

Banha University - Faculty of Arts
English Department
First Year Students

Introduction to Criticism
Lecture 3

Dr Iman A. Hanafy
Professor of English Literature
Faculty of Arts- Banha University

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Langston Hughes

The Negro Speaks of Rivers

Langston Hughes

- Langston Hughes (1902-1967) was the first black writer in America to earn his living from writing. Born in Joplin, Missouri, he had a migratory childhood following his parents' separation, spending time in the American Mid-West and Mexico. He attended Columbia University from 1921-1922 but left, disillusioned by the coolness of his white peers. Hughes' experience of racial exclusion was compounded by his sexual orientation which made him doubly separate from the "norm" of white society.

The Negro Speaks of Rivers

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.

the theme of roots

- Throughout Langston Hughes' poem, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" the theme of roots is prominent and this theme gives rise to the ultimate meaning of the poem, even though the word "roots" itself is not used in the text. The textual details of the poem invoke strong imagery related to veins, rivers, and the roots of trees and give the reader a sense of the timelessness of these objects.
- Through these images and details, the reader begins to understand the complexity of the poem and it is clear that it addresses themes that are much larger than simply rivers or human veins—it is a statement on the whole of [African-American history](#) as it has flourished along rivers

The first stanza

- In the short first stanza, the speaker in the poem by Langston Hughes states that he has “known rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of human blood in human veins.” From this early point in the poem, images of the canals of veins that run throughout the human body as well as similar images of rivers that wind around and are shaped like veins form our understanding that this poem is about more than blood or water, it is about roots and circuits.

Further.....

- Although that will be addressed later in this analysis of “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” by Langston Hughes, it is important to point out that after the first stanza there is a sentence that stands by itself for emphasis that simply states in one of the more important lines in “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” by Langston Hughes, “My soul has grown deep like the rivers.” This stand-alone line prefaces the issues that will be discussed in the following lines and makes the reader see that rivers are not like the long probing roots of a tree or human veins, but rivers are similar to the soul and, like [Hughes’ quest for identity](#), never ending.

Further.....

- The third section changes the tone of the poem since it reverts to the first-person perspective. Although the reader knows it is impossible for one person to have lived in so many places and time periods at once, it is understood that the “I” being used is meant to represent of thousands of voices from the past to the present.
- The theme of rivers is continued in the following lines where the speaker details looking along the Nile and then hearing singing in Mississippi and New Orleans and it is clear that these are locations of particular importance in African.

Further.....

- After the speaker has highlighted the many rivers important to the “roots” of the souls of people, there is another line break, which seems to be separated for added emphasis. The speaker states, “I’ve known rivers / Ancient, dusky rivers” and the whole theme of the roots of knowing and understanding are brought full circle. Just as when the speaker said his soul had “grown” deep, in this separated section when he says, “I’ve known” rivers he is making a reference to the roots of knowledge.

Walt Whitman

When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer

Walt Whitman

- Born on May 31, 1819, Walt Whitman was the second son of Walter Whitman, a housebuilder, and Louisa Van Velsor. The family, which consisted of nine children, lived in Brooklyn and Long Island in the 1820s and 1830s. He founded a weekly newspaper, Long-Islander, and later edited a number of Brooklyn and New York papers. In 1848, Whitman left the Brooklyn Daily Eagle to become editor of the New Orleans Crescent. It was in New Orleans that he experienced at first hand the viciousness of slavery in the slave markets of that city. On his return to Brooklyn in the fall of 1848, he founded a "free soil" newspaper, the Brooklyn Freeman, and continued to develop the unique style of poetry.

When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer

WHEN I heard the learn'd astronomer;

When the proofs, the figures, were ranged in columns before me;

When I was shown the charts and the diagrams, to add, divide, and measure them;

When I, sitting, heard the astronomer, where he lectured with much applause in the lecture-room,

How soon, unaccountable, I became tired and sick;

Till rising and gliding out, I wander'd off by myself,

In the mystical moist night-air, and from time to time,

Look'd up in perfect silence at the stars.

Analysis

- This poem might be paraphrased as follows: "When I grew restless listening to an astronomy lecture, I went outside, where I found I learned more just by looking at the stars than I had learned inside." But the paraphrase is neither as rich nor as complex as the poem. Through careful use of diction, Whitman establishes a dichotomy that supports the poem's central theme about the relative merits of two ways of learning.

Further.....

- The poem may be divided into two groups of four lines. The first four lines', unified by the repetition of "When," introduce the astronomer and his tools: "proofs," "figures," and "charts and diagrams" to be added, divided, and measured. In this section of the poem, the speaker is passive: He sits and listens ("I heard""I sitting heard"). The repetition of "When" reinforces the dry monotony of the lecture. In the next four lines, the choice of words signals the change in the speaker's actions and reactions.

- The language is concrete and physical, and the speaker is studying, receiving information from a "learned" authority. The rest of the poem, celebrating intuitive knowledge and feelings, is more abstract, freer. Throughout the poem, the lecture hall contrasts sharply with the natural world outside its walls.