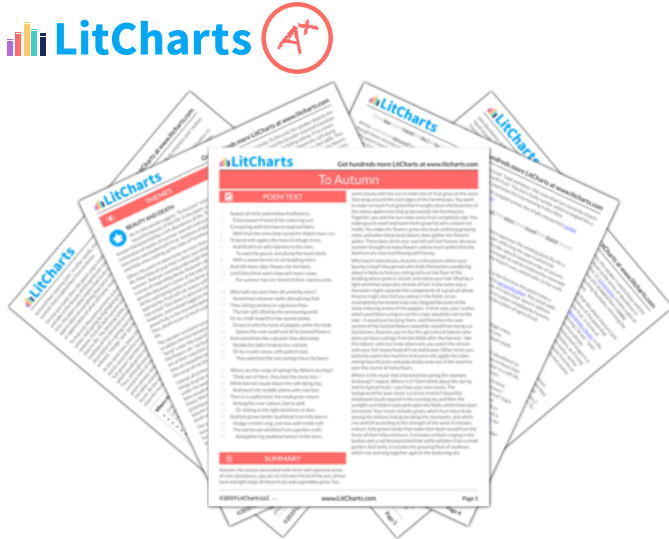


beauty of the moment. "To Autumn" is the last major work that Keats completed before his death in Rome, in 1821, where the 25-year-old succumbed to tuberculosis.

- You can read the full text of "To Autumn" here.



Get the entire guide to "To Autumn" as a printable PDF. [Download it!](#)

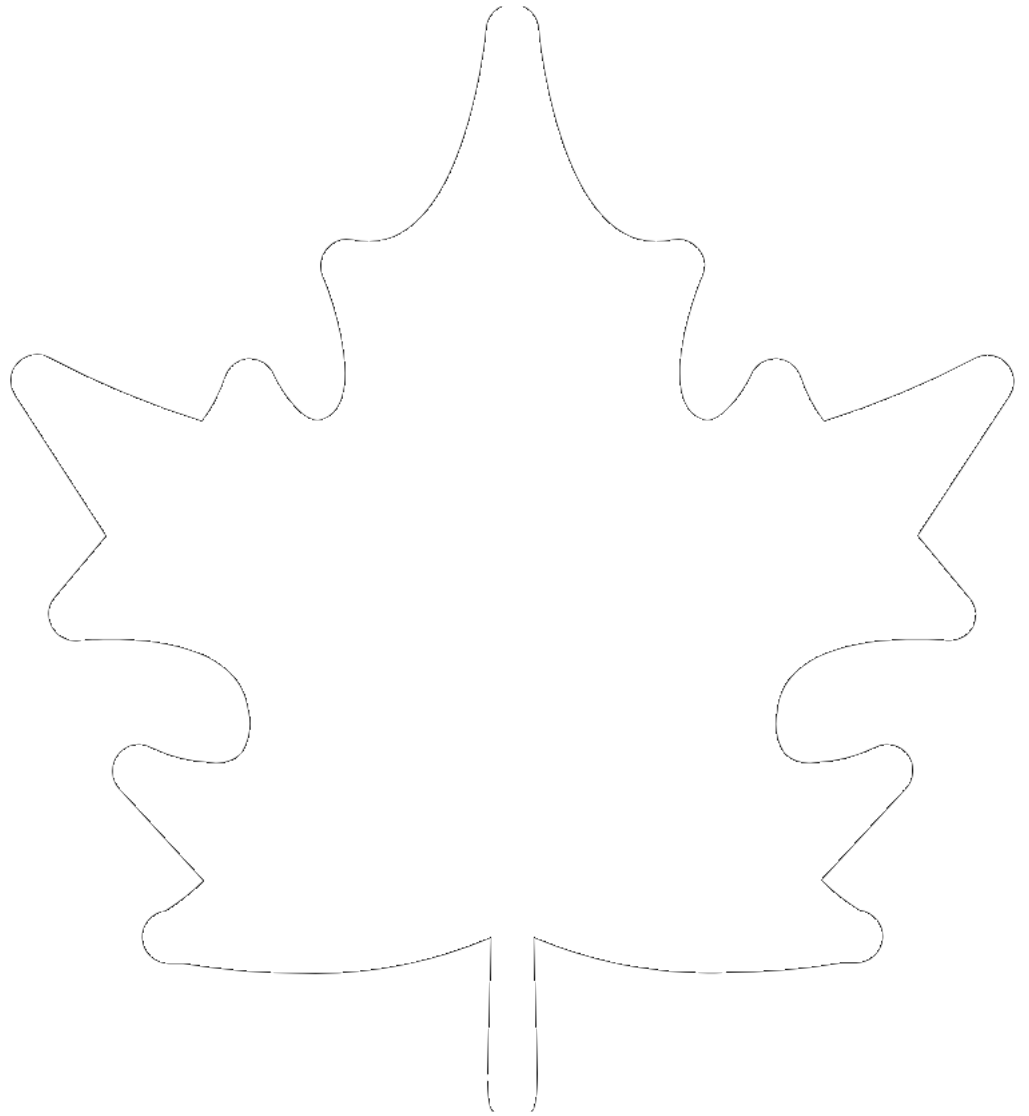
## • "To Autumn" Summary

- 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.

## • "To Autumn" 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.

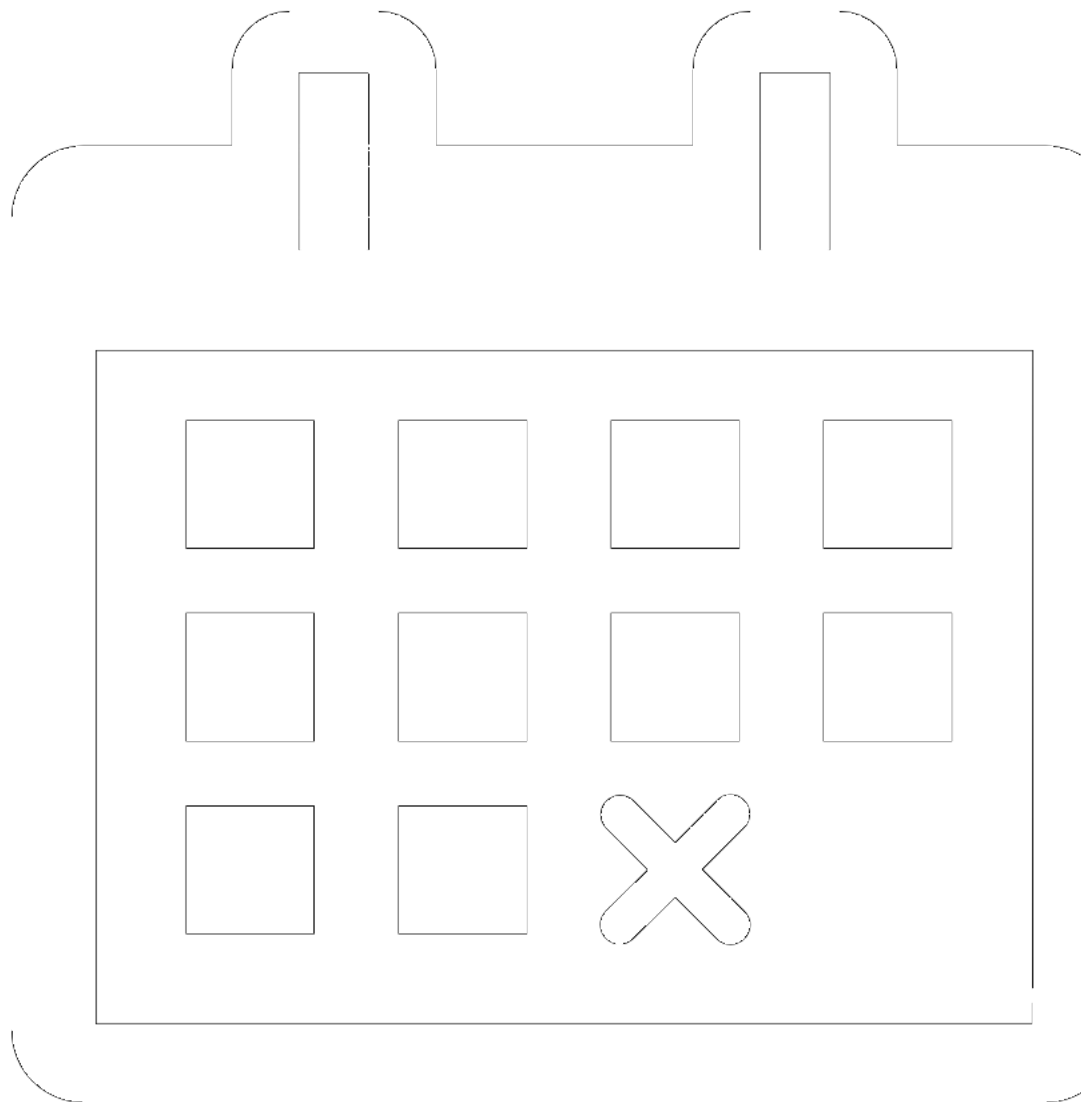
The second stanza takes up this idea by focusing on the harvest, describing the "winnowing wind," the "half-reap'd furrow," and the harvester's "hook." Each of these images depicts the separation and cutting associated with farming, especially the "hook," or scythe; each also clearly evokes death.

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 "Spare[s] 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.

- See where this theme is active in the poem.



### 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 shallows” (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.

- See where this theme is active in the poem.

## • Line-by-Line Explanation & Analysis of “To Autumn”

### ◦ 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:

Season | of mists | and mel- | low fruit- | fulness

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:

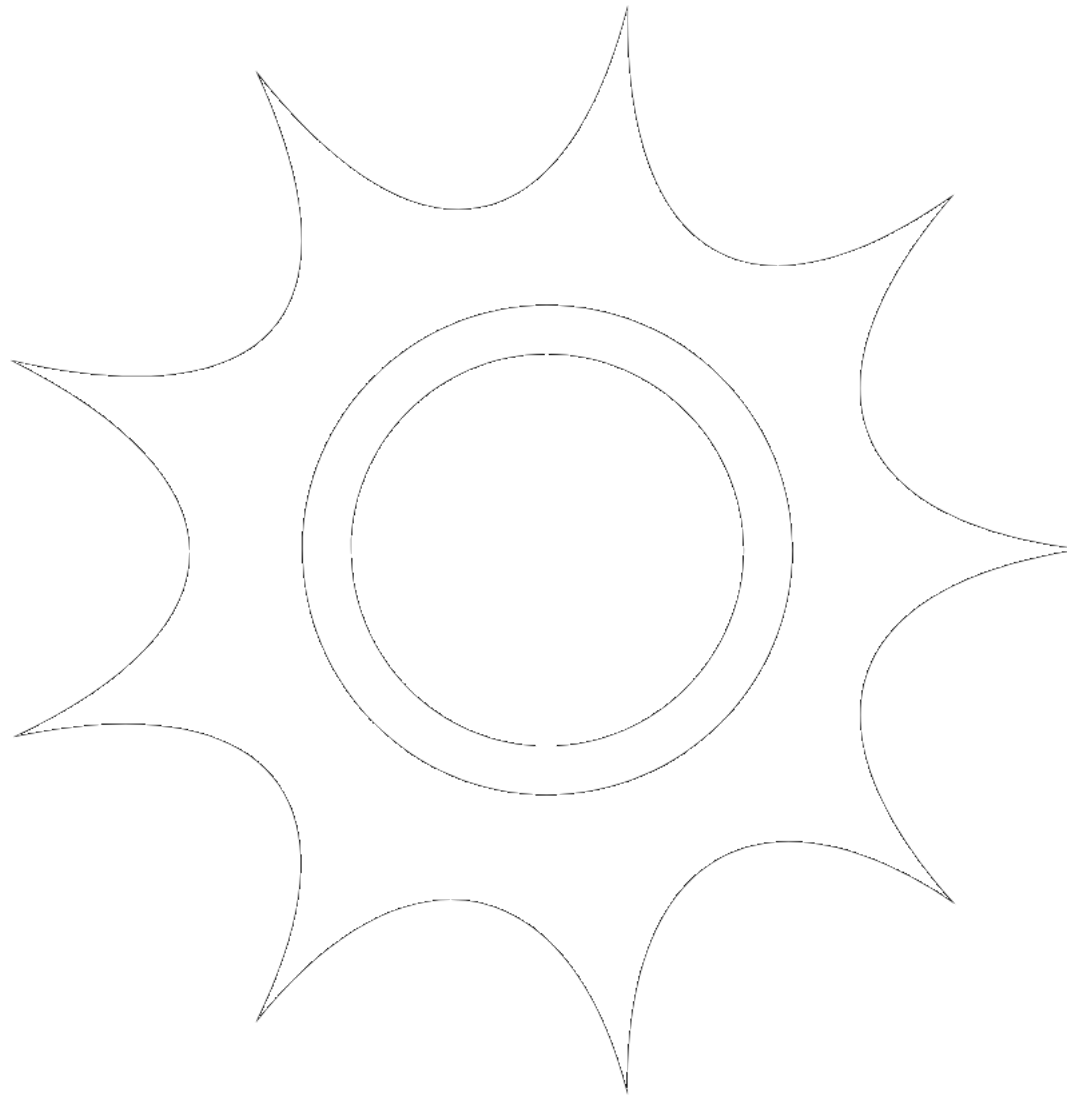
Close bos- | om-friend | of the | matu- | ring sun

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;



## **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.

- See where this symbol appears in the poem.

## • "To Autumn" Poetic Devices & Figurative Language

### ◦ 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.

- See where this poetic device appears in the poem.

### ◦ Alliteration

- Hook
- Swath
- Twined
- Gleaner
- Laden head
- Cyder-press
- Oozings
- Ay
- Barred
- Bloom
- Stubble-plains
- Wailful
- Gnats
- Sallows
- Bleat
- Bourn
- Treble
- Red-breast
- Garden-croft

Mellow ▾

- "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.
  - See where this vocabulary word appears in the poem.

## • Form, Meter, & Rhyme Scheme of "To Autumn"

### ◦ 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):

Season | of mists | and mel- | low fruit- | fulness,

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:

Conspi- | 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 | amid | 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:

ABABCDEDCE

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

ABABCDEDDE

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.

## • "To Autumn" 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.

## • "To Autumn" 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.

## • Literary and Historical Context of “To Autumn”

### 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 eulogized 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 steadfast 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 “To Autumn” Resources

### ◦ External Resources

- [Actor Ben Whishaw Reads “To Autumn”](#)— Ben Whishaw, who played John Keats in the 2009 biopic “Bright Star,” reads the poem.
- [The Original “To Autumn” Manuscript](#)— Photos of the poem’s original manuscript, which is archived in the British Museum.
- [Negative Capability](#)— In this 1817 letter to his brothers George and Thomas, Keats introduces, somewhat offhandedly, his now famous concept of “negative capability.”
- [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.
- [John Keats Biography](#)— A detailed biography focusing on the important stages of Keats’s career and the development of his poet ideas.

### ◦ LitCharts on Other Poems by John Keats

- [Bright star, would I were steadfast as thou art](#)
- [La Belle Dame sans Merci](#)