



IN-DEPTH  
STUDY  
GUIDE



## THEMES IN JOHN KEATS' "TO AUTUMN"

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### **Embracing the Present Moment**

Autumn is inescapably a season of transformation and constant change; therefore, the only way to truly appreciate it is to be mindful and alive in each individual moment. Each line of the poem is written in present tense and deeply rooted in the here and now. The first stanza introduces us to the imagery of growth and change held in beautiful, temporary stasis: “the vines that round the thatch-eves run” (Line 4); “the moss'd cottage-trees” (Line 5) hung with apples; “plump ... hazel shells” (Line 7); and, most vividly, the image of the bees working in their hive who “think warm days will never cease” (Line 10). The bees are basking in the abundance that summer is leaving behind as it makes way for Autumn. The natural world has reached its zenith and is pausing to enjoy the fruits, literal and metaphorical, of its labours.

The second stanza continues this period of repose and mindfulness as Autumn rests in the granary after the harvest, watching the cider being made “hours by hours” (Line 22). Here the reader feels an implied sense of gratitude for the time that it takes, and the ability to sit and watch. Then, Autumn expresses a slight deviation from the moment — what about spring? What about the music that it played half a year ago? But, as the poem reminds us, the music of autumn is just as beautiful and, most importantly, is right in front of us. The poem talks about the sounds that Autumn makes through the filter of “barred clouds bloom[ing] the soft-dying day” (Line 25) and the fields touched “with rosy hue” (Line 26). Interestingly, these are both moments that are by nature fleeting; the clouds will shift, the sky will darken, the sunset will fade, all within instants. Thus, it encourages us to listen to the music of the world around us and through it live in the present, because very soon it will be gone.

### **Labour and Rest**

Late summer through autumn is a season of beauty and bounty, but also of hard labour. During the summer, much of the work is done by nature; this is expressed in the opening to the poem, where Autumn and the sun work together to “fill all fruit with ripeness to the core” (Line 6). We see them filling the vines, the trees, the flower fields so that the animals (and, though they're not directly mentioned, the humans living on that landscape too) can thrive and grow. Though the work is rewarding, it isn't always easy. Once this work of nature is done, it is time for people to play their part in the agricultural cycle: working the fields, harvesting the wheat, and making apple cider. The bees, too, have been hard at work:

their “o'er-brimm'd ... clammy cells” (Line 11) are filled to overflowing with summer honey that they have made from the nectar of the flowers.

Once this period of labour is done, as early autumn begins to shift in its cycle of the year, everyone gets to take a well-deserved break. The bees luxuriate in their hives, so full of honey that they couldn't take any more, the fields have been sheared to stubble, and Autumn escapes to the granary to rest, to drowse “with the fume of poppies” (Line 17), to patiently sit and watch the apple cider dripping through the press. This takes us back to the theme of living in the present; this doesn't imply that the work done with a mind to the future is without value, but that when we have completed our labours we may reward ourselves with a few moments of relaxation and mindfulness.

### **The Beauty of Mortality**

As a season of abundance and colour, Autumn often feels more alive than any other time of the year. It is sometimes hard to remember that all of this abundance and colour comes as a result of life cycles coming towards their end in slow, controlled decay. Autumn is not a season of dead things — that distinction lies with winter — but a season of dying, of things slipping gently out of life and into death.

The late summer and autumn ripens the apples, the hazelnuts, and the flowers until they become perfect specimens of their kind. However, this state of perfection is most often just at the brink of decay, the tipping point just before the apples start to rot from the inside, the hazelnuts split, and the flowers begin to wither and bruise. The trees become bent with apples — were they too bend just a little bit further, it would likely damage or even break the boughs from which they hung. This poem suggests that every little piece of the world is at its most beautiful just before it begins to die, and that idea is reflected in the greater macrocosm of the world, too: the natural world is at its most beautiful in the autumn time, just before it begins its descent into winter and the season of dead things.

This idea carries on through the poem to the third stanza, which deals heavily in time and transition. It talks about the “soft-dying day” (Line 25), lambs that have become full-grown and will soon be slaughtered for winter feasts, the gnats mourning with “wailful choir” (Line 27). We see the beauty of an autumn sunset sprawled across freshly harvested fields, which again is symbolic of the dying day and the act of an afternoon decaying into night. And yet, it's during this period of dying that the day is at its most beautiful.

It's notable that "To Autumn" was Keats' last and arguably most beautiful poem, written in the twilight of his life as he himself was beginning to decay. Whether conscious or not, Keats may have had an awareness of his own mortality and a new appreciation for the beauty and potential for creation within it.

*Continue reading at <https://www.supersummary.com/to-autumn/summary/>*