

Stream of Consciousness

“The stream of our thought is like a river. On the whole easy simple flowing predominates...But at intervals an obstruction, a set-back, a log-jam occurs, stops the current, creates an eddy, and makes things move the other way.”

William James (1842 - 1910)

U.S. psychologist and philosopher.

The Principles of Psychology

Stream of Consciousness, literary technique, first used in the late 19th century, employed to evince subjective as well as objective reality. It reveals the character's feelings, thoughts, and actions, often following an associative rather than a logical sequence, without commentary by the author.

Stream of consciousness is often confused with interior monologue, but the latter technique works the sensations of the mind into a more formal pattern: a flow of thoughts inwardly expressed, similar to a soliloquy. The technique of stream of consciousness, however, attempts to portray the remote, preconscious state that exists before the mind organizes sensations. Consequently, the re-creation of a stream of consciousness frequently lacks the unity, explicit cohesion, and selectivity of direct thought.

Stream of consciousness, as a term, was first used by William James, the American philosopher and psychologist, in his book *The Principles of Psychology* (1890). Widely used in narrative fiction, the technique was perhaps brought to its highest point of development in *Ulysses* (1922) and *Finnegans Wake* (1939) by the Irish novelist and poet James Joyce. Other exponents of the form were American novelist William Faulkner and British novelist Virginia Woolf. The British writer Dorothy Richardson is considered by some actually to be the pioneer in use of the device. Her novel *Pilgrimage* (1911-1938), a 12-volume sequence, is an intense analysis of the development of a sensitive young woman and her responses to the world around her.

Characters in Stream of Consciousness :

In the 20th century, experiments with stream of consciousness, a literary technique in which authors represent the flow of sensations and ideas, added to the depth of character portrayal. English novelist Virginia Woolf followed this approach to explore the characters of an Englishwoman and a young former soldier in *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925). Sometimes stream of consciousness challenges the reader. In *To the Lighthouse* (1927), Woolf achieves a deliberately disorienting effect by moving subtly from character to character, from past to present, and from external events to internal thoughts.

Stream of consciousness as technique :

Irish writer James Joyce. In his novel *Ulysses* (1922) he focused on the events of a single day and related them to one another in thematic patterns based on Greek mythology. In *Finnegans Wake* (1939) Joyce went beyond this to create a whole new vocabulary of puns and *portmanteau* (merged) words from the elements of many languages and to devise a simple domestic narrative from the interwoven parts of many myths and traditions. In some of these experiments his novels were paralleled by those of Virginia Woolf, whose *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) and *To the Lighthouse* (1927) skillfully imitated, by the so-called stream-of-consciousness technique, the complexity of immediate, evanescent life experienced from moment to moment. Dame Ivy Compton-Burnett appeals to a small but discerning readership with her idiosyncratic dissections of family relationships, told almost entirely in sparse dialogue; her novels include *Brothers and Sisters* (1929), *Men and Wives* (1931), and *Two Worlds and Their Ways* (1949).

Faulkner's works demanded much of his readers. To create a mood, he might let one of his complex sentences run on for more than a page. He juggled time, spliced narratives, experimented with multiple narrators, and interrupted simple stories with rambling, stream-of-consciousness soliloquies. Although hailed as a genius, Faulkner acquired a reputation as a difficult author to read. American critic Malcolm Cowley, concerned that the writer was insufficiently known and appreciated, put together *The Portable Faulkner* (1946). This book arranged excerpts from Faulkner's novels into a chronological sequence that gave the entire

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Virginia Woolf (1882-1941), British novelist, essayist, and critic, who helped create the modern novel. Her writing often explores the concepts of time, memory, and people's inner consciousness, and is remarkable for its humanity and depth of perception. Before the early 1900s, fiction emphasized plot as well as detailed descriptions of characters and settings. Events in the external world, such as a marriage, murder, or deception, were the most important aspects of a story. Characters' interior, or mental, lives served mainly to prepare for or motivate such meaningful external occurrences. Woolf's novels, however, emphasized patterns of consciousness rather than sequences of events in the external world. Influenced by the works of French writer Marcel Proust and Irish writer James Joyce, among others, Woolf strove to create a literary form that would convey inner life. To this end, she elaborated a technique known as stream of consciousness, recording, as she described it, 'the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall,' tracing 'the pattern, however disconnected ... in appearance, which each ... incident scores upon consciousness.' Her novels do not limit themselves to a single consciousness, but move from character to character, using interior monologues to present each person's differing responses, often to the same event. Her specific contribution to the art of fiction was this representation of multiple consciousnesses hovering around a common center.