

Basic analysis of whitman's "o captain! my captain!" essay sample

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" The words of my books," said Walt Whitman, " are nothing, the drift of it everything." The various themes in Whitman's works are the most important, the actual erudite terms are only important in upholding these ideas. The main themes of his " O Captain! My captain!" are death of a hero, family, a journey, and defeat vs. victory. The themes are supported by a variety of concrete stylistic techniques, including tone, apostrophe, allusions, archetypes, and repetition.

Death of a hero is the first theme to consider. It's obvious the narrator has great respect for the Captain, rendered by tones of compassion, reverence, and ceremony in the poem. " Exult, O shores, and ring, O bells!" exclaims the narrator, which shows the amount of esteem the Captain deserves.

There are several ways the Captain (the hero) could be viewed; the more valid being Abraham Lincoln. In the actual book Leaves of Grass by Whitman, " O Captain! My Captain!" is headed under " President Lincoln's Burial Hymn.", and Whitman has written to Lincoln's memory before - for example, Abraham Lincoln by Whitman is featured in the Prose Forms: Journals section of The Norton Reader. This historical allusion in the poem contributes to the theme of Death of a hero, in which Lincoln is seen as the " father" of our country (symbolized by the ship) who has fallen dead, " bleeding drops of red."

Moving on to the sub-theme (if you will...) of family, The Captain could also be seen as the narrator's own father, with the ship symbolizing his deathbed.

"Our fearful trip is done...the voyage closed and done," says the poem, signifying the trials and tribulations a family goes through. Whether the Captain represents Lincoln or the narrator's own father, the theme is applicable. Another stylistic technique demonstrating Death of a Hero is apostrophe. Apostrophe is a style of personification in which the deceased or departed are spoken to as if they are still present: in the first stanza, the narrator calls out "O Captain! my Captain!", though knowing he is "cold and dead."

A somewhat secondary theme of the poem is the journey. Although this theme is definitely more obvious and not very "deep", it's still a principal part of "O Captain! My Captain!" It also relates to the former theme, death of a hero, because this journey mentioned is a huge part in what makes the Captain a hero. This could be classified as a situational archetype - a journey, the search for the truth. If you want to take it plainly, the Captain's journey at sea had been a dangerous and "fearful" trip that he had survived, a brave, heroic act. Personification is used to display his ship as "grim and daring," giving us an idea of this Captain's journey.

If you view the Captain as Abraham Lincoln, this journey would probably be another historical allusion: the Civil War. Lincoln died before he was able to see the official end of the war, even though the "prize we sought is won", just as the North won. "Rise up," the second stanza reads, "for you the flag is flung - for you the bugle trills; for you bouquets and ribbon's wreaths - for you the shores a-crowding, for you they call, the swaying mass, their eager faces turning..." This passage may signify the general public's response to

the end of the war. Finally, the journey of the narrator's actual father is not one as perilous or dangerous as the latter - it merely represents the father's life and everyday afflictions one suffers.

The last theme to be applied to " O Captain! My Captain!" is defeat vs. victory. It's not easy to pin down which is best pictured in the poem - the Captain has apparently accomplished what he had set out to do. " The prize we sought is won... the victor ship comes in with object won" which is a victory. However, since the Captain has died in the midst of this, the narrator gives us an elegiac tone of defeat: " but I, with mournful tread, walk the deck my Captain lies, fallen cold and dead." The narrator calls out to the Captain in the second stanza, wants him to hear the celebratory noise and see the " swaying mass" call. In the end, however, the Captain's " defeat" was just a small part in the victory for everyone else. The poem uses repetition to reinforce this defeat - " fallen cold and dead" comes at the end of each stanza, sending out a tone of finality and sentiment.

One thing Walt Whitman was famed for: his ability to artistically project onto other people's lives. His elegies are his best-known work, and " O Captain! My Captain!" is probably his most eminent poem. Whitman is celebrated for his facility to utilize imagery and other stylistic techniques, contributing to the inclusive theme of his works.