

### **Summary of O Captain! My Captain!**

Walt Whitman composed the elegy "O Captain! My Captain!" in 1865 to honour President Abraham Lincoln's passing. It was initially included in Whitman's collection of poems titled *Sequel to Drum-Taps* (1865), which was influenced by the American Civil War. Ironically, although being far more traditional in metre, shape, and theme than much of Whitman's other writing, the poem is arguably his most well-known. "O Captain! My Captain!" has remained one of Whitman's most beloved and frequently cited poems, despite some commentators arguing that Whitman regretted ever writing it. It unquestionably caught the spirit of a nation in mourning.

My Captain, my Captain! We have completed our difficult journey. We have won the treasure we have been battling for, and the ship has weathered every storm. I hear bells ringing and people celebrating near the port. The solid ship, that fearless and courageous vessel, is the centre of their attention. But my heart, my heart, my heart! Oh, see the blood splatters on the deck where my captain lies, lifeless and cold.

My Captain, my Captain! Listen to the bells and get up. They're playing the bugle and waving the flag for you, so get up. These people are swarming the shore for you, bringing you bouquets and ribboned wreaths. My Captain, my Captain! We have completed our difficult journey. We have won the treasure we have been battling for, and the ship has weathered every storm. Everyone's expectant faces are turning to you as the swaying crowd calls for you. Come on, Captain! Father, my beloved! Let me place my arm beneath your head. You must be laying dead and cold on the deck in my dream.

My Captain doesn't respond to me. His lips are lifeless and pallid. Due to his lack of consciousness and pulse, my father is unable to feel my arm beneath his head. The ship's voyage is ended now that it has safely anchored. The winning ship has returned with its prize after this arduous voyage. Let the bells ring and the masses rejoice! At the same time, I sadly and slowly make my way across the deck to where my Captain lies, lifeless and cold.

The poem "O Captain! My Captain!" is an elegy for President Abraham Lincoln as well as a celebration of the conclusion of the American Civil War. As a result, throughout the poem, victory and loss are intimately related. On the one hand, happy reminders that the war has won are used to soften its grief. On the other side, sorrow haunts its celebrations. In this

way, Whitman's poem sheds light on the trauma and enduring anguish of wartime losses—as well as the inability to ever truly divorce the human costs of victory from its triumph.

Through the use of poetry form, "O Captain! My Captain!" models the intimate connection between grief and triumph by contrasting the language of loss and victory. This poem initially appears to be a celebration of the Union's Civil War victory. The speaker says that "the prize we sought is won" and congratulates President Lincoln on navigating the symbolic ship of state through "every wrack," or storm. But the speaker stops midway through this victorious opening verse, saying, "But O heart! heart! heart!... my Captain lies, / Fallen cold and dead." The reader is made aware that something is amiss when the phrase "But O heart!" appears out of nowhere. Before confronting loss, the poem hardly has time to rejoice in victory.

The fact that the celebrations are meant to honour the leader who achieved this victory, but President Lincoln is not present to see the triumph, is one of the poem's terrible ironies. The happy pictures that open each stanza—ringing bells, "bouquets," "wreaths," and applauding crowds—make this all the more striking. The poem contrasts these lively and joyous moments with the "Captain's" "cold," "dead," "pale," and "still" body.

By repeating the word "you" five times, the speaker further highlights that all of these festivities are for President Lincoln: "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." Lincoln's absence from his own celebration is made all the more poignant by the word's repetition.

The speaker portrays the agonisingly intimate connection between defeat and triumph throughout. The reminder that the nation has paid a high price reframes the joy of the Union's victory. Whitman seems to contend that in every warfare situation, where winning always necessitates the sacrifice of human life, defeat and victory are inextricably intertwined.