

## UNDERSTANDING THE STREAM OF CONSCIOUSNESS TEXT: A LINGUISTIC PERSPECTIVE

SUKANYA SAHA

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Vidhyasagar Women's College, Chengalpattu, Tamil Nadu, India

### ABSTRACT

George Orwell's dictum that a novelist's prose should be a clear pane of glass through which the story can be clearly viewed, does not apply to the language of literary geniuses like Stream of Consciousness writers. These writers brought a kind of revolution in English prose by adding to it a potential and concrete force.

For many critics, Stream of Consciousness is the most important innovation in fiction of the twentieth century. These writers perfected the technique of stream of consciousness; emerged as the most inventive of the experimental novelists. Their work represents a great labyrinth, where reader is taken through a startling journey to an equally amazing realization and understanding of the workings of consciousness

After analysing their works, we find that one of the peculiarities of their writing is that in many ways it is unsurpassable. Their toying with language is many times startling and engages one's mind for a long time.

The present paper is an attempt to exemplify the poetic licences or the liberty which the stream of consciousness writers enjoy in the depiction of the working of human consciousness.

**KEYWORDS:** Stream of Consciousness technique, linguistic experimentation, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Ulysses

### INTRODUCTION

The stream of consciousness technique is perhaps the most innovative and most intrigued technique of modern fiction. This technique caught much attention due to its radical differences from conventional narration. The Oxford Companion to English literature records, "Stream of consciousness is a phrase coined by William James in his Principles of Psychology (1890) to describe the narrative methods whereby certain novelists describe the unspoken thoughts and feelings of their characters without resorting to objective or conventional dialogue"<sup>1</sup>.

'Stream of Consciousness' (hereafter referred as SOC) is specifically a literary technique with the involvement of psyche of fictional characters. It seeks to depict the multitudinous thoughts and feelings which pass through the human mind. "The Stream of Consciousness", says Joseph Warren Beach "is an infection to which anyone is liable". It is a kind of Epidemic which he declares, has left its stamp upon modern fiction in English. He further says:

The Stream of Consciousness type of narrative is a new and radical development from the subjectivism of the well-made novel. Its defining feature is exploitation of the element of incoherence in our conscious process. This incoherence characterizes both our normal and abnormal states of mind. The natural association of ideas is extremely freakish. Our psyche is such an imperfect, integrated bundle of memories, sensations and impulses, that unless sternly controlled by some dominating motives it is likely

to be at the mercy of every stray wind of suggestion<sup>2</sup>.

The SOC novel can be termed a revolutionary in its form, technique and to be specific, in language. In order to represent the character's ceaseless flow of thoughts and impressions, the authors have taken much liberties with regards to traditional fictional and structural norms. John Mepham in his article "stream of consciousness" discusses this technique in great detail. According to him, the SOC technique particularly aims at providing a textual equivalent to the stream of fictional character's consciousness. It gives an impression of reader's peeping into the flow of various experiences in the character's mind, gaining intimate access to his / her private thoughts. This technique involves presentation of the consciousness in written form, which is neither entirely verbal nor textual in form and structure.<sup>3</sup>

The SOC writer is a great experimenter. His mastery over the technique, the form, the style and the medium of fictional articulation while dealing with the consciousness of characters in his novels is evident in textual representation of disorderly thought process. Hence, the author confers upon language a complete autonomy; he has mastered the language and makes a verbal vision of life cutting across time and space. It becomes necessary for an author to introduce many linguistic features for the delineation of hazy and evanescent impressions of the mind.

The uniqueness with which authors like James Joyce, Dorothy Richardson and Virginia Woolf, use language in their novels has startled the critics and readers worldwide. These writers transcribe the thoughts and sensations that go on in a character's brain by the means of extensive linguistic experimentation, instead of simply describing them from the external standpoint of an observer. Hence, reader gets the most intimate thoughts of the character.

## DISCUSSIONS

In order to present the character's experiences, the language of these novels attains a special character. David Daiches<sup>4</sup> opines that presentations of the unique constitutions of consciousness should be reflected in the language. Hence, the first and foremost aim of the SOC novelist is to weave a linguistic pattern which would be expressive of that constant flux. Language being a vehicle of expression always attains an unprecedented character in the hands of SOS writers, who spurn literal description of things as empty pretension to realism. The path of the novelist becomes exceedingly difficult as he aims at challenging the mental faculty of his readers in deciphering the intrinsic sense of his innovative structures. SOC writer attempts to present experience of reality in communicable form, i.e. the verbatim reproduction of the mind's ponderings.

The problem with conventional patterns or norms of language is that it is capable or expected to communicate all states of consciousness in concrete forms, i.e. in the form of words, images, symbols etc. arranged in an order as sentence. The question which immediately strikes is, do we human beings always think in grammatically perfect structures? Hence, in the tangle of conventional structures, symbols or lexis, the rawness of the thought gets twisted or distorted if not completely destroyed. Needless to say that a SOC writer hence resorts to a highly fluid style with numerous fleeting shades and tones. Writer's fictional discourse, in order to capture the ceaseless flow of the unconscious and conscious of the character exhibits extravagant departures from ordinary and conventional linguistic usages. These departures often lead to obscurity and resultantly his discourse poses difficulties in understanding for a common reader. Michael Seidel, writes about Joyce that, "He never tried as a matter of course to be difficult. Rather, he had some goals in mind for what he felt narrative should and could do"<sup>5</sup>. SOC writer invites his readers to participate, contemplate and respond to his narratives. This is the cause behind the works of Woolf, Richardson and Joyce's worldwide appraisal and immense criticism. Every

time a reader or a critic comes across their novels he comes out with new interpretations as their texts are open ended. These writers open up a rich new territory of innovations and experimentations with their discourse as it comprises many inventions in the areas of lexis and syntax, narrative technique and text formation. The grammatically approved syntax is thrown overboard and a droll looking, fluid construction of sentences are adopted to express the ceaseless flow to thought process. The following passage from James Joyce's *Ulysses* supports the argument:

After he woke me up last night same dream or was it? Wait.  
Open hallway. Streets of harlots. Remember. HarounalRaschid. I am almosting it. That man led me,  
spoke. I was not afraid. The melon he had he held against my face. Smiled: cream fruit smell. That was  
the rule, said. In. Come. Red carpet spread. You will see who.  
(U, 58-9)

These sentences are in the form of stray ideas produced spontaneously one after another without completion and overt linkages. The ideas of this passage cannot be connected to each other, firstly because these ideas belong to different semantic fields and secondly the sentences are syntactically and cohesively incomplete. Most of these sentence fragments lack subjects, verbs, objects and conjuncts. Here Joyce depicts the stream of Stephen's thoughts, skipping associatively from one perception or thought to the next.

There is no linear progression of narration or the proper development of a single idea. The writer wants to delineate the haphazard conscious thought process which is sometimes full of diversions and is random association of ideas. He thus catches the essence of the most obvious and intimate thoughts of his characters at a particular situation and mental state. There is a sudden leap noticeable from one context to the next breaking the continuity of the passage as a whole. For example, consider the following passage. The context reveals that Stephens's thoughts do not follow a logical or semantic cohesive order:

(1) It would be nice to lie in the hearthrug before the fire, leaning his head upon his hands, and think on those sentences. / (2) He shivered as if he had cold slimy water next his skin. (3) That was mean of Wells to shoulder him into the square ditch because he would not swop his little snuffbox for Well's seasoned hacking chestnut, the conqueror of forty. (4) How cold and slimy the water had been! / (5) A fellow had once seen a big rat jump into the scum. / (6) Mother was sitting at the fire with Dante waiting for Brigit to bring the tea. / (7) She had her feet on the fender and her jewelery slippers were so hot and they had such a lovely warm smell! / (8) Dante knew a lot of things. / (9) She had taught him where the Mozambique Channel was and what was the longest river in America and what was the name of highest mountain in the moon. / (10) Father Arnall knew more than Dante because he was a priest but both his father and Uncle Charles said that Dante was a clever woman and a well read woman. / (11) And when Dante made that noise after dinner and then put up her hand to her mouth: that was heartburn. (AP, 10-1)

**The Following Table Explains the Leaps in the Thought Process of the Character**

Varying Contexts	Sentence Numbers in the Passage
Search for warmth near fire	1
Remembrance of the cold and slimy water of the ditch and reflections on the meanness of Wells	2-4
A fellow's vision of a big rat	5
Mother and Dante	6
Dante's jewelly slippers	7
Dante's knowledge of lots of things	8-9
Father Arnall's knowledge of worldly affairs and uncle Charles and father's views about Dante.	10
Dante, suffering from heartburn	11

Molly Bloom's eighty pages long interior monologue, positioned at the end of *Ulysses*, is a spontaneous flow of eight sentences. There is no punctuation to mark them as clear distinct and meaningful sentences. These can be rather called as extension of sentences which beyond their normal limits. Thus, we cannot take them up as sentences having conventional structures and graphic markings; rather they are more like paragraphs:

...well he could buy me a nice present up in Belfast after what I gave they've lovely linen up there on one of those nice kimono things I must buy a moth boll like I had before to keep in the drawer with them it would be exciting going around with him stopping buying those things in a new city better leave this ring behind want to keep turning and turning to get it over the knuckle there or they might bell it round the town in their papers or tell the police on me but they'd think were married O let them all go and smother themselves for the fat lot I care he has plenty of money and has not a marrying man so somebody better get it out of him if I could find out whether he likes me...  
(U, 886-7)

There are mainly sentence fragments in the interior monologues of characters in SOC novels. These are very effective in expressing the character's random associations. These are syntactically incomplete, for example, noun phrases have no verbs, verbs have no subjects, objects lack subject and verb both etc. These fragments are actually associations of stray ideas. Some examples are quoted here:

Pick the bones clean no matter who it was. Ordinary meat for them. A corpse is meat gone bad. Well and what's cheese? Corpse of milk. I read in that Voyages in China that the Chinese say a white man smells like a corpse. Cremation better. Priests dead against it. Devilling for the other firm. Wholesale burners and Dutch over dealers. Time of plague. Quicklime fever pits to eat them. Lethal chamber. Ashes to ashes. Or bury at sea.  
(U, p. 145)

## CONCLUSIONS

Almost every sentence these writers write is a work of art in itself, being strikingly innovative and having an unprecedented construction, which is sporadic in the traditional fiction. The depiction the random association of ideas is difficult through traditional grammatical structures. The quick and arbitrary mental associations are articulated through such deviant syntax. Joyce makes ample use of sentence fragments, as we know that our thoughts are faster and more fragmentary than any verbal articulation of them, so are these sentences. Presentation of the interior monologue in well-

formed sentences would be much less expressive or as stated earlier would do injustice to the originality of the thought. Writers often represent the stream of consciousness by leaving out verbs, pronouns; articles etc. and leave the sentences unfinished. The best part of SOC novels is that it is successful in generating positive response from critics and readers alike worldwide, owing to the ingenuity involved in the fabrication of such narratives. The writer's linguistic experimentation made his works energizing and enjoyable to everyone. The task of understanding and explicating SOC narrative proves to be endless. Reading SOC punctures any settled complacency about theoretical issues. Since language is an open ended entity so there is no end to a linguistic study of the works of a SOC writer as they leave immense scope for new discoveries.

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