The Negro Speaks Of Rivers Essay, Research Paper

THE NEGRO SPEAKS OF RIVERS

1. How does the title affect your reading of and response to the poem?

2. What is the poem about?

I could only understand the meaning of the title of the poem The Negro Speaks of Rivers after I gave my first opinion about it to my English professor. The poem has a simple, yet carefully chosen use of language, but the intricate ideas and the message the poem sends to the readers surprised me.

My first impression about the title and the poem itself was that the author wrote about the memoirs of a captured slave. The surprising factor was that Hughes wrote about different Negro societies and their presence in history.

When Hughes wrote the second line of his poem I ve known rivers as ancient as the world , he wanted to show the readers that the different Negro societies were present since the first days of the early civilizations. The word river was used to symbolize the paths of each society and their geographical locations in the world. Pay attention when Hughes mentioned the Euphrates, the Congo, the Nile, and the Mississippi. The names represent the different times in history and the geographical location of each society mentioned in the poem.

With all simplicity, the poem is a powerful message to the reader as well as a summary of the history of the Negro.

3. What makes the poem interesting to read?

Simplification was the key to the poem s appeal. It contributed to the appeal of the title and the message the author wanted to send to his readers. Hughes used his words and ideas carefully to elaborate his poem, but the way he simplified thousands of years of history in only ten lines of poem was the most significant attribute to his work.

This simplification was clear in lines six and seven where I could see the transition of times from the ancient Egypt (approximately 2000 3000 B.C) to America in the mid 1800 s. These two lines gave me a brief idea of the social and cultural changes that the Negro underwent, but Hughes didn t have setup the poem in a formal manner nor describe the transition to capture the reader s attention.

4. Who is the speaker? What role does the speaker have in the poem?

Another interesting characteristic about the poem is that it doesn t have only one speaker; it has millions. Hughes surprised the reader once again with another simplification. This time he combined the voices of millions of individuals from the different societies in one single voice telling a story.

This story captured the different moments in history lived by each society. The first societies described their freedom and innocence when they said, I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young. Then, a new society described its moments of glory when it ruled the world; I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it. The new generation, however, didn t tell a beautiful story as the others did. But the outcome was one of hope, 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.

This particular line described the fall to slavery and the new freedom achieved with the Emancipation Proclamation, by Abraham Lincoln, on April 16th, 1862. The pronoun I in each sentence to represented each society as a whole, not as individuals. Again, the careful use of simple words in the poem was effective to describe to the reader what Hughes wanted to express in the voices of each society.

5. What effect does the poem have on you as a reader? Do you think the poem intended to have such effect?

The poem has given me a new perspective towards the Negro and its culture, as well as the difficulties that they have endured for centuries. The author s intention was to create the same reaction in the readers. He wanted the readers to understand the circumstances that led to the fall of the ancient societies who ruled the world at one point, and visualize the new perspective born with the new generations born with the Emancipation Proclamation.

I ve known rivers:/ Ancient, dusky rivers., is the voice of the new generations describing the history of their forefathers to the readers, and when Hughes wrote, My soul has grown deep like the rivers, he wanted to tell the reader that the culture of the Negro is as strong as the river currents, and that each river in the poem represents the different Negro cultures and their influence in the world today. These two lines summarize the poem, and one could say that they are part of the closing statements of an essay.

6. What is distinctive about the poet s use of language? Which words especially contribute to the poem s effect?

The most distinctive characteristic about the poem was the use of simple words to express it s complexity. Even with the use of simple words, the idea presented by Hughes were carefully put on paper so the reader would be able to capture the message Hughes wanted to send.

When he wrote and I ve seen it s muddy bosom turn all golden in the sunset, Hughes described the new beginning in lives of the Negro when Abraham Lincolns freed the slaves. The word muddy not only represented the muddy waters of the Mississippi, but also the uncertain moments in the history of the Negro.

Bosom was chosen to symbolize the hearts of the slaves, and turn all golden in the sunset was the new feeling of freedom as well as the new life the Negro would have from that moment on.