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Text piece

Poetry Study Reference: To Autumn, John Keats

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wellreadscholar.blogspot.com - www.bookrags.com

Resources consulted

How to approach a poem, JSK Publishers

ENGLISH HOME LANGUAGE

PRESCRIBED POETRY FOR NSC EVALUATION 2009

Achebe	<i>Refugee mother and child</i>
Banoobhai	<i>You cannot know the fears I have</i>
Cummings	<i>i thank You God for most this amazing</i>
Day-Lewis	<i>Walking away</i>
Dikeni	<i>Love poem for my country</i>
Eliot	<i>Preludes</i>
Ghose	<i>Decomposition</i>
Keats	<i>To Autumn</i>
Livingstone	<i>Sunstrike</i>
Mungoshi	<i>If you don't stay bitter for too long</i>
Plath	<i>Mushrooms</i>
Serote	<i>City Johannesburg</i>
Shakespeare	<i>To me, fair friend</i>
Shelley	<i>Ozymandias</i>
Yeats	<i>An Irish airman forsees his death</i>

INTRODUCTION TO THIS STUDY REFERENCE

This document consists of three analyses of the poem “To Autumn” by John Keats. Each analysis contains the central broader idea with an enlightened understanding. It is recommended that you read all three.

Hope this helps.



To Autumn
John Keats

ANALYSIS #1

(courtesy: bookrags.com)

Summary: In his poem "To Autumn," John Keats portrays the different aspects of autumn and its progression through time. Through his use of vivid imagery and literary devices such as simile, personification, and rhetorical questions, Keats establishes the beauty and fulfillment of autumn and outlines autumn's mixture of ripening, fulfillment, dying, and death.

To Autumn by John Keats

The poem "To Autumn" written by John Keats is about the season of autumn where the composer talks about the different stages of autumn and emphasizes autumn's progression through time.

Throughout the poem Keats uses vivid imagery to attract the reader's interest as well as appealing to the senses of sight and taste. Also through the use of language devices of similes, personification and rhetorical questions the composer is able to establish a natural atmosphere, with its mixture of ripening, fulfillment, dying and death.

The first stanza of "To Autumn" concerns itself with the beauty and extravagance of autumn appealing to the senses of sight and taste. The first line, "seasons of mists and mellow fruitfulness" arouses visual imagery where the word "mellow" is used to depict the colour of autumn. The "mists and mellow fruitfulness" suggest the rustic colour of the fruits and leaves. Whereas the lines, "And fill all fruit with ripeness to the core; to swell the gourd and plump the hazel shells" describes the harvesting of fruits and conveys the image of autumn working together with the sun to ripen and plump the fruits. There is also an association if the sense of taste where the composer mentions "with a sweet kernel; to set budding more."

The second stanza personifies autumn as a lady, where autumn is given the characteristics of a woman where she is "sitting careless on a granary floor" which explains that she is calm relaxed and reflective because the work of spring and summer are over. The effect of "the winnowing wind" highlights alliteration and onomatopoeia where the word

"winnowing" evokes soft images which contain positive connotations of soft sounds.

Here the composer reveals that we should appreciate the gifts and unique experience that autumn brings.

There is a relaxed atmosphere where the composer mentions "Drows'd with the fumes of poppies while thy hook Spares the next swath and all its twined flowers." The words "Drows'd" and "swath" are both examples of long and slow vowels which create a slow rhythm and pace. "Twined flowers" portrays the image of slow and little movement where everything is almost standing still. The second stanza moves slowly as "thou watchest the last oozing hours by hours."

The third stanza is a comparison from winter to spring, "where are the songs of spring? Ay where are they?" in this stanza the composer makes an understanding that autumn, which represents the end of life, is just as important as spring, which represents new life. This has been shown in the last five lines of the poem where it shows spring as birth where, "full grown lambs loud bleat from hilly bourne..."

Therefore in terms of the way nature is presented, "To Autumn" by John Keats has used imagery to portray the different aspects of autumn and "To Autumn" has a number of words being emphasised to create a long period of time and giving a general feeling of abundance. The Romanticist wanted to express his opinions of beauty, nature and decay.

ANALYSIS #2 (STANZA BY STANZA ANALYSIS)

(courtesy: wellreadscholar.blogspot.com)

Analysis of First Stanza

When Keats wrote this poem, he was just two years away from his death. In the fall of 1819, he contracted tuberculosis and knew by February the following year that he would die soon. However, this did not prevent him from creating beautiful, much-admired poetry in his final years, when he was racked with illness.

In "To Autumn", Keats is addressing Autumn herself, personifying the season as a sort of goddess or deity. The first stanza describes Autumn as a lighthearted, kind entity that is more mature than summer but just as warm in personality.

"Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness" (line 1) conveys a sort of motherly personality-- the word "mellow", as described by my miniature American Heritage dictionary, means "1. *Soft, sweet, and full-flavored because of ripeness.* 2. *Rich and soft in quality: a mellow wine.* 3. *Having the gentleness often associated with maturity*". (See all the connotations and multiple layers of meaning a single word can bring us? Poets don't [always] just pick random words out of the air, so if you're an aspiring writer or literary critic, a dictionary can come in handy.)

Also, "fruitfulness" connotes not just "producing fruit" and "abundance" but also producing offspring, which is where the "motherly" feeling is coming from. Lines 2 and 3 bring across the speaker's view of Autumn as divine: Autumn is close friends with "the maturing sun" (line 2), and the sun is often portrayed as a sort of god in ancient religions. She "conspir[es] with him how to load and bless/With fruit the vines that round the thatch-eaves run" (lines 3-4)-- again, "bless" brings to mind the divinity of Autumn and the sun.

The stanza continues with a description of Autumn and the sun bringing fruitfulness to "cottage-trees" (line 5), "hazel shells" (line 7), and "later flowers for the bees" (line 9). Then the first stanza wraps up with the nostalgic tone of "Until they think warm days will never cease,/ For Summer has o'er-brimmed their clammy cells" (lines 10-11). Here, the lines depict Autumn as a continuation of summer. Summer carries a universal positive connotation, which transfers over to Autumn in Keats's "To Autumn".

Overall, the first stanza sets up the character of Autumn and personifies her as a caring, warm-hearted goddess, which sets the poem apart from the common association of autumn as a bitter, cold harbinger of winter.

Analysis of Second Stanza

In the second stanza of Keats's "To Autumn", the speaker begins to address Autumn directly and to characterize her personality and appearance. "*Who hath not seen thee oft amid thy store?*" (line 12). ("Store" refers to her supply of bounty, described vividly in the first stanza.)

"Sometimes whoever seeks abroad may find/ Thee sitting careless on a granary floor,/ Thy hair soft-lifted by the winnowing wind" (lines 13-15). "Careless" brings up a connotation of Autumn's sunny, feminine personality; its denotation in the context of the second stanza is best described with the definition "*free from cares, cheerful*" (*American Heritage Dictionary, Fourth Edition*).

A granary, or "a building for storing threshed grain" (*American Heritage Dictionary, Fourth Edition*), is unique to fall because autumn is the season when you harvest grain. This characterizing word, multiplied with the word "winnowing" (separating the chaff from the grain by means of a current of air), serve to separate Autumn from her much-glorified sister seasons. The speaker is starting to distinguish Autumn from Summer and Spring, explaining how she is just as beautiful as they are (more on that in the third stanza).

"Or on a half-reaped furrow sound asleep,/ Drowsed with the fume of poppies, while thy hook/ Spares the next swath and all its twinéd flowers:" (lines 16-18). Here, Autumn is outside, sleeping on a furrow ("a long shallow trench made in the ground by a plow or other tool", according to my trusty dictionary) that has only been half-harvested.

In line 17, an interesting word appears: "poppies". The mention of this bright scarlet/orange-gold/white flower seems out of place in the fall and more akin to spring or summer. Why would Keats use this flower? A quick Google search with the term "poppy symbolism" brings up the following suggestions: the poppy is a symbol of sleep, death, oblivion, and resurrection. In Greek mythology, Demeter, the goddess of agriculture and harvest, created the poppy to help her sleep after the loss of her daughter Persephone. (We all know how familiar Keats is with Greek mythology, right?)

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This fits because Autumn is "drowsed" and "asleep" with the fume of poppies. Furthermore, her characterization as a goddess leads to a new connection with Demeter. Demeter's role is to preside over crops: depending on her mood, she can either bring bountiful harvest or a devastating crop failure. Sounds a bit like Autumn, right? (And when we hit the Demeter-causes-winter-after-Persephone-is-abducted connection, we can analyze still more about the relationship between the season and the goddess.)

Okay, back to analyzing lines 16 through 18. The "hook" mentioned in line 17 is a "scythe or sickle", according to my Norton Introduction to Poetry book. Reminds me a little of death, which brings us back to the poppy symbolism. (Poetry analysis is seldom straightforward, in case one has not figured that out yet by my rambling.) The word "spares" in line 18 again gives us the impression that Autumn is benevolent (unless the action was caused by her poppy intoxication, that is).

"And sometimes like a gleaner thou dost keep/ Steady thy laden head across a brook;" (lines 19-20). Let's look up some definitions first, like my professor always tells us to. Glean: "to gather grain left behind by reapers". Steady? Multiple definitions: "1. Firm in position or place, fixed. 2. Direct and unfaltering, sure. 3. Not changing or fluctuating, uniform. 4. Reliable; dependable". Brook: "a small stream; creak" or "to put up with; tolerate". Not that that leads us anywhere, but good to know, right?

These lines are harder to make sense of. In modern English, I would translate it as "Sometimes, like one of those people who gather grain after harvest-time is over, you keep your laden [loaded as with cargo or burdened] head steady as you move across a brook." Still doesn't make sense, does it? Laden I could understand; perhaps Autumn the goddess is carrying a basket of grain or fruits on her head, or is wearing a divine wreath of fall flora on her head (most likely the former).

"Brook" probably symbolizes something or other. Water has many symbolic meanings: life, fertility, the power of nature and the passage of time, even boundary markers...it's starting to come together in my head, but I don't want to spoil all the fun (and make this post longer than it already is). I'll move on.

"Or by a cider-press, with patient look,/ Thou watchest the last oozings hours by hours" (lines 21-22). "Patient look" and the fact that she watches over every drip of the cider-making process contributes more to the poet's portrayal of Autumn's personality.

Knowing that I have an obsessive tendency to squeeze out every last drop of possible symbolism from a word, you ask, "Do you think 'cider-press' has any sort of symbolic meaning to it?" Possibly. If you can connect "juice pressed from apples" to some underlying meaning of fertility or eternal youthfulness in Norse mythology or Roman goddesses or whatever. (You can tell I never bothered to look up "apple symbolism" on Google, right?)

Analysis of Third Stanza

In the third stanza, the speaker reassures Autumn that she has her own music that is different yet just as lovely as spring's. He says, "Think not of them, thou hast thy music too" (line 24).

However, as the stanza progresses, he seems to lapse into a melancholy tone, showing the other side of Autumn: it comes from summer, but it dies and is replaced by winter. This tone surfaces in words such as "soft-dying day" (line 25); just as day becomes night, so does autumn become winter.

"Then in a wailful choir the small gnats mourn" (line 26) brings to mind a funeral chorus, furthering the symbol of death. "Full-grown lambs loud bleat from hilly bourn" (line 30)—the lambs have passed through their first stages of life, or youth, and are entering old age, represented by winter.

Lastly, the line "gathering swallows twitter in the skies" (line 33) subtly hints of the coming winter, when birds migrate to other continents; that could also be interpreted as the passing of life into the other realm of death.

ANALYSIS AND COMMENTARY OF *TO AUTUMN* BY JOHN KEATS

In 'To Autumn', a superficial reading would suggest that John Keats writes about a typical day of this season, describing all kind of colourful and detailed images. But before commenting on the meaning of the poem, I will briefly talk about its structure, its type and its rhyme.

The poem is an ode^[1] that contains three stanzas, and each of these has eleven lines. With respect to its rhyme, 'To Autumn' does not follow a perfect pattern. While the first stanza has an ABABCDEDCCE pattern (see the poem on the next page), the second and the third ones have an ABABCDECDDE pattern. However, it is important to say that a poetic license appears in the third stanza. The word 'wind' (line 15) is pronounced [waɪnd] to rhyme with 'find'.

With regard to the meaning of the poem, as I said above, the author makes an intense description of autumn at least at first sight. The first stanza begins showing this season as misty and fruitful, which, with the help of a 'maturing sun', ripens the fruit of the vines. Next, we can see clearly a hyperbole^[2]. Keats writes that a tree has so many apples that it bends (line 5), while the gourds swell and the hazel shells plumps. Finally, Keats suggests that the bees have a large amount of flowers. And these flowers did not bud in summer but now, in autumn. As a consequence, the bees are incessantly working and their honeycombs are overflowing since summer. In the second stanza, there is an evident personification^[3]. The poet starts asking a rhetoric question (line 12) to autumn which now is not only a woman but a gleaner. However, this woman is apparently resting in a granary or in the landscape:

'Or on a half-reaped furrow sound asleep,
Drowsed with the fume of poppies...'

As she is not working with her hook, some flowers, that were going to be cut, remain untouchable (lines 17 and 18). Also we can see an image of her hair gently moving. The stanza ends with autumn patiently watching the 'last oozings' of cider. The third stanza continues again with rhetoric questions. In the first one Keats asks the woman where the sounds of the spring are. And the second one is just a repetition of the same question. However, the poet tells autumn that she has her own sounds, although some of them are sad:

‘Then in a wailful choir the small gnats mourn’

On the contrary, the ‘full-grown lambs’ bleat loudly, the crickets sing, a red-breast whistles, and swallows warble in the sky. Keats also describes a day that is dying, ending, and, as a consequence, is getting rose (lines 25 and 26). The last lines of this stanza consist of a combination of the autumn sounds, of the animal sounds (lines from 30 to 33) as I said before few lines above.

To conclude, although my first impression was that John Keats was simply describing the main characteristics of autumn, and the human and animal activities related to it, a deeper reading could suggest that Keats talks about the process of life. Autumn symbolises maturity in human and animal lives. Some instances of this are the ‘full-grown lambs’, the sorrow of the gnats, the wind that lives and dies, and the day that is dying and getting dark. As all we know, the next season is winter, a part of the year that represents aging and death, in other words, the end of life. However, in my opinion, death does not have a negative connotation because Keats enjoys and accepts ‘autumn’ or maturity as part of life, though winter is coming.

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