



Negative Capability

A term used many times on this website...

'The concept of Negative Capability is the ability to contemplate the world without the desire to try and reconcile contradictory aspects or fit it into closed and rational systems.'

Keats was a romantic poet, full of intense passion and desire, yet shy and reserved. He was a young man with all the determination and melancholy of a teenager on a romantic quest to be among the English poets when he died.

He is an inspiration to all of us, full of colourful language and imagination. He battled through tuberculosis and only lived to be 25. He wanted to be famous, and he has well and truly lived up to his dream.

Keats longed to find beauty in what was often an ugly and terrible world. He was an admirer of Shakespeare, and his reading of the Bard is insightful and intriguing, illustrating the genius of Shakespeare's creativity. In a letter to his brothers, Keats describes this genius as 'Negative Capability':

'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, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.'

This description can be compared to a definition of conflict:

'An emotional state characterized by indecision, restlessness, uncertainty and tension resulting from incompatible inner needs or drives of comparable intensity.'

These two definitions are very similar; the meaning of conflict sounds very negative and hopeless. However, Keats' creative concept seems positive and full of potential by leaving out 'restlessness' by avoiding an 'irritable reaching after fact and reason'

In another letter, Keats says that the 'poetical character... has no self- it is everything and nothing- it has no character and 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 conceiving an Iago as an Imogen. What shocks the virtuous philosopher delights the camelion Poet... A Poet is the most unpoetical of anything in existence, because he has no identity, he is continually filling some other body'

In order for Keats to be able to create true poetry, one had to be able to remain in what may be states of conflict without 'irritably' reaching after facts or reasons. By not imposing one self upon the doubts and uncertainties which make up a conflict, Keats would rather we were open to the Imagination.

The word 'doubt' it from the Latin, 'dubitare' and comes from 'two' as in two minds. In most conflicts, two people (i.e. two minds) oppose each other. Yet instead of fighting the other, Keats finds the situation to be one that is open for creativity.



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In this sense, Negative Capability is a sublime expression of supreme empathy.

And empathy, is the capacity for participating in, experiencing and understanding another's feelings or ideas. It's a creative tool to help us understand each other, understand different points of views or different cultures so that we might be able to express them.

Being able to see thing from another's point of view, and to apply an open, imaginative creativity, are both critical, poetical methods to resolve conflicts creatively.

This phrase must confuse many people, who think it means 'being capable'. It actually means 'being capable of eliminating one's own personality, in order imaginatively to enter into that of another person, or, in extreme cases, an animal or an object'. The phrase was coined by Keats, in a letter- 22nd Dec 1817, to his brothers George and Thomas: '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, that is when Man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after facts and reason'.

It looks, on the face of it, as if the kind of genius Keats is thinking about, simply cannot make up his mind, and that is partly the case; but the reason he cannot make up his mind is because his own identity is precarious, and he is continually being invaded by the identities of other people. The person of fixed opinion, such as Wordsworth, enjoys, or perhaps suffer from, 'egotistic sublime'.

In an earlier letter, of the 22nd November 1817, Keats had affirmed that 'Men of Genius' do not have 'any individuality' or 'determined character'. Another letter (27th October 1818) defines 'the poetic character' as taking 'as much delight in conceiving an Iago as an Imogen', adding 'what shocks the virtuous philosopher delights the camelion poet'. We see 'Negative Capability' in operation in Keats as he contemplates a bird on a gravel path, and he told Richard Woodhouse that he could even conceive of a billiard ball taking a sense of delight in 'its own roundness, smoothness, volubility and the rapidity of its motion'. When in a room with the dangerous, leopardess-like woman Jane Cox, he felt her identity pressing in upon him: 'I forget myself entirely because I live in her' (letter of October 1818).

Many writers have identified themselves as having 'Negative Capability', even if they have not always used the phrase. Coleridge speaks in a letter of November 1819 of 'a sort of transfusion and transmission of my consciousness to identify myself with the object'. Byron says, in a letter to Thomas Moore (4th March 1822) that he embodies himself 'with the character' while he is drawing it. Browning claims to be able imaginatively to enter other beings. Clough's main character in *Amours de Voyage* says '...I walk, I behold.../That I can be and become anything that I meet with or look at'. T.S.Elliot in *Tradition and the Individual Talent* writes that 'the progress of the artist is a continual self sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality.' Mrs Ramsey, in Virginia Woolfe's 'To the Lighthouse', looks intently 'until she became the things she looked at'. Certainly it is a pervasive characteristic of the creative faculty. Margaret Atwood writes in *Second Words* (1982) of the writers desire to be teleported into somebody else's mind, but retaining one's own perceptions and memories.

Many artists long for such freedom of movement, but a central philosophical problem remains in all this: if other beings take over the artist's mind, how can the artist present them in a decisive, discriminating way; on the other hand, if the artist enters other beings with his or her own personality, perceptions and memories intact (like Satan entering the body of the serpent), how can it be claimed that they remain other beings?