

Analysis of Keat's ode to autumn



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Keats' ode 'To Autumn' deals predominantly with the passage of time, described within the imagery of the season of Autumn. The ode is a celebration of change, involving life, growth and death. Keats makes use of many literary and textual tools, which will be detailed in this analysis. A symbolic reading of this poem produces not only a literal appreciation of the text, but also invites the question of whether Keats was making another statement on the human condition, specifically the transitory nature of life itself.

The first stanza details the fertility of the season, with growth and ripening being the predominant images. Autumn is presented as a female personification, with many of the allusions being to natural growth; this allusion is strengthened later in the poem. The season is presented as one that is giving - "loading" and "blessing with fruit", "swelling" and "plumping". The bounteousness of Autumn is emphasised with "still more, later flowers", so many that bees continue to harvest as though the days of plenty will never stop. The description is predominantly feminine, and Keats uses words that suggest pregnancy or a natural state, such as "ripeness", "swell" and "budding". The first stanza centres on the growth of the first months of Autumn, and is crafted such that it is read in a slow, unhurried manner, much as the bees are not hurrying to collect pollen from the flowers, as they believe "warm days will never cease".

The second stanza is a slower presentation, with Autumn depicted "sitting", "sound asleep", or "drows'd". The months of plenty, which the bees thought would never end, are ending. There is an allusion to death in the form of the Reaper in lines 17-18, with the "hook" sparing the "next swath",

an extension of the "half-reap'd furrow" in line 16. There is no activity by the persona of Autumn in this stanza, the emphasis on watching and looking over the harvest. There is no haste in this stanza, with Autumn watching "the last ooziings hours by hours" - the words themselves are drawn out, using long vowel sounds and soft consonants.

The final stanza contains more allusions to the season's end - the "soft-dying day", and "wailful choir" of "soft gnats mourning". The opening of the first stanza, with "mists" of mornings, and "maturing" sun is brought to a conclusion in the third stanza with "barred clouds" of the "soft-dying day" touching the "stubble plains" of the harvested crop, an evening setting. This stanza compares Autumn favourably to Spring, each having their own sounds and songs. The final image is of the swallows, gathering for their Winter migration. The final stanza deals predominantly with the aural imagery of the season - from the opening line of the "songs" and "music" to the pathetic fallacy of the "wailful choir of small gnats", the "bleating" of the fully grown lambs, and the final "twitter" of the gathering swallows.

Overall, the poem appears written as an ode to Autumn, although it is delivered more in the format of an internal monologue, taking the form of a single voice musing the passing of time. The form of the poem, particularly the first stanza as a continual single sentence, implies a "stream of consciousness" approach - the poet thinking the words rather than giving them voice. The language is not contrived, and is quite informal. There is very little poetic compression of words, or inversion. The words are chosen for their descriptive powers, supporting the poem based around the imagery of the season. The tone is gentle, there is no haste; this is supported by the <https://assignbuster.com/analysis-of-keats-ode-to-autumn/>

use of long vowel sounds and soft consonants. These have the effect of forcing the reader to move slowly through each stanza, until the closing lines of the final stanza, where Keats uses harder consonants, giving a tighter presentation of the closure of the season.

The rhythm, although based on an iambic pentameter, has subtle variations that control the pace of the poem. For example, line 5 can be read strictly as an iambic pentameter, although it feels more natural to read "apples" as a single, monotone word, rather than enforced cadence of "-ples" in the word "ap-ples" that the metre would demand. This has the effect of displacing the rest of the metre, giving a slower overall reading of the line. Line 5 also contains "moss'd", a poetic contraction which could be read as "moss-ed", but feels more natural when read as "mossd", again, giving a softer tone to the line by removing the stress of "ed". The final words "cottage-trees" contain harder, repeated consonant "t" sounds, inviting three stresses on "cot-tage-trees", effectively bringing the line to a conclusion but without actually terminating it. The use of soft consonant sounds such as "s" and "l" slow the reading of the stanza, giving it an Autumnal, lazy feel. The use of a variation on the iambic pentameter gives the poem a more conversational or thoughtful tone, allowing control of the words but not enforcing a high degree of rigidity on the overall structure.

The rhyme scheme is constant throughout each stanza (A, B, A, B C, D, E, D, C, C, E), and this is used with the technique of enjambement and end-stopping with commas, colons or semicolons rather than full stops to allow the poem to flow. As mentioned earlier, the first stanza is a complete and single sentence, the second and third stanza only being broken by the questions of

<https://assignbuster.com/analysis-of-keats-ode-to-autumn/>

their respective opening lines. The definite rhyme scheme produces an overall feeling of harmony within the poem, and the regular length gives a feeling of order rather than discord or chaos. This use of harder consonant sounds in the final stanza, such as "touch the stubble plains", and "red breast whistles", bring the poem to a slightly harsher conclusion, as Autumn turns to Winter.

Keats also uses imagery and figurative language to give his poem greater impact. The visual imagery is the strongest, with detailed descriptions of the bounteousness of the harvest in the opening stanza, through to the description of the evening and the setting sun in the final stanza. Keats does not make extensive use of metaphor or simile throughout this text, preferring to focus on the personification of Autumn, depicted "sitting", or "sound asleep" in the second stanza. The auditory qualities are strongest in the final stanza, with Keats making use of onomatopoeia in the "bleat" of the lambs and the "twitter" of the swallows. Overall, the use of imagery in this way draws the reader into a visual scene, created by the skilful use of text.

Keats builds the sequence of imagery throughout each stanza, providing a visual experience, which leads the reader through Autumn. The conclusion of the completed harvest, the lambs now fully grown and awaiting slaughter, and the swallows gathering for their migration allow Keats to sum up the entire season of Autumn in 33 lines of verse. His images are intense, and immerse the reader completely in his vision of the season.

The poem may be taken on a literal level as a description of the season of Autumn. It may also be read as a symbolic description of the transitory nature of life itself, an explanation alluded to with the feminine, almost sexual, pregnant, description of growth in the first stanza, the "ripeness", "plumping" and "budding". The second stanza contains the first connotation of death with the introduction of the "reap'd furrow" in line 16 and the watching of the "last oozings", descriptions of a general cessation of growth. Symbolic references abound in this poem - autumn itself being a symbol for maturity, and the description of flowers symbolising the shortness of life. In addition, the references to birds in the final stanza may be a symbolic reference to the soul, as with the "sallows", or willow trees, referring to the whole order of nature, from roots, through branches to leaves and the continual cycle of life. The final stanza and its funereal "wailful choir" and "soft-dying day" bring to a conclusion this cycle of life. This underlying connotation gives the reader a deeper sense of involvement in the poem, and introduces a willingness to re-read in search of perhaps a deeper meaning.

In conclusion, Keats has produced a technically superb poem, utilising many of the tools available to the poet, to give on the literal level a description of season of Autumn, or on the symbolic level a description of the cycle of life. The poem enacts the passage of the season, from the rich, heavy growth of the opening stanza, through the soporific effects of the second, to the slow, concluding third. His rich use of the full range of imagery, and his control of the rhyme and rhythm produce an almost languid verse that produce a vivid, three-dimensional picture in the mind of the reader.