

# Langston Hughes: Star of the Harlem Renaissance

**“I could take the  
Harlem night  
and wrap  
around you,  
Take the neon  
lights and make  
a crown . . .”  
- “Juke Box Love  
Song”**

1902-1967

Langston Hughes was the biggest star of the Harlem Renaissance. He produced an astonishing amount of writing in his lifetime: 16 books of poetry, 20 plays, 7 collections of short stories, 3 autobiographies, and 2 novels as well as opera librettos, movie scripts, and children’s stories.

James Mercer Langston Hughes was born in Joplin, Missouri. His parents split up soon after, and Hughes grew up all over the Midwest. He enrolled in Columbia University in New York City but dropped out after a year. After that, he worked as a sailor and traveled the world.

Hughes Poem “The Weary Blues,” which was written after a visit to a Harlem nightclub was the first poem to use blues music form. When his first book of poetry, also called “The Weary Blues,” was published in 1926, the 24-year-old was suddenly a celebrity. By the time of his death in 1967, he was known as “The Poet Laureate of Harlem.”



# *The Negro Speaks of Rivers*

## **Background**

One of Hughes's poetic innovations was to draw on the rhythms of black musical traditions such as jazz and blues, but in “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” it's the heritage of Negro spirituals which is recalled by the poem's majestic imagery and sonorous repetitions. Written when Hughes was only 17 as he travelled by train across the Mississippi, “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” is a beautiful statement of strength in the history of black people, which Hughes imagines stretching as far back as ancient Egypt and further into Africa and the cradle of civilization. The poem returns at the end to America in a moment of optimistic alchemy when he sees the "muddy bosom" of the Mississippi "turn all golden in the sunset."

# *The Negro Speaks of Rivers*

## **Voice**

Written in the first-person voice, the poem begins, “I’ve known rivers.” The “I” is a collective voice of black people from ancient times (3000 b.c.e.) to the present. The narrator's voice speaks of bathing in the Euphrates, building a hut near the Congo, raising pyramids by the Nile, and watching the sun set on the Mississippi. The refrain “My soul has grown deep like the rivers” links the movement, endurance, and power of the great rivers to black history.

The repeated “I,” beginning seven of the ten lines, focuses the reader on the narrator, the black person who speaks of rivers, and on the effects of the tie between his history and the rivers.

# *The Negro Speaks of Rivers*

## **Imagery**

The primary image of “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” is water; its function as the river of time is to trace the heritage and past of the African American. The flowing, lyrical lines, like water, are charged with meaning, describing what the river has meant to black people in America. Hughes’s poetic ability and technical virtuosity are nowhere as evident as in this short poem, which formed the basis for his early acceptance as a brilliant poet. Hughes uses the repeated line “My soul has grown deep like the rivers” to emphasize the way rivers symbolize not only the physical history of the African American but the spiritual history (“my soul”) as well. The river is also a symbol of the strength of black people as survivors who move through history. Finally, the rivers reflect the direct path of blacks to America.

The entire poem is based on an extended metaphor comparing the heritage of the African American to the great rivers of the world. The poet reveals the relationship between the river and the lives of black people, starting with a river known to be important during the earliest great civilizations and ending with a river on which slaves were transported, to be bought and sold in the slave markets of America.

# *The Negro Speaks of Rivers*

## **Theme**

1. The immortality of the soul
2. Pride in one's history