
Negative Capability Revisited: John Keats and the Postmodern Poetics of Indeterminacy

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Abstract

John Keats's concept of Negative Capability has long been regarded as one of the defining principles of Romantic aesthetics. Traditionally interpreted as the poet's capacity to remain "in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason," the concept has primarily been examined within the intellectual framework of Romanticism. This paper argues that Negative Capability also anticipates significant aspects of postmodern literary theory, particularly its emphasis on indeterminacy, plurality of meaning, and resistance to epistemological certainty. Through a comparative reading of Keats's letters and selected poems alongside the theoretical perspectives of Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, and Jean-François Lyotard, the paper demonstrates that Keats's aesthetic philosophy prefigures several postmodern concerns while remaining distinctly Romantic in its faith in imagination and beauty. Rather than identifying Keats as a proto-postmodernist, the paper proposes that Negative Capability functions as an intellectual bridge between Romantic aesthetics and postmodern literary thought. Such a reading not only expands our understanding of Keats's poetic theory but also highlights the continuing relevance of Romantic aesthetics within contemporary critical discourse.

Keywords: John Keats, Negative Capability, Romanticism, Postmodernism, Indeterminacy, Literary Theory

Among the many concepts associated with English Romanticism, few have enjoyed as enduring a critical afterlife as John Keats's theory of Negative Capability. Coined in a letter to George and Thomas Keats on 21 December 1817, the phrase has become central to discussions of poetic creativity, imagination, and aesthetic experience. Keats defines the ideal poet as one capable of existing "in uncertainties,

Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason." Although this statement emerged within the context of Romanticism, its implications extend beyond the nineteenth century. This paper argues that Negative Capability anticipates several defining concerns of postmodern literary theory, particularly the embrace of indeterminacy, the rejection of fixed meaning, and the openness of interpretation. At the same time, it contends that Keats remains fundamentally Romantic because he never abandons faith in imagination as a meaningful way of engaging reality.

Traditional criticism has interpreted Negative Capability as Keats's response to Enlightenment rationalism and the growing dominance of empirical thought. M. H. Abrams, Walter Jackson Bate, and Helen Vendler have emphasized that Keats valued imaginative receptivity over systematic philosophy. The poet resists intellectual certainty because human experience exceeds the limits of rational explanation. His great odes repeatedly demonstrate this aesthetic openness by refusing to resolve the tensions they explore.

In *Ode to a Nightingale*, for instance, the speaker moves between the worlds of imagination and reality without establishing the superiority of either. The poem concludes with the famous question: "Do I wake or sleep?" Rather than providing closure, Keats deliberately leaves the reader suspended between alternative states of consciousness. Similarly, *Ode on a Grecian Urn* refuses to explain the paradoxes embodied in the urn itself. The enigmatic assertion, "Beauty is truth, truth beauty," has generated countless interpretations precisely because it resists definitive explanation. These poems illustrate that ambiguity is not a weakness of Keats's poetry but its governing principle.

It is this embrace of uncertainty that invites comparison with postmodern literary theory. Postmodernism emerged partly as a critique of universal truth, stable identity, and fixed systems of meaning. Jacques Derrida's theory of deconstruction argues that meaning is continually deferred through the endless play of linguistic differences. Roland Barthes challenges the authority of authorial intention by proposing that meaning is produced through the interaction between text and reader rather than dictated by the author. Jean-François Lyotard defines the postmodern condition as an "incredulity toward metanarratives," questioning all comprehensive systems of knowledge.

Although separated by nearly two centuries, these ideas resonate with Keats's understanding of poetic experience. Negative Capability rejects the desire for final

certainty in favour of sustained openness. Rather than imposing intellectual order upon experience, the poet inhabits contradiction without anxiety. In this sense, Keats anticipates what later theorists describe as the productive instability of meaning.

The comparison becomes particularly illuminating when one considers Keats's conception of poetic identity. In another famous letter, he remarks that "the poet has no Identity." Unlike Wordsworth's emphasis upon the expressive self, Keats imagines the poet as continually dissolving into the lives and experiences of others. Such a conception bears a striking resemblance to poststructuralist critiques of the unified subject. Michel Foucault questions the idea of the autonomous individual, while Barthes famously proclaims the "death of the author." Both reject the notion of a stable centre from which meaning originates. Keats's "camelion Poet," constantly assuming new identities, unexpectedly anticipates this decentered conception of subjectivity.

Yet important differences prevent us from identifying Negative Capability with postmodernism. Keats embraces uncertainty because he believes it deepens aesthetic and emotional understanding. His acceptance of ambiguity ultimately serves imagination rather than skepticism. Even when his poems resist definitive interpretation, they continue to affirm the possibility of profound human insight through beauty. The famous conclusion of *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, however contested, reveals Keats's conviction that aesthetic experience possesses enduring significance.

Postmodern theory approaches uncertainty from a different philosophical position. Derrida does not merely celebrate ambiguity; he questions the very possibility of stable meaning. Lyotard similarly rejects universal claims to truth, emphasizing the fragmentation of knowledge within contemporary culture. Keats, by contrast, never abandons the search for truth. He merely insists that truth cannot always be reached through logic alone. Imagination becomes an alternative mode of knowing rather than a rejection of knowledge itself.

This distinction is crucial. Negative Capability is not an early form of deconstruction, nor is Keats a postmodern thinker born before his time. Instead, his aesthetic philosophy reveals an important continuity in literary history. Both Romanticism and postmodernism resist rigid intellectual systems, yet they do so for different reasons. Keats embraces uncertainty because it enlarges human sympathy and imaginative perception. Postmodernism embraces indeterminacy because it questions the foundations upon which certainty itself is constructed.

The value of reading Keats through postmodern theory therefore lies not in collapsing historical differences but in recognizing productive dialogue across periods. Such an approach demonstrates that literary ideas often transcend the movements in which they originate. Negative Capability remains relevant because it articulates an ethics of openness that continues to inform contemporary approaches to literature. Readers are encouraged not to master texts through definitive interpretation but to inhabit their ambiguities with patience and intellectual humility.

Moreover, this comparative perspective enriches both Romantic studies and literary theory. It reveals that Romanticism was never simply a celebration of subjective emotion but also a sophisticated reflection upon the limits of knowledge and representation. Equally, it reminds postmodern criticism that openness to uncertainty did not originate exclusively within twentieth-century philosophy. Keats anticipated many of these concerns through poetic intuition rather than theoretical abstraction.

The continuing significance of Negative Capability lies precisely in this capacity to bridge historical paradigms. Its refusal of premature certainty encourages forms of reading that remain attentive to complexity, contradiction, and plurality without surrendering the possibility of meaningful aesthetic experience. In an age increasingly characterized by ideological polarization and epistemological skepticism, Keats's vision of imaginative openness offers an alternative model of critical engagement founded upon intellectual generosity rather than dogmatic certainty.

In conclusion, Negative Capability occupies a unique position within literary history. It belongs unmistakably to Romantic aesthetics while simultaneously anticipating aspects of postmodern thought. The comparison reveals significant affinities concerning ambiguity, subjectivity, and interpretive openness, yet it also underscores decisive philosophical differences. Whereas postmodernism frequently questions the existence of truth itself, Keats maintains confidence that imagination and beauty remain indispensable avenues toward human understanding. Negative Capability should therefore be understood neither as an accidental precursor to postmodernism nor as a concept confined to Romanticism. Instead, it represents a timeless aesthetic principle whose relevance extends across literary periods, continuing to shape critical debates concerning interpretation, creativity, and the nature of poetic truth.

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