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## Stream of Consciousness Technique: With Special Reference to Henry Bergson, Warren Beach and Virginia Woolf

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### Abstract

*Stream of consciousness is the name applied specifically to a mode of narration that undertakes to reproduce, without a narrator's intervention, the full spectrum and continuous flow of character's mental process, in which sense perceptions mingle with conscious and half-conscious thoughts memories, expectations, feelings, and random associations. The first user of this technique was the French novelist Edouard Dujardin in a short novel published in 1888. The phrase 'Stream of consciousness' however, was coined by the psychologist William James who wrote principles of psychology (1890). The stream of consciousness novelist tries to render the consciousness of its characters in its fullness without the least authorial intervention and without ordering into logical, lucid, and even grammatical narrative. Works like Joyce's Ulysses are indeed revolutionary in the history of English fiction, However the "stream of consciousness" novelists are much indebted to Freud, Jung, Bergson, Warren Beach than to James. Freud's theories of sexuality, unconscious, repression, and dreams, Jung's of collective unconscious myth and archetypes. and Bergson's of the subjectivity and relativity of time created around 1914 what Allen nurtured the stream of consciousness novelist like Joyce and Virginia Woolf.*

**Key Words:** half-conscious, grammatical narrative, collective unconsciousness

## STREAM OF CONSCIOUSNESS TECHNIQUE : WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO HENRY BERGSON, WARREN BEACH AND VIRGINIA WOOLF

Dr. Amritanshu Kumar

### Introduction:

**W**illiam James' theory of consciousness, Bergson's psychological time and his theory of novel and the explanation of the Unconscious undertaken by Freud, Adler and Jung. have influenced the stream of consciousness technique. That is why it makes imperative upon the reader of the modern novel to get himself acquainted with the broad facts of these discoveries in the realms of psychology. Many of these complex psychological theories have been directly transplanted into fictional works of the modernists. Theories of Oedipus complex, incest, libido, exhibitionism, self assertion, selfishness, inferiority complex, collective unconscious and such have been portrayed by Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, D.H. Lawrence and Aldous Huxley in their novels. Certain phenomena that occur in 'Ulysses' look irrational at the first sight due to strange mixture of the present with that past. Joyce writes this after being convinced on going through Jung's collective unconscious theory that it was possible to mix the present with bygone ages in a work of art through the use of psychological time, wherein mind travels from present to the past and then to future defeating the chronological concept of time.

The Stream of Consciousness Technique borrowed the analysis of the unconscious mind from psychoanalysts who were making therapeutic use of the psychological discoveries for curving mental maladies. But it is also not accurate to say that the stream of consciousness technique represents only the working of the unconscious mind.

The first to use this new phrase 'stream of consciousness' was William James. He said:

It (consciousness) is nothing jointed; it flows ..... in talking of it let us call it the stream of thought, of consciousness or of subjective life .<sup>1</sup>

The most important and convincing theory of stream of consciousness was propounded by Bergson which had all the four principal protagonists of this technique, Joyce, Proust, Woolf and Richardson as its adherents. Bergson gave the most accurate analysis of the region where conscious and subconscious join. He broke away from the traditional theory of intellect. He held that intellect analyses, classifies and conceptualizes and thereby, splits, the flow of reality as if it were a thing existing in space. The reality is a continuous flow which can be understood through sympathy and intuition:

It is an immediate experience and is in a constant state of flux ... in understanding the emotion of violent love of melancholy to discover numerical multiplicity in it by splitting it and separating the elements, forming it in time and space, is to distort the emotion which is one compact unit.<sup>2</sup>

Bergson's reality is the 'real duration' of an experience with regard to time and flux. Bergson's psychological time or inner time is opposed to the mechanical time shown by the clock. It is elastic and is the prolongation of the past into the present extending to the future. It is one unbreakable whole. This is the time concept portrayed in the novels of Virginia Woolf and James Joyce. It is difficult to say that a particular moment is the present instant Bergson holds:

It is clear that such an instant is pure abstraction, an aspect of the mind. It cannot have the real existence.<sup>3</sup>

There cannot be any 'instant anterior to it'<sup>4</sup> the entire area of our experience covered by one attention forms part of the present and as soon as one attention is withdrawn from the area, it becomes a part of the past. With the shift of attention the three past, Present and future, can be made to interact upon one another. Intuition plays a great part in the inner duration of an experience. It is immediate consciousness, a vision and there is an

identification with the object. This unity of subject and object with the help of intention has been described by Bergson in the following words:

... the direct vision of mind by the mind nothing intervening, no refraction through the prism, one of whose facts is the space and another language.<sup>5</sup>

'Intuition' has a specific role to play. with intuition the continuity of inner life of mind may be perceived. To think in terms of intuition is to think in terms of inner or psychological time. Bergson regards human personality as the sum of various mental states viz. feelings, sensation, desires, memories and ideas which are dynamic, responsible for the streaming of the mind. Bergson says:

In personality there is the continuous melody of inner life, a melody which is going on and will go on indivisible from the beginning to the end of our conscious existence.<sup>6</sup>

Bergson speaks about two types of memories involuntary and the voluntary. In involuntary memory, the recall of the past event is beyond the control of a person. Thus Ulysses travelling to the sun on his wings and falling down, is transmutation of a mythological fact into his experience. One cannot say that experience of the past stored in the unconscious will suddenly be released without the subject being conscious of it. Theory of heredity is based on this involuntary memory is not guided by reason. It works in an erratic way. The past things are recalled. Concept of Bergson of time, memory, intuition and personality make for stream of consciousness technique in literature. He feels that the conventional language and diction are fit to express only the static features of existence.

He suggests that to be accurate 'Reality is dynamic and fluid'<sup>7</sup> New words and phrases should be carried to arrest the fleeting and changing reality. Virginia Woolf uses parenthesis to inform the reader of the fact of Mr. Ramsay's death. Now for the important characteristics of the stream of consciousness technique, one finds a few outstanding factors. Time plays an important role. Man today has become intolerant due to certain

changes in basic social values like transience of life due to recurring world wars. rapid induction of industry and science. technology and such . He is most pensive today and has developed an inferiority complex. The new concept of time has influenced ‘the theme , “the form and the medium language.”<sup>8</sup>

The characteristics of the stream of consciousness fiction are governed by the chronological, as well as psychological time. It is this dual concept of time that imposes a pattern on the theme of the novel which has suspense, tempo, and rhythm. climax etc. Experiments have been carried out to depict simultaneity, immediacy and the backward and forward movements. Time by Einstein was characterized as the fourth dimension of matter and could be independently explored. A whole novel based on this issue , ‘ The time machine’ was written by H.G. Wells in the stream of consciousness technique time shift has been adopted by the novelists to explore the mind of the character.

The second characteristic is the ‘inwardness’ of the author. In certain cases disease or psychological disability of the author heightened the novelist’s analytical faculty. Virginia wolf was a patient of mental depression and so it is not impossible that the disease was partly responsible for turning her mind in ward in search of a mental stability . James Joyce and Dorothy Richardson had both acute types of myopia. Again because in such mental observation it is natural that the observer sees things not as they are but as he is , it turn out to be a subjective study. It may be erroneous but the author has no option. The novel will tend to be autobiographical, being more akin to the life of author than to the subject under study. Virginia Woolf’s novels speak the same truth . Rachael vintage , Mrs Dalloway, Mrs Ramsay etc. are the various representations of Wolfs own experiences. As she grows older her characters also assume an older age. She tells her own story every time in her novels.

A very important trait of such novels is interior monologue. The object of this device is to enable the reader to enter the inner life of a character straight away. like ordinary monologues interior monologues need no exclusive explanations to describe the mental condition of the character. it is theoretically not to be spoken.

Another trait of this technique is the adoption of symbolic device . The opening dialogues of the six character in ‘The Waves ‘ though superficially appearing to be

disjointed thoughts have a strong interior link through group sympathy and they are all spoken in symbolical language. The reason for this is the origin of thought not in terms of spoken words but in terms of certain symbols very familiar with the character. It gives a complete picture of the thought in its original form.

Defining the stream of consciousness technique Warren Beach says:

Stream of consciousness type of narrative is a new and radical development from the subjectivism of the well made novels. its defining feature is exploitation of the element of incoherence in one conscious process. This incoherence characterizes both our normal and our abnormal states of mind. The natural association of ideas is extremely freakish. Our psyche is such an integrated bundle of memories. sensations and impulses that unless sternly controlled by some dominating motive, it is likely to be at the mercy of every stray wind of suggestion.<sup>9</sup>

This definition is very helpful in establishing a link between the well made novels and the stream of consciousness novels. They are not completely disjointed from one another, but are rather interlinked by one being a projection upon the other.

Beach has propounded the idea of 'domination motive' as a control exercised upon memories. sensations and impulses. The idea tallies with that of Freud or Bergson. About control he describes the machination as automatic process of choice and selection of only relevant ideas in the mind Beach says:

It is our deliberate attention, called into play by the will to action, that brings order into this chaos, Consciously or unconsciously, we choose to ignore to forget ninety nine percent of all that is actually going within us.<sup>10</sup>

No doubt ninety nine percent is an arbitrary figure but is clear that mind maintains its

balance by rejecting a major part of the sensory experiences as rubbish and dumping that into the memory hole.

By large we find that in the stream of consciousness technique 'narrative replaces plot'<sup>11</sup> in place of external action and violent deeds. there is the interior monologue. The novelist lives in a world of his own with its own laws making it look often chaotic. The novelist is thus spiritually opposed to all the materialistic traditions of the conventional novel.

Virginia Woolf thought that the portrayal of the external actions and incidents a done in the traditional novels is not enough. Reality is somewhere else. And can be comprehended in terms of numerous impressions received by a person's mind.

Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives am myriad impressions trivial, fantastic, evanescent or engraved with sharpness of steel. From all sides they come. an incessant shower of innumerable atoms...<sup>12</sup>

In Bergson, the mental states are always changing. Their repetition is not possible. due to this change. But Virginia Woolf's character, living in the past, never touch the level of the present. They always recollect from their memory and thus are the chaotic flux of memories. There is a repetition of mental states in her novels. Virginia Woolf's concept of memory and reality is different from Bergson's According to her reality is fixed and static . Mrs Dalloway forms a static centre changing things in life. They present a concept of 'reality' which is most different from Bersanian continuity of change in mental states J.W. Graham says:

Reality is fixed in Virginia Woolf but in Bergson it is dynamic.<sup>13</sup>

But for all the difference in the concept of reality, there is similarly between Virginia

Woolf's and Bergson's concepts of personality, psychological time and intuition. Even though she may not have conceded to his view of looking at reality, she, as she wishes to be a psychological novelist, can not overstep the other theories of personality, time and intuition. she has given them a full scope in her novels.

Virginia Woolf's sole object in her novels has been to enshrine spiritual experience in written words. She found stream of consciousness technique a suitable medium to achieve that ambition. She was a searcher after truth . Truth lay in soul and its perception , not in the external manifestations in space. David Cecil considered her to be the culmination of the Aesthetic Movement brought about by Walter Pater in the nineties. But whereas Pater's beauty was a well laid object of superior choice, Virginia's was all pervading D. Cecil says:

She could find beauty as much in a scrap of orange peel, lying in the gutter as in the Venus de Milo, as easily walking down the Euston Road as within the consecrated portals of the National Gallery.<sup>14</sup>

David Cecil quips at Walter pater by saying that' the beautiful for him was mostly to be found in museum.<sup>15</sup>

Virginia Woolf's novels have depicted the psychological time, involuntary memory, instincts and intuition as described by Bergson. She has not explored the unconscious regions of the mind like James Joyce. The problems of reality, the question of individuality, the impact of time on man, and the uncanny mystery of death have engrossed her attention in her novels. The technique , first followed by Miss D. Richardson, reaches a stage of greater variety and maturity in Virginia Woolf.

She is more poetic, more artistic. The stream of thought technique of her has an order and a careful selection of materials. The way her characters occasionally flash back into the past compares well with pre-occupations of a philosophy of life. she wants to advance . she has never indulged in the new technique for the sake of its newness only but

also for converting it into a vehicle of her concept of truth and beauty.

Conclusion:

The stream of consciousness technique is a revolutionary concept of reality . it is a common practice to contrast modernism with Realism, as if the modern were not concerned with reality. They were in fact as much concerned with reality as any of their predecessors. But their concept of reality was very different as different was their techniques of presenting it. For them reality is not something superficial, mechanical, rational, or purely 'scientific' but something deeper, mythical, a logical, or even irrational. Henry Bergson, Virginia Woolf and Warren Beach, have a lot to do with the emergence of this technique. Virginia Woolf adopted the stream of consciousness method and aimed at expressing in her novels the reality of the life of the spirit. Warren Beach's and Henry Bergson's theories also affected the literary personalities of the day and left indelible imprint to be used and followed by the future generation of writers.

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