

Degree 1 English Composition (mb)

Critical appreciation of the poem O Captain! My Captain!

The poem *O! Captain My Captain!* has been categorised in form of elegy which is written by an outstanding representative democratic poet of America. The poem is written on the death of the former president of America Abraham Lincoln. An elegy is a mournful song, composed in the tone of sorrow and melancholy. The subject matter of an elegy is sombre and serious, often deals with the death and suffering of the people. The atmosphere of the poem is also very dark and gloomy. Walt Whitman occupies a great place in the field of American poetry. He has basically written his poems in free verse. His attitude and feelings are democratic which bring the feeling of oneness with the perfect harmony among various type of culture and civilisation. As he said, “our body cannot live without democracy, our heart cannot live without love and our soul cannot live without religion”. Whitman was greatly influenced by the sacred scriptures of the India. As he followed the teachings of Lord Buddha and the scriptures of Hinduism.

The poem *O! Captain My Captain!* Describes the selfless deeds and hardship of the captain Abraham Lincoln who is no more but his bravery, adventure, and endless will cannot be erased from the memory of the people of the universe, and everyone is lamenting and shedding his or her tears on the death of the great personality of America. Not only human beings are sad but the nature is also lamenting for the great soul. The setting of the poem is pastoral which describes the gloomy mood of nature.

In the first stanza, the speaker expresses his relief that the ship has reached its home port at last and describes hearing people cheering. Despite the celebration on land and successful voyage, the speaker reveals that his captain's dead body is lying on the deck. In the second stanza, the speaker implores the captain to rise up and hears the bell, wishing the dead man could witness the elation. Every one adored the captain, and the speaker admits that his death feels like a horrible and haunted dream. In the final stanza, the speaker juxtaposes his feelings of mourning and pride.

Whitman wrote this poem after president Abraham Lincoln was assassinated. It is an extended metaphor intended to moralize Lincoln's life and work. The captain represents the assassinated president, the ship represents the war-weathered nation following

the Civil War, the prize won represents the salvaged union. The speaker of the poem torn between relief and despair, captures America's confusion at the end of the Civil War. It was a time of many conflicting sentiments, and Whitman immortalises this sense of uncertainty in *O! Captain My Captain!*

The particular poem explores the variation on the theme; the self vs the other. The speaker struggles with balancing his personal feelings of loss with celebratory mood resulting from the successful voyage. In Whitman's poem the speaker believes that he should be part of the other group, celebrating the return to safety. However, his inner thoughts set him apart from the crowd as he tries to reconcile his emotional reaction to the captain's death.

O! Captain My Captain! is the only poem of Whitman that has regular meter and rhyme scheme. He was called as the father of free verse, Whitman tended to write his poems without following any kind of ordered poetic form. However, *O! Captain My Captain!* is organised into three eight lines stanzas, each with an AABBCDED rhyme scheme. Each stanza closes with the words fallen cold and dead, and the first four lines of each stanza are longer than the last four lines. Because this poem is an elegy to the

dead, the more traditional format adds to its solemnity. Additionally, the regular meter is reminiscent of a soldier marching across the battlefield, which is fitting for a poem that commemorates the end of the Civil War.

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