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**LANGSTON HUGHES' 'THE NEGRO SPEAKS OF RIVERS':
 A TRIBUTE TO AFRICAN HERITAGE**

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Abstract:

“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. In the paper, an attempt has been made to interpret the poem as not only a black history lesson or protest, but as a deeply felt and dignified tribute to those of African heritage.

“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 18 or 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” America¹. 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.”²

As Hughes's first published poem, critics view “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” as the first indication of the poet's lifelong themes and concerns. Although most critics now praise his ongoing dedication to racial struggle, when *The Weary Blues*, was published in 1926, critical reactions were mixed. A number of reviewers, including black intellectuals, questioned whether Hughes's colloquial language and racial themes constituted propaganda or “real art,” oversimplification or clear vision. Critics do not claim that “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” is particularly propagandistic, though it heralds a moralizing tendency in Hughes's poetry. This poem, moreover, is sometimes considered one of his lyrics, and lyrics are often considered nonpolitical.

Critics regard this poem as a lyric because it has a first person speaker who expresses a strongly felt emotion and appears to exist outside of time. These critics note, however, that the “I” in the poem represents less an individual persona or Hughes himself than a mythic, collective persona. Several critics suggest that the lyric speaker of this poem begins with personal memory but moves steadily toward collective memory. Raymond Smith, in his essay, “Hughes: Evolution of the Poetic Persona,” argues that in both early and later poems, Hughes “transforms personal experience and observations into distillations of the Black American condition.”³ In his essay, “The Origins of Poetry in Langston Hughes,” Arnold Rampersad similarly argues that “personal anguish has been alchemized by the poet into a gracious meditation on his race, whose despised (“muddy”) culture and history ... changes within the poem from mud into gold.”⁴ Rampersad also finds in the poem a traditional lyric concern with time and death. In *The Life of Langston Hughes, Vol. I*, Rampersad writes, “With its allusions to deep dusky rivers, the setting sun, sleep and the soul, “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” is suffused with the image of death and, simultaneously,

the idea of deathlessness.”⁵

Critics often attribute the personal anguish Rampersad mentions to Hughes's anxieties about his father. Hughes wrote the poem on a train he took to visit his estranged father in Mexico. Crossing the Mississippi outside St. Louis, Missouri, his birthplace, Hughes recalled, “I looked out the window ... [and] began to think what that [muddy] river, the old Mississippi, had meant to Negroes in the past - how to be sold down the river was the worst fate that could overtake a slave ... Then I remembered reading how Abraham Lincoln had made a trip down the Mississippi on a raft, ... seen slavery at its worst, and had decided within himself that it should be removed from American life. Then I began to think of other rivers in our past ... ” In this record of the poem's composition, Hughes reveals how a personal meditation was transformed through his associations into a meditation on collective racial identity and history, and how a lyric became an *ars poetica*, or artistic statement, for his career.

“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 or 19 years old, stands at the gateway of his entire body of work. In it is the beginning of his “affirmation of blackness,” as critic Raymond Smith states in “Hughes: Evolution of the Poetic Persona”⁶.

The black man had been brought to American shores as a slave and his presence preceded the birth of the United States, but in those years of forced illiteracy when a slave was forbidden to read and write, no work of note dealt with his history. After being freed by Abraham Lincoln in the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863, his rights were squashed in the South under the Jim Crow laws. These blatant injustices dealt with separate but unequal drinking fountains, blacks sitting at the back of the bus, not being allowed into hotels except through the back door as employees, and innumerable other humiliations. In particular, the act of voting was made into such an obstacle course for black voters, most were discouraged from the ordeal. Those that weren't found themselves physically threatened. The liberal North harbored less but subtler prejudices that stifled black initiative. When Langston Hughes began writing, he devised his own emancipation proclamation, quoted in “The Black Aesthetic in the Thirties, Forties, and Fifties” by Dudley Randall in *Modern Black Poets*:

We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased, we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too. If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn't matter either. We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves⁷.

Despite this thrust toward individual black pride, pride of black heritage was a necessary element to “stand on top of the mountain.” Hughes knew this on a personal level, since his father, of mixed race but always identified as black, despised the Negro and left the United States to become highly successful in Mexico. In fact, Hughes was on his way there to ask his father for college tuition when he wrote this poem. Although Hughes would soon hate his father for his views, when he wrote this, his hatred had not surfaced yet. This poem was most likely an anticipated reply to his father's criticism. In that case, out of anxiety and suppressed anger, a positive and stately poem emerged.

“The Negro Speaks of Rivers” begins with the speaker's claim: “I've known rivers.”⁸ Rivers suggest to us places of travel, exploration, discovery, and even settling down beside one. Then he expands the idea: he has “known rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of human / blood in human veins.” Now we are being transported back in time, not to man's ancient history, but to a time before man even existed, when the rivers alone existed. Yet these rivers mirror man because the water that flows in their channels is similar to the blood that flows in man's veins. Also, our speaker is giving us a sweeping

overview, suggesting possibly the beginnings of life by presenting a picture of water, one of the essentials for life. At this point, also, we understand the speaker is not only speaking for himself, but for all Negroes.

In the second stanza, which is only a line (“My soul has grown deep like the rivers”), Hughes compares his soul to the rivers, saying it has the depth of a river. Decades after this poem was published, during the 1960s, “soul” became a term used to describe black music and black food. The implications were that this music and food came from the deprivations the black man had to endure in an oppressive white society and, therefore, came from the soul.

In the third stanza, the speaker traces Negro history through rivers intimately connected with the evolution of those with African roots. He tells us he “bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.” The Euphrates and the Tigris in present day Iraq comprise a two-river system that creates what is known as the fertile crescent, land between these rivers that benefits from the waters overflowing their banks. Millennia ago, “when dawns were young,” and the country was called Mesopotamia, this fertile soil allowed its people not merely to survive, but to flourish, and western civilization began here along with western writing. Also, according to Muslims, Jews, and Christians, the Garden of Eden existed nearby, a beautiful spot believed to be the Al-Qurah of today. Although the Negro race did not begin in the Middle East, due to Africa's proximity, an African could have bathed in the Euphrates in ancient times. Besides, African slaves were sold to countries in the Americas populated by Judeo-Christian Europeans, products of this Mesopotamian-born, Western civilization. So, by force, this background became the Negroes' background.

The next river mentioned is the Congo, the second longest river in Africa, which runs through the center of the continent. Hughes states in *A Pictorial History of Black Americans*, “that Africa not only gave the world its earliest civilizations, it gave the world *man*.” Africa has long been considered the birthplace of man, since the human bones excavated there are the oldest found. Here the speaker “built [his] hut” and was “lulled ... to sleep,” suggesting the idealized beauty and peace the Negro enjoyed in this earliest of Edens. Here, too, rich civilizations rose up in a world where man lived beside the lion and the elephant. Ironically, though, in the more recent past, tribes living along the Congo, and the Kongo tribe in particular, helped feed the slave trade. This kind of betrayal can only happen to those who are “lulled ... to sleep” and unable to take action. The second interpretation does not contradict the first, but puts events into sequence and deepens the poetry.

The third river is the Nile, the longest river in Africa and one that flows through many African nations. But the speaker is referring to those places along the river where he “raised the pyramids above it.” Those Africans who helped build the pyramids were the Nubians who had a respected role in Egyptian society as soldiers and traders. More importantly, Hughes states in *A Pictorial History of Black Americans*, that “[b]lack Pharaohs ruled Egypt for centuries and black Queen Nefertete [was] one of the most beautiful women of all time.” Although Hughes might have wished to emphasize the Nile's glamour, the fact is, the whole of ancient Egyptian religion lauded death over life and focused on the pharaohs and their comfortable survival in the next world. Because of the pyramids, the Egyptians needed as much manpower as possible and enslaved those they captured to build their gigantic tombs. Still, this knowledge does little to detract from the glamour and, if anything, balances it with reality.

The last river mentioned is the Mississippi, the longest river in the United States, and one intimately connected to slavery. A slave sold down the river in Mark Twain's Missouri was doomed to an even worse fate than he was already living: Slavery was more entrenched in the deep South, escape to the free states was even farther away, and any slave sent down the river was not only leaving a familiar place, but family as well. However, the speaker “heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln/ went down to New Orleans”; the river was “singing” because, according to legend, when the future president saw the horrors of slavery, he vowed to eliminate that institution from the country.

In the last half of that line, the speaker has seen the Mississippi's “muddy bosom turn golden in the

sunset.” On a physical level, the speaker as Hughes most likely saw that phenomena as he wrote the poem on a train crossing the river from Illinois to St. Louis, Missouri. Its muddy bosom connects it to the Negro mother who nurtured her babies despite the fact that they could be taken away from her at any time and despite the fact that some of their fathers were the white masters. In the end, after a life of cruel hardship, the heavenly rewards come at death, at sunset. The black mother and her progeny, who never abandoned their spirituality but refined it into music, poetry and dance, are now seen for their true value, revealed in the light as golden.

In the fourth stanza the speaker repeats the phrase that he has “known rivers,” but now he broadens the image to include “[a]ncient, dusky rivers.” This concludes our history tour and ties these rivers to the color of dusk, the magical color of twilight, and the color of the Negro. The Negro encompasses the African in Africa or on any other continent, and especially the African-American, Hughes' first audience.

The last stanza repeats the second stanza: “My soul has grown deep like the rivers.” Now we understand more profoundly what the speaker means, for each of these rivers has nurtured the Negro and some have transported him as a slave. The final repetitions also add a rhythm to the poem, as if, after the flow of the first and third stanzas, like the river, this poem has arrived at its mouth, its place of proclamation to the world. These people, these Negroes, have come out of Africa, and later out of slavery, and they have flourished in the fertile crescent of their spirituality and contributed much to world civilization. Let them look back on a golden heritage, Hughes seems to say; let them speak of these rivers that are so much a part of that heritage.

“The Negro Speaks of Rivers” is spoken in first person point of view. However, the “I” represents neither a persona nor the author. Rather, the “I” speaks as and for people of African descent. “The Negro” of the title represents an archetype rather than an actual individual. There is a precedent for this collective “I” in the poetry of Walt Whitman, who spoke as and for America in his poem, “Song of Myself.” Hughes adopts two other elements in this poem that show the influence of Whitman: long lines and repetition of phrases. The long, free verse lines of this poem signal the speaker's attempt to encompass the world with his words. Hughes repeats several phrases (“I've known rivers,” “my soul has grown deep like rivers”), to make the poem sound like an incantation, or magical spell. Some critics remark that these repetitions echo the tone and rhythm of black spirituals. Hughes became famous for his use of other African American musical forms in his poetry, particularly jazz and blues.

In addition to repeating phrases, Hughes repeats syntactic units in a catalog or list: “I've known,” “I bathed,” “I built,” “I looked,” etc. The Bible catalogs who begot whom, and who boarded the ark; the poet Virgil cataloged all the ships and heroes going into the Trojan War. Catalogs, like the technique of long lines, represent vast numbers and magnitude. In “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” the catalog of the speaker's actions testifies to his (and the race's) vast worldly experience and importance in human history.

“The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” Hughes' first published poem, introduces a theme which would recur in several other works throughout his career. Many critics have classified this group as the “heritage” poems. Amazingly, although it was composed very quickly when he was only 18 or 19, it is both polished and powerful. In fact, in *Langston Hughes: An Introduction to the Poetry*, Onwuchekwa Jemie labels it the most profound of this group.

The poem utilizes four of the world's largest and most historically prominent rivers as a metaphor to present a view, almost a timeline in miniature, of the African-American experience throughout history. The opening lines of the poem introduce the ancient and powerful cultural history of Africa and West Asia, with the mention of the Euphrates and the dawn of time. Next the Congo, mother to Central Africa, lulls the speaker, to sleep. The world's longest river, the powerful and complex Nile with its great pyramids, follows. Last, the poem moves to more recent times, with the introduction of the Mississippi. Even though the Mississippi and Congo both hold bitter connotations of the slave trade, each of the four has contributed to the depth of the speaker's soul. The poem stresses triumph over adversity as the “muddy bosom” of the

Mississippi turns golden.

The speaker clearly represents more than Langston Hughes, the individual. In fact, the “I” of the poem becomes even more than the embodiment of a racial identity. The poem describes, underlying that identity, an eternal spirit, existing before the dawn of time and present still in the twentieth century. The different sections of the poem emphasize this: the speaker actually functions on two levels. One is the human level. The first words of lines five through eight create a picture of the speaker's ancestors: bathing, building, looking, hearing. However, the poem also discusses a spiritual level where the soul of the speaker has been and continues to be enriched by the spirit of the river, even before the creation of humanity. Thus, the second and third lines of the poem develop an eternal, or cosmic, dimension in the poem.

Notes

1. In his poem, “I, Too,” Hughes both implicitly and explicitly responds to the great poet of freedom and democracy, Walt Whitman. Hughes' opening lines recalls Whitman's “I Hear America Singing,” “Still Though the One I Sing” and even *Song of Myself*. Hughes' poem suggests that he, the Negro, the “Other,” can also sing of and for America. A similar notion is at work in Hughes' famous poem, “The Negro Speaks of Rivers.” In this poem, Hughes invokes the technique and spirit of Whitman yet again in an attempt to write a lyric that carries both public and private significance. Like Whitman in “Song of Myself,” Hughes constructs a poem that not only connects the individual to the land, to particular geographical places but also to history and to a distinctive culture, making the poem, like the river itself, a vehicle by which one flows through one space into another.
2. Onwuchekwa Jemie, *Langston Hughes: An Introduction to the Poetry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976).
3. Raymond Smith, “Hughes: Evolution of the Poetic Persona”, *Langston Hughes*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1989) 45-60.
4. Arnold Rampersad, “The Origins of Poetry in Langston Hughes”, *Langston Hughes*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1989) 179-189.
5. Arnold Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes: I, Too, Sing America, Vol. I, 1902-1941* (Oxford: OUP, 2002) 468.
6. Smith. “Hughes: Evolution of the Poetic Persona”.
7. Dudley Randall, “The Black Aesthetic in the Thirties, Forties, and Fifties”, *Modern Black Poets*, ed. Donald B. Gibson (Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1973) 35.
8. Arnold Rampersad, Ed. *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, New York: Vintage, 1995, 23.
9. Langston Hughes, Milton Meltzer, and C. Eric Lincoln, “First, We Were Africans,” in *A Pictorial History of Black Americans* (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1983) 7.