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“The Negro Speaks of Rivers”
Langston Hughes

Speaker: In this poem, the speaker is someone who seems to be indigenous to Africa, and familiar with its natural features. This familiarity consoles an intimacy with mind and the inherence the speaker has with his heritage.

Addressee: The addressee seems rather non-specific. He is not directing his speech towards anyone; the use of “I” and “my” in nearly every line of the poem denotes a closed and again intimate reflection of him/her self.

Situation: The poem takes place in Africa, where the speaker is probably indigenous to. When he/she speaks of the Mississippi River, the reader is informed that the speaker also is familiar with the United States. “I’ve seen its muddy bosom turn all golden in the sunset” implies that the speaker was there when “Abe Lincoln went down to New Orleans”. This is obviously pointing toward Lincoln’s freedom of the African American slaves. The reader is now able to realize that the speaker in the poem was from Africa and brought to the United States (most likely as a slave).

Tone: Hearing this poem from the film that our class viewed in class gives more insight as to how the poem is read aloud. It is stern, cogent, and callous. Timelessness and history are also parts of this poem. “I’ve known rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of human blood in human veins” represents an air of primal, primordial essence. Hughes establishes identity throughout the entire poem as well. All African Americans throughout time are connected in unity with one another; they together share elements- good and bad- of all time periods.

Diction: The use of the word “deep” in the lines “My soul has grown deep with the rivers” signifies an enduring atmosphere throughout time. As the rivers deepen with time, so does his soul. He has experienced strength, and connection with his heritage, no matter where he goes. “I bathed in the Euphrates” and “I built my hut near the Congo” is a way of living; it is only natural from a person of that origin to practice those customs. “I’ve known rivers: Ancient, dusky rivers” allows the reader to understand that the speaker has experienced both life in Africa, but also life with slavery and racism. He will carry this pain forever, as if it is an imprint left upon his soul. The speaker has become everything the poem says.

Metaphor: Hughes uses the muddy rivers as a representation of his race. “My soul has grown deep like the rivers” is a metaphor to parallel with the wisdom of a sage-like figure. “Muddy” creates the image of an African American. Also it implies, once again, the theme of his unified historical background and origin. Experience and the notion of

the beginning of life is embodied in the line "...older than the flow of human blood in human veins".

Symbolism: In the line "...and I've seen its muddy bosom turn all golden in the sunset" the word muddy signifies slavery; mud is unclear and murky- the times of slavery were soiled and smeared for the African Americans who endured that treatment. "...golden in the sunset" represents freedom and sovereignty of those who were slaves. Also, Hughes develops comfort and ease in the line "I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep". Being lulled to sleep creates an image of a baby being rocked to sleep or a child being read a bedtime story. You can tell that the speaker is comfortable and secure where he lives in the Congo.

Imagery: Hughes uses imagery throughout his poem to create a linking appeal for the reader. Every time he uses the word "river", the reader cannot help but picture a flowing body of water in their head. Also, "...the flow of human blood in human veins" is also used correspondingly to the rivers. When Hughes says "Mississippi" and "Abe Lincoln", one involuntarily imagines a large flowing river and a bearded man in a black suit and top hat. "Ancient, dusky rivers" portrays sort of a bottomless, powerful river that seems to never have an end of flowing. When Hughes states "My soul has grown deep like the rivers." I picture a man of his decent just standing tall and proud for what he is, where he came from, what he has yet to become. The use of imagery is quite powerful and intense in a sense that it aides the reader with understanding the poem.

Repetition: The use of repetition in this poem echoes the importance of union and connection with (Hughes') heritage. "I've known rivers" produces a quintessence of experience and being wise. In addition, the use of "I" recapitulates that the speaker is articulating the many elements of the poem through his point of view, which in reality is the general perception of his people.

Intent/Purpose: Bringing together all of the element of close reading, we are able to identify the general meaning of the poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" is all about looking back on the common things that African Americans share with one another, no matter what point in time. Hughes retraces the original source of humanity to his native grounds. By reading, we are essentially given a historical overview of African Americans. They were at once free, when living in African. Then brought to America, they experienced racism and slavery. Once again, they were freed by Abraham Lincoln. The sense of regained freedom tops another facet of this preceding history. Wisdom and astuteness are also dynamic in this poem. Just the sole repetition of "I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of human blood in human veins" carries a significance and more so an emphasis of humanity itself and the bond that his people have and will share forever. Again, as the rivers deepen with time, so does the black man's soul. He has become wise and gained experience throughout time.