

# A Noiseless Patient Spider



## POEM TEXT

- 1 A noiseless patient spider,
- 2 I mark'd where on a little promontory it stood isolated,
- 3 Mark'd how to explore the vacant vast surrounding,
- 4 It launch'd forth filament, filament, filament, out of  
itself,
- 5 Ever unreeling them, ever tirelessly speeding them.
  
- 6 And you O my soul where you stand,
- 7 Surrounded, detached, in measureless oceans of space,
- 8 Ceaselessly musing, venturing, throwing, seeking the  
spheres to connect them,
- 9 Till the bridge you will need be form'd, till the ductile  
anchor hold,
- 10 Till the gossamer thread you fling catch somewhere, O  
my soul.



## SUMMARY

The speaker noticed a silent spider, standing alone on a small ledge. The speaker further noticed that the spider, in order to investigate its huge, empty environment, sent out thread after thread. The spider is described as doing this constantly and perpetually, without appearing to get tired or slow down.

The poem then addresses the speaker's soul, which likewise stands isolated and unconnected in a vast, open place. The soul is described as continually considering, exploring, and seeking connections. The speaker says that the soul will go on doing this until it succeeds in finding and creating links between itself and its surroundings.



## THEMES



### ISOLATION AND CONNECTION

"A Noiseless Patient Spider" explores the relationship between the individual self and the larger world. The poem depicts a spider that is isolated in space but actively sending filaments "out of itself," seeking connection as it builds its web. This spider becomes an [extended metaphor](#) for the speaker's soul, which is likewise isolated and working to find a sense of connection. Ultimately, the poem suggests that in spite of the loneliness people might experience as individuals, the work of the soul is to constantly seek and make

connections—however daunting such a task may be.

The speaker begins by describing the spider as "isolated" and in a "vacant vast surrounding," essentially meaning it's all by itself as far as the eye can see. Yet the spider is also described as "patient" and "tireless" as it "explore[s]" its surroundings and makes its web. It "launch[es] forth" filament after filament into this unknown space, indicating its willingness to put itself out there, as it were—something the poem thus implies is an invaluable part of establishing meaningful connections; after all, the spider can't expect the web to build itself.

The spider then becomes a metaphor for the speaker's soul, which is described as "detached, in measureless oceans of space"—mirroring the image of the spider's isolation. Like the spider with its filaments, the soul is described as "ceaselessly musing, venturing, throwing" out "gossamer thread" to "catch somewhere." The spiritual work of the speaker, then, reflects the work of the spider; the soul, like the spider, must actively seek the connections it desires, and can do so by sending forth parts of itself.

What exactly this means is open to interpretation, though it's possible that those "gossamer threads" refer to person's personal writing, artwork, or other creative endeavor that might reflect who they are. What's clear is that once a connection is formed, it becomes a sort of "anchor"—offering the speaker stability and comfort within the "measureless oceans of space."

The poem switches to the future tense in its final lines, which suggests that the work of the soul is ongoing: perhaps, just as spiders have to create new webs many times, the soul too must constantly seek new connections, constantly send forth the "threads" that will anchor it. The future tense also conveys a sense of uncertainty in the poem, since the connections are not yet complete.

At the same time, however, since readers can see that the spider's work is both natural and inevitable—readers trust that the spider *will* create its web eventually, since that is simply what spiders do—the metaphor between spider and soul imparts a sense of hope in the poem's ending. Like the spider with its web, the poem suggests that the soul will at some point find the "bridge" it "need[s]." In other words, the soul will succeed in making a connection to someone or something else.

What's more, while the poem depicts both the spider and the soul as isolated, the metaphor it creates between them suggests that connection already exists. The poem begins with a moment of connection between the speaker and the outside world, since it begins with the *speaker* observing the spider. Like the spider who "stood," the soul is described as "standing," and where the spider "explore[d]" its "surrounding," the soul is

“surrounded” by “space.” The words “surrounding” and “surrounded” imply a presence outside the self, even if that presence is at first experienced as “measureless oceans of space.” Through its metaphor of a natural web, the poem thus ultimately suggests that people seek and make connections within a universe that is already, like a web, infinitely complex, meaningful, and interconnected.

#### Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-10



### CREATION AND CREATIVITY

“A Noiseless Patient Spider” presents a spider engaged in an act of creation, as it makes its web. The speaker’s soul, too, is engaged in a creative act, as the soul crafts its own “web” of connection. The poem thus suggests that any creative act (including the writing of poems) is an act of exploration, in that it involves both finding and making connections between apparently unlike things.

Both the spider and the soul are depicting as finding and actively creating connections. The spider “explore[s]” its “surrounding,” and the speaker’s soul is described as “musing, venturing ... [and] seeking.” These verbs suggest intellectual exploration, as the spider and the soul search for the “spheres” with which they can connect.

The spider and soul are also described with verbs that emphasize agency. The spider “launch[es] forth” its filaments, “unreeling them” and “tirelessly speeding them.” The soul, similarly, is “ceaselessly musing, venturing, throwing” its own “gossamer thread.” The spider and soul are thus shown as actively forging and crafting connections. On a [metaphorical](#) level, this might reflect the intellectual exploration and crafting involved in the act of writing.

To that end, the parts of this poem itself can be read as “filaments” of a web. The long lines of varied lengths visually suggest the threads of a web, each “launch’d forth” from the left margin, as though into the “measureless ... space” of the rest of the page. The commas at the line endings suggest that each line is a complete filament, but that the act of creation is ongoing. The full stops at the end of each stanza could be read as enclosing the two webs suggested by the poem: that of the spider and of the soul. The poem as a whole brings these two webs together into one.

The poem thus *enacts* the crafting of connections that it *describes*. Indeed, the poem’s extended metaphor forges a connection between two apparently unlike things—the spider and the speaker’s soul. And though the poem’s use of “you” refers to the speaker’s soul, it also turns the poem outward; the second person brings the readers into the poem’s web, as though they are in dialogue with the speaker. The poem itself

thus is essentially a complete act of a creation, a web that forges connections between the speaker, the spider, and the reader.

#### Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Line 1
- Lines 4-5
- Lines 6-10



## LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

### LINES 1-3

*A noiseless patient spider,  
I mark’d where on a little promontory it stood isolated,  
Mark’d how to explore the vacant vast surrounding,*

The poem starts by establishing the image that will develop into the its [extended metaphor](#): “A noiseless patient spider,” which the speaker notices standing all alone on a small ledge (“a little promontory”).

While letting readers know that the speaker is looking at a spider, the complicated [syntax](#) (basically, the arrangement of words) here also immediately suggests that something else is at work. A more syntactically straightforward sentence might begin: “I mark’d where, on a little promontory, a spider stood isolated.”

Instead, the speaker’s “I” follows after the “spider,” as though the “I” is the “spider.” That is, it feels for a beat as though the opening line is describing the speaker; think of how someone might say, “A lover of spaghetti, Mary always went to Italian restaurants”—that first phrase describes “Mary.”

The two—the spider and the speaker—are further linked by the [assonance](#) of the long /i/ sounds in both words. The adjective “noiseless” to describe the spider is also interesting; rather than an adjective like “silent” or “quiet,” the negative form of “noiseless” gives readers a sense of what the spider is *not*, or of what the spider is refraining from doing. This creates a sensation of absence (the absence of noise, specifically), that reflects spider’s isolation.

The adjective “patient,” meanwhile, [personifies](#) the spider, giving it a sense of dignity and consciousness. That the spider is placed on a “promontory” is also suggestive. A promontory is a place of high ground (a kind of lookout) that people usually think of in human terms (a high rock, a headland, a bluff). This description of where the spider “stands” thus further personifies it and ennobles it at the same time. All of this, in turn, will serve to make the poem’s extended metaphor, in which the spider and speaker’s soul are compared, clearer.

In the third line, the speaker repeats the word “mark’d” to tell readers more of what the speaker has noticed. This repetition,

which functions [anaphorically](#) (even if the “mark’d in the previous line is preceded by “I”), reminds the reader that the speaker is right there in the scene, watching the spider. It also gives the poem an energy of repeated outward momentum that predicts the outward-reaching action of the spider.

Finally, the spider’s surroundings are described as both “vacant” and “vast.” The [alliteration](#) here adds emphasis to the sense of emptiness, even as the shift from the long /ay/ sound at the beginning of “vacant” to the short /ah/ sounds in its second syllable and in “vast” imply a sense of movement and change.

## LINES 4-5

*It launch'd forth filament, filament, filament, out of itself,  
Ever unreeling them, ever tirelessly speeding them.*

The last two lines of the first stanza describe what the spider is doing: “It launch’d forth filament, filament, filament, out of itself, / Ever unreeling them, ever tirelessly speeding them.” In other words, the spider is producing silk and building its web.

The verb “launch’d” again both [personifies](#) and ennobles the spider, as it is a verb usually associated with the launching-forth of ships or actions on a grander scale. At the same time, the repetition of “filament, filament, filament” ([epizeuxis](#)) and “ever ... ever” enact what the poem describes: the spider’s constant, unceasing activity.

The word “unreeling” connects the spider’s threads to ropes (as one might unreel a rope on a ship) while “speeding,” parallel in structure to “unreeling,” appears here, unusually, as a transitive verb; the spider “speeds” the filaments rather than sending them out “speedily.” All of this again underscores the spider’s ceaseless energy and dedication to building its web.

In terms of meter, both of these lines feature clusters of feet in which the first beat receives a stress—something that also appears in the prior lines of the poem. Take line 1, with its three [trochees](#) (poetic feet with a **stressed**-unstressed, DUM da, pattern):

... noiseless patient spider

And line 4, which features three [dactyls](#) (**stressed**-unstressed-unstressed) in a row:

... filament, filament, filament,

The stress on the first syllable of each of these words adds to the poem’s sense of repeating, tireless movement, as though enacting the strength and energy needed to send forth each filament.

It is worth noting, too, that the entire stanza is one sentence, with each line ending in a comma. These line endings generate a sense of pause in the poem. Yet, since they are *commas* and not

*periods*, they also propel the poem forward, as the reader must continue on to the next line, and then the next, to reach the end of the sentence, which comes at the end of the stanza.

While the [syntax](#) of the sentence is trackable—the reader can tell at each line what the speaker is describing—a close reading indicates that it is more complex. Where is the sentence’s main clause? Readers can gather that it is “I mark’d ... a spider,” yet this clause is embedded within a longer, much more complicated sentence that *modifies* the main clause.

The sentence also employs [asyndeton](#), clustering together words while leaving out conjunctions (“I mark’d ... mark’d” rather than “I mark’d *and* I mark’d”). What matters here, the poem suggests, is not a hierarchical structure to the sentence (the speaker noticing the spider, then the spider sending out its threads, arranged into a clear order), but rather the repeated horizontal and interlocking movements of the spider’s efforts to create a web.

## LINES 6-8

*And you O my soul where you stand,  
Surrounded, detached, in measureless oceans of space,  
Ceaselessly musing, venturing, throwing, seeking the  
spheres to connect them,*

Lines 6-8 open the poem’s second stanza and describe the speaker’s soul in terms that connect it to the spider. “And you O my soul,” the stanza begins, with the word “And” here implicitly connecting the second stanza to the first, as though the speaker is continuing a single thought over the white space of the stanza break.

Here, too, the speaker addresses the soul directly—a form of [apostrophe](#)—as though it were an independent being outside the self, with its own agency. Like the spider, the soul is described as “stand[ing],” again as though imbued with its own will and physical presence.

The second line of this stanza begins with two words that could be read as contradicting each other: “Surrounded, detached,” the speaker says. The word “surrounded” implies that something is around the soul, while “detached” suggests that the soul is separate and unconnected from its surroundings. Importantly, “detached” can be read as a negative form of “attached,” just as “noiseless” is a negative adjective, telling us what is not there. The word implies that the soul *could* be attached but isn’t at this instant.

The line goes on: “in measureless oceans of space.” The word “oceans” continues the subtle [imagery](#) of ships at sea established in the first stanza by “unreeling” and, to a lesser extent, “promontory,” which could be read as a high point overlooking water. At the same time, the word “space” introduces a second visual [metaphor](#) into the poem, connecting the world of the speaker’s soul to the universe beyond the earth’s atmosphere. The poem also employs another negative

adjective here with “measureless,” emphasizing what is *not* in the description. This description links the soul to the spider, in its “vacant, vast” environment.

The third line of this stanza includes a list of actions for the speaker’s soul, echoing the list of “filament, filament, filament” in the first stanza. Here, the soul is described as “ceaselessly musing, venturing, throwing,” and then “seeking the spheres to connect them.” The word “ceaselessly” reflects the adverb “tirelessly” used for the spider, as well as the word “ever,” which suggests that this action must be continued perpetually.

The verbs in the list, meanwhile, are unified by their gerund form (they all end in “ing”) but are still strikingly different: “musing” suggests thought, or intellectual exploration; “venturing” physical travel or exploration; “throwing” a physical action, like the “unreeling” of filaments or ropes from a ship. The clause at the end of the line, “seeking the spheres to connect them” works to bring the three preceding verbs together into their singular purpose: seeking connection.

At the same time, the noun “spheres” continues the imagery of the universe and space, suggesting planets or moons. One could imagine the speaker, at this moment in the poem, looking into the night sky, aware of the “measureless[ness]” of space, and also of the spheres in that space and their movements.

The word “spheres” also brings up the ancient Greek concept, revitalized in the Enlightenment, of “The Music of the Spheres,” or universal music. The concept postulated that the sun, moon and planets make a kind of music as they move in relationship with each other. This “Music of the Spheres” was regarded as an ideal music, a true harmony which art should emulate. In the poem, then, the mention of the spheres might suggest that the speaker’s soul aspires to this harmony, and to the creation of a poem that would embody it.

Finally, the word “them” at the end of this line is curiously ambiguous. Is “them” the spheres, in which case the speaker is seeking to connect the spheres to one another? Or is “them” the filaments of the speaker, not explicitly referred to in this stanza, but implicitly present through the metaphor? In this case, the speaker would seek to connect the filaments, which come from the speaker’s soul, to the spheres. Both readings are possible and present within the poem, suggesting that the speaker attempts to make connections both with and among the spheres.

## LINES 9-10

*Till the bridge you will need be form’d, till the ductile anchor hold,  
Till the gossamer thread you fling catch somewhere, O my soul.*

The last two lines of the poem bring together the spider’s and the soul’s intention: “Till the bridge you will need be form’d, till the ductile anchor hold, / Till the gossamer thread you fling

catch somewhere, O my soul.” Like “filament, filament, filament” and “musing, venturing, throwing,” these lines use a list of three—in this case a list of three [parallel](#) clauses, each prefaced by “Till” ([anaphora](#)). This again creates a sensation of forward momentum, underscoring that the speaker’s will continue seeking connections as long as it takes.

The two clauses in line 9 present two different images: the first one of forming a bridge, the second of dropping an anchor. Both of these continue to build on the water-related [imagery](#) that has been present throughout the poem. While one suggests a horizontal movement—the creation of a bridge—the other involves vertical movement, with the dropping of an anchor. Both, the poem suggests, would serve as sturdy connections between the speaker and the earth on the other side of or beneath the water. The anchor, importantly, is “ductile” or flexible, as in the flexibility of a spider’s thread, but also, perhaps, in the flexibility of the speaker’s mind and the poem itself.

The poem’s closing line reestablishes its central [metaphor](#), as the “gossamer thread” connects readers back to the spider and its web. The lists in these two lines, by suggesting that the “bridge,” the “anchor,” and the “thread” are all different words for the same thing, imbue the delicate thread with the strength of a bridge or the weight of an anchor, while gifting the bridge and anchor with the subtlety and flexibility of the gossamer. The phrase “you fling” both addresses the soul and turns outward to the reader, while “O my soul,” repeated at the ending of the poem, has clear [assonance](#) on the long /o/ sound with “hold,” suggesting that the soul and its action are inseparable.

Much like the first stanza, the second stanza appears to be one sentence, with each line ending with a comma. However, a close reading shows that there is actually no main clause, as there would be in a complete sentence, for example, if the stanza began, “And you O my soul, you stand.” The entire sentence functions as a kind of extended adverb or modifying clause, reaching toward, but never arriving at, a main clause that would complete the action. The sentence ends only by turning back on itself, to where it began, with “O my soul.” The action the poem describes, then, is thus enacted by its syntax, as perpetual and unceasing.



## SYMBOLS



### FILAMENTS/THREAD

A filament is a thin thread or fiber. In “A Noiseless Patient Spider,” the spider is described as “launch[ing] forth filament, filament, filament, out of itself” in order to make its web. The filaments are, then, within the poem, the literal material of creation.

As the image is developed in the second stanza, with the speaker's soul "throwing" its "gossamer thread," the filaments come to stand, [symbolically](#), for all the ways that we as people seek and form connections. These connections could be interpersonal connections with other people. They could be ideas connecting one thing to another. They could also be poetic [metaphors](#) which bring together unlike things, as in the metaphor of the poem, which brings together speaker and spider.

Interestingly, a filament is also a kind of electrical wire that produces heat or light. As light is itself a symbol of intelligence and life, Whitman's filaments, understood this way, are life-giving connections, offering illumination and insight.

#### Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "filament, filament, filament"
- **Line 8:** "throwing"
- **Line 10:** "gossamer thread"



## POETIC DEVICES

### EXTENDED METAPHOR

An [extended metaphor](#) provides the overarching structure for the poem. The speaker begins by describing a spider that "stood isolated," but that "launch'd forth" its threads to make its web over and over again. The poem's second stanza then establishes that the spider is a metaphor for the speaker's soul.

Like the spider, the speaker's soul is isolated, as it is "detached, in measureless oceans of space." The speaker goes on to describe the soul "ceaselessly ... throwing" its own "gossamer thread," and says that, just as the spider will continue its work until it makes its web, the soul will continue its own efforts until "the bridge you will need be formed."

In other words, the speaker's soul will continue seeking connections until it succeeds. The spider thus serves as a visual metaphor, extended throughout the poem, for what it means to experience aloneness but nevertheless try, over and over again, to form connections with the surrounding world.

The poem's metaphor also serves another purpose. Metaphor is a device that brings together—or makes connections between—unlike things. In this sense, the poem *enacts* what it *describes*. While the speaker's soul is depicted as seeking and creating connections, the poem crafts its own connections, by creating a metaphor from one stanza to the next.

#### Where Extended Metaphor appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-10

### END-STOPPED LINE

In the poem, each stanza is a single sentence, ending with a period. Within the stanzas, each line ends with a comma. These lines are [end-stopped](#), in the sense that they end with punctuation that creates a pause, rather than ending in the middle of a clause. They create a sense of even pacing in the poem, which could be read as reflecting the spider's and the soul's work. Neither's efforts feel frantic, because the lines don't feel frantic; rather, the lines (and implicitly the filaments) are varied in length but steady, allowing a moment of breath at the end of each.

At the same time, the fact that the lines end with commas, not periods, creates forward movement in the poem. The reader must continue reading past each line ending to get to the end of the sentence, which doesn't arrive until the end of the stanza. This forward movement likewise conveys the actions of the spider and the soul, as their work is constant, ongoing, and "tireless."

The periods at the ends of the stanzas create stronger pauses. At the conclusion of the first stanza, the poem comes to a stop, and the reader must then bridge the white space to reach "And you O my soul" at the start of the next. This white space could convey the difficulty of the spider's and the speaker's work, a kind of visual representation of the "vacant vast" expanse surrounding each. It also suggests that each stanza is a discrete web, one belonging to the spider, the other to the speaker. At the same time, the fact that the poem *does* bridge this gap by creating a second stanza suggests that the spider and the soul, too, will overcome the challenges facing their work, and succeed in making connections.

#### Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** *(<sup>o</sup>)* ,
- **Line 2:** *(<sup>o</sup>)* ,
- **Line 3:** *(<sup>o</sup>)* ,
- **Line 4:** *(<sup>o</sup>)* ,
- **Line 5:** *(<sup>o</sup>)* .
- **Line 6:** *(<sup>o</sup>)* ,
- **Line 7:** *(<sup>o</sup>)* ,
- **Line 8:** *(<sup>o</sup>)* ,
- **Line 9:** *(<sup>o</sup>)* ,
- **Line 10:** *(<sup>o</sup>)* .

### PERSONIFICATION

While the spider in the poem is depicted, first and foremost, as a spider, it is also [personified](#). The spider is described as "noiseless," as though it is actively *refraining* from making noise rather than simply being quiet. It is also described as "patient," an adjective usually associated with a moral quality in a person. It stands on "a little promontory," a setting that readers would normally associate with people, since promontories are usually

thought of on a human scale (as in cliffs or bluffs or high outcroppings of rock). It is also described as "isolated," a verb that suggests a person's emotional isolation," yet tries to "explore" its surroundings as a person might.

Finally, it is said to "unreel" and "speed" its filaments. These adverbs suggest that the spider brings agency and intention to its work. It "unreel[s]" the filaments as though they are ropes to be unwound and sent out. It "speed[s]" them, suggesting that it has control over how slowly or quickly it does its work. All of these descriptions give the spider a noble, and distinctly human, quality.

The speaker's soul is also personified in the poem. That both the spider and the soul are treated as human is important in the poem, because it makes the poem's [extended metaphor](#) immediately easy to grasp. Since the spider has already been introduced in terms that reflect human values (values of work, effort, and patience), it is imbued with a kind of consciousness. The comparison to the soul, then, seems to develop naturally. It is as though, at some level, the spider and soul share a similar consciousness and intent.

#### Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "noiseless patient spider"
- **Line 2:** "on a little promontory it stood isolated"
- **Line 3:** "Mark'd how to explore the vacant vast surrounding"
- **Line 5:** "Ever unreeling them, ever tirelessly speeding them"
- **Line 6:** "you O my soul where you stand"
- **Line 8:** "Ceaselessly musing, venturing, throwing, seeking the spheres to connect them"

## APOSTROPHE

One striking element of the poem's second stanza is how the speaker's soul is introduced. In this stanza, the "I" disappears, and the soul is described in the second person. "And you O my soul," the speaker says at the beginning of the stanza, and "O my soul" repeats as the closing of the poem. This is a form of [apostrophe](#) because the soul, though it is imbued here with a kind of agency, can't actually reply to the speaker (at least verbally).

The apostrophe in the poem distances the speaker, in a way, from the soul, as the soul is depicted almost as though it is independent, with its own intents and its own work. Both the spider and the soul are held out in front of the speaker, to be observed, described, and implicitly praised for their efforts. The use of apostrophe also works to direct the poem outward to the reader, as though the reader is the "you" and "soul" of the speaker. This works, then, to create a third filament of connection within the poem, as the poem connects spider to speaker, and then the speaker to the reader.

#### Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** "you O my soul"
- **Line 10:** "O my soul."

## REPETITION

[Repetition](#) in the poem begins slowly in each stanza, then accumulates and builds momentum. In the first stanza, "I mark'd" in line two repeats with "Mark'd" in line three (an example of [anaphora](#)). This repetition builds into the poem, from the beginning, the sense of repeated actions.

The repetition then increases in the stanza. The spider is described as "launch[ing] forth filament, filament, filament." The repetition of this word ([epizeuxis](#)) works to convey the repetitive and constant nature of the spider's actions. Whitman further emphasizes this constancy in line 5, with the parallelism of the phrases "ever unreeling them, ever tirelessly speeding them." The variation within the clauses ("unreeling" and "tirelessly speeding") could be read as variation in the lengths of the filaments, or in where they are directed. Meanwhile, the repetition of "ever" and "them" enacts the spider's constancy and steadiness, suggesting that whatever else changes, the spider will keep working. The [assonance](#) of "unreeling" and "speeding" further underscores this sense of constancy.

The second stanza follows a similar pattern. Here, a word close to the beginning of the stanza repeats, with variation, a word from the first: the soul "stand[s]," echoing the spider who "stood." This repetition with variation works similarly to the repetition and variation at the end of the first stanza. The repeated verb "to stand" links the speaker and spider together. At the same time, the variation suggests the flexibility and momentum of the spider's and speaker's actions. That the soul "stands" further suggests that it is standing eternally, in a present tense that continues both within and beyond the bounds of the poem.

In the third line, Whitman uses four verbs of parallel form: "musing, venturing, throwing, seeking." Though these are obviously different words, the gerund (-ing) form of each creates a kind of repetition. At the end of the line the word "them" appears again, applying to the "spheres" but also, through its repetition, referring back to the "them" in the first stanza, which referred to the filaments.

The repetition then heightens toward the end of the poem, with the repetition of "Till the ... till the ... till the ..." in the last two lines (another instance of anaphora). This group of three recalls the list of three filaments. It also emphasizes the soul's persistence to go on working until it is able to create the connections it needs.

The poem ends with a final repetition, as "O my soul" repeats from the beginning of the stanza. The repetition of this phrase recalls the language of prayer, in which the one addressed

(usually, in those cases, God), is evoked again and again. Here, the repetition also works musically, as the long /o/ sounds in “O” and “soul” lengthen the phrase, making the reader slow down at the poem’s end and closing the poem with gravity and praise.

#### Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** “mark’d,” “stood”
- **Line 3:** “Mark’d”
- **Line 4:** “filament, filament, filament”
- **Line 5:** “Ever unreeling them, ever tirelessly speeding them.”
- **Line 6:** “O my soul,” “stand”
- **Line 8:** “musing, venturing, throwing, seeking,” “them”
- **Line 9:** “Till,” “till”
- **Line 10:** “Till,” “O my soul”

## ANAPHORA

[Anaphora](#) is a specific kind of [repetition](#) that appears in two places in the poem. In its first instance, line 2 begins “I mark’d” and line three begins “Mark’d.” Although this is not an exact repetition (the “I” is dropped from the second instance) it still functions anaphorically, as the “I” is implicitly present.

Anaphora often works to create momentum and insistence. This use of it is no different, as the repetition at the start of these lines creates an energetic momentum, sending each line forth from the left side of the page, as the filaments are “launch’d forth” by the spider.

The second instance of anaphora appears at the end of the poem, with three phrases within lines 9 and 10 beginning “Till.” This word works similarly to “Mark’d” at the beginning of the poem. Here, though, rather than listing what the speaker has observed, the poem looks into the future: the speaker tells us that the soul will go on working until it creates the “bridge [it] will need,” until “the ductile anchor hold,” and until “the gossamer thread [it] filing[s] catch somewhere.” In other words, the soul will keep working until it is able to connect with the world around it. The repetition of “till” works, here, to emphasize the soul’s actions as going on even beyond the ending of the poem, and perhaps endlessly.

#### Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** “I mark’d”
- **Line 3:** “Mark’d”
- **Line 9:** “Till,” “till”
- **Line 10:** “Till”

## ASSONANCE

[Assonance](#) is present throughout the poem. Often, this assonance creates sound echoes and links words together thematically. For example, the long /i/ of “spider,” “I,” and “isolated” in the first two lines of the poem links the spider to

the speaker, and both of these figures to the idea of solitude. This makes sense, given that the spider is representative of the speaker’s own soul.

Short /i/ sounds appear frequently in the poem as well, in words like “filament,” “itself,” “till,” “bridge,” “will,” and “fling.” This sound connects the words together, so that the spider’s “filament” is implicitly reflected in the soul’s “bridge” and in the act of “fling[ing],” as well as in the word “will,” which implies a future tense while also conveying the soul’s will, or agency.

Assonance also adds to the poem’s rhythm. Take the long /ee/ of “unreeling” and “speeding” in line 5: this creates a sensation of repetitiveness, which mimics the ongoing, relentless nature of the spider’s work. Similarly, the poem repeats /or/ sounds (a combination of assonance and [consonance](#)) in “promontory,” “explore,” and “forth” in the first stanza. The repetition of sound in these words creates a sensation of forward momentum, as the /or/ sound carries over from one line to the next.

This feeling of forward motion and repetitive action continues into the second stanza as well. For example, note the many long /ee/ and short /eh/ sounds of lines 7-8:

Surrounded, detached, in measureless oceans of  
space,  
Ceaselessly musing, venturing, throwing, seeking the  
spheres to connect them,

As with the previous stanza, the insistence on these sound evokes the ongoing, “ceaseless” (or endless, nonstop) nature of the soul’s work.

Assonance also sometimes highlights moments of difference in the poem. For example, the long /o/ sounds in “O my soul,” which appear at the beginning and the end of the second stanza, are echoed in “hold,” but otherwise work in contrast with the many short vowel sounds throughout the stanza. “Till,” “gossamer,” “thread,” “fling,” “catch,” “somewhere”—six out of the eight words leading up to “O my soul” at the poem’s end—each contain a short vowel sound. This heightens the shift to these final long sounds, and also suggests that some internal shift has taken place, as the poem moves from describing the spider’s and the soul’s work to a tone of praise or even awe at the poem’s close.

#### Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “spider”
- **Line 2:** “I,” “promontory,” “isolated”
- **Line 3:** “explore”
- **Line 4:** “forth,” “filament, filament, filament,” “itself”
- **Line 5:** “unreeling,” “speeding”
- **Line 6:** “O,” “soul”
- **Line 7:** “Surrounded,” “detached,” “measureless,” “oceans”
- **Line 8:** “Ceaselessly,” “venturing,” “seeking,” “spheres,”

“connect,” “them”

- **Line 9:** “Till,” “bridge,” “will,” “need,” “be,” “till,” “anchor,” “hold”
- **Line 10:** “Till,” “fling,” “O,” “soul”

## ASYNDETON

Much of the energy of the poem comes from its list-making and subsequent use of [asyndeton](#). The reader is told that the speaker “mark’d” where the spider stood and what it did. The speaker describes the spider’s actions through the parallel clauses “ever unreeling them” and “ever tirelessly speeding them.” The soul, meanwhile, is also described through a series of linked verbs: “Ceaselessly musing, venturing, throwing, seeking the spheres to connect them.” And the poem closes with a list of three parallel clauses that tell the reader how long the soul will continue its efforts.

Importantly, in all of these cases, the poem leaves out conjunctions. The speaker doesn’t say, for example, “I mark’d... and I mark’d.” The spider isn’t “ever unreeling them, *and* ever tirelessly speeding them.” The soul isn’t “musing, venturing, throwing, *and* seeking.” Finally, the reader isn’t told that the soul will go on working “Till ... till ... *and* till.” What does the poem achieve by leaving “and” out?

First, asyndeton works in the poem to emphasize its forward movement and momentum. Conjunctions slow a reader down, allowing a pause between the first and last clauses in a list. Here, Whitman cuts out these longer pauses, leaving only the shorter pauses of commas.

Asyndeton also works to equalize the components of a list. Since none is prefaced by “and,” the sense of order—of one thing following another—recedes. Instead, the poem creates a sense that the actions, and their meanings, are happening simultaneously, all at once. This sense also creates to the sense of perpetual effort in the poem; since the verbs aren’t bound by the usual rules of syntax, they are also not, the poem suggests, bound by the usual rules of time. The spider and the soul inhabit a space in which their work is eternal and boundless.

### Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** “I mark’d”
- **Line 3:** “Mark’d”
- **Line 5:** “Ever unreeling them, ever tirelessly speeding them.”
- **Line 8:** “musing, venturing, throwing, seeking”
- **Lines 9-10:** “Till the bridge you will need be form’d, till the ductile anchor hold, / Till the gossamer thread you fling catch somewhere,”

## CONSONANCE

Like assonance, [consonance](#) works in “A Noiseless Patient

Spider” to create links between words and their meanings. For example, the title and opening phrase “noiseless patient spider” create a continuum of sounds: the /s/ sound in “noiseless” is the first sound of “spider,” while the /p/ in “patient” is the second. This repetition connects the words to each other and, as with the poem’s use of assonance, creates a feeling of forward momentum.

The speaker then builds on these initial connections. The /p/ sound from “patient” and “spider” appears again in the second line in “promontory,” in the third line in “explore,” in the seventh line in “space” (which also repeats the opening combination of consonants in “spider”). /S/ sounds, meanwhile, occur in the second line (“isolated”), the third line (“surrounding”), the fifth line (“tirelessly” and “speeding”), and throughout the second stanza (“soul,” “stand,” “surrounded,” “measureless,” “space,” “ceaselessly,” “seeking,” “spheres,” “somewhere,” “soul”). In this way, the sounds associated with the spider are interwoven throughout the poem, creating a web of connections between the spider and its surroundings, its work, and the speaker’s soul.

In line 9, Whitman creates a second image linked by a continuum of consonants, similar to the image at the poem’s beginning. “Till the ductile anchor hold,” the line reads, with “till” echoed in “ductile,” the /k/ sound of “ductile” linking it to “anchor,” and the /d/ and /l/ of “till” and “ductile” connecting both words to “hold.” This consonance works even to integrate the uncertain possibility of making connection (the “till,” which implies an unknown future) with the resolution of that possibility (“hold,” at the end of the phrase). Whitman thus uses the *sounds* of the poem to enact the work of creating connections, and to show that these connections are possible.

These connections are further heightened in the poem at moments of [alliteration](#), notably “vacant vast” in line 3 and “forth filament, filament, filament” in line 4. The phrase “vacant vast” to describe the spider’s surroundings emphasizes each adjective while also suggesting the possibility of change, since alongside the alliteration of /v/ sounds Whitman includes the change from the long /ay/ in “vacant” to the short /ah/ in “vast.” The phrase “forth filament, filament, filament,” meanwhile, intensifies the sense of repetitive, constant action on the part of the spider, while also connecting its action (launching forth) with what it is sending out (the filaments).

Finally, Whitman weaves [sibilance](#), which is a specific form of consonance, into the whole second stanza, with “soul ... stand ... Surrounded ... space ... seeking ... spheres ... somewhere ... soul.” It seems relevant that at this point in the poem the shared sounds occur not only in words that are right next to each other, but also across gaps and spaces. The poem suggests, here, that both the spider and the soul can make connections across boundaries, while also implying that these connections may already exist, even when they are not immediately or obviously apparent.

**Where Consonance appears in the poem:**

- **Line 1:** “noiseless,” “patient,” “spider”
- **Line 2:** “promontory,” “it,” “stood,” “isolated”
- **Line 3:** “explore,” “vacant,” “vast,” “surrounding”
- **Line 4:** “forth,” “filament,” “filament,” “filament”
- **Line 5:** “tirelessly,” “speeding”
- **Line 6:** “soul,” “stand”
- **Line 7:** “Surrounded,” “measureless,” “space”
- **Line 8:** “Ceaselessly,” “seeking,” “spheres”
- **Line 9:** “till,” “ductile,” “anchor,” “hold”
- **Line 10:** “somewhere,” “soul”

**Venturing** (Line 8) - To venture is to move forward in spite of risk and danger, as in: “He ventured out into the storm.” One can also “venture” a thought or an opinion, knowing that it might be scoffed at or refused.

**Ductile** (Line 9) - “Ductile” means flexible, or something that can be shaped into a new form. In metal, “ductile” means that the substance can be made into wire or thread. Whitman’s image of the “ductile anchor,” then, conjures up an image of metal with all of its strength, but also a metal that is flexible and adaptive.

**FORM, METER, & RHYME****FORM**

“A Noiseless Patient Spider” is a [free verse](#) poem made of two stanzas. Each stanza is a quintain, meaning that each has five lines. Each stanza is also a single sentence. The first stanza describes the spider that the speaker sees, while the second stanza describes the speaker’s soul.

Though the poem does not follow a specific form (like a [sonnet](#) or [villanelle](#)) the form it creates is still important to its meaning. The poem describes two things (the spider and the soul), with one stanza dedicated to each. The poem also implicitly describes two webs (the one made by the speaker and the one made by the soul). The stanzas could be read as visual representations of these webs, while the white space between them could be read as the space that both the spider and speaker—and, implicitly, the poem—are trying to bridge.

Finally, the five-line stanzas are important, as the odd number of lines in each creates a sense of irresolution in the poem, in keeping with the sense of connections that are not yet sure or complete. At the same time, Whitman brings this into balance and a kind of resolution by combining the two stanzas into a poem that, as a whole, has an even number of lines.

Additionally, while the poem does not follow a strict form, it can be understood as working within the mode of *Ars Poetica*. An *Ars Poetica* is a poem that comments on the art of writing poems. In “A Noiseless Patient Spider,” one could read the images of creation and creativity as images of writing poetry; the poet sends out lines, or “filaments,” on the page, and seeks to make connections in creating metaphors.

Since the lines on the page could read as visual filaments, and the stanzas as visual representations of webs, the poem suggests that it in itself is the “web” created by the speaker’s soul. This reading of the poem is consistent with Whitman’s poetry as a whole, which emphasized, always, seeking and creating connections between the self (or the soul) and the surrounding world.

**VOCABULARY**

**Gossamer** () - The word “gossamer” comes from a Middle English adjective used to describe the appearance of cobwebs in the air. The word is connected to the word “goose,” perhaps because the lightness of cobwebs resembles the lightness of goose feathers. The word later came to be used for anything that is as light and delicate as those webs.

**Mark'd** (Line 2, Line 3) - “To mark” means “to see” or “to notice.” It also means to make a visible impression on something, or to write on something (as in the root of the word “marker”). In the poem, Whitman plays with both meanings; the speaker notices the spider, but the spider is also “mark’d” in the poem in the sense that its existence is written down.

**Promontory** (Line 2) - A promontory is a high point from which one can see a surrounding area, like a lookout. Promontories can take different shapes; they are sometimes thought of as areas of land (cliffs, bluffs, etc.) that jut out into water. They could also be a high crop of rock or any place one climbs to better see one’s surroundings. In the poem, the spider is seen on a “little promontory,” which the reader might imagine as a promontory on a spider-scale.

**Filament** (Line 4) - A filament is a fine thread or fiber, often used to describe elements of the natural world. The word originates from the Latin *filare*, which means “to spin” (as in, to spin thread) so the word’s origins are linked to ideas of craft and creation. A filament can also be understood in electrical terms, as in the wire which conducts heat or light.

**Detached** (Line 7) - “Detached” literally means separate or unconnected. Its secondary meaning, of being emotionally or intellectually detached, refers to someone being aloof, uninterested, or disengaged. Interestingly, because the word has the prefix “de,” it automatically conjures up its antonym, “attached,” suggesting that attachment is possible. The speaker in the poem is separate but not emotionally detached, since the speaker’s soul is described as constantly working to find connection and attachment.

## METER

"A Noiseless Patient Spider" is a [free verse](#) poem, meaning that it has no set meter. Whitman is credited with being the first American poet to write in free verse, as he wanted poetry to be close to human speech. The poem is varied in its movements and sounds; for example, the variation in the length of lines creates shifts in its pacing and rhythm.

At the same time, this poem, like much of Whitman's work, is highly musical, rhythmic, and patterned. The poem uses [trochees](#), [dactyls](#), and [spondees](#) to create a sense of energy and forward momentum. While the poem doesn't have a specific meter, then, it still largely contains a sensation of falling rhythm, of long, **stressed** beats moved forward to short, unstressed beats.

For example, the first line contains trochees, in which the first syllable is **stressed** and the second unstressed:

... noiseless patient spider,

The clause "filament, filament, filament" in the fourth line, meanwhile, contains dactyls, in which the first syllable of each is **stressed** and the following two unstressed:

... filament, filament, filament ...

Lines 8 and 10 combine strings of trochees and dactyls:

Ceaselessly musing, venturing, throwing, seeking ...

And:

... gossamer thread you fling catch somewhere ...

Again, while not true, steady meter, the overall effect is one of spurts of falling rhythm that push the poem forward. There is a repeated rush of energy—a sense closely aligned with the poem's description of constant, repeated outward movements by both the spider and speaker.

## RHYME SCHEME

As a [free verse](#) poem, "A Noiseless Patient Spider" has no fixed [rhyme scheme](#). The lack of strict meter or rhyme keeps the poem from feeling too constrained or stilted; instead it is free-flowing and unpredictable, qualities that echo the poem's content and thematic ideas. The poem itself feels exploratory, as if the speaker is tossing lines of verse into the "measureless oceans" of the blank page just as the spider and soul launch forth threads into their "vacant vast surrounding[s]" in the hope of finding a sense of connection.

That said, the poem does use [assonance](#) throughout, and one instance of [slant rhyme](#), to create a sense of musicality and rhythm. For example, the first stanza contains numerous

repetitions of /or/ sounds: "explore," "promontory," "forth." These shared sounds link the spider to the idea of exploration and to the tirelessness of its efforts. Finally, the poem uses slant end rhyme with "hold" and "O my soul." This connects the two words, underscoring the desire of the soul for find a steady "anchor" on which to "hold."



## SPEAKER

The speaker of "A Noiseless Patient Spider" is neither named nor gendered. Although the reader might assume that the speaker is Whitman—a reading supported by the poem's depictions of creativity, as in the writing of poetry—this is not necessarily be the case. In fact, many of Whitman's poems explored the meaning of the "I" and the individual, and the speaker of his poems is often both particular *and* expansive, as in the famous lines from his poem "Song of Myself": "Do I contradict myself? / Very well then I contradict myself, / (I am large, I contain multitudes)."

In his efforts to create a poetry that was truly American and democratic, Whitman sought to bring many different people and even elements of the earth into the voice of his speaker. Thus, the "I" in the poem could be any specific person, and also a more open-ended, inclusive "I."

What the reader can tell from the beginning of the poem is that the speaker is observant, noticing the spider and all of its activity. Interestingly, in the second stanza, the "I" disappears, as the speaker addresses "you O my soul" for the rest of the poem. It is the soul, addressed in the second person, that is credited with the connection-making and efforts so like those of the spider. This could be read as a development of the speaker in the sense that here, the speaker as a separate, detached "I" disappears, and what is left is the soul working in tandem with the surrounding world and universe.



## SETTING

The setting of the poem is interestingly ambiguous. The reader is told that the spider stands on "a little promontory," and that this promontory is within a "vacant vast surrounding." The speaker's soul, likewise, is described as standing in "measureless oceans of space." The reader could interpret this setting in many ways—as an open expanse of land, a place overlooking the ocean, etc. At the same time, what is "vacant" and "vast" to a spider is not so vast to a human being, and the "measureless oceans of space" the speaker sees could be blue sky overhead, seen from any location. What the reader knows is that the setting must be a place inhabited by both the spider and the speaker, so it is somewhere on the earth, or maybe the earth as a whole, from which both spider and speaker look out into the larger universe.



## CONTEXT

## LITERARY CONTEXT

Whitman first published "A Noiseless Patient Spider" as part of a longer sequence, "Whispers of Heavenly Death," in 1868. *The Broadway*, a new literary magazine based in London, had invited Whitman and several other well-known American writers to submit their work, and Whitman apparently wrote the sequence specifically for the magazine.

"Whispers of Heavenly Death" revolves around the speaker contemplating death, and specifically, the death of his male lover. One poem in the sequence, "[Of Him I Love Day and Night](#)," begins: "Of him I love day and night I dream'd I heard he was dead, / And I dream'd I went where they had buried him I love." Another, "[As If a Phantom Caress'd Me](#)," reads: "As if a phantom caress'd me, / I thought I was not alone walking here by the shore; / But the one I thought was with me now as I walk by the shore, the one I loved that caress'd me, / As I lean and look through the glimmering light, that one has utterly disappear'd."

In much of Whitman's work, these clear articulations of the speaker's love for other men in early versions of poems disappear in later versions of the poems. In this case, however, the sequence was republished in an 1891 edition of *Leaves of Grass* intact. This context for the poem—the speaker having lost "him I love"—sheds light on the isolation and solitude the speaker experiences.

On a larger scale, Whitman wrote at a time (the mid- to late-19th century, before, during, and after the U.S. Civil War) when writers were actively creating what American poetry and literature could be. Whitman was interested in creating a uniquely American poetics, a kind of democratic aesthetic, and he is considered the first American poet to have written in [free verse](#), seeing it as closer to the sounds of real speech.

At the same time, his poetry was highly influenced by music, and especially opera, an influence that can be heard in the repetition and cadences of his lines. Whitman was also profoundly influenced by Ralph Waldo Emerson and the ideas of Transcendentalism, which emphasized a return to nature. Readers can see these ideas reflected in "A Noiseless Patient Spider," as the speaker looks to an element of nature (a spider) as a model for how to create and seek connections. The sense of interconnection in the poem, and its preoccupation with the soul, also reflect the Transcendental idea of the Over-Soul, a kind of larger consciousness of which everything and everyone is part.

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Whitman wrote "A Noiseless Patient Spider," and the sequence of which it was a part, in 1868, just three years after the end of the U.S. Civil War. Whitman was a nurse during the war, and

cared for wounded Union soldiers in hospitals in Washington, D.C. He wrote a number of poems that directly refer to these experiences, as well as elegies for Abraham Lincoln, notably "[O Captain! My Captain!](#)" and "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd."

While "A Noiseless Patient Spider" and "Whispers of Heavenly Death" are less obviously connected to this historical context, they do reflect a time of grief and mourning, and a sense of needing to start over or find a way to begin again, as the speaker and spider start over and over again to create their webs. The "vacant vast surrounding" in the poem could convey a sense of spiritual vacancy left by Lincoln's death and the trauma of the war. Within the poem, then, Whitman considers what it means to be a poet seeking connection and creating art in this aftermath.



## MORE RESOURCES

## EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [Early Manuscript of "A Noiseless Patient Spider"](#) — See an early manuscript copy of the poem, as well as manuscripts of all of Whitman's work. (<https://whitmanarchive.org/published/LG/1891/poems/255>)
- [Biography of Walt Whitman](#) — The Poetry Foundation website has biographical information about Whitman, as well as links to many of his poems. (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/walt-whitman>)
- [Reading of "A Noiseless Patient Spider"](#) — Hear actor Paul Giamatti read "A Noiseless Patient Spider" as part of this short Poetry Foundation podcast. (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/podcasts/74670/looking-for-god-with-ar-ammons>)
- [Emerson's Essay on "The Over-Soul"](#) — Read the full text of Emerson's essay "The Over-Soul" to understand its influence on Whitman's poem. (<https://archive.vcu.edu/english/engweb/transcendentalism/authors/emerson/essays/oversoul.html>)
- [Whitman and the Civil War](#) — Read this article on Whitman's work during the Civil War for historical context on the years leading up to his writing "A Noiseless Patient Spider." (<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/walt-whitman-and-civil-war/>)

## LITCHARTS ON OTHER WALT WHITMAN POEMS

- [I Hear America Singing](#)
- [O Captain! My Captain!](#)
- [The Voice of the Rain](#)
- [When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer](#)



## HOW TO CITE

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