

NAKSHALBARI COLLEGE  
DEPT. OF ENGLISH

TOPIC- O CAPTAIN ! MY CAPTAIN ! :  
AN OVERVIEW  
BY- AMIT CHETRI



Walt Whitman ; May 31, 1819 – March 26, 1892) was an American poet, essayist and journalist. A humanist, he was a part of the transition between transcendentalism and realism, incorporating both views in his works. Whitman is among the most influential poets in the American canon, often called the father of free verse

O Captain! My Captain!

BY WALT WHITMAN

O Captain! my Captain! our fearful trip is done,  
The ship has weather'd every rack, the prize we sought is won,  
The port is near, the bells I hear, the people all exulting,  
While follow eyes the steady keel, the vessel grim and daring;  
    But O heart! heart! heart!  
    O the bleeding drops of red,  
    Where on the deck my Captain lies,  
    Fallen cold and dead.

O Captain! my Captain! rise up and hear the bells;  
Rise up – for you the flag is flung – for you the bugle trills,  
For you bouquets and ribbon'd wreaths – for you the shores a-crowding,  
For you they call, the swaying mass, their eager faces turning;  
    Here Captain! dear father!  
    This arm beneath your head!  
    It is some dream that on the deck,  
    You've fallen cold and dead.

My Captain does not answer, his lips are pale and still,  
My father does not feel my arm, he has no pulse nor will,  
The ship is anchor'd safe and sound, its voyage closed and done,  
From fearful trip the victor ship comes in with object won;  
    Exult O shores, and ring O bells!  
    But I with mournful tread,  
    Walk the deck my Captain lies,  
    Fallen cold and dead.

"O Captain! My Captain!" is an extended metaphor poem written by Walt Whitman in 1865 about the death of U.S. president Abraham Lincoln. Well received upon publication, the poem was Whitman's first to be anthologized and the most popular during his lifetime. Together with "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd", "Hush'd Be the Camps To-day", and "This Dust was Once the Man", it is one of four poems written by Whitman about the death of Lincoln.

"My Captain" was first published in *The Saturday Press* on November 4, 1865.

## Summary

The poem is an elegy to the speaker's recently deceased Captain, at once celebrating the safe and successful return of their ship and mourning the loss of its great leader. In the first stanza, the speaker expresses his relief that the ship has reached its home port at last and describes hearing people cheering. Despite the celebrations on land and the successful voyage, the speaker reveals that his Captain's dead body is lying on the deck. In the second stanza, the speaker implores the Captain to "rise up and hear the bells," wishing the dead man could witness the elation. Everyone adored the captain, and the speaker admits that his death feels like a horrible dream. In the final stanza, the speaker juxtaposes his feelings of mourning and pride.

## Analysis

Whitman wrote this poem shortly after President Abraham Lincoln was assassinated. It is an extended metaphor intended to memorialize Lincoln's life and work. The Captain represents the assassinated president; the ship represents the war-weathered nation following the Civil War; the "prize won" represents the salvaged union. The speaker, torn between relief and despair, captures America's confusion at the end of the Civil War. It was a time of many conflicting sentiments, and Whitman immortalizes this sense of uncertainty in "O Captain! My Captain!"

Whitman's poetry places a lot of emphasis on the individual. This particular poem explores a variation on that theme: the self vs. the other. The speaker struggles with balancing his personal feelings of loss with the celebratory mood resulting from the successful voyage. While the Civil War claimed many lives, it led to the reunification of the Union, so many Americans felt similarly divided. In Whitman's poem, the speaker believes that he should be part of the "other" group, celebrating the return to safety. However, his inner thoughts set him apart from the crowd as he tries to reconcile his emotional reaction to the Captain's death.

## Style

The poem rhymes using an AABBCDED rhyme scheme, and is designed for recitation. It is written in nine quatrains, organized in three stanzas. Each stanza has two quatrains of four seven-beat lines, followed by a four-line refrain, which changes slightly from stanza to stanza, in a tetrameter/trimeter ballad beat

## Reception

The poem was Whitman's most popular during his lifetime, and the only one to be anthologized before his death. The historian Michael C. Cohen noted that "My Captain" was "carried beyond the limited circulation of *Leaves of Grass* and into the popular heart"; its popularity remade "history in the form of a ballad". Initial reception to the poem was very positive. In early 1866, a reviewer in the *Boston Commonwealth* wrote that the poem was the most moving dirge for Lincoln ever written, adding that *Drum Taps* "will do much to remove the prejudice against Mr. Whitman in many minds"

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