

# Pastoral

A **pastoral** lifestyle (see [pastoralism](#)) is that of shepherds [herding](#) livestock around open areas of [land](#) according to [seasons](#) and the changing availability of water and pasture. It lends its name to a [genre](#) of literature, art, and music that depicts such life in an idealized manner, typically for [urban audiences](#). A *pastoral* is a work of this [genre](#), also known as **bucolic**, from the [Greek](#) βουκολικόν, from βουκόλος, meaning a [cowherd](#).<sup>[1][2]</sup>

## Pastoral literature in general

Pastoral is a [mode](#) of literature in which the author employs various techniques to place the complex life into a simple one. Paul Alpers distinguishes pastoral as a mode rather than a genre, and he bases this distinction on the recurring attitude of power; that is to say that pastoral literature holds a humble perspective toward nature. Thus, pastoral as a mode occurs in many types of literature (poetry, drama, etc.) as well as genres (most notably the pastoral elegy).

Terry Gifford, a prominent literary theorist, defines pastoral in three ways in his critical book *Pastoral*. The first way emphasizes the historical literary perspective of the pastoral in which authors recognize and discuss life in the country and in particular the life of a shepherd.<sup>[3]</sup> This is summed up by [Leo Marx](#) with the phrase "No shepherd, no pastoral."<sup>[3]</sup> The second type of the pastoral is literature that "describes the country with an implicit or explicit contrast to the urban."<sup>[3]</sup> The third type of pastoral depicts the country life with derogative classifications.<sup>[3]</sup>

[Hesiod's](#) *Works and Days* presents a 'golden age' when people lived together in harmony with nature. This [Golden Age](#) shows that even before [Alexandria](#), ancient Greeks had sentiments of an ideal pastoral life that they had already lost. This is the first example of literature that has pastoral sentiments and may have begun the pastoral tradition. [Ovid's Metamorphoses](#) is much like the *Works and Days* with the description of ages (golden, silver, brazen, iron and human) but with more ages to discuss and less emphasis on the gods and their punishments. In this artificially constructed world, nature acts as the main punisher. Another example of this perfect relationship between man and nature is evident in the encounter of a shepherd and a goatherd who meet in the pastures in [Theocritus'](#) poem *Idylls 1*. Traditionally, pastoral refers to the lives of herdsmen in a romanticized, exaggerated, but representative way. In [literature](#), the adjective 'pastoral' refers to rural subjects and aspects of life in the countryside among [shepherds](#), [cowherds](#) and other farm workers that are often [romanticized](#) and depicted in a highly unrealistic manner. The pastoral life is usually characterized as being closer to the [Golden age](#) than the rest of human life. The setting is a [Locus Amoenus](#), or a beautiful place in nature, sometimes connected with images of the [Garden of Eden](#).<sup>[4]</sup> An example of the use of the genre is the short poem by the 15th-century [Scottish makar Robert Henryson](#) *Robene and Makyne* which also contains the conflicted emotions often present in the genre. A more tranquil mood is set by [Christopher Marlowe's](#) well known lines from [The Passionate Shepherd to His Love](#):

"The Passionate Shepherd to His Love" exhibits the concept of Gifford's second definition of pastoral. The speaker of the poem, who is the titled shepherd, draws on the idealization of urban material

pleasures to win over his love rather than resorting to the simplified pleasures of pastoral ideology. This can be seen in the listed items: "lined slippers," "purest gold," "silver dishes," and "ivory table" (lines 13, 15, 16, 21, 23). The speaker takes on a voyeuristic point of view with his love, and they are not directly interacting with the other true shepherds and nature.

Pastoral shepherds and maidens usually have [Greek](#) names like [Corydon](#) or Philomela, reflecting the origin of the pastoral genre. Pastoral poems are set in beautiful rural landscapes, the literary term for which is "locus amoenus" (Latin for "beautiful place"), such as [Arcadia](#), a rural region of [Greece](#), mythological home of the god [Pan](#), which was portrayed as a sort of [Eden](#) by the poets. The tasks of their employment with sheep and other rustic chores is held in the fantasy to be almost wholly undemanding and is left in the background, abandoning the shepherdesses and their swains in a state of almost perfect [leisure](#). This makes them available for embodying perpetual [erotic](#) fantasies. The shepherds spend their time chasing pretty girls — or, at least in the Greek and Roman versions, pretty lads as well. The eroticism of [Virgil](#)'s second [eclogue](#), *Formosum pastor Corydon ardebat Alexin* ("The shepherd Corydon burned with passion for pretty Alexin") is entirely [homosexual](#), although the use of that term is [anachronistic](#) due to a lack of any idea of sexual identity in the times in which Virgil was writing.<sup>[[citation needed](#)]</sup>

## Pastoral poetry

Pastoral literature continued after Hesiod with the [poetry](#) of the [Hellenistic](#) Greek [Theocritus](#), several of whose *Idylls* are set in the countryside (probably reflecting the landscape of the island of [Cos](#) where the poet lived) and involve dialogues between herdsmen.<sup>[[s\]](#)</sup> Theocritus may have drawn on authentic folk traditions of Sicilian shepherds. He wrote in the [Doric dialect](#) but the metre he chose was the [dactylic hexameter](#) associated with the most prestigious form of Greek poetry, [epic](#). This blend of simplicity and sophistication would play a major part in later pastoral verse. Theocritus was imitated by the Greek poets [Bion](#) and [Moschus](#).

The Roman poet [Virgil](#) adapted pastoral into Latin with his highly influential *Eclogues*. Virgil introduces two very important uses of pastoral, the contrast between urban and rural lifestyles and political allegory<sup>[[6\]](#)</sup> most notably in Eclogues 1 and 4 respectively. In doing so, Virgil presents a more idealized portrayal of the lives of shepherds while still employing the traditional pastoral conventions of Theocritus. He was the first to set his poems in Arcadia, an idealized location to which much later pastoral literature will refer..

Italian poets revived the pastoral from the 14th century onwards, first in Latin (examples include works by [Petrarch](#), [Pontano](#) and [Mantuan](#)) then in the Italian vernacular ([Sannazaro](#), [Boiardo](#)). The fashion for pastoral spread throughout Renaissance Europe. In Spain, [Garcilaso de la Vega](#) was an important pioneer and his motifs find themselves renewed in the 20th century Spanish language poet [Giannina Braschi](#). Leading French pastoral poets include [Marot](#) and [Ronsard](#).

The first pastorals in English were the *Eclogues* (c. 1515) of [Alexander Barclay](#), which were heavily influenced by [Mantuan](#). A landmark in English pastoral poetry was [Spenser](#)'s *The Shepherdes Calender*, first published in 1579. Spenser's work consists of twelve eclogues, one for each month of the year, and

is written in dialect. It contains [elegies](#), [fables](#) and a discussion of the role of poetry in contemporary England. Spenser and his friends appear under various pseudonyms. Spenser's example was imitated by such poets as [Michael Drayton](#) (*Idea, The Shepherd's Garland*) and [William Browne](#). During this period of England's history, many authors explored "anti-pastoral" themes. Two examples of this is [Sir Philip Sidney](#)'s "The Twenty-Third Psalm" and "The Nightingale" focus on the world in a very anti-pastoral view. In "The Twenty-Third Psalm," Nature is portrayed as something we need to be protected from, and in "The Nightingale," the woe of [Philomela](#) is compared to the speaker's own pain. Additionally, he wrote [Arcadia](#) which is filled with pastoral descriptions of the landscape. "[The Nymph's Reply to the Shepherd](#)" (1600) by [Sir Walter Raleigh](#) also comments on the anti-pastoral as the nymph responds realistically to the idealizing shepherd of [The Passionate Shepherd to His Love](#) by embracing and explaining the true course of nature and its incompatibility with the love that the Shepherd yearns for with the nymph.

"A Country Life", another 17th century work by [Katherine Philips](#), was also a country house poem. Philips focuses on the joys of the countryside and looks upon the lifestyle that accompanies it as being "the first and happiest life, when man enjoyed himself." She writes about maintaining this lifestyle by living detached from material things, and by not over-concerning herself with the world around her. [Andrew Marvell](#)'s "[Upon Appleton House](#)" was written when Marvell was working as a tutor for Lord Fairfax's daughter Mary, in 1651. The poem is very rich with metaphors that relate to religion, politics and history. Similar to Jonson's "To Penshurst", Marvell's poem is describing a pastoral estate. It moves through the house itself, its history, the gardens, the meadows and other grounds, the woods, the river, his Pupil Mary, and the future. Marvell used nature as a thread to weave together a poem centered around man. We once again see nature fully providing for man. Marvell also continuously compares nature to art and seems to point out that art can never accomplish on purpose what nature can achieve accidentally or spontaneously.

The formal English pastoral continued to flourish during the 18th century, eventually dying out at the end. One notable example of an 18th-century work is [Alexander Pope](#)'s *Pastorals* (1709). In this work Pope imitates [Edmund Spenser](#)'s *Shepherd's Calendar*, while utilizing classical names and allusions aligning him with [Virgil](#). In 1717, Pope's *Discourse on Pastoral Poetry* was published as a preface to *Pastorals*. In this work Pope sets standards for pastoral literature and critiques many popular poets, one of whom is Spenser, along with his contemporary opponent Ambrose Phillips. During this time period [Ambrose Phillips](#), who is often overlooked because of Pope, modeled his poetry after the Native English form of Pastoral, employing it as a medium to express the true nature and longing of Man. He strove to write in this fashion to conform to what he thought was the original intent of Pastoral literature. As such, he centered his themes around the simplistic life of the Shepherd, and, personified the relationship that humans once had with nature. [John Gay](#), who came a little later was criticized for his poem's artificiality by [Doctor Johnson](#) and attacked for their lack of realism by [George Crabbe](#), who attempted to give a true picture of rural life in his poem *The Village*.

In 1590, Edmund Spenser also composed a very famous pastoral epic called [The Faerie Queene](#), in which he employs the pastoral mode to accentuate the charm, lushness, and splendor of the poem's (super)natural world. Spenser alludes to the pastoral continuously throughout the work and also uses it

to create allegory in his poem, with the characters as well as with the environment, both of which are meant to have symbolic meaning in the real world

### Pastoral epic

Milton is perhaps best known for his epic [Paradise Lost](#), one of the few Pastoral epics ever written. A notable part of Paradise Lost is book IV where he chronicles Satan's trespass into paradise. Milton's iconic descriptions of the garden are shadowed by the fact that we see it from Satan's perspective and are thus led to commiserate with him. Milton elegantly works through a presentation of [Adam and Eve's](#) pastorally idyllic, eternally fertile living conditions and focuses upon their stewardship of the garden. He gives much focus to the fruit bearing trees and Adam and Eve's care of them, sculpting an image of pastoral harmony. However, Milton in turn continually comes back to Satan, constructing him as a character the audience can easily identify with and perhaps even like. Milton creates Satan as character meant to destabilize the audience's understanding of themselves and the world around them. Through this mode, Milton is able to create a working dialogue between the text and his audience about the 'truths' they hold for themselves.

### Pastoral romances

Italian writers invented a new genre, the pastoral romance, which mixed pastoral poems with a fictional narrative in prose. Although there was no classical precedent for the form, it drew some inspiration from ancient Greek novels set in the countryside, such as [Daphnis and Chloe](#). The most influential Italian example of the form was [Sannazzaro's Arcadia](#) (1504). The vogue for the pastoral romance spread throughout Europe producing such notable works as [Bernardim Ribeiro](#) "Menina e Moça" (1554) in Portuguese,<sup>[9]</sup> [Montemayor's Diana](#) (1559) in Spain, [Sir Philip Sidney's Arcadia](#) (1590) in England, and [Honoré d'Urfé's Astrée](#) (1607–27) in France.

## Negative capability

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For the album by Marianne Faithfull, see [Negative Capability \(album\)](#).



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**Negative capability** is a phrase first used by [Romantic poet John Keats](#) in 1817 to explain 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 to *perceive* and *recognise* truths beyond the reach of consecutive reasoning.<sup>[1][2]</sup>



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## Keats: The poet's turn of phrase<sup>[edit]</sup>

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:<sup>[3]</sup>

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 Penetralium 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.<sup>[4]</sup>

[Samuel Taylor 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.<sup>[5]</sup>

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[.]<sup>[6]</sup>

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>[7]</sup>

This concept of Negative Capability is precisely a rejection of set philosophies and preconceived systems of nature.<sup>[8]</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>[9]</sup>

## Why 'Negative'?<sup>[edit]</sup>

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In the same way that chameleons are 'negative' for *colour*, so Keatsian poets are negative for *self* and *identity*.<sup>[10]</sup> they change their identity with each subject they inhabit.<sup>[11]</sup> This is a kind of personal Tao, and like the cosmic [Tao](#), negative capability can be difficult to grasp because it is not a name for a thing but rather a way of feeling or of knowing. This intuitive knowing of the inner life of, for example, a nightingale or a grecian urn, cannot be grasped as a concept; as with Tao, it is known through actual living experience of one's everyday changeable being.<sup>[12][circular reference]</sup> And this capability depends on being negative to what Keats called 'Consequitive reasoning'.<sup>[13]</sup>

Another explanation of the word *Negative* relies on hypothesising 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.<sup>[14]</sup>

Whatever the reason, modern psychological experiments indicate that his choice of the word *Negative* was truly inspired. If a composing poet is placed in a functional magnetic resonance imager ([fMRI](#)), it turns out that the initial stage of poetic inspiration relates to something negative: the **attenuation** of self-monitoring and top-down attention, related to **decreases** in executive control mediated by **deactivation** of the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex (DLPFC).<sup>[15]</sup> In this sense, Keats might be seen as providing an antidote to E. M. Forster's mantra of '[Only connect...](#)'. Keats might be seen as saying 'Only **disconnect...**' from our reassuring certainties, from our hyperconnected world, from our executive control, and from our prefrontal cortex.<sup>[15][16]</sup> 'O for a Life of Sensations rather than of Thoughts!' is how Keats expressed this in a letter to Benjamin Bailey in 1817.<sup>[17]</sup>

## Contrasted with positive capability<sup>[edit]</sup>

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When we are presented with external stress, our [autonomic nervous system](#) provides us with a 'fight or flight' response. This seems like a binary choice. But Keats provides us with a third way. Fight or flight has been called positive capability, and teachers of mindfulness stress the importance of cultivating negative capability in order to overcome and provide an alternative to our routine reactions to stress.<sup>[18]</sup> They point out that this teaches tolerance of uncertainty, and enriches decision making. Which is more important: negative or positive capability? Discussing this at length might be as sterile as debating which pole of a battery is more important: the positive or negative terminal? The point is: *a battery is only a battery if it has both.*

## Why is it important?<sup>[edit]</sup>

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The sections below show that negative capability is not the exclusive preserve of poets, but can describe the pre-creative mood of any artist, scientist, or religious person. So negative capability is important as a wellspring of our humanity and an explanation of how periods of indolence give rise to periods of creativity.<sup>[14]:18</sup>

## The competition (varieties of prepoetry)<sup>[edit]</sup>

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Negative capability needs to be understood as just one of a number of moods that may compete in the poet's mind before the poem arrives—i.e. during the phase that may be called prepoetry, after the musical form of the same name which delights in 'uncertainties, mysteries, [and] doubts'.<sup>[19]</sup> The only valid way to approach this subject is through the words of poets themselves, e.g.:

[Emotion recollected in tranquility](#) and wise passivity (e.g. Wordsworth)

[The systematic derangement of the senses](#) (e.g. Rimbaud).

[Automatic writing and thought transference](#) (e.g. Yeats).

[Frenzy](#)<sup>[20]</sup> (e.g. Shakespeare).

The poet's eye, in fine frenzy rolling,  
Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven;  
And as imagination bodies forth  
forms of things unknown, the poet's pen  
Turns them to shapes and gives to airy nothing  
A local habitation and a name.

(*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Act V scene 1, from line 1841)<sup>[21]</sup>

At one point Coleridge thought of the poet as Truth's Ventriloquist,<sup>[22]</sup> as if truth were in a cauldron. When it is stirred, e.g. by social events, truths bubble up and exit through the nearest poet, whose role is reduced to that of scribe. How to become the nearest poet? According to Coleridge, 2 grains of opium did the trick in the genesis of Kubla Khan.<sup>[23]</sup> (Best not to try this at home: the wrong dose might be fatal, and opium addiction slowly destroyed Coleridge.)

## Are its results fraudulent?<sup>[edit]</sup>

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Autumn can be a pretty time of year; birdsong can sound nice; and an old Greek vase may briefly attract the attention of tourists meandering aimlessly around a museum, but Keats's great odes (to [Autumn](#), to a [Nightingale](#), and on a [Grecian Urn](#)) seem to exaggerate the beauty of these topics, and to go beyond the evidence. Nightingales' songs, for example, are a bit disappointing.<sup>[24][25]</sup> If this unwarranted exaggeration is the result of having negative capability, maybe it is not such a good thing?

To quash this argument, it is not necessary to invoke poetry at all. A good curator of a museum can take a cracked piece of discarded junk and show that it was once a bronze mirror, on whose polished surface emperors and concubines used to come and go.<sup>[26]</sup> If we can accept that a great curator can teach us how to **see**, then we may be able to accept that a great poet can teach us how to **feel**.<sup>[27]:122</sup> But what is it that we feel? The answer is different for each reader, but if with Keats we can *feel half in love with easeful*

*death*<sup>[28]</sup> we may be ready for a new kind of life.<sup>[29]</sup> And if so, negative capability will be found at its wellspring.<sup>[9][27]:116</sup>

## Its miraculous nature<sup>[edit]</sup>

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The above attempts to show how negative capability can inspire great poetry. It does not explain how this mood is then engendered in readers of that poetry. This is one of the miraculous features of Keats's poetry: miraculous in the sense that an engine would be miraculous if it took in a high-octane fuel and then produced more fuel of an even higher octane rather than exhaust. How is this possible? A partial answer is given elsewhere in this encyclopedia, for example in those articles that analyse the great Odes, such as the [Ode to a nightingale](#). It is perfectly possible for a reader to listen to a great Ode, and to read an analysis of it, and still not be moved by it or to feel a sense of negative capability being transmitted. Patience is required, and travel: travel down Keats's [winding mossy ways](#), and along his [realms of gold](#), but particularly travel through labyrinths of suffering and loss.<sup>[30]</sup> Then when such a traveller returns to the great Odes, their truth and beauty may be more fully appreciated.<sup>[31]</sup>

There is one other way in which negative capability is miraculous. Poets have long loved to liken their verse to great or sacred rivers,<sup>[32]</sup> and philosophers such as [Heraclitus](#), from before the time of Socrates, have loved to point out that "you can't step into the same river twice, because both you and the river change". Transience confers immortality and change confers identity. The river would not be a river if it was static, and did not change or flow. In this sense, the reader cannot step into the same Ode twice. When readers put aside their certainties and embrace change and 'uncertainties, mysteries, and doubts' they set themselves adrift in a [drunken boat](#) on this '[miraculous stream](#)'. But where does this current take the reader? Down to a '[sunless sea](#)' and a place '[under sleep where all the waters meet](#)', i.e. towards a kind of negative capability, which is now seen to be both the origin and the destination of at least some great poetry.<sup>[33]</sup> No poet has written his name more clearly or more transparently in these miraculous streams, rivers, and seas than the poet John Keats whose own self-written epitaph reads "[Here lies One whose Name was writ in Water](#)".

## Unger: The thesis of negative capability<sup>[edit]</sup>

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[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>[34]</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>[35]</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>[36]</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>[37]</sup>

## Bion<sup>[edit]</sup>

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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>[38]</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>[39]</sup> His idea has been taken up more widely in the British Independent School,<sup>[40]</sup> as well as elsewhere in psychoanalysis and psychotherapy.<sup>[41]</sup>

## Lyacos: Negative capability and the social outcasts<sup>[edit]</sup>

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Greek author [Dimitris Lyacos](#) considers people leaving "in the margins" as possessing the negative capability that permits them to cross boundaries and, by accepting "the burden of the mystery", explore uncertainty and the flux of life against western norms and structures. In an interview in Berfrois Magazine Lyacos notes: "We carry with us a

backpack of ideas, theories, insecurities and the detailed scenarios we project onto the future. Unlike us, outcasts, fugitives and people in the margins are the ones possessing the negative capability, the power to bear the “burden of the mystery”; immigrants cross seas that might engulf them. Their fear is overcome not only by the hope of a better life but also by their acceptance of those darker alleys, where time and space are created at the moment in which they are experienced.”<sup>[42]</sup>

## In the context of Zen<sup>[edit]</sup>

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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>[43]</sup>

## In film, poems, songs, and popular culture<sup>[edit]</sup>

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Keats's concept of negative capability was little known except to scholars, poets, and other careful readers, until 2 November 2018 when the British singer-songwriter Marianne Faithfull released her album entitled [Negative Capability](#). Then, on 15 November 2020, the BBC aired the second installment of the second series of [His Dark Materials](#) based on the trilogy by Philip Pullman, of the same name.<sup>[44]</sup> Here the idea of negative capability is given great prominence, in what for the BBC was its most lavish production to date. It is presented not as an idea or a theory or a concept or a thesis, but as a *mood* which the heroine Lyra is able to sink into, and which enables her especial ability to read the rare and beautiful and truth-telling alethiometer. This device, like a nightingale, issues a code that cannot be understood by purely reductive means. Its beauty is part of its truth. Lyra visits the Dark Materials Research Laboratory where she meets the chief researcher, Mary Malone, who, has the uncanny ability to see particles of dark matter, if she puts herself in the right mood. She tells Lyra "you can't see them unless you put your mind in a certain state. Do you know the poet John Keats? He has a phrase for it: negative capability. You have to hold your mind in a state of expectation without impatience..." The implication is that Keats's nightingale<sup>[45]</sup> is his alethiometer, whose truth, like the truth of poetry itself, is not amenable to any amount of vivisection. Philip Pullman has written that 'many poems are interrogated until they confess, and what they confess is usually worthless, as the results of torture always are: broken little scraps of information, platitudes, banalities'.<sup>[46]</sup> But if we can follow Lyra and Mary Malone, and put ourselves in the right mood, the dark materials between the lines may become visible or audible. This is the nightingale's code referred to in popular songs such as in one alternate-take version of [Bob Dylan's Visions of Johanna](#)<sup>[47]</sup> and also in the song of the woodthrush in TS Eliot's poem *Marina*.<sup>[48]</sup> In the latter's case 'where all the waters meet' is a neat confirmation of the negative polarity view of

negative capability alluded to above. It is as if the poet's mind is the negative terminal or the sinkhole in which everything meets and is reconciled. The negativity here depends on the self abnegation of the poet, and its that which allows the current to flow.

Perhaps the darkest evocation of the mood of negative capability in popular culture comes from Bob Dylan's song *Not Dark Yet* which is best listened to<sup>[49]</sup> rather than read. Bob Dylan has famously been called 'Keats with a guitar' by the New York Times and others,<sup>[50]</sup> and this song shows their close affinity through contiguous explorations of their respective negative capabilities.

In 2013 jazz guitarist Bern Nix released an album titled "Negative Capability", containing liner notes explaining Keats definition.

## Criticism<sup>[edit]</sup>

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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>[51]</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>[52]</sup> Unger has addressed these criticisms by developing a full theory of historical process in which negative capability is employed.<sup>[53]</sup>

In *The Life in the Sonnets*, David Fuller makes use of negative capability in addressing the qualities and potential of writing literary criticism. A critic's experience and feelings altogether form a strong framework to expand one's ability in critical thinking, while negative capability replaces the notion of correctness in analyzing literary texts.<sup>[54]</sup>

## See also<sup>[edit]</sup>

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- [Anti-foundationalism](#)
- [Evenly-suspended attention](#)
- [Limit-experience](#)
- [Passion: An Essay on Personality](#)
- [Unsaid](#)
- [Unthought known](#)

## Notes<sup>[edit]</sup>

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- <sup>↑</sup>  *Kumar, Mukesh (May 2014). [Kumar, Mukesh. "John Keats: The Notion of Negative Capability and Poetic Vision Mukesh Kumar Page 912 JOHN KEATS: THE NOTION OF NEGATIVE CAPABILITY AND POETIC VISION." CiteSeerX, International Research Journal, May 2014, citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/summary?doi=10.1.1.683.8296. "The Notion of Negative Capability"] Check |url= value (help). International Research Journal. 1 (4): 912–918 – via <https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/>.*

2. [^](https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/john-keats-and-negative-capability) Keats wrote : 'I have never yet been able to perceive how any thing can be known for truth by consequitive reasoning' (*Letters I* 184) <https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/john-keats-and-negative-capability>
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## Further reading<sup>[edit]</sup>

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