O Captain! My Captain! by Walt Whitman

Below is a copy of Whitman's iconic poem. Line numbers are added for reference:

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Stanza 1
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1. O Captain my Captain! our fearful trip is done,
2. The ship has weathered every rack, the prize we sought is won,
3. The port is near, the bells I hear, the people all exulting,
4. While follow eyes the steady keel, the vessel grim and daring;
5. But O heart! heart! heart!
6. O the bleeding drops of red,
7. Where on the deck my Captain lies,
8. Fallen cold and dead.

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Stanza 2
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9. O Captain! my Captain! rise up and hear the bells;
10. Rise up--for you the flag is flung for you the bugle trills,
11. For you bouquets and ribboned wreaths for you the shores a-crowding,
12. For you they call, the swaying mass, their eager faces turning;
13. Here Captain! dear father!
14. This arm beneath your head!
15. It is some dream that on the deck,
16. You've fallen cold and dead.

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Stanza 3
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17. My Captain does not answer, his lips are pale and still;
18. My father does not feel my arm, he has no pulse nor will;
19. The ship is anchored safe and sound, its voyage closed and done;
20. From fearful trip the victor ship comes in with object won;
21. Exult O shores, and ring O bells!
22. But I, with mournful tread,
23. Walk the deck my Captain lies,
24. Fallen cold and dead.
Analysis
Now that we have a little background information, we can continue with our analysis.

1. **Rhyme Scheme** - aabb xxcx - the opening couplets of the first two stanzas establish a happy mood, which juxtaposed with the shortened succeeding lines, brings out the disappointment experienced by the poet over the captain's death. Note the progression: Stanza 1 begins with two happy couplets; Stanza 2 begins with two celebrating couplets, but something isn't quite right as demonstrated by the off rhyme of "bells" and "trills." Stanza 3 re-establishes the rhyming couplet pattern, but the message is as clear as the rhyme: the captain is dead.

2. **Meter and Rhythm** - there is no fixed meter; there is, however, a pattern of four long lines followed by four short lines in each stanza. The shortened lines emphasize the personal grief experienced by the poet against the backdrop of a broader victory. The poem's rhythm is created by the varying line lengths.

3. **Extended Metaphor** - The captain is Abraham Lincoln. The fearful trip is the Civil War. The ship is the United States. The prize is the preservation of the Union.

4. **The repetition** of "heart" in line 5 emphasizes the poet's grief at the death of his captain. "Fallen cold and dead" is repeated at the end of each stanza to emphasize the poet's deep loss.

5. **Apostrophe** - an apostrophe is a form of personification in which an individual addresses someone who is dead, someone who is not there, or an inanimate object. "O Captain! My Captain!" at the start of the first two stanzas are examples of apostrophe, as is "Exult O shores, and ring O bells!" in the third stanza.

6. The poet refers to the fallen captain as "father," representing his deep respect for president Lincoln and Lincoln's role as father of the Union.

7. **Word Choice** - words and phrases such as "grim and daring," "weathered every rack," "fearful trip," "flag is flung," "bugle trills," "ribboned wreaths," and "swaying mass" cast a shadow over the celebration, much in the same way the dead cast a shadow over any victory in war celebration.

Sample Paragraphs
Walt Whitman pays tribute to Abraham Lincoln with this poem taking the form of an ode, characterized by sustained noble sentiment and appropriate dignity of style, and as with most odes begins with an apostrophe. The poem is an extended metaphor: (1) Lincoln is the captain who has "fallen cold and dead," having been assassinated shortly after the Civil War had ended; (2) the "fearful trip" is the Civil War; (3) "the prize we sought" is the preservation of the Union, something which both Whitman and Lincoln felt was the supreme reason for fighting the war; (4) "the ship" is the United States.

The poet's grief is accentuated by the contrasting celebrations of victory and lamentations of death. The poet recognizes the importance of victory, calling out "Exult O shores, and ring O bells!" (21), but his "mournful tread" prevents him from truly taking part in the festivities. The image of the dead captain, "O heart! heart! heart! / O bleeding drops of red" (5-6), haunts the poem and the reader is constantly reminded that he has "fallen cold and dead."