

**Selections:**

1. "Backside" - Chika Sagawa
2. "The Fish" - Marianne Moore
3. "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" - Langston Hughes

**Unifying Themes or Motifs:**

- Life, death, mortality, moving on, cyclical nature of life
- Movement, passage of time
- Bodies of water, aquatic imagery, nature

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**"Backside"**

Chika Sagawa

Translated by Sawako Nakayasu

Night eats color,  
Flower bouquets lose their fake ornaments.  
Day falls into the leaves like sparkling fish  
And struggles, like the lowly mud,  
The shapeless dreams and trees  
Nurtured outside this shriveled, deridable despair.  
And the space that was chopped down  
Tickles the weeds there by its feet.  
Fingers stained with tar from cigarettes  
Caress the writhing darkness.  
And then the people move forward.

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## “The Fish”

Marianne Moore, 1887 - 1972

wade  
through black jade.  
Of the crow-blue mussel-shells, one keeps  
adjusting the ash-heaps;  
opening and shutting itself like

an  
injured fan.  
The barnacles which encrust the side  
of the wave, cannot hide  
there for the submerged shafts of the

sun,  
split like spun  
glass, move themselves with spotlight swiftness  
into the crevices—  
in and out, illuminating

the  
turquoise sea  
of bodies. The water drives a wedge  
of iron through the iron edge  
of the cliff; whereupon the stars,

pink  
rice-grains, ink-  
bespattered jelly fish, crabs like green  
lilies, and submarine  
toadstools, slide each on the other.

All  
external  
marks of abuse are present on this  
defiant edifice—  
all the physical features of

ac-  
cident—lack  
of cornice, dynamite grooves, burns, and  
hatchet strokes, these things stand  
out on it; the chasm-side is

dead.  
Repeated  
evidence has proved that it can live  
on what can not revive  
its youth. The sea grows old in it.

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## “The Negro Speaks of Rivers”

Langston Hughes, 1902 – 1967

I’ve known rivers:

I’ve known rivers ancient as the world and older than the  
flow of human blood in human veins.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.  
I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.  
I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.  
I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln  
went down to New Orleans, and I’ve seen its muddy  
bosom turn all golden in the sunset.

I’ve known rivers:

Ancient, dusky rivers.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

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## Close-reading of “The Negro Speaks of Rivers”

### Title and Syntax

The title, “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” is important to note. Although the subject of the title will be discussed below in relation to the rest of the poem, the title features an interesting choice of the *prepositional particle* “of.” The other particle that could have substituted for “of” is “about,” but then the title would have read too didactically or “preachy.” Rather, the particle, “of,” evokes the notion of testimony, and in conjunction with the time’s commonly used racial term of “Negro,” the poem’s title expresses a testimony of race.

It is important to note that “Negro” fell out of usage as a “proper” term in the 1970s, and although we may assume Hughes could have borrowed its racial connotations from Martin Luther King Jr.’s speech “I Have a Dream” in 1963, the poem was written around the 1920s.

Langston Hughes’ poem begins with the line: “I’ve known rivers:” The “I” seems to be “The Negro” that is referred to in the work’s title, but the particular inclusion of the *particle*, “The,” indicates that the titular figure is of some significance. Considering the temporal flexibility the speaker speaks from, Hughes choice to specify “the Negro” may be to create a figure that is representative of black people in America.

The first two lines of Hughes’ poem starts with the *perfect present tense* construction of “I’ve known.” Subsequently, the choice in tense conveys a sense of history, as if the speaker is recalling a memory from their position in the present. Afterwards, the poem shifts into the *simple past tense* with “I bathed.” This temporal transportation into the

past is contained within the framework of the *perfect present tense* which develops an ongoing relationship with the present time. The third stanza is dominated by the *simple past tense* until the middle of the ninth line where Hughes bucks the trend by shifting back to the *perfect present tense*. The poem continues in this tense until its end. Subsequently, the tenses effectively create a sense that the past is continually informing the present identity of the Negro.

The colons signify that the following ideas are important. Hughes places a colon after the first line, and then he places a colon after the final *repetition* of "I've known rivers". The second colon conveys that the following idea of the Negro's soul being deep as a river once again, but this time, the idea has been expanded upon due to the river-based *allusions* Hughes has previously presented.

### Repetition

- ❖ "I've known rivers"
  - Hughes decision to repeat this phrase in the first and second line may be inspired by Blues music which features the same type of repetition. Therefore, Hughes imparts a sense of musicality to the poem as if the Negro is singing. The line is repeated again towards the end of the poem.
- ❖ "I"
  - The *repetition* of "I" in the third stanza evokes simultaneously, the voice of one and the voice of many. Each line begins with "I," and the consecutive executions of these lines contributes to a continually layering effect of voices across time or an emphasis of the speaker's authority over their experience.
  - If we are to consider the effect of multiple voices, then the feeling of a "shared experience" is communicated via the singular pronoun "I." The *repetition* of the singular "I" illustrates the complex relationship of black identity with the grand scope of history.
  - In summary, the titular Negro's identity is a cumulation of the knowledge of all the historical sites Hughes has irrigated into the body of his poem.

### Allusions

- ❖ "the Euphrates"
  - Hughes mentions the Euphrates, a significant river in the history of Western Asia. The listing of rivers begins with the Euphrates due to its pivotal role in the development of Mesopotamia which is often referred to as "the cradle of civilization" because of the fertile lands that resulted in the emergence of the region's urban centers.
  - Mesopotamia is sandwiched by the Euphrates as well as another river, the Tigris. However, Hughes' decision to omit the Tigris may be in part due to the *internal rhyme* that resonates between the preceding verb of "bathed" and "Euphrates."

- ❖ “the Congo”
  - Hughes refers to the Congo, the second largest river in Africa. As a result, he situates a part of Negro identity within Africa as well.
- ❖ “the Nile”
  - The Nile is another African river, but its geographical relation to the pyramids connects “The Negro” to the highs of human achievement as well as the workers who slaved away at their creation. However, recent scholarship is debating whether the workers were slaves at all. Some posit that they were honoured paid labourers who were buried nearby the sacred pharaoh tombs.
- ❖ “singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln went down to New Orleans”
  - Hughes alludes to a teenaged Abraham Lincoln and his 1828 trip on a flatboat down the Mississippi River. Lincoln traveled all the way to New Orleans, exposing him to the Deep South’s slave market. His visit to New Orleans would become his first experience in a big city, but it was the slavery he witnessed that would eventually lead him to issue the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 during his presidency.
- ❖ “golden”
  - Golden could refer to the “golden era” of the Harlem Renaissance, but at its base, the description of a river tinted by sunset is a beautiful image.
  - Golden serves as an interesting contrast to the earlier image of the Mississippi’s “muddy bosom” and of the “Ancient, dusky rivers.”

### **Analogies**

- ❖ “rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of human blood in human veins.”
  - In these lines, Hughes associates the rivers with the image of flowing blood. Throughout the poem, rivers are used to trace the identity of the Negro, and as a result, blood also adorns racial connotations.
- ❖ “My soul has grown deep like the rivers.”
  - The Negro’s soul’s depth is comparable to the depth of the aforementioned rivers. Hughes repeats this line as the last line of the poem. The *repetition* of the line is coloured by the references to the rivers, and consequently, the idea the line was originally presented with is now expanded with those *allusions*.

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## Resources for “The Negro Speaks of Rivers”

- **“Langston Hughes reads The Negro Speaks of Rivers”**
  - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8cKDOGHghMU>
- **My Soul Has Grown Deep Like the Rivers: Langston Hughes at 100**
  - Online exhibit featuring images, video, and audio of Langston Hughes. Requires Adobe Flash (which needs to be segued out for the love of God).
  - <http://brbl-archive.library.yale.edu/exhibitions/langstonhughes/web.html>
- **Harlem Renaissance - PBS**
  - Small resource about “the cultural, social, and artistic explosion” of the Harlem Renaissance that spanned from 1918 to the mid-1930s. Langston Hughes was one of the many artists associated with the movement.
  - [https://www.pbs.org/wnet/jimcrow/stories\\_events\\_harlem.html](https://www.pbs.org/wnet/jimcrow/stories_events_harlem.html)
- **The Blues - PBS**
  - Lesson plan from PBS that revolves around Blues music. Insightful information about the lyrical format of Blues music may supplement the poem’s reading.
  - <http://www.pbs.org/theblues/classroom/intlyrics.html>
- **“Langston Hughes wrote a children’s book in 1955”**
  - Interesting article about Langston Hughes’ children’s book, *First Book of Jazz*. A link to the book is also featured since it was scanned and uploaded onto Flickr.
  - <https://www.vox.com/2015/4/2/8335251/langston-hughes-jazz-book>
- **Beyond Bourbon St. - “Abraham Lincoln in New Orleans - Episode #40”**
  - Podcast that features historian, Richard Campanella. Campanella is the author of *Lincoln in New Orleans: The 1828-1831 Flatboat Voyages and Their Place in History*. In the podcast, Campanella discusses life in New Orleans throughout the late 1820s and early 1830s and traces Abraham Lincoln’s trip down the Mississippi.
  - <http://beyondbourbonst.com/abraham-lincoln/>