The Negro Speaks of Rivers

Grades 6 to 12 | Interdisciplinary RST

Read the poem and investigate its meaning

First Name

Last Name

Langston Hughes

First published in The Crisis, June 1921

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.

Source The Crisis, June 1921. Public domain in the United States. Transcription checked against Lehigh University’s African American Poetry anthology. Original poetic wording and punctuation are retained.

Investigate the poem's meaning

Essential question

How does Hughes use rivers to express the depth of Black history and identity, and how can other disciplines sharpen our interpretation?

Read the complete poem on page 1. Return to its language as you complete each task.

Key language

"I've known rivers" establishes a voice of experience. "My soul has grown deep like the rivers" compares spiritual depth with river depth. The repeated claim joins places and eras through one imagined speaker.

Reading A Ancestral memory

The speaker spans more time than any individual could live. Read this voice as a possible collective voice connecting people across generations. The Euphrates evokes ancient civilization in Southwest Asia. The Congo evokes an African home and rest. The Nile evokes construction and achievement. The Mississippi evokes Black life in the United States and the history of enslavement and freedom. These are interpretive associations, not a literal travel diary.

Record one detail from the poem and your first interpretation.