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## Langston Hughes and Geography: A Poet in Time and Place

High (9<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup> grade)

Time required: 40-50 minutes

Specific recommendation: AP United States History

### Goals/Objectives:

- Compare/contrast point of view in two texts from *The Crisis*
- Identify how the music of “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” supports the text

### Common Core Standards:

- RH.11-12.7 Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media in order to address a question or solve a problem
- RH.11-12.1 Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, connecting insights gained from specific details to an understanding of the text as a whole.
- W.11-12.1 Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence

### Materials:

- **Song of America Links**

Basic Musical Elements handout: <https://songofamerica.net/downloads/basic-musical-elements-handout/>

Song of America “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” song page:

<http://songofamerica.net/song/negro-speaks-of-rivers-1>

Song of America Langston Hughes radio program:

<https://songofamerica.net/program/langston-hughes-and-the-harlem-renaissance/>

Song of America Langston Hughes page: <http://songofamerica.net/writer/hughes-langston>

- **The Crisis, Volume 22, No. 2** (public domain resource)  
[http://www.modjourn.org/render.php?id=1297782717453127&view=mjp\\_object](http://www.modjourn.org/render.php?id=1297782717453127&view=mjp_object)

### Instruction:

- The teacher introduces or reviews the NAACP and Langston Hughes  
[\[http://songofamerica.net/writer/hughes-langston\]](http://songofamerica.net/writer/hughes-langston)
- The teacher distributes Hughes’ poem “The Negro Speaks of Rivers”  
[\[http://songofamerica.net/song/negro-speaks-of-rivers-1\]](http://songofamerica.net/song/negro-speaks-of-rivers-1) and explains its appearance in the NAACP’s magazine *The Crisis*. Students read the poem silently to themselves.

- Students listen to “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” in a musical setting by Margaret Bonds [<https://songofamerica.net/program/langston-hughes-and-the-harlem-renaissance/>] at 2:29, or 1:37 with Thomas Hampson introduction—this same recording is also available on “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” song page [<http://songofamerica.net/song/negro-speaks-of-rivers-1>]
- The teacher begins class discussion by asking, “What did you notice about the singer’s voice? How does the singer’s voice and the way he sings reflect the text?” Students may first discuss these questions with a partner before the class discussion. The class discusses the volume, speed, and other elements of the music.
  - Refer to the *Song of America* Basic Musical Elements handout for an easy guide to talking about music:  
<https://songofamerica.net/downloads/basic-musical-elements-handout/>
- Consider the discussion questions suggested by the Academy of American Poets [<https://www.poets.org/sites/default/files/images/GuideToHughes.pdf>]  
—the teacher may write discussion questions on the board or show via projector (a world map could also be helpful in this discussion):
  - “In the poem ‘The Negro Speaks of Rivers,’ four rivers are named: the Euphrates, the Congo, the Nile, and the Mississippi.
    - What special significance do these four rivers have in terms of creating the world of the poem?
    - What historical or cultural worlds do they help us imagine?
    - How is the history of humanity related to the history of an individual man in this poem?”
  - Relate these questions to the music:
    - How does the music change with the naming of each river, and then tell us the story of each of these places and people?
    - How can we better understand these rivers and the people associated with them through the music of this song?
    - What is your understanding of these rivers because of the music, or what mental images come to mind?
- Listen to the song again with the specific discussion questions above in mind. Students should take notes on their copies of the poem.
- The class then discusses the aforementioned questions as well as the following: “What is Langston Hughes’ message in this poem? What was happening at the time that would have inspired him to write the poem? What do the international rivers of the poem have to do with Hughes and his sense of self as a young Black man in America?”

- *Guided Practice*
  - The teacher distributes copies of *The Crisis*, Volume 22, No. 2, pgs. 60-64, which includes book reviews from 1921  
[[http://www.modjourn.org/render.php?id=1297782717453127&view=mjp\\_object](http://www.modjourn.org/render.php?id=1297782717453127&view=mjp_object)]
  - A student volunteer reads aloud the first book review for the book *The Soul of John Brown*
  - Another student volunteer reads aloud “The Negro Speaks of Rivers”
  - The teacher draws attention to specific lines of text within the book review of *The Soul of John Brown* that connect to Langston Hughes’ poem
    - For instance: “In Georgia, he tramped the actual road from ‘Atlanta to Sea,’ to be able to contrast the modern conditions of ex-slaves with those of 60 years ago” (61). This excerpt from *The Crisis* book review reflects the author’s interest in tracing the conditions and heritage of Blacks, similar to Hughes’ reflection of Black heritage and roots.]
  
- *Independent Practice*
  - The class is divided into five groups with each group assigned a different book review:
    - *Two Colored Women With the A.E.F.* (Hunton and Johnson)
    - *Finding a Way Out* (Moton)
    - *Africa: Slave or Free?* (Harris)
    - *The Bantu—Past and Present* (Molema)
    - *Songs and Tales from the Dark Continent* (Curtis)
  - Students first read the book review silently to themselves and then one member reads aloud the book review
  - Students identify and take note of specific lines from the book review that either reflect or reject Hughes’ message in “The Negro Speaks of Rivers”
  - Groups take turns first verbally summarizing their book review and then stating the comparisons or contrasts to Hughes’ poem

Assessment:

Students answer the question: “Did Langston Hughes mirror the other writers of his day?” in a one-paragraph response, using textual evidence from one book review and “The Negro Speaks of Rivers.” The response could be homework that begins the following day’s discussion.

Going Further:

In 1926, five years after the publication “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” Langston Hughes published his essay “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” while he was still in college at Lincoln University. This essay would have an important influence on his later writing, including his poem “Prayer [2],” published in 1931. This activity compares and contrasts Langston Hughes’s writing over a 10-year period, explores the development of his point-of-view, and how that point of view is reflected and emphasized in musical settings.

- Students read Hughes’s “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” out loud in class (if there is time), or this essay is assigned as homework.  
[http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/g\\_l/hughes/mountain.htm](http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/g_l/hughes/mountain.htm)
- In class, the teacher distributes Hughes’ poem “Prayer [2],” titled “Litany” in John Musto’s song setting [<http://songofamerica.net/song/litany-1>]. Students read the poem silently to themselves and then listen to Musto’s musical setting of that poem [<https://songofamerica.net/program/langston-hughes-and-the-harlem-renaissance/> at 44:30, or 44:07 with Thomas Hampson introduction]
  - When comparing with “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” it may be helpful to play the recording of this song and/or read the poem aloud again.
- Some discussion questions could include:
  - What is Hughes’s thesis in his essay? Who is his audience?
  - How do Hughes’s views as stated in his essay reflected in his poetry? Is the audience the same for the essay and the poetry?
  - Is there a difference in tone between “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” and “Prayer [2]” (“Litany”), or are the two poems developing the same idea? Did Hughes’s views shift or change in an identifiable way between the two poems?
  - Margaret Bonds was a contemporary and friend of Langston Hughes; John Musto is a living composer who never met Hughes. How do both of these composers understand the meaning of Hughes’s message in setting his words to music? Identify specific examples in the songs, if possible.
  - How does Hughes’ description of contrasting racial identities in the United States, along with the messages of these two poems, connect with events occurring during the 1920s, both politically and culturally? (This could be a written assignment.)
- Hughes’s essay could be compared to other essays of the time on the same topic:  
<http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai3/community/text5/text5read.htm>