SEMESTER VI

**PAPER 15 - Literary Criticism**

**Section II: English Criticism : Early Modern to the Victorian**

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**JOHN KEATS: NEGATIVE CAPABILITY**

* John Keats first coins it in 1817.
* Artistic beauty is uncertain and often leads to confusion. Philosophical statements are actual truths or certainty for many people. Artists (including writers, poets, dramatists, actors, painter, critics, etc.) often try to follow the artistic beauty which leads them towards confusion and uncertainty.
* Many writers, especially Shakespeare would always choose this artistic beauty over philosophical certainty which often leads to confusion. But in the process they are also challenging the limits of a human’s ability to think and make decisions. Therefore even if it is not always a positive aspect, negative capability is that ability which allows an individual to go beyond human limitations.
* Perhaps NC is a good thing according to Keats as philosophical truths limit human understanding. After having explained a certain aspect philosophically, we cannot doubt it or cannot raise our voices against it, even if it is wrong. Keats believed philosophical truths are half-truths and half-knowledge and they are only misleading people. On the other hand, art allows us to question these philosophical truths.
* In case of Shakespeare, Keats says that his messages, themes are not always leading to absolute truths, rather they are leading towards more confusion. This pushes the audience and the critics to search for other meanings. That is the beauty of art and that is called NC.
* NC therefore leads to a rejection of definite set philosophies and preconceived systems of nature. Keats demanded that the poet should be open to various possibilities rather than searching for fact or reason, and to not seek absolute knowledge of every truth, mystery, or doubt. They should not be simply satisfied with the easiest answer or solution, rather push forward to find new answers and truths.
* Keats objected and did not approve the philosophies of Coleridge who according to him was simply satisfied by German philosophies. Coleridge did not try to find new answers and truths much like Wordsworth.
* A good poet/artist should accept that art cannot be explained and that there is no exact and one philosophical answer to art and there is no one meaning of what a poem or a piece of art means. Therefore a good poet/artist must let art be mysterious and difficult to understand, rather than try to find a philosophical meaning for it.