

O Captain America!

My Captain America!

In *Captain America: Civil War*, the melee between opposing factions of the Avengers is reminiscent of the type American Civil War battle echoed in the Walt Whitman poem, “O Captain! My Captain!” A typical battle during the Civil War began with two armies facing one another in straight lines and commenced, in a haze of gun smoke, as soldiers charged at their opponents, wielding swords, revolvers, or muskets with bayonets.



In *Captain America: Civil War*, Captain America and Iron Man each command an “army” of enhanced individuals who go to war against one another. Like soldiers in the Civil War, each army of Avengers begins the battle by standing in a straight line, facing their opposition. At their

leader's signal, the armies charge at one another, using their own superhuman abilities as weapons.



Between the comics and the movie franchise, the narrative of *Captain America: Civil War* runs parallel to the historic events beginning with the onset of the American Civil War and leading up to Abraham Lincoln's assassination. Notably, Captain America (alias Steve Rogers) shares contextual similarities with former president, Abraham Lincoln. To analyze these similarities, we can use the poem, "O Captain! My Captain!" as a framework. Composed by Walt Whitman in 1865, the most widely accepted reading of "O Captain! My Captain!" treats its narrative elements as an extended metaphor for Lincoln's assassination. The "captain" in the poem is meant to represent Lincoln, while the "ship" that's "anchor'd safe and sound, its voyage closed and done" represents United States after the Civil War. By replacing Lincoln with Captain America, an enhanced individual who occupies his time by fighting crime in a ballistic nylon suit, we can map the narrative of "O Captain! My Captain!" to *Captain America: Civil War* to explore the similarities between Captain America's storyline and Abraham Lincoln's biography.

The first mapping we can do requires us to replace the American Civil War with the fictional civil war described in *Captain America: Civil War*. Apart from the fact that both are civil wars – meaning a war between citizens from the same country of origin – these wars are

alike in that they both occur as the result of genuine political and ideological opposition. Described in “O Captain! My Captain!” as a “fearful trip,” the American Civil War arose because the southern United States wished to extricate itself from federal policies that disrupted their agricultural way of life, the most notable of these policies being the proposed abolition of slavery. Similarly, in *Captain America: Civil War*, the Avengers are divided over whether to sign the Sokovian Accords, a document proposed by the U.S. federal government that would restrict the Avengers’ autonomy and require that they operate only at the request of a United Nations panel. Tony Stark, another member of the Avengers, agrees with the government that the Accords are valuable, and votes for signing them. He states, “We [the Avengers] need to be put in check.” Much like the American South believed that succeeding from the United States and continuing the practice of slavery was the correct course of action, Stark genuinely believes that signing the Accords is the right decision, citing the death of Charles Spencer in his argument:

Oh that’s Charles Spencer, by the way. He’s a great kid. Computer engineering degree, 3.6 GPA had a floor-level gig at Intel planned for the fall, but first he wanted to put a few miles on his soul before he parked it behind a desk. See the world. Maybe be of service. Charlie didn’t want to go to Vegas or Fort Lauderdale, which is what I would do. He didn’t go to Paris or Amsterdam, which sounds fun. He decided to spend his summer building sustainable housing for the poor. Guess where. Sokovia. He wanted to make a difference, I suppose. We’ll never know because we dropped a building on him.

Steve Rogers (Captain America), disagrees with Stark. He doesn’t believe that signing the Accords will correct the Avengers’ accidental destruction of property and human life. For example, Rogers says to Stark, “Tony, when someone dies on your watch you don’t give up [...] We are [giving up] if we’re not taking responsibility for our actions. This document just shifts the blame.” Rogers’ ideological disagreement with Tony is similar to the American North’s disagreement with the South. The North believed that disbanding the union of the United States wouldn’t solve the deeper issues that disrupted relations between the American North and South. To further the similarity, the North also refused to accept the Constitution of the Confederate States of America, a government document like the Sokovian Accords.

To expand on this mapping, both the civil war described in “O Captain! My Captain!” and the civil war described in *Captain America: Civil War* revolve around preserving a union. Abraham Lincoln chose to enter into the U.S. Civil War in order to preserve the union of the United States. This national union is alluded to in “O Captain! My Captain!”:

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 ribbon’d wreaths—for you the shores a-crowding
For you they call, the swaying mass, their eager faces turning

Here, the “flag” and “bugle” described in the poem suggest that, by winning the Civil War, Lincoln and the American North have preserved the union of the United States. In *Captain America: Civil War*, Steve Rogers is also concerned with preserving a union, specifically the union of the Avengers. Furthermore, much like Lincoln, Captain America is at one point accused of making decisions that seek to destroy this union, rather than preserve it. For example, today much of the American South refers to the Civil War as “The War of Northern Aggression,” because the southern states believed that Lincoln’s choice to engage in the Civil War would serve to further partition the country. Similarly, Captain America is also accused of trying to destroy the union of the Avengers. For instance, before formally signing the Sokovian Accords, Natasha Romanoff (Black Widow) says to Rogers, “Staying together is more important than how we [the Avengers] stay together.” Again, as both opposing factions of the Avengers prepare to do battle against one another, Stark exclaims to Rogers, “I’m trying to keep you from tearing the Avengers apart” to which Rogers replies, “You did that when you signed.” In the case of both the American Civil War and the civil war among the Avengers, initially it appears that both Lincoln and Captain America seek to destroy the union. However, upon the close of each war, it becomes apparent that these characters were instrumental in preserving this union. For Lincoln, the United States remained a sovereign nation, and for Rogers the Avengers remained a team.

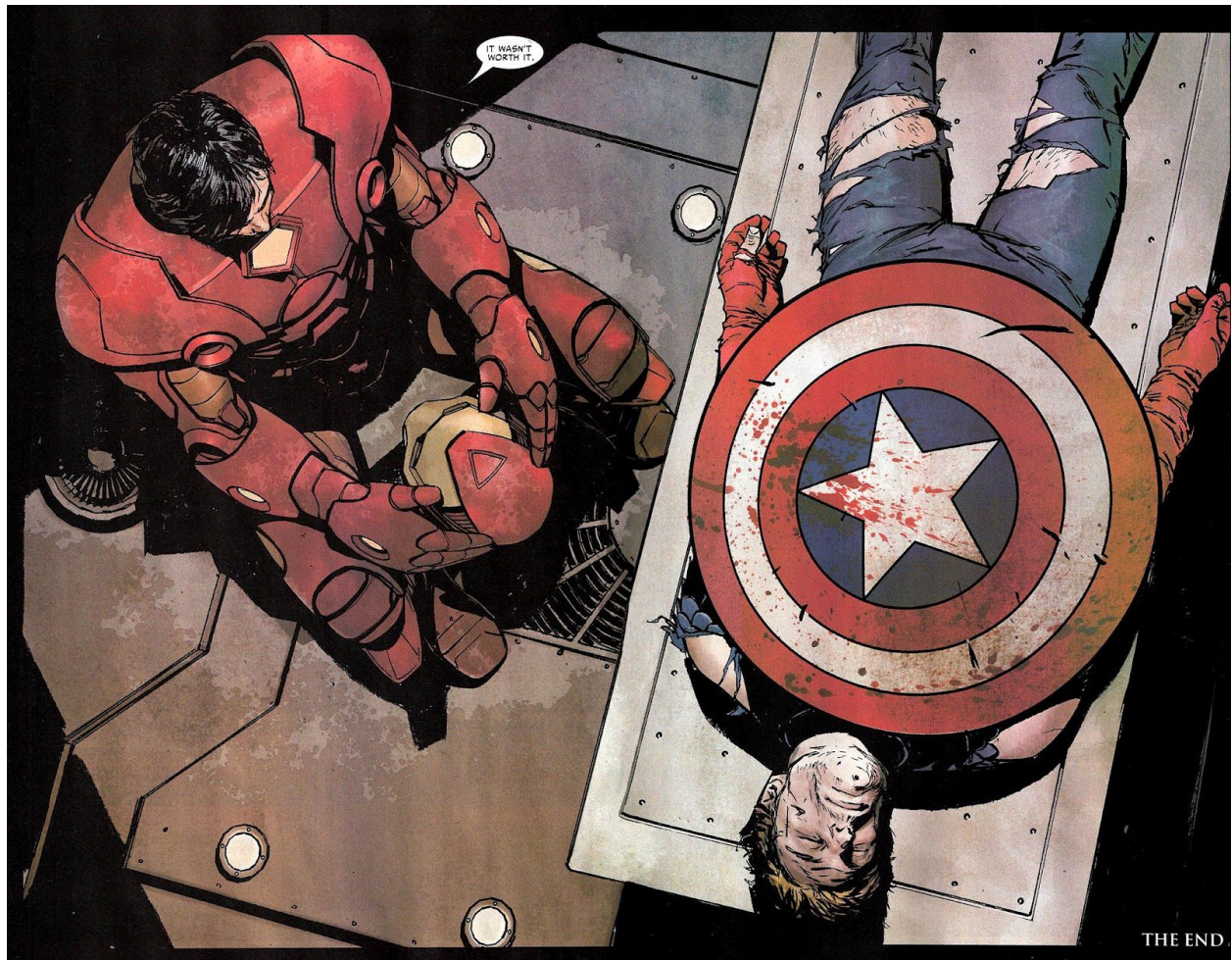
As a second mapping, we can compare Captain America to Lincoln directly. The plot of *Captain America: Civil War* and Lincoln’s biography are explicitly similar, in that both Rogers and Lincoln are assassinated after the end of their civil war. In “O Captain! My Captain!”

Whitman vividly depicts Lincoln's violent post-war assassination: "O the bleeding drops of red/Where on the deck my Captain lies/Fallen cold and dead." Although the assassination is omitted from the movie version, Captain America's assassination takes place in the comic series. As the web article "Does Captain America Die In Civil War?" describes, "After losing the war against the pro-registration side of the Marvel Universe, Captain America surrendered and was set to stand trial for his 'crimes' against the country in leading a group of heroes to fill out the anti-registration side of things. As Steve was led to the courthouse, shots rang out and his lifeless body fell to the ground."



These assassinations are similar both in their timing and their level of violence. Both Lincoln and Rogers' assassinations occur in a time of relative peacefulness. For Lincoln, this peace occurs throughout the U.S. and for Rogers it occurs among the Avengers. To further the similarity, both Lincoln and Rogers are assassinated by a shooter and after their death, they're both mourned. In the final stanza of "O Captain! My Captain!" Whitman describes, "Exult O shores, and ring O bells!/But I with mournful tread/Walk the deck my Captain lies/Fallen cold and dead." The

language used here is reminiscent of a frame from the Captain America comic, where Iron Man sits solemnly beside the body of the late Captain America, speaking the words “It wasn’t worth it.”



Does it seem odd that a comic book superhero has so much in common with the sixteenth president of the United States? Yes. But, ultimately, we shouldn’t be surprised by these similarities. Since the first Superman comic came out in 1938, superheroes have been explicitly and implicitly tied to history, oftentimes serving as symbols of American nationalism. For example, the article “Man and Superman: how the Man of Steel became myth,” describes Superman’s role in World War II America: “By D-Day, his name adorned vehicles across the Allied war effort, while actors playing the character could be heard on US radio soliciting for blood drives and war bonds. Soldiers read Superman comics at the Normandy landings, as their hero gamely battled ‘Japanazis’ and ‘Japoteurs’ in four-color adventures of his own.” Whether

writing Captain America as Abraham Lincoln was a conscious or unconscious choice, it's apparent that the narrative of *Captain America: Civil War* can stand in for the historical events of the American Civil War, when it's examined in the context of "O Captain! My Captain!" Even small details of *Captain America: Civil War* mirror historical fact. For example, the 2016 movie poster depicts Captain America in blue, the color of the Union Army, and displays the text "DIVIDED WE FALL," a sentiment that reflects the ethos of the American Civil War.



It appears that to truly understand the motives of the creators of Superman and Captain America, we must read their narratives within the context of history. In a sense, Captain America was meant to be read alongside "O Captain! My Captain!" As Grant Morrison postulates "The

heroes offer,' [he concluded], 'a bright flickering sign of our need to move on, to image the better, more just and more proactive people we can be'" (Man and Superman: how the Man of Steel became myth). According to Morrison, by comparing Captain America to Abraham Lincoln and cross-examining *Captain America: Civil War* alongside Walt Whitman's "O Captain! My Captain," we can tangibly explore the intention of Captain America's original authors.