I Hear America Singing

POEM TEXT

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.

SUMMARY

I can hear all of America singing: I hear the many different songs that people sing. I hear mechanics singing, and all of them are singing proudly and strongly—as they should be. I hear the carpenter singing as he measures pieces of wood. I hear the bricklayer singing as he gets ready for work or comes home at the end of the day. I hear the boatman singing about his work in the boat. I hear the crew singing on the deck of the steamboat. I hear the cobbler singing as he sits at his bench and the hatter singing as he stands at his workstation. I hear the logger's song, the young farmer singing on his way to plow the fields in the morning, or during his lunch break, or at sunset. I hear the sweet song of the mother or the new bride working, or of the girl who sews or washes clothes. Each of them sings about their own work, their own life, and nothing else. During the day, they sing songs appropriate to the day. At night, strong, friendly young men sing with open mouths their loud, tuneful songs.

THEMES

WORK AND AMERICAN IDENTITY

"I Hear America Singing" presents an idyllic—and idealized—vision of American life. The poem moves from the city to the country, from the shore to the sea, introducing the reader along the way to all different works along the way—from farmers, to shoemakers, to housewives.

Traveling through these places and professions, the speaker gradually builds a portrait of America as a place where people find joy and fulfillment in productivity and honest labor—even if that labor is not typically "sung" about in poetry. And while the poem takes care to emphasize the dignity and pride of each of these workers in their own right, it also affirms that the workers' many songs come together to form the sound of "America" itself.

The speaker's list of jobs cuts across the whole of the United States: moving from urban professionals making fashionable hats to those engaged in rural jobs, like plowing fields; from jobs on shore to jobs on the water. The speaker even includes women alongside men, acknowledging the work they do as important contributions to American society. Though the speaker limits this work to domestic chores like "sewing or washing," the fact that women are included at all is notable given that they were largely excluded from American political life at the time the poem was written.

In the speaker's vision, it seems *everyone* gets to participate in creating the American song, no matter their location, class, or gender (even if, to the modern eye, the terms of their participation are somewhat limited and constrained along traditional lines).

What's more, all of these different workers are singing. This probably isn't *literally* true, though perhaps a couple folks are indeed whistling away the hours. Instead, these songs are meant to represent the joy these workers take in their labor. Americans, the singing suggests, derive a sense of pride and dignity from their productivity. When the speaker says, "Each singing what belongs to him or her and to none else," this affirms the right of each worker to find personal value, and even a sense of self, directly in whatever work they do.

It's also worth noting that music and song are often used in literature as stand-ins for poetry itself. Part of the beauty of America, the poem thus implies, is that regular people are worthy of such song; you don't need to be some sort of mythical hero, beautiful damsel, or wealthy aristocrat for your life to be "sung" about, i.e., to be elevated to the level of poetry.

Yet even as the poem celebrates self-sufficiency and individualism through these "varied carols," it emphasizes that all these workers *together* form the fabric of America. However unique each of these workers, the poem is saying, what makes America *America* is that they are all singing.

After all, as the poem's first line announces, the speaker hears "America singing"—not "many workers singing." For the speaker, America is a place where people get to have it both ways: they're at once individuals, with personal freedom and independence, and part of a larger, harmonious collective. That, the poem ultimately suggests, is what America's "song" is all about.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-11

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

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 poem begins with the speaker declaring, in the first person, that he or she hears "America" itself singing. But, in the second half of the line, the speaker notes that the song America sings is actually *many separate songs*—"varied carols." The word "carols" is especially intriguing in this context, since it is often used for religious songs—and this is very much not a religious poem! The word suggests that Americans dedicate themselves to their country and their work with a passion and devotion that approaches religious faith.

The speaker then moves on to note some specific "songs" being heard: those of mechanics, carpenters, and masons. The speaker will follow this pattern throughout the rest of the poem, celebrating working Americans whose lives are humble and whose work is often difficult and physical. The fact that their songs are "blithe," meaning cheerful, and "strong" underscores the speaker's broader vision of America as a place where people find joy and fulfillment in their work. And as the poem describes these people, the speaker notably avoids using much fancy, literary language. Instead, the poem's tone is casual and conversational.

While it's certainly possible that all these mechanics, carpenters, and masons are literally singing to pass the hours, it seems more likely that this "singing" is a metaphor. On the one hand, it represents the pride and joy Americans take in their work. It also is meant to reflect the way America as a united nation emerges from its individual citizens, their unique songs blending into a broader harmony, so that, as the speaker says in the poem's first line, "America" itself is "singing."

As the poem celebrates the diversity and richness of American life, it also tries to find a distinctly American music. Whitman rejects European poetic traditions like meter and rhyme, which feel too constraining to capture the energy of American life. Instead, the poem is written entirely in free verse, and Whitman turns to other devices to make his poem sound musical.

The most obvious of these devices is anaphora, in the repeated phrase, "I hear [insert professional] singing," which begins in line 3. This anaphora operates a little bit like meter: it creates a sense of expectation in the reader, and it separates the poems long lines into more manageable chunks.

The poem also turns to other devices to guide the reader through its long lines and to make its simple language feel *poetic*. For example, almost all of the lines in the poem are end-stopped. This helps give the lines a sense of definition and integrity even as they expand and contract unpredictably. Further, the speaker uses devices like chiasmus to make the poem feel musical without rhyme. Line 1, for instance, can be divided into two halves, separated by a caesura; in the second half of the line the speaker repeats the information that was provided in the first half, but in reverse order, creating an ABBA pattern:

> I hear America singing, the varied carols I hear,

In this line: "I hear" repeats at the beginning and end, while "America singing" and "varied carols" are just different ways to refer to the same thing: the various songs of American workers.

Similarly, the poem is dense with assonance. Line 4 contains, for instance, contains repetition of the long /a/ sound, the short /i/ sound, the long /ee/ sound, and two variations of the /o/ sound:

> The mason singing his as he makes ready for work, or leaves off work,

The poem is thus not only about America singing: it makes *itself* into an example of a distinctly American music.

LINES 5-8

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,

In lines 5-8, the speaker continues to list American professions: boatmen, shoemakers, farmers. As the speaker does so, the geography of the poem's portrait of America expands. In lines 1-4, the speaker was mostly focused on urban professions: here the speaker considers people who work at sea, on rivers, in forests, on farms, *and* in cities. The poem does leave out a number of professions, including politicians, bankers, and lawyers. This suggests that it is focusing specifically on celebrating and elevating those jobs that often go unnoticed or under-appreciated by society.

In line 8, the speaker also adds women to this vision of America. Of course, the women in the poem are portrayed performing traditionally female tasks like "sewing or washing"; viewed through a modern lens, the America presented in this poem is not exactly a paradise of gender equality. On the other hand, the speaker does acknowledge that women contribute something essential to the American song, and that they are part of what makes America *America*. This is potentially a radical move at the time of the poem's writing, when women were largely barred from participating in American political life. (For instance, women were deprived of the right to vote for another 70 years after the poem was written).

As the speaker builds this portrait of America, he or she continues to use the poetic techniques developed in the first four lines. The poem remains in free verse, organized by strong anaphoric repetition in lines 5 and 6 (i.e., via the phrase "The [insert profession] singing"). Indeed, the anaphora is so strong that lines 6 and 7—with their use of the word "song" *instead* of "singing"—feel sort of like metrical variations. By metrical variations, we mean those times when a poet suddenly switches up the meter—for instance, if a poet has been writing in iambs (da DUM) but then begins a line with a trochee (DUM da). Lines 6 and 7 run counter to the reader's expectations by using the word "song," and, in doing so, they keep the poem from feeling stale or repetitive. Further, each line continues to be end-stopped, segmenting the poem's very long lines for the reader.

Within these lines, the speaker makes frequent use of parallelism and caesura. The caesuras tend to separate out the component parts of the line—dividing professions from each other in lines 5, 6, and 8 and times of day in line 7—while parallelism tends to bind them back together. This is evident in line 8:

> The delicious singing of the mother, or of the young wife at work, or of the girl sewing or washing,

Caesura separates out the various kinds of work, while the parallel structure (the repetition of "or of the + [young wife/girl]") emphasizes the *commonality* between the women it describes: the way their songs comes together to form a single, complex melody.

In lines 5-8, the poem maintains its own complex music, leaning heavily on alliteration and consonance in the absence of a rhyme scheme. In places these devices simply supply a rich music, as in line 7 with its consonance on /w/, /t/, /s/, /n/, /m/, and /r/ sounds:

> The wood-cutter's song, the ploughboy's on his way
> in the morning, or at noon intermission or at
> sundown,

But these devices also help to further organize the lines for the reader. Note, for instance, how in line 5, the poem uses a strong alliteration on a /b/ sound in the first half of the line—"boatman," "belongs," and "boat,"—and a different alliteration on a /d/ sound in the second half of the line, after the caesura: "deckhand" and "deck."

Finally, do note that even as the poem seeks to create a broad vision of America, it ignores some very important context about American life in the mid-19th century: namely, the existence of slavery. Though slavery was the most important and divisive topic in the 1850s when the poem was written, the speaker ignores it altogether. The speaker's harmonious vision of America comes at the price of serious consideration of the nation's conflicts and injustices.

LINES 9-11

> *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.*

In line 9-11, the speaker's focus shifts from listing off professions to talking about all this singing in more detail. The speaker declares that each worker has his or her own song; each sings that song and no other. At the heart of American identity, then, is an emphasis on individuality.

At the same time, however, the speaker also treats America as a cohesive nation that emerges from those individuals and is, in a sense, greater than them: from their many separate songs emerges a single America, with a uniquely American song. Somehow all the various songs blend together and all the individuals cohere into a group. For the speaker of the poem, America is a place where one can have it both ways: the individual is both highly independent and part of a collective.

In the poem's final two lines, the speaker adds a strange detail: the workers not only sing their own songs, they also sing them at certain times of day. During the day, they sing songs for the day; at night, rowdy young men sing songs appropriate for the night. Notably, line 10 contains the poem's only arguable enjambment—and after so many end-stopped lines, it does feel a little tipsy, a little loose, like the young men it describes. These lines remind one of the careful way the speaker separates "morning," "noon intermission," and "sundown" in line 7.

Americans may be free and individual, but they pay careful attention to behaving in certain ways at certain times of day. They respect the work day, and save the party for after hours.

The poem ends following the formal pattern established in the rest of the poem: in free verse with (mostly) end-stopped lines. And it extends the anaphora that structured the poem earlier, altering it slightly, so that "The [insert profession] singing" becomes "Each singing" in line 9 and just "Singing" in line 11. The poem remains committed to developing and practicing a distinctly American music.

SYMBOLS

SINGING

Throughout "I Hear America Singing," the speaker describes people with a wide variety of different jobs—some are farmers, some are sailors, some are carpenters. But they are united by the fact that all are "singing," a word that the speaker uses 11 times in the poem. It's certainly possible that some of them are literally singing, but it seems more likely that singing serves as a symbol in the poem for the joy that they feel and the pride that they take in their work.

Further, the "singing" of all these separate individuals also serves as a symbol for America itself. Though the speaker lists each profession separately, the poem's title suggests that all these separate songs come together to form a united, common song. After all, the poem is called "I Hear *America* Singing," not "I Hear a Bunch of People with Different Jobs in America Singing." From the many separate songs, a single song emerges—a song that is the nation itself.

As a symbol, then, "singing" suggests something important about the speaker's understanding of America: it emerges, as an idea, as a collective, from many separate individuals. Instead of being something directed from the top, organized ahead of time, America is as spontaneous and harmonious as the many songs its workers sing.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "singing"
- **Line 2:** "singing"
- **Line 3:** "singing"
- **Line 4:** "singing"
- **Line 5:** "singing," "singing"
- **Line 6:** "singing," "singing"
- **Line 8:** "singing"
- **Line 9:** "singing"
- **Line 11:** "Singing"

CAROLS

In line 1, the speaker refers to the "varied" songs that the poem describes as "carols." It is the only time in the poem that the speaker uses a specific, descriptive word for those songs—otherwise, the speaker simply describes the various workers that populate the poem "singing" "songs." It is a suggestive and interesting choice: carols are not only very joyful songs, but they are also often *religious* songs. The poem is otherwise empty of references to religion. In this sense, the carols are probably symbolic: they represent the passion, energy, and dedication that Americans apply to their country, a passion which is so deep and satisfying it has replaced religion.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "carols"

POETIC DEVICES

ENJAMBMENT

"I Hear America Singing" contains only one enjambment, in line 10-11, and this classification is rather ambiguous. We've chosen to mark is as being enjambed because it contrasts with the very clear end-stops that mark the rest of the poem's lines as being discrete and grammatically complete—as independent and self-sufficient as the proud American workers the poem describes.

The enjambment in line 10 thus comes as a surprise, an interruption in the poem's established rhythm. It breaks the sense of sureness and containment that has otherwise characterized the poem. In this sense, it perhaps imitates the rowdy energy of the "party of young fellows" out at night. Like them, the enjambment is a little tipsy, a little unsteady.

One might interpret this in several ways. On the one hand, it seems to admit a measure of insecurity, unsteadiness into the poem—otherwise so definite and confident in America. Maybe the enjambment suggests that the speaker is not quite as sure about America as he or she otherwise insists. On the other hand, the enjambment might seem like a relief after so many end-stops. It gives the reader a sense of freedom and unpredictability: America may be a harmonious community, but it still contains space for raucous energy, unruly pleasures. The enjambment is thus both suggestive and ambiguous: it's up to the reader to decide what it means.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 10-11:** "friendly, / Singing"

END-STOPPED LINE

"I Hear America Singing" is a highly end-stopped poem: as

mentioned in our entry on enjambment, all of its lines except line 10 are end-stopped.

End-stop is important to the poem in two ways. First, it helps establish the poem's rhythm. In the absence of a set meter, with lines that vary widely in length, the end-stops help ensure that each line feels like a poetic unit, a measure in its own right. Without such sharp end-stops, the poem's longer lines would lose their rhythmic integrity, dissolving into prose.

Indeed, a line like line 5 already runs over the edge of the right margin in most printings: it *looks* like prose. The reader recognizes it as poetry only because it follows the rules established in previous lines, employing the same diction, using anaphora, and concluding with an end-stop. The end-stop helps this poem—which rebels against some of the basic rules of poetry in Whitman's time—to remain *poetic*.

Second, the use of end-stop arguably reinforces the speaker's argument about America. Usually, each line in the poem concerns a single profession—mechanics or carpenters. The end-stops separate these professions from each other. It reminds the reader that the people the poem describes are independent, the very image of American self-sufficiency. Yet, as noted above, the end-stops are also what help to produce the poem's sense of rhythm, its cohesiveness as a poem. As a whole, the poem depends on the separation between its lines, just as America as a whole relies on the independence and self-sufficiency of the workers who create it.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "hear,"
- **Line 2:** "strong,"
- **Line 3:** "beam,"
- **Line 4:** "work,"
- **Line 5:** "deck,"
- **Line 6:** "stands,"
- **Line 7:** "sundown,"
- **Line 8:** "washing,"
- **Line 9:** "else,"
- **Line 11:** "songs."

CAESURA

The poem contains a large number of caesuras, which help break its long, complicated lines, into separate pieces. For example, the caesura in line 1 separates the two halves of the line's chiasmus, emphasizing the lines repetition and its musicality; the speaker introduces information in the first half of the line, and then after the caesura of the coma immediately repeats it, but in reverse order:

> I hear America singing, the varied carols I hear,

In this sense, one may add caesura to the long list of devices that Whitman uses to make his poem feel poetic in the absence of an established rhyme scheme and meter.

In other places, the caesuras serve to separate one profession from another, as in line 5 where the boatman's song and the deckhand's song are cut off from each other by the caesura between "boat" and "the." Although the speaker usually gives each profession its own line, these two share a line because they both work on the water—but the speaker is still careful to emphasize the difference between their roles within the line. In this way, the caesuras reinforce the conceptual work that the poem's end-stops do, emphasizing the independence and self-sufficiency of each profession.

Something similar happens in line 7 with the "wood-cutter" and the "ploughboy." However, line 7 demonstrates another role that caesura plays: dividing the day into separate parts: "morning" and "noon intermission." Here the caesura underlines the difference between work and leisure, labor and rest—a role it plays again in line 10, where the em dash at the center of the line splits night from day. In these cases, the caesuras play a regulatory role, dividing professions from each other, and splitting up the day into its separate parts.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** ", "
- **Line 2:** ", "
- **Line 4:** ", "
- **Line 5:** ", "
- **Line 6:** ", "
- **Line 7:** ", ", " "
- **Line 8:** ", ", " "
- **Line 10:** "—", ", ", " "

ALLITERATION

Alliteration can often make a poem feel artificial or overly literary. At the same time, alliteration is important to establishing the rhythm of a poem—and it often acts in support of devices like meter and rhyme, guiding the reader toward moments of special musical importance. In writing a poem like "I Hear America Singing," Whitman thus found himself in a bit of a bind. His poem attempts to capture the direct, unpretentious character of American speech. But, at the same time, it has no meter or rhyme—so it could use alliteration's help to articulate its rhythm.

The poem thus tries to strike a balance. It does not use alliteration in an excessive, flashy way, but careful attention to its sound reveals that the poem does often use alliteration—and that alliteration often helps to bind the poem together rhythmically. For instance, line 5 contains two strong alliterations, on a /b/ sound and a /d/ sound. The /b/ sound appears in the first half of the line; the /d/ sound emerges and takes over after the line's caesura.

> The boatman singing what belongs to him in his boat,
> the deckhand singing on the steamboat deck,

The line is one of the longest in the poem, an astonishing 23 syllables. The alliteration helps the reader to break the line up into manageable chunks. (And it emphasizes the distinction between the two professions the line describes as well).

Alliterations like these do not overwhelm the poem, but they do help guide the reader through it—a crucial task for a poem that breaks so radically from poetic tradition.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "s," "b," "b," "s"
- **Line 3:** "s," "h," "h," "h"
- **Line 4:** "m," "h," "h," "m," "w," "o," "o," "w"
- **Line 5:** "b," "b," "h," "h," "b," "d," "s," "s," "d"
- **Line 6:** "s," "s," "h," "s," "h," "s"
- **Line 8:** "o," "o," "w," "w," "o," "o"
- **Line 9:** "h," "h"
- **Line 10:** "d," "d," "f," "f"
- **Line 11:** "S," "m," "s," "m," "s"

ASSONANCE

"I Hear America Singing" uses alliteration in a relatively restrained way, underscoring the poem's rhythm and the organization of its lines. By contrast, the poem makes prolific use of assonance, particularly in its first four lines. For example, line 4 contains four separate assonant sounds, a /a/ sound, an /i/ sound, an /ee/ sound, and two /o/ sounds (in "for" and "work"):

> The mason singing his as he makes ready for work, or
> leaves off work,

This is perhaps surprising give the poem's interest in capturing the unpretentious character of everyday American speech. The quantity of assonance in these lines threatens to tip the poem over, transforming it into a highly literary document.

The poem is willing to endure this danger. There are a couple of reasons why. First, the use of assonance helps to make the poem feel rhythmic and musical, even in the absence of a set meter or rhyme scheme. Second, the poem is dedicated to defending the dignity of people who work in humble, unpretentious jobs. It seeks to identify the music in their work—and it insists that such music is central to American life. It makes sense, then, that the poem would itself be highly musical. In other words, in indulging so deeply in assonance, the speaker subtly suggests that unpretentious speech is itself full of literary merit, full of music—and as sophisticated as any polished poem.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "ea," "i," "i," "ie," "ea"
- **Line 2:** "i," "i," "i," "i," "e"
- **Line 3:** "i," "i," "i," "a," "e," "i," "a," "ea"
- **Line 4:** "a," "i," "i," "i," "a," "e," "a," "y," "o," "o," "o," "ea," "o"
- **Line 5:** "i," "i," "i," "i," "i," "i," "i"
- **Line 6:** "i," "i," "i," "i," "a," "i," "i," "a," "a"
- **Line 7:** "o," "o," "i," "i," "o," "i," "o," "a," "i," "i," "o," "a"
- **Line 8:** "i," "i," "i," "o," "o," "o," "o," "ou," "o," "o," "o," "i," "i"
- **Line 9:** "i," "i"
- **Line 10:** "o," "ou," "e," "o," "o," "u," "ie"
- **Line 11:** "i," "i," "o," "o," "o," "o"

CONSONANCE

Given that "I Hear America Singing" uses alliteration in a relatively sparing, judicious way, it is perhaps surprising to see just how much consonance the poem employs. Throughout the poem, its long lines are thick with repeated consonants, which create a subtle music in an otherwise straightforward, unpretentious poem.

This is especially clear in the poem's final line, with its repetition of /s/, /th/, /ng/, and /m/ sounds:

> Singing with open mouths their strong melodious
> songs.

It is no coincidence that a line about "melodious" songs is brimming with soothing consonant sounds. Think of each of these sounds almost like their own notes, which are then repeated throughout the poem to give it a sense of musicality.

In other places, the consonance emphasizes the distinctions that the speaker draws. For example, in line 10, there is an alliteration on a /d/ sound in the first half of the line; in the second half of the line there are consonant and alliterative /f/ sounds. Though some sounds do cross the caesura, the speaker creates a different sound palate on each side of it, emphasizing the differences between the night and the day. Consonance thus both supports the poem musically and conceptually.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "h," "r," "r," "c," "ng," "ng," "r," "c," "r," "h," "r"
- **Line 2:** "c," "c," "s," "s," "ng," "ng," "s," "s," "l," "b," "b," "l," "s"
- **Line 3:** "r," "r," "ng," "ng," "h," "s," "s," "h," "m," "s," "s," "h," "s," "r," "m"
- **Line 4:** "m," "s," "s," "ng," "ng," "h," "s," "s," "h," "m," "k," "s," "r," "w," "r," "k," "s," "w," "r," "k"
- **Line 5:** "b," "t," "m," "ng," "ng," "b," "h," "m," "h," "b," "t," "d," "ck," "s," "ng," "ng," "s," "t," "d," "ck"
- **Line 6:** "s," "ng," "ng," "s," "h," "s," "t," "s," "h," "s," "n," "h," "tt," "s," "ng," "ng," "s," "h," "s," "t," "n," "s"

- **Line 7:** “w,” “s,” “s,” “s,” “n,” “w,” “n,” “m,” “r,” “n,” “r,” “n,” “n,” “r,” “m,” “n,” “r,” “s,” “n,” “w,” “n”
- **Line 8:** “Th,” “s,” “s,” “ng,” “ng,” “th,” “th,” “r,” “r,” “f,” “th,” “w,” “f,” “w,” “r,” “r,” “f,” “th,” “w,” “ng,” “w,” “ng”
- **Line 9:** “ng,” “ng,” “ng,” “h,” “h,” “n,” “n,” “n,” “s”
- **Line 10:** “d,” “d,” “f,” “ll,” “r,” “f,” “r,” “n,” “l”
- **Line 11:** “S,” “ng,” “ng,” “th,” “m,” “ths,” “th,” “s,” “ng,” “m,” “s,” “s,” “ng,” “s”

ANAPHORA

"I Hear America Singing" is one of the earliest English language poems written in free verse. Since it has no meter or rhyme scheme, Whitman faced a novel challenge: how to make the poem *feel* poetic without relying on the formal devices that usually supply poems with rhythm and musicality. For musicality, Whitman leaned heavily on alliteration, assonance, consonance, and chiasmus. For rhythm, he leans heavily on anaphora.

Five of the poem’s 11 lines open with anaphoric variation of the phrase "The [insert profession here] singing." (And seven of the poem’s lines use the word "singing" at the start of the line. While these repetitions are not *technically* anaphora, they contribute to the force of the poem’s true anaphora). This anaphora give the poem a sense of rhythm and helps to guide the reader. Even as the lines expand, sometimes to more than 20 syllables, the anaphora helps the reader keep track of where a new line begins.

A regular meter establishes a set of expectations: the reader knows how the poem will feel, how it will sound—and thus registers deviations from those expectations, when a significant metrical variation enters the line. The poem's anaphora works in the same way: after a few lines, the reader comes to *expect* each line to open with an anaphora—and registers anything else as a deviation from that pattern. Thus the opening of line 7 is almost like a metrical variation. It helps keep the poem's rhythm fresh.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** “The carpenter singing”
- **Line 4:** “The mason singing”
- **Line 5:** “The boatman singing”
- **Line 6:** “The shoemaker singing”
- **Line 8:** “The delicious singing”
- **Line 9:** “Each singing”

PARALLELISM

In addition to the poem’s extensive use of anaphora—a device that helps give the poem a strong sense of rhythm, even in the absence of a defined, consistent meter—the poem also uses parallelism for much the same purpose. For instance, in line 5, the speaker takes the anaphoric phrase and repeats it within the line: "the boatman singing," "the deckhand singing." This brings the rhythm of the anaphora *inside* the line itself—an exceptionally long line—breaking it up into manageable chunks for the reader. (In doing so, the use of anaphora and parallelism here works alongside and supports the line’s caesura).

More broadly, the use of anaphora creates parallel sentence structures that recur throughout the poem; indeed, the use of anaphora in the poem *depends* on parallelism. This repeated use of parallelism helps structure the poem rhythmically and conceptually.

Finally, the poem also makes use of parallelism within lines, particularly when listing professions or people, as in line 8: "...or of the young wife at work, or of the girl sewing or washing." Even as the caesuras here mark the difference between them and their roles, the use of parallelism binds them back together, emphasizing how their shared song creates a unity out of their many separate lives.

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** “The carpenter singing,” “ his as he”
- **Line 4:** “The mason singing,” “ his as he”
- **Line 5:** “The boatman singing,” “the deckhand singing”
- **Line 6:** “The shoemaker singing,” “ as he,” “the hatter singing,” “ as he”
- **Line 8:** “The delicious singing of the mother,” “or of the young wife at work,” “or of the girl sewing or washing”

CHIASMUS

The poem’s first line contains a strong example of chiasmus—and that chiasmus accounts, in part, for the line’s seductive musicality (even in the absence of a set meter or rhyme scheme). The line begins and ends with the speaker announcing "I hear." Between the repetitions of this phrase, the speaker is describing *what* he or she hears.

> I hear America singing, the varied carols I hear,

The repetition is almost redundant, with the singing and carols referring to the same thing . Though the word "carols," which often refer to religious songs, is symbolically interesting in the context of an otherwise non-religious poem, the reader doesn’t really learn any new information in the second half of the line: the "singing" and "carols" refer to the same thing. The second half of the line therefore exists almost entirely for its musical pleasure. In turn, its musical pleasure comes almost entirely from the way it repeats and inverts the first part of the line. In this sense, chiasmus supplies another tool—alongside alliteration, assonance, and consonance—to make the poem musical in the absence of traditional devices like meter and rhyme.

Where Chiasmus appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "I hear America singing, the varied carols I hear,"

METAPHOR

"I Hear America Singing" is for the most part a very literal poem. It strives to describe and celebrate the humble, unpretentious work of everyday Americans—and, in doing so, it tries to avoid dressing up the reality of their lives in flowery language. There is a major exception, however. Throughout the poem, the speaker describes the various workers "singing." It's possible that some of them are actually singing, but it seems more likely that this song is a symbol, a metaphor. It represents not *literal* song, but rather the joy and pleasure that the workers take in their work.

More broadly, it serves as a metaphor for the process by which America as a nation emerges from the lives of its separate citizens: their many separate songs become one song, so that, as the poem's title announces, "America" itself is "singing." In other words, America emerges from the many separate lives—and many separate songs—of its citizens blending together to become one harmonious melody.

The "singing" that runs through the poem is thus a metaphor for the process by which America becomes *American*: a metaphor for the relationship between the country and its citizens. Needless to say, the speaker represents this as a fundamentally harmonious process, in which the differences between jobs, regions, and ideologies do not detract from the nation's unity—despite the political complications of the time when the poem was written, in the mid 1850s, just before the American Civil War.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "singing"
- **Line 2:** "singing"
- **Line 3:** "singing"
- **Line 4:** "singing"
- **Line 5:** "singing," "singing"
- **Line 6:** "singing," "singing"
- **Line 7:** "song"
- **Line 8:** "singing"
- **Line 9:** "singing"
- **Line 11:** "Singing," "songs"

VOCABULARY

Carols (Line 1) - Carols are often religious songs, sung during times of celebration (like Christmas).

Blithe (Line 2) - Merry or happy.

Leaves off (Line 4) - Goes home, leaves work.

Steamboat (Line 5) - A type of riverboat, powered by coal and steam, popular in the 19th century, particularly on the Mississippi River.

Hatter (Line 6) - A person who makes hats for a living.

Ploughboy (Line 7) - A boy or young man who plows fields. In other words, a farmer.

Intermission (Line 7) - A break or pause, in this case, for lunch.

Robust (Line 10) - Strong and sturdy.

Melodious (Line 11) - Sweet sounding, full of melody.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"I Hear America Singing" is not a formal poem. It does not have a set meter or a rhyme scheme. Instead, it is written in free verse, with a single stanza of 11 lines. This doesn't mean the poem is all over the place: these lines are very repetitive in structure, with the first 8 all listing different professions and the final 3 going into a bit more depth regarding the character of these various songs. The lines vary in length, though, and there is no real way to group them together beyond noting these sort of conceptual ideas. None of this is incidental, but is in fact meant to feel free-flowing and exciting.

Whitman is widely credited as the first person to write free verse in English (though the form developed separately around the same time in France). When it first appeared, free verse was a radical and shocking departure from literary tradition: after nearly 700 years of poetry written in accentual-syllabic meters (things like iambic pentameter), early readers had a hard time seeing Whitman's poems *as* poetry: for many 19th century readers, poetry was inseparable from meter.

But Whitman rejected meter as an outdated—and un-American—tradition. He sought a way to express the energy and newness of American life that did not depend on European literary examples. He wanted to capture the rhythms of American speech, the way that people really spoke and talked. In this sense, the lack of traditional form marks Whitman's attempt to capture "America singing"—to recreate, in poetry, the music of American speech and American life.

METER

Like all of Whitman's poems, "I Hear America Singing" is not written in any specific meter. The number of syllables varies widely across the poem: from 12 syllables in line 11 to 23 in line 5. Though the poem has a strong rhythm, that rhythm is not secured by meter. Instead, it comes from Whitman's use of devices like anaphora and parallelism. "I Hear America Singing" thus departs from one of the central traditions in English poetry—a tradition that dates to the middle ages. It finds a way to make a poem *poetic* without using accentual-syllabic meters

(i.e., meters like the famous iambic pentameter).

Whitman broke from this tradition because he wanted to capture the dynamics of American speech and the energy of American democracy. Writing in the first hundred years after America declared independence, he felt that America represented a radically new way of organizing human life—and that old-fashioned, European traditions couldn't possibly adequately capture the experience of it. His poem thus does not simply describe "America singing": it tries to be an American song.

RHYME SCHEME

Because "I Hear America Singing" is a poem in free verse, it has no rhyme scheme. And although some poems in free verse do include occasional, unstructured rhymes, "I Hear America Singing" avoids using rhyme almost altogether—apart from a few incidental internal rhymes, like "he" and "ready" in line 4. Despite its lack of rhyme, however, this is a very musical poem. Whitman finds other, less traditional ways to make his poem feel musical: he relies on devices like anaphora, parallelism, chiasmus, and alliteration.

Like all of Whitman's poems, then, "I Hear America Singing" diverges sharply from the traditions of English poetry. Indeed, starting in the middle ages and stretching into Whitman's life, most English poetry was rhymed. (Although earlier poets like Milton did write in blank verse—and, in that way, paved the way for a poetry without rhyme.)

Whitman abandoned this tradition because it was a tradition: it came from Europe and it was old, even antiquated. For a poet like Whitman, dedicated to documenting the dynamics and energy of American democracy, a tradition like rhyme was in no way sufficient to capture the rhythms of American speech or the novelty of American social life. Writing a poem without rhyme, then, Whitman hopes not only to describe "America singing" but to create his own distinctively American song.

SPEAKER

The poem doesn't give any information about its speaker: the reader never learns the speaker's class, gender, or job. This is a powerful gesture. Though the poem is rooted in the speaker's perspective—"*I* hear America singing," the speaker announces in line 1—that perspective is as broad and diverse as America itself. It is not tied to a specific region, perspective, or political party. This allows the speaker to survey the whole of America, from cities to country, land to sea.

The speaker has a comprehensive view of the country and the people who live there, a view that is broader than any one single person could possibly have. For this reason, it seems possible to think of the speaker not as an individual, but rather as being representative of an entire group: "I Hear America Singing" essentially presents the nation as a chorus that includes many separate voices. The speaker seems to both speaks for and be one of those voices.

SETTING

As its title suggests, this poem is set in the United States. It is not set in a specific place in the country, however—say, New York City or the Rocky Mountains. Instead, as the poem lists different professions, from farmers to sailors to hat-makers, it moves across the whole of the American landscape in the 19th century, encompassing its great forests, its farms, its cities, and its rivers.

The poem attempts to survey *all* of America, to capture all of its diverse environments. In doing so, the poem does not champion one environment over another: it does not, for instance, claim that farmers are more American than city-dwellers. Even as the poem notes the differences between the work that they do, it also emphasizes the common bond that binds them together: they joy they take in their work and in being American. The poem's setting is thus as broad as America itself, and as diverse as the nation's many environments.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Walt Whitman is one of the most innovative figures in the history of poetry written in English. He is not only widely regarded as the father of American poetry, but also the inventor of free verse, one of the most important poetic techniques in 20th and 21st century poetry. From the middle ages until the mid-19th century, when Whitman began publishing his work, almost all poetry was written in meter—and most of it was written in rhyme. These formal devices acquired the strength of tradition; indeed, for many readers poetry itself was *defined by* the presence of meter and rhyme. But such devices also acquired the weakness of tradition: instead of offering freedom and possibility, they constrained poets, forcing them to work with techniques developed long in the past.

From the earliest stages of his career, Whitman wanted to break free from everything antiquated and European, to develop a genuinely American poetry, that was responsive to the unique energies of American life and the rhythms of American speech. In crafting this distinctly American poetry, Whitman was inspired by the American transcendentalist philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson. In Emerson's essay "The Poet," he called for an American poetry free of meter: "Yet America is a poem in our eyes; its ample geography dazzles the imagination, and it will not wait long for metres." In other words, meter cannot express American life.

As Whitman later wrote about his experience of reading Emerson, "I was simmering, simmering, simmering; Emerson brought me to a boil." Whitman thus became the first poet in English to abandon meter and rhyme entirely, producing a new kind of poetry. For many of his 19th century readers, his poems were so strange and novel that they found them disorienting. Some even questioned whether they were poems at all. But Whitman gradually became a central figure in American poetry, and his free verse poems became a model for poets from Hart Crane ("The Bridge") to Allen Ginsburg ("Howl").

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The earliest version of "I Hear America Singing" was written in the late 1850; it was first published, in a different version and with a different title in the 1860 edition of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. (Whitman published six different editions of the book during his lifetime, beginning in 1855 and ending in 1891-92; each edition is substantially different from the others, with different poems and different versions of each poem). The poem was thus composed at a decisive and troubled moment in American history. In 1850, Congress passed the Fugitive Slave Act, which required all escaped slaves to be returned to their masters, even if they had fled to the North. The law significantly increased tensions within the country, culminating in 1860 with the election of Abraham Lincoln. Shortly after, the South seceded from the Union and the Civil War, the bloodiest war in American history, began.

"I Hear America Singing" was thus written at a moment in American history when the country was deeply divided, on the brink of a catastrophic war—and when the country was debating fiercely what it meant to be an American. However, the poem does not explicitly reflect these tensions: it celebrates instead a vision of America as a united community—a community whose difference and diversity does not detract from its overall unity.

However, there are signs that the tensions and divisions in American society in the 1850s have entered the poem. One notes, for instance, that Whitman does not include slaves in his account of joyful American workers, nor does he discuss the products most associated with slave labor, like cotton and tobacco. The poem has arguably repressed the most important fact about work in America during the 1850s: that much of it was done by people who were not free to choose their work or their place of residence; people who were deprived of their rights to participate in American political life. In this sense, Whitman's celebration of America remains partial and incomplete—a fact that has not been lost on some of Whitman's later readers.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- "I Hear America Singing" Read Aloud — A photostory and reading of the poem. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=snICjHsrzfc)
- What Is Free Verse? — A detailed history of free verse, from the Academy of American Poets. (https://poets.org/text/free-verse-poets-glossary)
- 1860 Version of "I Hear America Singing" — Images and text of the first printing of "I Hear America Singing" in the 1860 edition of Leaves of Grass, where it appears as "Chants Democratic and Native American #20." Because Whitman regularly revised his work—even published poems—it is different in important ways from the version most people study today. (https://whitmanarchive.org/published/LG/1860/poems/24)
- Walt Whitman's Biography — A detailed biography of Whitman from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/walt-whitman)
- Why Walt Whitman Called America the "Greatest Poem" — An article from the Atlantic Magazine about Whitman's views of American democracy. (https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2016/12/why-walt-whitman-called-the-america-the-greatest-poem/510932/)
- "The Poet" by Ralph Waldo Emerson — The complete text of Ralph Waldo Emerson's "The Poet"—a key inspiration for Whitman. (https://user.xmission.com/~seldom74/emerson/the_poet.html)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER WALT WHITMAN POEMS

- A Noiseless Patient Spider
- O Captain! My Captain!
- The Voice of the Rain
- When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer

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