**To Autumn**

by [John Keats](https://www.enotes.com/topics/john-keats)

Text

I

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.

II

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 cyder-press, with patient look,

Thou watchest the last oozings hours by hours.

III

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 sallows, 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.

**Introduction**

"To Autumn" is considered one of the five great odes John Keats composed in 1819. The ode, which personifies and dramatizes the season of autumn, features many of Keats's signature techniques: vivid imagery, sonorous rhymes and rhythms, and rich metaphors.

**Summary**

"To Autumn" is a 1819 poem by John Keats that celebrates the season of autumn.

* The first stanza of the ode speaks to autumn, personifying the season as an addressee. Autumn has conspired with the sun to bring the natural world to a state of ripeness and fruition.
* The second stanza describes the harvest, imagining autumn as a figure "sitting careless on a granary floor," gleaning in the fields, or watching the "cyder-press" at work.
* The third stanza dismisses the "songs of spring," for autumn "has [its] music too." The poem ends with a vivid description of a harvested landscape at dusk.

**Summary**

John Keats's "To Autumn" is an ode to the fall season, comprising three stanzas and utilizing a regular rhyme scheme and meter. The speaker begins by describing autumn as the "Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness." In the first stanza, the speaker details autumn's association with its "Close bosom-friend," the sun, stating that the pair work together to ensure that vines are laden with fruit and apples are able to grow ripe. This stanza identifies a number of different types of fruits and vegetables which will be ready for harvest in autumn, including gourds and hazelnuts. According to the speaker, autumn and the sun motivate "later flowers" to bloom for the bees, so that by the end of summer and the cusp of autumn,

. . . they think warm days will never case,  
For summer has o'er-brimm'd their clammy cells.

The second stanza begins:

Who hath not seen thee oft amid thy store?

Here, the speaker addresses autumn directly for the first time. Fittingly, then, the speaker proceeds to personify autumn repeatedly in this stanza, imagining autumn "sitting careless on a granary floor," "on a half-reap’d furrow sound asleep," and watching "the last oozings" of apple cider in the press "with patient look." As seen in the above quotes, whose actions are all relatively passive—sitting, sleeping, and watching—autumn's personifications in this stanza are characterized by stasis and slowness, as if to emphasize autumn's closeness to the end of harvest and the natural world's decay toward winter and cold. But Autumn and its surroundings are also shown to be tactile and sensuous—its "hair soft-lifted by the winnowing wind," its sleeping form "Drows'd with the fume of poppies," its body surrounded by "the next swath" of wheat "and all its twined flowers." These descriptions foreshadow the speaker's descriptions of autumn's inherent beauty in the next stanza.

The third and final stanza serves to highlight autumn's particular elegance—as opposed to the season poets may traditionally valorize (that is, spring). The speaker begins,

Where are the songs of spring? Ay, Where are they?  
Think not of them, thou hast thy music too . . .

The tone of these lines is almost consoling, particularly in the speaker’s continual direct address of autumn. Many of autumn's beauties are described in this stanza: softly tinted clouds, emblematic perhaps of sunset and the end of both the day and the growing season (autumn itself); "stubble-plains" of what’s left of the grain after harvest; "small gnats" and willows along the river; and the sounds of "full-grown lambs," "Hedge-crickets," and robins and swallows. These images are characterized by a muted subtlety that is nevertheless beautiful—the "rosy hue" of the sunset clouds, the "light wind" that "lives or dies," the "treble soft" whistle of the robin and "twitter" of swallows gathering before their yearly migration. Despite the closeness to death that much of the stanza's diction hints at—the gnats' "wailful choir" and mourning and the rosy color of the "soft-dying day"—the poem does not end on a morbid note. Rather, its emphasis on closeness, presence, and the natural cycles of things gives the end of the year's harvest and growth a bittersweet sort of consolation.

**Themes**

**Beauty and Death**

As its title would suggest, “To Autumn” celebrates them bountiful beauty of the fall. In the poem, autumn is a season characterized by a rich abundance of life. The culmination of weeks of summer warmth and sunshine, autumn sees trees overloaded with fruit, beehives dripping with honey, and thick vines trailing up the sides of farmhouses. Often, the poem is taken to be no more than an ode to a lovely, life-filled time of year that is often overshadowed by spring and summer. And yet, running underneath this celebration of life is a sense of impending decay. Autumn’s abundance is only possible because it comes at the *end* of the growing season, and all this well-being exists on the brink of death; as winter approaches, fruit will rot, leaves will fall, and crops will be harvested. This doesn't diminish the loveliness of autumn, however, and instead suggests that beauty shines all the more powerfully in the moments before it will soon be gone. In a way, then, death is just as much a part of autumn's loveliness as is life.

The speaker envisions autumn as a transitional season that straddles the line between abundance and decay. Tree limbs “bend” under the load of their apples, while gourds “swell” and the flowers are “set budding more, / And still more.” The fruits are at their sweetest and juiciest, ripe “to the core.” In a sense, they are beautiful and delectable precisely *because* they are on the verge of rot (that is, of dying).

Indeed, all of these images veer close to destruction: were things to grow without end, perhaps the tree limbs would break under the weight of their fruit, the gourds would burst, and the bees would drown in "their clammy cells" (i.e., their over-filled hives). More *life* would transform this beauty into something grotesque—which perhaps is why the speaker appreciates autumn not as a season of growth, but rather one of impending death and reaping.

The second stanza takes up this idea by focusing on the harvest, describing the “winnowing wind,” the “half-reap’d furrow,” and the harvester’s “hook.” Each of these images depicts the separation and cutting associated with farming, especially the “hook,” or scythe; each also clearly evokes death.

But the speaker softens these images, lending all this death a kind of pleasure. The “winnowing wind” results in “hair softlifted”; the personified autumn lies “sound asleep” on the “halfreap’d furrow”; and the scythe does not cut, but “Spares the next swath.” Later, autumn loiters drowsily in the fields, gazing into the brook and the “last oozings” of the cider press. Like the swollen fruit from stanza 1, these end-of-autumn images bulge forth with sensuous beauty that combines both life and decay. The poem ultimately presents death as a sort peaceful rest at the end of frenzied activity. To this end, the speaker depicts the day's transition into night (and the broader seasonal transition into winter) as a process similar to falling asleep. First comes the onset of evening, as “barred clouds bloom the soft-dying day.” Like autumn and its fruits, the day is dying—but *softly*. This process has the beautiful quality of a flower that slowly blooms and wilts. Next, the dying sunlight “touch[es] the stubble-plains with rosy hue.” It makes the freshly mowed plains, an image of

death, appear gentle and beautiful.

Meanwhile, a chorus of animals elegizes the end of autumn. Knowing death is on the horizon, the speaker interprets the gnats’ hum as “wailful” and mournful. The speaker also recognizes beauty in the singing crickets and the robin who whistles “with treble soft.” Finally, the swallows gather and sing against the void of the darkening sky, which will soon pummel the land with harsh weather. All this music, which might appear any time of year, takes on a special beauty in the gathering

shadow of death.

**Empracing the Present**

In “To Autumn,” the speaker stays rooted in the colorful world of the moment. The speaker urges personifified autumn not to think about “the songs of spring,” but rather to appreciate that “thou hast thy music too.” That is, the speaker asks both autumn and the reader to focus exclusively on the here and now. Yet even while focusing on autumnal imagery, the speaker can’t help but be reminded of what comes before and after this particular season. As such, the poem suggests that embracing the present somewhat paradoxically leads to a deep appreciation of the past and future as well.

The poem’s first lines contain bending apple trees, swelling gourds, ripe fruit, and beehives overflowing with honey. These images of teeming life emphasize that this poem is about the bounty of autumn. This bounty results from autumn’s close relationship with the “maturing sun, / Conspiring with him to load and bless.” While appreciating this specific point in time, then, the poem also recognizes that autumn only appears as the end of a long process of growth and ripening.

Indeed, focusing on the fruits of the present leads to an obvious question: where did all this come from? To answer it, the poem must acknowledge autumn’s precursor: summer. For instance, the bees see autumn as a lovely extension of summer—“they think warm days will never cease / For summer has o’er- brimm’d their clammy cells.” In other words, the bees recall the summer that enabled their hives to thrive.

On the one hand, then, the poem urges readers to simply stop and take in the beauty of this particular moment. At the same time, the poem subtly implies that to do so properly requires an appreciation of everything that *led* to this moment—as well as an appreciation of what will come next.

To that end, the poem presents autumn as a sort of mixture of winter and spring by highlighting features shared among the seasons. First off, both autumn and spring are full of noise and diverse life. The bleating lambs, whistling robin, and twittering

swallows of the third stanza might just as well appear in a description of a spring morning, as might the “river sallows” (or willows), “Hedge,” and “garden.”

At the same time, these images hint at the impending winter and its associated forms of death. The lambs, for example are “full-grown,” and therefore ready for slaughter. The swallows, which would perish in the cold, are gathering to migrate south. Thus, although autumn is distinct from these other seasons, it contains hints of each of them in its characteristic imagery. The poem conveys autumn’s depth without explicitly referring to the other seasons. Instead, it focuses on “thy music”—autumn’s music. At the same time that it distinguishes autumn, this lively, mournful music joins it with the past and future.

**Analysis**

John Keats wrote one of his best poems, “To Autumn,” on Sunday, September 19, 1819. Its remarkably quick completion exemplifies Keats’s accomplishments generally. The poem was written rapidly in a life notable as one of the briefest and most compact of all the great poets’ lives. It is the last of the odes that Keats composed from May to September of 1819 and thus one of the last poems he ever wrote. At the beginning of the following year, the signs of his tuberculosis appeared, and on February 23, 1821, he died in Rome at the age of twenty-five. Keats’s poetic career lasted only five years, and he wrote intensively for only three of those years.

Keats wrote five poems that he called odes during these middling months of 1819; “To Autumn” is designated by its title as an ode, and its form and manner echo those other poems, so critics generally classify it thus. The ode is a Greco-Roman classical form. Its two greatest early practitioners were the Greek Pindar and the Roman Horace. Keats’s odes resemble Horace’s more than they resemble Pindar’s. They comprise stanzas that incidentally bear some resemblance to the very nonclassical sonnets he had already written. In all the odes except “Ode to Psyche” (1820), the stanzas are of regular length.

For “To Autumn,” Keats chose an eleven-line length instead of his more usual ten-line pattern. He always begins his odes with an initial *abab* rhyme scheme, then switches to a different pattern in the second four lines and reuses rhymes from this second set of lines in the two or three following lines. In “To Autumn,” the seventh and eleventh lines rhyme. Having established a scheme for one stanza, he repeats it in the others. Many poets do not like rhymes at all, and Keats himself refers to “dull rhymes” in one of his poems, but once he establishes such a pattern, he repeats it precisely, with different rhyming words in each stanza—in as many as ten stanzas in “Ode to Indolence” (1848).

In addition to the end rhymes and the varied iambic movement of the lines, Keats creates many sound effects such as internal rhymes (“reap’d” and “sleep”), alliteration (“mists” and “mellow”), and assonance (“touch” and “stubble”). These patterns, intricate and subtle, may be studied at great length. Most of these effects can be found in an early version of the poem, suggesting that although they are to some extent calculated, they primarily demonstrate an ear innately sensitive to sound.

A more important characteristic of the ode as Keats practiced it is its dedication to a specific theme, well reflected in the titles he chose for his work. However, to say that “Ode on a Grecian Urn” (1820) is only about an urn is to neglect the intense provocativeness of the figures on the urn. The emotional appeal of “To Autumn” is similarly rich. In the first of the poem’s three stanzas, Keats develops the “mellow fruitfulness” of autumn; in the second, he considers nature’s gifts, both those heaped in a granary and those in the immediate surroundings. The third stanza contrasts autumn’s “songs” with those of spring, strongly emphasizing the beauty of the end of the season of natural growth that began months earlier.

The imagery of “To Autumn” is an important resource in conveying its theme. The sensory appeals in the poem are multiple. One particularly important such appeal in the first stanza is the sense of motion reflected in many of the verbs, such as “load,” “bind,” “run,” “fill,” “plump,” and “swell.” The summer sun and the bees have generated a harvest. In the second stanza, nature’s store is depicted as “sitting” on the floor of a granary, and the air is full of the smell of flowers. The growing apples in the first stanza give way to a “cyder-press” in the second. The harvest is not depicted as gleaned but as itself a “gleaner,” the grain itself personified in the image of a girl with hair swept by the wind.

In the third stanza, aural imagery predominates. Autumn, like spring, has its songs: bleating lambs, crickets, and birds. The scene has shifted away from granary and cider press to the outside world after the harvest, a principal image being the stubble of the harvested grain. Keats, describing one of his walks, also praised the sight of this stubble in a letter to a friend written only two days later. “To Autumn” includes no image of the actual cutting of the grain. Stubble is not for him a mere aftermath, for the stubble is “rosy” under the sun, as significant and admirable as the grain that has been harvested. Perhaps no poet has depicted natural change so brilliantly and yet managed at the same time to sustain the abiding presence of the temporal moment.

The movement of the poem from ripeness, to garnering, to the stubbly field is just one of the processes that unfold in “To Autumn.” Autumn represents the culmination of the year’s propagating forces, and the poem’s imagery also marks a trend from morning, with an image of the sun ready to shine upon and “bless” the fruit that is ripening, to afternoon details of heat and summer listlessness, and finally to the evening scene of crickets and gathering birds. Thus, the poem’s movement might also be reckoned as directional: from east to west, the course of the sun as it appears to the human eye. Also implied is movement from the sun’s “maturing” to its southward recession in autumn, when the swallows gather to fly in that direction.

Another process pertains to the working life of the poet. In a sonnet written early in the preceding year—“When I have fears that I may cease to be” (1818)—Keats uses much of the same imagery to refer to his own work. He portrays the poet as a gleaner and his poem as comparable to ripe grain. As a former medical student, Keats had considerable insight into his own physical condition, and he sensed that his poetic mission might be aborted. The tubercular disorder that would kill him showed its warning signs only a few months after he wrote “To Autumn.” Therefore, although the poem is not overtly metaphorical, any reader familiar with Keats’s health and prior poetry is likely to see the poem as pertaining to the autumn of his life. It does not, however, refer in any explicit fashion to his approaching infirmity or death, for he catches and holds in place the splendor of the season at hand. Like a fine painting, it makes an enduring spectacle.

The tone of this poem is quite different from that of “When I have fears.” There is nothing negative, nothing morbid in the later work. The stubble is not a ruined field but a beautiful evening sight. The poem is not about an interrupted harvest or the fear of its failure but about its fulfillment. The swallows depicted in the last line of the poem are “gathering.” An Englishman lives in a latitude that sees this gathering as an October preparation for a retreat to the south; the swallows will return the following spring. Keats, in an earlier version, used the past tense, saying the swallows “gather’d.” The result of the change is an emphasis not on a finished act but on a living, moving one. A phase of nature is retained as indelibly here as the dancers are held in place in “Ode on a Grecian Urn.”

**Forms and Devices**

“To Autumn” is rich in imagery, evoking the perceptions of sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch. Each stanza highlights one of the senses. The first stanza especially evokes the senses of smell and touch. The sharp smell of the early-morning mist, the mellowness of ripe apples, and the sweet-smelling flowers attracting bees all work together to tempt the reader into believing that summer will never end. Nothing appears static in this stanza; the fruit, the nuts, and the honeycombs swell, bursting into ripeness, spilling out of their shells.

Keats emphasizes the sense of sight in the second stanza by inviting the reader to see autumn as harvester, her hair “soft-lifted by the winnowing wind,” checking, cutting, and gleaning the crops. The sights evoke a certain lassitude. Autumn moves slowly amid her stores; she sleeps, “drows’d by the fume of poppies”; idly, she watches the “last oozings hours by hours.” The frantic movements so prevalent in the first stanza are slowly replaced by stasis in the second stanza until time seems no longer to move toward winter.

Although visual beauty is evoked by the sun going down on the “stubble-plains,” it is the sense of hearing that sets the tone in the last stanza. The reader and autumn are reminded that the songs of spring have been replaced by a different but no less beautiful music. One hears the mourning sound of the gnats, the bleating of the full-grown lambs, the whistling song of the red-breast, and the twittering of the swallows as they gather for their flight toward summer. The sudden chorus of sounds breaks the heavy silence of the second stanza, where in the midday heat of a fall day all sounds were hushed. The music brings autumn to a fitting close; the cycle of nature has been completed, and winter has come with a natural sweetness as the day dies softly to the mournful sound of the gnats.

In addition to the rich imagery, Keats uses an intricate structure and rhythm to bring the day and the season to their “soft-dying” close. The first stanza pictures early morning and pre-harvest ripening: “Seasons of mist,” “maturing sun,” and “warm days.” In the second stanza, it is midday and mid-season. The time is ripe for harvesting; cider presses are in full use, and the afternoon induces sleep. The last stanza pictures the evening and post-harvest sounds as the sun sets over stubbled fields, awakening the mournful sounds of evening.

The first stanza is replete with single-syllable verbs that receive strong primary stress: “load,” “bless,” “fill,” “swell,” and “plump.” In the second stanza, well-chosen alliteration and assonance induce the hushed appearance of the time of day and of season: “Thy hair soft-lifted by the winnowing wind.” Some of the words in the third stanza are onomatopoeic, imitating the natural sounds they portray: “bleat,” “wailful,” “twitter,” and “mourn.”