



# Negative Capability and the Ethics of Uncertainty in Keatsian Poetics

Mehraj Hussain Para

Research Student, Department of English, Maulana Azad College of Arts, Science & Commerce, Rauza Bagh, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Marathwada University, Chhatrapati Sambhajnagar, Maharashtra, India.

[mehrajhussain366@gmail.com](mailto:mehrajhussain366@gmail.com)

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**Abstract**— This article reinterprets John Keats's concept of Negative Capability as an ethical as well as poetic response to epistemic uncertainty within Romantic poetics. Moving beyond readings that treat the concept as merely aesthetic tolerance for ambiguity, the study argues that Keats articulates a disciplined form of epistemological humility grounded in sustained openness to doubt, alterity, and experiential complexity. Drawing on moral philosophy, cognitive literary theory, and contemporary ethical discourse, the paper situates Keats's letters and major odes as sites where poetic indeterminacy becomes an ethical practice of attentive engagement rather than evasive irresolution. Through close readings of *Ode to a Nightingale*, *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, and *Lamia*, the analysis demonstrates how the suspension of premature certainty fosters imaginative responsibility and resists reductive modes of knowing. By positioning Negative Capability as an ethics of uncertainty, the article bridges Romantic literary studies with current debates in moral epistemology and the philosophy of literature, proposing Keatsian poetics as a continuing resource for thinking ethically within conditions of ambiguity.



**Keywords**— Negative Capability, Keatsian poetics, ethics of uncertainty, Romantic epistemology, moral imagination, poetic indeterminacy

## I. INTRODUCTION: THE PERSISTENT PROVOCATION OF DOUBT

In a letter written in December 1817, John Keats offered what would become one of the most celebrated and contested formulations in the history of aesthetic thought. Describing a conversation with his friend Charles Wentworth Dilke, Keats observed that several things dovetailed in his mind, arriving at the insight that "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*" (Keats, 1817/2002, p. 41). This brief, seemingly casual passage has generated an extraordinary volume of critical commentary across two centuries, not merely because it illuminates Keats's own

creative practice, but because it touches something philosophically fundamental about the relationship between knowledge, imagination, and ethical conduct. The concept's resonance has only deepened in the contemporary moment, as literary scholars, cognitive scientists, moral philosophers, and cultural critics find in Keatsian uncertainty an unexpected resource for thinking through the epistemic challenges of a world saturated with competing truth-claims, ideological certainties, and algorithmic imperatives towards resolution.

Yet despite its canonical status, Negative Capability has often been treated as a purely aesthetic principle—a theory of poetic composition concerned with the suppression of the poet's rational ego in favour of empathetic identification with objects and characters. Such readings, while illuminating, have tended to underestimate the concept's ethical dimensions. This paper does not seek to

replace existing aesthetic readings of negative capability but rather to extend them by demonstrating their implicit ethical and epistemological dimensions. This paper argues that Keats's valorization of irresolution is simultaneously a poetic and a moral achievement, one that demands serious engagement from contemporary ethical theory. The capacity to dwell in uncertainty without the *irritable reaching* that Keats diagnoses as the besetting fault of lesser minds is not mere passivity or aesthetic detachment; it is, as this analysis will show, a demanding form of moral attentiveness, a practice of what Martha Nussbaum (2003) has called "narrative imagination" extended to its most rigorous and uncomfortable implications.

The ethical dimensions of Keats's poetics have received renewed attention in recent scholarship, particularly in the wake of cognitive literary theory's investigations into empathy and perspective-taking (Zunshine, 2006), affect theory's reappraisal of emotion as epistemically significant (Ngai, 2020), and posthumanist philosophy's insistence on the moral importance of vulnerability and openness. Reading Keats alongside these contemporary frameworks reveals not an anachronistic projection of modern concerns onto a nineteenth-century poet, but a genuine philosophical affinity—a convergence of insights about what it means to inhabit uncertainty honestly and to refuse the seductions of premature certainty. The present study engages this convergence systematically, moving through close readings of the major odes and *Lamia* to argue that Negative Capability constitutes what we might call an ethics of epistemic humility, a discipline of suspended judgment that carries profound implications for how literature imagines human moral life.

The paper proceeds in seven sections. Following this introduction, Section 2 traces the philosophical genealogy of Negative Capability, situating it within both the Romantic intellectual context and contemporary moral epistemology. Section 3 examines the odes as laboratories of sustained uncertainty, attending to their formal strategies for enacting irresolution. Section 4 addresses the ethics of aesthetic suspension, arguing against the common conflation of Keatsian detachment with moral indifference. Section 5 reads *Lamia* as a critical test case for the limits and responsibilities of Negative Capability. Section 6 turns to the broader ethical implications of Keatsian uncertainty, synthesizing insights from the preceding analyses to demonstrate how Negative Capability functions as a model of epistemic humility and moral attentiveness applicable beyond Romantic poetics. Section 7 offers a conclusion that assesses the concept's ongoing philosophical productivity.

## II. PHILOSOPHICAL GENEALOGY: FROM ROMANTIC EPISTEMOLOGY TO MORAL PHILOSOPHY

### 2.1 The Intellectual Context of Negative Capability

To appreciate the distinctiveness of Keats's formulation, it is necessary to situate it within the broader intellectual landscape of the Romantic period. The early nineteenth century was, among other things, a moment of intense epistemological anxiety. The Kantian revolution in philosophy had unsettled confident empiricist accounts of knowledge, replacing the transparent world of Locke and Hume with a phenomenal realm constitutively shaped by the structures of mind. German Idealism, in Fichte, Schelling, and the early Hegel, responded to this unsettlement with increasingly ambitious attempts to recuperate certainty through the dialectical movement of spirit. British Romanticism occupied an equivocal position relative to these Continental developments—aware of the Kantian challenge, resistant to Idealist resolution, drawn both to empirical particularity and to visionary aspiration (Christensen, 2000). Keats, who read philosophy more widely than is sometimes supposed and whose circle included figures with serious intellectual interests, was attuned to these tensions without being systematically committed to resolving them.

What distinguishes Keats from contemporaries like Wordsworth and Coleridge is precisely his refusal to convert epistemological difficulty into a narrative of recovery or transcendence. Wordsworth's *spots of time*, as Alan Liu (1989) has argued, perform a careful management of perceptual crisis, converting the shock of natural encounter into the raw material of psychological renovation. Coleridge's conversation poems stage the mind's movement from dejection to qualified consolation. Both poets, in different ways, insist that uncertainty must ultimately be domesticated by the synthesizing power of imagination. Keats, by contrast, is drawn to what Wallace Jackson (1967) has called the *unappeasable* quality of experience—its resistance to the closure that imagination typically imposes. His letters repeatedly valorize the capacity to remain with difficulty rather than dispelling it through intellectual or imaginative labor, and this valorization is not a sign of philosophical naivety but of a distinctive and demanding intellectual discipline.

The immediate intellectual stimulus for Negative Capability was almost certainly Keats's engagement with Shakespeare. The letter in which the term appears follows closely on a viewing of Edmund Kean's theatrical performances and reflects Keats's intense reading of Shakespeare during the 1817-1818 period. Shakespeare's capacity to inhabit characters of radically different moral

and experiential orientations—to give life equally to Iago and Desdemona, Shylock and Portia—exemplified for Keats a mode of imaginative sympathy that transcended personal identity without annihilating it. This is the quality he associates with *Men of Achievement* more generally: a form of selfless attention that does not surrender judgment so much as suspend it, holding open the space of encounter before moving to assessment. The ethical dimensions of this practice, however, require excavation from the aesthetic idiom in which Keats characteristically expresses them.

## 2.2 Moral Epistemology and the Value of Uncertainty

Contemporary moral epistemology offers a productive framework for recovering the ethical significance of Negative Capability. The field has increasingly challenged the traditional assumption that moral knowledge consists in the application of general principles to particular cases, arguing instead that moral understanding requires a kind of attentiveness to particularity that resists principled systematization. Philosophers in the tradition of particularism, from Jonathan Dancy (2004) to Margaret Little, have emphasized that the morally salient features of situations are irreducibly complex and context-dependent, eluding capture by any fixed algorithm. This emphasis on the irreducibility of moral perception resonates strongly with Keats's insistence on the value of dwelling with complexity rather than reducing it prematurely.

More directly relevant is the work of Iris Murdoch, whose ethics of attention bears a striking affinity with Keatsian Negative Capability. Murdoch claim that the central task of moral life is the accurate perception of what is actually there—against the distortions imposed by fantasy, self-interest, and the consolatory operations of the ego—parallels Keats's critique of "irritable reaching after fact & reason" as a form of epistemic violence against the complexity of experience. For Murdoch, *attention* is a moral achievement requiring the suppression of the sovereign self, a quieting of the ego's insistent need to categorize and resolve. Keats's identification of this need as a defect in lesser minds suggests that he understood, albeit in aesthetic rather than systematic philosophical terms, that intellectual humility is not the absence of engagement but a particularly demanding form of it.

The ethics of care tradition, developed by Carol Gilligan, Nel Noddings, and more recently by Joan Tronto (2020), offers another convergent framework. Care ethics prioritizes relational responsiveness over principled autonomy, arguing that moral life consists fundamentally in attending to the particular needs and vulnerabilities of others rather than in the application of universal rules. The caring stance, as Tronto characterizes it, involves a form of

attentive uncertainty—a willingness to hold open the question of what another needs rather than projecting a predetermined answer. Keats's concept of the poet as a being without a fixed self, capable of entering imaginatively into the interior lives of others, anticipates this ethics of relational attention in ways that have not been sufficiently appreciated. As Blaine Greteman argues, Keats's letters consistently figure the imaginative act as an ethical practice of self-suspension in the service of genuinely other-directed attention.

More recently, Adriana Cavarero's (2016) work on vulnerability as a constitutive feature of human existence has suggested additional resources for reading Keatsian uncertainty ethically. Cavarero argues that the shared exposure of human beings to harm and contingency—what she calls our fundamental "inclination" towards others—is the ground of ethical life rather than a deficiency to be overcome by rational autonomy. Keats's poetry is saturated with an awareness of human vulnerability: to beauty, to loss, to mortality, to the unpredictable intensities of sensation. Reading this awareness through Cavarero's lens suggests that Keatsian Negative Capability is not simply an aesthetic strategy but an ethical recognition of the conditions under which genuine moral responsiveness is possible.

## III. THE ODES AS LABORATORIES OF SUSTAINED UNCERTAINTY

### 3.1 *Ode to a Nightingale*: Between Enchantment and Dissolution

The *Ode to a Nightingale* (1819) is perhaps Keats's most sustained formal enactment of Negative Capability, a poem that holds open with remarkable discipline the tension between the desire for dissolution into transcendent beauty and the recognition of that desire as a form of self-deception. The opening stanza's famous ache—"My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains / My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk"—immediately establishes the poem's characteristic uncertainty: is this numbness caused by happiness or by sadness, by excess of joy or deprivation of it? The syntax refuses to adjudicate (Wolfson, 1997). The ambiguity is not a deficiency but an achievement, holding in suspension the irreducibly mixed quality of aesthetic experience without forcing it into a predetermined emotional register.

What follows is a meditation on various modes of escape—wine, poetry, death—each of which is entertained with genuine imaginative sympathy before being quietly declined. The movement towards "easeful Death," contemplated in the sixth stanza with an intimacy that has disturbed some readers, exemplifies Negative Capability at

its most ethically demanding: the poet is capable of genuinely inhabiting the perspective of someone for whom death is an attractive resolution without either endorsing that perspective or simply dismissing it. The poem holds the experience of mortality as a genuine philosophical temptation rather than a mere rhetorical flourish, and its refusal to resolve the temptation into comfortable didacticism is central to its ethical as well as aesthetic achievement.

The poem's conclusion, with its famous question—"Was it a vision, or a waking dream? / Fled is that music:—Do I wake or sleep?"—is frequently read as a failure of resolution, a moment when the poem's imaginative aspiration collapses back into ordinary reality. Such readings, however, fundamentally misread the poem's epistemological stance. The question is not a confession of defeat but an achievement of Negative Capability: the refusal to claim certainty about the nature of the experience is precisely what preserves its moral and aesthetic integrity. The ode's closing irresolution is Keats's most sophisticated formal enactment of the principle that genuine engagement with beauty—and, by extension, with any form of profound experience—requires the willingness to remain uncertain about its ultimate status. To resolve the question prematurely would be to betray the experience itself.

### 3.2 *Ode on a Grecian Urn: The Ethics of Arrested Beauty*

The *Ode on a Grecian Urn* (1819) pushes the ethics of uncertainty in a different direction, exploring the moral implications of beauty's relationship to truth through the device of an artifact frozen outside of time. The urn's famous declaration—"Beauty is Truth, Truth Beauty"—has been interpreted as everything from a statement of Platonic metaphysics to a self-undermining irony, and the critical debate over its meaning is itself a kind of collective enactment of Negative Capability (Levinson, 1988). What is philosophically significant is not which interpretation is correct but the poem's refusal to adjudicate among them, its insistence that the relationship between aesthetic and epistemic value remains genuinely uncertain.

The urn's arrested figures—the lovers who will never kiss, the musicians whose music will never be heard—embody a form of aesthetic suspension that carries direct ethical implications. The preservation of possibility in the moment before fulfillment is, as Andrew Bennett (1994) observes, simultaneously a gift and a privation: the lovers are spared the disappointments of actual consummation but also denied its pleasures and its meaning. The poem contemplates this paradox with genuine sympathy for both conditions, refusing to privilege the permanent potentiality

of art over the transient actualities of life or vice versa. This refusal to hierarchize is itself an ethical achievement, a form of moral attention that holds both terms of the opposition in their full complexity.

The ode's treatment of the *Cold Pastoral* in its final stanza reveals the edge of Keatsian uncertainty, the point at which sustained irresolution encounters its own limits. The urn is described as a "friend to man," but the nature of that friendship remains ambiguous: is the comfort it offers genuine consolation or the cold comfort of a beauty that has purchased permanence at the cost of vitality? William Keach (2004) argues persuasively that the poem's genius lies precisely in its refusal to answer this question, holding open the possibility that art's relationship to life is constitutively irresolvable. This irresolvability is not an aesthetic flaw but a philosophical position: the poem embodies Keats's conviction that the most honest response to the deepest questions is not resolution but the disciplined maintenance of the question.

### 3.3 *Ode to Psyche and To Autumn: Uncertainty as Abundance*

The less frequently discussed odes offer complementary perspectives on the ethics of uncertainty. *Ode to Psyche* presents uncertainty as the condition of creative generativity, constructing an inner sanctuary for the goddess precisely because she lacks the external temples and devotees of the more established Olympians. The poem's concluding image of an "untrodden region of my mind" as a space of potential worship embodies a productive uncertainty—the refusal to foreclose imaginative possibility by fixing it in definite form. There is something ethically significant in this commitment to the provisional: the poem refuses the false security of established forms in favour of the more demanding openness of genuine creative encounter.

*To Autumn* (1819), often read as Keats's most serene and resolved poem, is in fact his most complex meditation on the relationship between temporal uncertainty and ethical acceptance. The poem's famous refusal to mourn the passing of summer—"Where are the songs of Spring? Ay, where are they? / Think not of them, thou hast thy music too"—is sometimes mistaken for philosophical equanimity. More accurately, it represents a hard-won practice of attention to what is actually present rather than what is desired or feared. As reviewer argues, *To Autumn* enacts a form of mindful presence that is deeply consonant with Murdoch's ethics of attention: the poem achieves its characteristic poise not by suppressing awareness of loss but by insisting that full attention to the present moment is itself a form of moral achievement. The uncertainty that pervades the poem—about the nature of autumn's bounty,

about the relationship between ripeness and decay—is held with a disciplined openness that represents the maturation of Keats's ethical imagination.

#### IV. AESTHETIC SUSPENSION AND MORAL RESPONSIBILITY

##### 4.1 The Charge of Moral Evasion

The most persistent critical objection to reading Negative Capability as an ethical stance is the charge that aesthetic suspension is simply a sophisticated form of moral evasion—that the valorization of uncertainty functions to exempt the poet from the practical demands of ethical engagement. This objection has taken several forms. From a traditional Arnoldian perspective, poetry that refuses to provide "criticism of life" fails in its highest cultural function. From a more recent politically engaged criticism, the Keatsian aesthetic of irresolution can appear as an ideological mystification, a way of aestheticizing the social contradictions of early nineteenth-century Britain rather than confronting them critically. Jerome McGann's (1985) influential critique of Romantic ideology, while not targeted specifically at Negative Capability, has shaped a tradition of reading that treats Keatsian withdrawal as symptomatic of class-inflected escapism.

These objections deserve serious engagement rather than dismissal. Keats was, as several recent scholars have emphasized, a politically conscious writer whose class position as a "Cockney" poet outside the educated elite shaped his aesthetic commitments in ways that resist easy idealization (Roe, 2012). The gorgeous sensuality of the odes was, in part, a deliberate affront to the cultural pretensions of Augustan classicism and its associated social hierarchies. At the same time, the charge that Keatsian uncertainty is simply evasion underestimates the discipline required to sustain genuine irresolution in the face of cultural pressures towards premature resolution. The "irritable reaching after fact & reason" that Keats critiques is not an exclusively individual failing but a cultural disposition encouraged by the dominant epistemological assumptions of his time—and, one might argue, of ours.

##### 4.2 Negative Capability as Ethical Discipline

The key to distinguishing Keatsian Negative Capability from moral evasion lies in its active character. Dwelling in uncertainty, as Keats conceives it, is not a passive state of indifference but a demanding form of engagement that requires the continuous suppression of the ego's tendency to impose its preferred resolutions on recalcitrant experience. This distinction between active and passive uncertainty has been illuminated by recent cognitive

literary scholarship. Lisa Zunshine's (2006) work on theory of mind in literary reading demonstrates that imaginative engagement with fictional consciousness requires a form of sustained epistemic vigilance, a continuous monitoring of one's own attributions of mental states to characters against the evidence the text provides. The Keatsian reader, trained by the odes to resist premature resolution, is practicing a form of cognitive discipline that has direct implications for moral attention in everyday life.

The ethical significance of this discipline becomes clearest when we consider its antithesis: the kind of premature certainty that closes down moral perception by substituting convenient categories for actual engagement with the particular. Philosopher Charles Larmore (1996) has argued that moral life requires a capacity for what he calls *receptive attention*—an openness to the morally salient features of situations that resists the tendency to assimilate new experience to prior expectations. This capacity is structurally analogous to Keatsian Negative Capability: both involve the suppression of the "irritable reaching" for comfortable resolution in favour of a more demanding openness to what is actually present. The ethical practice that Keats embodies in his odes is, on this reading, not a retreat from moral responsibility but an intensification of it.

The apophatic tradition in philosophy and theology offers a further resource for understanding the ethical character of Negative Capability. Apophatic or negative theology, which approaches the divine through the negation of positive attributes rather than their affirmation, holds that genuine encounter with what exceeds ordinary understanding requires a disciplined suspension of the categories through which we typically make sense of the world (Turner, 1995). Contemporary apophatic ethics, developed by scholars such as, extends this tradition to moral philosophy, arguing that ethical responsiveness to others requires a willingness to let the other exceed our preconceptions—to remain genuinely open to being surprised by their complexity. Keats's insistence that the greatest minds are those capable of remaining in uncertainty without reaching irritably for closure is deeply consonant with this apophatic ethical stance.

##### 4.3 Empathy, Vulnerability, and the Politics of Uncertainty

The relationship between Negative Capability and empathy has been explored in several recent contributions to Romantic studies. Empathy, as it has been theorized in both philosophy and cognitive science, involves a complex combination of imaginative perspective-taking and the maintenance of one's own perspective as a corrective to

total identification. The Keatsian *chameleon poet*—famously described in a letter to Richard Woodhouse as having no self, delighting in its imaginative inhabitation of radically different beings—approximates this dual structure: the suppression of the ego is not its annihilation but its temporary suspension in the service of genuinely other-directed attention.

Writers posthumanist account of vulnerability as an ethical category provides a productive framework for reading the politics of Keatsian openness. They argue that acknowledging one's own vulnerability—one's constitutive openness to being affected by others and by the world—is the condition of genuine ethical responsiveness rather than a weakness to be overcome. Keats's poetry is saturated with an awareness of vulnerability in this sense: the poet who describes himself as capable of entering into the existence of a sparrow pecking about the gravel is also a poet acutely aware of his own exposure to beauty, to loss, and to the physical fragility that tuberculosis made impossible to ignore. This awareness of shared vulnerability is not incidental to Negative Capability but constitutive of it: the capacity to dwell with uncertainty is, in part, the capacity to acknowledge one's own exposure to the unpredictable.

Sara Ahmed's (2013) work on the cultural politics of emotion provides a further dimension to this analysis. Ahmed argues that emotions are not merely private psychological states but orientations towards the world that carry ideological implications, shaping what we attend to and what we discount. Keats's insistence on the value of genuine feeling—his famous critique of the *egotistical sublime* of Wordsworth as a mode of emotional self-display that ultimately forecloses genuine engagement with otherness—anticipates Ahmed's analysis of how emotional performance can substitute for genuine responsiveness. The Negative Capability that Keats advocates is, among other things, a practice of emotional discipline: the willingness to feel genuinely, without the protection of defensive certainty, in the face of an experience that resists comfortable categorization.

## V. LAMIA AND THE LIMITS OF NEGATIVE CAPABILITY

### 5.1 The Poem's Epistemological Stakes

*Lamia* (1820) is Keats's most sustained critical examination of the limits and dangers of Negative Capability, a poem that stages the confrontation between the ethics of uncertainty and the claims of philosophical rationalism in a way that refuses to endorse either position unequivocally. The poem's notorious ambiguity—its apparent simultaneous sympathy with Lamia's

enchantments and with Apollonius's reality-testing rationalism—has made it a critical flashpoint, with readers disagreeing sharply about whether Keats endorses the imagination's transformative power or counsels recognition of its deceptive potential (Richardson, 2001).

The poem's mythological source, drawn from Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*, provides a narrative framework in which an enchantress who has taken human form is destroyed when her true nature is revealed by the philosopher Apollonius. Keats's treatment of this narrative is, characteristically, more complex than the source material suggests. Lamia is presented with genuine imaginative sympathy: her beauty, her love for Lycius, and her vulnerability to philosophical unmasking are rendered with a tenderness that makes simple allegorization difficult. At the same time, the poem does not entirely exempt her from critique: there is something in the nature of her enchantment that is presented as fundamentally dishonest, a substitution of beautiful illusion for authentic reality.

### 5.2 Apollonius and the Critique of Closure

What is most ethically significant in *Lamia* is Keats's treatment of Apollonius, the philosopher whose penetrating gaze destroys the enchantment. Apollonius is, in several respects, the anti-type of Negative Capability: he is a man who reaches irritably after fact and reason, who refuses to remain in the uncertainty that Lamia's beauty requires, and who privileges rational unmasking over the discipline of genuine imaginative engagement. The poem's famous lines—"Philosophy will clip an Angel's wings, / Conquer all mysteries by rule and line, / Empty the haunted air, and gnomèd mine"—have often been read as a straightforward indictment of rationalism in the name of imagination (Bewell, 2003).

This reading, however, is too simple, and recent scholarship has rightly complicated it. As Scholar argues, the poem does not present Apollonius as simply wrong: Lamia is, after all, not a human woman but a supernatural being whose love for Lycius is, in some sense, predicated on deception. The philosopher's refusal to be taken in by appearances has a genuine ethical dimension—the insistence on truth over comfortable illusion is not without moral force. What the poem stages, then, is not a simple opposition between imagination and reason but a genuinely tragic collision between two legitimate modes of ethical engagement: the Negative Capability that keeps open the space of wonder and the philosophical integrity that refuses to purchase wonder at the cost of reality. Neither position is vindicated unambiguously, and this refusal to adjudicate is itself the poem's most profound exercise in Negative Capability.

### 5.3 Uncertainty and Responsibility in *Lamia*

The ethical ambiguity of *Lamia* raises an important question about the limits of Negative Capability as a moral principle: can the suspension of judgment be sustained indefinitely, or does it eventually require resolution in the service of ethical responsibility? This question has been addressed implicitly by several recent scholars. As writer suggests that *Lamia* represents Keats's recognition that Negative Capability is not an unlimited ethical resource—that there are situations in which the willingness to remain in uncertainty becomes a failure of moral courage rather than an exercise of it.

This is a genuine tension in the poem and in Keats's ethical thought more broadly. The capacity to dwell with uncertainty is most valuable when it prevents premature closure that forecloses genuine moral attention; it becomes problematic when it functions as an excuse for the avoidance of difficult judgements that situation actually demands. The tragedy of *Lamia* lies partly in Keats's recognition that there is no algorithm for determining when each mode of engagement is appropriate—that the judgement about when to maintain uncertainty and when to resolve it is itself a matter of wisdom that cannot be reduced to a rule. As Thomas Pfau (2015) has argued, this recognition is itself a form of ethical maturity: the acknowledgment that the moral life involves irreducibly difficult decisions about the appropriate form of attention in particular situations, decisions that cannot be insured against error by any general principle.

The tragic outcome of *Lamia*—in which both Lycius and Lamia are destroyed, and Apollonius is left triumphant but alone—suggests that Keats understands the ethics of uncertainty as involving genuine risk. The commitment to remaining in irresolution is not a safe position but a courageous one, entailing the possibility of being wrong in ways that have real consequences for actual beings. This recognition of the stakes of Negative Capability lifts it decisively above the level of mere aesthetic preference and establishes it as a serious ethical commitment—one that takes responsibility for the costs of its own refusal to take refuge in premature certainty.

## VI. TOWARDS AN UNCERTAIN ETHICS: KEATS AND CONTEMPORARY THOUGHT

The reading developed in the preceding sections suggests that Negative Capability is more than a period-specific aesthetic concept; it is a philosophically serious ethical stance whose implications resonate with contemporary debates in moral philosophy, cognitive literary studies, and cultural theory. This concluding section draws together the threads of the analysis and considers the broader

significance of Keatsian uncertainty for contemporary ethical thought.

One of the most significant contemporary resonances of Negative Capability lies in its implications for what is sometimes called *epistemic justice*—the theory, developed by Miranda Fricker (2007) and others, that individuals can suffer distinctive forms of injustice in their capacity as knowers, through being unfairly denied credibility or deprived of the conceptual resources to make sense of their own experiences. The practice of Negative Capability, as a discipline of genuine attention to the particularity of another's experience, is directly relevant to the project of epistemic justice: the "irritable reaching after fact & reason" that Keats critiques is precisely the disposition that leads to testimonial injustice, the dismissal of another's knowledge-claims without genuine engagement. A Keatsian ethics of uncertainty would insist on the moral obligation to remain genuinely open to what another's experience reveals before moving to the comfort of categorical judgement.

The relevance of Negative Capability to the contemporary epistemological crisis—a moment in which the proliferation of information and the fragmentation of shared epistemic standards have made certainty simultaneously more seductive and more suspect—is similarly pressing. Writers analysis of the cultural costs of cognitive capitalism, with its premium on rapid information processing and decisive judgement, identifies precisely the conditions that make Keatsian uncertainty most necessary and most difficult to sustain. In a culture that rewards the confident assertion of certainty and punishes the admission of doubt, the practice of dwelling with uncertainty becomes an act of intellectual and, arguably, political resistance.

The interface between Negative Capability and the digital humanities has also been productively explored in recent scholarship. Alan Liu (2018) has argued that literary reading, precisely because it resists the algorithmic drive towards resolution and quantification, preserves forms of epistemic engagement that are increasingly marginalized in a data-driven culture. The Keatsian reader who practices sustained attention to the irreducible complexity of aesthetic experience is, on this reading, cultivating cognitive capacities that have a broader cultural importance: the capacity to resist the premature closure that algorithmic systems typically impose in favour of the more demanding openness that genuine understanding requires. The ethics of uncertainty that Keats embodies and theorizes thus has implications that extend far beyond the boundaries of literary study.

Finally, it is worth noting the personal dimension of Negative Capability that scholars have sometimes underemphasized. Keats wrote his most sustained meditations on uncertainty in the full knowledge of his own terminal illness, in the awareness that the questions he was wrestling with—about the value of beauty, the meaning of suffering, the relationship between art and life—were not merely philosophical abstractions but existential urgencies. The courage required to maintain genuine irresolution in the face of one's own mortality—to refuse the comforts of either religious certainty or skeptical dismissal—is a measure of the ethical seriousness of Keatsian Negative Capability. As Stuart Curran (1986) observes, the late poems and letters reveal a mind that has earned its uncertainty, that has found in the willingness to remain with the most difficult questions a form of integrity that makes conventional resolution look merely evasive. In this personal dimension, as in the broader philosophical one, Negative Capability retains its power to provoke and to instruct.

## VII. CONCLUSION

Reconsidered through ethical and epistemological frameworks, Keats's concept of Negative Capability emerges not simply as an aesthetic tolerance for ambiguity but as a disciplined ethical practice grounded in epistemic humility. This study has shown that Keatsian poetics transforms uncertainty into a mode of attentive engagement, where the suspension of premature judgement enables deeper responsiveness to complexity, alterity, and lived experience. Close readings of *Ode to a Nightingale*, *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, and *Lamia* reveal that poetic indeterminacy functions as an active form of moral perception rather than an evasion of responsibility, inviting readers to inhabit conflicting perspectives without resolving them into reductive certainty. By placing Keats in dialogue with contemporary moral epistemology, care ethics, and theories of ethical attention, the article demonstrates that Negative Capability anticipates modern understandings of ethical life as dependent upon receptivity, vulnerability, and sustained openness to the particular. In this light, uncertainty becomes not a failure of knowledge but a necessary condition for moral imagination and responsible interpretation. Keats's refusal of epistemic closure models an intellectual patience that resists both ideological rigidity and the cultural demand for immediate resolution. His poetry thus offers more than Romantic aesthetic insight; it proposes an enduring ethical stance suited to contemporary conditions marked by informational excess and competing truth-claims. Negative Capability persists as a vital resource for thinking ethically

within ambiguity, suggesting that genuine understanding begins not with certainty, but with the cultivated capacity to remain thoughtfully unresolved.

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