

# Language, Consciousness, and the Human Interior: Shakespeare's Hamlet and Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*

DA-YOUNG CHOI

*Fairmont Preparatory Academy, 2200 W Sequoia Ave, Anaheim, CA 92801, United States*

## ABSTRACT

This narrative review examines the ways that Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* expose human consciousness in different linguistic and stylistic modes: soliloquy and stream-of-consciousness. Relying on A. C. Bradley's interpretation of the soliloquy, William James's conception of consciousness as a "stream," and the aesthetics of modernism, this paper proposes that both the authors dramatize the limits of language in representing the mind. While Shakespeare's soliloquies turn introspection into a form of theatrical performance, Woolf's prose places the reader within a continuous flow of perception and memory. Positioned respectively within Renaissance humanism and post-war modernism, these methods are used to show that literature plays the important dual role of mirror and model. This review focuses primarily on how *Hamlet* and *To the Lighthouse* render consciousness visible through language shaped by historical and cultural context.

**Keywords:** Shakespeare; Woolf; consciousness; soliloquy; stream-of-consciousness; humanism; modernism; language

## INTRODUCTION

Representations of consciousness in literature have long been at the confluence of language, psychology, and philosophy. From Shakespeare's Renaissance stage to Woolf's modernist prose, writers have tried to make that invisible movement in thoughts visible in the art form. The question of how language mediates the private and the public — mind and world — has thus remained at the heart of literary inquiry. William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* each engage with this same task in deeply

substantive ways through divergent but equally experimental formal procedures. If *Hamlet* dramatizes conflict within through the soliloquy, reducing introspection to spectacle, *To the Lighthouse* dissolves external narration altogether, leaving readers to inhabit a consciousness in transition. In his seminal analysis of Shakespearean tragedy, A. C. Bradley characterizes the soliloquy as revealing the dramatist's "inward struggle" of the soul (1). Later scholars have rewritten the soliloquy not so much as a declaration of personal thought but as rhetorical gesture informed by audience and moment. In this respect, Hamlet's "To be, or not to be" speech (3.1.56–88) exemplifies human reasoning in its very instability; in what it does it is as much an inquiry into being as an act of doubt. In contrast, Virginia Woolf's stylistic process in story structure (2)—in this essay, "Modern Fiction"—imagines consciousness to develop as a flexible and non-linear process. Grounded in William James's psychological

---

**Corresponding author:** DA-YOUNG CHOI, E-mail: danuriza@naver.com.

**Copyright:** © 2025 DA-YOUNG CHOI. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

**Accepted** November 13, 2025

<https://doi.org/10.70251/HYJR2348.36601606>

“stream of consciousness” (3), Woolf turns the narrative into an image of perception, memory, and time. Through free indirect discourse and syntactic rhythm, *To the Lighthouse* presents the mind as action, rather than a matter of statement. Among scholars who have demonstrated this Woolf’s formal experimentalism can be inferred as a response to the disillusionment of post-World War I modernism, which meant that self-unity could no longer be believed to be real, from Hermione Lee (4) to Julia Briggs (5). By contrast, Shakespeare’s Renaissance humanism depends on the belief that self-examination provides for moral insight, even if Hamlet exposes the limits of reason as such. When side by side, these works exemplify a much longer continuum of the time span through which literature serves both as aesthetic form and epistemological inquiry. This review seeks to explore how *Hamlet* and *To the Lighthouse* present consciousness in terms of language developed according to history and culture. In comparing soliloquy and stream-of-consciousness as artistic mediators of thought, the discussion hopes to bring to light how literature can convert introspection into a public act, and how, across the ages, it has continually examined the limits of the expressive capacity of the human mind. Ultimately, this review reveals how the use of language, shaped by historical and cultural context, allows the two texts to render consciousness visible.

## COMPARATIVE FRAMEWORK

A comparative analysis of *Hamlet*, however, and *To the Lighthouse*, illustrates two separate yet interrelated literary responses to the timeless question of how we can express consciousness in the language of text. Disjointed more than three centuries apart, Shakespeare and Woolf bear an abiding interest in the invisible mechanisms of thought, and in the ability of art form to depict interior life. Their innovations, the soliloquy and stream-of-consciousness, express two different views of what the human mind is and the philosophical and cultural climate of the time they are produced, not only reflect, but actually convey their divergent realities. Both writers, in contrasting ways, draw attention to the paradox of consciousness—its impulse for articulation mixed with resistance to a full articulation.

In the early modern world, soliloquy became a radical instrument that made introspection performative. The Renaissance was the era of the self-conscious subject who turned inward, learning as he did. A. C. Bradley referred to Shakespeare’s soliloquy as a “window into

the soul,” allowing the dramatist to dramatize the moral and emotional friction of tragedy (1). In *Hamlet*, the soliloquies draw the audience into the most intimate reaches of the protagonist’s mind. But this ostensible transparency is itself a theatrical illusion. Critics of the play have since proposed that Hamlet speaks in rhetorical manner, in acts of strategically constructed self-persuasion and self-representation not spontaneous confessions. The most well-known of these speeches is the “To be, or not to be” speech (3.1.56–88) which is emblematic of this tension, as its antithesis of speech and recursive questioning create a theatrical version of the paralysis of thought rather than any relief from it. The rhythm of argument and recission of the soliloquy epitomizes the Renaissance humanist paradox, the confidence in reason’s power to probe the self, and the dawning recognition that reason produces doubt in a person. So Shakespeare uses language as a tool of revelation and obstacle, a medium capable of narrating consciousness only if one exposes its contradictory.

In contrast, Woolf’s modernist experimentation internalizes the dramatic impulse. Here, Shakespeare projects the outward impulse of thought upon the audience and Woolf breaks through external narration entirely, allowing the reader to inhabit the interiority of the movements of perception and memory. Her essay “Modern Fiction” presents a radical aesthetic manifesto: “life itself” must be recorded in fiction as it navigates through the mind, not as subject to fixed plots or invented chronology (2). This conviction has a narrative mechanism on *To the Lighthouse* where time and space are destabilized by convention. The reader follows the unbroken flow of consciousness: Mrs. Ramsay’s changing attention, and Lily Briscoe’s painterly vision, and the temporal vacuum of “Time Passes” (3), alluding to William James’s “stream of thought” metaphor. For James, consciousness is not a series of discrete ideas but an ongoing stream of experience. Woolf presents this theory in its artistic most immediate incarnation: sentences stretch and shrink according to the speed of thought, division between minds is lost and syntax itself becomes rhythmized, echoing the cadence of mental life.

Critics such as Hermione Lee (4) and Julia Briggs (5) have asserted that Woolf’s stylistic achievements were inextricably linked to the historical circumstances of early twentieth-century modernism. The scarring of the First World War and the dissolution and decay of Victorian certainties left the modern subject atomized, unmoored, and always trying to find its way. Lee

reads Woolf's fiction in opposition to this culture's disillusionment, focusing on her attempt to identify the cohesiveness of such multiple things. Briggs, for her part, views the temporal experiments inherent in *To the Lighthouse* as a narrative equivalent to historical ruptures, in which the compression of years into pages effectively renders absence and silence as modes of meaning. Both critics highlight Woolf's conviction that language can never restore order to experience, but can at least establish the pattern through which it breaks down.

By comparison, Shakespeare and Woolf map the changing dynamic in how the mind is expressed in literature. Renaissance faith of the rational, knowable self gives way to the modernist consciousness of flux, multiplicity, partial knowledge. But for all their differences, both authors demonstrate a metacognitive understanding of language as experiment. In *Hamlet*, consciousness is performed through speech — the theater becomes a laboratory for moral soul-searching. *To the Lighthouse* has consciousness manifesting in silence and syntax and rhythm — the page becomes a psychological lab. Both approaches situate literature not as a repository of answers, but a mode of inquiry.

Read through this comparative frame, the two texts are treated as parallel strata in a single intellectual lineage: the constant striving to convert the formless into form, to convert the inner life into external articulation. Shakespeare's soliloquy expresses humanism's optimism in the potential of knowing oneself through discourse, while Woolf's stream-of-consciousness expresses the modernist doubt that language can encapsulate the totality of the mind. This lies between the poles: the lingering fascination with consciousness in literature — never as a problem to solve, but as a phenomenon to experience.

## **ANALYSIS OF HAMLET AND TO THE LIGHTHOUSE**

Comparative analysis between Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* demonstrates how two different modes of narration—soliloquy and stream of consciousness—show us the interior life of the mind. Every one of these texts makes consciousness into an art form by capitalizing on the expressive limitations of its medium: the stage for Shakespeare and the present-day novel for Woolf. Both reveal that thought portrayal is not an act of transparent divulgement, but a sort of performative artifice that

reveals the instability of human subjectivity. In *Hamlet*, the soliloquy is the main vehicle for dramatizing the struggle between being and knowing. A. C. Bradley's seminal reading defines *Hamlet* as “the tragedy of reflection,” in which the protagonist's intellect both determines his destiny and annihilates him (1). The “To be, or not to be” soliloquy (3.1.56–88) turned philosophical speculation into theatrical language. Shakespeare employs antithesis — “to die, to sleep” — as a way of formalizing indecision, and the recursive structure of clauses replicates the rhythm of roundabout thought. The soliloquy's argument is never resolved, but rather suspended, returning again and again to uncertainty. Stephen Greenblatt builds on this idea, suggesting that Shakespeare's characters “speak themselves into being” through linguistic performance rather than self-knowledge, and that this represents a distinctly Renaissance conception of identity that was theatrical and contingent (6). *Hamlet*'s own voice, then, becomes a medium in which language both makes and breaks up the self. In addition, the soliloquies work in a metatheatrical way: they make us see thought as an event. The inward is projected outward, but public speech warps what it claims to expose.

*Hamlet* trying to express his inner reasoning makes clear the impotence of rational mastery. His metaphors fill up his words and repetition enacts the friction between reflection and paralysis. Bradley's “window to the soul” metaphor is thus paradoxical—*Hamlet*'s mind is lit only so far as it is opened up (1). Language provides a window onto consciousness that makes clear it is too deep to be represented. Thus, too does Shakespeare's soliloquy prefigure our modern realization that thought is always performative, always mediated through form and circumstance. Virginia Woolf, who wrote in the wake of the First World War, looks inwards in a different direction. The rhetorical linearity of the soliloquy slips into narrative immersion, as thought doesn't announce itself, just happens. In *To the Lighthouse*, consciousness operates through different focal points—Mrs. Ramsay, Lily Briscoe, Mr. Ramsay—who inhabit a flowing interior world. The prose melts the distinction between perception and narration to produce what Dorrit Cohn calls “transparent consciousness,” a narrative form whereby the reader thinks thought without the interference or interruption of a third party's voice (8). Woolf's sentences can also extend across temporal and syntactic boundaries, much like the unfettered flow of William James's “stream of consciousness” (3). The effect is a stitched sense of a certain way of seeing and

feeling and recalling a memory interspersed throughout the action. In Part I, Mrs. Ramsay's meditations slide effortlessly between her children's voices and her existential meditation on transitory awareness, evading the friction or even contradiction that marks a duality of the domestic and mental. Woolf's prose rhythm is what Alex Zwerdling calls her "ethical aesthetic" as she articulates consciousness as an effort of empathy and ethical attention (7). To give another's interiority is, to Woolf, to acknowledge its opaqueness. That aesthetic of incompleteness is a stark contrast to the Renaissance impulse toward moral self-clarity. This painting scene of Part III, in which Lily Briscoe struggles to fulfill her canvas, is a metonym for Woolf's larger artistic enterprise. Lily's brushstrokes, languid, recursive, parallel Woolf's syntactic experimentation: Both attempts are meant to capture a sense that defies a finished product. As Hermione Lee notes, Woolf turns the modernist crisis of coherence into a principle of beauty (4). The canvas, or consciousness for that matter, is unfinished, but it has meaning precisely in its incompleteness. Julia Briggs notes that Woolf's temporal manipulation — the compression of a decade as depicted in "Time Passes" — stages the disintegration of stable historical sequence (5). Time is rendered subjective, elastic and haunted by absence; narrative silence becomes a kind of expression. Comparing both these writers shows a profound reversal in the direction of representation. In Shakespeare, consciousness grows outward, becoming the public speech and theatrical embodiment. In Woolf, it folds in, conveyed through syntax and rhythm rather than argument.

But both writers dramatize the same epistemological crisis: the impossibility of being fully certain of oneself. Hamlet's eloquence implodes into irresolution; Mrs. Ramsay's clarity of meaning collapses into silence. Their linguistic worlds vary in form, but one of them converges in intent: to make visible the shifting back and forth of clarity and opacity that characterizes human thought. For read from this perspective, *Hamlet* and *To the Lighthouse* function as mutually reflexive meditations on the bounds of language. Shakespeare's soliloquy treats consciousness as a dialogue between thought and audience; Woolf's narrative transfigures consciousness into an interior conversation between moments of perception. In either case, literature is an experiment in epistemology: a way in which to measure how far words can go before they crack their way against the impossible. What brings up both these works over centuries is their common recognition that

language does not solve consciousness — it exposes its incompleteness.

### **Synthesis: Consciousness and Language**

When read alongside one another, *Hamlet* and *To the Lighthouse* illustrate a perennial literary tension over the articulation and encapsulation of consciousness. For four centuries, Shakespeare and Woolf both disrupt language as an instrument of art, arguing that the perception of consciousness is not something to portray but something to think about. Both of them address this paradox through diverse rhetorical methodologies—the soliloquy and the stream-of-consciousness—which rearrange voice, temporality, and thought. That makes Hamlet's thought dramatization itself, that is, language. The soliloquy changes interior reflection into exterior performance, shifting awareness from monologue to dialogue. A. C. Bradley describes it as Shakespeare's almost incomparable ability to render "the inward struggle visible" (1); however, future writers such as Stephen Greenblatt have further complicated this, demonstrating, in Shakespeare, that the self is not found in language, but constructed, as an art, produced by language (6). Hamlet's identity is shaped by rhetorical self-making; the moment he speaks is the moment he is a being, however token or artificial. But that specific speech shatters him, too. Each antithesis — "to die, to sleep," "to be, or not to be" — is the realization of the serene dissolution of the self into rival possibilities. Language is how consciousness is transacted not as revelation, but as oscillation. The self does not exist before the speech but exists as such in the utterance. Woolf inherits from and then builds upon this performative ancestry. For her, consciousness is not something that's done in advance but rather internalized in the way that perception is written. In *To the Lighthouse*, the lack of overt dialogue is where Dorrit Cohn's model of "psychonarration," thought replaces action and yet we never learn from life as if it were a tale. You are here not speaking as the reader; rather, it is inside that you bear silent witness on movement (8). The language structure of Woolf's own writing—long lines that hang over time and recursive clauses, subtle repetition throughout — is suggestive of William James's famous statement: consciousness moves along a continuum (3). Here words don't make up a choice; rather, they play out the whole of time. A continuity of thought through ages. In this sense, Julia Briggs observes that Woolf's sentences "symbolize the rhythms of perception," and compress time without

disappearing texture (5). What Shakespeare achieves by contrast as a rhetorician, Woolf achieves by syntactic pattern. Both tell us that the life of the mind is not in the light, but in motion. The common thread running through both remains a doubt about their linguistic suitability. Both writers note that while language is a sign for consciousness, it can't contain it completely. Hamlet's eloquence wafts into self-doubt; Mrs. Ramsay's reveries withdraw in silence. So the soliloquy and stream-of-consciousness are not opposites but diverge on both ends of a given aesthetic problem in history. Each reveals how language is as much a mechanism for articulating thought as it is for limiting it. As Alex Zwerdling suggests, the story told by Woolf performs an "ethical humility" toward other minds' unknowability (7). This sense speaks back to Hamlet's own recognition that "there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so." So are Shakespeare's and Woolf's linguistic explorations converging in moral philosophy: Both maintain the belief that depicting consciousness is to grapple with the limits to knowledge itself. Time, in turn, makes this parallel all the more acute. Renaissance humanism conceived of time in terms of moral sequence, proceeding from reason to judgment. Hamlet's soliloquies are contained within that pattern yet question its teleology over and over again: every reflection ends not with resolution but with a reawakening of indecision. Modernism, on the other hand, inherits a world in time that has fractured into fragments. As Hermione Lee puts it, Woolf's handling of temporality in "Time Passes" makes evident a "temporal dissonance" in which memory is placed in the place of chronology (4). The result is a literary structure that makes consciousness the real measure of time. So Shakespeare and Woolf reconceive this temporality as psychological experience: they render time felt, not counted; consciousness occurs at this moment of unfolding. It is through that process that we see that the transition from soliloquy to stream-of-consciousness becomes not only formal but epistemological. The soliloquy externalizes action — the movement of the mind as performance — and the modernist interior monologue internalizes it as texture. But both modes are forms like labs of knowledge, dramatizing the human striving to transform interiority into expression. Dorrit Cohn has called this project "the epistemological privilege of fiction" — its power to mimic the world of the mind but do so not as it might in the sciences (8). Shakespeare and Woolf stand out from their classes as exemplars of this

privilege. Only through its experience do you know about consciousness, not analysis, and that is what their works inescapably suggest. Ultimately, Hamlet and *To the Lighthouse* suggest that the presentation of consciousness depends on not holding to transparency: it demands ongoing disorientation. We don't clean up; we maintain ambiguity through language. Whereas the soliloquy finds thought as performance in tension with itself, the modernist sentence claims that thought is a sort of fluid continuity that resists closure. And in either case, the act of expression is also the act of limitation — and limitation is precisely what art does. In this regard, the irony of consciousness is not that it escapes the reach of representation, but that representation is the means by which we undertake it.

## CONCLUSION

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* exemplify two key moments in literature's quest for consciousness: one born of Renaissance humanism; the other of modernist fragmentation. Both authors invest their mental energy, and in both the soliloquy and the stream-of-consciousness, these writers create a picture of cognitive activity and turn it into art, showing consciousness not in a solid state but in an ongoing process of becoming. Their works show that language, even with its imperfections, is essentially the only one-way medium through which the mind can approximate self-knowledge, a self that is able to approximate understanding. In *Hamlet*, so does the soliloquy externalize thought as spectacle. A. C. Bradley looked at this form as Shakespeare's strategy to "make the inward struggle visible" (1). Still, the soliloquies also emphasize the instability of such an insight. Hamlet's thinking is both an act of questioning and a performance of doubt; his words do not finalize thinking but signal its recursive movement. Stephen Greenblatt claims the language of Shakespeare constructs the self in performance (6) — speech does not reveal consciousness, it establishes consciousness. Hamlet's eloquence becomes his trap, as his words fail to yield firm conviction. The play's lasting power is in the paradox of this fact: of knowing thought only as you observe it fails to complete itself. Woolf reinterprets the struggle internally. In *To the Lighthouse*, she trades dramatic soliloquy for syntactic flow, turning the narration into a mirror of consciousness itself. William James's "stream of thought" (3) finds its most sustained literary formulation with Woolf's shifting perspectives

and temporal malleability—her characters—Mrs. Ramsay, Lily Briscoe, and Mr. Ramsay—don't think in straight lines of logic but in overlapping impressions. As Hermione Lee writes, Woolf's interference of time and voice "mimics the rhythm of perception" (4). Through this methodology, Woolf turns language into an emotional and time-bound means of representation rather than a means of description. Hence, both writers arrive at a similar conclusion: In the end, consciousness can only be represented by the recognition of not being complete. Dorrit Cohn's idea of fiction as "the epistemological laboratory of the mind" (8) appropriately describes their success. Shakespeare renders thought as a dialogue with the audience, while Woolf renders it as the texture of time itself. Centuries in the making, they all converge in their insistence that the work of art does not mean settling the confusion but continuing that uncertainty. Literature, in their hands, is both a mirror and an instrument - where the whole process of giving voice to the individual reveals that knowing oneself is not so much a destination but a continuous thought.

#### **CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

The author declares no conflicts of interest related to this work.

#### **REFERENCES**

1. Bradley AC. *Shakespearean Tragedy: Lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth*. London: Macmillan; 1904. ISBN-13: 978-0-333-03610-5
2. Woolf V. *Modern Fiction*. In: *The Common Reader*. London: Hogarth Press; 1925. ISBN-13: 978-1-528-77109-2
3. James W. *The Principles of Psychology*. New York: Dover Publications; 2007. ISBN-13: 978-0-486-20381-2
4. Lee H. *Virginia Woolf*. London: Vintage; 1997. ISBN-10 0099732513.
5. Briggs J. *Virginia Woolf: An Inner Life*. Orlando: Harcourt; 2005. ISBN-10 0151011435. <https://doi.org/10.3366/edinburgh/9780748624348.001.0001>
6. Greenblatt S. *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; 1980. ISBN-10 0226306534
7. Zwerdling A. *Virginia Woolf and the Real World*. Berkeley: University of California Press; 1986. ISBN: 9780520061842. <https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520353220>
8. Cohn D. *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction*. Princeton: Princeton University Press; 1978. ISBN: 9780691101569. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780691213125>