

# Stream of Consciousness Technique: Psychological Perspectives and Use in Modern Novel

**Weam Majeed Alkhafaji**

University of Kufa, College of Education

Email: [weamm.alkhafaji@uokufa.edu.iq](mailto:weamm.alkhafaji@uokufa.edu.iq)

**Sajedeh Asna'ashari**

Candle & Fog Publishing Company

Email: [sajedehasnaashari@yahoo.com](mailto:sajedehasnaashari@yahoo.com)

## Abstract

Stream of Consciousness technique has a great impact on writing literary texts in the modern age. This technique was broadly used in the late of nineteen century as a result of the decay of plot, especially in novel writing. Novelists began to use stream of consciousness technique as a new phenomenon, because it goes deeper into the human mind and soul through involving it in writing. Modern novel has changed after Victorian age from the traditional novel that considers themes of religion, culture, social matters, etc. to be a group of irregular events and thoughts interrogate or reveal the inner feeling of readers.

This study simplifies stream of consciousness technique through clarifying the three levels of conscious (Consciousness, Precociousness and Unconsciousness) as well as the subconsciousness, based on Sigmund Freud theory. It also sheds a light on the relationship between stream of consciousness, interior monologue, soliloquy and collective unconscious.

Finally, This paper explains the beneficial aspects of the stream of consciousness technique in our daily life. It shows how this technique can release our feelings and emotions, as well as free our mind from the pressure of thoughts that are upsetting our mind .

**Key words:** Stream of Consciousness, Modern novel, Consciousness, Precociousness and Unconsciousness and subconsciousness.

## تقنية انسياب الافكار : المنظور النفسي واستخدامه في الرواية الحديثة

ساجدة اثني عشري

دار نشر كاندل وفوك

ونام مجيد الخفاجي

جامعة الكوفة – كلية التربية – قسم اللغة الانكليزية

الخلاصة

ان لتقنية انسياب الافكار تأثير كبير على كتابة النصوص الادبية في العصر الحديث. ان هذه التقنية كان قد تم استخدامها بشكل واسع في نهاية القرن التاسع عشر كنتيجة لفترة القمة خاصة في كتابة الرواية. بدأ الرواة باستخدام تقنية انسياب الافكار كظاهرة جديدة، لانها تذهب عميقاً في الروح والعقل الانساني من خلال ربطه بالكتابة. تغيرت الرواية الحديثة بعد العصر الفكتوري من الرواية التقليدية التي كانت تعد الدين والثقافة والامور الاجتماعية وغيرها مجموعة احداث غير منظمة وافكار تعكس المشاعر الداخلية للقارئ.

تبسط هذه الدراسة تقنية انسياب الافكار من خلال توضيح المستويات الثلاثة للوعي (الوعي، ما قبل الوعي ، اللاوعي) اضافة الى العقل الباطن استناداً على نظرية سيكمند فرويد. كما وتسلس الضوء على العلاقة بين انسياب الافكار والتمثيل الداخلي والمناجاة واللاوعي الجماعي.

واخيراً، يفسر هذا البحث المفاهيم النافعة لتقنية انسياب الافكار في حياتنا اليومية. حيث يبين كيف لهذه التقنية ان تفصح عن مشاعرنا واحاسيسنا وكذلك تحرر افكارنا من ضغوطات الافكار التي تعكر مزاجنا.

## **Introduction**

Stream of consciousness is a narrative technique which is commonly used in the 20th century fiction. " Stream of Consciousness is a narrative technique in non- dramatic fiction intended to render the flow of myriad impressions, visual auditory, tactile associative and subliminal that impinges on an individual consciousness" (Britannica Concise Dictionary).

This technique is used in writing novels and stories in which the narration is from the mind of one of the characters: the thought process of the characters is depicted. The author takes all the thoughts of the protagonist and put them on paper. Therefore, the resultant narrative is called the stream of consciousness. It's not a story of physical action in which there is a hero, a heroine, and other characters. It is the story of the mental processes of the protagonist. This technique of narrating only the internal life of the character is called the stream of consciousness technique where thoughts do not follow a logical sequence. Stream of Consciousness according to Literary Dictionary is:

Continuous flow of sense, perceptions, thoughts, feelings, and memories in the human mind; or a literary method of representing such a blending of mental processes in fictional characters usually in an unpunctuated or disjointed form of interior monologue (Shaw.1996).

The thought is like a stream; it is like a flow which does not move in one direction. At any given point of time our mind is thinking of different things. So it is not a linear thinking "the transition between the thought of one object and the thought of another is no more a break in the thought than a joint in a bamboo or a break in the wood" (Joyce.1916). For example in the class, we are partly listening to the lecturer and partly thinking of other things: for instance, project of graduation or the financial problem, etc. So at every point of time our mind is flowing in different directions. But when we write we just choose one stream and write, whereas stream of consciousness tries to represent the complete flow of thoughts.

The term stream of consciousness is coined by an American psychologist, William James who wrote *Principles of Psychology* (1890). He believes that human thought is a continuous process. Thoughts are never interrupted, they keep jumping from one subject to the other:

Consciousness, then, does not appear to itself chopped up in bits. Such words as 'chain' or 'train' do not describe it fitly as it presents itself in the first instance. It is nothing jointed; it flows. A 'river' or a 'stream' are the metaphors by which it is most naturally described. In talking of it hereafter, let us call it the stream of thought, of consciousness, or of subjective life. (James, 1983, p.239).

For instance, early in the morning you get up and start thinking about the class. Then from the class you jump into something else: for example, you think to yourself, "What happened yesterday? " then your mind jump to something else, "What is happening in my house or to my own family today ?". Then again you think of something else. There is no control over the thoughts. There is no logical sequence of the thoughts. They can go anywhere. We cannot rationalize thoughts by saying that a thought will only be in this direction.

One can experiment this by sitting quietly for one minute and noting from the beginning where he starts and where he ends. He will find out that there is no relationship between one thought and the other. They are all fragmented thoughts with their only link which is the human mind or consciousness.

William James felt that the human mind is a continuous process of thought; there is no interruption, even in sleep, we are thinking. But you cannot give a sequence to thoughts like you can to a story (Lehrer, 2007). The story has always a reason, a beginning, and an end. Consciousness has no such thing. This was the theory behind stream of consciousness.

## **Psychological Aspect**

The term "consciousness", referring to the human mind, is different from the human brain. Brain is a physical organ where the mind resides. "Brain is the part of the central nervous

system ... serving to control and coordinate the mental and physical actions" (Collins English Dictionary). While mind is "totality of conscious and unconscious mental processes and activities" (Collins English Dictionary). Mind is the sign of thought, sense, feeling, emotion, perception, determination, memory and imagination that works within the brain. It usually refers to the thought processes of reason. If we cut man's head, we can find his/her brain but mind and consciousness cannot be found anywhere. Consciousness simply is an electric current of invisible energy which passes from nerve to nerve:

Human body is a complex ensemble of interlinked systems of over  $75 \times 10^{12}$  cells. A large number of independent 'streams' of vital energy govern the activities ... The vital energy in endocrine secretions, brain-impulses, bioelectrical and bio-magnetic functions is also a manifestation of the immense power of consciousness force indwelling our body. (Acharya P.35-40)

This invisible energy cannot be seen and touched. We can only experience thought. According to Sigmund Freud's theory, human mind is divided into two main parts, consciousness and unconsciousness:

Freud used the analogy of an iceberg to describe the three levels of the mind. On the surface is consciousness, which consists of those thoughts that are the focus of our attention now, and this is seen as the top of the iceberg. The preconscious consists of all which can be retrieved from memory. The third and most significant region is the unconscious. Here lies the processes. (McLeod, 2013)

Consciousness is the state of being awake and understanding what is happening around. But unconsciousness, the part of our mind that contains thoughts and feelings that we do not know about, and that influences the way we behave. It is the part that we cannot reach at all, and we keep all our habitual actions in. It is an engine of our information processing, the repository of our automatic activities, the origin of our intuition and dreams, etc. People who have studied philosophy and psychology spoke about consciousness. It is our response to the experiences of life. How we are responding. In a meeting we sit and listen so we are conscious. When we are conscious we can hear and do anything we want. If we lose our sense, we say we are unconscious.

Unconsciousness is the massive and unseen part of our mind based on the Freud's iceberg theory. All are programmed into us. For instance, when a child is born, nobody has to teach the child how to breathe because it is programmed into our unconscious mind how to be a human being. We only learn the attitudes but we do not generally learn the basic instinct of being a human being and that is the unconscious mind (Lewis, 2014). According to Freud's theory, what we are practicing today will be in the back of our mind.

Tomorrow we do not remember what we did today, but when somebody asks us, "What did you do yesterday?" we then recollect. We can bring it back. It is our preconscious.

The consciousness can be either participatory or witness. By participatory we mean we can take part in it. By witnessing we mean analyzing our own mind, what we call conscience<sup>1</sup>. For instance, a student wants to cheat in the exam. Some voice tells him, "Don't cheat!" In this situation, two levels of our mind get activated. One says, "Cheat!" the other says, "Don't cheat!" So we have participatory consciousness and witness consciousness.

A famous author, Plato, a Greek philosopher, spoke of consciousness as a cave. He gave the image of a cave "The Allegory of the Cave" (Sparknotes, 2017). He said that the human mind is like a consciousness imprisoned in a cave. For example, you take an animal and you tie it inside the cave. The animal can see only as far as the length of the rope permits. If the rope is long, it can come out and roam around. If you increase the rope the animal can go around further. So it is easy for the animal to come out and see around but it has partial reach. It is exactly like our

---

<sup>1</sup>. The part of the superego in psychoanalysis that transmits commands and admonitions to the ego.

conscious memory. We have limitations of vision. We can only see a limited perception. The human consciousness has a limit in perception.

In Indian philosophy there is a description of consciousness which is like pearls on a string "I will call my view the Pearl view, because it suggests that many mental selves exist, one at a time and one after another, like pearls on a string, in the case of something like a human being" (Strawson, 1997). If you remove the string, all the pearls will fall. Each pearl is like an experience and the string is like our consciousness. You have different pearls strung together by the mind, by the consciousness which is again a continuous process, but continuing in the mind not the experience. For instance, we come to college, we study, we graduate, we work then after 10 years we come back to college. There is continuity. As soon as we see our class we remember studying there. Once we were students. Then we are teachers in the same class. This is continuity. Different experiences are like pearls strung together which we call as consciousness. Taking all these ideas into consideration, William James formed the idea that consciousness is like a stream. "Stream of Consciousness refers to the flow of thoughts in the conscious mind. Research studies have shown that we only experience one mental event at a time as a fast-moving mind stream" (Wikipedia 1). Stream means flowing liquid: liquid is continuously flowing. We cannot stop the water because it is flowing continuously. Imagine we touch water in one particular place and after 10 minutes when we touch the water in the same place, it is not the same water. That water has flowed two kilometers away and this is the new water. So the mind keeps changing according to the experiences and this flow of experiences determines what we are and who we are.

A famous psychologist called Carl Jung speaks about the collective unconscious. All human beings have a racial memory<sup>2</sup>. That is called collective unconscious: "The collective unconscious is an universal datum, that is, every human being is endowed with this psychic archetype-layer since his/her birth. One can not acquire this strata by education or other conscious effort because it is innate" (Jung). Collective means shared by every member of a group. So all human beings have one level of programming which is present in their mind. It is already there in you. It is not transferable from this. All your experiences also make a change to collective unconscious. So the collective unconscious of human beings at the beginning of civilization has changed now, because we have become more instinctive. In the process of evolution from the monkey to the human being and from the human being to the 20<sup>th</sup> century human being the unconscious mind has changed. So collective unconscious alters without our effort. (Jung, 1939)

### **Stream of Consciousness in Literature**

The stream of consciousness technique came to be used by novelists in the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century; the end of Victorian era<sup>3</sup>, after a long period of change and development has taken place in that time. Novelists found stream of consciousness technique to be an excellent idea by using various images or ideas to create an outstanding story. It is marked by the sudden rise of thoughts and lack of punctuations. Modern writers abandoned traditional methods of writing, they begun to experiment and create their own unique styles. *Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett is one of the earliest examples of stream of consciousness technique. In this play Lucky's "thinking" is a long-winded and disjointed verbal stream of consciousness (Wikipedia 2). Three other famous novelists who made use of stream of consciousness technique in their writings are:

1. James Joyce who wrote the books *Ulysses* and *Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man*.
2. Virginia Woolf from England. She wrote *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Light House*.

---

<sup>2</sup>. Racial memory is a remarkable ability, helping human beings to pass on their experience, their knowledge and wisdom to generations yet unborn.

<sup>3</sup>. The Victorian era (1837-1901) was a period of dramatic change that brought England to its highest point of development as a world power. It was characterised by rapid change and developments in nearly every sphere.

3. William Faulkner, an American writer. He wrote *Light in August*.

These stories are told in a way different from the ordinary stories. They all occur in the mind of the protagonist. The stories are not told like ordinary novels. It is all from the mind of the protagonist.

James Joyce uses stream of consciousness in his well-known novel *Ulysses*. He describes the thoughts of Molly Bloom, as she lies next to her husband " Leopold " in the wee hours of the morning. She reminisces about many things that have happened in her past from her childhood up to her career life. She recalls her admirers and her affair with Boylan, then, she compares Bloom to Boylan.

Molly Bloom lies in bed thinking over her day and visit of Blazes Boylan; varieties of scenes from her past life crowd into her mind, and particularly she thinks of Leopold Bloom. Bloom has asked for breakfast in bed next morning; Molly is amazed, for he has never asked for such a thing since the old days. (Norton, 1972)

In this story, stream of consciousness technique shows the efficiency of memory in providing readers with new information and displaying a lot of memories. Whereas *Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man* novel, Joyce speaks about the way that the young boy interacts with everything. For instance, he goes to brush his teeth and he starts thinking about religion. There is no connection between religion and brushing his teeth but the story keeps going on. There is no logical sequence in the story. The story seems like a jungle of experiences and the only link between them is the consciousness of the protagonist.

It is different from soliloquy<sup>4</sup>, in which the speaker addresses the audience or some absent third person so that we can know what the speaker is thinking even though other characters on the stage are not aware of what is being said. In stream of consciousness the character is primarily addressing the character's self. It is like soliloquy except the third person is the reader instead of the audience. The character is not saying the words as they would in a play. We see inside of the character's mind. It has little structure yet it is often lacking in punctuation or traditional grammatical structure. When you are thinking you never think of punctuation: in thought there are no commas, full stops and colons, etc. Sentences can be a whole page long or even more. Whereas in soliloquy there is usually a sequence with complete sentences and beautiful words and at times lyrics while human mind can never work like that.

Stream of consciousness is often used interchangeably with the term interior monologue. Interior monologue performs the functions of stream of consciousness in a more organized way: " It is a form of stream-of-consciousness writing that represents the inner thoughts of a character" (Collins English Dictionary).

It is going to be more structured. We see the character's thoughts in the stream of consciousness; they may still be disjointed or make associative leaps. However in an interior monologue, we usually maintain proper punctuation and the grammatical sense. It would often be more comfortable to comprehend for a narrative work but in stream of consciousness you often want to stop and think or reread the text because you are reading someone else's thought who might not necessarily think like you. Some consider the interior monologue the technique of delivery of stream of consciousness because inherently stream of consciousness is the interior speech in someone's brain. So it is by definition an interior monologue.

This innovation did not happen by accident. Virginia Woolf and her contemporaries wanted their work to reflect life. They wanted something authentic. They sought in their writing to mirror the universal human experience. They wanted to make literature readable and understandable to everyone not just to those who were of noble blood, those who had the intellect to read and understand literature. We should also consider the fact that she was writing after the World War

---

<sup>4</sup>. Soliloquy is sometimes wrongly used where monologue is meant. Both words refer to a long speech by one person, but a monologue can be addressed to other people, whereas in a soliloquy the speaker is always talking to himself or herself

I. This war made so many changes in the way people lived, and the way they saw the world. And as literature is fundamentally a reflection of human experience, it had to change too, because the human experience had changed. (Mckee, 2000)

In Mrs. Dalloway, Woolf`s most famous novel, the whole story takes place in a single day. Clarissa Dalloway who is preparing herself for a party has flashbacks of her life and choices she regrets or could not make.

What a lark! What a plunge! For so it had always seemed to her, when, with a little squeak of the hinges, which she could hear now, she had burst open the French windows and plunged at Bourton into the open air. How fresh, how calm, stiller than this of course, the air was in the early morning; like the flap of a wave; the kiss of a wave. ( Woolf, 2015)

Woolf switches back from thought to action and from past to present, which follows Mrs. Dalloway`s stream of thought that is racing through her head during her meeting with Mr. Whitbread. She wrote wonderful words in this matter " I can only note that the past is beautiful because one never realises an emotion at the time. It expands later, and thus we don`t have complete emotions about the present, only about the past" (Woolf, n.d.)

In this story, Woolf also deals with another issue which was confronting the world of that time, post traumatic stress disorder<sup>5</sup>, through the character of Septimus Smith. The war really messed people up psychologically. After World War I, when men came back from the war, a lot of them were really awe-struck by what they had witnessed and what they had done and experienced. In the novel, Woolf parallels a single day in the lives of these two people: the privileged, socially elite Clarissa Dalloway, and Septimus Warren Smith, a shell-shocked veteran of a terrible war. As the day begins Clarissa is buying flowers for a party she will give that night, while Septimus is in Regent's Park listening to the sparrows, who, he believes, sing to him in Greek "Shakespeare`s plays and Miss Isabel Pole in a green dress" ( Woolf, 2015).

In Mrs. Dalloway`s story , the events also all happen in the mind of the protagonists. Characters' thoughts travel back and forth in time, reflecting and refracting their emotional experiences and their internal feelings. Clarissa demonstrates the repressed social and economic position of women, and Septimus represents the treatment of those who suffer depression to the point of sanity.

In William Faulkner`s *Light in August*, stream of consciousness technique shows how the author examines and displays unspoken feelings of his characters. Faulkner writes as though in the depth of mind of his characters. Usually, character`s mind transfers between events, but stream of consciousness attempts to hold this phenomenon. For example, Joe Christmas in this story conveys that memory is more physical than abstract. Whether the characters identify or understand the events that shape their lives, they recollect their memories, permanent and invariable. "Memory believes before knowing remembers. Believes longer than recollects, longer than knowing even wonders " ( Weinstein, 2010).

### **The Benefits of Stream of Consciousness Writing for Every Day Life**

Stream of consciousness writing has some benefits for daily life. It means that, if you`re feeling gloomy or upset, for any reason (maybe you have an aching feeling inside; maybe you`ve had a bad time with friends; maybe you`re in a stressful situation) you may be experiencing a sinking feeling inside. That sinking feeling is what pushes you to write – and when you start you will do so continuously, without interruption and without taking your pen off the paper.

This is a very powerful source of release of feelings and emotions. Writing down everything that has engaged your mind allows you at that moment to free your mind from the pressure of thoughts that are upsetting you, and not allowing you to live a peaceful life in the way you wish. So it can lead to great changes, great insights and a great sense of release.

---

<sup>5</sup>. PTSD is a disorder that develops in some people who have experienced a shocking, scary, or dangerous event.

It can also help you to get a better understanding of what is going on in your head and in your heart. Depending on the situation you're in, you may have a myriad of thoughts and feelings that have occupied your heart and in your mind. Stream of consciousness writing allows you to put those thoughts and feelings in words, helping you to learn more about yourself and the world you live in. These might be the unpleasant thoughts and feelings that you have never had the chance to articulate, and consequently to get rid of. Doing so, will calm you down and you start to feel you are more in control of your emotions and life. The struggle you used to make every day to manage these unpleasant thoughts and feelings is removed off your shoulders. The reason for this is that you're more frank, honest, and open to yourself. You get to know who you really are at that moment. So it is suggested that we can write for as long as we want until we come to a natural stop or we feel that we are in a normal emotional state. Stream of consciousness technique may be therapeutic" (Life Coach Directory, 2013)

### **Conclusion**

This paper aimed to clarify " Stream of Consciousness " as a term and technique. It defined stream of consciousness based on psychiatric and literary interpretation by considering many studies in this field.

Stream of Consciousness technique involved in literature in the late of 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the Victorian Era ended on 1901. Writers started looking for different types of writing, especially when the middle and low class adopted reading novels as a best way in their lives for entertainment. Thus, writers refused to depict the classical way of writing style, they found it is better to show life in the light of stream of consciousness technique.

This study also explained how novelists, like James Joyce and Virginia Woolf concentrated on the specific psychological events of the character rather than telling them the entire story of their lives. The dimension of time and place are ignored by using this technique. Therefore, the author has the space to move forth and back without limitation of sitting and other obstacles. Hence, modern novel appeared completely different from the tradition literary works.

### **Bibliography:**

- Brain. (n.d.). Collins English Dictionary - Complete & Unabridged 10th Edition. Retrieved July 18, 2016 from [www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/brain](http://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/brain)
- Britannica. (n.d.) *Concise Dictionary Encyclopedia Britannica*. Inc. 310. Retrieved from [www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/111/310](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/111/310)
- Interior monologue. (n.d.). Collins English Dictionary - Complete & Unabridged 10th Edition. Retrieved July 17, 2017 from Dictionary.com website [www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/interior-monologue](http://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/interior-monologue)
- James, William. (1983). *The Stream of Consciousness*. First published in 1902. Retrieved from [www.gutenberg.org/files/19980/19980-h/19980-h.htm](http://www.gutenberg.org/files/19980/19980-h/19980-h.htm)
- Joyce, James. (1916 ). *A Portrait of the Artist as a Youngman*. Bantam, New York.
- Jung, Carl. (n.d.). *Collective unconscious*. Retrieved from [www.jung.org/collective-unconscious](http://www.jung.org/collective-unconscious)

- Jung, Carl and Dell, S.M. (1939). *The Integration of the Personality* (English). traheniR&rarraF :kroYweN .(noitalsnart
- Lehrer, Jonah. (2007). *Thinking During Sleep*. Retrieved July 10, 2017, from <http://scienceblogs.com/cortex/2007/05/01/thinking-during-sleep/>
- Lewis, T. (2014). *Scientists Closing in on Theory of Consciousness*. LiveScience. <http://www.livescience.com/story/science/2014/05/01/scientists-closing-in-on-theory-of-consciousness/>
- Mckee, Michael. (Ed.). (2000). *The Theory of the Novel*. Johns Hopkins University Press. P. 539.
- Mind. (n.d.). Collins English Dictionary - Complete & Unabridged 10th Edition. Retrieved July 18, 2017 from Dictionary.com website <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/mind>
- Norton, R. 1972. *Ulysses Notes*. Lincoln, Cliff's. p.75-6.
- Shaw, Harry. (1996). *Concise Dictionary of Literary Terms*. Harvey Miller Publishers, Vols-2 New York: McGraw-Hill, London.
- SparkNotes Editors. (2005). SparkNote on Psychology Major Figures. Retrieved July 16, 2017, from <http://www.sparknotes.com/philosophy/republic/section7.rhtml>
- Stream of Consciousness*. In Wikipedia 1. Retrieved May 15, 2017, from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jimmy\\_Carter](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jimmy_Carter)
- Strawson, Galen. 1997. *Reduction and the self*. *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 4, No.5/6, 1997, pp. 405-28
- Waiting for Godot*. (n.d.). In Wikipedia 2. Retrieved June 10, 2017, from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Waiting\\_for\\_Godot](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Waiting_for_Godot)
- Weinstein, Philip. 2010. *The Art and Life of William Faulkner*. Oxford University Press. P. 99
- Woolf, Virginia. (2015). *Mrs. Dalloway*. University of Adelaide, South Australia 5005, Press. Life Coach Directory. (2013, 6 March). *Evoking A Great Sense of Release – The Benefits of Stream of Consciousness Writing*. Retrieved from <http://www.lifecoach-directory.org.uk/lifecoach-articles/evoking-a-great-sense-of-release-the-benefits-of-stream-of-consciousness-writing>
- Woolf, Virginia. (n.d.). Retrieved November 10, 2017, from <http://www.picturequotes.com/i-can-only-note-that-the-past-is-beautiful-because-one-never-realises-an-emotion-at-the-time-it-quote-46281>