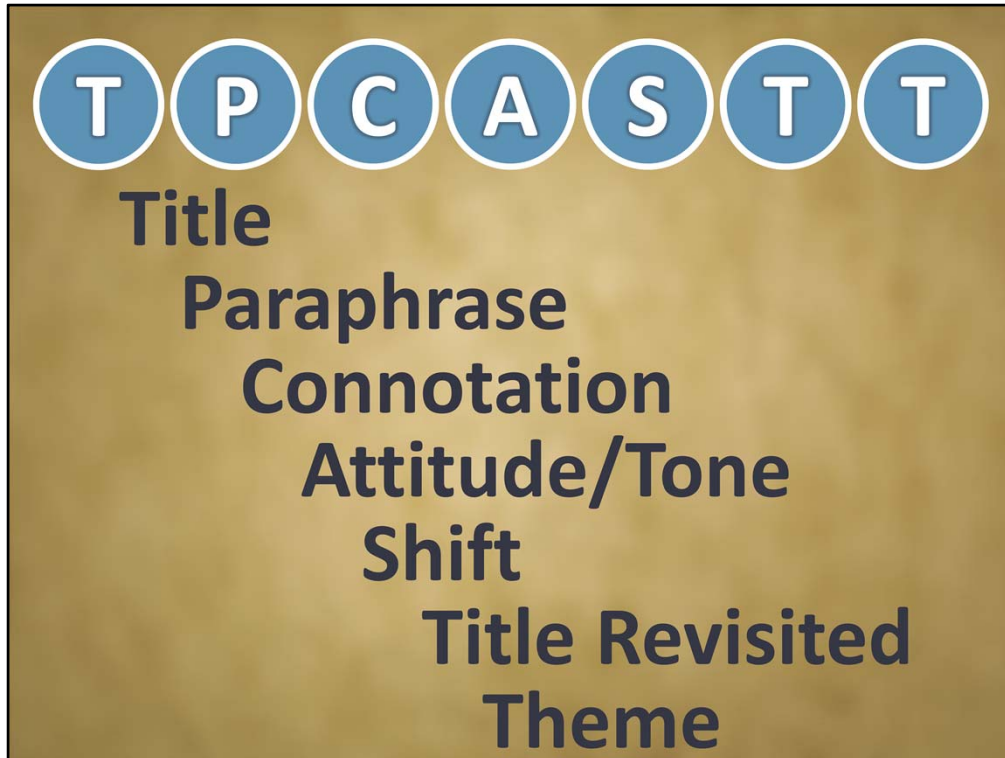


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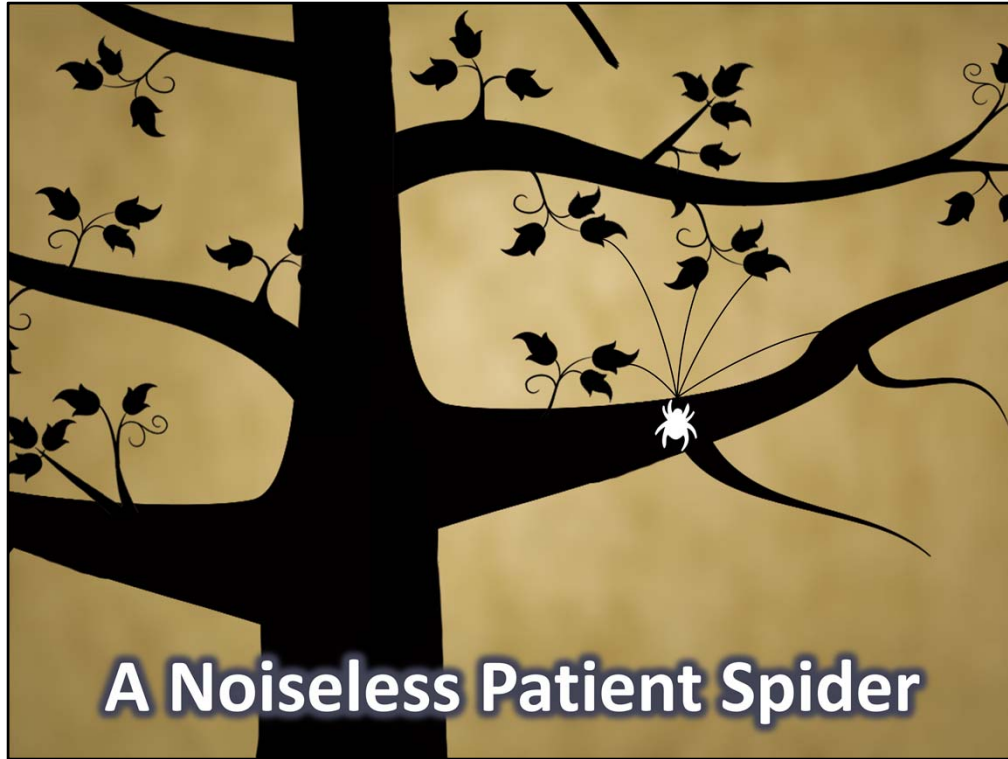
Analyzing Poetry Using TPCASTT

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TPCASTT is an acronym that can help you remember the elements of a poem that are important to understanding the meaning of a poem. TPCASTT stands for Title, Paraphrase, Connotation, Attitude or Tone, Shift, Title Revisited, and Theme.

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Observe how the TPCASTT method can help you analyze a poem such as "A Noiseless Patient Spider" by Walt Whitman.

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.

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How do you feel about spiders?

The first thing you usually notice about a poem is the title. Before trying to read and analyze a poem for its meaning, consider the title of the poem and make a prediction as to what the poem might say. Sometimes, the key to unlocking the meaning behind the poem's message can be found in the title itself.

If you are able to make predictions about the subject of the poem, this would also be a good opportunity to consider your own feelings about the subject. For example, you can guess that Whitman's poem will feature a spider. How do you feel about spiders, and how do you think the speaker might feel about spiders? What images or ideas do you associate with spiders? Are these associations positive or negative?

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I saw a quiet, patient spider alone on a little ridge

Analyzing the meaning of a poem can be difficult when you do not first understand the literal meaning of the poem. This is especially true for poems that were written in the far past when people used vocabulary and expressions that are no longer used today. A helpful method for understanding the literal meaning of a poem is to paraphrase it line by line. To paraphrase a poem, rewrite each line of the poem in your own words as if you were translating the poem into today's language for a modern audience. Notice that paraphrasing differs from summarizing. When you summarize a poem, you are retelling it in very few words. However, when you paraphrase a poem, you are retelling the poem in your own words without leaving out any details.


Here is an example paraphrase of the poem:

I saw a quiet, patient spider alone on a little ridge
I saw how it threw forth silken strands, continuously and tirelessly, exploring its large and empty surroundings

And then there is you, my soul
Standing there surrounded and detached in a wide open space
Continuously reflecting, exploring, throwing forth your own silken strands
Until you find the insight and meaningful connections to build your bridge
And your silky threads take hold and provide an anchor, oh my soul

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the spider's task is difficult or requires a lot of time

Poetry can be a powerful mode of expression due to the connotations, or secondary meanings, associated with words and phrases. These connotations convey a significance that goes beyond the literal meaning of language to express so much in very few words. When examining a poem for connotation, keep in mind the whole spectrum of poetic devices, such as imagery, personification, similes, metaphors, and symbolism. You should also pay close attention to sound devices, such as alliteration, consonance, assonance, onomatopoeia, and rhyme scheme. When identifying poetic devices, ask yourself how the poet uses the device to add meaning to the poem; all of the poetic devices should work together to contribute to the poem's overall meaning.

In Whitman's poem, how does the speaker describe the spider? What connotation does the word *patient* carry? Does that mean that the spider's task is difficult or requires a lot of time? Likewise, why does the speaker describe the spider as *isolated* as opposed to *alone*, *segregated*, or *desolate*?

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spiritual tone of self-discovery and exploration

An important aspect of a poem's meaning is the attitude or tone of the speaker or the poem itself. Remember that the speaker of the poem is not necessarily the poet. To analyze the attitude or tone of the poem, ask yourself how the poem feels. Is it happy, sad, hopeful, sarcastic, lighthearted? How does the speaker feel about the subject of the poem, the reader, other characters in the poem, or even himself or herself? You might think that a poem about death would be inherently sad, but if the speaker has a tone of hope, joy, and appreciation, then the poem may actually be celebratory regarding the cycle of life and death. Likewise, a poem about love would probably be lighthearted, unless the attitude of the speaker is filled with disappointment and pessimism.

You might say that Whitman's poem has a spiritual tone, one of self-discovery and exploration.

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second stanza focuses on the soul

Although most poems are much shorter than prose works, like novels, most of them still experience some form of shift, or a change in perspective or understanding. This new insight may be a gradual realization or final development in the conclusion of the poem. There are many ways that a poem can manifest a shift. For example, changes in stanzas, sentence structures, rhyme schemes, setting, rhythm, or punctuation can indicate a shift. Likewise, a poet may signal a shift using irony or keywords like *although*, *but*, *however*, or *yet*. Identifying the shift in a poem is often key to uncovering the poem's ultimate message. Even if a poem does not have a distinctive shift, the search for a possible shift can offer you further insight into the poem's meaning.

The shift in Whitman's poem begins in the second stanza when the poem connects the metaphor between the spider and the soul. The shift is strengthened during the closing of the poem in the last two lines. Although the poem is written in free verse, the repetition of the words "till the" helps to mimic the effect of a closing rhyming couplet often found in the end of sonnets. The implied couplet effect is also mirrored in the slant rhyme, or near rhyme, of the words "hold" and "soul."

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the spider as a metaphor for the searching soul

Now that you have closely considered many elements of a poem to uncover its meaning, you can turn back to the title of the poem to revisit its significance in light of what you have learned from the poem. Did the title of the poem give you correct clues as to the message behind the poem? Does the title mean something different from what you first predicted now that you have examined the poem in detail?

After reading the entire poem, the reference to the spider in the title of Whitman's poem may bring more to mind than a quiet spider spinning its web. The spider's patience and tireless effort is symbolic of the soul, searching for meaning in a universe that is greater and more vast than itself.

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theme: the spiritual search for meaning

Once you have analyzed a poem in detail, you can make a conclusion as to the poem's theme. The theme is the poem's central idea or insight. When considering the theme of a poem, ask yourself what message or idea the speaker of the poem wants you to take away. For example, a poem's theme might be the balance between one's desires and one's duties.

A possible theme worthy of consideration in Whitman's poem may include the spiritual search for meaning in life. The first stanza ends before the spider manages to build the foundation for its web, yet the spider is tireless and patient, implying that the web will eventually be built. Likewise, the second stanza ends before the soul has built a bridge and anchored its silky threads. However, the metaphor between the spider and the soul is tightly woven, so you can assume that the soul will also eventually "catch somewhere." The last three verbs in the closing couplet are in the subjunctive mood, indicating that they are future events yet to come and implying a sense of hope.