To Autumn

POEM TEXT

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 cyder-press, with patient look,
Thou watchest the last oozings 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 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.

SUMMARY

Autumn, the season associated with mists and a general sense of calm abundance, you are an intimate friend of the sun, whose heat and light helps all these fruits and vegetables grow. You work closely with the sun to make lots of fruit grow on the vines that wrap around the roof edges of the farmhouses. You work to make so much fruit grow that it weighs down the branches of the mossy apple trees that grow outside the farmhouses. Together, you and the sun make every fruit completely ripe. You make gourds swell and hazel shells grow fat with a sweet nut inside. You make the flowers grow new buds and keep growing more, and when these buds bloom, bees gather the flowers' pollen. Those bees think your warmth will last forever, because summer brought so many flowers and so much pollen that the beehives are now overflowing with honey.

Who hasn't noticed you, Autumn, in the places where your bounty is kept? Any person who finds themselves wandering about is likely to find you sitting lazily on the floor of the building where grain is stored, and notice your hair lifted by a light wind that separates strands of hair in the same way a harvester might separate the components of a grain of wheat. Anyone might also find you asleep in the fields, on an incompletely harvested crop row, fatigued because of the sleep-inducing aroma of the poppies. In that case, your scythe, which you'd been using to cut the crops, would be cast to the side—it would just be lying there, and therefore the next section of the twisted flowers would be saved from being cut. Sometimes, Autumn, you're like the agricultural laborer who picks up loose cuttings from the fields after the harvest—like this laborer, who has to be observant, you watch the stream with your full, heavy head of fruit and leaves. Other times you patiently watch the machine that juices the apples for cider, noting how the juice and pulp slowly ooze out of the machine over the course of many hours.

Where is the music that characterizes spring (for example, birdsong)? I repeat, Where is it? Don't think about the spring and its typical music—you have your own music. The background for your music is a scene in which beautiful, shadowed clouds expand in the evening sky and filter the sunlight such that it casts pink upon the fields, which have been harvested. Your music includes gnats, which hum mournfully among the willows that grow along the riverbanks, and which rise and fall according to the strength of the wind. It includes mature, fully grown lambs that make their *baah* sound from the fence of their hilly enclosure. It includes crickets singing in the bushes and a red-breasted bird that softly whistles from a small garden. And lastly, it includes the growing flock of swallows, which rise and sing together against the darkening sky.

THEMES

BEAUTY AND DEATH

As its title would suggest, "To Autumn" celebrates the 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 soft-lifted"; the personified autumn lies "sound asleep" on the "half-reap'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.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-2
- Lines 3-11
- Lines 12-14
- Lines 15-22
- Lines 23-24
- Lines 25-33

EMBRACING THE PRESENT

In "To Autumn," the speaker stays rooted in the colorful world of the moment. The speaker urges personified 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.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Line 1
- Lines 2-3
- Lines 4-8
- Line 8
- Lines 9-11
- Lines 23-24
- Lines 27-33

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness,
Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun;

Lines 1 and 2 present the main character and topic of the poem: the season of autumn. These personify autumn and begin to characterize its contradictory nature, hinting at one of the poem's main themes: the simultaneous existence of beauty, life, and death. These lines also preview how the rest of the poem will deal with meter and punctuation.

The whole poem is basically an apostrophe to autumn—the title is "To Autumn," and autumn is explicitly addressed in each stanza. In stanza 1, the address identifies autumn as the "Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness." This word choice efficiently characterizes autumn: it is a season whose distinguishing characteristics include its mistiness and "mellow fruitfulness."

These two features work both with and against each other. In one sense, the mist is part of what makes autumn so mellow, hanging over the fields in soft, peaceful silence. On the other hand, the mist is something that conceals. Lurking behind it—and behind autumn's mellow fruitfulness—is another autumnal feature: death. The season's abundant fruitfulness means it has reached its peak. In the rest of the stanza, all the overripe imagery will emphasize this point; the next, unspoken step is decay.

To a present-day reader, this misty, fruitful combination might seem rather clichéd. It's exactly what one might expect to find in pumpkin patch and haunted house imagery for children in October. Instead of perpetuating the cliché, however, the poem uses it to hint at autumn's complexity, something it will be the speaker's job to explore.

Line 2, by adding "the maturing sun" to the list of characters, also gives the first signal that humans will be absent from the poem. Yes, later on the speaker will personify autumn to such an extent that it seems like a real human, but not once will an actual human character enter the scene. The poem will have more to do with natural processes and beings—for example, the friendship between autumn and the sun.

The two are "Close bosom-friend[s]." The words "Close" and "bosom" lend the setting comfort and warmth, and the hyphen linking "bosom" and "friend" represents the inseparable nature of this friendship. Here again, there's a sort of contradiction: the warmth of this friendship is lovely, but the impossibility of altering its outcome—which is decay—is dreadful. The word "maturing" also emphasizes autumn's complexity. By maturing the fruits, the sun brings life, but it also brings them closer to death. The sun itself is also maturing. Its light thins out as earth spins into the low-angled sunlight of winter.

This theme of constant change is also reflected in the poem's meter, which often includes variations. Lines 1 and 2 both follow iambic pentameter, but with irregularities worth looking at:

Sea|son | of | mists | and | mel- | low | fruit- | ful|ness

Rather than start with an iamb, the line starts with its opposite: a trochee, which is a foot consisting of a stressed-unstressed syllable pair. This trochee gives autumn, the "Season," extra attention right off the bat. It also makes the reader hear more clearly the first syllable "Sea-," which sounds like "see." "To Autumn" is a highly visual poem, loaded with dense imagery. It's about *seeing*. After this emphasis, the line falls back into its mellow iambic meter.

Line 2 follows a weaker iambic pentameter:

Close bos- | om-friend | of the | matu- |ring sun

All the unstressed-stressed feet are where they need to be, though these stresses aren't as strong as they are in other lines of the poem (see line 4 for a good example). The hyphenated "bosom-friend" contributes to the meter's weakness because it encourages a faster reading that deemphasizes the stress in syllables like "bos-" and "friend." This deemphasis does contribute, however, to a meditative dreaminess that will appear in much of the poem, especially stanza 2. Rather than speaking directly at autumn with the clear meter of someone making an order, the speaker taps into an atmospheric reverie.

This dreaminess, however, will soon narrow into a concrete series of observations in stanza 1. The semicolon that end-stops line 2 marks the transition into a new thought and gets the reader used to the presence of such punctuation. Semicolons, as well as commas, end-stop many lines in the poem, imposing a little bit of order on the poem's overwhelming imagery.

LINES 3-4

Conspiring with him how to load and bless
With fruit the vines that round the thatch-eves run;

Lines 3 and 4 further emphasize the autumnal contradictions introduced in lines 1 and 2. They also flesh out the poem's autumnal setting.

First, autumn and the sun are described as "Conspiring [...] to load and bless" the land and trees with fruit. "Conspiring" is certainly the most unusual word in this line. It connotes secrecy and criminality. Does that fit with the warmth and mellowness of lines 1 and 2? It does, at least partially. In fact, this description shares a lot in common with "mists," which are light and peaceful at the same time that they *hide* something else. From this perspective, the mists can be thought of as elements in the grand conspiracy between autumn and the sun to bring everything into a state of peace, but also decay.

But there are also ways in which "conspiracy" has a less nefarious meaning. A conspiracy may not be criminal, but instead just mysterious and out-of-reach. The speaker chooses the word to express his or her awe over the hugely transformative seasonal process. The words "load" and "bless" support this reading. The land is made bountiful, which occurs to the speaker as a blessing, partly *because* it's beyond the speaker's control. In particular, "bless" revises the seedy conspiracy as a heavenly act, something humans must simply accept.

This blessing leads to an overflowing tangle of natural growth. The syntax of line 4 reflects that. This syntax is inverted, with the object of the preposition ("fruit") coming before the direct object ("vines"). This phrase also places the verb ("run") at the end of the sentence, rather than next to its subject ("vines"). If the sentence followed more intuitive grammar, the line would have read: "load and bless / the vines that run round the thatch-eaves with fruit." The line's funky syntax, which is tangled like a thicket, expresses the intertwining it describes.

Despite its tangled syntax, line 4 falls into perfect iambic pentameter:

With fruit | the vines | that round | the thatch- | eaves run;

This language, which expresses the winding plant life, fits a natural metrical order, reflecting the way in which the abundant plant life fits the natural seasonal order of autumn. This order is powerful enough to not be hindered by manmade impediments, such as the thatch-eves, which refer to the roofs of the farmhouses.

Also, this mention of roofs is the first time the poem notes a human presence not related to personification. This detail adds depth to the setting. The poem, it's now clear, doesn't address autumn generally, but locates it in a place inhabited by humans, which other details will reveal to be a place of agricultural production.

LINES 5-8

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;

The main purpose of lines 5-8 is to depict an abundance so complete that it approaches death. The images in these lines are both static and dynamic. They seem to appear in a still life, yet also convey an intensely active growing process.

The intensity of the images seems to freeze them in time. Before the speaker's eyes appear "moss'd cottage-trees," swollen gourds, plump "hazel shells," and "a sweet kernel." Each image vividly captures how these objects look and feel. Furthermore, the poem's punctuation fixes these words in place, emphasizing the stillness of the scene. The ripe fruit is divided from the other images with a semi-colon end-stop, for example, and the swollen gourd is set apart from the hazel shells by a comma. All of this detail and division gives the reader the impression that time stands still.

However, the verbs in these phrase inject dynamic energy into that stillness. These fruits grow because of the collaboration between autumn and the sun. Under such "maturing" influence, the earth transforms. The apple trees "bend," the fruits "fill," the gourds"swell," and the hazelnuts "plump." Though their vivid color and detail may momentarily freeze them in place, the fruits of autumn actually changes before the speaker's eyes. They are squirming with life.

The frequent /l/ sounds in "apples" "fill," "all," "swell," "plump," "hazel," "shells," and kernel" contribute to the sense of

overabundance, as if the stanza is filled to the brim with these liquid sounds. This overabundance hints at inevitable death. Having reached their liveliest point, these fruits can only grow smaller, weaker, and uglier, until they disappear. The poem, however, never fully commits to this pessimistic view of autumn. Here and going forward the speaker retains his or her belief that the death of autumn contains an unmatched beauty.

The "sweet kernel" of line 8 seems to represent this firm belief. The phrase appears directly after the enjambment of "hazel shells," a moment whose lack of punctuation seems to suggest that the plumping action is open ended—that it will go on until the shell itself busts. Instead, however, the speaker chooses to present the "sweet kernel." The kernel is a "core" in many senses. Literally, it is the core of the nut. Appearing right before the semicolon caesura, it also is the core of the line. And as a "sweet kernel," it represents the core of the poem's philosophy about autumn, its impenetrable belief that the season is fundamentally beautiful, not only in spite of—but also because of—its atmosphere of death.

LINES 8-11

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.

In lines 8-11, the "mists" from line 1 clear to reveal autumn's deathly yet nevertheless pleasurable end. They reflect the speaker's ambivalence between two tendencies: to bask in the opulence of the sun on one hand, and to acknowledge winter's fast onset on the other.

The flowers of lines 8 and 9 follow the semicolon as if blooming from it. Their "budding" seems like it could go on for ever. The phrase "And still more" conveys the speaker's amazement at such prolific output, suggesting both the autumn's incredible abundance and the speaker's disbelief that this state will last. The phrase "later flowers" further marks the fragility of autumnal life, since autumn's latest flowers are the soonest to be ravaged by winter.

Then the bees appear, crowding out the poem's other images with their buzzing swarms. Thanks to the lateness of the infinitely blooming flowers, the bees "think warm days will never cease." In this use of the pathetic fallacy, the speaker assigns the hive-minded bees the sort of thought a human might have during autumn. The warmth, bounty, and fullness of this season are so pleasurable that a person might easily convince him- or herself that these things will last forever. By assigning this thought to the bees, however, the speaker also distances him- or herself from this thought, acknowledging suspicion of it. The speaker can empathize with the bees, and may even indulge in similar thinking, but also knows that it's ultimately self-delusion. Autumn eventually ends, and winter takes its place.

Much like the previous lines, the speaker's word choice and the syntax of the clauses contribute to the sense of abundance in the images. For instance, in line 11 consonance creates a glut of the /m/ sound: "For summer has o'er-brimm'd their clammy cells." The double ms look like gushing fountains, mirroring the context of the overflowing beehive.

Line 11 ends on a period, revealing that this whole stanza is just one sentence—another structural feature of the poem that reflects the never-ending growth of the fruit. In terms of syntax, these lines contain the most subordinate clauses in the whole stanza. That is, each phrase's beginning ("*to* set," "*Until* they," "*For* summer") refers back to the previous phrase. Whereas the stanza's earlier lines present autumnal images in a paratactic list, these lines twist back on themselves, as if trying to penetrate the "kernel" of line 8. The stanza's earlier syntax breaks down. Finally, the speaker, wiping the sweat from his or her brow, ends the sentence and moves on to the next stanza.

LINE 12

Who hath not seen thee oft amid thy store?

Stanza 2 begins with a rhetorical question that emphasizes autumn's familiarity and universality: "Who hath not seen thee oft amid thy store?" If the description in stanza 1 gets a bit carried away in depicting autumn's super-abundance, stanza 2 returns to the purpose implied by the title, to speak directly "To Autumn," and in doing so alters autumn's image.

The question reminds the reader that the entire poem is an apostrophe addressing the season of autumn. Historically, the second-person pronouns *thee*, *thy*, and *thou* were used to address one's friends and family, while *you* was reserved for strangers and authority figures. Although by Keats's time *thee*, *thy*, and *thou* had fallen out of use, he still uses them in his poetry. Here, these pronouns make the poem's address more intimate, as if the speaker were trying to enter the "bosom" friendship of autumn and the sun.

Whereas stanza 1 addresses autumn with a distinguished title ("Season of mists"), stanza 2 addresses it as something more like a peer. In stanza 1, autumn represents a conspiracy that humans have no control over or access to. In stanza 2, autumn will be heavily personified, signaling the speaker's attempt to see autumn in a way that he or she *can* at least identify with.

The speaker does not, however, expect that autumn will literally answer the question. Rather, the question expresses autumn's universal familiarity. "Who hath not seen thee oft amid thy store?" is another way of saying that *everyone* recognizes autumn, and in a variety of places—from the apple orchards to the wheat fields to the farmhouse. Of course, despite autumn's universal recognition, the speaker continues describing personified autumn as it appears in its various zones of influence. In this way, the speaker suggests that the reader may recognize the season well, the poem will show him or her new

ways of seeing it.

One aspect of the line that reflects the speaker's fresh perspective is the meter, which adjusts the poem's iambic pentameter.

Who hath | not seen | thee oft | amid thy | store?

Instead of an iamb, the line starts with a spondee, whose double stress lends the question more force. This emphasis gives the question the quality of a true address, something spoken from one person to another. As such, the question targets the reader as much as it does autumn, encouraging him or her to wonder where autumn does appear—or, rather, if there's anywhere autumn *doesn't* appear.

Autumn's "store," or storage area (such as the "granary" in line 14) is ubiquitous—it could be anywhere. Autumn, a godlike store owner, presides over everything. So, though this line's intimate question makes autumn seem more human, autumn also retains the godly influence it shows off in stanza 1. In fact, this relates to another use of the *thee*, *thy*, and *thou* pronouns. In the King James Bible, they are used to refer to God. Their sense of intimacy takes on a dimension of holiness and reverence, aptly suited for the poem's treatment of autumn as at once human and godlike.

LINES 13-15

Sometimes whoever seeks abroad may find
Thee sitting careless on a granary floor,
Thy hair soft-lifted by the winnowing wind;

Lines 13-15 contain the first moment of stanza 2's detailed personification of autumn. This personification represents the speaker's attempt to recover from the vivid intensity of stanza 1 by presenting autumn in a way that humans can easily identify with.

"[W]hoever seeks abroad," says the speaker, is likely to find autumn in a number of places. This general "whoever" reiterates the universality of the experience of autumn, while the reference to roaming "abroad"—that is, traveling—depicts autumn as an appropriate time to be outside and explore nature. This hypothetical traveler "may find" autumn "on a granary floor," but isn't guaranteed to. Such a discovery, suggests the speaker, requires careful observation. What's more, regardless of whether anyone notices, autumn will continue, the seasons will keep on rolling.

Line 14, in which autumn sits "careless on a granary floor," seems to reverse the all-powerful image of autumn that appears in stanza 1. Here, autumn is "careless," almost lazy. The granary may symbolize the collective labor of the harvest, but work is the last thing autumn is doing. Like a farm worker sneaking a few extra minutes of rest, autumn lazes in a cool, quiet place.

Line 15, however, may change the way the reader interprets "careless." This hypothetical autumnal wanderer, says the speaker, might notice autumn's "hair soft-lifted by the winnowing wind." In one sense, this image falls totally in line with the lazy, dreamy farm worker from line 14. The wind is soft and pleasant; it caresses autumn's restful face. But this restfulness is exactly what suggests another reading. It implies a deathly stillness. Autumn could be napping, but it could also be dead. Given the overtones of death in stanza 1, and those that will follow, it's hard not to recognize in the image a corpse whose body is stirred only by the wind.

The word "winnowing" supports this reading. Though the /n/ and two /w/ sounds give it a soft roundness that matches the light touch of the wind, its meaning implies autumn's violence—particularly, the violence of the harvest. Winnowing refers to the separating of wheat from chaff in a piece of grain, a process that requires machinery, cutting, and forced separation. Winnowing, then, wears a disguise, much like autumn. It sounds pleasant enough. As in the case of the "soft-lifted" hair, it produces moments of tender beauty. But like the "mists" from line 1, it conceals a sort of violence.

It's also worth noting that "winnowing" is used rather cleverly in this context. The word's root is the Old English word for "wind," but over time it developed its agricultural definition. By describing the wind as winnowing, then, the poem *winnows* the word: it separates it out from its new context, like wheat from chaff, and returns it to its original one.

LINES 16-18

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:

In lines 16-18, the poem further personifies autumn and broadens the specific context of stanza 2, the world of the harvest. The poem also continues to serve up imagery that represents autumn's paradoxical blend of beauty, life, and death.

Having visited the granary floor, the speaker now travels outside to the fields. There, he or she finds autumn "on a half-reap'd furrow sound asleep." This line intensifies the image from the previous line. In the granary, personified autumn was "sitting careless." Here, in the field, autumn is "sound asleep." A deeper stillness, the speaker suggests, is sinking in. Autumn is changing, reflecting—through its physical, personified state—the transition from the color-burst and fruitfulness of autumn to the death of winter.

Also like the previous lines, line 16 contains a hyphenated adjective: "half-reap'd." In form it recalls "soft-lifted," but in implied meaning it's closer to line 11's "o'er-brimm'd," because it points directly to a process that will end, eventually, in winter and death. As stanza 2 develops, autumn's surroundings increasingly reflect the violence of the harvest. But at no point

will the season lose its hint of loveliness, including here. The field, after all, is only *half*-harvested. The violence has been cut short so that autumn can laze in the fields, sunk in what seems like deep pleasure.

Loveliness and death, as both opposing and conspiring elements, crop up in the following lines as well. For example, the speaker implicates "the fume of poppies" in autumn's sleep. The drowse-inducing fumes are deeply pleasurable, yet ultimately destructive. Poppies are the source of opium, a highly addictive drug that was popular among the English Romantics, if also often abused. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, for example, became heavily addicted to the drug, and his death may have been related to it. Thomas De Quincey, another Romantic writer, wrote an autobiographical work about his addiction called *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*.

Later in the line, the "hook," or scythe, introduces another conflicting image. Its enjambment into the next line opens the possibility that it may deal a deadly swipe, but in fact, it "Spares the next swath and all its twined flowers." Rather than representing pure death, autumn shows a kind of restraint, seeming to say, "It's alright to enjoy this pleasant time—in fact, you should, because it will not last."

The "twined" or twisted flowers, however, remind the reader once again of autumn's complexity. They are spared. In that way, they represent life. But like the swollen fruits from stanza 1, the flowers are overgrown. They twist around each other, creating an impenetrable thicket that will eventually dry up or rot, thus again using beauty to hint at death.

LINES 18-22

:
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.

Lines 19-22 deepen autumn's character even further. Though their syntax maintains the pace and tone of the previous lines, these lines initiate a major transition.

"And sometimes," the speaker says, autumn is "like a gleaner." In the previous lines, autumn was like a storehouse manager and reaper, the person who harvests the fields. Here, autumn transforms into a gleaner, the worker who, after the reaper cuts the crops, scans the fields for leftovers and gathers them up. To be a good gleaner requires patience, observance, and alertness—in other words, exactly the opposite of the lazy, sleepy autumn who appears in the previous lines.

The colon that end-stops line 18 marks this transition, representing the passage from the gates of sleep to a waking life that demands alertness. This is another moment in which the poem warns the reader not to be fooled by autumn's appearances. It may appear harmless and human-like, but is actually an unstoppable natural force, with the almost inhuman ability, for example, to watch the cider press for "hours by hours" without breaking eye contact, not even blinking.

Yet because the stanza's final lines share the rest of the stanza's syntax, they also soften autumn's change in appearance. "And sometimes" tells the reader that this clause is a parallel structure: "Sometimes whoever seeks abroad may find," and "sometimes like a gleaner thou dost keep." This repeated suggests that the final image of autumn as a gleaner is simply another item in the list of autumn's various appearances.

Furthermore, the images at the end of stanza 2 relate autumn back to the images of overabundance in stanza 1. One of the primary actions of the imagery in these final lines is that of flowing. First, the gleaner steadily watches the "brook" burbling past, as if meditating on the fleetingness it represents. Next, autumn watches the cider press, with a similarly "patient look," whose "last oozings" slowly flow out "hours by hours." While in stanza 1 various containers—fruits, nuts, and honeycombs—filled to the brim, in stanza 2 all those containers surpass their capacity or tolerance for pressure. They begin to release, flowing out.

Their discharge is slow (in line 21, a caesura breaks the line to reflect that slowness) and hypnotic. The "last oozings" of the cider press in particular seem to generate a swampy atmosphere from which autumn—or the typical autumnal wanderer ("whoever seeks abroad")—cannot be extracted. Again, the poem emphasizes the great, heavy, slow, and unstoppable conspiracy of the season.

LINES 23-24

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

In lines 23 and 24, the final questions for autumn develop the character of the speaker. Structurally, stanza 3 follows stanza 2. Both start with a question (in stanza 3's case, two questions) that fit on one line, and follow with one long sentence that in some way answers the question.

Both make similar adjustments to the poem's iambic pentameter.

> Where are | the songs | of spring? | Ay, Where | are they?

But line 23 takes that adjustment a few steps further. In addition to starting things off with a spondee rather than an iamb, it stresses the first three syllables of the second question, such that the exclamatory "Ay" and the repeated core of the question, "Where are," ring in the reader's ears. This metrical variation is the first of the major differences between lines 12 and 23.

The questions are also distinct from each other. Both are

rhetorical, but the questions in stanza 2 can also be read as actually demanding an answer—not necessarily from autumn, but maybe from the reader. The speaker genuinely wants to know, "Where are the songs of spring? Ay, Where are they?" The repetition of the question and the firm, expressive "Ay" convey the speaker's desire to find an answer one way or another. As in stanza 2, the questions come off as a challenge, as if the speaker is daring autumn to show him or her where the "songs of spring" are. (Later, it comes to seem that the music of autumn very much resembles the music of spring.)

The repetition and the "Ay" may give the questions an exasperated tone, but the following line lends them confidence: "Think not of them, thou hast thy music too," the speaker tells autumn, as if delivering a pep talk before a competition or performance. Here, the speaker encourages autumn, and him- or herself, to have confidence in autumn's unique beauty—to use the "patient look" of the gleaner in stanza 2 to absorb it all while there's still daylight.

But in urging autumn not to think about the songs of spring, the speaker presents a thought that's rather hard to banish. Spring is present in the sense that autumn both remembers and looks forward to it; both seasons are chained to the same natural cycle. As such, the rest of the poem will focus intently on autumn, but at the same time create a sort of spring.

LINES 25-26

While barred clouds bloom the soft-dying day,
And touch the stubble-plains with rosy hue;

Lines 25 and 26 reiterate the theme of beauty and death while also providing contextual information that distinguishes stanza 3 from the other two.

The unique autumnal music, says the speaker, occurs "While barred clouds bloom the soft-dying day, / And touch the stubble-plains with rosy hue." The first thing these lines do is mark a progression through time. In stanza 1, morning "mists" appear, and in stanza 2, autumn lazes around in the dusty drowsiness of a warm afternoon. In stanza 3, the day is "soft-dying"—the sun is setting.

In this moment before the figurative death brought on by night, the speaker locates one of the poem's most beautiful images: "barred clouds bloom the soft-dying day." The alliteration of the soft /b/ between "barred" and "bloom" gives the line a gentle firmness that reflects the image of the heavy, shadowed clouds. The dying of the day is a cause for mourning, but its softness demands appreciation, such that any lament must also include an element of celebration.

The following line, "And touch the stubble-plains with rosy hue," presents this sweetness in death even more starkly. Here, a gentle loveliness the color of a rose (a symbol of life and love) is laid directly over the mowed fields (a symbol of death). The field is completely shorn of life, and with winter it will freeze over and grow barren. Yet it still has the capacity to receive the touch of life. The speaker, perhaps remembering all that it *did* hold, is able to see the field as simultaneously deathly, beautiful, and alive.

As if to convey the peacefulness of the image, the line proceeds in purely iambic pentameter:

And touch | the stub- | ble plains | with ro- | sy hue;

With its steady, unflagging beat, the line reads like the heartbeat of a contented observer. The light clouds "touch" the harvested fields; emotionally, they touch the speaker. With the clouds, which come from the same realm as the maturing sun (i.e. the sky), the speaker establishes a physical connection with the natural world. That connection germinates in him or her, producing the music of autumn that follows.

LINES 27-29

Then in a wailful choir the small gnats mourn
Among the river sallows, borne aloft
Or sinking as the light wind lives or dies;

In lines 27-29, the speaker begins to describe the music of autumn, which is supposed to be distinct from "the songs of spring." These lines contain the poem's first animal life (other than humans) and emphasize the poem's theme of powerlessness in the face of change.

As if in response to the beauty of the rosy-hued stubble-fields, a cloud of "small gnats" begins to "mourn" in a "wailful choir." Anchored by "wailful" and "mourn," death swaggers through this line, though it doesn't crowd out the beauty. For example, the gnats are described as a choir. This is a rather strange way to describe a swarm of small, irritating insects, the type that get inhaled inadvertently and whine constantly in the ear, but the speaker, perhaps influenced by the surrounding beauty of the sunset, allows him- or herself to see them quite differently. Their wailing is beautiful, and not in spite of its mournful tone, but because of it.

To the speaker, the gnats are beautiful in the sound they create and the life they represent. Their sound is not an irritating whine, but a pleasant hum. They are creatures that won't live longer than a few days. However, during their brief window on the planet they work together, gathering above the riverbank and sacrificing themselves to hungry fish, thereby joining the natural system that autumn presides over. The "river sallows," or willows, which like the "twined flowers" of line 18 represent an impenetrable thicket. The gnats fly "Among" them, as if a part of that thicket.

Here, and in the following line, the poem depicts an atmosphere of calm among the inescapable influence of autumn. The gnats are "borne aloft / Or sinking as the light wind lives or dies." Like the implied humans from stanza 1 who might recognize in the conspiracy between autumn and the sun a natural process to

which they are bound, the gnats have no choice but to ride the wind. They do, however, seem to peacefully—if also mournfully—accept it. They show no resistance, letting the wind take them where it may.

With relatively long words like "wailful" and "sallows" and punctuation that slows the sentence (like the caesura in line 28 and the semicolon that end-stops line 29), the speaker lingers in the image and the music of the gnats. He or she seems to respect them deeply, perhaps because of their unquestioning acceptance of the seasonal change.

Under this reading, the entire poem may appear like an attempt on the part of the speaker to reach this level of acceptance. Though the speaker expresses doubt about the ability to do so, he or she does so subtly, and spends most of the time trying to extract beauty from the distinct moments of the autumn day. In stanza 3, that close attention seems to pay off, as the lines incorporate imagery from earlier in the poem. The willows recall the twisting vine from line 4, the river matches the brook in line 20, and the lifting wind seems to have traveled from the "granary floor" in line 14, where it "soft-lifted" the hair of personified autumn.

LINES 30-32

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;

In lines 30-32, the poem develops the music of autumn, directly responding to the question from line 23 and highlighting the similarities between autumn (the season of decay) and spring (the season of new life).

Many more animals enter the picture in these lines: lambs, crickets, and birds. In their bleating, singing, and whistling, they seem to answer the question from line 23, though indirectly. That question asked, "Where are the songs of spring?" but these lines present the songs of *autumn*. The reader, however, will notice that this exact music might just as likely mark a spring morning. The "hilly bourn," the "Hedge," and the "garden-croft" suggest an abundance of plant life. Without the poem's context, the reader wouldn't be able to identify them as decaying plants; nothing in the words themselves distinguishes them from the plant life that might sprout up in the same area during the spring.

The same thing goes for the animal cries, especially those of the lambs and the whistling "red-breast," which probably refers to a robin. Who's to say these animals wouldn't fill the spring air with just the same music? The speaker seems to want to make this very point. Autumn should be appreciated for its vitality just as much as spring is.

Autumn's deathly aspects, however, should also be appreciated. To that effect, the poem includes details that distinguish the dusk songs from the songs of spring. The lambs, for example, are "full-grown," meaning they are ready for slaughter, whereas in spring they would have been newborns. The crickets come out in the evening and chirp through the night. Because this stanza describes the sunset as a "soft-dying" process, the crickets can be seen as inhabiting that death.

And the robin whistles its soft song, but "from a garden-croft." The garden shelters the robin, who doesn't yet suffer from the onset of winter. The robin may, however, *feel* the onset: it's "treble soft," a high-pitched, delicate whistle, seems to signal that something will soon shatter it.

The poem, however, is not yet ready to enter that final moment. Like the garden and the "bourn," which is a fence that keeps the lambs in, semicolons (in two end-stops and a caesura) erect barriers between this lovely, mournful music and the final line, encouraging the reader to linger in its space for as long as possible, to indulge once more in the pleasure of the bees and "think warm days will never cease."

LINE 33

And gathering swallows twitter in the skies.

The poem's last line combines imagery and thematic elements from the rest of the poem, and presents a final image that suggests a future both conclusive and full of possibility.

The speaker's vision sweeps skyward: "And gathering swallows twitter in the skies." The swallows resemble the gnats as they gather into a cloud-like formation. They also recall the gleaner from line 19, whose job is to *gather* the leftover crops from the reaped fields. *Gather* is obviously a key word here. The line itself, by incorporating elements from the rest of the poem, acts as a sort of gatherer.

In "swallows" and "twitter," the poem makes final use of double letters, which jump from the page after just a quick scan of the rest of the poem: "moss'd cottage-trees," "o'er-brimm'd their clammy cells," "winnowing," "oozings," "barred clouds bloom," "stubble-plains." These doubles—this abundance—are everywhere. Additionally, in its status as a single image, fenced-off on each side by punctuation, the line resembles many of the poem's other lines, which tumble from the speaker's imagination as single units. Nevertheless, these similarities show how such units are tightly linked to each other.

In its irregular pentameter, the line also resembles the others.

And ga- | thering swal- | lows twit- | ter in | the skies.

The line starts with an iamb, but "gathering"—a word that could be read as having either two or three syllables—somewhat throws it off. If read with three, the line loses its distinction as being purely iambic, becomes the poem's second 11-syllable line (line 14 is the first, though "granary," like "gathering," could be read as two syllables), and joins many of the poem's other lines, whose slight breaks from the steady pentameter reflect

the space for jazzy improvisation within the order of the seasons.

And the image itself—the "gathering swallows"—represents the poem as a whole in that it, like the poem, is a huge collection of life. The poem contains fruits, vegetables, farm laborers, and animals of all shapes and sizes. Similarly, the flock of swallows contains hundreds if not thousands of lives. Their twittering might sound like a weak form of singing, especially compared against the bleating and whistling, but it's also just the swallows' normal way of going about things. There's confidence in their casualness. The swallows have good reason to be confident: they are about to migrate south. Yes, their journey will be arduous, many of them will die as they brave the Pyrenees and cross the Sahara, but unlike the poem's other animals, they can escape the winter.

The final image of the "skies"—plural and far-reaching—suggests both the swallows' fate and that of all the other life that appears in the poem. The expansiveness of "skies" represents a wealth of creative possibility within the limits of autumn, exactly the sort of thing the poem itself embodies. The darkening emptiness of "skies," however, represents the inevitable end, the moment when winter tightens its grip, leaving those who live through it with little more than dreams of the songs of spring.

SYMBOLS

THE SUN

Whether explicitly or implicitly, the sun appears in every stanza of "To Autumn." In a way, it has to, given that the poem is a description of a full, relatively cloudless day (some clouds do appear in stanza 3, but they're described in relation to the sunlight). In line with some of the poem's major themes, the sun symbolizes life and death—it is a force capable of both giving and taking away (sometimes as the result of giving too much).

In stanza 1, the sun's gift of life contains the hint of death. Autumn, addressed in line 1 as "Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness," is a "Close-bosom friend of the maturing sun" and works with the sun "to load and bless" the trees with fruit. The sun first appears with a descriptor: it is "maturing." This adjective hints at the sun's ability to simultaneously give and take. It matures the fruits and makes them grow, but this maturation eventually results in an overripeness that leads to death.

Every fruit in stanza 1 shares this quality of being on the verge of rot—so full of life that they are about to die—and the poem identifies the sun, in collaboration with autumn, as the one responsible. At the end of the stanza, the bees are described as thinking "warm days will never cease." Their thought points again to the sun's dual nature: it both bestows great warmth and removes it when it sets or when winter comes.

In stanza 2, the sun shifts to the background. The reader can imagine, however, that personified autumn's drowsiness is in part due to the energy-sapping heat of the day. In any case, the sun is certainly responsible for blooming the poppies that emit sleep-inducing fumes, and in that way is indirectly responsible for autumn's drowsiness. This drowsiness contains both life and death: it is beautiful and pleasant, but also marks the beginning of a path toward unconsciousness. The allusion to time in line 22 ("hours by hours") also implies the sun, whose arc across the sky marks how long autumn spends gazing into the cider press's decadent seepage.

In stanza 3, the sun receives more explicit mention, though the word "sun" doesn't actually appear. First, "barred clouds bloom the soft-dying day, / And touch the stubble-plains with rosy hue." This rosy hue, of course, describes the color of the sunlight filtered through the late-day clouds. Here, the sun once again contains both life and death. It shines with the color of a healthy rose, but upon a mowed field that harbors no life and is on its way to freezing over with the winter.

In the final line—"And gathering swallows twitter in the skies"—the sun is implied once again. By this point, it has almost fully set. Astronomical data indicates that on September 19, 1819, the day Keats supposedly wrote "To Autumn," the moon was just entering its new moon phase, meaning that night it would have appeared as just a sliver. The life-bestowing autumn sun he describes in the poem was about to be rivaled by its opposite: total (well, nearly total) darkness.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun; / Conspiring with him how to load and bless"
- **Line 10:** "Until they think warm days will never cease,"
- **Line 17:** "Drows'd with the fume of poppies"
- **Line 22:** "Thou watchest the last oozings hours by hours."
- **Lines 25-26:** "While barred clouds bloom the soft-dying day, / And touch the stubble-plains with rosy hue;"
- **Line 33:** "And gathering swallows twitter in the skies."

POETIC DEVICES

APOSTROPHE

The poem contains apostrophe throughout. Arguably, starting with the title, the whole thing is an apostrophe, since it directly addresses autumn (and, at the beginning of each stanza, reminds the reader that it's doing so).

This address is appropriate given that the poem is an ode, a form that typically praises or describes a person, event, or, as in this case, aspect of nature. Because the entire poem addresses

autumn, the apostrophe has time to develop. And as the poem moves forward, the apostrophe grows more direct.

Stanza 1 kicks things off by invoking autumn: "Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness." The poem's title, "To Autumn," firmly links this line with the season of changing colors. The descriptive nature of this first address signals to the reader that the rest of the stanza will deal out some vivid descriptions, and it does: immediately following are the "moss'd cottage-trees," swollen gourds, plump hazelnuts, and overflowing "clammy cells," for example. In the first stanza, then, the address to autumn functions as an entry point into the imagery and material of the poem. By introducing autumn evocatively (rather than plainly) as the "Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness," the speaker gives him- or herself license to delve into the lushness of the scene.

This is necessary, as it builds the poem's setting and context, that of a countryside so overflowing with life that its abundance obviously cannot last. Also, the pairing of "mists" and "mellow fruitfulness" points to the complex identity of the character being addressed. Autumn is at once extraordinarily productive and calm-inspiring, but it also lives behind a mist, a veil with ghoulish connotations that suggests an unseen, lurking presence behind the overwhelming beauty.

Stanza 2 develops the ideas presented in stanza 1. It starts with an even more direct address of autumn, a rhetorical question: "Who hath not seen thee oft amid thy store?" The speaker doesn't expect autumn to reply, but the direct question emphasizes the speaker's impression of the season: autumn is a season so intensely physical that the speaker can't help but think of it as a human being. As in stanza 1, the address in stanza 2 slides back into heavy description, but all of it maintains the image of autumn as a person. For example, autumn is seen drowsing among the poppies and gazing "with patient look" into the dribbling cider press. The address in stanza 2 also develops the mysterious characteristics hinted at in stanza 1. If the "mists" conceal death in stanza 1, they have cleared to expose it in stanza 2, where personified autumn, though apparently harmless, lazes beside "half-reap'd" field with its "hook," a tool that deals death.

In stanza 3, the address gets even more direct. "Where are the songs of spring?" and its immediate reiteration ("Ay, Where are they?") are a different kind of question than the one that starts stanza 2, because their answer is not necessarily implied. Therefore, by addressing autumn, the speaker asks the season to account for itself—specifically, for its uniqueness. Of course, autumn can't respond, at least not as a human would. So, in this final moment, the apostrophe rebounds to the speaker. In order to replace "the songs of spring" with the songs of autumn ("thy music too"), the speaker takes it upon him- or herself to pick out the various animal sounds, such as wailing gnats and bleating lambs, that give autumn its own character.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness"
- **Line 12:** "Who hath not seen thee oft amid thy store?"
- **Line 14:** "Thee"
- **Line 15:** "Thy"
- **Line 17:** "thy"
- **Line 19:** "thou"
- **Line 20:** "thy"
- **Line 22:** "Thou"
- **Line 23:** "Where are the songs of spring? Ay, Where are they?"
- **Line 24:** " Think not of them, thou hast thy music too,—"

ALLITERATION

"To Autumn" is overflowing with alliteration, just as the season the poem describes is overflowing with life. Sounds repeat throughout entire stanzas—not necessarily in the quick succession typical of alliteration, but closely enough that they echo across the poem's lines. Overall, the abundance of shared sounds reflects the abundance that characterizes autumn.

In a few places, however, alliteration has a more precise effect. Some word groupings, for example, deepen the poem's discussion of a process that simultaneously promotes beauty and death. Other groupings call into question the meanings of the alliterated words.

In lines 1-2, "**m**ists," "**m**ellow," and "**m**aturing" introduce the poem's central theme of beauty existing in death. In fact, each word alone suggests this theme. The mists are soft and quiet, but they also, possibly, veil something deathly. Mellow implies peace and loveliness, but also low energy. Given stanza 2, in which personified autumn falls into an almost deathly sleep, the mellowness of stanza 1 appears as the first step on the road to perpetual darkness. Maturing also has a double meaning. It describes the life-giving force of the sun, which "swell[s] the gourd" and the "sweet kernel," but the maturing process continues until that life overflows, which results either in the harvest or decay of the fruits—both a form of death. These three words, joined by alliteration, signal to the reader the overarching importance of the themes they represent.

In lines 2-3, "**C**lose" and "**C**onspiring," which both start their respective lines with a hard /k/ sound, modify each other's meaning. According to the speaker, autumn and the sun are "Close" and "bosom-friends," meaning they have a special, intimate relationship. They conspire with each other in the sense that they work closely together to ready the fruits of the fields and orchards for harvest.

On its own, "Conspiring" might give off a more negative vibe. Usually, it's a word associated with criminal activity. But with the similarly sounding "Close" before it, the reader may focus more on its connotations of intimacy than those of illegality. That said, the alliteration does prompt a longer pause over the

words, and in this pause, the reader may reconsider, once again, his or her understanding of the word. Maybe it means both: "Conspiring" is the mark of a close relationship, but also one that no one has any control over. The conspiracy between autumn and the sun, then, is exactly that: a private plan conceived among powerful parties that those affected—the people, animals, and plants—have no control over.

Finally, in spots like line 24, alliteration is a basic tool for emphasis. "Think not of them, thou hast thy music too," the speaker tells autumn. Here, /th/ sounds concentrate attention on the second-person pronouns and the word "Think." Through this emphasis, personified autumn becomes even more complete, a character with thoughts, feelings, and an identity worthy of personal pronouns (though second-person pronouns do appear in stanza 2 as well). The repeated sounds also give weight to the emotion of the speaker, who fervently believes that autumn must revise its reputation as a season purely of death.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "m," "m," "f"
- **Line 2:** "C," "f," "m"
- **Line 3:** "C," "h," "h," "l," "l"
- **Line 4:** "r," "r"
- **Line 6:** "f," "f," "r," "r"
- **Line 7:** "sw"
- **Line 8:** "W," "s," "w," "s," "m"
- **Line 9:** "m," "l," "f," "l," "f"
- **Line 10:** "th," "th," "w," "w," "c"
- **Line 11:** "s," "c"
- **Line 12:** "s," "th," "th," "s"
- **Line 13:** "S," "s"
- **Line 14:** "Th," "s"
- **Line 15:** "Th," "s," "th," "w," "w"
- **Line 16:** "f," "s," "s"
- **Line 17:** "f," "p"
- **Line 18:** "S," "p," "s," "w," "a," "a," "w"
- **Line 19:** "s," "l," "l," "th"
- **Line 20:** "S," "th"
- **Line 21:** "p," "p," "l"
- **Line 22:** "Th," "th," "l," "h," "h"
- **Line 23:** "s," "s"
- **Line 24:** "Th," "th," "th," "th"
- **Line 25:** "b," "b," "d," "d"
- **Line 26:** "t," "t"
- **Line 27:** "s," "m," "m"
- **Line 28:** "s," "l"
- **Line 29:** "s," "l," "l"
- **Line 30:** "l," "l," "b," "l," "b"
- **Line 31:** "s," "s"
- **Line 32:** "g"
- **Line 33:** "g," "s," "s"

CONSONANCE

Consonance appears throughout the poem. Like alliteration and assonance, the abundance of shared sounds reflects the abundance of autumn. Also like alliteration and assonance, the basic function consonance in "To Autumn" is to emphasize certain words. In many cases, it does just that, but in some cases in the poem it goes a step further.

For example, in a few lines the consonance mimics the meaning of the line's content. This happens in line 11, which, notably, ends its stanza. The speaker comments that bees think the warmth of the sun will never end, "For summer has o'er-brimm'd their clammy cells." This line has a profusion of /m/ sounds. Adding to the bounty, they're all *double* /m/ sounds. In a line that describes a beehive overflowing with honey, it's entirely appropriate that the line bursts forth with similar sounds. Even the shape of the m—two rounded pillars, which in this context might look like gushing fountains or the branches of an overgrown tree—adds to the sense of uncontainable growth. Appearing at the end of the stanza, this consonance raises the sense of overflowing to the level of form: the overbrimming and the oozing is so much that the poem must start fresh on a new stanza.

Other moments of consonance make a more straightforward emphasis. For example, the /l/ sounds that connect "mellow," "fruitfulness," "load," and "bless" in stanza 1 call attention to autumn's key features and actions. In stanza 3, the /l/ sounds among "small," "sallows," "aloft," "bleat," "hilly," and "treble" emphasize the sweet and mournful sound and activity of the animal chorus.

The reader should note that the /l/ sounds occur most frequently in the poem's consonance. They give the poem an atmosphere of liquid, fragile lightness that sweetens the emotional effect of autumn's fleeting beauty.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "S," "s," "m," "s," "s," "m," "ll," "f," "l," "ss"
- **Line 2:** "C," "l," "s," "s," "f," "m," "s"
- **Line 3:** "C," "s," "h," "h," "l," "l"
- **Line 4:** "r," "v," "r," "v," "r"
- **Line 5:** "tt," "t"
- **Line 6:** "f," "ll," "ll," "fr," "r," "r"
- **Line 7:** "ll," "l," "ll"
- **Line 8:** "W," "sw," "l," "s," "b," "m"
- **Line 9:** "ll," "m," "l," "f," "l," "f," "b"
- **Line 10:** "l," "th," "th," "w," "w," "ll," "c," "s"
- **Line 11:** "s," "mm," "r," "r," "b," "r," "mm," "r," "l," "mm," "c," "ll"
- **Line 12:** "th," "s," "th," "th," "s"
- **Line 13:** "S," "s"
- **Line 14:** "s," "ss"
- **Line 15:** "s," "ft," "ft," "w," "nn," "w," "n"
- **Line 16:** "f," "r," "f," "rr," "s," "s," "p"

- **Line 17:** “w,” “f,” “p,” “pp”
- **Line 18:** “Sp,” “s,” “w,” “w”
- **Line 19:** “s,” “s,” “l,” “k,” “l,” “st,” “k”
- **Line 20:** “St,” “l,” “d,” “d,” “c,” “b,” “k”
- **Line 21:** “b,” “c,” “r,” “pr,” “ss,” “p,” “l,” “k”
- **Line 22:** “Th,” “th”
- **Line 23:** “s,” “ng,” “s,” “ng”
- **Line 24:** “Th,” “th,” “th,” “th”
- **Line 25:** “l,” “b,” “l,” “b,” “l,” “d,” “d”
- **Line 26:** “t,” “t,” “l”
- **Line 27:** “l,” “l,” “sm,” “ll,” “n,” “m,” “n”
- **Line 28:** “m,” “s,” “ll,” “s,” “l”
- **Line 29:** “s,” “s,” “l,” “l,” “s,” “s”
- **Line 30:** “ll,” “l,” “l,” “b,” “l,” “ll,” “b”
- **Line 31:** “s,” “n,” “n,” “t,” “l,” “s,” “t”
- **Line 32:** “r,” “r,” “st,” “st,” “l,” “s,” “g”
- **Line 33:** “g,” “s,” “w,” “ll,” “ws,” “tw,” “tt,” “s,” “s”

ASSONANCE

Like alliteration and consonance, assonance appears throughout "To Autumn." It plays a few specific roles: to emphasize the warmth and comfort of the season, to contrast certain elements in the season, and, in the final stanza, to raise the volume of the choir of animals. Most of the assonance in the poem links /o/ and /u/ sounds, though to varying effect.

Between lines 1 and 3, close long /o/ sounds help present autumn's warm, peaceful loveliness. The words "mellow," "close," and, arguably, "bosom," for example, convey comfort both in sound and meaning. Pronouncing these /o/ sounds requires only a slight rounding of the lips—in other words, little effort. The reader might imagine the drowsy autumn of stanza 2 electing these easy words over more involved ones.

In line 14, /a/ sounds (and, in a moment of consonance, /r/ sounds) link "careless" with "granary," two words that don't match as naturally as "close" and "bosom" do. The granary is not a place for carelessness. As a storehouse for grain, its upkeep is essential for survival through the winter. Here, the assonance suggests that autumn has a mind of its own. Humans may have conformed their habits to it, but autumn will not adapt to accommodate humans.

In stanza 3, /oo/ and (slightly differing) /ow/ sounds lend music to a stanza about singing. Just a few examples of the connected words are "bloom," "hue," "mourn," "choir," and "bourn." The speaker repeatedly rounds his or her lips to say these words. A group reading this poem aloud might look like it was singing, like a chorus. Whereas the /o/ sounds in stanza 1 are the lazy, easy choice—the sound that requires the least effort—in stanza 3 they are more consistent. Their purpose is to show autumn that "thy has thy music too."

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** “o,” “o,” “o,” “o”
- **Line 3:** “o,” “i,” “i,” “o,” “oa”
- **Line 5:** “o,” “o”
- **Line 6:** “o,” “o”
- **Line 7:** “e,” “ou,” “e,” “e”
- **Line 8:** “o”
- **Line 9:** “o,” “o,” “ee”
- **Line 10:** “a,” “ea”
- **Line 12:** “o,” “o”
- **Line 14:** “a,” “a,” “a”
- **Line 15:** “i,” “i”
- **Line 16:** “o,” “ou”
- **Line 17:** “ow”
- **Line 18:** “a,” “a,” “a,” “ow”
- **Line 19:** “i,” “i,” “ea,” “ee”
- **Line 20:** “ea,” “e,” “ea”
- **Line 21:** “y,” “y”
- **Line 22:** “ou,” “ou”
- **Line 24:** “u,” “oo”
- **Line 25:** “oo”
- **Line 26:** “ou,” “u,” “ue”
- **Line 27:** “a,” “a,” “ou”
- **Line 28:** “a,” “ow,” “o,” “o”
- **Line 29:** “i,” “i,” “i,” “i,” “i”
- **Line 30:** “ow,” “ou,” “ou”
- **Line 31:** “o,” “o”
- **Line 32:** “o”
- **Line 33:** “o”

END-STOPPED LINE

All but eight lines in "To Autumn" are end-stopped. The main purpose of the poem's end-stops, most of which are achieved with a comma or semicolon, is to slice up the poem's images, giving each one equal weight. From the plump fruits to the wailing creatures, this poem is crowded (arguably "o'er-brimm'd") with imagery. The frequent end-stops divide those images and impose at least some order on the swollen, twisted mass. There a few cases of different punctuation, however, that have a different effect.

The reader need look no further than stanza 1 to get a sense of how the end-stops in "To Autumn" fix its vivid imagery in place. In line 2, a semicolon halts the image of the "bosom" friendship of autumn and the sun. "[M]aturing" is an interesting place for it to happen—the end-stop can be read as halting maturation by slowing down the movement into the next line, or as promoting it, by encouraging the reader to savor the image of the sun and autumn as close friends, to let it develop before the imagery in the following lines replaces it.

Line 4 has another striking image contained by a semicolon: "With fruit the vines that round the thatch-eaves run." The

semicolon invites the reader to read the line again. Given this line's backwards syntax, the reader may very need to give it a second read. The forced pause pushes the reader to fully involve him- or herself in the lush, tangled imagery of autumn.

The end-stops with semicolons and commas in stanza 2 play a similar role. In each line, the reader can identify a clear image: autumn on the granary floor, autumn's hair lifting, autumn sleeping in the field, autumn watching the cider press, etc. Again, the end-stopping punctuation invites the reader to participate in the stanza's overall mood—in this case, its dreamy laziness—by slowing down the action of the poem, letting each image ripen.

The instances of a colon, question mark, or em-dash are worth paying attention to, because there are so few of them. The colon and the em-dash only appear once, the colon in line 18 and the em-dash in line 24. The colon appears after a list of images depicting what personified autumn might be doing in the middle of the harvest. It marks a change from one type of image to another. Before it, autumn is depicted as sleeping. After it, autumn is depicted as patiently watching. The colon's appearance at the end of the line emphasizes its effect on the action of the poem. As it passes through the colon's gates, autumn transforms from dreamer into attentive observer. The quality of autumn's attention is almost inhuman—it gazes "hours by hours"—reminding the reader that though it may appear lackadaisical at times, it also has a job to do: prepare the land for winter.

The em-dash end-stop appears in line 24, and represents the release of energy that spills forth into the concluding music of autumn, one to rival "the songs of spring." Here, the end-stop is a sort of flourish, the outstretched arm of the master of ceremonies introducing the audience to the final act.

The two question-mark end-stops appear in lines 12 and 23—the starts of stanzas 2 and 3. They solidify the questions the speaker asks autumn. The question marks prompt a longer pause than the commas and semicolons, and therefore break the wending rhythm of the poem. With these questions, the speaker interrupts him- or herself, introducing another line of thinking (and, literally, another stanza). The end-stops help prepare the reader for this shift.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “,”
- **Line 2:** “;”
- **Line 4:** “;”
- **Line 5:** “,”
- **Line 6:** “;”
- **Line 8:** “,”
- **Line 9:** “,”
- **Line 10:** “,”
- **Line 11:** “.”
- **Line 12:** “?”
- **Line 14:** “,”
- **Line 15:** “;”
- **Line 16:** “,”
- **Line 18:** “:”
- **Line 20:** “;”
- **Line 21:** “,”
- **Line 22:** “.”
- **Line 23:** “?”
- **Line 24:** “,—”
- **Line 25:** “,”
- **Line 26:** “;”
- **Line 29:** “;”
- **Line 30:** “;”
- **Line 32:** “;”
- **Line 33:** “.”

ENJAMBMENT

The poem contains eight cases of enjambment. Each case heightens the emotional atmosphere of whichever line precedes it.

Line 3, for example, is left hanging on "bless." By this point, the poem has already dealt out some unexpected imagery (for example, the close friendship of autumn and the sun). A sense of great potential hangs in the air. The word "bless," implying the bestowal of a holy gift, could take the poem anywhere, and therefore swells the poem's promise. Line 13 has a similar effect: "Sometimes whoever seeks abroad may find." Leaving "find" unpunctuated, the poem encourages the speaker to ask what the seeker will find. As with "bless" in line 3, line 13's "find" suggests a world of abundant possibility.

In line 17, the enjambment between "hook" and "Spares" suggests another kind of possibility that underlines one of the poem's main thematic elements. The hook, or scythe, is a tool capable of dealing great violence, but in this case it spares the crop. As the poem argues throughout, autumn is both deadly and merciful—it allows itself and its inhabitants to linger in its dreamy sweetness before the inevitable winter.

In lines 27 and 28, the enjambment mimics the emotional state of the speaker, or, more generally, of the autumnal observer. Here, the speaker surrenders him- or herself to the music of the dusk chorus. The mournful wailing is unhindered, and sends the speaker headlong into the next line, where he or she tracks along the riverbank before being "borne aloft" and taken into yet another line. Like the gnats, the lines move forward with a smooth, flowing motion that resembles that of the wind.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** “bless”
- **Line 7:** “shells”

- **Line 13:** “find”
- **Line 17:** “hook”
- **Line 19:** “keep”
- **Line 27:** “mourn”
- **Line 28:** “aloft”
- **Line 31:** “soft”

CAESURA

Caesura appears in "To Autumn" a handful of times. For the most part, the caesuras appear in groupings that precede or follow long stretches without caesura. These groupings comment on the content of the stanza in which they appear.

The poem's first caesura's appear in lines 7, 8, and 9, where commas and a semicolon break up the description of the swelling fruit and happy honey bees. This stanza describes the maturation of the fruits and vegetables to the verge of burst and rot. The stanza might be thought of as a container, like the hazelnut shell or the apple skin. By line 8, where the first caesura appears (in the form of a semicolon, a relatively hard stop), the stanza starts nearing its limit; there's only so much rich imagery it can take. Like the fruits of autumn, it is on the verge of overflowing. It continues to get filled, but more haltingly, as if it can barely fit another word.

In lines 17 and 21, caesura imitates the drowsiness of stanza 2. In both cases, the comma offsets a subordinating clause that lingers, thereby deepening the image of the present moment, giving the lines a slowness that approximates the pace of drowsy autumn moving through the dusty, fragrant fields.

At the top of stanza 3, the cluster of caesuras drums up the emotion of the poem's conclusive music: "Where are the songs of spring? Ay, where are they?" Here, a question mark and comma in quick succession give the speaker's apostrophe a demanding tone. They build a tension that releases, in the rest of the stanza, as the song of autumn.

The poem's final caesura, in line 31, represents a last attempt to linger in the present before surrendering to winter's icy claw. As a semicolon, its pause is firm and extended. It represents a moment in which the speaker, or the typical autumn wanderer ("whoever seeks abroad") closes his or her eyes and appreciates the mournful sweetness of the moment, while also acknowledging that it will soon end.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** “,”
- **Line 8:** “;”
- **Line 9:** “,”
- **Line 17:** “,”
- **Line 21:** “,”
- **Line 23:** “?,” “,”
- **Line 24:** “,”
- **Line 28:** “,”
- **Line 31:** “;”

PERSONIFICATION

Autumn is personified throughout the poem. The season is the poem's fullest character, appearing in every line, and assuming many shapes. Each stanza lends autumn a different set of character traits, each of which represents a different kind of person. In this way, the poem implies a rich human component to the season without mentioning any specific human characters (the one exception is the "whoever" who "seeks abroad" in line 13, but this person is generalized and featureless).

In stanza 1, autumn is described as being and doing things typically associated with humans. The season is the "Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun," and it *conspires* with the sun to load the plants with fruit. Of course, the sun is personified here too (the sun is given the male gender, but autumn is genderless). As friends who conspire with each other, or work together, autumn and the sun have a god-like influence beyond human control. But since they are described as humans, they also imply those humans who *do* have influence (albeit limited) over the progress of the seasons: farmers. In the same way that autumn and the sun conspire to "load and bless," farmers work closely with the earth to plant and tend.

The autumn of stanza 2 represents another type of agricultural worker—not the farmer overseeing the process, but the laborer who harvests the fields. In this stanza, autumn is likened to both a reaper, who cuts and gathers the crops, and a gleaner, who collects the leftover crops strewn about after the reaping. When autumn assumes these roles, however, it's not exactly to do the work. Autumn sits "careless on a granary floor." In the fields autumn is "sound asleep." Here, the personification adds another dimension to the life of the harvest: many workers, whether taking advantage of little oversight or indulging in the pleasures of daydreams, shirk their duties. They would rather get high on the poppy fumes than finish reaping that crop row.

In the third stanza, autumn steps into the background, but the description suggests that it has gained an alertness distinct from stanza 2. "Think not of them, thou hast thy music too," the speaker tells autumn, referring to the "songs of spring." Here, the personification consists in the address—autumn, like a person, is something worthy of being addressed, and what's more, is capable of producing music. Though the rest of the stanza contains no explicit mention of autumn's humanlike activity, personified autumn's strong presence in the preceding stanzas suggests that it's still present. But this time, rather than lazing around, it's listening—silently, to its own music. In this way, autumn comes to represent the attentive speaker, or even the poet, who must carefully listen to autumn in order to write about it.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun; / Conspiring with him how to load and bless"
- **Lines 13-22:** "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."
- **Line 24:** "Think not of them, thou hast thy music too,—"

PATHETIC FALLACY

In a few spots "To Autumn" employs the pathetic fallacy to describe the workings of the natural world during this season of change. Very much connected to its use of personification, the poem assigns human attributes to animals and aspects of nature in order to imply what humans might think about the season in a poem where humans are pretty much absent.

In stanza 1, autumn and the sun are "Conspiring." Of course, the season and the celestial body aren't exactly capable of meeting secretly and hatching an elaborate plan, but the word certainly sheds light on the way the two entities do function together. A conspiracy is something secret and removed. Though farmers can tinker with the influence of the seasons (for example, by using greenhouses, which would allow them to extend the growing season), as a whole it's something they have no control over; they can't stop the onset of winter. "Conspiring," therefore, points to both human ingenuity and helplessness.

In line 10, the bees think like humans—"they think warm days will never cease." Here, the speaker, without bringing humans into the picture, describes a very common trap that humans fall into during times of bounty and pleasure: the temptation to think it will last forever. This delusion has the power to drive humans toward great, productive activity (if someone were always thinking of the moment when the warm days *do* end, they would never get anything done), but also the power to disappoint—the fall from paradise to the real world is much more painful when it's unexpected. With the thinking bees, the speaker stitches in his or her own take on the beauty of the moment.

In stanza 3, the gnats wail and "mourn." Of course, they do not actually—wailing is simply what their buzzing cloud sounds like to the speaker. The speaker, therefore, projects his or her interpretation of the moment onto its natural features. The day is ending, and autumn is transitioning into winter; a beautiful thing is dying and hardening over. The speaker recognizes this, feels it in his or her bones, and with that feeling interprets his or her surroundings.

Where Pathetic Fallacy appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "Conspiring with him how to load and bless"
- **Line 10:** "Until they think warm days will never cease,"
- **Line 27:** "Then in a wailful choir the small gnats mourn"

SIMILE

In line 19 the poem uses a simile to compare autumn to a gleaner, the type of agricultural worker who walks around the harvested fields picking up, or gleaning, stray crops. This simile is part of the poem's larger project of personifying autumn, which is likened to a human multiple times in each stanza. Due to the previous personification, by the time this simile appears the reader is already well-conditioned to imagine autumn as a laborer. The purpose of the simile, then, is to draw specific attention to the type of laborer mentioned: the gleaner. It prompts the reader to ask how exactly autumn is like a gleaner.

A gleaner is someone who gathers something, removing it from one source and taking it to another. In its good-natured conspiracy with the sun, autumn gleans nutrients from the air and soil and funnels them into the maturing fruits. In a sense this process heightens life, but it also diminishes it by sapping up an environment's resources. The gleaning, then, is a form of sucking that will leave the landscape barren, at least until spring.

A gleaner is also observant. It is the gleaner's job to make sure that nothing is left over after the harvest. Autumn emulates this characteristic of the gleaner in its "patient" watching of the cider press, "hours by hours." In this reading, the word "gleaner" can also represent what the poem imagines the role of the poet to be. In order to write a poem like "To Autumn," a poet must be a patient, steadily hardworking gatherer of images, language, and emotions.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Line 19:** "like a gleaner"

RHETORICAL QUESTION

A rhetorical question appears at the beginnings of stanzas 2 and 3. The first case follows the standard definition of a rhetorical question, in that it truly expects no answer. In stanza 3, however, the speaker really does seem to expect an answer. What's more, he or she seems to get one.

Stanza 2 starts with a question addressed to autumn (in that way, the question also forms part of the poem's overall apostrophe): "Who hath not seen thee oft amid thy store?" This question doesn't expect an answer. It is another way of saying that *everyone* has seen autumn "amid [its] store" ("store" could refer to any place touched by autumn's influence—arguably

everywhere). But by forming the statement as a question, the speaker underlines his or her confidence that any human can appreciate the ways in which autumn changes the earth (and, as a result, human and animal behavior). The question, therefore, comes as a challenge. "I dare you," the speaker seems to be saying, "to claim that you haven't experienced the lush dreaminess that I'm talking about."

The rhetorical questions in stanza 3 are also challenges—to personified autumn, to the reader, to the speaker him- or herself—but of a stronger type in that they really seem to expect an answer. The speaker emphasizes the demand by repeating/revising the question: "Where are the songs of spring? Ay, where are they?" If the first question recalls the question from stanza 2 and leads the reader to assume that it doesn't require an answer, the second question scolds those who make that assumption. The exclamatory, almost pained "Ay" helps drive the speaker's point home. "I repeat," he or she seems to be saying, "I want an answer."

In the rest of the stanza, the speaker answers him- or herself. By presenting the lively song of *autumn*, the speaker shows how nearly indistinguishable the two seasons, fall and spring, can be. Both are full of whistling birds and baying creatures. With some slight adjustments (for example, the removal of "stubble-plains" and "soft-dying day"), the rest of stanza 3 could just as well describe a spring morning. The question at the top of the stanza may not get a direct answer, but by expressing one of the poem's main themes—the simultaneity of the four seasons—it encourages the reader to ponder the question on his or her own.

Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:

- **Line 12:** "Who hath not seen thee oft amid thy store?"
- **Line 23:** "Where are the songs of spring? Ay, Where are they?"

PARALLELISM

The poem uses parallelism in stanzas 1 and 2 to underline autumn's process from growth to decay and its far-ranging influence.

In stanza 1, the poem repeats infinitives, whose marker is typically the word "to," to make a list of the fruits of autumn and the sun's collaborative effort. The partners conspire "to load and bless," but also "To bend," "And fill," "To swell," "and plump," and "to set budding more." This parallelism is an aspect of the sentence's parataxis. It presents its objects as equals. Far from displaying favoritism, autumn and the sun distribute their "maturing" powers evenly.

The particular type of parallelism is worth noting as well. An infinitive requires the word "to" (in the case of "to load and bless" and "To bend...And fill," the preposition applies to both verbs). "To," as a preposition, implies a moving *towards* something. The speaker suggests that, though there's flexible room within it, autumn has a fixed end. Inevitably, it drains into winter.

The repetition of "sometimes" and its associated sentence structure emphasizes the lighthearted, lazy vibe of stanza 2: "Sometimes whoever seeks abroad may find / Thee sitting careless...And sometimes like a gleaner thou dost keep..." Repeating the vague "sometimes," the speaker avoids making any definite claims and thereby emulates the labor-shirking autumn, who avoids reaping the whole crop row and instead drowses in the fields. However, "sometimes" does contain a hidden promise: it suggests that autumn is all of these things, and can therefore be found everywhere, in everything. In this sense the word appears not as an evasion, but as an acknowledgement that anything more specific would ignore autumn's far-ranging influence.

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "to load and bless"
- **Line 5:** "To bend "
- **Line 6:** "And fill"
- **Line 7:** "To swell," "and plump"
- **Line 8:** "to set"
- **Line 13:** "Sometimes"
- **Line 19:** "sometimes"

DIACOPE

The poem uses diacope in lines 8 and 9 with the quick repetition of the word "more," simply to emphasize the sheer abundance of flowers budding in autumn. Later, diacope is used in the questions that start stanza 3 in order to deepen the questions' implied meaning. The repeated word is "where": "Where are the songs of spring? Ay, where are they?" Appearing so close to its precursor, the second "where" prompts the reader to think of locations within both a physical and emotional landscape.

The first question—"Where are the songs of spring?"—seems pretty straightforward. Where did the music typically associated with spring, such as birdsong, go? Here, the reader might respond that they exist in the past, or the future. Either way, they exist in a landscape marked by the new life of spring rather than the decaying life of autumn. But the mention of the songs of spring, of course, *recalls* the songs of spring. In this sense, the reader travels through his or her memory to a place in which the songs of spring exist.

The second question—"Ay, where are they?"—further prompts this memory travel. In the rest of the stanza, the speaker reproduces the songs of *autumn*, which strongly resemble the songs of spring. That is, though the songs of spring have technically disappeared, in many ways they come to seem present again.

So, the "where" in the first question represents a distant time and place—a "there." Yet the "where" of the second question seems to hint at the fact that the songs of spring are secretly present after all, in the here and now of autumn.

Where Diacope appears in the poem:

- **Line 8:** "more"
- **Line 9:** "more"
- **Line 23:** "Where," "Where"

IMAGERY

Like the "clammy cells" in stanza 1, this poem is absolutely overflowing—not with honey, but with imagery. This is not to say, however, that the imagery spills forth chaotically. Like the seasons, the stanzas impose order on their content. Each stanza in "To Autumn" contains a different type of image.

Stanza 1 is dedicated to images of ripeness and abundance. The first plant imagery appears in line 4, describing the "fruit" whose "vines" grow around "the thatch-eaves." In this image, the vine winds itself tightly around a farmhouse. The inverted syntax ("With fruit the vines that round the thatch-eaves run") sends the reader on a journey of parsing meaning that imitates the way an observer might follow the twisting vine with his or her eyes. This vine, like the swollen gourds, plump hazelnuts, and overbrimming beehives, seems to have a life of its own. It's almost as though these images have agency (the bees, for example, "think"), which emphasizes the lively, abundant aspect of autumn.

Stanza 2 emphasizes the laborious aspect of autumn—the harvest. As such, the imagery deals in death, labor, and idleness. The first image of personified autumn, for example, is of it "sitting careless on a granary floor." The next image is of autumn sleeping by "a half-reap'd furrow." The words "granary" and "furrow" imply many months of hard work, but phrases like "sitting careless" and "sound asleep" oppose that work.

In both the labor and idleness, death lingers. The reaping of the fields represents strenuous activity for humans, but violent death for the plants. The drowsy sleeping in the fields, though pleasant, shows personified autumn approaching a state of total inactivity and death. The images in this stanza combine autumn's contradictory characteristics in order to emphasize its theme of beauty and life existing in death.

In stanza 3, the imagery heralds the end of autumn by depicting singing and nightfall. The singing is the mournful type (literally, "the small gnats mourn"), and therefore announces the end of something. The images present a beautiful sunset: "barred clouds bloom the soft-dying day, / And touch the stubble-plains with rosy hue." Like the images in stanza 2, those in stanza 3 emphasize the harmony between beauty, life, and death.

The creatures that appear further down are quite active—the gnats rise in their cloud, the lambs bleat together, and the swallows gather in the sky—but all of them, with winter, will either migrate or die. The poem's final image, that of the swallows gathering against the darkening void of the sky, fixes this tension in place. The flock of swallows, a unit of hundreds of individual lives, strains against the nothingness behind them.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- Lines 4-11
- Lines 14-22
- Lines 25-33

VOCABULARY

Mellow (Line 1) - "Mellow" has a variety of meanings, all of which create an atmosphere of calm. As an adjective, it can mean relaxing or easy-going. As a verb, it means an action that has a calming or softening effect. Mellow comes from the Middle English word for "ripe, sweet, and juicy." In the poem, therefore, it also describes the fruitful abundance of the first stanza.

Fruitfulness (Line 1) - "Fruitfulness" means the state of being fertile and productive. The word points to the literal, physical fruitfulness that follows in the first stanza—the swelling gourds and plump fruits—but it can also describe an imaginative or emotional fruitfulness.

Bosom-friend (Line 2) - "Bosom-friend" means a very close, intimate friend. Since the poem already uses the word "Close" to modify friend, bosom emphasizes the sense of loving intimacy. The extra two syllables also help the line follow iambic pentameter.

Maturing (Line 2) - "Maturing" means getting older or developing physically—or, as is the case in this poem, to *make* something older or *make* something develop physically. Maturing refers to the sun, whose light and heat facilitates the growth of the swollen fruits of stanza 1. That is, the sun *matures* the fruits of autumn. The sun, however, can also be thought of as *itself* maturing. Each day, it is getting older, and as winter approaches its rays hit the earth at a lower angle, diffusing its heat and making for a cold few months.

Conspiring (Line 3) - "Conspiring" means to plan, plot, collaborate, or scheme. In the poem, autumn and the sun conspire—or collaborate—to make the land fruitful and mellow. Conspire can have a negative connotation, often referring to the secretive planning of an illegal act. In the poem, the collusion between the sun and autumn can be thought of as secretive (no one is privy to the planning process; it just happens), but not necessarily negative.

Thatch-eaves (Line 4) - "Thatch-eaves" refers to the edges of thatched roofs. Thatched roofs are roofs covered with straw or a similar material. Eaves refers to the overhanging edges.

Cottage-trees (Line 5) - "Cottage-trees" refer to the trees planted outside cottages, or small houses, in the countryside. Given the poem's autumnal setting, and its description of the fall harvest, it's reasonable to assume that these cottages are home to farmers.

Gourd (Line 7) - A "gourd" is a type of fruit with thick skin that's often multi-colored and bumpy. A gourd typically has a bulbous base that tapers into a narrow, probe-like tip. A gourd is kind of like a squash, though most types aren't edible. Today, they're used mostly decoratively—they're a fairly clichéd symbol of autumn—or they're hollowed out and dried for use as a container.

hazel shells (Line 7) - "Hazel shells" refers to hazelnuts. Hazelnuts are the fruit of the hazel tree, certain types of which are native to England. The mature hazel nut, which appears in the poem, has a hard, smooth, brown shell that must be cracked in order to access the flavorful, protein-rich fruit.

Kernel (Line 8) - "Kernel" means core, center, heart, or seed. In the poem, it refers to the hazel nut, the fruit inside the "plump hazel shells." More generally, it refers to an absolute center, beyond which there is nothing.

O'er-brimm'd (Line 11) - "O'er-brimm'd" is a contraction of over-brimmed, which means overflowing. Brim refers to the edge or limit of a container. In the poem, it refers to the cells of the beehives, which are so glutted with honey that the substance spills slowly from its keep. Every fruit in stanza 1 is "o'er-brimm'd" in a way—plump, swollen, and ripe to the core. The contraction of "over" into "o'er" reduces it from two syllables to one, and thus keeps the line true to the poem's iambic pentameter. The contraction of "brimmed" to "brimm'd," which does nothing for syllable count, is more of a flourish.

Clammy cells (Line 11) - "Clammy cells" refers to the hexagonal units of the beehive, which the bees use to store larvae, pollen, and honey. In the poem's case, "clammy" refers to the sticky moistness of the honey. Clammy also has a more grotesque connotation. It refers to a pale, cold, altogether unpleasant moistness. In the poem, therefore, clammy both anticipates the coming winter, and takes on a more pleasant meaning in the warm, lovely context of stanza 1.

Store (Line 12) - "Store" refers to the product of autumn's harvest—all the bundled hay, fruits, and vegetables. It refers to the products themselves, but also the physical place in which they're *stored*. In the context of the poem, store can also more generally refer to autumn's domain, or every place infused with the signs of autumn, such as a dusty barn, a mowed field, or a thatch-roofed cottage piping gentle woodsmoke from a stone chimney.

Abroad (Line 13) - "Abroad" means out and about, away from home, or in a foreign place. In the poem, it refers to being out in the open air and to freely wandering around from place to place. In the poem, "abroad" refers to a general "seeker," but also, implicitly, to personified autumn, who wanders among the granary, the fields, and the cidery.

Granary (Line 14) - A "granary" is a place where grain or other agricultural products are stored. It can also refer to a storage unit more generally, but in the poem the meaning seems to be literal—autumn sits "on a granary floor," among the fruits of the harvest.

Winnowing (Line 15) - "Winnowing" is the process by which the wheat, or fruit of a unit of grain, is separated from the chaff, the grain's papery husk. On agricultural fields, heavy machinery is used to winnow the grain. In the poem, the wind winnows, or separates, the hair of personified autumn.

Half-reap'd (Line 16) - "Half-reap'd" is a contraction of "half-reaped," which refers to a field that has been harvested incompletely. "Reap" refers to cutting and gathering a crop. A reaper is someone who uses a scythe (in the poem, "hook") to complete the action. In its more general application, reap means to take advantage of, as in the common phrase, "you reap what you sow."

Furrow (Line 16) - A "furrow" is a narrow, manmade ditch dug out for growing crops. The furrow is half-reaped, meaning that, so far, only half of its crop has been cut and bundled up. Furrow is often used to describe the deep lines in a person's wrinkled brow.

Fume (Line 17) - A "fume" is a thick, airborne discharge (often a vapor or gas from a plant, animal, or machine) with a strong scent. In the poem, fume refers to the chemicals responsible for the poppies' sleep-inducing aroma. A fume can be pleasant, as in this context, or deadly (arguably, the fume in this context is deadly too, as autumn eventually dies and is replaced by winter). Fume comes from the Latin word "fumare," which means "to smoke."

Hook (Line 17) - In the poem, "hook" refers to a scythe, the curved blade used for cutting crops from fields. The hook can be a somewhat violent image (it's literally used to end life), but in the poem its harshness is mellowed in the following line, where the speaker explains that it "Spares the next swath." Nevertheless, something that is "hooked" is trapped, much in the way that autumn cannot avoid its decay into winter.

Swath (Line 18) - A "swath" is a broad strip or area of something, usually of land. It can also refer, more specifically, to a crop row, and that's what it does in this poem.

Twined (Line 18) - "Twined" means twisted, knotted, or bound. In the poem, it refers to flowers that have not yet been cut from their crop row; the row is dense enough that the flowers have grown and twisted around each other. Twine also refers a string made by twisting together multiple strands, which is exactly the material that would be used to keep together a bouquet of flowers. The word's meaning in this line, therefore, is somewhat ambiguous, as it could refer to both cut and uncut flowers.

Gleaner (Line 19) - A "gleaner" is an agricultural laborer who gathers loose and fallen crops in the field after the reapers, who cut the crops, have completed their work. Gleaner comes from the verb "glean," which means to gather, collect, or obtain. In the poem, autumn is described more as a gleaner of images, keeping a close albeit lazy eye on the final moments of the season.

Laden head (Line 20) - "Laden" means loaded or weighted. A "laden head" is one with lots of hair—probably heavy and thick hair. In the poem, autumn's laden head appears much like the bent boughs of the apple trees: it is weighed down, compelled toward the earth.

Cyder-press (Line 21) - A "cyder-press," a.k.a. a cider press, a machine that uses pressure to pump juice and pulp from apples and similar fruits, which is then fermented into cider, a lightly effervescent brew. To extract all the juices, the machine employs long, slow pressure, making the process last "hours" (see line 22).

Oozings (Line 22) - "Oozings" refers to the slow and thick seepage of a fluid. In the poem, pulpy apple juice oozes out from under the weight of the heavy cider press. Something that is oozing has a slow, sluggish quality. Ooze comes from the Old English word for a slow, stagnant pool.

Ay (Line 23) - "Ay" is an affirmation. It is used to express assent or to emphasize a point. In the poem, it follows the question, "Where are the songs of spring?" It can be read as meaning something along the lines of "indeed" or "I repeat."

Barred (Line 25) - "Barred" means to be covered in bars, or striped. In the poem, it describes the clouds, which can be barred in two senses. They can bar, or stripe, the sky. Depending on the position of other clouds, the clouds themselves can also be barred with shadow and light. The word bar also recalls the word barrier, though the roots are different. The clouds are a sort of barrier or bar between the fertile (but dying) earth and the void of the sky.

Bloom (Line 25) - In the context of the poem, "bloom" has two meanings. First, it means to color with a warm glow; filtered through the clouds, the waning sunlight casts the mowed fields in soft pink. Second, bloom refers to the unfurling of a bud into a mature flower, and implies the next step, which is to wilt and die. This is exactly what the clouds do: they expand like flowers, then fade away.

Stubble-plains (Line 26) - In the poem, "stubble-plains" refers to the freshly mowed fields, or plains. "Stubble" refers to the short, stiff remainder of the harvested crop, typically a grain. Stubble also often refers to early growth of hair, as on a face that has recently been shaved.

Wailful (Line 27) - "Wailful" means sad and mournful—literally, full of wailing, or crying. Typically, wailing is a pretty unpleasant sound. In the poem, however, the potential shrillness is softened, and the speaker hears the wailing as a sadly sweet song.

Gnats (Line 27) - "Gnats" are a type of small fly that emerge in great number in moist places, like rivers, during the evening. Gnats hatch in the mud or stagnant water and form clouds, meaning that they're very noticeable despite their individual tininess. Gnats have short lifespans; some live and die in a day.

Sallows (Line 28) - A "sallow" is a willow, a leafy tree or shrub that has long, flexible, slender branches and grows in moist regions in the Northern Hemisphere. Willows are especially common along rivers, where they form a tangled barrier between the water and the shore.

Bleat (Line 30) - A "bleat" is the sound that a lamb, goat, or calf makes. The cry has a wavering quality to it, and thus emphasizes the weakness of the animal. As with "wailful," however, the speaker identifies a mournful sweetness in the sound.

Bourn (Line 30) - A "bourn" is a limit or boundary. Its original meaning is the boundary of a field, and that seems to be how it's used in the poem: the lambs cry from the boundary of their pen—a literal fence, perhaps—which is built along a hillside.

Treble (Line 31) - "Treble" is a musical term that means high note. In the poem, the red-breasted bird softly whistles high notes that approach the limit of what humans can physically hear.

Red-breast (Line 32) - "Red-breast" refers to a whistling bird with a red-feathered chest, probably a robin.

Garden-croft (Line 32) - A "croft" is a small enclosed farm or field. A "garden-croft" is basically the same, though "garden" emphasizes the field's purpose: to grow flowers, herbs, fruits, and vegetables for small-scale consumption.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"To Autumn" is an ode—a poem that praises a person, an event, or an aspect of nature, though the form is pretty flexible in terms of content. . Similarly, "To Autumn" can be described as both an elegy and perhaps even a pastoral poem (a pastoral poem describes goings-on in a rural or agricultural setting).

Odes are flexible in terms of form, and Keats takes advantage of that in "To Autumn." The poem consists of three 11-line stanzas (most of Keats's other odes from 1819 have 10-line stanzas). Each stanza starts with a quatrain (a group of four lines) with a normal alternating rhyme scheme (ABAB), and ends with seven lines with some relatively funky rhyming. Within these seven lines, Keats inserted rhyming couplets. So, each stanza can be thought of as having three units: the quatrain, the seven lines, and a rhyming couplet toward the end of the seven lines.

In one big way, "To Autumn" is very traditional. It follows the basic structure of the original ode, which first appeared in Greek drama. There, an ode would be broken into three sections: strophe, antistrophe, and epode. In Greek drama, a chorus, or group of singers/chanters who commented on and provided context for the action of the play, would sing these three parts. In the strophe, the members of the chorus sing stage-right to stage-left, and present a problem or argument. In the antistrophe, they sing left to right, and provide another perspective on that argument. In the epode, they chant together, commenting conclusively on the theme of the two preceding arguments.

"To Autumn" follows this general movement. In stanza 1 (the strophe), the poem presents a view of autumn's vivid abundance. In stanza 2 (the antistrophe), autumn is seen from the perspective of the harvest, a form of death. And in stanza 3 (the epode), the life of the first stanza and death of the second are combined in animals that are lively, but nevertheless awaiting winter and death.

METER

"To Autumn" follows iambic pentameter (meaning it has five iambic feet—which follow a da DUM rhythm—per line), though with considerable variation. With line 1, the poem immediately signals that it will not be strictly adhering to the unstressed-stressed iambic pattern. The first word, "Season," is actually a trochee (stressed-unstressed):

Sea son | of mists | and mel- | low fruit- | ful ness,

In other words, the poem starts with a long, stressed syllable. The reader is plunged immediately into autumn—literally, the "Season." This line, however, recovers its iambic trot in the rest of the line by keeping "of" unstressed, the result of which is that "of mists," and the feet that follow, are all iambs.

Plenty of lines in the poem are totally iambic, but they vary according to the strength of the meter. For example, line 4 follows a strong, steady iambic pentameter:

With fruit | the vines | that round | the thatch | -eves run;

With the exception of "eaves," all the unstressed words in this line are merely functional ("With" is a preposition, "the" is an article, and "that" is a pronoun). The iambic meter, therefore, emphasizes the line's key imagery of a fruit-loaded vine wrapping its way around a cozy farmhouse.

Line 3, on the other hand, follows a relatively weak iambic pentameter:

Con spi- | ring with | him how | to load | and bless

The weakness lies in the stressed syllables, most of which don't receive *that* much stress; you almost have to force it to hear the iambic pentameter ring out. For example, "with" and "how" can be read without too much emphasis. The last two stresses, "load" and "bless," however, *do* receive the full stress of the meter; they ring out emphatically when read aloud. This is appropriate, given that they do the most work in the line, describing exactly what it is the sun and autumn conspire to *do*.

Some lines start with a spondee, or two stressed syllables. Line 12 is a good example:

Who hath | not seen | thee oft | a mid | thy store?

These stresses emphasize the beginning of the question; they firmly mark the break from the meandering description of stanza 1 to the obviously direct address in stanza 2. That is, stanza 1 *does* address autumn, but does so in order to describe the fruits of the season. Stanza 2 clarifies the address: "Yes, autumn, I'm talking to you," it seems to be saying. As in line 1, which begins with a trochee, line 12 readjusts after the first foot and falls right back into iambic pentameter.

Lastly, there are a few lines that don't have 10 syllables. For example, lines 14, 15, and 33 (the final line) have 11. The 11-syllable lines owe their length to the inclusion of some three-syllable words: granary, winnowing, and gathering. The middle syllables in these words, however, can be contracted/glossed over, such that the words can be read as having only two syllables. Line 25 has the opposite problem: it only has 9 syllables. Given that it evokes the "soft-dying day," however, maybe it's appropriate that it's the shortest line in the poem.

RHYME SCHEME

"To Autumn" is made up of 3 stanzas with 11 lines apiece. Each of these stanzas follows the same rhyme scheme—almost. In each stanza, the third-to-last and second-to-last lines form a rhyming couplet. In stanza 1, this couplet rhymes with the C rhyme. But in stanzas 2 and 3, this couplet uses the D rhyme.

So stanza 1's rhyme scheme looks like this:

ABABCDEDCCE

And the scheme in the other two stanzas looks like this:

ABABCDECDDE

The poem can be broken up in a few different ways based on its rhyme scheme. It starts off with a quatrain (a group of four lines) that uses the A and B rhymes, and it ends with a seven-line unit that uses the C, D, and E rhymes. It might also be appropriate to add a third section into this mix by thinking of the rhyming couplet as intervening in the middle of the second section.

The slight variation in the rhyming couplet from stanza 1 to stanzas 2 and 3 mimics the seasonal process that the poem depicts. Autumn grows into one form in stanza 1, is

transformed into another by the harvest in stanza 2, and hardens into that form with the onset of freezing winter in stanza 3.

The poem also uses a fair amount of slant and internal rhyme—the actual rhymes are rule-breaking, much like the rhyme scheme (Keats's 11-line stanzas were an innovation, and he fashioned the penultimate rhyming couplet to fit inside them). For example, "bees" and "cease," which form the first rhyming couplet, are slant-rhymed, producing a slight friction (the /z/ sounds vs. the /s/ sound) that may anticipate the change in form that the reader sees in stanzas 2 and 3. In stanza 2, "find" and "wind" are also slant-rhymed, though this doesn't create friction so much as emphasize the drowsy laziness that the stanza describes.

Internal rhyme appears throughout as well, though subtly. In stanza 1, "mists" and "moss'd" form a very faint rhyme, as though the pervasive mists crept across the three intervening lines to brush the moss with a sheen of moisture. In stanza 2, "seeks," "half-reap'd," and "gleaner" share long /e/ sounds. Each word describes the activity of a person during autumn. The internal slant rhyme, which loosely unifies them, evokes a sense of the collective effort of the autumn harvest. And in stanza 3, "sallows" and "swallows" echo off each other as well, pointing to the affinity of plant and animal life—both of which must either die or change their habits in the winter.

SPEAKER

The poem's speaker is anonymous, genderless, and highly observant—though also removed from what is happening in the poem, in the sense that he or she (or it) never refers to him- or herself with a first-person pronoun. The speaker's role, then, is of steady observer, someone who regards the world with the same "patient look" with which personified autumn watches the cider press.

The speaker's powers of observation serve up colorful, sensuous imagery starting in stanza 1. He or she sees everything as part of a radiant system or network. Autumn and the sun collaborate "to load and bless / With fruit the vines" that twist around the pleasant little farmhouses, bend the apple boughs with overripe fruit, and swell, plump, and fill to the brim everything in sight.

The speaker also recognizes human beings as part of this network. In stanza 2, he or she personifies autumn as a dreamy farm worker lazing around the storehouses and in the fragrant dust of the half-harvested fields. In stanza 3, the network broadens further—it now contains animals ranging from the minuscule gnat to the whistling robin to the bleating lambs. The speaker chooses descriptors that locate these animals within the natural cycle of the seasons. The lambs, for example, have grown fat enough for slaughter, while the swallows are preparing to migrate for the winter.

Because the speaker has no identity, he or she is the one living aspect of the poem that isn't affected by the season and the landscape—at least not obviously. The speaker's choice of where to focus his or her attention and how to describe autumn does point to some fairly strong opinions. For example, the speaker seems pretty clearly to feel that there's beauty in death. The drowsy sleep of personified autumn, for example, is a kind of death, but it's lovely and peaceful. The song of the animals in stanza 3 is mournful, but sweet.

Overall, though, the speaker's anonymity allows the poem to stay focused on the beauty it describes.

SETTING

"To Autumn" takes place in the countryside during autumn. The precise location isn't specified, the poem contains some characteristic features of the *English* countryside: apple trees, hazelnuts, and willows along the riverbank, for example. More generally, this is clearly a region where agricultural work takes place: the "thatch-eves" run around the roofs of farmhouses, and the "cottage-trees" are planted outside them. Furthermore, stanza 2 is full of images from the harvest.

The imagery that evolves from stanza to stanza marks the passage of time. This poem takes place during the entire season of autumn, from its overripe beginnings at the end of summer to its cold decay at the onset of winter. The first stanza depicts this ripeness with the swollen gourds and "plump ... hazel shells." The second stanza fixates on the fall harvest with its mention of the "granary floor," the "half-reap'd furrow," and the "last oozings" of the cider press. In the final stanza, "the soft-dying day" and "gathering swallows," along with other images, mark the beginning of winter. So, though the poem stays rooted in one setting—a technique that Keats referred to as "stationing"—that setting travels through time in the imagination of the speaker.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"To Autumn" would be Keats's sixth and final ode, joining poems like "Ode on Indolence," "Ode on a Grecian Urn," and "Ode to Psyche" in a grouping that would become one of the most studied and highly regarded in the English language. "To Autumn" is thought to have been written on September 19, 1819. A few days later, on September 22, Keats wrote a letter to his friend John Hamilton Reynolds that alludes to the poem's composition. "How beautiful the season is now—How fine the air," Keats wrote. "I never liked stubble-fields so much as now ... Somehow, a stubble-field looks warm ... This struck me so much

in my Sunday's walk that I composed upon it."

Keats was a member of the loose-knit second generation of Romantic poets, whose work often sought inspiration from the natural world. Keats's generation more specifically built upon the poetic ideas of figures like William Wordsworth ("I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud") and Samuel Taylor Coleridge ("Kubla Khan"), who, in 1798, had jointly published *Lyrical Ballads*. This was a collection that sought, among other things, to return English poetry to a language rooted in the speech of those who lived and worked in the countryside.

Lord Byron ("The Destruction of Sennacherib," "She Walks in Beauty") and Percy Bysshe Shelley ("Love's Philosophy," Ozymandias," "Ode to the West Wind") were also part of the second generation of English Romantics, and both helped build some misconceptions about Keats's short life. After the 25-year-old Keats died of tuberculosis in 1821, Shelley elegized him in the long poem "Adonais." In the introduction to that poem, he blamed ruthless critics for Keats's rapid physical decline. In "Don Juan," Byron contributed to the myth, writing, "'Tis strange the mind, that very fiery particle, / Should let itself be snuffed out by an Article." Keats was a popular target of critics, and certainly suffered for it, but he always bounced back after a bad review. He died not from bitter words, but tuberculosis, the same disease that killed his mother and both brothers.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"To Autumn" was written in September 1819, four years and a few months after the Battle of Waterloo, which ended the Napoleonic Wars. Having fought in and financed much of the wars, Britain emerged from the conflict with one of the world's most powerful militaries. At the same time, its people, due to wartime taxes, trade restrictions, and rationing, suffered greatly in this period. Unemployment, poverty, and famine were widespread. Tough conditions forged a political radicalism among the lower classes that, on August 16, 1819, boiled over in an event known as the Peterloo Massacre.

That morning, a group of nearly 100,000 protesters gathered in Manchester in order to call for parliamentary reform. The rowdiness of the crowds convinced local magistrates that violence was afoot. The officials called upon regiments of the British cavalry, who swept through the crowd with drawn sabers. Eighteen died and hundreds were injured in the attack and ensuing chaos.

Evidence for it is limited, but some scholars argue that "To Autumn" was written in direct response to the massacre, suggesting that "Conspiring" refers to the possibly premeditated charge of the cavalry, "load" to the loading of weapons, and the "patient look" of line 21 to a kind of state surveillance.

By this point, Keats had experienced quite a bit of upheaval himself. His brother Tom had died of tuberculosis in December 1818, and Keats, who had acted as Tom's nurse, was probably infected in that period. By the time he wrote "To Autumn," he was already physically declining. In 1820 doctors ordered him to move to a warmer climate, and, as a consequence, away from his lover Fanny Brawne, to whom he dedicated his sonnet, "Bright star, would I were stedfast as thou art."

Critics have noted that "To Autumn" is the last major work that Keats produced. The next year was one of fast decay. Keats arrived in Rome in November 1820 with his friend the painter Joseph Severn. He died the next February.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Actor Ben Whishaw Reads "To Autumn" — Ben Whishaw, who played John Keats in the 2009 biopic "Bright Star," reads the poem. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fwn6Xaz_uLM&t=10s)
- The Original "To Autumn" Manuscript — Photos of the poem's original manuscript, which is archived in the British Museum. (https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/manuscript-of-to-autumn-by-john-keats)
- Negative Capability — In this 1817 letter to his brothers George and Thomas, Keats introduces, somewhat offhandedly, his now famous concept of "negative capability." (http://mason.gmu.edu/~rnanian/Keats-NegativeCapability.html)
- A Letter From Keats — Keats's letter to his friend John Hamilton Reynolds a few days after he wrote "To Autumn," in which Keats says the warm appearance of the fields in Winchester inspired him to do some writing. (http://keats-poems.com/to-john-hamilton-reynolds-winchester-september-22-1819/)
- John Keats Biography — A detailed biography focusing on the important stages of Keats's career and the development of his poet ideas. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/john-keats)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER JOHN KEATS POEMS

- Bright star, would I were stedfast as thou art
- La Belle Dame sans Merci
- Ode on a Grecian Urn
- Ode on Melancholy
- Ode to a Nightingale
- On First Looking into Chapman's Homer
- When I have Fears That I May Cease to Be

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Callan, Will. "*To Autumn.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 8 May 2019. Web. 22 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Callan, Will. "*To Autumn.*" LitCharts LLC, May 8, 2019. Retrieved April 22, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/john-keats/to-autumn.