



Portrayal of Negative Capability in John Keats's *Ode To Nightingale*

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Abstract

Negative capability is the ability to not know, to tolerate ambiguity and resist that instinctive need to protect oneself through understanding and control. It is the ability to see the truth of the world through an unfiltered lens, no matter how disturbing or threatening it is, and to abandon beliefs that serve to protect one's identity and create comfort. Negative Capability, as articulated by John Keats in his 1817 letter, is a pivotal concept in Romantic literature. It refers to the poet's ability to remain in uncertainties and mysteries without seeking factual or rational explanations. In *Ode to a Nightingale*, John Keats exemplifies Negative Capability—the ability to exist within uncertainty, mysteries, and doubts without irritably reaching after fact or reason—by immersing himself in the fleeting beauty of the nightingale's song, accepting the coexistence of joy and pain, and embracing the unknown regarding life and death.

Keywords: Negative Capability, Romanticism, Escapism, Perception

Introduction

Negative capability was a phrase first used by Romantic poet John Keats in 1817 to characterise the capacity of the greatest writers particularly Shakespeare to pursue a vision of artistic beauty even when it leads them into intellectual confusion and uncertainty, as opposed to a preference for philosophical certainty over artistic beauty. The term has been used by poets and philosophers to describe the ability of the individual to perceive, think, and operate beyond any presupposition of a predetermined capacity of the human being. Keats used the phrase only briefly in a private letter, and it became known only after his correspondence was collected and published. In Keats' poem *Ode to a Nightingale* an example of negative capability is visible. The poem deals with the poet's musings on morality in a pessimistic manner. In the beginning



the poet is being mesmerized by the nightingale's song and he is in a state of intoxication. Later poet intends to join the bird by forgetting all the worldly difficulties by having high quality wine. But then the poet rejects this idea and by his "viewless wings of poesy" he can leave the world. He believes his imagination will help him to forget all the pains of life. And he is already with the bird with his imagination. Towards the end poet believes that this is the most appropriate time to die because he can leave the world by listening to the immortal song of nightingale. When Keats concludes the poem he is in a state of confusion and says "was it a vision or dream?" He is in a state of internal conflict and never reaching for facts or reasons. In this instance we can find element of negative capability in *Ode to a Nightingale*.

Major Thrust

Among the celebrated poets of the Romantic era, John Keats stands out for his exceptional ability to evoke beauty and deep emotional resonance in his works. Born in 1795, Keats produced a remarkable body of poetry within his short life, marked by an intense sensitivity to the fleeting nature of human experience and a profound appreciation for the aesthetic dimension of life. The concept of Negative Capability is foundational to understanding John Keats's poetic philosophy. Through a close examination of Keats's letters and major poems, this section analyses how he articulates and exemplifies Negative Capability, using textual evidence to illustrate the depth and complexity of this idea.

First the intoxication of wine and later the "viewless wings of Poesy" seem reliable ways of escaping the confines of the "dull brain," but finally it is death itself that seems the only possible means of overcoming the fear of time. The nightingale is "immortal" because it was not born for death and cannot conceive of its own passing. Yet without consciousness, humans cannot experience beauty, and the speaker knows that if he were dead his perception of the nightingale's call would not exist at all. This paradox shatters his vision, the nightingale flies off, and the speaker is left to wonder whether his experience has been a truthful "vision" or a false "dream." Referred to by critics of the time as "the longest and most personal of the odes," the poem describes Keats' journey into the state of Negative Capability. Keats' poems are full of contradictions in meaning ('a drowsy numbness pains') and emotion ('both together, sane and mad') and he accepts a double nature as a creative insight. In *Ode To Nightingale* it is the apparent or real contradictions that allow Keats to create the sensual feeling of numbness that allows the reader to experience the half-swooning emotion Keats is trying to capture. Keats



would have us experience the emotion of the language and pass over the half-truths in silence, to live a life 'of sensations rather than of Thoughts'. Thus, *Ode to the Nightingale* is more feeling than a thinking poem. Keats often deals in the sensations created by words rather than meaning. Even if the precise definition of words causes contradiction, they can still be used together to create the right ambience. Negative Capability asks us to allow the atmosphere of Keats' poems to surround us without picking out individual meanings and inconsistencies.

“That I might drink, and leave the world unseen”

Hearing the song of the nightingale, the speaker longs to flee the human world and join the bird. His first thought is to reach the bird's state through alcohol--in the second stanza, he longs for a "draught of vintage" to transport him out of himself. But after his meditation in the third stanza on the transience of life, he rejects the idea of being "charioted by Bacchus and his pards" and chooses instead to embrace "the viewless wings of Poesy." The rapture of poetic inspiration matches the endless creative rapture of the nightingale's music and lets the speaker, in stanzas five through seven, imagine himself with the bird in the darkened forest. The ecstatic music even encourages the speaker to embrace the idea of dying, of painlessly succumbing to death while enraptured by the nightingale's music and never experiencing any further pain or disappointment.

The most notable use of Negative Capability in *Ode to a Nightingale* is the embodiment of imagination. The purpose of Keats's Negative Capability is to warn himself and other poets that the key to successful poetry is imagination and that if one wants to have a constant stream of imagination, one must paralyze one's consciousness, empty one's pain-filled soul, refrain from eagerly going back to its roots, and possess the ability to live in confusion and hesitation. Keats fully liberated his imagination in this poem. In the first two stanzas, Keats wrote: "*my heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains my sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk.....that I might drink, and leave the world unseen, and with thee fade away into the forest dim*", the poet expressed his obsession with the song of the nightingale, and his wish to fly with it to a world without suffering and pain, but only by drinking poisoned wine or opium to anesthetize his nerves. However, in stanza 4, he wrote: "*away! away! for I will fly to thee, Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards, but on the viewless wings of Poesy*", relying only on the imagination of poetry to escape from the immediate suffering, even if human consciousness would hinder his progress. Moreover, only by letting one's imagination take



flight is it possible to follow the nightingale into the mountains in hiding. These four stanzas are interconnected, giving the readers a lively leap while implying a logical relationship that cannot be ignored. The readers are brought into it as if hearing the crisp and gentle cry of the nightingale and following it as it drifts ever further away. This fits perfectly with the concept of Negative Capability, where imagination is the grip that can extract beauty from the truth while remaining confused and unrequited is the key that can fully stimulate the imagination. To a certain extent, it reflects Keats's pursuit of the aesthetic value and artistry of poetry, his confidence in his ability to integrate purely into nature, and definitely, it may also be limited to his poor physical condition and in order to escape from the pain of life for a short time, he can only rely on poetry to send his spirit to the things of nature. Meanwhile, in the third stanza of the poem, the poet sees through the nightingale's perspective that the human world is full of negative emotions and pain and also sees the fickleness of youth, beauty, and love. For John Keats, it was as if nothing could be eternal except the song of the nightingale. The reason why the poet saw these images regarding the human world through the nightingale's eyes was that they were closely related to Keats's personal experience: his father died in 1810, and his mother died six years later of tuberculosis. To support the family, Keats became a pharmacist, a despised profession at that time, and within a year, he quit his job to become a poet. The death of his family, the turmoil of his career, his anxiety about money, and the pain of not being able to obtain the perfect love all weighed on his shoulders. The fleeting happiness and beauty in his life made Keats feel desperate, but he was not overwhelmed by despair. Instead, he kept searching for a spiritual way out, struggling to get rid of the shackles of his mind, looking down on life and death in the world of poetry, and then living his short and twisted life with transcendence and spontaneity. However, in the darkness, Keats chose to let his thoughts fly above the natural fields. From spring to summer, he saw the wilderness and the fading violets and saw swarms of flies around the decaying vegetation. Such a scene was full of the most natural beauty, compared to the sorrow and joy of earth; Keats felt the supreme pure beauty, which all followed the laws of nature, either vibrant or fading. These stanzas combine the human world with the eternal world, and there are some similarities and also differences. The purpose of Keats in constructing this vision is to make the human world and the bliss world become a community, and the format of the whole enables the poet to be at ease. Moreover, in the next verse, Keats said frankly: *"now more than ever seems it rich to die, to cease upon the midnight with no pain, while thou*



art pouring forth thy soul abroad in such an ecstasy!” Keats, who had lost the romantic expectations of life and death, looked forward to his own judgment of death in such a beautiful scene. Moreover, in the last stanza, Keats wrote *was it a vision, or a waking dream? Fled is that music: —Do I wake or sleep?* This questionable ending is very thought-provoking. The poet does not give a specific answer but leaves this question to the readers and himself.

Conclusion

This paper mainly analyses the critical concept of Negative Capability proposed by Keats and tries to make the analysis more specific by dismantling *Ode to a Nightingale*. This article explores the deep connotation of negative capability and its application of it in Keats’s poetry and concludes that negative capability is not only an aesthetic concept proposed by Keats but even becomes his life creed. It is only in dreaming, Keats says, that we can become conscious of, and merged with, the life around us. Thus, Keats heads towards Negative Capability in the poem. Keats is not as great as Shakespeare but he has the same power of self-absorption, that wonderful sympathy and identification with all things, that Negative Capability which he saw as essential to the creation of great poetry and which Shakespeare possessed so abundantly.

Works Cited

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