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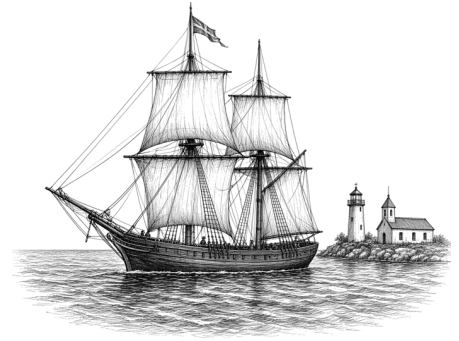
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O Captain! My Captain!

by Walt Whitman

Grades 6–9 · Common Core RL.7.4, RL.7.2, RL.7.5

Whitman wrote the poem in 1865, after President Lincoln was assassinated at the end of the Civil War. It is an extended metaphor: the captain is Lincoln, the ship is the United States, and the “fearful trip” is the war. Unusually for Whitman, it uses regular rhyme, meter and a refrain.



THE POEM

O Captain! my Captain! our fearful trip is done,
The ship has weather'd 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;
5 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;
10 Rise up—for you the flag is flung—for you the bugle trills,
For you bouquets and ribbon'd 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!
15 It is some dream that on the deck,
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 anchor'd safe and sound, its voyage closed and done,
20 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.

VOCABULARY

rack — violent strain or storm damage**exulting** — rejoicing, celebrating**keel** — the main beam along the bottom of a ship**trills** — plays with a quick, shaking sound**swaying** — moving back and forth**victor** — winner**mournful** — full of sadness

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Who is the captain, what is the ship, and what is the “fearful trip”?

2. Why is the crowd on shore celebrating while the speaker is grieving?

3. What words or phrases repeat across the three stanzas? What effect does the repetition have?

4. How does the speaker’s way of addressing the captain change from stanza to stanza?

5. Why might Whitman have chosen a ship and a voyage to describe this moment in history?

WRITING PROMPT

Write a short elegy (12–16 lines) for a person, pet or place you have lost, using one extended metaphor all the way through.

O Captain! My Captain! — Answer Key

1. The captain is Abraham Lincoln, the ship is the nation, and the fearful trip is the Civil War.
2. The war is won (“the prize we sought is won”), so the people cheer, but the speaker sees the captain lying “fallen cold and dead.”
3. “fallen cold and dead,” “O Captain! my Captain!” and the bells and bleeding drops. The repetition creates a mournful, drumbeat-like rhythm and emphasizes the shock of the death.
4. He moves from calling to him, to pleading with him to “rise up,” to accepting that “My Captain does not answer,” and finally walks the deck “with mournful tread.”
5. Accept supported answers: a ship captain guides everyone through danger, the nation was a “ship of state,” and the image makes the loss feel personal and dramatic.

Read the full poem online: poetrycatalog.com/o-captain-my-captain-walt-whitman/