When I heard the learn’d astronomer;
When the proofs, the figures, were ranged in columns before me;
When I was shown the charts and 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 night-air, and from time to time;
Look’d up in perfect silence at the stars.

Walt Whitman
ABOUT THE POET

Walt Whitman (1819–1892) worked as a journalist, a teacher and a government clerk. His major work, *Leaves of Grass*, was a volume of poems that he kept adding to throughout his life. His style broke away from conventional poetry and some of his poems seem very close to prose in their style. He wrote in free verse and, although he did not invent it, he is known as ‘the father of free verse’. Whitman continues to be one of the most influential American poets.

WORDS TO KNOW

**astronomer** a scientist who studies stars, moons, planets and other objects in space

**learn’d** well educated, usually written as learned and pronounced with two syllables *learn-ed*, here it is pronounced as one syllable to reflect an ordinary person’s way of speaking

**lectured** to give a talk or presentation on a subject

**lecture-room** in the 19th century, people often went to listen to talks by experts on a range of subjects, these were held in public rooms or in community halls

**mystical** having or inspiring awe or fascination

**proofs** evidence that a mathematical equation is true

COMPREHENSION

1. **Answer the following questions.**
   a. In the first half of the poem, where is the poet?
   b. In the first half of the poem, who is the poet with and what is he doing?
   c. Which words or phrases show that the astronomer is respected by the poet and the audience?
   d. What scientific tools and methods does the astronomer use?
   e. In the second half of the poem, where is the poet?
   f. In the second half of the poem, who is the poet with and what is he doing?
   g. What words and images in the first half of the poem are a contrast to ‘the perfect silence’ in the final line?

   **This question is more difficult. Discuss it first.**
   h. What is the message of this poem?

UNDERSTANDING POETRY

The poem does not have a rhyme scheme.

2. **Count the syllables in each line. What do you notice about the pattern in the first four lines? What do you think is suggested by this?**
3. What do you notice about the number of syllables in each line of the last four lines? What does this suggest about the poet's feelings?

4. Note that the poem consists of one sentence. What has the poet done to signal a change in the poet's thoughts and feelings? What are the different thoughts and feelings he has in the two halves of the poem?

5. The poet uses a rhetorical device called anaphora in this poem.

   *Anaphora* is the repetition of a word or phrase at the beginning of successive clauses. It is often used in poetry and in speeches to emphasize an idea or create a particular impact.

   *When* is repeated at the start of the first four lines. The repetition shows us that the lecture is dragging on and not captivating the poet.

   How does Whitman use repetition and sounds in the second half of the poem to convey that the poet is captivated by the stars in the night sky?

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**WORKING WITH WORDS**

**CONTRACTIONS**

- When speaking, and in informal writing, people often use contraction.

  - Examples:
    - They might say: *I don't like 'em instead of I do not like them*
    - They might write: *He could've instead of He could have*

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1. Which three words does the poet contract?
2. What do they mean?
3. How should they be written and how many syllables should they have?
4. What are the two other words that Whitman could have contracted in the same way?

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**GROUPING WORDS**

5. Whitman has used lots of pairs in the poem. For example, when he describes the calculations that the astronomer uses: the proofs, the figures.

   Find four more examples of Whitman's use of pairs.

6. Can you also find a trio of verbs he has used?
7. Find two examples of alliteration that draw attention to key words and images.
LEARNING ABOUT LANGUAGE

1. In each of the following sentences there is an adjective phrase. These begin with a preposition (of, with, in, etc.). Underline each phrase.
   a. The balloon with the yellow stripes burst loudly.
   b. The dog under the table was growling at the cat on the chair.
   c. Those hills in the distance form the border between the two countries.
   d. The driver of the tractor slowed down and stopped.
   e. We went to visit the man with the large garden.
   f. She spoke to the woman in the green sari, yesterday.
   g. The love between mother and child is very strong.
   h. The artist's painting of the sea and the hills was sold for a vast sum.

2. Can you find three examples of adjective phrases in the poem?

LISTENING AND SPEAKING

Listen to the poem. Answer the questions when you hear it read for a second time.

1. Can the microbe be seen? ..................
2. From the context, sanguine means:
   a. negative [ ] b. optimistic [ ] c. pessimistic [ ]
3. In the poem the microbe is supposed to possess certain features. Add any further descriptions you remember about the following.
   a. the tongue .................. b. the teeth ..................
   c. the tail ..................... d. eyebrows ..................
4. Who ought to know what a microbe is like? ..................
5. Whom or what should we never doubt? ..................
6. Does the poem have a rhyming scheme? Which is it?
   a. abcdedef [ ] b. ababab [ ]
   c. abcabc [ ] d. aabbcc [ ]
7. How many syllables or beats are there to each line of the poem?

COMPOSITION

Using the structure of Whitman's poem and your understanding of anaphora, write your own poem.