

Analysis of a Negro Speaks of Rivers

By Mr. Roets



The Negro Speaks of Rivers

(you will be reading your poem--you can put the actual poem on slide or put a link to the poem on the slide with a picture)

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.



Initial understanding of the poem

(What were your first thoughts? Why did you choose this poem?)

and Historical

First reading – Hughes makes a personal connection to the history of his race – using “I” to represent the personal and the whole, and using a variety of rivers – ancient geological features – to connect his history to the history of the world. He does this to demonstrate the depth of not only his soul but the soul of the black race/community

Biographical and Historical context

Biographical context is what was happening in the author's life when he wrote the poem. Historical context is what was happening in the world when he wrote the poem. How did his life and what was going on the world influence what he wrote in the poem? Depending on what you find out- this could be one or two slides. First find out when poem was written using pages ____ --- _____ in book. Also look at timeline of Langston Hughes life on pages _____ - _____.

Biographical context:

Poem was written while Hughes traveled by boat on the Mississippi river, south to his father in Mexico in the summer of 1920. Hughes had been raised by his grandmother up to this time – his parents were divorced. On his way down the river, he quite likely was considering who he was. He was 18, a high school graduate, and considering his place in the world. He did not get along with his father, and was soon on his way to Columbia University in Harlem, NYC. Hughes had been writing poetry since his school days, and so using a poem to express himself was to be expected. This was his first published poem, and is often considered one of his most important. Not only is it a young man's exploration of his place in the world, but it is also a legitimizing poem for the importance of black people – something that Hughes tried to do his whole career.

Historical context:

In the late teens and early twenties of the nineteenth century, America was in the midst of great change. It was having an economic upswing following the Great War, and with the advent of cars, national railways, and radio, distances in America were getting shorter. African – Americans were moving north to the cities and changing the population density in these cities. Jazz music was becoming popular amongst white people as well as black people, and “black” culture was becoming more and more valued. “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” is a poem that gives weight and historical dignity to the “Negro,” a figure demeaned in the history of America. In fact, membership in the Ku Klux Klan was growing and peaking at this time – this poem can be seen as a very real push back to the racism of the KKK. It says – “We are important. We are ancient. We are soulful. We are to be reckoned with.”

Connotative Meaning

a connotative exploration of word choice

Connotation means an idea or feeling that a word invokes in addition to its literal or primary meaning.

What words did Langston Hughes choose to use in his poem? How do they impact the meaning of the poem?

Was there any figurative language used? Similes? Metaphors? This may be more than one slide.

Connotative reading:

Free verse poem with deliberate line separation.

First person – “I’ve known rivers” – this is personal and social – LH is a member and representative of a community . Knowing suggests a depth of understanding, and it refers to both past and present tense. And he repeats this phrase for weightiness.

“rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of human blood in human veins” – this line makes clear that the speaker – the Negro – has always been here, and has the weight of history on his side. The specification of in human veins suggests the opposite of blood spilled outside of those veins.

“My soul has grown deep like the rivers.” – the soul is the eternal part of mankind, the eternal soul of the negro is deep – depth suggests powerful and complicated and complex, and deep rivers are amazingly powerful – deep rivers change the very landscape

The listing of rivers in time and place – the Euphrates, the Congo, the Nile – all in Africa and all tied to ancient civilizations that predate European or Western civilizations. These rivers cement the Negro's position as older, wiser and more powerful than others – or at least as powerful. Euphrates is tied to Babylon, the Congo to ancient African kingdoms, and the Nile to the building of the pyramids - one of the world wonders. The Mississippi brings the Negro to America and all of the complex history of the African-American. The evils of slavery, the joys of community, the music and culture of New Orleans, and the freedom granted by Abe Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation are all called forth as parts of the Negro's complicated soul. More weight – and also natural beauty. "The muddy bosom turning golden in the sunset" suggests the actual color of the Mississippi which is BROWN and turns golden – valuable

Repetition of "I've known rivers: ancient dusky rivers. My soul has grown deep like the rivers." Dusky gives color to the rivers – darker not lighter, like the Negro. A soul that grows is also a soul that is alive, and again deep suggests power and complexity.

How Syntax and Grammar impact meaning

How are the words and phrases arranged in the poem? How is grammar used (or not used)? How do both of these impact the meaning?

Capitalization and punctuation are standard. The 5 stanzas are all different lengths and serve to create emphasis through space for pauses. Seven simple declarative sentences make meaning clear and straightforward. One longer compound sentence for the contemporary river suggests more experience with it.

The last two stanzas are near repeats of the first two stanzas - emphasis.

Final Judgement of Poem

Was this poem good? Bad? Inspiring? Memorable? Instructive? Poignant? Why do you think this? Be specific!

This is a simple and yet brilliantly complex poem. Declarative sentences in the first person make it immediate and “NOW” but it provides a depth of history and meaning to an entire race that in America had been subjugated and ignored as “lesser.” James Brown would have loved it: “Say it loud: I’m black and I’m proud!”