

Using the *Stream of Consciousness* Technique in Fiction

by
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One of the difficulties of successfully using the stream of consciousness technique in the composition of fiction is that the writer frequently tends to lose the focus of the technique itself: as a tool for disclosing pertinent fictional information it is a marvelous device, but it is also a device filled with the potential for disastrous effect. By definition, it is the inclusion of seemingly random thoughts and impressions of a character as part of the narrative. I include the modifier 'seemingly' purposely, because I believe that the best use of the stream of consciousness technique lies in its specificity, not in its randomness. The key to effectively using it as a means of disclosing character reflection is to apply each reflection exclusively to the circumstances of each scene; a string of associated reflections may follow (as in the case of a character's recollection stimulated by his conscious reaction to some aspect of the scene), but the progression must be logical and purposeful. When the reflection removes itself from environmental circumstance (the people, place or circumstances at hand) then each succeeding layer of reflection must follow logically from the reflection that preceded it.

This is as much saying that each inclusion of stream of consciousness material must have a specific purpose within the story. With this in mind, the writer should understand that the use of the technique must be done conscientiously (and, for the most part, sparingly, since layering associated reflections may lead the narrative so far from where the stream of consciousness section began that returning to the perceptual point of origin may prove impossible—this is one of the hazards of the inexperienced writer using this technique). So the section in stream of consciousness must first pertain to the perceptual stimulus; then the succeeding reflections must relate to themselves. In the best form, if an extended series of stream of consciousness reflections are used the final stream of consciousness reflection must reflect back on the original perception to keep the narrative flow intact.

I will give an example of an associated stream of consciousness reflection rising from narrative perception. Let us assume that an elderly woman is examining the contents of a box that her grandson has removed from her attic. Her grandson stands and watches as she brings up articles into the light of the room. Her perception of each article then leads to a

stream of consciousness reflection that supports the narrative importance of the object being examined:

“She carefully pulled the small locket from the shadows of the box; why it was in the box she didn’t know, but there it was, and now in her hand, a little tarnished but still as she remembered. Her grandson stared at it without expression, but she smiled, and met his gaze with the enthusiasm of her remembrance, and he smiled, too, childishly agreeing with her unspoken sentiment. She managed to open the clasp despite the arthritic condition of her fingers, and when she did the small photograph, no larger than a dime, met her gaze with great importance; she’d known that it was a picture of her late husband, of course, but to actually to see him as a young man, very handsome and so sadly youthful, with a full head of black hair and the thin physique of an active life, filled her with astonishment. She lost all notice of her grandson as the minute face in the locket stared on her with ageless vigor and happiness. *So long ago, and so full of life that no circumstances of aging, poverty and death could hurt him; what was he thinking when this picture was taken? Was he thinking of her? Or was he thinking of all those things that life might offer, a collection of unexplored oceans, potential lovers, the money that he would earn and lose in self-indulgent ways—again and again, testing the limits of life, until he found the path to his greatest happiness, indulging in simplicity, and the rewards of hard work laid at the door of never-ending employers. When the silence came, and the last words were spoken, and the sheet was raised over him, even as she wept, was he satisfied with what he left behind? And all his dreams unfulfilled, and all his accomplishments smaller in his estimation, and all his sensual desire spent for one moment of the realization of death? How far removed was he from death when the light reflected by his face fell through the lens of the camera that produced this image, this image that let him stay in the world as someone’s dying memory?*

She closed the locket then, and let the memory seal itself into the darkness of a very small place.”

So the scene must be calculated to include the effect of the stream of consciousness reflection as it relates to the rest of the narrative; the inexperienced writer’s inability to maintain this balance is the chief reason why the use of this technique is so inartistically applied in many cases. The association must be complete; the cyclic nature of scene must have a sensory integrity if the narrative is to find success (or, at the very least, avoid disaster).

In the above example we see that the stream of consciousness inclusion (in italics) begins as the viewpoint character’s recognition of the small photograph in the locket; from that recognition the section continues to include references to the photograph and the man in the photograph, and then proceeds to wonder about that person’s life accomplishments, wishes, hopes dreams and desires, concluding, in its cyclic execution, in the death of the man in the photograph and the suggestion that he remains alive only in the viewpoint character’s memory.

By this explication we see that the best use of stream of consciousness is its disciplined application. On first inspection, the stream of consciousness technique would seem to be a random association of thoughts and impressions, like the stereotypical responses to a Rorschach test; but nothing could be further from the truth. The benefit of using the

stream of consciousness technique comes from its precise application to the narrative.

A good rule of thumb for the writer trying to assess the value of a stream of consciousness entry is to isolate the entry and to evaluate it on the basis of what it communicates—as well as on how well it avoids misdirection, ineffectual cognitive connections, and just plain skylarking, which is terribly easy for the writer to do because of the seemingly random flow of thoughts. Again, nothing should be randomly included (or done for the sake of exotic effect); at least, not in the best writing. For what would we produce if we represented every fragmented thought that we have in the form of our writing? We would have a randomly produced collection of expressions that quite probably would bear no relation to one another. So the conscientious writer must necessarily impose form on what would otherwise be a formless human enterprise.

As I mentioned at the beginning of this essay, the writer may also layer stream of consciousness reflections one after another, so that the first reflection leads logically to the second, third, and so forth. In the best-case scenario, the final reflection would link back to the beginning of the stream of consciousness process.

As an example, let us assume that a man is on a fishing expedition after the death of his son. He and his son used to fish together regularly, until the son's death, and now he is returning to it alone after a period of mourning. The point of the technique is to bring the memory of his son into the process of fishing, and to emphasize the father's state now that he must continue alone.

"He waded a little further into the cold stream, letting the line trail gracefully in the water. He held the line in a loop with his left hand, gently swinging the tip of the rod, and the length of line extending from it, with his right hand, waiting for the right moment to release the lure into the air. It was this subtle motion, and the artistry that it required, that was the most difficult aspect of fly-fishing that he'd taught his son. But his son hadn't learned it easily; hours and days and weeks and months passed before the boy was finally able to release the lure in a beautiful rainbow across the river; the backward whipping motion that prepared the cast was even more difficult for him to learn. But in a year, or a little more, he was moving the line as skillfully as his father. This was something that he had given his son, and now it was lost again.

And my father was just as frustrated with me when I first learned. I held my temper better, though, didn't I? Or was that only an illusion... on that first day, I thought that I would never be able to show you, to teach you, because it's such an intuitive talent... but I guess I was wrong, I was wrong about a lot things, I never had enough patience to understand that you needed time to learn about the world, about fishing, about working, about loving people... I was too impatient with you on so many thing, driving, school, chores... but I finally learned that you could learn, and all those things that I said to you about being lazy and rebellious weren't true at all, were they? It was my own fault, I expected you to live my life, I expected your life to be an extension of mine, I never believed you to be anything more than my own reflection... and now you're gone, and all I have are the fish, and the sunlight, and the water...

He moved the line gracefully again, then swept the lure in a wide arc over the gently moving water. The lure flew in the air brightly, and then disappeared beneath the current."

In the above example we see the stream of consciousness entry moving from the father's recollection of fishing, to teaching his son, to his son's response, and then on to his assessment of his own conduct with his son and his perceptions of his failures as a father. The father's thoughts finally return to fishing and the river, closing the cycle so that the continuing exposition resumes with the scene at hand, that is, the father casting his line into the water. In a case like this, the writer has license to explore a variety of themes—from how much time it takes to learn fly-fishing to a person's success or failure as a father—but the stream of consciousness flow must return to some aspect of the scene at hand. This creates a sense of unity, and subtly strengthens the narrative.

The best writers using this technique—Virginia Woolf, William Faulkner, James Joyce—knew that its effectiveness could only be found in its specificity. Why would one use this technique for any other reason but to elucidate human thought that only helps to illustrate the meaning of the whole narrative? This would lead us to believe that the use of stream of consciousness technique serves a very specific purpose in fiction: to further explain the psychological universe of one or more characters within the narrative. And by expanding a character's psychological universe the writing expands the meaningfulness of his or her work. This, ultimately, should be the goal of using any prosodic technique; and the reason for being aware of these techniques as an artist and craftsman.