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English 105

19 July 2019

O Abe! My Abe! The Civil War Is Done

Walt Whitman created a series of elegies dedicated to American President Abraham Lincoln right after his assassination in 1865. The poems were first published in 1867 in a book by Walt Whitman called Sequel to Drum-Taps (Pannapacker). Initially, Walt Whitman was indifferent towards President Lincoln, but as the civil war pressed on, he started to appreciate him (Griffin). They both lived in Washington D.C., during the middle of the American civil war, and were unionists (Pannapacker). The two were thought of as "kindred spirits" because they shared the same opinions on "democratic ideals, the preservation of the Union, and the greatness of the common folk" (Pannapacker). Along with having similar ideals, both men published some of the most famous literary works of the civil war between President Lincoln's *Gettysburg Address* and Walt Whitman's *Drum-Taps*. Although they never met, President Abraham Lincoln and Walt Whitman had political and biographical similarities that supported the connection of the two men.

The assassination of President Abraham Lincoln in 1865 caused Americans to mourn the loss of a fallen hero and reflect on the civil war, which Walt Whitman did through his poem "O Captain! My Captain!" Walt Whitman incorporated controversial topics of the American Civil War into this poem through the "Captain" which is Abraham Lincoln, the "ship" being the United States, the "prize we sought" being the end of slavery, and "the fearful trip" being the civil war. These interpretations are consistent throughout every scholarly article. Although the poem is about mourning the loss of President Lincoln "the plight of an entire nation of people far outweighs the fate of a single man" ("Overview: 'O Captain! My Captain!'").

Nevertheless, Walt Whitman chooses to mourn the President rather than celebrate the victory of the nation, and when he is called to rejoice walks "with mournful tread." One interesting interpretation of the poem suggests the details of the Captain's body "pale; still lips, no pulse, and cold and dead" along with the "ignorantly wild, very alive, cheering crowds" juxtaposes the death of Christ (Hochman). "Lincoln was a man who died in the name of (the) Union, just as Christ died for the sake of humanity's eventual union with God" (Hochman). Although the comparison is far-reaching, it still is an interesting perspective on the poem. The same article brings up that it seems like the "speaker in the poem had rushed on stage after Booth left it" except instead of being in a theater on a ship instead (Hochman). Then the speaker of the poem proceeds to start crying out in a weak attempt to bring the "Captain" back to life (Hochman). While this probably was not Whitman's intended interpretation, there is still sound reasoning behind this argument.

"O Captain! My Captain!" is broken into three stanzas walking through Walt Whitman's coming to terms with President Lincoln's death through each one. The speaker sets up the poem's extended metaphor in the first line, "O Captain! My Captain! Our fearful trip is done" exclaiming to the dead Abraham Lincoln that the civil war is over. We can assume the "Captain" represents a character that is not just a captain of a ship because the word is capitalized throughout the poem as if it is a proper noun. In line two, he states "the ship" or the United States has won "the prize we sought," which is slavery. Lines three and four provide a visual of the "Captains" ship coming back to the mainland representing a close to the civil war. The repetition of "heart! heart! heart!" and "O" in lines five and six showcases the speaker's dismay at the loss of the Captain. The line "O the bleeding drops of red" is in between "heart! heart! heart!" and "where on the deck my captain lies" signifying that the speakers wounded heart is bleeding along with the dead Captain's. The last four lines of the first stanza are a broken couplet and have iambic pentameter. These types of couplets are used to emphasize emotion like it is doing here with the speaker's grief.

The second stanza blends two scenes. The first being crowds gathering to celebrate the Union for its victory during the civil war and the other gathering to honor him as a fallen hero. "Rise up and hear the bells" in line nine signifies a celebration of victory over the confederates and "for you the flag is flung" is in honor of the death of President Lincoln. Lines nine through twelve hints at a military funeral through the "bugle" which is a trumpet used in military calls. After President Lincoln's death, people came from all over the country to see his body be moved from Washington, D.C. to Illinois. which is hinted at through "for you the shores a-crowding." In the second stanza, the speaker places more significance on President Lincoln's passing than on the Union's victory in the civil war by dedicating half of one line to the victory and over three lines to honoring President Lincoln. The metaphor becomes expanded when the speaker calls the Captain "father." By doing this, he recognizes President Lincoln as more than just a military figure but also as the father to this new post-civil war nation. There is a repetition of "Fallen cold and dead" In the last line of each stanza except in stanza two where it is altered slightly by adding "you've." With the addition of the pronoun, the speakers coming to terms with the Captains death becomes emphasized.

The repetition of "O Captain! My Captain!" throughout every stanza emphasizes the uncertainty he feels about the captain's loss. The speaker, at last, realizes the reality of President Lincoln's death, "my father does not feel my arm, he has no pulse nor will." At that moment, he starts to refer to the Captain in the third person for the first time. After facing the facts of the Captains death, the speaker returns to the civil war victory. He recognizes the significance of the victory, but is grief overshadows it and when he is called to celebrate walks with "mournful tread."

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