

“O Captain, My Captain” Exemplar Response

“O Captain! My Captain!” refers to a terrible event in American history: the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln. The poet, Walt Whitman, points out that the murder of the president happened right when the country should have been able to celebrate and rejoice over the ending of the Civil War and the country being kept whole.

“O Captain! My Captain!” is written as if a sailor on a ship is talking about spotting the home port and seeing all the people there ready to celebrate the ship’s homecoming and to honor the captain who brought the ship and crew safely back. The people are described as triumphantly awaiting the ship’s return. It says in the first verse, “The ship has weathered every rack, the prize we sought is won” (line 2). Then in the second verse, the sailor says to his captain, “Rise up—for you the flag is flung—for you the bugle trills” (line 10). But the captain can’t rise up. He is on the deck “fallen cold and dead.” In fact, Whitman repeats that line, “fallen cold and dead,” at the end of each verse of this poem, three times. All three stanzas begin with triumph and end in despair.

There is something terrible about only the one sailor on the boat realizing that the Captain is dead and not able to enjoy the victory. It ruins the joy of coming home safely for the sailor, and you get the sense that as soon as the people on shore find out their captain is dead, they are going to grieve as much as him. The joy and then sorrow that the narrator feels in the poem must have been similar to the public’s feelings when Lincoln was killed. Everyone wanted to celebrate that the terrible war was over and that the North had won, but instead, people despaired because the President, who had made it happen, was killed senselessly after the close of the war.

Note: This exemplar response was adapted from materials created by Student Achievement Partners.