

Clare's Emotional Trajectory and Characterization in *The Nightingale*: A Literary Psychology Reading

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Abstract:

Film characters can externalize psychological conflict through dialogue, gesture, memory, and action, making cinema a productive object for literary-psychological analysis. This article examines Clare, the main character in Jennifer Kent's *The Nightingale*, by condensing and restructuring the evidence reported in the author's undergraduate thesis. The study aims to identify Clare's dominant emotional classifications and explain how characterization makes those emotions legible in the narrative. A descriptive qualitative design was applied to scenes, dialogue, facial expressions, and actions, with emotion categories derived from the David Krech framework used in the thesis and characterization examined through telling and showing. The itemized findings identify 18 emotional instances: guilt (1), hidden or repressed guilt (2), self-punishment (2), shame (1), sadness (4), hatred (5), and love (3). Hatred is the most frequent category, but the narrative does not present it in isolation; grief, attachment, guilt, and self-directed distress form a broader emotional trajectory that follows Clare's exposure to sexual and colonial violence and the murder of her family. Characterization is conveyed primarily through showing, especially through action, dialogue, bodily response, and repeated memories, while direct telling has a more limited role. The findings suggest that Clare's transformation is better understood as an emotionally layered response to violence than as a simple shift from a good to a bad personality. The study demonstrates how literary psychology can connect emotional classification with narrative characterization in film analysis.

Keywords: Characterization; emotion; literary psychology; *The Nightingale*; trauma

INTRODUCTION

Film is a narrative form in which characterization, conflict, dialogue, and image construct human experience. For literary psychology, film is useful because psychological states are rarely presented as labels; they become visible through choices, speech, bodily responses, memory, silence, and interaction. Research on emotion in narrative shows that characters' affective patterns shift across narrative time, so

emotion is most informative when read as a developing trajectory rather than as isolated categories (Hipson & Mohammad, 2021). In Indonesian literary studies, Krech-based classification remains in use for identifying guilt, self-punishment, shame, sadness, hatred, love, and related states in literary characters (Ali & Anas, 2024; Rosfi et al., 2022; Septiana et al., 2020).

Jennifer Kent's *The Nightingale* provides an especially demanding context for such

analysis. Set in colonial Van Diemen's Land, the film places Clare, an Irish convict woman, within overlapping structures of gendered, penal, and colonial violence. Scholarship on the film has emphasized that its violence is not simply an individual revenge mechanism but is embedded in wider histories of frontier conflict and colonial domination. Arrow & Findlay (2020) situate the film within debates about gender, race, and historical representation; Faulkner (2020) examines violence against children as part of its critique of colonialism; (Harman, 2020) connects its fictional violence with documented features of the Vandemonian past; and Findlay (2020) reads the Clare-Billy partnership within a longer representational history of convict-Aboriginal relations. These studies demonstrate that Clare's emotional responses cannot be detached from the violent social world that produces them.

The thesis underlying this article identifies seven emotion classifications alongside direct and indirect characterization. A journal article derived from the same research was later published by Putri et al. (2021), focusing mainly on Clare's emotion classifications. Accordingly, this adaptation does not claim a new corpus; it extends the analysis by integrating emotion distribution with characterization and recent scholarship on *The Nightingale*. The thesis also tends to equate the prevalence of hatred with a simple deterioration in Clare's personality. This risks flattening a trajectory in which hatred emerges after coercion, sexual violence, bereavement, and institutional dismissal, then coexists with guilt, love, and a desire to stop revenge. The question is therefore not only which emotions occur, but how characterization organizes them into a psychological trajectory.

This article restructures the thesis evidence around that problem. It retains the thesis's qualitative corpus and its operational use of Krech's emotion categories, while bringing the emotion data into dialogue with the telling-showing distinction used for characterization. The article also reads the findings against scholarship on *The Nightingale*'s colonial and gendered violence, without converting a literary analysis into a clinical diagnosis. This approach treats emotions as narrative evidence: sadness and love establish attachment and loss; hatred directs action toward the perpetrators; guilt and self-punishment complicate revenge; and indirect characterization allows the audience to infer psychological change from behavior rather than from authorial explanation.

Accordingly, the study has two objectives: first, to identify the distribution and narrative function of Clare's emotions as reported in the thesis; and second, to explain how direct and indirect characterization make those emotions visible. The contribution of this journal adaptation lies in integrating the two analytical strands that were largely separated in the thesis. Rather than describing Clare as simply changing from 'good' to 'bad,' the article argues that the film constructs a layered emotional arc shaped by attachment, trauma, grief, anger, retaliatory violence, guilt, and partial disengagement from revenge. This reframing offers a more defensible literary-psychological interpretation of character development and clarifies the relation between emotional classification and characterization technique.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a descriptive qualitative design and treats *The Nightingale* (Kent, 2018) as the primary narrative text. The unit of analysis is Clare's characterization as represented through dialogue, action, facial expression, memory, dreams, and responses to other characters. Following the procedure documented in the thesis, data were obtained through repeated viewing, observation of scenes and body movement, selection of relevant dialogue, reduction of non-relevant material, thematic display, and interpretive conclusion drawing. The emotional data were classified according to the seven operational categories used in the thesis: guilt concept, hidden or repressed guilt (termed 'penetrated guilt' in the thesis), self-punishment, shame, sadness, hatred, and love. Characterization was examined through the direct/telling and indirect/showing distinction adopted by the thesis, with showing understood as the disclosure of character through action and dialogue. The analysis in this article does not add new film scenes to the thesis dataset; instead, it reorganizes the reported evidence to examine how emotion and characterization interact. A data-consistency issue also required explicit treatment: the thesis contains different totals in one later summary paragraph, while the abstract and the itemized findings table agree on 18 emotion instances. For reproducibility, this

article follows the itemized table and thesis abstract because they provide the most complete category-by-category record: 1 guilt, 2 hidden guilt, 2 self-punishment, 1 shame, 4 sadness, 5 hatred, and 3 love. The earlier Klasikal article derived from the research reports four hatred instances rather than five (Putri et al., 2021); because the declared source of the present adaptation is the thesis, the discrepancy is flagged rather than silently harmonized. The characterization counts are discussed qualitatively because the thesis clearly presents five showing examples but does not provide a stable, internally consistent numerical total for both methods. The analysis remains interpretive and literary rather than clinical.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Distribution of Clare's Emotions

The itemized findings show that Clare's emotional characterization is dominated by hatred, followed by sadness and love. However, frequency should not be mistaken for psychological importance. The less frequent categories, especially guilt and self-punishment, become crucial because they disrupt a straightforward revenge narrative. They show that Clare does not move cleanly from victimization to retaliatory certainty; her actions generate new conflict within the self. Table 1 summarizes the emotion data reported in the thesis.

Table 1. Distribution of Emotion Categories in Clare's Characterization

Emotion category	Frequency	Percentage	Narrative function
Guilt concept	1	5.6%	Moral unease after retaliatory violence
Hidden/repressed guilt	2	11.1%	Concealed distress and unresolved experience
Self-punishment	2	11.1%	Self-directed distress after loss and violence
Shame	1	5.6%	Bodily vulnerability and exposure
Sadness	4	22.2%	Grief, bereavement, and attachment to family
Hatred	5	27.8%	Retaliatory drive toward colonial perpetrators

Love	3	16.7%	Attachment to child, husband, and later human connection
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From Grief to Hatred: Emotion as Narrative Movement

Sadness is anchored in the loss of Clare's husband and child and in reminders of that loss during the pursuit. The thesis records four sadness instances, including her response to the murders and later moments when objects or situations reactivate family memory. These scenes establish grief as the emotional ground from which the pursuit begins. Love, recorded three times in the itemized findings, is equally important because it explains what has been lost. The bedtime interaction with her child and her bond with Aidan provide the affective reference point against which subsequent violence is measured. In this sense, love and sadness are structurally connected: grief has narrative force because prior attachment has been made visible.

Hatred is the most frequent category, with five instances. It appears when Clare confronts the institutional refusal to help her, insists on pursuing Hawkins and his men, and commits retaliatory violence against one of the soldiers. Read only as a frequency count, hatred might suggest that revenge simply replaces Clare's earlier personality. A closer reading indicates something more complicated. The film's historical world is organized by coercion, racial hierarchy, sexual violence, and the unequal credibility granted to a convict woman. Scholarship on *The Nightingale* similarly emphasizes that individual brutality is embedded in the colonial order rather than presented as an isolated moral failure (Arrow & Findlay, 2020; Elder, 2020; Harman, 2020). Clare's hatred therefore functions as both a personal response to bereavement and an affective response to a structure in which formal redress is effectively unavailable to her.

The prominence of negative emotion is also consistent with broader research showing that character emotion can become increasingly

negative and volatile as narrative conflict intensifies (Hipson & Mohammad, 2021). This does not mean that the film can be reduced to a universal emotional formula. Rather, the finding supports the methodological point that repeated emotions should be interpreted across narrative time. In Clare's case, hatred rises after violence and institutional dismissal, reaches its most destructive form during revenge, and is later complicated by guilt, exhaustion, and her stated desire for the violence to stop. The category is therefore dynamic rather than a stable personality trait.

Guilt, Shame, and Self-Punishment as Complications of Revenge

The guilt-related categories are less frequent but analytically significant. The thesis identifies one explicit guilt instance, two instances of hidden or repressed guilt, and two instances of self-punishment. One guilt scene occurs in a dream after Clare has killed a soldier; the murdered figure returns as a frightening image, indicating that retaliation does not produce uncomplicated relief. The hidden-guilt category is associated with experiences Clare conceals from Aidan, while self-punishment is linked to episodes of self-directed danger following the deaths and her own violent acts. These findings show that revenge generates psychological residue. Clare is not represented as emotionally untouched by the violence she commits.

The single shame instance concerns bodily exposure during Clare's journey with Billy. Although numerically minor, it illustrates how the film uses the body as part of characterization. Shame is not narrated by an omniscient voice; it is inferred from Clare's immediate attempt to cover herself and Billy's response. This is precisely where the emotion analysis intersects with characterization technique. The emotion is readable because the film shows a bodily reaction. Similar contemporary studies using Krech-based

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categories treat emotional labels as interpretive outcomes of verbal and non-verbal evidence rather than as self-sufficient facts (Septiana et al., 2020; Rosfi et al., 2022; Ali & Anas, 2024). The Nightingale strengthens this point because many of Clare's most important emotional states are conveyed through performance, gesture, pacing, silence, and memory rather than through explicit psychological naming.

Characterization Through Telling and Showing

The thesis identifies both telling and showing, but the evidentiary weight lies strongly with showing. The telling discussion relies mainly on a name-based interpretation of 'Clare' as indicating positive qualities. Because the thesis does not provide an independently documented etymological source for that claim, the present adaptation treats it as a secondary observation rather than as central evidence. By contrast, the showing data are concrete and scene-based. Clare's determination to cross a dangerous river, persistence in rescuing her horse, confrontation with Hawkins, fear before the attack on her family, and emotional release near the end of the

film are all conveyed through actions, dialogue, facial expression, and spatial behavior.

This dominance of showing matters because it prevents the emotional categories from becoming detached labels. Clare is characterized as determined because she acts against danger; grieving because loss repeatedly interrupts her movement; hateful because she pursues and attacks those she holds responsible; guilty because violent memories return; and loving because attachment continues to organize her memories and decisions. In film, these dimensions are also multimodal. Visual performance, editing, sound, and physical proximity work with dialogue to make the character's state inferable. The audience is therefore not merely told that Clare has changed; it is made to witness a sequence of reactions through which change becomes plausible.

Representative scenes demonstrate how the two analytical strands can be integrated without reproducing the thesis's long dialogue transcripts.

Table 2. Representative Evidence Linking Emotion and Characterization

Approx. time	Evidence from thesis	Emotion/trait	Characterization mode
00:13:27	Clare comforts and narrates to her child before sleep.	Love; maternal attachment	Showing through dialogue and interaction
00:30:45	Clare responds to the murder of her husband and child.	Sadness; traumatic loss	Showing through action, expression, and cry
00:30:59-01:09:30	Clare pursues and violently attacks a soldier associated with the killings.	Hatred; revenge drive	Showing through action and confrontation
01:20:24	A murdered soldier returns in Clare's frightening dream.	Guilt	Showing through dream imagery and fear
01:22:04	Clare engages in self-endangering behavior after recalling the deaths and her own violence.	Self-punishment	Showing through physical action
Final movement	Clare confronts Hawkins verbally and later expresses grief rather than simply completing a revenge script.	Mixed hatred, sadness, exhaustion	Showing through dialogue, performance, and withdrawal

Colonial Violence and the Limits of a Simple Personality Reading

A professional reading should resist the thesis's most reductive formulation: that Clare begins as a good person, is

treated badly, and consequently becomes bad. That causal sequence captures the direction of the plot but not its moral or psychological complexity. The film's critical scholarship consistently positions Clare's story within colonial violence,

gendered domination, and contested historical memory. Arrow and Findlay (2020) describe the film as an intervention into historical representation; Harman (2020) identifies parallels between the film's violence and the Vandemonian past; Faulkner (2020) reads violence against children as part of a critique of colonial power; and Findlay (2020) shows that the relationship between Clare and Billy complicates older screen traditions of convict-Aboriginal partnership. These contexts make Clare's emotions socially situated rather than purely individual.

The thesis data support this reframing. Hatred is the largest category, but the same character also displays love, sadness, guilt, shame, and self-punishment. The coexistence of these categories means that her development is internally contradictory. She wants retribution yet is disturbed by what revenge makes possible; she carries love for the dead while being pulled toward destructive action; and she moves through a colonial landscape alongside Billy, whose own losses challenge her initial prejudices. The emotional arc therefore works through accumulation and collision rather than a binary moral conversion. This is also why indirect characterization is central: the film permits the audience to observe contradiction without resolving it into a single psychological adjective.

The result is a character whose emotional trajectory contributes to the film's larger ethical question about violence. Elder (2020) notes that critical reception of *The Nightingale* has been shaped by the problem of how colonial violence is represented, while Faulkner (2020) and Harman (2020) demonstrate that the film's brutality carries historical and political meaning beyond individual

victimhood. In this context, Clare's hatred is narratively understandable but not celebrated as a complete solution. Guilt and self-punishment mark the costs of retaliatory violence, and the final movement away from a simple revenge endpoint prevents hatred from becoming the only interpretive key. The literary-psychological value of the character lies precisely in this instability.

CONCLUSION

This article reorganizes the thesis findings into an integrated account of emotion and characterization. Using the itemized thesis record, Clare displays 18 emotional instances across seven categories: guilt (1), hidden or repressed guilt (2), self-punishment (2), shame (1), sadness (4), hatred (5), and love (3). Hatred is the most frequent emotion, but frequency alone does not define Clare's personality. Love establishes attachment, sadness records bereavement, hatred drives the pursuit of the perpetrators, and guilt and self-punishment complicate the apparent certainty of revenge. The character is presented mainly through showing: dialogue, action, facial expression, dream imagery, bodily response, and interaction allow the audience to infer psychological states. Direct telling has a smaller and less securely evidenced role in the thesis. Read within the film's colonial and gendered context, Clare's development is therefore better described as a layered emotional trajectory produced by violence, loss, retaliation, and moral conflict than as a simple transformation from good to bad. Future research should compare Clare's emotional arc with

Billy's, examine the film's use of sound and song without reducing them to plot summary, or combine close reading with systematic scene coding to strengthen reliability. Researchers should also clearly document coding rules and resolve category-count inconsistencies before publication so that literary-psychological interpretation remains transparent and reproducible.

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