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*John Keats: Negative Capability*

Negative Capability is a state of mind where a person attempts to look at the world around them without trying to attain fact or reason. It can be seen as an expression of empathy, as it can help someone to understand the feelings of someone else. This is important, since it allows people to see the world through different points of view and furthermore, express them. This is important to artists, such as poets, because in order to write true, beautiful poetry they need to be able to forget their own problems and worries and surrender themselves fully to the conflicts, characters and objects that they are writing about.

John Keats came up with this idea of Negative Capability while he was walking home with friends on Christmas in December 1817 (Hebron). He described Negative Capability as “when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason” (Keats Letter to His Brothers, December 1817). Keats believed that in order to write – or read and understand – a poem of literary merit, we need to be comfortable with letting mysteries and doubts remain as they are instead of searching for reasons and answers. When thinking of Negative Capability Keats is using the word ‘negative’ with the idea that a person’s potential is displayed by what someone does, and not what someone has. In terms of Negative Capability, Keats is referring to the fact that a person has more potential when they do not possess the need to work everything out and understand everything in the world (Hebron).

One of John Keats greatest desires seemed to be focused on finding beauty in a world that was often seen as ugly and cruel. He thought that art was an essential key to doing this. Furthermore, he felt that art was a tie between the real world and the imagination. Keats thought that the only way to find the beauty he was searching for was to get outside of his own mind and his own self and relinquish himself fully to his imagination.

In the sense of poetry, John Keats thought that having Negative Capability was one of the most essential traits a poet must possess in order to write good works. He believed that the ‘negative space’ of their minds allowed them to symbolize object. A poet would then be forced to throw himself into the object in question and then proceed to erase his own personal identities. By doing this the poet is able to express the intensity and emotion of his or her works by communicating solely with his imagination. The purpose of doing this is so that the poet can tie the emotions with the object in such a way that the object is a symbol for the emotions being expressed or displayed. The beauty that Keats was so longing to find came from the connection between the object and the emotions of the poet.

One of the central problems with the idea of Negative Capability, however, is the conflict of how a poet can present these emotions and objects when his mind is so overtaken by imagination. The claims made in the poems need to have credibility, but at the same time, by instilling their own personality, ideas, and memories into the work the poet can also compromise the integrity of the piece. Keats, however, felt that the heart of a poet’s expression came from the knowledge that the mysteries of the world shouldn’t be forced to make any sort of sense. He felt that in order to really be successful, these uncertainties needed to be relished and not studied as if in a scientific manner. When bringing together the literal meanings of the words ‘negative’ and ‘capability’, it is easy to understand how Keats came to this idea, because when brought together the words refer to the place in a person’s mind where they are free from life’s darkness and troubles (Theory and Practice). Only in this space can a poet truly produce good poetry.

John Keats got inspiration for this idea of Negative Capability while watching Shakespearian dramas. Keats saw Shakespeare as a “Man of Achievement” and in a letter to his brothers described him as such:

“At once it struck me, what quality went to form a Man of Achievement, especially in literature, and which Shakespeare possessed so enormously – I mean Negative Capability…” (Keats, December 1817)

John Keats saw Shakespeare as one of the greatest poets for expressing the emotions of the human heart. He imagined the Bard’s power deriving from the sort of dedication and determination Keats himself had in pursuing his desire to be a great poet (Hebron).

The overall conception of Keats’ idea of Negative Capability, however, stemmed from watching the performances of Edmund Kean, who starred in many of the plays Keats went to see over the years. By watching Kean, Keats came up with the idea of ‘gusto’, which is described as an “intensity which supercedes older term like nature and universality as a first order criterion for poetic development (Ibrahim Ali, 116)”. In other words, it’s the poet’s ability to make his work seem more ‘real’ and ‘alive’. Keats watched the way Kean gave up his own identity to his characters’ and melted into his performance onstage. The way the actor’s personal life and individuality vanished in order for Kean to give a true performance fueled Keats’ idea of Negative Capability.

When thinking about how someone might literally *use* the idea of Negative Capability, they might consider when a person stops to admire or think about a bird hopping about on the path in front of them, or when a person looks at someone they admire or love and forgets his own self because he is in a sense living in that other person. Negative Capability is completely giving oneself up to their emotions and imagination and ridding himself of anything that may get in the way of that, even if it means momentarily giving up his own identity.

Keats employs the concept of Negative Capability in his own poetry, especially in the poem “Ode to a Nightingale”. In this piece John Keats is trying to understand the mysteries of the world the nightingale lives in. He does this by trying to lose himself within the being of the bird, or by becoming one with it. He feels an ache in his heart that isn’t from physical desire or hurt, but because he wishes so strongly to become part of the nature that surrounds the nightingale.

“My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains

My sense, as though hemlock I had drunk,

Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains

One minute past, and Lethe-wards had sunk” (Keats, Ode to a Nightingale, lines 1-4)

The poet’s wish to become engulfed in the bird’s song is like how wine intoxicates the brain. The effects of the alcohol allow the speaker to be free from the confines of his own boring thoughts. The poet feels as if his consciousness as a human being forbids him from being able to be happy like the nightingale. If he were to be free of this consciousness, then the poet would be able to see and experience the beauty that the nightingale is experiencing.

The reason the nightingale seems to be so happy in the first place is because she has no knowledge of what it’s like to be afraid of time, and even more so, of death and mortality. The immortality that the nightingale seems to possess stems from the fact that she can’t think. By utilizing the idea of Negative Capability the poet has the power to not necessarily escape into the bird’s world, but unite with her in a way so that he can fly with her. He clears his mind of his life’s troubles and allows himself to see through her eyes.

“Cannot see what flowers are at me feet,

Nor what soft incense hangs upon the boughs,

But, in embalmed darkness, guess each sweet/

Wherewith the seasonable month endows/

The grass, the thicket, and the fruit-tree wild;

White hawthorne, and the pastoral eglantine…” (Keats, Ode to a Nightingale, lines 41-46)

By being able to observe and experience what the nightingale’s world is like, the speaker comes to realize that the things he, and most other humans, worry about most are things that shouldn’t be worried about at all. Humans are scared of time, because time means eventual death. Still, it is through the bird’s song that the poet realizes how much he wants to attain the kind of immortality the bird and her music has. This helps the poet realize that time and death may not be as ‘final’ as they so terrifyingly seem at first. Perhaps he may physically die one day, but his ideas – his art – will live on after him, just as the nightingale’s song will be eternal.

When the bird flies away at the end of the poem, the poet is forced to decide whether what he witnessed was real or whether he made it up in some sort of dream. This paradox is what allows John Keats to use the concept of Negative Capability in the poem. Keats wants readers to read the poem in such a way that they align themselves with the language and emotions of the piece. The idea he’s trying to put forth is that while reading his poetry, and while writing poetry as well, a person should live and act based on the sensations and emotions they feel – on their instincts – and not on thought and reason.

Another example of how John Keats used the idea of Negative Capability in his own work is by looking at his poem, “Ode on a Grecian Urn.” In this piece Keats is trying to use fantasy and imagination in order to obtain eternity through a work of art. By using the urn Keats is displaying what is possible when a person ties their emotions to a certain object. The doubts and uncertainties in the poet’s mind are what enable him to fuel his imagination in such a way that he can truly contemplate the urn. He finds that when he lets himself really look into the pictures displayed on the urn, he is able to completely forget everything he may have been worrying about moments before.

The urn is unaffected by time, and it helps the poet transition from being a mere observer to actually participating in the life depicted on the vase. It lets him really contemplate that life, and eventually the poet starts to lose his own self, or identity, so that he can become one with that world on the urn.

On the urn are three main symbols from Grecian lifestyle. These are music, nature, and love. The poet can hear the music, even though no sound is being produced at that moment when he is looking at the urn. The trees on the urn are never bare, and the lovers are always happy. The urn represents immortality by using these three symbols by showing these special, frozen moments in Grecian life.

The poet is able to feel the sense of happiness depicted on the urn just by opening himself up to the idea that the urn is protected from time. The trees will never lose their leaves; the lovers will always be young and filled with joy. This happiness is a key concept because it is such a stark contrast in comparison to what troubles the poet may be feeling as he’s gazing at this urn. By being able to imagine such a world that is free of worry and time, the poet is able to really experience and share the emotion that is being immortalized by this depiction of the Grecian world.

The reasons the poet is able to feel and experience all these things so intensely, and describe them as such, is because they are using Negative Capability. By losing his own identity the poet can fully look further into the paintings on the urn and try to think about the kind of community these people on the vase may have been a part of. For example, one question the poet seems to wonder about is that of the sacrifice of the female cow. By employing Negative Capability he can go beyond the paintings to question what the identity of the priest may be, what direction the people might be coming from, and where they might be going. These aspects aren’t physically displayed on the urn through paintings, but the intensity of the poet’s description of the object allows one to think about the unknown.

Furthermore, questions like this allow the poet to contemplate the urn’s connection to immortality. In fact, it almost seems like the urn ties mortality and immortality together, or fuses them. The physical place depicted on the urn is not on earth, nor in Heaven, but somewhere in between. Therefore, the people on the urn can never arrive where they are actually going, which is why the poet will never be able to know what direction they are coming from or where they are going during the scene of the sacrifice. They’ll never go to Heaven, since they’ll never reach the altar where the heifer is being sacrificed, but they’ll never make it to earth either because they’ll never make it back to whatever town or village they may have come from. The pictures displayed on the object are silent. Still, the poet is able to link his point of view to the world on the urn and let go of his troubles simply because he is employing Negative Capability.

As in “Ode to a Nightingale,” however, the final stanza serves as the point where the poet must retreat from his imagination and back into the real world he came from. This means that he must look at the urn as an outsider, and analyze it as such. The point of the poet getting so enraptured by the urn in the first place was to show how much power an object can have over our emotions, to the point where they can take us out of our own thoughts completely. This is where Keats’ idea of ‘gusto’ comes into play, because it is this gusto that gives the urn the ability to encourage the poet to shed his identity and worries in exchange for being able to experience this ambiguous Grecian lifestyle.

The urn allowed the poet to take a journey through his own imagination in such a way that he is able to realize what he himself thinks is most important in his own world. Delving into the world on the urn gave Keats’ the insight into the idea that beauty and truth can in fact be the same thing. The intensity of the feelings and emotions he felt while looking at this urn showed that our outside lives, or our rational, logical thoughts and reasons, can cover up the beautiful world around us. Keats realized that the world seems so ugly and cruel because it is the inner thoughts and troubles of our human minds that make it so.

In order to write “true” poetry, such as “Ode to a Nightingale” and “Ode to a Grecian Urn” John Keats needed to experience a sense of inner conflict, but without wanting to resolve it or go after answers. Instead of yearning to discover the facts of life, he needed to open himself completely to his imagination. He realized that in order to really understand poetry a person must be open to creativity and interpretation. For example, the poet’s reconciliation with the world depicted on the Grecian urn and the song of the nightingale results from his ability to unify two conflicting ideas. Employing Negative Capability is what allowed Keats to come to the conclusion that the heart of truth is beauty and that he heart of beauty is truth.

Keats has even inspired other poets with his idea of Negative Capability. Coleridge, Byron, Atwood, and more have employed the concept in their works. Overall, all these poets have come to the realization that Negative Capability is a state of concentration. It enables a poet’s reactions toward certain ideas or objects. All of these poets also seem to agree with the idea that they must strip away their own identities and intimately tie themselves with the object of their poetry in order to gain access to the truth and beauty hiding within them. As hinted by Keats in his letter to Richard Woodhouse in October 1818, a poet employing Negative Capability must have no self:

“As to the poetical Character itself (I mean that sort of which, if I am any thing, I am a Member; that sort of distinguished from the wordsworthian or egotistical sublime; which is a thing per se and stands alone) it is not itself – it has no self – it is every thing and nothing – It has no character – it enjoys light and shade; it lives in gusto, be it foul or fair, high or low, rich or poor, mean or elevated…” (Keats, October 1818)

In other words, a poet must fully understand the subjects and objects they are writing about. They have to free themselves from their own worlds and experiences and rid themselves of any limitations that would inhibit their understanding of the world they hope to understand with their poetry. They must fuse with everything around them, whether it’s through touch, sight, or sound. Negative Capability was developed by John Keats so that it could become a central value to all poets, and therefore give them the guidance and knowledge they need to create true, real, beautiful poetry.

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