

The “Stream of Consciousness” Style of Literature: A Study of English Novels

***P.Thippeswamy, Assistant Professor of English, HPPC Govt. First Grade College, Challakere.**

Abstract

This paper attempts to study how stream of consciousness a narrative mode or method that attempts "to depict the multitudinous thoughts and feelings which pass through the mind" of a narrator as employed by novelists. The term was coined by Alexander Bain in 1855 in the first edition of *The Senses and the Intellect*, when he wrote, "The concurrence of Sensations in one common stream of consciousness (on the same cerebral highway) enables those of different senses to be associated as readily as the sensations of the same sense" (p. 359). But it is commonly credited to William James who used it in 1890 in his *The Principles of Psychology*. In 1918, the novelist May Sinclair (1863–1946) first applied the term stream of consciousness, in a literary context, when discussing Dorothy Richardson's (1873–1957) novels. *Pointed Roofs* (1915), the first work in Richardson's series of 13 semi-autobiographical novels titled *Pilgrimage*, is the first complete stream-of-consciousness novel published in English. However, in 1934, Richardson comments that "Proust, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf & D.R. ... were all using 'the new method', though very differently, simultaneously". There were, however, many earlier precursors and the technique is still used by contemporary writers.

The term stream of consciousness, also known as Interior monologue characterizes the unbroken flow of thoughts and awareness in the waking mind. It is a mode of narration that attempts to give the written equivalent of the character's thought process either in a loose interior monologues or in connection to his/her actions. Stream of consciousness as a narrative technique successfully captures without the author's intervention ,the complete mental process of the character in which sense perception mingles with consciousness and half conscious thoughts,memories,feelings and random associations. In literature, the phrase refers to the flow of these thoughts, with reference to a particular character's thinking process. This literary device is usually used in order to provide a narrative in the form of the character's thoughts instead of using dialogue or description. The thought process in the mind of the characters is never coherent and jumps from one thought to the another.

Key words: *literary device, stream of consciousness, William James, free indirect discourse*

Introduction

Stream of consciousness is a narrative device that attempts to give the written equivalent of the character's thought processes, either in a loose interior monologue (see below), or in connection to their actions. Stream-of-consciousness writing is usually regarded as a special form of interior monologue and is characterized by associative leaps in thought and lack of some or all punctuation. Stream of consciousness and interior monologue are distinguished from dramatic monologue and soliloquy, where the speaker is addressing an audience or a third person, which are chiefly used in poetry or drama. In stream-of-consciousness, the speaker's

thought processes are more often depicted as overheard in the mind (or addressed to oneself); it is primarily a fictional device.

An early use of the term is found in philosopher and psychologist William James's *The Principles of Psychology* (1890): "consciousness, then, does not appear to itself as chopped up in bits ... it is nothing joined; it flows. A 'river' or a 'stream' are the metaphors by which it is most naturally described. In talking of it hereafter, let's call it the stream of thought, consciousness, or subjective life".

In the following example of stream of consciousness from James Joyce's *Ulysses*, Molly seeks sleep:

a quarter after what an unearthly hour I suppose they're just getting up in China now combing out their pigtailed for the day well soon have the nuns ringing the angelus they've nobody coming in to spoil their sleep except an odd priest or two for his night office the alarmclock next door at cockshout clattering the brains out of itself let me see if I can doze off 1 2 3 4 5 what kind of flowers are those they invented like the stars the wallpaper in Lombard street was much nicer the apron he gave me was like that something only I only wore it twice better lower this lamp and try again so that I can get up early The world wars had changed how people saw the world and as a result literature too changed as it is fundamentally the human experience. There was this post traumatic stress disorder after world war I. Men came from the war disillusioned with what they saw, did and experienced. The technique of stream of consciousness best captures these experiences of people. Perhaps the earliest stream of consciousness writer was the minor French novelist and a short story writer Eduard Dujardin who attempted the technique in a rather crude manner in his short novel "The laurels have been cut" In English the technique has been used by Dorothy Richardson in *pilgrimage* (1915-1938) Virginia Woolf in *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) *To the light house* (1927) William Faulkner in first part of *The sound and fury* (1929) arguably because of the long passages found in them by George Meredith, Henry James and James Joyce in *Ulysses* (1922). In 1918 May Sinclair first applied the term stream of consciousness in the literary context while discussing Dorothy Richardson's novel. Stream of Consciousness was a phrase used by William James in his *Principles of Psychology* (1890) to describe the unbroken flow of perceptions, thoughts, and feelings in the waking mind. It has since been adopted to describe a narrative method in modern fiction. Long passages of introspection, in which the narrator records in detail what passes through a character's awareness, are found in novelists from Samuel Richardson, through William James' brother Henry James, to many novelists of the present era.

Objective:

This paper intends to explore and analyze stream of consciousness as a method of narration that describes happenings in the flow of thoughts in the minds of the characters. Also called "interior monologue," where the individual thought processes of a character, associated to his or her actions, are portrayed in the form of a monologue that addresses the character itself. It is generally associated with the modern novelist and short story writers of the 20th century

Stream of consciousness

Stream of consciousness is a narrative style that tries to capture a character's thought process in a realistic way. It's an interior monologue, but it's also more than that. Because it's mimicking the non-linear way our brains work, stream-of-consciousness narration includes a lot of free association, looping repetitions, sensory observations, and strange (or even nonexistent) punctuation and syntax—all of which helps us to better understand a character's psychological state and worldview. It's meant to feel like you have dipped into the stream of the character's consciousness—or like you're a fly on the wall of their mind. Authors who use this technique are aiming for emotional and psychological truth: they want to show a snapshot of how the brain actually moves from one place to the next. Thought isn't linear, these authors point out; we don't really think in logical, well-organized, or even complete sentences.

While many sources use the terms stream of consciousness and interior monologue as synonyms, the Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms suggests that "they can also be distinguished psychologically and literarily. In a psychological sense, stream of consciousness is the subject matter, while interior monologue is the technique for presenting it". And for literature, "while an interior monologue always presents a character's thoughts 'directly', without the apparent intervention of a summarizing and selecting narrator, it does not necessarily mingle them with impressions and perceptions, nor does it necessarily violate the norms of grammar, or logic – but the stream-of-consciousness technique also does one or both of these things." Similarly, the Encyclopædia Britannica Online, while agreeing that these terms are "often used interchangeably", suggests that, "while an interior monologue may mirror all the half-thoughts, impressions, and associations that impinge upon the character's consciousness, it may also be restricted to an organized presentation of that character's rational thoughts".

Development

Beginnings to 1900

While the use of the narrative technique of stream of consciousness is usually associated with modernist novelists in the first part of the twentieth century, several precursors have been suggested, including Laurence Sterne's psychological novel *Tristram Shandy* (1757). John Neal in his novel *Seventy-Six* (1823) also used an early form of this writing style, characterized by long sentences with multiple qualifiers and expressions of anxiety from the narrator.

It has also been suggested that Edgar Allan Poe's short story "The Tell-Tale Heart" (1843) foreshadows this literary technique in the nineteenth century. Poe's story is a first person narrative, told by an unnamed narrator who endeavours to convince the reader of his sanity while describing a murder he committed, and it is often read as a dramatic monologue. George R. Clay notes that Leo Tolstoy, "when the occasion requires it ... applies Modernist stream of consciousness technique" in both *War and Peace* (1869) and *Anna Karenina* (1878).

The short story "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" (1890), by another American author, Ambrose Bierce, also abandons strict linear time to record the internal consciousness of the protagonist. Because of his renunciation of chronology in favor of free association, Édouard Dujardin's *Les Lauriers sont coupés* (1887) is also an important precursor. Indeed, James Joyce "picked up a copy of Dujardin's novel ... in Paris in 1903" and "acknowledged a certain borrowing from it".

Some point to Anton Chekhov's short stories and plays (1881–1904) and Knut Hamsun's *Hunger* (1890), and *Mysteries* (1892) as offering glimpses of the use of stream of consciousness as a narrative technique at the end of the nineteenth century. While *Hunger* is widely seen as a classic of world literature and a groundbreaking modernist novel, *Mysteries* is also considered a pioneer work. It has been claimed that Hamsun was way ahead of his time with the use of stream of consciousness in two chapters in particular of this novel. British author Robert Ferguson said: "There's a lot of dreamlike aspects of *Mysteries*. In that book ... it is ... two chapters, where he invents stream of consciousness writing, in the early 1890s. This was long before Dorothy Richardson, Virginia Woolf and James Joyce". Henry James has also been suggested as a significant precursor, in a work as early as *Portrait of a Lady* (1881). It has been suggested that he influenced later stream-of-consciousness writers, including Virginia Woolf, who not only read some of his novels but also wrote essays about them.

However, it has also been argued that Arthur Schnitzler (1862–1931), in his short story "'Leutnant Gustl'" ("None but the Brave", 1900), was the first to make full use of the stream of consciousness technique.

Early twentieth century

But it is only in the twentieth century that this technique is fully developed by modernists. Marcel Proust is often presented as an early example of a writer using the stream of consciousness technique in his novel sequence *À la recherche du temps perdu* (1913–1927) (*In Search of Lost Time*), but Robert Humphrey comments that Proust "is concerned only with the reminiscent aspect of consciousness" and that he "was deliberately recapturing the past to communicate; hence he did not write a stream-of-consciousness novel". Novelist John Cowper Powys also argues that Proust did not use stream of consciousness: "while we are told what the hero thinks or what Swann thinks we are told this rather by the author than either by the 'I' of the story or by Charles Swann."

The term was first applied in a literary context in *The Egoist*, April 1918, by May Sinclair, in relation to the early volumes of Dorothy Richardson's novel sequence *Pilgrimage*. Richardson, however, describes the term as a "lamentably ill-chosen metaphor".

James Joyce was a major pioneer in the use of stream of consciousness. Some hints of this technique are already present in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), along with interior monologue, and references to a character's psychic reality rather than to his external surroundings. Joyce began writing *A Portrait* in 1907 and it was first serialised in the English literary magazine *The Egoist* in 1914 and 1915. Earlier in 1906, Joyce, when working on *Dubliners*, considered adding another story featuring a Jewish advertising canvasser called Leopold Bloom under the title *Ulysses*. Although he did not pursue the idea further at the

time, he eventually commenced work on a novel using both the title and basic premise in 1914. The writing was completed in October 1921. Serial publication of *Ulysses* in the magazine *The Little Review* began in March 1918. *Ulysses* was finally published in 1922. While *Ulysses* represents a major example of the use of stream of consciousness, Joyce also uses "authorial description" and Free Indirect Style to register Bloom's inner thoughts. Furthermore, the novel does not focus solely on interior experiences: "Bloom is constantly shown from all round; from inside as well as out; from a variety of points of view which range from the objective to the subjective". In his final work *Finnegans Wake* (1939), Joyce's method of stream of consciousness, literary allusions and free dream associations was pushed to the limit, abandoning all conventions of plot and character construction, and the book is written in a peculiar and obscure English, based mainly on complex multi-level puns.

Another early example is the use of interior monologue by T. S. Eliot in his poem "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (1915), "a dramatic monologue of an urban man, stricken with feelings of isolation and an incapability for decisive action," a work probably influenced by the narrative poetry of Robert Browning, including "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister".

Stream Of Consciousness Writing

From the modernist era forward, stream of consciousness writing has been consistently popular. Here are some of its most notable applications.

James Joyce, *Ulysses* (1922). This novel tracks a single day in the life of Irishman Leopold Bloom. It contains long lengthy passages of stream of consciousness, truly mimicking a brain's free-associative abilities. Joyce pushed this technique even further in later works, culminating in the arguably narrative-free *Finnegans Wake*.

Samuel Beckett, *Molloy* (1951). Beckett used many of the same narrative techniques as his Irish contemporary Joyce. Most famous as a dramatist, Beckett placed stream of consciousness style monologues in the mouths of many of his characters and later applied the method to his novels.

Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925). Woolf used stream of consciousness writing to articulate her characters' inner monologues, both in this novel and others like *To The Lighthouse*.

William Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying* (1930). Faulkner had already worked with stream of consciousness in earlier novels like *The Sound and the Fury*, but *As I Lay Dying* stood out in its method of narrating the novel through the perspective of 15 different characters, each of whom narrated in a stream of consciousness style.

Jack Kerouac, *On the Road* (1957). Kerouac's novel stood out for using stream of consciousness as actual narration. Via the largely autobiographical narrator Sal Paradise, Kerouac presents the story as a largely uninterrupted flow of ideas. Driving home the point was the fact that Kerouac typed the entire novel in epic bursts on a continuous roll of typewriter paper.

Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes From Underground* (1864). Decades before "stream of consciousness" became a literary term, authors were using it to create intimate portraits of their narrators. The technique was popular in Russian literary culture, with strong examples written by the likes of Tolstoy, Chekov, and Dostoevsky.

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1923 to 2000

Prominent uses in the years that followed the publication of James Joyce's *Ulysses* include Italo Svevo, *La coscienza di Zeno* (1923), Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), *To the Lighthouse* (1927), and William Faulkner in *The Sound and the Fury* (1929). However, Randell Stevenson suggests that "interior monologue, rather than stream of consciousness, is the appropriate term for the style in which is recorded, both in *The Waves* and in Woolf's writing generally." Throughout *Mrs Dalloway*, Woolf blurs the distinction between direct and indirect speech, freely alternating her mode of narration between omniscient description, indirect interior monologue, and soliloquy. Malcolm Lowry's novel *Under the Volcano* (1947) resembles *Ulysses*, "both in its concentration almost entirely within a single day of Firmin's life ... and in the range of interior monologues and stream of consciousness employed to represent the minds of characters". Samuel Beckett, a friend of James Joyce, uses interior monologue in novels like *Molloy* (1951), *Malone meurt* (1951; *Malone Dies*) and *L'innommable* (1953: *The Unnamable*). and the short story "From an Abandoned Work" (1957).

In theatre, playwright Eugene O'Neill made use of stream-of-consciousness monologues, most extensively in his 1928 drama *Strange Interlude*, and to a more limited extent in the play-cycle *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931) and other plays.

The technique continued to be used into the 1970s in a novel such as Robert Anton Wilson/Robert Shea collaborative *Illuminatus!* (1975), concerning which *The Fortean Times* warns readers to "be prepared for streams of consciousness in which not only identity but time and space no longer confine the narrative".

Although loosely structured as a sketch show, Monty Python produced an innovative stream-of-consciousness for their TV show *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, with the BBC stating, "Gilliam's unique animation style became crucial, segueing seamlessly between any two completely unrelated ideas and making the stream-of-consciousness work".

Scottish writer James Kelman's novels are known for mixing stream of consciousness narrative with Glaswegian vernacular. Examples include *The Busconductor Hines*, *A Disaffection* and *How Late It Was, How Late*. With regard to Salman Rushdie, one critic comments that "If Rushdie's novels follow an Indian/Islamic storytelling style, a stream-of-consciousness narrative told by a loquacious young Indian man". Other writers who use this narrative device include Sylvia Plath in *The Bell Jar* (1963) and Irvine Welsh in *Trainspotting* (1993).

Stream of consciousness continues to appear in contemporary literature. Dave Eggers, author of *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (2000), according to one reviewer, "talks much as he writes – a forceful stream of consciousness, thoughts sprouting in all directions". Novelist John Banville describes Roberto Bolaño's novel *Amulet* (1999), as written in "a fevered stream of consciousness".

Conclusion

Stream of consciousness writing refers to a narrative technique where the thoughts and emotions of a narrator or character are written out such that a reader can track the fluid mental state of these characters.

The term “stream of consciousness” traces back to *The Principles of Psychology*, published in 1890 by William James. It was first applied to literary criticism by May Sinclair in 1918, via analysis of novels by Dorothy Richardson. However, the technique existed long before it was named—stream of consciousness writing can be found in the nineteenth-century works by Edgar Allan Poe, Leo Tolstoy, and Ambrose Bierce, among many others. It became especially popular among writers of the Modernist era—roughly contemporaneous with Sinclair’s 1918 essay. Famous Modernist practitioners of the stream of consciousness technique include Virginia Woolf, Samuel Beckett, James Joyce, and Marcel Proust. It has remained fashionable in the ensuing years, appearing in the mid-century works of William Faulkner, Jack Kerouac, and Flannery O’Connor to those of contemporary writers like Stephen King, Salman Rushdie, and Nathaniel Rich.

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