

Walt Whitman: O Captain! My Captain!

On the evening of April 14, 1865, President Abraham Lincoln went to Ford's Theater in Washington, D.C., to see a performance of the comedy "Our American Cousin." Five days prior, Confederate General Robert E. Lee had surrendered at Appomattox Court House in Virginia, effectively bringing the grueling and deadly Civil War to an end.

Former slaves were now free, the Union remained intact, our great nation survived, and after enduring years of loss and devastation, Americans looked toward a hopeful future.

But on the night of April 14, tragedy struck again.

Not everyone was happy that the Union emerged victorious in the Civil War, including actor and Confederate sympathizer John Wilkes Booth. In an attempt to save the Confederacy, Booth and a group of co-conspirators hatched a plan to assassinate Lincoln, Vice President Andrew Johnson, and Secretary of State William H. Seward (after a failed kidnapping attempt targeting Lincoln).

During the show, Lincoln was in a cheerful mood. He laughed during the performance while seated in a private box with his wife, Mary Todd Lincoln, an army officer, Henry Rathbone, and Rathbone's fiancé, Clara Harris.

As the show continued, Booth snuck into Lincoln's box at 10:15 p.m. and shot the president of the United States in the back of his head with a .44-caliber single-shot derringer pistol. Rathbone rushed toward the criminal Booth, who then stabbed the young army officer in the shoulder. Booth then jumped from the box to the stage and yelled out, "Sic semper tyrannis!" (The Virginia state motto that translates to "Thus ever to tyrants!")

Lincoln was carried across the street to a boardinghouse. The surgeon general arrived to help, but determined that Lincoln would not survive. The next morning at 7:22 a.m., President Lincoln died, surrounded by his wife and several of his loved ones.

Americans across the country mourned the death of a heroic leader who bravely led the United States through the devastating Civil War. As the train carrying Lincoln to his final resting place in Illinois made its nearly two-week journey north, tens of thousands of Americans stood beside the railroad tracks to pay their respects.¹



This devastating tragedy inspired the poet Walt Whitman to write numerous poems commemorating Lincoln's life, legacy, and impact on America. Like Lincoln, Whitman came from humble beginnings.²

Born in 1819 on Long Island, New York, the young Whitman was taken out of school to help support the family. He held numerous jobs as an office boy, a printing apprentice for a local newspaper, and later, a teacher, a printer, a fiction writer, a poet, an editor, and a journalist, as well as others.

Whitman's younger brother, George, joined the Union Army in 1861. The following year, George was injured, and Walt made the journey to Virginia to care for him.³ Though his brother recovered, this period illuminated a calling in Whitman. He knew he wanted to provide care and comfort to wounded soldiers.

Whitman moved to Washington D.C., where he got a job as a clerk. In his free time, Whitman visited and cared for wounded soldiers at military hospitals.⁴ While living in Washington, Whitman found himself at the center of the fight to save the Union from crumbling. He had developed an interest in Lincoln's leadership as he led the nation through this crisis, and even saw the president around D.C. several times between 1863 and 1865 – though the two never formally met.⁵

Whitman recognized the immense burden that Lincoln carried to save the Union. Like Whitman answered his call to help wounded soldiers, Lincoln answered his call to lead America through the grueling Civil War.

When Lincoln was suddenly assassinated, Whitman spent the summer writing various poems to commemorate his life. Published in the Saturday Press on November 4, 1865, "O Captain! My Captain!" became one of Whitman's most famous and enduring poems. Broken into three stanzas – a fancy word that essentially means sections in poems – Whitman decided to use rhyming in this poem.⁶ Unlike his fellow poets of the time, Whitman strayed from using regular meter and rhyming in his work.⁷

Let's read the poem and dive into what it means. We'll begin with the first stanza.

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,
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
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,
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.⁸

On its surface, the poem is an elegy for the captain of the speaker's ship. Whitman used the extended metaphor of a ship to represent the exhausted United States after the Civil War, the "prize" to represent the preservation of the union, and the captain to represent Abraham Lincoln.

Take a look at the first stanza. The speaker describes a ship returning back to port after enduring hardship and emerging victorious. Yet the captain did not survive. In the second stanza, the speaker describes the praise and celebration waiting for the captain upon his return and begs the captain to arise. The speaker is convinced that the captain's death cannot be real and is just a bad dream. In the third stanza, reality sets in for the speaker and he is torn between mourning the death of his captain and celebrating the victory of the voyage.⁹

Think about how this parallels America at the time of Lincoln's death. The Union had weathered a devastating conflict and won the Civil War. While there was much to celebrate, there was also much to mourn. Not only had Lincoln tragically died, but many Americans lost loved ones in the Civil War. "O Captain! My Captain!" captures these conflicting feelings of sadness and joy, despair and relief, that many Americans were experiencing at the time.

The poem's popularity clearly struck a chord within the hearts of the American people. While it honored the contributions of Lincoln, it also expressed the big and confusing emotions that were affecting Americans after the Civil War ended. The next time that you feel happy and sad, or excited and angry, take a moment to look at Whitman's poem, and take comfort in knowing that others throughout history, who came long before you, felt that way too.

Footnotes

1. <https://www.history.com/topics/american-civil-war/abraham-lincoln-assassination>
2. <https://www.loc.gov/item/today-in-history/february-09/>
3. <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/whitmans-life/>
4. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/walt-whitman>
5. <https://archive.nytimes.com/opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/05/04/how-whitman-remembered-lincoln/>
6. [https://pressbooks.pub/poetrypoetics/chapter/o-captain-my-captain/#:~:text=%E2%80%9CO%27Captain!,Taps%20\(1865%2D1866\)](https://pressbooks.pub/poetrypoetics/chapter/o-captain-my-captain/#:~:text=%E2%80%9CO%27Captain!,Taps%20(1865%2D1866))
7. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/walt-whitman>
8. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45474/o-captain-my-captain>
9. <https://www.loc.gov/item/today-in-history/february-09/>

Additional Resources

- <https://www.history.com/topics/american-civil-war/abraham-lincoln-assassination>
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