



Reflective Poetry 'The Human Seasons'

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Abstract:

'The Human Seasons' is an Elizabethan sonnet and reflective in nature that presents the poet's contemplation over the stages of life as reflected in one's mental growth. The poet rests his idea on the metaphoric analogy of seasons which can be termed as archetypal use of a natural cycle. In the process, striking adjectival collocations are used with a few passive verbs. The language of the poem is simple. The structure of the poem, however, is well thought of. The poet invokes natural imagery and archetypes to convey his thought which is characteristic of Romantic conventions. Although many writers have written on the passage of human life, Keats's 'The Human Seasons' comes to us as one small piece of composition packed with careful observation and ripe understanding of the subject qualified with just use of linguistic and literary devices.

Keywords: Archetype, Collocation, Refrain, Sonnet, Stylistics

1. Introduction

John Keats's 'The Human Seasons' is a reflective poem. Reflective poem means that the poem presents a thought as its subject matter instead of an event or action. Narrative poems, on the other hand, would majorly involve some past action or event in its content. Reflective poems tend to be philosophical in their outlook toward life, and the poet either observes or speculates about truth of persistent conditions of human life which may include inductive thinking. Besides, explicit, or implicit generalizations in such poems often tend to give an abstract quality to the general import of the poem. There are a lot many other examples of reflective poetry, and to name a few, Shakespeare's 'All The World's A Stage', Emily Dickinson's 'Hope is the Thing with Feathers', W. B Yeats's Byzantism poems, Robert Frost's 'Fire and Ice' Maya Angelou's 'Still I Rise' among others.

Like many poets writing in different times and traditions, Keats also takes an objective look at human life with a sense of detachment. With utmost economy of words, he sums up the kernel of significant phases of human life, which is, analogically speaking, reminiscent of the ancient Indian concept of Purusarth Chatushthaya or 'fourfold actions' set in four 'ashramas' of human life.

John Keats (1795-1821) was one central figure among the second generation of English Romantic poets along with Lord Byron and PB Shelley. His poems were noted for his forthrightness in subject matter, bold assertions celebrating physical and transient phenomena in the world and sensual imagery that took its society by surprise. 'The Human Seasons' is Keats's personal ruminations about life when he was at Teignmouth, a seaside town in the British county of Devon in the year of 1818. His first work on his collected poems, Poems by John Keats was published in 1817. Soon after the promising poet was out in print with his poems so different in tone, style and content, his art was severely reviled by Blackwood's Magazine and Quarterly Review. One piece published in Blackwood's, 'On the Cockney School of Poetry' made him almost reluctant to publish his next major work 'Endymion', which was also doomed to be flaked by debasing reviews from the critics. More so, the year 1818 became a crucible for Keats concerning his own and his brother Tom's failing health and the latter's subsequent death in the same year. Despite the vagaries of time and dwindling health, Keats came to produce finest

of odds, sonnets, long narrative poems, lyrics in short time which were sufficient to secure his name in the English literary history. Surprising though, harsh critical reception of his time made this 'bright star' though he was a failure when he breathed his last at the tender age of twenty-five.

2. Objectives

- To paraphrase and clarify denotative meaning of the poem
- To understand Keats as a Romantic Poet with reference to his major poetic principle
- To explicate the poem with close reading and interpret it in terms of archetypes and stylistic analysis
- To understand the structure of the poem and devices used therein
- On completing the Unit, you should be able to elaborate on interpretations of the poem 'The Human Seasons' and evaluate its literary devices and structure.

3. Poem: The Human Seasons

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,
Take in all beauty with an easy span:
He has his Summer, when luxuriously,
Spring's honey's cud of youthful thought he loves
To ruminate, and by such dreaming high
Is 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
A pass by unheeding as a threshold brook.
He has his Winter too of pale misfeature.
Or else he would forego his mortal nature.

4. Keatsian poetic outlook

Keatsian writing differs from his fellow poets in terms of his choice of content, style and outlook to the world. The element of Romanticism is singularly marked in his poems by an undying optimism and projection of nature as a source of the 'beautiful' and 'changing reality' yet a steady source of them. In a letter to George and Thomas Keats that he wrote in December, 1817, he stated, the excellence of every Art is its intensity, capable of making all disagreeables evaporate, from their being in close relationship with Beauty and Truth. (John Keats: Letters, 370). This idea culminates into one of his major critical tenets that he contributes to the history of ideas which he called 'Negative Capability'. In another letter to his brothers George and Thomas (on 21 December 1817), he elaborates on his idea of 'Negative Capability' of the poet which enables the poet to live with the unlivable in the world without any conflictual impulse. He wrote: 'I mean Negative Capability, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason... It means that sometimes in the pursuit of aesthetic principle, the writer or the poet moves from intellectual certainties to something unknown or uncertain and the artist explores his or her own vision unbiased of readymade formula of thought and feeling prescribed by philosophy, religion, and social ethics. All human endeavours, howsoever disparate they may be, should in the end converge in attainment of Beauty and Truth. His contemplation about art and life are to be seen in his poems and letters.

Keats majorly deals with the following themes in his poems such as eternal principles of truth and beauty, death or dissolution of existence, sensual reality and art, music, ancient worlds, and musings about the beloved.

5. Explication of the poem

Natural seasons, as perceived in Europe, namely, spring, summer, autumn, and winter correlate here with stages of life as in childhood, youth, maturity, old age, or death. However, Keats takes this comparison further to a subtle level of states of mind that one experience. And it is possible to envision them by imagination and reasoning without as such having lived them physically.

In the first two lines, the poet introduces the idea of the poem. The following two lines speak of the early phase of life, or a mindset that is innocent. The usage 'lusty Spring' stands for luscious and joyful time when the perception of the world is full of wonder, happiness, and curiosity. It is this readiness to witness and participate in the abundance of joy that makes one marvel at the world. Such 'fancy' makes one behold everything in the world as beautiful and passes one's time in this phase easily.

Summer is the buoyant phase of youthfulness or when the state of mind is chirpy. This phase signifies stepping into action. All that one had perceived with wonder and marvel, the youthful gaze on life loves to ponder about it; the faculty of imagination soars high. It is the time when the youthful take on life makes one embark on joyride of life with adventures, explorations, new ventures while the expectations are high. In such dreamy high-flying state of mind, one feels 'nearest unto heaven'.

Autumn is marked by peaceful and steady poise. It is the state of mind where one feels the need to 'furl close one's wings' withdraw from diverse fields of action. The person now takes the estimate of what one gained on roundabouts and what one lost on swings. It is the time when one can look back on actions and choices made and with hindsight one understands one's participation in life. Having lived fully and seen much, now one feels content and responds to the charms of life with unaffected equipoise of mind. Autumn here stands for the maturity that comes after analyzing and understanding one's experiences of life.

Winter is the final passage or a state of mind that completely withdraws from all sorts of engagement of body and mind. The sense faculties are no longer at service of the living being and even the slightest capacity of relishing the life diminishes.

6. Critical reading of 'The Human Seasons'

While at Teignmouth, Keats penned this sonnet and sent it along with a letter to Benjamin Bailey dated 13 March, 1818. He wrote: 'You know my ideas about Religion. I do not think myself more in the right than other people and that nothing in this world is proveable. I wish I could enter into all your feelings on the subject merely for one short 10 Minutes and give you a Page or two to your liking. I am sometimes so very skeptical as to think Poetry itself a mere Jack a lan then to amuse whoever may chance to be struck with its brilliance. As Tradesmen say everything is worth what it will fetch, so probably every mental pursuit takes its reality and worth from the ardour of the pursuer 'being a nothing 'Ethereal thing may at least be thus real, divided under three heads Things real things semi-real and no things. Things real such as existences of Sun Moon and Stars and passages of Shakespeare. Things semi-real such as Love, the Clouds & which require a greeting of the Spirit to make them wholly exist and Nothings which are made Great and dignified by an ardent pursuit which by the by stamps the burgundy mark on the bottles of our Minds, insomuch as they can "consecrate whatever they look upon." I have written a Sonnet here of a somewhat collateral nature so do not imagine it a propos des botes.'

Young Keats makes a subtle point in that perceived reality consists of concrete objects or phenomena as could be felt and seen, objects not in direct contact or emotions that could be understood with a dash of imagination or sensation, and thoughts or mental pursuits which do not exist in real life yet they can be sublime to experience as much as one endeavour to fathom them. Writing and reading poetry belongs to this last category, especially when the poem is reflective and deals in some kind of idea. In this poem,

The Human Seasons', the poet ideates about the passage of life and builds a fine symbolic abstract complex of ideas on it.

Keats makes it explicit that the poem is about the seasons as are in the mind of man. Seasons are transformational processes of nature and so is true about human lives. Over period, we do change with respect to our thoughts, feelings, priorities, and goals and understanding of life. Human beings transform and there seems to be a pattern akin to nature's transformational processes.

Apart from apparent parallels between different seasons and psychosomatic realities of life, Keats underscores these parallels by his striking collocations of words. These collocations yield symbolic overtones to meanings: lusty Spring, fancy clear, easy span, honied cud, quiet coves, threshold brook, pale misfeature, mortal nature. In the description of each seasonal correlation, these collocations leave space for different interpretations.

Let us look at some of these meanings. Calling Spring lusty draws attention to itself, which stands for a frame of mind and time in life where everything seems possible and one observes 'all beauty'. 'Easy span' suggests certain courage born of innocence or naivete where one marvel at this whole world with a sense of wonder. However, this time of childhood fancy lasts for a short time. 'Honied cud' evokes an imagery of the cattle and suggests the blithesome time spent in the phase of youth; reminiscing memories of ebullient joy that one experienced in living and doing. The grown-up mind in Summer can better assess the pleasantness of experiences. Man can reflect on his Spring (childhood) with better clarity in his Summer (youth). In Autumn, quiet coves are man's thoughtful reflections on his 'honied cud' of youth. There is a beginning of emotional and rational detachment from what made man lively. Keats employs the imagery of bird that furls close its wings to connote this withdrawal and ability to transcend to higher contemplative nature. More number of lines are devoted to Autumn, for these time stands for the culmination of man's wisdom. One is seemingly at peace and considers not only the beautiful but also the oddities of life with equanimity. 'Fair things', which once drew out man's enthusiasm now 'pass by unheeded'. Here, man is aware of joys and calls of life, but no longer is he driven by them. Winter ushers in 'pale misfeature' it could be read either as incapacity born of old age or even death. One comes to terms with the 'mortal nature' of human life and that is the ultimate reality of every living being.

7. Interpreting the Seasons

The human life is short lived; an ephemeral truth of existence while one walks and breathes in the world. The lives of individuals may vary, yet everyone unexceptionally pass through the same phases of life just as the reality of day and night may vary on every part of the day but the cycle of the season permeates everywhere on the earth. By setting parallels between natural seasons and human conditions, Keats makes the entire poem symbolic and leaves open different possibilities to interpret it differently. Look into the table given below for possible interpretations.

Seasons / interpretation	Spring	Summer	Autumn	Winter
<i>Stages of growth</i>	Childhood	Youth	Maturity, procreation, sustenance	Old age, debility, nearing one's end
<i>Life as a journey</i>	Innocence, Inexperience	Growth; willingness to do	Observing experience; understanding things around	Withdrawal, passing out
<i>Emotional states</i>	Curiosity; desire to know and explore	Optimism; Liveliness	Contemplation; Objectivity	Sense of finality; completion
<i>Pastoral trope</i>	Sowing seeds, plantation	Cultivation; Nurturing	Ripening; Harvesting	Post-harvest cleaning
<i>Archetypes</i>	Birth	Growth	Decay	Dissolution
<i>Frye's archetypal scheme of genre</i>	Comedy	Romance	Tragedy	Irony

From the above chart, one can see that four seasons may be interpreted differently such as stage of growth in human life, life as a journey or series of experiences, emotional conditions, pastoral trope, or even archetypes or typical thought frameworks which many writers have used over centuries in their writings, and lastly, Northrop Frye's classification of the literary genre or kinds of writing that correspond to the seasons. Frye used seasonal analogy to elicit major thematic concerns in given genres that correspond to the environmental changes. He also showed through his analogy how the archetypes of birth, growth, decay, and dissolution recurred in most literary traditions in different literary and art forms and drew their symbolic import from the cycle of natural seasons.

8. Structure of the poem

Keats's 'The Human Seasons' is an Elizabethan sonnet with the rhyme pattern of ababcdcdefeg written in iambic pentameter. A sonnet typically has 14 lines. Here, the structure of the poem is carefully set. First, the natural order of seasons is preserved: spring, summer, autumn, and winter. (Note that this is the order of the fourfold season as perceived in England. In India, seasons are conventionally classified as six: Vasanta 'spring', Grishma 'summer', Varsha 'Monsoon', Sharada 'autumn', Hemanta 'Pre-winter', Shishira 'winter') Second, the order of seasons also correlates with natural order of aging. Moreover, number of words in lines spared for each season is in relevance to the significance of the phase of human life: spring is short; summer and autumn are long, and winter is short.

The innocent period of life stays for short duration and that is reflected using only two lines spared for the 'Spring': 'He has his lusty Spring, when fancy clear/Takes in all beauty with an easy span: 'The joyful time of summer is little longer and suggests man's ability to engage with life while one reflected on the past. The time of Autumn is the pinnacle of human understanding of life. The poet uses a greater number of lines in the description of Summer and Autumn. The final dissolution or death is treated in the last two lines. Besides, references to seasons per se become metaphorical in nature.

The poem makes use of refrains. A refrain is a repeated word, phrase or line that recurs in the composition to serve either thematic or mnemonic purpose. In this case, the recurring phrases are, 'He

has his lusty Spring', 'He has his Summer', 'He has his Winter'. The refrain gives a tonal unity and makes reading easy. This poem carefully uses this device to single out different seasons in the poem.

Besides this, 'The Human Seasons' is a reflective poem, that is, the poem foregrounds an idea rather than an event or action. Stylistically speaking, action verbs are less preferred over passive verbs and more adjectival phrases are employed. In this poem, ten verbs are used. They are: 'fill', 'takes', 'loves', 'ruminate', 'dreaming', 'furleth', 'look', 'let', 'pass', and 'forego'. And all these verbs suggest passive or negligible movements in physical life, which will not be the case in a narrative poem full of action. Moreover, the seasons are qualified with unusual adjectival collocations:

Spring: _lusty spring', 'easy span'

Summer: 'honied cud', 'youthful thought'

Autumn: 'quiet coves', 'mists in idleness', 'fair things pass by', 'threshold brook'

Winter: 'pale misfeature', 'mortal nature'

Thus, the poem presents a thought quite philosophical in nature and compels its reader to consider these analogies in earnestness.

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