"I go around among these sights, among the crowded hospitals doing what I can, yet it is a mere drop in the bucket. . . . the path I follow, I suppose I may say, is my own."1 The unique path which Walt Whitman followed during the American Civil War (1861-1865) led to an insightful, poetic record which captures the turmoil of this era on an intimate level. Like all transformational events in history one must examine the literature of the time to reach an understanding of the day-to-day effects on common people. Unlike other wars, no major author was a military participant in the Civil War. Yet there were authors who had personal interaction with soldiers and experienced important events of the war. Herman Melville went on scouting rides in order to get a glimpse of the soldier's lifestyle before writing his Battle Pieces and Aspects of War. Louisa May Alcott published Hospital Sketches (1863) after a brief time as nurse during December 1862 and January 1863. Her work was cut short when she became ill with typhoid fever and returned home.

Besides firsthand diaries of soldiers, the most poignant scenes of the Civil War come from Walt Whitman's wartime prose and most distinctly his book of poetry entitled Drum Taps (1865) Many of its poems resulted from his years in Washington, D.C., spent as a psychological nurse to sick and wounded soldiers. Whitman wrote to a friend in 1863, "The doctors tell me I supply the patients with a medicine which all their drugs & bottles & powders are helpless to yield" in reference to the aid of his cheerful disposition and careful attention to the welfare of the soldiers.2

During these hospital years Whitman was known to be constantly scribbling in little notebooks made of pieced together scraps of paper. These now prized notebooks are filled with bits of poetry, addresses of friends and notes concerning the needs of the wounded soldiers. The material in these notebooks is priceless to modern scholars' understanding of Whitman's experiences during the war. In one such notebook Whitman writes, "The expression of American personality through this war is not to be looked for in the great campaign, & the battle-fights. It is to be looked for . . . in the hospitals, among the wounded."3

**Campbell Hospital**

It was in these hospitals, and not on the battlefields, as some of the poems perhaps suggest, that Whitman's work in Drum Taps was inspired. He brought to life the emotions and realities of the Civil War. Whitman was in his forties when the war began and did not participate as a soldier. Two of Whitman's brothers did, however, join the Union Army. Andrew Jackson Whitman served only briefly but George Washington Whitman fought with the Fifty-first Regiment of New York Volunteers for most of the war. When George was wounded in the Battle of Fredericksburg in December 1862, Whitman made the trip to the nation's capital and then to Falmouth, Virginia, across the Rappahanock River from Fredericksburg to find and care for his brother. George was only slightly wounded, but Walt's errand of mercy would forever change his outlook on the war and life.

When Whitman arrived at the front and climbed the river bank to the Lacy House, a makeshift military hospital, his first sight was "a heap of feet, legs, arms, and human fragments, cut bloody, black and blue, swelled and sickening . . . ."4 Despite such grotesque scenes, he quickly became engrossed in the passion and pathos of the wartime hospitals. He remained in camp with George for eight or nine days and spent much of his time at the field hospital. In his diary of December 26, 1862, he writes, "Death is nothing here. As you step out in the morning from your tent to wash your face you see before you on a stretcher a shapeless extended object, and over it is thrown a dark grey blanket-- it is the corpse of some wounded or sick soldier of the reg't who died in the hospital tent during the night-- perhaps there is a row of three or four of these corpses lying covered over."5

His compassionate nature was quickly overrun with a desire to help these wounded men. On December 28 Whitman left the camp at Falmouth with a trainload of wounded soldiers bound for Washington, D.C. Upon arrival in Washington he visited his friends, the O'Connors, with the intention to remain in the city for only a week to visit some hospitalized soldiers from Brooklyn. However, he quickly realized that he could not leave his new found and suffering comrades and return to his life in Brooklyn, which now seemed meaningless in comparison. He found a job in the Army Paymaster's Office working a few hours a day. For the next three years he kept almost constant company with wounded soldiers and spent his small salary on food, gifts and tobacco for the lonely patients in wards all around Washington. He remained throughout the war, doing the best he could to be a friend to these forgotten men. William Douglas O'Connor wrote of Whitman's hospital service in The Good Gray Poet (1866), suggesting that Whitman had grown gray in the service of his country: "His theory is that these men, far from home, lonely, sick at heart, need more than anything some practical token that they are not forsaken."6

To understand more fully Whitman's Drum Taps, it is necessary to learn more about the hospitals of wartime Washington, many of which he earnestly patronized. They are the physical and psychological setting of some of Whitman's greatest verse. The occurrences within their walls, or more often tent sidings, were the focus of Whitman's life for four years during and after the war. Although many poems are set in charge or battle, he visited the front only twice and witnessed no actual battles. His experience stems from his time spent listening to wounded soldiers, writing letters to their parents, and attempting to preserve individual identities for the anonymous and wounded men. To understand the man Whitman was, and to appreciate the full context of Drum Taps, we must begin with the history of wartime Washington and its military hospitals.
before the war began, Washington was a relatively rural town with limited medical accommodations. There were no military hospitals and very few medical facilities. Yet by the end of the Civil War there were approximately fifty hospitals marking the Washington landscape. Their beginnings were in the tents of regiments of soldiers. The regulations provided that there be a hospital tent in proportion to the number of men within each regiment. 

Whitman writes one of the most accurate descriptions of field hospitals in a letter to his mother in 1864:

> I suppose you know that what we call hospital here in the field, is nothing but a collection of tents, on the bare ground for a floor, rather hard accommodations for a sick man--they heat them here by digging a long trough in the ground under them, covering it over with old railroad iron & earth, & then building a fire at one end & letting it draw through & go out at the other, as both ends are open--this heats the ground through the middle of the hospital quite hot . . .7

Soldiers were kept in the field hospitals indefinitely and often sent on to Washington after their conditions had so worsened as to make surviving the trip almost impossible. When the regimental tent was full, a nearby home or building was usually commandeered and converted for medical care. Although intended as temporary units, these regimental tents and field hospitals were soon clustered together to make larger accommodations of hospital camps that eventually spotted the city.8

Following the early defeats of the Army of the Potomac in 1861 and 1862, Washington became a vast hospital complex with more than 20,000 wounded troops. The first military hospitals were opened in Washington, D.C. in 1861. The E street Infirmary and the Union Hotel both received patients in May 1861. The E street Infirmary's first patients were soldiers in the Sixth Massachusetts Regiment who had been sent to quell a riot of Southern sympathizers in Baltimore. At the time the E Street Infirmary, or Washington INFIRMARY, was the only hospital in the District of Columbia. It remained steadily in operation until destroyed by fire on November 3, 1861.

The military quickly realized that the current facilities were inadequate and many public buildings needed to be converted into hospitals. One wing of the Patent Office became the Patent Office Hospital from October 1861 to March 1863.9 Patients were cared for within the walls of the Capitol, and Reynolds Barracks Hospital was set up on what is now the south lawn of the White House. Other buildings temporarily used as hospitals include the Georgetown College, Water's Warehouse, and Saint Elizabeth's Insane Asylum. Many private buildings were taken over and used as hospitals as well, e.g., hotels and boarding schools, often for a monthly rental fee. Private medical practices, such as Desmarre's Eye and Ear Hospital on the corner of Massachusetts Avenue and 14th Street, were used as well. Miss Lydia English's Female Seminary became Seminary Hospital and was in operation between June 30, 1861, and June 14, 1865.11

Along with private buildings, churches opened their doors for the emergency. Boards were laid atop the pews to serve as the floors in these makeshift asylums for the military sick and wounded. Converted church hospitals in Washington included Ascension, Methodist Episcopal, Epiphany and Union Methodist Episcopal, all in the northwest section of Washington. Between 1861-1862, the U.S. Sanitary Commission urged the importance of building pavilion-style hospitals, instead of renting buildings ill-adapted to use as hospitals. As a result, Mount Pleasant and Judiciary Square hospitals were completed in April of 1862.12

In keeping with the informal setup of these medical hospitals, security and privacy for the sick were virtually nonexistent. Anyone could wander in and out of the hospitals freely. There was a constant stream of people looking for wounded friends and family members, along with zealous pastors attempting to convert the wounded. Some helpless wounded were the victims of theft or were befriended in the hope of being named in a dying man's will. More fortunate soldiers would sometimes receive gifts and food from the good Samaritans. Mothers, wives, or sisters of wounded men were allowed to care for their loved ones and were usually accepted and aided by the hospital nurses. On the negative side, visitors often ignored soldiers in adjacent beds in their zeal to comfort their loved ones. Others would help only those soldiers from a particular state or scoff at Confederate wounded also in the Washington hospitals.13

The hospitals averaged five hundred beds and the majority of buildings were neither heated nor well ventilated. Sanitation was of little concern. Before knowledge of microbes and infection, there was no concern for sterilization of instruments and used bandages littered the floor. Doctors moistened stitching thread with their saliva before sewing wounds and sharpened surgical knives on the sole of their boots. The water supply was a serious consideration because the barracks were seldom participants in municipal conveniences. As a result, blood poisoning, tetanus and gangrene were extremely common. 14 It has been estimated that the hospitals killed as many as they saved. Whitman writes in one of his notebooks of two such needless deaths in Campbell Hospital. "Frederick Huse . . . died 5th Jan.'63, overdosed by opium pills & laudanum, from an ignorant ward master . . . Joshua Ford, wardmaster gave him inwardly lead muriate of ammonia, intended for a wash for his feet." 15

The nutritional deficiencies only added to the difficulties of hospital life. The food within the hospitals was no better than what was received in the field. Wounded soldiers were fed cornmeal and hard tack fried in pork grease. Fruit and vegetables were virtually never fresh and seldom available. Food was sometimes confiscated from civilians, yet by the end of the war there was a shortage everywhere. Scurvy and malnutrition was rampant. Between the poor diet and unhealthy hospital conditions, nature had very little support in aiding the soldiers' healing process. Whitman may have made more than a psychological difference for some soldiers with his frequent gifts of fruit for the men.

Doctors of this time had typically completed only two years of medical school, which consisted of basic principles and lectures and little or no practical training. Although medical breakthroughs were occurring in Europe, it took many years for new procedures to become common in America. Thermometers were being used throughout France, yet there were only twenty thermometers in the entire Union Army. The stethoscope was still a novelty and many surgeons would "dust" wounds with morphine rather than using injections. Harvard University did not own a microscope until after the war. Rampant infection in extremity wounds rendered amputation as the most common Civil War surgery. According to Federal records, three of four
Along with the lack of medical knowledge, a great deal of animosity existed between the volunteer surgeons and the regular officers. The regulars found the volunteers to be unorganized and unable to take orders. At the same time, the volunteers considered the regulars arrogant and set in their methods of backward medical care. Additionally, the hospital doctors were regularly accused of cruelty and neglect of their patients. Many rumors and some specific cases claimed that patients were dying due to the drunkenness of surgeons. Nurses were especially quick to accuse doctors for being intoxicated on duty or drinking alcohol from supplies meant to ease the suffering of the patients. Alcoholic doctors, however, were probably less numerous than the rumors suggest. In Whitman’s many years spent visiting and observing hospital life, he found the majority of doctors to be good and hard-working men. The overload of patients was so great that the physicians were simply unable to give enough individual attention to the men. This is where Whitman’s time in the hospitals was so vital to the patients’ welfare. In Specimen Days Whitman explained, “I found it was the simple matter of personal presence, and emanating ordinary cheer and magnetism, that I succeeded. . . more than by medical nursing, or delicacies, or gifts of money, or anything else.”

Unfortunately, although Whitman understood the psychological needs of the men, it appears that no one understood the basic need for cleanliness. The lack of sanitation in the hospitals resulted in typhoid, dysentery and malarial fevers as the leading diseases of the war. The first two were spread by contamination from bedpans left unemptied in wards or the general lack of adequate latrine facilities in many hospitals. Harrowed Hospital, for example, in Washington began as a series of tents and was soon surrounded by refuse and excrement. As a result, Anopheles mosquitoes and flies abounded, spreading malaria and transporting other diseases. Most Washington hospitals were equipped with mosquito netting, but many patients found it hot and uncomfortable and would not keep it in place. Given their deplorable conditions, it is understandable that soldiers often dreaded being sent to the hospitals.

Judiciary Square hospital became known for its brutality as corpses were left naked on a vacant lot to await burial. One soldier wrote in November 1861 near Washington, “In the hospital men lie on rotten straw; in the camp we provide clean hemlock or pine boughs. . . In the hospital the nurses are convalescent soldiers, so nearly sick themselves that they ought to be in the wards, and from their very feebleness they are selfish and sometimes inhuman in their treatment of the patients. . .” This is a common description of the hospital conditions in the first unbearable months of the war. Yet as the union slowly accepted the fact that the war was not to end quickly, responsibility was taken to improve medical conditions.

The contributions of nurses in the Civil War are inestimable. Not only did hospital staffs, often voluntary, aid the wounded, but they forged a place for women working outside the home. Their presence added a kind, tender figure for the soldiers. In Memoranda During the War, Whitman expressed that “Middle-aged and healthy and good condition’d elderly women, mothers of children, are always best” as nurses. His opinion was in agreement with Dorothea Dix, one of the most important figures in the nursing effort. Dix appeared at the office of the Secretary of War on April 19, 1861. She was familiar with the British Sanitary Commission and had visited the reformed hospitals of Florence Nightingale. Already known as the founder of insane asylums, she was quickly given the title of “Superintendent of Female Nurses.” Miss Dix enforced strict standards for her nurses: they had to be over thirty, healthy, and extremely plain in dress and personal appearance. She also required impeccable moral conduct and took great pride in her nurses.

Unfortunately, Miss Dix’s administrative skills were not conducive to her high administrative position. She was known to take up for her nurses against doctors and administrators to a fault. Extremely particular that everything be done to her exact specifications, she often showed very little respect for the doctors. It must be noted that at the beginning of the war there was not a single medically trained female nurse in America. Often when surgeons disciplined or released nurses, it was with good reason. Yet Miss Dix forced surgeons to retain her nurses, often attempting to have the surgeon or administrator dismissed. In 1863, a general order was issued to deal with these constant confrontations between doctors and Miss Dix. If a nurse was dismissed, the hospital administrator had to offer reason; and no female nurses were to be carried on the muster role if not appointed by Miss Dix, unless approved by the Surgeon General. Yet, unfortunately for Miss Dix, the Surgeon General -- Joseph K. Barnes -- was known to enroll any woman requested of a hospital head. Much to Miss Dix’s dismay, many young and attractive women were employed as nurses, and quite a few eventually married soldiers whom they nursed.

Along with the positive impact of nurses, the U.S. Sanitary Commission was established in June of 1861, for the purpose of giving advice based on the most current medical knowledge of the day. It became the organizing force of Civil War hospitals. Its goal was efficient, decent health care for the wounded. The directors were men of high professional standing and had the political means to apply pressure as needed. The members of the Sanitary Commission were volunteers, but the professional fundraisers and directors held paid positions. The Commission set up shelters for troops and bought and distributed medical supplies. They raised funds through donations, fairs, and auctions. At one such fair, President Lincoln donated a draft of the Emancipation Proclamation, which was purchased by Mr. T.B. Bryan of Illinois for $3,000 and donated to the Chicago Soldier’s Home.

A similar organization of great importance was the U.S. Christian Commission, founded in November 1861 in New York City by the Young Men’s Christian Association. It also focused on service to the wounded, but with an added emphasis on spiritual and intellectual improvement. This organization was strictly voluntary and worked with the Sanitary Commission, the surgeons and the hospital chaplains. It established libraries of hometown newspapers, Bibles and other religious information within the hospitals. In a letter to his mother, Whitman expressed a high opinion of the Christian Commissioners, “they go everywhere and receive no pay,” but he described the Sanitary Commissioners as “incompetent and disagreeable.”27 Whitman was appointed as a representative of the Christian Commission on January 20, 1863.
Whitman writes in one of his notebooks, "I have been... a good deal to Campbell and Armory Square Hospitals, and occasionally to that at the Patent Office... Every one of these cots has its history--every case is a tragic poem, an epic, a romance, a pensive and absorbing book, if it were only written." Although Whitman visited nearly all of the Washington hospitals, much of his time was spent at Armory Square Hospital. It was a pavilion hospital constructed in the summer of 1862 and was located on Seventh Street across from the grounds of the Smithsonian Institute, just beyond the canal. Today this is on the Washington Mall, where the Smithsonian Air Museum is located. At this time the canal was basically an open sewer, which rendered this location rather undesirable. The old City Canal was a "fetid bayou filled with floating dead cats, all kinds of putridity, and reeking with pestilential odors." However, the site was close to the major thoroughfares and was easily accessible to the wharves and the railroad depot.

The hospital consisted of eleven long pavilions placed side by side with their gables facing the front and rear of the grounds. There was a main pavilion that constituted an administration building. It contained a reception room and offices for the surgeon in charge, the dispensary, a linen room, post office, and officers' quarters. In the rear of this building was a general kitchen, laundry, and mess hall. The remaining ten pavilions were positioned five on each side of the administration building. These ten buildings served as wards for the soldiers. Each ward pavilion was 149 x 25 feet with an average height of about thirteen feet, and held about fifty beds. A section at the rear of each ward served as a dining room and lodging for female nurses before facilities were built to house them. At the opposite end of the ward were the bathroom, water-closet and wardmaster's room. Within the wards just described Whitman spent many hours at soldiers' bedside. He writes of ward K in Armory Square Hospital, "I am very familiar with this hospital... have spent many days & nights in it-- have seen many die here, have seen the wounded brought here after battles, &c."31

Campbell Hospital was another in which Whitman spent many hours. Originally, it had been a barracks for cavalry and was located on the northern extremity of the city, near the end of Seventh Street. It consisted of long, low, narrow buildings made of rough boards. Six of these encloosed an oblong space with two buildings forming each long side and one building forming each short side with one building in the center. These buildings all served as wards. Jutting off perpendicular from one side of the oblong were five additional buildings. The center building served as dining room and kitchen with the other buildings also serving as wards. A building projecting from the short side was used for administration purposes. There were eleven total wards that had a combined capacity of six hundred beds. The small buildings at the top served as a series of outbuildings serving as nurses quarters, guard rooms, Negro quarters, and the dead house.

Ridge ventilation was introduced after the barracks were turned over to the Medical Department. This type of ventilation refers to the clearing away of earth from the walls and laying open the ridge during summer for air movement. Louvered exits were used in winter with inlets near the stoves. Ten tent wards holding fifty beds each were soon added (not shown on the diagram). Many similar converted barracks hospitals were in poor condition because they were not connected with the municipal water supply. Campbell Hospital was more fortunate due to its location. The Potomac River water was distributed to the wards. The waste water was carried off by drains to sewers and every alternate ward had a bathroom and sinks that were kept clean by a running stream.32

Methods of transporting the wounded from battlefields to the described hospitals were another challenge for which the military was unequipped at the beginning of the war. Wounded soldiers were roughly placed into the back of rickety two-wheeled vehicles which jostled and bumped them endlessly. The ambulance drivers were of the roughest class, described by a surgeon in 1862 as "the most vulgar, ignorant, and profane men I ever came in contact with... such as would disgrace... any menials ever sent out to the aid of the sick and wounded." Drivers had no concern for the cries of the soldiers and had not even the decency to get water for the wounded during the short stops on the journey.

In battles such as the second Bull Run, however, wounded men were fortunate to be taken off the battlefield at all. Frequently, ambulance drivers fled at the first sound of gunfire. Of the ambulances which remained many had broken down, leaving military divisions without any transportation vehicles. Because the Union troops were defeated, wounded who had been left on the field were on Confederate ground. Three thousand soldiers remained where they had been wounded three days after the battle. These soldiers were starving and had received no attention. Miraculously, 600 still remained alive on the field five days after the battle. After seven days the last group of men were transported to hospitals in Washington, despite the fact that many of the ambulance drivers sent to retrieve these men drank the supplies of alcohol and never reached the battlefield.33 The deaths resulting from such a lack of organization are inestimable and abominable.

In 1861, the U.S. Army Medical Department was headed by an eighty-year-old man whose methodsailed from his experiences in the War of 1812. It was April 1862 before he was replaced by William Hammond. Hammond was young and well educated, and the ambulance system eventually began to see improvement. Dr. Hammond appointed Dr. Jonathan Letterman as Medical Director of the Army of the Potomac to organize an ambulance corps. Letterman had ambulances manned with soldiers who received specific training for their positions. He set up division hospitals and regimental hospitals which were to merge into divisional units. The wounded were arranged so as to transport those less severely wounded to general hospitals-- clearing the overcrowding and allowing the worst cases to receive care in the field hospitals. Ambulances moved constantly and on a set schedule. Antietam was the first battle after Letterman's appointment, and the well organized results were the most promising sign of improvement.34

The once quiet capital was soon abuzz with military hospitals and sick soldiers. In figure three, a map showing the location of fifty-six hospitals in use during the war shows the extent to which hospitals covered Washington. These hospitals only added to the wartime atmosphere of the city that already swarmed with regiments of soldiers. Army wagons and artillery tore up the unpaved streets and roads, and ambulances jolted by all hours. Whitman's Washington consisted of an unfinished Capitol dome with blocks of marble and granite strewn about its grounds. The Washington monument was not yet half of its present height of 555 feet. The Treasury, Post-office, and Interior Department buildings were unfinished as well. There were few sidewalks and only one theatre.35 The years of war were a time of growth and change for Washington. The Union capital watched as the country was torn apart by war and restored by defeat and compromise. On March 2, 1863, Whitman writes, "This is the last day of the 37th Congress, the body during whose existence..."
Despite the many influential and important members of Congress, Abraham Lincoln is the figure which one views as most representative of the era of the Civil War. The tall, gaunt Westerner who spoke in country anecdotes and was seen to be lacking in social etiquette and grace possessed an honest nature, kind heart and shrewd wisdom.37 Although opinions of Lincoln in the Capital were not unfavorable, Lincoln's appearance in Washington was not greeted with the usual fanfare associated with a new president. Crowds of people, mostly men, poured into the city to watch the inauguration, but a serious tone filled the streets. There was little decoration for the parade and many businesses and residences along the route had closed up their windows and doors. Rumors floated that if Mr. Lincoln were inaugurated, Virginia horsemen would capture him later in the evening at the Union Ball. Lincoln's carriage rode in a short almost military procession surrounded by cavalry on highstepping horses attempting to block all view of the man inside, assuring that an attempt on his life would be very difficult. To the surprise of many no trouble occurred during or after the inauguration. Clara Barton wrote, "The 4th of March has come and gone, and we have a live, Republican President."

Possessing many of the same qualities -- a gentleness of spirit, working-class background, and a burning love of America and democracy -- Lincoln and Whitman held each other in the greatest respect. There is no record of their having ever met one another, but in his account of seeing Lincoln on his way to the Second Inaugural, Whitman wrote of "the old goodness, tenderness, sadness, and canny shrewdness, underneath the furrows" of Lincoln's face. In turn, Lincoln apparently read and enjoyed Whitman's poetry. It is rumored that Lincoln picked up a copy of Leaves of Grass that was lying in the law office one day and after a moment began to read aloud, praising Whitman's verses for "... their virility, freshness, unconventional sentiments, and unique forms of expression..."39 Sadly, Whitman was to write some of his best poetry and the most famous of all American elegies, "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," upon Lincoln's death in 1865.

Walt Whitman -- 1867

The process of "bringing out" Drum Taps was to be long and frustrating. Whitman could not find a publisher and finally had to borrow money to have his new volume printed privately. Adding to the delays, when Drum Taps finally came near to publication, Lincoln was assassinated. Whitman soon recognized that his book was now incomplete, and he wrote Sequel to Drum Taps, a series of eighteen poems beginning with the most famous of American elegies, "When Lilacs Last in the Door-yard Bloom'd." With the addition of the Lincoln poems, Whitman's Drum Taps became a thorough psychological examination of the war-- expressing the years of recruitment and patriotism and the harsh and bloody realities of the wounding and death of young soldiers, consummated in the sorrow and tragedy of Lincoln's untimely death.

The tone and purpose of Drum Taps closely shadow the changes in Whitman's life. While living in New York he expresses a common attitude during the onset of war, manifest in his war poetry with an exhilarated "First O Songs for a Prelude." Whitman's Manhattan is full of "pride and joy" as her men march off to war. There is an enlivened sense of excitement as America is put to the test. The tone is quick and urgent to declare the preparation of America and her boys for war. "War! an arm'd race is advancing! the welcome for battle, no / turning away." Whitman writes, "How I love them! how I could hug them..." allowing his childlike optimism and his love for the men to shine through. This early poetry is full of brass bands and glory, with no anticipation of the trials and loss to come.

The poetry following the early recruitment poems takes on a tone of pathos. These are the poems written between Whitman's time in New York and his sequel poetry written after the death of President Lincoln. These powerful poems come from Whitman's years in Washington, with his hospital life serving as the emotional center of the verse. The first such poem, "By The Bivouac's Fitful Flame," renders a haunting account of a lonely soldier's thoughts of home. In the dark and solitude of a nighttime camp when there is only an "occasional figure moving," the soldier's mind turns to "life and death--of the home and the past and loved,/ and of those that are far away;/ A solemn and slow procession there as I sit on the ground,/ By the bivouac's fitful flame." This melancholy poem expresses...
Whitman's empathy for the young, homesick men and is based on stories from his wounded soldiers. Whitman's evocative imagery signifies the emotion of the soldier's experience and explains his plight in a way unknown to the separate world of civilians.

Such lines reveal the inner change in Whitman--his metamorphosis from "Song of Myself" to "The Dresser." Whitman's years of hospital work in Washington represent his passage from "Walt Whitman, an American, one of the roughs, a kosmos to O'Connor's "Good Gray Poet." "The Dresser" is Whitman's presentation of his personal role in the hospitals and the war experience. The narrator is the old man telling "Years hence of these scenes, of these furious passions, these chances" as he requests the reader to "follow me without noise, and be of strong heart." As we enter the hospital, the tone quickly shifts from lethargic memory to an acute sense of duty and a fervent desire to ease the suffering of the men he so admires. We are shown the realities of the hospitals, "refuse pail,/ Soon to be fill'd with clotted rags and blood, emptied, and fill'd again." Whitman also reveals his own unbearable duties: "Cleanse the one with a gnawing and putrid gangrene, so sickening, so offensive." Yet grotesque reality is seen through the idealistic and loving eyes of the poet who says, "(poor boy! I never knew you./ Yet I think I could not refuse this moment to die for you, if that would save you.)" and who so mercifully thinks, "(Come, sweet death! be persuaded, O beautiful death!" Whitman recalls the experience "sweet and sad" which so altered his life by its effect.

The importance of the hospitals in Drum Taps is the importance of the hospitals in Whitman's own psychological evolution. Without these emotionally intensive years of hospital work, Whitman might never have matured past Leaves of Grass and its focus on man as individual and all powerful. Through his proximity to war and death he comes to accept truths of the all encompassing human condition. It is this shift from the transcendentalist self to the common concerns of humanity which allows Whitman the depth to write some of his greatest poetry in Drum Taps. Years later Whitman wrote, "Curious as it may seem the War, to me, proved humanity. "42

In "Come Up From The Fields Father," Whitman depicts both sides of a story with which he was painfully familiar. As the parents of a young soldier hurry from their farmers' routine to read news of their son, thoughts flash through the mother's mind, "O this is not our son's writing, yet his name is sign'd;/ O a strange hand writes for our dear son-- O stricken/ mother's soul!" The "strange hand" belonged to Whitman in many cases as he so lovingly performed the rufuel duty of writing to families of the suffering or death of their beloved soldiers. Whitman's striking image of the grieving mother with "the little sisters huddle[d] around" is effective because it is written through sincere empathy with the scene. Along with his role as the "strange hand," Walt and his family had many experiences of anxiety and fear while the fate of brother George, ultimately a prisoner of war, was unknown. They were, however, extremely lucky as they never received that letter-- "they stand at home at the door, he is dead already"--except in the deepest fears of their imagination.

Whitman's practice of writing letters home for soldiers began during those first days spent in camp with George at Falmouth. Many of the soldiers were illiterate or simply inarticulate, and as a man of letters Whitman found great joy and responsibility in writing for his wounded men. Upon leaving the protected atmosphere of Brooklyn and arriving in the world of soldiers, Whitman realized the chasm that separated the soldier's existence and that of the civilian's world. Whitman's writing-- verse, letters, newspaper articles and notebooks-- created a link between these two worlds and a better understanding of the unique suffering on each side. In some ways, Whitman's role as psychological nurse to the wounded extends to a surrogate and psychological bridge between two distinct worlds during the Civil War.

I have been sitting late tonight by the bedside of a wounded Captain, a friend of mine... in a large Ward partially vacant. The lights were out, all but a little candle, far from where I sat. I sat there by him... occupied with the musings that arose out of the scene, the long shadowy Ward, the beautiful ghostly moonlight on the floor. . .43

Such descriptions by Whitman served as his inspiration for poems like "Vigil Strange I Kept On The Field One Night." He placed his personal experience, "Passing sweet hours, immortal and mystic hours with/ you, dearest comrade" into a "battle-field spreading." Although traced to his own diary entries, very few of Whitman's poems are clearly set within the resulting verse. He viewed his writing as not only a duty of the hospitals, "refuse pail,/ Soon to be fill'd with clotted rags and blood, emptied, and fill'd again." Whitman also reveals his own unbearable duties: "Cleanse the one with a gnawing and putrid gangrene, so sickening, so offensive." Yet grotesque reality is seen through the idealistic and loving eyes of the poet who says, "(poor boy! I never knew you./ Yet I think I could not refuse this moment to die for you, if that would save you.)" and who so mercifully thinks, "(Come, sweet death! be persuaded, O beautiful death!" Whitman recalls the experience "sweet and sad" which so altered his life by its effect.

Whitman's years of hospital work in Washington represent his passage from "Walt Whitman, an American, one of the roughs, a kosmos to O'Connor's "Good Gray Poet." "The Dresser" is Whitman's presentation of his personal role in the hospitals and the war experience. The narrator is the old man telling "Years hence of these scenes, of these furious passions, these chances" as he requests the reader to "follow me without noise, and be of strong heart." As we enter the hospital, the tone quickly shifts from lethargic memory to an acute sense of duty and a fervent desire to ease the suffering of the men he so admires. We are shown the realities of the hospitals, "refuse pail,/ Soon to be fill'd with clotted rags and blood, emptied, and fill'd again." Whitman also reveals his own unbearable duties: "Cleanse the one with a gnawing and putrid gangrene, so sickening, so offensive." Yet grotesque reality is seen through the idealistic and loving eyes of the poet who says, "(poor boy! I never knew you./ Yet I think I could not refuse this moment to die for you, if that would save you.)" and who so mercifully thinks, "(Come, sweet death! be persuaded, O beautiful death!" Whitman recalls the experience "sweet and sad" which so altered his life by its effect.

The Washington hospital with mosquito netting

Washington hospitals included a soldier's narrative of a night march. He speaks of the "road unknown" --literally the road of the exhausted soldiers, but more poetically that road of life all men follow into the unknown. Whitman describes the men in this "improptu hospital" as "Faces, varieties, postures beyond description, most in/ obscurity, some of them dead." This issue of obscurity was of great importance for Whitman's hospital years and the resulting verse. He viewed his writing as not only a bridge between the two worlds of American society during the war, but as a calling to give identity to the lives of these neglected and anonymous young men. Becoming a voice to families and to the civilian world for these brave men was the great achievement of Whitman's life. The opportunity to care for the rough and uneducated soldier and to befriend him intimately was the zenith of Whitman's
It is not surprising that Whitman was to voice "my book and the war are one" years later. The tragic sights and sounds of the years in Washington were so moving as to alter his views of men in a democracy, where the common soldiers saved the day. His poem "Camp In The Day- Break Grey and Dim" is a moving depiction of the earlier mentioned account of sights in the first few days of camp with George. The horrors which he encountered are enough to evoke a transformation in any man. The hospitals and wartime experience served to sustain and bolster his beliefs of democracy. Young men living and dying for one another and coming through the trials of war as friends was an ideal situation for Whitman. In "Over The Carnage Rose Prophetic A Voice" he writes, "One from Massachusetts shall be a Missouri's comrade . . . More precious to each other than all the riches of the earth."

Whitman's hope was that men rich and poor would become comrades through knowing one another on a personal level during the war. He strongly advocated the officer who came up from the ranks, as was the case with his brother George. He found the hierarchical system of West Point and the Naval Academy distasteful, and he was always to take the side of the uneducated soldier against the formally trained officers. Just as he describes in his poetry, Whitman found a close and intimate friend in one young, uneducated Confederate soldier named Peter Doyle during his years in Washington.

Whitman was a man with a great deal of love for life, for America, and for his fellow man. This inner appreciation and joy about the world around him were first depicted in *Leaves of Grass* and its praise of nature and the self. This overwhelming love of life found its truest outlet during Whitman's years in Washington. His time as a nurse served to fulfill what for Whitman were his basic needs to love and nurture others, bringing joy to himself and the wounded. Whitman spent many years searching for his niche in the world where he could feel important and accepted. He craved more than an ordinary life, and the singular years of the Civil War coupled with Whitman's uncommon experience as attendant to the wounded, served to provide him with the rare pleasure of "find[ing] myself in my element among these scenes."45

In "Hymn of Dead Soldiers" Whitman depicts his peace of mind as he "chant[s] this chant of my silent soul/ in the name of all dead soldiers." He speaks of the companions he has known, many who died in the hospitals, asking that their memories "Follow me ever! desert me not, while I live." The memories of these men were never to be forgotten by Whitman. The last stanza of the poem reads ". . .make me a fountain,/ That I exhale love from me wherever I go,/ For the sake of all dead soldiers." Such sentiments were to temper his life and writings from the years in Washington until his death. After writing *Speciman Days*, Whitman was asked in 1888, "Do you go back to those days?" and he is said to have answered, "I do not need to. I have never left them."46

Of these days Whitman refers to, the most tragic and indelible was April 16, 1865 when his beloved Lincoln was assassinated in the Ford Theatre. "Hush'd Be The Camps Today" was written on April 19, 1865 to commemorate the day of Lincoln's burial. It is the sole Lincoln poem included in *Drum Taps* (the others are included in *Sequel to Drum Taps*). Here Whitman retains his role as a voice for the common soldiers. Along with declaring his own particular sorrow, he places his emphasis on the tragic emotions of his comrades, "Sing, with the shovel'd clods that fill the grave-- a/ verse./ For the heavy hearts of soldiers."

Although this poem focuses on the loss felt by the soldiers, Whitman's sense of sadness over the death of Lincoln was profound. The details of Whitman's relationship with President Lincoln are sketchy, yet the effect Lincoln had on the Good Gray Poet is undeniable. Lincoln was the ideal of the public man as civil servant, much in the same way that Whitman was the ideal of the private citizen. Lincoln embodied Whitman's ideal of the common man: a strong, plain Westerner-- an American through and through. In one of his many Washington notebooks Whitman recorded, "Mr. Lincoln on the saddle generally rides a good-sized, easy-going gray horse, is dress'd in plain black, somewhat rusty and dusty, wears a black stiff hat and looks about as ordinary in attire, &c., as the commonest man."

Lincoln's presidency bordered on a fulfillment of prophecy for Whitman. In his essay "The Eighteenth Presidency!" (c.1854) Whitman described his model candidate:

I would be much pleased to see some heroic, shrewd, fully-informed, healthy-bodied, middle-aged, beard-faced American blacksmith or boatman come down from the West across the Alleghanies, and walk into the Presidency, dressed in a clean suit of working attire, and with the tan all over his face, breast, and arms. . .47

This description uncannily applies to the backwoods lawyer, and it is no wonder that Whitman devoted himself to admiring Lincoln from afar during his Washington years. In a letter to Nathaniel Bloom and John F. Gray, Whitman describes the new president as having a face "like a hoosier Michelangelo, so awful ugly it becomes beautiful. . ." Later in this same letter he addresses Lincoln as a "captain" who is doing well "keeping the ship afloat." This image of Lincoln was to be developed in one of Whitman's most famous, though uncharacteristic, poems "O Captain! My Captain!"

Lincoln's death was a tragic moment in our country's history and it came as a great shock to Whitman. He would forever refer to the assassination as Lincoln's "murder" in his speeches given in memory of Lincoln in the years to come. Considering the hope Whitman held concerning a unification of social class and geographies after the war, Lincoln's assassination shattered many of his expectations. Through this devastation Whitman wrote the most famous of American elegies in remembrance of Lincoln, "When Lilacs Last In The Door-Yard Bloom'd" which serves as the opening poem of *Sequel To Drum-Taps*.

The years Whitman spent in Washington, D.C., during the Civil War were the core of his greatest poetry after the first three editions of *Leaves of Grass* (1855-1860). Whitman's journey to visit his brother George in December 1862 served to immerse him in "Quicksand years that whirl me I know not whither." Yet fate controlled these years of his life and by March 1863 Whitman had written to his brother...
Jeff, "I cannot give up my Hospitals yet. I never before had my feelings so thoroughly and (so far) permanently absorbed, to the very roots, as by these huge swarms of dear, wounded, sick, dying boys..." Out of the experience of his Washington years came not only some of Whitman's greatest writing but his greatest, most democratic self. The earlier brash Whitman was so humbled and affected by these young men as to be "permanently absorbed" in those memories for the remainder of his years. Perhaps the best summary for Whitman's experience is given in his own words in "Not Youth Pertains To Me." He concludes Drum Taps by declaring his greatest achievement in life with these lines, "yet there are two things inure to me: / I have nourish'd the wounded, and sooth'd many al dying soldier; / And at intervals I have strung together a few songs, / Fit for war, and the life of the camp."

ENDNOTES
1. The prose can be found in Memoranda During the War (1875), and in Speciman Days (1882); this quotation is taken from Walt Whitman: Notebooks and Unpublished Prose Manuscripts, ed. Edward F. Grier (New York: New York University Press, 1984), II, 588.
10. Medical and Surgical History of the Civil War, VI, 897.
15. Grier, 519.
27. Allen, 289.
30. Medical and Surgical History of the Civil War, VI, 937.
32. Medical and Surgical History of the Civil War, VI, 913.
33. Adams, 75-6.
34. Adams, 77.
37. Leech, 47.
38. Leech, 56.
43. Basler, 54.
45. Miller, 85.
46. Brower, 45.
47. Allen, 197.
48. Miller, 49.

Traveled to Washington, D.C., area to search for brother George Whitman among the wounded. Wallet stolen in Philadelphia on the way, and George was not found in military hospitals in the city. Helped by William D. O’Connor and Charles Eldridge (friends made while producing the 1860 edition of *Leaves of Grass* in Boston), who were working as civil servants in wartime Washington. Planned for publication of his book of war poems, *Drum Taps*. Returned to Washington from New York. With the help of William O’Connor, began work in the Patent Office building as a copyist for the Bureau of Indian Affairs. The essay emphasized Whitman’s patriotism in caring for the Civil War wounded and the uplifting nature of his poetry. *Drum Taps* received mixed reviews. By the time Whitman reached Washington, moved and overwhelmed by the injured soldiers he encountered, he had decided to stay as a nurse and work in the hospitals for the duration of the war. The experience, though taxing, was ultimately rewarding for Whitman, who enjoyed helping the soldiers and regularly kept an account of his work with them. By the time the Civil War was over, Whitman estimated that he had made over 600 visits or tours, and went among from some 80,000 to 100,000 of the sick and wounded, as sustainer of spirit and body in some degree, in time of need. Six months after his original publication of *Drum-Taps*, Whitman republished the book with a sequel, a series of poems responding to the end of the war, including the death of Lincoln. But Whitman’s experience as a witness to the war was mostly important as an inspiration for poetry. A collection of poems titled “Drum Taps,” was published after the war as a book. The poems contained in it ultimately appeared as an appendix to later editions of Whitman's masterpiece, "Leaves of Grass."