

As Toilsome I Wander'd Virginia's Woods

Whitman was almost 42 when the Civil War broke out. He was living in New York—Brooklyn—with his mother, and his brother George, 32, immediately enlisted. In December, 1862, George was wounded at the first battle of Fredericksburg, and Whitman immediately traveled south to find him. He stopped in Washington, D.C. along the way, searching makeshift army hospitals. The realities of the war became real for him when he witnessed the suffering of the wounded. He did not locate George, so Whitman left for the front lines in Virginia. Here he found his brother who was not seriously wounded. Afterward, he notified his mother he would stay in Washington both writing and attending to wounded Union and Confederate soldiers.

While in Virginia, Whitman penned "As Toilsome I Wander'd Virginia Woods." Distribute copies of the poem to the students and read it aloud to them. (You may wish to practice ahead of time so that your reading is smooth and rhythmic.) Read the poem a second time, stopping at the end of each line or section to discuss its meaning. Following this discussion, ask the students to explain how the poem illustrates the profound impact the war had on Whitman.

As Toilsome I Wander'd Virginia's Woods

As toilsome I wander'd Virginia's woods,
To the music of rustling leaves kick'd by my feet, (for 'twas
autumn)

I mark'd at the foot of a tree the grave of a soldier;
Mortally wounded he and buried on the retreat, (easily
all could understand,)

The halt of a mid-day hour, when up! no time to lose—yet
this sign left

On a tablet scrawl'd and nail'd on the tree by the grave,
Bold, cautious, true, and my loving comrade.

Long, long I muse, then on my way go wandering,
Many a changeful season to follow, and many a scene of life,
Yet at times through changeful season and scene, abrupt,
alone, or in the crowded street,

Comes before me the unknown soldier's grave, comes
The inscription rude in Virginia's woods,
Bold, cautious, true, and my loving comrade.