

Ode to Autumn by John Keats: Summary and Analysis

In this poem Keats describes the season of Autumn. The ode is an address to the season. It is the season of the mist and in this season fruits are ripened on the collaboration with the Sun. Autumn loads the vines with grapes. There are apple trees near the moss growth cottage. The season fills the apples with juice. The hazel-shells also grow plump. These are mellowed. The Sun and the autumn help the flowers of the summer to continue. The bees are humming on these flowers.

They collect honey from them. The beehives are filled with honey. The clammy cells are overflowing with sweet honey. The bees think as if the summer would never end and warm days would continue for a long time. Autumn has been personified and compared to women farmer sitting carefree on the granary floor; there blows a gentle breeze and the hairs of the farmer are fluttering. Again Autumn is a reaper. It feels drowsy and sleeps on the half reaped corn. The poppy flowers have made her drowsy. The Autumn holds a sickle in its hand. It has spared the margin of the stalks intertwined with flowers. Lastly, Autumn is seen as a worker carrying a burden of corn on its head.

The worker balances his body while crossing a stream with a bundle on his head. The Autumn is like an onlooker sitting the juicy oozing for hours. The songs and joys of spring are not found in Autumn seasons. But Keats says that Autumn has its own music and charm. In an autumn evening mournful songs of the gnats are heard in the willows by the river banks. Besides the bleat of the lambs returning from the grassy hills is heard. The whistle of the red breast is heard from the garden. The grasshoppers chirp and swallow twitters in the sky. This indicates that the winter is coming.

Ode to Autumn is an unconventional appreciation of the autumn season. It surprises the reader with the unusual idea that autumn is a season to rejoice. We are familiar with Thomas Hardy's like treatment of autumn as a season of gloom, chill and loneliness and the tragic sense of old age and approaching death. Keats sees the other side of the coin. He describes autumn as: "Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness! / Close bosom friend of the maturing sun". He understands maturity and ripeness as one with old age and decay. Obviously then, old age is a complement to youth, as death is to life. Keats here appears as a melodist; he seems to have accepted the fundamental paradoxes of life as giving meaning to it. The very beginning of the poem is suggestive of acceptance and insight after a conflict.

The subject matter of this ode is reality itself at one level: Keats depicts the autumn season and claims that its unique music and its role of completing the round of seasons make it a part of the whole. Although autumn will be followed by the cold and barren winter, winter itself will in turn give way to fresh spring. Life must go on but it cannot continue in turn give way to fresh spring. Life must go on but it cannot continue without death that completes one individual life and begins another. This is indirectly conveyed with the concluding line of the ode: "And gathering swallows twitter in the skies". In one way, this gives a hint of the coming winter when shallows will fly to the warm south.

The theme of ripeness is complemented by the theme of death and that of death by rebirth. So, in the final stanza, the personified figure of autumn of the second stanza is replaced by concrete images of life. Autumn is a part of the year as old age is of life. Keats has accepted autumn, and connotatively, old age as natural parts and processes them.

Among the six wonderful Odes of Keats *To Autumn* occupies a distinct place of its own, for it is, in execution, the most perfect of his Odes. Many critics agree in ranking *To Autumn* first among Keats' Odes. Its three eleven-line stanza ostensibly do nothing more than a season; no philosophical reflections intrude. His simple love of Nature without any tinge of reflectiveness and ethical meaning finds expression in *To Autumn*. The scented landscape in the first stanza, and the music of natural sounds in the last stanza would have been enough for most poets, but the effect would have been incomplete without the figures of the winnower, the reaper, the gleaner and the cider-presser which give a human touch to Autumn. Although the poem contains only three stanzas, Keats has been successful in expressing the beauty, the charm, the symphony of Autumn, and the ageless human activities in the lap of Nature.

To Autumn is, in a sense, a return to the mood of the *Ode on Indolence*-«making the moment sufficient to itself. It is, apparently, the most objective and descriptive poem, yet the emotion has become so completely through it. There is no looking before and after in this poem as Keats surrenders himself fully to the rich beauty of the season. He is not troubled by the thought of the approaching winter nor by that of the vanished spring. In this approach to Nature he remains the great artist that he was. Neither philosophy taints his thoughts, nor does sorrow cloud his vision. Other poets have thought of Autumn as the season of decay. But to Keats, Autumn was the season of mellow fruitfulness and happy content. He is content with the autumn music, however pensive it may be.

There are no echoes in it, no literary images; all is clear, single, perfectly attuned. Our enjoyment of the beauty and peace of the season is disturbed by no romantic longing, no classic aspiration, no looking before and after, no pining, for what is not, no foreboding of winter, no regret for the spring that is gone, and no prophetic thought of other springs to follow. *To Autumn* expresses the essence of the season, but it draws no lesson, no overt comparison with human life. Keats was being neither allegorical, nor Wordsworthian. Keats in this poem is almost content with the pure phenomenon. He describes Nature as she is.

This is the secret of Keats's strength, his ability to take the beauty of the present moment, so completely into his heart that it becomes an eternal possession. For him the poetry of the earth is never dead. It is noteworthy that *To Autumn* is the only major poem of Keats that is completely unsexual. Woman as erotic object has been banished from this placid landscape. Keats' sense of the wholeness of life is nowhere communicated so richly or with such concentration as in this

Ode. The characteristic tension of the other Odes makes them more passionate, perhaps, but leaves them with a sense of strain. Here all is relaxed and calm, life-accepting.