

The negro speaks of rivers langston hughes literature review

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What does the speaker mean when he says, “ I’ve known rivers.”?

‘ The Negro Speaks of Rivers’ by Langston Hughes was first published in 1921 and is a very profound poem in which Hughes seems to speak as an African American (certainly not a white European) Everyman. In order to understand what the poem means, it is necessary to consider the importance of rivers in human culture and civilization, but also the very broad sweep of human history over several thousand years. In pre-historic times human settlements had to be located next to rivers: they provided water for cleaning, drinking and cooking; and the rivers could be used to water plants and to carry away human garbage. Water is needed for seeds to germinate, but it can also be destructive. Even today human beings have a complex relationship with water: we have wishing wells and there are many fountains all over the world in which it is common to throw coins: for our prehistoric ancestors throwing valuable things into rivers or water was a way to please the river gods.

Hughes also mentions specific rivers by name, and this is done deliberately to evoke certain mental associations. In addition, rivers can be destructive when they flood and destroy human buildings. In Christian symbolism (indeed in many cultures) rivers have a clear symbolic function and during the era of slavery in the Southern United States, rivers were used to transport slaves.

Hughes’s non-European Everyman says that he “ bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.” (line 4) The Euphrates valley is seen by many archaeologists as the dawn of human civilization as we know it – when early

man first stopped hunting and gathering and began to build cities. The Euphrates valley is often referred to popularly as the cradle of civilization – the first cities, the first fixed social organization, the first architecture, art and writing. The next river to be mentioned is the Congo which runs through central Africa, and Hughes may be reminding us that a thousand years ago African civilization was as advanced as European civilization at the time. Then he tells us, “ I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.” (line 6) This is a crucial line. On the one hand, the mention of the pyramids reminds us of the glories of Egyptian civilization (again non-white, non – European), but also makes us think of the Jews held captive as slaves and made to build the pyramids. Under the system of slavery in America, slaves had been encouraged to embrace Christianity and the Biblical story they found the most evocative was that of Moses, leading the Jewish slaves of Egypt to freedom and the promised land. In this story they found hope for their own eventual emancipation. Hughes also mentions the Mississippi – an American river and a major transport route in the era of slavery. ‘ To be ‘ sold down the river’ originally meant to be sold by your owner and possibly being separated from your wife and children; in addition, conditions for African American slaves in the deep south (towards which the Mississippi flows) were very brutal.

So what does the speaker in the poem mean when he says, “ I’ve known rivers.”? As I argued above he is an Everyman – proud of his roots, proud to African American, proud and aware that human civilization began outside Europe; aware of the importance of the Moses story in African American cultural life; aware that rivers bring life and irrigate, but also that they can

take you to brutality and oppression like the Mississippi. He is taking a huge view of human history and is also suggesting that, despite all the rivers he has known, and their contradictory natures, the human spirit will always live on.

Works Cited

Hughes, Langston. ' The Negro Speaks of Rivers.' In Perkins, George and Barbara. The American Tradition in Literature. Volume Two. 12th edition. New York: Mc Graw-Hill. Print.