

# An Analysis of Stream-of-Consciousness Technique in *To the Lighthouse*

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## Abstract

Virginia Woolf, one of the prominent representatives of modernist novelist in England, has contributed significantly to the development of modern novel in both theory and practice. She abandoned traditional fictional devices and formulated her own distinctive techniques. The novels of Woolf tend to be less concerned with outward reality than with the inner life. Her masterpiece, *To the Lighthouse*, serves as an excellent sample in analyzing Woolf's literary theory and her experimental techniques. This paper deals with the use of modern stream-of-consciousness literary techniques: indirect interior monologue and free association.

**Keywords:** Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, Stream-of-Consciousness technique

1. When we mention Virginia Woolf's *To the lighthouse*, it's very natural to talk about her stream-of-consciousness technique. In this novel, the structure of external objective events is diminished in scope and scale, or almost completely dissolved. It is composed of the continual activity of characters' consciousness and shower of impressions. External events occupy little space in the novel compared to the rich development of the response to these events. We can also find in this novel the writer as an omniscient narrator has almost completely vanished and almost everything stated appears by way of reflection in the consciousness of the dramatic characters. And the novel does not progress on "what-happens-next" basis, but rather moves forward through a series of scenes arranged according to a sequence of selected moments of consciousness. And the techniques to which Mrs. Woolf mainly employs are interior monologue and free association.

## 2. Interior Monologue

### 2.1 Interior Monologue Defined

Interior monologue is a term that is most often confused with stream-of-consciousness. It is used more accurately than the latter, since it is a rhetorical term and properly refers to a literary technique. But even this term is in need of more precise definition, and it is greatly in need of more limited application, if it is to be a useful critical term.

Edouard Dujardin, who claims to have used interior monologue first in his novel *Les Lauriers Sont Coupés* (1887), once gave us his definition of the technique. But his definition is not standard and accurate enough to be relied on, because he defined interior monologue as: "the speech of a character in a scene, having for its object to introduce us directly into the interior life of that character, without author intervention through explanations or commentaries; ... it differs from traditional monologue in that: in its matter, it is an expression of the most intimate thought that lies nearest the unconscious; in its form, it is produced in direct phrases reduced to the minimum of syntax."

Particularly, it should be noted that it is a technique of representing the psychic content and processes at various levels of the conscious control; that is, of representing consciousness. It should be emphasized that it may deal with consciousness, however, at any level (it is not necessarily, even rarely, "an expression of the most intimate thought that lies nearest the unconscious"); and that it is concerned with the contents and the processes of consciousness, not with just one of these. It should be noted also that it is partly or entirely unuttered, for it represents the content of consciousness in its inchoate stage before it is formulated for deliberate speech.

Therefore, the following definition, coming from Robert Humphrey, is simpler and more accurate: "Interior monologue is then, the technique used in fiction for representing the psychic content and processes of character, partly or entirely unuttered, just as these processes exist at various levels of conscious control before they are formulated for deliberate speech."

It is important to distinguish between two basic types of interior monologues, which can be conveniently designated as “direct” and “indirect”. Direct interior monologue is that type of interior monologue which is represented with negligible author interference and with no auditor assumed. An examination of its special methods reveals: that it presents consciousness directly to the reader with negligible author interference; that is, there is either a complete or near-complete disappearance of the author from the page, together with his guiding such as “he said” and “he thought” and with his explanatory comments. It should be emphasized that there is no auditor assumed; that is, the character is not speaking to anyone within the fictional scene; nor is the character speaking, in effect, to the reader (as the speaker of a stage monologue is, for example). In short the monologue is represented as being completely candid, as if there were no reader. This distinction is not easy to grasp, but it is a real one. Obviously, every author is writing, finally, for an audience. The interior monologue proceeds in spite of the reader’s expectations of conventional syntax and diction in order to represent the actual texture of consciousness--in order to represent it finally, however, to the reader.

Indirect interior monologue is, then, that type of interior monologue in which an omniscient author presents unspoken material as if it were directly from the consciousness of a character and, with commentary and description, guides the reader through it. It differs from direct interior monologue basically in that the author intervenes between the character’s psyche and the reader. The author is an on-the-screen guide for the reader. It retains the fundamental quality of interior monologue in that what it presents of consciousness is direct; that is, it is in the idiom and with the peculiarities of the character’s psychic processes.

In practice, indirect interior monologue is usually combined with one of the techniques of stream-of-consciousness especially with description of consciousness. Often, it is combined with direct monologue. This latter combination of techniques is especially suitable and natural, for the author who uses indirect monologue may see fit to drop out of the scene for a length of time, after he has introduced the reader to the character’s mind with enough additional remarks for them to proceed smoothly together.

From their definition we learn that these two techniques differ greatly, both in the way they are manipulated and in their possible effects. The basic difference between the two techniques is that indirect monologue gives to the reader a sense of the author’s continuous presence; whereas direct monologue either completely or largely excludes it. This difference in turn admits of special differences, such as the use of third or second person point of view instead of first person; the wider use of descriptive and expository methods to present the monologue; and the possibility of greater coherence and of greater surface unity through selection of materials. At the same time, the fluidity and sense of realism in the depiction of the states of consciousness can be maintained.

## 2.2 *Indirect Interior Monologue in To the Lighthouse*

Virginia Woolf, among the stream-of-consciousness writers, relies most on the indirect interior monologue and she uses it with great skill. In *To the Lighthouse* Virginia Woolf succeeds in producing a much subtle effect through the use of this technique. This novel contains a great deal of straight, conventional narration and description, but the interior monologue is used often enough to give the novel its special character of seeming to be always within the consciousness of the chief characters. Virginia Woolf says in her essay, *Modern Fiction*: “Let us record the atom as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall, let us trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearances, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness.” This is the best description in her method. Let us examine the following passage in the first chapter of part one.

...For how would you like to be shut up for a whole month at a time, and possibly more in stormy weather, upon a rock the size of a tennis lawn? She would ask; and to have no letters and newspapers, and to see nobody; if you were married, not to see your wife, not to know how your children were, --if they were ill, if they had fallen down and broken their legs or arms; to see the same dreary waves breaking week after week, and then a dreadful storm coming, and the windows covered with spray, and birds dashed against the lamp, and the whole place rocking, and not be able to put your nose out of doors for fear of being swept into the sea? How would you like that? She asked, ... (p.4)

The passage above is represented in the manner of straight narration by the author, but it is clearly what the character feels and thinks, and it reflects the character’s consciousness and inner thought. In this passage, Woolf facilitates the indirect interior monologue with her unique skills. Firstly, she uses the conjunction “for” as an indication of the beginning of this monologue and produces an easy and natural shift from objective description to the character’s interior monologue. Secondly she presents Mrs. Ramsay’s consciousness by the guiding phrases “she would ask” and “she asked” to make the reader wonder about unhurriedly in Mrs. Ramsay’s consciousness. Thirdly, here she employs semicolons to indicate the continuation of the consciousness. The use

of semicolons characterizes Woolf's skill in dealing with indirect interior monologue, as also shown in the following excerpt:

Yes, he did say disagreeable things, Mrs. Ramsay admitted; it was odious of him to rub this in, and make James still more disappointed; but at the same time, she would not let them laugh at him. 'The atheist', they called him; 'the little atheist', Rose mocked him; Prue mocked him; Andrew, Jasper, Roger mocked him; even old Badger without a tooth in his head had bit him, ... (p.4)

The above passage illustrates the occasionally baffling similarity between a narrator's utterance and omniscient-narrator commentary. It demonstrates, however, how punctuation can wonderfully signal the continuation of consciousness sometimes. The extraordinary subtlety of her skill here is located in the use of the semicolons after "they called him". Had she not placed a semicolon there, the reader might easily be misled to think that the sentence "but at the same time, she would not let them laugh at him" is an omniscient-narrator commentary. So in this passage, with the help of semicolons, the reader can easily discern what is the character's interior monologue and when it begins and halts.

In the case of indirect interior monologue, the omniscient author's continuous intervention is essential to guide the reader in reading the character's mind. The use of frequent parentheses is the pet device of Virginia Woolf's intervention in her novels which exerts several functions. Parentheses can be signals of digression and of simultaneity as this one, "Teaching and preaching human power, Lily suspected. (She was putting is beyond away things.)" (p.33) Parentheses can also be little asides, explanations, pointers to what is going on. Lily in this passage is thinking about Mr. Bankes:

I respect you (she addressed him silently) in every atom; you are not vain; you are entirely impersonal; you are finer than Mr. Ramsay; you are the finest human being that I know; you have neither wife nor child (without any sexual feeling, she longed to cherish that loneliness), you live for science (involuntarily, sections of potatoes rose before her eyes); praise would be an insult to you; generous, pure-hearted, heroic man! (p.18)

Here the parentheses signal sudden and momentary switches in perspective. The narrative is thrown backwards and forwards between Lily's voice, with its intonation mimicked exactly. Lily's dwelling on the austerity of Bankes' life indicates not only Bankes' desire for solitude, but also hers--and at the same time shows her resistance to her own loneliness. She wants at once to extend and to limit, to see more of Bankes and less of herself. This conflict is represented in the simultaneous development of two registers: the succession of main clauses inscribing Lily's voice, and the little interruptions of the parentheses, at the corner of Lily's eye. The final set of brackets describes a sudden obstruction of her vision: the rising of potatoes before her eyes. Yet this obstruction too is part of the movement of her thought: it is her habit to conceptualize intellectual disciplines as material objects ("She always saw, when she thought of Mr. Ramsay's work, a scrubbed kitchen table.") (p.17) Obviously the parentheses help render the inner world of Lily more exactly clearly and help present us with the exact condition of consciousness.

Sometimes Woolf puts her interior monologue also in the parentheses as displayed in the following passage:

'Such expeditions', said Mr. Ramsay, scraping the ground with his toe, 'are very painful.' Still Lily said nothing. (She is a stock, she is a stone, he said to himself.) 'They are very exhausting,' he said, looking, with a sickly look that nauseated her (he was acting, she felt, this great man was dramatizing himself), at his beautiful hands. (p. 114)

Here again the parentheses act as signals of perspective. They are the demarcation lines between omniscient narration and interior monologue. With the help of brackets, Woolf makes an easy and clear transition between the two. And this is one of the indications of her sophistication in artistry.

With her unique devices such as guiding phrases, semicolons, and parentheses embroidered to her interior monologue, Virginia Woolf successfully overcomes the shortcomings of stream-of-consciousness novel of being incoherent and chaotic, and achieves great explicitness, coherence, vividness and surface unity in presenting the characters' inner world. However, it should be noted that her presentation of the characters' interior monologue is not only coherent in meaning, but also conventional in appearance. It is something of a shock to realize that what is usually considered the most extreme form of the experimental novel is often worked out with the basic method of using conventional description by an omniscient author--without any attempt on the part of the author to disguise the fact. The only thing unusual about it is the subject of this description, which, of course, in the stream-of-consciousness novel is the consciousness or psychic life of the characters.

### 3. Free Association

The chief technique in controlling the movement of stream-of-consciousness in fiction has been an application of the principles of psychological free association. Among all the writing techniques in *To the Lighthouse*, the most confusing and difficult to follow may be the free association, for the consciousness of the characters in the fiction has no order and no regular pattern. However, the application of the free association in the stream-of-consciousness novel has much aesthetic significance. First, the free association technique extends the scope and the levels the writing expresses and makes it possible for the writers to deal as much as possible the characters' subjective experience within fairly narrow objective time-space scope. Second, the free association technique breaks out the traditional narrative structure. By the help of this technique, the characters may think about others upon seeing related things, recall old memories at familiar sights and think of another thing or person upon seeing one; the consciousness may shift freely among present, past and future, or from one place to another. During the process of the association, the objective time and the psychic time intermingle; the past memories, the future expectation and the present consciousness exist alternately; the result of which is a structure of confusion in space-time and disorder in sequence. Third, the free association technique may have the effect of contrast and satire through the writers bringing together the instances happening at different time and different places. Therefore this technique is essential for the writers to depict the real world of the consciousness.

#### 3.1 Three Factors That Control the Association

Every responsible writer must face the problem of determining the possible technical devices by which consciousness can be represented convincingly and determining the controls by which selection of material can be made.

What, then, are the essential problems of depicting consciousness in fiction? There are two orders of them and both come from the nature of consciousness of itself. "First, a particular consciousness, we assume, is a private thing; and second, consciousness is never static but is always in a state of motion". The first of these is dependent on the second, so we shall occupy ourselves now with the problem of the flux of consciousness.

Complex theory need not concern us in order to determine the nature of the movement of consciousness, since it is enough to set up difficult problems for any reader. Consciousness, first of all, is considered in its movement fluid and unbound by arbitrary time concepts by these writers who belong to the generation following William James and Henri Bergson. "Fluid" does not mean a smooth flow necessarily. The flow of consciousness, it might be admitted, is found on levels nearing the state of unconsciousness, but as the pre-speech levels nearer surface are the subjects of most stream-of-consciousness fiction, the checks interferences to the flow from the outer world become an important consideration. In short, the term "stream" is not fully descriptive. The notion of synthesis must be added to that of flux to indicate the quality of being sustained, of being able to absorb interferences after the flow is momentarily broken, and of being to pass freely from one level of consciousness to another. The other important characteristic of the movement is its ability to move freely in time--its tendency to find its own time sense. The premise is that the psychic processes, before they are rationally controlled for communication purposes, do not follow calendar continuity. Everything that enters consciousness is there at the "present moment"; furthermore, the event of this "moment," no matter how much clock time it occupies, may be infinitely extended by being broken up into its parts, or it may be highly compressed into a flash of recognition.

The primary facts of free association are the same no matter whether they are suspended in the psychology of Locke Hartley or of Freud-Jung; and they are simple. The psyche, which is almost continuously active, cannot be concentrated for very long in its processes, even when it is most strongly willed; when little effort is exerted to concentrate it, its focus remains on any one thing but momentarily. Yet the activity of consciousness must have content, and this is provided for by power of one thing to suggest another through an association of qualities in common or in contrast, wholly, or partially--even to the barest suggestion. "Three factors control the association: first, the memory, which is its basis; second, the senses, which guide it; and third, the imagination, which determines its elasticity". These three factors are dependent and influencing each other, composing the main features of consciousness. The subtlety of play, the rank of precedence and the physiology of these factors are problems of dispute among psychologists. None of the stream-of-consciousness writers, except to a limited extent Joyce in *Finnegans Wake* and Conrad Aiken, has been concerned with the complexities of the psychological problems; but all of the writers have recognized the primacy of free association in determining the movement of the psychic processes of their characters.

#### 3.2 Free Association In *To the Lighthouse*

In *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf usually encloses free association into the indirect interior monologue to represent the psychic processes of her characters. We may take the 7-10th chapters of the first part of *To the Lighthouse* as

an example:

The continuity of the section is established through an exterior occurrence involving Mrs. Ramsay and James: Mrs. Ramsay tells James the story of the *Fisherman's Wife*. After consoling her despair-stricken husband, Mrs. Ramsay began to read the story to James. Many lines later, she went on with the story, “‘The man’s heart grew heavy,’ she read aloud, ‘and he would not go...’”, then she entrusted her daughter to ask Mildred if Andrew, Miss Doyle, And Mr. Rayley had come back. A little later she read, “Next morning the wife awoke first...” A few lines later, she read on, “Ah, wife”. Four pages later, she said, “And that’s the end,” At that time, the stroke of the lighthouse came into her eyes. Then Mildred came in to fetch them. And here chapter 10 ends.

The process of the story-telling is constantly interspersed with other elements which, although they do not interrupt its progress, take up far more time in the narration than the whole scene can possibly have lasted. Most of these elements are inner processes, that is, movements within the consciousness of individual personages.

In skeleton outline the movement of Mrs. Ramsay’s stream of consciousness is clear, as it is controlled by the principle of free association through memory, the senses, and the imagination.

Seeing Augustus Carmichael shuffling past

1. thinking of his wife’s iniquity towards him
2. thinking why he shrank from her
3. thinking that she has no difficulty in making people like her

Seeing Augustus just nod to her question

4. thinking that all this desire of hers to give, to help, was vanity
5. thinking how flawed human relations are even at their best

Learning that Minta and Paul had not come back

6. thinking whether Minta accepted Paul

Going on with the story

7. recalling the scene of their (Minta, Paul, Mrs. Ramsay) standing at the hall door after lunch
8. thinking she must speak seriously to Minta and she is responsible to Minta’s parents
9. thinking of Minta’s parents and Mrs. Doyle’s accusation
10. thinking that she is not domineering and tyrannical and she just cares about hospitals and drains and diary
11. thinking she will have time to deal with the problems of hospitals and drains when her children are older
12. thinking she wants her children not to grow up thinking about each of her children
13. thinking of her husband ’s dissatisfaction with her pessimistic view of life
14. thinking whether she had put pressure upon Minta

The very pattern of the outline itself shows the direction of Mrs. Ramsay’s free association. The passing of Augustus, the story-telling, the passing of Cam, and the news that Minta and Paul had not come back indicate places where the outer world impinges on Mrs. Ramsay’s inner life. The outer world and the actual happenings serve only as the stimuli and inspirations of the inner world of the characters. Often even the preceding thoughts give birth to the successive following associations.

The essential characteristic of the technique represented here by Virginia Woolf is that we are given not merely one person whose consciousness (that is, the impression it receives) is rendered, but many persons, with frequent shifts from one to the other---in our text, Mrs. Ramsay, Mr. Ramsay, Lily and Mr. Bankes. The multiplicity of persons suggest that we are here after all confronted with an endeavor to investigate an objective reality, that is, specifically, the “real” Mrs. Ramsay. She is, to be sure, an enigma and such she basically remains, but she is, as it

were, encircled by the content of all the various consciousness directed upon her (including her own), and there is an attempt to approach her from many sides as closely as human possibilities of perception and expression can succeed in doing.

Another remarkable example perches in the twelfth chapter in the last part of *To the Lighthouse*. In this chapter, Lily Briscoe, the artist, while watching the sea, feels her mind ebb and flow with it. When she paints the picture by the seaside, her mind exhibits an exuberance of vivid pictures and sights: She seems to see Mrs. Ramsay and later she sees somebody in the drawing room set an odd-shaped triangular shadow over the step. From the triangular shadow over the step to the shadow on her canvas and to the meadow under the canvas and finally to the faraway in the sea, all the fragments of life are put together and reflected. We may trace her free association as follows:

Looking at the sea

1. think about Mr. Ramsay and his children

she laughed, hearing Mr. Carmichael suddenly grunted, and

Looking at the house

2. think about some common feeling held the whole

Seeing the brown speck of Mr. Ramsay's sailing boat

3. thinking of her picture

sitting down and examining with her brush a little colony of  
plantains, seeing Mr. Carmichael

4. thinking of Mr. Carmichael and his poems

the squeak of a hinge drawing her attention

5. thinking of Mrs. Ramsay

stirring the plantains with her brush

6. thinking of Charles Tansley

raising a little mountain for the ants to clime over

7. thinking of Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay

screwing up her eyes and standing back

8. thinking of Mrs. Ramsay

seeing an odd-shaped triangular shadow over the step,  
dipping her brush

9. thinking of Mrs. Ramsay

crying Mrs. Ramsay! Mrs. Ramsay!

Though the above outline just displays a bird's-eye view and does not produce a minute description of the flow of Lily's consciousness, it does not endanger a full appreciation of the free association technique. The actual occurrence is too thin to be called a plot: Lily stands by the sea drawing. The information Woolf offers here makes us feel that the traditional narration is too inferior to bear comparison at this point. Wherever Lily's eyes cast a look, there sprung some bygone memories, present meditation or future expectations concerning what she sees. Her consciousness just flows freely and naturally among present, past and future, or from one thing or person to another. Therefore, the time-space limitation vanishes here and we readers enjoy such free conscious activities very much.

4. By analyzing these two typical stream-of-consciousness techniques, we can find indirect interior monologue makes Woolf express the character's inner world in such great coherence and surface unity. Her presentation of the characters' interior monologue is not only coherent in meaning, but also conventional in appearance. Her use of indirect interior monologue allows the narrator to reveal the characters' flow of thoughts and takes the reader into the consciousness of the characters in the novel. And free association makes the readers step into the inner worlds of her characters by their feelings, thoughts, memories, etc. So there is no question that Virginia Woolf is at her best when she is writing her stream-of-consciousness novels which deal with the conscious, subconscious and even unconscious part of her characters. It is her emphases on the experiences and inner lives of her

characters that lead to her elevation as a master of the stream-of-consciousness novel.

Although the historical period when stream-of-consciousness novel acted as a main trend in literature has ended, the experimental techniques adopted by the modernist writers have further influence upon literary creation. Virginia Woolf's individualized and experimental art of fiction has offered significance not only in studying the stream-of-consciousness fiction but also in literary creation.

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