

by Philip Brandt George

Elegy for a Fallen Leader

Almost 140 years before President John Fitzgerald Kennedy was felled by an assassin's bullets, American poet Walt Whitman lamented the death of another president—Abraham Lincoln, also a victim, in April 1865, of an assassin's attack. Whitman, too old to serve in the Civil War, worked as a newspaper correspondent early in the conflict. In Washington he served as a clerk in a government office and also volunteered as a nurse. He was still in the area when Lincoln made his last visit to Ford's Theatre. Whitman's wartime experiences yielded material for a collection of poems titled *Drum-Taps* that ran the emotional gamut from the first flushed excitement at the prospect of the coming conflict to dismay and disgust at its horrible cost. Included are two poems honoring Lincoln, whom Whitman never met but probably saw on many occasions. While "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" is thought to be one of the finest elegies in the English language, "O Captain! My Captain!" is far more oft-recited, perhaps because of its brevity and powerful verbal imagery. "O Captain! My Captain!" mourns the loss of a beloved leader, yet exults in the knowledge that the ship of state has successfully weathered a series of severe trials. It was almost inevitable that the poem, written in 1865, would again be called upon to express the nation's emotions following the tragedy in Dallas on November 22, 1963.

O Captain! My Captain!

Walt Whitman

*O Captain! my captain! our fearful trip is done;
The ship has weathered 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.*

But O heart! heart! heart!

O the bleeding drops of red!

Where on the deck my captain lies,

Fallen cold and dead.

*O captain! my captain! rise up and hear the bells;
Rise up! for you the flag is flung, for you the bugle trills:
For you bouquets and ribboned wreaths, for you the shores a-crowding:*

For you they call, the swaying mass, their eager faces turning.

O captain! dear father!

This arm beneath your head;

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 anchored safe and sound, its voyage closed and done:
From fearful trip the victor ship comes in with object won!*

Exult, O shores! and ring, O bells!

But I, with silent tread,

Walk the spot my captain lies

Fallen cold and dead.



