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I Hear America Singing

By Walt Whitman

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 the 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 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.

Background Information

Walt Whitman is considered one of the greatest American poets. He wrote this poem after the Civil War when America began to move from being an agricultural country to a manufacturing nation. This poem appears in his book, *Leaves of Grass*.

Performance Suggestion

Practice and perform this poem with a group of classmates. Divide the poem up by the different occupations that Whitman hears. Discuss the feelings that Whitman is trying to portray through his words.



Emma Lazarus and “The New Colossus”

By Lorraine Griffith

A reader’s theater for two readers

- R1:** Emma Lazarus was an American poet born into a Jewish family on July 22, 1849.
- R2:** She was in her teens when she began writing poems.
- R1:** Miss Lazarus shared her poems with Ralph Waldo Emerson, an already famous American poet. But when he created a collection of poetry, her poems were conspicuously left out. She was not credited with greatness in her lifetime because she was a woman.
- R2:** And because she was Jewish, she knew what it was like to also be judged for her ethnicity. During the 1880s, there was a vicious wave of anti-Semitism sweeping through Eastern Europe. As these Jews found refuge in America, Lazarus became a speaker for her people.
- R1:** When the opportunity came in 1883 to help raise funds for a pedestal to hold the French-given Statue of Liberty, Emma Lazarus wrote a sonnet entitled “The New Colossus.”
- R2:** A *colossus* is defined as a “statue that is several times larger than life size.” In her sonnet, she transformed the “brazen giant” into a “Mother of Exiles.”
- R1:** Her poem speaks to the heart of immigration from personal experience. She had comforted the “huddled masses yearning to live free” when she helped to welcome the Jews fleeing the Russian persecution.
- R2:** Since Emma Lazarus died at the young age of 38, she did not live to see her poem placed on a plaque at the base of the Statue of Liberty.
- R1:** A Jewish woman’s words welcomed all newly immigrating Americans as they visited the “Mother of Exiles” in New York City.



Emma Lazarus and “The New Colossus” (cont.)

Both: “The New Colossus,” by Emma Lazarus

R1: *Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
with conquering limbs astride from land to land;*

R2: *Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates
shall stand a mighty woman with a torch,
whose flame is the imprisoned lightning,*

R2: *and her name*

R1: *Mother of Exiles.*

R2: *From her beacon-hand glows world-wide welcome;*

R1: *her mild eyes command the air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.*

Both: “*Keep ancient lands, your storied pomp!*”

R2: *cries she with silent lips.*

Both: “*Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-
tost to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door!*”

Background Information

The first two lines of “The New Colossus” talk about a Greek statue called the Colossus of Rhodes. This statue is no longer standing today, but people who saw it long ago described it. The statue was the Greek god Helios and it was erected on the Greek island of Rhodes. It was about the same size as the Statue of Liberty.

