

‘Do I wake or sleep’? –The Progression of Negative Capability in John Keats’ Poetry

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Abstract

The concept of negative capability- a well-known notion, is projected in Keats’ poetry and also widely receives diverse interpretive notions. Practiced by the poet, in a predominant fashion, the lyrical poetry and odes of Keats reflect negative capability as an illustration of his theory of creativity. This is achieved through tracing the working of a sensuous path towards an imaginative experience that the canon of Romanticism is known for. This paper conducts an in-depth exploration of Keats’ poetry and letters and debates as to how the Romantic poet –narrator develops a connection with an urge for ‘escapism’ and a progressive reassessment of identity, imagination and creativity. This paper probes into questions like why and how Keats’ depicts a paradoxical inclination towards residing in the corporeal world and in the imaginary world at the same time. Moreover, it is explored as to how Keats’ poetry attains sublimity by using negative capability and how this practice gains perpetual development in his successive poems. It is also deciphered as to what inspires the poet to impart an experience of aspiring for the worlds beyond and attaining a visionary gusto. It is concluded that Negative capability is essentially and intrinsically connected with the notion of ‘existential un-certainty’ in the writings of Keats. Moreover, as Keats’ successive poetic works attain an increased sense of sublimity, the poets’ potential of employing negative capability also increases. Thus, the poetry of John Keats is a remarkable example of experimentation with the art of writing and the realm of experience.

Keywords: sublimity, negative capability, romantic poetry, John Keats, imagination.

Introduction

In Post-modern and contemporary times, the corporeal world posits paradoxical questions of truth and reality. This era allows a reader of romantic poetry to probe into the gusto and artistic inclination of romantic writers. The writers from romantic time period transgress, trans-create and traverse reality, however, they project a consciousness of the organic unity as well. Particularly, the second-generation romantic poets, known for their soulful rendition and faithful representation of nature, are observed to be coping with the temptation to alter or change the binary opposites of corporeal world and the outside imaginative world. This also perplexes a common mind as travelling from one world to another through the art of writing is a peculiar experience and worth an exploration. Thus, there is a constant proposing of concepts and philosophies and their explanations since they are apparent and not apparent at the same time and using oxymora is similar to a play with words.

John Keats achieves a sense of comprehensibility as far as the corporeal and paradoxical world is concerned through employing and introducing the concept of 'negative capability'- a writing and experiential technique that Keats is most known for. Keats' poetry is also acclaimed for working on the realm of experience in the poetry. Gautam & Malik (2018) opine that negative capability is a trait that a poet like Keats ascribes to great men of achievement such as William Shakespeare. Keats considered negative capability, not as a restriction to conform solely to objectivity but as a restrictive state that is practically an impossibility to achieve (Starr, 1966). Keats advocates an utter surrender in the idea of suspension on part of an individual. This is akin to Coleridge's 'suspension of disbelief' necessarily linking this believer with a continual tussle between the two worlds. Fitzpatrick (1981) exclaims "the puzzling oxymoron of negative capability contains a negative and a positive, hence is difficult to understand for many". Similarly, Lu (2014) astutely states that the Romantics had a certain faith to use imagination for transmuting flawed realities of this world into the ideals visualized by them. This asserts that romantic poetry of Keats is complex and simple at the same time. Also, romantics use imagination in a par excellent manner in order to showcase the details of this world.

Furthermore, the odes of Keats also present certain inquiries about this world and the experience of the outside world. For example, "*Do I wake or sleep?*" is a question put forth by Keats in his *Ode to a Nightingale*. This interrogation is an inquiry that epitomizes the poet's aesthetically productive and psychic state. It also hints at the usage of 'negative capability,' (Castellano, 2010). It is the wish of the poet to transgress the boundaries of this world in a state of sleep and stay suspended between the real and the imagined world in way that he is able to enjoy the experience of both the world. He is also able to strike a balance between the concrete and the abstract realm of sublimity. As a consequence, Keats touches upon the marginalized 'liminality'.

Moreover, for Keats, imagination and sublimity have a high esteem in the expression of a poetic experience. For him, imagination is an intellectual process. Keats, a younger romantic, was inspired by Longinus' concept of the sublime in the process and creation of art. As per Longinus, art has to inherently pure and sublime throughout the process of his creation, production and the resultant transmission. Keats, in a similar fashion is able to establish a communion with truth and beauty as for him, these are synonymous of each other. Thus, a non-conformist to the real world of absolute order and conventional ways is not attractive for Keats and he moves beyond truth and this is what negative capability means for Keats. Moreover, this desire to practice negative capability is accentuated by the poet's 'escalating skepticism' (Lu, 2014). Keats questions the workings of this world.

Furthermore, critics have presented various definitions and elaborations of Keats' negative capability. According to Keats, poetry has a close relation with creativity attained by a potential of escaping into another world and freeing from the ties of the material world. This very moment of total freedom is the precursor of progressive poetic creation. Thus, in critical commentaries posited during post-Keatsian period, negative capability is positioned as a practice of embodying truths of one's inner self and the ability to be one with the inside and the outside world. As per Castellano (2010), negative capability, positioned as it is within an intricate matrix of epistemology, ontology, and ethics, suggests facing the 'tragic vicissitudes of existence' (p. 24). Rather than considering it a disaster, negative capability leads an experiencing subject to a state of 'posthumous existence' (p. 24). Similarly, Lau (2006) argues that negative capability means to "negate one's personality, project into the thoughts and feelings of others and remain open to variety of points of views." Moreover, sublimity is also explained as a state of mind that brings about a celebration of existence and artistic endeavors. In coda, negative capability, produces art and artistic flow without any limitations and bounds. This has been widely practiced by both British and American romantic writers.

In short, the concept of negative capability by John Keats is termed as a widely researched niche and is subjected to critical discussion in both literary and psychological journals (Fitzpatrick 1981). Quite recently, the concept has attained grounds in economics and social sciences research wherein looking beyond material reality is advocated. The very idea of coming back to the corporeal world labels Keats' art as tragic art. Moreover, as per Tso (2011), the inter-mingling of illusion and disillusionment also lends to a therapeutic effect emanating out of Keats's lyrical poems, in particular- the odes. The poetry also has a dream quality inviting much of the literary criticism about the imaginative and artistic connotation of it.

Keats’ Lyrical Poetry and the Progression of Negative Capability

When we read and examine Keats’ poetry, the concept of negative capability invites an in-depth exploration of the progression of the concept in the successive writings. Alongside some other interpretations of the term negative capability, this paper largely focuses on Keats’ own definition and practice of it as he states that negative capability is a feeling of not living in this world alone but “in a thousand worlds” (I, p.403); and his explanation of the term as the quality of “*being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.*” (Keats, 1970, p.43) which makes Shakespeare great, as ascertained from Keats’ letters.

As stated earlier, negative capability has been investigated and commented on by critics and theorists of all times. As Hebron (2016) explains that the adjective ‘negative’ in the term negative capability, coined by Keats himself, does not carry negative connotations. However, it cultivates a meaning of ‘all encompassing’ and not only ‘the experience of one world. This is also a sort of passivity which is essential to any kind of literary achievement as employed by Keats. For example, *Ode to a Nightingale* provides a platform to the poet to escape this world through a bird’s song. As soon as the bird leaves, Keats question his experience of the outer world and also the existence of it. He is propelled to think that the transportation to the other world was but only a waking dream or indeed the real world. The poet gets into reflective passivism and ponders for a moment on the bird’s world and reality and dream like quality of the two worlds. Unable to distinguish between fancy and truth, the poet asks whether he was asleep or awake. He leaves the reader with the same pricking though. In short, *Ode to Nightingale* is an apt illustration of Keats’ interpretation of the two worlds. Keats’ negative capability progresses in practice in his later poems as well.

Moreover, Keats propounds that a jubilation and a cathartic healing power is experienced when a flight is taken from this world to that world. Shelley (1977) refers to the therapeutic power and capability of the poetry of Keats, the poet-healer, thus: “A Poet is a nightingale who sits in darkness and sings to cheer its own solitude with sweet sounds; his auditors . . . feel that they are moved and softened, yet know not whence or why” (p. 486). Also, Shelley suggests that though poetry may be based on art for arts’ sake (a belief practiced later by the Victorians) it heightens the exasperations of a romantic reader. The reader is a part of the experience through its power to transgress him to the outer world which the poetry sketches. Similarly, Keats’ negative capability corresponds with William Wordsworth’s “wise passiveness,”. This relation is established because negative capability is suggestive of a liberal, capacious, “truly protean intellect — wisely passive, watchful, receptive, but also powerfully equal to all things” (as cited in Castellano, 2010, p. 2).

In short, Keats propounds a rejection of social and psychological conservatism in which one reality is accepted and no counter realities are accepted. The romantics write about human life, nature and the power of subjectivity in diverse and varied forms. Keats' genius, contextualized in the Romantic era, presents that he genuinely loves the world as it is with all its binary opposites as depicted in the following lines:

Welcome joy, and welcome sorrow, Lethe's weed and Hermes' feather; Come to-day, and come to-morrow, I do love you both together! I love to mark sad faces in fair weather; And hear a merry laugh amid the thunder; Fair and foul I love together. (A Song of Opposites)

Keats' sensuousness is widely recognized. He passionately embraces the sensuality of writing, reveling in the phenomenon of experience itself. He took extraordinary delight in depicting the interplay of the senses, which led to various delightful and joyful human experiences. Consequently, he formed an unbreakable and universal connection with envisioning beautiful things and capturing the joy that emerges from these living and non-living objects. It was his concept of negative capability that allowed him to achieve such a high degree of sensuousness in his writing.

Keats displayed empathy through his deeply held belief in preserving the delights of an appreciative, poetic mind. In his long journal letter, he writes, "I feel more and more every day, as my imagination strengthens, that I do not live in this world alone but in a thousand worlds" (I, p.403). Keats first mentioned the term 'negative capability' in a letter to his brothers, George and Thomas, in 1817 (Ali, 2011), where he explained that the concept struck him suddenly while contemplating the qualities that define a 'Man of Achievement' in literature, like Shakespeare. The answer was negative capability, the term whose paradoxical nature made Bate (1962) call this as the most puzzling of his letters. However, Keats goes on to explain the term as the quality of "*being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.*" (Keats, 1970, p.43). This is precisely why critical romantic studies declines to over or under simplify the notion of romanticism and Keats' negative capability. Any attempt to correlate, juxtapose or simplify it solely adds more to its complexity and intricacy propelling a need to dwell more deeply into its investigation.

Ali (2011) describes the literal meaning of negative capability as a mental space free from life's troubles, which can be developed and utilized for specific purposes. Fitzpatrick (1981) further explains that Keats' negative capability is a mental state rather than a talent—an elusive quality essential for poetic success. It allows the poet to become like a chameleon, adopting the characteristics of his surroundings and losing his own identity. Thus, Keats' poems can be seen as explorations in the poet's search for identity. By doing so, the reader of Keats' poetry is not detached from the corporeal world but through role-play, he is able

to comprehend various roles, situations, positions and settings in his life. So, the very act of negative capability is purposeful and generates new possibilities. It raises new questions about human possibilities, capabilities and potential. In short, it celebrates the power of human mind, thought, understanding and thinking.

According to Lu (2014), the poetry of the second-generation Romantics reveals a gap between human imperfect execution and transcendental vision. Fitzpatrick (1981) notes that Keats' concept of negative capability aligns with Hazlitt's view of man's inherently disinterested nature and his imaginative and sympathetic understanding (Finney 1963). The quality of disinterestedness is also mentioned in Keats' letters (1958), where he praises his clergyman-to-be friend, Bailey, for his 'probity and disinterestedness' and describes his sister-in-law as the 'most disinterested woman' he has ever known. Lu (2014) suggests that in relation to Shelley's poetry, the term disinterestedness can be replaced with disgust. Quite related to the term negative capability is the issue of identity which remains a debatable issue while comprehending Keats' writings (letters and poetry). The notion of dual identity, despair, and human imperfection is closely related to negative capability. In "Hyperion," the impersonal and detached poet can observe the frozen pain of the gods for a month. However, in "The Fall of Hyperion," the human Keats confronts the issue of stasis, enduring an agonizing transformation into a Grecian Urn. The sympathetic spirit of imagination permits greatness in any piece of writing by enabling the loss of personal identity to an object cherished more than oneself (Bate 1963).

Keats' poetry can be seen as a dramatic quest for identity or an experiment with multiple identities. Problematizing the conception of identity allows for a deeper understanding of negative capability, which becomes the essential prerequisite for anyone aspiring to be a successful literary artist. This capability involves negating one's own identity and attuning to multiple personifications. The writer must first live the life of their character, showing a keen disinterestedness in their own self. For instance, to portray Lear, Shakespeare understood the madness and suffering of a king exposed to a merciless storm on a heath. Simultaneously, the writer must also experience the clown's fun and fury. Keats' most quoted passage in his letter states: "as to the poetical Character ... it has no self- it is everything and nothing -it has no character- it enjoys light and shade..." (I, p. 386-387) and equally enjoys conceiving an Iago or an Imogen. According to Keats, this creative impulse increased his humility and ability to submit to the experiences he depicted.

Negative capability involves adapting one's mental state to various moods and temperaments. As previously mentioned, Shakespeare is a classic dramatist whose works are globally renowned because he portrays kings and clowns, heroes and villains with equal perfection and artistic gusto. This showcases his supreme command over negative capability. John Keats similarly admired

Shakespeare's ability to present characters so realistically that it felt as if the writer truly lived the lives of his personas. For Keats, negative capability involves encountering death to become familiar with the unforeseen possibilities of the other world and transitioning from one existence to another. As Bennet (1999) opines, the creative impulse of a romantic poet stems from the ability to immortalize oneself, escape from the corporeal world, and transcend the ego. Older Romantics like Wordsworth and Coleridge shared similar views and promoted their own cult of romanticism.

In his successive poetic creations and personal letters written over four years, Keats explores a multitude of objects and phenomena, from mythological figures to sunsets and birds, often merging or losing his identity in these subjects as a process of discovery and fear. Keats eventually realizes that this merger strengthens his identity through imagination. Fitzpatrick (1981) argues that during this period, Keats' ability to retain his identity even amidst powerful visions shows remarkable development. By the time he composed his odes in the spring of 1819, his poetry exhibited the height of realism and a newfound mastery of imagination. Although the theme of dissolving identity is prominent in both "Endymion" and "Hyperion," written in 1818 (the same year Jane Austen wrote "Persuasion"), the outcomes of this loss of identity are not entirely logical. In "Endymion," the resolution is unsatisfactorily achieved through the illogical reconciliation of Endymion's divided soul, while in "Hyperion," the combination of detached stoicism and the progressivism of Oceanus leads to a sudden and unprepared conclusion.

“Endymion! unhappy! it nigh grieves
Me to behold thee thus in last extreme:
Ensky'd ere this, but truly that I deem
Truth the best music in a first-born song.
Thy lute-voic'd brother will I sing ere long,
And thou shalt aid—hast thou not aided me?
Yes, moonlight Emperor! felicity
Has been thy meed for many thousand years;
Yet often have I, on the brink of tears,
Mourn'd as if yet thou wert a forester, —
Forgetting the old tale.” (Endymion)

The main premise of "Hyperion" revolves around the quest for spiritual growth, which materializes after the loss of power. Saturn's experience of being separated from his 'strong identity' is a struggle shared by the gods in the epic. Keats' maturing vision, grounded in realism, is evident in Oceanus's speech about stoic acceptance. The protagonist grapples with identity in both "Endymion" and "Hyperion," struggling simultaneously with the passions for power and love.

And all those acts which Deity supreme

Doth ease its heart of love in.—I am gone
Away from my own bosom: I have left
My strong identity, my real self,
Somewhere between the throne, and where I sit
Here on this spot of earth. Search, Thea, search! (Hyperion)

The aesthetics of Keats' letters and the profound themes of his poetry are intricately intertwined in "The Fall of Hyperion: A Dream" and "Ode to a Nightingale." In both poems, the poet himself serves as the protagonist, with the creative artistic process taking center stage. In "The Fall of Hyperion: A Dream," the imagination is depicted as guided by Moneta, the goddess of memory, and the poem explores a spiritual struggle articulated through dreams. Keats emphasizes the importance of imagination and "self-concentration" rather than selflessness, a concept he also discusses in his letter to Shelley (II, 322-323). This notion should not be mistaken for self-indulgence but rather relates to a kind of self-annihilation that precedes progressive spiritual growth, facilitated by an enhanced understanding of negative capability.

".....-Art thou not of the dreamer tribe?
"The poet and the dreamer are distinct,
"Diverse, sheer opposite, antipodes.
"The one pours out a balm upon the world,
"The other vexes it...." (The Fall of Hyperion)

In "The Fall of Hyperion," the narrator strives to achieve an emotional detachment from the misery of the gods, similar to the detachment that God has from the temporal world. He desires to emulate the gods in their endurance. However, despite his visionary imagination, he finds it insufficient to resolve the transformation of identity from mortal to immortal—from being worldly and created to becoming godlike. Keats seems to highlight the struggle of transcending the impermanent and shedding temporal and corporeal identity. This theme is evident in the creation of the nightingale, where Keats swiftly immerses himself in the bird's essence without resistance from the reader. The poet's detachment is not merely about identifying with immortality but also about presenting the creative process. In the opening of "The Fall of Hyperion," self-doubt emerges as essential; questioning and a desire for escapism are portrayed as necessary components of visionary imagination.

"Fanatics have their dreams, wherewith they weave
A paradise for a sect; the savage too
From forth the loftiest fashion of his sleep
Guesses at Heaven; pity these have not
Trac'd upon vellum or wild Indian leaf
The shadows of melodious utterance. (The Fall of Hyperion)

In the prelude to *The Fall*, the vacillation between acute self-doubt and partial reassurance has been used to exaggerate negative capacity, or being content in doubts, mysteries, and uncertainties. Although the vision is unleashed by the drama of doubt, the resolution—identifying with an immortal instead of a mortal—is a contentious idea. Why would a poet like Keats, who in *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* writes about a beautiful girl, see so much truth and beauty in the real world, and yet want something more? Questions like these require to be probed into by commentators and investigators of romantic poetry. In short, it is reiterated that Keats celebrated the world and the beauty it offers as it is, however, he opened new chasms and possibilities of human imagination and subjectivity through negative capability.

The era in which *Ode to a Nightingale* was written is crucial for reevaluating Keats' continuous conflict with the boundaries between visionary imagination and identity. Taking a closer look at the variations of Romantic aesthetics reveals evolving ideas about the function of poetry and imagination. The poem, which depicts the poet's visionary identification with the nightingale, first appeared in print in the spring of 1819. Afterwards, the poet returns to the sufferings of the human world. In the poem's final words, the promise of the "sole self" serves as a comforting reminder of one's mortality and temporal identity and permits one to proceed down the path of detachment, distance, and conjecture. The last comment about feeling "forlorn" is a hard-won reality that hits like a punch.

"Forlorn! the very word is like a bell
To toll me back from thee to my sole self!
Adieu! the fancy cannot cheat so well
As she is fam'd to do, deceiving elf."
(*Ode to a Nightingale*)

The letter describes the poetic identity as erratic yet having a great deal of creative potential. The poet is so overcome by his vision and desires that he loses himself. The creative art becomes sublimity and mature as a result of the imaginative mission. The poet creates art by acting out a dramatic presentation of the emotions that are felt during the creative process. The meditations on mythic elaborations and oscillations of lost and found identity suggest that identity that is threatened or abandoned is somehow associated with negative capability: identity that is endangered generates an impulse to create; identity that is flexible allows for successful creativity; and the creative impulse primarily centers on the emotions of a temporary lost identity with its concomitant terror and ecstasy.

According to Keats, poetry captures the richest and most complete human experience. Therefore, in Keats's letter to Reynolds (2002), it cannot have a "palpable design upon us" (Selected letters, 2002). Rather, it should be something that, in Coleridge's words, "to suspend in disbelief," that the reader may accept in all its wonder. It is the ability to remain objective in the face of excruciating personal suffering and to come to terms with it—not by reason,

logic, or reality, but by realizing what this suffering actually is. The ability to connect oneself with the subject of one's art or poetry in one's imagination is a progressive phenomenon that can only be described as acceptance and contentment. According to Keats' philosophy, this is the only way to get at truth, as stated by Bate (1939/1962).

In *Ode to a Nightingale*, Keats describes hearing the bird chirping in England but, in his thoughtful imagination, hearing it at several locations at once, allowing him to transcend reality and establish a spiritual connection. Therefore, a poet does not fear whether the desire to embrace death is imagined or theoretical, as Keats puts it in one of his letters: "A poet is the most unpoetical of anything in existence, because he has no identity—he is continually in for and filling some other body" (Keats, 1948). He travels all worlds and is boundless and limitless in his potential just like imagination is.

Keats says, "What shocks the virtuous philosopher, delights the chameleon poet," which is a noteworthy statement (Keats, 1948). Like Shakespeare, Keats aspires to accept men and women in the world and all things in all their moods, from exaltation and serenity to hatred and disgust. Through his own work, he hopes to actualize the notion that beauty is truth and truth is beautiful, and that's all one needs to know and understand. He has a sensual perception of beauty, and for a poet of his caliber, aesthetics takes precedence above everything else. According to Keats, superbly intense art of any type has the power to "evaporate" everything distasteful since great art is inextricably linked to truth and beauty (Keats, 1948). The chameleon poet may evoke the same type of joy while seeing beauty even in misery and ugliness. This poet takes great pleasure in creating a villain or a nasty character. For Keats, beauty has a special and profound meaning. That very seductive aura of inviting intensity requires whatever seen or felt with intensity to be lovely and true. Keats' interest in paintings and other arts, according to Jack (1967), enhanced his attention and obsession with the idea of beauty and helped him maintain a balance between the extrovert and the introvert, which is extremely clear in how he visualizes the Grecian Urn.

Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st,
"Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all

Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know." (Ode to the Grecian Urn)

To gain an understanding of how the poet-narrator has manifested his obsession with the concept of "escape," it is crucial to examine a few of Keats' well-known odes. It also reveals the deep critical readings that underlie the Romantic poet's motivation to create another existence to dwell in. In "Ode to a Nightingale," Keats is depicted as relishing the beauty of the bird's singing, yet his journey into the realm of negative capability makes him paradoxical in both "pain" and "happiness." When

he hears the nightingale, his "heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pain," but at the same time, the singing "It's not through envy of thy happy lot, but being too happy in thine happiness" makes him extremely happy. Keats attempts to be in the company of the bird, identifying himself with that exquisite creature and hoping to experience the joys of some other world. When he says that, he wants to vanish,

*"That I might drink, and leave the world unseen,
And with thee fade away into the forest dim:"*

However, we can sense that he is aware of the constraints of being human, which prevent him from feeling the bliss of being a bird when he states,

*"Forlorn! the very word is like a bell,
To toll me back from thee to my sole self!"*

Does a Romantic poet's physical shape serve as a barrier or restriction to their ability to change into a bird? Or can he capture the environment the bird lives in just enough detail for the reader to be able to fully appreciate it? Wordsworth is escorted by a romantic reader to the country of daffodils and on the mountain peaks of the Lake District. It is a frequent characteristic of the Romantics to be one with the reader, to take the romantic reader together on the voyage. Singing the Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner, Coleridge transports the same reader to a place of haunting seas. The same is true of Keats, who transports the reader to the realm of the nightingale. This ode, which depicts Keats being overwhelmed in the state of negative capacity, is frequently cited as the longest and most poetic of all the odes.

Upon hearing the song, the poet desires to emulate the bird and free his own sense of self by hiding from or escaping the sorrows of the world, transforming into the 'unseen world'. The refreshing and captivating music of the nightingale urges him to delight in the concept of death while listening to the bird's song and evading the pains, sorrows, and complexities of life.

*"Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget
What thou among the leaves hast never known,
And now more than ever seems it rich to die,
To cease upon the midnight with no pain."* (Ode to Nightingale)

Here, the fleeting nature of life and the sorrow of aging find solace in the bird's timeless world of happiness. The poet acknowledges that this everlasting quality exists in the world.

*"where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies;
where but to think is to be full of sorrow"*

Keats enables the reader to experience the feelings evoked by sensuous words and unfolds the serenity of the unseen world, them to the transcendental realm, leaving this mundane world behind. The poet yearns for eternity, which he believes can only be found in the music of the bird and not in the harsh world of suffering. In the ode, he declares, "Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!"

'Do I wake or sleep'? -The Progression of Negative Capability....

The theme of numbness permeates the poem, with "drowsy numbness" in the beginning and the poet's words at the end, questioning, "Was it a vision or a waking dream? Fled is that music: Do I wake or sleep?" This conveys the uncertainty of perception and reality, akin to the mixed feelings experienced in a dream. Keats explores negative capability, asserting that only in dreaming can we attain the eternities and immortality of art and music. From the outset of his poetic career, Keats aimed to achieve negative capability, where he balanced and viewed attitudes toward good and evil from a broader perspective. In the "Ode on a Grecian Urn," Keats addresses the tragic dilemmas of life with courage, although he doesn't fully resolve the dilemmas. Despite a world filled with sadness, "Where but to think is to be full of sorrow," Keats doesn't envy the joys of the world of the nightingale but rather has the capacity to share in her joys and to be "Too happy in thine happiness." Even with an acute awareness of the short span of human life, he can still take joy in the "unheard melodies" and the "Still unravish'd bride of quietness." The Grecian Urn represents classical purity of form and stays with us, leading us to contemplate and absorb the timeless values it symbolizes without questioning or reasoning. Keats's ability to do justice to feelings and emotions of entirely different natures, ranging from pain and sorrow to mortality and imperfection to perfection, is the reason for the success of these Odes.

"The Ode to Melancholy" perfectly presents the transformation of a complex and rich poetic experience into an experience that anyone can relate to. As Keats identifies with the poet, the poem loses its individuality and becomes universally great. Any sensitive soul knows that pleasure and pain, joy and sorrow, and transience and permanence coexist. The intensity of melancholy, although temporary, brings a strange pleasure.

"Bidding adieu; and aching Pleasure nigh,
Turning to poison while the bee-mouth sips:
Ay, in the very temple of Delight
Veil'd Melancholy has her sovran shrine."
(Ode to Melancholy) .

"To Autumn" is a poem that celebrates the time of "mists and mellow fruitfulness" and reflects Keats's evolution toward a mature vision. The poem accepts transience, pain, and ugliness without regret, acknowledging them as part of a greater, more permanent cycle of birth, growth, death, and renewal. In a Lacanian interpretation of To Autumn, Mark Bracher suggests that death is a manifestation or flowering of being (quoted in Castellano, 2010). The poem immerses us in a profoundly overwhelming pastoral experience, and its unity and completeness contribute to a moral understanding situated within the larger realm of ethics.

"Where are the songs of spring? Ay, Where are they?
Think not of them, thou hast thy music too,—

While barred clouds bloom the soft-dying day,
And touch the stubble-plains with rosy hue;
Then in a wailful choir the small gnats mourn
Among the river shallows, borne aloft.” (Ode to Autumn)

Keats embraced life's experiences and transformed rich sensations into peaceful wisdom. Embracing sensuality contributed to his gaining of rationality. The changing seasons symbolize the rhythms of human life. Keats' appreciation of the winter season, his acceptance of its harsh reality, and his expression of faith in the eventual and wonderfully constant return of spring is closely connected with Shelley's romantic affirmation in "Ode to the West Wind": "O, wind, if winter comes, can spring be far behind?"

Keats, a practitioner of the Romantic aesthetic tradition, is deeply interested in the sensory experience of seeing, hearing, touching, and tasting. He identifies himself with his sensory perceptions and enjoys the intense experience of life, whether it is positive or negative. The term "Gusto" used by Keats is borrowed from Hazlitt, who describes it as the passion or power defining any object in art. Keats uses it to refer to the intensity and ability to make things seem real and alive. He values poetry for its submission to reality without intellectualizing it. Keats feels a deep connection with nature and living beings and is fully absorbed in the beauty of the present moment, as seen in his appreciation of autumn in "Ode to Autumn." This joy and immersion in the beauty of the present is a key characteristic of Keats' genius as a poet.

The paper examines how Keats not only introduced the concept and critical legacy of negative capability but also demonstrated it in his poetry. The study highlights how some of Keats' major poems express the poet's desire to escape and his fascination with leaving this world for another that is more accommodating and leads the readers toward the realm of death or an even more enthralling world. During the four-year period of his letter writing and composing poetry, Keats' notion and portrayal of the concept of negative capability evolved towards maturity. The journey began with a bewildering loss of identity in the face of mysteries offered by the surroundings and the poet's imagination. This led to a trance-like state of poetic imagination, followed by a faint spiritual realization and culminated in a complete merger with the object of the poet's fantasy, investing his latest odes with a sublime quality. It is not only thought-provoking to accompany the poet in his true essence of meaning, but also a unique experience for the reader to partake in the richness and profundity of Keats' romantic poetry.

Hence, it is concluded that John Keats was a theorist, poet par excellence and avid practitioner of a cult through which he was able to canonize romantic writing and the much-acclaimed notion of negative capability. The remarkable and distinguished concept of negative capability shall continue to enthrall readers, critics and commentators of romantic poetry. Engaging in sublimity via

practice of mature writing and imagination is key to interpreting Keats's negative capability and is vividly evident in his poetry and valuable personal letters. Keats' odes are loaded with interpretations just like the way this poesy transports the protagonist and the reader to worlds unknown. The mystery, charm and fancy of the world's unseen resonate the poetry of John Keats and continues to mesmerize the readers till date.



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