Preparing to Read

I Hear America Singing
by Walt Whitman

LITERARY SKILLS FOCUS: CATALOG

A catalog is a long list of related things, people, or events. Whitman frequently uses catalogs in his poetry. By selecting and naming workers and their “songs” in his poem “I Hear America Singing,” he celebrates the energetic spirit of the nation. A catalog also creates a kind of rhythm built on the repetition of certain sentence patterns.

As you read the poem, Whitman’s use of cataloging should be easily identifiable. Here are some of the workers to look for as you read:

- the mechanics
- the carpenter
- the mason

READING SKILLS FOCUS: ANALYZING TEXT STRUCTURES

To create certain effects and to get across the meaning of his poems, Whitman uses text structures such as parallelism and elliptical constructions. Parallelism is the repetition of words, phrases, clauses, or sentences that have the same grammatical structure. For example, the phrase, “I sang, cooked, and washed up,” uses parallel structure. It contains a series of three verbs in the past tense.

Elliptical constructions are phrases, clauses, or sentences with words left out. Their meaning can be inferred, or guessed, from nearby sentences with similar structure. The phrase “Lucy read her book and Ricky read his” is an example, because “Ricky read his book” is implied.

Analyze Whitman’s structure as you read “I Hear America Singing.” Pause occasionally to decide if what you are reading is an example of parallelism or elliptical construction.
I Hear America Singing

**SELECTION VOCABULARY**

**blithe** (BLYTH) adj.: happy and cheerful.

> Whitman admires Americans’ blithe nature.

**beam** (BEEM) n.: large, long piece of wood for use in construction.

> The speaker describes carpenters measuring a beam.

**mason** (MAY SUHN) n.: worker who lays stone or brick.

> The mason sings as he is about to begin his work.

**robust** (ROH BUHST) adj.: vigorous and healthy.

> The robust young men enjoy singing as they socialize after work.

**melodious** (MUH LOH dee UHS) adj.: sweet-sounding; musical.

> Whitman uses melodious language and natural rhythms.

**WORD STUDY**

**DIRECTIONS:** Write “Yes” after each sentence if the italicized vocabulary word is being used correctly. Write “No” if it is being used incorrectly, and rewrite the sentence so that the word is used correctly.

1. There was a **blithe** feeling during the funeral procession; nearly everyone was crying. **_______**

   ____________________________________________________________

2. He practiced hammering nails into a wooden **beam**. **_______**

   ____________________________________________________________

3. I hired the finest **mason** to construct my grandfather’s new fireplace. **_______**

   ____________________________________________________________

4. The **robust** toddlers seemed to have an endless supply of energy. **_______**

   ____________________________________________________________

5. The substitute teacher scraped his fingernails on the chalkboard; the **melodious** sound got everyone’s attention. **_______**

   ____________________________________________________________
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 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 deck-
hand singing on the steamboat deck,
The shoemaker singing as he sits on his bench, the hatter singing
as he stands, A
The wood-cutter’s song, the plowboy’s on his way in the morn-
ing, 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, B
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. C
Applying Your Skills

I Hear America Singing

VOCABULARY DEVELOPMENT

DIRECTIONS: Unscramble each set of letters below to form a vocabulary word from the Word Box. Then, write the definition for the vocabulary word in your own words. One word will not be used.

Word Box
blithe
beam
mason
robust
melodious

1. SOAMN
2. BELTIH
3. BURSTO
4. SIDEMOLOU

LITERARY SKILLS FOCUS: CATALOG

DIRECTIONS: On the lines below, explain what effect the use of a catalog has on the meaning of “I Hear America Singing.”

______________________________

______________________________

______________________________

READING SKILLS FOCUS: ANALYZING TEXT STRUCTURES

DIRECTIONS: On the lines below, write two examples of parallelism from the poem and explain what makes the structure parallel.

______________________________

______________________________

______________________________