

## The Portrayal of Escapism in John Clare's Poetry

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### تصوير الهروب من الواقع في شعر جون كلير

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#### Abstract:

The aim of this paper is to shed light on how Clare portrayed his tendency toward escapism in his poetry. Clare's works are known for the reiteration of themes of nature, alienation, and nostalgia. The use of nature, conjuring up childhood memories, and seeking death were the means by which he managed to achieve this purpose. By using the psychoanalytic approach, this paper explores the latent meanings beyond the manifest language, and provides possible motives and drives behind each of these choices by which he strived to fulfill this tendency.

**Keywords:** Escapism, Refuge, Nature, Imagination.

#### المخلص:

تهدف هذه الورقة إلى تسليط الضوء على كيفية تصوير كلير لميله إلى الهروب من الواقع في شعره. تشتهر أعمال كلير بتكرارها لمواضيع الطبيعة والاعترا ب والحنين إلى الماضي. وقد شكّل استخدام الطبيعة واستحضار ذكريات الطفولة والسعي إلى الموت الوسائل التي مكنته من تحقيق هذا الهدف. من خلال استخدام المنهج التحليلي النفسي، تستكشف هذه الورقة المعاني الكامنة وراء اللغة الظاهرة، وتقدم دوافع محتملة وراء كل خيار من هذه الخيارات التي سعى من خلالها إلى تلبية هذا الميل.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** الهروب، الملجأ، الطبيعة، الخيال.

#### Introduction:

Escapism is one of the major themes in poetry. As a matter of fact, writing poetry is considered, by some, as a means of escaping reality (Sayyed, 2025). A notable poet whose writings have this recurrent motif is John Clare, a late romantic poet who lived in obscurity and alienation by the end of his turbulent life. His poetry is a crucible in which contradictions such as (trouble, peace; life, death) are brought together to be presented as a whole. His works are deliberately equivocal, as they could be seen as mere belle-lettres, or works that stand and speak for what he believes in. However, for the readers of Clare, the recurrence of such themes is nothing unfamiliar. Frequent references to pastoral landscapes, imaginary scenes, and childhood days appear in almost every poem and could be inferred as a way of escapism to insinuate a sense of detachment from the time and place he lives in. Moreover, these references are of a great significance in Clare's poetry as they became part of his identity. These characteristics of Clare's poetry are among the ones that distinguish him from the other poets who also belong to the Romantic Era which is characterized by individuality and celebration of nature, as Clare's biographer (Bate, 2004) states in his book *John Clare: A Biography*: "No one has ever written more

powerfully of nature, of a rural childhood, and of the alienated and unstable self.” With his tendentiousness, Clare did not view nature as a place to visit but a place to live in, hence, not only had he found solace in nature, he also found joy, peace, and tranquility. In her essay ‘John Clare’s Colours’, (Stafford, 2015) argues that nature in Clare’s poetry is seen as a symbol of lost innocence that provides a sanctuary from the pressure of the society and a source of joy.

Based on the premise that nature cannot be a source of sadness, it is a well established custom for the Romantics to seek refuge and rapture in nature, as (Coleridge, 1798) asserts this in his poem *The Nightingale*: “In nature there is nothing melancholy.” Clare’s longing for immersion in nature is understood in the light of being a late romantic poet, and in his late years it was reinforced by the approaching Victorian era in which his poetry could be perceived as a reaction against the dreadful conditions of that period. Many literary scholars and critics described John Clare as a poet who celebrated the countryside: a peasant poet. (Jack, 1966, p.191) states “If Clare had never lived, it would have been tempting to invent him, for he conforms remarkably to the romantic stereotype of the poet ... he described scenes of external nature with extraordinary fidelity.” However, very few who perceived his poetry as an attempt to escape his reality. Thus, the aim of this paper is to explore how Clare portrayed his inclination toward escapism and the reasons behind it in his poetry.

This paper deploys qualitative methods (descriptive and analytic) to identify and analyze the prevalence of the theme escapism within the poems chosen for this study, which are: ‘Home Yearning’, ‘I am’, ‘The Approaching Night’. The identification of the evidence that shows this theme in these poems was done by reading rigorously through the texts and taking notes. The interpretation of the evidence found in the texts was done by the use of psychoanalytic theory. Using this lens facilitates looking for apparent and hidden meanings and their implications, and offers deep insights into the drives and desires behind the tendency for escapism.

Escapism is a strategy that is deep-rooted in human behavior. It has a significant impact on human beings. Exploring its effects through literature provides a valuable understanding of its causes, complexities, and aftermaths. This paper adds to the accumulated knowledge to minimize the gap and provide apposite information that is germane to the literature on this subject.

#### **Literature Review:**

According to the psychologist Jennifer (Delgado, 2019, para. 3) escapism can be defined as “a coping strategy that involves the tendency to evade the real world in search of the long-awaited security and tranquility in a fantasy universe.” This definition emphasizes that it is a conscious choice done voluntarily by individuals to emotionally protect themselves. Delgado also argues that escapism is not necessarily towards a real place, but could be an imaginary one, as she adds “It usually involves some degree of uprooting from reality to find refuge in a fictional parallel universe.” Thus, the term ‘Escapist’ can be defined as a person who seeks diversion from reality.

(Freud, 1923) considers escapism as a defense mechanism by which individuals retreat to a world of fantasy to avoid the harsh reality of life. This process encompasses using fantasy to handle emotional pain and distress. He says that the ego, by using escapism, guards itself from the external world with all its negative aspects. It also protects itself from the internal conflicts, which includes creating an alternative world in which the ego finds peace and tranquility.

The presence of the escapism theme in literature - poetry in particular - is a commonplace tradition; writings of various authors are replete with the idea of escapism through literature. Moreover, the process of writing itself is considered by some as a means of escapism from the circumstances that the author deals with at the time of writing. (Stapledon, 1939) in his essay ‘Escapism in Literature’ writes about escape literature and argues that the main concern of it is to protect the mind from the bothersome reality, therefore, the ultimate motive of escapism is finding relief by making the imaginary world more pleasant and more acceptable.

Romantic poets were masters when it came to the use of this technique i. e. escapism. (Chauhan, 2019) in his paper ‘Tendency of Escapism in the Poetry of Keats, Wordsworth, Shelley and Coleridge: A Critical Study’ argues that Romantics used escapism as a refuge to rescue themselves. The process entails creating an imaginary world that he describes as (*Ibid*, p.53) “beautiful world full of pleasure, peace, beauty, and happiness.” So that when they escape to this world, they can be free from the pain, hardships, and the harsh realities of the real world. He adds that all Romantics were escapist; therefore, their poetry is characterized by the presence of escapism, and the tendency of escapism is prevalent in the poems of the Romantic poets. Albeit their interpretations of escapism are different, their motives were almost the same. This notion is affirmed by (Karthikeyan, 2017) in his study ‘The Idea of Escapism in Romantic Poetry and Confessional Poetry’ in which he indicates that Romantic poets made use of this technique and that the employed imagination to surpass their disappointment with existence; moreover, they used escapism to retreat from their problems and societal pressure.

The theme of escapism in John Clare's verse has been traced by some literary scholars and authors. A prominent study that discussed the escapism in Clare's poetry was made by (Gordon, 1983) in which he examined the importance of the ideas of solitude, isolation, and escapism, by showing their connection and relationship to his biography and other major themes in his poetry. He also elaborated on the escapist tendency which we have seen arising in Clare's early poetry until his asylum years.

#### **Using Escapism a Defense Mechanism:**

Escapism in John Clare's poetry can be viewed as a defense mechanism used by Clare as a coping strategy against the trauma caused by the society he lives in. He used several elements to achieve this purpose. He used each of them as a resort or a refuge from the oppression he found in his society, establishing a private world for himself. The deterioration of his mental health - which entails his anxiety, shattered self-esteem, and his madness – alongside poverty and alcoholism led to his confinement in The Northampton Asylum and to deeper psychological distress. His problem of not being able to find self-validation from the society he lives in exacerbated his condition and can be identified as the catalyst for his tendency to find a refuge to escape to.

Many poems speak of Clare's tendency toward escapism; for instance, the poem *I am* explores self-fragmentation where Clare is striving for finding his identity, hence the title 'I am, struggling to safeguard a sense of self from the external world among his peers and his inner turbulence. The poem itself can be seen as an act of both asserting and questioning identity as presented in the first line: "I am — yet what I am none cares or knows." This contradiction insinuates the struggle between his need to exist and his inclination to escape, which creates a paradox that tell of his mental state.

By inference, one of the motives behind this tendency is his isolation and the fact that his friends abandoned him as he mentions in the second line: "My friends forsake me like a memory lost." This conjecture can be justified based on the sense of urgency and abruptness by which Clare introduced the above mentioned line. Moreover, the poignant lines: "Even the dearest that I loved the best\Are strange — nay, rather, stranger than the rest." assert that this abandonment affected him heavily and made him not only wanting to escape some people, but also to escape the society that ignored him. This led him, fueled by his angst, to seek refuge in a place that has no human beings, as presented in the line: "where man hath never trod." The final stanza of this poem is the epitome of escapism, where he indulges himself in a flight of fancy that can be perceived as a counterbalance to the neglect of his friends, the idea of his dearest became stranger than the rest, and all the negative things he mentioned throughout the poem.

#### **Escaping to Nature:**

Nature is an intrinsic and ubiquitous theme in Clare's poetry. His early works provided snapshots of rural life. He has an enormous love and appreciation for the countryside and values its intrinsic elements to the extent that, in dire situations, he seeks refuge in the natural surroundings and believes that they can provide the solution to all of his problems. Clare spent his childhood and his early years in the countryside villages, sauntering in the meadows that are rich in green life. He was immersed in nature and became a friend of nature. All the natural sceneries became engraved in his memory and evoked his imagination as a grown-up. Those sceneries served as inspiration for his writings. Clare takes a keen interest when describing nature with an enormous vividness. His description is very elaborate, containing a lot of careful details. This detailed description of natural sceneries, where he meticulously describes birds, trees, and insects with all their colors and sounds, acts as a sensory immersion by which he transcends the walls of his confinement, which leads to temporarily overcoming his suffering.

His yearning for escapism to nature had been reinforced by some factors, among which is the passing of The General Enclosure Act by the British Parliament in 1809 (Kamal, 2022) that enabled landowners to enclose common lands which, in turn, altered the essence of the countryside that Clare grew up in. He perceived this as a subversive act that caused disruptive changes, which he described as "lawless law" in his poem 'The Mores'. The impact of this act on Clare is pervasive in his writings; the line "I long for scenes where man hath never trod", in particular, may be interpreted as an expression of a wish that is probably induced by the Enclosure Law. (Brown, 2008, para.12) in his article 'Alienation and John Clare' comments on Clare's tendency to escape his harsh reality in the poem 'I am' as he states "This is an experience of pain, of withdrawal into 'nature', into the Eden of the heart and the past. Eventually, it was to lead to the speaking silence of a neglected past, a man alone with nature, with poverty, with 'madness' recreating a world in his green language." Clare tries to withdraw from the aggressive society with all its rules and expectations and evade to the imaginary natural world he created in his mind to find comfort and condolence. Natural world can be a surrogate that substitutes the things that are missing in Clare's life: human connection and safety. This natural world is not just an ordinary scenery; it actually represents the realm of immaculate and sincere life. (Gouli, 2020, p.99) states "Clare gets peace and strength when he surrenders himself into the lap of nature. Whenever he experiences unbearable pain and obstacles, he tends to communicate with nature dealing with its

different shades to find the ways to tackle his problems.” By using nature as a refuge, Clare tries to paint the imagery of a natural place with some characteristics and details that cannot be found except in his imagination. In such a place, he can live freely and away from the restrictions and impediments of the world around him.

Viewing this through the psychoanalytic lens explains how these references to nature reflect Clare's inner psyche with all its needs, repressed thoughts, and fears, which reveals his unconscious drives, his inner conflicts, and his developmental stages. The latter in particular can be linked to his very first experiences with nature, which can be treated as a mother-child relationship. By seeking this kind of relationship again in his later years, Clare searches for a relationship that is therapeutic and curative by which he can indulge in a period of convalescence to heal all of his traumas and pain. According to Lacanian approach, this pursuit for finding peace in nature represents Clare's search for the 'Real'. This sought after 'Real' will provide contentment and relief, two major states that Clare was deprived of.

#### **Death as a Refuge:**

Clare frequently entertained the idea that death can be a solution to one's problems and can bring suffering to an end. (Gordon, 1983, p.69) postulates this theory as he states “Moreover, the desire to escape from life's problems through death appears periodically in Clare's work and reaches its culmination in 'I am'. Hence, death appears to offer the best remedy for one who has been reduced to the straits of poverty and humiliation.” This argumentation can be proven by reading through Clare's poetry where there are references to death. The line “There to abide with my creator God” unmistakably indicates Clare's wish to end his misery with death. He perceives death as a final solution that is eternal and sufficient. (Brown, 2008, para.16) posits “The dialectic between past and present, childhood and age, nature and wealth were only resolved for Clare in death.” This notion can be seen as a spiritual yearning, viewing Clare's longing for untainted existence in an otherworldly place that can be the source of peace. In much of Clare's poetry, there is a deep-rooted longing to escape from the negative impacts and the consequences of isolation and to achieve a kind of spiritual fulfillment, which (Crossan, 1976) refers to as “a relish for eternity.” He, as a sentient person, believed fervently in the existence of a place that has not been trodden by other people, with the thought that it can offer a haven from the problems he has, the noise, and the ridicule that he probably gets from the people around him as presented in the line “Into the nothingness of scorn and noise.” His stressed and anxious mind seeks solace in this place, as he thinks that the sound of these noises and scorn would dim and will haunt him no more.

Clare in his poem 'What Is Life?' describes death as something that arouses great fear and anxiety “That dark mysterious name of horrid sound”; nevertheless, he still believes strongly in the idea that peace can only be found in heaven and the grave, to which he made a clear reference in the poem where he states in the fourth stanza: “And Peace? where can its happiness abound? Nowhere at all, save heaven, and the grave.” Unlike how he believes that earthly life provides nothing but sorrow and woes, he perceives death as a gateway to a spiritual realm of eternity in which he can find solace, emancipation, and relief. According to (Freud, 1927), the core principle of this wish is the biological urge for the ending of life, as he states in an interview with G. S. Viereck (*Ibid*, p.3) “all living matter, consciously or unconsciously, craves to regain the complete and absolute inertia of inorganic existence.” This means that the psyche pursues mitigation by going back to a state of no stimulation. Based on this theory, Clare has an ambivalent feelings toward his existence and his wish to end his life is deep rooted in his inner self, and he wants to make use of it to find eternal peace and happiness.

#### **Revisiting Childhood through Poetry:**

In his asylum years, Clare experienced both physical and mental imprisonment. His unbearable complex present at that time was a prison per se; therefore, he probably used poetry as a therapy. It could be argued that Clare finds escape through the act of writing a poem, by considering the poem itself as a private world or a sanctuary where he can be in the fields watching herds of sheep, smelling the flowers, and watching birds building their nests and relish their chirping again the way he did when he was a child. It also serves as a creative resistance against the expectations of the society and the restrictions imposed upon him. (Hartman, 1970) argues that the restrictions of one's intellect “can only be broken by the liberating power of the poetic imagination.” Hartman believes that this is the core essence of Romanticism and the Romantic poets used escapism through “a vision of unitary consciousness with eternity.”

Clare did not use memory as a mere recollection of moments, he used it as an active and creative process of reestablishing the past to compensate for what he needs in the present; therefore, constructing a richer and more passionate world than the place he dwells in. In his book *The Poetics of Space*, (Bachelard, 1958) explores how imagination fills a space with spirit and meaning, and reciprocally, how the space evokes feeling, memory, and fantasy in its occupant's imagination. This is evident in the poem 'Home Yearnings', where Clare uses this poem to escape his loneliness and confinement in the Northampton General Lunatic Asylum, by deploying memory to create idealized



scenery of home and childhood love. In this poem, Clare's escape is not to a place but rather to a time. He wants to escape from this 'now' by remembering the 'then' the past when there were nature, his mother, and another recurrent reference to 'sleep', delineating the present as a source of agony and deprivation that does not offer him solace, whereas the past is a source of joy and pleasure. Thus, the word 'Home' in the title is a reference to the pleasure of reminiscence of his past with all the things that he mentioned in the poem that engender feelings of nostalgia. In her paper '*Ambivalence' as a Concept in John Clare's Middle and Late Poetry*, (Kamal, 2023, p.32) argues that "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 fulfillment, which he frequently connects with his childhood sweetheart Mary."

In the final stanza of the poem 'I am', Clare makes reference to his infancy and childhood days "And sleep as I in childhood sweetly slept\Untroubling and untroubled where I lie." Clare's desire and yearning for sleep the way he did when he was a child is considered as a pre-oedipal fantasy and as a release from the pressure of adulthood with all its responsibilities. This regression can be perceived as a Freudian idea, when a person who becomes in contact with harsh reality retreats to an earlier and less complicated phase of his life to seek undisturbed state of mind. In that state, he would not cause trouble to the people around him or vice versa. This fantasy also brings to focus the days when Clare spent his life playing and enjoying himself among the fields and meadows. The escape fantasy of Clare stems from the clash between two opponents: 'I' that represents the ego, and the 'self-consumer' that represents the superego. This repeated clash culminates in the agony and persistent distress. Thus, this fantasy can bring an end to this clash and, eventually, to end the suffering.

However, one of the downsides of this longing is the aggravation of his delusory state. Human beings usually tend to see the past through rose-colored glasses. John Clare is no exception as he mentions in the poem that he experienced joy even when he cried, as it appears in the final stanza of the poem 'Home Yearning': "T was pleasure e'en to weep." Moreover, Clare is seemed to be incarcerated in the past as he paradoxically yearns for his previous way of life of poverty and struggle that he attempted to escape from when he was younger, as it appears in these lines from the poem 'Approaching Night':

*O, how I long to be agen  
That poor and independent man,  
With labour's lot from morn to night. (...)  
From light to dark when toil could yield  
Real happiness with little gain. (11-17)*

These memories that Clare recalls are not necessarily accurate, they can be referred to as selective or biased. They serve to subdue pain and the feeling of loneliness. Using good memories from one's past is considered by psychologists as a defense mechanism to harness unwanted emotions. In his essay 'Screen Memories', (Freud, 1899) describes these memories as 'tendentious', and for him the use of these memories is a form of denial, he adds (*Ibid*, p.14): "they serve the purposes of the repression and replacement of objectionable or disagreeable impressions." So, the composition of this poem can be seen in the light of 'writing poetry as an escape'. Therefore, all of the memories, imageries, and the language that he used construct the reality that offers him a shelter where he can suppress the negative emotions and retreat from pain, problems, and neglect by mentally reliving a lost past. This yearning for a long gone past constructs a dreamlike reality that can be contrasted with his harsh status quo at that time, representing a contradiction between his holistic identity in the past and his fragmented identity in the present.

### **Conclusion:**

When analyzed and studied in depth, the poems 'I am', 'Home yearning', and 'The Approaching Night' reveal much of Clare's tendency toward escapism. Within the context of Romanticism, Clare's life was full of societal constraints, vulnerability, and inability to fit within the society. He made use of his poetry, which is full of references to natural landscapes, childhood memories, and mentions of death, to overcome these constraints and his prolonged pain that he experienced with heightened intensity. Through the psychoanalytic lens, each of these references reveals a covert tendency of escapism alongside some overt ones, as well as the reason behind using these references in particular. Thus, childhood memories are no longer perceived as an abstract thing, but as a haven that a person can retreat to when the situation around does not provide solace. Nature, on the other hand, has healing properties that can alleviate his suffering. Ultimately, death is not something to be feared, but rather a release from agony and distress.

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