**Overview: “O Captain! My Captain!”**

**Introduction**

Written on the occasion Abraham Lincoln's assassination, "O Captain! My Captain! " was first published in the *New York Saturday Press* (November 1865) and was later included, along with "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," in a group of poems titled "Sequel" to *Drum Taps* (1865). While “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd” has become one of Whitman's most critically acclaimed poems, "O Captain! My Captain!," which incorporates more conventional rhyme and meter, was by far the most popular of Whitman's poems during his lifetime.

**Explication**

*Lines 1-4:*

The first lines of the poem serve to begin the controlling metaphor upon which the rest of the poem builds. A metaphor is simply a figure of speech in which one thing is substituted for another, and a controlling metaphor is a metaphor that impacts, controls, or unifies the entire poem. In this poem, the "Captain" is a substitute for Abraham Lincoln, and the "ship" is the United States of America. "The fearful trip" is the Civil War, which had ended just prior to Lincoln's assassination. Thus, the ship is returning home to cheering crowds having won "the prize" of victory, just as the Union, led by Lincoln, had returned victorious from the Civil War. The utterance "O Captain! my Captain" is particularly interesting in this light. In one sense the speaker is addressing his Captain directly, but in another respect, he seems to be speaking to himself about his Captain. The repetition helps to assert the uncertainty he feels at the Captain's loss.

*Lines 5-8:*

Lines 5-8 communicate the unpleasant news that the Captain has somehow fallen dead after the battle. More importantly, the repetition of "heart! heart! heart!" communicates the speaker of the poem 's dismay and horror at realizing that his Captain has died. The poem is then as much about the "I" of the poem and how he comes to terms with his grief, how he processes this information, as it is about the central figure of the Captain. The "bleeding drops of red" are both the Captain's bleeding wounds and the speakers wounded heart. Finally, these lines function as a broken heroic couplet, a two-line rhymed verse that originated in heroic epic poetry and is usually, as is the case with these lines, written in iambic pentameter. The broken lines are called hemistiches and are commonly used, as they are here, to the underlying rhythm of the poem and to suggest emotional upheaval.

*Lines 9-12:*

In this pivotal second stanza, the speaker of the poem entreats his Captain to "Rise up and hear the bells." In essence, the speaker laments that his Captain, having led his crew bravely to victory, will not receive the fanfare that is his just due. At the same time Whitman blends two distinct scenes: one in which crowds gather to receive and celebrate the Captain (Lincoln) upon his return from military victory; and the second in which people gather to lament him as a fallen hero.

The bells of the second stanza are presumably the bells rung in celebration of military victory; however, knowing the great Captain and leader has died the bells might also symbolize funeral bells tolled in mourning. Similarly, the "flag," is flown in honor of the Captain both as a symbol of rejoicing and victory and as a symbol of lamentation—as in the tradition of flying the American flag at half-mast when a respected American dies. The bugle, a quintessentially military musical instrument, alludes to both military victory and to "Taps," the requiem traditionally played at funerals of fallen soldiers. Bouquets and wreathes are also common to both celebratory receptions and funerals. Finally, the throngs of people become symbolic as well. Not only are they representative of the people who welcomed and rejoiced at the Union's victory in the Civil War, but they represent the throngs of people who gathered across the nation to mournfully view Lincoln's coffin as it was taken by train from Washington, D.C., to Springfield, Illinois. The crowds remind the reader that the speaker of the poem is not alone in lamenting his Captain's death, but rather shares this experience with the masses. In this manner the poem is in keeping with Whitman's experience. While he himself had a powerful personal reaction to the news of Lincoln's death, Lincoln was the Captain and father-figure of an entire nation and so the poet's grief, while central to the poem, is shared by the rest of the country.

*Lines 13-14:*

In the next group of lines, the speaker of poem again entreats his Captain to "hear." In this case he may be referring to the bells of the first stanza, or perhaps to himself, his pleas. More importantly, the speaker for the first time calls his Captain "father." In this manner, Whitman expands the metaphor for Lincoln beyond the more limited scope of a military leader of men into a father figure, one whose wisdom and teachings led his children into adulthood. The poem celebrates Lincoln as more than simply a great military leader who led the Union to victory during the Civil War and attaches to him a broader significance as the father of this new, this post-slavery country.

*Lines 15-16:*

In Lines 15-16 the speaker asserts that this must all be a bad dream. Here the poem captures the speaker's denial; the emotional impact of Lincoln's demise has made it almost impossible for the speaker to accept. The refrain "fallen cold an dead," is slightly altered in this stanza in that it is apparently addressed to the Captain. The effect is to again reinforce the speaker's difficulty in coming to terms with his Captain's death; even though his Captain is dead, the speaker continues to speak to him as though he were alive.

*Lines 17-18:*

The speaker of the poem, no longer able to hold out hope, faces up to the reality of his Captain's death. The details and images evoked in these lines all serve to reiterate that the Captain is deceased: his pallid lips, lack of a pulse, and lack of will. Unlike the two previous stanzas, the speaker in no way addresses his Captain directly but speaks of him entirely in the third-person. In this sense, he has finally accepted that his Captain is dead.

*Lines 19-24:*

Having finally faced up to his Captain's death, the speaker then turns his attention back to the recent victory. Lines 19-24 suggest again the internal division suffered by the speaker of the poem. Having accepted that his Captain is indeed dead it would seem he can now return his attention to the military victory. After all, one could surely argue that the plight of an entire nation of people far outweighs the fate of a single man. Nevertheless, the speaker of the poem chooses the individual over the larger nation. While "Exult O shores, and ring O bells" is explicitly a call for rejoicing, the speaker himself will not celebrate but will walk "with mournful tread," knowing that his Captain is indeed "Fallen cold and dead." The speaker thus celebrates the end of the Civil War but continues to express his need to mourn his fallen hero.

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