

Stream of Consciousness

Stream of Consciousness Definition

In literature, stream of consciousness is a method of narration that describes happenings in the flow of thoughts in the minds of the characters.

The term was initially coined by psychologist William James in his research, *The Principles of Psychology*. He writes:

“... it is nothing joined; it flows. A ‘river’ or a ‘stream’ is the metaphors by which it is most naturally described. In talking of it hereafter, let’s call it the stream of thought, consciousness, or [subjective](#) life.”

Another appropriate term for this device is “interior [monologue](#),” where the individual thought processes of a [character](#), associated to his or her actions, are portrayed in the form of a monologue that addresses the character itself. Therefore, it is different from the “dramatic monologue” or “[soliloquy](#),” where the [speaker](#) addresses the [audience](#) or the third person.

Examples of Stream of Consciousness in Literature

The stream of consciousness [style](#) of writing is marked by the sudden rise of thoughts and lack of punctuation. The use of this narration style is generally associated with the modern novelist and short story writers of the 20th century. Let us analyze a few examples of the stream of consciousness [narrative](#) technique in literature:

Example #1: *Ulysses* (By James Joyce)

James Joyce successfully employs the narrative mode in his novel *Ulysses*, which describes a day in the life of a middle-aged Jew, Mr. Leopold Bloom, living in Dublin, Ireland. Read the following excerpt:

“He is young Leopold, as in a retrospective arrangement, a mirror within a mirror (hey, presto!), he beholdeth himself. That young figure of then is seen, precious manly, walking on a nipping morning from the old house in Clambrassil to the high school, his book satchel on him bandolier wise, and in it a goodly hunk of wheaten loaf, a mother’s thought.”

These lines reveal the thoughts of Bloom, as he thinks of the younger Bloom. The self-reflection is achieved by the flow of thoughts that takes him back to his past.

Example #2: *Mrs. Dalloway* (By Virginia Woolf)

Another 20th-century writer that followed James Joyce’s narrative method was Virginia Woolf. Let us read an excerpt from her novel *Mrs. Dalloway*:

“What a lark! What a plunge! For so it always seemed to me when, with a little squeak of the hinges, which I can hear now, I 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; chill and sharp and yet (for a girl of eighteen as I then was) solemn, feeling as I did, standing there at the open window, that something awful was about to happen ...”

By voicing her internal feelings, the Ms. Woolf gives freedom to the characters to travel back and forth in time. Mrs. Dalloway went out to buy flower for herself, and on the way her thoughts move through the past and present, giving us an insight into the complex nature of her character.

Example #3: *The British Museum Is Falling Down* (By David Lodge)

We notice the use of this technique in David Lodge's novel *The British Museum Is Falling Down*. It is a comic novel that imitates the stream of consciousness narrative techniques of writers like Henry James, James Joyce, and Virginia Woolf. Below is an excerpt from Chapter 3 of the novel:

“It partook, he thought, shifting his weight in the saddle, of metempsychosis, the way his humble life fell into moulds prepared by literature. Or was it, he wondered, picking his nose, the result of closely studying the sentence structure of the English novelists? One had resigned oneself to having no private language any more, but one had clung wistfully to the [illusion](#) of a personal property of events. A find and fruitless illusion, it seemed, for here, inevitably came the limousine, with its Very Important Personage, or Personages, dimly visible in the interior. The policeman saluted, and the crowd pressed forward, murmuring ‘Philip’, ‘Tony’, ‘Margaret’, ‘Prince Andrew’.”

We see the imitation of the typical structure of the stream-of-conscious narrative technique of Virginia Woolf. We notice the integration of the outer and inner realities in the passage that is so typical of Virginia Woolf, especially the [induction](#) of the reporting clauses “he thought,” and “he wondered,” in the middle of the reported clauses.

Function of Stream of Consciousness

Stream of consciousness is a style of writing developed by a group of writers at the beginning of the 20th century. It aimed at expressing in words the flow of characters' thoughts and feelings in their minds. The technique aspires to give readers the impression of being inside the minds of the characters. Therefore, the internal view of the minds of the characters sheds light on plot and [motivation](#) in the novel.