The Human Seasons

POEM TEXT

Four seasons fill the measure of the year;
    There are four seasons in the mind of man:
He has his lusty Spring, when fancy clear
    Takes in all beauty with an easy span:
He has his Summer, when luxuriously
    Spring's honied cud of youthful thought he loves
To ruminate, and by such dreaming nigh
    His nearest unto heaven: quiet coves
His soul has in its Autumn, when his wings
    He furleth close; contented so to look
On mists in idleness—to let fair things
    Pass by unheeded as a threshold brook.
He has his Winter too of pale misfeature,
Or else he would forget his mortal nature.

SUMMARY

The year is measured out into four seasons. The human mind has four seasons, too. People have an energetic springtime, when their fresh imaginations easily stretch to take in beauty. They have a summertime, when they love to slowly chew over delicious thoughts, and in doing so come almost as close to heaven as they can. In its autumn, the human soul withdraws to quiet, sheltered places; it folds up its wings, and is happy to idly watch the mists rolling by—to allow beautiful things to pass, hardly noticing them, the way one might watch the stream that runs outside one's front door. People have a winter, too, a time of colorless disfigurement; if they didn't, they would forget that they're fated to die.

THEMES

THE GROWTH OF THE HUMAN MIND

"The Human Seasons" imagines the growth of the "mind of man" (that is, the human mind) as the seasons of a year. "There are four seasons in the mind of man," Keats observes: the spring of childhood, the summer of youth, the autumn of middle age, and the winter of old age. Over the course of a person's life, then, their mind follows the same rhythm that a year does: it moves from the easy contemplation of springy beauty to a harrowing reckoning with wintery death and decay. For people to earn a fully developed mind, this poem suggests, they must learn from all these seasons, letting themselves be shaped by both beauty and loss.

This process of learning starts out gently. Keats begins the poem by imagining humanity's "Spring": childhood, when a person can look out at the world with a "fancy clear," a sparkling-clean imagination. With such a blank slate of "fancy" on board, people are able to "take[] in all beauty with an easy span." The first stage of growth, in other words, is to simply absorb the world's beauty and let it work on one's imagination.

The "Summer" of young adulthood, meanwhile, requires a little more effort from a mind—but that effort is pretty delicious. Summer's work is to "ruminate" the "cud of youthful thought" one gathers in spring: that is, to *chew over* all the beauties one absorbed as a child, transforming them into nourishing dreams, just as a cow transforms grass into milk. If the first season of life is all about soaking beauty up, the second is about making something of that beauty.

The mind's "Autumn" and "Winter" are different matters. In the autumn of middle age, people must step back. Rather than chewing life with gusto, they must learn to watch the world's beauties "pass by unheeded," to stop grappling with existence and instead quietly accept it. This prepares them for life's grim final stage: the winter of old age, when "pale misfeature" (wan, colorless disfigurement) is the best they can expect.

This progress from delight to withdrawal to suffering might paint an upsetting picture of human life. But in fact, the poem hints, facing loss and suffering is as urgently important as delighting in beauty. If people didn't have to face their own metaphorical winter, they might "forget [their] mortal nature," Keats concludes. In other words, a complete and truthful understanding of life involves an encounter with all its seasons—and with the fact that the "measure" of the human "year" has an end.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-14

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

Four seasons fill the measure of the year;
*   There are four seasons in the mind of man:*
He has his lusty Spring, when fancy clear
*   Takes in all beauty with an easy span:*

"The Human Seasons" begins by laying out a neat conceit—an

extended metaphor that will shape the whole poem. "Four seasons fill the measure of the year," the speaker begins. Likewise, "there are four seasons in the mind of man." The *year* and the *mind*, the repetition suggests, run parallel to each other: both develop over four similar stages.

The idea that human life has seasons just as the year does is a very old metaphor—readers have probably heard someone describe childhood as the "springtime of life" or middle age as the "autumn years." In this sonnet, however, John Keats will do something unusual with this familiar idea. He's interested, not just in the way that *people* grow from childhood to old age, but in how their *minds* grow.

The nature of a mind's growth starts to reveal itself in lines 3-4, where the speaker describes childhood, life's "Spring." This is a "lusty" (or vigorous and enthusiastic) time during which children's minds absorb their surroundings with an "easy span" (that is, an effortless ability to reach out and take things in). They encounter the world with "fancy clear": with imaginations that are as yet spotlessly clean, ready to be filled up with "all beauty."

That line stresses an idea that comes up often in Keats's work: that beauty has something to teach us. (This, after all, is the poet who famously wrote, "Beauty is truth, truth beauty"—though critics have argued for years about precisely what that might mean.) Childhood's special power is to take in "all beauty" without even trying, to simply be open to what the world has to offer. The beauty that children's minds so readily absorb, this poem will suggest, shapes the rest of their lives.

Keats will explore the growth of the human mind in an English sonnet. That means that this poem:

- Is 14 lines long.
- Uses iambic pentameter: lines of five iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm, as in "There **are** | four **sea-** | sons **in** | the **mind** | of **man**."
- Uses the traditional English sonnet rhyme scheme, which runs ABAB CDCD EFEF GG.

Glancing at that rhyme scheme, readers might already be able to guess how the poem's shape will reflect its themes: four seasons, four life stages, and a four-part poetic form.

Keats's choice of the English sonnet form for this particular subject also shows his deep devotion to Shakespeare, whose sonnets are the best-known in the English language (so much so that this form is sometimes called the Shakespearean sonnet). It's hard to write a sonnet about the stages of life without calling Shakespeare to mind—for instance, the famous "seven ages of man" speech from *As You Like It* or the autumnal melancholy of Sonnet 73.

LINES 5-8

He has his Summer, when luxuriously
Spring's honied cud of youthful thought he loves
To ruminate, and by such dreaming nigh
His nearest unto heaven:

The poem's next quatrain is dedicated to young adulthood, the summer of life. Keats envisions this as an era when people work over all the beauties they took in as children, developing "youthful thought" through a "luxurious[]" process of "ruminat[ing]" and "dreaming." This is a meditative, gentle, and above all *pleasurable* vision of what it is to be young. Keats's representative "man" (a stand-in for all humanity) doesn't have to do any striving or questing; he just has to enjoy reflecting on the beauty he first perceived as a child.

Keats develops this idea through a gently funny metaphor:

> Spring's honied cud of youthful thought he loves
> To ruminate [...]

In this image, thought is a "cud": that is, a ball of chewed grass. By extension, the man chewing it over is a cow or a sheep! Keats underscores that image by describing the man "ruminat[ing]"—a word that indeed means "to thoroughly chew," though in the modern day it's more often used figuratively to mean "to think deeply."

By casting the developing young man as a sheep working its cud over, Keats suggests that there's something *natural* and *nourishing* about this kind of chewing. To slowly digest visions of beauty is an easy, leisurely, and delicious process, and the young man "loves" to do it. The cud of thought is "honied," after all, sweet as honey. (Notice how the dull /uh/ assonance of "honied cud" highlights this faintly comical image, suggesting a sweet, dense lump of chewed thought.)

This ruminative "dreaming," Keats concludes, takes the young man "nigh / his nearest unto heaven." In other words, it brings him *nearly* as close to heaven as he'll ever get. (Presumably he'll only get nearer when he dies and heads to heaven in person.) Alongside the image of the ruminating sheep, these lines might suggest that young adulthood feels as lush as Arcadia—that is, the pastoral paradise of Greek myth, where shepherds live idyllically among their sheep.

In this vision, the "mind of man" develops through delight. Childhood offers visions of beauty; young adulthood offers the chance to slowly, dreamily reflect on those visions of beauty. Life, so far, is nothing but pleasure.

But midway through line 8, a caesura breaks in on this bliss:

> His nearest unto **heaven:** || **quiet** coves
> His soul has in its Autumn [...]

This mid-line change of direction cuts summer's quatrain slightly short. Blissful youth might likewise feel as if it comes to an end rather sooner than the dreaming, ruminating young man

might have been ready for.

LINES 8-12

quiet coves
His soul has in its Autumn, when his wings
He furleth close; contented so to look
On mists in idleness—to let fair things
Pass by unheeded as a threshold brook.

As the poem turns to the "Autumn" of life—middle age—the tone quietly changes. The spring and summer sections both dealt with the mind: the work of the "fancy" (or imagination) in childhood, the "honied cud" of "youthful thought" one chews in young adulthood. Now, the poem looks from the mind to the "soul."

The autumn of life, the speaker suggests, is a time for quiet reflection, a period when the soul withdraws to "quiet coves" (sheltered bays or caves) and "furleth close" (or folds up) its "wings." Metaphorically, the soul becomes a bird here. But unlike a lot of metaphorical birds, this soul-bird doesn't seem interested in flight, or in getting a wider perspective on the world. This is a bird that's perfectly content to stay on the ground in some safe place. Perhaps it's already seen enough.

Summer was all about thought—albeit a "luxurious[]," "dreaming" kind of thought. Autumn, by contrast, seems to be to do with passively observing, watching from a distance. The speaker describes the autumnal soul as "contented [...] to look / On mists in idleness" from its seclusion. The imagery here suggests a peaceful acceptance of mystery. The soul isn't trying to peer *through* those veils of mist to see what's behind them; it's just quietly watching them swirl by. (This ability to patiently watch the mists bears some resemblance to the quality that Keats famously described as "Negative Capability": a great artist's ability to "be in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason.")

The soul's relation to beauty also starts to change in this autumn. Rather than absorbing beauties as a child does, or ruminating on them as a young person does, this autumnal soul is happy to let beauties "pass by unheeded as a threshold brook." In other words, the middle-aged soul doesn't pay any more special attention to beauty than a person would pay to a familiar stream that runs past their front door.

There might be something a little poignant or resigned in that simile. How sad not to feel beauty so intensely any more! But by the same token, the image suggests a way of living peacefully side-by-side with beauty, aware that it's always flowing past right next to you.

Everything about the poem's description of autumn feels softer and gentler than what's come before. Looking back over the first lines, readers might observe that Keats uses emphatic anaphora to open his descriptions of spring and summer: "He has his lusty Spring," "he has his summer." The autumn passage, by contrast, sidles in quietly in the middle of a line, turning away from that repeated language.

Autumn is a quieter, more withdrawn sort of season, then. But it also seems peaceful, contented, and wise. An autumnal comfort with reserve, mystery, and not-knowing is the unlikely fruit of a youth full of blissful intensity.

LINES 13-14

He has his Winter too of pale misfeature,
Or else he would forget his mortal nature.

The poem has now come to its finale: to winter, to old age, and to the rhymed couplet that caps every English sonnet. Describing life's final stage, Keats returns to the strong anaphora he used in spring and summer: "He has his Winter too," he begins, perhaps encouraging readers to expect another description of seasonal pleasures. An old age of wisdom and contentment, perhaps, building on the peace and watchfulness of autumn?

But no. Where spring and summer offered beauty and delight, winter brings only "pale misfeature"—wan, colorless disfigurement. "Misfeature" was a word Keats coined himself, and it bears a closer look here. Just as "misbehavior" is behavior gone wrong and to "misspeak" is to speak wrongly, "misfeature" invites readers to imagine an unpleasant, even unsettling change to a face's original features. The representative man's face was once another way; wintery old age has made it *off* somehow.

This unhappy change is nonetheless necessary to the mind's growth. If it weren't for this tangible "misfeature," the poem concludes, man would "forget his mortal nature." In other words, if people didn't physically age, they might believe that they would just go on enjoying the world's beauty forever.

Like the ambivalent image of the unheeded "threshold brook," these closing lines might be read in two ways:

- In one sense, this is a grim conclusion to a poem that has so far focused on the role that *beauty* plays in a human life. All that relish and dreaminess inevitably leads to "misfeature" and death.
- However, these lines also underscore precisely *how* sweet the rest of life can be. The dreams and beauties of youth, these closing words suggest, are so powerful that they might just about make people feel that they're going to live forever.

But it's important that people *don't* feel they're going to live forever. Coming to terms with one's "mortal nature" is as much a part of being alive as experiencing the world's beauty. Perhaps the orderly progress of these "human seasons" even indicates that this final phase is the most critical of them all. A grounding in beauty, here, allows the developing mind to face the inevitability of loss.

POETIC DEVICES

CONCEIT

"The Human Seasons" is built around a well-worn poetic conceit: an extended metaphor in which the seasons represent the stages of human life. Keats doesn't stray from the traditional shape of this metaphor here. Spring is childhood, summer is youth, autumn is middle age, and winter is old age, just as they have been in many, many poems before and since.

However, this poem wears these metaphors pretty lightly, and it uses them in a novel way. Rather than connecting the human *body* to the seasons—for instance, by depicting children as spring flowers or elderly people as leafless trees—Keats explores the growth of the *mind*, relating the seasons to different ways of perceiving and thinking:

- Spring is all about effortlessly absorbing beauty.
- Summer is a time for both pleasure and work—for making something of the beauties of spring, transforming them into ideas through delicious "ruminat[ion]."
- Autumn is about contemplative withdrawal rather than active engagement.
- Winter is the time to confront mortality.

The metaphor suggests that something about the way the seasons *feel* relates to the way people experience the seasons of their lives. Everyone might feel a little like a child again when exposed to the fresh, hopeful beauties of spring—and everyone might feel a little reflective and withdrawn when grey autumn rolls around.

It's only in winter that Keats draws a strong connection between the *physical* qualities of the season and the life stage it represents. Winter, here, is marked by "pale misfeature"—that is, colorless disfigurement. The words call up two simultaneous images: the pale, withered face of a very old person, and the way a winter landscape looks drained and distorted, all its softening foliage blasted away by the cold.

It makes sense that Keats would depict an especially physical reckoning in this final stage of the extended metaphor. Facing the fact that the body won't endure forever is exactly what life's "Winter" is about.

Where Conceit appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "Four seasons fill the measure of the year; / There are four seasons in the mind of man:"
- **Line 3:** "He has his lusty Spring"
- **Line 5:** "He has his Summer"
- **Lines 8-9:** "quiet coves / His soul has in its Autumn"
- **Line 13:** "He has his Winter"

METAPHOR

Within the poem's larger conceit of life stages as seasons, Keats introduces a series of smaller metaphors that link people to the natural world. In lines 4-8, for instance, he imagines a man in the summer of his life—young adulthood—"ruminat[ing]" the "honied cud of youthful thought" he gathered in spring. In this image, thought is a wad of chewed grass, and the person chewing it is a sheep or a cow.

In one way, this is a familiar metaphor. Readers have likely heard the word "ruminate" used to mean "think deeply," or heard someone say they're going to chew an idea over. But originally, the word "ruminate" literally meant "to chew," and in particular to chew as a sheep chews grass: that is, for a long, thoughtful, thorough time. Keats brings that original connotation to life here, and in doing so raises a few interesting possibilities:

- In this metaphor, long and dreamy thinking is both nourishing and delicious. This is a "honied cud," not just a ball of wet grass; it offers sweet pleasure as well as sustenance. Summer, in this vision, is a time of absolutely *savoring* the process of thinking and reflecting.
- The image also casts humanity as an animal. Ruminating a cud, the man here behaves like a sheep or a cow. The image brings all sorts of associations: green fields, woolly peacefulness, and perhaps even Arcadia, the mythic Greek paradise where young shepherds tend their flocks. (Keats loved Greek myth, so this association is plausible.)
- This metaphor thus suggest that life's summer is a time of pastoral bliss—a time when it feels like all one has to do is lazily, deliciously relish one's developing thoughts.

Keats uses a different flavor of natural metaphor to describe life's autumn, middle age. Here, the soul finds its way into "quiet coves"—sheltered bays or caves that metaphorically suggest withdrawal, safety, and seclusion. Juxtaposed with the green fields of the summer, this image feels a little bare and lonely. Autumn isn't about nourishment and development, but about stepping aside.

That impression gets stronger when Keats imagines the autumnal soul "furl[ing] close" its wings—that is, folding them up. No longer a sheep, the soul is a bird now, and one that seems done with flying. This image suggests that the soul might have gained a new power from its time ruminating the cud of youthful thought: the power to see things from a broad, bird's-eye perspective. But it's also ready to *give up* those powers. It's seen enough.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 6-7:** "Spring's honied cud of youthful thought he loves / To ruminate"
- **Lines 8-9:** "quiet coves / His soul has in its Autumn"
- **Lines 9-10:** "his wings / He furleth close"

SIMILE

In lines 11-12, a simile captures the simultaneous peace and resignation of middle age. Picturing the human soul in the autumn of life (middle age, that is), Keats describes it as "contented [...] / to let fair things / Pass by unheeded as a threshold brook." In other words, the soul watches beauties rolling past almost without noticing them, the way one might let the stream that runs outside one's front door (or "threshold") rattle by without really stopping to pay attention to it.

This image might feel a little melancholy. Beauty rushes past like water, and the soul no longer stops to take note of it; maybe, then, middle age means getting a little less sensitive to the world around you. By the same token, though, the simile might feel comforting and fulfilling. Perhaps there's a certain peace in living near a familiar stream, knowing it so well one can let it run by "unheeded."

Beauty, here, is part of the middle-aged soul's everyday experience. Maybe the world's beauties don't hit so hard or make such an impression as they did in youth. But by the same token, the soul can trust in beauty's continuous, reliable flow.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 11-12:** "to let fair things / Pass by unheeded as a threshold brook."

ANAPHORA

Anaphora gives the poem a rhythmic, predictable shape that mirrors the cycle of the seasons and the progress of a human life. Three of the seasons that Keats describes—life's spring, summer, and winter—all get introduced with the same words:

> He has his lusty Spring [...]
> He has his Summer [...]
> He has his Winter [...]

This repeated phrasing feels emphatic. Human life, the anaphora stresses, most certainly and reliably has these seasons, just as the year has. The repetition also suggests that there's no getting away from this rhythm: each season is an inevitable piece of a full lifetime.

It's only in the lines describing autumn that Keats breaks away from this pattern—and that makes sense. The autumn of middle age, as Keats describes it, is a more withdrawn, quiet, thoughtful time than any of life's other seasons. Spring, summer, and winter are all presented as seasons with emphatic tasks: taking in the world's beauty in spring, chewing over one's thoughts in summer, or facing the hard cold truth of mortality in winter. Autumn, meanwhile, is a time apart, a step away from the work of youth and a resting place before the work of winter. Keats likewise steps away from his anaphora here, making the shape of the language fit the shape of the season.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "He has his lusty Spring"
- **Line 5:** "He has his Summer"
- **Line 13:** "He has his Winter"

ALLITERATION

Touches of alliteration help to create this poem's atmosphere. The first lines, for instance, use a mixture of /f/ alliteration ("four," "fill") and /m/ alliteration (the "measure of the year," the "mind of man." These soft sounds gently highlight the poem's central conceit, in which the seasons of the year become images of human development.

Elsewhere, alliteration introduces energy and flavor:

- The /sp/ sound of "Spring" makes a jaunty connection to the "easy span" of the youthful imagination in lines 3-4.
- The luscious, drawn-out /l/ sound of "luxuriously" and "loves" makes the young man's contemplation of beauty feel even more pleasurable in lines 5-6.
- In lines 7-8, the /n/ sounds of "nigh / His nearest unto heaven" stress that almost hyperbolic image of touching paradise through "ruminat[ing]" on the world's loveliness.
- And the contained /c/ sounds of "close" and "contented" in line 10 help to capture the withdrawn peace of middle age: these sounds click and crackle quietly, like a low fire in an autumn hearth.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Four," "fill," "measure"
- **Line 2:** "mind," "man"
- **Line 3:** "Spring"
- **Line 4:** "span"
- **Line 5:** "luxuriously"
- **Line 6:** "loves"
- **Line 7:** "nigh"
- **Line 8:** "nearest"
- **Line 10:** "close," "contented"

VOCABULARY

Fill the measure of the year (Line 1) - That is, measure out the year between them.

Fancy (Line 3) - The imagination.

An easy span (Line 4) - An effortless stretch. (Think of the way one might say that something "spans the globe.")

Honied cud (Line 6) - That is, a honey-sweet mass of thoughts—like a "cud," the ball of grass that a cow or a sheep slowly and thoroughly chews.

Ruminate (Line 7) - To chew over, both literally and figuratively. Keats is picking up on the metaphor of the "cud" of thought in the previous line, here: a sheep is said to "ruminate" its cud when it chews it into submission, and people are said to "ruminate" when they're thinking long and deeply.

Nigh / His nearest unto heaven (Lines 7-8) - That is, comes nearly as close to heaven as he ever will.

Coves (Line 8) - Sheltered nooks or bays.

His wings / He furleth close (Lines 9-10) - That is, "he tightly tucks away his wings."

Unheeded (Line 12) - Unnoticed.

Threshold brook (Line 12) - A little river running past one's door.

Misfeature (Line 13) - Disfigurement, ugliness. (Keats coined this word himself.)

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Human Seasons" is an English sonnet. That means that it follows this traditional shape:

- It's 14 lines long.
- It uses iambic pentameter—lines of five iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm, as in "There are | four sea- | sons in | the mind | of man."
- And it uses an ABAB CDCD EFEF GG rhyme scheme.

This is a form indelibly associated with Shakespeare, and it makes sense that Keats chooses it here: he's riffing on some very Shakespearean themes about the ages of humankind and the relation of the mind and body to the seasons. (Shakespeare was Keats's great hero: Keats called Shakespeare his "presidor," his guardian literary spirit.)

This sonnet form also makes a lot of sense considering Keats's subject matter. The English sonnet breaks down into four parts: three quatrains and a closing couplet. Just as "four seasons fill the measure of the year," four stanzas fill the measure of the English sonnet! Keats thus hints that human life has a *poetic* structure as well as a seasonal one.

Like many sonnets, this poem uses a volta (Italian for "turn"), a sudden change in tone or direction. Here, that volta appears with the final couplet. The three quatrains that make up the first part of the poem all feel either joyful or gentle: there's the thrill of spring, the "luxurious[]" pleasure of summer, the peaceful "content[ment]" of autumn. The tone changes dramatically when winter comes along. This season of life, by contrast, is marked only by "pale misfeature"—faded disfigurement.

METER

"The Human Seasons" is written in the classic meter of the sonnet: iambic pentameter. That means it uses lines of five iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm. Here's how that sounds in line 1:

> Four sea- | sons fill | the mea- | sure of | the year

Keats uses this traditional rhythm in a pretty subtle way here, so the poem sounds quiet and reflective. Some of his stressed syllables are very soft indeed. For instance, take line 11:

> On mists | in i- | dleness—| to let | fair things

The stress on the "-ness" of "idleness" is barely there, fading away—a suitable effect for a line describing the gentle mists of life's autumn.

In the couplet at the end of the poem, Keats also introduces a pair of what are known as feminine endings: extra unstressed syllables on the ends of lines, like so:

> He has | his Win- | ter too | of pale | misfeature,
> Or else | he would | forget | his mor- | tal nature.

These endings give the poem's darker closing lines a hushed, falling-away sound that, again, matches what Keats describes. The lines descend into that last unstressed syllable as humanity descends into wintery decay.

RHYME SCHEME

"The Human Seasons" uses the traditional rhyme scheme of the English sonnet. The pattern runs like this:

ABAB CDCD EFEF GG

This pattern breaks the poem down into four parts: three quatrains (four-line stanzas) and a closing couplet. Keats assigns each of these groupings to a season, more or less:

- The first quatrain introduces the poem's conceit (a human life develops like the four seasons) and

describes childhood, life's springtime.
- The second describes youth, life's summer; at the end of line 8, it eases into...
- The third quatrain, which describes middle age, life's autumn.
- Then comes the closing couplet, which describes old age, life's winter. The change in the pattern of rhyme emphatically cuts off this last and harshest season, setting it apart from the rest.

Keats also uses a smattering of slant rhyme: he pairs "luxuriously" and "nigh," "loves" and "coves," "misfeature" and "nature." (There's some chance that this final rhyme was perfect in Keats's 19th-century London accent, however—an accent that modern-day Londoners would hardly recognize!) This effect softens the poem slightly, fuzzing out the lines' edges.

SPEAKER

The poem's speaker is an omniscient voice here, an observer describing the way that human life runs parallel to the seasons. This speaker notes (as many poets have) that people have a spring, summer, autumn, and winter just as the year does.

What makes this speaker distinct is their very Keatsian focus on beauty (and the perception of beauty) as the essential work of a life. This poem is all about people's relationship to "fair things," their capacity to "take[] in all beauty" across a lifetime. Childhood and youth, in this speaker's view, are the times to absorb and relish beauty, while middle age means peacefully letting beauty wash past. But old age cuts this process off pretty sharply. An elderly season of "pale misfeature" (colorless ugliness or disfigurement) is *necessary*, in this vision, to keep humanity aware of its "mortal nature," the inevitability of death.

There's something rather poignant about this notion of a human lifespan, coming as it does from the pen of a poet who wouldn't live past the summer of his life. Keats died at only 25—though he had the time and the wisdom to recognize the beauties of autumn before he went.

SETTING

If there's a setting for this poem, it's the whole world. Using the seasons as a conceit for the span of a human life, Keats draws on images that transcend any one time or place.

Some of the specific metaphors Keats chooses, however, might evoke either the English countryside or a more archetypal rural paradise. The image of thought as a delicious "honied cud" that youths "ruminate" casts those youths as sheep or cows, peaceful grazing animals of the sort one might find in an English field—or in Arcadia.

In the ancient Greek myths that fascinated Keats (and that inflected much of his poetry), Arcadia was an imaginary pastoral paradise where shepherds peacefully tended their flocks in an eternal summer. Casting young people as blissed-out sheep, Keats quietly suggests that youth *feels* like living among green fields and constant sunshine—and might feel as if it will never end, too.

Similarly, the "quiet coves" and "threshold brook[s]" in the lines on life's autumn feel grounded in landscapes Keats knew, and perhaps in the very landscape Keats was in when he wrote this poem. He composed "The Human Seasons" while visiting England's West Country in 1818, a place where one can't move for seaside coves and trickling brooks.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

John Keats (1795–1821) is often seen as an archetypal Romantic poet: a dreamy, sensuous soul who died tragically young. But Keats was also a vigorous, funny writer, a working-class kid making inroads into a literary scene dominated by aristocratic figures like Lord Byron. He died obscure and poor. But he had a quiet faith in his own genius. In an early letter, he once declared, "I think I shall be among the English Poets after my death."

Keats was also among a notable crowd of English poets during his lifetime: he met or corresponded with most of his fellow Romantics. However, he never got too close to any of them. As a young writer, he was inspired by William Wordsworth, who helped set English Romanticism in motion—but was dismayed to find him pompous and conservative in person. ("Mr. Wordsworth," Wordsworth's wife Mary reprimanded the enthusiastic young Keats, "is never interrupted.") Keats had just one conversation with Samuel Taylor Coleridge (which seems to have felt more like a whirlwind than a friendly chat). And while Percy Shelley admired Keats's work, Keats never quite fell in with him and his elite clique; Byron, Shelley's close friend, was actively contemptuous of Keats. Keats's real circle was instead built from earthier London artists like Charles Lamb, Leigh Hunt, and Benjamin Haydon.

Much of Keats's early poetry, in fact, was markedly social: he wrote poems in conversation (or competition) with friends and often integrated his poetry into letters. He enclosed this poem, for instance, in a letter to his friend Benjamin Bailey, prefacing it with these words:

> [P]robably every mental pursuit takes its reality and worth form the ardour of the pursuer—being in itself a nothing—Ethereal thing[s] may at least be thus real, divided under three heads—Things real—things semireal—and no things—Things real—such as existences of Sun Moon & Stars and passages of

> Shakespeare—Things semireal such as Love, the Clouds &c which require a greeting of the Spirit to make them wholly exist—and Nothings which are made great and Dignified by an ardent pursuit [...] I have written a Sonnet here of a somewhat collateral nature.

In spite of being something of an outsider in his time, Keats has indeed landed "among the English Poets" since his death. Ever since later Victorian writers like Tennyson and Elizabeth Barrett Browning resurrected his reputation, he's been one of the most beloved and influential of poets.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Over the 25 years of his short life, John Keats saw more than his share of loss and pain. His mother and father both died while he was only a child, leaving Keats and his siblings in the care of their grandparents, who shortly also died. Thereafter, the four surviving Keats kids—one further brother died in infancy—grew up under the guardianship of the grasping Richard Abbey, a prosaic businessman with no sympathy for Keats's literary ambitions.

This was only the beginning of Keats's troubles. When he wrote this poem in 1818, his beloved youngest brother Tom was showing the signs of what would be a fatal case of tuberculosis (then known as "consumption," and incurable). Keats, who trained as a doctor, nursed Tom through this dreadful final illness, only to contract tuberculosis himself. He died in 1821—a cruelly short time after he became engaged to his neighbor Fanny Brawne, a young woman he had fallen deeply in love with.

In a biographical light, there's something specially poignant about this poem's visions of a long, complete human life. While Keats only barely lived to see his summer, he fit more than a lifetime's worth of insight and beauty into the few years granted to him. In an 1819 letter to his brother George, he described life and all its pains as a "Vale of Soul-Making":

> I will call the world a School instituted for the purpose of teaching little children to read— I will call the human heart the horn Book used in that School— and I will call the Child able to read, the Soul made from that School and its hornbook. Do you not see how necessary a World of Pains and troubles is to school an Intelligence and make it a Soul? A Place where the heart must feel and suffer in a thousand diverse ways!

In this poem as elsewhere, then, Keats reads grief and loss as a "necessary" part of life, an experience that gives the soul itself its form and identity. More than that, he felt, art that engaged truthfully with suffering had the power to transform pain into beauty.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Keats's Legacy — Admire a statue recently raised to mark Keats's birthplace in London. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2024/oct/26/john-keats-statue-bronze-martin-jennings-moorgate-london)
- Portraits of Keats — See some images of Keats at London's National Portrait Gallery. (https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/person/mp02480/john-keats)
- The Keats Letters Project — Visit the Keats Letters Project to learn more about Keats's letters—some of the liveliest and most profound correspondence in English literature. (https://keatslettersproject.com/)
- Mapping Keats's Progress — Visit this website for a comprehensive overview of Keats's miraculously swift poetic development. The site traces the events of Keats's life and records how and when his poems were composed. (https://johnkeats.uvic.ca/index.html)
- A Brief Biography — Read the Poetry Foundation's short biography of Keats. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/john-keats)
- An Appreciation of Keats — Read an article from the Paris Review reflecting on Keats's literary afterlife. (https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2016/02/23/writ-in-water/)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER JOHN KEATS POEMS

- A thing of beauty is a joy for ever (from Endymion)
- Bright star, would I were stedfast as thou art
- In drear nighted December
- La Belle Dame sans Merci
- Lamia
- Ode on a Grecian Urn
- Ode on Indolence
- Ode on Melancholy
- Ode to a Nightingale
- Ode to Psyche
- On First Looking into Chapman's Homer
- On Seeing the Elgin Marbles
- On Sitting Down to Read King Lear Once Again
- On the Grasshopper and Cricket
- On the Sea
- The Eve of St. Agnes
- This living hand, now warm and capable
- To Autumn
- To Sleep
- When I have Fears That I May Cease to Be

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