

3. Critical Analysis of "To Autumn" by John Keats

*"When last the sun his autumn tresses shook,
And the tann'd harvesters rich armfuls took.
Soon was he quieted to slumbrous rest:
But, ere it crept upon him, he had prest
Peona's busy hand against his lips,
And still, a sleeping, held her finger-tips
In tender pressure.."*

Endymion [line 440-447]

The favourite themes of Keats's romanticism are set in his Odes and of his numerous Odes, "To Autumn" is constructed with the harmonious skill of brevity in form and elaborate in meaning.

In both its form and descriptive surface, "To Autumn" is one of the simplest of Keats's odes. There is nothing confusing or complex in Keats's paean to the season of autumn, with its fruitfulness, its flowers, and the song of its swallows gathering for migration. The extraordinary achievement of this poem lies in its ability to suggest, explore, and develop a rich abundance of themes without ever ruffling its calm, gentle, and lovely description of autumn. Where "Ode on Melancholy" presents itself as a strenuous heroic quest, "To Autumn" is concerned with the much quieter activity of daily observation and appreciation. In this quietude, the gathered themes of the preceding odes find their fullest and most beautiful expression.

"To Autumn" takes up where the other odes leave off. Like the others, it shows Keats's speaker paying homage to a particular goddess—in this case, the deified season of Autumn. The selection of this season implicitly takes up the other odes' themes of temporality, mortality, and change: Autumn in Keats's ode is a time of warmth and plenty, but it is perched on the brink of winter's desolation, as the bees enjoy "later flowers," the harvest is gathered from the fields, the lambs of spring are now "full grown," and, in the final line of the poem, the swallows gather for their winter migration. The understated sense of inevitable loss in that final line makes it one of the most moving moments in all of poetry; it can be read as a simple, uncomplaining summation of the entire human condition.

Despite the coming chill of winter, the late warmth of autumn provides Keats's speaker with ample beauty to celebrate: the cottage and its surroundings in the first stanza, the agrarian haunts of the goddess in the second, and the locales of natural creatures in the third. Keats's speaker is able to experience these beauties in a sincere and meaningful way because of the lessons he has learned in the previous odes: He is no longer indolent, no longer committed to the isolated imagination (as in "Psyche"), no longer attempting to escape the pain of the world through ecstatic rapture (as in "Nightingale"), no longer frustrated by the attempt to eternalize mortal beauty or subject eternal beauty to time (as in "Urn"), and no longer able to frame the connection of pleasure and the sorrow of loss only as an imaginary heroic quest (as in "Melancholy").

In "To Autumn," the speaker's experience of beauty refers back to earlier odes (the swallows recall the nightingale; the fruit recalls joy's grape; the goddess drowsing among the poppies recalls Psyche and Cupid lying in the grass), but it also recalls a wealth of earlier poems. Most importantly, the image of Autumn winnowing and harvesting (in a sequence of odes often explicitly about creativity) recalls an earlier Keats poem in which the activity of harvesting is an explicit metaphor for artistic creation. In his sonnet "When I have fears that I may cease to be," Keats makes this connection directly:

“When I have fears that I may cease to be
Before my pen has glean’d my teeming brain,
Before high-piled books, in charactry,
Hold like rich garners the full ripen’d grain...”

In this poem, the act of creation is pictured as a kind of self-harvesting; the pen harvests the fields of the brain, and books are filled with the resulting “grain.” In “To Autumn,” the metaphor is developed further; the sense of coming loss that permeates the poem confronts the sorrow underlying the season’s creativity. When Autumn’s harvest is over, the fields will be bare, the swaths with their “twined flowers” cut down, the cider-press dry, the skies empty. But the connection of this harvesting to the seasonal cycle softens the edge of the tragedy. In time, spring will come again, the fields will grow again, and the birdsong will return. As the speaker knew in “Melancholy,” abundance and loss, joy and sorrow, song and silence are as intimately connected as the twined flowers in the fields. What makes “To Autumn” beautiful is that it brings an engagement with that connection out of the realm of mythology and fantasy and into the everyday world. The development the speaker so strongly resisted in “Indolence” is at last complete: He has learned that an acceptance of mortality is not destructive to an appreciation of beauty and has gleaned wisdom by accepting the passage of time.

Like the “Ode on Melancholy,” “To Autumn” is written in a three-stanza structure with a variable rhyme scheme. Each stanza is eleven lines long (as opposed to ten in “Melancholy”), and each is metered in a relatively precise iambic pentameter. In terms of both thematic organization and rhyme scheme, each stanza is divided roughly into two parts. In each stanza, the first part is made up of the first four lines of the stanza, and the second part is made up of the last seven lines. The first part of each stanza follows an ABAB rhyme scheme, the first line rhyming with the third, and the second line rhyming with the fourth. The second part of each stanza is longer and varies in rhyme scheme: The first stanza is arranged CDEDCCE, and the second and third stanzas are arranged CDECDDE.