

# Negative Capability: The Power of What is *Not*

The theatre, and ultimately most written literature in the West, emerged out of the Greek festivals of Dionysus, the god of wine and ecstasy. Plays came into existence because of the need for entertainment at these festivals. That is, the Greeks needed something else to do while drinking and having orgies. So plays were written, theatres built, and Dionysus came to be associated with creative inspiration. After all, wine is spirit of a sort.

When Dionysus is sculpted in human form, his face typically looks mask-like. This is also the origin of the Druidic “green man” we see depicted in garden ornaments. The idea is that behind the eyes of Dionysus is emptiness, or at least, a seeming void which, if you know your science, isn’t truly empty.

The Mysteries of Dionysus, a religion active at the time of Christ, taught that it is only when you are empty, or “emptied out” and, therefore, open to something new, do you receive direction. So the way to spirit is through falling into instinct and the apparent emptiness that follows. And when you are empty, something new will come in.

This emptiness is similar to what people strive to reach in various forms of meditation, but as an end in itself, because it is also restful.

The idea in Mahayana (“Great Vehicle”) Buddhism is that *nothing* has a self, a soul or an essence. You can read this two ways: either as if *no thing* has a self, soul or essence, or, as if *nothing-ness* has a dimension or identity of its own, just like “something-ness.”

I had a dream once that played on this idea. An inner voice said to me in a combination of Italian (which I have never studied) and English, “Coppa di guare, god of nothing.” *Coppa di guare*

translates “cup of healing, cure or recovery.”

A poet I once studied with put it to me this way: “If you want to be a poet, first you must get yourself really lost.”

I replied, “Well, I’m on track. I’m lost all right. No question there.”

“Great!” he responded. “Some people can’t get that far. You are where you need to be to learn how to see and hear and feel anew. Now you just have to learn how to be comfortable *living* in that place.”

This handout gives you some ideas about what some other writers have said about this subject and, on the back, shares an example of a poem written with this idea of emptiness, or negative capability, in mind. Good luck on your journey to nowhere. May emptiness find you!

**American Poet Mary Oliver in *A Poetry Handbook: A Prose Guide to Understanding and Writing Poetry* (New York:**

**Harcourt, 1994):** Negative capability is not a contemporary concept, but a phrase originating with [John] Keats. His idea was, simply but momentously, that the poet should be a kind of negative force—that only by remaining himself negative, or in some way empty, is the poet able to fill himself with an understanding of, or sympathy for, or empathy with, the subject of his poem. Here is a passage (from a letter to his brother) in which he discusses it:

“...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 a man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason—...Coleridge, for instance, would let go by a fine isolated verisimilitude caught from the Pentralium 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."

Keats elsewhere writes of "taking part" in the life of the sparrow pecking crumbs at his window. "A Poet is the most unpoetical of any thing in existence," he says in still another letter, "because he has no Identity—he is continually in for—and filling some other Body—..." Neither was Keats bothered by the categories of animate and inanimate: his friend Richard Woodhouse records that Keats claimed he could "conceive of a billiard Ball that it may have a sense of delight from its own roundness, smoothness & very volubility & the rapidity of its motion."

Now, as then, the concept of negative capability goes to the heart of the matter—the "mere" diction of the poem, in any age, is the vehicle that holds, then transfers from the page to the reader an absolutely essential quality of real feeling. Poetry cannot happen without it; and no one has talked about it more usefully and marvelously than Keats; his commentary is as up-to-date as a sunrise.

**Former U. S. Poet Laureate Robert Hass:** "All interesting works of art come very close to saying almost the opposite of what they say. To be real, it has to have a sense of darkness."

**Persian poet Rumi, in *The Book of Love*:** Let the lean and wounded be revived in your garden. The ground's generosity takes in our compost and grows beauty. Try to be more like the ground....Real value comes with madness."

### **WORKDAY by Linda Hogan**

I go to work  
though there are those who were missing today  
from their homes.  
I ride the bus  
and I do not think of children without food  
or how my sisters are chained to prison beds.

I go to the university  
and out for lunch  
and listen to the higher-ups  
tell me all they have read  
about Indians  
and how to analyze this poem.  
They know us  
better than we know ourselves.

I ride the bus home  
and sit behind the driver.  
We talk about the weather  
and not enough exercise.  
I don't mention Victor Jara's mutilated hands  
or men next door  
in exile  
or my own family's grief over the lost child.

When I get off the bus  
I look back at the light in the windows  
and the heads bent  
and how the women are all alone  
in each seat  
framed in the windows  
and the men are coming home,  
then I see them walking on the Avenue,  
the beautiful feet,  
the perfect legs  
even with their spider veins,  
the broken knees  
with pins in them,  
the thighs with their cravings,  
the pelvis  
and small back  
with its soft down,  
the shoulders which bend forward  
and forward and forward  
to protect the heart from pain.

