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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, 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). Not only did they share similar ideals, but both published some of the most popular texts 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 Lincoln caused Americans to mourn the loss of a fallen hero and reflect on the civil war, which Whitman did through his poem “O Captain! My Captain!” Whitman incorporated controversial topics associated with the American Civil War into this poem through the “Captain” which is linked with Abraham Lincoln, the “ship” linked with the United States, the “prize we sought” representing the end of slavery, and “the fearful trip” being the civil war. These interpretations are consistent throughout the scholarly articles written about the poem. It is suggested that although the poem is about grieving the loss of the President it “could surely argue that the plight of an entire nation of people far outweighs the fate of a single man” stating that one cannot forget the victory they gained because of one death ("Overview: 'O Captain! My Captain!'"). Nevertheless, 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.”

Although all scholars agree that the “ship” in this poem represents the United States, some went beyond this interpretation to determine if there are any other underlying meanings. One article suggests that the poem is written as if the “speaker in the poem had rushed on stage after Booth left it” except instead of being in a theater the action takes place on a ship (Hochman). Then the speaker of the poem proceeds to start crying out in a weak attempt to bring the “Captain” back to life similar to what happened at Ford’s Theater (Hochman). The “Deck” of the ship which is mentioned three times in every one of the stanzas (lines 7, 15, 22) is said to resemble the theater stage. The only difference between Booth and the speaker of the poem is that he is not an assassin, but a helpmate mourning and coming to terms with the Presidents death. The comparison emphasizes not only the significance of the captain figure but how the death of the President took a toll on the speaker.

The comparisons continue by highlighting the resemblance between Lincoln and Christ. Some scholars compared President Lincoln’s death to that of Christ stating that “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). The juxtaposition with the Catholic Church continues with how both President Lincoln and Walt Whitman had tortured bodies and ignorant bystanders (Hochman). The resemblance between Lincoln and Christ that Whitman creates appears in the poem between these details of “pale; still lips, no pulse, and cold and dead” (lines 16 and 17), and what Hochman describes as “ignorantly wild, very alive, cheering crowds.” Further emphasizing how the two were both unpopular but sacrificed themselves for the greater good. Although the comparison is not direct, it still points to the emphasis on the individual figure in the poem.

“O Captain! My Captain!” is broken into three stanzas walking through the speaker’s coming to terms with President Lincoln’s death. The last four lines of every stanza are a “broken heroic couplet.” This form of couplet is commonly used and is meant to “suggest emotional upheaval” which in this case is the speaker’s grief at the Presidents loss ("Overview: 'O Captain! My Captain!'”). In line seven, “Where on the deck my captain lies” uses inversion in order to maintain the rhyme scheme of the poem. Repetition is used throughout the poem with the words “heart” because of the speaker’s grief and “fallen cold and dead” to add finality to the sense of loss in the poem.

The speaker of the poem sets up the extended metaphor of the poem in the first line of the first stanza, “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 the defeat of 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 use of repetition makes the poem equally about the death of the Captain as it is the speaker coming to terms with the loss. The lines “O the bleeding drops of red” is in between “heart! heart! heart!” and “where on the deck my captain lies.” The repetition signifies that the speakers wounded heart is bleeding along with the dead Captain’s.

The second stanza blends two scenes. The first depicts crowds gathering to celebrate the Union for its victory during the civil war “rise up and hear the bells” and the other shows gathering to honor Lincoln as a fallen hero “for you the flag is flung.” Lines nine through twelve hints at a military funeral through the “bugle” which is a trumpet used in military calls and “for you the shores a-crowding” when President Lincoln was trained from Washington D.C. to Illinois people came to watch it be taken away. 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. “Fallen cold and dead” is the last line of each stanza except in stanza two where it is altered slightly by adding “you’ve” this is to reinforce the speakers coming to terms with the Captains death.

The repetition of “O Captain! My Captain!” throughout every stanza emphasizes the uncertainty the speaker 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.” When he refers to the Captain as “my father,” it is the first time he refers to the Captain in the third person. After facing the facts of the Captain’s death, the speaker returns to recognizing the civil war victory. He recognizes the significance of the victory, but his grief overshadows it and when he is called to celebrate walks with “mournful tread.” The poem wraps up by recognizing the end of a war but while still mourning the loss of the President.

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