8–10

Here Hughes draws an analogy between the ancient rivers alongside which Africans founded civilizations, and the Mississippi, the river on which several American cities were built, including St. Louis (Hughes’s birthplace) and New Orleans. Onwuchekwa Jemie, writing in *Langston Hughes: An Introduction to the Poetry* notes that “the magical transformation of the Mississippi from mud to gold by the sun’s radiance is mirrored in the transformation of slaves into free men by Lincoln’s Proclamation.” In *The Life of Langston Hughes*, Arnold Rampersad views this transformation as “the angle of a poet’s vision, which turns mud into

gold.” The sun’s transformation of muddy water to gold provides an image of change. The change may represent the improved status of African Americans after the Civil War, hope for future changes, or the power of the poet to transform reality through imaginative language. Line 8 personifies the river by giving it the human capacity to sing. The river’s singing invokes both the slave spirituals and songs of celebration after the slaves were freed. Line 9 also personifies the river by endowing it with a “muddy bosom.” The Mississippi river is known for its muddiness. The term “bosom” is associated with women and so connotes fertility and nurturing. Through this personification, Hughes associates the ceaselessness of the mighty river with the eternal, life-affirming endurance of Africans and African Americans.

Lines 11–13

The poem closes with the phrases that opened it. The speaker’s language completes a cycle that mirrors the river’s eternal cycling of waters around the earth and the African race’s continuing role in human history. By enacting the circling of time and rivers, the speaker again associates himself with those elemental forces. The phrase “dusky rivers” refers literally to rivers that appear brown due to mud and cloudy skies. Figuratively, the phrase again likens rivers to peoples of African descent, whose skin is often called “dusky” or dark. The final line reaffirms the speaker’s sense of racial pride, of continuity with ancient, advanced civilizations, and of connection to life-giving, enduring forces in nature.

The Negro Speaks of Rivers” Themes

Blackness, Perseverance, and Cultural Identity

"The Negro Speaks of Rivers" stretches from the earliest moments of human civilization all the way to American slavery, emphasizing that black people have both witnessed and participated in the key moments of human history. In the face of centuries of slavery and oppression in America, the poem’s speaker asserts the perseverance of black cultural roots. The poem argues that people of African descent have not simply been present for all of human history, they have been

a *guiding force* shaping civilization. In this sense, the poem is an ode to black perseverance.

The speaker of the poem acts as a representative figure. After all, the title is "*The Negro Speaks of Rivers*," not "A Negro..." (At the time of the poem's writing, "Negro" was a common term that wasn't considered offensive). In this sense, the speaker models how he or she thinks the black community as a whole should relate to its history and culture.

As an almost mythical figure, the speaker emphasizes the depth of his or her experience, which turns out to represent the entire history of black people. The speaker has "known rivers ancient as the world," and "bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young." The Euphrates is a river in the Middle East associated with an area called the Cradle of Civilization, where human agriculture first began. As such, the speaker is saying he or she was present at the very start of human history, implying that black people have helped shape the world as we know it. Invoking this deep history establishes the fact that black experience extends as far back as any other people's, creating a profound sense of community and connection between black people.

In fact, the speaker has "known rivers ... older than the flow of human blood in human veins"—suggesting that black history existed even *before* human existence. This connects the speaker to the natural world. On one hand, such a connection could be considered problematic, since racist discourses often oppose "civilized" white populations to "natural" or "uncivilized" black peoples. (Because of these racist ideas, Hughes himself veered away from such characterizations in his later work.) On the other hand, this connection can be seen as asserting a sense of wisdom and peace (such as when the Congo "lull[s]" the speaker to sleep) in the face of slavery and oppression, which the poem alludes to later on.

In addition to the speaker's deep historical experience, he or she has also witnessed recent events, such as "the singing of the Mississippi"—a river on the American continent, thousands of miles away from the Euphrates—when "Abe Lincoln went to down to New Orleans." The line alludes to a famous trip Lincoln took down the Mississippi as a young man, which exposed him to the evils of slavery. The speaker invokes these examples to show the breadth of black experience—which includes moments of triumph, like building the pyramids, and moments of trial and tribulation, like slavery and the Civil War. In all these moments, black experience has helped define the course of history.

As the speaker outlines these distant, disparate experiences, he or she stresses that they are not disconnected events. They form one uninterrupted experience, like a river. Rivers represent continuity: they cannot be chopped up into discrete chunks. Furthermore, the speaker's experience is "deep" like a river, suggesting permanence, perseverance, and inner strength. Black people have persevered through the most difficult times. Like a river, black history keeps flowing.

This argument holds special importance for the American black community for two related reasons. First, the slave trade cut off black people from their homes, their cultures, their families—and, ultimately, their history. Yet the speaker asserts a continuous history *despite* that cutting-off. Second, American narratives of history have usually focused on white people, effectively erasing black experience. So, in presenting the speaker's knowledge as stretching across continents and historical periods, the poem portrays a different narrative—one that acknowledges black history.

The speaker argues that black identity and accomplishment are so powerful they can cross the gaps that slavery created, reconnecting with lost ancestors and

traditions. In this way, the poem proudly portrays the depth of black historical experience.

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