

## JOHN CLARE: THE PEASANT AND LUNATIC POET

John Clare is “the quintessential Romantic poet,” according to William Howard writing in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*. With an admiration of nature and an understanding of the oral tradition, but with little formal education, Clare penned numerous poems and prose pieces, many of which were only published posthumously. His works gorgeously illuminate the natural world and rural life, and depict his love for his wife Patty and for his childhood sweetheart Mary Joyce. Though his first book, *Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery* (1820), was popular with readers and critics alike, Clare struggled professionally for much of his life. His work only became widely read some hundred years after his death.

Clare was born into a peasant family in the small English village of Helpston in 1793. Despite his disadvantaged background—both of his parents were virtually illiterate—Clare received some formal schooling as a youth and then he went to night school, studied informally with other boys in the area, and read in his spare time. During his school days Clare met fellow student Mary Joyce and embarked upon a romantic relationship with her. Although the two eventually separated and Clare married Patty Turner, Clare would devote much of his later poetry to Mary.

Although Clare had received some education, the work he did out of financial necessity consisted largely of manual labor such as gardening, ploughing, threshing, or lime-burning.. Clare was inspired to write his first poem, “*The Morning Walk*,” after reading James Thompson’s *Seasons*. As Clare began to write more, his parents unwittingly became his first critics. He soon accumulated a substantial poetry collection, which was published in 1820 by John Taylor (who also published the work of John Keats) as *Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery*.

*Rural Life* ranges over a variety of topics and themes, including nature, folk literature, social injustice, and the world of the mind and it includes a number of poetic forms, such as descriptive verse, elegies, sonnets, and comic poems. *Rural Life* was a success, selling three thousand copies and going through four editions within a year. It was generally well reviewed. Clare’s attempts at comedy, however, were considered by contemporary critics to be vulgar or objectionable. An example is Clare’s “*My Mary*,” a parody of William Cowper’s poem “Mary”:

The poem was eliminated from later editions of *Rural Life*—an incident that was representative of a problem that would continue to occur throughout Clare’s career.

The success of *Rural Life* brought Clare recognition. Clare soon published another collection, *The Village Minstrel, and Other Poems* (1821). Though *The Village Minstrel* includes a variety of poetic styles similar to those in *Rural Life*, the themes of the volume are more limited. Clare focuses on “the value of country sports and customs,” according to Howard, although other topics include the consequences of enclosing lands that were once commonly owned and the plight of the gypsies. In “*The Gipsy’s Camp*” Clare wrote: “My rambles led me to a gipsy’s camp, / Where the real effigy of midnight hags, / With tawny smoked flesh and tatter’d rags, / Uncouth-brimm’d hat, and weather-beaten cloak, / ‘Neath the wild shelter of a knotty oak, / Along the greensward uniformly pricks / Her pliant bending hazel’s arching sticks.”

Clare’s next major effort to be published was *The Shepherd’s Calendar* (1827). Though the poet derived the idea for the book from the work of Edmund Spenser, Howard noted that “his eventual treatment of Spenser’s idea goes beyond imitation to the creation of a new, contemporary version of pastoral, rooted in the soil of English country life.” In the first section of *The Shepherd’s Calendar* Clare devises a poem for each month of the year, offering a celebration of rural life with a shepherd figuring throughout. Other pieces include “*Poesy*” and “*The Dream*,” a darkly written description of a nightmare. The collection was praised by *Eclectic Review* editor Josiah Conder, however, who asserted that the book “exhibits very unequivocal signs of intellectual growth, an improved taste, and an enriched mind.”

Although Clare had to contend with physical and mental illness in the years following the publication of *The Shepherd’s Calendar*, he was able to recover sufficiently to produce *The Rural Muse*, which was published in 1835. *The Rural Muse* includes songs, sonnets, and autobiographical poems. Though Howard considered some of the pieces “disappointing,” he noted that others “demonstrate just how far Clare had progressed in his craft.” Howard praised the originality of “*Autumn*,” in which Clare describes the changing of the seasons.

*The Rural Muse* was the last major collection published in Clare’s lifetime. He continued to write, but his mental and physical health weakened during the late 1830s and his doctor

recommended that he recuperate in an asylum. In 1836 Clare was admitted to High Beech asylum, where he was allowed considerable freedom to write poetry and stroll the grounds. The poet missed his family, however, and soon became dissatisfied with this situation. In 1841 Clare walked away from the asylum and continued to walk until he reached his home four days later. Clare was admitted to Northampton Lunatic Asylum, where he was to spend the rest of his life five months after he left High Beech.

Clare's asylum poetry includes "*Don Juan*" and "*Child Harold*," which were derived from the work of Lord Byron. "*Don Juan*," written in what Howard termed "earthy" language, is a "rambling discourse on sexuality, morality, and politics." "*Child Harold*" concerns the character of poets and love, and much of the work addresses Mary Joyce, with Patty relegated to the status of "other" wife. Howard considered "*Child Harold*" to be "unmistakably Clare's most original work."

Many of Clare's other poems of this period are traditional love verses and songs written to various women, especially Mary Joyce. The poet still created original work, however. Howard cites "*A Favourite Place*" as one of Clare's "impressive array of original lyrics". One of Clare's letters, written in 1860, reads: "Dear Sir, I am in a Madhouse & quite forget your Name or who you are you must excuse me for I have nothing to communicate or tell of & why I am shut up I dont know I have nothing to say so I conclude yours respectfully John Clare."

After more than twenty years at Northampton, Clare died in 1864. New editions and previously unpublished collections of his work continued to be released after his death. The more recent editions of Clare's work, including Eric Robinson and Geoffrey Summerfield's editions of *The Later Poems of John Clare* and *The Shepherd's Calendar*, have reinstated Clare's idiosyncrasies in language, spelling, and punctuation, which were "corrected" by his editors in early versions.

Clare's work continues to attract readers, poets, and scholars. In the 20th century, poets especially rediscovered Clare: John Ashbery wrote both a poem to Clare, "For John Clare," and wrote about him in his book *Other Traditions* (2000). And scholars now recognize Clare as an important poet and prose writer. "As an observer of what it was like in England in the early nineteenth century, not only for the peasant but also from a peasant point of view, he is

irreplaceable,” declared Thornton. In Clare’s prose, Thornton concluded, “we... see reflected there in sharp clarity the very essence of a period, a place, a language, a culture, and a time.”