Close Read of “O Captain! My Captain!” by Walt Whitman

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| I. O 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:  
  But O heart! heart! heart!  
  O the bleeding drops of red,  
  Where on the **deck** my Captain lies,  
  Fallen cold and dead.  |
| **rack**: a cluster of dark clouds  
**port**: a town or harbor where ships are located  
**keel**: a flat-bottomed boat  
**vessel**: a ship  
**deck**: the floor of a ship.  |
| 1. How has the trip been characterized?  
What has the journey been like?  |
| II. 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 ribbon’d 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.  |
| **bugle**: a trumpet  |
| 2. Reread the first line of each stanza.  
What does the way the speaker addresses the captain in each of those lines reveal about his feelings toward the captain?  |
| III. 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;  
  From fearful trip, the victor ship, comes in with object won;  
  **Exult**, O shores, and ring, O bells!  
  But I, with **mournful** **tread**,  
  Walk the deck my captain lies,  
  Fallen cold and dead.  |
| **Exult**: O shores, and ring, O bells!  
**mournful**: sad, sorrowful  |
| 3. How are the people on shore responding to the ship’s safe return?  
What specific words and images in this second stanza denote celebration?  |
| 4. Which emotions are expressed in the first two stanzas?  
Which words and phrases create those emotions?  |
| 5. The narrator refers to the captain as “dear father.”  
What does that phrase reveal about the narrator’s relationship to the captain?  
How does the phrase influence the mood of the second stanza?  |
| 6. Compare the speaker’s emotions with those of the crowd on shore and describe the effect of these emotions on the poem.  |
| 7. The poem ends with the refrain, “fallen cold and dead.”  
How does this refrain contribute to the mood of the poem?  |

**Culminating Task:** Consider the emotions of the narrator and the crowd on shore. Is one emotion emphasized more than the other throughout the poem? What is the relationship between the emotions? Make sure to include textual evidence in your response.
UNIT 4: Poetry
Lesson 7: Putting it all together: Close Read of “Oh Captain! My Captain!”

Close Read: “O Captain! My Captain!” by Walt Whitman - ANSWER SHEET

1. How has the trip been characterized? What has the journey been like?
   The voyage has been difficult and intense, because the poet describes it as “fearful,” and says their ship has “weathered every rack.” They were successful because the poet says, “the prize they sought was won,” yet the captain has died, as revealed in the second stanza.

2. Reread the first line of each stanza. What does the way the speaker addresses the captain in each of those lines reveal about his feelings toward the captain?
   By saying “my captain,” the speaker reveals how committed he is to his leader. Saying captain acknowledges respect, but addressing the captain as “his” captain shows how deeply and personally connected he feels to following his captain.

3. How are the people on shore responding to the ship’s safe return? What specific words and images in this second stanza denote celebration?
   The people on shore are eager to celebrate the ship’s successful return. The poet describes the joyful sounds of celebration, such as “people exulting,” “hear the bells,” and “bugle trills,” as well as sights that suggest celebration, including bouquets, flags, ribbon’d wreaths, and crowded shores of celebrated masses.

4. Which emotions are expressed in the first two stanzas? Which words and phrases create those emotions?
   The first two stanzas are full of sadness and sorrow for the captain’s death but also joy and rejoicing because the ship has returned. Phrases such as “bleeding drops of red,” and the repetition of “fallen cold and dead” reflect a sorrowful mood. Phrases such as the “prize we sought is won” and “for you bouquets and ribbon’d wreaths” create a mood of elation and celebration.

5. The narrator refers to the captain as “dear father.” What does that phrase reveal about the narrator’s relationship to the captain? How does the phrase influence the mood of the second stanza?
   The speaker calls the captain “dear father.” This shows that the relationship is not only one of deep respect, but one of deep personal love, and that the speaker both admires and adores his captain. This phrase contributes to the sorrowful mood of the stanza because it emphasizes the narrator’s affection for his captain, making his death more tragic for the narrator.

6. Compare the speaker’s emotions with those of the crowd on shore and describe the effect of these emotions on the poem.
   The speaker is saddened because of the death of his captain, while the crowd is “exulting” because of the ship’s return. These emotions create conflicting moods in the poem, one of grief and sadness and one of rejoicing, which add tension to the emotional poem.

7. The poem ends with the refrain, “fallen cold and dead.” How does this refrain contribute to the mood of the poem?
   The refrain “fallen cold and dead” contrasts with the images of celebration of having returned the ship safely ad triumphantly to shore. While the mood in several of the stanzas is celebratory, describing “ribbon’d wreaths” and “exulting crowds,” each stanza ends with the starkly grim line: fallen cold and dead. This tension shows that, while the public is celebrating the ship’s triumphant return, the speaker is unable to celebrate because he is grieving deeply the loss of his captain.