

○ Captain! My Captain!

○ CAPTAIN! my Captain! our fearful trip is done;
The ship has weather'd every rack*, the prize we sought is won;
The port is near, the bells I hear, the people all exulting,
While follow eyes the steady keel, the vessel grim and daring:

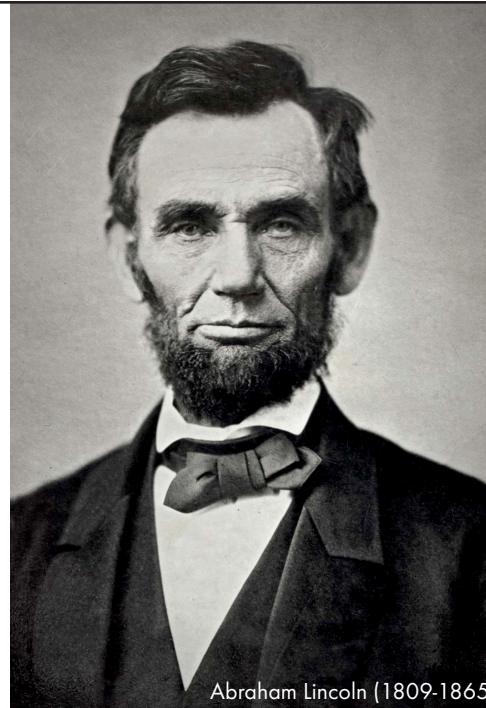
5 But ○ heart! heart! heart!
 ○ the bleeding drops of red,
 Where on the deck my Captain lies,
 Fallen cold and dead.

○ Captain! my Captain! rise up and hear the bells;
10 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 Captain! dear father!
 This arm beneath your head;
15 It is some dream that on the deck,
 You've fallen cold and dead.

My Captain does not answer, his lips are pale and still;
My father does not feel my arm, he has no pulse nor will;
The ship is anchor'd safe and sound, its voyage closed and done;
20 From fearful trip, the victor ship, comes in with object won;
 Exult, ○ shores, and ring, ○ bells!
 But I, with mournful tread,
 Walk the deck my Captain lies,
 Fallen cold and dead.

– Walt Whitman, 1865

* rack = strong wind



Abraham Lincoln (1809-1865)



John F. Kennedy (1917-1963)

Elegy for J.F.K.

When a just man dies,
Lamentation and praise,
Sorrow and joy, are one.

Why then, why there,
Why thus, we cry, did he die?
The heavens are silent.

What he was, he was:
What he is fated to become
Depends on us

Remembering his death,
How we choose to live
Will decide its meaning.

When a just man dies,
Lamentation and praise,
Sorrow and joy, are one.

– W. H. Auden, 1964

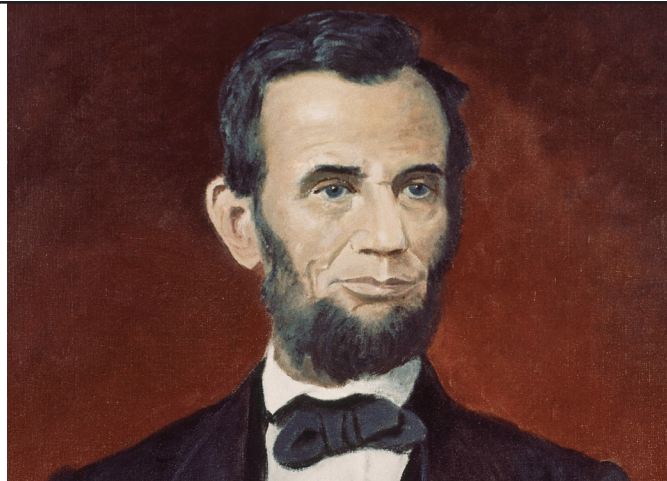
Questions

"O Captain!
My Captain!"

&

"Elegy for J.F.K."

Record your answers on a separate sheet of paper.
You must answer in complete, thoughtful sentences.



1. "O Captain! My Captain" is an extended metaphor, as Whitman symbolically connects the death of the sea captain to the assassination of Abraham Lincoln on April 14, 1865, just five days after the end of the Civil War. Looking at the poem through the lens of the extended metaphor, explain what Whitman intends each of the following items to represent:

- a. "our fearful trip" (line 1)
- b. "the prize" (line 2)
- c. "the vessel" (line 4)
- d. "the swaying mass" (line 12)



2. Explain the emotional contrast between the sailor and the people on the dock. What point is Whitman trying to emphasize by presenting this contrast?

5. Whitman uses rhyming couplets, but he intentionally breaks the flow and pattern of the couplets in the last four lines of each stanza. Notice that if you added line 6 to the end of line 5 and line 8 to the end of line 7 that you would have a regular rhyming couplet structure throughout the entire poem. Notice, too, that rhymes are sometimes perfect (ex: "done" and "won"), but other times the rhymes are slant or near (ex: "bells" and "trills"). Why, do you suppose, Whitman decided to subtly break the traditional pattern?

6. In "Elegy for J.F.K.," Auden presents a similar theme, but builds his poem with a leaner, more sparse style. Can you find any pattern to the rhyme or meter he uses? How does this help emphasize the poem's theme?

7. Auden mentions that both sorrow and joy are felt at the same time as people grieve. What would be joyful about such a tragic time?

8. Look at the last line of the first and last stanza in each poem. What technique is being used here by both poets? What effect does this technique create for the reader?

9. Which poem did you find to be more effective in relaying the sorrow of the poet? Explain why.

3. Does Whitman think the country will heal from the wounds left by the Civil War and the assassination of Lincoln? How do you know? Cite a line from the poem that supports your stance.

4. Some experts have noted that the sailor in Whitman's poem travels quickly through several psychological stages of grief that people experience when someone they love dies suddenly. Look closely at the last four lines of each of the three stanzas and explain the different reactions that we see the sailor experience.



"O Captain! My Captain!" and "Elegy for J.F.K." worksheet questions

KEY

1. "O Captain! My Captain" is an extended metaphor, as Whitman symbolically connects the death of the sea captain to the assassination of Abraham Lincoln on April 14, 1865, just five days after the end of the Civil War. Looking at the poem through the lens of the extended metaphor, explain what Whitman intends each of the following items to represent:

- "our fearful trip" (line 1) **The bitter Civil War**
- "the prize" (line 2) **The abolishment of slavery/victory over the South**
- "the vessel" (line 4) **The nation**
- "the swaying mass" (line 12) **The bulk of Americans who are happy the war is now over**

2. Explain the emotional contrast between the sailor and the people on the dock. What point is Whitman trying to emphasize by presenting this contrast? **On "the vessel grim and daring," the ship and sailors have known the ugly realities of war. Even before we see the collapsed captain, the mood on board the ship is heavy. The people on the dock who haven't fought in the war, however, are jubilant because they are happy the war is over and the men are back. The crowds of people have been sheltered from the grim realities of the battlefield, so they are able to feel the unbridled joy that eludes the sailors.**

3. Does Whitman think the country will heal from the wounds left by the Civil War and the assassination of Lincoln? How do you know? Cite a line from the poem that supports your stance. **Whitman does think the nation will heal from the heartache of the war and the assassination. We know this because he says "the ship is anchor'd safe and sound" and all of the people on the dock continue to be happy/celebrate. It's all going to be okay; the ship (the U.S.) is going to be secure and sheltered again.**

4. Some experts have noted that the sailor in Whitman's poem travels quickly through several psychological stages of grief that people experience when someone they love dies suddenly. Look closely at the last four lines of each of the three stanzas and explain the different reactions that we see the sailor experience. **In the first stanza, the last four lines express his shock and seeing his fallen hero. The "O heart! heart! heart" line is especially evocative of his surprise and shock. In the second stanza, the sailor slips into denial, thinking it can't be possible that the captain is dead. We see this in line 15, when he suggests that all of this is just a bad dream. Finally, the sailor reaches grim acceptance of the death in the final lines of the third stanza. As the crowd cheers, the sailor mourns as he resolutely accepts the true weight and tragedy of the moment. This process is similar to Kübler-Ross' model of the five stages of grief. Often, my students are familiar with the grief stages from their health and psychology classes and it's interesting that Whitman observed this psychological phenomenon nearly a hundred years before**

the Kübler-Ross theory was published.

5. Whitman uses rhyming couplets, but he intentionally breaks the flow and pattern of the couplets in the last four lines of each stanza. Notice that if you added line 6 to the end of line 5 and line 8 to the end of line 7 that you would have a regular rhyming couplet structure throughout the entire poem. Notice, too, that rhymes are sometimes perfect (ex: "done" and "won"), but other times the rhymes are slant or near (ex: "bells" and "trills"). Why, do you suppose, Whitman decided to subtly break the traditional pattern? **The broken pattern emphasizes the broken psyche of the sailor and the nation. If the poem were perfect rhyming couples, it would take on the feel of a children's poem, like a Dr. Seuss poem of sorts. By breaking the structure, it leaves us feeling that something is wrong or "off." The order of the normal way of life has been interrupted and that's exactly what's happened to the country in 1865. The structure emphasizes Whitman's theme.**

6. In "Elegy for J.F.K.," Auden presents a similar theme, but builds his poem with a leaner, more sparse style. Can you find any pattern to the rhyme or meter he uses? How does this help emphasize the poem's theme? **There is no rhyme scheme, but the meter is built so that each three-line stanza is 17 syllables long. Interestingly, Kennedy was born on May 29, 1917. Coincidence? Maybe, but probably not. Poets are sneaky like that. As for the theme, there is balance to the piece, so perhaps Auden is hoping Americans can move forward and restore the balance of life.**

7. Auden mentions that both sorrow and joy are felt at the same time as people grieve. What would be joyful about such a tragic time? **The joy is the celebration of the man's life. People say nice things about the deceased and that's the joyful part, but it's so bittersweet because of the loss of life.**

8. Look at the last line of the first and last stanza in each poem. What technique is being used here by both poets? What effect does this technique create for the reader? **In both poems, repetition of the last line of the first stanza is used later for dramatic effect/emphasis. The effect of this is that the repetition creates an emphasis of the emotional magnitude of the men's deaths in the head and heart of the reader. Technically, this also creates good balance in each piece and a musical quality to the reading of the lines, like the echo of a chorus in a tune.**

9. Which poem did you find to be more effective in relaying the sorrow of the poet? Explain why. **Students' answers will vary, but this question usually makes for a thoughtful class discussion as we review the students' answers aloud in a class discussion.**