

# Before You Read

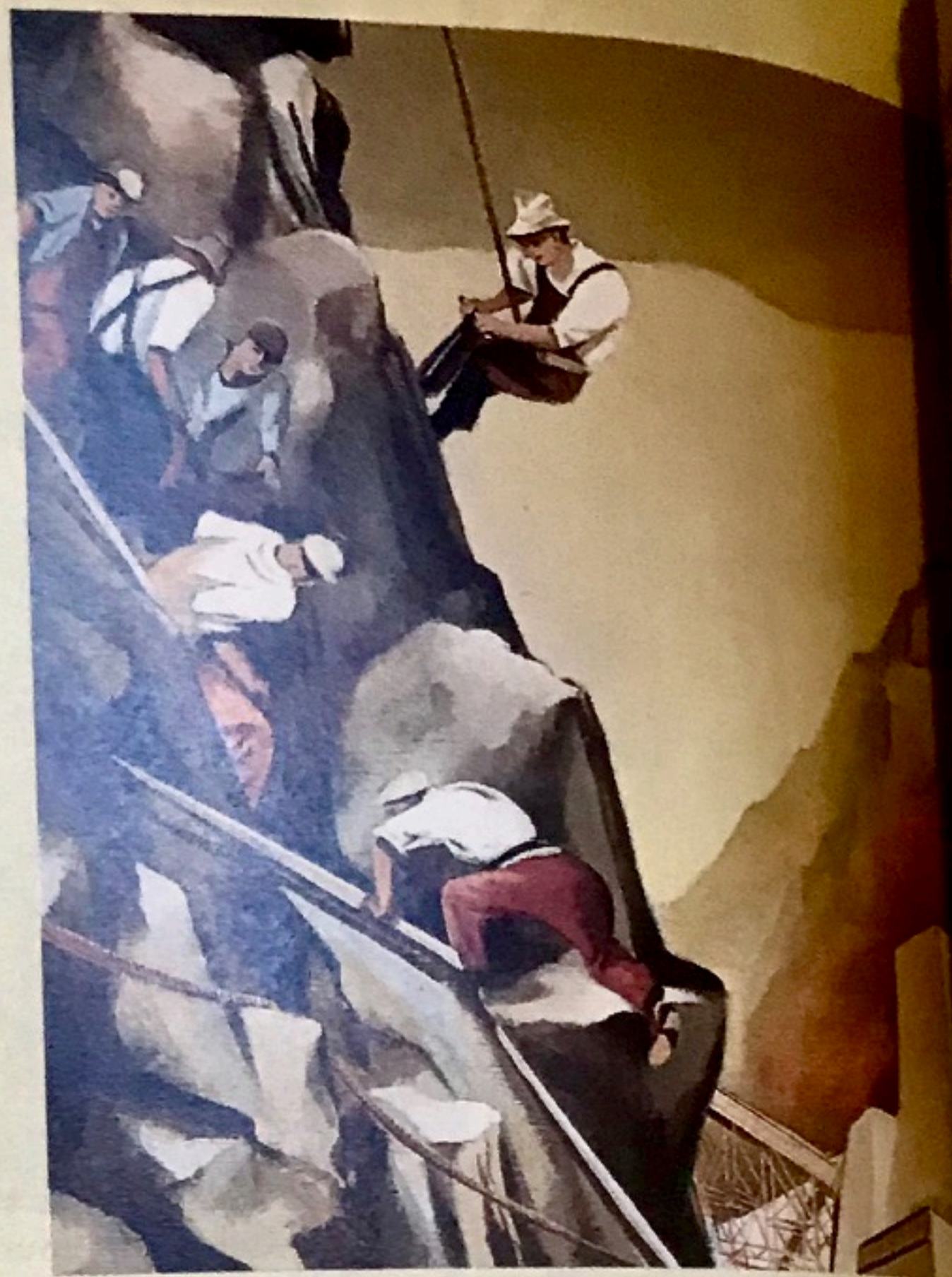
## I Hear America Singing

### Make the Connection Quickwrite

This famous poem appears near the beginning of *Leaves of Grass* and introduces one of the poet's major themes—the tremendous variety and individuality in American life. Whitman celebrates the American enterprise, in all its forms, through the varied carols, or songs, of men and women who take pride in their occupations. Why do you think a poet who celebrates America would focus on work songs? List a few of the jobs you would expect to be celebrated in an American epic written today.

### Literary Focus Catalog

One of the most obvious characteristics of Whitman's poetry is his frequent use of **catalogs**—long lists of related things, people, or events. By selecting and naming items in this way, Whitman expresses his unbounded love for everything and everyone in the world. He also, by means of the catalog, creates a kind of rhythm built on the repetition of certain sentence patterns. To hear the effect of cataloging, read aloud this poem and others in this Whitman collection.



*Construction of the Dam* (1937) by William Gropper. Mural study, Department of the Interior, National Park Service.

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#### INTERNET

More About  
Walt Whitman

Keyword: LE5 11-3

A **catalog** is a list of things, people, or events.

For more on *Catalog*, see the *Handbook of Literary and Historical Terms*.

#### SKILLS FOCUS

#### Literary Skills

Understand the use of catalogs in poetry.



I Hear A

Walt Whitm

I hear America s  
Those of mecha  
The carpenter s  
The mason sing  
The boatman s  
steamboat  
The shoemake  
The wood-cut  
intermissi  
The delicious  
or washin  
Each singing  
The day what  
singing with



Dam (1937) by  
Judy, Department of  
Park Service.  
American Art Museum  
Art Resource, NY.

# I Hear America Singing

Walt Whitman

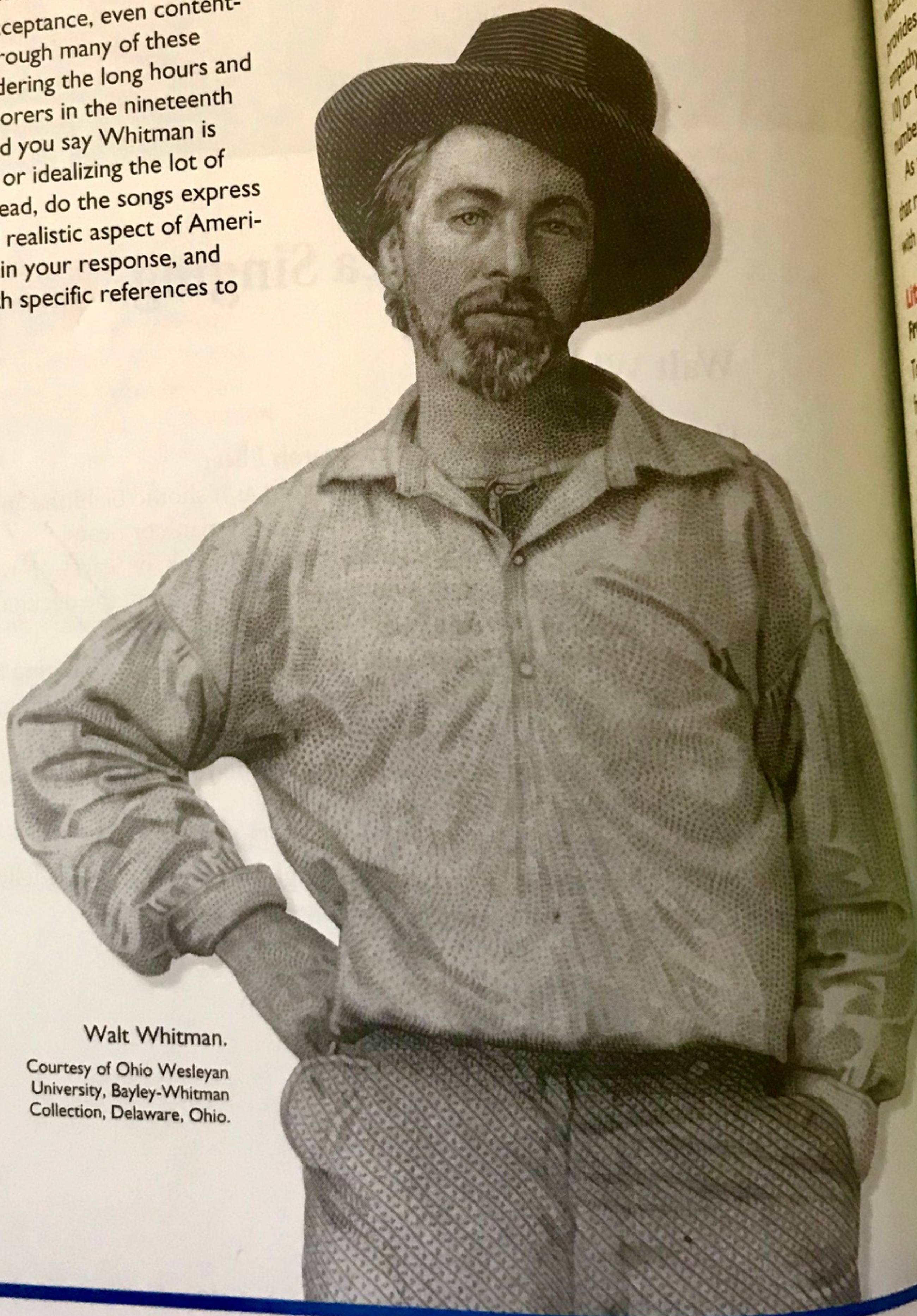
I hear America singing, the varied carols I hear,  
Those of mechanics, each one singing his as it should be blithe and strong, **A**  
The carpenter singing his as he measures his plank or beam,  
The mason singing his as he makes ready for work, or leaves off work,  
The boatman singing what belongs to him in his boat, the deckhand singing on the  
5 steamboat deck,  
The shoemaker singing as he sits on his bench, the hatter singing as he stands,  
The wood-cutter's song, the plowboy'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,  
10 The day what belongs to the day—at night the party of young fellows, robust, friendly, **B**  
Singing with open mouths their strong melodious songs. **C**

# Response and Analysis

## Thinking Critically

1. Name the people the speaker hears in lines 2–8. According to line 9, what does each person sing?
2. What Whitman has in mind here are not the actual work songs associated with various trades and kinds of physical labor but something more subtle. What would you say is the real **theme** of this poem—what is the speaker saying about the American people?
3. A feeling of acceptance, even contentment, runs through many of these voices. Considering the long hours and low pay of laborers in the nineteenth century, would you say Whitman is romanticizing or idealizing the lot of workers? Instead, do the songs express a positive and realistic aspect of American life? Explain your response, and support it with specific references to the poem.

4. Imagine the kinds of singing Whitman would hear if he were alive today. In what ways might these work songs be different from those he heard in his own time? In what ways would they be the same? Before you answer, review your Quickwrite notes. ✍️
5. The **catalog** in this poem uses **parallel structures** to create a kind of rhythm. What parallel structures can you find repeated in the poem? Read them aloud to hear the rhythm they create.



Walt Whitman.

Courtesy of Ohio Wesleyan University, Bayley-Whitman Collection, Delaware, Ohio.

SKILLS  
FOCUS

**Literary Skills**  
Analyze the use  
of catalogs in  
poetry.

from 5018  
**Make the Connection**  
Whitman tries to feel what  
the person or thing he is talking  
about has you have experienced  
which is at the heart of Sonnet  
and emotions in movielike  
broad American scene. Each  
whether real or fictional,  
provides Whitman with a  
empathy, a chance to feel  
(1) or to share in heroic  
number 33).  
As you read, look for  
that reveal Whitman's a  
with people quite differ

**Literary Focus**  
Free Verse  
Today we are so used  
free verse that we tak  
Whitman's time, how  
ferred poetry that wa  
ten in England: They  
show strict concern  
Thus, Whitman's spr  
olutionary, as was his  
sing, foreign words  
sionally made up to  
Whitman's free ver  
inspired by the rom  
from the King Jame  
measured cadence  
Free verse is  
out regular rhyme  
not really free at  
meter and regula  
made full use of  
ments of poetry