

“Negative Capability”: Imagination in Ode to a Nightingale

Yizhi Tang*

Department of Business, Beijing Normal University-Hong Kong Baptist University United
International College, Zhuhai, China

*Corresponding author: p930001068@mail.uic.edu.cn

Abstract. Keats was one of the most famous English Romantic poets of the 19th century. Although he had a difficult life and died young, Keats still produced many unsurpassed works in his short life, and even today, his achievements shine like a star in the world of poetry. In addition to his poetic achievements, Keats also put forward many aesthetic ideas, and this essay will focus on the concept of “Negative Capability”, which requires that the poet should extinguish his inherent consciousness and empty himself, and be comfortable in difficult situations and negative emotions and not be anxious to find answers and reasons, which is the best way to release his imagination. The “Negative Capacity” is one of Keats’s most widely known aesthetic theories, which fully reflects his profound thoughts on truth and beauty and his pursuit of the capacity to be a poet. In order to analyze and deconstruct this concept more specifically, this paper will take Ode to a Nightingale as an example and explore the deeper meaning and application of “Negative Capability” while analyzing the poem. This paper concludes that Keats’s pursuit of “Negative Capability” is perfectly reflected in Ode to a Nightingale - he lets his imagination go free by emptying himself and uses a lot of rhetorical techniques to show his lament for the fickleness of life and his pursuit of eternal joy. The ode to the nightingale is a perfect embodiment of this.

Keywords: Negative Capability; Ode to a Nightingale; Imagination.

1. Introduction

John Keats was a highly accomplished English Romantic poet known as the Pleiades, along with Wordsworth, Blake, Byron, and Shelley. In fact, in the 19th century, Keats’s talent was not fully appreciated, and his reputation was much less than that of Byron and Shelley. However, by the 20th century, not only did the famous modernist poet T. S. Eliot praise the modern character of Keats’s poetry but also the Nobel Prize winner Eugenio Montale ranked Keats among the “Supreme Poets” [1].

John Keats’s success in the poetry field was due to his extraordinary insights and super strength of will, which were polished by his humble origins and difficult fate to some extent. Keats’s father died when he was a young child, and his mother died soon after she abandoned her children and remarried. Keats’s representative works include Ode to Autumn, Ode to a Nightingale, and Ode on a Grecian Urn, which made him an immortal miracle in the poetry world.

In 1817, Keats mentioned “Negative Capability” in a letter with his brother George. This concept fully demonstrated Keats’s almost demanding pursuit of “truth” and “beauty”. In fact, Negative Capability is not the opposite of “positive” but requires the poet to have the ability to empty himself and accept everything, not to seek the truth of things too much but to see and describe things around him and nature from an objective point of view, which means that the poet’s spirit and environment must be melded as an integral whole. Taking the Ode to a Nightingale as an example, the poet begins the poem by stating that he has become mentally numb from drinking poisonous hemlock and smoking opium. The hidden meaning of this is that after drinking the hemlock and eating the opiate, the poet had extinguished his own consciousness and emotions in the process and had completely freed the imagination which could bring himself into the body of the nightingale, viewing all the fleeting sorrows of the world from the perspective of the nightingale. However, In the last stanza, the poet says, “was it a vision, or a waking dream? Fled is that music: —Do I wake or sleep?” Like waking up from a dream, the poet’s consciousness returned to his own body. This poem fully embodies the “Negative Capability” advocated by Keats; that is, the poet abandons his own inherent

consciousness in the process of writing, releases his imagination as much as possible, and completely puts the emotion in the scene.

The readers' understanding of "Negative Capability" can not only provide a deeper comprehension of Keats's intention and the hidden emotions behind his poetry but also allow them to interpret the connotations of other poets, such as Shakespeare's poetry, and even draw on Keats's wisdom and apply it to their own life. This article will use Keats's Ode to a Nightingale as an entry point to analyze the poem's verses and hidden emotions from the perspective of "Negative Capability" and to analyze this concept in a more concrete form. Since there are already a large number of excellent articles and books detailing this concept and its meaning, the author will use the literature research method to summarize and integrate the characteristics of these articles, pointing out the shortcomings of current research and the gaps that can be filled in the future.

2. The Relationship between Negative Capability and Imagination

In 1817, in a letter to Benjamin Bailey, Keats mentioned the concept of "No Individuality", advocating that poets should not pour out their personal emotions and thoughts in the process of writing but should be free of themselves and eliminate their individuality [2]. At the same time, he also pointed out the great importance of imagination – "What the imagination seizes as Beauty must be the truth" he believes that imagination, truth, and beauty are interlinked and inseparable, and imagination is the means to extract the truth from beauty [1]. Therefore, it is clear from this that for John Keats, imagination is a necessary fundamental, an essential thing, and an ability that he must have on his way to pursue truth and beauty. In addition, in the letter, Keats wrote, "I have never yet been able to perceive how anything can be known for truth by consecutive reasoning", which clearly shows Keats's definition of imagination, which for him is a lot different from rational reasoning [1]. The two are mutually exclusive and incompatible in thought, so the way in which truth and beauty can be obtained is the exact opposite of reasoning.

Two months later, in an exchange of letters with his brother George, Keats first mentioned the concept of "Negative Capability" – "I mean Negative Capability, that is when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason". Moreover, he compared the poetry styles of Shakespeare and Coleridge, arguing that Shakespeare succeeded in large part because he possessed this ability, while Coleridge wrote in a style that grasped every slight possibility and was unwilling to be in a state of half-knowledge [1]. While both poets were highly accomplished artistically, Keats's position was clear as he wrote, "this pursued through Volumes would perhaps take us no further than this, that with a great poet, the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration" [1]. This is in line with the critical theory of "No Individuality" that he mentioned in his previous letter to Bailey and can be said to be a summary and sublimation of the previous concept. The content of this letter showed fully about Keats's definition of Negative Capability, which required poets to be open, natural, and appropriate to embrace any uncertainty or unhappiness, to abandon the dominant dogma in their mind, and not to be anxious to find out the truth and the cause of things, then such a state can help poets to better integrate into the environment and to empty their minds so that they can gain an unrestrained imagination, which was extremely critical to poets [3]. However, if one pursues the truth and cause of things, the poet's imagination and creative ability will be stagnant and finally unable to achieve a breakthrough and transcendence.

Keats was a lifelong advocate of "truth" and "beauty" in his poetry, and the idea of negative capability is also in line with his writing style - Keats wanted to achieve a state of forgetfulness in order to better integrate with nature.

3. Negative Capability in Ode to a Nightingale

3.1. The Full Use of Imagination – Analysis from Stanzas

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 [4].

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 [5]. 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 [5]. 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 [6]. 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 [1]. 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 [7]. 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 [8]. 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 [8].

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. Such an ending not only completes the poem, since the poet enters the illusion with “mental numbness”, but also makes the imagination more free and fluid with this question [9].

3.2. The Full Use of Imagination – Analysis from Synesthesia

Moreover, in this poem, Keats cleverly uses the rhetorical technique of synesthesia to make the whole poem more vivid by describing the senses of hearing, taste and smell, and sight [10]. For example, “’Tis not through envy of thy happy lot, but being too happy in thine happiness” showed the sweetness and joy of the nightingale’s song. It was as if the readers heard the crisp song and walked into the eternal world of bliss, where the sun was shining on the lively earth, and how could one not want to live with the nightingale forever in such a beautiful environment [11]? In addition, the sound of “here, where men sit and hear each other groan” instantly made the readers feel the sorrow and sadness of the human world but also highlighted the happiness and beauty of the blissful world on the other side. However, at the beginning of stanza 6, the poet says, “darkling I listen”, and the contrast between the beautiful scene of nature and the real life in front of him, and the tireless song of the nightingale, makes the poet think of death [11]. How peaceful and happy it would be to die under such a beautiful scene! All beautiful things would eventually pass away, but the song of the nightingale would live forever on the earth. Moreover, in the last stanza, “thy plaintive anthem fades Past the near meadows, over the still stream, Up the hill-side; and now ‘tis buried deep in the next valley-glades”, as the nightingale’s song faded away, the poet awakened with a start and wondered if it is a dream or the real world. The song of the nightingale ran from the beginning to the end, taking the poet and the readers into the eternal world of happiness, seeing all the pains of the earth and then fading away again.

In addition to auditory imagery, the use of taste and smell intention was also very clever [11]. At the very beginning, the poet swallows poisonous wine and opium: “as though of hemlock I had drunk, or emptied some dull opiate to the drains”, which makes the readers cannot help but associate with the stimulation of alcohol and the extraordinary bitterness of poison, for this imagination of this extreme bitterness not only allowed the readers to gain empathy for the taste buds, but also to feel the mental pressure as a result, which was the feeling the poet wants to convey. The “draught of vintage” and “tasting of Flora and the country green” in Stanza 2 both reminded readers of the fragrance of vintage wine, the sweetness of nectar, the coolness of dew, and the fragrance of grass and flowers [11]. The fantasy of a fairyland is enough to make people feel mysterious, and the expectation and desire for it were also born.

Finally, visual imagery had a basic effect throughout the poem [11]. From “That thou, light-winged Dryad of the trees in some melodious plot of beechen green, and shadows numberless” to “with beaded bubbles winking at the brim, and purple-stained mouth”, the bright green feathers of the tree spirit and the crimson lips of the wine, such a sharp color contrast painted a colorful scene, highlighting the carefree and innocent beauty in that world of joy. However, the words turned, “where palsy shakes a few, sad, last gray hairs, where youth grows pale, and specter-thin, and dies”, sparse gray hair and tragic pale cheeks emerged before the eyes. The pain of the world was constantly wearing away one’s energy and appearance, and the vivid color was gone, leaving only a scene of gray and white. This color shift easily showed the sorrow of the world, which in turn accentuated the joy and happiness of the blissful world. Such a contrast ended with the darkness of the summer night. In the darkness, one can rely on one’s imagination to see green grass, flowers, shining stars, and gentle breeze, and at this time, all the restlessness and confusion could be buried in the gentle deep night.

The use of different imagery and its integration with each other created greatly excellent rhetoric of synesthesia in this poem, which made the song of the nightingale and the fairyland vivid but also showed the helplessness and sadness in the human world [10]. On the one hand, it allowed the readers to forget the boredom of life for a while in the fairyland, and on the other hand, it ended the poem with a sense of loss.

4. Conclusion

This paper mainly analyzes 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. In the first place, he thinks that poets should have this capacity in order to acquire a more vigorous imagination and then rely on it to gain a greater sense of truth and beauty; secondly, the prerequisite for a person to acquire this ability is that he can completely empty himself. Even in adversity or in a bad mood, he can also calmly handle it, neither too eager to explore the reasons nor be bound by his own dominant experience, and he can put himself into the environment so as to obtain spiritual relief. As a poet, Keats needed to have a negative ability so that he could naturally create many well-known masterpieces. As a human being, he had experienced the bitterness and sorrow of the world. Whether his parents died when he was young, or he was suffering from illness when he grew up and could not get married to his beloved, he was mentally tortured and could more or less face life and his own fate more positively by using negative capability. This article only takes *Ode to a Nightingale* as an example to explain negative abilities, and the analysis angle is very limited. In fact, this article can be expanded from more perspectives, such as analyzing the deep meaning behind the images written in the poem, different levels of emotion in the poem, and the thinking Keats wants to convey, or taking other poems as examples to analyze this aesthetic concept in detail. At present, many articles still summarize Keats’s achievements from the dimensions of his poetry and life, and only a few articles specifically start from one of Keats’s aesthetic concepts. It is hoped that more articles will excavate the value of Keats’s poetry and gain more harvest into Keats’ theory through the analysis of more poems.

References

- [1] Ou, Li. *Keats and Negative Capability*. 1st ed. London: Continuum, 2009.
- [2] Xi Chen. A Comparison of Keats’s Negative Capability Theory and Liu Xie’s Empty and Quiet Theory. *Snow Lotus Magazine*, 2015(11):133-134.
- [3] Xiu Chen. “Negative Capability” in *Ode to a Grecian Urn*. *Appreciation of Masterpieces*, 2013(03):61-62+94.
- [4] Yue Shi. A Brief Analysis of Keats’s Negative Capability. *Literary Education*, 2016, 384(12):62-63.
- [5] Monthéard, Oriane. Negation and Poetic Capability in Keats’s Odes. *Etudes anglaises* 73.2, 2020, 171–18.
- [6] Yuxin Luo. *Ode to a Nightingale: A Romanticized Reminder of Reality*. *Journal of North University of China (Social Sciences Edition)*, 2022, 38(01):87-90.
- [7] Jianchong Nan, Jiaqi Wang. The “No-Self” Writing of John Keats’s “Double Ode” in the Context of Comparative Poetics. *Journal of Guangdong University of Foreign Studies*, 2021, 32(06):92-102+155.
- [8] Chunyan Xie. Rising Acceptance of Life and Negative Capability—A Reading of John Keats’s Odes. *Overseas English*, 2013, 228(05):210-211+228.
- [9] Ulmer, William A. *Negative Capability: Identity and Truth in Keats*. *Romanticism (Edinburgh)*, 2019, 25(2):169–179.
- [10] Oldfather, Elizabeth. ‘Ode to a Nightingale’: Poetry and the Particularity of Sense. *European romantic review* 30, 2019, 5-6: 557–572.
- [11] Hongxia Liu, Jun Li. The Thought of “Negative Capability” in “Ode to a Nightingale” and the Poetic Image. *Journal of Hebei University of Technology (Social Science Edition)*, 2017, 34(03):73-75