

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Class: \_\_\_\_\_

# O Captain! My Captain!

By Walt Whitman  
1865

*From 1861-1865, the United States was involved in a civil war that claimed the lives of an estimated 620,000 people. Abraham Lincoln (1809-1865) served as president through most of the American Civil War, but was assassinated by John Wilkes Booth just weeks before the war was officially declared over. American poet Walt Whitman lived in Washington, D.C. during the war, and worked as a government clerk and a war correspondent. He also served as a volunteer nurse, caring for the thousands of wounded soldiers who filled the nearby military hospitals. Walt Whitman wrote "O Captain, My Captain!" after reflecting on the American experience in the Civil War. As you read, take notes on how the symbolism in the poem connects to the events of the American Civil War.*

[1] O Captain! my Captain! our fearful trip is done,  
The ship has weather'd<sup>1</sup> every rack, the prize we  
sought<sup>2</sup> is won,  
The port is near, the bells I hear, the people all  
exulting,  
While follow eyes the steady keel,<sup>3</sup> the vessel<sup>4</sup>  
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,<sup>5</sup>

For you bouquets and ribbon'd wreaths — for you the shores a-crowding,  
For you they call, the swaying mass, their eager<sup>6</sup> 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.



*"Lincoln Chicago Arch" by Unknown is in the public domain.*

1. an archaic way of saying "weathered," which means "to survive" an event
2. "sought" is a past participle of the word "seek"
3. a part of underside of a boat
4. a term for a large boat
5. the repeating of a high-pitched sound from the instrument
6. **Eager (adjective):** very interested, anxious, or enthusiastic (to do or have something)

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<sup>7</sup> tread,<sup>8</sup>  
    Walk the deck my Captain lies,  
        Fallen cold and dead.

*"O Captain! My Captain!" by Walt Whitman (1865) is in the public domain.*

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7. **Mournful** (*adjective*): full of sorrow, sadness, regret, or grief  
8. **Tread** (*verb*): to walk or step

## Text-Dependent Questions

**Directions:** For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. What is the central idea of this poem?
  - A. A victory has been achieved but the leader was lost in the process.
  - B. The crew on a ship mutinied against their captain, and he has died.
  - C. The captain of a ship died from the cold, causing the crew to lose hope.
  - D. A great crowd is cheering for the crew of a ship as they return from a successful journey.
  
2. How does the tone change throughout the poem?
  - A. The tone begins as depressed but turns much more upbeat when the sailor sees the crowds waiting for the ship on the shore.
  - B. The tone begins as celebratory and stays that way even after the sailor realizes the captain has died because, despite his death, a great victory has been won.
  - C. The tone begins as depressed and stays that way throughout the poem, for the captain dies without completing the journey.
  - D. The tone begins as celebratory, then changes to shock and disbelief, and ends on a depressed note.
  
3. PART A: What does the word “exulting” most closely mean as it is used in line 3?
  - A. loudly playing music
  - B. showing happiness and excitement
  - C. shouting out of fear
  - D. sailing along the coast
  
4. PART B: What detail from the text best supports your answer to Part A?
  - A. “our fearful trip is done” (Line 1)
  - B. “the port is near” (Line 3)
  - C. “While follow eyes the steady keel, the vessel grim and daring” (Line 4)
  - D. “For you bouquets and ribbon’d wreaths — for you the shores a-crowding” (Line 11)
  
5. What purpose does the repetition of the phrase “fallen cold and dead” serve in this poem?

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6. How does the rhyming in this poem create emphasis on certain words? How does the emphasis on those words, in turn, emphasize certain themes? Cite evidence from the text to support your answer.

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7. Considering the events occurring at the time this poem was written, how does the author use the captain, the ship, and the journey as symbols to develop the theme of the poem? Use specific evidence from the text to support your answer.

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## Discussion Questions

**Directions:** *Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.*

1. Why do you think Whitman chose to use the symbol of a captain, a boat, and a journey at sea as symbols in this poem? What other symbols could he have used?
2. Do you think all people felt the same way as the sailor at the end of the Civil War? Why might some people have felt differently?
3. In the context of this poem, how are we changed by war? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.
4. Do you think the captain was a hero? In the context of this poem, what makes a hero? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.
5. In the context of this poem, how has America changed over time? In what ways do you think the country was different before the Civil War than it was after the Civil War? In what ways is America different or the same now? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.