

Argumentative essay on aspects of the literature produced during this long sweep ...

[Literature](#), [Poem](#)



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Question 1

The Romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley, in many of his works, tends to celebrate the idealized relationship between man and nature. He feels that nature is absolutely beautiful and powerful, and is connected to man through the divine spirit of God. In " Mont Blanc," he refers to God when talking about the titular mountain and the Arve River, and in " Hymn to Intellectual Beauty" he cites a " spirit of beauty" as something that us the source of all truth and joy (766). " Ode to the West Wind" utilizes a terza rima format for its five cantos of text - here, it is used to describe the qualities of the West Wind itself, each canto noting just how wonderful the wind is, and the last two cantos relating the Wind to the speaker himself. The terza rima format is one that is strictly controlled, and capable of incredible power in and of itself - this allows the poem to flow strongly and with purpose, an attribute they attempt to identify with the wind. By using terza rima, the pattern of threes is very strongly alluded to - the first description of the titular subject in the first line is three alliterated words: " Wild West Wind" (1. 1).

Victorian poet Emily Bronte was extremely concerned with how man related to nature; unlike Shelley, she did not believe that the spirit of Man and the

spirit of Nature were one and the same, but they did have a complex relationship with each other. In "I'm happiest when most away," she alludes to Man's purest form being among nature, where she can commune with God and contemplate mortality: "I can bear my soul from its home of clay / On a windy night when the moon is bright / And the eye can wander through worlds of light" (1311). Bronte focuses on the tangible attributes of Nature itself to find this spiritual connection and introspection. She sees nature as an escape from the everyday, the mundane, the stressful - Nature is where she can find peace. At the same time, Bronte does find herself separating the man-God relationship with Nature; it is possible to not have them, as noted in "No Coward Soul is Mine": "Though earth and man were gone, / And suns and universes ceased to be, / And Thou wert left alone, / Every existence would exist in Thee" (1317).

20th century poet Thomas Hardy has a particularly localized love of nature; to him, man is related quite closely with the particular nature that he or she grew up in. He does not spiritualize nature like Shelley does, but he loves the relationship of man to his natural home. His is a love of rustic nature, as he adores the lower classes of society who work most with it - the woodcutters and dairymaids, and more. In "The Darkling Thrush," a "caroling" bird is likened to the hopefulness and continuity of human life: "Some blessed Hope, whereof he knew / And I was unaware" (Hardy 1871). From this, Hardy shows his belief that mankind has a lot to learn from nature, and that it holds secrets from us that we are heretofore unaware.

His poem "Drummer Hodge" cements the localism that Hardy has in his work with regards to nature, making the prospect of being buried far from

home a terrifying prospect. Hodge's body will be quickly forgotten, and become part of a new place, somewhere that the man himself did not know, but where he is permanently stuck: " Yet portion of that unknown plain / Will Hodge forever be" (lines 13-14). Hodge's unfamiliarity with the area is emphasized in the poem - " Young Hodge the Drummer never knew - / Fresh from his Wessex home - / The meaning of the broad Karoo, / The Bush, the dusty loam" (lines 7-10). This means he has no significance or attachment to this area, and that it would mean nothing for him to be buried there. Poor Drummer Hodge does not get the luxury of being buried at home; he is left behind, " His homely Northern breast and brain / Grow to some Southern tree" (Hardy, lines 15-16). Hardy finds this a tragedy; as much as he loves nature and man's relationship to it, his greatest love is for localism and regionalism - men must be tied in some inextricable way to the land on which they were born and raised, and to rip them from that is a grave injustice. All three poets seem to recognize that Nature is an important and vital thing to Man, but there are slight differences in how each poet approaches the subject. Shelley believes Nature is all-encompassing and spiritually pure, and through it we can find unity and truth. Bronte loves Nature and sees it as comforting, but it can be separated from our ultimate need to commune with God. Hardy loves nature for its own sake, especially as it relates to where an individual comes from.

Question 2
Keats' concept of negative capability involves a person or an artist's ability to be receptive to the natural world, without having to form the world or frame it in certain theories or categories. In this case, negative capability involves a poet's ability to embrace uncertainty and mystery

within life; they do not search for a rhyme or reason behind the things they see, particularly in nature and the complexities of man.

In the case of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Keats in particular criticized Coleridge's seeming inability to reach negative capability; the man would often touch on a mystery, but then follow through with it to attempt to explain the nature of the mystery. In *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, the poet describes the mythical nature of the albatross by matter of a simple lesson that the Mariner imparts on his fellows: " He prayeth best, who loveth best / All things both great and small; / For the dear God who loveth us, / He made and loveth all" (Coleridge 444).

Dickens is slightly more successful with the concept of negative capability, though he has the greater challenge of achieving it via prose: in " A Visit to Newgate," Dickens' visit to the titular prison touches on the mysterious and cyclical torment of these prisoners: " These same men, day by day, pass and repass this gloomy depository of the guilt and misery of London, in one perpetual stream of life and bustle, utterly unmindful of the throng of wretched creatures pent up within it" (1239). Here, the hopelessness of the prisoners (and the lack of purpose to the prison's conditions) is not given an explanation or exploration; Dickens accepts the solution to these problems as an uncertainty.

Mary Shelley's ability to touch on the uncertain gives her a gift for negative capability; in *The Mortal Immortal*, the immortal Winzy, and the nature of his immortality, is not really touched upon except via a magic potion, leaving his stresses and anxieties about his health and mental state equally ambiguous. " Am I, then, immortal? This is a question which I have asked myself, by day

and night, for now three hundred and three years, and yet cannot answer it" (Shelley 961). The torture of immortality becomes apparent, as he cannot actually live happily while seeing all of his loves and friends die; this brings up greater questions of the nature of the universe that Shelley also does not answer.

Arnold's "The Buried Life" shows the power of ambiguity, and the fact that we will never truly know what lies in our true selves, showing his understanding of negative capability: "long we try in vain to speak and act / Our hidden self, and what we say and do / Is eloquent, is well--but 'tis not true!" (lines 64-66). Tennyson's "The Lotos-Eaters" and "Ulysses" talk about the issues of fulfillment and the problems of dissatisfaction with the status quo, making it a good example of negative capability. Both narrators need change in their lives, but while Ulysses feels the need to set off for adventures that he sorely misses in his stagnant life, the mariners who eat the lotos simply want to remain in that perfect, untainted world of peace, free from strife. Tennyson contrasts these two ideas strongly, while still showcasing them as examples of the inherent need for change in a person's life. By showing people who want both danger and peace, he demonstrates that fundamental aspect of humankind that is never satisfied with what it has. This restlessness can often lead to danger; while Ulysses and his men sail off to probable doom, the lotos-eaters seek to turn themselves into drugged-out zombies on an island for all eternity, eschewing all thoughts of home and family.

In "Drummer Hodge," Hardy shows the idea that, even in death, we will not know where we will lie, or what that will mean to people. "Young Hodge the

Drummer never knew - / Fresh from his Wessex home - / The meaning of the broad Karoo, / The Bush, the dusty loam" (lines 7-10). The buried man, incapable of comprehending the rhyme or reason behind the land in which he will spend the rest of eternity, showcases Hardy's understanding of negative capability, which is couched in futility.

Browning's work, grounded as it was in exaltation of Christianity and focus on women's and children's rights in particular, somewhat denies the nature of negative capability. She believes that it is possible to put the universe in a Christian framework, in the case of "The Cry of the Children," noting exactly why the children are crying: "Now tell the poor young children, O my brothers, / To look up to Him and pray — / So the blessed One, who blesseth all the others, / Will bless them another day" (Browning 1081). Taking such a clear-cut religious perspective denies the unknowable and mysterious nature of the universe, as illustrated by negative capability.

Wilfred Owen, on the other hand, takes a rather fatalistic approach to this kind of mystery of life; in "Miners," his final stanza notes that "The centuries will burn rich loads / With which we groaned," but "they will not dream of us poor lads, / Left in the ground" (1973). Here, the complete and utter senselessness of mining deaths, even to those who were lower-class, gives his poems the subtle question of what causes these 'poor lads' to suffer so. Eliot, as both a poet and a criticism writer, welcomed ambiguity, the kind of thing that leads to negative capability in many cases. In "Tradition and the Individual Talent," he claims that concentration is the key to truly good poetry - "concentration of a very great number of experiences" (Eliot p. 960). In essence, the personal must be removed from the poet, and they must

simply write to escape from their emotions, instead of turning them loose. With these things in mind, according to Eliot, good poetry can be made. Woolf has a somewhat strong grasp of the ambiguities present in negative capability; in "A Room of One's Own," Woolf argues that the need to imagine and create is the right of every individual, women and men alike; "In the first place, to have a room of her own.. was out of the question, unless her parents were exceptionally rich or very noble" (Woolf).

Question 3

Shelley's Romantic-era poetry is a good example of the optimism about human nature and potential that will be undercut by pessimism by the time the 20th century arrives. In "Ode to the West Wind," Shelley's belief in the supremacy of the natural world translates to our ability to relate to each other; nature can inspire us and allow us to create, while also allowing us power over nature as well. Our minds create the capacity for great beauty and love, but also, in "Ozymandias," the power to destroy that which we create.

Keats, another Romantic poet, believed that beauty was paramount to our survival - he thought it could bring light to our limited, mortal lives. In his Odes, in particular, he gives immortality to these objects, imbuing them with an aesthetic and spiritual beauty that can fight and slow down death; in "Ode to a Grecian Urn" he opines that the pictures on the urn make it the "foster-child of silence and slow time" (905). This means that, no matter what, these pictures will remain on that urn long after he is gone, and Keats' descriptions demonstrate his willingness to believe that others can connect

to these objects in this way as well.

At the same time, Romantic-era prose writings were free to be not as optimistic about the human condition. For example, Thomas De Quincey wrote about his own battle with drugs in *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*; in it, the man attempts to show the slowing and tragic nature of time as he takes the drug. "I sometimes seemed to have lived for 70 or 100 years in one night; nay, sometimes had feelings representative of a millennium passed in that time, or, however, of a duration far beyond the limits of any human experience" (560). Here, the fallible nature of man is shown, and De Quincey admits to the most alluring, yet hazardous experiences while poisoning himself with drugs.

Browning, in "Porphyria's Lover," shows a marked pessimism about man's ability to connect through the eyes of someone who murders his lover. The narrator is portrayed as an insane man who uses reason and argument to explain and justify his cruel actions. "Surprise/made my heart swell, and still it grew/While I debated what to do," says the narrator; once he learns that Porphyria loves him, he does not know what action to take next (1252). Porphyria seems to be the one who is in control at the beginning of the poem, but once he strangles her, "That moment she was mine, mine, fair/Perfectly pure and good" (1252). This shows Browning's inclination that men do terrible things to each other for control and power, showing this modern pessimism as far back as the Victorian age.

In 'Digging,' the relationship between Heaney and his father is portrayed as intensely isolating, as both go about their duties in similar ways with different instruments. Heaney's "squat pen rests; as snug as a gun," while

his father's spade "sinks into gravelly ground," equating both of their tools while still differentiating them significantly (2824). Heaney then goes over his family history, noting that his grandfather and the various "old men" in his family "could handle a spade," noting their agricultural prowess (2824). This further isolates Heaney from the rest of his family, creating the insecurity that he does not match up to them. The fact that he is looking through a window at his father working is further evidence of this isolation. Eventually, Heaney states that he will "dig with" his pen, recognizing that he will carry on his family's tradition of hard work, just in a different way (2824). In this poem, Heaney demonstrates the isolation he feels from the rest of his family by taking a different path in life; however, by the end of the poem he resolves himself to carry on with their traditions of hard work and dedication, just in a different way.

In "In Praise of Limestone," Auden shows his cautious optimism about the arts and beauty in human society, as he spends the poem informally gushing about the beauty and majesty of the landscape. While he can appreciate it, he admits that his appreciation is limited, and he claims that other outsiders cannot appreciate this connection between man and this landscape: they "never stayed here long but sought/ Immoderate soils where the beauty was not so external" (Auden 2435). Here, Auden demonstrates the uniquely 20th century skepticism about human beings being linked to nature and each other.

In James Joyce's short story "The Dead," Gabriel Conroy, is depicted as an awkward, self-absorbed and pathetic man, constantly unsure of himself yet confident in his superiority over others. Gabriel himself is a bit of an

antisocial misanthrope; he has difficulty relating to and talking to others, and he is one of the few people in the story to actively state that he dislikes Ireland. His relationship with his wife is extremely frustrated and confused, as he often does not recognize her or know her as well as he should for being with someone so long. This extends to his lack of understanding about religion as well, since he cannot relate to the Catholic guests at the party; he has no interest in religion, and thus no frame of reference.

In D. H. Lawrence's "The Horse Dealer's Daughter," human communication is stunted as both Mabel and Jack are searching for love in all the wrong places; they seize an opportunity for affection, but they turn it down because the effort is being forced. Mabel begins to recognize the signs that Jack does not love her, and begins to form an excuse to let him off the hook. She says she is "awful, too awful" and "horrible," attempting to free Jack from her advances. Jack, however, is insistent that he wants her and is going to marry her, out of honor more than anything; those words only "frightened her almost more than her horror lest he should not want her" (Lawrence 2262).

Works Cited

Greenblatt, Stephen. *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* (8th ed.) W. Norton & Company, 2005. Print.