

And We Shall be Steeped and Vocabulary

Section Objectives:

- Incorporate strategies for reading poems
- Analyze imagery
- Analyze characteristics of catalog poems, haiku, sonnets, lyric poems, ballads, and free verse
- Compare two poems
- Analyze a speaker's persona, tone, and voice



In the 1930s Léopold Sédar Senghor and other blacks from French colonies helped form *Négritude*, a cultural and ideological movement that took pride in African heritage and opposed French colonialism. Many members of la Négritude were influenced by the Harlem Renaissance, particularly by the works of Langston Hughes and Richard Wright.

Leopold Sedar Senghor

Leopold Sedar Senghor is extremely accomplished in a variety of fields. He is a poet, literary critic, teacher, activist, and government leader. Born in 1906 in Senegal, West Africa, Senghor grew up speaking French. During these years, Senegal was a French colony and Africans like Senghor thought of themselves as French. He was also educated at a French University in Paris. It was during this time, however, that he realized he would never be accepted in French society because of the black color of his skin and the continent he was from. Recognizing how important it is for Africans to appreciate and celebrate their heritage and culture, he helped form the Negritude movement for this purpose. After serving in the French military during World War II, he was one of two West Africans elected to the French National Assembly. In this position, he helped to draft constitutions that eventually brought independence to France's West African colonies. Once Senegal became its own nation, Senghor was elected its first president. He held this position for four terms.

Reading “And We Shall be Steeped”

“And We Shall be Steeped” is an example of one of his writings that celebrate his African roots. This poem is rich in **imagery**. **Imagery** consists of words that appeal to the reader’s senses. Though he includes **visual imagery** of African scenery, he also uses imagery that depicts other sensual experiences. Look for words that appeal to one’s sense of **smell, sound, taste** and **touch** as well.

First, it is important to understand the word “**steeped**” in the title, which conveys the purpose of the poem. It means to be “soaked,” “drenched,” or “immersed.” So the rest of the poem immerses the reader in a variety of sensual descriptions of African culture and surroundings in order to channel African spirit. Make a list of all of these descriptions and label which sense each appeals to.

Notice in the first line the speaker addresses “my dear.” What does this choice of words reflect and who could this be?

Senghor names many items that represent both the past and present of African history, like the “pure primordial masks distant and present” in line 3. What message is conveyed by the juxtaposition of these things?

Finally, the colors “White black and red” are mentioned in the last line of the poem. These colors are **symbolic** because they represent African history. What could these colors represent? Which image in this poem does this contrast with?

Another important component of this poem is its **sound devices**. Senghor wanted to imitate African sound in this poem. Especially when this poem is read in its original French, it sounds like the rhythms created by traditional West African chanting because many lines begin with stressed syllables. This poem was also meant to be accompanied by the four-stringed African guitar, the khalam. Other poetic sound devices that are featured in this poem are **alliteration** and **assonance**. **Alliteration** is the repetition of consonant sounds in neighboring words. By the same token, **assonance** is the repetition of vowel sounds in nearby words. One example of **alliteration** is in the repetition of the “s” sound in the words “somber” and “serene” in line 2. The repetition of the long “e” sound in line 1 in words like “we,” “steeped,” and “dear” is an example of **assonance**. Can you find another example of each sound device in the poem?

Vocabulary

Several terms in this poem really can’t be figured out by context clues because they refer to African geography or history. For example in line 2, “**Guinea**” and “**Congo**” are nations in Africa, but in this poem, this is a reference to the entire West African coast. Then “**hereditary guests, for the Princes of the High Lands**” in line 4 refers to great African rulers of the past. Though Sudan is a present-day African nation, “**Sudanese Cloths**” in line 7 refers to the plains that span the continent below the Sahara desert.

Context clues can be used to decipher other words unfamiliar words in the poems like **“somber”** and **“serene”** in line 2 and **“wellspring”** in line 6. Another powerful strategy that can be used to figure out the meaning of words is to look at the individual parts of the word. Specifically try to recognize or associate the root, prefix and suffix to a word you are familiar. Try this with **“primordial”** in line 3 and **“antiphonal”** in line 7. Do you know any other words with similar prefixes or roots that can help you figure the meaning of these words out?

