



## **walt whitman'a elegy to a president slain**

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Walt Whitman's status as poetic innovator and father to American verse is undisputed today; but, while alive, he enjoyed little public acclaim, only minor distribution—and much notoriety. Public and chattering classes aside, however, Whitman was critically acclaimed from his début; Ralph Waldo Emerson, so-called "father of American literature", wrote to the poet, upon receipt of Leaves of Grass, proclaiming "I greet you at the beginning of a great career", and later described Whitman's poetry as "a remarkable mixture of the Bhagvat Ghita and the New York Herald".

Lauded and republished around the world—especially so in England—Whitman never saw a broad appeal or readership at home, the main subject of—and intended audience for—the majority of his poetry—albeit in a single poem of which, ironically, the poet, himself, thought very little: "O Captain! My Captain!" \_

O Captain! my Captain! our fearful trip is done;  
The ship has weathered every rack, the prize we sought is won;  
The port is near, the bells I hear, the people all exulting,  
While follow eyes the steady keel, the vessel grim and daring.  
But O heart! heart! heart!  
O the bleeding drops of red!  
Where on the deck my Captain lies,  
Fallen cold and dead.

With layout set deliberately to resemble a ship approaching a destination, "O Captain! My Captain!" is a masterful but rare example of rhymed, rhythmically regular verse by a poet renowned for innovative form and structure. There's no doubt the use of rhyme was intentional; written as immediate response to the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, in 1865, it served to create a fittingly somber, exalted effect; a bittersweet elegy of commiseration and commemoration.

The poem was published to immediate acclaim in the New York City Saturday Press, and was widely anthologized during Whitman's lifetime. He would be asked to recite the poem in public lectures and readings so often that he's quoted as saying "I'm almost sorry I ever wrote [it]," although it had "certain emotional immediate reasons for being".

Envisioning Lincoln as archangel captain, the poet is said to have dreamed, the night before that president's murder, of a ship entering harbor under full sail (an image dominant throughout), and the poem was deliberately typeset to appear on page as a vessel approaching its port of call.

It could be argued that, in Lincoln, Whitman saw the living embodiment of his poetic ideals: uniter of the nation, kindred opponent of slavery, harbinger of a golden future—a future of

universal freedom and brotherhood, which the poet imagined as American destiny and tangible reality:

I am of old and young, of the foolish as much as the wise,  
Regardless of others, ever regardful of others,  
Maternal as well as paternal, a child as well as a man,  
Stuff'd with the stuff that is coarse and stuff'd with the stuff that is fine,  
One of the Nation of many nations, the smallest the same and the largest the same

-from "Song of Myself"

Poet Sri Chinmoy succinctly describes Walt Whitman's poetic and national vision as interchangeable:

"When the wind and storm of today bring in the golden Tomorrow, Whitman will shine forth, haloed in a new glory on the new horizon. His poems and his nation's consciousness are inseparable."

Lincoln's death was a violent blow to Whitman's American vision and confident proclamation. Already traumatized by the division of the just ended Civil War, "O Captain!" was written at a time of great despondency and personal soul-searching.

The poem saw its first official publication as an addition to Whitman's "Drum-Taps Civil War" poems, one of a grouping of poems under the title When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd and Other Pieces—name also to a more critically significant piece dedicated to Lincoln, preferred, by the poet, to the more conventional, populist "O Captain!"

Ever the perfectionist, Whitman revised "O Captain!" in 1866 and, then again, in 1871, a trademark practice of continual revision and never-ending improvement. His life work, Leaves of Grass, was recurrently revised from first publication in 1855 until 1892—the year of his death; the name for the final, definitive version, which included "O Captain!", is thus 'the Deathbed edition'.

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