



WHITMAN'S PERCEPTION OF LINCOLN IN "O CAPTAIN! MY CAPTAIN!"

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ABSTRACT

Walt Whitman and Abraham Lincoln were contemporaries who shared identical political ideas. While the former expressed his ideas through poetry and active politics, the latter took political leadership as a tool to achieve his objectives. This paper studies the way Whitman projected Lincoln in the poem "O Captain! My Captain!".

Keywords: Lincoln, Whitman, Elegy, Slavery and Politics

Walt Whitman, an American poet and journalist, became famous after publishing his anthology *Leaves of Grass*. His exceptional poetical genius is manifested in the rejection of English metrical verse and adoption of free verse. Whitman believed poetry to be a religion where the poet is a prophet. It is a means to express his faith and ideas. Whitman's concern about a progressive America emanated from his active participation in politics. His detestation of slavery and wish for a Union of States brought him closer to the ideals of Abraham Lincoln.

Amongst all poems, we shall study the elegy "O Captain! My Captain!" The elegy written for Lincoln grabs the attention for its serenity. In the article on Walt Whitman, published in *Poetry: A Magazine in Verse*, Monroe asserts:

"In all his songs of death-"heavenly death",
"delicate death"- some of them beautiful
beyond praise is the same high serenity"

Whitman's poems about Abraham Lincoln includes: "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd", "Hush'd Be the Camps To-day", "This Dust was Once the Man" and "O Captain! My Captain". Whitman and Lincoln were contemporaries who shared a sense of mutual

respect to each other. Clarence A. Brown in his essay "Whitman and Lincoln" claims that Whitman's assessment of Lincoln is unusually accurate though they "never were introduced and never exchanged a word" (176). There was a close affinity between the bard and the President. The vision of American democracy and Union of the States were objects of interest to both of them. Whitman saw the West as a source of inspiration and great hope to achieve his objectives. In his essay on "The Eighteenth Presidency", Whitman prophesied and expressed his willingness to approve any beard faced American Blacksmith or boatman coming from the West and sitting on the throne of presidency. His expectation of the President to be fully informed, shrewd, heroic, healthy bodied and middle aged gets fulfilled through Lincoln. The string of epithets mentioned by Whitman in his essay resonates throughout his poems. The shared interest between Whitman and Lincoln came to the fore during the introduction of Wilmot Proviso by Congressman David Wilmot in 1846. The proposal was to prohibit slavery from territory acquired from Mexico during the Mexico-American war. During this time, Whitman's political affiliation was to the Democratic Party; a party which

did not endorse Proviso. On the other hand, Lincoln was voting for the Proviso in the House of Representatives. Whitman's strong belief and determination led him to leave the party and join the Republicans thereafter. This brought Whitman in line with the ideals of Lincoln.

The sense of high regard for Abraham Lincoln comes to the fore in the poems written by Walt Whitman. Whitman, in the poem, "O Captain! My Captain!" refers to Abraham Lincoln as "Captain" of a ship. The political and social upheaval witnessed during the American Civil War (1861-65) is the "fearful trip" undertaken by him. Lincoln is seen to be celebrated by the masses. They are exalted as he rescues America from the shackles of slavery. The port is metaphorically a reference to the American shore free of slavery. The state of ecstasy among the citizens does not last long as the situation turns grim. The Captain lies dead, cold and unmoved with red blood splattering all over the deck. The speaker wants Lincoln to 'rise up' and hear the victory bells. The flag flutters in the name of Lincoln. The stage is decorated with bouquets and the air is buzzing with 'bugle trills'. The eagerness of people to have a glimpse of Lincoln turns out to be a disappointment as the Captain is dead. The speaker refers to the inexpressible loss as a lamentable 'dream'. The reference to Lincoln as "father" is testimony to the adoration and admiration that Whitman harbours. The elegy is a tribute to the great persona who anchored the America safe and sound. Most importantly, the objective of achieving an America free of slavery is won.

References

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