

## John Keats: Negative Capability

**Negative capability** was a phrase first used by [Romantic poet John Keats](#) in 1817 to characterise the capacity of the greatest writers (particularly Shakespeare) to pursue a vision of artistic beauty even when it leads them into intellectual confusion and uncertainty, as opposed to a preference for philosophical certainty over artistic beauty. The term has been used by poets and philosophers to describe the ability of the individual to perceive, think, and operate beyond any presupposition of a predetermined capacity of the human being.

Keats used the phrase only briefly in a private letter, and it became known only after his correspondence was collected and published. In a letter to his brothers, [George](#) and Thomas, on 22 December 1817, Keats described a conversation he had been engaged in a few days previously:

I had not a dispute but a disquisition with [Dilke](#), upon various subjects; several things dove-tailed in my mind, and 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 a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason—Coleridge, for instance, would let go by a fine isolated verisimilitude caught from the Penetratum of mystery, from being incapable of remaining content with half-knowledge. This pursued through volumes would perhaps take us no further than this, that with a great poet the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration.

S.T. Coleridge was, by 1817, a frequent target of criticism by the younger poets of Keats's generation, often ridiculed for his infatuation with German idealistic philosophy. Against Coleridge's obsession with philosophical truth, Keats sets up the model of Shakespeare, whose poetry articulated various points of view and never advocated a particular vision of truth.

Keats's ideas here, as was usually the case in his letters, were expressed tersely with no effort to fully expound what he meant, but passages from other letters enlarge on the same theme. In a letter to [J.H. Reynolds](#) in February, 1818, he wrote:

We hate poetry that has a palpable design upon us—and if we do not agree, seems to put its hand in its breeches pocket. Poetry should be great & unobtrusive, a thing which enters into one's soul, and does not startle it or amaze it with itself but with its subject

In another letter to Reynolds the following May, he contrived the metaphor of 'the chamber of maiden thought' and the notion of the 'burden of mystery', which together express much the same idea as that of negative capability:

I compare human life to a large Mansion of Many Apartments, two of which I can only describe, the doors of the rest being as yet shut upon me—The first we step into we call

the infant or thoughtless Chamber, in which we remain as long as we do not think—We remain there a long while, and notwithstanding the doors of the second Chamber remain wide open, showing a bright appearance, we care not to hasten to it; but are at length imperceptibly impelled by the awakening of the thinking principle—within us—we no sooner get into the second Chamber, which I shall call the Chamber of Maiden-Thought, than we become intoxicated with the light and the atmosphere, we see nothing but pleasant wonders, and think of delaying there for ever in delight: However among the effects this breathing is father of is that tremendous one of sharpening one's vision into the heart and nature of Man—of convincing ones nerves that the World is full of Misery and Heartbreak, Pain, Sickness, and oppression—whereby This Chamber of Maiden Thought becomes gradually darken'd and at the same time on all sides of it many doors are set open—but all dark—all leading to dark passages—We see not the balance of good and evil. We are in a Mist—We are now in that state—We feel the 'burden of the Mystery,' To this point was Wordsworth come, as far as I can conceive when he wrote 'Tintern Abbey' and it seems to me that his Genius is explorative of those dark Passages. Now if we live, and go on thinking, we too shall explore them. he is a Genius and superior to us, in so far as he can, more than we, make discoveries, and shed a light in them—Here I must think Wordsworth is deeper than Milton.

Keats understood Coleridge as searching for a single, higher-order truth or solution to the mysteries of the natural world. He went on to find the same fault in Dilke and Wordsworth. All these poets, he claimed, lacked objectivity and universality in their view of the human condition and the natural world. In each case, Keats found a mind which was a narrow private path, not a "thoroughfare for all thoughts". Lacking for Keats were the central and indispensable qualities requisite for flexibility and openness to the world, or what he referred to as negative capability.<sup>[5]</sup>

This concept of Negative Capability is precisely a rejection of set philosophies and preconceived systems of nature.<sup>[6]</sup> He demanded that the poet be receptive rather than searching for fact or reason, and to not seek absolute knowledge of every truth, mystery, or doubt.<sup>[7]</sup>

It is not known why Keats settled on the phrase 'negative capability', but some scholars have hypothesized that Keats was influenced in his studies of medicine and chemistry, and that it refers to the [negative pole](#) of an [electric current](#) which is passive and receptive. In the same way that the negative pole receives the current from the positive pole, the poet receives impulses from a world that is full of mystery and doubt, which cannot be explained but which the poet can translate into art.

## Unger: The thesis of negative capability

[Roberto Mangabeira Unger](#) appropriated Keats' term in order to explain resistance to rigid social divisions and hierarchies. For Unger, *negative capability* is the "denial of whatever in our contexts delivers us over to a fixed scheme of division and hierarchy and to an enforced choice between routine and rebellion." It is thus through *negative capability* that we can further empower ourselves against social and institutional constraints, and loosen the bonds that entrap us in a certain social station.<sup>[9]</sup>

An example of negative capability can be seen at work in industrial innovation. In order to create an innovator's advantage and develop new forms of economic enterprise, the modern industrialist could not just become more efficient with surplus extraction based on pre-existing work roles, but rather needed to invent new styles of flexible labor, expertise, and capital management. The industrialist needed to bring people together in new and innovative ways and redefine work roles and workplace organization. The modern factory had to, at once, stabilize its productive environment by inventing new restraints upon labor, such as length of the work day and division of tasks, but at the same time could not be too severe or risk being at a disadvantage to competitors, e.g. not being able to shift production tasks or capacity. Those industrialists and managers who were able to break old forms of organizational arrangements exercised negative capability.<sup>[10]</sup>

This thesis of *negative capability* is a key component in Unger's theory of [false necessity](#) and [formative context](#). The theory of false necessity claims that our social worlds are the artifact of our own human endeavors. There is no pre-set institutional arrangement that our societies adhere to, and there is no necessary historical mold of development that they will follow. Rather we are free to choose and develop the forms and the paths that our societies will take through a process of conflicts and resolutions. However, there are groups of institutional arrangements that work together to bring out certain institutional forms, liberal democracy, for example. These forms are the basis of a social structure, and which Unger calls formative contexts. In order to explain how we move from one formative context to another without the conventional social theory constraints of historical necessity (e.g. feudalism to capitalism), and to do so while remaining true to the key insight of individual human empowerment and [anti-necessitarian social thought](#), Unger recognized that there are an infinite number of ways of resisting social and institutional constraints, which can lead to an infinite number of outcomes.

This variety of forms of resistance and [empowerment](#) (i.e. negative capability) make change possible.<sup>[11]</sup>

This thesis of *negative capability* addresses the problem of [agency](#) in relation to [structure](#). It recognizes the constraints of structure and its molding influence upon the individual, but at the same time finds the individual able to resist, deny, and transcend their context. Unlike other theories of [structure and agency](#), *negative capability* does not reduce the individual to a simple actor possessing only the dual capacity of compliance or rebellion, but rather sees him as able to partake in a variety of activities of self empowerment.<sup>[12]</sup>

## Bion

The twentieth-century British psychoanalyst [Wilfred Bion](#) elaborated on Keats's term to illustrate an attitude of openness of mind which he considered of central importance, not only in the psychoanalytic session, but in life itself.<sup>[13]</sup> For Bion, negative capability was the ability to tolerate the pain and confusion of not knowing, rather than imposing ready-made or omnipotent certainties upon an ambiguous situation or emotional challenge.<sup>[14]</sup> His idea has been taken up more widely in the British Independent School,<sup>[15]</sup> as well as elsewhere in psychoanalysis and psychotherapy.<sup>[16]</sup>

### In the context of Zen

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The notion of negative capability has been associated with Zen philosophy. Keats' man of negative capability had qualities that enabled him to "lose his self-identity, his 'imaginative identification' with and submission to things, and his power to achieve a unity with life". The Zen concept of [satori](#) is the outcome of passivity and receptivity, culminating in "sudden insight into the character of the real". Satori is reached without deliberate striving. The antecedent stages to satori: quest, search, ripening and explosion. The "quest" stage is accompanied by a strong feeling of uneasiness, resembling the capacity to practice negative capability while the mind is in a state of "uncertainties, mysteries and doubts". In the explosive stage (akin to Keats' 'chief intensity'), a man of negative capability effects a "fellowship with essence".<sup>[17]</sup>

### Criticism

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[Stanley Fish](#) has expressed strong reservations about the attempt to apply the concept of negative capability to social contexts. He criticized Unger's early work as being unable to chart a route for the idea to pass into reality, which leaves history closed and the individual holding

onto the concept while kicking against air. Fish finds the capability Unger invokes in his early works unimaginable and unmanufacturable that can only be expressed outright in blatant speech, or obliquely in concept.<sup>[18]</sup> More generally, Fish finds the idea of radical culture as an oppositional ideal in which context is continuously refined or rejected impracticable at best, and impossible at worst.<sup>[19]</sup> Unger has addressed these criticisms by developing a full theory of historical process in which negative capability is employed.