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2-27-2024

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#### Recommended Citation

Dilworth, Thomas. (2024). 'Barred Clouds': Constraint in Keats's 'To Autumn'. *The Explicator*, 65 (1), 26-28.  
<https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/englishpub/99>

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## ‘Barred Clouds’: Constraint in Keats’s ‘To Autumn’

by Thomas Dilworth

To Jim McKinnon, who taught me how to read this poem,

[This is a revision of ‘Keats’s ‘To Autumn’ published in *Explicator* 65:1 (Fall 2006), 26-8]

I have long wondered why in line 24 of Keats’s ‘To Autumn’ the clouds at sunset are ‘barred’. Keats writes that Autumn has its own songs, ‘While barred clouds bloom the soft-dying day, / and touch the stubble-plains with rosy hue’ (lines 24-5).<sup>1</sup> The adjective ‘barred’ denotes that the clouds are long and thin and horizontal. The modifier is odd and, as merely descriptive, would be under employed. This is especially the case since Keats took some trouble over the image—in the manuscript of the poem, ‘barred clouds bloom’ replaces ‘a gold cloud gilds.’<sup>2</sup> In a poem of such tactile and kinesthetic imagery, ‘barred’ likely has more than visual force. Bars obstruct, curtail activity, may be grasped and held. And they verbally correspond with ‘cells’ of bees in line 11, which ‘Summer has o’er-brimm’d’ with honey. Cells in a honeycomb are not prison cells, of course, but the word is the same, and this sameness is augmented by the bee cells being ‘clammy’, as prison cells, especially dungeon cells, often are. Windows in prison cells are barred. So ‘barred clouds’ evoke imprisonment. In this they symbolically mean one or both of two things: that the poet and reader and all humans are imprisoned; or that the sun, setting behind the clouds, is imprisoned. If the latter, Keats may be influenced by the sun behind the skeleton ship on Coleridge’s ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’.

And straight the Sun was flecked with bars,  
(Heaven’s Mother send us grace!)  
As if through a dungeon grate he peered  
With broad and burning face. (lines 176-80)<sup>3</sup>

If the poet, the reader, and the rest of humanity are imprisoned, there seems to be justification for the negative connotations of ‘Conspiring’ in line 2 of Keats’s poem, where Autumn is ‘Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun; / Conspiring with him how to load and bless / With fruit the vines ...’ (lines 2-3). Beyond immediate positive purpose, the sun colludes with all seasons to

‘imprison’ humanity in time. About this, of course, the sun and seasons are not free but are themselves similarly constrained.

The word ‘barred’ as indicative of constraint in association with ‘Conspiring’ and ‘cells’ adds to the negative connotations of mutability throughout the poem. It darkens them by adding the element of enforcement and implied opposition. And that alters the overall meaning of the poem, intensifying its effect. Negative connotations increase the impression of abundance by contrast, as seasoning increases taste and darkness brightens light. In the poem, physical, emotional, and sonic abundance remains the primary experience owing to emphasis on present awareness, which is secured by imagery of touch and kinesthesia. This suits Keats’s stated preference for experience over philosophical thinking: ‘O for a Life of Sensation rather than of Thoughts!’<sup>4</sup> In this poem, immediate tactile sensation results in experience of fullness and peace, which resists thoughts of winter and death that durational time inevitably brings. In this respect, ‘the truth of literature’, i.e., of this poem, is profoundly true since in real experience there is no past or future, only the present moment. The imagery of constraint gives edge to awareness in, and of, the present and highlights a heretofore unappreciated thematic aspect of the poem. It implies that inner freedom of awareness and attention is available to the poet and reader and to anyone else in any physical context, situation, or condition. As Richard Lovelace puts it, ‘Stone walls do not a prison make, / Nor iron bars a cage.’<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Online: [To Autumn by John Keats | Poetry Foundation](#)

<sup>2</sup> Photograph of the manuscript. Andrew Motion, *Keats* (University of Chicago, 1997), p 40.). Sensitive to the negative connotation of the image, Motion writes that “‘barred clouds” ... give intimations of mortality while seeming to resist it’ (p. 4600, though he does not explain how bars suggest mortality.

<sup>3</sup> On line: [The Rime of the Ancient Mariner \(text of 1834\) by... | Poetry Foundation](#)

<sup>4</sup> John Keats, *The Letters*, Maurice Forman ed. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1947), 68.

<sup>5</sup> On line: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/search?query=To+Althea%2C+from+Prison>