
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Theatre of the Mind: Hamlet's Soliloquies as Staged Psychoanalysis in William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*

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| ABSTRACT

This paper reinterprets William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* through the lenses of psychoanalysis and performance theory, positing that Hamlet's soliloquies function as staged therapy sessions—dramatic enactments of his unconscious conflicts. Rather than treating them as literary constructs, the analysis views these soliloquies as acts of self-analysis, with Hamlet, assuming both the roles of patient and analyst, performing his mourning, guilt, and repressed desires before a silent witness: the audience. Drawing on Freudian and Lacanian discourse, the paper examines how Hamlet's feigned madness, Oedipal tensions, and philosophical ambivalence are theatrically embodied in his speech, transforming the stage into a metaphorical mental landscape. By interpreting the soliloquies as psychoanalytic performances, the research offers a fresh perspective on Hamlet's psychological depth and Shakespeare's intuitive understanding of the human psyche. Ultimately, this study proposes that Hamlet's soliloquies are not merely introspective monologues but performative enactments of psychoanalysis, where the stage becomes a site of psychic revelation and dramatic introspection.

| KEYWORDS

Hamlet, soliloquy, psychoanalysis, Freudian theory, Lacanian performance theory

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1. Introduction

William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is one of the most psychologically and dramatically intricate dramas in the Western literary canon. At the heart of its enduring appeal is the character of Prince Hamlet, whose introspective soliloquies have enthralled audiences, actors, and scholars for years. Each of these soliloquies contributes to the play's atmosphere by helping the audience comprehend Hamlet's innermost thoughts in addition to advancing the story. Historically, these soliloquies have been interpreted as windows into Hamlet's troubled mind—private moments of reflection that reveal his intellectual profundity, moral struggle, melancholy, and doubt. "Hamlet's soliloquies are foremost in bringing the idea of the delay to our notice. But the stress on delay in the soliloquies also shows how Hamlet is preoccupied with his role; a role undertaken by him with what might almost be termed a preordained course and end (p. 122)." However, this article offers a more complex and performative interpretation. During his soliloquies, which are more than just contemplative monologues, Hamlet uses the stage to create a symbolic mindscape in which he depicts his unconscious battles in front of a silent therapist in the shape of an audience. Prince Hamlet makes seven of the eleven soliloquies, which illustrate his dramatic transformation from the play's opening to its conclusion. These soliloquies reveal a number of psychological facets, including Hamlet's emotions, disposition, and inclinations. In essence, the purpose of this literary device is to inform the audience of things that are not possible to discuss in casual conversation. Shakespeare illustrates Hamlet's incapacity to control his

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emotions through his soliloquies. Because of his intelligence and self-control, he unknowingly attempts to control himself in order to exact revenge for the death of his father. He has multiple opportunities to kill his father's killer, but his hesitancy prevents him from carrying out his plan. However, Hamlet's hesitancy turns into a grave and tragic defect that ultimately leads to his demise.

This research reinterprets Hamlet's soliloquies as staged therapy sessions in which Hamlet assumes the roles of both patient and analyst, drawing on the psychoanalytic theories of Freud and Lacan. By combining psychoanalysis and performance theory, this paper offers a new interpretation of Hamlet's inner world, seeing it as a staged, dynamic reflection rather than a static text. Thus, it seeks to shed light on Shakespeare's natural comprehension of the human mind as well as the theatrical power of soliloquy as a means of emotional disclosure.

2. Literature Review

The soliloquies in *Hamlet* have long been a focal point of scholarly inquiry, often interpreted as windows into the protagonist's psyche. Traditional literary criticism has viewed these monologues as expressions of Hamlet's internal conflict, moral hesitation, and philosophical depth. However, recent interdisciplinary approaches have begun to reframe these soliloquies through psychoanalytic and performative lenses.

Freudian interpretations of *Hamlet* emphasize the Oedipal complex, suggesting that Hamlet's hesitation to kill Claudius stems from unconscious desires and guilt (Jones, 1949). Lacanian theory, on the other hand, shifts the focus to language and the symbolic order, interpreting Hamlet's speech as a manifestation of his fragmented self and his struggle with desire and identity (Lacan, 2006). These psychoanalytic readings underscore the depth of Hamlet's unconscious motivations and the role of repression, mourning, and desire in shaping his actions.

James E. Groves (2018), in *Hamlet on the Couch*, treats Hamlet as a psychoanalytic case study, examining how his soliloquies embody core Freudian concepts such as the death instinct, transference, and the compulsion to repeat. Groves notes, "The Double Soliloquy: Freud's 'Compulsion to Repeat' is dramatized in Hamlet's recurring internal debates, where he replays unresolved conflicts without resolution" (Chapter 11, p. 183). This aligns with the notion of Hamlet performing therapy on himself, caught in cycles of self-analysis and repression.

Similarly, Bisht (2015) offers a Freudian reading of Hamlet's soliloquies, particularly focusing on the "To be or not to be" speech. Bisht interprets Hamlet's language as a manifestation of aggression against the self, mourning, and guilt: "In a close reading of its language, one finds the expression of aggressions against the self that reveal the experience of a son in mourning, and the secret guilt of the playwright for having written Hamlet" (p. 12). Rathod (2022) deepens this perspective by emphasizing Hamlet's psychological paralysis as rooted in unconscious desire: "Hamlet's procrastination is not merely a moral or philosophical dilemma but a psychological paralysis rooted in unconscious desire and guilt" (p. 22). Kurumlu (2018) contributes a Lacanian dimension, arguing that Hamlet's entrapment in the symbolic order shapes his inability to act: "Hamlet's inability to act is not just hesitation—it is a symptom of his entanglement in the symbolic order, where desire is structured by loss and the phallus becomes a signifier of power and absence" (p. 6).

While these studies offer rich psychoanalytic and performative insights, they often treat Hamlet's soliloquies as either literary introspection or symbolic expressions of unconscious desire. What remains underexplored is the idea of soliloquy as a staged therapeutic ritual, where Hamlet assumes both the roles of patient and analyst, performing his unconscious conflicts in front of a silent audience-as-therapist. The metaphor of the stage as a mental landscapes—a site of psychic revelation and dramatic introspection—has not been fully developed in existing scholarship. This study addresses that gap by reevaluating Hamlet's soliloquies as dramatic enactments of psychoanalysis, drawing on Freudian and Lacanian theory while integrating performance theory to conceptualize the soliloquies as therapeutic sessions.

3. Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative, interpretive methodology informed by psychoanalytic theory and performance analysis. The seven principal soliloquies of *Hamlet* constitute the key source text, and these are subjected to close textual analysis in order to uncover underlying psychological themes and performative structures.

The research is structured around the following analytic frameworks:

- i. **Freudian Psychoanalysis:** Concepts such as repression, mourning, the death drive, and the Oedipal complex are used to interpret Hamlet's speech and behavior. Particular attention is paid to how unconscious desires and guilt manifest in his soliloquies.
- ii. **Lacanian Discourse:** Theories of the mirror stage, symbolic order theories, and theories of the split subject by Lacan form the basis for the analysis of Hamlet's language and self-construction. The soliloquies are seen as acts of language that reveal the instability of Hamlet's self.
- iii. **Performance Theory:** Grounded in theories of embodiment and theatricality, the soliloquies are analyzed as performed acts of psychological work. The stage is conceptualized as a metaphorical mindscape and the viewers as an unobtrusive analyst.
- iv. **Comparative Analysis:** The soliloquies of the play are being compared for tracing Hamlet's psychological evolution. Tone, usage, and subject matter change are examined to identify how his inner struggles develop and disappear.

This interdisciplinarity allows for a rich interpretation of *Hamlet*, reading the soliloquies not as literary set pieces but as psychoanalytic performative enactments of self-reflection. The research will make contributions to both Shakespeare studies and wider argument about the intersection of literature, psychology, and theatre.

3.1 A Brief Introduction the Theoretical Frameworks

This study is based on the psychoanalytic theory of Jacques Lacan and Sigmund Freud, in addition to performance theory within dramatic literature. As a whole, these models provide the framework for interpretation within which Hamlet's soliloquies are read—not simply as literary confessions, but as performative enactments of psychological energies.

Freud's psychoanalytic theory provides central concepts with regard to repression, mourning, the Oedipal complex, and the death drive. The death drive (Thanatos) is an unconscious drive toward destruction, regression, and return to inorganic form. In *Hamlet*, this is seen in his constant brooding about death, his suicidal tendencies, and his immobilization when confronted with action. As Jones (1949) adds, Hamlet's indecisiveness is rooted deeply in unconscious motivation and guilt concerning his mother and his father's murder. These Freudian notions decipher the psychological and emotional weight latent within Hamlet's soliloquies, revealing a psyche conflicted between desire and devastation.

Lacanian theory builds upon Freud's by focusing on language, identity, and the symbolic order. The central premise of Lacan's system is the mirror stage, a period of development during which the child becomes aware of himself for the first time, fashioning a sense of self as empowering but alienating. This is where the subject comes into Imaginary and later Symbolic order, in which identity is socially and linguistically mediated. In *Hamlet*, Lacan (2006) interprets soliloquies as sites of disintegration, where the subject is split between desire and prohibitions of symbolic structures. Hamlet's speech becomes an act of language that reveals his fractured self and his struggle to speak meaning in an unsettled world—mirroring the alienation of the mirror stage.

Performance theory adds a theatrical dimension to this psychoanalytic reading. Taking the cue that the stage is a psychological landscape, Hamlet's soliloquies are interpreted as self-analytic rituals, acted out before an imaginary

public who act as stand-in therapists. Cumulatively, these theoretical models enable a deeper understanding of Hamlet's soliloquies as staged therapy sessions, where character, actor, and analyst all break down. The soliloquies are not stilled literary artifacts but performative enactments of psychoanalysis, showing Shakespeare's intuitive comprehension of the human mind and the therapeutic potential of theatrical self-scrutiny.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 Hamlet's Soliloquies as a Psychological Theater

Shakespeare turns the soliloquy in *Hamlet* into a psychological theater, as Hamlet acts out the drama of his broken self. Every soliloquy turns into a staged psychoanalytic session in which Hamlet confronts his latent wants, fears, and moral quandaries in the roles of both analyst and analyzed. As A.C. Bradley (1904) observed, Hamlet's soliloquies are "the most profound utterances of a soul in torment, (p. 129)" revealing not just his grief but the psychic disintegration that follows. Hamlet's soliloquies serve as dramatic enactments of psychoanalytic introspection. Each soliloquy resembles a therapeutic session in which Hamlet confronts his unconscious fears, desires, and moral dilemmas. In his first soliloquy, Hamlet expresses suicidal thoughts, checked only by religious interdiction—an internal conflict between the id's death drive and the superego's moral restraint. In the first soliloquy, "O, that this too too solid flesh would melt, / Thaw and resolve itself into a dew! (1.2.129–130)", Hamlet's psychic landscape is dominated by grief, disgust, and suicidal ideation. His lament over the world as "... an unweeded garden / That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature / Possess it merely (1.2.135–137)." reflects not only Denmark's moral decay but his own internal disintegration. The tension between the id's death drive and the superego's religious restraint is palpable, as Hamlet's desire for oblivion is checked by divine law: "Or that the Everlasting had not fix'd / His canon 'gainst self-slaughter! (1.2.131–132)." His revulsion at Gertrude's remarriage and his comparison of Claudius hints at oedipal jealousy, suggesting that Hamlet's trauma is not merely political but deeply personal and repressed. This soliloquy stages the first therapeutic confrontation—grief not just expressed, but dramatized. In the second soliloquy, Hamlet reacts to the ghost's revelation with a vow to erase all prior knowledge: "I'll wipe away all trivial fond records, / All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past (1.5.99–100)." The ghost, as a symbolic manifestation of Hamlet's unresolved paternal ideal and buried trauma, ruptures his psychic equilibrium. His resolve to act is performative—a desperate attempt to stabilize a psyche destabilized by betrayal and loss. Harold Bloom (1998) argues that Hamlet's grief is not merely reactive but "a performance of mourning," suggesting that Hamlet dramatizes his trauma as a way of processing it.

In subsequent soliloquies, Hamlet continues to question his own motives and confront his inability to act. His third soliloquy ("O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!" (2.2.576) is a moment of self-loathing, where he berates himself for his inaction and compares his emotional paralysis to the actor's passionate performance. His harsh self-criticism—"... Am I a coward? / Who calls me villain? (2.2.548–549)" —exposes the displacement of rage from self to Claudius, a Freudian defense mechanism that masks deeper guilt.

The plan to stage "The Mousetrap"—"...The play's the thing / Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king (2.2.582–583)." —reflects Hamlet's neurotic need for external validation, suggesting that his delay is not strategic but symptomatic of unresolved psychic conflict. Here, Hamlet's psyche performs its own fragmentation—rage, guilt, and impotence colliding in theatrical self-analysis. This soliloquy dramatizes Hamlet's internal fragmentation and his struggle to reconcile thought with action. Freud's theory of displacement is evident as Hamlet redirects his rage toward Claudius while repressing his own guilt and fear. Terry Eagleton (1967) interprets Hamlet's delay not as weakness but as "a refusal to be reduced to mere instrumentality," suggesting that Hamlet's paralysis is a resistance to becoming a tool of vengeance.

The famous "To be or not to be" soliloquy stages Hamlet's existential crisis. Here, he contemplates life, death, and the fear of the unknown, revealing the paralysis of a mind caught between conflicting drives. This soliloquy is not merely philosophical—it is a performance of despair, where Hamlet's inner turmoil is externalized through language and metaphor. He is trapped in a recursive loop of overthinking, where action is perpetually deferred by the weight of imagined outcomes: "Thus conscience does make cowards of us all (3.1.83)." Stephen Greenblatt (2013) sees this soliloquy as Hamlet's "performance of inwardness," where thought becomes both refuge and prison.

In “Now might I do it pat, now he is praying (3.3.73), Hamlet rationalizes his decision not to kill Claudius during prayer. This moral displacement conceals Hamlet’s unconscious fear of committing the act. The soliloquy dramatizes Hamlet’s internal resistance to action, cloaked in moral reasoning. Hamlet’s psychological wounds remain unhealed, and his declaration of purpose is as much a performance of strength as it is a genuine transformation. As D.S. Kastan (2005) notes, Hamlet’s resolve is “always shadowed by ambiguity,” and even this moment of clarity is tinged with unresolved psychological tension.

These soliloquies form a cohesive psychoanalytic narrative—a theatre of the mind where Hamlet’s internal conflicts are not only voiced but staged. Shakespeare’s genius lies in his ability to dramatize the unconscious, allowing the audience to witness Hamlet’s psyche in motion. The soliloquies are not scattered reflections but interconnected acts in a psychological drama, where Hamlet’s self is both subject and spectacle.

4.2 Hamlet as Analyst and Patient

Hamlet’s intelligence and self-awareness position him as both analyst and patient in his own psychological drama. He dissects his motives, guilt, and hesitation with remarkable precision, often engaging in self-interrogation that mirrors psychoanalytic dialogue. He addresses himself as a “whore”. Freud states that Hamlet

... is able to do anything – except take vengeance on the man Hamlet who did away with his father and took that father’s place with his mother, the man who shows him the repressed wishes of his childhood realize. Thus, the loathing which should drive him on to revenge is replaced in him by self-reproaches, by scruples of conscience, which remind him that he is no better than the sinner whom he wishes to punish (p. 33).

His plan to stage “The Mousetrap” reflects a neurotic need for external validation of internal truth—a strategy to confirm the ghost’s story and justify his revenge.

Throughout the play, Hamlet exhibits traits of a philosopher rather than a man of action. His introspective nature leads him to overanalyze every situation, resulting in chronic procrastination. As Cohen (1989) observes, Hamlet’s actions reveal that “we are dealing with a philosopher, not with a man of action (p. 112).” This dual role—of thinker and actor, analyst and patient—creates a complex psychological portrait that Shakespeare masterfully unfolds through soliloquy.

4.3 The Stage as a Mindscape

The physical stage in Hamlet functions as a metaphorical mindscape, reflecting the protagonist’s internal world. Hamlet’s feigned madness, his elaborate schemes, and his philosophical musings transform the stage into a space where unconscious conflicts are dramatized. Characters such as Claudius and Gertrude can be interpreted as projections of Hamlet’s repressed desires and fears. Claudius, in particular, embodies Hamlet’s Oedipal rival—a figure who has usurped both the throne and the maternal affection Hamlet subconsciously craves. Gertrude’s remarriage is a recurring source of anguish for Hamlet, suggesting that his emotional turmoil is rooted more in her sexual loyalty than in the political betrayal.

4.4 Madness as Method

Throughout the play, the madness of Hamlet remains a mystery—whether he truly is insane or merely pretending. Hamlet initially decides to feign madness as a protective strategy after discovering the shocking truth about his father’s murder. However, this pretension appears to overtake him in reality as the play progresses. Madness becomes not just a disguise but a method of examining and expressing loss, desire, fear, and trauma in a contorted form. From the outset, Hamlet applies madness to ensure his own safety and manipulate other characters, but the performance also seems to invoke a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Hamlet's erratic facial expressions, incoherent aphorisms, and morbid humor gradually envelop him in the madness he performs. In his exchanges with Ophelia, Polonius, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern, Hamlet deploys madness in a calculated sense. He forces himself into Ophelia's room and behaves like a madman, informing her of his love in a way that ensures she will report his insanity to her father Polonius, who will then inform the King. Hamlet successfully accomplishes these goals, using madness to destabilize the court and distance himself from the tardiness of revenge.

Yet the latency in his liberated performance of madness does not appear to be fully utilitarian; rather, it shares a psychological quality of injured resistance. Hamlet's obsessive distraction with death, his encounter with Polonius's corpse, and his graveyard reflections reveal a mind preoccupied with mortality and decay. Madness, in this context, becomes both a defense mechanism and a medium for psychic expression. Of the many definitions of madness we may decipher next to Hamlet's use of madness, the living thought processes locate madness as a type of psychic medium.

4.5 The Ghost as Trauma

King Hamlet's ghost serves as an emblem which represents unresolved trauma while embodying Hamlet's guilt and moral duty and remorse. Hamlet's mental disintegration begins when the ghost appears, which forces him to acknowledge his murder while demanding he fulfill its call for vengeance. The ghost's command to "Remember me" becomes a persistent presence throughout the play, which drives Hamlet toward inner turmoil. The appearance of the ghost astonishes Hamlet, who reacts with both amazement and horror. His initial determination to take revenge fades quickly due to growing uncertainty about the ghost's authenticity. Hamlet suspects the ghost may be the devil in disguise because he lacks certainty about its true identity. The uncertainty shows Hamlet's basic fear that accepting an alternative truth would disrupt his emotional and moral foundations. The ghost's visit intensifies Hamlet's psychological conflict related to his oedipal situation. The ghost's murder revelation demonstrates the irresolvable combination of both sexual and political transgressions that Hamlet faces. The delay in Claudius's murder exists as a symbolic representation of the divided nature in Hamlet due to his contradictory loyalties and concealed feelings.

5. Conclusion

Hamlet is not just a revenge tragedy, but a rich exploration of the human psyche, dramatized through soliloquy, madness, and introspection. By interpreting Hamlet's soliloquies as performed psychoanalytic confrontations, we have a protagonist tormented by circumstances outside his control but also by the inner demons that regulate his every action and word. Hamlet's status as both patient and analyst allows him to dissect his motives, fears, and desires with vast self-knowledge, but the same self-knowingness is the reason for his paralysis.

The stage in *Hamlet* is a psychic landscape, in which figures like Claudius and Gertrude are political operators and also symbolic enactments of Hamlet's unconscious struggles—his oedipal conflicts, his moral ambiguity, and fear of becoming the thing he despises. His madness, genuine or simulated, becomes a vehicle for entering the unconscious, a world in which repressed trauma and taboo desires become realized. The ghost, as a supernatural embodiment of unresolved grief and filial expectation, is the agency causing Hamlet's psychological disintegration.

Hamlet's tragedy is not indecision, but the sheer burden of his own private world. His soliloquies reveal a mind rent in two by itself, caught between the imperatives of duty and the paralyses of doubt. Shakespeare, far in advance of Freud, constructs a character whose psychological depth foreshadows the demands of twentieth-century psychoanalysis. In doing so, Hamlet not only remains a revenge tragedy, but an ageless look at the vulnerability of the human mind and on the theatre of self.

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