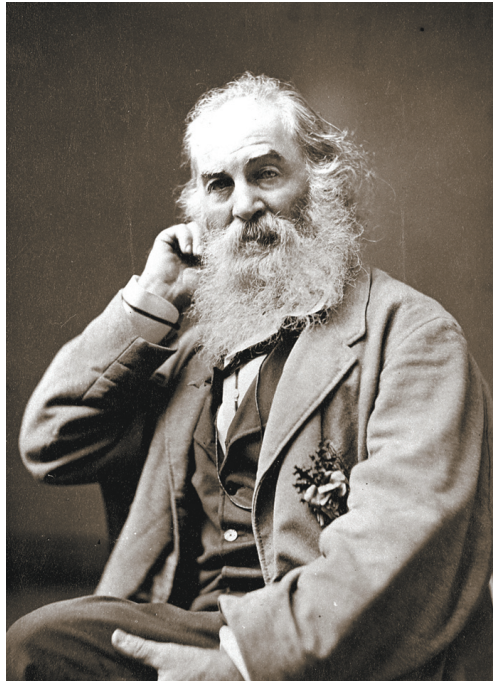


Portraits of Character

from the National Portrait Gallery

Walt Whitman Civil War Poet and Caregiver

Walt Whitman, although best known for his work as an American poet, is also remembered for the care he gave to thousands of sick and injured soldiers in Washington, D.C., hospitals during the Civil War. In December of 1862, Whitman first traveled to the city from his home in Brooklyn, New York, to search through the hospital wards for his brother, George Washington Whitman, who the family believed had been seriously injured in the Battle of Fredericksburg. Not finding his brother there, the forty-three-year-old poet traveled on to Virginia, where he was relieved to find an only slightly wounded George at the Union army camp at Falmouth—across the Rappahannock River from the site of the actual battle. Greatly affected by the suffering he witnessed firsthand, Whitman decided to establish residence in Washington to care for these sick and wounded soldiers. For the next three years, he visited patients daily in various Civil War hospitals located throughout the city. Whitman spent hours listening to their stories, writing letters home to family members, scribbling down their needs in small notebooks he carried with him, and bringing them gifts such as fresh oranges and licorice candy. Some of Whitman's



Walt Whitman (detail) (1819–1892) by Mathew Brady (1823?–1896). Albumen silver print, circa 1867. National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution; gift of Mr. and Mrs. Charles Feinberg

bestknown collections of poetry, including *Drum Taps* and *Sequel to Drum Taps*, as well as the poem “Oh Captain! My Captain!” were inspired by this cumulative experience.

Taking a Closer Look

Throughout his life, Walt Whitman demonstrated his love for America and for mankind, especially in his poetry. Whitman was in his late forties or early fifties when this photograph was taken at the Mathew Brady Studio in Washington, D.C., around 1867. Look carefully at his pose, dress, and demeanor. Do you think this portrait reflects these caring attributes? How?

Learn more about Walt Whitman and read selections from his Civil War–inspired poetry and notebooks at these Web sites:

<http://www.liglobal.com/walt>
The Poetry of Walt Whitman

<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/wwhome.html>
Poet at Work: Recovered Notebooks from the Thomas Biggs Harned Walt Whitman Collection, Library of Congress



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