

## O Captain! My Captain! by Walt Whitman

“O Captain! My Captain!” is an elegy written by Walt Whitman in 1865 to commemorate the death of President Abraham Lincoln. It was first published in *Sequel to Drum-Taps* (1865), a collection of Whitman’s poems inspired by the events of the American Civil War. The poem is perhaps Whitman’s most famous—which is ironic, since it is far more conventional in meter, form, and subject than much of Whitman’s other work. Although some critics have suggested that Whitman regretted ever writing “O Captain! My Captain!” it undeniably captured the mood of a nation in mourning and has remained one of Whitman’s best-loved and most-quoted poems.

### Summary

The speaker’s coming to terms with the death of his fallen comrade is the focal point of the poem at hand. At the start of the poem, the speaker attempts to come to reality as he observes his dead captain on the deck. Slowly and gradually, he realizes that the change is permanent and life must go, regardless. The end of the Civil War was supposedly

a moment of rejoicing for the American populace, instead, it became an event of mourning. The conclusion of the Civil War has brought with itself national mourning and a period of reflection.

### O Captain! My Captain! Meaning

The title of the poem, 'O Captain! My Captain!' refers to Abraham Lincoln as a captain of the ship. Here, the "ship" is a symbol of the civil war fought for liberating the slaves. According to the poet, the ship is sailing nearer to the shore, meaning the war is about to end. They have achieved their coveted goal. Being a moment of victory, everyone is happy. However, they have to consider, at the same time, that their metaphorical "captain" of the ship is no more. When he lived, he guided the multitude with his fatherly guidance. After his death, the nation is fatherless. In this agony, the poet writes the verses. However, the mood of the poem is not gloomy. Even if they have lost Lincoln, the dream Lincoln has seen is not lost.

### Structure

The poem, 'O Captain! My Captain!' consists of 3 stanzas in totality having 2 quatrains in each. A quatrain is a stanza consisting of four lines. Besides, this poem is an elegy. An elegy is known as a mourning poem. Apart from that, Whitman uses the free verse form while writing this poem. For this reason, the lines of the poem do not rhyme at all. Yet there are some instances where one can find the use of rhyming. As an example, in the second part of the first stanza, the words "red" and "dead" rhyme together. Thereafter, the poet mostly uses the iambic meter in this poem. For instance, the first line is in iambic hexameter. The following two lines are in iambic heptameter. While the second quatrain does not follow a specific metrical scheme.

### Literary Devices

Most of Walt Whitman's poems use repetition and rhythm for rendering a spellbinding poetic beauty. He uses anaphora constantly as several verses begin with the same word/ phrase. For instance 'When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomers' uses 'when' 4 times to render a lyrical sound. Anaphora is generally used for joyous chants and rendering celebratory feelings

in a poem's entirety. 'O Captain! My Captain!' makes use of 'father' and 'heart' to mourn the death of assassinated Abraham Lincoln. Moreover, the fallen ship's captain is a reference to Abraham Lincoln, whereas the ship is also an allusion to the United States of America during its early years of independence.

### Themes

Whitman emphasizes the importance of self in the majority of his poems, ranging from 'I Hear America Singing' to others, he prizes the American populace to believe in themselves. More so, he even uses symbolical allusions to drive home a point. He may use inanimate objects for that end. Apart from that, Whitman uses the themes of victory, lamentation, grief, sadness, and loss in his poem, 'O Captain! My Captain!'. Though this poem concerns the theme of victory, it contains a sad note on the death of Lincoln. The poet creates contrast by transposing the images of the joyous crowd beside the lifeless body of the captain. This concoction of emotions resembles the nature of life. Along with that, the

themes of grief and lamentation are important aspects of this piece.