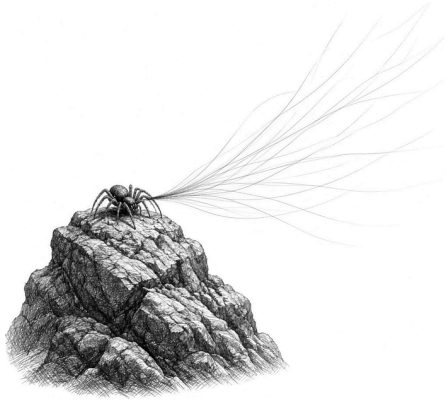
Name _____ Class _____ Date _____

A Noiseless Patient Spider

by Walt Whitman

Grades 8–11 · Common Core RL.9-10.4, RL.9-10.2, RL.9-10.5



Whitman wrote an early version in the 1860s; this version appeared in Leaves of Grass in 1871. It is a free-verse poem in two five-line stanzas: the first describes the spider, the second the speaker's soul. Together they form an extended comparison. Note: on our page one long line wraps onto a second line.

THE POEM

A noiseless patient spider,
I mark'd where on a little promontory it stood isolated,
Mark'd how to explore the vacant vast surrounding,
It launch'd forth filament, filament, filament out of itself,
Ever unreeling them, ever tirelessly speeding them.

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 anchor hold,
Till the gossamer thread you fling catch somewhere, O my soul.

VOCABULARY

noiseless — silent

promontory — a high point of land jutting out

isolated — alone, cut off

vacant — empty

filament — a very thin thread

unreeling — unwinding

detached — separated, not connected

ductile — able to be stretched without breaking

gossamer — very fine, light thread

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Where is the spider, and what is it doing?

2. Why does Whitman repeat “filament, filament, filament”?

3. Who is the speaker talking to in stanza 2?

4. Find three ways the soul is like the spider.

5. What is the soul trying to do? What might the “bridge” and “anchor” stand for?

WRITING PROMPT

Choose a small creature or object. Write two stanzas: one describing what it does, and one comparing it to something in your own life.

A Noiseless Patient Spider — Answer Key

1. On “a little promontory,” “isolated”; it launches filament after filament “out of itself” to explore “the vacant vast surrounding.”
2. The repetition shows the spider’s patient, endless effort and imitates the threads going out one by one.
3. “O my soul”: his own soul.
4. Both are isolated (“Surrounded, detached”), surrounded by vast empty space, and keep reaching out (“venturing, throwing, seeking”).
5. To connect with others, with meaning or with God: “Till the bridge you will need be form’d, till the ductile anchor hold.” The bridge and anchor are lasting connections.

Read the full poem online: poetrycatalog.com/a-noiseless-patient-spider-walt-whitman/