**Negative capability**

What is negative capability in poem?

Negative capability, a writer's ability, “which Shakespeare possessed so enormously,” to accept “uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason,” according to English poet John Keats, who first used the term in an 1817 letter.

Who is associated with negative capability?

Negative capability is a phrase first used by Romantic poet John Keats in 1817 to explain 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 ...

What does Keats mean by ‘negative capability’?

Clearly, he is using the word ‘negative’ not in a pejorative sense, but to convey the idea that a person’s potential can be defined by what he or she does not possess – in this case a need to be clever, a determination to work everything out. Essential to literary achievement, Keats argues, is a certain passivity, a willingness to let what is mysterious or doubtful remain just that. His fellow poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge, he suggests, would do well to break off from his relentless search for knowledge, and instead contemplate something beautiful and true (‘a fine verisimilitude’) caught, as if by accident, from the most secret part (‘Penetralium’) of mystery. The experience and intuitive appreciation of the beautiful is, indeed, central to poetic talent, and renders irrelevant anything that is arrived at through reason. Keats ends his brief discussion of negative capability by concluding that ‘with a great poet the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration’.

The poetical character

Keats never repeated the phrase ‘negative capability’ in his letters. Like similar nuggets found throughout his correspondence, it is of the moment, prompted by a desire to share his latest thoughts with his friends; it is not part of an overarching intellectual structure. But it is prefigured in a slightly earlier letter, written to Benjamin Bailey on 22 November 1817, in which Keats observed that he was unable to see ‘how any thing can be known for truth by consequitive [sic] reasoning … 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 Sensations rather than of Thoughts!’.[2]

And Keats touched again on the idea of the passivity, humility even, of a great writer, in a letter he wrote to his friend Richard Woodhouse on 27 October following year. The ‘poetical Character’, he maintained,

is not itself – it has no self – it is everything 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 – It has as much delight in an Iago [the villain of Shakespeare’s Othello] as an Imogen [Shakespeare’s heroine in Cymbeline]. What shocks the virtuous philosopher delights the camelion Poet.[3]

The word ‘gusto’ was used by Keats’s contemporary, the essayist and critic William Hazlitt, to describe the power and passion with which an artist creates another form. ‘The infinite quantity of dramatic invention in Shakespeare takes from his gusto’, Hazlitt wrote in the Examiner on 26 May 1816; ‘The power he delights to show is not intense, but discursive. He never insists on any thing as much as he might, except a quibble.’

Keats, who knew Hazlitt and was influenced by his writing, developed this idea. He found an ‘indescribable gusto’ in the voice of his favourite actor, Edmund Kean, who completely inhabited the parts he played. Great poets, argued Keats, had gusto because they were not impeded in their work by an identity of their own, with personal opinions that might affect the independence and freedom of the characters they create: a poet, he told Woodhouse, ‘has no Identity – he is continually informing and filling some other Body’.[4]

**Negative Capability Definition**

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. Therefore, a person with negative capability has no fixed “self,” but rather possesses shifting selves which allows her constant sympathies with nature and with others. Keats was seen as rejecting the Enlightenment’s attempts to rationalize nature.

The most famous romantic poet John Keats, “the Chameleon Poet” is the expounder of the term “Negative Capability”. Writing to his brothers, George and Thomas, in December 1817 letter found in Selected Letters, Keats coins the phrase “Negative Capability”:

“I mean Negative Capability, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason”

**Negative Capability Psychology**

The world is full of uncertainties. No one really knows what happens next. Every living creature is programmed to survive. In human beings that conditioned self-interest extends beyond our physical selves (our bodies) to our social selves (our identities). For most, life is a personal survival puzzle to be solved, and they conceptualize every experience in order to predict and explain it in accordance with that goal.

Negative Capability Examples

The most prominent references of ‘Negative capability’ are found in Keats’ poem “Ode to a Nightingale”, “Ode on a Grecian Urn”, “Ode to Autumn” etc. In “Ode to a Nightingale” Keats wants to escape from the real world full of ‘fever’ and ‘fret’ to the magical and ideal world of Nightingale. The inspirational power of beauty, according to Keats, is more important than the quest for objective fact; as he writes in his ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn,’ “Beauty is truth, truth beauty”.

If we think of the Harry Potter universe, most of us are aware that magic doesn’t exist in real life, but J.K. Rowling dumps us right into the world of witches and wizards, giants and dwarves, goblins and ghosts, and she fully expects her readers to keep up with her.

Negative Capability Function

Therefore, negative capability gives the reader permission to sit back and enjoy the ride, and it can also give them an idea of what to expect from the rest of the work. If we don’t make the attempt to explain all the details, the reader will subconsciously receive our permission to not worry about the hows or whys.