Stream of consciousness

(For B.A. fourth semester)

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When writing a novel, writers are presented with an array of literary styles to further their story. Each style possesses its own unique attributes and very in suitability depending on the story, characters and overall meaning that the author tries to illustrate. The stream of consciousness is one such writing style. It is a technique specially in nondramatic fiction intended to render the flow of myriad impressions – visual, auditory, physical, associative and subliminal that impinge on the consciousness of an individual and form part of his awareness along with the trend of his rational thoughts. The phrase was used by William James in his ‘Principles of Psychology’ in 1880 to characterize the unbroken flow of thought and awareness in the waking mind. It has now been adopted to describe a narrative method in modern fiction. Long passages of introspection are found in novelists such as George Meredith and Henry James etc which is a sustained attempt to represent all the scenes and events as they impinge upon the consciousness of the central character.

The stream of consciousness as it was refined after World War I is a mode of narration that undertakes to capture the full spectrum and flow of a characters mental process, in which sense perceptions mingle with conscious and half-conscious thoughts, memories feelings and random associations. Some critics use ‘stream of consciousness’ interchangeably with the term ‘interior monologue’. The Interior monologue, in its radical form, is sometimes described as the exact reproduction of consciousness, but since sense perceptions, feelings, and some aspects of thought itself are nonverbal, it is clear that the author must convert these elements into some kind of verbal equivalent, and much of this conversion is matter of narrative convention rather than of unedited, point-for- point reproduction. The Interior monologue is reserved for that kind of stream of consciousness which depicts the ongoing conscious thoughts that occur in a characters mind. Interior monologue can further be split up into direct and indirect forms. In interior monologue the author does not intervene and does not correct the irregularities of the mental thoughts into grammatically accurate sentences or into a logical or coherent order.

James Joyce perfected various techniques of stream of consciousness narration in his ‘Ulysses’. Dorothy Richardson sustains a stream of consciousness narrative, focused exclusively on the mind of her heroine, throughout the twelve volumes of her novel ‘Pilgrimage’; Virginia Woolf employs the procedure as the chief narrative mode in several novels including ‘Mrs. Dalloway’ and ‘To the Lighthouse’. William Faulkner also exploits it brilliantly in the first three of the four parts of ‘The Sound and the Fury’.

The most famous aspect of ‘A Portrait of the artist as a Young Man’ is James Joyce’s innovative use of stream of consciousness, a style in which the author directly transcribes the thoughts and sensations that go through a characters mind, rather than simply describing those sensations from the external standpoint of an observer. Joyce’s use of stream of consciousness makes A Portrait of the artist as a Young Man a story of the development of Stephen’s mind. In the first chapter, the very young Stephen is only capable of describing his world in simple words and phrases. The sensations that he experiences are all jumbled together with a child’s lack of attention to cause and effect. Later, when Stephen is a teenager obsessed with religion, he is able to think in a clearer, more adult manner. Stephen’s mind is more mature and he is now more coherently aware of his surroundings. Nonetheless, he still trusts blindly in the church, and his passionate emotions of guilt and religious ecstasy are so strong that they get in the way of rational thought. It is only in the final chapter, when Stephen is in the university, that he seems truly rational. By the end of the novel, Joyce renders a portrait of a mind that has achieved emotional, intellectual and artistic adulthood.

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