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## Reading Keats' "To Autumn"

	1	
Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness,	1	
Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun;	2	
Conspiring with him how to load and bless	3	
With fruit the vines that round the thatch-	4	
eves run;		
To bend with apples the moss'd cottage-trees,	5	
And fill all fruit with ripeness to the core;	6	
To swell the gourd, and plump the hazel	7	
shells		
With a sweet kernel; to set budding more,	8	
And still more, later flowers for the bees,	9	
Until they think warm days will never cease,	10	
For Summer has o'erbrimm'd their clammy	11	
cells.		
	2	
Who hath not seen thee oft amid thy store?	12	
Sometimes whoever seeks abroad may find	13	
Thee sitting careless on the granary floor,	14	
Thy hair soft-lifted by the winnowing wind;	15	
Or on a half-reap'd furrow sound asleep,	16	
Drows'd with the fume of poppies, while thy	17	
hook		
Spares the next swath and all its twined	18	
flowers:		
And sometimes like a gleaner thou dost keep	19	
Steady thy laden head across a brook;	20	
Or by a cyder-press, with patient look,	21	
Thou watchest the last oozings hours	22	
by hours.		
	3	
Where are the songs of Spring? Ay, where are	23	
they?		
Think not of them, thou hast thy music	24	
too,—		
While barred clouds bloom the soft-dying day,	25	
And touch the stubble-plains with rosy hue;	26	
Then in a wailful choir the small gnats mourn	27	
Among the river shallows, borne aloft	28	
Or sinking as the light wind lives	29	
or dies;		
And full-grown lambs loud bleat from hilly	30	
bourn;		
Hedge-cricket sing; and now with treble	31	
soft		
The red-breast whistles from a garden-croft;	32	
And gathering swallows twitter in the	33	
skies.		

In "To Autumn," Keats treats autumn as a kind of god or goddess whose presence can be felt in many occurrences of late summer and early fall. The weather, crops, plants and animals, sounds, even the activities typical of that season are turned into images of the god's presence. The poem was written on or about September 19, 1819, just at the time of the fall equinox when the lengths of day and night are the same.

Keats did not believe in gods and goddesses. He did, however, take a great interest in the poetry of ancient Greece, and "To Autumn" is the sixth in his famous sequence of *odes*, poems ancient Greeks wrote to the various gods in their polytheistic world. To the Greeks, a god was not a distant, disembodied entity (see pp. 14–16). Thus a god could dwell at the site of a river, for it was the spirit of the river. Even one of the mightiest gods, Apollo, was at some level simply the sun.

Many European writers in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were inclined to reinterpret ancient religions as *mythopoetic* creations that fused the spiritual insights of myth with the imaginative function of poetry. Often atheists themselves, these writers thought mythopoetic beliefs preferable to the sectarian creeds of their own times and, perhaps feeling unappreciated, supposed mythopoetic art to have had more influence in the ancient world than their own poetry exerted on their own societies. As a consequence, sometimes the writers envied the power of ancient myths, hymns, and dramas. Sometimes, though, the poetic, pagan, polytheistic world of the ancients simply furnished the modern poets with a style for expressing their rejection of the moral and political authority upheld by the monotheistic religions of their own time. In any case, they became fascinated with the idea that a poem in ancient times had been a sacred act performed by a priest speaking directly to a god near or at the very spot where the god resided.

To lay the groundwork for reading a poem, it is always a good idea first to read through the whole poem aloud and then to go back to each stanza and establish its grammar and its most prevalent topic. Let us use Keats' "To Autumn" to practice how such careful reading proceeds and to consider how Keats' mythopoetic imagination transforms activities that would have been familiar and might have seemed mundane to most people in the nineteenth century.



Typical 19th C. dogcart of the British Isles such as Keats would have seen on his walk.

*Stanza 1:*

The whole stanza is a single phrase that does not form a complete sentence. It addresses Autumn by name, just as a prayer would begin by invoking or naming the god it addresses, but uses a description rather than Autumn's proper name:

Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness,

and then uses a metaphor to name Autumn again, this time adding an element of personification by calling the season the maturing sun's *bosom-friend* and attributing to these friends the capacity of *conspiring* together:

Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness,  
Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun;  
Conspiring with him how to . . .

Reading through the stanza to the end, note that all the rest is a listing of what Autumn and the sun conspire to do: "To load and bless. . . ; To bend. . . and fill," etc.

*Questions:*

1. What is meant by saying the *maturing* sun? In what ways might the sun be mature? Are there other words or phrases in the stanza that suggest maturity?
2. What are all the things Autumn and the sun conspire to do?
3. Why might Keats have designed this stanza as a listing, even a somewhat repetitive listing of ripening?
4. The effects of Autumn and the sun are physical occurrences, with two exceptions. First, Autumn and the sun not only *load* but also *bless* the vines with fruit. What are the effects of using the word *bless*? Second, at the

end of the stanza, Autumn and the sun make so many flowers bud late in the season that the bees have become confused:

Until they think warm days will never cease,  
For Summer has o'er-brimm'd their clammy  
cells.

Keats might simply be using a fanciful exaggeration for effect here, as though saying, "I'll tell you how plentiful the flowers were. They were so plentiful that the bees thought they'd have to keep making honey forever." Or he might be using this exaggeration about the flowers and the bees to suggest something else about illusions or unawareness. What might Keats have in mind here? Can you find support for your idea in other phrases or images in the poem?

*Stanza 2:*

This stanza, too, is addressed to Autumn. It begins with a question:

Who hath not seen thee oft amid thy store?

The question is a rhetorical one, since Keats is stressing that in fact everyone has seen Autumn. Two complete sentences follow. The first runs between lines 13–18: "whoever seeks. . . may find / Thee sitting. . . / Or. . . sound asleep"; and the second between lines 19–22: "thou dost keep / Steady thy laden head. . . / Or. . . / Thou watchest. . . ."

All the stanza's images take sights common in the countryside during autumn—harvested grain, a partially harvested field, apples being pressed to make cider—and depict them as some action or attribute of personified Autumn. For example, the chaff blowing about in a granary is depicted as Autumn's wind-blown hair.

*Questions:*

1. What are the various actions being performed by the personified god or goddess Autumn?
2. What are the various real-world scenes or actions referred to by those same images?
3. Many of the images seem to picture Autumn at rest (*sitting careless; sound asleep; Drows'd; keep / Steady; with patient look*), while the real-world events referred to actually involve the harvest, a time of the year when people have to work hard to get the crops in. How does Keats build this combination of leisure and working, bounty and effort? Do you think Keats' vision sharpens or blunts the realities of rural life and work?

Stanza 3:

The final stanza also begins with a question and quickly answers it:

Where are the songs of Spring? Ay, where are they?

Think not of them, thou hast thy music too,—

What then follows is one long compound sentence: “while. . . clouds bloom . . . and touch, . . . the . . . gnats mourn . . . ; lambs . . . bleat . . . ; hedge-crickets sing . . . ; red-breast whistles . . . ; and . . . swallows twitter.”

Questions:

1. What does the speaker mean by *songs of Spring*? Are they songs sung by human beings? or sounds heard in spring? Why might one wish for them in the autumn? Whose voice asks the question, “Where are the songs of spring”? Is it Keats’ own, or is he quoting or ventriloquizing someone else’s question?
2. What are the various examples of Autumn’s music?
3. Several words or phrases in the stanza carry associations or implications of death or dying. List all the words and phrases that suggest death or dying. Based on your list, what are the different ways Keats makes a phrase suggest death? Do these images, then, make death the actual topic of the stanza, or do they serve some other purpose?
4. Compare how the following three images carry—or do not carry—connotations of death (*connotation* refers to the secondary or suggested meaning of an image as distinct from the primary meaning it designates):
  - (a) *And full-grown lambs bleat from hilly bourne;*
  - (b) *Hedge-crickets sing;*
  - (c) *And gathering swallows twitter in the skies.*

Do all these images carry connotations? Which image carries the strongest connotation? Do you think the connotations of the images are connected to real features of the lambs, hedge-crickets, and swallows? Or are they imaginary elements supplied by the poet? Do the real or the imaginary elements end up being the most prevalent?

Issues for further discussion:

Now that you have examined each stanza separately, how do they relate to one another? What patterns connect them? Is the connecting thread established by their different themes—for example, fruitfulness, leisure, and music—or by other meanings suggested by these overt themes? Is the connecting thread, instead, perhaps the different pictures of Autumn?

On the one hand, Keats’ poem is about a rural scene and appeals to experiences shared by everyone (“Who hath not seen thee oft amid thy store?”). On the other hand, the poem’s style reveals a very urbane and educated sensibility, including a knowledge of ancient Greek poetry, the rhetoric used in the poetic tradition, and so on. Are these two inclinations consistent? What elements in the poem seem most realistic, what experiences the most shared? And, on the contrary, which moments in the poem seem the most stylized or refined or artificial? How has Keats attempted—whether successfully or unsuccessfully—to hold these two inclinations together?

Keats wrote a letter to his friend J. H. Reynolds on Tuesday, September 21, 1819, including a brief passage on the walk two days before that occasioned “To Autumn.” Even the letter alludes to ancient myths, where Diana (in Roman myth, or Artemis in Greek) is the moon and the goddess of chastity and hunting:

How beautiful the season is now—How fine the air. A temperate sharpness about it. Really, without joking, chaste weather—Dian skies—I never lik’d stubble-fields so much as now—Aye better than the chilly green of the Spring. 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.

The passage might help explain the experience that prompted Keats to write the poem, but it does not necessarily explain the experiences that went into making the poem as a whole or even its most significant features. Try to sort out—partly by speculating, partly by drawing on direct evidence in the poem—what experiences or questions or anxieties Keats was attempting to address in writing “To Autumn.”