

A Review of John Keats's Negative Capability

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John Keats's poetic idea of negative capability distinguishes him from other major Romantic poets. It prioritizes the poet's contentment with uncertainties and half knowledge over his zealous striving for certitude and knowledge. This paper seeks to provide a review of the critical studies on Keats's concept of negative capability, and attempts to propose that Keats's negative capability bears a close resemblance with the Chinese philosophy of Taoism. In spite of many similarities in terms of their emphasis on the void and uncertainties, these two concepts draw inspirations from distinct cultural origins and therefore differ from each other in their connotations.

Keywords: John Keats, negative capability, Taoism, Chinese philosophy

Introduction

The Romantic period in British literary history is characterized by freedom from neoclassicism and emphasis on the emotions of poets. Among the poets of that period, John Keats exhibits distinctive characteristics in that his poetry represents a different trend from those of the Lake Poets as well as Shelley and Byron; and to a certain extent, his poetry anticipates the theories of Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot. Particularly, Keats's concept of "Negative Capability" places him "among the English Poets" after his death. He proposed this principle in one letter to his brothers George and Thomas:

...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... (Abrams, 1999, p. 889)

This theory intends to reduce the emotions of the poet, and therefore goes against Wordsworth's idea of poetry as "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings". Many studies have been done on this topic and some critics have done some research on the similarities between the negative capability and Zen as well as the relevant literary theory in ancient Chinese literature; nowadays Keats's influences and his brilliance as a poet have overshadowed the other Romantic literary figures.

The purpose of this paper is to provide a review of the criticism on John Keats's theory of the negative capability and to propose that Keats's negative capability bears a close resemblance with the Chinese philosophy of Taoism by examining the different cultural connotations of the two.

A Review of the Criticism

It's easy to think about the opposite of a certain concept which we come across, and so some studies, such

as Reuven Tsur's "Two Critical Attitudes: Quest for Certitude and Negative Capability" (1975), focus on the two extreme poles. He refers to one extreme as negative capability, and the other as "positivism" or "factualism". Certitude and precision are what are required in scientific thinking and the negative capability is mainly applied to literature. Taking a psychological approach, the negative capability or literary thinking is compared to what the psychologists of "Perception and Personality" call "delayed closure", while the scientific thinking requires "rapid closure". Tsur offers two readings of *Waiting for Godot* as an example to illustrate the essence of the negative capability. The two readings focus on the question "who is Godot". A man with a scientific thinking will surely try to dispel uncertainties by seeking somebody or something that Godot stands for. But it may be true that Godot stands for nothing. We cannot get the pleasure Samuel Becket offers us in the play unless we are satisfied with the uncertainties. The essay ends with the claim the negative capability and the quest for certitude bearing psychological tendencies as flexibility and rigidity, abstract and concrete personality, tolerance and intolerance of ambiguity, respectively. This thought-provoking essay offers a new perspective to probe into the theory of negative capability.

As mentioned above, Keats's poetry characterized by the negative capability has a distinct feature from that of Wordsworth. Keats stays more content with "uncertainties" and half knowledge, while Wordsworth often seeks knowledge and morality. This difference is ascribed to Keats's display of his negative capability. "Ode on a Grecian Urn" can serve as a good illustration. This poem is one full of paradoxes, and the contraries between the ideal life on the urn and the real life in Keats's world, but Keats does not go and find why it should be so or continue with further questioning; instead, he remains content with half-knowledge.

In literary criticism, there is a similar term to negative capability, "wise passiveness", as often found in the discussion of Wordsworth's poetry. Although H. W. Garrod equates Wordsworth's "wise passiveness" with Keats's "negative capability", Jacob D. Wigod, in his essay "Negative Capability and Wise Passiveness" (1952), elaborates the two concepts are actually "poles apart". Different from Shakespeare, who Keats thinks is "possessed with so enormously" with the negative capability and whose poetry is like "a prism ... of many facets of mankind", Wordsworth's poetry is "a mirror of Wordsworth", and he never writes poetry without morality in mind. Wigod expounds that Keats's poetry has in its core the sense of "universe of human experience as a harmony", and a consequent of "love of good and evil". For Keats, the harmony of universe should include both good and evil and "paint all sides of life". Whereas, Wordsworth stresses more on the morality and so his harmony is of "Nature and morality". And in the negative capability, mind controls the body and becomes "a thoroughfare for all thoughts", while the wise passiveness is simply the opposite case. Besides, in Keats's poetry we can find that the poet-narrator is excluded in the text and the poet and the description of nature or objects seem to be of oneness.

As for this point, we need go back to his idea of a poet. Wigod compares the differences between the two. Keats is a poet of no identity, a chameleon poet who feels satisfied with the state of half-knowledge, but Wordsworth is a poet "who has a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul" (Abrams, 1999, p. 246). Overall, Jacob D. Wigod presents to us a more thorough research of the negative capability and the wise passiveness, and through the comparative study of the two, we are given a more complete understanding of this guiding principle of Keats than what Garrod in essay discusses.

And some critics who are more familiar with the Eastern thoughts may feel Keats's negative capability bears resemblance with the oriental religion, such as Zen, a school of Buddhism. Richard P. Benton makes a thorough analysis and comparison between the two. Keats's success in achieving "a genuine loss of self-identity", which

is an exemplification of his negative capability, parallels the awakening of Zen, both of which require “the loss of self-identity”, and to submit oneself to something larger than oneself. Besides, Keats’s epistemology of being content with “uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts” is similar to that of Zen, as Zen preaches that “the real” is within us and that we need not to make deliberate efforts to discover “the real”. And also, in some other aspects, such as the attitudes toward dogmatism, the union of men with the universe, and relationships of the ego and “the Self”, Richard P. Benton makes an in-depth analysis. This approach by making comparisons between Keats’s thoughts and religious views other than Christian or Platonic is rather significant as it can arouse the interests of people who are of an Asian cultural background, especially Chinese, and can promote cross-cultural studies.

Closely related to Zen as regards to the loss of self-identity and being half-knowledge, it naturally reminds Chinese scholars of “the void and quietude” theory as well as the “materialization” of Zhuangzi in ancient Chinese literature. Some Chinese critics start the research of Keats’s negative capability from this perspective. The concept of “the void and quietude” is quite similar to Keats’s “loss of self-identity”. A man of negative capability should be satisfied with the state of “half-knowledge”, and Zhuangzi proposes that one who his confines is the wisest. Poets need to experience a process of “materialization” or “loss of identity” to attain the truth. When someone is “without any irritable reaching after fact & reason”, what he has access is the imagination, and in Keats’s sense, “What the imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth” (Abrams, 1999, p. 887). Though Keats and Zhuangzi have similar poetic concepts in this aspect, differences still exist between the two theories in terms of mind and cognition as pointed out by Li Zhengshuan in his criticism. The truth in Zhuangzi’s concept is the Dao which the core and root of the universe, and what poets are supposed to obtain are Dao, while to Keats the truth is beauty. The interpretation of Keats’s negative capability through the comparison with Chinese philosophical concept not only can help us have a deeper understanding of Keats’s principle with a new vision, but also provide a new approach to do studies on this topic.

Conclusion

This article has reviewed the criticism of John Keats’s negative capability from different perspectives. A core in the criticism is the emphasis on “half-knowledge” and “loss of self-identity”. This is the view that exerted much influences on T. S. Eliot’s literary theories. When the negative capability is compared with the Chinese philosophical concepts, such as “the void and quietude” and “materialization” of Zhuangzi, it is quite safe to state their similarities, but the author would like to propose their cultural connotations are rather distinct. The materialization has its origin in a story composed by Zhuangzi and Taoism, but Keats draws his idea of negative capability from the inspirations he had from Shakespeare and bears its influence from Christianity and Greek philosophers like Plato. But it is undeniable that both concepts have had extremely great impacts upon Chinese and English literature respectively.

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