
‘Ambivalence’ as a Concept in John Clare’s Middle and Late Poetry

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Abstract:

This paper signifies the contradictory point of view in John Clare’s poetry. Clare (1794-1864) is an English romantic poet in the nineteenth century, who writes more than ten volumes about nature. So, this study highlights the concept of Psychoanalytic theory which is ‘ambivalence’ and how through this theory can interpret any literary text on the basis of utilizing psychoanalytic methods to literary texts in order to reveal the author’s inner emotions such as motives, dreams, as well as wishes. Consequently, the concept of ‘ambivalence’ has a lot in common with the human psyche and its struggles. Sometimes the reader finds the author/poet talking about something real or a notion with pleasant sentiments, and then he refers to the same thing with sad sensations that are not as happy as the first ones without explanations. Here, the critic’s job is to identify the reasons behind these contradicting emotions in the piece of literature. Then, two long poems ("Summer Images" and "Child Harold") from different times show opposing perspectives of natural scenes in the poet’s environment and abstract thoughts that revolve in his head. Another aspect is Clare’s insanity. Is it only an accusation, or is it true? Finally, this critical study emphasises the idea that Clare’s poetry always reflects the inconsistency and instability of thoughts and feelings that the poet suffers from due to his irritated psychological and mental condition.

Keywords: psychoanalytic, ambivalence, Clare, nature, romantic poet, environment.

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Introduction:

The psychoanalytic approach sometimes referred to as "classical psychoanalysis," seeks to deal with the psychological issues that people experience as a consequence of the conflicts, needs, and desires that are stored in the unconscious mind (Tyson,2006: 12). Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) was a Founding Father of Psychoanalysis who constructed some images for the human psyche that served as the dynamic grounds for his theory of psychoanalysis. The psychologist Freud attempts to develop a framework that includes the same principles he uses to evaluate the conduct of his patients in light of their childhood memories and dreams (Bressler,2011:123-5).

Eugen Bleuler (1857-1939) (Swiss Psychiatrist) introduced the concept of ‘ambivalence’ into psychiatry terms for the very first time through his essay "Vortrag über Ambivalenz" 1910 in a Lecture on ambivalence. In simple words, Bleuler defines it as: the prominent symptom of ailments on the schizophrenia scale. Ambivalence is the potential of schizophrenic thinking to cause two opposing thoughts or emotional attitudes to dwell simultaneously and intensely (Bleuler,1910:267). Freud quickly adopted Bleuler’s ambivalence, applied it to situations of the ongoing coexistence of ‘love’ and ‘hatred’ directed towards the same individual (Bleger et al.,2013:261). Freud further broadened the definition of Bleuler’s concept to include the coexistence of both active and passive tendencies within the same innate impulse, which he referred to as ‘pairs of contrary component instincts’ (Freud,1905:256). On the literary level, it is important to note, that the ambivalent texts liberate the writer from any limitations while additionally guaranteeing his place in the literary writings. The writer manipulates his words in a way so that every reader accepts him (Shavit,1980:85).

Lorenz-Meyer, D. (PhD researcher in studies of ambivalence and affect) says: ‘ambivalence does not, then, reflect indecision or paralysis but a mature step towards acknowledging a more complex world of multiple perspectives and emotional resilience’ (Biggs,2007:706). Ultimately, one cannot help but agree with Pillemer and Sutor (2008) when they say in their article ‘Collective ambivalence’ that ‘The most important single characteristic of ambivalence is a contradictory assessment or response toward the same object’ (395).

Provided that John Clare (Peasant Poet) has been categorized as an ‘insane poet’ for a long time by critics due to the suffering he endured in his final two decades of life, it is simply logical and natural to find this concept in his poetry, either explicitly or implicitly, towards nature and its non-human beings, given that also he is regarded as a ‘descriptive’ poet of nature (Kamal,2022:40,74).

So, this paper aims at investigating John Clare’s ambivalence towards nature and all its components (non-human) with reference to some abstract notions. Clare is also a poet of ‘ecology,’ therefore ‘ambivalence’ is another facet of him in which he addresses nature within the ecological and psychological frame. The findings of the study will determine if the peasant poet is insane or not and whether Clare’s disturbance correlates well or poorly with the ‘ambivalence’ concept.

1. John Clare’s Biography and Romanticism

One of the most attentive poets who studied the natural world was John Clare (1793–1864). He was raised in a rural laboring household and associated with both the Romantic and his hometown (Helpstone). Clare was to be the ‘Northamptonshire peasant poet’ of Helpston. It is important to note that the poet had a rigorous self-education approach that supported his development. ‘Self-taught’ is a term that is frequently used to describe working-class poets similar to Clare (Goodridge,2013: i, ix). As a result, the spelling does not fit the typical letter, and the poetry is still unpunctuated. Nevertheless, even after Clare’s

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initial editors edited his writings for the publication's release, other sorts of messiness stayed (Gorji,2009:1). Clare got married to Martha ('Patty') Turner in the year 1820. He cherished the kids they raised, but the romantic poet all over his life idolized and held Mary Joyce, his adolescent sweetheart, in high regard. The reasons behind the separation are unknown, yet, it appears that associated with a socioeconomic distinction. The remembrance of this failed romance haunts his words (Walker,2005:2).

Undoubtedly, the peasant poet was seriously touched by the social disturbances which occurred after Enclosure Law. He regretted the changes which were undermining the traditional society he loved and cherished: his recollections of boyhood sports and regular traditions connected with the crop year, his grievances over the passing of beloved landscapes, and Clare's moving [enforcing to leave Helpstone] to Northborough at last (Jayne,2004:7). He says in his poem "The Flitting"1833: 'I've left mine old home of homes'(Line 1) and 'my old home now left-' (Line 196). Consequently, anyone who has studied Clare's biography will be aware that one of the reasons which led to his eventual confinement in psychiatric institutions (asylums) was this forced migration from the countryside (Helpstone) to the city (Peterborough).

The child of a destitute rural laborer begins his career to compose his earlier poetry during breaks from hard long hours working on the grounds to assist his parents pay their rent. While his later poems were created during 'lucid intervals' in an asylum where he had been sent owing to bad health, heavy employment, and excessive alcoholic drinking (Storey,1973:301).

The penniless peasant used store papers 'of all colors,' butter packaging materials, pages ripped from old, torn booklets, and other leftovers to write his poetry. So, the remaining written material (like manuscripts) and poems look messy, written in scrawling calligraphy with fading handmade ink (Gorji,2009:1).

Poetically, 'No Romantic poet wrote more passionately about the joy of experiencing nature in all its immediacy than John Clare, and no poet argued more strongly for its permanence and continuity across generations as part of the original design of Creation' (Bewell,2011:550). Clare's poetry is so rich in details that it seems as if he is escorting readers along on his explorations through the woods and ascending the trees, allowing one to feel and smell the tactile materiality of everything he comes across. Clare paid close attention to the 'architecture and materiality of birds' nests.' As well as, considering all biological material, animals, insects and people: living (thresher) and non-living entities: (brooks, hills, grasses, holes and the like)(Bresnihan,2013:78).

Moreover, some of the most other significant subjects that interested Clare and consequently occupied the majority of his poetry are: he writes about impoverishment from the perspective of a poor man, the most severe effects of enclosure law (1809) from the viewpoint of a man who has experienced them, and on how social prejudice damaged his sense of creativity and personal dignity whilst depriving him of his first love (Mary) (Clare,1987:6).

On the stylistic level, Clare was recognized for his unique usage of 'vernacular style and regional dialect.' He grants 'voice to the unwritten language of England' ... 'vivid descriptions of rural scenery, in originality of observation and strength of feeling, richness of style and delicacy of sentiment' (Bate,2003:162,249). In addition, many of the Northern and Scottish terms that Clare uses are no longer commonly prevalent in contemporary Britain but have persisted in the United States and Canada. Clare utilizes a number of English expressions also that were obviously "Americanisms" in his day (Robinson,2010: 94).

Clare's Romanticism is most visible in his youth poems and in the asylum phase (White,2017:205). His poetry is a unique and distinct addition to Romanticism. The elements of Romanticism that Clare gives particular consideration to are: 'fancy, the sublime, ruins, childhood, poesy, and joy.' Critics claimed that 'childhood' is a 'keyword' in Romanticism (White,2017:3,207).

Ecologically, Clare's biography established 'a certain ecology' solidly at the center of 'Clare's poetics.' A type of ecology characterized in his poetry by intimate, regional surveillance of a feudal relic of society and culture that has destroyed by capitalist practices like enclosure law (Morton191). James C. McKusick (Associate Professor in environmental studies) (1992) 'clearly entitles him [to] be regarded as the first ecological writer in the English literary tradition'(227).

Finally, to summarize, Clare's poetry recounts the societal and ecological consequences of modernization by tackling the dislocation produced by the loss of an English rustic environment that had been tightly linked with the long-standing customs of the English rural lifestyle (Bewell,2011:552).

2. John Clare's Middle Poetry: 'ambivalence' Concept

Clare's "Summer Images" is a poem included in the collection "The Rural Muse" from the middle period (1822–1837). It is a lengthy poem (196 lines) that paints several and marvelous contrasting pictures of summer season. The poem received highly praise from the poets such as Eliza Emmerson (Clare's friend). She said:

'What a train of lovely visions she [your Muse] hath brought unto me— 'Summer Images' ... in all their glowing beauty, in all their native freshness, ... —truly, this muse of thine, is a most bewitching sort of modeller—she makes dame Nature and her progeny ... ever varying, ever new— she robes them with such peculiar grace. Such resistless modesty— that, we can only stand and gaze and gaze, and wonder at the artist's skill!'"(Storey,1973:212).

At the same area, John Taylor (Clare's friend, cousin, and publisher) wrote to Clare: 'in many Parts it is as good as anything you ever wrote' (Storey,1973:212).

The poem as a whole is a poem of 'joy,' sung to nature. The poet sings of all the details of nature like: seasons 'summer-health,' 'summer morn,' 'vagrant summer dream,' 'Summer's sweet breath,' and 'rosy fingered Spring'). Then, he says about the same season: 'swarthy Summer, by rude health'). Nevertheless, the poet provides a contrasted image for the reader. The rivers ('the gay river' but 'shallow stream'). The poet also states that the animals have contradicting attributes, positive as well as negative: such as 'The jetty snail,' 'the startled frog,' and 'silly sheep' in accordance with birds ('The early lark,' and 'The pranking bat').

Then, after creating this beautiful artwork that speaks of image, sound, and colour, one can find the poet juxtaposes the description of 'mornings' with the 'evenings' in the surrounding nature of him. For instance, in the stanza numbered twelfth, Clare describes the 'summer' morning with its 'wild flowers' and asserts how 'beauty' feeds on the moments of ecstasy. Everything in nature is upbeat, even the 'convolvulus=ivy' that is joyously swinging around a 'thorn.' Then, within the same stanza, Clare continues by connecting the 'early morning hours' with a fresh gilded mint. Besides, he expresses a desire for the enthusiasm for bathing with a royal 'cup' filled as well as droplets of 'honey' that are sparkling 'with dew' drops:

I see the wild flowers, in their summer morn
Of beauty, feeding on joy's luscious hours;
The gay convolvulus, wreathing round the thorn,
Agape for honey showers;
And slender kingcup, burnished with the dew
Of morning's early hours,
Like gold minted new. (78-84)

But then Clare, on the other hand, portrays the night in a different image with a distinct sensation in the same nature. The night appeared to be in contrast to the daytime. It seems to be gloomy 'dank' with a strong sensation of cold and dampness. Even the weeds, which are non-human living things in nature, are depressing, 'sombre' and unhappy. Then, according to simple people's beliefs, he mentions the most ominous bird, the owl, and this reference is required in order to delve into the condition of grief and despair. Meanwhile, as the 'crickets' tremble and shiver from the cold night, the insects of the night arrive to complete the dismal scene. The sad poet next closes the bleak stanza with two lines that are even more terrible by saying goodbye to the day in its entirety with a chorus and a dreary leaving song. Perhaps even the poet did not need to follow up with a song of parting because the word 'farewell' conveys the depth of his melancholy at the end of the day.

But now the evening curdles dank and grey,
Changing her watchet hue for sombre weed;
And moping owls, to close the lids of day,

On drowsy wing proceed;
While Chickering crickets, tremulous and long,
Light's farewell inly heed,
And give it parting song. (148-154)

Through these two conflicting poetic pictures from the same natural setting, the poet allows his readers to clearly and precisely observe how the notion of 'ambivalence' is expressed in the poem toward nature. Clare hates and fears nature to the end, just as much as he loves it. For instance, in Clare's poetry,

and the middle stage in particular, the oscillation between passion and hate-fear is a sign that cannot be ignored since it is the stage that came before the stage of lunacy. Thus, all the causes in this stage that led to confusion in the way he behaved and thought began. As a result, the fluctuations in emotions is anticipated and typical. It merely serves as a sign of utterly unstable psychological illness.

3. John Clare's Lately Poetry: 'ambivalence' Concept

"Child Harold," the poem of 1273 lines, is notable for its consideration of 'home' as one of its secondary topics, as seen by the recurrence of numerous phrases with exclusively temporal connotations, such as (house, palace, rooms, walls) and others. It is remarkable that Clare has always been obsessed by the idea of the home, as seen by the fact that it appears repeatedly in the majority of his poems—twenty eight times in this lengthy poem being the greatest example. The meaning of 'home' does not refer to physical structures or even a family; rather, it refers to a person's spiritual domiciliary and emotional fulfilment, which he frequently connects with his childhood sweetheart Mary. Clare associates between Mary, 'home' and 'love:' 'To seek a home in Mary's smile' (Line 92) and 'My home was love and Mary' (Line 97). However, there are two contradictory portraits of Mary. Once upon a time, she was his home, but he did not live in exile: 'Her truth and heart my home/Her truth and heart were once my home' (Lines 925,6).

Even so, he refutes those verses when he denies the existence of 'home' entirely: 'I had no home in early youth' (Line 98), regardless of its many connotations to him: there is no home in Mary's arms (love): '— Man meets no home within a woman's breast' (Line 112). Additionally, the poem's subsequent lines make the paradox more evident. After combining love, home, and Mary, the poet reiterates the notion of these three things, yet becoming lost together: 'I've lost love, home and Mary' (Line 420). The concept of "ambivalence" in its most magnificent form, which upends everything and presents an idea that is radically different from the exact same things stated earlier, offers an insight inside the prudent reader's thinking when Clare adds apparently that no home in the days of childhood (safety): 'No home had I through all the year' (Line 916), and no home even for his heart (homeland)! 'No other home my heart can find' (Line 920). After all, the poet's haunting emotions culminate in the poem's most distinguished line of the poem at the moment saying: 'My heart without a home' (Line 941).

Regarding the three following poetic verses, Clare praises the 'love' of his life, 'Mary,' with genuine affection 'Mary's honest love' before contradicting himself by claiming that love is as unsteady as 'the wind' in the following line. So, the concept of 'ambivalence' is made obvious to the readers in the most lovely, brief and concise way while yet having a clear purpose and meaning:

But Mary's honest love
But love inconstant as the wind
Soon shifts another way. (917-19)

Thereby, the poetry of the last stage is straightforward and obvious in presenting the concept of 'ambivalence.' Here, the concept serves as an effective tool as much the sincerity of

Clare's feelings. Vacillation is in its most extreme forms and phases. The poet does not take time between lines, as he does in his middle-stage poetry, to shift from one state of mind to another that opposes it. He denied feeling with feeling in just under three consecutive lines. Simply said, this rate of change is a gauge of how quickly attitudes and emotions may change while also providing proof of a poet's confusion of feelings caused by psychological problems that kept him incarcerated in mental institutions for years.

4. Conclusion

Following this brief analysis of two poems from two distinct eras of John Clare's poetry. It is evident that, given the variety of psychological anxieties he experienced throughout his life, it is acceptable to have two opposing viewpoints on the same topic without regard for the essence of it, either for living things or abstract notions.

In addition, the apparent contradiction in the long poems gives them an aesthetic that makes the readers' minds re-read them carefully to make them contemplate both points of view separately. For example, in the poem "Summer Images," one can find a review of what is in nature in terms of beings and scenes in a positive manner, followed by a description that differs from the positivity and is filled with grief and gloom.

In the poem "Child Harold," the ideas of 'home' and 'love' are important and recurring symbolic motifs in most of Clare's poems. The latter describes them as once enjoying the atmosphere of the house and living the madness of love, and once losing both; his home and his love. In either case, he is honest. Referring to Mary was the love of his life, but he did not marry her and was deprived of her. The same is true of the notion of the house represented by his village (Helpstone), in which he grew up during his boyhood days and writes incomparable poetry, but he also abandoned it after the enclosure law. So he is reliable in their contradictory descriptions. It is not a sign of his madness as much as it is a sign of his fluctuating feelings toward things. Indeed, Clare's insanity is just an accusation, not a fact. It does not necessarily follow that somebody is insane just because his name appears in the files of mental health facilities. Many mentally unstable individuals experiencing transient mental breakdowns reside in asylums.

It is obvious that the splendor of the aforementioned poems is not affected at all by Clare's psychological condition or his attendance to the asylums; but rather it increases them with a special elegance that distinguished him from those of his contemporary poets, such as John Keats, Shelley and Wordsworth.

Throughout his stay in the mental facilities, he never ceased writing and instead went for walks in the hospital gardens, carrying his small notebook to write.

So, this paper offers a framework for the concept of 'ambivalence.' Clare's poems are good examples to study such concepts because he is a psychologically disturbed poet in some periods of his life. Thereupon, it is abundantly clear that his opinions or viewpoints are changing.

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