

# **Longfellow's "The Village Blacksmith" and Whitman's "Song of Myself": Alternative Constructions of the American Worker**

## **Lesson Plan**

A resource developed through the *Longfellow and the Forging of American Identity* program

**Author:** Mark Gorey

**Suggested Grade Level:** 11-12

**Subject Area:** American Literature and American History

### **Maine Learning Results targeted:**

*English Language Arts*

Process of Reading: A3, A4, A9, A10

Literature and Culture: B11

Stylistic and Rhetorical Aspects of Writing and Speaking: G5

*Social Studies*

History

Historical Knowledge, Concepts and Patterns: B2, B5

Historical Inquiry, Analysis and Interpretation: C3

### **Time Required:**

One long period (75-90 minutes) or two 45-50 minute periods

**Learning Objectives:** Students will read poetry from both Longfellow and Whitman and decide which poet speaks to them in a more meaningful way and why.

### **Materials and Resources Required:**

(included in this lesson plan packet):

- Introduction
- Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's "The Village Blacksmith"
- Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself"
- Currier and Ives images: "The Village Blacksmith" and "The Happy Home"
- Activities
- Post-writing questions

### **Introduction**

Most if not all of us have or will need to work in the American marketplace for at least six decades of our lives. There's a saying that I remember a superintendent telling a group of graduating high-school seniors: remember, when you are on your deathbed, you will not be saying that you wish you had spent more time "at the office." But Americans do spend a lot more time working each year than nearly any other people on the planet. By the end of our careers, many of us will have spent more time with our co-workers than with our families.

Already in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, much has been written about the “Wal-Martization” of the American workplace, about how, despite rocketing profits, corporations such as Wal-Mart overwork and underpay their employees, how workers’ wages have remained stagnant since the 1970s, while the costs of college education and health insurance have risen out of reach for many citizens. It’s become a cliché to say that the gap between the “haves” and the “have-nots” is widening to an alarming degree. In his book *Wealth and Democracy*, Kevin Phillips says we are dangerously close to becoming a plutocracy in which one dollar equals one vote.

Such clashes between employers and employees, and between our rhetoric of equality of opportunity and the reality of our working lives, are not new in America. With the onset of the industrial revolution in the first half of the nineteenth century, many workers were displaced from their traditional means of employment, as the country shifted from a farm-based, agrarian economy toward an urban, manufacturing-centered one. In cities such as New York, groups of “workingmen” (early manifestations of unions) protested, sometimes violently, unsatisfactory labor conditions. Labor unions remain a controversial political presence in America today.

Longfellow and Whitman both wrote with sympathy about the American worker, although their respective portraits are strikingly different, and worth juxtaposing. Longfellow’s poem “The Village Blacksmith” is one of his most famous and beloved visions: in this poem, one blacksmith epitomizes characteristics and values which many of Longfellow’s readers, then and now, revere as “American” traits. Whitman’s canto (a section of a long poem) 15 from “Song of Myself,” however, presents many different “identities” of the American worker, representing the entire social spectrum, from the crew of a fish smack to the president (I must add that Whitman’s entire “Song of Myself” is actually 52 cantos in length).

I do not pretend to offer these single texts as all encompassing of the respective poets’ ideas about workers, but these poems offer a starting place for comparison and contrast. We know that Longfellow was the most popular American poet of the nineteenth century, just as we know that Whitman came to be one of the most controversial. Read more widely in the work of both poets and decide for yourselves which poet speaks to you more meaningfully and why.

**“The Village Blacksmith”**  
**by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow**

Under a spreading chestnut-tree  
The village smithy stands;  
The smith, a mighty man is he,  
With large and sinewy hands;  
And the muscles of his brawny arms  
Are strong as iron bands.

His hair is crisp, and black, and long,  
His face is like the tan;  
His brow is wet with honest sweat,  
He earns whate'er he can,  
And looks the whole world in the face,  
For he owes not any man.

Week in, week out, from morn till night,  
You can hear his bellows blow;  
You can hear him swing his heavy sledge,  
With measured beat and slow,  
Like a sexton ringing the village bell,  
When the evening sun is low.

And children coming home from school  
Look in at the open door;  
They love to see the flaming forge,  
And bear the bellows roar,  
And catch the burning sparks that fly  
Like chaff from a threshing-floor.

He goes on Sunday to the church,  
And sits among his boys;  
He hears the parson pray and preach,  
He hears his daughter's voice,  
Singing in the village choir,  
And it makes his heart rejoice.

It sounds to him like her mother's voice,  
Singing in Paradise!  
He needs must think of her once more,  
How in the grave she lies;  
And with his haul, rough hand he wipes  
A tear out of his eyes.

Toiling,--rejoicing,--sorrowing,  
Onward through life he goes;  
Each morning sees some task begin,  
Each evening sees it close  
Something attempted, something done,  
Has earned a night's repose.

Thanks, thanks to thee, my worthy friend,  
For the lesson thou hast taught!  
Thus at the flaming forge of life  
Our fortunes must be wrought;  
Thus on its sounding anvil shaped  
Each burning deed and thought.

## **“Song of Myself”**

### **Canto 15**

**by Walt Whitman**

And of these one and all I weave the song of my The pure contralto sings in the organ  
loft,  
The carpenter dresses his plank, the tongue of his foreplane whistles its wild ascending  
lisp,  
The married and unmarried children ride home to their Thanksgiving dinner,  
The pilot seizes the king-pin, he heaves down with a strong arm,  
The mate stands braced in the whale-boat, lance and harpoon are ready,  
The duck-shooter walks by silent and cautious stretches,  
The deacons are ordain'd with cross'd hands at the altar,  
The spinning-girl retreats and advances to the hum of the big wheel,  
The farmer stops by the bars as he walks on a First-day loafe and looks at the oats and  
rye,  
The lunatic is carried at last to the asylum a confirm'd case,  
(He will never sleep any more as he did in the cot in his mother's bed-room;)  
The jour printer with gray head and gaunt jaws works at his case,  
He turns his quid of tobacco while his eyes blurr with the manuscript;  
The malform'd limbs are tied to the surgeon's table,  
What is removed drops horribly in a pail;  
The quadron girl is sold at the auction-stand, the drunkard nods by the bar-room stove,  
The machinist rolls up his sleeves, the policeman travels his beat, the gate-keeper marks  
who pass,  
The young fellow drives the express-wagon, (I love him, though I do not know him;)  
The half-breed straps on his light boots to compete in the race,  
The western turkey-shooting draws old and young, some lean on their rifles, some sit on  
logs,  
Out from the crowd steps the marksman, takes his position, levels his piece;  
The groups of newly-come immigrants cover the wharf or levee,  
As the woolly-pates hoe in the sugar-field, the overseer views them from his saddle,  
The bugle calls in the ball-room, the gentlemen run for their partners, the dancers bow to  
each other,  
The youth lies awake in the cedar-roof'd garret and harks to the musical rain,  
The Wolverine sets traps on the creek that helps fill the Huron,  
The squaw wrapt in her yellow-hemm'd cloth is offering moccasins and bead-bags for  
sale,  
The connoisseur peers along the exhibition-gallery with half-shut eyes bent sideways,  
As the deck-hands make fast the steamboat the plank is thrown for the shore-going  
passengers,  
The young sister holds out the skein while the elder sister winds it off in a ball, and stops  
now and then for the knots,  
The one-year wife is recovering and happy having a week ago borne her first child,  
The clean-hair'd Yankee girl works with her sewing-machine or in the factory or mill,  
The paving-man leans on his two-handed rammer, the reporter's lead flies swiftly over

the note-book, the sign-painter is lettering with blue and gold,  
The canal boy trots on the tow-path, the book-keeper counts at his desk, the shoemaker  
    waxes his thread,  
The conductor beats time for the band and all the performers follow him,  
The child is baptized, the convert is making his first professions,  
The regatta is spread on the bay, the race is begun, (how the white sails sparkle!)  
The drover watching his drove sings out to them that would stray,  
The pedler sweats with his pack on his back, (the purchaser higgling about the odd cent;)  
The bride unrumples her white dress, the minute-hand of the clock moves slowly,  
The opium-eater reclines with rigid head and just-open'd lips,  
The prostitute draggles her shawl, her bonnet bobs on her tipsy and pimpled neck,  
The crowd laugh at her blackguard oaths, the men jeer and wink to each other,  
(Miserable! I do not laugh at your oaths nor jeer you;)  
The President holding a cabinet council is surrounded by the great Secretaries,  
On the piazza walk three matrons stately and friendly with twined arms,  
The crew of the fish-smack pack repeated layers of halibut in the hold,  
The Missourian crosses the plains toting his wares and his cattle,  
As the fare-collector goes through the train he gives notice by the jingling of loose  
    change,  
The floor-men are laying the floor, the tinnners are tinning the roof, the masons are calling  
    for mortar,  
In single file each shouldering his hod pass onward the laborers;  
Seasons pursuing each other the indescribable crowd is gather'd, it is the fourth of  
    Seventh-month, (what salutes of cannon and small arms!)  
Seasons pursuing each other the plougher ploughs, the mower mows, and the winter-  
    grain falls in the ground;  
Off on the lakes the pike-fisher watches and waits by the hole in the frozen surface,

The stumps stand thick round the clearing, the squatter strikes deep with his axe,  
Flatboatmen make fast towards dusk near the cotton-wood or pecan-trees,  
Coon-seekers go through the regions of the Red river or through those drain'd by the  
Tennessee, or through those of the Arkansas,  
Torches shine in the dark that hangs on the Chattahooche or Altamahaw,  
Patriarchs sit at supper with sons and grandsons and great-grandsons around them,  
In walls of adobie, in canvas tents, rest hunters and trappers after their day's sport,  
The city sleeps and the country sleeps,  
The living sleep for their time, the dead sleep for their time,  
The old husband sleeps by his wife and the young husband sleeps by his wife;  
And these tend inward to me, and I tend outward to them,  
And such as it is to be of these more or less I am,  
    And of these one and all I weave the song of myself.



“The Village Blacksmith” by Currier & Ives



“The Happy Home” by Currier & Ives

## Activities

1. Look up in a dictionary and write out definitions for the following terms: hierarchy, social class, democracy, ideology, egalitarianism, rhetoric.
2. Print a copy of each of the poems. Read and annotate (make notes in the margins of) each poem, paying careful attention to the identity of the worker(s), the values being celebrated, the apparent purpose of the poem, as well as how the poem's form (i.e. its rhyme scheme, stanza arrangement, the line breaks and layout on the page, its point of view, the diction choices, and tone) reflects that purpose.
3. View the lithographs "The Village Blacksmith" and "The Happy Home."
4. Write an essay in which you compare and contrast the two poems: you may wish to comment upon the authors' apparent purposes and how the poems' organizations, use of rhyme, points of view and diction choices communicate that purpose; be sure to use specific examples from each text to support your claims.



## Post-writing questions

### For discussion with your peers and teacher:

- How are form and author's purpose interrelated in the two poems?
- Which of the poems is more similar in terms of form and purpose to the Currier & Ives images?
- Which text would have been / still is more popular and why?
- Which text would have been / still is more controversial and why?
- Which values are celebrated / affirmed in Longfellow's poem? In Whitman's?
- Who in America is not included in Longfellow's poem? Do these exclusions matter? Why or why not?
- Which poem seems more "American" or more "democratic" in its ideology? Explain.
- Is the more popular poem also the more democratic? If not, how can we explain this?
- To what extent do you believe Longfellow's poem corresponded with the reality of work in America in the nineteenth century? How about today?