

What is Negative Capability?

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What is negative capability? [2016]

Negative Capability is a famous idea by John Keats (1795–1821). He introduced it in a letter to his brothers George and Tom in December 1817. It means a poet's ability to accept mystery, doubt, and uncertainty without seeking clear answers. It also shows the poet's power to stay detached from his personal feelings while creating poetry.

Definition and Meaning: Keats defines this term perfectly. He says,

“One who has negative capability, is capable of being uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.”

This means that a great poet can remain calm in the face of confusion. He also accept the unknown without trying to explain it through logic. It is the capability of negating oneself.

Seen in Keats's Poetry: This quality is best seen in Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale." Forgetting the painful realities of life, he shares the joy of the bird's song and enters an ideal world through imagination. He writes,

“Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!

No hungry generations trample thee down.”

Here, Keats finds comfort in the eternal beauty of art and nature. Similarly, in "Ode on a Grecian Urn," he admires the silent urn that preserves eternal truth and beauty..

Beyond Rational Understanding: Negative Capability enables Keats to express experiences that transcend reason. He does not explain them but accepts their mystery. It gives his poetry universality and emotional depth. His calm acceptance of uncertainty makes him an impersonal and objective artist.

In short, Negative Capability is the poet's power to stay open to mystery and beauty without seeking reason. It shows Keats's belief that true art grows from imagination, not from logic or personal emotion.