Mortality, Death and Decay in Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind" and Keats' "To Autumn."

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Abstract
One of the most principal attributes of Shelley and Keats is their gift of using both lush and tactile words in their literary products. Both poets are great lovers of nature, and the abundance of their poetry is filled with nature and mysterious magnificence. Both writers happen to produce poems concerning Autumn in the same year, 1819. Although the two pieces contain similar traits of the romantic period, they differ in their views in several ways as well. Keats' "To Autumn" and Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind" comprise potent and vivacious words about the Fall. They include similar metaphors involving Autumn. However, the feelings each writer expresses vary relatively. They address nature in these two poems with different intentions.
Nature in Shelley's and Keats' Poetry:

Nature is a source of inspiration for every poet from which they derive imagery, emphasizing its symbolic meaning and role as a powerful force in human life. Nature was elevated to a high position by the Romantic poets. Poetry in the prime moments of the Romantic era was rich in its imagery which is full of passion, mystery, inspiration, imagination and nature.

The Romantics regard nature as an external world full of beauty and power and adorn its poetic language in garments of simplicity to make it understandable for the common men.

The Romantic poets have several characteristics in common; certainly one of the most significant of these is their respective views on adorable nature which seems to range from a more spiritual, if not pantheistic, view as seen in the works of John Keats and Percy Bysshe Shelley. All of these authors discuss, in varying degrees, the role of nature in acquiring a meaningful insight into the human condition. These writers all make appeals to nature as if it were some kind of a living entity; calls upon nature are made to rescue the struggling writer and carry his ideas to the world. Nature, then, is the focal point or everything to them.

Most of Percy Shelley's and John Keats' poems are centered on nature. Both poets are classified as Romantic ones and have certain poetic elements in common, besides having differences in style and theme that differentiate them clearly. Both poets are spurred to react and to tackle nature in two different perspectives. Shelley addresses nature in most of his poems climatically, according to his spontaneous and momentary response, while Keats turns to reverie due to his personal suffering.

Keats seems to be under the impression of nature being a great and benign force: Almost divine. However, he expresses the typical Romantic view of the natural world while Shelley was "an idealist who believed in the essential goodness of human nature." (1)

For Romantic poets who are known for their extraordinary sensitivity to natural moods, the period of the fall becomes a great force for poetic creativity. (2)

The following section will focus on the concept of mortality, death and decay in Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind" and Keats' "To Autumn." Shelley and Keats use nature to express their attitudes, particularly the autumnal concept, and to speak out their internal and personal feelings. Autumn is traditionally associated with the transience, mutability and dying of nature and with the expectations of the following winter time.
II

Mortality, Death and Decay in Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind" and Keats' "To Autumn"

Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind" and Keats' "To Autumn" are the two poets' sensational poems which fuse their personal feelings through autumn. Both poets are influenced by the seasonal process in nature which ushers them into the mood of transience and aging. However, both of them differently perceive the same natural manifestations.

Shelley observes the deadly changes in nature caused by the autumnal wind with an expectation for the following spring and revival. In the seasonal process he sees a symbolic prototype for possible revolutionary changes both in his own life and in the existing social and political structure of his country. His "Ode to the West Wind" primarily appeals to the active sublime power of the west wind to give him that energy which is able to change the world. Shelley was a revolutionary who had a dream of a new political system in England. He read the future and prophesied of political and social changes to come. This is a main theme of his ode which has been read by some critics as a political allegory. The poem has also been read autobiographically: his desire for the rebirth of his own physical and poetic powers.

In the meantime, another Romantic poet, Keats, accepts the idea of aging and accomplishment in his ode "To Autumn"; he celebrates the fruitfulness of autumn and bids farewell to the passing year and, together with it, to his great poetry. The Romantic autumnal odes of Shelley and Keats are "born from the poetic observations of natural changes and from their ability to penetrate the mood of fall which provides them with an incentive for artistic creativity." In "Ode to the West Wind," Shelley mainly concentrates on his observations of the manifestations of death caused by the autumnal wind. The wind as a destroyer is emphasized through the death motif also by such words or phrases as "corpse"(l.10) and "pestilence-stricken"l.11). He compares the "leaves dead "(l.2) to "ghosts"(l.3), and the "winged seeds"(l.7) to dead bodies which "lie cold and low... within [their] graves" (l.8). All these images talk to the author of the "dying year" (l.24), of the transience of time and of aging. Little by little his mind becomes full of "dead thoughts" (l.63) which overwhelm him after he penetrates the autumnal mood of nature; thus his mind generates the mood of the season and he becomes part of it. However, observing the autumnal devastation, Shelley knows that "this season is not to rule over the earth forever: for him it is just a period of darkness which waits for a redeemer". He expects the time when "Spring shall blow" (l.9) over England and new leaves will replace the falling ones, and when the "winged seeds" (l.7) will awake from their deep sleep to produce a new life. Aware of the fact that year after year "the old life...
goes and a new life returns with the seasonal cycle," the poet is disturbed by a feeling of the heavy pressure of time on the world. Being a part of the natural mood, as well as the natural mood being a part of him, Shelley decidedly composes the lines, where he identifies the mature season of the year with his own aging: "A heavy weight of hours has chained and bowed/ One too like thee: tameless and swift and proud." (ll.55-6) Shelley writes, "Make me thy lyre, even as the forest is/ What if my leaves are falling like its own!" (ll.57-8) 

Shelley believes that the "wild west wind,... breath of Autumn's being" (l.1) is responsible for the autumnal desolation which influences both nature and the poet himself. In the Ode, the poet describes it as a power "...from whose unseen presence the leaves dead/ Are driven like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing." (ll.2-3) 

Ronald Tetreault, Shelley's biographer, sensibly claims that the wind "a mysterious cause whose existence is evident only in its effects," in this poem becomes a "symbol for the unknown power which animates the life." This is a kind of sublime authority which has an infinite rule over the worldly substances: Shelley's west wind is a "Destroyer" (l.14). Throughout the whole poem Shelley deliberately chooses the praises for the powerful west wind: he calls it a "wild" (l.12) or "fierce" (l.61) spirit which is "moving everywhere" (l.12) and, moreover, calls its power "Uncontrollable" (l.47). All these characteristics serve the invocation of the impression that the wind is an absolute and free power which influences everything around. The "loose clouds like Ear! this decaying leaves are shed" (l.16) and "the blue Mediterranean" awakes "from his summer dreams" (ll.30-1) when the wind makes its way through the sky. Even "...the Atlantic's level power/ Cleave themselves into chasms" (ll.37-8) to make a path for the west wind, and "the oozy woods" (l.39) "grow grey with fear/ And tremble and despoil themselves" (l.41-2) when they hear its voice.

The poet, seeing the mighty influence of the wind on nature, appeals to this "Spirit fierce" (l.61) to become his own spirit so that he can also influence and change things around him. His "Ode to the West Wind" may be righteously called "both a hymn and a prayer," because in this verse Shelley does not only praise the wind for its active energy but he also appeals to its active power to help him bring the necessary changes into the world. The poet believes that since there is a seasonal cycle in nature, thus in human life there also must be a cycle of renewal. He would himself try to do it only if he would be "a dead leaf" (l.43) or "a swift cloud" (l.44) or "a wave" to be therefore able to move together with the wind, to have a part of its power, to "... share / The impulse of [its] strength" (l.45-6). However, this is a very difficult task for the mature poet who, as the autumnal nature, is not "in [his] boyhood" (l.48) anymore, and is not so flexible as a child and so he appeals with a prayer
to the external power in his "sore need" (l.52), his need to do something in order to change things rather than dying passively in silence! Thus, "Ode to the West Wind" "is not a mere private meditation" (12) but a public poem, in which the poet needs the wind to change him in order to "transform the world." (13) Observing the seasonal cycle, the poet looks for "a similar pattern in the world of social and political life" (14) of England: he wants to be such a changing power for his nation, as the wind is for nature. So he calls for the wild spirit to become his own, praying to it, he says: "Drive my dead thoughts over the universe/ To quicken a new birth!" (ll.63-4). He wants to hasten the coming of new changes in his society; through his verse he asks of the wind to "scatter... /[his] words among mankind" (ll.66-7) as the prophetic revolutionary entreaty. He ends his prayer to the wind by asking it to be through his lips "the trumpet of a prophecy" (l.69) to the whole Earth, which is as yet "unawakened" (l.68) as nature in the season of autumn in expectation for the coming of springtime after the winter is over. So Shelley logically concludes the ode with a rhetorical question which affirms the inevitability of the coming change or revolution rather than questions it: "O Wind, if Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?" (ll. 69-70)

The same English autumn inspires another Romantic poet, John Keats, who, under the impression of the mood of this season, composes his "last complete great poem" (15) "To Autumn." However, the autumn in this ode is different from the one described in Shelley's poem (16) "Ode to the West Wind." It is very important to acknowledge the fact that "nature may provide a stimulus, but it is the poetic consciousness itself that must give voice to nature and articulate its meanings" (17) so, though both poets live in the same epoch and in the same country and witness the same natural manifestations during the fall time, they apply to it different terms. While in "Ode to the West Wind" Shelley personifies the active sublime power of the wind, the other poet in "To Autumn" puts in the center the figure of autumn which, in his descriptions, is "a female's passive, an embodiment of earthly paradise." (18) Unlike Shelley's fall which sounds as a mighty symphony of falling leaves and dying nature, Keats' autumn is a drowsy and fertile sonata. "To Autumn" begins from a very calm and meaningful statement, "Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness," (19) which sets the tone over all the following lines.

By mentioning the autumnal mists, the poet implies his fusion with the mood of the season and half-sleepy, half-real perception of the world around where he finds not death of the year as Shelley does, but fertility and benevolence instead. This is obvious that Keats, as well as the other poet, under the influence of the season, gets sick with the idea of transience, his autumn is an aging mother figure, conspiring with her "close-bosom friend" the "maturing sun" (l.2) Also such expressions as
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"sound asleep" (l.16), and "Drows'd with the fume of poppies" (l.17) serve the implication of the poet's belief that the world passively falls asleep, that time passes and that autumn is a passive watcher of the "last oozings, hours by hours" (l.22). These phrases introduce the reader to "the idea of transience" (20) and mutability which later leads the poet to bewail the spring that has passed: "Where are the songs of Spring? Ay, where are they?" (l.23).

However, Keats looks "back to Spring instead of forward to Winter," (21) trying to find good things in what is left beyond the autumnal fogs and sees the autumn's own beauty: he appeals to it not to think about those songs of spring saying to it "thou hast thy music too" (l.24). It sounds very true that in the mood of transience, "in fear of early death, and sensing riches his pen might never glean, Keats evokes a figure of genial harvests." (22) Instead of expecting something better to come in the future, Keats finds just beauty in what he still has today, though feeling that very soon this will be over. In his last great poem he implies the feeling that the autumn is still full of energy "to load and bless" (l.3), "to bend" (l.5), "And to fill" (l.6), "to swell" and "plump" (l.7) every lively thing around. Indeed, his whole poem is full of images of fertility and blessing. Jeffrey Baker, a romantic critic, wisely notes that "we have in these lines not merely a description of autumn, but a celebration of it." (23) Indeed, the season is described in this poem as being full of provincial harmony. There are trees that, full of apples and swelled gourds along with the bees, enjoy the "later flowers" (l.9), thinking that these last "warm days will never cease" (l.10), the "clouds bloom" (l.25), and "full-grown lambs loud bleat from hilly bourn" (l.30). The autumn herself is shown "careless" (l.14), when she is described sitting "drows'd with the fume of poppies" (l.17) next to her "store" (l.12), and even the wind, so furious and powerful in Shelley, in this poem is "winnowig" (l.15) and "light" (l.29), playing with the autumn's "soft-lifted" (l.15) hair. It seems as if the poet creates this picture of relaxation and fertile accomplishment to bid last farewell to the beauty of the passing year and together with it, to his poetic creativity and life.

Shelley and Keats exhibit their genius for the rich energized use of words within these two poems wonderfully. Also, an interesting similarity between the two pieces lurks in some of the metaphors the poets create. Hair is a subject both writers explored as a metaphor for nature. Shelley, in "Ode to the West Wind," claims the wind is "like the bright hair uplifted from the head/ Of some fierce Maenad,"(ll.20-1) while Keats views autumn as "sitting careless on a granary floor,/ Thy hair soft-lifted by the winnowing wind"(ll.14-5). Hair, often used in poetry metaphorically, tends to symbolize feminine beauty, fertility, mourning, sadness and strength; in this case, both poets make use of the subject of hair when describing certain aspects of nature. The speakers in
these two poems also express their thoughts on the portent of the coming spring. In the final couplet of Shelley's poem, the speaker asks, "Oh wind,/ If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?"(ll.69-70). The speaker in Keats' poem inquires, "Where are the songs of spring? Ay, where are they?"(l.23). Both poets look upon autumn as an indication of the coming season which is opposite to autumn. The subjects of seeds and budding plants are also touched upon within the two pieces. Autumn is when, as Shelley writes, "the winged seeds"(l.7) are placed in their "dark wintry bed"(l.6) and "lie cold and low"(l.7). And Keats writes that autumn is the time when the hazel shells are "plump[ed]... With a sweet kernel; to set budding more"(l.8). These similarities between the two pieces are interesting, however, there are many differences in the two poems as well.

Keats and Shelley express different emotions about the fall season. Shelley looks at autumn as being wild and fierce while Keats has a more gentle view of it. Shelley perceives autumn as an annual death, calling it "Thou dirge/Of the dying year,"( ll.24-5) using words such as "corpse"(l.8) and "sepulchre"(l.25). He also employs words such as "hectic"(l.4) and "tameless"(l.56), and looks upon the autumn horizon as being "the locks of the approaching storm"(l.23). Also, he claims that autumn winds are where "black rain, and fire, and hail will burst."(l.28). Lines such as this reveal the speaker's attitude that autumn is a ferocious and reckless season bearing morbid portence of the coming winter. On the other hand, Keats fills his poem with lighter words such as "mellow,"(l.1) "sweet,"(l.8) "patient,"(l.21) and "soft"(l.31). The speaker of this poem looks out upon the landscape and hears the "full-grown lambs loud bleat from hilly bourn,"(l.30) and listens as the "gathering swallows twitter in the skies"(l.33). These lines indicate a much softer and more amiable emotion felt by the speaker; sentiments quite opposite to those felt in "Ode to the West Wind."(24)

Another great difference in these two poems is the intentions of the poets themselves. Shelley, in his thirst for fame, wants to attain power like that of the wind. He asks of the wind, "Be thou, Spirit fierce,/ My spirit! Be thou me, impetuous one!"(ll.61-2) He pleads it to move his thoughts "over the universe/ Like withered leaves to quicken a new birth,"(ll.63-4) and to "Scatter, as from an unextinguished hearth/ Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind" (66-7).

Shelley's more ambitious approach to the weather differs from that of Keats, who merely enjoys the season for what it holds and asks nothing of it. Keats thoroughly enjoys the "stubble-plains with rosy hue,"(l.26) and listens as "The red-breast whistles from a garden-croft"(l.32). Although both writers examine the autumn season, yet each expresses different intentions in the poems they have written.
III

To sum up, Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind" and Keats' "To Autumn" have striking similarities when it comes to their rich metaphors; however, the poems differ in almost every other sense. Shelley holds a much more savage notion about the season, while Keats looks upon autumn as being soft and gentle. Shelley's ambitions are expressed in his piece, while Keats only reflects the beauty of what he sees. Both writers display their own unique talent as poets, deserving their titles as being two of the greatest Romantic writers of the period.

The two autumnal odes by Shelley and Keats are two diverse points of view on the same subject. This subject is our human understanding that everything in our lives is transitive and that nothing lasts forever. The two Romantic poets deeply penetrate the mood of something going and dying. They both see in the aging of a year their own aging and fear it, however, they represent two different human relations with the things they see. Shelley represents the optimistic humanity which is able to expect a better future even in the casual present perplexities and the humanity continues living with his hopes for the changes. At the same time, Keats is a representative of that part of us which is not able to withstand his pessimistic thoughts and he lives by what he has today and silently leaves the world for tranquility in nonexistence. So the poets in their own poems show their readers the two possible ways of existence which are given to each one of us for selection.

Notes


8) Sharen Ruston, *Shelley and Vitality*, p.46.


Bibliography