



## The Negro Speaks of Rivers

Langston Hughes  
*The Weary Blues*  
(1926)

*In the poem you are going to read, Hughes looks to ancient civilisations in the hope of finding an answer to the question of the Afro-American's identity.*

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.

5 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.

10 My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

### LITERARY COMPETENCE

#### > VOCABULARY

**1 READ** the poem and match the highlighted words with their meaning.

- 1 sunrises .....
- 2 breast .....
- 3 dark .....
- 4 washed .....
- 5 quieted down .....

#### > COMPETENCE: READING AND UNDERSTANDING A TEXT

**2 READ** the poem again and complete the table below considering the rivers mentioned, the situations connected to each river and the ideas they evoke.

Rivers	Situations	Ideas

#### > COMPETENCE: ANALYSING AND INTERPRETING A TEXT

**3 LOOK** at the layout of the poem and say how many parts make it up. Then comment on the way each section is arranged. Does the poem have a rhyme scheme and a traditional metre?

**4 POINT** out some of the sound devices that Hughes employs.



- 5 DEFINE** the tone of the poem and explain how the sound patterns you have analysed so far contribute to evoke a certain atmosphere.
- 6 FOCUS** on the 'I' of the poem. Do you think it stands for the subjective 'I' of the poet or a collective 'I'?
- 7 WRITE** down the experiences the 'I' has gone through and highlight what they have brought to him. Then point out the device Hughes uses to convey the identification between the 'I' and the rivers.

Experiences	Result

- 8 EXPLAIN** the message Hughes is trying to express by choosing the word 'soul' in the final line of the poem. This is the definition of 'soul' given by a dictionary of Afro-American talk: 'Soul: the sensitivity and emotional essence that derives from the blues; the heritage that is black; a natural process; black authenticity; feeling for one's roots, as demonstrated in black music and literature.'
- 9 FIND** the lines which underline the idea of development linked to the river. What does the transformation symbolise? Why do you think Hughes chose the image of the river?

#### ➤ COMPETENCE: ESTABLISHING LINKS WITH THE CONTEXT OF THE AGE

- 10 ANALYSE** this extract from Hughes's autobiography *The Big Sea* and say what insight it provides into

- the poet's method of composition;
- his view of America.

'Now it was just sunset, and we crossed the Mississippi, slowly, over a long bridge. I looked out of the window of the Pullman at the great muddy river flowing down toward the heart of the South, and I began to think what that 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 in times of bondage. Then I remembered reading how Abraham Lincoln had made a trip down the Mississippi on a raft to New Orleans, and how he had seen slavery at its worst, and had decided within himself that it should be removed from American life. Then I began to think about other rivers in our past – the Congo, and the Niger, and the Nile in Africa – and the thought came to me: 'I've known rivers', and I put it down on the back of an envelope I had in my pocket, and within the space of ten or fifteen minutes, as the train gathered speed in the dusk, I had written this poem, which I called *The Negro Speaks of Rivers*'.

#### ➤ COMPETENCE: PRODUCING A WRITTEN TEXT ON A GIVEN SUBJECT

- 11 WRITE** a 10/12-line paragraph to discuss the way Hughes deals with the problem of being Afro-American in a country to which black people belong but which exploits and marginalises them.