



FLORIDA

### SUNSHINE STATE STANDARD

#### Literary Analysis

**Benchmark LA.1112.2.1.3** Analyze, compare, evaluate, and interpret poetry for the effects of various literary devices, graphics, structure, and theme to convey mood, meaning, and aesthetic qualities.

#### NOTABLE QUOTE

*"Humor is laughing at what you haven't got when you ought to have it."*

#### FYI

Did you know that Langston Hughes ...

- was one of the first African Americans to earn a living solely from writing?
- was dubbed the "poet low-rate" of Harlem by some African-American intellectuals?
- wrote radio jingles during World War II to promote the purchase of war bonds?

#### Author Online

For more on Langston Hughes, visit the [Literature Center at ClassZone.com](http://LiteratureCenter.com).

## Selected Poetry

by Langston Hughes



### Langston Hughes

1902–1967

Langston Hughes was one of the leading poets of the Harlem Renaissance as well as an accomplished novelist, playwright, and essayist. His writings center on poor and working-class African Americans, a group whom literature had generally ignored.

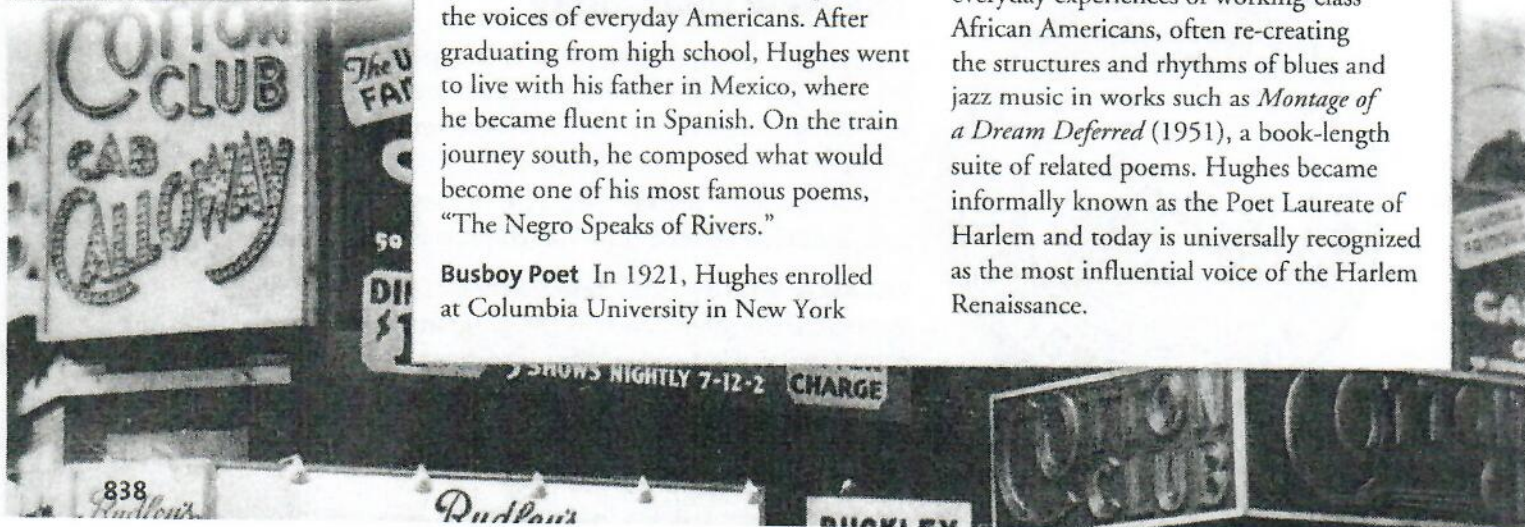
**Early Inspirations** James Mercer Langston Hughes started writing poetry in seventh grade, when his classmates elected him class poet. He admired the work of Paul Laurence Dunbar and Carl Sandburg, two poets known for their efforts to capture the voices of everyday Americans. After graduating from high school, Hughes went to live with his father in Mexico, where he became fluent in Spanish. On the train journey south, he composed what would become one of his most famous poems, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers."

**Busboy Poet** In 1921, Hughes enrolled at Columbia University in New York

City. He left after one year to travel the world as a cook's assistant aboard a ship. In 1925, Hughes settled in Washington, D.C., and took a job busing tables at a hotel restaurant. One day Vachel Lindsay, a well-known poet, came to the hotel. Hughes mustered the courage to slip three of his poems, including "The Weary Blues," beside Lindsay's plate. Lindsay liked the poems, and the next morning's newspapers reported Lindsay's discovery of the "busboy poet."

A year later, Hughes published his first poetry collection, *The Weary Blues*. His gritty depiction of "workers, roustabouts, and singers and job hunters" angered some African-American critics who felt that members of the race should always be portrayed in the best possible light. Hughes responded to these criticisms, saying, "I knew only the people I had grown up with, and they weren't people whose shoes were always shined. . . . But they seemed to me good people, too."

**Poet Laureate of Harlem** As a poet, Hughes kept his language direct; he made no attempt to be obscure or pretentious. He celebrated the lively nightlife and the everyday experiences of working-class African Americans, often re-creating the structures and rhythms of blues and jazz music in works such as *Montage of a Dream Deferred* (1951), a book-length suite of related poems. Hughes became informally known as the Poet Laureate of Harlem and today is universally recognized as the most influential voice of the Harlem Renaissance.





### Explore the Key Idea

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## What shapes your IDENTITY?

**KEY IDEA** Hughes wrote poetry to honor his African-American heritage, but he didn't limit himself to great heroes and historical events. For Hughes, it was the vibrant culture of everyday people—their music, their slang, and their experiences of life in the city—that shaped his sense of **identity**.

**DISCUSS** What everyday experiences help shape your identity? List images and activities that characterize the way you live: the sounds and smells of your neighborhood, the places you go, the foods you eat, and so on. In a small group, compare your answers. Which experiences, if any, do group members have in common?

### LITERARY ANALYSIS: SPEAKER

You know that the **speaker** of a poem, like the narrator of a story, is the voice that talks to the reader. In his poems, Langston Hughes created speakers who represented important aspects of African-American culture. Sometimes his speaker is the voice of the culture itself.

*I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of human blood in human veins.*

Hughes also uses his speakers to portray the joys and struggles of working-class African Americans.

*In a deep song voice with a melancholy tone I heard that Negro sing, that old piano moan—*

As you read each poem, try to identify the speaker of the poem and what aspects of African-American life the speaker describes.

### READING SKILL: ANALYZE RHYTHM AND REPETITION

When Hughes began writing, most African-American poets tried to sound like the white poets they read in school. Instead, Hughes drew his inspiration from jazz and blues music, using the rhythm and repetition of these musical forms to structure his poetry. Musical elements found in Hughes's poetry include

- jazz-influenced **rhythm** (the pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables) that features strong accents, quick changes in rhythm, and irregular beats
- rhythmic **repetition** of words and phrases, like that used in blues lyrics
- the **refrain**, one or more repeated lines of poetry that function like the chorus of a song

As you read each poem, use a chart like the one shown to record examples of these musical patterns.

<i>Rhythm</i>	<i>Repetition</i>	<i>Refrain</i>



# Harlem

*Langston Hughes*

What happens to a dream deferred?

- Does it dry up  
like a raisin in the sun?  
Or fester like a sore—  
5 And then run?  
Does it stink like rotten meat?  
Or crust and sugar over—  
like a syrupy sweet? **A**
- 10 Maybe it just sags  
like a heavy load.
- Or does it explode?*

## ANALYZE VISUALS

What elements of this painting help capture the thriving street life in Harlem?

## **A** RHYTHM AND REPETITION

Identify the pattern of stresses in lines 2–8. Which words are emphasized by this rhythm?

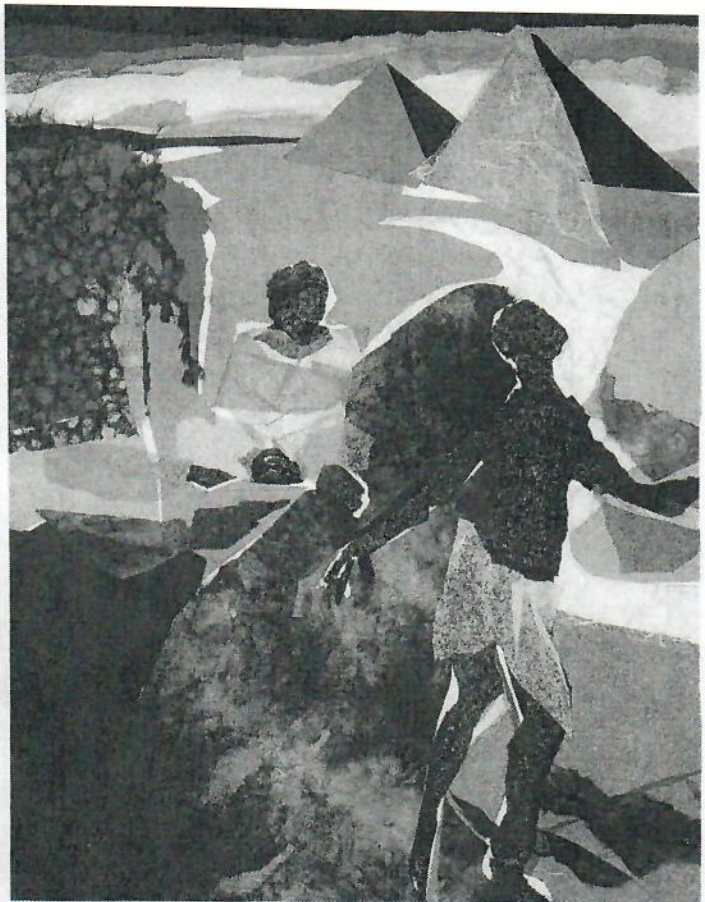
## Literary Analysis

- 1. Clarify** What does the speaker mean by “a dream deferred”?
- 2. Make Inferences** What social or political consequences are hinted at in the poem’s last line?
- 3. Interpret Figurative Language** List the **similes** the speaker uses to describe the effect of a deferred dream. What do these comparisons reveal about the speaker’s attitude?

*Street Shadows* (1959), Jacob Lawrence. Egg tempera on hardboard, 24" × 30". Private collection, New York. Photograph courtesy of Gwendolyn Knight Lawrence/Art Resource, New York. © 2007 The Jacob and Gwendolyn Lawrence Foundation, Seattle/ Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

# The Negro Speaks of Rivers

Langston Hughes



*The Negro Speaks of Rivers* (1998), Phoebe Beasley. Silk screen. © Phoebe Beasley.

I've known rivers:  
I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the  
flow of human blood in human veins. **B**

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

5 I bathed in the Euphrates<sup>1</sup> 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,<sup>2</sup> and I've seen its muddy  
10 bosom turn all golden in the sunset.

I've known rivers:  
Ancient, dusky<sup>3</sup> rivers.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers. **C**

## **B** SPEAKER

Reread lines 1–3. What traits of the speakers are emphasized by Hughes's word choice?

## **C** RHYTHM AND REPETITION

Reread the poem. Which line serves as the poem's refrain?

- Euphrates** (yōō-frā'tēz): a river flowing through present-day Turkey, Syria, and Iraq. The valley between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers was the site of one of the world's earliest civilizations.
- when Abe Lincoln went down to New Orleans:** Lincoln's first glimpse of the horrors of slavery reportedly came on his trip to New Orleans as a young man.
- dusky:** dark; shadowy.

# I, Too

*Langston Hughes*

I, too, sing America.

I am the darker brother.  
They send me to eat in the kitchen

When company comes,

5 But I laugh,

And eat well,

And grow strong. **D**

Tomorrow,

I'll be at the table

10 When company comes.

Nobody'll dare

Say to me,

"Eat in the kitchen,"

Then.

15 Besides,

They'll see how beautiful I am

And be ashamed—

I, too, am America.

**D** **SPEAKER**

Reread lines 1–7. Identify the speaker of the poem. What aspects of the African-American experience does the speaker describe?

## Literary Analysis

- 1. Summarize** In "I, Too," what is the speaker's attitude toward America?
- 2. Interpret Imagery** What is the significance of the four rivers mentioned in "The Negro Speaks of Rivers"?
- 3. Compare and Contrast Speakers** What qualities do the speakers of both poems share? In what ways are they different?

# The *Weary* Blues

Langston Hughes

Droning a drowsy syncopated<sup>1</sup> tune,  
Rocking back and forth to a mellow croon,  
I heard a Negro play.  
Down on Lenox Avenue<sup>2</sup> the other night  
5 By the pale dull pallor<sup>3</sup> of an old gas light  
He did a lazy sway. . . .  
He did a lazy sway. . . .  
To the tune o' those Weary Blues.  
With his ebony hands on each ivory key  
10 He made that poor piano moan with melody.  
O Blues!  
Swaying to and fro on his rickety stool  
He played that sad raggy tune like a musical fool.  
Sweet Blues!  
15 Coming from a black man's soul.  
O Blues!  
In a deep song voice with a melancholy tone  
I heard that Negro sing, that old piano moan—  
"Ain't got nobody in all this world,  
20 Ain't got nobody but ma self.  
I's gwine to quit ma frownin'  
And put ma troubles on the shelf."  
Thump, thump, thump, went his foot on the floor.  
He played a few chords then he sang some more— E  
25 "I got the Weary Blues  
And I can't be satisfied.  
Got the Weary Blues  
And can't be satisfied—  
I ain't happy no mo'  
30 And I wish that I had died."  
And far into the night he crooned that tune.  
The stars went out and so did the moon.  
The singer stopped playing and went to bed  
While the Weary Blues echoed through his head.  
35 He slept like a rock or a man that's dead.

**E RHYTHM AND REPETITION**  
Identify three examples of repetition in the poem thus far. Which line or phrase might be considered the poem's refrain?

- 
1. **syncopated** (sɪŋg'kə-pā'tīd): characterized by a shifting of stresses from normally strong to normally weak beats.
  2. **Lenox Avenue**: a main north-south street in Harlem.
  3. **pallor** (pāl'ər): lack of color.



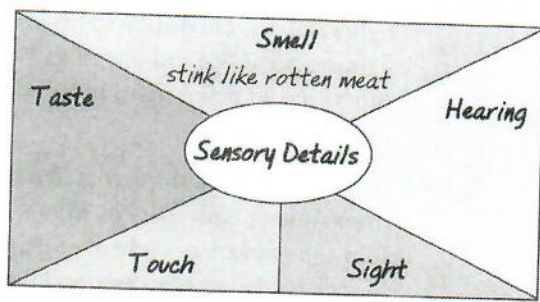
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## Comprehension

1. **Clarify** What hope does the speaker of “I, Too” express?
2. **Recall** Who are the individuals described in “The Weary Blues”?
3. **Summarize** What happens to the speaker of “The Weary Blues”?

## Literary Analysis

4. **Identify Sensory Details** Many of Hughes’s poems are rich in details that appeal to the five senses. Reread “Harlem” and “The Weary Blues.” For each poem, use a chart like the one shown to record examples of each kind of sensory detail. Which example did you find especially vivid? Explain your answer.



5. **Analyze Rhythm and Repetition** Review the chart you created while you read the poems. Which poem seems most influenced by the rhythms of jazz music? Support your answer with details.
6. **Examine Style** Describe the differences between the two blues verses in “The Weary Blues” (lines 19–22 and 25–30) and the other lines of the poem. In your opinion, do the two styles work well together? Explain your answer.
7. **Draw Conclusions About Author’s Perspective** Use the events, situations, and ideas presented in each of Hughes’s poems to draw conclusions about his views on African-American **identity**. In Hughes’s eyes, what characteristics define African-American culture?
8. **Evaluate Speakers** Consider the four poems you read. In your opinion, which speaker best achieves each of the following goals? Cite details from the poems in your answers.
  - captures Hughes’s pride in African-American culture
  - reflects the everyday life of African Americans
  - conveys the sounds of African-American speech
  - represents the feelings of African Americans today

## Literary Criticism

9. **Critical Interpretations** In a review of Hughes’s poetry collection *The Weary Blues*, poet Countee Cullen criticized Hughes for “too much emphasis on strictly Negro themes” and questioned whether jazz poems belong to “that select and austere circle of high literary expression which we call poetry.” Do you agree with Cullen’s concerns? Why or why not?