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Abstract

This paper examines and analyzes the ideations of negative capability postulated by Keats in his "Ode to Autumn". His negative capability embraces uncertainty, doubt, and ambiguity in poetry, without seeking to impose rational explanations or resolutions. He employs the third- person narration, depersonalized imagery, universal themes, and avoids using personal pronouns in writing the odes. These aspects expose his fundamental concept of negative capability because he desires to remain in doubt, uncertainty, and mysteries by the process of depersonalization of the authorship. He explicates the true nature of beauty in his "Ode to Autumn". He embraces the mystery and complexity of the ripening of fruits like grapes, apples, gourd and hazelnuts. The bee-hives are filled with honey. The season embodies the contrasting qualities with their harmonious coexistence. Keats explores the occupations of autumn. The season performs various activities in the form of a reaper, a winnower, a gleaner and a cider –presser. Keats juxtaposes the activities of life as well as the passivity/ death in these occupations. He introduces the songs of autumn. The mournful sounds of the gnats, the bleating of the lambs, the singing of the crickets, the whistling of the redbreast and the twittering of the swallows offer the music of autumn. The ambiguities of the abundance and the decline in these songs reflect the cyclical nature of the autumn season. This paper applies the dynamics of the qualitative approach, with an interpretive research design to unveil the beauty of the autumn season.

Keywords: Autumn, negative capability, ode, personification, sensuousness

Introduction

This research explores Keats's negative capability in his "Ode to Autumn", to find his appreciation of nature, especially, the autumn season. John Keats possesses a poetic philosophy that sets him apart from his contemporaries. His concept of negative capability forms a central approach to his poetry. This theory refers to the ability of a poet to remain in a state of uncertainty, doubt, and ambiguity without the longing for fixed answers or

resolutions. This concept allows him to explore the depths of human experience as he embraces the complexities and contradictions inherent in life.

Keats demonstrates his negative capability in his "Ode to Autumn". He immerses himself in the sensory richness of the autumn season. He retreats from imposing rigid interpretations or moral lessons upon it. He captures the essence of the season through vivid imagery and lyrical language. He finds its splendor in the ripening of fruits and the soft murmurs of the wind. At the heart of "Ode to Autumn" lies a celebration of the cyclical nature of life and the inevitable passage of time. He explores in it a veritable paean of praise for the beauty and bounty of nature. He appreciates nature for its own sake. He embraces the transience of the season. He invites readers to confront their mortality, to reflect upon the fleeting beauty of existence. He allows the contradictions like life and death, growth and decay to coexist harmoniously within the poem. Thus he embodies the spirit of negative capability.

Keats employs the phrase 'negative capability' to mean 'the capability of negating oneself'. He analyzes it further as remaining outside of or detached from what he is writing, or preserving a quality of universality. He introduces this concept in a letter to his brothers George and Tom on December 22, 1818:

I had not a dispute but a disquisition with Dilke, on various subjects; several things dovetailed in my mind, & at once it struck me, what quality went to form a Man of Achievement especially in literature & 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 & reason. (193)

The above excerpt explores a conversation Keats makes with Dilke and contemplates the concept of negative capability. He finds it essential for achieving greatness in literature, as Shakespeare demonstrates. It refers to the ability to remain open to uncertainties, mysteries, and doubts without feeling the need to forcefully resolve them with facts or reasoning. Keats finds this quality crucial for creative and intellectual endeavours. Kamini Singhal analyzes Keats's definition further, "The poet should be receptive rather than searching for fact or reason and should not seek absolute knowledge of every truth, mystery or doubt" (565). His theory focuses on maintaining objectivity or impersonality in writing the poems. Thus Provinziano adduces:

It concentrates on capturing the intensity of emotion and communicating this feeling via the imagination. This involves a key action: the poet must throw himself into an object in order to obliterate his personal identity. [. . .] The purpose of this is to fuse emotional intensity with the object so that the object becomes symbolic of the emotions. (Theory of negative capability)

The above excerpt analyzes a poet's ability to convey intense emotions through imagination. To achieve this, he must immerse himself completely in the object of his expressions effectively erasing his own identity. For instance, Edmund Kean's performances on stage

trigger the idea of 'gusto' in Keats. This idea analyzes 'gusto' as "intensity which supersedes older terms like nature and universality as a first order criterion for poetic development" (Ali 116). Keats vanishes his personal life and individuality to give a true performance onstage. It fuels the negative capability in Keats. A poet destroys his identity only when an object attracts him. When his emotion fuses with the object, this union brings beauty and truth. Keats finds "a thing of beauty is a joy forever" (5). He demonstrates 'nature' as nothing beyond it. For instance, he employs the theory of the negative capability of a poet in the themes and technique of "Ode to Autumn". Poonam Sinha finds the characteristics of a poet as, "The poet is like a chameleon" (39825). He merges himself in the very object like a chameleon merges with the object by changing its colours. Thus, he loses his identity. She further adduces, "the poet merges himself in the very object. The two become one and the result is the sweet wholesomeness" (ibid). Keats's odes exemplify them. Further, the poet expresses his empathy when he participates, experiences, and understands another's feelings. So, he needs to remain away from uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, etc., to create a true poetry.

Shakespeare's plays inspire Keats so much he analyzes his creativity as the "Negative Capability" (Sinha 39826). Keats finds in his plays the "comprehension of experience, largeness and compassion; not the egotistic self-assertion, but the negation of self" (ibid). This capacity of objectivity comes to Shakespeare not through fact and reason, but through terrible personal suffering and understanding the true nature of works. He annihilates and merges himself completely, for the time being, into the object of treatment. He has no character of his own. He always identifies himself with his characters. He becomes Hamlet, Macbeth, Iago, Portia, Desdemona, Falstaff, and yet he becomes none. Thus he becomes an exemplary figure of the negative capability. Keats aims to attain perfection in odes, as Shakespeare has attained in his drama. So, Keats analyzes the sensations passively and observes them astutely in his poetry as they constitute the necessary factors to take to any disciplinary role.

A poet analyzes "sensuous enjoyment of beauty" (Sinha 39827) through odes. So, an ode constitutes a form of the poem where the poet addresses some animate and inanimate objects. It's a beauty of art, of nature, and of the ancient world of the Hellas. Keats's odes like "Ode to a Grecian Urn", "Ode to a Nightingale", "Ode on Melancholy", "Ode to Autumn", etc. choose human things like love, sorrow and beauty and present them in concrete shape. They explore the impersonality and objectivity of the poet. Keats's poetry receives mixed reactions from literary critics. F.R. Leavis asserts, "It is as if Keats were making major poetry out of minor as if, that is, the genius of a major poet was working in the material of minor poetry" (qtd. in Wolfson 167). He compares Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" with Shelley's "Skylark" and finds Keats's poetry not as sensuous, objective, pictorial and musical as others find them. In the biography of Keats, Amy Lowell explores autumn as a "picture and nothing more" (qtd. in Lott 71). The poem portrays the picture of autumn. Walter H. Evert finds the season "fruition and fulfillment in the process

of time" (297). Autumn loads with fruits of variety and tastes. However, W.H. Hudson analyzes Keats's poetry important for three reasons. He adduces:

First, on the side of form and style he is the most romantic of the romantic poets, handling even his Greek themes with a luxuriance of language and a wealth of detail as far as possible removed from the temperance and restraint of Hellenic art. Secondly, more than any other great poet of his time, he represents the exhaustion of the impulses generated by the social upheaval and his humanitarian enthusiasms of the Revolution. Finally Keats's influence was none the less very strong upon the poets of the succeeding generations. (19)

The above remarks exemplify Keats's knowledge of appreciating the beauty of nature as well as art. Hood, Tennyson, etc. follow Keats's poetry. Thus Keats remains a romantic, revolutionary, and inspirational poet. This researcher makes a study of Keats's employment of negative capability in the context of "Ode to Autumn" in the foregoing sections.

Statement of the Problem

Numerous scholars analyze John Keats's concept of negative capability and its application in his poetry. However, there remains a gap in understanding its specific significance within "Ode to Autumn." This research attempts to fill this gap by investigating how Keats utilizes negative capability as a means of conveying the complex interplay between mortality, beauty, and the transience of life in "Ode to Autumn". Further, this study attempts to elucidate its role in shaping interpretations of Keats's poetic technique, philosophical outlook, and engagement with nature.

Research Questions

This research sets the following questions as prerequisites to draw its findings:

- (a) What are the specific instances of negative capability evident in the imagery, language, and themes of the poem?
- (b) How does Keats employ negative capability in "Ode to Autumn" to evoke a sense of openness and uncertainty?

Objectives

This research aims to draw the following objectives:

- (a) To identify and examine specific instances of negative capability within the text of "Ode to Autumn" through a close textual analysis.
- (b) To analyze Keats's use of negative capability as a poetic device in "Ode to Autumn" and its impact on the readers' interpretation of the poem.

Significance

Keats's odes feature the sensuous, pictorial, objective, and musical poetry. The significance of this study lies in understanding Keats's art of magnifying the natural beauty of the autumn season. The study also benefits the readers by knowing how he unravels the magnificence of the season in its exact forms.

Methodology

This study employs the qualitative approach to research. It employs Keats's theory of negative capability as a theoretical tool to meet its objectives. This research considers the original text of Keats's "Ode to Autumn" as a primary source of the study. It considers the book- reviews, commentaries, academic journals, scholarly articles, literary criticisms, and online resources as the secondary sources of the study. It employs thematic analysis to analyze the sources of the research. It uses a systematic approach to coding and categorizing the sources to ensure the rigour of the analysis. It compares the findings from the analysis of primary and secondary sources, to enhance the reliability of the study.

Limitation of the Study

This research limits its study to explore Keats's negative capability in "Ode to Autumn". It explores Keats's other odes in general, to make a study of how Keats introduces the beauty of nature. However, this researcher intends to study Keats's "Ode to Autumn" in particular, to analyze how he employs negative capability to explore the beauty of autumn. The foregoing discussions help the research to reach to its conclusion.

Negative Capability in the Fruits of Autumn

Keats's "Ode to Autumn" explores the autumn season. He records his mood in the form of this ode by seeing the beauty of the season. He never attempts to intellectualize or indoctrinate it. He does not contemplate the beauties of nature; rather he delineates pictorially the sensuous apprehension of the physical manifestation of nature. He makes this poem objective or impersonal by accepting the transience of beauty. He keeps himself out of the picture. The poem describes the beauty and bounty of nature during the autumn. Keats catches the spirit of the autumn afternoon. He introduces a vivid picture of luxuriant nature at the time of autumn:

The Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness,
 Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun;
 Conspiring with him how to load and bless
 With fruit the vines that round the thatch-eaves run; (112)

Keats analyzes the bounty of the autumn season. It helps trees laden with ripe fruits like the vines loaded with grapes. It acts as an intimate collaborator of the sun to bring all the fruits to maturity. Keats explores the variety of fruits mature enough for harvesting in this season. He exhibits a negative capability in the above lines through his vivid sensory imagery. The opening line of the stanza contains the ambiguity in its expression. It sets the tone for the entire poem by juxtaposing the misty atmosphere of autumn with its abundant fruitfulness. Is it a season of melancholy and fading light, as suggested by the "mists", or one of abundance and ripeness, as indicated by the "fruitfulness"? The season embodies contrasting qualities.

Keats does not provide a clear explanation of what it means for autumn to "conspire" with the sun, leaving room for interpretations and allowing for a sense of ambiguity to

permeate the stanza. The phrase "close bosom-friend" implies a close relationship between autumn and the sun, suggesting a sense of warmth and intimacy. However, the modifier "maturing" adds a layer of ambiguity—is the sun maturing, or is autumn the one maturing alongside the sun? This ambiguity reflects the dynamic and interconnected relationship between the seasons and the natural world. The word "conspiring" suggests a secretive collaboration between autumn and the sun, adding an element of intrigue to their relationship. Additionally, the phrase "how to load and bless / with fruit the vines" raises questions about the intentionality behind autumn's actions—does it actively plan and orchestrate the ripening of fruit, or is this process simply a natural occurrence? Keats explores the bounty of the season in the following lines with his sensuous appeal:

To bend with apples the mossed cottage-trees,
 And fill all fruit with ripeness to the core;
 To swell the gourd, and plump the hazel shells
 With a sweet kernel; to set budding more, (112)

Keats portrays a pictorial of the grapes, the apples, the gourd and hazelnuts - all swell in size and mellow. All fruits taste better with the ripe from the inside. Apples weigh down, gourd grows bigger, and hazel-nuts fill with a sweet kernel. He further examines the beauty of autumn, "And still more, later flowers for the bees, / Until they think warm days will never cease; / For summer has o'er brimmed their clammy cells" (112). Certain varieties of flowers bloom in the autumn. The bees suck the sweetness of these flowers to make honey. For them, summer does not expire which helps them fill their honeycombs to the brim. The vines suggest fruits like grapes, apples, gourds, and hazel-nuts with their sweet kernel. The bees suggest honey. All these appeal to readers' senses of taste and smell. Through imagery like the ripening of fruits and filling up of honey combs, Keats suggests a prolonging of fulfillment. However, he hints at the images of ageing like the maturing sun and autumn itself, the "close bosom friend" (Keats 112) of the sun.

The above lines from the poem portray the ambiguities in their expressions. The phrase, "And still more, later flowers for the bees, / Until they think warm days will never cease" presents a temporal ambiguity, as it describes the continued blooming of flowers in the autumn. The phrase "later flowers" suggests a delay or extension of the flowering season beyond what is typically expected for autumn. Additionally, "the bees" mistaken belief that warm days will never end introduces a sense of illusion or deception, highlighting the transient nature of the season. There is a sense of fluidity and transformation in nature, as seen in the imagery of "set budding more, / And still more, later flowers for the bees." This anticipation of perpetual summer contrasts with the inevitable arrival of autumn, highlighting the theme of transience and the paradoxical nature of time. This fluidity mirrors the openness and flexibility inherent in negative capability, allowing for the coexistence of growth and decay, abundance and decline.

The above stanza from "Ode to Autumn" portrays autumn as a season of complexity, where opposing elements coexist harmoniously. It invites readers to engage with the poem's

ambiguity and multiple layers of meaning. Keats's use of language allows the poem to resonate with readers on various levels, encouraging them to engage with its themes and imagery in nuanced ways.

Negative Capability in the Occupation of Autumn

"Ode to Autumn" introduces the occupation of autumn manifested all over nature. Keats describes the presence of autumn through its activities and scenes such as sitting on a granary floor, by the winnowing wind, collecting grain and carrying it over the head, and standing by the cider-presser. These sights and spells of nature catch his senses and imagination. He adduces:

Who hath not seen thee oft amid thy store?
 Sometimes whoever seeks abroad may find
 Thee sitting careless on a granary floor,
 Thy hair soft-lifted by the winnowing wind; (112)

Keats finds autumn as a reaper storing the grains in the granary. It sits carelessly in the field during a winnowing operation with her locks of hair gently lifted by the winnowing wind (fluttering breeze). This indirect approach aligns with the concept of negative capability, allowing readers to engage with the poem and interpret the imagery in their own way. The poem's ambiguity lies in the identification of the subject in "Thy hair soft-lifted by the winnowing wind." It could refer to autumn personified, suggesting a gentle breeze playing with autumn's hair. Alternatively, it could symbolize the ripened crops or harvest, which is often associated with autumn. He explores the season further:

Or on a half-reaped furrow sound asleep,
 Drowsed with the fume of poppies, while thy hook
 S pares the next swath and all its twined flowers;
 And sometimes like a gleaner thou dost keep (112)

Keats paints a picture of autumn. He finds it asleep in a half-reaped furrow, with its senses possibly dulled by the scent of poppies. He introduces the languid, dreamy atmosphere of autumn, where one immerses in a state of relaxation and reverie amidst the harvest work. He explores the ambiguous activities of the autumn season. "Sound asleep/ Drowsed with the fume of poppies" portrays its intoxicated and drowsy state whereas "sometimes like a gleaner thou dost keep" portrays its active state in the field. The "hook" sparing "the next swath" and "twined flowers" implies a deliberate and careful approach to harvesting. It also symbolizes the relentless march of time or the inevitability of change. The imagery of a gleaner adds to the depiction of autumn's activities. On one level, it suggests autumn's role in gathering the remaining fruits of the harvest. On another level, it evokes themes of loss, renewal, and the passage of time, as the gleaner collects what remains after the main harvest is complete. Keats doesn't explicitly state that these scenes depict autumn but rather suggestively presents those, allowing readers to infer the season through the imagery presented. This indirect approach exemplifies negative capability, as it encourages

readers to engage with the poem and interpret the scenes according to their perceptions and experiences.

Keats further finds autumn by a cider-press, "Steady thy laden head across a brook; / Or by a cider-press, with patient look, / Thou watchest the last oozings, hours by hours." (112). It sits by the cider press and looks patiently for hours together at the last drop of juice coming from the press. Keats employs negative capability in the above lines, with the possibilities of numerous explanations or resolutions by the readers. In "Steady thy laden head across a brook", the action of crossing a brook could symbolize the transition from one season to another or the passage of time. Similarly, in "Thou watchest the last oozings, hours by hours": the act of watching the last oozing from a cider-press "hours by hours" could suggest patience and attentiveness. It could symbolize the meticulousness and care with which autumn oversees the final stages of the harvest process, or it represents the passage of time as autumn gradually gives way to winter. Similarly, On the one hand, autumn's watching the "last oozings, hours by hours" (Keats 112) indicates the passivity and presence of death. On the other hand, the pictures Keats employs in the poem make it human and universal because he brings the eternal labours before the eyes of the readers.

Negative Capability in the Songs (music) of Autumn

"Ode to Autumn" records the music of autumn. Keats regrets to introduce the absence of spring's music in the autumn. However, the sense of contentment prevails as autumn has its music. The clouds in the western sky at sunset give the whole of nature a fascinating look. The poem portrays no regressions, no romantic ongoing for spring's beauty, nor any prophecy of death or decadence. It presents a serene mood throughout. These elements help this poem stand different from all his odes. Keats sees the continuity in the life of nature. So he rejoices at the beauty of autumn without any sense of regret. He asserts:

Where are the songs of spring? Ay, where are they?

Think not of them, thou hast thy music too,---

While barred clouds bloom the soft-dying day

And touch the stubble-plains with rosy hue;

Autumn lacks the sweetness of music as much as spring possesses. However, the "mellow fruitfulness" (Keats 112) makes the present enjoyable. It gives a sense of fulfillment and utters contentment. The thought of approaching death or decadence hardly comes to Keats's mind. The fact that the music of the earth never dies whether in spring or autumn, gives the poet a sense of contentment regardless of its harshness. Keats finds autumn's music further in:

Then in a wailful choir the small gnats mourn:

Among the river shallows, borne aloft

Or sinking as the light wind lives or dies;

And full-grown lambs loud bleat from hilly bourn; (112)

The background music of the autumn prevails in the scene of the sunset in which shadowed clouds expand in the evening sky. It filters the sunlight in such a way that it casts pink

upon the fields, which have been harvested. Gnats hum mournfully among the willows that grow along the riverbanks, and which rise and fall according to the strength of the wind. The mature, fully grown lambs make their bleating sound from the fence of their hilly enclosure. Keats finds the music of autumn further in "Hedge-Crickets sing; and now with treble soft / The redbreast whistles from a garden-croft, / And gathering swallows twitter in the skies" (112). The songs of the grasshoppers, the Robin redbreast and the twittering swallows too constitute the music of autumn. Crickets sing in the bushes and a red-breasted bird softly whistles from a small garden. The growing flocks of swallows, which rise and sing together against the darkening sky, further add music to the autumn.

Keats replaces the personified figures of autumn with the concrete images of life in the above stanza. He introduces the hints of death but with less horror. It does not affect the activities of the gnats, the hedge-crickets, and the redbreasts. Though the mourning of gnats is associated with the funeral dirge of the dying year, its sound is not confined to autumn alone. Swallows gather for their temporary migration. These instances portray the beautiful songs of autumn.

Keats demonstrates negative capability in the context of the above lines through its sensory richness, its acknowledgement of transience and ambiguity, and its integration of contrasting elements. His willingness to embrace uncertainty and complexity allows the poem to resonate with a sense of depth and authenticity. He explores the sense of abundance and decline, and reflects the cyclical nature of autumn. The imagery of the "gathering swallows" suggests a sense of vitality and abundance, while the "soft-dying day" and the "rosy hue" introduce an element of melancholy and decay. He embraces the ambiguity of these contrasting elements, allowing them to coexist without seeking to resolve them into a singular interpretation.

Keats juxtaposes the images of life and death, growth and decay, thus presenting a multifaceted portrayal of autumn. The stanza captures the richness and complexity of the season, and integrates the contradictions harmoniously. It reflects the inherent paradoxes of existence. It invites readers to contemplate the mysteries of nature. Keats replaces the personified figures of autumn with the concrete images of life in the above stanza. He introduces the hints of death but with less horror. It does not affect the activities of the gnats, the hedge-crickets, and the redbreasts. Though, the mourning of gnats is associated to the funeral dirge of the dying year, its sound is not confined to autumn alone. Swallows gather for their temporary migration. These instances portray the beautiful songs of autumn.

Conclusion

This research finds the employment of negative capability in Keats's "Ode to Autumn". Keats introduces the theory of negative capability as the ability to remain in a state of uncertainty, doubt, and ambiguity without longing for fixed answers or resolutions. He exemplifies this theory through his vivid sensory imagery; his exploration of themes such as beauty, love and mortality, and his willingness to confront the uncertainties

of human existence. He negates his personal feelings and sufferings to understand the true nature of the works. He appreciates autumn in its exact form. He employs sensory experience of sights, sounds and textures in the poem. He makes a study of the fruits of autumn, the occupations of autumn, and the songs of autumn. He analyzes the pictures of the autumn's fruits. The ripened apples, the swollen gourd, the sweet kernel in the hazels, and the honey in bee-hives make a sensuous appeal to the readers. He analyzes the occupation of autumn like a reaper storing grains in the granary, a gleaner collecting grains in the fields, and a cider- presser watching the oozing drop by drop. He analyzes the songs of autumn. The mournful sounds of the gnats, the bleating of the lambs, the singing of the crickets, the whistling of the redbreast and the twittering of the swallows offer the music of autumn. He postulates the rotational effect of the seasons. Autumn misses the song of spring but he accepts the impermanence of the season with no tracer of sadness. Swallows gather to migrate to warmer climates with their forthcoming departures. They reappear when warm days come again. The pictorial quality makes the poem remarkable. Thus Keats explores the theme of maturity in the poem that matters most in life. Maturity precedes decay. Through ripeness of fruits the growth reaches to its climax. Yet growth still surprisingly goes on. The vivid description of beauty, music and color recreates before readers a realistic picture of autumn with all its richness. The future researchers can make a study of various symbols, the metrical rhythm as well as the images of death associated with this poem.

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