

## Critical analysis of "O Captain! My Captain! "

The poem "O Captain! My Captain!", a meditation on the death of President Abraham Lincoln, was written by Walt Whitman in 1865, and was included in his controversial and widely acclaimed collection *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman was immensely moved by President Lincoln's assassination on April 14, 1865. Though pleased with the outcome of the Civil War, Whitman was despondent over the death of his "Redeemer President". Abraham Lincoln was one of the greatest presidents of the United States of America, who fought a war (the American Civil War) against the Southern States to give the Negro slaves freedom and human dignity. The war was won, the slaves were freed, but Lincoln, soon after his election as president for a second term, fell a victim to an assassin's bullet. Each April, whenever possible, Whitman gave a memorial lecture on the anniversary of Lincoln's assassination ending with an emotional recitation of "O Captain! My Captain!". The last recitation was in 1890, two years before his death. "O Captain! My Captain!" became the most recited and the most popular of Whitman's poems.

In the poem, Lincoln is conceived as the brave captain of a ship who falls dead on the deck just when the journey is over and the victory is won. The speaker in the poem delivers the message to the captain and declares that their fearful and dangerous trip is done. Their ship had withstood every destructive encounter and their prized reward, that they longed for, is won. Their weary ship is drawing near the sea-port, the church bells are ringing to celebrate a victory and the people are rejoicing. Yet in the midst the celebration, the poet sees that in the vessel, his captain is lying cold and dead.

Whitman pleads desperately to the captain to get up from his bed and see that the people are flying the flag just for him. The people are blowing their trumpets and bugles and are waiting to present him with bunches of flowers and decorated garlands to honour him-the victor. The seashores are swaying with crowds of cheering people. All the faces of the people on the shore are eager to see the captain addressing them from the deck. Yet the captain, the father to all people of the nation slept still and cold with his arm beneath his head. It is like an unbelievable bad dream that the leader is dead at the moment of victory.

Whitman, in order to ensure the effect of tragedy of Lincoln's death in the perspective of the nation's crisis, brings up the sustained metaphor of the ship and its voyages, and executes the story allegorically. He (Whitman) portrays the nation as the ship, and the Civil War as the perilous voyage. The end of the War is depicted as the end of the journey. The people standing on the shore with flags and ribboned wreaths are the eager and exultant people of the country who feel safe and victorious. Death, in the poem comes with a dramatic suddenness. When everybody is agog with positive expectations, the Captain falls dead on the ship, which is only a few yard away from the shore. Thus all the victory celebrations and welcome ovations get immediately transformed into a muted and heart rendering funeral of the dead leader. The loneliness, the pathetic cry of disbelief and the passionate refusal to accept Lincoln's death is an experience, which Whitman shared with millions of countrymen. And his success lies in rendering this elegiac feeling in a well- reticulated accent of lyricism.

