

## A DISCOURSE COMPREHENSION ANALYSIS OF WALT WHITMAN'S ELEGY: O CAPTAIN, MY CAPTAIN

By

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### RÉSUMÉ

Ce poème contient les analyses profondes et cohérentes avec tous les points essentiels requis pour son analyse littéraire. Il est un art et détient une forme viable.

*Etant mélancolique, ce poème est une lamentation du poète qui regrette la mort brutale d'Abraham Lincoln, ancien Président des Etats-Unis, considéré comme capitaine dans ce poème, assassiné lâchement par les extrémistes du sud. Homme loyal, brave et un cosmos, avec toutes les qualités dignes d'un Président d'une nation, un modèle dont il faut célébrer la grandeur et que la mort a laissé le chagrin et un désespoir pour le peuple américain. A l'auteur de conclure qu'il n'y a pas de gloire après la mort moins encore une récompense méritée pour un travail sur la terre.*

**Mots-clés :** *Capitaine, navire, gagner, port, peuple, exultant, cœur, saignant, tombé, mort, se lever, cloche, drapeau*

### ABSTRACT

*This article analyzes Walt Whitman's elegy "O Captain, my Captain" in order to interpret its meaning; subject matter, themes and poetic devices for a better understanding using discourse-comprehension approach. The formal organization of the poem is described first, followed by a discussion of the semantic organization or how meaning is conveyed; the feelings are aroused and the effects are created.*

**Keywords:** *Captain, ship, win, port, people, exulting, heart, bleeding, fallen, dead, rise, bell, flag*

**O Captain! My Captain!** by Walt Whitman

O Captain! My Captain! Our fearful trip is done;	a
The ship has weathered every rack, the prize we sought is won;	a
The port is near, the bells I hear, the people all exulting,	b
While follow eyes the steady keel, the vessel grim and daring	b
But O heart! Heart! Heart!	c
O the bleeding drops of red!	d
Where on the deck my captain lies,	e
Fallen cold and dead.	d

<b>O Captain! My Captain!</b> Rise up and hear the bells;	f
Rise up for you the flag is flung for you the bugle trills	f
For you bouquets and wreaths for you the shores a crowding	b
For you they call, the swaying mass, their eager faces turning.	b
O Captain! Dear father!	g
This arm beneath your head;	d
It is some dream that on the deck	b
You've fallen cold and dead.	d
My captain does not answer, his lips are pale and still	h
My father does not feel my arm, he has no pulse nor will.	h
The ship is safe and sound, its voyage closed and done:	a
From fearful trip the victor ship comes in with object won!	a
Exult, O shores! and ring, O bells!	f
But I, with silent tread,	d
Walk the spot my captain lies	e
Fallen cold and dead.	d

**A. LITERARY APPROACH : DISCOURSE COMPREHENSION ANALYSIS**

The discourse - comprehension approach is a combination of the discourse and comprehension process for the sake of efficiency.

Discourse studies real language in use which might be a text, a poem, a play, a novel and the like. Discourse (cook, 1989) is « language in use for communication ». Discourse (leech 1981: 19) operates at the level of meaning with semiotic signs (= punctuations).

Comprehension process takes into account some factors that influence a comprehension of a text such as: motivation, personal interest, time factor, personal effort, study habit (Ngwaba, 2014).

The discourse comprehension approach is an ECLETIC APPROACH that is built on four angles of the four traditional literary approach from which individual approaches have derived since PLATO (Ngwaba, P.64):

- Mimetic orientation (sociological, historical, socio-historical, political or marxism approaches)
- Affective orientation or pragmatic (work and reader relation with didactic effects,...)
- Expressive orientation (Work and author relation (self author's expression – It includes the psychological and Psycho – analytical approaches).
- Objective orientation (the work with its objective, independent status...it includes the formalistic, structuralism, linguistic, stylistic as a variance of he linguistic and semantic approaches).

Discourse comprehension shouldn't be ignored while interpreting a text. Discourse comprehension takes into account everything, both internal and external to the text interpretation and covers for this sake seven variables:

- Discourse interactional factors,
- Background knowledge,
- Language clues
- Paralanguage,
- Punctuation marks,
- Macro-language functions and,
- Rhetorical aspects

Made of information focus and Pitch, discourse analysis at its side focuses on language clues: vocabulary, grammar and sense devices and paralanguage features.

## **B. HYPOTHESIS**

Walt whitman is- a poetic voice of American freedom who uses poetry to celebrate American democracy, democratic values and union.

## **C. RATIONALE FOR THE CHOICE OF THE TOPIC**

The choice of the topic could be explained by:

1. Personal interest in American literature, i. e, as a new literature in search of mythology and identity which America didn't have at the start, as a new nation, new paradise, a new man lying on his potential, a self – made man with no one to help him, a man with new spirit and a new zest for life and ready for revolution to defend his liberties cherished.
2. The celebration of freedom and self pride in walt whitman's poetry.

## I. DESCRIPTION OF FORMAL ORGANIZATION OF THE POEM

"O Captain! My Captain!" is a 24 line poem in 3 stanzas of eight lines each. The first line rhymes with the second, the 3<sup>rd</sup> with the fourth, the sixth with the eighth in every stanza, but the fifth and seventh lines do not rhyme within the octets. The rhyme scheme runs as follows: **aabbcded**, **ffbbgdbd**, and **hhaafdeed**, respectively in the first, second and third stanzas.

The main tenses used are the simple present and the present perfect tense along with the passive voice. The simple past denotes that the action was completed in the past (Murphy, 2004: 5). The past action is in line 2; the poet used the past participle acting as adjectives as in lines 8 and 24. The present perfect tense denotes that the result or consequence of the past action is still present. Murphy (2004: 14) – "when we use the present perfect, there is a connection with now", as in line 1, has weathered, line 2, is won and, have fallen and line 16, and in line 10 with is flung.

The simple present tense expresses daily routines, a habitual or permanent action. It is remarkable in lines 3, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12, 15, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, and 23 of the poem with respectively such verbs as hear, lies, rise up, trills, wreaths, call, answer, are, feel), has, come, exult, ring, and walk. Some of these verbs are repeated such be, has, rise up, etc.

The most prominent parts of speech used are nouns, pronouns, adjectives, adverbs, verbs, conjunctions, prepositions.

The most remarkable nouns are captain in the title and in lines 1, 7, 9, 13, 17, 23; ship in lines 2, 19, and 20); rack in line 2; keel and vessel in line 4; deck in line 7; flag in line 10); bugle in line 10; trills in line 10; bouquets in line 11; and shores in line 11.

The pronouns used are the personal pronouns: "I" in lines 3 and 22, "you" in lines 10, 11, 12, and 16; "he" in line 18; "it" in line 15; and the possessive pronoun: "its" in line 19. The adjectives used are fearful in line 1, steady in line 4, grim in line 4, bleeding in line 6, eager in line 12, cold in lines 8 and 24, and dead in line 8, and 16. The other adjectives used are the possessive adjectives: **my** in the title, and in lines 1, 7, 9, 17, 18, 23, **our** in line 1, **their** in line 12, **his** in line 15; the demonstrative pronouns **this** and **that** in lines 14 and 15. The prepositions used are beneath in line 14, near in line 3, of in line 6, on in line 7, for in lines 10, 11, and 12, in line 20, at in line 22), and with in line s20, 21. There are two articles used: the definite and indefinite articles in lines 2, 3, 4, 9, 10, 11, 12, 19, 20, and 23.

The conjunctions used as connectors are **but** in lines 5 and 22 and **and** in lines 4, 8, 9, 11, and 24).

There is an extensive use of sense devices, such as *apostrophe*, and *invocation*, *personification*, *metonymy*, *repetition*, *image*, *metaphor*, *refrain*, *paradox*, *substitution*, *irony*, and *foregrounding*.

“**Apostrophe** is an exclamatory passage in a speech or poem addressed to a person, often dead or absent, or thing often personified” (Oxford English Reference Dictionary, 2003). as in *O Captain! My Captain!* where the speaker is addressing to the dead Captain who is Abe Lincoln in his admiration for him.

Lines 1 and 9 show examples of **invocation** when the speaker says

O Captain! My Captain! Rise up and hear the bells.  
You've fallen cold and dead

The captain he is talking to is already dead.

The poem contain a lots of images such as captain, fearful, ship, port, bell, arm, vessel, heart, and bleeding which are mental representations of the thing he describes.

“Captain – image of a leader “(line 1, 9, 13, 17)

“Ship – image of a transporter/carrier;

“Port – image of a terminal, the final destination for this ship (line 3),

“arm – is the image of weapon

“pale is the image of dead, and still is the image of death (line 17)

“Bleeding drops of read” show the image of death, etc.

The metaphors used in this poem are captain, ship/vessel, and port. **Captain** is an extended metaphor that stands for Abe Lincoln, whom he also refers to as his father. Ship/vessel stand for the coffin that carries the Abe Lincoln's corps to the graveyard, and port stands for the cemetery, which is the final destination.

A fourth sense device used is **refrain** which is a line or a phrase repeated is at the beginning, the middle or at the end of the poem” (Webster's College Dictionary (2005) as in the following lines:

Line 1: O Captain! My Captain!

Line 8: Fallen cold and dead

Line 16: You've fallen cold and dead

Line 24: Fallen cold and dead.

Repetition is another sense device used. A lot of words and phrases are repeated in the poem such as the title itself, heart, which is repeated four times; “Actually, poetry is built on the principle of repetition and variation whereby a word, phrase, or verse is repeated many times in poem for the sake of focus, emphasis or reinforcement (Ngwaba, 2013: 100), as in the following phases:

For you the flag is flung,  
 For you the bugle trills,  
 For you bouquets and wreaths,  
 For you the shores a – crowding,  
 For you they call.

**Variation** is another sense device used in the poem with such words as:

Captain and father, leader, (line 1, 9, 17)  
 Ship and vessel (in lines 2, 4, 19 and 20)  
 Port and graveyard (in line 3,

**Paradox** is a seventh sense device found in the poem. What is paradoxical in this poem is the fact that the celebration in this poem is that of a dead person's deeds, and it is a triumph and celebration mixed with grief, sorrow and regret, as it shown in lines 5, 6, 7, and 8:

But O heart! Heart! Heart!  
 O the bleeding drops of red!  
 Where on the deck my captain lies,  
 Fallen cold and dead.

Another **paradox** is when the speaker says: **we won the prize**, while the captain lies dead. All their celebrating turns into tears.

A seventh sense device in the poem is **kenning** which is a phrasal metaphor, a stock phrase poetic phrase name of a person or object that is picturesque (Shaw, 1972: 214); as when the poet writes: He has **no pulse nor will** (to mean a corpse), or You've **fallen cold** (to mean dead)

There is an **irony** of situation, the fact celebrating the deeds of a strong person who is dead. Irony is a way of writing in which what is meant is contrary to what the words appear to say (Peck and Coyle, 1984: 135).

**Foregrounding** is also used. Many words are in important or prominent position, forefront. Foregrounding consists also of using a word or a group of word in the front position for the sake of emphasis and aesthetic (<http://www.answers.com/topic/foregrounding> retrieved on June 20, 2020).

The following opening words, for example, have prominence:

O CAPTAIN !, The ship, The port, but O heart!  
 Fallen cold and dead.  
 Rise up  
 O Captain! Dear father!

My captain  
 My father

**Ambiguity** is brought by the use of words having double meanings such as ship, vessel and port, which are metaphors. A port, for example, is where ships stop for loading and unloading cargo, but here it has another meaning.

## II. DISCUSSION OF THE SEMANTIC ORGANIZATION OF THE POEM

The section explains how meanings are conveyed in this particular poem. In this way, the scenario is described, including the subject matter, the central theme and sub-themes, the feelings aroused, the effects created in the poem, the tone, and the poet's intention. The general appreciation of the poet's controlled use of language, and a personal appreciation of the poem in terms of its literary and artistic values, are given, including saying if the poem would be of any significance thirty or fifty years from now, and a personal opinion about whether or not I like it, why and not? And whether or not you would recommend the same poem to other people (Ngwaba, 2013: 115).

### Description of the scenario

"A synonym for scenario is situation which is a paralinguistic feature along with gesture, body expression, and other prosodic feature as pitch information focus. The purpose of the scenario is to help create a mental representation, a kind of diagram of the events that contribute to understand meaning. (Ngwaba, 2013: 45).

The speaker of the poem is an "I-speaker" who seems to be involved in a monologue. This "I-speaker" is the poet himself. The topic of the scenario is *O Captain! My Captain!* The poem is an elegy in which the speaker is mourning the death of Abraham Lincoln, the 16<sup>th</sup> President of the United States, who proclaimed the Emancipation Act (1862-1863) to free the slaves and restore the south to the union.

There are four addressees in this poem: the speaker himself, the captain, his American compatriots, and the general audience. One of the addressees in this poem is the I-speaker because the poem is elegy, as line 5 reads: *But O heart! Heart! Heart!*

The second addressee is the captain as lines 9, and 10 read:

*O Captain! my captain! Rise up and hear the bells  
you've fallen cold and dead;*

The third addressee is the speaker's compatriots. The poem reads: ..., **the prize we won;**

**We**, here, stands for nation: the Americans. Finally the poem is also addressed to the general audience as part of humanity to sympathize with him.

The purpose of the poem is to mourn and regret the loss of Abraham Lincoln for whom he has great admiration as someone who shared his spirits and ideals of democracy. **Subject matter of the poem**

*O Captain! My Captain!* is an elegy in which the speaker is mourning and regretting the death of Abraham Lincoln who was assassinated by South extremists, after the North won the victory over the South and proclaimed the emancipation act.

The speaker is praising him for the victory he won, celebrating the safe and successful return and at the same time regretting his death, recalling the circumstances of his death (see line 6, of the bleeding drops of red). Actually Abe Lincoln got shot in a movie theater in Washington DC while watching a play. The poem is more concerned the procession toward the graveyards.

A series of questions came in mind: why a fearful trip? What makes it fearful? What A trip to where? and What port is near? The speaker is talking about the trip to the graveyards. The ship he is referring to here is the coffin, and the port is the cemetery, which the last destination for the burial, which is why he feels the sorrow saying O heart! Heart! Heart! to show regret.

In the second stanza, some questions arise such as why did the speaker tell him to rise up to hear the bells and see the flag flung?

The speaker cannot believe his own eyes, and he still would like his captain to rise up and see the crowd mourning, with their flowers in hands, and the flag on the air in his honor, wishing the dead man could witness the elation.

O Captain! My Captain! Rise up and hear the bells;  
Rise up for you the flag is flung for you the bugle trills  
You've fallen cold and dead.

The speaker realizes that the captain does not respond to his numerous speeches because he is, indeed, dead, He has pulse nor will; he is dead.

Master J.R. & Kuming D.D. eds. (1998) write: " O captain! My captain became the most recited and popular of Whitman's work. His most anthologized poem. Whitman insisted that it had an emotional, historical necessary purpose. The poem continues to be a revealing representation of the rhetoric of despair and celebration that followed the war, and it remains Whitman's most successful attempt to reach a national audience".

### Central theme

The central theme of this elegy is **death**; Abraham Lincoln's death which is recurrent in each stanza (see lines 8, 16, 24) with the words "Fallen and dead" and again with "Fallen cold and dead". **Betsy Erkkila (1989: 237) writes:**

O captain ! My captain ! is one of the poems in Memories of President Lincoln. The poem is preceded by the long and more frequently anthologized poem on Lincoln' funeral procession.

### Subthemes

A lot of sub-themes could be deduced from this poem namely: invocation (because the poet is invoking a death, his captain), fear (due to death), victory (of the U.S./ America as a democratic country), joy, regret, dream (the captain has fallen because of a dream he has, the American dream), silence (the fact).

There is an **invocation** because the speaker is calling, addressing to a dead person and telling what is happening. And the speaker is **regretting this loss** of the person he admires a lot the use of words such as O Heart! Heart! Heart!

Abe Lincoln won victory over the South. Actually it was the victory of democracy over the Southern States. The poem reads: *...the prize we sought is won*, (see line 2).

The captain has fallen because of a dream he has, the American dream; a dream that any person living in the United States, could become prosperous through his work, his courage and his determination. Dream of personal achievement through hard work and merit through a democratic way with open possibilities to everyone by innovation and creation.

The trip he is referring to here is the trip to the cemetery, which is why it is fearful.

The other subthemes are **love and admiration**. The speaker loves Abraham Lincoln and he admired him a lot because for he incarnated democratic values, which is probably why Whitman has great admiration for him. Both were committed to democratic ideals, the preservation of the union and the greatness of the common folk of better America. Lincoln was opposed to the spread of slavery.

Another subtheme is **loyalty**. Lincoln was loyal to the US Constitution and its ideals. Whitman was politically passionate and involved. His enthusiasm was particularly sparked by Lincoln who represented all that he thought a president should be in American life. He was virtually the living embodiment of the "I" of Leaves of Grass, he was, according to Whitman, "one of the roughs", "a cosmos", with the whole range of qualities that term implied... Leaves of Grass and the War were one, they particularly came together in Lincoln, symbol of loyalty.

### Feelings aroused in the poem

This poem arouses mixed feelings on the reader such as: praise, and admiration, victory, grief/regret, fear, victory, sorrow, endurance, disappointment and despair.

### **Effects created by the poem**

The reading of this poem "O captain! My captain! creates mixed effects in the reader, such as: sorrow, disappointment, regret, gratefulness, despair, shock due to the captain's death.

### **The Tone of the poem.**

The tone of the poem "O captain! My captain! is melancholic, sad and pathetic, pensive and descriptive in this elegy.

It is melancholic and sad because the poem is an elegy mourning the assassination of the captain that the speaker greatly admired. It is pensive because the speaker kept remember the victory the captain for the entire nation, and the terrible loss for him and for the nation.

The same tone is descriptive because the speaker offers a description of the procession and of how became the body after being shot down, as well of how he personally feels after when he looks the corpse, and how the crow came for the last ceremonies at the cemetery.

### **The poet's intention**

By writing this elegy in which the poet is mourning the assassination of Abe Lincoln, his intention is to praise his qualities, bravery, victory and celebrate his grandeur, merit and his achievement in recognition on the one hand; and on the hand, blame, criticize and condemn this sadistic and devilish attitude toward values.

Another aspect of his intention is to celebrate Lincoln's great sense of patriotism. He certainly knew it was risky but he dared because the Parliament decided and gave him full power to raise arms against the south, as President he could not say no.

### **Overall appreciation of the poet's control of discourse**

The use of discourse is controlled to help convey the subject matter, themes, the feelings, and the effects created. The poet has used language, paralanguage and punctuation marks in his own way. His discourse is poetic in that it is short, condensed, incomplete, connoted, and implicit. It is rhetorical because it contains rhetorical devices such as: repetition, variation, substitution, invocation, imagery, metaphor, refrain, paradox, irony, metonymy.

### **The use of punctuation to convey the meaning desired by the poet**

The most remarkable punctuations marks in the poem are: exclamation mark, semi-colon, colon, and comma,... Punctuation "clarifies sentence structure, separating some words and grouping others. It adds meaning to

words and guides the understanding of readers as they move through sentences (Gibaldi, 1995: 44).

A first remarkable punctuation mark used in this poem is **exclamation mark**, "Exclamations are sentences that express strong feelings" (Sharpe, 1989: 24). The use of **colon** (:) observed in line 19 offers an explanation of line 18 to say that the ship has arrived at the shores and the bells are heard for the burial. "The colon suggests some explanations of enumerations. It is used to introduce a list, an elaboration of what was just said, or the formal expression of rule or principle" (Gibaldi, 1995: 50). The use of the semi-colon (;) helps to explain as in lines 1, 2, 9, and 14. In line 2, the semi-colon offers an explanation of the arrival of the ship after the victory because it is close to the port. The semi-colon in line 9 helps to explain why the speaker is inciting the captain to rise up; the reason is to hear the bell and see the flag flung in his honor. The last semi-colon is used to explain the idea that the voyage is closed and done because the coffin has reached the destination for the burial to take place.

A third punctuation mark used is the **full stop/point**. The first stanza runs as sentence and ends with a full stop showing that there is one indeed expressed which is the death of the captain. The second sentence in the second stanza expresses the speaker's incitation to rise up to hear the bells and see the bouquets of flowers they brought him (see lines 9-12). The third sentence runs from lines 12-16 and expresses the idea of death again, as the captain has fallen cold and dead. The idea expressed in the fifth and last sentence is that of death also: here the captain does not answer, doesn't feel his arm because he is indeed, dead (see lines 17-24).

### **The use of paralinguistic features to convey the meaning desired by the poet**

The use of paralinguistic features helps to understand the meanings intended by the poet. The main paralinguistic features used in this poem are the scenario, the pitch, and information focus.

The poem is built around a *clear scenario or situation*. The description of the scenario encompasses the participants, the relation between participants, the tone, the code, the purpose and the setting. Both the speaker and the audience are in a clear network. The I-speaker is talking to himself, the captain, his compatriots and to the general audience describing and regretting, the death of the captain and exalting and praising his merits and patriotism.

*The pitch* is high in each line of the poem to emphasize the speaker's emotion and sorrow and exult the public celebration, as in the following lines:

Rise up for you the flag is flung

The *Information focus* is achieved through the repetitions many phrases and words, such as: O Captain! my captain! O heart! heart! heart! Fallen cold and dead, Rise up, etc.

### **The use of language to convey the meaning desired by the poet**

The use of language is controlled to help convey meaning as intended by the poet. Poetic sense devices have been used for this purpose such as invocation, apostrophe, personification, imagery, metaphor, refrain, repetition, paradox, irony, metonymy, substitution, variation and kenning. Language plays a directive function because it urges the addressee to act.

The reading of "O Captain! my captain" is a great experience because the poem addresses a significant world issues: slavery and sadism against which Lincoln raised weapon against the South, and was later assassinated. Another issue the poem raises is **patriotism**, which urged Lincoln to defend the US Constitution's ideals and democratic values: democracy and their sacred union.

Another significant world issue that the poem addresses is sensitivity: Lincoln was a sensitive type of person who could not stand slavery on a land where democracy was a rule of the game. The poet admires Lincoln because of he was the incarnation of democratic and of the American dream.

To some extent this poem is a satire directed against evil, sadism and slavery for which Lincoln was assassinated after defending a loyal cause: the American and abolishing slavery for African-American emancipation. To some extent it is the meaning of being human that is being questioned.

The poem demonstrates craft and artistry. The poet's craft is remarkable in the skillful way of selecting words and poetic devices and rearranging them meaningfully well to make a heartbreaking elegy. The first line and title in each stanza for example, it begins with an apostrophe, "O Captain! my captain!

The poet's artistry is revealed through his ability to allude to Lincoln victory and death to write such a moving elegy, showing use great imagination at and creativity work. The poem appeals to common sense and humanitarian sensitivity.

I would recommend this poem to others because of universal values, subject matter, themes, craft and artistry.

## CONCLUSION

O Captain! My Captain! is an elegy in which the speaker is mourning and regretting the death of Abraham Lincoln who was assassinated by South extremists...The poet is praising him for the victory he won, celebrating the safe and successful return and at the same time regretting his death, recalling the circumstances of his death. The central theme of the poem is **death** that runs throughout the poem. The main sense devices used are *apostrophe, and invocation, personification, metonymy, repetition, image, metaphor, refrain, paradox, substitution, irony, and foregrounding*.

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