

Poem 1: A Noiseless Patient Spider

A noiseless patient spider,  
I mark'd where on a little promontory<sup>1</sup> it stood, isolated,  
Mark'd how to explore the vacant vast surrounding,  
It launch'd forth filament, filament, filament,<sup>2</sup> out of itself,  
Ever unreeling them, ever tirelessly speeding them.      5  
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,  
Till the bridge you will need be form'd, till the ductile<sup>3</sup> anchor hold,  
Till the gossamer thread you fling catch somewhere, O my Soul.      10

Poem 2: I Hear America Singing

I HEAR America singing, the varied carols I hear;  
Those of mechanics—each one singing his, as it should be, blithe and strong;  
The carpenter singing his, as he measures his plank or beam,  
The mason singing his, as he makes ready for work, or leaves off work;  
The boatman singing what belongs to him in his boat—the deckhand singing on the steamboat deck;  
The shoemaker singing as he sits on his bench—the hatter singing as he stands;  
The wood-cutter's song—the ploughboy's, on his way in the morning, or at the noon intermission, or at sundown;  
The delicious singing of the mother—or of the young wife at work—or of the girl sewing or washing—Each singing what belongs to her, and to none else;  
The day what belongs to the day—At night, the party of young fellows, robust, friendly,  
Singing, with open mouths, their strong melodious songs.

1. promontory: Land or rock formation above ground level that projects outward toward the sea.
2. filament: Thread, fiber, tendril.
3. ductile: malleable, stretchable; capable of being shaped without breaking

Questions:

1. What is Whitman's reaction to watching the spider spin its web?
2. What is the spider the spider? What are the measureless oceans of space with which the speaker's soul is surrounded?
3. What poetic sound device is utilized the most in this poem? List examples.
4. In the second stanza, is Walt Whitman still addressing the spider? Explain why or why not?
5. How does the choice of a spider show several ideas of Transcendentalism?

Questions:

1. What occupations does Whitman mention? What does his catalogue of occupations suggest about his vision of America
2. Why does Whitman choose the idea or "singing" as his way of describing what he hears?
3. Parallelism is the use of a series of words, phrases, or sentences that have similar grammatical structures. What examples of parallelism do you see in this poem? What affect does this parallelism have on the poem?
4. What do these occupation catalogues suggest about Whitman's thoughts on America?
5. What does the ending of the poem suggest about the tone of the poem?

Poem 3: By the bivouac's fitful flame,  
 By the bivouac's fitful flame,  
 A procession winding around me, solemn and sweet and slow - but  
 first I note,  
 The tents of the sleeping army, the fields' and woods' dim outline,  
 The darkness lit by spots of kindled fire, the silence,  
 Like a phantom far or near an occasional figure moving,  
 The shrubs and trees, (as I lift my eyes they seem to be stealthily  
 watching me,)  
 While wind in procession thoughts, O tender and wondrous thoughts,  
 Of life and death, of 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.

Poem 4: When I heard the learn'd<sup>1</sup> astronomer,  
 When the proofs, the figures, were ranged in columns before me,  
 When I was shown the charts, the diagrams, to add, divide, and measure them,  
 When I sitting heard the astronomer where he lectured with much applause in the  
 lecture room,  
 How soon unaccountable I became tired and sick,  
 Till rising and gliding out I wander'd off by myself,  
 In the mystical moist<sup>2</sup> night-air, and from time to time,  
 Look'd<sup>3</sup> up in perfect<sup>4</sup> silence<sup>5</sup> at the stars.

#### Notes on Whitman Poetry

*Leaves of Grass*, a set of poems by Walt Whitman, is considered an American Epic. **Epic Poetry** tells a long story about a hero whose adventures embody the values of a nation.

Whitman's **epic theme**—that all people of all times are connected by their shared experience of life.

Whitman's **style** is

**Free verse**—no set structure in regards to meter or rhyme. The poem has varying line length and almost sounds like just people talking

**Long Lines**

**Catalogues or lists**

#### Questions:

1. What sights does the speaker look upon? What is the procession to which he refers to in line 2?
2. What does the speaker's mind go as he gazes upon the scene before him? Is the procession he refers to in line 9 the same one referred to earlier? Explain
3. What poetic devices does the poem use the most? Give examples.
4. What characteristics of the Transcendentalist time period does this poem show?
5. What is the overall tone of this poem? Explain.

#### Notes:

1....learn'd: This word may carry a hint of sarcasm.

2....mystical moist: This phrase may be intended to contrast with the coldly factual dryness of the lecture.

3....Look'd: Like learn'd in the first line and wander'd in sixth line, this word has an apostrophe in place of the e. Whitman does not use an apostrophe, however, in place of the e in ranged (line 2) and lectured (line 4).

4....perfect: One may fairly ask whether this modifier helps the poem. After all, silence is silence. There is no perfect or imperfect silence; there is only silence, the absence of sound. However, speakers and writers of English often use perfect in this way—sometimes for euphony, sometimes for emphasis.

5....silence: As the adage suggests, silence speaks louder than words (of the lecturer).

#### Questions

1. What is the subject of the speech that the speaker hears? What is his reaction to the speech?
2. What do the speaker's actions after hearing the speech reveal about his personality?
3. In what ways does the perfect silence in the last line contrast with the lecture?
4. What is the speaker saying about the value of science versus a personal experience with nature?
5. What characteristics of Transcendentalism are present in this poem?

**Anaphora**—repetition of phrases or sentences with similar structures or meaning

**Onomatopoeia**—words whose sounds imitate their meanings