



VIRGINIA WOOLF AS AN ADEPT IN EMPLOYING STREAM-OF-CONSCIOUS TECHNIQUE IN HER MRS. DALLOWAY: AN APPRAISAL

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Abstract

This is an attempt to trace to some extent the stream of consciousness technique in fiction employed and experimented by the novelists between the two world wars with a focus on Virginia Woolf's stream of consciousness employed especially in her novel Mrs. Dalloway, considering one important feature of Woolf's art as one highly articulating and watching the feelings and thoughts of the characters studied through stream of consciousness. It examines how Virginia Woolf's main purpose as a novelist is to depict the inner world, the human psyche not totally ignoring the outer world.

Key Words: *Stream Of Consciousness, Inner World, Human Psyche, Technique, Psychological Aspect, Fleeting Mental Life, Distinctive Method.*

The stream of consciousness technique in fiction employed and experimented by the novelists between the two world wars was nothing but the manifestation of extreme individuality and heterogeneity working at the substratum in society. The rise of the stream of consciousness technique on the eve of the First World War does significantly mark the beginning of a new epoch in the realm of English novel. Though the phrase, 'the stream of consciousness' is used today to refer to a popular novelistic technique, it has a psychological origin. The phrase was first coined and put to use by William James who remarked. Thus:

"Every definite image in the mind is steeped and dyed in the free water that flows round it. The significance the value of the image is all in this halo or penumbra that surrounds and efforts it. Consciousness does not appear to itself chopped up in bits. Like a bird's life, it seems to be made of an alternation of flights and perchings. The rhythm of language expresses this, where every thought is expressed in a sentence and every sentence closed with period. It is nothing jointed. It flows. A river or a stream is the metaphor by which it is most naturally described. Let us call it the stream of thought or of Consciousness or of subjective life"(P239)

The psychological researchers, the new scientific inventions, the revaluation of old ideals, the sense of uncertainty and disillusionment and the new technique of music and cinema left their indelible mark of the stream-of- Consciousness technique. With the denunciation of the traditional concept of plot and characterization, with the use of symbols and the portrayal of psychological times and the dynamic mental states, the novels written in the stream-of- Consciousness technique embarked upon the exploration of a new reality, thus marking a complete break with the traditional fiction.

According to this term, life is a flowing reality and in fiction, it denotes the technique of presenting the psychological aspects of characters, "the novels which have as their essential subject-matter the Consciousness of one or more characters, this depicted Consciousness serves as a screen on which the material in these novels is presented" Robert Humphrey 20). The term 'interior monologue' is often used to describe this technique in which a character tries to introduce the readers to his own inner life, without any intervention on the part of the novelist. When the term 'Stream of Consciousness' is used to describe a certain type of fiction, it is reserved for indicating an approach to the presentation of psychological aspects of character in fiction. Robert Humphrey explained the stream of Consciousness novel thus:

"The stream of Consciousness novel is identified most quickly by its subject-matter. This, rather than its techniques, its purpose, or its themes, distinguishes it. Hence, the novels that are said to use the stream of Consciousness technique to a considerable degree prove, upon analysis, to be novels which have as their essential subject-matter the Consciousness of one or more characters; that is, the depicted Consciousness serves as screen on which the material in these novels is presented" (P 31).

The stream of Consciousness technique has been so predominantly inward in character that it has been described as interior monologue and its characteristics have been described in these under:



“It is the speech of a character in a scene having for its object the direct introduction of the reader into the interior life of a character without any interventions in the way of explanations or commentary on the part of author; like other monologues, it has theoretically no hearers and is not spoken” (P 33).

The stream-of- Consciousness as a literary technique has been directly or indirectly influenced by the psychological and philosophical writings of William James and Henri Bergson, the psychoanalytical works of Freud, Adler and Jung and by the post-impressionistic paintings, cubism and the techniques of music. In literature as in psychology, the phrases ‘stream-of-Consciousness’ represents a new concept of time and reality. David Daiches aptly writes:

“The Stream-of- Consciousness technique is a means of escape from the tyranny of the time dimension. It is not only an indistinct memories that the past impinges on the present and in much vaguer and subtle ways, our mind floating off down some changer superficially relevant but really having a definite staring. Off place from the initial situation, so that in presenting the characters reactions to the events, the author will show us state of mind modified by associations and recollections deriving from the present situation, but referring to a constantly shifting series of events in the past” (Daiches 32).

Truly speaking, the exponents of the stream of Consciousness believed that inner reality of things is what matters most. It is the business of the novelist to explore this inner reality, and not be satisfied with showing the readers the façade that hides the inner reality. By means of the interior monologue, the novelist enables the reader to enter into the inner life of a character. The novelists of this school were encouraged by the study of the subconscious to penetrate beneath the surface reactions in life. Perhaps the clear definition of the stream-of- Consciousness technique is the one that comes from Robert Humphrey:

“We may define stream-of- Consciousness fiction as a type of fiction in which the basic emphasis is placed on exploration of the pre-speech levels of consciousness for the purpose, primary revealing the psychic being of the character” (P 4).

He confines himself to the pre-speech level of Consciousness, depicting its traits in the light of William James’ theory of Consciousness. It has been felt that when thoughts and feelings of mind and heart have been depicted into words, some of them lose their meaning. Certain shades of meaning cannot be caught into words. In order to overcome this difficulty, novelists have invented certain techniques to express the vogue and fleeting mental life into words. The stream-of-Consciousness is one such technique. The Consciousness of their characters quite often forms the subject matter of their novels. These novelists, in general, observe a sort of objectivity and detachment to circumvent the difficulties of introspection. James Joyce follows the method modeled by Flaubert. The artist is alive all through his work but always remains unseen and hidden. In *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, he makes his position absolutely clear when he says that the artist is within his work, behind, beyond and above his “handiwork paring fingernails” (P219). But the feelings expressed are highly subjective. Therefore it may be concluded that a stream-of- Consciousness novel is mostly autobiographical in nature. The novelist reveals his mind in his novels and the reader’s mind is supposed to identify with various minds of the novelist’s creation.

Virginia Woolf is a well-known theorist of fiction who not only proved herself an eminent practitioner but also clearly expressed her aesthetic of fiction. She is said to have assimilated the various influences of her age in a creative manner. Though she belonged to a particular school known as the ‘stream-of-Consciousness School’, she did not allow the individuality of her creative genius to be impaired by her loyalty to that group. Virginia Woolf had been one of the most inveterate artists in the field of fiction. The best way to appreciate Woolf’s novels is to acquaint ourselves with her own theories of fiction. It is generally held that Virginia Woolf adopted the stream-of- Consciousness technique but she enriched it by means of her contributions and carried the movement a step further. In her technique, the world can be reduced to a snail but a snail can also become a pin-point of experience from which the mind moves out into the world. Though her main purpose as a novelist was to depict the inner world, the human psyche, she did not ignore the outer world. The character’s egocentric Consciousness is the unifying subject in the novel. Only by dint of her original technique, Virginia Woolf occupies an important place among English novelists.

One important feature of Virginia Woolf’s art lies in her distinctive method of characterization and it is this that distinguishes her from other writers of this movement. “Her characters are highly articulate and quite abnormally self-aware, watching their thoughts and feelings the whole-time”. The most distinctive aspect of Virginia Woolf lies in her original technique. It is she who discarded the existing technique because she found it inadequate to give expression to her own experience. She is said to have created a limited range of characters but within this range, she never repeats itself.



In the words of Walter Allen, “Her characters belong not only to a certain class, the upper middle-class intelligentsia but also to a certain temperament, they are distinguished by a discriminating intelligence and an acute self-Consciousness” (59). In *Mrs. Dalloway* individual characters are brought into relationship with a number of others of whose existence they may be quite ignorant. Woolf is not a preacher but a pure artist and she makes it a point to see that the outer is not only related to it but it is absorbed into the inner life. For success in producing a more subtle effort through the use of this technique, one must look to Virginia Woolf who obviously uses the stream-of-Consciousness technique in *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Life House*, Virginia Woolf says in her essay, ‘Modern Fiction’:

“Let us record atoms as they fall, let us
Trace the pattern, however disconnected
and incoherent in appearances, which
each sight or incident scores upon
the consciousness” (The Common Reader 213).

A close examination of the opening lines of *Mrs. Dalloway* will help identify such a technique:

“Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself For Lucy had her work cut out of her. The doors would be taken off their hinges. Rumpole Meyers men were coming. And, then thought Clarissa Dalloway, what a morning-fresh as, if issues to children on a beach what a lark! What a plunge! For so it has always seemed to her ...” (Mrs. Dalloway 5).

In her fiction, Virginia Woolf is not interested in telling a story, in them, the sequence of events does not lead to a climax and in the final pages no knot is unraveled. In place of narrating dramatic events, she gives to her readers subtle and penetrating inlets into the consciousness of human beings. Clarissa Dalloway, Peter Walsh and Septimus Smith are the chief characters. Clarissa Dalloway is the central figure through whose stream of thought, the events are seen in the novel. Her garden party is to be attended by eminent persons and great dignitaries including the Prime Minister of Britain. One day depicted stands for all days of human life. The incoherent states of Mrs. Dalloway’s mind have been pictured by Virginia Woolf. Virginia Woolf herself partly controls the show and manipulates things, and partly the characters are allowed to present their experiences.

The novel opens with Mrs. Dalloway going out to buy flowers for the party and then comes a description of the tea party. Within these limits a most complex and fascinating pattern of human experience gets woven. It is composed of the day dreams, memories and immediate impressions of this central character, enriched by transitions into the Consciousness of other characters who are connected with Mrs. Dalloway in some emotional or even merely passing relationship. In spite of the transition from one thought-process to another and in spite of the sudden change from present to past time and from past to present, the novel remains simple and uncomplicated. The time covered in this novel by external action is only twelve hours from the morning when Mrs. Dalloway goes out to buy flowers for the party to the evening when it is over. But the psychological method permits the whole of the life to be shown in between. The entire existence of the single personality in the interval between birth and death is shown. In that world, an indulgence in personal emotions is not permissible, but becomes the main preoccupation of a cultured life.

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, sometimes the reader moves into “the Consciousness of the character who is stationary in the space; at another time he observes various events occurring in the space at a time and the mental reactions of various characters have been portrayed in the novel” (Daiches 203). Clarissa Dalloway who has gone to buy flowers in the market place, is in London and sees the white reads; she recalls how she once liked Hugh Whitebread and not his wife Evelyn. Then she recollects her love for Peter Walsh, she remembers Lady Bexborough, Richard Dalloway, Elizabeth, Miss Killam and finally comes to Mulberry’s for flowers. Mrs. Dalloway’s mind moves backward, her consciousness shifting from object to object and person to person. As she walks further she enters the park and for a moment enjoys the pleasant surroundings. The eye, then, catches the movement of a person, the familiar gait and she now does no mistakes in identifying the person. He is Hugh Whitebread, her “admirable Hugh”. A cut to the present movement, followed by a short conversation, once again shifts her to the past time when Clarissa had made several visits to the nursing home to see Evelyn.

At another time, the characters are fixed in time; the Consciousness of many persons has been delineated. The example of this is the explosions of motor car. Here one can see the consciousness of many persons being delineated. Mrs. Pym goes to the window and apologies after the explosion. Edger J.Watterss says humorously, “Prime Ministers Kyar”. Septimus Warren Smith also hears him. The movement of the car sets people conjecturing as to whose car it is, Lucrezia speculates that perhaps, Queen is inside the car. People and children also are glancing at the car and the special personage occupying it.



Mrs. Dalloway coming out of Mulberry's with her flowers guesses that perhaps the Queen is there within the car. Similarly the sky-writing of an aeroplane draws the crowd. Mrs. Coaks, looks up at the sky. The aeroplane is writing ACE and L.

"That's an E" said Mrs. Bletchley, or a dancer,
Its toffee" murmured Mr. Bowley – a dancer" (P 5)

The readers are shown the reactions of Maisie Johnson and Mrs. Depters. And then Mrs. Dalloway's stream of thought has been presented. Woolf takes another point in the outside world in Bond Street in June morning. She also depicts various points of consciousness in different characters. For example, Peter Walsh's stream of thought has been vividly described by her. Peter Walsh a former lover of Mrs. Dalloway has come back from India and is likely to attend her garden party. Mrs. Dalloway asks him not to forget her party. From this point, Peter Walsh's thought shifts backward in time. He recollects his experience in India, the diseases there, his love for Clarissa, and the change in her. He sees things in introspection and his mind moves backward to the conditions in India, and then it moves towards the present from the past, when he thinks of the speed of the motor car and the mechanics. The Plate-glass window of the motor car manufacturer seen by him also governs his flows of thought. The entire thought process, of course, centres on Clarissa. Peter Walsh is introspective. The sound of St. Margaret's arouses his past amorous feeling:

"It is half past eleven, she says, and the sound of St. Margaret's glides into the recesses of the heart and buries itself in ring after ring of sound, like something alive which wants to confide itself, to disperse itself, to be with a tremor of delight, at next like Clarissa herself, thought Peter Walsh, coming downstairs on the stroke of the hour in white. It is Clarissa herself she thought, with a deep emotion and an extra-ordinary clear, yet puzzling, recollection of her, as if this bee had come into the room years ago, where they sat at some moment of great intimacy, and had gone from one to the other and had left like a bee with honey, laden with moment". (P 56)

In the above quoted passage, the chiming of the bell reminds Peter Walsh of his past intimate attachment to Clarissa. The memory is visual. The whole picture of his association with her glimmers on the verge of his consciousness is evoked by the rhythmic resounding bell. The next important character in *Mrs. Dalloway* is Septimus Warren Smith, whose stream of thought reflects the horror and obsessions with guilt and death. He is terror-stricken, nervous, and thinks of committing suicide. He sees the wrath of his deceased friend Evans, and commits suicide. Lucrezia Smith's stream of thought mirrors her sense of anguish, caused by the illness of her husband and of her issuelessness. Her frustration and agony increase, when she realizes that her husband's ailment has not been cured by Dr. Holmes and the psychiatrist Bradshaw. Virginia Woolf reveals the subtle mental states of her characters in *Mrs. Dalloway*. The reference of the clock time, now and then, is meaningful. It denotes a break in the continuity of time from the past to the present and serves as artistic purpose, enabling the author to portray the shift of thoughts. To cite an instance: Razia's casual statement, "It's time" (78) provokes Septimus to think about time. Septimus could travel to the timeless past in the viewless wings of poesy, where the present, past and future become one interminable moment. Woolf seems to suggest that only poetry can do this wonder. Septimus Warren Smith can be considered to be Mrs. Dalloway's other self.

The sense of isolation which the individual feels in this complicated, mechanical and highly organised society has found frequent expression in the twentieth century literature. In Virginia Woolf's novel *Mrs. Dalloway*, this theme has found rather finest treatment to be met within the entire range of modern fiction. In the words of David Daiches:

"The novel opens with the heroine planning to give a party; parties bring people together – but do they really bring people together or is one lonelier still in a crowd? As she moves about London shopping, every encounter she produced a response colored by the whole texture of her earlier experience, so that as we follow the stream of consciousness. We learn all of her previous history or all that matters Septimus Warren Smith goes ... has lost all sense of contact with other people at all, is driven into the isolated emptiness of him and is dragged back by representatives of crude conventionality who imagine that by imposing their artificial social norms on him they can restore his sense of communication". (158)

One characteristic feature of Virginia Woolf's characterization is that she perceived the variety of impressions made by one person upon the people round him and his own ever changing consciousness of the surrounding world. Instead of defining an identity or epitomizing it in a particular incident, Virginia Woolf invites the readers to discover it by living in the minds of her characters or in the minds of others with whom they come into contact. Mrs. Dalloway emerges as a fully rounded character because we know her husband, and Peter Walsh, Miss Kilmen and Salley Seton and several others in whose minds we see her reflected. Thus, Virginia Woolf has pictured employing stream-of-Consciousness technique the actual story in



Mrs. Dalloway of one day in the life of a middle-aged woman. The story embraces much of Mrs. Dalloway's past life and her relations with other characters in the past as well as in the present, so that even judging the story on the simple narrative level, it can be seen that it is more than the story of one day's activity. This inclusion of so much of Mrs. Dalloway's past life is made possible by the way in which her ever changing state of mind is described. Fixing her character physically at a given point in time and space, Mrs. Woolf has followed the character's "stream of Consciousness" up and down in such dimensions as time indications and thoughtful memories.

To conclude, it may be stated that Virginia Woolf is said to have "stood apart from her age, for she had no part or parcel with the noisy trafficking of the years between the wars". Virginia Woolf, it is said, was interested more in investigating and portraying the inner realities of human mind, moving from the husk of life to its kernel and as such, the external world, the cross-currents of social and political life and things like the great depression are conspicuous by their absence in her works. Her work has won universal significance which is above a work of mere contemporary significance.

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