

STREAM OF CONSCIOUSNESS

ORIGIN OF CONCEPT

“The discovery that memories, thoughts, and feelings exist outside the primary consciousness is the most important step forward that has occurred in psychology since I have been a student of that science.”

William James
The Principles of Psychology
(Holt 1890)

DEFINITION

“The total range of awareness and emotive-mental response of an individual, from the lowest pre-speech level to the highest fully articulated level of rational thought. The assumption is that in the mind of an individual at a given moment a *stream of consciousness* (the phrase originated in this sense with Alexander Bain in 1855 and was given currency later by William James) is a mixture of all the levels of awareness, an unending flow of sensations, thoughts, memories, associations, and reflections; if the exact content of the mind (‘consciousness’) is to be described at any moment, then these varied, disjointed, and illogical elements must find expression in a flow of words, images, and ideas similar to the unorganized flow of the mind.

However, because consciousness is neither a stream nor a thing given to verbal articulation, the *stream-of-consciousness* technique has become as artificial and convention-bound as any other literary technique, although it may give the impression or illusion of preserving a lifelike resemblance to real consciousness. Joyce’s approximation involved the removal of customary signals, such as quotation marks, hyphens in compounds, and chapter numbers and titles. By moving the written text closer to the realm of speech, which is normally unpunctuated, Joyce gave the impression, in effect, of moving his discourse from the outer world of the reading eye to the inner world of the listening ear....

In general, most psychological novels report the flow of conscious and ordered intelligence, as in the work of Henry James, or the flow of memory activated by association, as in the work of Marcel Proust; but the stream-of-consciousness novel tends to concentrate its attention chiefly on the nonverbalized level, where the image must express the unarticulated response without the logic or grammar. However differing the techniques employed, the writers of the stream-of-consciousness novel seem to share certain common assumptions: (1) that the significant existence of human beings is to be found in their mental-emotional processes and not in the outside world, (2) that this mental-emotional life is disjointed and illogical, and (3) that a pattern of free psychological association rather than of logical relation determines the shifting sequence of thought and feeling.

Attempts to concentrate the subject matter of fiction on the inner consciousness are not new by any means. The earliest impressive example seems to be Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* (1759-1767), with its motto from Epictetus: ‘It is not actions, but opinions about actions, which disturb men,’ and with its application of Locke’s psychological theories of association and duration to the functioning of the mind. Yet Sterne, although he freed the sequence of thought from the rigors of logical organization, did not get below the speech level in his portrait of Tristram’s consciousness. Henry James, too, remained on a consciously articulated level. In a major sense the present-day stream-of-consciousness novel is a product of Freudian psychology with its structure of subliminal levels, although a precursor appeared in *Les lauriers sont coupés*, by Edouard Dujardin, 1888, where the interior monologue was used for the first time in the modern sense. Other important users of the interior monologue...have been Dorothy Richardson, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, Thomas Wolfe, and William Faulkner.”

C. Hugh Holman & William Harmon, eds.
A Handbook to Literature, sixth edition
(Macmillan 1936-92)

TECHNIQUES

1. Direct interior monologue: the technique used in fiction for representing the psychic content and processes of character, partly or entirely unuttered, just as these processes exist at various levels of conscious control before they are formulated for deliberate speech, with negligible author interference and no auditor assumed. The most famous example is the last 45 pages of *Ulysses* (1922) by James Joyce.
2. Indirect interior monologue: an omniscient author presents unspoken material as if it were directly from the consciousness of a character and, with commentary and description, guides the reader through it. It differs from direct interior monologue basically in that the author intervenes between the character's psyche and the reader, as in *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) and *To the Lighthouse* (1927) by Virginia Woolf.
3. Omniscient description: an omniscient author describes the psyche through conventional methods of narration and description, as in *Pilgrimage* (1915-35) by Dorothy Richardson, influenced by Imagism in poetry. See Preface to *Some Imagist Poets* (1915).
4. Soliloquy: differs from the interior monologue primarily in that, although it is spoken *solus*, it nevertheless is represented with the assumption of a formal and immediate audience, as in *As I Lay Dying* (1930) by William Faulkner.

DEVICES

1. Suspension of sense impressions and ideas in the memory for so long they reappear by psychological association
2. Representation of discontinuity and compression by standard rhetorical figures
3. Suggestion of multiple levels of meaning by images and symbols

PATTERNS

1. Classical unities of time, place, character and action
2. Symbolic structures
3. Motifs
4. Scenic arrangements
5. Natural cycles such as days, seasons and tides
6. Theoretical cycles such as history and musical structures

OVERVIEW

“From the earliest experiments with impressionistic rendering of the inner world, illustrated at its best in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* and at its most extensive in Dorothy Richardson's *Pilgrimage*, through the extremely forceful presentation of psychic life in Joyce's *Ulysses*, to the culmination of experiment in *The Waves* by Woolf and *Finnegan's Wake* by Joyce--which led to obscurity--we come to a retrenchment and synthesis in Faulkner's stream-of-consciousness novels: a return to the fundamental basis of fiction, the prominent use of significant external action.”

Robert Humphrey
adapted from *Stream of Consciousness in the Modern Novel*

(U of California 1954, 1962)

Michael Hollister (2015)