



## Pre-Birth Hamlet: Counterfactual Narratives and the Boundaries of Alternative History in Ian McEwan's *Nutshell*

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.59045/nalans.2025.75>

**APA Citation:** Baysal, Y. (2025). Pre-birth Hamlet: Counterfactual narratives and the boundaries of alternative history in Ian McEwan's *Nutshell*. *Journal of Narrative and Language Studies*, 13 (27), pp. 69-80.

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### Abstract

This article analyses the function of counterfactual narrative within the theoretical frame of alternative history and moral responsibility in Ian McEwan's *Nutshell* and William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Both texts investigate the limitations of agency, fate, and moral responsibility through the lens of alternate history and speculative thinking. *Hamlet* portrays a protagonist that is paralyzed by uncertainty and torn between action and inaction, while *Nutshell* presents a narrator with omniscient insight who is unable to change the course of events. Therefore, this study aims to examine the different but parallel issues, revealing that counterfactual thinking does not serve as an emancipating activity but rather reinforces existential paralysis in both characters. It situates *Nutshell* within the wider context of counterfactual narrative and alternative history theory, analysing McEwan's novel as a metahistorical critique and an extension of Shakespeare's investigation into historical contingency. Besides, it underlines the impact of counterfactual reasoning on self-perception, demonstrating that identity is shaped by both previous experiences and hypothetical alternatives. In both texts, counterfactual thinking results in the tragic dilemma of the protagonists as counter-historical subjects as *Nutshell* and *Hamlet* overlap in their portrayal of speculation as an inherently detrimental aspect of human consciousness. Consequently, McEwan and Shakespeare present a frame to explore how individuals endeavour to reconstruct or resist their preordained circumstances and realities by revealing the boundaries of counterfactual thinking in modifying historical determinism.

**Keywords:** Counterfactual thinking, Alternative history, Moral responsibility, *Nutshell*, *Hamlet*

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### Introduction

Alternative history and counterfactual narratives have served as literary and intellectual tools for examining historical inevitability, fate, and the possibility of altering the course of events.

These speculative reimaginings provide new insights into history by posing the question “what if?” which inquiries the inevitability of historical decisions and their repercussions. Contemporary scholars like Katsman, Hellekson and Gallagher contend that counterfactual narratives serve as both literary devices and philosophical inquiries, examining the boundaries of free will and historical causality. *Nutshell* by Ian McEwan, a contemporary rewriting of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, explores the interplay between fate and agency in an extremely unique way.

McEwan's exploration of *Hamlet* via alternative history and counterfactuality prompts a reconsideration of Shakespeare's play as an early example of counterfactual narrative. Hamlet, the eponymous protagonist, is profoundly engaged in “counterfactual speculation” preoccupied with inquiries on fate, agency, and the ramifications of possible actions (Khan, 2015, p. 43). While Hamlet contemplates endlessly, hindered by the burden of doubt, McEwan's fetal narrator lacks even the illusion of autonomy. Despite possessing an omniscient-like consciousness and profound knowledge of human history, the fetus is unable to alter the course of events, making its counterfactual reflections futile. The contrast between Hamlet's inaction and the fetus's imposed passivity offers an ironic introspection and manifestation on the essence of alternative histories and their alleged potential to challenge historical determinism.

This study proposes that *Nutshell* functions as a counterfactual thinking experiment that ultimately affirms the unavoidable nature of fate rather than subverting it. Although counterfactual narratives generally imply that history is “contingent” (Callagher, 2018, p. 22), McEwan reveals the constraints of such speculative endeavours. The fetus' recognition of alternative options highlights his physical incapability mirroring Hamlet's existential crisis, paralysis and inaction. In other words, via its interaction with *Hamlet*, this study analyses *Nutshell* through the lens of alternative history and counterfactual thinking to indicate how this text deconstructs and reconstructs the fundamental principles of historical inevitability and speculation.

### **The Fetus as Historian: Omni/Im-potence in *Nutshell***

Through the narrative of *Nutshell*, the fetus holds a contradictory position between omnipotence and impotence as he is endowed with outstanding intellectual abilities but completely unable to control the course of the events. This particular scenario illustrates the novel's inquiry with alternative history because the fetal narrator functions as not only an observer but also a silent witness to the incidents that will shape his future. McEwan delves into the fundamental nature of alternative history revealing its inherent contradictions and constraints. *Nutshell* establishes a connection with *Hamlet*, investigating the themes of fate, knowledge and inaction by imposing a liminal position of a tragic historian on the fetus. This study examines how McEwan integrates the narrator's unique point of view to uncover the restrictions of counterfactual narratives and to revise the intrinsic inadequacy in historical knowledge.

The fetus narrates a story of intrigue, infidelity, and murder, possessing extraordinary cognitive powers that enable him to sense and comprehend the world out of the womb. However,

this comprehension does not confer upon him the authority to intervene in the surrounding events. In this sense, the fetus functions as a historian observing events without the capacity to influence them. He exists as both a passive historian and an active reflector, situated at the convergence of two opposing forces: his remarkable awareness and absolute inability to act. He is an outsider to the world, both physically and existentially, yet he is fully aware of the unfolding drama involving his mother, Trudy, and her lover, Claude. This observation of external events as a detached observer echoes Hamlet's position in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, where the protagonist reflects on his situation but remains predominantly inactive. The fetus, like Hamlet, takes part in contemplative speculation: while Hamlet's indecision arises from moral uncertainties over action, the fetus is restricted by the immovable nature of his physical constraints.

The unborn protagonist serves as an omniscient observer, fully conscious of the conspiracies surrounding him, especially the terrible attempt to murder his father. From the womb, he observes his mother's adultery with Claude and the wicked arrangements that unfold. Through the novel, he observes, "I can feel her struggling with a choice. I'm an organ in her body, not separate from her thoughts ... Her decision, her whispered command, her single treacherous utterance, appears to issue from my own untried mouth. As they kiss again she says it into her lover's mouth. Baby's first word. 'Poison'" (McEwan, 2016, p. 42). In *Metahistory: Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, Hayden White asserts: "The narrator is permitted to emplot the historical process not as if it were a Romance, a Tragedy, or a Satire but only as if it were a Comedy cast in the tone of Irony ... as the case may be" (1973, p. 403). For White, historical narratives are not objective or purely factual; they are constructed according to various narrative modes or emplotments. The modes of Romance, Tragedy, Comedy, and Satire influence the presentation, interpretation, and comprehension of historical events. In other words, history is shaped by the observer's interpretative choices. The fetus's function as an observer can be interpreted concerning White's philosophical framework of historical observation, which asserts that historical narratives are contingent upon the observer's perspective, while recognizing that the historian's understanding does not modify the past. In this sense, the fetus is regarded as an external observer, collecting information on occurrences without the capacity for participation. This observation underscores his awareness of situations out of his control as he narrates his tragedy from his own perspective helplessly and he cannot change the course of events occurring surrounding him.

In terms of historical observation and emplotment, Hamlet also functions as an observer of history; however, his approach to narrate and interpret events differs from the fetus's approach. Hamlet serves as an archivist of history, piecing together historical fragments to construct a coherent narrative of his father's murder. Unlike the fetus, he does not witness the murder directly but recounts through oral testimony, circumstantial evidence, and feigned madness. His duty and responsibility are to pursue the truth via historical inquiry in spite of being fully aware of the restrictions of bias and subjective perception. Shakespeare emphasizes Hamlet's responsibility as a historian when he states, "The time is out of joint: O cursed spite, / That ever I was born to set it right" (2003, I.V.188-189). It emphasizes his duty to recreate the past in order to reestablish order like a historian piecing together fragmented evidence to uncover the truth. Unlike the fetus in *Nutshell*, which passively witnesses unfolding events, Hamlet is compelled to actively analyse circumstantial evidence to overcome the uncertainties of history. Lewis asserts that the past that Hamlet constructs is "selective, subjective, and

divorced from the willingness to understand things as they might, in fact, have been” (2017, p. 172). In this sense, history “is something that people appeal to in the attempt to dignify or justify their inclinations and impulses in the present. It is instrumental, and has no objective force of its own” (Lewis, 2017, p. 172). Hamlet’s historical inquiry is constructing a narrative that serves his present motivations rather than uncovering an absolute truth. His endeavour to entails not merely a historical reconstruction but also an attempt to justify his own decisions. Shakespeare portrays history not as an objective account of the past but as a dynamic construct influenced by its interpreters. Hamlet, like a historian, is not just a recorder of history but an active participant in its creation.

Historical contingency, which is one of the fundamental principles within the theory of alternative history, indicates that historical events are not predetermined but are influenced by a complex interaction of chance, choice, and necessity. This viewpoint challenges deterministic narratives, highlighting the function of unforeseen factors in generating historical results. Hawthorn states, “The possibilities that we consider for the actual, by contrast, start from particular agents in particular sets of circumstances as those agents and sets of circumstances actually were. Models, theories, or precepts may guide our speculations about what might then follow” (1999, p. 168). History does not progress as a preordained sequence; instead, it arises from an intricate web of choices, coincidental events, and structural forces, each contributing to the formation of “plausible worlds” (Hawthorn, 1999, p. xi) that could have been. McEwan depicts the plausible world of the fetal-narrator:

I ask myself once more what I gain by their falling out. It could bring them down. Then I’ll keep Trudy. I’ve heard her say that in prison nursing mothers have a better life. But I’ll lose my birthright, the dream of all humanity, my freedom. Whereas together, as a team, they might scrape through. Then give me away. No mother, but I’ll be free. So which? (2016, p. 166-7).

The fetus conveys a similar sense of speculation about alternative choices and consequences. These lines illustrate the fetus’s internal conflict with regard to several potential futures, underscoring the novel’s engagement with historical contingency, alternative scenarios and counterfactual thinking. His mother, Trudy, and uncle, Claude, conspire to murder his father, John. This conspiracy posits the unborn child in an existential and “ethical dilemma” as he ponders on the ramifications of their actions for his future. He reveals the possibility that their dispute results in their separation but this leads to Trudy’s imprisonment. This scenario makes him anxious about his freedom and well-being. He contemplates that nursing mother can have better life conditions; however, he will lose his freedom. Another scenario is that when they reunite and overcome their difficulties, he is anxious about being abandoned. This internal conflict underscores the fetus’s tension between the yearning for maternal attachment and an inherent desire for freedom (Shang, 2017, p. 10-11).

*Hamlet* is also a literary text that profoundly examines historical contingency. Hamlet’s indecision, the unstable political atmosphere of Denmark, and the unexpected consequences of trivial actions generate a narrative domain filled with counterfactual possibilities. If Hamlet had acted decisively upon uncovering Claudius’ guilt or innocence, the narrative of the play and its tragic end could have been drastically changed. In this sense, Katsman asserts that alternative history does not simply create an alternate past but instead “proposes a different memory” which reveals “oscillation between myths, identities, and true ethically responsible choices” (2013, p.

74-5). Shakespeare situates Hamlet in a perpetual state of uncertainty in the middle of competing historical possibilities. This oscillation is most evident in his fluctuating conception of agency and fate. Initially, he perceives himself as an independent historical agent capable of controlling events, while at the end, he consents to the notion that history is dictated by an external force beyond his control. This tension can be seen in Hamlet's oscillation between decisive action and hesitant contemplation. When the Ghost firstly commands him to avenge his father, he replies with immediate determination: "Haste me to know't, that I with wings as swift / As meditation or the thoughts of love / May sweep to my revenge" (Shakespeare, 2003, I.V.29-31). Hamlet perceives himself as a crucial agent in history, entirely able to influence Denmark's future through his deliberate actions. However, after a while, his determination disintegrates into uncertainty as he contemplates the ethical and philosophical ramifications of vengeance. This is most memorably expressed in his soliloquy, "To be or not to be, that is the question" (Shakespeare, 2003, III.I.56), in which he contemplates not just life and death but also the implications of taking action versus passively allowing events happen without his involvement. His hesitation interrupts a linear understanding of time, generating a realm of historical oscillation that refers to a liminal state where multiple potential futures exist but remain unactualized. Besides, this soliloquy transcends mere existential introspection; it represents a moment of historical contingency, in which Hamlet realizes that his choice to act or not to act will irreversibly shape the future of Denmark. If he revenges his father's murder, he turns into an agent of history, reshaping the political landscape. Conversely, if he gives up, history progresses uninterrupted by his actions, highlighting the idea that personal choices determine historical results. Hellekson examines alternative history and emphasizes that history is not a static, linear continuum but a dynamic construct created by human agency, uncertainty, and contesting narratives. She claims that alternative histories "rupture linear movement" and necessitate a revision of "the past's link to the present, the present's link to the future, and the role of individuals in the history-making process" (2001, p. 10). This insight is directly related to *Hamlet*, as the protagonist is immobilized by the burden of possible consequences at a historical junction.

### **Counterfactual Ethics and the Burden of Moral Responsibility in *Nutshell***

Counterfactual narratives provide a distinctive perspective through which literature examines "historical moral responsibility." Counterfactual thinking examines the tension between reality and potential alternatives, facilitating a reconsideration of moral agency and experience in personal and historical contexts (Gallagher, 2018, p. 62). Counterfactual histories in fiction generally challenge traditional perceptions of causality, exposing the fragile relationship among fate, free will, and moral responsibility. *Nutshell* and *Hamlet* explore these profound themes from drastically distinct perspectives: *Hamlet* portrays the existential inertia of a prince burdened by revenge whereas *Nutshell* depicts the ironic situation of a conscious but impotent fetus observing a conspiracy to commit murder.

*Nutshell* and *Hamlet* utilize counterfactual ethics to examine the borders of human agency and the significance of moral responsibility. The protagonists in these texts grapple with

possible outcomes. Hamlet's well-known hesitancy to decide between avenging his father and reconsider the moral implications of his actions exemplifies a deep meditation of future potentials. McEwan's fetal narrator plays a pivotal role through the narrative as counterfactual thinker by contemplating multiple possible outcomes but he is incapable of influencing any of them. Both protagonists find themselves in a condition of speculative paralysis by struggling with the ethical consequences of inaction.

Owing to the shared exploration of speculative histories that inquiry the boundaries of fate and free will, the counterfactual ethics in *Nutshell* and *Hamlet* is profoundly influenced by historical alternativeness. Historical alternativeness is used through counterfactual narratives as a rhetorical device that interrupts linear time to uncover unrealized possibilities that represent the moral consequences of decision-making (Katsman, 2013, p. 10-11).

Historical alternativeness significantly influences the counterfactual ethics in *Nutshell* and *Hamlet*, as both texts explore speculative histories that examine the restrictions of fate and action. In counterfactual narratives, historical alternatives serve as a rhetorical mechanism that disrupts linear time, revealing unrealised possibilities that highlight the ethical implications of decision-making (Katsman, 2013, p. 10-11). Hamlet's indecision and inaction are linked to historical alternativeness because the trajectory of events through *Hamlet* is disrupted and remains unrealised. Similarly, *Nutshell's* fetus ponders potential futures; however, his insight of multiple possible outcomes does not encourage him to alter the course of the events. These narratives underscore the paradox of historical alternatives while counterfactual thinking implies a realm of infinite possibilities, both *Hamlet* and *Nutshell* ultimately reaffirm the constraints of contingency, illustrating that awareness of alternative histories does not necessarily equate to agency. Through the exploration of historical alternatives, these texts reveal the conflict between the perceived malleability of history and the determinism of fate, emphasizing ethical questions inherent to counterfactual introspection.

The counterfactual introspection can be associated the notion of personality. In terms of the theory of alternative history, personality is "a possibility of itself" as there are "different identities or different characters of the same personality" and "identification" with them generates the "personality's meaning." In other words, the personality's choice takes place along with the squire of choice, which is a continuum of identification/alienation. The squire of choice presents four possibilities of the personality at the bifurcation point. In this continuum, the first possibility is the nonmovement which means to remain in the current situation. The three dynamic options are alienation (equal to identification with the other), non-identification, and non-alienation (corresponding to renewed identification). The most famous instance of the alternativeness of choice is seen in *Hamlet*. Hamlet, as the protagonist of the play, possesses four potential outcomes. First, when Hamlet identifies with himself and his father, he believes in the ghost and takes revenge. Another possibility is self-alienation, which would entail rejecting his father's character and identifying with his enemy, Claudius, the play's archetypal "other," so involving betrayal and rejection of the pursuit of truth or a deliberate disregard for it. The third possibility is a non-identification with the paternal figure, which would effectively refer to inaction, neglecting the ghost, and avoiding from the pursuit of truth or revenge. In all three scenarios, Hamlet neither seeks the truth nor engages in contemplation. Concerning non-alienation as the fourth possibility, Hamlet may revive his identification with his father, though with suspicions and uncertainties, thereby seeks and discovers the truth. In this case, Hamlet

deals with a conflict while developing a new personality with which we are acquainted and that is the realized possibility in the narrative. Indeed, renewed identification is the means for the realized history, and the unrealised alternatives still exist in the background setting (Katsman, 2013, p. 201-2). Hamlet preserves his agency to determine his trajectory as a tragic hero. It shows that Hamlet's ultimate destiny is not wholly predetermined; instead, it results from a series of moral decisions with each option shaping a distinct ethical path. His final action in the duel with Laertes and Claudius signifies his complete movement of the decision-making process, culminating in a resolution that embodies neither absolute vengeance nor total passivity, but a realisation of his position in history.

The fetal narrator in *Nutshell* can be similarly examined regarding historical alternativeness and the square of choice. He lives a reality created by conflicting historical narratives: one in which he is born into a nurturing family and another in which he suffers as a victim of his mother and uncle's crime. He recognises the possibilities: to quietly accept fate or intervene in the approaching tragedy. His self-awareness and internal monologues indicate a profound engagement with various potential futures, similar to Hamlet's consideration of alternative actions. McEwan supports the idea of historical alternativeness within his narrative: "I count myself an innocent, but it seems I'm party to a plot. My mother, bless her unceasing, loudly squelching heart, seems to be involved ... My mother is involved in a plot, and therefore I am too, even if my role might be to foil it. Or if I, reluctant fool, come to term too late, then to avenge it" (2016, p. 2-3). The paradox of agency is clearly emphasized by the fetus's narrative. It is aware of multiple potential futures in which it becomes a passive victim or an active avenger. The fetus does not want to be part of the conspiracy but he is unable to avoid its consequences. This corresponds to the notion of historical alternativeness, as his reflection parallels Hamlet's internal struggle, exemplifying the tension between divergent versions of history that may unfold. Just like Hamlet, he is captured in a web of historical possibilities, fully aware that each choice results in a distinct reality. In other words, his position within the womb situates him at the brink of existence, rendering him acutely aware of unactualized futures. Similar to Hamlet, he is burdened by the realisation of crime and betrayal, oscillating between inaction and action, reflecting on potential results. Concerning the square of choice model, the fetus experiences four existential possibilities. He identifies with his father, John, and becomes resentful of Trudy and Claude. In terms of alienation, he contemplates emotional detachment, yielding to his sense of impotence. He reflects on inaction, acknowledging his impotence concerning non-identification. Lastly, within non-alienation, its ultimate resolution is to compel its own birth to symbolically disrupt the murder plan, which corresponds to renewed identification.

A crucial issue arising from the interaction between historical alternativeness and multiple alternatives of choice is the burden of moral responsibility, as both *Hamlet* and *Nutshell* uncover that awareness of multiple possible outcomes does not exempt an individual from the ethical consequences of decision-making but rather reinforces it. This study contextualises these texts within the extensive debate on counterfactual reasoning, examining how they scrutinise the significance of moral responsibility in a context where agency is constrained and fate seems inevitable. In *The Fragility of Goodness*, Nussbaum asserts that "the good human life relies on factors beyond human control" highlighting the limitations of ethical agency imposed by luck (2001, p. vii). Hamlet grapples with the conflict between agency and external forces, recognising that his moral decisions are restricted by factors beyond his control such as history, fate, political

duties, and his own psychology. By the end of the play, Hamlet embraces the idea that human fulfilment is vulnerable to external forces, adopting a fatalistic point of view: "If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come: the readiness is all" (Shakespeare, 2003, V.II.193-195). These lines indicate his unconditional acceptance of the fragility of human agency. Despite his attempts to shape events, he acknowledges that fortune and destiny dictate his ethical trajectory more drastically than his personal decisions. In this sense, Hamlet's existential conflict can be considered as not merely as a matter of moral agency but as a tragic recognition of the ways in which human existence is governed by uncontrollable factors. In *Reasons and Persons*, Parfit deepens this discussion by challenging the fundamental concept of stable personal identity as a prerequisite for ethical responsibility. He states, "Reduced psychological connectedness would reduce both responsibility for past crimes, and obligations to fulfil past commitments" (1984, p. 446). Hamlet's psychological transformation from indecision to acceptance can be perceived as a detachment from previous selves, especially the one that previously grappled with ethical responsibility. Relinquishing prior preoccupations with vengeance, duty, and consequence, Hamlet attains a state in which responsibility turns from a burden into an inevitability. The readiness he indicates is not only a preparedness for death but an acceptance of existence without objection to destiny. Moreover, this psychological transformation intensifies his tragic burden instead of relieving him of moral responsibility. He recognises that regardless of whether he acts immediately or later, the moral consequence is unavoidable. Even when the agency is constraint, awareness of alternatives increases the burden of moral responsibility rather than decrease it.

McEwan's *Nutshell* offers a distinctive exploration of moral responsibility from through the lens of an unborn fetus, serving as both an omniscient spectator and a powerless witness to a crime. The novel is examined in terms of moral responsibility by addressing philosophical and psychological theories, especially with counterfactual thinking, imagination, and moral cognition. Moral responsibility necessitates "two conditions" as the epistemic condition, which asserts that an agent must be aware of the relevant facts regarding their action, and "the control condition" which holds that the agent must act freely without pressure or external forces (Fischer and Ravizza, 1998, p. 13). The epistemic and control conditions are intimately connected to *Nutshell*'s primary moral dilemma: the fetus's understanding of the upcoming crime and his inability to act. In terms of the epistemic condition, he is fully conscious of the conspiracy between Trudy and Claude to murder his father. His internal monologue reveals a profound comprehension of the ethical significance of their acts: "Knowing everything, almost everything, I'm party to the crime, safe, obviously, from questioning, but fearful" (McEwan, 2016, p. 168). Although the fetus fulfils the epistemic condition, he cannot satisfy the control condition, as it remains physically incapable of altering the trajectory of events. Moral responsibility necessitates both knowledge and the autonomy to act on that knowledge (Fischer and Ravizza, 1998, p. 13). The lack of agency gives rise to an existential paradox, as the fetus endures profound moral distress due to his incapacity to act. The sense of powerless observation situates him in an ethically liminal space: "My thoughts turn with my mother's world. My father's rejection of me, his possible fate, my responsibility for it, then my own - fate, my inability to warn or act" (McEwan, 2016, p. 76). These lines reinforce the epistemic condition and emphasize the failure of the control condition regarding the ethical and psychological turmoil of the fetus. In spite of physically unable to intervene, he experiences a profound moral burden. Moral cognition is profoundly connected to counterfactual thinking in which individuals



create moral realities not solely via their behaviours but also through their contemplations of potential alternatives (Byrne, 2017, p. 314). The fetus obsessively reimagines potential acts, particularly the impossible ones. His impotence intensifies his existential paradox. Like Hamlet's moral inertia, the fetus is also unable to act. However, their conditions are different. The fetus possesses knowledge but is hindered by its circumstances resulting in a profound ethical dilemma while Hamlet does not have enough knowledge owing to his doubts and hesitations. Hamlet has the ability to fulfil the control condition but fails the epistemic condition whereas the fetus fulfils the epistemic condition and fails the control condition. In other words, Hamlet and the fetus demonstrate two distinct manifestations of moral paralysis: the fetus is incapable of action despite certainty; however, Hamlet possesses the capacity for action yet is paralysed by uncertainty.

However, through the end of the novel, the fetus presents a critical moment of transformation and he narrates his decision:

After all my turns and revisions, misinterpretations, lapses of insight, attempts at self-annihilation and sorrow in passivity, I've come to a decision. Enough. My amniotic sac is the translucent silk purse, fine and strong, that contains me. It also holds that protects me from the world and its bad dreams. No longer. Time to join in. To end the endings. Time to begin (McEwan, 2016, p. 191).

Through these lines, we see the active decision of the fetus, finalising his engagement with historical alternativeness and the paradox of agency. His will to disrupt the course of events is obvious with his premature birth. His reflection indicates a transition from passive observation to taking control to intervene. Despite his physical constraints, his psychological perspective turns from impotency to agency. Within this frame, Shang asserts that "his preterm birth is an important "ethical choice" of the narrator as a fetus; meanwhile, it also marks the beginning of his "ethical selection" of a human being as an ethical existence" (2017, p. 11).

### **Counterfactual Identity as an Alternative History of the Self in *Nutshell***

Counterfactual thinking plays a crucial role in identity formation and moral responsibility since individuals construct their sense of self through both lived experiences and hypothetical alternatives. In both *Hamlet* and *Nutshell*, identity is not solely an outcome of lived experience but is significantly shaped by counterfactual thinking as imagined alternatives reshape self-perception and moral responsibility. While Hamlet develops various potential selves through his fluctuation between action and inaction, the fetus in *Nutshell* contemplates speculative futures that remain perpetually unattainable. Their engagement with counterfactual possibilities reinforces their moral burden, highlighting the paradox of responsibility in a world where knowledge is not equivalent to control.

Alternate history scrutinizes "the very conception of historical time, trying to question its deterministic linearity" (Vinale, 2023, p. 359). Within the frame of alternative history, via

counterfactual thinking, people think about “what might have been” and imagine “how events might have turned out differently, ‘if only’ ...” (Byrne, 2005, p. 1). In other words, they consider and reconsider the routes not taken concerning the counterfactual narratives. Both Hamlet and the fetus shape their identities through imagined alternatives rather than fixed truths. Counterfactual thinking give rise to multiplicity of the self in these narratives because these protagonists construct multiple versions of their selves through speculations. In this sense, “the transmission of personal knowledge” is “to create a new identity” (Katsman, 2013, p. 258). Hamlet’s indecision between action and inaction reflects the fetus’s imaginative contemplation of existence beyond the womb. Similar to Hamlet’s contemplation of whether avenging his father will transform his identity, the fetus ponders his future identity at birth: will he be an individual formed by his mother’s crime or an innocent entity separate from it? Both characters construct counterfactual identities, defining themselves through possibilities rather than absolute realities.

Hamlet’s identity is ultimately influenced by the profound impact of lived experience, whereas the fetus’s identity remains entirely hypothetical. Hamlet endures “life-changing” and “dramatically personally transformative” experiences (Paul, 2014, p. 3) encountering his father’s ghost, engaging in philosophical reflections, and witnessing betrayal, which result in his counterfactual selves to confront reality. The fetus exists in a purely hypothetical state, constructing his identity exclusively from external narratives and imagined futures. He says, “My selfhood would be sculpted by pleasure, conflict, experience, ideas and my own judgement, as rocks and trees are shaped by rain, wind and time” (McEwan, 2016, p. 144-5). In contrast to Hamlet, whose identity is ultimately determined by ‘transformative’ experiences, the fetus exists in a state of pre-experiential liminality emphasising the paradox of self-formation within counterfactual narratives. Besides, the narrator’s unborn but hyper-aware position can be associated with a hybrid consciousness where “the emergence of a new identity space” as a “strategic counteraction” (Aldemir, 2025, p. 431). Existing in the womb, he is neither entirely active nor totally absent remaining in limbo. He generates a counterfactual subjectivity in resistance to his mother and uncle through counterfactual narration rather than transformative experiences.

Both *Hamlet* and *Nutshell* interrogate traditional notions of identity by presenting selfhood as a counterfactual construct. Therefore, in both cases, Hamlet’s fragmented identity manifests through transformative lived experiences and imagined alternatives, whereas the fetus constructs his identity only through speculative reasoning. The application of alternative history theory on these texts reveals that the construction of counterfactual identity functions similarly to counter-historical fiction, in which the past, present, and future are perpetually reconstructed through speculative thinking. Consequently, Hamlet and the fetus exemplify counter-historical subjects in a borderline position in which identity is formed not only by past experiences but also by future possibilities.

## Conclusion

This study examines *Nutshell* and *Hamlet* focusing on McEwan's novel as a counterfactual exploration of historical contingency, agency, and narrative reconstruction. *Nutshell* presents a contemplative critique of Hamlet, presenting the wider implications of counterfactual thinking in historical and literary discourse. The novel's dual paradigm allows for an examination of McEwan's critique of the restrictions of alternative history and the impotence of counterfactual speculation. Shakespeare portrays the conflict between historical determinism and contingency through Hamlet's changing philosophy. The fetus in *Nutshell* copes with the dichotomy of determinism and contingency, yet his position is drastically distinct from Hamlet. The fetus is hindered by his physical circumstances and unable to intervene in the crime he foresees. However, his final resolution to 'join in' reflects a limited effort to assert some form of agency.

Both *Hamlet* and *Nutshell* highlight the weight of ethical responsibility in which counterfactual consciousness does not ensure ethical agency or clarity. Indeed, it reveals the poignant realization that alternative histories are generally inaccessible. Recognizing the alternative outcomes, not only the fetus but also Hamlet are caught within the unavoidable trajectory of history owing to their impotence to escape the predestined nature of the narratives. *Nutshell* functions as a reimagining of Hamlet's existential crisis and a philosophical inquiry of the boundaries of counterfactual thinking. Both texts analyse the conception of identity as a counterfactual construction. Although the fetus's identity mainly matures through speculative reasoning, Hamlet's fragmented identity is influenced by transformative experiences and hypothetical scenarios. Within the frame of the theory of alternative history, this study shows that how the construction of counterfactual identity serves like counter-historical fiction, where past, present, and future are reimagined through speculation. Hamlet and the fetus exist in a liminal space in which their identities are formed by both their past experiences and future potentials.

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