

## Keats's "to Autumn": a Praise of a Conspiratorial Season

### ---- A Harmonious Whole with Tensions and Conflicts

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**Abstract:** Keats's "To Autumn" has been regarded as the most accomplished one among his six odes. New Critics believe that tensions are necessarily a part of everyone's life and superior poetry presents these human experiences while at the same time showing how these tensions are resolved within the poem to achieve its organic unity. "To Autumn" possesses these qualities of superior poetry that New Critics maintain. This article attempts to interpret this poem in a formalistic approach by resorting to "careful scrutiny" of New Criticism, based on its principle concepts such as "tension", "paradox" and "irony".

### 1. Introduction

John Keats was an English Romantic poet and one of the key figures in the second generation of the Romantic Movement. In 1819, Keats composed six odes in a short period of time. As a whole, the odes represent Keats's attempt to create a new type of lyrical poem. Keats wrote "To Autumn" during a trip to Winchester in autumn 1819. He had sought seclusion in order to reorganize his Hyperion poem and to research the background to Lamia. After an evening walk across fields of reaped corn, he recorded his great joy in a letter to his friend John Reynolds.

How beautiful the season is now-how fine the air. A temperate sharpness about it. Really, without joking, chaste weather-Dian skies-I never like'd stubble fields so much as now--- Aye better than the chilly green of spring. Somehow a stubble-plain looks warm-in the same way that some pictures look warm--- This struck me so much in my Sunday's walk that I composed it [1].

"To Autumn" has been regarded as the poem in which Keats fulfills his exploration of the ode form. "It represents the very incarnation of the 1819 odes sequence by condensing into its unified and dramatic vision the full value and significance of truth and beauty as matter of empirical fact." [2] Most critics have seen it as the most accomplished one among the six odes and offered various appreciation and understanding from different perspectives. Some interpreters view that the subject of the Autumn Ode is mutability. Some notice that the role of man in the natural setting. And a few studies show the interdependence of man and nature. This article attempts to interpret this poem in a formalistic approach by resorting to "careful scrutiny" of New Criticism, based on its principle concepts such as "tension", "paradox" and "irony".

### 2. A Harmonious Whole with Conflicts and Tensions

#### 2.1 A Brief Review of New Criticism

Placing little emphasis on the author, the social context, or a text's historical situation as a source for discovering a poem's meaning, New Criticism asserts that the poem itself is an artifact or an objective entity and its meaning must reside within its own structure. They also believe that by closely analyzing this structure, we can discover the meaning of all poems. "Borrowing their ideas from the writings of Samuel T Coleridge, the new critics posit the organic unity of a poem—that is, the concept that all parts of a poem are interrelated and interconnected, with each part reflecting and helping to support the poem's central idea. "Such organic unity allows for harmonization of conflicting ideas, feelings, and attitudes, and results in the poem's oneness. Superior poetry declares the New Critics, achieves such oneness through paradox, irony and ambiguity." [3] Therefore, New

Critics believe in the thematic and structural unity of a poem and maintain that all good and successful poems must have organic unity. They search for meaning within the text's structure by finding the tensions and conflicts which will be resolved into a harmonious whole.

New Criticism provided readers with a distinct methodology, which is often called "careful scrutiny", to help uncover the meaning of the poem. According to New Critical principle, a good critic examines a poem's structure and meaning by scrutinizing its poetic elements, rooting out and showing its inner tensions and demonstrating how the poem supports its overall meaning by reconciling these tensions into a unified whole.

Keats's "To Autumn" contains all these characteristics of superior poetry maintained by New Critics. Because it embodies tensions, conflicting and balanced force within itself, the poem become more fascinating and full of vigor and vitality beyond time and space. "Unlike the other major odes, the meaning of 'To Autumn' begins in its detailed word pictures and sound, rather than from a prior interpretation. John Watson has justly pointed out that the poem makes its point so well that there is no need for Keats to introduce an explicit moral." Similarly, according to New Critical principles, "To Autumn" itself is an artifact and its meaning resides within its own structure, therefore, we can discover its meaning from the text by using New Criticism's methodology.

## 2.2 Paradox and Irony

The term "tension" is used to describe the opposition or conflicts operating within the text. New Critics agree that the poems meaning is derived from the oscillating tensions and conflicts that are brought to the surface through the poetic diction. Because conflicts or tensions control the poem's structure, the meaning of the poem can be discovered only by analyzing contextually the poetic elements and diction. Because context governs meaning, meanings of individual words or phrases are therefore context related and unique to the poem in which they occur.

"To Autumn" is a poem of partings of the day, of the season. Yet none of this makes it in any gloomy. The whole poem shows a development from maturing fruitfulness to harvesting, and then towards the close of this season over its three stanzas. The three stanzas present a process through three different time zones of autumn. "Each stanza furnishes a moving picture of time, each image poised at a crucial turning point in the season. Likewise, each embodies a tension between the process of time's movement and the impulse to retard it, to savor the moment." The whole poem centers on the major tension of the cycle of life.

Stanza one presents autumn as a season of fruitfulness and mellowness. The abundant imagery of plenty, roundness and fullness is almost palpable: fruitfulness, bosom, round, full, ripeness to the core. However, beneath a scene of warmth, sweetness and fruitfulness are deception and conspiracy. Autumn uses her "mists" in an attempt to hide her actions that may and will threaten other parts of nature. Another characteristic of autumn mentioned in this stanza is her "mellowness", suggesting her ability to pleasantly intoxicate her environs. Autumn is thus lulling nature, etherizing it before she prepares to do her work. And the guise of benevolence, autumn "bends" the mossed cottage-tree with unbearable weight, "swells" the gourds as if bruised by a violent strike, and "plumps" the hazel shells as though fattening them for slaughter. Even the "bees" are lured by "later flowers" from their wintry slumber in "clammy cells" where they had been safe for the season from cold. As a whole, autumn both has good effects and destructions on nature as the phrase "to load and bless" indicates. Therefore, Autumn poise at a tension and a integral unity.

The second stanza introduces us to autumn as a time of harvesting. The words, such as "the store", "a granary floor", "the winnowing gleaner" present a scene of busy working and harvesting joy. However, autumn performs her work carelessly and patiently. "Autumn sitting careless on a granary floor while thy hair soft-lifted by winnowing wind." As an image of peace, Autumn is approaching death. Disguised by her patience and carelessness, she carefully makes the death of summer and herself, she is able to find peace in the seasons' demise because she knows that death is just one part of the cycle of life. Knowledge of this fact enables her relax and do her work peacefully. However, Autumn will not wait for her death. As in the first stanza, Autumn also tries to retard the process of time and delay her unavoidable doom. Autumn now "on a half-reape'd furrow

sound sleep. / Drows'd with the fume of poppies." This image shows an attempt by nature and Autumn to escape their coming doom. Emitting perfume, the poppies lull Autumn to sleep in order to delay their unavoidable destruction. But their destruction is unavoidable. The harvest will be gathered, the storehouse will be filled, and the cycle of the season will not be delayed or avoided. The "last ooziings" are squeezed from the apples, which suggest the harvest is coming to an end, which betokens the end of autumn. As a whole, this stanza contains the conflicts and fights between Autumn and nature, the tensions between the bustling harvest activities and Autumn's uncaring and unfeeling work, between the movement of time and the intension to delay it.

The first line of the third stanza: "where are the songs of spring? Where are they?" Like Shelley's lines, these questions of Keats also forecast the coming of spring. Moreover, like spring, Autumn has her own beauty and joy and sings her own songs: "Think not of them, thou has thy music too." We can feel little tone of lament. At this point, Autumn's task of destruction does not change, however, it is presented as part of nature's continuous cycle of change and renewal. For example, in line 25 through 33, several images of death are now connected with images of life, birth, and rebirth. In line 25, the phrase "barred clouds bloom the soft-dying day", contains a combination of both positive and negative meaning. "Barred clouds" often produces destructive and terrible storm while "bloom the soft-dying day" connotes a good and positive aspects of death. The day must die as much as must the season, but the day's death is "soft" and "gentle". In line 26, the "stubble plains" are now given a "rose-hue". These once fruitful but now empty fields are rosy, exhibiting their own beauty. The harvested and somewhat barren plains are no longer an image of death but connote hope and life. In the next three lines of the ode, "Then in a wailful choir the small gnats mourn/ Among the river shallows, borne aloft, or sinking as the light wind lives or dies." [4] Death is mixed with hope and life. Lament is combined with joy. The "gnat" choir mourning their and all nature's impending doom, but this choir floats in "the light wind". It seems that all is not lost, that something is and will be gained from apparent loss that even in dying there is cause for rejoicing. Seemingly, all of nature is celebrating the end of the season, and the end of autumn. Such music contains both note of mourning and joy. Like the season itself, many creatures will die. The grass will wither, no fruit will grow on the trees, and the fields will be barren. But with Autumn's passing comes winter, and when winter passes, spring will come again. As Autumn prepares all for death, winter allows nature its much needed rest. But for death, from resting, issues life again.

Like the term tension, paradox and irony are also the very important terms of New Critics. "Cleanth Brooks claims that the chief elements in a poem are paradox and irony, two closely related terms that imply that a word or phrase is qualified or even undercut by its context." Therefore, we can discover a poem's interpretation by analyzing contextually these two elements.

Paradox is the statement that seems to be absurd or contradictory but is or may be true. "To Autumn" is an ode. The term "ode", means " a single, unified strain of exalted lyrical verses, directed to a single purpose, and dealing with one theme. The term connotes certain qualities of both manner and form. The ode is elaborate, dignified, and imaginative." Therefore, the verses seem to praise a good-intentioned season bestowed with the ability "to bless". However, in fact it is a paradoxical commentary on the sometimes harsh and conspiracy qualities of the season. In addition, the word, "autumn" has its origin in the Middle English word "autumpne", which means any period of maturing or the beginning of a decline. Therefore, "autumn" indicates a paradoxical situation which contains two opposing forces. As a whole, "autumn" and "ode" embodies the major paradox around which the poem derives its meaning and effects.

In the first stanza, the phrase "to load and bless" is another example of paradox. The word "load", with the meaning of being weighted or tempered with, has somewhat negative connotation of being overfilled, which indicates a trick or trap. Meanwhile, the word "bless" implies the beneficial effects of the season. However, such blessing serves as a mask to lull nature into accepting its prescribed destiny. Autumn, whose job is "to load and bless" has indeed deceived all of nature into accepting it approaching death.

In the second stanza, Autumn is personified. She is firstly described as "sitting careless on a granary floor / Thy hair soft-lifted by the winnowing wind." Autumn seems to enjoy herself

leisurely and have no work to do. But in the following lines, Autumn “steady thy laden head across a brook.” Paradoxically, she is loaded with something and has to worry about her task. This paradox introduces us a very vivid image of Autumn and makes her task more mysterious and fascinating.

By employing paradoxes, the third stanza produces more fresh images and enriches the meaning of the poem. For example, “the soft-dying day” connected the dreadful image of death with the image of softness and gentleness. With our accustomed thinking, we often consider the end of a day as a dying day, which is approaching death. But, after a second thought, the end of a day also has its own beauty of warmth and peacefulness. Thus, this usage of the paradox completely challenges the conventional image of dusk. It gives us some impressive and fresh images. They enable the poem full of wits and keep readers more space to imagine. Meanwhile, they make the language of the poem more vivid and meaningful.

Irony is expression of one’s meaning by saying the direct opposite of one’s thoughts in order to be emphasis, amusing or sarcastic. In the whole context of “To Autumn”, the meaning of some words and lines are completely changed and are endowed ironic meaning. In the second stanza, Autumn is depicted as a vivid and lively person. She is endowed with human feeling and thinking. “Thee sitting careless on a granary floor / thy hair soft-lifted by the winnowing wind.” The literary meaning of these two lines is that Autumn sits there leisurely to relax herself. It seems that she has no work to do and care nothing around her. However, when analyzing in the whole context, we know that Autumn is not that uncaring and leisurely. Actually, she has very important task to accomplish and is loaded with pressure. As the following line describes, (Autumn) “steady thy laden head across a brook”. [5] Therefore, under the guise of her careless and peaceful image, Autumn brings about great change to the nature and herself.

### **3. Conclusion**

New Critics believes that tensions are necessarily a part of everyone’s life and superior poetry present these human experience while at the same time showing how these tensions are resolved within the poem to achieve its organic unity. “To Autumn” possesses these qualities of superior poetry that New Critics maintains. The whole poem is full of tensions and conflicts. It focuses on the central paradox, which is the continuous cycle of life from birth to death and then rebirth. “To Autumn” vividly presents autumn’s special beauty and nature’s law, reflects conflicting ideas and feeling and finally achieve its organic unity. According to New Critical principle, “To Autumn” is a superior and successful poem.

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