Name _____ Class _____ Date _____



The Village Blacksmith

by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

Grades 8–10 · Common Core RL.8.4, RL.8.2, RL.8.5

"The Village Blacksmith" was published in 1840 and then in Longfellow's Ballads and Other Poems (1841). It has 48 lines in eight six-line stanzas. The first stanzas show the smith at work, at church and at home; the last stanza turns his shop into a symbol for all of life, "the flaming forge of life." Longfellow based the smith on a real blacksmith in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and on a chestnut tree that stood on the street there. As you read, notice what the poem admires in the man, and where the tone becomes more tender.

THE POEM

Under a spreading chestnut-tree
The village smithy stands;
The smith, a mighty man is he,
With large and sinewy hands;
And the muscles of his brawny arms
Are strong as iron bands.

His hair is crisp, and black, and long,
His face is like the tan;
His brow is wet with honest sweat,
He earns whate'er he can,
And looks the whole world in the face,
For he owes not any man.

Week in, week out, from morn till night,
You can hear his bellows blow;
You can hear him swing his heavy sledge,
With measured beat and slow,
Like a sexton ringing the village bell,
When the evening sun is low.

And children coming home from school
Look in at the open door;
They love to see the flaming forge,
And hear the bellows roar,
And catch the burning sparks that fly
Like chaff from a threshing-floor.

He goes on Sunday to the church,
And sits among his boys;
He hears the parson pray and preach,
He hears his daughter's voice,
Singing in the village choir,
And it makes his heart rejoice.

It sounds to him like her mother's voice,
Singing in Paradise!
He needs must think of her once more,
How in the grave she lies;
And with his hard, rough hand he wipes
A tear out of his eyes.

Toiling,—rejoicing,—sorrowing,
Onward through life he goes;
Each morning sees some task begin,
Each evening sees it close
Something attempted, something done,
Has earned a night's repose.

Thanks, thanks to thee, my worthy friend,
For the lesson thou hast taught!
Thus at the flaming forge of life
Our fortunes must be wrought;
Thus on its sounding anvil shaped
Each burning deed and thought.

VOCABULARY

smithy — a blacksmith's workshop

sinewy — tough and muscular

brawny — strong and heavily muscled

whate'er — whatever (an older contraction)

bellows — a tool that blows air into a fire to make it hotter

sledge — a heavy hammer

sexton — a church worker who may ring the bell

forge — the furnace where metal is heated; the blacksmith's workplace

chaff — the husks separated from grain

threshing-floor — the place where grain is beaten to separate it from chaff

parson — a minister or preacher

repose — rest

wrought — shaped or made, especially by hammering

anvil — the iron block on which a blacksmith hammers metal

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In the first two stanzas, what physical details make the smith seem "a mighty man," and what do lines 11–12 add about his character: he "looks the whole world in the face, / For he owes not any man"?

2. Lines 13–18 describe his work "from morn till night" and compare his sledge to "a sexton ringing the village bell." What do the sound and the comparison suggest about the pattern of his days?

3. Stanza 4 shows "children coming home from school" at the open door, watching the "flaming forge" and the sparks that fly "Like chaff from a threshing-floor." Why might Longfellow include the children here, and what does the farm comparison add to the picture of the shop?

4. In stanzas 5–6 the smith hears "his daughter's voice" in church, and "It sounds to him like her mother's voice, / Singing in Paradise!" How do these stanzas change our sense of him, and how do they lead to the summary in line 37, "Toiling,—rejoicing,—sorrowing"?

5. In the last stanza the speaker thanks the smith "For the lesson thou hast taught!" What is the lesson of "the flaming forge of life" and the "sounding anvil," and how do "Our fortunes" and "Each burning deed and thought" complete the comparison?

WRITING PROMPT

Choose a person whose everyday work you admire (a cook, a mechanic, a teacher, a farmer, a nurse). Describe what they do in clear, physical detail, as Longfellow describes the smith, then end by saying what lesson their work could teach about how to live. Use at least one simile.

The Village Blacksmith — Answer Key

1. He has “large and sinewy hands,” and “the muscles of his brawny arms / Are strong as iron bands.” His hair, tan-like face and “honest sweat” add to the picture of hard, regular work. Looking “the whole world in the face” because “he owes not any man” presents him as independent and honest, not only strong: he has nothing to be ashamed of and is not in anyone’s debt.

2. The “measured beat and slow” of the sledge, heard “Week in, week out,” makes his work sound steady and almost like a clock or a ritual. Comparing it to “a sexton ringing the village bell” links the shop to the life of the whole town, as if his labor were as regular and public as the evening bell.

3. The children make the smithy a gathering place, not just a workplace, and they “love to see” the fire and sparks, so the work looks wonderful as well as hard. Sparks “Like chaff from a threshing-floor” compare the forge to farm work, which also feeds the community, and they make the flying sparks easy to picture.

4. Until now he has seemed mainly strong and busy. In church he sits “among his boys,” rejoices at his daughter’s singing, and then we learn that her mother “in the grave she lies,” so he also grieves. “Toiling,—rejoicing,—sorrowing” gathers the whole poem into three words: work, joy and loss all belong to his life, and still he goes “Onward.”

5. Life is compared to a forge and anvil: we are shaped by what we do, just as metal is hammered into shape. “Our fortunes must be wrought” means our lives are made by effort, not simply given. “Each burning deed and thought” is like the hot metal on the “sounding anvil,” so both actions and thoughts help form who we become. The “lesson” is that steady work, done day by day, shapes a life.

Read the full poem online: poetrycatalog.com/the-village-blacksmith-henry-wadsworth-longfellow/