The Academic
International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research

An Online Peer Reviewed / Refereed Journal
Volume 3 | Issue 5 | May 2025
ISSN: 2583-973X (Online)
Website: www.theacademic.in

The Thinking Prince: Hamlet and the Pre-Modern Stream of Thought.

Ligy Joseph

Post Graduate Student
Post Graduate Department of English St.Mary's College Manarcadu
srjeevathereselsc@gmail.com

ARTICLE DETAILS

Research Paper

Accepted: 26-05-2025

Published: 10-06-2025

Keywords:
Hamlet, stream of consciousness, modernism

ABSTRACT

This project explores William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as a literary precursor to the modernist stream of consciousness technique. Through an in-depth analysis of Hamlet's soliloquies, the study reveals how Shakespeare portrays the character's inner world with remarkable psychological realism. Hamlet's speech is marked by non-linear reasoning, emotional fragmentation, and philosophical introspection—elements that align closely with the narrative style later formalized by authors such as James Joyce and Virginia Woolf. By drawing comparisons between *Hamlet*, *Ulysses*, and *Mrs. Dalloway*, this paper argues that Hamlet's introspective monologues function as an early form of interior narrative, positioning the play as a foundational text in the evolution of literary consciousness. The findings highlight how *Hamlet* anticipates key features of stream of consciousness, making the character not only a Renaissance figure but also a prototype of the modern psychological self.

DOI : https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15651912

Introduction

William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is renowned not only for its complex plot and memorable characters but also for its powerful use of soliloquies. These speeches, delivered by Hamlet alone on stage, allow the audience intimate access to his internal thoughts and emotional struggles. Through seven major soliloquies, Shakespeare charts Hamlet's psychological development and uses the form to explore

themes such as revenge, mortality, madness, and indecision. Hamlet's soliloquies distinguish him from other Shakespearean protagonists by offering a portrait of a man engaged in profound self-reflection and existential questioning. Among his many plays, *Hamlet* stands out for the depth, frequency, and psychological realism of its soliloquies. Unlike soliloquies in other Shakespearean works, Hamlet's monologues are distinguished by their introspection, philosophical depth, and function as a narrative and psychological tool. These unique qualities contribute to the play's enduring complexity and emotional power.

Stream of consciousness remains one of the most significant innovations in literary history. The literary technique known as **stream of consciousness** revolutionized modern narrative by giving readers direct access to a character's inner thoughts, feelings, and perceptions. Coined in the late 19th century and developed prominently during the Modernist era, this method aims to represent the continuous, often chaotic flow of a character's mental activity. Unlike traditional narration, which is ordered and linear, stream of consciousness abandons grammatical conventions and chronological structure to capture the fragmented and nonlinear nature of human thought. This narrative device is most famously used by writers such as Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, and William Faulkner.

The term "stream of consciousness" was first introduced by psychologist William James in *The Principles of Psychology* (1890), where he described consciousness as "a river or a stream… changing yet continuous" (James 239). Literary modernists adapted this psychological insight into narrative form. The goal was not to explain a character's thoughts, but to replicate their mental experience as it unfolds. This style often omits punctuation, uses free association, and shifts rapidly in time and focus to mimic the inner workings of the mind. It offers a window into the depths of human thought and emotion, stripping away narrative conventions to capture the mind in motion. Through this technique, writers like Joyce, Woolf, and Faulkner transformed the novel into a vessel for psychological realism, blurring the boundary between reader and character in a powerful, intimate way.

Though the literary technique of stream of consciousness is most often associated with modernist writers like James Joyce and Virginia Woolf, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1603) anticipates this style through the prince's soliloquies. Stream of consciousness, as defined by William James, is the flow of thoughts and feelings in the conscious mind—unstructured, continuous, and often fragmented (James 239). In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare uses soliloquy not merely as a tool for exposition or dramatic monologue, but as a window into Hamlet's restless, looping, and self-questioning mind. These soliloquies represent some of

the earliest dramatic explorations of consciousness, and they share key features with modern stream of consciousness writing: interior monologue, associative logic, and temporal fluidity.

William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is often regarded as one of the earliest explorations of human psychology in literature. Through Hamlet's soliloquies, Shakespeare offers readers and audiences an intimate look into the character's mind—one that is complex, nonlinear, and emotionally fragmented. These characteristics mirror the **stream of consciousness** technique developed centuries later by modernist writers such as **James Joyce** and **Virginia Woolf**. Though the term "stream of consciousness" would not be coined until the late 19th century by psychologist William James, Hamlet's soliloquies anticipate many of its features. This paper explores how Hamlet's internal monologues function as early examples of stream of consciousness by comparing his mental patterns to those in modernist literature.

The Uniqueness of Hamlet's Soliloquies in Comparison to Shakespeare's Other Works

Hamlet's soliloquies are marked by a philosophical and existential depth not commonly found in Shakespeare's other protagonists. For instance, in the famous "To be, or not to be" soliloquy (3.1.56-88), Hamlet contemplates the nature of life and death, pondering whether it is nobler to endure life's suffering or to end it through suicide. This internal debate showcases a profound engagement with metaphysical themes such as mortality, the afterlife, and the value of existence—concerns that are less central in the soliloquies of characters like Macbeth or Othello. While Macbeth also reflects on death and fate, his soliloquies are driven more by guilt and ambition rather than philosophical inquiry. For example, in Macbeth's "Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow" speech (5.5.19-28), he laments the futility of life, but does so with a tone of nihilism rather than Hamlet's contemplative uncertainty.

Another distinctive feature of Hamlet's soliloquies is their function as a medium for self-analysis and internal conflict. Hamlet does not simply narrate his thoughts; he debates with himself. In his first soliloquy—"O, that this too too solid flesh would melt" (1.2.129-159)—Hamlet expresses his despair over his father's death and his mother's hasty remarriage. His tone oscillates between sorrow, disgust, and resignation, revealing the emotional instability and mental complexity that define his character. Unlike characters such as Iago in *Othello*, who use soliloquy as a means to inform the audience of their plans, Hamlet's monologues serve as an introspective dialogue with himself. This self-questioning makes him appear more human and relatable, giving the audience access to his evolving psyche.

Moreover, Hamlet's soliloquies are structurally more reflective and less action-oriented compared to soliloquies in Shakespeare's other tragedies. While Macbeth's "Is this a dagger" soliloquy (2.1.33-61) precedes a decisive act of murder, Hamlet's soliloquies often delay action. They articulate his paralysis and indecision. In "How all occasions do inform against me" (4.4.32-66), Hamlet criticizes himself for his inaction and contrasts his introspection with the decisiveness of others. This continual postponement of action in favor of thought highlights a central theme of the play: the conflict between thought and action.

In sum, Hamlet's soliloquies are unique within Shakespeare's body of work for their introspective depth, existential themes, and narrative function. They are not merely poetic expressions of emotion or foreshadowing devices; they are dramatic representations of a human mind wrestling with the burdens of consciousness, morality, and uncertainty. Through these monologues, Shakespeare created a character whose inner life remains compelling and enigmatic centuries after the play was written.

When reading the play closely, it may be discovered that Hamlet, the main character, delivers seven significant soliloquies. There are a few further minor soliloquies in addition to them. Shakespeare demonstrates various facets of Hamlet's personality in these soliloquies. Readers can gain a more precise understanding of Hamlet's thoughts through the analysis of the soliloquies(Chaudhary and Agarwal 102)Hamlet expresses his innermost feelings, innermost thoughts, and future aspirations in these seven soliloquies. These soliloquies are the fundamental building blocks of the play and are still regarded as some of Shakespeare's finest works. One cannot truly appreciate this wonderful drama without reading these seven soliloquies. The main goal of Hamlet's monologues is to reveal his personality and mental state. Most of them also act as turning points in the narrative, where he takes choices that have an overall impact on the entire plot moving forward. The prince muses on life's challenges, considers death—his own and that of his uncle—and chastises himself for being a coward. His demeanor changes over the course of the monologue, starting off violent, then turning quieter and darker, and eventually erupting once more in the conclusion. They make Hamlet appear to be a thoughtful person who prefers to reflect overtake action. In addition, he can be idealistic, impetuous, and occasionally needs to consciously control his wrath. Hamlet's paradoxical personality gives him depth and adds to the story's conflict (Chaudhary and Agarwal 102).

The Seven Soliloquies in *Hamlet*

William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* features seven deeply introspective soliloquies that offer a window into the conflicted mind of the Prince of Denmark. Through these monologues, Hamlet expresses his grief, anger, doubt, and philosophical inquiries, allowing the audience to trace his psychological evolution throughout the play.

1. "O, that this too too solid flesh would melt" (Act 1, Scene 2)

Hamlet is devastated by his father's death and appalled by his mother Gertrude's swift remarriage to his uncle, Claudius. He longs for escape from his painful reality but acknowledges that suicide is against divine law. This soliloquy reflects Hamlet's profound sorrow, disillusionment, and feelings of helplessness.

2. "O, all you host of heaven! O earth! what else?"(Act 1, Scene 5)
After speaking with the ghost of his father, who reveals that Claudius murdered him, Hamlet swears to seek revenge. He vows to remember the ghost's words and let nothing distract him from his purpose. This monologue reveals Hamlet's initial surge of resolve and the sacred weight he attaches to avenging his father.

3. "What a rogue and peasant slave am I!"(Act 2, Scene 2)

Ashamed of his inaction, Hamlet criticizes himself for failing to carry out revenge. He compares his emotional paralysis to the passion actors can display over fictional events. This soliloquy reveals Hamlet's self-loathing, inner conflict, and the torment of his perceived cowardice.

4. "To be, or not to be: that is the question"(Act 3, Scene 1)

In one of literature's most iconic soliloquies, Hamlet contemplates life and death, questioning whether it is better to suffer through life's hardships or to end them through suicide—though the uncertainty of the afterlife gives him pause. This meditation explores existential dread, the fear of the unknown, and the philosophical weight of human suffering.

5. "'Tis now the very witching time of night" (Act 3, Scene 2)
Following the success of the play-within-the-play meant to "catch the conscience of the king," Hamlet

steels himself for action. The night, symbolic of secrecy and supernatural energy, matches his darkening resolve. This soliloquy signals Hamlet's transition from contemplation to impending action.

6. "Now might I do it pat, now he is praying" (Act 3, Scene 3)

Hamlet finds Claudius alone and seemingly vulnerable in prayer. He considers killing him but hesitates, worrying that Claudius's soul would be saved if he dies confessing. Hamlet decides to wait for a more damning opportunity. This monologue underscores Hamlet's obsession with justice, morality, and the spiritual consequences of revenge.

7. "How all occasions do inform against me" (Act 4, Scene 4)

Moved by the sight of Fortinbras' soldiers willing to die for a trivial cause, Hamlet reflects on his own delays. He criticizes his overthinking and reaffirms his commitment to act decisively. This final soliloquy marks a turning point—Hamlet moves from indecision to resolve, ready to fulfill his tragic destiny.

These soliloquies serve as windows into Hamlet's complex psyche, showcasing his doubts, fears, and determination. Each one contributes to the tragic arc of the play, revealing the inner turmoil of a prince torn between duty, revenge, and existential questions.

Hamlet: A Proto-Stream of Consciousness Character

Though separated by over three centuries, William Shakespeare's Hamlet and the works of James Joyce and Virginia Woolf share a striking similarity in how they portray the inner workings of the human mind. Hamlet's soliloquies, rich with contradiction, emotional fluctuation, and unfiltered introspection, anticipate the stream of consciousness technique that modernist writers would formalize in the 20th century. These literary techniques offer deep psychological insight by abandoning strict logical structure in favor of mimicking how people *actually* think.

Nonlinear Thought and Mental Disruption in Hamlet

Hamlet's soliloquies do not follow a traditional, linear argument. Instead, his thoughts flow in real time, often shifting rapidly between emotions, ideas, and memories. In the first soliloquy, "O, that this too too solid flesh would melt" (1.2.129–159), Hamlet begins with suicidal despair, then turns to

memories of his father, and soon launches into bitter accusations against his mother: "So excellent a king… / So loving to my mother… / Let me not think on't—Frailty, thy name is woman!" (Shakespeare 1.2.139–146). His use of interruption, sudden topic changes, and emotional outbursts mimic the **free-associative structure** that would become central to stream of consciousness narratives.

Similarly, in the modernist novel *Ulysses*, **James Joyce** presents the inner thoughts of Stephen Dedalus and Leopold Bloom in a flowing, unpunctuated manner. Thoughts overlap, contradict, and wander: "He is young Dedalus… Thought is the thought of thought. Tranquil brightness. Then he was aware of them, of their eyes" (Joyce 17). Like Hamlet, Stephen is intellectual, self-critical, and prone to philosophical digressions. Both characters reveal their inner lives **not through action**, but through prolonged introspection.

Hamlet and Existential Reflection

Hamlet's soliloquies are deeply **existential**, reflecting on death, the afterlife, morality, and the purpose of suffering. In "To be, or not to be," Hamlet considers suicide but is halted by the fear of the unknown:

"To die, to sleep— / To sleep—perchance to dream: ay, there's the rub, / For in that sleep of death what dreams may come" (3.1.64–66).

This line of thought, built on uncertainty and recursive logic, mirrors the kind of existential questioning found in **Virginia Woolf's** *Mrs. Dalloway*. Clarissa Dalloway, like Hamlet, reflects on death and identity while moving through ordinary experiences: "She felt somehow very like him—the young man who had killed himself. She felt glad that he had done it" (Woolf 186). Here, Clarissa, like Hamlet, contemplates death in deeply subjective, personal terms. The thoughts do not form a clear argument but rather **drift** across memory, emotion, and speculation—hallmarks of the stream of consciousness technique.

Self-Awareness and Emotional Turmoil

Another key similarity between Hamlet and modernist characters is their **extreme self-awareness**. Hamlet is not just thinking—he is constantly **thinking about his thinking**. He often questions his own courage, intentions, and morality: "Am I a coward? / Who calls me villain? / Breaks

my pate across?" (2.2.538–540). This metacognitive turmoil finds a modern parallel in the inner monologue of characters like Clarissa or Joyce's Bloom, who constantly reassess themselves and their place in the world.

Literary scholar **Dorrit Cohn** argues that stream of consciousness narration attempts to "translate the silent and chaotic language of the mind into the orderly language of fiction" (Cohn 25). Shakespeare achieves a similar effect on stage, turning Hamlet's interiority into compelling drama. Though delivered aloud, Hamlet's soliloquies are not meant for other characters; they are **private mental explorations**, made audible to the audience.

Hamlet's soliloquies are non-linear, introspective, and emotionally driven, which are core traits of stream of consciousness. In the famous "To be, or not to be" soliloquy, Hamlet contemplates suicide, but his thoughts move unpredictably between suffering, fear of the unknown, and moral hesitation:

"To die, to sleep— / To sleep, perchance to dream—ay, there's the rub" (*Hamlet* 3.1.64–65).

Here, Hamlet interrupts himself mid-thought, using the rhythm of speech to reflect hesitation and philosophical doubt. There is no clear progression, just a flow of competing ideas shaped by mood and memory—exactly what James Joyce would do in *Ulysses*.

In *Ulysses*, Stephen Dedalus, like Hamlet, is highly intellectual and paralyzed by self-consciousness. Both characters engage in interior monologue where thoughts jump between past and present, memory and theory. In Stephen's stream of consciousness, for example:

"I am the servant of two masters… an English and an Italian… and a third who wants me for odd jobs" (*Ulysses* 1.2).

The lack of punctuation, the rapid shifts in reference, and the blending of thought and speech all echo the free-associative quality of Hamlet's soliloquies. Hamlet, too, shifts between addressing himself, Claudius, God, and the abstract concept of life and death—all in a single speech.

Virginia Woolf, particularly in *Mrs. Dalloway*, emphasizes inner life over external events. Clarissa Dalloway walks through London, her mind drifting from flowers to memories of lost love to the meaning of life. The transitions are emotional, not logical, just like Hamlet's speech in "O, what a rogue

and peasant slave am I" (2.2), where he leaps from self-hatred to philosophical musing to plotting vengeance. Woolf once said of Shakespeare:

"If we want to know him, we must look within ourselves." (*A Room of One's Own* 79) This echoes Hamlet's introspective nature—his thoughts do not tell us what will happen but who he is.

Conclusion

Hamlet's soliloquies are a masterclass in character development and dramatic monologue. Each speech reveals a stage in his psychological and moral journey—from grief and despair, through intellectual paralysis, to a final resolve. Shakespeare uses these moments to deepen our understanding of Hamlet's internal conflict, making him one of the most introspective and human characters in the theatrical canon. The soliloquies not only advance the plot but also give audiences a direct line into Hamlet's troubled consciousness, a literary innovation that continues to resonate with modern readers. These seven soliloquies chart Hamlet's psychological and philosophical journey, revealing his inner turmoil as he struggles with grief, morality, duty, and revenge. Each monologue builds upon the last, offering timeless insight into the human condition.

Shakespeare predates modernism by centuries, Hamlet's soliloquies anticipate many of its concerns: the instability of identity, the burden of self-awareness, and the dislocation of time. As Dorrit Cohn writes in *Transparent Minds*, stream of consciousness fiction attempts "to represent the unspoken, unstructured thoughts of characters" (Cohn 25). Shakespeare's innovation lies in bringing such unspoken thoughts to the stage, allowing the audience to witness not only what Hamlet feels, but how he thinks. The soliloquies are not only dramatic devices but representations of a fragmented psyche.

While Shakespeare did not invent stream of consciousness, Hamlet's soliloquies function in much the same way. Like the modernists, Shakespeare breaks from external narrative and linear reasoning to dramatize internal experience—raw, recursive, and conflicted. In this way, Hamlet stands as a proto-modernist character whose psychological depth aligns him more with Joyce's Stephen Dedalus or Woolf's Clarissa Dalloway than with the heroes of his own time.

Hamlet's soliloquies share the core qualities of the stream of consciousness technique: **nonlinear structure, emotional fragmentation, associative thought**, and **philosophical introspection.** Through his internal monologues, Hamlet becomes a psychologically modern character, foreshadowing the

innovations of Joyce and Woolf. Though separated by centuries, these writers are united in their efforts to depict the **true complexity of human consciousness,** capturing the mind not as a rational machine, but as a chaotic, flowing river of thoughts, doubts, and desires.

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* offers a compelling early example of what would later be formalized as the stream of consciousness technique. His interiority is marked by fragmentation, contradiction, and mental turbulence—hallmarks of psychological realism that anticipate the techniques of modernist fiction. Far from being formal speeches, Hamlet's soliloquies open a dramatic space where thought is in process, unresolved and alive, making *Hamlet* a prototype for later explorations of human consciousness in literature.

Works cited

Chaudhary, Shalini, and Dr. Gunjan Agarwal. "A Critical Study of Hamlet's Soliloquies." *International Journal of Research in English*, vol. 6, no. 2, Part B, 2024, pp. 102–105

Cohn, Dorrit. *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction*. Princeton UP, 1978.

James, William. *The Principles of Psychology*. Vol. 1, Henry Holt and Company, 1890.

Joyce, James. *Ulysses*. Edited by Hans Walter Gabler, Vintage, 1986.

Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*. Edited by Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine, Folger Shakespeare Library, Simon & Schuster, 2012.

Shakespeare, William. *Macbeth*. Edited by Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine, Folger Shakespeare Library, Simon & Schuster, 2013.

Shakespeare, William. *Othello*. Edited by Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine, Folger Shakespeare Library, Simon & Schuster, 2014.

Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own*. Harcourt Brace, 1929.

Woolf, Virginia. *Mrs. Dalloway*. Harcourt Brace, 1925.