

**‘Autumn’ in Society – Rest or Death
Comparison between
P. B. Shelley’s *Ode to the West Wind* & John Keats’ *To Autumn***

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P. B. Shelley

Portrait of Shelley, by [Alfred Clint](#) (1829)

Courtesy: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Percy_Bysshe_Shelley

Introduction

Percy Bysshe Shelley (04.08.1792 – 08.07.1822) and John Keats (31.10.1795 – 23.02.1821) were friends, and the contemporaries of Romantic Age. Both have made significant contribution to English literatures through their writings, particularly poems. However, Shelley’s *Ode to the West Wind* and Keats’ *Ode to Autumn* are two among their eternal works. Like the most works of Romantic Age, these Odes also deal with the natural-realistic phenomena. Both these works elaborate the attributes and nature of the Autumn season. In these odes Shelley and Keats express various views on the Autumn season. This paper attempts to examine the level of

their social concern in their respective above-mentioned odes; and tries to analyze the theme 'Autumn' with the light of Subaltern studies.

Historical & Social Backgrounds

During the Romantic Age of English literature (1798-1830), literature had come out from the courts and forts to the woods and farms, all credits to the French Revolution. Since then more poets lost their patronage from the aristocrats and kings. The poets are well influenced by historical incidents that happened in that age such as Napoleonic wars, rise of the working-class people, civil wars, development of socialistic ideologies, beginning of colonialism, and slavery. Especially, as per the claim of historians, the Peterloo Massacre (Aug 1819) in England became the kernel of most of the poetry of that time. As like in all Capitalistic countries, in England also only rich were becoming richer. The French Revolution triggered revolutionary thoughts against the higher-class people throughout the Europe. Simultaneously those so-called revolutionaries were violently oppressed by the higher-class people. But the very fundamental prayer of majority people was peace and equality.

Shelley's View on 'Autumn' through His *Ode to the West Wind*

Chronologically, Shelley wrote this ode shortly after the Peterloo Massacre while he was residing in Florence, Italy. It was published two years before his death (1820). In this ode, as a naturalist, Shelley describes the natural attributes of the West Wind; addresses the West Wind which brings the autumn season as well as the personification of termination, death and preservation. He complies himself with the natural phenomenon; expresses his hope on the Spring or restoration. He gives more space to the readers to make their own interpretation over this poem.

Destroyer and Preserver, Hear!

Apart from the poetic descriptions, the following lines of his ode help the readers to understand his stand on the autumn season.

*Wild Spirit, which art moving everywhere;
Destroyer and Preserver; hear, O hear! (13-14)*

Through these lines the poet welcomes the West Wind which is the symbolization of autumn; then addresses it as unstoppable force which is existing everywhere, terminator of the temporal things and the preserver of the future.

*If I were a dead leaf thou mightest bear;
If I were a swift cloud to fly with thee;(43-44)*

In these lines the poet acknowledges the unstoppable power of the west wind and exhibits his willingness to comply with it. He is ready to become to dead leaf or a cloud in order to unify himself with the west wind.

*The wingèd seeds, where they lie cold and low,
Each like a corpse within its grave, until
Thine azure sister of the Spring shall blow. (7-9)*

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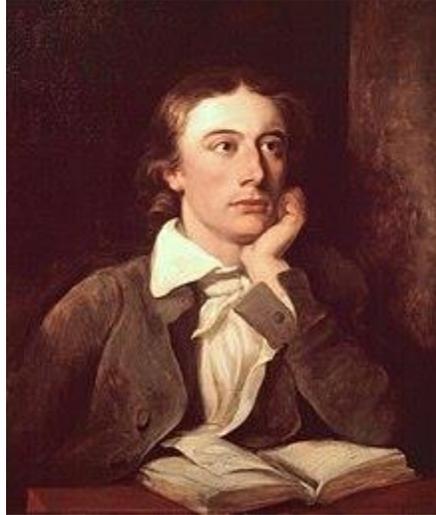
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In the above lines he describes that though the dead – weak leaves are being driven out by the autumn, the mighty seeds are being preserved. Though it seems like a lifeless body in a grave it will survive and will bloom when the arrival of the assured spring season.

Keats' View on 'Autumn' through His *Ode to Autumn*



John Keats Portrait of John Keats by [William Hilton](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Keats). [National Portrait Gallery, London](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Keats)

Courtesy: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Keats

Keats composes his poetry work on autumn, known as “To Autumn” in the same year that Shelley compose his ‘Ode to the West Wind’ (1819), similarly published in 1820. This poem is considered as the last poetic work of Keats. The poem describes the gradual raise of autumn season. Particularly the first stanza elaborates the pleasantness of the beginning period of autumn. The second stanza describes the period of harvesting and the third stanza expresses the decay of happiness and the lifelessness when the autumn attains its fullness.

*To bend with apples the moss'd cottage-trees,
And fill all fruit with ripeness to the core;(5-6)*

Keats enjoys the beginning period of autumn and the harvesting time. He sees a bended apple tree due to the large quantity of apples; and as well as the other trees, paddies and vineyard also look fruitful. They are ready to be harvested

*Drows'd with the fume of poppies, while thy hook
Spares the next swath and all its twined flowers: (17-18)*

The above lines denote the scenario in the mid-time of autumn season. The environment is very calm and becoming lifeless as if the autumn has been intoxicated by the poppies. The tools are ready to cut the vines and branches.

*Then in a wailful choir the small gnats mourn
Among the river shallows, borne aloft
Or sinking as the light wind lives or dies; (27-29)*

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These lines express the unpleasant quality of the autumn season at its peak. Nearby the riverside tree, the small insects and bugs are mourning for those cold-dark dying days. Some insects are flying with an uncertainty of life.

Comparison between the Views of Shelley and Keats on ‘Autumn’

As the Romantic poets, both Shelly and Keats describe Autumn in an extraordinary poetic manner. Both adore the natural phenomenon such as termination, death, darkness and cold which are personified as Autumn. Simultaneously both are longing for the pleasant spring which restores all things. But through the lines “*O Wind, If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?*” (lines 69-70) Shelley ends his poem up with a ‘hope’. Thus, he encourages the readers to overcome their sufferings and suppressions.

And Keats, through his verses “*Where are the songs of Spring? Ay, where are they?*” (line 23), expresses just his ‘expectation’. Thus he insists on the readers to tolerate the sufferings as a part of nature.

Examination of the Social Concern of Shelly and Keats’ on Their Theme ‘Autumn’

We can assume that apart from the eminent poetic skill, Keats as a medical practitioner, a person who was in the need of economic assistance and less fame, he has more concerns over the human life and emotions, and the realities of life. Thus, his works became more subjective. His poem may console the readers who are being defeated. Even ‘To Autumn’ itself imitates his personal depression more than the public status.

But as a high school dropout, Shelley had more time to spend with the nature as well as the marginalized people of the society. So, he had a clear understanding over the society and had a suitable solution for the social evils of his time. While we read ‘Ode to the West Wind’ through the goggle, Shelley’s works ‘A Philosophical Review of Reform’ enables the readers get another interpretation of the poem in favour of suppressed people. Beyond the reality and his own view, he encourages the marginalized people to fight against the cause of their suppression. His contradictory views over the extreme capitalism and slavery and advocacy over the Socialism and equality have been appreciated by later personalities such as Karl Marks, Leo Tolstoy, et al.

Conclusion

Thus, authors of this paper come to a conclusion that Shelly had a clear view on social discriminations of his age. He had more social concern than Keats. So we take his poem to get answer for the question “whether defeat which is personified here as autumn is to be considered as a rest or death for society?”. As per the examination over his verses in *Ode to the West Wind*, we claim that Autumn is nothing but “Rest”.

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