

# The Negro Speaks of Rivers



## POEM TEXT

- 1 I've known rivers:
- 2 I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than  
the flow of human blood in human veins.
- 3 My soul has grown deep like the rivers.
- 4 I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.
- 5 I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.
- 6 I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.
- 7 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.
- 8 I've known rivers:
- 9 Ancient, dusky rivers.
- 10 My soul has grown deep like the rivers.



## SUMMARY

I have been familiar with a lot of rivers. I have been familiar with rivers that are as old as the planet itself, older than blood pumping through people's veins.

My soul has become very deep, just like the rivers I know.

I went swimming in the Euphrates River when human civilization was still young and even sunrises were new. I built my home near the Congo River and its murmuring waters helped me fall asleep. I saw the Nile and helped build the Pyramids on its shore. And I heard the Mississippi River sound as if it were singing, when Abraham Lincoln traveled on it to New Orleans. And I've seen the surface of that muddy river, like a person's chest, reflect the sunset, turning gold.

I've been familiar with a lot of rivers: very old, dark rivers.

My soul has become very deep, just like the rivers I know.



## 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 River*," 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 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.

#### Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-10



## LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

### LINES 1-2

*I've known rivers:*

*I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of human blood in human veins.*

The first 2 lines of "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" establish the poem's themes and its formal pattern. The poem begins with the speaker directly addressing the reader, speaking about his or her experience: "I've known rivers," the speaker claims. At first, this doesn't seem to be all that impressive or revelatory: after all, more or less everyone has seen a river. But over the course of the poem's 10 lines, the speaker's apparently unremarkable statement will transform into a bold assertion about black cultural identity and history. As the poem progresses, all three words in the poem's opening line, "I," "know," and "river," take on new, expanded meanings.

The speaker begins this transformation in the poem's second line, where he or she announces that there is something special about these rivers. The lines have a [parallel](#) construction: both

open with the [anaphoric](#) phrase "I've known rivers," which serves as a [refrain](#) for the poem. This encourages the reader to see the second line as an *expansion* of the first line. More specifically, the second line expands the reader's understanding of the "rivers." They are "ancient as the world"—in other words, as old the earth itself.

The [simile](#) (the rivers are "ancient *as* the world" suggests that the reader shouldn't focus on the rivers as *literal* bodies of water, but instead on their relationship to other things: in this case, to the history of the world. As the line progress, the speaker also measures the rivers against human life itself, noting that they are "older than the flow of human blood in human veins."

The second half of line 2 makes use of [synecdoche](#). The speaker is saying that these rivers are older than the human species, but he or she represents humans through one part of their bodies, the blood that flows in their veins. This flowing blood resembles the flowing of water in a river. In this way, the speaker suggests that human beings are like rivers, that they *contain* rivers.

The first two lines of the poem are visually arresting: the first line is short, almost terse; the next line spills across the page, a full 23 syllables long. Each of these lines is [end-stopped](#), a pattern that will hold throughout the poem (the poem contains no [enjambment](#)). The reader also notices, immediately, that the poem lacks any set [meter](#). And it also does not have a [rhyme scheme](#). Indeed, throughout the poem, the speaker avoids using [rhyme](#) almost entirely. In other words, the poem is written in [free verse](#). It thus faces a challenge: how to make the poem feel musical, feel *poetic*, in the absence of a set meter or rhyme scheme.

These lines suggest how the poem meets that challenge: using devices like parallelism and refrain to create music. It also relies heavily on [assonance](#) and [consonance](#). Line 2 contains 13 assonant and consonant sounds—it almost overflows with sonic play and pleasure. However, the speaker largely avoids [alliteration](#), perhaps because alliteration is so closely linked to European forms of poetry. Indeed, the speaker's rejection of meter and rhyme might be seen as part of a broader rejection of white poetic traditions, an attempt to develop an independent black poetic voice, that does not rely on white models to articulate black culture and identity.

### LINE 3

*My soul has grown deep like the rivers.*

Like the first 2 lines of the poem, line 3 is in [free verse](#) and [end-stopped](#); it contains little [alliteration](#), though it contains [assonant](#) and [consonant](#) sounds. Although it appears on its own here, isolated, it eventually becomes a second [refrain](#) (in addition to "I've known rivers"), repeating as the poem's last line.

Just as line 2 expands on the key word "river" in the poem's first line, now line 3 transforms the reader's understanding of another key word in the first line, the word "I." In line 3, the speaker tells the reader that the speaker's "soul" has taken on the characteristics of the rivers. It has "grown deep" like them. The speaker's soul is not simply physically deep: like the rivers the speaker "know[s]," it is also *historically* deep. Using a [simile](#) to compare the speaker's soul to the "rivers," the speaker suggests that his or her soul is as "ancient" as the rivers themselves.

In this sense, the speaker's soul begins to seem [symbolic](#). Usually a soul is something deeply personal: the very heart or essence of a person. But the speaker uses the word "soul" in a broader sense, perhaps echoing W.E.B. DuBois' classic work of sociology, *The Souls of Black Folks*. In DuBois's specific use of the term, the *soul* is not personal, but cultural. It contains the knowledge and experience of a whole culture, a whole people. Indeed, the title of the poem suggests that the speaker is less a specific person, and more a representative of a community. After all the title is "*The Negro Speaks of Rivers*," not "A Negro..." (The term *Negro* was the standard term for referring to black people at the time the poem was written and thus should not be read as offensive in this context).

The poem's speaker emerges as a representative figure, someone who has experienced all of black culture and history. The historical depth of the speaker is important and provocative. At the time of the poem's writing in the 1920s, the black community suffered from racism and violence in the North and South. Further, slavery was still in living memory for many black people. Slavery had cut off black people from their families, their cultures, their religions, and their traditions—in other words, from their own pasts. If the speaker's "soul" is "deep like the rivers" and therefore as "ancient as the world," then he or she has surmounted this trauma, finding a way to connect to something deep and resilient that survives despite the wounds inflicted by slavery. In this way, the speaker's "soul" presents a model for how to survive racism by reclaiming a black tradition that extends into the distant past.

However, line 3's suggestions about the depth of the speaker's historical experience are just that—*suggestions*. However, over the next four lines the speaker expands those suggestions with specific details. Then, when the line returns at the end of the poem, it returns as a triumphant assertion of the majesty and persistence of black culture.

## LINES 4-6

*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.*

In line 3, the speaker suggests that his "soul" is historically deep, as "ancient" as the "rivers" that he or she has "known." In lines 4-7, the speaker expands on that suggestion, showing just

how deep his or her "soul" really is. The speaker names a series of rivers, "the Euphrates," "the Congo," "the Nile," and "the Mississippi." These rivers are scattered across the globe, from the Middle East to Africa to North America. The rivers [metonymically](#) represent the societies that grew up around them, a series of historically distant human civilizations—from the earliest human settlements to the recent past. Despite the historical and geographical separation between these rivers, the speaker has direct experience of all of them. In this sense, the speaker's "soul" encompasses the whole of human history—and the whole of black history.

The speaker begins with the "Euphrates," in line 4. The Euphrates is a river in the Fertile Crescent in the Middle East, the place where agriculture and civilization were first born. The river thus stands metonymically for those early civilizations. The speaker claims to have "bathed" in this river "when dawns were young." This phrase, "when dawns were young," is complex. It uses "dawns," which represent beginnings and the passage of time, as a metonym for history itself. And it also uses [personification](#): by calling dawns "young," the speaker gives them human characteristics. All in all, this phrase places the speaker at the very beginning of history, in its youth.

The speaker then moves to the Congo, a river in west Africa and the site of a major African kingdom, the Kingdom of Kongo, which ruled over a large section of the region from around 1390 CE to 1857 CE. Once again, the river stands metonymically for that kingdom—and once again, the speaker was part of it. He or she "built my hut" along the river's banks; it "lulled" him or her "to sleep." The speaker personifies the river here—speaking as though the river were trying to soothe him or her, to help him or her sleep. The use of [assonance](#) in the line, with soft /u/ sounds in "hut" and "lulled" and long /e/ sounds in "me" and "sleep," mimics the river's soothing, murmuring sound.

Then the speaker invokes another African river, the Nile, announcing that he or she "raised the pyramids above it." This is an [allusion](#) to the famous pyramids that the Egyptians built alongside the Nile, magnificent accomplishments of human engineering and creativity. Notably, the pyramids were built long before the Kingdom of Kongo. Thus, the speaker is not moving from the ancient past to present in a straight line, but moving around in history as it suits the speaker's purposes. Yet the poem binds together these separate historical experiences with [anaphora](#) and [parallelism](#). Each line begins with the word "I," followed by a verb, "bathed," "built," "looked." The parallel sentence structure, the repeated "I," links these separate historical experiences together, emphasizing their connections and continuity, rather than the distance between them.

## LINE 7

*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.*

The first three rivers that the speaker mentions follow a pattern. They attest to the majesty of black culture, which is capable of building wondrous monuments and powerful kingdoms. They also attest to the presence of black people at key moments in history, like the founding of civilization—even though Western historical narratives often ignore their contributions. With these rivers, the poem presents black culture as a source of pride. Yet with the final river the poem mentions, the Mississippi, it turns to the traumas that black people have suffered across history.

The Mississippi is the largest river in North America, and it was a key waterway for slave plantations in the American south. Plantation owners used the river to ship goods like cotton and tobacco to markets in New Orleans, at the mouth of the Mississippi. The river thus serves as a [metonym](#) for American slavery—an institution that tore apart black families and cultures, separating enslaved people from their traditions, religions, and homes. Once again, the speaker has direct experience of this: the speaker notes that he or she “heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln went down to New Orleans.” This is an [allusion](#) to a famous trip that Lincoln, the future President of the United States, took as a young man—a trip that exposed him to the violence and cruelty of slavery and hardened his resolve to become an [abolitionist](#). In this way, the river also serves as a metonym for the end of slavery, since Lincoln himself freed the slaves with Emancipation Proclamation.

In the final half of line 7, the speaker moves from this recent history into the present: “I’ve seen its muddy bosom turn all golden in the sunset.” The line [personifies](#) the river, giving it a “bosom,” or chest. The river thus seems a comforting, even maternal presence, much like the Congo which “lull[s]” the speaker to sleep in line 5. The use of [alliteration](#) and [consonance](#) in the line reinforces this personification. An /m/ sound binds together “Mississippi,” “muddy,” and “bosom.” This is the only moment in lines 4-7 that isn’t tied to a specific historical event or civilization. Instead, it seems to come from the speaker’s present moment or recent past. It thus suggests that the speaker’s experience runs all the way from the start of human civilization into the present.

Line 7 also continues the pattern begun in lines 4-6: it starts with the word “I,” followed by a verb, “heard.” The [anaphora](#) and [parallelism](#) that bound those lines together also binds line 7. This is perhaps surprising: lines 4-6 describe the triumphs of black history, while line 7 describes its greatest trauma, slavery. Yet the speaker *doesn’t* switch up the poem’s form when the history it describes switches from magnificent to terrible. In this way, the speaker suggests that black identity encompasses both the triumphs and the traumas of black history. Furthermore the speaker also seems to imply that black identity should not be defined exclusively by those things. It involves moments as simple as watching the sunset reflected

on the water.

## LINES 8-10

*I’ve known rivers:  
Ancient, dusky rivers.  
My soul has grown deep like the rivers.*

In lines 8-10, the speaker returns to the opening lines of the poem, repeating them almost exactly. Indeed, lines 8 and 10 copy lines 1 (“I’ve known rivers”) and 3 (“My soul has grown deep like rivers”) to the letter. These lines thus serve as [refrains](#) for the poem, helping to organize it musically in the absence of a set [meter](#) or [rhyme scheme](#). But the refrain has subtly changed in meaning between the first time it appears, in lines 1-3, and at the end of the poem, in lines 8-10. The “I” is much grander than the reader initially expects. After reading about the speaker’s many historical experiences, the reader has come to know that the “I” isn’t simply a single person’s experience, but a whole culture’s.

The speaker’s knowledge is also much more impressive than one might initially expect. It includes intimate, first-hand knowledge that stretches from the present into the deepest reaches of human history. When the speaker says in the poem’s final line that his or her “soul” has “grown deep like the rivers,” the reader knows just how deep that soul is.

The speaker thus serves as a representative figure. He or she models an ideal relationship between the black community and its own history—including both its triumphs and its traumas. But for a poem specifically trying to work against racism, its ideals only become meaningful if they can be used by real people, in everyday life. The refrain suggests one way this might be the case. A deep knowledge of black history allows black people to look beyond the present, with its virulent racism, and acquire a deeper sense of possibility and identity—which in turn will help them weather the racism they face.

In its closing lines, the poem follows the formal pattern it had established earlier: it remains unrhymed and unmetred, relying on other devices, like [assonance](#), to generate its own particular sonic pleasure. In this sense, the poem works hard to find a poetic form specific to the speaker’s knowledge, a form that does not simply repeat white forms. Instead, the form uniquely expresses the black cultural identity that the poem celebrates.



## SYMBOLS



### RIVERS

When the speaker of “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” first mentions rivers in the poem’s opening line, they seem like literal things, actual bodies of waters. However, as the poem progresses, the rivers gradually accumulate symbolic

weight. Sure, they are real rivers, but they also stand in [metonymically](#) for the cultures that have risen and fallen on their banks—from the ancient Sumerian culture that flourished along the Euphrates to the slave culture of the American south. In this sense, each individual river the poem mentions serves as a symbol or a metonym for those cultures.

More broadly, the rivers themselves come to serve as symbols for human history. This symbolism reveals important things about the speaker's understanding of that history. Rivers are continuous and unbroken: they cannot be chopped up into discrete parts. The speaker understands history in similar terms—as a continuous experience that stretches from the distant past into the present. In turn, this means that black identity is not defined by the traumas it has suffered under slavery, [Jim Crow](#) laws, and American racism. Instead, black identity stretches across these traumas into the distant past, to cultures and traditions that the slave trade interrupted. As symbols, the "rivers" thus present a fundamentally hopeful view of black culture. It is strong and powerful enough to survive the traumas of slavery, connecting black people to a past they might otherwise have irreparably lost.

#### Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "rivers"
- **Line 2:** "rivers"
- **Line 3:** "rivers"
- **Line 8:** "rivers"
- **Line 9:** "rivers"
- **Line 10:** "rivers"



#### HUMAN BLOOD IN HUMAN VEINS

In line 2, the speaker describes the "rivers" that he or she has "known" as "older than the flow of human blood in human veins." In this case, the "blood" serves as a symbol or [synecdoche](#) for human beings themselves. In other words, the speaker is saying that the rivers are older than humans as a species. The symbol raises an interesting possibility, which complicates the way the poem talks about the rivers. Elsewhere in the poem, rivers serve as [metonyms](#) for particular human cultures. More broadly, they symbolize human history itself. But here the speaker suggests that the rivers should not be simply or exclusively associated with human culture: they exist beyond, before, and outside human beings. As a symbol, then, "human blood in human veins" indicates the limits of humanity. It suggests that the things the poem describes have an existence beyond their participation in human culture. In turn, this seems to grant the speaker a sense of wisdom and peace, causing his or her soul to "grow[] deep."

#### Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "human blood in human veins"



#### THE SOUL

In lines 3 and 10, the speaker claims that his or her "soul has grown deep like the rivers." In a sense, this is the poem's key claim. It suggests that the speaker has internalized the deep history and experience that the rivers embody, a history that stretches all the way to the dawn of human civilization. The speaker's soul thus takes on unusual characteristics. In Christianity, a soul is the part of a person that survives after death: it is the thing that God judges, either raising it into Heaven or casting it down into Hell. In other words, it's a private, personal thing, the very essence of a human being. It's marked by the course of that person's life, the good and bad that they have done.

But the speaker's soul in "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" seems much grander and broader than that. It encompasses not only the speaker's individual life, but the whole history of black culture. In this sense, the speaker's use of the word "soul" echoes how it was used by the black sociologist W. E. B. DuBois, in his 1903 classic *The Souls of Black Folk*. For DuBois, the *soul* is not a personal possession. Instead, it is a symbol of black culture more broadly, the spirit and essence of the people. The speaker's use of the word "soul" in lines 3 and 10 thus serves not only as a reference to his or her personal experience; it also represents the experience and identity of the speaker's culture. In other words, it serves as a symbol of that culture.

#### Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "soul"
- **Line 10:** "soul"



## POETIC DEVICES

### END-STOPPED LINE

"The Negro Speaks of Rivers" is a highly [end-stopped](#) poem: indeed, it contains no [enjambments](#). This would be unusual for any poem, since almost all poems contain at least a few enjambments—but it is especially unusual for a poem written in [free verse](#), that is, a poem that doesn't have [meter](#) or a [rhyme scheme](#).

Free verse poems usually rely on enjambment to create surprise and [rhythm](#). However, the speaker of "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" is not particularly interested in that kind of surprise. Instead, the poem dramatizes the speaker's deep, continuous knowledge of black life and culture, stretching back to the beginning of human history. There is no need for surprise or uncertainty here because the speaker already knows

everything he or she needs to know. The poem's end-stops thus contribute to the sense that the speaker is self-assured, confident in his or her experience and knowledge.

Further, the speaker finds ways to make the end-stops themselves contribute to the poem's rhythm. Five of the poem's ten lines end with the word "rivers." This creates a chiming music, to which the poem returns again and again as it moves through its long, discursive lines. The river becomes a point of rest and assurance, something that grounds the poem's rhythm. In much the same way, the rivers that the speaker describes also ground his or her historical experience: because they are continuous, flowing, and consistent, they model the speaker's deep knowledge of black life and history.

The poem's use of end-stop thus helps create a sense of music and rhythm in the absence of meter and [rhyme](#). At the same time, it reinforces the speaker's sense of confidence and self-assurance.

#### Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "rivers:"
- **Line 2:** "veins."
- **Line 3:** "rivers."
- **Line 4:** "young."
- **Line 5:** "sleep."
- **Line 6:** "it."
- **Line 7:** "sunset."
- **Line 8:** "rivers:"
- **Line 9:** "rivers."
- **Line 10:** "rivers."

## REFRAIN

Poets like Langston Hughes, writing in [free verse](#) in the early years of the 20th century, faced a unique poetic challenge. Since poems in [meter](#) and [rhyme](#) had dominated English poetry for so long—seven hundred years, give or take—poets needed to figure out how to make their poems feel *poetic* without using those devices. Poets were only just starting to figure that out when Hughes wrote "The Negro Speaks of Rivers"—and his poem is an important contribution to that broader project. Hughes employs a number of devices to give his poem a sense of rhythm and musicality—perhaps most notably, [refrain](#).

"The Negro Speaks of River" contains two refrains, "I've known rivers," which appears in lines 1, 2, and 8, and "My soul has grown deep like the rivers," which appears in lines 3 and 10. These refrains bracket the poem's central [stanza](#) (lines 4-7), in which the speaker outlines the depth and breadth of his or her historical knowledge, which stretches from the beginning of human civilization to the recent past. The refrains thus supply a kind of musical framing for the poem's key assertions, a framing which helps the poem feel *poetic*.

But the refrains also register the poem's argument. When they

first appear, the refrains merely hint at the depth of knowledge and experience that lines 4-7 reveal. When the reader first hears "I've known rivers"—and even "I've known rivers ancient as the world..."—her or she probably doesn't imagine that the speaker has first-hand knowledge of the very opening stages of human civilization. The speaker's "I" still seems flat and unremarkable, just like anyone else's. When the refrains return after lines 4-7, however, their content has fundamentally changed. Apparently innocent words, like "I" and "know" take on new meanings. The speaker's "I" has acquired depth, and his or her knowledge has too, both stretching past the usual boundaries of human experience.

In this way, the refrains model the broader dynamics of the speaker's knowledge and status in the poem. The speaker serves as a representative figure, modeling an ideal relationship between the black community and its own troubled, exalted history. But the speaker is also an actual person. After all, the poem's ideals are of no use if they can't be embodied by real people, in everyday life. That is, the model that the poem presents must actually help the black community reframe its relationship with its own history. The poem suggests that a deep knowledge of black history will allow black people to surmount the boundaries of the present, and acquire a greater sense of possibility and identity. In the expansion of words like "I" and "know" that occurs as the refrains repeat, the poem models this deepening sense of identity and possibility.

#### Where Refrain appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "I've known rivers:"
- **Line 2:** "I've known rivers"
- **Line 3:** "My soul has grown deep like the rivers."
- **Line 8:** "I've known rivers:"
- **Line 10:** "My soul has grown deep like the rivers."

## ANAPHORA

Alongside its use of [refrain](#), "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" turns to [anaphora](#) to give the poem a sense of rhythm and music. This is a pressing challenge for the poem, since it's written in [free verse](#), and therefore lacks the scaffolding that [meter](#) and [rhyme](#) provide. It has to find its own music, to invent its own [rhythm](#). Following the example of earlier free verse writers, like Walt Whitman, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," finds anaphora to be particularly useful in creating its own rhythm—and one can find instances of anaphora in most of the poem's lines. For instance, the poem opens with an anaphoric repetition of the phrase "I've known rivers." (Here anaphora and refrain coincide. The repetition of the phrase "I've known rivers" in line 8 is arguably also anaphoric—though it's far enough away from the first two instances of the phrase that it probably doesn't register as such).

Then, in lines 4-7, the speaker uses a series of [parallel](#) phrases:

“I bathed,” “I built,” “I looked,” and “I heard.” The repetition of “I” at the start of these phrases is anaphoric. This anaphora is important to the poem’s argument. It binds together the four separate statements that make up lines 4-7. In doing so, it suggests that—although they describe very different historical moments, in very different parts of the world—the speaker’s experience of them is continuous, bound together by a stable “I.” The anaphora underlines the connection the speaker hopes to build between past and present, which cuts across the traumas and dislocations of slavery. In this way, anaphora not only helps the poem find its own, distinctive music—it also underlines the poem’s argument.

#### Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “I’ve known rivers”
- **Line 2:** “I’ve known rivers”
- **Line 4:** “I”
- **Line 5:** “I”
- **Line 6:** “I”
- **Line 7:** “I”

## PARALLELISM

“The Negro Speaks of Rivers” relies heavily on [parallelism](#). Indeed, one can find examples of it in almost every line of the poem. Usually, the poem’s use of parallelism underlies other devices. For example, the repeated phrase “I’ve known rivers” creates a series of parallel sentences, in lines 1, 2, and 8. These parallel phrases also serve as a [refrain](#) for the poem, providing it with a musical structure.

Similarly, the parallel phrases that appear in lines 4-7, “I bathed,” “I built,” “I looked,” and “I heard,” also generate [anaphora](#), with the repeated “I” at the start of each line. In this sense, parallelism is the structure—the underlying architecture—that supports the poem’s use of anaphora and refrain. Since these devices are key to establishing the poem’s [rhythm](#) and musicality in the absence of set [meter](#) or [rhyme scheme](#), parallelism is also key to making the poem feel *poetic*.

Parallelism does appear on its own in the poem, for example in the phrase “and I’ve seen its muddy bosom...” in line 7. Since this appears in the middle of the line, it is not technically anaphoric—though it does repeat the pattern established by anaphora in the start of lines 4-7. This is a special moment in the poem, since it’s the only one that might occur in the present. In other words, it’s not bound to a specific historical civilization or cultural accomplishment.

The use of parallelism, however, does link this potentially present moment to the other time periods that the [stanza](#) describes, from the birth of human civilization to slavery. It suggests that the past is linked to the present, so that all periods of time are somehow present to the speaker.

#### Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “I’ve known rivers”
- **Line 2:** “I’ve known rivers,” “human blood in human veins”
- **Line 3:** “My soul has grown deep like the rivers”
- **Line 4:** “I bathed”
- **Line 5:** “I built”
- **Line 6:** “I looked”
- **Line 7:** “I heard,” “I’ve seen”
- **Line 8:** “I’ve known rivers”
- **Line 10:** “My soul has grown deep like the rivers”

## ALLITERATION

“The Negro Speaks of River” does not make extensive use of [alliteration](#)—and much of the alliteration that it does employ appears because of its repetitions and [refrains](#). For example, in the poem’s first [stanza](#), there is alliteration of the /h/ sound, but this appears simply because the speaker repeats the word “human.” The other alliterations that appear in the stanza are incidental, with particles like “as” or “of” alliterating with other words in the stanza. Since those words are not important to the line or the poem, the alliterations they contain do not generate meaning.

After the poem’s first stanza, alliteration almost entirely disappears from the poem: there is very little alliteration in the poem from line 3 until its end. The question will be, then, why the poem so studiously avoids the use of alliteration—since alliteration is present in almost all English poetry.

Though there is no definite answer to this question, it may have to do with the history of alliteration. Alliteration is central to English poetry: indeed, it was the key formal aspect of the poetry written in England in Anglo-Saxon times (roughly, 700 CE-1066 CE). It is deeply associated with the white, European poetic tradition. In refusing to use alliteration, the poem breaks from free from this tradition—and begins to establish an independent poetic voice, with its own formal characteristics.

#### Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** “a,” “a,” “a,” “o,” “th,” “th,” “o,” “h,” “h”
- **Line 4:** “wh,” “w”
- **Line 7:** “w,” “w”

## ASSONANCE

Compared to its very light use of [alliteration](#), “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” contains a lot of [assonance](#). For example, the poem’s second line contains assonant /o/, /a/, and /u/ sounds. And, unlike the poem’s sparse alliterations, many of these sounds do not emerge from the poem’s refrains and repetitions. Though the assonant long /u/ sound at the end of line 2 comes from the poem’s repetition of the word “human,” the /o/ sounds that also appear in the line bind together a

number of discrete words: “known,” “older,” and “flow.”

Similarly, the many assonant sounds in lines 4-7 keep the poem feeling musical and sonically pleasing, even in the absence of much alliteration. In line 5, the assonant short /uh/ sounds in “hut” and “lulled” and the long /e/ sounds in “me” and “sleep” mimic the musical sound of the river itself, the way its murmuring waters help the speaker drift off to sleep. Assonance is thus one among many devices—including [anaphora](#), [refrain](#), and [parallelism](#)—that the poet uses to create the poem’s own music, in the absence of structuring devices like meter and rhyme. As it does so, it reinforces the poem’s similes and its broader argument.

#### Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** “o,” “a,” “a,” “o,” “a,” “o,” “a,” “o,” “o,” “u,” “a,” “oo,” “u,” “a”
- **Line 3:** “ou,” “o”
- **Line 4:** “a,” “a”
- **Line 5:** “u,” “ea,” “u,” “e,” “ee”
- **Line 6:** “l,” “l”
- **Line 7:** “l,” “l,” “l,” “l,” “l,” “ea,” “ee,” “y,” “o,” “o,” “o,” “u”
- **Line 10:** “ou,” “o”

## CONSONANCE

Alongside its widespread use of [assonance](#), “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” also uses a lot of [consonance](#). For example, alongside the assonant /i/, /o/, /a/, and /u/ sounds in line 2, the line also contains consonant /n/, /r/, /s/, /l/, /d/, /w/, /h/, /m/ and /n/ sounds. The result is a line almost overflowing with assonance and consonance: a deeply pleasurable, deeply musical line of poetry. However, almost none of this sonic pleasure comes from [alliteration](#). The poem manages to achieve its musical pleasure by relying on the letters *within* words. As a result, the poem’s music is subtle, quiet: it doesn’t show off, doesn’t insist that the reader notice its musical sophistication.

The poem’s consonance also subtly reinforces its arguments. For example, in line 7, there is a consonant /m/ sound in “Mississippi,” “muddy,” and “bosom.” The consonance links the river to the way it looks: the Mississippi is a muddy river. But it also links the river’s physical characteristic to the [metaphor](#) that the speaker uses to describe it, calling it a “bosom,” as though the river had a chest. The metaphor [personifies](#) the river, turning it into a human body. But the use of consonance suggests that this personification is not inappropriate. An underlying sonic connection binds the river to the body it turns into. In this sense, the use of consonance reinforces the poem’s broader contention: that the black historical experience has all the depth, majesty, and continuity of a mighty river, emphasizing the links between human bodies and rivers.

#### Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “v,” “kn,” “n,” “r,” “v,” “r,” “s”
- **Line 2:** “v,” “kn,” “n,” “r,” “v,” “r,” “s,” “n,” “n,” “s,” “w,” “ld,” “n,” “d,” “ld,” “r,” “n,” “l,” “w,” “h,” “m,” “n,” “l,” “d,” “n,” “h,” “m,” “n,” “n,” “s”
- **Line 3:** “r,” “r,” “r”
- **Line 4:** “th,” “th,” “wh,” “n,” “w,” “n,” “w”
- **Line 5:** “t,” “t,” “l,” “ll,” “t,” “l,” “p”
- **Line 6:** “l,” “p,” “n,” “N,” “l,” “n,” “d,” “r,” “s,” “d,” “p,” “s”
- **Line 7:** “s,” “M,” “ss,” “ss,” “w,” “n,” “w,” “n,” “w,” “n,” “N,” “w,” “n,” “n,” “s,” “n,” “m,” “dd,” “s,” “m,” “n,” “ll,” “l,” “d,” “n,” “n,” “s,” “n,” “s”
- **Line 8:** “v,” “kn,” “n,” “r,” “v,” “r,” “s”
- **Line 9:** “n,” “n,” “s,” “r,” “r,” “s”
- **Line 10:** “r,” “r,” “r”

## ALLUSION

In lines 4-7, “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” [alludes](#) to several historical events and civilizations. These allusions stretch across the whole course of human history and much of the Earth’s geography. In line 4, the speaker mentions the “Euphrates,” a river in the middle east. The Euphrates was part of the so-called Fertile Crescent, an area of the middle east where agriculture—and with it, human civilization—began. The allusion thus places the speaker at the very beginning of human society. It suggests that black culture is at least as old as human society itself—and that black people deserve credit for the creation of civilization.

In the next line, the speaker describes living alongside the “Congo” river. The Congo is a major river in Africa—and it was the site of an important African kingdom, the Kingdom of Kongo. The river thus stands, [metonymically](#), for that kingdom. In alluding to it, the speaker emphasizes that black people are more than capable of governing themselves, of holding political power—in fact, they have built kingdoms that equal the greatest European kingdoms in majesty. The force of this allusion carries into the next line, where the speaker claims that he or she “raised”—built—the famous Egyptian pyramids along the bank of the Nile. This allusion to the magnificent structures of the Egyptians once again emphasizes the power of black culture, claiming authorship over some of the most impressive buildings humans have ever built.

However, for the speaker, black history is not simply one of triumph and accomplishment—it also encompasses the violence, trauma, and dislocation of American slavery. The speaker alludes to this history in line 7, when he or she claims, “I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln went down to New Orleans.” This is an allusion to a trip Abraham Lincoln, the 16th President of the United States, took down the Mississippi as a young man—a trip that exposed him to slavery and turned him into an abolitionist, someone dedicated to ending slavery. In alluding to this trip, the speaker also invokes the horrors of slavery, and with it the racism and violence that black people have faced in the United States.

In combination, these four allusions thus portray black history in its full complexity and depth, stressing its majesty and its traumas, its historical depth and its recent contours. In this way, the speaker urges the black community to draw its identity from its full history, building an identity that includes slavery and racism, but is not limited to such traumas.

#### Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** “I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young”
- **Line 5:** “I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep”
- **Line 6:** “I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it”
- **Line 7:** “I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln went down to New Orleans”

## PERSONIFICATION

As the speaker describes a series of rivers—rivers like the Euphrates, the Congo, and the Mississippi, which are closely linked to the history of black culture—he or she often [personifies](#) them. For instance, in line 7, the speaker describes the Mississippi as having “muddy bosom”—as though the river were a human body with a chest.

Similarly, in line 5, the speaker describes the Congo “lulling” him or her to sleep, as though it had agency and were actively trying to soothe the speaker, to help him or her sleep. These instances of personification suggest that the speaker has an intimate relationship with the rivers he or she describes: they are welcoming, soft, comforting. The rivers’ capacity for violence and destruction—as, for example, with flooding—does not enter into the speaker’s characterization of them. At the same time, these instances of personification lend support to the speaker’s [similes](#), which compare the rivers to his or her “soul.”

In line 4, the speaker also personifies “dawns,” describing them as “young”—suggesting that dawns will age like a human being, passing through several life stages, before finally dying. The personification is part of another poetic device: [metonymy](#). The “dawns” stand in metonymically for human history. That they are “young” indicates the speaker is right at the start of that history. In order for the metonymy to work, the speaker must personify the “dawns.” Because they’re described as young—placing them in the trajectory of a human life—the reader understands that they refer to a particular moment in human history.

#### Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** “dawns were young”
- **Line 5:** “it lulled me to sleep”
- **Line 7:** “its muddy bosom”

## METONYMY

At the center of “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” the speaker invokes a series of powerful, important rivers—rivers which have been at the center of human civilization throughout its history. The speaker insists on his or her first-hand experience: “I bathed in the Euphrates,” the speaker claims in line 4. This insistence suggests that the speaker regards these rivers as literal places; that he or she is interested in them as actual bodies of water.

At the same time, the speaker uses the rivers as [metonyms](#) for the cultures that grew along their banks. “The Euphrates” in line 4 is not simply a real river in the Middle East; it also the cradle of human society, the place where agriculture and civilization first developed. The river stands metonymically for that early culture. Similarly, the “Congo” in line 5 stands metonymically for the Kingdom of Kongo, which lay on the south banks of the Congo River for more than 500 years, from around 1390 to 1857. And the “Nile” in line 6 stands for the Egyptian civilization that flourished along its banks and constructed marvels of engineering, like the Great Pyramids at Giza.

These metonyms thus follow a pattern: through the association between a river and a culture, they introduce the reader to a triumphant moment in the history of black life. In doing so, they suggest that black people were key contributors to the history of civilization—despite the fact that their contributions have been written out of Western historical narratives.

The metonymy the speaker introduces in line 7 follows a different pattern. Here, the “Mississippi” stands in for trauma and violence, rather than triumph: it represents the history of American slavery, which removed millions of people from their homes in Africa, severing them from their languages, religions, and traditions. “Abe Lincoln” later in the line also stands metonymically for emancipation from slavery, with the Emancipation Proclamation, which he signed in 1863.

The stanza contains one more metonym, which does not make reference to a river. It occurs in line 4, when the speaker claims that he or she “bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.” Here, “dawns” (an element of daytime, and thus of time itself) stand in metonymically for human history. [Personifying](#) these “dawns,” the speaker notes that they are “young”—in other words, that human history is just getting underway.

#### Where Metonymy appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** “the Euphrates,” “when dawns were young”
- **Line 5:** “the Congo”
- **Line 6:** “the Nile”
- **Line 7:** “the Mississippi,” “Abe Lincoln”

## SIMILE

“The Negro Speaks of Rivers” contains two [similes](#), both of which (appropriately enough) have to do with rivers themselves. In line 2, the speaker notes, “I’ve known rivers ancient as the world.” Then in lines 3 and 10, the speaker claims, “My soul has grown deep like the rivers.” The poem’s similes thus follow a pattern. In each case, the speaker takes the “rivers” at the heart of the poem and compares them to something else—the world, the speaker’s “soul.” The similes suggest that the reader should focus less on the rivers as literal bodies of water, and more on their capacity to register human history, to express the condition of the speaker’s “soul.”

Indeed, it is striking that the rivers are capable of doing both things at once: they can serve as images of human history in general and the condition of a specific human being’s soul. Of course, this duality is at the center of the poem’s argument: in lines 4-7, the speaker insists that he or she, as a specific person, has direct experience of black life going back to the very start of human history. If the speaker’s “soul has grown deep like the rivers,” this is because the speaker’s soul has absorbed the full history that the rivers themselves have incorporated. In other words, the poem’s similes suggest not only the age of the rivers in question; they also reinforce the depth of the speaker’s own historical experience.

## Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** “ancient as the world”
- **Line 3:** “My soul has grown deep like the rivers”
- **Line 10:** “My soul has grown deep like the rivers”

## SYNECDOCHE

In line 2, the speaker claims that the “rivers” which the poem describes are “older than the flow of human blood in human veins.” This is an instance of [synecdoche](#). “Human blood” and “human veins” represent humanity itself. In other words, the speaker is telling the reader that the rivers are older than human beings themselves; they not only predate human civilization, they are older than the species itself. This is a strange moment for the poem, since it suggests that the rivers are not simply [metonyms](#) for human cultures (as the speaker suggests in lines 4-7). They predate human beings and have an existence beyond human culture and civilization. The speaker does not return to this point: elsewhere in the poem, he or she discusses the rivers exclusively in relation to human culture. The moment thus resonates, unresolved. It suggests that there is something grand, calm, and permanent outside the trauma and triumph of human culture.

This synecdoche is suggestive in another sense: it’s striking that, in a poem about rivers, the speaker chooses to represent humanity through the movement of blood through veins. The speaker sees the flow of blood as similar to the flow of rivers:

both, after all, are a liquid motion, following the same physical laws. The speaker in this way suggests that the human body is full of its own rivers. Taken as a whole, this synecdoche represents a kind of wisdom on the part of the speaker, who is capable of seeing the connection between human history and the large time scales of the natural world.

## Where Synecdoche appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** “human blood in human veins”



## VOCABULARY

**Ancient** (Line 2) - Very old, prehistoric.

**Deep** (Line 3, Line 10) - Possessing literal and metaphorical depth. The river is many feet deep; the speaker’s soul similarly goes far down, deep into human history.

**Euphrates** (Line 4) - A river in the Middle East. Human agriculture and civilization first developed alongside the banks of the Euphrates.

**Congo** (Line 5) - A river in central Africa. A major African kingdom, the kingdom of Kongo, was located on its southern banks.

**Lulled** (Line 5) - Calmed or quieted. In this case, the soft murmuring of the river’s waters helps the speaker fall asleep.

**Nile** (Line 6) - The longest river in Africa and the center of Egyptian civilization. The many Pyramids and sculptures for which the Egyptians are famous were built along its banks.

**Raised** (Line 6) - Built, constructed, or erected.

**Pyramids** (Line 6) - Between 2700 and 1700 BCE the Egyptians built a series of enormous pyramids on the banks of the Nile River. They served as burial sites for important people, usually their Pharaohs or Kings. Their four outer surfaces are triangles that converge, forming a point at the top. For much of human history, the pyramids were the largest—and most magnificent—manmade structures in existence. Even in the modern age, they remain testaments to the immense ingenuity and creativity of ancient peoples.

**Mississippi** (Line 7) - The longest and most important river in North America. During the period of American slavery, it was used to ship cotton and other goods from plantations across the South to markets in New Orleans.

**Abe Lincoln** (Line 7) - Abraham Lincoln, the 16th president of the United States, who led the Union through the Civil War. He emancipated the slaves with the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863. “Abe” and “Honest Abe” were his nicknames.

**Bosom** (Line 7) - Chest. A [personification](#) or [metaphor](#) for the river’s surface, which is broad like a human chest.

**Dusky** (Line 9) - Dark or murky. The word was often used in

literature (and racist discourse) to refer to black people themselves.



## FORM, METER, & RHYME

### FORM

"The Negro Speaks of Rivers" is written in [free verse](#), which means that it has no set [rhyme scheme](#) or [metrical](#) pattern. Sometimes its lines are very short; sometimes they are very long. For instance, the first line of the poem, "I've known rivers" contains just four syllables, while the second line has twenty-three. As a result, the poem's lines move like a river's current: sometimes full of energy and rushing forward, sometimes running slowly and softly.

Hughes also experiments with the length of its five [stanzas](#). Stanzas 2 and 5 are only a single line, while the poem's third and central stanza extends to four lines. Stanzas 1 and 4, which employ the [refrain](#) "I've known rivers," have two lines. This pattern creates a kind of structural symmetry, much as in a [blues](#) song. In general, the poem's flowing, variable, free verse lines allow Hughes to find a poetic expression of the historical complexity of the black experience.

Throughout his career, Langston Hughes sought to find literary forms capable of expressing the depth and complexity of black experience. He often experimented with the blues, translating the musical genre into poetry. "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" should be understood as part of this sustained attempt to develop black literary forms. It rejects white European poetic traditions as incapable of expressing black experience. Instead, its closest literary relative is the American poet Walt Whitman's experiments with free verse in poems like "[I Hear America Singing](#)." However, Hughes's free verse is even more flexible than Whitman's: its juxtapositions between very long and very short lines is more radical than Whitman's consistently long lines.

### METER

"The Negro Speaks of Rivers" does not have a set [meter](#). Instead, it is written in [free-verse](#). As a result the pattern of stresses with each line varies organically. For instance, the first line contains two stresses, an [iamb](#) (a duh DUH [rhythm](#)) and a [trochee](#) (a DUH duh rhythm):

I've known | rivers

It's also entirely possible to scan that first foot as a spondee (stressed-stressed):

I've known | rivers

The next line begins with the same rhythm, but then diverges

from it, sometimes falling into an iambic rhythm, then falling out of it:

I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than  
the flow of human blood in human veins.

In the absence of a set meter, the poem's rhythms flow like a river: sometimes accelerating and finding a groove, sometimes slowing down, becoming languorous and luxurious. It's possible to see such an effect in the way line 2 swoops through a series of unstressed syllables ("ancient | as the world"), before falling into a groove of iambs ("and old- | er than | the flow"). In this way, the poem not only describes rivers, it imitates their distinctive rhythms, the way they flow.

Since the meter (such as iambic [pentameter](#)) usually used in English poetry is a white, European form, rejecting meter allows the poem to develop an independent set of poetic resources that reflect black cultural traditions. However, just because the poem doesn't have an established meter doesn't mean that it lacks music. In the place of meter, Hughes uses a raft of poetic devices to give the poem a feel of rhythm and music, such as [refrain](#), [parallelism](#), and [anaphora](#) (among others). These devices allow the poem to develop its own music, its own rhythm—which emerges from its specific language, rather than a pre-established metrical scheme.

### RHYME SCHEME

"The Negro Speaks of River" does not have a [rhyme scheme](#): it is written in [free verse](#), a poetic form that avoids using [meter](#) and rhyme in a regular way. But this poem goes farther than many free verse poems. Many such poems use rhyme casually, occasionally, to underscore important points. ("[The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock](#)" is a good example: it contains rhyming [couplets](#), which serve as a [refrain](#) for the poem). By contrast, "The Negro Speaks of River" contains almost no rhyme. There are a few occasional [internal slant rhymes](#), like "rivers" and "older" in line 2 and "me" and "sleep" in line 5. There's just one end-rhyme in the poem, "above it" and "sunset" in lines 6-7, and it's a barely perceptible slant rhyme.

The poem arguably rejects rhyme so thoroughly because rhyme is often associated with the European tradition of poetry. In fact, the rise of rhyme's popularity historically coincided with European colonialism and the slave trade. In rejecting rhyme, the speaker rejects a specific period of European culture, a period in which European countries did horrifying violence to black traditions and communities. The poem works hard to develop its own music, a music independent from this European tradition, turning instead to devices like [anaphora](#), [parallelism](#), and [refrain](#).



## SPEAKER

The speaker of "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" is presented as a representative figure: the poem's title, after all, is "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" rather than "A Negro..." The speaker is a model for the black community. The speaker shows how that community can or should relate to its own history, its traumas, and its triumphs. The speaker's relationship to that history is deep and continuous. He or she was present for the earliest moments of human history, bathing in "the Euphrates"—a river in the Fertile Crescent, where human civilization began—"when dawns were young." But the speaker also heard "the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln went down to New Orleans," a reference to a trip that future President Lincoln took as a young man, which exposed him to the evils of slavery. The speaker's experience comprehends the very ancient and the very recent. Further, it includes the triumphs of black culture, like the construction of the pyramids, alongside its greatest trauma, slavery.

The speaker's experience suggests several things at once. First, that black people have been key participants in human civilization, and that their contributions should not be ignored. Second, that black culture is strong and resilient—resilient enough to overcome the traumas of slavery, which cut off black people from their families, traditions, and countries. As a representative figure, then, the speaker suggests that the black community should take pride in this vibrancy and resilience, turning to its history as a source of identity in the face of racism.



## SETTING

Over the course of 10 lines, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" moves across the whole breadth of human history and much of the Earth's geography. The speaker's earliest experiences take place alongside the Euphrates, a river in the Fertile Crescent, where human civilization began. The speaker "bathed" in the river "when dawns were young." His or her most recent experiences take place across an ocean and several millennia later, on the Mississippi, where the speaker hears the river's "singing" as Abe Lincoln travels down it. In between, the speaker makes pit stops at the Nile and the Congo rivers in Africa. These are sites of major black cultural accomplishments: the construction of the pyramids and the Kingdom of Kongo, an African kingdom.

The poem's setting is thus as broad as human history itself, stretching from its very earliest moments to its recent past. And its setting is as wide as black people's presence across the globe: from the Middle East, to Africa, to the Americas. This broad variety of times and places becomes part of the poem's point: that black culture is vibrant, continuous, and

accomplished. The speaker thinks that black people should take pride in this, and that white historians should not ignore or disparage it.



## CONTEXT

### LITERARY CONTEXT

Langston Hughes wrote "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" when he was only 17. According to legend—a legend that Hughes promoted—he was taking a train from St. Louis to Mexico City to visit his father. When the train crossed the Mississippi, inspiration struck and the poem poured out. Whether the story is true or not, the poem quickly became one of the most famous documents from the Harlem Renaissance, a literary movement that flourished in the 1920s in Harlem, a neighborhood in upper Manhattan. In the Harlem Renaissance, black artists, writers, and intellectuals developed distinctively black literary and artistic forms. The literature of the Harlem Renaissance celebrates black life, black traditions, and protests the virulent racism of the 1920s. Its key literary figures include Hughes, [Claude McKay](#), and [Zora Neale Hurston](#).

In articulating black experience in "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," Hughes rejects many of the central traditions of English poetry, like meter and rhyme. Those traditions are often associated with white Europeans. Instead, the poem tries to develop a distinctly black literary voice to express the distinctiveness of black culture. This would be a lifelong project for Hughes; he would experiment with a number of forms—including African-American musical forms like the blues. Here he draws on the [free verse](#) developed in the 19th century by the American poet [Walt Whitman](#). Yet Hughes' take on free verse is arguably even more radical than Whitman's, with greater variety in line length and [stanza](#) structure. In using a form so closely associated with American poetry—Whitman is often considered the father of American poetry—Hughes insists that he's as much an American poet, and as much an American, as Whitman himself.

In this sense, Hughes departs from other poets who worked alongside him the Harlem Renaissance. Where Hughes rejected white poetic traditions, poets like Claude McKay experimented with European literary forms like the [sonnet](#) (see, for instance, McKay's Petrarchan sonnet, "[If We Must Die](#)"). McKay's poem makes a different formal argument than Hughes's. It argues that black writers are capable of outdoing giants of European poetic tradition, like [John Milton](#) and [Francesco Petrarca](#), on their own turf. Hughes, however, suggests that such competition is unnecessary and ultimately unproductive. According to Hughes, it's more important to develop an independent black poetic tradition, one that asserts the vibrancy and persistence of black culture.

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Because it stretches from the dawn of human history to American slavery, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" has an extremely broad historical context. Indeed, its context might be said to be human history itself. In engaging such a broad context, the poem challenges the dominant historical narratives of its time. These narratives were assembled by white historians and tended to ignore or slight the accomplishments of black people in human history. Indeed, the German philosopher G.W.F. Hegel claimed in his *Philosophy of History* (1837) that the African continent—and by extension, black people—were simply outside human history: that they didn't contribute in any way to the political and cultural development of human society. The poem asks its readers to reconsider that history and to recognize the centrality of black people in human history and culture.

In doing so, the poem engages with a more specific historical context: the early 20th century in America. At the time the poem was written, in the 1920s, many black people were fleeing the American south—with its discriminatory laws and racist violence—for new lives in northern cities like New York and Chicago. Once in the north, they found new and vibrant black communities, which sparked major black literary movements, like the Harlem Renaissance. (They also encountered much of the racism and restrictions they had tried to leave behind in the south). Many of these migrants were only one or two generations removed from slavery, so that it remained part of the living memory of the black community. Slavery tore people from their communities, cutting them off from their traditions, their languages, and their religions. One of the key challenges facing the black community was to reconstruct a sense of identity—to reclaim the parts of its history that had been destroyed or obscured by slavery. "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" attempts to answer this challenge by presenting a speaker whose experience includes slavery, but also stretches far beyond it.



## MORE RESOURCES

### EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [The Harlem Renaissance](#) — A history of the Harlem Renaissance from the Poetry Foundation, with links to key poems from the movement.

(<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/collections/145704/an-introduction-to-the-harlem-renaissance>)

- [Langston Hughes Biography](#) — A detailed biography of Langston Hughes from the Poetry Foundation. (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/langston-hughes>)
- [The Poems \(We Think\) We Know: "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" by Langston Hughes](#) — A detailed analysis of "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" from Alexandra Socarides. (<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-poems-we-think-we-know-the-negro-speaks-of-rivers-by-langston-hughes/>)
- [Langston Hughes Reads "The Negro Speaks of Rivers"](#) — Hear Langston Hughes read his poem himself. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5mFp40WJbsA>)
- [On "The Negro Speaks of Rivers"](#) — A collection of scholarly responses to "The Negro Speaks of Rivers." ([https://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/g\\_l/hughes/rivers.htm](https://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/g_l/hughes/rivers.htm))

## LITCHARTS ON OTHER LANGSTON HUGHES POEMS

- [I, Too](#)
- [Let America Be America Again](#)
- [Mother to Son](#)
- [The Ballad of the Landlord](#)
- [Theme for English B](#)
- [The Weary Blues](#)



## HOW TO CITE

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