

## American Literature Readings 7



# The Roaring Twenties and the Great Depression

## INTRODUCTION

The United States was a study in contrasts during the 1920s. New ideas and lifestyles conflicted with traditional patterns of life, but it was an age of optimism and new economic freedom for many. During this period, outstanding literary works and personalities blossomed. In New York City, a group of writers known as the Algonquin Hotel Round Table included Dorothy Parker, Harold Ross, Alexander Woolcott, Franklin P. Adams, and Edna Ferber. Across town the Harlem Renaissance was in full swing. Its stars were Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Countee Cullen, and Dorothy West, among others. The theater district supported Eugene O'Neill, Thornton Wilder, and Clifford Odets. Elsewhere, Carl Sandburg and Edna St. Vincent Millay were making their mark on poetry.

The economic boom that characterized much of the decade came to an abrupt end in 1929, however, and Americans faced the worst economic collapse in United States history. The Great Depression resulted in millions of unemployed people and violent labor unrest among those who did have jobs but were overworked and underpaid.

## "The Negro Speaks of Rivers"

Langston Hughes

**About the Selection** Langston Hughes (1902–1967) first began writing poetry in high school, eventually becoming one of the leading figures of the Harlem Renaissance. He published many books, including collections of poems and short stories, plays, novels, essays, and two autobiographical works. Many of Hughes's works take a deep look at the African ancestry of African Americans.

## GUIDED READING

As you read, consider the symbolism of the major rivers mentioned in the poem. Then answer the questions that follow.

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.

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