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An Ancient People

Langston Hughes, born in 1902 and died in 1967, wrote some of the most well know works during the Harlem Renaissance. His poem, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," is one his writings from this time period. The poem, if literally interpreted is about rivers, but it holds a much deeper meaning to a trained eye and an empathetic soul.

The literal portion of the poem uses some common literary devices, such as repetition. This is shown in lines one and ten, "I've known rivers." It is also apparent with "My soul has grown deep like the rivers" in lines four and twelve. This repetition adds a crucial overall meaning to the poem, both the blatant and the subliminal.

The author wrote in a more profound meaning into this work though. Telling of how Black people have played a key role throughout history. Such as in Egypt shown "I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it", line six. It also states that they were there from the very beginning, in the Cradle of Humanity, given in line five with "I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young." Showing this is what the true meaning of the poem is about.

In addition to being around since the beginning, Hughes also show that the Negro people have seen the biggest changes through out all history. A major situation they watched, and were the main subject of, was slavery; represented in line eight, "...the singing of the Mississippi..." with the Mississippi River being a symbol of slavery. The

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changed they (Negros) witnessed was the “freeing” of the slaves, this can be interpreted from line seven “and I’ve seen its (the Mississippi River) muddy bosom turn all golden in the sunset.” The sunset could be the ending of slavery and the “golden bosom” is the new age that may in sue from their new gained “freedom.”

It is with the combination of simple poetic devices and an extremely deep inner meaning, that “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” was one of Langston Hughes’ better known poems. Not only being one of his well known works, it is a very good example of the writings that came out of the Harlem Renaissance. So then, if poetry speaks to the soul, then no work from the time could ever fall upon deaf ears.