

# Personality and Impersonality in the Works of Keats

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## Abstract

John Keats is widely regarded as one of the most significant Romantic poets of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and of all times. Among his many literary contributions, his concept of impersonality stands out as a crucial aspect of his poetic style. In literature, impersonality refers to the idea that the author should remove personal feelings and opinions from their works, allowing the reader a more objective experience. Keats' poetry embodies this concept, as he believed that poets should not impose their thoughts and emotions on the reader but rather allow them to form their interpretations. This research paper explores Keats' concept of impersonality in his literary contributions. The paper aims to provide a detailed manifestation of his works by delving into these areas. It examines impersonal elements in his poetry, how impersonality relates to the themes of his works, the significance of impersonality in a deeper understanding of Keats' poetic style and the impact of impersonality on the reader's experience.

**Keywords:** Chameleon Poet, Impersonality, Negative Capability, Universality

## 1. Introduction

Eliot's essay "Tradition and Individual Talent" suggests that poetry "transcends personal limitations and transcends individuality"<sup>1</sup>. All art, particularly poetry, is considered a deeply personal expression of the creator. Art is often seen as a manifestation of the artist's unique personality, reflecting their inner self and the external medium through which it is projected. This intricate relationship between art and personality highlights the complex interplay between the creator's inner self and the external medium, resulting in a rich tapestry of interpretations and meanings within the artistic realm. The debate between art's impersonal and personal aspects serves as a testament to the multifaceted nature of creative expression.

Impersonality in art represents the universality within individuality, transcending intellectual contemplation to explore the emotional essence within a work. This emotional core is abstract, all-encompassing and detached, characterised by its detached nature. Eliot explains this concept through the "relationship between the poet and its creator"<sup>1</sup>, which functions as a conduit in the act of creation. This transformative power of art emphasises the importance of distancing oneself from the work to create a universal and timeless creation.

True artistry lies in directing emotions and ideas beyond individual identity, creating a work that speaks to the collective human experience.

## 2. Keats's Concept of Impersonality

The letters written by Keats have served as the foundation for countless essays in the realms of aesthetics and criticism, delving into the depths of artistic expression and interpretation. These letters have become so deeply ingrained within this field that their phrases are often woven seamlessly into arguments, assumed to be common knowledge in poetic theory. Concepts such as the "sacredness of the heart's affections, the authenticity of the imagination, the comparison of imagination to Adam's dream"<sup>2</sup>, "the subtle refinement of tone, the elusive concept of negative capability, the poetic measure of pleasure, the delicate balance of a sublime excess, the organic emergence of poetry akin to the leaves on a tree", "the ethereal realm of the chamber of maiden thought, the ever-changing nature of the chameleon poet"<sup>3</sup> and countless other declarations exploring the themes of beauty and truth, have transcended their origin and become part of the general lexicon of criticism and aesthetics. These

phrases have even inspired the titles of books and articles, assuming a level of authority and solemnity that warrants occasional reflection on their origins. By revisiting Keats's letters, we are reminded of how these phrases first came into existence and their profound significance, representing the ceaseless exploration of his youthful yet maturing mind. Keats's letters possess a profound and genuine epistolary style, capturing the essence of his multifaceted genius and expressing his thoughts in their purest form. In these letters, one can savour the rich complexity and multidimensional nature of Keats's intellectual prowess, gaining a deeper understanding of his artistic vision and the depth of his literary contributions.

In a letter by Keats to Richard Woodhouse dated October 27, 1818, the poet delves into a profound analysis, highlighting the contrasting nature of an ideal artist compared to the egotistical sublime displayed by Wordsworth. Keats asserts that this ideal artist is devoid of self, transcending the limitations of individuality and becoming everything and nothing simultaneously, "distinguished from the egotistical sublime like Wordsworth, has no self — it is everything and nothing — it has no character, it enjoys light and shade, it lives in gusto, be it foul or fair, high, or low, rich, or poor, mean or elevated — it has as much delight in conceiving an Iago as an Imogen. What shocks the virtuous philosopher delights the Chameleon poet"<sup>3</sup>.

The artist possesses no discernible character, as it revels in the interplay of light and shade, finding solace and inspiration in the full spectrum of existence. Regardless of the circumstances, whether foul or fair, high or low, rich or poor, mean or elevated, the artist remains consumed by a voracious appetite for life, finding equal delight in conceiving characters as "diverse as Iago and Imogen"<sup>3</sup>. These sentiments which may shock the virtuous philosopher, serve as a source of joy for the chameleon poet, who thrives on the ability to adapt and transform to immerse oneself fully in the multifaceted realm of creativity. This letter is a testament to Keats's audacious exploration of selfhood, particularly concerning the enigmatic nature of a poet such as himself, who is inexorably entwined with a distinct and peculiar selfhood. Within this introspective examination, Keats dares to challenge conventional notions of identity, inviting readers to contemplate the intricate tapestry of the artist's psyche and the myriad influences that shape their artistic expression. By rejecting the fluidity of self and the limited spectrum of human experience, Keats

presents an unconvincing argument for the artist's boundless incapacity to transcend the limitations of the individual and disconnect with the universal essence of existence. In this process, he offers a deep understanding of the transformative power of artistic creation and the unwavering pursuit of truth and beauty.

Keats's utilisation of the term 'the poetical character' is closely tied to the abovementioned concept. The poetical character, "distinct from the egotistical self or the Wordsworthian self, takes pleasure solely in 'gusto'-actively participating in all aspects of life, regardless of their moral nature"<sup>4</sup>. This active participation necessitates removing or eradicating the ego, the self that assesses experiences based on moral standards. Only through this capacity to assume different identities can the artist bring to life distinct characters - such as Iago or Imogen - evoking Hazlitt's analysis of Shakespeare's genius, which resonates with the readers.

Keats's works explore the complex relationship between human identity and creativity, between the visually appealing and the ethically commendable and between artistic expression and tangible reality. His most influential influence comes from William Hazlitt, who influenced his work in this area. In the eyes of Keats, an exemplary poet, exists the remarkable ability to adapt and blend seamlessly with every conceivable emotion and mindset. The hallmark of a multifaceted genius lies in its elusiveness and impersonality, its detached and unbiased perception of what is considered good and what is considered evil. The ideal poet is regarded as possessing a Protean nature, capable of assuming diverse forms and perspectives or as an elevated entity beholding the multifaceted aspects of life as exquisite embodiments. According to Keats, negative capability can also be understood as an extraordinary potentiality inherent in artists, one that encompasses the ideal poetic stance of perceiving life as an enigma, surrendering oneself to experience without the confines of reason or doctrine and finding contentment in partial knowledge without seeking solace in the comforts of faith and certainty.

As expounded by Keats, impersonality in literature is not merely a stylistic choice but a profound philosophical stance that poets adopt in their creative process. This concept of impersonality is best understood through Keats's idea of the "negative capability, a state in which poets and artists transcend their identity, allowing them to create without the imposition of their character or individuality on the work"<sup>5</sup>. Keats believed that achieving

this level of detachment was a critical characteristic that distinguished the true poet. During moments of intense observation and sympathetic identification with their subject matter, poets experience a form of self-effacement. They lose themselves in the object of their focus, whether it is a “natural scene or an aspect of the human condition, to intuit and express qualities that go beyond ordinary perception”<sup>6</sup>. This heightened perception enables the poet to experience and convey the essence of the object in a way that resonates with the reader. This process can be seen as an abstraction where the subjective self is removed to reveal a more universal truth. The impersonality inherent in such poetic creation aligns closely with the conception of abstraction in other cultural contexts, as seen in the work of Persian literature’s Suhrab Sipihrī, who mastered the art of distancing personal emotion from his poetic imagery. Through this lens, impersonality becomes a conduit for a deeper connection among the poet, the art and the audience, as it fosters a purity of perception untainted by the personal biases and distractions of the creator’s ego.

### 3. Impersonality in Keats’s Poetry

John Keats’s embodiment of impersonality in his poetry represents a pivotal moment in literary history, positioning him between Shakespeare and T.S. Eliot as a Romantic figure who navigates the complex terrain of self-effacement within the creative process. This detachment from the personal is not to be mistaken for a lack of emotion or passion. Instead, Keats’s approach maintains the emotional intensity found in the confessional works of Wordsworth while simultaneously redirecting it toward external stimuli, such as the “natural world or classical antiquity”<sup>7</sup>. Negative capability is central to understanding Keats’s stance on impersonality. It allows the poet to dwell in uncertainties and mysteries without the anxious grasp for concrete fact and reason. This state of being is not merely a passive existence but an active surrender to the unknown, which can lead the poet to profound insights that transcend personal experience. Through this lens of abstraction, Keats’s poetry achieves a universal resonance, connecting the subjective with the objective in a manner that both challenges and enriches traditional notions of self-expression.

### 4. Impact of Impersonality on the Reader’s Experience

Keats’s embrace of impersonality in poetry, often seen as a precursor to T.S. Eliot’s modernist sensibilities, brings forth a dynamic tension within the reader’s experience. While Keats might have resisted certain orthodoxies with Hazlitt by his side, the broader idea that impersonality is a crucial component of the creative process can fundamentally alter the reader’s engagement with a text. This concept compels readers to grapple with elements of the poetic voice that transcend personal identity, pushing them into a realm where the “I” of the poet is not the source of the narrative but rather an external force that must be interpreted and understood. Interestingly, despite the impersonal method, the emotional intensity remains undiminished, akin to the emotive power found in Wordsworth’s confessional style, yet the external world now carries this emotional weight. Such a method promotes an abstracted mode of reading, where the reader is invited to engage with the poem on a level that mirrors the abstraction inherent in Keats’s conception of impersonality or negative capability, wherein the audience must dwell in uncertainty and interpretive openness”<sup>7</sup>. This abstraction does not entirely eradicate the poet’s presence. Even in modern poetry that echoes Keats’s influence, the creator’s personality seeps through, though it may do so subtly and with a degree of ambiguity. Thus, the reader is left to navigate between the lines of personal and impersonal, between the known and the unknowable, creating a uniquely challenging and enriching experience.

### 5. Manifestations of Impersonality in Keats’s Works

In the poem “To Autumn”, Keats manifests an exemplary degree of negative capability, a concept he famously defined as the ability of the poet to remain content with half-knowledge and embrace uncertainty without the irritable reaching after fact and reason. This is evident as Keats exhibits a conscious withdrawal of the self from his work, allowing the autumn season to speak for itself without the imposition of personal reflection or emotion<sup>8</sup>. The poem’s strength lies in its depiction of the season’s unique music and richness, highlighting how Keats

finds fullness even in the waning moments of the year, suggesting a universal significance rather than a personal narrative. Moreover, the near-complete absence of the speaker from the scene, as demonstrated in “To Autumn”, underscores Keats’s mastery of impersonality. The lack of a defined speaker’s voice allows for a more profound engagement with the subject matter, as the reader is invited to experience the essence of autumn without the bias of an intermediary. This artistic choice reflects Keats’ literary philosophy and elevates the natural cycle above individual sentiment, thereby underscoring the significance of impersonality in understanding the depth and breadth of Keats’s contributions to English literature.

## 6. Conclusion

The central idea of Keats’s impersonality is best understood through his concept of “negative capability”, a state in which poets and artists transcend their identity, allowing them to create without imposing their character or individuality on the work. This state of being is not passive but an active surrender to the unknown, leading the poet to profound insights that transcend personal experience. Keats believed that achieving this level of detachment was a key characteristic that distinguished the true poet. Impersonality enables the poet to experience and convey the essence of the object in a way that resonates with the reader, a process which can be seen as a form of abstraction where the subjective self is removed to reveal a universal truth. The near-complete absence of the speaker from the scene, as demonstrated in “To Autumn,” underscores Keats’ mastery of impersonality, allowing the natural cycle to speak for itself without the

imposition of personal reflection or emotion. Moreover, the lack of a defined speaker’s voice invites a more profound engagement with the subject matter, as the reader experiences the essence of autumn without the bias of an intermediary. Keats’s contribution to English literature through the embodiment of impersonality in his poetry cannot be overstated, as it represents a profound philosophical stance that poets adopt in their creative process. The discussion of Keats’s impersonality contributes to the ongoing advancement of knowledge in the field, identifying potential future directions for research and acknowledging potential weaknesses or biases.

## 7. References

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