



I Hear America Singing

Walt Whitman
Leaves of Grass
(1855)

The protagonists of this popular poem are all the categories of American workers who are trying to build a better society and to bring the American dream to life.

- 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 beam¹,
 The mason² singing his as he makes ready for work, or leaves off work,
 5 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 the noon intermission³ 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 her, and to none else;
 10 The day what belongs to the day – at night, the **party** of young fellows, robust, friendly,
 Singing with open mouths their strong melodious songs.

1 **plank or beam.** Tavola di legno o asse.

2 **mason.** Muratore.

3 **intermission.** Pausa.

READING COMPETENCE

1 READ the poem and match the highlighted words with their translation.

- | | |
|--------------------|---------------------------|
| 1 cappellaio | 6 canzoni |
| 2 marinaio | 7 gaia, allegra |
| 3 comitiva | 8 taglialegna |
| 4 panca | 9 giovane contadino |
| 5 che cuce | 10 falegname |

2 READ the poem again and do the following activities.

- Answer the following questions.
 - What can the poet hear?
 - What are the people doing?
 - What kind of jobs do they do?
 - Are women mentioned by the poet? How?
- Write down the words referring to time. What does the reference to time imply about the people's songs?
- Do the layout and the rhyme scheme respect the traditional forms of poetry?
- How is the poem written?
- Whitman gives unity to his poem through the use of repetition and parallelism, i.e. the use of similar syntactic units inside the same line or from line to line. Provide examples from the text.
- Complete the table below with the words conveying the ideas of the voices heard both in isolation and fused in a sort of choir.

Individual voices	Fusion



7 What features of the 'singing America' are emphasised in the poem?

8 Who do you think the 'I' in the poem stands for?

- A One of the workers.
- B America itself.
- C The poet himself.

9 What does the workers' song symbolise?

- A The attempt to feel happy in spite of hard work.
- B The effort to build a better society.
- C The happiness of poor people.

➤ **COMPETENCE: LINKING LITERATURE TO PERSONAL EXPERIENCE**

3 DISCUSS. Do you think Whitman's view of America is exaggeratedly optimistic or does it correspond to the present reality of American society?