

The Stream of Consciousness Novel

'Stream of Consciousness' was a phrase used by William James to characterize the unbroken flow of thoughts. Today, it is used to describe a narrative method in modern fiction. This type of narrative has its origin in English in the novels of Dorothy Richardson, James Joyce and Virginia Woolf. The 'stream of consciousness' technique is a new and radical development from the subjectivism of the well-made novel. Its defining feature, according to J.W. Beach, is the 'exploitation of the element of inherence in one's conscious prose'. The term is most useful when it is applied to the mental process. It indicates an approach to the presentation of psychological aspects of the characters.

Although the 'stream of consciousness' is often defined as a technique, most of the stream of consciousness novels are rather identified by their subject matters than by their style. Their essential subject-matter is the consciousness of one or more characters. The consciousness that the novelist describes is not merely the intelligence, will or memory of the character, but the entire area of mental attention. The stream of consciousness novel differs from the psychological novels because it is more concerned with the incoherent and inexplicable parts of the mind.

The originator of the stream of consciousness novel is the little known Dorothy Richardson. It was she who invented the fictional depiction of the flow of consciousness. She is a writer characterized by a great sensibility to the subtleties of mental functioning. Her aims as a novelist are recorded in the brilliant Preface to 'Pilgrimage' where she declared that she wanted to use fictional writing as 'a means to discovering the truth about one's own thoughts and beliefs.

Virginia Woolf is another important writer of the stream of consciousness novel. She wanted to show the process of inner relationship of truth, a truth which is mysterious and inexplicable in normal language. She wrote three novels of this type - 'Mrs. Dalloway', 'To the Lighthouse', and 'The Waves'. All the heroines of these novels - Clarissa, Mrs. Ramsay and Lily Briscoe - have their moments of vision which are a kind of climax to their search for individuality and identity. For Virginia Woolf, life is a 'luminous halo' surrounding us. This is what the novelist must communicate to the reader.

The most important of the stream of consciousness novelists is James Joyce. In his novels like 'Ulysses', he achieves great objectivity with the stream of consciousness technique. In the essay 'The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man', he tells us that the novelist or author is impersonal in the process of writing. For Joyce, existence is a comedy and man is to be satirized for his incongruous role in it. 'Ulysses' shows the level of man's day-dreams, the smallness of man, and the great gap between his ideals and his actual life.

In conclusion, stream of consciousness technique is a great achievement of modern fiction. But, it is not a technique for its own sake, but rather it is based on a realization of the drama that takes place in the mind of human beings. The stream of consciousness novelists have opened up a new area of human experience in fiction by adding mental function to the already established areas of human motive and human action in creating human-like character. While the traditional well-made novel was wide in scope for its characterization and depiction of the society, the stream of consciousness novelists have concentrated on the subjective lives of their characters. In this way, they achieved greater psychological depth.