The Negro Speaks of Rivers Study Guide

The Negro Speaks of Rivers by Langston Hughes

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

"The Negro Speaks of Rivers" is a short, evocative poem written by Langston Hughes when he was only seventeen. Despite Hughes's relative lack of real-world experience, the work embodies a wisdom and cultural awareness far beyond the poet's years. The poem's narrator evokes images that span thousands of years and thousands of miles, relating the experiences of all black people throughout history to himself in his present day.

Hughes wrote the poem while traveling by train across the Mississippi River on a trip to Mexico. Biographer Arnold Rampersad, in his book *The Life of Langston Hughes*, tells the story:

The beauty of the hour and the setting—the great muddy river glinting in the sun, the banked and tinted summer clouds, the rush of the train toward the dark, all touched an adolescent sensibility tender after the gloomy day. The sense of beauty and death, of hope and despair, fused in his imagination. A phrase came to him, then a sentence. Drawing an envelope from his pocket, he began to scribble.

The poem was published in *The Crisis*, the official publication of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), in June of 1921; it was Hughes's first professionally published work. From this short debut poem, however, readers could already see that Hughes had the potential to become an influential voice in American literature. When Jessie Fauset, literary editor of *The Crisis*, first read the poem, she showed it to W. E. B. Du Bois—cofounder of the NAACP—and asked, "What colored person is there, do you suppose, in the United States who writes like that and is yet unknown to us?"

"The Negro Speaks of Rivers" offers a sweeping portrayal of the vast black experience in just over one hundred words. The poem focuses on four rivers—the Euphrates, the Congo, the Nile, and the Mississippi—and nods to each river's role in the narrator's cultural history. Despite the narrator's repeated use of the pronoun "I," the reader quickly realizes that the narrator is not an actual individual person and indeed could not be since the events described in the poem take place over such a wide span of human history. The narrator is the embodiment of all black people and shares in the experiences of all who have come before him. The poem carries a message of unity and connectedness among Africans and their descendants—a message not frequently heard at the time.

Hughes continued his successful career as a poet even as he attended college at Columbia University pursing a degree in engineering. He eventually left Columbia, completing his education at Lincoln University while continuing to write. His first published book, a collection of poetry called *The Weary Blues* (1926), marked the first book publication of"The Negro Speaks of Rivers." The poem appeared again in Hughes's *The Dream Keeper and Other Poems*, a collection aimed at young readers and first published in 1932.

Despite Hughes's youth and comparative lack of practice as a poet when it was written, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" remains one of his most anthologized poems. It has also inspired composers, two of whom have set the poem's words to music as a song. The poem's positive message extends beyond the time in which it was written and invites modern readers to share in a celebration of cultural awareness just as relevant today as it was in 1920. As Jean Wagner writes in *Black Poets of the United States:*

"The Negro Speaks of Rivers" heralded the existence of a mystic union of Negroes in every country and every age. It pushed their history back to the creation of the world, and credited them with possessing a wisdom no less profound than that of the greatest rivers of civilization that humanity had ever known.

Author Biography

Langston Hughes

James Mercer Langston Hughes was born in Joplin, Missouri, in 1902, and spent much of his youth in Kansas and Illinois. Though he wrote poetry from an early age—"The Negro Speaks of Rivers" was published while still in his teens—he attended Columbia University to study engineering. He was successful in school, but dropped out and spent several years in Europe.

Hughes returned to the United States in 1924, continuing his career as a poet and a novelist. His first full-length book, a collection of poetry titled *The Weary Blues*, was published in 1926. He quickly became one of the artists most associated with the Harlem Renaissance, a period of great productivity among African American writers of the 1920s and 1930s, and his works often focus on capturing the black experience in urban America. However, many of Hughes's works reach beyond race: they depict the economically downtrodden of all races and cultures, and spotlight the ever-growing chasm between the rich and poor in the United States.

Hughes received a great deal of recognition during his lifetime; his first novel, *Not Without Laughter* (1930), received the William E. Harmon Gold Medal for literature, and Hughes received a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1935. In 1960, Hughes received the Spingarn Medal from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and was inducted into the National Institute of Arts and Letters the following year. Hughes died in 1967 due to complications from prostate cancer. In 1973, the City College of New York instituted the Langston Hughes Medal, an annual literary award given to a work by an African American writer who follows in the tradition of Hughes.

It is also possible that narrator is referring to the Nubian Pyramids, also found along the banks of the Nile River in an area once called Nubia, currently known as Sudan. Like the Egyptian pyramids, these structures were built to honor the highest members of Nubian society. If the narrator is referring to these pyramids, the line is more likely an expression of cultural pride than of weathering the adversity of enslavement. However, it seems likely that the narrator's rather casual reference to "the pyramids" is meant to refer to those pyramids most familiar to the audience—in other words, the Great Pyramids of Egypt.

With his claim that he helped build the pyramids, it becomes increasingly clear that the narrator is speaking not just for himself as a person, but for an entire race. Since the only fact the reader knows about the narrator is that he is black, this suggests that the narrator is describing the history of the black experience against the backdrop of different rivers.

In the next line, the narrator speaks of the Mississippi River. He describes the sound it makes as "singing," and notes in particular a time when Abraham Lincoln traveled down to New Orleans, where the Mississippi River empties into the Gulf of Mexico. This

echoes a popular legend about Lincoln from his young adulthood. It is established that in his early twenties, Lincoln was hired to transport goods down the Mississippi River in 1831; he traveled by river from his home in Illinois to New Orleans. Some believe that once in New Orleans, Lincoln witnessed a slave auction. Such auctions were commonplace in a southern port city such as New Orleans. According to legend, seeing this slave auction strengthened Lincoln's resolve to end slavery in the United States. The "singing" of the Mississippi can be interpreted as a celebration of coming end to slavery in America.

The narrator also describes how he has seen the river's "muddy bosom turn all golden in the sunset." The Mississippi River is frequently referred to as "The Muddy Mississippi" due to the amount of silt carried in its water. The technique Hughes uses when referring to the river's "bosom" is called personification—the attribution of human characteristics to nonhuman things. By referring to the river's "bosom," the narrator clearly intends to draw parallels between the river and a person. A person's bosom is often considered the source of human emotion, and the bosom also calls to mind a motherly embrace. To say that the river's bosom was muddy calls to mind the darkness it had represented for African Americans in the past. He then notes that the river becomes "all golden in the sunset," as if in the afterglow of Lincoln's visit, the Mississippi has come to offer warmer, brighter possibilities.

The final lines of the poem echo the first lines. Again, the narrator issues the simple statement, "I've known rivers"; and again, the narrator describes those rivers as ancient. However, the narrator here also describes the rivers as "dusky." The word "dusky" can be interpreted as "dim" or "hazy," but is most often used to mean "dark in color." This definition reinforces the relationship the narrator has established between the rivers and black people.

The narrator concludes with another line repeated from the opening of the poem: "My soul has grown deep like the rivers." In addition to stillness, this line also suggests the depth of cultural history signified by the rivers. Rivers are used to connect the past with the present; in this way, the experiences of blacks throughout history are connected to the narrator. Just as a river is a single body that can span eons, the narrator's soul, having grown deep, represents the cumulative history of his people in a single body.

Plot Summary

"The Negro Speaks of Rivers" is written from the first-person perspective, or the viewpoint of the main character of the poem. The protagonist and narrator is described only by the term "Negro" in the title. The entire work consists of a mere thirteen lines of free verse. Although it does not employ a set rhyme scheme or stanza pattern, the poem does feature parallel structure within several lines as well as two simple phrases that act as a refrain, or a repeated section similar to a chorus in a song. The poem begins with a simple declaration—"I've known rivers"—that implies the narrator's experience and wisdom.

The narrator elaborates on this depth of knowledge in the next lines, noting that he has known rivers "older than the flow of human blood in human veins." This comparison ties humanity to the oldest parts of nature and suggests that the flow human life force is much like the flow of a river. The narrator then notes that his "soul has grown deep like the rivers." Again the narrator compares a human attribute—the soul—to a river. This image, however, contrasts with the description of a moving river. At its deepest points, the flow of a river seems to almost cease; as it becomes shallower, the water flows more quickly. The narrator, then, is comparing his soul to the deceptive stillness of a deep river.

In the next lines, the narrator lists several personal experiences involving rivers. All begin with the pronoun "I." First, he says that he has cleansed himself in the Euphrates River. This river, which begins in Turkey and flows through Syria and Iraq, is mentioned in the Bible as one of four rivers flowing out from the Garden of Eden. The river also forms the western border of a region known as Mesopotamia, where many of the earliest recorded civilizations flourished. For this reason, the area near the Euphrates is often called the "Cradle of Civilization." The act of bathing also recalls the rite of baptism, which in some denominations of Christianity is meant to cleanse the recipient of sin. Thus, in more ways than one, this line provides images of purification for the narrator.

The narrator tells that he was in the Euphrates "when dawns were young." This implies a time in the distant past, and this in turn reflects the region's status as the birthplace of humankind. It is also the reader's first clue that the narrator might not be describing personal, individual experiences—despite the use of the pronoun "I"—since the event apparently happened several thousand years ago.

The narrator next mentions that he once built a hut along the Congo River, which is in central Africa. The gentle sound of the river serves as his lullaby and helps him to sleep. Again, the narrator is evidently describing an event from the distant past, though perhaps more recent than the experience in the Euphrates. The Congo River has long served as one of the most important geographic features of central Africa, providing a steady year-round flow of water throughout the region. For this reason, many tribes have settled on its banks over the millennia.

In the next line, the narrator claims not only to have seen Egypt's Nile, but to have "raised the pyramids above it." This phrase seems to refer to the Great Pyramids and is the first event the reader can place into the context of recorded history. The Great Pyramids of Egypt, according to historians, were mostly built between 2600 and 1600 B.C.. The narrator implies that he played an active part in constructing the pyramids; in the early twentieth century when the poem was written, it was widely accepted that slaves were responsible for the construction of the pyramids. Egyptian slaves were often traded up the Nile River, so it is conceivable that many of these slaves originally came from more southern regions of Africa. The narrator, therefore, seems to be describing an early and notable example of African enslavement. In recent years, however, evidence uncovered by archeologists suggests that the builders of the pyramids were treated more as craftspeople than as slaves.

Themes

Cultural Awareness

In "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," the narrator—never referred to by name, and therefore known only as "The Negro"—stands as a representative for all black people throughout history. By offering snapshots from several different periods of time, the narrator is expressing a personal awareness of and connection to his roots. Appreciation of this connection appears to be what allows the narrator's soul to grow deep.

The poem suggests that by remaining in touch with the heritage of one's ancestors, a person can achieve a certain degree of inner peace and wisdom. In the case of the narrator, the heritage is a centuries-long narrative of struggle in which the tide may finally be turning. The poem mentions Abraham Lincoln's trip to New Orleans, which according to legend, was when Lincoln resolved to end slavery. This reading is reinforced by the uplifting image of the muddy Mississippi River looking "golden in the sunset."

The flow of a river might also be compared to the flow of Africans from their native homelands to other parts of the world, such as Egypt and the United States. Though this large-scale flow of people was in many cases forced—a by-product of the African slave trade—the narrator of the poem helps the reader follow this "river of culture" back to its source, establishing an ancestral connection in particular for black Americans. Slaves and their descendants were often forced to abandon their traditions, or denied the tools and community needed to keep those traditions alive. Hughes's poem represents a deliberate attempt to reestablish those roots in the mind of the reader.

Slavery

"The Negro Speaks of Rivers" refers to slavery only indirectly, though the theme plays in important part in the poem. The narrator asserts that he "raised the pyramids" near the Nile. It was once commonly believed that slaves performed the work of building the Great Pyramids of Egypt. Although historical evidence now supports a different explanation for the building of the pyramids—that the workers were skilled craftspeople, and were respected in Egyptian society—the author and his readers in the 1920s would clearly have understood this line as a reference to slavery in ancient Egypt. Even modern scholars recognize this connection: in his 1987 essay "From the Bottom Up: Three Radicals of the Thirties," Adrian Oktenberg notes, "Raising the pyramids above the Nile was the act of slaves."

The poem also evokes slavery in its mention of Abraham Lincoln traveling to New Orleans. Lincoln may have decided to dedicate himself to the abolition of slavery in the United States after witnessing a slave auction in New Orleans. Although this legend

might be obscure to a modern reader, it is likely that the story was well-known to the author's readers in 1921, less than sixty years after Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation.

Though "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" never refers to slavery explicitly, the poem nevertheless narrates black people's struggle against oppression. The narrator first recounts the experiences of free people, bathing and sleeping without fear. Then he implies the toil of building the pyramids, clearly meant to bring images of enslavement to mind. Finally, he portrays the twilight of slavery in America as embodied by Abraham Lincoln. In the end, the narrator has achieved a certain resolve; while the struggle against oppression may not be over, his knowledge of his own cultural history has given him the strength and steadfastness of a great river.

Historical Context

The Euphrates and Ancient Civilization

The Euphrates River winds from modern-day Turkey to Iraq and empties into the Persian Gulf. It marks the western border of a large floodplain known as Mesopotamia. The Tigris River, which merges with the Euphrates in southern Iraq, forms the eastern boundary of Mesopotamia. The region of Mesopotamia is often called the "Cradle of Civilization" because it was home to several of the earliest organized human societies, such as the Sumerians. The Euphrates is mentioned in the ancient writings of many religions, including Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. In the Bible, the Euphrates is one of the four rivers flowing out from the Garden of Eden. Its associations with both paradise and early civilization secure its regard as one of the most important rivers in human history.

The Pyramids of Egypt

Most of the pyramids of Egypt were created between 2600 B.C. and 1600 B.C.. These massive monuments, at least eighty of which still remain in some form, were primarily built along the west bank of the Nile River and served as tombs for Egyptian leaders, known as pharaohs. The earliest and most durable pyramids were constructed entirely from limestone, while later pyramids were made primarily from granite or mud bricks. Each pyramid was then covered with a polished outer casing of limestone, though most have lost this layer over the centuries.

For over two thousand years, many people believed that the pyramids had been constructed by slaves forced into labor by the mighty pharaohs. However, modern archeological findings cast doubt on this belief. Excavations at Deir el-Medina, home to hundreds of workers who built tombs for the pharaohs between 1600 B.C. and 1000 B.C., indicate that workers were granted significant wealth and status in recognition of their talents. According to Rosalie David, author of *Pyramid Builders of Ancient Egypt: A Modern Investigation of Pharaoh's Workforce*, "There is never any indication that they were slaves … and … there is no indication that there was any strict regulation of their domestic lives or religious practices."

The Mississippi River and the American Slave Trade

The Mississippi River is the longest river in the United States. In the early 1800s, before the advent of rail travel, the Mississippi River was the primary means of transporting goods to and from newly settled frontier areas such as Illinois and Missouri. Cities located along the river include Minneapolis, St. Louis, and Memphis, as it makes its way south to the Gulf of Mexico. The Mississippi River was essential in providing a way of transporting slaves to the many cotton plantations along its banks. Because of this, New Orleans—often considered the "port city" of the Mississippi River, even though the

mouth of the Mississippi is actually located many miles south—became a booming market in the slave trade.

During the early and mid-1800s, slavery became a big business in the South. Territories farther north along the Mississippi, such as Illinois and Iowa, became established "free states"—they did not allow the practice of slavery. So in addition to facilitating the slave trade among southern states, the Mississippi River was also instrumental in providing a route northward for escaped slaves to reach freedom prior to the Civil War.

The Harlem Renaissance

Langston Hughes was a teenager when "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" was first published in 1921; at the same time, art and culture were blossoming in black urban communities throughout the United States, most notably in the Harlem neighborhood of New York City. This period of artistic achievement, lasting roughly from 1920 until 1940, is known as the Harlem Renaissance.

The neighborhood of Harlem, originally settled by the Dutch and named after an important city in the Netherlands, was home to many different cultural and ethnic groups over the centuries. In the early 1900s, a large number of educated, middle-class black families relocated to Harlem. In addition, with the advent of World War I, thousands of black laborers from the South moved to New York City and other urban centers to work in factories that supported the war effort.

As more blacks achieved middle-class status, they began forming organizations dedicated to addressing the concerns and needs of black Americans in general. In 1909, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was created in an effort to achieve racial equality. Many black Americans, for the first time feeling the freedom to choose their own career paths, sought self-expression through the arts. Jazz and blues music, brought to New York by black southern musicians, became wildly popular in both white and black communities. Harlem became a haven for those seeking to become part of a thriving creative community.

Like countless others, Langston Hughes himself was drawn to New York by this newly flourishing arts environment. As biographer Arnold Rampersad quotes Hughes himself in *The Life of Langston Hughes*, "I had come to New York to attend Columbia,… but *really* why I had come was to see Harlem." Over the next several years Hughes became a fixture on the Harlem literary scene, along with other influential writers like James Weldon Johnson and Zora Neale Hurston.

During the Great Depression, Harlem and its arts-heavy economy were hit especially hard. Many of the most influential figures of the Harlem Renaissance moved away during the 1930s, and mainstream America turned its interest to social welfare and world politics. However, the seeds planted in Harlem during the 1920s and 1930s brought a greater awareness of African American culture in the population at large, and

a determination among African Americans to demand greater racial equality in the United States.

Critical Overview

"The Negro Speaks of Rivers" was first published in book form as part of the poetry collection *Weary Blues* in 1926. Though the book's initial print run was small, it received positive reviews from several respected publications. An unnamed reviewer for the *New York Times* remarks, "We sincerely hope that Langston Hughes will receive the wide reading he deserves." Du Bose Heyward, a reviewer for the *New York Herald Tribune*, calls the book "[a]lways intensely subjective, passionate, keenly sensitive to beauty and possessed of an unfaltering musical sense."

However, some reviewers felt that Hughes had clearly not yet reached his potential. A reviewer for the *Independent* notes, "Time may give more depth and beauty to his work, which is crude in texture and lacking in distinction." In the *London Times Literary Supplement*, an unnamed reviewer dismisses the weight of Hughes's works with these words: "Civilization merely excites his senses, and he becomes the poet, flamboyant or sentimental, of the cabaret."

"The Negro Speaks of Rivers" also appeared in *The Dream Keeper and Other Poems*, published in 1932 as a poetry collection intended for young readers. A reviewer for the *Boston Transcript* calls the poems in this collection "simple, human, vivid, tingling with sincerity." In a review for the *New York Times*, A. T. Eaton applauds the author, stating, "It is not hard to understand the appeal of Langston Hughes to young people sensitive to poetry." In the *Saturday Review of Literature*, W. R. Benét offers the poet both compliment and criticism in the same sentence: "Langston Hughes is not a first-rate poet, even among those of his own race, but he is distinctly an appealing one, a melodist who touches with sensitiveness the stops of his black flute."

Hughes's popularity has only grown with time. Today, Hughes remains one of the most anthologized American poets. In 2001, the Academy of American Poets placed a poll on their website allowing visitors to vote for the American poet they most wanted to see on a postage stamp. Hughes won by a landslide, and the United States Postal Service issued a Langston Hughes postage stamp in 2002, further celebrating his reputation as one of America's most popular poets.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Wilson is a popular-culture writer. In the following excerpt, he discusses Langston Hughes's "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" and casts a critical eye on its modern relevance as "a celebration of racial culture and history."

Langston Hughes wrote "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" when he was only seventeen. As a poem, it succeeds brilliantly in conveying mood and tone while offering glimpses of human existence in times past. As a celebration of racial culture and history, as it is often credited, the poem has problems—some specific to the language and imagery Hughes employs, and some endemic to any literature that purports to celebrate a certain race.

Since the purpose of the poem seems to be to evoke feelings of cultural connectedness and racial pride, the "historical snapshots" chosen by Hughes should be historically relevant. Unfortunately, if one assumes that Hughes means to convey a sweeping portrait of the "black experience"—as most literary scholars seem to accept—then the poem becomes problematic at nearly every stage of its central stanza.

First, Hughes—through the narrator "the Negro"—mentions bathing in the Euphrates River. Certainly Hughes knew the actual location of the Euphrates: in modern geopolitical terms, the river begins in Turkey, flows through Syria and Iraq, and empties into the Persian Gulf. Inhabitants of this middle eastern region are Middle Easterners, not Africans, as the narrator implies. Most readers overlook this detail, though George Hutchinson, in *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White*, addresses the issue directly:

A spoken performance of "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," read by the author himself, is included on the audiocassette *Langston Hughes Reads*. It was released by Caedmon in 2000.

In 1932, composer Howard Swanson wrote a song incorporating the words of the poem as lyrics. A version of this song, performed by David Korevaar and Odekhiren Amaize, is found on *The Negro Speaks of Rivers: Art Songs by African American Composers*, released on compact disc by MSR Classics in 2000.

Another song built around Hughes's lyrics, also known by the same title as the poem, was written in 1942 by Margaret Bonds. A performance of the song by Darryl Taylor and Maria Corley is included on the compact disc *Dreamer: A Portrait of Langston Hughes*, released by Naxos in 2002.

Readers rarely notice that if the soul of the Negro in this poem goes back to the Euphrates, it goes back to a pre-"racial" dawn and a geography far from Africa that is identified with neither blackness nor whiteness—a geography at the time of Hughes's writing considered the cradle of all the world's civilizations and possibly the location of the Garden of Eden. Thus, even in this poem about the depth of the Negro's soul

Hughes avoids racial essentialism while nonetheless stressing the existential, racialized conditions of black and modern identity.

Another problematic line is the narrator's discussion of the pyramids built along the Nile River. Hughes clearly means to suggest that black slaves were used to construct the pyramids. The notion that slave labor built the pyramids is an old one, probably originating with the Greeks, that was still accepted when Hughes was a young man. However, in the last fifty years, archeologists have uncovered evidence to suggest that the builders of the pyramids were not merely slaves, but were regarded by ancient Egyptians as talented craftspeople. Although Hughes could not have foreseen the revised understanding of ancient history that would come later in his life, a modern reader's modern understanding of this historical detail weakens the poet's imagery.

Finally, we come to the last historical snapshot of the poem's central stanza: that of Abraham Lincoln traveling to New Orleans. This references the legend that Lincoln, during a trip down the river to New Orleans as a young man, witnessed a slave auction and was so horrified that he decided to work to end slavery if he possibly could. While it is well established that Lincoln did travel on a flatboat to New Orleans as a young man, the rest of the tale occupies the same shaky historical ground as other presidential legends, like George Washington's infamous chopping down of a cherry tree. As Benjamin Quarles points out in *Lincoln and the Negro*, the "story will not stand up, as it was told by a man who did not accompany Lincoln on either of his trips [to New Orleans]."

A reader could assume that Hughes intends to address not just the "black experience" but the "human experience"; readers of all races find the poem moving and resonant. However, the other deliberate choices made by Hughes in the poem belie this notion. First, the title quite pointedly mentions that the narrator is "Negro." Additionally, three of the four historical snapshots relate to Africa and/or slavery, and are clearly particularly relevant to the author and his narrator.

It could be that Hughes did not mean to reference real historical events so much as suggest a symbolic racial history. Even in this case, though, we run into the problems inherent in any literary work that espouses any type of "racial pride." The concept of racial pride fails in two ways; first, because "race" has no truly quantifiable meaning without delving into absurdity, and second, because "group pride" is often just prejudice in disguise.

Race is a distinction based solely on the idea of exclusion. The concept of race is used to identify outsiders so they can be effectively marginalized by the distinguishing population. To accept any racial designation—and worse, to do it with pride—is to accept and legitimize the false premise that race is in any way a real thing.

If different people have different colors of skin, one might ask, how can race not be a real thing? No one considers redheads a different race, though their features are distinctive. By the same token, Jews are considered by many to comprise a different racial group, though there are no reliable physical characteristics to distinguish them

from non-Jews. Is race based on pedigree, then, instead of appearance? What if a person has an Anglo parent and an African parent? It should come as no surprise that, historically, children of such mixed parentage have almost always been lumped in this group as a member of the more maligned "race." In particular, American history is rife with absurd terms and laws meant to either prevent the mixing of races, or to stigmatize children of such unions for many generations. (Thus, "whites" invented terms like "octoroon" to describe a person who was one-eighth "black," and seven-eighths "white"—but still, according to prevailing prejudice, legally "black.")

In fact, Langston Hughes himself was the product of a mixing of "races." According to Arnold Rampersad, one of the poet's great-grandfathers was "a white Virginia planter." Rampersad also quotes one of Hughes's schoolteachers, describing her former student: "he was a bad combination—part Indian, part Nigra, and part white." Hughes's skin tone was lighter than that of many "blacks"; in fact, on the very same trip to Mexico during which he wrote "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," several people assumed that Hughes was Mexican. He did not correct them. Indeed, Hughes welcomed the notion that a certain camaraderie existed between all people with comparatively dark skin, as Rampersad quotes from Hughes's journal: "I am among my own people, for … Mexico is a brown man's country."

Hughes—despite having a mixed heritage himself—buys into the premise that race is quantifiable. He even offers a sweeping generalization of Jewish people in his journal from his trip to Mexico, noting that "Jews are warm hearted people and seldom prejudiced." This is in reference to one of the very same people Hughes chose not to tell he was actually African American and not Latino.

Pride—in its most positive sense—is something earned through accomplishment, by the actions of an individual or group. Whether someone is "proud to be a Daughter of the American Revolution," "proud to be black," or "proud to be white," these are not achievements in and of themselves, but accidents of parentage and genetics. Would it not be silly for someone to say he or she is "proud to be tall" or "proud to have green eyes"? What did such an individual do to achieve these qualities? Not a thing. In a more common usage, pride can mean the absence of shame. For a person to say she is "proud to be the grandchild of immigrants" or "proud to be Native American" may mean that she is not ashamed of her heritage. Just as the uncontrollable traits of one's ancestors are shaky ground on which to base one's sense of worth, neither should they be secrets to be hidden or denied.

This is not to suggest that people should not be comfortable with their own heritage and appreciate the histories of different cultures and societies. The more one studies human history, the less likely one is to judge oneself or another on something as arbitrary as a racial designation. This is also not to suggest that living as a part of an oppressed population does not require effort worthy of pride; however, oppressed groups should be wary of subscribing to the very notions that enable their oppression.

It is important to point out, further, that Hughes had not even reached the age of majority when he wrote the poem and visited Mexico, and he lived in an environment

where prejudice was dangerous and real—even if the oppressors sometimes had difficulty figuring out who should be oppressed. One can hardly fault him for not exhibiting a way of thinking that was not widely popularized until four decades later. However, those who continue to overemphasize the poem's importance as a call for racial awareness only serve to perpetuate divisiveness between groups of people, as well as steal attention from the poem's other merits.

None of the aforementioned criticisms take away from this simple fact: a seventeen-year-old boy, looked down upon as a Negro by the society in which he lived, was inspired to write an eloquent meditation on humanity's connection to its ancestry. In a mere 103 words, the teenaged Hughes conjures feelings of dignity, nobility, and optimism in his readers. The poem rings true even if it is not true, and with its expertly crafted use of imagery and tone, foreshadows the greatness that its author would achieve: Hughes became one of the finest and best-loved American poets of the twentieth century. "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" is as beautiful as it is important, and whether the poet meant to speak for all humankind, all humankind can see itself in the brief but moving meditation on an individual's relationship to the multitudes of human history.

Bibliography

Benét, W. R., Review of *The Dream Keeper and Other Poems, in the Saturday Review of Literature, November 12*, 1932, Vol. 9, p. 241, as quoted in *The Book Review Digest*, Twenty-Eighth Annual Cumulation, edited by Marion A. Knight, Mertice M. James and Dorothy Brown, The H. W. Wilson Company, 1933, p. 466.

David, Rosalie, *Pyramid Builders of Ancient Egypt: A Modern Investigation of Pharaoh's Workforce*, Routledge, 1997, p. 76.

Eaton, A. T., "Review of *The Dream Keeper and Other Poems," in New York Times*, July 17, 1932, sec. V, p. 13.

Heyward, Du Bose, Review of *Weary Blues*, in *New York Herald Tribune*, August 1, 1926, Books, p. 4, as quoted in *The Book Review Digest*, Twenty-Second Annual Cumulation, edited by Marion A. Knight and Mertice M. James, The H. W. Wilson Company, 1927, p. 350.

Hughes, Langston, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," in *The Dream Keeper and Other Poems*, 1932, reprint, Alfred A. Knopf, 1994, p. 62.

Humes, James C., *The Wit and Wisdom of Abraham Lincoln*, Gramercy, 1999, p. 55.

Hutchinson, George, *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White*, Belknap Press, 1997, as quoted on Modern American Poetry: An Online Journal and Multimedia Companion to *Anthology of Modern American Poetry*, www.english.uiuc.edu/MAPS/poets/g_l/hughes/rivers.htm (April 12, 2006).

Oktenberg, Adrian, "From the Bottom Up: Three Radicals of the Thirties," in *A Gift of Tongues: Critical Challenges in Contemporary American Poetry*, edited by Marie Harris and Kathleen Aguero, University of Georgia Press, 1987, pp. 83-111.

Quarles, Benjamin, *Lincoln and the Negro*, Da Capo Press, 1991, p. 18.

Rampersad, Arnold, *The Life of Langston Hughes*, Vol. 1, Oxford University Press, 2d ed., 2002, pp. 4, 18, 40, 51.

Review of *Weary Blues*, in *New York Times*, March 21, 1926, p. 6, as quoted in *The Book Review Digest*, Twenty-Second Annual Cumulation, edited by Marion A. Knight and Mertice M. James, The H. W. Wilson Company, 1927, p. 350.

Review of *Weary Blues*, in the *Independent*, April 3, 1926, Vol. 116, p. 404, as quoted in *The Book Review Digest*, Twenty-Second Annual Cumulation, edited by Marion A. Knight and Mertice M. James, The H. W. Wilson Company, 1927, p. 350.

Review of *Weary Blues*, in the *Times (London) Literary Supplement*, July 29, 1926, p. 515, as quoted in *The Book Review Digest*, Twenty-Second Annual Cumulation, edited by Marion A. Knight and Mertice M. James, The H. W. Wilson Company, 1927, p. 350.

Review of *The Dream Keeper and Other Poems*, in the *Boston Transcript*, July 30, 1932, p. 2, as quoted in *The Book Review Digest*, Twenty-Eighth Annual Cumulation, edited by Marion A. Knight, Mertice M. James and Dorothy Brown, The H. W. Wilson Company, 1933, p. 466.

Wagner, Jean, *Black Poets of the United States: From Paul Laurence Dunbar to Langston Hughes*, University of Illinois Press, 1973, p. 394.

Younge, Gary, "Review: Live and Letters: Renaissance Man of the South: Gary Younge Remembers Langston Hughes, America's Most Popular Poet, Whose Centenary is Celebrated in London Next Week (Guardian Saturday Pages) (Letter to the Editor)," *Guardian*, October 26, 2002, p. 34, in *InfoTrac Custom Newspapers* (April 5, 2006).

Copyright Information

This Premium Study Guide is an offprint from *Novels for Students*.

Project Editor
David Galens

Editorial
Sara Constantakis, Elizabeth A. Cranston, Kristen A. Dorsch, Anne Marie Hacht, Madeline S. Harris, Arlene Johnson, Michelle Kazensky, Ira Mark Milne, Polly Rapp, Pam Revitzer, Mary Ruby, Kathy Sauer, Jennifer Smith, Daniel Toronto, Carol Ullmann

Research
Michelle Campbell, Nicodemus Ford, Sarah Genik, Tamara C. Nott, Tracie Richardson

Data Capture
Beverly Jendrowski

Permissions
Mary Ann Bahr, Margaret Chamberlain, Kim Davis, Debra Freitas, Lori Hines, Jackie Jones, Jacqueline Key, Shalice Shah-Caldwell

Imaging and Multimedia
Randy Bassett, Dean Dauphinais, Robert Duncan, Leitha Etheridge-Sims, Mary Grimes, Lezlie Light, Jeffrey Matlock, Dan Newell, Dave Oblender, Christine O'Bryan, Kelly A. Quin, Luke Rademacher, Robyn V. Young

Product Design
Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

For more information, contact
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48334-3535
Or you can visit our Internet site at
http://www.gale.com

Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's"For Students" Literature line, NfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on "classic" novels frequently

studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of "classic" novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members—educational professionals— helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in NfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed—for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man–the character is listed as "The Narrator" and alphabetized as "Narrator." If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. • Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name "Jean Louise Finch" would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname "Scout Finch."
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by NfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an “at-a-glance” comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author’s time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

NfS includes “The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,” a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children’s Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Novels for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Novels for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Novels for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from NfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

“Night.” Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234–35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from NfS (usually the first piece under the “Criticism” subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on “Winesburg, Ohio.” Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335–39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. “Margaret Atwood’s “The Handmaid’s Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,” Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9–16; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133–36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. “Richard Wright: “Wearing the Mask,” in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69–83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59–61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Novels for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

Editor, Novels for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331–3535