

# The Negro Speaks of Rivers Literary Device

Writer: Langston Hughes | Generated: Jan 26, 2026

## Symbols

**Rivers :** Hughes uses rivers as symbols of the old history of black people, their pride, and their struggle. In this poem, the poet says that he has known rivers.

***“I’ve known rivers ancient as the world...”***

It means the poet is a part of the history of human civilization. The entire black African-American race is a part of the history of human civilization. This is why he says that he has bathed in the Euphrates. He has built a hut near the Congo to live in comfort. He has built the great pyramids upon the Nile. So, from these rivers, the poet learns that the black people have been present from the start of human history. Hence, the rivers become symbols of the rich history of the black people and their pride. Hughes also mentions the Mississippi River to remind us of the struggles of black slaves. So here, this river becomes a symbol of struggle.

## Figures of Speech

### Simile

A simile is a figure of speech that compares two different things using like or as.

Example: ***“My soul has grown deep like the rivers.”***

Here, the poet compares his soul to deep rivers. It means that his, and the soul of the black race, is old, wise, and full of experience, just like the rivers that have flowed for ages.

### Synecdoche

Synecdoche means using a part to represent the whole, or the whole to represent a part.

Example: ***“I’ve known rivers.”***

Here, the “rivers” stand for the long history and experiences of the whole Black race.

### Personification

Personification gives human qualities to non-human things.

Example: ***“I heard the singing of the Mississippi...”***

Here, the river is personified — it is described as if it can sing.

### **Allusion**

Allusion means a reference to something famous from history, religion, or literature. The poem alludes to ***“Abe Lincoln”*** and the famous trip Lincoln took down the Mississippi as a young man. This allusion reminds us of the struggles of the Negro slaves on the banks of the Mississippi River.

### **Assonance**

Assonance is the repetition of vowel sounds in nearby words.

Example: ***“I’ve known rivers ancient as the world...”***

Here, the short “a” sound in “ancient” and “as” makes the line smooth and musical. It gives a flowing sound like a river.