“I hear America Singing” and “I, Too, Sing America”

The American Dream is to pursue happiness – a dream that inspires people of the past, present, and future to work hard and stay determined. The Dream gives people hope of a better life; it gives people an optimistic attitude toward a brighter future. Poetic works such as “I Hear America Singing” by Walt Whitman and “I, Too, Sing America” by Langston Hughes explore the theme of the American dream. Both poets use the metaphor of the chorus and its singing to represent the collective efforts of Americans. America is the song and its people are the chorus, in which each and every person has an important part to sing. Whitman and Hughes explore the pursuit of the American Dream using figurative language; however, Whitman celebrates the situation of individual efforts of Americans whereas Hughes focuses on the collective situation of struggle by African Americans.

In Whitman’s “I Hear America Singing,” the immediate situation is a country of people working towards a greater good. Whitman characterizes this greater good as the song of America, which he establishes with the metaphor of singing in the first line. The “varied carols” represent the different voices of people singing in America (1). Individuals working hard at their different jobs represent the melodious harmony of working for the American Dream. The voice of mechanics are “blithe and strong” (2); the carpenter is singing “as he measures his plank or beam” (3); the mason, the boatman, the
shoemaker, the wood-cutter, the mother, the young-wife, and the girl are all singing while working through the day. The illustration of each singing worker is different; no two people are doing the same thing. This suggests that the people in Whitman’s poem are not singing the same song, but they do share a common purpose - a better future. Their working together for the improvement of America gives a sense that everyone is singing together in beautiful song. Also, there is no gradation of importance of themselves or their work, because their efforts are the voices of American democracy; each person is equally important in a society because each person is needed for a different skill or trade.

Furthermore, Whitman applies action verbs to each job in order to provide a sense of imagery and realism for the reader. When the carpenter “measures his plank” (3) or when the girl is “sewing or washing” (8), the reader is compelled to envision them working and gains an appreciation for their work. Also, Whitman celebrates the individual efforts through his diction. Although there is no rhyme scheme, the reader still feels a melody in the repetitions and syntax. When illustrating the “varied carols” (1), Whitman begins every line with the working-class folks “singing” (1) in his or her unique way and repeats the structure to suggest a feeling of harmony like that in a chorus. The chorus shows how everyone is ultimately working towards their American Dreams.

A poet of another era, Langston Hughes presents the situation of pursuing the American dream in a different manner in his poem, “I, Too, Sing America”. In the first line, Hughes states “I, too, sing America” as if he is directly referring to Whitman’s poem (1). He implies that he is just as important as the workers in Whitman’s poem and that he, too, is an important part of the American Dream. If the America is a chorus, then he is also a singer in the song. From this first line, the reader can already observe Hughes’
focus on racial inequality. Hughes asserts his identity as the “darker brother” to represent the African American community. The situation in which he is sent “to eat in the kitchen” illustrates the current injustice he faces. Although slavery had ended by Hughes’ time, racial segregation is still prominent in society. From this inequality, we see the driving force for his American Dream, which is much different than that of Whitman’s. Even after being sent away, his appetite is unchanged and his optimism unaffected. A distinctive theme presented in these is the idea of mental freedom. Though he is treated poorly, he never devalues himself and never allows his mind to be caged; he firmly believes he is equal and refuses to be broken down by a segregated society. When “tomorrow” comes, he knows that he’ll “be at the table” and nobody will tell him to “eat in the kitchen.” The “tomorrow” that Hughes is referring to does not mean the next day or the next week; he is alluding to a future in which blacks and whites are treated as equals; a future in which his American Dream becomes a reality. America, “the beautiful”, is defined by its freedom and justice. To be finally recognized as “beautiful” represents the acceptance as an equal American.

What makes Whitman’s poem distinct from Hughes’ poem is his purpose and what the American dream means to him. Whitman’s poem is written with an optimistic and seemingly melodic tone. The optimism and celebration of the working-class individuals function to inspire and motivate the reader. After all, the American Dream is an idealistic pursuit and often requires encouragement when the struggle becomes overwhelming. For Whitman, the American Dream means striving for a better life in every way. The working class individuals go to their job today to have a better tomorrow, “each singing what belongs to him or her and to none else” (9). Their selfish pursuit is for
more happiness and freedom. However, the Dream is different for a race that had little happiness from the beginning. As a white American, Whitman has not had to deal with inequality or oppression - to the extent that black Americans had felt, so the pursuit of equality is out of the scope of his conscience. Therefore, what the American Dream means to him is different than what the American Dream means to Hughes.

For Hughes, the American dream is not about the individual strive for an even better life; it is about the collective struggle of his race for equality and justice. Hughes’ life is defined by his work as a social activist in the Harlem Renaissance. The idea of working for equality for his people is ingrained in his conscience. For him, the American Dream is first and foremost a hope to overcome oppression and segregation. In fact, his idea of the American Dream is implied in the third stanza. His dream is working for the “tomorrow” (8) when the “darker brother” (2) can eat “at the table” (9) with whites as an equal citizen of America. Different from Whitman’s focus on the individual dreams, Hughes’ purpose for writing is to raise awareness for his people and illustrate the oppression they face. Even though the speaker of the poem is “I”, in no instances is Hughes only talking or and for himself. With every assertion and every statement, he is representing and speaking for every African American.

Despite these differences, the two poems are similar in their use of “singing” as a metaphor. The singing represents the individual goals and aspirations of the American Dream; the song of America represents the collective Dream of a better America. In Whitman’s poem, the repetition of the workers one after another gives an impression of a chorus of singers, one singing after another. As individuals, they are “varied carols”, but together, they are singing America (1). As the title of Hughes’ poem suggests, he also has
a role in the chorus because he too can “sing America” (1). The significance of using such a metaphor by both poets is to emphasize the individual effort as well as the collective effort in attaining the American dream.

Being American means being free and being able to pursue the American Dream. This idea has become a crucial part of the American culture and still stands true today. The American Dream, as many literary works have shown, is an idealistic vision that cannot be fully attained. However, the Dream does represent hope. Hope is what drives people to work hard everyday in “I Hear America Singing.” Hope is what drives Hughes’ vision of a better tomorrow in “I, Too, Sing America.” Hope is what ultimately unites everyone with common dream for a brighter future.

Final comment: Jane, your comparison and contrast of Whitman and Hughes on the situation of celebrating the American dream works well overall to explore Hughes’s emphasis on racial uplift as an updating of Whitman’s singing. Your comparison of their use of figurative language works well and you illustrate it effectively with quoting. Continue to work on passive verbs and employ more thematically purposeful diction in your topic sentences. Grade: B+
Works Cited
