"O Captain, My Captain" Reading Guide

PreReading

1. How is the President of the United States like the captain of a ship?

During Reading

2. What type of figurative language does Whitman use when he compares Lincoln to the captain of a ship?

3. Whitman says the Captain has just guided the ship through a “fearful trip.” To what event in American history is Whitman referring?

4. Why is there rejoicing at the same time the Captain of the ship has died?

5. The central idea of this poem centers around the death of a hero. Which line from the poem best illustrates this central idea?
   a. “O Captain! My Captain! Our fearful trip is done”
   b. “For you they call, the swaying mass, their eager faces turning”
   c. “The ship is anchor’d safe and sound, its voyage closed and done”
   d. “I, with mournful tread,/Walk the deck my Captain lies, Fallen cold and dead”
Learning Target: I can analyze the impact of rhymes and repetitions of sounds.

4. Look at the first stanza of the poem where the word “heart!” is repeated before the line “O the bleeding drops of red.” What does the speaker emphasize when he repeats these words? What kind of mood does this repetition create?

Learning Target: I can determine how a poem’s structure contributes to its meaning.

5. You’ve learned that an elegy is a poem written to express grief over death. How does knowing that this poem is an elegy help you understand the central idea Whitman is trying to convey to you?

6. Would this poem be as effective if it had been written as a narrative poem that told the story of how Abraham Lincoln died? Explain your answer with specific reasons.
Meet the Poet

Walt Whitman

Walt Whitman lived in Washington, D.C., during the Civil War. He worked as a government clerk and a war correspondent. He also served as a volunteer nurse, caring for the thousands of wounded soldiers who filled the nearby military hospitals. The Saturday before Abraham Lincoln’s second inauguration, Whitman attended a reception at the White House. On Inauguration Day, March 4, 1865, Whitman twice saw Lincoln pass by in his carriage. He commented that the President looked “very much worn and tired; the lines, indeed, of vast responsibilities, intricate questions, and demands of life and death, cut deeper than ever upon his dark brown face; yet all the old goodness, tenderness, sadness and canny shrewdness lay underneath the furrows.” The President was assassinated just a month later, on April 14, 1865. Walt Whitman wrote his poem “O Captain, My Captain!” about the death of President Abraham Lincoln.