

Language, cognition, and poetics of solitude in Dylan Thomas

Jaya Shrivastava

National Institute of Technology Srinagar, India

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Abstract

This paper presents a stylistic and cognitive-poetic analysis of Dylan Thomas's poem "Ears in the Turrets Hear", with particular attention to how linguistic form and literary imagination converge to represent artistic isolation and existential dilemma. The central aim is to investigate how cohesion, repetition, and parallelism interact with embodied metaphors and conceptual mappings to dramatize the poet's oscillation between solitude and social contact. Drawing on stylistics and cognitive poetics—especially Text World Theory and Conceptual Metaphor Theory—the paper shows how linguistic patterning functions as both a textual and cognitive network, foregrounding recursive thought, hesitation, and the gradual negotiation of artistic identity.

Keywords: stylistics, cognitive poetics, Dylan Thomas, isolation, metaphor

Introduction

The poem "*Ears in the Turrets Hear*", by Welsh poet and writer, Dylan Thomas, is built on a self-questioning theme. The poet is deeply concerned with the problem of the isolation of the individual, and in particular the isolation of the artist. The poem is permeated by an intense sense of fear—fear of contact, fear of contamination, and fear of loss of artistic integrity. It presents a dramatic situation in which the poet is torn between the desire for complete isolation and the equally compelling need for communication with others. This tension runs through the entire poem and determines its structure as well as its imagery, producing an impression of solitude and inwardness. What calls for closer examination, however, is how this psychological conflict is articulated through the poem's linguistic and stylistic organization. This paper therefore examines the interaction between linguistic texture and psychological experience in the poem, asking how stylistic patterning functions as a means of representing mental states and the creative struggle between withdrawal and expression.

Methodology

The analysis of Dylan Thomas's "*Ears in the Turrets Hear*" adopts a dual framework combining stylistic analysis and cognitive poetics to examine how linguistic form and literary imagination converge to represent artistic isolation and existential dilemma. Classical stylistics accounts for the poem's structural and semantic organization, while cognitive poetics extends this analysis to the mental

processes through which meaning is constructed. By situating linguistic choices within broader cognitive processes—such as perception, conceptualization, and embodied simulation—the study draws on Text World Theory (Werth 1999; Gavins 2007), Cognitive Grammar (Langacker 2008), and Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff and Johnson 1980) to read the poem as a dramatization of the mind's negotiation between containment and permeability.

Stylistic analysis

The poem's language itself becomes a means of expressing the poet's psychological conflict. The recurrent use of repetition, parallelism, and structural symmetry reflects the poet's hesitation and uncertainty. The poem is characterised by cohesion, achieved through the repetition of words, phrases, and syntactic patterns. These cohesive devices bind the poem together and contribute to the development of its central themes. Both lexical and semantic cohesion are prominently employed. Lexical cohesion includes repetition of "ears" and "hear" (lines 1, 17); "hands" (lines 2, 9, 25, 26, 32); "eyes" and "see" (lines 3, 19). Semantic cohesion occurs in parts of body (flesh, hair, bone, ears, hands, eyes, fingers), architectural structures (turrets, gables, doors, white house), geographical features (island, sea, coast, land, hills, bay, sand, slates), classical elements (land, wind, fire, sea, rain), lexical items pertaining to the sea (island, sea, coast, ships, sailor, anchor, bay), and lexical items pertaining to isolation (alone, unseen, beyond, bound, out of). Verbs also show semantic cohesion: perception (hear, see), motion (grumble, flying, pass, run, beats), static (stay, hold, bound, lies), change (unbolt, die, disturbs, anchor, welcome). Repetition, parallelism, and semantic oppositions (locks vs. unbolt; stay vs. run; land vs. sea; poison vs. grapes) reinforce cohesion.

The poet is acutely self-conscious of his isolated existence within the turreted house, fully aware of both sensory perception and action. This awareness is articulated through material processes such as "Hands grumble on the door" and "The fingers at the locks," alongside mental processes like "Ears in the turrets hear" and "Eyes in the gables see." Although all the senses are oriented toward unlocking the door, fear and indecision leave the action incomplete, crystallized in the question "shall I unbolt or stay alone." Loneliness appears necessary to artistic creation, yet permanent isolation is terrifying. Opening the door risks individuality while promising recognition; remaining closed preserves autonomy but forecloses visibility. Lexical choices such as alone and unseen reinforce the "white house" as a guarded private space, while "stranger-eyes," intensified in line 7, "Unseen by stranger-eyes," signals anxiety about the unfamiliar. The question "Hands, hold you poison or grapes?" further encodes uncertainty, with the conjunction or lexically realizing the dilemma. By projecting sensory organs as agents, the poem animates the "white house," merging body and dwelling into a single sentient, islanded entity.

The poet's and island's isolation is explicit. The preposition 'beyond' shows the island is far from the mainland, bounded by sea and coast. The metaphorical expressions "a thin sea of flesh" and "a bone coast" identify the island with the poet. "The land lies out of sound / And the hills out of mind" implies all landscapes lie beyond perception and comprehension. His body acts as both barrier and means to access the world. The poet fears human reaction: will he receive poison or grapes? Lines "No bird or flying fish / Disturbs this island's rest" foreground the island as a sentient being undisturbed by creatures. Transferred epithet in "flying fish" balances swiftness; birds symbolize soaring freedom.

The poet's anxiety and restlessness grow. He seems to stand on the shore of his island. "Ears in this island hear" and "Eyes in this island see" show nearness. The simile "the wind pass like a fire" shows intensity of anxiety. Ships from the mainland arrive; the poet asks whether to run to the ships or stay. Lines "Shall I run to the ships / With the wind in my hair" reveal hidden desire to meet people despite valuing seclusion. He fears societal judgment and injury, questioning whether to live aloof or engage.

Repetition of lines "Hands grumble on the door" and "Ships anchor off the bay" shows ongoing processes and anxiety. Short sentence repetition conveys fear and indecision. Heavy rain suggests sailors seek refuge, and the poet faces moral responsibility to welcome them. Two lines contemplating letting in visitors show growing importance of this option, reinforced by foregrounded last lines. The last two lines shift focus to visitors: "Hands of the stranger and holds of the ships / Hold you poison or grapes?" The poet now considers what his work offers society. The near homophonic pun in "holds" and "hold" suggests multiple meanings. His dilemma remains unresolved, but the last lines show the poet's change of mind: he is no longer alone; his privacy has been intruded, and his work is open to judgment as poison or grapes.

Phonological cohesion is achieved through alliteration, assonance, and internal rhyme creating a sonic texture that parallels the thematic rhythm of hesitation and recurrence. The interplay of soft fricatives ("flesh," "flying fish") and plosive consonants ("bones," "bay," "beats") intensifies the sensory experience of the poem. These sound patterns enact the pulse of cognitive oscillation, as if the phonetic fabric itself embodies the tension between resistance and release.

Cognitive-poetic interpretation

From a cognitive-poetic standpoint, "Ears in the Turrets Hear" stages the mind's struggle between self-preservation and the desire for connection. Recurrent spatial metaphors—house, island, door, sea, ships—function as conceptual containers that map psychological boundaries. Within the mappings SELF IS ISLAND and MIND IS HOUSE, the "white house" signifies both purity and confinement, while the "door" marks the threshold between solitude and contact. The island "bound by a thin sea of flesh / and a bone coast" exemplifies

embodied metaphor, fusing body and landscape to show the self as a cognitive boundary.

In Text World Theory terms, the poem constructs nested worlds: the inner “white house,” the island, and the external world of ships and strangers. Deictic “this” anchors consciousness within shifting mental spaces, while rhetorical questions signal recursive decision-making. Conceptual Metaphor Theory further reveals CONTACT IS RISK and COMMUNICATION IS INGESTION, as “poison or grapes” frames artistic exposure as both nourishing and destructive. Thomas thus transforms cognitive hesitation into poetic form.

Conclusion

Patterns of cohesion, parallelism, and foregrounding illuminate how the poem encodes isolation not merely as theme but as linguistic structure. The image of the “white house” figures the body as a bone-bound island—at once a site of enclosure and a medium of perception—through which experience is filtered and negotiated. This enclosure, however, is not absolute: the tentative admission of the reader signals a fragile opening toward communication. Read through a stylistic and cognitive-poetic lens, Thomas’s language functions as both textual fabric and cognitive network, making perceptible the processes by which consciousness organizes itself. The poem’s poetics of solitude thus articulates not simple withdrawal, but the ongoing cognitive labour of sustaining selfhood at the threshold between isolation and relation.

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