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Writing to Competence

Analytic essay

I sat next to my Grandmother's hospital bed and held her hand. Her breathing was shallow and her eyes were open and fixed on me as she whispered, "Please read Keats to me." Tears rolled down my cheeks and my voice quivered as I began to read her favorite poem, "To Autumn." As I finished the poem, I looked up and noticed her breathing had changed. It was slow and shallow and the seconds seemed like minutes as the spaces between breaths increased. I gently reassured her, "I'm right here, Grandma." From a lying down position she sat straight up, looked me in the eye, wrapped her arms around me for just an instant, and then fell back on the bed. The spaces between breaths continued to increase as she repeatedly whispered my grandfather's name, Carl, until the only sound left was an indescribable silence. I looked at my Grandmother as the muscles in her face relaxed. Her eyes and facial expression reflected a calmness and a gentleness. As I closed her eyes I knew in my heart that I was witnessing the peacefulness of someone who had relinquished everything negative in her life. John Keats, a brilliant poet, knew intimately the pain of suffering in life and the peacefulness of coming to terms with death. He lost many family members and ultimately died at a young age of tuberculosis. By accepting, even celebrating autumn in his poem, "To Autumn", Keats reveals his acceptance and coming to terms with the end of his own life.

As the title indicates, the poem is set during the season of autumn. Autumn is personified in this poem as the "season of mists." The fruit trees are loaded with fruit, bending under the load of its burden. With the sun, Autumn is plotting how to bless the vines so they grow more

bountifully. Autumn “swells the gourd” and “plumps the hazel shells.” Autumn will ripen the flowers now, so that they produce seeds to produce flowers for the bees next year. This signifies the continuance of the “cycle of life-life and death” (Kimball) and how one is essential for the other. The sense is one of warmth, maturity, and ripeness. The days are full of warmth; summer seems to overflow.

The poet then personifies Autumn as a woman. She is often reported to be seen amongst her store of goodies, where the stocks for winter have been stored, “sitting careless on a granary floor.” Her hair is “soft-lifted” by the wind and she sleeps in the fields. In the first instance Autumn is symbolized as a harvester. In the second image Autumn is personified as a reaper, a drowsy and happy image. As the reaper falls asleep for a moment, the next few plants get a respite which signifies the cutting down of nature to give way to winter. Autumn in the next instant is personified as a gleaner, gleaning the remnants of nature and beauty from the surrounding world. Here the poet is gathering knowledge by welcoming the time that has passed, the changing seasons and the cycle of life. The last personification is that “of a farmer watching his cider-press squeezing the juice from apples” (Sparknotes), signifying the poet’s desire to squeeze every ounce of joy and life from his last few moments left on earth.

The poet asks about the lost beauty, youth, and life that spring has taken with it. Now all that remains are the “stubble-plains” (Keats), imparting a rosy hue to the land. Gnats are lifted and dropped by the breeze amongst the river willows. Lambs born in spring are now full-grown to face the winter, and are bleating loudly. Birds are twittering in the skies, getting ready to migrate for the winter. The scene expresses calm and serenity. It exudes a positive air.

In this poem, Keats pays homage to Autumn as a time of abundance, but sitting on the cusp of the death of winter. The mood of the entire ode is calm and serene, unlike that in “ode to

a Nightingale” one of Keats’ other famous odes. This poem offers a solution rather than posing a question. It is flawlessly constructed, and thematically expresses harmony with nature. The poem does not exhibit any strong emotions. The reader does not feel the poet’s anguish as deeply as in some of his other poems. Keats reveals acceptance of the cycle of life and nature. He shows a simple appreciation of beauty through simple, yet powerful images. The most stirring aspect of the poem is its simple yet lasting impact, and the realization that appreciation of all that is good and beautiful need not stop just because one life is ending, because another is beginning elsewhere. Through the poem “To Autumn” Keats and my grandmother accepted, celebrated, and even came to terms with the end of their own lives.

Cited Works

Keats, John. *Keats: Poems Published in 1820*. 1909. Ed. M. Robertson. London: Oxford at The Clarendon Press, 2013: 83. Print.

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