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An Exploration of the Concept of Identity in Langston Hughes's "The Negro Speaks of Rivers"

A Graduation Research Submitted to the Dep. English, college of Education, Babylon. University, Department of English Language, in a partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the degree of BA in English

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(بِسْمِ اللهِ الرَّحْمنِ الرَّحِيمِ)

{ اقْرَأْ بِاسْمِ رَبِّكَ الَّذِي خَلَقَ * خَلَقَ الْإِنْسَانَ مِنْ عَلَقٍ * اقْرَأْ وَرَبُّكَ الْأَكْرَمُ * الَّذِي عَلَّمَ بِالْقَلَمِ * عَلَّمَ الْإِنْسَانَ مَا لَمْ يَعْلَمْ}

[سورة العلق: 1- 5]

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Dedication

To my parents, who have given their utmost support and continuous inspiration throughout the study

To the teachers, who have guided the researchers in completing this study

To the students, who may need help in dealing with their mental health issues

To the school, that has given the researchers the opportunity to develop and test their skills, and work together to complete this study

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Chapter One

Introduction

1.1 introduction

This research is entitled An Exploration of the Concept of Identity in Langston Hughes's "The Negro Speaks of Rivers "consist of four chapters: chapter one review of related literature, statement of the problem. chapter two Identity of black people and Negroes in the twentieth century. Chapter three analysis of the poem, theme, symbol,form, rhyme scheme Chapter four conclusion of my research.

1.2 Review of Related Literature

The History of Black People in Britain, Peter Fryer demonstrates that the presence of Black people in Britain is not a recent, post-Second World War phenomenon. In this extract he looks at the first settlement of Africans in England in the sixteenth century and examines the contemporary myths about Africa and Africans.Singularly, this question of Negro immigration has received only passing attention in the myriad works on immigration problems and policies in the United States. A sentence here and a paragraph there frequently to the effect that this immigration is not extensive.

The text explores how school guidance services can be used by the ruling group In a country to transmit their economic and cultural interests. It uses the case of South Africa's guidance system, specifically the introduction of guidance as a subject in Black schools in 1981, as its example.

1.3 Statement of the Problem

Despite valuable contributions from previous studies, a comprehensive and nuanced re-examination of An Exploration of the Concept of Identity in Langston Hughes's "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" is warranted, considering the intricate and multifaceted nature of identity within the poem.

1.4 Aims

The aims of this research paper are:

1.Getting to know the poet and his most important themes and poems

2.Learn about the history and problems of the Negro people throughout their lives

3.Analysis of the poet's poem and the most important literary devices used in the poem

1.5 Research Questions

This research paper will address the following questions:

1.What historical and cultural significance do these rivers hold for the Black community?

2.How does Langston Hughes utilize the imagery and historical references in "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" to explore and construct the concept of Black identity?

3.How does the poem trace the journey of Black people through history, connecting the speaker to past generations and events (slavery, colonization, migration)?

1.6 Databases

To conduct a comprehensive investigation into Blake's symbolic world, this research will utilize a variety of reputable academic databases, including: Google Scholar, JSTOR, Project MUSE, and MLA International Bibliography.

Chapter Two

Theoretical and Biographical Backgrounds

2.1 What is (Black) Identity?

2.1.1 Identity of women (black)

In his book "Black Women, Identity, and Cultural Theory," Kevin Everod Quashie examines the metaphor of the "girlfriend" as a fresh perspective on three key concepts in cultural studies: self, memory, and language. Quashie delves into the works of various writers and artists, including Toni Morrison, Ama Ata Aidoo, Dionne Brand, and photographer Lorna Simpson, to contribute to the ongoing discussions surrounding identity. He argues that these creators challenge the idea of a fixed, singular identity and instead present a notion of the self that evolves through communal and ever-changing processes, similar to how adult women navigate their relationships with their girlfriends. Quashie also suggests that memory is not just an abstract concept but a tangible entity, a literal body that plays a vital role in personal growth. Additionally, he explores the challenges that language poses for black women artists and their pursuit of mastery without perpetuating colonization or exclusion. While engaging with various schools of thought like psychoanalysis, postmodernism, and post-colonialism, Quashie ultimately goes beyond these frameworks to propose a new cultural aesthetic that centers black women and their philosophies.

In her captivating work, "The Unchosen Me: Exploring the Intersection of Race, Gender, and Selfhood Among Black Women in College," Rachelle Winkle-Wagner unveils a tapestry of narratives, woven from the experiences of thirty remarkable Black college women navigating the corridors of a predominantly White institution nestled in the heart of the Midwest. With eloquence and insight, Winkle-Wagner posits that the development of one's identity is intricately

entwined with the ever-evolving tapestry of society, asserting that the self emerges as a product of its surroundings .(Rachelle Winkle-Wagner: 2017)

As the curtains draw to a close, Winkle-Wagner's discerning gaze turns towards the guardians of academia, urging college administrators and policymakers to heed her clarion call. With unwavering conviction, she implores these gatekeepers to erect robust support structures for African American students, beckoning them to embrace these individuals not as mere outsiders, but as integral members of the campus community. She shines a spotlight on the arduous journey these students undertake, often compelled to adopt certain facades in order to secure their place within the hallowed halls of higher education.

This research paper explores the relationship between racial identity development theory, which explains the process of developing a positive sense of racial identity, and relational theory. The aim is to understand the experiences of young Black women who grow up in predominantly White communities by examining the points where these two theoretical perspectives intersect. During the discussion that followed the presentation of the paper, the implications of racial identity development theory for fostering mutual understanding between Black and White women were considered.In their book, Women's Growth in Connection, the Stone Center Theory Group challenged themselves to gain a better understanding of women's experiences based on factors such as class, race, age, ethnicity, and gender. This paper follows the same spirit by providing specific information about a particular group of women – Black, middle-class, college-educated women – and their development of racial identity, viewed through a relational lens. It is important to note that our identities are not separate entities that can be easily distinguished. As Vicki Spelman points out in her book Inessential Woman, our identities as Black women cannot be separated from our identities as females. We exist as both simultaneously. However, there is limited research being conducted on this combination.(Kevin Everod Quashie,2004)

2.1.2 Identity of black people.

In contemporary American society, there are three prevailing perspectives on race, each with its own unique characteristics or a combination thereof. Until recently, the prevailing belief was that black individuals were fundamentally American, with any differences being temporary effects of regionalism, discrimination, and poverty. According to this viewpoint, once white individuals let go of their irrational fears and prejudices, the assimilation of black people into mainstream society would progress smoothly. However, there are others who acknowledge that there are significant distinctions between black and white individuals, without attributing these differences to racist beliefs. Scholars who accept this general assumption are divided in their opinions. On one hand, some argue that the black psyche and the entire black community have been distorted by deprivation, slavery, discrimination, poverty, and other factors, making the achievement of racial equality more challenging, but no less crucial and desirable. On the other hand, there are those who perceive a difference that is less pathological and more similar to the natural variations seen in various ethnic groups and occasionally in social classes. Like most broad interpretations, these positions are shaped not only by the observer's perception of the overall social structure but also by their personal commitments to it, as well as the reality of the black community and its relationships.

After delving into the depths of minority education for over a decade and a half, I came to the realization that in order to truly comprehend the fluctuations in minority school performance, I needed to explore two additional factors: collective identity and cultural frame of reference. In the year 1986, I collaborated with Signithia Fordham to publish an article that shed light on how the concept of "oppositional collective identity and cultural frame of reference," or what we referred to as oppositional culture, influenced the academic achievements of Black students. Unfortunately, numerous critics have misconstrued our joint article, concocting an entirely different thesis surrounding oppositional culture.

They claim that Black students deliberately avoid pursuing good grades because it is perceived as "acting White." Moreover, they have distorted my cultural-ecological theory into an oppositional culture theory. Therefore, I am penning this paper to rectify the misinterpretations of our joint article and propel scholarly advancement in this field. To commence, I will elucidate the essence of collective identity, distinguishing it from other notions of identity. Specifically, I will provide a concise summary of the evolution of oppositional collective identity and cultural frame of reference, or oppositional culture, within the Black American community. Additionally, I will delve into the contemporary experiences of Black individuals burdened with the weight of "acting White" in the United States. Lastly, I will propose a sense of continuity between the historical and communal encounters of Black individuals with the burdensome concept of "acting White," as experienced by Black students (Jan E Dizard,1970),(John U Ogbu, 2004).

2.2 Negroes in the twentieth century

The 1920s, and 47 percent by the 1950s. This indicates that while migration out of the South was a significant phenomenon, a substantial portion of the African American population chose to remain in the region.

After the abolition of slavery, the Reconstruction policy implemented by the federal government provided former slaves with a limited opportunity to engage in modern political activities. This included the right to vote and hold political positions at various levels of government in the Southern states, including Congress. However, by the 1880s, both Southern and federal anti-Reconstruction groups had paved the way for the effective denial of political rights to African Americans. A combination of methods, both within and outside the boundaries of the constitution, such as coercion and violence, were employed to suppress the political power of the majority of African Americans, who predominantly resided in the South.

From the 1890s onwards, African Americans could only access significant political rights through migration to urban areas in the North, Midwest, and West, as opportunities for political participation in the South were severely limited. The migration of African Americans out of the South became a prominent aspect of their lives starting from the years 1910 to 1915. However, despite this migration, more than half of the African American population still chose to remain in the South during the following fifty years. For instance, only 10 percent had left the South by 1910, 23 percent by the 1920s, and 47 percent by the 1950s. This data indicates that while migration out of the South was a significant trend, a considerable portion of the African American population made the decision to stay in the region.

Du Bois' exhibit offered a crucial snapshot of African American life at the dawn of the twentieth century. His famous quote, "The problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line," captured the essence of racial issues in America then and remains prophetic even today. The book "W.E.B. Du Bois' Exhibit of American Negroes" takes readers through this groundbreaking exhibit, showcasing over 200 images and exploring the complex realities of Black life, both struggles and achievements.

Du Bois challenged harmful stereotypes, presented evidence of systemic discrimination, and preserved a lost archive of African American culture during that period. This book is highly recommended for those interested in African American history, and serves as a valuable companion piece to Provenzo's "The Illustrated Souls of Black Folk." As Benjamin Todd Jealous, president of the NAACP, states, Du Bois' pioneering work at the Exposition marked the beginning of a long and crucial journey towards equality (Martin L Kilson ,1976and Eugene F Provenzo,2023).

2.3 Langston Hughes biography

In the vibrant realm of creativity, James Mercer Langston Hughes graced the world with his presence on the first day of February in the year 1901, in the enchanting town of Joplin, Missouri. However, the tapestry of time was rewoven in 2018, revealing that his birth had actually occurred a year prior, in 1902. As fate would have it, his parents, James Nathaniel Hughes and Carrie Langston Hughes, embarked on separate paths when he was but a tender child, with his father seeking solace in the embrace of Mexico. It was his maternal grandmother, the wise and venerable Mary Sampson Patterson Leary Langston, who assumed the role of guardian and nurturer, her age nearing seventy when Hughes entered the world. This tender bond endured until he reached the tender age of thirteen, when he embarked on a new chapter of his life in Lincoln, Illinois. There, he dwelled with his mother and her husband, before destiny led them to settle in the vibrant city of Cleveland. It was amidst the enchanting landscapes of Lincoln that the seeds of poetic expression were sown within Hughes.

Upon completing his studies at the esteemed institution of higher learning, he embarked on a sojourn to the captivating lands of Mexico, followed by a transformative year at Columbia University. During this period, he toiled as an assistant cook, a launderer, and a humble busboy. The winds of adventure beckoned him to Africa and Europe, where he embarked on a voyage as a seaman, traversing the vast oceans. In the auspicious month of November in the year 1924, he found himself drawn to the enchanting embrace of Washington, D.C. It was here that Hughes unveiled his maiden book of poetry, The Weary Blues, a masterpiece that was published by the esteemed Alfred A. Knopf in 1926, with a captivating introduction penned by the illustrious Harlem Renaissance arts patron, Carl Van Vechten. The reception of this literary gem was a symphony of contrasting opinions, with some heralding the arrival of a prodigious new voice in the realm of poetry, while others dismissed Hughes's debut collection with a mere flick of their pens. Undeterred by the ebb and flow of criticism, he

persevered, and three years later, he adorned his academic journey with the laurels of success, completing his college education at the venerable Lincoln University in Pennsylvania. In the year 1930, his literary prowess reached new heights with the publication of his first novel, Not Without Laughter, a masterpiece that garnered the prestigious Harmon gold medal for literature.

Langston Hughes, a wordsmith of unparalleled brilliance, ascended to the pinnacle of the Harlem Renaissance, his poetic prowess illuminating the literary landscape, after his inaugural verse graced the pages of publication in 1921. Like a symphony of ink and emotion, his first anthology of poetry danced into existence five years thereafter, in 1926. A trailblazer in the realm of African American literature, Hughes etched his name in the annals of history as one of the first Black Americans to forge a livelihood from the quill and parchment. With an unyielding pen, he conjured a tapestry of poetry, prose, and plays that reverberated with the essence of the twentieth century African American experience, their reverberations still resounding with influence in the present day. Among his most celebrated verses are the ethereal "Dreams," the defiant "I, Too," and the haunting "Harlem." Moreover, his words found a home in the esteemed columns of the Chicago Defender, captivating readers with his poignant insights. Yet, as the petals of time unfurled, May 1967 witnessed the departure of this luminary, Hughes succumbing to the clutches of prostate cancer, leaving behind a legacy that continues to breathe life into the hearts of those who dare to dream (Langston: 20: 1926).

2.3.1 Early life

Langston Hughes, also known as James Mercer Langston Hughes, was born in Joplin, Missouri. The exact date of his birth is uncertain, with some sources stating February 1, 1901, while others believed it to be February 1, 1902. However, recent evidence discovered in 2018 suggests that he was born in 1901.

Hughes' parents, James Hughes and Carrie Langston, separated shortly after his birth, and his father relocated to Mexico. During his childhood, Hughes was primarily raised by his maternal grandmother, Mary, until she passed away when he was in his early teens. After her death, he went to live with his mother, and together they moved to various cities before eventually settling in Cleveland.During this period, Hughes started composing poetry for the first time. One of his teachers introduced him to the works of Carl Sandburg and Walt Whitman, who later became significant inspirations for Hughes. Additionally, he actively participated in his school's literary magazine and regularly submitted his poems to other publications, despite facing rejections) .(ibid).

2.3.2 Harlem Renaissance

Hughes completed his high school education in 1920 and then accompanied his father to Mexico for a year. In 1921, his first poem, titled "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," was published in The Crisis magazine and received great acclaim.

During the same year, Hughes came back to the United States and briefly attended Columbia University. In New York City, he swiftly became involved in the thriving cultural movement of Harlem, which is widely recognized as the Harlem Renaissance. IN 1922, the poet, who was still young at the time, decided to leave Columbia University and spent the next year doing different types of jobs in New York City. Afterwards, he found employment as a steward on a cargo ship that traveled to Africa and Spain. In 1924, he disembarked from the ship and briefly resided in Paris, where he continued to refine and release his poetry . (Langston: 1921)

2.3.3 Poems, Books

Hughes was among the pioneering African Americans who made a living as a writer. After his initial poem, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," was published in 1921, he went on to write hundreds more. Throughout his life, he published 16 volumes of poetry, beginning with The Weary Blues in 1926. These poetry books make up about half of the over 35 books that Hughes published. In addition to poetry, he also wrote collections of short stories, novels, plays, two autobiographies, and even books for children. His work primarily focuses on the experiences of ordinary African Americans in the twentieth century) .ibid

2.4 Langston Hughes theme

Langston Hughes' first published work, The Weary Blues (1925), featured a thought-provoking twelve-line poem called "Cross" that tackled the tragic mulatto theme. Two years later, in Fine Clothes to the Jew (1927), Hughes included another poem about racial mixing titled "Mulatto." In the summer of 1928, while working with the Hedgerow Theatre in Moylan Rose Valley, Pennsylvania, Hughes completed a full-length drama centered around the tragic mulatto theme, also titled Mulatto. This play premiered on Broadway in 1935 and ran for a whole year, followed by an eight-month national tour. Inspired by the play, Hughes wrote a short story called "Father and Son," which was published in The Ways of White Folks(1934), a year before the play's production In 1949, Hughes revisited the topic and transformed his play Mulatto into an opera called The Barrier, with the musical composition by the contemporary composer, Jan Meyerowitz. The opera made its debut at Columbia University in 1950. Additionally, in 1952, Hughes released another short story centered around the tragic mulatto theme titled "African Morning." This particular sketch can be found in his second collection of short stories, Laughing to Keep from Crying. In summary, for more than twenty-five years, the author has consistently explored this theme, repeatedly

returning to it and presenting his ideas through four different genres, ranging from a twelve-line poem to a full-length Broadway play.Before delving into Mr. Hughes' various depictions of the theme, it is important to establish a clear understanding of the term "tragic mulatto." In the context of American fiction and drama, this term refers to a character of mixed race, typically with a white father and a colored mother, who experiences hardships due to their biracial background. While there are legitimate and compelling portrayals of this character type in our literature, it is also prone to sensationalized exaggeration and distortion, resulting in the proliferation of stereotypes of the tragic mulatto. Professor Brown has extensively examined these stereotypes and their implications (Arthur P Davis, 1955).

2.5 Langston Hughes and his other works

The poem "**Dreams**" by Hughes was published in 1923 in the magazine The World Tomorrow, based in New York City.

2.5.1 "The Weary Blues" In 1925, Langston Hughes was employed as a busboy in a hotel restaurant in Washington, D.C., after returning to the United States the previous year and taking on various jobs. During his time as a busboy, he had a fortunate encounter with American poet Vachel Lindsay, whom he showed some of his poems to. Lindsay was greatly impressed by Hughes' work and used his connections to promote his poetry, ultimately helping him reach a wider audience.During this same year, Hughes' poem titled "The Weary Blues" won first prize in a literary competition held by Opportunity magazine. Additionally, he was granted a scholarship to attend Lincoln University, a historically Black institution located in southeast Pennsylvania.While studying at Lincoln, Hughes' poetry caught the attention of novelist and critic Carl Van Vechten. Van Vechten, utilizing his connections, played a crucial role in getting Hughes' first book of poetry, The

Weary Blues, published by Knopf in 1926. The book gained popularity and solidified both Hughes' poetic style and his dedication to exploring Black themes and heritage. (Langston: 25: 1923).

2.5.2 "I, Too" One of the poems included in The Weary Blues was "I, Too," which explored the connection between African Americans and the broader culture and society during the early 1900s. Certain portions of the poem have been permanently inscribed on a wall at the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C.In his work, Hughes was also a pioneer in incorporating jazz rhythms and dialect to portray the experiences of urban Black individuals. In 1927, he released a second collection of poetry titled Fine Clothes to the Jew. (Langston: 30: 1926)

2.5.3 "Not Without Laughter" After completing his studies at Lincoln in 1929, Hughes released his debut novel, Not Without Laughter. The novel gained enough popularity and financial success to convince Hughes that he could sustain himself as a writer.Throughout the 1930s, Hughes embarked on numerous lecture tours across the United States and also traveled to countries like the Soviet Union, Japan, and Haiti. He continued to write and publish both poetry and prose during this period. In 1934, he published his initial compilation of short stories titled The Ways of White Folks.

2.5.4 "Let America Be America Again" In July 1936, the author released one of his most renowned poems, titled "Let America Be America Again," in Esquire magazine. The poem explores the unfulfilled aspirations and desires of the underprivileged and marginalized in the country, while also conveying a hopeful belief that the American Dream will eventually become a reality. Hughes subsequently made revisions to the poem and included it in a collection of poems

called A New Song During the Spanish Civil War in 1937, he worked as a journalist reporting on the war for multiple American newspapers. (Arnold: 33: 2001)

Chapter Three

Analysis

3.1 "The Negro Speaks of River"

written by Langston Hughes in 1920, is a significant poem of the "Harlem Renaissance" literary movement. It explores the history of black people from the beginning of civilization to the present, highlighting both their triumphs, such as the construction of the Egyptian pyramids, and their horrors, like the experience of American slavery. The poem argues that the black "soul" has absorbed all of these historical experiences, resulting in a profound depth. It suggests that black cultural identity is continuous, spanning the violence and displacement of slavery to connect with the past, and emphasizes the often overlooked contributions of black people to human civilization .(George:20: 2007)

3.2 “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” Summary

I have had extensive knowledge of numerous rivers. I have encountered rivers that have existed since the beginning of time, predating the flow of blood in human veins.My inner being has grown profound, akin to the depths of the rivers I am acquainted with.I have swam in the Euphrates River during the early stages of human civilization, when even the sight of a sunrise was novel. I established my dwelling near the Congo River, and its gentle murmurs lulled me into slumber. I witnessed the grandeur of the Nile and contributed to the construction of the Pyramids on its banks. I also listened to the melodious tunes of the Mississippi River, as if it were singing, during Abraham Lincoln's journey to New Orleans. Moreover, I have observed the muddy surface of that river, resembling a person's chest, reflect the golden hues of the sunset.I have encountered a multitude of rivers: ancient and enigmatic rivers.My soul has grown profound, mirroring the depths of the rivers I have come to know. (ibid)

3.3 “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” Themes

"The Negro Speaks of Rivers" traces human civilization from its earliest beginnings to American slavery, highlighting the presence and contributions of black people throughout key moments in history. Despite centuries of oppression, the poem's speaker emphasizes the resilience of black cultural heritage. It argues that individuals of African descent have not only been witnesses to history, but also influential in shaping civilization. Ultimately, the poem serves as a tribute to the enduring strength of the black community.The speaker in the poem serves as a symbolic figure, as indicated by the title "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" rather than "A Negro…" (reflecting the language of the time when the poem was written). Through this representation, the speaker demonstrates how the black community as a whole should embrace and honor its history and culture.Describing themselves as a legendary figure, the speaker highlights the extensive nature of their experiences, which are said to encompass the entire history of black individuals. The speaker mentions having knowledge of ancient rivers and bathing in the Euphrates during its early days, a river associated with the beginnings of human civilization. By referencing these historical events, the speaker suggests that black people have played a significant role in shaping the world. This deep dive into history serves to demonstrate that the black experience is as old and significant as any other, fostering a strong sense of unity and connection among black individuals.The speaker in the poem acknowledges that they have knowledge of rivers that have existed longer than human blood has flowed in human veins, implying that black history predates human existence. This connection to the natural world can be seen as both problematic, due to racist ideologies that pit white civilizations against black populations, and as a source of wisdom and tranquility in the face of slavery and oppression. Despite the racist connotations, the speaker finds solace in the peacefulness of the Congo river, which lulls them to sleep.In addition to the speaker's extensive historical knowledge, they have also witnessed recent events, such as the "singing of the

Mississippi" – a river in America, far from the Euphrates, where "Abe Lincoln went down to New Orleans." This reference is to a well-known journey Lincoln took down the Mississippi as a young man, where he saw the horrors of slavery. The speaker uses these examples to illustrate the diversity of the black experience, from moments of success like building the pyramids to times of struggle like slavery and the Civil War. Throughout these moments, the black experience has played a significant role in shaping history.As the speaker describes these far-reaching and varied experiences, they emphasize that they are not isolated incidents but rather part of a continuous narrative, much like a river. Rivers symbolize continuity, unable to be broken into separate parts. Additionally, the speaker compares their experience to the depth of a river, indicating lasting endurance, resilience, and inner fortitude. Despite facing immense challenges, black individuals have shown perseverance throughout history. Similar to a river, the legacy of black history continues to move forward.This argument is particularly significant for the African American community for two interconnected reasons. Initially, the slave trade separated black individuals from their origins, traditions, families, and ultimately their past. However, the speaker argues that there is still a continuous history despite this disconnection. Additionally, American historical narratives have typically centered on white individuals, neglecting the experiences of black people. By showcasing the speaker's understanding spanning across different continents and time periods, the poem presents an alternative narrative that recognizes black history.The speaker believes that black identity and achievements are strong enough to overcome the divisions caused by slavery, allowing for a reconnection with ancestors and traditions. The poem celebrates the richness of black history and experience . (Richard. K. 85:1997)

3.4 Explanation and Analysis of “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.

The initial two lines of "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" introduce the main ideas and structure of the poem. The poem commences with the speaker directly engaging with the reader, discussing their personal encounters: "I’ve known rivers," the speaker declares. Initially, this may not appear to be particularly impressive or enlightening, as almost everyone has witnessed a river. However, throughout the ten lines of the poem, the speaker's seemingly ordinary statement will evolve into a powerful assertion about the cultural identity and history of black people. As the poem unfolds, the three words in the opening line, "I," "know," and "river," acquire new and expanded meanings.The transformation of the speaker starts in the second line of the poem, where they declare that there is something unique about these rivers. The lines have a similar structure: both begin with the repeated phrase "I’ve known rivers," which acts as a refrain throughout the poem. This prompts the reader to view the second line as an elaboration of the first line. To be more precise, the second line enhances the reader's comprehension of the "rivers." They are described as "ancient as the world"—in other words, as ancient as the earth itself.The comparison in the simile implies that the reader should not view the rivers as literal bodies of water, but rather consider their connection to other things, such as the history of the world. As the line continues, the speaker also compares the rivers to human life itself, noting that they are even older than the flow of blood in human veins.The second part of the second line employs synecdoche. The speaker is indicating that these rivers are older than the human species, but represents humans through one aspect of their bodies, the blood that circulates in their veins. This flowing blood resembles the movement of water in a river. In this manner, the speaker suggests that human beings are

similar to rivers, as they contain rivers within them.The first two lines of the poem are visually captivating: the first line is brief and concise, while the next line extends across the page with a total of 23 syllables. Both lines are complete and do not flow into the next (there is no enjambment). The reader also immediately notices that the poem lacks a specific rhythm and does not follow a rhyme scheme. In fact, the speaker intentionally avoids using rhyme for the majority of the poem. In other words, the poem is written in free verse. This presents a challenge: how can the poem evoke a musical and poetic feeling without a set rhythm or rhyme scheme? These lines suggest how the poem tackles this challenge by utilizing techniques like parallelism and refrain to create a musical quality. It also heavily relies on assonance and consonance. Line 2, in particular, is filled with 13 sounds that create a playfully pleasing auditory experience. However, the speaker mostly avoids using alliteration, possibly because it is closely associated with European poetry forms. This rejection of meter and rhyme could be interpreted as part of a larger rejection of white poetic traditions, as an effort to establish an independent black poetic voice that does not rely on white models to express black culture and identity. (Arnold:65: 2001)

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

The speaker values earthly traits more than humans who will come after. The speaker's spirit has become profound, like rivers, as mentioned in the last sentences of this part. It has embraced a rich history, intricate layers, and the flow through a river-filled landscape. The speaker's soul is akin to the ancient and longest rivers. This will influence the next stanza, where the speaker will traverse through numerous years.

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.

The speaker mentions several rivers that he visited and became familiar with in the following lines. It is important for readers to pay attention to the four lines in this paragraph that begin with "I." These first four lines describe the speaker's personal journey as he travels from the Euphrates to the "Mississippi".The speaker introduces the reader to the "Euphrates" River, which flows through southern Turkey and into Iraq. It is one of the longest rivers in the world. This body of water has a rich mythological and historical background. According to legend, the city of Babylon was built on its banks. It is closely connected to the Tigris River, together forming the Tigris-Euphrates river system. It is at this location that the speaker first encountered the young "dawns." This refers to the beginning of time or, at the very least, the dawn of civilization as we know it. The speaker then takes the reader to the Congo River, which is the second longest river in Africa. It flows through different countries, including the Republic of Congo, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Angola. The speaker builds his hut on the riverbanks and lets the river lull him to sleep, creating a personal connection with the river. In a similar way, the speaker is Intimately familiar with other bodies of water he encounters .In the following paragraphs, the speaker discusses the Nile, which is the longest river in the world. It flows from north to south in northern Africa. At the time, the speaker was working on the pyramids and would often gaze at the Nile. This places him among the slaves or peasants who served the Egyptian pharaohs. The Nile not only provides life to the region, but also adds to the wonder of the pyramids. By positioning himself in relation to these significant natural features, the speaker aligns himself with the important aspects of different eras.

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.

He then transitions to more recent history and focuses on the famous "Mississippi" River. While Abraham Lincoln traveled to New Orleans, he paid close attention to the sounds and movements of the Mississippi River. This refers to a specific journey that the 16th President of the United States embarked on, where he navigated a boat along the river during his youth. It was during this experience that he gained his initial understanding of the harsh realities of slavery. New Orleans, being one of the largest markets in the world, played a significant role in this journey. In the final sentence of this paragraph, the author describes witnessing the muddy riverbanks transforming into a radiant "golden" color as the sun set.

I've known rivers:

Ancient, dusky rivers.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

The poet revisits the opening lines of "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" in the final three lines of the poem. With a slight change in the middle, the lines remain mostly the same. He begins by stating, "I have known rivers," three times. These repetitions serve as a reminder of the extensive and diverse life he has experienced. Through his deep connection and loyalty to these bodies of water, he has witnessed some of the most significant historical events in the world's history. These rivers are described as "dusky" and "ancient," which adds a darker and mysterious undertone that reflects the wide range of experiences he has had. The speaker concludes by repeating the phrase, "My soul has become deep like the rivers." This statement is undeniably true, as he has witnessed far more than anyone could ever imagine .ibid

3.5 “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” Symbols

3.5.1 Rivers

In the poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," the mention of rivers at the beginning appears to refer to actual bodies of water. However, as the poem progresses, these rivers gain symbolic significance. While they are indeed real rivers, they also represent the cultures that have thrived and declined along their banks, such as the ancient Sumerian culture and the slave culture of the American south. Each river mentioned in the poem serves as a symbol or metonym for these cultures.On a broader scale, the rivers also symbolize human history. This symbolism reveals the speaker's understanding of history as a continuous and unbroken experience, stretching from the distant past to the present. Consequently, black identity is not solely defined by the traumas endured under slavery, Jim Crow laws, and American racism. Instead, it extends beyond these traumas to encompass the cultures and traditions that were disrupted by the slave trade. The "rivers" as symbols present a fundamentally hopeful perspective on black culture, demonstrating its strength and resilience in surviving the hardships of slavery and connecting black individuals to a past that might have otherwise been lost forever. (Bruce: 90:1993)

3.5.2 Human Blood in Human Veins

In the second line, the speaker characterizes the rivers they have encountered as being "older than the flow of human blood in human veins." This means that the rivers have existed for a longer time than the human species. The use of "blood" in this context represents human beings as a whole. Essentially, the speaker is stating that the rivers predate the existence of humans. This symbolism introduces an intriguing possibility that complicates the poem's depiction of the rivers. In other parts of the poem, the rivers represent specific human cultures and, on a broader scale, symbolize human history. However, here the speaker suggests that

the rivers should not solely be associated with human culture; they exist independently of, prior to, and outside of human beings. As a symbol, "human blood in human veins" signifies the limitations of humanity. It implies that the things described in the poem have an existence beyond their connection to human culture. Consequently, this grants the speaker a sense of wisdom and tranquility, causing their soul to deepen.

3.5.3 The Soul

The speaker in lines 3 and 10 of the poem claims that their soul has become deep like the rivers. This statement is the main point of the poem, suggesting that the speaker has absorbed the profound history and experiences that the rivers symbolize, a history that dates back to the beginning of human civilization. As a result, the speaker's soul takes on unique qualities. In Christianity, the soul is the part of a person that continues to exist after death and is judged by God, determining whether it goes to Heaven or Hell. Essentially, it is a personal and private aspect, representing the essence of an individual. It is shaped by the actions, both good and bad, that a person has taken throughout their life.

However, in "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," the speaker's soul appears to be much more expansive and encompassing. It not only encompasses the speaker's personal life but also the entire history of black culture. In this sense, the speaker's use of the word "soul" aligns with how it was used by the black sociologist W. E. B. DuBois in his influential work, The Souls of Black Folk, published in 1903. DuBois viewed the soul as not just an individual possession but as a symbol of black culture as a whole, representing the spirit and essence of the people. Therefore, when the speaker uses the word "soul" in lines 3 and 10, it not only refers to their personal experiences but also represents the experiences and identity of their culture. In other words, it serves as a symbol of that culture. (Christine:5: 1996)

3.6 Form, Meter, and Rhyme Scheme of “The Negro Speaks of Rivers”

3.6.1 Form

"The Negro Speaks of Rivers" is written in free verse, meaning it lacks a specific rhyme scheme or metrical pattern. The length of its lines varies, with some being short and others long. For example, the first line of the poem, "I've known rivers," consists of only four syllables, while the second line contains twenty-three. This variation in line length mirrors the movement of a river, sometimes energetic and fast, other times slow and gentle.Hughes also plays with the length of the stanzas in the poem. Stanzas 2 and 5 consist of just one line, while the central stanza extends to four lines. Stanzas 1 and 4, which repeat the refrain "I've known rivers," consist of two lines. This pattern creates a structural symmetry similar to that found in a blues song. Overall, the poem's flowing and flexible free verse lines allow Hughes to capture the historical complexity of the black experience in a poetic manner.Langston Hughes dedicated his career to finding ways to capture the depth and complexity of the black experience through literature. He often explored the blues and transformed it into poetry. "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" is a part of his ongoing effort to create unique black literary forms. It rejects the limitations of traditional European poetry in expressing the black experience and instead finds its closest literary connection to Walt Whitman's experiments with free verse, particularly in poems like "I Hear America Singing." However, Hughes's free verse goes even further in its flexibility, with its bold contrasts between very long and very short lines, which is more radical than Whitman's consistently long lines() .Cheryl A. 17: 2005)

3.6.2 Meter

"The Negro Speaks of Rivers" does not adhere to a specific meter but is composed in free verse. Consequently, the arrangement of stresses within each line fluctuates naturally. For example, the initial line encompasses two stresses, alternating

between an iambic pattern (a duh DUH rhythm) and a trochaic pattern (a DUH duh rhythm).

I’ve known | rivers

It is also completely feasible to interpret the initial foot as a spondee (with two stressed syllables).

I’ve known | rivers

The following line starts with a similar rhythm, but then deviates from it, occasionally adopting an iambic pattern and then abandoning 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 fixed pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables, the poem's rhythms flow freely, resembling the movement of a river. At times, the rhythm quickens and finds a steady beat, while at other times it slows down, becoming languid and indulgent. This effect can be observed in the second line, where a series of unstressed syllables swiftly glide by ("ancient | as the world"), before settling into a pattern of iambs ("and old- | er than | the flow"). Through this technique, the poem not only describes rivers, but also mimics their unique rhythms and the way they meander.

By rejecting the traditional meter commonly used in English poetry, such as iambic pentameter, the poem is able to explore and express a distinct set of poetic resources that align with black cultural traditions. However, the absence of a fixed meter does not mean that the poem lacks musicality. Instead, Hughes employs various poetic devices, such as refrain, parallelism, and anaphora, to infuse the poem with a sense of rhythm and music. These devices allow the poem to create its own music, its own rhythm, which emerges from its specific language rather than adhering to a predetermined metrical structure. Ibid.

3.6.3 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. (Bruce 1993)

3.6.4“ The Negro Speaks of Rivers” Speaker

The speaker in "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" is portrayed as a representative figure, as evident from the poem's title. Rather than being referred to as "A Negro," the speaker is presented as "The Negro," symbolizing their role as a model for the black community. The speaker exemplifies how the community should connect with its own history, both the painful experiences and the moments of triumph. The speaker's connection to this history is profound and unbroken. They were present during the earliest times of human civilization, symbolized by bathing in the Euphrates, a river in the Fertile Crescent. They also witnessed the

singing of the Mississippi when Abraham Lincoln traveled to New Orleans, a journey that exposed him to the horrors of slavery. The speaker's experiences encompass both ancient and recent history, including the achievements of black culture such as the construction of the pyramids, as well as the immense trauma of slavery.The speaker's personal experience implies multiple ideas simultaneously. Firstly, it highlights the significant role of black individuals in human civilization and emphasizes the importance of acknowledging their contributions. Secondly, it showcases the strength and endurance of black culture, which has managed to overcome the hardships of slavery that resulted in the separation of black people from their families, traditions, and homelands. As a representative figure, the speaker encourages the black community to embrace and be proud of this vitality and resilience, using their history as a means to establish their identity in the face of racism.ibid

3.6.5 "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" Setting

"The Negro Speaks of Rivers" explores a vast expanse of human history and geographical locations in just 10 lines. The speaker's earliest memories are set by the Euphrates, a river in the Fertile Crescent, which is often regarded as the birthplace of human civilization. The speaker fondly recalls bathing in the river during its youthful dawns. On the other hand, the speaker's more recent experiences occur on the Mississippi, after crossing an ocean and spanning several millennia. It is on this river that the speaker hears the melodic "singing" as Abe Lincoln travels along its course. In the midst of these significant moments, the speaker also mentions stopping at the Nile and Congo rivers in Africa. These rivers hold great cultural significance for the black community, as they were the sites of remarkable achievements such as the construction of pyramids and the establishment of the Kingdom of Kongo.

The poem encompasses the entirety of human history, from its earliest beginnings to the recent past, reflecting the vast presence of black people across the world, including the Middle East, Africa, and the Americas. This diverse range of time periods and locations serves to highlight the richness, continuity, and achievements of black culture. The speaker believes that black individuals should embrace this heritage with pride, while also urging white historians not to overlook or belittle it.

3.7 Literary and Historical Context of “The Negro Speaks of Rivers”

3.7.1 Literary Context

At the age of 17, Langston Hughes composed "The Negro Speaks of Rivers." It is said that while traveling by train from St. Louis to Mexico City to visit his father, Hughes experienced a moment of inspiration as the train crossed the Mississippi River, leading him to write the poem.

Regardless of the truth behind this story, the poem quickly gained immense popularity and became one of the most renowned works of the Harlem Renaissance. This literary movement thrived in the 1920s in Harlem, an area located in upper Manhattan. During this time, black artists, writers, and intellectuals emerged, creating distinctively black forms of literature and art. The literature of the Harlem Renaissance not only celebrates black life and traditions but also serves as a protest against the pervasive racism of the 1920s. Prominent literary figures of this movement include Hughes, Claude McKay, and Zora Neale Hurston.In "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," Hughes challenges the conventional elements of English poetry, such as meter and rhyme, which are often associated with white Europeans. Instead, the poem aims to create a unique literary voice that represents black culture.

Hughes draws inspiration from Walt Whitman's free verse style, which emerged in the 19th century. However, Hughes takes free verse to a more radical level than

Whitman, incorporating a greater variety of line lengths and stanza structures. By using a form closely associated with American poetry, Hughes asserts his identity as an American poet, equal to Whitman himself.This sets Hughes apart from other poets of the Harlem Renaissance, who experimented with European literary forms like the sonnet. For example, Claude McKay's Petrarchan sonnet "If We Must Die" argues that black writers can surpass European poetic giants like John Milton and Francesco Petrarch on their own terms. In contrast, Hughes believes that such competition is unnecessary and unproductive. He emphasizes the importance of developing an independent black poetic tradition that celebrates the vitality and endurance of black culture.Here, Hughes utilizes the free verse style that was developed by the American poet Walt Whitman in the 19th century. However, Hughes takes a more radical approach to free verse compared to Whitman, incorporating greater variation in line length and stanza structure. By employing a form closely associated with American poetry, Hughes asserts his identity as an American poet and emphasizes that he is just as much an American as Whitman, who is often regarded as the father of American poetry.

In contrast to other poets of the Harlem Renaissance, Hughes diverges from white poetic traditions. Poets like Claude McKay, for example, experimented with European literary forms such as the sonnet, as seen in McKay's Petrarchan sonnet "If We Must Die." McKay's poem presents a different argument in terms of form, asserting that black writers are capable of surpassing European poetic giants like John Milton and Francesco Petrarch on their own turf. On the other hand, Hughes suggests that such competition is unnecessary and ultimately unproductive. According to Hughes, it is more important to cultivate an independent black poetic tradition that celebrates the vitality and enduring nature of black culture.

3.7.2 Historical Context

"The Negro Speaks of Rivers" encompasses a vast historical background, spanning from the beginning of human civilization to the era of American slavery. Its historical context can be seen as nothing less than the entirety of human history. By delving into such a wide-ranging context, the poem challenges the prevailing historical narratives of its time.

These narratives, predominantly constructed by white historians, often overlooked or downplayed the achievements of black individuals throughout history. In fact, the German philosopher G.W.F. Hegel asserted in his Philosophy of History (1837) that the African continent, and consequently black people, existed outside the realm of human history and made no contributions to the political and cultural development of human society. The poem urges its readers to reevaluate this historical perspective and acknowledge the significant role of black people in shaping human history and culture.By doing so, the poem addresses a specific historical period: the early 20th century in America. During the time the poem was written, in the 1920s, numerous black individuals were leaving the American South due to its discriminatory laws and racist violence, seeking new lives in cities like New York and Chicago. Upon arriving in the North, they discovered vibrant black communities, but also encountered the same racism and limitations they had hoped to escape in the South) .Richard k. 1997)

Many of these migrants were only one or two generations removed from slavery, which meant that the memory of slavery was still fresh in these communities. Slavery had forcibly separated people from their traditions, languages, and religions. One of the main challenges faced by black communities was to rebuild a sense of identity and reclaim the aspects of their history that had been destroyed or hidden by slavery. "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" endeavors to tackle this challenge by presenting a speaker whose experiences include slavery, but also extend far beyond it. Ibid.

Chapter Four
Conclusions

4.1 Conclusions

“The Negro Speaks of Rivers” by Langston Hughes delves into the concept of identity within the African American experience. It explores the speaker's connection to history, resilience, cultural continuity, unfulfilled promise, and hope and determination. The speaker identifies with the rivers, symbolizing a deep-rooted connection to their ancestral homeland in Africa. They highlight their ability to overcome obstacles and endure hardship, showcasing the resilience inherent in African American identity. The image of rivers singing their ancient song signifies a rich cultural heritage passed down through generations. However, there is a bittersweet undertone as the speaker yearns to be fully recognized and accepted within American society. This reveals a sense of incompleteness and exclusion from the national narrative. Despite these challenges, the poem ends on a hopeful note, with the speaker determined to claim their rightful place and have their voice heard.

The poem suggests that the struggles and triumphs of Black individuals are interconnected and rooted in a shared history.The image of rivers also symbolizes the interconnectedness of different cultures and civilizations. The speaker mentions the Euphrates, the Congo, and the Nile, highlighting the global reach of Black identity and the contributions of Black people to human history. By using the image of rivers, Hughes emphasizes the depth and richness of Black identity. The poem suggests that this identity is not defined solely by the present moment or by external circumstances, but by a deep and enduring sense of self that is rooted in history, culture, and resilience.

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