

BA Part II
Paper IV, Romantic Period
Unit 4 - (c)
&
BA, Eng Hons (CBCS) Second Semester
Paper Code – 202- ENGH-C4 (British Romantic Literature)

John Keats : ‘To Autumn’

About the poet

John Keats (1795 – 1821) was born at the stables of the Swan and Hoop, Finsbury Pavement, London, October 29 or 31. He had his schooling in Enfield of the Rev. John Clarke, father of Charles Cowden Clarke. After the death of his parents in 1804 (the death of his father in 1804, followed by that of his mother in 1810, he was apprenticed to Thomas Hammond, a surgeon of Edmonton.

Keat’s poetic career virtually started in 1815, when he wrote the sonnet ‘On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer’. In 1816 came out his two other poems ‘I stood tip-toe’ and ‘Sleep and Poetry’. Not so successful in his medical profession, Keats’s poetic genius confirmed to bloom with greater glory with the publication of “Endymion” in 1818. In the same year he also wrote sonnets ‘When I have fears’, ‘The Human Seasons’, and ‘To Homer’; lyrics ‘In’ a drear-nighted December’, ‘Fancy’, ‘Bards of Passion’. During this time he also began writing “Hyperion”.

But it was The Year 1819 which was The most productive period in his poetic career not so much for the quantity but for the quality of his poems like ‘The Eve of St. Agnes’, ‘Lamia’, The Odes-‘To A Nightingale’, ‘On a Grecian Urn’, ‘To Psyche’, ‘To Autumn’, ‘On Melancholy’, ‘On Indolence’, ‘La Belle Dame Sans Merci’, ‘Eve of St. Mark’; sonnets ‘I cry your mercy’ and ‘Bright Star’.

In 1820 there was the commencement of fatal illness and in 1821 he died at Rome, February 23.

The Poem – To Autumn

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-eaves 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 oozy 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 shallows, borne aloft

Or sinking as the light wind lives or dies;
And full-grown lambs loud bleat from hilly bourn;
Hedge-cricket sing; and now with treble soft
The red-breast whistles from a garden-croft;
And gathering swallows twitter in the skies.

About the Poem 'To Autumn'.

'To Autumn' is generally considered as the last of the five great Odes written by Keats. It was possibly composed on Sunday 19 September 1819. The immediate occasion of the poem was stated in Keats's letter to J.H. Reynolds, 22 September, 1819: "How beautiful the Season is now - How fine the air - a temperate sharpness" about it. Really, without joking, chaste weather - Dian Skies - I never liked Stubble - field so much as now - Aye better than the chilly green of the spring. Somehow, a stubble - field looks warm in the same way that some pictures look warm. This struck me so much in my Sunday's walk that I composed upon it."

For multiple reasons 'To Autumn' has earned the appreciation of twentieth - century critics. Walter Jackson Bate "has found it one of the most nearly perfect poems in English". For M.R.Ridley it is "the most serenely flawless poem in our (English) language", whilst for Stuart Sperry "the perfection of the ode" lies in its status as "Keats's last and most mature comment on the poetic process". According to Paul Wright, "Like 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', 'To Autumn' suggests that art, and great poetry, can create a near transcendent stasis".

'To Autumn' provides a unique and an interesting poetic experience both structurally and thematically. The entire poem celebrates the rich sensuousness, of nature associated with autumn. In the opening stanza the living human relationship is established among The objects of nature as "The maturing Sun", being the "close bosom - friend" of autumn, conspires with him how to "load" and "bless" the autumnal fruits with ripeness. In the first stanza Keats presents a panoramic view of mellow fruitfulness and ripeness of the autumnal season. The stanza is

enriched with visual (“the moss’d cottage trees), tactful (“plump the hazel shells/ With a sweet Kernel”) and gustatory images.

In the second stanza the poet visualizes the spirit of autumn in four human figures – the harvester (lines 12 -15), the reaper (lines 16 – 18), a gleaner (lines 19 -20) and a man making cyder (lines 21 – 22). The stanza illustrates Keats’s myth – making power and his ability to foreground the atmosphere of opulence, larger or and super abundance in terms. The essential spirit of autumn is thus humanised and the poet evokes a series of visual images transforming the stanza into a veritable picture gallery. In this connection particularly noteworthy are the last lines of the stanza where the lengthening of vowel sounds signifies the long duration of time during which the man making cyder watches the slow movement of juice.

The concluding stanza begins with an interrogation. It suggests the initial doubt and dilemma in the poet’s mind. For a while he remembers “the songs of Spring” simply to reach the conclusion that autumn has his own storehouse of music as appealing as those of spring. The stanza provides a rich tapestry of visual and auditory images. It describes “barred clouds”, “the stubble – plains” touched with “rosy hue”. It explores the music of autumn as it refers to “wailful choir” of “the small gnats”, the loud bleating of “full grown lambs”, the whistling of the red – breast and the twittering of swallows gathering “in the skies”.

Notes and Glossary:

First Stanza

1. Mellow: (Adj) relaxes or pleasant
2. Conspiring from the verb ‘conspire’ which means ‘consult secretly and confidently. Therefore ‘conspiring’ means consulting secretly and confidently.
3. Thatch – eves (N): frontal parts of the thatched roof of a cottage. The vines enveloping and overrunning the frontal parts of the roof in a fine visual imagery.

4. “And fill all fruit with ripeness to the core”: The fruits are getting ripened to the fullest extent under the beneficial and grateful warmth of the autumn seen.
5. Hazel: A small tree that produces nuts that can be eaten. The poet here actually means the hazel nut which has a hard brown shell.
6. Clammy cells: Sticky and slightly wet.
7. “For summer has o’er – brimmed their clammy cells”. In this famous line there is the suggestion that autumn to some extent is the continuation of summer. The green beauty of summer time culminates into a state of ripeness, maturity and plenty.

Second Stanza

1. Granary: a large building for storing wheat, paddy and other similar crops.
2. Winnowing wind: the wind blowing the chaff from grain before it can be used as food. We should note the use of alliteration in the phrase which makes it auditory in appeal.
3. Furrow: a long line or hollow which is formed or cut into the surface of something.
4. Fume: smell.
5. Next Swath: next line of corn.
6. Twined flowers: flowers which are entangled with one another.
7. Gleaner: the person who collects corn from the cornfield. The verb form is ‘Glean’ (verb transition).
8. Brook: a small stream.
9. Cyder: The alternative spelling of cider, juice from crushed apples used as a drink or to make vinegar.
10. Oozings: the movements of juice in a cider press.

Third Stanza

1. Barred clouds bloom etc.: “The clouds suggest both death and the ‘bloom’ of life. ‘Barred here means of varying colour”. (Paul Bright)
2. The soft dying day: the day that passes away gently. We should note the note of sadness that clings to the phrase.
3. Stubble – Plains: The cornfields looking empty and barren after the crop being reaped.
4. Hue: colour.
5. Wailful Choir: The poet possibly refers to the tedious and drawling hum of the gnats.
6. Treble: a musical term, meaning highest notes.
7. Garden- croft: enclosed part of the garden.

Essay Type Questions: (For BA Part II, English Honours Students)

1. Discuss Keats as a Romantic poet with reference to the poem ‘To Autumn’.
2. Write a critical note on Keats’s sensuousness.
3. Critically assess Keats as a poet of nature.
4. Comment on Keats’s myth – making power.

Short Questions: (Both for Part II and for BA 2nd semester Eng Hons)

1. Select the visual and factual images in the poem ‘To Autumn’.
2. ‘Thou hast thy music too’ – Who is addressed as ‘thou’? Mention some of the ‘music’.
3. How does the poet describe (a) a harvester, (b) a reaper, (c) a gleaner and (d) a man making cyder.
4. Why is the autumn described as the “close Bosom friend of the maturing sun”? Why is the sun referred to as “maturing”?
5. Give the meanings of the following :

- “...how to load and bless/ With fruit the trees that round the thatch – eaves run”.
- “thy hair soft – lifted by the winnowing wind”.
- “Or on a half – reaped furrow sound asleep, / Drowsed with the fume of poppies...”
- “Or by a cyder – press, with a patient look, / Thou Walnut the last oozing hours by hours”.
- “And full – grown lambs loud bleat from the hilly bourn”.

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