

“To Autumn” by William Blake (1783)

William Blake (1757-1827) was a British poet, painter, and engraver who lived and worked in London. His parents encouraged his art from a young age, but as that schooling became more expensive, he was then apprenticed to a master engraver. He spent a lot of time drawing Westminster Abbey and the gothic architecture and tombs affected Blake’s romantic sensibilities and imagination. In the early 1780’s Blake became acquainted with a “celebrated lady of fashion,” Harriet Matthew, whose home was a favorite meeting place for artists and musicians—this is where Blake began to recite his poetry and led to the publication of his first volume, *Poetical Sketches*, in which “To Autumn” was published (though only 50 copies were known to be in print).

“To Autumn” is one in a set of four season poems by Blake, aptly including “To Winter,” “To Spring,” and “To Summer.” These seasonal invocations can be read alone, but Blake also intended them to interconnect. The cycle of the seasons is often interpreted as the cycle of rebirth and death, themes that apply to human nature as well. Each of the season songs can be read as Blake’s reference to the different stages of human life. “To Autumn” is not a particularly personal poem, but is significant in that it, along with the other seasonal songs, seems to correlate mythology that Blake created. The personas of the seasons can be read as counterparts to Blake’s spirits: Tharmas (most like spring), Orc (most like summer), Los (most like autumn), and Urizen (most like winter). Thus, “To Autumn” can be read as a particular view of human nature, or in a way which relates more to Blake’s later works.

Throughout the poem, the speaker addresses autumn as if it were a person. In the first stanza, he notes that autumn and the sun are like best friends plotting how to make fruit grow and how to ripen crops before the harvest. The ripening will lead to the dropping of seeds, which sets the stage for spring flowers and the whole process starting over again. He tells us about the bees that think summer can last forever as they buzz around the flowers. But the speaker knows better.

The second stanza describes the period after the harvest, when autumn just hangs out around the granary where harvested grains are kept. Most of the hard work has already been done, and autumn can just take a nap in the fields, walk across brooks, or watch the making of cider.

In the third stanza, the speaker notes that the music of spring is a distant memory, but that autumn's music is pretty cool, too. This music includes images of clouds and harvested fields at sunset, gnats flying around a river, lambs bleating, crickets singing, and birds whistling and twittering. All of the sights and sounds produce a veritable symphony of beauty.