

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

O Captain! My Captain!

WALT WHITMAN

In the days after Lincoln's assassination, the nation, already war-torn and weary, grieved for its fallen hero. The poet Walt Whitman (1819–92) had lived in Washington, DC during the Civil War, and was a great admirer of Lincoln. He had been present at Lincoln's second inauguration just weeks before the assassination, after which he noted that the president "look'd very much worn and tired," but still showed "all the old goodness, tenderness, sadness, and canny shrewdness, underneath the furrows." Devastated by Lincoln's death, Whitman wrote one of his most famous poems—and the only one with rhyming meter. "O Captain! My Captain!" was first published in New York's Saturday Press in November of 1865.

Page | 1

Why does Whitman address Lincoln as "my Captain"? What is the "ship," and what "prize" has it won? How does Whitman render the loss of Lincoln as a loss personal to the speaker of the poem? How does he render the loss of Lincoln as a national loss? Can one, at the same time, feel joy for great victory and sadness at great loss? How does the poet navigate this emotional terrain? Does the rhyming meter add to (or detract from) the poem's meaning and impact?

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.

O Captain! my Captain! rise up and hear the bells;
Rise up—for you the flag is flung—for you the bugle trills,
For you bouquets and ribboned wreaths—for you the shores a-crowding,
For you they call, the swaying mass, their eager faces turning;
Here Captain! dear father!
This arm beneath your head!
It is some dream that on the deck,

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

You've fallen cold and dead.

My Captain does not answer, his lips are pale and still;
My father does not feel my arm, he has no pulse nor will;
The ship is anchored safe and sound, its voyage closed and done;
From fearful trip the victor ship comes in with object won;
Exult O shores, and ring O bells!
But I, with mournful tread,
Walk the deck my Captain lies,
Fallen cold and dead.

Page | 2