

= To Autumn =

" To Autumn " is a poem by English Romantic poet John Keats (31 October 1795 ? 23 February 1821) . The work was composed on 19 September 1819 and published in 1820 in a volume of Keats 's poetry that included *Lamia* and *The Eve of St. Agnes* . " To Autumn " is the final work in a group of poems known as Keats 's " 1819 odes " . Although personal problems left him little time to devote to poetry in 1819 , he composed " To Autumn " after a walk near Winchester one autumnal evening . The work marks the end of his poetic career , as he needed to earn money and could no longer devote himself to the lifestyle of a poet . A little over a year following the publication of " To Autumn " , Keats died in Rome .

The poem has three eleven @-@ line stanzas which describe a progression through the season , from the late maturation of the crops to the harvest and to the last days of autumn when winter is nearing . The imagery is richly achieved through the personification of Autumn , and the description of its bounty , its sights and sounds . It has parallels in the work of English landscape artists , with Keats himself describing the fields of stubble that he saw on his walk as being like that in a painting .

The work has been interpreted as a meditation on death ; as an allegory of artistic creation ; as Keats 's response to the Peterloo Massacre , which took place in the same year ; and as an expression of nationalist sentiment . One of the most anthologised English lyric poems , " To Autumn " has been regarded by critics as one of the most perfect short poems in the English language .

= = Background = =

During the spring of 1819 , Keats wrote many of his major odes : " Ode on a Grecian Urn " , " Ode on Indolence " , " Ode on Melancholy " , " Ode to a Nightingale " , and " Ode to Psyche " . After the month of May , he began to pursue other forms of poetry , including the verse tragedy *Otho the Great* in collaboration with friend and roommate Charles Brown , the second half of *Lamia* , and a return to his unfinished epic *Hyperion* . His efforts from spring until autumn were dedicated completely to a career in poetry , alternating between writing long and short poems , and setting himself a goal to compose more than fifty lines of verse each day . In his free time he also read works as varied as Robert Burton 's *Anatomy of Melancholy* , Thomas Chatterton 's poetry , and Leigh Hunt 's essays .

Although Keats managed to write many poems in 1819 , he was suffering from a multitude of financial troubles throughout the year , including concerns over his brother , George , who , after emigrating to America , was badly in need of money . Despite these distractions , on 19 September 1819 he found time to write " To Autumn " . The poem marks the final moment of his career as a poet . No longer able to afford to devote his time to the composition of poems , he began working on more lucrative projects . Keats 's declining health and personal responsibilities also raised obstacles to his continuing poetic efforts .

On 19 September 1819 , Keats walked near Winchester along the River Itchen . In a letter to his friend John Hamilton Reynolds written on 21 September , Keats described the impression the scene had made upon him and its influence on the composition of " To Autumn " : " How beautiful the season is now ? How fine the air . A temperate sharpness about it [...] I never lik 'd stubble fields so much as now [...] Somehow a stubble plain looks warm ? in the same way that some pictures look warm ? this struck me so much in my sunday 's walk that I composed upon it . " Not everything on Keats 's mind at the time was bright ; the poet knew in September that he would have to finally abandon *Hyperion* . Thus , in the letter that he wrote to Reynolds , Keats also included a note saying that he abandoned his long poem . Keats did not send " To Autumn " to Reynolds , but did include the poem within a letter to Richard Woodhouse , Keats 's publisher and friend , and dated it on the same day .

The poem was revised and included in Keats 's 1820 collection of poetry titled *Lamia* , *Isabella* , the *Eve of St. Agnes* , and *Other Poems* . Although the publishers Taylor and Hessey feared the kind of

bad reviews that had plagued Keats 's 1818 edition of Endymion , they were willing to publish the collection after the removal of any potentially controversial poems to ensure that there would be no politically motivated reviews that could give the volume a bad reputation .

= = Poem = =

Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness
Close bosom @-@ friend of the maturing sun
Conspiring with him how to load and bless
With fruit the vines that round the thatch @-@ eves run ;
To bend with apples the moss 'd cottage @-@ trees ,
And fill all fruit with ripeness to the core ;
To swell the gourd , and plump the hazel shells
With a sweet kernel ; to set budding more ,
And still more , later flowers for the bees ,
Until they think warm days will never cease ,
For Summer has o 'er @-@ brimm 'd their clammy cells .
Who hath not seen thee oft amid thy store ?
Sometimes whoever seeks abroad may find
Thee sitting careless on a granary floor ,
Thy hair soft @-@ lifted by the winnowing wind ;
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 :
And sometimes like a gleaner thou dost keep
Steady thy laden head across a brook ;
Or by a cider @-@ press , with patient look ,
Thou watchest the last oozy hours by hours .
Where are the songs of Spring ? Ay , where are they ?
Think not of them , thou hast thy music too , ?
While barred clouds bloom the soft @-@ dying day ,
And touch the stubble @-@ plains with rosy hue ;
Then in a wailful choir the small gnats mourn
Among the river shallows , borne aloft
Or sinking as the light wind lives or dies ;
And full @-@ grown lambs loud bleat from hilly bourn ;
Hedge @-@ crickets sing ; and now with treble soft
The red @-@ breast whistles from a garden @-@ croft ;
And gathering swallows twitter in the skies .

= = Themes = =

" To Autumn " describes , in its three stanzas , three different aspects of the season : its fruitfulness , its labour and its ultimate decline . Through the stanzas there is a progression from early autumn to mid autumn and then to the heralding of winter . Parallel to this , the poem depicts the day turning from morning to afternoon and into dusk . These progressions are joined with a shift from the tactile sense to that of sight and then of sound , creating a three @-@ part symmetry which is not present in Keats 's other odes .

As the poem progresses , Autumn is represented metaphorically as one who conspires , who ripens fruit , who harvests , who makes music . The first stanza of the poem represents Autumn as involved with the promotion of natural processes , growth and ultimate maturation , two forces in opposition in nature , but together creating the impression that the season will not end . In this stanza the fruits are still ripening and the buds still opening in the warm weather . Stuart Sperry says that Keats

emphasises the tactile sense here , suggested by the imagery of growth and gentle motion : swelling , bending and plumping .

In the second stanza Autumn is personified as a harvester , to be seen by the viewer in various guises performing labouring tasks essential to the provision of food for the coming year . There is a lack of definitive action , all motion being gentle . Autumn is not depicted as actually harvesting but as seated , resting or watching . In lines 14 ? 15 the personification of Autumn is as an exhausted labourer . Near the end of the stanza , the steadiness of the gleaner in lines 19 ? 20 again emphasises a motionlessness within the poem . The progression through the day is revealed in actions that are all suggestive of the drowsiness of afternoon : the harvested grain is being winnowed , the harvester is asleep or returning home , the last drops issue from the cider press .

The last stanza contrasts Autumn 's sounds with those of Spring . The sounds that are presented are not only those of Autumn but essentially the gentle sounds of the evening . Gnats wail and lambs bleat in the dusk . As night approaches within the final moments of the song , death is slowly approaching alongside the end of the year . The full @-@ grown lambs , like the grapes , gourds and hazel nuts , will be harvested for the winter . The twittering swallows gather for departure , leaving the fields bare . The whistling red @-@ breast and the chirping cricket are the common sounds of winter . The references to Spring , the growing lambs and the migrating swallows remind the reader that the seasons are a cycle , widening the scope of this stanza from a single season to life in general .

Of all of Keats 's poems , " To Autumn " , with its catalog of concrete images , most closely describes a paradise as realized on earth while also focusing on archetypal symbols connected with the season . Within the poem , autumn represents growth , maturation , and finally an approaching death . There is a fulfilling union between the ideal and the real .

Scholars have noted a number of literary influences on " To Autumn " , from Virgil 's Georgics , to Edmund Spenser 's " Mutability Cantos " , to the language of Thomas Chatterton , to Samuel Taylor Coleridge 's " Frost at Midnight " , to an essay on autumn by Leigh Hunt , which Keats had recently read .

" To Autumn " is thematically connected to other odes that Keats wrote in 1819 . For example , in his " Ode to Melancholy " a major theme is the acceptance of the process of life . When this theme appears later in " To Autumn " , however , it is with a difference . This time the figure of the poet disappears , and there is no exhortation of an imaginary reader . There are no open conflicts , and " dramatic debate , protest , and qualification are absent " . In process there is a harmony between the finality of death and hints of renewal of life in the cycle of the seasons , paralleled by the renewal of a single day .

Critics have tended to emphasize different aspects of the process . Some have focused on renewal ; Walter Jackson Bate points to the theme of each stanza including " its contrary " idea , here death implying , though only indirectly , the renewal of life . Also , noted by both Bate and Jennifer Wagner , the structure of the verse reinforces the sense of something to come ; the placing of the couplet before the end of each stanza creates a feeling of suspension , highlighting the theme of continuation .

Others , like Harold Bloom , have emphasized the " exhausted landscape " , the completion , the finality of death , although " Winter descends here as a man might hope to die , with a natural sweetness " . If death in itself is final , here it comes with a lightness , a softness , also pointing to " an acceptance of process beyond the possibility of grief . " The progress of growth is no longer necessary ; maturation is complete , and life and death are in harmony . The rich description of the cycle of the seasons enables the reader to feel a belonging " to something larger than the self " , as James O 'Rourke expresses it , but the cycle comes to an end each year , analogous to the ending of single life . O 'Rourke suggests that something of a fear of that ending is subtly implied at the end of the poem , although , unlike the other great odes , in this poem the person of the poet is entirely submerged , so there is at most a faint hint of Keats 's own possible fear .

According to Helen Vendler , " To Autumn " may be seen as an allegory of artistic creation . As the farmer processes the fruits of the soil into what sustains the human body , so the artist processes the experience of life into a symbolic structure that may sustain the human spirit . This process

involves an element of self @-@ sacrifice by the artist , analogous to the living grain 's being sacrificed for human consumption . In " To Autumn " , as a result of this process , the " rhythms " of the harvesting " artist @-@ goddess " permeate the whole world until all visual , tactile , and kinetic presence is transubstantiated into Apollonian music for the ear , " the sounds of the poem itself .

In a 1979 essay , Jerome McGann argued that while the poem was indirectly influenced by historical events , Keats had deliberately ignored the political landscape of 1819 . Countering this view , Andrew Bennett , Nicholas Roe and others focused on what they believed were political allusions actually present in the poem , Roe arguing for a direct connection to the Peterloo Massacre of 1819 . Later , Paul Fry argued against McGann 's stance when he pointed out , " It scarcely seems pertinent to say that ' To Autumn ' is therefore an evasion of social violence when it is so clearly an encounter with death itself [...] it is not a politically encoded escape from history reflecting the coerced betrayal [...] of its author 's radicalism . McGann thinks to rescue Keats from the imputation of political naïveté by saying that he was a radical browbeaten into quietism " .

In his 1999 study of the effect on British literature of the diseases and climates of the colonies , Alan Bewell read " the landscape of ' To Autumn ' " as " a kind of biomedical allegory of the coming into being of English climatic space out of its dangerous geographical alternatives . " Britain 's colonial reach over the previous century and a half had exposed the mother country to foreign diseases and awareness of the dangers of extreme tropical climates . Keats , with medical training , having suffered chronic illness himself , and influenced like his contemporaries by " colonial medical discourse " , was deeply aware of this threat .

According to Bewell , the landscape of " To Autumn " presents the temperate climate of rural England as a healthful alternative to disease @-@ ridden foreign environments . Though the " clammy " aspect of " fever " , the excessive ripeness associated with tropical climates , intrude into the poem , these elements , less prominent than in Keats 's earlier poetry , are counterbalanced by the dry , crisp autumnal air of rural England . In presenting the particularly English elements of this environment , Keats was also influenced by contemporary poet and essayist Leigh Hunt , who had recently written of the arrival of autumn with its " migration of birds " , " finished harvest " , " cyder [...] making " and migration of " the swallows " , as well as by English landscape painting and the " pure " English idiom of the poetry of Thomas Chatterton .

In " To Autumn " , Bewell argues , Keats was at once voicing " a very personal expression of desire for health " and constructing a " myth of a national environment " . This " political " element in the poem , Bewell points out , has also been suggested by Geoffrey Hartman , who expounded a view of " To Autumn " as " an ideological poem whose form expresses a national idea " .

Thomas McFarland , on the other hand , in 2000 cautioned against overemphasizing the " political , social , or historical readings " of the poem , which distract from its " consummate surface and bloom " . Most important about " To Autumn " is its concentration of imagery and allusion in its evocation of nature , conveying an " interpenetration of livingness and dyingness as contained in the very nature of autumn " .

= = Structure = =

" To Autumn " is a poem of three stanzas , each of eleven lines . Like others of Keats 's odes written in 1819 , the structure is that of an odal hymn , having three clearly defined sections corresponding to the Classical divisions of strophe , antistrophe , and epode . The stanzas differ from those of the other odes through use of eleven lines rather than ten , and have a couplet placed before the concluding line of each stanza .

" To Autumn " employs poetical techniques which Keats had perfected in the five poems written in the Spring of the same year , but departs from them in some aspects , dispensing with the narrator and dealing with more concrete concepts . There is no dramatic movement in " To Autumn " as there is in many earlier poems ; the poem progresses in its focus while showing little change in the objects it is focusing on . There is , in the words of Walter Jackson Bate , " a union of process and stasis " , " energy caught in repose " , an effect that Keats himself termed " stationing " . At the beginning of the third stanza he employs the dramatic Ubi sunt device associated with a sense of

melancholy , and questions the personified subject : " Where are the songs of Spring ? "

Like the other odes , " To Autumn " is written in iambic pentameter (but greatly modified from the very beginning) with five stressed syllables to a line , each usually preceded by an unstressed syllable . Keats varies this form by the employment of Augustan inversion , sometimes using a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable at the beginning of a line , including the first : " Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness " ; and employing spondees in which two stressed syllables are placed together at the beginnings of both the following stanzas , adding emphasis to the questions that are asked : " Who hath not seen thee ... " , " Where are the songs ... ? "

The rhyme of " To Autumn " follows a pattern of starting each stanza with an ABAB pattern which is followed by rhyme scheme of CDEDCCE in the first verse and CDECDDE in the second and third stanzas . In each case , there is a couplet before the final line . Some of the language of " To Autumn " resembles phrases found in earlier poems with similarities to *Endymion* , *Sleep and Poetry* , and *Calidore* . Keats characteristically uses monosyllabic words such as " ... how to load and bless with fruit the vines that round the thatch @-@ eves run . " The words are weighted by the emphasis of bilabial consonants (b , m , p) , with lines like " ... for Summer has o 'er @-@ brimm 'd their clammy cells . " There is also an emphasis on long vowels which control the flow of the poem , giving it a slow measured pace : " ... while barred clouds bloom the soft dying day " .

Between the manuscript version and the published version of " To Autumn " Keats tightened the language of the poem . One of Keats 's changes emphasised by critics is the change in line 17 of " Drows 'd with red poppies " to " Drows 'd with the fume of poppies " , which emphasises the sense of smell instead of sight . The later edition relies more on passive , past participles , as apparent in the change of " While a gold cloud " in line 25 to " While barred clouds " . Other changes involve the strengthening of phrases , especially within the transformation of the phrase in line 13 " whoever seeks for thee may find " into " whoever seeks abroad may find " . Many of the lines within the second stanza were completely rewritten , especially those which did not fit into a rhyme scheme . Some of the minor changes involved adding punctuation missing from the original manuscript copy and altering capitalisation .

= = Critical reception = =

Critical and scholarly praise has been unanimous in declaring " To Autumn " one of the most perfect poems in the English language . A.C. Swinburne placed it with " Ode on a Grecian Urn " as " the nearest to absolute perfection " of Keats 's odes ; Aileen Ward declared it " Keats 's most perfect and untroubled poem " ; and Douglas Bush has stated that the poem is " flawless in structure , texture , tone , and rhythm " ; Walter Evert , in 1965 , stated that " To Autumn " is " the only perfect poem that Keats ever wrote ? and if this should seem to take from him some measure of credit for his extraordinary enrichment of the English poetic tradition , I would quickly add that I am thinking of absolute perfection in whole poems , in which every part is wholly relevant to and consistent in effect with every other part . "

Early reviews of " To Autumn " focused on it as part of Keats 's collection of poems *Lamia* , *Isabella* , the *Eve of St. Agnes* , and *Other Poems* . An anonymous critic in the July 1820 *Monthly Review* claimed , " this writer is very rich both in imagination and fancy ; and even a superabundance of the latter faculty is displayed in his lines ' On Autumn , ' which bring the reality of nature more before our eyes than almost any description that we remember . [...] If we did not fear that , young as is Mr K. , his peculiarities are fixed beyond all the power of criticism to remove , we would exhort him to become somewhat less strikingly original , ? to be less fond of the folly of too new or too old phrases , ? and to believe that poetry does not consist in either the one or the other . " Josiah Conder in the September 1820 *Eclectic Review* mentioned , " One naturally turns first to the shorter pieces , in order to taste the flavour of the poetry . The following ode to Autumn is no unfavourable specimen . " An anonymous reviewer in *The Edinburgh Magazine* for October 1820 added to a discussion of some of Keats 's longer poems the afterthought that " The ode to ' Fancy , ' and the ode to ' Autumn , ' also have great merit . "

Although , after Keats 's death , recognition of the merits of his poetry came slowly , by mid century

, despite widespread Victorian disapproval of the alleged " weakness " of his character and the view often advanced " that Keats 's work represented mere sensuality without substance " , some of his poems began to find an appreciative audience , including " To Autumn " . In an 1844 essay on Keats 's poetry in the Dumfries Herald , George Gilfillian placed " To Autumn " among " the finest of Keats ' smaller pieces " . In an 1851 lecture , David Macbeth Moir acclaimed " four exquisite odes , ? ' To a Nightingale , ' ' To a Grecian Urn , ' ' To Melancholy , ' and ' To Autumn , ' ? all so pregnant with deep thought , so picturesque in their limning , and so suggestive . " In 1865 , Matthew Arnold singled out the " indefinable delicacy , charm , and perfection of [...] Keats 's [touch] in his Autumn " . John Dennis , in an 1883 work about great poets , wrote that " the ' Ode to Autumn ' , ripe with the glory of the season it describes ? must ever have a place among the most precious gems of lyrical poetry . " The 1888 Britannica declared , " Of these [odes] perhaps the two nearest to absolute perfection , to the triumphant achievement and accomplishment of the very utmost beauty possible to human words , may be that to Autumn and that on a Grecian Urn " .

At the turn of the 20th century , a 1904 analysis of great poetry by Stephen Gwynn claimed , " above and before all [of Keats 's poems are] the three odes , To a Nightingale , On a Grecian Urn , and To Autumn . Among these odes criticism can hardly choose ; in each of them the whole magic of poetry seems to be contained . " Sidney Colvin , in his 1917 biography , pointed out that " the ode To Autumn [...] opens up no such far @-@ reaching avenues to the mind and soul of the reader as the odes To a Grecian Urn , To a Nightingale , or On Melancholy , but in execution is more complete and faultless than any of them . " Following this in a 1934 analysis of Romantic poetry , Margaret Sherwood stated that the poem was " a perfect expression of the phase of primitive feeling and dim thought in regard to earth processes when these are passing into a thought of personality . "

Harold Bloom , in 1961 , described " To Autumn " as " the most perfect shorter poem in the English language . " Following this , Walter Jackson Bate , in 1963 , claimed that " [...] each generation has found it one of the most nearly perfect poems in English . " Later , in 1973 , Stuart Sperry wrote , " ' To Autumn ' succeeds through its acceptance of an order innate in our experience ? the natural rhythm of the seasons . It is a poem that , without ever stating it , inevitably suggests the truth of ' ripeness is all ' by developing , with a richness of profundity of implication , the simple perception that ripeness is fall . " In 1981 , William Walsh argued that " Among the major Odes [...] no one has questioned the place and supremacy of ' To Autumn ' , in which we see wholly realized , powerfully embodied in art , the complete maturity so earnestly laboured at in Keats 's life , so persuasively argued about in his letters . " Literary critic and academic Helen Vendler , in 1988 , declared that " in the ode ' To Autumn , ' Keats finds his most comprehensive and adequate symbol for the social value of art . "

In 1997 , Andrew Motion summarised the critical view on " To Autumn " : " it has often been called Keats 's ' most ... untroubled poem ' [...] To register the full force of its achievement , its tensions have to be felt as potent and demanding . " Following in 1998 , M. H. Abrams explained , " ' To Autumn ' was the last work of artistic consequence that Keats completed [...] he achieved this celebratory poem , with its calm acquiescence to time , transience and mortality , at a time when he was possessed by a premonition [...] that he had himself less than two years to live " . James Chandler , also in 1998 , pointed out that " If To Autumn is his greatest piece of writing , as has so often been said , it is because in it he arguably set himself the most ambitious challenge of his brief career and managed to meet it . " Timothy Corrigan , in 2000 , claimed that " ' To Autumn ' may be , as other critics have pointed out , his greatest achievement in its ability [...] to redeem the English vernacular as the casual expression of everyday experience , becoming in this his most exterior poem even in all its bucolic charm . " In the same year , Thomas McFarland placed " To Autumn " with " Ode to a Nightingale " , " Ode on a Grecian Urn " , " The Eve of St. Agnes " and Hyperion as Keats 's greatest achievement , together elevating Keats " high in the ranks of the supreme makers of world literature " . In 2008 , Stanley Plumly wrote , " history , posterity , immortality are seeing ' Ode to a Nightingale , ' ' Ode on a Grecian Urn , ' and ' To Autumn ' as three of the most anthologized lyric poems of tragic vision in English . "