RESEARCH ARTICLE

A Stylistic Analysis of Peter McDonald's "Solitude"

Ammar Lateef awad *

Al-Muthanna University , College of Education for Humanities , English Department , Iraq

ABSTRACT

This study presents a stylistic analysis of Peter McDonald's "Solitude", a poem that has attracted attention for its layered description of isolation and human experience and named "poem of the week" by *The Guardian* on Sep. 1, 2025. Drawing on Leech and Short's (2007) framework as an analytical tool, the study examines the poem at graphological, phonological, grammatical, lexical, and semantic levels to show how sound patterns, line arrangement, lexical choices, and structural choices contribute to shape the overall meaning of the poem. The study reveals that McDonald uses some stylistic tools such as; alliteration, assonance, and consonance to foreground tension between despair and beauty, while punctuation and visual layout are used to show the fragmented mood of solitude. By situating "Solitude" in both fields, linguistics and literature , this study shows how stylistic analysis provides a deeper understanding of contemporary poetic texts and contributes to uncovering their aesthetic beauty.

Keywords: **Stylistics, Solitude, McDonald, Phonology, Semantics.**

مقالة بحثية

تحليل اسلوبي لقصيدة العزلة لبيتر مكدونالد

عمار لطيف عواد *

جامعة المثنى، كلية التربية للعلوم الإنسانية ، قسم اللغة الإنكليزية ، العراق

الملخص:

قدمت هذه الدراسة تحليل اسلوبي لقصيدة (العزلة) لبيتر مكدونالد وهي القصيدة التي نالت اهتمام واسع لما تضمنته من من وصف عميق ودقيق للعزلة والتجربة البشرية. كما وأطلق عليها لقب (قصيدة الاسبوع) بتاريخ 2025, ايلول, 1 من قبل صحيفة الغارديان. بالاعتماد على نموذج ليج وشورت (2007) كأداة تحليل على المستويات الكتابية والصوتية والنحوية والدلالية، بينت الدراسة كيفية تأثير الانماط الصوتية وترتيب السطور والاختيارات التركيبية في صياغة المعنى. افضت هذه الدراسة الى ان استخدام مكدونالد لبعض الوسائل الاسلوبية مثل الجناس والتجانس الصوتي للأصوات الساكنة والصامتة يشير الى النزاع ما بين الأسى والجمال. اما استخدامه لعلامات التنقيط واهتمامه بالشكل العام للنص يشير الى بعد اخر الا وهو وصف لحالة العزلة التي تعتبر فحوى القصيدة العام. بالنظر للقصيدة من منظور لغوي وبالرغم من كونها نص ادبي، بينت الدراسة كيف من الممكن ان يساهم علم الاساليب بتقديم فهم عميق للنصوص الشعرية وتبيان معانيها الجمالية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: علم الاساليب، العزلة، مكدونالد، علم الصوت، علم الدلالة.

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* Corresponding author.
E-mail addresses: amar.lateef@gmail.com **(A. L. Awad)**.
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1.Introduction

The ability of the renowned modern poet and critic Peter McDonald to blend lyrical nuance with intellectual rigor has frequently been commended. This balance is best shown by his poem Solitude, which *The Guardian* selected as Poem of the Week and which offers readers a contemplation of loneliness, memory, and the intricacies of human existence. The poem evokes both comfort and unease by establishing a space where language and silence blend together through its skillfully chosen imagery, sound patterns, and tone. McDonald's work encourages stylistic analysis that reveals the interplay between form and meaning as a contemporary poet who is profoundly rooted in tradition. By analyzing Solitude through stylistic elements like diction, imagery, rhythm, and symbolism, we can better appreciate the poem's aesthetic appeal while also comprehending its philosophical undertones. This study aims to investigate how McDonald's language choices influence the reader's sense of isolation, turning a private subject into a universal observation.

1. Style and Stylistics

Style may refer to some or all of the language habits shared by a group of people at one time, or over a period of time, as when we talk about the style of Augustan poets, the style of Old English 'heroic' poetry, the style in which civil service forms are written, or styles of public-speaking. [1]

Stylistics is defined as the linguistic appreciation of the literary language (styles) in which meaning is created [2] . To this end, stylisticians use models from the linguistic theories , as their analytical tools in order to describe and explain how and why meaning can be extracted from the words on the page. In poetic texts , the stylistic analysis focuses on the phonological, lexical, grammatical, semantic, and pragmatic levels of the poem, while in prosaic texts, the stylistic analysis depends on a model (from a linguistic theory) that has some sort of harmony with the text. McDonald's Solitude is a poetic text so it is analyzed according to the stylistic levels. It is a new poem which was named the poem of the week by *The Guardian* on (1 Sep. 2025).

2. Levels of Stylistic Analysis

To analyse stylistically, the analyst should decide at first the type of text that is wanted to be analyzed; is it a poetic text or a prosaic one ? In poetry, the text is analyzed according to its main levels which are:

3.1- Graphological Level:

It is the study of handwriting styles. For example, as a way of learning more about somebody's character through his writing: contracted forms, commas, stops, and question marks [7] .

3.2 Phonological Level:

It is the study of the sounds system of a language and also describes formal rules of pronunciation. The phonological analysis focuses on analyzing sound patterns, utterance of different words and forming systemic use of sound in language in order to know the meaning, ideas, focus and idiosyncratic behaviors in a text. The phonological devices are alliteration, repetition, consonance, assonance [1] .

3.3 Grammatical level:

Grammatical level includes grammar, parts of speech, clauses, and phrases used in writing. It helps us to find out subtleties of time, place, and about what is done, what is going to be and what was in the past. Through grammatical analysis of text we can know the author's intended meanings, foreshadowing meanings and events [2] **3.4 Lexical Level:**

The lexical level refers to the total amount of vocabulary items and usages of words in a piece of text. Lexical level includes the study of individual words and idioms in different linguistics contexts. It involves the study of semantics, word formation, and morphology Leech (1969).

3.5 Semantic Level:

Semantics is the study of meanings in a language. Meanings are judged through the analysis of the context, and social and individual point of view. Pragmatics is also a branch of semantics which allows us to find out the hidden meanings to be judged by the reader through the environment created by the poet in a poem [7].

3.6 Pragmatic Level:

Pragmatics is the study of invisible meaning in a piece of text which is spoken or written. It discusses how we recognize the invisible meanings in a text. It is the context based study including linguistic context, thematic context, preexisting knowledge, and the physical context of the text [9]

Another type of stylistic analysis is the analysis of prosaic texts (novels, short stories and drama). The prose is not analyzed randomly; an analyst does not take sentences from the text haphazardly and analyse them . Instead, he divides the text into its phases (exposition, completion, ante-climax, climax, anti-climax, and conclusion). These phases represent developing or turning points in the

literary text where actions go either up or down. Then, he adopts a model that is taken from a linguistic theory and has homogeneity with the text to analyse it depending on the features of that model.

Literature Review

Peter McDonald is suited within a broader cohort of "New Voices" emerging in Northern Irish poetry. This chapter maps a shift from traditional notions of rootedness toward adeterritorialized poetics, highlighting displacement, mobility, and cultural

permeability as central to McDonald's poetic identity. McDonald's work is interpreted as emblematic of how home and identity become fluid constructs in light of globalization and diaspora [2].

In her review of Torchlight, Brearton highlights Peter McDonald's technical mastery and restraint as hallmarks of his poetic style. She notes how poems such as "Reversing Around a Corner"—with its extended single sentence and tight rhyme structure—transform everyday moments into elegant meditations on choice and instinct, exemplifying McDonald's "superb technique."The review also emphasizes Torchlight's thematic range: childhood memories in Northern Ireland during the Troubles, musical nostalgia, and mythic depth through a new translation of the Homeric Hymn to Demeter—a central piece that connects personal recollection with classical resonance, particularly around themes of loss, recovery, and revelation. This underscores McDonald's lyric agility, which moves seamlessly between historical memory and mythic narrative[4].

A detailed close reading of *Solitude* from McDonald's *One Little Room* is offered, interpreting how the poem transforms Saint-John Perse's mythic imagery into a stark, modern tableau. The stranded gannet in a car park becomes a powerful metaphor for fragility, environmental decay, and existential alienation. Rumens underscores how McDonald's paraphrase intensifies the original's ambition into a sense of irreversible loss and impending extinction, portrayed through vivid imagery like shredded palm-tree debris, a distorted bird, and a solitary blue egg [3].

3. Methodology

The current study follows a qualitative stylistic analysis to analyse the poem *Solitude* written by Peter McDonald. It aims at analyzing the stylistic levels including; Graphological, Phonological, Lexical, Semantic, Grammatical, and Pragmatic levels to show how meaning can be created by the choice of language and creates an effect.

4.1 Research Design

Rather than testing a hypothesis numerically, the research adopts a descriptive and interpretive design; it describes the linguistic features of the poem and interpreting them.Such design is appropriate for stylistic analysis as it provides an in-depth exploration to the literary language.

4.2 Data Collection

The full text of the poem is the primary data of this study. It is published by *The Guardian* and named as the poem of the week on (1 Sep. 2025). No other text is added to the analysis and the poem is analyzed in its original form. To provide a theoretical framework for the analysis the researcher followed the framework of [6]

4.3 Analytical Framework

The analysis is carried out according to the stylistic levels:

1. Graphological Level
2. Phonological Level
3. Grammatical level
4. Lexical Level
5. Semantic Level
6. Pragmatic Level

4.4 Justification of the Method

Stylistic analysis is followed because it provides a detailed observation of the linguistic choices. Unlike general interpretation and literary criticism, stylistic analysis enables researchers to make a systematic and scientific way to study poetic texts.

4.5 Reliability and validity

Reliability is enhanced by following the same framework across all levels of analysis and validity is ensured by depending on the framework of [5] .

4.6 Ethical Consideratons

This study analyses a published text and no human participants are involved in data collection process. Secondary sources are not used in this study and the references are acknowledged according to the APA 7th edition referencing guideline.

4. Data Analysis

To show how linguistic choices shape meaning in McDonald's "Solitude", this section applies all the stylistic levels to the poem. This process enables the researcher to uncover the implied meaning in the text.

5.1 Graphological Level

5.1.1 Stanza Division

The poem is divided into five stanzas which

are irregular in length (4 lines, 4 lines, two lines, four lines, 2 lines). This irregularity mirrors the isolated sea bird from its natural environment. The subject matter in this case is a fragmented object.

The short stanzas (third and fifth stanzas) are used here to create a rhythmical and visual pauses that refer to a case of incompleteness.

5.1.2 line lengths

The line lengths of the poem vary from very short ones as *"The Gannet eyes"* to longer ones and flowing sentences as in *"shadows that latch the streets, and windows open*". This diversity in lines shows a case of contrast and instability of situation; a majestic sea bird that used to fly freely, is forced to stay in a car park.

5.1.3 Punctuation

-Commas dominate the poem except the last stanza to show layering images and hesitation.

-A dash is used at the end of the third line of the first stanza "*and its head too heavy for the neck to bear—*" to show a kind of shock; bird's neck cannot bear its head.

- A semicolon in the fourth stanza creates a heavy pause "*close, damp, and heavy now with a storm coming;*" . It refers to the heaviness of the storm.

5.1.4 Capitalization

The use of formal capitalization all over the poem shows a contrast as the poem is about a case on instability and chaos, yet it is written in a formal manner.

5.2 Phonological Level

5.2.1 Alliteration

The poem makes subtle use of sound patterns to reinforce mood and imagery. Repetition of consonants heightens intensity:

"**b**eautiful **b**ird, **b**eautiful ugly **b**ird."

the /b/ sound mimics heaviness and bluntness, echoing the awkwardness of the stranded gannet.

"**b**in-men / re**dd**ing up shre**dd**ed **p**ieces of **p**alm-trees" repeated /b/ and /p/ create a harsh, broken rhythm, reflecting destruction.

5.2.2 Assonance

Long vowels are used to slow down rhythm:

"Th**e** gann**e**t I found strand**e**d in **a** c**a**r-p**a**rk,
s**o**mething **a**ll wr**o**ng with its w**i**ngs,
and its h**ea**d too h**ea**vy for the neck to b**ea**r—
b**ea**utiful bird, b**ea**utiful **u**gly bird."

"Not the str**ee**t-part**ie**s d**a**y and n**i**ght tom**o**rr**o**w,
but the m**o**rn**i**ng **a**ft**e**r that, and the b**i**n-m**e**n
redding up shr**e**dd**e**d p**ie**c**e**s of palm-tr**ee**s
like the d**é**br**i**s of **e**norm**ou**s w**i**ngs."

"The gann**e**t's **e**y**e**s,
the gann**e**t's b**i**g cl**o**wn-f**a**c**e**."“A t**ou**ch of y**e**ll**o**w, and the t**o**wn in y**e**ll**o**w l**i**ght,cl**o**s**e**, d**a**mp, and h**ea**vy n**o**w with **a** st**o**rm c**o**m**i**ng;
sh**a**d**o**ws that l**a**tch the str**ee**ts, and w**i**nd**o**ws
openwh**e**re dress**e**s fl**a**p and h**a**ng, and n**e**v**e**r dr**y**."A gr**ea**t s**ea**-g**o**ing b**i**rd's
s**i**ngl**e** bl**u**e **e**gg.

McDonald's use assonance for more than just aesthetic purposes. While shorter vowels provide abruptness and fragmentation, long vowels express weight, distance, or gravitas. Sound symbolism functions in this way. Together, they capture the central paradox of the poem: a bird of flight that becomes grounded, a symbol of beauty amid devastation.

5.2.3Consonance

The guttural, nearly awkward effect of repeated harsh consonants (/k/, /g/) in phrases like "car-park," "wings," and "big clown-face" emphasizes the bird's struggle.

5.3 Grammatical Level

5.3.1 Sentence Types

Declarative Sentences dominate the poem:

"Th**e** gann**e**t I found strand**e**d in **a** c**a**r-p**a**rk"

"A great sea-going bird's"

The poet gives a descriptive and observational quality to the text by using declarative sentences.

The tone of the poem is contemplative rather than interactive because the poem includes no imperatives or interrogatives.

5.3.2 sentence complexity

Sentences vary from fragments to complex.

Fragmentary: "The gannet's eyes, the gannet's big cloun-face." Lacks a finite verb phrase to make a dramatic focus.

Complex:"A t**ou**ch of y**e**ll**o**w, and the t**o**wn iny**e**ll**o**w l**i**ght,cl**o**s**e**, d**a**mp, and h**ea**vy n**o**w with **a** st**o**rm c**o**m**i**ng"

5.3.3 Noun Phrases

Noun phrases are heavily modified in the poem. These phrases foreground metaphorical weight and imagery.

"shr**e**dd**e**d p**ie**c**e**s of palm-tr**ee**s"

“the debris of enormous wings”
“a great sea-going bird’s single blue egg”

5.3.4 Verb Phrases

The use of verb phrases in the poem is to modify heaviness rather than actions

“I found stranded”
“sh**a**d**o**ws that l**a**tch the str**ee**ts”

5.4 Lexical Level

5.4.1 lexical Choice and Register

The poem juxtaposes everyday lexis such as: car park, dresses, bin, and men with poetic items such as: débris, enormous, sea-going . This lexical variation creates what Leech and Short (2007) call a “clash of registers”. It means that poet uses ordinary lexis to refer to the urban world while poetic ones to show the nature of the bird.

5.4.2 Repetition

The “gannet” is repeated four times to suggest that the bird is the central item in the poem and evaluated highly by the poet. It is referred to as “bird” which is repeated also multiple times. “beautiful” is repeated and contradicted with “ugly”. Such reiteration functions as what Leech (1969) identifies as “foregrounding through parallelism” making these expressions salient to the reader .

5.4.3 Adjectival Usage

The adjectives in the poem are not descriptive; they are evaluative: beautiful, ugly, enormous, heavy, damp, yellow. The evaluative nature of the adjectives show some sort of admiration and contributes to the emotive colour of the poem. They shape readers’ perception of the bird and its environment.

5.5 Semantic Level

5.5.1 Denotation and Connotation

The poem is about a seabird “gannet” which is displaced from its natural environment.

-Denotative Meaning: The gannet is referred to by physical terms: its wings, eyes, neck, and head.

-Connotative Meaning: The bird is a symbolic presence; its “beautiful ugliness” connotes fragility, suffering or perhaps human vulnerability.

The clash between the physical description of the seabird and its symbolic association creates a semantic tension.

5.5.2 Semantic Fields

-Nature Imagery/ Gannet, Head, neck, bird eyes, egg, and sea-going

-Urban setting / Windows, bin-men, car-park, and palm trees.

-Weather/ Atmosphere/: Yellow light, storm, shadows

The clash between fields suggests that the nature of the bird is misplaced in the hostile urban atmosphere.

5.5.3Figurative Language and Imagery

- **Metaphor:** “shredded pieces of palm-trees like the débris of enormous wings.” equates urban litter with natural destruction. It refers to the destruction of the natural world.
- **Oxymoron:** “beautiful ugly bird” juxtaposes contradictory features to foreground the beauty in suffering.

Symbolism: “single blue egg” is a concentrated symbol of renewable life and fragility.

5.5.4 Sense relations (Hyponymy, Antonymy, and Semantic Contrast)

- **Hyponymy:** is viewed in the chain from (bird- Gannet- wings- neck- egg), moving from general to specific deepening of emotional response.
- **Antonymy:** (ugly/ beautiful), (life/ Debris)

-Semantic Parallelism: the repetition of the “gannet” foregrounds its centrality and forcing the reader to encounter the bird with new meaning each time.

5.5.5 Semantic Deviation

The gannet appears in an unnatural context. It is placed in a car-park , out of the place where it is meant to be. This contrast in contexts creates a semantic deviation which makes the imagery striking and foregrounded.

5. Conclusion

The present analysis of “Solitude” for Peter McDonald, has demonstrated how the poem’s meaning is inseparable from its language, depending on Leech and Short’s (2007) stylistic framework. On the Graphological level, the study found out that variations in line lengths and stanzas division are stylistic tools used to create visual pauses that refer to incompleteness, while formal capitalization and commas refer to the contradiction in the poem; the poem is about humans’ loss which is represented by the isolated bird, yet it is written in a formal manner.

These graphological features - irregular stanzas division, different lengths of lines, fragmented punctuation- visually reflect the distributed uneasy theme of majestic seabird which is reduced to helplessness in an urban setting. Shifting from long stanzas (descriptive) to short ones (isolation) reflects the tension between emptiness and clutter, silence and storm.

On the phonological level, McDonald's use of alliteration, assonance, and broken rhythm creates a harsh, disjointed soundscape that reflects the gannet's strange environment and the poem's unsettling tone.

On the grammatical level, the poem shows fragmentary structures with heavily modified and complex noun phrases, at the grammatical level to reflect the tension between descriptive richness and rupture. Ellipsis, and parallelism are used in the poem to magnify the physical imbalance of the stranded bird and the storm.

On the lexical level, the poet uses lexis from different semantic fields; he mixes between everyday lexis and poetic ones to show the conflict between the true nature of the bird and its current situation. Different settings, evaluative adjectives, and repetition of vocabularies are used to highlight the valuable nature of the bird which refers to the nature of the modern man.

In conclusion, from the perspective of McDonald, the fun is nearly over for earth's conquerors. "Not the street-parties day and night tomorrow / But the morning after that." We can conclude that "the morning after" is now, or a period not far into the future, and it represents some wretched aftermath. There has been serious destruction – of "palm-trees" and "enormous wings" – for the "bin-men" to start "redding" up. The Scottish verb here, means "to make tidy", but, as sound-association, it provokes the dropping of blood from the maimed wings. The morning light is lurid, the air is "heavy" and threatening. The sight of the deformed gannet, a bird which has either suffered horrible injuries or represents some equally horrible genetic mutation, changes before our eyes, from "beautiful bird" to "beautiful ugly bird". It may, symbolize human forms of alienation.

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