

Negative Capability in John Keats' poetry

Babita Rani, Kurukshetra

M.A.(English), B.Ed.NET

Abstract

John Keats, one of the leading Romantic poet, was the first one who coined the term 'negative capability' in his poetry. It is that characteristic feature that enables a poet to live in uncertainty, doubts and confusions. This term is totally opposed to a preference for philosophical certainty over artistic beauty. Different philosophers and poets have used the term 'negative capability' as the capacity of an individual to perceive, think and operate any presupposition of a predetermined ability of the human beings.

Key-words: Certainty, philosophy, doubt, mystery, sensation

Paper

John Keats is a Romantic poet in the company of William Wordsworth, P.B. Shelley, S.T. Coleridge and Lord Byron who shares a general romantic aversion to any reason for what Wordsworth has called 'meddling intellect.' Although, Romanticism

has been defined in as many ways as there are scholars, so much so that F.L. Lucas has enumerated 11506 definitions of Romanticism in his most prominent work, *Decline and Fall of Romantic ideals*. However, the most convincing and cogent views are that Romanticism is ‘Renaissance of Wonder’, as well as ‘Return to Nature’ with its attendant feelings of mystery, thrill, sensation, suspense and horror.

In this respect, John Keats is a Romantic poet par excellence. However, in spite of these Romantic affiliations and extensions, Keats stands apart from the main stream of Romanticism by virtue of his persistent endeavour to move away from ‘Egoistic Sublime’ of Wordsworth and Byron to the objectivity of Shakespeare. As for Wordsworth, a poet is a man speaking to men, and for Shelley, a poet is an acknowledged legislator of humanity, so for John Keats also a poet is a selfless empathy inheriting is very skins of others.

In other words, a poet for John Keats is the most unpoetical being who keeps on assuming the shape and face of the objects or living beings he is describing. That means the most important talent and

to transport it to the object of contemplation which is generally known as negative capability of John Keats.

According to John Keats himself, the negative capability of an artist is “to exist among uncertainties, mystery, and doubts without irritable reaching after fact and reason.” That means, it is the capability of a poet to submit to things as they are without any assertion(complaint).

Albeit, John Keats could not achieve and effect complete objectivity or what T.S. Eliot has also called the ‘Impersonality of Art’, in his poetry in general, and in his odes in particular, still there is a constant attempt on the part of the poet to negate and forget himself as he himself says in *Ode to Nightingale*:

‘Fade far away, dissolve and quite forget’ in to the world of the bird to experience and understand imagination affinity and oneness with the bird itself. As the poet enters in to the realm of the bird, he finds this sense of sight paralysed which indirectly is the defect of this ideal world:

“I cannot see what flowers are at my feet

Nor what soft incense hangs upon the boughs

But, in embalmed darkness, guess.”

So, it is through the negative capability that the poet experiences the full thrust and pulsation of the world of bird so much so that even death here becomes a positive experience as the poet also points out:

“Now more than ever rich to die

To cease upon the midnight with no pain.”

In the same way, the poet also flies to the realm of urn with the help of his negative capability. In the beginning, he addresses the urn as ‘unravished bride of quietness,’ and then interrogates the various pictures and scenes carved upon the surface of the urn as the poet asserts

“What men or god are these? What maiden loth?

What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?

What pipes and timbrils? What wild ecstasy?”

The frequent use of nouns instead of verbs in the above lines like loth, pursuit and struggle emphasize the permanent and fixed nature of all activities in the world of art. It is the poet's imaginative oneness with the world of urn that he is capable of consoling the bold lover standing beneath the trees not to grieve as

“She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss

For ever wilt thou love, and she be faint”

In other words, it is the imaginative negation of the poet's self with its consequent merging in to the realm of art that the trees and branches become happy and the love also appears to be happy, more happy, happy one. However, this imaginative honeymoon of the poet in the pastoral world of art makes him aware of the existence of mysteriousness and death in the form of Heifer lowing the sky, the emptiness of the town along with the feeling of desolation.

Because of this, a he finds not a single soul over to return, so the poet himself returns to his world of human beings and calls this 'sylyan historian as 'cold pastoral' with. A similar perception runs

through runs through even in the last two mature odes as the poet now has learnt and even understood the illusory nature of the world of fancy and imagination. The poet has reconciled himself with the harsh and hard reality of human world as he declares:

“She dwells with beauty-beauty that must die

And joy whose hand is ever at his lips

Bidding Adieu.”

In this way, besides being a pure poet of Romanticism and sensuousness, John Keats is also an artist who, with the help of his negative capability, makes a dramatic expression of his personal experiences so as to arrive at more intimate and lucid comprehension of the tragic contradictions and misfortunes of life, when he questions the very absence of beauty and joy .

‘Ay where are they?-

Which he himself answers by assuming a stoic forbearance as he says:

“Think not of them, thou hast thy music too.”

In this way, after making a close and incisive study of the concept of negative capability as propounded by John Keats in his poetry in general, and in his odes in particular, we can safely and rightly aver the fact that his poetry is without any palpable design in it. It has thoroughly been characterized by the streak of negative capability in it.

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