

"to autumn" by john keats



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Of John Keats' "Great Odes," "To Autumn" is a poem which rests on a precipice. In other words, autumn lies directly between the life breath of spring and summer and the impending death of winter. Much to his advantage, Keats knowingly embraces autumn's ambivalent nature in order to perpetuate the middle season's own unique beauty. The result is an ode entirely dictated by negative capability, in which the common human context of autumn is transformed and reviewed in a new light. "To Autumn," filled with both vivacious nature poetry and subtle nods in death's direction, gradually affirms the paradoxical beauty of the season through stark contrast and steady change.

In the first stanza, Keats establishes autumn's lively benevolence through traditional pastoral imagery, basking in autumn's more conventional beauty with only slight references to the cold ahead or warmth prior. Here, abundance and excess are both prevalent themes. With summer only recently departed, the speaker flushes with autumn's blessings of "swelling" gourds, "plump" hazel shells, and cottage-trees that bend from the bounteous weight of apples. "And still more," the speaker continues, "later flowers for the bees, / Until they think warm days will never cease" (ll. 9-10).

Here, Keats lets slip the first hint of comparison upon autumn's beauty. Summer's legacy, represented by the late "maturing sun," is the driving force of life with autumn acting as its conductor. In fact, their collaborative efforts are so pronounced that the bees think not of colder weather, the end to a seemingly endless bounty. However, this surmise regarding summer's end is highly ominous. While the thoughts of bees with honey combs "o'erbrimm'd" seems innocuous enough, the speaker is actually laying the

foundation for a great change. The fruit of the land is filled with “ ripeness to the core,” indicative of both summer’s triumphant conclusion and autumn’s own commencement—the harvest. Summer and autumn’s literal fruition, while lively in its own right, is the impetus for autumn’s own inverted bloom.

The transitory second stanza is marked by the harvest and a personified autumn encumbered by the “ oozing” advance of time and death rather than the labors of nature. Now, autumn who was once referred to as the regal “ season of mists and mellow fruitfulness” in the introductory apostrophe is now listless: “ sitting careless on a granary floor.” The speaker recounts, “ Or on a half-reap’d furrow sound asleep, / Drows’d with the fume of poppies, while thy hook / Spares the next swath and all its twined flowers” (ll. 16-18). Previously a divine champion of bounty and life, autumn now finds itself in a delicate, humanized stupor. The bed of flowers, noticeably “ half-reap’d,” portrays the harvest as another symbol of autumn’s ambivalence, half-way between life and death. Meanwhile, time’s slow, ceaseless procession is encapsulated well by autumn’s serene slumber induced by “ poppies,” nature’s literal opiate. These images are incredibly striking despite their blurry, languid nature due to their divergence from the sweet festivities of the first stanza. Vines riddled with produce have been replaced with autumn half-reaping and half-sparing the fruits of two seasons’ labor. Now, the season assumes the figure of the reaper with “ hook” gliding past each swath toward autumn’s final trimester.

Finally, the third stanza, a literal and figurative sunset on autumn’s reign, features the speaker blending the elements of life and death and at last confiding in autumn its true beauty. It begins, “ Where are the songs of

spring? Ay, where are they?" (l. 23). Nearing autumn's close, the speaker bemoans the loss of "songs," or beauties, of spring; Keats even employs *ubi sunt* as if to indicate the fruition of a full emotional—or seasonal—transformation. Clearly, springtime has long left this world: "barred clouds" have taken the place of the once "maturing sun" and the harvest is deep into the past. However, the speaker quickly expounds on autumn's beauty, "Think not of them, thou hast thy music too" (l. 24). In tender and genuine tone does the speaker reassure autumn of its worth, walking a fine line of life and death. The sun falls low, casting off the "soft-dying day," and a "wailful choir" of gnats harmoniously mourn the climax of autumn. All at once it seems, the design of nature begins to betray and contradict itself. Rosy skies contest to the glorious, "soft-dying" transition from day to night, and the buzzing gnats incite the full chorus of autumn's own songs. Oxymoronic "full-grown lambs" bleat before the shepherd or the slaughterhouse while crickets and robins "sing" and "whistle" respectively, reciprocating the speaker's reassured peace. Here, nature appears to be untangling its own natural contradictions and juxtapositions and thus allows autumn to assert its own capability to be beautiful regardless of the lapse of spring and summer or the oncoming wintertime. Then, as if to relinquish any doubt, the speaker concludes, "And gathering swallows twitter in the skies" (l. 33). The birds, eager to resume along the procession of time and season, soar up and "twitter" the last refrain in autumn's song shortly before flying south for the winter.

From onset to its conclusion, "To Autumn" is strung about by time and change. The apples which hung from the cottage-trees at sunrise are

plucked and then juiced by the cyder-press at midday. The " winnowing wind" tossing autumn's soft hair " lives or dies" among the river shallows. Indeed, autumn is capable of attaining beauty because negative capability allows the speaker to seek beauty out in the least likely of places. In this case, beauty lies on the boundary of life and death, both individually beautified while forever conscious of their polar opposite. To Keats, autumn is nature's primary example of the coalescence of life and death.