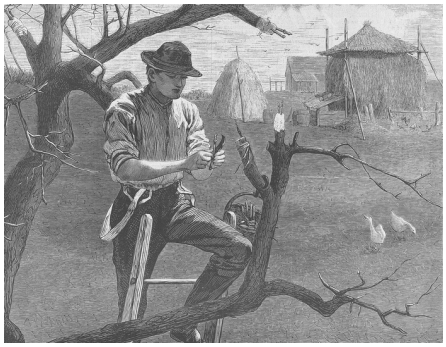
Name _____ Class _____ Date _____



I Hear America Singing

by Walt Whitman

Grades 6–9 · Common Core RL.7.4, RL.7.2, RL.7.5

The poem first appeared in the 1860 edition of Whitman's Leaves of Grass, just before the Civil War. Whitman wrote in free verse (no regular rhyme or meter) and used long lists, called catalogs. Note: on our page one long line wraps onto a second line.

THE POEM

I hear America singing, the varied carols I hear,
Those of mechanics, each one singing his as it should be blithe and strong,
The carpenter singing his as he measures his plank or beam,
The mason singing his as he makes ready for work, or leaves off work,
The boatman singing what belongs to him in his boat, the deckhand singing on the steamboat deck,
The shoemaker singing as he sits on his bench, the hatter singing as he stands,
The wood-cutter's song, the ploughboy's on his way in the morning, or at noon intermission or at sundown,
The delicious singing of the mother, or of the young wife at work, or of the girl sewing or washing,
Each singing what belongs to him or her and to none else,
The day what belongs to the day—at night the party of young
fellows, robust, friendly,
Singing with open mouths their strong melodious songs.

VOCABULARY

varied — different, diverse

carols — joyful songs

mechanics — skilled workers who use tools or machines

blithe — cheerful, carefree

mason — a worker who builds with stone or brick

deckhand — a worker on a ship's deck

intermission — a break

robust — strong and healthy

melodious — musical, pleasant-sounding

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What does the speaker hear? Is the "singing" only real songs?

2. List six workers named in the poem.

3. What does "Each singing what belongs to him or her and to none else" suggest about each person?

4. Why do you think Whitman chose ordinary workers rather than presidents or generals?

5. What is the effect of the long list (catalog) and the lack of rhyme?

WRITING PROMPT

Write your own "I Hear ___ Singing" poem about your school, town or family. List at least six people and the "songs" they make as they work or play.

I Hear America Singing — Answer Key

1. “America singing, the varied carols”: working people singing as they work. The “singing” also stands for their pride, energy and individual contributions.
2. Any six: mechanics, the carpenter, the mason, the boatman, the deckhand, the shoemaker, the hatter, the wood-cutter, the ploughboy, the mother, the young wife, the girl sewing or washing, young fellows.
3. Each person is unique and proud; their work and voice are their own.
4. Accept supported answers: he believed ordinary working people are the true heart of America and democracy.
5. The list feels endless and inclusive, like a crowd of voices; free verse lets the lines grow long and natural, like speech or song.

Read the full poem online: poetrycatalog.com/i-hear-america-singing-walt-whitman/