



## JOHN KEATS: THE NOTION OF NEGATIVE CAPABILITY AND POETIC VISION

---

Mukesh Kumar<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract:

*John Keats has been remembered as one of the greatest British romantic poets in British English Literature. He was a pure poet. His vision of Poetry was never distorted by theories. He coined the phrase 'Negative Capability' in a letter written to his brothers George and Thomas for the first and last time. The notion of 'Negative Capability' describes the capacity of human beings to trust and revise their contexts. It describes the ability of the individual to perceive, think and operate beyond any presupposition of a predetermined capacity of the human being. He did so in criticism of Coleridge, who he thought sought knowledge over beauty. Throughout his poetry and letters Keats proposes theory that beauty is valuable in itself and that it does not need to declare anything for us to know that it is important. With the collaboration of Benjamin Bailey, Keats's realization was itself a further argument for the need of "disinterestedness" and a further indication of the futility, in a universe of uncertainties, of the belief, assertive postures we assume. As Keats says "I am certain of nothing but the holiness of the Heart's affection and the truth of imagination – what the imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth whether it existed before or not." It characterizes an impersonal or objective, the author who maintains aesthetic distance, as opposed to a subjective author who is personally involved with the characters and actions represented in a work of Literature, and opposed to an author who uses a literary work to present his personal beliefs. In this term he considers Shakespeare, the man of ability and the master of negative capability and condemns the other poet's views about the poetry and found that there is a lack of objectivity and universality in Wordsworth's poetry. Throughout his poetry, he finds melancholy in delight, pleasure in pain, an excitement in both emotional sensations and intellectual thoughts, praises beauty, but at the same time he knows that all things are beauty must fade and die, experiences love and death with equal intensity, knowing that they are closely connected. Keats observes that a poet has no identity except filling some other bodies. In a nutshell, we see an acceptance of uncertainty, self-abandonment to mystery, and delight in doubt.*

**Keywords:** Negative Capability, Disinterestedness, Aesthetic Distance, Beauty, Truth, Odes, Poet, Imagination.

---

<sup>1</sup> Assistant Professor of English, Dept of English, University College Kurukshetra  
Kurukshetra University



John Keats (1795-1821) was a stupendous British romantic poet in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Century English Literature. He was highly interested in the beauty of nature, studied Spencer, Chapman's Homer, and the Renaissance Poets, and had been remained unlucky in his love with Fanny Brawne and died in 1821 of consumption.

The vision of Keats was never distorted by theories. He was a pure poet. The Romantic Poet John Keats coined the phrase 'Negative Capability' in a letter written to his brothers George and Thomas on the December 21, 1817. He used the phrase Negative Capability for the first and last time. He did so in criticism of Coleridge, who he thought sought knowledge over beauty. In the letter, he defined his new concept of writing:

... 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. (Abrams 183)

Throughout his poetry and letters Keats proposes theory that beauty is valuable in itself and that it does not

need to declare anything for us to know that it is important. That is, beauty does not have to refer to anything beyond itself. The ideal of "disinterestedness" about which Keats and Benjamin Bailey had talked at Oxford had eluded his impulsive efforts to apply it to his own personal experience. The realization was itself a further argument for the need of "disinterestedness" and a further indication of the futility, in a universe of uncertainties, of the belief, assertive postures we assume. Capability was not meant for submission, Negative would still be far from adequate. Meanwhile, he goes on:

I am certain of nothing but the holiness of the Heart's affection and the truth of imagination – what the imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth whether it existed before or not – for I have the same idea of all our Passions as of Love they are all in their sublime, creative of essential Beauty. ... The imagination may be compared to Adam's dream (Paradise Lost, VIII – 452-490) - he awoke and found its truth – I am the more zealous in this affair, because I have never yet



been able to perceive how anything can be known for truth by consecutive reasoning - and yet it must be – can it be that even the greatest philosopher ever arrived at his goal without putting aside numerous objections. However, it may be, O for a Life of Sensation rather than of Thoughts! (Bate 238)

It is this ability to hold out a beautiful truth despite the fact that it does not fit into an intellectual system that Keats praises in Shakespeare. Poetry should be the outcome of the Negative Capability. It characterizes an impersonal, or objective, author who maintains aesthetic distance, as opposed to a subjective author who is personally involved with the characters and actions represented in a work of Literature, and opposed to an author who uses a literary work to present his personal beliefs.

It is a kind of negation of self which characterized Shakespeare, and the capacity to come to terms with this Misery, not through fact and reason but through an understanding of its true nature. It must be called acceptable. It involves the ability to identify oneself with the subject of one's poetry or art.

William Shakespeare was the master in handling this kind of art. Keats attended the great literary critic William Hazlitt's "*Literatures on the English Poets*" and was undoubtedly inspired by Hazlitt's Speech. According to Hazlitt:

Shakespeare's mind had the power of communication with all other minds – so that it contained a universe of thought and feeling within itself, and had no one peculiar bias, or exclusive excellence more than another... the least of an egoist that they could become. He had only to think of anything in order becomes that thing, with all the circumstances belonging to it. (Hazlitt 11)

In fact when he (Shakespeare) conceived of a character, whether real or imaginary, he entered into all its thoughts and feelings. Shakespeare could enter and merge into the personality of King Lear in his madness. It is what makes his drama great. He possesses so enormously "Negative Capability" to create an Iago or an Imogen; to dark, villainy or purse, and innocent with equal perfection. In this context John Keats says himself: "A poet



is the most unpoetical of any thing in existence, because he has no identity – he is continually in for and filling some other body” (Cox 84).

Keats’ letters are important documents and after many revealing insights into the nature of poetry and many critical precepts which are still today as the basis for the evaluation of poetry. Keats wrote, “We hate poetry that has to palpable a design upon us, and if we do not agree, seems to put its hand into its breeches pocket. Poetry should be great and unobtrusive, a thing which enters into one’s soul, and does not startle or amaze it with itself, but with its subject” (Storey 361). By this he means that we distrust poetry which tries overtly to persuade or convert us to the poet’s point of view. According to this statement, poetry should be more indirect, communicating through the power of its image without the poet making his own presence too obvious.

Keats’s poetry is the conflict between the everyday world and destiny: the everyday world of suffering, death and decay, and the timeless beauty and lasting truth of poetry and the human imagination. His best-known poetry was composed twenty years after the

publication of Lyrical Ballads and, although his poetry contrasts with that of Wordsworth and Coleridge, they remained an important influence on his work and his theories of poetry.

His Odes explore fundamental tensions and contradictions. The contradictions in meaning as we see in the line ‘a drowsy numbness pains’ (Ode to a Nightingale) and emotion (‘both together, sane and mad’). Actually, he accepts a double nature as a creative insight. In Ode to a Nightingale it is the apparent or real contradictions that allow Keats to create the sensual and the hedonistic feeling of numbness that allows the reader to experience the half swooning emotion of the language and pass over the half-truths in silence, to live a life ‘of sensations rather than of thoughts!

Actually Keats here uses the principle of Kant’s philosophy by which thought is sublingual by making the meaning of words less important than their ‘feel’. We cannot express our thinking if there is a paucity of language. Keats often deals with sensations created by words rather than the meaning. Negative Capability asks us to allow the atmosphere of Keats’ poems to surround



us without picking out individual meanings and inconsistencies. There is a complication between truth and beauty and their respective definitions. The moments of intense feeling combined thought and emotion in appreciating beauty. That is why Keats poetry is devoted to catching, and holding moments of beauty. This kind of desire has been expressed in Ode on a Grecian Urn (Lines 15-20) where he explains that the fair youth who is seated beneath a tree cannot leave his song or those trees will never become bare. The bold lover will never be able to kiss his beloved, although he is very close to achieving the destination and his beloved beauty will never fade, it will still live as it is. Thus Keats captures moments and holds those moments to prevent change and decay, reveling in those moments of perfection.

Keats finds melancholy in delight, pleasure in pain, an excitement in both emotional sensations and intellectual thoughts. He contrasts dreams and reality, the imagination and the actual, the tangible and the intangible. He celebrates beauty, but at the same time he knows that all things are beauty must fade and die. He experiences love and death with equal intensity, knowing that they are

closely connected. He shared with both Wordsworth and Coleridge the view that suffering is necessary for an understanding of the world and that great poetry grows from deep suffering and tragedy. The Romantic poet Keats took the veneration of sadness to its logical extreme and described suffering as a prerequisite for the literary life as he wrote, "Do you not see how necessary a World of Pains and troubles is to school an intelligence and make it a soul?" (NYT 38)

Keats demonstrates the depth of his appreciation of the beautiful and in the act of appreciation creates poems as exquisite as that which he is admiring. His 'Negative Capability' is the ability to bask in the beautiful without questioning either it or his methods of description. In other words, to take beauty simply as it is.

This notion of Negative Capability describes the capacity of human beings to trust and revise their contexts. The term has been used by the 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. John Keats asserted that the poet



should be receptive rather than searching for a fact or reason, and to not seek absolute knowledge of every truth, mystery, or doubt. As accepted of what we can know about the world as necessarily being limited, and rejected the artist's attempt to analyze, rationalize, or categorize the world. It is a concept which is a rejection of set philosophies and preconceived systems of nature.

Keats understood Coleridge as searching for a single, higher order truth or a solution to the mysteries of the natural world. He found that there is a lack of objectivity and universality in Wordsworth Dilke in their views of human condition and the natural world. The poet receives impulses from a world that is full of mystery and doubt, which cannot be explained, but which the poet can translate into art.

If poetry comes not as naturally as the leaves a tree it had better not come at all. The Genius of Poetry must work out its own salvation in a man. It cannot be matured by law & precept, but by sensation and watchfulness – That which is creative must create “itself. (Bate 233-234)

Such an inquiry leads us as way from a rational “quest for certainty” in philosophical dialogue towards an experience with philosophy nurtured by the poetic element in Negative Capability. Dewey tells us in *Art as Experience* that there are but two philosophies. One of them accepts life and experience in all its uncertainty, mystery, doubt, and half-knowledge and turns that experience upon itself to deepen and intensify its own qualities. It is for Keats the ability to be content with “half-knowledge”, and it is the trait possessed by Shakespeare the “Man of Achievement” in poetry. According to Keats Poet has no identity, he is continually filling some other badly. He reveals to Walter Jackson Bate that in our life of uncertainties, where no one system or formula can explain everything what is needed is an imaginative openness of mind and heightened receptivity to reality in its full and diverse concreteness. This demands a resistance to the temptation to try and place all insights into a rational systematic structure of one's own making and thus involves the momentary negation of one's own ego. In such a state one's intellect is strengthened by making up one's mind



to become a “through fare for all thoughts”.

Thus, in Keats and Shakespeare we see the philosophy of an acceptance of uncertainty, self-abandonment to mystery, and delight in doubt. It is a poetic philosophy that flourishes on imaginative becoming. One that permits the completeness of surrender in perception and thus allows its adherents

to become what they perceive and speculate on. Keats tries to enter into the mind of people. His approach to truth was through the imagination and sympathy, and this allowed him to penetrate the barrier which space put between him and the object of contemplation. He could in final analysis, sees into the heart of, and become all things.

## References:

1. Abrams, M.H.. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. New Delhi: Cengage Learning, 2009. Print
2. Bate, Walter Jackson. Ed. *A Collection of Critical Essays*. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1964.
3. Cox, Phillip. *Gender, Genre, and the Romantic Poets: An Introduction*. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1996.
4. Keats, John. 1899. *The complete Poetical Works and letters of John Keats*. Cambridge: Houghton, Mifflin & Company.
5. Keats, John. 2001. *Complete Poems and Selected Letters of John Keats*. New York: The Modern Library.
6. New York Times Magazine. *Depression's Upside* .<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/28/magazine/28depression-t.html?pagewanted=all>, Accessed on May 12, 2014.
7. Peerless, J. L. C. Ed. *The sayings of John Keats*. London: Duckworth, 1995.
8. Storey, Mark. Ed. *John Clare: The Critical Heritage*. London: Taylor & Francis, 2002.
9. William Hazlitt, “Lectures on the English Poets” *Bibliobazaar*, 2007.