



Language Arts



Earth Day: Every
Day for Everybody



Below is a short poem by Langston Hughes along with some discussion questions to get your students interested in doing close readings of literature. The poem was published in 1921 when Hughes was only 17 years old.

The Negro Speaks of Rivers

Langston Hughes

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.

Questions for further discussion

1. Is this really a nature poem, or is it about something else? *Perhaps mention allusions to slavery and the subject ("I") as not one person but as an entire people*
2. Analyze the progression of rivers from the Euphrates to the Mississippi. What is Hughes doing here? *Suggest the possibility of a chronological progression from the beginning of human time with the Euphrates ("dawns were young") to the Emancipation Proclamation and the Mississippi*



3. Why does this poem focus on rivers? Consider the beginning stanza – the focus on their age and their comparison to human blood. How does all of this relate to the poem’s meaning?
4. Why does Hughes use the word “dusky” in the second-to-last line? What does “dusky” mean?
5. Discuss the line “My soul has grown deep like the rivers”. Why does Hughes repeat it, and why does he separate it from the rest of the poem? What does it mean? *Suggest the possibility that “deep” refers not only to depth, but to age*

