UNIT 34  LANGSTON HUGHES

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34.0  OBJECTIVES

At the end of this unit you will be able to:

• discuss Langston Hughes’ life, career, major works, poetics and his association with various movements
• analyse and appreciate the poem “The Negro Speaks of Rivers”
• analyse and appreciate the poem “Young Gal’s Blues”
• analyse and appreciate the poem “Mother to Son”
• discuss the use of African-American dialect of English in the poems

34.1  INTRODUCTION

According to R. Baxter Miller, Langston Hughes “was perhaps the most wide-ranging and persistent black American writer in the twentieth century.” Miller’s view means that Hughes was not merely a poet; he was, in addition, a fiction writer, dramatist, librettist, writer of Broadway musicals, essayist, children’s
Hughes’ career spanned over a period of fifty years. He was a product of the socio-cultural milieu of the African-Americans [Nowadays, we do not use the terms blacks, Negroes, etc., to denote the descendants of the Africans in America. However, you may find them used in some quotations in this Unit] between the 1920s and 60s. He was associated with the Harlem Renaissance of the 20s and the Black Arts Movement of the 60s. The cultural events of each decade kept on shaping him as a writer and, to some extent, as an African-American activist. In the 1920s he began his career writing blues and jazz poetry. In the next decade, the decade of the Great Depression and communism in America, he was passionately grappling with the issue of the Afro-Americans’ equality in a white society. In the forties, he published some of his finest lyrics “as artistic relief to the racial lynching at the time.” Some of his best short stories appeared in the 50s. The Black Arts Movement of the next decade gave him the opportunity to project himself as a social activist.

Hughes was a benefactor in more ways than one. With his help many young African-American writers could publish their literary pieces in major periodicals. He was instrumental in liberating American literature from the plantation traditions, which mostly presented the submissive and suffering Afro-American. He wrote with the purpose of unifying the African-Americans with the white Americans even as “He helped charm the American audience to the future of ethnic quality and pluralism.”

In the following section we shall know more about the life and works of Hughes.

34.2 LANGSTON HUGHES (1902-1967): A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY

James Langston Hughes was born on 1 February 1902 in Joplin, Missouri (America). His father was James Nathaniel Hughes and his mother’s name was Carrie Langston Hughes. The poet’s maternal grandfather, Charles Howard Langston, had a special liking for literature and Hughes inherited this liking. Charles’ brother, John Mercer Langston, was an autobiographer; he published his life history in From the Virginia Plantation to the National Capital (1894). Carry Hughes, too, wrote poetry and she used to deliver monologues in costume. You must have noticed from the short description of Hughes parental lineage that he grew up in a literary environment.

James Hughes, the poet’s father, studied law through the distance mode, like you. He wanted to take the Oklahoma territory bar examination but was denied permission by an examining board consisting of only white people. So in 1889 he moved onto Joplin with his wife. They lost their first child there in 1900. Langston Hughes was born two years later. Faced with poverty and the burden of supporting 18-month old Langston Hughes, James Hughes left the US for Mexico in 1903. He could earn money there and thus support his wife and son who were still in the U.S. Carry did not go with her husband. Because she could not get a regular Job, she moved from city to city seeking some work. She would take the young Langston Hughes with her only occasionally. For about nine years Carrie left him with her mother, Mary Leary Langston, who lived in Lawrence.
However, little Langston visited his mother briefly at Topeka or Colorado and even accompanied her to Mexico in 1908 to visit his father.

While young Hughes lived a hard life with his grandmother, his cousins lived in luxury in Washington D.C. Unlike the other women in Lawrence, Mary Langston did not do domestic service to earn money. She rented the rooms of her house to the students of Kansas University and sometimes she rented out her entire house while she stayed with a friend.

In 1907 Carry took Langston Hughes to a library in Topeka where he fell in love with books. One of the reasons for the sudden liking was that one could borrow books there without paying money. Years later, Hughes wrote about the impact of books on him: “Even before I was six, books began to happen to me, so that after a while there came a time when I believed in books more than in people which, of course, was wrong.”

When he lost his grandmother in April 1915, Hughes lived with his mother briefly. By then Carrie had married Homer Clark. When Clark moved on seeking a job, Carrie left Hughes with Auntie Reed, her friend, and her husband.

When Hughes was in the seventh grade, he secured his first regular job which involved cleaning the lobby and toilets in an old hostel near his school. This job experience later helped him write the poem “Brass Spittoons.” In 1916, while living with his mother, stepfather and stepbrother, he entered the Central High school at Cleveland. During the 4 successful years there, he wrote poems for the student magazine, *The Belfry Owl*.

Hughes was with his father in Mexico in the summer of 1919. There he realized that he disliked his father’s materialistic outlook. He was depressed most of the time and even thought of suicide. In July 1920, he visited his father again and stayed with him till September 1921. His father wanted him to join a European university but he preferred Columbia University, where he enrolled in 1921 as a student with his father’s permission. However, quite contrary to his expectations, the environment and the teaching at the University did not impress him at all. So he missed classes to attend Broadway shows. He couldn’t go on like that for long; he dropped out of Columbia and took up various odd jobs. He also began to be attracted towards the African-American literary and cultural revival called the Harlem Renaissance (We will know more about the renaissance in a subsection of this biography).

By 1921, Hughes had started publishing literary pieces in major literary magazines. The January 1921 issue of *The Brownie’s Book* carried two of his poems. Similarly, its July issue contained *The Gold Piece*, Hughes’ one act play for children. Let us recall that he was still a teenager while publishing them. A poem that he wrote in 1923, “The Weary Blues”, was a significant one, for it was written in the pattern of blues, a kind of folk song. (In another subsection we will learn more about blues). The title of the poem was soon to become the title of his first collection of poems.

In 1923, Hughes undertook a sea travel to Africa by working in the ship by which he was sailing. On board the ship, he threw a box of books into the sea. The books, according to Buxter Miller, “reminded him of the hardships of his past: attics and basements in Cleveland, lonely nights in Toluca dormitories at Columbia, and furnished rooms in Harlem.” Hughes’ first reaction on seeing Africa was “My Africa, Motherland of the Negro.” He returned to the US late that year. Next year he visited Paris and Italy.
In 1924, Hughes met Arna Bontemps. They admired each other and collaboratively produced books and anthologies. While working as a busboy at Wardman Park hotel he met the American poet Vachel Lindsay. After reading some of the poems by Hughes, Lindsay published a favourable article on him in a newspaper.

When Hughes won a poetry prize in 1925, Carl Van Vechten got some of Hughes’ poems published in the form of an anthology (The Weary Blues) from Alfred A. Knopp in 1926. Hughes met Arthur Spingarn, a lawyer, and his sister-in-law Amy Spingarn. His friendship with them, initiated through Vechten, lasted for many decades. The Weary Blues evoked mixed responses from critics. To Alain Locke, Hughes appeared to be “the spokesman for the black masses.”

In February 1926 he joined Lincoln University, Pennsylvania, as a student. While being at the University he wrote one of his finest poems “Mullato” and it appeared in the Saturday Review of Literature. The poem, according to Hughes, dealt with the “White fathers and Negro mothers in the South.” Hughes also began to write and publish short stories, like “The Childhood of Jimmy”, during this time. He graduated from Lincoln University in June 1929.

Hughes’ meeting Charlotte Mason, an elderly white lady, in 1927 proved beneficial to him. With her support as literary patron he began to work on his first novel Not without Laughter and it was published in 1930. However, towards the end of the year, the relationship between the patron and the poet became strained because of their divergent views on political philosophy and race.

When he was almost 30, Hughes took the decision to earn his livelihood from writing. In 1931 he received a 1000-dollar grant from the Rosenwald Fund. With the money he went on a trip to the Afro-American colleges in the South. The tour, Baxter Miller says, “deepened Hughes’ commitment to racial justice and literary expression.” The trip also deepened his social commitment. After this tour, in 1932, Hughes visited Russia where he met the Hungarian-born British writer Arthur Koestler. Their discussions on emotion and creativity were beneficial to Hughes and their meeting, to quote Miller again, “renewed his [Hughes’] leftist inclinations.” Similarly, a meeting with Marie Seton also reinforced his leftist thinking. In the 1930’s, keeping oneself away from the leftist ideology was difficult in America. The Great Depression of the decade drove many writers and intellectuals to the communist fold. However, Hughes was never a member of the Communist party. Significantly, The Ways of White Folks, his first collection of short stories, appeared in 1934.

Between 1932 and 1934, Hughes earned much money through his enormous literary output. He sent a substantial part of the money to his mother, who was physically unwell then. On 22nd October 1934 his father died in Mexico but he could not attend the funeral because he got the news of of the death late.

When the Spanish Civil War was on, in 1937, Hughes joined the Baltimore Afro-American, a daily, as a correspondent. While reporting the war he happened to meet many white American writers, like Hemingway and the critic Malcolm Cowley, who were visiting Spain. He also met the French novelist Andre’ Malraux and the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda.

“Hughes’ work continued to earn public recognition from 1938 to 1967, the year of his death”, says Miller. That means, he was actively involved in socio-political and literary activities till his death. In 1939 he founded the New Negro Theater in
Los Angeles. In 1940 he was able to publish the first part of his autobiography *The Big Sea*. Its second part, entitled *I Wonder as I Wander*, came out in 1956. He founded the Skyloft Players and produced his musical *The Sun Do Move* (1942). He wrote a weekly column in the *Chicago Defender* in which he published “the tales of Jesse B. Semple, later called Jesse B. Simple — a folk philosopher who would capture the hearts of thousands of readers.” In 1946 he won a medal and a prize of 1000 dollars from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Next year he was visiting professor of creative writing at Chicago University. In 1951 he published his book-length poem, *Montage of a Dream Deferred*. On March 26, 1953, Hughes was questioned by Senator Joseph’s subcommittees for “subversive activities.” The questions were on his radical past. In the early 1960’s Hughes visited Africa and Europe again. *Ask your Mama* (1961), “Hughes’ crowning achievement”, was a satirical response to the anger of the 1960’s against all kinds of inequality that prevailed in American society. He was also a part of the Black Arts Movement and the Civil Right movement in the decade.

On 6 May 1967, Hughes admitted himself to the Polyclinic Hospital in New York with an infection of the prostate gland and a heart condition. In order not to receive any special consideration as a writer, at the hospital he registered his name as James Hughes. Later, an African-American orderly informed the hospital authorities that Hughes was suffering because of poor emergency care. Proper care came when it was too late. On 22 May he died. As Miller points out, “The African American folk poet died by the theory he had lived by.” During his long writing career, Hughes dealt with a large number of themes including free speech, transitoriness, and assimilation; nationalism, racism, integration, and poverty.”

In the following subsections let us briefly learn about some movements with which Hughes was associated, his interest in Afro-American folk music and his aesthetic views.

### 34.2.1 The Harlem Renaissance

The period of the Harlem Renaissance was, roughly, from 1919 to early or mid-1930s. According to some, the publication of *Opportunity: A Journal of Negro Life* marked its beginning and the stock market crash of 1929 marked its end. The Renaissance was originally called the New Negro Movement. The place Harlem, in New York City, was an Afro-American neighbourhood, with a large number of them settling there as migrants from the American South. Here they were not victims of racism whereas in the South slavery was an accepted practice. For the uneducated, Harlem offered jobs while the educated class made it the centre of Afro-American literature and culture. A white American writer, Ridgely Torrence, staged his *Three Plays for the Negro Theatre* which “featured African-American actors conveying complex human emotions and yearnings.” The same year saw the founding of the Liberty League and the newspaper *The Voice* by Hubert Harrison. According to the Wikipedia, “Contributing factors leading to the Harlem Renaissance were the Great Migration of African Americans to northern cities, which concentrated ambitious people in places where they could encourage each other, and the First World War, which had created new industrial work opportunities for tens of thousands of people. Factors leading to the decline of this era include the Great Depression.”
Langston Hughes is considered to be an important thinker and writer of the Harlem Renaissance. He lived in Harlem for long and his literary outlook was influenced by the Afro-American life and culture there. With a strong sense of racial pride, he made significant contributions to the shaping of the political and literary basis of the Renaissance. It was he who published the Manifesto-essay of the movement, namely, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” (1927), in the journal Nation. The Manifesto “skillfully argued the need for both race pride and artistic independence.” His entire literary and non-literary output underlines the importance of equality, condemnation of racism and injustice and the celebration of African-American culture, humour and spirituality. For example, the first two volumes of his poetry—*The Weary Blues* (1926) and *Fine Clothes to the Jew* (1927)—contain poems that effectively blend Afro-American jazz and blues.

### 34.2.2 Hughes and African Folk Music

Hughes was deeply interested in African folk music. His love for the music was natural because of his African ancestry and lineage. Of the many forms of the music, the blues was a type that he used in his poetry. The blues has its origin in Africa and in the 20th century America, it has been associated with the work songs of labourers like stevedores, field hollers and with the shouts of slaves. The blues do not share common characteristics. “The earliest blues-like music was a ‘functional expression, rendered in a call-and-response style without accompaniment or harmony and unbounded by the formality of any particular music structure.’”

Many American writers have attempted to mix the essence of this musical form in to their works. Langston Hughes was one such writer. According to Edward Waldron, “In his blues poetry Langston Hughes captures the mood, the feel and the spirit of the blues; his poems gave the rhythm and the impact of the musical form they incorporate. Indeed, the blues poems of Langston Hughes are blues as well as poetry.”

Waldron has quoted Simon Campbell’s definition of the blues which goes thus: “The blues are simple, elemental. They have the profound depths of feeling that is found in any race that has known slavery, and the American Negro is no stranger to suffering.” Adding to this definition, a blues marker Clarence Williams says: “...blues, as we know them today were always written about love, someone’s baby leaving them, hard luck dogging one’s tail, and the ‘misery roun yo door’” The religious counterpart of the blues is the spirituals. Both forms are means for the slaves to give vent to their pent up feelings against their white masters. In that sense both are necessary releases for them.

You may recall that the first poetry collection of Hughes was *The Weary Blues* (1923). The title poem is an example of Hughes early use of blues in his poetry. The poem deals with a piano player in Harlem and the poem captures the essence of night life, people and folk forms. The poem has the typical call and response pattern of the blues. The speaker of the poem, the piano player, is alone but the piano talks back to him. The theme of his song is his troubles. The playing and singing, assuming the piano’s response, releases his dammed up anger against the white oppressors and thus he attains peace of mind. The poem evokes the African-American ethos in lines like these:
Sweet Blues!
Coming from a Black man’s soul
O blues!

Hughes has included a set of blues poems, “Blues for Men”, in his poetry collection entitled *Shakespeare in Harlem* (1942). In the poem “In a Troubled Key”, Hughes underscores the necessity for the Afro-American to release his pent-up emotions. The singer of the poem, who has been badly treated by his woman, sings:

Still I can’t help lovin’ you,
Even though you do me wrong.
Says I can’t help lovin you
Though you do me wrong—
But my love might turn into a knife
Instead of to a song.

His suppressed anger and despair at the ill-treatment has been transformed into a song so that he does not indulge in any violent act.

Walder has explained the mood and the purpose of using the blues in poetry: “. . . the mood of the blues is often one step away from death—either murder or suicide—and that the presence of the blues form makes it possible for the anguished one to direct his sorrow inward into song and find happiness in the release.” [On the YouTube you can listen to African-American singers singing blues songs.]

### 34.2.3 Hughes and the Black Arts Movement

The Black Arts Movement (BAM), also called the Black Aesthetics Movement was the aesthetic branch of the Black Power movement. It was called a sixties Movement. LeRoi Jones, the well-known African-American writer, started it in Harlem. According to the *Time* magazine, the Movement has been the “single most controversial moment in the history of African-American literature – possibly in American literature as a whole.” Drawing inspiration from the Movement, African-Americans began to establish their own publishing houses, magazines, journals and art institutions. Universities started courses in African-American studies. The prominent figures associated with the movement include Nikki Giovanni, Sonia Sanchez, Maya Angelou, Hoyt W. Fuller, and Rosa Guy.

One of the important achievements of the Movement was that it revolutionized literature by bringing in the voices of the oppressed people. Before it, “the literary canon lacked diversity, and the ability to express ideas from the point of view of racial and ethnic minorities was not valued by the mainstream.” Theatre groups, poetry performances, music and dance were received greater attention during the time of the Movement. Through these mediums they were able to educate the people the value of the art of the minorities, like the African Americans themselves. For propagating the worth of their literature and culture, the representatives of the Movement travelled extensively reading poetry.

James Smethurst, an Afro-American scholar, thinks that Hughes played some role in shaping the BAM. Smethurst says: “If one looks to uncover linkages between the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and the 1970s and the earlier radicalisms of the 1930s and 1940s, the work of Langston Hughes as a writer,
editor and cultural catalyst during the 1950s and 1960s is a good place to start. Not only was his writing a crucial forerunner of Black Arts poetry, drama, essays, and short fiction, but Hughes tirelessly promoted the careers of the young (and sometimes not so young) militant black arts then, providing practical, moral, and emotional support and encouragement.

### 34.2.4 Hughes’ Poetic Theory

Like the poet Allen Ginsberg, about whom are you going to study in the next Unit, Langston Hughes was also influenced by some of his literary predecessors. The writers who influenced him in shaping his own theory of writing, according to Steven C. Tracy, are Walt Whitman, Mark Twain, Harriet Beecher Stowe and WEB Du Bois. Tracy argues that these writers “sought to bring to bear upon their art a humanity and a sense of freedom and justice that Hughes recognized and with which he identified and that he sought to incorporate into his twentieth-century vision of art.”

You might have noticed that one of the striking features of Hughes’ poetry is its simplicity. It is a striking point to be noted because he was a poet who lived through the High Modernist period. You might remember, perhaps, that one of the characteristics of Modernist poetry is its obscurity (consider, for e.g., the poems of TS Eliot). In spite of being an active writer in the 1920’s and 30’s, he did not make his writing difficult to understand. According to Tracy, Hughes inherited the plain style that has been there in American Literature since the publication of The Bay Psalm Book (1640). The style, Tracy argues, “has been synonymous with guilelessness and directness.” The tradition of plain writing continued through some of the writers who influenced Hughes. He admired Whitman for the latter’s “open and democratic” writing. The older writers included the lower classes and their dialects in their writing. Hughes was very early impressed by Mark Twain’s Adventures of the Huckleberry Finn, for it presented in a plain style the superiority of the African Americans as human beings in comparison with the white Americans. Twain’s use of the African-American dialect also impressed Hughes. In his works, to quote Tracy again, “Twain was experimenting with the social and linguistic resonance of dialects, as well”.

Harriet Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin (1852) also dealt with Afro-Americans’ life of bondage in America. The moral implications of the novel appealed to Hughes. “In Stowe, Hughes recognized an artist of courage and symbol who placed morality at the centre of her art and attempted to use her writing to serve the broader interests of mankind.” What drew Hughes to Du Bois was the latter’s intellect and education, integrity and commitment.

When we examine Hughes’ works, including his poems, we notice that he has derived much from these writers’ plain style and themes. But at the same time there were other influences as well. His Afro-American origin and his firsthand knowledge of the prejudice and discrimination against the black community had a part to play in the shaping of his aesthetics. His interest in the leftist ideology further contributed to his creative outlook. Again, Hughes’ interest in African-American folk culture and music was partially instrumental in shaping his art. He used his aesthetics with a purpose: to speak for the voices that have been silenced. However, his concept of literary art does not advocate hate for or violence against the white population. But it certainly argued for the unity of the racially marginalized. Steven Tracy argues: “Exploring and affirming the pan-
American component of the human experience, particularly the African American dimension of the American experiment: this was the aim Hughes’s entire artistic harvest. Implicit in that affirmation was a rejection of the social and literary pretensions that divided the African American lower and upper classes, emphasizing a commonality of colonized experience that united—or should have united—darker peoples in America and around the world.”

As has already been mentioned, Hughes was a prolific writer. For your reference a select list of the important works of Langston Hughes is given below (Source: Wikipedia):

Poetry collections

[On YouTube, you can watch Langston Hughes reading some of his poems. For example you can hear him reading the poem “Negro Speaks of Rivers” and “Mother to Son”]

The Weary Blues (1926); Fine Clothes to the Jew (1927); The Negro Mother and Other Dramatic Recitations (1931); Dear Lovely Death (1931); The Dream Keeper and Other Poems (1932); Scottsboro Limited: Four Poems and a Play (1938); Let America Be America Again (1938); Shakespeare in Harlem (1942); Freedom’s Plow (1943); Fields of Wonder (1947); One-Way Ticket (1949); Montage of a Dream Deferred (1951); Selected Poems of Langston Hughes (1958); Ask Your Mama: 12 Moods for Jazz (1961); The Panther and the Lash: Poems of Our Times (1967); The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes (1994)

Novels and short story collections

Not Without Laughter (1930); The Ways of White Folks (1934); Simple Speaks His Mind (1950); Laughing to Keep from Crying (1952); Simple Takes a Wife (1953); Simple Takes a Claim (1957); Tambourines to Glory (1958); The Best of Simple (1961); Simple’s Uncle Sam (1965); Something in Common and Other Stories (1963)

Non-fiction books

The Big Sea (1940); Famous American Negroes (1954); I Wonder as I Wander (1956); A Pictorial History of the Negro in America, with Milton Meltzer (1956); Famous Negro Heroes of America (1958); Fight for Freedom: The Story of the NAACP (1962)

Major plays

Mule Bone, with Zora Neale Hurston (1931); Mulatto 1935 (renamed The Barrier, an opera, in 1950); Troubled Island, with William Grant Still (1936); Little Ham (1936); Emperor of Haiti (1936); Don’t You Want to be Free? (1938); Street Scene, contributed lyrics (1947); Black Nativity (1961); Five Plays by Langston Hughes (1963); Jericho-Jim Crow (1964)

Books for children

Popo and Fifina, with Arna Bontemps (1932); The First Book of the Negroes (1952); The First Book of Jazz (1954); Marian Anderson: Famous Concert Singer, with Steven C. Tracy (1954); The First Book of Rhythms (1954); The First Book of the West Indies (1956); First Book of Africa (1964)
Self-check Exercise I

1) Read the biography of Langston Hughes given in Wikipedia and collect more information about his political views.

2) Do you find any similarities between the life of Langston Hughes and the life of Alan Ginsberg? What are they?

3) Do you think that the use of blues helped Hughes to write a different kind of poetry?

34.3 THE NEGRO SPEAKS OF RIVERS

34.3.1 Introduction

This poem is one of the most anthologized poems of Langston Hughes. In July 1920, Hughes visited his father in Mexico. The train by which he was travelling was crossing the Mississippi River and going to St.Louis. The noisy movement of the train, the muddy water in the river and the summer clouds touched his heart in a special way. They evoked many ideas in his mind, concerning beauty and death, hope and despair. They also stirred his heart to think about the history of the Afro-Americans from its earliest times to the 19th and 20th centuries. As he travelled, Arnold Rampersad says, “A phrase came to him, then a sentence. Drawing an envelope from his pocket, he began to scribble. In a few minutes Langston had finished a poem.” Remember, he was only 17 years old when he wrote this poem. The poem was dedicated to WEB Du Bois and it first appeared in the journal Crisis in 1921.

The poem contains references to four rivers with which the African-American history is tied up. The rivers also evoke in the poet memories of slave trade. As
Miller points out, “The muddy Mississippi made Hughes think of the roles in human history played by the Congo, the Niger and the Nile, down whose water the early slaves once were sold. The poem also alludes to Abraham Lincoln’s historic journey down the Mississippi which was instrumental in shaping his anti-slavery attitude. Thus the poem, while expressing the Afro-Americans’ disturbing memory about their days of slavery, underscores the antiquity of their race and the depth that the Afro-American’s character attained through varied experiences over centuries. The poem may also be considered as a critique of dominant cultures that have been insensitive to human suffering.

34.3.2 The Text

I’ve known rivers:
I’ve known rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of human blood in human veins.
My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

I bathed in the Euphrates 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, and I’ve seen its muddy bosom turn all golden in the sunset.

I’ve known rivers:
Ancient, dusky rivers.
My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

Glossary:
The Euphrates: It is the longest and one of the most historically important rivers of Western Asia. Together with the Tigris, it is one of the two defining rivers of Mesopotamia. Originating in eastern Turkey, the Euphrates flows through Syria and Iraq to join the Tigris in the Shatt al-Arab, which empties into the Persian Gulf.
dawns: here, civilizations
the Congo: It is a river in Africa and the world’s deepest river with measured depths in excess of 220 m (720 ft). It is the second largest river in the world by volume of water discharged. Additionally, its overall length of 4,700 km (2,920 mi) makes it the ninth longest river.
lulled: caused to feel sleepy
the Nile: is a major north-flowing river in northeastern Africa, generally regarded as the longest river in the world. It is 6,853 km (4,258 miles) long. The Nile is an “international” river as its water resources are shared by eleven countries, namely, Tanzania, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Kenya, Ethiopia, Eritrea, South Sudan, Sudan and Egypt. In particular, the Nile is the primary water resource and life artery for Egypt and Sudan.
Langston Hughes

**the Mississippi**: a river flowing entirely through the USA. Its length is 4070 Kms

**Abe Lincoln**: Abraham Lincoln, the American President who abolished slavery

**New Orleans**: In 1828, a teenaged Abraham Lincoln guided a flatboat down the Mississippi River to New Orleans. The adventure marked his first visit to a major city and exposed him to the nation’s largest slave marketplace. It also nearly cost him his life, in a nighttime attack in the Louisiana plantation country. That trip, and a second one in 1831, would form the two longest journeys of Lincoln’s life, his only visits to the Deep South, and his foremost experience in a racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse urban environment.

dusky : dark in colour

[Explanation for references to Euphrates, the Congo, the Nile and New Orleans are partial quotations from the Wikipedia and other sources on the Internet. You can get more interesting information about them from the sources.]

### 34.3.3 Analysis of the Poem

The poem is a first person (singular) narrative. If the speaker ‘I’ in the poem is Langston Hughes himself, then the pronoun can stand for any Afro-American who shares the poet’s views. The poem appears to be a proud proclamation of his race’s close connection with the evolution of human history and civilization. But at the same time it hides in it the atrocities that the African race had to face over centuries.

There are references to four rivers in the poem and three of them flow through the dark/African continent. When the speaker says “I have known rivers”, he is stressing the fact that the Afro-American’s knowledge of rivers is different from that of any others because his life has always been closely associated with them. He doesn’t say ‘I know rivers’ but ‘have known’ them. The present perfect tense indicates the Africans’ long and close association with rivers. Further, the word “known” indicates his deep and firsthand knowledge of them; he does not simply know ‘about’ them. And these rivers, because they originated with the earth, are older than human beings (“older than the/ flow of human blood in human veins.”)

The rivers mentioned in the poem are deep. But the depth can also refer to their long history of continuous flowing. The soul of the African, who too has a long history, is deep like the river; the history of his existence has been made complex through colonial experiences, dislocations and hardships.

The speaker goes on to talk about the antiquity of his race: “I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.” As you might know, Mesopotamia is considered to be the cradle of all western civilizations and it was located between the two rivers Euphrates and Tigris. The speaker of the poem argues that his ancestors existed on the banks of Euphrates, thereby implying that the African’s origins can be traced back to the origins of the earliest civilizations (“dawns”). Next, the speaker refers to his race’s peaceful existence on the banks of the Congo river: “I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.” The river
is presented, as Rachel DuPlessis says, “as a pastoral, nourishing, maternal setting.” For the African, the sound of the flowing river was like a lullaby.

The next river is the Nile whose name is closely associated with the history of Egyptian civilization. Egypt is also known for the Pyramids. But the Pyramids hide beneath them the toil of the Africans. The speaker subtly suggests that his people were also involved in the building of the ancient pyramids, maybe as slaves or as peasants. For the monument work granite had to be transported through the Nile and the Africans were supposedly helpful in doing the work and thus, as the speaker implies, they “raised the pyramids above it [the Nile].”

By mentioning the river Mississippi, an American river, the speaker is turning the history of the Africans to the recent times, that is, the 19th and 20th centuries. The river, unlike the previous ones, is described as “muddy.” The quiet existence of the African was disturbed when colonization and slave trade began, when his people were transported to the US by the Mississippi River. Slavery was legally accepted until, at the end of the American Civil War, Abraham Lincoln abolished it through his Emancipation Proclamation of 1863. His visit to New Orleans as a young man had given him a dreadful firsthand knowledge of slavery. The speaker closes the poem by asserting once again that he has known rivers and that his knowledge of them, like his experience, is deep.

34.3.4 An Appreciation

This short seemingly simple poem is a fine representation of the complex history of the African-Americans. The poet has effectively connected the history with 4 rivers. At the creation of man, the river Euphrates was one of the headwaters of the main river that flowed from the garden of Eden (Genesis 2: 10-14). While Euphrates connects the Africans to the beginning of the world and civilization, the Nile and the pyramids suggest their not so pleasant and arduous advancement with civilization. Finally, the Mississippi connects them with the recent past in American history and their existence in the new continent as slaves till the 20th century. Over the centuries, the African has seen the rise and fall of civilizations and his surviving spirit has continued even in the US, despite colonisations and the consequent racial discrimination.

The ‘I’ in the poem is not a complaining individual but, like the ‘I’ in Whitman’s poems, a pleasant speaker for his race. He narrates the Africans’ common past. The changing of the Mississippi’s colour into golden yellow in the sunset perhaps alludes to the slaves’ freedom gained through Lincoln’s proclamation. But centuries of slavery has left indelible scars in his memory. Thus he repeats the line “My soul has grown deep like the rivers” to suggest that “he is no longer the same man who ‘bathed in the Euphrates’” or “built [his] hut near the Congo”; he is now a black man who has toiled for the building up of civilizations and has experienced the pain of slavery and racism. The imprint of these experiences in his soul has made his character deep.

It is significant that the speaker does not explicitly talk about Africans’ slavery or the pains of racism; the poem has a pleasant surface. Thus bathing in Euphrates or building the hut near the Congo can be considered as normal human activities and they indicate undisturbed life. But raising the pyramids evokes images of the African slaves’ hard work in building them (some scholars believe that Africans were made to work as slaves in the erection of the pyramids, while some do not). And the references to Abraham Lincoln and New Orleans bring to mind
American Civil War and slavery. When the poem ends, he repeats that his soul is deep, also perhaps as a result of the wisdom he has gained through his suffering.

The poet uses many poetic devices in this short poem. For instance, we notice the use of simile in the line “My soul has grown deep like the rivers.” Similarly, if we consider the speaker’s lines in their literal sense, then many of them will appear hyperbolic (“I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young” or “I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln/went down to New Orleans”). Again, the lines “I have known rivers” and “My soul has grown deep like the rivers” are used as refrains.

Self-check Exercise 2

1) Write a note on the theme of the poem.

2) How does the poet link the history of the speaker’s race with the rivers in the poem?

3) How is the language of the poem different from that of the other two poems?

34.4 YOUNG GAL’S BLUES

34.4.1 Introduction

This poem has death, aging and loneliness as its themes. One cannot escape death. It evokes feelings of sadness and grief. It can also lead to the (in)significance of human existence. In this poem a young girl, after witnessing death and loneliness, is considering death as a desirable option in a world devoid
of love; she prefers death to growing old. This is might sound unusual because for a young person life is full of hope and expectations. So when a young girl desires death, the cause of the desire has to be justified. This is what Hughes tries to do in this poem. Whether he is serious about the justification is something that we are going to see shortly.

34.4.2 The Text

I’m gonna walk to the graveyard
‘Hind ma friend Miss Cora Lee.
Gonna walk to the graveyard
‘Hind ma dear friend Cora Lee.
Cause when I’m dead some
Body’ll have to walk behind me.

I’m goin’ to the po’ house
To see ma old Aunt Clew.
Goin’ to the po’ house
To see ma old Aunt Clew
When I’m old an’ ugly
I’ll want to see somebody too.

De po’ house is lonely
An’ de grave is cold.
O, de po’ house is lonely,
De graveyard grave is cold.
But I’d rather be dead than
To be ugly an’ old.

When love is gone what
Can a young gal do?
When love is gone, O.
What can a young gal do?
Keep on a-lovin’me, daddy,
Cause I don’t wanna be blue.

Glossary:

gal : girl
gonna : going to
Hind : behind
de : the
po : poor
gravel : small rounded stones, often mixed with sand
wanna : want to
blue : feeling sadness

34.4.3 Analysis of the Poem

The opening of the poem itself is striking for it evokes thoughts about death. The young girl, the speaker of the poem, begins her song thus: “I’m gonna walk to the graveyard.” At the outset the reader gets the hint that the theme of the poem could be death. She seems to be accompanying the funeral cortege of her friend
Miss Cora Lee. The reason why she is walking to the graveyard is, “…when I’m dead some/Body’ll have to walk behind me.”

She also says that she is visiting old Aunt Chew at the latter’s poor house. Like the reason for going to the graveyard, there is a reason for visiting the old aunt: “When I’m old an’ ugly/ I’ll want to see somebody too.”

In the third stanza we again get references to old age and death. She says Aunt Chew is lonely in her poor house and Cora lies cold in her grave. Comparing death and old age she says: “But I’d rather be dead than/To be ugly an’ old.” Being old means being ugly and lonely, so death is preferable.

Why does she prefer death? Perhaps because she does not seem to receive love, “love is gone”. She underscores the fact that it is difficult to live without love. So she requests her dad to keep on loving her because she does not want to be sad.

34.4.4 An Appreciation

We have already seen that Langston Hughes was deeply interested in African-American folk music, especially the blues. You must have noticed that the poem we have just analysed has the word ‘blues’ in it. The word can mean ‘feelings of sadness’ but the structure and lines of the poem remind us of the folk music form called the blues. Interestingly, this poem is included in the collection *Fine Clothes to the Jews*, which contains many of Hughes blues poems.

The speaker of the poem should be an African-American woman. In order to make this clear, the poet has used certain spellings, forms of pronunciation and colloquial words typical of the African-American dialect of English. For example, look at the spellings ‘ma’ (my), ‘de’ (the) and ‘Hind’ (behind); similarly, note the pronunciations ‘po’ (poor) and ‘goin’ ‘ (going). Again, words like ‘gal’ and ‘gonna’ are examples of informal words used in speech only. Although these unusual linguistic features underline her African-American identity and dialect, her grammar is not faulty.

Let us now briefly examine how Hughes makes use of the blues in this poem. Remember, bringing the effect of blues in poetry is no easy task. According to Paul Oliver, an authority on folk music, “Blues is for singing. It is not a form of folk song that stands up particularly well when written down.” So what poets do is to poetise the blues. But then there is another problem: Oliver adds, “. . . blues made literary read not like refined folk song but like bad poetry.” Your study of the poem might have convinced you that Hughes’ “Young Gal’s Blues” is not a bad poem. If so, how does he succeed in blending the elements of the blues in the poem?

In David Chinitz’s opinion, Hughes was interested in the blues because the music was “an expression of the resilience and tragedy of the African-American lower class.” In the poem, the girl is talking of death aging and absence of love. She might be thinking of the racial discrimination practice by the white man against her people which indicates cruelty and lack of love. Death and racism are tragic subjects. However, we cannot be sure whether she is resilient.

Quoting Hughes’ own words, Chinitz says: “The blues were ‘sad songs’ because they manifested the ‘hopeless weariness’ of an oppressed people; they were ‘gay songs because you had to be gay or die’”. The themes of “Young Gal’s Blues” are really sad, for she is talking of the love that she longs to receive. In a sense, she is
representing her class of African-American girls who have suffered racial injustice and discrimination.

The structural pattern of the poem resembles that of the blues. In his “Note on Blues”, Hughes says: “The Blues . . . have a strict poetic pattern: one long line repeated and a third line to rhyme with the first two. Sometimes the second line in repetition is slightly changed and sometimes, but very seldom, it is omitted.” In order to give the shape of poetry to his blues poems he alters this pattern; he breaks the first two lines into two lines each and also divides the final line so that a stanza will have six lines. Notice that the poem we are studying has six-line stanzas. However, let us not think that all poets will compose their blues poetry in this way; each one modifies the pattern according to his poetic sensibility.

Further, Chinitz points out that many of Hughes blues poems in Fine Clothes are sung by women. The speaker of our poem, for example, is a girl. And the humorous element present in blues is visible in the present poem, too. The young girl talks of old age and death in the first three stanzas and in the last stanza she is lamenting the absence of love in the world. This appears humorous because she is too young and has not suffered enough to be tired of life. Yet the lines reflect the hopelessness that creeps into the mind of the young Afro-American.

This is how Langston Hughes uses the blues music in the poem. He was so careful to blend the blues elements in such a way that the poetic qualities essential to a poem are not sacrificed.

Self-check Exercise 3

1) Write a note on the language of the poem.

2) Why does the young girl desire death?

3) Pick out the lines repeated in the poem. Why are they repeated?
34.5 MOTHER TO SON

34.5.1 Introduction

This is another simple poem written by Langston Hughes. It was published in his first collection of poems, *The Weary Blues*. He was only 21 when he wrote it. Here, too, Hughes uses the language of the uneducated African-American but, as Baxter Miller points out, by using it he “shows how dialect can be used with dignity.”

The title might suggest that it is a dialogue between a mother and her son. However, critics like Baxter Miller and Aidan Wasley consider it as a dramatic monologue. As in the case of the other two poems we have just studied, the speaker of this poem also is a representative figure, an Afro-American woman/mother who has struggled hard in life. The poem reveals the woman’s (Hughes’, too) optimism and her acceptance of the fact that life is a struggle and that one should not give up on life even when it is full of difficulties. Hughes passes on this idea using a striking metaphor that has significance throughout the poem.

34.5.2 The Text

Well, son, I’ll tell you:
Life for me ain’t been no crystal stair.
It’s had tacks in it,
And splinters,
And boards torn up,
And places with no carpet on the floor—
Bare.
But all the time
I’s been a-climbin’ on,
And reachin’ landin’s,
And turnin’ corners,
And sometimes goin’ in the dark
Where there ain’t been no light.
So, boy, don’t you turn back.
Don’t you set down on the steps.
’Cause you finds it’s kinda hard.
Don’t you fall now—
For I’s still goin’, honey,
I’s still climbin’,
And life for me ain’t been no crystal stair.

Glossary:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ain’t</td>
<td>am not/is not/are not/has not</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tacks</td>
<td>small sharp nails with a flat end</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>splinters</td>
<td>small sharp broken pieces of wood, glass, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>landin’s</td>
<td>landings; areas of floor or passage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>honey</td>
<td>an address showing endearment; a pleasant person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>set</td>
<td>sit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kinda</td>
<td>kind of (a common expression in the Afro-American dialect, meaning ‘slightly’, ‘in some ways’)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
34.5.3 Analysis of the Poem

The poem opens with a mother’s address to her son. As mentioned earlier, the son is an imagined listener rather than one who is actually present. This imagined listener/audience makes the poem a dramatic monologue. She tells her son that (as an African-American woman), life was not easy for her; it was not a crystal stair with strong smooth steps. During her life’s journey, she had to walk on sharp nails, broken and pointed substances which lay scattered on the stairs. She means to say that she had to bear experiences that pierced her heart and hurt her like sharp objects. Similarly, sometimes her walk was dangerous since the steps on the stairs were broken. She had to stop and think about ways of going ahead and her barefooted walk on the rough steps (“with no carpet”) only caused pain and suffering.

After narrating these painful experiences she underwent, the mother explains how she faced them. She says they could not stop her from climbing the stairs (“I’se been a-climbin’ on”), that is, from going ahead in life. There were landings for her but there were corners, too, which seemed to block her way ahead; there were occasions when she was totally without light (“And sometimes goin’ in the dark”), meaning there were times she had lost all hope and future lay dark before her. But she did not stop her walk and came thus far overcoming all obstructions that were in store for her.

Having faced a tough life she is capable of advising her son:

So, boy, don’t you turn back
Don’t you set down on the steps
‘Cause you find it’s kinder hard

She is advising her son not to give up on life or stop going ahead just because it appears slightly hard. She encourages the son by giving her own example: even after suffering so much over the years, her struggle has not ended: she is still climbing the remaining steps of her life arduously: “And life for me ain’t been no crystal stair.”

34.5.4 An Appreciation

“Mother to Son” is a dramatic monologue which takes its readers to different levels of meaning. Its structure and content appears simple but it has something to tell everyone and it, probably, throws light on Hughes’ apprehensions about his prospective career as a young Afro-American.

We do not know why the African-American mother is narrating her woes to her son. Perhaps the son asked her to narrate them to him; or, he must have complained about life at a frustrating moment. So the mother begins: “Well, son, I’ll tell you” and begins her story of struggles. Life for her was no crystal stair, she says repeatedly.

When Hughes wrote this poem he was just beginning his career as a poet and he was an educated man, too. So he may not speak English the way the mother in the poem speaks. Then the question is, why does he make an elderly (African-American) woman his narrator? According to Aidan Wasley, “we can see the speaker of ‘Mother to Son’ as representing a kind of collective voice, the voice of the generations of African-Americans whose troubled history . . . ‘ain’t been no crystal stair.’”
That means the speaker-mother, by narrating her own story of hard struggle, is narrating the story of her race beginning from their homelands and ending in America where it still has not ended (“And life for me ain’t been no crystal stair). The African-Americans had to walk on tacks, splinters, torn up boards, etc. In the United States they had to live in narrow dirty tenement houses and fight poverty. Yet, the mother and thousands like her climbed on their difficult stairs. Their future, she tells the son and by extension to countless young African-Americans, depends on this willingness to struggle; they should not “set down on the steps” accepting defeat. Because they still have to climb, they need to be inspired by their traditional spiritual, “We shall overcome someday.” Here, it is quite desirable for the readers of the poem to take the mother’s advice for themselves.

Hughes has very effectively planted the story of the woman within a central image—the crystal stair. Wasley equates this stair with the stairway/ladder that Jacob, the Old Testament patriarch, had seen in a dream. Jacob had to run away from home to his uncle’s house to save himself from the anger of his brother, Esau, whom he had cheated. On his way, Jacob reached a place in the evening and because it was dark he slept at that place keeping a stone as pillow under his head. While sleeping he had a dream in which he saw a stairway/ladder with its foot on the earth and the top touching heaven. He also saw God’s angels walking up and down the stairs. Standing at the top God spoke to Jacob: “I am the Lord, the God . . . . I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth and you will spread out” in all the four directions (This event in Jacob’s life is described in the first book of the Bible, Genesis, chapter 28 and verses from 10 to 15).

How can this event in Jacob’s life be related to the poem we are studying? Jacob’s descendants are the Israelites (Jews). They had to be captives in Egypt and the Pharaohs put them under slavery for many centuries. While suffering in Egypt they all the time longed for the land that God had promised Jacob. This story of Jacob was very popular among the African-Americans when they toiled in the Southern plantations before the Civil War. Like the Israelites, they were also yearning for freedom and a peaceful life in the promised land of America. As Wasley points out, “The heavenly stairway became a powerful image of liberation and salvation, attainable only through suffering and faith in God.” Wasley guesses that Hughes might “have been very familiar with the associations of Jacob’s ladder with the struggle for freedom and equality of blacks in America.” It is significant to note that one of their best-known traditional spiritual songs was “We are climbing Jacob’s ladder.” The song “speaks of climbing ‘higher and higher’ to become ‘soldiers of the Lord’” and it also exhorts the singers to “Keep on climbing, we will make it.” It ends with the question, “Children do you want your freedom?” In the context of these details, the mother in the poem attains larger significance. She is a wise woman advising her people, scattered across Northern America, to keep climbing and not to sit on the steps. The image of the crystal stair, thus, evokes “simultaneously the painful history of blacks in America while pointing to the tradition of faith and hope that has sustained them through it all.”

As mentioned earlier, we may identify the son in the poem with the poet himself. When Hughes wrote this poem he was a very young poet struggling to formulate the basis of his art. He might have been wondering whether he should write about his own people, their struggles and longing for absolute freedom in America or ignore his African roots. These problems were not easy to solve and if we read “Mother to Son” keeping in mind these issues the poet faced, then we discover
that “the poem suggests that the son’s frustration and despair is that of the poet, who is faced with the impossible task of writing poetry that truly speaks to and for the African-American experience.” The mother’s exhortation in the poem then attains another level of meaning. As an African-American poet, Hughes is advised to boldly accept his status as an African-American and sing of his race’s history drawing extensively from their art forms—spirituals, blues, jazz, etc. Also, see how the mother’s advice is apt to solve the poet’s dilemma: “So, boy, don’t you turn back/ Don’t you set down on the steps/'Cause you find it’s kinder hard.” She knows that his task is not easy and his poetry cannot be about a smooth crystal stair.

Again, in a very general sense we can consider the son as anybody who is tired of life’s hardships. The mother’s advice to him/her is not to accept defeat but to keep on going in the face of stiff oppositions and adverse circumstances.

In this poem, too, as in “Young Gal’s Blues”, we find the use of the African-American dialect. Words and expressions like ain’t a-climbin’, reachin’, set down, kinder, I’se, etc., illustrate this fact. They also point to the mother’s lack of education and her son’s difference in terms of education. The influence of the blues also is visible. Thus the poem has heavy rhythmic beats, repeating lines and the narration of the African-Americans’ sad struggle. While distinguishing the blues from the spirituals, Hughes says: “Unlike the Spirituals, the Blues are not group songs . . . they are usually sung by one man or one woman alone.” He goes on to point out that “the Blues are songs about being in the midst of trouble, friendless, hungry, disappointed in love, right here on earth.” This poem is also sung by a woman and it talks of hardships and unfavourable circumstances.

**Self-check Exercise 4**

1) What features of the dramatic monologue do you find in the poem?

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2) Comment on the significance of the crystal stair as a metaphor in the poem.

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3) Is this a poem of hope?

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34.6 LET US SUM UP

We have studied three poems by Langston Hughes. They reflect his concern for and interest in the African-American race. The first poem, “Negro Speaks of Rivers”, is an assertion of the historical antiquity of the race. The poem, through the speaker, briefly but pointedly narrates the history of the Afro-Americans from the dawn of civilizations to the 20th century. The progress of the race is associated with four rivers and it subtly reveals the losses the race had to suffer because of its dislocation from its original places.

In “Young Gal’s Blues” a young girl is discussing death, old age and the absence of love among people. Thoughts about these subjects lead her to express her desire to die rather than to live. We do not know whether Hughes wants us to take the girl seriously, for she appears to be too young to be tired of life or to think about death.

The third poem, “Mother Speaks to Son”, expresses the hope of an Afro-American woman who has suffered a lot in her life. She tells her son that life for her was not a crystal stair. The steps of the stair she had to climb during her life’s journey were not smooth. At each step she had to face some kind of hurting obstruction. But that did not deter her from going ahead in life. She is a direct contrast to the young girl in the previous poem. The present poem expresses no cynicism; it is a song of hope.

34.7 SUGGESTED READING

Some of the books on Hughes that you may refer to are:


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All the answers given below are according to the serial numbers of the questions

**Answers to the questions on Hughes’ biography**

1) This you can do on your own. Just Google ‘Langston Hughes.’

2) The childhood of both the poets was unhappy. Hughes’ mother could not take care of him properly. He did not get his father’s attention. Ginsberg’s mother was mentally unstable. His father was strict and traditional in outlook. Both the poets had enrolled at Columbia University and Hughes was a dropout. Both were prolific writers.

3) Writing poems in the pattern of the blues is not easy. Yet Hughes attempted it and could give a peculiar kind of structure and music to his blues poems. The section “Langston Hughes and the blues” will help you complete this answer.

**Answers to the questions on the poem “Negro Speaks of Rivers”**

1) The poem deals with the history of the Afro-Americans in two parts and the history is skillfully linked with the names of rivers. The poem deals with the theme of the African-Americans’ dislocation from their local habitats and their exploitation by the so-called advancing civilizations.

2) The Euphrates and the Congo rivers are associated with his peaceful life in the African continent. The Nile and the Mississippi bring in the theme of slavery and the dislocation of the African-Americans from their places of origin.

3) The language of the poem conforms to the spelling, grammar and usage of contemporary English. It is not written in the African-American dialect. We see the use of the dialect in the other two poems.

**Answers to the questions on “Young Gal’s Blues”**

1) The poem contains spellings and words which are dialectal. For more details see the second paragraph of the section ‘Analysis of the poem’.

2) She desires death because she is dejected by the sight of death, old age and the thought of loneliness.

3) The lines repeated are: 2, 7, 13, and the first two lines of the last stanza. This kind of repetition gives the poem the musical quality of a folk song in which repeating lines is a common feature. For more details, read the section on blues and the appreciation of the poem.

**Answers to the questions on “Mother to Son”**

1) A dramatic monologue appears as though there is a speaker and a listener or listeners, but there is no real listener. The speaker’s words in the poem generally reveal his/her character and temperament. In Hughes’ poem the son is only supposedly there and hence does not respond to his mother. So his is an imaginary presence. Also, the woman’s words clearly reveal the resilience of her character.

2) The entire poem revolves round the metaphor of the crystal stair; we find its presence throughout the poem. It signifies life’s progress, the hardships life brings and the need to climb up, rather than climb down, in the face of adversities.

3) Surely, this is a poem of hope. It enables one to keep hope about future even as one meets with adverse experiences in life.