

A Multimodal Discourse Analysis of Walt Whitman's Poem "O Captain! My Captain!"

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Abstract

"O Captain! My Captain!", written by Walt Whitman, one of the most talented poets in American history, is an elegy on the death of Pres. Abraham Lincoln. It portrays Lincoln as the captain of a sea-worn ship, which implies the Union triumphant after the American Civil War. By drawing on multimodal discourse analysis and its theoretical framework of Halliday's systemic functional grammar, this paper seeks to explore its meaning from both literary and non-literary aspects. The ideational function of the poem presents readers largely material processes, which post a whole dynamic scene. Whitman calls the captain "captain", "my captain" and "father". The change indicates that the author's mourning seems to transcend the sorrow of a citizen for the assassination of a leader to become more like that of a son for his father. Cohesive markers of conjunction glue everything together and make the poem ship-like. To connect literature with linguistics and multimodal discourse analysis provides a new way to interpret Whitman's poem and helps to understand the poem better.

Keywords: Multimodal Discourse Analysis, Systemic Functional Grammar, ideational function, interpersonal function, textual function, mourning.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Walt Whitman is America's world poet—a latter-day successor to Homer, Virgil, Dante, and Shakespeare. Along with Emily Dickinson, Whitman is regarded as one of America's most significant 19th-century poets and exerts an influence on many other poets, including Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams and Allen Ginsberg.

"O Captain! My Captain!" is an elegy written in 1865 to commemorate the death of President Abraham Lincoln. It was first published in *Sequel to Drum-Taps*, a collection of Whitman's poems inspired by the events of the American Civil War. The poem is perhaps Whitman's most famous—which is ironic, since it is far more conventional in meter, form, and subject than much of Whitman's other work. Although some critics have suggested that Whitman regretted ever writing "O Captain! My Captain!", it undeniably captured the mood of a nation in mourning and has remained one of Whitman's best-loved and most-quoted poems.

This paper attempts to analyze the literary and non-literary aspects of the poem from the perspective of multimodal discourse analysis, which is developed from the theoretical framework of Halliday's functional linguistics. The aim of the study is to explore different possibilities of interpreting Whitman's poetry.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Walt Whitman is famous for innovative and unconventional poems, but "O Captain! My Captain!" is definitely not the case and it's much more conventional in many aspects, which makes possible to interpret it from meter, form or something alike. Lv Chunjia (2016) thought "O Captain! My Captain!" is an extended metaphor poem and uses many symbols to express Whitman's deep sorrow for the death of Abraham Lincoln. Except from uses of metaphor and symbols, Lu Huaping (2011) focused on repetition, apostrophe and the smart arrangement of plots. The hilarious scene of the captain's coming back and people's resounding cheers formed a sharp contrast with the ending line "Fallen cold and dead", which deepens the sorrow of the reader. Jiang Renlong (2013) used a concept called poetic iconicity, derived from

iconicity in linguistics, and it expresses the specific feeling and aesthetic effect in literary text with semiotic form and builds a bridge across which feeling is iconic to form between author and reader. To conclude, most scholars pay attention to literary devices Whitman uses, such as symbols, metaphor and repetition.

This paper mainly uses Halliday's three meta-functions and MDA. The combination of the two will make the interpretation of the poem more accurate and comprehensive. According to Halliday, language has ideational, interpersonal, textual functions. Ideational function constructs a model of experience as well as logical relations, interpersonal function enacts social relationships and textual function creates relevance to context (Halliday, 2004). Multimodal discourse analysis (henceforth MDA) is an emerging paradigm in discourse studies which extends the study of language to the study of language in combination with other resources, such as images, scientific symbolism, gesture, action, music and sound. Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996) held that language and other non-verbal symbols are source of meaning. Thus, it is natural to use MDA to analyze the ship-like poem "*O Captain! My Captain!*".

3. ANALYSIS OF THE POEM "*O Captain! My Captain!*"

To properly understand the poem, one must be aware of the basics of the American Civil War and Lincoln's assassination. In "*O Captain! My Captain!*", Whitman's depiction of Lincoln's heroism is based on Lincoln's success in preserving the union, or bringing the "ship of state" safely to port. By analyzing Whitman's poem, it is quite clear to see how Whitman uses limited words to create unusual visual and musical effects with a unique typographic style, thus vividly conveying and displaying the emotions and meanings he wants to express in his poem.

3.1 Ideational Function

The ideational function is to convey new information, to communicate a content that is unknown to the hearer (Hu Zhuanglin, 2015). It mainly consists of "Transitivity" and "Voice". Transitivity is measurable and will be used to study the clausal structure which is based on the main verb of the sentence. And different processes are distinguished, classified and known as material processes, relational processes, and mental processes. There are also three subsidiary process types that share the features of each of the three main processes, which are behavioural processes, verbal processes and existential processes. The following is the transitivity analysis of the poem "*O Captain! My Captain!*"

The most frequent used processes are material processes. It seems like that we are presented a whole dynamic scene right before our eyes. The speaker, a sailor, reports to his captain that the ship has completed

its journey. They have returned from a successful voyage. The crowd is celebrating on the shore to welcome home the captain. But suddenly the speaker exclaims that the captain has fallen on the deck, "cold and dead". The speaker pleads the captain to rise up as people erupt in joy and wait to have a look at their captain. But the captain does not move. The speaker cannot enjoy with the people outside. He moves towards the fallen captain and mourns over the loss.

Our fearful trip is done [Material Process, Passive voice]

The prize we sought is won [Material process, Passive voice]

Normally material process is made up of an action verb, an Actor and the Goal of the action. And in the above two sentences, action verbs are respectively "done" and "won", and goals are "our fearful trip" and "the prize". As for the actor, it refers to President Lincoln and American people as a whole. And another thing to mention is the use of passive voice. It helps create a feeling of accomplishment and together with the implied actor, it shows that the ship after enduring tough storms and impenetrable winds makes it back on the dock. Jaded and exhausted after a tiresome journey, the mission has been a roaring success.

The relational processes appear when the ship nears the harbor and when the captain lies on the deck. The former gives us an impression that we are on the verge of a successful end. We could easily catch sight of the nearer port, and hear the ringing bells and exulting people. But the poem takes on a dark turn, foreboding something unfavorable to be revealed. "Grim and daring" are the terms referring to the twisting mood. The ship carries some unwanted news for the awaiting crowd, which forms a sharp contrast and strikes a heavy blow on the reader's mind. The captain lies on the deck and his lips are pale and still. The sailor looks sadly at the dead captain in pure agony and observes his lips to have paled like a corpse. The captain fails to respond to his cries of helplessness. The liveliness from the captain's face has drained now. His pulse has stopped and he's unlikely to move from now on.

3.2 Interpersonal Function

Interpersonal function is realized by mood and modality. Mood shows what role the speaker selects in the speech situation and what role he assigns to the addressee. Modality specifies if the speaker is expressing his judgement or making a prediction. As for mood selection, we have information to exchange and that is the indicative. The indicative can be further divided into the declarative and the interrogative. The other two kinds of clauses are exclamatory clause and imperative clause. The former is suitable for expressing a variety of feelings, such as happiness, fear or agony, and can be used to command or satirize as well. The

latter is typically used to command a person to do something. These are the typical uses of the four clause patterns. However, it is important to be aware of the fact that a pattern and its use do not always match up like this. It depends on the context.

Mood consists of two parts: the subject, which is a nominal group, and the finite operator, which is part of a verbal group. When the finite is used, we should pay attention to its tense, which is closely related to the time that the conversation takes place. The poem is mainly written in the present tense simple. However, the poet employs present perfect simple and past tense simple mixed with passive voice to give readers a sort of back story on what has happened prior to the ship going home: "The ship has weather'd every rack, the prize we sought is won". The passive voice helps create a feeling of accomplishment, while the present perfect simple is used to show that past actions have effects on the present. But the poem is mostly describing present actions, suggesting an ongoing pain when it comes to the captain's death and a feeling of impatience when it comes to the boat reaching the shores.

At the first glance of the poem, one will inevitably pay attention to the frequent uses of exclamatory sentences.

The title of the poem "*O Captain! My Captain!*" implies the tension between collective experience and private emotion, "*O Captain! My Captain!*" The speaker compares President Lincoln to the captain of a ship and then refers to him as my captain, emphasizing his own personal connection to the president. The poem is not titled "*Our Captain!*"; rather, the speaker seems to feel that President Lincoln is his captain in particular. Logically, the captain of a ship is indeed everyone's captain, but the poet's choice to emphasize the personal pronoun makes the loss seem private and personal rather than public.

The public celebrations that accompany the return of the ship into the harbor—metaphorically standing in for the victory of the Union in the Civil War—are a shared experience of joy. By contrast, the speaker's experience of grief is private and solitary. The descriptions of the crowds give the impression of a shared public experience. The "people" are "all exulting"; they are "a-crowding" and form a "swaying mass" on the shore. They seem to have become a kind of collective, feeling together and expressing themselves as one body.

On the other hand, the depiction of the speaker himself emphasizes his isolation and solitary melancholy. Although he "hear[s] ... the bells," he ignores them and walks alone, "with mournful tread." The poem presents an experience of collective rejoicing, but the speaker chooses to physically and emotionally separate himself from the crowd. The

isolated nature of the speaker's grief seems to result from his perception of his relationship with Lincoln. That is, his mourning seems to transcend the sorrow of a citizen for the assassination of a leader to become more like that of a son for his father. Indeed, the speaker repeatedly refers to President Lincoln as "father."

In its juxtaposition of the language of loss and victory, "*O Captain! My Captain!*" uses poetic form to model the close relationship between triumph and pain. At first, it seems as if this will be a poem celebrating the victory of the Union in the Civil War. The speaker congratulates President Lincoln on steering the metaphorical ship of state through "every wrack," and declares that "the prize we sought is won." However, halfway through this triumphant first stanza, the speaker breaks off: "But O heart! heart! heart! ... my Captain lies, / Fallen cold and dead." The sudden appearance of a "But O heart!" reveals to the reader that not all is well. The poem scarcely has time to celebrate triumph before facing loss. It looks like the speaker is utterly shocked, almost dumbstruck! He sees drops of blood on the ship. His captain's body lies on the board. The captain who was supposed to be welcomed grandly by the masses is now fallen on the deck, lifeless and cold.

The sailor calls the dead captain to rise up and hear the sound of the bells. The people have gathered to welcome their captain. They are waving the flag and playing the bugle for him. They have brought bouquets and wreaths with ribbon to give him a grand welcome. The crowd is cheering for the captain. They are calling out to him. Their eager faces say they can't wait to see their beloved captain.

He addresses the captain as his "father" many times, beckoning him to rise up and participate in the celebrations. However, as he watches the cheering crowd, his "father" figure still rests lifeless in his arms. He calls to the captain to get up and witness their victory. However, it is all in vain, as he knows that he will not respond. Still, something in his heart prays for a miracle. The speaker puts his arms under the captain's head and tries to raise him as he calls him "dear father". Though the captain is not probably his father literally, he has done something of great responsibility to have earned that respect. However, the speaker wishes that it is some dream he is going through. He cannot accept the reality that his dear captain is now dead and fallen on the deck.

Whitman has given human qualities to lifeless objects. He has personified the walk of the speaker as a "mournful tread" because he cannot live without his captain. He has also personified shores where it is stated, "Exult, O Shores!" As if the shores are humans and they are going to blow trumpets of victory. The exulting crowds and the ringing bells form a sharp

contrast with the fallen cold and dead captain. It's like a stage, where the death of the protagonist calls to an abrupt end when the audience cannot barely recover from the previous climax. While the crowd keeps erupting in joy, the speaker cannot join them. He stays all alone on the ship. Grief-stricken, he walks slowly towards where his beloved captain lies on the deck, cold and dead. One of the poem's painful ironies is that its celebrations are intended to honor the leader who won this victory, yet President Lincoln is not there to witness the triumph. This is made all the starker by the joyous scenes that begin each stanza: there are ringing bells, "bouquets," "wreaths," and cheering crowds. The poem juxtaposes these moments of vibrancy and happiness with the body of the "Captain", which is "cold," "dead," "pale," and "still."

A little digression on the speaker of "*O Captain! My Captain!*" is that the speaker seems to be an ordinary crew member of the ship described in the poem—a ship that stands in, metaphorically, for the United States—since he describes President Lincoln as "my captain." Though the speaker is not gendered in the poem, it's likely that he is a man given that, at the time of the poem's writing, a ship's crew would be made up only of men. Of course, poems are not always beholden to their context, and it is entirely possible to interpret the speaker's gender otherwise!

In any case, at first this speaker appears as a kind of spokesperson for the crowds who cheer the return of the ship, noting that "our fearful trip is done" and "the prize we sought is won." Soon, however, the poem opens up a gap between the speaker and the celebrations around him. While the people are "exulting" or celebrating, the speaker fixates on the drops of blood on the deck of the ship and expresses his grief that the captain has "fallen cold and dead" even at the height of his triumph.

3.3 Textual Function

The textual function refers to the fact that language has mechanisms to make any stretch of spoken or written discourse into a coherent and unified text and make a living passage different from a random list of sentences. Cohesion is a concept to do with discourse or text rather than with syntax, it refers to relations of meaning that exist within the text, and defines it as a text. Discoursal/textual cohesiveness can be realized by employing various cohesion markers: reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction, lexical collocation. The connectedness of a text depends not only on the cohesion of a text, but also on language users establishing coherence by actively relating the different information units in the text. The connectedness of discourse is a characteristic of the mental representation of the text rather than of the text itself. The connectedness thus conceived is often called coherence. Coherence phenomena may be of a

cognitive nature, but that their reconstruction is often based on linguistic signals in the text itself.

In "*O Captain! My Captain!*", there are different words referring to the captain including "Captain" "My Captain" "dear father" "My father", which we have discussed meticulously in the interpersonal function part, so here we turn to the cohesive markers of conjunction word: But.

But O heart! heart! heart!

But here shows the speaker's glee turns to shock and sorrow when he sees his Captain bleeding, cold, and dead.

**But I with mournful tread,
Walk the deck my Captain lies,
Fallen cold and dead.**

The crowd will celebrate the ship's triumphant return. The speaker, however, will mournfully walk the deck where his Captain died. Similarly, the nation in general will rejoice over their victorious military campaign. Some, however, like the speaker, will be in mourning over Lincoln's death. This tragedy will overshadow the greater victory. The last use of "my Captain" shows the speaker forgoing the celebration to continue mourning. He's not ready to live on his own, even though soon, he will have to.

3.4 Multimodal Discourse Analysis

The peculiar typography and musical effects catch our attention. The poem consists of three stanzas of 8 lines each. But in each stanza, the first four lines are quite long while the last four lines are very short, setting them apart from the first four, which makes the shape of each stanza exactly like a real ship. The ship refers to the nation, or the United States. The captain is a metaphor for Abraham Lincoln, president of the United States from 1861-1865. Lincoln was like a captain because he was the leader of the country in the same way that a captain leads his crew. Significantly, Whitman always capitalizes this word, indicating that it refers to a specific captain and one who is highly respected. This kind of unusual form for the poem has a reason though. The poet has deliberate done this to relate it to the thematic shift to the later stages of the stanzas. The first quatrain in each stanza starts with the scene of celebration on the shore at the homecoming of the ship. But then it shifts to the speaker's grief at the death of the captain in the next four lines in each stanza.

The first four lines in each stanza loosely follows an iambic meter (a duple or disyllabic meter where a stressed syllable comes after an unstressed one) and the rhyme scheme used is ABAB. But the next four lines doesn't seem to follow a particular metrical pattern and the rhyme scheme here is CDED.

The difference in the meter and the rhyme scheme between the first four and the last four lines in

each stanza is also deliberate like the length of the lines. As the first quatrain speaks of the people's joy and celebration, it has a rather regular metrical pattern, suggesting a rhythm of life there. But the next quatrain mourns the loss at the captain's death. That is why it's lacking the rhythm.

Even small formal features like the poem's punctuation register the tension between celebration and mourning, as the speaker's emotions descend from joy to grief. For example, the exclamation points after "O Captain!" in the first stanza seem like enthusiastic celebrations of victory. Later in the poem, however, the meaning of the exclamation points begins to subtly change. "O heart!" becomes an exclamation of grief and dismay. The exclamation points after "O Captain!" in the second stanza take on even darker connotations, since it's now clear that the speaker is addressing a dead man rather than a living leader. The five total exclamation points in this stanza take on a desperate quality, as if the speaker is begging the fallen leader to come back to life again. By the final stanza, there is only a single exclamation point, marking the poem's newly restrained tone of quiet grief. The speaker acknowledges that the world around him is celebrating "Exult O shores, and ring O bells!"—but he walks with "mournful tread," grieving even as the country rejoices.

4. CONCLUSION

As we said in the introduction part, the visual effects of the unique typographic style give Whitman's poetry rich meaning. And the coexistence of words and images, which rely on each other and complement each other, becomes the distinctive feature of "*O Captain!*

My Captain!". In this paper, we attempt to analyze the classic poem "*O Captain! My Captain!*" by the American poet Whitman and its unique typographic style in detail, using the multimodal discourse analysis method that emerged in the 1990s and based on the framework of Halliday's systematic functional grammar. In doing so, we hope to explore a new method and approach for the interpretation of Whitman's poetry, and even for the interpretation of more literary texts with multimodal discourse analysis.

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