O Captain! My Captain!

Introduction. This well-known elegy O Captain! My Captain! Is a kind of public tribute to the dear departed leader of the Nation – Abraham Lincoln. At the same time, it depicts the tragedy which the poet felt as personal loss. The poet describes the emotion of rejoicing as well as that of grief. It is apt to quote G. Dutton who said: “Some of the best and simplest of Whitman’s poems are concerned with the interplay between love and death”.

Summary. Abraham Lincoln, the sixteenth President of the United States of America, was kind, soft-hearted and courageous. He was a staunch propagator of democratic ideals. He could not bear to see the pitiable plight of negro slavery in the southern states of the country. His aim was to do away with slavery. The disparity began with the northern and southern states. There was disharmony and it reached the verge of disintegration when Lincoln saved the Nation. He emerged a successful and dynamic leader of the people in the Civil War. It was after his tragic assassination in a theatre that Whitman wrote this elegy in 1865.

O Captain! My Captain! Our fearful trip is done,

The ship has weather’d every rack, the prize we sought is won.

These two lines from Whitman’s Elegy O Captain! My Captain! Show the feelings of the poet towards the Captain. He uses metaphors to elucidate his point. ‘The ship’ is the ‘Nation’. The fearful trip refers to the obstacles faced by the ship. It refers to the negro slavery and disharmony which would have disunited the entire nation. It refers to the Civil War waged, through which the leader Lincoln took his country to safety. The Captain with his excellent leadership belongs to the Entire Nation. But he is closer to the poet’s heart so. He calls him ‘My Captain’. The Captain was kind, brave, and able. Whitman liked him for what he was. He rightly compares Lincoln to a Captain. He helped his people to overcome the hurdles and emerge victorious. The people are happy that the voyage is completed successfully and peace is won. The object they fought for is won.

Here Captain: dear father:

This arm beneath your head:

It is some dream that on the deck,

You’ve fallen cold and dead

These lines show the profound attachment which the poet felt towards the Captain. The poet compares the President to the Captain. The Nation is the ship. The ship on its journey overcomes many hurdles. The Nation similarly overcomes obstacles of disunity and disintegration under the guidance of Lincoln. The people are overjoyed at the victory. They are eagerly awaiting the Captain’s return to honor him. But in vain: the Captain undertook the pains in bringing success but he did not live to share the fruits of his own efforts. He was shot dead by Booth. His death was a tragic blow to the Nation. It was a personal loss to the poet. He refers to him as ‘dear father’. Lincoln was like a father to the Nation. His responsibility was to look after his people with love and care, as a parent would do. The poet tries to support the Captain’s head with his arm. It’s of no use. The poet does not want to believe that the Captain is dead. He wants to think that the Captain is just sleeping and dreaming. He wants to think its a dream and the captain would get up. But everything is in vain. Reality has got to be faced. The Captain is lying cold and dead, the poet mourns the death of the Captain whom he calls ‘dear father’.

Exult O shores, and ring O bells:

But I with mournful tread,

Walk the deck my Captain lies,

Fallen cold and dead,

The people are rejoicing at the fact that the ship has returned home victorious, under the apt guidance of its Captain. He pleads that the bells should also ring heralding the victory of the ship’s return. The ship had overcome all obstacles with the help of its able captain. Everyone would be happy except the poet, as he knows that the captain is lying dead on the deck.

The Captain is Abraham Lincoln. He steered his Nation the ship from chaos to peaceful harmony and unity. He saw the civil war come to a victorious end. The people were happy. They wanted to honor him. But fate snatched Lincoln away from them. He was shot dead by Booth. The poet pictures the agony of that loss, in metaphorical language, which is appealing.

ANALYSIS AND CRITICAL APPRECIATION

The poem O Captain! My Captain! Is an elegy on the death of the captain. The Captain of the ship with his able captaincy takes the ship to safety, overcoming all hazards.

The Nation is metaphorically referred to as the ship. The President of the Nation is the Captain. The disharmony between the southern and the northern states, the ensuing disunity and negro slavery were the main obstacles which the Nation had to face. The Nation under the able guidance of the President overcame all those hazards. Lincoln took his country to safety. He emerged a successful leader through the Civil War, and the country got a firm footing to prosperity. He never bothered about himself. His life was at stake, but he never cared. He did not survive to see the fruits of his labor. He was shot dead by Booth. The whole Nation was shocked beyond words at that tragic loss.

The poet in Whitman tried to find some voice, to be able to give vent to the soul-stirring emotions which was the true feelings of any person then. The poet presents the whole picture of Lincoln’s success and death in the form of a voyage of a ship.

The first two lines show that the ship has successfully overcome all hazards, and has emerged victorious, under the able guidance of the Captain

The people are overjoyed. They are awaiting with eager looks for the Captain’s return to honor him. They want to show their respect to him. But also, they do not know that the Captain is no more. The poet hence shows the grief in saying:

But O Heart! Heart! Heart!

O the bleeding drops of red;

Where on the deck my Captain lies

Fallen cold and dead

The Captain belongs to the entire ship. But the ‘Captain’ becomes ‘My Captain’ to the poet. Lincoln was admired a lot by his people. He was the poet’s idol also. The death of the Darling of the Masses becomes a personal loss to the poet. The captain lying dead on the deck is deaf to the exultation of the people on the shores. The heart of the poet is full of grief. It is too full to contain the sorrow of the death of the Captain. The line

‘O the bleeding drops of red’

May also be referring to the blood oozing out as soon as Lincoln was shot dead. The poet pleads to the Captain to rise, to awake, and hear the bells ringing with merriment. The bugles making shrill sounds, were as though heralding the arrival of the Captain. People were thronging with bouquets and wreaths to present to their hero – their leader – their Captain.

The poet then calls the Captain ‘My Father’. It brings the Captain nearer to the heart. The leader of any Nation is like a parent whose main duty is to see to the welfare of his children. He would be duty bound to see to the children with love and care. At any cost, he would see his children live happily. Lincoln like a father risked his own life in seeing to the welfare of his country and people.

The poet does not like to believe that the Captain is dead. He wants to think that the Captain is asleep, dreaming. He wants to think that everything is a dream. But the reality has got to be faced. He realizes that the Captain does not feel his arm: his lips are pale, and still. He is dead, that’s the naked truth.

The ship after its terrific voyage overcoming all obstacles had reached its destination the harbor. But the Captain who steered it through the hurdles to victory and safety was no more.

The whole scene turns grim and gloomy. The bells would start ringing slowly announcing the Captain’s death. The wreaths would be laid on the Captain’s body as a mark of respect. The flags would fly half-mast in honor of the leader. The people with eager, happy looks would wear sullen melancholy looks at the shocking news of the death of the Captain.

The poet says that Lincoln being an able leader saved the Country from disintegration. The people rejoiced the victory. They wanted to honor the man whom they cherished and admired. But that man – their hero was killed in cold blood. To the nation, it’s a tragic loss. To the poet, it is a personal loss. He respected and admired the leader. He walks dolefully on the deck where the Captain is lying dead.

His words are poignant with feelings of joy and sorrow. The feelings of joy are overshadowed by the feelings of sorrow which were seething within him. The poem also has metrical regularity which is appealing to the ears. The treatment of the subject appeals to the heart.